

## 3 Concentration

### NATURAL AND DELIBERATE CONCENTRATION

If you master concentration, you will never have to be told how to practice. Concentration is a requisite for all tasks, especially those demanding a high degree of skill. Since nothing worthwhile can be accomplished without it, we had better determine how it can be induced. In order to concentrate, you must first direct your attention to something in particular. When practicing, for example, you need to have a clear idea of what it is you wish to accomplish. You must have a specific goal in mind. By focusing your attention on this, you will intensify your powers of concentration.

There are many activities in life in which you slip automatically into a natural state of concentration: a good movie, for example, can fascinate you to the extent that you are drawn involuntarily into the plot; being with someone you love inspires such an intense interest that you can often forget about yourself entirely; children at play can become so engrossed in a game that they may fail to hear their parents calling. In short, being interested and involved in what you are doing makes you concentrate in spite of yourself.

In the book *Gestalt Therapy*, a comparison is drawn between deliberate concentration and natural ("healthy, organic") concentration:

In our society concentration is regarded as a deliberate, strenuous, compulsive effort—something you *make yourself* do. This is to be expected where people are forever neurotically commanding, conquering and compelling themselves. On the other hand, healthy, organic concentration usually is not called concentration at all, but, on those rare occasions when it does occur, is named attraction, interest, fascination or absorption.<sup>5</sup>

Although both types of concentration come into play in practicing,



it is the latter that produces the best results. If by forcing yourself to concentrate you set up a barrier that impedes your progress, you can rob yourself of the vital energy needed for your best work. How then can you induce "healthy, organic" concentration when you practice? Needless to say, if you are not in the mood to practice, natural concentration is affected proportionately. To induce it, however, you can begin by practicing deliberately toward a specific goal at a predetermined time, whether you are in the mood or not. Thus, by adhering to a self-induced routine, you will eventually become so absorbed in what you are doing that your "deliberate concentration" will be converted into "spontaneous concentration." The one essential ingredient for bringing about this conversion is an unconditional love of the composition you intend to master.

## SIGHT-READING

Few activities can capture a musician's interest more easily than sight-reading. For this reason, I would unhesitatingly choose the ability to read well as one of the most valuable assets a musician can have. Some have a natural talent in this direction. The more new repertory they explore, the greater their skill becomes. For me, sight-reading was never a chore but a pleasure. I remember at age fifteen visiting the Newark Public Library every Saturday morning and staggering home under a mountain of piano scores—original works and transcriptions of operas and symphonies. It was quite a feat to maneuver the stack through the bus door, but I certainly improved my sight-reading.

However eager some musicians may be to explore music, their deficiency in processing musical notation quite often deters them from doing so. I am convinced that the correction of this deficiency must take top priority in musical education, not only because sight-reading enables one to grasp a piece as a whole, but more important, because it trains the memory and sharpens the powers of concentration. I had never noticed this connection between sight-reading and musical memory until rather recently when I had to confront the problems of an especially conscientious pupil who simply could not read. Apart from the fact that he could not satisfy his curiosity by reading through repertory, he found his practicing



to be a particularly agonizing process. For he could not even read through the pieces I assigned him. To deal with his problems, I began by restricting his reading to simple scores and having him adhere to all the standard approaches to sight-reading:

1. Before playing, study the music silently, taking special note of the key and time signatures.
2. Clap the rhythm.
3. For pieces in a distinguishable key (tonal), play the scale in which the piece is written to fix the tonality in your ear.
4. Keep your eyes on the score at all times.
5. Read from the bass upward.
6. Look ahead.
7. Move your hands only when necessary.

Although he followed this program faithfully, my pupil made little progress. From my close observation of his physical reactions to notation—in particular, the timing, or lack of it, between his eye-hand reflexes—I saw clearly enough the tendencies of a poor sight-reader. To help him, I had to find out what good sight-readers do. Watching the facile readers among my pupils, I looked for certain constant factors in their processing of notation. In every case, their eyes, I noticed, moved in slight anticipation of their hands; their hands knew the keyboard as one does the most familiar terrain. Yet, none of these good readers could tell me anything about their mental processes. "I'm not exactly sure what goes on in my mind," was the usual response. Or, "When I see the notes on the page, I just seem to feel them with my fingers. I never think of the names of the notes at all." It occurred to me then to wonder what I myself think of when sight-reading.

To peer into one's own mind as a disinterested observer is not the easiest of tasks. But what I discovered by making the effort not only helped my pupil, but also revolutionized my approach to teaching sight-reading. The instant I began to read, my mind framed a running commentary coincidental with the automatic movements of my hands. The absorption into my mind and retention of successive musical facts were triggering the appropriate responses of my hands. By drawing on a great store of information, gathered from years of experience, I was able to analyze complex musical situations at a glance and reduce them progressively to their simplest elements. Above all, I found myself able to anticipate



what was to come, as, for example, repetitions of motifs, rhythms, and harmonic progressions. This ability to predict musical events, being the major skill for sight-reading, is rooted, as I realized from observing myself, in the power of retention. Thus, to know what is to come, one has to remember what has just transpired.

When my pupil arrived for his next lesson, I placed before him one of my own compositions in the intermediate grade:

Andante - as a chorale

*relax the tempo*

Seymour Bernstein, *The Praying Mantis* (from *Insects*, Bk. 2). (Reprinted by permission of Alexander Broude, Inc.)

I allowed him eight seconds to reduce the first measure to the simplest theoretical and structural facts he could find. He was then to close his eyes and recite whatever of this information he could retain, as, for example:

The bass is held throughout the measure.

The soprano moves in contrary motion to the tenor.

The right hand begins with an augmented fourth.

I then allowed him eight seconds to play the first measure while simultaneously scanning the second measure for associative information. This meant, of course, that he had to take in the second measure with his peripheral vision while he was decoding the first. At the same time, his fingers had to find their way over the keys



unassisted by his eyes. I then had him stop playing at the end of the first measure and recite only those facts absorbed from the second measure that were harmonically or intervallically related to the first measure. At this point he faltered, but with a little coaxing and a lot of encouragement, he finally reported the following:

The bass is tied into the second measure.

The soprano moves down three diatonic steps.

The last note resolves into a G major chord.

His assigning a pitch name to a chord for the first time encouraged me to have him play through the first two measures while scanning the third at whatever point he felt able. This time, he not only retained more specific information, but also began to draw upon his knowledge of theory, as his comments on the third measure showed:

The bass, D, is a pedal point. The soprano, B, in the third measure resolves to an A, making it part of a D7 chord. There is a tenor B<sup>b</sup> in the final chord that is somehow related to the B<sup>b</sup> in the first measure. But shouldn't it be notated as an A<sup>#</sup> instead?

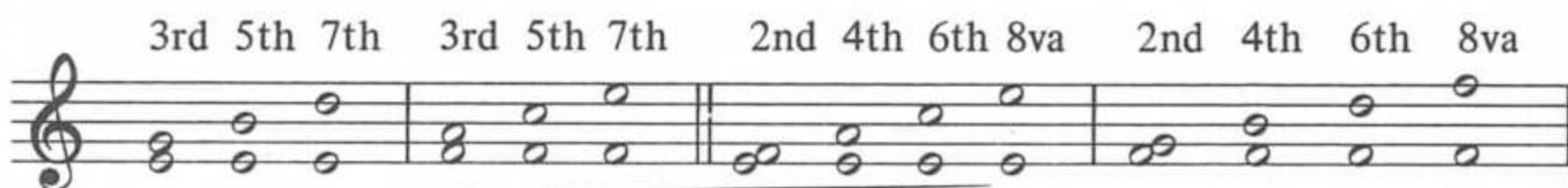
“If you can raise a question on enharmonic notation, then you are retaining more information than either of us thought possible,” I was happy to observe. I now set the metronome at ♩ = 60 and asked him to read through the entire composition without stopping, even if it meant omitting notes. More important, he was to continue a running commentary of associative facts while he was playing. At first, his recitation comprehended a few notes only, but soon he was able to scan one or two measures in advance of his playing. As he grew more adept at performing these multiple tasks, he finally began to predict what was to come with greater accuracy. Though he could foresee at this stage only the obvious—such as simple cadences and melodic progressions that did not deviate from the established tonality—he was nonetheless calling upon his musical memory. That is, he was retaining a mental image of the melodic pattern he had just played long enough for it to make musical sense to him. And in the split second it took for his mind to absorb this meaning, three things happened: his ear responded to the tonality, his hands reacted to the signal from his mind, and his eyes were set free to look ahead. It was, of course, only a beginning. But it encouraged him to continue exploring unfamiliar scores. For me, it was proof again that the human mind, if presented with suf-



ficient stimulus, is capable of performing far more difficult tasks than usually seems possible. For the sake of convenience, I have condensed the process of sight-reading developed for my pupil into an outline of essentials:

### I. Preliminaries

- A. Identify key and time signatures.
- B. Identify all rhythmic values, and determine how they relate to each other; for example,  $\text{♩} = \text{♩} ; \text{♪} = \text{♩}$
- C. Know your scales and arpeggios thoroughly, including all the forms of minor scales.
- D. Identify all intervals, recognizing how they are distributed over the lines and spaces of the staff. This facilitates visual comprehension:
  1. thirds, fifths, and sevenths extend from line to line or space to space.
  2. seconds, fourths, sixths, and octaves extend from line to space or space to line.



- E. Recognize chords and their inversions.
- F. Identify cadences—especially IV, V, I.

### II. Sequential Steps for Memory Retention in Sight-Reading

- A. Set the metronome to a slow tempo.
- B. Allow it to tick for a full measure. Simultaneously, scan the first measure of the piece you are reading and recite whatever theoretical or structural facts you can absorb.
- C. Keep your eyes on the score.
- D. With the metronome ticking, begin to play the first measure, listening carefully to what you are playing. Simultaneously, scan the second measure for associative information. Recite your findings *before* you reach the second measure.
- E. Repeat this procedure, moving from the second to the third measure and so on.
- F. Repeat this sequence from measure to measure throughout the entire piece. Omit notes, if necessary, but try not to stop.
- G. Do this every day for at least fifteen minutes, always selecting an unfamiliar piece, and, above all, using your metronome as



a guide. In time, your memory will sharpen, your sense of the key-board will become more dependable and your aural experience of melodic patterns in various rhythmic and tonal contexts will assist you to predict musical events.

As my pupil progressed slowly but steadily in his sight-reading, I could not help recalling a wise saying in the Talmud: "From my pupils have I learned." For certainly, the events in my pupil's progress helped me to understand a fundamental factor in sight-reading—namely, that it enlists the musical memory far more than has been noticed even by musicians themselves. It is, in its highest stage of efficiency, a form of instant comprehension and retention—not only of notational symbols, but of everything on the printed page that represents music. All told, sight-reading serves three important functions: (1) it allows for a spontaneous response to an entire composition, which, as is discussed in Chapter 9, is critical in the initial stages of learning; (2) it assists the tactile and kinetic memory by developing a sense of the keyboard; (3) it activates the musical memory—that raw material from which all our responses, comprehension, and musical associations are fashioned. In short, the ability to group notes into patterns, to experience these patterns as musical events, and to discover in them a musical meaning enables a musician to probe to the heart of the music he plays.

## INDUCING CONCENTRATION

Performing is a natural outgrowth of your love for music. No matter how much concentration is required in working toward this goal, the rewards far exceed the difficulties. The very steps that lead toward self-realization are to be found in the learning procedures that enable you to perform a musical composition for one or more individuals.

The first step in learning a new piece is to play it through from beginning to end even if it means making mistakes. Because your goal is to encompass the meaning of the composition as a whole, every impression you absorb, however fleeting it may be, is important at this stage. That is why it is so crucial that you be able to sight-read. Liszt, who sight-read perfectly, used to skip this process and begin a new piece by studying it slowly and in great detail. To a



pupil, however, he suggested sight-reading every day so that she would learn to grasp a piece as a *whole* and not just in small details. Therefore, allow yourself to make mistakes. A fear of hitting wrong notes, causing you to stop and start again and again, hampers you from experiencing the music in its entirety. Freeing yourself from this fear will enable you to function far better than you anticipate. To your delight, you will end up making fewer mistakes. As a result, you will grasp the composition as a total structure, at the same time sensing its emotional content. It is not necessary to analyze during this preliminary phase. Just be receptive to your natural feelings about the piece without inhibiting those associations that may occur to you during the reading. Being receptive means, for example, that you welcome and enjoy any comprehension of form and content that is revealed along the way. But if this initial comprehension does not come about quite naturally, don't seek it out forcefully. Instead, allow the music to reach you unimpeded by analysis. Because of their extreme complexity, some contemporary works are very difficult to sight-read and for that reason cannot be approached in the way I have described. In order to grasp the content of such compositions, it is advisable that you study the details first before proceeding to read through the entire piece.

After you have gained a general feeling for a piece in its entirety, it is time to concentrate on smaller goals. Play the piece through again (you will already have played it through as often as necessary to satisfy your curiosity about it), but this time concentrate on the technically difficult measures. Bracket them in pencil when you have finished. These bracketed measures now become targets of still more intense focus. Study these measures carefully in order to find a comfortable fingering for your particular hand. Chopin thought that *everything* depends on a good fingering. Most performers agree that good fingering is the sine qua non in expressing music on an instrument, for it not only affords you ease and accuracy at fast tempos, but also comfort and control in slow passages. However, some instrumentalists consciously neglect to devise fingerings for music that moves at slow tempos, the feeling engendered by such music leading them to adopt whatever fingering "happens to come along." This, I believe, explains why these performers tend to suffer more memory slips when playing slow music than fast music. For if you use a different fingering each time you play the same passage, your reflexes are unable to store secure patterns that will fortify your memory.



Curiously enough, you won't necessarily arrive at a good fingering by practicing a difficult passage slowly. What may feel comfortable at a slow tempo may not work at all when you play it faster. Therefore, even though you can't negotiate a problematic passage perfectly when taking it up to tempo, try it faster anyway. Be daring! Even if you make mistakes, you will nonetheless find out whether or not the fingering in your edition or the one devised by you and your teacher will eventually work. Once again, do not be overly concerned if mistakes should occur. Remember that you are working in a process and that playing through a piece up to tempo, even with mistakes, is only one step in this process. Besides, when you anxiously try to avoid mistakes, you not only distract yourself from concentrating on musical values but also create tensions that are often hard to eliminate. Your goal is perfection and all of these procedures will lead you gradually toward it.

Once you discover a reliable fingering, you are ready to practice in greater detail. Be cautioned, though, to exercise great care since a more concentrated focus can easily divert you from your original intention—that of becoming absorbed in the emotional content of the composition. As you proceed to work through the various passages in increasingly smaller sections, repeating them in slow and fast tempos, keep in mind that mechanical practicing, if devoid of feeling, can produce accuracy but not musicality. For this reason it is necessary to abandon all detailed practicing from time to time and play the piece through in its entirety. After all, you will understand the musical significance of individual passages only when you relate them to the larger structures of which they are a part. Therefore, playing the piece through will reinforce not only your love of the composition, but also your sense of it as a unified whole. For it is specifically your desire to express this whole musical structure that motivates you to work on details with true concentration. Thus, you build up musical patterns note by note, the sum total of which represents your conception of the entire composition in much the same way as an architect converts his image of a large building into the detailed specifications of a blueprint.

## THE AUTOMATIC PILOT

After constant repetitions of both small and large patterns, a magical process called *reflex action* takes place. This "automatic



pilot," as a friend of mine aptly calls it, eventually becomes your mainstay when performing from memory. What happens is that while you are concentrating on specific goals, a storehouse of impulses is being fed into your brain—nature's most efficient computer. The period of time between the first encounter with a piece and the moment at which the "automatic pilot" takes over differs with each person. Knowing this can teach you patience. To help matters along, however, be sure to feed the *right information* into your computer. You could be tempted, for example, to circle around the preliminary phase of your work, that is, to sight-read indefinitely. But if, by doing this, you keep feeding haphazard fingerings, chance note patterns, and distorted rhythms into your computer for too long a period, you will actually be practicing mistakes, and the reflex action, true to form, will faithfully reproduce this confusion.

In Chapter 1, I stated that practicing is a process through which thoughts, feelings, and physical gestures become synthesized. Therefore, when your feelings are converted into muscular activity, your automatic pilot or reflex system is fed not only physical impulses but also the *feelings implicit within them*. This fact is of extreme importance, and understanding it will help you make the following resolution: never approach a passage in a purely mechanistic way; always have, instead, an *emotional intention*. This does not mean that you should give free rein to your feelings. Rather, you must always strive for a *balance* between thought and feeling.

Many instrumentalists think they must practice dryly and mechanically to build a sound technique and that feeling is added at the end, like the icing on a cake. Concerning this, Liszt advised his student Valérie Boissier not to practice her exercises mechanically, "for the soul must always try to express itself."<sup>6</sup> When you synthesize musical feelings with each gesture during your practicing, you can depend upon your automatic pilot to reproduce beautiful playing.

The ultimate in concentration is your awareness of what you feel on every note you play. Such an awareness brings you into close accord with the composer's intentions. Just as feeling is fed into your reflexes via your muscles, conversely, the same is true of dry, mechanical playing. This explains the plight of the pianist who practices diligently with high, percussive fingers and succeeds only in conditioning his muscles to play unmusically. Finally, at a performance, his intention to project feeling is thwarted by his reflex



system. How could it be otherwise? It is obeying, true to its nature, the commands it received from hours of dry, mechanical work. This explains why an awareness of feeling should be your primary concern, both at the piano and away from it. The next chapter is devoted exclusively to feeling.

## A CLOSE LOOK AT MISTAKES

Most musicians agree that young instrumentalists of the twentieth century show a standard of excellence unparalleled in the history of the performing arts. You have only to hear one of the rounds of an international competition to realize just how high this standard can be. Recordings have even higher standards since the technique of splicing makes it possible to eliminate all mistakes from a performance. Because of this, music lovers who are used to hearing mistake-free recordings, are shocked when performers play an occasional wrong note at a concert.

Society teaches us that mistakes are unacceptable. This can be good or bad. There is a tendency, for example, to give the first prize in contests to a contestant who plays perfectly even though he does not show as much imagination as another, and to by-pass an imaginative performer who makes too many mistakes. But why should an imaginative performer make mistakes? Is he willing to sacrifice accuracy for sensitivity just as a meticulous performer strives for technical perfection as an end in itself? Neither extreme is desirable. Wrong notes get in the way of a musical message, but it is just as bad to sacrifice musical feeling for the sake of hitting every note correctly. Trying to play note-perfect without feeling is comparable to striving for a straight "A" average in school as an end in itself. One reason for pursuing perfection at all costs is to guard against the possibility of failure. After all, failure can have unpleasant aftermaths: a mistake on a test results in a lower mark; your parents may be disillusioned with you; your deficiency in meeting high standards may shake your confidence. In other words, failing to meet external standards can result in a rejection by others and a lower estimation of yourself.

If a performer plays "more wrong notes than there are fall leaves in the Adirondacks," as one critic sardonically said of a pianist's debut in Carnegie Hall, then his performance reflects a lack of preparation. Perhaps he miscalculated the amount of time it takes



to prepare a program; perhaps the works he programmed were beyond his capabilities. He may, of course, have suffered debut nerves. When a performer recovers from the shock of a bad review or a student faces the reality of bad grades, he must answer his conscience: "Did I or did I not prepare my best?" Some musicians prepare inadequately either by cramming in their practicing at the last moment or by not practicing enough hours each day over extended periods of time. Others never learn to concentrate properly during their practicing and, as a result, end up making even more mistakes than when they began. Mistakes can also be symptomatic of your striving toward unrealistic goals. Suppose you have a friend who plays faster and more brilliantly than you do. Your performance sounds excellent as long as you play a little slower and softer; but your competitive nature makes you determined not only to match your friend's performance but even to surpass it. If you end up with "more fall leaves" than you imagined, it means that your goals were not commensurate with your abilities. In this case, mistakes are a sign that you are striving beyond your present level of attainment. Yet, a brilliant performance can challenge you by serving as a model to emulate. Experimentation can tell you whether or not your mistakes are merely transitory or whether your goals are, in fact, unrealistic. Sometimes overly ambitious goals are foisted upon you by others. A teacher or parent may expect you to conform to a standard that is conceivable to them but not ideal for you. You will then make mistakes.

When your fantasy audience hovers about you, symbolizing the highest musical standards, it is up to you to evaluate those standards relative to your own present ability. Such an evaluation will enable you to pinpoint not only the cause of your mistakes but also the limits of their acceptability to you and to others. For example, do your mistakes indicate a lack of serious practicing or do they derive from a suggestion to chance errors in the early stages of learning a piece? Do they distort the musical intention or are they merely insignificant slips that even a skilled performer is entitled to make? Assuming that you have practiced conscientiously, an occasional mistake should neither distract you nor your audience from your musical intention nor should it lessen your self-esteem. It is, in fact, your knowledge of having prepared your best that enables you not only to recover in seconds after making a mistake but also to play the following measures so beautifully as to dispel all remembrance of it. Being able to do this is proof in itself of your integrity



and devotion to your art. Besides, such insignificant mistakes are usually more painful to you than they are to others.

I have an artist friend who has developed a method of drawing that is similar to everything we have discussed concerning the process of practicing. His chief concern, like yours, is to capture the whole feeling of his subject. Therefore, without taking his eyes off his subject, he makes a free, spontaneous sketch in his pad. Instead of examining this sketch, he tears it out and makes nineteen more. Finally, he looks at the twentieth sketch and then proceeds to focus on details—exactly as you have been advised to do in your practicing. By dispelling his fear of making miscalculations during the initial stages of his drawing, he preserves his artistic spontaneity and actually succeeds in sketching more accurately.

No one likes to make mistakes, no matter how insignificant they are. The kind of steps you take to eliminate them, however, will either lead you toward your ultimate goal of self-mastery or cause you to circle endlessly around meaningless details. You must constantly refresh your spirit by becoming one with the harmonious order of music, just as a painter does by contemplating the harmony in a Raphael painting. The perfection which you perceive in great music becomes the standard toward which you direct your own work. Having adopted such a standard, you are then willing to devote whatever preparation is necessary to do justice to a work of art. When you concentrate properly during your practicing, your sensibilities will become fused with the sublime order inherent in music. Ideally, such order does not admit of error. Nevertheless, we are only human and, provided that we practice properly, whatever mistakes we do make will be inconsequential in the light of true artistic achievement.

## A CLOSE LOOK AT THE WHOLE AND ITS PARTS

One evening I invited some friends and pupils to meet the well-known composer, the late Alexander Tcherepnin, on the occasion of a newly released recording of his works. At one point during the evening, he went to the piano and played a series of chords, exclaiming, "I have just reduced the first eight bars of the *Jupiter Symphony* to a harmonic progression. But analyzing these chords will not bring us any closer to an understanding of the music."



Later, after our distinguished guest had left, I discovered what had elicited his somewhat dramatic remark: he had been discussing the importance of retaining an emotional response to music during all detailed analysis. It was not that he disapproved of harmonic analysis. On the contrary, he considered it indispensable and had even taught a course in it for many years. What he meant to convey by his striking observation was that our love for a *Jupiter Symphony* defies all rational analysis. It is specifically our emotional response to a composition as a whole that leads us to love it. In other words, we could not possibly come to love a composition or, for that matter, a person, through the process of analysis alone. For if details are analyzed as ends in themselves, they divert you from a natural acceptance of your love—whether it be for a work of music or for a particular person. As far as music is concerned, analysis, as I see it, has two primary functions: it facilitates memorization and it substantiates theoretically what we already feel. To put it another way, our responses to music antecede all else, placing analysis after the fact. Understanding the details of style and structure merely enhances that which you have experienced in its total form. But the manifold attributes of a work of art are like those of a human personality. Considered independently from the whole, they can enlighten you as to particulars, but they can neither explain your love nor lead you to love a composition or a person.

Keeping intact your love of a composition as a whole enables you to work on details creatively: you memorize the intervals within one motif while simultaneously absorbing the structure of similar motifs throughout the piece; your musical conclusions on one phrase are correlated with numerous other phrases. Your sense of the composition in its entirety also inspires you to find novel technical devices for expressing your musical ideas: you try a different fingering, a different pedaling, or a different angle of your elbow. In your constant search to find the sound that will communicate your musical feeling, you may experiment with various procedures only to return to your initial solution. Pupil No. IV (*The Cookie Jar is Empty*) reminded me of one such experimental session on the *Appassionata Sonata* by Beethoven:

I remember a passage that wouldn't work. You suggested, "Try taking the top B<sup>b</sup> with your fourth finger instead of your third; try dividing your hands; try changing the right pedal on the first 16th note; now let me hear it once more with the long pedal and your third finger. Oh, that's much better. By all means, do it that way (see Illustration I).



(hop)

*f a tempo*

LH

*f*

or:

ILLUSTRATION I. Beethoven, *Sonata in F minor*, Op. 57 (pedal indication and fingering by Seymour Bernstein)

Susan Goldberg, pianist, offers the following facilitation:

[3]

[2/3]

[2/3]

[2/3]

[2/3]

[2/3]

2/5  
1/3

[2/3]



In Konrad Wolff's book, *The Teaching of Artur Schnabel*, there is a beautiful description of this process:

His [Schnabel's] method of practicing was experiment rather than drill. . . . His practice time was devoted to working out the exact articulation of a piece. He worked over each phrase hundreds of times to find the fingering, the hand position, the finger and arm movements that would secure the perfect inflection of melody, rhythm and harmony which he heard inwardly. To his pupils, he defined practicing as "passing the day at the piano with patience and serenity," and this, as far as I know, is what he did himself.<sup>7</sup>

## A CLOSE LOOK AT FINGERING

There are endless possibilities for a good fingering. Schnabel's edition of the Beethoven *Sonatas*, to cite one example, is a treasure trove of creative ideas. His intimate knowledge of musical stresses and relaxations within a phrase determined his choice of the strong or weak fingers of the hand. This ingenious edition is a lesson in how to co-ordinate musical needs with physical resources.

The work scores of great instrumentalists show a striking difference between those who subscribe to a fixed, mechanical approach and those who are essentially creative in their practicing. One way in which you can recognize a creative approach is in an artist's choice of fingering. On a single bar of Sir Clifford Curzon's work scores, for example, you can see the intricate workings of an inventive mind—always malleable, forever actuated by the constant search for a fingering that will yeild maximum expression even to two notes. The score that follows is an awe-inspiring testimonial to musical truth as he perceives it. Each number, each line, each commentary graphically portrays his struggle to reveal this truth to us. The result: his inimitable artistry (see Illustration II).

In the book, *Landowska on Music*, there is a reproduction of one page of Bach's *Fugue in B Major* from the *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I*.<sup>8</sup> This is another example of how a great musical mind approaches the dynamics of fingering. The photograph shows tiny bits of white paper pasted over holes worn into her music from constant erasures. She explains what prompted these constant changes: "Sometimes finding a solution for setting in relief a certain phrase demands a complete change of fingering and more



VIERER KONZERT  
 für das Pianoforte  
 von

# JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

124,

Dem Erzhertzog Rudolph gewidmet.

Op. 58.

London, W. J.

Flauto.  
 Oboi.  
 Clarinetti in C.  
 Fagotti.  
 Corni in G.  
 Pianoforte.  
 Violino I.  
 Violino II.  
 Viola.  
 Violoncello e Basso.

Allegro moderato.

Solo.  
 Allegro moderato.

Tutti.

ILLUSTRATION II. Beethoven, Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 (from the work score of Sir Clifford Curzon)



work. All the better, as long as it will sound! One must never be afraid to start all over again as many times as it is necessary.”<sup>9</sup>

Leschetizky once gave a pupil some memorable advice about fingering: “Play it with your nose if necessary, but make it sound right!” Making it “sound right” may, in fact, require a fingering that appears at first to be absurd. The choice of placing the thumb on the high F near the end of the *Harp Etude* by Chopin is a case in point. Interestingly enough, it will help you to play the high F with accuracy and control (see Illustration III). Old-fashioned notions

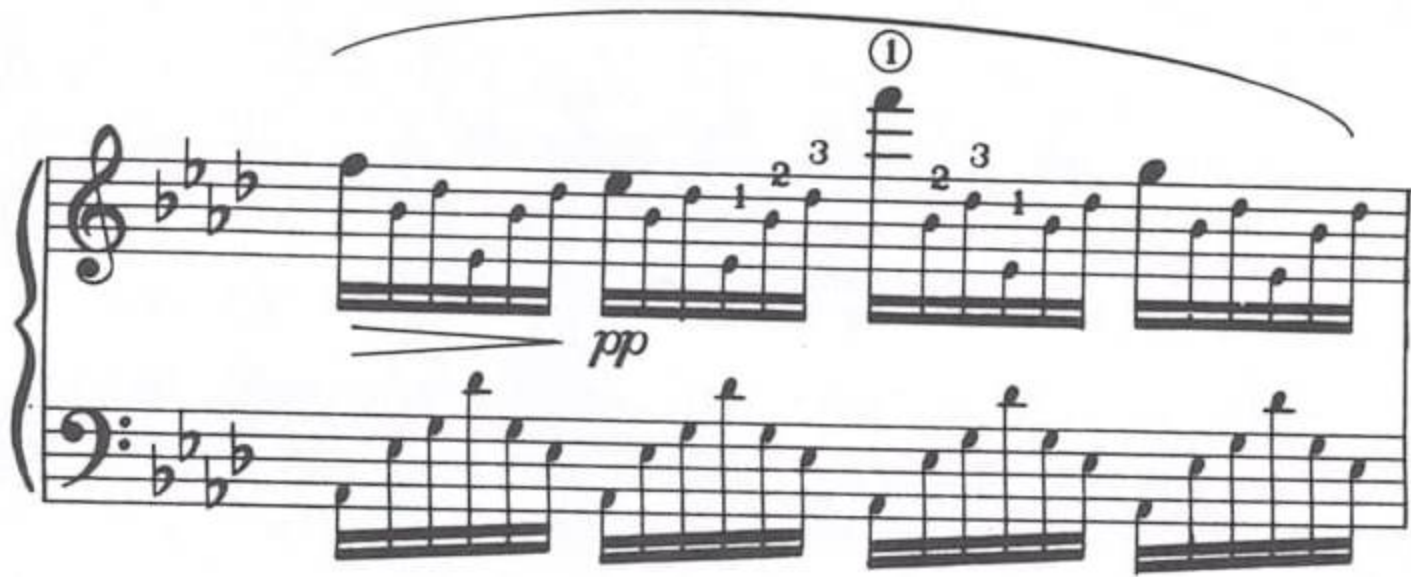


ILLUSTRATION III. Chopin, *Etude*, Op. 25, No. 1

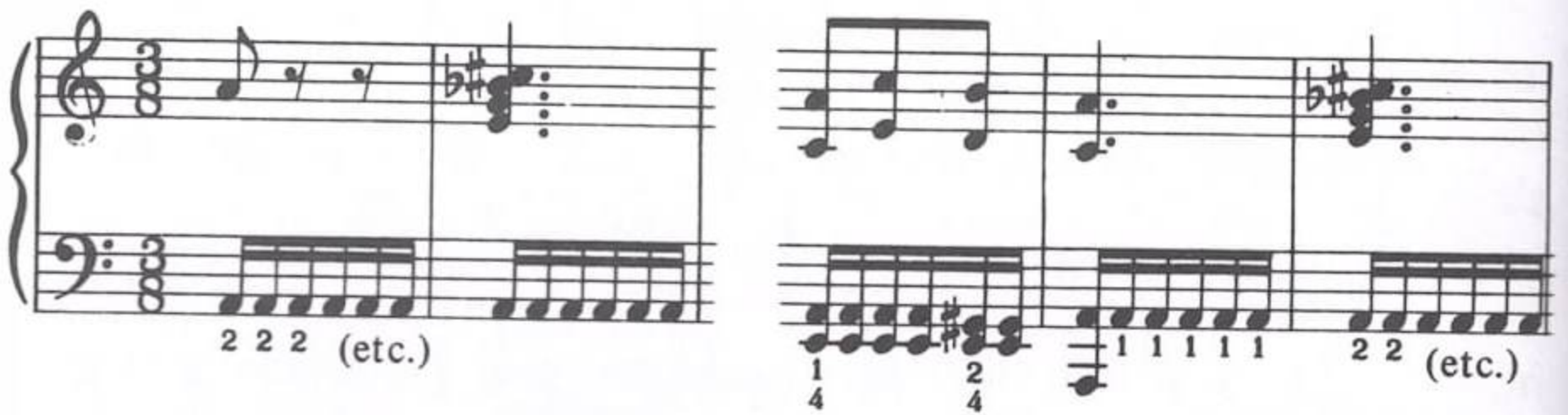


ILLUSTRATION IV. Beethoven, *Klavierstück (Für Elise)* (Klinsky-Halm WoO 59)



ILLUSTRATION V. Schumann, *Papillons*, Op. 2



such as “always change your fingers on repeated notes” have for years held back the art of piano playing. *Comfort* for the sake of musical expression and control of sound should be our primary concern—and not rigid rules (see Illustration IV). We also need to reappraise the fingerings of octaves. Keeping the hand in a mold and adhering to 1 and 5—even on black keys—will often produce free and, therefore, even octave passages (see Illustration V). Pian-

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system includes a piano introduction with a *pp* dynamic. The right hand (RH) and left hand (LH) parts are shown with various fingerings and articulations. The LH part includes a *leggiero* marking and a *3 2* fingering. The RH part includes a *3 2* fingering and a *3 2 1* fingering. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting with a brace under the RH part.

ILLUSTRATION VI. Brahms, *Trio in B major*, Op. 8



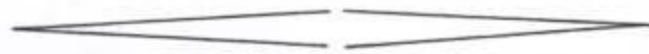
ists often resort to hand divisions to facilitate the playing of difficult passages. Illustration VI—certainly one of the more extravagant “swindles” I have devised—once sent a colleague into gales of laughter.

There is a risk, however, in striving for a creative fingering. If, for example, you change a fingering too soon before a performance, your automatic pilot may not have enough time to absorb the new pattern. You may then be prone to memory slips. Therefore, it may be best to make do with your old fingering and practice the new one between performances until it becomes more reliable. In any case, the lesson to be learned from great artists such as Curzon, Schnabel, and Landowska is that true art never remains static. “Fingerings,” as one artist told me, “may sometimes change as much as people do.” Such changes should grow, of course, out of a tireless search for what is true and beautiful in life as they must in art.

### ANTICIPATION—THE ARCH ENEMY OF CONCENTRATION

One of the most serious problems faced by the performer is *anticipating a note before it is time to play it*. One way of dealing with this problem is to concentrate on the *full length of each note value*—filling it out, as it were, to overflowing. When playing a long note, always try to keep in mind the shorter values pulsating throughout its length. The following exercise will demonstrate this important rule:

1. Choose any three notes on the piano.
2. Play them in whole notes—slowly and legato—with either hand, following the dynamic scheme:



3. The first time through, concentrate only on the pitches and the dynamics.
4. The second time, count aloud 1-2-3-4 on each note. As you count, make a crescendo with your voice to the second note and a diminuendo to the third note.
5. Count silently and imagine that each note is gradually increasing and diminishing in intensity. During the crescendo, move your body slowly forward at the same time gradually increasing the



pressure in your arm and finger. For the diminuendo, move your body slowly back to its original position while gradually decreasing the pressure in your arm and finger. (The increase and decrease in pressure thus coincide with the dynamic scheme.)

As soon as a piano string is set into motion, the sound begins to die. This explains why some pianists stop concentrating on long note values. Since they can't control the sound of a note once it is struck, they assume that there is no further need to concentrate on it. But beautiful piano playing results from knowing how to create illusions through a skillful manipulation of sound. To do this, you must first imagine crescendos, diminuendos, or a constant dynamic level on a sustained tone (see Chapter 5, where the illustrations demonstrate how this is achieved). Unless you imagine one of these three dynamic choices on any sustained sound, the following will result:

1. You will rob the *present note* of its full rhythmic value.
2. You will anticipate or delay the *next note*.
3. By allowing the first note to lose its musical impact, you will be unable to articulate the second note at the proper dynamic level so as to sustain the musical line.

Beautiful playing demands that each tone arrive at a specific time and at a specific dynamic level—no more, no less. To conceive a convincing dynamic plan for a particular note in a melody, you must think of the composition as a self-contained universe in which each note has a particular function. The choice of dynamics from note to note is ultimately determined by your comprehension of the entire piece and its overall musical content.

There is another kind of anticipation that interferes with your ability to concentrate. Most of us experience this at one time or another. For example, there are times when my desire to practice or write is so great that I resent having to perform various routine tasks of the day. This sort of resentment is then converted into tension which in turn robs me of the energy I need for my work. Thus, if while exercising I am worrying about my practicing, I am neither doing my music nor my abdominal muscles any good. But if I concentrate on my body and how it is functioning during sit-ups, I find myself feeling refreshed at the end of the exercise. I can then shift my attention to my work. If you allow too many tasks to occupy your consciousness at the same time, you cannot concentrate properly on any one thing. This applies equally to your practicing. If



you practice one passage and at the same time worry about all the other passages in the piece that require your attention, you make it virtually impossible to concentrate on your immediate task. If this should happen, stop your work and take stock of the situation. Make a list of what you want to accomplish in the order of necessity and then focus on one task at a time. As though by magic, tension vanishes.

Performers who play from memory know that anticipation causes memory slips. Instead of concentrating on the natural flow of the music, a voice will suddenly ask, "What is the next bass note?" When this happens, the automatic pilot is sabotaged and a blow-out occurs. Allowing the future to encroach upon the present is a sure sign that you are not concentrating. For when you really concentrate, you are concerned with *now, this moment, this note*—you are involved only in what you are doing at the moment.

Practicers who achieve optimum results from their work all agree that it takes a long time to learn how to concentrate properly. This should not discourage you. Sometimes you get immediate results; other times you have to wait for your rewards. Only children and immature adults expect immediate results. Once you realize that accomplishment is the offspring of patience, you will have taken the first step toward attaining your goals.

This book is a collection of ideas; it is not meant to take the place of your teacher but rather to stimulate you to new concepts and make you aware of the endless possibilities inherent in your art. It is to encourage you always to be responsive not only in your musical life but also in your personal life. I could never satisfy my curiosity about music with one composition any more than I could limit my associations to just one person. Being responsive does not rule out favorites in a hierarchy of interests, but it does offer unlimited possibilities in our search for knowledge and experience.

The thoughts of great artists can inspire you as you strive for perfection. Wanda Landowska, who writes about practicing with the same beauty and passion that characterized her playing, thus speaks to us all.

If everyone knew how to work, everyone would be a genius! I hate the word *practice*. Practice breeds inurement. Instead of discovering, of distinguishing traits that are deeply hidden or merely veiled, one ends seeing nothing anymore. One ceases to be aware.

To be aware, to be conscious at all times is what appears to me the



worthiest in my thoughts and in my work. While interpreting, even at the most impetuous moments when a musical phrase overflows with passion, I want to remain conscious. I may forget a liberty I took at one place or another, but this does not change in any way my state of consciousness, which is always on the alert.

Awkwardness and mistakes in playing are always due to a lack of concentration.

I attach great importance to concentration because I was born into a family of undisciplined individuals. I had to kick and scold myself. But I believe that I have acquired the faculty of concentrating, and now I can teach it to my pupils.

I work best with closed eyes. Only then I see and I hear. How should one start to play? One has to concentrate and be entirely ready so that when the first note is struck, it comes as a sort of continuation of a soliloquy already begun. Too often the value and importance of the start in playing is belittled. And yet all depends on its being carefully prepared. Before I begin a phrase, between the preparatory gesture of the hand or of the finger and the first note, there is an infinitesimal period of time, always surprising because of its unpredictable duration and because of its expressive impact. The listener can never anticipate the exact dosage I apply to this rest. . . . Breathings and caesuras, especially those that precede a beginning, have a positive value equal to that of the notes themselves.

Similarly, the last note is never the last. It is rather a point of departure for something to come.<sup>10</sup>