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MUSIC PEDAGOGY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In Fall 2011, I was asked to hold a keynote speech for the European Piano Teacher Association. I was at first hesitant about discoursing on the theme I was given, *Music Pedagogy in the 21st Century*. I basically think that the underlying principles for making independent adults out of still-maturing children have not changed that much since Montaigne wrote about them in the 16th century. Of course, some things have changed since then, including our environment, the sheer number of inhabitants of our planet, as well as the state of our scientific knowledge and technology. With these thoughts as starting points, I try in the following comments to explain some ideas on pedagogy that I find important today and then relate them to music instrumental learning.

The importance of 'grit'

In a recent issue of the «New York Times Magazine»¹ there was an article about education entitled: *What if the Secret to Success is Failure?* It described the endeavors to find the most successful educational pattern for the present time, specifically in the context of two very different high schools in New York City, one with students from a very poor area, the other from one with very well-to-do families.

Both schools criticized the overrated importance often given to IQ tests: «This push on tests is missing out on some serious parts of what it means to be a successful human being».² Instead, both schools reported that the former high school students, who were later successful in college and actually graduated, were not necessarily the ones who had excelled academically in high school.

They were [rather] the ones with exceptional character strengths, like optimism and persistence and social intelligence. They were the ones who were able to recover from a bad grade and resolve to do better next time; ... to resist the urge to go to the movies and stay home and study instead.³

This ability to move from failure to success has been called 'grit'. The full list of character traits, which led to success later on in life, contains several other abilities: besides grit, there was zest, self control, social intelligence,

¹ P. TOUGH, *What if the Secret to Success is Failure?*, «New York Times Magazine», 14 September 2011, Section Magazine, pp. 1-9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

gratitude, optimism, and curiosity. Of course, in every special field one also needs talent for this field. In our case of music pedagogy, this would be a certain gift to combine sound imagination and body movement.

This character catalogue is certainly not new. But I do think it needs to be called to educators' attention every once in a while. Perhaps especially so today, when authorities throughout Europe have put so much weight applying to education a bean-counting mentality of measurable external values.

Providing a good environment, a good life, is also not enough. Pupils from the well-to-do families did not necessarily always succeed in college. The pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy⁴ told me once, that he owed part of his successful pianistic development to the grey everyday environment of the Soviet Union: there were no distractions like movies, computer games, discos and what not. Everyday life was so grey that it was relatively easy to spend the time on the piano practicing for hours. This environment perhaps was good for the development of 'grit'.⁵

To my question about why he left the Soviet Union, Ashkenazy replied that many people left because they believed there was not enough individual freedom. Here perhaps the environment didn't encourage the development of another character trait, optimism, here an artist's hope of following his own path.⁶

Back to the article of the NYT. The schools and associated researchers talk about two general categories of character: 'moral character' and 'performance character'. Moral character includes traits such as fairness, generosity, optimism, and integrity. Performance characters are those of effort, diligence, and perseverance or grit. Equally important, they found, is the difficult task of learning to consistently further these character traits over time, to not give in to the modern taste for short-term results.

What is teaching about?

How could we apply the insight from these schools to our ideas of what teaching, in general, is about? I think teaching must be about (at least) the following five things:

1. it is about *exchanging ideas* (about motivation, curiosity, exploration, research) on all levels;
2. it is about exploring and explaining how *things may function* sensually, emotionally, and cognitively;
3. it is about how to establish *methods* for proceeding step by step to more and more differentiated level;

⁴ T. BRÄM, *Interview with Vladimir Ashkenazy*, in ID., *Bewahren und Öffnen*, Aarau, Musikedition Nepomuk, 1992, pp. 19-28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*

4. it is about how to best use one's *skills* at the technical level one has reached;
5. it is about building *character*, especially grit, so that one may find one's own place.

Thoughts of the younger generation of music teachers with examples of three conversations

So now let us go from these 'high-falluting' abstract ideas back to the reality of a younger generation of music teachers who are active in the 21st century. I'd like to share with you some insights I had while talking recently to three younger music teachers.

I asked a 43-year-old music teacher in Germany about what he thinks 21st-century music teaching should be about. He is a school musician and also has a degree in guitar teaching. His environment is, for Germany, 'average': no specially educated and ambitious parents, but all people wanting the best for their kids, which includes sports, computer games, ... and a little bit of instrumental playing. He teaches guitar, recorder, and piano in order to make his living. He himself is not too ambitious, he is not frustrated, and he likes people. «What's your vision?», I asked. His reply: «Improvisation, much more playing together, no 'solitary confinement' (*Einzelhaft* in German) at the piano». I said: «That's great, but after a year or so it will get boring if there is no technical development; without some systematic playing (we used to call that 'practicing') there will be no increased pleasure. What do you think about that?». After a pause he said: «That's the problem».

Improvisation? I personally do not think that it matters in what style you play (improvisation, jazz, Bach...), but it is a matter of how systematically we work within one style. For me, it was Bach. My father – himself a very good piano player (although not a professional musician) – was my teacher for my first ten years, from age 6-16, until I began to play better than him. He told me: «You have to play Bach from the beginning: not only Bach, but always». Which I did. My reading ability and my hand coordination developed fast and well. I never made it to the concert stage with a virtuoso 'horizontal' piano playing (playing sideways fast) of 19th-century repertoire, but I could sight-read Alban Berg's *Sonata*, where more polyphonic structures such as one finds in Bach's fugues are important.

I talked also to a young Italian master student in cello playing. He wrote a very nice paper about the right way to sit at his instrument. There are basic laws for an instrument: on the piano it is the fall of the finger (the understanding of speed and weight), it is the command over the sideways-movement, it is the chord playing, it is to learn the safe distances in jumps. In cello playing, you have to be able to play with the upper bow with the right hand and you have to be able to climb to high positions on the fingerboard. These factors help determine how your body has to position the instrument or how your body has to adjust to the instrument. Your body belongs to you, you

have to accept it, but – and this is the interesting point in this student’s paper – the ‘right position’ is not a life-long given, it changes. At the age of 6, the young piano player usually needs a footstool under the feet; the 66-year-old may need more breaks when the neck starts hurting. There is no single method as such; the method depends on your body at the given time. While today we can train and enjoy our virtual abilities on a computer, we still very much need to know more about our bodies; not only to know, but also to feel how we function best. That was the wish of the cello student for our pedagogy of the future.

Most recently I met with a 25-year-old German pianist who studies in Basel and is already a quite successful performer. She has a Master of Performance degree and has started an additional Master of Pedagogy. In our discussion she focused on several points that would be most important to her in teaching:

- she idealistically wants to help each student (on every level) to express him/herself;
- for this she wants to find out what’s for every individual the right way;
- she wants to teach the students how to persist until he or she finds this way (this is what we have been talking about as developing ‘grit’);
- as teacher, she wants to go along learning herself with the student;
- she has to communicate a method how to use the student’s strong sides in the most efficient way, for which she thinks the use of images or metaphors from nature and the body are of great help;
- for all of this she believes one needs time and patience.

This young pianist is still full of enthusiasm and idealism, two aspects that certainly will help to develop the character trait of optimism we talked about before. Her big advantage is, in addition, her advanced musical and technical background in her field, which enables her to understand and explain the technical steps of piano playing. Besides piano, she takes a lot of chamber music and vocal accompaniment courses, which contribute to her social intelligence. By working with ensembles that use other instruments she is also widening her encyclopedic knowledge of sounds (violin, voice, winds, drums, etc.).

A few words here about the new Master of Pedagogy in Europe. In former times the student used to do a teaching diploma first and then move on to a performance degree. Now it’s often in the reversed order: first the degree in performance, then in teaching. I think this is an improvement.

What, in sum, did the three interviewees wish? More improvisation, less solitary confinement, more knowledge about one’s own body and a lot of time and patience in order to develop all the necessary skills. How to follow up these wishes in our present time of demanding speedy results, of encouraging disembodiment and of managing human resources primarily for a profit – I leave up all this to your discussions in your sessions.

Changing influences throughout the years on music teaching

1. *Beyond Czerny and Cramer.*⁷ – In the span of my lifetime, what was deemed most important in pedagogy has changed several times: in the 1960s, we found that there are other musical aims to be had outside of mastering the Czerny and Cramer *études*. Already Beethoven himself mocked this mechanical way of playing quite wittily in his *Diabelli-Variations*. However, without the technical ability of what Czerny or Cramer aimed at, we could not play the *Diabelli-Variations*. So I think that learning Czerny or Cramer should not be the sole aim, but rather, having learned their exercises, what we could do with these techniques is, for example, playing the *Diabelli-Variations*.

2. *Piaget and cognitive development.* – In the late 1960s, influenced by the psychologist Piaget, we music teachers found that we have to adjust our teaching to the cognitive development of children, specifically their developing ability for abstract thought. I remember a violin teacher who came to me when I was directing a music school and told me that I had allowed a totally ungifted child in his class. I went to the lesson where he demonstrated to me how he judged the giftedness of this little boy. He asked the child: «What note will sound, when you put the 3rd finger on the d-string?». The kid was embarrassed and did not know. «But I told you this last time». The kid still didn't know. So I asked the teacher: «How old is the boy?». He said: «I don't know, I assume maybe twelve». It turned out that the boy was eight and had had barely half a year of violin lessons. So the teacher's question was probably simply too abstract for a child of this age, especially as we all know that the violin's 'third finger of the left hand' is actually the fourth finger if you count the thumb and it might take time to learn such a special label. I don't think that such an incident would happen anymore today.

3. *Neuroscience, brain mapping.*⁸ – Then, in the 1980s, began the years of the influence from neuroscience, from studies in how the brain works. Our attention shifted to the mapping of the brain, the specializations of the right and left lobes, etc. For example, we began to analyze what we do with the left and with the right hand (or, more precisely put, with the 'dominant' and 'non-

⁷ See also T. BRÄM, *Il far musica: pedagogia in azione*, in *Educazione musicale e Formazione*, ed. by G. La Face Bianconi and F. Frabboni, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2008, pp. 191-199, and T. BRÄM, *Das Orchester als pädagogisches Instrument*, Luzern, Hochschule Luzern - Musik, 2007, pp. 35-43.

⁸ See: P. BOYES BRÄM - T. BRÄM, *A Pilot Study of the Expressive Gestures Used by Classical Orchestra Conductors*, in *The Signs of Language Revisited: An Anthology to Honor Ursula Bellugi and Edward Klima*, ed. by K. Emmorey and H. Lane, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Ass., 2000, pp. 143-168 (a German version published as T. BRÄM - P. BOYES BRÄM, *Der Versuch einer Klassifizierung der Ausdrucksgesten des Dirigenten*, in *Improvisation III*, ed. by W. Fähndrich, Winterthur, Amadeus Verlag, 1998, pp. 220-248).

dominant' hand). Why do we hold the violin bow in the right hand and use the left hand for the forming of more emotional sounds? Why do we show the structural temporal patterns in conducting with the dominant hand and the more emotional, expressive details with the left hand (an area in which my wife and I have done some research)? Why is high in piano playing to the right side of the keyboard and low to the left? (A truly weird concept of up and down for kids.)

During these years, we thought, the better understanding of the brain functions would improve our pedagogy – which it did.

4. *Research projects on how things function.*⁹ – In the last 15 years or so, we have developed an unbelievable urge in our European educational institutions to understand *everything*, and to accomplish this through all kinds of research projects. This has been largely influenced by the adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon Bachelor and Master systems. For me, this represents a shift in emphasis and interest in our society from 'how to communicate things' to 'how things function'. The assumption is that knowing how things function will hopefully help to communicate how it is done. For example, a new and interesting project here in Lucerne (in cooperation with a university in Germany) utilizes new technology to try to measure how the 'groove' works, what causes the feeling of 'being in the groove'. What happens in Jazz when a regular pattern is played slightly offbeat and causes the listeners (and maybe also the players) to tap their feet and to move their body? (Think of people listening to music through their earphones in trains.) The question for teachers is: Would the results of this research project lead to a better understanding of how to teach playing in the 'groove'?

In another research project, researchers tried to see if the quality of the sound in clarinet playing improves by training certain muscular movements in the back. The results were somewhat amazing: even most of the non-musicians who heard the examples of pupils who received the training noticed significant improvement.

Current studies on piano playing focus on such research topics as what body movements of players are universal (for playing a particular style of

⁹ See: O. SENN, *The Relevance of 'Participatory Discrepancies' for the Perception of 'Groove' in Jazz and Funk Music*, Research project in progress at the Hochschule Luzern - Musik; H. MÄTZENER - J. GUTZWILLER, *Klarinettenklang. Versuch einer physiologischen Analyse*, Research project 2007-2011 at the Hochschule Luzern - Musik, «Dissonance», 118, June 2012 (http://www.dissonance.ch/upload/pdf/diss118_43_bsm_hma_klarinettenklang.pdf); G. CASTELLANO - M. MORTILLARO - A. CAMURRI - G. VOLPE - K. SCHERER, *Automated Analysis of Body Movement in Emotionally Expressive Piano Performance*, «Music Perception», XXVI, n. 2, 2008, pp. 103-120; J. MACRITCHIE, *Elucidating Musical Structures through Empirical Measurement of Performance Parameters*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2011 (available at <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/202357/01>).

music, such as a Chopin Prelude) and which are idiosyncratic. This might help us to decide what one could or should (or should not) teach about body movements accompanying our playing.

Two last thoughts specifically about piano teaching

This is the European Piano Teachers' Association. I have not talked exclusively about piano teaching. For that, you will have specialists from different fields presenting their findings. But I would like to make two final comments about our field.

Before the invention of what we call today 'piano', learning to play the piano was more like what we today would call keyboard playing. A person played any instrument with keys (harpsichord, fortepiano, clavichord, organ, etc.) as a basic tool for learning theory, composition, *basso continuo*, as well as performance.

We find ourselves today in a similar situation. Only one aspect is really new, which is illustrated in this anecdote. When Jonathan Nott conducted *City Life* by Steve Reich in 1999 at the Lucerne Conservatory, he needed a keyboard player to play the samples of the street sounds, which Reich uses in this piece. I asked a student from the concert class in piano to play this part. She was totally shell-shocked after the first rehearsal. In the following days, she had to practice hard to leave behind the idea that keys were not only for producing pitches, but could also be for triggering noises and street sounds. Some aspects of piano technique, moving ones fingers over the keys may obtain totally different artistic results than what we are accustomed to. In a very primitive way, even simple electric keyboard instruments ask for very different aesthetic results from what we consider 'piano music'. Nevertheless, these are today's means, which probably will soon also be available as touch screens. Here, it is not the question of talking about the value of these means, but recognizing they definitely represent a field to which some forms of piano playing could lead. I encourage us to discover what is valuable about them and to develop and further these new experiences.

My second comment is that, on the other hand, this development makes our piano heritage even more precious and should encourage us to treat it with the highest respect. If we have students who still want to play piano, we have to develop their ear for all the sounds and articulations we can only do on this specific instrument, our good old piano. We have to excite them and make them aware of the stylistic characteristics of the present and former epochs.

What, then, is our task as music teachers today? Most generally, it is to implement all this knowledge, to use what we know. How can we do this? Highly relevant to this question is a caution: I think we have to be careful that our way of teaching is not being dictated by political and administrative authorities, who often have completely other priorities and concerns. We have

to develop our curricula ourselves, for our special fields, and in order to do so, we have to discuss the different – often controversial – issues among ourselves.

This is one of the main reasons for the existence of professional groups such as the European Piano or String or Guitar Teacher Associations or the Association Européenne des Conservatoires (AEC) and many others. The important work of these institutions, in my view, is to meet regularly, to exchange ideas, to get excited about new discoveries, to develop our own ‘grit’ so that through our curiosity and passion, our students – whoever they are and on whatever level they are – discover the excitement of finding out how things work generally, globally, and above all individually, for themselves.