Lecture 3: Making Music and Musicians

Irving Wassermann

Utah State University
Everyone is talking about challenges these days and you can believe this occasion is a real challenge for me. This is one of the few times in my life I must assume the role of public speaker and, in so doing, communicate in a medium which is not second nature for me. Playing the piano is my first language. Speaking before an audience makes me nervous, so with your kind indulgence, I shall turn from time to time to my favorite voice, the piano, for support.

Tonight my assignment is pointed towards my role as a teacher, both in general terms and as a teacher of music, particularly piano. To prepare myself for this stimulating invitation, I reviewed my past. I came to realize that my years as a student hopefully made me the channel through which the wisdom of two especially great teachers is being transmitted to my students.

Who were these great teachers and why were they important to me? The man who had greater influence on me than any other person was Edward Steuermann. I went to study with him in Vienna after my high school years in Rzeszow, Poland, where my piano instructor was Kazimierz Mirski, a delightful man of great culture but not a very good teacher. However, his infectious love for music and good literature, particularly French and German, had a great impact on my formative years. Though he was unable to develop my technical skills, he gave me the great gift of appreciation for the arts.

Then the curtain went up on a wider world for me. I came in contact with the greatness of Eduard Steuermann. As his student I became a human sponge--soaking in his every word and opinion, the validity of which has weathered a half-century of scrutiny and evaluation on my part. I learned not only to respect and admire him but to love him to the degree that my wife was prompted to remark that there hadn't been a single day since she had known me that I
had not made some reference to Mr. Steuermann. I believe that to be the ultimate compliment to a great teacher.

Why do I refer to Mr. Steuermann so often? Because from him I have learned the most valid approach to musical performance--attention to every detail no matter how minute and at the same time awareness of the overall concept of composition. In this respect Steuermann was a superb and rare exception among teachers, the majority of whom stress one of these two elements but are unable to synthesize both of them. Some teachers work with their students on technique and the development of pianistic facility; some others neglect this phase and concentrate on the musical aspect of the student's growth. But rare among them is the one who, like Steuermann, has the ability to help the student to become a skilled technician and at the same time to grasp the meaning of the music he is playing.

In order to understand the composition, the performer must employ a great number of approaches. He not only must understand the overall structure, harmonic progressions, rhythmical problems and other factors; but, most importantly, his difficult task is to coordinate all of these elements with the influences upon the composer other than the musical ones. Since the composer does not live in a vacuum, the historic, sociological, ethical, ethnical--in sum--all the cultural pressures become part of his musical totality and vocabulary. His language and means of communicating are the expression of the environment in which he lives. Therefore, in order to comprehend a composer's message, we must become well acquainted with all stimuli of which the composer is the product and, to some extent, the spokesman. This is exactly where I see my joyous task of helping the student discover the real meaning of the composition. There is no greater satisfaction to me than being able to lead him beyond the printed page and show him the vast world of feeling, drama, and excitement, waiting to be discovered by the inquiring mind. How, for example,
can one play a Bach minuet without seeing through the eyes of one's imagination the ballrooms of German nobility where dances were played by court orchestras, in some of which Bach was himself a member. One can truly say that without imagination there is no art.

I am going to play for you now a Gavette from the Suite in G Major by Bach. Since Bach did not give any indications of tempo, dynamics or phrasing, it is imperative to mentally transplant oneself into some nobleman's ballroom with men and women dressed according to the customs of the late Baroque period during which Bach lived. One must imagine the refined and graceful court dancing and from that derive the proper tempo, the right kind of tone and correct phrasing. Only this way can the pianist hope to bring out the charm of these elegant, stylized dances. And now, since music is my first language, I'll let my fingers do the talking.

Next to Steuermann, the second strongest influence of my musical life was my contact with Anton Webern with whom I studied harmony and musical analysis for close to four years. I was extremely fortunate that during my Viennese experience Webern accepted me as a student. Next to Arnold Schoenberg, he was the composer who has had the greatest influence upon the post-World War II generation of composers. Through my association with both Steuermann and Webern, I became an active member of the so-called Schoenberg Gemeinde (community) which among its followers counted not only Schoenberg, Webern, Steuermann, but also Alban Berg, Krenek, members of the Kelish quartet and many others. I soon became involved in performances of contemporary (at that time) music. Since this group of musicians was championing the cause of Mahler and Bruckner, I soon came under the influence of these two giants who are still among my favorite composers. It was also, thanks to the members of the 'Gemeinde', that I fell in love with the music of Wagner, an enthusiasm which still enriches my musical life.
One of my vivid recollections of Webern was his constant pre-occupation with the works of Goethe. I remember clearly the last time I was in Webern's home in Meedling, a suburb of Vienna. He was reading Goethe's Essay on Color. At that time I was surprised that Webern would spend his time reading about a subject, which was to me seemingly unrelated to his profession which dealt with sound and not color. Now, however, in retrospect, I see that Webern's interest in color found its parallel in his unique concept of tone and its properties. Webern, more than any other composer, explored and used with dramatic impact the opposite of sound--the rest. It took me many years before I learned to feel and not just count the rests in music. In the last few years, in particular, working with students, I try to make them feel the flow of melody which used for its expressiveness the sound as well as its absence--the rest. I very often compare the importance of a rest with a performance of an actor who, through sheer silence, can be more expressive than when speaking. Using other arts as a guide for musical interpretation is what makes playing and teaching exciting to me.

I remember, when I first learned a short piece by Brahms, the so-called Edward Ballade. It did not mean very much to me till I read the poem upon which it was based; then it all made sense. This music evoked in me everything I read about the medieval world. I could see the castles, knights, dark forests; tales of the dim past came alive. Now I could feel the piece and interpret it to my satisfaction. And this is the reason why I encourage my students to read as widely as possible--history, novels, books on art, philosophy, just about anything that constitutes good literature. Mr. Steuermann could quote from Homer (in Greek) as easily as from Schopenhauer or Voltaire, and I hope, on a smaller scale at least, to set a similar example to my students. Now I am going to play for you the Ballade Op. 10 in D Minor by Brahms and I hope you will enjoy my interpretation of it. But first, let me read the poem.
Edward

Why does your sword drip so with blood,
Edward, Edward,
Why does your sword drip so with blood,
And why do you go so sad o?
0 I have killed my hawk so good,
Mother, Mother,
0 I have killed my hawk so good,
And I had no more but he o.

Your hawk's blood was never so red,
Edward, Edward,
Your hawk's blood was never so red,
My dear son I tell thee o.
0 I have killed my red-roan steed,
Mother, Mother,
0 I have killed my red-roan steed,
That before was so fair and free o.

Your steed was old and you have got more,
Edward, Edward,
Your steed was old and you have got more,
Some other grief you suffer o.
0 I have killed my father dear,
Mother, Mother,
0 I have killed my father dear,
Alas and woe is me o.

And what sort of penance will you suffer for that,
Edward, Edward,
And what sort of penance will you suffer for that?
My dear son, now tell me o.
I'll set my feet in yonder boat,
Mother, Mother,
I'll set my feet in yonder boat,
And I'll fare over the sea o.

And what will you do with your towers and your hall,
Edward, Edward,
And what will you do with your towers and your hall,
That were so fair to see o?
I'll let them stand till down they fall,
Mother, Mother,
I'll let them stand till down they fall,
For I must never more be here o.

And what will you leave to your children and your wife,
Edward, Edward,
And what will you leave to your children and your wife,
When you go over the sea o?
The world's space, let them beg through life,
    Mother, Mother,
For them never more will I see O.

And what will you leave to your own Mother dear,
    Edward, Edward?
And what will you leave to your own Mother dear,
My dear son, now tell me O.
The curse of hell from me you shall hear,
    Mother, Mother,
The curse of hell from me you shall hear,
Such counsels you gave to me O.

The Brahms piece was an example of why the performer must be sensitive to literature in order to grasp the meaning of many compositions, and be able to project their content. But literature is only one of the many factors which affect the composer. In the case of Chopin, one of the most beloved and most frequently performed composers, the knowledge of European history in general and Poland's in particular is indispensable. I am going to play Chopin's Polonaise, and, I think, the background of this piece might be of interest to you. Towards the end of the 18th century, Poland was partitioned among three powers: Prussia, Russia, and Austria. All throughout the 19th century, Polish patriots staged fruitless uprisings trying to regain the independence of their beloved country. In 1830, one of the bloodiest rebellions against the Russians took place in central Poland occupied by Russia. Chopin, an ardent Polish patriot, wanted to join the insurrection, and it was only with great difficulty that his friends were able to dissuade him from active participation. They finally convinced him that living in France and exerting his influence as an ambassador of good will he would be able to contribute to a much greater degree to the cause of Poland than by carrying arms. When he could not serve with a sword, he turned to music. The glorious past, the greatness of his motherland, the heroic deeds of his ancestors, all this comes to life in his magnificent Mazurkas, Polonaises, Krakowiaks and other compositions. As I play these pieces I can sense the pride of the once powerful nation. The
feeling of independence that defies the tyrant speaks from every note of these masterpieces. It is a universal feeling that appeals to every freedom-loving human being, and this explains why Chopin's music is more popular throughout the world than that of most composers. Now I shall play Chopin's famous Polonaise in A Flat Major, Op. 53.

One thing I did learn during my Viennese studies was to have an open mind toward the latest developments in compositional trends. Not since 1600, when the new operatic style revolutionized the thinking of musicians, has there been such radical change in the approach to music as the one introduced by Schoenberg and modified by his disciples, the 12-tone system. Most people were neither prepared nor willing to accept such radical change which was, to some extent, complete negation of the values which reigned supreme for many centuries. Ridicule, vicious slander, and strongest condemnation came from all sides. I remember vividly Dr. Joseph Polnauer, who had a big scar on his cheek from a knife-wound inflicted on him after a performance of Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra, when he got in a fight with a man who tried to disrupt the concert. I also remember playing Webern's Variations for one of my teachers, Stefan Ashkenase, who in a polite way termed this composition as mental aberrations of a composer whose music could be evaluated only on an intellectual level, otherwise without any expression or message. However, all these obstacles did not deter Schoenberg, Webern, Berg and their disciples from following their course. The belief in one's convictions and the determination to see them materialize in a finished musical product is the mark of every great composer who must have confidence in himself and the cause he embraces. If he succumbs to easier solutions and tries to placate his critics, he is untrue to his art and he does not fulfill his mission. It is the fate of every creative artist that, at first at any rate, he is misunderstood by his contemporaries who apply to his work an obsolete yardstick of comparison with
older works. Let me quote a criticism written about one of the greatest composers of all time—Beethoven: "Beethoven always sounds to me like the upsetting of bags of nails, with here and there an also dropped hammer." And this was written in 1881 by no less a critic than John Ruskin. I like to remind my students that at one point in time every composer, Monteverdi, Handel, Mozart, Wagner, Weber, is a contemporary, avant-garde composer. As an example of the kind of music which was highly controversial, if not completely rejected, 50 years ago and yet today occupies an important place in standard piano repertory, I would like to play two short pieces from Op. 19 by Schoenberg.

I tell my students: "When it comes to new music or painting or poetry or just about anything, do not be swayed by the opinions of the older generation who have the tendency to approach change with a negative attitude. After all, it is different from the experiences they have had and it takes quite an effort to reevaluate one's thinking. Give contemporary music a chance; listen to it a number of times and try to analyze and understand it to the best of your ability. The quality of music depends primarily on whether the composer has something important to say. Second in importance is the form in which he says it. It is the message that counts, and we owe it to ourselves to interpret this message in terms most meaningful to us. After all, although we may be looking at the same picture, each one of us sees something different in it.

We listen to a piece of music and there are as many impressions and interpretations as there are listeners. In sum, I encourage my students to do their own thinking. They will make mistakes but how else does one learn? Mistakes in judgment are part of growing up and maturing. What matters is that we are willing to admit that we were wrong, and subsequently change our opinions. In 1911, James G. Huneker, the Dean of American music critics in those days, wrote this in the New York Sun about Debussy's opera Pelleas et Melisande, one of the 20th century's most beautiful and important masterpieces: "It would be
impossible to conceive a finer vehicle of expression than that invented by Debussy through the simple yet original process of abolishing rhythm, melody, and tonality from music and thus leaving nothing but atmosphere. If we could abolish from the human organization flesh, blood and bones, we should still have membrane. Membranous music is perhaps the fitting expression of Pelleas et Melisande. Mr. Huneker lived long enough to have become one of the most ardent champions of Debussy's music. I love to give the students Debussy's music to work on and I try to make them aware of Debussy's indebtedness and close relationship with the impressionistic movement in painting of the 19th century. The entire palette of colors with all the hues and shadings comes to mind on every page of his music. To translate these impressions into sound is the most difficult but rewarding task of the performer. The difficulty lies in the subtle tone control and use of the pedal. Above all, it is the performer's imagination that recreates the imagery of Debussy's piano poems. And so, from his collection entitled Images I have selected "Reflections in the Water". I hope as I play, you can, in your mind, see and hear drops of water causing ripples on the surface of a woodland pool.

As a teacher I am constantly searching for new ways of developing in my students pianistic skills and musical understanding. Over the period of many, many years I have changed my own playing and my teaching methods a number of times and, I am sure, I will change them again in the future. But one thing will never change--my love for music. If I can make my students share this love with me, I shall consider myself a very successful teacher.

I would like to conclude this presentation with playing Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 11. After almost 50 years of playing this piece I still enjoy its gypsy mood and the pianistic brilliance.