

Piano: 1

Some thoughts on piano teaching and how to acquire a sound physical technique.

I have spent a lot of the last 25 years teaching the piano, with some success. Below are some thoughts and observations about the art of teaching which may be of some help to other teachers. While anyone is welcome to use these notes, please respect my copyright and acknowledge this resource where appropriate.

This is in no way meant to be a comprehensive or thorough treatise, rather it is an outline of my philosophy of teaching with some helpful pointers and advice.

The great Russian teacher Heinrich Neuhaus's book "The Art Of Piano Playing" is the definitive work on the subject and it should be on every music teachers book shelf! My contribution, therefore, makes no attempt to enlarge upon Neuhaus's brilliant book. I write from the less rarefied world of the "shop floor".

SOME INTRODUCTORY REMARKS CONCERNING TEACHING IN THE UK

(A Very Personal/Partisan View)

Here in The UK, we continually labour under the culture of mediocrity that so characterises British classical musical life. When someone from these islands does achieve distinction, it is usually "in spite of the system rather than because of the system!"

The mentality of "The Party Piece" is pervasive at all levels of our music education system. Music is not taught with any real sense of rigour.

Comparisons between the product of, say, Juilliard, The Moscow and Paris Conservatories and our own UK institutions are stark and embarrassing, but only very rarely acknowledged!

It is a fact that although hundreds of thousands of people learn instruments in their childhood here in the in Britain, very few are able to play competently, if at all, in adulthood! The investment, both personally and financially is not rewarded with results that are in any way commensurate to the effort expended.

I believe that the quality of teaching must improve at all levels, if our children are to compete on equal terms with those of the former Soviet Union, Europe, The Far East and The United States.

THE AIMS OF TEACHING & THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE TEACHER

1) The first and principal task of teaching is to help enable pupils to achieve their full potential on their chosen instrument. So that they can enjoy the many pleasures and benefits of being able to play music well.

Note : Almost everyone is capable of reaching a reasonable level of fluency with hard work and good teaching.

2) Secondly, to enable the talented pupil to reach levels of performance which are appropriate to their gifts.

Note : This forms the nub of my approach. All teaching must be geared towards the gifted child. If this is done, even the average pupil will benefit, and those with obvious, latent, or not so obvious gifts, will not be missed or let down.

Rule : Assume from the start that the new pupil in front of you may be capable of becoming a great artist.

Note: Unfortunately, by the "law of averages" this is unlikely to be the case, but if you make this assumption, you are already in the position where you treat each and every pupil seriously and place upon yourself the moral and musical expectation of high standards and integrity.

If you take the above as your starting point, you are already on the road to being a better teacher.

By definition, the great artist must acquire a formidable and comprehensive range of abilities : imaginative, technical, personal and moral.

Are you up to the task? Do you, personally, know what it takes? Do you have the necessary skills, insight, imagination and personal qualities to guide your pupils towards their goals?

Rule : If you cannot do something yourself you cannot teach it!

The above may seem over prescriptive and dogmatic, however, what is the alternative?

Art is nothing if it is not rooted in integrity and morality. Quality is everything! Without it we as teachers betray our pupils and demean ourselves.

Therefore, avoid creating the delusion of achievement, the comfort of mediocrity, the endless stream of pupils, who learn for a while, get a few Grades, then give up, only to be replaced by another hopeful face, for the cycle to be repeated : on and on and on. Does this sound familiar?

Note : Of course, in our throw away age, some pupils will, inevitably, "give up". It is my firm opinion, however, based on experience, that more will, and do, stay the course if the teaching is of a high standard, rigorously applied!

ASSESSING MUSICAL TALENT

What is musical talent? Can it be quantified? These questions have exercised me for a long time.

I have come to the conclusion that musical talent is an amalgam of gifts. The more of these gifts that are possessed, the greater the talent.

A talented person should have (in no particular order):-

- 1) A good ear and sense of pitch.
- 2) Good rhythm.
- 3) Intelligence.
- 4) Physical gifts (Good hands, strength Etc.)
- 5) Good hand to eye co-ordination.
- 6) Imagination.
- 7) The ability to work hard, unaided.
- 8) A sense of adventure.
- 9) An inquisitive mind.
- 10) Emotional sensitivity and flexibility.
- 11) Good/strong character.
- 12) Individuality.
- 13) Desire and ambition.
- 14) Good background (This IS a gift!)
- 15) Love music!

Individually, all of the above are measurable. When combined, in abundance, the possessor of these gifts can be said to "have talent".

Note : People develop at differing rates. Therefore the teacher must not judge pupils prematurely, lest they make a mistake and a talent goes unnoticed. Many factors effect development including : environment, upbringing and general education. Some pupils (even very gifted ones) can take a long time in becoming confident in their own abilities.

After careful teaching I have on several occasions been surprised and delighted by a pupil suddenly becoming talented.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PIANO PLAYING AND TEACHING

Playing the piano is at root easy!

Playing a note requires virtually no effort!

Understanding musical notation and relating it to its position on the keyboard is a simple matter for all but the most unintelligent!

The basic principles of tone production are easily explained - the harder a key is struck the louder the sound.

Knowing which parts of the locomotor mechanism are used to produce a sound, and where to do what, is simply a matter of common sense, methodically and intelligently applied.

Problems only start to develop when confusion enters the arena. Keep things simple, and always explain what you teach and why, at every single stage of the process.

Note : Never teach by rote!(Human beings are not to be confused with Parrots and Performing Seals!) If you do, you are storing up problems for the future. These problems are often incurable.

Note : Never expect a pupil to advance at a pace which is faster than what they are physically, emotionally and intellectually capable of!

AT THIS POINT : A FEW TIPS ("Words of Wisdom")

(My pupils know these as "The Thoughts of Chairman Owen". From now on referred to as TOCO)

- 1) A teacher's job is to enable the pupil to become independent of the teacher, not dependent upon the teacher.
- 2) No note is difficult to play, in between the notes are where all difficulties reside.
- 3) There are two kinds of note :- Finger notes and Arm notes. All notes which are not legato are Arm notes.

Note : This crystal clear advice (3) is slowly allowed to erode, and develop, in the light of experience, and the requirement to produce differing qualities of tone when the pupil reaches a more advanced stage.(Children and beginners alike need statements to be in Black and White, understanding shades of grey comes with time.)

- 4) What you do not notice, you cannot practise.
- 5) Never assume anything is correct. Mistakes do not always sound wrong and in time come to sound right.
- 6) Practise is the Art of Intelligent Repetition.*
- 7) The purpose of practise is getting things right, solving problems.

Note : A mistake is a mistake is a mistake, and cannot be improved upon.

* Practising and the techniques involved are dealt with later on.

PHYSICAL TECHNIQUE

Note : Physical Technique is, of course, not an end in itself. It is a means to an end, namely: to eliminate the barrier between the printed score, the performance and the audience.

Poor technique places the performer under a handicap. What they imagine cannot be realised. Talent and insight without the necessary physical wherewithall is fatally compromised and inhibited.

Physical Technique alone is, needless to say, worthless.

There is no such thing as a natural technique. So called natural technique is merely facility (often mindless) and has its natural limitations. Technique is acquired through hard work and understanding. Its potential for development is, for most people, essentially limitless, until the physical deterioration that comes with age sets in.

The Elements of Technique are :-

- 1) Speed.
- 2) Stamina.

3) Strength.

4) Control.

These can all be acquired without problems. All that is needed is the aforementioned hard work, understanding and patience.

HOW TO ACQUIRE A GOOD PHYSICAL TECHNIQUE

Technique is acquired in stages :-

After first acknowledging three self-evident truths.

1) The piano is simply a sound producing machine. It is an inanimate object. It only responds to physical action.

Note : Musical elbows, tortured facial expressions, swaying bodies and the like, cut no ice with the average Steinway. All that stuff is strictly showbiz!

2) The human body has some inherent "design faults" which must be understood and overcome if the piano is to be played successfully.

Note : Luckily, the design of the keyboard meets us half-way, and in time the student will come, indeed must come, to feel that the piano is a natural extension of his/her body and thus by extension, their mind and heart.

3) Acquiring an "easy" relationship with the instrument is the vitally important goal towards which, all who study the piano must strive.

Note : One of the sure signs of poor teaching, is the pianist who is not at ease with the instrument. These pupils seem, always, to be in awe of the piano. It is the enemy rather than a friend!

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES

The Fingers : The job of the fingers is to play (strike) legato notes, uninhibited by natural weakness.

The Arms : The job of the arms is to play (Drop with controlled weight) all non-legato notes, take the hand along the keyboard, and provide a stable (relaxed) platform from which the hand can operate.

Note : Relaxation is an often misunderstood concept. If one were ever to be completely relaxed, one would of course fall off the piano stool! Rather, relaxation is the art of using only as much force/tension as is absolutely necessary, and in not wasting energy through the inefficient use of the body.

UNDERSTANDING THE HAND (Evolution did not have pianos in mind when our species set out on its journey to now.)

1) Thumb needs attention - designed to work on a different plane to that required on the piano; designed for gross movement, it is not by nature sensitive.

2) Finger two - well designed.

3) Finger three - almost as good as finger two.

4) Finger four - hopeless! Does not have its own independent mechanism.

5) Finger five - weak and unwilling to move.

In addition, all our fingers are of a different length, have a tendency to collapse at the joints (thereby absorbing energy and using up precious time), and do not, naturally, use the full range of movement that the joints allow.

They need exercise to develop their potential.

Play on Tips of The Fingers and the side of the thumb.

This is correct advice. Why?

1) The natural, relaxed, position of the hand when brought up to the keyboard will, by default, bring the tips of the fingers into contact with the keys.

- 2) By playing on the tips of the fingers, the problem of different length fingers disappears.
- 3) Playing on the tips of the fingers creates space for the thumb to pass under when playing a scale.
- 4) Playing on the tips of the fingers, gives each finger room to move/articulate.

Note : Finger Five : Particular attention should be given to this finger. There is a tendency for it to not articulate. This is because it is weak and the joint is rarely, if ever, utilised naturally. Therefore the hand "falls/leans" towards it, in order to compensate for its inherent weakness. The result is that it is not encouraged to develop, and the pupil labours, permanently, under a handicap.

WHAT EXERCISES?

There are two schools of thought with regards finger exercises.

One opinion is that exercises are unmusical and sterile; that they encourage a mechanistic approach in the pupil. The people who support this point of view say that technique acquired through the learning of pieces integrates the mechanical with the musical.

My own view is that pieces provide inefficient training . They were conceived as music, therefore, they do not present difficulties with enough intensity. Real music was not designed to be graded according to technical difficulty.

Furthermore, to reduce a piece of music to the status of a "study aid" is to diminish its worth. By the time a piece has been learnt, and all of its problems overcome and all of its technical lessons absorbed, love for the piece can be, and often is, destroyed.

Far better therefore, to isolate the purely mechanical.

Note : One of the great joys of playing a musical instrument, is the physical and athletic exhilaration and joy which is an inherent in the activity. Playing fast is fun!

Note : I am not dogmatic about the above. It is all a matter of judgement.

I think that the following exercises are as good as any :-

Note : It is not the books you use that are important, but the way you use them.

Scales, arpeggios Etc. of course - plus

Beginners :- Schmitt - Preparatory Finger Exercises.

Intermediate :- Dohnanyi - Essential Exercises.

Advanced :- Brahms - 52 Exercises, and Phillippe.

Note : I dislike the Hanon- type exercises as they are long and repetitive for no good reason.

Studies, should be learnt in conjunction with the above exercises.

Beginners :- Bartok - Mikrokosmos Books 1, 2 and 3.

Intermediate :- Czerny (Take your pick)

Advanced :- Chopin, Liszt and Debussy.

UNDERSTANDING THE ARM

The arm makes two movements in piano playing. The vertical and the horizontal.

THE VERTICAL MOVEMENT OF THE ARM

This is best understood by dividing the arm into three. The upper arm, the forearm and the hand. In order to lift and then drop with controlled weight the following must occur :-

The lift should always be in time : On a beat or the exact proportion of a beat. If this is not possible the note preceding the lift is staccato or detached.

The drop should be smooth yet precise. The upper arm moves a bit, the elbow amplifies this movement into the forearm, then the hand strikes the keys with the wrist acting as a spring and shock absorber.

Note : This weight transferred through the wrist is the piano's "tone control". Sensitivity for the varying amounts of tension the wrist is capable of is one of, if not the, most difficult skills a pianist must master

Note : It is anatomically efficient to have the wrist level or slightly below the level of the hand. High wrists are a sure sign of tension, and result in poor tone.

Note : It is impossible to bang (Jar the piano mechanism) if one uses weight as opposed to force.

THE HORIZONTAL MOVEMENT OF THE ARM

The arm must move sideways in order to take the hand to the desired location on the keyboard.

TOCO - What you are not above you cannot play.

If you are not precisely above what you play, you must, by definition, apply some force to the drop.

In order to move accurately the arm should take/lead the hand and

not follow it.

Note : It is very important to keep the relationship between the arm and hand in a constant, straight plane for as far along the keyboard as is practical

Very Important Note : It is inevitable that a piece of music may force the pianist out of these idealised positions (hand shape Etc.). These should be forced onto the pianist by circumstances and not anticipated.

This sideways shift must likewise occur on a beat or an exact proportion of a beat.

Note : Everything a player does should be rhythmical. If this is not the case tension can and often does result.

Exercises for the arm.

All of the above technique for the arm can be acquired through the study of Bartok's Masterpiece Mikrokosmos in the early and intermediate stages,

FINALLY - HAND STACCATO

When playing repeated notes, the technique used is speed dependent. Slow, you play with the arm, then, as you accelerate the hand takes over playing in rhythmic groups, finally when the hand cannot go any faster, finger staccato (repeated notes) takes over.