THE MOVEMENT AS A RESOURCE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT
OF MUSCULAR RELAXATION, MENTAL CONCENTRATION
AND MUSICAL EXPRESSION

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During the early years of my piano playing experience, the expression of discomfort, fear, tension and lack of enjoyment during my performances was at times criticized by people in the audience. Yes, I was playing all the notes with accuracy and solving the technical challenges of the music. Yes, at times I was even expressive. However, the stiffness and the fear were almost there constantly and the spectators at my recitals had the impression that I was not enjoying what I was doing. As a consequence, they did not enjoy my performance either.

Very often, even though I had devoted many hours to learn the music, I finished a recital feeling unsatisfied and unhappy. Amazingly, what I liked doing the most, making music with my instrument, had come to be one of my deepest frustrations.

On one occasion, during a conversation with a dear friend of mine, I realized I was not alone: “How is that you don’t attend piano recitals anymore, Javier?” – I asked. - “Raul, I really don’t like to attend a recital where the performer seems to suffer instead of enjoying the music he/she is playing.” He answered.

His comment was a slap in my face. We certainly don’t want to be the spectators of any recital, where the predominant elements of the show seem to be tension, fear and anxiety.
What happened then with the enthusiasm, passion, enjoyment, energy, vitality and
gusto with which we started playing our instruments? When and how did we lose all of
that? What could we do to recover the creativity, spontaneity, and imagination we had in
our early years of piano practicing?

The question itself became a concern and gradually it developed into an obsession
and passion. I started looking for different possibilities, resources, and strategies to regain
what I, and many of my colleagues and students were missing. My exploration went from
praying, practicing transcendental meditation and autohypnosis, to reading and applying
the advices and recommendations given in books, music journals and DVDs related to the
topic.

At the beginning I thought the answers belonged only to the psychological realm.
Thus I told myself, “If I could get rid of all my biases, prejudices and fears, and really
develop freedom in my thinking, my performing will have to reflect my new patterns of
thought as a consequence.”

I tried this approach for a while. However, though I could see some improvement
in my playing, I felt the enjoyment I was trying to express was rather artificial, instead of
organic. I was still missing something.

I found the missing link (my missing link!) by accident, while observing the
classes of Ursula Werren, a wonderful Swiss pedagogue living in Monterrey, Mexico.
While watching her classes I was able to observe how much fun children had, while
expressing music and exploring the space through movement. They reacted
spontaneously enjoying the excitement of music without any prejudice. Even better, they
were not afraid of mistakes.
As a consequence of that first exposure to music and movement, a question came to me: What differentiated adults and young adults from children? The answer was evident: willingness and desire to move, as well as freedom to move and to react spontaneously to the musical stimulus.

The second question was: Can adults and young adults recover that willingness and desire to move and the freedom to react spontaneously to musical stimulus? If I wanted the answer to that question I needed to have myself the same experience. Thus, I started looking for workshops and master classes where the element of “movement” was involved.

Through my exploration I became acquainted with the music education approaches of Dalcroze, Orff and Kodaly, the somatic training approaches of Feldenkrais and Alexander Technique, as well as interesting seminars like the one given by Dr. William Westney at Texas Tech University entitled “Dimensions of Performance.”

At that point everything was a discovery for me. I did not know that Emil Jacques Dalcroze and Carl Orff had already developed two of the most wonderful music education philosophies devoted to draw out of children the love, passion and enjoyment for music that is innate in all human beings. Among many things, I had previously ignored that their music education philosophies included areas in which space, form, harmony, improvisation and other music elements were to be experienced and explored through movement.
I must add that, music education is a very neglected area in Mexico (my native country) and many of us have grown believing that the only way to learn music is through instrument lessons. Thus, many musicians in Mexico (and I believe in many third world countries) ignore the benefits of good music education systems (like those by Orff, Dalcroze and Kodaly) during childhood. An interesting paradox is that, even nowadays, in first world countries, many musicians seem to relegate those systems to the realm of pre-k and elementary school. Therefore, in both third world countries as well as in 1st word countries, many teachers deprive themselves of wonderful movement resources to teach music to young adults and adults, as well as to themselves.

Through my research, I came to discover that, during our growth, many of us have come to believe that experiencing music like children (playing, exploring, experimenting and moving) it is prohibited for adults and young adults. Therefore, many of us limit ourselves to only enjoy music at an aural and intellectual level, rather than involving the kinesthetic level.

“A Movement Says More Than Thousand Words”

The saying “an image says more than thousand words” can be transformed into: “a movement says more than thousand words. In other terms, an instructor who intends to teach how to play an instrument only from the technical and intellectual point of view, deprives himself of a more holistic approach to teach music that allows students to understand musical concepts such as harmonic tension and resolution, how to shape a musical phrase, how to convey a certain character, what is the form of a section or piece,
or how to execute a *ritardando*, an *accelerando*, a *morendo* and other expression markings.

There are many more benefits of allowing our body to freely respond to a musical stimulus such as handling muscular tension and developing a freer technical approach to perform. A psychological state of liberation can also be developed by allowing our muscles to respond spontaneously to the musical stimulus of our playing. It is in that state that a musician can focus his/her attention more clearly on the enjoyment of his/her playing as well as on the musical expression and interpretation of a masterwork being performed. Other benefits include the developing of better concentration that may lead to overcome or control stage fright as well as the fear of memory slips.

Feeling the music and allowing our muscles to react to music also helps us to feel in control of *tempo* and keep a steady beat. Yet, at the same time it allows us to take risks during an *accelerando* and regain control once it is over.

I have to admit that, many instrument teachers and students don’t seem to need any extra help to overcome the challenges that playing an instrument represents. They seem to assimilate everything in a natural and spontaneous way and seem to be so comfortable on the stage.

However, there are people, (both amateurs and professionals) who fight to understand how music functions, and struggle to overcome tension, anxiety and stage fright. They would love to play with some ease and relax and they would pay anything to regain the enjoyment of music. These types of people are the ones who would benefit tremendously from applying to their own playing less orthodox resources and tools to achieve more successful experiences.
Traditional studying techniques have their place in learning how to play an instrument. All of us know that most of the results we get are proportional to the time we devote to practicing as well as to the quality of our practice. Practicing hands apart, with metronome, practicing at a slow tempo, practicing one hand on our lap while the other plays on the keyboard and so forth, give tremendous results. However, I strongly believe we should not limit ourselves to these resources or practice methods.

The resource of musically exploring movement to understand better what happened in a masterwork and to perform and develop musicality can be used away from our instruments (in the setting of group dynamics or individual activities). However, some types of movements can be incorporated when playing the instrument. Sometimes, the music student may only need to experience the feeling of a *rallentando*, or understanding a harmonic modulation; others, might want to add a certain type of movement in his playing to help him/her to convey what is wanted.

The strongest criticism that I have received for involving “too much movement” in my piano teaching and playing includes comments such as: “moving too much it is distracting,” “moving interferes with your technique and may cause technical problems,” “moving affects your playing,” or “what you feel when you move away from the instrument it is not the same at the moment of playing.” While I admit there might be some truth in that, I strongly believe the benefits outweigh the negatives. Furthermore, I don’t believe everything has been already established concerning how to make music, thus, one can always experiment, take some reasonable risks, and finally, leave whatever works and get rid of whatever represents an obstacle.
I am not an international and re-known concert pianist. However, I always have a sincere and honest desire to, first of all, help myself and then help those who are learning how to play the piano under my supervision. I believe I am not alone in the search of answers. Many pianists and teachers look for the same answers that I do in the search for help for themselves and their students.

If we are to believe that anybody can and has the right to make music, we have to take the responsibility to research, find and use any device or resource we believe can help a student to achieve his/her goal.

Those of us who have read Eloise Ristad’s book, have come to realize that everybody has a need to develop to their full potential. Thus, we teachers, have the privilege to encourage and help our students realize their unique potential, by using any available resource, method or system no matter how unconventional, or un-orthodox seem to be, even by doing bizarre things such as “Putting a Soprano on her Head.”

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

