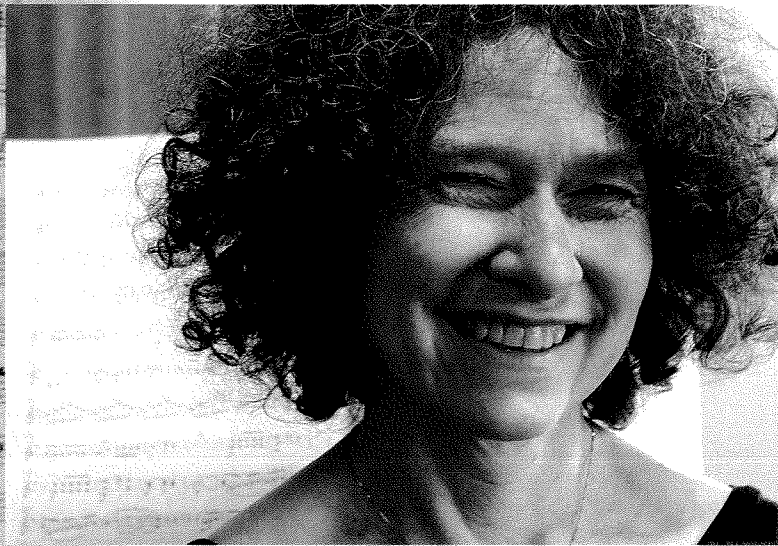


Ruminations on Musicality

by Catherine Kautsky



The conversion of a series of black dots into a piece of music is a magical process, but one all too easily derailed. The alchemy occurs in two steps: the first step—relatively simple—converts dots into audible pitches, while the second—far more complex—converts pitches into intelligible language. As teachers, we're responsible for teaching both, but one is a finite skill set, the other a mysterious and frustratingly vague intangible ability.

How does one help a student to speak the language of music, to convert the dots into words, sentences, paragraphs? What allows for hearing over an extended phrase? Perhaps someday neuroscientists will discover an actual site in the brain for "musicality," and we will begin to understand the impact of nature versus nurture. Meanwhile, we as teachers must try to make as many students as possible "native speakers" of music, people who speak fluently and naturally in a language of tones.

As all of us know, the piano itself, of all instruments, militates most strongly against such fluency. First and foremost, of course, the mechanism of hammers and the consequent lack of control over the sound of a note once struck makes it less than natural to hear a line. But also important is the physical action itself of pushing down, punching a key, or "pressing a button"—a seemingly contained action, unrelated to sustaining sound. And then there's the physical nature of the instrument, so outside of our bodies, unheld, unyielding. Whereas Picasso used guitars, violins, and clarinets as symbols of human sexuality, their curved and sinuous shapes a way to portray the human condition, the large grand piano, unlike any other instrument, functions in our lives as a piece of furniture: a decorative element, more allied with a house than a body.

And so we cannot cradle our instrument and transmit to it directly our breath or our motion. We cannot subtly alter its pitch or the life of a single note. That note begins to die as soon as it is born, and our influence over its life resides in our imaginations. Somehow we must then teach our students not only to hear the sound they actually produce, but also to pretend with absolute conviction that it throbs and flows uninterrupted into the next pitch on the page.

We are advised, toward this end, to have our students sing, and indeed I find that for those students comfortable with their own voices this can be transformative. Almost as efficacious is playing a line on another instrument. In either case, the student is able to hear a line without the impediments of two tangled hands and complex vertical sonorities. The line is pure and the connection direct.

But that in itself is not sufficient. The students must also group notes, eradicate bar lines, breathe at phrases. They must, in other words, supersede the paltry notation before them and understand that out of the dark vertical bar lines and cross bars—well-named and marking, aptly, a prison of timekeeping and predictability—they must create groupings which supplant both the measures and the subgroupings implied by hooking together notes in regular groups of two, four, or eight (see Excerpt 1). They must not believe that all notes with the same value on the page last the same length of time, or that the space between all notes is equal. All ideas of musical democracy must be dropped: all notes were not created equal!

Excerpt 1: French Suite No. 5 in G Major, BWV 816, Courante, by J.S. Bach, mm. 5-6. Grouping is from the sixth sixteenth note and over the bar line.



Thus notation is an enemy. It reeks of regularity and reductionism. In teaching students to read accurately, we risk teaching them to misunderstand. Further, almost equally perilous is our method of sound production. We're taught to play to the bottom of the key on every note. But some notes settle in, while others travel. Some are movers, others are keepers. They do not all sit and become an end in themselves.

What to do? Singing is helpful, but not sufficient. I sometimes fear that only neurosurgery could create musicians out of nonmusicians, but the following are ideas which attempt to make an art into a science.

Play melodies alone without their accompanying harmonies. And while you do:

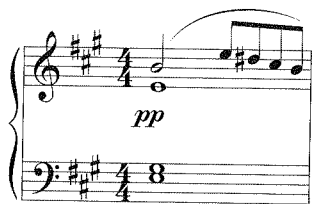
- Breathe physically at the ends of phrases, marking the phrasing in the music as a singer would mark breaths. A pencil is invaluable; it imparts solidity to your passing thoughts. Insist on physical breathing, for the timing between phrases will inevitably be correct when it corresponds to an actual breath.

- Complete one thought before moving on to the next one; otherwise, you put both thoughts at risk. This is one of those many happy occasions when technical and musical considerations are in perfect accord. We all forget to hear and vigorously play the notes at the end of a passage: this is a failure perfectly akin to mumbling the end of a sentence when speaking, and is equally catastrophic for both the listener's comprehension and the performer's technical ease.

- Finally, play the melodies, even the very slow ones, at a moving tempo in order to more easily connect the dots. I had a teacher long ago who suggested practicing fast music slowly and slow music fast; such is the perversity of human hearing that the advice is superb. Just as we tire of hearing a poor speaker pause after every word, we cease to make connections between notes too far apart. Playing slowly and truly *cantabile* is a consummate skill and one acquired step by step.

Once the melody is heard well when isolated, proceed to place it back in context. At that point, **concentrate on voicing**. Employ every means at your disposal to hear the melody above all else so that your well-earned sense of its contour will not be lost in a morass of harmony (see Excerpt 2). This advice can later be modified to emphasize basslines, inner voices, or full chordal textures, but it is initially crucial for building a melodic line. (I used to think voicing was for the listener. Now I think it's even more important for the performer's own work: it serves as an indelible audio highlighter.)

Excerpt 2: Sonata, D. 959, Mvt. I, by Franz Schubert, m. 55. A dramatic illustration of the power of voicing.



Shape the melody and diagram it, marking the tops of the lines. Again, the pencil assures that fleeting perceptions become permanent habits.

Then, work on *legato*. I find it enormously helpful to imagine the next note in a line as I play, so that I've anticipated the shape before it happens, simultaneously hearing the previous note out to the very end, and thus allowing no aural gap.

When the melody is phrased and voiced, it's time to parse it out. **What are the implied groupings** within it? Chances are they move across the bar line, making small notes into upbeats that pull the music inexorably forward. Thus chant, relentlessly, as did another former teacher, "and then to there" or "and then we go to there," as needed, to build a verbal counterpart to the musical energy carry-

ing you forward. Do not emphasize downbeats, but rather, fill in the little notes leading to them.

Then, **inculcate rhythm into the body**—counting, tapping, stamping, conducting, dancing. Insist on rhythmic variety, and be sure to find it above all in passages where it appears to be missing entirely (e.g., when all the notes on the page are of the same value). Notice that in many passages it helps to make the first notes slower, the middle ones faster—as if pulled by gravity—and the last ones again more marked. Know that rhythm in general is the most common culprit in all manner of technical and musical conundrums. And not only musical ones. Yet another teacher pointed out to me Virginia Woolf's lament: "...here am I sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can't dislodge them, for lack of the right rhythm." Apparently we're in good company when rhythmically hamstrung!

Check articulations and pedaling. Make sure both are full of partial values. We all want the pedal to be either up or down, the note to be either long or short, but a world in black and white is a bore.

- Consider first the pedal. If, as Anton Rubinstein is said to have observed, "The pedal is the soul of the piano," then surely our souls have more settings than On and Off. Pedal affects color, volume, duration. It keeps a note alive and determines in large part whether that life shall be diffident or forceful, solitary or convivial, brief or close to eternal. A shimmer is almost always more interesting than a mudslide (see Excerpt 3), but even within shimmers there are infinite degrees of variation in duration and amplitude which correspond, mundanely enough, to exactly how far and for how long we put our foot down. (Note how language leads us astray: to "put your foot down" is an action entirely lacking in nuance. Simplistic demons lurk everywhere!)

Excerpt 3: Sonata, D. 845, Mvt. I, by Franz Schubert, mm. 105-107. A slight haze of pedal makes this a magical passage. Excessive pedal destroys it.



- Likewise with articulation. The most eloquent passages are often those that are *portato*, lodged between *legato* and *staccato*, an enunciation reminiscent of speech. Again, complexity is what makes the music alive. It's the resistance to quick release that conveys tension and serves as a potent tool in that eternal struggle against the obvious (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4: Images, Book 2, "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut," by Claude Debussy, m. 17. The chantlike quality of both melodies depends on the carefully specified portato.



When you've done all this, **determine how far you can hear.** Are the ideas getting longer and longer in your head? You must go from words to sentences to paragraphs, or the music can't make its argument. Ultimately, this lengthening is what transforms an interpretation from the banal to the profound—or what makes it become, both figuratively and literally, “moving.” Because, of course, it is moving: it is effectively carrying us across time. If the music does not exist in this liquid, pourable form, then it cannot grow: it will be hijacked before it reaches its destination.

In order to make a journey of any consequence, both people and music must also encounter obstacles, and if you are not sensitive to where the impediments lie and what the hurdles are to resolution and arrival, you will be unable to create suspense or angst. If you don't notice the minor key passage in the midst of a major tonality, or the augmented sixth chord in the midst of diatonic harmony, or the deceptive cadence when an authentic one was due, you'll be like the foreign language dilettante who can ask for the restroom but misses out on more alluring topics (see Excerpt 5). **Mark the harmonic outliers** with exclamation points or hearts, for without responding to them each and every time you play, you will be playing without nuance and presenting a flattened universe of perpetual and insipid good cheer.

Excerpt 5: Moments musicaux No. 6, D. 780, by Franz Schubert, m. 17. This augmented-sixth chord, like so many in Schubert, leaves one gasping at the power of mere accidentals.



Now make sure your long lines, your varied rhythms, your sense of shape and of harmonic tension and release are not a mirage existing only in your own private mental universe. **Make liberal use of recording devices** so that you confront the reality of what you've created. You will almost inevitably be shocked by what you encounter, but how much better to weather the shock before, rather than after, a performance! In addition to acquiring a good iPod mic

or similar apparatus, you can hone your own internal recording equipment. Try sitting especially still when you play in order to listen more effectively; there's generally an inverse correlation between moving and hearing, despite the very understandable temptation for musical people to physically emote. And take to heart Boris Berman's idea in *Notes from the Pianist's Bench* that “when playing a two-part texture, your right ear will be responsible for the upper voice while the left ear will take care of the lower one.” I do worry slightly about the multi-eared monstrosity required to play a five-voice fugue, but the analogy is nevertheless a good one. The more ears the merrier, as long as they are all on friendly terms, and can cooperate to form an integrated picture.

Once you've sprouted your multiple ears and put your foot half-down and learned to play neither short nor long, where will you find yourself? Unfortunately, smack in the middle of the contradiction between achieving consistency and variability, between practicing and remaining spontaneous, between creating a whole and hearing the parts. Just as our instrument and our notation work against musicality, so, in many ways, does our work mode. If music must be in motion in order to be alive, if it is to be conversational in order to function as speech, then our attempts to “nail” every passage are musicality's death knell. Apparently, we must sprout not only multiple ears, but also multiple personalities as we practice. We must achieve reliability without uniformity, we must be deeply subjective without losing objectivity, we must hear multiple lines but ultimately one composite line, and we must be slaves to the printed page without being confined by what it tells us.

No wonder it's hard to be a piano student! In the end, it's precisely the paradoxes of what we do that make it so endlessly interesting. It is not the dots on the page and the levers we press that enthrall us, but it is rather the conflicts and complexities that they so adamantly evade that speak to our inner struggles. Our job as teachers is to be the go-betweens, and to create syntax from unwaveringly isolated motions and symbols. Notes, like people, are social creatures, and every small victory over the obstinacy of single, lonely pitches is a victory in the midst of our students' button-driven world. ▲

Catherine Kautsky, Chair of Keyboard Studies at Lawrence University in Appleton, WI, has performed across the U.S., as well as in Europe, South America, Asia, Australia, and Africa. She has published widely on the intersections of music with literature and the other arts and has been an invited presenter at CMS, MTNA, and NCKP. Ms. Kautsky's CD of music for piano and narrator was issued by VOX, and she has recently completed a CD of the Debussy Preludes, intended for inclusion in her book Postcards from Paris, 1900-1914: Claude Debussy's Preludes and the City that Inspired Them. Ms. Kautsky can be reached at kautskyc@lawrence.edu.

ycmused.com

THE Revolutionary Way to Play Piano

- B** A one-stop-shop for piano lessons and music in color
- A** “Teaching has never been so easy!” *LS from Florida*
- G** “A unique method that my kids love” *HD from the UK*
- F** “Getting my students interested is a breeze!” *JN from DC*
- E** Every child should have this first piano experience
- D** Color promotes consistency and confidence

Join ycmused.com today to access comprehensive lesson plans, sheet music, games and more!

