



NEW ENGLAND

PIANO TEACHERS' Assoc., Inc.

October 2007

Dear Colleagues,

Our opening meeting, presented by **Robert Levin**, was truly inspiring - filled with wisdom and insight, and spiced with wit and dazzling examples at the piano. If you missed it, be sure to read **Allen Giles'** notes, attached to this newsletter, and resolve to be with us in October.

On October 22, we will hear from **William Westney**, who will present *The Perfect Wrong Note*, a lecture/demonstration on perfectionism in music – is it healthy or not?

At that meeting we will have our twice yearly “sale” of donated music. If you would like to donate some music for the benefit of NEPTA, please bring it before the program for display, and remove it, if it isn't taken. This is a great way to keep useful music in circulation. We still need a coordinator for this program.

Also at our October meeting, the lottery winner of our new award in honor of **Miriam Pizer** will be announced. Those who entered and do not win should remember to inquire about the Grants-in-Aid program, explained in our Yearbook.

The Board is encouraging all members to spend some time getting to know each other better this year. Come early, get your name tag, and take some time to introduce yourself to someone new.

The applications for recitals and competitions are included with this mailing. Please keep them for your use at the correct time. Applications will also be online for members this year, at the NEPTA website (www.nepta.info). The deadline for membership (9/30) to enter a student or students this year is now past.

Don't forget to sign up for the Master Class for teachers with **Yehudi Wyner** on November 5. See page 7 of your Yearbook for details.

Please remember that NEPTA will go green in January. Check your information in the Directory, and send any corrections to **Michelle Kelley** throughout the year.

I look forward to seeing you in October!

Sincerely yours,

Joan Reddy, President

Notes by Allen Giles, Recording Secretary

Mr. Levin began by observing that he was pleased to be able to talk with those who give their lives to the music education of the young -- and not so young. He has adjudicated major piano competitions all over the world, and he expressed his concern about the performances he has encountered at these competitions. Most of the performers demonstrated wonderful fingers and no sense of what distinguishes the music of Bach from the music of Rachmaninoff. His concern is intensified by the realization that these pianists will be TEACHING! Their students will be carrying on this ignorance to succeeding generations.

He plans to devote this lecture-demonstration to playing the music of the Baroque period. In order to understand the music of this period we must deal with the existing repertoire from the period. While most instrumentalists have a very limited repertoire from this period to work with, keyboard players are fortunately well supplied.

We must deal with our instrument, the piano, not the dialects of composers. First we must consider that modern pianos are nearly all clones of the Steinway. Earlier keyboard instruments were quite different from each other. The further back we go the more this is true. Mr. Levin observes that this is unfortunate, that there needs to be more competition for the Steinway, pianos that provide contrasting qualities of sound. In order to explore his thesis we must begin with a survey of the development of keyboard instruments.

Most of the music composed for keyboard instruments in the Baroque period was composed for instruments that were significantly different from the modern Steinway. This is not a matter of progress; it is a matter of changing values. Just as the paintings of Rembrandt have not been discarded because of the work of Monet. Likewise, Ravel is neither a better nor a worse composer than Schubert. Just different.

What Beethoven chose to do on the instrument of his time was determined by the instrument at his disposal. The properties of his instrument need to be considered in our performances. What you don't know about his piano can hurt your performances and your teaching of music of his time. There were major changes in the construction of the piano during the 19th century. The principal changes include the introduction of overstringing, whereby the bass strings are aligned at an angle over the treble strings. Earlier pianos were built with all of the strings parallel, and parallel to the grain of the soundboard. The modern Steinway, designed during the 1870s, is also built with a cast iron frame, making possible much greater tension on the strings and leading to greater resonance. The hammer velocity is also much faster. As a result of these changes in design, the new Steinways, which became the model for all of the pianos built since the late 1870s, have much more power and the sound created decays much more slowly. The crossed strings are shorter, so they must be thicker. (The pitch of a string is determined by its physical mass: if a string designed to produce a particular pitch is shorter it must be thicker.) Thicker strings produce a less clear tone. Therefore, pianos with crossed strings are less effective for the contrapuntal music of the 18th century. They are best for the homophonic music of the mid- to late 19th century. The heavier, thicker bass strings make the left-hand bass notes louder than the upper right-hand notes.

Bach wrote primarily for the harpsichord; it is impossible to make the left hand notes louder than the right hand notes on a harpsichord. While the modern piano is wonderful for one type of music, homophonic music of the sort that dominated during the 19th century, it is not so successful in clarifying the transparent counterpoint required for music composed during the 18th

century. In playing fugal music, it is important to hear ALL of the contrapuntal lines. The common approach used so often of projecting dynamically each statement of the fugue subject misses the whole point. The musical drama is about the interplay between the subject and the other contrapuntal lines. The purpose of these interactions between voices is "to take you someplace--to lower you gently into the water" (Levin's phrase) of new ideas.

Purely tonal harmony occupied a brief period in the early part of the 18th century (Vivaldi and Corelli). Bach heard this new language and incorporated it into his primarily contrapuntal style, "making Bach into the great composer that he was" (Levin again). He took the chords and animated them, unfolding one chord into the next, building the music structure from the bottom to the top in a "total glow." Bach does not help you to decide where the music should breathe--as most late 18th and early 19th century composers do. Instead you must listen to the unfolding of the chordal structure. In teaching we must excite the musical intuition of our students so that they learn how to accomplish this goal. The bass line is often a guide, as the phrases follow the harmonic flow. Determine the narrative of the musical flow and determine where it is going. In contrast to the idea that we learn the notes first and then make the expressive decisions, the expression will be there right from the beginning of the learning process.

Digressions: It is a crime to attempt to learn how to play "evenly" with the music of Brahms, Schumann, etc. Use scales, arpeggios, Czerny, etc. for that purpose. The steadiness problem should have been mastered before the great composers are studied.

Finger strength is not created by playing fast. Slow practice first.

Diagnostic coaching is needed only when a student encounters problems.

The plot line of the musical language is found by examining the harmonic events in a piece. Create expectations for your listeners by making the direction of the musical plot clear.

The Wiener Urtext of the Mozart Sonatas published by Schott/Universal contains an extended preface by Mr. Levin in which he expands at some length on many of these matters.

Articulation In Playing 18th Century Music

Mr. Levin: The 18th century speaks; the 19th century sings.

The 18th century detailed contrapuntal clarity, many small slurs, more detached clear articulation. Harpsichord sound. Strings plucked, short decay time.

The 19th century: more legato, long slurs, long singing phrases. Modern piano sound, longer decay time. Project melodic line with more prominence. This not a matter of good or bad, just different.

Be unique in the way you play every piece.

Explore alternatives in determining interpretation. There is rarely only one way to play any passage.

Use fingers only for passages demanding small muscular effort or extreme speed; larger impulses may require wrists, forearms, upper arms, shoulders, back, whole torso.

Mozart's publishers published music for amateurs. Early editions contain much detail to help the amateurs who purchased most of the printed music of the time. Examine the manuscript to see what Mozart intended for the serious pianist. There will be much less detail.

Teachers can't force-feed the student. Students must understand what is going on in the music to play with real style.

A repeat of the exposition in a Mozart sonata must be different from the first exposition. Mozart wrote down some of his repeated expositions. Examine them for ideas of Mozart's style. Then assign students to create their own variations, one way to determine whether they understand the style.

Isolated chords in Mozart are nearly always arpeggiated.

Czerny, who studied with Beethoven, created an edition of the complete sonatas of Beethoven. While his editing is often strange, we should examine this edition for interesting ideas.

Various diacritical marks can mean different things to different composers and even the same composer a different times. Examples:

- When stem directions change, Mozart often closes a slur and starts a new one, even when it is obvious that a continuous slur is intended. He also will close a slur at the bottom of a page. His page--it may not coincide with the page ending in the printed version.
- Chords under a slur with dots on the top note indicate that the melody goes on.

Composers are trying to clarify their intentions, not trying to confuse you. Take the marks seriously and try to determine what the composer is getting at.

Grasp all opportunities to do something imaginative.

Ravel and Debussy are classic and romantic composers respectively. They are performed very differently.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?? All of our study of each piece must be directed toward this question.

Unfortunately your scribe had to leave while the question period was still under way at noon. My parking meter was running out.

And again: YOU REALLY HAD TO BE THERE. Mr. Levin is a fascinating speaker. And he spoke with no notes! I had to leave out many anecdotes and stories that I couldn't write fast enough to get down. Not to mention all of his musical demonstrations at the piano. I hope to see ALL of you at the next meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Allen Giles