THE 10 MINUTE PIANO VIRTUOSO
An Insider’s Guide to Transforming Your Piano Playing in Ten Minutes a Day

DAVID MOTTO
Coauthor of the bestseller Musician’s Practice Planner
THE 10 MINUTE Piano Virtuoso
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To my wife, Stephanie, for her unfailing support, creative ideas, and commitment to using music education to help students have more opportunities in life.

To every pianist and keyboard player who has wondered if there was a better way to learn their instrument—without all the struggle—there is, and the secrets in this book will show you how.
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Introduction

Imagine if you could improve your piano skills to the point where you could play any song you wanted. Yes, it’s actually possible. There is a path that will take you to this level, and the steps on this path are in *The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso*.

These steps are not obvious, and they’re clearly different than the usual picture pianists have of practicing, which looks something like this:

You lock yourself in a room—alone—for a couple hours a day. While you’re in this room, you tell yourself everything you’re doing wrong and wonder out loud why it all seems so difficult. Then, you suddenly come to a realization: You have to repeat this every day for the next ten years.

This is the way most piano players learn their instruments. Unfortunately, it’s the way I learned to play music! It wasn’t until I was an established professional—performing, doing session work, giving private lessons, and teaching in a university—that I realized that almost no one knew the best way to learn a musical instrument. Teachers, students, amateurs, and professionals were all just doing what everyone else was doing whether it was successful or not.

I decided to do something about this. I started reading everything I could get my hands on regarding practicing, learning, and performing music. I went through books, journal articles, and websites. I attended lectures, presentations, and master classes. I even studied areas outside of music like business efficiency, athletic conditioning, and the psychology of success.

Two results came from all this research. First, I created the *Musician’s Practice Planner*, a specialized notebook that helps musicians organize their practicing into manageable parts and clearly define their goals. The *Musician’s Practice Planner* has gone on to sell tens of thousands of copies worldwide.

The other result was that I accumulated a huge body of information on what works and what doesn’t work to master a musical instrument. Over time I’ve turned this raw information into specific strategies that save piano players hundreds of hours and transform their playing.

These strategies make up the 101 secrets in *The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso*. And, they must be secrets. If the strategies were well known, every piano player would already be using them! But, that’s just not the case. Musicians constantly tell me they have no idea what to do to get better.

So, here is the information in an accessible, easy-to-read format. The secrets in *The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso* will help you make real improvements in your piano skills, and you’ll soon be playing songs you never thought you’d be able to play.
How to Use This Book

The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso is designed to help you improve your piano playing immediately. It isn’t intended to be read from cover to cover. Open it up wherever you’d like, and you’ll find something useful. You’ll benefit most and make the best use of your valuable time by reading just one or two secrets and applying them today.

The main idea behind this book is simple, and it’s highlighted in Secret 1: You’ll progress most quickly by playing the piano a small amount every day. This is a better plan than trying to catch up by practicing a whole bunch one day a week. Start with the first secret and then explore the rest of the book.

Though the book is not sequential, it is organized. The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso is broken into four parts, each dealing with an important topic to help you become a better pianist:

PART I: Secrets to Achieving Your Goals—In a Fraction of the Time
PART II: Secrets to Mastering Any Song—No Matter How Difficult
PART III: Secrets to Inspire and Motivate You—Every Time You Play
PART IV: Secrets to Getting Ready for the Stage—And Feeling Comfortable There

You can use this structure to get exactly the guidance you need right away. PART I will help you increase how quickly and efficiently you learn. PART II gives you the nitty-gritty details of exactly what to do in the practice room. PART III is loaded with strategies to help you get in your ten minutes of piano time today. PART IV will show you how to be prepared for any performance.

Each part of The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso contains many great pieces of advice, and it can be challenging to know exactly what you should read. So, here are several fast track reading sequences to help you:

❖ Are you brand new to playing the piano? 
   Read and apply these secrets, in this exact order: 6, 1, 16, 26, 2, 31, 48, 55, 63, 22, 25.

❖ Been playing for a while and feel you’re not improving? 
   Try this sequence of secrets: 3, 7, 21, 1, 55, 12, 17, 36, 34, 32, 37, 82, 25.

❖ Can’t seem to get motivated to play piano every day? 
   Use these secrets immediately: 63, 57, 71, 67, 68, 56, 62, 54, 64, 3.

If you don’t see your specific situation listed here, many more fast track reading sequences are available at www.moltomusic.com/ten-minute-virtuoso/fast-track-piano.

You have a lot of options for getting the most out of this book. The main thing is to get started now. The sooner you start reading, the sooner you’ll benefit.

No matter how you use The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso, it’s my sincere wish that this book will improve your piano playing and let you enjoy making music.
Part I

Secrets to Achieving Your Musical Goals
In a Fraction of the Time

You don’t have time to waste when you’re playing music. The tricks and tips in PART I give you the secrets of accelerated learning and efficient use of your time. These strategies make the entire process of learning piano easier and faster than ever before.
Secret 3

Have Specific Goals

*Know what you are trying to do before you do it*

Do you ever find yourself starting a practice session feeling unclear on what exactly you’re trying to accomplish? You know you need to make your song sound better, and you’re sure there’s a technical exercise to help you master it. But, you don’t know where to start.

The trick is to have extremely focused, specific goals every time you sit down at the piano. Decide what part of the song should be your focus, and know what you’re trying to accomplish.

Create these specific goals each day before you start practicing. You’ll get much more done when you have a specific result you’re shooting for, and creating your plan will save you enormous amounts of time.

Here are three ways to make your goals more specific:

1. **Choose a Specific Tempo:** If the performance tempo is 120, your goal for today may be 60.
2. **Focus on a Specific Section:** Instead of learning an entire song, just learn one section of the song. Make sure that your goal is to play the section accurately without stopping or re-starting.
3. **Fix a Specific Problem:** Tackle the exact notes that are difficult for you. Every musical problem has a technical solution that you can figure out.

Creating specific goals will completely change your focus in the practice room. Instead of having a vague notion that your playing needs to be better, you’ll have specific targets to hit quickly today.

Imagine what you’ll accomplish with this goal: “I’ll play the last two measures of the A section and all of the B section at half-speed, with accurate rhythms and dynamics.” That’s so much better than saying, “This song needs some work.”

If you want real results fast, don’t be vague. Ambiguous goals lead to ambiguous results.
Secret 17

Don't Let Yourself Learn Mistakes

*Stop confusing your muscles*

Many pianists teach themselves mistakes at every practice session. They’re usually not even aware that these errors are happening. This habit of learning mistakes is so commonplace because of the way most keyboardists practice their music. A typical, unsuccessful attempt at learning a song looks something like this:

1. Start playing at the top.
2. Stop when a mistake is made.
3. Correct the mistake.
4. Move on and keep up this process until the end of the piece is reached.

Let’s look at these steps from your muscles’ point of view. They learn that stopping in the middle of a phrase is normal and acceptable. They also believe that incorrect notes are a regular part of what they should play. Finally, they accept that a wrong note followed by a corrected note is a perfectly reasonable sequence of activities.

You must replace this style of practicing immediately. Stopping and starting just confuses your muscles, and you will never master your music if your muscles are confused. Instead, here’s another way to approach learning new music:

1. Practice slowly enough that you accurately play every note and rhythm.
2. Teach your fingers and muscles to play correctly without stopping.
3. Slowly work the music up to performance tempo with your muscle memory intact.

This approach lets you learn correctly the very first time you go through new music. It undoes the dangerous process of teaching your muscles mistakes. If your muscles learn mistakes, you face a very painful and time-consuming process of re-learning your music so you can play accurately. You don’t have time for that.

First, you would have to unlearn the mistake. Then, a new, correct sequence must be learned by the muscles. While this corrected sequence is being learned, there will be a struggle as the earlier mistake tries to creep into the music. Re-learning your music disrupts progress and is very frustrating.

Instead, don’t learn mistakes in the first place. You will learn faster, feel more confident, and enjoy playing the piano more.
Part II

Secrets to Mastering Any Song
No Matter How Difficult

In PART II you’ll get the practicing secrets of the world’s most successful musicians. These secrets reveal exactly what to do to be as effective as possible while you’re playing piano. Use these strategies during your practice sessions to master new techniques and quickly learn songs.
Secret 34

Repeat Your Initial Success

*Using repetitions to strengthen your playing*

After working diligently on a specific technique or a section of a song, you'll taste success for the first time. You'll suddenly be able to play everything correctly! This is definitely cause for celebration and one of the most rewarding experiences of playing music.

At that point, you need to make sure the difficult bit is permanently under your control. Can you play it again successfully? Don’t stop working after getting something right only once. You're not yet ready to move on.

Instead, it’s time to repeat the music in question over and over. The minimum number of repetitions to do is three. The first time you played it successfully might have been a fluke. Getting it right twice shows that the first time was real. Playing correctly a third time proves you know it.

Successful musicians employ two repetition strategies:

1. Play a specific number of repetitions. You’ll play the music five or ten times in a row. The ultimate goal is to get them all right. But, shoot for four out of five (or nine out of ten) being correct. If you’re unsuccessful playing these repetitions, slow down and keep practicing.

2. Play repetitions for a certain amount of time. Put on your timer for three or four minutes and play as many repetitions as you can in that amount of time.

If you move on to other material the first time you play something correctly, you’ll have to come back tomorrow and learn it all over again. Repetitions cement the music into your muscle memory and save you a lot of practice time.

Remember this anonymous quote: “Amateurs practice until they get it right. Professionals practice until they can't get it wrong.” Even if you're not a professional piano player, you'll benefit from using their practice secrets.
Secret 37

Increase Your Tempo Gradually

Staying in control gives you the best results

Many of the time-saving strategies in this book focus on learning notes accurately and efficiently. Once you know all the notes, though, you’ve got to learn to play them at the performance speed.

The secret to building your tempo is to always play at a speed where you have complete control of every note. You start slowly, and build your tempos by the smallest of margins. It’s simply a waste of time to radically increase your tempo to a speed where you have no hope of playing everything correctly.

This foolproof process for increasing tempos works every time:

1. Master the music at a slow tempo. This means you can consistently play all pitches, rhythms, dynamics and phrasing—in both hands—and produce a tone you’re happy with.
2. Play a minimum of three repetitions with a metronome at your current mastery speed.
3. Bump up the metronome one or two beats per minute. You shouldn’t even feel the change in tempo.
4. Play at least three repetitions at the new tempo. Continue only if you have complete control of the music at this new speed.
5. Continue steps 3 and 4 until you get to the point where you can’t go any faster without losing accuracy. At that point, stop playing.

By increasing your tempo gradually, you make steady progress. With each increase you’re fooling your muscles into thinking they’re not going any faster even though they are. Your muscle memory in both hands stays intact. That’s essential to your success. You may hit some plateaus where you can’t actually go faster, and that’s to be expected. Just stop there for the day. You’ll pick it up again when you practice piano tomorrow.

Slow and steady really does win the race. You’ll be amazed at how easily you can increase your tempo. This approach saves time, builds your confidence, and helps you master your music. It’s one of the most powerful practicing secrets.
Part III

Secrets to Inspire and Motivate You Every Time You Play

The more motivated you are to play the piano, the more you’ll learn in a short amount of time. PART III reveals the most effective strategies for pianists who don’t always feel they have enough time for their music. Use these secrets to stay inspired, stick to your plan, and build a success mindset.
Secret 55

Understand the Learning Curve

It’s normal not to see constant improvement

You may find it difficult to believe that you’ve forgotten how to play something that was completely playable just a couple days ago. Not seeing day-to-day progress can be frustrating.

This frustration comes from misunderstanding the learning curve. Pianists expect the learning curve to work like this: Once a section of music is learned, it will only get better, easier, and faster. Every day will be an improvement on the day before, and progress will always move in a positive direction.

Unfortunately, this is how the learning curve actually works: You learn some music. But, when you return to the piano another day, you might have to figure it all out again. You don’t make any progress speeding it up for days on end. Then, one day you have a breakthrough, and you can play it twice as fast. The day after that, your tempo drops a bit.

This constant rise and fall in your progress is completely normal. Even if you’re seeing no change in your abilities for many days in a row, you are getting better. Stay with the program because you will have another breakthrough. Then what will happen? You will slip back from that plateau and your learning may be flat again. This will continue over and over, day by day, year after year.

Human beings do not make constant progress. The capricious nature of the learning curve is one of the primary reasons you need to practice piano every day. You’ll never see the next breakthrough in your playing if you’re only practicing once a week.

The learning curve is a lot like a roller coaster. It’s a crazy ride with many ups and downs. As long as you know and expect this, you can stay calm during the times you don’t feel you’re getting any better. The improvement is coming! Just keep working.
Secret 76

Get Rid of Practice Barriers

_Eliminating roadblocks in your life_

So many pianists place barriers between themselves and playing their instruments that they never get around to practicing. Others only squeeze in one practice session every week or two. Imagine how much more fun you would have if you played piano regularly. You’d improve faster and never feel guilty about not playing.

Make it easy to start practicing. Don’t let physical or mental barriers get in your way. These are the most common roadblocks musicians create:

- Not having piano practicing on your calendar. Put music on your calendar like any other important activity.
- Keeping your piano closed up and covered with so much stuff that you can’t get to it comfortably. Make your instrument accessible at all times.
- Thinking it’s okay to skip today and telling yourself you’ll get to it tomorrow. No you won’t. Play piano for 10 minutes right now!
- Not having a plan. Start by choosing one song you want to learn.
- Having a goal that is impossible to reach so you’re always frustrated. You need a short-term goal that you can achieve this week. Little goals eventually build into your big goal.
- Not being able to make noise in your house or apartment. Do whatever it takes so you can practice. Play a keyboard while wearing headphones or soundproof a room for your acoustic piano.
- Thinking that all conditions must be perfect—the house to yourself, an afternoon totally free, feeling excited to play—before you can start. Just start. Life is never perfect.

How many of these barriers do you have in your life? It’s time to make some changes so you can easily and comfortably play piano every day.
Part IV

Secrets to Getting Ready for the Stage
And Feeling Comfortable There

At a certain point in your practicing, you need to switch gears to prepare for a performance. Included in Part IV are the insider secrets that move you from the practice room to the stage. By following these strategies, you will know you’re ready to play in front of an audience.
Secret 79

Push Beyond Your Target Tempo

Making performing easier than practicing

Every song has a performance tempo—a target you want to hit. After days or weeks of work, you will finally reach it. At that point, you'll need a new goal: the ability to control the music at your target tempo consistently under any circumstances.

It’s one thing to work up to this tempo in your practice room. But, it’s quite another to have the poise needed to play at this speed during a performance.

If you’ve been diligently practicing and have just barely gotten your music up to speed, you are not yet ready to perform. You never want your performance to be at the very peak of your abilities, a level of piano playing that you only sometimes achieve. You need to be in your comfort zone onstage, fully in control of your music and ready to give your all.

To have that control, and to guarantee that you can successfully play at your target tempo onstage, make sure you can play all of your music 10% to 20% faster than your performance tempo. For instance, if your performance speed is 120 beats per minute, work your way up to 132 or 144 beats per minute. Gaining this extra speed is a great use of your practice time, and this method works best when tackled a few minutes every day.

This technique is called “over-practicing,” and it yields amazing results. By over-practicing, you’ll have the confidence to succeed on stage. You’ll be able to handle the slightly faster concert tempos that often occur when the adrenaline is flowing.

Knowing that your practice room training was more rigorous than the performance itself, you can approach the stage feeling inspired and ready to play. The stage environment might even seem downright comfortable. Imagine how great that will feel.
Secret 93

Transition from Practicing to Performing

Getting ready for the stage

Once you can play all the notes for an upcoming concert, the practice room needs to become a performance preparation room. During this phase, you go from learning to mastery. Mastery means automatically playing your music from start to finish.

These are specific practice room techniques that will make you a performance master:

1. Visualization #1: Hear the music in your head and feel yourself playing it. Any difficulties during your visualization will likely be real issues on stage. Make sure you feel comfortable throughout this visualization.

2. Visualization #2: Picture yourself playing piano on stage in front of your audience. Feel calm, cool, and collected. Know that you are in control!

3. No Stopping: Play through each section one at a time without any pauses whatsoever. This may mean initially playing more slowly than you want. That’s okay. You’re working on mastery, not winning a race.

4. Control Each Section: Be able to play each section of your music—in any order. If your piece has five sections, try playing each section in random order or backwards order.

5. Tighten the Transitions: When each section is playable, make sure you can easily transition from one section to the next. Play the last few measures of one section into the first few measures of the next section.

6. Put It All Together: Play the sections in order. You don’t have to start by playing the whole piece. If your music has five sections, you can play sections 3, 4, and 5, or sections 2, 3, and 4. Try different combinations. Eventually, you’ll easily be able to play the entire piece of music flawlessly!

These techniques will give you confidence and prepare you for performance success. Try the last four of these techniques on separate days. Each builds into the next one. In about a week, you’ll be able to play through your whole song.
Conclusion

Getting the Most from This Book

Now that you’ve got your game face on, you can stay calm during any practicing, rehearsal, or performance situation. The secrets in *The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso* have given you motivational tools, efficiency ideas, practice room strategies, and performance tricks that allow you to learn any song, master your instrument, and be the pianist you want to be.

To get the most out of this book and to give yourself the greatest advantage when practicing, use several of the strategies simultaneously. Imagine how effective you’ll be when you combine the secrets.

For instance, playing a loop (SECRET 43) very slowly (SECRET 26) with a metronome (SECRET 32) while you record yourself (SECRET 82) is an extraordinary use of your time. If, before you do those steps, you first do a quick warm-up (SECRET 27) in the same key (SECRET 33) and then pause for 30 seconds to visualize yourself playing the loop perfectly (SECRET 78), you’ve just improved your efficiency and mastery by a huge factor!

Next Steps

Make sure you keep acquiring musical knowledge. First, keep this book as a handy reference and reminder of the best ways to master the piano. Return to the motivational secrets in PART III anytime you need some inspiration, and keep trying out all the strategies.

Second, take advantage of the amazing wealth of books, articles, websites, and blogs written for musicians. There’s a list of recommended reading for you on the Molto Music website at: [www.moltomusic.com/ten-minute-virtuoso/recommended-reading](http://www.moltomusic.com/ten-minute-virtuoso/recommended-reading).

Finally, to thank you for reading *The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso* and for making it all the way to the conclusion, I want to give you a gift—actually, several gifts. These gifts are free guidebooks that answer many questions musicians commonly face. You can download these guidebooks at [www.moltomusic.com/ten-minute-virtuoso/guides](http://www.moltomusic.com/ten-minute-virtuoso/guides).

The information in *The Ten Minute Piano Virtuoso* and on the Molto Music website will help you learn your instrument efficiently *and* help you have as much fun as possible playing music. That’s an effective combination, and I wish you all the best with playing the piano.

To Your Musical Success!
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DAVID MOTTO IS A musician, writer, and expert on the best way to learn musical instruments. He is in demand throughout the United States as a speaker and teacher. David is the coauthor of the best-selling book, Musician’s Practice Planner, and the author of three instructional books for the bass guitar. He is also the owner of Molto Music Publishing Company and a member of the Recording Academy—which gives him the privilege of voting for the Grammy Awards. He lives with his wife in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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