

# Playing Piano Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Michael Shepherd** (February 26, 2026)

*In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email [expertanalysis@law360.com](mailto:expertanalysis@law360.com).*

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I have been actively playing the piano for almost 40 years, which is more than twice as long as I have been a practicing lawyer.

In that time, I have been lucky to learn from some really amazing lawyers and music mentors. What's interesting is that over the years I have often noticed strong parallels between the skills required to memorize difficult music and the skills required for the effective practice of law, which all relate to effectively managing complexity.

In other words, the fundamental activity is to digest complex information and present it in a way that an audience can understand.



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In particular, performing complex legal tasks and interpreting complex musical passages both require the ability to tell a good story, the ability to learn new things, and the ability to abstract chaotic information into more readily understandable chunks.

To me, the most fundamental skill in both disciplines is storytelling, i.e., the ability to weave detailed source material into an easy-to-follow narrative. At the keyboard, it's vitally important to understand what a sea of notes on a page is trying to say. What voices should be emphasized? What should the listener take away from this passage?

In music, one of the most powerful techniques for memorization is to make sure that you can hear, in your mind, what an entire passage or piece sounds like. That mental vision then guides the hands to naturally and reliably deliver the message that you hear in your head.

In a similar way, complex legal documents, be it briefs or patent applications, need to tell a compelling, easy-to-follow story, no matter how complex the source material. What mental vision or journey should this document create in the reader's mind? Thinking about such narratives with the audience's impression in mind helps to create a document that keeps the reader engaged and, as a result, allows the reader to more effortlessly learn the most important points being conveyed.

Another fundamental skill in both disciplines is the ability to constantly learn new, unfamiliar things, which may, in turn, require new strategies. The classic example in the piano world is the famous Chopin Etudes, where every piece is essentially a puzzle whose solution is often a practicing strategy that you likely have not previously used or considered. The key concept is to figure out the ground rules first before trying to ascend to higher levels of understanding and competence.

Similar strategies are needed for mastering difficult new technologies, which often rely on fundamentally different underlying systems and platforms. For example, the large language model artificial intelligence systems that are revolutionizing many industries have at their core a computational mechanism called self-attention, which determines which input elements are likely to refer to each other.

Understanding this baked-in mechanism is critical for reasoning about higher-level large language model behaviors. Thus, in both disciplines, true mastery can be achieved only after learning the fundamentals.

Last, another key skill in both disciplines is the ability to effectively abstract chaotic information into digestible chunks that are easier to recall later on. For example, in music, abstracting sequences of notes into higher-level segments is often necessary to keep track of and manage the underlying complexity.

I often write labels directly onto the sheet music to give a distinctive and often colorful name to a particular section of the music, such as "Main Theme now in E flat" or "Stormy A flat Section." When encountering that named passage again, its name immediately evinces its unique qualities in your mind.

This is frequently a useful strategy for memorizing the often-subtle differences between particular passages and figurations that are highly similar, but not exactly the same.

I use the same techniques when trying to digest technically dense prior art references, legal arguments, or academic literature. I add the same kinds of labels to give names that distinctively identify the particularities of certain sections and help to signal what the underlying complexity in those sections is about. Then, when reviewing such information later, the labels help me to remember the key points about each section without me needing to do another deep dive on the material.

Another major activity that requires effective abstraction is legal writing. Luckily, legal writing also lends itself to effective abstraction by a simple technique that is all-too-often forgotten: topic sentences.

When reviewing draft documents, I often encounter overly specific assertions or sentences that start paragraphs. And when I see these, I typically make a comment that what that paragraph needs is a topic sentence. By backing up to one level higher and using topic sentences, thus abstracting away from overly specific assertions, the writing becomes much clearer and easier to read.

From a patent standpoint, this exercise automatically forces the writer to generalize in a way that improves the scope of the claims and the description.

These are just a few of the common skills I have noticed between the two disciplines, and they both largely involve understanding and taming complexity in a way that resonates with target audiences.

There are of course other parallels as well, such as perseverance, project planning, attention to detail and pattern recognition. However, at a fundamental level, both piano and law are disciplines that require transforming complex information into new formats that the target audiences can more readily consume.

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