

Božena Steinerová: Think with your heart and feel with your brain

Pisa University News

It is very hard to write about music. How we perceive it, how we feel it. My opinion is that one possible explanation of this problem is to hear it. Nevertheless I'll try to describe simply a way, how I came to music, how I feel it and how I endeavour to turn it over to my students.

My mother married my father, the Czechoslovak citizen, and she didn't know a Czech word. She was from Romania, Transylvania, and studied the piano at the F. Liszt Academy in Budapest. My father was a lawyer and he was also a good violinist. Just as a little child I was put on a piano when my parents played together Beethoven's Sonatas and I think that it was the first what I listened to. My parents communicated with each other through music. Since my childhood the music have evoked different feelings in me like dancing or singing, didn't matter whether the music was reproduced or live.

I was affected by three different piano schools in my life – Czech, Russian and Hungarian. I graduated from the Music Academy of Performing Arts in Prague under the tutorage of Prof. Ilona Štěpánová-Kurzová, who was a daughter of the greatest Czech piano Professor - Vilém Kurz, who published a lot of professional piano literature and was active at the famous conservatory in Lvov (formal Poland). I went to the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow after my studies at the Music Academy. I admired great geniuses of the Russian piano, violin and cello school in that time; S. Richter, E. Gilels, D. Oistrakh, L. Kogan, M. Rostropovich, N. Gutmann, etc. were my life idols.

My stay and studies at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory influenced my view, feeling and opinion of music for the whole life. In that time there taught a famous pedagogue Prof. H. Neuhaus, teacher of S. Richter and E. Gilels, in whose classroom I used to visit his unforgettable lessons.

The Hungarian piano school influenced me from the side of my mother. First steps and contact with music came from her, who studied in Budapest, how I mentioned before, where Béla Bartók was a chancellor. Her colleague was excellent world pianist Annie Fischer.

My mother started to teach me the piano when I was 4 years old, from the reason that she didn't rule our language and she talked to me through the music. It was self-evident for me and a certain part of my personality.

Except the concert activity, to which I devoted many years I have also taught. I demand maximal possible technical ability from my students, to which I have an individual approach. It cannot be spoken by great talents about solving this or that technical problem on the lessons, because for them it is self-evident. Unfortunately teacher doesn't meet often such great talents and that is why is necessary to acquire the handicraft so much, that student can fully devote to a creative process.

It's not possible to analyze a method of getting an accord, an octave or another finger technique and series of different touches. But I would describe briefly how to create the sound. I meet very often with the opinion, that a piano is the instrument, where only the simple touch is enough to achieve definitive sound quality. That is a big mistake. Like on the violin, cello etc. the sound is created also on the piano - there are thousands of colours.

It's the stroke culture, which I learned from my excellent Prof. Štěpánová. We have a lot of possible touches (keystrokes), which we use to reach the sound imagination, which comes out of the note record. It's not possible to describe all styles of a stroke – passive, expressive, staccato, which is played from a wrist or a shoulder, which helps to get long, soft and not hard sound, etc.

My task is to explain exactly to my student the motion, which comes out from hand or arm or the whole body to reach certain sound. It belongs to the handicraft, what I'm writing about, what is a part of professional play. Other important component is the right thinking during the play. Not many students realize that the way of thinking influences the whole play. As we should follow phrasing in music records (sheets), what is most important in musical breathing, also there must proceed right thinking and phrasing in the brain. It's necessary to know from where to where to think, not to get your brain tired, what helps to solve specific technical problems. Correct thinking is the base of many technical problem solutions. I wouldn't like to impress you, that the most important thing is technical perfection. It is completely the other way round. Music, which doesn't have soul, which is not creative and interpret doesn't merge with it - is not music. No art can be real without form and content.

Let me allow describing a practising style. In my practice I met a lot of students, which didn't know how to effectively practise. It's very important to solve many problems in short time, which brings the composition. It's important to practise economically in the right way. Brainless, unconcentrated frequent repeating of a certain passage doesn't bring anything. It's necessary to be sure wherein a technical problem consists, analyze it and repeat it so long as your concentration lasts. This way of the practising can help to increase the efficiency of learning process. It's important to distinguish "the practising" from "the play". Great interpreters say: 6 days in week to practise and one day to play. This is important to foster since youth.

Shortly about psychological approach to the public performance. In contrast to other kinds of art (painting art, literature...), public performance runs in real time. It is more exacting, when a performer is not fully concentrated at this moment. Even if he is excellent, the performance is unfortunately influenced by that. I try to explain to my students, that it is very necessary to keep the similar (or the same) style of thinking and feeling during the play, as they had during lessons and practising. It is very important; because I know from my own experience that a different piano, hall or environment influence the performer psychical side. I think that it is important to create "immunity" against these new and strange conditions, not to influence the whole result of interpretation. Of course, the presence of the audience creates special and new atmosphere, which is impossible to realize before and especially this should be more stimulating for deeper, persuasive interpretation.

Well, there are a lot of technically talented pianists. Their play is uninteresting and even boring. That is why I tend to create music experience with more or less talented students not with technique as only matter to express the content of the composition. Since childhood, when children start to play any instrument, they should distinguish whether the composition is sad, happy, in humour or serious mood. In my teacher work I try to catch their interest about other kinds of art – literature, painting art, drama or film. Musician-student, who practises 10 hours a day and cannot experience a book, cannot feel painting's emotions, who cannot sense the beauty of landscape, I think, cannot experience neither Chopin's Prelude nor a slow part of the Mozart's Concerto. I try to open this way of feeling and bring near to my students. They can hear from me often: "Learn to think with the heart and feel with your head". True art, may it be music, painting art, literature, drama, cannot be created without heart, wisdom, talent and diligence.