

Twistonality: An Approach to Musical Composition

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This paper investigates the reactions to contemporary Western art music expressed by various writers, and examines some of the challenges associated with a predominantly intellectual approach to composition. It questions the separation of performance and composition training in music institutions, and suggests that creative writing which relies on traditional key-centres and functional (or non-directional) harmony should be strongly encouraged in the private teaching studio. Based on recent research, the term 'twistonal' is used to describe any music in which the 'performer-composer' adapts musical material stored in the conscious or sub-conscious memory as the basis for an individual style. With the aid of excerpts from the writings of the legendary pedagogue, Josef Hoffmann, the author argues that if music is primarily a means of emotional communication, piano teachers should cultivate and nurture students' interest in original composition not only in order to strengthen their knowledge of theoretical concepts, but as an aid to musical interpretation in general.

Introduction

This paper uses the Conference theme, "Legacies", as a springboard to investigate recent perceptions of contemporary music and the role which tonality might play in the creative potential of student pianists. The idea of 'legacies' could be applied to the pedagogical research of yester-year, to the colourful teaching styles of our musical ancestors, or the idiosyncratic performances by pianists of past generations whose recordings (or rare film clips) still speak to us today with remarkable authority. Equally important, however, is the legacy of tonality itself.

Most children are exposed to music from an early age: cradle songs, lullabies, nursery rhymes, Christmas carols and folk songs are all part of our musical heritage, but this is a language far removed from the complex sounds of much contemporary art music. One might argue that all music draws an emotional response, but unlike many *avant-garde* or serial compositions, tonal music is easily recalled and often remembered in detail. It is therefore important to ask: how may piano students utilise their innate knowledge of tonality in a creative way? How may they tap into their earliest emotional responses to music, how may they use their musical memories to assist them in the long and arduous task of training to be good musicians?

The Social Context

In his book *The Unconscious Civilization*¹, John Ralston Saul promotes the idea that our society is increasingly in danger of putting conformism before genuine democracy, and corporatism before the individual. He is convinced that language is being used increasingly to represent special interest groups, rather than citizens of the community. Lamenting the manipulation of music and language by today's propagandists, he points out that music and literature "naturally express the emotive. Love, religion, nationalism, patriotism can be celebrated. But they can also be manipulated to wipe out thought"². The following statement is of particular interest:

¹ John Ralston Saul. *The Unconscious Civilization*. (Melbourne: Penguin, 1997)

² Saul, 65–66.

The odd thing is that the tendencies of serious music—the art which in the past has produced the true magic of uncontrollable liberation—have turned in the second half of the twentieth century towards an arid, mechanistic rationalism. With a few remarkable exceptions, the field of public engagement in contemporary music has been left wide open to the propagandists.³

Saul might be referring here to those who, in order to overthrow what they regarded as the degenerate regime of tonality, have indulged in complex serialism, indeterminacy, long-winded minimalism and deliberate musical anarchy. He could also be hinting at the fact that musical institutions have seized the opportunity to encourage students to make intellectual capital from what David Cope once described as ‘antimusic’, i.e. “those sounds which destroy the mind (*danger music*), which don’t exist (*minimal and concept music*), or which come about without the hand of man (*biomusic and soundscapes*)”, music in which the composer is “in search of the ultimate paradox”, music which “is in reality an ‘anti-Western-tradition music’.”⁴ Such a situation is complex, and potentially disturbing in so far as it indicates a widening gap between young composers and instrumentalists in terms of their musical priorities and philosophical aims.

Similar concerns have been expressed by the Australian composer Ross Edwards. As Margaret Barrett points out,⁵ “Ross Edwards insists on the need (for students) to develop a strong and individual technique, cautioning the young composer against being ‘hoodwinked by some tenured guru keen to recruit disciples and palm off a brand of bogus technical facility as a sure-fire career booster’.”⁶ Many readers will also be familiar with the Howard Goodall book and TV series, *Big Bangs*. Goodall’s views are equally relevant. In an article entitled “What the Kids Think about Music”,⁷ he explains that for today’s school students, the experimental music of the mid-20th century is

“of tangential , non-musical interest – like a science experiment. It does not engage with their senses or their emotions at all. To some extent this explains their passionate distaste—one might even say loathing—for avant-garde modernism. Make no mistake about this. Theirs is not—as is sometimes alleged—an antipathy born of ignorance, or even of a squeamishness about dissonance (towards which they are entirely neutral), it is a mistrust of things that seem to be ‘clever-clever’, music for a PhD’s sake.”⁸

Although Goodall is referring here to young people in general, it is tempting to think that their reaction to this kind of ‘modernism’ is no different from that of a much more mature audience.

Quite apart from the ‘anti-Western-tradition’ as such, an intellectual emphasis on atonal or ultra rational composition was easily promoted in schools and at tertiary level by those who had little or no training in instrumental performance and who often appeared emotionally indifferent to the musical styles of previous centuries. Since the 1970s, however, many more composers have shown an interest in modal or neo-tonal idioms, and there is now greater acceptance of the plurality of styles in contemporary music. Within music departments, however, the continuing separation between the

³ Saul 66.

⁴ David H.Cope. *New Directions in Music, Second Edition* (Dubuque: Wm C. Brown, 1980) 196.

⁵ Margaret Barrett. “Teaching Composition: Lessons from an ‘eminence’ study”. *Sounds Australian* 66 (2005): 40.

⁶ Ross Edwards. “Composing Notes, 2004”, p.59.

⁷ Howard Goodall. “What the Kids Think about Music”. *Music Forum* 12.1.(2005-6).

⁸ Goodall, 33.

disciplines of performance, theory and composition has left little room for students' creativity within the tonal idiom. Those being trained in Western European performance traditions are taught that music is primarily a means of emotional communication. They aim for technical mastery over a wide-ranging repertoire; they study the works of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Bartok and Boulez; they research the historical background in order to deepen their understanding of style and interpretation; they are taught harmony and counterpoint, but they are no longer trained in improvisation, or in basic writing techniques. Faced with the compositions of some of their peers, or even with new music in general, they can often feel alienated and anxious. There was a time when all musicians were expected to perform, to improvise, and to compose, but since the late 19th century, when piano playing and composition became separate specialisations, the integration of these skills has disappeared from the educational agenda. Indeed, it is not unusual to find that for students wishing to major in both performance and composition, or to take jazz improvisation as part of a 'classical' program, special dispensation is required.

The Contemporary Conundrum

Composers in the latter half of the 20th century have been very much influenced by the work and intellectual aesthetic of John Cage. His *Autobiographical Statement* is easily found online, and the following excerpt refers to his early lessons with Arnold Schoenberg:

After two years it became clear to both of us that I had no feeling for harmony. For Schoenberg, harmony was not just coloristic: it was structural. It was the means one used to distinguish one part of a composition from another. Therefore he said I'd never be able to write music. "Why not?" "You'll come to a wall and won't be able to get through." "Then I'll spend my life knocking my head against that wall."⁹

Knocking his head against a wall included the discovery of what he called 'micro-macrocosmic rhythmic structure', where 'the large parts of a composition had the same proportion as the phrases of a single unit', and 'thus the entire piece had that number of measures that had a square root.' He became aware of Zen Buddhism which, he says, for him took the place of psychoanalysis. More to the point, Cage writes:

I was disturbed both in my private life and in my public life as a composer. I could not accept the academic idea that the purpose of music was communication, because I noticed that when I conscientiously wrote something sad, people and critics were often apt to laugh. I determined to give up composition unless I could find a better reason for doing it than communication.¹⁰

Whether John Cage was a genius, whether he was totally egocentric or just wilfully perverse, his aesthetic has had far-reaching consequences. Many composers are now trained predominantly in the techniques of 20th century composition and, weighed down by the necessity to create 'something new', they invent their own musical language—often by a process of elimination, or avoidance. For example, sometimes a small number of pitches is selected, arranged and justified by artificial means (including graphics or mathematical formulae), and the piece is constructed according to the composer's self-imposed and pre-defined aural, verbal or visual criteria. Unfortunately, when there is little deviation from a prescribed but unidentifiable sonic landscape,

⁹ John Cage. *Autobiographical Statement*. <http://www.newalbion.com/artists/cagej/autobiog.html>. (10 June, 2007).

¹⁰ Cage.

listeners can struggle to find their bearings. With no key centres, no clear melodic signposts or recognisable harmonic development, with large intervallic leaps, relentless dissonance or deliberately complex rhythms, some performers can experience an emotional ‘block’ and search in vain for the muscle memory of gestures associated with more familiar repertoire. Similarly the listener, paralysed by lack of aural comprehension, can feel either insulted, bewildered, or simply unmoved. While the compositional process is acknowledged as one of ascetic intellectual creativity, the listener is often at a loss regarding the product, unable to perceive its emotional content, unaware (without a written explanation) of its internal structure, and incapable of remembering it in any detail.

In his book *Music and the Mind*¹¹ Anthony Storr has pointed to the limitations of serial music:

Serial music is difficult to remember because it abolishes the hierarchical structure of tonal music in which it is easy to recognize ‘home’ as consonance following dissonance. Some serial music is also difficult to remember because, unlike classical tonal music, it tends to avoid repetition. This is why so many listeners cannot make sense of serial music.¹²

It should be noted, however, that Storr carefully qualifies each of these statements by using the words “difficult” (rather than impossible), “some” and “so many” (rather than all). The music of Webern, Berg and Schoenberg is, after all, now part of the standard repertoire. We think of them as having expanded, rather than destroyed, the concept of tonality because, in reflecting late 19th century musical conventions, their music has become emotionally accessible despite its more mechanistic technique.

Elsewhere, in a book called *The Dynamics of Creation*, Anthony Storr gives a brilliantly persuasive definition of the meaning of music. He writes:

There are those who maintain that musical patterns have no relation to human emotions; and that our appreciation of music is purely aesthetic. In this view, music has no meaning outside itself, and the listener’s enjoyment of a musical work is the consequence of his appreciation of its structure. Of course the appreciation of musical form is a vital aspect of musical appreciation in general; but it is impossible to accept that this constitutes the whole of our response. Music generates emotion; in fact, a whole range of physiological responses which can be measured, including changes in pulse rate, blood pressure, rate of respiration, muscular energy. Any consideration of music which pays attention only to musical form, and which omits to take into account its emotional content, must be ruled out of court.¹³

The Language of Music

In Chapter 17 of Milan Kundera’s novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*¹⁴ he produces an astonishingly perceptive and sensitive description of the language of music in layman’s terms. A trained musician and the son of a professional concert pianist who had studied with Janáček, Kundera speaks from experience when he writes:

¹¹ Anthony Storr. *Music and the Mind*. (London: HarperCollins, paperback edition, 1997).

¹² Storr, 171.

¹³ Anthony Storr, *The Dynamics of Creation*. (London: Penguin, 1972) 292.

¹⁴ Milan Kundera. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Trans. Aaron Asher, (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

This is what Papa told me when I was five years old: in music every key is a small royal court. The King (the first step of the scale) exercises power with the help of two princes (the fifth and fourth steps). Under their orders are four other dignitaries, each with his own special relation to the king and princes. The court also takes in five other tones, which are called chromatic. They of course occupy first-rank positions in other keys, but here they are only guests.

Because each of the twelve tones has its own position, title, and function, any piece of music we hear is more than just a mass of sound: it is an action developing before us. Sometimes the events are terribly tangled (as in Mahler or still more in Bartók or Stravinsky), with princes from several courts intervening and soon you no longer know which tone is serving which court or if it isn't serving several kings at once. But even then, the most naïve listener can still make a rough guess about what is going on. Even the most complex music is still speaking the *same language*.¹⁵

He then goes on to describe the introduction of the twelve-tone system, the abolition of “the hierarchy of tones”, and finally their replacement by “a subtle, no doubt magnificent structure of noises” which in turn inaugurated “the history of something different based on different principles and a different language.”¹⁶

While much of the classical music in the second half of the 20th century was by nature experimental, it is worth noting that, during the same period, jazz departments began to flourish; many talented musicians instinctively turned their attention to increasingly sophisticated forms of jazz and popular music, where creative freedom is the prerogative of the performer. While the cultural divisions between these styles have widened considerably since Gershwin found inspiration in the works of Liszt and Debussy, and Ravel explored the expressive gestures of jazz, there have always been countless examples of significant cross-fertilization.¹⁷ Certainly composers now have at their disposal an expanded form of musical notation encompassing new instrumental techniques, and an ever-increasing frame of musical reference. The language of music has been enhanced by classical experimentalists, and enriched by the exotic harmonies, modes and rhythms which exponents of jazz and ‘world music’ have taken to new expressive heights. Tonal music is no longer frowned upon, neo-tonal idioms have been in the ascendancy for some time, and those for whom classical music is one of life’s necessities have an unprecedented variety of styles from which to choose.

For many piano students working at basic or intermediate levels, the wide variety of experimental and contemporary classical idioms still remains relatively unfamiliar. This is not to say, however, that they are not interested in exercising and extending their own creative potential. Most are trained in the standard repertoire with perhaps token acknowledgement of contemporary music, but in order for them to understand it properly they need to experience at first hand the way in which music is constructed; and the best way for them to do this is to become involved in the act of composition itself. As piano teachers today, are we comfortable with the idea of teaching composition? Are we confident, in the private studio, to ask our students to compose (and eventually notate) their own music? Do we have the right to encourage creative efforts based on the laws of tonality and dependent, in part, on the compositional techniques of previous centuries?

¹⁵ Kundera. 244ff.

¹⁶ Kundera 246.

¹⁷ For example, Terry Riley and La Monte Young were both saxophone players enamoured of the music of John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy.

Twistonality

In August 2002, I embarked on a research degree in composition at the University of Adelaide. My creative instincts veered towards the neo-tonal, but it was difficult at first to establish a credible framework for the research. As the investigation progressed, it became clear that the fundamental question was this: what constitutes the forging of a musical identity, an individual style, a personal voice? Eventually the term ‘twistonality’ was coined as a conceptual umbrella for any form of music which is based in tonality, but which twists the tonal system with easily recognisable consistency in order to create a unique style—an audible signature, as it were. It was interesting to discover that my own compositional agenda had already been admirably summed up by the contemporary Russian composer, Rodion Shchedrin (born 1932). In his own Notes to a CD of his *Old Russian Circus Music*, he writes:

My *Circus* is directed straight at the listener, the audience, at the skill of the instrumental player, the soloist, at the joy that can be derived from well coordinated and virtuoso ensemble playing. In this work I deliberately strove for colour, musical painting, and humour, and also for those things which are effective, superficial and entertaining. In a word, I flew in the face of what is now considered to be good taste, i.e. depicting oneself as an ascetic, ruminating philosopher, or a monk who has taken the vows of schema.¹⁸

The main purpose of the research was to investigate the ways in which functional and/or non-directional harmony might be combined with more recent compositional techniques in order to create something original, if not entirely new. The word ‘twistonal’ describes a style informed by the historical conventions of functional harmonic progression, but which incorporates and extends the scope of familiar contemporary idioms. Within a tonal context functional chord progression is a powerful tool, but it is difficult to replace, because most alternative structural devices or artificial techniques tend to limit the recognition of emotional content by way of reference to the “known”. In acknowledging the fact that compositional activity may be inspired by the knowledge of existing works written during the last five hundred years, it seemed reasonable to believe that prevailing tonal structures resident in our conscious (and perhaps subconscious) memory might be twisted to incorporate more recent compositional techniques and, by a process of cross-fertilization, lead to the evolution of a uniquely individual style. The research concludes that this involves a combination of factors, *viz.* a knowledge and appreciation of great musical literature from the past, an understanding of compositional craft, an awareness of contemporary styles and culture, and a recognition of the historical and emotional significance of performance as a social reality.

The term ‘twistonal’ might be applied to the work of numerous composers: Franz Liszt, Hugo Wolf, Ravel, Prokofiev, Britten and many others, most of whom were practising musicians and often pianists. They themselves found other ways to explain their music, and musicologists have used standard terms such as ‘impressionistic’, ‘neo-classical’ etc. to place them within an historical context. The notion of ‘twistonality’, on the other hand, is simply an attempt to account for the fact that performer-composers, being both enriched and encumbered by music from the past, cannot easily distance themselves from all that has gone before. Instead, they must twist an inherited tonal language to accommodate new ideas, to express their own emotional experience, informed as it is by current aesthetic trends, contemporary art and the prevailing cultural

¹⁸ Rodion Shchedrin, trans. Phillip Taylor. Notes to *Old Russian Circus Music*. Music by Rodion Shchedrin. Cond. Vassily Sinaisky. BBC Philharmonic. CD (Chan 9552) 4.

environment. ‘Twistonality’, therefore, might be regarded as the performer-composer’s solution, the expressive outcome of the classical performer’s search for a personal style, or musical identity. It is neither a theoretical approach to composition, nor a reference to any particular compositional procedure. Rather, it describes the process of natural selection whereby creative musicians attempt to wrest something new from the immense legacy of the past. While the term ‘twistonal’ might be new, the process itself has for centuries been an integral part of the Western European cultural tradition.

A Voice from the Past

Speaking of ‘legacies’, there is a small book entitled *Piano Questions answered by Joseph Hofmann, author of ‘Piano Playing’: a little book of direct answers to two hundred and fifty questions asked by piano students.*¹⁹ It was published in 1910, and in the Foreword Hofmann explains that this ‘little book is compiled from the questions and my answers to them, as they have appeared during the past two years in the *Ladies Home Journal.*’ In terms of pedagogy, it is worth noting that Hofmann sees himself merely as a facilitator:

It is only natural that a book of this character cannot contain more than mere suggestions to stimulate the reader’s individual thinking Any rule or advice given to some particular person cannot fit every other person unless its is passed through the sieve of one’s own individual intelligence and is, by this process, so modified as to fit one’s own particular case.²⁰

Two of the questions posed in the book are pertinent to this discussion. Here is the first:

Q: Besides my study of the piano, shall I try to compose if I feel the inclination and believe I have some talent for it?

A: The practice of constructing will always facilitate your work of reconstructing, which is, practically, what the rendition of a musical work means. Hence, I advise everyone who feels able to construct even a modest little piece to try his hand at it. Of course, if you can write only a two-step it will not enable you to reconstruct a Beethoven Sonata; still, there may be little places in the Sonata that will clear up in your mind more quickly when you have come in touch with the technical act of putting down on paper what your mind created, and you will altogether lose the attitude of the absolute stranger when facing a new composition. Do not construe this, however, as an encouragement to write two-steps!²¹

Hofmann’s answer to the student is honest, succinct and pedagogically sound.

Observation and experience suggest that those students who are drawn to creative work at the piano also have a strong emotional reaction to music, even if this is not yet audible in the interpretation of their set repertoire. This is perhaps best illustrated by the following case study involving a 13 year-old student who had already been taking piano lessons for six years. Several days after she had completed her AMEB 4th Grade examination, she attended her regular lesson with few works prepared. New repertoire had not yet been chosen, but she had been encouraged to buy a new theory book and to ‘resurrect’ the Mozart D minor Fantasie which had been put on the back-burner while she concentrated on her exam pieces. At the beginning of the lesson, she asked if she might play one of her own compositions, something which she had ‘invented’ during the past few days. It was relatively simple in terms of its rhythmic and harmonic structure, but it lasted for several minutes, and there was a surprising level of emotional

¹⁹ Joseph Hofmann. *Piano Questions*. (London: Hodden & Stoughton, 1910).

²⁰ Hofmann, vii.

²¹ Hoffman, 108.

involvement in her performance. When it finally came to a close, she explained that she was not yet entirely happy with the result; it was declared a ‘work in progress’, and one which she would like to ‘try again’ at the next lesson. She then produced the Mozart Fantasia, and already during the Introduction it was immediately clear that this work—which had not been practised at all for the last four or five weeks—had undergone a dramatic change: phrases were now being shaped, rests expanded, and dynamic contrasts realised at a level far in advance of her previous efforts. There was considerable emotional involvement, reminiscent of that which had been shown in the performance of her own composition, and a new kind of physical engagement with the instrument that was extremely positive. Finally, she presented her new Third Grade Theory book in which the first 4 lessons had been neatly (and correctly) completed. There seemed little doubt that this student’s sudden burst of creative activity had sparked a deeper awareness of musical form and structure, raised the level of engagement in her musical performance, and even encouraged a disciplined and more purposeful approach to theoretical work.

Hofmann has arranged his questions under certain Headings, so the second one follows quite logically from the first:

Q: Please advise me as to the best way of learning composition. Which is the best work of that kind from which I could learn?

A: First learn to write notes. Copying all sorts of music is the best practice for that. Then study the doctrine of harmony. Follow it up by a study of the various forms of counterpoint. Proceed to canon and its many kinds and intervals. Take up the fugue. Then study forms until you learn to feel them. Books for every one of these stages there are many, but better than all the books is a good teacher.²²

Here Hofmann has managed to summarise all that one would like to include (and much of which is now lacking) in a tertiary music degree. The fact that this was printed 100 years ago in *The Ladies Home Journal* certainly gives us food for thought. On the other hand, his advice can easily be translated into language more appropriate to the 21st century:

First buy a simple publishing program, and learn how to enter the notes. Copying music or working through the tutorials is the best way to do this. Then study the various types of chords. Follow it up by writing melodies, and adding simple accompaniments. Do some research on various musical forms. Download your favourite pieces to your Ipod or MP3 Player and listen carefully until you know them well. Discuss your ideas with your teacher, and take your work along for regular feedback ...

When students bring original compositions to their piano lessons, they are doing several things. First and foremost, they are confirming their love of music, and the meaning of music in their lives. They are also revealing their emotional independence while showing complete faith in you as their mentor. They are demonstrating that they have been listening to music, thinking about music, and spending time at the piano and/or the computer. In return, we as teachers should encourage their efforts wholeheartedly. Even if their compositions are reminiscent of well-known pieces, TV jingles or popular music, we should seek to develop these creative activities as a valuable part of the students’ musical training. When the time is right, we should encourage further development of the ideas already inherent in their music. Would some of the material sound different in another register, or in another key? Could it be halved or doubled in tempo? Could there be variations on a theme? Can the melody be played

²² Hofmann, 108-109.

backwards, or upside-down? Could it be treated as a canon? Might they consider adding a middle section, or some contrasting material? At a later stage, we might even suggest that two or three small pieces might be combined into one longer work. Once they have a feel for ‘improving’ and extending their first efforts, these students are much more likely to understand the compositional techniques revealed in the works which they are studying, and discussion about the form and structure of standard repertoire becomes a journey of musical discovery rather than a tedious analytical chore. In addition, when the basic concepts of functional harmony and form have been grasped, an introduction to serialism and more advanced compositional techniques could make an enormous difference to students’ on-going interest in contemporary music.

To those who specialise in the teaching of composition at advanced levels, the thought of students creating banal compositions in a tonal idiom, perhaps even with popular overtones, might seem pointless or even regressive, but we should remember that Ravel’s advice to his own students, should they ever lack inspiration, was this:

If you have nothing new to say, you cannot do better, while waiting for the ultimate silence, than repeat what has been well said. If you do have something to say, that something will never be more clearly seen than in your unwitting infidelity to the model.²³

This advice is at odds with the notion that every composition must be based on an entirely new harmonic scheme, or on a unique mode, or on a complex system of mathematical equations. Indeed, if Ravel is right, every student will eventually develop his or her own style according to individual musical preferences. With regard to students’ original compositions, whether or not the outcome is fundamentally derivative, we must remember that the creative process itself is one of infinite discovery—about oneself, about others, and about the very nature of music. Furthermore, as Hoffmann suggests, it provides an excellent conceptual basis for the process of reconstruction which occurs every time a work is studied and performed. It is vitally important for students to be exposed, in the early years of training, to the widest possible range of musical styles and genres because it will then become clear, sooner rather than later, whether they are better suited to classical music or jazz, performance or composition, teaching or research, or any combination of these activities. If, as seems likely, an increasing level of specialisation is here to stay, then this can only augur well for the choice of an appropriate musical vocation and career path.

New Music of the Future

In a recent publication entitled *A Musicians’s Alphabet*,²⁴ well-known British pianist Susan Tomes invites her readers in a relaxed and discursive style to speculate on a number of issues pertaining to musical performance and its place in today’s society. Each letter of the alphabet triggers a miniature essay on a specific topic: “A is for Audience”, “B is for Background Music” etc. In the chapter “F is for Formula”, she begins by discussing the recent practice of using classical music as a social deterrent, e.g. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was broadcast at Stoke-on-Trent in order to prevent ‘undesirables’ from loitering in the shopping centre, and ‘troublemakers’ were supposedly chased from a bus station in the north of England by being subjected to Vivaldi Concertos!²⁵ This leads to an explanation of the phenomenon of pop music and the idea that “you need only spend one evening listening to any pop radio station across

²³ Roger Nichols. *Ravel*. (London: J.M.Dent & Sons, 1977) 118.

²⁴ Susan Tomes. *A Musician’s Alphabet*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

²⁵ Tomes 34-35.

the world to know that most songwriters in all countries now work to a formula.”²⁶
Towards the end of the chapter she writes:

We need an equivalent of the delightful campaign begun in Italy to promote what they call ‘Slow Food’; not just slow music, obviously, but real music. The Slow Food advocates want to bring back local variation, ancient expertise, garden herbs, individuality, conversation. Make people realise it’s not an advance in society to be able to buy the same synthetic lunch in Algiers or Alaska . . . Don’t get me wrong: a well-made hamburger with good ingredients can be a delicious meal. A cheap imitation full of E-numbered chemicals is an insult to the original dish. In the same way, a great popular song can be a joy forever. But a cynical, manipulative sham just leaves your ear hungry for the real thing. . . We don’t need synthetic moods to be created by music; we want to hear music that expresses all the facets of human experience and feelings. Let that be in any musical genre—as long as it’s not formulaic, but personal and genuine, as the popular music of the past used to be.²⁷

In this Chapter, Tomes is largely referring to the difference between ‘classical’ and ‘pop’ music. Reading between the lines, however, one is reminded of some contemporary art music which might also be described as “a cynical, manipulative sham”, one which “leaves your ear hungry for the real thing”. Whether ‘formulaic’ art music will repel or attract hooligans is, of course, open to question, but Tomes is clearly expressing a preference for ‘real music’ and ‘active listeners’ when she asserts that “Good music, like good food, needs to taste of something, not just make you feel the same as every other consumer.”²⁸

Susan Tomes is a highly intelligent and articulate performer who is clearly eager to share her musical experiences with the widest possible audience. Like Hoffmann, she is also a brilliant pedagogue, and she is speaking—as was Hoffmann—not only to her piano students, but to every musician and to every member, or potential member of the audience. Clearly it is up to each individual to recognise the music which, for him or her, is the most inspirational, moving or satisfying, but by encouraging students to involve themselves in original composition, even at a basic level, we will soon discover what music they enjoy most, and how much they really understand. If the creative talents of aspiring young pianists are nurtured alongside their re-creative activity, is it not also possible that, apart from all the benefits outlined above, they would gradually take more interest in new music?

There are many issues here for further discussion, as a number of questions have been raised which cannot be fully answered in a paper such as this. However, if our aim as private studio teachers is to give every piano student the best possible all-round musical training, and if we give serious consideration to the multiple careers paths which are now available, we should certainly encourage their creative endeavours. If future composers and performers were to speak a more common language, their respectful collaboration would surely lead to the emergence of music which is both new and meaningful to performers and audiences alike. Such interaction should serve to heighten rather than destroy the links between contemporary music and performance practice. There are no rules for the composition of good music, or for the preservation of any particular style or genre. The performers’ purpose, however, is to communicate, rather than to confront, so an understanding of compositional techniques seems crucial

²⁶ Tomes 37.

²⁷ Tomes 38.

²⁸ Tomes 38

if they are to present contemporary repertoire with any real authority. It seems fitting to conclude by quoting one more question and answer from Hofmann's 'little book':

Q: Being a cornet player, and wishing to become a conductor and composer, I should like to know if the study of the piano is necessary in addition to my broad, theoretical studies and a common college course.

A: It depends upon what you wish to conduct and what to compose. With no other means of musically expressing yourself than a cornet it is highly improbable that you will be able to write a symphony. But you may be able to lead a brass band and, perhaps, to write a march or a dance piece. If your musical aims are serious by all means take to the piano.²⁹

About the Author

An honours arts graduate from the University of Melbourne and the recipient of a DAAD Scholarship for study in Germany, Diana Weekes began studies in musicology at Munich University before completing her Meisterklassendiplom in performance at the Musikhochschule. A major prize-winner in five international competitions, she has had an active career in performance and teaching, and in 2007 completed a PhD in composition at the University of Adelaide. Formerly a full-time lecturer in music at the Flinders Street School of Music, she is now Senior Lecturer in Keyboard at the Elder Conservatorium of Music where she also co-ordinates the Chamber Music and Accompanying courses.

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²⁹ Hofmann, 128.