

Piano: 2

Style and interpretation: some general principles.

INTRODUCTION

Part two of this series of articles about piano playing and teaching, deals with some generalities about how to approach a new work. Specific composers are dealt with in later parts.

TOCO - What you cannot imagine, you cannot practise.

The job of the pianist is to interpret the composition, to place before the listener/audience as accurate and faithful an account as is within the capability of the performer. In other words, to play what is actually written in the score and what is implied by what is written.

TOCO - The performer is the vehicle for the music. Music is not a vehicle for the performer.

This requires an attitude of humility, inquisitiveness, an understanding of style, musical theory and, of course, imagination.

TOCO - The performer is the essential partner to the composer. In order to live, a piece must be played.

This is the essence of performance: The "living" partnership and relationship between the written page and the performer, where the performer has the power to reveal or conceal; enlighten or obscure; be honest or dishonest.

Note : In reading what follows, remember to trust your intuitive and spontaneous feelings, as they form the bedrock of any performance.

WHERE TO START

First we must assume that the pianist is adequately equipped to meet all eventualities:-

The pianist must have a good physical technique.* We must assume that the work to be studied poses no technical threat, and is not too difficult.

The pianist must be theoretically competent.

The pianist must be artistically literate.

First Steps (The below may seem blindingly obvious, but in my experience, these steps are usually not followed.)

1) - Who composed the work about to be studied?

Note - When answering this apparently innocuous question, the student (we are all students) has immediately got to know the answers to many other questions. For example:- Are the markings on the score editorial or the composer's own? This then leads to the following questions :-

2) - What period does the work belong to, and what are the implications of knowing this?

3) - What are the particular linguistic/stylistic characteristics of this composer's music at this particular point in his development?

4) - What is the nationality/temperament/personality of this composer, and will this have any bearing on your approach?

5) - What is the piece called? Does its name have any particular historical or stylistic significance?

Note - The above gets you started on the next stage : namely deciding with a reasonable degree of certainty how to approach learning the notes and achieving an acceptably accurate initial interpretation.

Once the notes are known (and, indeed, during the note learning stage), the answers to the above questions will gradually get you moving towards gaining your own image of the piece/work.

Next Steps

Now the fun starts.

Note - Ask yourself the following question : If we assume that a great pianist can sight read virtually anything and give an accurate and stylistically well informed performance straight off, WHAT DO THEY DO FOR FIVE HOURS A DAY?

Answer: They are taking these next steps.

- 1) - What does this particular piece mean?
- 2) - What is the composer saying, or trying to say?
- 3) - What should I be feeling?
- 4) - Is what I am feeling appropriate?
- 5) - Is what I am feeling, imagining, "at one" with the music?
- 6) - Am I "getting it across"?
- 7) - Could I do it this way?
- 8) - What if I do it that way?
- 9) - Why, when I play this like "so and so", does his playing seem right, but mine does not?
- 10) - Is the way that is right for me valid and justifiable?
- 11) - At what point can I present this as a public performance?

Note - All these questions/challenges, and your success in dealing with them are a test of your integrity and insight. It is the measure of your artistry. It is your sacred trust.

This work is the most joyful part of music making. No definite answers, only infinite questions!

TOCO - The greatest composers ask the most questions.

*See Piano Part One