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# Creating a Convincing Solo Piano Performance

A great deal of jazz piano pedagogy is devoted to playing with a rhythm section. Playing solo piano presents challenges and rewards of its own. In this article I'll discuss some principles to create a convincing, creative, eclectic and (yes!) swinging solo piano performance.

## CLARITY & CONSISTENCY

Sometimes when students play solo for me, I'll ask, "Were you playing rubato or in time?" Often they answer, "I don't know!" It's very important to be clear in your own mind about what you are trying to do. Otherwise, it will not be clear to the listener. Playing freely, out of time, can be very effective in creating a mood, so if you're going to stretch out over the time, then take your time. Try to feel phrases, not beats or bar lines. The space between the phrases is important, too.

One of the first rubato interpretations of a standard that caught my ear when I was a student was Wynton Kelly's performance of "Love, I've Found You" from Miles Davis' 1961 album *In Person, Friday Night At The Blackhawk, Volume I* (Columbia). This is a wonderful example of pacing. I have transcribed this arrangement and made it available online at

<http://robertajazz.com/downloads/wynton>.

No transcription can do justice to Kelly's phrasing and dynamics, not to mention his masterful pauses between the phrases. While the transcription will be helpful, I strongly encourage you to listen to the original recording.

Conversely, if you're playing in time, clarity of tempo is important. Even though you're playing by yourself, you should have the tempo in mind and (silently) count the tune off before you start. The more solid your internal groove, the more relaxed, light and swinging your playing will be. The audience will not even notice that you do not have a bassist and drummer laying down the time.

## VARIETY

One of the biggest challenges in doing an entire concert (or a whole CD) of solo piano is to have enough variety. One option is to vary the typical head-solo-head format by using thematic material from the tune to create a "free" improvisation in which you are not necessarily concerned with the tune's chord changes.

Certain tunes lend themselves well to this approach. On my first solo

### Example 1: Motives from “Monk’s Dream”



piano CD, *Solo* (Thirteenth Note Records, 2012), I chose to open the Thelonious Monk tune “Monk’s Dream” this way because, as is typical with Monk’s compositions, it has very strong and distinctive motives.

The harmony in this case is derived from an exploration of the melodic themes, as opposed to the traditional jazz approach of improvising over the chords of the tune. I start very simply and sparsely, with one simple motive. The improvisation builds in complexity as I add more motives, using transposition, inversion, retrograde, augmentation, diminution and fragmentation to eventually create a dense contrapuntal effect. Some of the motives I use are shown in Example 1.

Sonic variety is also an important consideration when playing on one instrument. Pianist Richie Beirach is a master at getting different sounds out of the piano by varying touch, dynamics and register. In particular, “Darkness Into Air,” from Beirach’s *Self Portraits* (CMP, 1992), exhibits a command of the piano’s three registers: the bass, the middle and the treble.

On this same recording, the accented, staccato attack of “Grandfather’s Hammer” contrasts the lighter sustained ballad approach on “Song Of Experience.”

Taking the concept of variety even further, on “A Quiet, Normal Life,” Beirach uses the technique of prepared piano, in which objects are placed on and between the strings to drastically change the sound.

### LESS IS MORE

In clinics and in my private teaching, it has been my experience that many students overcompensate for the lack of a rhythm section by trying to sound like a whole band. For example, often less-experienced pianists will substitute their left hand for the “missing” bass player, walking a bass line on the piano. This is not particularly effective; the left hand tends to get in the way of the right hand because the contrast in sonority that exists with an actual bass player is obviously missing with the “left-hand bass,” so the sound gets muddled up.

To be clear, there are no hard-and-fast rules. Some pianists are able to use the left-hand bass with some success. (An obvious example is the great Lennie Tristano, whose right-hand lines were so strongly articulated that nothing could get in the way, not even a sometimes overbearing left hand.) In my opinion, however, it’s a device best used sparingly, if at all, and with great deliberation.

Another left-hand “trap” that students fall into is banging out chords on the downbeat of each measure. While there’s nothing wrong with hitting a “one” now and then, too much of this sounds unmusical and may indicate that you are dependent on your left hand to ground the time. In order to break this habit, you will need a strong right hand to express the rhythmic pulse.

Listen, for example, to Bill Evans’ solo piano version of “Here’s That Rainy Day.” While best known for his trio recordings, Evans’ understated approach to solo piano on his 1968 Verve album, *Alone*, is very effective. There’s no need for a rhythm section or for left-hand bass lines. Evans’ right hand provides the rhythmic momentum.

How do you develop a strong right hand and internalize the time in this way? Practice playing eighth-note lines with only the right hand, and record yourself regularly. Pick a simple tune so you can focus on the rhythm, without worrying about complex changes. In fact, you can start by playing over one chord. It can be as simple as a C7 chord. It doesn’t

### Example 2: Bill Evans’ “A Time For Love” Excerpt



matter. When you listen back, are your eighth notes lined up rhythmically? Are they dynamically controlled and even, or are some notes randomly louder than others? Where might you be rushing or slowing down, and why do these tendencies manifest? Are you rushing your triplets? Hesitating at an unfamiliar bridge?

Solo piano forces you to be honest with yourself. It is like playing under a giant magnifying glass, where every note counts for more than it would otherwise. You will become hyper-aware of your own flaws, and working on them will make you a better pianist in any situation.

The metronome can be useful as a reference point, but be careful not to become dependent on it.

As your right hand becomes more independent, you will find your left hand is freed up to explore more interesting rhythms. Check out the offbeat accents of Evans’ left hand on “A Time For Love” starting at 2:38, from the *Alone* CD. Here’s an example of how his extremely independent left and right hands interact at the top of the chorus. I’ve transcribed the first four bars of this section in Example 2, but the whole chorus is worth transcribing and learning to play.

The great thing about playing solo piano is that you have total control, and infinite possibilities: textures ranging from thick block chords to one single line; broad and expansive rubato ballads or swinging burners; dynamics from whisper soft to roaring loud. Enjoy exploring this infinite art form.

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Roberta Piket is a pianist, organist, composer, arranger, educator and occasional vocalist living in the New York area. Her most recent CD, *One For Marian: Celebrating Marian McPartland* (Thirteenth Note Records, 2016), features McPartland’s compositions arranged for sextet. The group frequently performs in trio and quartet formats as well. Piket’s previous two CDs were both solo piano recordings: 2012’s *Solo* and 2015’s *Emanation (Solo: Volume 2)*. In addition to freelancing, she performs with the quintet of her husband, the drummer Billy Mintz; with saxophonist Virginia Mayhew’s quartet; and in a free-improvisation trio with Mintz and saxophonist Louie Belogenis. Visit Piket online at [robertajazz.com](http://robertajazz.com).

### RECOMMENDED SOLO PIANO RECORDINGS

Geri Allen, *Flying Toward The Sound* (Motéma Music)

Richie Beirach, *Self Portraits* (CMP)

Paul Bley, *Open, To Love* (ECM)

Alan Broadbent, *Heart To Heart* (Chilly Bin Records)

Stanley Cowell, *Live At Maybeck Recital Hall* (Concord)

Bill Evans, *Alone* (Verve)

Chick Corea, *Piano Improvisations Vols. 1 & 2* (ECM)

Keith Jarrett, *Facing You* (ECM)

Russ Lossing, *Drum Music—Music Of Paul Motian* (Sunnyside)

Thelonious Monk, *Solo Monk* (Columbia)

Roberta Piket, *Solo and Emanation (Solo: Volume 2)* (Thirteenth Note Records)

Art Tatum, *Solo Masterpieces (Volumes 1–7)* (Pablo)

Lennie Tristano, *The New Tristano* (Atlantic Records)