

Too good to be true? Introducing the Taubman approach.

CRAFTING THE WELL-TEMPERED PIANIST: INTRODUCING THE TAUBMAN APPROACH

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Introduction

While conducting research into my continuous passion — piano playing in general and how to improve my technique in particular — I was surprised to find a recently published book that claims to address piano pedagogy, yet fails to acknowledge some of the most widely discussed developments this field has to offer.

Internet and library searches on the subject have resulted in lots of different leads, often offering random discussions, very personal and vague observations, and a multitude of contradicting and confusing information. There doesn't even seem to be a clear definition of what piano technique is, let alone what it should accomplish, and why it has divided the world of pianists and teachers into warring factions. It appears that in this minefield of theories no two approaches are the same, and wide discrepancies are almost impossible to overcome.

A lot of what is coined 'general knowledge' consists of old and mostly unexamined material that has found its way from one generation and teacher to the next generation of easily impressed students. As children, most pianists have had some of those bigger than life figures guiding our naïve curiosity and innocent love for the piano, and we carry the experiences of that relationship — good and bad — with us for the rest of our lives.

Without a doubt, the role of the piano teacher is a special one, and with it comes an endless array of opportunities that a good or not-so-good pedagogue can use to either empower or damage a student. Sure, many teachers who allow their students to explore their inner voice in following the great masters, and in so doing really teach them what music is all about, exist.

But who has not heard about a teacher who has been too strict, taking all the fun out of the equation, making the student want to quit? And what about those almost angelic teachers, always patient and (literally) holding their students' hands?

Then there are teachers who take pride in an historic link between a young aspiring performer and the great traditions of the piano masters. How many times have we heard something like: "She was a pupil of

that distinguished teacher, who goes back to Liszt himself." But does this really help the piano student in acquiring better tools for his or her own playing, or does it just inflate a student's self-confidence? How useful is it to legitimize one's own talent through that of one's teacher's teachers?

The truth is that unless their teaching methods are rock solid, big name teachers do not automatically create great students; nor does the fact that they themselves play or perform well automatically make them interested in and knowledgeable about the difficulties and very specific needs of a student. One might argue that a pedagogue with less name recognition but more insight might prove to be the better choice for a piano student.

Yet there exists an utterly uncritical acceptance of authority, as well as a 'no pain, no gain' credo, both often very detrimental to the young or not-so-young pianist. Many of our great pianists, past and present, have and still are experiencing discomforts, some even pain and injuries. Though not the only ones, it is them, in particular, who need clarification of the different positions and motions that are at the basis of piano technique.

The more one investigates the history of the great piano schools, with their differing stylistic mannerisms and ideologies, each one worshiping their most famous exponents, the more the question arises: What *really* happens at the keyboard? What are the actual minute movements that give the playing apparatus its phenomenal speed and remarkable control? What creates the accuracy of timing and depth of key depression? What are the guiding principles of this process – those that are not really visible to the eye?

The first time I came across a method that seemed to provide answers to these questions was when a fellow piano enthusiast invited me to attend a one-week seminar on the Taubman method, offered by the Golandsky Institute at Princeton University. The seminar consisted of lectures and master classes conducted by various teachers of the institute, including its co-founder and artistic director, Edna Golandsky.

When remembering my initial response to that first encounter with the Taubman approach years later, I realized that it had not been significantly different from what Edna Golandsky had told me of her own initial response to the method. "For the first time in my life I was given rational explanations about piano playing and music making. During all the years of my piano instructions – although everybody agreed that I was talented – I experienced mostly vagueness," says Golandsky.

And of finally meeting Dorothy Taubman in 1967, she says, "Although I did not know what I was getting into, I realized that there was a very different understanding, a visionary concept of coordinate movement that provided an entirely systematic approach to playing the piano. This petite authoritative lady in

Brooklyn had thoroughly logical answers to the most significant questions about virtuosic piano technique."

Back then, Golandsky was enrolled in the master's program at the Juilliard School of Music where her highly esteemed teachers had been Rhosina Levine and Adele Marcus. She had been experiencing back pain and fatigue, and felt that she was not in complete control of her playing. "Sometimes things would work, and sometimes they wouldn't," she explains. "So here, for the first time, problems were analyzed and resolved. Within a few weeks, Mrs. Taubman had cured my back pain, which was a result of my so-called 'relaxed playing' with a dropped wrist and knuckles."

Golandsky would keep working with Taubman for the next 25 years, during which time the two women founded the Taubman Institute. Deciding to make Taubman's approach to the piano her life's work, Golandsky later started her own organization, the Golandsky Institute, with co-founders John Bloomfield, Robert Durso, and Mary Moran.

The Challenge: Finding the Boundaries of What Works and What Doesn't

The genius of Dorothy Taubman is that she not only understood the source of pianists' problems but also developed a pedagogically sound approach to systematically retrain movements for an efficient technique. It is about complexity that results in simplicity. — Edna Golandsky

According to Golandsky, the bottom line of Taubman's approach is getting the pianist out of pain and removing limitations. "Since certain physiological principles pertaining to motion are rational and known to work, anything we do at the piano has to be in accordance with that," Golandsky says, opening the treasure chest of her wisdom and expertise as she lays out the ground rules of the method she has been using successfully for many years.

Rule #1: Isolating limb parts from each other, such as the fingers, hands, etc., is one of the main reasons for pain. It is something that should be avoided. The opposite of isolation in this case would be alignment. Skeletal body alignment is essential for our health — a fact that has been emphasized by many other disciplines, such as Feldenkrais, the Alexander Technique, etc. But these disciplines do not go far enough when it comes to playing an instrument.

Our investigation should start with the parts of the body directly involved with playing the piano — let's call it "the playing apparatus." First there are the fingers, which are the only limb parts actually touching and playing the keys. Then there is the hand, which is directly connected to the fingers, and the forearm, which connects to the arm.

We can define coordination as "bringing parts of a whole into order." The fingers, hand, and arm must always be connected to each other in their natural alignment to achieve unified movement.

To maintain natural alignment, we have to determine the position of the knuckles. High knuckles make it difficult for the fingers to move fast. This position brings the fingers to an extreme range of motion. By pulling the knuckles up, the fingers are limited in their ability to open. The result is a break in alignment.

Bench height is also determined by the need of the playing apparatus to be unified. Sitting too high or too low will adversely affect coordination. The length of the upper arm should determine where we sit. In order to achieve proper balance on the keyboard, the elbow needs to be more or less level with the top surface of the white keys. So, if the upper arm is long, we have to sit a bit higher; if the upper arm is short, we would sit a bit lower.

The Pianist and the Law of Motion

Correct motion is essential in keeping us aligned, and it allows us to move with the greatest ease and speed possible. Our joints are the stable points from which limb parts move; they function as fulcrums. When the knuckles are too low or collapsed, it is difficult for the fingers to move. The wrong muscles are activated to make up for faulty positions, e.g. the muscles in the back might become involved when there is a collapse in the knuckles. The same goes for the wrist. Yet when these fulcrums (joints) are in the right place, it is possible for the entire apparatus to move freely, quickly, and in an uninhibited manner.

If proper alignment of the playing apparatus is to be kept throughout the playing, the fingers, hand, and forearm must move together in the same direction, with the same speed, and at the same time.

One might argue that a child prodigy follows all these principles quite naturally, and conclude that this 'natural' use, which neither requires conscious thought nor analysis, proves that an efficient technique cannot be a question of muscle training as such.

The good news is that people who don't grow up as prodigies can be trained to have a technique that is just as free and effortless. It is a question of training with the right motions, under the supervision of an expert teacher. While the Darwinians among us might argue that all talent is God-given and therefore unchangeable, most others would claim that artistic competence and humility is what makes a truly great artist.

There is no reason why a pianist, once he or she has completed their course of study, should not engage in further learning. In no discipline is an artist considered accomplished in a static, 'once and for all' way,

but his or her ongoing growth, as a human and an artist, is what engages us and makes us respect the artist.

Says Edna Golandsky: "In the last decades, a few prominent pianists, like Leon Fleisher and Gary Graffman, have been open about the injuries they have suffered. Such admissions did not just surface recently." And the pianist Paderewski writes: "I had become used to the constant and terrifying pain in my arm, and I had also learned to play with four fingers of my right hand only, and to adjust my will and nerves to the ordeal ... I felt, as did my physicians, that I might never play again."

Several of Rachmaninoff's letters are also revealing: "I am very tired and my hands hurt. Every extra hand movement tires me." And: "My concert season has ended, and it is as if my hands have lost feeling. ... The more I get tired, the more pain I have."

Golandsky follows:

Clearly, our field has faced a problem of epidemic proportions for more than a century. We should, once and for all, realize that when we don't adhere to certain physiological laws, obey certain laws of motion, and have an awareness of how the piano works, there is a tremendous cost to the body. These laws are universal: they are based on the way the human body is built and moves, and the way the piano functions. If we don't learn what it means to move in a healthy, coordinate way, it will be impossible to avoid the physically disabling and psychological devastating results that afflicted so many of our pianistic forebears, and that continue to afflict many pianists and other instrumentalists currently. And we do have the tools, the technique and the knowledge available.

In short, piano playing shouldn't be, and doesn't have to be painful, but a real pleasure. Is this a vision of something too good to be true? Or is it a reality that can be created with the right tools and knowledge?

In future articles in this series pianists of all levels speak about their experiences with the Taubman approach and its continuous impact, and we will look at some success stories from the Golandsky Institute.