

# ***Developing technique into musicality***

## **By Trevor Barnard**

This article originally appeared in *Clavier Companion*, July/August 2009 and is now offered as an addendum, or prelude, or 'appetiser' to Trevor Barnard's book 'Neglected Areas of Piano Teaching', published by Diversions Books.

### **Introduction:**

**"Is a physically gifted student likely to be rhythmically reliable and musically aware?"**

Anyone who has taught piano or any other instrument for more than a short time invariably must deal with one of the major challenges facing a music teacher.

That is, becoming a good player simultaneously involves diverse kinds of learning: perceptual, physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, etc. To make matters even more complex, each student shows up in our studios with differing innate abilities in each of these areas. In some people, the differences are modest but in others they are quite pronounced. We rally around each student's strengths while we also try to shore up the areas that are less intuitive (i.e., more difficult).

Even with a teacher's best intentions and skills, it is not uncommon for a student's strong areas to surpass the others as years go by; this tends to happen even more dramatically with those who are extremely gifted in one area.

Good and valid arguments can be made that teaching to a person's strongest natural abilities during the early years can motivate and foster self-confidence. But at some point, a reckoning needs to occur.

I have asked Australian Trevor Barnard to explore this topic specifically from the perspective of situations where technical prowess exceeds other areas. His extensive experience as an accomplished pianist and teacher over many years allows him to approach this subject with significant insight. You will also see these qualities in his two book publications listed in his biography. If you have not yet examined them, I encourage you to do so.

***Bruce Berr, Editor, Clavier Companion***

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My answer to the original question is, “Often, no.” Sense of rhythm varies from person to person, and some more physically gifted students are not necessarily superior to those who have less talent in this regard. The same also applies to musical awareness.

While some students are naturally gifted, they often develop these “gifts” through extensive technical practice and training. Unfortunately, there are many instances where this training is done in a mechanical fashion that hampers rhythmic and musical development. These students can easily conquer tough technical challenges, but they often are lacking in rhythmic and musical maturity. So how do we help students who are used to technical things coming “naturally” develop more rhythmic – and thus musical – awareness?

Rhythm, of course, is the most important element of music-making, and it also governs every aspect of life. Because of this, every living creature is affected by it and exhibits awareness of it to a certain degree. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* refers to rhythm as “metrical movement,” and in music the metronome would be the closest thing to movement of an exact and mechanical nature. However, it is restricting to keep and adhere to the regular tick of the metronome. In fact, it is impossible to satisfactorily present any musical performance under this highly restraining influence. The metronome cannot be our only approach to shoring up rhythmic deficiencies.

## **Rubato in daily life**

So how does one get around it? In music the term that refers to establishing a coherent flow of phrasing is called *rubato*. This Italian word, meaning “robbed,” refers to adjustments of speed – constant accelerations and decelerations of pace – that enhance musical expression within an established meter. These adjustments are mostly of a very minor nature, otherwise it would be difficult if not impossible to maintain a stable and musically expressive pulse. The only digression from this would be if the composer gives specific instructions to change the tempo and/or inserts *accelerando* or *ritardando* in the score.

If one thinks about it, *rubato* dominates everyone in daily life in whatever activity one is engaged. Without *rubato*, one just could not exist. Think of the uneven way a person breathes, talks, walks, or runs, no matter how slightly or extremely such actions are achieved. To breathe, talk, walk, or run exactly like a metronome would certainly result in strange looks from aghast onlookers. It would be hard to discover someone who is not aware of life’s continuing pulse since it is an ever-present experience in one’s existence.

## **Mechanical scale practice can delay rhythmic and musical growth**

Rhythm is certainly a feature of the early years for piano students. Unfortunately though, the conventional way that scales are practiced over the years to develop the fingers can often result in a lack of musicality. Students are encouraged to emphasize the tonic

of a scale when ascending and descending. Or if practiced in groups of triplets or sixteenths, the first notes of each group are accented. This gradually leads to over-rhythmic, mechanical results when playing pieces.

One general suggestion that I make to students about the pulse is to feel as few strong beats to the bar as possible, even in a very slow piece. By adopting this policy the movement of the music flows more naturally instead of in a stilted fashion.

Listening to international piano competitions can be quite revealing. There are often two outcomes in how gifted and advanced young performers approach their work. One is how metronomic the playing can be. Alternatively, the fingers can often be heard skidding over the keys in an indistinct manner with little regard to a consistent musical pulse. This may be an unconscious sort of rebellion against the years of practicing scales in an isolated environment. Tone control is often the last aspect to receive attention in a pianist's training (for reasons that are incomprehensible to me), and thus is also something that is frequently lacking. For example, it is a regular experience for *p* to sound *pp* or even *ppp* from players who otherwise have very advanced technical skill.

In listening to the recent Sydney International Piano Competition of Australia I found that the over-rhythmic habit of giving precedence to main beats was particularly exposed in the playing of works by composers such as Mozart and Haydn, whose music should be more transparent.

### Practice solutions

I believe that from very early on, a student should be encouraged to practice scales in a slow manner by accenting offbeat notes. As the student progresses, they should then get rid of these accents (these practice steps develop control) and shape the scale into a more melodic line. For instance, in groups of three try emphasizing the second note of the triplet figure, and then the third note. To make it more interesting in a scale that is ascending and descending, one can alternate between the two. The same approach can be extended to mordents and slow trills where temporary accents can be placed on notes other than the ones on downbeats. Of course, by all means practice the traditional methods of accenting the tonic and/or the first notes of triplets and sixteenths, but broaden the approach. By doing this a sense of phrasing can be instilled early on instead of many years later, if ever.

Composers are not always accommodating in starting the first note of phrases on a main beat (thank goodness!). Since technical work should be preparation for playing pieces and not treated as an end in itself, in my view it is imperative to keep all this in mind. Frequently a melodic phrase overlaps a bar line but often this does not deter a young performer from accenting the downbeat in the middle of it. What happens? The phrase becomes bumpy and uneven. The answer is to gently but firmly emphasize the first note of the phrase that will coincide with an upbeat, and then flow into the next bar in a smooth and musical manner.

**Technique has to be the servant of musical expression, not the master**

To further assist getting the feel of phrasing in playing beyond main beats, listen to an accomplished singer or string quartet to hear how they express their music in a *cantabile* manner. It can be helpful if you listen to music of a slow-moving pace at first and then move on to faster tempi. As you practice faster in your own playing, or if you are fearful of losing the natural pulse, place a very small pause at the bar line to re-establish the basic meter. Eventually you will be in less need of this and should ultimately be able to discard it.

### **Small pauses for sforzandi**

It is amazing what very small pauses in phrasing can achieve. One frequently hears a *sforzando* given a heavy accent, for example. This may be justified in a certain context, but the degree of emphasis is often unnecessary. In this dilemma I have encouraged students to overcome such a heavy-handed approach by adopting three different ways of dealing with a *sforzando*:

1. Place a very small pause before it and play the note with no accent at all. This action (called an agogic accent) will result in an accent being implied; or
2. Place a very small pause and give a gentle accent; or
3. In more extreme circumstances, give a firmer accent in addition to the pause (even then the tone should not be unduly forced).

### **. . . and syncopations**

Young players, especially in ensemble situations, often have difficulties with syncopations, and they end up playing with distorted rhythms. The solution is very similar to that of a *sforzando*. In a jazz piece one frequently encounters an off-beat note that is tied to a main beat note. Instead of playing the off-beat with a large accent and thereby throwing the pulse into disarray, only a

small adjustment needs to be made. By all means accent the off-beat note but insert a very small pause just before the main beat to re-establish the pulse. This will stabilize the performance, respect the composer's intentions, and everyone will end up being happy!

Another syncopation problem that one encounters in 6/8 is when there are three quarter notes in one hand and six eighth notes in the other. Frequently the performer goes from two groups of three to three groups of two, thereby ending up in 3/4. The rhythmic distortion is glaring and quite unnecessary. Again, there is a simple solution. By inserting a tiny pause after the second of the quarter notes (halfway across the measure), the 6/8 meter is clearly communicated and the syncopation is made effective. The same approach can be used in other situations where a syncopation "threatens" to disrupt the rhythmic flow.

### **Ensemble playing must also "breathe"**

If a student wishes to be an accomplished musical player, dealing with the complex situation of rhythm has to be addressed. In an ensemble scenario, including performing as soloist with an orchestra, a performer has to be utterly clear in regards to both rhythm and musicality.

I remember many years ago I had an unpleasant run-in with a conductor when I was engaged to make a radio recording of Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43. During a rehearsal, in starting the first of the more rhapsodic variations, the conductor turned and accused me of "playing out of time" in front of the entire orchestra. I felt sufficiently confident to stand my ground, but the

accusation was not withdrawn. Eventually, I had no alternative but to walk back to the dressing room. During the rehearsal break, the concertmaster of the orchestra came to see me and assured me that they could follow me perfectly, and that the conductor was not held in high regard by the players. I was also told the producer approached the conductor and informed him that unless the recording was completed he would forfeit his fee. A meeting was arranged between us forthwith. Following a piano rehearsal, the recording was completed without a further hitch. However, that experience is not something I would want to repeat in a hurry!

In summing up my response to the question of this article, I wish to urge students to keep the application of rhythm in perspective. Yes, it is certainly the most important aspect of music-making, but the use of it has to be applied in a sensible manner – otherwise the music suffers. Students often become victims of rhythmic

tyranny because the development of technique becomes an obsession through all the years of hard work. Technique has to be the servant of musical expression, not the master, and technical practice should be kept in proper perspective by treating it only as preparation for the playing of pieces.

I hope I have shown that good rhythmic playing is not necessarily straightforward, and that natural physical talent is not necessarily a guarantee of good music-making. However, in the situation where a gifted student is lacking in musical subtlety because of a misguided use of rhythm, there is no reason why the problem cannot be successfully addressed under the tutelage of an effective teacher.

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