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An Interview with Spencer Myer

21st-Century American Pianist

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Counting Out Loud: A Fresh Look at a Traditional Practice Tool

By Adam Cole

I give my piano students many tools to improve their practice, such as logging their time and playing their music backwards, but one of the most useful tools is counting while playing. This technique is one of our most-loved pedagogical practices, and its benefits cannot be understated. By outlining these advantages for ourselves and our students, teachers can renew their commitment to this important teaching tool.

The basic idea is simply stated: players count out loud while they play a piece of music. The question of *what* and *how* to count is slightly more involved.

How to Count While Playing

The most direct method is to count the meter according to the time signature. In my instruction, I explain that the top number of the time signature tells us what the music counts *to*, and the bottom one tells us what it counts *with*. If the meter is in 4/4, we count "*to* 4 *with* quarter notes."

The time signature tells us which counting number will fit the music best but you can, of course, count *any* number to a piece of music. Why should we choose the meter?

Although you can wear any size coat, you choose to wear a coat that fits the best. In musical terms, the number that "fits" will be the top number in the time signature because counting it will always land us on "1" when we begin a new section of the piece. If we counted to "7" instead of "4" in a 4/4 piece, each new section might start on a different number.

It is true that counting to "2" in a 4/4 piece will also result in each section beginning on "1." However, when we choose to count with the number that "fits," we can also reliably keep track of the number of measures in a piece of music without having to look at the score.

Having established the idea of the correct number, we ask the player to count *with* the division specified at the bottom of the time signature. If a piece is in 4/4, for instance, we ask a player to count "1, 2, 3, 4" with quarter-note pulses. We continue the count no matter what is happening in either the left or the right hand, and also during any rests or pauses.

The time signatures 3/8, 6/8 and 9/8 are a little more difficult. They are called "compound meters" because they actually count to two different numbers *at the same time*. For instance, because counting to six with eighth notes is usually too fast in a 6/8 piece, one would generally count to two with the two dotted quarter-notes per measure: "1 x x 2 x x, 1 x x 2 x x."

The odd 5/8 and 7/8 meters are even more problematic. The teacher will have to examine the intent of the meter, whether it is music with a lilt such as the folk-inspired pieces in Bartok's fourth book of the *Mikrokosmos*—a series of complex rhythmic ideas that vary from measure to measure—or a compositional artifice that actually hides a simple rhythm behind it. For most instances, one would either count every eighth note, or group irregular beats corresponding with the meter and the intent of the music: i.e. 5/8 = "1 x x 2 x, 1 x x 2 x."

In pieces that change meter, (four measures of 4/4, followed by one measure of 3/4, then back to 4/4) one would be asked to change the count accordingly. In this case, all the previous rules must be applied at once. This careful study of the music will go a long way towards clarifying its structure for the player.

Approaches to Counting

Counting approaches that subdivide the meter, such as "1-e-and-a, 2-e-and-a" are plentiful. These have been famously used by choral conductors such as Robert Shaw as a powerful teaching tool. Counting out loud is an excellent way for singers to discover musical subdivisions.

For pianists, I find that it is more helpful to have a steady, un-subdivided count. Hearing the contrast between the metrical pulse in the voice and the elements of the music in the hands is far more stimulating than it would be against a minute subdivision. Syncopations jump out and rhythmic oddities cannot be glossed over when one is sticking to a basic count.

There are two ways to count the basic meter:

1) Allowing oneself the freedom to slow down and speed up
2) Keeping a steady tempo.

Both are valid and serve different functions at different stages of practice.

In the article "Eight Things Top Practicers Do Differently,"[1] author Noa Kageyama notes that one of the strategies consistently practiced by top pianists is a willingness to slow down in advance of possible errors. It seems that the best pianists avoid practicing mistakes by changing speed sufficiently in order to see and avoid pitfalls. Counting can greatly facilitate this excellent strategy.

With students who are first learning a piece, I advise that they take the liberty of slowing down whenever necessary to ensure that they play the next notes correctly. As they slow their hands, they should also slow their counting. Because they must sync their numbers with the music, the students remain engaged in the activity of looking carefully at the score. With visual processing being one of the most powerful means of learning, students can maximize the benefits of their focused attention, further reducing early error. Meanwhile, the count takes the place of the steady beat, maintaining the musical integrity of the composition at any speed.

When the music has been mastered, it is appropriate to ask the student to keep the count steady. Now the counting is serving a slightly different function as it gives the student feedback on progress and ability.

Students who can keep a steady count while playing know several things about their performance. First, they are focused. Until we have mastered the skill, we cannot count and play while daydreaming.

Second, students have a strong sense of how the rhythm and the structure of the piece works against the pulse. Play a Mozart sonata while counting and one will also discover that many phrases begin *in the middle of a measure*, defying the bar structure.

Lastly, when we make a mistake while counting, we are very likely simulating a performance situation in which there is an added strain upon our processing power. While we may be able to fool ourselves in the practice room by playing our piece "perfectly," we are more likely to make those "real time" mistakes while counting. The activity serves as a wonderful check against mindless practice.

Counting While Practicing Scales

Learning to play scales can be a challenging step for beginning pianists who have not yet begun learning to shift the fingers. The question of when to shift is the one that taxes beginners' minds the most. Counting solves these problems in surprising ways.

Adam Cole

When I ask my students to count with scales, I always insist that they count one number for every two notes they play:

1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 ...
C D E F G A B C / D E F G A B C ...

At first, my students find counting with scales such a burden that they often attempt to skip the counting in their practice. I always discover their trickery at the lesson when I ask them to demonstrate the counting for me. If they are reluctant to incorporate it into their practice, I "sell" it with the following rationale: counting makes the scales more difficult in the beginning, but it makes them much easier later on. When playing scales one hand at a time, we find that counting, *once incorporated into the activity as second nature*, actually helps a student remember where the fingers shift.

Counting numbers:
1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 ...
C D E F G A B C / D E F G A B C ...

Right-hand finger numbers:
1 2 3 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 1 2 3 4 5

The association between counting numbers and finger numbers becomes even more important when the hands are combined and each must shift at different times.

Counting numbers:
1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4

Right-hand finger numbers:
1 2 3 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 1 2 3 4 5
Left-hand finger numbers:
5 4 3 2 1 3 2 1 4 3 2 1 3 2 1

Counting, at first, makes the job much harder because the student now has three sets of numbers to track. Once the students have grown accustomed to the activity, however, they are able to relate shifting and the beats more easily in their minds than they would be without the counting ruler.

As an added benefit, I like to point out to the students that the counting numbers fall on different notes depending on which octave they are playing. When they begin, students will count "1" with C. On their second octave, however, "1" will be associated with "D." This is a little-appreciated musical aspect of scales that occurs from the fact that there are only seven notes in the octave,

a fact which will eventually assist their comprehension of repeated figures in many musical works such as Chopin etudes and Beethoven sonatas.

1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4...
C D E F G A B C / D E F G A B C...

Advanced Counting

When students have mastered counting to such a degree that it no longer provides an adequate challenge, there are a number of more advanced counting games the teacher can offer. These more complicated counts will serve an advanced student in the same way that basic counting benefits the beginner: increased focus, musical interest, and extra processing.

The simplest thing to do is count only part of the meter. In a work with a 4/4 meter, the student may choose to count "1....3....1...3," leaving out the 2's and 4's. The student would maintain quarter-note silences over the missing numbers.

Other combinations are even more interesting. Counting on the off-beats, 2 and 4 will do wonders for a student's sense of timing. Even more pernicious are combinations such as 1 and 4, or 2 and 3.

For the adventurous student, it is always a kick to count the "wrong" meter to a piece of music, creating a kind of hemiola effect. Given a piece in 4/4, count to seven over it. This kind of virtuoso game is as amusing as it is difficult, and it would cause one of my favorite teachers to sometimes burst out laughing while counting to a piece of music, which nicely put the activity in perspective.

A Final Reason

If you are looking for a less intellectual reason to require your students to learn to count while playing, there is one particularly organic one. When students count out loud, they must use their voice. They must breathe.

By having students count regularly, their tendency toward holding their breath while playing magically vanishes. They gain all the benefits that regular breathing can offer their playing: relaxation, oxygen to the brain, and a reminder that the music, too, must breathe. Surely this reason alone is enough to ask students to take on the challenge and learn this valuable skill. ▲

Notes:

[1] Noa Kageyama, "8 Things Top Practicers Do Differently." *Bulletproof Musician*. October 20, 2018. Accessed November 12, 2018. http://www.bulletproofmusician.com/8-things-top-practicers-do-differently/.

[2] Haig Kouyoumdjian, "Learning through Visuals," *Psychology Today*. Accessed November 12, 2018. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/get-psyched/201207/learning-through-visuals.

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