

# PIANO

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## (Half)-Marathon Training for Piano Playing

Two years ago this month, I discovered the joys (and pains) of running.

My sister, Jorena, and I were home in Los Angeles for Thanksgiving break. With her being the hobbyist runner she is, and me being the competitive sibling I am, I agreed to go along with her one morning. I kept up with her for a 0.6-mile continuous run, then started taking short walking breaks. Before long, my muscles started to hurt and it became difficult to breathe properly! The walking time soon outweighed the running time as she disappeared in the distance. I

pushed myself the last quarter mile to not stop, and collapsed on the lawn in front of our house when we completed the 2.2-mile loop. I remember my quads shaking uncontrollably, and my sister laughing. It was the longest distance I've ever done in my life until that point, and I limped for days!

I always scoffed at even the idea of running, but something changed in me that day. My inner introvert enjoyed the reflection time, and my competitive spirit wanted the challenge. Exactly one year later, I ran my first half marathon in Berkeley, California. Jorena was there to cheer me on at the finish line. (see picture)

Having to prepare myself for something as grueling as a 13.1-mile run was hard work - mentally, emotionally, and physically. I spent hours each week in the gym and running through all kinds of weather. Committing to this is a lifestyle change, and training for something that wasn't music-related helped me understand the preparation process much better. After all, a race (like a solo recital) is the culmination of months of training; a display of technique, artistry, stamina, and inspiration. As we get into audition/recital season, here are some thoughts to help you maximize your preparation:

**Warm up and Stretch:** I'm going to start with a confession: I stopped warming up a few years ago. I adopted the "I warm up by playing my pieces" mentality. But, while preparing for a recent series of recitals, I decided to bring it back and almost immediately noticed a change. The point of warming up is simple. Playing piano, like running, is a very physical activity which requires the utmost precision. Even if the goal is minimum motion, numerous muscles are being engaged - sometimes for long periods of time. Warming up the mind is equally important as the muscles. Take a moment after you've warmed up to stretch and loosen these muscles to help prevent injury.

**Breathe:** I remember the moment when this priceless piece of advice was given to me. We think of it as being instinctive. You have to breathe to live, right? But we as adults tend to shallow breathe, and breathe a lot less when under stress. Create short exercises when you warm-up to encourage breathing. Some of these might be inhaling slowly in an ascending one-octave scale, and exhaling on the way down, or vice versa. (Email me for more ideas!) Finally, find places in your music to consciously breathe – especially before tricky passages. Runners often practice “rhythmic breathing,” where one breathes every prescribed number of strides. Try breathing with the beat. And don’t forget that one deep breath before you start!

**Strength Train:** True or False: running is the only way to get better at running? False! Contrary to Nike’s “Just Do It!” slogan, playing a piece over and over will not fix your problems. If a soccer player merely practices kicking balls into a goal, the only place that person will find him/herself is on the bench! Runners who incorporate strength-training (squats, deadlifts, benchpress, etc.) are usually stronger, healthier, and more well-balanced athletes who are less prone to injuries. My proof: For my first half-marathon, my training consisted of probably 85% running to 15% strength training. For the next race four months later, I adjusted to 60/40 and beat my time by seven minutes! Strength training is all the “behind-the-scenes” work. For pianists, these are exercises and etudes, knowledge in theory, music history, world history, chamber music, reading, listening (lots of listening...not only to your piece, but other pieces by the same composer and his/her contemporaries), meditation, and wellness.

**Perform What You Practice and Don’t Worry About Others:** “But it was perfect in the practice room!” Can anyone relate to this statement? My former teacher (and current mentor), Robert Ward, understood that it was easy to get caught up in the moment. We often rely on emotions, and are consciously (or subconsciously) aware of what other people think. This can lead to anxiety, self-doubt, and lack of concentration. “Stick to the game plan,” he told me every time I went out to give a performance. When starting my first long race, I had to fight with myself not to be influenced by my surroundings and to “stick to the game plan,” which was to start the race slowly. My pride was scarred as people passed me in the early miles, but was restored as I passed them later on. (W. Timothy Gallwey’s *The Inner Game of Tennis* is a fantastic resource on how to control your mental game for peak performance)

**Fuel:** Playing a piano recital is a physically and mentally draining activity. Without the proper nourishment, you can easily hit a wall mid-way through a performance. Runners often rely on gels, beans, or chews, which are more concentrated forms of “high octane fuel.” These products are engineered to provide carbohydrates, electrolytes, and (sometimes) caffeine quickly through the body. But a simple banana might be all it takes to give you the energy you need. Bananas are excellent sources of carbohydrates which help your muscles and mind stay sharp. They are packed with potassium which, as an electrolyte, helps provide fluid balance in your cells and are an excellent source of Vitamin C. Hydration is also extremely important as it’s easy to become dehydrated under the hot lights and through sweat. But more so, drinking water has been scientifically proven to reduce stress. Keep a banana and bottle of water backstage for some light snacking in between pieces!

**Dig Deep and Finish Strong:** Sometimes finishing that race or recital is all you want to do. In her book *Run Your Race: How to Keep Going When Life Wears You Out*, Elle Babington Steele states, “Finishing strong is when you gather up every ounce of anything you have left to make it through the finish line and still maintain your character, your brilliance, and your light.” Finishing strong isn’t about going into overdrive to the point you become careless (or injure yourself). It’s about treating that last note with the same importance as the first, and giving yourself a chance to succeed so you can start thinking about that next race.