

THE PIANIST'S ORACLE

E-NEWSLETTER



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www.robertfinleypianist.com

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the first edition of The Pianist's Oracle, the free online newsletter published by Robert Finley with articles of interest to the student, amateur and professional pianist. This newsletter will be published monthly.



I decided to write this newsletter because I enjoy writing about music, giving lectures and talking about music, teaching, and performing to an audience. I thought that a newsletter containing my thoughts about interpretation and technique might be of benefit to my piano students, piano teachers and other pianists, helping them to improve their music-making to the highest standard.

The information in these articles is based on the knowledge and experience I gained from many years of playing the piano, studying with some of the world's finest concert pianists including Louis Kentner, Vlado Perlmutter and Jorge Bolet, teaching the piano in the UK and the USA, and playing solo recitals, chamber music and piano concertos with orchestras. Since I have also been an electronics engineer, I have a keen interest in music technology such as MIDI and the internet, and the latest developments that will assist with teaching and education.

This edition contains an article about playing chordal melodies, a review of British-Australian pianist Leslie Howard's recent Boston recital, and a calendar of events including interesting recitals, competitions, masterclasses and music festivals.

If you would like to have your recital, masterclass, festival or competition listed in the newsletter I will be

glad to do so. There will also be a question and answer section, and you are welcome to send in any questions you have, so please "consult the oracle". I will do my best to answer them.

If you would like to subscribe to this newsletter, please click the subscribe button on my web page and enter your name and email address. I respect your privacy and none of the information will be shared with a third party.

Playing Chordal Melodies

"You have no idea of, and I presume this happens to a lot of other pianists, the amount of tension, of suffering, of wondering, that is necessary in order to play the last three chords, so that every note will be in exactly the right proportion to the other notes, not one note too much, and the bass is always a big problem, and every note from the piano is going to sound..."

These were the closing words from Jorge Bolet, the famous Cuban American pianist, at the end of my masterclass with him on Liszt's "Benediction to God in Solitude" during the Liszt Centennial at the Library of Congress in Washington DC, 1986. He was referring to the last pianissimo chords in the piece.

One of the most important challenges for a pianist is to make the piano sing and to provide a pleasing accompaniment to a melodic line. This article discusses the problem and an approach how to achieve the best results with proper technique and practice.

In many compositions, it is necessary to play chordal melodies. The most common problems people have include not sounding all the notes properly, and not having a suitable balance between the melody and the other notes. An extreme example is when one or more notes in the chord sound louder than the melody and obliterate it, or when notes in the accompaniment or melodic line are weak or even missing altogether.

When two or more notes are sounded together, this forms

a chord. Usually, one note forms the melody and the other notes form the accompaniment. Sometimes the melody is the highest note, or the lowest note, or at other times somewhere in the middle. The technique must be developed so that the fingers can control the level of sound for each note so that the melody is properly balanced against the accompaniment.

To play chords properly, it is essential to sound all the notes, and this can be done by pressing each key fully down to the bottom. If the key is partially pressed down, the note may or may not sound. Usually, all the keys must be pressed down exactly at the same time unless it is a broken chord or played arpeggiando. This becomes a greater challenge when the chord is played pianissimo, because there is more chance that one or more notes may not sound. This is also a factor that depends on the piano action (which may be light or heavy), but the pianist has to adjust his finger technique to suit the instrument being played.

In order to achieve the proper balance, the notes have to be played at different levels. This requires careful control of the fingers, and the player must listen to the quality of the sound being produced and how the melody sounds against the accompaniment. Sometimes people forget how important it is to listen carefully to themselves. The pianist has to "blend" the sounds so that they are pleasing to the listener, and the result conveys the ideas, thoughts and emotions of the composer to the audience.

To play a note with a different level, it is necessary for the finger to apply a different amount of force to the key. When the key is pressed down with more force and speed, this is applied to the hammer in the piano via the action, giving it more momentum and speed, so that it strikes the string harder, making a louder sound. When the finger presses the key down more slowly, the hammer strikes the string with less momentum, causing the sound to be softer.

A good way to start practicing chords is to play two notes together, for example the major third formed by middle C and E above it. Play the chord several times, emphasizing the top note E by applying more force or attack to the finger playing the top note. Then emphasize the lower note, C, in the same way, listening carefully to the sound. Then play a succession of major thirds up the scale. Emphasize the top notes first, and then repeat the scale emphasizing the lower notes.

After you have played a scale of major thirds, play a triad consisting of C, E and G. Play the triad several times, playing all notes at the same volume. Then play

the triad several times, bringing out the G. Then bring out the E, and finally the C. Make sure all notes sound properly each time, exactly together, and listen to the quality of the sound. Play an ascending scale of C major in triads, first emphasizing the C, then the E, and finally the G. of the first chord etc. Then try playing the chord in the first and second inversions, e.g. E, G, C and G, C E, and repeat the exercises above.

After you have worked on these exercises, you might consider playing some pieces that have chordal melodies. Many pieces have four parts, and they can be likened to the voices in a choir: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. They could have more or less tones than this. As an example, consider the introduction to the 2nd Ballade in F major Opus 38 by Chopin. After the repeated C's, the main theme is played, and this is a four part harmony. The melodic line is the uppermost note.

The best way to practice this is to start by playing the melodic line. Pay special attention to the smooth legato, the phrasing and dynamics. The next stage is to add the accompaniment.

The first two chords consist of F and C in the left hand, and A and C in the right hand. The next two chords consist of F and C in the left and B flat and C in the right hand etc. Play the first phrase and listen to each chord, making sure that the melodic line stands out and the other notes are in the correct proportion. If necessary, play just one of the chords several times and listen to the balance.

The questions one should ask are: Does the melody stand out sufficiently? Is the bass note loud enough? Are the other notes sufficiently loud or soft? What happens if you increase or decrease the level of the A or other notes in the first chord, for example?

When you play the melody and accompaniment together, keep in mind that since the dynamics of the melodic line may vary, the accompaniment must match the dynamics. When a diminuendo is called for, the accompaniment should also be taken down in level.

When chords are played legato, careful fingering is required to make the notes sound smoothly connected, especially in the melodic line. Sometimes it is possible to change the fingers while holding down a key to achieve legato of the melodic line. This is something that Chopin made wide use of.

Frequently in a melody with a chord progression, it is necessary to sustain or hold down some of the notes in a chord while playing others. A good example of this can be found in the beginning of the 13th Nocturne by Gabriel Faure. It is necessary to analyze the score to determine

which notes are to be held, and for how long, as well as adjusting the intensity of them to achieve the best harmony. In other pieces, there are inner voices that are played with the melodic line and accompaniment, so it is necessary to consider the balance between them too.

The sustaining pedal can be used during a chordal melody to prolong the sound and to add color. It is extremely important to pedal cleanly so that there is no blurring of the harmony. The sustaining pedal must be pressed down and lifted at the precise time. A blurred effect occurs when the tones of the previous different chord sound together with the next chord because the pedal wasn't lifted, or it was lifted too late, beforehand. When the first chord is a dominant 7th followed by the tonic (part of a cadence) for example, the pedal must be lifted before the tonic is played so that none of the tones of the dominant 7th are heard with those of the tonic.

An excellent way to practice chordal melodies is to study Bach's preludes and fugues. Not only do these pieces contain chords, but they are contrapuntal, where several voices are played together at the same time.

Review of Leslie Howard's Boston Recital

On Tuesday January 29th, the British-Australian pianist Leslie Howard gave a recital of works by Russian composers in Seully Hall, Boston Conservatory of Music. I used to know Leslie through the British Liszt Society when I lived in London during the 1970s. He became the president after Louis Kentner died. The last time I saw Leslie was in 1980 when I was preparing the Rachmaninoff 3rd Piano Concerto to play in Jorge Bolet's masterclass, and with an orchestra, in Edinburgh Scotland, a few months before I emigrated to the USA. Leslie accompanied me on a second piano with the orchestral reduction.



Leslie Howard's Recital in Seully Hall, Boston

Leslie's program consisted of the Scherzo No. 2 by Balakirev, Petite Suite and Scherzo by Borodin, Sonata No. 1 by Glazunov, Three Pieces and the 2nd Piano Sonata by Rachmaninoff.

I hadn't heard any of the pieces before except the Rachmaninoff Sonata, which I play myself in the shortened, edited version. I found the Balakirev Scherzo to be generally more tuneful and atmospheric than Islamey which is his most famous piece. It was typically Russian in character with some similarities to the beautiful themes from Borodin's Polovtsian Dances in the introduction. Leslie gave the Scherzo a superb performance.

The Petite Suite and Scherzo by Borodin consisted of eight short pieces including an Intermezzo, Mazurkas, Reverie, Serenade, Nocturne and Scherzo. The Serenade, sixth piece in the Suite, was reminiscent of the song "Stranger in Paradise", based on Borodin's "Andantino" from the Polovtsian Dances.

The British Liszt Society used to arrange some wonderful soirees at different member's homes that went on until the early hours of the morning. Leslie used to go to these and played the Tchaikovsky and Rubinstein Sonatas, and anything else that was requested. He has an amazing repertoire of pieces he can play from memory.

It's possible that I heard the Glazunov Sonata at one of these soirees. The first movement of the sonata starts with a melancholy mood similar to the beginning of Franck's Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, or the tragic piano Sonata by Janacek. The final movement is more cheerful and lively, and reminded me of one of Moszkowski's Virtuoso Etudes. This sonata is a very romantic, passionate, dramatic and melodious work, and I would be interested to get the score and try it out myself.

Leslie played the original uncut version of Rachmaninoff's 2nd Sonata. I am more familiar with the shortened version because I play it, and I have sight read through some of the original version edited by John Browning. Some of parts of Leslie's performance had additions and changes that were not in the Browning edition. This made me wonder whether Rachmaninoff had written some other alternative sections or "ossias".

It was a very brilliant and powerful performance. It made the later version sound simple by comparison. There were some parts that I preferred to those in the shorter version. I believe that some pianists including Vladimir Horowitz made their own version by

combining sections from the original and later versions that they liked best.

For an encore, Leslie played a Valse Caprice by Anton Rubinstein. He received a standing ovation. It was a wonderful recital and one of the highlights in the musical calendar.



Leslie Howard with Robert Finley after the concert

Calendar of Events

Recitals

On Friday February 22nd at 8 p.m. in Symphony Hall, Boston, **Alfred Brendel** will be giving a recital of works by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. See Celebrityseries.org for details.

On Friday April 18th at 8 p.m. in Jordan Hall, Boston, **Dubravka Tomsic** will be giving a recital of works by Mozart, Scarlatti, Beethoven, Brahms, Srebotnjak and Prokofiev. See Celebrityseries.org for details.

On Thursday April 24th, the Washington International Piano Arts Council (WIPAC) presents the **“Grand Prix” concert** in Washington DC, featuring four winners of international piano competitions. For further details see www.wipac.org

Competitions

Between April 18th and April 22nd, the **Steinway Society of Massachusetts** will be holding a piano competition at M. Steinert and Sons in Boston. This competition has two divisions: for people 14-18 years old and 19-35 years old. The deadline for applications is March 28th. For details call 6174261900 or see their webpage www.steinwaysocietymass.org

The **e-Piano Competition Junior Division** will be holding “virtual auditions” on a Yamaha Disklavier at the Piano Salon of Yamaha Artist Services Inc. in New York City. The auditions are open to the public. For information see www.epianocompetition.org

The bi-annual **International Piano Amateur Competition Berlin, Germany**, will be held between September 22nd and 27th in the Berlin Philharmonic Halls. This year’s competition will feature chamber music in the final round. The deadline for applications is February 25th. Details are available on the webpage www.ipac-berlin.com

Piano Festivals

“Piano Texas” International Academy and Festival will take place at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth between June 5th and June 29th. This will feature recitals, masterclasses, and concerto performances. There will be three divisions, for young pianists, amateur pianists and piano teachers. For details, see the webpage www.pianotexas.com

“International Piano Amateur Festival” will take place in Paris, France at La Maison de la Radio France, between June 30th and July 4th. This will feature finalist and winners of international piano competitions around the world. The recitals are open to the public and will be recorded for broadcast on the Radio. Details are available on the webpage www.ipaf.fr

In the Next Edition of “The Pianist’s Oracle”:

“What makes a great performance?” Robert Finley will discuss the ingredients for a good or even great performance of a piano work, including such topics as style, adherence to composer’s intentions, rhythm, voicing, phrasing, melodic line, harmony, accuracy, pedaling, silence, drama etc

“Introduction to MIDI”. Robert Finley will describe what MIDI is and how this applies to electric pianos and keyboards, Yamaha Disklaviers, player pianos and synthesizers, basic MIDI setup, recording onto a computer and playback, use in practicing and accompaniment.

“Recital Review”. A recital in the Boston area will be reviewed

“Calendar of Events”. Upcoming recitals, competitions, masterclasses and competitions will be listed.

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