"The components of natural playing include an upright posture, few extraneous movements, and little tension. Glenn Gould used his hands and arms perfectly but sat so low at the keyboard that he lifted his shoulders unnaturally. This leads to back pain, numb fingers, neck strain, and tendonitis."

Peter Feuchtwanger

BY HEINER KLUG

German-born pianist and composer Peter Feuchtwanger has devoted 40 years to teaching, helping others to play naturally and eliminate the movements that may lead to injury. He has learned that some teachers never discuss the physical aspects of piano playing. "While I was on the jury of an international competition, another jury member — a French pianist and teacher — complained about the exaggerated movements of one competitor. This took me by surprise because the pianist was his student. When I asked why the teacher hadn't corrected these bad habits, he simply replied that it was not his job to correct physical shortcomings."

Since 1967 Feuchtwanger has presented masterclasses and adjudicated for many international piano competitions. He has taught at the *Musikhochschulen* in Karlsruhe and Basel and the Yehudi Menuhin School in England and is vice president of the United Kingdom European Piano Teachers Association.

Feuchtwanger's teachers include Gerti Rainer (a pupil of Emil von Sauer), Max Egger, Edwin Fischer, and Walter Gieseking; and he studied composition with Hans Heimler (a pupil of Heinrich Schenker, Alban Berg, and Felix Weingartner) and Lennox Berkeley. He studied Indian and Arabic music and philosophy with Nazir Jairazbhoy and Arnold Bake. His *Variations on an Eastern Folk Tune* won first prize at the International Viotti Competition in 1966, and a piece he composed for

Yehudi Menuhin and Ravi Shankar was performed at the Bath Festival that year and was the basis of their recording *East Meets West*.

As a young teacher Feuchtwanger soon realized students didn't know how to practice. If he told them to go home and practice more when a lesson didn't go well, they returned playing the same way. "I started to think about how I had taught myself using natural movements and how other pianists, such as Clara Haskil, play with a natural technique. She performed stunningly with innate abilities, even with severe scoliosis (curvature of the spine). Haskil played the piano from early childhood but did not have early training in technique. Rachmaninoff and Horowitz remained very still as they played, even during the most hair-raising feats of bravura, and Beethoven seems to have had a similar approach. Czerny said of Beethoven, 'His posture during playing was exemplary: quiet, dignified and beautiful, without even the merest grimace; only through increasing deafness did he crouch over the keyboard.'

"One component of natural playing is an upright posture with few extraneous movements and little tension, which prevents many disabling conditions. Glenn Gould used his hands and arms perfectly but sat so low at the keyboard that he lifted his shoulders unnaturally, leading to back pain, numb fingers, immense neck strain, and tendonitis. Louis Kentner, by contrast, sat almost as low as Gould but used his body correctly; he played magnificently — never with pain — well into old age.

"Several years ago I taught a highly talented student when his teacher went on concert tours. During one such period I waited to hear from the student for some time. She finally called but confessed to having developed tendonitis. Whenever this happened the regular teacher suggested she either stop playing, have a cortisone injection, or learn the Bach/Brahms *Chaconne* or the Ravel Concerto for the Left Hand. Unfortunately, this advice is common.

"I have many memories of the magnificent Youra Guller sitting regally at the piano, and producing amazing *fortissimos* with no apparent physical effort. Veteran jazz pianists, such as Fats Waller, sat quietly while performing difficult left-hand leaps."

Feuchtwanger says that as early as the 16th century Girolamo Diruta advocated sitting quietly at the keyboard. As a young prodigy Liszt used excessive exhibitionist gestures, prompting John Field to question, "Does he also bite?" Couperin wrote on the importance of a beautiful attitude at the keyboard in *L'art de toucher le Clavecin* in 1716. Daniel Gottlob Türk wrote *Klavierschule*, which includes a strongly worded description of unnecessary movements at the keyboard.

Feuchtwanger devised exercises that take a minimum amount of energy and lead to a natural way of playing the piano, which are available on D.V.D. or video with a book (www.peter-feuchtwanger.de). The exercises are deceptive because they appear easy enough to play correctly the first time.

Feuchtwanger reviews a score with violinist Yehudi Menuhin.

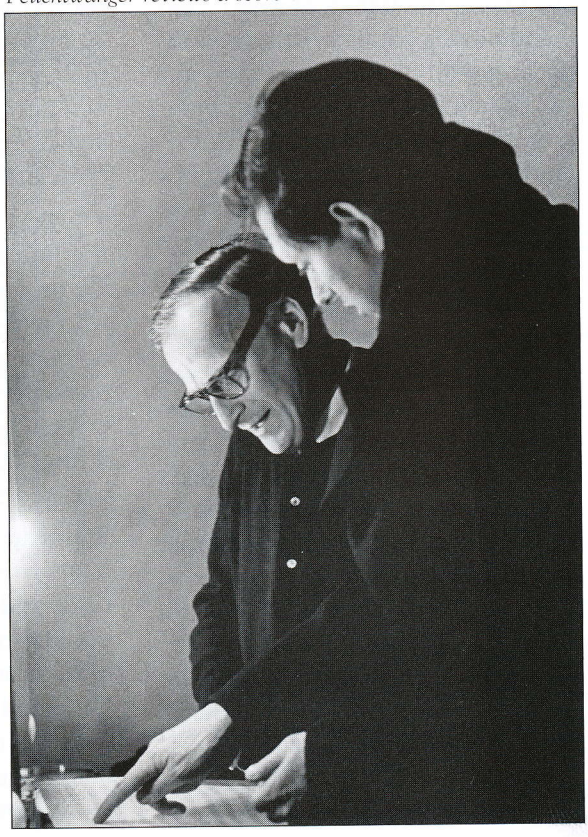

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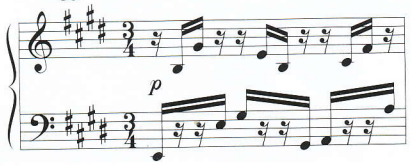
Photo by Malcolm Crowthers

Tatiana Nikolaeva and Peter Feuchtwanger in the late 1980s, before her last concert in Wigmore Hall in London. They are discussing a Bach Prelude and Fugue, which Tatiana performed on the program that night.

"Some of the principles I teach begin with the idea that the keys become an extension of the fingers, which means the fingers play in a flat position rather than curved. My focus is how the fingers release the keys instead of how they strike them. The fingers and hands have the feeling of quickly coming off the keys, springing off them, like a flat stone that skims over the water in a ricochet action. After the hands stretch to play octaves or large chords, they immediately return to a natural position, without interfering with the natural arm weight. The wrists are always loose, and the arms and elbows follow movements that begin in the fingertips; the thumbs remain free when the other fingers play. The right hand generally makes elliptical movements counterclockwise, the left clockwise." He recommends pianists interested in playing with natural movements read *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel (Penguin), *The Pianist's Talent* by Harold Taylor, in addition to the writings of F. Matthias Alexander and Moshe Feldenkrais.

Some pianists mistakenly rely on muscle memory to master pieces for recitals. "Simple tests show if a pianist is in command of the music or only knows it by motor response. I have students play a piece in a different key or with the hands crossed; you can also play everything with one finger. A place to try the one-finger test is the beginning of the second variation in the slow movement of the Beethoven Op. 109 because there are no chords and the passage moves between both staves.

Variation Two
Leggieramente



"Many pianists typically reach the limits of their ability by overloading muscle memory. The ones who pass the one-finger test have no gaps in their memory and don't rely solely on finger memory. You can choose an ideal fingering, but if finger memory suddenly deserts you in a recital, it's over."

Transposing also helps pianists to sharpen their musical imaginations and trick muscular memory because of the changes in the order of white and black keys. Different fingers have to play different patterns in the music without changing the musical and mental processes. The result is greater independence and a flexible, natural technique for musical structures. This approach is helpful for mastering difficult passages.

Feuchtwanger emphasizes that music has to be securely memorized. Once a pupil performed the *Abegg Variations* of Schumann for him, including the difficult third variation, which had a few problems. He advised her to play this variation in a different key every day, and at the next lesson it went smoothly, without a hitch. "A teacher needs to have all his pupils practice transposing from the beginning. If listening is an important part of learning, it shouldn't be a problem."

Over the years Feuchtwanger has become a friend to many virtuoso pianists, who seek his advice on interpretation and artistry. Shura Cherkassky became a regular visitor and for decades played

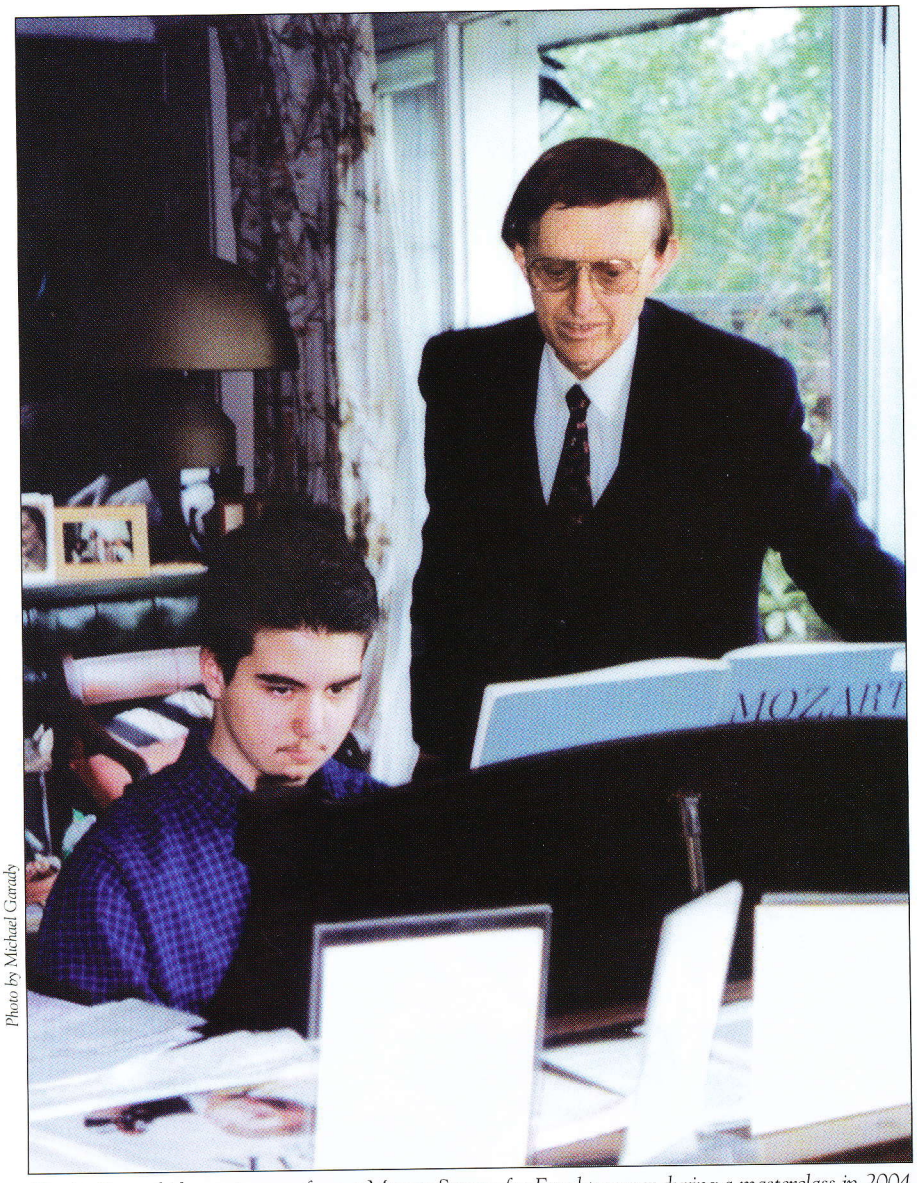


Photo by Michael Gurady

Dustin Conrad plays a passage from a Mozart Sonata for Feuchtwanger during a masterclass in 2004.

recital programs for Feuchtwanger. Of his sessions with Martha Argerich, Feuchtwanger modestly says, "These were not lessons; it was more a case of playing for a colleague. Martha is such an excellent musician that she didn't need me at all."

Clara Haskil was Feuchtwanger's artistic model and most important influence. He remembers she once played a cadenza in a Mozart piano concerto that he didn't recognize. After the concert he asked about the lovely cadenza. "Oh, it was awful," she said in a typically self-critical way, "I improvised it. Wasn't it horrible?" A few weeks later before a performance he asked whether she would play the same cadenza again. "I have no idea what I did then; I'll play something new and hope it will be better this time."

Feuchtwanger recalls that Alfred Cortot was satisfied to have Haskil practice only one hour a day. "She had an unbelievable ear. She heard Vlado Perlemuter play *Feux follets*, one of the hardest Liszt studies, in a private concert. Two days later she played it as an encore. After the concert someone asked to see the score, but she had never seen it."

Clara Haskil's virtuosity should be a model for all serious teaching. "Musical imagination and creativity combined with a flexible technique are inseparable. For example, instead of playing the beginning of *Für Elise* with two fingers, try 1-2-4-3-5, which gives the fingers the feeling of moving toward the piano lid while being completely supple. I did this naturally as a child, and developed a free way of fingering on my own."

Peter Feuchtwanger was born in Munich and grew up in Israel, because the family emigrated just before World War II. As a boy he wanted to take piano lessons but was not allowed to because he was a poor pupil in school. At age 12 Peter began to play truant from school and secretly visited a nearby neighbor who had a piano to try out pieces he heard on recordings. "We had recordings of all the Chopin studies with Alfred Cortot and Wilhelm Backhaus, Beethoven Sonatas played by Arthur Schnabel, Liszt etudes with Simon Barere and some Liszt pupils, such as Frederic Lamond and Eugene d'Albert. Unfortunately, the gramophone ran slightly too fast so I learned everything a half step too high."

One day Peter's father met the school headmaster and discovered his son's truancy. Once the boy explained what he had been doing all that time, the rest is the story of a child prodigy.

Peter's first piano lesson was a fiasco, because he couldn't read notes and only performed by ear. First the boy performed a work by Liszt in F♯ minor, instead of the correct key, F minor, and failed a sightreading test, because he had never before seen a score. When the teacher placed an edition of Beethoven on the piano to sightread, Peter guessed the pieces were slow movements of the "Moonlight," "Pathétique," and the "Appassionata" Sonatas; but

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he had no clue how to read the notation. Feuchtwanger remembers the teacher said, "First of all you're playing the wrong sonata, second it is in the wrong key, and for another thing, you have not looked at the music even once."

The teacher tried to change his technique. "You have to imagine holding an apple in your hand," he said, "and that the fingers are like little hammers." Today Feuchtwanger still quotes that teacher as a warning to students about poor technical advice.

Growing up Feuchtwanger, who had perfect pitch, realized he could learn pieces very quickly by ear. Concert promoters took advantage of this ability and asked him to change recital programs on short notice.

He tells the following story with good humor, in spite of the intense pressure at the time: "I entered the green room, ready to perform Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 109, but the program listed the Op. 101 Sonata instead. When I talked to the agent about the printing error, he shouted to me over the telephone, 'If you don't play Op. 101, I'll never engage you again.' He said Fischer played 109 a couple of days ago, and Backhaus would play it next week; he didn't want another 109.'

"I didn't dare say no and played Op. 101 in the recital, although I only knew it from the Schnabel recording. Naturally I was nervous, but everything went smoothly until six or seven pages before the end when I suddenly had no idea which key came next. After improvising the fugue for ten minutes at some point, I reached the last page and remembered the end. By the way the critic didn't notice a thing and wrote that the Sonata was the highlight of the concert. I decided then that it was presumptuous to play a masterpiece by Beethoven without working on it."

Today Feuchtwanger teaches so much that he has little time to compose. In addition to giving private lessons at home in London, traveling to competitions, and giving masterclasses, he accepted a guest professorship at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. He continues to emphasize the correct way to use the body. Through this he hopes the students who follow his approach will be able to express music in a natural way. □