Goals and motivation in piano playing

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Abstract: - This paper studies the role of goals in the training of a pianist within a motivational frame. It begins with the study of the importance of setting goals and the criteria on which the goals should be based. The paper also analyzes the complex problem of setting goals in the special case of a piano teacher. It emphasizes the relation between motivation and goals setting for piano students and teachers.

Key-Words: - goal setting, piano playing, motivation

1 Introduction
The etiology of the word motivation comes from the latin word “motivus” which means something which makes things move. Through motivation we understand the totality of all the intern and extern mobiles which are born or acquired, conscious or unconscious, simple physiological needs or abstract ideals [3]. These are the main factors which trigger, direct and sustain energetically every human activity.

A goal is something you want to achieve. In order to take the right steps to obtain the desired goal, one has to set a certain target a priori. Setting goals is very important for one’s motivation, because this is the first moment when you realize what you aim for and this makes you think of different strategies to get there. Your learning efforts as well as your motivation increases because you can direct your attention and action precisely to the target. Having a specific goal in mind also promotes persistence and effort over a longer period of time, because it gives you a reason to go on working at your theme, even when this isn’t going as well as you have expected. Having a goal also makes students think about how well they are doing their task in order to reach the goal, so it helps them evaluate themselves.

Teachers have to know exactly what their goals for their students are, and their duty is to encourage them to set goals for themselves. Setting goals by and for oneself can lead to greater satisfaction. Assigned goals must be accepted by students. If students don’t agree with an imposed goal, for example because it seems to be too difficult to achieve, the result will be a lower commitment to the goal followed by a lower motivation and a bad performance. But if students accept the assigned goal, it doesn’t matter any more that it was imposed in the first place by a teacher. They get involved in developing strategies of how to reach it and put effort in exercising at their best, so finally the goal itself plays the most important role, and not who set it.

2 Characteristics of goals

2.1 Setting goals
When you set one goal, others may be activated. For example, when someone wants to obtain a PhD degree, the goal is getting that diploma with the PhD title on it. But besides this, there are other goals activated, such as: being better paid, moving forward on the hierarchy scale, learning new things to improve teaching. This way, your motivation for learning for your PhD degree will increase, because now you will have more than only one reason to learn.

But if more goals have to be productive at the same time, they must be coordinated and not in conflict. When students or people in general strike for more goals
than they can handle at one time, the result will be negative. What may happen is that one goal may become dominant over the others, or worse, one or more goals may result in failure. For example, when one of your targets is to make more friends and the other to go to a piano contest, you have to stay motivated and to study daily for the contest. Otherwise, if you keep going out with your friends, the goal of making more friends, which also means more fun, will overcome the goal of going to the contest, and in the end you will be not able to attend, because you haven’t studied enough, or you will go and play under your normal possibilities. So teachers should help students clarify which is the most important goal to pursue or how to get the right balance between more goals.

The most important thing about setting a goal is to know how to do it. Goals by themselves don’t make you perform better. But some attributions of goals influence study and performance. Knowing how to make the right steps towards your target plays an important role.

2.2 Short-term goals and long-term goals

There are two kinds of goals: long-term goals and short-term goals. Long term or end goals have the mission to remind students to stay focused on their ultimate target. Short-term goals or subgoals are the smaller steps students have to make in order to reach their ultimate goals. Both kinds of goals have their own importance and they complement each other.

Experience shows that students who set for themselves achievable subgoals progress more rapidly than students who don’t know how to break up end goals into proximal goals.

Let’s take as an example a piano student who proposes himself to learn by heart in two weeks a piano piece of 14 pages and another student whose goal is to learn by heart the same piece, but one page every day. Almost for sure, the first student, who has only his end goal in mind, will think that he has enough time to accomplish his task, so he will probably start to study too late to get it done at the right moment. But the second student, who realizes that he has to accomplish something specific every day will be more motivated and will show more intrinsic interest in solving the task properly.

In conclusion, we can state that smaller steps (subgoals) immediately increase self-motivation and sustain it for a longer period of time in order to reach the end goal. Subgoals also show students the best way to achieve performance. On the other hand, distal goals are too far away in time, and therefore they are not so effective in immediately directing effort towards the end goal. The importance of end goals remains in fact that they help students keep the bigger picture in mind.

2.3 Goal Difficulty

Another important property of goals is their level of difficulty. Even though it may seem hard to believe, goals which are more difficult, but seem to be attainable, lead to a better performance than easier ones. Students normally work harder to solve a problem of a higher level of difficulty, but they must have the impression that the problem is not over their possibilities. A task that seems impossible to solve makes most of the people avoid it, instead of trying to solve it. For example, if a 9th grade piano pupil gets the task to play the first Chopin Piano Concerto, they listen to it, and they are convinced that the piece is too difficult for them and that they will not be able to play it, they will try to choose another concerto, which is more suitable for their age, or if they begins to study it knowing from the beginning that they can’t play it as they should, their motivation will be very low and the result will be failure. But if the level of difficulty of the piece they have to study is very high, but yet realistic for their age and possibilities, this will help them to perform at their best.

From another point of view, it is important to know that for accomplishing a good performance of high difficulty, the level of motivation must not be so high, whereas for a good performance of a low difficulty level, the motivation degree must be higher. In this respect there is the law of Yerkes and Dodson (1908) which says that: „The performance of a certain complex task decreases while the physiological or mental arousal increases, in order to reach optimal performance“. [3]

The explanation is that if a student thinks that they have to play an easy piano piece in not a very important place, she or he will have the impression that this is a task they will easily solve, and their motivation for study will be low, and in the end they will play worse than expected. On the other hand, if a student has to play a difficult piano concerto with a well known orchestra at the Frankfurter Opera , her/his motivation level will be very high, so it can happen that she/he will work too hard, for too many hours. In this case they will get overtired and eventually also scared that the task is too difficult to accomplish successfully, so they will also play under their possibilities. The conclusion is that students have to give enough attention and effort to an easy task, not underestimate it, and they have to be careful not to overrate the difficulty level of a more complicated task, in order to obtain an optimal result.

2.4 Goal Specificity

Performance is also influenced by the specificity of a goal. An example for a specific goal would be: ”My goal is to study the piece at first separately, then with
both hands, and to be capable of playing it *moderato* until next week*. A general goal would be: “My goal is to play better until next week”. In the first case, the goal is very clearly formulated. In the second case the goal is very vaguely formulated and the result is not clearly specified.

A specific goal is always better than only good intentions. A specific goal increases the level of motivation in study, because the aimed target is very clear, and it is much easier to cope with. If the goal is to accomplish a specific task, students will know better how to study, because they will be obligated to ask themselves questions about the best strategy to use in order to reach the purposed target and they will also know how much effort is needed in order to get to the end. So teachers should help students to set specific, short-term goals.

### 2.5 Goal Commitment

Another factor which plays a great role in attaining a goal is how much power we put in it. Goal commitment is our determination to pursue a course of action that will lead us to the goal we aspire to achieve[2]. The power of goal commitment will influence how hard a student will try to achieve their goal.

Strong motivation and psychological involvement are not possible without an emotional attachment to the work or work context [1]. If the pupils don’t like to practice the piano for hours, and they do it only because their parents tell them so, there will never be a strong motivation and a powerful commitment in studying at the instrument. But a student who plays for their own pleasure, who wants to become a worldwide known pianist, will put a lot of effort in exercising to accomplish their goal.

There is a positive relation between work motivation and job satisfaction, and as job satisfaction increases, work motivation also increases, and vice versa. In our case, referring to piano playing, if for example you are satisfied with a public performance you gave and everybody praises you, you will feel very good about yourself, and your self-esteem will increase because you demonstrated you are a good piano player. From that point on, you will be even more motivated to exercise a lot to become even better. Motivation also increases when a student has to play at a contest. In order to get extrinsic rewards such as money, prizes, awards, he will put more effort in his exercising. Intrinsic rewards such as a meaningful goal - like being the next Rubinstein - , a better future, the feeling that one is doing something important and significant in terms of one’s study will also emphasize the value of effort and maximize it. So if you don’t have any extrinsic rewards you can offer, you have to work with emotion, you have to be emotionally and psychologically very deep involved in what you are doing. The more thought and emotion you will put in developing and achieving a goal, the more likely you will be committed to it.

### 2.6 Goals and feedback

Feedback means to be informed by another person (teacher, colleague) about your progress and your results referring to a specific task. As we said in the beginning, setting a goal helps students evaluate their standard of performance at a specific time in order to be able to direct their actions and effort to a target. Knowing the target and what their artistic possibilities are, they can prepare themselves for a specific type or level of performance which will enable them to attain the goal. Feedback about their progress in achieving that goal gives students the possibility of modelling their actions and the amount of effort they put into it, gives them the opportunity of changing some methods which are perhaps inappropriate. Feedback also allows students to set realistic goals for themselves. Positive feedback increases the students’ belief in their own capabilities, a fact which also enhances their future aspirations.

Goal setting seems to be very important for increasing students’ performances in every kind of schooling, so teachers should teach their students how to set goals.

### 3 Conclusions

This paper studies the role of goals in the training of a pianist within a motivational frame. It begins with the study of the importance of setting goals and the criteria on which the goals should be based. The paper also analyzes the complex problem of setting goals in the special case of a piano teacher. It emphasizes the relation between motivation and goals setting for piano students and teachers. Teachers have a crucial responsibility in education to help students increase their own qualities of motivation. These will influence them in the future and will help them develop aspirations, independent learning and accomplish complex goals.

References: