

Karl Ulrich Schnabel's Approach to Expression

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Claude with grandfather, Karl Ulrich Schnabel, West Hartford 1986

There is an old Jewish joke about two mothers: one Jewish, one Catholic. The latter, bursting with pride, informs the former that her son has just entered a seminary. Visibly unimpressed, the Jewish mother says, "That's nice." Taken aback, the Catholic mother says, "But you know when he graduates he'll be a priest!" "Congratulations," comes the response. A bit defensive now, the Catholic mother says, "Well, if he becomes a priest, he could become a bishop!" Ever more talkative, the Jewish mother shrugs, "Eh!" Increasingly exasperated, the Catholic mother insists, "If he were a bishop, he might become a cardinal or even the pope one day!!" Again, "Eh!" Completely infuriated, the Catholic mother glowers, "What do you want... that he should become God!!?"

"One of ours did."

The "Wrong" Schnabel:

One of ours did. As a descendant of Artur Schnabel, this punch line has a certain poignancy for me. When I still aspired to be a pianist, the glamour of association was soon tempered by the realization that my own playing or teaching would unquestionably be compared, not only to the reality of my great-grandfather's playing and teaching, but to the legend. Artur Schnabel was not God, of course, but I have heard a student of his use the word in referring to him.

For my grandfather, Karl Ulrich Schnabel, his father cast a very long shadow; the famous name he inherited was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, being a Schnabel meant that he had been enveloped by the most wondrous music, literally since before he was born. Later it meant that he would have the opportunity to teach pianists who were older and more experienced than he was, to prepare them to study with his father. But eventually, it often came to mean that he was simply "the wrong Schnabel."

It was a stigma which, especially late in his life, he did not deserve, and which haunted him more than most people knew.

Ironically, the greatest single influence on Karl Ulrich's approach to the piano was not the playing of his father, but the musicianship of his mother, the contralto Therese Behr Schnabel. Like his father before him, my grandfather attributed much of his musical development to the experience of accompanying his mother in the songs of Schubert, Schumann, and many others. For the young Karl Ulrich, the gut-wrenching emotionality of *Dichterliebe* and *Die schöne Müllerin* became second nature—a second nature that may have scared off more than a few pre-pubescent girls who caught the boy's fancy.

All his life, Karl Ulrich Schnabel sought to promote and propagate the Schnabel “legacy.” Many remember the part of the legacy that entreats us to remain true to the composer's intentions. Unfortunately, too many forget the rest: play in good taste, and above all, never be boring—the audience has plenty of opportunity to be bored at home. It may seem strange to include this last part in the legacy of an artist who often programmed particularly difficult music seemingly to spite provincial audiences. However, this is not a contradiction; being interesting is not the same as pandering to the lowest common denominator—Artur Schnabel expected his audience to listen actively. The flip side of the audience's responsibility to listen is the performer's responsibility to professionalism—which in this case entails that a performing artist cannot rely on the romantic notion that inspiration will strike at the opportune moment.

I have little to say here about Artur Schnabel—I never met him, since he died so long before I was born—and most people interested enough to read these words will know as much about him as I do, or more. Nor do I wish to concentrate on how Karl Ulrich Schnabel continued his father's legacy. It is true that he did... but so did many others. Too often, I have heard effusive praise of my grandfather to the effect of, “It was almost like being able to study with Artur!” Such statements are simply inaccurate and, frankly, offensive. Even among some of his most ardent admirers, it is not always clear that people appreciate to what extent Karl Ulrich was an innovator, rather than a vessel holding his father's legacy in trust.

As a teacher, he had a great deal more to say about technique than his father had had—largely because he came to his own technique later in life, and with greater difficulty than his father had; but also because he spent years exploring how subtle variations in touch would affect tone quality. He found that he could manipulate the sound even after a note had been struck; and more importantly, he figured out how he had done it, and thus could teach the techniques to others. Similarly, he explored the use of the pedal and wrote *Modern Technique of the Pedal* (1950). But more than the *fp* that made the opening chord of the *Pathétique* riveting, more than chromatic scale fingering that brought my plodding final scale of Chopin's first Scherzo up to the requisite blazing speed overnight, more than the sparkling trills that transformed all his students' playing, more than all of this I remember his approach to expression.

Learning about expression:

When, like many young children, I began to take piano lessons at the age of five, my grandfather soon realized (or was made to realize) that here was one instance where he would not be able to maintain his lifelong habit of not teaching children. And so I soon became the first and only child he ever taught, and he began to teach me all manner of things my other teachers wished he hadn't. Specifically, he believed that there was no reason to wait until I had a fully formed technique to teach me about expression. I clearly remember my first lesson with him; I had brought some infantile (and not very interesting) piece to play for him. I have no memory of the piece, but one piece of advice he gave me sparked my imagination and stays with me.

"Can you imagine an angry lion?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, imagining the sharp claws, majestic mane and pointy teeth on that angry (hopefully not at me!) lion.

"Now imagine a very small bird," he continued.

"Yes..." I said, trying to imagine what it would be like to be that angry lion.

“Now,” he said, “couldn’t that bird be just as angry as the lion?”

I imagined I was that little bird, furious. “Yes.”

“But that angry bird wouldn’t be loud like the lion, would he?” he asked.

What a revelation! “No!” I smiled.

“So this section here should be like the angry bird, piano, but with the same emotion,” he concluded. It seemed the most natural thing to my five-year-old self. This simple lesson—the first of many—opened a world for me that, sadly, remains shrouded in mysticism and metaphysical gobbledygook even for most adult artists. The simple question, “What, specifically, do you want to express right here?” is all too often answered with no more than a blank stare, or a meaningless platitude like, “This part gets really emotional.”

The List:

admire
anger
appreciate
ardent
aspire
be hit
believe
blazing
boring
bursting
cavalier
clear
complexity
concentrate
conclude
con fuoco
consider
contradiction
defensive
deserve
difficult
effusive praise
entreat
envelop
exasperated
exclaim
expect

Almost a decade later, my grandfather gave me the keys to the world he had been giving me glimpses of all those years. “Most people,” he explained to me, “play with only three or four emotions.” Something like: happy, sad, passionate, angry, nervous (but not on purpose!). “This,” he continued, “simply won’t do.” With so little variation, even the best playing will be dull, or at best just nice. “To be really interesting, you must play with all the emotions.” This much made sense, but what are all the emotions? Here I would be on my own; I would have to find them for myself. “When you go home,” he said, “write down twenty emotions, then go to the piano, and play some simple phrase using each of the emotions on your list.”

To get me started, he explained to me that my list need not be just English, that musical terms for emotions were just as good: *con fuoco*, *vivace*, *gemütlich*, *smorzando*, *sotto voce* and so on. He also explained that some things that one may not usually classify as emotions, such as simplicity, are

expressible through music, and so are also to be included. “It’s so obvious!” I thought to myself, as it hit me that he was only telling me what I already knew—what anyone would know if they just considered it seriously. Just because something sounds simple or easy does not mean that it is simple or easy; it might sound simple yet difficult, and be complex but easy—“She makes it sound so easy!” we exclaim, “He makes it sound so difficult,” we sneer. The difference? Expression.

Each week, I should repeat the exercise, and my playing would be the richer for it. Then, for inspiration I suppose, he told me about a previous student. “I once had a student who played with virtually no expression,” he frowned, “then I gave her this exercise. When she came back,” he intoned, “her playing was transformed! She told me that her list had grown,” his eyes grew wide as saucers, “to more than five hundred emotions! I don’t know how she did it—she must have used a dictionary!” he recalled with that trademark sparkle in his eye. “Whatever it was, it worked. Her playing was never dull again.”

I went home from that lesson, locked myself in the cellar, and in a fit of inspiration wrote a list of some eighty-six emotions in about three hours. Supremely pleased with myself, I put away my list and never looked at it again. Despite my cavalier approach to the task, I like to think that my list served its purpose. The preceding text—somewhat pedantically—explicitly names or uses at least 122 emotions—mercifully excluding “metaphysical gobbledygook,” but including “pedantic” (and “merciful”). This is a fairly conservative count, excluding both “work” and “play” because of how these are used in the text, and derived without any attempt to be systematic. (Fair, conservative, work, play, attempt, and systematic make 128.)

Two more things he told me in that lesson: first, “An artist experiences emotions that are much more intense than those most people feel. On a daily basis, we handle emotions that

experienced
 explain
 explore
 fancy
 fit (have a)
 furious
 frank
 frown
 gemütlich
 give
 glamour
 glimpse
 glower
 grow
 happy
 haunt
 imagination
 important
 infantile
 infuriated
 innovate
 insist
 inspiration
 intention
 interesting
 intone
 ironic
 know
 legacy
 legend
 listen
 majestic
 merciful
 mixed blessing
 mysticism
 natural
 nervous
 nice
 obvious
 offensive
 open
 opportunity
 pander
 passionate
 pedantic
 platitude
 pleased
 plodding
 poignant
 praise
 prepare
 pride
 purpose
 question
 realization
 remember

responsibility
revelation
rich
riveting
romantic
sad
serious
shadow
shroud
shrug
simple
small
smile
smorzando
sneer
sotto voce
spark
sparkle
specific
spite
start
stigma
strange
subtle
taken aback
talkative
tasteful
temper
transform
trying
unfortunate
unimpressed
vivace
widen
wish
wondrous
world
wrenching (gut)
wrong

are so intense that they would kill most people,” he said with his usual flair for the dramatic. “But, unlike most people, we have an outlet for these strong emotions—because we can go to the piano. So, when you have an emotion that is so strong that you just can’t take it, don’t throw yourself out the window,” he admonished. “Go to the piano, and use that emotion in some piece... When you play using that strong emotion, it will be so good, and you will feel so good about playing so well, that you won’t want to throw yourself out the window anymore!” (flair, dramatic, and admonish make 131.)

Second: “When you’ve had such a strong emotion, store it in a box in your brain, so you can call it up and use it when you need it.” The box metaphor never quite worked for me; how was I to identify all these unlabeled boxes with their precious cargo at the precise moment I needed them... “People think they have no control over their emotions... this is nonsense!” We can take control over our emotions, but not with language or logic; “pusillanimous!” we exhort, but feel just as brave as before, if just a little silly. No, we can only take control of our emotions with emotions. The words on our list are just that: words, empty but for our experience of them. (Call up, need, identify, precious, precise, control, nonsense, logic, pusillanimous, exhort, brave, silly, and empty bring us to 144—maybe 500 isn’t such an outrageous number after all!)

An Emotional Analysis:

There is no better way to take the humor out of a joke than to analyze it, but I will do it anyway—as I might analyze a piece of music. When I wrote down the joke at the beginning of this essay, I did so with the specific goal of being explicit about the manner in which the two women interact. So looking back on the paragraph, it was not surprising to find eleven words that are emotionally charged: bursting, pride, unimpressed, taken aback, defensive, talkative, shrug (a non-committal gesture), exasperated, insist,

infuriated, and glower. Most notably absent from this emotional inventory is the point of the story: humor, assuming, of course, that it is humorous. However, since the humor does not lie in the word joke, I did not include it; along the same lines, I did not include old, or mother, even though one may express ancientness, or the property of being maternal, through music.

Among the eleven emotions listed in the previous paragraph, inform and response are also absent. Yet, we talk of the “statement” of a theme, pairs of phrases as “question” and “answer”; does it not feel different to state, ask, or answer? Clearly, it does. In this little case study, “inform” and “response” do not add much to the emotional content of the unfolding drama, and so are excluded from the list; but in music, the situation is different. All moderately talented musicians express these, shall we say, structural emotions. With the realization that they are emotions comes the corollary realization that there are many different ways to state (reveal, imply, aver), ask (plead, entreat, challenge), or answer (explicate, scoff, ignore).

More conspicuously absent above than old or response is congratulation. The word is associated with an emotion, but in this context it is hollow—hence the reaction. It may seem strange that I chose a trite bit of language for this analysis rather than a great piece of music. There are two reasons: first, emotion in music is too pure and too personal for me to do it justice with the written word. Second, there is a reason why great composers chose to express themselves through music—music is the proper medium for expressing what they wished to express, words are not. Words, on the other hand, have at least one property which pure music does not: they need not mean what they say. This is the case with “congratulations” here; the utterance is not congratulatory, but insincere.

Up to this point, the emotions that I have counted have been only those explicitly mentioned, but here is an emotion—insincerity—that is not mentioned. Talkative, which I did include in the initial list, is not insincere but ironic. Irony is a type of contradiction marked by inevitability or necessity—talkative and “eh!” are necessarily contradictory—in order to express irony, both emotions must be present (here: terseness alongside volubility). Three more emotions are present in this little joke: indifference, sarcasm, and Schadenfreude—I leave the exercise of finding them to the reader.

Rather than just counting up these last few newly mentioned emotions—does the number really matter?—there is something far more interesting to note at this point: there is an emotional counterpoint to this simple interaction. There are three emotional lines: one for each of the two mothers, and a narrative accompaniment. The narrative introduces itself as a joke, maintains some levity with the use of irony, and concludes with a punch line. The Catholic mother enters “bursting with pride,” is then “taken aback,” becomes “defensive,” then “increasingly exasperated” and “insist[ent],” and finally “infuriated... glower[ing]” and cuttingly sarcastic. The Jewish mother is first described as “unimpressed” though possibly pleasant, quickly becomes insincere, then noncommittal and indifferent, but ends with Schadenfreude. There is an emotional, as well as dramatic, logic to each of these paths, and to their interaction.

Coda:

As predicted, the previous five paragraphs have succeeded admirably in squeezing every possible drop of humor out of a perfectly innocent bit of fun. This, however, is also the point. By examining and planning every emotional detail, we risk becoming interesting at the expense of spontaneity, humor, and fun. This tragic irony leads far too many music lovers to conclude that there is a choice to be made between spontaneity and care. The one group believes that music is far too ephemeral to be too carefully planned; as a result they may play beautifully—if inspiration strikes—but with a tendency towards shallowness. The other group believes that music is far too serious a matter to be left to chance; as a result their playing may be subtle and refined, but with a tendency toward pedantry and humorlessness.

Karl Ulrich Schnabel’s genius was not his ability to play with great emotional depth while sustaining the freshness and spontaneity of whatever he was playing—although he did do this. In every generation, there are a handful of musicians with this ability. His special genius was the ability to teach what most believe to be unteachable: musicality. In master classes, it seemed that he could literally lend his talent and musicianship to the student. In the end, Karl Ulrich Schnabel cast a pretty long shadow of his own. I would know—I had the good fortune to grow up in it.

In Memoriam

In a small cemetery plot adorned with a majestic little Japanese maple tree, against the backdrop of the rugged cliffs of the Swiss Mythen, four musicians are laid to rest. Some who come to pay their respects may read the names Artur Schnabel, Therese Behr Schnabel, Helen Schnabel, and Karl Ulrich Schnabel, and wonder who these two women were who lived their lives in these men's shadows, but this would be a mistake. It is an accident of history that the men are remembered, and the women largely forgotten, rather than the reverse. There can be no shadow without light—they were the light.



Practicing with Onyx at his side, West Hartford, CT, 1988