

How Expanded Musical Thinking Can Simplify the Path to the Artistic Performance

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The main purpose of this lecture is to elucidate the elements of study needed for young pianists to develop their playing to a higher level.

General remarks and advice:

- 1) *Perfect reading of musical texts*
- 2) *Awareness of unwritten rules which can help real art in performance*

When we speak about perfect reading we think about:

- 1) *How to read rhythmic structure and its design in the best way,*
- 2) *About the relation between hands in rhythm and dynamics,*
- 3) *About suitable technique play and suitable tempo,*
- 4) *About the performance of the dynamics written in musical works,*
- 5) *About the relation between notes and rests and their execution,*
- 6) *About playing the trills in the artistic way (as on woodwind instruments),*
- 7) *About the need for imagination, which will also help us to play stylishly and persuasively to excite the audience and*
- 8) *How to use the best pedaling, which shows and opens the “Soul of the Piano” and enriches overall sound of this instrument.*

If all of these elements are followed and produced, the result will be a very important achievement; the performer will hear him/herself accurately in every moment and will experience full self-control in all finesses of musical performance.

All these short topics are followed with a demonstration of short excerpts in live performance or from recorded performances by Slobodan Zivkovic as a pianist.

This lecture has been prepared as a continuation of my previous lecture held in Sydney 12 years ago at the 3rd International Piano Pedagogy Conference. In the previous lecture I spoke about “My Approach to Piano Technique” and now I am writing about my musical thinking of how to simplify the path to a real artistic performance through expanded musical thinking. I will speak from my point of view, based on my experience as a pianist and a piano teacher, about how fundamental understandings in our expanded musical thinking can assist in the development to artistic performance in students. This can be beneficial for young pianists of an advanced level and for piano teachers who enjoy debate of this type in piano pedagogy.

This article's goal is to help young pianists and their teachers to shorten the way to real artistic performance in their playing. It is understood that these students have developed their technical ability to a highly advanced level. This technique has to achieve clarity at speed with good sound quality.

I will only write about some of my explorations and their conclusions. I will discuss unwritten rules and about musical points which can help and contribute to the production of an artistic performance. Use of unwritten rules, which I will mention and describe later, always has to be accompanied and followed by sincere and "controlled" spontaneity in playing. Sincerity and musical spontaneity are the most valuable points in any artistic endeavour.

Let's imagine that we have in front of us a young player with a roundly developed piano technique and who possesses a wide knowledge in harmony, polyphony (counterpoint), musical forms/structure of music works, history of music, and knowledge of stylish characteristics of music periods.

Each pianist possesses different musical talents, a different apparatus of hands and fingers, different muscles in body structure, particularly in the fingers, different touches of piano keys and different levels of natural intelligence.

For faster playing speed I recommend playing with the tips of curved and vertically positioned fingers and sometimes playing with part of their nails, especially the thumbs. That will facilitate and simplify playing of fast passages, which consist of parts of scales and arpeggios, broken chords, trills and different figuration of notes. If we need to perform group of notes in *legato*, but in *fortissimo* dynamics, we will play it with much more power concentrated in the fingers playing on each key in the melody line, with our wrists positioned a little bit higher than usual in coordination with free elbows and with relaxed shoulders. We will not play with real *legato*, but in a more *portato* way with an emphasis on each note, combined with the use of suitable pedalling.

Besides these things, it is very important to use a freely natural rotation of the wrists and replacement of fingers on the same keys, all needed for better *legato* playing. That can be synchronized by the replacements of one, two or three fingers, for example in *legato* chord playing in the music by Debussy, J.S. Bach and other composers. It should be observed that great pianists sometimes use unusual and unorthodox fingering to gain a better sound and expression in their playing.

What is most fundamental is that we practice regularly so much and enough that we know in every moment what is following in the music we perform. The practice will also enable us to memorize music items more easily and in a shorter period of time. It is what every good pianist consistently does.

If we have in front of us a copy of the original content of music, not edited and without any signs of dynamics in addition to notes and rests, we have to make a perfect reading of a music piece practicing in slow tempo. The development of a teaching plan should be relevant to the study of all composers. I will give some proposals to consider.

It is very important to notice the correct rhythmic structure in all the musical works we perform, their musical impulses in bars, musical motives and whole musical phrases. In that case we can play more movingly; we can breathe and speak music on a higher artistic level. When we produce impulses that sound as light accents, we move fingers and hands more actively and we produce a motoric effect or musical pulsation and with this we get a better sounding effect in musical expression. All this we do for the benefit of persuasive dynamic content and artistic expression. My way to make the rhythm of the complex rhythmic groups very clear and precise (different notes of smaller values, ornamental groups and trills, adapted also on the style of music) is to subdivide counting the rhythm aloud, using the smallest value of one note as a unit. I count demisemiquavers in $\frac{3}{4}$ as units of 6x4 demisemiquavers or $\frac{4}{4}$ as 8x4 demisemiquavers in one bar. The 2nd movement of the *Concerto in F minor* by J.S. Bach, or the Introduction in the 1st movement in *Sonata op.13* and the 2nd movement in *Sonata op.31 No 2* by Beethoven provide examples where this method is useful. Counting is a very useful tool for self-control in practice and is very supportive for balancing the playing between the hands.

Regarding the previous point of rhythmic reading, it is of the most indispensable significance to produce a correct relation between notes and rests! For example, in the introduction part of *Sinfonia from Partita No 2 in C minor* by Bach J. S, we need to play the last note in the group of notes followed by the rest, by actively moving the finger off so that it sounds a little bit shorter and softer with a kind of “light echo sound in addition”; we don’t hear the dead end of the last note and we can clearly hear the stillness of the rest which follows. In the air we can feel that there are new sounds to follow.

Also, we have to emphasize syncopated notes in order to produce powerful sounding results in the melodies performed. “To speak of the complete interdependence of tone and rhythm is almost superfluous. If a syncopation, which is of such tremendous rhythmic importance, is played more softly than the non-syncopated note preceding or following it, or simultaneous with it but in another part, it ceases to be a syncopation. In other words, it loses its rhythmic and dynamic characteristic...”¹

We have a very important technique to resolve when we have *staccato* notes to play. Students often play *staccato* notes very short because of *staccato* signs. But they can’t be played so short. Only, if we have an indication by the composer that

¹ H. Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing*, Kahn & Averill, London, 1993, 52

we need also to emphasize or accent these notes, then we can do so. In my opinion, we need to play them in a “singing staccato” and to strike the keys as we would bounce a ball. An interesting example is a very simple music piece, “The Banjo” by Michael Aaron.² Playing *staccato* notes is not correct if we shorten their duration so much and make rests between them which don’t exist! Because of that, good pianists play *staccato* in the manner of singing *staccato* as I mentioned before.

When we speak about dynamics written in music scores, we could think and speak of how to treat them objectively and personally in the right way for the sounding relations between notes grouped in melodies and in small musical patterns. This also depends on the periods and styles to which the music item belongs and for which keyboard instruments it was written. For example, we will play music from the Baroque period on average with a lighter sound than music from the Classical or Romantic period.

When a composition begins with an anacrusis, (I consider this in reading the right hand only in music scores), as in the 3rd movement from Beethoven’s *Sonatas op.10, No 1 in C minor* and *op.31, no. 2 in D minor* and the introduction section in the *Sinfonia* from J.S. Bach’s *Partita No. 2 in C minor*, we always need to begin to play a softer first note in a group of notes which follow any kind of rest. This is similar in many works composed by Mozart and others.

Generally, I perform dynamics in the playing groups of notes watching their contour. It is very suitable to play them with a very light *crescendo*, when they follow up in line or a very light *decrescendo* when they go down in line. This sounds artistic and musical. (The accompaniment in the left hand in the *Study Op.10, No 12 in C minor* by F. Chopin is a further example).

We need always to perform music with feelings of love and warmth.

It is very important to find the most suitable sounding relation between hands, where the right hand usually plays the melody and the fingers have to be pressed deeper to make a louder, but singing sound. The left hand generally plays an accompaniment. This means that we need to treat the melody in right hand as the role of a soloist, which has to dominate. Also, in playing groups of consecutive chords, we have to press much deeper the 4th and 5th fingers, which are naturally weak, to dominate the sound in some kind of hidden melody, also as a soloist. In Bach’s Preludes and Fugues this is not the case, because in the Preludes sometimes we have a melodic dialogue between hands and in the Fugues we have melodies (subjects) in different voices and hands. It is also very important to know how to produce the most suitable accents depending on the written dynamics in the context of the music played.

² M. Aaron. Piano Course Grade 1, *Alfred Publishing Co. Inc.*, Van Nuys, Copyright 1945, 38

It is not always easy to find out the most suitable tempo for the performance of musical works with high musical and technical requirements. One of the reasons can be a lack in a student's piano technique and a lack of feeling for the natural fluency of music. Great pianists don't have such a problem in fast playing and when they play some virtuoso music piece their fingers look like they are gliding over the keys, without any apparent movement. The most suitable tempo is one in which performed music sounds most naturally and persuasively.

In performing trills we have to have as a role model the way they sound on woodwind instruments. A very good example for trills is a development part of the third movement in Saint-Saens *Piano Concerto No 2 in G minor*, where the trills are written as constructive elements of a long melody; they are very virtuosic. In my approach to performing them, I found that the best way is to begin every trill with the light accent on the initial note and then to play trill in *crescendo* and straight back in a short *decrescendo*.

Pedalling

Pedalling has a very important role in piano playing. It has a significantly important role in legato playing, in colouring the piano sound and through the left pedal *una corda*, in making the sound softer. Use of the damper pedal contributes to making all the strings of the piano resonate with each other. Called "the soul of the piano" by many musicians and composers such as Anton Rubinstein, Franz Liszt and countless others, the damper pedal helps to achieve a richer and more beautiful sound in performance.³ The most common and important use of the damper pedal is the syncopated pedal. Every one of us is aware of its use. Also, we can use the damper pedal in *legato* playing by pressing it $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ on the way down or to vibrate the pedal for a special musical effect; this depends on style of music performed. The left pedal we use mostly for a colouring a piano sound in impressionistic music.

Imagination

Imagination in music performance from the early age of a piano student is of very great importance for a more musical and persuasive expression and presentation. I'll write about some works of the highest technical level and musical value I've performed and how I have seen them. E.g.: *Sonata op.27, No1* by L. van Beethoven, first movement⁴ where the imagination can be sparked by the story

³ L. Kentner, Piano, *Kahn & Averill*, London, 1991, 70

⁴ This is a story about how Beethoven was inspired to compose the first movement of his Sonata op.27, No1. He enjoyed walking through the streets of Vienna and one night he saw a girl on the balcony of a house, who was looking towards a cloudless sky of full moon and stars, holding her head very strangely. He later heard from her mother that she was born blind and he was saddened. When he entered the house he saw a piano in the lounge room. Beethoven sat the piano and began to improvise music in simple broken chords by which he deeply tried to describe to the girl through his immediate musical imagination the beauty of the moon and the stars. I learnt of this story from

about blind girl and the Moonlight and his *Concerto No 4 in G major*, second movement in light of “the dialogue between Beethoven and his beloved nephew” or F. Chopin’s *Sonata in B flat minor*, in its 3rd movement Funeral March and 4th movement or *Etude Tableau in E-flat minor* by S. Rachmaninov, although not written as program music, can be considered to have highly descriptive content which sounds like a musical whirlwind. F. Liszt’s *Sonata in B minor* is for me a musical presentation of the Novel “Faust” by the famous German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, which I have studied long time ago, and three musical subjects which present “three principal characters: Faust, Marguerite and Mephistopheles (all integral parts of Liszt’s own character!) are vividly portrayed...⁵ (*Independently I came to the same conclusion, thanks to my studies in German Language and my study of Liszt’s Sonata*), “Carnaval” by R. Schumann or big works of Spanish music by Albeniz: e.g. “*Malaguena*” /music in which we can easily feel and recognize guitar playing, the singer and the flamenco dancer.

The implementation of these unwritten rules will act as guidance to all young pianists on the stage, where they will see and clearly hear in advance what follows in the music they perform and will have a better opportunity to consciously master delivery of a more artistic performance in every sense of musical art, which will excite the audience.

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my German Language Teacher at High School in Belgrade, Prof. Budimir Bogdanovic, who heard this story in the time of his imprisonment during the Second World War in Germany (1941 – 1945).

⁵ L. Kentner, Piano, *Kahn&Averill*, London, 1991, 171