

Of Means and Ends

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“Those that seek not to make mistakes, shall make mistakes.” (Andrew Buskell)

Andrew Buskell, for those unfamiliar with the name, is a bright, creative and enthusiastic teenager. He also happens to be one of my piano students. On his own time, Andrew regularly unearths unfamiliar and intriguing music, and often brings it in to his weekly lesson. His tastes are eclectic, to say the least. One day, he appeared with a piano transcription of Stravinsky's Firebird. For several weeks in a row, he subjected my patient and long-suffering ears to some downloaded sheet music from a video game (Final Fantasy, which appears to have no end of sequels, raising some questions about the accuracy of the title). To another lesson, he brought a CD player with a piece of jazz that had captured his imagination. Occasionally he composes something and plays it for me. One day a few months ago, he had been doing some reading about Zen and presented me with a sheet of paper on which he had written some of his own Zen-like aphorisms about piano playing. I glanced through it, we both laughed, and I posted it on my notice board and gleefully used his own sayings to make suggestions about his playing. However, his aphorism about mistakes kept coming back to me to haunt my thoughts and after a while, I began to find a curious wisdom in it.

Many students, unless relentlessly encouraged otherwise, focus their attention on hitting the right notes to the exclusion of all else, particularly when first learning a piece of music. I use the term “hitting” intentionally. They lurch frantically from place to place on the keyboard with such anxious, startled movements that even if they happen to find themselves at the right note, they are so worked up that it is impossible for them to play with any sensitivity. This kind of “bull in a china shop” approach invariably does violence to the music, the piano, the teachers' ears, and last but definitely not least, the player. No wonder so many people think playing the piano is hard physical labor!

Once they know the notes, a student's focus can change from trying to hit the right notes to trying to avoid playing the wrong notes. And if I do not constantly pay attention when I practice, I can just as easily fall victim to this as my students! I suspect that this trap comes as a result of two powerful and mutually reinforcing influences: a natural human desire to succeed as well as a strong culturally reinforced need to be seen by others as being right and successful all the time and at all costs. The outward trappings of success are usually richly rewarded in our society and are also interpreted as meaning that the successful person is a happy and well-adjusted person. They apparently have it all! This apparent reality is contradicted by consistent evidence in our newspapers and magazines. They report in technicolor the misery and shattered personal lives of apparently successful people, from beautiful movie stars to flamboyant CEO's to wealthy sports stars. In a piece of music, the notes are the outer trappings of the music and are of course indispensable, but they are not the music itself.

By this time, the student's awkward motions have been well practiced so that they feel normal and natural. They may think that since they are actually getting the right notes, that this is the way it has to be, and that this is sufficient to play well. However, they still continue to hit wrong notes, and the diligent ones practice more and more to try and avoid making those pesky mistakes. Often, they keep practicing the same way, tense, nervous, and increasingly frustrated, so they find themselves in a vicious circle. The simple intention not to make a mistake can cause physical tension, which makes it more likely that they will hit a wrong note, so they try harder not to hit a wrong note. "Those that seek not to make mistakes, shall make mistakes."

The problem is not that many students are unintelligent, unmusical, or even uninterested. It can simply be that they are putting their attention in the wrong place. When learning a piece, it is a given that the student must play the right notes. But having decided on which piece to learn, the notes themselves become less important than how to reach them easily and efficiently. If the movement is right, then the note will inevitably be right. It is somewhat like setting out from home to go to school. One must know where the school is in relation to the home to be able to find it. At the keyboard, the way in which a student gets from point A to point B determines whether or not they get the right note.

About 100 years ago, an Australian actor and orator named Frederick Matthias Alexander developed the Alexander Technique in response to a crippling performance problem. He would lose his voice in the middle of his performances, and nobody could figure out why. Alexander persevered on his own and discovered that he was using his entire body in an inefficient, uncoordinated and in fact destructive manner. After several years of concentrated effort, he found ways to use his body more efficiently and eventually cured himself. He concluded that it would be a far more valuable contribution for him to impart his technique of correct body use than giving any number of Shakespearean speeches, so he began to teach his technique. Briefly, the Alexander Technique is a way of guiding people to train themselves in the proper and efficient use of their own body by teaching them to inhibit ineffective and harmful movement habits and discover new movements that work well. In most people's movement, they tend to concentrate on the end they are trying to gain rather than the way they do it. For example, a person wanting to stand would make the decision to stand. Then, instead of paying attention to the process by which they get from the sitting to the standing position, they keep their attention focused on the actual final position. Alexander's terms were "endgaining", concentrating solely on the position itself, and "means whereby", attending to the action or the way to move. Piano students continually make the mistake of endgaining (focusing on the note) rather than paying attention to the means whereby they gain that end (the movement itself).

Of course, focusing attention in the appropriate place is also applicable to other things besides notes. Simply playing the right note involves a rather crude action when compared to the subtlety of movement necessary to play that note with good rhythm, dynamics and articulation within the context of the musical phrase. To discover and maintain perfect or near-perfect movement for each note is a subtle and time

consuming task, and requires a constantly varying balance that depends on the piano, the hall, and the student's mental and physical state. Students must pay close attention to the movement in order to let go of any extraneous tension, a never-ending process of comparing internal sensation (movement/means) with external results (sound/end). They must be willing to admit their errors to themselves and face those errors down, for without the observation, admission, and solving of mistakes, there is no learning. To simply try and avoid making mistakes, especially without awareness of what they are, is another way of saying, "I am afraid to learn."

Playing even an elementary piece of music is a staggeringly complex aggregate of a very large number of simple movements. Any added complication to each simple movement can quickly add up to crippling muscular tension. The only way to avoid this is to pay very close attention to the "means whereby" the pianist gains their end. The blind alley of simply trying to avoid mistakes can probably wreak more havoc than any other approach. In his novel "East of Eden", the great American author John Steinbeck writes: "If one were properly to perform a difficult and subtle act, he should first inspect the end to be achieved and then, once he accepted the end as desirable, he should forget it completely and concentrate solely on the means" (ch. 21, para. 1.) Steinbeck, Alexander and Andrew Buskell all offer similar advice. And I can't think of a better general principle for learning to play the piano.