

A penny for your thoughts, they say, as though nothing were easier than articulating what flows along the edge of consciousness. The assumption is that by virtue of being inside oneself, the brain's proceedings can at least be read, if not necessarily understood. Defining one's train of thought is particularly hard when one is not just musing, but engaging in the complicated mental acrobatics of a musical performance. A further challenge is to disentangle one's actual thoughts from those one believes *ought* to occupy the mind! (Blessedly they remain, at least for the moment, unverifiable by others.) 'What do you think about while you play?'; 'Do you worry about remembering what comes next?'; 'Do you have extra-musical images?' Such questions are personal, confidential, and downright dangerous: performance is so precariously dependent on one's state of mind that it could be perilous to delve too deeply into the delicate and fragile balance maintained during what is perhaps man's most complex psycho-physical activity.

A great variety of mental states can manifest themselves. They range from dreaming with the eyes open, to such a strenuous super-consciousness of incoming and outgoing detail that processing this flood of information might almost provoke a seizure analogous to a computer's system failure. The mind's self-boggling, myriad, interwoven strands easily dwarf the complexity of the six-voice fugue with which it may concurrently be wrestling. In addition to countless details and a superimposed determination to contemplate loftier realms, one might simultaneously be thinking: 'look out, this passage was a mess last night'; 'go easy on that G#, it sticks out harshly'; 'don't wear this suit again, it's too hot'; and 'I hope Tamara is here and will come backstage!' But one tries to subdue these confusing threads until they form a very subordinate part of one's mental counterpoint. It is because of the ephemeral nature of mental self-control (which is more difficult to achieve than instrumental mastery) that disturbances are so destructive. While striving to hypnotize ourselves and the audience, and transport everyone to a distant universe, any reminder of the surrounding squeaky seats,

chime watches, candy wrappers, defective hearing aids and music-lovers with acute bronchitis can be seriously disruptive.

Beginners are condemned to think of the most prosaic necessities: note names, fingerings, how far to curve which joint, etc.; they need to remind each finger to vacate the key at the right instant, and to silently count off the beats. Imprisoned by details, they will, like all good prisoners, do their time bar by bar and aspire to no greater goal than staying out of conspicuous trouble. Very gradually, they may learn to unshackle themselves from such mundane burdens, only to encounter more barriers on their escape route toward pure artistic contemplation. Higher levels of detail demand our obeisance, such as dynamics, balance, and sonority. One of the first signs of progress is when we learn to aim at an aural image, rather than a mechanical one. Instead of: 'play B-D-G-B, fingering 1-2-4-5; attack very close to the keys to avoid surface noise, and let the arm rise just before hitting bottom, to avoid the percussive sound at the bottom of the key; play the top B quite firmly, so it will ring melodically, the rest of the notes gently, especially the other B; start their descent imperceptibly earlier so the chord will be perfectly together, and sustain for the longest plausible 2½ beats in the Allegro moderato of Beethoven's 4th piano concerto (the execution of whose first treble chord this endless sentence gives simplified instructions for)'... instead of all this, simply project a mental image of the sound – use an analog rather than a digital image! If there is a difficult leap, merely imagine the sound desired, which through years of practice becomes intimately associated with the motions needed to produce it.

It is difficult to transcend this intermediate stage, in which the player has at least learned to think of notes and motions in clusters rather than singly. But one must strive to overthrow the dictatorship of these numberless clusters too, and deal directly with the music's feelings. Like physical love, if one concentrates on the mechanics, no matter how proficiently, neither partner will be very satisfied. The moment one starts freeing one's self from consciously directing every detail represents both a superb opportunity and a criti-

cal danger. The mind may be released to contemplate the music's emotional and intellectual content; or it may consume itself with doubts and fears that can destroy the pleasure and even the ability to play in public.

On the highest level, satisfying performances depend on the extent to which one can leave the world of difficulties, special effects, irrelevant thoughts etc., and allow the feelings and emotions of the music to fully occupy one's consciousness. In fact one sometimes wishes one could stop thinking entirely and simply glow. Sometimes specific extra-musical images can help. In Chopin's first Prelude, for example, imagine robust waves on the sunny shores of Majorca (where it was composed). Such images, when confessed, sound embarrassingly banal, but they can help concentrate the mind and prevent it from focusing on other matters, such as reflections on how well the performance has been going – if that is what is on one's mind, then it really is not going well.

During sections which are improvisatory in nature, I imagine I am composing them on the spot. Indeed, one must picture the music throughout as being alive, displaying a will of its own, so that the precise lengths of notes, the relative dynamics, the tensions and the shapes are creating themselves at the instant they are heard, rather than being churmed out in a preordained way. Think: 'This phrase is alive now, it is at this instant joining the minds of the listeners to mine, it has never before and will never again come to life in precisely this way.' Only in the performing arts can such creation take place in real time, a unique, non-repeatable event.

Imagine that there must be someone out there to whom this moment is truly important; if one could just make the music compelling enough, it would transform him. One can also cultivate a sensation of awe at the greatness of the composer, and feel his spirit come to life and address us directly, simply allowing it to speak and not to disturb the process. Ultimately, one must try to make performances so meaningful and overwhelming that they in themselves should seem to make life worthwhile.

These may be nothing but pretentious, illusory notions of a dreamer – but that is exactly what is needed. Just as in religion, the faith, not the bitter reality, is what counts; faith may not move mountains, but it certainly helps men move mountains and musicians move people. Music inhabits that miraculous, puzzling, inseparable intersection of the physical and the mental. That is why it is the warmth of the music that can best thaw cold fingers, the music's own logic that can best prompt the memory, in effect letting us recompose the piece – and the feelings embedded in the music can ignite our emotions. It is by entering unreservedly into the mood of the music that the fingers can best be coaxed into fearlessly obeying their nearly subconscious instructions. Then we may occasionally feel intensely that uncanny bond which can exist between composer, artist and audience, and immerse ourselves in it with ever-growing dedication and conviction.

# Thoughts While The Music Plays

Anton Kuerti undertakes a delicate mission as he probes the background to performance.