

THE ROLE OF SELF-CONFIDENCE IN PERFORMANCE: REFLECTIONS ON NOA KAGEYAMA'S APPROACH IN THE CONTEXT OF TRAINING YOUNG PIANISTS

ROXANA OTA 

University Lecturer, PhD,
"George Enescu" National University of Arts,
Iași (Romania)²⁷
roxana_ota@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study explores the concept of expressive courage in performance, through the lens of psychology, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by young pianists. It draws on the "Becoming Fearless" course created by Noa Kageyama - psychologist, performer, and professor at The Juilliard School - who is widely recognized for applying principles of sports psychology to the field of music. His approach offers strategies for managing performance anxiety, enhancing focus, and building self-confidence. Key strategies discussed include keeping a journal, engaging in mental rehearsal, distinguishing between practice for learning and practice for performance, and regularly reflecting on two central questions: "What went well?" and "What do I want to improve?" The study highlights that many of the challenges young performers face are not solely technical or artistic, but often rooted in emotional and psychological factors - such as fear of failure, perfectionism, low self-confidence, or difficulty performing under pressure. By integrating these psychological tools into their daily practice, young pianists can, according to Kageyama, develop healthier mental habits that foster expressive, authentic, and resilient performances.

Keywords

Noa Kageyama, stage preparation, performance psychology, performer preparation, practice techniques

²⁷ 29 Cuza Voda Street, Iași 700040, Romania

Introduction

From a pedagogical perspective, the stage preparation of a pianist cannot be approached as an isolated endeavor, but must be integrated from the earliest stages of the study of a work. This is the result of a well-established relationship between a deep musical understanding, an effective study methodology and a psychological preparation adapted to the challenges that each performer faces, according to his or her level of training. The present study offers some reflections on the concept of *expressive courage* in performance through the lens of psychology, with a particular focus on the specific difficulties faced by young pianists.

1. About Noa Kageyama and the *Becoming Fearless* course, part of the *Practice that Sticks* program

The starting point is the *Becoming Fearless* course²⁸, designed by psychologist and performer Noa Kageyama²⁹ - a specialist in the psychology of artistic performance and professor at the prestigious *Juilliard School*. Kageyama is known for integrating the principles of psychology into the field of music, providing a sound theoretical and practical framework for managing stage anxiety, developing concentration and cultivating self-confidence. From my own pedagogical experience, as well as from the perspective offered by Noa Kageyama's course, it is becoming increasingly clear that artistic success is not only built in the study hall, but also in the depths of the performer's mind, as the author says: "The mental side of performance is as important as the technical side. In fact, it is often the missing piece of the puzzle."³⁰

²⁸ Noa Kageyama, *Becoming Fearless: And Learning How to Trust Yourself on Stage*, <https://bulletproofmusician.com>, accessed: 2.03.2025.

²⁹ Born in Marysville, Ohio, Noa Kageyama holds both a bachelor's degree in psychology from *Oberlin College and Conservatory* and a master's degree in violin performance from *Juilliard*, where he studied with such prominent names in the musical landscape as Franco Gulli, Paul Kantor, Masao Kawasaki, Roland and Almita Vamos, and Donald Weilerstein. He later dedicated himself to psychology and obtained a master's degree in this field at *Indiana University*. He currently teaches at the conservatory where he graduated, *Juilliard*, and coaches the *New World Symphony Orchestra*. Kageyama specializes in teaching performers how to use the principles of psychology used by competitive athletes to most effectively exploit all their abilities under pressure. He has conducted workshops at institutions such as *Northwestern University*, *New England Conservatory*, *Peabody*, *Eastman* and the *U.S. Armed Forces School of Music*. He has taught in programs such as the *Starling-DeLay Symposium*, *Perlman Music Program*, and *National Orchestral Institute*, as well as for organizations such as the *Music Teachers' National Association* and the *National Association of Teachers of Singing*.

³⁰ "The mental side of performance is just as important as the technical side. In fact, it's often the missing piece in the puzzle." Noa Kageyama, *Why Musicians Should Train Like Athletes*, *The Bulletproof Musician*, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/why-musicians-should-train-like-athletes/>, accessed: 2.03.2025.

Kageyama has been featured in such publications as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Musical America*, *Strings Magazine*, *Strad*, and *Lifehacker*. He maintains a private coaching practice and a blog on applied psychology in music performance, *The Bulletproof Musician*, which has more than 100,000 monthly readers. On this platform he has also included the *Practice that Sticks* program, which contains several modules. Reflections on Noah Kageyama's course emphasize the value of a perspective that combines psychology with performance practice.

What makes this course truly relevant is the way in which research in the field of psychology is tailored to the real needs of musicians, giving them concrete support in the tense moments associated with stage appearances. The proposed techniques - such as mental rehearsal, stress simulations or concentration plans - are not just abstract ideas, but clear methods that are directly applicable in daily study and concert preparation. Kageyama's approach is balanced and geared towards progress, not perfection, encouraging patience and confidence in the artistic journey. For performers who have frequently experienced the emotions of the stage, the course can be a truly transformative experience, radically changing the way they relate to the stage, the audience and, above all, to their own performance.

2. Issues addressed: a parallel between pedagogical observation and Noah Kageyama's hypotheses

In my pedagogical work, I have identified a number of recurrent difficulties in the path of young pianists, obstacles that affect both their stage appearance and their emotional balance.

2.1. Stage pressure

One of the most common problems observed is the intense pressure felt by young people in contexts involving a concert or recital. Although they have mastered the work in the learning environment, mental blocks, unexpected mistakes or loss of control occur on stage. This reaction is caused by a natural tendency of the body to become cautious and tense under pressure, which often leads to under-performance. Kageyama explains this phenomenon by analogy with athletes who start playing not to lose, not to win. Furthermore, he emphasizes that "playing cautiously is often more risky than assuming an authentic and confident interpretative gesture"³¹. In this sense, the solution lies not in eliminating fear, but in cultivating confidence in one's own preparation and training the instinct

³¹ "We sound different when playing with confidence than when playing from a cautious and tentative place." Noa Kageyama, *Becoming Fearless*, Module 5, p. 12, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/> accessed: 2.03.2025.

to keep going, "getting used to doing the exact opposite when under pressure"³².

2.2. Perfectionism and fear of failure

Fear of failure often blocks spontaneity and expressiveness. I've noticed that many students prefer a safe but unvibrant approach, avoiding any artistic risk. Kageyama argues that this kind of behavior stems from a misinterpretation of the idea of „perfect practice makes perfect," which can actually encourage a mindset of avoiding mistakes instead of being open to trying new things. He makes an essential distinction between „positive mistakes, which arise in the process of artistic exploration and foster learning, and negative mistakes, which come from an overly cautious attitude and do not bring real progress"³³.

2.3. Inefficiency in the learning process

Another difficulty is the often superficial nature of individual study, centered on mechanical repetition rather than active analysis. From my teaching experience, I have noticed that many young people lack clear methods of identifying the technical problems that lead to mistakes. Kageyama confirms this observation, stating that "not all study hours are equal and that repetition in itself does not guarantee performance, only deliberate practice based on analysis, reflection and strategic adjustments"³⁴. He proposes a model³⁵ carried out in three stages -

³² "The safest thing to do is actually to condition yourself to do the opposite of your normal instinct under pressure. To practice becoming comfortable really going for the big shift and approaching those passages with trust. Proving to yourself over time, that 'letting go' as Obi-Wan suggested, is actually the most effective thing you can do. Even if it might feel scarier." Noah Kageyama, *Becoming Fearless*, Module 5, p. 12, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/>, accessed: 2.03.2025.

³³ "A 'positive' error could be thought of as a mistake that happens when you're trying something new or different, trying to stretch the envelope, and really go for something compelling. Where even if the attempt fails or falls short, you still learn something from it, and take a forward step in your evolution as a musician." Noah Kageyama, *Becoming Fearless*, Module 5, p. 22, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/>, accessed: 2.03.2025.

³⁴ "Not all practice is created equal. That repetition alone doesn't lead to expert performance, and that 'deliberate practice' is an important key to getting good at things in the most effective and efficient way possible." Noah Kageyama, *Practice That Sticks*, Module 1, p. 9, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/>, accessed: 2.03.2025.

³⁵ There are three phases to every repetition: **Phase 1:** It all starts with a goal or target. A clear idea what you want a phrase, or even a single note, to sound like (PLAN - or 'forethought' phase). **Phase 2:** Then you give it a go, and do your best to hit that target (PLAY - or 'performance' phase). **Phase 3:** And then it's time for some reflection. Did you hit the target? If not, what happened instead? And why did that happen? (REFLECT - 'self-reflection' phase). This then loops you right back into Phase 1 again. Because as you start identifying adjustments to make that might solve the problem, this becomes your new goal or target. See how it's just a big circular or iterative process?", Noah Kageyama,

planning, execution, reflection - in which each attempt is followed by a specific analysis of the results and the technical causes of the problems encountered.

2. 4. Loss of motivation and the illusion of progress

Many young people feel demotivated because the results obtained during the study are not preserved during the performance on stage. This is explained, according to Kageyama, by what he calls the "illusion of mastery"³⁶ - the phenomenon whereby apparent progress during rehearsals is in fact temporary and not reinforced by memorization strategies. One of the central ideas is that it is not the amount of time spent at the instrument that is decisive, but the quality of attention and intention with which the practice takes place.

3. The applicability of Noa Kageyama's practice techniques in piano study: a personalized pedagogical selection

I thought it appropriate to extract from Noa Kageyama's lectures those strategies that can have a direct and effective impact on the way pianists, especially young pianists, learn, study and perform. The selection below covers those techniques that can be easily integrated into the daily study routine.

3. 1. Goal-Oriented Practice³⁷

One of the first recommendations is to begin each study session with a clear goal, be it technical, expressive or memorization. Instead of rehearsing a work from start to finish, Kageyama encourages us to work in small sections with the clear intention of resolving a particular aspect, for example, legato in a phrase or articulating a quick passage. It involves a constant alternation between what we set out to do, execution and reflection, with each repetition becoming an opportunity for conscious learning. This approach is essential for pianists because the repertoire of this instrument is often very technically dense, and isolated study on small fragments becomes a necessity for real and consistent progress.

Practice That Sticks, Module 1, p. 13, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/> , accessed: 2.03.2025.

³⁶ "The kind of practice that increases performance reduces learning. And the kind of practice that increases learning comes at the expense of performance." *Noa Kageyama, Practice That Sticks*, Module 1, p. 24, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/> accessed: 2.03.2025.

³⁷ "Deliberate practice requires: 1) Having a clear goal in mind; 2) Identifying the imperfections in the result you heard, in very specific detail; 3) Making a guess at the underlying technical cause(s) of what you just heard; and 4) Coming up with specific technical adjustments to test out in your next attempt." Noa Kageyama, *Practice That Sticks*, p. 12, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/> accessed: 2.03.2025.

3. 2. Slow and conscious study - with controlled mistakes

The "Practicing Slowly with Variation" technique helps to automatically identify problems and consolidate greater control over movements. Kageyama emphasizes that mistakes are not the enemy of studying, but the material from which we can learn the most, provided we actively observe and patiently correct them.

3. 3. Spacing technique and distributing repetition over time

Another suggested technique is based on the idea that long-term learning is not achieved by intensive repetition in a single session, but by spreading it out over time (*distributed practice*), i.e. periodically returning to the material over several days. This technique reinforces long-term memory and reduces the need for constant 'relearning'.

3. 4. Mental simulation and pressure training

To combat stage fright, Kageyama recommends incorporating "simulations" into the routine, in which the musician imagines performing an audition or concert, replicating emotions, conditions and mental state as closely as possible. This type of controlled exposure helps the body and mind better adapt to the real-life pressure.

3. 5. Study diary and progress awareness

One of the most effective techniques suggested is keeping a study diary. It not only helps to structure a timetable, but also provides a sense of concrete progress and motivation. Reflecting daily on what went well and what needs to be improved turns studying into an active and self-evaluating process.

3. 6. Managing emotions and building confidence

The "Focus Plan" technique teaches us how to direct our attention consciously, from the mental preparation, to the start of the work, to the phrasing during the performance. For the moments when mistakes occur, it is also recommended to practice an automatic and positive response, whereby we immediately return to the musical discourse without getting stuck in the moment when the mistake occurred. This type of reaction can be practiced and becomes essential in maintaining fluency and composure. Also, 'reframing anxiety', turning fear into opportunity, is a mental exercise that helps us to see intense emotions as a sign of involvement, not of danger. Confidence should not be expected passively, but actively built, through concrete actions and decisions: a firm posture, confident eye contact, clear phrasing.

Conclusions

In the context of current research on the effectiveness of music study, it is becoming increasingly clear that artistic performance is not exclusively the result of many hours spent at the instrument, but rather of the conscious application of scientifically validated strategies. Effective study involves not quantitative accumulation but qualitative selection, the deliberate choice of methods that have proven their effectiveness in artistic practice.

The techniques proposed by Noa Kageyama offer not only a coherent theoretical framework but also tools with immediate applicability. When consistently and intentionally integrated into work routines, they produce significant changes in studio quality and interpretive confidence. Applying these principles does not eliminate the emotions associated with the scene, but it does allow for the development of a form of control over how they are managed. Instead of a sterile inner struggle, the musician learns to convert emotional tension into expressive energy, thereby building artistic freedom.

To achieve this ideal, it is essential to transform repetition from a mechanical process into an active mental process. Mistakes are no longer perceived as obstacles but as points of support for development, while the mind is trained with the same rigor as the instrumental gesture. Emotions become allies, not adversaries, and personal rituals of concentration can reinforce a state of presence and clarity essential to the interpretive act. In this way, a model of musical practice emerges in which technique, psychology and expressivity are mutually supportive, contributing to the formation of a solid interpretative personality, capable of transforming study into a conscious process and the stage into a space of freedom and artistic assumption.

Bibliography

- Hallam, Susan. *Music Psychology in Education*. Institute of Education, London: University of London, 2006.
- McPherson, Gary E.; Welch, Graham F. *The Oxford Handbook of Music Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Webography

- Cornett, Vanessa, Kageyama, Noa. „A bulletproof -interview with Noa Kageyama”. *American Music Teacher*, 69 (3), 2019, pp. 20-23, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27143182> accessed: 3.03.2025.

Kageyama, Noah. „Why musicians should train like athletes”, *The Bulletproof Musician*, <https://bulletproofmusician.com/why-musicians-should-train-like-athletes/> accessed: 2.03.2025.

The Juilliard School, *Noa Kageyama*,

Site <https://www.juilliard.edu/music/faculty/kageyama-noa> accessed: 3.03. 2025.

Teen World Arts. „Noa Kageyama”. <https://teenworldarts.com/magazine/noa-kageyama> accessed: 3.03.2025.c