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Piano Pedagogy as a Test Case*

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*Lia Laor, *Paradigm War: Lessons Learned from 19th Century Piano Pedagogy*,
Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. Pp. xxi + 172.

“Good taste is always a proof of good sense and a clear understanding” (Carl Czerny; cited
on p. 90).

As someone with no background in music pedagogy, theoretical or practical, active or
passive, I fancy that two competing first piano lessons given to a normal child might sound

something like this. Traditional: ‘Put your right hand here. No, not like that, but this way. Relax. Now, strike the keyboard with your thumb. The name for this note is Middle C’, etc. Wild: ‘Can you make a sound on the piano? Fine; again. Can you use both hands? Lovely. Is it better, do you think? Fine. Now, as you make the sounds, can you move your right hand up and down? Better, no? And can you do the same with your left hand?’, etc. Which approach is more to your temperament? Carl Czerny took the first as unquestionably the obvious answer, while Charles Ives was equally convinced about the second. My heart is with Ives.

Perhaps that is why I found this book a pleasure to read, together with its presentation of the differences within a wider history of a grand-scale disagreement. Its thrust – that of an opposition to the current compartmentalization of piano teaching – is a popular one these days. In short, it is a clear, concise summary of a forgotten intellectual history, the study of a very narrow issue from the most general of perspectives. Specifically, it deals with early nineteenth century discussions of piano pedagogy from competing social philosophies, methodologies, and aesthetic and education theories, in the process summing up discussions that involved teachers, theoreticians, pianists and composers (p. 59).

The narrow issue being examined here is still alive and hotly debated in and around music schools, yet little published literature on it is available. The debate concerns the relative merits of technique; essentially, that the emphasis on the development of technical competence is lost on geniuses, who need very little training, and on most ordinary beginners,

since they drop out before they have a chance to become proficient (thereby remaining amateurs at best). The amount of effort that music teachers invest in them is therefore a waste. As for professionals (ignoring geniuses, who never need training, and top performances that are utterly agreeable both technically and artistically), discussions are split between those who consider technique the primary concern and those who stress interpretation more. Some value clean performances over artistically interesting ones, while others go the opposite way. When it comes to education, the dispute is more extreme: some require of trainers that they show total disregard for art; others insist that attention to art must enter in the very first lesson. The difference is conspicuous, both in the choice of music to be played and in the instructional techniques utilized.

The book presents this dispute in a highly scholarly, yet very readable, manner. The discussion turns firstly on the various philosophical antecedents and then on details of opinions on music teaching. Advocates of the science-oriented, mechanistic attitude towards instruction disregard the autonomy of the student that in other contexts appears as the soul of the scientific attitude. The more integrated view, the advocates of which are traditionally hostile to science, is holistic; that is to say, there is a tendency to ignore the boundaries between the diverse topics of discussion, subjects, and so on. This study presents a compromise opinion, a modification of the holistic view that appears when a holist does not dismiss mechanistic considerations out of hand.

When considered in the light of later developments, all past theories look to us wanting. While their impact on music education cannot be disputed, history nevertheless shows repeatedly that eclectic views have certain advantages. This is not to decry the idea of diversification: clearly, eclecticism owes its very existence to the imperfect general ideas that it subsequently exploits. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that even the severest critics of the most general ideas, those who dismiss them as metaphysical, cannot let them go. The ideas in question were developed during the Enlightenment Movement (which began during the scientific revolution and ended in the French Revolution), and in the Romantic Movement that followed. Despite its failure, the scientific revolution was successful in secularizing education; indeed, secular art schools bloomed early in the early nineteenth century. The more notable piano training works were also much in demand during the same period. Among the most significant are those of Clementi, Czerny, and especially Schumann, whose approach not only influenced Bartók and Kodály, but which also led to an increase in the kinds of publications opposed to boring exercises that, for example, Saint-Saëns and Debussy expressed in their famously humorous pieces.

In retrospect, this is very agreeable. Dull exercises, such as playing scales on the piano, cause tremendous ambivalence (pp. xvii, 155). However, exercises in and of themselves are but an example of a more general problem. Repetition of the same piece of music, such as Beethoven's notorious *Für Elise*, creates the same result. It rests on the discomfort we have

about a metaphysical issue. Every thing and every event partake in it. We are both unique individuals and replicas of what makes us human; the same holds, even if less obviously, for the pieces of furniture in our homes or for the items of clothing we wear. It is no accident that Glenn Gould preferred recording to public performance, whereas Sergiu Celibidache tried hard to prevent any recordings being made of his performances. The perfectionism that Arturo Toscanini suffered from was his search for the best recording of the best performance of a masterpiece that clashed with his recognition of the right of different versions to claim excellence, each in their own, different way.

The conflict is irresolvable. Immanuel Kant identified the divine with the rational, and the rational with the universal, although he never explained why. He ignored the unique. He demanded of education nothing but discipline. For him, what we learn in school is unimportant: it is the learning of discipline while we do it that matters. His *magnum opus* is his three critiques, each concerned respectively with science, ethics, and goal-directedness. The last item includes biology and art. What upset him about the latter is that its value lies in the very uniqueness of each significant work. Science recognizes any unique experience only after generalizing it within the universal language of mathematics. That art does the opposite perhaps requires a comment. Leading art historian Ernst Gombrich saw art as the outgrowth of artisanship, where only the latter is reproducible by a formula. It is well known that some artists — Rubens, Schubert, Stravinsky — created some uninteresting work that they then

turned into unique, valuable works of art by slightly retouching them. Other artists — Leonardo, Beethoven — went the opposite way and struggled with their creative ideas from the start, always striving for the unique.

Kant, too, struggled with the unique. He said, generally, that we appreciate art because it is beautiful. Beauty is universal. The beauty of a natural scene presented no problem for him. Neither did the beauty of artefacts created by rote. The beauty of a unique artwork, however, did. He viewed it as the product of a genius that defies characterization, and as an inferior kind of work that has no intellectual value (pp. 42-3). We still suffer from this ambivalence of his, especially towards geniuses, since the optimism of the Enlightenment Movement led it to view all ability as universal. Information theorists assure us that it is — in principle — possible to replicate a painting with a degree of accuracy that exceeds our perceptions to the extent that we are utterly unable to distinguish the original from the copy. Our recognition of diverse senses of uniqueness means that an observation is unique even after it has been generalized...meaning, in turn, that Kant was in error. In principle. In his neglected 1924 classic of philosophy, *Speculum Mentis or The Map of Knowledge*, R. G. Collingwood expressed dissatisfaction with scientific knowledge for its oversight of the particular, of religious knowledge for its oversight of the universal, and a cautious appreciation of artistic knowledge for its recognition of both.

Discussions regarding the training of a pianist — how many exercises are necessary, or how many rehearsals are required — are themselves questions concerning repetition, yet their applications differ depending on the case concerned.

Professor Laor takes us, in a concise and clear manner, through the philosophies of the period in the form of the rationalist Enlightenment Movement and the irrationalist Romantic Movement. Naturally, the former preferred science to art, while the latter reversed the order of significance. Today, we tend to evade this question by referring to circumstances: it is not that we generally prefer this or that; instead we defer to what serves us best at any given moment. As to the general preference, it rests on error: “Both Enlighteners and Romantics viewed rational thinking as inherently mechanistic, while viewing art as inherently intuitive” (p. 33). Einstein destroyed the popularity of the view of science as having no need for intuition, just as Gombrich dismissed the idea that art has no need of routine. It is indeed strange that this idea was ever popular, given that we have so many art theories and so many training practices.

What we have also learned is that training can be harmful. It is impossible to judge how much damage has been done due to erroneous musical theories, and how much the popularity of these theories has been, in turn, due to philosophical errors. Yet the fact that philosophy *has* contributed, both positively and negatively, permeates Professor Laor’s discussion every time the more general is linked with the more specific. Indeed, I would go further and say

that, to the extent current opinion links every art item to its background, the main challenge that artists face (and which they invite their public to share with them) is that it is not the truth or falsity of this or that idea that matters but the issues involved in the realization of those thoughts. Hence, we may notice that the commonly accepted division between the brain and the heart is erroneous. Traditionally, this division appeared as that between well-defined automatic procedures and intuitions, yet this dichotomy ought to be rejected no matter what exactly each component is made of. When we teach harmony, for example, we should indicate that the rules in and of themselves are not sufficient for composing a piece of music. (Likewise, the difference between the music of Palestrina and computer-generated music is the distance between the artistic and the merely pleasant.) Gombrich's theory of art was that training opens the way to creativity. This serves to bridge the Enlighteners' and the Romantics' views on art, a theory that Professor Laor masterfully presents. She finds its first significant expression in the forgotten philosophical work of early nineteenth century writer Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter), who greatly influenced Robert Schumann's contribution to piano training. (His 'Album for the Young' (op. 68), which seems to me better remembered now as pieces of music rather than as training for the young, is a mantle that has been inherited by Bartók.) Indeed, the author hopes that her book will help at the very least revive, if not Schumann's contribution to piano instruction, the exuberance that permeates his tremendous respect for children's autonomy (pp. 126, 130-1).

The setting of the book as a *Paradigm War*, as a controversy, ensures its presentation of different views. While clearly siding with the party that recommends training includes technical dexterity from the start, as well as considering artistic concerns and more, it contributes to the current debate by clarifying the history of the dispute. It is surprising how many misunderstandings Professor Laor finds in the documents cited, all of which are subsequently – and convincingly – clarified. These clarifications should help render the ongoing discussions more rational, while simultaneously allowing for many up-to-date items and voices, whether philosophical, aesthetic or educational, to contribute towards, participate in, and further enrich, the debate.