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The Pianist's Fingers: Fragments of Desire

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The Pianist's Fingers: Fragments of Desire¹

Eric Daffron

Loving Schumann, doing so in a certain fashion *against* the age. . . ,
can only be a responsible way of loving: it inevitably leads the
subject who does so and says so to posit himself in his time
according to the injunctions of his desire and not according to
those of his sociality.
Roland Barthes, "Loving Schumann"

Call me an amateur. Like many gay boys in the making, I started taking piano lessons around the age of eight. But it was not until my piano teacher persuaded me to take organ lessons at the age of fourteen that I reached the apotheosis of my career as an adolescent, gay musician. In college, I decided to study organ performance but wrestled with two competing passions, music and words, that vied for my exclusive attention. In the end, words won the battle for my heart, but not without a fight. After the dust settled, I continued to play and even took musical lovers on the side, but soon I realised that I was only an amateur.

*

Despite my demoted status, I find myself in good company. Roland Barthes justifies our maligned existence. According to Barthes, the amateur hails from an era when little separated playing from listening to music. Over time, those roles were divvied up between performer and audience ("From" 162-63; "Loving" 294; "Musica" [English] 149-50). Yet, as Barthes explains, the amateur is destined to make a triumphant comeback. The herald of the future, the amateur is a liberating force ("Twenty" 217; "Play" 204). With no regard for "the *imago*," the amateur makes music only for personal delight ("Twenty" 216-17; "Réquichot" 230 [English]). For that subversive tendency, the amateur

instills apprehension (“Few” 317-18). Indeed, the amateur’s motto is none other than “celui qui ne se fait pas entendre” (“the one who does not make himself heard”; “Réquichot” 1638 [French]; “Réquichot” 230 [English]).² Perhaps the amateur’s most distinctive characteristic stems from etymological roots. As Barthes reminds us, the word *amateur* derives from the Latin *amator* (*Roland* 52). Taking that etymology to heart, I create my own slogan: “I am the one who loves.”

*

Even the amateur has musical likes and dislikes, and thus I share my own in the spirit of Barthes’s inventory (*Roland* 116-17). *J’aime*/I like: Bach and Baroque, choral masses and organ fugues, French chanteuses and jazz legends, Glenn Gould and Nina Simone, the organ and the piano, tenors and mezzos, Edith Piaf and Maria Callas, handsome pianists and sexy baritones, medieval chant and art song, accompanists and page turners, trills and triplets, rubato and the key of E-flat, men who play woodwinds and women who sing the blues. *Je n’aime pas*/I don’t like: cymbal crashes and marching bands, bars with loud music and cell phones with no earbuds, accidentals and ledger lines, excessive encores and inter-movement applause, sight-singing and transposing, over-loaded programs and under-pitched singing. Admittedly, the amateur is sometimes more irritable than loving.

*

It took me a long time to accept my position in a musical world divided between professionals and amateurs. In college, after I changed my programme of study, I considered reversing my decision almost monthly. Even after college, once my English degree was conferred, I continued to play publicly for almost two decades, mainly for church services but occasionally for vocalists and instrumentalists. For example, I accompanied a soprano for a recital and an oboist for a short recording. Clearly, I had succumbed to that sad state of affairs: the one who makes himself heard without proper credentials. Then, around the age of forty, I assumed new job responsibilities. They left me with so little discretionary time that I stopped playing almost completely for a decade—and abandoned mottos altogether. What kind of motto could I have adopted, after all, as an amateur who had fallen out of love?

*

Remarkably, Barthes did not observe the fingerings in his piano music. Instead, he improvised, preferring instantaneous bliss over tiresome discipline even if he made mistakes (*Roland* 70). As a college-age musician, I too ignored fingerings but to my detriment. Blessed with an ability to sight-read easily but cursed with an eagerness to perform too soon, I rushed to play

music long before the notes were solidly under my fingers. As a result, my playing was sometimes disjointed and inaccurate, but that was of little consequence in my imaginary concert hall. While practicing alone, I sometimes pretended that I was performing before an audience that would applaud my precociousness. In so doing, I rebelled against the fate of Orpheus, Barthes's figure for the pianist who, in playing a piece hastily, forfeits the ultimate prize (70). Amateurs accept that loss when they trade polished skill for immediate delight, but at least they catch sight of Euridice. Enthralled by my own *imago*, I gained nothing but imaginary cheer.

Thirty years later I still rush to play music, but amatory disappointment and rheumatic joints have rendered me a bit wiser than I was before. Just the other week, I devoured *Album for the Young* and *Scenes from Childhood* by Robert Schumann, one of Barthes's favourite composers. Even with slightly slow tempos and occasional wrong notes, I can make music with these gems almost immediately. Most people who play these pieces have a special affinity for "Reverie," in the second set. Considering my age, so should I, and yet I am drawn to the untitled movement in the first set marked "Molto lento." The piece's opening rolled chord invites me into the piece every time; its repetitive phrases insist without tiring. Whenever I play that piece, I look back at Euridice, but now I honour her for who she is. She is the lost object: the pianist that I could have been.

*

When I was a grade-school child, my piano teacher assigned me Hanon's famous *Virtuoso Pianist*. Probably many piano students resent this collection of finger exercises. After all, the book's subtitle unabashedly advertises its disciplinary goals: "For the acquiring of agility, independence, strength and perfect evenness in the fingering, as well as suppleness of the wrist." However, when I was a student, I never minded those drills. For I hoped that, if I ever mastered the first twenty, I would reach the section entitled "Transcendent Exercises in Preparation for Virtuosity." Who would not aspire to transcendence? Although I abandoned transcendence long ago, I still pull out my forty-year-old tattered copy. I now submit to those exercises because, like other pieces, they too stage "une dialectique sensuelle entre la plage d'ivoire et le coussinet de peau" ("a sensual dialectic between the ivory keyboard and the finger pads"; Barthes, "Piano-souvenir" 1207; my trans.). Thus, the *Virtuoso Pianist* has become a pathway of desire.

*

Before college, music was for me mostly muscular but only rarely auditory. Thanks to my piano teacher, who frequently asked me to sight-read, I

developed good eye-to-hand coordination. In contrast, I was never asked to sight-sing unaccompanied. In fact, in my church choir, the pianist always played our parts as we sang. Thus, I learned prematurely but perverted one of Barthes's contentions: "The sensuality of music is not purely auditory, it is also muscular" ("Twenty" 217).

When I left for college, I had high hopes as a music major but soon experienced my first significant musical setback. Theory I, a fundamental music course, required me to sing intervals at sight. Although I could play the same intervals on the piano immediately upon request, I could not transfer the same skill to my voice. When I was called on, I would break out in a cold sweat and often sing wrong notes. Surely, it was for that reason alone that, in their contest with music, words made such easy inroads into my collegiate heart.

*

Surprisingly, for a lifelong music lover, I own very few compact disks. In fact, I possess only two. Throughout my twenties and thirties, I built a decent collection of recorded classical and jazz music. However, in my forties, when I moved to New Jersey and later to New York City, I gradually downsized from a two-story house to a small studio. Along the way, I discarded my CDs. I cannot say that I miss them much now. In large measure, I bought those CDs because I thought that a musician should own a vast collection of recorded music. However, when the CDs were no longer in my possession, I realised what I always suspected: I prefer live over recorded music. Yet that platitude only begins to assess the situation. For, although I reside in one of the world's greatest music meccas, I rarely attend live concerts. In truth, I like playing music more than listening to it.

My preference undoubtedly comes from being an amateur, who exults in making music, but there is still more to my predilection. Barthes once confessed "that a certain piece of Schumann's delighted [him] when [he] played it (approximately), and rather disappointed [him] when [he] heard it on records...." Accounting for this unexpected reversal, he went on to explain, "Schumann's music goes much farther than the ear; it goes into the body, into the muscles by the beats of its rhythm...." ("Loving" 295). J. S. Bach has had a similar corporeal effect on me. However, I would never say that his music—whether live, recorded, or played—has ever let me down. For Bach has been, from the very beginning, my musical all in all.

*

In fact, I have gone steady with Bach for decades. Admittedly, our relationship cooled during the decade in which I all but ceased to play the piano, but we

never completely lost touch. My love affair with him began in grade school. The *Two-Part Inventions*, a staple for every young pianist, then entered my repertoire. I still love the fourteenth invention, the one in B-flat. My whole body dances as my fingers execute the piece's thirty-second-note figure. In college, I graduated to organ fugues, and as an older adult, I finally tried my hands at the *Goldberg Variations*. Although I admire Bach's choral and other instrumental music, it has been through his keyboard music most of all that I have found my passion. I have never felt more tenderness than in the A Minor organ fugue or greater majesty than in the B Minor organ prelude. And I have discovered no better example of intimacy and playfulness than in certain *Goldberg Variations*. When I channel my body and emotions through Bach, it is mostly in playing rather than in listening to his music. Playing Bach as if he composed only for me, I can say, with Barthesian boldness, "the true Bach player—*c'est moi*."³

*

I have long indulged a fetish for the fingers of the male pianist. I appreciate their length, their suppleness, and even their beauty. Barthes shared my admiration of the pianist's fingers but cultivated a more discriminating taste. For him, every form of music has its "grain," its somatic, even sensual dimension. If, in singing, the throat rather than the lungs properly bears that dimension, in piano playing, it is in the finger pads, not in the arms or the finger tips, that we hear the grain ("Grain" 182-83, 188-89). Although I appreciate the fine distinction, I am content if the pianist's touch is "pétrisseuse" ("kneadingly physical"), Barthes's description of the music making that he associated with the amateur by approach rather than by technique. For, unlike a professional, the amateur incites in me "not satisfaction but desire, the desire to *make* that music" ("Musica" 835 [French]; "Musica" 149-50 [English]). In fact, I know that I have encountered a fellow amateur if, whenever I leave the concert hall or turn off a recording, my first inclination is not to evaluate the performance but rather to sit at my piano and place my fingers on the ivory keys.

*

The casual concertgoer underappreciates the page turner, for the latter can make or break an accompanist's performance. For better or for worse, I should know. As an undergraduate, I was often enlisted for my page-turning services. I was a quick study, and I could usually intuit a player's every move. However, I had a misfortune one fatal morning. At the last minute, a pianist asked me to turn pages for him while he accompanied an instrumentalist. Only a few hours before, he had received the music, one of those contemporary pieces

both tedious to play and difficult to follow, and we had no time to rehearse before the performance. Relying mostly on head nods, I struggled to turn each page at the appropriate moment. Then, half way through the piece, my fingers fumbled—and the next page of music fell to the floor. As I heard gasps from the audience, I chased the falling page, grabbed it, and returned it to its proper place on the music stand. It was a sign of the pianist's impeccable skill that, despite the tragedy, he continued to play without missing a beat. Mortified, I exited the auditorium immediately after the performance and for weeks refused to turn any pages but my own.

*

Most people seek excitement in novelty, but repetition has always satisfied me. In fact, throughout my life, I have returned obsessively to piano pieces from the past. Sometimes it has been a work that I learned as a youth and relished playing with relative ease as an adult. At other times, it has been a score that I never quite mastered but nevertheless reopened with hopeful aspirations. For example, a few years ago, I set a goal of learning the *Goldberg Variations* within a year. After the aria, I dutifully learned one variation at a time until I realized that I would never master the piece even in a lifetime. Thus, I modified my goal with the aim of learning all of the variations that I could reasonably imagine myself playing. Then I focused on the first ten variations, though that set too eventually became elliptical. Now, every few months, I return to the *Goldberg Variations*—my abbreviated version plus a few random variations—as if I have never seen the piece before. In starting it over, I feel as Barthes must have felt when he wrote in fragments: “so many fragments, so many beginnings, so many pleasures” (*Roland* 94).

When I imagine Barthes, I conjure one image of him at the expense of another. I derive my images from François Noudelmann's descriptions of Barthes at the piano. According to Noudelmann, Barthes “flirted” with a piece, sight-reading through part but not always all of it. He hoped “to rediscover or, indeed, multiply the pleasure of beginnings” (107). On some occasions, he would then move on to a new piece. “Sight-reading allowed him to go through new pieces ad infinitum,” Noudelmann explains, “letting him decide the amount of time he would devote to this prelude or to that intermezzo” (109). On other occasions, however, Barthes would return to a piece that he had already played. Indeed, the amateur “neither performs nor completes a piece, but always begins and begins again to play it” (106).

These two images correspond to two currents in Barthes's work. One of them is best exemplified in his comments on cruising. Asked on one occasion to explicate the word, Barthes defined it as “le voyage du désir”

("Vingt" 333). "[W]ithdrawn from all repetition," he explained, it provides the excitement of "the 'first time'" ("Twenty" 231). Elsewhere, however, he decried one-off encounters, condemning, as a characteristic of modern consumerism, the habit of reading a book once only to put it down and open another one (*S/Z* 15-16). "[T]hose who fail to reread," Barthes declared, "are obliged to read the same story everywhere. . ." (16). If cruising, an act of initiation, escapes repetition, paradoxically, only rereading, a practice of reiteration, encounters difference.⁴

Embracing the Barthes who reread scores and books, I ironically take my cue from the other. In his discussion of cruising, *that* Barthes compared "la quête érotique" to "la quête des textes" ("Vingt" 333). Like a man who cruises another man, a reader cruises an author, who entices the former with fragments ("Twenty" 231). After sampling those fragments, the comparison suggests, one moves on to new ones. Applying Barthes's other insights to that comparison, I celebrate a different style of cruising. Rather than turning to a new score, I cruise a beloved one a second or even a seventh time as if it were the first.

*

Whenever I cruise the *Goldberg Variations*, I discover something different. Sometimes it is my own musical deficiencies that I confront even as they facilitate new ways for me to make music. My edition of the score includes the editor's helpful but annoying "Execution of the Ornaments." For some reason, no matter how hard I try, I cannot play the ornament in the aria's third measure without stopping sooner than instructed. Thus, one day, I rewrote the ornament so that it ends squarely on the third beat, picks up the final two sixteenth notes, and moves forthrightly to the next measure. At other times, I experience something novel within myself. Early on, I was drawn to the eighteenth variation, but it was only much later, when I returned to the piece, that I became fascinated with its spirited bass line. All alone, the line moves up and down the scale, approximating, with a few exceptions, my own vocal range. Sometimes I even catch myself singing the line as if I were Glenn Gould.

*

A pivotal moment in my love affair with Bach occurred when I purchased a compact disk of Glenn Gould's 1955 recording of the *Goldberg Variations*. I was only in my early twenties, roughly Gould's age when he made the recording, and I played that CD incessantly throughout my twenties and thirties. Of course, I was drawn to Bach's powerful music, but I was also entranced by Gould's virtuoso performance. The sheer velocity of his tempi for some variations swept me along; his tender approach to other variations cut

to the core. However, what enticed me most about this recording was Gould's occasional moaning and humming. I no longer own that CD, so I can confirm neither my audition nor my memory, but I believe that it was in the twenty-first variation that I heard his voice most clearly.

Today, when I access digital versions of that famous recording, I no longer hear his voice. Yet I yearn to hear it once again. For in that voice, aberrant and unassimilable, I heard his desire. Barthes claims that, whenever he heard Richter or Horowitz play, he "hear[d] *them* and not Bach or Schumann" (*Roland* 56). So I suppose that when I heard Gould play Bach, I heard only Gould. Eventually, I invited Gould into my relationship with Bach but refused to allow the eccentric performer to eclipse the musical master altogether. Instead, we negotiated a polyamorous relationship.

*

Throughout my teenage years and into my early twenties, I moved my upper body and head excessively at the keyboard. In fact, in high school, some relatives asked me not to move so much when I played for church services. Routinely ignoring their requests, I continued to choreograph my emotional attachment to every musical phrase. It is tempting to say that I took inspiration from Gould. In truth, however, I had never laid eyes on him until my early fifties, when I watched a couple of short documentaries with footage of the young genius gently but passionately swaying while singing at the piano bench.⁵

Then sometime after college, my body gradually assumed a calm composure. To this day, I still do not know why or even how. Perhaps it was my overreliance on the body to evince musicality that finally waned. In any case, like a windup toy wound down, my body slowed until it reached a resting state but with one notable exception. A musical admirer once remarked that she loved to watch my hands while I played. Apparently, they moved with graceful flourishes. Although I thought little of her comment at the time, I now wonder if my hands spoke the desire that my body still yearned to express.

*

Pianists are trained to move their bodies properly, but two twentieth-century experts were divided on the matter.⁶ In *The Groundwork of the Leschetizky Method*, Malwine Brée argues, "The listener's ear should first be seduced through the eye, and thus be rendered more impressionable" (1). Thus, she opens the book with a brief discussion of body posture and soon moves to the fingers. "[A] pianist's art find[s] expression. . .," she contends, "through his fingers" (1). Illustrated with close-ups of Leschetizky's hand in various positions, the book explains that, with proper training, the pianist's hand

“becomes broader, supple in the wrist, and muscular, with broad finger-tips” (2). In fact, “the springy pad of the finger-tip yields a mellower tone than the inelastic nail” (2). To train the pianist’s fingers, the book offers numerous exercises, which promise to develop a touch with a “full, warm tone” (28).

If Leschetizky’s method focused primarily on the hands, Abby Whiteside’s *Indispensables of Piano Playing* embraced the entire body. “It is the body *as a whole*,” she contends, “which transfers the *idea* of music into the actual production of music” (3). To accomplish this feat, the body must cultivate rhythm. Rhythm coordinates the body “from center to periphery”—from, that is, torso and upper arms to fingers—rather than the reverse (3-17 and *passim*). “Put a rhythm in your body and keep it going,” she insists (14). In contrast, other methods have paid undue attention to “finger technique” (31). In fact, Whiteside advises throwing Hanon away. Only pieces that incite “excitement and intensity of desire for accomplishment,” she declares, should preoccupy the pianist’s rehearsal time (50).

Although it is not my place as an amateur to weigh in on the relative merits of those two methods, observation tells me that Whiteside was onto something. Some of the most musical keyboardists I have ever witnessed played with a gentle motion from the torso and upper body. Yet, considering my finger training, not to mention my finger fetish, it should come as no surprise that my affinities still lie with Leschetizky’s method.

*

I discovered the metronome in elementary school when my piano teacher briefly lent me his own. Since then, I have owned several metronomes. By all accounts, I needed every one of them. As a grade-school child, I always received low marks for rhythm at hymn festivals. Even in college, I still could not keep a steady beat. But in all fairness, as one of my organ professors once quipped, it was not so much that I did not have a steady rhythm as that I had several of them all in one piece. Then something miraculous happened in the year between college and graduate school. Suddenly and inexplicably, I found my steady beat—and I have kept it going ever since.

*

It was only a finger, only the pinkie finger at that, but I learned from an injury just how important that appendage was to me. Throughout my teenage years and twenties, I had occasionally jammed a finger but never broken one. Then, the year before I turned forty, I smashed my right pinkie against the inside of the dryer as I was pulling out my laundry. (Only later did I register the irony: tragically, my muse died after a run-in with a laundry van.) Nursing my finger for a couple of days, I finally consulted a doctor, who said that a benign tumour

had compromised the bone. After surgery, I mended for a few weeks and then underwent extensive physical therapy. During that period, I worried that I would never play the piano or the organ again, but a few months later, I proved to myself—and announced publicly—that I had finally overcome my injury when I played the infamous Widor “Toccatà” at church on Easter Sunday.

*

“I never knew,” a baffled friend said when I showed off my new keyboard. Having known each other for over five years, how could he have possibly not known that I played the piano? Yes, of course, during all that time, I rarely played, but, still, why was he not aware of such an important aspect of my life? The responsibility for his ignorance rested entirely with me. Having put that part of my life in abeyance for a decade, I used a career change around the age of fifty as an opportunity to make other life changes, and so it was then that I purchased the keyboard. When I pulled out old music and sat at the keyboard, my fingers were understandably stiff, but, thanks to trusty scales and Hanon exercises, I eventually made some headway. At that point, I recommitted myself to practicing every day.

*

Only by practicing at minimum an hour every day, Barthes claimed, can one attain the level of an amateur pianist (*Préparation* 580). To that end, Barthes practiced daily. In Paris, he sat at the keyboard in the early afternoon; on vacation, he played in the early evening (“Almost” 180; *Roland* 82). Coveting the same credential, I play the piano or sing almost every day around eleven in the morning. If I devote my session to the piano, I usually start with scales or Hanon exercises and then open a ragged score, perhaps the *Goldberg Variations* or another piece that I have cruised many times before. Alone I sometimes imagine inviting Barthes to sit beside me on my piano bench. If one amateur makes a lover, surely two make a duo, and thus we play *à quatre mains*.

¹ This piece pays homage to Roland Barthes and derives inspiration from Wayne Koestenbaum’s *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*. I explore a few of the ideas in this piece with Becky McLaughlin in “Another Shore”: *Mourning Roland Barthes in the Year of Pandemic and Protest: A Dialogue between B and E*, which is currently unpublished. I thank her and Anne B. McGrail for insightful comments on an earlier version of this piece.

² Some of the texts cited in this fragment address amateurs of other art forms or the amateur in general, but the remarks nonetheless apply to the amateur pianist.

³ This sentence is adapted from Barthes’s “Loving Schumann” (295).

⁴ For an astute analysis of Barthes's theory of rereading, an analysis that has influenced my remark here, see Johnson (3-4). I thank Becky McLaughlin for drawing my attention to Johnson and for inspiring my application of Barthes's theory of rereading to music making in the next paragraph. See her essay (165-167).

⁵ See the documentaries on Gould directed by Kroiter and Koenig.

⁶ Many thanks go to Mitchell Vines for drawing my attention to these books.

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