

PEOPLE

Connections

Portland man sees the whole body in a whole piece of music

BY ANDY SIMON

Thomas Mark is a man who makes connections. Listening to him talk brings to mind that old tune that says the arm bone's connected to the shoulder bone. Though Marks would be quick to point out that there is no actual shoulder bone.

"Dressmakers are concerned about shoulders," he remarks, "and in that sense they are a real region of the body, but actually they are just a place where three different bones come together."

To illustrate this description, he pulls out a hinged model that shows how, when you raise your arm, all three of these bones move together.

These skeletal observations come up in the context of discussing Marks' approach to playing the piano. He offers courses and workshops on body movement training for pianists, focusing on whole body awareness.

"We make music with our bodies," he observes. "Traditional piano methods do sometimes include finger exercises, because fingers come in direct contact with the piano. But they overlook that fingers are connected to wrists, which are connected to arms, which are all held up by the spine."

He refers to his trusty model. "See how it can support the head and the arms like a column of a building if everything is lined up. But if it's bent like this or like this," he says, twisting the bones unmercifully back and to the side, "muscles here and here are going to have to be tensed to hold it up."

Bad habits of movement cause injuries in pianists. One of the benefits of the training Marks provides is that it helps them avoid repetitive stress injuries. But it also results in dramatically improved playing, he notes.

"If muscles are tensed to hold the body up, then certain movements that involve those muscles are not available to the pianist. And if that happens, the movements he or she can use to express the feeling of the music becomes limited. Improving the quality of a pianist's movement improves the quality of the music."

All this sounds very theoretical.

I sit at the piano and fumble my way through a couple of choruses of a piece I know quite well. I'm a little nervous, playing for a stranger who is an accomplished pianist and



"Emotions have to be mapped as motions of the body." Thomas Marks helps pianists make better music.

being videotaped to boot.

Marks signals me to watch myself on the camera's small video screen.

"See how you sit—you're leaning way back from the keyboard. And these muscles," he taps my shoulder and upper back, "are working very hard to keep your arms the right height in front of you."

We return to the piano, and I sit to play. He pushes me gently forward. "Now this may seem like you're leaning in at first, but sit there for a moment and feel how you can relax your shoulders and still remain upright."

I do as he says, and, in fact, it does feel different, less tense. I play the same piece. I play it better, fewer wrong notes. Maybe I'm just a bit less nervous. But the way it feels to play is certainly changed.

We look at the videotape again. The

change in my posture is noticeable, and I do seem to be moving my arms more freely.

Marks began preparing for a career as a concert pianist in his teen years after attending an inspiring concert by Artur Schnabel at Carnegie Hall in New York. But by the time he graduated from college, he had developed a taste for the academic life. He went to graduate school at Columbia, where he earned a Ph.D. in philosophy. Then he began teaching college.

Marks began making connections and publishing in respected philosophy journals articles like "Philosophy of Piano Playing: Reflections on the Concept of Performance" and "On Works of Virtuosity."

In the 1980s Marks left teaching to become a full-time househusband, enabling

his wife to attend medical school. Staying home with his two sons brought him back to the piano. He discovered a deep love for chamber music and began developing a repertory. He organized and played in a benefit concert for his wife's hospital.

This was work he found very fulfilling. When the family moved to the Oregon coast, he put together Newport Coffee Concerts, a chamber music series that continued for nine years. Marks himself was frequently featured on the program.

He was a little late in making one connection, though, when in his 50s he finally correlated a lifelong fascination with men to his sexual needs and identity. He says his family is supportive; his sons are grown, and, though he remains friends with his wife, they have separated.

He now lives in the Portland area and is focusing his attention on his body movement training classes and workshops, as well as on making music. His new book, *What Every Pianist Needs to Know About the Body*, will be published this year.

Marks believes his coming out has aided his piano playing in much the same way that whole body awareness helps.

"Emotions have to be mapped as motions of the body," he notes. "If there's tension in the muscles, certain motions are closed off, and that will limit the feelings the music can express.

But if I'm withholding certain emotions because I'm not ready to recognize them in myself, then that's going to close off feelings in the music, too."

In the final analysis, Marks' concept of piano playing goes beyond whole body awareness. It's important to know how our bones hang together, but we have to be aware that our hearts and our spirits are also connected to the fingers that press the keys that make the sounds.

Perhaps "whole person awareness" is the proper name for Marks' approach to music. □

Tom Marks' BODY MOVEMENT TRAINING FOR PIANISTS can be reached at 503-680-7930 or tom@pianomap.com. Visit his Internet site at www.pianomap.com.

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