

Pianodao

The Way of Piano



How much musical baggage do you carry?

Guest Post by Roberta Wolff

One of the things I love about teaching is hitting upon that perfect explanation, aural, visual or verbal, which offers immediate clarity. Sometimes the answer comes after much reflection and thought and sometimes it seems to hit, apparently, from nowhere.

This is what happened recently with an adult student. After a strong start to her piece she began scrambling, reacting to the notes on the score rather than working with control. I pointed out that to keep playing at her current speed would be to create *musical baggage*.

This was the first time I had used the term, but her comprehension was immediate simply because she already understood the common phrase, *emotional baggage*. The idea of musical baggage resonated with her and so has proven to be a simple but powerful aid to her practice.

Naturally, I developed the idea so it could benefit more than just one student...

“Musical Baggage”

- So, what is musical baggage?
- How is it created?
- How do we teach students to avoid it in 3 simple steps?
- What terminology can be used when talking to children or teens?
- How much do you and I carry?

Musical baggage vs. Emotional baggage

Here is the rather hefty definition of *emotional baggage* from Wikipedia:

‘Unresolved issues of an emotional nature, often with an implication that the emotional baggage is detrimental.’

It goes further to say,

‘As a metaphorical image, it is that of carrying all the disappointments, wrongs, and trauma of the past around with one in a heavy load.’

Musical baggage is not that burdensome since the wrongs and disappointments we are talking about take place in the much smaller arena of the score.

Musical Baggage is not a viable shortcut

In piece learning, practising in a way which risks musical baggage can seem like the easy path when in fact, in the long term, it is the harder and messier route.

- Musical baggage is created when practising unsystematically or without awareness.
- Musical baggage can also be, and often is, created without the musician noticing. This means, it can crop up at any moment to surprise or throw a musician off course.
- It takes time and effort to eradicate musical baggage.
- No one likes the idea of carrying any sort of ‘baggage’.

Musical Baggage, children and teens

There needs to be a slight alteration to the term *Musical Baggage* to make it relevant to younger students.

For teens, referring to a bar with *musical issues* always gets a smile! The urban dictionary describes 'issues' as '*fancy and elegant way to say "problems"*'. I also make a subtle change in my language connecting the musical issue to the bar, not their execution of it.

For younger musicians, talk about a bar which might contain a *musical trap, ambush or problem*. This inspires a story line where the student can feel proud for successfully by-passing the trap.

Consequently, the student is motivated and all teachers need do is empower the student by sharing clues on how to practise effectively.

The Solution – Awareness is Power

Students can only avoid the type of practice which creates musical baggage once they know what to look out for. There are 3 areas where musical baggage can develop if unchecked.

This means the solution is a three-tier level of mindfulness which covers what they *Do, Feel and Think*.

Doing – The notes are a given

The matter of *doing* is associated with accurately deciphering and playing the music; being certain of pitch, rhythm, key, articulation, fingering, expression. It is useful to stress the value of returning to the score regularly, rather than hoping it was all assimilated in the first reading. The temptations are:

- to make assumptions in note reading/fingering or to be vague to keep the piece moving;
- to let the odd fluff pass by unaddressed until it becomes a mistake;
- to build in retakes instead of forcing the mind to be a step ahead;
- to stop reading the music. This is possibly the most upsetting of all because the degree of this problem often only becomes apparent during mid performance.

Most pianists are fully aware of the need for accuracy in this area. However, they are less aware of the importance of accuracy in the following two tiers.

Feeling – A piece should feel good to play

Musical Baggage in this tier presents as stiff and uncoordinated movements. To avoid it, students need to remember that *how* they make the sound is as important as playing the right note. The amount of time invested in getting the notes right should at least match that of getting the movements right. Here are some points to remember:

- Note accuracy is only a tiny portion of the pianist's job.
- Concentration can easily turn into muscle stiffness if allowed to go unchecked.
- No movement should feel like a rush or a scramble. If one does, break it down, analyse it, practise it and find a way to make it comfortable.
- A common mistake is to continually practise at your fastest speed. A piece will never feel comfortable and secure if it is always practised outside the comfort zone.
- Consciously control your breath – it is only by practising breath control that a musician knows how to utilise it during a performance.
- As a tricky passage comes up the natural tendency is to inwardly brace. However, this also has a physiological effect. Breath becomes shallower, muscles become tighter and suddenly the tricky passage becomes a whole lot trickier. Learning to recognise and inhibit these reactions, then replace them with a long exhale and an effective conscious movement is a vital component of practice.

Teach students to regularly check in with their posture, shoulders, neck, jaw, elbows, wrist, fingers, toes, breath, etc. Students should aim for a sense of purpose, vitality and efficiency to every movement, as if each were choreographed, and build in regular opportunities to 'refresh' by returning to neutral.

Over time pianists will learn to recognise their own habitual holding patterns and will notice what affects these have on their playing.

Thinking – Think it to become it

Musical Baggage in this tier presents as unhelpful thoughts which are allowed to take reign and distract the pianist from their practice. Teach students to examine their thought processes and frame of mind and to use their thoughts to achieve positive outcomes. Students should:

- Approach each practice session with calm resourcefulness.
- Learn to recognise and release unhelpful thoughts: *I don't feel like practising; I don't have enough time to do this properly*. Students should experiment with taking a very

pragmatic approach of not letting these thoughts waste their time, rather focusing on getting down to business.

- Learn when to have healthy and productive internal dialogues: *this is getting nowhere*, could lead on to, *why is this getting me nowhere, what can I do instead?*
- Be taught to view challenges positively.
- Never become flustered, frustrated or angry at the notes on the page. Rather they should channel this energy into something positive.
- Get into the habit of questioning every thought. If there is a leap or stretch that they don't like they should examine why and find a different way to think about it...
- **Teachers** should be mindful of how they talk to their students. Is it important not to label anyone as this will form a big part of the student's internal dialogue.

A true tale from the studio

Just this week a student came to me saying this left-hand part is difficult because it is so stretchy. Observing her hand, it did look very uncomfortable.

I know this particular student loves pizza, so I asked her to imagine that she had just eaten a whole pizza and she was feeling full, comfortable and lounging in front of the TV.

Then I asked her to play the section again, it was much freer and the hand played deeply with ease. It looked comfortable and sounded rich and sonorous.

There was never any issue with the fingers or hand size it was just that she believed it was awkward (possibly because it felt awkward on the first playing). Every time that passage cropped up the brain said, '*this is awkward*' so the hand tightened, thus fulfilling the brain's prediction.

Three times correctly in a row

A common practice challenge is to be able to play a section three times correctly in a row.

Let's tack on: play it once to get the doing right; once to get it feeling/moving right; and once to check up on your thoughts.

Students will become more mindful and work from a position of calm control. There will be less frustration, less chance of injury in the future and more productivity.

Musical Baggage – the Positive Spin

Given what I have just written above, “*give it a positive spin*” I should not be surprised to find myself here! I have sold musical baggage as something bad, to be avoided at all costs.

But I wonder, would I get out of bed and practise every day if I did not carry some of my own? Perhaps with the baggage comes the motivation to strive for improvement.

How much do you and I carry?

Possibly the honest answer is that musical baggage comes with being a musician, we **all** carry some. The choice lies in whether we let it niggle or whether we use it as the impetus for mastery.

Roberta Wolff

Roberta Wolff is a pianist, teacher, and author.

For further information:

www.musicmepiano.co.uk

www.robertawolff.co.uk



Thanks for your support in 2020
Wishing you all the best for 2021

[Pianodao](#) includes 500+ articles and reviews FREE of charge.

The site grows thanks to the generous [support](#) of readers.

For extra content and discounts join the [Tea Room community](#).

SUPPORT PIANODAO

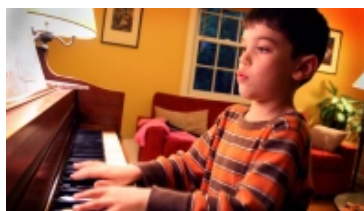
JOIN THE COMMUNITY

PLEASE SHARE THIS...



[Customize buttons](#)

RELATED:



Developing Performance Skills

In "Guest Authors"

It's Time To Stop Practising & Start...?

In "Guest Authors"

My Practice Palette

In "Guest Authors"

PUBLISHED BY



Andrew Eales

Andrew Eales is a pianist, writer and teacher based in Milton Keynes UK, where he runs Keyquest Music - his successful independent music education business, private teaching practice and creative outlet. [View all posts by Andrew Eales →](#)

📅 May 20, 2017 👤 Andrew Eales 📁 Guest Authors, Pathways for Playing, Pathways for Teaching 🔖 Learning Piano, Musical Baggage, Roberta Wolff

Website Powered by [WordPress.com](#).