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TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

From Performance to Understanding

My teaching career began in 2006. After winning first prize in an international piano competition, I was invited by my teacher to serve as a teaching assistant, marking the beginning of what has become nearly two decades of keyboard teaching. Since then, my teaching experience has encompassed university and conservatory students, young musicians, and community-based music education, while my teaching and research have expanded from piano to music theory, fortepiano, harpsichord, and historical keyboard performance.

These experiences have gradually shaped a central teaching philosophy:

The purpose of music education is not to provide students with a predetermined set of “correct answers,” but to help them learn to ask better musical questions and develop the abilities to analyze, research, listen, practice, and make independent judgments.

I. Beginning with the Score: Making Theory Serve Performance

My teaching usually begins with the score itself.

I do not regard music theory as an abstract body of knowledge separate from performance, but as an essential tool for entering into the composer’s musical thinking. Through the analysis of harmony, structure, and the overall logic of a work, students can develop a clearer understanding of why the music unfolds as it does, and can then consider how these structural relationships shape phrasing, articulation, and expression.

Regardless of period or style, the score itself contains a great deal of information relevant to interpretation. Many performance questions that we are accustomed to attributing simply to “style” can first be approached through the music itself. One basic but often overlooked step is to carefully understand the information the composer has explicitly provided in the score: the notes, notation, tempo, dynamics, and other markings. When these elements are accurately understood and realized, the basic structure and musical framework of a work already become remarkably clear.

This principle becomes particularly revealing when students put the notation into practice. For example, in Bach, allowing written note values to sound for their full duration can immediately change the way students perceive the interaction of voices and the continuity of a musical line. In Classical repertoire, observing Mozart’s slurs with particular attention to their written boundaries can lead students to reconsider articulation and phrase structure in ways that may differ from their habitual approach.

Likewise, following Chopin's written pedal indications closely can reveal unexpected relationships between harmony, resonance, and texture. Such experiences do not necessarily prescribe a single "correct" way to perform these works. Rather, they allow students to discover how much information is already embedded in the notation, and how taking that information seriously can open new ways of hearing and understanding the music.

Analysis, therefore, is not an exercise separate from performance; it is part of the process through which interpretation emerges. From there, this understanding can be brought into dialogue with historical context, instrumental conditions, and actual listening, allowing students to test and refine their interpretive judgments.

II. From Historical Evidence to Performance Practice

If the score is the starting point for interpretation, then Historically Informed Performance allows us to explore the historical context of a work and the performance practices associated with it—not as a fixed set of rules, but as an evidence-based process of inquiry. When students encounter an unfamiliar work, I do not expect them to immediately enter the most complex primary sources. Instead, I encourage them first to establish a research pathway. The preface, editorial notes, and critical commentary of a reliable scholarly edition can often provide an extremely valuable starting point. Behind a strong scholarly edition lies substantial research into a work's sources, publication history, historical context, notation, and performance practice. For students encountering a work for the first time, these materials help establish a basic research framework while also revealing which questions about the work are worth pursuing further.

From there, students can gradually move into more extensive sources, including facsimiles, manuscripts, early editions, and historical treatises, comparing the information they provide.

This process also changes the way students understand recordings. Recordings can provide extremely valuable information and reveal possibilities in performance. But a recording is ultimately one specific interpretation made by one performer under particular circumstances. Rather than asking, "How did someone else perform it? How can I play it just like they did?" students can learn to ask: "Why did they make that choice? What evidence supports it? And do I have sufficient reason to make the same choice?" A recording therefore becomes part of the research process rather than its endpoint.

The same approach can also extend to ornamentation, language, and historical dance. These areas of study offer additional perspectives on phrasing, articulation, gesture, and musical expression, while deepening students' understanding of the historical context in which the music was created.

This approach keeps historical research closely connected to performance. Rather than treating historical information as something to be memorized, students use it to reconsider their performance choices and develop interpretations that are both informed and thoughtful.

III. Let the Instrument Become a Teacher

My experiences with the historical keyboard collection at Cornell and with harpsichords at Flintwoods have deepened my understanding of the significant differences among keyboard instruments from different historical periods in mechanical construction, keyboard design, touch, sound production, range, resonance, and tonal decay. These physical characteristics directly shape the conditions within which performers

make musical choices. Hence, many questions of historical style cannot be fully resolved through verbal explanation alone.

For example, when studying Classical repertoire, the sound production and decay characteristics of early fortepianos can prompt students to reconsider habits developed on the modern piano, from pedaling and touch to the shaping of phrases. I would not simply prescribe, “Never use pedal when playing Haydn.” Instead, students can compare how different instruments and performance conditions affect harmonic clarity, phrase boundaries, and the relationships among voices. Such comparisons can lead to a deeper question: Why might clarity of articulation have been such an important part of the musical language of this period?

This way of thinking can also extend naturally to other keyboard traditions, including organ. The instrument itself, together with the acoustic environment in which it is played, can likewise directly affect articulation, phrasing, and musical rhetoric.

Of course, access to an extensive collection of historical instruments is not a prerequisite for this kind of teaching. When historical instruments are not immediately available, recordings, treatises, historical sources, and digital resources can still provide students with new perspectives and raise questions about the relationship between instruments and musical interpretation. Exposure to different instruments, even indirectly, can reveal possibilities that may not be apparent from the score alone and encourage students to reconsider familiar assumptions about how a work might be performed.

Ultimately, historical knowledge becomes most meaningful when it returns to the act of performance: turning evidence into sound, research into practice, and practice into a means of testing our understanding. In this process, the instrument itself becomes a teacher.

IV. Student-Centered Teaching: Cultivating Independent Musicians

All of the principles described above must ultimately be realized through individual students.

Students have different technical backgrounds, learning habits, and musical experiences. A completely fixed teaching model cannot account for these differences. The starting point is to understand: How does this student learn? How does this student listen? How does this student think? How does this student practice?

While maintaining high expectations, I seek the most effective learning pathway for each student. The goal is not only to address immediate performance problems, but also to help students gradually develop self-assessment and problem-solving abilities that can transfer to other works.

Particular emphasis is placed on developing the ability to listen objectively. A common challenge in keyboard study is that the sound students hear in their own playing may differ significantly from the musical result they intended to create. To help students recognize this gap, I often ask them to record their own performances and listen back while referring to the score and the musical ideas they have developed from it. I then ask a very simple question: “Is this really the sound you intended?”

This question is not just about personal preference. A student’s musical conception should be grounded in the information provided by the score and informed by an understanding of the composer’s musical language and historical context. The goal is to develop the ability to hear whether the actual performance truly realizes that conception—and, if not, to determine why.

In this process, the analysis, historical research, and exploration of the instrument discussed above become part of the student's own practice. Practice becomes a continuous process of feedback and inquiry:

Analysis → Perform → Listen → Identify the problem → Practice → Adjust → Listen again

As this process is repeated, students gradually learn to observe their own playing from an external perspective rather than relying entirely on the teacher to identify what has gone wrong. They become increasingly able to evaluate their performance, identify the source of a problem, and determine what needs to be reconsidered or changed. Ultimately, they learn not only how to solve a particular performance problem, but how to become their own teacher.

V. Music Teaching in a Liberal Arts Environment: Cultivating Independent Learners

This teaching philosophy is especially well suited to a liberal arts environment. Music does not exist in isolation; its forms and meanings are deeply connected to the historical, cultural, artistic, and political contexts in which it is created and experienced.

My teaching experience at Fudan University has especially reinforced this understanding. Many of my students have come from a wide range of academic disciplines, spanning both the sciences and the humanities. Interestingly, they have also brought strong interests in history, culture, and political thought. They may not approach music through professional musical training, but they bring distinctive bodies of knowledge, ways of thinking, and intellectual curiosity. Starting from the knowledge and interests they already possess can provide a meaningful entry point into music.

A liberal arts education encourages students to approach a question from different fields of knowledge, consider different perspectives and forms of evidence, and develop their own understanding. Meaningful and lasting learning often begins with curiosity. The teacher's responsibility is not to determine what students should be interested in, but to help them turn their interests into deeper exploration:

“We are not here simply to teach you; we are here to learn and explore with you.”

This also reflects how I understand the role of a teacher. A teacher can provide knowledge, experience, questions, tools, and direction, but successful education should ultimately return ownership of learning to the student. This principle was deeply influenced by my theoretical and analytical mentor, Robert Cuckson, during my studies at Mannes School of Music. Through his teaching, I came to understand that a teacher is not merely a transmitter of knowledge, but someone who helps students learn how to think, how to ask meaningful questions, and how to develop their own perspectives.

The strongest outcome of teaching is therefore not that students continue to look to the teacher for answers, but that they leave the classroom with the confidence and tools to pursue their own questions, evaluate possibilities, and make informed decisions independently.