

Finding the Drastic: Exploring Forms of Attention in Piano Performance

by

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ABSTRACT

While Carolyn Abbate's essay "Music – Drastic or Gnostic" sets provocative parameters for considering performance, she also makes a bold stand on the mutual exclusivity of the knowing or gnostic mind and active or drastic body in performance. Abbate suggests that when one is involved in the real-time experience of music (i.e. performance) there is no room for thought because conceptual awareness interrupts the real-time experience. Thus, drastic precludes gnostic. Yet many performers speak about the need to negotiate a balance between mind and body in performance. This implies that an imbalance can occur in either direction, that over-thinking the execution is not conducive to flow but that the ultimate experience of the music 'playing itself' may also incur an undesirable sense of not being in conscious control.

This paper aims to explore the limits of a gnostic approach and the parameters for a drastic performance. My own experience has demonstrated the ways in which too much conscious control - or rather, too much conscious attention on certain tactile aspects of playing - can end up hampering the physical execution. Indeed, *Science Daily* has summarised recent research in the *Journal of Neuroscience* that confirms scientifically that over-thinking can be detrimental to performance. Implicit memory (unconscious and expressed by means other than words) and explicit memory (which is conscious and can be described in words) each operate from different parts of the brain; and the implication is that physical performance in most cases requires the deployment of implicit as well as explicit memory. For a pianist, in other words, on the one hand the 'action' must become instinctive at some point because one's attention cannot focus simultaneously on the fingers prior to every sound and on the sound itself. On the other hand, it is also not desirable simply to deliver the action to some level of drastic, or pure 'doing' (as the ancient meaning of the word suggests), even to a meta-drastic point where the music 'plays itself'. Thus it would seem that Abbate's stipulation gnostic or drastic requires further reflection.

Through my critical analysis of this discussion, I would like finally to be able to redress the balance between a gnostic and drastic approach in my own

performance. Resituating the mind-body balance itself requires a shift in consciousness: a shift that effectively distracts me from overt tactile awareness and places my foreground attention to sound. This shift, ironically, requires an immense conscious effort: in other words, my shift towards the drastic is launched by the gnostic. Through documenting the process of my own journey from gnostic/explicit performance to drastic/implicit performance, I will propose that a specific balanced blend is ideal: that is, I need to move from a cognitive or conscious process that focuses on physical aspects of performance, in order to bring an unfettered consciousness of sound to the foreground attention. If I can suppress my conscious attention to the kinetics of playing the piano and this very suppression permits a focus on sound itself, will that be a shutting down of one kind of excessive cognitive effort and signal a release of the drastic, or simply resituate the gnostic? For myself, finding my way to trusting a drastic approach and yet balance it with a gnostic input is imperative if I am to find music making a pleasure.



Golden Steps

from Score Series

By Kazu Nakagawa

<http://www.kazunakagawa.com/exhib-bath.html>

(A poignant artwork, presented to me by Kazu for my 40th birthday, which seems in hindsight to parallel the golden steps of my pianistic gnosis.)

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Preface

My research focus for this master's thesis is on the practice room - the pedagogy of preparation *prior* to performance. As a pianist who has continually struggled to find ease at the instrument, I have been beset for years with a key question; **'WHAT are able pianists doing that I am not doing?'** In coming to terms with the way the answer must be related to mind and consciousness rather than pure physicality alone, the implications fed a desire to document the process. My aim in this exegesis is to explore the question through pulling together personal reflection and some recent research across various fields of scholarship. My conclusions attempt to assess the relationship of the issues I identify with a fundamental pedagogical problem, and to identify a gap in conventional teaching methodology.

In the process of this research I have also worked to determine how to solve my own problem of lack of ease. It is one thing to know 'what' is wrong and quite another to know 'how' to change that. The issue is one for the 'practice room' first and foremost.¹ Investigating my own working processes at the piano, the practice room has therefore become the main laboratory for my research – the place where I could put the various concepts from my scholarly research into a testing phase.

The first chapter sets the background scene. The path that lead me to this master's thesis is described, including a brief account of the personal history that shaped and molded my behavioural patterning – the patterning I now seek a reduction of. The second chapter explores connections to scholarly discourse with a focus on two authors in two separate fields: in musicology, Carolyn Abbate; and in neuroscience, Taraz Lee. The ideas laid out by these scholars create a theoretical context that inspires my praxis. Chapter 3 then deals with the very personal and

¹The natural progression, once solved, is to take the step to the concert stage, where the issues that arise may or may not be related to the private practice room issues to be explored here. For me, performance anxiety, and the act of stage performance are not the specific subjects of my work; just the issue of performance anxiety could constitute an entire thesis in itself. As I have personal issues with performance anxiety, though no doubt in part related to my ill-ease at the piano, the step to the final performance stage may prove premature, in that other issues not addressed in my research may become an issue.

practical applications of these theoretical concepts. Consequently it reflects a unique and subjective point of reference, which must, through definition, use both auto-ethnographic and performative methods of report, in order to demonstrate the link if any, between praxis and theory. As this chapter records part of an experiential process, there is a chronological element to it, especially towards the close. Chapter 4 was written entirely post-examination, when the laboratory experiment had concluded. The exegesis finale draws conclusions on aspects of the process raised in previous chapters; picking up where Chapter 3 left off, it provides an auto-ethnographic assessment of the practical exam. My conclusions raise questions that may provide pathways for continued research in piano pedagogy.

Chapter 1 The Elusive Drastic

The story so far...

I was seven years old. My first piano teacher sang as I played; lessons were always a pleasure for me, as I remember; she let me invent little tunes by way of avoiding theory homework; she let me play with collapsed knuckles. My first performance, at a 'musical evening' for piano students in my parents' home, was a disaster. I still remember refusing to play at first, the tears, the pep talk, and finally playing my little one or two line piece 'perfectly'.

From twelve years old, my second piano teacher demanded a far more disciplined approach. At sixteen, as I struggled to play the first few bars of the final movement (Allegro Assai) of Mozart's Piano Sonata in F major KV332 with any ease, I had my first conscious inkling of a deeper problem. To help me through this seemingly technical problem, my teacher demonstrated her finger technique of that passage on my forearm. The touch felt very strong, and so I ended up misinterpreting her intent. By trying to imitate it at the piano, I began years of pressing down into the keyboard *consciously*, with an acute awareness of, and mental focus towards, the sensation in my fingertips. My "solution" contributed to a problem I am still trying to overcome.

From my youthful vantage point I did not understand the depth of my problem, this ill-ease, let alone the future limitations it would impose. In the meantime I managed to achieve very good results with exams, gaining Distinctions from Grades Five to Eight. University beckoned, with no other viable option presenting itself: as I recall, I had no clear idea of wanting to do anything specific with my life. At that time it was still widely felt that obtaining a university degree in any field was sure guarantee of good employment. In my environment, as a girl, I was not conditioned to think about a career to ensure my financial security. Only later did I become aware of the largely subliminal, common sociological assumption/expectation of marriage, housekeeping and motherhood.

Entry into university performance studies at seventeen launched years of earnest self-analysis at the piano and three further piano teachers in whom I put my

faith. There were contemporaneous students who left my year class because they either did not pass or decided to pursue other options. But it seems to be a natural trait of mine, to my detriment perhaps, to need to *solve* things, and it simply frustrated me that I could not play as easily as I felt I should be able to - and that some peers seemed to be able to do so. Our teacher instructed the first year students to read *Zen in the Art of Archery*, by Eugen Herrigel. Something about this little book struck a chord in me, and although I am sure much of it was beyond my naive comprehension at the time, it perhaps propelled me onwards, determined to experience its claims.

As with previous piano exams, I did well at university, in the sense that I never merely 'passed,' and when I returned to complete an Honours year I achieved an 'A' for that recital. The good marks confused me all the more and made me more determined to work out how to balance what 'they' saw was clearly good in my playing with what was problematic to me – a lack of ease, whether playing slow or fast. Little did I know that I would still be searching to find the solution thirty years later.

A third, private, teacher while I was at tertiary level aimed to be my 'piano doctor' and specifically set out to teach me '*conscious* piano technique'. Two hours could be spent on two bars of a Czerny study; notebooks were filled with her precise directions for finger execution. She analysed every harmonic, melodic and rhythmic function with me and demanded I think about every movement as well as listen to the sound I produced. I found that doing both, simultaneously, was very difficult – perhaps impossible? But I did not know why.

Returning to the second teacher, at university, with a final recital looming, the more I worked *consciously*, for uncounted hours, with calculated intent, with grim determination and effort, the tighter I got and the worse I played. 'Conscious piano technique' heralded no positive result for me. Practice did not make perfect. The ten thousand hour theory had provisos. For the first time in my life, I merely 'passed'. I gave up 'officially' on the idea of finding a teacher who could help and I gave up piano performance 'for good' – well, for more than a decade.

I do not hold any of my teachers responsible for not being able to help me solve my dilemma. I have since realised that none of my teachers had ever had any

personal experience of equivalent issues. They had never themselves 'felt' how it was to be suffering such inadequacies. Whilst working with them I did not understand the extent or true nature of my problem, so I did not talk about it with teachers (as I can now). Instead, I was given the general impression that technical drills - concentrating on the visual evidence, the physical positioning as a means to correct sound - were the only way to achieve 'ease'. However, I discovered that hours of scales and studies do not necessarily produce technical ease: holding or relaxing the arm, elbow, hand or fingers this way or that does not necessarily make a core difference; thinking of creating such and such a tone colour, phrasing, articulation or dynamic can be cosmetic, and not related to fundamental motor function. There was clearly something more to it.

Understandably, students' difficulties tend perhaps to be described as resulting from either lack of practice or lack of talent, the latter being some ineffable quality, not to be challenged to reduction. The point is that I now perceive a significant gap between the experience of my tertiary teachers (and the secondary school piano teacher who played on my arm) and my own experience. This empirical gap represents mutually exclusive approaches and delineates the abyss I am trying to leap.

Many struggling performance students decide to take another, more expedient direction with their lives. And maybe, in my case, I should never have been accepted into a university course in the first place.² As it was, after years of having supported myself with a combination of the most mundane employment and a little piano teaching, I was also now faced with finding another direction. I continued initially with an existing piano teaching position at a private girls' school in North Sydney for one year with the sole purpose of funding a one-way air ticket to the UK for the standard kiwi 'OE'.

² Teaching piano had never been of interest to me, and certainly my issues did not help me to feel qualified. However, had a university qualification in piano pedagogy been available, I suspect this might have stimulated solutions and provided me with a viable alternative pathway and in turn *created* a personal interest in teaching piano as a career.

During this teaching period, the year I turned thirty, my natural analytical tendencies could not be switched off.³ **WHAT are able pianists doing that I am not doing?** On one notable occasion, minding a house that had a grand piano, I observed that I was slightly disorientated with the sound projection from the open lidded instrument. All of my life I'd played and practised for the most part on upright pianos, except for performances and concomitant rehearsals. The direction from which the sound came, in this particular session, teased out the sweet kernel of an answer, appearing as a major epiphany, which I will elaborate on in a moment. As it was, battle-weary and not knowing whether I would ever actually explore its validity, I happily 'shelved' the epiphany for a later time.

I hung up the proverbial sign, 'GONE FISHING'. Literally, there were a few commercial fishing experiences and a little farm work for the 1996 year before heading to the UK. There I spent eighteen months in hospitality and travelling. Back in New Zealand, based in Whangamata from 1998, a relationship led me in the next two years to further commercial fishing.⁴ I next sold real estate through the property boom, until, tiring of that, I headed off to play background popular music on a cruise ship in the Caribbean in August 2006. Working on ships for eight months, my interest in playing the piano *better* again stirred.

Nevertheless, I continued to meander before relocating to New Plymouth in 2008 - a vibrant musical community in comparison to the worlds I had inhabited since 1996. As I put the word out that I was interested to be involved, the shortage of pianists meant I was soon in demand: accompanying student exams and performances; playing as rehearsal and orchestra pianist for a major show; filling in where the local orchestra required a 'horizontal harp' (keyboard). I was even honoured to accompany Dame Malvina Major twice, for retirement home events.

³ Performances I was involved in were mostly accompanying within the school, but there was one public solo appearance and one public concert with a peer flutist.

⁴ Fishing being in my extended family I fell into employment in that industry. I hauled tuna in by gloved hand from Westport to Taranaki to Manakau to Bay of Plenty and the North; sorted scallops endlessly; endured rough conditions at sea for stretches with extremely limited facilities on board at times (i.e. no shower or toilet); but I also saw some wondrous sights and had some wonderful experiences, including the sometimes brutal and sheer unsophisticated aura of that lifestyle. Culture was country music and rum. Beethoven did not exist; there was no need for art at all.

The real pinnacle, however, was appearing as soloist in a performance of a full piano concerto in a public concert with the New Plymouth Orchestra, the Polish Ambassador in attendance, in 2011.⁵

In this three-year period I had been drawn back into playing classical music, eventually taking it ever more seriously and inevitably picking up at the old battleground with the previously shelved epiphany. With the concerto performance I began a practice notebook recording aspects of the learning process as I sought to clarify a path forward towards a more comfortable and pleasurable execution. Five years on from the beginning of this late surge, I find myself near the business end of a university course, still with those notebooks and still recording the process.

The epiphany...

My original epiphany, the answer to the **WHAT**, was concise and seemingly simple: what able pianists could do that I was not able to do was listen as they played. At first, this may seem a kind of tautology: surely, the art of listening should always be taken for granted, as any musician's *raison d'être*. A visual artist clearly hones his/her special art of 'seeing'; it stands to reason that any musician's special art is to do with listening. But for me, why I was unable to listen effectively to the sound I produced at the piano was a problem that needed to be solved: simply understanding that I needed to listen more closely did not offer me a solution. Discerning this '**WHY can I not listen**' and working with it to find a remedy for '**HOW can I listen better**', these were and are the parameters of my personal investigation. At the point of that early realisation I could not have imagined just how complex my *definition* of the art of listening would become.

Only within the last few years have I become aware that, at least since teenage years, I have *always* been both consciously and fundamentally concerned with the kinetic execution, and, equally importantly, *that this is not desirable*. The actual sound I produced was the target of my *secondary attention* even if it was the consciously acknowledged, all-important result of where I directed my *primary*

⁵ The concert was held at Taranaki TSB Showplace on November 12th 2011. The concerto was Karol Syzmanowski's Symphony Concertante Opus 60.

attention.⁶ I knew the sound should be my first priority, but I could not give it the *attention* it required. The battle continues. My theory on the **WHY** is that the usual focus of my primary attention, the kinetics, effectively constitutes linguistic or cognitive interference, hampering my aural attention.

***“Don’t think of what you have to do,
don’t consider how to carry it out!” he exclaimed.***

***“The shot will only go smoothly
when it takes the archer himself by surprise.
It must be as if the bowstring suddenly
cut through the thumb that held it.
You mustn’t open the right hand on purpose.”***

Eugen Herrigel⁷

Finding a correct mindful attention leads me in a trajectory towards the **HOW**. On one hand, listening is an engaged, critical process, logically involving *thought* processes; but it is also a pure sensual *action* performed by the body. There is an opposition here. A binary. A duality. A dichotomy. Yes, a cache of bandied clichés. But simply put, I have come to terms with a fundamental tension between thinking and doing.⁸ I first came to this conclusion through my ‘laboratory’ research into my own mind’s attitudes and thoughts whilst at the piano. But it was through reading and exploring research by a range of scholars, as I outline in the following chapter, that I was able to alight on some corollary theories, which in turn enhanced my experimentation in my practice room laboratory.

⁶ My current and hindsight observations are that this is a relatively common problem amongst pianists at varying levels of ability – poignantly I *recognise* it because it is also my experience.

⁷ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (NY: Random House, 1981 - originally published 1953), 29.

⁸ The reference here is the “floating” quote that preceded the paragraph. These quotes will be inserted in this style throughout, and are designed as ‘performative’ devices to register as piquant parallels to the accompanying discussion; I leave the relevance to the reader.

*Making is an entirely different order from Saying.
Composing music, playing it, singing it;
or even hearing it in recreating it
– are these not three modes of doing,
three attitudes that are drastic, not gnostic,
not of the hermeneutic order of knowledge?*

Vladimir Jankelevitch¹

While my basic focus on listening might seem obvious to most musicians, my reading and research across this year began to identify why “listening” is not as simple as it seems. My first goal was to be able to listen better, in order to gain a sense of ease in my playing. Little did I know how complex this was going to become. The apparent stumbling blocks to listening presented by my over-thinking and over-attention to the kinetics were deeply rooted and complicated. On the one hand, Carolyn Abbate’s essay, ‘Music – Drastic or Gnostic?’ immediately painted categories of “thinking” and “doing” that drew a significant parallel, and provided the scholarly springboard for this exegesis.² Further, an article in the field of neuroscience, by Taraz Lee, provided a scientific corollary to Abbate’s terms, and offered an even more concrete explanation for the often negative impact of explicit memory on implicit memory processes, which seems to shed a distinct light on my difficulties.³ Knowing that my limitations were in part related to mind, and related to my use of conscious processes rather than purely a lack of physical training, led me to explore a range of reading related to consciousness theory: embodied intelligence, the phenomenology of listening and the ability to control one’s own psychic consciousness in order to achieve “flow”. Clearly, things became *very* complex – more complex than I could have thought possible.

¹ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Music and the Ineffable* (first published 1961), trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton University Press, 2003), 77.

² Carolyn Abbate, ‘Music – Drastic or Gnostic’, *Critical Inquiry* 30/3 (2004), 505-536.

³ Taraz Lee, Robert S Blumenfeld and Mark D’Esposito, Disruption of Dorsolateral But Not Ventrolateral Prefrontal Cortex Improves Unconscious Perceptual Memories, *The Journal of Neuroscience* Vol 33 (2013).

This chapter will traverse some of this thorny material. I will interweave my account of Abbate's essay, the neuroscience relation and embodied intelligence with the thoughts of selected performers, by way of illuminating a theoretical parallel to my practice room aims. The phenomenology of listening is of obvious importance to these issues; but for my own process, I found the links to consciousness, in the bodily sense rather than the cognitive sense, most relevant. All these fields represent an enormous purview of study, too great to tackle within this essay. Chapter 2 thus represents a selective sampling of scholarly ideas that provided a very personal framework for me, relating to my problems with listening and with finding ease. Though the findings discussed here impacted on my *theoretical* understanding of these dilemmas, significantly they did *not* directly affect my work at the piano.

Carolyn Abbate: Music-Drastic or Gnostic?...

Carolyn Abbate's essay has been very influential for the field of musicology, and its relationship to thinking about music as performed. For me, however, the terminology that she introduces us to sets up a difference between ways of knowing within the context of live performance, and her essay encouraged me to think differently about the processes of performance itself. While her depiction of the "drastic" is in fact inspirational for me, describing a kind of performance I aspire to, in my thinking the interrelationship of drastic and gnostic *during performance* has become the key issue I have wrestled with.

To begin then, let me provide Abbate's definition to the terms drastic and gnostic:

Jankelevitch's distinction between drastic and gnostic involves more than a conventional opposition between music in practice and music in theory because drastic connotes physicality, but also desperation and peril, involving a category of knowledge that flows from drastic actions or experiences and not from verbally mediated reasoning. Gnostic as its antithesis implies not just knowledge per se but making the opaque transparent, knowledge based on semiosis and disclosed secrets reserved for the elite and hidden from others.⁴

⁴ Carolyn Abbate, 'Music – Drastic or Gnostic', 509-510.

Following on from this rather obscure definition, Abbate's essay underscores the nature of music's live performance as both an embodied and temporal action, the impact of which is not easily harnessed or explained against musicology's perpetual desire to defer to and translate music's text. The real time event becomes almost superfluous in preference to the decoded score. Her argument lays out the complexities of resituating live performance within the context of academic discourse and musicology itself. My concern is not academic discourse, but rather the nature of performance. Abbate's definition of "drastic" permits both a label (noun) and a mode (adverb) for dealing with those intangible aspects of performance that performer and scholar alike wrestle with. However, it is not just scholars who must employ the gnostic process, and the gnostic process implies more than just scholarly knowledge.

Simply put, "gnostic" comes from the Ancient Greek verb "to know" and "drastic" from the verb "to do", or "to act". At a mundane level this is the 'conventional opposition between music in practice and music in theory' that Abbate mentions. Abbate asks, "is the gnostic attitude precluded by performed music"?⁵ She performs a practical experiment to assess whether any formal or musicological knowledge does have, can have, or should have, any part of the live performance event. She proposes musicological questions to herself whilst she is accompanying a singer. The absurdity of this is immediately obvious: the questions/conscious thoughts she poses have nothing to do with the kinds of questions/conscious thoughts performers engage with in live performance. She next considers what, if anything, she DOES think about whilst playing. It seems she doesn't suffer the same gnostic interference I do (!) and so if any thought occurred at all, it was merely about a passage being fun to play fast or a big jump coming up. In fact, Abbate is not considering these thoughts 'gnostic,' as her definition applies the term to a procured academic knowledge. But, any commentary *at all* in my head whilst playing, whether it be how to shape this phrase, from where does this motive arise, what key have I modulated to, where is the structural climax, what is the next note, was that the right colour, or the wrong fingering - as well as, that was fun to play and here comes

⁵ Ibid., 510.

a big jump - constitutes verbal mediation. Consequently, whether related to formal knowledge or not, any commentary is therefore, for me, part of the gnostic process. In addition, something Abbate does not question is the subconscious influence of her gnosis upon which her drastic performance is contingent. Could this be her 'opaque and hidden knowledge'? I think so, but her focus is merely to demonstrate the gap between music as studied and music as experienced and hence to illuminate the problem for musicology. She is proving what Jankelevitch so simply states: that, fundamentally, "music acts upon human beings, on their nervous systems and their vital processes...the man [performer - but also listener, and by extension, composer] robbed of a self...has become nothing more than a vibrating string, a sounding pipe...this process...borders more on magic than on empirical science".⁶

Yet at a higher level than mundane thoughts and mundane physical actions, Abbate's formulation of these Greek terms suggests drastic as something untamed or wild in action, and gnostic as an unspoken knowledge.⁷ Therefore in applying these terms to performance, I suggest instead that it is more helpful to tease out degrees of gnostic and drastic by defining two broad categories of each mode. I will term the most mundane level – unadulterated physicality without thought – *basic-drastic*, involving anything motoric that we can do physically and without thinking, like walking. But not all basic activity is drastic: I also invoke what I will call a *basic-gnostic* process as when, for example, a beginner ballet dancer has to think about every movement and gradually learn the knowledge of dance: eventually the complex movements become as automatic as walking, and so turn into the *basic-drastic*. The process of learning to dance therefore evolves from a varying degree of gnostic understanding to a varying degree of drastic experience - and there are many levels of skill involved for both gnostic and drastic application.

In addition, however, I believe that for both drastic and gnostic there is an ultimate, or meta, category. The *meta-drastic*, in my formulation, is a more complex level of the drastic, one in which elements of the gnostic interact and have a contingent role to play. To be a star of the ballet would connote a meta-drastic

⁶ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 75.

⁷ This assumes Abbate's definitions are fully correct and authentic to Ancient Greek usage. I am not able to verify this here or give a fuller account of the etymology.

ability, because the level of performance necessarily carries with it a much higher level of understanding resulting from years of gnostic application, which continually feeds into the dancer's drastic performance. Such a performance is likely to contain within it immense physical pleasure, in that the gnostic, at this level of application, becomes an embodied drastic experience. My idea of a definition for *meta-gnostic*, due to its 'hidden and opaque' components, is necessarily vague and could almost imply a level for which only Glass Bead Game players are equipped!⁸ However, Daniel Barenboim illustrates exactly the sense that I am aiming for, and shows that an extremely high level of gnosis is required. In this sense, then the gnostic would seem to somehow cross over into the drastic, *in order to* complete the ultimate symbiosis of score and performance:

It is almost as if the interpretation of a text creates a subtext for itself that develops, substantiates, varies and contrasts the actual text. This subtext is inherent in the score and is itself boundless; it results from a dialogue between the performer and the score and its richness is determined by the curiosity of the performer.⁹

Thus it would seem that the score itself carries Abbate's *opaque knowledge*, in my new terms a meta-gnostic component, which is only made transparent in the hands of an embodied performer in a real time event, a meta-drastic event. That knowledge, according to Barenboim, is boundless. In other words, the star ballet dancer cannot achieve the physical and seemingly magical feats that go beyond mere technique (a mid-level drastic?) without applying a learned and complex knowledge: a knowledge arising from deep within self that is born of 'practice' combined with a relentless pursuit of the mystery which is, by definition, hidden. It is this, an expansion of Abbate's opaque knowledge, that I am calling the meta-gnostic, and at this highest point of performance meta-drastic and meta-gnostic merge.

At the end of Chapter 1, I provided my self-diagnosis of *cognitive interference*, which may now also be called *gnostic interference*. The process of playing the piano necessarily requires thought but it would seem that at some point

⁸ This is a reference to Herman Hesse's novel, '*The Glass Bead Game*' (first published 1943) (New York: Picador, 2002).

⁹ Daniel Barenboim, *Everything is Connected* (London: Orion Publishing Group Ltd, 2008), 52.

gnosis becomes subservient to a drastic attitude. My attempt at navigating this slithery gnostic/drastring field in overlapping levels between *basic* and *meta* is my lifelong struggle.

The Neuroscience Perspective...

For a moment, reflect that Abbate's definition of drastic included 'the flow of actions and experiences not from verbally mediated reasoning' for which, 'gnostic is the antithesis'. Implicit and explicit memory are neuro-scientific terms that provide a contemporaneous analog for Abbate's more academic terms, drastic and gnostic respectively:

There are two kinds of memory: implicit, a form of long-term memory not requiring conscious thought and expressed by means other than words; and explicit, another kind of long-term memory formed consciously that can be described in words.¹⁰

A recent (August 2013) University of California Santa Barbara paper by Taraz Lee in the *Journal of Neuroscience* discusses implicit memory and explicit memory; the article has in turn been summarised in lay terms in the *Science Daily* article quoted above. The paper describes experiments where one side of the cerebral cortex is shut down in order to show that implicit memory is negatively influenced by explicit memory. The article follows on with a summary of the relevant brain function:

Scientists consider these distinct areas of function both behaviourally and in the brain. Long-term memory is supported by various regions in the pre-frontal cortex, the newest part of the brain in terms of evolution and the part of the brain responsible for planning, executive function, and working memory.¹¹

Looking at these extracts it is an easy for me to extrapolate to my piano playing. The title and opening sentences from the same article point to concerns regarding my own 'gnostic interference':

UCSB Study Reveals That Overthinking Can Be Detrimental To Human Performance – Trying to explain riding a bike is difficult because it is an implicit memory. The body knows what to do but thinking about the process

¹⁰ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/08/130807134512.htm> (8 September, 2013)

¹¹ Ibid.

can often interfere. So why is it that under certain circumstances paying full attention and trying hard can impede performance?¹²

Everyone knows that ‘trying too hard’ is not prudent, but it is another thing to have it scientifically demonstrated that the issue needs to be understood in relation to the way in which conscious thought can interfere with implicit memory. Most literature that I have read on how to play the piano pays scant attention to the workings of the mind, instead concentrating on the visual and aural elements of practice. These are the physical exercises to gain a better technique and sound - exercises that concentrate on aspects associated with kinetic function rather than attention placement. Reading these books one may be forgiven for assuming that **RIGOROUS and VIGILANT** conscious thought has a lot to do with proper execution at the instrument – that one must think very hard, and try very hard, in order to execute.

Therein lies the fundamental problem: indeed, I suspect that this core brain/bodily function is an essential contributing factor, if unwritten, in the definition of musical talent. For example, in his book of core exercises called *Piano – A Technical Approach to Relaxed Control at the Keyboard*, Michael Houstoun is one of those rare authors who tackles the issue of attention, which he labels ‘concentration’, albeit very briefly and with admission of its intrinsic mystery:

The act of concentration can tire a musician more than any of the physical work in this book. Such exhaustion usually comes from the tension involved in furrowing your brow, forcing your mind to a narrow focus on the musical problems. The effort at concentration which produces such tiredness is misdirected. Playing the piano involves a certain amount of physical effort, but there should be no extra effort involved in the concentration. It is difficult to explain, but we should not strain to concentrate, we should simply concentrate.¹³

My tendency towards ‘gnostic interference’ or overthinking the execution soaks up a great deal of concentration; it is exhausting and means that each ‘performance’ whether in public or private, feels like walking a tightrope with no catch-net. My attention is a twofold mis-placement. I am unable to listen effectively, to rely on an implicit aural memory and, with so much attention to the tactile response, I am

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Michael Houstoun, *Piano – A Technical Approach to Relaxed Control at the Keyboard* (Auckland: Lone Kauri Press, 1988), 34.

impeding an implicit kinetic memory - commonly referred to as muscle memory. I am trying too hard, in the wrong areas. Harold Taylor confirms my error:

“...the old school room maxims: “Concentrate!” and “Try Hard!” must be banished from our vocabulary, as they have no relevance to the growth of coordination...misapplied concentration actually diminishes awareness, as in the common case of the student who becomes so intent on his operations at the keyboard that he **fails to hear the sound he is making.**”¹⁴ (Emphasis added.)

If the **WHAT** I am doing wrongly manifests as inefficient listening, then misplacement of my ‘*attention*’, my concentration, could be the root answer to the question of **WHY**. Taraz Lee’s research focuses on *attentional* processes in the brain:

Lee’s fascination with the affect of attentional processes on memory stems from his extensive sports background...[Lee now comments:] “if we can figure out the ways in which activity in this part of the brain hurts you, then this also informs how your brain works and can give us some clues to what’s actually going on.”¹⁵

In his abstract Lee explains that his conclusions suggest explicit function can interfere with implicit function:

The findings lead to the hypothesis that explicit memory processes mediated by the prefrontal cortex can interfere with memory processes necessary for implicit recognition memory.¹⁶

My self-diagnosis of ‘gnostic interference’ is surely equivalent to explicit memory process interfering with a ‘drastic’, or implicit, process.

However, there are moot questions to be raised on the possibility of a gnostic/drastic combination, whether see-sawing or simultaneous. Lee also writes:

Subsequently, many studies provided further evidence that explicit and implicit memory are distinct at both the behavioural and neural levels, although with some evidence of **overlap**. Unfortunately the potentially competitive interaction between these two systems remains underspecified.¹⁷ (emphasis added)

¹⁴ Harold Taylor, *The Pianist’s Talent* (London: Kahn and Averill, 1979), 97.

¹⁵ <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/08/130807134512.htm> (8 September, 2013)

¹⁶ Taraz Lee, Robert S Blumenfeld and Mark D’Esposito, Disruption of Dorsolateral But Not Ventrolateral Prefrontal Cortex Improves Unconscious Perceptual Memories, 32.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Remember, the question Abbate was asking of herself; “is the gnostic attitude precluded by performed music?”¹⁸ Is there a valid and *competitive interaction*, between gnostic and drastic modes, which, even scientifically, *remains underspecified*? Must one entirely preclude the other? Or, to return to my analogy, does the star ballet dancer normally have thoughts whilst dancing at her best? Any thoughts occurring won’t necessarily stop her dancing so it is possible to maintain some degree of both drastic and gnostic (by my definition) *at the same time*. But when dancing *at her best* perhaps there is no thought at all, just pure doing and if a thought enters, the ideal flow is lost – or threatens to vacate? If there is no thought at all then perhaps this is meta-gnostic, unspoken knowledge, “damped down” as Abbate says, in deference to the meta-drastic. For the majority of top performers, is a *see-sawing* combination of thought/non-thought passages the norm? Is any see-sawing in equal quantity? Or is it continuous, *simultaneous* thought and action? Or is the peak experience sought one of zero commentary?

Embodied intelligence...

The systems of implicit memory and explicit memory themselves suggest a competition between body and mind. Embodied intelligence includes a sensual intelligence, and the embodied, or overall bodily intelligence of which that is part, and innate. Abbate considers that this is not ‘intellectual’ which conjures up a misleading connotation for ‘drastic’:

The state engendered by real music, the drastic state, is unintellectual and common, familiar in performers and music lovers and annoying nonmusicologists, and it has value. When we cannot stare such embarrassing possibilities in the face and find sympathy for them, when we deny that certain events of states are impenetrable to gnostic habits, hence make them invisible and inaudible, we are vulnerable.¹⁹

We have varying abilities to reason just as we have varying abilities physically. Abbate suggests that the former, a gnostic state, is intellectual at any level and that the latter, a drastic state, at any level, never is. She implies they are mutually

¹⁸ Carolyn Abbate, *Music-Drastic or Gnostic?*, 510.

¹⁹ Carolyn Abbate, *Music – Drastic or Gnostic?*, 534.

exclusive, or at least mutually independent rather than contingent in any way upon each other. Despite allowing that the drastic state is actually wonderful and then contrasting it to the intellectual, she refers to the drastic state as unintellectual and common, but there are surely untold degrees and overlaps and some sense in which, at least, one state is, or can be, a subset of the other.

Whether one state does actually preclude the other or not is a central question arising in this thesis, and one Abbate also asks: “is the gnostic attitude precluded by performed music”?²⁰ If the drastic state is *unintellectual and common*, why is it something that as a performer I have such difficulty encountering? Abbate’s perspective is laid out for the critic/musicologist; for the performer’s perspective, surely there needs to be a gnostic/drastic interrelationship? Even if a pure drastic state is ‘unintellectual’, or does not comprise ‘verbally mediated reasoning’, surely *intelligence* is not however absent: even as precursor to a drastic state, gnosis, training and learning provide an ongoing and underlying presence, if subservient. As a performer I am aspiring to a drastic performance but what then, if any, is the role of cognition *during* my performance? If cognition is to be minimal, then how does the drastic state function?

If the drastic state does not comprise verbally mediated reasoning, what does it comprise instead? Embodied intelligence. Jankelevitch hints at the nature of an embodied intelligence: intelligence within the body; intelligence that is not defined as something which maybe described in words; intelligence which, nevertheless, is *not* necessarily NOT a form of cognition:

Hence, Prokofiev, instinctively using atonal language when some unidentifiable impulse dictated the choice, looked at the reporter who questioned him about the “crisis of tonality” with astonishment, because he never asked himself any such questions. His business is Doing, just as the nightingale’s business is singing and the bee’s business is producing honey. A nightingale or a poet resembles a hero in this regard: a hero does not read papers about heroism, and he is not heroic by virtue of what he says but because of what he does. And nightingales sing ornaments but do not give lectures about ornamentation.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., 510.

²¹ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 80-81.

Bodily intelligence then, in its own way, can have an indefinably cognate or *non-verbally* mediated reasoning ability, perhaps instinctive or unconscious ‘reasoning’ such as, for example, when we correct our balance, but also, when we instinctively rather than intentionally choose a creative language. One decision is obviously bodily, the second is mental and thus *effectively cognitive, effectively intellectual*, yet arising out of an embodied unconscious mind. Considering the balance between making conscious and unconscious choices, and remembering that in performance I am struggling to lay my conscious thoughts aside, I find the words of innovative theatre director, Jerzy Grotowski instructive:

If you think, you must think with your body...When I tell you not to think, I mean with the head. Of course you must think, but with the body, logically, with precision and responsibility. You must think with the whole body by means of actions. Don’t think of the result, and certainly not of how beautiful the result may be. If it grows spontaneously and organically, like live impulses, finally mastered, it will always be beautiful – far more beautiful than any amount of calculated results put together.²²

Bennett Hogg describes Grotowski’s acting method, making what seems to me an irrefutable case for embodied intelligence. Such intelligence must include actions the body undertakes and includes the ability of the body to perceive through the senses:

In Grotowski’s theatre most of the work is in the training and preparation of the actor. His actors would spend much of each day training their bodies, not only acquiring fitness and strength but also a sense of being in their bodies as an expression of a kind of physical **intelligence**, so that rather than thinking and then acting, his actors would strive for the ‘total act’ defined as the point at which consciousness and instinct are united. This phrase implicitly identifies a binarism between consciousness and instinct, predicated upon a dual association of consciousness with thought and instinct with the body, that to a greater or lesser extent has structured many of the debates about the phenomena of consciousness.²³ (Hogg’s emphasis)

This binarism between thought and body, consciousness and instinct not only readily equates with the gnostic drastic definition and the explicit/implicit memory ‘competitive interaction’ that Taraz Lee speaks of, but it imposes an interrelationship rather than *one state precluding the other* as Abbate suggested. The nature of this

²² Bennett Hogg, Enactive Consciousness, Intertextuality, and Musical Improvisation: Deconstructing Mythologies and Finding Connections, in *Music and Consciousness*, ed. David Clarke and Eric Clarke (Oxford University Press, 2011), 83.

²³ *Ibid.*, 80.

interrelationship is vague, and as Lee points out, it is as yet under specified in scientific analysis. Musicologist Bethany Lowe in her writing on music, consciousness and Buddhism, writes:

Though the auditory and mental main minds may alternate rapidly, and may interact on a moment to moment basis, one of the provocative implications of this theory of mind is that only one of these, broadly speaking either listening or cogitating, will be to the fore at any given moment during a musical experience.²⁴

The interrelationship, for Lowe, is a balance comprising an alternating dominant and subservient mode, rather than a simultaneously occurring or equal split. It confirms the idea that drastic may not preclude gnostic absolutely, nor continually, and that one state may require the other in some sort of balance.

The practitioner...

Defining how the balance between gnostic and drastic, explicit and implicit memory, conscious and unconscious 'cognition' actually works remains in the realm of subjective experience. There is no empirical evidence for an ideal quotient of each. However, it appears to me that my explicit processes are over-active, and if some oscillating overlap is warranted, many have acknowledged that the presence of any thought can become an overt hindrance in performance. Bennett Hogg, again speaking of Grotowski's method, suggests that though there is a point where conscious playing and instinct are united, the dynamic unity is such that physical liberation is possible only by putting cognitive mind, not to the *permanent* background, as Abbate's notion of drastic would suggest, but into *abeyance*:

...it is nevertheless clear that much of the work towards the elimination of blockages is to be done by putting the mind, and thinking (figured here as something done by the conscious brain) into abeyance, allowing the body to act without hindrance.²⁵

²⁴ Bethany Lowe, 'In the heard, only the heard...': Music, Consciousness, and Buddhism', in *Music and Consciousness*, ed. David Clarke and Eric Clarke (Oxford University Press, 2011), 114.

²⁵ Bennett Hogg, 'Enactive Consciousness, Intertextuality, and Musical Free Improvisation: Deconstructing Mythologies and Finding Connections', 80.

As I work to correct my overthinking - explicit versus implicit, gnostic versus drastic, thinking versus doing, conscious versus unconscious, directing versus allowing – the competitive interaction inside my head at times becomes such that it seeks implosion in order to escape the dichotomy.

Zero commentary is my aim, not in the preclusive sense that Abbate suggests, but more in the *subservient* or *abeyance* sense of Lowe and Hogg. Daniel Barenboim's description of the process appears to be a picture-perfect example of a pathway from a gnostic excavation of the text, gliding to a meta-drastic performance, where thought does not enter the fray:

The structure of a work must become so internalised in the mind of the musician that intellectual thought during the performance is no longer necessary. On the other hand he may trust that his spontaneous promptings arise from his deep knowledge of the work and not from a personal whim... The next step is the result of knowing the material in a most detailed way... which allows me to unfold the piece as if the music is being composed as I play it.²⁶

Now consider the comments of some other performers revealing the range of opinions on thought versus non-thought in performance. Leaving all conscious thought aside, John Ogden, in the Foreword to *The Pianist's Talent*, describes an 'agency', like a channeling experience, which would also appear meta-drastic: "I think many performers have the feeling, if a performance is going well, that the music is playing itself and that they are the agents through which music passes."²⁷ Yet many performers also speak about the need to negotiate a balance between mind and body in performance. The suggestion is that a balance, or consciously negotiated degree, between the gnostic and drastic in real time performance is ideal for some. Aldo Ciccolini, for instance, tells Carola Grindea that "I never understood how and when this happens [an experience similar to John Ogden's] and I do not wish to go through such an experience every time I appear in public. I want to know that I am in full control."²⁸ Radu Lupu, in his interview with Grindea, said that "without intuition there cannot be balanced performance but the mind must be in control all the

²⁶ Daniel Barenboim, *Everything is Connected*, 57-58.

²⁷ Harold Taylor, *The Pianist's Talent*, 7.

²⁸ Carola Grindea, *Great Pianists and Pedagogues* (London: Kahn and Averill, 2007), ix-x.

time.”²⁹ For those who invoke a certain level of consciousness in performance, the question of whether it is simultaneous with their experience of flow, or whether it only occurs outside their best moments, remains moot.

It goes without saying that the aforementioned pianists have formidable technical skills in all areas of sound production so there is no debate over their drastic abilities, nor question of their ability to apply gnostic awareness. If gnosis is to be kept in abeyance so that a drastic state may become dominant, the difficulty for me is in making this leap. As a musicologist specialising in embodied mind, Alicia Acitores clarifies the gap:

Beginner musicians need to consciously control the position and movements of their bodies whereas experts do not.³⁰

Why do the generally accessible teaching manuals, on the whole, not speak of this gap, but rather simply emphasize the postures and exercises that (I suspect) *assume* a drastic ability, or assume that it *will* arise as a result of the work. As a well known pedagogical text states:

Gifted students will find instinctively the proper duty of the wrist and its relation to the changing position of the hand. Others will have to get this by study, in a sort of preparatory technique for fluent and easy execution.³¹

Gifted students, in particular, do not seem to be hampered by any such gap: perhaps they have learned, or instinctively trust, that their finger movement and aural imagination are aligned. Their motor mechanisms are stimulated by thought-in-sound, not thought in words. “Others” as spoken of in the quote, will have to get “this” in a “sort of” preparatory technique. Sort of... Very imprecise...

However, if we take the Acitores quotation seriously—that it is the beginner musicians who need to work on conscious control—a question lurks: namely, how does a pianist move from conscious playing to liberation from consciousness, to a release from concentration on consciously playing the notes? For me, in moments

²⁹ Ibid., 20.

³⁰ Alicia Acitores, ‘Towards a Theory of Proprioception’, in *Music and Consciousness*, ed. David Clarke and Eric Clarke (Oxford University Press, 2011), 220.

³¹ Malwine Bree, *The Leschetizsky Method: A Guide To Fine And Correct Piano Playing* (Dover Publications, 1997), 58.

where I seem magically to achieve this, I am *automatically* able to hear myself more clearly and my playing goes with concomitant ease. Carola Grindea interviews many pianists in *Great Pianists and Pedagogues*, and while answering questions on aspects of their training there is a common theme that they were indeed *taught to listen*. How exactly they were taught to listen was not discussed. And how do the performers *describe* listening? In terms of process in the practice room, how do the performers make the leap from a gnostic understanding to a drastic performance? How much is this their aim? Are they conscious of this *as* a process? *Is* it a conscious process? Do teachers consider this leap teachable? Or is it left to some chance morphing or osmosis: luck or talent? Is the gap perceived at all, a tiny seam in the fabric yet dynamic for its emphatic causal effect?

***“You are under an illusion,”
said the Master after a while, “if you imagine
that even a rough understanding
of these dark connections would help you.
These are processes which are
beyond the reach of understanding.
Do not forget that even in Nature
there are correspondences which cannot
be understood, and yet are so real
that we have grown accustomed to them.”***

Eugen Herrigel³²

I was once aboard a plane from Sydney to Auckland and listening to the classical radio programme recorded for inflight entertainment. A young prodigy violinist, a teenaged girl, was being interviewed. The announcer asked her what she was thinking about as she played. Her reply was “I don’t know, I am just playing.” On another occasion I was reading an interview with Vladimir Ashkenazy and the question was as to why he did not teach piano. His reply was “I don’t know how I do what I do.”³³ These two experiences stood out as epiphanies in my Sydney years and despite my naiveté and inability to comprehend them, they fuelled my search for

³² Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 57.

³³ The nature of the events means that I cannot corroborate the facts with concrete sources.

pianistic freedom. They remain epiphanies today as I now have experienced their gravity, physically, *in praxis*, as will be elaborated on in the next chapter. As a result of this year's research, I see how they also bear reference to the gnostic/drastic philosophy, embodied intelligence, and the explicit/implicit science talked about in this chapter: or rather, perhaps, that the gnostic/drastic philosophy and an understanding of the implications of the interworking of explicit/implicit memory and embodied intelligence have had a powerful impact on my understanding in part because of how they link up with, and partially explain, those early epiphanies.

The next chapter takes an empirical angle as I attempt to relay the personal account of a practical, real time experiment: altering my interior behaviour, my attention, my neural wiring through my gnostic application. And I find it interesting that the research that inspired this experimentation, as laid out in this second chapter, has had a very deep resonance with my two epiphanies from my early years of piano study.

Chapter 3A Retraining the Gnostic

*Music, too, makes every listener into a poet,
since music has the sole possession
of a certain persuasive power, called the Charm
and innocence is the condition for its existence.
The innocence of the performer in re-creating
responds to the innocence of the composer
in the midst of creation; thus, the performer
forgets the onlookers' stares, so absorbed is he or she
in bringing the work into being, sustained ecstatically
by the labour required to overcome obstacles.
While this is happening, how could a performer allow
self-consciousness to engender a split personality,
or to strike attitudes for the gallery?
The eloquent, mute lesson of Charm
Functions only by means of spontaneous
and nascent suggestion on the part of the agent.
Because if the agent wants too much,
then the one acted upon will no longer desire;
if the agent begins to work too hard,
then the one acted upon withholds his or her consent:
and the Charm is broken.*

Vladimir Jankelevitch.¹

Understanding theories (Chapter 2) or diagnosing deficiencies (Chapter 1) doesn't necessarily equate to an easier execution at the instrument. It is one thing to theorise about playing the piano, or about the nature of listening, another to play the piano and learn how to listen, in reality. Chapter 2 raises three *theoretical* processes: gnostic linguistic processes in the mind, which may be linked to explicit memory; drastic and embodied behaviour, which correlates roughly to processes of implicit memory; and thirdly, the body's own process of cognition. In Chapter 3, I will first consider key reflections upon entirely *practical* experiences that have contributed to my understanding of how to play the piano, and will then turn to an explication of my applied real time attempts to create a synthesis between the theories and the practice, *a description of the central experiment of my thesis*.

¹ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 88.

Three powerful memories were brought forward, when, without really planning to, I resurrected my battle with piano performance: Ashkenazy and the violinist (as outlined at the end of Chapter 2), and the original epiphany (as outlined in Chapter 1). I had not yet pin pointed the connections between the three memories. I focused on the memory that the violinist wasn't consciously 'thinking' at all but rather 'just playing'. And that somehow, Ashkenazy did not know how he was able to play the piano - not enough to explain it. And that somehow, in my own playing, I knew that I was not able to listen effectively enough as I played. In 2011, with the concerto performance fast approaching, I began recording in notebooks the thoughts that seemed to be useful in triggering the loosening of my constriction at the piano, and in turn I eventually began to make sense of what Ashkenazy and the violinist meant. With the realisation that I was overthinking the execution came the realisation that they did not - their foreground attention was drastic and relied on implicit memory (in the terms from my recent research presented in Chapter 2), while mine was gnostic and depended on explicit memory.

At that time, I of course did not have the benefit of my more recent research. My readings from various performers emphasise further the basic sense that a focus on too much thinking interferes with performance. My current aspirations concur with Barenboim's opinion, quoted above, that:

The structure of a work must become so internalised in the mind of the musician that intellectual thought during the performance is no longer necessary. On the other hand he may trust that his spontaneous promptings arise from his deep knowledge of the work and not from a personal whim...the next step is the result of knowing the material in a most detailed way...which allows me to unfold the piece as if the music is being composed as I play it."².

Thus a primarily gnostic understanding evolves to a drastic rendering: Barenboim's description of the process illuminates Ashkenazy's and the violinist's statements and becomes my premise for the practical research laid out in this chapter.

The irony is that in order to learn and attempt to acquire a drastic habit, an approach that will resituate my concentration away from overly directive dialogue/ conscious verbal thought – Barenboim's intellectualised thought - I will first need to

² Daniel Barenboim, *Everything is Connected*, 57-58.

retrain my inhibitive and raging gnostic habit. Put another way, I have to find a different way to think about playing in order to stop this over-thinking and find a way, eventually, to an experience that is not overwhelmed by internal verbal commentary: I have to explore another way of “knowing” the kinetics that by-pass my current habits of conscious thinking. On a bike it would be like replacing my rusty trainer wheels with better ones, then finding a way to remove the trainer wheels knowing that I will be able to have fun riding the bike.

Whether it’s riding a bike or reproducing a complex musical score, I need to learn a process in which the intellect remains active to a certain extent, possibly in the background, while retaining maximum concentration; and yet at the same time keep my concentration away from consciousness of the wrong details. I am not seeking some vague dream state, but rather a targeted *mindful* attention at a basic level (in order to stay on the bike let alone enjoy the ride at some meta level, or, to play through the notes comfortably let alone attain some mysterious sensation of freedom). At some point I need to leave the intellectual direction, in some sense, aside, even while remaining connected to the structure represented in text. I would also like to be able to include some productive mental commentary, should it be required, albeit in such a way that it does not interfere with my implicit memory. This is how I understand my task: retraining the gnostic in order to release the drastic.³

A method for re-wiring the neural pathways...

But how! As an adult who now has a preset neural network, is it possible to retrain the wiring? A high performance expert who has studied athletes and musicians, Doug Newburg, says, ‘it is easier to take someone who is and teach them to know than to take someone who knows and teach them to be’.⁴ The collected *theories*

³ After forty years the neural grooves are pretty deep, however. Jumping tracks at this late age is quite an ask.

⁴ Doug Newburg, Ph.D., interview by John Eckberg in ‘The Cincinnati Enquirer’, February 18, 2002.

http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2002/02/18/fin_a_theory_of_high.html
(September 23, 2013)

resonate but I have found the *practice* of effecting change at times excruciatingly difficult both mentally and physically. Perhaps opening the proverbial can has unleashed a tangle worse than when it was contained by ignorance. Ignorance is bliss where knowledge can stifle practice. In my teaching experience, adults often grasp the conceptual foundations of piano playing immediately but despite their desire, they lack patience to train (retrain?) the body. Children often have little conception of what is ahead of their current level and so develop naturally, wiring the neural pathways at a pace their body (including the embodied mind) allows.⁵ I am attempting to reverse my training with an advanced knowledge of the desired result and acutely aware of my limitations. I must allow for the possibility that the most I may achieve will be through rare but real glimpses.

In launching this experimentation, my methodology had to begin with observing my thoughts as I played to discern where my mislaid concentration lay. Right away, for instance, I would notice my overt attention to finger placement that I then realised was both a continuous commentary interpretation on the details of the score AND a physical or motor directive. Once I recognised the counter-productive cognitive strand, I would then alight upon varying expressions or thought streams as heuristic devices for shaking these intrusive habits loose. These ‘devices’ were often fragmentary and short, containing a larger implied essence. Sometimes they were a paragraph describing an ‘attitude’ I wanted to effect. I used them to divert my attention towards sound and find a new way to listen. Crucially, I wanted *to be guided by* that drastic mode, rather than by thought. Listening is something we DO, not something we know or think.

The first such expression that I recorded in my notebooks is an instruction to ‘play by ear’. The very idea suggests dropping thought from the equation, which is the purpose of the directive. However, I found that it worked for me only momentarily, as inevitably my habitually overactive mind pushes its way back to the foreground. Upon reflection, it seems that I partially have a fear of being out of, or of losing, control. My deep powerful underlying and unconscious assumption

⁵ Children also have much greater plasticity in their brains, so it is easier to create new neural pathways. On the other hand, new research is finding that older brains are more capable of regenerating pathways than had previously been thought.

(perhaps learned and ingrained rather than innate) seems to be that active thought is the premier control of the physical process. Control is required *somehow* in order to regulate, monitor, direct the sound conveyed. Control is a territory my mind has learnt to dominate using a linguistic process. The irony I experienced is that even though a *greater* control is inexplicably felt and undoubtedly gained when loosing the mental attachment, the thinking mind is all the same loathe to trust this foreign sensation, which is indeed implicit memory or an intelligence of the body: the patterns are so deep that I am still loathe to trust a necessarily instinctive and intuitive response.

People often refer to non-classical musicians' ability to 'play by ear'. Apart from the less stringent requirement to be able to read music usually implied by this statement, there is an implication that the ability to 'play by ear' is not something that classical musicians have – that somehow they have the supposedly easier task of merely playing out a pre-written formula. The implication, conscious or not, is that somehow a classical musician does not 'play by ear' – that is, for classical music *the ears are hardly required*. Of course all musicians must use their ears; but it is perhaps indicative that the use of ears, as opposed to the reliance on score, is not, in general, discussed. My initial focus on the directive to 'play by ear' indicates, unfortunately, this very tendency to rely primarily on the visual formula. Barenboim, in discussing the "subtext inherent in the score" (see quotation page 15), hints at the invisible, intangible, ineffable elements of a fixed score and rescues "classical musicians" from any assumption of formulaic repetition. It always seemed to me, despite my now apparent and immovable adherence to the 'formulaic method' – the above supposition of merely playing out a pre-written formula - that once the symbols of the text have been absorbed, the aim is very much to play classical music as if it comes 'by ear' - and in the same manner an improvised performance in any other genre would. Barenboim's words surely find sympathy here...*'which allows me to unfold the piece as if the music is being composed as I play it'*.

The temporal dilemma...

But that freedom has been very hard for me to achieve. Thinking it through, I realised that in order to hear the sound I produced, I had to have already played it. If I was too busy with thought processes connected to the symbols on the page (whether playing from music or from memory) and with the kinetics of playing those sounds, the temporal dilemma meant that I was always concerned with what lay AHEAD in the music and the associated advance physical preparation of the hands. This creates physical tension as the body tries to deliver a physical response to TWO timeframes at once, the sound being completed and the sound coming up. It is impossible, and the result (as I can attest) is physical stress and soreness. In terms of what I was hearing, my foreground attention on the production and direction of FUTURE sound meant that my attention to the PAST sounding was relegated to background attention. If I now want to concentrate my foreground attention to the sound just played then I have to a) TRUST that I will instinctively know what is coming next and b) TRUST that my fingers will do it without my conscious control.

Easier said than done. If one is not used to applying such trust then this dependence on TRUST feels like removing those trainer wheels for a steep downhill run. The insistence on an overly cognitive approach stems, I suppose, from pre-tertiary years. I have talked to a number of other amateur musicians who, curious and in wonder, agree that they were never told to stop counting, to stop reading, to stop being aware of the note names as they played, to stop intentionally making sure they were putting in the dynamics, to stop reminding their fingers which notes to go to, or to stop considering how they were holding their elbows out. They were never told to STOP THINKING, DO IT and JUST LISTEN. With this self-conscious approach, however, their fear of hitting wrong notes grows paramount. In turn, a tense and tight mental control is further encouraged. I never grew wise to the fact that the symbols on the page and the physical tools at my disposal were somehow to be transcended so that I could eventually LISTEN first and foremost, and to let *that* be my over-arching guide and free-control.

In the meantime I assumed that every professional or better musician was *busily thinking* their application in exactly the same way I was - but they could play

with the coveted ease simply because they were more ‘talented’, able to juggle all those thoughts and stay super aware of every detail even while freely engaging with the music in the present. I did not realise that their entire approach was, at base, worlds apart from mine.⁶ Grappling with the problem, experimenting with countless heuristic thought streams, assessing my attention placement in the process, I gradually became aware of how much I relied on linguistic thought to control everything I did at the piano. More importantly, I began to come to terms with how this was so effectively impeding my painfully limited experience of performance ease. And of course, as now was beginning to make sense to me, this was not how Ashkenazy and the violinist experienced playing.

Flow...

Despite intermittent yet certain progress, I continually fell back to old habits of over-thinking. Retraining my mind was not easy. In the event, I often turned to a variety of readings, which I found illuminated the struggle I was experiencing in daily practice. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s book, *Flow – The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, looks at the reasons why some people achieve ‘flow’ and others struggle to achieve it.⁷ And crucially, from my perspective, he suggests ‘attention disorders’ are the issue:

Some people are just temperamentally less able to concentrate their psychic energy than others. Among school children, a great variety of learning disabilities have been reclassified under the heading of attentional disorders, because what they have in common is lack of control over attention. Although attentional disorders are likely to depend on chemical imbalances, it is also very likely that the quality of childhood experience will either exacerbate or alleviate their course. From our point of view, what is important to realise is that attentional disorders not only interfere with learning, but effectively rule out the possibility of experiencing flow as well. When a person cannot control psychic energy, neither learning nor true enjoyment is possible.”⁸

⁶ In saying that other performers’ approach was so different to mine, this is aside, and separate from questions of genetics and definitions of talent. Granted, some pianists are genetically more inclined towards ‘talent’ than others.

⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow – The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Incorporated, 1990).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

Do I have an attentional disorder, a difficulty in controlling my psychic energy, which manifests as an inability to retrain my over-thinking, and explains my excessive fear of playing wrong notes, and my consequent, and unfortunately prevalent, stage performance issues? He directly follows on from the above:

A less drastic obstacle to experiencing flow is excessive self-consciousness. A person who is constantly worried about how others will perceive her, who is afraid of creating the wrong impression, or of doing something inappropriate, is also condemned to permanent exclusion from enjoyment.⁹

Perhaps precisely because it is not uncommon, the psychological issue of self-consciousness is perhaps more important to the context of musical performance than it would at first seem.¹⁰ Many writers quoted in this thesis refer to self-consciousness, including Jankelevitch in the opening quote: Harold Taylor, in *The Pianist's Talent*, gives it careful consideration; and Eugen Herrigel, in *Zen in the Art of Archery*, speaks of practising self-forgetfulness. Further, Csikszentmihalyi adds:

...too much psychic energy is wrapped up in the self, and free attention is rigidly guided by its needs. Under these conditions it is difficult...to lose oneself in an activity that offers no rewards outside the interaction itself."¹¹

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that it is possible that just as some people are born with better muscular coordination, some may be born with genetic advantages as far as controlling consciousness goes.¹² From my point of view, all of this emphasis on consciousness goes a long way to explaining my difficulties both to trust any potential I may have at the piano, and to believe in that potential enough to rise above the difficulty.

⁹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow – The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 84.

¹⁰ The issue of self-consciousness raises questions about the psychology of practising and the use of psychological methods, like therapy and hypnosis, for musicians grappling with this and other issues. For the purpose of this thesis I have not explored those types of professional options. Though potentially vital for inclusion in some new vision of piano pedagogy, this thesis was not the place to explore the subject further.

¹¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, 86.

The temporal dilemma points to something else...

Across the year, in the process of this research experiment, I have used an endless number of heuristic expressions to trick my mind out of its groove. Aside from the 'play by ear' already mentioned, here are some of the examples I have played with: 'don't think about what comes next, just hear it'; 'resist the urge to control or to play correctly, remove the judge'; 'it is not ME playing – it has nothing to do with ME'; 'listen behind the sound'; 'hear it as if you had nothing to do with playing it'; 'like snow falling from a bamboo leaf, waiting not hesitating'; 'don't control your fingers' etc.¹³ Although I have succeeded with some of these 'tricks' well at times, reversion to overt consciousness whilst playing eventually returns. Sometimes it is within the current session, at other times it maybe a few days or a week later. I do not always know what to attribute my failure to: it could just be the result of a bad sleep the night before. Despite knowing that I must stop excessive linguistic consciousness of both the kinetic execution and the score, I still need to find a permanent and effective *alternative* attention placement.

I have explored the ways in which music's temporal nature might hold a clue. In my practice I was always experimenting with how I perceived the sound I played. Did I hear it AS it sounded, AFTER it sounded, or in my mind BEFORE it sounded? Could I *intentionally* train my ear to one temporality at a time? From early on, I was curious about this: the phrase, above, 'listen behind the sound' was one such directive experiment. Our memory as musicians has to be active not only backwards, in past sounds, but also forward to the next sounds, which will occur in the future. I have decided that the now is so fleeting so as to be immediately past: effectively there is no 'now' or 'being in the moment'.¹⁴ The phenomenon of sound is 'past' the moment we hear it. What is more, Zeno's ancient paradoxes shimmer in, questioning the nature of motion and the dissection of time: since every moment

¹³ The phrases I have used are far too numerous to document and explain in the context of this thesis. Each phrase has its own story or inspiration, and it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to explore each one.

¹⁴ Our experience of consciousness is temporal and affects theories of listening because that, also, is experienced temporally. Husserl and Derrida, among many other philosophers, discuss such phenomena at length, as I will mention in Chapter 4.

can be infinitely divided, just how is one to decide upon where ‘the’ moment actually lies?¹⁵ The ‘now’ can be as *wide* as one decides is prudent, rather than, per se, that being in the now is impossible!

If the ‘now’ is wide, then somehow, in music performance it needs to incorporate several places at once - in the past, in the now and looking forwards: we need some quantum grasp on time itself, because to be stuck in any one spot defies the temporal art. To interpret a musical score classical musicians require memory to work forwards in time (to know what is coming up in the score), and at the same time they require memory of what has already sounded, in the past. My tendency has always been to remember explicitly, in words relating to musical symbols, what is coming next in the score even while critiquing what has just passed. Ideally, and for Ashkenazy and the violinist, I am sure, memory needs to work *implicitly*.

My notebooks, former and current, are full of heuristic tools (such as the phrases mentioned above) leading to enhanced listening ability and setting aside thought streams. But only in very recent months, during this degree, have I considered that a more fluid temporal engagement may also be necessary in order to engage with listening in the way I want to. The cliché is “go with the flow” but this can just as unhelpful as “be in the moment”. Experimenting with listening within the *continuum* of sound, future, present and past, led to another clue for finding an effective alternative attention placement. I had already attempted ‘watching the sound’, ‘being a *passive* observer to sound’, ‘surfing the wave of sound’, ‘letting the sound take me’, ‘imagining the sound ahead’, et cetera, but I was still *assessing the sound linguistically* – hearing it, assessing it *explicitly*, going back to it. I was still a step away from *thinking in sound* (to cut out the middle step) in the same sense that Grotowski wanted his actors to ‘think with the body, not with the head.’ Considering the flow of sound with a linguistic analysis may have its critical place, at times, both in practice and performance; yet it is nevertheless an altogether implicit analytic process that is more desirable, which can be termed *thinking in continuous sound*. Literally, sound is the medium of cognition, not words.

¹⁵ There are three well-known motion paradoxes ascribed to Zeno – Achilles and the Tortoise, the Dichotomy Paradox, and The Arrow – all demonstrating that motion is an illusion.

Sound as cognition...

But, how to think in sound? Learning to speak in music's language, putting together phrases, allowing a continuous stream and not getting stuck, *sonically* assessing those phrases in order to put together more phrases, intelligently, communicatively, using sound 'as if it were words' in the sense that we want to make music 'speak', can seem a koan-like task.¹⁶ In order to do this, it becomes apparent that memorisation, and playing from a familiar score (as opposed to sight-reading), requires knowing the material in a more detailed way than I had previously assumed necessary. Rather than partially relying on a linguistic description for what comes next in terms of the score and kinetics (explicit memory), it is desirable to know each piece implicitly, completely, in all its complexity, totally aurally, as pure sound, with as much assuredness as we might know a simple nursery rhyme - *without having to think about it*. Perhaps it is only in this way we can hope to play as Barenboim suggests, with no 'intellectual thought'. Of course, the conundrum is that one cannot know a piece this well without first applying conscious thought, in order to know it in Barenboim's 'most detailed way'.

In this emerging formulation, technique becomes defined as 'the art of manipulating sound' and is a skill reliant upon correct attention placement. Simply put, unless our attention is in the right place, we have difficulty with anything we attempt at all. The cliché here is "to be in the zone." **My conclusion**, from countless hours of experimentation, **is that correct attention placement itself trains the desired kinetic execution**; the desired kinetic execution cannot be the result of exercises on a silent piano, for instance, because the sound is intrinsic to the nature of the execution.¹⁷ I can only guess that professional performers instinctively know how to focus the right kind of attention without necessarily ever having to think

¹⁶ Koans are heuristic devices designed to shake the mind loose from itself. Perhaps my phrases are too 'graspable' and do not shake my mind up enough?

¹⁷ I had an actual conversation with a pianist who considers technical limitations as purely motoric ones, not sonic, whereas I experience that sound quality is intrinsically and inseparably tied to motor function. Notwithstanding genetic disposition towards motor ability being a valid part of the equation, my point is that correct attention to sound itself trains the technique - or motor function, if this function must be an isolated component in the definition at all. My friend would disagree that the training of motor function has ANYTHING to do with sound.

about it. Many amateurs assume the latter to be true without ever having thought about it.¹⁸ For example, until relatively recently I had assumed slow practice (that drill command we have heard since early lessons) was to train the fingers to their places so that they could execute at tempo. My experimentation shows that this is erroneous. There were many times throughout my life when *all of a sudden* I could execute a difficult passage *without having specifically drilled it*. I knew that my ‘attention’ had shifted to some right place, allowing the coordination to flow. Only through this year’s work have I realised that, fundamentally, my attention had shifted to sound and that this in turn had triggered the correct execution. In my experience, the true purpose of slow practice is to train the attention of the ears on sound awareness (with a correspondingly relaxed physical attitude, of course) so that the fingers will automatically (implicitly) go there at tempo.¹⁹ Otherwise, you may as well train on a silent piano.

My assumption is that because professionals *implicitly* ‘think in sound’ and have done so for so long, if not from their first lessons, it would probably not occur to them, nor could they comprehend, how anyone would not be doing the same: this is *music* after all. Therefore, there has been little need to ponder the dilemma let alone write about it. Amateurs, by definition, usually do not continue this relentless search for ease, possibly because they wisely accept their personal status quo and there is the pressing need to divert attention to other priorities in life. And yet perhaps it is exactly this issue that keeps them from developing more possibilities in relation to performance. Mine is the case of a rare and tenacious amateur.²⁰

¹⁸ I use the distinction between amateur and professional broadly. It may be useful in this context to consider amateurs as being those who struggle with their skills.

¹⁹ The process is exactly the same for faster as for slower music. I can be just as ill at ease with slow music, even though it is not as obvious to an audience because there is more time with which to get to the correct notes.

²⁰ The quest may even benefit other amateurs and their teachers. Perceiving similar struggles in many others, I would not wish my thirty years of frustration on anyone.

My teacher's input...

Jian Liu, my present teacher and professional performer, has overseen my research this year. He has read my notebooks and has understood my struggle. It is pertinent to bring him in at this point in order to place his presence within the context of my evolving research. I feel blessed that Jian has had a willingness to understand my purpose here and to embrace my burgeoning methodology. Significantly, like most teachers and performers at his level, as I have mentioned, he has never experienced the dis-ease at the piano with which I am accustomed and has therefore never had to solve it for himself in order to be able to advise methods for solution. I entered this course therefore not expecting to find solutions from Jian, as I equally absolve previous teachers from the responsibility.

Where Jian has been invaluable, apart from his personal willingness, compassion and commitment to my purpose, has been as an experienced and knowledgeable sounding-board. In lessons I have plagued him with my theories and postulations and repeatedly asked him how he plays and what he thinks about while he is playing. For instance, when playing the piano, I was always aware of what note I was on and with which finger: on the whole, he is not. Jian is 'imagining the sound ahead' whereas I was thinking about which notes and which fingers were ahead: he was 'thinking in sound' rather than 'thinking in words'.

If I had a bad week at the piano I did not cancel my lesson because, to me, it was just as important to have Jian observe me struggling as playing well. In that way, he also could provide input into the difficulties I was defining and my developing theories for overcoming them. At times I played spectacularly badly. On one occasion where I played well enough to please my teacher but the performance did not please me, I was able to play it again with perceptible difference. I could explain that, to me, the first performance felt satisfactory but nevertheless 'manufactured' - that is, it was as if it were brain-driven. The second performance was more 'organic' or natural in its flow because I was able to shut down my thoughts. Jian was able to observe both and concur about the difference thus crediting my approach. It is possible to play acceptably, musically, but remain somehow bound to the score as if it were a formula. This comfortable execution, whether it pleases the audience or

not, remains a 'basic' drastic performance. To go beyond this, towards a 'meta' drastic performance, whether an audience perceives it or not, *must* be the aim, *always*. And also, it is the aim of practice. As Jian Liu says, searching for glimpses of this mysterious freedom is why professionals continue to play. It invokes Barenboim's 'subtext'. The sensation nevertheless does not always arise, despite the technical ease of the executants. I am sure that the window of definition is wide; that my glimpses are nothing like Jian's. And most of the time, I struggle with delivering a 'basic' execution.

***There are different grades of Mastery,
and only when you have made the last grade
will you be sure of not missing the goal.***

Eugen Herrigel²¹

Learning to trust implicitly...

My notebooks are filling less quickly now, as I seem to be distilling my thoughts into practice, although I need to fight a sneaking suspicion that I am simply running out of fresh ideas! Ironically, I find that I need to remind myself continually *in words, explicitly, from a gnostic understanding*, to shut down my thinking mind. 'Blending the sound beautifully' is yet another phrase device which, for the moment, is working.²² This phrase implies hearing what I have just played, in the past, in order to blend it with what comes next. Attempting to blend *beautifully* seems to cover the future component of sound not-yet-heard because it trains my attention to the match-work. Once I click into this 'action' there is no time to consider the kinetic memory or the textual memory and I must trust the *implicit* response to be there. On the occasions this happens, I feel a freedom in playing and a deep enjoyment that has no tightness or constriction mentally or physically. Frustratingly, in spite of all my focus on the process, I hardly know how I do it when it goes right: I could

²¹ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 57.

²² Part of the problem with the heuristic word devices is that through continued use, like any oft repeated word, as children discover in play, they can lose their meaning, become sonic gibberish and the mind fails to be 'tricked' loose until another phrase is brought in to jig the wiring again.

hardly say what I am thinking about at the time. Ashkenazy and the violinist! I am realising, though, that it is at these moments that I am actually achieving a level of *drastic* rendering, by thinking in such a way to allow my attention to go there.

*Only after considerable time
did more right shots occasionally come off,
which the Master signalled by a deep bow.
How it happened that they loosed themselves
without my doing anything,
how it came about that my tightly closed
right hand suddenly flew back wide open,
I could not explain then and I cannot explain today.
The fact remains that it did happen,
and that alone is important.
But at least I got to the point
of being able to distinguish, on my own,
the right shots from the failures.*

*Eugen Herrigel*²³

Unfortunately, it does not take much to knock my attention back to the delusion of requiring thought to control my actions – at which point my fingers invariably get stuck and my brain ties itself in *intellectual* knots trying, trying, trying. A Zen phrase comes to mind: *and calculation that is miscalculation sets in.*²⁴ I very much doubt I have all the answers or that I will ever master playing the piano. Even now, breakthroughs come and soon after are thwarted by relapses. In working towards the thesis recital, my ongoing concern has been that despite the occasional drastic flight, twin psychological or emotive barriers remain rooted beneath any rational solution: fear and the inability to trust that the embodied instinct *will be there.*²⁵ Perhaps this is a separate, psychological problem?

It is my hope, however, that the more intimate I become with the sound implied by the score, just as in a nursery rhyme, the deeper my implicit memory may groove, that my fingers will more naturally find their way and I will, despite nerves

²³ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 53.

²⁴ Eugen Herrigel, viii.

²⁵ Though relevant to the cause, and under consideration, it is not the place of this exegesis to dig and display a personal psychological assessment of my formative years, which may provide further explanation.

threatening to shatter all resolve, find some ease playing and performing. My current practice, based on months of trial and error, is to have the self-belief and courage to listen to the very end of the current sounding, trusting that the next tones will seemingly magically appear under my fingers, because I know them so well that I do not have to remind myself of them. That is, the sound itself triggers the mechanical execution rather than the reverse. And what all of my experiments with modes of conscious thought have taught me is that I can only do this if I *trust my deeper unconscious* and totally lose my *self-consciousness*.

*Man is a thinking reed
but his great works are done
when he is not calculating and thinking.
"Childlikeness" has to be restored
with long years of training
in the art of self-forgetfulness.
When this is attained,
man thinks yet he does not think.
He thinks like the showers coming down from the sky;
he thinks like the waves rolling on the ocean;
he thinks like the stars illuminating the nightly heavens;
he thinks like the green foliage shooting forth
in the relaxing spring breeze.
Indeed, he is the showers, the ocean, the stars, the foliage.*
*Eugen Herrigel*²⁶

²⁶ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, viii-ix.

Chapter 3B Black Holes

*Every student of the piano will be able
to recall those occasions when, apparently
by chance, a sudden improvement
has been experienced in the performance.
Mysteriously, the gap between thought
and action has narrowed,
and everything has gone well.
If only we could play like that all the time!
If only we could BE like that all the time!
For this is the crux of the matter – that
in these moments of greater coordination
we veritably are different people,
in the sense that our pattern of behaviour
has unconsciously altered. It is noteworthy that
the feeling of heightened physical efficiency
at these times is always accompanied
by a corresponding increase in mental control,
which means that less work is
being done to greater effect
by the total mind-body mechanism.*

Harold Taylorⁱ

There is a well-known phrase that says the higher we go, the further there is to fall. As much as I learn and as much as I understand, as much as I accomplish and as much flow I can achieve, nevertheless, the road is full of potholes. Chapter 3A lays out what may come across as an optimistic and linear map of solutions. After writing that chapter, however, I suffered a particularly bad relapse where the old struggles resurfaced with a vengeance. I have experienced a number of these relapses across the year; often they occur just after I think ‘ah, now I’m getting it, now I see how to do it’. A kind of expectation sets in below the surface of conscious recognition and destroys any flow. Again, the *theory* is easy to understand, *mentally*, but when I apply theory, *in practice*, to a *physical skillset*, the *enactive doing* in real time, an imbalance can occur, and the gap between the two modes can function as a bruising reminder of my limitations. After this particular relapse, I briefly fired on all cylinders again, so to speak. I recovered an ease only to surrender to fear and mis-self-trust in

the ensuing piano lesson. For me, piano lessons function as performances: they dissolve the comfort and confidence of privacy, setting up a preliminary external critiquing arena. I have found that any wobbles I am experiencing will be amplified. My forearms still ached as I was writing this, one week later. In order to convey a little of this up-and-down process that my research work has engendered, what follows is the performative expression of these combined misbalancing experiences. My auto-ethnographic account of the battle can be juxtaposed with my account of the primarily positive learning process outlined in Chapter 3A. The tortured tone serves as an empirical link between theory and praxis; it depicts what actually happened, and therefore probes my experience of consciousness – the quietly subterranean plot of my thesis.

BLACK HOLE

where everything unravels...

*possibly my playing was headed for a fall anyway
the process has always been about breakthroughs
then, just when i think the path forwards is clear
i fall over*

*round and round i go
give up, pull through
stumble, fly*

*each time
i fly higher
the glimpses of freedom are more real
but the fall is further
and it hurts where it never used to*

*years of mal-practice brought no physical pain
how i didn't succumb to RSI intrigues me
now that i find occasional bliss in right-playing
there can be foreign twinges which do feel appropriate
(Harold Taylor confirms the reaction of previously dormant muscles!ⁱⁱ)*

*But the tightness that comes with wrong-playing
yields aches
aches that feel precursors to the usual pianists' ailments
and mentally, the desire to give up the battle
is stronger with each fall*

*this time
the soundbite du jour was working well
until Csikszentmihalyi turned up
many authors read
confirming much of my thinking
on the importance of attention placement
on the use of consciousness
on over-thinking and trying too hard
on 'allowing' rather than making it happen
on the doer versus the knower
on trusting self*

*but Csikszentmihalyi went further
he suggested some are born with a lesser ability to order their consciousness
a GENETIC thing
a lesser ability to obtain 'flow'
and a name for it that we all know
'attentional disorder'*

*an inability to concentrate the mind
sometimes extreme as in schizophrenia
but less DRASTIC (how could he know his mocking)
is the tendency towards self-consciousness*

*ok, i can work on self-consciousness per se
but if i have some kind of genetically pre-programmed 'attentional disorder'
what hope is there!*

*yet, if Csikszentmihalyi's genetic supposition was correct
i was doomed to fall from flow again and again and again
so whether my playing was anyway about to lose a wheel
or whether the imminent threat of an actual performance had toppled my nerve
or a combination of these
this confounded book compounded the thing*

*at home, i felt as awkward as i ever had at the piano
nothing was comfortable
everything was a battle
my fingers felt wooden as chopsticks
ease was never present, not even for a skinny moment
everything i thought i'd gained this year, this life, was in a moment lost
of course, i realised i was over-thinking and trying very hard
but equally, i was tired of trying so hard not to try so hard
and if i didn't try, it was worse
how could it BE so bad when it had been so good*

*Masters felt pointless
all my theories disproven, or simply unproven
i couldn't play a single passage with ease
there was no way i could ever hope to because it was a GENETIC disposition!*

*so what was the point of continuing
no point
there was no employment point to this crazy degree anyway
i need to just quit and get a job and get over it
no point*

*but i seek solutions for amateurs
surely valid
the elitism of the classical world
won't survive without amateurs
and amateurs dwindle in the shadow of the specialists
the all blacks would not be assured of their place without the system beneath them
the playing amateurs who love the game – who become the teachers
amateur musicians need to get better
have just as much right to that
to enjoy THEIR art more
to encourage and promulgate THE art
to reduce the stuffiness of it
to bring it into the lounges – a predicate for the concert halls
for pleasure, not status
i am not researching performance, but practice
but there is no degree for 'practice'*

*the concerto had been a lifelong dream fulfilled
this recital was fast becoming a nightmare fulfilled
and i did not know i would feel this way*

*the performance itself was eating away at me
creating a hidden tension as i worked my precious soundbite
and now that the clock was tolling 11
it was freak out time*

*i wanted to talk it over with Jian
before making any decision
perhaps even an exegesis that dis-proved or questioned my theory had some validity
(after all, no one knows for sure where research is going to lead when they start out)
perhaps a closed exam? special circumstances? to ease anxiety?
i never wanted to be on the cursed stage
i seek pianistic freedom only in the privacy of my lounge!*

*i emailed Jian
my teacher had some sage advice regarding 'flow'
that it is hard for any musician to come by this
and sometimes, flow is perceived by the listener
where even the performer feels there was none
but it is the Music which keeps our search alive
even when we play less than our best*

*in his usual gentle way, never pushing, never pulling
(much appreciated)
Jian was encouraging
reminded me that i had made progress
that my 'mind was tricking me'*

*even if Jian's conception, of my concept of flow, is what i would label meta-drastic
where all i crave is the ease of basic-drastic AT LEAST
that is, to pedal the bike without having to think about it
as natural, as normal, as walking, as using a knife and fork, as driving
nevertheless, he had a point about the mind tricking me
i decided, at the piano, to not listen to my mind
simply, a defiance
a new soundbite du jour!*

*not always, but some times, something else happened
which i dare not try to dissect, the HOW, for fear of losing another wheel
but in it i believe i found some flow - basic flow not meta-flow!
and Eugen Herrigel came to mind: "It" shot, the arrow loosed itself!*

***Right shots have the effect of making
the archer feel the day has just begun.
He feels in the mood for all right doing,
and, what is perhaps even more important
for all right not-doing.
Delectable indeed is this state.
But he who has it,
said the Master with a subtle smile,
would do well to have it
as though he did not have it.
Only unbroken equanimity
can accept it in such a way
that it is not afraid to come back.***

Eugen Herrigelⁱⁱⁱ

*in the ensuing week strides were made
it felt GOOD to play
i could even detect an unforeseen excitement about the upcoming performance
(WHAT?! ME?!)
the newest soundbite was working
renewed hope!*

*not that it was flawless playing
but it had flow
it had promise
it had ease
not all the time
some of the time
enough of the time*

but then
in front of Jian
in effect, a semi performance
i seized up inside
my forearms ached at the wilfulness of my playing
my brain was locked into safety mode
would not heed my soundbite
instead, check every note!
check every finger!
“it sounds safe”, Jian said
i felt it too; formulaic, dull, lifeless
i could feel it sneaking up on me
but i didn’t know how to stop it
i didn’t know how to make the leap
to trusting myself
jian’s eyes on me
so self-conscious
please don’t watch me
tightening arms
boa grip brain
jian’s eyes on me
what a fraud
how ridiculous to even think i might try this
performance path
and at my age
jian’s eyes on me
in front of a professional
such a joke
i came to a halt before the end of the piece
and so the brain wins again

***"The right art," cried the Master,
"is purposeless, aimless!
The more obstinately you try to learn
how to shoot the arrow
for the sake of hitting the goal,
the less you will succeed in the on
and the further the other will recede.
What stands in your way is
that you have a much to wilful will.
You think that what
you do not do yourself does not happen."***

Eugen Herrigel^{iv}

*so a particularly GOOD week at the piano
bore the WORST results yet
it seems to get worse, not better
tighter, not freer
the more i KNOW and UNDERSTAND about this skill
the more i glimpse of RIGHT playing
(that is, the wondrous elusive ease)
the more i want it
and the less i can DO it*

*at the same time
the loudest parameters of the dilemma
scream emotional, psychological - not mental
not about over thinking per se
but about why the over thinking persists
about where it sprang from
fear and inability to trust my self
is this the self-consciousness Csikszentmihalyi speaks of?*

maybe it's a common human "game"

as Gallway says:

***"if human beings did not have the tendency to interfere with their own ability to
perform and learn, there would be no inner game"***

which is why many shun this complex "sport"

which involves physical precision and intricate memory as well as creative design

and maybe there are early childhood triggers

nurture affecting nature

or maybe they are all genetic triggers

or both

either way, my arms only ache

when my head beats me up

blocking the potentials

on this point:

Mr Taylor would call me an end-gainer, by the way

far too attached to the desired result

he says they do not necessarily lack innate ability

talented pianists are born but end-gainers are made

by pressures of upbringing, environment and training

which only the super-talented maybe able to withstand^{vi}

and now i must begin the ascent yet again

there's only one way out of this hole

trust

frightening challenge

unbelievable masochism, some would say (and me), to stare at that fright

but it's the only way out

trust

practice trust

***“You know already that you
should not grieve over bad shots;
learn now not to rejoice over the good ones.
You must free yourself from
the buffetings of pleasure and pain,
and learn to rise above them
in easy equanimity,
to rejoice as though not you
but another had shot well.
This, too, you must practice unceasingly
- you cannot conceive how important it is.”***

Eugen Herrigel.^{vii}

ⁱ Harold Taylor, *The Pianist's Talent*, 21.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., 98.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 53.

^{iv} Ibid., 31.

^v Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Golf* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1981), 11.

^{vi} Harold Taylor, 106.

^{vii} Eugen Herrigel, 60.

Chapter 4 Finding the Drastic?

Poetry can be memorised and recited; poetry implies rituals of declamation and exclamation.

But what is such an “act” compared to that great adventure, the piano recital? A few quarter hours of stratospheric tension and constant vigilance, presence of mind, sangfroid, concentrated courage, these, in themselves, are the militant reality of music for a pianist. Music does not exist in itself but only in the dangerous half-hour where we bring it into being by playing it.

Vladimir Jankelevitch¹

The repertoire presented in my most dangerous ninety minutes I learned to a depth I had not previously encountered, yet the more I discovered the more I could see that there was more to find...beyond. If you beat an improvised path to a mountain peak, not only can you then with eagle eye see a clearer path for next time but you realise there are yet higher peaks to climb. It is evident to me that many budding pianists, myself included, merely *think* they know the music they are to perform, not realising that their knowledge is patchy and only represents the tip of the tip of the iceberg. I have the tip of the iceberg pretty well covered now. But the proverbial iceberg lies mostly beneath the surface.

The gloom that comes with ‘mistakes’ is often sheer lack in gnosis, in sufficient preparation - this is my happy conclusion: happy because my psychological despair falls away in light of this realisation. Having taken the long and winding path demonstrated by this exegesis, the peak I have discovered on the path to performance gives me confidence that finding my way to the next level of ease will be much quicker, more efficient and more pleasurable. Chapter 3 charts the experiences leading towards my exam; as I will outline in this chapter, the final build up and the exam experience itself further clarified some of the issues earlier raised.

¹ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 78.

A final epiphany?...

Following the disastrous piano lesson described in Chapter 3 Part B, Black Holes, I did not practise piano for over two weeks. Sometimes a rest is the best remedy. Breakthroughs often occur when least expected. Sitting down to a practice session is like facing oneself in battle. Will the war be won or lost today? Can I figure myself out today? How honest is my intent? Will my honesty free me or will my illusions reign over my despair? The point is that in my experience one can't get better unless one faces the facts of inadequacy and perseveres in the perennial critique of one's performance.

I am not sure of the trigger, in hindsight, but in returning to practice for the final build up to the examination date, I discovered a further 'ease' seemingly prompted by a new *awareness of the complete experience* rather than a mere enhanced ability to listen, per se. I was immediately reminded of a comment Jian Liu had made in a lesson months earlier. We had been speaking of my tendency to be too aware of what note I was playing at any given time, linguistically (the named note), visually (both graphically/score-wise and visual placement on the instrument) and in a kinetic/physical sense. Jian commented (as mentioned in Chapter 3) that not only was he not aware of which note he was playing at a given moment, but that he could simply be aware of how it 'felt'. At the time I was confused because the kinetics, or how it felt to play, was to me something I was trying to focus on LESS, not more. Was he asking me to become more [perilously] conscious of the kinetics? Surely not. So what did he mean? What his words have come to mean for me is that he felt a physical awareness of some kind, but it was a sensation he was familiar with and therefore had not tried to analyse further. Thus, this physical sensation is in part the feeling an implicit motoric response allows, while my kinetic awareness, on the other hand, had always been explicit. This physical sensation is not limited to some sensation in the fingers, however.

An explanation of my new understanding of physical sensation allows, in turn, a partial answer to the question framed in Chapter 2 (page 24): how does a pianist move from conscious playing to liberation from consciousness, to a release from concentration on consciously playing the notes? As I have said, my

consciousness has always been linguistic and kinetic: a linguistic comprehension driving a linguistic directive to the motoric system. To be liberated from this self-consciousness one is required to drop the linguistic referencing. Language per se, names everything in this world. Language labels that which has no name *in essence*: ‘music itself,’ for instance, can only be described using metaphors. Sound has no name, it is just sound. The pitch “A”, for instance, knows not that it is “A”. We call it “A” but that is just a tool, a symbol for a pitch in whichever context we ascribe it to as part of *gnosis*. To drop the linguistic referencing, for me, means to be able to hear an “A” without naming it: in fact, to hear a complete passage as pure sound as I play it, and without ascribing pitch, harmony, rhythm, articulation, dynamics, the relationships and critique of these, in linguistic thought or awareness. To hear and be aware of the ‘music itself’ is the new aim.

***Can you look at the hills,
the changing flora and fauna,
and see you too are nameless?***

Anon.

For a beginner this new kind of listening and awareness means that even as one learns to count the rhythm and read the notes, one must be beginning to absorb how the sound ‘feels’ in such a way that the active counting and reading become no longer necessary. With this kind of sensation, sound enacts with and impacts upon the entire body, physically. In scientific terms it would be related to the behaviour of the body as it reacts to sound waves. This sensation naturally includes an aural aspect - that which is heard - but is not confined simply to the aural, although what exactly it does entail is subtle and difficult to describe. It was with this sensation that I thus discovered a new kind of physical feeling of/on the keys; rather than being literally aware of which note I was playing with which finger, I found myself within an embodied experience of the WHOLE SOUND VIBRATION. “Experience” is the right word because it implies a fuller bodily involvement than simply an ability to listen.

My tendency both to name pitches and direct finger placement now disappears IF I can shift my attentional awareness to this whole embodied ‘attitude’ that involves both mind and physical senses – a very different awareness to that

which I have been struggling with over the years. Here is the pathway to Jankelvitch's vibrating string, so to speak: where one combines an awareness of pitch, harmony, rhythm, colour, and the kinetic physicality, with a *whole experience* that by nature is free and nameless only if it is experienced *implicitly*.² This experience is fuelled by knowledge in the first instance: the tools of learning including music history and theory, a gnostic attitude which then crosses over into a drastic experience via the new 'attitude', which triggers the new 'attention.' Thus the drastic experience arises from but does not, as I will further discuss, necessarily preclude gnosis.

Imagining the sound in advance...

There is perhaps a reason that some pianists play with linguistic directives rather than being guided in the first instance by their ears (let alone a fuller embodied experience). I speculate that amateur pianists can tend to be lazy with their ability to hear sound because they do not have to make sure the notes they play are in-tune: they can simply rely upon the pre-tuning of the piano. Also, they can see the keyboard in front of them, which further exacerbates the tendency towards laziness in terms of learning to permit implicit motoric memory. In other words, a pianist can go a long way towards reproducing a score by mentally directing their fingers on to the right keys to an extent that a violinist, for example, simply cannot.³

Throughout the past year, my explorations have brought me to realise a deeper significance of pitch awareness, something pianists do not appear usually to think about. To explain: an amateur who is not acutely aware of pitch may be instead more inclined to rely on linguistic directive because they are not permitting

² This experience causes me to ponder the deaf musician, Evelyn Glennie, and her ability to appreciate the sound experience by means of vibration; *literally* as Jankelevitch's vibrating string. Along these lines of thought, one can also ponder Beethoven's ability to compose whilst totally deaf...

³ Is it a coincidence that many professional pianists have perfect pitch, or at least very good relative pitching ability? I would guess not. They possibly have more inclination to attend to pitch discernment, which in turn naturally trains their attention towards the inner subtleties involved in blending, voicing and matching sounds.

themselves to be - or even able to be - guided by sound. It is this issue, never addressed, that seems to have led to my reliance on a thought-guided mode of execution.⁴ A question arises more generally: if pianists are not taught to pay attention to specific pitching relativity, does the misguided sense of awareness that has plagued my story become a problem that is actually widely prevalent among students and amateurs? I have talked about knowing what comes next as well and as easily as one might know some common nursery rhyme. Inherent in this assertion is an emphasis on pitch knowledge because our familiarity with these common tunes is primarily melodic - rhythm aside, pitch relativity in these tunes is inculcated from a young age and to such a degree that most can 'rattle off' an entire rendition with barely a [calculating] thought involved in the process. In order to *experience* the whole sound in such a way that an impending explicit consciousness evaporates, I found I needed to know what comes next in implicit detail pitch-wise: that is, not linguistically knowing that an "A" was required by the 4th finger, but rather instinctively knowing it both aurally and kinetically.

In the past, my knowledge of what was coming next in a passage of music I was playing involved words, or at least an awareness, which though not necessarily overt, could be described in words – as in when you can think something in a second but which would take ten seconds to enunciate properly. Recently, however, I have begun to be aware of the next sounds in a passage in terms of pure sound, with no underlying nor overt linguistic formula: that is, without labeling. For example, during the final piece in my exam I had to remind myself to calm down, to reassure myself that I did know the work, and to keep my awareness on the whole sound and specifically on what was to come next. When I lock into this sensation, thought in words disappears; suddenly the 'music itself' is there. The 'whole sound' for me now encompasses what others cursorily call being in the moment, or in the now, or in the zone, as a precursor to going with the flow, and is redefined in my experience as a

⁴ I have had lesser problem with rhythm, articulation or dynamics, per se, and so I am less likely to rely on visualising this graphic. For my fingering, for instance, I can rely on muscle memory, where others seem to need to write in fingering in great detail. I will see the score in my head as I play (and cling to that) but it is usually the pitch and the structural placement (where I am on the page) that most concern me.

bandwidth that includes the current moment, its recollection (which, as earlier stated, I cannot separate, philosophically), and what lies just ahead.

In my recital I no longer had a problem with what *had just sounded* because of my months of heuristic expression work; but Jian Liu's exhortation to 'imagine what is coming next' was only just beginning to sink in empirically. And crucial to this gradual recognition was my new understanding that to imagine what is coming next is not to think linguistically, and not just to have a new awareness in terms of some 'unnamed' pitch relationship; rather, I had to *remember in advance* an entire embodied experiential knowledge of the next sounds. I was not thinking about what chord was next, or its function, or what phrase was next, or whether I was in the development section, or where to put my fingers next. Jian had once said to me that he felt that in his mind he was constantly running just ahead of where he was actually playing - in effect, also 'imagining' what comes next. And this form of imagination requires acute pitch awareness as well as the other elements such as rhythm, dynamics etc. At last I can understand Jian's words; but this type of sensation and mental thought is so new to me that only in the final examination piece was I able consciously to remind myself to enact it. My experience now shows that only if I don't know a work well enough, or if I have a concentration lapse, might it be necessary to resort to a linguistic defense, as a sort of gnostic back-up.⁵

For me, this embodied experience seems to be gained through practising trusting in the physical experience of the whole sound in balance (rather than singling out an aspect, the melody, or being aware of the two separate hands and what they each are doing, for example). I digest the score's graphics and all the background history and analysis, and as soon as I can, I learn, through trusting body and mind, to let the symbols and the symbolism go. My aim becomes going *beyond* the score, *beyond* pitch, *beyond* descriptive knowledge, to *meta* knowledge in *action*; my drastic experience of performance.

⁵ The sheer fact that I can arrive at a fifth year of tertiary study in piano performance, with a good number of positive achievements behind me, ignorant of these matters demonstrates just how possible it is to play the piano to a certain level without them. One might wonder if this is of significant concern for music education in New Zealand, generally?

The psychology of performance...

There were a few occasions prior to my exam when I had 'run through' opportunities to test my nerve. On one such occasion my teacher noted a perceptible enjoyment in my execution. He was correct. I was as surprised as he. At these moments, my self-consciousness dropped away, I engaged with the 'whole sound experience' and it became an enjoyable creative event. At these moments, any issues of nature versus nurture, my upbringing, my fears, and my psychological pre-conditioning seemed to dissolve into irrelevance. I can only conclude that the closer I am to the whole sound experience – as prepared first of all through a basic gnostic application, carried through to some level of drastic rendering which may be a varied combination of both implicit and explicit memory – the more likely that performance anxieties will not arise to destroy my concentration. Easier said than done, and requiring more and more varied types of preparation than at first seemed necessary. Yet these experiences permit me to relinquish the fear that genetic inheritance precludes me altogether from achieving Csikszentmihalyi's state of flow. They permit me to conclude, with some relief, that perhaps performance anxiety, in my case, has much more to do with the complexities of preparation than with any extraneous psychological handicap.

The exam...

Run-throughs do not equate with the moment of truth, however! For my overall experiment, my focus has been on the preparation carried out in the practice room rather than the examination itself.⁶ But of course practice ideally leads to stage performance once the preparation is complete. And for a variety of reasons, my performance in the exam did not end up fully illustrating the learning process of my experimentation across the year.⁷ In the exam I found I could not really concentrate in the way I wanted to until the very last piece. Perhaps this is because it was the last piece, or perhaps it was because it was the piece that I connected with most personally. For the rest of the performance, my excruciating self-consciousness in the face of the audience meant that I could not therefore 'enjoy' being there as I had begun to at a prior run-through. This experience tells me, in part, that I was not stage ready (in terms of my own comfort) and that even though I was on the right trajectory for creative enjoyment and flow *in the practice room*, I cannot yet put it into practice in performance for an audience. Jankelevitch's 'dangerous half-hours' are periods of high stress for which total and complete assuredness in the privacy of the practice room is a prerequisite. The revelations are still too new, and not yet fully set into my application. I am consistently required to be vigilant in releasing my age-old tendency to think too much in terms of the graphics of the score and the executing kinetics. It is not yet natural for me to rely on the whole sound experience

⁶ It must be noted here that the specific pieces I chose to prepare for the examination (see Appendix) are not discussed in this exegesis, because from my perspective the experiment would have been the same for any programme. I did commission two contemporary pieces, but that was merely to provide balance across a broad programme. The crucial issue for me was to include the canonic repertoire, as that is precisely where I find it is impossible to disguise or hide technical dis-ease: contemporary music (i.e. music that your audience has not heard before) *can* have the allure of the reverse, but my aim was to 'face the music'!

⁷ Much of the year's progress would only have been evident to my teacher, I suspect. Despite my discomfort on that stage, there was much that I executed with an ease not possible one year ago. As I said, I allowed my teacher to observe the gamut of my playing difficulties and subsequent achievements.

and to trust that this will guide the execution. Only once this process is automatic could I ever consider stage performance seriously.⁸

Drastic versus Gnostic...

Once, very recently, prior to my exam, while playing the last line of my Beethoven Sonata I experienced what I believe could have been a meta-drastic moment. All of a sudden the notes seemingly leapt into being of their own accord. They had a presence that did not seem at all guided or controlled by me. Verbal commentary was notably absent. It was a fleeting moment, delightful if slightly frightening. I can only imagine in my wildest dreams how it would feel to play an entire piece like this. It was as if my mind had no part in the affair. Perhaps this is what Ashkenazy and the violinist can achieve effortlessly?

***The hand that guides the brush
has already caught and executed what floated before the mind
at the same moment the mind began to form it,
and in the end the pupil no longer knows
which of the two – mind or hand –
was responsible for the work.***

Eugen Herrigel⁹

The rest of the time, as in my exam, a piece I know even as well as the Beethoven CAN find a certain flow, but my mind is always there in the background, controlling in an underlying way, but in abeyance to an implicit response that can not be maintained if a dominant mental attitude interferes. Ultimately, this means that I

⁸ It is always more difficult to put in place a new approach to a piece already learned than it is to effect fresh results on neural pathways not yet set. My approach at the beginning of the study year, when I learnt my repertoire, changed and developed and so I was faced with constantly attempting to eliminate pre-set bad habits. I am sure that learning new repertoire now would be a more direct and effective process. I of course do not know how far I could take this progress, but as the ju-jitsu teacher of my niece stated recently, he began at eleven years old and twenty five years later he still has to think his execution whereas his son who began at four year old, now ten, does not have to think through his moves.

⁹ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 41.

cannot think my way into playing the way I wish to be able to play. At some point, as Barenboim says, no intellectual thought is necessary.

But does then gnostic remain active, even as a background utility, in a subservient role, whilst the drastic experience continues? Or is a truly drastic experience one in which conscious gnostic information is dropped from view entirely? Does drastic preclude gnostic? I think it may depend upon each individual's definition and aims. The pianists that Carola Grindea interviewed would seem to prefer that their 'mind' remains in control; that to achieve an unbidden and mysterious kind of flow whereby the music seems to play itself is not necessarily desirable, as they feel that at these moments they have lost control. Jian Liu, on the other hand, has spoken of this state as rare yet wonderful and part of the reason musicians are musicians: they are in search of this experience. Perhaps it is in this contradiction that we must come to terms with the difficulty of defining such a subjective experience. One performer's description compared to another's is an interpretation of a phenomenological event, one that depends on the efficiency of language.

If one is performing solo recitals and concertos all the time, in Jankelevitch's dangerous half-hours, perhaps conscious if underlying mental control is advantageous for maintaining a guaranteed and consistent standard. In any case, it would seem that the drastic does necessarily not preclude gnostic.

***It is important in the playing of the game
to be completely involved in the physical action
and yet to have another part of me
standing back and taking a quiet look
and computing... The physical is instinctive
and immediate, while the mind schemes
and plans with an overview.
One section functioning without thought,
the other without action, timeless.***

Graham Mourie¹⁰

¹⁰ Within the confines of this exegesis and just a few oblique references (archery, golf, walking, dancing and ballet, and a quote from a high performance expert who has studied athletes as well as musicians), I have drawn scant attention to the correlations between sport, dance and music performance. In this day and age I

Even meta-drastic moments may include layers of gnostic knowledge and awareness. My meta-drastic moment certainly seemed to leap out and away from any conscious knowledge and I did not know from where the music sprang: an unusual experience to say the least, but wonderful and one I would like to be able to repeat. But can I really say that all layers of gnosis dropped away? Were they there but hidden from view? Or was this the dissolution of the gnostic/drastic duality into a seamless blend? It would seem that before I could experience this phenomenon, a certain level of gnosis first had to have been absorbed in order to liberate the drastic moment. But to say that the drastic precludes gnostic, categorically, is an argument that must remain moot: constituting an implied binarism, it appears to me to be not, in fact, a black and white matter. Attempts to reduce the sensation in terms of these concepts may be challenging those same dark connections that Eugen Herrigel says we cannot navigate.¹¹ These are the dark connections that perhaps can never be explained: Jankelevitch's music and the ineffable.

***What is the source of the force that
through the green fuse drives the flower?***

***Dylan Thomas*¹²**

Our sense of gnostic and drastic experience are therefore dependent on the perspective of the individual performer; it is perhaps not possible to arrive at any objective ruling. Musicologist, Eric Clarke, writing about musical perception, expresses the difficulty of understanding what goes on in our minds while we play and listen to music:

speculate that the links are ever more pertinent. Graham Mourie, *Captain* (Auckland: Moa Publications Ltd, 1982), 84.

¹¹ From page 25: "You are under an illusion," said the Master after a while, "if you imagine that even a rough understanding of these dark connections would help you. These are processes which are beyond the reach of understanding. Do not forget that even in Nature there are correspondences which cannot be understood, and yet are so real that we have grown accustomed to them." Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, 57.

¹² Quoted in: David Clarke, "Music, Phenomenology, time consciousness: meditations after Husserl", in *Music and Consciousness*, ed. David Clarke and Eric Clarke (Oxford University Press, 2011), 24.

The phenomenology of musical listening is still a poorly developed field, for reasons that are both understandable and more arbitrarily disciplinary in nature. The thought that anyone could provide a complete and faithful account of their own listening experience is as illusory for music as it would be for any vivid human experience, undermined by at least three insurmountable factors. First, introspection – on which a phenomenological account depends – is necessarily limited to an account of **conscious** experience, excluding what Edelman terms both non-conscious and unconscious processes. The former term refers to perceptual and cognitive processes that are necessarily and intrinsically below the level of conscious awareness; the latter to processes that although available to consciousness in principle may be blocked or repressed for a whole range of reasons. The potential significance of both of these cannot be underestimated...A second factor that profoundly affects any introspective account is the limit of language...Third, and tightly bound up with the language problem is the myth of unmediated description: the idea (or fantasy) that it might be possible to give some kind of pure and unsullied account of the contents of consciousness.¹³

It is thus hardly surprising that an understanding of what goes on in our minds while playing – as a teacher, as a student – is not generally discussed in lessons and is treated as unknowable. As a result though, there seems to be a fundamental gap in the teaching methodology at the point where an amateur needs to make the leap from explicit to implicit memory systems, from a gnostic to a drastic awareness, from knowledge to action, from thinking to doing. The teaching manuals tell us *what* to practice but not *how* to think or *how* to have an embodied experience or knowledge of the music; hence, perhaps, the way my own questions, answers, theories, diagnoses and prescriptions here resonate a bit like a map-less search. As John Sloboda, a prominent writer on aspects of music psychology writes: “surprisingly, there is little reliable scientific information on how musicians practice”¹⁴; in turn, of course, there is little concrete guidance offered to students and amateurs on how best to practice.

My fundamental conclusion, from countless hours of experimentation, is that a certain gnostic ‘attitude’ is required in order to find correct ‘attention’ placement,

¹³ Eric Clarke, “Music Perception and Musical Consciousness”, in *Music and Consciousness*, ed. David Clarke and Eric Clarke (Oxford University Press, 2011), 197-198.

¹⁴ I assume Sloboda is referring to expert musicians, students, and amateurs. John Sloboda, *Exploring the Musical Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 307.

which itself trains the desired kinetic or drastic execution. Put another way, in order to find the balance of concentration that allows physical freedom at the piano, one first needs to take the right kind of mental approach. My experience, outlined in Chapter 1, showed that without finding the correct approach, many hours of dedication and concentrated drills at the piano will bear no good result. Practice can thus be defined as training attention. The tools of explicit knowledge, of the score and music history, theory and analysis, are absorbed mentally and passed trustingly into an embodied implicit memory, which is mindful, sensual and physical; one cognitive process is exchanged for another, while the channels between them remain accessible - how much so, is an overlap that Taraz Lee (in Chapter 2) confirms is not even scientifically known.

My own experience across this year, after years of frustration, would seem to suggest that understanding this process can lead to a different level of performance, and solve a variety of what would otherwise be understood simply as “technical” pianistic problems. My experience also shows that I have taken baby steps towards a new form of attention in piano playing: that training this attention is something that needs to be practised, nurtured and mastered.

Thus, my conclusions end with a call to action for piano pedagogy: to stop concentrating on the tangible visual and physical and even musical elements alone; and instead to take into account the placement of attention in piano playing, and play a role in how the student learns and engages with the mental processes of performance – to engage at least in a conversation about those aspects that may be ultimately unknowable. In my experience, teachers do at times reference emotional content, or meaning, in the music and, whatever this is deemed to be, it is in itself perhaps merely an heuristic device for directing the attention. And yet, this too is misguided, at worst a misunderstanding of the root propulsion of the attention: ‘feeling’ the music in these terms lacks a deeper essence and is a distortion of the full embodied experience.

Jankelevitch makes good summary of my original, learned, assumptive and misguided “attitude” towards making music on the piano:

But exactly where, in the end, is music? Is it in the piano, or on the level of the vibrating string? Does it slumber within the score? Or maybe it sleeps within the grooves of the record? Is it to be found at the tip of the conductor's baton? In effect, the characteristics attributed to "music" often exist only for the eye, by means of the conjuring trick of graphic analogy. The simple particularity of writing, which results from the symbolic projection of a musical act into two dimensions as a score, will suffice for us to characterise the melodic "arch"; and a melody that is outside all space, as a succession of sounds and pure duration, is subjected to the contagion of graphic signs inscribed horizontally on the staff. In the same way, the chord, a harmony composed of simultaneously perceived sounds, tends to be confused with the vertical aggregation of notes that form its schema; and the parts in polyphonic music seem to be "superimposed", placed in space on top of and underneath one another.¹⁵

This "attitude" saw years of "attention" towards these graphics in combination with the "attention" to their execution at the other visible end of music: my fingers on the keyboard itself. Over the past year I have developed a new "attitude" about where the music lies, and I have intensively worked to shift my "attention" towards an embodied sound experience, which thereby permits me to encounter a new ability to listen to myself play whilst my fingers somehow carry on playing by themselves. To a large extent, I have succeeded and I now believe I am on a better path. Playing the piano is much easier than it was, and certainly more pleasurable. I have achieved a better core physical skill, that which I have defined here as basic-drastic; and more often I can now find a deeper "drastic" experience and flow. Performance is not my dream, although if I were to reach a point where this new "attention" became as automatic as riding a bike then, I am sure, performance would not pose the problems it has in the past.

This exegesis represents the ways in which one student has practised the piano. I wonder how other amateurs and students would think about these things? I wonder if this experiment bears any relation to some professionals' thoughts on the matter? I can only describe my experience to the best of my ability. Language can be a tough medium: as tough and ineffable as music itself - a poet's rhetoric is this, but I merely wish to start a conversation.

¹⁵ Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 91.

The dancer does not dance just to perform certain rhythmical movements of the body. The mind has first to be attuned to the Unconscious. If one really wishes to be a master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an "artless art" growing out of the Unconscious. In the case of archery [music performance], the hitter [musician] and the hit [the execution] are no longer two opposing objects, but are one reality. The archer ceases to be conscious of himself as the one who is engaged in hitting the bull's-eye [music itself] which confronts him. This state of unconsciousness is realised only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill, though there is in it something of a different order which cannot be attained by any progressive study of the art.

*Eugen Herrigel*¹⁶

¹⁶ Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, vii.

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* Much material, much of which is not included here, informed this exegesis across the year. The confines of the paper meant that I needed to reduce the quantity of information considerably.

PROGRAMME

ROSS HARRIS
Etude (Waves)

HELEN BOWATER
Blue Shift

SHOSTAKOVICH
Prelude & Fugue No.7 and No.2

BACH
Italian Concerto

GERSHWIN
Three Preludes

INTERVAL

RACHMANINOV
Etude Tableau Op.39 No.2 and No.4

CHOPIN
Barcarolle

BEETHOVEN
Sonata Op.90