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Pianistic memorization as cultural memory: Insights from religious and devotional traditions

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Abstract

Pianistic memorization has long been treated as an expectation, a marker of virtuosity, or a source of performance anxiety, yet its deeper cultural and symbolic meanings remain largely unexamined. This article reframes memorized performance through the lens of religious and devotional memory practices, drawing on scholarship in cultural memory, cognitive psychology, and nineteenth-century performance history. Across Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Jewish traditions, memorization functions not merely as retention but as a transformative, embodied discipline through which texts are internalized, enacted, and carried forward in communal identity. Placing pianistic memory in dialogue with these traditions illuminates how learning music by heart involves similar processes of internalization, embodiment, and meaning-making. Historical analysis traces how memorization became entrenched in nineteenth-century concert culture, while cognitive research highlights the layered systems of analytical, auditory, visual, and kinesthetic memory through which pianists build secure performance. Integrating these perspectives reveals that memorized performance is not simply a technical requirement but a form of cultural participation with implications for canon formation, pedagogy, and performer identity. Considered alongside religious traditions, pianistic memorization emerges not as an outdated convention but as a culturally meaningful discipline that shapes interpretation, repertoire, and artistic identity. This reframing encourages a broader understanding of what it means to internalize a musical work and situates pianistic memory within a much older human lineage of devotional and embodied memorization.

Keywords

cultural memory, embodied performance, music pedagogy, pianistic memorization, religious memorization

Introduction

The question of memorization has occupied a central yet often contentious place in piano performance for nearly two centuries. Although the expectation that pianists play solo repertoire without the score has become widely embedded in concert culture, it remains a topic of ongoing debate among teachers, students, and professional performers. Memorization is alternately praised as a sign of mastery, criticized as a source of anxiety, defended as an interpretive tool, or dismissed as an arbitrary tradition inherited from nineteenth-century virtuoso culture.

Recent performance practice illustrates this tension clearly. Pianists such as Alexandre Tharaud, Richard Goode, Yuja Wang, and, in his final years, Sviatoslav Richter have all appeared with scores. Tharaud is particularly striking because he has built an international career without playing from memory at all, whereas Goode, Wang, and Richter had long performed according to standard expectations before moving toward more flexible approaches. At the same time, most major solo pianists still perform the standard repertoire from memory. Among those who have spoken about the practice are András Schiff and Stephen Hough, both of whom continue to perform much of their solo repertoire without the score. Some even undertake extraordinary feats of pianistic endurance and memory. Schiff, for example, has played Bach's complete *Well-Tempered Clavier*, all forty-eight preludes and fugues, from memory in marathon recitals at venues such as the 92nd Street Y and the BBC Proms (Tommasini, 2012), and Yuja Wang has performed cycles such as the complete Rachmaninoff concertos from memory (Wright, 2023). These feats sit alongside an increasing number of high-profile performances in which the score, often on an iPad, is visibly present.

The surrounding discourse is rarely neutral. Writing on her blog *The Cross-Eyed Pianist*, Frances Wilson (2019) describes how, in amateur piano clubs and meetup groups, attitudes to memorization can be among the most intense she encounters. Many participants, she notes, revere great *virtuosi* and equate playing from memory with being a "proper" pianist. In these communities, the desire to prove oneself sometimes leads players to attempt memorized performances without adequate preparation, resulting in memory slips that stem as much from anxiety and ego as from technical limitations.

A widely read *New York Times* article by Anthony Tommasini (2013) brought these issues into the mainstream. Tommasini pointed out that major pianists such as Peter Serkin and Olli Mustonen had begun to use scores in solo repertoire and discussed Gilbert Kalish's decision to play all of his repertoire, including solo Haydn and Brahms, with the score. Kalish went further, helping to change degree requirements at Stony Brook University so that students could decide whether to perform from memory or not, depending on what allowed for their most assured performance. Yet, as Tommasini observed, the profession at large still clings to the assumption that solo pianists must play from memory. In one season, Tharaud played two New York recitals entirely with scores. Reviewers concentrated on the imagination and vitality of his playing, but the accompanying photograph of him performing with a score provoked protest on social media from listeners who equated the presence of the text with insufficient preparation (Tommasini, 2013).

Stephen Hough has spoken at length about memorization, and his comments capture many of the contradictions pianists feel. In one interview, when asked whether memorizing music is important, he replied that the answer is both yes and no. For him, memorization is a skill worth acquiring early, alongside instrumental technique. He likens it to learning a role in theater: Actors must eventually set the script aside in order to inhabit a character. In that sense, memorizing can be part of learning music "in a deep way." At the same time, Hough questions whether displaying this skill is always necessary in concert. He notes that highly complex postwar works, such as piano sonatas by Boulez or the *Klavierstücke* of Stockhausen, demand such dense and intricate notation that requiring memorization may add little to musicianship while greatly increasing the burden on performers. According to Hough, it was partly the rise of such contemporary repertoire

that began to loosen the absolute expectation that pianists must always play from memory (Kageyama, 2020).

Hough also stresses the theatrical dimension of memorized performance. Concerts, he says, are a kind of theater. In certain repertoire, the visual impression of a performer standing or sitting alone on stage with no score can be part of the drama. He imagines, for instance, how different it would have felt to see Vladimir Horowitz playing the F-sharp minor *Polonaise* at Carnegie Hall with an iPad or a human page turner, and admits that the change in visual symbolism would alter the experience. In this way, playing from memory participates in the aura of star status, distance, and fascination that has long surrounded the virtuoso. The absence of the score contributes to an illusion of superhuman ability, while the presence of the score can make the performer feel more recognizably human. For audiences, part of the pleasure of performance lies precisely in witnessing something that appears beyond ordinary capability (Kageyama, 2020).

This article suggests that the current conversation surrounding memorization in piano performance is incomplete. Rather than approaching memorization simply through the binary of valuable tradition versus obsolete burden, it offers a different perspective, one that situates pianistic memorization within broader cultural and historical traditions of human memory. Across civilizations, memorization has functioned as a spiritual discipline, a method of internalizing meaning, a tool for forming identity, and a technology for preserving and transmitting culture (A. Assmann, 2011; J. Assmann, 1995; Ong, 1982; Yates, 1966). Ancient Greek mnemonic systems, medieval Christian devotional practices, the Islamic hafiz tradition of Qur'anic memorization, and Buddhist recitational lists all demonstrate that memory, when cultivated deliberately, becomes a form of embodied understanding rather than simple retention. Seen this way, pianistic memorization can be understood not only as a performance convention or technical feat but as a kind of cultural and cognitive work with deep historical precedents.

The aim of this article is not to advocate for or against memorized performance. Instead, it seeks to broaden the conceptual framework through which pianists and teachers understand the practice. Looking at parallels between musical memorization and other memory traditions offers insight into why memorization developed historically, why it acquired symbolic significance, and why it continues to elicit strong emotional reactions. Methodologically, the study draws from historical scholarship on nineteenth-century performance culture, research in cognitive psychology, and work in religious and cultural memory studies. It outlines the rise of memorized performance in the nineteenth century, examines analogous memory practices in major religious and intellectual traditions, and considers how these perspectives can inform contemporary pedagogy. The goal is to reframe memorization as a cultural and interpretive phenomenon whose meanings extend beyond performance convention and technical display.

Literature review

Scholarship on musical memorization tends to fall into three principal areas: historical accounts of its development, contemporary discourse among performers and critics, and scientific research on memory.

Historical studies by Kenneth Hamilton (2008), Dana Gooley (2004), and others describe how memorization became entwined with nineteenth-century virtuosity and with changing ideas about the musical work. Their work, along with that of David Gramit (2002), Mark Evan Bonds (2014), and Lydia Goehr (1992), shows how concert culture shifted

from improvisation to textual fidelity. Authority in performance became increasingly tied not to spontaneous invention but to accurate interpretation of a stable score. While earlier examples of memorized performance existed, such as the extraordinary feats of recall attributed to Mozart, these were considered exceptional rather than normative (Bonds, 2014). The memorized performances of Clara Wieck Schumann and Franz Liszt in the 1830s and 1840s marked a turning point by making memory itself visible and theatrically charged (Gooley, 2004; Hamilton, 2008; Mishra, 2016).

Contemporary discourse among performers and critics likewise centers on anxiety, professional expectations, and the symbolic meanings attached to playing with or without a score. Writers such as Anthony Tommasini (2012, 2013) and Frances Wilson (2019) have documented these tensions in journalism and blogging, while performers including András Schiff and Stephen Hough have reflected publicly on the benefits and limits of memorization. Together, these sources illustrate how deeply memorization is entwined with questions of identity, tradition, and audience perception. In response, pedagogical literature frequently explores structured, multi-level strategies to help pianists build more secure memorization (Dickinson, 2009/2010).

Cognitive and psychological research examines the processes underlying musical memory. Studies by Grace Rubin-Rabson (1940), Roger Chaffin and colleagues (Chaffin et al., 2002, 2016), Rita Aiello and Aaron Williamon (2002) and Jane Ginsborg (2017, 2024) identify multiple systems involved in memorization, including kinesthetic, visual, auditory, and analytical memory. This work also underscores the importance of distributed practice and sleep-based memory consolidation, showing that memory strengthens through spaced engagement more than through massed repetition (Aiello & Williamon, 2002; Rubin-Rabson, 1940). Although this research has significantly improved our understanding of the techniques and vulnerabilities of memorized performance, it does not fully address the cultural, spiritual, or symbolic meanings of memorization, which lie at the heart of the present study.

In religious and cultural memory studies, scholars such as Frances Yates (1966), Mary Carruthers (2008), Jan and Aleida Assmann (J. Assmann, 1995; A. Assmann, 2011), and Walter Ong (1982) have demonstrated that memory operates as an embodied, symbolic, and often sacred practice. Research on Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and Buddhist memorization reveals memory as a mode of devotion, identity formation, and interpretive engagement (A. Assmann, 2011; Carruthers, 2008; Ong, 1982; Yates, 1966). These traditions emphasize that memorization is as much about understanding and transformation as it is about retention. Yet such frameworks have rarely been applied directly to instrumental music performance, leaving unexamined the cultural, spiritual, and meaning-making dimensions that have long accompanied memorization in other domains of human life.

Historical evolution of memorization in piano performance

Before the nineteenth century, memorization was not a central feature of Western instrumental performance. Musicians such as Mozart clearly possessed remarkable memory, but professional emphasis rested on improvisation, sight reading, and flexible adaptation. Scores were treated as starting points rather than untouchable texts requiring exact replication (Hamilton, 2008).

Between roughly 1800 and 1850, several changes reshaped this landscape. The pianist's role shifted from that of composer-virtuoso to that of interpreter of works

increasingly understood as fixed entities. The rapid rise in the popularity of the piano transformed public concert life. Middle-class audiences flocked to hear pianists, and by the 1850s the solo piano recital had emerged as a distinct institution with its own programming conventions. At the same time, tastes shifted toward historical concerts featuring the music of Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and other earlier composers. Mendelssohn played a key role in reviving previously neglected works, especially Bach. As certain pieces became familiar through repeated performance, they began to acquire quasi sacred status as masterworks of the canon (Bonds, 2014; Goehr, 1992; Gooley, 2004; Gramit, 2002; Hamilton, 2008; Parakilas, 1999).

Within this evolving culture, memorization gradually took on new significance. A well-known anecdote illustrates the earlier, skeptical stance. Around 1805, the teenage Carl Czerny frequently visited Prince Lichnowsky, a patron and friend of Beethoven. The prince would call out an *opus* number, and Czerny would play the corresponding Beethoven sonata entirely from memory. Beethoven, however, was not pleased. He reportedly warned that relying too much on memory would weaken Czerny's ability to sight read and maintain an accurate overview of the piece. During this early period of the nineteenth century, memorization could be seen as a superficial display potentially distorting the work (Hamilton, 2008; Parakilas, 1999).

By the 1830s, attitudes were changing. Clara Wieck's 1837 performance of Beethoven's *Appassionata* from memory was considered daring and even ostentatious. Some observers felt that playing without the score shifted attention from the composer to the performer, making the concert into an act of self-display (Mishra, 2010). Yet the very boldness of the gesture also aligned with emerging ideals of Romantic virtuosity, which celebrated individual heroism and expressive intensity. Franz Liszt took this further, programming recitals in which he performed large portions of his repertoire from memory. His charismatic stage presence and reliance on memorization helped to cement the idea that a true virtuoso does not need the score (Gooley, 2004; Hamilton, 2008; Mishra, 2016; Parakilas, 1999).

As the century progressed, memorization became more common and eventually expected. Reports from the 1860s and 1870s describe a growing number of pianists and other instrumentalists performing from memory. Critics were divided. Some admired the heightened freedom and expressivity that seemed to result, while others complained that memorization turned concerts into risky acts of daring, more suited to the circus than to the concert hall. The psychological cost of this new standard is vividly documented in writings by Anton Rubinstein, who confessed to agonizing fear of memory lapses and described the experience as a kind of torture, even when audiences imagined him to be calm and in control (Hamilton, 2008; Mishra, 2016; Parakilas, 1999). Clara Schumann, later in her life, sometimes returned to using scores in public, in part because of the strain of relying exclusively on memory (Hamilton, 2008).

By the early twentieth century, conservatories, competitions, and professional norms had fully institutionalized memorization for solo pianists. The conservatory jury or degree recital played from memory became a rite of passage. Chamber music and other collaborative playing generally remained score-based, though the etiquette was not always entirely consistent. In the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, digital tablets such as the iPad and Bluetooth pedals made it visually easier to perform with a score, and some high-profile artists began to challenge the old rule more openly

(Tommasini, 2013). Nevertheless, the symbolic resonance of performing without the score persists, especially in standard canonic repertoire, where audiences often still assume that a memorized performance is both more authoritative and more virtuosic.

Memorization in religious, cultural, and intellectual traditions

To understand why memorization carries such emotional and symbolic weight, it is helpful to step away from the piano for a moment and consider the broader history of memory. Before the widespread availability of printed books, memory played a central role in education, law, religion, and daily life. Knowledge was stored not in external media but in the minds of individuals and communities. The development of memory was considered a basic intellectual skill (Ong, 1982).

Ancient Greek culture gave mythic form to this importance through the figure of Mnemosyne, the goddess of Memory and mother of the Muses. The poet Simonides of Ceos was credited with inventing the art of memory after a famous banquet in Thessaly. When the banquet hall collapsed, killing the guests, Simonides was able to identify each body by mentally reconstructing where people had been seated. From this story arose the method of loci: the idea that one could remember a sequence of ideas by placing striking mental images in an imagined architectural space and then walking through that space in the mind (Yates, 1966).

Roman authors such as Cicero and Quintilian elaborated this art of memory. They described how an orator might imagine a building with many rooms, fill each room with vivid images representing points in a speech, and then retrieve the speech by mentally moving through the building. Memory was thus understood as active, imaginative, and spatial. It required training and practice, much like instrumental performance (Carruthers, 2008; Yates, 1966).

Medieval thinkers distinguished between “natural” memory, the basic capacity we all possess, and “artificial” memory, the cultivated skill developed through such techniques. Memory was not only useful but morally charged. Philosophers and theologians transformed memory from a mere cognitive tool into a virtue closely related to prudence. Thomas Aquinas, for example, is said to have remembered everything his teachers told him and considered memory essential for ethical reasoning. Images of virtues and vices in paintings and sculpture served as memory aids that also shaped moral perception. Vivid and sometimes fearsome images of heaven and hell were intended to impress spiritual truths upon the imagination (Carruthers, 2008).

In an era before printed books, much of culture depended on such practices. Epic poems like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were transmitted orally for generations by singers whose memories were trained to retain vast amounts of verse. Laws were preserved as “immemorial custom” before being codified in documents. Ritual and liturgy, including chants, prayers, and responses, were learned largely by heart, especially by priests and monks. The prevalence of verse, rhyme, and music reflects their value as mnemonic devices (Ong, 1982).

Some thinkers were already aware of the potential downsides of externalizing knowledge. In Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus* (274c–275b), Socrates recounts a myth in which the Egyptian god Thoth presents the invention of writing to King Thamus. Thamus worries that writing will weaken people’s memories by encouraging them to rely on external marks instead of internal recollection. He warns that written texts may give readers the appearance of wisdom without the reality, since they can repeat words they do not truly

understand. When we consider how some students mechanically sight-read, reproducing notes accurately but without grasping their significance, Socrates' concerns feel surprisingly relevant.

The art of memory in its classical and medieval forms was not only a way of storing information. For many, the structure of a mnemonic system reflected their conception of the structure of knowledge itself. Memory could be a way of understanding the world (Carruthers, 2008; Yates, 1966). This has clear analogies in music. Pianistic memorization is not just a method for retrieving notes. It can also be a way of understanding and integrating a musical work in mind and body, reconstructing its architecture internally and, in a sense, re-creating the act of composition.

Religious traditions provide further perspectives. In Christianity, memorizing scripture has long been regarded as more than a way of recalling texts. It is understood as listening to and internalizing the voice of God. Passages such as Psalm 119's declaration, "I have hidden your word in my heart" (Psalm 119:11, *New Revised Standard Version*), express the idea that the divine word must be carried in the heart, shaping thoughts, choices, and character. The goal is not just to read but to absorb the text so deeply that it becomes part of one's inner life. If we draw a parallel to music, we might ask whether carrying a piece within us in this way can also shape us and change how we share its message with others. Rather than seeing musical memorization as a convention imposed from outside, we might understand it as an act of devotion to the work, a way of letting it live within us.

In the Islamic world, memorization is explicitly framed as worship. To memorize the *Qur'an* is to become a hafiz, a "protector" of the sacred text. Many Muslim communities maintain schools devoted to Qur'anic memorization (tahfiz), where students learn through intensive recitation, repetition, and correction; this process is described as a way of embodying the divine word and preserving the *Qur'an* across generations (Dzulkifli & Solihu, 2018; Shukri et al., 2020). The process is intensely embodied: It involves vocal recitation, careful pronunciation, rhythmic patterns, and bodily discipline. Memorization here shapes both behavior and identity. The hafiz is expected to live according to the teachings they carry in their memory.

Buddhism offers another rich example. Early Buddhist literature contains a striking number of lists: the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the five aggregates, the ten fetters, the thirty-seven factors of awakening, and many more. These lists served as mnemonic devices shaped by the oral nature of early Buddhist culture. Reducing long sermons to sets of numbered items distilled the teaching into a structure that could be retained and recited. Memorizing these lists was not a matter of rote learning alone. The arrangement was thought to reveal the inner structure of the Dhamma, the Buddha's teaching. Reciting the lists functioned as a meditative practice that cultivated insight, mindfulness, and faith (Gethin, 1992, 1998).

Jewish traditions of textual study emphasize communal learning and memory. In yeshiva study of *Torah* and *Talmud*, students chant texts aloud, question them, argue about them, and repeat them over many years. Errors are corrected through collective recitation. Memory is sustained by community rather than by individual perfection. The text is not simply stored in one person's mind but lives in the ongoing conversation of the group (Milgram, 2016).

Across these traditions, memory is not simply an act of retention but a form of devotional practice. Memorization engages the whole person: voice, breath, bodily posture, gesture, and imaginative visualization (Carruthers, 2008; Ong, 1982). It is a way of embodying meaning, allowing a text or teaching to move inward until it becomes something “held in the heart,” a phrase used repeatedly across Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions to describe the deepest form of internalization. In these contexts, memorization shapes identity, linking individuals to a lineage of predecessors who have carried the same words, chants, or teachings within themselves. It also functions as a mode of cultural continuity, preserving knowledge through human bodies when external media are scarce, fragile, or considered spiritually insufficient (A. Assmann, 2011; J. Assmann, 1995). Seen through this lens, pianistic memorization becomes easier to understand not as a technical requirement but as a practice of inhabiting musical works, allowing them to be absorbed, carried, and eventually expressed from within. Just as devotional memory practice binds individuals to tradition, memorizing a piece can serve as a way of entering into the history and culture of piano repertoire, participating in its transmission, and transforming notation on the page into lived, internal knowledge.

Reframing pianistic memorization as cultural and embodied interpretation

Seeing pianistic memorization through the lens of these broader memory practices offers a more meaningful sense of what pianists are really doing when they learn a work by heart.

First, memorization can be understood as a form of embodied interpretation. For a pianist, the body is the site where musical meaning takes shape. The way a hand moves to shape a line, the posture adopted for a particular sonority, all contribute to how the music is felt and understood. When a piece is memorized, these gestures are no longer guided by the visual stimulus of notation but by an internal sense of structure. The work becomes a set of possibilities stored in muscular, auditory, and visual memory. Even when a score is present, this internalization can deepen the sense of connection between performer and piece.

Second, memorization participates in canon formation. In religious traditions, the texts that are memorized are typically those considered central to identity and practice. Something similar happens in music. Works that pianists memorize repeatedly across generations acquire a special status. Beethoven’s sonatas, Bach’s preludes and fugues, and the canonical piano works of Chopin, Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Liszt, Schumann, Brahms, and Rachmaninoff have become part of a shared internal repertoire. They are carried not just in libraries and recordings but in bodies and minds. If we take seriously the idea that memorization helps secure a work’s place in cultural consciousness, then choices about what to memorize become significant. When performers and teachers encourage memorization of works by composers such as Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, or Grazyna Bacewicz, they participate in expanding the canon in a very concrete way.

Third, memorization has a symbolic and theatrical dimension. Audiences often interpret playing without the score as evidence of mastery, commitment, or almost superhuman ability. This perception is not arbitrary. It builds on long standing associations between memory and authority in religious and rhetorical traditions (Carruthers, 2008; Yates, 1966). At the same time, performing with a score can send different, equally

meaningful signals: a commitment to reflection, a desire to focus attention on the music rather than the performer, or recognition of the complexity of certain contemporary works (Kageyama, 2020). Recognizing these symbolic meanings can help performers make conscious choices about how they present repertoire, rather than feeling constrained by inherited expectations.

Crucially, this reframing also clarifies why solo piano culture places such unique emphasis on memorization. It is important to recognize that expectations vary significantly across performance traditions: collaborative pianists, chamber musicians, and most wind, brass, and string players routinely perform with scores without sacrificing musicality or interpretive depth. This contrast underscores a central point: memorization is not a universal prerequisite for deep musical understanding, but a historically and culturally specific expectation within solo piano practice.

Finally, a broader perspective on memory highlights a more compassionate attitude toward error. In many religious contexts, gaps in memory are addressed through repetition, support, and correction from others. They are understood as part of an ongoing process of learning (A. Assmann, 2011; J. Assmann, 1995). In contrast, musical culture often treats a memory slip in concert as a near catastrophic failure. When we remember that memory is inherently dynamic and reconstructive, we can begin to view lapses not as moral failings but as moments that reveal the vulnerability and humanity involved in carrying large works internally.

Pedagogical implications

These perspectives have practical consequences for how we teach and learn music. Students often experience memorization as a compulsory, anxiety-inducing task. If we instead present memorization as one way of entering into deeper relationship with a piece, grounded in meaning, embodiment, and cultural participation, students may approach it with more curiosity and less fear.

A first implication is the importance of cultivating multiple types of memory. Analytical memory involves understanding form, harmony, and motivic structure. Visual memory includes both the layout of the score and the spatial mapping of the keyboard. Auditory memory encompasses inner hearing, the ability to anticipate sounds and progressions before they are produced. Kinesthetic memory rests in patterns of movement and touch. Teaching students explicitly about these different layers can help them move beyond the idea that memory lives “in the fingers” alone (Chaffin et al., 2002; Ginsborg, 2017).

A second implication concerns the timing and spacing of practice. Research on memory consolidation shows that distributed practice over days and weeks, interspersed with periods of sleep, leads to stronger and more stable memory than single long sessions (Aiello & Williamon, 2002; Rubin-Rabson, 1940). Teachers can encourage students to begin forming memory early in the learning process, to revisit passages across multiple days, and to avoid last-minute cramming. This approach parallels religious memory traditions in which texts are revisited regularly over long periods (Carruthers, 2008; Ong, 1982).

Mental practice offers a third tool. Asking students to visualize themselves playing a piece away from the instrument engages analytical, visual, and auditory memory simultaneously. They can imagine starting at different points, hear the lines internally, and recall fingerings and harmonies. This kind of practice strengthens the internal “memory

palace" of the work and makes performance less dependent on the specific physical context of the practice room (Chaffin et al., 2002; Ginsborg, 2017).

The concept of performance cues, developed in psychological studies of expert performance, can also be integrated into teaching. Students can be guided to identify key chords, gestures, harmonic changes, or expressive decisions that anchor their memory at important points in the piece. These cues function like signposts in a landscape, making it easier to navigate under pressure (Chaffin et al., 2002).

Finally, pedagogy benefits from emphasizing student autonomy. Not every performance context requires memorization. Competitions and certain recitals may insist on it, but lecture recitals, contemporary music programs, and many collaborative settings allow the use of scores. Teachers can help students distinguish between situations where memorization is demanded by external norms and those where it is optional. Within those boundaries, students can then decide when memorization serves their artistic and emotional goals. When memorization is presented as one meaningful option among several, rather than as a universal litmus test of seriousness, students can develop a more flexible and healthy relationship with it.

Conclusion

What would happen if we thought of pianistic memorization less as a test of bravery or conformity and more as an act of transmission and devotion, analogous in some respects to religious memorization? In such a view, learning a piece by heart would be a way of allowing it to inhabit the deepest layers of our minds and bodies so that we can recreate it from within for our audiences. Memorization would not always be required, nor would it be the only valid way to perform, but when chosen, it would be understood as an expression of love for the music and a desire to carry it with us. To be clear, this is not to suggest a theological claim or spiritual mandate for performers, but rather to highlight how the cognitive and embodied processes of memorization serve similar meaning-making functions across different human disciplines.

This perspective also sharpens the notion of canon consciousness. Works that are memorized repeatedly become part of what a culture remembers about itself (A. Assmann, 2011; J. Assmann, 1995; Bonds, 2014; Goehr, 1992). As long as certain pieces remain confined to the printed page and are never internalized by performers and listeners, they risk being perceived as marginal or disposable. Choosing to memorize a lesser-known work is one way of helping it enter our shared musical memory and, eventually, the canon.

Since antiquity, memorization has been regarded as something that can and should be cultivated. It is not simply a natural gift but a set of practices that can be taught, refined, and supported (Carruthers, 2008; Yates, 1966). For piano teachers, this means addressing memorization with the same seriousness as other aspects of technique and interpretation, while also being attentive to the psychological and cultural pressures students face.

Memorization in piano performance is a complex, multifaceted practice. When viewed through cultural, religious, and historical lenses, it emerges as a way of embodying meaning, internalizing repertoire, and participating in artistic identity. This broader understanding neither mandates memorization nor dismisses it. Instead, it situates the practice within a long human history in which memory serves as a means of understanding, transmitting, and inhabiting knowledge. Recognizing these dimensions can encourage more nuanced pedagogical approaches and help performers articulate

their own relationships to memorization. Whether a pianist chooses to perform with or without the score, awareness of the deeper contexts of memory can foster flexibility, empathy, and interpretive richness. In this way, memorization becomes not a rigid requirement but one of many meaningful paths into the music that shapes our artistic lives.

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