

On Preparation for a Piano Competition
by Ruth Slenczynska

**In March 2005, Dr. Slenczynska served
on the jury of our Seventh National
Chopin Piano Competition**

PIANO COMPETITIONS AT EVERY LEVEL do a great deal of good for those who participate:

- 1) Young musicians push themselves to work harder, and more effectively than they normally would.
- 2) Competitions offer the opportunity to perform on a superior instrument in front of a knowledgeable and encouraging audience. Often contestants receive written helpful comments from each of a jury of highly qualified judges.
- 3) The solitary feeling of working in an "ivory towers" is dispelled by meeting and exchanging ideas with many peers. Staying in touch can create a benevolent network that can sustain a young artist for a lifetime.

It is possible that these very real advantages don't coincide with fuzzy dreams of quick fame and fortune harbored by many young people (and mis-guided parents and teachers!) but there is never any way of predicting what twists and turns a rich life truly dedicated to the arts will bring. At the very least a competition provides a useful springboard of experience toward the future of a young career.

All piano entrants need to cultivate the skill to perform at the top of their ability at any time, at any place, on any instrument. The life of a viable competitor is not for the timid, the unprepared, or the temperamental. A fine teacher can help by simultaneously offering repertoire compositions of varying levels of difficulty, and requiring the student to always have something ready to play. In this way a less difficult "finished" composition can acquire playing experience and polish while a more demanding work is receiving attention on the "back burner". Eventually this last work will be put through the difficult birthing process of "trial-and-error" performances until it becomes a smooth, effective "show piece," while yet another potential "blockbuster" is being prepared. In this way, students acquire a more diverse repertoire base. No would-be artist has the right to say "No" to what can be a valuable playing experience. "I'm not in the mood" is an unacceptable excuse; the duty of an artist is to create a mood for listeners. Doing one's best at all times should become routine; this will permit the aspiring mind to soar to further horizons.

Judges recognize, and usually agree readily, when they hear someone exceptional. One young contestant who had failed enquired, "Where did I go wrong? I never worked so hard in all my life to produce a mistake-free performance." Is it possible that this young person worked toward the wrong goal? Judges listen for musical content, sensitive ideas that reveal an aspiring artist. It is exciting to listen to an original musical mind at work. In this paper we are trying to draw attention to musical ideas utilized by artists that can be cultivated by less experienced pianists with the aim of guiding them to become better competing musicians.

Create a special beautiful, personal sound

A pianist's sound exists only in the performer's brain and inner ear. Before a pianist touches the keyboard of any instrument he must internally "hear" the wished-for sound, then produce it. A personal quality of sound is unique, an aural fingerprint. A good pianist will be able to make an unresponsive piano sound at its best, and will make a good piano sound superb. To do this the inner ear must be a consummate listener that continually monitors the hands to produce what the music demands. This is a somewhat different task than that of the instrumentalist who usually performs on his own instrument and knows in advance what sound it will, or can, produce.

To achieve this personal sound it is helpful to practice on any piano, regardless of quality, without pedal. Two listening ears and well-practiced hands must be responsible. Later, pedal can be used to enhance and supplement the already established sound.

So often a young pianist will begin compositions such as Chopin's Bb minor Sonata, or Rachmaninoff's C# minor Prelude, or Beethoven's Sonata "Pathetique" by coming down with all his strength from above the keyboard. This practice creates a harsh, short-lived, ugly, loud sound, which will turn off any sensitive listener. Instead, push your whole body weight into the piano to obtain maximum volume with warmth.

Actively, unceasingly, and critically listen to and create your own sound. Franz Liszt said, "Listen as if you were a rival pianist in the next room."

Music is a language

A fine pianist must "speak" musical thoughts too sensitive for words to express. The composer starts us on this adventure by writing dynamic signs, articulation directives, and phrase markings, all of which we must study and obey. But all of these provide just a starting point or all pianists would sound the same! The searching pianist will begin to discover a special sensitive quality perhaps in just two notes of a single phrase to begin with. Many repetitions will intensify the special quality and invite you to enlarge the tiny idea into a whole phrase, bringing out something that you never before heard. Continue to seek and find; experiment! Try a particular phrase many ways: < or > or < >. When you hear a version that appeals to you, find a musical reason why you like it. Where does the phrase go? From where did it come? How does it fit into the context of the music? The matinee idol and singing star Robert Goulet, confided that the one word "Simple" caught his imagination; from this tiny start he fashioned his famous role of "Sir Lancelot." Forming an interpretation is exciting! if you work consistently you will be rewarded every few days with a gift of special insight.

Following is a list of very primitive suggestions that could help you to lengthen a phrase into a musical paragraph or chapter:

A. Repeated sections can be:

Loud-Soft (good in baroque repertoire)

Soft-Loud (often useful in Chopin and Schumann) Three repeats can be: Soft-Louder-Loudest Loud-Softer-Softest

Loud-Soft-Loud (favored by Haydn, Mozart, early Beethoven) Soft-Loud-Soft

Loud-Louder-Loudest Soft-Softer-Softest

Try each possibility. Until you listen critically, you won't know what you prefer.

B. Look and listen for "Question-and-Answer" sections.

Every Bach Fugue subject has a "Question-and-Answer" as do countless themes in Classic and Romantic repertoire. The opening theme of Schubert's great Bb major Posthumous Sonata, last movement, is characterized by "Questions-and-Answers." Dynamically make a mini-crescendo to point up the question and a mini-decrescendo to shape down your answer. This adds a dimension of meaningful color.

C. Tutti and Solo:

Every classic Sonata and Sonatina offers these possibilities. Think "chamber music" when appropriate (Haydn, Mozart) and "full orchestra" (Beethoven, Brahms). Make your solo voice especially clear, easy for the listener to enjoy. This voice should sing, high, beautiful, and uninterrupted by a busy accompaniment. The full "Tutti" offers a colorful contrast.

D. If you search you will often find an inconspicuous left hand bridge that can be used with a crescendo to forge two phrases into one longer, more effective phrase. Use every opportunity to stretch the length of your musical line.

E. A musical phrase, especially in Romantic music, will respond to three dimensions. Dynamically, it ascends, then there is a plateau that includes the climax, and then the line descends. Try to lengthen the "plateau" to well past the climax to give the illusion of length to your phrase. Try this on the popular melodies of Chopin's Eb major Nocturne or Schumann's Traumerie. Sometimes you will crescendo as the phrase descends, look at the opening Ab major bars in the 2nd movement of Beethoven's C major Concerto No. 1.

F. Often within a long Classic or Romantic Sonata movement, the composer uses a small area as if he were confiding a special secret (Beethoven Sonata Opus 7, 4th movement starting at Bar 16, left hand Eb arpeggio is an example.) when you find such a precious motif, draw attention to it with your sweetest pianissimo and grow dynamically with the music.

G. Make use of every appoggiatura, every group of small notes (often found in a Chopin Nocturne), every broken chord, every cadenza (whether called a cadenza or not) to lengthen your over-all musical line. Every note needs to contribute.

H. A Mozart Sonata is not three separate pieces. Search for the connection that holds the Sonata together. Sometimes the rhythms will have something in common, or there will be a common motif used in different ways, or perhaps a melodic interval will play up the relationship of the movements. Most Sonatas and Suites from all music periods will give up such wonderful information if you spend enough time with them.

As you work on lengthening your musical lines in your repertoire with an active "seek-and-find" attitude you will surely bring to life your own unique interpretation based on your research and musicality.

The great Sergei Rachmaninoff had a musical plan for an entire program with a climax that he called "the point". When he played a concert he felt he succeeded only if he reached this "point" effectively. This demands tremendous concentration as well as many failed performances (in his ears only!). Often the trials are discouraging during the "trial-and-error" period that all artists must live through. But still we persist. The errors become fewer and we can smite. This is a good time to begin working on a new, even more exciting program!

Are there too many artists? "NO" said the famous impresario Sol Hurok. "There are always too few artists at the top!" This should be inspirational to all who honestly try.c

About the Author:



In March 2000, Dr. Slenczynska served on the jury of our Sixth American National Piano Competition

Ruth Slenczynska is the first American woman pianist in history to celebrate 60 years of professional music making. Following her New York City debut at the age of eight, which Olin Downes of the New York Times called "an electrifying experience," Slenczynska has performed more than 3000 recitals on both hemispheres and appeared with most of the world's greatest orchestras. She has been called "the greatest among women pianists today" by the London Times.

Dr. Slenczynska has criss-crossed the globe many times, concertizing in Europe, South Africa, Asia, the United States and South America and her life story has been featured on many television programs as well as in many national magazines.

Her discography includes a dozen records for Decca Gold Label, three for Musical Heritage Society; and two current CD's on Ivory Classics and ACA Digital were named "Picks of 98" by Fanfare magazine.

She has written two books, "Forbidden Childhood" and "Music At Your Fingertips" (DaCapo Press). Her articles on a variety of musical subjects appear regularly in "Clavier", "Piano Quarterly" and "Music journal." Slenczynska is a popular adjudicator as well as workshop clinician and master class teacher.

In 1999, Ruth Slenczynska was the only woman as well as the only U.S. delegate to judge the Busoni and the Franz Liszt International Piano Competitions.

She was awarded the Golden Cross of Merit by the country of her ancestors, Poland and has been honored by several crowned heads in Europe and five United States presidents. She has received the Lifetime Achievement Awards for Excellence in the Fine Arts from the Arts Education Council of St. Louis.