

Piano experiences in London

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Back at 1991 I had the opportunity to attend a series of lessons for a few months with distinguished pianists in London. I was at that time twenty six years old, and that experience was unique. Each pianist or piano teacher had something to offer me which remained indelible in my memory. That experience in London so greatly enhanced my knowledge and skills and shaped my future path, that I wrote down this knowledge on notes, which I processed later and resulted to the published book titled “from left and right – the piano”. We have already prepared the translation of that book in English and will soon be published.

One of the first experiences I had, was with the teacher Kuthron Sturrok. I acquired much knowledge with that piano teacher, but what remained unforgettable was the practice of use of the left (soft) pedal (the *una corda* pedal in Latin). Each time I was pressing the soft pedal in order to play more softly, Kuthron stung my left foot with a pencil. As she was explaining to me, the purpose of the soft pedal is not to play more softly, but to give another color in your performance. If at any point of a piece you perform, this color is required, or if you want to use that other color, then you can use the soft pedal, but not in order to play more softly. The soft pedal, depending on the piano, can give you a dull color, like the cloudy sky. When the composer implies with his melodic or rhythmic lines that you have to give a dull color, then you can use the soft pedal, but again not in order to play more softly. If you want to play more softly, you will achieve this with your fingers, not with the soft pedal.

At another time, I had the opportunity to attend piano masterclasses at Royal Academy of Music with the distinguished Hungarian pianist Tamas Vasary. He was a student of Horovits. What remained unforgettable from this encounter, was the remark he made to all students of the Royal Academy of Music: “Too many fingers up in the air”, that is, the fingers must not be high and far from the keys, but instead they must be close or adjacent to the keys, even if they don’t play something. It was striking that all the students who performed at those masterclasses, had their fingers far from the keys. The reason for the comment of Tamas Vasary, that the fingers must be very close to the keys, is because in that way they can immediately perform instructions of the brain and not miss valuable time. When the fingers are high and far from the keys, they cannot easily and immediately play the notes and consequently, a time lag between the executed notes is created.

However, I believe that Tamas Vasary’s comment should not be generalized for all cases. For instance, when we have a dance, a waltz or a mazurka, then, in my opinion, it is advisable for the wrist and the hand to follow the motion of the hand and to ascend higher than the keys. Thus, with that manner the fingers will participate more energetic to the dance and they will interpret the waltz or the mazurka better. On the contrary, when we have fast passages, then it is advisable to have the fingers close to the keys, ready to

perform the piece, without losing valuable time. In that manner, the notes will sound timely and this will lead to a better and more accurate sound result.

Another comment of Tamas Vasary, which he did to one student of the Royal Academy of Music, was that when we perform chords, we do not have to press the keys downwards, but the motion of the hand must be upwards. The irony was that the student's playing, in this case the downwards motion of the wrist and the hand and pressing the keys vertically downwards, was learned from her teacher. Of course, when somebody performs in a concert hall, then she has to perform the pieces generally more loudly, so as even the last rows of the audience are able to hear clearly the performance. Again the motion of the wrist and the hands must be upwards and not to press the keys downwards.

Another experience I had during the lessons at Morley College of London, was with the distinguished Cypriot pianist Martino Tirimo. What was memorable out of these classes was the comment of Martino Tirimo, especially in impressionistic works such as the ones of the French composer Claude Debussy that, we have to play only where the composer marks so, as softly as possible, and with a lot of pedal. Like an impressionistic painting, where the artist interprets the first impression and does not form details in the picture, similarly in an impressionistic work for piano we have to perform only the exact written score, as soft as possible and with a lot of pedal. Pedal joins chords, many times harmonically unrelated with each other, in order to create the emotion that the composer wants to give.

Another distinguished piano teacher, Garola Grindea, gave special emphasis to the posture of the body, which a pianist needed to have. Many problems that musicians face, and especially the pianists, come from the wrong posture of the body. Garola Grindea was trying to correct the wrong posture of the body and at the same time to help the performer to play more naturally, without having tension and stress.

At the same College, that is Morley College, I attended piano lessons with Gweeneth Pryor as well. That exceptional piano teacher was approaching the piece the student was playing, from all aspects. She didn't emphasize only one aspect of the piece, but she was trying to correct the piece from all the aspects, such as the interpretation, the technique, the fingering, the pedal etc. In fact, this is what I believe good teachers need to do. They must not emphasize only one aspect of the piece, but approach the piece all together, from all aspects.

Another experience I had, was with the distinguished pianist and pedagogue Kendall Taylor. When the last lesson I had with him finished, I pulled out my wallet to pay him, but he replied: "No, young man, put your wallet in your pocket. I don't want money from you. You know everything a pianist needs to know. You only need practice".

Finally, I would like to refer to a distinguished pianist and piano pedagogue, Max Hallecker, whom I was lucky enough to have as my teacher in Athens. That exceptional piano pedagogue taught me how to produce correct sound from the piano and transfer it

to the audience. He had exceptional love to his students and he emphasized at all times how important the correct technique is, which a pianist needs to have. He taught us many technical exercises and in that manner, exercising on the correct technique on the piano, we produced correct sound from the piano. He encouraged us to study many hours daily and to start our study always with technical exercises.

All in all, these were some memorable experiences I had with distinguished pianists, to whom I am grateful for the knowledge and skills they taught me in their classes.