



'Playing like a girl': Practices and performance ideals at the piano

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ABSTRACT

Studies of classical music have typically neglected the physical production of musical sound, in line with an ideal that a musician's performance appears effortless. However, the costs of elite classical musician performance are increasingly becoming evident, as studies capture the very high incidence of injury and doping. This paper takes a preliminary step towards critically analysing elite classical musician performance enhancement measures and health implications by examining the contexts of music performance. Taking the case of pianists, I address the question of 'enhancement to what end?' arguing that what counts as optimum performance, and the methods by which it is achieved, is situated historically and socioculturally, and can be specific to factors such as gender. I suggest that studies of elite classical musician performance enhancement and health need to take account of this context, and contribute to this research approach through an examination of the cases of the 'accomplished' pianist, the classical pianist, and the female classical pianist.

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1. Introduction

I had my first piano lesson in 1990, and throughout my schooling came to accept scales, technique, repertoire, and exams as normal. Over my first 11 years my two teachers, both of whom were women, gave me a 'standard' Australian Music Examinations Board education. Early lessons included visualisations like cradling a precious peach from above to encourage a rounded and delicate hand position. Correct comportment was ensured through an adjustable chair, and a box that supported my legs until I could reach the piano's pedals. My hands were willed to be stronger, faster, and more precise through hours of gruelling technique, with progress marked through grading and competition. I had planned to continue on with the piano at university, but was advised against it: I was having troubles with my hands, and ultimately, I would only end up teaching. I pursued a non-musical path, but eager to keep playing, I found a new teacher. In one of our first lessons, 'not intending offence', he told me that I 'played like a girl'. From his perspective, I had learnt to use my body in ways that did not make full use of my physical strength. My feminine comportment meant I did not shift my body weight when playing at extremes of the keyboard. I played from my wrists down. To play without pain and more 'beautifully' required a more efficient and holistic use of my body. It required a new technique and practice methods.

The physical production of musical sound can be easily passed over in a technological context in which sounds are often separated

from their source. As my opening reflections illustrate, however, music is practiced and performed by musicians that can be trained and retrained often with different goals in mind. As a discipline, musicology has largely focused on history, theory and criticism (Leppert & McClary, 1987, p. xii). Music-makers (including performers and composers) appeared almost invisible prior to the work of feminist musicologists, who have emphasised music-making as implicated in identities (Burgan, 1986; McClary, 1991), social norms (Citron, 1993) and social capital (Gillett, 2000; Leppert, 1993; Weliver, 2000). Whilst these discussions of musicians' gender imply that music is made by a performer, training and use has largely fallen beneath the radar as if musical ability is a natural talent or the sole product of a social identity (Miller, 2008, p. 428). However, it makes as much sense to say that musical skill is innate as it does to suggest that speaking French is genetic (Levitin, 2006, p. 196). As elite pianist Angela Cheng stated: 'You're always either improving or going backwards. There's no stationary stage' (Branham, 1995, p. 338).

This paper seeks to make a modest contribution to a study of musician practices by exploring the relationship between socio-historical context, ideals of performance, and their influence on how musicians practice and perform. It has a central interest in the contexts and goals of piano practice techniques and performances. This focus works from the assumption that pianists are specialised athletes (Friedberg, 1993, p. 3), who are trained and regulated with specific functional and cultural outcomes in mind. I address the question of 'enhancement to what end?' and argue that what counts as optimum performance, and the methods by which it is achieved, is situated historically and socioculturally, and can be specific to factors such as gender. This question is

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foundational to broader issues in musician performance enhancement, including doping amongst classical musicians, technologies and techniques to enhance performance, and the health costs of elite musician training (Mazanov & Quirk, 2011). To explore the context and goals of piano techniques and practices, I take three examples: the ‘accomplished’ young woman, the classical pianist, and the female classical pianist. I examine the divergent contexts of performance ideals, the contextually specific performance enhancing techniques, and outcomes and implications of these contexts and practices.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach taken in this study includes textual analysis of piano technique manuals and popular culture sources, supplemented by ethnographic data. Textual analysis has been a common method used in social studies of classical music (for examples, see Burgan, 1986; Gillett, 2000; Leppert, 1993; McClary, 1991). A strength of this method is that it facilitates an investigation into the social contexts in which music has been practiced across place and time. This capacity is particularly useful for the present study, given its central concern with the context of training methods and performance practices. For example, examining the musical forms and performance instruction of common piano technique manuals gives powerful insight into the ways in which pianists are trained, and performances that they facilitate. In other words, they show us both how the performer is shaped, and why they are shaped this way. Similarly, popular culture sources such as the work of Jane Austen have been used particularly in the examination of women’s accomplishment, as these texts capture something of the performance style, its goals, and its reception – a topic rarely dealt with in other historical works.

A weakness of textual analysis is its focus on cultural discourses over the experiences of musicians (Finnegan, 2007; Pieslak, 2008; Small, 1998). Given this criticism, where possible, I have also drawn on ethnographic data from published interviews with pianists. This data is used in the discussion of contemporary women classical pianists as a means to illustrate how the social contexts of piano performance influence individual experiences at a professional level. The arguments presented here are also informed by a broader study I conducted on learning methods and measures of expertise amongst musicians, as well as my own experiences as a pianist over the last 21 years.

3. Two pianistic traditions

The piano and its performance has varied and evolved radically over its history, changing in response to socio-political, cultural, geographical and economic contexts. The construction and use of the instrument responded to the rise of the middle-class, its practice has been ‘rigidly gendered’ (Leppert, 1993, p. 119), and it has been sympathetic to the countries and cultures it has been used and developed within (Crisp, 1995; Loesser, 1990). Notions of optimum performance have also varied with context, as have the methods by which it is achieved. Two archetypal examples of piano playing that demonstrate this variation in practice methods and performance ideals are the ‘accomplished’ young woman, and the ‘classical’ pianist. The notion of ‘performance’ has been used by scholars including Goffman (1959) and Butler (1999) to address questions of identity and actions in the social world. In this context I am using the term ‘performance’ in the literal sense of ‘performing’ music for an audience, with the layer of understanding that such practices have a social context.

From the eighteenth-century, an affinity between the piano, middle-class humanity and women has been purported on the

grounds of their mutual associations with the home, leisure, decorum, modesty, education, gentility, beauty, and ‘accomplishment’ (Loesser, 1990, pp. 64–66). The piano was seen as a ‘perfect companion’ for the homebound woman (Gillett, 2000, p. 4) and, as such, small pianos were often made to double as sewing tables (Leppert, 1993, pp. 136, 139). Ideally, piano-playing was also an avenue for women to reflect their families with respectability, with the ultimate goal of attracting a husband (Loesser, 1990, p. 267). In this context, optimum performance demanded competence, a feminine repertoire, and a feminine comportment.

In the case of women’s ‘accomplishment’, competence at the piano implied some music education, and enough skill to play appropriate repertoire without errors. Playing the piano was gender-specific to the extent that it was one of the few areas in which most middle- and upper-class girls were educated, whereas boys were not (Gillett, 2000, p. 5; Weliver, 2000, p. 1). This education covered skills in using the instrument and reading music sufficient to support performance of appropriate repertoire. The ideal of optimum performance did not include virtuosity and, as such, a punishing technique was not emphasised. Rather, where young women showed skill and interest, practicing more advanced repertoire was encouraged as a method to develop competence, though such works were only for practice, as their performance introduced the possibility of errors (Miller, 2008). An optimum performance for the accomplished woman implied that she ‘pleased’ her audience, which was achieved through accuracy, and a performance that ‘did not bring the materiality of the performance’ to the audience (Miller, 2008, p. 430). Ideally, she played seemingly without effort or expertise.

As this notion of competence implies, appropriate repertoire was a vital ingredient to an ‘accomplished’ pianist’s optimum performance. As Loesser argued, piano-playing in this gendered context was only ‘superficially related to the fine arts’ (1990, p. 267). In other words, performance was not for the purpose of making great music, or displaying virtuosity. The music women performed was customarily amateur purpose-written salon music that provided light entertainment in a social setting and demonstrated women’s accomplishments. These compositions did not require a great deal of technical skill or musical intelligence, and typically included short, manageable pieces, such as simple ballads, sacred works, dances, and simplified transcriptions of popular classical melodies (Burgan, 1986, pp. 56–57). For example, the simplified and abridged versions of Chopin’s compositions were made widely available in published collections with titles including *Drawing-Room Trifles*, to the extent that the composer became closely associated with women and the domestic sphere (Samson, 1994, p. 10).

Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* offers a well-known example of this ideal of piano performance, and is in a sense a primary source of the social history of women’s piano playing, a topic passed over in most other accounts. In this novel, each of the Bennet girls practiced the piano a little, enough to fashion themselves into the model of Victorian womanhood and class, and to ‘exhibit’ these attributes. Of the sisters, Mary, who is described as possessing ‘neither genius nor taste’, expressed a distinct preference to perform classical repertoire at a gathering at Lucas Lodge. Despite this preference, however, she was interrupted, as her audience experienced her chosen concerto as tedious in comparison to a Scotch or Irish air. This representation reflects the judgement that performance of classical music in its original form was not considered appropriate for women, particularly in social settings, both because it was not women’s music, but also because it was not congruent with the stated goals. Whilst women’s practice and performance of the piano functioned as a means to provide entertainment and illustrate her accomplishments, it was appropriate only that a woman play in a pleasing manner. Mary’s description as lacking both genius and

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