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From voice to the hands: towards a piano method

Tsihelashvili, Olga

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INTRODUCTION

Piano playing has always been my calling. It is a unique process which embraces my entire being, allowing me to reach such a degree of emotional, nervous, psychic and physical unity, that at times I feel as though I have been channelled into another dimension where the slightest emotional impulse or musical idea causes immediate response in my performing apparatus (my hands) and directly reflects in my sound. During these moments piano playing feels as natural as breathing, and becomes a source of the greatest joy and contentment.

My work is the culmination of many years of searching for the kind of piano mastery which enhances artistic spontaneity, virtuosity and beauty of sound, rather than compromising the quality of tone through almost mechanical playing. Having experienced many different approaches to piano playing, the subconscious desire to return my piano technique into equilibrium with my inner artistic nature, has dominated my life as a piano performer.

From my early childhood my piano and vocal pedagogue Natalia Pirozerskaya planted the seed of *organic* piano technique into the very core of my artistic nature while nurturing my talent over a period of four years.[1] Pirozerskaya taught me singing and piano playing in inseparable unity as she believes that an easy, well-coordinated vocal movement stimulates the natural piano touch, thus positively influencing piano technique and tone quality. At that time I was not aware that Pirozerskaya's pedagogical approach was based on a comprehensive vocal method of Alexander Yakovlev whose teaching sprang from the Russian post-Romantic artistic tradition of the beginning of the

[1] *Organic* technique– a term used by Yakovlev referring to vocal organ functioning in accordance with the laws of its physiological nature, free from any force or preconceived manner of breathing and sound production and thus preserving each performer's unique vocal touch and sound palette, as well as allowing for spontaneous expression of one's natural musical feeling in performance.

twentieth century.[2] The two most distinguishing features of that artistic period were the powerful emotional impact of musical performance on the audience and a combination of magnificent virtuoso technique with a rich range of sound resources.

My ideal sound - the supple, warm, unsuppressed, soaring and quivering beneath the pianist's fingers – is a tone, which conveys the maximum of one's inner expression. It identifies with the art of several great pianists from the first half of the twentieth century which was captured on their recordings, in particular Joseph Lhevinne, Joseph Hoffman, Sergey Rachmaninov. Particularly striking was the ability of these artists to carry out 'wide', free-flowing piano *cantabile* melodies.[3] Their recordings gave me the impression of vibrant sound without a sign of forced expulsion while charged with emotional intensity. This was coupled to a powerful spontaneous virtuosity where that natural, free-flowing quality of sound was sustained throughout fast virtuoso passages, each note clear like a 'pearl'.

I strive to revive this kind of performing art in which a personal dialogue between the artistic soul of the musician is conveyed through the responding instrument to the audience. Through my artistic example and pedagogical practice I also aim to bring back the enlightened values attributed to musical art in the Romantic and early twentieth-century tradition where the purpose of a stage performance was to capture and reveal the deepest emotional and psychological content of the work, and thus awaken sublime emotions, console, uplift and inspire.

My fascination with this style of performance began at the age of seventeen as a result of an acute conflict between my inner artistic self and my uncomfortable, stiff hands. Being a third-year student at the Music College of the St-Petersburg State Conservatoire, I felt

[2] Alexander Vasilievich Yakovlev (1886-1961) – Russian vocalist, pedagogue and scholar whose profound vocal method lies at the heart of my research as a premise for my proposed piano technique.

[3] By *cantabile* playing I refer to the specific sound quality on melodious passages, which requires flowing *legato* and continuity of the piano tone.

that my technical resources (not abilities – the two are so often confused by teachers!) did not meet my artistic ideals and requirements, and that I was unable to realise most of my inner musical potential. In 1987 my doubts were confirmed when I witnessed my ideal coming to life under the fingers of Arcadi Volodos , now considered one of the greatest pianists of the twentieth century.

My first impression of watching Volodos play in a Conservatoire classroom was shattering. What exactly was it about his piano technique that made such an impact on me, set the direction for my future pianistic journey and finally brought me to embark on this research? It was the unique combination of his astonishing virtuosity and the specific sound quality which I immediately associated with the recordings of the great artists of the 1920-1950s![4] Cheryl North writes about Volodos in her interview with him for *ANG Newspapers* : 'He is a pianist in the grand, 19th century tradition. Many critics, including myself, feel that he now stands alone on that lofty pinnacle of pianism vacated by such late piano titans as Franz Liszt, Sviatoslav Richter, and Vladimir Horowitz. Volodos alone among the young crop of superstar pianists seems to embody the all-too-rare combination of virtuoso keyboard athletics with profound musical intelligence and lyric sensibility.' (San Francisco, 04.02.03. http://www.northworks.net/c_volodos.htm/)

But most fascinating was the way that Volodos executed his sound from the piano (in other words, his piano touch): his hands were resting upon the keyboard with his fingers caressing the keys rather than executing a hammer-like action. At times his fingers were moving at such high speed that one could hardly follow their action. And he always maintained that overall impression of effortlessness in his hands and posture no matter what kind of music he played. 'Volodos is breathtakingly athletic, and plays with a range

[4] Russian violinist Dmitri Sitkovetsky (son of the world-famous pianist Bella Davidovich) speaking of the rich sound palette in relation to the abovementioned artistic tradition in his interview on the television station RTR Planeta, called the sound quality of those great piano masters 'piano *bel canto'* and commented that only Arcadi Volodos possesses this tone quality among significant pianists of a 'younger generation' (Yuri Bashmet. *Vogzal Mechti* [Station of Dreams], 21.04.2007, at 17:55).

of touch and articulation that is nearly unequalled in the current generation of pianists.' (n.d. http://www.sonyclassical.de/arcadivolodos)

The fusion of Arcadi's apparatus with the instrument was complete, and his sound which conveyed such richness of emotional intensity, seemed the result of some sort of direct, spontaneous impulse from his fingertips that were constantly in contact with the keys. Reviewing Volodos' November 2000 Carnegie Hall recital, Anthony Tommasini wrote in the *New York Times*: "his sound was velvety and plush. You could almost hear the voice of Rosina Lhevinne,[5] the Great Russian pedagogue, proclaiming from the beyond, 'Now, that's what I call sound!" (quoted in Bob Benson's Interview, Baltimore, March 2001. http://classicalcdreview.com/avint.htm).

At that point in my life Arcadi's incredible mastery seemed like a mind-blowing mystery. At the St-Petersburg Conservatoire around the 1990s, students were not generally taught the values of this tradition. I remember a piano lecturer telling a talented student in his master class: 'First learn to play "like everybody else", and then we will see what your talent is really worth!' (October 1991). Thus, despite the admiration for the art of the pre-war performers, their mastery sank into a realm of 'beyond what a regular student can grasp'. Such artistry was considered too high to be understood and taught in practice: instead, a lifeless mechanical piano technique was encouraged with its finger drill resulting in a metallic hammering effect on every note of a virtuoso passage, and forced athletic *fortissimo*, deprived of any signs of spontaneous expression or natural

[5] Rosina Lhevinne (1880-1976) – wife of Josef Lhevinne; one of the most significant piano pedagogues within the abovementioned great Russian tradition. J. and R. Lhevinne were the founders of Juilliard School in New York where R. Lhevinne nurtured a remarkable array of talent. Among her students were Van Cliburn, Daniel Pollack, and Misha Dichter. On several recordings capturing her own piano playing 'one can hear all that exemplifies the best of the Russian school: beautiful golden tone, effortless technique, exquisite *legato* and a natural freedom in phrasing.' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosina_Lh%A9vinne) During our years of studying in St-Petersburg Volodos several times briefly mentioned a connection that existed between R. Lhevinne and his elderly piano teacher at the College of Choral Singing and Conducting of the St-Petersburg Capella, where he studied from his childhood until the age of fifteen.

musical feeling. This became a predominant feature in the late twentieth-century Russian piano tradition.

It seems that the way to the pre-war type of mastery has now been forgotten. The strongest motivating force behind my passion for analysing this issue is that I am convinced of the previous existence of a school with a distinctive method of developing piano technique approximately around the 1920s. Being Yakovlev's successor, my teacher Pirozerskaya captured the principles of his vocal art in their deepest essence. And I believe that her method of marrying vocal and pianistic sensations sheds some light on how one can access and develop the fascinating features of this piano mastery in practice.

One outcome of this rather unique method is the unsuppressed, supple, sonorous piano tone, rich in its expressive nuances and dynamic range. The resultant effortlessness and spontaneity of playing affords the pianist physical and emotional comfort. Added to this is the liberation of the pianist's performing apparatus assisted by the development of organic vocal movements, which leads to the awakening of one's true virtuoso potential. Yet, the total fusion of the physical and emotional aspects of performance results in a vibrant, unconstrained and focused piano touch (as opposed to a static, pre-imposed way of playing). The hands in this case become highly responsive to the inner artistic impulses of the performer, which bring out his or her unique artistic qualities.

I see Volodos' phenomenon as a living example of these qualities in piano playing. He was also familiar with Pirozerskaya's teaching method, and subsequently enrolled himself for a series of vocal sessions with her. As fellow-students at the Conservatoire we had many long conversations about the value of Pirozerskaya's method and its impact on piano touch and technique. Volodos' own phenomenal virtuosity and unique tonal quality have confirmed my belief that these tools are vital to the full expression of music, and can be enhanced through this method of teaching and practising.

My hypothesis is that there are strong ties between Yakovlev's vocal method and the pre-war type of piano mastery**.** And the evidence exists that my hypothesis is more than just a theory as I have not only experienced the transformations of piano tone and touch through the influence of *organic* singing in my own playing, but I have also observed its emergence in some of my young students. And I believe that in the course of my research, where by using my own experience as well as case studies of certain of my piano students, I am exploring the relationship between piano touch, technique and musicianship, there is a strong possibility of finding something that could reveal how to achieve this special piano mastery.

CHAPTER I

TRANSLATING VOCAL METHOD INTO PIANO TECHNIQUE

The ultimate aim of my research is to propose a piano method which preserves the individual specifics of one's piano touch and sound palette, by maximising the expressiveness through the performer's body. My proposed piano technique is based on the principles of Yakovlev's school of *organic* singing. A combination of rich, nuanced sound palette with a precise, focused though easy and unsuppressed piano touch maintained throughout the whole dynamic sound range (even in a strongest *fortissimo*),[6] is characteristic of this *organic* approach to piano playing.

What could I achieve by reviving the pre-war/post-Romantic performing tradition? The thrill and excitement of spontaneous musical feeling conveyed in its richest nuances through piano tone as such, rather than over dramatic gestures or any other 'substituting' factors. Therefore, I want to recover the strong emphasis on the expressive and aesthetic qualities of the piano tone as a primary means of expression. I see this as the basis of my constantly developing proposed piano method.

Thus, the main focus of my work will be on piano technique in relation to individual creativity and artistic expression. The term *piano technique* includes a wide spectrum of phenomena. Besides the commonly attributed qualities such as finger velocity, physical strength, hand and body coordination, this notion also refers to the art of piano touch as a phenomenon deeply embedded in the specifics of the psyche and physiological nature of a particular individual, strongly linked to one's artistic temperament, aims and ideals. I

[6] Unsuppressed piano touch means when the naturally highly elaborate proprioceptive sensitivity of the pianist's fingertips retains its vitality and is not suppressed by any harsh, forced or preconceived manner of sound production.

see the task of developing piano touch that neither suppresses the suppleness and continuity of piano tone nor deviates from one's inner sound ideal as my principal aim. Franz Liszt felt that 'all technique originates in the art of touch and returns to it' (quoted in Eigeldinger 1986, 17).
Ever since I noticed the connection between Yakovlev's vocal method and this type of piano mastery, I have been investigating his method. Yakovlev worked on the physiology of the human voice and certain functions of the human brain that generate the psycho-neurological processes of musical performance. He himself had a medical qualification, and his aim was to develop a method relating general neuro-physiological data to the unique qualities of the individual's voice, as well as his particular artistic personality and the range of expression of his sound resources**.** Yakovlev's method of *organic* singing and his concept of the vocal apparatus as a sensory organ functioning in relation to musical performance will be further explained in Chapter III.

In my work I will attempt to expand on Yakovlev's comprehensive vocal method beyond the realm of the voice and to apply it to piano performance by translating it from the voice to the hands as the primary agents in playing the piano. My work is located within the frame of twentieth-century interrogations of the piano playing process. I am looking into a vocal method, and I am locating it within the piano methodology. Just as Yakovlev postulates the concept of the larynx as a sensory organ, I too postulate that the hands – the primary performing apparatus of the pianist – also function as sensory organs in relation to musical performance. Both vocal organ and hands are parts of the body, and there is a strong possibility that as they are involved in the process of musical performance, they stimulate the brain in a similar way.

My proposed piano method will also work to preserve the uniqueness of the individual piano touch, sound palette and artistic personality of the student. Just as the singer transfers his or her musical intelligence and artistry through the voice so, by touching the instrument, the pianist transfers his artistic energy and effort into the resulting performance.

Having been exposed to Yakovlev's principles through Pirozerskaya's teaching, I have developed my own extensive experience of applying the sensations from the voice to the hands, and I believe that a new piano method and way of training can be developed and utilised after further analysis. 'When personal knowledge arises out of one's own rational reflection upon one's own considered action, it may be regarded as authentic' (Carr 1983, 189-190).

My methodology revolves around two primary fields of analysis: a case study with its narrative style of writing on the one hand, and on the other hand – the theoretical grounding and explanation of my reasoning, suggestions and hypothesis. I believe that the methodology of action research (my teaching observations and self-case study as its modified form) in combination with related inductive theorizing and thematic content analysis provide an optimal way of conducting this kind of study. New findings continuously occur in a process of translating Yakovlev's vocal method to piano playing, appearing in the form of specific sensations in my hands as well as in my entire body. Being conscious of these sensations I delve more deeply, and as a new finding establishes itself in my pianistic process, I proceed by verbalising and then developing a theory around it.

Given the exploratory nature of my research, little published information exists**.** However, my personal experience on stage sheds light on the performance outcome. Apart from issues in piano playing and stage performance my expertise as a piano teacher has equipped me with evidence of this technique's benefit to my students, and I will include my findings in Chapter V.

The ability to trace changes over time is a major strength of case studies. In the following chapter where I reflect on my own piano work and search for piano mastery over a period of thirty years, I employ a combination of pattern-matching and 'time-series analysis' (Yin 1994, 118). This allows me to track the evidence in the process of moulding my piano mastery during different stages. The autobiographical style of

writing in Chapter II serves to explain the phenomenon of shaping my piano mastery and initiating my proposed piano method by describing the complex chain of key events and experiences over time. From this I am able to draw my conclusions and anchor my explanations. This methodology also lets me adopt the role of participant observer rather than detached 'scientist', and therefore play an active role in what I discover. 'The major distinction between naturalistic case study research and classic scientific research lies in the greater concern of the former with subjectivity and phenomenological meaning' (Gillham 2000, 7).

The observation and analysis of my own sensations at the piano has been crucial in providing the necessary evidence to make my piano method practical and useful. Aiming at a systematic analysis of what happens 'inside' a technical approach is the only way to pass it on to other pianists. However, as I am aware that conducting a self-case study can be dangerously subjective, it is important for me to also evaluate the outcomes of the application of the proposed method to a number of my piano students. Here I refer to the Professor of Moscow State Conservatoire Samuel Feinberg who addresses the difficulties experienced by some distinguished pianists when they attempt to scientifically analyse their creative pianistic process through self-case study. In his book *Masterstvo Pianista* [The Piano Mastery] Feinberg points out that in their awareness of the dangers of inaccurate wording and generalizations when attempting to describe their own creative process, many great masters of piano playing have tended to avoid such analysis. However, he strongly believes that such attempts at self-analysis can be very valuable to both piano teachers and artists (1978, 51).

Another pianist and scholar Luigi Bonpensiere conducted his own experiments at the piano when developing his concept of *Ideo-Kinetics.* He gives an interesting insight into the process of self-case study: 'The scholar must become his own psychologist and physiologist and build his system diligently out of the basic and positive data` (1952, 21).

When compared to classical piano methods, the distinctive feature of my proposed piano method is its employment of a preliminary vocal warm-up (using Yakovlev's exercises along with various folk songs) before starting to play the piano. The essence of this warm-up which according to Pirozerskaya, serves to 'feed' and stimulate various centers of the brain, is to align the whole process. This type of warm-up 'sharpens' the inner hearing while liberating the muscular movements in the entire body. In return the whole creative inner artistic self of the performer comes to life, stimulated by a wave of spontaneously-born musical initiative and feeling. According to Yakovlev and Pirozerskaya, the latter can naturally arise as a result of cerebral interchanges that get established during the process of *organic* singing between the vocal organ and the corresponding centres of the brain, enhanced by the substance of the music itself. Vocal pedagogue and scholar Cornelius Reid wrote: 'Functional freedom awakens feeling, and when this happens it is not necessary to 'put' feeling into anything. It is there' (quoted in de Alcantara 1997, 212). Thus, a warm-up conducted according to Yakovlev's principles, connects these inner sensations to the musical performance at the piano where one gradually learns to achieve the transference of those 'positive symptoms' to the hands.

My research is closely related to the field of piano pedagogy. I intend to show the value of this perception of piano playing as a practical tool for pianists and piano teachers, as well as a constructive method of teaching musically gifted children. I anticipate that research of this kind would enrich the quality of learning and enhance performance. I will be discussing certain issues of modern piano pedagogy in the light of Yakovlev's principles in Chapter IV of my report.

At the centre of my attention lies the phenomenon of *funzione d'attacco,* discovered by Yakovlev. In his research on the physiological nature of the singing process he found that a well-coordinated vocal movement can serve as an *effector*:[7] a sensory organ which

[7]*Effector* was Yakovlev's term for this phenomenon.

'feeds' the centres of the cerebrum in return to its impulses. In his unpublished conference paper 'Pevcheski Process kak Musikalno-Dvigatelnaya Funczia' [Singing Process as a Musical-Motor Function], Yakovlev labelled this phenomenon *funzione d'attacco* (1959, 4).[8] *Funzione d'attacco* means constant reflexive interchanges between a free, balanced, functioning in accordance with nature's laws performing apparatus (in Yakovlev's research – the vocal organ, in my own – the pianist's hands) and certain centres of the cerebrum in the process of musical performance.

> 'The voice-forming section of the larynx is nothing but a living, constantly developing mechanism of the brain, based on hearing/motor coordination. This explains the essence of the *funzione d'attacco*' (Pirozerskaya 2001, 17).[9]

In the light of this theory, *organic* singing (as well as *organic* piano playing) becomes a motor reflex feeding the centres of the cerebrum.

A human voice is the most natural instrument (because of its embodied nature), and I find the fact that a method of this kind first arose in vocal pedagogy most significant. I firmly believe that if a pianist's hands develop organically in accordance with their physiological nature, their movements also stimulate motor centres of the cerebrum and enhance musical feeling. That is the essence of *funzione d'attacco* in relation to piano playing. Pirozerskaya's findings on certain stimulating and therapeutic qualities of the singing voice in possession of *funzione d'attacco* inspired my own further discoveries in this field through my application of this vocal technique to the process of piano playing

The challenge of exploring the application of *funzione d'attacco* in piano methodology is another reason for employing action research, besides its suitability for my self-case study and teaching observations. The action research 'implies adopting a deliberate openness to new experiences and processes' and is hence a vital condition for the success of a project such as this (Bissex 1987, 9). My work also briefly touches upon the

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[8] Yakovlev refers to the Latin word *attacus* – touch, the Italian term *funzione d'attacco* is my equivalent for Yakovlev's meaning.
[9] All translations from Russian sources are my own.

field of cognitive science due to its relation to the specific role of the brain in the process of musical performance, and to the highlighted concept of the musician's performing apparatus as a sensory organ.

Funzione d'attacco is a phenomenon attributed to people with highly elaborate sensory organs, as an ability to draw the sensory organs into the creative process. Pirozerskaya defines a vocal organ (or hands of the musician) with *funzione d'attacco* as an apparatus with the evidence of the creative essence of artistic personality of the performer.
The nature of the desire to seek the realisation of the inner artistic self at the piano, characteristic of musically gifted individuals, can also be explained in the light of *funzione d'attacco,* as the process of *organic* piano playing embraces one's entire being, making one's instrumental technique indivisible from other neural and physiological processes of the human body.

Although Yakovlev's method originated on Russian soil, I do not see it being exclusively tied to Russian music, or being a Russian phenomenon as such. I believe that its core principles are so deeply embedded in the natural processes of the human mind and body that they should apply across musical cultures, especially to the performance of Western classical music. The fact that Yakovlev referred to the Russian folk song as 'a treasury of inner feelings captured in a vocal melody' (1971, 7), leads me to believe that folk music of other nations possibly possesses the same qualities - with the specifics of national character and different perception of a 'natural' vocal sound production.

I see the application of *funzione d'attacco* to the pianist's performing apparatus as the most natural and direct way of touching the instrument and allowing the pianist to achieve his artistic potential while performing. Any emotional state in an individual causes corresponding motor reaction in the body. According to Pirozerskaya, if those unconditioned (intuitive, inborn) reflexes of the cerebellum are transmitted into the vocal intonation or piano touch unspoiled, the reflection of emotions in musical performance can become very powerful. Perhaps this statement contains the answer why the art of the

pre-war masters had such a powerful emotional impact on the audience. This alliance of superb technique and touch with expressive understanding and artistic will endows the concert performer with the ability to deeply move the audience.

Pirozerskaya often refers to the notion of 'ancient levels' of the brain. As confirmed to me by Professor of the Salzburg Universität Mozarteum Doctor Ulrike Jungmair, during our interview on 27 June 2007, the 'ancient levels of the brain' mean the layers of deeply entrenched nerve pathways and the chains of reflexes established and gathered by the individual on the genetic level over many generations. 'The ancient levels of the brain, like the depth of the Earth, contain rich reserves of creative energy' (Pirozerskaya 2006, 83). In the light of Yakovlev's theory where the organic vocal movement plays the role of *effector* in its reflexive interchanges with the cerebrum, accessing these ancient pathways through vocal movements could serve to 'feed' (stimulate) the natural musical talent and creative energy of the musician.

I firmly believe that applying the *funzione d'attacco* to the pianist's performing apparatus mobilises the technical and expressive resources throughout the piano repertoire.

CHAPTER II

MOULDING THE PIANO MASTERY: self-case study

This chapter will be characterized by a personal, almost autobiographical style of writing. By using a self-case study method to explain my findings, I reflect on my own musical background, my thirty-year-long pianistic journey, in order to expose my reader to the depth of the moulding process of the *organic* piano technique – a technique that allows the maxim3um realisation of one's inner artistic potential (with all its individual specifics) in piano performance.

From my early childhood music was always an essential part of my parents' household. Even at the age of four, I found myself fascinated by my grandmother's singing. She often sang the beautiful time-honored songs of Russian and Gypsy folklore while knitting or washing the dishes, and I was enchanted by these sounds. I felt compelled to express myself through singing, but for some reason I was incredibly shy to sing with 'full voice' and expression in the presence of my parents. Only when I was left at home with my grandmother would I run into one of the rooms and sing my heart out, miming and dancing in front of the big mirror. Those were unforgettable outbursts in which I first explored my artistic self. At the age of five I saw my first opera *The Tale of Zar Sultan* by Rimsky-Korsakov at the Mariinsky Theatre in my home city Leningrad.[10] I was mesmerized. I felt that sheer beauty penetrating my entire being, and in delight, I lost myself in an ocean of sounds, colors and lights. According to my parents, I 'had not moved once' while listening to the entire opera.

I think that was when I discovered my passion for music. Shortly afterwards, I asked my parents for piano lessons. Being engineers and having no previous experience with

[10] Leningrad has reverted to its original historical name of St-Petersburg.

professional music education, my parents were unsure of how to go about this. So as I started my first year of school, our class music teacher became my private piano coach.

As the lessons went by, my disappointment increased. After approximately two months of regular (twice a week) lessons I was still not allowed to play anything resembling a beautiful melody or what sounded to me like a complete musical phrase! All that time I was restricted to playing some preparatory exercises which made absolutely no musical sense and were meant for mastering a certain way of moving my arms and hands, taught to me on the top of the closed piano lid or a few piano keys. As a young child I could not make any sense of what was going on and eventually started feeling very uncomfortable in the presence of my teacher (I do not remember her name) who at times would come across in an impatient, almost intimidating manner. And no matter how diligently I tried to 'contort' my arms in the manner she wanted, she never seemed pleased with me. Soon I had reached the height of frustration and pleaded with my family for 'protection'. On being faced with this issue, the teacher pronounced the 'verdict': 'You are wasting your time! This child cannot grasp the first thing about piano playing.'

My parents did not pass those words onto me until many years later. But they did look for another teacher. One day, a tall middle-aged lady with distinct features and bright penetrating eyes appeared at our door. She was Natalia Pirozerskaya, the person I am indebted to for discovering and nurturing my musical talent. She initiated me into her special art of piano playing where my inner artistic images and creative musical ideas found realisation through organic piano touch, which I possess to this day. Her influence on me has led to this research.

The recounting of this anecdote is meant to highlight the importance of the first steps in a child's musical journey as well as the responsibility of the teacher. As confirmed by such titans of piano pedagogy as Neuhaus and Martienssen, the elementary music instructor needs to be sensitive and creative.

Pirozerskaya is well-known in St-Petersburg as a chamber singer, pianist and pedagogue. Her teaching credo is to ‘put aside one’s own professional principles in order to discover the values inherent in the nature of childhood’ (2006, 68). At the age of six I was not aware that her teaching technique was based on the principles of Yakovlev’s vocal school (I will be discussing principles of Yakovlev’s method in detail in the following chapter). I spent four years studying privately under Pirozerskaya. She used to select beautiful piano pieces, as well as *romances* and folk songs for our vocal sessions, to cultivate my musical feeling and creative artistic initiative. She managed to develop to a high degree a great variety of my professional skills such as sight-reading and sight-singing, ability to perform a vocal work with self-accompaniment, write short musical extracts by ear, and even to accompany a choir (in 1979 when I turned eight, she let me accompany her Girls’ choir at a number of local eisteddfods). While studying with Pirozerskaya I performed as a pianist-soloist before various audiences at different schools and institutions: for medical, industrial and community workers. Thus, Pirozerskaya did not expose me so much to the competitive environment of eisteddfods or exams, but rather to general, often large audiences. Perhaps it was during that time when my aesthetic ideal of ‘being an artist’ was conceived.

When I turned nine my family was advised to enrol me into a specialised music school so that I could follow the path of professional music education. Pirozerskaya expressed her deepest concern about this decision. Shortly afterwards, however, I started my piano tuition at one of the best specialised music schools of Leningrad under Maya Theonskaya. Besides piano lessons I, together with other pupils of the school, also attended solfeggio, music history and theory group classes, as well as the school choir (for pupils who studied orchestral instruments there was also an orchestra and a compulsory ‘general’ piano course). The lessons took place after the end of the academic school day. Music classes used to commence at approximately 16:00 and end after 20:00.

It did not take me long to discover that as a pianist I was way ahead of the general standard at the school. Admired by my new teacher I went on tackling an extensive number of rather challenging pieces for my age (in addition to the prescribed assessment repertoire) for which I was then not fully technically equipped. Among these works were Beethoven's *Pathetique* and *Appassionata* Piano Sonatas, *Valses-Caprisi* by Schubert-Liszt and various Preludes by Rachmaninov. Theonskaya, being gentle-hearted and just as passionate and dedicated to music as I was, did not attempt to stop me from playing those works, nor did she warn me about the dangers of such endeavours for my developing apparatus (my hands) and for my general professional discipline. She used to just do some 'cosmetic' work on the general dynamics, articulation, *tempi*, rhythmic inaccuracies, and pedaling, etc., hardly ever paying serious attention to the action of my hands. The true highlights of my time with Theonskaya were my master classes with her daughter Eugenia who at the time was a student of the world-famous pianist (and then professor of the Moscow State Conservatoire) Dmitri Bashkirov.[11] I used to anticipate Eugenia's return home during holidays, and though concerned about my ambitious choice of repertoire, she gave me many productive and inspiring piano sessions.

Being well attuned to the ease of touch and pleasant, harmonious sensations at the piano (thanks to Pirozerskaya), my hands though stiffening at times when I played complex virtuoso passages, generally felt good throughout the following two years, after which Theonskaya retired and I was transferred to the piano class of Alexander Serduke. He was a well known concert organist and regularly performed in the Soviet Union, as well as abroad. Serduke was a genuine musician, a performer of high standard, and a dedicated teacher. His professional emphasis lay on works of J. S. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. During the following three years I developed an extensive repertoire which included some of Bach's *Partitas, French* and *English Suites,* a few *Inventions* and six Preludes and Fugues from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*; Piano Sonatas by Mozart and Beethoven as well as Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto. My romantic and

[11] Currently Bashkirov resides in Spain, and, as one of the most venerable piano pedagogues of our time, coaches both Eugeni Kissin and Arcadi Volodos.

contemporary repertoire consisted of works by Schumann, Chopin, Schubert, Liszt, Brahms, Grieg, Prokofiev, and also a number of lesser-known Soviet compositions. Serduke coached me with passionate enthusiasm and determination, and owing to his efforts I attained the level of professional discipline required for a high standard of performance.

Evaluating the skills and qualities gained at that time, I would highlight the following: awareness of the markings in the score, ability to differentiate my performance stylistically, development of a steady, expressive rhythmic pulsation in my playing, and the invaluable experience of intense Bach studies. Under Serduke my concert career had flourished. I performed a number of piano recitals, took part in numerous concerts, performed in all the main concert venues of Leningrad, recorded several works for the Leningrad Radio, and played Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor with the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra. But as I look back, I realise that Serduke's concept of piano technique was questionable in many ways. I had developed a firmly fixed and rather stiff hand position with curved fingers. On one hand, playing this way greatly strengthened the bones of my fingers and arm muscles, but on the other, it negatively reflected on my tone production and *cantabile* sound, and eventually limited my virtuoso abilities. As the sound ideal cultivated by Pirozerskaya was deeply embedded in my nature, my piano tone somehow kept remaining of a good quality and my *fortissimo* never turned harsh. However, the discrepancies between my tone quality and stiff arms and hammer-like finger action grew progressively, leading me towards an unnaturally forced way of playing and loss of harmony with the instrument. Besides its limitations and damage, several valuable aspects nevertheless developed from Serduke's teaching method to form some distinctive features of my current piano mastery. These were my vivid artistic temperament, the strong rhythmical will of my performance, and the sound timbre that Serduke used to label 'dark piano tone', which remains an important timbre of my current sound palette.

The other facets of musical knowledge were taught at the school at an extremely high level of excellence. I mention, for example, that in the final year when the students' age reached 14-15 years, part of the solfeggio requirements included singing Bach's *Inventions* in two parts *a capella*. Similarly, performing a *Lied*, *Romance* or even an entire operatic scene (sung with self-accompaniment) in class was a regular task for music history.

I was very fortunate to witness many unforgettable live performances by the greatest musicians of our time. Just to mention conductors Claudio Abbado, Illiah Mussin, violinists Izhak Perlmann, Iegudi Menuhin, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, pianists Emil Gilels, Sviatoslav Richter, Vladimir Horowitz, Van Cliburn, Christian Zimmerman, Martha Argerich as well as violinists Maxim Vengerov, Vadim Repin and pianists Eugeni Kissin and Arcadi Volodos of my generation. I will never forget the experience of being present at Richter's performance of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in C minor opus 111 in Leningrad at the Hermitage Theatre of the Winter Palace. While he was playing the 'Andante', one felt almost as if time had stopped: in the majestic silence flowed graceful sounds of indescribable beauty, penetrating every corner of the Theatre Hall and transferring one's mind into a timeless eternity. Richter's piano tone was of a unique quality. The sounds would form under his fingers as if the piano had no hammers, freely vibrating and flowing. Another unforgettable memory was the inability of people in the audience to hide their tears at the sight of thirteen-year-old Kissin playing both Chopin's Piano Concertos on the same night at the Great Philharmonic Hall in Leningrad in 1984. His stage presence, incredible beauty of his piano tone, passion and purity of his expression are forever imprinted in my mind.

At the age of fifteen I successfully passed entrance examinations for the Music College of the St-Petersburg State Conservatoire which is named after Rimsky-Korsakov. In my pianistic journey this meant the end of childhood with its semi-instinctive approach to piano playing. During the five years of College I began my concert tours to different parts of USSR performing various piano and chamber music recitals and several piano

concertos. It was during that time that I started becoming more and more concerned with the narrow, slightly forced quality of my piano tone as well as by the fact that due to the stiffness of my apparatus my progress as a virtuoso was getting gradually slower. My new piano pedagogue Mary Gooseva insisted on getting my fingers relaxed and straightened (she called my curved fingers 'claws' or 'hooks'). Gooseva continuously instructed me to 'hang my hand' (which meant to achieve a total relaxation of the palm and fingers from the wrists down). I resisted this awful instruction knowing I would at the same time lose all the energy, intensity and expressiveness of my performance! Thus, Gooseva's concept, which I now see was correct in principle, did not achieve much, because it was imposed purely by means of visual shape and imitation. It was completely alien, contradicting my fiery artistic temperament and the way I felt instinctively that I should realise it. This experience with Gooseva led me to realise that the question of hand position is, in fact, a very complex one, deeply tied in with the specific psycho-physiological processes of the individual (related to piano playing). 'The cause of wrong tensions is most often the lack of right tension. In such case, it is fruitless to try to relax those wrong tensions directly' (de Alcantara 1997, 15).

'The relaxation illustrated by the apparent effortlessness of Rubinstein or Heifetz, is not the cause of a musician's mastery on his instrument, but an effect of it' (de Alcantara 1997, 15). Though I was fully aware that my apparatus was faulty, losing the 'heart and soul' of my performance was definitely not an option. I felt devastated as I was losing my ability to 'hold things together' at the piano. At that time I began my intensive research, studying many writings on piano technique and also listening and analysing recordings of the great pianists, trying to resolve my problems. And though I still regularly performed on stage and was successfully passing College assessments and exams, I no longer felt in harmony with the piano. From the age of seventeen I entered a difficult stretch of my piano journey where I was no longer satisfied with my way of playing, but had not yet established anything more advanced. 'Since habitual control is often inadequate, losing it is a necessary first step in acquiring true, natural control' (de Alcantara 1997, 159). This very painful process of breaking down my faulty piano

technique without actually knowing where it would lead me was unimaginably frightening and frustrating. It was a subconscious cry of my nature revolting against being misused and instigating me to take action to achieve my artistic goals. Australian dramatic actor and pedagogue Frederick Alexander taught that 'the very essence of change demands coming into contact with the unknown' (quoted in 1997, 179).[12]

And at that point in my life I encountered Arcadi Volodos who had joined the same Music College from the third year. The irresistible magnetism of his playing originated in a rare combination of his astonishing virtuosity and his rich, warm (quivering) piano tone born so spontaneously under his fingers, vibrating and soaring as if it was alive! During the following two years Volodos and I had numerous sessions at the piano either discussing his incredible mastery or playing for each other. The value of this friendship in my life was priceless. Arcadi opened my mind and showed me the way to the real art of piano playing. I felt enlightened after my long struggle, and inspired by Arcadi's advice, confidently continued my further journey towards realising my inner artistic ideal. Here I will highlight a little knowledge passed to me by Volodos.

Even though I struggled to 'squeeze' my inner expression through my uncomfortable, rather stiff apparatus, Arcadi used to find great enjoyment in my playing. However, the first thing he pointed out was the poor 'pupil-like' quality of my thin *cantabile* sound. To him that was the core of my trouble. Explaining the way he was producing his rich and indescribably beautiful piano tone, he told me that while executing a melody he could feel each sound 'in his belly'. As a first step he advised me to stop executing my sound with hammer-like 'stab' of my fingers and instead learn to extract it directly from the keys by 'sinking' the fingertips into them. He supported his explanations by playing several melodic extracts from Liszt and Rachmaninov, with no visible finger effort, and making the piano sound like a living voice! Secondly, he pointed out that my finger action was wrong in principle. According to Volodos, the effort involved in my knuckles

[12] Alexander was the founder of the teaching technique that bears his name (*Alexander* technique).

raising the fingers above the keys was meaningless and limited my virtuoso potential. His fingers seemed to work 'downwards', exhibiting a kind of free fall with flexible, relaxed knuckles. He said that this way one could achieve finger velocity more easily. He also warned of a fear factor paralysing the pianist's inner hearing and causing inhibition of all motor reflexes. Using the first five of Chopin's *Etudes Opus 10* (which I could play) Volodos would coach me to play them at the correct *tempo* over and over again, helping me to overcome my blinding fear, and developing my kinetic ability. He advised that I should play a new piece through many times while it was still in a 'raw' state, in order to 'feel the line and direction and to find the right momentum' before working it in smaller sections. Arcadi also felt that one's ability to play at a fast *tempo* is directly proportional to one's ability to clearly hear the piece in one's mind in minute detail at speed (if the fear factor has been eliminated).

Being eager to achieve the desired level of mastery in my performance, I began to review my entire approach to piano touch and technique by applying some of Arcadi's knowledge and carefully analysing my inner sensations and impulses. This process, accompanied by numerous invariable ups and downs of discovering new things and then again experiencing emotional discomfort and painful sensations in my hands, continued over the following eight years throughout my Conservatoire studies and in the first years after my immigration to South Africa.

In 1991 I became a student at the St-Petersburg State Conservatoire and was placed in the large piano class of Leonid Sintsev, who joined the piano faculty just a year before while attempting to establish his career as a concert pianist. From the start of my lessons I revealed the purpose of my search at the piano, my goals and concerns to Sintsev. He enthusiastically responded by inviting me to follow his 'proven' method of creating a virtuoso pianist. As Sintsev had a reputation of being an excellent performer of Liszt, I was ready to follow his system.

At first, I was asked to study a volume of Czerny's *Studies Opus 299* for an entire semester and prohibited to play any other repertoire. A little puzzled, I prepared the first ten *Studies* for the following lesson, but Sintsev hardly let me finish eight bars. He instructed me to strike each note of the *Study* as hard as I could by raising each finger with great effort and at an extremely slow *tempo*. He kept encouraging me to strike the notes harder and harder so that I could feel my fingertips 'stinging' from the impact with the keys. The clanging, coerced piano tone was grating on my ears; however, assured by my teacher as to the effectiveness of his method, I decided not to object. For the following two weeks I had to practice just that single *Study* in that way. Although I did not mind a 'healthy' feeling of burning, hard-working fingertips, during my home practicing I would occasionally soften the attack, 'feeling sorry' for my magnificent *Bluthner* piano. But at every lesson Sintsev would be displeased and kept repeating the same *Study* as an assignment for a following lesson. As the weeks went by, I started feeling general symptoms of neurosis, and my irritation from the harsh, monotonous piano tone reached a level close to hysteria. Then (not without the help of my family) I was finally 'promoted' to a selected repertoire of Sintsev's choice. Unfortunately I was up for another disappointment as my teacher showed a total lack of interest and commitment. In reality, out of twenty-two students in his class, Sintsev used to give his genuine pedagogical attention only to one… (for a number of non-professional reasons). I thus found out that many other students in his class felt the same frustration. He was possibly just too pre-occupied with his own concert career, and used to cancel or be late for lessons regularly.

In Sintsev's class I learned the pain of being neglected with all my dreams, aims and needs. The figure of the pedagogue is extremely important in the life of a talented student who is constantly seeking a deep emotional connection (almost intimate understanding) with the teacher. Negative experience in such relationship can become

very traumatic for a young student.[13] The atmosphere in Sintsev's class had adversely reflected on my entire personality and self-esteem. From being a positive, highly motivated and sociable person, in my early twenties I became a nervous, introverted, vulnerable and insecure young individual.

Based on this personal experience, I advocate that if a natural, artistically integrated technique is part of a player (even if, as it happened in my case, it became so at a very young and unaware age), this should not be tampered with. The individual will subconsciously seek that unity with the instrument as well as with his/her inner artistic self throughout life, no matter what the subsequent circumstances of the musical journey. Pirozerskaya calls this phenomenon 'being loyal to yourself' (meaning to one's inner artistic nature), and also stresses that *organic* vocal or instrumental technique does not allow any coercion from unnatural, forced teaching methods. Due to the innermost connection of *organic* music technique with the psycho-physiological processes involving a particular person as a whole, an attempt to dismantle it will in some way have a negative impact on the individual's performing apparatus and even his/her general well-being. And the severity of such outcomes is likely to be directly proportional to the level of musical ability: the musically gifted students are most likely to suffer the consequences in the most painful way. I truly believe that I experienced the serious consequences implied above in my own trials.

In my second year at the Conservatoire I was transferred to the piano class of Professor Nathan Perelmann – one of the oldest and most respected pedagogues at the celebrated institution. Under Perelmann my creative artistic self revived and soon I resumed my concert performances. I still felt that my sound in itself was not sufficiently meaningful, though. By that time I had also developed many ungainly body movements and tensions; often during piano practicing I would feel dizzy from my convulsive unnatural breathing,

[13] Volodos, after his piano teacher's sudden immigration abroad, joined Sintsev's class at the beginning of the second year, and after several months of friction refused to accompany him on a concert tour to Spain. He discharged himself from the St-Petersburg Conservatoire to pursue further studies in France

and during particularly long sessions I experienced discomfort in my shoulders and arms, and even pain in my back. ‘Most often fatigue is symptomatic not of weakness or lack of endurance, but of misuse of the self’ (de Alcantara 1997, 197). I realised years later that a successful reversal of faulty technique would cause interfering tensions to disappear without them ever having been made a matter for direct concern.

During my second year at the Conservatoire I got to know some senior piano students who were taking private vocal lessons with Pirozerskaya. Intrigued by their first-hand account of the benefits for piano playing derived from her method, I resumed my relationship with her and returned to her for vocal sessions. I was now twenty. This time round I realised the incredible connection between piano touch, the ability to express myself at the piano, and the natural spontaneity and responsiveness of my voice. These qualities seemed to me to have developed together. One of the most distinct sensations during Pirozerskaya’s vocal sessions at that time was the amazing relief of stress in the mind and body which would clearly show in my posture and breathing. Only recently (in the last two-three years) does the actual act of piano playing at its best moments lead me to experience the same sensation. During our recent telephonic interview-questionnaire, Pirozerskaya explained that, as the vocal organ lies closer to the brain than the hands, certain impulses reach the voice long before the hands, and one needs to be at a sufficiently high level of instrumental mastery to experience the same inner sensations from playing an instrument (14 August 2007).

During my third year at the Conservatoire one of the works in my repertoire which I was particularly keen on, was the *Barcarolle Opus* 60 by Chopin. For several months I had been trying to achieve precision of touch and simultaneous playing of the two hands; however, my tone was unfocused, wobbly and spread, my phrasing unclear, and my breathing haphazard. After one of my vocal sessions with Pirozerskaya, where I managed to achieve spontaneity, ease and precision of my vocal touch (attack or tone initiation) with a meaningful, expressive sound of my voice, I continued practising the *Barcarolle* on the piano. Suddenly I felt delicate impulses in my fingertips while

executing one of the melodic passages. It felt as if all I needed to do was to gently touch the keys, with the rest of my arm being absolutely free and still; and there was, though very gentle, a sense of focus like the tip of a needle: a clear, penetrating, quivering piano tone! This was a fascinating sensation which I would best describe as 'not-doing'. The sound was born out of my fingertips so spontaneously, almost 'by itself', and the more I minimised my efforts, the better was my sound flow and the simultaneity of my coordination. For the first time in my life it felt as though I was just sitting and watching with amazement the music coming out of my fingertips into the keyboard. And then all of a sudden I began to notice a kind of tiny quivering physical sensation in my belly! Astonished, I called my family and they confirmed the dramatic change in my playing and posture. I believe that was the day when my natural piano touch began to revive and I pinpointed a substantial sensation at the piano that I could seek over and over again. I also noticed that during that experience my general level of concentration was extremely high. After approximately an hour of playing, my 'euphoria' was over and the old, spread and uncertain touch returned. During the following six years I caught and lost this sensation numerous times, but every time I managed to bring it back I would notice more about how it manifested itself, until recently I finally possessed it as the innermost foundation of my piano mastery.

Due to his advanced age of ninety-two Professor Perelmann often used to limit his piano classes to twice a month, and that is how one of his closest friends and colleagues, Professor Grunya Gankina, became my assistant piano coach. The successor to Olga Kalantarova and the very famous Anna Yessipova,[14] professor Gankina at eighty-two years of age was a remarkable concert performer and a pedagogue of a rare calibre. At the Conservatoire she taught piano duet and chamber music classes. Over a number of years she had taught me piano solo two to three times a week. Recognising the depth of

[14] Anna Yessipova (1851-1914) was one of the greatest pianists at the turn of the century. As a piano pedagogue (professor of St. Petersburg Conservatoire) Yessipova created one of the most significant branches of Russian piano tradition, having pupils like Olga Kalantarova, Simon Barer, Anastasia Virsaladze (grandmother of Eliso Virsaladze), and Sergey Prokofiev.

my musical ability and my desire to devote my life to performance, Gankina generously shared her professional knowledge and the 'secrets' of her splendid piano technique (which was so much like the one I was seeking!) and her rich sound resources. Taking me on at a very difficult point of my piano journey, she coached me with incredible tact, sensitivity and enthusiasm. Under her supervision I studied and successfully performed extensive concert repertoire. Professor Gankina guided me through the deepest nuances of interpreting Romantic music; she helped me to gain my new, full and nuanced sound palette, and along with Pirozerskaya furthered me in my re-connection with my instrument through cultivating a natural, vibrant piano touch. My family members who knew Gankina insist that the shape and effortless look of my hands while playing seem almost like a reflection of Gankina's own hands. If this is indeed the case, I have managed to capture some of the very essence of her piano mastery.

Upon my immigration to South Africa in 1997, I continued to follow my artistic goals and, as the years went by, I discovered a staggering phenomenon: my ability to apply myself at the piano, to find corresponding movements to my inner musical impulses, and to maintain the natural flexibility of my hands on virtuoso passages at fast *tempi* grew proportionally to my ability to persevere demanding life situations, welcome new tasks and changes, and improve my endurance, habits and attitudes. Until the age of twenty-five I lived in my parents' care like a 'hothouse plant': my existence revolved around my education and music studies; I was exempted from most of the house work and taken under protection in every conflicting life situation. My immigration to South Africa on my own brought upon me an intensive personal growth, as I experienced the rigorous responsibility of being an adult and learned, willingly or because I was compelled to, many life and social skills. My piano technique gradually matured together with my mind, often unrelated to any excessive professional training. Some days I would simply discover a new colour in my sound palette or an ability to perform a technically demanding task with comfort and ease. This process cultivated the mind and to a great extent enhanced my piano technique, opening new, previously unattainable horizons of my virtuoso potential. Pirozerskaya confirmed my discovery during my telephonic

interview (mentioned above) by saying that ‘one needs to be able to use an entire range of his/her abilities’ (14 August 2007).

Life and art are indivisible. Narrowing the focus in life to one specific activity and creating an ‘ideal environment’ to excel in it by eliminating the other aspects of life is not stimulating, and thus, not such a positive factor. I have known many musicians who would stay away from certain (often daily) activities, believing them to be harmful to their arms in one way or another. However, Pedro de Alcantara, a cellist and renowned *Alexander* teacher living in France, states: ‘The more you concentrate on your arms, the less you pay attention to the use of the whole self, thereby increasing the possibility of accidents’ (1997, 141). Famous pianist Claudio Arrau said: ‘I do a lot of things that actually are dangerous for my hands – weeding with a sickle, for instance. I’m not fussy at all. Its important – otherwise you become self-conscious about the action of the hands’ (quoted in Horowitz 1982, 105). A legendary pianist of the Romantic era Ignaz Paderewski used to find the effect of physical labour on his nerves and muscles to be more restorative than anything else. ‘I like best to work in the country. Often … when tired of practising I go out into the fields and labour for an hour or two with bare hands. Of course they get stiff and sore. But when I return to the piano, I feel reinvigorated’ (Stevenson 2003 [1992], 62).

After fairly gradual development, my piano technique has reached a point where my inner creative artistic impulses and their physical realisation on the piano have been established. Any artistic idea, whether emotional impulse or timbral colour, specific momentum or pronouncing a *cantabile* melody, causes sensations in my apparatus (body, arms, hands, fingertips) which effortlessly transfer onto the instrument. The following words of Schmidt-Shklovskaya, one of the most significant Russian piano pedagogues of 1960s, best describe the harmonious unity of the body and the instrument:

> the elasticity of the muscle tone combines with a specific state of the hands as if the sound is flowing from the body through the hands, fingers, and keys directly into the strings. The pianist feels as if the keyboard is ‘playing by itself’ and all he needs to do is just to listen and feel. The hands respond with such ease as if

> they are ‘walking on air’. We shall call such a state a ‘flowing penetration of sound’ (1985, 20).

At the point when a pianist achieves the almost automatic response of his/her apparatus to creative impulses of the inner hearing, he or she feels an extraordinary sense of satisfaction. It is then that the pianist establishes a whole range of individual sound resources and other expressive means. The physical ease that inaugurates this level of mastery ensures the achievement of a personal style. I am deeply grateful to Mrs. Pauline Nossel, a pedagogue of very high calibre, for greatly enhancing the process of crystallization of my piano mastery. Mrs. Nossel expressed remarkable sensitivity to my inner world of creative artistic ideas and findings, and through her encouragement and her dedicated pedagogical approach inspired me to work to my true potential. She managed to put that ‘final touch’ of professional awareness and discipline into the process of my moulding as a concert artist.

As perfection has no acme, nor I believe, has piano mastery. The more one seeks it, the more new aspects and horizons will eventually open. And as within the *organic* approach to piano playing, a piano mastery and one’s entire being are inseparable, I am confident that a delight of harmony with the inner self that comes upon the performer at the instrument during those special, unforgettable moments of practising and concert performance are worth all the ‘joys and throes’ of the moulding process.

CHAPTER III

THE ESSENCE OF YAKOVLEV'S VOCAL METHOD

> Nothing extraneous can be added to the organ of song … all the qualities needed in singing exist already within it … nothing can realise these qualities except the proper functioning of the organ itself.
>
> (Husler-Rodd-Marling 1965, 3).

Triggered by his extensive research on Pavlov's neurological studies, Russian vocalist, pedagogue and scholar, Alexander Yakovlev (1886 – 1961) developed a vocal method based on his concept of the vocal apparatus as a sensory organ. Linked to the great artistic tradition of the 1920-1950s and born on Russian soil, Yakovlev's method was specifically developed to embrace the highly charged emotional content of the vocal repertoire by composers of the Russian School, at around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. These included such composers as Glinka, Dargomizsky, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky. This type of music required a specific kind of singer with a highly elaborate and sensitive vocal apparatus, able to communicate the emotional and psychological content of the music in performance. The greatest exponents of this artistic tradition were the singers Fyodor Chalyapin, Antonina Nezdanova and Leonid Sobinov. Their art was characterised by the 'unlimited' free-flowing vocal *cantilena,*[15] refined intonation and articulation, powerful virtuosity, depth of expression, and most of all by the amazing impact it had on the audience.

[15] *Cantilena* – an Italian term, meaning a lilting, tuneful, harmonious vocal melody.

Yakovlev called his comprehensive method *Glinka-Chalyapin's school of organic singing.*[16] He saw the vocal sound not as an end in itself but as a means to unfold the artistic concept of the composition. This approach was deeply embedded in Glinka's vocal tradition as the following statement confirms:

> 'The specifics of vocalizing the phonemes in the Russian tradition lie in their treatment,[17] not just as refined melodic patterns but as an expression of the thoughts and feelings that the character is capturing, reflected through the finest gradations of the vocal timbre on the long phonemes' (quoted in Levashova 1987, 56).[18]



Figure 1 Alexander Yakovlev, 1920s (a personal gift from Pirozerskaya)

3.1. The physiology of the singing process

Basing his explanations on Pavlov's theory, Yakovlev defines the movement that conceives the sound of the human voice as an unconditioned reflex. Only when the inchoate cry becomes an intonation or a phoneme does it start to live and function as a conditioned reflex controlled by the corresponding physiological factors in the processes of the central nervous activity.

Yakovlev's theory positing that the vocal apparatus functions as a sensory organ during musical performance is labelled *funzione d'attacco.* At the core of this theory lies a phenomenon (discovered by Yakovlev) that the vocal organ, if developed according to

[16] Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka's greatest achievements lie in his operatic and vocal compositions. He was a professional singer (tenor) and devoted himself to vocal pedagogy.

[17] The term *vocalizing* means a vocal skill which ensures the maintenance of a melodious, sustained sound of the phonemes, which the singer delivers with artistry.

[18] All translations from Russian sources are my own.

its physiological nature, will become able to access various areas of the brain and with practice will develop reflexive pathways through the process of musical performance. Thus, by establishing constant afferent and efferent interactions,[19] the vocal organ becomes an instrument which 'feeds' the brain by stimulating its various centres through organic vocal movements. In Yakovlev's terminology, the vocal organ becomes a sensory *effector*. 'The singing apparatus is a physiological prerequisite for the formation of a flexible apparatus in the cerebrum of the large hemispheres' (Yakovlev 1971, 23). Thus, the slightest vocal movement is transmitted to the cerebrum as a stimulus, and this process of to and fro slowly creates a whole system of reflexive pathways and areas of stimulation.

According to Yakovlev, the organic vocal movement stimulates the appearance and growth of the singer's expressive sound palette (timbres as a creative initiative of the musician). Frederick Husler and Yvonne Rodd-Marling develop this thought further: 'A fully healthy vocal organ

> is charged with rhythm so that it possesses both speed and flexibility. Unless the singer happens to be miraculously untalented, phrasing of a simple kind ensues automatically, as a result of the correct physical-physiological movements in the vocal organ. What is more, its good condition stimulates the singer's inventiveness (cited in de Alcantara 1997, 182).

Thus, an organic vocal movement as such enhances the inner rhythm, musical feeling and creativity of the singer. This explanation accords with the concept of *funzione d'attacco*.

For several years I have observed a similar phenomenon during my students' piano playing (as well as my own). This leads me to conclude that a well-coordinated, organic pianistic movement, formed as a natural motor response to one's inner creative musical stimuli, also serves to awaken those qualities in the pianist. Rachmaninov's words to Medtner seem to contain the same meaning when despite ill health, 'on first touching the

[19] *Afferent* is a term indicating the direction in which information is conveyed from a sensory receptor to the central nervous system, as to the brain.
Efferent is opposite to *afferent*; refers to nerves that carry impulses away from a nerve centre.

piano keys' his passion and inspiration would re-appear (cited in Bryanzeva 1976, chap. 7).

Yakovlev describes the vocal apparatus as the sum of everything brought into motion in the attempt to create a singing sound.

> The voice-forming area of the larynx together with acoustic shape of the soft resonators of the gullet and mouth, as well as the supporting muscular breathing complex controlled by the central nervous system, ensure the complex coordination of the singing movement, which if advanced and developed, can be called a vocal apparatus which will perform the singing act (1971, 21).

The French scholar Raul Yusson, who developed his research on the singing voice during the same era as Yakovlev, confirms the latter's findings. Yusson postulates that there is no specific organ which would function to conceive the singing voice; this points to the existence of an additional function of the brain.

Yakovlev regarded the physiologically correct way of producing sound together with the creation of spontaneous (functioning as a reflex) *funzione d'attacco* of the larynx as the most important functional moment in vocal art. In the vocal apparatus the larynx plays the role of the sound generator while the nasopharynx and cavities of the nose and mouth function as resonators. These components change shape and capacity with the contraction of the tongue, the muscles of the soft palate, as well as of those muscles that form the walls of the mouth cavity, and of the nasopharynx and larynx, while a singing movement inside the larynx is formed and controlled by the motor *analyser* of the cerebrum.[20]

[20] *Analyser* is Yakovlev's term for an area of the cerebrum which receives stimuli from the related sensory organ. L. D. Yakovleva, A. Yakovlev's widow, specified this meaning of the term during Pirozerskaya's research of Yakovlev's archives in 1965.

> The voice-forming area of the larynx (so refined in its design by nature!) is able to form a complete scale of the vocal sound range if correctly trained (Yakovlev 1959, 36).

Yakovlev specifies that the vocal muscle, controlled by the impulses from the brain, serves as a motor factor in the singing process; it activates the movement of the vocal chords, and by using the air-stream creates the sound.

> The sound initiation should start automatically when the ladle-shaped cartilages (*arytenoid* cartilages*) with* the attached vocal muscle and the vocal chords with their close-fitted mucous vocal folds switch into the process of phonation.[21] Only then with a latter *cantilena* movement, does the rest of the vocal muscular complex become activated (1971, 14).

3.2. From the anatomy to musical qualities

Yakovlev grounds his research on his extensive knowledge of the anatomy of the vocal apparatus and how it functions naturally. His aim was the scientific grounding of the vocal process and teaching methodology. Aided by his medical qualification, Yakovlev discovered that certain parts of the vocal apparatus function in relation to certain musical qualities of the voice.

[21] Vocal *phonation* means the articulation of vocalized sound; Yakovlev mainly applies this term to the articulation of vowels.

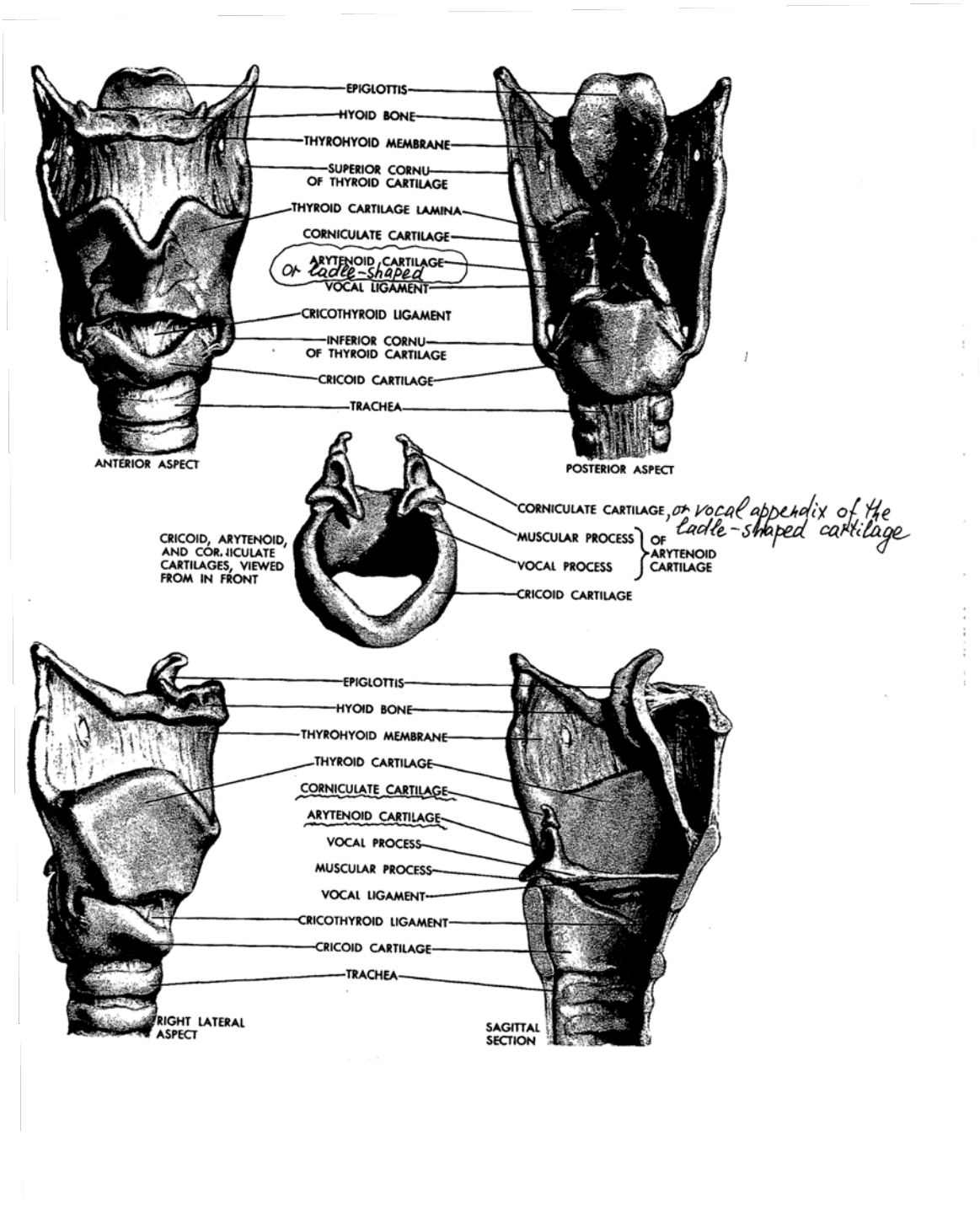


Figure 2 The cartilaginous structure of the larynx (Reid 1983, 181)

Here I will provide a brief overview of Yakovlev's findings, based on extracts from his writings.

3.2.1. Larynx

> The larynx is the most important component of the vocal apparatus. The structure of its cartilage frame can to a certain degree determine the individual features of the singing sound as well as the possibilities and limitations of its development and improvement … out of its seven cartilages four determine the quality of the singing sound by their movements (1971, 30).

> A different quality of vocal touch is not only determined by a differently shaped beat of the air-stream on the vocal chords, but by a process of complex internal movements in the larynx which is the realisation of the cerebral singing reflex (1971, 25).

3.2.2. Vocal chords

Yakovlev perceived a vocal chord as a string regulated by the vocal appendices of the ladle-shaped cartilages (*corniculate* cartilages). This string is constantly forming the pitch specifics of the singing sound. 'The vocal chord is covered with mucous tissue which determines the quality of timbre and is an important factor in the formation of a beautiful singing sound' (1971, 12). Yakovlev discovered that as a result of multiple repetitions of physiologically correct movements, the surface of the vocal chords and mucous tissue on the walls of the voice-forming area of the larynx undergo significant micro-tissural functional transformation. Accordingly, this reflects significantly on the vocal sound: the intonation becomes pure, the sound supple and the timbre also gains new qualities; it becomes brilliant, rich and mellow.

3.2.3. Vocal muscle and *Conus Elasticus*

Regarding the vocal muscle, Yakovlev mentions that while preserving some tessitural qualities the vocal muscle needs to work in such a way that it does not suppress the

elastic cone (*Conus Elasticus*) or the vocal chords, but enhances the coordinated interaction of all parts of the vocal apparatus by its differentiated movement.

> The elements of the elastic cone help the vocal shafts to connect naturally without any force during singing. Along with the whole space above the vocal chords and above the larynx - from the false vocal chords to the tip of the tongue and teeth, - they serve to enrich the timbre of the vocal sound (1971, 14).

3.2.4. *Gullet's ring*

Yakovlev speaks of the *gullet's ring* as a necessary condition for the correct sound formation in the middle register. He explains that the *gullet's ring* creates a special physiological condition for the voice to gather those timbral qualities that characterise the best part of the singer's sound range. According to him, the *gullet's ring* includes the neck, the larynx and the gullet, which together form a unified muscular complex, and at the same time function as separate units: extrinsic neck complex, middle glottal and laryngeal. 'At the moment of formation of the "*gullet's ring*" the muscles of the gullet connected to the tongue, tongue bone and larynx contract, allowing an easy transition of the voice into its middle register' (1971, 15).

Cornelius Reid uses the term '*collar of the larynx'* speaking of 'the muscular ring, formed by the aryepiglottal folds, which comprises the upper portion of the larynx. This ring-like structure forms a link between the arytenoids muscles of the larynx and the epiglottis' (1983, 63). It seems as if Yakovlev and Reid are speaking of the same phenomenon.

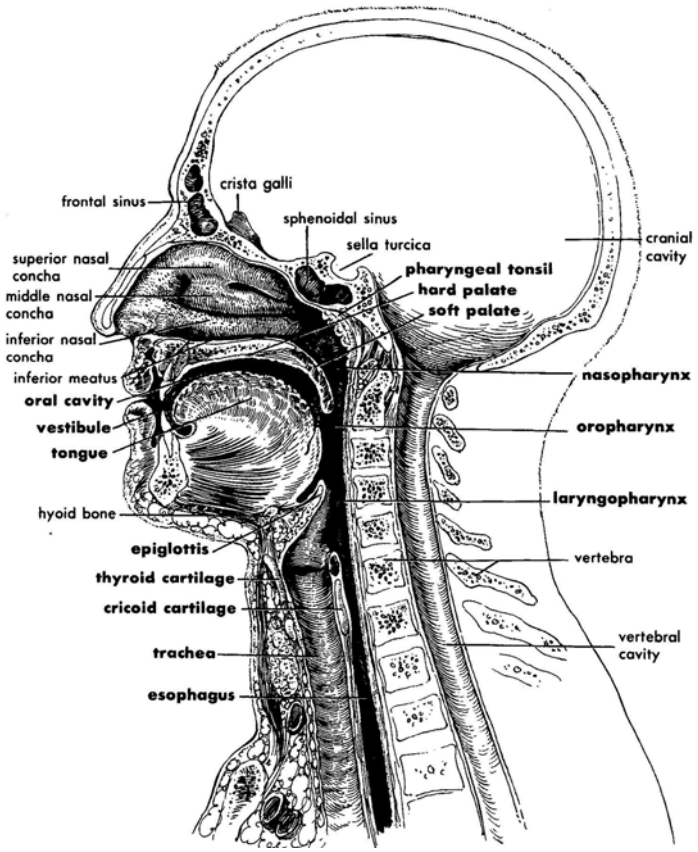


Figure 3 Resonance cavities (Reid 1983, 321)

3.3 *Organic* singing

Yakovlev speaks of the two receiving areas of the singing stimuli: one activated by the receptor of the hearing *analyser*, and the other through proprioceptives of the voice-forming area of the larynx.[22] All these stimuli form reflexive connections, as well as

[22] By *proprioceptives* Yakovlev means the sensory end organs in the body tissues (such as, for example, muscles or tendons) that are sensitive to the stimuli originating in these tissues by the body movements.

creating and securing a well-coordinated functional unity which ensures *organic* singing.[23] 'A key to *organic* singing is the spontaneous interaction of the air-bow with the vocal chords, which stimulates a free-flowing sound extraction' (1971, 32). During the singing process all the elements remain in constant motion and thus naturally influence the formation of vocal timbres, purity of intonation and diction. 'The functional unity of the tissural resonators of the mouth and larynx with its voice-forming area is one of the core factors in creating *organic* singing' (1971, 36).

In the light of his anatomical and physiological findings, Yakovlev explains why it is that when certain sections of the vocal apparatus are developed in isolation from the entire system, natural spontaneous singing with its organic *legato,* gentle *piano,* and light *acciaccatura* cannot occur. He stresses that the refinement and complexity of the vocal organ's design as well as its multi-functionality show that it would not be enough (or correct) to limit an explanation of the process of vocal sound formation to a description of its single constructive elements (such as breathing, diction, sound extraction).

Reid supports this view:

> Singing involves the totality of the individual and sums up the totality of the human experience. This demands that the physical, intellectual, instinctual, and emotional properties of each individual are brought into balance and fully exploited. Excessive dependency on any one factor, to the partial exclusion of others, destroys this balance and aborts the learning process (1983, 59).

As mentioned earlier, I perceive piano playing as a process which embraces one's entire being. Thus, the identical concept lies at the foundation of my proposed *organic* piano technique.

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[23] *Organic* singing is natural, unforced and spontaneous singing.

3.4. Breathing

Yakovlev perceives breathing and breath control as the most fundamental means of supporting *organic* singing. His approach opposes all schools of direct breath control advocated by many contemporary vocal methods. Yakovlev saw the state of 'support' as a static, fixed breathing position.

He suggests that at the moment when the sound is formed, breath plays a similar role to that of the violinist's fingertips slightly moving the bow:

> If one carefully observes the movement of a violinist's bow, one will notice that the birth of sound on the string under a bow begins with a tiny movement of the fingertips holding the bow. The rest of the arm at that point remains absolutely calm, and only later as the volume increases, do the arms become involved (1971, 20).

He refers to this phenomenon as 'air-bow' (1971, 22).Yakovlev explains that the entire vocal apparatus switches into its specialised motor-singing function with the first interaction of the two halves of the voice-forming area of the larynx, when the 'air-bow' between them goes into motion. The vocal muscle and vocal chords begin to move with the first attempt to produce sound, and the necessary 'in-breath' happens involuntarily.

Yakovlev's argument is that the process of sound formation in singing begins with the connection of the vocal chords and contraction of certain laryngeal muscles, and not with the contraction of the abdominal muscles. 'Do not practice breathing mechanically; do not pump yourself full of air before singing a phrase; do not hold or hoard air; do not breath in deliberately' (de Alcantara 1997, 98). As in this case,

> the singing act will start from the opposite end, and proprioceptive signals will not flow from the vocal organ but instead from the abdominal muscles, causing tension and muscular contraction (Yakovlev 1959, 44).

'A properly functioning larynx regulates and trains to a high degree (by means of the ear) the respiratory muscles needed in singing' (Husler and Rodd-Marling 1965, 42).

Frederick Alexander suggests: ‘It is not necessary … even to think of taking a breath; as a matter of fact, it is more or less harmful to do so’ (cited in de Alcantara 1997, 96). Pirozerskaya also supports this theory, as do other experts – Giovanni Battista Lamperti, Patrick Macdonald, Frederick Husler, Cornelius Reid and Yvonne Rodd-Marling.

Yakovlev explains that the notion of the importance of breathing in singing, which is absolutely correct in principle, in the case of a lack of grasp of the vocal apparatus as a whole and a distortion of its reflexive coordination, leads to vocal disorders in many singers. Reid also warns against such a conscious approach to vocal breathing:

> The utilitarian value of breath support as a pedagogic practice is highly suspect. It is not based upon a valid functional principle, it leads to a self-conscious awareness of the body, confuses ends with means, and overlooks the fact that in an ideal technique all of the muscular systems involved are in equilibrium, which means that they are self-supporting (1983, 43).

‘The most important thing about breathing … is not to do it, but to allow it to happen of its own. Ideally “breath takes itself” rather than having to be taken’ (Reid 1992, 45). ‘If you allow your ribs to move, as nature intended’, wrote Macdonald, ‘you will breathe properly. What you have to learn is to let them move. “Let” is the operative word’ (cited in de Alcantara 1997, 97).

De Alcantara notes that truly spontaneous breathing is extremely difficult to study because physiological factors have a strong influence on the way we breathe. In this regard he quotes Reid:

> The diaphragm is without proprioceptive nerve endings, and therefore without sensation. Thus, it is impossible to exercise any control over diaphragmatic movement except through the reflexive act of breathing (cited in 1997, 93).

> The singer who breathes out according to the laws of nature will have little difficulty in breathing in properly… Once the air has been expelled the diaphragm automatically switches over to breathing in, a process that needs no attention or conscious effort; either, indeed, would be more likely to disturb this perfectly natural control’ (Husler and Rodd-Marling 1965, 36).

Yakovlev perceives the diaphragm as a more useful source of energy than the abdominal press in the process of vocal breathing. The latter in his view, although a source of power, tires the voice quickly.

> Powerful abdominal muscles if misused can overload and thus ruin the functional balance of the breathing muscular complex as well as suppress diaphragmatic movements. In this case, instead of the free-flowing vocal *cantilena* one will have to force the sound out, and this will result in the destruction of the highly organised and complex natural singing process (1959, 47).

Lamperti and Reid address certain pedagogical limitations of the common perception of 'breath-support':

> The real question … [is] improving the co-ordinate relationship of a highly complex system of laryngeal muscles, which lies beyond voluntary control. No known system of 'breath-support' addresses itself to this problem (quoted in Brown 1931, 134).

'Vocal tone is nothing more than pressure variations created by an oscillation movement of the vocal folds whose frequency determines pitches. It is a physical impossibility to "support" these vibratory patterns' (Reid 1983, 42). Reid clarifies the matter further:

> It is true that when all of the muscular activities involved are in equilibrium one is aware of the body being in a comfortable, poised condition and of the voice being 'supported'. But the feeling of support is an end result of good singing, not the process by which you improve your voice – an effect not a cause (1992, 168).

This statement coincides with the similar idea regarding the effortlessness and relaxation of the pianist's hands, stated in the Chapter II. In the same way, comfortable posture and relaxed, effortless hand movements appear as a result of piano mastery and not as a pre-requisite for good piano playing.

The importance of calm, tension-free breathing advocated by Yakovlev has strong implications for piano playing (this will be further discussed in the following chapter).

3.5. The main principles of Yakovlev's vocal pedagogy

Yakovlev determines the aim of vocal pedagogy as 'to physically strengthen and musically cultivate the vocal organ as well as the nerve centres of the singer' (1959, 57). He stresses that the method of developing vocal technique needs to be so systematised that the technical skills of the singer can become almost automatic. He also advises vocal pedagogues to study and analyse the anatomical-physiological picture of vocal sound formation.

As a pedagogue, Yakovlev aimed to preserve the natural qualities of the student's vocal timbre while at the same time developing the intonational and vocal reflexes, which formed his/her 'vocal touch'[24].

He believed that the process of perfecting a singing movement needs to be clearly systematised and graded. That is why it was necessary for him to design special vocal exercises in order to ensure the correct and harmonious development of the proprioceptive sensitivity and coordination of the muscular movement. I have personally experienced the effect of Yakovlev's vocal exercises through Pirozerskaya.

> The proprioceptive sensitivity of the tissues in the vocal apparatus together with their co-attuning ability also play a significant role in the formation of the vocal movement, and directly influence the purity of intonation (1971, 22).[25]

The easy, natural vocal touch was developed in conjunction with interpretation as some works require gentle touch and some a hard sound attack.

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[24] By *vocal touch* Yakovlev meant the intensity of the vocal sound attack.

[25] Co-attuning means a process of establishing interactions between the corresponding nerves centres.

Yakovlev also paid a lot of attention to the articulation of the singer's mouth, as he felt that the naturalness of articulation combined with the ability to form singing phonemes in different timbres, is the key to enriching the singer's sound palette and expressiveness of his intentions in performance. Yakovlev's ultimate aim was to develop the performing artist within the talented singer. Thus, Yakovlev's method re-connects the artist with his own natural creative personality.



Figure 4 Alexander Yakovlev among his students, 1940s (a personal gift from Pirozerskaya)

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artist within the talented singer. Thus, Yakovlev's method re-connects the artist with his own natural creative personality.

According to Yakovlev, a naturally established, 'ready' vocal apparatus as such does not exist either in children or in adults; there is only a potential singing ability.

> It is very seldom that one comes across a naturally formed singing voice, and in this case the role of a pedagogue would consist of preserving the natural functional coordination of such apparatus. Most beginner singers do not have functional balance in their sound production. That is why vocal pedagogues need to focus their attention on developing the vocal apparatus as a whole, as the beginning stage will determine the voice quality at a later stage (1959, 61).

Yakovlev introduces a light, easy *staccato* movement of the voice without any tension in the larynx (the phoneme 'oo' is used the most frequently for this kind of sound production in his vocal exercises) as an expedient method of developing the correct way of forming vocal sound. He believed that this way the voice gathers the natural qualities of its timbre, which form the best part of the singer's vocal palette. He refers to Glinka who treated this 'natural *staccato*' as a pedagogical starting point (1959).

Yakovlev's pedagogical strategy was to give the larynx a task that will make the process of phonation start automatically in its natural functional order determined by the structure of this organ. 'Our laboratory research shows that the correct and expedient method of forming the right sound is the light, easy *staccato* movement of the voice in the middle register without any force on the larynx.' (1971, 33) Why did Yakovlev choose the light *staccato* and not any other movement (for example, light *legato*)? He believed that, firstly, an inexperienced singer will find the light, naturally flowing *legato* difficult to achieve (often due to many faulty vocal habits developed before). And secondly, inexperienced singers often start *legato* with 'scooping' which even in its slightest form negatively reflects on the correct development of singing sound by causing a 'drop' of the larynx.

> The larynx needs to be kept in a state of constant flexible mobility in order to achieve spontaneous, natural sound expulsion. And it functions this way during

> the light *staccato* movement with all its components switching into the process of phonation in the right order for specific tasks at specific times (1971, 33).

Reid provides an interesting insight into the execution of vocal *staccato*:

> The diaphragm is without proprioceptive nerve endings and cannot be controlled volitionally, while the abdominals are far too sluggish in movement to coordinate with the rapid opening and closing of the glottal space required by successive *staccati.* What the successful execution of *staccato* figures does require is a head voice-dominated technique resonated within a poised and stabilized laryngeal adjustment (1983, 352).

Yakovlev asserts that it is possible to develop vocal intonation to such a degree of perfection that the ingeniousness and spontaneity of the vocal movement will become automatic. *Automation* in Yakovlev's sense is a specific process embracing the technical skills of the singer when a strong artistic impulse awakens corresponding sensations in the performing apparatus, until eventually this connection develops into a practical skill (in other words, into a corresponding movement). Yakovlev considers this process proved by Pavlov's neurological theory: 'The stimulus moves through the central nervous system via the beaten pathways, and this way even the most complex singing movement eventually becomes easy, almost automatic' (1971, 52). I firmly believe that the same process applies to the development of the pianist's technical skills.

Thus, automation means a highly elaborate connection between the emotional/hearing and motor/muscular spheres to a degree where the physical response of the apparatus to inner stimuli becomes immediate, almost reflexive. When a pianist's skills are developed in constant connection with his/her inner sound perception and artistic impulses, similar neural pathways are created, and over a period of time pianistic movements develop into a reflexive response to the pianist's inner stimuli. Several authorities including Samuel Feinberg and Luigi Bonpensiere refer to the similar process of automation in relation to piano playing.

'The more established and coordinated the time-related ties between the hearing and the motor *analysers,* the more secure the development of intonational reflex' (1971, 50).

Here Yakovlev speaks of a certain connection between the muscular representative of the voice-forming area of the larynx in the cerebrum and the cerebral ‘projector’ of the hearing organs, which is established during the singing movement.

> The automation of the singing movement on chromatic and diatonic scales is formed by the centres of the cerebellum and *sensory cortex*. The motor, auditory and visual *analysers* of the cerebrum fulfil the governing function’ (1971, 50).

American neuroscientist Daniel Levitin determines the function of the *sensory cortex* in relation to musical performance as the ‘centre of the brain which receives tactile feedback from playing an instrument and dancing’ (2006, 264).

Yakovlev suggests that the reason for poor intonation lies not in hearing but in a disorder of the functional balance between the voice-forming area of the larynx and the soft resonators of the palate and glottis. Due to the resulting lack of interactions between those components the acoustic shape of particular sounds form incorrectly and thus an aesthetically unpleasing false intonation occurs. Being reflected in the ‘projector’ of the cerebrum, such singing becomes chronically out of tune.

Many vocal pedagogues consider the transition from *forte* to *piano* (or in other words, the formation of vocal *filando*) to be one of the most technically difficult components of the vocal art, and believe that it should be mastered only at the later stages of vocal studies. According to Yakovlev’s laboratory research, ‘the vocal appendices of the ladle-shaped cartilages play a similar role to the fingertips on the violin bow in a process of vocal sound-formation’ (1971, 22). And he highlights that the vocal pedagogy should focus on this important movement from the beginning by developing the kind of sound execution that takes this important area of the larynx into consideration (1959, 22).

Yakovlev accuses many vocal schools contemporary with him of having a preconception about ideas of the sound production. He speaks against such preconceptions that ‘often override the singer’s natural timbral spectrum, thus suppressing the individual spontaneity of sound production’ (1959, 36). Yakovlev was against any tension or

unnatural intensification in a vocal apparatus. He believed that the larynx always needs to be kept in a state of free mobility and not in some forced or fixed position. Here Yakovlev's view strongly ties in with my own argument about the question of the hand position on the piano. He strongly believed that forced singing as a method violates the law of the functional physiology of the singing process by ignoring many specifics of laryngeal structure. He points out that forced singing totally excludes the most important timbre-forming component of the larynx – the edges of the mucous vocal folds of the vocal chords. When a powerful stream of air bursts with all its force through the vocal gullet, the vocal folds flip upwards and the passing air misses their edges. Yakovlev explains which parts of the larynx and surrounding muscles are involved at the moment of producing vocal sound, and how in the case of the forced expulsion of breath the singer loses the ability to control the dynamics and timbre of the voice.

> What happens if one makes the student sing loudly from the first few lessons? Usually the whole bulk of the vocal muscular shaft switches on before the proper time in a rough and forced manner. Then the ends of the vocal folds flip upwards making it impossible for the singer to achieve any *diminuendo,* as during the transition to *piano* the voice will falter (1959, 38).

'The 'air-bow' in the form of an air-column creates a process of friction embracing the elastic cone and the section of the larynx above the vocal chords. Yakovlev points out that a vocal pedagogue should be aware that these particular components of the apparatus enrich vocal sound with overtones, thus creating its timbre. He notices that in the case of forced singing the 'tension that occurs in the abovementioned section of the larynx does not allow it to fulfil its active role in the formation of a rich, colourful timbre of the voice' (1959, 40). To him 'the worst in singing – the forced scream-like sound expulsion' could only be explained by a lack of knowledge about the exact moment of sound formation in the vocal organ (1959, 38). Thus, in an attempt to attain very powerful, so-called 'stage sound', an unprepared singer can lose the natural timbre of the voice. However, Yakovlev concedes that a certain kind of forced singing is at times necessary as an effect serving a certain artistic idea.

Yakovlev's focus during the initial stages of learning was on the development of singing phonemes ('oo', 'ah', 'aw', 'ee', and 'eh'). He believed that at this stage the consonants can cause an inhibition of the singing reflex and interrupt the sound flow.

According to Yakovlev, a *trace* reflex (tracing phenomena in the central nervous system) can play a significant role in the learning process of cultivating singing *funzione d'attacco.* A stimulus in the motor *analyser* caused by a sound at a certain pitch and timbre does not always have enough time to fade before a new, often totally unrelated subsequent stimulus occurs. In this case the imprints of the first stimulus can interfere with the clarity of perception of the following one. It is a natural characteristic of the neuro-muscular tissue to leave an imprint of stimuli. Yakovlev used this phenomenon to assist with the formation of different singing phonemes in his vocal pedagogy by employing the singing of a phoneme which the student finds most natural and comfortable as an effect of a 'positive' inhibition, enhancing the formation of a subsequent, more problematic phoneme. Most often the phoneme 'oo' was taken as the initial.

Pirozerskaya defines the phoneme 'oo' as the 'most ancient sound' (2006, 37); Yakovlev explains that 'oo' creates a condition of utmost ease in the nerves and muscular tone of the soft resonators of the gullet and mouth, allowing the air-bow to move freely through the vocal organ. 'The phoneme "oo" needs to be sung with a minimum tension; then its acoustic shape helps the following vowels gain better musical qualities and be more enriched with overtones' (1971, 51). In his choice of the right sequence of phonemes Yakovlev proceeded according to the student's individual abilities; also when in some cases *piano* and *mezzo voce* singing presented real difficulty for a student, he suggested a sound of moderate dynamics at the initial stages of learning. He writes that the most basic vocal exercises on the phoneme 'oo' 'serve to break unwanted vocal habits of the student' (1959, 44).

My hypothesis regarding this matter is that the *trace* reflex can be used in a similar way at the piano by alternating different kinds of technical tasks. Over the last three years I have created a series of elementary piano exercises inspired by some of my youngest students. Each exercise is developed from a short motive (repeating as ascending and descending sequences) designed especially to suit the needs of each particular student. In each case I vary the articulation (*staccato* and *legato*), rhythm and finger combination according to my students' individual strength and weaknesses.

Yakovlev postulates that the *legato* technique, if formed on the basis of *staccato*, will enable the singer to achieve a smooth, flowing *cantilena*, accuracy of intonation, and sound that carries:

> *Legato* sound formed on the basis of *staccato* is characterised by spontaneous though focused attack, light and easy *cantilena* (without noticeable effort from the abdominal muscles), and by the simplicity and spontaneity of sound production. This way the singer will not only be equipped to tackle technical difficulties with spontaneity and ease but also be able to enrich such natural sound with the emotional colours necessary for a fulfilling artistic performance (1959, 73).

Yakovlev specifies that one needs to keep in mind that the condition of nerves and muscular tone in *cantilena* passages differs in different registers of the vocal sound scale.

He concludes his pedagogical writings thus:

> This kind of training process with its effect on the singing voice as a whole, allows us to create singers with untouched individual timbral features of their voices. After a short period of training the singing sound will start gaining truly cultured qualities such as focus, brilliance and gentle melodiousness remarkable in its suppleness and moving unaffectedness of expression (1959, 75).

3.6. My own practical experience of Yakovlev's vocal method

I was introduced to Yakovlev's method by Natalia Pirozerskaya. She is a passionate follower of Yakovlev's ideas, and has devoted some forty years of her teaching career to

becoming his successor. She shares her life-long experience with this method (as well as some of her own pedagogical discoveries) in her trilogy *Vokalnaya Tema v Svete Otkritia Yakovleva* [The Vocal Theme in the Light of Yakovlev's Discovery].

From the time I began my studies with Pirozerskaya at the age of six, every piano lesson used to begin with approximately fifteen minutes of singing: first, some basic melodic figures alternating different phonemes (which as I later found out were Yakovlev's vocal exercises), and then a few beautiful Italian or Russian folk songs. Only after this routine had been completed was I then seated at the piano. I still remember the amazing feeling I used to experience during those short singing sessions: as my voice produced the sounds, it was as if my entire being had been filled with the emotions of a particular song, and every part of me was awakened by the desire to express the beauty I could hear in the music. As a young child it enabled me to 'come out of my shell' and greatly encouraged my artistic initiative and imagination.

The student does not have to possess a beautiful singing voice to use Yakovlev's exercises; what is important is how he or she uses it to articulate and respond to the emotional nuances of the music. As I have been taught according to Yakovlev's principles, I know what kind of vocal sound is taken as ideal and how to produce it (this includes advice on breathing, intonation, vocal movements for different phonemes and timbral qualities). I have a clear idea of what kinds of sensations and sound qualities relate to these principles at the piano.

It is the task of the professional singer to explore Yakovlev's method in all its depth. As for the instrumentalist, I believe the most important thing to master is the easy, spontaneous way of conceiving vocal sound which is seemingly effortless, requiring a high degree of inner concentration. Also important would be learning to shape different phonemes by finding suitable vocal movements of the lips along with acoustic mouth resonance. Added to these one will automatically include articulation (*staccato, legato*) as it is embedded in Yakovlev's vocal exercises (marked by Yakovlev himself), from the

initial steps of learning. And the final necessary step for a non-singer would be exploring the specifics of Yakovlev's expression: how to endow each sound with focus and emotional meaning; how to produce organic musical phrases; and, as importantly, how to achieve that pure expression without affectation, 'scooping', or any ungainly movements or stiff (masque-like) facial expressions. Pirozerskaya in her work with instrumentalists used Russian and Italian songs or *romances*: some lively and full of spark; the others lyrical, filled with feeling.

I will attempt to describe how Pirozerskaya taught me to breathe. I was never allowed to 'pump' myself with air before starting an exercise or a song. To prevent this from happening she often used to instruct me to start singing 'on the spot' without inhaling, and then re-gain my breath during singing. Always breathing through the nose, I could take a slow, relaxed or a quick, shallow breath (at times even in the middle of the phrase as it is hardly noticeable if one breathes this way).

A number of times I felt slightly dizzy but always very comfortable, relaxed and fulfilled during my singing sessions. However, some of the other students who had faulty habits or forced technique (vocal, as well as instrumental) used to experience symptoms of severe 'cerebral fatigue' (Pirozerskaya's term): dizziness, hoarseness in the voice, incessant yawning. All of her students yawned during the singing sessions to a degree, and I constantly observe this phenomenon in my own students during their preliminary vocal warm-up. During 2003-2005 I conducted St. Stithian's' *Mangeloi* choir, a junior choir which consisted of approximately ninety children aged six to eight years. I introduced some of Yakovlev's exercises to warm up their voices (mainly to alert their sense of pitch), and many of the children would yawn during singing, finding it a pleasant relaxed sensation.

Yusson analyses yawning as part of the singing process with reference to French vocal pedagogues who have applied the mechanism of yawning in their teaching practices. He refers to dramatic tenor Ibos and to Professor Siz of Paris Conservatoire (Yusson 1974,

186). This aspect of Yusson's analysis astonished me, confirming what I had already been taught. Pirozerskaya always used to pay a great deal of attention to the phenomenon of yawning during singing. She interprets it as a positive sign showing that the vocal apparatus is functioning naturally and correctly! Pirozerskaya explains that excessive yawning can occur during singing in the initial stages of reaching *funzione d'attacco.* According to her, it is a phenomenon related to the awakening of certain areas of the brain which are not used to receiving feedback from a sensory organ. She also points out that the soft palate contains numerous nerve endings which are easily irritated by the air-stream during the singing process.

Pirozerskaya uses a notion which she terms 'phonemic massage': this has to do with breathing and speech-forming muscular complexes, referring, on the other side of the coin, to 'massaging' certain areas of the brain. Pirozerskaya explored the therapeutic effects of *funzione d'attacco* and *organic* singing and made a significant contribution to the field of music therapy in Russia. She suggests that the energy of the 'ancient levels' of the brain enriches the voice with a refreshed strength of the respiratory flow.

> The spiritual cosmos of a person feeds from so called 'delicate strings' [the vocal folds] of the singing voice, which will not awaken without the spontaneous contact of breathing with vocal muscle, in other words, without *funzione d'attacco* (2003, 92).

I can only verbalise my experience of this singing method to a certain degree, as it is not possible to express sensorial experience through the written word. In order to make it a workable tool for pedagogical use, it would require a practical demonstration by someone trained in this method (in the case of my research - me).

'The perfect singer (ideally speaking) is one who has succeeded in overcoming all forms of technical usage, he is past the stage of needing its help, he sings with a fully liberated vocal organ, from its inmost nature, with every impulse, urge and drive belonging to it' (Husler and Rodd-Marling 1965, 112).

CHAPTER IV

NOTES ON MY PROPOSED PIANO METHOD

'A system has a beginning and an end, a method is constantly developing'
(Pirozerskaya 2001, 12).

I do not claim my developing piano method to be a brand new path towards piano mastery and music interpretation, but rather a synthesis of my own ideas, deeply connected to Yakovlev-Pirozerskaya's *organic* school, and of what I believe to have been the best theories on piano playing. What follows incorporates some of the thoughts and ideas of renowned pianists and piano teachers right back from the mid-nineteenth century. I refer particularly to Frederic Chopin, German pedagogue Carl Adolph Martienssen, famous pianist virtuoso Josef Lhevinne, as well as piano pedagogues of the early-mid twentieth-century Russian school: Henrich Neuhaus, Samuel Feinberg, and Anna Schmidt-Shklovskaya.

Thomas Frost, a producer of *Sony Classical* defines Volodos' style of playing as *neo-romantic*: 'Arcadi Volodos is a neo-romantic in the best sense of the word: he engenders in his audience a wide range of emotional responses, from serenity to rousing excitement, without ever loosening the reins of a guiding intellect' (1997, *Sony Classical* CLOSK 62691). I think this description fits in well with my proposed approach to piano technique and artistic style, as I am building my piano method on the values of the Romantic tradition. The power of emotional expression, passionate spontaneous virtuosity and a strong sense of individuality attract me to this kind of art. I firmly believe that because of its potential capacity to communicate emotions, and thus touch 'the innermost strings of the heart', this approach to piano performance is relevant, valuable and essential for the contemporary audience.

There is a general perception among pianists and music lovers of what they call ‘the Russian technique’ which I often hear when my own performances are being discussed by the audience. Perhaps this notion has been formed by a range of certain distinctive qualities that most Russian concert performers possess, such as virtuosity, powerful sound and accuracy. But there is, in fact, no such thing as a unified Russian piano school or technique. Many significant piano schools and methods arose in Russia in the last century. Some of the most famous Russian piano pedagogues of the twentieth century were Henrich Neuhaus, Leonid Nikolaev, Anna Schmidt-Shklovskaya, Sophia Lakhovitskaya, Alexander Goldenweiser and Bertha Maranz. Currently there are Eliso Virsaladze and Dmitri Bashkirov. However, besides sharing some key values, these individuals often differ greatly in their approach to piano touch and technique, as in their methodologies.

Following Yakovlev’s definition of *organic* singing, I will refer to my proposed approach to piano playing as an *organic* piano technique**.** In this chapter I will suggest some fundamental principles while also providing guidelines to their practical application. The method I am developing is not a common one among modern piano practices. It incorporates Yakovlev’s vocal exercises into a piano routine, and places great emphasis on maximising artistic expression, something which typified the performing arts during the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, it is connected to the Russian post-Romantic tradition through such pianists as Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943) and Josef Lhevinne (1874-1944). Among the other arts it is also associated with singers Fyodor Chalyapin (1873-1938), Antonina Nezdanova (1873-1950), Leonid Sobinov (1872-1934), dramatic actor Constantine Stanislavski (1863-1938), and violinist Jascha Heifetz (1901-1987). Besides the powerful emotional impact, virtuoso technique appears to be another attribute of this artistic tradition. The unique quality of such virtuosity was its spontaneous nature, filled with abundance of expressive nuances. The virtuoso technique of the abovementioned artists never became lifeless and mechanical. What was the secret of this amazing mastery?

Yakovlev's ideas were formed during the same period, when he was able to provide actual physiological evidence of such technique in vocal art. This is hinted at in his words:

> At the foundation of the organised vocal movement lies the neural process of merging the auditory and motor stimuli. The technical skills of the singer need to be almost automatic, a reflexive response to what is dictated by his inner hearing and artistic aims (1959, 28).

Thus, Yakovlev's school possessed the knowledge of how to develop a highly advanced virtuoso technique that was also strongly tied to the expressive individuality and artistic aims of the singer. The principle aim of my work is to find the way to the same phenomena in piano playing.

4.1. Preliminary Vocal Warm-up: from the Voice to the Hands

A distinctive feature of my proposed piano method is its employment of Yakovlev's vocalizing exercises followed by beautiful melodious folk songs, preceding piano practice or performance. This I have myself experienced as a centering, stimulating and relaxing activity.

Why in the case of a pianist is it that Yakovlev's exercises serve to stimulate the hands and to bring them into a state of balance and readiness? In the light of the theory of *funzione d'attacco* these vocal exercises serve to stimulate and draw various areas of the brain into the process of musical performance, thus helping the hands to naturally find movements that closely correspond to the pianist's inner musical impulses. Such a process of adopting sensations from the voice to the hands happens almost on the intuitive level. However, with practice, the connection between the vocal and pianistic motor-sensory responses becomes gradually more established, and then those first intuitive sensations develop into practical skills.

Therefore, the preliminary vocal warm-up serves to awaken the sensory connection between musical bodily movements and the centers of the cerebrum, in other words for the awakening of *funzione d'attacco.* According to Pirozerskaya, the preliminary vocal warm-up is necessary to help free the body to produce the differentiated movement which forms the foundation of an instrumental technique. If sung in accordance with Yakovlev's principles (with the precise, supple initiation of sound, without 'scooping' between the notes or any force in the larynx and so with pure intonation) these vocal sessions involve the musician's entire being in this process of deeply self-connected *organic* singing. Besides creating a high level of awareness of one's inner hearing, this way of singing has a relaxing effect on the singer's muscles and nerves. In my case, as well as that of my piano students, taught by this method, such preliminary singing generally seems to stimulate the artistic inspiration and promote readiness.

Why is it easier to achieve the desired musical expression through *organic* singing rather than piano playing? Pirozerskaya claims the vocal organ to be the 'youngest' of all sensory organs, as well as the closest to the brain (2003, 26). She calls the singing voice the 'essence of one's inner self' (2006, 9). Vocal muscle is closer to the brain than the hands and thus more responsive. After a preliminary vocal warm-up, the hands, 'channeled and tuned' by the voice, create new cerebral links to different centers of the brain by transferring the artistic energy of the performer onto the keyboard.

De Alcantara defines music technique as the 'psycho-physical means of actualising a musical conception' and also points out that if one accepts this definition, one needs to understand the necessity of training the brain, or, more precisely, 'the connection that exists between brain and muscle via the nerves.' (1997, 171) By stimulating various areas of the cerebrum, I believe that Yakovlev's vocal exercises provide such training. I also hold that the phenomenon of *funzione d'attacco* has enormous potential for the growth of a musician's virtuosity, artistic imagination and expressive sound range.

‘During *organic* singing the vocal organ begins to function as a key system that has under its authority the pathways to the “ancient levels” of the brain, which lead to a reservoir of creative energy’ (Pirozerskaya 2003, 63). A leading South-African psychiatrist Jonathan Moch confirmed Pirozerskaya’s words, and also referred to another area of the brain called the *amygdala*, in which the emotional memories are stored. It is this part of the brain that he believes (following my description of various sensations, experienced during piano playing or vocalizing Yakovlev’s exercises) to be accessed and stimulated during this process (Johannesburg, 27 October 2007).

I would like to refer to Chopin, Martienssen, Lhevinne and Pirozerskaya who pinpointed the connection between the functioning of the pianist’s hands and the singing voice. Pirozerskaya believes that the weight of the hand in piano playing plays a similar role to the ‘air-bow’ for the larynx during vocal breathing and sound production. Chopin compares the function of the pianist’s wrists with vocal breathing: ‘The wrist: respiration in the voice’ (quoted in Eigeldinger 1986, 45).

Martienssen refers to the connection between the vocal and pianistic apparati in relation to their sensory function:

> For the pianist the fingertips play the same role as the larynx for the singer. Psychological and physiological research determines that in our bodies only the tip of the tongue is more sensitive then the fingertips (1966 [1951], 190).

By this Martienssen is certainly alerting one’s attention to the proprioceptive sensitivity of both the larynx and the fingertips.

Lhevinne draws his own comparison between the functioning of the two apparati:

> Just as the voice immediately reflects in its quality the emotions of great joy, pain, sorrow, scorn, meanness and horror, so do the fingers and the arm in a somewhat similar fashion respond to these emotions, and represent them in playing for those who have mastered the technique of playing sufficiently to not be concerned with details which should become automatic (1972 [1924], 26).

I hypothesise that Yakovlev's finding on the development of the phonematic *trace* reflex in the brain progressively from the phoneme 'oo' through 'aw' to 'aah' which is linked to the corresponding physiological processes in the larynx, can be applied to a progressive development of different elements of piano technique (for example, *staccato,* double notes octaves, *cantabile,* arpeggios), where the sequence of the elements would be chosen according to students' pianistic inclinations. It is also possible that vocal exercises with alternating phonemes enhance the natural transition of the hands from one element of piano technique to another.

It is possible, then, that the singing of Yakovlev's exercises in different registers stimulates the development of various aspects of piano technique: a type of link between the voice and the hands possibly exists. After years of self-observation, I feel that singing in a low register enhances warm, expressive *cantabile* piano tone, while also stimulating octave/chordal technique. A light *staccato* singing enhances the hands' light mobility and flexibility, and also helps to form a precise, focused, penetrating piano touch. Singing in a high register, on the other hand, seems to stimulate velocity in the fingers. As this is only a preliminary hypothesis at this point, I need to continue researching the relationship between these elements and qualities before drawing a sound conclusion.

My own hypothesis on the matter is that a voice with developing *funzione d'attacco* conveys powerful vocal therapy for the revival of the nerve-muscular complexes of all motor functions of the human body including the hands – the apparatus of the pianist.

4.2. The core features of my proposed *organic* approach

In my proposed piano method the attitude to sound determines the way in which the technical skills of the pianist are formed. I regard this to be a core feature of *organic*

piano technique. My perception of piano technique shows fundamental similarities to the views of various authorities in piano pedagogy.

The principles of the famous German piano pedagogue Carl Adolph Martienssen in many ways correspond with those of Yakovlev. Martienssen saw piano technique as an individual phenomenon determined by the specifics of the particular pianist's inner hearing and ability to create and structure sound in the imagination (which Martienssen called 'the sound-creative will'). His pedagogical principles sprang from the piano pedagogy of Liszt.[26] Martienssen rated the psychic element of music-making even higher than its physical realisation. In his view, the body should only make sounds that corresponded with the inner sound ideal. He speaks of 'animated hearing` which can 'electrify all ten fingers and the nerve endings of the pianist with the power of creative imagination` (1977 [1957], 33). Martienssen determines the function of such hearing as informing the brain and sending back sensory instructions in the form of impulses that flow into the playing fingers.

De Alcantara provides an insight into the *Alexandrian* approach to instrumental technique by capturing some 'thoughts in action':[27]

> I conceive certain sounds, articulation, and dynamics; I command my arms, hands, and fingers to move as needed to make those imagined sounds real … everything I do with my body is the result of a command from my brain (1997, 55).

Gregory Kogan quotes Ferruccio Busoni as saying that technique, which according to the latter, forms only part of the art of piano playing, does not lie just in the fingers, wrists, or physical strength and endurance. 'The highest technique is concentrated in the brain.'(quoted in 1971, 36). Reflecting on his interview with Volodos, Bob Benson writes:

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[26] Martienssen studied under Reisenhauer and Klindwort who were pupils of Liszt.

[27] An approach based on the principles of *Alexander* technique.

> How does he maintain his prodigious virtuosity? By practising intensely, but not too much… usually devoting about two hours daily. Volodos, famous for spectacular Horowitzian virtuosity, describes that very virtuosity by saying it is more in the head that in the fingers (Baltimore, March 2001. http://classicalcdreview.com/avint.htm).

Pirozerskaya refers to Schmidt-Shklovskaya's piano method as an example of natural piano technique. Her students' principle task was not to 'repeat the movement` but to 'find the sound` (1985, 6). As a result a strong relationship between the desired sound quality and corresponding sensation in the hands will develop. Schmidt-Shklovskaya's aims were to achieve the maximum 'fusion` with the piano and a natural spontaneous performance. I think this captures the essence of the notion of *organic* technique in Yakovlev's sense.

4.3. The hands as the apparatus of the pianist

Praising the hands as a pianistic apparatus, Neuhaus believed that the anatomy of the human hand is ideal from the point of view of the pianist: it is a convenient, suitable and intelligent mechanism which provides a wealth of possibilities for extracting the most varied tones out of the piano.

My concept of the pianist's hands functioning as sensory organs in the process of musical performance was inspired by Yakovlev's theory of *funzione d'attacco*. French pianist and scholar Luigi Bonpensiere as well as Israeli pedagogue Vladimir Maazel support the same view.

In 1950s Bonpensiere developed his method of *Ideo-Kinetics*. He believed that it could greatly contribute to the art of piano playing by revealing some of the deepest secrets and the unsuspected capacity of the nervous system. Bonpensiere hypothesises on the existence of an additional range of functions of the sensory organs:

> Hypothesis after hypothesis, nothing could explain how, at the faintest mental image of a series of sound, the hands, having lain inert, would bring to action with a competence that the most attentive will could not have imparted. What we may discover some day is the existence of another aspect of our sense organs – an aspect of their functions not reacting to external stimuli as we know them, but as intimate links of connection between the activity of the individual and the intentions of Nature (1952, 38).

Earlier during the same era Yakovlev identified this special dimension in vocal art as the phenomenon of *funzione d'attacco.*

As the result of extensive research into the hands in relation to musical performance nowadays, Maazel came to the conclusion that the fingertips are amazing sensory organs endowed with their own sensations: almost 'a gift of fore-hearing` (2004, 7). This statement is strongly reminiscent of Yakovlev's physiological explanation of the *funzione d'attacco* phenomenon, and also points to the hand's functioning as a sensory organ in a process of musical performance. Maazel believes that the resources of the hand as a musical performing apparatus are 'truly unlimited` and insufficiently investigated (2004, 38).

Maazel's point of view leads to a highly elaborate perception of the pianist's hands, and reaches far beyond their physical features or limitations. 'A conscientious musician does not indulge in the feeling of anatomical inadequacy… Regardless of their size and shape, hands used in harmonious co-ordination with the whole self have all the power, suppleness, precision, and speed needed for every task' (de Alcantara 1997, 143).

4.4. Sound initiation and piano touch

I perceive the moment of sound formation (in the case of piano playing, the moment of physical contact with the instrument) as a combined effort of will-power, nerves, intense concentration of the inner hearing, breathing, muscular-motor and other bodily

responses. Smidt-Shklovskaya advises that in order for the sound to correlate with one's inner ideal, one needs to 'execute the sound directly and immediately, "in one go", without taking aim at it or hesitating causing muscle spasms' (1985, 28). That coincides with Pirozerskaya's means of vocal sound initiation: a spontaneous, direct vocal touch without any tension, force or 'scooping' between the notes. Pirozerskaya aims for an 'inaudible', supple beginning of the vocal sound, and I believe that, accordingly, a piano tone should be executed without any thrust or spasms, particularly without hitting or 'pricking' the keys with the fingers. The desired timbre should reflect in one's sound directly and not be wasted on ungainly 'expressive' gestures and postures. Such pure piano tone, born directly from the fingertips as by some kind of a nerves impulse, forms the foundation of my proposed piano technique.

'When an experienced, caring doctor handles a patient with this kind of touch – secure, warm, reassuring, life-giving – the patient immediately responds by relaxing and opening up. So should a piano when touched by the pianist' (de Alcantara 1997, 137). Similar to this is a poetic description of the process of piano touch attributed to Chopin:

> The fingers should sink, immerse themselves somehow in the depths of the piano – in *piano* as well as in *forte* playing – drawing from it that sustained, melancholy sound which ….is able to bring out from even the least melodious instrument a singing quality close to that of the Italian singers (quoted in Eigeldinger 1986, p.31).

Chopin insisted that one should 'mould the keyboard with a velvet hand and feel the key rather than striking it!' (cited in 1986, 31).
Schmidt-Shklovskaya describes piano touch as 'the fingers blending with the keys`. Her sound ideal was a 'singing' piano tone which completely removed any impression of hammering (1985, 5). In relation to piano touch Neuhaus quotes Rachmaninov's description of the fingers 'growing through the keyboard' (1973, 62).

Stiffness anywhere in the body should not create an obstacle for the organic flow of sound. The body resembles a channel, where the sound (or rather the sound idea in the form of impulses from the brain) runs through the body to the fingertips, giving it its

final shape and realisation. The fewer obstacles those impulses meet on the way to the fingertips, the more natural and precise will be their realisation in the piano sound. Schmidt-Shklovskaya calls such a condition the ‘flowing penetration of sound` (1985, 17). This term means the absence of any tension, fixations or spasms: it is a condition of total freedom and fusion of the pianist with the instrument.

4.5. Hand position

As in Yakovlev’s vocal method, my proposed piano method will work to preserve the uniqueness of the individual piano touch, sound palette and artistic personality of the student. Birmack quotes physiologist Steinhausen as saying: ‘The nature of the sound ideal that lives in the psyche of a pianist determines the shape of his technical movements’ (cited in 1973, 14).
This statement symbolises my own approach to the question of hand position on the piano. In the light of *funzione d’attacco* the formation of the pianist’s hand position is strongly linked to the awakening of proprioceptive sensitivity in the fingertips, determined by the way his/her brain responds to the inner musical impulses.

Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938), one of the greatest piano virtuosos of his time (who was also Neuhaus’ piano lecturer), believed that the ‘whole secret of talent and of genius is that in the case of a person so gifted, music lives a full life in his brain before he even touches a keyboard or draws a bow across the string’ (quoted in 1997, 177). In the case of those children with highly developed musical feelings and inner artistic impulses, a beautiful hand position forms almost naturally as a reflection of a sensory ‘projective’ musical apparatus of the cerebrum. In such cases the teacher’s role is not to spoil those inborn pianistic reflexes by imposing some stagnant ‘rules’ of finger action upon a gifted child. An aesthetically pleasing, relaxed and effortless look of the hands on the keyboard is the product of the pianist’s mastery over his/her inner psycho-physiological musical process and thus over the instrument. Through my own experience as a student with

different teachers, I have come to the conclusion that by constantly drawing the pupil's attention to the outer shape and look of the hands, a piano pedagogue will not be able to get to the inner core of the pupil's technical problems, and thus to help him or her to solve them completely. 'Human growth is never ending, and each individual develops in a unique way. If you could find a "right position", it would be right for you only' (de Alcantara 1997, 14).

Two of my gifted young pupils, Kimon Pienaar and Ssanyu Sematimba were brought up within my proposed piano method from their first contact with the piano. A few of my colleagues as well as the children's parents, pointed out to me while they were playing, that Kimon's and Ssanyu's hands look very much like my own. In a similar way my parents (who knew Professor Gankina) insist that during the past three to four years my hands have started to look very much like Gankina's hands on the piano. Interestingly enough when I studied with Gankina from 1992 to 1995, there had been no sign of this in my playing, and I had absolutely no intention of 'copying' the look of her hands. On the contrary, I was very protective of my own hand position. I believe that a phenomenon such as this occurs when a gifted student, being highly responsive to a teacher's method, naturally captures some features of the teacher's own piano mastery. It is not possible to achieve this level by means of any visual imitation.

4.6. Brief Insight into Chopin's Piano Pedagogy

Another strong focus of my method lies in the continuity of the piano tone, organic sound flow, vocal-like *cantabile*, and the richness of nuances and expressive potential of the piano touch. My way strongly emphasises the beauty and quality of the piano tone and the transmission of the desired expression through piano touch.

I feel that Frederick Chopin's pedagogical principles show deep similarities to my proposed piano method. His interpretation of several aspects of piano technique is

related to my research. Like me, Chopin also based the principles of his piano technique on a vocal ideal. Unfortunately, due to the lack of information one cannot be certain how he applied it to piano playing in practice. In the 1840s Frederick Chopin intended to write a comprehensive piano method, which was unfortunately neither completed nor published. In his book *Chopin: pianist and teacher* Professor Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger (University of Geneva) provides a fragmented insight into this method based on Chopin's unfinished writings and the words of his students. Chopin's technique represents the most beautiful flower of Romantic pianism, and though it would not naturally suit all styles of piano music, it contains invaluable links to the *organic* approach to piano playing.

Chopin advocated intense listening concentration; in his definition of piano technique, the sound production, or the art of touch, comes before the acquisition of virtuosity. Madame Courty and Louis Aguettant, who were pupils of Chopin, captured some specifics of his approach:

> Naturalness, naturalness, no forcing, and a taut and balanced rhythm…..; all this, in conjunction with an extreme poetic sense – without any exaggeration, above all in the tempo – goes to make up that unparalleled beauty characteristic of the true pupils of this [Chopin's] exquisite school, so often misunderstood (quoted in Eigeldinger 1986, 54).

The parallel drawn from this statement to Yakovlev's principles is obvious.

Eigeldinger explains that 'in Chopin's playing, the fingers activate the whole arm: all his technical innovations rest upon the feeling of perfect continuity from the shoulder to the tips of the fingers' (1986, 18). The feeling described here corresponds to Smidt-Shklovskaya's requirement of sensing the hand as 'one unit from the body to the fingertips' (1985, 18). There is a saying attributed variously to Ferruccio Busoni and Dinu Lipatti: 'A pianist should play with arms of spaghetti and fingers of steel' (cited in de Alcantara 1997, 138).

Karol Mikuli, known as one of Chopin's favourite pupils, recalls:

> On beginning a lesson, Chopin's main concern was to do away with every stiffness and convulsive or cramped movement of the hand, in order to obtain the primary requisite of organic playing: suppleness and with it independence of fingers (cited in 1986, 29).

Mikuli's words seem reminiscent of the condition described by Schmidt-Shklovskaya as the 'flowing penetration of sound', quoted earlier. Other students of Chopin, Marcelina Czartoryska, Adam Czartkowski and Cecylia Dzialynska, confirm his request for the hand to

> be supple and trained to flex as far as possible, without ever having to resort to the force of the elbow, except in *fortissimo* passages, and not always even then. Furthermore the hand should fall softly on the keys just with its own weight – as though to play *pianissimo*, often seeming to caress the keys; sometimes lying as though dead at the wrist, but keeping always a living, active link from each finger to the hand, concentrating the sensorial power in the extreme tips of the fingers (cited in 1986, 30).

Chopin makes an interesting observation that if the wrist is not passive, the sensorial power spreads through the whole hand right through to the fingers, paralysing them; according to him this robs the fingers of their freedom and tires the player. I think that Schmidt-Sklovskaya addresses a similar sensation as she believed that the pianist should be able to maintain control over the state of his hands without making 'relaxing movements' to relieve tension in the muscles. According to her, the control over pianistic sensations embraces the awareness of the state of the hands and a degree of conformity between the real sound production and the original sound ideal. The search for the correct sound, movements, and muscle tone should thus happen almost intuitively. She postulates that the economy, yet freedom of movement do not contradict one another. 'Just as giving up the "relaxing movements" is not a restraint, the tranquility is not a fixation` (1985, 8).

Here I would like to mention that Schmidt-Sklovskaya was known throughout the former Soviet Union for her successful treatment of pianists' hand injuries. Unlike other specialists, she began the treatment by activating the whole muscular apparatus,

reconstructing its working tone rather than insisting on the total relaxation of the muscles. According to de Alcantara, tension is an inevitable, necessary, and desirable factor of a musical performance and in itself is not negative. ‘A well-coordinated performer is not relaxed but collected: possessed of calmness and composture often through concentrated effort’ (1997, 265). What is harmful is the wrong kind and amount of tension, in the wrong places, for the wrong length of time.

Peru, a pupil of Chopin, shares the memory of a lesson where Chopin made him practise, constantly varying the attack of one single note, and showed him how he could obtain diverse sonorities from the same key, by striking it in twenty different ways. Professor Gankina once mentioned that her teacher Kalantarova used to give her students a similar task (Gankina spoke of twenty-seven different ways).

4.7. Finger Work

My proposed piano method is dependant upon the concept of finger isolation in Chopin’s sense rather than the common way of achieving it through mechanical ‘finger drilling’.

Chopin explains the difference between the two concepts**:**

> for a long time we have been acting against nature by training our fingers to be all equally powerful. As each finger is differently formed, it‘s better not to attempt to destroy the particular charm of each one’s touch but on the contrary to develop it. Each finger’s power is determined by its shape; the thumb having the most power,
> being the broadest, shortest and freest; the fifth as the other extremity of the hand; the third as the middle and the pivot; then the second and the fourth, the weakest one, the Siamese twin of the third, bound to it by a common ligament, and which people insist on trying to separate from the third – which is impossible, and, fortunately, unnecessary. As many different sounds as there are fingers (quoted in Eigeldinger 1986, 32-33).

Cultivating sensitivity of hearing and maximum suppleness of touch was the purpose of the exercises Chopin prescribed in the first lessons. He developed the finger's individual characteristics, prizing their natural inequality as a source of variety in sound.

Jan Kleczynski points at this specific approach:

> Chopin, from the first lesson, unceasingly directed the attention of the pupil to the freedom and independence of the fingers. He differs in this, I believe, from other professors who do not come to the independence of the fingers until after a long course of study (cited in 1986, 33).

I would add that even finger work includes a similar quality of timbre for every note in a passage combined with the strong sense of line and direction which Martienssen labeled 'will to forward motion' (1966 [1951], 44). Within that framework any dynamic variations are possible. This will assist in preserving the natural 'individuality' of touch of different fingers while coordinating their action.

Chopin stresses the importance of the 'emancipation of the thumb' (1986, 19), and I also see the flexibility of the thumb as a crucially important factor of good piano technique. Interestingly, for Smidt-Shklovskaya the principle aims of exercising were achieving the flexible mobility of the thumb during the change of positions, and smooth, organically flowing *legato.*

As the ultimate result of his finger training, Chopin wanted the fingers to be 'free, running over the keys without the slightest effort – but not superficially 'tickling' the keyboard, except in the most delicate passages' (quoted in 1986, 30). His ideal reminds me of the free, effortless fingers of Volodos and Gankina. Here I would like to add that for Martienssen the true aim of finger training was maximising their velocity (1977 [1957], 56). He, like Gankina and Volodos, advises keeping the fingers close to the keys.

What is a typical definition of a 'drilling', mechanical approach to piano technique? 'Technique is the ability to direct mentally and to execute physically all of the necessary

playing movements of left and right hands, arms and fingers' (de Alcantara 1997, 121). By defining technique this way, one risks equating the technical work with just training the body. Just as Yakovlev and Reid postulate that the singing process involves the totality of the individual, I see piano playing as a process embracing one's entire being. 'The self does not consist of two halves (body and mind) or three thirds (body, mind and spirit) that work together; it consists of a whole, so unified in its workings' (1997, 12).

Chopin expressed his opinion on such a mechanical approach to piano technique, thus:

> People have tried out all kinds of methods of learning to play the piano, methods that are tedious and useless and have nothing to do with the study of this instrument. It is like learning, for example, to walk on one's hands in order to go for a stroll. Eventually one is no longer able to walk properly on one's feet and not very well on one's hands either. It doesn't teach us how to play the *music* itself – and the type of difficulty we are practising is not the difficulty encountered in good music; the music of the great masters. It is an abstract difficulty, a new genre of acrobatics (quoted in 1986, 22).

'We hear it said of someone that he has "great technique" but an ugly sound. This is a patent absurdity' (de Alcantara 1997, 173). The musician with an 'ugly' sound might have great dexterity, which is but one aspect of technique, but he does not have a good technique.

Yakovlev warns about the consequences of forced singing. The synonym of forced sound expulsion in singing is the harsh, hammer-like execution of piano keys with a lack of concern for timbral and aesthetic quality of sound, as well as the 'athletic' interpretation of *fortissimo* when an enormous amount of physical strength is applied and the chords are 'hammered' into the piano. The result is a strangled, metallic sound that does not carry. The first sign of the forced approach to piano playing is a lack of warmth, vibration and continuity of tone on *cantabile* melodic passages (finger pricking effect, sound not flowing).

4.8. Restoring the balance

Pirozerskaya stresses that ‘a voice in possession of *funzione d’attacco* does not allow careless usage or odd interventions into the vocal technique; it can lose its timbres and organic flow’ (2001, 88). That ultimately applies to the pianist’s hands too! I believe that certain approaches to piano touch and technical development (particularly the development of the finger isolation and even finger work) as advocated by various other methods, can suppress the individuality of the pianist’s natural touch and sound qualities, and detract from one’s artistic aims. A commonly used method of developing equal strength of the fingers involves exercises with high finger action, a harsh hammering sound attack, and without any concern for timbral quality, dynamic or emotional intensity of the piano tone (which in other words, means omitting the music itself). This is counterproductive. Such an endeavour can lead one away from achieving the desired expression in performance, and it is pedagogically unsound to imagine that after this ‘finger drill’ the student is able to ‘put the music back into a performance’.

The loss of the hands’ harmonious fusion with the piano can result in all sorts of physical and emotional discomfort. That is where, I believe, a specific kind of gentle *piano* playing which I developed through my application of Yakovlev’s principles is useful. It could be described as practising *mezzo voce* where all the muscular force, ungainly movements and sound exaggerations, resulting from the pianist’s attempt to gain volume are removed, and the ‘exposed’ pure piano tone shows all its shortcomings in reflecting one’s true inner expression. Decreasing the volume in this case does not mean reducing the inner emotional intensity of every moment of the performance: on the contrary, one’s sense of inner rhythm, timbre and organic phrasing increases while the impulses in the fingertips sharpen, and the entire apparatus returns to its balanced state, free from any strain. Such gentle *piano* was known to be advised (especially at the initial stages of

learning a piece) and practised by several great piano virtuosos (Nicholai Rubinstein,[28] Busoni). If one's artistic aims are not yet clearly formed or if the pianist experiences general fatigue and lack of energy during a practicing session, then at least this way of playing will not spoil his/her artistic interpretation or do any harm to his/her piano technique by ruining the natural balance in the apparatus.

Thus, the purpose of such gentle *mezzo voce* playing is to avoid any forced dynamic expulsions which distort the natural flow of the music and create unbalanced sensations in the arms and hands. By practising 'full sound' without a clearly formed artistic concept or when tired, one can develop a forced, unnatural touch. The same can be developed through technical studies taken in isolation from the inner sound ideal. This will be followed by the loss of flexibility in the entire apparatus which will 'refuse' to respond directly to one's stimuli, and result in emotional and/or physical discomfort.

According to Yakovlev and Pirozerskaya the purpose of gentle *piano* singing is to ensure that the 'delicate strings' of the voice (the vocal folds that determine its timbral qualities) do not lose contact with breathing (Pirozerskaya 2001, 34). In a similar way, I see the purpose of *mezzo voce* playing in preserving the proprioceptive sensitivity in the fingertips. This 'frequent employment of *piano*, for the purpose of avoiding heaviness and clumsiness of the hand' is a characteristic feature in the method of Chopin (1986, 33).

In the case of *mezzo voce* playing with its balanced touch and intensification of inner hearing, the piece itself leads one to its natural technical realisation. Samuel Feinberg advises one 'to be attentive to the way the apparatus "reacts" to the new piece` (1978, 144).

[28] Nicholai Rubinstein (1835-1881) was the younger brother of Anton Rubinstein (a titan of Romantic pianism), and also one of the most significant pianists of his time (Liszt considered him to be the best performer of his *Dance Macabre*). He was the founder of the Moscow Conservatoire. Amongst his piano pupils were Tanyev, Zilotti, and Zauer.

When separating difficult passages during practicing, one needs to be unfailingly aware of the timbre, dynamics, and emotional atmosphere of that particular place in the piece while taking the passage out of the context. Just imagine sculpting an arm or a leg of a statue, and forgetting the features of the rest of the body, distorting the proportion.

If I happen to stray from the desired timbre, emotional tone and natural phrasing, I always experience strange running, 'biting' sensations throughout my right arm. It seems initially as if my right hand is experiencing internal discomfort and technical difficulties. But the moment I am able to grasp the momentum of the piece and its basic form, these unpleasant sensations vanish! What taught my right hand to react to the slightest deviations from my inner artistic ideal? This question still needs an answer. At first I treated these sensations as negative and problematic, but later I began to see them as a positive symptom.

4.9. Inborn Kinetics

Chopin advised his students to practice in the dark:
'When the eyes can see neither notes nor keys, when all disappears, only then does the hearing function with all its sensitivity…while the hand acquires an assurance and boldness that it cannot find when the player is constantly looking at the keys.' (quoted in Eigeldinger 1986, 28) These words relate to the question of creating an organic connection between the spheres of the emotional/hearing and motor/muscular, and also point towards the natural inborn kinetics of the pianist's hands.

This brings me to the following observation by Feinberg, coinciding with one of the vital areas in my argument:

> One should not interfere with the way his/her natural motor ability manifests itself. How often training follows a mistaken path of preconceived solutions and hinders the direct and natural realisation of the inborn kinetics (1978, 144).

The whole idea is to stop ‘worrying` about the hands during playing or trying to be ‘in control` by consciously prescribing every movement; it is important to let go, on the contrary, ‘not do`, to let the conscious mind function only as creative source, in order to allow the subconscious mind and bodily impulses to take over the physical realisation. In this case, according to Feinberg, the hands will respond by finding the most natural, rational movements on the piano.

Bonpensiere’s method of *Ideo-Kinetics* illustrates a specific way of developing piano technique based on revealing and cultivating the natural kinetics of the pianist’s hands. The core principle of Bonpensiere’s method is contained in his words: ‘If instead of transmitting the performing volition, we withdraw it (another phase of specific volition) from any possible combination with the physic-motor apparatus, the act is inexorably bound to be performed in the most ideal realization` (1952, 9). Corresponding with Bonpensiere, de Alcantara speaks of the necessity of losing fear of missing notes: ‘play wrong notes quite willingly, with confidence and pleasure. Give up getting the right note and you will find freedom; find freedom, and you will get the right note’ (1997, 247).

Bonpensiere discovered that by using his method of *Ideo-Kinetics*, practising with one hand alone benefits the other (1952, 89). I at times use a similar method in my own practice, and especially with my students by making the hand that seems to function more naturally ‘teach’ the other to adopt certain sensations. The result is a rapid technical improvement of the way a musical phrase or passage is executed. At a later stage I would like to investigate this phenomenon further. Bonpensiere also speaks against prescribed fingering, arguing that the hand will naturally find and fix its own optimal workings. This phenomenon has also been repeatedly and successfully tested in my teaching and performance practice.

Feinberg uses the notion of ‘pianistic kinetics` speaking of the process of automating the movements of the pianist’s apparatus in a very similar way to Yakovlev’s motivation of vocal technical skill. *Automation*, in Yakovlev-Feinberg’s sense, means a specific process when a strong artistic impulse awakens corresponding sensations in the performing apparatus, until eventually this connection develops into a corresponding movement. In connection with this, Feinberg mentions that not all aspects of piano technique lie within the grasp of the performer’s conscious intentions: ‘Some of it comes intuitively; some is conceived in a sphere of the subconscious` (1978, 139-140). Martienssen also mentions the same dimension as Feinberg where ‘there is a monopoly of the subconscious powers and the sound-creative will` (Martienssen 1977 [1957], 98).

Feinberg notices in addition that unfortunately not only the ‘correct` sensations and movements but also the wrong ones can become automatic. For this reason he strongly advises the student not to rehearse the ‘problematic areas` of the pieces in the artist’s room a few minutes before the concert, because all the inaccuracies that occur as a result of the anxiety and adrenaline of the situation, can damage the correct technical movement and creep into the concert performance (1978, 152).

4.10. On Practising

According to Mikuli, Chopin invented a completely new method of piano playing that permitted him to reduce technical exercises to a minimum. I believe that my proposed method can greatly contribute to the improvement of the quality of the pianist’s practicing routine: knowing where the focus lies saves a great deal of time and energy. As Alexander said ‘a person who learned to work to a principle in doing one exercise will have learned to do all exercises’ (cited in de Alcantara 1997, 178). Indeed, musicians often take an exercise that is potentially beneficial and make it harmful in the way they practise it. No exercise is intrinsically healthy: it may become so according to the way it is executed.

Feinberg expresses his views on mechanical exercise thus:

> Unfortunately a young pianist often gets caught in a trap of mechanical repetition. The hands of the clock keep rotating as the fingers keep "bashing" their way through the passage, while the thoughts are far away… Let this persistent toiler ask himself: What skill is it exactly that is developing through this way of practising?' (1969, 140-141).

De Alcantara compiles his own description of a 'productive exercise':

> The ideal warm-up is not a series of physical or technical exercises, which would deny the wholeness of your being, but a simpler version of a gesture which affirms your wholeness. Use a scale or arpeggio, for instance, but execute it to principle from the first note onwards: using your whole, co-ordinated self, and infusing the gesture with musicality and rhythmic forward motion (1997, 196).

Many pianists distort the rhythm of musical phrases or passages in order to accommodate a technical ineptness while practising. In the mean time the muscles, being a form of organic life, are rhythmically constituted, and according to Husler and Rodd-Marling by rousing a muscle's rhythmic sense, deep-seated energies within it can be released. As Plato defined it, 'rhythm regulates movement' (quoted in Husler and Rodd-Marling 1965, 107), and I am convinced that in the same way a rhythmic clarity in piano performance makes for ease and freedom of the pianist's movements.

Thus, a rhythmic discipline is not a limitation for the pianist's freedom of interpretation, but its most important requirement. And if practising with distorted rhythm a pianist will not be able to regulate the body movements needed to master the technically demanding passages. 'Before you have achieved inner mastery of rhythm, your gestures at the instrument are primarily manifestations of technical shortcomings. Once you achieve mastery, your gestures are primarily manifestations of your interpretative freedom' (1997, 190).

Practising within the method of *organic* piano technique requires a high level of inner concentration, and that is why I believe that the duration of a daily practice should not

exceed three hours. ‘It is virtually impossible for a musician, however brilliant, to hear himself with due attention over too long a period of time’ (1997, 194). Both Leshetitsky and Heifetz were against practising 5-6 hours a day! ‘Quit at your best, and your impression of the total practice session will be entirely positive, increasing the likehood of success the following day’ (1997, 195).

‘Just as most people feel sated only after overeating, so you may feel technically secure only after over-practising. True control often feels like a lack of control’ (1997, 193). I would like to draw special attention to this important observation, as such an illusion greatly contributes to pre-concert anxiety. One responds to the exaltation of a concert situation by entering an extraordinary state of self. Birmack calls such a state ‘creative dominant’ and describes it as concentration of the stimulation in one of the areas of the cerebrum, which attracts the nerve impulses from the other areas (1973, 32). Enhanced by the emotions, this condition works to help the body towards the realisation of an activity, in other words enables the artist to lead his audience and to experience the moments of inspiration.

However, the pre-concert state certainly is an emotional exertion, quite unlike the common every-day state of mind, where under the pressure of rising anxiety, one often tends to indulge in the feeling of ‘losing control’. In many cases this results in incessant practising on the day of the concert, tiring the mind and the hands. A performer needs to come to terms with the fact that in a concert situation the hands will experience a couple of unpredictable sensations due to the extraordinary state of self, and instead of over practising, learn to ‘let go’.

4.11. *Fortissimo* Playing

The physical strength of one's hands is, indeed, very important for *fortissimo* playing. However, in order to produce a powerful sound which is sonorous and charged with emotional intensity, the pianist's physical strength needs to be combined with a strong inner drive that will uplift and transform the body in the necessary way.

Liszt's contemporaries spoke about the 'electrified' intensity of his riveting *crescendos* and *fortissimo*. Kogan pinpoints an interesting quality of Busoni's *fortissimo*: 'Even when compared to some other pianists, Busoni's playing lacked thunder, it possessed plenty of lightning. His sound did not drown the *tutti* of the orchestra but cut through it' (1971, 73). Kogan also refers to Alfred Cortot who felt that the effect of Busoni's *fortissimo* was a lot like Liszt's: 'Liszt's playing, according to his contemporaries, used to penetrate and lighten up everything around him. Busoni's playing was very similar' (cited in 1971, 73). I aim for the same indelible quality of *fortissimo* and *crescendo* which can enrich a performance with an electrifying energy that rivets the audience. I would describe the level of the inner concentration before executing a powerful *crescendo* or an octave/chord cascade, as the calm before a storm: as if the pianist's body is charged with electricity. And I strongly believe that the phenomenon of piano virtuosity takes its roots in this 'electrified' alert state of self.[29] In my opinion the answer to how a pianist of small stature produces a powerful *fortissimo* lies in his or her ability to attain this special condition.

To play loudly pianists often lift their shoulders and 'bear down' on the keyboard with contracted arms, wrists, hands, and fingers. Thus, such pianists first create tensions within themselves, and then instead of applying their body weight and strength to producing a sonorous *fortissimo,* they fight against those very tensions. I believe that loud playing requires even greater relaxation than quiet playing. I have noticed that I

[29] Prokofiev's music is filled with this kind of 'electricity'

slightly drop my head and shoulders a few moments before executing certain virtuoso passages, thus bringing my muscle tone to the required level of relaxation while my intense inner concentration (arising from anticipation of the passage) charges my apparatus to a high degree of sensory alertness. ‘Watch a cat jump up onto a table, and you will see how she goes down before jumping up. This is a universal principle’ (de Alcantara 1997, 247).

Professor Kalantarova, a student of the famous Anna Yessipova, made an interesting observation that the forearms (which are the common cause of hand fatigue and injuries) actually should not be ‘felt’ during *fortissimo* playing. This means that one should avoid heaviness and tension of these muscles, as the main power resources, in Kalantarova’s view, are concentrated in the back. Gankina, who was a student of Kalantarova, passed this advice on to me. During playing some powerful *fortissimo* passages I have noticed something that seems crucial: if the arms support the back, then the back supports the arms. And by using a strong back to free the arms during loud musical episodes, I can achieve a kind of sonority that is freely resonant, powerful yet luminous, and compellingly alive.

4.12. Floating Hand

One of the greatest piano virtuosos of his time, Josef Lhevinne left a written legacy containing clues to his mastery.[30] In his attempt to verbalise the sensations in his own hands while playing the piano, Lhevinne used a metaphor of ‘floating hand` (1972 [1924], 27). I find it an apt description of the specific feeling of the hands on the keyboard which I have always compared to a buoy on the surface of the water, as if some kind of a force keeps pushing the hands back to the surface while playing. This sensation requires ‘the entire absence of nervous tension or stiffening in the apparatus`

[30] Lhevinne devoted his life to concert performance more than to piano pedagogy.

(1972 [1924], 26). I believe that Lhevinne's 'floating hand' is the key to the warmth, richness and continuity of the piano tone as well as to the indefatigability of the hand during performance.

Chopin captured the core sensation of the 'floating hand' in the following words: "In simple repeated notes and octaves don't leave the key, but simply let the finger be softly pushed back up by the key itself" (quoted in 1986, 41). According to Kleczynski, Chopin also recommended that the fingers should fall freely and lightly, and that the hand should be held as though suspended in the air without weight. From playing this way 'the various qualities of tone came of themselves, and the hand was never fatigued' (quoted in 1986, 33). Smidt-Shklovskaya's comment on the execution of repetitions also corresponds with Lhevinne's conception of the 'floating hand':

> The movements of the vibrating fingers are very supple, almost unnoticeable. This way the fingertips do not slide along the keys and repetitions come out more accurately, as if after the first sound the rest are played by a kind of involuntary ricochet' (1985, 44).

As Rachmaninov's friend, Nicholai Medtner, also a pianist and composer, commented on his playing as follows:
'Rachmaninov's piano technique with all its energy, speed, power, and accuracy was based on "shaking" the movements out from within, in other words on a vibratory movement' (cited in Schmidt-Shklovskaya 1985, 44).

In his book *The Art of Piano Playing* Neuhaus alludes to the specific impression of 'spatial depth` in the sound palettes of several great pianists: 'a picture with a deep background and varying plans' (1973, 63). It has to do with mastering the skill of balancing the sound of different layers within the piano texture according to their place within the whole sound picture. This is achieved by distributing the weight of the hand among the different fingers to match the 'floating feeling` described by Lhevinne. For me Lhevinne's playing in his recordings is an ideal example of such textural 'layering'. Listening to him one gets the impression of 'spatial depth' similar to an experience of

Leonardo da Vinci's paintings. I am convinced that the key to this mastery lies within Lhevinne's concept of the 'floating hand' through the distribution of the weight of the hand among well-isolated fingers. Thus, the varied dynamics within musical phrases as well as the sound balance between different layers of the piano texture can be achieved.

4.13. Breathing

Breathing at the piano is also an important factor for achieving piano mastery. I consider calm, tension-free nasal breathing during piano playing an important component of a well-coordinated pianistic process. Many pianists suffer from stiffness in their vocal organ and unnatural breathing during piano playing, especially on melodic *cantabile* passages. Such pianists 'hiss along' during their performance. I myself experienced this problem for a short while, and I noticed that the exaggerated, stiff breathing occurs especially in *cantabile* passages, and not so much in the fast virtuoso runs. I have seen some serious cases of breathing disorders at the piano while teaching. One of my fifteen-year-old student's breathing on melodic passages was distorted and hazardous, making her dizzy and tired. At the same time her leg would stiffen on the pedal and occasionally start to shiver uncontrollably, causing the whole piano to shake.

I am certain that Yakovlev's approach to breathing can prevent this problem as this stiff, exaggerated breathing is just a form of compensation for the lack of expressiveness in the sound itself (in other words, for the poor tone quality). Pirozerskaya taught me a specific way of spontaneous shallow breathing while singing a musical phrase. At times while my voice gently followed the direction of the phrase, a quick (almost involuntary) breath would occur several times at various parts of the phrase. This had no negative effect on the musical logic and sound flow; on the contrary, it contributed to my free, relaxed state, and naturally blended with the music. Such smooth vocal-like flow is my ultimate aim for the piano *cantabile*, and I believe that Yakovlev's approach, taught to me by Pirozerskaya, is the practical link between the two.

Only recently have I realised the amazing implications of such a way of breathing for my freedom of movement at the piano. I have gained the ability to breathe freely and quietly at any *tempo* and anywhere while playing *cantabile* melodies, where my breathing is not dependently aligned with beginnings and/or endings of phrases.

4.14. Brief account of pedagogical application

My proposed piano method aims at awakening the whole creative musical personality of the individual. This holistic pedagogical approach benefits pupils at all levels and of all degrees of natural aptitude, even though only musically gifted children will be able to grasp its deepest core and essence. Yakovlev mentioned that his method is focused on a musically gifted student (1959, 70). I believe that my proposed piano method (deeply rooted in Yakovlev's *organic* singing) is able to provide stable training for musically gifted children by awakening their sensitivity of musical perception while cultivating their piano playing skills. In connection with this I refer to the world-famous piano pedagogue Henrich Neuhaus who stresses that piano pedagogy 'must encompass all degrees of talent` instead of emulating mediocrity (1973, 9). Neuhaus' method (like Yakovlev's) has the objective of creating a performing artist. He saw the making of a student's performance touching, exciting, and interesting for the audience, as one of the principle aims of piano pedagogy.

I see the principle task of piano pedagogy in narrowing the gulf between the inner artistic ideal and its physical realisation on the instrument. I fully support two of Martienssen's principles concerning elementary pedagogy. The first warns against enforcing the reading of notes onto very young children before cultivating their musical pitch, creative initiative and individual piano touch (1977 [1957, 48]. The second stresses the need for pedagogical inventiveness and creativity at the elementary stage (1977 [1957], 47).

An experienced, sensitive pedagogue should be able to ‘read’ the pupil (in other words, to establish the type of his/her personality, individual temperament and level of responsiveness in addition to purely musical abilities) in order to find the right approach for each individual. I would like to point out that a clear mental attitude, free from fear or preconceptions is an important condition for both teacher and student.

The art of piano playing, like all other fields of human knowledge, is taught in as many different ways as there are teachers**.** ‘Good teachers do their utmost to remove all the barriers that a pupil may have created to the correct execution of every exercise. In this sense every music teacher has to be a psychologist as well. ‘Patience, humour, imagination, and cunning are all as important to a good teacher as technical knowledge’ (de Alcantara 1997, 179). I believe this to be one of the key factors of successful music pedagogy. I know from my own teaching experience that for example, in the case of a pupil’s fear of fast *tempi*, a pedagogue needs to be a sensitive psychologist, in order to help him/her overcome the barrier of fear and free his/her natural virtuoso ability.

In regard to teaching the *Alexander* technique, de Alcantara explains the basic *Alexander* procedure as ‘the teacher’s giving you a stimulus, and your reacting to it’ (1997, 83). I continuously use my hands to monitor the posture and adjust the hand position of the pupil. And I have found that besides correcting, my guiding touch often gives encouragement, support and energy to the pupil. Vocal pedagogue Lamperti found an interesting way to describe the practical side of teaching vocal technique: ‘Technique is like animal training! Make them jump over the stick!.. Wait for a sign of the pupil’s intelligence before giving reasons’ (cited in Brown 1931, 139). This means that during the teaching process there are many ways of communicating an idea (or a sensation) to the pupil, which can be much more useful than a verbal explanation.

It is clear that during the process of training within my proposed piano method, it will become evident where the limitations of one’s natural musical abilities lie, and the ‘natural hierarchy’ will take place. Those who possess powerful artistic personalities will

have the potential to make their statement in the performing arts; others with creative analytical minds will make successful pedagogues, and some will benefit from the method to become creative, harmonious personalities and listeners.

CHAPTER V

A PEDAGOGICAL JOURNAL

I include my selected students' diaries not as a formal case study, but rather for the interest of the reader who is a piano teacher.

5.1. Ssanyu Sematimba

- Ssanyu's family comes from Uganda. At the age of five-and-a-half she came into my piano class at St Stithian's College.

18.05.2002: We spent most of Ssanyu's first piano lesson 'enacting' different characters: I played various piano pieces, and she had to create a scenario about her character by moving to the music around the classroom. She is a wonderful little actress, and certainly has an inborn sense of rhythm. Her appearance and dancing movements give me an impression that she is lyrical by nature. After the game I sat her on a chair close by, and sang eight bars of a beautiful *Vocalise* by Concone, accompanying myself on the piano (this *Vocalise* was taught to me by Pirozerskaya when I was small). Ssanyu loved the *Vocalise* and asked me to sing it again. I complied and asked her in return: 'Now would you like to try it?' With a smile she slowly answered, 'Yees'. I played a few arpeggios as an introduction, and then she came in: spot on pitch, vocalizing 'aah' with her beautiful deep contralto! The timbre of her voice is so unusual for a five year old, and her sound is so warm and melodious!

25.05.2002: After singing the *Vocalise* I taught Ssanyu Yakovlev's exercise forming the phoneme 'oo'. She thoroughly enjoyed travelling up and down the chromatic scale, singing the exercise from different notes and so trying out different registers. Her vocal intonation is so pure - she is a fascinating sight to see. I am sure that before me is a child with rare musical talent and inborn culture, shining through the way Ssanyu talks and

carries herself: a real ‘little princess’. I sat her at the piano and she started touching random keys all over the instrument. The movements of her hands and arms are naturally supple and pianistic. We have chosen the ‘best finger’ to play with: for Ssanyu it is the third finger (usually little children instinctively choose the finger with most proprioceptive sensitivity in the fingertip). I played a little tune imitating a cuckoo call, on two keys (one note for the left hand and one for the right) as Ssanyu was watching and singing: ‘oo’-‘OO’, ‘oo’-‘OO’, ‘oo’-‘OO’. She easily repeated the little song on the piano, and kept singing while she was playing. Next I taught her a tiny warm-up on the piano (my composed item) for two fingers (we used second and third); on the way I showed her the notes from C to G on the piano. This warm-up includes elementary articulation and has a particular rhythmic pattern.



Ssanyu’s hands are so relaxed and flexible; you can shape them like plastercine!

01.06.2002: After a preliminary vocal session we played Ssanyu’s warm-up first with the right hand (from middle C) and then with her left hand (from the lower C). She remembers it very well, plays at a steady tempo and with a beautiful light *staccato* at the end of the slurs. Then I introduced a little *Lullaby*, and while I was playing Ssanyu was humming along. We spent three minutes together creating lyrics to this tune: ‘I am like a small bird, called on a rainy day’. The image of the words blended well with the music. Ssanyu started to learn the melody on the piano:



And so we finished learning all the notes on the piano. Still using the third fingers and executing a most beautiful tone from the piano, Ssanyu discovered a hand coordination problem: after playing repeated As and Bs with different hands, the long As need to be played with the left hand only. This seems to throw Ssanyu off the familiar left-left, right-right pattern, and she kept faulting on the second long A.

05.06.2002: It took us two more lessons of practising by touching the sides of the piano or Ssanyu's lap with the correct hand, while singing the *Lullaby* together, before this co-ordination problem was solved. In two weeks time Ssanyu and I will play the *Lullaby* as a duet for the school's eisteddfod *Junior Night of the Stars*. I cannot wait to see how she reacts in the concert situation.

28.09.2002: The evening of Ssanyu's first concert performance. She seems calm and focused. We rehearsed on the grand piano in the chapel yesterday. Ssanyu is by far the youngest participant (she is not even six yet). She bowed gracefully before she seated herself at the piano, and I helped her to settle on the long piano stool which the two of us shared. I noticed a special poise in her posture (I have not seen her this way in the classroom). While I played my short introduction, Ssanyu's hands were resting on her lap (I prefer this to her keeping her hands in a static position on the notes while waiting for her entry). Without relying on me for any kind of indication, she slowly put her hands on the piano and began to play the melody. Her tone was lingering and mellow as if she was singing on the piano. Three bars before the end of the song the old co-ordination problem suddenly occurred, and Ssanyu pressed a wrong key. I decided to keep playing my accompaniment as if nothing had happened. Ssanyu left out the two

following notes (just the amount of time she needed to get her mind back on track), and then joined in with me and finished the piece in the same poised manner. Although she missed a few notes she did not get distracted by my continuing to play. She kept following the melody in her mind and came back in at the correct point. St Stithian's chapel, which seats close to 700 people, was filled to capacity. The way Ssanyu handled the concert situation was most impressive, and the audience gave her a hearty ovation.

20.02.2003: Ssanyu's piano technique is growing at a rapid pace. She is playing a varied repertoire and is asked to perform at every school music event. Her artistic personality permeates her performance more and more, and besides her exquisite piano tone, she has started to show finger velocity and distinctive sound clarity at fast *tempi.* She gives me so much joy!

14.05.2003: Ssanyu among other St. Stithian's pupils is playing an audition for a prestigious music event run by Sonya Raymond (Sonya is adjudicating the auditions herself). We have chosen a slow melodious piece with some elements of polyphony called *By the River* (From Nicholaev's *Piano Course*). After the audition Sonya admired the maturity of Ssanyu's musicianship and her ability to 'hold the audience' to the last note. Ssanyu became the only junior piano candidate chosen for the concert.

31.05.2003: Even though I have been teaching Ssanyu to read and write music notation, I still catch myself indulging in her amazing natural ability, and not insisting on her systematic reading firmly enough. I am thinking of entering her for the Grade One UNISA exam to balance her skills.

19.06.2003: Ssanyu's scales are exquisite. She is able to play them much faster than prescribed in the syllabus, and her legato runs sound like *perlé*. However, reading her exam pieces is not going so smoothly. Ssanyu cannot stand following prescribed fingering while reading, and only after a few 'battles' with me realises that the fingering I am insisting on is really logical (I wrote the fingering in her book following the

specifics of her hands). She also seems to experience some kind of inhibition between her right and left sides during playing while looking at the book. She does not really lose her place, but gets confused in the strangest way when playing and at the same time looking in the book. I wish I could get under her skin and find out what on earth she sees in the score that confuses her so!

07.07.2003: Ssanyu remembers all four of her piano pieces by memory. Now things will get moving!

27.07.2003: We have spent the whole lesson on the last exam piece, trying to achieve natural *rubato* and gradual long *ritenuto* at the end. I almost forget that I am working with a seven year old! Ssanyu's standard of musical perception is that of a fine musician: one can talk about the tiniest deviations of *tempo*, refined tone colours and sound balance.

16.11.2003: Ssanyu passed her exam with a distinction. We spent this lesson choosing a new repertoire, and settled on three pieces:
Clementi. *Sonatina*
Schumann. *First Loss*
Tchaikovsky. *Prayer* (last piece in his *Album for the Young*).
We also took a few of Czerny's S*tudies*, and agreed to sight-read something every lesson (for that we decided to use *Piano Course* by Lakhovitskaya, full of beautiful little pieces). Both Ssanyu and I are really looking so forward to 'conquering new heights'.

March 2004: Ssanyu left St Stithian's. Our lessons are becoming more and more irregular. I am very concerned.

07.05.2004: I agreed to drive to Ssanyu's home after work (once a week) to give her lessons, as there appear to be complications with her transport. The Sematimbas live in a beautiful home in Ferndale, and Ssanyu has a lovely private room with a piano. By now

she has a vocal repertoire of Russian and Italian songs which we treat ourselves to at the end of the preliminary vocal sessions. Today she sang my favourite traditional Italian lullaby, *Sleep Little One*. I love accompanying her voice: I am accompanying a musician whom I myself brought up! After the *Sonatina* we proceed with Tchaikovsky. What a magnificent sound quality this child possesses! We worked on Ssanyu's pedal in the Coda, where the sound reaches *ppp* marked in the score. Ssanyu is able to produce it without using *una corda.* That is how sensitive her fingertips have become.

28.07.04: Ssanyu performs her programme at the Johannesburg Festival and receives a diploma. Diane Heller appraises her unique sound quality and poised performance.

- To my deepest regret a number of family circumstances did not allow Ssanyu to continue regular professional training. It was not meant for Ssanyu to realise her musical ability and one day to walk onto the big concert stage where a talent of her calibre truly belongs. This pain, mixed with unforgettable memories of working with Ssanyu, left a deep imprint in my heart.

5.2. Sanderine Kao

- Sanderine joined my piano class in the middle of 2006. She grew up in Taiwan; studied accounting and presently lives and works here in Johannesburg. Music is her true passion. She has learned to play the piano, music theory and harmony privately for four years and is at approximately grade eight level. Sanderine is thirty-one years old, and has a dream of becoming a professional musician.

22.08.06: In our first lesson Sanderine is playing Chopin's *Nocturne in E major*. Her exceptional musicality is immediately noticeable as is her beautiful sound quality and her diligent approach to the score. I noticed a tendency to overindulge in little motives

and fragmented phrasing (thinking in small bits instead of grasping bigger phrases), and a lot of ungainly body movements. We have chosen two studies from Czerny's *Opus 740*, a *Polonaise* by Chopin, and *Tarantella* by Liszt.

29.09.06: Sanderine loves her pieces, and works diligently and with great perseverance. As we go we discover that certain areas of her musical knowledge are lacking. She is playing her pieces at a moderately slow *tempo*, pausing at times to 'get the right notes' but she seems very responsive to my advice on touch and phrasing.

10.01.07: Three months have passed but Sanderine is not showing fluency in her playing and still sticks to 'safe mode' *tempi*. Today I have decided to instruct her on increasing the tempi so that I can show her some real insight into piano mastery. What I saw was very disturbing: Sanderine has such a fear of fast *tempo,* that her mind together with her motor reflexes would go into a state of deep inhibition (almost shutdown) when I pushed her out of her 'comfort zone'. Her face had an expression of blind panic as her arms and fingers stiffened and 'stopped in their tracks', paralysed by her fear. I understood the seriousness of her condition. During a discussion on this matter it became clear that Sanderine is fully aware of her problem but cannot help it, however hard she tries.

- Sanderine is a petite lady with strong self-discipline and deep spirituality. She has a substantial knowledge of ancient philosophy and wisdom of India, China and Tibet, and practices meditation. Assured by these factors, I am hoping to help her overcome her fear through a 'psychological' approach to her pianistic process and also by distracting her from this problem through focusing on other aspects of piano playing.

June 2007: By now Sanderine has learned various piano skills, and her playing has improved in many ways. However, preserving the newly gained qualities at fast *tempi* is still very difficult for her, but she is eager to learn and her perseverance is truly amazing.

We seem to be putting the *Polonaise* together and have decided that she will perform it at my family gathering on 15 July.

15.07.07: Seated at the piano in a room full of people, Sanderine looked nervous, but also inspired. She showed some beautiful tone colours in the slower parts of the *Polonaise*, even though she had a couple of 'hiccups' in the virtuoso runs. Her hands stiffen as she approaches the virtuoso passage, and her fingers battle their way through. Obviously this negatively reflects on her sound quality. However, Sanderine never 'totally lost it', and got a warm applause from her friendly audience.

- This performance gave me the strong impression that Sanderine has reached her limit. I was running out of ideas on how I could improve her performance. At that point I thought of Yakovlev's vocal exercises. I have not yet tried this method with an adult student. Sanderine's problem is not in her hands but in her psyche and her nerves. Because of her genuine musicality and dedication to piano playing, in my heart I refuse to believe that this is the limit of her technical ability. Employing training in *organic* singing, plus working on Sanderine's repertoire (which is at concert level) means devoting at least two hours at a time to her lessons. Anyway I have decided to try.

23.07.07: Motivating my reasons for incorporating vocal sessions into her piano routine, I briefly explained the essence of Yakovlev's method and shared some of my own experiences with Sanderine. She was eager to try it. She easily adapted to the specific vocal touch required in Yakovlev's exercises and seemed to be comfortable shaping all the phonemes. She naturally sings very softly and with pure intonation. Her light vocal *staccato* is easy and supple but in one particular exercise she struggles to achieve a *legato* movement from the phoneme 'oo' to 'aw' and keeps singing it *non legato* no matter how many times I show her. Not one of my students seems to have any difficulty with this exercise. While she was singing I had the idea of asking her to sing a Taiwanese folk song of her choice. She sang a beautifully melodious song. I did not

understand the meaning of the words, but was moved by the song's refined simplicity and the depth of expression embedded in the melody. Sanderine communicated this expression through her singing well. I once again thought of my hypothesis that the worldwide native folk music is a treasury of captured inner feelings (as Yakovlev believes Russian folklore is). And I decided to use Taiwanese songs along with Russian folk songs to awaken her inner artistic personality, and draw her attention to beautiful natural phrasing and a richness of nuances in her singing voice.

05.09.07: Now I have found a way to Sanderine's true artistic self. Her phrasing and awareness of tone quality in relation to her inner hearing is rapidly improving. She is developing a lovely piano touch, even though the constant inhibition of her pianistic movements by the fear of fast *tempi* is distorting the formation of the 'floating' feeling of her hands on the keyboard.
As my next step in the on-going challenge of combating her fear I need to find a way to bring out her inborn kinetics, and teach her to trust her hands and allow them to find the optimal movements.

29.09-07: We are preparing the first movement of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto for an audition to play with the Johannesburg Symphony Orchestra (this was Sanderine's idea). By now I can see a noticeable improvement in her playing. Sanderine has captured the essence of *organic* singing with such ease that I let her practice Yakovlev's exercises at home without my supervision (which I do not allow other students to do). I predict that the process of mastering the *organic* piano technique will take her a few years (largely due to her deeply-seated faulty habits). The development of healthy piano playing skills is a delicate process which progresses at a different rate for each student. Regarding Sanderine's fear of fast *tempi*, I am inclined to believe that liberating the natural kinetics of her pianistic movements will have a positive effect on this problem. Anyway, I don't think that we can kill her fear by addressing this problem directly.

- ❖ I have a lot of faith in Sanderine's pianistic recovery. I truly believe that her amazing inclination towards *organic* singing and her sensitive musical perception will one day bring her emotions, muscles and nerves into the desired state of functional balance to enable her to fulfil her dream.

5.3. Denise Orege

- ❖ Denise came to me for an audition at the end of May 2007. She was about to start preparing for her Grade Two exam when her teacher immigrated to England.

I was astounded by the accuracy of her playing, as well as by her exceptionally mature demeanour. She is only seven years old. We spent quality time getting to know each other and choosing new pieces for her exam. She went home with specific instructions to prepare a section of each of the chosen pieces. I could not wait for her first lesson to see what she could do with these pieces on her own.

02.06.07: What she produced exceeded my every expectation. Denise not only completed the prescribed tasks, but went on to complete two of the pieces. It is obvious that besides her fast fingers and firm rhythm she also has an extraordinary grasp of the score. She seems able to hear and interpret the musical text. A pupil of this calibre is a dream to teach. Her hand coordination is very advanced. I find her touch generally quite heavy and her tone very plain and overly regular in everything she plays. Owing to her level of self-discipline and preparation, I did not have to spend a great deal of time helping her to learn the notes. I immediately proceeded to draw her attention to various musical qualities in her playing. Denise responded with great interest and attention.

16.06.07: Today I decided to focus on certain musical tasks. I chose two pieces – one old, one new. As she progressed, I would complicate her task to test her patience, perseverance and ability. We worked on eight bars of *'The Cuckoo and the Nightingale'* aiming firstly at achieving light *staccato,* then, the dynamics and phrasing, and finally at

bringing out the soprano voice inside the three-voice texture. The last task was not an easy one for Denise; but not for a minute of her hour-long lesson did she lose concentration. At the end of the lesson, as a reward for her brilliant work I offered to teach her to sing a song. I put her on a chair about two meters away while I sat at the piano. The real purpose of this was to introduce Denise to Yakovlev's *organic* singing as a way of lightening her piano touch and awakening her ear to a more colourful sound palette. Considering her seriousness and inclination to analyse and understand everything that is going on, instead of beginning with Yakovlev's exercises (which I thought she might find rather unfamiliar) I started singing and playing a beautiful, lively Russian folk song from my childhood (using my own English translation). After a few bars Denise's face lit up and she started 'dancing' on the chair and clapping in time with the catchy beat of the song. Two minutes later she was up and singing the song herself with great spirit.

Both Denise's parents (the family is of Kenyan origin) attend all her lessons, and earlier on I suggested to her mom that she start a journal recording the content of each lesson. Many times during the lessons, if she finds my comments really important, Denise stands up and tells her mom: 'Are you writing this down?'

23.05.07: I offered Denise the opportunity of participating in the Phillip H. Moore Music Competition (in the category eight and under) as by now I have all confidence in her. The whole family is excited about the competition. Not finding her three piano pieces contrasting enough, I added *The New Doll* by Tchaikovsky (taken from his *'Album for the Young*) two months before the competition. This piece is a grade above her current level, but well suited to her artistic personality.

07.07.07: Denise brought me *The New Doll* for the first time. Her parents bought her the entire book *'The Album for the Young'*, which she is very proud of. I started the session, alternating Yakovlev's exercises with the two songs she had already learned. Seated at the piano, Denise asked to play the piece with each hand separately first (which is most

unusual for her). Obviously she found this work more challenging than her other pieces. So now I sat back and let her play the piece one hand at a time. She needed some assistance with the left hand part, which consists of various double note repetitions. Her rhythm and most of the notes were correct but I could see that she was approaching this piece with caution. Even though her notes were still 'raw', I firmly drew her attention to phrasing and the flow of the music by showing her some beautiful curves of the melody and 'sighing' slurs in the middle section, playing those at a slower *tempo*. I need to distract her from the technical difficulty she has recently become aware of. Towards the end of the lesson, as Denise was playing the right hand part quite competently, I joined in playing the left.

28.07.07: After a short singing session Denise volunteered to try *The New Doll* with both hands together. Even though she played at a slower pace, it worked. From now on we will play it hands together most of the time.

04.08.07: We are working on two pieces for the first round of the competition. We have decided to leave *The New Doll* for the second and possibly the third rounds, if Denise makes it. We are trying to achieve consistency in dynamics and *legato* in the runs of the fast *Giga*. By now her touch has become easy and natural, even though her wonderfully isolated fingers sometimes run mechanically at a fast *tempo* and do not shape phrases.

11.08.07: Two weeks to go to the first round of the P. H. Moore Competition. I called my entire family into the piano room so that together with her parents, Denise could have an audience. I took her music book and sat in the corner of the room so that she could not see my face. She performed both her pieces in front of the audience for the first time. Three things are clearly noticeable: 1) she is not sure how fast to start the *Giga*, 2) her second piece *Garage Sale*, although played with the correct articulation and some dynamics, sounds rather lifeless, 3) she is looking around while playing trying to find me, as my voice and my presence are no longer there. We gave her a big round of applause, and I decided to speak to her about the mistakes the next lesson.

27.08.07: Day of Denise's performance in the first round of P. H. Moore. She is calm, focused and confident. As she is playing second last, she listens attentively to the other contestants seeming surprised at any mistakes made by the players. I touched her hands: they were cold - the only sign of pre-concert anxiety. I wrapped my jersey around her hands. When it was her turn, Denise stood up and confidently took her place at the piano. She played with clarity and rhythmic stability, and went through to the second round. Jenny Harzon (the adjudicator) told me after Denise's performance: 'As she began to play I was fascinated. Her sound has a different quality altogether from the other piano contestants'. Jenny and I briefly discussed Yakovlev and the *organic* piano technique during the interval.

14.09.2007: Tomorrow Denise will be playing at the second round. We have chosen *Garage Sale* and *The New Doll*. As Denise started playing *The New Doll* her hand co-ordination fell apart. She tried again and again, but at some point her hands would run away from each other. I had a silent moment of panic. Denise was very puzzled: 'What's wrong?' I replied: 'Nothing, it is your hands trying to play tricks on you but your mind is strong; it has just gone out for the day'. And I went on making up a whole story how the mind will come back tomorrow and sort the naughty hands out. Then she burst out laughing and the problem was forgotten. I asked her afterwards to play the left hand in the Coda, aiming for light *pianissimo* without losing a single note. Denise performed *Garage Sale* with great spirit at the end of the lesson. I asked her mom to spend the evening choosing her outfit for tomorrow, letting her lie in a warm bath and reading a nice bedtime story. I strictly forbad Denise to play the piano until the following morning. As she was leaving, she suddenly said that she could already see herself playing in the third round. What wonderful confidence! This was not an easy moment but I do feel I've done the right thing.

15.09.2007: Half an hour before the second round begins. Denise has symptoms of flu and looks a little down, but carries herself as if nothing is wrong. She begins her

performance with *The New Doll*. I close my eyes in anticipation of what is to happen. Denise played the first page with absolute clarity and at a lovely *tempo*, but then suddenly 'bumped' into a wrong chord in the left hand, got confused and stopped (she played by memory). My heart sank as I thought our dream to play in the final round was shattered. But without a minute's delay Denise turned to the adjudicators (Anneke Lamont and Amanda Louw) and politely asked them: 'May I please start again?' To my relief, both adjudicators agreed. And this time she played with amazing consistency and accuracy. *Garage Sale* was slightly lacking in artistic temperament but was played meticulously. As Denise left the stage and returned to her chair next to me, she sat for a few minutes as if frozen, and then burst into tears. There are a few more contestants to perform before the results are announced. I realise that Denise's condition is largely due to her flu, and while my father was comforting her, I kept telling her to wait and see: 'You never know'. But in my heart the hope was gone. Only two contestants were going to go through to the final round.

When Anneke Lamont stood up to announce the names of the two chosen candidates, Denise was crying on my father's shoulder and I was upset and a little distracted. And suddenly I thought I heard her name. I looked at Anneke: she was looking straight at us, holding Denise's letter for the Gala evening in her hand. Denise's mother whispered in my ear; 'It's us, it's us!' I could not believe this to be happening while the crying Denise went to fetch her letter. Everyone around was congratulating me. Denise's standard was so high that the adjudicators forgave her for stopping. At this point, overwhelmed, I burst into tears myself. Vicky Bennett, (daughter of P. H. Moore) looked at me surprised: 'I thought Russians don't cry!', she said. As she could see, they do.

22.09.2007: Gala Evening. Denise looks lovely in her beautiful dress and pretty hairstyle. She is happy, excited and full of energy. Today is so special: it is her eighth birthday. There are five adjudicators, and the hall is full. She played with incredible spirit and stamina. Her sound was soaring and rich with nuances, and she literally didn't

lose a note. Tonight Denise became a winner of P. H. Moore Competition in her age category.

5.4. Kimon Pienaar

- I heard Kimon sing for the first time at St. Stithian's Junior School. He was five-and-a-half years old. As he began to sing the prescribed melody in class – it stopped me in my tracks. He had a freely flowing melodious soprano and sung with such emotion! A year later we began piano lessons.

09.05.2005: Kimon's first lesson. I sat him at the piano and showed him the notes on the keyboard, as well as a few other basics. Afterwards I offered to teach him a tiny melody on the piano with my accompaniment. I was almost shocked by the clumsiness of his hands as he tried to produce the melody on the piano. His hands resembled the inflexible awkward hands of a total beginner, and there was no trace of that beautiful musicality that I had heard in his voice, in his piano touch. I am puzzled, but refuse to believe that a child so musically gifted could appear so mediocre at the piano. Immediately I introduced him to Yakovlev's exercises which he absolutely loved.

- Kimon's family has a rich cultural background. From his mother's side, it is Greek, and from his father's it is Afrikaans. At this time Kimon is already taking Greek lessons.

16.05.2005: Kimon remembers everything we did last week, including the melody on the piano (which he still plays without any sign of physical comfort or attention to sound quality). After approximately ten minutes Kimon asked me if we could sing some more 'warm-ups'. He sang the vocal exercises with the same enthusiasm (phoneme 'oo' on one note with various articulations, then 'oo' across to 'aah'). After that he sat at the piano and started playing his melody again. This time I drew his attention to the mood

conveyed in the song (it was a little tune in a minor key, beautifully blended with the teacher's accompaniment). I explained that the piano is alive and can sing with many different voices depending on how it is touched. In support, I offered to vocalize the melody while playing. As he started again, he stopped after a few bars, puzzled by the contradiction between his beautifully expressive, vocal intonation and 'grey' inexpressive piano tone. For a few moments Kimon examined his hands. Then he put them back on the piano trying the melody over and over several times. His face reflected intense concentration, while both of us were singing the melody together (vocalizing it on phoneme 'aah') as he played.

- The choice of phonemes for vocalizing a melody depends entirely on the particular student's vocal inclination. In the case of Kimon's natural vocal ability, the phoneme 'aah' was beautifully shaped (like his 'oo') and felt most natural to him. Pirozerskaya regards 'aah' to be an advanced phoneme, which easily shapes into a beautiful singing tone only after a period of regular training, except for those cases when the student is 'a singer by the grace of God'.

24.05.2005: He wanted to start playing straight away but I sat at the piano and began playing Yakovlev's exercises. Kimon happily followed, with such pure intonation and confidence. I introduced the exercise with the alternation of three phonemes: 'oo'-'aw'-'aah'. At first Kimon struggled to shape the 'aw', but soon produced the exercise with a beautiful *legato*.

- My piano class is a multi-cultural family, and it is fascinating for me to observe how students of different nationalities shape the phoneme 'aw': especially the English speaking children who usually mispronounce it. Phoneme 'aw' is a Russian vowel resembling a 'dark', closed Zulu sound.

After the vocal warm-up, I sat with Kimon at the piano and asked him to play the melody on his own (without my accompaniment). As he began, I could not believe my

eyes and ears: he was playing with a most sensitive touch, even with a hint of *crescendo-diminuendo*, and showed creativity by making a slight *ritenuto* at the end. Instead of his clumsy hands I saw flexible pianistic movements, as if his hands were 'breathing' together with the melody. His entire posture felt comfortable and settled. I have never seen such a sudden transformation in my entire pedagogical practice! I looked at him in admiration, and with a charming smile Kimon softly proclaimed: 'Now I know'.

- Since this day his progress at the piano has been remarkable. In a short while we have learnt an extensive repertoire of short piano pieces and piano exercises which I composed especially for him. I also translated a few Russian folk songs (which used to be Pirozerskaya's favourites) into English, trying to preserve their vowel sounds as much as I could, and started including them into his preliminary vocal sessions.

04.07.2005: Kimon's hands have become so 'alive' and flexible! He is showing excellent *staccato*: light, easy and so well coordinated. We have chosen a new programme of four pieces with more complex hand coordination and a variety of moods and articulation. Now we are starting a music manuscript book and learning music notation 'for real'.

Kimon is showing genuine interest in theoretical knowledge, and also has beautiful handwriting.

- I enjoy using a manuscript book where my students write notes and other musical symbols after my explanations. Being able to demonstrate what they write in their books on the piano is a compulsory task for all my students. I start using the prescribed theory material at a slightly later stage (depending on the students' general reading skills and maturity to work with those books without losing the practical link to the piano that we have developed).

12.10.2005: Kimon cannot stop yawning during his vocal session, and he finds it quite funny. I keep telling him to stop looking so apologetic, carry on vocalizing, and enjoy the sensation. We sing a song in two voices, changing parts. At the piano his hands are floppy and he is very sleepy (possibly tired after his afternoon sport). I instruct him to decrease the volume and we gently play through his entire programme. He feels comfortable and still plays with excellent rhythm and phrasing. I make a couple of suggestions, and ask him to go and rest. Not so keen to go, Kimon tries to 'promise' me that he will 'wake up and play properly', but I insist that the lesson ends.

- I often work overtime with Kimon. Lately he has started wearing a big watch (which would usually come off in the lessons), and as I announce the end of the lesson he would try to argue that the lesson was too short, pointing at the 'magic watch' (which he cannot yet properly read!).

15.11.2005: Kimon performs three pieces at the school assembly for the first time. He shows no nervousness and delivers everything with naturalness and clarity. He proudly responds to the applause.

16.04.2006: Kimon is grasping piano technique fast. His rhythm and finger action are becoming well-defined, and his playing shows growing individual expression. I teach him to vocalize *Ave Maria* by Schubert ('aah', no words), and once again he amazes me with his spontaneity and depth of musical feeling. If at the early stages of learning his dynamic range was *pp* to *mf*, now he is showing a tendency to increase the volume as well as trying chordal technique. He is developing a firm rhythmic will.

April 2006: Kimon's progress seems to be slowing down. This must be because of tiredness from all his extra-mural activities (he has not got a single free afternoon). There is also a lack of discipline in his home practising routine. Today he came for his lesson so tired after school that he could not even stand during the vocal warm-up (I let him sit in a chair)

- Unfortunately Kimon's home practising is becoming so unsystematic that he has started coming to lessons unprepared. He also from time to time loses his belongings. I am very concerned, but I cannot control his private life. Despite all this his piano tone and touch are still as beautiful as always.

June 2006: I left St. Stithian's, and Kimon's lessons are now at my home.

13.09.2006: Kimon played two short compositions of his own. They were slightly unfinished, but had lovely musical ideas and individual rhythm. We worked on his piano exercises and two S*tudies* by Czerny and Gnesina. The sensation of 'floating hand' is natural for Kimon. We are working on even sound flow, phrasing and sense of direction in each particular exercise. He enjoys that intense listening concentration, and giggles when the sounds are uneven or stick out. He played two pieces by Mozart and Tchaikovsky where he displayed beautiful articulation and phrasing, even though the hand coordination does not seem to come so easily. Kimon works with great perseverance.

03.03.2007: Due to a number of circumstances we had a few months break. Upon Kimon's return I find his piano touch unspoiled and he can still play most of his repertoire. But I noticed an unusual lack of concentration on his tasks, as if his mind is drifting somewhere else while I am talking. It took me forty-five minutes to bring him into an alert responsive state. He also shows reluctance to read music (which before was not a problem). Apparently he is experiencing similar problems at school (he is currently in Grade Three). We have chosen two new pieces.

15.05.2007: Kimon's productivity during the lessons seems to be improving. However, he yawns incessantly and stretches every two or three minutes and again is very distracted where reading music is involved. His perseverance regarding music reading also seems to be declining and he looks for audio-visual clues as I play extracts of his

pieces. I stopped the lesson and switched to Yakovlev's exercises. Kimon is struggling to maintain a steady standing posture (he leans on everything he can around him, a few times trying to sit down), but after five minutes gets carried away with singing and becomes 'bright and shiny' again. When seated back at the piano he starts asking questions in regard to the score, and then works to his usual standard. But most of the lesson is over by then and he only has ten minutes left. I go a little over time as he doesn't want to stop.

02.06.2007: Kimon's tired, sleepy, droopy state is becoming chronic. Now we have two short singing sessions, one at the beginning and one in the middle of the lesson, as Yakovlev's exercises certainly work to clear his 'foggy', unfocussed state of self. He is playing Grade Two to Three repertoires. His sensitive ear and extraordinary memory keep him 'afloat' but there is no discipline in his home practicing.

12.06.2007: I mention the P. H. Moore Competition. Kimon is thrilled. We have chosen three contrasting pieces and decided to have lessons twice a week.

29.08.2007: P. H. Moore Competition (Jeppe High School for Girls). Kimon is a little nervous and we spent ten minutes in the practice room singing Yakovlev's exercises, getting into 'artistic mode', and playing just a few bars of each piece. While waiting for his turn and listening to other children of his age category (ten and under) he was holding my hand with both of his. A moment before the adjudicator announced his entry, Kimon whispered in my ear: 'I will die!' on which I calmly replied: 'No, you will not, just picture my stage image for a few minutes, and go.' Being at most of my solo concert performances, Kimon with his sharp mind has obviously picked up some features of my own stage appearance and concentration. He walked onto the stage poised, without a sign of agitation, gracefully bowed, sat at the piano, closed his eyes for a few moments and then began the *Adagio*. In the audience there was a hush. Kimon played most of the *Adagio* with his eyes closed. His piano tone was superb and his phrases flowed with poignancy and ease. He was singing his heart on that stage and completely captured his

audience. Then, after a warm round of applause he performed *The Dance* a little slower than usual, but with perfect rhythmic control and clarity. Ending on a long fermata, Kimon let the sounds fade, and still did not move for a few moments after which the applause of the audience broke the silence. He walked off the stage in the same poised manner. Carel Henn (the adjudicator) in his address to the participants pointed out Kimon's unique sound quality and his special presence on stage. Kimon went through to the second round.

5.5. My two experiences with preliminary vocal warm-up

26.03.2006: During my session of songs and vocal exercises (always self-accompanied on the piano) I have pinpointed a distinct sensation: there is a kind of sensory response in the head to every sound, whether I create it with my voice or my hands. It seems as if some image-reflection-perception of that sound in the brain records its intensity, timbre and pitch! And to each differently pitched sound there is also a unique reflection-response in my head. It seems as if during singing as well as piano playing (with the condition of having the same inner artistic idea of the melody produced) the same areas of the brain are stimulated, resulting in similar responses.

16.09.2006: After rehearsing Chopin's *Piano Concerto No I in e minor* on an atrocious piano with Johannesburg Symphony Orchestra, I started feeling pain in my right arm. On arriving home after the rehearsal, I set down at my piano and began singing Yakovlev's exercises. My phonemes were as 'paralyzed', and at the same time the usual lightness and natural bounciness of my hands was gone. After approximately twenty minutes of singing I began to feel distinct sensations reflecting in my head from my singing sound, and immediately my right arm started to feel at ease as if a heavy pressure started lifting off it!

I have a feeling that the phoneme ‘oo’ is strongly tied with the awakening of the light, easy *staccato* as well as of the organic *cantabile* sound on the piano, and it also endows the piano tone with focus (as if there is a ‘needle in the core of every sound) making it penetrating and soaring. If another phoneme, ‘aah’, is not forming well (spread, unfocused vocal attack), the piano *cantabile* usually comes out as an unformed ‘falsetto’ and does not have that warm, rounded quality. Such round, vibrating, expressive piano tone is the greatest secret of the abovementioned piano mastery of Rachmaninov, Hoffmann, Lhevinne and Volodos. In my pianistic journey it is one of the highest goals (I believe, this kind of piano tone is still in an embryonic stage in my own playing).

CONCLUSION: a personal reflection

Having inherited the *organic* piano technique in my early childhood, I returned to it twelve years later after extensive piano studies through other methods. I have realised that this *organic* technique allows me to free my virtuoso potential without compromising my inner artistic self. I have come across many musically gifted pianists whose sensitive musical perception has led them, like me, to reject the mechanical approach. After many years of trial and error, I am convinced that this method really works. Through this highly elaborate yet organic approach to playing the piano, the spontaneous musical talent can be developed and expressed.

As a concert pianist I have greatly benefited from my proposed piano method's capacity to enhance artistic expression. In the concert situation I believe I have acquired a highly developed reflexive connection between the movements of my hands and my inner musical impulses, allowing freedom of expression and immediacy in performance. The goal of this kind of training is that the movements of the arms, hands and fingers eventually become so natural and automatic, that the artist need not be concerned with this area of performance on stage. Referring to creating performing artists, Yakovlev meant exactly this when he commented that the singer's technical skills need to become automatic, almost reflexive. Often during concert performances or during my home practice, I experience a wave of inspiration, where it feels as if my hands are playing by themselves, and I am sitting back and 'doing nothing'. This incredible feeling is the result of the *organic* piano mastery.

As a piano pedagogue this method enables me to free the true musical potential of my students and find a key to their artistic imagination and creative will. As I have extensive practical experience in this technique as a student, scholar and concert performer, I possess the necessary expertise to pinpoint and explain these special sensations that occur in my body while playing, and apply them to each student's unique qualities,

removing myself as the role model. This way I preserve their individual piano touch and artistic expression (just as Yakovlev did). My students respond with deep trust in me as a teacher, a readiness to persevere in their tasks, and the joy and inspiration that they gain from their achievements at the piano in class or on stage.

With the growth of my expertise in awakening *funzione d' attacco* through the preliminary vocal warm-up, I am learning to 'read' the wealth of information about my students' characters, conveyed through their unrestrained singing voices. The way the students sing Yakovlev's exercises enables me to detect some of their musical strengths and/or weaknesses, and predict the way these will reflect on their piano playing. As I am pioneering this field of research, I realise that exploring these connections between the voice and the hands will take me substantially longer, before I gather a solid body of evidence and draw sound conclusions.

Being a pianist virtuoso myself helps me to detect minute sensations in the student's apparatus. Certain tensions immediately show in their sound quality, some are noticeable on observation. I often use my hands to help my students overcome some obstacles while they are playing, by slightly lifting their wrists, moving their elbows or gently shaking them by the shoulders. I find this way of coaching much more effective than verbal comments such as 'lift your wrists' or 'relax your shoulders'. If I demonstrate an episode or a passage for a student myself, I try not to 'bowl him/her over' by my own piano mastery, but to match his/her manner of playing, so that the student can grasp what I am doing. I believe that <u>not</u> understanding these pedagogical tactics has caused many piano virtuosos to be unsuccessful in their teaching.

As I am myself continuing towards the establishment of a harmonious unity between technique and artistry, I increasingly believe that the path of *organic* playing married to the phenomenon of *funzione d' attacco* contain a fountain of knowledge about the inner artistic self, and holds almost endless possibilities for the continued growth of the pianist – as a student and established artist.

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