

Marcel Baudet

The parrot and the musical paradise

- a short introduction for young pianists –

For some time, I had planned to put into words the main basic principles I try to follow in my own teaching. The following is the result of an attempt to formulate the essence in short, clear and practical formulations. Everyone should make use of these general guidelines in one's own individual way in order to have the maximal benefit of them.

The main thing in becoming a pianist is to become a *musician*. This means that one has to learn to speak the language of music without any artificial interface, as (it has been said before) one's mother tongue. The basic condition for this is the reference we have, built up by knowledge and experience. The extent of references enables us to develop our imagination, taste and judgement. Without a (natural) image of the music, there is no chance for musicality and musical playing. In general we can state that the more music one knows and the more music one has (in an active way) experienced, the better musician one may become.

The best if not the only way, in order to draw on one's musical potential is by turning the 'passive' into the 'active'. Thus, from an early age, the student should learn to reproduce the music he has heard, and even more, to improvise on its basic elements. In a later phase, one could even become a composer, with original material or with themes borrowed from another composers. This process should never end, in fact. But as we know, for these things to become natural we should focus on early childhood, the best period for the development of the brain, and for creating connections in the nervous system. A large and permanent input is the best condition for the awakening of the dormant musical talent and sources of creativity. The following four stages are the main steps for the development of the ability to create musical images, which are the essential base of instrumental playing.

The path of acquiring musical mastery



1	Reference
2	Reproduction
3	Improvisation
4	Composition

These should be taught and trained at any professional musical institution, since without these skills, the student is no more than a parrot, a marionette of the teacher, or the recording, or an obedient servant of the prevailing canon of the conservatory.

It may be clear that, if not the parents, then at least the primary and secondary schools are largely responsible for stage 1, the supply of musical knowledge and experience. Unfortunately, most of the time it does not happen this way. Administrators and politicians have, generally speaking, very little idea of the great importance of musical development for every individual, nor for the hence resulting capability of creating social coherence, and cooperation with chances of wider synergetic processes.

As a consequence, students who enter a University, College or Conservatory, are most of the time behind in their knowledge of music, let alone their skills to reproduce music they have heard, and improvise on it's fundament. This causes the usual situation that the students are permanently behind the times, fully occupied to fulfill the needs of the moment. However, as we know, playing a Mozart sonata properly is only possible when one's knowledge of Mozart's music is extended and profound, from his piano solo music, to his chamber music, to his orchestral work, to his solo concertos and of course, to his operas. Generally speaking, such a set of references is rarely encountered in students, which is the more surprising as access to the complete music literature is nowadays almost unlimited.

The ability of creating a musical image is of primordial importance for instrumental playing. This should not only be mentioned in the lesson, but also put into practise. Teachers ought to have enough time to work on a comprehensive musical education, of which creating the image is a basic element. There should be enough time for constructive working on harmonic reductions and ensuing improvisations. Understanding the language of music comes down to understanding the occurring harmonic progressions. Creating sound and shape and a natural timing derive all from this. In other words: the quality of the harmonic understanding is one of the main determinators of the (musical and artistic) quality of a performance. And this should reflect in the official curriculum and in one's practise.

Western music has, in the course of its history, become structured around a certain internal order, which has to be kept in mind and to be taken into account when studying a score. There is a basic hierarchy in our music and its real understanding has certainly strong implications for the quality of our performance. Clearly, rhythm is the fundament of all music, so it is of Western music. It is eventually the experience of time, and in this respect the 'evidence' of its existence. If rhythm is the first layer of our music, harmony and harmonic progression is the second. These two aspects contain the main parameters of our music. It is virtually impossible to understand a piece of music without understanding the rhythm or the harmonic progression. The third layer, one could say, is melody, grafted upon the underlying ones, with elements such as articulation, dynamics and other qualifications in their retinue.

The internal order of Western music

6	<i>Other</i>
5	Articulation
4	Dynamics
3	Melody (shape and line)
2	Harmony and harmonic progression (tension, relaxation)
1	Rhythm (tempo, pulse)



Many of the occurring musical (and technical) problems can be traced back to insufficiencies in mastering these deeper layers of musical understanding. Technical problems however, find their roots not only in wrong thinking, but, of course, also in wrong movements and a lack of knowledge of the way to approach technique.

Before I move on to some remarks on piano technique, one last word about the subject of theory. Having said here above that the development of the internal ear is the most important aspect of the musical and instrumental education, it's no less than obvious that a thorough knowledge of theory and the acquiring of relevant skills is

very much needed as well. I am always rather surprised when theoretical subjects are treated with contempt or neglected. It should be clear that, no matter how the teacher or the school has set the bar of (minimum) requirements, any serious student should permanently invest in the development of his aural (singing, solfège) and theoretical skills, such as analysis, aesthetics and historical foundations. The right interpretation of a score requires knowledge of the period, the way of writing, the possibilities of the instrument at the time, in short, interpretation needs desperately 'reference'. Because even with all the above mentioned layers mastered, and all the technical skills on board, one can be terribly mistaken about the meaning of a dot, a slur or the interpretation of a tempo indication.

Technique is our instrument. Therefore also some words on the technique of playing. There are, simply put, two main departments: sound production and playing sequences. It is important to realize that every sound needs to have identity, in other words: core. A sound without core is empty, it doesn't speak and cannot convey any story. Even in very soft notes, one must seek the core of the sound, imagining how it will find its way in the room in which it is being projected. It all starts with making contact with the key. This defines one's relationship to the piano and to music. Among the exercises that will show the path to building this relationship, one I would like to mention in particular: learn to feel the upward pressure of the key. The finger should let the key come up, without leaving it. This exercise not only establishes a continuous connection with the piano, it also reveals the 'hidden' powers of the piano, and points at the chances of playing with a highly refined touch, gently and with a minimal loss of energy and time.

The main problem with the production of the sound is the obvious verticality of the action. If the system would operate just on a logical base, the finger action should be working strictly vertical, i.e. at an angle of 90°. Playing the key from this position (\perp) however gives a harsh, metallic, and a sometimes even dead sound. In the process of 'horizontalization', we can choose from all sorts of different angles and movements, and from all sorts of *combinations* of movements. We can push our hands slightly forward or pull them slightly backward, we can raise the position of our wrists, or lower them instead, etc. etc. The general rule is: never a strict vertical position or a strict vertical downward movement (unless some modern composers require so....).

As the angle of the finger (tip) can differ, so can the distance from the key. Playing from *above* the key will give a different sound than playing from *on the surface* or even from *in the key* (the key being a little down already). It is obvious that the higher we start, the more spiked and tart the sound will tend to be. When we play *on* or *in* the key, the sound will get more warm and more 'communicative', not only as such, but also in relation to other notes. This is very important for the singing quality of the music. The same applies for the speed we use. A slow downward movement will give a totally different sound than a fast one. In many cases, I advise what I call an 'accelerando-touch', which means: starting slow and gently, from the surface of the key, and making speed as soon as the key starts to get down. The finger is increasingly moving faster as the desired tone is getting closer. This gives in many cases a very beautiful, warm and speaking sound.

Talking about the fingertip, there is another important aspect that influences the sound, which is 'grip'. It will be most effective in all sorts of passage work. In fact it

is very easy to understand: imagine you would hang on a cliff, soon you would be very much aware of the strain on your fingertips. The little muscles would be working hard to save your life...In piano playing, a tiny bit of 'pulling' with your last phalanx, providing you with a sensation of resistance, will result in more 'grip' on the key, which in turn will give your sound substance and expressive power. The resistance you will experience gives you the necessary grip on the key. Notice that this is less easy to experience with the thumb, which is by nature in a different, namely tilted position than the four other fingers. Its base, always important to realize, is located just above the wrist!

It's pointless to put pressure on the key after the sound has been produced. However, in the act of touching the key, you can be very much helped by adding a slight pressure on your finger. This will activate the weight of the lower arm, which is the main source of expressive sound and dynamic relief. Applying this pressure should be executed in combination with the general 'circular' arm movement, which we mainly lead from the wrist. It's easy to imagine the general feeling if one thinks of a gentle massage with the finger, with a small portion of initial pressure from the hand and/or arm, not going deep, and certainly not lasting long, operating within a more general (permanent) cycle of circular wrist (and if bigger: arm) movements, which allows you to play with natural, physical continuity. Alternatively, singing chords and melodies may benefit from a *forward* movement of the hand and arm. One could describe this way of playing as *giving the sound to the piano*. This movement combines the circular movement of the wrist and arm with transferring the weight of the finger, hand and arm to every new finger and key. If you add to this set of movements a small, but quick (*accelerando*) finger action, your sound will have core. The tone quality you get from this is different from the pulling movement, where the 'grip' is essentially responsible for the core of the sound.

The conclusion of this quick bird's-eye view of creating a suitable piano sound is that, in order to avoid a too direct, metallic sound, we must '*de-verticalize*' the action. For this we need maximal flexibility in the wrist, elbows and shoulders, and a sense of grip in the fingertips, and () continuous natural movement, creating a fluent alternation of action and relaxation, the "*pianistical*" *tides*, enabling us to play with endless variety and without any damage to our body. We need to create our own piano choreography.

Everything said here is very much linked to the idea of 'legato' playing. Legato is, after all, one of the most important starting points of music making (though not the only one!). It is usually very helpful to imagine every note as a link in a chain, no matter its length or articulation. Even the shortest note is still a fragment of a long, 'living' sound, and should bear the genes of its larger occurrence. In order to produce a good legato, one must concentrate on the second half of every note. Only then the connection to the next will be balanced. It is as if our path to 'paradise' becomes stepwise visible especially in this second half of each note. When we concentrate on this part of the sound, our system of playing will get adjusted in order to hear *more* of it, with the consequence that our legato will increase, and hence the singing quality of our playing. It is needless to repeat that only a clear image of the sound and a focused listening to our playing will provide us with a real cantabile. There are, of course, many other ways of touching the key. The expressive 'romantic' sound, as described above, is suitable for a great deal of our literature, but speaking for instance of

composers like Scarlatti, Mozart, Stravinsky or Berio, we have to find a sound that has, at least to some extent, more to do with *quick finger (or wrist) action* than with singing legato. To be more precise, every composer requires a specific sound, and thus a specific way of playing. Nothing could be so boring as the universal romantic sound, with only oil colours and expressive strokes... You couldn't imagine that sound for Debussy or Ravel, could you?

Playing sequences is the second element of technique. It means: playing series of notes. And of course, it means the ability to play fast. Quick movements are always needed. Their speed depends on the quality of the reflexes, on the economy of the gestures and... on sheer training. There are, of course, endless combinations possible, but essentially, it boils down to a small set of fundamental problems: trills, groups of three or more consecutive notes (scales), arpeggios (alternating series of thirds, fourths with the passage of the thumb). The faster we need to play the notes one after another, the lighter we must do it. And here again, also a maximal flexibility is the key to success. As touched upon before, the amount of lightness in the playing is naturally also a matter of style and of taste, of which the degree of understanding () will depend upon the quality of the education. It will be clear that a sensible build-up and maintenance of a technical library of which one can dispose utilize at will, is indispensable for any professional musician.

Daily Technique Maintenance on a One-Hour-Basis

	EARS, SOUND AND BODY
ca.5'	Start the day with finding your sound. Make the connection from your musical imagination to your physical movements. Do this by improvising chord progressions and/or melodic lines. Make use of the weight of your arm and hand, and be aware of the angle of your fingertip towards the surface of the key. Be <i>in</i> the keys and experiment with the speed of your downward movements. Make sure you are able to stay on the key without any pressure when it's rising in order to feel the upward pressure of the key. Feel the difference between a light touch and one that gets to the bottom of the key.
	POLYPHONY AND LEGATO
ca.10'	Play some Bach, for instance a Prelude, an Allemande or a Sarabande. Be concentrated on the singing character of your playing. Point of departure is a real legato sound. Think of non legato notes as fragments of legato.
	FINGER STRENGTH AND SPEED
ca.15'	Finger-exercises will strengthen your reflexes and give you control over your touch. Make sure every finger is checked. Take two different exercises a day, and practise them in every key. Make sure you do this in different speeds, both with and without looking at the keyboard.
	SCALES AND KEYS
ca.15'	Practice one scale each day in different forms: major and minor, in octaves, tenths, sixths, thirds; in contrary motion, in different speed, both with and without looking at the keyboard. Play in different rhythms and with a different touches: <i>legatissimo</i> , <i>legato</i> , <i>non legato</i> and <i>staccato</i> . Make sure you do this in different tempi, both with and without looking at the keyboard.
	ARPEGGIOS
ca.15'	Play the arpeggios of the same key, again both major and minor, and practise them in octaves, sixths and tenths. Make sure you do this in different tempi, both with and without looking at the keyboard.

Something also needs to be said about polyphony and the accumulation of tasks to be performed in one hand. Polyphony is one of the most characteristic elements of Western music. In most of the cases it means a melody (usually in the top) and

accompanying notes in the rest of the hand, sometimes as notes belonging to another voice, sometimes mainly as element of harmony (i.e. chords). Even in series of chords, we can also easily find a sometimes hidden polyphony, such as in the left hand of the Mazurkas of Chopin. One of the things that makes piano playing hard for our hand is this almost permanently occurring job of ‘multi-tasking’. To be able to bring out one voice and play differently with other fingers is an important asset for a pianist, which not only requires mechanical control, but also musical understanding and a very profoundly developed ear. Mere understanding is just half the dish.

Listening, *hearing* properly, is difficult, but all this during playing is really hard. In fact a musician needs to listen at three different levels, from three different dimensions, at the same time. The sound we imagine, and which we try to project in the room or hall, and which we can evaluate only after it has been produced. Still, it needs to happen while we are playing new notes that come after....

Three phases of ‘simultaneous’ listening

Imagining the sound		
	Listening to the moment we play	
		Evaluating the sound in the context

The complex interaction of all this inevitably creates a tremendously busy ‘electronic’ traffic within our nervous system: from brain to ear, to finger, and then back to ear and finally to brain, a process much faster than we are able to conceive consciously. In fact it almost gives us the sensation of occurring simultaneously. But the latter is not the case () and it is important to realize what actually happens, and what we thus demand from our body and mind while playing music.

A final word on what it all makes it worthwhile: the endless hours of practise, the constant strive for mental and physical flexibility and the unequalled search for musical understanding. It is the *poetry of music*, something that speaks to us with the power of reality, something which is even more true than reality, existing beyond the tentacles of logics and its arguments. Day and night coincide, as do love and hate or life and death, and within one person the masculine and the feminine. In this poetry we find a gleam of the unconceivable truth of our existence, and the reflection of what we imagine as paradise. This life-long lasting, irresistible seduction of poetry should be the guide of our teaching and practising and the source of inspiration of all our technical and musical labour. Our imaginative powers should be fostered by the magnet of musical poetry, and this too, should protect us from lapsing into features of parrotry, so easily occurring in our practise and performance, both as a musician and as a teacher, and to which behavior the unsuspecting student is often introduced, albeit unintentionally. In order to not get caught up in this false process, one has to identify the right path and follow it, towards one’s personal, true musicianship.

