

# MUSIC AND METHOD

## On Method in Musical Education

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### *Medium and goal*

Music exists for humanity; but *where* does it exist? It exists within each living person. We cannot explain music, but we can experience it. Music is not reducible to mere sound; but it can arise through the medium of sound. This we all know from our own experience.

According to one survey, there are only about 300 000 true lovers of music world-wide<sup>1</sup>. With a world population of around five billion, this is equivalent to just six in every hundred thousand people; a depressingly small proportion in view of the contribution which music could make to the solution of world problems.

Having a method means having a path or procedure to follow; thus, having a musical method entails following a path or procedure towards music. We need a path to follow, in order to bring out the music which resides within us. But which is the right one?

In the field of music there are countless methods, schools, systems and techniques. Perhaps the two best known are the Kodaly and Suzuki methods. One talks of “the French school”, “the German“, or “the Russian schools“. Violinists refer to Sevcik and Flesch, cellists use Casals or call themselves adherents of the Tortelier school, or speak of the Navarra technique. Double bassists have to contend with the coexistence of two completely different bow-holds.

In earlier times there was even more on offer on the ‘method-market‘. A small book from the 1920s by a piano-teacher, Theodor Ritte, is representative of the manifold endeavours in this field in past times; it bears the title, ‘How To Become a Virtuoso Pianist: Advice and Tips for the Ambitious‘<sup>2</sup>. The book introduces the “Energetos-Ritte“ system, otherwise called the finger-sport system, which advertises itself as “a completely unique gymnastic-autosuggestive experience“. An epilogue quotes from the disciples of this method; one director of a music college writes, for example, “I have applied your system to my own playing and can say that it

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<sup>1</sup> information from the conductor, Sergiu Celibidache

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Ritte: *Wie werde ich Klaviervirtuose? Ratschläge und Winke für Aufivartsstrebende*, Alexander Fink & Co., Freiburg i. Br., 1919

works wonders“. This eulogy ends with the following passage: “I intend to introduce your system in my college, which consists of 30 piano-teachers and over 1100 pupils“. Another recommendation claims, “the life-work of Ritte should become the Gospel of all musicians“.

We seem to be confronted with a variety of methods, but are they really paths to *music*? Are the majority of them not merely paths to the instrument, to technical dexterity?

We know that numerous methods have indeed produced miracles above all in our instrumental development, and that countless pupils have been helped. The arrival of the twentieth century brought the research of instrumental, physiological and psychological laws to the musical community; the triumphal march of science invaded even music. Everything which could be described as a tool was to be employed. Our present high standard of technique, a prerequisite for the music industry, is due in large part to the originators of different methods and schools, to the musicians whose experience we now draw on.

The necessary unity of musician and instrument has however led to a change of focus; the *means* have become far more central to our concerns than the *end*. However, when our instrumental method is not part of a musical method, we are no longer on the path towards music. An instrumental method which is not seen as a permanently transitory phase *en route* to a higher goal can be fatally damaging to the aspects of music which concern us most closely. However necessary attention to the external or technical elements of music may be, obsession with the material is the first stage of musical oblivion, leaving the musician no more than an instrumental robot.

### ***The fatal tendency toward technical media***

The age of technology is responsible for the materialistic narrow-mindedness in all our current-day methods. This imbalance is the logical consequence of a cast of mind typical in our present lives. In the face of increasing inundation of music through technical media and other mechanical elements in our daily lives, we must ask ourselves where our point of saturation lies. Where does the role of serving and helping end, and where does the enslavement of the human begin? At what point is it no longer the case that humans are being served and helped by these media, but rather that we are being enslaved by their dictatorship?

Contemporary musical life is already largely mechanised; this fact alone is already problematic. Moreover, a gigantic recording industry makes our relationship with music progressively more technical, thereby increasing the danger of regarding technical perfection as an end in itself. Wilhelm Furtwängler recognised this trend already in 1931, stating in his essay, ‘The Vital Force of Music’<sup>3</sup>:

“the criterion today of a good piano recital or orchestral concert has come to be measured more against the perfect, balanced and omniscient recording than by the quality of the ever-unique live performance. Thus, the standards and norms of the recording studio have been transferred in

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<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Furtwängler: ***Die Lebenskraft der Musik***, in *Ton und Wort, Aufsätze und Vorträge*, F.A.Brockhaus, Wiesbaden, 1966

large part to the concert hall. Technical perfection has brought with it a fear of radically slow tempi, of large contrasts, and of silence and pauses, and worst of all, a fear of everything which is extreme, structure- and form-giving, and educative in the deepest sense. This is a fundamental change in our whole sense of musicianship. Music has lost its driving, living and spontaneous character; rhythm, the pulsation of the living heart, has been replaced by the mechanical, schematic beat of a machine, thereby destroying the organic shape which permeates music down to the smallest sung phrase and gives its content real warmth and sinewy, living existence. The more interpretations have identified with the mercilessly all-hearing recording, the more acute music's malnutrition has become, assuming the insipid taste of distilled water which cannot even be improved with artificial additives. Thus we arrive at the present situation of musical excess."

The fact that Furtwängler also made records, or that recording techniques have improved greatly since those times, does not weaken his argument. The betrayal that emanates from the recording industry is as perfectly crafted as the recordings themselves. As far as Furtwängler's sound-documents are concerned (which, incidentally, were often recordings of live performances), it should be pointed out that not even the slightest trace of recording-studio standardisation can be detected in them.

I have made this excursion into the technical environment surrounding our musical lives in order to cast some light on the background and sphere of influence of the musical methods currently in use. This entire range of problems throws up a further issue, which is of far more importance for teachers; namely, the issue of *how* to teach, which is equally important to consider as *what* we teach. To put it bluntly: should we be bending our pupils into form, like a piece of flexible wire; or are they individuals whose unique personalities we must respect, and in whom we must discover the true instrument of music?

### ***A question of dogma versus communication between individuals***

Should we imprison our pupils in the confines of a single indisputable method, reducing them to obedient subordinates of a single, unsurpassable, solely valid method, or should we develop a method which takes account of the pupils' individualities, allowing the instrumental and anatomical laws to be funnelled through the pupils' own personalities into music? Are we trying to give them orders, or are we striving to set up a dialogue? Is the teacher someone 'up there' with the pupil 'down below', or should the ethical slogan *primus inter pares* ('first among equals') be our guiding principle? The answer to such questions is not hard to find.

In earlier centuries, the power of the teacher and dependence of the pupil were far more pronounced. In the twentieth century we have experienced the assumption of personal responsibility in all thinkable areas of human action. Any method which fails to take account of this overlooks the efforts of the individual in our time to become, under the guidance of an expert, his or her own teacher. Working on the self-sufficiency of the pupil has become a central task of modern teaching. The days of the professor's oracular role seem to be over. Pupils have become an active part in the general teaching process, with the teacher's cards on the table, as it were. It should not be left to the pupil only to ask questions of the omniscient teacher; rather, the teacher should set about questioning the pupil: what was wrong with what he or she has just

played; which are the weak points which let the playing down; what must be practised; where does the phrase lead; where does the movement culminate? This gives the pupil a chance to air all the possible answers. And if the pupil does have questions for the teacher, they can be provocatively answered with, "I don't know". This turns the tables on the pupil, communicating the message that we are not the real teachers, we only represent the teaching process; the pupil is the real teacher, taking lessons from him- or herself. We are only the catalysts.

This approach may seem to reduce the role of the teacher, but the opposite is in fact true. The motto 'first among equals' still emphasises the importance of the *first*. Naturally, the fundamental impulses and their corresponding methods can only originate from the teacher; but as they are taken on board by pupils, they are subject to rich differentiation and nuance, in contrast to the production-line attitude, which reduces the pupil to anonymous robotics. One of the crucial differences between humans and parrots is that we are capable of more than mere imitation. It cannot be our intention to allow a military element to creep into music. There is a vital place for order within music, but military intervention destroys all that is musical. Paul Rolland, a source of inspiration for all string players, said once that militarism is the dialectical opposite of music.

It must never be our intention to drill people as the military do their horses, to gain maximum achievement from them for our own uses, but rather we must help each individual toward personal and musical maturity, through the challenge of the musical material in question, and through the responsibilities to which we, as teachers, are bound.

We are bound to the uniqueness of each lesson, to what occurs in the 'constant moment' in the interaction between the individual qualities of the teacher's giving and the pupil's receiving of information. This uniqueness condition does not in any way reduce the role of the teacher; on the contrary, it broadens immeasurably the sphere of teaching responsibility.

Musical education is not a side-kick to artistry; it is in itself the art of an art, and its structure is akin to that of a theme with an infinite number of variations.

Hence we may conclude that there is in effect only one single method: the human, living and breathing *method of the moment*. This method has no list of rules, no right or wrong answers; it knows no dogma, pedantry or philistinism. It does, however, contain all that we have inherited from the testimonies of the great musicians and excellent teachers which we know from history, and particularly from our own century - all that we have borrowed from the rich treasury of our predecessors, and which has grown to be such an integral part of us that we may use it as a vital teaching source.

In addition we have at our disposal our own curiosity as eternal pupils; we continue to study music to the ends of our lives, seeking perpetually to deepen our musical, technical and pedagogical experience. And, last but not least, we have a wealth of literature on the teaching of music, from which we must select the fruits which will satisfy our spiritual hunger. Unfortunately, it is all too common for this flood of publications to mirror the tendency which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, namely to 'scientise' our work.

Some time ago I discovered the following listing in Doblinger's catalogue of new publications: "Music and its psychologies: the socio-psychological, eco-psychological, cognitional-psychological, developmental-psychological, differential-psychological, and neuropsychological aspects of musical perception and complex psychologies and psychotherapy. 140 pages."

All I can say is that we are lucky to have - in addition to so many complex "aspects" of music - the European String Teachers' Association, ESTA! In my address on the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the Danish branch of ESTA, I described the Association as a "permanent forum for the broadening of horizons". The culmination of our work lies in the individual teaching capacities of each one of us; the experiences we gather in our teaching lives are the life-giving forces for our existence as musicians. When people ask me who I studied with, I like to answer, "with my students".

I have tried to set down the conditions of the 'living method of the moment'. I have spoken of the necessity of an art of teaching based on the individuality of the pupil, and I have mentioned the danger which is represented by methods which do not transcend a purely technical control of the instrument.

### ***Dissonances in pedagogical life***

What is the actual situation? Where are the possible frictions, dissonances and errors, the confrontations between so-called truths, each of them claiming to be the one and only universally valid method? Should we find it unsurprising that things can evolve in different ways?

A single example should suffice to illustrate the intensity of this deeply problematic situation; namely, the passage of a pupil from one teacher to another - an entirely natural process in the musical development of a young person. What happens? The new teacher receives this pupil with a thoroughly negative condemnation of all that has been learned previously. This is the more or less obligatory counterpoint, even the *cantus firmus*, through which the invalidity of all previous work is revealed to the pupil.

Of course it may be that all or much of what was learned before is simply incorrect, but even then, is such a condemnation justified? It may be that it is the pupil, and not the teacher, who is wrong. All too often, a change of teachers is accompanied by the undermining of the former teacher's competence. I am sure that we are all aware of this, as all or most of us have found ourselves on one or other side of this transfer in the past. We can either dismiss the whole topic as trivial, or we can try to see the positive side of it; such important changes in the pupil's independent development can contribute to a wonderful broadening of perspective.

How is it when the pupil proceeds to his or her third or fourth teacher, and has to start from scratch each time, maybe having to change the bow-hold or completely alter all the basics of playing technique? In the maze of these problems, in the turmoil of method, is there any indication to the pupil when he or she will be able to begin addressing actual *musical* phenomena?

We, as teachers, know that there will be something in particular to work on more intensively with each new pupil that comes to us. Of course there will be some correction of the basics, and there may even be problems which are virtually insoluble. We all know that development is a purely individual thing. Even after a thorough musical education, it is not uncommon for fundamental problems to lead a pupil right back to elementary questions. All the rudiments need a general inspection from time to time, just as every house or garden needs attention. Similarly, in music, we must continually reckon with the possibility that a technical check-up is in order. No teacher should be held to blame if such check-ups seem most relevant when a pupil changes teachers; in fact, this is an opportune moment to intervene.

There is clearly no point in driving a highly motivated nine-year-old to tears with intensive finger drills and bowing exercises, or in failing a pupil in the graduation examination of the institution where she has received all her education, simply because the external examiner does not approve of her technique. These are, however, situations which do occur, and they represent the senseless abuse of the building blocks of our medium. The kind of narrowmindedness which only considers technique, ignoring the laws of individuality, ends all too frequently in frustration. False ambition, vanity, arrogance and narcissism are infertile ground for the formation of the healing processes which must take place in musical education.

### ***A single goal: musical realization***

However, even the most seemingly hopeless teaching situations can be saved by transformation and metamorphosis, giving the kind of continuity which is so vitally important for the pupil's creativity; continuity alone does not rule out the danger of a one-track method, but it gives at least a sense of direction. However, the decisive basis for all our endeavours lies in something further: the ability to recall, and to keep in mind, the original aim - namely, music.

None would dispute this, but few know what is actually meant by it. The musical powers which, as I noted at the beginning, reside in all people, must be *realised* in every moment of playing. "Fourth finger, more vibrato; a bit less on the third; more bow here, but less there; flatten the a-flat more; don't forget the staccato in bar 53; remember your bow-hold; check yourself with the metronome, the mirror, the tape..."; such commands do only lip-service to the musical goal.

Naturally, without analysis, there is no synthesis; the analytical stages are obligatory in the musical process, and anyone who omits them neglects the entire fundament of music. Music without technique is impossible; but, as I have indicated, technique without music *is* possible and unfortunately all too common. The problem lies in the current obsession with perfection as the single goal, which kills music and destroys the musician.

It is not my purpose here to attempt an introduction of the vast and visionary field of thought in musical phenomenology today; instead, a few examples should suffice to illustrate a procedure originating in the purely musical experience. We must ask ourselves, for example, what is true intonation? It is the constant uniqueness of intervallic relationships. What is true rhythm? It is the

musical identity of a rhythmic sequence. What is the right musical sound? It is the way the music should sound in every moment of a musical context; no simplistically exaggerated vibrato, as is so often the case. It is the production of tone which is the most sensitive indicator of a musician's mental and emotional proximity to the music. Each individual tone carries in itself the possibility of becoming a miniature form; it is the activity of our inner hearing which is decisive in realising this.

In chamber music, for example, we should not say to the second violin, "raise the c", but rather we should allow the dynamics of ensemble-playing to prevail, saying instead, "listen to the cello, and feel yourself part of the musical environment of the ensemble and of this chord". Some time ago I experienced confirmation of this approach while I was rehearsing César Franck's Symphony with a college orchestra. The ten woodwinds and twelve brass were becoming familiar for the first time with the wonderful harmonies of this composer. At first it sounded out of tune and unbalanced. However, through mutual listening to the harmonies and their progressions, combined with a detailed chord analysis, they achieved not only flawless control of intonation and dynamics, but also a real identification with the musical forces at play.

None of the concrete, technical work in the earlier stages is disqualified in such an experience, but that groundwork does gain a larger context in which to thrive. We should not *begin* with technique, but with music, and with the triad of the three unique aspects of each teaching situation: the uniqueness of the music, and of the pupil and of the teacher. These are the conditions of a single method, with infinite variations, the "living method of the moment". It is the *influence of all one's past musical experiences* which is decisive in providing a method which carries the hope of bringing pupils, together with their instruments, to music. There is no place for intellectualism in music; musical consciousness is of an entirely different nature than the intellect; but neither is music a cosmetic decoration.

The unifying perspective in all our work is the striving to allow the divine powers which are given to us through music, to shine through. In this way we hope to make a contribution to the highest aims of humanity.

Edwin Fischer, an incomparable musician, said in Lucerne in 1949<sup>4</sup>:

"Each and every musician belongs to those chosen few, who, be they painters, architects, scientists, or other sages, work for the continued life of the spirit. Beyond the boundaries of race, nation, language and environment, they weave, together, the heavenly carpet of unbounded spirituality and of the imperishable dome of the soul which rests on, and above, the walls of the material world. There they receive wisdom and love, respect for the enduring, and for the mortal and immortal powers of human hands, in the knowledge of the enduring canon of the law of the universe which is fixed in the stars. To be allowed to serve in this pure sphere is the holy duty, highest honour and greatest happiness of any musician."

Translated from the German by Juliana Hodkinson.

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<sup>4</sup> Edwin Fischer: *Von den Aufgaben des Musikers*, Insel-Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1960