

Repertoire Maintenance

Repertoire Maintenance — Hot Spots, Tempo Caps, and Rotation

In one line Don't maintain repertoire by playing whole pieces at full tempo — maintain the passages most likely to decay. Keep the fragile bits (*hot spots*) warm below tempo, on a rotation, and trust the rest to come back fast. Maintenance ≠ performance preparation.

The big reframe from Dominic Cheli's workshop "*How to Maintain Piano Repertoire Without Burning Out*": the naive model — sit down, start from the top, play the whole thing at performance tempo, judge whether it "still works" — is unrealistic and exhausting. Only a handful of deeply internalized pieces are instantly playable. Everything else is **recoverable**, not ready, and recovery is what you protect.

The three states of a piece

Professionals stay clear about which one each piece is in; confusing them wastes energy.

State	What you're doing	Cost
Learning	Building the piece from the ground up	High
Maintaining	Keeping selected material warm and recoverable	Low — quiet, private, economical
Performing	Preparing for public execution at a set time	Highest — full tempo, intensity, run-throughs

This mirrors the distinction *maintaining* / *practicing (actively improving)* / *performing*. **Performance readiness is expensive**; maintenance is deliberately cheap.

The core moves

1. Don't "turn up the heat" too soon

Reviving a piece straight at full tempo + full intensity breeds frustration and the false sense that it's lost. Start **calm, selective, below performance pressure**. The goal isn't to prove it's ready today — it's to preserve it so it comes back efficiently later.

2. Avoid playing the whole piece — for as long as possible

The guiding question: “**How long can you avoid playing the whole piece?**” Full run-throughs spend energy on easy material that doesn’t need it. Stay on the **hot spots** instead: passages that are technically hard, memory-sensitive, unreliable, or mentally demanding.

3. Practice passages, not pieces — and map them when you learn

While *learning*, mark up the score: easy passages, focus-required passages, genuinely hard passages, **memory traps**, technical hot spots, and sections needing a specific pre-performance warm-up. That map makes maintenance cheap later — you already know where the leaks are.

4. Sort passages into difficulty buckets

- **Easy** — reliable without much concern.
- **Focus required** — works if you concentrate, don’t rush, stay present.
- **Hard** — needs special prep: repeated cycles, slow-to-fast, technical routines.

Buckets kill the vague, useless verdict “the whole piece is hard” and tell you where the time goes.

5. Use a tempo cap (~70–80%)

Maintain **below** performance tempo — if the target is 100, maintain at 70–80. Full tempo is *expensive* in mental, physical, and emotional energy; chasing it every day turns maintenance into an unsustainable performance simulation. The cap keeps the piece warm without that cost.

6. Preserve the excitement — don’t spend it daily

Maintenance practice doesn’t need to be emotionally intense or maximally musical. Cheli often maintains in a **restrained, controlled** way — checking the *tools* (fingers, memory, gestures, transitions, mechanisms), not recreating performance excitement. Save the intensity for the performance. This is the anti-burnout core, especially with passionate repertoire (e.g. **Rachmaninoff**).

The diagnostic: the one-week test

Better question than “*Can I play this perfectly today?*” → “**Can I bring this back within one week?**” Pros appear to hold enormous repertoire because it’s *recoverable* fast, not instant — learned deeply, with the fragile parts preserved. Less advanced players: a 2–4 week window. Same principle: keep it close enough to revive quickly.

Running it day to day

A/B/C rotation — group pieces (or hot spots from several pieces) and maintain one group per day: A today, B tomorrow, C the next. Keep it realistic — maintenance shouldn't become the day's main workout. **Mix difficulties:** maintaining only hard pieces is draining and inefficient; keep easier "confidence" pieces in circulation for experience, confidence, and enjoyment.

Listening as maintenance — the most useful recording is usually **your own**, not a famous interpretation: it reflects the version you know physically, musically, psychologically. Even a decent student recording helps later revival.

Tracking — Cheli uses **ForScore** on iPad with set lists (learning / maintenance / performance / holiday / fun / etc.); paper piles or folders work just as well. The tool matters less than having a *system integrated into daily practice*.

A suggested daily/weekly shape **Daily:** 5 min warm-up on 1–2 hot spots · 10–15 min maintenance block on older-repertoire passages · main work on the current learning/performance piece · (weekly) test whether one maintained piece can expand toward performance tempo. **Weekly:** Day A = hot spots from pieces 1–2 · Day B = pieces 3–4 · Day C = easier/confidence pieces · repeat.

Ramping back up — and the limits of maintenance

A tempo cap doesn't mean never touching full tempo. With a performance approaching: maintain hot spots at medium tempo → **occasionally test full tempo** → see whether it returns naturally → only raise intensity if full tempo feels unstable. If 1–2 weeks isn't enough to recover performance tempo, the problem is likely **technical, physical, or in how the piece was originally learned**.

Two cases where maintenance alone isn't enough:

- **Virtuosic pieces** (e.g. **Chopin Étude Op. 10 No. 1**) that are "hit or miss" at tempo need **public repetitions** — play for people, record, simulate pressure — to bank the *psychological* evidence that they hold up under pressure.
- **Fugues** resist isolated hot spots — their logic depends on context, voice-leading, and continuity, so extracting a fragment can confuse more than help. Maintain **larger contextual sections**, or just return to the piece more fully when needed.

The method, condensed

1. Find the **20–30%** that holds the true hot spots.
2. Bucket them by difficulty.

3. Practice mostly *just* those.
 4. Tempo cap ~70–80%.
 5. Avoid full run-throughs without a reason.
 6. Keep hot spots on a regular rotation.
 7. Listen to a personal recording occasionally.
 8. Test performance tempo only periodically.
 9. Move to performance mode only when a deadline appears.
 10. Keep learning / maintenance / performance clearly separate.
-

Based on Dominic Cheli's tonebase workshop "How to Maintain Piano Repertoire Without Burning Out."