

Big Magic. Big Music.

The creative process is always evolving as students navigate the joys and challenges of working at the piano or on their compositions. I'm in the thick of the process now as I embark on writing my own book, an extension of my Ph.D. research. Recently I came upon Elizabeth Gilbert's *Big Magic* (2015), a handbook on creativity. Here are some of her practical tips that might be useful for students and parents doing creative work:

1. Be curious. What about music fascinates you? Follow the clues and see where they take you.
2. Try not to quit too soon. Getting started is the hardest part. It's a fact of life that whatever you practice you will get better at, and it usually becomes more fun.
3. Treat the process lightly. Gilbert tells the story of songwriter Tom Waits who was tormented by creativity in his youth. Every song he wrote was a struggle. When he had children he took inspiration from their total freedom of expression. He learned from them to lighten up, and ideas flowed.
4. Don't worry about what others think. What matters is the integrity with which you pursue your work. That honor will shine through.



Beethoven the composer

Most of us know Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) from his symphonies: the heroic opening of [Symphony No. 3](#); the ba-ba-ba-baaa rhythm of [Symphony No. 5](#); the heart wrenching second movement of [Symphony No. 7](#); and the Ode to Joy theme that closes [Symphony No. 9](#). (Click the links to listen.)

Beethoven's creative genius found expression in his treatment of large-scale forms like the symphony. But he also was interested in more intimate genres like piano



Samantha Osborne playing through the third movement of Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata, January 2019.

(Beethoven cont'd)

music. His 32 Piano Sonatas, composed over the course of his career, represent among the most refined and powerful expressive gestures ever written for the instrument.

The piano was invented around 1700. When Beethoven published his first three sonatas in 1795, the piano was still relatively new. He was fascinated by the potentialities of the instrument and began to explore innovative ways to compose for it.

Beethoven's earliest piano sonatas were in the style of Mozart, Haydn, and Clementi. But what distinguished his music from his predecessors were the fullness of his sonorities and the complexity of his textures. The music provided a sheer visceral experience. Click [here](#) to listen to the final movement of Sonata No. 3 in C Major (1795), dedicated to Haydn, a musical portrait of Beethoven's youthful exuberance.

As his career progressed, Beethoven's piano music became more experimental. He wrote longer movements and placed unimaginable technical demands on performers. Sonata No. 23 in F minor (1806), later known as the "Appassionata," moves through dramatic changes in mood and technically difficult passages. One critic writing during Beethoven's lifetime called it a "desperate, schizophrenic struggle." Others considered his experimental works "in the realm of the colossal and immeasurable." It was a moment in music history when the genre of the piano sonata began to shift from salon party entertainment to more serious music for the virtuosic performer in the concert hall. Critics, audiences, and performers gradually adjusted to the difficulties and expressive weight of Beethoven's piano music.

Samantha Osborne, age 15, is currently working on Beethoven's "Appassionata." She said, "it's the most fun piece I've played. There are so many moments I play over and over. The first page of the third movement keeps you hanging because it's on a diminished seventh chord and doesn't resolve until 20 measures later. I like it because the tension keeps building all the way to the end."

Our ears today are accustomed to Beethoven's sounds. But during his lifetime, particularly when his hearing began to deteriorate, Beethoven's music seemingly took a turn toward the private, as if he no longer concerned himself with the expectations of his audience or the capabilities of performers. But in time, listeners, critics, and pianists rose to the challenge of his increased demands. Beethoven had invented an expressive language that forever changed what was possible in music.

To learn more about Beethoven's life and work, visit his Encyclopedia Britannica entry [here](#).

Little Bird Student Profile

Frances Hamilton, 17 years old, started playing the piano at age five. At age 11 she picked up stand-up bass and is now an active composer. She is a member of the Reno Youth Symphony Orchestra and plays jazz in several combos. During the fall of 2018, Frances studied abroad in the southern part of Africa, where she found inspiration in both remote and urban landscapes. She is currently finalizing an album of original songs for voice and piano. Below Frances reflects on her musical influences, compositional process, and love of music.



Frances Hamilton in Africa, fall 2018.

Music has been a big part of my life since I was very young. I sang before I talked, and I started playing piano when I was around five years old. I was raised with music surrounding me and have been eager for that to be my lifestyle, though I truly came to love music through admiring some of my greatest musical influences. When I was younger, I fell in love with the classical compositions of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and Debussy. The strong and gentle melodies of their pieces inspired my love of classical piano. Later I veered more towards jazz and got swept away into a world of improvisation and unique sound. I listened to and watched videos of Herbie Hancock, Esperanza Spalding, Miles Davis, Christian Scott, and Snarky Puppy. Along my way through the classical and jazz worlds, I also found inspiration in pop music. Figures that stuck with me the whole way through were Taylor Swift, Adele, Regina Spektor, Dave Matthews Band, and Prince. All of these influences formed me in some way to be the musician and writer I am today.

If I were to describe my compositional process, I would say it's very unpredictable! Some days I have a hard time coming up with melodies or words, and some days it's hard for me to stop. No matter what though, I adjust my mentality to make sure I am capable to go with the flow no matter which day it is and never get down on myself about it. I usually come up with a melody for the vocal section of my song first, then go to my piano and create the accompaniment around that melody. I never know what is to come when I am writing a song, so what I tell myself to get through it is to really let go and really feel the music. I try to leave it to my ears, heart, and hands to tell me what to write or play next and soon enough, I have a song I love. It took me many years to learn to let go in my songs, and I am happy I have gotten closer. I know that I have so much more to learn when it comes to composition, but I am always excited to learn. Some advice I would give to upcoming musicians and writers is to have patience. Be patient with yourself and your learning and writing process. Be patient with your songs and your original sound, and be patient with your listeners and the criticism you may get, constructive or not. I guarantee you that any obstacle you face will be a lot easier to get through with a little bit of patience. I am still learning this myself!

(Hamilton cont'd)

One of the main reasons I have gotten to where I am today has been my love for music. I love playing it because it brings me to another world. Sometimes when I go and sit down at my piano I start my stopwatch and start playing. I get so in a trance with music that I literally lose track of time and soon enough, I look down at my watch after what seemed like five minutes and it has been 30! Music is the most magical and beautiful part of my life, and I hope for all of you who are reading this to one day feel the same.

—Frances Hamilton, January 2019

These little birds told me...

"Playing fortissimo is super fun!"

—Simon Foygel, age 6



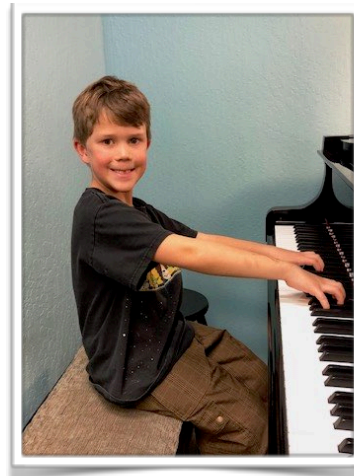
"I like playing piano because sounds make music, and music makes me happy."

—Stella Foygel, age 8



"When I play the piano it sounds magical. It's my favorite instrument."

—Riley Baker, age 8



"My favorite thing about playing the piano is that it calms me down."

—Drew Hansen, age 7

Upcoming Musical Events

January 31 – Chamber Music at UNR: Schubert's *Winterreise* and *Lebensstürme* for four-hand piano

February 2 – Metropolitan Opera Live HD: Bizet's *Carmen* live from NYC shown in Reno and Grass Valley

February 9-10 – Reno Philharmonic plays Missy Mazzoli, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky at the Pioneer Center

March 9 – San Francisco Symphony Music for Families: Once Upon an Orchestra at Davies Symphony Hall