

# Piano-playing without force

*Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.*

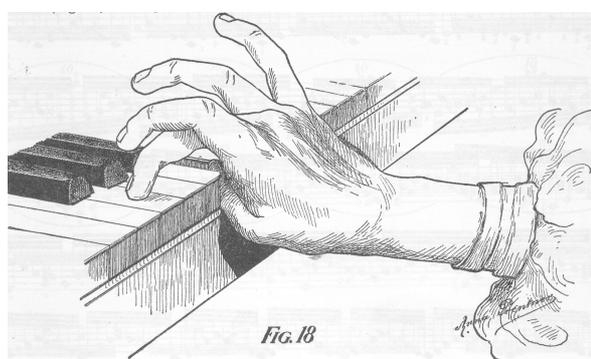
*Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 15th Letter*

*The word "playing" is beautiful, for playing an instrument means becoming one with it. Whoever does not play with the instrument does not play it.*

*Robert Schumann*

## **And if you aren't willing, I'll have to use force...**

At first glance, the title shows the unreal association of force and music. Does a piano-playing exist using force? It does exist, and since everything has an effect on the person carrying it out, such a technique also influences the player. That's why many careers in music end up with chronic inflammation of the ligaments and massive back problems, and with singers the collapse of their tortured vocal cords.



*From the repertoire of the pianist who uses force*

To hit the keys as though with hammers, pushing and pressing, stabbing with "lightning fingers", to drill into the piano, hitting into it, attacking it, to allow the dead arm to fall on it like a stone. To pull the hand away as from a hot stove. To put a coin on the back of the hand! To fix a book under the armpits! To fix and control, to writhe and twitch, shoulders up, the back stiff as a rock.

What results from all this? The piano sounds in the same way as we treat it; the echo returning from the woods gives back what we call out. Consequently, what comes from hands that are forced can never sound well. Piano manufacturers such as Bösendorfer and Fazioli nevertheless attempt to make the piano sound beautiful. But I prefer to hear the pianist's own sound on the more neutral Steinway.

Why do players use force? Using force on the instrument can be seen as a fruitless attempt to deal with what is separated, as a paradoxical attempt to unite the separated music and the separated instrument. The person using force still loves music; he dedicates his life to music and sacrifices endless hours to it. Frequently, people who use force are nonetheless very engaged with their soul, making music with temperament and with subtlety. Yet it is always separate, and this is a tragic component. It is surprising that they didn't give up a long time ago. I heard of a violinist who opened a snack bar. But it can be different.

## **While we are singing, it sings in us – of the great yearning**

*From the repertoire of those with empathy*

You can caress the keys (Chopin: "*Caresser, non frapper*" – "caress, don't bash"), love the piano, coax the keys towards you. Dive and sink into the key-bed. Embrace the piano, take it up as part of your body, work together with it as with a partner, knead and massage it strongly. Offer your hand to it. Entice the notes, free them out of the piano, let them arise. Play "upwards" instead of downwards. Swing together with the piano, with its rhythm – in the same way as pushing somebody on a swing does not work against the swing's own rhythm. Not to *make* the tone, but to let it arise. Let the sound arise as we are forming it.

To make music audible in this sense requires a certain capacity of devotion. Since music lives essentially in relationships and movement, it is itself not acoustic, that is, audible with the ears. Music forms the musical sound from a higher level – not the contrary, that “the sound makes the music”. Ideally music plays in us while we are playing. Unless we are one with it, we could not make anything of it audible.

In thinking over the prerequisites for this becoming-one, we soon arrive at basic questions concerning this “making it your own”. For not only can we move fingers, or realise a score; we bring our whole being into music-making. No aspect remains outside.

In a comprehensive sense, the great human longing aims to make into one with what has become divided, and this is also valid for music and our instrument. Every musician searches, or at one time did search, in his/her own way to become one with the music, the instrument and the audience, seeking that “it” plays, that it flows effortlessly without disturbances from within and without. Everyone who with enthusiasm plays an instrument or sings has experienced moments in which music-making suddenly succeeds easily and completely. Unfortunately, these moments always appear short and apparently unexpectedly. A sympathetic branch of research today is concerned with the conditions under which the experience of flow arises and how one can achieve it more frequently.<sup>1</sup>

With adults, the becoming one with what has been split off comes about after a painful period of feeling separated. Separation however has a meaning, for it makes possible consciousness and freedom. Unless we are separated from the world, nobody could discover themselves as a free, autonomous person. Let us accept the falling apart of player, instrument and music not only as a necessity, but as a opportunity! That we can and should find our own way to integration out of freedom, is indeed a blessing. We could not achieve any insights on our own, understand anything, unless we realised both possibilities – being divided, as the given condition, and being integrated, as the goal of a pathway. Those who use force also seek to become one, but with the false means of power and enforcing, both of which, however, strengthen the division.

If the approach to the piano is blocked, the pianist falls almost forcefully into still more force and power, or into fearful resignation. In the pent-up space between player and instrument bog-flowers of musical sentimentality start growing.

### **Technique and dishes**

That which leads music out of the inaudible into the audible is called technique. The movements of living technique are such that the inner movements of music can be found in it, can so to speak be embodied in it. The movements of the player and of the music become one.

The inner relationships and tensions of music (e.g. relationships of intervals) are felt in the body in a living technique. The relationships, tensions and resolutions of the music correspond to those of the player. Consequently technique is not the same as mechanics, or the same as outer velocity and dexterity, although the latter is helpful and belongs to technique. *Techné* (ancient Gk.) means “skill, skilfulness”. The – at times – rather imperfect Cortot had incomparably better technique than the more perfect Pollini. The musical sounds he produced “transported” very much of the inaudible realm. The orchestral entries under the great conductor Furtwängler were imperfect but alive and exciting; those under Karajan were perfect, but frequently empty and dead. Poor Alexis Weissenberg had a completely machine-like technique. Karajan enjoyed this and invited him after seeing his horrible video. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgJ0XWY4Y&feature=related> )

A meaningful technique separate from music does not exist. For whoever only practises dead mechanics and then uses this in music-making, has practised something like a foreign body that is placed between him and the music. It remains separate from the instrument; the music “does not come through”, it cannot embody itself.

Many teachers promise their pupils: practice first scales and arpeggios, become a bit like a machine, then the music will come later. But it doesn’t come, or only insofar as the pupil becomes a vehicle for it. That is then simply called “talent”, and since talent cannot be taught, the kernel of music-making remains conveniently omitted. These teachers emphasise that technique is there to serve the music. But the music does not arise from it. And so technique exists purely on its own account, for itself, and for the audience, who at the most can admire quick fingers.

The audience actually leaves the hall empty. Imagine you go to a restaurant. You pay beforehand, then the dish arrives, precious and beautiful, but empty. An absurd picture? Not at all! For that’s what many concerts are like. The people pay for their tickets, but are not nourished in soul and spirit. Even not for

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<sup>1</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (1995): *Flow. Das Geheimnis des Glücks*. See also <http://www.ueben-im-flow.de/>

their bodies – here I think of my one-time violinist in his snack bar. Is he doing more for humanity? Sooner or later the deceived justifiably boycott these events. But many people still feel that music could nourish them. Fortunately, an approach to music and its power does not depend on whether it is well played or not. Even badly played music can of itself still nourish. I realise this especially with Bach, who appears to me most indifferent with regard to instruments and playing.

### **Practically, at the piano**

If the keys are felt as an extension of your fingers (Peter Feuchtwanger), then the cleft between player and instrument is overcome at the place of division. The entire instrument can be experienced as a continuation of the body. The great early masters did not play *on* the piano, but *in* the piano. They did not set to work artificially as if from outside, but sang with it as with their own voice.

Our most important tool when practising is to pay attention with feeling. We can direct this to quite different areas.

We can

- feel the instrument: the keys, the path to the key-bed, the resistance, the release, the resting on the key-bed.
- feel the movement of the hammer, like giving a swing a push, which only succeeds in its own rhythm, that is, in agreement with it.
- hear the sound, hear and feel the aural space.
- experience the movements – everything arises out of movement, even the musical sounds, the notes. You can learn to perceive movements or processes before the musical sound, in and after the musical sound, and between the musical sounds.
- perceive the movements of your fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, back, breathing, etc. Behind all the movements is a stillness, a silence. Before the sound there lives a fulfilled silence. (Where is the music? From where does it come to us?)
- begin the movements economically – play with the right tension, at the right place, at the right moment.
- How do we begin? Rather than the motto “On your marks, get set, go!”, commence out of a movement which is already there long before the first note, and which continues afterwards.

Peter Feuchtwanger describes in a wonderful way how the beginning of a piece by Mozart came about under the hands of Clara Haskil:

I sat at the piano and said to her, “Clara, I find the beginning of Mozart’s G-major Concerto, KV 453, difficult.” She pushed me off the piano stool, saying, “But it doesn’t ‘begin’!”, and while she was sitting down, it somehow came about. Her arm simply glided on to the keys. It never began and it never stopped; it was simply a movement in the universe. As though you stepped on to a conveyor belt that was already moving. Clara Haskil’s beginning came from the movement. There was no separate beginning (Feuchtwanger. 27).<sup>2</sup>

We can apply this to any note. It comes out of a movement in the universe, it does not begin at a specific point. Only the note as a physical event begins at a certain point; the non-physical music already exists before the birth of the sound and also after it dies away.

### **Declaration of love to water**

The simplest wave shows us an ideal movement. From every point of view it is complete, flowing coherently within itself, relaxed and yet obeying a certain lawfulness, adapting and open for everything that comes, creating balance between tension and relaxation, between sphere and plane, between circle and line; sometimes mighty and even moving rocks, sometimes quickly agile and dancing.

Even *drops* can become an inspiring picture, an ideal. Kept in its form through tension, it disintegrates at some time or other, at that moment when a sudden movement occurs, an interruption of the flowing continuum. The way that happens can become an example for the movements of playing. You can try to release a musical sound out of your hand like a falling drop.

Music is frequently compared to a *river*, for example by Furtwängler, who compared a symphony by Beethoven to a river and its various qualities. Even the course of human life is compared to the picture of a river.

Heraclitus claimed “*Panta rhei* – Everything flows”. This saying can become an effective meditation for someone who is able to within to make piano technique more alive.

Similar to water, one could following Francis of Assisi, devise declarations of love for the plants, the

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Feuchtwanger, *Klavierübungen*. London, Wertheim & München, 2004.

supple movements of cats, the overview of the eagle, the thorough working through of matter through the cow. In all these examples *an idea becomes an ideal*, which in instrumental practice can awaken strengths.<sup>3</sup> Of course, it appears outlandish to seek to learn more about piano-playing from a cat than from a solid book. Yet try it; it really helps.

#### **“Stated honestly, I don’t know how I do it“**

Artur Rubinstein is supposed to have said this. We do not know today how a blade of grass grows; the secret of the living is far from becoming revealed.<sup>4</sup> It can’t come to light with the mechanical thinking usual today. What is dead can only lay hold of what is dead; what is alive cannot be conceived by what is dead, but only by what is alive. Insofar as Rubinstein’s music-making was alive, it could not be laid hold of from the materialistic standpoint. What “living” means in music, would be the object of a special essay. How what is alive can be conceived at all, is a part of a future science only in its very first beginnings, that no longer denies the influence of the spirit, but attempts to take it up and establish it.<sup>5</sup> Here a few indications have to suffice. Try to transfer to music the following qualities of what is dead and what is alive.

##### *What is dead*

Individual, isolated parts  
Persistence or decay  
Weight  
Effect of point by point (physically)  
Life is not integrated in what is dead  
What has become  
Time is an outer factor

##### *What is alive*

Connection of parts, form, the whole  
Change, rebuilding, building-up  
Lightness  
Effect of periphery (cosmic forces)  
Death is integrated into the living  
What is “becoming”  
Time is an inner component of the living

The great masters are wonderful examples, but not necessarily the greatest teachers. How often are we told, “Do it like THIS!”, perhaps with the encouraging remark, “It’s quite easy.” It looks quite easy, but the way to do it remains inexplicable.

In some way or other there belongs in a professional musical training today, a training in movement and posture (Alexander technique, Feldenkrais, etc.), and this seems good in principle. If everything in the world came into being out of movement, and is further changed through processes, then we cannot exclude this aspect from music-making without some loss. Eurythmy, the training in movement that stands nearest to music, has unfortunately not yet established itself.

Moreover for some decades the far-Eastern Zen has played a great role for searching musicians and music teachers. Eugen Herrigel’s very impressive book *Zen in the Art of Archery* is repeatedly warmly recommended for students. Facing the mechanical and one-sided Western view of organising control, impulses out of the East can be experienced as freeing and fructifying. Whether the path to the East is the best one for us Europeans, with all respect for the great spiritual traditions, I would question. No great master of the piano plays so that “it” takes place without his co-operation. It is and always was a breathing weaving together of your own creativity and receptivity.

That the masters did not know how they “did” it – assuming for the moment that this is also valid for the other masters –, shows that the way to a fully adequate teaching and learning is still a long one.

#### **From the dictionary of those who are divided**

*Touch* and Fr. *touché* – much better than Germ. *Anschlag*, i.e. “hit”.

*Expression* – (who presses what here? Toothpaste?). In exams, I find still worse the favourite expression *Ausdruckswille* – “intention to express” (she or he would like to, but cannot ...).

*Interpretation* – thinks about music, but not *in* music ...

*Sensitive* – feels, but cannot do it ...

*Mechanical dexterity, playing apparatus, singing apparatus* (the human machine – not an actual musical ideal).

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Steiner. *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds: How is it achieved?*, chapter “conditions”. “Every idea that does not become an ideal for you kills a force in your soul; every idea, however, which becomes an ideal creates life-forces in you.”

<sup>4</sup> Kathrin Passik & Aleks Scholz, *Lexikon des Unwissens. Worauf es bisher keine Antwort gibt*. Chapter “Leben”. Reinbek 2008, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Esoteric/ Occult Science*, chapter 2 on the make-up of the human being. Jochen Bockemühl, etc., *Erscheinungsformen des Ätherischen*, Stuttgart 1977.

*Competitive tempi* – who can do it the quickest and loudest? 1000 notes in so-many seconds? Who manages to jump over the hurdle without touching it? Who plays Liszt's Don Juan Fantasy most accurately? Especially those fearful jumps? Truth to tell, I have nothing against being able to play the Fantasy accurately....

### From the dictionary of those who are devoted

*crescendo* – growing, not forcing (African proverb: “The grass does not grow quicker if you pull on it”, that is, allow to grow, also allow yourself to grow; then *forte* will be “strong”, not merely “loud”). Heinrich Jakoby: “Let the bass notes grow towards you!” Do notes grow? Or what grows between, before and after the notes? That is something worth researching. What does “lively” mean in music?

*Vivo, vivace* – with life, lively. The translation “quick” is too banal.

*Aria, Air* – not only songs or lyrical pieces, but literally also the air, the atmosphere. But what sort of air?! What is contained in the air?

*Chord* – not only sounding together, but also Fr. *d'accord*, i.e. “agreed, in harmony, monophonic”.

*Animato, con anima* – with soul, with life.

*Con amore*.....! !

### Videos and sound recordings

**Alexis Weissenberg** plays Stravinsky's “Petrushka” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aTDn93Mhso>

<http://www.stefanabels.de/petr1.mp3> Every computer plays Stravinsky similar to Weissenberg, but even quicker and more exactly. Nobody can keep up with that.

On the other hand, **Artur Rubinstein** with Franz Liszt's “Liebestraum”. One does not object that romantic pieces have to be played differently than the more modern Stravinsky, or that more recent times demand a different manner of playing. All this is no reason to change the human being into a machine!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkXOrkeZyqQ>

Compare **Lang Lang**. He undeniably expresses much, or should one say presses *out of it*? What is real and what is only show? And where is his tummy when playing?! One could imagine that the whole bodily middle is suppressed, in order that the rest can make such efforts.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubVVSWHkxs8&feature=related>

Stravinsky can also be played differently.

**Vladimir Horowitz**: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOuBhEbu8zk>

**Emil Gilels**: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENKOtrOpNsM&feature=related>

You probably know the “Flight of the Bumble-Bee” by Rimsky-Korsakov. Meanwhile, the furry bumble bees have developed into iron-clad killer-insects, in any case in Cziffra's arrangement of the actually beautiful original.

“Shredding the piano”, **Yuja Wang** impressively shreds a Steinway.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8alxBofd\\_eQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8alxBofd_eQ)

Do you know **Moritz Rosenthal**? Unfortunately this recording is only aural, without a visual recording. Rosenthal, pupil of Franz Liszt, plays Chopin, Nouvelle Etude in Ab major. This is the most beautiful recording I know.

Rosenthal creates time, he is not given over to measurable clock-time; he is a master of timing. With him you can also see very well how being proactive and letting-it-happen breathe together.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlTBrjyOPY&feature=related>

**Edwin Fischer** and **Wilhelm Furtwängler** perform Brahms' Second Piano Concerto in Bb major, second movement.

Listen how the sacred stillness yet continues to flow – or a flow standing behind the grand stillness. Unbelievably, this recording originates from the War-year 1942. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ek45BNZsy90>

**Wilhelm Furtwängler** conducts Beethoven's "Egmont" Overture. You can hear the famous "imprecise" entries here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONDQHSy7aEs>

Compare 5 versions of Chopin's Nocturne, op. 27, no. 2:

**Maurizio Pollini** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cxkLZoEFfE>

**Moritz Rosenthal** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ECn-oe3bOQ\\_\\_4.31](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ECn-oe3bOQ__4.31)

**Josef Hofmann** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cw1YqjaR7I&feature=related>

**Dinu Lipatti** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZ\\_XsVcCtTM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZ_XsVcCtTM)

**Solomon Cutner** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8sodC0Thj4&feature=related>

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