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1. Introduction

Perfect: being entirely without fault or defect: flawless

Corresponding to an ideal standard or abstract concept.

The purpose of this book is to serve as a practical guide to the musician in the pursuit of perfection. It looks at our work from the first contact with a piece of music in the practice room to the moment on stage when the music is shared with the listener. Note that I have written *pursuit* and not *attainment* of perfection. While striving to attain that which is 'entirely without fault or defect' in our music making, this goal is (to paraphrase Wordsworth) an "arch wherethrough gleams that untraveled world whose margins fade ever and ever as I move." Perfection is not a goal; it is a pathway. In travelling this pathway, a musician -wherever he or she is in the development and realization of their talents - never reaches an end.

As a performing pianist, I have been on this path for over a half-century. I am still discovering new insights, new depths in the music that I practice and perform. This book is a summary and distillation of the knowledge I have acquired while on the path of musical perfection. Some of what I write here is musical common sense. Some may perhaps be stated in a new way. A few suggestions are completely original to me.

The chapters are purposely short and can be absorbed in a single reading. My hope is that these short chapters will serve as a catalyst to your own explorations in the art of music. Think of it not as a

comprehensive guide but as a map drawn in pencil, roughly pointing the way, but not giving you exact directions. The details are for you to discover for yourself. They will be different for each one of you, depending on your givens, your circumstances and how your musical life unfolds.

Much of what is written here is grounded in the teaching of two remarkable men: Jan Ekier and Tadeusz Wroński, a pianist and violinist respectively. Both were professors at the Warsaw Academy of Music in Warsaw, Poland in the 1970's when I studied there as a post-graduate student in piano. During those years, in the middle of the Cold War, in a country that was behind the Iron Curtain, I discovered a lively and lucid pedagogical tradition. Ekier and Wroński had developed through their teaching and in consultation with each other a unique approach to learning music – an approach that answered in very wise and practical ways questions about practicing and performing that up until that time had remained a mystery to me. Topics such as learning and practicing a piece, memorization and performance were thoughtfully discussed. Suggestions for how to approach each were clearly described. Such an approach to practice and performance that was methodical without being pedantic gave me a map by which to chart my musical progress.

Their work in effect “de-mythologized” the practice room for me, opening the way to perceive the truly profound mysteries of the art of music. Their work and their thought permeate Perfect Practice/Perfect Performance. I have built on their seminal work, enlarged it, altered it, and I hope moved it forward by combining it with my own experience. But I am completely aligned with their message: that music is a mystery, the processes of art are mysterious, and that even so there are clear

ways to make our work in music, the actual process of learning and performing music, more effective and successful, and ultimately more satisfying.

In the realm of the practice room more than any other, a needless sense of mystery pervades. We have the idea that “talented” students know how to practice, and that “untalented” students do not. We have the idea that when a teacher says in a lesson “go home and practice that” there is no further advice to be given. The rest is up to the student who must blindly grope, alone in the practice room, until she discovers answers, often quite by accident.

There is a better way.

We can have practice sessions which are dependably productive, confidently carrying us forward on the path of perfection, and allowing us to securely share our music with our listeners.

Although this book is a practical guide, some passages in it may seem very abstract and removed from the practical. This is because bad results in practice and on stage often come from bad thinking, and if we can change our thinking about music, we may see a positive change in our musical efforts. Indeed, bad results in practice, leading to unsatisfactory performances, may come from not thinking at all! This is the curse of thoughtless, mechanical practice that hinders our musical development while repeating our bad habits.

Someone once said that practice was 99% mental and 1% physical. There is a great deal of truth in this. It is our mental focus and attitude in practice that ultimately determine the success of our work.

A sharp and inquisitive mind endlessly seeks the easiest and most elegant solution to each musical problem. A curious and expansive mind is open to every solution to every problem, capable of asking the right question to get the right answer.

How fortunate that in practice we have instant feedback for our thinking - mistakes! Every mistake we make poses a question - how do I play this better? Every mistake is an opportunity for learning. We must listen to our mistakes carefully because inside each of them is the seed of an answer. To repeat a mistake is to ignore the answer, not to pursue perfection but to habituate imperfection.

I have tried to write a handbook of general observations suitable to all musicians. Although I am a pianist, I have not limited my observations to only the piano but expanded them to general principles which can apply to all instrumental musicians as well as vocalists.

Someone once gave me a postcard, with the following words simply printed on a white background:

YOU PLAY THE WAY YOU PRACTICE

Every performance we give is a summary of how we have practiced. It is a kind of travelogue of our trip through the piece, step by step, hour by hour, day by day. There is nowhere to hide onstage. How we practiced, the decisions we made or didn't make, the shortcuts we took to "get through," the problems we ignored, everything - for better or worse - is on display. In my life as a musician, I have made most of the mistakes in practicing I describe in the chapters that follow. I have fallen into the bad habits I discourage you from repeating. After many a frustrating and painful performance when I have fallen far

short of the music I heard in my imagination, I have, sometimes slowly and painfully, dug my way out of non-productive methods of work in search of a better way. Thus, this work is written from personal experience. There is no observation recorded here, no practice method advocated here, that has not been personally tested by me for its effectiveness.

All the recommendations in this book must successfully answer two questions:

1. *Do they bring results, both in the practice room and in performance?*
2. *Do they change the sound of what I am playing?*

Music is about sound, and any practice method that does not change the sound of my music-making for the better is useless.

May this handbook aid you in your pursuit of the perfect sound.