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by Florence Leonard.

Technique: The Outgrowth of Musical Thought

Vladimir Horowitz is one of the outstanding figures in the pianistic world of today. Born October 1, 1904, at Kieff, Russia, at six he had piano lessons from his mother, and later entered the Petrograd Conservatory to become a pupil of Felix Blumenfeld, himself a pupil of Anton Rubinstein. He made concert tours of Russia till 1924 when he left for Berlin and became a favorite throughout musical Europe.

Horowitz:

For the development of technique, it is important to know not only *how* to practice but also *what* to practice. One cannot choose any particular composition or any particular composer as best to practice. Instead one should play *all* the good music, *all* the good composers. As a small child of six years I studied music with my mother, and at the age of eight or nine I began to read music for myself—whatever I fancied, easy or difficult. When I was ten years old, I tried to learn the compositions of Rachmaninoff. So I suppose that would be called "talent." But not till I was twelve or thirteen did I seriously consider making music my career.

My teacher, who had been a pupil of Rubinstein, had of course learned most valuable ideas from him. And one of them was this—to make his pupils acquainted with all the best music. So we played duets together, the symphonies of Beethoven and of Brahms, and much Russian music.

Playing Musically and Orchestrally

Our talk was of music, not of technique. I had to find out my technique for myself in order to play these duets. And, further, whatever was played, it must be played musically. Further still, it had to be played orchestrally. Moreover, I had to find out for myself how to make the effects. In other words, we first played not "the piano" but "music." Then we played music as it is rendered by special instruments.

"How would a violinist play that?" my teacher would ask. or, "Play that like a 'cellist," or, "Like a flutist." Whatever was the effect which he sought, I myself had to find out the way to make it. I cannot tell how I learned technique any more than I can tell how I

learned languages—French, German, Italian—which I was learning at the same age. I only know that in the music itself I found out what the fingers had to do.

I practice four hours a day and have done so for years. An artist must keep up a large repertoire, and must continually add to it. The new compositions require new technique also.

Different Technics for Different Composers

Every composer has a different technique. Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, each has his special technique. One must find this technique with the fingers themselves, must *feel* it out. The studies of Czerny, Clementi, Cramer and the like I have never practiced. They are bad for the ear and bad for the touch, because they are not alive; they are merely mechanical. No mechanical playing assists the technique.

It is easy to understand why technique varies so much in Bach, Beethoven and Chopin, for instance. The early classics were not written for the grand piano, but for a piano with a much lighter action. Therefore the technique of the fingers was all-important. The contrapuntal devices in which the middle voices were so prominent required the sensitive, active finger. There is always an intimate connection between brain and finger tip!

After the polyphonic period came the doubling of voices, the expansion of the whole style of writing for the piano. This took place in Beethoven's day. So the development continued up to the time of Chopin. Chopin was the first composer who wrote for the piano *as a piano*. His objective was to produce a variety of characteristic sounds from the piano to make the tones of the piano express his ideas.

With Beethoven the case was different. He wrote for the piano, but he thought orchestrally. His piano was the means to an end, and his objective was fulness of tone. He heard in the piano the string quartet, the orchestra.

Arm, Wrist and Finger

Such differences in the style of writing brought about changes in technique. Before Beethoven's time, the wrist had not had much to do in technique. But since that time the use of the wrist has been one of the chief elements of technique. Now the ideal equipment for the pianist consists in movement in the wrist and relaxation in the arm. The touch itself must reside in the finger. This is the secret of avoiding a harsh tone.

In my own technique, the fifth fingers (both right and left) are the basis for playing runs, chords and octaves. Great strength is necessary in the fingers, but it comes with playing, if one plays rightly, that is, musically. From the moment one feels that the finger must *sing*, it becomes strong. That is a quite different matter from playing exercises or etudes with mechanical repetition merely for the sake of strengthening, and saying, "I

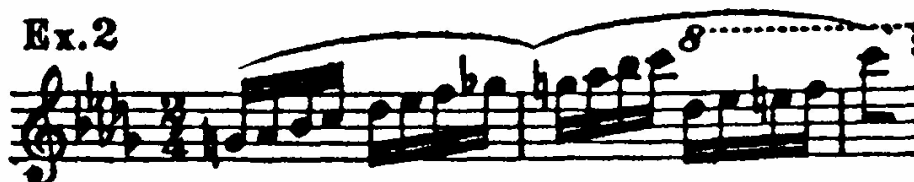
will exercise my fingers and make them strong." Such playing as this latter sort does not help.

The fifth finger I might call the "guide" through passages of scales or arpeggios ("runs"), chords and octaves. It is almost as if the fifth finger, with its acute sensitiveness, strength and control, taught the other fingers how to play. In scales and other passages I play as the violinist does. A good violinist does not play all the tones with equal strength.

The following from Chopin's *Ecosseise* [in D flat, op. posthumous 72/5 (1826), bars 11-13, 27-29]



he plays thus:

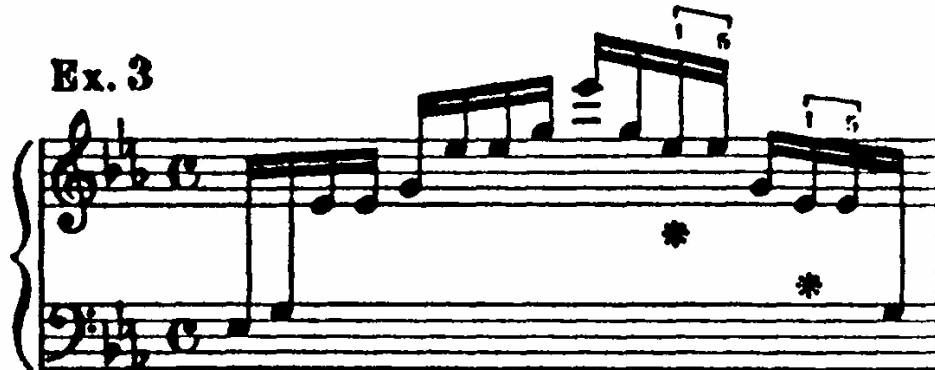


(Ex. 2 is identical to ex.1, an obvious error. We, therefore, have no way of knowing what Horowitz means by intermediate notes.)

He does not *lose* the intermediate tones; they are all there. But the listener does not hear them obtrusively. Each falls into place, and the emphasis is on the last tone to which the others lead. So if I play all the notes steadily along, without graduation, or without relating one to another, and without climactic or guiding emphasis, I have said nothing, even though I may have played the notes correctly and in correct time. *But* if I play in such a way that every finger *feels* its tone, as it has learned to do from the sensation of the fifth finger, then I have my effect. Finger strength one must have, however, in order to make the effect.

Such a composition as the *Etude in C Minor*, by Chopin, op. 25, No. 12, affords a good example of how to practice and how *not* to practice. If, for instance, I play stiffly, holding my wrist low and my fingers high and striking vigorously, I am soon weary, and, moreover, the tone is very hard. But if I carry my hand and wrist more nearly level, with fingers near the key, and keep the fingers extremely free in the knuckle, always *feeling* the tone, then I am using the suitable technic. I can practice for a long time, and I have a musical, interesting tone.

The wrist must relax often, to help out in the skips, at the change from the first finger to the fifth.

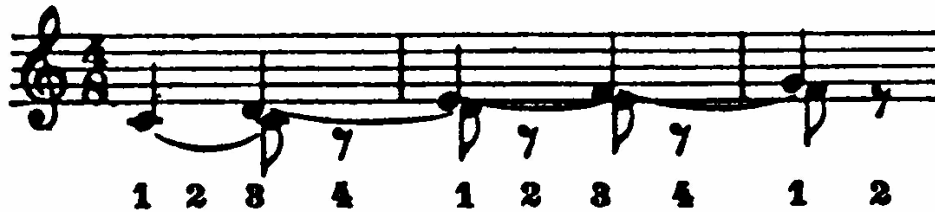


This skip is too wide to be made by the fingers alone. The fingers would not be accurate, and the tone would be weak. Therefore a slight sidewise movement in the wrist is needed.

For accuracy, constant care is required. I always practice distinctly, never indistinctly. Then, if I do play falsely, I hear the incorrect note at once. But absolutely distinct practice is an essential for accuracy. In long compositions the player must have endurance. Etudes, such as this one, are built on one figure which is repeated throughout the piece.

Endurance, in one sense, is a question for the doctor rather than the artist - a question of prescriptions, of physical condition. And yet the artist must so balance his powers and distribute his strength that he can hold out to the end. One must, therefore, not play all the time heavily and with much strength. He must bring his mind to bear on the problem and conserve his strength. The idea of the assistance of the fifth finger is, of course, applicable here.

Endurance requires, nevertheless, long, strong, firm practicing, with patience. It has to be, this routine practice! But, after all, endurance is the least difficult part of playing. In my rapid passage work (runs), I play very much of the time half *staccato*, *portamento*, so that every tone is very clear. This I find to be effective, even necessary, in a large hall. If I play

Ex. 4

as is called by some players *legato*, by others, *superlegato* (*legatissimo*), the effect will not be clear. The release of the note must be accurate, perfect, or the tones will be blurred, especially in a large hall. Therefore for rapid runs I prefer the *portamento*, in which one note is practically connected with the next, but not held over beyond the beginning of that note.

Ex. 5

For slow melodies, *cantilena*, however, I use only the very well connected *legato*. I do not use a stroke in playing, either in runs or in chords. In rapid runs there is no time for a stroke. If you wish to strike something, your arm must be at a distance from it. You cannot strike when your hand or arm is close to the object. So in rapid playing there is no time to lift high and strike. The fingers must remain near to the keys.

The tone made by striking is not agreeable to me. I prefer the tone which is *felt* by the finger, and it is impossible to "feel" the note and also to strike it. In playing *forte* passages, such as those in the Chopin Etude just referred to, I am aware of a slight movement in the hips, in addition to the finger movements already described. This movement in the hips brings the body to the assistance of the fingers. But - the body is always assisting when the playing has life, vitality.

Even when playing chords and octaves, I do not use the stroke. Take as an example this phrase from Brahms' *Ballade Op. 10, No. 1*:

Ex. 6



The upper notes of all the chords make the melody or theme. Each such note must be played by the upper finger, fifth or fourth, as the case may be. The theme must stand out, must sing. The accompaniment, whether *legato* or *staccato*, must be softer than the theme. Both these effects must be made by one hand. There must be relaxation in the wrist, in order to accomplish the necessary connecting between the melodic notes played by the upper fingers.

But this idea is not enough! One must not merely say "the upper voice is stronger than the lower voices, and it must be *legato* or *portamento*." No! The wrist must *feel* the movement which makes the connection; the fingers must have a *consciousness* of the movement which makes the singing, predominating melody! Here, again, the fifth finger is the guide through the intricacies and proportioning of the chord tones. Finger strength is necessary. In *legato* or *cantilena* octaves, similarly, the fifth fingers feel the tone.

In playing chords, whether they are *piano* or *forte*, I play close to the keys. I always use pressure, as it makes a smoother, more agreeable tone. The Tausig arrangement of Schubert's *Marche Militaire* affords a good example of what may be done with pressure chords in place of "struck" chords. One manner of touch makes a clear, songful tone; the other is harsh, with too many overtones. In other words it is "noisy." Therefore I use the pressure touch, in all degrees of dynamics, from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, and even for accents. In this chord playing, I am conscious that there is a connection between the hands and the *sides* of the body (the body, again, is assisting!) In *fortissimo*, the pedal is, of course, a most necessary aid.

Octaves

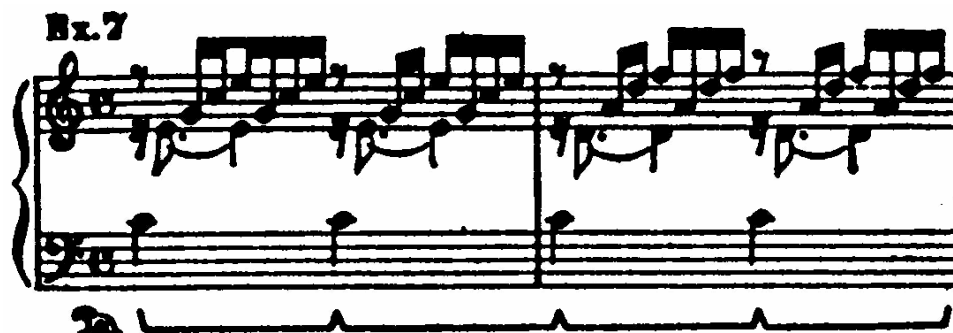
The octave passage in the "Sixth Rhapsody" of Liszt is famous. Here I use the wrist (hand) alone, not the fore-arm, not the upper arm. The movement *stops* at the wrist. If I used the whole arm, I should be fatigued, and the tone would be harsh and clumsy. So I use the hand, moving it in the wrist only. Yet I perceive, again, some connection between the wrist, or small acting member, and the triceps, as if, in some way, the triceps was assisting.

If, as I have said before, endurance is not the most difficult thing to acquire in playing, what, then, is most difficult?

There are two greatest difficulties, tone and pedaling. And the pedal is hardest of all to learn! Pedaling is a matter of detail, but such details are most important, most significant. Pedaling cannot be taught in words only, nor described in words only. It must be learned by constant experimenting. But when I have once decided on the pedaling in a composition, I rarely deviate from it. The great question is which pedal to use! And the

next question is when to use it. I often play *forte* with the *una corda* pedal for color. But pianos vary greatly. In some pianos the *una corda* pedal gives a very unpleasant tone which can almost be called a nasal tone. On some pianos only an occasional note has this tone. But if it is present on any note, I cannot use the *una corda* pedal.

In general, one must pedal according to the harmony. Thus, if there are chord effects which sound well when sustained, then the damper pedal must be used. Even in Bach I find this true. For example, in the *Prelude in C major* from "The Well-Tempered Clavichord, Book I,"



I use the damper pedal throughout. But in the *Fugue* which follows



there should be very little pedal.

Another test as to the use of the pedal is the relation of certain melodic notes to the harmony, as in Brahms' *Ballade, Op. 10, No. 4*:

Ex. 9

Musical notation for Ex. 9, showing a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass staff. The bass staff has a pedal line with a fermata over the first two measures and a slur over the next two measures.

If you wish to join these notes to the accompanying figure you must pedal them as marked. But if you wish to detach them from the accompaniment, as might well be the case, you must pedal them as follows:

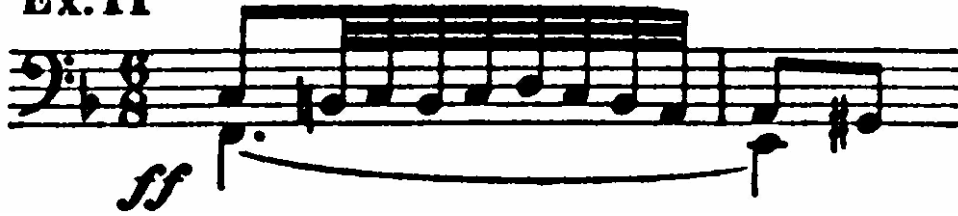
Ex. 10

Musical notation for Ex. 10, showing a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass staff. The bass staff has a pedal line with a fermata over the first two measures and three separate slurs for the next two measures.

For each is a different kind of music!

In searching for tone-quality—the second of the most difficult factors in playing—it is helpful to think of the instruments of the orchestra. Some people say, "A piano is only a piano." But I do not feel it so. I think *forte*, and think "orchestra." I think of many instruments when I play. I do not mean that one should try to imitate, for the timbre of the piano is not the timbre of the violin nor the bassoon nor the flute. But if one thinks of the quality or the sonority of the various instruments, one is helped to play more beautifully. We have, in the piano, all registers—flute, oboe, violin, viola, clarinet, 'cello, bassoon, double bass. If, when I play from Beethoven *Sonata Op. 10 No. 3*

Ex. 11



Music is a Cultural Study

Here in America the cultural influence of the study of music should be more strongly emphasized than it is at present. Your modern life, with its sports, machines, dances and what not, is greatly in need of the influence of the musical classics. Whether the student is talented or not, these great works have an influence on his character. It should be remembered that the study of them is not a "substitute" for education, as some educators would have us believe. No! it is one phase of education itself!