

# Zen in the art of playing the piano

A commentary on Peter Feuchtwanger's Piano Exercises

By Stefan Blido

Peter Feuchtwanger's teaching on playing the piano, in particular his teachings on a naturally functional way of playing, stem from his spontaneous experiences as a "wunderkind", whose playing was never influenced by any teaching or method. As is well known, Peter Feuchtwanger had no piano teacher until he was thirteen. At this point he was already in command of a large part of the classical and romantic repertoire. Recordings made by him at this time show that the young Peter Feuchtwanger's playing was world class, and that his technique (in the widest sense of the word), rooted in the piano artistry of the "Golden era of piano playing" can be compared favourably with that of the great pianists.<sup>1</sup>

At the core of such music making is the experience of effortless capability, spontaneous and untarnished by excessive reflexion. It is a complete absorption in the activity, which brings with it moments of thorough bliss. In a conversation with Kurt Hoffman, the Austrian pianist Friedrich Gulda describes such moments, which we know Peter Feuchtwanger also experienced:

"Deep down inside me is something over which I have no control. I don't know what it is. I had this feeling for the first time during the international competition in Geneva in 1946. I was then 16 years old. At a particular point in the concert I had the feeling that it was not me myself playing." It was playing. One gets goose pimples when that happens, when one is especially absorbed, when it goes the right way, just as one wants it to go. Later I learnt that this feeling doesn't just come as a coincidence, but that one has to fight for it, again and again. I took it for granted that it would just continue like that, with ease – "Oh, that's it, from now on I'll always do it like that" -, and I was bitterly disappointed to find out that one has to work to attain this as well. In my best moments I have the feeling that it isn't me at all, but apart from these best, decisive and important moments, my estimation of myself is that I'm normal."<sup>2</sup>

What Gulda describes is basically a mystical experience. Having no goal, a lack of the feeling of self and a deep absorption in what one is doing are characteristic of this state. Player and played become one and the spirit goes its own way. In short: "*It*" plays. Such experiences form an intrinsic part of Zen, a Buddhist movement in Japan.<sup>3</sup>

An important authority on Zen-Buddhist wisdom is Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955) who at the end of his career worked as professor for Systematic Philosophy in Erlangen. Between 1924 and 1929 he taught Philosophy at the Imperial University in Sendai, Japan. During his time there he wanted to learn about Zen. He was told that if he wanted to learn about Zen he must first learn one of the traditional Japanese arts,

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<sup>1</sup> At this point I would like most warmly to express my thanks to Prof. Elgin Roth (Hamburg), who gave me my basic orientation on the subject of Piano methodology. I also thank Wieland Hartwich (Speyer) for his hints and help on finding the relevant literature.

<sup>2</sup> Gulda 1990, page 14

<sup>3</sup> When I point out similarities to Peter Feuchtwanger's teachings, this is to make them easier to understand and to show what universal roots they have. However it would be wrong to infer that Peter Feuchtwanger studied Zen, Tai-Chi or Feldenkrais and then developed his teaching from them. These body techniques verify his own personal teaching after the fact, so to speak.

and he decided on archery. His experiences over many years are to be found in a book<sup>4</sup>, “Zen in the art of archery”, which we strongly recommend to anyone practising the piano. Herrigel says himself: “What applies to archery or sword craft applies equally to every other art”.<sup>5</sup>

But are spiritual, emotional and bodily experiences, and their interrelation, whether to do with archery or piano playing, such that one can describe them with words? Can one write or talk about them meaningfully? Eugen Herrigel was aware of this problem and said in short that words are less than thoughts, and thoughts are less than experiences. “Words are a filtrate, and what drops through the filter is robbed of the best.”<sup>6</sup>

So we too can ask whether it makes sense to try to write about Peter Feuchtwanger’s teaching method and his exercises, which are central to it. Can one describe movements at the piano in such a way that “outsiders” can understand them? And what about the subjective perception of these movements, that is the kinaesthetic experience of them? Is the description of them in words and pictures sufficient, or does one need a teacher to show one how to do them?<sup>7</sup> Harold Taylor writes in his pioneering book “The pianistic talent”, which we strongly recommend for anyone interested in understanding Peter Feuchtwanger’s work: “To describe in words those things which in reality can only be experienced is no easy task”<sup>8</sup>

As a little help on the way for those whose first experience of the exercises is made with a teacher we quote what Erwin Johannes Bach said about his book “The perfect piano technique” : It is also impossible to understand everything in it at once, but in the course of studying it, more and more relationships will become apparent, and the way to one’s own independent and self-governed progress will open up.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus we recommend that one approach the exercises with patience, openness, lack of prejudice, and with a wakeful sensory awareness.

Let us return to Herrigel’s book. The ancient art of archery here described is not to do with learning a sport, nor does it serve any useful purpose in a day to day sense. It is not even supposed to be for aesthetic pleasure. Rather it is about “training one’s consciousness” and so how “harmoniously to adjust the conscious to the unconscious.”<sup>10</sup> Herrigel describes the different stages on his road to learning archery, which went on for several years. He tells in detail of the resistance in himself which he had to overcome and how he gradually managed to let go of his inhibitions.<sup>11</sup> Eventually he came to attain a level of consciousness that enabled his ability to become “spiritual”.

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<sup>4</sup> Herrigel 1973 (1st edition 1948)

<sup>5</sup> Herrigel 1973, p.89

<sup>6</sup> Herrigel 1973, p.9

<sup>7</sup> In the course of discussing the description of one of the exercises Peter Feuchtwanger said “People who don’t know me will interpret everything in the wrong way.” This shows clearly the limitations of language in describing movements and kinaesthetic experiences. Peter Feuchtwanger is very aware of this.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor 1996 p.11

<sup>9</sup> Bach 1960, P.7

<sup>10</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, in: Herrigel 1973,p.7

<sup>11</sup> Siegfried Eberhardt, a violin teacher who pioneered holistic and physiologically aware music making, sums up: “From inhibition to mastery is a long journey” (quoted in Fellisches 1991 p.45). In

At the beginning he learnt that it is unnecessary to use his full potential muscle power in order to pull the bowstring. Instead, his hands alone should do the work, “while the shoulder and arm muscles remain loose and look on as if they were uninvolved. This is one of the preconditions for tensing the bowstring and shooting in a “spiritual” way, and only when you can do this do you fulfil it.”<sup>12</sup> Herrigel’s teacher and master let him feel the muscles in his arm while he tensed the bow. To his surprise Herrigel could feel hardly any tension there, as if they had no work to do<sup>13</sup>. The avoidance of muscle tension and superfluous movements: what pianist could not learn from this?

I have often experienced the astonished reaction of pianists when they see a video of themselves playing. They were totally unaware of their exaggerated body movement and their facial grimaces while playing. However, “a pianist can learn to stop making such superfluous gesticulations by completely focussing his awareness on the sound and by transferring the feeling for the tone production to the finger tips. One should regularly do such exercises and play them slowly. Perfection and accuracy of touch can little by little free a pianist of unnecessary extra movements.”<sup>14</sup>

Heinrich Neuhaus too expected from his pupils the principle of economy, “le stricte necessaire”, in connection with tension and movement behaviour.<sup>15</sup> Peter Feuchtwanger says on this subject that art comes from skill, which is related to control, and therefore he accepts everything that is controlled.<sup>16</sup> However all movements which are unconscious, superfluous, or dysfunctional are unacceptable for him.

A further important step for Herrigel was learning the right way of breathing to overcome physical blockages. He constantly points out the connection between breathing and archery. “For through this breathing you will not only discover the source of all spiritual strength but will also cause this source to flow more abundantly, and to pour more easily through your limbs the more relaxed you are.”<sup>17</sup> Herrigel’s description of his difficulties further on his way is very revealing. Gradually he learned to breath in the right way, and sometimes he felt as though it wasn’t he himself breathing, but that he was “- strange as this may sound – being breathed.”<sup>18</sup>

At a new stage in the learning process Herrigel learns how to release a shot. To begin with he is not “capable of cushioning the suddenly freed hand.”<sup>19</sup> Apart from this, he thinks far too much about what he is supposed to be doing. His ambitious

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another place Eberhard writes: “Excessive force and tension [...] looks unnatural in every artistic performance and makes the listener uneasy, because he can’t rid himself of the impression that the player’s fight against his own physical blockages is distracting him from giving his full attention to the music.”

<sup>12</sup> Herrigel 1973, p.28

<sup>13</sup> I once had a similar experience with Peter Feuchtwanger. He was demonstrating how to play *fortes* on the piano, and let me feel his muscles while he played. I could feel no marked tension in any of the muscles concerned, in particular not in the biceps, triceps or pectoral muscles.

<sup>14</sup> Samuil Feinberg in: Feinberg 1976, p.66

<sup>15</sup> Neuhaus 1981, p.92

<sup>16</sup> „Art is control, so I want that everything is controlled” (Peter Feuchtwanger in conversation.

Compare this with Stravinsky: “Art demands in the first place that the artist acts consciously” (quoted in Böttner 1985, p.60).

<sup>17</sup> Kenzo Awa, Herrigel’s Master, in: Herrigel 1973, p.34

<sup>18</sup> Herrigel 1973, p.36

<sup>19</sup> Herrigel 1973, p.43

copying of the master has the opposite effect, so that he becomes unsure of himself. The master instructs him: “don’t think of what you have to do, don’t consider how to carry it out! [...] The shot will only go smoothly when it takes the archer himself by surprise. [...] You mustn’t open the right hand on purpose.”<sup>20</sup>

Herrigel learns to open his hand unintentionally. “The right art is purposeless. Aimless!” said the master, and explained further: “The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede. What stands in your way is that you have a much too wilful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen.”<sup>21</sup>

Here as well we can see close similarities with Peter Feuchtwanger’s teachings. At an elementary mechanical level he is against preparing chords, octaves and single notes and putting the hand into position in advance. Instead of this, Peter Feuchtwanger’s approach to the keyboard is always immediate and direct. The playing of chords is elastic and cushioned, and without preparation and one could describe it as “purposeless”. He only accepts *mental* preparation.<sup>22</sup> Instead of preparing the notes in the hand and then playing them, we play them spontaneously, taking them in on the move. Moreover we learn to concentrate on the right instant in time.<sup>23</sup>

Peter Feuchtwanger often recommends comparing movements at the piano with movements that we carry out in daily life. For instance, when we shake hands with someone we don’t prepare our hand; we just reach it out spontaneously. The same goes for speaking – we don’t open our mouth in anticipation and then speak, we just speak. We simply speak and thereby we preserve the unity of movement and expression. The following comment by Beate Ziegler, cited by Friedrich Rabi, can be mentioned in this context: “A spring over several octaves often fails because the pupil is cramped from worrying about hitting the wrong note, or because some superfluous movement hinders him in reaching the correct one. Beate Ziegler said “put this pencil on f<sup>3</sup>.” This comparison leads immediately to a more natural attitude.”<sup>24</sup>

On the subject of “playing without preparing” I would like to pass on the following little travel anecdote by Joachim Ernst Berendt, which he relates in his book “There is no way. Only going. Being at one with nature.” When he was taken by fishermen to the Fiji islands on a boat he wondered how they navigated. To his surprise he ascertained that “although they had radar, they didn’t turn it on a single time, [...]. I asked the captain: „ How do you find your way to the Fiji Islands?” He replied: “I aim at the Fijis and I’ll get there.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Herrigel 1973, p.43/44

<sup>21</sup> Herrigel 1973, p. 46/47. Dürckheim 1964,p.10, said in connection with an exercise, that this should be done “[...] totally freed of the worry that it could fail and unimpeded by the ambition that it *must* succeed”

<sup>22</sup> Compare this with Safonoff, p.25: “Unless a special effect of roughness is intended, a chord should never be prepared in a stiff position, for then the sound becomes hard and wooden. The chord must, so to speak, be hidden in the closed hand, which opens, in falling from above for the necessary position, just at the moment of striking the keyboard. This means that the chord must be ready in the thought of the player before the hand opens. This was the secret of the incomparable beauty of sounds in the chords of Anton Rubinstein, whose playing the author of this book had the good fortune to watch closely for many years.”

<sup>23</sup> Herrigel’s master urged him:“You must learn to wait properly“. (Herrigel 1973, p.47)

<sup>24</sup> Rabi 1983, p.8.

<sup>25</sup> Berendt 2000,p.19

However, we now return to Herrigel, who, following on from the topic of purposelessness, devotes a whole chapter to the subject “letting go of oneself”.<sup>26</sup> “If the shot is to be loosed right, the physical loosening must now be continued in a mental and spiritual loosening, so as to make the mind not only agile, but free.”<sup>27</sup> Thus Herrigel learns to forget himself completely and to adapt himself without purpose to what is going on, without the need for directing and controlling deliberation. Here Herrigel’s master compares this to the carefree way of a child.<sup>28</sup>

The similarity with the following comment by Peter Feuchtwanger is of certain interest: “I let go completely and feel myself as being part of the universe. For me it is self-evident that I can let go. I used to meditate a lot and thereby I concentrated on all parts of my body.” About his best concert he says: “I just sat there and listened to myself.”<sup>29</sup>

Pianists, teachers and composers have again and again stressed how important it is to free oneself from personal matters. For example, George Copland cites the following comment by Claude Debussy: When I asked him why there were so few people who could play his music, Debussy replied after thinking for a while: “I think it is because they try to project themselves into the music. However it is necessary to give one self up and let the music do what it will with one – as if one were a vessel through which the music flows.”<sup>30</sup> The important Piano pedagogue Ludwig Deppe (1828-1890) stressed “the letting go of subjectivity, the suspension of direct expressions of will, and purposelessness.”<sup>31</sup>

The following instruction, which Herrigel received from his master, can also be mentioned in this context: “You know already that you should not grieve over bad shots. [...] You must learn to rise above them in easy equanimity [...] this, too, you should practise unceasingly – you cannot conceive how important it is.”<sup>32</sup>

As far as Peter Feuchtwanger’s piano exercises (e.g. Exercise 2) are concerned, this means, among other things, that we should accept the result of each attempt and not comment on them each time or try to improve them afterwards. We accept what has happened since we cannot change the past. It is also pointless to react to a mistake by making a face (e.g. by pulling the corners of the mouth down). Instead we accept the status quo. “When one eye is watching the goal then there is only one eye available to find the way.” (See p.16.)

What we can learn from Herrigel for our piano playing is this: we should understand practising as “daily meditation”.<sup>33</sup> To sum up we quote Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, whose works (“Daily life as exercise” and especially “Hara. The Earth Centre of Man” etc.) belong equally to the background context which is detailed in this essay and

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<sup>26</sup> Herrigel 1973, p.49

<sup>27</sup> Herrigel 1973, p.51

<sup>28</sup> In connection with this a change in mental attitude, as suggested by Taylor in his matchbox experiment, is helpful: that one watches oneself from outside when doing something, as if one were an uninvolved observer. (Taylor 1996, p.37)

<sup>29</sup> Peter Feuchtwanger in conversation.

<sup>30</sup> Zilkens 1998, p.12

<sup>31</sup> Zeitschrift der internationalen Musikgesellschaft, 6th year, issue no.10, 1905, p.413.

<sup>32</sup> Herrigel 1973, p.85

<sup>33</sup> Uhde 1973, p.19. See also Bollnow 1987.

which are in keeping with Peter Feuchtwanger's intentions: "It's always about the same thing: that someone in the untiring practise of his art form so completely frees himself of his fearful ego, which is worried about success and needy of material attention, that he becomes the tool of a deeper power. From this deeper power a perfect performance arises without his help and completely without intention, like a ripe fruit falling from a tree."<sup>34</sup>

## The Piano Exercises

In Peter Feuchtwanger's Piano Exercises we have in concentrated form his teachings on pianistic movements, which are based on economical movements and lead to a virtuoso piano technique. With these exercises Peter Feuchtwanger has produced a substantial contribution towards a foundation technique for the piano. They assist a "bodily Reasoning" (Friedrich Nietzsche) with their "axioms of movement"<sup>35</sup>, and are, as the body therapist Moshe Feldenkrais puts it, an "education in spontaneity". In their essence the exercises contain a body of wisdom which trains the unity of mind, will and body. Peter Feuchtwanger's holistic methodological thinking is distinguished by its uniformity, simplicity and comprehensiveness. His exercises are based on a uniform, physiologically well-founded, concept, which arises from personal experience. They are not a thought up product pieced together from bits of various other theories. The exercises are built up logically, one after the other, and always relating to a simple knowledge of how the body works. Therefore one doesn't have to first learn isolated, artificial movements and then put them together later. For: "Mal-coordinated gestures are fundamentally complex, coordinated gestures are fundamentally simple."<sup>36</sup> Frédéric Chopin once said about Liszt after hearing a concert by him: "La dernière chose, c'est la simplicité."<sup>37</sup>

Peter Feuchtwanger says about his exercises: "The exercises look very easy, but they aren't. I've never met anyone who could do them correctly at the first attempt. However, once someone has learnt them, he can't understand why he couldn't manage to do them straight away."<sup>38</sup> Mozart once praised the ease with which a contemporary violinist mastered the most difficult passages, and said "one can't see that it is difficult, and one believes one must be able to do the same straight away. And that is the way it should be!"<sup>39</sup>

Raymond Thiberge points out that the superiority of virtuosos doesn't so much come from their extraordinary abilities, "than from the extremely simple and natural means which they have discovered of using them."<sup>40</sup> Hence he comes to the pedagogical conclusion that the acquisition of an advanced technique requires a constant simplifying "realised through the choice of the most simple and subtle action, the furthest removed from that kind of struggle with the keyboard which is the negation of all artistic achievement."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Dürckheim 1961

<sup>35</sup> E.Roth

<sup>36</sup> Taylor 1996, p.39

<sup>37</sup> Cited in E.Roth, *Pianistische Kinästhetik*, unpublished typescript, p.7, which means, „The ultimate goal is simplicity“

<sup>38</sup> Peter Feuchtwanger in conversation.

<sup>39</sup> Rampe 1995, p.90

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Taylor 1996, p.98

<sup>41</sup> R.Thiberge, cited in Taylor 1996, p.88

In the general part of the introduction we established that the piano exercises contain a complete and exhaustive set of the movements one needs to play the piano. Last but not least the exercises distinguish themselves through their beauty and elegance, which is why Feuchtwanger compares them to dancing or ballet. The connection between tone and movement aesthetics is discussed extensively in the relevant literature; as an example representative of this we quote Deppe's<sup>42</sup> motto: "If it looks pretty then it's right."<sup>43</sup>

Feuchtwanger's methodological thinking and the piano exercises correspond in every respect to the principle of holism. Because of this one cannot reduce his teachings to one particular method (e.g. weight technique or finger technique), nor to a dogma or some maxim or other.

Both body and mind are taken equally into account. On the physical side, one can say that "all parts of the muscle-movement system work interdependently with another"<sup>44</sup> and that "the human body is an indivisible entity"<sup>45</sup> The exercises sharpen the awareness of the whole "playing organism" (supporting system and playing system). For Peter Feuchtwanger isolated movements are out of the question. Here he refers to comparable schools of movement, such as Tai Chi. "Tai Chi was created as a system to train the mind and the body, [...] a system that is based on universal basic principles of balance. When you practise Tai Chi the first elementary principle that you should observe is: as soon as you begin to move, your whole body should move as a single entity"<sup>46</sup>

In this way an organic and natural playing from the centre of the body results." What the importance of correct breath control is for singers, is for pianists the right transfer of weight. It is the directing of the energy flow from the centre of the body to the finger tips."<sup>47</sup> Peter Feuchtwanger says about this: "The energy comes from behind, from the back." Thus Peter Feuchtwanger's teaching stands in the tradition of holistic piano playing, which we know of from countless sources. For instance, Marie Fromm reports on Clara Schumann's teaching "The real basis of her teaching was that the arm should be completely loose and that not a single muscle in the forearm, upper arm or wrist should be tensed or cramped. The finger joints must be loose and the whole strength and tone quality should come from the muscles in the back"<sup>48</sup> Franz Liszt too had this sense of the inner synergic connection between the back and the fingers", which he described as "an elastic string fastened at both ends" from the spine to the fingers.<sup>49</sup> Pichier/Krause spoke of the arm being like a "chain" and it is "hung" onto the shoulder.<sup>50</sup> Feuchtwanger compares the arm to a suspension bridge. To make the picture clear he sometimes takes a scarf and holds it at the shoulder of a pupil. The scarf swings freely between this point and the other end. "To start with one brings to mind again that the fingers, hand, forearm, and upper arm are as it

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<sup>42</sup> Ludwig Deppe (1828 – 1890). Amy Fay devoted a chapter to this important piano teacher in her book "Music –Study in Germany". Elisabeth Caland wrote several books on Deppe, among others "Die Deppe'sche Lehre des Klavierspiels" (Stuttgart 4.Aufl. 1912)

<sup>43</sup> Caland 1912, p.6. On this subject see also e.g. the works of Heinrich Kosnick.

<sup>44</sup> Kosnick p.7

<sup>45</sup> Taylor 1996, p.22

<sup>46</sup> Liao 1996,p.148

<sup>47</sup> Ziegler 1983, p.29

<sup>48</sup> Reich 1991, p.393.

<sup>49</sup> E.Roth, Kinästhetikische Erwägung in klaviermethodischen Bereich, unpublished typescript, p.9

<sup>50</sup> Pichier/Krause 1962

were segments in a chain which is attached to the shoulder and hangs down loosely at the side of the body. In actual fact even the shoulder girdle is not fixed. The shoulder is carried by the supple trunk of the spine. Only in the pelvis does one have a stable support when sitting.”<sup>51</sup>

When Ferruccio Busoni became aware of the part the strength of the back plays in piano playing (stimulated by reading the works of Elisabeth Caland), he reported enthusiastically: “ Only my piano playing goes well, I hardly use my hands at all any more.” Raymond Thiberge too advised his pupil Harold Taylor:” Stop trying to play the piano with your fingers!”<sup>52</sup> Elisabeth Caland consistently advocated a holistic methodological approach and was therefore opposed to isolated movements, like for example finger raising exercises. For “ as long as one part is trained independently or in preference to the rest of the organism involved in playing, it happens at the expense of the psyche, or to the detriment of this one-sidedly trained part of the body.”<sup>53</sup> In Peter Feuchtwanger’s words: “We have to compensate”

Since one can’t separate the physical and psychological aspects, the exercises also have a psychological effect. They take in the person as a whole and change him. Peter Feuchtwanger compares the exercises with in-depth psychological analysis.

### **Thought Exercises (or Brain Exercises)**

Since the piano exercises address the player as a whole, they are also concentration exercises, or in Deppe’s phraseology “thought exercises”. They serve to concentrate the mind on the essentials and to letting go of all unnecessary, and thereby superfluous, tension. The exercises train one’s awareness of the body and also one’s inner hearing. What Elisabeth Caland says about Ludwig Deppe’s term “thought exercises” applies equally well to Feuchtwanger’s exercises: “Instead of time wasting and mentally exhausting exercises, which just wear out one’s physical and nervous energy with their mechanical monotony, there are some finger exercises that are controlled from the brain. These shouldn’t be confused with typical old-fashioned mechanical key hitting ones. They are really exceptional thought exercises and also proper studies in making artistic sounds.”<sup>54</sup> In another place she writes: “Since complete control of the mechanism of the torso, arms, hands and fingers comes from the brain, a purely mechanical way of working should definitely be ruled out.”<sup>55</sup> We can claim just this of Peter Feuchtwanger’s exercises, namely that they present a “discipline for both the brain and the hands” and “relax the hands and the fingers in a very short time and prepare them for playing.”<sup>56</sup>

Peter Feuchtwanger points out that his exercises demand inner peace, regular breathing and absolute concentration. When done properly they represent a form of disciplined creativity.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Schubert 1946, p.62.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in Taylor 1996, p.55

<sup>53</sup> Cited in E.Roth, Kinästhetikische Erwägung in klaviermethodischen Bereich, unpublished typescript, p.9

<sup>54</sup> Caland 1912, foreword to 2nd edition.

<sup>55</sup> Caland 1912, Technische Ratschläge für Klavierspieler, supplement to “Die Deppe’sche Lehre des Klavierspiels”, foreword.

<sup>56</sup> Caland 1912, Technische Ratschläge, p.6

<sup>57</sup> Feuchtwanger 1993. The correct performance requires among other things exact observation, ideally by a second person: Am I relaxing my jaw, for example? Tip: Tensions in the jaw radiate into

Safonoff said that one should always practise “so that your fingers follow your brain, and not your brain your fingers”<sup>58</sup> Friedrich Rabi says of Beate Ziegler that she never practised in the conventional way, but that she wanted to solve technical problems by “pondering” over them.<sup>59</sup> Heinrich Kosnick is another pedagogue who has doubts about the value of the mechanical repetition of studies and mindless drill: “what counts is that one should not try to obtain one’s technique from some outside source; but rather by means of knowledgeable, wilful, and mental saturation of one’s own “playing apparatus” [...] Mental practise means acquiring a knowledge of the functional relationships in the body; Mind and Will should be focussed on one’s own articulated movement apparatus.”<sup>60</sup>

## Coordination

One of the most important aims of the piano exercises is the improvement of coordination in general, and in particular at the piano. The basic precondition for a coordinated action is the correct balance in the muscles between tensing and relaxing.<sup>61</sup> Thus the difference between a talented and an untalented musician “lies first and foremost in the behaviour of the body towards its state of balance”.<sup>62</sup> Feldenkrais, who devoted a large part of his works to this topic, writes “In order to act in a coordinated way we must above all learn to dampen the unintentional contraction of muscles, which happens without or against our will. We must learn to inhibit the activity of those cells in the motor cortex from where the excitation spreads. [...] Without such inhibition no coordinated action is possible.”<sup>63</sup> “In a well organised body the work of the large muscles is directed by smaller muscles through the bones to its goal, hardly losing any power on the way.”<sup>64</sup> “The total activity of a co-ordinated performance may therefore be expressed as a two-way flow of energy between the performer and his instrument. Paradoxically, the performer must be able to surrender to this flow in order to control it.”<sup>65</sup> The result: the feeling as though “the piano is “playing itself””<sup>66</sup>

In moments of increased coordination the whole mind-body mechanism achieves far better results with less effort.<sup>67</sup> The “principle of economy” thereby addressed is one of the most important basic tenets of Peter Feuchtwanger’s piano exercises<sup>68</sup> Thus we learn in the first basic exercise, “Quick Release”, how to take up energy from the

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the spine and influence the breathing, and can cause headaches and pains in the neck. (See Franklin 2000, p.83)

<sup>58</sup> Safonoff p.28. Safonoff wrote above his exercises, which he called „New Formula“:“They cannot possibly be played mechanically. All these exercises are not merely **finger exercises**, but are at the same time **brain exercises**: a constant **telegraphy**, so to speak, between **the brain and finger tips**, requiring from the player **complete concentration**.”

<sup>59</sup> Rabi 1983

<sup>60</sup> Kosnick 1964, p.12. Margit Varro too understands „ the complexity of technique as being mainly mental.” (Der lebendige Klavierunterricht, Wilhelmshaven 1970, p.285.)

<sup>61</sup> Francois Couperin stipulated in *L’art de toucher le clavecin*, that the body should be properly balanced (équilibre).

<sup>62</sup> Mingotti 1949, p.28

<sup>63</sup> Feldenkrais 1990, p.124

<sup>64</sup> Feldenkrais 1990, p.126

<sup>65</sup> Taylor 1996, p.55

<sup>66</sup> Taylor 1996, p.55

<sup>67</sup> Taylor 1996, p.21 points this out in the chapter on “The basis of coordination”.

<sup>68</sup> Jean Phillippe Rameau put it in these words: “to try not to try” (cited in Roth 2001, p.125).

key and so play it with just a minimum of our own energy. For “under coordinated conditions nearly all the energy expended on key-depression is returned to the performer by the rebound of the key.”<sup>69</sup> This insight is however not new – Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach counted among the “qualities a good harpsichord should have”: “The keys should have a proper weight, which pushes the fingers back up”<sup>70</sup> Let the gentle reader contemplate and enjoy this sentence, and think of the swarms of piano pupils who have suffered, and will suffer in the future, from having to do pointless finger lifting exercises meant to strengthen the fingers. On this subject Peter Feuchtwanger says: “one should strengthen the brain, not the fingers”, for (to continue with Feldenkrais) “he who has no other alternative turns exertion into a habit.”<sup>71</sup> Taylor comes to the absolutely correct conclusion that the real problem of piano technique does not lie in overcoming the resistance of the keyboard, “but in eliminating the root causes of obstructions which lie within oneself.”<sup>72</sup>

Feldenkrais too points out that by gradually eradicating superfluous exertion one can increase one’s kinaesthetic sensitivity.<sup>73</sup> The piano exercises help to achieve a state of balanced tension (“Eutonie”) and one needs tension to play the piano. However an over- tensed body, just as an under- tensed body, cannot *express* tension.

## Flowing

Peter Feuchtwanger: “What I do is never without movement. There is always movement when I do something: everything comes from movement. There must always be a small movement present.” This is a fundamental statement about his teaching. He plays the keys so that they are included in the movement as a whole. In this way he flow of the playing is retained. He always seeks flowing movements, so that the “playing organism” doesn’t get stiff, and he explains with he following illustration: “Supposing a stone is lying on the bed of a river. The water continues to flow around it. It flows on and on and doesn’t stand still. (?) Compare this with the following words by Herbert Spencer: “One of the main characteristics of grace is continual movement. All beautiful movements in nature are rounded. Movements in curved lines are at the same time economical ones.”<sup>74</sup> Peter Feuchtwanger’s special fingerings should also be seen in relationship to movement. What Elisabeth Caland said about Chopin’s fingering applies equally well to them: “When Chopin is regarded as a “reformer of fingering”, as Fr.Niecks called him, we should bear in mind that these fingerings were the result of how he moved when playing the piano.”<sup>75</sup>

## Posture and Sitting Position

Erik Franklin points out that the word posture (Haltung) is not a good description of the ideal upright bearing of the body. For the aim of “posture training” is exactly the opposite of *posture*, it is *fixture*. A good posture is in motion, loose and not strained. If one has a good posture one doesn’t even think about it, it is just there. [...] Posture training is only useful if it helps us to move economically and loosely. A posture which

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<sup>69</sup> Taylor 1996, p.55

<sup>70</sup> Bach 1753, p.9 and also on p.9: “The fingers [must..] be raised up again by the tangents.”

<sup>71</sup> Feldenkrais 1978, p.120.

<sup>72</sup> Taylor 1996, p.39, Feldenkrais 1978, p.126.

<sup>73</sup> E.Roth, Kinästhetikische Erwägung in klaviermethodischen Bereich, unpublished typescript, p.4

<sup>74</sup> Herbert Spencer, cited in Böttner 1985, p.51

<sup>75</sup> Caland 1919, p. VI

doesn't carry over into good movement is a farce, only good for cosmetic purposes. A dynamic posture and good movement are two sides of the same coin."<sup>76</sup>

Methodologists have always stressed that the inner upright bearing so described is the key to the deeper source of energy that one needs to play an instrument. Sigfried Engelhardt says the same as Elisabeth Caland, that the energy needed for a movement is much less when its source is as close to the body's centre of gravity as possible, so that the supporting force required comes from inside the body. For this reason he suggests that every teacher should at first learn to "trace the course of each chain of movements over the shoulder into the back", since "Concentration comes hand in hand with the right posture."<sup>77</sup> Liszt once said to a pupil: "Sit up straight and stop staring at the keys! [...]"<sup>78</sup>, and the first thing Leschetizky said to his pupils was: "Many pianists, even eminent ones, attach far too little importance to a good posture when playing, and have only "as long as it pleases the ear" in mind. One should behave at the piano like a good horseman, at ease and straight in the saddle, and as far as is necessary yield to the movement of the arms."<sup>79</sup> By sitting up straight one changes the sensitive structural interplay between the head, neck, shoulders and torso.

The following is also relevant to this theme: "In general a lower seat is to be recommended"<sup>80</sup> Ludwig Deppe was already recommending this, pointing out that the posture of the whole body "is more free and elegant when one sits on a low stool". Apart from this a low sitting position also prevents "the unaesthetic superficial gestures which one often sees". Deppe spoke of "waving the hands about" and of certain "movements of the elbows which remind one of a cobbler's workshop."<sup>81</sup> Such compensating movements, which differ fundamentally from necessary, yielding, compensating movements, are superfluous. "A wobbly body functions as badly as a spade with a loose shaft."<sup>82</sup> When talking about uprightness and balance<sup>83</sup>, Elgin Roth compares this to a cyclist riding a bicycle freehand, whereby the centre of gravity is concentrated in the pelvis.

## Stroking the keys

We know about Debussy's piano playing from a description by Maurice Dumesnil: "I observed that he sometimes played with the fingers almost flat. This happened especially when he played soft chord passages. He seemed to caress the keys, stroking them downwards with a slanting movement, instead of pressing them down vertically."<sup>84</sup> As a "grandchild" pupil of Chopin, who called this way of playing "stroking" (fr. *toucher*) the keys<sup>85</sup>, Debussy was opposed to "playing with little

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<sup>76</sup> Franklin 1998, p.71

<sup>77</sup> Cited in E.Roth, Kinästhetikische Erwägung in klaviermethodischen Bereich, unpublished typescript, p.14

<sup>78</sup> Lachmund 1970, p.60

<sup>79</sup> Cited in E.Roth, Kinästhetikische Erwägung in klaviermethodischen Bereich, unpublished typescript, p.9

<sup>80</sup> Hinze-Reinhold 1933, p.8

<sup>81</sup> Deppe 1903.

<sup>82</sup> Dore Jacobs, Die menschliche Bewegung, Ratingen 1962, cited in Roth 2001, p.122.

<sup>83</sup> On this subject see also Heinrich von Kleist's essay "On the puppet theatre".

<sup>84</sup> Cited in Zilkens 1998, p.12

<sup>85</sup> Cited in Taylor 1996, p.55

hammers” and demanded regularly of his pupils: “one must forget that the piano has little hammers inside.”<sup>86</sup> Is it not then even more important to avoid seeing our fingers as little hammers that set the little hammers in the piano moving? For the same reason Peter Feuchtwanger is opposed to the use of the term “hitting the key”. He prefers instead to speak of “manipulating the key”, although he says there isn’t really any good expression for this complicated physical action. He is in favour of a non-violent, soft approach, and of the development of inner strength, i.e. using the brain and being centred, as opposed to forcing and mechanical drill.

This approach to the body and the piano is a precondition for the singing and floating sound, heard within, which makes Belcanto possible on the piano, which in theory is a “percussive instrument”.<sup>87</sup> The Piano Exercises in this book show a way to achieving this, beyond any particular method, since they are based on universal (meta-) principles. “One should not apportion value to *individual* methods. The only method, which is of significance, is the general plan of things created by Nature. It is the role of a teaching establishment to show what this is!”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Cited in Zilkens 1998, p.14. Debussy’s teacher Madame Mauté de Fleurville was a pupil of Chopin, making him a “grandson” pupil.

<sup>87</sup> See also on this theme: Peter Feuchtwanger, Belcanto on a “percussion instrument”? in: EPTA-Documentation 1982, p.104-124, or in [www.peter-feuchtwanger.de](http://www.peter-feuchtwanger.de).

<sup>88</sup> Kosnick 1971, p.52

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