MUSIC AND THE INSTRUMENT

On the unity of instrumental technique and musical expression

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The unity of instrumental technique and musical expression: is this a seif-evident combination, or a paradox posed by our present musical life?

There is at least no doubt what is understood under the term ‚instrumental technique': achievement on a level corresponding to the technical perfection of our times. I do not wish to devaluate all technical achievements - on the contrary, research into instrumental, physiological and psychological processes has the potential to help us greatly. When we come to consider musical expression, however, then I am sure that opinions are divided; this is a basic Symptom of our limes.

We have the expression from Johann Mattheson, the well-known Kapellmeister of the Hamburg Opera House in Händel's time, "An instrument is to music as a spoon is to soup". Of course, it is probably easier to eat soup with a spoon than it is to use an instrument in such a way that the music becomes a palatable dish - no instrument can function without instrumental technique; but any instrument, of whatever kind, musical or non-musical, is merely a means of assistance, a medium for bringing about the conditions necessary to place something in the world. Mattheson's simile may be more profound than we appreciate: he compares music to nutrition. Is there still a significant reason for evoking this comparison nowadays? I can only answer this question with an emphatic 'yes', which I must express quite radically: we now have an unprecedented control over our musical instruments. And an unprecedented loss of music.

Music: spiritual necessity or optional extra?

What do we actually understand under the term 'musical expression'? What is going on in this respect in our schools, music colleges and orchestras - everywhere, in fact, where music forms the focus of people's efforts? It is far from my intention to suggest that nothing is going on at all. On the contrary, there may be far more happening than we guess. Nevertheless, music has become a side-track, often a cul-de-sac.

Not infrequently it is claimed, or at least tacitly accepted, that instrumental technique as such is identical with musical expression, even that the concreteness of instrumental technique constitutes the sum total of musical expression. Any talk about music which is not purely technical is dismissed as nostalgic gushing and pigeon-holed in the dark corner of dilettantism. 'Music' as a concept exists today only *pro forma:* in reality it is technology which has survived. It is almost as if one had opened up Meyer's encyclopaedia'[1] and found under the heading 'music', "the word, in its broadest sense, means the purposeful organisation

[1] *Meyers Neues Lexikon* in Acht Bänden, Bibliographisches Institut, Mannheim/Zürich, 1978.

of sound-events ..."

Another, almost equally widespread, tendency is to leave music to speak for itseif - a taboo subject in conversation. Often the result of negative experiences, this argument states that music has been talked to death, that music is a sacred realm, about which one neither can nor should try to say anything meaningful in words.

Neither the technological conception of music, nor the tendency to keep well away from music's internal affairs intends to bury music. And so, somehow or other, thank God, music always manages to survive, and musical expression arises its head even when little or nothing is undertaken in its favour. In the long term, however, a situation such as the present one, in which music appears more and more by chance than design, must breed the same effects as we meet in the environment; a disproportionate growth of wasteland, due to the irresponsible treatment of nature.

What can we do? Can we say things about musical expression? And if so, how can such a talk influence instrumental technique, even fundamentally transform it? In other words: how can technical ability be transformed into truly musical impulses?

Three points of failure in present musical education

In 1981, at the ESTA conference in Edinburgh, I held a lecture which proposed chamber music as an opportunity for training in musical teamwork; I spoke about the imbalance between the development of musicians as soloists and as chamber musicians, about the imbalance of the individual and social elements of music. Then, as now, I was concerned with the broader contexts surrounding a specific theme. Surveying the current situation in musical education, I made the following remarks:

"We now have excellent centres of musical training throughout the world, and as far as the promotion of talent is concerned, all the necessary connections are in place. That is not to say, however, that ideal conditions prevail. On the contrary, there are many trouble-zones in our musical lives; in reality, however, all such problems belong to the chamber-music dilemma. I am thinking in particular of the problems in the teaching of theory, where the indispensable inner musical ingredients, which are supposed to be enriched through maximal technical understanding, often turn into stone instead of bread, because the capacity for experiencing music is insufflciently developed - sometimes it is even directly obstructed. More specifically, I am thinking about the difficulties of permeating instrumental technique with expression, of transforming technical impulses into musical ones, of generating musical life."[2]

I had in mind two further imbalances: the gap between an all too often abstract music-theory and a conscious experience of musical phenomena; and the separation of sterile instrumental perfection from that which turns the musician himseif into a musical instrument. My concern today, then, has arisen from this context.

It must however be added, and emphasised, that precisely the two trouble-zones which I have just mentioned are extremely closely connected: these are, in short, the problems of musical imagination and of musical realisation. Any attempt to answer the basic question of my present lecture - how instrumental or technical potential can be transformed into musical impulses - should pay

[2] Deckert, Hans Erik: *Giving and Taking*, trans. Juliana Hodkinson (lecture held at ESTA conference, Edinburgh 1981)

attention to these areas.

The musical imagination

First of all, however, I would like to articulate the basic question more clearly. It is quite easy to demonstrate the vehemence of this paradox, which seems to concern us more and more.

In his book, 'The Art of Piano Playing', the incomparable pianist Heinrich Neuhaus writes:

"How many times have I heard pupils who have had no real musical or artistic schooling, i.e., no easthetic education, who are musical insufficiently developed, attempt to render the compositions of great composers! Musical language was not clear to them; instead of speech, they achieved some sort of muttering; instead of a clear idea - only some meagre fragments of thought; instead of a strong emotion - some abortive pangs; instead of profound logic - "effect without cause", and instead of a poetic image - a prosaic shadow. And, of course, so-called technique was consequently also inadequate. This is the kind of playing you get if the artistic iamge is distorted, or is not at the core of the rendering, or is altogether absent.

"[...] Music lives within us, in our brain, in our consciousness, our emotions, our imagination; its "dornicile' can be accurately established: it is our hearing. The instrument exists without us; it is a particle of the objective outside world and as such must be studied, must be mastered and made to comply with our inner world, and obey our creative will.

"Work on the artistic image should begin at the very first stage of learning the piano and note reading. By this I mean that if a child is able to reproduce some very simple melody, it is essential to make this first "performance" expressive, in other words, that the nature of the performance should correspond to the nature (the 'content') of the melody; for this purpose, it is especially advisabie to use folk tunes in which the emotional and poetic element is much more apparent than even in the best educational compositions for children. The child should be made, at the earliest possible stage, to play a sad melody sadly, a gay melody gaily, a solemn melody solemnly, etc. and should make his musical and artistic intention completely clear. Experienced teachers of children's schools report than children of average talent are much more enthusiastic in rendering folk tunes than the educational children's literature which is concerned with purely technical or "intellectual" problems (for instance: the playing of minims, crotchets, etc., rests, staccato, legato, etc.); such problems, which help to develop a childs fingers and brain, his effective 'working' energy, and are consequently *absolutely essential and irreplaceable,* leave his feelings and imagination completely unaffected."[3]

Precisely the conclusion of his inspiring words demonstrates clearly the matter in question, which is captured even in the title of the first chapter in Neuhaus' book: 'The artistic image of a musical work'.

Another musician whom I regard as a foremost spirit of our times is William Pleeth. Countless cellists owe him the decisive impulse for their musical lives. In bis book 'Cello' he begins the first chapter, 'Technique in perspective', with the following sentence: "The spirit of music is the only thing which can rightfully dictate physical action on the cello". Later on, he continues:

"People who think in terms of 'studying technique' have made a very small world of technique. You cannot fully learn technique, you can only learn the basics of technique - real technique is something which only begins to take off when it is caught up in a creative musical idea ... This fanaticism about 'technique', this practising of 'technique' as an end in itself, worries me - it severs the thread between the physical means and the music and creates a separateness which is contrary to the nature of things."[4]

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[3] Neuhaus, Heinrich: *The Art ofPiano Playing,* trans. K.A. Leibovitch (Barrie & Jenkins, London 1973)
[4] Pleeth, William: *Cello* (complied and edited Nona Pyron, Macdonald, London 1982, Yehudi Menuhin guides).

Lastly, we find also one of our greatest colleagues, Mstislav Rostropovich, taking issue on this subject in an interview with the journal 'Musik und Medizin', where he says:

"One must look beyond the notes to find out what it is that a composer's music is trying to say to us. When I have worked intensively with a piece in this way I can step onto the performance stage with a good feeling. I know I won't be one of those who drop their cello, or the bow, out of nerves. I am simply glad to play, and I keep in mind the maxim; *how* I play is nothing compared to *what* I am playing. Maybe it's not a very good example, but it sometimes seems to me as if I were a priest speaking to a congregation, not with my own words, but with those of God."[5]

Rostropovich answers, to the question whether his articulative nuances are the result not only of technical repetition, but also of bis imaginative capacity:

"Yes, that has always been my working-method, also in teaching. Every musician of whatever level must above all know what it is he wants to produce. The sound must be prepared first of all inside the head, and in the heart; only when I have this image of the sound can I turn to my instrument. And if the idea, the desire, is strong enough, then the muscles can perform miracles. With a purely technical method, on the other hand, it just never comes right."

All these quotes are merely intended to give a few testimonies to my way of thinking, although many more examples could be named: Pablo Casals, Isaac Stern, Yehudi Menuhin.

Musical realisation

What can we conclude from all the above quotes? Neuhaus speaks about the artistic image of a musical work, and of the music of our inner life. Pleeth talks of the creative musical idea as the origin of all work with the instrument. And Rostropovich urges us to look beyond the notes and to produce the sound first and foremost in our heads and hearts.

We can begin to see an unconditional prerequisite:

Music begins not with the instrument, but with a fixed image of what it is that the musician wishes to work on. First the image, then its realisation.

Such a statement should be superfluous, and above all nothing new to the true musician. Nevertheless, looking around at music's status in present times, I believe it has to be stated.

At the beginning, then, we need the skills which enable us to build musical images. These are the skills which are taught, for example, in many music colleges, as subsidiary subjects, such as aural training. But aural lessons should be equally as important as the student's main instrumental studies, not a mere extra. A prominent personality in Danish musical life once said, when addressing instrumental teachers at a college: "Aural training is much too important to be left to aural teachers!" He was making two points with this provocation: firstly, he was drawing attention to the fact that in this subject one runs the risk of proceeding merely 'technically', thus ruining all chances of making a link with the student's first-instrument studies; secondly, instrumental teachers themselves are reminded that they have a duty to help develop not only the student's capacity for musical realisation, but also his conscious musical imagination. As we have heard from Heinrich Neuhaus, the same is true in principle at the elementary

[5] Stegmann, Monika: *Interview mit Mstistlaw Rostropowitsch (Musik und Medizin,* Neu Isenburg, Februar 1976)

level. Just as it is a foregone conclusion that teachers can intercept helpfully any technical problem of the pupil, so must it be a matter of course that not only the external but also the internal musical development is encouraged. How often it happens that these possibilities are not realised! In this state of affairs, as I said at the beginning, music is left to chance operations, or even completely forgotten, with the result that it often suffocates.

We have an instrumental profession, but no music profession. Unfortunately, music education often resembles sports training in that pupils are taught to chase after gold medals

A living musical imagination is the source of all musical practice. This is the only way of setting the process in motion. Only when I have the musical idea inside me, can I take up the instrument - out of the desire to realise this inner idea. It is in this field of tension that the entirety of our instrumental rewards appear. We step eagerly into the working-process, in order to form a technical ‘basis‘, as William Pleeth calls it; every detail must be examined in the ‘plastic workshop‘. Physical actions on the instrument relating to the difficult passages are analysed and systematically worked on through individual practice-methods. We concentrate on the most precise matters of timing. However, it is essential that we remain rooted in this field of tension. We have to experience that in every step of the realisation, the artistic picture is also being developed. It must be like the experience of walking towards the horizon: as I approach it, it seems to move away from me. The musician must never depart from the space which lies between imagination and reality. When this happens there is a great risk of danger, and apart from that, it is not far from this to technical free-wheeling: an hour spent working on the first bar, an hour on the second, then an hour on the first and second bars together, followed by an hour on the third . . . I am sure that we have all at some time or another practised the many and various manifestations of this kind of technical free-wheeling. Who has never had cause to yawn when listening to someone practising? We know that this neutral practising of technical manoeuvres is not only a danger to the spirit, but can even ultimately diminish our technical abilities.

Practice as a qualitative process

It can never be emphasised enough that music is both the outset and goal of all practice, placing its craft and tools in a purely servile role. Heinrich Neuhaus says, in the previously-quote chapter of his book: “I propose the following dialectical triad: thesis - music; antithesis - instrument; synthesis - performance.“

This transforms practising into a qualitative process. This means of practice is the life-path of the musician, indeed of every artistically active person, and it leads not only from music to the general control of physiological and instrumental functions, but also back to music. We all know the strength of the influences of our individual personalities on our work. Music can only live inside us when we ourselves are music. Most people today are not music, but they could become so. I am thinking of Kodaly‘s saying: “We must find new ways if we want to raise music to the status of a common good.“

This unity of music and musician has not only the consequence that a living teaching method should always begin with the individual, but also that we need only to raise an already present and decisive experience from our everyday lives into consciousness. This is the job of self-confidence, a factor whose importance we already know very well from experience.

We practise and practise, but one passage just won‘t come right. Why not? Is it that I can‘t play this passage, or is it perhaps just that my ability to do so is blocked? I would like to illustrate my point with two contrasting examples from my own experience:

In the 1950s, Otto Klemperer came to Copenhagen to rehearse the Eroica symphony with the Royal chapel, Copenhagen‘s philharmonic orchestra. The opening of the second movement was nothing but a rumble from the double-bass department: half the short notes fell on the beat and the rest landed all over the place - a complete mess. Klemperer gave the orchestra half an hour‘s break, stood himself in front of the bass section and gave them a lesson which they probably didn‘t forget in a hurry. Anyone who can remember Klemperer will be able to imagine the scene. Here, it wasn‘t a question of being able or unable to play the passage; it was a question of tackling the task in a concrete way.

The other experience was under Ferenc Fricsay. We were playing Brahms‘ second symphony. In the beautiful B major Adagio the cellists have the theme. The whole cello-section was gripped in concentration: trying to play in tune, get the right bowing, be in the right part of the bow, not fumble the rhythm, and above all get the notes right! All our efforts were concentrated on just not making any mistakes. It sounded quite correct, but something was missing. Fricsay looked at us benevolently and said, “It doesn‘t matter if you play out of tune - the main thing is, it should sound good“. So we played it again, and of course it was no longer out of tune; more importantly, however, Fricsay had removed our inhibitions. In this case, it was the question of self-confidence alone, and not the concrete approach, which produced the right results.

This experience with Fricsay is not only proof of the positive aspects of self-confidence; it also appeals to us not always to approach things immediately from the technical perspective, when they go wrong. In some cases a purely musical impulse is sufficient to bring everything to fruition. It must be possible to deploy the right technical procedures through purely musical means. This must be practised just as much as the analytical method of systematic reworking on a technical basis.

I once tried to let a double-bass section in on the art of continuo-playing in a work by Händel, by drawing their attention to the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic structure of the bass line, and to the necessity of being aware of the melody, and the avoiding of a mechanical pulse. They couldn‘t understand me; they wanted to know exactly how much bow to use, up or down, short or long, piano or forte ... In other words, all the things they had learnt and been practising for years; they could only understand this kind of language and nothing else. Why didn‘t it work? Because the musical language, as Heinrich Neuhaus formulated it, was not understood; because the bassists were lacking a living musical imagination, an artistic image.

Inner playing and inner singing

Thus, I come to the most important questions: how can we develop our musical imagination, how can we relearn this musical language? How must we practise, so that music comes alive within us? I have already said that aural training cannot achieve all this alone. How, then?

We could try to play music in our thought-world, with neither instrument nor physical movement. Many people do this, sitting still or lying down - we should all do so. To begin with, the pieces may be very simple, becoming progressively more difficult. This was how I learnt to practise the Bach suites. It is important not just to run through the music in one‘s head, but also to concentrate on the whole process of playing. Therefore it is particularly useful to practise slowly in one‘s mind, so that each individual movement can be checked.

I can also recommend another, more unusual exercise: silent choral singing, or the inner singing of music

in several parts. Even if for no other reason than this, it is important that every musician has the experience of singing in a choir at some time in his life. The conductor Hans von Buelow once said, "if you can't sing, then don't play the piano" - a comment which we can of course transfer to all instrumentalists.

It is now relatively rare to discover singing as one of a person's most spontaneous means of expressing himself. I once experienced silent singing in a choir. A good friend of mine, the composer, pianist, and music teacher Christoph Peter, who unfortunately died very young, was rehearsing a Mozart canon with about two hundred singers. They agreed that in the course of singing the canon, everyone should stop singing on a certain sign from the conductor, and the choir should continue to think through the music silently until a second sign from the conductor for us to re-enter. It was miraculous; everyone came in very precisely and in tune, as if nothing had happened. Such experiences are of immeasurable worth.

Musical Transcendence

I would like to suggest sound production as the starting-point for approaching basic musical ideas. Is the tone produced by an individual that of personal ambition, of exhibitionism, or does it strive to be true to the expression of the work, reflecting all the music's refinements and nuances, radiating transcendence? The brilliant, dazzling tone-quality characteristic of our times is quite often the result of a more or less exclusive pursuit of perfection. We find music caught up in a process which the sociologist Konrad Lorenz describes in an introduction to his most recent book, 'The Waning of Humaneness':

"Thought habits engendered by technology have become consolidated into doctrines of the technocratic system, which has isolated and protected itself through self-immunisation. Technocracy, as a result, has become over-organisational and its enervating effect increases with the number of people to be organised. An absence of those multifarious interchanges that are prerequisites for every creative development is also obvious within the cultural realm. The predicarnent of young people today is especially critical. Forestalling the threatening apocalypse will devolve on their perceptions of value; their sensibilities of the beautiful and worthwhile must be aroused and renewed. And just these values are those being suppressed by scientism and technomorphic thinking. Educative measures begin with an exercising of Gestalt (form) perception, our only means for achieving a sensitivity to harmonies."[6]

Such a thesis, when applied to our subject, implies that all work with musical phenomena must begin with single tones.

All that does not belong to music - all efforts directed towards playing the most difficult pieces as bad and fast as possible - is musical waste. We must travel to the centre of the experience of the tone, where space and time form a unity, where music appears as something inaudible. The audible is merely the physical sound. Music can only arise when a person's perception of sound becomes a perception of time, when the listener senses the pull of an inner current. Oddly enough, we are all very well able to perceive when a tone transcends and when it does not. Our search for the substance of music through the study of perception can lead us to the various musical elements, allowing us a qualitative experience of all musical terminology in the fields of melody, rhythm, and harmony.

What are the qualitative properties of intervals?
What is the inspiration behind the phenomenon of the leading note?
What source of life exists in a single rhythmic phrase?
What do 'major' and 'minor' actually mean?
What is tonality as a language, as a conveyor of emotions?

[6] Lorenz, Konrad: *The Waning ofHumaneness,* trans. R.W. Kickert (Unwin Hyman, London, 1988).

What is a cadence, when we regard it as tension from the tonic over the subdominant to the dominant and back to the tonic?
What is the nature of the drama inherent in the Neapolitan sixth?
What is the polarity between consonance and dissonance?
What is the basic qualitative experience of triple and of quadruple metre?
What kind of intensity of movement lies in a modulation?
What do the terms ‘fugue‘ and ‘sonata‘ actually signify?
How do the fugue and sonata gain their biographical or ‘narrative‘ forms?
What is the real significance of studying counterpoint?

A propos counterpoint - here is a perfect example of the shocking famine in the world of our musical imagination. Counterpoint lessons often turn into mathematical torture sessions instead of offering a chance of the development of the student‘s sense of musical form; they become like a dried-out riverbed, in which a life-giving stream once flowed.

It is possible to experience each of the musical elements as a centre of power, as a spiritual fact, which we approach with ever more respect and dedication. This brings us into music‘s most sacred sphere, where I believe all study of music should have its focus - namely, in musical phenomenology. It seems that the need for musical awareness, as distinct from intellectual awareness, is constantly growing. I am in no doubt that many contemporary musicians regard the relation between Musik and Mensch, which has been corrupted above all by the mass media, as a rather schizophrenic one, in comparison to what it once was. We have only to read some of the many accounts of musical art - stretching from St Augustinus, over Arezzo, Luther, Shakespeare and Goethe, up to the present day - to us that music is a world unto itseif. Hence the attempt to approach musical phenomena through practice, a much admired example of which is then music-phenomenology teaching of the conductor Sergiu Celibidache.

Music as tue source of all instrumental processes

The paradox of the unity of instrumental technique and musical expression is that of the unity of a player‘s capacity for musical imagination and musical realisation. Imagination in music - the formation of musical ideas - necessitates that all the musical elements form a constant current of inspiration which, in turn, permeates the player‘s technique, or in other words, orientates the technique toward a musical leading image.

The more that every movement with the instrument, and every technical term, is deployed in relation to this qualitative process, the greater is the possibility of broadening technique into musical expression. Every study, very scale, down to the smallest technical exercise, can be developed into a musical endeavour. When music is the starting-point, even the most concrete of technical exercises must lead to music. This is my only way of interpreting Heinrich Neuhaus‘ triad: thesis - music; antithesis - instrument; synthesis - performance.

A performance, for example, such as the one which Karl Zuckmayer once described after he had heard Enrico Mainardi‘s interpretation of three of the Bach cello suites:

“I wanted more than anything else to hear this C major suite - this dance of the heavens in which I find the whole world expressed once over again, followed by a repetition of the whole concert. But then came the wonderful D minor suite, and after the interval the E fiat major, with its powerful full bows at the opening, like the silhouette of a cathedral. That night I wrote in my diary, “unsurpassable“. Unsurpassable indeed by anything in this world, even the most perfect recording that could ever be invented. Nothing could surpass this feeling of being present at the

moment of artistic transcendence, comprised as much of suffering, fear and agony, as of happiness at achieving that goal of rising above the material. The figure on the platform is Apollo and Marsyas in one, and we become a part of him as we share the trernendous tension, the radiation of energy between one note and the next, literaily within the same space, the same moment, the same timeless duration - and as a result a very real and almost physical aura is created, embracing performer and audience, signifying the Eros of artistic creation, an artistic representation of the work, which we can rightly call 're-production' in the true sense of the word."[7]

No musician would deny such experiences. As music teachers, we are given the privilege of the artistic development of the people with whom we work. The significance of this task was articulated particularly clearly by Arnold Schoenberg a few weeks before his death in a letter which he wrote to the director of the Academy of Music in Jerusalem:

"I cannot express in words how gladly I should have contributed to this institution through both teaching and personal dedication. Teaching has always been my passion. I have always wanted to discover how to help beginners best, how to familiarise them with the technical, spiritual, and ethical demands of our art, how to make them understand that artistic ethics do exist, and to make them understand why we must never stop cultivating them, why we must fight against every atternpt to undermine artistic ethics ... I would so gladly have promoted this institution's universal significance as a counterpart to the trend to surrender before an amoralizing, commercial materialisrn, behind which all the ethical conditions of our art are disappearing more and more. A universal ideal should not be allowed to be left in the hands of dilettantes, who produce instrurnentalists for whom the greatest skill is that of being able to adapt themselves to the requirements of entertainment. Those who graduate from such an institute as yours should be nothing less than the true priests of music, who worship their art with the same reverence as shown by God' priests before the altar."[8]

Translated from the German by Juliana Hodkinson.

[7] Mainardi, Enrico: *Bekenntnisse eines Künstlers* (Brockhaus, Wiesbaden, 1977).

[8] Schoenberg, Arnold: *Correspondence* (complied and annotated by Egbert M. Ennulat, Scarecrow Press, 1991)