





THE 4-PIECE CHALLENGE

Questioning the Culture of Speed in Music Lessons

By Karen Gerelus

Every day, students around the world are practicing their instruments and working toward recitals, festivals, competitions, exams or even on their way to completing 40 pieces in a year. You have probably heard of the 40-Piece Challenge, conceptualized by Australian composer, teacher and author Elissa Milne. The general premise is that a repertoire-rich system of learning takes students through a large quantity of pieces each year in pursuit of stronger reading skills, a breadth of stylistic knowledge and student engagement as they cycle quickly through repertoire (Milne 2015). This idea has been taken up by many well-known music educators (Stevens, 2013) and bloggers (Topham 2019) around the world with recognizable success. They all acknowledge that learning 40 pieces at the student's maximum capacity is impossible and work

with incrementally more difficult pieces, which can be learned in about one week. The main idea: quantity is quality. There is certainly a difference in understanding between a student who has learned 10 Bach minuets and the student who has learned one Bach minuet. This system of learning is primarily intended for beginner and early-intermediate students, with some variations such as the 40-Page Challenge for advanced students working through many pages of sonatas or scherzos.

The criticism that arises from this approach involves breadth versus depth. At the end of the year, how many pieces can the student play by heart, with conviction, and at a high level of excellence? If there is a public piano in the middle of a shopping mall will they be able to spontaneously sit down and perform without music? Has the music made a long-term impact on the student? Has it become engrained

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as part of “who they are”? As adults, will they hear a piece and reflect “I used to play that piece when I was little and *loved it*”? This is hard to accomplish if they had only experienced the piece for a week. For those students who proudly exclaim, “I learned 40 pieces this year!” how much of the music will they remember a month from now? Mozart completed the 40-symphony challenge while Beethoven only completed 9 symphonies. Which would most musicologists agree is the greater collection? In response to the 40-Piece Challenge, I present to you the 4-Piece Challenge. I developed this challenge based on my own teaching practice and learning-related evidence from educational psychology literature. The following pages will draw from scholarly work, popular publications and personal reflections to encourage a deeper style of learning and less speed in music lessons. Ultimately, this article asks what it really means to *learn*.

The Slow Movement

There is an uprising in the world that runs against the culture of speed. In contrast to instant messenger, fast food, line-jumping, pre-ordering and fast-tracking, the Slow Movement seeks to unravel the speed at which the world now moves. It began in 1989 with the Slow Food Movement in Italy, which was founded by Carlo Petrini in reaction to the spreading fast food culture (Petrini 2007). His initial goal was to promote enjoyment of traditional, regional foods and the aesthetic experience of eating quality food, but subsequently expanded the mission to include sustainability and social justice. At its heart, the Slow Food Movement is not only about food, but about people, and adding “a more human, less frantic pace of life to celebrate conviviality, the enjoyment of company round the table” (Petrini 2007, 65). The slow movement has been taken up in a number of different disciplines but has not yet found its way into music, which continues to demand faster, bigger, more impressive outcomes for students.

More recently, Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber have written *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (2007). Their reflections mainly focus

on universities as institutions that are becoming increasingly corporatized, however there are many important concepts we can take away as private studio teachers. For example, we are taught that displays of busyness are useful and impressive. But if there is one sector of society who should be resisting the world’s frantic pace and cultivating deep and critical thought, it is teachers. For those students working through an enormous amount of repertoire in the piano studio each year, when does it leave time to experiment, to dream, to reinvent or to find meaning? True learning must be allowed to take all the time it needs. Could there be a link between the pressure of a deadline and a lack of imaginative playing? It is not hard to reach this conclusion, and longstanding research has shown that even with interesting activities, deadlines decrease people’s intrinsic motivation for that activity (Amabile DeJong and Lepper 1976, 92–8). This is because deadlines are perceived to be controlling, and controlled people tend to do things because they think they “should” or they have to” (Deci and Ryan 1985, 109–134). This should make you pause for thought about the process and not the product. For Berg and Seeber, they are personally shifting their thinking from time as a linear and quantifiable progression to a process of *becoming*. For piano students, this means that rather than thinking about the accumulation of titles on a 40-piece mission, we might encourage them to think about each piece contributing to an unfolding of who they are as musicians (regardless of how many pieces they learn).

Aligned with the *Slow Professor* is the Slow Science movement (The Slow Science Academy 2010). Their manifesto is particularly apt for musicians due to the longstanding nature of our two respective fields. In the excerpt below, all of the terms “science” or “scientist” have simply been changed to “music” or “musician”:

Music needs time to think. Music needs time to read, and time to fail. Music does not always know what it might be at right now. Music develops unsteadily, with jerky moves and unpredictable leaps forward—at the same time, however, it creeps about on a very



slow time scale, for which there must be room and to which justice must be done. Slow music was pretty much the only music conceivable for hundreds of years; today, we argue, it deserves revival and needs protection. Society should give musicians the time they need, but more importantly, musicians must *take* their time.

Higher institutions of learning are widely compelling their students to slow down. In an address to students, dean of Harvard College, Harry R. Lewis, titled his speech *Slow Down: Getting More out of Harvard by Doing Less*. His advice to students: “You are more likely to sustain the intense effort needed to accomplish first-rate work in one area if you allow yourself some leisure time, some recreation, some time for solitude, rather than packing your schedule with so many activities that you have no time to think about why you are doing what you are doing” (2004). Some people might simply call this *focus*. Lewis’s same sentiments could apply to the volume of music we are compelling our students to push through in an academic year. If students are to reach first-rate work on certain pieces, there must be time for rest and reflection. More importantly, if

someone were to ask your student why they are learning 40 pieces, would they be able to tell them?

Slow Thinking and Long-Term Benefits

There is a stream within psychology that compares the “fast” and the “slow” brain. This is most widely attributed to Nobel-prize winner Daniel Kahneman and his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011). The general premise is that we have two thought processes: System 1, or Fast, which includes automatic, effortless or unconscious responses, and System 2, or Slow, which includes logical, effortful and conscious thought. For example, a fast-brain scenario might be localizing the source of a specific sound, while a slow-brain scenario might be getting your rental car into a tight parking space. Kahneman explains that most of the time we operate in System 1 because System 2 is so much slower, deliberate and less efficient (Kahneman and Frederick, 2007, 45–6). System 2 consumes more energy, but for a complex task such as playing the piano it should be the one in charge.

Part of the problem with our rapid-firing brains is the desire for the “quick fix.” Students in particular seem to be more

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inclined toward instant gratification than in previous years. Could it be said that the 40-Piece Challenge panders to this rapid but shallow level of learning? In his book, *The Slow Fix*, Carl Honoré cites that delayed gratification and adopting long-term thinking is hard work (2013, 23). Making room for slowness means never rushing through things or moving forward just to prove a point. Honoré advocates that going slowly even has a spiritual connection since “the great benefit of slowing down is reclaiming the time and tranquility to make meaningful connections (2004, 277). Our teaching always has been about connecting with the music. I urge you to consider this: nothing worth having ever came easily or quickly. This concept can apply to university degrees, baking bread, road trips or even marriage. In terms of music, it means that no piece truly worth playing is ever going to be learned in one week.

Leaving Space and Interleaving

There are a number of recent publications in the field of education that draw on the field of neuroscience and are helpful to use when considering slow learning. Without getting into a review of declarative versus procedural memory and the processes that create neural pathways, you will at least want to familiarize yourself with the terms “consolidation” (forming, strengthening, stabilizing and storing information) and “retrieval” (being able to search, find and bring forward things you have already stored). These are two particularly important terms that the authors of *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* use to explain spaced learning. Leaving space between learning the same task allows us to better organize and understand the problem in our minds:

Embedding new learning in long-term memory requires a process of consolidation, in which memory traces (the brain’s representations of new learning) are strengthened, given meaning, and connected to prior knowledge—a process that unfolds over hours and may take several days. Rapid fire practice leans on short-term memory. Durable learning, however, requires time for mental rehearsal... Hence, spaced practice works better. The increased

effort to retrieve the learning after a little forgetting has the effect of retriggering consolidation, further strengthening memory (Brown, Roediger and McDaniel, 2014, 49).

If we used spaced learning to approach a piece, with the acknowledgement that forgetting between practices is natural and valuable, we are forced to draw upon long-term memory retrieval, which leads to more meaningful learning. This seems to suggest that we cannot “move on” from a piece when we have successfully performed it once because it only exists in short-term memory. In order to sufficiently and durably say we have *learned*, we need to allow it space and time, and return to the piece again with fresh ears and a slightly restructured brain.

Research tells us that not only do we need to leave space, it tells us that learning should be messy and messiness brings about creativity. Learning should involve a process of unraveling and re-ravelling; it should be about taking things apart and putting them back together with a new and better result. Deep learning is about *rediscovery*: discovering the same thing over and over again and understanding it in different ways. Ultimately, in music, it should involve going beyond the score into your own world of creativity. As shown in Bloom’s Taxonomy (see Figure 1), creativity is the highest level to which we can aspire and the hierarchy “elevates creativity as the most complex of the cognitive processes” (Hanna 2007, 7–16). While some musicians may compose or improvise to reach creativity, the classical piano world interprets. What can you bring to this piece that has never been tried before? How will you give new life to these notes and rhythms? Creativity is not just a cognitive process, but it is the place where students get the knowledge out of their heads and into their hearts and bodies. It is where we *feel* the music and, in turn, the music changes us. Students attempting to complete 40 pieces likely do not have a chance to reach this level, and in all probability get stuck in the third “Applying” phase before being asked to move on. Good learning does not involve a neat sequence of incrementally more difficult tasks, and neat sequences do not allow for the messiness that creativity demands.

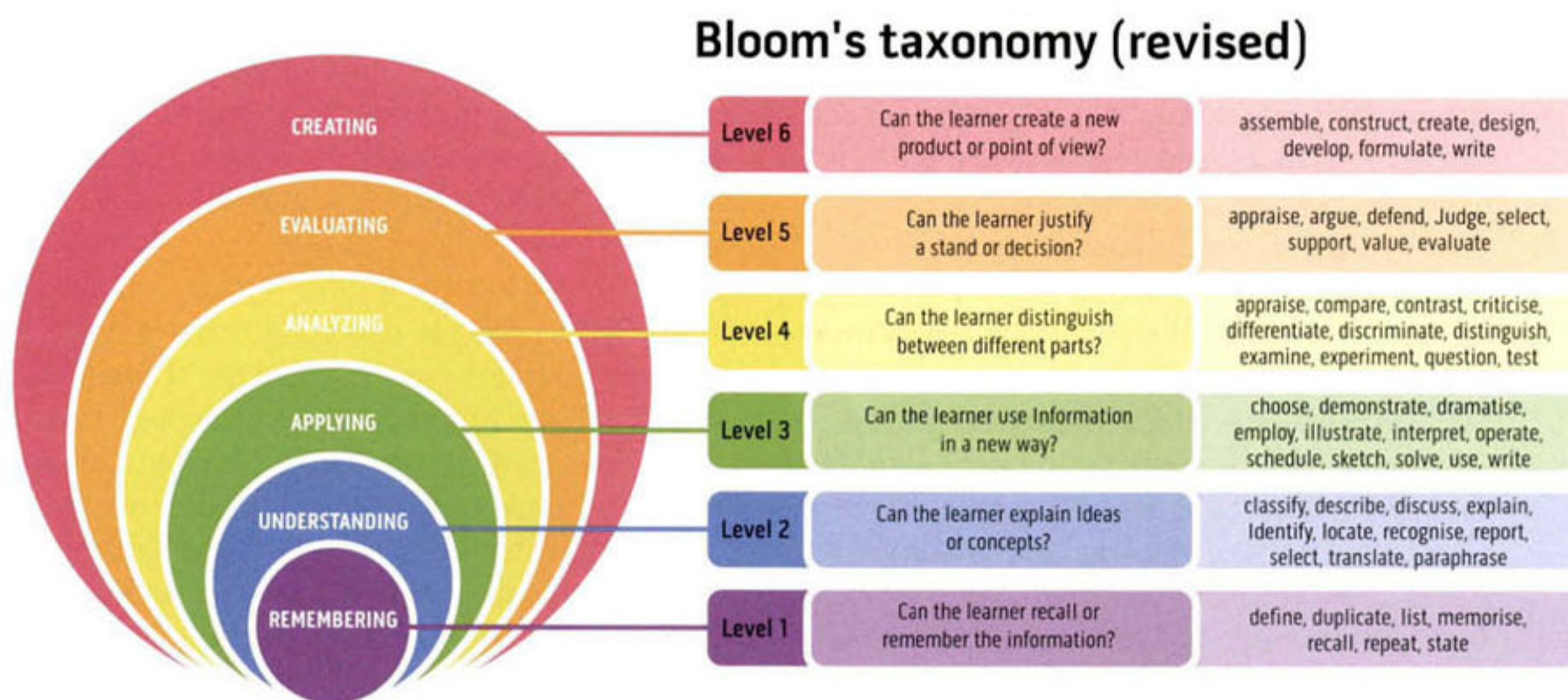


Figure 1: Niall McNulty (2017) Bloom's Taxonomy

Incorporating messiness into the process of learning itself is sometimes called *interleaving*. The topic of interleaving has been taken up by many scholars but presented more simply and beautifully in the book *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. Here, author James Lang explains that “interleaving refers to the practice of spending some time learning one thing and then pausing to concentrate on learning a second thing before having quite mastered that first thing, and then returning to the first thing, and then moving onto a third thing, and then returning to the second thing, and so forth” (2016, 68). From my understanding of the 40-Piece Challenge, students learn Piece A and B in Week 1, Piece C in Week 2, Piece D in Week 3 and so on, until they have accomplished a series of 40 pieces. This orderliness and simplicity is an appealing way to quantify progress. However, with an *interleaving* approach, students would be introduced to Pieces A and C simultaneously, the next week Piece B is added, then a few weeks later Piece A gets momentarily set aside in favor of Piece D, and so on. Please let me be clear at this point—I am not talking about List A, B, C, D as might be found in the language of preparing for a conservatory exam. Learning the 4 required pieces for an exam and then abandoning them the day after the exam presents a different, equally troubling problem. Pieces

in the 4-Piece Challenge presented here may certainly capture one particular era, depending on your student's strengths and weakness and the teacher's pedagogical goals. While weaving their way through 4 pieces, learners may find this winding path frustrating. Compared to their peers on the straight and narrow path, they may have nothing completely learned, while their friends have finished 5 or 6 pieces. According to all the research on interleaving, though, the students who have gone back and forth in their learning are going to understand and retain the information much better than the students in the sequential learning model—not only by the final recital, but going forward in their music learning long-term.

The Practical, The Slow and The Messy

So how can we achieve the 4-Piece Challenge? You and your student, together, will choose 4 pieces and work on them over a long period of time until they can be played at any speed, on any instrument and for anyone at any time. Supplement these core pieces with other material as the year progresses, but do not move past this special set. For example, my student Tira (age 7) has been learning a Minuet in G Major, Arietta, *Cradle Song* and *The Happy Farmer* over a number of months. Tira has all of these pieces memorized, can transpose many of them and recently performed in a master class with Marvin Blickenstaff. I

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have also given her a few Bartók selections, a significantly easier minuet and other material that she has accomplished in only a week. Her lessons never involve playing a piece once and moving to the next task: We play the Arietta and then a scale, then left-hand alone of Minuet, then Arietta again focusing on something new, then right hand of Minuet, then the *Happy Farmer* as a duet, then get off the bench to do theory, then the scale at a faster tempo, then trying Minuet hands together for the first time, then an easy piece well below her regular level, and so on. In his book, *How We Learn*, Benedict Carey clarifies that interleaving “is not just about review but also discriminating between types of problems, moves, or concepts” (2014, 170). The mixing up of skills during lessons not only helps the student review, but helps us identify the differences between each skill and achieve a clearer grasp of them individually. It also de-emphasizes the lesson as an itemized “student performance-teacher lecture” and points lessons toward more of a learning exercise. Further, students are surrounding the new skill with older things that are already well-established in a “stretch and relax” kind of way.

Merlin Thompson uses the terms *growth* and *rest* pieces (Thompson, 2018). In this instance, your student’s 4 pieces at the heart are challenging but doable, rich with teachable moments and surrounded by other more easily achievable pieces. We all know that we cannot learn at our maximum capacity at every minute; exhaustion and frustration set in quickly. But the *rest* pieces serve as little gems along the way. In the meantime, play the growth pieces until *magic moments* start to emerge: those moments where messages from the student’s heart run down their arms and through their fingers are the point of musical excellence. The 4 pieces will be learned to such a high standard that expression and creativity become the ultimate goal, but also many components of technique and theory can be interwoven because the student understands the music so intimately. All of a sudden, young students understand why technique and theory are actually important and understand it better because they have experienced it. Critics of this approach may worry that your student will be left behind as

their friends complete an additional 36 pieces. I would remind them that there is an important place in this world both for sprinters and long-distance runners. And as the age-old saying goes, “slow and steady wins the race.”

Slow Relationships

The whole process really has to do with building relationships: between the student and pieces; the student and teacher; the piece and an audience; and the student’s past, current and future selves as they play this music over time. The relationship you build with anything (or anyone) should change you. I encourage your students to make friends with their pieces and let it change them. It means that a piece must be learned so well that it has been practiced, performed, ripped apart, relearned, reimagined, put back together, evolved and creatively been taken beyond the score. It has become part of the student’s identity and will be with them going forward throughout their musical journey. If someone was to make a playlist or soundtrack of their life, these pieces would be on it. Surely you can imagine those certain special pieces you played for years without becoming bored: You came back to it time and again to experience what it offered. For me, those have been the Three Gershwin Preludes, Samuel Barber’s *Excursions*, and Oscar Peterson’s *Canadiana Suite*, which I have practiced and performed at various points over the last decade. They remind me of my love affair with jazz in high school, my proud Canadian heritage and the final solo recital I gave before my mum passed away. Good music can make you remember everything and forget everything at the same time. Playing these pieces years later transports me to different places and times and allows me to infuse the music with the new life experience I have gained since first reading the score. The relationship between a student musician and “their” piece is something to be celebrated, but takes time to cultivate.

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