

MINI ESSAY 16: “REAL” MUSIC

By Dr. Julie Knerr

While I was observing and interviewing John Weems, a fabulous pre-college teacher in Houston, Texas, for my post doctoral research on piano technique, I made a very embarrassing mistake. I asked him, “So you use the Faber *Piano Adventures* books with your students. But at what point do you have them start playing ‘real’ music.” By “real,” I meant standard piano literature. I will never forget Mr. Weems answer. “These Faber pieces *are* real music.” He said he treats every piece as a musical gem and a technical exercise. He requires the students to study each piece as intently as if it was a Beethoven Sonata. I was speechless, but I think I discovered that day why his students win top prizes at national competitions. They are trained to play every piece at a professional level.

This relates to one of my favorite Teaching Strategies. I call it **CD Ears**. It is easy for me to become so attached to a student and so proud of the student’s progress that I am too close to objectively notice the flaws that are still present in the student’s playing. If I can consciously take a step back and put on my **CD Ears** and listen to the student’s performance as if I was listening to a CD quality performance, I can start to hear the deeper levels of refinement that need to be attended to in the student’s playing. Even a beginning student should be able to play his pieces at CD quality. If he cannot, either the piece is too difficult for him at that time, the teacher was not careful enough in forming the student’s technique or musicality, or the piece is not suited to the student. By “not suited,” I mean that there is no sense in trying to get an 8-year-old exuberant boy to play a slow, pretty piece. It is better to wait until he becomes a moody 14-year-old. Let him play fast and fiery pieces while he likes to!

When I was in college, I most definitely did not have **CD Ears** with regards to my own playing. What I heard myself playing was very different from what my teacher heard, because my ears had never been developed. I could sightread almost anything, but I was not really listening in depth to what I was playing. My ears needed serious training. It was very frustrating, as my teacher would say, “Did you really mean for the phrase to sound like this?” and play my mistake in an exaggerated way. “No, of course not!” I would say. But I really did not even notice I had played the phrase that way. I had the right musical idea in my brain, but I was not listening intently enough to hear whether that idea was becoming a reality in sound.

When I started teaching, I started honing my ears. Training students to really hear the sounds they are producing is one of the most important tasks of the piano teacher, and this training begins in the beginning of study, first with basic aural discriminations like high and low, loud and quiet, and then with greater and greater gradations of discrimination for tapered phrase endings, balance, tone, voicing, intervals, chord qualities, etc. This is what John Weems was doing in his careful teaching of each of the Faber pieces. He looked at each piece as a work of art and trained his students to hear the details. Because they were doing CD quality work from the beginning, their Beethoven Sonatas were also CD quality.

I now keep in mind that if I am teaching a piece, even “Bingo” or “Zebra on a Pogo Stick,” I need to treat it as a little gem worthy of study. If I do not think a piece is worthy of study or if I do not like the piece, then I would be better off skipping the piece rather than teaching it badly. By looking at each piece as a small etude and a work of art, I am building into my students the aural, technical, and focus skills necessary to eventually play the Beethoven Sonatas and Chopin Scherzos I aspire to for them.