

Pianists learn better by playing

Instead of simply hearing a melody, learning to play a ditty makes people more familiar with it. The finding, published March 12 in *Cerebral Cortex*, provides evidence for the brain's enhanced ability to learn by doing. Researchers from McGill University in Montreal and INSERM, the National Institute of Health and Medical Research in France, asked 20 skilled pianists to each learn 12 simple melodies by listening to them or by playing them. In later tests, the pianists were better at spotting a single errant note in a recording of a piece they had played than at spotting a wrong note in a piece they had only heard. Electrodes monitoring the pianists' brain activity revealed that hearing a wrong note in a previously played song activated parts of the brain that handle movement. Physically doing a task sears its memory into the brain in a special way, the authors suggest. — *Laura Sanders*