

Finding the Space Between: A Decade of Unlikely Learning Through Harpsichord Teaching

For 10 years, I've been traveling back and forth between my home in Boston and the College-Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati in order to teach now hundreds of extraordinary student musicians a little bit about playing the harpsichord, how to stylishly collaborate as accompanists in 17th and 18th century music, and what the playing of this music can mean if it really gets inside you. I've passed through the lives and educations of so many blossoming pianists and organists, briefly having my way with them as I entice them, sometimes implore them, to swing their arms, to stop controlling musical figuration with crystalline and precise thrusts of the finger, to listen for the thunk thunk thunk of too much force, to breathe at endings, to separate gestures, to allow some notes to be longer than others even if they look the same on the page, to treat basslines like songs and dances, to never make a musical statement sound exactly the same when said a second time.

I have had no shame, demonstrating through jetés run amok how the dancer jumps in the air and then lands softly with bent knees and how this is like the upward swing of the arms and the release of their weight into the key bed, with the arpeggiated spreading of notes in a chord being the bending of the knees.

I have sung without compunction, willing my grating voice to convey shapes with tapered evaporating endings, adding words to musical figures to hear the strong syllables and weak ones and the punctuation, making painfully visceral the swell into syncopations and dissonances that one would never believe to be even up for discussion when playing an unswellable instrument like the harpsichord.

I have collected and refined my evocative vocabulary – words for 'carelessness' in several languages, picture-like terms for sweep, lift, delay, placement, repose, intensity, contrast and, when the time was right, disappearing, even dying.

I have said "Stand up, let me play" a thousand times when words and other more remote modes of demonstration defeat me, or I have said "No, stay there, keep going" as I leaned over them to play along with accompanying harmonies on the

upper keyboard, as my teacher did with his long arms in his dank studio so long ago.

I have written the words and symbols for strong and weak, up and down, so many times they have started to look strange and misspelled.

On occasion, when faced with the robotically inflexible performances that come when a student has despaired of the harpsichord giving anything malleable or multi-colored to work with, I have sat silent and then said “You just can’t play that way”. The almost psychedelic excursions in the cadenza of Brandenburg V, the sultry stateliness of sarabandes and pavans, erratic interjections and affective shifts of toccatas and fantasias, and even the most obvious call for an aesthetic of elasticity found in French unmeasured preludes – all of these fall victim to a type of literal-mindedness and privileged accuracy that can settle upon the aspiring young concert artist, if they’re not really paying attention. If someone’s not paying attention for them.

I admit, my attention has wandered on long days when someone is sitting before me earnestly replicating the notes exactly as seen on the page, I’ve looked out the window and noticed that there are no clouds, that there are buds on the trees, that students walking across the plaza are wearing shorts, and I’ve longed to be on my bike, or sitting on a rock overlooking the rising tide of Cobscook Bay. Then I’ve turned back, recommenced listening to see what there might be to grab onto. A delicacy of touch? A look of ardor on the player’s face even if it’s not coming through in the music? Often there’s a simple but stunning technical facility to these conservatory students – I’ve many times said they can play circles around me – perhaps we could work from there? Or sometimes I only have the fact that they’ve shown up, they’ve registered for this, that tells me there’s something to be tapped, a willingness to play differently, perhaps a need for some incongruous little refuge where they’ll be scolded for playing TOO perfectly, for neglecting their individuality, for denying themselves the freedom to inflect, to breathe, to sing.

This is, after all, a vocational school which, despite its open spaces, streaming sunlight, and the sounds of jazz riffs wafting from open windows, is meant to generate musicians who will survive the rigors of competitions, orchestral auditions, and the constraints of old school canons. I am recess, I am therapy, sometimes I am even physical healing from overuse injuries. I can become the earth mother, the yogi, I’ve always failed to be in real life, and for an hour we

are seeking to express what our mind's ear is hearing with the fullest intention, to listen deeply to the instrument's bloom and decay, to trust our bodies to create clouds of sound and an infinite range of shapes through articulation, arpeggiation, rhythmic inequality, and release into silence. This is the language I've developed over 30 years of wrestling with this unlikely machine. I am slowly unfolding in these writings a precious language's makeup, the specifics of its origins, how it attaches to parts of a larger life lived, and the rich wellbeing it ultimately brings – this is what I've been traveling to Cincinnati to deliver to any unsuspecting soul put in front of me.