

Getting Organized for the 2021/22 Year of Learning

Make the next year of piano count!

September 18, 2021

1. Planning your year and quarters

1a. Plan your piano learning like college – start in September, with various terms throughout the year:

- September to December (term 1, 3.5 months)
- January to March (term 2, 3 months)
- April to June (term 3, 3 months)
- July to August (optional summer term 4, 2 months)

1b. Map out your year-at-a-glance and note any events, such as exams, performances, courses to take, and so on.

1c. Where are you planning to be at the end of the year? Will you finish a method book or course? Will you share any music on YouTube? Will you “graduate” from grade 1 to 2?

1d. Once you’ve completed your overarching goals, make a detailed plan for the current term (September to December). What books/pieces/goals will you be working on?

2. Do weekly reviews and weekly planning

This is possibly my #1 productivity tip, so if you’re to do one thing, do this!

2a. Every Sunday (or whenever makes the most sense), set aside 1-2 hours to review to-do lists from your week. What did you accomplish? What didn’t you do? Do you have any insights from the week?

2b. Plan your upcoming week. Dump all of your ideas on a blank notebook page. Go through your calendar for important events or dates. I sometimes organize this brain-dump by category, and sometimes not.

2c. Convert this page into to-do items on your day planner. This saves a ton of energy during the week since you don’t need to make decisions about what to do and when to do them – you only have to decide how to pivot when things inevitably go awry. I never finish everything on my list, but I make WAY more progress (and meaningful progress, at that) than I would without a plan.

You’ll also have a wonderful record to review each quarter. It’s heartening to notice how many things you’re actually accomplishing from this perspective, and that fuels motivation.

3. Pick your planning tools

I use three tools for my planning:

1. Notion

Notion, or another app like Evernote, works very well for keeping notes of my weekly reviews and progress notes. Much of my journaling, work notes, and so on also live here.

2. A big blank notebook

I use a large hardcover 8.5x12 unlined notebook for all of my random notes. For example, I planned this webinar in such a notebook. Brainstorms, random ideas, weekly plans, far-flung goals, and more live in this notebook. The size is important, since it's useful to keep 1-2 pages open for a brainstorm. In a smaller book, this 2-pg webinar plan might've been 5-6 pages, and no one likes flipping. I prefer it unlined because sometimes I like to doodle, mind-map, or just change up my writing size.

3. A planner

I rejected using planners for years, but recently picked one up and it's been a godsend. I convert all of my weekly plans into daily action steps (in a variety of cute colors) on a day planner, and this has helped immensely, especially as my child has just started preschool and my life has an additional layer of complexity.

4. What to practice

4a. Select 20-40 pieces (more if you're using a method book) to learn for the year. You don't need to individually select each one in advance, but plan your pieces for the current term at least. Plan to become very good at 5-10 of those pieces – the others can simply be learned to a passable level.

4b. If you don't know your level, experiment with the free online RCM Piano Syllabus. My course Design Your Own Piano Path covers this in extensive detail. If you're on the beginner side, testing out a few method books can be a good indicator of your level.

5. Energy management

The biggest thing that derails me isn't a lack of planning – it's grumpiness. In those modes where you get down on yourself, and curse yourself for not being faster or as competent as others, you lose your energy to move toward your goals. Because what's the point? With a negative state of mind and a defeatist attitude, the best-laid plans will die. Keeping your energy up and staying positive, therefore, can be the biggest benefit to your overall productivity. Here are some ideas:

- Find moments for "me" time
- Maintain levity and humour – don't take things so seriously
- Practice self-compassion when things don't go as you'd hoped
- Listen to inspiring audiobooks and/or podcasts
- Laugh!
- Get out for a walk – fresh air and nature is a fabulous balm
- Visit with friends or family

There are likely many more ideas, but these are a few of mine. It's important to fill your cup in order to sustain momentum in the long run.