

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT TEACHING PIANO

from David Watkins

As I continue to teach and practice through the years, certain pieces of advice seem to come up at every turn, not only in the studio, but in my own practice and performance. Below are a few of those ideas that keep being repeated. I hope that, as you read this, ideas will ring true with you in your own teaching and performance, and perhaps give you another way of saying the same things we all say to our students and to ourselves on a daily basis. I also congratulate you all on your dedication to passing on the art of music to your students, and through them to future generations.

Always warm up: I have always found it necessary and desirable to warm up. Our hands are like little athletes that must be prepared for the work ahead. The greatest pianists have advocated a solid diet of easy stretching, repetition exercises, scales and arpeggios of all kinds, and creating exercises from difficulties encountered in the music. Practicing these things also gives the pianist an intimate working relationship between the hands and the keyboard, as well as insight into how the greatest pianist/composers “think with their hands” as they compose.

Do enough of this type of work to warm up properly before practicing and playing. This is important for students from the most elementary to the most advanced levels. I am grateful to my teachers for stressing this. My undergraduate teacher at NEC, Lucille Monaghan used to say “If you encounter a difficulty in the music, go on a campaign to conquer it.” As one example, I remember that she made me practice the descending “trickles” in the trio section of Chopin’s *Scherzo in c-sharp minor*, Op. 39 in all major and minor keys chromatically.

Practice the music as it should be played: Once you develop an ideal of how you want to play the music, then whatever way you are practicing it, be true to that ideal. Many teachers play new pieces for less advanced students before sending them home to practice. When doing this, always play with emotion and shape, and encourage the student to play with emotion as well. Music has a powerful and unique emotional message for each person. It is important to always be in touch with the emotional life of the music in the working out of a piece.

While it is important to stress to the student that music is built in phrases that contain a melodic, harmonic and rhythmic shape, and that these phrases work together as larger sections that have climactic moments, we should always have our emotional response at the heart of our work with the piece. We can constantly remind the student to be emotionally responsive to the music. While encouraging students to practice thoroughly, we often tell them to do things like practice in different rhythms, move accents around within the beat, practice fast passages slowly, slower passages more quickly, practice hands alone, etc. It is important to stress that the emotional life of the music should be ever present in this type of work.

Now for a list of “short” suggestions:

Avoid “false” accents: accents that are out of place, metrically or melodically.

In general, play in more toward the fallboard when black keys are used. I find that students gravitate outward to the white keys, and this causes excessive opening and closing of the fingers. This often inhibits speed and evenness.

There are two kinds of practice: practice and practice/performance. In practicing, fix mistakes when they happen, not later. When you are practice/performing, try not to stop, but go back and fix mistakes immediately after finishing.

The body is built for curvilinear motion. Always try to play with curvilinear motion.

While stretching the hand is often necessary, try not to stretch more or longer than necessary.

Deciding when and where to look is an important decision in accomplishing leaps successfully.

Listen “within” the beat for tonal and rhythmic evenness in passagework.

As you play, try to hear what your audience is hearing. Listen to the sound that is coming back to you. A wise person said to me long ago to “Listen in the third person.”

Always listen for voicing and balance, no matter what type of practice you are doing at any point.

Always project the melody. The listener should never have to wonder what is most important melodically in your performance.

When playing the music of any period, play it in the style of that period; but always remember that music contains an emotional message regardless of when it was written.

The memorization process is a “muscle” that we need to use constantly in order to keep it in shape.

I hope that you will be able to use these suggestions in your own teaching and playing.