

Recipe For Success

A Little More PFT

By Ryan Fogg, NCTM

My dad was an excellent cook, but he seldom followed a recipe. If he were asked what the ingredients were for a specific dish, his response was often, “A lot of TLC.” (By TLC, he meant “Tender Loving Care.”) I enjoy judging for various piano auditions, competitions and festivals, but I often hear performances lacking three special ingredients: PFT (pedaling, fingering and tempo).

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Perhaps I'm just inclined to listen for these particular items, or perhaps there is truly a trend of student neglect or apathy in these areas. Regardless of the reason, the fact remains that these three items could certainly stand to have some more attention.

Pedaling

On more than one occasion, I've had some of my students question whether to pedal a passage that sounds like it needs it (any Chopin, for example), but is not indicated in the score. My response is always, “Of course!” Many scores do not include pedal markings, but that does not necessarily mean they should be played without any pedal. Composers would often assume the pianist was knowledgeable and experienced enough to pedal sty-

listically and tastefully, and thus would not see the need to indicate every single pedal indication.

On the other hand, pedal should not be over used when only a small amount is needed (Mozart comes to mind here). Good pedaling depends upon many factors, including the acoustics of the performing space, the capabilities of that particular instrument, the relative speed of the passage in question, dynamics, voicing and the like. When students fail to use the pedal effectively, it tells me they are not listening well. You do not pedal with your feet; you pedal with your ears. Almost all pedaling offenses can be remedied by simply listening more closely. Combine this with an informed stylistic and harmonic awareness, and a more beautiful sound is inevitable. This type of listening may be difficult to develop if a student is too pre-occupied with notes, rhythms, memory or a host of other items, but as I tell my students

frequently, “That’s why we practice.” Finally, students need to be reminded that pedaling is not an “all or none” exercise—there are various depths of pedal that can be employed to achieve the desired sound. Encourage them to explore these possibilities on their own. Here are some questions students can use to check their pedaling progress:

1. Am I pedaling appropriately for this style of music? For this composer?
2. Am I changing the pedal harmonically?
3. Are there any places where I could have a longer pedal for a special sonorous effect?
4. Is there enough clarity where there needs to be?
5. Would different depths of pedal be appropriate in this piece? If so, where, and how much?

Fingering

These three items are not mutually exclusive, for they are often intertwined. For example, it must be emphasized that the pedal is not meant to be a cloak to cover one’s poor choice of fingering. Students may take what they deem to be the easy way out, choosing a convenient fingering over a musical fingering. A legato fingering is often difficult to achieve, but certainly worthwhile. As with pedaling, I believe listening is the key. I can usually tell if one of my students is playing with a poor fingering choice even if I’m not looking at the keyboard. The ear should inform the hand on the adjustments that need to be made.

There is an abundance of high-quality editions of the standard repertoire available today, many of which offer good fingering suggestions. In addition, there is often more than one possible fingering for any particular passage. Students need to explore various fingering possibilities, try them at different speeds and decide which one works best for them. This should go without

saying, but once a fingering has been chosen, be sure it is written in the score! Too many times I have asked a student, “What fingering are you using here?” To which he responds, “I don’t know.” Remember most, if not all, passages have a fingering that should work fairly well—you just have to find it. As a student progresses with a piece over time, she may find the original fingering does not work in the long term; it’s important to be flexible and willing to change, even at this point. Here are some fingering questions that may be helpful for students:

1. Is my fingering as legato as it needs to be throughout? If not, how can I make it more legato?
2. Is my fingering in faster passages causing the sound to be even and smooth?
3. Have I written fingerings in the score for the more difficult spots?
4. Am I consistent with my fingering from one practice session to the next?

Tempo

Rarely, if ever, should music be played mechanically. A tempo must breathe, but it must also serve as a unifying element to the piece. How often have you heard students inappropriately slow down in more difficult spots, or worse yet, speed up because of the anxiety those passages presented? Continuity of tempo is imperative to a successful performance, yet students often play without this essential ingredient. The cause for this is debatable. Is it a lack of preparation? Not enough slow practice? Not enough work with the metronome? I confess I have often jumped to this last conclusion, assuming that the metronome is the magic elixir all students need. Sometimes it *is* exactly what they need, but often the issue lies far deeper than that. If a student has not developed a strong inner sense of pulse, then hours of metronome practice will most likely be for

naught. Students who lack this inner sense of pulse will be unaware of their tendency to change tempos in performance. It may be helpful to have them listen to a recording of their playing while counting, clapping or conducting. If a student does have a strong inner sense of pulse, then metronome practice can be helpful in eradicating any tendency to change tempos unexpectedly. Beyond this, other factors of tempo should be considered as well, such as how gradual or sudden a *ritard* or *accelerando* should be, or how much “breathing” time should be taken between larger sections of a piece (exposition and development, for example), or between small sections or phrases.

Here are some questions students may find helpful regarding tempo:

1. Does my piece require a fairly rigid tempo throughout, or is there a good amount of flexibility/*rubato* that is appropriate?
2. Is my tempo steady where it needs to be? Flexible where it needs to be?
3. Have I practiced with the metronome (if appropriate)? Have I counted beats while practicing?
4. Am I slowing down or speeding up where I shouldn’t?
5. Is my piece unified by my executions of tempo, or does it seem divided?
6. Am I following the indicated tempo marking in the score, or is my tempo too slow? Too fast?

Conclusion

These three items are paramount to a student’s musical progress. As teachers must guide our students through the perils of blurred pedaling, poor fingering and sporadic tempos, and help them listen more intently. Only then will these and other issues truly be resolved. With greater attention to PFT, your student’s performance is certain to sound (taste) better!

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