

Lister-Sink: Silence before sound



Lister-Sink: Iris No. 25

Piano Technique & Musical Artistry - Positively (or Negatively) Correlated?

by Barbara Lister-Sink, Ed.D.

I am a pastelist who loves to paint bearded irises. What, might you ask, does that have to do with the topic at hand – the correlation, if any, between technique and artistry? Everything. You see, I am largely a self-made visual artist with spotty training in the fundamentals of technique. Even though I have a strong artistic concept, I have little confidence in my ability to realise that concept. So frustration is a frequent companion.

Likewise, over the last 50 years I have worked with innumerable serious pianists who felt a similar frustration. Their unsteady grasp of technique made it difficult to realise their musical concept, so they could not perform to their highest artistic potential. Many of these pianists have been sensitive, seasoned, and even successful professionals who questioned their ability genuinely to command and control their playing technically. Perhaps not coincidentally, many also reported anecdotally a high rate of performance anxiety.

Nadia Boulanger asserted, “Music is technique. It is the only aspect of music we can control.... one can only be free [musically] if the essential technique of one’s art has been completely mastered.”¹ And as Reginald Gerig stated in his encyclopedic *Famous Pianists & Their Technique*, “There cannot be a truly great performance without a masterful physical technique. It becomes the great liberating force for the pianist.”² But is a masterful technique essential for a great performance, or even a good one? What is “technique” actually? What constitutes a “masterful” technique? Is it just playing all the right notes in the right place with appropriate style and expression?

Defining Technique

Arguably, technique has had as many definitions over the centuries as pedagogues. And therein may lie a key to our high injury rate and even to the reluctance to correlate technique with musicality. Historically, the pendulum has swung between defining technique as what we play – scales, arpeggios, exercises,

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etudes – and how we play: high or low fingers, wrists, and benches; more or less arm “weight,” bent or extended arms? Consensus continues to elude the piano world.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, developing piano technique – carefully sequenced from the simplest to the most complex notational patterns – was a top priority of famous teacher-composer-performers, and especially the unfairly maligned and brilliant teacher Carl Czerny.³ Throughout the mid-19th to early 20th centuries, it might be suggested that musical giants Chopin, Liszt, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Debussy and Stravinsky built on this stockpile of earlier exercises and motor skills. Their technically demanding “etudes” were also musical gems, marrying technique with art.

Paralleling this explosion of demanding technical etudes was a movement by Breithaupt, Leschetitzky, Matthay and the early Russian school, among others, to define piano technique using a quasi-scientific, but largely empirical and subjective approach. These pedagogues believed that technique alone was worthless; its function was to serve the highest artistic purposes. Josef Hofmann stated, “There is a technic that liberates and a technic which represses the artistic self...It is perfectly possible to accumulate a technic that is next to useless.”⁴

In the 1920s, Otto Ortmann stirred up controversy by drawing on physics, anatomy and acoustics in the first objective, scientific approach to analysing piano technique.⁵ Meanwhile, pianists such as Gát, Kochevitsky and Bonpensiere – echoing a growing interest in neurophysiology – delved into the importance of the mind/brain in controlling technique. Concurrently, Abby Whiteside focused on the pianist as athlete and on the importance of sensing rhythmic movement throughout the entire body as essential to masterful technique.⁶

However, by the mid-20th century, unless we were willing to read reams of impenetrable scientific analysis, pianists were left to their own devices. A belief took hold that a more rational, science-based approach to technique would actually dull our artistry! So technique – rather than being essential to artistry – came under suspicion. An inexplicable lapse in critical thinking caused much of the piano world to believe that a scientifically informed technique was incompatible with artistic performance. Ernst Bacon summed up the trend in mid-century attitudes: “Learned books have been written on the physical aspects of piano playing... But while they stimulate and satisfy “scientific” curiosity, they help the student of piano no more than would an analysis of the larynx, the lungs, the diaphragm, and the sinuses, help the singer to sing. In aiming to enlighten, too much mechanical self-knowledge mostly confuses. Piano playing will never be a science. If it were, it would cease to be an art.”⁷

Sadly, this “either/or” attitude led to tragic consequences: such disavowal of the importance of a science-based approach to technique has most likely contributed to the plague of playing-related injuries worldwide.

Fortunately, in the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries, pedagogues such as Taubman, Sandor, Fink, Grindea, Fraser and Karpoff, among others, have attempted to reverse this distrust of scientifically-informed technique. The field of performing arts medicine, and research in movement science, neuroscience, somatic education, etc., have contributed further to this movement toward a science-based definition of injury-preventive, artistry-enhancing – or as Gerig called it – “enlightened technique.”⁸

“Enlightened” Technique and Artistry

Building on Gerig’s idea of “enlightened technique,” I define technique as the most efficient, well-coordinated use of the whole body, directed by the brain, in service to the highest standards of musical artistry.⁹

With this definition in mind, we can begin to answer our original questions: is there a correlation between well-coordinated, injury-preventive technique and enhanced artistry? Does having such a commanding technique ensure high artistic standards? The answer to the latter question is “Not necessarily.” As I tell my students repeatedly, they can be technically free as a bird, and musically dull as a brick. An efficient, well-coordinated, or even virtuoso technique will not ensure a high artistic performance. Nor will an inefficient, poorly-coordinated technique necessarily produce a lowered artistic outcome. Many of our most gifted and expressive pianists have startling deficiencies in their physical coordination. However, I do firmly believe that a well-coordinated technique can give the pianist far more tools for maximising artistry while promoting mental and physical command.¹⁰ Here are a few of the correlations:

Neurological, Physical and Musical Correlations with Artistry

1. Neurological. Recent advances in the ability to measure brain activity have informed – or corroborated – our teaching and learning methods, leading to the creation of the field of neurodidactics. The more efficient the coordination in a complex motor skill, the less activity in the brain’s motor cortex: the pianist is less distracted by excessive muscular activity from overuse or misuse of muscles (implicated in some studies in focal dystonia).¹¹ We are able to attend more to listening and musical concept. More areas of the brain are available for listening, tactile and kinesthetic awareness, greater mental focus, and memory. Also, more “cortical real estate” will be available for our musical concept, imagination and enhanced creativity.

2. Physical. A well-coordinated technique optimises the entire musculoskeletal system. It reduces stress on the spine and joints, constantly refreshes the muscles, deepens breathing, and improves blood flow to all parts of the brain and body, which in turn strengthens mental focus. Efficient breathing decreases negative



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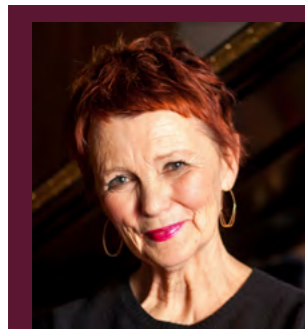
Conclusion

Is there a positive correlation with technique and artistry? The answer is a resounding “Yes!” Especially if the technique is well-coordinated and injury-preventive, and if we use it in service of the highest artistic standards. The aforementioned benefits – above all, the musical – suggest we should focus our attention on developing technical models based on core principles of good biomechanics and efficient coordination, and reliable means for teaching them successfully. Well-coordinated technique is a skill that pianists can acquire, not only to help prevent injury, but most importantly, to enhance our ability to play with more compelling artistry.

So perhaps it is time for me as a pastelist to deepen my technical skills. If it enhances the artistic outcome, I am sure my irises would agree!

mental stress and performance anxiety by providing sufficient oxygen to the brain, reducing hyperactivity in the amygdala, and changing brain wave patterns. Less discomfort, strain, pain and fatigue means increased concentration, a sense of well-being, and greater command both physically and mentally.

3. Musical. A well-coordinated technique enables a broad range of dynamics – from the most subtle of pianissimi to resonant, non-strident fortissimi. Smooth, sequential coordination of the whole arm, hand, fingers and body promotes a natural sense of timing and rhythm. Increased aural sensitivity, tactile awareness, muscular suppleness and joint mobility enable us to create more diverse and subtle articulations. The ability to “differentiate” neuronal pathways from the brain to the fingers enables ease of voicing,¹² and speed and facility are achieved without accumulation of muscle tension. We also are able to create seamless dynamic gradations and smoother phrasing, as well as to widen and deepen our tonal palette. And, although studies in the correlation between the piano and the body mechanism have not yet confirmed this, anecdotal evidence has strongly suggested since the late 1800s that a well-coordinated technique produces a perceivable improvement in tone quality. At the very least, it enables the pianist to be more available to experiment with a rich palette of tonal colours. Finally, the enhanced ability to listen continually ensures that we are realising our musical concept.



Barbara Lister-Sink, internationally acclaimed pianist and acknowledged global leader in injury-preventive keyboard technique, is a graduate of Smith College, the Utrecht Conservatory and holds an Ed.D. from Columbia University. A Steinway Artist since 1977, Lister-Sink has performed and given workshops throughout North America, Europe and Australia. Her DVD *Freeing the Caged Bird – Developing Well-Coordinated, Injury-Preventive Piano Technique* won the 2002 MTNA-Frances Clark Keyboard Pedagogy Award. Presently Artistic Director of the Salem College School of Music and Director of the Graduate Music Program, she has taught on the Eastman School of Music Artist Faculty and was keyboardist for the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. A previewer for Oxford University Press, Lister-Sink was chosen by *Musical America Global* as one of America’s “30 Top Professionals of 2018” as an innovator, independent thinker, and visionary leader.

¹ Boulanger, N. (1958-1959). “Sayings of great teachers.” *The Piano Quarterly*, 26 (Winter), 26.
² Gerig, R. (2007). *Famous pianists and their technique*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1.
³ Gerig, R. *Ibid.*, 103-119.
⁴ Hoffman, J. (1920). *Piano playing with piano questions answered*. Philadelphia, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 80-81.
⁵ Gerig, R. *Ibid.*, 412-413.
⁶ Gerig, R. *Ibid.*, 464-472.
⁷ Bacon, E. (1963). *Notes on the piano*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 77.
⁸ Gerig, R. *Op. cit.*, 507-517.
⁹ Lister-Sink, B. (2015). A study of students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of an interdisciplinary method for teaching injury-preventive piano technique. (Dissertation: Columbia University.) Proquest, 373.
¹⁰ Lister-Sink, B. *Ibid.*
¹¹ Doidge, N. (2015). *The brain’s way of healing*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 173.
¹² Doidge, N. (2007). *The brain that changes itself*. New York, NY: The Penguin Group, 122.

A Lifetime’s Devotion to Piano & Pedagogy

Ida Gamulin in conversation with Murray McLachlan



Ida Gamulin has been President of EPTA Croatia since 2004. Her extensive repertoire ranged from baroque to contemporary, and she is acclaimed for her appearances with major symphony orchestras, as recitalist, chamber musician and recording artist. She has appeared solo and with orchestras in almost all European countries, as well as in Russia and the United States. She was awarded many prizes, including prestigious Svetislav Stančić Prize at Yugoslav Music Artists Competitions, Dame Myra Hess Award in London, Special Prize at Freiburg Festival and Milka Trnina prize, Croatian’s top cultural award.

Ida Gamulin is a frequent broadcaster on both radio and TV. Her recording of Brahms F Sharp Minor Sonata has been proclaimed the best recording performance by the USA Classical Music Directory in 2005. Apart from her solo career, Ida Gamulin has been full-professor at the Zagreb Music Academy. She holds regular master classes in Europe and sits on jury for international piano competitions.

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Murray McLachlan (MM): Tell us about your family, early years and your first musical memories.

Ida Gamulin (IG): I was born in Split, a beautiful city on the Adriatic coast in the heart of the Mediterranean, into a big family of both Austrian and Croatian origin. There were no professional musicians in my family, but everyone could play an instrument and music was part of our everyday life... like bread and water. My earliest memories recall my grandmother Ida Strömberger singing to me in the evening Austrian folk songs and beautiful melodies from Schubert songs. She was taking care of my musical education from my first piano classes in Split to my first public concerts. My family usually spent summer holidays in Jelsa on the island of Hvar (Pharos), where my grandmother donated the organ to the local church. I remember playing Bach for hours locked in the church and fascinated by the timbres and colours of the sound. From that time on I began to have a magical obsession with Bach’s music which continues today. I start every day with Bach to cleanse my thoughts, refresh my memory and keep my fingers alive.

MM: Tell us about the beginnings of your piano studies and first teachers.

IG: My first piano was a very bad instrument and I was already thirteen when my grandmother bought me a new Challen piano. I remember trying the piano in front of my whole family with the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata. My reaction was quite unexpected... I showed no joy or happiness but tears which could not stop. It was a natural reaction to the beauty of the sound that I had never heard before.

I was always fascinated by the sound, and that fascination led me from my first piano lessons to my studies in Zagreb under Prof J. Muray, who was the first assistant of the legendary Svetislav Stančić, founder of the Zagreb Piano School. His