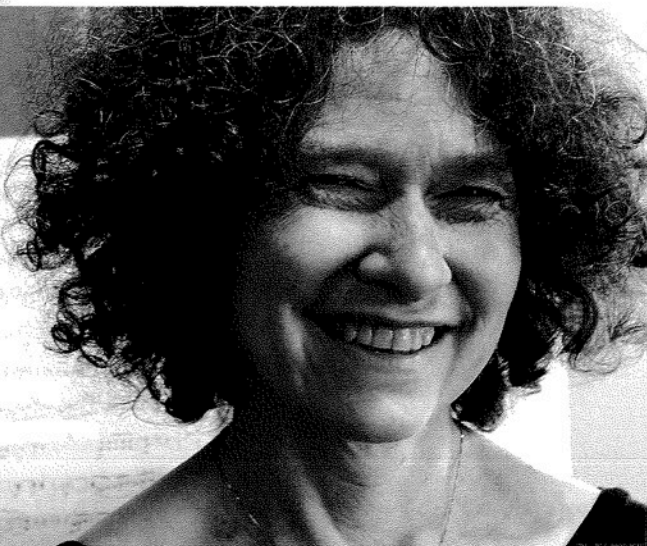


Ruminations on Musicality

by Catherine Kautsky



The conversion of a series of black dots into a piece of music is a magical process, but one all too easily derailed. The alchemy occurs in two steps: the first step—relatively simple—converts dots into audible pitches, while the second—far more complex—converts pitches into intelligible language. As teachers, we're responsible for teaching both, but one is a finite skill set, the other a mysterious and frustratingly vague intangible ability.

How does one help a student to speak the language of music, to convert the dots into words, sentences, paragraphs? What allows for hearing over an extended phrase? Perhaps someday neuroscientists will discover an actual site in the brain for "musicality," and we will begin to understand the impact of nature versus nurture. Meanwhile, we as teachers must try to make as many students as possible "native speakers" of music, people who speak fluently and naturally in a language of tones.

As all of us know, the piano itself, of all instruments, militates most strongly against such fluency. First and foremost, of course, the mechanism of hammers and the consequent lack of control over the sound of a note once struck makes it less than natural to hear a line. But also important is the physical action itself of pushing down, punching a key, or "pressing a button"—a seemingly contained action, unrelated to sustaining sound. And then there's the physical nature of the instrument, so outside of our bodies, unheld, unyielding. Whereas Picasso used guitars, violins, and clarinets as symbols of human sexuality, their curved and sinuous shapes a way to portray the human condition, the large grand piano, unlike any other instrument, functions in our lives as a piece of furniture: a decorative element, more allied with a house than a body.

And so we cannot cradle our instrument and transmit to it directly our breath or our motion. We cannot subtly alter its pitch or the life of a single note. That note begins to die as soon as it is born, and our influence over its life resides in our imaginations. Somehow we must then teach our students not only to hear the sound they actually produce, but also to pretend with absolute conviction that it throbs and flows uninterrupted into the next pitch on the page.

We are advised, toward this end, to have our students sing, and indeed I find that for those students comfortable with their own voices this can be transformative. Almost as efficacious is playing a line on another instrument. In either case, the student is able to hear a line without the impediments of two tangled hands and complex vertical sonorities. The line is pure and the connection direct.

But that in itself is not sufficient. The students must also group notes, eradicate bar lines, breathe at phrases. They must, in other words, supersede the paltry notation before them and understand that out of the dark vertical bar lines and cross bars—well-named and marking, aptly, a prison of timekeeping and predictability—they must create groupings which supplant both the measures and the subgroupings implied by hooking together notes in regular groups of two, four, or eight (see Excerpt 1). They must not believe that all notes with the same value on the page last the same length of time, or that the space between all notes is equal. All ideas of musical democracy must be dropped: all notes were not created equal!

Excerpt 1: French Suite No. 5 in G Major, BWV 816, Courante, by J.S. Bach, mm. 5-6. Grouping is from the sixth sixteenth note and over the bar line.



Thus notation is an enemy. It reeks of regularity and reductionism. In teaching students to read accurately, we risk teaching them to misunderstand. Further, almost equally perilous is our method of sound production. We're taught to play to the bottom of the key on every note. But some notes settle in, while others travel. Some are movers, others are keepers. They do not all sit and become an end in themselves.