The following essay was written as a preface to a course entitled 'The Philosophy of Pianism', for which I was asked to provide a blurb. That it exceeded its brief is evident at a glance. The course in question is planned for the Sixth Chethams International Summer School and Festival for Pianists, which takes place in Manchester, England, from 19 to 26 August 2006
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The Blurb That Wasn't

I have been told that what I teach amounts to a philosophy of pianism. I feel flattered without quite knowing what this means. Since the information is apparently traceable to my students, I suppose I must plead guilty or innocent or both. I certainly love the piano. I fell helplessly and permanently in love with it when as a child I first struck a single note (I think it was the C below Middle-C). With that one sound, which seemed to my childish ears to go on forever, I entered another world. It was like a kind of aural Narnia, but without the witch. And rather than being always winter but never Christmas, it was like all possible seasons - and Christmas all the time. It was not, in fact, a world, but a universe. A universe not of stars and planets but of overtones. I didn't know that at the time, and it was years before I knew that's what they were called, let alone what they actually were. Like the astronomical universe, it was a place of infinite discovery, thus also of limitless fun. And so, for me, it has remained. But unlike Narnia, I could enter this universe whenever I chose (if there was a piano handy, and preferably nobody else around). And there, in the vibrations of a single tone, I was eventually to find the source of every aspect of our music: harmony, melody, polyphony, timbre, tempo, rhythm, even metre, and the phenomenon of metrical dissonance. There, too, though hardly at once, I found that in tone – in the hidden vocabulary of a single note – lay a perfect, audible, living symbol for virtually every physical manifestation of our inner, non-verbal life, from despair to uncontainable joy.

For all the languages, nationalities, belief-systems and human frailties that seem at times – and certainly at the present time – to divide us, to threaten our manifold, deeply contrasting societies, to polarise our visions of the world, we have in common those fundamental experiences which accompany us from birth to death, and shape our perceptions of the environment in which we live (and more importantly still, of which we are a part). The newborn baby doesn't cry in English or Swahili or in Greek; the sufferer of intolerable pain, whatever its source (including birth and that first appalling breath), doesn't scream in French or Japanese or Yoruba; the laughter of young children is the same in every land, though society may later diversify it (but not by much). Our physical reactions to fear, our expressions of transcendent love, the racking sobs of grief, our intakes of breath in surprise or distress, the contour of our vocalisations, do not distinguish us from one another. Rather, they proclaim our community.

Our death is at once uniquely solitary and universal. Music is perhaps the most comprehensive record of our voyage to that one defining moment. Its powers of imitation have no equal. Thus it can unfurl a gripping narrative without recourse to words - precisely through its ability to duplicate the contours of our physical-

emotional expression. What it cannot do, of course, is to reproduce the sound of the spoken word (though it has its own 'consonants' and 'vowels'). But at the beginnings of our lives, and often, sadly, at the end, we express ourselves very eloquently (and sometimes remarkably specifically) without the use of words. And even when we *use* words, we often communicate more by the way we say them than by the words themselves. Thus a completely neutral sentence – like its counterpart in music - can be injected with a wide variety not only of emotions but of dramatic implications. And implication has everything to do with music. More than that, the arousal of curiosity, of expectation, is the principal engine of musical movement.

The term 'dramatic music' is ultimately tautological. Because music is built on relationship, *all* music, at one level or another, is dramatic. Most of the pieces we play deal in one way or another with the development of related contrasts. To a very large extent, it could almost be said that if there's no development, there's no music. Which is where we pianists come in - we more than any other musicians, because we have at our disposal the world's most wide-ranging and versatile instrument, the ultimate one-man-band (interestingly, one-*woman*-bands – unlike women pianists – are virtually unknown).

In one sense, the very aspect of the piano that we spend most of our time trying to transcend – its essentially percussive nature – is one of its greatest advantages when it comes to emotional expression and psychological manipulation (which is to a large extent what music is). The explanation, however, lies at least as much with physiology as with musical theory or instrumental technique.

It's a well-established fact that variations of tonal intensity have an immediate effect on the body's chemistry, and that these have a direct correlation with the physical manifestations of emotion and inner experience. A sharp increase of tonal intensity is a powerful stimulant, with measurable and often dramatic effects on the nervous system. Sudden, unexpected blasts of sound can induce a state of shock which at its most extreme can prove fatal. A gradual increase of volume, on the other hand, can produce not only a state of pleasurable expectation - dilating the pupils of the eyes, inducing a delicate film of tears, expanding the facial capillaries, thus bringing a blush to the cheeks - but also many other, similar changes, affecting circulation, heart rate, blood pressure, muscular tension, electrical activity in the brain and so on. Interestingly – and vitally, for the performing musician - these symptoms rely on the *variation* of the stimulus. Since the nervous system adapts so quickly to altered circumstances, any prolonged level of tone soon loses much of its stimulant properties. Any instrument, therefore, which is restricted, like, say, the clavichord, to a very narrow dynamic range, or confined, like the harpsichord, to a set number of inflexible dynamic levels, is correspondingly limited in the range of emotions it can embrace. The piano, on the other hand, can move smoothly from one dynamic extreme to another, with any number of contrasts in between. As an emotional generator, the piano is in a class by itself.

But even these vital aspects of musical expression pale in comparison with the most important of music's wonders, which goes unmentioned in historical treatises, instrumental manuals and learned dissertations on performance practices. Yet it was summed up in a single line by the poet Robert Browning in 1871. "Who hears music," he wrote, "has his solitude peopled at once." It is, indeed, the greatest spiritual binding agent in the world.

I cannot end this solicited soliloquy, however - I was asked only for a blurb! - without returning to that quite un-looked-for tag as a pianistic philosopher. If I 'philosophize' in teaching, it is only as an adjunct of my principal aim: to provide a

system of underlying and universal principles of performance, which is above all else *practical*, being applicable to the playing of *all* music – *especially* on the piano. When Mark Twain observed that "Wagner's music is better than it sounds" – a very profound statement – he summed up (while appearing to contradict) my entire attitude to music. My *only* consuming interest in music, which is the love of my life, is in how it sounds. My instrument is the piano. If I cannot demonstrate and pass on to my students the ability to transform thought and feeling into sound - at the keyboard - then I have not begun.

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