

MIGHT THE FUTURE OF PIANO PLAYING LIE IN A REMARKABLY DIFFERENT APPROACH TO PIANO TEACHING?

By Adrienne Sirken with Patricia Powell

For more than two centuries, piano teaching has relied mostly on a word-of-mouth tradition from one generation to the next. Ideas have often been accepted without much investigation into how the playing apparatus, which includes the fingers, hand and forearm, moves, how the instrument works, and how the two interrelate. The fact that many pianists experience frustrating limitations or injuries has generally not changed the belief that a “no pain, no gain” approach is acceptable. Naturally, there have been those who questioned, but their explorations did not lead to enough help for pianists who were struggling either with pain or with insecurity and limitations in their playing.

Playing the piano requires a complex interaction and synchronization of different movements. The mostly invisible nature of these movements made them difficult to detect and describe. More than 50 years ago American pedagogue Dorothy Taubman began to analyze what makes a virtuoso technique function. Her work is carried forward today by Edna Golandsky, and the body of knowledge that has resulted from their inquiry has enabled many to understand what makes virtuoso playing possible. Beyond that, a pedagogy with practical information about how to solve problems and prevent injury by building healthy skills has evolved so that these ideas can be available to all. Taubman understood early that no part of the body is ever required to violate its natural limits and that all passages are playable when the playing apparatus functions optimally. The choreography of a piece that results from these insights is both elegant and effortless, using the minimum effort for the maximum result.

Harvard medical school professor Frank Bunn has written, “The underpinnings of the Taubman technique rest on remarkably simple but, to my mind, highly sound and rational applications of a thorough understanding of anatomy and neuromuscular physiology.... The principles are based upon maximizing sound arm and hand position with a technical approach based on forearm rotation and the use of arm muscles that are suited for rapid movement and limiting the overuse of muscles that are not so endowed.”

Practice has always been necessary for artists to develop and refine their skills. But when pianists force themselves to repeat incorrect movements mindlessly for hours, they put themselves at risk for repetitive stress injuries. Ms. Golandsky says, “People don’t realize that some pianists are able to play, even to play beautifully, in spite of, rather than because of, their techniques.” They are always shocked to read some of the following admissions by great pianists of the past:

Clara Schumann wrote in her diary, “... I always had to tolerate grief and anxiety concerning my fingers, which were constantly inflamed from playing.” Rachmaninov wrote to a friend, “I am very tired and my hands hurt. Every extra movement tires me. My concert season has ended and it is as if my hands have lost feeling... the pain is

almost constant.” After practicing Liszt’s *Don Juan Fantasy*, Scriabin wrote that his “tendons and inflamed muscles burned and ached.” When Schnabel was diagnosed by his doctor with neuritis, which no treatment seemed to help, he referred to his problem as “my occupational disease.” Glenn Gould suffered from a “very disturbing breakdown of control” over his hands, as well as a lack of coordination throughout the last 22 years of his life.

What are some of the reasons for problems of this nature? There are physiological principles that govern motion and are crucial to the study of technique. For example, the fingers move at their fastest and freest when they are in their natural position: neither curled nor straight, but naturally curved. In this position they are moved by the short flexors, which are quick muscles. On the other hand, the muscles that move the fingers sideways are slow. Since playing depends on moving from finger to finger as well as playing down into the keys, we need arm motions that can get us across the keyboard as quickly as the fingers move up and down. Also, the fingers will feel strong only when they are supported by the hand and arm in key depression. They will attain their “independence” when all parts of the playing apparatus move in the same direction at the same time, with the same speed and same freedom. This means that all the fingers then will feel equally strong, which points to the most basic principle of coordinate motion: the fingers, hand and arm must always be aligned. Yet, so many of the exercises pianists have developed throughout the centuries involve stretching and isolating the fingers.

Pianists have long complained that the fourth finger feels weak. However, when the fourth finger is aligned with the hand and arm and then they move together, the problem disappears. Finger weaknesses generally result from separation and isolation of the fingers, and they can be quickly resolved.

Another principle is that efficient motion occurs only in the mid-range of motion. Movement becomes increasingly more difficult as it approaches either extreme of the range. Try extending your hand all the way upward, for example, and you can feel the resulting tension in the wrist and forearm. When we approach the extremes of our range, the body begins to exert a contraction in the opposite direction. Forcing any limb to play in this position will exact a high cost in terms of comfort, ease and security.

Pianists today, just as those of yesteryear, still respond to the problems of execution of difficult passages with interpretive compromises or longer hours of practice that often include exercises for stretching and isolating the fingers. In their pursuit of perfection, they too often get into the kind of trouble that threatens their ability to continue to play at all. Frequent complaints by some of the great pianists, as well hundreds of conservatory students world-wide, have still not made us see the urgency of changing our approach to teaching and playing.

As those who heard her at the 2001 EPTA Conference in Oxford will attest, Ms. Golandsky believes that virtually all of these playing-related limitations and injuries can be prevented. And, in most cases, working properly at the piano can actually provide a cure for pianists in trouble. In teaching students to play in a healthy, coordinate way, this

approach gives them tools that lead to a lifetime of pain-free music making and puts to rest the myth that physical pain and suffering are acceptable byproducts in the quest for artistic excellence.

Ms. Golandsky's teaching goes far beyond showing students how to develop a finely honed technique. Demystifying the movements necessary for high-level playing is only one step along the pathway towards developing artistry at the piano. Before a particularly compelling lecture about interpretation in New England she said, "A big part of my lecture is about technique with artistic results. How do we move to accomplish musical results? It is the 'how-to' of interpretation. People think of technique and music as two separate things, but the two are actually one. There is no separation."

Ms. Golandsky adds, "It is fascinating that the principles of coordinate movement are also shown to govern such 'musical' components of playing as tone production, phrasing, timing, color and rhythmic excitement. There is never any conflict between moving well and achieving an artistic result."

The Golandsky Institute's programs hold out exciting possibilities for growth to students and pianists of all levels. The Golandsky Institute 2004 Summer Symposium at Princeton University will give participants the opportunity to study with faculty members who are expert Taubman teachers, to hear daily lectures about the building of a healthy technique, to enjoy master classes on the integration of technique and interpretation, and to attend nightly recitals by internationally renowned pianists, both from the classical and jazz worlds. Ms. Golandsky says, "If you know how to move properly, you won't be injured in the first place." And move these artists do! Attendees will enjoy the intensity of Ilya Itin, the transcendence of Sean Duggan, the elegance of Nina Tichman, the brilliance of Eric Ferrand-N'Kaoua, the poetry of Misha Dacic, and the incomparable swing of jazz great Bill Charlap.

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