

# Preface

Happiness, success and confidence in piano playing starts and finishes within the mind-set of the pianist. Thoughts, feelings and visualisation are everything; if you feel worried that you may hit wrong notes at the beginning of *La Campanella* immediately before you start to play it, then you will assuredly hit wrong notes throughout your performance. If you worry about forgetting your Bach fugue in the green room before you go out on stage to perform it, then you will most certainly forget it. Conversely if you have a real sense of confidence and success before starting to play whatever repertoire you are about to share with your audience, then positivity and conviction in your performance is assured.

*The Psychology of Piano Technique* is the fourth book in the ongoing 'Piano Professional' series – an exciting collaboration between Faber Music and EPTA UK. It is hoped that EPTA's values of supporting and encouraging piano teachers and their students will be given continued stimulus and inspiration from this gradually evolving series of books relating to the piano and teaching. *The Foundations of Technique*, the first of these books, came to the conclusion that 'technique is about putting into practice everything that you wish to fulfil'. This principle is extended and explored in a wider musical context in the second book, *Piano Technique in Practice*, whilst the third book, *The Mindful Pianist* deals specifically with focus and engagement. Its concluding sentence stands as a Prelude to the current volume: 'If we set ourselves up to fail, we certainly will, but if we plan to succeed, and make it possible to achieve something rather marvellous, we just might.'

In fact, *The Psychology of Piano Technique* goes further than 'just might' in its belief that 'success' is unquestionably assured, provided we emotionally convince ourselves that it will happen and needs to happen. It begins with a call for self-love as the vital 'technique' for musical development, and argues that happiness, comfort and inner contentment are seen as essential 'technical tools' for piano mastery. Clearly, alongside physical preparatory exercises, pianists also need mental warm-ups in order to set the scene for a healthy and fulfilling daily musical routine. Avoiding the word 'work' is seen as important in a creative context. We should never forget that we 'play' rather than 'work' the piano! Certainly, we should do all we can to airbrush away any sense of labour or drudgery in the teaching or practice room; in both lessons and practice time, flow and 'playfulness' should always be seen as top priorities.

Though this book deals with enormous subjects including stage-fright, inspiration, injury, long-term development strategies, short-term tactics for success, and authenticity, the over-riding message is a simple one: approach all of the challenges of piano playing from a positive cast of mind – a comfortable,

# 8

## Talent, musicality and emotional involvement

### Talent

How can you tell if someone is talented? How much is down to nature and how much is due to nurture? Evaluating musical talent will always be a subjective and controversial endeavor, because 'talent' is extremely hard to define. Certainly, there are many different kinds of talents; it could well be argued that it takes just as much talent to have tenacity and organisational powers in practice as it does to memorise music quickly and securely. And in any case, is talent teachable? Do we take an idealistic approach and say 'yes', or should we be realistic and concede that there are certain things in the biological and psychological make-up of humanity that are given by genetics which simply cannot be altered? Are pianists fixed with a proverbial musical IQ from day one and stuck with it for the rest of their lives? Is there a 'threshold' of achievement?

These questions are riddled with danger. To create a proverbial 'Richter Talent Scale' for musicians from their earliest years, with the highest ranked pinpointed for special 'musical earthquakes' later in their careers, is potentially to demotivate all those who are not ranked at the top, as well as to risk being grossly unfair to 'winners', placing too much responsibility on their shoulders.<sup>35</sup> Quite apart from anything else, it is severely patronising and authoritarian to imply that talent is a fixed phenomenon. We should always feel that people can change, and that there should be no such thing as a threshold of achievement. 'Everything is possible if you want it to be' is a very healthy starting point.

### An all-star society

Though we cannot all be stars, we can all certainly twinkle! Claudio Arrau once mentioned that 'even the smallest talent is special'. We would do well to remember that, and to constantly realise that human potential, if developed and encouraged with emotional intelligence and love, is unlimited. We also need to remember that life is about the journey, not the destination. And it certainly isn't about the start either. At birth we are all endowed with different attributes and abilities – some of us have large hands, some small; certain students pick up sight-reading more quickly than others; some seem more adept at performing in concerts than in exams, and vice versa. Whatever your pluses and (apparent) minuses, take time to celebrate them. For all musicians, the joys of learning and discovery far outweigh what nature and fate has bestowed on us.

<sup>35</sup> Of course, it all comes down to how teachers, parents and institutions treat those in their care. Certainly, it is wrong to make anyone feel dismissed or 'classified' as 'of average talent' or 'unexceptional ability'.

### Curators

Since 1945 musicians have become increasingly historically aware, with many embracing period instruments and turning to musicologists for authenticity in terms of performance practice. In addition to the numerous Urtext and authoritative performing editions that have accumulated over the decades, authors such as Thurston Dart and Howard Ferguson have had an enormous impact on the way many pianists approach works of the 18th century in particular. We have also become much more conscious in the past 70 years of the importance of reading around the keyboard literature. We should celebrate the ease with which information and opportunities can reach us in the 21st century, because knowledge is most certainly power! However, for practising pianists at all levels there are real dangers in enacting the role of musical 'curator'. We run the risk of having an overwhelming amount of data with which to work. For this reason, it is important for pianists to develop organisation techniques in order to sensitively select the source material from which they should work. In baroque repertoire, confidence and positive delivery are everything. Without these attributes, it will be very hard for performers to sound authoritative when it comes to realising ornamentation, dealing with hotly contested issues such as the use of notes *inégaies* or double-dotting in pieces such as the D major Fugue from Book One of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Of course, there are just as many 'conviction' issues in repertoire from the other centuries.

Musicians should never stop being curious and never lose the quest to re-evaluate interpretive decisions about works they may have performed successfully for decades, however if too much contradictory information is considered at a single time, if compromises are made simply to avoid offending any particular writer or adjudicator, then there is a strong likelihood of lacklustre music making. We should never lose sight of the fact that any one performance is just that – we all have the opportunity to replay and reconsider our decisions. So, it is much better to embrace strongly your interpretive decisions in one concert performance than to try to moderate your interpretive choices in a bid to please everyone. This will energise and lead to more confidence and conviction, even if a few of your listeners may be offended in the process!

### Traditionalists

Alongside misguided students who try in vain to reproduce performances of their favourite pianists stand those who refuse to accept any interpretation unless it is in a particular 'school' or tradition. In the previous chapter, we