

## ADVICE TO SERIOUS YOUNG MUSICIANS (and even those not so young)

(Spoken at Interlochen Arts Academy previous to shortened version of “Beethoven: Idealist, Consoler and Liberator” presentation-12/7/2018 )

Hello. I am very grateful for this opportunity to share some thoughts with you about Beethoven. However, before I do that, I have been recalling what it was like to be a serious music student at your age over half a century ago, and what life has been like in music ever since.

I admire each of you for your dedication to our art as shown by the fact that you are attending school here. You are getting a great head start on what many musicians will not experience until they enter a conservatory or college.

When I was your age, I had no idea of the important duty of a pianist to be much more than just a pianist. I eventually discovered that this includes 6 areas:

- 1) Music theory, which is simply another word for the language of music. It is impossible to successfully interpret a piece without a mastery of theory. One must not just memorize information to pass a test. You need to apply everything you learn in theory class when you listen to music and when you work on your pieces. Musical interpretation is based on the degree of tension between sonorities and it is music theory which helps us all to better perceive the relationships between every single note and every other note in a piece.
- 2) Music history is another crucial area where the music and the information must be permanently internalized and not seen just as facts to be memorized in order to pass a test.
- 3) A pianist needs to know in depth all the genres of music. To interpret Mozart's piano music, one must know the Mozart operas. To understand Schubert's piano music, a pianist needs to have performed Schubert's songs and chamber music. One understands Liszt's piano music so much better if one knows Liszt's orchestral works and Wagner's operas. I believe I have learned as much about interpreting Bach's works on the piano from harpsichordists, organists, choral directors and studying the 350 years of keyboard music written before Bach, as I have in my piano lessons. Not only will you interpret your piano pieces with more insight by knowing all the genres of music, you will be personally enriched by getting to know some of the greatest music ever written -and it is debatable how much of the greatest music ever written is even for solo piano.
- 4) One needs to be familiar with the entire keyboard output of any composer whose music you perform. One needs familiarity with all the Beethoven Sonatas in order to perform even one of them with deep understanding.
- 5) One needs to know the philosophy and aesthetics which influenced every composer whose music you play. For example, one does not really understand Schumann's piano music without a knowledge of German literary Romanticism. Not to know the background behind Schumann's music is as inexcusable as an opera singer knowing nothing of the character, they are portraying onstage.

Last, but definitely not least, to me, is believing that there is a spiritual message behind the notes of much classical music. Human beings innately yearn for transcendence of the material world, and for spiritual uplift. Did you know that Liszt believed music to be “a bridge to Heaven” and likened the role of the musical performer to that of a priest who lifts humanity up to a higher level? I share Liszt’s philosophy, and I hope you will too. I also hope that you will transmit the spirituality you experience in music to your future students and to your audiences.

It is an extremely humbling endeavor to be a serious pianist at any age. One can never, ever, even for a moment, be satisfied. Since one’s standards are always rising, one can never, ever, reach his/her goals. No matter how much we will eventually learn and grow, in music we all remain lifetime students until our last breath. Much of what one learns actually occurs AFTER the completion of high school, college, a master’s degree, or even a doctorate.

To excel at anything in the arts requires one to be a perfectionist, and perfectionists pay a price by suffering constant self-doubt and anxiety. It is ironic that those who do achieve artistic greatness are continually dissatisfied with themselves, while those who seem satisfied with themselves never achieve greatness. Each musician must ultimately work out a way to live with perpetual dissatisfaction. This is not easy, and can take many, many years.

Our field is extra challenging because it is so subjective. Someone in an objective field can prove why they are correct. Our work will never be good enough in our eyes. Perhaps it can encourage you to know that Chopin’s completed compositions never seemed good enough in his eyes either.

Our field demands that one have a “thick skin”, as the saying goes. Not everyone will always appreciate your work. But you must continue forward with your ideals and what you believe. One cannot, and never will, please everyone in the world, nor should that be your goal.

Being a serious teenage musician is an especially complex experience. There are three stages of development in any art. The first stage is when one is young and experiences primarily the emotional gratification of self-expression.

In the second stage one’s art becomes more challenging. One learns there is a craft which must be mastered. One learns that great art is built upon precepts, principles and guidelines and that one must painstakingly dissect every aspect of one’s craft. One can become at times overwhelmed during this stage and seem to lose the confidence one had in stage one. What once seemed relatively easy can now in some ways seem to be a struggle. Some of you may find yourselves in stage two now. If you don’t now, you are likely to at some time in the future, if you are to ever become a truly great artist.

Eventually one is ready to enter stage three. Great art can never take place without the artist having spent time in stage two and great art can only be built upon what one learns in stage two. But great art needs more than the tools which one learns in stage two. In stage three the vitality which one had in stage one returns. However, now it rests upon a solid foundation. Now one is a master musician and has become a true artist. Wagner created an entire six-hour opera on this subject, “Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg”-the Master Singers. You have a profound musical and personal experience ahead when you get to know that opera.

Our art demands continual sacrifice. A college music curriculum is as demanding as that in medical school. There is so much to learn and there always seems so little time to do it. Your generation has the

new distraction of dealing with of technology and social media. When I grew up, without all the technology, we all had much more time in every day to accomplish what we needed to accomplish in our art and in our lives.

All of you who will make your living in music will undoubtedly make your living primarily from teaching. But if any of you has dreams of a performing career as a way of making a living, that goal will demand sacrificing nearly everything. If one is aiming for that, but does not make huge sacrifices for that goal, there are thousands of people out there in the world who are willing to sacrifice everything.

Your focus now should be on becoming the best musician and pianist you can be. But you can take comfort from the fact that later when you teach, you will be entering the noblest profession there has ever been, or ever will be. You will find great fulfillment in transmitting to future generations what you were given and what you will yourself have discovered. My teacher, the 95-year-old Menahem Pressler, has spent his life touring the world and still teaches at Indiana University. He has always maintained that if he were forced to give up either his playing or his teaching, he would keep the teaching. This statement is proof that ultimately the most fulfilling aspect of being a musician is to teach and share with others what one knows and loves.

Despite the abundance of outstanding performers, classical music in the United States is becoming less and less in demand. You are needed to keep it alive. But you will be needed to do more than just run your fingers over the keys. Audiences of the future will desire and demand that a musician be able to talk to them about music in terms that they can understand. It is not enough to walk on stage and play dazzlingly or beautifully. You will need to speak vibrantly, persuasively, and articulately about music. In the old days it was enough to come on stage and just play. Those days are gone.

Just being a stupendous pianist will never be enough. However, there is a place for you in the musical world if you can verbally communicate with other human beings. And you must do everything possible to build future audiences, or eventually classical music could almost disappear.

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