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Abstract

Nurturing Musical Independence

Where in present-day teaching trends can we further promote musical independence? Three variables that significantly influence the achievement of first-rate music making will be examined. They are: Teacher weaknesses and strengths, student weaknesses and strengths and the length of lessons. The paper will illustrate how these variables can be positive factors in nurturing independence – extending the individuality of teachers, helping students to be more confident and providing a means by which time can be better used. The topic is discussed with an analysis of recently published piano pedagogy manuals.

NURTURING MUSICAL INDEPENDENCE

Those who deliver a paper at a conference invariably regard their topic as important. Notwithstanding, I would like to stress that the topic of nurturing musical independence is an extremely important one which still requires more discussion and attention. It is my intention to illustrate why it is a central issue for teachers of piano.

WHAT IS MUSICAL INDEPENDENCE?

It is a student who has mastered the essentials of good music making. It is when a student can make intelligent musical decisions and know why they are good. It is not necessarily freedom from mentors because we probably all have them throughout our lives to give us essential feedback on our musical efforts. I am referring to a position of security for a musician where good decision-making can take place.

I became fascinated with this topic when I was taking a piano pedagogy class and one of the students in preparation for a demonstration lesson asked me what should be included. It was one of those questions which, thankfully, haunted me for a long time. For experienced teachers, the obvious answer is; why good music making of course. However, just what constitutes good music making?

I was greatly impressed with the introduction to a chapter entitled *Musicality* by Seymour Fink in *A Symposium for Pianists and Teachers – Strategies to Develop the Mind and Body for Optimal Performance* (Ed. Kris Kropff, Heritage Music Press, OH, 2002, p. 97). It reads:

“The training of a true musician concerns listening, singing, and moving. It includes inner hearing and audiation skills, discrimination, memory, continuity in movement and rhythmic control, recognition of rhythmic, melodic and harmonic patterns, cognitive understanding, and awareness of tonality. Truly superior training promotes musical imagination, improvisation, musical decision-making, and joy in performance; thus inspiring a highly personal involvement with music.”

It is a rarity to read a list of the essentials for students to learn. Before coming to the conclusion that such an approach runs contrary to independence of teacher and student, think about it this way: If students arrive in early adulthood without sight-reading skills, we cannot say they are musically independent; they are musically handicapped. The same could be said about a lack of a strong technique, a small repertoire and the inability to analyse and memorise a work, to improvise or compose a few bars, to hear musical sounds and know how to adjust them. Therefore, there are some essentials that need to be taught if in the end we want strong musicians. I do not wish to spend time on these essentials. They are covered in my book, *Piano Teaching: A Guide to Musical Independence* (New Arts Press, Perth WA, 2007) but I list them. The acronym ART MUSIC also provides an easy-to-remember checklist:

AURAL
 REPERTOIRE
 TECHNIQUE

MEMORY
 UNDERSTANDING
 SIGHT READING
 IMPROVISATION/COMPOSITION
 CHORDS/HARMONY

These essentials are not just a list of activities which must be included in a lesson but a way of examining music so that it is thoroughly understood. Here are some activities which link these essentials with piano repertoire. Are your students able to perform these tasks on any one of their current repertoire?

- Sing any part of their composition – melody, bass movement and up and down individual chords
- Sight read other scores of a similar standard
- Create their own technical exercises from repertoire to help overcome weak points
- Improvise or compose a short piece in a similar style
- Talk freely about the music, including the structure of the work
- Memorise thoroughly (so that it is retained in the long-term memory)
- Describe any chord in the work

WHY DOES MUSICAL INDEPENDENCE NEED MORE ATTENTION?

One of the areas of study that most fascinates me as a piano teacher is the student who loves music but who struggles significantly with one or more areas of piano playing. Of course I love teaching the talented student who progresses at a great rate and is able to play effortlessly. In the private music studio there can be a diverse range of students. Over the years I have taught many adults who learnt piano as children. Often in the initial lessons one can observe that there was little understanding of music making. Somehow the love of music won through enough for them to persevere and eventually to return to piano studies. The longest gap for a student in my studio between teenage studies and taking the piano up again is 56 years. It took only 12 months before she was again playing intermediate level repertoire – and at that level there is a wealth of repertoire to explore. Another group to enter my studio are

teenagers who have had years of piano training and are about to do tertiary education. However, they are often still struggling with elementary issues such as hearing and adjusting the sounds, playing evenly, sight reading, fingering, and pedalling. Then there are the young adults who have passed through tertiary training. Many are still a long way off being independent at a stage of life when they should be claiming it. Then there are the young transfer students who may be climbing the examination ladder but have failed to be aware of really important areas of music making. Years of investment of time, effort and money does not necessarily equal musical independence.

I do not believe we can say it is enough to teach independent thinking so that students will be able to work out their own problems. From my experience, students having serious difficulties with any of the essentials of music making in their early 20s still need significant help. The independent ones, with time, may be able to overcome problems themselves but at this stage in life anyone with a musical handicap may take years to conquer it. If we can set up good foundations with students much earlier, they in turn will be much more effective musicians and teachers when they enter the work force. This is why musical independence needs much more discussion and why we need to find ways of prioritising it from the first lesson. I feel fortunate to work with youngsters from their very first musical steps. I even find myself taking on students as young as three and half and although working with this age group is relatively new to me I am pleasantly surprised at how much can be achieved and the resultant rewards. I am happy to admit though that this age group is hard work.

For students to be strong and musically healthy there are essentials they must master early. Some may say this is not possible because teachers have particular strengths and weaknesses; they cannot be expected to be strong in all areas of teaching and besides, wouldn't that be cloning teachers? Some may say students have strengths and weaknesses and it is impossible to address them all and because of the ever-decreasing available time, to be talking about essentials is impractical. However, I would like to examine how these three variables that often work *against* us can also be made to work *for* us.

- 1 Each teacher has his or her own strengths and weaknesses
- 2 Each student has his or her own strengths and weaknesses
- 3 Time: How can we ensure students' learn the essentials in the limited lesson time available?

TEACHER STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

In the 2006 winter issue of the *Piano Journal*, Janina Fialkowska in conversation with Malcolm Troup delightfully compares her first two teachers: The first was “a shade over-serious – a nice woman, if something of a martinet, with a rich inner life” (Yvonne Hubert); the second had “amazing hats and blonde hair: theatrical to the core” (Yvonne Léfébure). The emphasis in their teaching was just as contrasting: “developing technique very logically, step by step” and “the need for dramatic projection... leave the notes to look after themselves... find the soul of the composer”. Then in 1970 at the age of 19 with her third teacher (Sascha Gorodnitzki – by the way of whom she said “he couldn't care less if I ended up as a performer; he just wanted me to play the piano to the limit of my abilities” (p. 9)), she learnt about

sound. Janina described her playing up to this time as lacking in warmth and sensuous colour. This is a fairly standard sort of interview in magazines and journal articles on music. We are conditioned to the labelling of teachers with a particular characteristic – the strength they are known for. We need to take care that we do not use this traditional way of thinking as an excuse: We can't be good at everything, we can't know about every aspect of music making so it is acceptable if we just concentrate on the aspects we feel strong in. Would it have not been better for Janina (and any piano student) to learn about the importance of sound from early stages? To do something about our weaker areas does not subtract from our strong area(s) – it will only add to them.

As perhaps with many teachers, I myself started with many weaknesses. For instance I was happy to encourage those who were naturally gifted in memorisation and tended to ignore the skill in those who were not good at it or not interested. The reason was I did not understand the processes involved in memorising thoroughly. I do not believe that every student should play without music – some play better with it and some need it as illustrated by chamber musicians but I do believe music should be learnt inside out. I did recitals in my student years without music and on reflection as a teacher I realised it was more muscle memory than anything else. When teaching the topic to piano pedagogy students I was not happy until I found ways of memorising thoroughly, trying them out for myself so I could offer some well-founded advice to others.

With all the resources available today there is no excuse for not filling in the gaps of our own experience. I look on it as a challenge. However, perhaps the hardest step is to be able to acknowledge one's strengths and weaknesses. Let me tell you about a response from an experienced teacher after I described my summer-break project of watching 10 long videos on piano technique; "so what's new in the last 200 years of piano playing?" Unfortunately, there will always be some teachers who are not really interested in moving from a set position. There was not much that I ended up agreeing with in the videos but I still gained insights from watching them. Even in the most boring of piano pedagogy manuals there are always new ways of approaching piano pedagogy. Since my student days at university my teaching has drastically changed. Here are some personal examples which might encourage others.

SIGHT READING

One of my strong areas has been sight-reading. Because I had to teach it as a unit at tertiary institution it revolutionised my way of thinking about it. Why? I had to find answers to help students who could not do it – it was curiosity. Now it is an integral part of nearly every piano lesson I give and has led me to write a manual *Sight Reading Skills: A Guide for Sight Reading Piano Music Accurately and Expressively* (New Arts Press, Perth WA, revised ed. 2007)

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

Back in my student years one of the descriptions of my general knowledge in a diploma AMEB exam was "rather shaky". These days, the bedside table generally has a stack of piano pedagogy books or composers' biographies. A description of Spanish music with Moorish flavour "sinuously arabesque melodic tracery" (*Enrique Granados Poet of the Piano*, Walter Aaron Clark, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 32) sends me to the piano with a desire to play through the Spanish Dances.

PERFORMANCE SKILLS

With those who are preparing to teach the piano I often hear comments like “I am *only* a teacher.” The necessity for keeping up performance skills is not emphasised enough. If only these trainee teachers realised that sometimes the one-to-one performance situation is one of the most profound because of its intimate environment. If we want to teach independence, the best way is to be independent: happy to grow in our own music making at whatever level. It is too easy to think that we are not on a par with the great performers of this world and there are so many wonderful CDs that our contribution does not amount to much. However, I know that I approach teaching better when I am playing to the best of my ability. Recently I recorded half of Liszt’s *Pieces Poetic and Religious* on the occasion of my mother being ordained into the Anglican Church at the tender age of 78. Of course this meant much to a loved one but probably more importantly, I was the one to benefit the most. The set contained one of my favourite pieces that I had played for years. Practising the music so that I felt happy about it being recorded took it to another level. I felt challenged and stretched to a place I had not been before. We shouldn’t expect only our students to be reaching new heights. We also need to be in a healthy performance position.

CHOICE OF MATERIAL

With beginners I have had a major change of approach. I have never felt really satisfied with any of the method books. Now, concentrating on making sure that all the essentials are covered and also because each student’s needs are so different – I construct in each student’s large scrapbook an individual course. Of course, sometimes I choose to use parts of method books. Some could say that it is a lot of work and as one adult student commented to me, it is only the exceptional teachers who are able to work this way. I don’t think so. I think it is also a matter of training and experience. It is these two factors which have changed me.

MOTIVATION

To regard oneself as on a journey of discovery is an exciting way to teach. This, in turn, motivates and propels students. I think of little six-year-old Ollie who gave me a Christmas card with the normal polite thank you and greetings on one page but then on the next in huge letters he wrote “GO FAITH.” Motivation is so much better when it is a circle. I have noticed that since lending magazines and other musical materials, students reciprocate in kind and it can sometimes bring about the most extraordinary amount of interesting material. For example, in one week I wrote down what had been passed to me:

Mozart’s Sister, a novel by A.M. Bauld

Tchaikovsky from the series *Composer’s World* by Wendy Thompson

A CD of Swedish piano music by Sven-Erik Back

Three CDs of Paul Lewis playing Beethoven sonatas

A three-part video series on Mozart

The CD, *Beethoven Lives Upstairs* (Classical Kids)

A volume of Ponce’s piano music to sight read

How can we be anything but enlivened if we have this kind of input each week?

Can we rely on music specialists to fill in the gaps? Our work is so much easier when a student has been working with other music specialists but because we have no standard system where we know students are being thoroughly grounded in the music essentials then we, at least, must be knowledgeable in the essential in order to gauge how a student is progressing. Seymour Fink's advice in this area is, "When possible, piano teachers should farm much of this work out to the choral, eurhythmic, dance, and theory professionals, but we can never wash our hands of it completely" (*A Symposium for Pianists and Teachers: Strategies to Develop the Mind and Body for Optimal Performance*, ed. Kris Kropff, Heritage Music Press, OH, 2002, p.106).

I am not advocating a fixed method or system. Because of the variables – and this is what makes the subject so delightful to teach – each lesson is unique. This is why expertise is needed – to diagnose on the run. As the teacher György Sebök said about the skill of great teaching: "It is the ability to respond exactly to a person and a situation" (*Beyond the Notes* by Susan Tomes, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2004, p.133). We must still ensure that we have confidence and understanding in all the essential areas. Otherwise how can we fairly judge and guide our students' progress? There must be discussion as to what are the essentials to be taught for students to be strong. This will not create teacher clones. The quantity of material is so extensive. The manner of approaching this material is manifold. There is still plenty of room for all teachers to have their own unique approach. If we as teachers want to be in a healthy position to develop independence in our students, we need the very characteristics that we look for in our students – curiosity, a willingness to try new approaches, to be part of a cycle in the process of learning and receiving from others. This will not produce cloned teachers but ones who are distinguished by their individuality.

STUDENT STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Let me tell you about Student X, a post-tertiary piano student with an excellent ear and perfect pitch. He flew through his aural course at university and could memorise music at the click of a finger. Despite this, he was way behind in understanding about the subtlety of piano sound – how to layer it and how to create contrasting colours and textures, even how to shape a line. Concentrating on these areas has transformed his playing.

Serious piano students know when a major area of musicianship is not working well and I have noticed a tremendous sense of relief in them when they begin to understand – it is their desire to address weaknesses. Let me introduce Student Y, a post-tertiary piano student who had never memorised. It was not a requirement of her particular course and she was never challenged to do so. However, when I suggested that I help her understand the process and asked would she like to give it a go, it obviously excited her. Her first piece was painstakingly slow but transformed her whole approach to playing. Having experienced this, it was then her desire to prepare a whole program in a similar vein and she now has a 40 minute program happening. Not only did understanding this part of music making change her approach, but it will, in turn, help her students. It is easy to relegate "unessential" (for exams) elements to the backburner but if we are clear in our minds what elements are necessary for the development of a better musician then we will be unwilling to compromise and the benefits to the student will be greater.

There is a tendency to let particular strengths of students alone when it appears that those areas are fully covered. However, that is where we need to be extending the student even further. Whatever the strength, that area still needs to be monitored and developed.

I think of 10-year-old Hannah and composition. She often comes to lesson with her own new composition. The attitude could easily be taken that she is far in advance of other students in this area so I do not need to worry about it. No, it is in these instances setting particular projects will make sure the student is further challenged and stretched. In addition if her compositions are written down, there is a bonus - another way of helping her theory, where she is in need of motivation.

Michael is a nine-year-old who is gifted in transposition and harmony work (he does not flinch when I ask for any black-note key centre). Again I could say there is no need to persist in this area as he has it in hand and is far advanced of other students his age. However, I will press on as he occasionally mentions organ playing and if that is the direction he goes, these skills will be invaluable (but just as invaluable for piano playing). Thus he is nearly up to reading figured bass.

The examples I have given are good arguments for teachers to know well the essentials that need to be covered and to make sure students, whether weak or strong are aware of the need for continual vigilance of every aspect of their playing.

TIME

We are all unique in our approach – so we can learn much from each other. How we use our time cannot be too prescriptive if we value one another's uniqueness. However, if we want to cover the essentials of good music making, we need far more discussion on approaches that use time economically. There are moments when the prescriptive cutting up of the time into various segments can work but on the whole this approach often leads to students not relating one area to another – an example is working on cadences in a theory book as opposed to a piece of music. There is more talk of the necessity and benefits of theory, sight reading, aural work, improvisation and composition but the dilemma for the teacher is how to fit it all in. These essential areas of music making should not be just portions of lessons sometimes dealt with when time permits. To use our time wisely and to teach lessons of depth, we must find ways of making the areas overlap. If, for instance, a student is sight singing the melody as preparation for sight reading a new section of a repertoire piece, three areas are being covered at the one time – repertoire, sight reading and aural. The lesson becomes one of depth – a far more enriching learning experience. Working on repertoire can integrate all the essential elements of music making. This must aid musical maturity.

A lesson learnt well can be transferred to the next project. As teachers, we need the constant reminder to go for depth rather than breadth. Of course there are times when we choose to apportion our lesson times and concentrate on one element.

If we are going to go to the effort to look at music in detail and with great care then I think the essential ingredient is good music. Then it is easy for the approach to be

multi-faceted. Like an observer of a beautiful object in a glass case in the middle of the corridor of a museum, we want to walk around it and observe it from many angles and shades of light. If we look at music just in technical terms we will obviously get a different result than one which involves analysis and memorisation, background information, creating your own piece in a similar style and sight reading through other pieces of a similar nature. The essentials I list are not restrictive for the teacher but liberating. They are a skeleton, a foundation, a jumping board from which extends a multitude of approaches to the teaching of music. They can also be a measuring stick to check that we are being really thorough in our approach.

Some of us aim to cover all angles but all of us would have to admit that time limitations force us to be selective. What does work for us is that if we teach a small amount of these techniques well, then it can be applied to other works where students can further extend their independence. This is one of the reasons why it is easier with a student we have had for a long time. If the lessons have been deep and learnt well, what has been learnt is transferred by the student from piece to piece. Difficulties arise with transfer students who often have huge gaps in one or more areas. Young students need from their very earliest music education to be learning in the way I have described. Therefore all teachers at all levels should understand the importance of content and delivery.

EMPHASES IN GENERAL PIANO PEDAGOGY MANUALS

In *The Art of Teaching Piano* (ed. Denes Agay, Yorktown Music Press, 1981, 2004, p. 463) there is a two-page chapter (out of 519 pages) listing the essentials for a lesson but there is no general discussion of how this can be done. The same applies for *The Well Tempered Keyboard Teacher* (Marianne Uszler, Stewart Gordon, Scott McBride Smith, Schirmer, 1991, 2nd edition 2000, p.83) Thankfully we are seeing more chapters written on the essential elements of teaching such as aural work, improvisation, composition, sight reading but these topics are mostly presented as separate topics – the link is not being made with connecting these important elements with the music that is being studied. The musical elements are treated as optional extras instead of essential means for understanding and examining music. In *Practical Piano Pedagogy; The Definitive Text for Piano Teachers and Pedagogy Students* by Dr. Martha Baker-Jordan (Warner Bros. Publications, 2003, 2004) there is an inspiring chapter on how she taught composition of a prelude and fugue when her student was also studying one. There is a chapter called *The “Black Hole”* in which she argues the need for all piano students to be proficient in Harmonization, Transposition, Improvisation and Composition. The reasons are compelling.

Within the same 455-page book there are 82 pages of forms. These forms are also repeated in the main text and together with more forms, add up to more than one third of the book. Organisation is useful – we cannot be effective without it but it can also stifle learning of independence. I give the example of the practice form (p. 409) with the direction “*after you play each piece three times each day put a tick in the box*” and “*Review – Play each piece two times each day*”. While there are moments when one is tempted to use such an approach, if used, what is the student really learning about the different stages of practice and personal reflection and evaluation? Should we resort to saying that a repertoire piece needs to be repeated so many times when some may need to practice more, some less? Is it not better to teach students to decide

for themselves when the piece is accurate and expressive? Practice comes in many different shapes and sizes and each student's stage will be unique. Therefore, the practice form, if used, needs to be individual for each student, each week. The *Piano Repertoire List* form (p.449) worked a treat for nine-year-old Michael. A highly motivated child, he was indefatigable in his zeal to fill each of the boxes, memorise and play in public every piece. It kept him focused and on target. Yet I know other students with whom I would choose not to use this approach because of the disheartening effect of never completing a whole page within a set time.

Then there is the matter of setting work. Baker-Jordan writes (p.88) "*Above all, assignments for the young child in a small spiral binder with no specific directions are inadequate, outdated, and not very professional. Teachers need to have a system for assignments that is organized, clear, and pedagogically sound.*" As already mentioned, with my young ones (about 5 to 8 years of age), I use a large scrapbook allowing me the freedom to address each child's needs individually. I wonder if this comes in the same category as a spiral binder. It is not always appropriate to be highly organised in the sense of having a set course because to set assignments which are fully integrated – relating any aural, reading, composition, etc with the music that is being studied – often needs to be done on the spot. We cannot always predetermine what the main issues of the lesson will be and herein lies the necessity for the teacher to be a highly skilled specialist who is able to be flexible.

One of the most useful texts I would recommend for inexperienced and experienced piano teachers alike is *A Symposium for Pianists and Teachers; Strategies to Develop the Mind and Body for Optimal Performance* (Ed. Kris Kropff, Heritage Music Press, 2002). This book has excellent suggestions on how to practise, the mechanics of piano playing – how the body works, levers, movements, hand positions, gestures, exercises for fitness, causes and solutions of pain and injuries, and overcoming issues of the mind – anxiety and fear. Ten authors were given the freedom to write on their favourite topics within the context of the general theme – optimal performance. It is interesting that only 9 pages in this 264-page text (plus a hand full of scores mentioned in passing) contain specific musical examples. There is plenty of scope for writers to make more of a connection between music and these worthwhile and relevant topics. You can have a holistic approach to a healthy and effective piano technique but you can still have bad or boring music making. Good music making cannot really be separated from good music. Seymour Fink reinforces this point in his excellent chapter entitled *Musicality*; "*Technique is best defined as purposeful movement towards musical ends and must be presented in ways that reinforces music's existence only in perceived or actual sound*" (p.99). This is why books by great performer/teachers such as Neuhaus, Brendel, Rosen and Berman are so inspirational.

Recently published piano pedagogy material sees a growth in the following areas –

- how to practise,
- posture and use of the body
- performance anxiety
- how to set up a studio
- student individual characteristics and learning styles

We can ride coat tails on these important topics in discussing how we can better help students find musical independence. However, we have a long way to go if we believe that the healthiest approach is when the music is at the centre of study.

In piano pedagogy manuals I would like to see more material in these areas:

- a philosophy of piano teaching and how it affects what we teach and how we teach
- guidance for reading about the music and composers
- good editions
- good recordings
- the teacher as a performer – maintaining and improving skills in performance
- working with the best possible instruments
- the essentials needed to help develop a strong healthy independent musician
- approaches for delivery of the essentials for students to achieve independence
- delivery so that all is covered in depth
- time as a precious resource
- the importance of choosing the best-quality music
- a case for putting music at the centre of study

It is essential that the approach to teaching is based on knowing what we need to teach for students to gain musical independence. If not, we run the risk of having an approach that is splattered with mediocrity and students ending up with only a smattering of skills, and thus are not nearly as useful to our society as strong, independent musicians.

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