

Becoming a Functional Pianist

Let's look at the piano. Don't be scared. It is essential that singers who are looking for ways to improve their ability to improvise have a good knowledge of the piano. This is because your instrument (the voice) is essentially an ear-activated slide whistle. You can't push a button to find a note when you are singing. Fortunately, when you are playing the piano, that is exactly what you do.

Keep in mind, for starters, that you don't need great technique at the keyboard to begin. What you need first and foremost is to be able to find notes on the keyboard, and this leads to finding harmony on the keyboard and perhaps even finding melody, scales and interesting material to sing over progressions at the keyboard. You need to become a functional pianist in the style that used to be called "arranger's piano."

Some of you may have experienced a wave of fear, or a feeling of self-loathing (or perhaps "piano-loathing") when I mentioned that you need to become functional as a pianist. One thing that many singing students have in common is a bad past experience with theory classes or piano study. I remember talking to a good working singer and something related to theory came up in the conversation and she said, "I should remember that—we talked about that in theory class and I thought I had it memorized." It was as if she was trying to remember a formula, how to do quadratic equations, or the combination of a locker. If you have not integrated theory basics into something that you can do at the piano (or guitar, although this is somewhat less desirable due to the complexities of the guitar fingerboard and the simplicity of the piano keyboard) then you might as well not study theory at all.

I had another student once—an opera singer who wanted to study piano—but confessed that she had an extreme mental block concerning the piano. She couldn't even



remember the pattern of white and black keys, and she hoped I could help her overcome this mental block. So we spent a lot of time concocting different tools she could use, writing the note names on the keys, drilling different aspects of note finding, using a drawing of a keyboard

and other ideas. Finally, since she was improving so little, I asked her to keep a diary of her work. When she returned three weeks later, she had recorded a total of 20 minutes of piano practice since I had last seen her. "Aha," I said, "I have discovered the nature of your mental block. You aren't practicing." Learning the piano does take time and effort. But by taking minimal steps and focusing on the music, you can improve steadily and I think somewhat painlessly. Thirty minutes a day should lead to massive improvement within a few months. (It should also give you six-pack abs and buns of steel, but I'm not promising anything there.)