

Do You Want Your Piano Playing to Sound Terrific? Start by *Reading the Menu!*

By Ed Mascari

One of my piano students once told me that every time she begins a new piece of music, she starts by **reading the menu.**

Have you ever gone into an unfamiliar restaurant and simply ordered your food?
Wouldn't you first want to see what's on the menu?

Then why would you start playing a new song without paying attention to what's on its bill of fare?

You are probably already aware of the [musical ingredients \(terms and expressions\)](#) but you may not be paying attention to them.

If you want to sound terrific, you need to get beyond just playing the notes.

Playing the correct notes is essential for a great performance.

But when you bring out the dynamics, get the tempo just right and follow the phrasing,

Your piano playing will come to life!

Here is the musical menu to help you go from good to great.

- Beverages
 - **Clef:** Normally the right hand reads treble clef and the left hand bass clef, but there are exceptions.
 - **Register:** There is only one correct place on the keyboard for every note on the staff. Every octave on the piano has its own character.
- Appetizers
 - **Key Signature:** You need to use this guide not only to remind you of which notes to play sharp or flat, but also so that you will know and hear the character of the scale of that key (sharp keys are usually bright; flat keys tend to be dark).
 - **Major or Minor Key:** All key signatures can either identify major or minor keys. Be sure to know which it is. This makes a world of difference.
- Soup & Salad
 - **Time Signature:** The biggest contrast is between duple (multiples of 2) and triple (multiples of 3). Decide which it is **before** you start playing.
 - **Tempo indication** (metronome setting): Playing a song at just the right speed is essential. Too slow, it will be dull and sluggish. Too fast and it will sound rushed and can easily lead to sloppiness and mistakes.
- Entrée
 - **Dynamics:** These are your guides for playing at just the right volume. Should this section be loud or soft? Somewhere in between? Or does the volume increase gradually (crescendo) or decrease (diminuendo)?
- Side Orders
 - **Expression marks:** The phrase marks (curved lines) will show you where the music needs to breathe. Think of this as if you were singing or playing the clarinet. To get this effect on the piano, lift your hand off the keyboard at the end of each phrase.

- **Articulation:** The biggest difference is between legato (smooth & connected) and staccato (detached), but you will need to notice accented notes and much more.
- Desserts
- **Lyrics, era, and genre:** These can certainly help you uncover the stylistic secrets that will help you present the piece in the correct context. Whether it's Bach or the Beatles, Scarlatti or Sinatra or something in between, you'll know just what feeling the composition needs.

Action Exercises

Here are three things you can do immediately to put these ideas into action.

First, pick a new piece that you really want to learn. Before you start playing the notes, look for all of its menu items. Use the above list as a guide.

Second, every time you practice this piece, incorporate the first three menu ingredients as you learn the notes. Note: you'll need to practice more slowly at the beginning as you're learning the notes, but when you're ready, select the most suitable speed.

Third, add polish to your playing by using the second half of the menu list as your guide to discovering the other essential musical elements.

If you want to play the piano with more expression, more expertise and more enthusiasm, always remember to **start by reading the menu.**

You'll have a guaranteed recipe for success, and.....

You'll be amazed at how quickly your piano playing will sound terrific!

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About the Author

Ed Mascari has been teaching piano privately to children and adults for three decades. He combines his extensive experience to guide students in a variety of styles as he helps them achieve their unique potential.

To find out all about piano lessons, visit: <http://www.edmascariplanostudio.com/>

Ed also teaches group classes for piano students in the tele-class format. All of the programs at <http://www.mykeyboardsuccess.com/> focus on specific topics that are designed to give participants the tools and techniques that will help them to play piano better and better.

Ed Mascari is a seasoned performer (pianist/ jazz organist) of show tunes, jazz and popular music as well as a published classical composer and church musician. For more info, go to: <http://www.myspace.com/edmascari>.

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