

## **Back to the Future: How Creativity and the Liberal Arts Spirit Can Pave The Way for the Future of Piano Teaching**

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Let me start by saying that reading from a prepared paper is a departure for me, for my past presentations have involved me, a piano, and little or no script. That format befits presentations on creativity and spontaneity. A prepared paper, on the other hand, seems rather contradictory and ironic. Nevertheless, I am pleased and honored to have the opportunity to share what I hope will be a thought-provoking examination of classical pianism today and how its future can be guided and enriched by a fuller historical understanding and affirmation of our creative liberal arts spirit and tradition.

"What's past is prologue,"<sup>[1]</sup> wrote William Shakespeare. This paper's premise is that the vitality of tomorrow's pianism will hinge on (1) a renewed affirmation of the liberal arts spirit and (2) a revitalization of the now-underemphasized creative side of our classical music past.

First, a little personal background. As a child, piano lessons consisted of learning how to play "correct" notes with "correct" interpretations. You played "good" classical music - as opposed to "bad" popular music. You played only the notes on the page - no messing around with the sacred score. You did what the teacher said, for he or she was the absolute authority figure, the very fountain of all knowledge, not to be questioned or challenged. Music was serious business! But alas, it is human nature to bite the forbidden fruit. I spent many childhood hours figuring out how to play (gasp!) the latest Beatles tunes on the piano. To my teachers, this was wasted time, to the detriment of my moral and musical character! Little did they recognize that my zeal for popular music was, in essence, my ear training. It's no accident that I could identify any chord by ear as a teenager. Moreover, popular music has always been with us in the form of folk songs, theater music, etc. Franz Liszt was famous for asking for spontaneous requests from his audience members, who often requested popular melodies. Many of the great "serious" composers throughout history enjoyed the popular music of their day and incorporated themes into their music.

By age eleven, I was composing. It was a solitary task, for there was no place for it in piano lessons. I filled out my "Fletcher Theory Worksheets," but there was no attempt to connect theory with practice. How oddly out of sync this is to real tradition, wherein the very goal of theory was to *use* it in the furtherance of composition and extemporization. In the early days of piano recitals, performers were composers; it was routine to hear original works. Furthermore, improvisation and embellishments were commonplace.<sup>[2]</sup> The improvisational

abilities of the greatest composers – Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, etc. – were legendary and well documented. Composers often wrote repeat signs in their music. More often than not, it was understood that you would introduce your own tasteful and discreet variants in those repeated passages.

Today, however, we rarely deviate from the printed page, believing (ironically) that this is the one true path to "authenticity" and faithfulness to the composer's intentions. But, as my good friend John Salmon (Professor of Piano, University of North Carolina-Greensboro) points out, musicians of bygone days were "constantly...re-arranging, adding on, transposing, recontextualizing [their own] and others' music." As with jazz practice today, it would have been considered unusual and boring to interpret a musical score too literally - as ridiculous as a jazz pianist playing *only* the notes of a fake chart. And speaking of jazzers, let's note here that they pride themselves on originality, on finding their own unique voice. In contrast, our current classical music orthodoxy often applauds loudest when students demonstrate what I call "interpretive plagiarism" - that is, sounding like a composite of the last few recordings you heard, or re-creating *exactly* (and *only*) what your last teacher told you to do.

As a college student, I had an intuitive inkling that the literalist approach wasn't the whole story. I recall a piano lesson in which I repeated a section of a Chopin nocturne and introduced some variants (original variants, but in the style of Chopin). My teacher loved it - right up until I explained that they were *my* variants. Then she got furious and forbade me from playing it this way. I wish I could go back in time, for I would point out that Adolphe Gutmann, a student of Chopin, asserted that Chopin *never once* in his lifetime played the famous *Nocturne in E-Flat Major, Op. 9/2* as published. Chopin *always* embellished on it! This piece is a representative mother lode of improvisatory evidence, for Chopin often penciled his variants into his students' music scores. Such variants have been assembled by diligent musicologists and are published, albeit sometimes in rarefied sources. I've played this nocturne for conferences and workshops across the country; the reactions range from wild enthusiasm to shock and dismay from those who, curiously, consider themselves "purists." One famous teacher once phoned me to inquire, "Are you still playing that *bastardized* version of Chopin?!"

This tug-of-war between "purists" and "anti-literalists" (for lack of a better term) is not a new phenomenon inside or outside the music arena. For example, the debate over whether we should adhere to a strict or loose interpretation of the United States Constitution has raged since the very founding of this country, and continues to this day. Should we appoint Supreme Court justices who interpret the Constitution literally or loosely? If loosely, then how loosely? Similarly, many music treatises deal with the vexing question of balancing freedom with good taste and adherence to rules. The pendulum constantly swings on such issues. Perhaps this is healthy, for one can make a good case that a middle ground is arguably best with such things. Many would argue that the excesses of Romanticism led to today's Urtext-maniacal backlash. Was it simply a matter of

one extreme leading to its opposite? Or could there be more to it than that? Music, after all, does not exist in a vacuum.

So how did we get to a point where there is such a disconnect between much of modern pianism and the rich, full, creative tapestry of our *real* heritage? For part of that answer, let's explore this thing we call "liberal arts." When magazine columnist Marilyn vos Savant was asked to define this, she replied, "...the word 'liberal' has nothing to do with politics. Rather, the term is rooted in 'liberty' and goes back centuries, when it referred to work or studies that one undertook freely, in contrast to activity necessary to earn a living or to train for a technical profession."

This concept does indeed go back centuries. In 1725, Johann Fux wrote a treatise on counterpoint, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, written as a dialogue between master and student. In the opening dialogue, the master cautions that learning music is a lifetime exhaustive study that should be pursued for its own sake only. The student assures the master in no uncertain terms:

"I have no other object than to pursue my love of music, without any thought of gain....[I] strive...for proficiency and a good name [rather] than...wealth, for virtue is its own reward."

Ah...such idealism! Today we find ourselves in the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Do we just ignore the harsh realities for students who, as a practical matter, must ultimately find career paths and make a living? Must we hang on for dear life to the quaint notion of "art for art's sake," forgoing all thoughts of material gain?

Let us consider the words of Dr. Ernest Nolan, Vice President for Academic Administration at Madonna University in Livonia, Michigan:

"A Department of Labor report projects that 80 percent of the children beginning kindergarten will eventually enter jobs that don't even exist today!... For some, ['liberal arts'] means all those required classes that stand in the way of [job] training...But, upon closer inspection, the liberal arts can be understood as the key to survival in any field that is subject to change over time. The standard definition of liberal arts education implies a program of study designed to foster capacities of analysis, critical reflection, problem solving, communication, computation and synthesis of knowledge from different disciplines. Its goal is to provide students with an intellectual, historical, and social context for recognizing the continuity between the past and future and for drawing on the human capacity of reason to understand human experience, to question the values dimension of human enterprise, and to articulate the results of this process of thinking....[L]iberal arts education puts the individual into the presence of the greatest ideas, most transforming concepts, and most powerful works of the imagination that human beings have produced...an intellectual framework with which to understand and evaluate human events and interactions...[It] is empowering; it provides rehearsal for life in the imagination; it liberates us from the

limitations of our own experience and opinions by proffering alternative views, scenarios, and explanations. It helps us to appreciate the fact that neither the easiest nor the most complex solution is necessarily the correct one. We learn to think, marshal evidence, and weigh the relative merits of different factors before committing to a plan of action."

The trend toward specialization, on the other hand, can be seen as a relatively recent spillover of what former businessman and educator Robert Freeman (not to be confused with the *other* Robert Freeman, former President of Eastman, by the way) calls "the struggle between two different models [for education]." In a recent commentary, Freeman compares the older "cultural womb" model<sup>[3]</sup> (borne of Plato's Academy and the universities of medieval Europe) with the newer model so prevalent today:

"One model views schools as a process of cultural birth, of bringing forth a new generation... who will carry on - replicate - the culture. The other model views schools as a machine, an industrial process not unlike an assembly line. Its purpose is to mass produce 'factors of production,' well trained, obedient inputs that can be used in the manufacture of wealth.

...[T]hese competing models produce radically different prescriptions for how to improve our schools. The differences show up in everything from how to pay and retain good teachers to curriculum design, teaching methods, and discipline."

I especially like Freeman's next sentence:

"In order to improve our schools, getting the *model right* will prove not nearly so important as getting the *right model*."

It is the factory model of education, asserts Freeman, that drives so much of the current calls for reform in the way of greater efficiency and cost effectiveness. Freeman warns of the perils of what he views as wrong-headed educational reform:

"Increasing efficiency means removing variability while boosting output. This is a great formula for mass-producing hamburgers or semiconductors. It is a disaster for producing intelligence and character...[which] come from carefully managed complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty, all delivered in a safe, patient, nurturing environment. This is the opposite of efficiency."

Wouldn't this make an exquisite university motto? I can just see the brochure now: "Managed complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty, all delivered in a safe, patient, nurturing environment " I love it!

The essence of the liberal arts tradition transcends curriculum; it is a spirit, an attitude, a holistic student-centered approach to teaching. It can be lacking in schools that call themselves "liberal arts"; conversely, it can thrive in private studios, research universities, and conservatories. The term "conservatory" has become rather synonymous with specialization and compartmentalization.

However, "conservatory" connotes conserving, or preserving, *all* that is precious and timeless in our artistic heritage. When we look back at history, we find that well-roundedness and versatility are the rule, not the exception.

Specialization, a product of the industrial revolution, has, to a large extent, outlived its usefulness in today's ever-changing, information-age society. Our wonderful world of piano teaching is the quintessential liberal arts medium, for it is the conduit for critical thinking, problem solving, integration, individuality, creativity and versatility - attributes that are often *better* suited to new, emerging economies than overspecialized technical training. It's a win-win - and it should be leading us to more, not less, support for music and the liberal arts. More importantly, however, Freeman's "cultural womb" model is simply the intrinsically better model for us as human beings with creative, complex spirits.

Sadly, the notion persists that those who are well rounded are excellent at nothing. The great conductor, pianist and composer Leonard Bernstein, however, understood that versatility enriches (rather than detracts from) every part of the whole. The whole is, as they say, greater than the sum of the parts. Furthermore, great creative luminaries are generally inclined to *embrace* uncertainty, ambiguity and change.

To quote Robert Freeman again:

"I spent 20 years in the computer industry before becoming a public-school teacher...I know business. And I know...education...Education is harder...because cultivating human intelligence is one of the most difficult things in the world. It is far more complex and takes far longer than producing cheaper widgets or staging new ad campaigns. It takes millions of nuanced, exquisitely tailored stimuli, all reinforced at the right time, in the right context, and all delivered in a supportive emotional environment."

This is indicative of the liberal arts spirit and our *real* tradition, unless we prefer to define tradition as a set of frozen precepts and inflexible edicts. Without eternal vigilance, all great traditions - art, philosophy, religion, music, etc. - run the risk of turning into fossilized rituals. Genuine teaching involves infinitely more than information dispensing. Let us reject authoritarian, spoon-fed "teaching." We should ask ourselves which of these statements is more empowering to students: 1) "I will *teach* you," or 2) "We are *both* students here, actively exploring, actively discovering, and learning *how* to learn." The second approach is reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote:

"It is a low benefit to give me something; it is a high benefit to enable me to do somewhat of myself."

And, as music theorist Brad Hansen pointed out in a recent paper:

"Evaluating a student's ability to retain facts is temptingly neat and simple. A better teaching model moves beyond mere facts and engages students, who [acquire] the ability to analyze and solve problems on their own....Any curriculum that focuses on performance without the integration of history and

theory, or without providing opportunities for students to pose or to solve problems, is limited in its effectiveness."

This approach, of course, presents a singular challenge, for it is all the rage nowadays to scientifically quantify "learning outcomes." How do we evaluate "success?" Let me proffer that the true measure of our effectiveness will, at best, be imperfectly manifest in faculty evaluations forms and in the mere outer trappings of our students' careers, fame, and wealth. As Emerson put it,

"Society's praise can be cheaply secured, and almost all...are content with those easy merits."

Perhaps, instead, the truest indicator of success is this: Have we instilled in our students a genuine, deep and lifelong passion for learning and the empowering tools for self-actualization as creative human beings? "Measuring" this is exceedingly difficult; the seductive certainties of standardized tests do not suffice. Furthermore, *transforming* students (as opposed to merely imparting specific skills and knowledge) requires endless patience, ingenuity and dedication. Nevertheless, it is the only way to avoid defining all "value" and "success" in superficial and transient market-driven terms. It is one thing to be mindful of the shifting vicissitudes of commercialism; it is quite another to be slaves to it. Let us ensure a proper balance by affirming the liberal arts spirit and the importance of *intrinsic* value at every turn. As classical pianists, it is all too tempting to retreat into fear, narrow-mindedness, cynicism and the comforts of the current status quo. That path will only lead to stultification and the slow death of our craft. Instead, we can help pave the way to a reinvigorated future by reawakening the vibrant creative spirit that was so abundant in the panorama of our earlier music history. Let's rediscover who we really are.

Before I close, let me strongly recommend a book entitled "After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance" by Kenneth Hamilton. It is an eye-opener, and could, to some extent, serve as a catalyst for breathing new life into current and future pianism.

I would also like to bring to your attention a festival that I founded, which is the embodiment of the creative ideals of which I speak in this paper – The Festival for Creative Pianists ([www.pianofestival.org](http://www.pianofestival.org)). The website has a treasure trove of educational information for teachers and students - just go to the prizes link and click to "educational information."

Thank you all for coming. Do we have time for questions or comments?

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, act 2, scene 1, 245–254

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0-19-517826-5

<sup>3</sup> Robert Freeman, *Competing Models for Public Education: Which Model is Best?*, published February 26, 2005 by CommonDreams.org