

On Finger Drumming

There are people who, for some unknown reason, have the habit of drumming their fingers on tables or desks in the same way that others grind their teeth, bite their nails or pick their noses. I find this habit bad enough but what really irritates me are those who strum on the piano. Let me say straight away that I am not referring to piano virtuosi who, for me as a lifelong music-lover, command my highest respect.

This habit of strumming, usually on an upright piano is widespread in our country which is not surprising given that it is the homeland of Chopin, one of our most famous composers and in addition we have had, and still have, a whole galaxy of outstanding performers of his music. From our obligatory school reading books we retain an affectionate memory of Jano Muzykant whose musical gifts were sadly wasted as he had no opportunity to develop them.

Thus from childhood on we all strum away on the piano in the hope that some new Chopin will emerge but at the very least to show that no talent should be neglected. So we carry on banging away for a few years because, after all, nobody knows when our great hidden talents will one day emerge to universal acclaim. Even if we lack such lofty aspirations we carry on anyway for our own pleasure and musical appreciation.

This kind of thinking was popular during my youth (I was myself a victim at the age of 6) and is still popular although it has somewhat diminished nowadays because children are loth to be deprived of "strumming" on the keyboards of their computers which we now call "clicking".

Of course, the above-mentioned musical appreciation must be allowed to develop without the need to torture oneself and everybody within earshot with hours of practice. One should devote some of this wasted time to listening to great music performed by acknowledged masters. But best of all is to go to live concerts when the opportunity arises for only then can we concentrate fully on the music in ideal conditions and not be distracted by asides or conversations or be occupied by other tasks. Knowledge about music can be acquired from reading appropriate books.

The art of piano playing for one's own pleasure brings me to my next point. In actual fact, this doubtful pleasure is confined to a small group of friends, often the family circle where our amateur pianist plays a few popular songs and dances and even essays some popular pieces of classical music, done to death in simplified versions. His repertoire is usually very limited and when he is asked to play, "Give us a tune, Raphael", he finds he has already run out of tunes to play. His playing is full of mistakes, there is no attempt at interpretation and he keeps the sustaining pedal permanently depressed so as to produce more sound, the louder the better and besides, it hides his mistakes. Quite simply, he is murdering music. You would need to have enormous self-confidence and very little musicality to take any pleasure whatsoever in this sort of playing. Very occasionally you might hear an amateur pianist whose playing is acceptable and in whose pleasure you can share. But there exists a large gulf between the playing of such a person and the virtuoso skills of a concert pianist.

All this keyboard thumping and scraping of course does not necessarily lead to any instrumental virtuosity nor produce any composer. Certain specific prerequisites are necessary to achieve this level. Firstly, there must be enthusiasm and persistence to achieve one's goals, essential for all successful careers in all professions. Perhaps we can all agree on that. A further prerequisite for success in music is musical sensitivity and a musical gift.

Our personal response to music is very varied except perhaps for those afflicted by deafness. Nowadays various devices can transform musical sounds into vibrations which the deaf can feel. But it is doubtful whether such vibrations can produce aesthetic responses just as others are colour blind. But despite these defects, they do listen to certain types of music and even go to concerts. What attracts them is rhythm, spectacle, movement, singers' gestures, the atmosphere and above all the lyrics. There exists an enormous diversity among those who are normally responsive to and interested in music with a capital M as to what they define as pleasure in listening to music. There are also those who prefer the sound of specific instruments, or the human voice or who cannot tolerate high notes.

Lovers of orchestral music are similarly divided; some are attracted by beautiful melodies, others by rhythm and still others by harmony and instrumentation while for a few, the most important is the musical structure of any given work. The great composers were similarly divided. Bellini and Donizetti poured out endlessly beautiful melodies. Berlioz was a master of orchestration. The great Beethoven, although less noted for his melodic invention, created his works like architects their splendid buildings. We bring to each type of music our own intensely individual responses which range from indifference, through intellectual pleasure to rapturous ecstasy.

Musical talent is an even more complicated matter. Its most important elements are an ear for music, memory, technical ability and the capacity to offer creative and individual interpretations of musical works. The requirements for composers are even greater.

People who have no ear for music are unable to reproduce any heard sound with their own voice and cannot detect the pitch of any note. Such people may be able to learn to play the piano a little because each note on a piano keyboard has its own defined pitch but a violin would defeat them because where you stop the string with your finger depends on your ability to hear the sound.

The most perfect form of a musical ear is absolute pitch. Those who possess this gift can distinguish and vocally reproduce any note, and not only heard ones. They can also identify notes in a score and can reproduce the sound of any note heard on a piano keyboard. They can identify each note of any chord they hear. Absolute pitch is a great help when learning to play an instrument but, interestingly, only 11% of orchestral players have it. But there are many gradations between the extreme forms of aural ability. Can absolute pitch be taught? Unfortunately not, despite the claims of advertisers on the Internet who offer their services. You can however improve your ear for music a little through practice. For example, those who listen or sing together the same piece of music often enough can learn, over time, to all start on the same note.

A musical memory not only facilitates playing by ear as is popularly supposed. A pianist with a good memory should know the musical score, master the fingering in both hands and have a sense of the geography of the keyboard allowing him to play chords accurately not immediately under his fingers and without needing to look – important especially for blind pianists. He must be able to play to perfection all the themes of the musical piece with all their nuances as these themes are often repeated in the same work with insignificant variations. Should his memory fail him at any time, he must be able to improvise as faithfully to the style of the piece as possible. The ideal pianist will have internalised all these techniques so that he can concentrate solely on interpreting the music. All this presents considerable challenges and there are many pianists who cannot play without the score in front of them, nowadays unacceptable in public performances. Technical ability is the next challenge. Speed and positioning of the fingers, mastery of the dynamics between *pianissimo* and *fortissimo* and a perfect balance between the fingers of both hands are the basic elements.

Can these be taught? Yes. Experts say that ten thousand hours of practice over a period of 5 to 10 years are necessary to achieve this level, depending on the individual degree of intensity of practice. In fact, young pianists practice 5 hours a day rising to 7 hours a day before an examination or competition. Who would not rather choose another field of study and treat music as a sideline? Perhaps only the greatest talent would obviate the need for all this practice. In this case it would be better to dedicate oneself entirely to music.

Fritz Kreisler, the famous Viennese violinist was once asked how many hours a day he devoted to practice. “I don’t practice at all” he said, “Practice is only for those who lack talent”. However, an individual gift for music does not necessarily include all aspects of music ability. Even world famous virtuosi have their weak points. Many famous pianists for example have poor fingering and occasionally fumble a note. Artur Schnabel was one as was Ignacy Paderewski. In rapid passages audiences do not generally notice these little slips. After one of his concerts, Paderewski was praised by his friends for his performance and then one of them said. “Maestro, didn’t you play one or two wrong notes today?” “One or two?” replied Paderewski, “I played enough of them to make a new composition”.

Writing about the difficulties of becoming a pianist, I do not want to give the impression that I am against playing this instrument. But I would be less than honest if I did not express my view that learning to play the piano should only be undertaken by young people with a special talent – and there is no lack of such people worldwide. Statistics from music schools in the USA show that 80% of their graduates could play the piano by the time they were between 4 and 6 years old and were able to give public performances of demanding works by established composers by the time they were between 12 and 14. Thus, musical talent reveals itself at a very young age. Artur Schnabel said that he taught himself to play the piano before he could speak.

The possession of musical talent and an acute sensitivity to music certainly facilitates a pianistic career. Unfortunately these gifts are genetically determined and not everybody possesses them to the same degree or in the same area of musical ability. Having said this, I am aware that not everybody will agree with me. Most parents would object when I suggest they are passing on bad genes to their offspring preventing them from fulfilling their potential. Nor would most music teachers agree because their livelihood is at stake although some proceed on the principle “those who can, do; those who can’t, teach”. Certain political and social commentators would also challenge me and say my views verge on discrimination. “Political Correctness” is more important for them.

The question of whether our unusual gifts, talents and even genius are innate, dependent on our genetic inheritance or the opposite, that is to say, acquired through responsible upbringing, education and dedication, is a never-ending one, beginning with the Ancient Greeks to the present time. Scientists in various fields studying this subject use the English term “Nature versus Nurture”. Readers interested in these matters will find many articles on the internet and others which may be found by typing in “the genetic basis of talent” as well as many books by Oliver Sacks who has investigated a wide range of human abilities including musical ones and writes in a most interesting and accessible way.

Personally, I incline to the genetic basis of talent and I have come to this conclusion after studying the subject and observing the musical and other careers of people with unusual gifts in different areas. I therefore have one request for parents – do not force your children to strum away on the piano for 5 hours a day if they have neither talent nor interest.