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Mindfulness in music

Beyond the mysticism

Mindfulness has captured the public's imagination in a giddy array of ways during recent times. Though its origins lie in Buddhist meditation, modern thinkers have been quick to recognise the potential for improving our psychological well-being via activities as diverse as sport, macramé and even bread-making. Hence in this broader, secular sense, mindfulness has acquired a non-spiritual emphasis. It acknowledges the need for inner calm and self-reflection – indeed a more wholesome awareness of how we go about our daily lives. The Mental Health Foundation endorses the cultivation of mindfulness, and this has found practical outlets in institutions prone to claustrophobia and anxiety disorders, such as correctional institutions, learning places and even multinational companies.

Tuning in to our potential, both as pianists and in our everyday lives, requires us to take a bold step away from the distractions which insidiously permeate our existence. Our preoccupation with competition and ambition leads us, often unwittingly, into a dizzying world of haste, breathlessness and confusion. Attempts to regroup all too soon leave us feeling we are underachieving again. There is nothing new about stress of course, but today we do battle with neurosis on an unprecedented scale. The tyranny of email and social media may partly account for this sense of being weighed down by scrutiny and accountability. Furthermore, we have become overburdened by choice; the very freedom to wander easily around our global village requires us to reject options which under other circumstances we might feel are ideally suited to us. It is undoubtedly easier to choose between a dozen options than one million and, ironically, it seems that keeping our options open for too long merely increases the risk of making none.

The average twenty-five-year-old has already notched up adventures abroad which knock the experiences of their parents into a cocked hat. But they too are feeling the strain of a society which has left them in the lurch; they are unsure whether to be enchanted or terrified by their future. Our sometimes uneasy society, struggling to come to terms with its ever-shifting identity, is leading us inexorably towards a 'dabble-culture'. We are left feeling unfulfilled as we dip in and out of activities, piano playing sometimes among these, any one of which could soak up a whole lifetime. Our shelves groan under the weight of unread books, while the simple satisfaction of walking among the flowers seems inevitably interrupted by the beeping of our smartphones, alerting us to what is trending on Twitter. We measure our day not by what we may have achieved, but with the numbing suspicion that we ought to have accomplished more.

One irony here is that even those areas of our lives which should be able to draw us away from our daily tensions can so easily succumb, too. Take piano

Debussy, *La Cathédrale engloutie*, bb. 28–30

28

ff

8va bassa
(Sostenuto)

...Then change the sustain pedal on each chord →

If you experiment regularly with the middle pedal you too can become a veritable Gene Kelly of pedalling, deftly sliding the right foot from the *sostenuto* to the sustain pedal, and back again, while perhaps simultaneously using the left foot to operate the *una corda* and then take its turn with the *sostenuto*! There seems little point in pianists becoming expert at sleight-of-hand if we are going to neglect the possibility of becoming fleet-of-foot also.

If we dare to think ‘outside the box’, we can sometimes come up with cunning ways of sidestepping irksome issues that would remain unresolved by a more conventional route. By way of example, in Ravel’s ‘Ondine’, from *Gaspard de la Nuit*, we need to hear a crystal-clear but softly-spoken statement of the water nymph’s tune, just after the tumultuous cascade of notes at bar 89. This is virtually impossible to achieve using the sustain pedal, or even *sostenuto*. This is because this beautiful, plaintive melody must somehow emerge from a ‘backwash’ of colour ringing on from the previous flourish, which has been trapped in the pedal. An unconventional solution lies in placing the entire left hand (and even forearm) onto the notes in the middle register to silently depress some keys *after* the pedalled flourish has taken place. We can then slowly lift the sustain pedal, thereby transferring much of the backwash away from the foot to the arm: we can now take all the time we wish ‘painting’ this exquisite melody, entirely free from unwanted blurring and with the flourish still reverberating hauntingly – voila!

Ravel, ‘Ondine’, from *Gaspard de la Nuit*, bb. 89–93

89

pp

pp

Très lent

(Pedal) →

1. Place forearm silently down on middle register white notes
2. Slowly lift / flutter pedal
3. Play beautiful melody!

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Exams: a view from the examiner's chair

I would like to offer some entirely personal ruminations from the 'other side' – the examiner's chair. There are no trade secrets or anything controversial here, but hopefully a few illuminating ideas as you gather yourself up to take your next graded piano exam, prepare your candidates or help your child in the lead up to an exam day. Mindfulness in the practice room is one thing, but mindfulness in an exam is something altogether more challenging.

The fact that piano exams 'matter' should not mean they matter more than other focal points in our musical lives, such as school concerts or piano club get-togethers. Exams are convenient markers along a continuum, but they are still performance situations, and like any performance there will always be a sense of the unknown to deal with. The possibility for something memorably beautiful to occur must always be tinged with the potential for small-scale calamities. Our biggest challenge is how to deal with the peculiarities of our own temperament. For most of us, the question is not whether we may encounter aspects of our playing which displease us on the day, but when, how and to what extent we will allow these things to get the better of us. Once exam candidates have a little experience under their belt, they usually start to realise that the compromises imposed by an unusual environment do not need to be unduly intimidating or undermining. Candidates usually learn to calm themselves in response to the positive experience they had last time with that rather nice examiner wearing the orange tie.

Exams provide goals, motivation and important measures of success from recognised bodies. They can provide the main motivation for mastering scales or sight-reading, for example, and this can lead to a satisfying sense of achievement. But we need to use exams wisely, recognising how they do, and do not, help us progress. If our ideal is to be able to play inspiring music spontaneously, by ear and using improvisation – not just by reading notes – we need to seek out syllabuses which encourage this, and look carefully at the repertoire to be sure such things are being actively encouraged.¹²⁵

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For the more senior candidate, keeping exams in perspective may be easier said than done. The attitude of mind we have during the run up to an exam is therefore critical to the approach we end up taking as we stroll into the room. When things go a little astray, rehearse how you hope to react – can you keep your neuroses at bay and hold your nerve? One poorly-executed scale need not cause you to crash in all the others.

¹²⁵ Although the importance of improvisation is rarely denied in prominent educational circles, alas, it continues to play only the tiniest role within the suite of piano examinations offered by the foremost boards (ABRSM Jazz and Practical Musicianship Syllabuses, TCL Supporting Tests).