



The Tyranny of Tradition in Piano Teaching: A Critical History from Clementi to the Present

Walter Ponce

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This is one of the most informed and thought-provoking books about piano playing and education to have appeared in recent years. Bolivian-born Walter Ponce, a pupil of Sascha Gorodnitzki at Juilliard, is former director of keyboard studies at UCLA. Ponce has much bad news about keyboard teaching to communicate in this densely argued polemic, but first the good news.

Ranging over his lengthy career and personal experiences, he praises piano masterclasses given by Karl Ulrich Schnabel, Claude Frank, Leon Fleisher, Richard Goode and Murray Perahia for their 'magnificent musicianship, honesty, and compassionate behaviour'. They are the antithesis of the masterclass as 'narcissistic vehicle of self-promotion' – the kind given by some other performers.

Ponce's teaching ideal is based upon individual self-realisation for each student, with no set philosophy, but rather choices adaptable to suit personal requirements. He advocates educational freedom as described by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and is perplexed by the high reputations of the late Leonard Shure of the New England Conservatory of Music and Aube Tzerko of UCLA, whose didactic approaches were characterised by 'unrestrained negativity and humiliation'.

Even today, such traditional 19th-century teaching 'rooted in fear persists practically

unchecked in some parts of the world, most notably in South Korea, some areas of China, and numerous clusters in the former Soviet republics (Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, etc)'.

Ponce alerts readers that hanging around famous teachers for years in a subservient manner is no way to develop individual abilities for expressing one's own musical universe. To solve this issue, he suggests that fewer advanced degrees in performance studies should be granted, and only to highly accomplished student pianists at the most reputable schools. Major conservatories should require all students to work 'not with one "major" teacher, but with many, in a rotating system that will encompass several piano teachers – a different teacher each semester. Students would thereby learn to 'confront and accept disparities'.

The goal would be to receive advice and opinions from a variety of musicians, instead of one guiding light presumed to be infallible. This and other solutions were arrived at during what might be termed Ponce's own 'school of hard knocks'.

Of his own years at Juilliard, Ponce recalls that Gorodnitzki's teaching 'was based on pure emulation. His constant demand that I "photocopy" his playing, going even into the smallest of mannerisms, made my lessons with him difficult and frustrating'.

Even earlier, Ponce was subjected to didactic compositions written by musical mediocrities of yore. He notes: 'Practicing something dull for an extended period of time induces and causes the brain to enter into a dormant state, thus training the student to carry over the same quality when transferring to something of beauty... Bottom line: To play well Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, Bartók, Messiaen, or any other great composer, practising Clementi, Hummel, Czerny, Hanon, Pischna, Philipp, or any of the hundreds other books of studies and exercises is a waste of time'.

To those who retort that Horowitz made memorable recordings of Clementi's *Gradus ad Parnassum*, and that the Italian pianists Vincenzo Vitale and Alessandro Marangoni (the latter on Naxos) have made plausible cases for Clementi's set of pedagogical exercises, Ponce explains that while exceptional pianistic talents can conquer all, such is not the case for the vast majority of keyboard tyros.

He emphasises, 'Practicing Hummel studies – or similar works – for any length of time is destructive in many ways, the most important

of which is damage to cognitive ability – the functions of the mind – and to the enjoyment of music... Studying Hummel's exercises has all the attractiveness of self-flagellation'.

Ponce concedes that it may help any student to work on a 'few' of Czerny's studies 'on a limited basis', but then move promptly on to 'more substantial repertoire'. It would be ill-advised to afflict pupils with 'years of Czerny, as many teachers do even today; it is not music a student looks forward to with enthusiasm'.

If such time-honoured studies were to be abandoned, what would be the replacement? Ponce recommends having students play the 'music they love', citing examples from Leopold Godowsky and Heinrich Neuhaus to Sviatoslav Richter who learned by playing through scores of operas, symphonies and vocal music.

Expanding faculties at conservatories in the USA and elsewhere results in crowds of graduates with inadequate performance skills or teaching ability: 'Lifeless performers with limited talent upon graduation will develop, out of necessity, inordinate aggressiveness'.

Ponce reminds teachers and pupils alike that no set method is applicable to masses of students, and accepting this notion would be the first step to a more humane and effective world of keyboard instruction. **IP**



Leonard Shure: a didactic approach characterised by 'unrestrained negativity and humiliation'