Week One Overview

What Makes a Pianist Great?
The Instruments They Play
Some Noble Pioneers
So!

Just what *is* a Great Pianist, anyway?
A pianist is somebody who plays the piano.

Obviously.

And a professional pianist is somebody who does it for a living, or at least tries to.
But what makes a pianist GREAT?
It’s not just one thing. Most great pianists have possessed a combination of skills and attributes that have led to their eminence.

The following list is by no means exhaustive—sometimes what makes a pianist “great” isn’t reducible to simple statements or descriptions.
Astounding Technique

A great pianist might possess extraordinary technical ability at the piano.

Although what constitutes that extraordinary ability is not always quite what you might think.
Astounding Technique

Sometimes it’s pretty obvious.

Hearing a young Vladimir Horowitz storm through the killer octave passages at the end of the Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6, we know that this is physically beyond ordinary mortals—it’s like being in the presence of an spectacularly gifted athlete.
Astounding Technique

Sometimes it’s more noticeable to other pianists than to the general public.

Leopold Godowsky’s 1926 recording of the final passage from his piano transcription of Schubert’s “Gute Nacht” demonstrates Olympian technique —perfect dynamic control, clarity, repose, and immaculate handling of complex lines.

Horowitz’s thunder is deeply impressive, but this is the kind of playing that leaves other pianists muttering to themselves.
Authority

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Authority

Arthur Rubinstein was a pianist of supreme authority. Some of it was given to him by his audiences—he was a recognized giant of the keyboard, and his Chopin interpretations were considered among the finest of his generation.

But more importantly, he played with authority, the confidence that can come only with a lifetime of experience and an in-depth identification with the music he played. He never had Horowitz’s sheer bravura or Godowsky’s polish, but he had his own magic.

Chopin Ballade No. 4, recorded in 1959
Authority

Wilhelm Kempff gave music to the world over a long career. He is best known as a supreme player of the Austro-Germanic repertory, particularly Beethoven, Schumann, Schubert, and Brahms.

His playing called no attention to itself; he was focused on bringing out the composer’s intentions, but that included his own clear hearing, intelligence, and heartfelt approach to music.

Brahms Intermezzo Op. 117 No. 2, recorded 1963
Interpretation

Among the most honored of the great pianists are the great *interpreters*—those players who apply extensive study and intelligence to their work.

Some of those pianists combine other aspects—such as being extraordinary technicians or the like—but it’s their insight into the music that is best remembered.
Schnabel and Beethoven

No pianist has ever been so completely identified with the music of Beethoven than Artur Schnabel, and with good reason: he not only edited a fine performing edition of the sonatas, but he was the first pianist to record the entire cycle of Beethoven’s 32 piano sonatas.

His playing, as preserved in recordings, is always worth studying closely for its superb pacing, understanding of structure, and tonal beauty.

Sergei Rachmaninoff

The legendary composer-pianist-conductor left us a memorable legacy of insightful, fascinating, and sometimes shockingly original performances both in concert and on records.

Rachmaninoff was of course peerless in his own music, but his penetrating musical intelligence worked wonders with other composers’ music as well.

His performance of the second Chopin nocturne is a revelation: freely unfettered, almost like a great singer.
Elegance

The fine art of playing with elegance, without descending into superficiality, is rare. Many of the greatest pianists have been able to conjure up such elegance, without any lessening of passion or musical creativity.
Josef Hofmann

One of the most celebrated prodigies of the instrument, Josef Hofmann was a dapper gentleman and formidable musician who played with a glorious sonority and made even the most difficult of music seem easy.

But his playing was filled with fire and nuance nevertheless—there was never a hint of the salon about Hofmann.

He’s at his incomparable best in this aristocratic and luminous performance of the Chopin C-sharp minor Waltz.
Maurizio Pollini

Elegance is only one aspect of this titanic Italian pianist, but it is one of his defining characteristics.

Like Hofmann, Pollini achieves ultra refinement without any lessening of power or imagination. Part of this has to do with one of the most perfect techniques in piano history, but its his in-depth study of the music and his care with every nuance that make him the legend that he is.

Chopin Prelude in F-sharp Minor, recorded in 1985.
Vividness

There has never been a *boring* great pianist, but some pianists bring a special vividness to the music they play.

Some of these pianists wind up being controversial, but they’re never less than fascinating.
Glenn Gould

No pianist ever made for more controversy than Glenn Gould, but there has never been a pianist with more fascinating ideas than Gould, or more of the pianistic wherewithal to make his ideas into reality.

He had a wider range than is often acknowledged, but he remains one of the great Bach keyboard interpreters of all time—even if most of us would never play Bach the way he does.

The beloved and familiar C Major Prelude, from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, is a case in point.
Sviatoslav Richter

Technique in abundance, elegance where necessary, power, imagination, authority, Richter exemplified the ideal of the artist as hero—more than just a mere pianist, but a musical force at the keyboard.

Interestingly enough, he claimed that the pianist must never be other than a conduit for the composer—despite the vividness of his own musical personality.

Certain pianists might come to be identified with certain repertory, in which their performances are considered benchmark.

Many great pianists have had such identification with Chopin, Liszt, and Beethoven—but some of the greats are identified otherwise.
Gieseking and Debussy

Walter Gieseking was a wonderful pianist in a wide repertory, but he is best remembered and celebrated for his exquisite performances of Debussy’s piano music.

To this day his performances—captured in a series of post-WWII recordings—remain touchstones.

*Reflects dans l’Eau*, recorded in 1948.
De Larrocha and Spanish Music

A tiny woman, but made of steel, Alicia de Larrocha had been an extraordinary child prodigy in her native Catalonia.

Although she played a fine range of music—her Mozart is particularly distinguished—she was perhaps at her best with the big virtuoso pieces from the Spanish repertory, particularly the works of Granados and Albéniz.

*El pelele*, from Goyescas by Enrique Granados.
The Instruments They Play
Walter and Stein Fortepianos

The early *fortepiano* sounds somewhat like a modern piano, but is considerably more ‘boxy’ and ‘pingy’. It has a very light touch and an equally low volume, although the sound carries quite well thanks to the production of numerous high overtones.

Robert Levin plays the opening of the “Romanze” from Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, K. 466
The piano had grown considerably by Beethoven’s day. The manufacturer John Broadwood presented Beethoven with a piano in the early 1800s (pictured on the right.) The instrument has far more carrying power, and an overall deeper sound than Mozart’s.

Richard Brautigam plays the opening of the Op. 28 “Pastoral” sonata’s finale on a Broadwood fortepiano.
Érard

The piano composer most strongly associated with the Paris-made Érard is Frederic Chopin.

An Érard from the 1830s is fully playable by a modern pianist, requiring very little in the way of adjustment, unlike playing earlier instruments, which might require a great deal of re-training. An Érard sounds (and feels) very much like a fully modern piano, save with a bit more of a ‘woody’ sound.

Alexander Melnikov plays the opening of the Chopin E Major Etude on an 1837 Érard.
Bösendorfer

Still an ongoing business, Bösendorfer is one of the finest pianos in the world, and also one of the most individualistic. Bösendorfers can be difficult to play well—they are inclined to harshness if played in a muscular or insensitive fashion.

But played well, a Bösendorfer can be spectacular with its bright tone and rich resonance.

Alexander Melnikov plays the Andante movement from Liszt’s *Don Juan* Fantasy, on an 1875 Bösendorfer—an instrument Liszt would have himself used.
Bechstein

Sometimes thought of as the German equivalent of a Bösendorfer, Bechstein is a venerable piano make with a strong sonority, extremely fine treble, and superlative build quality.

Jorge Bolet’s wonderfully nuanced performance of Leopold Godowsky’s fantasy on the Chopin A-flat major “Harp” Etude really shows off the silvery, bell-like treble of a Bechstein grand to great effect.
Steinway

It’s the world standard with good reason. Steinway entered pianistic consciousness in the 1850s and has been dominant ever since.

There are factories in both New York and Hamburg, Germany. The “Hamburg” Steinway is a more rounded-sounding instrument, more like a Bösendorfer in some ways, while the New York produces an instrument that can be, with the right maintenance, virtually flawless.

Artur Rubinstein plays Schubert’s last piano sonata on a Hamburg Steinway, recorded in 1969.
Recent Makers

An Italian invented the piano, so it’s only fitting that among recent piano manufacturers to emerge, the Fazioli plant in Italy (est. 1981) would become a leader.

Faziolis are ultra-luxury pianos; the firm makes fewer than 200 a year. (The least-expensive model is about $120,000.)

Beautiful, refined tone and a liquid and responsive action make it a winner all around.

Angela Hewitt plays the Allemande from Bach’s French Suite in B Minor on a Fazioli.
Some Noble Pioneers
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

- Mozart was indubitably the first of the great pianists, as opposed to harpsichordists or organists.
- He wrote works for himself to play, works that showed off his fine technique and glittering musicianship.
- In many of his piano concertos, he played the solo part without having written it down—preferring to work out the bugs before committing the thing to paper.
- Sometimes he never got around to writing out a fully-fleshed piano part …
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major, K. 453: Finale

Murray Perahia, pianist and conductor
English Chamber Orchestra
This sprightly coda to a theme-and-variations movement threads the main theme through a series of glittering and propulsive piano and orchestra figurations.

The exuberance and sheer joy of the writing are irresistible—Mozart at his most showy, but also Mozart at his most charming.
Ludwig van Beethoven

- Beethoven was something new in the history of piano playing.
- He thundered. He caressed. He pushed the instrument past its physical limitations.
- Both in his playing, and in his writing, he transformed the instrument and what it meant.
- His solo piano works—including 32 sonatas—and concertos stand at the apex of the repertory.
Ludwig van Beethoven

Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major, Op. 106 “Hammerklavier”

Paul Lewis, piano
Recorded 2007
The “Hammerklavier” sonata remains to this day one of the most severe trials by fire a pianist can undertake. It is also one of the most rewarding sonatas ever written, if a pianist can only make it through the long preparation, and through a performance, intact.

The sheer scope of the thing is made clear by the opening, one of the most titanic statements in all piano literature.
Franz Liszt

- The first of the super-virtuoso pianists, Liszt barnstormed Europe with a heady combination of ultra technique, glittering repertory, and a massive dose of sex appeal.
- He was also a superb musician, but most folks were too busy swooning over his pyrotechnics to notice.
- Later in life he became one of the most influential teachers of all time—many of the early 20th century’s pianists studied with him at one time or another.
Franz Liszt

Transcendental Etudes, No. 10 “Appassionata”

Claudio Arrau
Recorded 1976
Liszt’s *transcendental* etudes are more than just muscle-and-stamina fests: they really push the piano into previously-undreamed levels of orchestral sonority. It takes a very special kind of pianist to play these works well: a knockout technician with unabashed showmanship and physical stamina, but with enough musical intelligence to keep all this excess under control. Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau was definitely such a pianist, one of the best Liszt players of all time.
Clara Schumann

♦ The exact opposite of Franz Liszt in many ways, Clara Schumann evolved from something of a light note-spinner in her youth to a high priestess of all things musical.

♦ She had a superb technique but always insisted on music first, performer second.

♦ If Liszt is the forefather of pianists such as Vladimir Horowitz, Schumann’s progeny include such folks as Artur Schnabel, András Schiff, Murray Perahia, Paul Lewis, and famed female pianists such as Clara Haskil and Myra Hess.
Robert Schumann

Fantasie in C Major, Op. 17: III

Clifford Curzon
Recorded 1954
An entirely different set of skills is required to play Robert Schumann’s C Major Fantasy, a threemovement exploration of moods and feelings that makes no attempt to “wow” its listeners, even in its virtuosic second movement. Although Schumann dedicated it to Liszt, Liszt never played it in public, considering it unsuitable for concert use.

It is the sort of work that pianists such as Clara Schumann could play with distinction, requiring the rare ability to think through the long line and play with a sense of the overall structure in mind, while continuing to focus in the moment’s needs for beautiful sound and expressiveness.

The English pianist Clifford Curzon had an enormous range, but he was never better than when exploring the lonely introversion of Schumann’s final movement, marked Langsam getragen (slow, serious).