INTONAZIONI

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THE CREATIVE TEACHING OF THE PIANO

FIRST COMPLETE ENGLISH EDITION

CARL ADOLF MARTIENSSEN

AD VERITATEM

Carl Adolf Martienssen
The Creative Teaching of the Piano

Original title: Schöpferischer Klavierunterricht
Original edition used as reference: VEB Breitkopf & Härtel Musikverlag, Leipzig, 1954
First complete English edition: 2026
English translation and editorial supervision: Luigi Gaggero
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Ad Veritatem · Genoa, 2026
Intonazioni series, directed by Luigi Gaggero

EDITOR'S NOTE

It is a privilege to introduce to English-speaking readers one of the finest books ever written on instrumental technique. I say deliberately instrumental, and not merely pianistic: much of what Carl Adolf Martienssen has to say can, with the necessary adaptations, be transferred to any instrument, to singing, and even to conducting.

Its singularity is even more apparent in today's musical landscape. For many decades, discourse on technique seems to have divided into two territories that communicate less and less. On the one hand, an often pseudo-scientific approach flourishes, meticulously concerned with how things are done but unable to relate this "how" to an artistic why. On the other, much more rarely, we encounter the testimony of great musicians: profound intuitions, poetic images, reflections on listening and interpretation that are nevertheless almost never translated into a concrete and transmissible technique.

Martienssen still belongs to a world in which these two dimensions can and must be thought together. In his work, the spiritual vision of the musical act determines instrumental technique. Yet this statement does not remain a declaration of principle, a noble intention, or a slogan: concrete consequences follow from it, analysed with extraordinary precision down to the most minute aspects of the relationship between perception, sound will, gesture, and acoustic result. Few authors have approached with comparable order, systematic rigour, and patience a subject that, precisely because it depends on the invisible part of music-making, lends itself so readily to vagueness.

There is also a curious story behind my own discovery of this book. I studied music in Germany, at the *Hochschule für Musik* Hanns Eisler in Berlin, without anyone ever speaking to me about Martienssen. I discovered him instead in Ukraine, and only later realised how widely his ideas had circulated in the Soviet world and how, even today, they continue to be discussed in that cultural sphere. This geographical reversal perhaps says something about us as well: about the growing difficulty, in Western musical culture, not only of receiving an organic discourse of this kind, but by now even of conceiving that such a discourse might exist.

Martienssen begins from the observation of exceptional talent, significantly taking the child Mozart as his point of departure. Not in order to turn the prodigy into an unattainable model, but to understand, in its most natural and intense state, the relationship between the inner imagination of sound and gesture. Pedagogy then arises not from the uniform application of a method, but from an understanding of the living forces present in the pupil.

In this respect too, the book retains an almost provocative force today. If pedagogy must begin from the individual reality of the pupil rather than from the uniform application of a method, it must first of all be capable of recognising qualitative differences, talent, and even exceptional talent. In some pedagogical circles today, this is a criterion that has become difficult even to name; yet genuine pedagogy does not consist in pretending that differences do not exist, but in recognising and understanding them, and in allowing each person to develop to the highest degree what he or she actually possesses. Failing to recognise exceptional talent is no less serious a form of pedagogical

It is precisely this capacity to hold together what today is so often separated that makes Martienssen's book extraordinarily valuable. To publish *The Creative Teaching of the Piano* for the first time in English is to bring back to light not only a major text of piano pedagogy, but a conception of music and its teaching in which spirit and body, imagination and technique, talent and discipline, individuality and pedagogical rigour belong to a single organism. The greatness of the spiritual

vision does not diminish the concreteness of the teaching: on the contrary, it is its condition. And the precision of technique does not restrict that vision: it is the way in which the vision takes bodily form.

Perhaps it is precisely this unity that we have lost most profoundly. And that is why Martienssen, after so many decades, appears not merely relevant: he appears necessary.

Luigi Gaggero

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PREFACE

For a long time it was a dogma of piano methodology that physiology had to constitute the foundation of the entire pedagogical edifice. Every substantial work on piano pedagogy began with a minute physiological foundation. Anatomical knowledge was considered indispensable for every piano teacher. Technique was conceived as something separate from art and from the artist's personality, something that could be transmitted from the outside in a purely mechanical way.

The effects of this theoretical attitude upon the art of piano playing are summed up by a perceptive observer, H. Scherchen, in his Handbook of Conducting, in these drastic words: "The piano, as a domestic instrument, has devastated music like an epidemic. Even in orchestras one encounters a way of making music that dissolves every melodic connection into small fragments."

Against this observation stands the experience of another musician of very wide influence, C. Flesch, who in his Art of Violin Playing repeatedly singles out pianists, among genuine musicians, as those organised artistically to the highest degree.

Scherchen describes a state of affairs that undoubtedly corresponds to the majority of cases. The piano as an instrument bears no blame for it. Flesch, on the other hand, indicates what a properly oriented piano pedagogy ought necessarily to succeed in making common property.

For this to happen, piano pedagogy requires a consistent reversal: from a primarily physiological orientation to a primarily psychological one. Technical formation from the outside inward must give way to formation from the inside outward. The conception of technique as a mechanical function must be replaced by the conception of technique as a creative function in the highest sense of the word.

To help this insight achieve a decisive breakthrough: this is what the present book seeks to accomplish for the theory of piano playing. Only then will piano pedagogy be able to continue fulfilling its culturally important mission.

Let the concept of the "prodigy complex", set out in Part One, be the Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth of methods for everyone who seeks and investigates. Its further development leads to the concept upon which this book is founded: the "creative sound will". The creative sound will is the one fundamental psychic force from which the multiplicity of phenomena arises. Only after recognising it did it become possible to unite in a comprehensive synthesis methods that had seemed to diverge.

To give piano pedagogy this synthesis: this is what the present book seeks to accomplish for the practice of piano playing.

Anyone who in future wishes to pronounce upon the technical problems of piano playing must first clarify toward which type of creative sound will his or her artistic personality tends. Only then can one decide whether to develop technical doctrines exclusively for that particular type, or whether principles of general validity can be derived from it.

The bibliography at the end of this book includes only authors who are actually cited. I have made no attempt to provide a complete bibliography. This book grew out of artistic experience and wishes to be judged as such. It presents and grounds my experiences in piano teaching as professor of piano at the state higher institutes of music in Leipzig (21 years, alongside Karl Straube and Robert Teichmüller), Berlin (10 years, as Edwin Fischer's successor), Rostock (4 years), and, since 1950, at the German Higher Institute of Music in Berlin.

I now send this book into a new life. It brings together, in a newly reworked form, my 1930 volume The Individual Piano Technique on the Basis of the Creative Sound Will and its practical

complement, published in 1937 under the title The Methodology of Individual Piano Teaching, with the hope that it may continue to contribute to unity in the art of piano playing.

Berlin, summer 1953
Carl Adolf Martienssen

PART ONE

THE CREATIVE SOUND WILL

THE PRODIGY COMPLEX AS A MODEL

Piano pedagogy has become accustomed to regarding the phenomenon of the musical child prodigy as an exception. It was thought that talents so unusual, which moreover could develop only under particularly favourable external conditions, were of no relevance to piano pedagogy in general: the latter had to deal with the average and should therefore take its bearings from it.

Yet examination of individual cases repeatedly leads to the conclusion that the child prodigy possesses a complex of psychic and physical functions that must serve as a model for every form of instrumental training. We shall call it here the "prodigy complex".

A qualification is necessary. Not everyone who appears in public in short trousers or children's clothes is a genuine child prodigy. Trained monkey tricks are encountered just as often as organic growth. Only the latter can concern us here. The experienced teacher's ear distinguishes the two with absolute clarity after only a few bars. And the incorruptible judge, life itself, decides with equal inexorability. When the period of maturation ought to begin, mere training generally causes the little prodigy to sink into nothingness - unless an exceptional psychic energy undertakes a total reconstruction. Genuine child prodigies, by contrast, grow organically and without rupture toward the mastery that corresponds to their personality.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHILD PRODIGY W. A. MOZART

Before formulating a precise definition, let us show by means of an example how the prodigy complex is organically constituted in the genuine child prodigy. The example of W. A. Mozart offers itself naturally. A psychological investigation of the early development of the many musical prodigies who later became masters of the first rank will, in its fundamental principles, always lead to the same results. By fortunate circumstance, in Mozart's case - a musical prodigy in the highest degree - reliable testimony has come down to us that is extraordinarily instructive from the psychological point of view concerning his learning of the piano, the violin, and the organ. Because of its importance for the present inquiry, this testimony must be given here in full.

Schlichtegroll's obituary, based on information supplied by Mozart's sister, reports as follows on his learning of the piano:

"The daughter [W. A. Mozart's sister] showed so decided a talent for music that the father soon began giving her piano lessons. This made a great impression on the boy, who was about three years old; he too would sit down at the piano and could spend a long time looking for thirds, which he would then play together, showing great delight at his discovery; moreover, he retained in his memory the most striking passages of the pieces he heard. In his fourth year his father began, almost in play, to teach him a few minuets and other pieces at the piano; within a short time he could play them with the greatest neatness and the firmest rhythm. Very soon his own creative impulse awakened: at the age of five he composed little pieces, which he played to his father, who wrote them down."

On his learning of the violin, a passage from the famous letter written to Mozart's sister after the composer's death by the Salzburg court trumpeter Schachtner is illuminating:

"Some time before this, during the first days after your return from Vienna, when Wolfgang had brought with him a little violin that he had received as a gift in Vienna, our already excellent violinist, the late Herr Wentzl, who was then beginning to compose, came to us. He brought six trios that he had composed during your father's absence and asked for his opinion. We played these trios: your father took the bass on the viola, Wentzl the first violin, and I was to play the second. Wolfgangerl asked to be allowed to play the second violin; his father scolded him for this foolish request, since he had not yet received the slightest instruction on the violin and therefore could not possibly be capable of doing anything with it. Wolfgang said: 'Surely one need not first have learned in order to play a second violin'; and when his father insisted that he should go away at once and stop disturbing us, Wolfgang began to cry bitterly and went away dragging his little violin behind him. I asked that he be allowed to play with me. At last his father said: 'Play with Herr Schachtner, but so softly that no one can hear you; otherwise you must go.' And so it happened, and Wolfgang played with me. I soon noticed, to my astonishment, that I was entirely superfluous; I quietly laid down my violin and looked at his father, down whose cheeks tears of admiration and consolation were running during this scene; and so he played all six trios. When we had finished, Wolfgang, made bold by our approval, maintained that he could play the first violin too. For amusement we tried it, and nearly died laughing, because he played that part as well - with fingering that was wholly wrong and irregular, yet in such a way that he never came completely to a halt."

The way in which the seven-year-old Wolfgang immediately found himself at home on the organ is described with great vividness in a travel letter from his father dating from June 1763:

"The newest thing is that, to amuse ourselves, we went to the organ and I explained the pedal to Wolferl. He immediately gave proof of it, stante pede: he pushed the bench aside, preluded standing up, and added the pedal as though he had practised it for many months. Everyone was astonished; and it is a new grace of God, one that some people obtain only after much labour."

LEOPOLD MOZART'S PEDAGOGY

What, then, is important in these reports? From the psychological and pedagogical point of view, the decisive fact is that in this early musical development the primum agens is not intellectual learning but sense - the sense of hearing, the sense of sound - actively exercising itself through play.

The foundation is a house filled with music. Sounds and melodies accumulate in the brain. The first motor reaction of the auditory sense takes place in the organs most immediately available: by humming, whistling, or singing "the most striking passages of the pieces" that the child had heard and retained in his memory. Schlichtegroll's account must be interpreted and chronologically reordered in this sense. Only at a second stage do the sister's example and play indicate a new path by which the worlds of sound accumulated in the auditory sphere of the brain can discharge themselves motorically in another form. Searching - and this is the decisive point: searching with the ear - the three-year-old child approaches the piano and never tires of the new discoveries he makes there. And the father, that pedagogical genius? Smiling, he lets the child go on for a certain time. For a certain time: Schlichtegroll expressly distinguishes chronologically, though in wording that is not entirely precise, between "the boy of about three" and "in the fourth year of his age".

It is therefore "in the fourth year of his age" that the father begins to concern himself musically with his son. But he does not begin with the tedious manner of schoolroom learning. As a teacher, he instead inserts himself almost imperceptibly into the child's autonomous impulse toward the activity of the auditory will, and at first teaches him "almost in play" - an expression that should probably be understood in a double sense: "playing" in the properly childish meaning and "playing for him", that is, letting him hear the example. A pedagogical instinct of genius took good care not to destroy what was organic or to introduce into the child something alien and, for the moment, inorganic. Schlichtegroll's account of the first attempts at composition reveals the same exemplary pedagogical behaviour: the child plays, the father writes; the central force is therefore, once again, the child's auditory will.

Just as organically, according to Schachtner's delightful description, Leopold Mozart allows his son to grow into the sound-world of the violin. Here too the father had at first allowed the child to amuse himself with the instrument as he pleased, guided solely by his auditory will - and for quite a long period. According to Abert's reconstruction, Wolfgang possessed a violin at the latest during the journey to Vienna in September 1762, whereas the episode related by Schachtner must be placed at the beginning of 1763. Wolfgang had therefore discovered for himself where, on the violin's fingerboard, the sounds he wished to hear were to be found. Fingerboard and sound formed for him an immediate unity, just as key and sound had previously done at the piano. If a sound kindled in his auditory sphere, he knew at the same time at what point on the violin fingerboard he had to realise it. Playing from notes could not constitute anything essentially new for an auditory will that had already been strengthened to such a degree. The notes were merely stimuli, signals for the will to hear particular sounds, and originally had nothing whatever to do with taking the notes with the fingers, with bodily activity - which from now on we shall call the "motor apparatus". This close union between auditory will and violin fingerboard made possible what seems astonishing: Wolfgang could play things for which he did not possess even the smallest part of what is commonly called technique. He simply played what his ear demanded, without thinking much about his fingers, "although with fingering that was wholly wrong and irregular".

After this, the father's account of the way in which Wolfgang felt at home on the organ from the very first moment is no longer in itself so surprising. What remains astonishing is the strength of the seven-year-old's auditory will: without any preliminary preparation “through play”, the feet are simply required to realise what the inner ear wishes to hear.