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My Eyes Uncover My Hands: A Pianist's Journey

Although I've played the piano since the age of six, for many years I did not consider myself a pianist. Even after twelve years of lessons, I found it difficult to make pleasant, effective physical gestures at the piano. My fingers could not move quickly enough, and I continued to blunder in the same places. My sight-reading was very poor, so I was limited to playing pieces by ear, or making them up. I worked at being a pianist for a long time, and yet, in my eyes, I remained inept. Meanwhile, when other people played, their fingers seemed to dance across the keys like lightning. There was no way for me to match their apparent ease as I muddled through difficult music as best I could. My stiff movement eventually led to physical problems; I suffered from debilitating lower back pain when sitting before the keyboard. Unable to sound or feel comfortable on the piano bench, I became increasingly unwilling to play in front of people.

As a teenager, I did not spend hours a day practicing exercises to increase my ability, even though this is the usual route for anyone aspiring to play at a high level. Because my musicality came so easily, I was sure my pianistic ability should come the same way. Even though I spent a lot of time with each piece, I did not really work on the difficult parts. I just kept playing, and hoped that they would improve on their own. My piano teacher, Mr. Chagy, offered me advice, but as he had decided that my staying with the piano was more important than my becoming a virtuoso, he was not very forceful in his suggestions, so I tended to shrug off his comments.

I do not believe that a stricter regimen would have helped me. In the end, technique alone does not generate the kind of true ease that most truly successful pianists come to. Many people spend hours on scales and exercises in their youth, and then never have to play them again. It is my belief that these people are using the exercises as a bridge to find their true physical selves at the piano, after which they transcend the need for physical strength; whereas, for me, a rigorous program only would have blanketed my problems without eliminating them. If I had learned to play the piano through nothing but "hard work" then I would have exhausted my love of the instrument quickly. Had I pushed through my physical difficulties without seriously attending to them, I might have injured myself quite seriously. At the very least, I doubt I would have found the playing of faster, more difficult music enjoyable.

Instead of going the traditional route of playing etudes and exercises, I spent most of my practice time attempting to keep myself entertained: improvising, experimenting with playing pieces in the wrong places on the piano, higher and lower than they had been written, and learning pieces by ear from records. I knew that I should be working harder on my homework assignments, but instead I simply played pieces again and again without really addressing the trouble spots. I "worked on" one piece for nearly a year in this way without significantly improving it. I was trapped between a desire to perfect my playing and a fear of undertaking the necessary effort to do so.

I wanted to play beautifully, and in my head, that's how I imagined myself, but I could not bear the thought that such heights might be beyond me. In the end, I avoided any situation that might have forced me to admit I was lacking as a player, even when the truth seemed quite obvious.

I did not come to this fear of failure after years of playing; it was present from the beginning. Even as a small child, I detested performing for my relatives or friends, or even my parents. I only played for my piano teacher, who was always extremely gentle with me. By eleven years of age, my distaste for the presence of listeners was so great that I stopped what little performing I was doing. At twenty-two, I called myself a pianist by virtue of having remained in constant practice for sixteen years, although I had only performed on my instrument once in all that time.

After college I returned home and found a more demanding piano teacher. I wanted to work as an accompanist, with the hope of eventually developing through practical experience the skills I had failed to cultivate as a child. I found two situations where I could play without anyone specifically listening to me: ballet classes and jazz venues. Because I could make up my own music in these situations, no one would know what I lacked as a player. In ballet classes, the dancers were more concerned with my tempo than my finger-slips; and in jazz-venues such as hotel lobbies and restaurants very often no one is listening at all. For years, I lived in these environments, and they allowed me to gain some experience playing in front of other people. But neither these situations, nor the hours of daily practice I undertook on behalf of my new teacher, solved my physical problems, nor did they desensitize me to my blinding fear.

The disparity between my internal sense of musicianship and my external ability remained so great that I felt humiliated every time I played the piano. The inconsistency between the ability of my two hands made the situation more confusing. While my left hand was fairly clever, reliable, and able to succeed with somewhat complicated passages, my right hand, which is my dominant one, was clumsy and weak. When playing jazz, I could walk a very good bass line with my left hand, but I could not play rapid solos with my right. In ballet classes, I could make up waltzes requiring my left hand to jump all over the place, but my right hand was unequal to the improvisational task. I was unable even to imagine how people played fast runs with their right hands; I had no comprehension of what they could be doing. When I tried to play quickly, my entire right arm stiffened as though it were made of wood.

I wasn't able to perform precomposed music in front of people at all, with either hand! Whenever I played such pieces, it was always in a state of panic. At places where I got lost, I would experience a terrifying sense of disorientation, both within the notes and within my body. I would feel myself flailing about in empty space, with no sense of grounding, nothing to push against, and subsequently no way to control my direction. I locked my eyes upon the keyboard, right between my hands, but could not focus them upon the keys. This was my way of holding on for dear life. In this state, I lost even the technique that I knew I possessed, having experienced it in the privacy of my room. In public, things which should have come easily to me vanished along with my memory of ever having done them. I was unable even to represent myself as I was, much less as I could be.

I never had this problem with other types of performance. As an actor, despite having been through several terrifying performance experiences such as forgotten lines, unplanned disasters, and so forth, I never panicked to the extent that anyone would have remembered. As a singer, too, I always had enough confidence in my ability to remain in control of my voice, as

well as my potential to float over frightening circumstances, to go forward and represent myself well.

After a year of playing furiously to make up my deficit, I injured myself. The joints of my fingers throbbed every time I played, frightening me enough to stop and take a break from the piano. I discovered the Feldenkrais Method as a means of recovery. My initial twelve private sessions intrigued me so much that I eventually decided to seek my certification as a Feldenkrais teacher. It was my hope that becoming intimate with this Method would somehow connect me physically to my innermost musical self.

During my training, I discovered a number of things about my organization. One of the most astounding was my inability to really comprehend what I was seeing. At first, I discovered that I had no useful depth perception, though I have two good eyes, which have been surgically corrected for 20-20 vision. Later, I found that my dilemma was even more profound. Long ago, I had stopped connecting with the images I was seeing. I comprehended them in a limited way, but in general, I did not use my eyes for anything deeper than a rudimentary recognition of things around me.

It took a while for me to begin to understand what "seeing" meant for me. Even though I had depth perception, I did not use it. Rather, I saw everything as flattened out, like a photograph. I believe I discounted depth in order to reduce the amount that my eyes had to process, because even though I took in lots of visual information, I tended not to put that information together very well. I picked important details out of the wash of images before me and ignored the rest.

I was very surprised that my vision could be so fragmented. I am a juggler, and so have managed a fair amount of hand-eye coordination. I have also been a painter and can draw a model or a still life accurately. But my ability to remember what I see is nearly nonexistent, and I visualize images only with difficulty. As a young artist, unable to draw what I "felt" and "saw" in my head, I often abandoned my drawings. I may have lost the opportunity to develop my visual skill as a teenager because I could not tolerate my failure to transfer the images from my imagination to my pen, just as, later, I would be unable to get the musical notes to the keyboard.

As the training proceeded, I discovered a startling connection between my awareness of my body, my ability to move, and my vision. At some point, I realized that I had no sense of three-dimensionality in my own body. I moved stiffly because I had long ago lost much of the movement in my torso, being somewhat frozen into a hunched position, the result of a mild scoliosis. Without a good internal image of the full shape of my upper body, ribs, shoulders, chest, and neck, I had created an idea that I was a thing with width and height, but no depth. I imagined myself to be a stick of gum with arms and a head, and I only possessed the limited movement such a figure would have had.

After countless Awareness Through Movement lessons, as I began to develop an internal sense of my body's shape, and its depth, I found I was more able to think of myself as a solid being in space, which was connected to the rest of the world by virtue of sharing that space with other objects. When my conception of inner space changed, my understanding of the space that I could see changed as well, and my depth perception began to improve.

During the second year of my training, I received a lesson from Carl Ginsburg that was a turning point for me. I don't recall the lesson in its entirety, but I do recall a couple of its elements. Carl taught me how to soften my chest by bringing movement back into my ribs. Then he focused

on my vision. He showed me that when I closed my eyes and moved my finger from left to right, the image of my finger vanished and reappeared in my imagination, depending on where the finger went. He then worked with me to fill in the missing image of my finger as I moved it past my closed eyes, until I could "see" it no matter where it was.

The first thing I remember about that lesson was that I could breathe again. Actually, it wasn't a choice of breathing. The air was pouring into my lungs. I grew cold and dizzy from the huge inrush of air, and I had to sit quite a while to get my balance back. I also had a different view of the world. It was as if someone had put a pair of 3-D glasses on me. Objects appeared very solid, and the difference between things that were close and those that were only a little farther away seemed much more vivid. It was very odd for me to discover that what I had been calling depth perception was in fact my intellectual approximation of depth, and that three-dimensional vision really existed!

It was pleasant breathing and seeing so clearly, but a frightening experience awaited. Now I had to bring my physical sensations with me into the world of people. Ten students had observed my lesson, and when I sat up and had to look at them, I came face to face with the sense of exposure I experienced when I was able to connect with someone with my eyes. I recognized that I had to really LOOK at someone in order to have a true connection with them, and with myself. Both the pleasant feelings of being able to breathe so freely and see such clear images, and the unpleasant fears of the worst kinds of criticisms being leveled against me, came into sharp relief, and I found myself with a powerful choice that I wasn't sure I wanted: whether to connect with my eyes and feel real, or to distance myself from the world and remain safe. Dizzy from the inrush of oxygen, sitting more comfortably than I ever had, I looked from person to person. They were so available to me in a visual way; I could tell just how far away they were. I could move my head freely in any direction to look straight at any of them if I wished. They watched me intently, some with fascination, others perhaps with embarrassment. I was torn between my new freedom and the oppressive sense of fear that bore down upon me. When I tried to express to Carl and to the group what I was going through, I became overwhelmed with the intensity of the experience, and I cried.

Walking around outside after the lesson was like walking on the moon. I bounced like a rubber puppet, and I thought that I must look as if I was having spasms with every step. Meanwhile, my vision was fantastically clear. I could make out every leaf on every tree, even those a quarter of a mile away. Looking at the impossibly sharp contours of the branches with their startling autumn colors, I was dazed by clarity, and I felt so free that I had to shout out into the crystalline air.

Sadly, my euphoria and freedom only lasted a couple of days. My habits were very strong and I soon began to lose the insights I had gained. So, in the months that followed, I began to integrate that lesson into my life. Now, when playing in jazz ensembles, I had to get up the courage to look at the other musicians on the bandstand, and I found that my ability to play well fluctuated according to the extent that I could connect to them with my eyes. The mysteries of my strengths and weaknesses began to fall away as I discovered more important facets to my visual acuity. I found that my ability to understand mathematical concepts requiring me to concentrate for a long period of time depended on how smoothly and easily I could read the page in the textbook without my eyes skipping around. This discovery suggested that not only was there a connection between my eyes and my physical state, but my thinking process as well. My ability to concentrate

on a single idea for a length of time, essential for the comprehension of mathematics, as well as complex music, related to the ease with which I could scan a page continuously left and right, up and down.

As my use of my eyes continued to improve, I found something vital to my understanding of myself as a musician that required all of the insights I have mentioned. I noticed that I tended to lose my connection to the music when my eyes came upon something on the page that confused them. While music notation is very logical, there are some aspects of it that require a level of translation; for instance, if the notes go too high, they are brought back down to a more central location, and an indication is given that they are actually higher. At such instances my eyes would lose their focus and I would find myself desperately hanging onto the page.

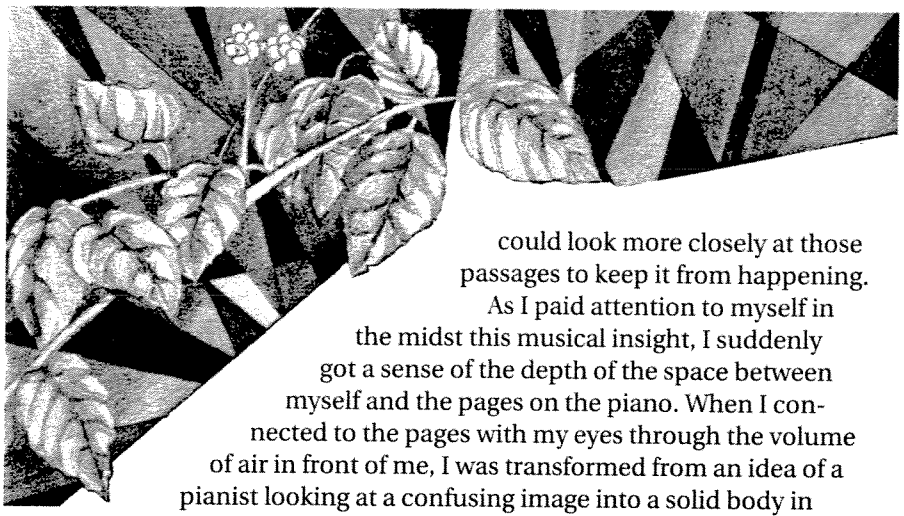
I discovered that, while practicing, it is necessary for me to stop and really look for the thing that has confused me visually. Once I find it I must spend a quiet moment paying attention to the spot and asking myself what I have been seeing until now. Then I have to look carefully at the music and match the true image of the notes with the sound in my head. After I have done this, I am able to play through the moment so smoothly that I can hardly believe it was ever a problem. Discovering this process was a revelation to me, after having been confused for years about my inability to correct passages I clearly understood.

As with all discoveries, I didn't truly own it until I was able to make use of it. I recently found myself guest pianist at a three-week ballet workshop in Tennessee. My experience of these workshops had always been that I play for classes, where I can improvise music and make all the mistakes I want. But this time, something was different. Two weeks into the workshop, one of the teachers asked me out of the blue if I would play a Chopin waltz during the performance as an accompaniment to his dancers on stage. Because I was passing myself off as a professional pianist, I could hardly say no without a very good reason, and "I'm too scared" really wouldn't have cut it.

So I said yes and began dealing with my terror all over again. I had played on stage in front of people a few times after I left college, but the experiences were still so rare that I could count them on the fingers of my left hand. In every case, I had gone ahead with the performing, but still lacked any sense of control or musicianship, only the relief of having gotten through it.

In the week of rehearsal leading up to the single performance, I found myself inconsistently playing a piece of music upon which I had spent many hours, wondering why in the world I kept making mistakes NOW when I had played it so much better in private. A number of times, I contemplated skipping out on the final performance without giving anybody any notice, just getting in my car and driving out of Tennessee without ever looking back. Of course I never would have. But it seemed to me that there was nothing I could do to help myself, and that I was doomed to suffer whatever fate awaited me at the performance.

In my off hours, I was studying a volume of Alexander Yanai lessons in preparation for a workshop I was to teach in Atlanta the following month. Each day, I was doing ATMs, then coming to the piano in various states of organization. As I floundered through the piece during rehearsal one evening, making all kinds of silly mistakes that I knew were simply the result of losing my connection with the music, I remembered AS I WAS PLAYING how my eyes got lost. I recognized that in my moments of panic, it was very hard to look carefully at the music. I recalled how certain passages in the music tended to confuse my eyes and knock them off the track, and that I



could look more closely at those passages to keep it from happening. As I paid attention to myself in the midst this musical insight, I suddenly got a sense of the depth of the space between myself and the pages on the piano. When I connected to the pages with my eyes through the volume of air in front of me, I was transformed from an idea of a pianist looking at a confusing image into a solid body in three-dimensional space interpreting music. By experiencing myself as connected in space to the pages, the difference between seeing versus looking, both in terms of my musical cognizance and my physical comfort, became obvious. To my great joy, when I entered this state of presence I was able to translate my visual comprehension into the correct movements I needed at the piano.

Jack Heggie has described his experience in skiing and the Feldenkrais Method as "being skied." I had the opposite experience here. When I was able to look at the music with comprehension, I was not being played, but completely playing. I felt like I couldn't miss a note. I knew that it was entirely up to me whether I made a mistake or not, that there was no reason why I should be afraid, and that any slips I made would not be evidence of my incapacity, but indicators of places that could be improved.

It was hard for me to believe how easily I could play certain passages which, the day before, had seemed to go right only by chance, and which had gone wrong much more often. I understood the process that had occurred, the difference between my playing before and after my illumination, and it thrilled me to realize that I was having the experience that I had always seen every other competent pianist having: the ability to perform. I had the physical sensation of being connected to my fingers, as opposed to my previous organization, where I would merely be sending messages to them across an empty space. This time, my right hand was a part of my body, and I knew where it connected to the rest of me. After rehearsal, as I walked across the street to get dinner, the colors and shapes and distances of the trees, the road, and the stores looked more vivid to my eyes than they ever had in the weeks prior.

Of course I lost that wonderful sense of confidence by the next morning, as well as my superior vision, but I was not too alarmed. With a little time spent at the piano, I was able to take myself back into competence, and I was even able to reverse the experience and go from the state of competence to incompetence, and back again intentionally, a number of times. So, when the moment finally came, that Friday afternoon at the Tivoli Theater, as frightening as it was, I was able to rise to the occasion, be conscious during my performance, and play, if not a flawless Chopin waltz, then a waltz that I was PLAYING and not merely witnessing from somewhere within my mind. When I arose, elated, from the piano bench an endless three minutes later, I decided that I could at last claim to be the pianist that everyone else could see.