

THE BIG PICTURE

by Matthew Kam

Competitions are gruesome. They are rarely synonymous with ‘real’ music making yet many aspiring pianists feel the need to go in for international competitions. Some think that if they win, they can get a playing career; others go in simply for the prestige of doing them. Whatever the motivation might be, the pressure to play well and succeed will always be there. One will also undoubtedly find the typical sort of playing that exists in all competitions: extremely polished, evened out and mechanically precise, note after note. But what about those performances that really inspire, speak and communicate at a deeper level?

Not having progressed through the rounds in the *22eme Concours International de Piano d’Epinal 2009*, I learnt a great deal instead by attending the competition and listening to performances given by an array of pianists from Europe, Asia and America. I obviously favoured some styles of playing and not others. What does attract me is the kind of musician totally committed, convincing, consistent and concentrated with everything that he or she does. This sort of playing is sophisticated, classy, conveying a depth of thought and feeling, and a strong empathy for the composer and understanding of the style in question. Such honesty and dedication to the music would mean that this person is bound to say things simply and beautifully.¹

This article arose from all the jottings that I made after listening in the audience throughout the week in Epinal, France. My discussion will be on the interpretation of the score: seeing the ‘backbone’, the overall structure of the work. The big picture is, in my opinion, one of the keys to finding and getting the confidence to be totally *committed, convincing, consistent* and *concentrated* in the performance.

1) The conception of the overall structure: the big picture

Conceiving a piece of music on the psychological level is extremely important. By this, I mean achieving an insight into the overall structure of a work in the mind’s eye. The grand design becomes the primary focus of awareness, rather than the smaller but equally important musical details, which ought to fall into place and be in balance with the bigger picture. Just imagine the beautiful simplicity of a magnificent landscape, the view that birds (and humans in aeroplanes) see from the sky. In a way, it is about finding a big enough ‘container’ so that everything can settle well inside it.

The overall structure of a work can be best achieved through training oneself to hear the music internally. The hierarchy or organization of the syntax – individual phrases and large sections of the piece – ought to lead in a logical line towards and away from highpoints, with mid- and low-points being transitional.² A way of conceiving a Classical sonata first movement, for example, is to be consistent and as concentrated as possible with the organizing of the disparate materials within the overall structure (see Figure 1).³ This involves recognizing and tastefully distributing the levels of intensity in the expression from the start to finish. This method might seem calculative, devoid of feeling and emotion to some practitioners, but I believe that it is important to find the hierarchy of structures and logic of the whole piece in order to help the more intense expressions to be channelled purposefully and meaningfully in the performance. If one is secure with the grand construct, then all the feelings and emotions can naturally take over, within reason and in context.

¹ There was one particular player in Epinal whom I felt exemplified all those attributes, but she was eliminated soon after. The remaining four contestants lucky enough to reach the Final were all very accomplished pianists, with extremely brilliant technique and an uncanny sense of evenness in their playing.

² This can be best exemplified by any Baroque, Classical, Romantic or contemporary piece of music that possesses a strong sense of pulse, rhythmic and harmonic structure with the traditional I-V-I (Tonic-Dominant-Tonic) language.

³ See my graphical outline of the 1st movement of *Les adieux* Sonata, Op.81a by Beethoven (Figure 1) containing some important but unusual features within its overall architecture. Questions to ask oneself: 1) *Why is the coda so much longer than the other sections?* 2) *What is the significance of ‘Lebewohl’ (Les adieux), and how is this reflected in the thematic development and in the coda?* 3) *Why are there so many instances of single line instrumentation giving birth to a thin texture of sound?* 4) *What do the harmonies written in their 1st inversion imply?* 5) *What is the overall rhythmic character, and how is it best to use pulse to pace all four sections with the main climaxes in mind?* 6) *How would one terrace the climaxes? Where is the biggest climax?*

It is important also to remain fully aware *en route* of all the significant rhetoric and stylistic nuances: melodic, harmonic, rhythmic etc. The overall vision of the architecture must nevertheless become the primary force that lets all those smaller musical details unfold naturally in performance. It is easy for the pianist to enjoy and get caught up with a particular chord, a turn of melody, or even a bridging passage, so much that it is at the expense of the bigger picture. As a result, listeners can get confused and start losing interest in the work. Things sound out of context, because the main argument and certainty of direction towards and away from the main climax points are undermined by those distortions. The worst possible case is the example of the miniature rubatos and delays of attack that some pianists love doing either consciously or unconsciously. In competitions, it is easy to become more cautious in the performance than when playing in concerts, so that one can achieve a note-perfect delivery. This is clinical death to music making. Is it not more worthwhile to aim for consistency in the style of delivery based on the understanding of the overall structure, rather than aspiring towards technical evenness as the sole priority? Many pianists at the Epinal competition did not give just merely mechanical performances it must be said, but some of these players could have profited from this line of thought: seeing the big picture.

2) Smaller musical details within the big picture

The overall structure of a work provides the foundation upon which the musical details can reside. These details include the basic elements like melody, harmony, rhythm, texture etc. In order to gain a totally committed and convincing interpretation of the score, one needs to make certain decisions, such as finding out the best way to characterize these elements, and then integrate them back into the bigger picture. The method of doing this is of a personal matter best left to the artistic devices of the musician. Thus it is only reasonable for me to suggest that the focus on the smaller but equally important musical details be subtler than the attention given to the work's overall outline.

The musical details can be divided into two categories: [i] *Construction*, [ii] *Characterization*. Under 'Construction', the composer's ideas can be arranged thus: (A) *Horizontally* and (B) *Vertically*. Similarly, under 'Characterization', there exists the following subcategories: (a) *Variety*, (b) *Integration*, (c) *Pacing*. The following table suggests some ways of subsuming various musical elements into an overall framework (see Table 1).

(Table 1)

[i] CONSTRUCTION	
(A) Horizontal Component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to a single line of melody and polyphonic strands. • Individual phrases make up bigger sections of music, and usually, highpoints, midpoints and low-points exist within the overall construct.⁴ • The levels of intensity in the expression can be terraced through the use of a concentrated palette of sound from section to section, persuading listeners to hear a logical-musical structure: good tonal control in a long line.
(B) Vertical Component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is the three-dimensional building block of sound, where the organization of voices is commonly grouped into Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass in a homophonic texture. • The synchronization of voices in both the RH and LH in piano playing is important, especially with balancing textures, colours and voicing (using precise and tasteful pedalling as well). • If the accompaniment figures are more complicated (in harmony, rhythm, tessitura, texture, physical gestures etc.), it is useful then to unravel systematically the technical difficulties in order <i>not</i> to take the mind and ears' attention away from the broader perception of (A).
[ii] CHARACTERIZATION	
(a) Variety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This involves an ongoing period of searching and experimentation, and it is helpful to approach this quest logically and creatively using the work's title, form, tempo marking and musical qualities as the bases. • The manner of characterization must always be in context. • Quantity does not necessarily mean quality. • Adopt an open attitude towards embracing new ideas or changes during the preparation period, but then finalise the interpretation at an appropriate stage, aiming for consistency and a concentrated delivery in the

⁴ See Footnote 2

	performance.
(b) Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsume the characterization work into the overall structure, and always notice and listen out for inconsistencies. • Feel if things are in or out of context, and always integrate all manner of characterization under an umbrella theme, mood or atmosphere if possible.
(c) Pacing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From a bird's-eye-view, the overall structure is generally governed by highpoints, midpoints and low-points. • Thus pace the characterization of individual phrases accordingly, and ultimately, sections at a time.

In addition to the above table, there remain other musical considerations (see Table 2):

(Table 2)

COMMITMENT IN LISTENING	
	<p>(i) <i>Primary importance of the melody or main themes</i> Take into consideration the meanings that arise from stepwise motion, no motion, leaps, harmonic outline (e.g. arpeggio), chromaticism, dissonance, length of phrase, stylistic rhetoric and logic of syntax (e.g. antecedents and consequents, cadences, sighs, appoggiaturas etc), speech inflection and accents influencing lyricism, tonal connection and disconnection etc.</p>
	<p>(ii) <i>Secondary importance of decorative melodic materials, counter-melodies and their function</i> These include groups of notes that usually serve the function of repetition, reiteration, elaboration, peroration, harmonic tension, resolution and points of colour, ornamentation etc.</p>
	<p>(iii) <i>Balance of accompaniment, colours and textures</i> See [i](B) in Table 1. In addition, harmonies (whether consonant or dissonant) should always serve a grammatical function to highlight the overall meaning and emotion embedded in the music.</p>
	<p>(iv) <i>Use of articulation to accentuate the character of the piece</i> Using fingers, wrists and arms, as well as the various pedals, find all possible nuances and inflections in the expression. The intensity in the expression (and sound also) can always be varied using different combinations of the playing mechanisms of the body. It is helpful constantly to mimic the natural speech-rhythms that come from various languages. Thinking of lyricism is particularly useful for gaining a cantabile style of playing that avoids the sort of monochrome and evenly mechanical touch. The variety of articulations still needs to be integrated back into the overall big picture through careful listening.</p>
	<p>(v) <i>Variety and the intelligent use of all of the above</i> This boils down to the individual pianist showing empathy for the general style and composer, coupled with the performer's unique faculties of perception as well as his or her current stage of experience.</p>
THE FEELING OF TEMPO AND PULSE	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is the backbone of every performance. • Keep developing and refining the sense of pulse, which can vary from free to flexible, and strict to inevitable. What feels natural to the music will depend on the style and composer's directions. • Generally, the overall structure of a work is most convincing when the pianist (or any performing musician for that matter) is committed to starting and finishing with one general pulse, guarding it from excessive wavering. Occasionally, however, it is necessary to vary the pulse in order to obey the indicated tempi and/or mood changes. • Pulse is the beating heart of the music. Within each pulse, there is space for the element of air or breath. Hence be aware of musical timing based on natural human activities such as singing and dancing.

The above are only some ideas that relate to the musical details belonging to the overall structure of a work. Finding the balance between the smaller and bigger structures is always a worthwhile task, and a never-ending pursuit in the act of interpretation. The pianist's task is a particularly onerous one, because we have to behave like an orchestra when we play, juggling several lines of voices and sifting through complicated textures. Remember, having prioritised the overall structure over the smaller details, keeping a good pulse and an acute sense of rhythm can also help to unlock an assured performance.

3) The technical/physical aspect of playing in relation to the big picture

The technique required in performance is simply an expression of the music in physical gestures. The overall picture provides a context for the range of gestures and conversely, to realise the overall picture, one needs a whole repertoire of gestures typified by a fine or virtuoso technique. A poor technique means limited control of expression and ultimately a weakening of structural logic: there will be uncontrolled gestures that give the music away too soon. A pianist with sensitive technical control, however, has a reservoir of possibilities and a chance to bring about a more satisfying interpretation. The degree of refinement in technique is also intimately associated with the understanding of the musical ideas outlined the previous section (see Tables 1 and 2).

Just as gymnasts and sportspeople need to keep training daily to maintain their regime of overall fitness, strength and flexibility, so must we as pianists. The following is a list of some technical points, which might be useful to keep in the awareness during the practice session:

- ✓ Cultivate alertness in the attention to details, but always subsume this intense focus into a broader awareness.
- ✓ Sit tall, comfortably balanced on the seating bones, at a stool height advantageous to you.⁵
- ✓ Larger movements of the arms start from the shoulders, but all movements involve the use of the whole back.
- ✓ The arms and wrists should always adjust, moving in proportion to the amount of sound desired.⁶
- ✓ The LH and RH are not totally independent entities. They rely on one another for finesse in technical control: the coordination between all ten fingers, as well as both wrists and arms moving in tandem.
- ✓ Aim for a consistent LH–RH coordination: a simultaneous descent of both arms should always be borne in mind, even in the listening exercise involving the balancing of voices within a chord, for example.
- ✓ Fingers must work adequately, in proportion to the level of brightness of sound desired.
- ✓ Fast passages involving quick finger work require digital strength, flexibility, suppleness of the hands and a constant application of arm pressure (as needed), as well as rhythmic control. Ultimately, it is the inner phrasing, musical integration of structures and timing that always reveal the solutions to technical problems.
- ✓ Thumbs should always remain supple but active, encouraging the hands to adjust into and out from various finger position possibilities. Thumbs can help with measuring leaps too.
- ✓ Fingers, wrists and arms should always move in sympathy and not over-yield at important joints.
- ✓ Close the hands in whenever possible to avoid introducing tension into an outstretched position.
- ✓ Stopping practice is good: it gives you a chance to assess the playing mechanisms and also check for any unnecessary build-up of tension elsewhere in the body, not useful for the sound production. Also, it gives you a chance to think back and critically assess the delivery of a particular phrase, for example.
- ✓ The ears and feet should respond to one another and be sensitive to the various levels of pedalling.
- ✓ Pedalling should be absolutely precise in response to changes of harmonies (unless indicated), and not obscure melodic and rhythmic clarity. Obviously, acoustics vary from room to room, hall to hall; hence listen carefully.
- ✓ Finally, when you feel you have mastered most things, then stop thinking technically and musically, and try to see the bigger picture and let that guide the performance.

The technique of playing the piano must finally always relate back to the music, especially the overall structure with all its intricacies. If it is helpful, then plan out the sophisticated range of gestures to correspond to the range of musical structures, characterization, intensity of expression etc.

Summary

There is obviously more than one way to achieve the sort of playing that is sophisticated and stylish, but I believe ultimately that seeing the bigger picture is a good basis for a sound interpretation. The topic of interpretation is certainly one of the most interesting, but it is too big in scope for this article to cover satisfactorily with further examples. I hope that young pianists who aim to be communicating musicians (whether they decide to go in for competitions or not) will have gained from reading this. Confidence in technique, musicality and overall artistry comes from striving to be *committed*, *convincing*, *consistent* and *concentrated* in both the preparation and the performance.

Matthew Kam was born in 1981 in Borneo, Malaysia. Since moving to Australia in 1994, and England in 2005, he graduated from Melbourne University and the Royal Northern College of Music with a Bachelor of Music Performance, Postgraduate Diploma in Performance and Master of Music, all with distinction. He was an RNCM Junior Fellow from 2007 to 2009. He has performed in Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia, the UK, Europe and the USA, and released a disc on Schimmel Artists Collection [MCD346]. He won the Australian National Piano Competition 2004 and numerous other prizes during his time of study. Currently, he is deputy piano tutor at RNCM Junior School and visiting piano teacher at Wrekin College in Shropshire, UK.

⁵ I personally find that sitting too low causes the shoulders to rise instinctively, thus causing restriction within the articulation of those joints.

⁶ Contrary to certain schools of thought, I believe that having some movement is better than having no movement at all.

(Figure 1)

