An Interview with Spencer Myer: 21st-Century American Pianist
By Lynn Worcester Jones

Steps to Parnassus
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Spencer Myer: 21st-Century American Pianist

Setting the Scene
Spencer Myer emerged as a concert pianist of note upon winning three important competitions shortly after the turn of this century. In 2004, he placed first in the UNISA International Piano Competition in South Africa, then in 2006 he won the Christel DeHaan Classical Fellowship from the American Pianists Association, and he was the gold medalist in the 2008 New Orleans International Piano Competition. We also know Myer as a laureate of the 2007 William Kapell, the 2005 Cleveland, and the 2005 Busoni International piano competitions. In 2013, he was the MTNA National Conference Artist.

In addition to his solo career, Myer is a sought-after chamber musician. Myer’s lineage can be traced back to the Lhevinnes, Schnabel, Fleisher, and others through his advanced studies with Joseph Schwartz, Peter Takács, Julian Martin, and Christina Dahl. He earned a bachelor of music from the Oberlin Conservatory, a master of music from The Juilliard School, and a doctor of musical arts from Stony Brook University. He has served on several faculties and is currently a faculty member at the Longy School of Music of Bard College. As an innovative 21st-century musician, his students benefit from his first-hand experience as a soloist, chamber musician, collaborator, teacher, coach, and manager, among other roles.

We were lucky that Spencer Myer found time to sit down with Clavier Companion: The Piano Magazine to be interviewed by Lynn Worcester Jones. Highlights of the interview follow. Please visit ClavierCompanion.com to read more of the interview with Spencer Myer. Be on the lookout for news about Spencer Myer’s Frances Clark Center webinar this winter.

An Interview with Spencer Myer

By Lynn Worcester Jones

Spencer Myer on His Formative Piano Studies

Lynn Worcester Jones: When did you begin your piano studies?

Spencer Myer: I started piano when I was six. Actually, I was in line with my mother to sign up for the baseball team, when I tugged on her sleeve and said ... what I really wanted to do was take piano lessons. So, I played baseball for two years, but we went immediately to sign up for lessons. So I started [piano] when I was six.

I think it is important to always be aware of what drives you. Knowing why you continue to do music and why you started it in the first place is important. For me, it was a deeply-seated, total, complete love for music that was inescapable and I felt that I just had to do it. And, that still drives me to this day. It brings me so much satisfaction and joy. And thank goodness, it did take my parents saying, “Yes, this is a possibility for you, and you can do this.”

LWJ: How difficult or easy was it for you as a young child to practice piano?

SM: You know, it was easy at first. I was very drawn to the piano because my dad was a classical guitarist. My whole life he was an engineer, but his first degree is in music. So, he would play his guitar at home, [and] we had a piano, [and] he would play his records. So I was surrounded by music, and I came to it on my own. I never had to be really forced into it. However, after a couple years of lessons I do remember hitting a hump where it got difficult, and that was the only time my parents had to enforce practice, where I had to do thirty minutes a day or an hour a day.
That lasted maybe about six months and then, when I got over the hump, it started to come more easily. I think every child goes through that at least once, where it's difficult and you don't want to face the challenge. For me, after that, there was no looking back. I was pretty self-motivated from that point on to practice.

**LWJ:** So then, piano was always priority number one growing up?

**SM:** Yes. I did do other things, but piano was always a priority. Not so much that my life ever felt unbalanced in the piano direction. I did have a very normal childhood and did explore other things. I often hear teachers complaining about how their students are spread in so many different directions and are involved in every activity in school, and that was never quite me. I was always pretty focused on music—piano and other musical pursuits. I sang in choir and everything. I [feel] I had a pretty balanced childhood.

**LWJ:** What aspects of your musical training from your youth were most important?

**SM:** I always say that I wish I had done more really basic technique work when I was very young. There is a lot to be said for students learning difficult repertoire or Czerny etudes when they're young, before their bodies know it's difficult. When you get to a certain age and you've started listening to say the Rachmaninoff third concerto or the Tchaikovsky concerto, and you're telling yourself that it's difficult, and then you go and try to learn it, it's automatically difficult. Whereas, a child can learn and can progress, just like learning a language. But, I would say that what I appreciate the most from my early training is that my teacher did a lot of scales and arpeggios with me. As much as I wish I did more technical work, she was religious about the scales and arpeggios. I started in Hanon, for about a year, then I went on to scales and arpeggios. I studied with my first teacher (Coren Estrin Minio) for ten years. And from that point on, it was scales and arpeggios in contrary motion, thirds, sixths, tenths, all kinds of different kinds of combinations of scales and arpeggios.

**LWJ:** In your youth, how much time did you dedicate to developing your technique in relation to learning and mastering repertoire?
**SM:** I would say in my first few years, I would practice an hour a day. Maybe ten minutes of that was devoted to scales, arpeggios, and technique. I wish I had forced myself to do more. If I had understood better the concept of learning and drilling these things when young, I would have done it a lot more. That’s my one regret. I was always a good sight reader and was just crazy about music, so I was more prone to jump into the repertoire. I wish I had drilled my technique a little bit more. When I got to university, there were a lot of holes I had to fill in. I was always very musical, but I was clumsy. I learned things really quickly and carelessly and faked a lot, so I do wish I had spent a greater percentage of my practice when I was young on technical stuff.

**LWJ:** Are there any pieces in your repertoire that you are happy you learned while you were in high school and college?

**SM:** For me actually no, because I really did have a lot of clumsy habits. In my last year of high school, I studied the “Appassionata,” Chopin’s fourth Ballade, and the Rachmaninoff second concerto. Every time I come back to pieces I studied in high school, I have to work through another bad habit that I still haven’t worked out. It’s so difficult!

**LWJ:** Was it that you wanted to learn that repertoire, or was it repertoire that you were encouraged to learn?

**SM:** A little bit of both. I was always self-driven, in terms of repertoire. I started listening to classical music really intently around junior high school and got to know so much repertoire through listening. I went through high school with a well-formulated idea of what I wanted to study. My teacher, of course, helped guide me. If there was a piece that was totally inappropriate, then she would steer me away from it. But basically, those were pieces that I chose.

**Spencer Myer on Performing and Practicing**

**LWJ:** When you got to college, did you know you wanted to pursue a performance career?

**SM:** I did, but I don’t think I realized what was involved. I just knew I wanted to play. I think that was actually a very healthy mentality to have. Knowing that no matter what, I wanted to be playing.

**LWJ:** Aside from actually performing the music, what is your favorite thing about having a performing career?

**SM:** I do really love to perform. But, I find that the music itself provides an emotional outlet. I also find a lot of companionship in the music, the piano, and the composers. I’m often traveling alone when I’m performing. But, I’m definitely a people-person; I love being around my friends and loved ones. So, in the time alone on the road or while I’m practicing, I find companionship with the music and the composers.

**LWJ:** What’s your favorite repertoire to perform?

**SM:** I think the repertoire I feel the closest to and that I identify with the most is the Romantic repertoire of Rachmaninoff, Chopin,
Brahms, and Schumann. But, I love playing French Impressionist music, too. Just the idea that you can be a painter at the piano and make colors with sound is so incredibly engaging and fun for me.

**LWJ:** If you didn’t have to sleep, what would you do with extra time?

**SM:** Oh, that’s a good question. I think I would play the piano more. I do feel that there are not enough hours in the day for the amount of practicing and the amount of playing that I want to do. I also don’t feel like I have enough time to play for pleasure, even though I get so much pleasure out of every minute that I am at the piano. But, I wish I could spend more time just exploring repertoire and being at the piano—not in preparation for something that is coming up or for a performance. And, I would definitely spend more time with my friends, for sure.

**LWJ:** How do you maximize your practice time?

**SM:** Maximizing practice time is something I’ve learned greatly from doing competitions. I really credit my experience in competitions with my current work process. Having to prepare so much repertoire, that you will play perfectly in a short amount of time, really helps you to discover what needs to be done quickly. So, in the early stages of learning a piece, I discover problem spots and identify how I’ll need to practice them. Also, I think that slow practice is great because it changes the way the music feels. Because much of our practice is repetition, it can go too much into the muscle memory bank, and that is very dangerous when you get on stage. So, a lot of my practice is about finding ways to make it feel different so my brain is more engaged.

**LWJ:** Do you do mental practice?

**SM:** Yes, I do mental practice on planes and when I’m traveling. It trains my brain to be more engaged and constantly turned on. Occasionally, there are moments on stage, where, for example, if you feel yourself getting nervous or feel a memory slip coming on, it’s nice to shut off your brain for a minute, and just go on autopilot and draw on your muscle memory. But in general, I think the brain always needs to be engaged; that’s when you’re most successful as a performer.

**LWJ:** You have such an outstanding career, performing all over the world, winning so many competitions. Do you consider yourself a virtuoso?

**SM:** No, I definitely don’t consider myself a virtuoso. I’ve always felt that musicianship, expression, and sound came much more naturally to me than technique. Technique is something I have to work for. There are certain technical pieces that I’ve always thought other people could play better than me. I’ve always considered myself a musician-type player, rather than a virtuoso.

**LWJ:** Do you have any special routines on the day of a performance?

**SM:** Yes, I take a power nap. I didn’t really discover the benefits of having any sort of routine before performance until I did my first actual concert tour, which was after I won the competition in South Africa in 2004. Having to play a number of concerts in a row really illuminated a lot of things for me. A power nap really does help. I often don’t fall asleep, I just rest and shut my eyes for twenty or twenty-five minutes. I do not eat a full meal that will weigh me down, but instead, about two hours before performing, I have a high-protein, low-carb meal. So, for a 7:30 concert, at around five or five-thirty, I’ll generally eat a chicken salad or something simple that will give me energy through the concert. Then, I’ll have energy but not feel full and weighed down, and I won’t be completely starving when I’m done.

**LWJ:** How do you mentor students who want a career in performing?

**SM:** The best way for me to mentor is by doing it. The best education for them is to see that I’m teaching them all day and that I have a suitcase with me and I’m about to board a plane. They see that I haven’t practiced all day, but that I have a performance tomorrow and I’ll be spending a week away from my home and my friends. There are things like that, about a performing career, that students don’t think about.

Things I stress are the importance of having a lot of repertoire. As much as I regret that I was a careless learner because I’m a good sight reader, I learned a lot of repertoire. Having a lot of repertoire at my fingertips and also being able to learn quickly has helped me hugely in my career. Additionally, honing your practice skills, largely because you never know how much time you’re going to have to prepare for a concert is also important for students.
**LWJ:** For students who are used to taking more time to learn a piece, how do you advise them to start learning faster for their own benefit?

**SM:** I think learning music and sight reading are skills that are important and can be developed, like improvising, just by doing it. I encourage all of my students to just start sight reading. Take out slow movements of Mozart sonatas and sight read. Once the sight reading starts to get faster, the learning process can go faster. As much as I like to go into detail with a piece, after we’ve spent two to three lessons on it, I encourage my students to bring in something else. That gets them into that habit of absorbing a lot of repertoire.

**LWJ:** What advice do you have for those students who get really nervous before they perform?

**SM:** First, I talk about their practice techniques and about engaging the brain, not just playing the piece over and over again to get it into muscle memory. When I’m on stage, I breathe because we so often forget to breathe when we get nervous. When I have a moment on stage where I’m feeling nervous, the first thing I tend to think about are the notes and the mistakes I’m about to make. So, my default is to start singing in my head. This is not out loud, but I have a picture of myself standing on stage singing that somehow takes me out of that state of nervousness, out of thinking about the notes and the mistakes, and brings me more into the music. That’s really what it’s all about. If you can stay focused on the music, the nerves have a lot more room to dissipate.

**LWJ:** What words do you use to describe yourself as a person, performer, and teacher?

**SM:** Positive is the first thing that comes to mind. I’m encouraging as a teacher. I have always thought that it is possible to illustrate to students that something is wrong without telling them that they are bad. Some other words that apply to my teaching are encouraging, matter of fact, and down to business. As a person, I’m positive, easy going, passionate, loving, and affectionate. And that translates to teaching as well.

**Editor’s Note:** For additional, online-only content, read more of our interview with Spencer Myer at claviercompanion.com where Spencer discusses collaboration, performance anxiety, and challenges facing concert pianists today.

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