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Murray McLachlan – Teacher/Mentor Extraordinaire IRMTNZ National Tour of New Zealand July 2011

By Dianne James



Murray McLachlan

“They can’t all be stars but they can all twinkle,” said Murray McLachlan, as he reflected on ways of fulfilling and nurturing the potential of all the students we teach.

This was just one of the many memorable observations peppered throughout Murray McLachlan’s absorbing and stimulating series of talks to teachers that took place in July in several cities throughout New Zealand.

The topics covered during McLachlan’s three sessions with the Auckland Branch were hugely relevant, ranging from finding the motivation to teach and practise, to a creative approach to the resolution of technical problems. This was McLachlan’s second visit to New Zealand and, as before, his unassuming manner coupled with his warm and friendly personality – not to mention his

charming Scottish brogue – endeared him to all who had the pleasure and good fortune of his company.

“Why do we teach? Why do we practise, play and perform?”

Such questions provoked us to reflect on our own core beliefs as music teachers and students. McLachlan’s answer, “that we are drawn to our art because it takes us towards something much more beautiful than our everyday concerns”, certainly resonated with me as I reflected on the importance of music in my own life, and the way it somehow alleviates the stress of life running a busy family and household. The music profession – and this includes private teaching – is a very hard one to enter unless one is passionately in love with it: “We must adore what we do.”

It is, McLachlan observed, “a kind of priesthood”, and if we are to nurture a love of music in our students we must find ways to nurture and deepen our own love of music. “There’s a great beauty in what we’re doing – there’s beauty in practice and in teaching,” he said, and we must remember this at all times.

A sense of curiosity is one of the most important things to develop in our students, and we cannot foster this unless we are curious ourselves. We must nurture our own learning, and develop our knowledge and understanding of music through continued and frequent professional development. This can take many forms: attendance at concerts, social and professional interaction with colleagues, attending art exhibitions, reading widely and, of course, taking advantage of the wealth of opportunities offered by our local branches.

As teachers we must remain connected to our own playing; keeping personal practice going is very much part of being a teacher. One can accomplish much in just ten minutes if fully engaged and focused.

Practice

This is a perennial problem and one that music teachers grapple with on a daily basis. The pianist Lang Lang believes that instilling a love of practising in a child is one of the most important elements of music teaching, but doing this is challenging.

McLachlan shared some of his views on how we might motivate and inspire our students. In

the first instance it can be a matter of finding a way into music, and he cited the film Amadeus as providing the inspiration for one of his sons at a crucial period in his musical development.

One might also embrace the background support by fostering a ‘triangular’ relationship between the parent, teacher and child.

Technology is a huge factor in our students’ lives, so we might embrace this by viewing, comparing and discussing YouTube videos, or by recording our students’ performances during lessons and reviewing these together.

The music studio itself can be a source of motivation if it is a happy, bright, and inspirational environment.

Our own personal warmth and rapport is crucial as well. We must engage students in the music-making process, for example, let them help find words to a piece (perhaps to help with a challenging rhythm); or ask questions of the student so that they feel a sense of ownership in the interpretative process, such as “what fingering should we use?”



Murray McLachlan, July 2011

The Joy of Sound

Beauty and love of sound was the leitmotif that linked all three lectures; indeed it emerged as the core ingredient to be fostered as we shape an interpretation of a piece of music with our students.

McLachlan believes that we must begin all our work with the joy of sound, and that we can stimulate an appreciation of sound quality both in ourselves and in our students by fully engaging all the senses in the pursuit of “elevated” interpretation. By involving all our senses in the ways outlined, we, and by extension, our students, might really begin to “play” rather than “work”. Titles of pieces often evoke pictures and these can provide interpretative direction.

Encourage students to imagine a film screen in front of them as they play; find the underlying story, find a drama, whether pre-existent (e.g. the Faust legend) or an imagined one that might fit with the dramatic sentiment of the music at hand. Bring out the humour, enjoy the dance aspects! Imagine the keyboard in front of you is an orchestra such as the Berlin Philharmonic, making make every sound your fingers make as orchestral as possible. “Look no further than the Beethoven sonatas for perfect material to experiment with, since each one of these can be considered from the perspective of a string quartet or a classical orchestra.”

Smell, touch and taste can stimulate the interpretative process as much as the more usual visual and aural senses. So, we might discuss the “dark, chocolaty” colours of Beethoven’s A-flat Piano Sonata, Op.26, or Chopin’s A-flat Nocturne, or find parallels between “biting chords and acidic bitterness”.

McLachlan’s discussion of how an awareness of touch and physical sensations might lead to deeper interpretative insights was centred, most memorably, on the closing variation movement of Beethoven’s glorious E major Piano Sonata, Op.109 as in this beautifully sensual description from his extensive notes:

The theme makes physical sense when related to the act of slowly sinking into a deliciously soft pillow – stuffed with the finest of ducks’ feathers. For Variation 1 it is compelling to imagine dark, deep velvet (rather than plastic, make-shift ivory) as one strokes the keys. Variation 2 is plucked rather than struck in nature’s realm, whilst fire and energy in the 3rd Variation is very much to the fore as

the left hand scampers in childlike mischief away from the authoritarian paternal decrees in the right hand. With Variation 4 it is vital to feel gently lifted in undulating waves, albeit at a relatively low height. One can continue this approach into the final stages of the movement, in which case the quasi choral baroque heroics of the 5th Variation need a sense of resonant glow from the diaphragm, before the final pages literally lift the performer upwards to the spiritual heights as never portrayed in keyboard literature before.

The “danger” period

Included in McLachlan’s wide-ranging discussion were his views on some of the things that can potentially de-motivate students.

He cites the age 12-13 years as the ‘danger’ period, when students risk dropping out. This often happens because the journey into music has become too onerous. Many students find it difficult to read musical notation, and McLachlan suggested that sticking slavishly to tutor or method books can be a real turn-off to some, as these are often obsessed with notation.

“Get the fingers dirty with the soil of the notes,” he said memorably, that is, start with the sounds, explore the instrument, sing and clap to music on a regular basis, and thus cultivate a student’s involvement with music and sound.

Exam culture can also be extremely dangerous in certain instances, and as teachers, we must guard against creating a sense of music as a series of List A, B or C pieces. Exams have their place, he believes, but they must be viewed as “bridges” rather than as the “river” itself. Use them pragmatically and selectively.

Repertoire choices can sometimes convert and transform students, and McLachlan reminded teachers of the importance of being curious about the literature available. He suggested that we each have a list of ‘magic’ pieces, or ‘spells’ that can be the catalyst to moving students forward.

We must also provide for those who make ‘horizontal’ progress, whether they are adult amateurs or the 14-15 year-old who has little time to practise. A piece such as Grieg’s famous ‘Arietta’ (from the Op.12 Lyric Pieces) can be an inspired choice for such a student.

Technical issues

Technical issues, in particular creative ways of developing and maintaining technique, not just on the piano, but equally on all instruments, was the focus of the first of McLachlan’s lectures. He believes that healthiness is the most important aspect to be nurtured, as stress and tension in playing must be to be avoided. He promotes a holistic approach to his students’ technical problem, and recommends enlisting the support and expertise of practitioners in Pilates, Tai Chi, Alexander Technique or Feldenkrais to assist with the broader development of the body, and its relationship to the development of the fine motor skills needed to play a musical instrument.

Retaining firm fingertips, while being free everywhere else is the particular conundrum of piano technique: the spine must remain light and flexible, and the feet must provide adequate support for the upper body, just as the roots of an oak tree support the weight of the tremendous growth above the ground.

Flexibility is a fundamental element of a healthy technique on all instruments, and this can increase with age if fostered correctly from the earliest stages. Great problems can result from poor wrist alignment – McLachlan described the wrist as “the gearbox of piano technique”, and stressed the importance of the correct alignment of wrist and arm. He reminded us that the human body is structured symmetrically so we should embrace the synergy that exists between the hands, such as putting thumbs together in contrary motion passages.

Enlightening practice routines

McLachlan’s thoughts on practice routines were also enlightening. He suggests that we might begin with two minutes of meditation, followed by some consciously deep breathing. “Celebrate the stillness” and “expand the lungs like an accordion”.

One could follow this with some “gripping” exercises, focusing on the firmness of the finger-tips while feeling the flexibility in the wrists, arms and shoulders. One-finger scales might follow, during which one explores the resonance of individual notes. Proceeding to chord playing, one could try to voice chords in different ways, thinking alternatively of the top, middle and bass layers.

At the heart of all this work is sound – one must proceed by careful listening with sound as the priority. “Our ears are our greatest teachers,” and we must train these so that we are able to evaluate our own playing, and that of our students, more objectively. The development of a concentrated, thoughtful approach to practising, with much visualisation, will help in the long run to overcome the anxiety many feel in performance.

Technical difficulties are best solved through a creative approach, and one could begin by transposing thorny passages to different keys, practising each version with care and curiosity. McLachlan strongly recommends that difficult spots in the one hand are practised in the other hand too, again using transposition and modulation, and bearing in the mind that “pianism thrives on fingering that is symmetrical”. Several different sources of ideas to develop creative technical exercises were mentioned:

- Busoni’s long out-of-print edition for Schirmer of the *Bach Preludes & Fugues* is brimming with ideas and possibilities for exercises based on Bach
- Frank Merrick’s book *Practising the Piano* (published 1960) is one of the “most creatively charged books on piano technique in the literature”, with many of his suggestions derived from re-workings of the Bach Two-and Three-Part Inventions – for example, playing these in thirds, sixths, octaves, and transposing them to different keys, while retaining fingerings from the original key
- Alfred Cortot’s *Rational Principles of Piano Technique* was also recommended, not only for its wealth of creative suggestions for technical practice and its encyclopaedic breadth of coverage, but also for its focus on ways of nurturing resonant, non-percussive sonorities, and its emphasis on the need for pianists to remain flexible in their wrists, elbows and shoulders. These beliefs were firmly endorsed by McLachlan throughout his wide-ranging discussion on the development of technique in young musicians.

Murray McLachlan’s visit has certainly been one of the high points of the 2011 teaching year. His programme was full and intense, comprising not just the three lectures summarised here, but also a wonderful recital where we were able to observe him putting into practice much of what he had said that afternoon. His performance of Chopin’s Op. 28 Preludes was like a series of exquisite paintings with the individual character and colours of each strongly indicated, yet linked into the work as a whole so that the cumulative effect of the 24 pieces was not compromised.

And his playing of the Prokofiev Sonata was epic in its scope and vision, with moments of tender lyricism contrasting some biting intense virtuosity, all of which he handled with poise and elegance. This was truly a weekend to remember, and one looks forward to future visits with impatient anticipation.

Dianne James is a member of the IRMTNZ Council and the Auckland Branch Committee. She has an interest in 18th Century music, especially that of Haydn, and has presented seminars to both Auckland and Wellington Branches on teaching his music. Dianne contributes regularly to feature programmes on Radio NZ Concert.