

To Read or not to Read: How pianists practise to perform with music score and from memory

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Professional musicians preparing for performance demonstrate sophisticated practice strategies to facilitate accurate, efficient and reliable processing of music. To perform from memory, musicians instinctively identify technical, structural, expressive and interpretive cues during their practice, which in turn will become cues in performance. There is an expectation that pianists will perform from memory and that these performance cues serve as memory prompts. If memory is an integral part of the existing practice and performance framework, how do musicians practise if they are asked to perform with the music? Changing the performance goal may reveal different approaches and strategies to practising and performing and expand our knowledge of expert practice strategies of performing from memory. To date, no studies have considered the differences between practice strategies of expert musicians required to practise and perform the same piece from memory and with music.

The aim of this study is to investigate how pianists practise to perform from memory and with music and to compare their practice strategies for each performance goal. Four tertiary piano students practised the same unknown piece for performance over two weeks in 4-6 practice sessions. Two pianists were instructed to perform from memory and two with music. Pianists made an audio recording of their practice sessions and gave verbal commentary to elucidate their practice goals and strategies. Recordings were initially transcribed to count the number and location of pianists' repetitions, errors, starts and stops and to note any comments. Recording these features and transcribing verbal commentary gives insights into the strategies of pianists preparing to perform from memory and with the music score. Each of these markers was tallied and interpreted to identify each pianist's technical, expressive, interpretive and performance cues. Pianists who performed from memory gave more detailed verbal commentary than those who performed with music. Recurring reading errors were more common in practice sessions of pianists performing with music. Results will be discussed with reference to the music practice literature. These findings will have implications for performers, pedagogues in understanding how performers approach learning and/or memorizing new repertoire under different performance goals.