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Maria João Pires

The Seventh Book: An interdisciplinary approach to piano study

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In 2013, the pianist Maria João Pires organised a ten-day course for pianists where they would explore a variety of unorthodox approaches to learning, breaking with the usual agreed-upon habits and preconceptions about music and piano playing. A reading list of six books, with a seventh revealed at the end of the course, was required reading. Literature and music are closely-related fields with many intersections throughout history and evident in the pianistic repertoire itself. But is there also an even greater benefit for pianists in reading literature, philosophy or other seemingly unrelated subject matter?

I had the privilege to participate in this ten-day course with the pianist Maria João Pires. Eight pianists were selected for the course consisting of six days in residence at the Royaumont Abbey, a former Cistercian abbey approximately 20 miles north of Paris. This was followed by four days of public masterclasses at the Paris Philharmonic culminating in a public performance of solo and four-hand piano music. The course was conceived entirely by Pires and was unlike anything I had ever experienced.

The course was developed with a clear effort to have us break with our usual habits as pianists by embracing a variety of alternative and unorthodox

approaches. Pires is a deeply thoughtful and spiritual artist who embraces the vision that being a pianist is not simply a profession but a philosophy of life. She sees the musician's role as being one of service to the community with the responsibility of communicating an artistic message of tolerance and benevolence. She makes no separation between music-making and the content of the artist's character, behaviour and intentions. Pires believes these traits directly inform and contribute to the ability to communicate musically and she sees the life of a musician as carrying with it a responsibility for activism and leadership. There is a utopic and deeply ethical element to her approach as she sees music as a force for good in the world. The focus of the course was on developing these intangible elements within each of us, forcing us to think about our role in society and the type of society we would like to help shape. If one believes that it is character and desire for self-actualisation that will enable the pianist to communicate with an audience, then there is where the focus should be.

The course was entitled "Le Septième Livre", the seventh book. In preparation for the course, we were given a reading list with six books. There was no explanation as to why we should read these books or how they would be integrated into the course, but only the request to read them. The list included the following works: Haruki Murakami *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, Marguerite Yourcenar *Alexis*, Christophe André *Les États d'âme*, Albert Jacquard *Mon Utopie*, André Comte-Sponville *Impromptus*, Thierry Janssen *Le défi positif*; the seventh and final book would be given to us at the end of the course.

Considering that the course was in French and took place in Paris, most of the authors were French speaking except for Murakami. It was not a specific book that I found most important but rather the role that reading can have on personal development and in turn on piano playing. This list contains a variety of genres. Some authors are focused on questions of psychology and personal development like Christophe André and Thierry Janssen. Others offer commentary and solutions to larger societal questions like Jacquard and Comte-Sponville. Both Yourcenar and Murakami are novelists although this particular work of Murakami's is non-fiction, describing his life as a writer and long-distance runner. The parallels with piano playing and a book like Murakami's are easy to see. As Murakami describes the relationship between writing and long-distance running, we are immediately reminded of our own daily practice regimen and rituals, with common themes of self-motivation, planning, perseverance and the perceived limits of our bodies and minds.

Other works on the list have a more indirect relationship to piano playing but deal with larger philosophical questions about society, social justice, ecology and psychology, offering ideas of how to move towards a more just and equitable society. This choice of literature clearly reflects Pires's own beliefs and her desire to share this perspective. By assigning these books before the first meeting, she created a common repository of knowledge that we could draw upon in our conversations. In these daily group conversations, there was no emphasis on making direct links between the literature and the musical works we were studying. Although we would refer to them from time to time, no one was suggesting a direct or explicit connection. The books created an intellectual environment and set of shared values that we could all embrace as we lived and worked together.

Historically, literature and music are two deeply-connected artistic activities. Piano literature is brimming with composers and works that have

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direct connections to literature. Both Franz Liszt and Robert Schumann are particularly strong examples. There is little doubt that reading Petrarch, Lord Byron, Senancour or Victor Hugo will improve a pianist's understanding of the deeply literary nature of Liszt's music. An understanding and familiarity with themes, characters and narrative of Dante's *Divine Comedy* will have a direct impact on a pianist's comprehension of the narrative drama present in Liszt's *Après une lecture du Dante*. In this case, a disregard of the literary groundwork will lead to a fundamental misunderstanding of the musical work. We encounter a similar case with Robert Schumann who had a lifelong love of both music and literature. Most obvious are the connections between *Papillons* op. 2 and the novel *Flegeljahre* by Jean Paul Richter as well as *Kreisleriana* op. 16 and the character of Johannes Kreisler in the works of E. T. A. Hoffmann. When the reference to a literary work or author are made explicit, it is undeniable that reading these works will bring the interpreter closer to the composer and their artistic intent. But most piano music does not have such overt relationships with literature. What then is the pedagogical goal of encouraging pianists to read such a wide range of authors?

First, we can explore the benefit of reading literature within a larger interdisciplinary approach to music education. The questions and

observations that are evoked through reading literature can correspond to musical works and generate new insights in interpretation and comprehension. Reading requires us to engage and connect with the author through characters, setting, themes and narrative, forcing us to move outside of ourselves and into the world and perspective of another, mirroring the work that we do as interpreters of a musical work. Although we are bringing the work to life through performance it is ultimately the composer's perspective and voice that we must strive to understand and communicate. Even though reading and playing the piano are largely solitary activities, they both can bring us out of ourselves and into the world of another. Reading can also improve our ability to empathise, to know what another person is thinking or feeling by creating bonds with the writer and characters. This same skill is valuable in piano playing as we search to create a bond with the composer and form an aesthetic or emotional idea of the notes on the page.

Second, reading literary works that deal with larger philosophical questions can help us reflect upon the fundamental questions of artistic creation and the expressive power of music. They can provide insight into the underlying psychological, societal and aesthetic principles of works of art and encourage us to reevaluate our preconceived ideas. These readings can create distance between ourselves and our preconceptions, renewing our understanding of our artistic pursuits and providing goals in helping forge a unique artistic vision. Regardless of the importance we give music it is not exempt from a relationship with society nor with other forms of artistic expression. Although much of our work is done in isolation, we cannot ignore the public nature of musical performance. Larger ethical and social questions are relevant to artistic creation and the role of the artist in society is a subject that we should all reflect upon.

Third, interdisciplinary study can provide pianists with useful tools to address the challenges of a life

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in music in today’s complex and fast-moving world. A musician’s life can be highly competitive, isolating and compartmentalised. Reading can provide spiritual, moral and psychological tools to help the pianist develop a clearer sense of self, purpose and values. These readings can provide solutions and alternative ways of viewing their careers and musical lives. Rather than feeling conscripted into a particular career we can widen our viewpoint and explore the variety of opportunities available to us. This wider interdisciplinary approach can create opportunities that we may have never otherwise imagined and liberate us from what can feel like a fixed or immovable fate.

Fourth, reading can also demonstrate the limits of language as an expressive

art form and show us the privileged role of music. Music is inherently more abstract than language as its meaning is often concealed and at times cryptic, lacking the formal logic present in language. But music also has the unique ability to communicate profound spiritual and emotional states with ease. Music can express what verbal language is, at times, incapable of saying. Here, it is not the common elements between two art forms but rather their differences that can provide insight.

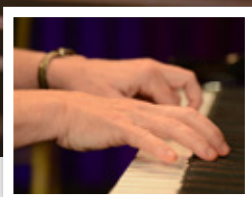
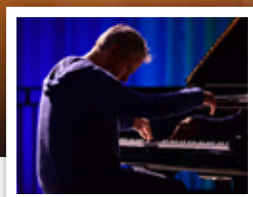
The “Seventh Book” given to us at the end of the course was Jean Giono’s *The Man Who Planted Trees*, an allegorical short story about a shepherd who spends his life planting acorns in order to re-forest a valley in the Alps. The story has a strong ecological

To read more about the workshop, here is a link to a *Le Monde* article written at the time: <http://bit.ly/3ZFuUS7>

message but also demonstrates the power of anonymous good deeds and the profound impact they can have on society. A clear parallel can be made with the artist’s life. The background of this book also has a secondary message: Giono distributed this immensely successful book freely, never making a profit.

I cannot say with any certainty that reading literature or philosophy will make someone a better pianist, but I have no doubt that it will contribute to a more meaningful, ethical and fulfilling life. Connecting with other perspectives and voices will ultimately create a better understanding of ourselves and the human condition, integral elements to any artistic practice.

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Partimento

as a Method to Learn Historical Keyboard Improvisation

by Peter van Tour

This article explores the fascinating world of eighteenth-century keyboard improvisation and composition. It highlights how young students in Italy’s earliest music institutions developed their skills using thoroughbass-based exercises, today more commonly known as partimenti.

As many pianists may have noticed, classical improvisation has become a timely subject. Historical research into eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century performance practices has highlighted the integral role of improvisation in the music of composers such as Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig Beethoven and many other composers across Europe. Advocates of improvisatory learning argue that improvisation in historical styles enhances a musician’s melodic and harmonic fluency and deepens a more general understanding of the musical language. By employing strategies similar to those once used, performers can embellish reprises, craft cadenzas for concertos, and even compose or improvise pieces in the stylistic idioms of the past.

The quest to rediscover authentic improvisatory techniques has led scholars to explore the musical archives of Italy’s earliest music institutions. The world’s first conservatories in Naples and the Convent of San Francesco in Bologna served as vital centres for training eighteenth-century musicians in musicianship, improvisation and composition. Their archives preserve an extraordinary trove of manuscripts shedding light on keyboard improvisation practices. Materials such as singing exercises (*solfeggi*), thoroughbass exercises (*partimenti*) and counterpoint notebooks offer invaluable insights into teaching methods that extend beyond reproducing notated works. These sources reveal how musicians were trained to create new music through improvisation, composition and the variation or recomposition of existing works.

Imagine travelling back in time to witness the training of music students during the era of Haydn and Mozart. For aspiring musicians of that period, such a journey often meant crossing the Alps to study with a master in cities like Bologna or Naples. Among these, Naples stood out – not only for its favourable climate and excellent wine but also for its esteemed music conservatories. By the mid-eighteenth century, Naples boasted three renowned music conservatories that cultivated some of Europe’s finest musicians. Graduates proudly proclaimed their Neapolitan training on the title pages of their compositions with the phrase *Maestro di Cappella Napoletano*. These conservatories excelled in teaching singing, keyboard-based counterpoint and written composition. Apprentices who completed the rigorous 10- to 12-year curriculum often emerged as highly-skilled composers, well-equipped to succeed in the opera business or as church musicians in Italy’s major cities and beyond.

Music education during this period emphasised *contrappunto pratico* (practical counterpoint), which focused on improvising from thoroughbass-based exercises in the F-clef and composing music for the church or opera. Notably, the concept of harmony (*armonia*) was still seldom used in eighteenth-century Italy. When mentioned, it typically referred to French theoretical approaches, such as Jean-Philippe Rameau’s fundamental bass practice. In contrast, Italian pedagogy prioritised practical skills like keyboard improvisation, relegating textbooks and theoretical study to a minor role. The stylistic model that students followed had very little to do with the chorale-style type of harmony in our modern books of four-part harmony. Italian students instead learned to improvise a rather contrapuntal three-part style reminiscent of the trio sonatas of Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713).

See Figure 1, below.



Figure 1: Keyboard improvisation was grounded in a three-part polyphonic style rather than the four-part chorale style still commonly taught today. This approach drew inspiration from the trio sonatas of Arcangelo Corelli, such as the excerpt from his *Trio Sonatas*, Op. 3, No. 7 (bars 1–9).