

Statement of Piano Teaching Philosophy

There are many ways to envision piano instruction. I believe that the work of a classical piano teacher is to help and encourage the student to enrich his personal music experience with a view to deepen and clarify his comprehension of the essence of music.* What I understand by the essence of music amounts to the relationship between the “musical gesture” which “gives a life to the sound”¹ and to the grouping of these “musical gestures” that make up the piece. All this together forms the “soundscape”² or, in other words, the vision of the performer. By these musical gestures, the performer tells the story of a piece, giving it personal meaning in the time dimension of the performance. It is through the immediate vertical elements and other progressive horizontal elements of this time dimension that the pianist must seek to maximize his expression. In order to better understand the musical components that this entails, I like to compare the activity of the pianist with those of the singer and the orchestral conductor.

I agree with Kululuka in considering that “the vocal gesture is, without doubt, the closest to the musical thought. It allows for an unlimited invention of timbres [and] a control of time that is directly connected to the deepest impulses of the human being”³. Contrary to the singer, the pianist has his body and his instrument as intermediaries between himself and his musical gesture. To bring himself closer to his musical gesture the pianist must move his embodied self to make music. For Thomas Mark, this means that when the pianist’s awareness of his body in movement is based on refined kinesthesia and a good body [and piano] map, his conception of the music – the sound – will fuse with his conception of the movement that produces the music.⁴ Certain characteristics of the piano distance it further from a true feeling of support and legato that are inherent to the singer. Examples of this are the piano’s inability to renew the sound after the immediate production and its inability to connect two notes from the same source of resonance because of each note being connected to different strings. The work of an orchestral conductor helps to remedy these difficulties because he expresses himself through gesture and not through a specific instrument. By preparing the music with his inner ear, the demands and difficulties of each instrument are trumped by his independent musical ideas. When guiding my students, I call this work of the “visualization” of the musical intentions “*listenization*”⁵. Moreover, the orchestration allows for different levels of the score (the melody, the bass, the harmony, counter-melodies, contrapuntal voices, etc.) to be cared for individually by distinct instruments, unveiling the true expressivity needed for each level in relation to the perspective of the full “sound space”.

*Masculine used without discrimination.

¹ Translation from French by Antoine Joubert; Word for word, « to print a life to the sound » : Kululuka, Apollinaire Anakesa, *Du fait gestuel à l’empreinte sonore : pour un geste musical*, APC-MCX, Atelier no 37 – « Complexité de l’œuvre : musique, musicologie, spectacle vivant », 2009, p. 11.

² Schafer, Raymond Murray, *The Tuning of the World*, Random House Inc., 1977.

³ Kululuka, Apollinaire Anakesa, *Du fait gestuel à l’empreinte sonore : pour un geste musical*, APC-MCX, Atelier no 37 – « Complexité de l’œuvre : musique, musicologie, spectacle vivant », 2009, p. 11.

⁴ Mark, Thomas, *What every pianist needs to know about the body*, GIA Publications, Chicago, 2003, p. 13.

⁵ The Suzuki method is referring to the word « tonalisation » to describe the sound production. The expression “*listenization*” (© Antoine Joubert) is simply the step of conception before this production : Suzuki, Dr. Shinichi, *Suzuki piano school*, Volume 1, New International Edition, Alfred Publishing Co., USA, 2008, p. 4.

In the moment of playing, the pianist, consciously or not, must constantly make use of different functions of the brain: cognitive, sensual and kinesthetic, motor, and emotive.⁶ Additionally, since “the irrational creative forces [...] in art mock all effort to rationalize”⁷, it is important to not use the intellect as a “simple tool put to the service of the power and the creative intention”.⁸ In the end, the musical experience of the performer can only be of full service to the musical essence if the performer succeeds totally to immerse himself in the musical activity. Each moment when instinct loses control is a sign that the musical text is not enough sufficiently known.

Thus, in the context of these premises, the musical experience of an individual distinguishes itself. In my opinion, it is primordial for a professor to evaluate, discern and respect the components of the experience of his student in such a way as to allow his “personality [to] reveal itself”⁹ with its strengths and weaknesses. My experience has shown that a teacher can transmit the necessary elements that will complete and reinforce the students’ experience. Below is a glimpse of certain global elements of the musical experience of a student that I have determined and classified through my teaching experience, as a pianist, as a student and in my personal reading and research:

Musical Experience			
Personality	Musical Culture	Tools for implementation	Artistic Approach
Psychological type of person -introvert/extravert -intuitive/factual -intellectual/emotional ¹⁰	History of styles, composers and performers	Transmission of the musical idea	Repertory choices
	Repertory studied	Organization of the discourse	Piece preparation -reading and memorization -detail work -performance preparation
	Knowledge of cultural milieus and current musical issues		Ability to phrase the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic contours
Emotional control/mastery	Comprehension and analysis	Relationship between the pulsation, the tempo and the character	Critical sense and esthetic conception
Personality traits	Musical competence		Management of deadlines
Physiognomy	Understanding of musical essence	Relationship to the instrument	Diffusion of his work
Perceptiveness	Capacity to regroup and distinguish different musical ideas		Abilities -speed and precision -power and stability -touch and control of articulations -sonority, colours and pedal mastery -posture and control of movements -comfort and economy of energy
Life experience			
Imagination			
Brain functions**			
Sensitivity			
Reaction to stress			
Self-confidence			

**see footnote 6

And now, in order for the experience to be profitable, it seems to me that it should be subjected to the highest artistic criteria. Here is a list of examples of what I believe a performing pianist should strive to achieve:

⁶ Mark, Thomas, *What every pianist needs to know about the body*, GIA Publications, Chicago, 2003, First Chapter.

⁷ Translation from French by Antoine Joubert; Jung, Carl. G., *L'âme et la vie*, Textes essentiels réunis et présentés par Jolande Jacobi, traduit de l'allemand par le Dr Roland Cahen et Yves Le Lay, Éditions Buchet/Chastel, Paris, 1963, p. 259.

⁸ Translation from French by Antoine Joubert; Jung, Carl. G., *L'âme et la vie*, Textes essentiels réunis et présentés par Jolande Jacobi, traduit de l'allemand par le Dr Roland Cahen et Yves Le Lay, Éditions Buchet/Chastel, Paris, 1963, p. 264.

⁹ Rosen, Charles, *Piano Notes, The world of the pianist*, Free Press, NY, 2002, p. 101.

¹⁰ According to Carl G. Jung, http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Type_psychologique, consulted the 27 of December 2010.

1. Varied working methods that maximize both the angles through which the piece is perceived and the “anchoring points”¹¹ as a part of a sustained daily practice
2. Intense listening and focus
3. Maintained and ever renewing interest that avoids all forming of habits that will inhibit the creative process, conserving spontaneity, simplicity and the natural, according to the established plan
4. Lucid musical intentions, expressed with a palette of flexible and rich parameters
5. Body movements reduced to their most simple expression through a “joyful body”
6. A strong presence, emotion and “playing with love”¹²
7. Precise details that find the true expression within the context
8. A moving performance as much for the neophyte as for the specialist
9. Music that is organic and not calculated
10. Respect for the score, but conveyed in a personal and convincing manner within the parameters of the style
11. Controlled sonority with “sophisticated”¹³ pedaling

The complexity and rigor of the work of a performer requires, as Neuhaus says, that the musical image or the poetic substance be in place as soon as possible, so that a performer develops a precise understanding of the goal and endeavors to achieve and incarnate this in his playing¹⁴. “The best method of teaching is to practice with a student or to demonstrate how one practices and then watch the student work until the passage comes right. Before the student’s technique is almost completely formed, this is the only way, and requires a lot of patience.”¹⁵ It is in this way also that one achieves the best results in daily work – practicing in an uninterrupted manner on a targeted passage during a period of time as long as is required to master it.

Over the years, I have developed several strategies and acquired different values in my teaching. It is my opinion that healthy teaching must be founded in complicity, listening and respect. For me, being a teacher also means being a “motivator”. I focus on the students’ smallest successes so that he believes in his ability, making sure that he understands the principle behind the result, but also in order that he evaluate and understand what he still needs to achieve his goals. By accumulating tools, the student gains confidence and independence. He will take more and more initiative and will set even higher goals for himself. Moreover, I am a very patient and positive person and I make sure to never be condescending. I hope to awaken in my students their sense of curiosity, discipline, punctuality, but also humility, generosity and passion. I insure that all aspects concerning the logistics of the lessons correspond to the needs of the student. It is important that I be accessible to my students and respond quickly to their questions and needs. Ultimately, I hope that my students will become conscious of the time and effort that one must invest in order to truly experience the pleasure of music.

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¹¹ Expression from Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).

¹² Expression of Annie Fisher explaining her beautiful sonority to a student.

¹³ Expression of Dang Thai Son.

¹⁴ Neuhaus, Henrich, *The Art of Piano Playing*, Praeger Publishers, NY, English translation by Barrie & Jenkins Ltd., 1973, p. 2.

¹⁵ Rosen, Charles, *Piano Notes, The world of the pianist*, Free Press, NY, 2002, p. 100.

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