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The Educational Process in Mastering and Developing Pianistic Technique through Performance of Modern Pieces for Intermediate and Advanced Level Students

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Abstract

This paper combines interpretative, comparative theoretical, and aesthetic approaches with the aim of facilitating the piano teaching process in primary, secondary, and higher musical education around the world. Contemporary composers have a specific vision, an idea, and employ interesting figures and melodies which influence the ear training and intonation education of the student and enrich their musical experience and repertoire. It is also interesting from a different aspect, namely the opportunities these composers create for educators within the prominent technical and piano-intoning frameworks. This is also an attempt to carry on the tradition of compiling, systematizing, analyzing and publicly promoting quality piano compositions which would then take their rightful place in everyday teaching cannon. Another aim of this paper is to familiarize the student, and above all, the teaching and the whole performing public with the quality of the pieces of contemporary composers; to introduce them to as many styles established by contemporary composers as possible, to enable them to discover new technical problems, and the overcome them successfully. The methodology employed in this paper is a combination of several approaches relating to the subject at hand - comparative, systematic, analytical, logical theoretical, and a method of learning and analysis of practical experience.

Keywords: piano technique, rhythm, tempo, agogics, tone production.

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1.0 Introduction :

"There are as many technique problems as there are books written about piano" - G. Neigauz [1].

Constructing the artistic shape of a piece:-

The value of a musical interpretation is determined by the ability of the performer to discover and delve into the essence and content of the piece.

A good performer achieves this through the following qualities: - musicality, emotionality, imagination, stylistic character, fine tone, diverse dynamics, expressive phrasing, proper use of pedal, good technical preparation, and assuredness.

2.0 Piano technique:

The etymology of the word "technique" comes from the Ancient Greek word "τέχνη" (techne) - art, handicraft. Technique is, in effect, an entirety of forms of expression, but it cannot be simply the goal, but the means to achieving a quality, highly artistic performance.

In this context, I will quote G. Neihauz: "*Technique is not something that should be done, but rather, **how** something is done* [2]."

Not just every composer, but different periods of their work pose completely different piano-playing problems. The gradual development of musical and pianistic talent in a young pianist, many pedagogues feel, should be based on a gradual mastering of pieces ranked by the genre and difficulty level of their musical technique skills.

In order to create a true work of art, one must truly master technique. Systematic and constant practice is essential to developing good technique. The necessity of employing man's full anatomical motility is very important and very helpful. Starting with correct and moderate movement of the fingers, of the whole hand, the forearms, all the way to proper sitting.

2.1 Psychophysical fundamentals of technique

Musical performance is viewed as a sum of complex conditional reflex processes. While getting familiarized with notes and piano-playing motions, the student develops basic conditional reflex connections.

In the absence of an aural skill base, incorrect reflex connections develop, since we have a reaction to a written note without having formed an auditory representation of it.

When the initial groundwork is laid, the performer is able to produce an entire string of reflexes - this is the so-called "automatization of movement". And if hearing is not activated, the professional development of the pupil or the student will take an entirely wrong turn, on a non-musical basis [3].

That is why the activation of aural skills is greatly important, because otherwise, technique will only be built on so-called "muscle memory". It is a sense which arises while playing under the influence of stimuli coming from certain cells in the muscles and leading to the so-called "inner analyzer". These senses affect the speed and quality of movement [4].

Another important condition is brain activity during that process.

Consciously or unconsciously, that is why while adopting any kind of material, it is very important to:

1. Set clear and defined goals,
2. Introduce versatility into the work method
3. Look for focus in the basic task

2.2 Shaping the pianist's technique

The processes of developing music and technique should be interlinked. Forming a correct musical representation and conscious auditory control of the accuracy of the sheet music and the quality of the sound is hugely important for a pianist. The so-called automatization of movement is perfected in the more advanced stages of education.

There are two schools of thought about the way one should work on a piece independently:

1. By paying special attention to practicing technique exercises and etudes
2. By lending no time to such exercises lest character and tone are corrupted.

However, contemporary methodology offers a reasonable eschewal of these two extremes!

All kinds of scales, etudes, thirds (3rd), sixths (6th), broken chords, seventh chords (7th chord), etc. are played. These elements must be mastered before the material is played.

Working on those elements:

- Full aural self-control
- Performance in all dynamics: pp, p, mp, mf, f, ff

- Performance with different articulation (legato, non-legato, staccato, portato, etc.)
- Performance of special etudes to develop technique

3.0 Methods of work:

Basic prerequisites for successful work:

1. Awareness - going through the piano movements, while being actively attentive, consciously self-controlled, and concentrated
2. Direction - setting clearly defined tasks
3. Diversity - variety in practice
4. Proper distribution of the work - changing from more difficult to easier elements, in order to maintain the intensity of one's working ability

3.1 Conditions for the shaping of a pianist's technique

Even though piano technique develops at a galloping speed, and we have a unification of "national schools", a unification of style, interpretation, it all still greatly depends on the character of the performer, their education, etc. In any case, there is an upward trend in the development of the interpretation in terms of the recognition, analysis, and understanding of the piece. Of course, there is plain virtuosity, which is inevitable, and the sum total of all of the aforementioned components in the shaping of a mature pianist does not become the definitive deciding factor for success [5].

The basic conditions for the shaping of a pianist's technique are:

- Musicality
- Willingness
- Persistence
- Concentration
- Ability

However, despite everything, if the work towards perfecting it has a sound basis, it will produce the proper musical results. Etudes must be played as much as possible in order to stabilize the hand, achieve good finger articulation, full control of the wrist, the elbow, the shoulders, and the back. Coordination between the hands is very important, especially for compositions by contemporary authors, in which polyrhythm is quite common. Aside from polyrhythm, contemporary composers, and neo-folklorists in particular, employ idioms used in folklore in order to give a piece a special mark and it is very frequently symbolized with irregular rhythm and polymetrics.

Here we move onto the next topic, which is actually one of the basic components in the formation and development of a pianist - Rhythm.

4.0 Rhythm. Tempo. Principles of agogics.

Music is a sound process moving through time. That is why sound and time are the cornerstones of the further artistic shaping of a piece, and rhythm is the arrangement of sounds into specific temporal relationships.

Rhythm is commonly compared to the heartbeat of living organisms; it is the fundament of musical performance, which greatly determines the character and characteristics of an artistic creation.

The sense of rhythm is a complex one, it requires the development of a string of abilities:

- a sense of metric pulsation, an ability to consciously accentuate the first points in time. One of the most important factors to achieving the true expression of the composition, especially during performance, is, actually, rhythm.

The texture and concept of piano are interpreted as linear, virtuosic, or static conditions of sound matter. The author implants them with certain thematic elements which are, concurrently, also the elements of an unusual and enriched microchromatic modal structure [6].

5.0 Agogics.

Agogic accents represent extended duration, a slowing down of the movement of sound with the goal of emphasizing important musical rhythmic moments. The sum of similar, barely noticeable changes to tones is called agogics. This is especially important in contemporary music, where contemporary techniques and the aforementioned characteristics of this music, its rhythmical figures, truly demand well-executed agogics.

A highly developed sense of rhythm makes the performance of the Rubato tempo possible, and the musical taste, maturity, and rhythmical sense of the performer can be recognized and felt in its performance.

True tempo, metric pulsation, and rhythmic feeling are some of the components that constitute a phrase [7].

6.0 Style. Style in pianistic performance

Style is important to artistic interpretation. It is the sum of markers characterized by certain features of the music created during a given time period in the work of a given composer. In effect, style is the summation of correct pianistic technique, proper use of pedal, accurate and well-executed tone production etc. Therefore, from the 15th and 16th century until today, styles have been formed such as Baroque, Pre-Classicism, Classicism, Romanticism, Impressionism, Realism, and modern music is also classified into different styles, depending on the elements and techniques employed by a given composer.

Performers must get to know the style they would be performing very well, all of its characteristics and specificities, since very often, as a result of wrong technique, musical strokes that do not correspond to a given time period, wrong use of pedal, etc., the style can be completely wrong and missed.

A performer's forms of expression are: their tone production, dynamics, phrasing, articulation, and use of pedal.

One's own, individual performance plays the main role. However much a pianist tries to be authentic, it is impossible to achieve. And each of their performances differs from previous ones.

7.0 Good tone. Tone production:

A performer's chief means of expression is tone!

A performer with primitive tonal abilities is a weak artist; they cannot diversify the content of the musical composition.

Artistic tone production is tied to the idea of the emotional content of the piece. It is the highest achievement in the art of piano and necessitates the development of all musical senses in order to be achieved. The Russian piano school is fully based on it [8].

7.1 Qualities of pianistic tone:

Pianistic tone has four basic qualities:

- pitch, duration, loudness, and color (timbre)

1. Pitch is fixed and does not depend on the performer.
2. Duration depends of the sustained holding down of a key and, naturally, quieting down or termination of the vibration
3. Loudness depends of the strength of the stroke and it is, of course, determined by the performer
4. Timbre (color) depends on the quality of the instrument, but nevertheless, color is created by the performer through correct dynamic nuancing and good tone production.

Neigauz called fine tone: "*Necessary tone*", and that tone is achieved through skillful gradation of the loudness of the tone in the melody or smooth and natural elevation of phrases to their culminations and, of course, their fading away towards the end. If bass is added to that melody, which at times underscores melody in the harmonic basis, it enriches the sound. But it is also very important how those basses are played.

Longer tones should be played longer and more loudly. In this case, they represent pedal tones and replace the pedal.

Working on tone production is a complex and time-consuming process, which nevertheless depends greatly on the pupil's or the student's hearing, and that is why attention is paid to auditory control from an early age.

7.2 Common characteristics and trends in modern western piano creativity and pedagogy:

Keeping in mind the aforementioned and commented-upon piano pedagogy methods, the statements of the writers themselves, and the impressions of famous musicians working in the field of pianistic methodology, we can conclude that, as in Western Europe and the world, "the main approaches and methods in piano education are nearly identical - working on ear training, an esthetic attitude towards musical development, pouring the foundations of piano playing through training by using modern compositions.

A trend in western schools is to use author-written compositions and technical patterns which do not always have the needed artistic qualities [9].

8.0 Use of pedal:

It is characteristic of nearly all works of contemporary Macedonian composers to not indicate pedal. However, it is very closely connected to tone production. The pedal enhances the tone of the piano, which Rubinstein rightfully calls "the soul of the piano".

Artistic use of pedal is intertwined with the character and the style of the composition. Since in modern music we have such clearly differentiated styles, some of them demand more pedal "saturation", but there are also compositions which do not require so much use of pedal, as it is with 16th and 17th-century works. Even though with Beethoven, as well as the Romantics, the pedals are used more, clean harmonies and clear melodic lines are still important [10].

The Impressionists and 20th-century composers are pedal-intensive, but in these cases, where pedals should be used and to what extent is very debatable.

Pedals are a separate part of piano science, a very complex and complicated one. Even though it is said that after a while, the pedals are used intuitively, in order to reach that degree of maturity, the role of the pedals must be studied well and accurately.

The same way that incorrect articulations, technique and improper tone production can produce the wrong style, so can the incorrect use of the pedals create a completely reverse image of the composition [11].

The methods of piano teaching today are different. However, even the most popular methods in the world that are governed by the basic laws - an individual approach to the work to train the student's ear, establishing good pianistic habits, working on rhythm, and performing many popular, modern compositions in which the use of pedal is center-stage, and we should put an emphasis on it too [12].

9.0 Connection to contemporary music:

- How do we bridge the gap between the analyzed composers and contemporary music?

In my opinion, only a small subset of modern composers in general have an accurate idea of this complex matter which is crucial to piano training and crucial to modern piano training. We would probably have to create a new, modern school in the 21st century which would implement musical pieces with modern themes.

Thematic versatility as a whole, as well as the original forms of performing modern piano compositions pose a great number of important interpretative and pedagogical issues about pianistic texture, rhythm, tempo, and aural skills which are mentioned in this paper.

10.0 Conclusion:

We know that a stylistically rich piano repertoire has the potential for volume and versatile development of musical culture. While choosing a repertoire, one seeks a balance through which the musical aural skills would be developed, as well as the basic motor skills, artistic thinking, and emotional experience. Works containing modern composition techniques rely heavily on the connections between intonation and intervals. The auditory representations of the intonational organization of the musical material are closely connected to the keys and the development of the fingering talent. They become a strong foundation for the three manifestations of musical memory - auditory, visual, and motor. A fully developed intonation-interval talent forms the basis for complex musical thought, prepared for the music of the 20th century, and will connect musical-auditory education, pianism, and musical memory.

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