

## The perfect wrong note: learning from mistakes

By Frances Wilson

**My students don't believe me** when I tell them there is a book called *The Perfect Wrong Note*. Nor do they believe me when I tell them that mistakes are good, that mistakes make us better musicians.

**The desire for perfectionism is all around us in our modern society**, from the need to produce a perfectly cut and edited film or CD, to the pressure to achieve the 'perfect body' (whatever that is!). Very young children are immune to this pressure: they learn from mistakes, often made during play, and by doing so gain a huge amount of knowledge about the world around them before they have stepped foot inside a school environment. But from the moment they are in school, they are encouraged not to make mistakes, and through the demands placed upon them by teachers, peers and parents, they develop a certain moral judgement and become self-critical. They learn that not making mistakes wins praise, while making mistakes results in disapproval.

**Being a musician, particularly a professional musician, is highly demanding**, and the training required is extremely rigorous. Music students strive for mastery and perfection in their playing, because they know that being well-qualified in this respect will earn them merit and recognition - from teachers, peers, audiences and critics. As musicians, and teachers of musicians, it is important that we set ourselves high standards, but constantly striving for perfection can promote false or impossible goals. People frequently - and wrongly - equate perfection with excellence. While perfectionism is negative and damaging, excellence is achievable and positive.

### Three key questions

When I'm teaching students, and when I'm practising myself, I never see a wrong note as a mistake. Wrong notes and mistakes are instructive - and we can always learn from them. When an error occurs, we need to ask ourselves some key questions:

- ▶ Do I know **where** the mistake happened?
- ▶ Do I know **why** the mistake happened?
- ▶ Do I know **how** to put the mistake right so it doesn't happen again?

**All mistakes happen for a reason** and it's important that we understand why a mistake happened and what we can do to prevent it re-occurring. Sometimes it may be something quite simple like a poor or awkward fingering scheme; but sometimes mistakes, particularly those that recur in the same places, may be the sign of a more deep-seated issue, technical, physical or psychological.

**I try to encourage students to 'play through' mistakes.** When students come to lessons with me, many of them play their pieces with slips and errors - and many of them stop to correct these errors, despite my saying 'keep going!'. I try to encourage students to 'play through', to keep the flow of the piece going by not stopping to correct each and every mistake. Look at any exam report, for whatever grade, and you will see that 'flow', or rather lack of it, is a constant gripe of music examiners. Constantly stopping to correct mistakes becomes ingrained in the muscle memory to the point where one will always stop at the same point, even if the mistake is no longer there. If one plays blindly, without taking notice of what one is doing, and not listening, mistakes get overlooked, and keep cropping up, every time we practise. Mistakes such as these are hard to correct and need careful, detailed practising to put right. Mistakes made from poor conception and understanding, lack of preparation or careless practising need consistent work to put them right. But mistakes made from off the cuff inspiration and insight can be wonderful and exciting.

**Mistakes show we are human**, and fallible, that it's ok to have an off day when your playing and practising may not go as well as usual. Giving ourselves permission to make mistakes allows us to be fulfilled by our music and to feel positive about our practising. A willingness to make mistakes teaches us to be self-critical, but in a positive, productive way.

**An excellent performance may not be a perfect performance** - but the excellent performance will almost certainly be the one which conveys the meaning and emotion of the music, which 'tells the story', communicates with the audience, and allows the listener to be carried away by the music, to the point that the performer almost becomes invisible. Some of the greatest pianists of all time made noticeable mistakes in their performances - Liszt, Anton Rubinstein, Paderewski, Cortot, Hofman, Moiseiwitsch, Horowitz, Richter, Gilels - but these people remain piano legends because of the beauty of their playing, their insight and communication, and interpretative skills. I have been to concerts by some of the top professional pianists in the world today and have heard mistakes - split notes, a smeared run, a missed chord. I've even been party to a few memory lapses on occasion. Did these spoil the concert experience as a whole? Of course not, because the performer played with conviction, emotion, musical understanding, passion.

**We need to learn how to free ourselves from the tyranny of perfectionism** to become more fluent, confident, convincing and expressive musicians. We should strive for the 'ideal' not the 'perfect' version in our music. And sometimes we just need to stand back and see the bigger picture.

### Further reading:

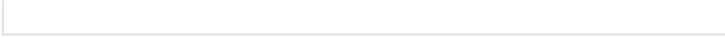
*Music from the Inside Out* - Charlotte Tomlinson  
*The Perfect Wrong Note* - William Westney  
*The Inner Game of Music* - Barry Green  
*The Musician's Way* - Gerald Kilckstein

### About Frances

Frances Wilson is a pianist, piano teacher, concert reviewer and blogger on music and pianism as [The Cross-Eyed Pianist](#). A keen supporter of amateur pianists, she is co-host of the London Piano Meetup Group and co-founder and curator of the South London Concert Series.

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