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# ***Fanny Waterman***

***On Piano Teaching  
and Performing***

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FANNY WATERMAN

*On Piano Teaching  
and Performing*

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## *Preface*

In 1978 I was invited by the Royal Society of Arts in London to give the Tolansky Memorial Lecture, and chose as my subject the preparation of the young pianist for the concert platform. The present book grew out of that lecture, stimulated in particular by a series of piano masterclass programmes I was commissioned to prepare for screening on TV Channel 4. In bringing the manuscript to press, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable help of my husband, Geoffrey de Keyser, and my publisher, Martin Kingsbury.

This book is dedicated to Geoffrey with gratitude and affection.

FANNY WATERMAN

*July 1983*



## *Introduction*

In 1943 a 'brilliantly gifted pianist and musician' left the Royal College of Music, London, after studying with one of the finest teachers of the day. That student had won most of the important awards for pianists at the College and, at the end of her time there, she was invited to play at a Promenade Concert with Sir Henry Wood and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. What more auspicious beginning to a career as a concert pianist could there be?

Let me confess that I was that young pianist. As with so many young artists – the majority perhaps – things did not turn out quite as I expected. I found my vocation was teaching – my true vocation, that is, and not just second best to performing. I then began to ask myself how I could draw on my experience as a pianist to benefit others and to help them meet the challenges to be faced.

The three aspects of musical training which I believe to be of paramount importance are: learning to be a craftsman, learning to be a musician, and becoming an artist.

The first and most important step in becoming a fine pianist is to learn the craft, that is, to master every technical detail of piano playing by learning *how* to do it: how to play a scale at speed with each note of equal brilliance or pearly delicacy; to play trills and repeated notes dynamically controlled to suit the mood of the music; to develop a wrist staccato resembling the vertical action of a piston; to master the art of tone production and pedalling (the perpetual challenge of how to make the piano sing); to achieve powerful octaves, accurate skips, perfect co-ordination between the hands, balancing parts when playing more than



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one melody at once . . . all these and a host of other technical details.

Mastering such details will absorb the pianist from his first lesson to his last performance. Although work on problems of technique will occupy only a fraction of the pianist's working day (some being used simply for limbering up), it is nevertheless a vital part of his efforts to produce the most apt and beautiful sounds and convincing interpretations, which constitute the goal of all technical work. Craftsmanship or 'technique', cannot be created in a vacuum. I have never been able to accept that there is a dividing line between technique and the two other aspects of training – musicianship and artistry. With these we embrace a limitless and elusive field where each individual's imagination and personality have an essential role to play.

My approach is to help the pupil to explore the artistic essence of the work, and to strive for *his* ideal interpretation. No amount of 'technique' in the sense of a precise and faultless rendering of the notes, velocity, bravura, etc., will produce a fine interpretation. When my pupils play a passage accurately but without feeling, I tell them they sound like a musical typewriter. Only when practice is combined with study of the *meaning* of the music will it lead to an artistic performance.

So let us move to the second aspect of training – musicianship. From the beginning, every musician must learn how to shape and colour a phrase; then how to play it in relation both to the next phrase and to the previous phrase; how to join several phrases together rhythmically so that a large section, an exposition or development, for example, is fused together; and, finally, how to build together large sections to give the piece or movement rhythmic unity as one architectural whole. The teacher must help the young musician to do this by developing a strong rhythmic sense, getting him to play metronomically, so that even the shortest

## *Introduction*

note is in its correct 'time-spot'. When his rhythmic understanding is secure, he must learn how to use rubato, where speeds fluctuate – almost imperceptibly in Classical music, more markedly with Romantic and contemporary composers. In acquiring musicianship, the study of style and knowledge of composers' lives and times, what instruments were used and how they sounded, is vitally important. The ability to phrase and 'time' stylishly reveals the fascinating differences between every performer, and marks each with his or her own individual stamp.

How can a pianist equipped with technical virtuosity and musical sensitivity blossom into an artist? This third and vital step is impossible to teach. Artistry is the one quality which, I believe, is innate, and therefore cannot be taught but only stimulated.

I shall return in more detail to these three aspects of studying the piano – craftsmanship, musicianship and artistry. But before doing this, it may be helpful if I outline my own lesson format.

## *Lesson format*

Young beginners can only concentrate for a short time, so their lessons last approximately half an hour. Before introducing any new material, we will go through the previous week's work, with marks given for each item and an overall percentage. If they get 80% or over they get a blue star, 90% or over, a gold star. And ten lessons each with a star will win them a prize. I am a great believer in incentives. Better results can be obtained in this way than by telling an eight-year-old that if he practises every day, he *might* one day become a great pianist. On the other hand, I do emphasise that he must not pay too much attention to my marks, but great attention to my *remarks*. Special points for attention and a detailed plan for daily practice are always written down in a notebook. I also encourage a parent to be present at lessons. Parents then share the experience of the child, and in recalling the points raised at the lessons, can supervise practice at home and play a vital role in the child's progress and enjoyment of the piano. (I am sometimes asked how I choose my pupils, and I reply: ideally I don't choose the pupils, I choose the parents!)

At the first lesson I give the young pianist Ten Musical Commandments. These vary somewhat according to his age and capability, but the principal ones are as follows: (1) Keep your back straight and your fingers rounded; (2) Practise regularly every day; (3) Before you start playing any unfamiliar music, clap the rhythm counting the beats aloud; (4) Choose fingering most suited to your hand, write it on the music and keep to it; (5) Hands separate before hands together; (6) Practise slowly before playing up to speed; (7)

### *Lesson format*

When practising, correct any mistake immediately and play the passage several times correctly before going on or back; (8) Play any piece with precise rhythm throughout before introducing any rubato or rhythmic freedom; (9) Follow *all* the composer's markings; (10) Listen to *every* sound you make on the piano.

The normal lesson time for older children is about one hour. This gives time for technical work – Czerny studies, for example, and basic exercises which I have evolved over the years – one or two pieces in different styles, sight reading and aural tests. Each piece will give rise to technical work on such details as fingering, tone-production and phrasing. One or two pieces are studied in great depth over a period of many weeks in preparation for a performance – I believe that a piece is not really learnt until it has been performed either in public or to family and friends at home. The teacher should always look for opportunities to arrange informal concerts in front of other young musicians and their parents, since these provide a valuable stimulus and incentive.

Advanced students are encouraged to listen to each others' lessons, which last one or two hours (or indeed more) depending on the amount of work prepared. I rarely work on pre-prepared exercises, scales or studies in these lessons, but I do concentrate on any technical problems that arise in the course of the lesson. The student brings a piece of his own choice: it is important that he plays something for which he has a natural love and affinity. I may, of course, offer suggestions as to what he should learn next, in order to help him build a balanced repertoire from which he can later choose recital programmes.

At the beginning of every lesson the student will play a whole piece or movement without interruption, and from memory. Whatever mishaps occur he must carry on – for he must learn quickly to cover up mistakes and recover from memory slips. This is, of course, quite the reverse of his

### *Lesson format*

reaction to making mistakes when practising at home. Then he must stop, recall exactly what happened, think critically why the mistake was made, correct it, play the correct version several times, and only then link the entire passage with what follows. (A tape recorder can be invaluable for exposing both a technical fault and the factors which lead to it.) It is said that if Toscanini's players didn't deliver at a rehearsal he would explode; but if there was a slip-up at a performance, this was the human factor: it could happen to anyone at any time and there were never any post-mortem recriminations.

Memorising is, I believe, something everyone can do if it is tackled in the correct way – unlike, for example, sight-reading, for which some pianists have a natural flair. First, there is the tactile sense by which the pianist absorbs a specific fingering pattern over a period of weeks. Then there is the photographic memory: knowing that on the score, on the top left-hand side, for example, is the 'end of the second subject'. Seeing this in his mind's eye the pianist can, as it were, turn over the pages in his imagination as he is playing. Then there is the aural memorising – knowing what sounds follow next and how to find them on the keyboard. I never say to my pupils 'Memorize this piece by next week', because memorizing should not be forced but come naturally out of the concentrated effort that is required in studying any piece. Of course, one must be very careful when one alters fingering: it shouldn't be the day before a recital! It takes some time to absorb new fingering, and one must take into account the sense of stress which generally occurs before a performance in public.

When the student is playing at his lesson I will follow the score, and will be making notes and comments in it. I insist on good editions with as little editing as possible, although it is always interesting to examine the editions of masters such as Schnabel (his edition of the Beethoven Sonatas) or Cortot (Chopin's *Etudes*). At the end of the student's performance, I

### *Lesson format*

will always find something to praise and then make general critical comments. The real work then begins, on *every* note of *every* phrase in the greatest detail. The student must be able to start from any beat of any bar (eventually from memory). The opening phrase of a piece could absorb an entire lesson – for instance, the first chord of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, or the precise rhythmic pattern in the pianissimo opening of his 'Appassionata' Sonata, or the relationship of sound and silence in the first bars of Liszt's B minor Sonata.

I will try the passage myself several times in different ways, and together the student and I discover the approach he likes best. He, in turn, will try the passage several times and the process of exploration and discovery is continued until *he* has clarified his interpretation for himself. These reciprocal exchanges may go on for some time. As part of the process of exploration, I will comment on details such as the balance between the hands, singing the top note of a chord, polyphonic clarity, the unobtrusive emergence of one chord from another, the mood of the passage, and so on. Besides playing, I will also demonstrate by singing, conducting, explaining, making up words to fit the music, capturing its mood with a quotation from a piece of poetry, even dancing, if necessary. The process is applied to successive passages until we have covered the entire piece or movement and a unified performance has emerged.

I must now return to the first aspect of musical training – craftsmanship or ‘technique’ – in greater detail.

## *Craftsmanship*

Technical development and musical development should go hand in hand – a great painter, an actor, a doctor, scientist or composer must know ‘how to’, and this is where technique begins.

No two hands, as the police well know, are the same. In the early stages of learning the piano, great thought must be given to the most comfortable fingering of a passage, with the proviso that it also produces the best sound. Pupils, I find, all too readily accept the ‘ready-made’ fingering printed in their music. If they do so, I will ask them how well they remember the hand of, say, Mr Harold Craxton. Did he have long slender fingers or short chubby ones? They give me a blank stare in reply, until I point out to them that the fingering has been done by Harold Craxton to suit *his* hand, and he certainly had quite a different hand from theirs. Their fingering must be ‘made to measure’ and worked out with the help of the teacher. To show the pupil how hands and fingers vary in size and shape, the teacher should trace in pencil the outline of his own hand and the pupil’s on a sheet of paper or inside the cover of his music, and compare the two.

Craftsmanship must start with tone-production. Even on a single note we can play from the softest to the loudest sound; we can produce a large tone without hardness and a pianissimo that will carry to the last row of the top gallery. I

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like to explain this tonal variety to my pupils by comparing it to the artist's palette of colours. Just as there are many different shades of blue – for example, powder blue, turquoise, navy blue, sky blue, wedgwood blue and pacific blue – so there are many different nuances of piano tone. Much has been written and said about tone-production and I would like initially to draw attention to a few important considerations.

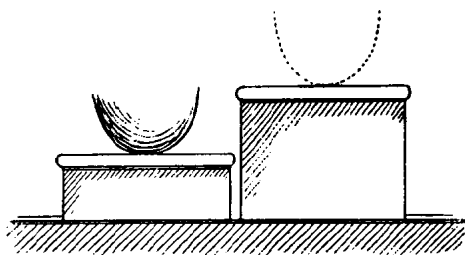
First, the pianist must learn how to listen to himself – how really to listen, that is, to the quality of every sound he produces. Good tone-production comes, in the first place, from having the right sound in your mind so that you can recognize it when you hear it. The teacher can help by demonstrating at the piano the range of possibilities, and by constantly encouraging the student to assess whether a particular sound he is producing matches the sound he is aiming for. When he has once heard himself produce a really fine tone, he will never forget it. I sometimes ask my pupils whether they would rather hear an indifferent pianist on a good piano or a good pianist on an indifferent instrument. I remind them that, unlike other instrumentalists, a pianist cannot carry his own piano around with him. But he can carry his own sound with him by his ability to cajole that sound out of even an indifferent instrument. (Sometimes he may find himself having to play on a piano that is worse than indifferent, in which case I tell him to do the best he can: 'What can't be cured must be endured'.)

This leads on directly to the second element in tone-production, the question of 'touch'. It is vital for the pianist to understand that the character and volume of sound depends on the speed at which the piano key descends. To control the speed of key descent is to control the volume. It is also to control the tonal colour, since the 'mix' of partials caused by a forcible impact of hammer on string is different from that produced by a gentler one. I show my pupils that the key can



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be depressed by only a quarter of an inch, and that all types of tone must be produced within this small depth.



If the key is depressed very slowly, no sound at all is emitted. By quickening the descent just fractionally, the thinnest thread of sound can be produced. The pianist must feel the exact finger movement required, which of course will vary from one piano to another. At the other extreme the hand can come swiftly down on the key from a height to produce a really full, strong sonority. Between these extremes come the many speeds of descent which yield the full palette of tonal colours.

To make the point clear to my younger pupils, I ask them to imagine that they have a rubber ball in their hand. If it slips gently down to the ground, it will produce much less noise than if it were bounced with vigour. They soon get the message, and enjoy producing sounds at different dynamic levels and in the differing moods associated with each level. This is exploited in one of the first five-finger tunes I give to beginners (see opposite).

Tone quality is, of course, also affected by the position of the fingers. Bright passage-work requires well rounded fingers (joints well bent), so that only the fingertips are in contact with the keys. For fuller tone, the fingers must be less rounded, i.e. slightly flatter (joints less bent), so that the fleshy