

# Music in your head

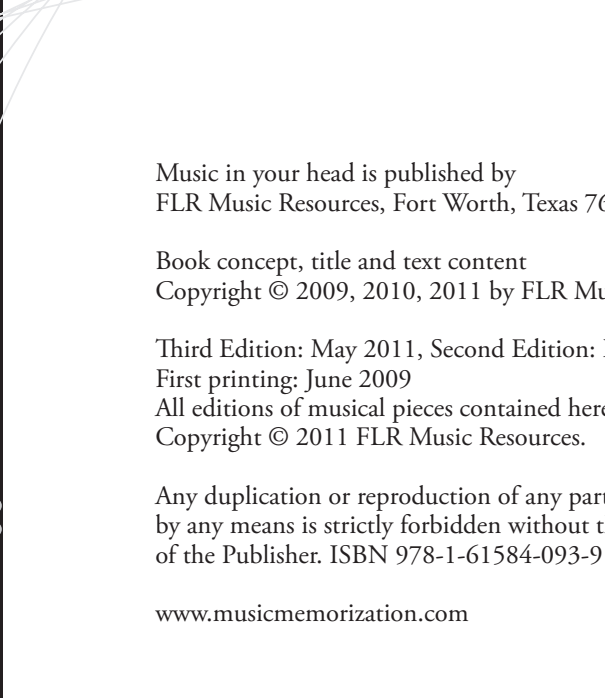

Mental practice, how to memorize piano music



*by François L. Richard*



Born in New York City, François Richard was raised in Paris, France, where he started studying the piano at a young age. He now lives in the United States, where he works as an airline pilot. Prior to working for the airline, he worked as an instructor pilot and, due to his passion of transmitting complicated information in the simplest way and the success of his students, was awarded the “Gold Seal” by the Federal Aviation Administration. Helped by the most famous pedagogues and artists, he conducted fifteen years of extensive research on piano memorization and mental practice. Because of the lack of formal training, generally given on this very important subject, he wants to share this precious knowledge with us in a fun and simple way.



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On French television, the amazing French virtuoso H el ene Grimaud was interviewed—nothing abnormal so far, but suddenly, something striking happened. The anchor declared that only recently had the world-renowned pianist purchased a piano! The virtuoso explained that she had a little upright piano before, which she almost never used, because she always favored mental practice. “When you have a clear image of what you want to do with a piece, you almost don’t need instrumental slavery! And above all the convenient aspect of it, like practicing in airplanes or hotel rooms where international artists spend a lot of time, it is good to have a clear mental picture of what we want to do with the work, because every artistic creation starts first in the imaginary.” In another interview—this one on the radio—a famous pianist declared he likes to rehearse Mozart’s concertos while riding his bicycle in Switzerland!

It started in France in the nineteenth century. A famous virtuoso by the name of Marie Jaell—a very good friend of Franz Liszt—started to discover the virtues of mental practice in piano performance. She also recommended working only two hours a day, whereas the bulk of her colleagues were spending their days “teaching the pieces to the piano,” yet her virtuosity was well beyond every pianist at the time, according to Camille Saint Saens. As H el ene Grimaud so exactly expressed, every artistic creation first starts in the imagination. Too many pianists today want to make a career, but they just play without having a clear concept of what they want to do with the piece. There is no conductor in that orchestra, no architect for that building; we get what their fingers will give, not what will be given by their creative mind. With mental practice, you are going to hear your ideal interpretation in your head—practicing it until you make the piece yours. Many pianists are in every piano competition, but you need to stand out. The jury and the public are waiting for something more than the simple execution of the score. As Gustav Malher once said, “the printed score is everything you need to know about the music, except the essential.”

Not only interpretation, but also technique starts in the mind. If you have a technical difficulty, it is often because you didn’t think it through in the proper way. Reviewing the difficulty very slowly, with eyes closed and visualizing your fingers and hand movements on the keys, you will improve your technique tremendously. Sometimes you will discover that something as small as a little slant of your hand is the solution! Paganini, the famous violinist whose virtuosity was so great, was rumored to be associated with the Devil. On concert days, he was observed to stay for hours, laying on his bed, keeping his eyes open, mentally representing all the movements to make during the performance. I experienced it myself with Chopin  etudes and treadmills!

My name is Fran ois Richard. I’m an airline pilot and I started studying piano in Paris, France. My aviation career requires me to go on four- or five-day trips without a piano, so I practice piano music mentally. When I come home, I play the new piece on the piano, while the score is still in my luggage! Completing my piano training in Paris, I’ve also done fifteen years of extensive research, with the help of the most famous virtuosos and pedagogues on the subject of piano memorization and mental practice. I have the luck to live in “Piano City” America—Fort Worth Texas, which stages the famous international Van Cliburn competition every couple of years. I would like to thank Tam as Ung ar, who hosts Piano Texas at Texas Christian University (TCU) every year. Piano Texas enables me to enter the concert pianist world by watching all those master classes, attending conferences, and discussing piano with all those international artists. Most of them are passionate, very accessible and friendly and more than happy to share with us the “secrets of the trade.”

Pianists can access four piano memories: visual, tactile, analytical, and aural. The mental practice that we are going to learn here uses all four memories. Therefore, when following the steps it is infallible. It also produces a lot of pleasure and exuberance to be able to rehearse music in your head, almost anywhere, and, you will understand by the way you conceive your playing that you have achieved something in common with the famous masters.

In this book you are going to be introduced to the method with “Jardins sous la pluie” by Claude Debussy. We will then discover the “secret of memorizing piano music,” followed by a very important aspect of piano memorization: the vocal approach and relative pitch. You will attend a little master class, followed by a study of a four-voice fugue by J.S. Bach. I want to show you that this method works even with the most complicated music. Then, we are going to talk about chords and their progressions; for a better understanding of music, followed by a little Chopin waltz. I would suggest that, if you are quite a beginner, to read and learn the entire method, but start by playing the Chopin. Finally, we will finish with some general considerations.

**All information in bold letters like this is general and often important information and rules that apply not only to the specific piece, but for all piano memorization and mental practice. They are “key words”!**

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