

**The Craft of Piano Playing: A New Approach to Piano Technique**, by Alan Fraser. Scarecrow Press (4720 Boston Way, Lanham, MD 20706), 2003. 448 pp., \$34.95.

Alan Fraser has written a formidable and insightful volume on piano technique. Using the Feldenkreis Method as his foundation, he has presented 417 articulate and often eloquent pages. It is not an easy read, for there is so much to absorb. Indeed, a course based on the content of this book alone, especially the lengthy first section, strikes me as a possibility for a pedagogy teacher.

Fraser divides his book into three sections. The first he calls "The Foreground: Pianistic Problems in Musical Craft." It is truly a book in itself, with much attention paid to economy of motion, developing a good legato and concepts of a reliable physical approach to the keyboard. He stresses hand structure, finger articulation, arm activity and finger shape. There is an excellent discussion on legato. And he stresses brilliantly the benefits of cultivating effective stillness—bravo for addressing this issue! Fraser is not afraid to address many perplexing problems students and teachers alike face in the standard repertoire. In particular, I would mention his short but valuable discussion of tremolando octaves in Beethoven's Sonata No. 3 in C Major, Op. 2, and the "Pathétique" Sonata No. 8 in C Minor, Op. 13 (pages 121–122), and his excellent discussion about practicing the opening arpeggios in the "Appassionata" Sonata No. 23 in F Minor, Op. 57. Of special interest, too, is the brief chapter on "The Phil Cohen Arm-Swing Exercise." His discussions of "The Underlying Musical Purpose of Arm Movement" and his comments on "Forearm Rotation in Liszt" (with special attention to *Jeux d'eau* and *La Campanella*) are as clear and sensible as anything one would wish to read. Fully aware I am skipping vast amounts of material in this large first section, I would focus on the charming chapter titled "The Feldenkreis-Horowitz Connection." Using principles of Moshe

Feldenkreis's method, Fraser probes Horowitz's astounding mechanical genius, postulating that while Horowitz had no knowledge of Feldenkreis, he nevertheless arrived at some of Feldenkreis's ideas "solely through his intention to realize his artistic conception" (pages 281–282).

Section two he calls, "The Middleground: Some General Aspects of Musical Craft." Here the focus is on rhythm, phrasing and orchestration. There are many valuable suggestions throughout this shorter section, but of greatest interest is the chapter on orchestration and his lesson on the Rachmaninoff Etude Tableau No. 5 in E-flat Minor, Op. 39. In the closing paragraphs, here dealing with the Rachmaninoff Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18, the first movement's second theme, he stresses the contrapuntal element in the left hand. It truly is wonderful to read these comments from a musician who realizes that left-hand "Alberti basses" and their myriad derivations are far more than filler and motion, containing melodic elements that must be highlighted.

The third section is titled "The Background: Tell a Story." Here, Fraser addresses the emotional content of music, and his discussion of J.S. Bach's Prelude in B Minor from Book 1 of the Well-Tempered Clavier is fine. He bases his ideas on the concept, stated at the top of page 364, that in this and other contrapuntal music, interpretations result from "a continuous fluctuation between dissonant tension and consonant relaxation." He further suggests that interpretive strategies be sensitive to the clever juxtaposition of legato and staccato/portato, to place stresses on dissonances and the approaches to a dissonance, and relax the dynamic as the melody flows into a consonant tone. In the chapter entitled "You Must Be Willing and Able To Live Emotionally When You Play," he advocates creating a program for the music. Of course, this was a nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century teaching technique that sometimes ran amok. (Hans von Buelow's fanciful explanation of the

Chopin Preludes immediately springs to mind.) But going to the other extreme, as we have in the latter part of the last century, produces technically inadequate or colorless performances. The discussion of this concept revolving around his work with a non-responsive student on the Chopin Ballade in F Major, Op. 38, is bound to raise some eyebrows among this book's readers.

And that brings me to a word of warning. This book is not—I repeat, *not* a self-help method. While thoroughly readable, it requires much thought. A teacher should read it carefully before applying it in his teaching. In the discussion on emotionality, for example, Fraser admits his frustration with the student who "couldn't get it" regarding the Ballade. It can be frightening to a student to urge them on beyond their emotional capacities. Some students simply have not developed emotionally to the point where they can "feel" the anguish of the "Presto con fuoco" section of the F-Major Ballade. I have made that error far too many times in my own teaching to not at least be sensitive to the dangerous territory emotionality can explore. But then, repertoire choice is critical here. Maybe Fraser could have reached this student with a less "fear-some" work in preparation for the Ballade. The examples he explores are all, without exception, from the top-of-the-line concert repertoire: difficult works such as Liszt's *La Campanella* and *Feux Follets*, the aforementioned Rachmaninoff and Beethoven pieces, Scriabin's Etude No. 5 in C-sharp Minor, Op. 42, and so forth. So, the teacher working with younger students might find his book of great interest, but not as useful in her teaching. And, of course, any instruction dealing with the physical at the piano requires great sensitivity on the part of the teacher who is applying the methods with students—each psyche and hand is individual and unique.

With these gentle caveats, I am pleased to recommend Fraser's book on *The Craft* (Also the ART?) of *Piano Playing*. Reviewed by Louis Nagel, Ann Arbor, Michigan.