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program and liner notes,
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Clavier by J.S.Bach*

PIANO LESSONS:
Reflections from a Life in Music
by Vladimir Feltsman

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PIANO LESSONS

Reflections from a Life in Music

Vladimir Feltsman

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Contents

Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Part I - Essays	1
Music and Related Matters	3
Years of Learning	9
Practicing.....	26
Performing.....	34
Recording	43
Part II - Program Notes Music from the Motherland	51
<i>The Russian Underground</i>	53
Russian Experiment.....	59
<i>Program One: From Mysticism to the Avant-garde Calculated Ecstasy</i>	59
<i>Program Two: From Classicism to Postmodernism, Shostakovich to Schnittke</i>	64
Part III - Liner Notes	71
J.S. Bach (1686-1750).....	73
<i>Two-Part Inventions and Three-Part Sinfonias (BWV 772-801)</i>	73
<i>English Suites (BWV 806-811)</i>	78
<i>French Suites (BWV 812-817)</i>	82
<i>French Overture (BWV 831)</i>	85
<i>The Six Partitas</i>	86
<i>The Goldberg Variations (BWV 988)</i>	89
Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809).....	91
<i>Sonata in A-flat major, circa 1767 (H.XVI:46)</i>	92
<i>Sonata in C minor circa 1771 (H.XVI:20)</i>	93
<i>The 12 Variations in E-flat major (H.XVII:3), written before 1774 for harpsichord.</i>	94
<i>Sonata in D major circa 1778 (H.XVI:33)</i>	94
<i>Sonata in G minor before 1788, possibly as early as 1771 (H.XVI:44)</i>	94
<i>Sonata in E minor circa 1778 (H.XVI:34)</i>	95
<i>Sonata in G major circa 1780 (H.XVI:39)</i>	95
<i>Sonata in C major circa 1789 (H.XVI:48)</i>	96
<i>Sonata in E-flat major circa 1790 (H.XVI:49)</i>	96
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827).....	98
<i>Sonatas</i>	98
<i>Sonata No.8 in C minor, op. 13, "Pathetique"</i>	98
<i>Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor, op. 27 no. 2, "Moonlight"</i>	99
<i>Sonata No. 23 in F minor, op. 57 "Appassionata"</i>	101

<i>Sonata No. 28 in A major, op. 101</i>	103
<i>Sonata No. 29 in B flat major, op. 106 “Hammerklavier”</i>	104
<i>The Diabelli Variations, op. 120</i>	106
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	111
<i>Sonata in A minor D. 537</i>	113
<i>Sonata in E minor D. 566</i>	114
<i>Sonata in E-flat major D. 568</i>	115
<i>Sonata movement in F-sharp minor D. 571</i>	116
<i>Sonata in B major D. 575</i>	116
<i>Two Scherzos D. 593</i>	117
<i>Adagio in E major D. 612</i>	118
<i>Sonata in A major D. 664</i>	118
<i>Sonata in A minor D. 784</i>	119
<i>Sonata in C major D. 840, “Reliquie”</i>	121
<i>Sonata in A minor D. 845</i>	122
<i>Sonata in D major D. 850</i>	123
<i>Sonata in G major D. 894</i>	126
<i>The Last Three Sonatas, D. 958, D. 959 and D. 960</i>	126
Robert Schumann (1810-1856)	131
<i>Carnaval, op. 9</i>	133
<i>Kinderszenen, op. 15</i>	134
<i>Kreisleriana, op. 16</i>	135
<i>Fantasie, op. 17</i>	136
<i>Arabeske, op. 18 and Blumenstück, op. 19</i>	137
<i>Faschingsschwank aus Wien, op. 26</i>	138
<i>Three Romances, op. 28</i>	138
<i>Album für die Jugend, op. 68</i>	139
<i>Waldszenen, op. 82</i>	140
<i>Bunte Blätter, op. 99</i>	140
<i>Albumblätter, op. 124</i>	141
Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)	143
<i>Nocturnes</i>	144
<i>Barcarolle in F-sharp major, op. 60</i>	148
<i>Berceuse in D-flat major, op. 57</i>	149
<i>Waltzes</i>	149
<i>The Impromptus</i>	152
<i>Mazurkas</i>	154
<i>Ballades</i>	156
<i>Fantasie in F minor</i>	159
<i>Polonaise-Fantasie</i>	160
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	162
<i>Liebestraum No. 3 in A-flat major</i>	163
<i>Ballade No. 2 in B minor</i>	164
<i>Six Consolations</i>	165
<i>Berceuse in F-sharp major</i>	165
<i>Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude</i>	165

<i>Elegia</i>	166
<i>La lugubre gondola</i>	166
<i>En rêve</i>	167
Johannes Brahms (1833-1896).....	168
<i>Four Ballades op. 10</i>	171
<i>Eight Klavierstücke op. 76</i>	173
<i>Two Rhapsodies op. 79</i>	175
<i>Seven Fantasien op. 116</i>	176
<i>Three Intermezzos op. 117</i>	179
<i>Six Klavierstücke op. 118</i>	180
<i>Four Klavierstücke op. 119</i>	183
Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881).....	186
<i>Pictures at an Exhibition</i>	186
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893).....	190
<i>Album for the Young op. 39</i>	190
<i>“A Tribute to Tchaikovsky”</i>	191
Alexander Scriabin (1871-1915).....	196
<i>A Tribute to Scriabin</i>	198
Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953).....	201
<i>“A Tribute to Prokofiev”</i>	202
Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998).....	205
<i>Piano Sonata No. 1</i>	205
Part IV - The Well-Tempered Clavier.....	209
Overview.....	211
<i>The Well-Tempered Clavier</i>	212
<i>Understanding the Baroque Style</i>	216
The Preludes and Fugues.....	221
<i>Tempo</i>	221
<i>Phrasing, Articulation and Embellishments</i>	223
<i>Pedal</i>	224
<i>Dynamics</i>	224
<i>Authentic Performance</i>	226
Book I.....	228
<i>Prelude and Fugue in C major</i>	228
<i>Prelude and Fugue in C minor</i>	229
<i>Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp major</i>	230
<i>Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp minor</i>	231
<i>Prelude and Fugue in D major</i>	232
<i>Prelude and Fugue in D minor</i>	233
<i>Prelude and Fugue in E-flat major</i>	234
<i>Prelude and Fugue in E-flat minor</i>	234
<i>Prelude and Fugue in E major</i>	235
<i>Prelude and Fugue in E minor</i>	235
<i>Prelude and Fugue in F major</i>	236

<i>Prelude and Fugue in F minor</i>	237
<i>Prelude and Fugue in F-sharp major</i>	238
<i>Prelude and Fugue in F-sharp minor</i>	238
<i>Prelude and Fugue in G major</i>	239
<i>Prelude and Fugue in G minor</i>	240
<i>Prelude and Fugue in A-flat major</i>	240
<i>Prelude and Fugue in G-sharp minor</i>	241
<i>Prelude and Fugue in A major</i>	241
<i>Prelude and Fugue in A minor</i>	242
<i>Prelude and Fugue in B-flat major</i>	243
<i>Prelude and Fugue in B-flat minor</i>	243
<i>Prelude and Fugue in B major</i>	244
<i>Prelude and Fugue in B minor</i>	244
Book II	246
<i>Prelude and Fugue in C major</i>	246
<i>Prelude and Fugue in C minor</i>	247
<i>Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp major</i>	247
<i>Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp minor</i>	248
<i>Prelude and Fugue in D major</i>	249
<i>Prelude and Fugue in D minor</i>	250
<i>Prelude and Fugue in E flat major</i>	250
<i>Prelude and Fugue in D-sharp minor</i>	251
<i>Prelude and Fugue in E major</i>	251
<i>Prelude and Fugue in E minor</i>	252
<i>Prelude and Fugue in F major</i>	252
<i>Prelude and Fugue in F minor</i>	253
<i>Prelude and Fugue in F-sharp major</i>	253
<i>Prelude and Fugue in F-sharp minor</i>	254
<i>Prelude and Fugue in G major</i>	255
<i>Prelude and Fugue in G minor</i>	255
<i>Prelude and Fugue in A-flat major</i>	256
<i>Prelude and Fugue in G-sharp minor</i>	256
<i>Prelude and Fugue in A major</i>	257
<i>Prelude and Fugue in A minor</i>	257
<i>Prelude and Fugue in B-flat major</i>	258
<i>Prelude and Fugue in B-flat minor</i>	259
<i>Prelude and Fugue in B major</i>	259
<i>Prelude and Fugue in B minor</i>	260
Sketches	263
<i>Monteverdi</i>	263
<i>Bach</i>	263
<i>Haydn</i>	263
<i>Mozart</i>	263
<i>Beethoven</i>	263
<i>Schubert</i>	263

<i>Schumann</i>	263
<i>Chopin</i>	264
<i>Liszt</i>	264
<i>Brahms</i>	264
<i>Wagner</i>	264
<i>Mussorgsky</i>	264
<i>Tchaikovsky</i>	264
<i>Scriabin</i>	264
<i>Rachmaninoff</i>	264
<i>Mahler</i>	265
<i>Debussy</i>	265
<i>Schoenberg</i>	265
<i>Webern</i>	265
<i>Berg</i>	265
<i>Stravinsky</i>	265
<i>Messiaen</i>	265
<i>Prokofiev</i>	265
<i>Shostakovich</i>	265
<i>Ustvolskaya</i>	265
<i>Schnittke</i>	266
<i>Silvestrov</i>	266
Discography	267

Music and Related Matters

What is music? There is no simple answer to this question. Many people have tried to find an answer but have not succeeded. Music defies definition, resists any attempt to reduce it to words. And for a good reason: music is a self-sufficient language and trying to explain one language in terms of another is a futile undertaking. Every language is a tool of knowledge that creates its own internal system of references.

Musical language is abstract, but it appeals to people and affects them on different levels—emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual (a dangerous concept). Why is that, what makes it possible? The source of our emotions, feelings and thoughts is much deeper than any given form of their expression and is prior to the world of words. Music comes from this source. It tells us something, it communicates with us, sending a non-verbal “message” that resonates with us. Like every art form, music shows us what we are and what the world is. More importantly, however, it shows what the world could become. A true artist does not accept the world as it is, but gives us a vision of the world as it could and should be. And here is the fundamental difference between science and art. Science operates on and explores the “objective” world as it is; art, although to a degree it reflects this objective world, transforms it and creates its own reality, its own world. Art in general, and music especially, has tremendous power of cognitive acceleration and the ability to alter our consciousness delivering indispensable lessons in a very compressed form, to open up new horizons and possibilities, to expand our comprehension of the world and ourselves. All that is required in return is our full attention, active participation and a sincere effort to connect directly to the music and unlock an ever-throbbing energy eager to be released and manifested through the flash of our recognition. Each masterpiece is still waiting to be discovered: each masterpiece is a storage house of energy, a battery that never runs out of juice.

All creative endeavors come from one source and follow a universal law of becoming and formalization. Like any creative art form or scientific or spiritual discipline when thoroughly followed, music can help us to recognize the fundamental unity of existence and

to realize that there is one light that is extended and reflected in millions of lights, creating an infinite variety of manifestations. Once perceived and experienced, this principal of unity becomes obvious and pertains to everything. In Nabokov's words, it is something that "the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen."

Music and mathematics are the most abstract and universal languages—music operates through twelve tones (digits, letters, signs), while mathematics operates through ten numbers. Much had been written about the intrinsic connection between mathematics and music, between the operational modes of numbers and tones (twelve signs of the Zodiac and seven planets, twelve tones in the chromatic scale and seven in the tonal scale etc.). There is one power behind all manifestation, including the movement and interactions of the planets and the relationships between the intervals and overtones. "The music of the spheres" that Pythagoras and Dante pointed to actually exists. It is up to us to recognize it.

Every language is a dynamic entity that contains an infinite capacity for variation and meaning, while retaining its fundamental unity and stability. It is the way a language is used, the way we speak the language that changes, not the language itself. In music this is very apparent—different styles come and go, old becomes new and new becomes old, but the basic building units of the musical language stay intact—the same twelve tones are used. For me, the saying "There is nothing new under the sun" refers first and foremost to language itself. No matter how one mixes up the words, the language, which is the operational mode of our mind, remains fundamentally the same. It seems to me that, more often than not, it is not we who are speaking the language, but rather the language is playing around and speaking through us. Language (any given language in the arts) is the primary tool of creation; being sensitive and open to the working of language is a pre-condition of creativity.

At the beginning of the creative process, there is an initial impulse, an instantaneous vision and comprehension of the whole that contains multiple possibilities of realization. This is not a temporal, gradual process, not an intellectual invention, but a sudden event that is imprinted in the mind of the artist. The artist translates this creative impulse into a work of art and gives it a particular form of realization. The process of translation and formalization of the initial impulse is rational, and there is a fusion of the prophetic, the intuitive and the

rational that makes the final product. Any authentic vision/idea has a powerful auto-creative potential towards formalization. The best thing the artist can do is to become available and receptive to this potential, to let the language (whatever it is) work through him or her. When it happens, the artist becomes a conduit, a medium through which the work is done. An artist is always both a tool and a creator at the same time. All great works of art are inspired and “bigger” than their creators. Every genuine artist clearly understands this process and submits to it. The message is greater than the messenger. This is the highest and the purest form of creativity.

Art is a by-product of the human mind trying to comprehend its own nature. Art gives us a “mirror” and it is up to us to take an honest look inside. What we see depends on the way in which we look and the result may not be comfortable. But the mirror is not to blame. In the end, we see nothing but ourselves.

Art is a self-expanding context, a never-ending commentary on itself. This context is fluid and grows exponentially, creating new references, new connections, and new semantics. There is no “progress” as such in art besides technical innovations. Every creative artist takes a fresh look at what has been done before, at what is available and reevaluates and adapts it to his or her needs. The ability to see what has not been seen before is essential—all true artists create their own worlds by discovering new connections, new references and potentialities that then become points of departure and inspiration for other artists, making us in turn see what we have not seen before.

The way we perceive the past is unavoidably affected by the context of our own time, which means that the past is fluid, evolving and alive. It seems to me that we are always moving toward the past that is still ahead. And the other way around—the future is fostered into existence by connecting the dots with the past and creating new semantics, new references, through the ceaseless self-fertilization of time and art could be seen as a memory of the future. But in truth there is no past or future in art, only the all-inclusive ever-expanding now.

Music is the art of modeling and manipulating time in the form of sound—time made audible. Music operates (unfolds) in the present time only, but this “present” contains currents of the past and future,

before and after. The main impact of music, like that of any art form, happens after the work is completed—played or listened, read through or perceived in any shape or form, in our consciousness. The sense of time in music is interior and subjective (as are the workings of our mind and intuition) and it does not coincide with so-called “real time”, which is objective, exterior and directional. Contrary to our memory, which is experiential and time bound, works of art possess an autonomous existence of their own: Bach’s fugue and Dante’s *terzina* have no expiration date.

Every artist works with models. For performing musicians these models are the works they study and play. They do not create them—composers do that—but recreate them. In order to recreate well, we have to trace back the creative process that resulted in the work that we play. There is an arc of descent—the initial creative impulse, an “idea”, comes down and is manifested as the work of art, which, in turn, becomes the point of departure for a journey back up to the source from which it came—an arc of ascent. Downhill—uphill, a good workout in more ways than one.

So-called “freedom of interpretation” comes from a clear understanding of the language, idioms, rhetoric, stylistic features and formal structure of the work at hands. This comprehension provides the framework and sets the boundaries within which music can unfold and present itself. When such clear comprehension is present, there is no longer any need to make choices; there is not much to be done, but simply to let the music speak for itself. Freedom of interpretation becomes a freedom from interpretation. Freedom is an expression of discipline. The whole concept of “freedom” is often misunderstood. Freedom is not making voluntary choices and picking up what you like (as children do), but rather freedom from having to make a choice—being free releases you from the necessity of choice. If this is not understood clearly, “freedom of interpretation” can easily become an opportunity to display your personality, an ego trip using the work at hand as a vehicle for this purpose. Real freedom is not “of”, but “from”. There is no more sense of doing, but a lucid state of being: no one is there to make a choice.

Reason and logic have their limitations. There are vast areas of our consciousness that the thinking mind cannot access or penetrate—the known is just the tip of the unknown and the rational is the surface of the irrational. At the highest level, works of art give us direct and

immediate access to these areas, expanding the boundaries of what can be known and experienced. Art, especially poetry and music, penetrates and bridges the gap between the known and unknown by fluctuating between and dancing on the fringes of both worlds. That is why great works of art cannot be explained or understood only rationally. Every masterpiece contains a window of sorts, a pathway to the uncharted territory of our collective memory and imagination from which all creativity originates.

There are only a few authentic artists in any field who are capable of seeing what has not been seen before, who are not inhibited by established idioms, dogmas and practices. Such artists are rarely successful in their lifetime and usually are outside the establishment.

What makes a performance authentic? What constitutes “authenticity”? In music, playing on period instruments certainly does not automatically make a performance authentic. It is your ability to respond and connect directly to the music (your response-ability), to the creative processes behind it. You have to look straight in the eyes of the composer, not up or down, but straight. Only in this way can a direct connection be established—there can be no middleman between you and music. If you are not directly connected to music, you will either look up “in fear and trembling”, intimidated by the greatness of the composer and afraid of making “a mistake”, or look down at the work at hand using it as the means for displaying your personality and technical skills, trying to say something “new”. Neither of these “approaches” works, of course. When there is a direct connection with music (or with anything else) a communication becomes a communion, performer and composer become one, creating a new truly authentic entity that is so precious. Such authenticity is always unique, always one of a kind and cannot be replicated.

So-called “inspiration”, like all the most precious things in life, does not depend on or originate in the intellect, but in our instincts and intuitive memory. The nature of mind and intellect is to think and discriminate and most of the time we are doing just that, being caught up and circling around in a web of ideas and concepts. Inspiration comes and goes like a flutter of the wind emanating on its own whim from the edges of our memory. It cannot be forced by intellectual exertion—we cannot recognize it while our mind is busy. In a creative

endeavor our intellectual capacities take a back seat, replaced by the non-discriminatory and intuitive comprehension of reality that is rooted in our memory. We cannot recognize or touch anything of *real* value as long as our rational mind is active and calling the shots. Only when our mind and senses are hushed and at rest, can we become aware of the radiance of beauty in our heart. All great art and everything precious in life is an extension of this radiance.

Practicing

Musicians spend most of their time at home alone playing their respective instruments. The quality of their practice defines the result of the actual performance. What is involved in this process of practicing, besides sitting on our butts for a prolonged amount of time daily? It is imperative to know clearly what needs to be done and how to accomplish it in the most effective way. It is not the amount of time we spend practicing our instrument that is important, but the intensity, efficiency and quality of the time.

Different musicians have different needs and the length of time we spend practicing varies widely. I have never practiced more than three hours a day, even when I was young and preparing for competitions or important dates. (I certainly do not recommend this three-hour rule to anyone as an example to follow). Nowadays, my daily practice ranges from zero to an hour and a half at the piano, but music is present in my head almost all the time, especially during the night when I am half asleep or actually sleeping. For me, this “practicing” away from the piano is equally important as, and in a certain sense even more important than, practicing at the piano. Besides learning a new score and making sure that my hands know where to go and what to do, I practice in order to transfer the “idea” and “image” of any given work that is formed in my head into actual playing—from head to hands, not from hands to head, provided that the hands are kept in working condition and do not create obstacles of their own by refusing to cooperate.

And here comes the actual practicing at the piano. This transfer from head to hands takes time and never is quite literal—something gets lost in translation and something is gained, but the final result never quite matches what you had in mind, because the image of the work is not set in stone, but is alive and evolving. There is an element of unpredictability and fluidity in the outcome that is frustrating, but also precious and vital in any creative process. During 30 years of teaching I have worked with many students who try to get good results just from their hands, without really understanding what is going on musically, without comprehension of the whole work at hand. Of course, this approach does not work and at the very best can produce only technically impressive playing devoid of any other

value. We can't give what we do not have—it seems simple enough, but it's not always easy to understand what this really means.

During their lessons, students often try to copy what is being shown, to imitate the quality and character of the sound, trying to understand my “technique”. It does not quite work, because the sound that comes out through your hands is a manifestation of the sound that you have inside. Playing the piano, or any other instrument, is a process of projection and manifestation of your inner hearing, which is a form of energy, into actual physical sound. The same law applies to conducting an orchestra, which becomes an instrument through which the conductor transfers his or her hearing and vision of the work into the sound of the orchestra.

Musicians work with their scores as artists work with their models. Working with the score involves much more than learning the notes and being able to play them. It requires comprehension of the form, style, technique of writing, language and idioms of each work. We can't understand and appreciate the value of a composer by studying just one or two of his works; this gives us a partial view at best, which is incomplete, although it may create the illusion that we know what we are doing. All the major works (not works for piano only) of the great composers must be studied, comprehended and assimilated. There is no substitute for this and no short cuts. Everything is in the eye of the beholder and learning how to read a score and understand the intentions of the composer is an open-ended process. Everything we need to see is there already, but we have to find out what it really means. A musical score provides us with a road map; it is up to us to read this map and navigate by it. Every piece we learn has its period of gestation before it is ready to be born, ready to go out and see the world and be allowed to be seen by the world. This process of maturation should not be rushed, but left alone to unfold in its own time and way. As we mature and evolve, so do the works that we play and there is no end to this process, fortunately.

Frequently, students start their “acquaintance” with a composer by choosing to play one of his or her most challenging works. When a student brought to her lesson Schubert's A major sonata D. 959, I asked her which other piano works by Schubert she had played. She answered that this is the very first one and that she is very excited about it. To be excited is not a bad thing, but to start learning

Schubert with this sonata without playing anything else is presumptuous, silly and childish. But nowadays we have to be politically correct and not “discourage” anyone, no matter what. I tried to explain to this student that perhaps she’d be better off studying some of Schubert’s other works before trying to play D. 959. She asked me why, and I said that in order to ascend to the peak of Everest, one has to learn how to walk first. She nodded, gave me a blank look and said that she understood.

Our current obsession with political correctness creates obstacles for students. The teacher does not necessarily need to be nice, polite and friendly, but does have to be really competent, able to point out the problems that exist and help to resolve them. (When we go to the doctor’s office with our problems, we do not expect to hear that everything is fine, but rather what the diagnosis is and how to deal with it and make it go away.) It should not matter how the message is delivered, as long as it is valid and true. Nowadays, however, the delivery part often becomes more important than the actual teaching. During our years of learning in Russia, we had no idea of political correctness between the teachers and students. Our teachers delivered their message with no concern about how gently it was done and the results were not too shabby. But it was another time, another place and another culture.

I am certainly not an easy teacher to work with; in order to study with me the right chemistry has to be established between the student and myself. Sometimes it happens and sometimes it does not. The teacher serves as a mirror that shows the student the real state of affairs, not what the student wants to see, but rather what needs to be seen. Most of the time, this picture is not flattering or perfect, but in order to improve and grow the student must understand clearly what needs to be done and accept it without reservation. Students must trust their teacher and understand that the teacher is “giving them a hard time” not to hurt them, but to help.

Several issues that regularly come up during lessons are not “musical” per se, but very important because of their impact on the quality of performance: the physical posture, the position of the hands, how close and how high one sits at the piano. If your body is tense and you feel uncomfortable, it means that your mental state is not right and clear, because physical tension is caused by and reflects your mental state. Tense, high shoulders and a rigid neck are

commonly visible symptoms that obstruct the natural flow of energy through the body—they obstruct the unfolding of the music, because music is a manifestation of energy, energy in the form of sound. It is necessary to find your center of gravity, a steady place that does not move, but allows movement to happen and keeps everything stable. When this center is found, there will be no excessive body movements, which are destructive and useless, no overly emotive facial expressions, no excessive movements of the hands and lifting fingers high above the keys or stamping on the pedals—all of these are useless and to be avoided.

The height of the piano bench, how far one sits from the piano and the position of the hands on the keys are another area of concern. Often the seat is too high, which causes the elbows and wrists to be much higher than the keyboard. When this happens, one has to push down into the keys from above, in my opinion not the smartest way to play the piano. Elbows and wrists should stay parallel to or slightly lower than the level of the keys; this position allows the transfer of weight into the keys naturally without effort because the tips of your fingers already carry the weight of your body. If the seat is too high, we are walking on our toes only, when we are sitting correctly, we are walking naturally carrying our weight with the whole foot and can shift and distribute our weight effortlessly into the keyboard. If we are sitting too close to the piano, the elbows stay parallel to the body and it becomes difficult to transfer the weight of our body to the keys. If we are sitting too far from the piano, we have to lean forward to the keys and lose our center of gravity.

It is imperative for students to learn how to practice by themselves, how to teach themselves. Quite often students practice thoughtlessly just for the sake of practicing and running the clock without a clear understanding of what they are trying to accomplish, beyond being able to play the notes. The automatic repetition of technically challenging passages is useless without an understanding of what causes the challenge. The majority of technical problems can be eliminated rather easily when the cause of the difficulty is clearly seen. A challenging passage or a sequence of chords that is difficult to play can be broken down into shorter groups that are easy to play. After such groups have been found, all that is left to do is to connect them together. Technical difficulties are often self-created, caused by

mental anxiety that in turn is produced by lack of understanding how to approach and resolve any given technical problem. Naturally, mental problems must be resolved mentally. What the mind creates the mind destroys. When that is done, our own shadows do not frighten us anymore.

How to memorize the work that is being studied is another sensitive issue. Of course, some of us learn the score more quickly than others, without making an actual effort to memorize it. Ideally, the memorizing should happen naturally without trying, just by playing and reading the score. There are two components in memorization that are equally important, mental and physical. In my experience, the physical memory, the memory of the hands, can be more lasting than the mental memory. Sometimes I may not really remember the score, but my hands do. When learning a new piece, practicing it in our head, away from the piano, speeds up the process of memorization significantly.

There are several traps that to avoid: overplaying the piece, getting used to what you do and starting to like it, not really hearing what comes out of the piano while you play, lack of control of the dynamics, shaky tempos, excessive pedaling and, most importantly, lack of understanding of the goal to be achieved.

The ability to hear clearly what one is doing is essential and our hearing ability should be disciplined and developed to the maximum—we can't produce a sound that we can't hear. Many students have the habit of playing mezzo piano or mezzo forte with a neutral, generic sound that does not fluctuate much and has no life in it, no expressive value. Soft playing is especially challenging for many students and often a hearing aid might be needed to hear what they are playing. This problem can easily be eliminated by making sure that the bottom of the keys is reached, no matter how softly one is playing. Sound is a manifestation of energy that has an expressive value and there is no such thing as "neutral" sound in music. Each work manifests itself through a particular sound, releasing the expressive energy it contains.

Good pedaling is an art that is often underestimated. A common mistake is pushing the pedal down too deep. When this happens, it becomes practically impossible to have a quick change of pedal without hangover from the previous pedal and the whole sound picture becomes murky and dirty. The pedal should not be pushed all the way down, but to half or a quarter of its depth only, which allows

a quick and clean “invisible” change of pedal without any hangovers. Good pedaling is not really noticeable—you do not stamp on the pedal and there is very little motion involved in the process when it is done right. The pedal should be alive and breathing.

The pedal is especially important in the works of Chopin; if Chopin’s detailed (to the point of obsessiveness) instructions are ignored or not clearly understood, his music loses its special elusive expressiveness, liveliness and stylistic charm. Unlike other composers, Chopin does not use the pedal to connect the bass line, but rather to emphasize the melody. In other words, in Chopin the pedal generally deals with the top, not the bottom and the switch of the pedal happens not after a change in the bass, but just before, leaving the melody alone for a brief moment—the melodic line is cleaned up between the notes, as if it is breathing, making the whole texture more transparent. The melody becomes the connective tissue that binds the music together—the melody, not the bass. It is essential to understand the difference between this function of the pedal in Chopin and in the works of other composers. When Chopin’s pedal directions are mastered and followed, his music begins to live and breathe more easily and naturally, it become more alive, fragile and precious.

The use of dynamics presents a challenge for many students. Dynamic markings in the score are not only directions as to what should be played loud or soft, but also indications of the character and meaning of the musical material. The dynamic directions of composers emphasize the expressive value and importance of the musical material. It is the expressive intensity of sound that matters. Often students think that the louder they play the bigger impression they will make, without being aware that the quality of their sound is harsh and nasty. The main reason for the production of a nasty sound is the wrong technique for getting a big sound from the piano. Many young (and not so young) pianists mistakenly think that the harder one hits the keys, the bigger the sound, which obviously is not the case. It is not how hard one hits the keys (what a negative word “hit” is), but the velocity of the contact with the keys. There is no need at all to lift your hands to the sky before taking a big chord—all such balletic movements above the keys are useless. All unnecessary body movements should be eliminated and when that is done, playing the piano becomes easier and more enjoyable.

The piano already contains all possible sounds before we touch it. All that needs to be done is to get the right sound from the piano, which already has it in itself, and hitting it hard is not the way to go. The simple advice that I give to students is: do not touch the piano in a way you yourself would not want to be touched. Besides, there is no need to scream and shout when you want to be listened to. Real power is never explicit and does not openly display itself. Powerful people do not have to talk loudly because everyone is eager to hear what they say. Displaying ourselves too explicitly and screaming instead of talking is a sign of impotence, not power.

Having a singing tone and playing legato requires not only the technical skill of connecting the notes in the melody, but the ability to hear what is going on between the notes. Without this, it is impossible to play well the slow movements of Mozart, for example, or many works of Chopin that are vocal and operatic in nature. Listening to good singers can be very useful and help us to understand how to connect the notes within a phrase, where to take a breath and deliver the whole singing line well. Familiarity with opera and understanding of the basics of singing technique is very helpful.

It is important to manage our emotions and passions while we are playing. There are different ways to make a desirable impression and emotional impact on our listeners. No matter how we approach this, we should never get carried away and lose control over our emotions during a performance. Many years ago, I heard a telling story from a famous theater director in Moscow. “The difference between a great actor and an average one is this—a good actor playing King Lear would get really emotional and could even cry during performance, but the public would not be really moved. A great actor, while playing the same role, could be thinking about what he’ll have for dinner with his date after the show, but the public will be crying while watching him play”. Being expressive is important, of course, but being over-expressive is not a good path to choose. While playing, we should be able to observe ourselves as if from above and see the big picture, making sure that we are moving in the right direction without being distracted by excessive emotion or getting off the track by picking too many flowers to sniff along the way. The ability to see the big picture is a must and quite often less is more.

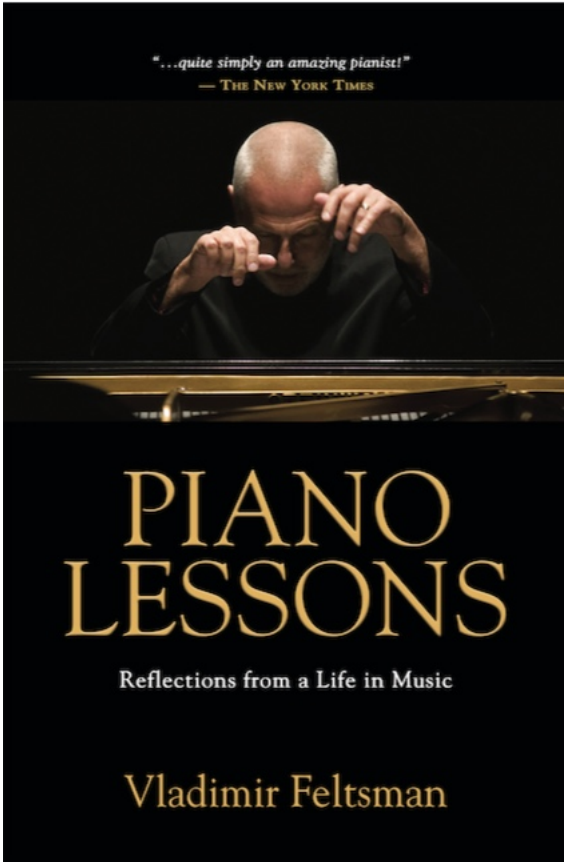
There are many other matters of concern that arise during lessons with students, but it is hard to make a list of these in the abstract. Each

lesson is different and each lesson has its own requirements. Naturally, it is always easier to point out things that should not be done than to explain what needs to be done.

Having good instincts and intuition is important, but not enough for becoming a full-fledged musician. To develop a general comprehension of music and understanding of the “what, how and why” of every work is a must. A child prodigy can get away with playing on intuition alone, but a mature musician certainly can’t. Music is a language that, like any other language, must be studied and thoroughly assimilated. We can’t become complete musicians just by playing our instrument well, without a general understanding of culture and acquaintance with all forms of art. I firmly believe that reading important books—“The man is what he reads” (Brodsky)—studying great work of art and doing some honest thinking is necessary to expand our imagination and memory (from which all creativity originates), to hone our instincts and taste, to develop our mind and the ability to process information. By studying and understanding culture, we come closer to ourselves and begin to realize the immense value of what we have inherited. And, just as with our family inheritance, we should appreciate and take good care of our cultural legacy, our collective memory.

We can tell a lot about people by looking at the company they keep. By educating ourselves, we are joining a circle of friends—our favorite books, works of art, and music. These are our real friends that sustain, nurture, inspire and guide us, if we only make ourselves open to receiving this guidance. It is good to know that we are not alone in this world, that we are not orphans without a family history but the rightful heirs of our cultural inheritance and links in the never-ending search for the meaning and purpose of human existence.

“Thanks to the arts, instead of seeing one world only, our own, we see that world multiply itself and we have at our disposal as many worlds as there are original artists” (Proust).



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