

# FEELING THE SOUND

By Jessica Johnson, NCTM

## *Reflections On Claiming One's Own Musical Voice*

*Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>1</sup>

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**M**y first college piano teacher, Donna Coleman, sent me into brain shock during my first semester. I recall her calmly telling me to “feel the sound” during my lessons. I had no idea, despite hours of dutiful practice, what she meant. She would demonstrate myriad possibilities, incorporating one of the most beautifully balanced physical relationships with the instrument I have ever observed, alongside an intense connectedness with

the music and its intent. She was patient and certain that in time I would find my own way. She helped me systematically discover better fingerings, physical choreography and foundational skills that define a literate musician. Yet, she never forced me to relate to music just as she did. Rather, she opened the door to real knowing and authenticity.

A lifelong perfectionist and overachiever, I was ridden with chronic tension—psychological and physical. I was afraid of making mistakes, of not being perfect, and most importantly, of finding out who I was. The path she offered, like the one she encouraged me to read about in Eugene Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, was not an easy one. It required tremendous risk and vulnerability. Unfortunately, after yielding to external pressure and criticism, I decided to switch teachers halfway through my undergraduate degree process. I was too afraid to face my own demons and claim my voice. I chose instead to follow and imitate the prescribed course laid out by a more conventional teacher. I have always regretted this decision and my own lack of courage at a critical point in my development as a musician and human being.

Subsequently, I have observed other teachers who routinely spoon-feed their students, always guiding them toward a “correct” interpretation or way of doing things. These students are often able to come to an acceptable, commendable result much more rapidly and efficiently than those who are permitted to honor their own process. But I wonder, at what cost? After many years and much soul-searching as an artist and teacher, I understand more clearly what Coleman was trying to do. By never telling me to “play it like this,” she was inviting me to experiment and explore artistic possibilities. In so doing, my journey did not always follow the most direct path. Now, of course, I realize I was involved in a deep, gloriously authentic learning process that was awakening my musical soul. This awareness now resides as the guiding force of my own philosophy of teaching: *above all, honor the student's own process and voice.*

I have come to believe that short-term gains can derail some of our most important aims in the pursuit of artistry. As teachers, we must be concerned with the *whole* student: mind, body and spirit. This means valuing and devoting time to the pursuit of those beautiful, immeasurable, non-empirical ways of “knowing” such as intuition, active listening, fantasy, imagery and metaphor, creativity and inspiration. We must honor the individual's socio-cultural experience, learning style and personality as we design an individualized curriculum for each student without relying

on one method or system for all. We need to allow our students to examine their own beliefs as musicians and teachers, encouraging them to find their own way even if it does not coincide with our own ideas and values.

Great teaching includes a willingness to be vulnerable, take risks and not always have a specific agenda or fixed outcome in mind. If there is the possibility of this, often the student will surpass us and introduce something unexpected. This is when deep learning can occur. We have to be willing to relinquish our control by not always manipulating and insisting on a particular way of seeing, playing and hearing music. This of course means that sometimes we do not have the answer and that we are willing to learn alongside our students and engage in that wondrous exploration of music making in the whole sense. We have to be willing to reveal our own weaknesses and insecurities. This is an invaluable gift and helps students find the courage to explore their own fears in a safe place, without judgment.

If I force my students to imitate me, they may win competitions, fulfill every criterion on my list of goals and objectives, but they may do so at the risk of stunting the development of their true musical voice. Deep learning is sometimes messy, illogical, non-sequential and inefficient. Sublime artistry always includes the use of holistic processes that resist quantitative measurements and do not easily submit to imposed, structural boundaries. If I permit a student to their own way, I often have to let them discover for themselves the *wrong* way so they can hear/feel/know their own personal truth. Eloise Ristad, in her book *A Soprano on Her Head* expresses these eloquent sentiments about self-learning:

How often we are robbed of our ecstasy by trusting implicitly in external authority and negating our internal wisdom.... We yield our wills and our imaginations to “experts,” both visible and invisible, and pretend that only the experts have god-given powers of perception. We forget the legitimacy of our knowing.... It takes an act of will to become vulnerable enough to explore scary, unknown territory in our minds and bodies. It takes will power to keep from sliding along the track someone else makes for us in the snow without realizing when it is time to make our own tracks.<sup>2</sup>

In our culture, we often value the intellectual over the intuitive, the rational over the creative and the product over the process. In *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says this about valuing the creative process:

You would think that given its importance, creativity would have high priority among our concerns. And in fact there is a lot of lip service paid to it. But if we look at the reality, we see a different picture. Basic scientific research is minimized in favor of immediate practical applications. The arts are increasingly seen as dispensable luxuries that must prove their worth in the impersonal mass market.... When school budgets tighten and test scores wobble, more and more schools opt for dispensing with frills—usually with the arts and extracurricular activities—so as to focus on the so-called basics.<sup>3</sup>

## Getting The Big Picture

Neuroscience has come a long way since Roger Sperry's groundbreaking research in the 1950s reshaped the way we view the functions of our brains. Many popular theories have emerged about left- versus right-brain dominance, depicting the left hemisphere as the champion of analytical, rational, linear and logical tasks and the right hemisphere as the center for holistic, emotional, nonverbal, kinesthetic and creative processes. While we are discovering monumental things with each passing year about how our brains process information, one thing remains clear—the most profound and transformational artistic endeavors involve *whole-brain* processes.

In *The Metaphoric Mind*, Bob Samples states:

The role of metaphoric thinking is to invent, to create, and to challenge conformity by extending what is known into new meadows of knowing.... Holistic thought, cyclical perceptions, and extended networks of relationships all lack the logical, linear precision so compatible with the rationality of Western bias. Specificity is the virtue, ambiguity the vice.<sup>4</sup>

This preference for linear, logical processes has infiltrated music education as well. We worry about efficiency, learning pieces as quickly and accurately as possible. We evaluate our success by how many programs we can perform, how perfectly we play. When we explore only efficient, rational and logical steps, we may indeed speed up the process and achieve the objective more easily, but the cost may be too great. The immediate goal is achieved but the long-term process is disturbed, interrupted and the real learning and music making may be lost. As Madeline Bruser says, "We become vulnerable to joyless, rote-learning and even injury by cutting ourselves off from our very selves."<sup>5</sup> We are learning the notes but not experiencing real music making that comes from an inner place.

For holistic learning to take place, we have to trust the long-term process and value it more than the short-term product. Teachers who insist on telling and showing students how to interpret every note essentially suffocate their student's creative impulses by forcing them to recreate this exact, *right* way of playing. This does not invite experimentation and open the door to the creative realm. Rather, it stifles intuition, undermines one's innate abilities and may even create debilitating physical tension.

Learning how to practice well is an integral part of artistic and technical development. Despite this, many students practice the same way, every day, without much awareness of whether or not what they are doing is sending them in the right direction. Walk down the halls of any hallowed music conservatory and you'll probably hear the following practice scenario: Student plays passage from beginning to end. Student fumbles through difficult passage. Student goes back to beginning and repeats over and over with more determination and intensity. Rather than looking for a more creative solution, we simply resort to mindless drill and repetition because it's *easier*.

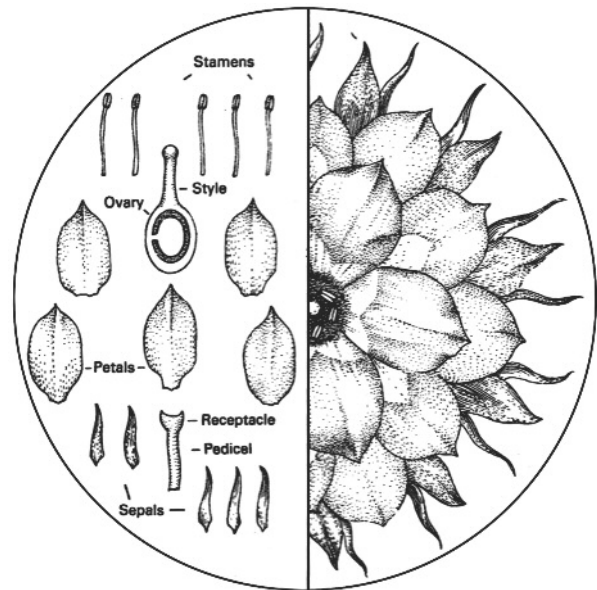


Figure 1: From *Teaching for the Two-Sided Mind: A Guide to Right Brain/Left Brain Education* by Linda Williams. Used by Permission.

In reality, deep practicing needs a balance between rational and creative processes. In his book *Music Quickens Time*, Daniel Barenboim says,

In music...intellect and emotion go hand in hand.... Rational and emotional perception are not only not in conflict with one another; rather, each guides the other in order to achieve an equilibrium of understanding in which the intellect determines the validity of the intuitive reaction, and the emotional element provides the rational with a dimension of feeling that renders the whole human.<sup>6</sup>

Examine Brahms's *Capriccio in F-Sharp Minor, Op. 76, No. 1*, which provides the student with an opportunity to experience the beauty and challenges of a romantic-style texture. While it would be easy to jump in and learn this work note by note and worry about the expressive features later, this approach assumes that the student already has a clear sense of the underlying harmonic and rhythmic framework. By outlining the essential harmonies corresponding with the large-beat rhythm, the student begins to hear the essential elements that guide interpretation at the macro-level.

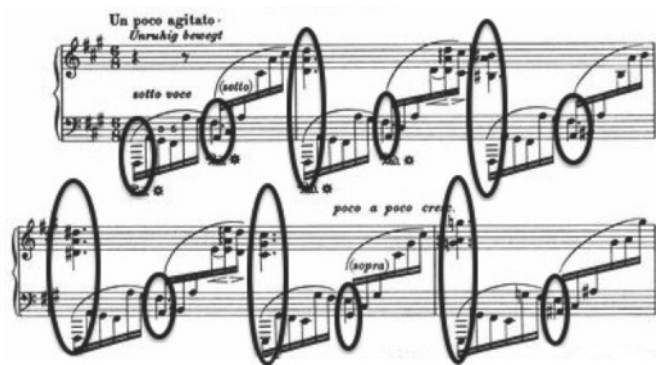


Figure 2: *Capriccio in F-Sharp Minor, Op. 76, No. 1* by Johannes Brahms (Kalmus edition. Used by permission).

## Chaos And Brainstorming

To summon the creative spirit, we need to be willing to experiment and brainstorm. In short, we must invite chaos. In *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It For Life* Twyla Tharp says, “The wonderful and scary thing about solving creative problems is that there isn’t one right answer. It’s tempting to try to rein in the unruliness of the creative process, especially at the start. Planning lets you impose order on the chaotic process of making something new, but when it’s taken too far you get locked into a status quo, and creative thinking is about breaking free from the status quo, even from one you made yourself.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Csikszentmihalyi advises us to allow ideas to incubate:

The second phase of the creative process is a period of incubation, during which ideas churn around below the threshold of consciousness. It is during this time that unusual connections are likely to be made. When we intend to solve a problem consciously, we process information in a linear, logical fashion. But when ideas call to each other on their own, without our leading them down a straight and narrow path, unexpected combinations may come into being.<sup>8</sup>

While it’s tempting to over-teach and dictate musical choices at every turn, the wise teacher understands the value of honoring the student’s process. Brainstorming can manifest itself in a plethora of ways. Students can deliberately play a work in the *wrong* style, try to depict the opposite character, use way too much pedal or none at all, turn an *adagio* into a *prestissimo* or vice versa. By flipping things around, we invite chaos into our learning process.

## Eureka! Breakthroughs And Epiphanies

We’ve all experienced those moments when everything clicks, and it all makes sense. We make a quantum leap! In *The Perfect Wrong Note*, William Westney reminds us that “One of the most misleading notions about learning...is that progress should always be visible and steady. We tend to expect the straight-line steady climb, especially from someone who is known to be a good student, whereas a more true-to-life pattern has plateaus and breakthroughs.”<sup>9</sup>

When we think of being “creative” in the piano lesson, most of us think of including five minutes for improvisation and composition at the end of the lesson. Indeed, this is a wonderful way to synthesize concepts and deepen musical understanding. But it’s not the only way. There are zillions of ways to engage the student in the creative process. But first, you have to go out on a limb and truly believe the student has the potential to be extraordinarily creative.

What does it mean to be creative? According to Sir Ken Robinson, “Creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value.”<sup>10</sup> To arrive at a creative idea, you have to experiment and try things without fear of failure. Then through a process of sifting and winnowing, we can arrive at an original idea that has meaning and value. Think of Edison and the light bulb. Consider this hypothetical exchange during a piano lesson:

Teacher: “How would you orchestrate this passage?”

Student (with puzzled expression): “I dunno. Trumpet and bass trombone?”

Teacher: “Interesting. I think Beethoven was *really* thinking string quartet.” (But thanks for playing).

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Do this a few times and even the most creative, outgoing student will quickly turn into a compliant, passive lump. So here's the really hard part. Anything goes. Let them swim in the deep end. Don't jump in and save them...even if the student says accordion, theremin and didgeridoo! Go with it. Let them really explore it. If you have a keyboard, have them actually orchestrate it. What do they discover? How does that shed light on what Beethoven was trying to express? Honoring the student's creative process doesn't mean that we disregard the composer's intent. It's just a less linear way of exploring it.

When students are really genuinely following their own process, they should be allowed to float around and try things out without the teacher reeling them in prematurely. Working with curious, creative students has taught me that they are usually much more innovative than I am.

## Nurturing The Creative Process

In his book *Improvisational Practice Techniques: A Handbook for Incorporating Improvisation into the Percussionist's Daily Practice Routine*, Anthony Di Sanza emphasizes the importance of practicing spontaneity:

To have the confidence for personal spontaneity in performance one must engage in spontaneous thoughts and actions while practicing. There are many practice techniques that encourage and combine holistic, process-oriented thinking with a spontaneous attitude. Improvisation, which by its very nature stimulates spontaneity, can be effectively used as the foundation for just such a practice technique.<sup>11</sup>

Improvisation can be based on existing musical material, harmonic progression, melodic idea or rhythmic motive. Creative ideas can also come from extra-musical associations. *Klingendes Haus* invites students to improvise their way through a house, creating a musical narrative that corresponds with the story evoked by the drawing. After this experience, the student may be inspired to create an improvised soundtrack to accompany his or her own artwork, video or a virtual journey through an art museum. This kind of creative process can open up new ways of relating to music and sound.

Our sensory system includes not only the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste, through which we take in information about the world outside us, but also the proprioceptive senses—the kinesthetic, vestibular and visceral systems, which monitor internal sensations. One does not need to be a synesthete like Messiaen or Scriabin to appreciate how vital the sensory realm is in music making. Cross-modal explorations of our senses can open new channels of creative exploration. How does it feel to hear music in color? How does the sound look and feel?

Klingendes Haus

Miriam Maslo



Man tritt in das Haus ein und beschreibt improvisierend seine Bewohner.  
You enter into the house and describe its occupants through improvisation.

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Figure 3: *Living Piano*, edited by Monika Hildebrand (Universal Edition UE 31587). Used by Permission.

Use of fantasy, evocative language and metaphor can help place specific parts within the context of a meaningful whole. In *Teaching for The Two-Sided Mind: A Guide to Right Brain/Left Brain Education*, Williams encourages us to day-dream: "Fantasy is a door to our inner world, that magical realm where the imagination creates its own realities unfettered by the limitations we encounter in the outer world. Time and space pose no problem for the mind. Within it we can travel to China at the suggestion of the word or shrink to the size of an atom to explore microscopic worlds."<sup>12</sup>

In *The Culture of Education*, Jerome Bruner maintains, "Some...may wonder why literature and drama play such a large part...Narratives...leave room for those breaches and violations...making the all-too-familiar strange again.... That's why tyrants put the novelists and poets in jail first."<sup>13</sup> So instead of simply asking, "What mood/character is

this?,” we can imagine that we are “Puck” in the middle of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or pretend to be a time traveler and participate in a Viennese ball. Invite storytelling, poetry, visual imagery and fantasy into the practice room. Any sound is possible. Westney urges us to:

Plunge in with gusto—no caution!... Many music students approach the music they are learning with too much deference—caution and physical timidity—as if they were afraid to mess it up, or as if they somehow felt a bit guilty in advance. They don’t dare bring any real energy to it until they know better how to control and refine everything. Sadly, this attitude guarantees that they will fall short of their dreams of confident mastery.<sup>14</sup>

### Letting Go: Awakening Intuition

The word “intuition” means to look within. Intuition inspires us to become creative in our lives and in the ways we view our lives. For most of us, the first step toward hearing the language of intuition requires that we become open to accepting another, seemingly illogical way of perceiving and receiving information. Albert Einstein often writes of the power of the intuitive: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”<sup>15</sup>

Wassily Kandinsky understood the importance our trusting our own voice and intuition:

The artist must be blind to distinctions between “recognized” or “unrecognized” conventions of form, deaf to the transitory teaching and demands of his particular age. He must watch only the trend of the inner need, and hearken to its words alone. Then he will safely employ means both sanctioned and forbidden by his contemporaries. All means are sacred which are called for by the inner need. All means are sinful which obscure the inner need.<sup>16</sup>

As artists, we should savor the possibilities, wonder, joy and vitality of the music that we practice. By believing in and nurturing the beauty of our own unique musical voice, we embark on a lifelong path of growth and discovery through music making and the practice of the art. Perhaps Martha Graham put it most eloquently: “There is a vitality, a life-force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and be lost.”<sup>17</sup> ♪

### Notes

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