



Seven Tips for Maintaining Keyboard Skills

After fifteen years of piano lessons, I certainly believed that all this time in study would grant me all the keyboard skills necessary to succeed as a professional musician. But as an undergraduate student, I heard about a new course called Functional Piano. Curious, I signed up for the class, and learned an entirely new skill set that just doesn't often appear as a topic in private lessons.

The Tuesday/Thursday meetings broadened my knowledge to include more practical applications. Transposition, melody harmonization, open score reading, and figured bass realization were just a few of the topics we tackled.

Since taking that class, I've approached the keyboard in a new way. Still, one class wasn't enough to grant lifelong mastery. Without regular practice, it's just a little bit harder the next time I need to polish off my ability to read figured bass.

Many of us may neglect to devote real study time to these keyboard topics, and usually brush up those skills on an as-needed basis.

Here are some ways to address the ongoing process of keeping up with the keyboard skills:

1. Keep up your memorization skills

Most organists do not have to regularly play by memory. There are many "shortcuts" that we can use to sidestep even the occasional memorization. For example, one can write in the chords to a reharmonization rather than playing from memory. If short on practice time, it can be handy to take these shortcuts, but look for opportunities to stretch your mind (and your hands), even if it's not required.

2. Keep accountable with a friend

If you have organist friends near or far, you can ask what pieces they've been working on, what kind of music they've been using in church, and what technical exercises they might use. These ideas can inspire you to take on new challenges when you feel stuck in the same routines.

3. Watch a tutorial or workshop online

Did you know that you can watch master classes with Olivier Latry for *free*? From the comfort of your own living room or study, you can watch Dan Forrest speak to creative arranging, or listen to Brad Nix review tips for choral accompanying. Recently, I've enjoyed lectures by Marin Alsop, one of the forerunner female conductors of our time. If you have a good chunk of time and feel ambitious, check out Leonard Bernstein's lectures

at Harvard. The wealth of free knowledge available on YouTube is simply amazing.

4. Sight-read a new piece every day (or every time you practice

If you're a busy musician like me, your work may accomplish this on its own. Sight-reading is one of the most important skills for many keyboardists, whether at the organ or piano. If your jobs don't require a great deal of reading new music, this is one of the most critical skills to hone on your own time.

5. Take a class

Look for local opportunities to enroll in a one-semester, or even shorter, class involving keyboard skills. If you're a church pianist transitioning to the organ or returning to music-related employment after years in another career, you can greatly benefit from formal study without breaking bank.

6. Read open score

This goes especially for anyone who is not already reading open score on a consistent basis for work or school. You never know how much you need your open score reading skills until the moment you sit down and realize that the Eric Whitacre score has no piano reduction. For the most difficult pieces, "fake it" by learning the feel of the chord progressions if you don't have time to study the score in detail.

7. Play songs by ear

This builds listening skills and applies some of those hypothetical improvisation skills. You can practice coordination by singling out the tenor line with a solo instrument, or play it above the soprano melody for easy descant inspiration.

Even if none of these ideas are new to you, consider this your reminder to spend a few free minutes watching a concert organist on YouTube before you queue the vine compilations. By maintaining the keyboard skills that may feel basic, we strengthen ourselves as musicians and better approach the more advanced tasks.