



BEING A TECHNICIAN VS AN ARTIST

A Guide for Young Pianists to achieve true meaning of artistry

Mario Santoso

msantoso@indiana.edu

Abstract:

Kita melihat banyak sekali pianis-pianis muda dan mempunyai talenta yang tinggi setiap harinya. Mereka latihan sangat keras untuk bias menjadi pianis yang handal. Mereka mulai daftar ke piano kompetisi-kompetisi untuk dapat diorganisasi oleh manager-manager terkenal dan untuk dapat kesempatan bermain di beberapa tempat recital hall bermain baik solo maupun dengan orkes-orkes terkenal di dunia. Tapi selalu muncul suatu pertanyaan mendasar, "Apakah mereka benar-benar sudah bermain musik, atau hanya menjadi seorang atlit di atas piano." Melalui artikel ini, saya mengajak pembaca untuk berdiskusi tentang teknik piano dan hubungannya dengan permainan musik supaya khususnya pianis-pianis muda lebih punya pengertian bahwa bermain piano adalah jauh lebih dari hanya sekedar "memainkan" tapi lebih mengarah ke kontras, warna, dan bayangan dari suara-suara

"There is that technique, the ability to play scales rapidly up and down the keyboard, which is necessary, but which becomes very boring after two or three minutes of listening. That instrument is capable of sounds which are loud and soft; but in between there are many, many degrees of sounds which may be played. To be able to produce many varieties of sound-now, that is what I call technique, and that is what I try to do."

Vladimir Horowitz

In fall 2004 I met pianist Arnaldo Cohen, of the Indiana University, and fortunately I had lessons with him during my time there. In the first lesson, I played Chopin Polonaise Fantasy, Op. 61, and suddenly he cut my playing. He asked me, "What degree are you doing now?" I said I was doing my Master's degree in piano performance. And then he almost made me collapse by saying that I could not even play piano. "You do not use your arms, fingers, etc. You basically lock your wrist and the



sound you produced I barely can stand." After that, I spent almost three hours in his office and we basically just talked and talked. I found having conversation with him was very interesting, because he was so inspiring. The next thing I know, he did not allow me to play any music, and instead he wanted me to only learn how to play piano for complete three months playing only scales and basic five-finger position.

Since the first time of our meeting, he instilled in me the idea that even technical problems are controlled by the mind. I came to realize that sufficient mental effort produces a satisfactory solution, whatever the difficulty. He also said that music was poetry. Once you have played, it's over. You could never express the same thing twice in the same way. Every great artist once started as a student who gradually assimilated his own concepts, tested methods and musical thoughts, learned from false start and failure as well as from success, developed his musical personality through knowledge, hard work, and optimism. Many personal factors go into the making of an artist: flexibility; the willingness to learn from every situation; the courage of our artistic convictions even when fashionable musical-opinion-makers leave us in the minority. We must be stubborn optimists who will spend hours, weeks, even months working on dull problems of technique.

It is also interesting that in a performance, heart, mind, and hands all work together. "The heart is filled to overflowing with wonder and beauty; the mind learns how to communicate these emotions; the hands must execute the musical ideas that heart and mind command," said Cohen. In music making, we must be able to imagine every tone, every phrase, and the whole composition as we wish it to sound.

It is a fact that the relationship between piano technique and music making is so close and direct; a pianist without enough technique definitely can not make good music, or even think about projecting the sound of the music itself. Now the question is what technique really is and how important it is to achieve great artistry in piano playing. Technique is any kind of facilities that a pianist needs to transfer or to serve his/ her musical ideas through his/ her hands, and then project the sounds to the audience, which is very difficult because the most challenging thing that a pianist or even musicians in general encounter is *how to listen to themselves*. Franz Liszt once said that you must listen to yourself as critically if you were a rival pianist in another room. Pianists often are so preoccupied with producing music that they forget about listening to it.



Mischa Elman, the violin virtuoso, felt that it is more important for the pianist than any other instrumentalists to practice the art of the uninterrupted melodic line. This is easier for singers and string players because they normally work with only one melody, while keyboard have a host of other factors to consider. Like pianist Ruth Slenczynska said, "Play your musical phrase and give your fullest, uninterrupted attention to musical line. Be careful never to exaggerate the accent at the peak of the phrase or to let it get lost between a crescendo and a diminuendo; the musical line must flow naturally."

As it is already discussed that technique is any kind of facilities to serve a pianist's idea, there is one thing for sure to help achieving all these facilities, which is by practicing and developing some exercises. Exercises are very personal things; there are lots and lots of different exercises like developing scales, arpeggios, double notes, rapid octaves, etc. But one thing about exercises is that they are done in a different manner by different artists. An artist might not do the same exact way with one another, but they have same goal for sure, which is to have these facilities to transfer their musical ideas fluently, as Rachmaninoff once said, "No technique, no music."

People often ask us about how we practice, and sometimes we do not have exact clues how to answer that question. The right answer to that is what kind of technique they need to have to achieve the sound they want; it is really their musical thinking and ideas that decide what kind of technique they are going to use. International pianist Andre Watts once said not to be stuck with one or several exercises; just practice the music you are playing at the moment and whatever technical problem occurs in that music, look for many different ways and perspectives to encounter those problems. For example, if you want to get a certain quality of sound, you have to experiment to find your finger, arm, elbow, and perhaps the whole hand movements that will get this sound. You have to do experiment with sound as much as you can; the way to do this is to press the key many times with extremely different degree of dynamics. Listen to the sound carefully and be sensitive with how you approach the keys. A good piano will definitely respond to your touch. Your approach to the keys can be differentiated with how you move your finger, arm, elbow, etc.

Another huge misconception about piano technique is that people think that technique is the ability to play rapid scales, fast octaves, or even perfect double notes. This is completely a very poor understanding



and low-level type of technique. "These rapid scales, octaves, etc. eventually are something that pianists should have had or developed when they were young, otherwise, these facilities can also be achieved," Leon Fleisher said. But the highest kind of technique is that the ability to command and serve a pianist's musical attention; the greater and wider the imagination of a pianist, the more demand will be on the technique since the pianist has lots of pictures and variety of things inside his head.

Sometimes, if not most of the times, although a student have this imagination in his head, but he/ she has a difficult time to control and project the sound. If this is the case, do not practice any spots, especially difficult ones with purely mechanical point of view. Practice them in a *very slow tempo* with all musical ideas and imagination that you are going to put into it later-the same kind of sound, imagination, expression, and dynamics should be in your full attention when you practice these spots. Please note that patience is very important in practicing. So many pianists try to practice as fast as they can, but what is the point? There is nothing in this world you can accomplish anything fast, because what will happen next is that so many things you miss. For example you most likely will not notice the tempo marking, dynamics, or even rest signs; and do not forget that even great composer Debussy said that music is whatever happens between notes. The result is when you practice slow and gradually start mastering it in this manner and the form has been stable with all these materials, it perfectly will be in your hands and eventually will become "your" music up to any performances.

Since exercises are very personal things and might be done in a different manner by different artists, it means that you can not tell another person how to achieve ease of technique. They can share to one another on how they practice, but how one artist practice might not help another one. Music is personal; ultimately you can't teach it because music is unlimited. One thing about practicing, I will not start with practicing exercises, but I would start out by playing any pieces I like, or even do sight reading just to relax my muscles, then start practicing some whatever exercises needed for the music you are working on since everything in your body is still not ready to do anything, moreover start practicing exercises. If you start your day by directly practicing some technical exercises, you might even injure yourself because your hands are still too cold to even start doing anything. But again, all this are very personal; this is the way I find suitable and working for me. But you can't generalize this way to anyone, but this idea might help certain ones in their practice.



I believe that every single pianist is imaginative, but most of the time they have to be exposed to it. The primary function of a teacher is not only inspiring students, but also helping them be more open and give all they have, meaning to help them listening to themselves and projecting the sound. Nelita True added the function of a teacher is to tear away the protective covering people tend to grow so as not to be hurt by life, or to be safe.

As Leon Fleisher said, "It is easy to be safe; it is colorless to be safe. It is unfortunately, very uninteresting to be safe." I find this statement very strong; every time a performer walks out on the stage, everything becomes different because of the pressure of the hall itself and from the audience, plus one's psychological thinking. When he walks to the stage, he takes the greatest risk imaginable and takes his life into his hands because he assumes the responsibility is too big to handle. Arnaldo Cohen said that the pianist hoped to give the best out of he could have-this wonderment, beauty, emotion, poetry, picture, whatever it is- of the music to all people who came to listen, which was a tremendous responsibility. Sometimes you work so hard, and then many circumstances like muscle tension, nervousness, pressure of hall, or whatever they are may prevail that make it difficult for this to come off successfully. The effort of course is to achieve a certain professional level of performance so it will be acceptable.

When a pianist puts down a note, he has to have the sound that he wants inside his ear. This is I think the most difficult and the most advanced musical listening. This also is the very thing that Debussy always stressed; the sonority or the exact sound must be in advanced heard inside your head. Once I attended a masterclass by Garrick Ohlsson, and there was something very interesting as he said this, "As you put down the note, you have to give full attention of what you are doing while you are putting it down; and after you put it down, if the sound is not precisely what you had in your ear, you adjust what you did with your hand to be able to make the next note or even phrase to get the sound you want."

As I mentioned before, the greatest problem for any musician is to hear himself. You have to listen to what you have done and at the same time think about what is coming next so that you will be able to infuse it with what you are trying to do. Unfortunately, you can not really teach people how to listen but to make them more aware of all these various possibility of sounds. One way that might help is to call attention to the



speed at which a note goes down, or in short, how you attack certain keys. Do the experiment of touching a key with varieties of touch. How you attack and how you release will give you many, many degrees of sound possible on the piano. So, in conclusion, technique means the ability to reproduce what you have in your ear, and not the ability to play faster and louder than anyone else.

Speaking about making music on the piano, there are a lot of things to consider. There are two different types of performers: a pianist and an artist. What makes them different is how they really make their performances as beautiful and poetic as they can.

First of all, do not ever treat the piano as a piano, but always approach it as an orchestra. Piano in one way can be the best instrument among any music instruments if approached well, but can also be a coca cola can if approached as a piano. Think about your ten fingers as orchestral instruments, and your ear and your head as the conductor who leads all your fingers. Be imaginative and creative!! Consider your fifth finger in your right hand as first violins in the orchestra that probably will give most melody; so you have to always think about making your fifth finger livelier and brighter than other fingers. Another example would be your thumb in your left hand as cello department. So first approach of making music on the piano is never treat the piano as a piano, but as an orchestra.

Secondly, basic pulse has 50 % of total 100 % responsibility that will decide if the music you perform is interesting enough or not. When you learn new pieces from whatever period, even Chopin recommended to always practice with a metronome because it will give you this pulse that will be planted in your heart and later on you will have more understanding on how to organize the flow of the music better. One big problem that usually attached with pulse is *diminuendo*. For some reason it tempts us to slow down, but it must not interfere with the rhythmic pulse of the music.

Third, be faithful. You have to start with an absolute faithfulness or loyalty to what the composer wanted by studying the early editions. This loyalty to what the composer wanted is only a basis on which the artist builds his own vision and his own idea of the work. But the vision must not jeopardize his respect to the original intention of the composer. Arrau said that some pianists "used" the original music and changed it into a form of self-expression only, which was wrong. A good artist goes into a flight of imagination on his own, but never destroys the integrity of the work as the composer once saw it.



Fourth, learn how to sing. Chopin once asked his students to go to vocal recitals in order to understand how and when singers breathe before they go on to the next phrase. Van Cliburn said that his approach to the instrument was not digital, but vocal. "I learned by sight-singing." Why do we have to use the vocal approach on playing the piano is that because vocal is the purest and the most natural among any musical instruments.

Fifth, find balance and proportion of phrase, sound, tempo, and voicing. Balance of sound means which fingers need more attention to be attacked to produce the singing-tone sound. For example, when you play a triad, at least there are three different layers of sounds that can be produced. If you play C major triad, you can give more voice on the note G and less sound on the note E and C; the same thing also applied if you would like to give more attention on the note E and C, while the rest are less sound.

Balance of phrase means not to stretch out of proportion of a phrase. The phrase must always go on and continues to the next phrase. The end of a phrase does not indicate the end of the phrase, but as the preparation to the next phrase. For example, there are uncounted beautiful moments in Chopin's piano music, and unfortunately, so many pianists stretch out every single phrase out of proportion because they are drawn by each phrase's beauty. It is not wrong definitely, but the result is that the music will die slowly as it progresses to the climax or toward the end. Find the highest point of a composition, and try to build that piece toward that point instead of cutting each phrase one by one. Rachmaninoff once said about the problem of phrasing. He showed his students as elastic band and stretched it slightly, then allowed it to bounce back; next, he stretched it beyond a certain point, and it snapped. He meant to say that no part of a musical line should be stretched out of proportion to the whole composition. We have a natural tendency to take a breath after each phrase, but we must be careful not to overdo it.

Balance of voicing does not mean that you only have to show the top note. Yes, the top note is important because its responsibility is carrying the melody most of the time, or as the "first violin" in the orchestra. But for example, in Brahms music which is so bold harmonically, you can't just bring out the top notes, because every single note in every chord has to speak clearly. Now it is just the matter of how you balance your other fingers so that everything is speaking, but the top note still speaks out more. Balance of sound is another pianistic virtue that must be acquired from the very start. The great composers for the keyboard placed much emphasis on the quality of tone. Debussy said that every sound must be beautiful.