

SEEKING ARTISTIC GOALS: SUGGESTIONS FOR PIANO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

by Jiayin Li

Concert Pianist

Member Precollege Piano Faculty

Manhattan School of Music

As a student in China, I had a great deal of exposure to the well-developed teaching methods of my home country. However, when I came to the US and began to study with Solomon Mikowsky in the doctoral program at Manhattan School of Music, I had no idea what to expect. It was an epiphany for me!

In just a few years, he has taught me the most important requirements to become a good and successful piano instructor: how to listen and how to apply it into effective teaching. My added experience, first as Dr. Mikowsky's Assistant, and then, as a member of the MSM Precollege faculty, I have developed a series of concepts that have informed my teaching. I wish to share them with the reader.

Before starting on this discourse, I wish to share a selection of the great teachers of the past, included in Kookhee Hong's "The Piano teaching legacy of Solomon Mikowsky," where Dr. Mikowsky pays tribute to them. Just as pianists are familiar with the names of some of the most famous pianists, it is time for credit to be given to their teachers.

Great teachers in the past: Alfredo Casella (Italian, 1883-1947), Marcel Ciampi (French, 1891-1980), Maria Curcio (Italian, 1918-2009), Louis Diémer (French, 1843-2019), Edwin Fischer (Swiss, 1886-1960), Sidney Foster (American, 1917-1977), Carl Friedberg (German, 1872-1955), Alexander Goldenweiser (Russian, 1865-1961), Ernest Hutcheson (Australian, 1871-1951), Theodor Leschetizky (Polish, 1830-1915), Lazare Lévy (French, 1882-1964), Marguerite Long (French, 1874-1966),

Antoine François Marmontel (1816-1898), Tobias Matthay (British, 1858-1945), Moritz Moszkowski (Polish/German, 1854-1925), Yves Nat (French, 1890-56), Heinrich Neuhaus (German/Ukrainian, 1884-1964), Vlado Perlemuter (Lithuanian/French, 1904-2002), Egon Petri (Dutch/German, 1881-1962, Isidor Philipp (Hungarian/French, 1863-1958), Nadia Reisenberg (Lithuanian, 1904-1983), Vassily Safonov (Russian, 1852-1918), Olga Samaroff (1882-1948), Bruno Seidlhofer (Austrian, 1905-1982), César Pérez Sentenat (Cuba, 1896-1973), Leonard Shure (American, 1910-1995), Eduard Steuermann (Ukrainian, 1892-1964), Isabelle Vengerova (Belarusian, 1877-1956).

PIANO LESSONS FOR ALL?

Composers, performers, and listeners play an equally important role in our beloved profession. The musical experience of learning an instrument provides spiritual and cultural enrichment, perhaps none as much as the piano. The appreciation derived from such studies are necessary to preserve music as an art form. Making music on your own or appreciating the art of music as an informed listener has been historically beneficial to civilization.

MUSIC READING

The lack of good reading skills is the main reason piano students quit after only a few years of studies (or suffering!). Even advanced students are unable to learn the vast repertoire necessary to be a professional performer. When auditioning a student, I request him or her to read a few sentences English. It always goes well. But when I ask for a piece of music to be sight-read, much easier than the ones prepared to play for me, it is always a struggle. Why should there be a difference?

For beginning method books, I recommend the use of an intervallic approach, stressing the equality of black and white keys. "All keys matter!" The long-established Middle-C approach keeps beginning

students on white keys for too long. Also, learning pieces hands separately first is the worst possible approach.

I often ask “advanced” students how they would feel if they were invited to a party and unexpectedly asked to accompany a singer in a song never played before in front of the guests. Would they ask if it is possible to practice it hands-separate first in front of the audience?

Any piece assigned to a student should not be too difficult for the student to play hands together decently at sight. Ambitious teachers often assign more difficult pieces, a pattern that deters the student’s development. It is much more productive to assigning short, not too difficult pieces. They will allow the student to learn more efficiently.

The unintended result of assigning pieces that take too long to learn is that it keeps the student “reading” the same piece for too long. After one year, he/she can only play three- four big pieces, eventually performed to the delight of parents, teachers, and audiences, who listen to the final product unaware of the exaggerated time spent mastering it.

Young children should be assigned easy one-page pieces. They can then cover even 50 in many styles in one year, learning them hands-together (though specific problems can be practiced hands-separate). This will facilitate advancement as the difficulties increases, until eventually reaching the large and demanding ones.

A piece that requires learning hands-separately is the worst repertoire prescription. The student might develop pianistically but will never become an artist who must be capable of sight-reading music fluently to be able to enjoy the vast literature for the rest of his/her life.

RHYTHM

It is important for students to learn how to deal with rhythmic challenges without the burdensome concerns about wrong notes

notes and fingering. Those corrections can be dealt with immediately thereafter. Students should tap the notes in the score on the piano lid until perfect. Then play the notes with the best fingering choices. Rhythmic difficulties are not usually challenging in traditional music but can be a major issue in contemporary music.

Unfortunately, modern music is seldom taught to young children, Bartok's Mikrokosmos being an occasional exception. When required by competitions, students offer traditional sounding pieces by Ginastera or Villa-Lobos. Etudes by Ligeti have become attractive, not for their musical content and innovation, but because of the technical challenge they pose (I will address this subject in the section on repertoire).

It is imperative for serious piano students to become aware that avantgarde contemporary music is required for professional success and international artistic achievement. Inexperienced teachers often are timid when approaching contemporary music. Finding appropriate scores in many countries can be a challenge.

Teachers need to get advice on repertoire, perhaps from young local composers who would presumably be more familiar with Western European and American music. Prokofiev and Debussy are not the answer. They made great contributions . . . 100 years ago! Traditional art and music represent the beauty in the world. There is also plenty of ugliness. When presented artistically, ugliness can be beautiful!

Rhythm consists of sound and silence, both equally important. Students often play the notes with rhythmic precision but are careless with rests. They must be felt as vividly as the notes. I often place my flat hand on top of the hand of a student tapping the rhythm of a piece on the lid and ask him/her to hit my hand at the end of the note value. This approach makes them vividly aware of rests and improves rhythmic precision, as notes start and end on time.

A good performance requires a combination of strictness and freedom, always composer dependent. Listening to a metronomic performance is boring. While teaching strictness, teachers must

also challenge the student's imagination, and singing is effective in this regard.

Singers must breathe; music must too! Good singers convey the importance of certain notes, because of their tessitura, their time value, or the meaning of the words behind the vocal line. Singing a melody or, at least, listening to singers, can help students achieve the goal of all pianists: to make the instrument sing!

SOUND PRODUCTION

The wrist plays a crucial role in the achievement of a beautiful sound. Teachers should not attempt to deal with it until a child has enough command of the instrument to control such a demanding task. It is a combination of firmness in the fingers and flexibility in the wrists. The diverse characters of different styles of music require various approaches that are capable to emulate the voice, orchestral instruments and the occasional percussiveness required in some music, particularly contemporary.

It is important to achieve mastery to deal with the challenges posed by differences between instruments and with the acoustics among concert halls. Stiffness can also be welcome at times.

Demonstration is required rather than attempting to describe it in words.

HAND POSITION

Hand position is the point of departure for the eventual mastering of performance requirements of a particular piece. Fingers should be slightly curved in the natural way we experience when we drop our hands on the sides of our body. The wrists should be placed slightly

above keyboard level so that each finger can move comfortably up or down as a unit.

Beginners should be asked to play from C to G, up and down, hands separately, without breaks in the sound, using only the fingers. Then they should do the same with the first 5 notes of all the major and minor scales, hands together, using the same 1-5 fingering (thumbs on black notes when required), first in contrary and then parallel motion, by ear, later reciting the names of each note as they play them slowly, thus mastering tonal theory without the confusion that correct scale fingering can add when taught too soon.

HANON EXERCISES

These exercises by the 19th-century French piano teacher continue to be used by millions of piano students all over the world. The smartness of his approach is based on the use of patterns that require limited reading skills; no struggle in learning them nor achieving speed. Depending on their application, they can be quite useful.

Many teachers attempt to increase the strength of the fingers by making the students play each note loudly. When watching a student doing so, one can immediately observe that the student is pushing with the whole arm to produce the sound. Does that help to achieve finger strength? It does not. Each finger is a small muscle and should produce the sound of each note by itself, with no other help. The results would not be forte, obviously.

Equally important to striking each key is to release it when striking the next. That swift movement up is the key to clarity. Students achieve great speeds without clarity because their only concern is

for the keys to come down fast, without paying equal attention to their release. When faced with rapid passages in the piano literature, there is a logical frustration with lack of evenness and clarity.

SCALES

The same principle applies to scales. They are taught to little children prematurely. The passing of the thumb tends to create tension and bad habits until such time as the hand is ready for it. Trying to reach the next higher note with the right hand or lower with the left hand by passing the thumb can disrupt a good hand position.

Teachers must take into consideration that fast speed in scales place the thumbs in front of the next segment of notes without that disruption. However, it is possible and beneficial to teach a scale in slow motion to a more advanced student by showing how to shift the position of the hand without affecting its shape.

Children should be started on scales with the use of tetrachords, playing the first 4 notes with the left-hand, 4-3-2-1, and the next 4 notes with the right-hand, 1-2-3-4, first by ear (hopefully noticing when a sharp or flat note is required for the melodic pattern to remain consistent. Basic triad chords should follow each scale. Only in preparation for classical sonatinas do children need to learn to deal with traditional scale fingering and master them completely.

Blocking the 7 notes in every scale in groups of 3 and 4 notes, hands separately, up-and-down 4 octaves, can help students sense the logic behind traditional scale fingering, avoiding the thumbs on black keys. Notice that the established fingering for the left hand in the scale of D Major is not consistent with that logic: it should be 2-1-4-3-2-1-3-2. Departing from the standard fingering should always be contextual.

LEGATO

As pianists face the challenge of imitating the human voice while striking individual keys and producing the sounds by way of piano hammers, playing legato becomes an important goal. Once again, the wrists play a crucial role. It is best to start with appoggiaturas, playing only 2 white-key notes with fingers 2-3 with the right hand.

After playing the first note with a flexible wrist, using weight (rather than striking with the 2nd finger), there is a need to transfer that weight to the next note higher, from 2 to 3, while coming up with the 3rd finger without accent and a bit of overlap. When mastered, it must be done by all adjacent fingers in both hands. This eventually leads to the mastery of two-note appoggiaturas, constantly used by Bach's phrasing, as well as his predecessors and followers.

In the seldom-played Capriccio on the Departure of his Beloved Brother, for example, Bach expresses his longing for his brother by the constant use of appoggiaturas. Rapid appoggiaturas appear in the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 31, No. 2 and in the second movement of his Sonata Op. 78, as well as endless other places. Intelligent fingering can help convey a sense of down-up rather than repeated notes.

This two-note technique must then be expanded into three notes, four notes, and five notes, with all fingering combinations. Even two octaves apart can be "connected" with the proper use of the wrist. A flatter hand, using the fleshy part of the fingers, always helps to differentiate legato from non-legato.

FINGERING

One cannot overstate the importance of good and consistent fingering. Imagine assigning a minuet by Bach to a young student;

the teacher has two choices: write down on the score the most logical fingering or let the student learn the minuet with incorrect fingering by him or herself, wasting a week playing it wrong. Which choice is better? In my opinion, the 2nd!

If the teacher writes the fingering beforehand, the student will need a teacher forever. If instead, the teacher shows the student the logic of the teacher's fingering at the next lesson, the child begins to learn to think and to understand the reasoning behind effective choices as well as the difference between his/her fingering and the teacher's fingering.

I encourage students to play a newly assigned piece through at sight, under tempo with pedal, while disregarding mistakes in notes, rhythms, and fingering. To keep on going is the immediate goal. After doing that once or twice, the student is ready to start learning the piece. Without any pedal, the student might work on only two measures at a time, deciding on the best fingering, sometimes hands separately and then together, under the supervision of the teacher.

When approaching a new measure, I ask the student to try to come up with the best fingering. It is important that the final decision is arrived at by the student following a process of questions and suggestions that leads the student to think of the choices and the various rules that could apply. After clear examples, it is good for the teacher to let the student try at home and bring the results of their increasing awareness to the next lesson.

It is a long and tedious process that eventually allows the teacher to trust the student, who must provide feedback only when needed or requested. The student should write down only some of the fingerings (in pencil), which should be checked by the teacher until he/she can ascertain the consistency of the student's choices.

Consulting fingerings in different editions is key to the discovery of distinct possibilities; the teacher can help the student ascertain the advantages and disadvantages of each suggestion. It is impossible

to even begin to describe the myriads of solutions to every situation encountered in the vast piano repertoire.

The decision as to the placing of the thumb in scales and its relationship to the sense of the beat, is one example. Letting a finger recover before using it again in rapid passages is another. Many hours are spent with each student on every new piece until smoothness and logical fingering solutions are achieved. The rules are infinite and artistic mastery is impossible without it. I recommend consulting the book “The Art of Fingering in Piano Playing” (Universal Music Publishing) by Julien Musafia, as an introduction to the subject (first published in the United States in 1971 by MCA).

ETUDES

We owe a lot to Czerny, Cramer, Clementi and many other early composers for their dedicated effort to help young children develop their fluency and technique. Unfortunately, most of their etudes are limited in their harmonic language. Musically, they are bland.

I suggest using Czerny etudes only at the very beginning, for as short a time as possible, choosing only the short ones collected by Germer (Book I). This makes it possible to cover many etudes in a short time instead of having students spend weeks learning longer ones, thus avoiding for them to keep reading the same notes for too long. I recommend following up as soon as possible with the etudes by Moszkowski (Op. 94, published in Japan) and assigning later the more difficult Op. 72.

Of course, the Chopin etudes are a must for any aspiring pianist, but one must keep in mind that, with only two exceptions, their challenges lie basically in the right hand. That is not the case with the Moszkowski etudes, where the composer manages to distribute the problems more equally between both hands. The etudes by Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Dohnanyi, Prokofiev, Bartók, Debussy, Liszt and other composers should be taught as music, not as technical challenges.

Studying and mastering the piano literature of all great composers, including Bach, can be just as useful for technical development. Had Bach named his keyboard works as “etudes,” students would love to practice them!

PRACTICING

The best way to develop our students as performers and teachers is to teach them to teach themselves when they practice. Our 10 fingers are our students! Each finger is eager to learn, but they are overwhelmed by the enormous demands placed on them by the “practicing” student.

They cannot possibly comply. Most students practice with the pedal from the start. How can one hear what the fingers are doing, thus be able to control them? Repetition, in small units, is a must. Students tend to “perform” for themselves, day after day, month after month, without perfecting anything. Resulting performances are sloppy and memorization is insecure.

Blocking multiple notes that belong together (often harmonically) is helpful to developing intervallic finger memory. That is why it is possible for blind pianists to play accurately. Students tend to look too much at their hands when it is not necessary, instead of concentrating on skips, when it is.

There are passages in the literature when one hand is skipping and the other is not. If students look at what the non-leaping hand is doing, they will make more mistakes with the leaping hand.

Teachers must practice with the students! We must insist they practice by teaching their 10 pupils (the fingers), stopping, and repeating each step of the way. This is difficult to be able to do justice to this important subject in the context of an article.

Students practice for countless hours during their lifetimes. They must be taught how to practice effectively. That means, teaching them to be teachers! A teacher must ask the students what needs to be done each step of the way to master a piece and play it as

beautiful as possible. A few measures are all that is needed. I seldom give solutions. The student must arrive at them through a process of thinking. We must teach students to become independent (the Socrates approach).

PEDALING

Practicing new pieces with the pedal is detrimental to a student's artistic potential. The slower students play, the more pedal they use. When the tempo is finally increased, they are already hooked, like a drug addict, to the lushness that the pedal provides, often in conflict with the style requirements. T

The truly great pianists, especially those referred to as "Golden Age" pianists, were able to show clarity of the texture in the music. Please listen to Shura Cherkassky's live recordings or videos, so you will hear Chopin with the same clarity of texture one hears in Bach. In fact, the influence of Bach is obvious in most traditional music. Great artists show it in their performances. A student's concept of pedaling is often: "Use pedal and take it off when not needed." A much better approach would be: "Don't use pedal and add it only when needed!"

Even the attractive contrast between rich and clear sounds eludes many piano students. In the Chopin Polonaise in F-sharp Minor, Op. 44, the composer's pedal markings are only applicable to the much lighter 19th-century French pianos.

Too much pedaling is incompatible with Chopin's taste (he loved Scarlatti!), delicate hands, and physical appearance. Chopin was the opposite of Liszt! Chopin played much softer, to the point that his eminent contemporaries, Kalkbrenner and Moschelles, complained about it in their comments, following a Chopin recital.

Learning to play with less pedal, and to use gradations, is imperative for young pianists to achieve artistic success. The use of the left

pedal is too complicated and subtle to try to explain it in writing. I have found that many students wait until they reach the softest measures to press the left pedal in a diminuendo. At that sound level, it can disrupt control. It must be pressed a bit earlier, achieving the ultimate diminuendo with finger control.

MEMORIZATION

Most teachers expect and demand rapid memorization. Why? Memorization of music has at least four components: the aural, tactile (fingers), theoretical (structural), and visual. Recently, one of my students played for me the first movement of a Beethoven sonata by memory. It sounded acceptable. She played at the right tempo. At the end, I asked her what tempo marking Beethoven had written. She did not know! Then I asked her to write down on music paper the first two measures of the piece and she could not. That means she memorized it aurally, tactilely, maybe structurally, but not visually. That is an insecure way to memorize, as it lacks one of the four main ingredients.

If she had combined her practice, playing it from memory sometimes, with looking at the score for a bit longer, her visual memory would have been reinforced. Bad readers prefer to look at their hands rather than at the music. Many teachers unknowingly encourage it. As far as the tactile memory is concerned, it is crucial to decide on the best fingering for every note, even in easy situations such as single notes.

How often, when teachers ask a student to start playing from a specific measure, does the student then request to start a few measures earlier in an easily recognizable spot? Not being able to start anywhere in the piece leads to stumbling, memory slips, and stopping in the middle of a performance.

That leads to the nervousness that almost all students complain about. They are anxious, as they really do not know the pieces securely. They claim they need more “experience.” What they

really need is to learn how to practice!

OCTAVES

A singing tone on the upper note, harmonized an octave below by the thumb, would make many performances more beautiful. This is particularly true with the octaves in Chopin, like in the Polonaise in F-sharp Minor, Op. 44 or in many pieces of Liszt. There are important differences in the octaves between these two great composers, each one seeking different goals according to their personalities.

To achieve a more cantabile sound, octaves should be played on the edge of the keys, which allows the wrists to be more flexible, with a less stretched hand. Many students play octaves inside the keys, requiring more stretching and stiffer wrists, thus achieving a harsher sound.

TRILLS

The law of recovery, where a finger needs at least two more notes played by other fingers before being used again, compels us to try to use a rotating motion by using the thumb for one note and another finger for the other, or two fingers that are not contiguous.

Sometimes this relaxed approach cannot be used, and adjacent fingers, each moving fast down and up, are required. The up movement is crucial, as the note must be released before being ready to be played again (see Hanon exercises). Teachers must work on trills with students, so that they can understand the difficulties and possible solutions, which vary with each one. Imaginative fingering can solve many problems.

COMPETITIONS

It is important for teachers and parents to understand how damaging competitions can be! Yes, they can celebrate when a child wins a small competition and proudly tell their friends and colleagues. But we must prepare students for the future, not for the present. Parents tell their child: “We want you to be the best!” Can every child be? My parents exhorted me: “Learn as much and be as good as you can.” - much better advice!

Children have far too much pressure trying to live up to their parents’ and teachers’ egomaniac expectations and demands. It can be devastating, leading to psychological issues and even suicide in some cases. Expectations should be tempered with reality. Reviewing the same repertoire, competition after competition, is detrimental to the student’s progress!

REPertoire

Dr. Mikowsky taught me that, when students are advanced enough and ready, to assign a Baroque work (usually by Bach, sometimes by Scarlatti or a French baroque composer); a classical sonata; a large romantic work (that includes polyphony); a French piece by Debussy, Ravel, Faure, Poulenc, or others; a Spanish piece by Albéniz, Granados or De Falla; a Russian piece by Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, or Stravinsky (the short pieces); a work by Bartok or other early 20th-century composers; a contemporary piece (usually by an American composer); a short encore piece (for a concert or a party, usually a transcription); and a concerto.

Some of the pieces must show imagination towards repertoire selection and not be part of the repetitive standard repertoire. Eventual artistic success depends on it! Students should not try to compete with Kissin all the time. Play something else!

The choice of repertoire is as important as the choice of medications a medical doctor makes in trying to cure a patient. Initially, I never assign pieces for which the student is not ready as

that would require too much help on my part and time to master (baby-sitting!). It would be detrimental to the student's ability to read (the result of looking at the same scores for too long) and to cover the vast repertoire required for a career.

There also must be logical increments in the difficulty of works assigned by a particular composer. Many students learn Carnival, Op. 9 by Schumann as their first piece by him. What about getting to know Schumann through the Op. 1, 2, 8, or 15? I know why they want to play Op. 9 first: it is more brilliant thus it will get more applause in a concert. With those values, that student will never become an artist, and the teacher is at fault for encouraging that attitude.

Same situation with Debussy: the first piece is Isle Joyeuse, sometimes an etude, looking for brilliance and missing the point of learning Debussy for the sound and the atmosphere permeating his music. The preludes would be a much better choice.

Unfortunately, the early Russian influence in my country mentioned before has not been conducive to the appreciation of French music. World wars kept the two civilizations apart. The same is true with Bach in Russia and in China, where highly edited and stylistically wrong editions are still being used. Learning to play polyphonic music by Bach with a correct sense of style (opinions vary) is one of the biggest challenges for piano students.

Too often, students overemphasize the right hand. Bach did not play music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, nor Prokofiev. For Bach, all voices were equal! Having an amiable conversation between voices, higher and lower, is a basic requirement. When giving equal importance to all voices, a new world of beauty is established.

I warn teachers that spending too much time on classical sonatinas is detrimental to the development of students' music reading. Only a couple are needed to become familiar with the sonata-allegro form used by the great classical composers in their sonatas. The repetitious Alberti bass allows the student to concentrate in reading mainly the right hand.

Any piece where the hands move independently, even a Bach minuet, is more challenging than a sonatina and keeps the student alert. Polyphony is what distinguishes a superior classical composer from a lesser one. Of course, one must admire the talent needed to compose a great melody; popular and folk music from many countries, as well as some Broadway shows, are examples.

The biggest challenge is learning and appreciating modern music. The earlier the better! I had a 5-year-old Chinese student who played a one-page piece by Boulez! For him, contemporary and melodic music sounded equally “sweet.”

Unfortunately, a sonata by Mozart sounds “nice” when played at sight, but a contemporary piece does not until one can play it up-to-tempo. How to deal with learning such music would require a whole article by itself. Below, I have tendered a list of worthwhile contemporary music of many styles and levels of difficulty:

Hugh AITKEN (1924-2012/USA): Three Connected Pieces, Piano Fantasy

Bela BARTOK (1881-1945/Hungary): Mikrokosmos, Sonata, 3 Etudes, Out of Doors, Suite, Improvisations

Alban BERG (1885-1935/AUSTRIA): Sonata

William BOLCOM (1938-/USA): 12 Etudes, 12 New Etudes, Garden of Eden, various rags.

Benjamin BRITTEN (1913-1976/Great Britain): Nocturne, 12 Variations, Holiday Diary

Leo BROUWER (1939-/Cuba): 10 Bocetos

John CAGE (1912-1992/USA): ASLSP, Etudes Australes, Sonatas & Interludes for prepared piano

Elliot CARTER (1908-2012/USA): Sonata, Night Fantasies, Intermittences, Two Thoughts about the Piano, 90+

Alfredo CASELLA (1883-1947/Italy): Children Pieces Op 35, Sonatina Op 28

Carlos CHAVEZ (1899-1978/Mexico): 10 Preludes, 2 Barcarolas

Aaron COPLAND (1900-1990/USA): Variations, Passacaglia, 4 Piano Blues, Cat and Mouse

Henry COWELL (1897-1965/USA): Banshee, Lilt of the Reel, Aeolian Harp

Sebastian CURRIER (1956-/USA): Scarlatti Cadences & Brainstorm

Luigi DALLAPICCOLA (1904-1975/Italy): Sonatina Canonica

Norman DELLO JOIO (1913-2008/USA): Prelude to a Young Musician, Intervalllic Etudes, Sonata No 3

David DIAMOND (1915-2005/USA): Sonatinas 1 and 2, 4 Preludes and Fugues

Manuel de FALLA (1876-1946/Spain): 4 Spanish Pieces, Fantasia Baetica, Allegro De Concierto

Ross LEE FINNEY (1906-1997/USA): Sonata No 4 "Christmastime, 1945"

Lukas FOSS (1922-2005/Germany-USA): Two Part Inventions, Sonatina, For Lenny

Jean FRANÇAIX (1912-1997/France): Scherzo, 5 Portraits of Young Girls

Morton GOULD (1913-1996/USA): Prelude & Toccata, Boogie-Woogie Etude

Paul HINDEMITH (1895-1963/Germany): Suite 1922, Sonata No 3

Leo JANACEK (1854-1928/Czechoslovakia): Sonata 1905, In the Mists, On an Overgrown Path

Nikolai KAPUSTIN (1937-2020/Russia): Etudes Op 40, Variations Op 41

Zoltan KODALY (1882-1967/Hungary): Dances of Marozzek, Dances of Galanta

Ernesto LECUONA (1895-1963/Cuba): 6 Afro-Cuban Dances, Diary of a Child, Suite Andalucia

Benjamin LEES (1924-2010/USA): Piano Sonata No 4, Fantasy Variations

Tania LEON (1943-/Cuba): Ritual, Momentum, Tumbao

Witold LUTOSLAWSKI (1913-1994/Poland): Preludes, Poeme, Sonata

Gian Carlo MENOTTI (1911-2007/Italy-USA): Ricercare and Toccata

Olivier MESSIAEN (1908-1992/France): Preludes, Vingt Regards Sur L'Enfant Jesus

Darius MILHAUD (1892-1974/France): Saudades do Brazil, Mazurka

Federico MOMPOU (1893-1987/Spain-Catalan): Cancons I Dansas, Impressione Intimas, Variations on a Theme of Chopin

Joaquín NIN-CULMELL (1908-2004/Germany-Spain): Tonadas - 4 Volumes

Vincent PERSICHETTI (1915-1987/USA): Toccatinas, 12 Piano Sonatas, Poems, Mirror Etudes

Octavio PINTO (1890-1950/Brazil): Scenas infantis, Improviso

Francis POULENC (1899-1963/France): Improvisations, Mouvements Perpétuels, Suite Napoli, 8 Nocturnes

George ROCHBERG (1918-2005/USA): Partita-Variations, Nach Bach, 12 Bagatelles

Joaquín RODRIGO (1901-1999/Spain): Serenata Española, 3 Spanish Dances

Frederic RZEWSKI (1938-/USA): Die Profundus, North American Ballads, The Days Fly By, People United Will Never Be Defeated

Igor STRAVINSKY (1882-1971/Russia): Tango, Serenade en La, Ragtime, 4 Etudes

Jeno TAKACS (1902-2005/Hungary): Toccata, Partita

Alexander TCHEREPNINE (1899-1977/Russia): Bagatelles, Message, 5 Concert Etudes, Songs Without Words

Ernest TOCH (1887-1964/Austria): Burlesques Op 31, 5 X 10 Etudes

Joaquin TURINA (1882-1949/Spain): Danzas Fantásticas, Silhouettes, The Circus

Heitor VILLA-LOBOS (1887-1959/Brazil): Tres Marias, Prole do Bebe, Rudepoema, Cirandas, Valsa d'or

Carl VINE (1954-/Australia): 4 Sonatas, 5 Bagatelles

Anton von WEBERN (1883-1945/Austria): Variations

RECORDINGS

Listening to recordings of newly assigned pieces is detrimental to

the development of musicianship and independence. It is only beneficial after the student knows the piece and has his/her own conception. The score should be the main source of information, supplemented by reading about the composer and background information on the music.

Listening is very beneficial after completing that process. Students should hear at least three recorded versions so that there is no imitation, only influences and awareness of different ideas, possibilities, and points of view.

Students need their teacher's advice regarding which pianists have become recognized for their interpretations of a particular composer. It is often based on the country in which they were born, dates of birth and death, teachers with whom they studied, and many other factors.

In other words, students need cultural exposure and guidance, and teachers should take the responsibility to explore which books and recordings can be helpful. Listening together with a student to portions of a piece can help students "hear" to what they are listening to, as they often fail to notice aspects and details that make a crucial difference.

It is essential for students to listen to other piano music than the pieces they are learning, as well as orchestral and chamber music works, songs, operas, and any other works that are representative of a particular composer. Apply the same principles to concert attendance. Students should write down the names of the performers, orchestras, conductors, singers, etc. If admired, why not remember who they are?

CULTURE

Suppose you win a big competition. The critic of the local newspaper wants to interview you. Are you ready to talk about your relationship with each piece you chose? If the sponsor invites you for dinner in a Hungarian or Italian restaurant, are you going to be able to show your familiarity with "Nockerl", "Gnocchi" and "Pesto" sauce? Or do you only eat pizza or spaghetti with tomato sauce?

What about literature, painters, poets and even your own country's traditions and history? Do you read newspapers and know what is going on in the world? What specific problems are making millions of people suffer and even starve? Do you have an opinion as to how to make this a better world?

I recently went to a party. There were about 50 guests. I tried to find which one could teach me something I don't know. And I did! It was an Indian medical doctor who updated me on medical training in his country (I wanted to learn about the balance between the influences of the U.S. and the United Kingdom, the colonizing country before independence, on Indian medical training). Do you always look for friends that you feel comfortable with but are not able to teach you anything you don't already know?

When attending a graduation recital at Manhattan School of Music, I often notice that only students of the same nationality as that of the performer are present. How is it possible not to make a single friend of another nationality after 2 or 4 years of attendance at an international school? It is so important in large cities like New York to seek out and make friends with students of other nationalities. Exposure to different cultures is crucial to artistic development.

STAGE DEMEANOR

Only geniuses like Glenn Gould or Pogorelich got away with their weird stage demeanor. The rest must learn, starting with observation. Students pay attention to the performances but seldom pay attention to what is going on in front of their eyes.

Do you notice the length of time between the lights going off and the appearance of the artist on the stage? How slow or fast does he/she towards the piano? Is the applause intense enough to carry the artist until they are seated? Is the bowing always the same, or does it vary between formal and informal, according to circumstances? Does the stage behavior compel the audience to applaud more than they might otherwise? Is the applause at the end of a performance of a major work, before the artist goes backstage for a short rest, the same that will greets him/her back after the rest?

Audiences come to see you and hear you! Should they stay home and just listen to your recording? Can you keep an audience visually concentrated on you? Do you ever listen to yourself, looking up, or are you constantly looking at your hands on the keyboard? Does your physical behavior and facial expression denote the character of the music you are playing? Have you noticed the face expression of conductors conveying the meaning of the music to the orchestra? Have you watched singers interpreting the poetic words they are singing?

SUMMING UP

No advice nor suggestion can be applicable to each of you. Whether you are a student, teacher, or concert pianist, you must always question your approach and seek fresh information. Learn from the great ones who came before you. They deserve your admiration and eternal gratitude!