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Learning from Performance

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Learning from Performance

“The keyboard is a very cruel instrument.”

Lawrence Campbell explains these harsh-sounding words by saying that most great pianists begin lessons quite young and almost sacrifice adolescence so their technique can grow with their hands. A fine pianist must commit to developing a sense of space, pitch, and movement — “a sense of geography that goes beyond what people see when they look at those 88 ...” Campbell pauses at the word choice, “piranhas.”

Despite the agony-over-ecstasy implied by these words, Campbell’s relationship to the piano has reaped its share of accolades. Honors for his talents began before he reached his teens and continued beyond the achievement of his doctorate in piano performance at Indiana University. A member of the Illinois Wesleyan University faculty since 1978, Campbell was named to the School of Music’s only endowed chair, the Fern Rosetta Sherff Professor of Music, in 1998.

It was during Campbell’s undergraduate studies at Northwestern University that he encountered Pauline Manchester Lindsey, a piano professor who first provoked his interest in pursuing an academic career rather than full-time performing. But he didn’t realize, as a student watching Lindsey, that there was more involved in being a faculty member than three to four hours of teaching a day and playing concerts at one’s own discretion.



Lawrence Campbell works with students (from left) Mark Portolese '05, Stephanie Swearingen '04, and Tara Gebbink '05 in his Presser Hall office. Campbell says he doesn't teach piano so much as he teaches individuals. (Photo by Jamie Stukenberg)

“I didn’t see all the other things that go into being a faculty member, which at times can seem to impinge on the things you love most and the reason you became a college professor,” he says. He admits at first he found expectations of faculty service outside of his discipline “irksome.” But after he began increasing his involvement, he came to like it “better and better.”

“I’d been here eight years and I hadn’t been on any committee outside the School of Music. I was just a real School of Music creature. If I’d continued that way without starting to get into the larger arena of University service, I think I’d be an unhappy faculty member now, because a great advantage of the university (setting) is getting to know your colleagues outside of your field and working with them. It really amounts to a continuing education.”

This also counters the musician’s tendency to be insular, he says, adding, “a pianist is the most insular of all musicians;

we do it by ourselves.”

Campbell has friends who are full-time concert pianists, and he personally considers the exertion of constant travel and unpredictable concert conditions “utterly deadening.” But neither would he give up performing entirely.

“I think a musician who abandons playing altogether and quits playing concerts loses a great deal of mettle. To really teach at a superior level, you have to be engaged with your craft, and with the art of playing, in order to offer the best solutions.”

Because it typically takes 500 hours to prepare a piano concert, Campbell feels it is a bad investment of time to perform a program only once. In 1986, he marked the centenary of Franz Liszt’s death with 50 recitals across

the country devoted to Liszt's music, and he performed a series of 30 concerts in 1997 for the 200th anniversary of Franz Schubert's birth. At one point he performed 15 recitals in 20 days and, Campbell confesses, he became so accustomed to the repertoire that during one regrettable performance he lost the "nervous energy" that lends essential excitement to live music-making: "I was totally calm. It was totally mechanical. I didn't miss a note — it was totally boring."

He now considers an ideal number of recitals in a year to be six or seven. "There's something about the rhythm of playing that's really important to doing your best work," he says. "I think if I ever quit playing recitals I probably would just quit teaching. It is *that* important."

"And I think your students feel a certain security if they see you putting yourself in the same position. ... They feel a common ground that they wouldn't feel otherwise. So it's really important (to keep performing), not only for your own self-development, but psychologically for the students and also for the ongoing development of new ideas about how to teach."

Because individual differences in hand size, height, and length of arms and torso will affect the way each student approaches the piano, Campbell says he doesn't teach piano so much as he teaches individuals. As he was taught early in his own college training, Campbell espouses a level of technique in which a person knows her body, and the exact type and speed of movements needed to produce the desired sound, with such precision that if that sound doesn't come out of the piano, "the piano is wrong." At least, that's the goal.

For an artist to reach a level of true mastery, Campbell says, depends not only on talent, but also on depth of desire. His mentor, Pauline Manchester Lindsey, had her own take on the "sweat vs. ability" question, which she gave in a 1993 interview with Northwestern School of Music's quarterly magazine *Fanfare*. Campbell pulls a copy of this article from his wall and reads from it.

"Oh, I know a lot of people who work like dogs and haven't played piano worth a damn," Lindsey said. "What makes an artist in any field? It's talent, given by the Lord, plus slave labor and luck."

"She was quite a character," Campbell says, the warmth in his voice unmistakable.



"To really teach at a superior level," says Campbell, "you have to be engaged with your craft, and with the art of playing, in order to offer the best solutions." (Photo by Jamie Stukenberg)