

The Teaching Methods and Philosophies of

Three Leading Piano Teachers in China:

Zhe Tang, Ling Zhao, and Vivian Li

by

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## ABSTRACT

Piano education in China is a complex phenomenon shaped over the past century by many factors: China's rich history of musical traditions, the influence of missionary piano teachers, the establishment of government-formed music conservatories, rapid changes in a political top-down approach, and the contributions of Russian piano teachers. Globalization and China's rising economic status in the last four and a half decades have led to more Chinese pianists studying abroad and bringing their education back home. Once a foreign import, the piano is now played by more children in China than anywhere else in the world, and young Chinese pianists are frequently recognized on the world's most competitive stages. As musicians compete on a global scale and international exchanges grow, understanding piano education in China becomes increasingly important.

Three renowned teachers shape today's piano education in China: Dr. Zhe Tang (唐哲) at Shanghai Conservatory, Dr. Ling Zhao (赵聆) at Central Conservatory, and Dr. Vivian Li (李穗荣) at Xinghai Conservatory. After studying in both China and the West, they train some of China's best young pianists who are recognized on the world's most competitive stages. This paper shares the teaching methods and philosophies of Tang, Zhao, and Li through comprehensive interviews and lesson observations. It aims to enhance the teaching and performance of pianists, while offering valuable insights into piano education in China.

The document explores Tang's methods to inspire characters in the music and achieve balance in timing and sound, Zhao's techniques to position and move the hands

and fingers for effortless control, and Li's approaches to manipulate natural arm weight to create a variety of tones and sounds. Their teaching presents useful ideas for how to effectively communicate music and guide students to become passionate and independent musicians. Techniques taught by Zhao and Li—such as the finger standing stably on the key, grabbing with the hand, and differing approaches to the high finger technique—encourage pianists to investigate the function of different body parts, the interconnectedness of tension and relaxation, where strength should come from, and how to best support weight with ease. Additionally, Tang, Zhao, and Li describe the unique aspects of piano education in China.

To my mom, the violinist Lily Burton, whose love for music inspires my own  
and  
Popo, my grandmother Gilda Li, who embodies how to learn and grow with humbleness  
and joy even in her nineties.

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## PREFACE

Inspiration for this paper came largely from personal experiences and applications which merit a brief introduction to my background. As a pianist of Chinese heritage raised in the United States, my personal connection to piano and Chinese culture has fueled my ongoing curiosity for piano education in China. My academic interests closely intertwine with the topic, from my undergraduate double major in music and Chinese studies to intensive language courses in Mandarin Chinese. I spent a year in China researching the country's piano education under a Fulbright research grant, completed a Chinese master's program in piano performance, and have written on the topic throughout my education. Stories of my ancestors, pianists in China whose careers faced setbacks during World War II and the Cultural Revolution, also increased my interest.

During my time as a doctoral piano student at Arizona State University (ASU), unexpected doors opened for me to continue learning about piano education in China. Roughly half my piano studio-mates were from China and it was during this time that I met Dr. Zhe Tang and Dr. Vivian Li. They came to ASU for the 9th Bösendorfer and Yamaha USASU International Piano Competitions that I coordinated in 2019—Dr. Tang as one of the competition judges and Dr. Li as the teacher of two competing students. That year, three of the six Yamaha senior and junior prizes were awarded to pianists from China, including Dr. Tang's and Dr. Li's students. That same year, Dr. Tang invited me to China to act as judge coordinator for the Shanghai International Music Festival and Competition for Young Artists and 12th Shanghai International Youth Piano Competition.

The more I learn from my experiences, the more I realize how diverse and varied piano education is across China, encompassing a broad range of playing levels and motivations. Inextricably linked with Chinese culture, political systems, and values of discipline and honor, piano education in China is constantly changing. There is a sense of freshness, spontaneity, and excitement. Well-known pianists and teachers, such as Dr. Tang and Dr. Li, are seen as superstars.

I was later introduced to Dr. Ling Zhao, the daughter and student of Pingguo Zhao and Yuan Ling—two renowned teachers regarded as pillars of China’s piano education who taught Lang Lang and Yuja Wang in their formative years of study. Dr. Tang, Dr. Li, and Dr. Zhao graciously agreed to share their piano teaching in this study. I am deeply humbled by their earnest desire to share something so personal. While organizing this paper, I have watched their students perform brilliantly on numerous world-class stages and felt honored to be the one “uncovering their secrets.”

Their teaching has inspired me to understand how my hands, fingers, and wrists move and function when playing piano in ways I never considered before. It challenges me to investigate how to use different parts of my body most effectively and effortlessly to produce various types of sound. I am motivated to explore how to center weight in my fingers and discern where in my body to use energy and where to relax. New approaches to students’ comprehensive growth and how to communicate music in a way that speaks to our inner being have all inspired my playing and teaching.

In the same way, I hope this paper will guide readers to think in new ways about their own body’s mechanics and how to communicate music. Just as Dr. Tang, Dr. Zhao, and Dr. Li each developed their unique teaching ideas through various influences, one

can develop their own ideas through investigating the teaching presented. I sincerely hope this research offers useful methods and philosophies to enrich one's piano teaching and performance, while providing insight into piano education in China.

Natalie Burton

Nov. 2023

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Historical Background of Piano Education in China

The globalized nature of today's music world and China's ability to develop generations of strong young pianists make piano education in China increasingly relevant to the West. As musicians compete on a global scale for schools, teaching positions, and performance opportunities, Chinese pianists constantly raise the international playing standard. Spots in the world's top music conservatories are often won by Chinese pianists: "In fall 2016, Northwestern, New England Conservatory, and Peabody all reported a sixty to eighty percent Asian student enrollment in their piano studios, with some elite institutions reporting that Chinese students accounted for as much as half of all pianists enrolled."<sup>1</sup>

China's rising economic status in the last four and a half decades and increasing number of pianists who bring overseas education back home have created new norms for the country's piano education. The Western classical music scene in China has transformed from a foreign import in the early part of the twentieth century to a common part of the middle-class culture today. Nowadays, more children are playing piano in China than anywhere else in the world: "There are thirty million to forty million children

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<sup>1</sup> Zhong Bei Lin, "China's Piano-Mania is Reaching American Shores: The Development of Chinese Pianism and its Influence on American Institutions," *Piano Pedagogy Forum of the Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy* 18, no. 2 (October 2017): 7, [https://pianoinspires.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PPF\\_18.2.pdf](https://pianoinspires.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PPF_18.2.pdf).

in China taking piano lessons, compared to less than ten million in the rest of the world,” said Steinway & Son’s Chief Financial Officer Benjamin Steiner in 2019. “So, sixty percent to eighty percent of kids playing the piano are in China.”<sup>2</sup>

Chinese culture already had an inherent belief in music’s power and a long history of unique musical instruments and traditions when the piano was introduced against the backdrop of Western imperialism during the Qing dynasty. The piano was introduced to different parts of China mainly by missionaries. They acted as China’s earliest piano teachers who could often only play hymns and simple pieces.<sup>3</sup> After the fall of the Qing dynasty and founding of the Republic of China in 1912, China established its “first music education institution of higher learning” in 1927, which is now known as the Shanghai Conservatory of Music.<sup>4</sup> Russian pianist Boris Zakharoff taught at the institution beginning in 1929, which elevated the level of teaching and performance. He later brought in several pianists from Moscow Conservatory to teach as well.<sup>5</sup>

Following World War Two, the People’s Republic of China was established by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. In the same year, the government merged several music education institutions together to establish the Central Conservatory of Music in Tianjin, which later relocated to Beijing in 1958.<sup>6</sup> Russian piano teachers, including

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<sup>2</sup> Xiaojin Ren, “Steinway & Sons Upbeat on Hitting the Right Notes,” *China Daily*, March 19, 2019, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201903/19/WS5c9043d6a3106c65c34ef579.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Meng Bian, *Zhongguo gangqin wenhua zhi xingcheng yu fazhan* [The course and development of China’s piano culture], trans. Shanyi Bian (Beijing: Huayue chubanshe [Huayue publishing house], 1996), 8.

<sup>4</sup> “About SHCM,” Shanghai Conservatory of Music, last modified May 2021, <https://en.shcmusic.edu.cn/79>.

<sup>5</sup> Bian, *Zhongguo gangqin wenhua zhi xingcheng yu fazhan*, 17 and 19.

<sup>6</sup> “Xueyuan jianjie” [Brief introduction to the school], Central Conservatory of Music, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.ccom.edu.cn/aboutccom/xyjj>; Bian, *Zhongguo gangqin wenhua zhi xingcheng yu fazhan*, 34.

Aram Taturian and Tatyana Kravchenko, taught at the conservatory from 1954 until 1960 when all Russian pianists were ordered to return to Russia during the Sino-Soviet split. These teachers contributed significantly to the conservatory's piano education and guided several Chinese students to win prizes at international piano competitions.<sup>7</sup>

In 1953, China's Ministry of Culture created guiding principles for Shanghai Conservatory and Central Conservatory, which included "fostering specialized musicians for the nation that have a Marxist-Leninist theoretical foundation, general literature and art cultivation, proficient vocational ability, and full-hearted service for the people."<sup>8</sup> To speed up the fostering of musical talent, a fourteen-year program was established at the two conservatories around this time. The program started third-grade students for four years at the attached music primary school, six years at the specialized music middle school, and four years at the undergraduate college.<sup>9</sup>

Following the establishment of the Central Conservatory of Music, music training schools were founded in important cities throughout China, which later developed into regional conservatories.<sup>10</sup> Among them was a music school founded in 1957 now known as the Xinghai Conservatory of Music in Guangzhou.<sup>11</sup> During this time, a generation of remarkable Chinese pianists who studied abroad or with foreign pianists in China had

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<sup>7</sup> Chi Lin, "Piano Teaching Philosophies and Influences on Pianism at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, China" (DMA diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2002), 13 and 18.

<sup>8</sup> Bian, *Zhongguo gangqin wenhua zhi xingcheng yu fazhan*, 34-35, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>9</sup> Bian, *Zhongguo gangqin wenhua zhi xingcheng yu fazhan*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Bian, *Zhongguo gangqin wenhua zhi xingcheng yu fazhan*, 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> "Xinghai yinyuexueyuan jianjie" [Brief introduction to Xinghai Conservatory], Xinghai Conservatory of Music, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.xhcom.edu.cn/xxgk1/xxjj.htm>.

become the backbone of China's piano education.<sup>12</sup> This development was stunted, however, by the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976.

In *Musicians from a Different Shore*, Mari Yoshihara explains the Cultural Revolution's effect on Chinese musicians:

The Cultural Revolution's mission to destroy old customs, habits, culture, and thinking of the 'exploiting class' led to public attacks and violence against intellectuals who allegedly practiced 'feudal' thinking or had a background that could be called 'bourgeois,' such as having a Western education. Musicians became easy targets for these charges. Western musical instruments and musical scores were confiscated and burned. Musicians were attacked, imprisoned, and forced to work as manual laborers. Those determined to practice music did so in hiding, many miles away from villages, in the middle of the night after a day of physical labor. Some professors at the Shanghai Conservatory and their family members who were subjected to the Red Guard's unfounded allegations, cruelty, and abuse resorted to suicide. Within the first few years of the Cultural Revolution, seventeen conservatory professors, spouses, and students had taken their own lives. Others died during imprisonment or forced labor. Those who criticized the policy of art in service to politics were attacked, sentenced to perform physical labor in rural areas, or imprisoned.<sup>13</sup>

The Cultural Revolution put a halt on Western classical music in China, while the rest of the world continued to advance. However, since the end of the revolution in 1977,

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<sup>12</sup> Bian, *Zhongguo gangqin wenhua zhi xingcheng yu fazhan*, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Mari Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 22.



piano education has developed rapidly in China. In the first two years, over twenty thousand people from across China applied to music conservatories each year, with the number of applicants for attached middle schools and other music specialized schools almost one hundred times more than the number of students accepted.<sup>14</sup>

Since 1978, when China's economic reform and Open Door Policy began, China has grown economically and increased their interactions with the rest of the world. History shows that economic growth furthers a country's development of cultural infrastructure, such as musicians, music education, schools, and concert halls. The United States' rise in economic power supported the formation of a classical music culture distinct from that of Europe. Similarly, China's economic growth has paralleled the development of its own unique classical music culture. Chinese composers have written an increasing number of piano pieces with Chinese characteristics, and new music schools, concert halls, and piano competitions have been established throughout China.

Among China's increased international exchanges are more Chinese students studying abroad and more opportunities for foreigners to teach and perform in China. At the forefront of today's piano education in China are three teachers with a wealth of knowledge and perspective after studying in both China and the Western world: Dr. Zhe Tang at Shanghai Conservatory, Dr. Ling Zhao at Central Conservatory, and Dr. Vivian Li at Xinghai Conservatory. While blazing new trails for the future of piano education, they build off the unique history and culture that has shaped their respective conservatories. Once thought of as a distinctly Western art form, piano education has

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<sup>14</sup> Bian, *Zhongguo gangqin wenhua zhi xingcheng yu fazhan*, 81.

developed in China with new teaching methods and philosophies—by teachers such as Tang, Zhao, and Li—from which the Western world can learn.

### Zhe Tang, Ling Zhao, and Vivian Li

As the children of Chinese musicians who lived through the Cultural Revolution, Dr. Zhe Tang, Dr. Ling Zhao, and Dr. Vivian Li all began their piano studies in China with parents who greatly valued their music education. With diligent studies, they were admitted to the pre-college schools affiliated with the music conservatories where they now teach. All three teachers studied abroad, received graduate education, and established themselves as remarkable piano performers before returning to China to teach. As leading piano teachers in China, their students are recognized nationally and internationally in prestigious competitions and accepted to top music schools around the world.

Dr. Zhe Tang (唐哲)

Born in China, Dr. Zhe Tang began studying piano at age six before entering the Shanghai Conservatory of Music at age twelve.<sup>15</sup> He continued studying in the United States at the Cleveland Institute of Music, Northern Illinois University, and Eastman

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<sup>15</sup> Xi Lu, “Xingzhe wujiang, zai yinyue zhi lu shang yongyuan qianxing—fang zhuming gangqin yanzoujia gangqin jiaoyujia Tang Zhe” [A limitless walker always moving forward on the path of music—interview with famous piano performer and educator Zhe Tang], *Qin Tong* [Little Musician] 7 (2009): 6; “Bio, Zhe Tang,” Michigan State University College of Music, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.music.msu.edu/assets/Bio-Zhe-Tang.pdf>.

School of Music where he earned a Doctor of Musical Arts degree and Performer's Certificate.<sup>16</sup> At Eastman, Tang was the teaching assistant to Barry Snyder and the first Chinese to teach piano at the school.<sup>17</sup> He won the silver medal at the Edvard Grieg International Piano Competition in Norway and first prize at the Kosciuszko Chopin Piano Competition.<sup>18</sup>

In 2003, Tang became one of the youngest piano professors at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and was the "first doctor of piano invited to Shanghai from abroad."<sup>19</sup> His roles at Shanghai Conservatory have included Dean of Piano and Director of the affiliated middle school piano department.<sup>20</sup> Tang has served on the juries of international competitions, such as Gina Bachauer, Bösendorfer, Cleveland, Hilton Head, and Zhuhai Mozart as well as major Chinese national competitions. He organizes competitions, directs festivals, and "has contributed as an advisor for over twenty universities and musical organizations in China."<sup>21</sup>

Tang has played as soloist with numerous orchestras. His performances with the China Philharmonic Orchestra and Shanghai Symphony were broadcast nationally by Chinese television and radio, "reaching approximately nine-hundred million people."<sup>22</sup> Tang's students have won prizes in prestigious competitions, such as the Cleveland

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<sup>16</sup> "Eastman Student Wins Silver Medal in Prestigious International Piano Competition," Eastman School of Music, published September 25, 2000, <https://www.esm.rochester.edu/news/2000/09/191/>; "Bio, Zhe Tang."

<sup>17</sup> "Bio, Zhe Tang"; "Tang Zhe," Steinway & Sons, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.steinway.com.cn/artists/zhetang>.

<sup>18</sup> "Bio, Zhe Tang."

<sup>19</sup> "Bio, Zhe Tang"; "1st Zhuhai International Mozart Competition for Young Musicians: Zhe Tang," Zhuhai International Mozart Competition for Young Musicians, accessed September 27, 2023, <http://en.zhmozart.org/review/6/47.html>.

<sup>20</sup> "1st Zhuhai International Mozart Competition for Young Musicians: Zhe Tang."

<sup>21</sup> "Bio, Zhe Tang."

<sup>22</sup> "Bio, Zhe Tang."

International Piano Competition for Young Artists, Hilton Head International Piano Competition for Young Artists, Yamaha USASU International Piano Competition, International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians, International Franz Liszt Competition for Young Pianists, Zhuhai International Mozart Competition for Young Musicians, and the Chinese Golden Bell Award for Music.<sup>23</sup> Many have also been admitted to conservatories such as the Curtis Institute of Music and Juilliard.

Dr. Ling Zhao (赵聆)

Dr. Ling Zhao was born into a family of revered pianists who lived on the campus of Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. She was named after her father, Pingguo Zhao, and mother, Yuan Ling.<sup>24</sup> In the 1950s, Pingguo Zhao and Yuan Ling were among the first generation of students to study at the Central Conservatory of Music.<sup>25</sup> Pingguo Zhao was selected to study with the conservatory’s Russian piano teachers, Aram Taturian and Tatyana Kravchenko, and competed in the 1962 International Tchaikovsky Competition.<sup>26</sup> Upon graduation, Pingguo Zhao and Yuan Ling remained at Central

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<sup>23</sup> Tang Zhe gangqin julebu [Zhe Tang Piano Club], “Xibao: Tang Zhe jiaoshou xuesheng Jiqinyaoyao zai di wu jie Zhuhai Mozhat guoji qingshaonian yinyue zhou zhong huo di yi ming!” [Good news: Professor Zhe Tang’s student Qinyaoyao Ji won first place at the fifth Zhuhai International Mozart Competition for Young Musicians!], WeChat post, September 27, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Yadong Wang, “Qingsong zhong jin jian zhencheng—fang lv De ganginjie Zhao Ling” [Sincerity is seen in ease—interview with pianist Ling Zhao who travels to Germany], *Gangqin yishu* [Piano Artistry] 9 (2005): 45.

<sup>25</sup> Guangren Zhou, “Gangqin laoshi yinggai shi peiyang yishujia de yishujia” [A piano teacher should be an artist cultivating an artist], Zhaoling\_gangqin [Zhaoling\_piano], posted on February 13, 2022, Xiaohongshu video, :09, <https://www.xiaohongshu.com/explore/6209b0bf00000000102d26d>.

<sup>26</sup> Huiqiao Bao, “Gangqin laoshi yinggai shi peiyang yishujia de yishujia—zhuming gangqin jiaoshou Zhao Pingguo fangtan lu (shang)” [A piano teacher should be an artist cultivating an artist—interview recording with famous piano professor Pingguo Zhao (part 1)], *Gangqin yishu* [Piano Artistry] 5 (2021): 30-32.

Conservatory to teach.<sup>27</sup> They taught many prominent students, such as Lang Lang (taught by Pingguo Zhao) and Yuja Wang (taught by Yuan Ling).

Among Pingguo Zhao and Yuan Ling’s outstanding students was their daughter, Ling Zhao. Zhao studied at the Central Conservatory of Music beginning in the attached primary school through college. Yuan Ling was Zhao’s piano teacher until her third year as an undergraduate student, while her father would also give her lessons before competitions or performances.<sup>28</sup> From a young age, piano was a natural part of Zhao’s everyday life, which included playing duets with her parents as a reward for good behavior and playing weekly “weekend concerts” at the home of their neighbor—the renowned piano professor Guangren Zhou.<sup>29</sup> Zhao thanks her parents for letting her “become friends with music.”<sup>30</sup>

After graduating from the Central Conservatory of Music, Zhao went to Germany in 1994 to study at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater München (University of Music and Performing Arts Munich).<sup>31</sup> After completing her studies, Zhao was recognized as

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<sup>27</sup> Huiqiao Bao, “Yi ge laoshi zui xingfu de shihou jiu shi kandao xuesheng yi ge ge chengzhang, chengcai, zili, bingqie mei ge ren dou jide ni de haochu—zhuming gangqin jiaoshou Ling Yuan fangtan lu (shang)” [A teacher is most blessed when seeing each student mature, become capable, support oneself, and everyone remembers your good—interview recording with famous piano professor Yuan Ling (part 1)], *Gangqin yishu* [Piano Artistry] 7 (2016): 6; “Zhao Pingguo,” Xinbawang [sin80.com], last modified March 8, 2021, <https://www.sin80.com/artist/zhao-pingguo>.

<sup>28</sup> Wang, “Qingsong zhong jin jian zhencheng,” 46.

<sup>29</sup> “Zhuanfang renwu: 2021 Deguo Hannuwei Jizejin guoji gangqin jingying yaoqing sai pingweihui zhuxi Zhao Ling jiaoshou” [Exclusive interview: 2021 Hannover Gieseking International Piano Elite Invitational Competition jury chair, Professor Ling Zhao], *Shijie yinyue wang* [World music network], last modified November 6, 2020, [https://m.sohu.com/a/430004006\\_120190981](https://m.sohu.com/a/430004006_120190981); Zhou, “Gangqin laoshi yinggai shi peiyang yishujia de yishujia”; Guiru Zhang, “Yong ai tuoqi mingtian de taiyang—ji qingnian gangqin yanzoujia Zhao Ling” [Use love to support tomorrow’s sunshine—notes on young piano performer Ling Zhao], *Qin Tong* [Little Musician] 1 (2012): 39.

<sup>30</sup> Wang, “Qingsong zhong jin jian zhencheng,” 45, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>31</sup> Zhang, “Yong ai tuoqi mingtian de taiyang,” 40.

the “first ever Chinese Doctor of Piano” at the conservatory.<sup>32</sup> Zhao stayed at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater München to teach as the conservatory’s first Chinese piano teacher.<sup>33</sup> As an active performer, Zhao has given “hundreds of piano recitals and chamber music concerts” around the world.<sup>34</sup> Zhao has collaborated with the Bonn Classical Philharmonic, Hamm Symphony Orchestra, Munich Philharmonic, Beijing Symphony Orchestra, and Tianjin Symphony Orchestra. Her performances have regularly been broadcast on Bavaria Radio, Radio Classique, WDR 3, Berlin Radio, North West Radio, and other radio stations.<sup>35</sup>

In 2008, Zhao moved back to China where she has been teaching piano at the Central Conservatory of Music.<sup>36</sup> In addition to teaching and performing, Zhao compiled a method book for beginners entitled *Lingdian qibu xue gangqin* (Start learning piano from nothing) published in 2013. Her students have gone on to win prizes in prestigious competitions, such as the Rachmaninoff International Competition for Pianists.

Dr. Vivian Li (李穗荣)

Dr. Vivian Li was also born into a family of artists. She began studying piano with her father, Qi Li, a famous concert pianist. Qi Li won fourth place when representing China at the 1964 George Enescu International Piano Competition and was

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<sup>32</sup> “Zhao Ling,” Chinese Piano Works Concert, National Centre for the Performing Arts, accessed September 27, 2023, [http://en.chncpa.org/whatson/zdyc/202103/t20210303\\_226789.shtml](http://en.chncpa.org/whatson/zdyc/202103/t20210303_226789.shtml).

<sup>33</sup> Zhang, “Yong ai tuoqi mingtian de taiyang,” 40.

<sup>34</sup> “Zhao Ling.”

<sup>35</sup> “Zhao Ling.”

<sup>36</sup> Zhang, “Yong ai tuoqi mingtian de taiyang,” 41.

the solo pianist of the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra for over twenty years. He was trained at the Central Conservatory of Music from age eleven in 1954 at the attached middle school through the undergraduate program.<sup>37</sup> Vivian Li explains that her father's teachers included Zhao's parents: "One of his teachers for almost two years at the middle school of Central Conservatory was Ling Zhao's father, Teacher Pingguo Zhao. He and his wife Yuan Ling, Ling Zhao's mother, were two of the very first and youngest teachers in the middle school of Central Conservatory at that time."<sup>38</sup>

Under her father Qi Li's guidance, Li's piano journey began at age four. She studied at Xinghai Conservatory's affiliated middle school in Guangzhou, China before immigrating to Toronto, Canada where she completed high school and received an Artist Diploma from Canada's Royal Conservatory of Music.<sup>39</sup> Following this, she studied at Oberlin Conservatory and the University of Houston where she earned a Doctor of Musical Arts degree. Li's playing was recognized with Oberlin's William R. Abate Outstanding Pianist Award along with prizes in Canada's CMC International Stepping Stone Competition, the Grace Welsh International Piano Competition, and the San Antonio International Competition.<sup>40</sup>

In 2005, Li returned to Guangzhou where she has been teaching piano at the Xinghai Conservatory of Music.<sup>41</sup> In addition to being an adjudicator at major Chinese piano competitions, Li also regularly serves on the faculty of festivals in Italy, Beijing,

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<sup>37</sup> "Yanzoujia jianjie: Li Qi" [Performer's biography: Qi Li], Xinghai Concert Hall, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.concerthall.com.cn/newpage.php?id=1120-0>.

<sup>38</sup> Vivian Li, interview over Zoom by author, August 2021.

<sup>39</sup> "Vivian Li," Piano Demystified, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://vivjay.com/about>.

<sup>40</sup> Piano Demystified, "Vivian Li."

<sup>41</sup> Piano Demystified, "Vivian Li."

the United States, and Germany.<sup>42</sup> Her students have “distinguished themselves in major international competitions such as Hamamatsu, Cleveland and Cliburn Junior” and received top prizes from “Gina Bachauer, e-Piano Junior, Beijing Chopin, Zhuhai Mozart, Ettlingen, Sendai and Aarhus.”<sup>43</sup> In 2021, Li’s student Hao Rao was the “youngest and only finalist from China” in the 18<sup>th</sup> International Chopin Piano Competition.<sup>44</sup> Li’s students have been accepted to top conservatories, such as Juilliard, New England, Oberlin, and the Royal College of Music.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Vivian Li,” 2022 Spotlight International Piano Competition Coaches, Spotlight Arts & Culture Foundation, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.tsacf.org/piano-coaches-3/vivian-li>; Piano Demystified, “Vivian Li.”

<sup>43</sup> Piano Demystified, “Vivian Li.”

<sup>44</sup> Spotlight Arts & Culture Foundation, “Vivian Li.”

<sup>45</sup> “Li Suirong” [Vivian Li], Steinway & Sons, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.steinway.com.cn/en/artists/lisuirong>.



## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

#### Objectives and Overview

This study analyzes and documents the teaching methods and philosophies of three prominent piano teachers in China—Zhe Tang, Ling Zhao, and Vivian Li—through comprehensive interviews and lesson observations. The aim is to advance the field of piano performance and pedagogy and offer insight on piano education in China. The process of conducting this study included exploring available resources; preparing, conducting, and transcribing interviews; preparing, observing, analyzing, and documenting piano lesson observations; and translating material. This chapter explains the methods used in each of these steps to provide a basis for similar studies in the future and to help readers discern the study’s integrity and specific limitations.

In conducting research for the interview and teaching methods chapters, the primary question asked was: *“How can the teaching methods and philosophies of Tang, Zhao, and Li be analyzed and documented in a way that enriches and contributes to the teaching and performance of pianists?”* Additionally, the conclusion—which synthesizes themes among the teachers’ research—and parts of the interview chapters address a secondary question: *“How can piano education in China be better understood through Tang, Zhao, and Li’s teaching methods and philosophies?”*

## Available Resources

Published material on Tang, Zhao, and Li's teaching methods and philosophies are from Chinese sources. The materials include interview segments in magazine articles and online videos, online piano masterclass videos of Tang and Li, online videos of Zhao and Li teaching piano pedagogy concepts, and a piano method book compiled by Zhao entitled *Lingdian qibu xue gangqin* (Start learning piano from nothing). These resources provided the author with helpful background information and are occasionally referenced in the paper as supporting material, particularly in the chapter "Teaching Methods of Ling Zhao." However, more comprehensive material was needed for the purpose of this study, which was acquired through conducting interviews and lesson observations with each teacher.

## Interviews

### Preparation:

Tang, Zhao, and Li were asked to participate in interviews and lesson observations with the agreement that the information be used solely for this paper. The terms of participation were outlined in consent forms approved by the International Review Board (IRB) and signed by each teacher (see appendix B). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the author was unable to travel to China to conduct interviews and lesson observations in person.

Interview questions were written to understand the teaching methods and philosophies of each teacher, how their background shapes their teaching, and their views on piano education in China. The questions covered eight sections: basic information, teaching philosophy, expectations, teaching methods, repertoire and interpretation, technique, performance, and piano education in China. Prior to being interviewed, Tang and Li were given the interview questions in English, while Zhao was given a version translated to Chinese by the author (see appendix A for the complete list of questions in English and Chinese). The teachers were told to elaborate as much or little as desired on each interview question, which highlighted the prominence of different topics in their teaching methods and philosophies.

#### Conducting Interviews:

Zhao and Li each participated in two interview sessions conducted by the author through recorded Zoom video calls. The interview sessions with Zhao were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, while the sessions with Li were conducted in English. To maintain a cohesive flow in the interviews, the author adjusted the order of questions asked to the topics brought up by Zhao and Li's responses. Certain original questions were omitted when the author felt it was already answered substantially in response to another question. Follow-up questions were asked throughout the interviews for the purpose of clarifying or elaborating on topics particularly helpful to the study.

Tang preferred to conduct the interview through an audio recording spoken in English that he sent to the author in response to the given questions. After receiving

Tang's initial recording, the author sent Tang the transcribed interview with follow up questions in between Tang's original responses. Tang responded to the follow up questions by sending the author two more audio recordings spoken in English. While the use of audio recordings resulted in a less conversational interview than those conducted over Zoom, the author felt the material was still substantial in meeting the needs of this study.

Transcribing:

The author transcribed about seven hours of recorded interview material spoken in English and three hours spoken in Chinese. To maintain faithfulness to the original Chinese Zhao spoke in the interview, the interview was first transcribed in Chinese and from that transcription, translated section by section into English by the author. After transcribing all three interviews in their entirety, the author chose which material to include based on its contribution to the teaching and performance of pianists and/or insight into piano education in China. To better understand each teacher's philosophies, material that gave context to the teachers' background, current situation, and personality was included.

Material deemed irrelevant by the author was removed and delineated with an ellipsis ("...") in the transcript. The author sometimes added material in parenthesis for clarification, while descriptions of nonverbal communication were put in brackets. While staying as faithful as possible to the original English words used by Tang and Li, the author corrected grammar and removed filler words as needed to maintain the transcripts'

fluency. On rare occasion, the author also altered misused words. To maintain the anonymity of students mentioned in Zhao and Li's interviews, names were replaced with "student" and accompanied by descriptions when needed.

Due to the conversational nature of Zhao and Li's interviews, certain parts were moved around for a clearer organization of topics and sections in each interview. This reorganization was done only when the move did not change the original meaning. When text in between questions was moved, as opposed to an entire question and answer being moved, the author wrote an ellipsis ("...") prior to the moved text.

### Lesson Observations

#### Preparation:

Tang, Zhao, and Li were each asked to provide two lesson observations with three of their students—one college student and two pre-college students with at least one age ten or younger—for a total of six lessons per teacher. The ages requested were to highlight the teachers' different methods used for younger and older students. The students chosen by each teacher were asked to participate in this study knowing their names would remain anonymous in the paper. The terms of participation were outlined in IRB-approved consent and assent forms signed by each student and the parent of each student under age eighteen (see appendix B).

To provide context for the lesson observations, the author requested information about each student, such as their age, length of study with the given teacher, average

daily practice time, and the names of pieces played in the observed lessons (see appendix A for the student information form in English and Chinese). This information was sent to the author by either the teacher, parent, student, or a facilitator assigned by the teacher. Tang, Zhao, and Li were asked to conduct lessons as normal for the observations.

#### Observing Lessons:

The teachers and students spoke in Mandarin Chinese during all eighteen lesson observations. The length of each lesson varied among teachers and students. However, the author did not find this discrepancy a disadvantage to the overall research but rather a demonstration of each teacher's varying levels of conciseness and orientation to detail.

To make it easier for Zhao to share her lessons, the author observed one lesson with each of Zhao's two older students through a screen-recorded WeChat video call. The sound quality of the piano was poor and the speaking was not always audible. However, with multiple viewings, the author was still able to grasp certain concepts. To ensure better quality of sound for the remaining lesson observations with Zhao and for all the observations with Tang and Li, lessons were video recorded by the teacher, student, student's parent, or a facilitator and then sent to the author. Despite the poor audio quality of the first two observations with Zhao, these lessons—in combination with the same two students' later lessons with clear audio—were more than substantial for this study.

For Zhao's five-year-old student, the parent sent nineteen video clips from seven lessons. While the numerous clips prevented the author from observing the student's full lessons, they also had unique benefits such as highlighting a greater number of different

concepts in technique and a moving camera angle that showed the hands in a way not possible from any stationary position. This variance of lesson clips provided more benefit than hindrance in this study's ability to contribute to the teaching and performance of pianists.

Due to Tang often being away around the time his lessons were recorded, his three students were each given two back-to-back lessons as opposed to their normal once-a-week lesson. Additionally, to help his two older students prepare for upcoming competitions, their lessons were conducted with other students in attendance as opposed to their usual private lessons. While lessons given under more normal circumstances were preferred, the author understood the constraints and did not find the unique situations to change the results of this study in any significant way. The school's two-week closure due to COVID-19 also changed the normal lesson routine, so that Tang's back-to-back lessons with his youngest student were recorded on a small stage at an outside location. The author did not consider this location change to impact how the lessons were conducted.

Li's two recorded lessons with her youngest student were taught back-to-back in accordance with their normal lesson routine. While Li and her youngest student normally speak Cantonese in lessons, the recorded lessons were conducted in Mandarin Chinese for the author's comprehension. This language change may or may not have influenced the student to be less talkative during the lessons, although the author did not consider it a significant change to the research. For each of Li's two older students, two recorded lessons from different days were sent to the author for observation.

## Limitations to Videos:

Observing lessons through pre-recorded videos presented unique limitations. The start and end of the video recordings relied on the person in charge of recording, which often meant the videos started with the student playing or teacher instructing and ended before the student got up to leave. While the author cannot know which portions of the lesson were unrecorded before or after, the amount of content sent for each lesson was more than enough for this study. In two observed lessons, the cameras accidentally stopped recording mid-lesson before recording again after a seemingly short time. However, these unrecorded segments had minimal effect on the author's ability to understand the lessons.

The camera's positioning and angle also relied on the person recording. For one lesson with Li's twenty-one-year-old student, the camera angle did not always show Li's hands clearly when she demonstrated. For Zhao's lesson with her eleven-year-old student, Zhao sometimes stood in between the student and camera so the student's hands were out of view. However, the obstacle these camera angles created in the author's ability to understand the teaching was minimal. The overall lesson observation content from each teacher was more than sufficient for the author to gain a comprehensive grasp of each teacher's methods.



## Analysis and Documentation:

The author observed and analyzed each teacher's lessons and wrote their respective chapter before moving on to the next teacher. This focus on one teacher at a time was to avoid making comparisons between teachers before fully understanding the teaching of each. The author studied the lessons repeatedly until grasping the material and took detailed notes in English and Chinese. To gain deeper insight, material was crosschecked with that in each teacher's other lessons, interview transcript, and any relevant published works including Zhao's *Lingdian qibu xue gangqin*. When certain concepts were still unclear, the teachers were asked for clarification. Next, the author looked for lesson material particularly helpful to the teaching and performance of pianists and grouped this material into categories.

After categorizing material, the author began writing descriptions of concepts and lesson examples as accurately as possible without inserting her own opinion. Due to the nuanced nature of teaching music, however, the author was often required to interpret factors that were not explicitly clear, such as the teacher's intentions for teaching certain concepts. This interpretation was aided by context, the audio and visual demonstrations in the lesson videos, and crosschecking information. While no interpretive research is completely free from misunderstanding and error, the author used utmost integrity and effort to understand and accurately portray the teaching of each teacher to her best ability.

## Translation

Due to the majority of research material being spoken or written in Mandarin Chinese and relying on the author's translation to English, it is helpful to briefly outline the author's translation process and philosophy. When using quotation marks, the author sought to translate material as literally as possible to the extent that the intended overall meaning and tone were still conveyed. This literal approach means a "word-for-word" translation apart from the unavoidable changes that must be made in organization and grammar from Mandarin Chinese to English. However, when the combination of literal word translations resulted in an overall meaning or tone not intended in the original, the author altered the wording even if it resulted in a less literal result.

This "word-for-word" translation approach contrasts with a "thought-to-thought" approach that leans more toward creating an equivalent meaning of the original text rather than a literal translation. Naturally, this approach is more inclined to incorporate the translator's interpretive views. While this "thought-to-thought" approach was not used to translate material in quotation marks, the author did use it when paraphrasing. However, the author was still inclined to translate literally the more significant words of paraphrases.

Lastly, the author feels it beneficial to explain the translation of "knuckle" and "palm side of the knuckle," since these terms are used significantly when describing Li's and Zhao's teaching. The term "knuckle" in this paper refers to the joint connecting the finger and hand, not including the other joints of the finger. The original Chinese word is *zhangguanjie* or "metacarpal joint," which can refer to either the "knuckle" or "palm side

of the knuckle.” Depending on the author’s understanding of which was being referenced, the author used both terms to translate. Therefore, it will be beneficial when reading this paper to think of the “knuckle” and “palm side of the knuckle” as one interchangeable unit.

### Concluding Remarks

This study required a team effort that relied on the availability and willingness of Tang, Zhao, and Li to conduct the interviews and share their lessons with the author. It also relied on the teachers, students, parents, and other facilitators to create and send the author the lesson videos, information of the nine students, and the students’ and parents’ fifteen consent and assent forms. This collaboration required the author to delicately balance the quality and quantity of material needed with the demanding schedules of everyone involved and the teacher’s preferences for how to share their teaching. While involving certain limitations, allowing the three teachers to be comfortable and therefore open when sharing was of utmost importance and allowed the author to observe and portray their teaching more accurately. To the best of the author’s ability, this paper organizes and documents Tang, Zhao, and Li’s teaching methods and philosophies to contribute to the teaching and performance of pianists and help readers better understand piano education in China.

## CHAPTER 3

### INTERVIEW WITH ZHE TANG

#### Order of Questions

##### BASICS:

How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching at your current institution?

How many pre-college students do you teach? How many collegiate students do you teach?

What does a typical week of teaching and work look like for you?

##### TEACHING PHILOSOPHY:

What do you enjoy most about teaching?

What are some of your main goals in teaching piano? What do you consider your role as teacher to be?

Do the goals you have for your older students differ from those for the younger? Does this cause you to teach them with different approaches?

What type of environment do you seek to create in lessons?

What does music mean to you? What do you hope music will mean to your students?

What do you hope students will remember most about your teaching?

When are you most proud of your students?

## EXPECTATIONS:

What are your criteria for accepting students?

How do you define talent? How important do you think talent is to a student's success in learning piano?

What do you require of your students (practice time, talent, attitude, etc.)?

Do most of your students have time for other interests outside of school besides piano—such as sports or another instrument?

What do you consider the role of the parent to be in their child's piano education? What are your expectations for their involvement?

What do you do in situations where the student is or becomes unmotivated?

## TEACHING METHODS:

Who are some of your favorite composers (and/or compositions) to teach? How do you have your students approach these pieces?

In your opinion, which composers (and/or compositions) are most difficult to teach and why? What have you learned in how to effectively teach these works?

How do you help to cultivate each student's unique artistic development?

How much do you analyze the music with students? How important is this in your methodology?

Do you find any common issues that you have to work on with transfer students? If so, what are they?

What do you believe makes your teaching unique from other piano teachers?

What would you say contributed the most to your development as a piano teacher?

What advice would you give to aspiring piano teachers for how to become a successful teacher?

#### REPERTOIRE AND INTERPRETATION:

Do you use any teaching materials such as method books or leveled repertoire books? If so, which materials do you use and why?

Do you have your students learn from specific editions of music?

What is your process of teaching interpretation?

How do you teach interpretation and freedom of expression in relation to being faithful to the details of the score? Does this change with different composers?

Do you incorporate Chinese piano repertoire in your students' playing?

Do you find your way of teaching these pieces to differ from teaching Western music? How so?

#### TECHNIQUE:

What would you define as good technique?

How do you teach technique? Do you teach technique differently to younger students compared to the older? Do you have your students practice certain technique exercises (such as scales, arpeggios, finger strengthening, etc.)?

Do you teach physical motion and arm weight? If so, how do you approach these concepts?

Do you have any particular approaches to teaching touch and how the fingers contact the keys?

Do you have any particular methods for teaching release of tension?

## PERFORMANCE:

In your opinion, what is a meaningful and inspired performance? How do you help your students to get there?

In your opinion, how important are competitions to the growth of a student's playing?

Do you have all your students participate in competitions?

What are some tips you would give for students preparing for competitions? Do you have specific ways for preparing your students for competitions?

Are there other performance opportunities for your students apart from competitions?

## PIANO EDUCATION IN CHINA:

Where did you learn piano as a child? Have you seen piano education in China change since you were young? How so?

Can you describe the teaching of your piano teacher(s) in China? Do you teach this way as well or differently? If differently, then how so?

Do you believe studying in countries outside of China made significant contributions to your teaching? If so, how did it?

How important do you think studying abroad is for students? Why?

Do you feel China offers its pianists opportunity to fulfill their artistic development and achievement? Why?

What do you consider some of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of piano education in China today?

What do you hope for piano education in China in the next thirty years?

## Introduction

Transcribed by the author from an audio recording spoken in English from Dr. Zhe Tang on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. Follow-up questions were sent to Dr. Tang and answered by him through audio recordings sent on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022 and July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022. Material from all dates was combined into one transcript to maintain fluency. “B” represents the interviewer Burton and “T” represents the interviewee Tang. Original questions are italicized and follow-up questions are not.

## Basics

*B: How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching at your current institution?*

T: Actually, I started teaching when I was fifteen years old, so it has been thirty something years. For my current institution, Shanghai Conservatory of Music, I have been teaching for eighteen years.

*B: How many pre-college students do you teach? How many collegiate students do you teach?*

T: Currently, I have about six pre-college students, about seven college students, plus maybe four graduate students.

*B: What does a typical week of teaching and work look like for you?*

T: The only word I can find is “busy” teaching schedule. Plus, I have much other work to do, so it is a struggle.



## Teaching Philosophy

B: *What do you enjoy most about teaching?*

T: When I see a student's improvement and we solve even one small problem in their playing. I enjoy the challenge of teaching, because each student is very different in many ways—not only in personality but also in musicality and technical abilities. The challenge of overcoming these problems and helping each student improve gives me much enjoyment in teaching.

B: *What are some of your main goals in teaching piano? What do you consider your role as teacher to be?*

T: Particularly pre-college students and even some college students, especially in China, need many things to fill in (the gaps in) their knowledge and performance of the piano. For that, my goal is to fill in what they need. But I think my second goal is more important: I want to raise their knowledge and ability to understand, appreciate, and love music more. I encourage them to use their own thinking to think and listen more to the music. In Chinese we say, "I provide a stick for them to walk better, but finally they have to walk by themselves." Another saying in China is: "We do not give them the fish, but we teach them how to fish." That is my role.

B: *Do the goals you have for your older students differ from those for the younger? Does this cause you to teach them with different approaches?*

T: I approach them differently not only because of their ages but also because of their musicality and capability.

B: How will you approach them differently?

T: The language I use will differ according to the music and their ages. For the older students who understand music more, I might go directly into the music with them and the requirements I have for them. For the younger students, I usually say other things to help them understand better and more easily.

B: *What type of environment do you seek to create in lessons?*

T: I try to give students a more relaxed environment, because in China, these lessons are automatically very important to the student, so sometimes they get very nervous. I try to ease their nerves and also slip in some jokes. Even within the music, I try to make them happy and more relaxed to create a better learning environment.

B: *What does music mean to you? What do you hope music will mean to your students?*

T: I mostly teach the more professional students in music institutions where their career or pursuit is music. Music, for me, is already my life. I have to live with music in my life, and my life cannot be sustained without music. That is what music means to me. Of course, I think at least some of the professional music students in China feel the same way. They are sinking in music every day, even when they are walking. That is what music is for them.

B: Do most students come to you with the mindset that music is their life? If not, how do you encourage this deep meaning for them?

T: Of course, not all students. Particularly when they are younger, they probably like or even love music, but it is too early to say music is their life. I do not purposefully encourage this, because maybe later they will choose another path. But when they study

with me, I will let them know what the value and pursuit of music is. I am happy that at least most of my students love music more and better after studying with me.

B: *What do you hope students will remember most about your teaching?*

T: I always say to my students, “My task is to teach you, but my goal in teaching is that you will not need me anymore.” When they are older, they can still remember me as a good teacher at least. But musically, I am trying to lift up their own personality in their music rather than remember what my teaching is.

B: *When are you most proud of your students?*

T: Of course, when they have some great moments in their playing and win some competitions, and when they are very happy about their music. And particularly, when I feel they truly understand what this part of the music really means and I feel they understand what I am saying and what the music is about, even when challenged with some very difficult music. That is the moment I am proud of.

### Expectations

B: *What are your criteria for accepting students?*

T: I try to choose students based on my very limited time, but I do not usually have the best talents of students, because I like to accept some students with challenges. I find I enjoy teaching those students.

B: What do you require from the student and their family’s attitude before accepting a student?

T: I will get to know the student, their parents, and family to evaluate if they are ready for the road to pursue music.

B: *How do you define talent? How important do you think talent is to a student's success in learning piano?*

T: You need to have talent of the ears and listening, and also talent of thinking, because music is filled with logic and you have to understand this music in a logical way. Also, quick reaction and, of course, a very stable mind and strong will. These are the talents future musicians need to have. For students to be successful in learning piano, one needs to own these talents. The more, the better of course.

B: *What do you require of your students (practice time, talent, attitude, etc.)?*

T: I require my students, because they are a professional musician or at least pursuing the professional music field, to have a very positive attitude toward their life, actually. Their music has to fill their everyday life. Of course, within each day is their practicing, listening, and research. These are the things I require of my students.

B: On average, how long will your students practice every day?

T: On average, they probably practice at least three to five hours a day. I actually encourage them not to practice too much. Of course, some students do not work hard enough and then I will tell them they have to keep an alarm in hand.

B: *Do most of your students have time for other interests outside of school besides piano—such as sports or another instrument?*

T: That is actually quite difficult, particularly in China. I do not know about in the States. I think for some big cities, students also have this similar situation where one big hobby or big duty sometimes occupies most of their time. But I do encourage my students to at

least have one or two or more other hobbies like sports or maybe some other instruments or other things.

B: *What do you consider the role of the parent to be in their child's piano education? What are your expectations for their involvement?*

T: I think the parents, particularly Chinese parents, are very, very important in the student's improvement when pursuing piano study. Sometimes it is very difficult work, because it is not good for the student when the parent is sometimes involved in too little, but the parents involved in too much also affect the improvement of the student. The balance of the parent's involvement is very important.

B: Can you explain what an overly-involved parent will do too much of?

T: One of the symptoms of an overly-involved parent, particularly the mother, is not allowing the student to think and listen by themselves when they practice at home. Other parents will actually do too much housework for students. I always encourage students to take responsibility in doing some of the housework to help their family, because they need to know their responsibility as a family member. They have to love and care for other people in order to love and care for the music.

B: What will a parent involved in too little fail to do?

T: Actually, none of the parents I encounter are involved in too little, but I heard that in the education parameter, particularly for some non-professional students, sometimes the parents would just drop them off to the teacher and not get involved in any of the student's study. Even some parents would be too busy and even hire a babysitter to accompany the student's practice. My opinion is that no matter the level of the student, parent involvement is not only to help the student maintain an attitude in how to study

and revive what they learned from the lessons, but it is also very important for the student's growth. The parent's attention to the student makes them at least feel that studying is important. Sometimes parents intentionally or unintentionally find so-called "reasons"—let's say "too busy," time conflicts, etc. Fortunately, the parents I know are very responsive to the teacher and very much involved—sometimes too involved—in the student's practice and study.

*B: What do you do in situations where the student is or becomes unmotivated?*

T: My students are quite motivated, because they cherish the opportunity to study at Shanghai Conservatory and with me. But sometimes even adults will encounter some difficult or unmotivated times, so for that I would encourage my students to relax and even take some vacations. People need that, and sometimes that will cure their lack of motivation.

### Teaching Methods

*B: Who are some of your favorite composers (and/or compositions) to teach? How do you have your students approach these pieces?*

T: There are many, so I cannot say really. All the classical composers, most of the Romantic period composers, and many pieces like baroque pieces. Of course, Bach, Scarlatti—they are all some of my favorite composers.

*B: In your opinion, which composers (and/or compositions) are most difficult to teach and why? What have you learned in how to effectively teach these works?*

T: I find Chopin's works are very difficult to teach, particularly waltzes and mazurkas, because they need rhythmical so-called "talent" and inner feeling. We have some ways to try to change the student's rhythm if it is too stiff for waltzes or mazurkas, but that can only get to a certain level or degree, and then beyond that would need so-called "talent."

B: What ways of teaching have you found effective for helping students feel the sense of rhythm in Chopin's waltzes and mazurkas?

T: Generally, it is hard to find triple meter in Asian music, so this is difficult for Asian students. I will ask them to watch some videos of mazurkas and waltzes to see what it is, how they dance, what the dance steps are, and how the music cooperates with the dance. I think this helps. Some other music also—such as that in the Vienna Philharmonic's New Year's Concert, which sometimes includes lots of waltzes—is also a very good and authentic way for them to understand better and see how the rhythm and beats work with each other.

B: *How do you help to cultivate each student's unique artistic development?*

T: First, as a teacher, you have to find the strong and weak points of the student not only technically but also artistically and musically. It is like being a doctor. You have to find their good and bad things. Then, like Chinese medicine, you have to prescribe what medicine and herbs are good for what parts of the body, then see how their circulation is, and make their whole circulation and body become healthier. That is what I think a teacher should do. Finally, artistically, you want to help them find their own way to reach their peak point. Of course, every student and their talent is different. Certain students deal with limitations—even big limitations—but as the teacher, your role is to help them achieve the most their ability can achieve.

B: How do you help students to find their own way to reach their peak point?

T: In many ways. Not only in music lessons but also in their family homes. I will oversee their overall activities and behavior to help them be a better person and musician. In music, I try to help them find their own voice. I have them listen to themselves without pushing my ideas on them first, so they will think first, even if they think differently from me or even wrongly.

*B: How much do you analyze the music with students? How important is this in your methodology?*

T: Of course, you have to analyze the music with students in lessons, but I would say you have to help them understand. Let's say here, this is the problem. At first, especially with the younger students, you have to tell them this is what you have to do. And when you read this score with this sign, what do you do? Then later on, the second step is to find this similar problem maybe in the same piece in other places. Then you ask them, "When you see this, do you remember when we already solved a similar problem before?" Finally, when they see something like that, they will solve the problem.

B: Do your pre-college students also take music theory and ear training classes where they analyze music? How much time will they spend on these classes each week?

T: Yes. They have music theory and solfege classes—I think at least two classes every week.

*B: Do you find any common issues that you have to work on with transfer students? If so, what are they?*

T: With transfer students, there are mostly two common problems. One is with technical problems, especially how to make tone colors and such, and even some more basic



technical problems. And musically, they have to understand what the score really says to do. These are some of the most common problems I find.

B: For transfer students with basic technical problems, are there certain exercises you will have them practice?

T: Sometimes I assign them some particular etudes to solve certain technical problems, but usually I try to solve all the technical problems through music, such as Classical sonatas, Baroque pieces, etc. I find Scarlatti sonatas and Chopin waltzes to be some very good so-called “exercises” to help students.

B: *What do you believe makes your teaching unique from other piano teachers?*

T: I try to find an easier, relaxed, and even humorous way to communicate with the students. Secondly, I try to find very concise and effective ways to solve problems.

B: *What would you say contributed the most to your development as a piano teacher?*

T: First, when I was studying in the States, I got to learn and study many things, including being exposed to historical recordings of many great artists. I think this learning environment helped my development. Secondly, I learned from all different teachers not only at the schools where I studied. I acted as teaching assistant to a great Chinese artist, Fu Cong (Fou Ts’ong)—who unfortunately passed away—when he was the guest professor at Shanghai Conservatory. I think I learned a lot at that time. Thirdly, I think judging international competitions really helps my involvement in the international scene and also how I see the changing trends of piano playing. It does not matter if I am teaching or judging, I am always trying to learn more and learn new things.

B: *What advice would you give to aspiring piano teachers for how to become a successful teacher?*

T: First, you have to become a very good doctor. You have to find a very effective and quick way to recognize the student's problem, and their good and bad things. Secondly, you have to find good medicine—the right medicine to solve their problems and give what they need. Thirdly, you have to find a unique way to help individual students develop to their highest possible ability.

### Repertoire and Interpretation

B: *Do you use any teaching materials such as method books or leveled repertoire books? If so, which materials do you use and why?*

T: I believe you can create your own method for a leveled teaching procedure. Of course, all the pieces are our vessels. I do not usually use massive books. We do have Czerny and such, if those are called “leveled books.”

B: What do you consider to be the strength of practicing Czerny?

T: For many pianists, they had to play and practice Czerny when they were younger. When you grow older, you find that Czerny, particularly his etudes, are not really etudes, but at least some of them are very valuable artistically. Sometimes I will give Czerny to my younger students to even use in competition and win the young artist competition.

B: In addition to Czerny, what other teaching materials do you use (versus performance repertoire)?

T: For other materials, I would probably use Clementi, Scarlatti, and many others instead of etudes.

B: *Do you have your students learn from specific editions of music?*

T: Because the editions are so different, I do try to have my students find the right or so-called “best” editions for music.

B: What do you think makes certain editions better than others?

T: The editions of scores involve knowledge and historical understanding. Some music editions are pretty much universal, but for some editions even the urtexts will be different, because the editors have different aspects and views to the so-called “original” editions that we call urtexts. I think you have to make a decision based on historical understanding to find and choose a good edition.

B: *What is your process of teaching interpretation?*

T: That is a big question. Of course, students must understand the music’s historical background, the particular composer’s style, and the style of the time period. Then we must pay attention to many details on the score in order to make our interpretation more authentic or composer-oriented.

B: *How do you teach interpretation and freedom of expression in relation to being faithful to the details of the score? Does this change with different composers?*

T: That is such a big question, because “interpretation”—even this word—means that you have already involved your own thinking and so-called “interpretation.” Philosophically, we say one person never stepped into the same river twice. With interpretation, we try to interpret within our knowledge and understanding of the score to do a more faithful interpretation. It does not change with different composers, because the composer’s score, with a good edition, gives us our needed information to interpret.

B: *Do you incorporate Chinese piano repertoire in your students’ playing?*

T: I do incorporate Chinese piano repertoire for students' study, because the music itself is familiar to them—the tune, the pentatonic scales, etc. Another thing about Chinese music is that most pieces are programmatic, so they have some stories or even titles. It is great for students to understand immediately what the music is about. Compare this with “sonata,” “suite,” or “concerto.” These are hard, especially for the younger students, to understand.

B: *Do you find your way of teaching these pieces to differ from teaching Western music? How so?*

T: I do not find that I teach Chinese compositions so differently from Western music, because the principals are the same. Of course, Chinese music will be more understandable for Chinese students, since they are probably familiar with those melodies and tunes from hearing it when they were young. Since Chinese music is more melodic and programmatic, I will probably describe more to the students when teaching it.

## Technique

B: *What would you define as good technique?*

T: Whatever you want to do on the piano, you can do.

B: *How do you teach technique? Do you teach technique differently to younger students compared to the older? Do you have your students practice certain technique exercises (such as scales, arpeggios, finger strengthening, etc.)?*

T: In our school (Shanghai Conservatory of Music) when students are young, we already have examinations on technique with the twenty-four keys of scales, arpeggios, etc., so

we assume they will solve their technique problems when they are fifteen or sixteen years old. But I think for me, technique is a wider array. Why do I say that? I would say even layers of tones and how to create tone colors are also technique. I will tell our students, “Do not only understand technique as how fast you move or how quick your octaves are, but also understand the technique of controlling the keyboard and making your sound sing.” That is also very, very, very important technique.

B: What are the specific requirements for the examinations at Shanghai Conservatory of Music when students are younger?

T: Usually for different ages, there are different requirements. For instance, the younger ones are usually required to play a level of etudes equal to or higher than Czerny Op. 299, a Bach three-voice invention or above, a free repertoire piece, and the first movement of a Classical sonata. At least four pieces, plus some scales and arpeggios. For those a little older around age twelve or thirteen, they are required to play etudes above the level of Czerny Op. 740. Usually, they will not play Czerny but will play Chopin or Liszt etudes, or something like that. I think two etudes. Also, a movement of a Classical sonata in

sonata-allegro form, a Romantic or modern free-choice piece, and a Bach prelude and fugue.<sup>46</sup>

*B: Do you teach physical motion and arm weight? If so, how do you approach these concepts?*

T: Yes, of course. I try to teach technique through the music—through all their pieces. With technique is your physical motion, your arm weight, and everything. This is also included in technique.

*B: Do you teach specific motions for running octaves, scales, and arpeggios? If so, can you explain?*

T: I always try to combine my teaching with whatever music they are playing to solve their technical problems.

*B: Do you have any particular approaches to teaching touch and how the fingers contact the keys?*

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<sup>46</sup> Xinhao Gu, a teacher at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, explains that semester evaluations have some discrepancies from year to year but are generally the following: “The exam is divided into mid-term exams and end-of-term exams. The mid-term exam is also called the ‘technique exam,’ which mainly evaluates scales, etudes, or occasionally requires the performance of one piece. The end-of-term exam mainly evaluates repertoire of different categories and styles.

“Each grade level has different amounts of repertoire for the exam. In addition to free choice repertoire, there are also some assigned works. For example, in the attached middle school, first-year high schoolers are required to play three different composer’s etudes and second-year high schoolers are required to perform one complete sonata. Exams for undergraduate freshmen and sophomores include some assigned repertoire (Ligeti, Chinese works, etc.) and for undergraduate juniors, the main component is a concerto.”

When asked what the requirements were for scales and arpeggios, Gu explained, “The speed generally does not have a fixed requirement, but everyone normally can play at 150 bpm per four notes or faster. Scales and arpeggios progress according to difficulty. For example, the attached primary school only requires keys of white notes and grade levels a little higher require black notes, double thirds, etc.”

(Xinhao Gu, WeChat message to author, June 20, 2022, translated from Mandarin by author.)

T: I do not have any particular approaches, but within the music, we always focus on how you touch the keyboard and how to make the touch—what kind of touch will make what kind of sound, how to involve your pedaling with your touch, and how to achieve the right sound right here at the right moment.

B: *Do you have any particular methods for teaching release of tension?*

T: I do not have particular methods, but I always teach them how to relax through the music, because tension and relaxation are related not only to your body movement but also to the technical approach and the needs of the music.

B: Ideally, which parts of the body should be relaxed when playing?

T: Relaxation and tension are always combined. You cannot have absolute relaxation when playing, because you use energy when you play, so it cannot be totally relaxed. I cannot say which parts of the body should be relaxed, because it depends on the different passages or technical needs, but absolute relaxation or absolute tension do not exist when playing.

### Performance

B: *In your opinion, what is a meaningful and inspired performance? How do you help your students to get there?*

T: When you say what you want to say and the audience receives it. I always try to teach students how to speak in music and what kind of techniques to use in order to achieve that.

*B: In your opinion, how important are competitions to the growth of a student's playing? Do you have all your students participate in competitions?*

T: I think competitions, nowadays at least, are very important to students' development. Very few musicians can achieve their career without competitions. For most pianists, if they want to develop their career and gain opportunities to even play with orchestras, competitions are the very practical way of achieving that. With a student status, without any fame, and without anybody knowing you, it is hard for anybody to get an invitation to play with an orchestra. With this practical goal, competitions are important.

*B: What are some tips you would give for students preparing for competitions? Do you have specific ways for preparing your students for competitions?*

T: I do not think I have specific ways, but competitions are very important for motivating students to achieve an even higher quality of performance. When we prepare for competitions, we have a very high standard and try to play at the highest quality—highest way of playing itself, not actually for the competition.

*B: Do you have any methods to help your students with memorization before a competition or performance?*

T: Usually, my students do not have problems with memorization, so I do not often encounter this kind of problem.

*B: Are there other performance opportunities for your students apart from competitions?*

T: Of course, performance opportunities are always there, but they are hard to get. So even when preparing for competitions, we need to find some venues to have warm-up performances before a competition. Sometimes we have other concerts and such. It is all very important for the students' development.



B: Will your students play for each other regularly as well?

T: Probably not regularly. Sometimes I do not know when they play for each other, but I try to have them play for each other or other people in different occasions and venues as much as possible.

### Piano Education in China

*B: Where did you learn piano as a child? Have you seen piano education in China change since you were young? How so?*

T: I started to learn piano when I was a child in Shanghai. Of course, piano education has changed so much since then. When I was a child, there were only very few piano teachers available. Fortunately, I had the best teachers in China. But now there are more graduates from conservatories and teachers available not only at colleges but also in society. Still, China is such a big country, so we are doing a lot to try to improve the level of teaching in China and balance all the different places—not only Shanghai, Beijing, and those big cities but also even more remote areas. We are trying to do all sorts of things to improve.

B: What is being done to try to balance the quality of teaching throughout the country?

T: This is a difficult thing to do. What we can do is try to create some activities to activate the circulation of knowledge and expose what is happening outside of China and outside of a teacher's city and teaching room. In recent years, many teachers have improved due to these international and national activities that exposed them to what is happening.

B: *Can you describe the teaching of your piano teacher(s) in China? Do you teach this way as well or differently? If differently, then how so?*

T: Our teachers in China had the Russian school of teaching, so they were very strict, but very good. Now, I think we try to use a more artistic approach in teaching and lessons, and we try to make a more relaxed environment and such. Of course, it is very different. Even the performance opportunities are very different.

B: Were your former piano teachers in China also of the Russian school of teaching?

T: Yes. My former teachers were all inherited from the Russian school. Even though they probably did not directly study with Russian teachers but their teachers studied with Russian or even some German teachers. This was before the People's Republic of China was founded (in 1949). In the 1920s and 1930s, many Jews and Russians came to Shanghai. Some were educated by those teachers, including some of the founders of Shanghai Conservatory of Music. The first chair of the piano department was a Russian pianist, Boris Zakharoff.

B: *Do you believe studying in countries outside of China made significant contributions to your teaching? If so, how did it?*

T: Yes. I studied in the United States and I think that helped me significantly in my understanding of music, approach to teaching, and also my understanding of the art. In turn, I bring back what I learned and understand, and I give it to my students.

B: What new approach to teaching did you learn in the United States?

T: Of course, the new repertoire. Even after I studied in the States, I also learned from many things, such as being on the jury for competitions (including those in the United States). Piano is a lifetime learning process, so I am still learning. In the States, we learn

different approaches and interpretations from different schools. The teaching itself is more open, so we learn to keep an open mind when learning and teaching.

*B: How important do you think studying abroad is for students? Why?*

T: I think it is important, because they have to understand life and how it is different compared with that in China, and how you communicate with people differently in the Western world and in China. That is very important. Also, the language I think is very important, because music is about language—the tone and comprehension of language. That is also very important for a student to learn music better.

*B: Do you feel China offers its pianists opportunity to fulfill their artistic development and achievement? Why?*

T: For China as a country, I think it is very difficult to answer this question.

B: How so? Can you explain its complexity?

T: It is mostly because of the environment and cultural background. China has lots of people studying piano, but its original culture is not that of a (Western) musical country. We do not have many churches and such, so it is hard to have students get to know particularly Western music. When they grow, unless they really play well, it is hard to find opportunities to expose them to perform, because there are too many people.

*B: What do you consider some of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of piano education in China today?*

T: The greatest strength is that the society, government, parents, and family see music as a very important part of life and their children's education. The weakness is that our teachers are not balanced in quality and quantity throughout the country.

B: How would you define good music education? What makes a teacher of good quality?

T: I think good music education will fulfill a student's needs. Also, it will let them not only have discipline but let them know the freedom they have in music and in artistic pursuits. I think what makes a teacher of good quality is that, first, they have good taste and style. Also, they know when to say what and when not to say what. In Chinese painting, we call this "reserve the white" (*liubai*—meaning to leave empty space).

B: *What do you hope for piano education in China in the next thirty years?*

T: My hope is that education with good quality teachers will spread all over China and the students and young kids will receive good music education in China. It does not matter where you are, because we all believe that music is very important for our lives and the world.

## CHAPTER 4

### TEACHING METHODS OF ZHE TANG

#### Order of Sections

Lesson Environment

Humor in Haydn

Characterization of Instruments, Dialogue, and Dances

Timing in Romantic Music

Slow and Melodic Sections

Balance of Sound

Crescendos and Decrescendos

## Teaching Observation Information

Dr. Zhe Tang’s teaching was observed through video recordings of lessons with three of his students ages ten, seventeen, and twenty-two. The video recordings were sent to the author and included two back-to-back lessons with each student for a total of six lessons. To help Tang’s seventeen- and twenty-two-year-old students prepare for upcoming competitions, other students attended their lessons as audience members. Tang taught from one grand piano while his students played on another. For his ten-year-old student, lessons were conducted on a single grand piano at an off-campus location due to a temporary COVID-19 school closure. Tang and his students spoke in Mandarin Chinese. Paraphrases and quotes have been translated to English by the author.

Table 1

Student Information for Dr. Zhe Tang’s Lesson Observations

Name*	Tammy	Harry	Sherry
Age and school grade	10 y.o. / 4 <sup>th</sup> grade	17 y.o. / 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	22 y.o. / 4 <sup>th</sup> year undergraduate
Number of years studied with Tang	4 years	5 years	6 years
Average daily practice time	5 hours	6 hours	4 hours
Pieces played in the lesson observations	Etude in D Major Op. 740 No. 3, by Czerny; Piano Sonata in D Major Hob. XVI:33, by Haydn;	Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor Op. 35, by Chopin	Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109, by Beethoven

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*Pièces Pittoresques*  
No. 10 Scherzo-Valse,  
by Chabrier

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\* Names have been changed for anonymity.

### Lesson Environment

Lessons begin with the student playing their piece on stage uninterrupted while Tang listens from a distance. Tang then introduces the piece's history and unique characteristics when other students are in attendance. He often asks the student to describe the piece in a few adjectives before explaining how to play more in line with their description. As the student plays from the beginning again, Tang stops them throughout to demonstrate and explain. In order to strike the right balance in timing or sound, Tang has the student try a passage several times before moving on.

Tang teaches with a straightforward manner of speaking and often looks for ways to make the student laugh with sarcasm and humor. To help students understand the character of the music, Tang acts out characters and imagery with his body movements and facial expressions. He also sings in different tones and textures that range from deep operatic singing tones to light high-pitched sounds. By giving students a clear characterization of the music, he helps them understand how to express the music in a more natural and personal manner.

## Humor in Haydn

Tang uses physical comedy to surprise and amuse the student with sudden movements, gestures, expressions, and sounds that show how humorous the music can be. When teaching Haydn’s Piano Sonata in D Major Hob. XVI:33, Tang wants a light and nimble sense to the music’s humor as opposed to harsh sounds. To demonstrate this type of humor, Tang playfully pokes Tammy while making funny sounds and clicking his tongue. “This is humor,” says Tang. He then pretends to stab her harshly and says, “If striking creates hurt, then how can it be humorous?”<sup>47</sup>

To play with sophisticated humor, Tang encourages Tammy not to rush endings by listening to the shorter accompaniment notes. He also teaches grouping phrases into subgroups to elongate the phrase and allow a more gradual ending. Additionally, Tang wants Tammy to play with a sense of unpredictability.

Figure 1. Haydn’s Piano Sonata in D Major Hob. XVI:33 Mov. 1, mm. 1-6<sup>48</sup>



Tang demonstrates the opening of Haydn’s Piano Sonata in D Major Hob. XVI:33 and explains: “The feeling and meaning is always changing. One should not be able to predict

<sup>47</sup> Zhe Tang, lessons with Tammy, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>48</sup> Franz Joseph Haydn, “Sonate,” in *Sonaten für Klavier zu zwei Händen*, ed. Carl Adolf Martienssen (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1937), 80, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Keyboard\\_Sonata\\_in\\_D\\_major,\\_Hob.XVI:33\\_\(Haydn,\\_Joseph\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Keyboard_Sonata_in_D_major,_Hob.XVI:33_(Haydn,_Joseph)).



what you are doing.” Tang playfully pokes Tammy lightly before speaking in a loud and stern voice. “You cannot tell if they are actually being stern with you or just messing with you playfully. This is humor.”<sup>49</sup>

Tang sings the first few measures indifferently without phrasing or expression before suddenly singing with lively and changing characters from the upbeat of m. 5. He explains how beginning with restraint creates more contrast and humor, like an expressionless mime who suddenly reveals their true amusing self. To show Tammy how starting with too much expression takes away from the humor in the end, Tang sings from the beginning with wacky movements and sound that are predictable. As Tammy tries, Tang embodies different characters at her side.

To create unpredictability at repeated phrases, Tang sings repetitions with different textures. For example, one is serious with a rich and deep tone while another is playful, light, and funny. “Not to say it must be this way,” says Tang, “but you need to think about your way of speaking and how to arrange it.”<sup>50</sup> Tang also has the student make the endings of each repetition unique.

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<sup>49</sup> Tang, lessons with Tammy.

<sup>50</sup> Tang, lessons with Tammy.

Figure 2. Haydn's Piano Sonata in D Major Hob. XVI:33 Mov. 1, mm. 58-66<sup>51</sup>

The image shows a musical score for Haydn's Piano Sonata in D Major, Hob. XVI:33, Movement 1, measures 58-66. The score is in D major and 3/4 time. It features a right-hand melody with various ornaments and fingerings, and a left-hand accompaniment with arpeggiated chords. Dynamics include 'meno f' and 'f'. Measure numbers 58, 63, and 66 are indicated.

Tang wants the repeated arpeggiated chords at mm. 60 and 64 to sound like ends of questions with different lengths and dynamics. Which is longer or shorter? Which is louder or softer? Tang depicts many of the piece's repetitions as questions that must be asked with different intensities and moods. To demonstrate, he asks a question in shock with his hands up, then with directness while pointing at Tammy, then with curiosity and hesitancy while looking upward, and lastly whispered with fear and hunched up shoulders. He explains that to ask the same way twice would be foolish.

#### Characterization of Instruments, Dialogue, and Dances

Tang often relates music to the sound of instruments, dialogue, or dances to encourage the student's imagination. For example, hearing sustained bass notes below the melody like the drone of a bagpipe that continuously maintains the same sound, hearing repetitive rhythms drummed out like percussion with a steady and intentional tempo,

<sup>51</sup> Haydn, "Sonate," 81.

imitating a music box with a calm and constant tone and tempo, or imitating opera or the sound of laughter. “You can imitate all kinds of tones and manners of speaking,” says Tang.<sup>52</sup>

Figure 3. Haydn’s Piano Sonata in D Major Hob. XVI:33 Mov. 1, mm. 93-97<sup>53</sup>



Tang characterizes the left-hand marcato notes from Haydn’s Piano Sonata in D Major Hob. XVI:33 as plucked notes on a string instrument where the whole arm plays with the hand lifting up and down. He explains how the repeated marcato notes are like a fugue where “from the first note, you need to define your tone color.”<sup>54</sup>

In addition to imitating instruments, Tang has students bring out alternating lines in the left and right hands like a dialogue between two people.

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<sup>52</sup> Tang, lessons with Tammy.

<sup>53</sup> Haydn, “Sonate,” 82.

<sup>54</sup> Tang, lessons with Tammy.

Figure 4. Czerny's Etude in D Major Op. 740 No. 3 "Presto veloce," mm. 61-68<sup>55</sup>

The image shows a musical score for Czerny's Etude in D Major Op. 740 No. 3, measures 61-68. The score is in D major and 2/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a cello-like bass line and a treble line with sixteenth-note patterns. Dynamics include p, cresc., and f. Fingerings and articulation marks are present throughout.

In Czerny's Etude in D Major Op. 740 No. 3, Tang alternates singing the left-hand quarter notes like a cello with a rich and mysterious tone and the right-hand sixteenth notes brightly and clearly. After the right hand leads at m. 61, Tang wants the left hand to lead at m. 62, then the right hand at m. 64, left hand at m. 66, and right hand at m. 68. "The level of importance of the two hands is changing," says Tang.<sup>56</sup> He encourages the student to adjust their technique to the needs of the music by playing the accompanying hand lighter, which also saves strength.

For dance music, Tang has students create variance between downbeats, such as in the opening of *Pièces Pittoresques* No. 10 "Scherzo-Valse" by Chabrier.

<sup>55</sup> Carl Czerny, *L'arte di rendere agili le dita: 50 studi brillanti per pianoforte (op. 740)*, ed. Luigi Finizio (Milan: Curci, 1948), 17, [https://imslp.org/wiki/The\\_Art\\_of\\_Finger\\_Dexterity,\\_Op.740\\_\(Czerny,\\_Carl\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/The_Art_of_Finger_Dexterity,_Op.740_(Czerny,_Carl)).

<sup>56</sup> Tang, lessons with Tammy.

Figure 5. Chabrier's *Pièces Pittoresques* No. 10 "Scherzo-Valse," mm. 1-4<sup>57</sup>



Tang wants the feeling of a countryside dance with more emphasis on the first measure's downbeat and somewhat less on the second measure's downbeat, so that the opening measures are grouped into two measures each. To help Tammy hear the variance in downbeats, Tang sings the melody while stomping more on the first downbeat with the palm of his hand facing up and less on the second downbeat with his palm facing down.

When teaching the third movement *Tempo di Menuetto* ("Tempo of a Minuet") of Haydn's Piano Sonata in D Major Hob. XVI:33, Tang also wants the student to feel the sense of dance in the three beats per measure. He has the student watch how a minuet is danced with huge dresses but small steps, and at what tempos. The elegant dance is "extremely delicate, exquisite, and refined," says Tang who sits upright with his head back in a sophisticated pose and conducts the three beats with his hand motioning from left to right like dance steps. In contrast, he plays at the student's faster tempo and then dances comically and out of control to show how the character changes completely.

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<sup>57</sup> Emmanuel Chabrier, "X. Scherzo-Valse," in *Works for Piano*, ed. Roy Howat (n.d., ca. 1891; repr., Mineola: Dover Publications, 1995), [https://imslp.org/wiki/10\\_Pièces\\_pittoresques\\_\(Chabrier,\\_Emmanuel\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/10_Pièces_pittoresques_(Chabrier,_Emmanuel)).

## Timing in Romantic Music

Playing music with timing that creates balance, variance, or emphasis while connecting with human emotions is central to Tang's teaching. When teaching Romantic works, Tang focuses on a careful balance: "We must maintain a unified and always flowing tempo and pulse, but it does not mean you cannot extend the timing. When you extend the timing, often you must immediately come back to the original road. ... If you are on an outside path too long and do not come back to the original road in time, then it seems sluggish. If you come back to the original road too fast, then it seems you are extremely rash."<sup>58</sup> Through singing, hand motions, and snapping, Tang guides the student to play natural ebbs and flows in timing with reminders such as "breathe" and "a little simpler."<sup>59</sup>

When teaching Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor Op. 35, Tang explains how Harry needs to extend the timing in some places, so that even when the music is uneasy and pressing, we still have a sense of his control.

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<sup>58</sup> Zhe Tang, lessons with Harry, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>59</sup> Tang, lessons with Harry.

Figure 6. Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor Op. 35 Mov. 1 “Doppio movimento,” mm. 19-22<sup>60</sup>



This running eighth note rhythm lasts for a page and a half in the opening of Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor Op. 35. Tang points out that Harry plays with a sense of always moving forward and that as soon as it is loud, it is easy to feel a sense of urgency. Instead, Tang demonstrates taking time at some places where the music gets louder, such as m. 21. “Only when you have laid out a foundation of broadness prior, can you then pull faster,” says Tang.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to taking time among many phrases, Tang also teaches elongating certain notes. For example, holding loud chords so the following note can be heard clearly or suspending time on certain notes to prevent sounding too straightforward. For slow melodic phrases that repeat several times, Tang teaches suspending time on one note in the phrase and playing each repetition of that note with subtle differences in timing, dynamic, and feel that must be planned beforehand.

Tang also teaches the importance of taking time at *sforzandos* in Romantic music. Pianists at the Chopin Competition often emphasize *sforzandos*, accents, or peak notes by taking more time on them, explains Tang. Tang encourages his students to learn from

<sup>60</sup> Fryderyk Chopin, “Sonate No. 2, Op. 35,” in *Chopin Complete Works: VI Sonatas*, ed. Ignacy Jan Paderewski, Ludwik Bronarski, and Józef Turczyński (Warsaw: Institut Fryderyka Chopina, 1950), 46, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Piano\\_Sonata\\_No.2,\\_Op.35\\_\(Chopin,\\_Frederic\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Piano_Sonata_No.2,_Op.35_(Chopin,_Frederic)).

<sup>61</sup> Tang, lessons with Harry.

imitation as the first step to creative ingenuity, just as Bach learned from copying others' pieces since a young age, which later allowed him to develop into an extraordinary and innovative composer.<sup>62</sup>

To express music in a way that touches others and draws them into its introspective aspects, Tang explains how one must reflect on their way of speaking in the music, which often involves timing. He imagines Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 as speaking to oneself or a one-way communication with the heavens that might also give some replies. If Bach's works are like the Bible's Old Testament, says Tang, then Beethoven's sonatas are like the New Testament with its crown being his last five sonatas that tend to be introspective, introverted, and reflective.

Music's greatness is to touch people's hearts and make life more beautiful even in war-torn circumstances, says Tang. For example, Myra Hess raised everyone's morale and spirits during World War II by playing great piano works, including Beethoven in London when it was being bombed by Germany. Also during World War II, a Polish-Jewish pianist played Chopin and was helped by a German officer as told in the movie *The Pianist*, showing how music touches people whether they are the aggressor or aggressed upon, and whether their power is large or small.

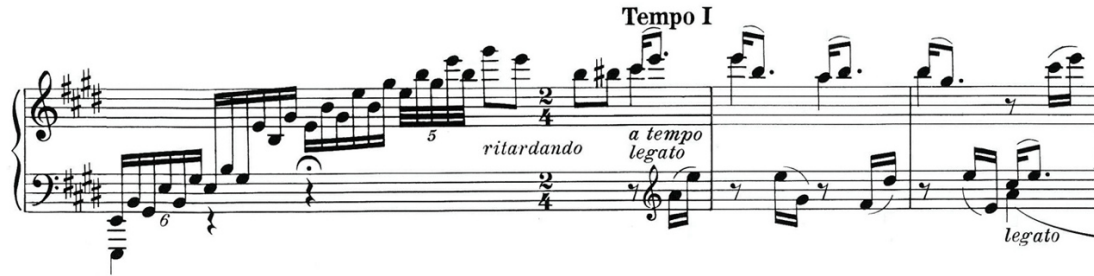
To express music's greatness and its introspective qualities, one must play with sincerity in their timing.

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<sup>62</sup> Zhe Tang, lessons with Sherry, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.



Figure 7. Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 Mov. 1, mm. 66-68<sup>63</sup>



In Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 Mov. 1, Tang explains how the return to Tempo I has a feeling of hesitancy and reflection, so it cannot start too abruptly or be played too fast. To create a transition into Tempo I that sounds extremely lonely and yearning, Tang has Sherry use less pedal on the arpeggiated notes prior. Tang explains how less pedal also creates a more stylistically correct sound, since the piano in Beethoven's time could not produce the sound today's modern piano can with the pedal left down for so long.<sup>64</sup>

### Slow and Melodic Sections

Tang has students play notes to the bottom of the key bed in slow and melodic sections even when the dynamic is quiet. "When soft," says Tang, "actually your arm's weight needs to push to the bottom and from this produce this slightly plumper sound rather than an empty or weak sound."<sup>65</sup> Tang explains how keys cannot be pushed down all the way if the elbows lock up. If the keys are not pushed down all the way, then the

<sup>63</sup> Ludwig van Beethoven, "Sonate, Opus 109," in *Klaviersonaten: Band II*, ed. Bertha Antonia Wallner (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1952), 275-276, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Piano\\_Sonata\\_No.30,\\_Op.109\\_\(Beethoven,\\_Ludwig\\_van\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Piano_Sonata_No.30,_Op.109_(Beethoven,_Ludwig_van)).

<sup>64</sup> Tang, lessons with Sherry.

<sup>65</sup> Tang, lessons with Sherry.

sound's thickness will not be enough. Tang demonstrates dropping down into the keys with soft wrists and elbows. He also reminds students not to hunch over the keys, saying they often do not hear well when hunched over.

Tang relates melodic sections to human feelings and expression to help the student connect with the music and play more naturally. Tang describes different sections of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 as asking life questions to which no one can give an answer or earnestly praying for mercy only to be ignored, which slowly develops a struggle and discontentment in one's heart. "We say that our lives and experiences help us to understand music," says Tang, "because if a person's life is extremely smooth and easy without any suffering, setbacks, or these frustrating types of circumstances, then they do not have a way to feel this inner strength." Tang sighs painfully. "See, even taking a breath requires effort. How much more playing piano?"<sup>66</sup>

Figure 8. Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 Mov. 1, mm. 74-81<sup>67</sup>



Tang inhales at the rests of mm. 75 to 77 in Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 Mov. 1 and describes them as gasps for breath that require coming off the prior notes in time. He explains how the following measures are like walking with difficulty

<sup>66</sup> Tang, lessons with Sherry.

<sup>67</sup> Beethoven, "Sonate, Opus 109," 276.

and struggle one step at a time. As Sherry plays from m. 77, Tang gives reminders: “harmony,” “don’t play fast,” and “push with the arms.”<sup>68</sup>

Figure 9. Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 Mov. 3, mm. 196-203<sup>69</sup>



Tang describes the ending of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 as a meditative monologue spoken with a type of helplessness that sees through the vanities of this world. He has Sherry listen to the connection between notes to prevent an uneven touch, push with her arms, and pedal cleanly. For the resolution in m. 199, Tang wants Sherry to hear the full harmony crescendo and decrescendo instead of playing with a thin sound.

To help Sherry play the last two measures (mm. 202 to 203) with appropriate feeling and timing, Tang has Sherry imagine how she speaks when pouring out the intense emotions of her heart. Suppose she feels helpless and hopeless at the end of a bad day. She did not play piano well, Tang was not pleased with her, and her mom yelled at her. When she expresses her emotion either to herself or someone else, it will be said in a simple and contemplative way. “Forget it. I won’t live,” says Tang sincerely.

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<sup>68</sup> Tang, lessons with Sherry.

<sup>69</sup> Beethoven, “Sonate, Opus 109,” 290.

To imitate Sherry slowing down too much, Tang then says it again with a very slow ending that sounds overdone, unrealistic, and therefore comical. When Beethoven's music is overdone, it also sounds unrealistic, which is why we must play with sincerity. Tang explains how, even though Beethoven's language is different from ours, we can still derive from his manner of speaking what he or we might want to say, which is why great music can inspire us.

### Balance of Sound

Throughout Tang's teaching, he emphasizes striking a correct balance of sound whether vertically between different voices or horizontally with crescendos and decrescendos. "These proportions are things we need to seek after our whole lives," says Tang.<sup>70</sup> Between different moving lines, Tang teaches establishing layers where sometimes the right hand is more than the left hand and vice versa, but the relationship between layers is always changing. For groups of fast-moving chords, Tang sometimes suggests bringing out the top line with a lighter left hand for a clearer sound that also serves as a safety net where any wrong left-hand notes are less noticeable.

In *forte* sections of Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor Op. 35, Tang explains how it is not good for the sound to be too strong nor not strong enough. "We need to look for a middle ground," says Tang.<sup>71</sup> To prevent the music from sounding noisy, Tang suggests playing with some restraint and a less thick sound. He also teaches

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<sup>70</sup> Tang, lessons with Harry.

<sup>71</sup> Tang, lessons with Harry.

motions to help cushion chords and prevent a slapped or crushed sound that comes from pushing the keys too impetuously.

Tang explains how the end goal of different touches and motions is to control the speed in which the hammer hits the piano string by controlling the speed in which the keys are pushed: “All of our sound on the piano, if you really speak of it from a physics perspective, is simply a hammer hitting a piano string. ... This is a process no one can change. Therefore, all the telling you to ‘touch the key this way,’ ‘your elbow should be like this,’ ‘arm,’ ‘shoulder,’ ‘waist,’ etc. is actually to help you solve the problem of the speed and force in which you contact the key. When we solve these two problems (of the speed and force used to contact the key), we thereby solve the inside problem of the force in which the hammer hits (the string).”<sup>72</sup>

The sound is reliant on the timing in which one contacts the key to be just right. Movements, such as lifting the hand a little higher or breathing, help to cushion the speed in which one pushes the key and therefore cushion the force in which the hammer hits the string.

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<sup>72</sup> Tang, lessons with Sherry.

Figure 10. Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 Mov. 1 "Adagio espressivo," mm. 60-61<sup>73</sup>



Tang demonstrates playing loud chords in Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 Mov. 1 with his elbows making the motion of a half circle going out and up, so that there is a cushion or buffer zone as the chord is pushed down. As Sherry plays, Tang reminds her to bring out the top voice of the chord and to "open the arms."<sup>74</sup>

### Crescendos and Decrescendos

To create a balance of sound among crescendos and decrescendos, Tang teaches maintaining a consistent tone and playing natural ups and downs inspired by imagery. He encourages students to explore the many ways one can crescendo and decrescendo comfortably without rigidly forcing the sound. "Our piano practice is all about practicing appropriate proportions," says Tang.<sup>75</sup> He explains how it is a mistake to crescendo too much or little, or to stay quiet for too long after a decrescendo. "In a long phrase, there

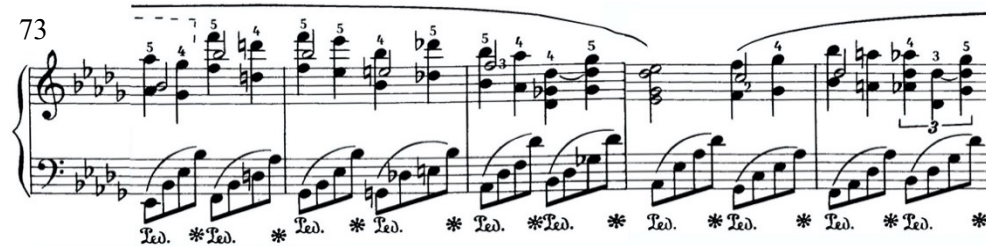
<sup>73</sup> Beethoven, "Sonate, Opus 109," 276.

<sup>74</sup> Tang, lessons with Sherry.

<sup>75</sup> Tang, lessons with Sherry.

can be times you come down, but coming down is definitely for the sake of going up again.”<sup>76</sup>

Figure 11. Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor Op. 35 Mov. 1 “Doppio movimento,” mm. 73-77<sup>77</sup>



When the sound decrescendos in mm. 75 to 76 of Chopin’s Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor Op. 35 Mov. 1, Tang explains how the harmonies still must maintain a certain thickness in sound with the left hand’s help. At the same time, the melody line must also maintain the same singing style with each note. Even when the volume of sound changes, the tone must remain consistent. To demonstrate, Tang sings each of the melody notes in a rich operatic tone: “Si la re sol mi.” To contrast, he then sings the notes while becoming lax in tone and calls it a “pop song.”<sup>78</sup>

To inspire natural ebbs and flows in volume, Tang uses imagery. For example, playing with a “feeling of running away” to encourage a gradual decrescendo as opposed to a sudden decrease in sound. Or playing as though the music is in the distance and slowly coming closer to encourage a gradual build up as opposed to a sudden loud or aggressive sound. After the third movement funeral march of Chopin’s Piano Sonata No.

<sup>76</sup> Tang, lessons with Harry.

<sup>77</sup> Chopin, “Sonate No. 2, Op. 35,” 48.

<sup>78</sup> Tang, lessons with Harry.

2 in B-flat Minor Op. 35, Tang describes the fourth movement's continuous triplet eighth notes as a cold autumn wind that sweeps away fallen leaves on tombs in a graveyard with a somber and desolate feel.

Figure 12. Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor Op. 35 Mov. 4, mm. 1-3<sup>79</sup>



To help Harry imagine and create the sound of wind, Tang sings wind sounds of varying intensities by crescendoing and decrescendoing and motions little circles of wind with his hand. To show how crescendos can easily be overdone to the point of not sounding like wind, Tang sings comically loud with out-of-control hand movements. Tang has Harry play with a shorter touch, lighter left hand, and pedaling that is not too clear nor muddled. He reminds Harry that his touch should be the same as when playing without the pedal in order to clearly enunciate each fast note.

### Summary

With a concise and humorous way of teaching, Tang guides students to create music that characterizes human emotion, instruments, dance, or nature. Tang embodies various characters through singing, hand motions, and demonstrating on the piano to help

<sup>79</sup> Chopin, "Sonate No. 2, Op. 35," 67.



students see what type of imagery their playing inspires and the type of imagery to which they can aspire. To strike the right balance in timing and sound, Tang has students try a passage several times. The students are then able to speak through the piano in a realistic and sincere manner.

## CHAPTER 5

### INTERVIEW WITH LING ZHAO

#### Order of Questions

##### BASICS:

How long have you been teaching?

How long have you been teaching at your current institution?

How many pre-college students do you teach? How many collegiate students do you teach?

What does a typical week of teaching and work look like for you?

##### TEACHING PHILOSOPHY:

What do you enjoy most about teaching?

What are some of your main goals in teaching piano? What do you consider your role as teacher to be?

Do the goals you have for your older students differ from those for the younger? Does this cause you to teach them with different approaches?

What type of environment do you seek to create in lessons?

What does music mean to you? What do you hope music will mean to your students?

What do you hope students will remember most about your teaching?

When are you most proud of your students?

## PERFORMANCE:

In your opinion, what is a meaningful and inspired performance? How do you help your students to get there?

In your opinion, how important are competitions to the growth of a student's playing?

What are some tips you would give for students preparing for competitions? Do you have specific ways for preparing your students for competitions?

Are there other performance opportunities for your students apart from competitions?

## PIANO EDUCATION IN CHINA:

Have you seen piano education in China change since you were young? How so?

What do you consider some of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of piano education in China today?

What do you hope for piano education in China in the next thirty years?

Do you feel China offers its pianists opportunity to fulfill their artistic development and achievement? Why?

Can you describe the teaching of your piano teacher(s) in China? Do you teach this way as well or differently? If differently, then how so?

Do you believe studying in countries outside of China made significant contributions to your teaching? If so, how did it?

What would you say contributed the most to your development as a piano teacher?

How important do you think studying abroad is for students? Why?

## TECHNIQUE:

What would you define as good technique?

How do you teach technique? Do you teach technique differently to younger students compared to the older? Do you have your students practice certain technique exercises (such as scales, arpeggios, finger strengthening, etc.)?

Do you teach physical motion and arm weight? If so, how do you approach these concepts?

Do you have any particular approaches to teaching touch and how the fingers contact the keys?

Do you find any common issues that you have to work on with transfer students? If so, what are they?

#### EXPECTATIONS:

What are your criteria for accepting students?

How do you define talent? How important do you think talent is to a student's success in learning piano?

What do you require of your students (practice time, talent, attitude, etc.)?

Do most of your students have time for other interests outside of school besides piano—such as sports or another instrument?

What do you consider the role of the parent to be in their child's piano education?

What are your expectations for their involvement?

What do you do in situations where the student is or becomes unmotivated?

#### TEACHING METHODS:

Who are some of your favorite composers (and/or compositions) to teach? How do you have your students approach these pieces?

In your opinion, which composers (and/or compositions) are most difficult to teach and why? What have you learned in how to effectively teach these works?

How do you help to cultivate each student's unique artistic development?

How much do you analyze the music with students? How important is this in your methodology?

What do you believe makes your teaching unique from other piano teachers?

What advice would you give to aspiring piano teachers for how to become a successful teacher?

#### REPERTOIRE AND INTERPRETATION:

Do you use any teaching materials such as method books or leveled repertoire books?

If so, which materials do you use and why?

Do you have your students learn from specific editions of music?

What is your process of teaching interpretation?

How do you teach interpretation and freedom of expression in relation to being faithful to the details of the score? Does this change with different composers?

Do you incorporate Chinese piano repertoire in your students' playing? If so, do you find your way of teaching these pieces to differ from teaching Western music?

How so? Which Chinese pieces are especially important?

## Introduction

Transcribed and translated from Mandarin Chinese into English by the author from two days of interviews over Zoom with Dr. Ling Zhao on August 21<sup>st</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Material from both dates was combined into one transcript to maintain fluency. “B” represents the interviewer Burton and “Z” represents the interviewee Zhao. Original questions are italicized and follow-up questions are not. In-between teaching, practicing piano, and taking care of her mother, Dr. Ling Zhao interviewed on two weekends.

B: *Is your mom still teaching piano?*

Z: Yes. She is still teaching.

B: That is amazing. I am sorry to hear the news of your father’s passing.

Z: We are all saddened.

B: *Did he also teach piano until the very end?*

Z: He taught up to the last half year of his life when he was sick. Every time he left the hospital, he said he could teach.

B: *It really is a lifetime of teaching.*

Z: Yes. And he played piano until the very end. He was not able to eat very good food, but when we asked if he still wanted to play piano, he wanted to.

B: *You treat them very well to take care of them.*

Z: Being next to them is also great for me.

B: In another interview, you mentioned your husband is in Germany and that he never complained when you went back to China to take care of your parents. This really touched me.

Z: He supported me coming back to China. When I decided to come back, my friends in Germany disagreed, saying this is your life and such.

B: Not to mention you were the first Chinese (piano) professor there at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater München (University of Music and Performing Arts Munich).

Z: He told me my parents really needed me. He is great and treats my parents very well, so I am very lucky.

#### Basics

B: *How long have you been teaching?*

Z: I graduated in 1991 and then stayed at my school (Central Conservatory of Music) to teach. Before this, we interned under the guidance of Guangren Zhou. I formally started teaching in 1991 and then went to Germany in 1994.

B: *How long have you been teaching at your current institution, Central Conservatory of Music?*

Z: Since 1991. When I left (for Germany), it was my school and country who sent me, so I was still considered the school's government-sponsored teacher. So from 1991 until now (thirty years). [Makes horrified face and laughs].

B: *How many pre-college students do you teach? How many collegiate students do you teach?*

Z: Ten collegiate students (after the start of the semester) and two pre-college students.

B: *What does a typical week of teaching and work look like for you?*

Z: The set schedule is for each student to have two lessons a week. If needed, I might give extra lessons and double the amount.

B: In addition to teaching, do you have other work? Or is it mostly just teaching?

Z: I used to teach a piano pedagogy and practicum course to third-year students twice a week. The rest of my time is busy preparing for classes and recitals. Now I am helping my mom publish her book and spend time writing many things about my parents.

B: You also seem to perform a lot.

Z: Yes. I love playing piano, so the more I play the better. But this also requires me to be able to practice piano more, and time is tight.

### Teaching Philosophy

B: *What do you enjoy most about teaching?*

Z: I want to help my students and for them to be able to work independently. This is most important.

B: *What are some of your main goals in teaching piano? What do you consider your role as teacher to be?*

Z: I think my role as teacher is to look further ahead than my students do, see their most critical problems, and gradually help them. Not only to be their friend but to guide them.

B: *Do the goals you have for your older students differ from those for the younger? Does this cause you to teach them with different approaches?*



Z: Definitely. Each child is so different. Some children pick things up quickly, have good technique, and study correctly. Everything is easy to sort out and you can teach musicality along with their technique, whereas some children come to you and you have to start over with them. Sometimes older children's ability to pick up on things and imitate is not as good as younger children—some will need more dialogue, while others need more demonstrating at the piano. You have to think according to each student's different way of learning. Sometimes great children are not always easy to teach.

B: For children, what do you think is the most important outcome? Is this different for older students?

Z: You must give a clear idea and standard of how to play piano. Then you must help them build this standard, so they can do it later. I have seen many children who might play one piece very well, but with another new piece, they start from nothing. This is because their teacher would add things to their pieces like makeup: "Play loudly here, play slowly there, that should be this way, etc." Then everything is somewhat fragmented and unnatural.

This does not solve anything, and the student is still unable to work independently. You must teach and develop the student's abilities. You are just a walking stick that supports them for a certain period of time. You have to tell them how you help them and how to not hurt themselves, so that when you leave, they can continue working and go even farther without you. This is most essential. I am just one person for one period of time with them. In this time, I must tell them the most crucial things to help them. Then I let them go.

B: Is this the same for older students? Or is it different?

Z: The foundation of older students' piano playing is different. If a student has a good foundation from their middle school years, then you may be able to take them further in this process. For example, my student who competed at the (18<sup>th</sup> International) Chopin Piano Competition. She is not a child that I have to give lessons to every day. She learns very well and has her own individuality and personality. You have to consider what kind of suggestions and guidance she needs most, and then give it to her at the right time. You must teach the most crucial points and let her see that these places can be transformed right away. Then she will do it herself. This is very different from teaching all the small details to children.

B: *What type of environment do you seek to create in lessons?*

Z: Harmonious, but there must still be mutual respect.

B: What advice do you have for how teachers can create this type of environment?

Z: You must be able to quickly discern what the student needs and wants from you, and in this time deliver it well so that they trust you. You have to gain trust through a process. If at first, you are only a good friend who chats with the student, then there is no respect. This is very important. Without respect there is nothing—what you say will be useless. So from the very start, it must be known that there will be respect. It does not necessarily mean you will be strict, but the student will know that you know what they need and can help them. ...

So what is the environment? Definitely harmonious, but when needed it is very strict or can be very happy or can be many things. They must balance together [makes a circle with both hands to show the two balancing], maybe like this [shows tension between her hands and laughs], but they must work together to be effective.

B: *What does music mean to you? What do you hope music will mean to your students?*

Z: Music means a lot to me. It is an important part of my life that I do not think can be separated. I hope to tell my students what music means to me, and if they trust me, then they may be like children are to their parents: my parents think this is good, so maybe I also think this is good. Children do not have much discernment yet, so you are the example that guides them.

B: *What do you hope students will remember most about your teaching?*

Z: That it helped them. This is not so much my hope, but if what I give them is truly useful to them then they will definitely remember me. [Laughs]. Before Yuja Wang left China, she felt my mom's hand (her mom was Wang's piano teacher) and said, "Okay. I've memorized your hand now." This is just how it is.

B: When you were young, your parents were also your piano teachers. Was that a happy or hard time? Or both?

Z: Both. Definitely. When I was younger, (my parents and older brother) all played piano. My brother told me that because he would listen to records all day, I could whistle large-scale works like Beethoven's symphonies and Dvořák's violin concerto and such when I was two years old. My parents gave me this type of environment, so when asked if I wanted to study piano, I said, "Of course!" What else was there besides this? I thought this was the best thing and did it every day. But when it came time to practice piano, maybe because I was a kid, I would often mess around.

B: Do you have any advice for how music teacher parents can successfully teach their children, while also making it a happy experience?

Z: I do not think there are any examples of this. [Laughs]. I grew up in the school (Central Conservatory of Music), so the families around me all had parents who could play piano, even if it was not at such a professional level. Many children my age studied piano, but as of today the number of people who ended up making a career of it is extremely small. Also, those with families who trained them little by little are unfortunately very few.

My mom was very strict in what she required and did not allow me to be reckless. My dad was extremely kind and would reason with me, “You can’t do this in this way, because of this and that.” He would have me take time to achieve things in the moment. Generally speaking, Chinese children from my generation were very obedient. I was very naughty and would always be outside playing and climbing trees, but when it came time to get things done, I would still get things done.

B: Would your mom help you practice piano?

Z: Definitely, but since we lived in the school, there were also practice rooms I could go to. I was scared to practice at home, because as soon as I played, it was incorrect. [Laughs]. At the school, I would take my music books to go practice, or perhaps I would go out to play.

B: *When are you most proud of your students?*

Z: When they can take what I tell them and use it fluently—for them to sort it out appropriately and use their abilities to demonstrate it. For example, I felt very proud after watching my student perform (at the 18<sup>th</sup> International Chopin Piano Competition). I do not mean she will win something, but I felt she was using all her abilities, and this is what I really wish to see.

B: She put her heart into the performance and was able to touch others.

Z: Yes. I think this is most important, because everyone has different wants and goals. I feel so-called “proud” of my student when they use my help where needed. It should be a very unselfish thing and not a time to look at all the things I have done but rather to feel that my student has matured, and therefore I am happy for them.

### Performance

B: *In your opinion, what is a meaningful and inspired performance? How do you help your students to get there?*

Z: Each person’s perception of the same piece is different. There is a fundamental framework and structure that must be expressed. You have to help the student achieve this, but how you help them is also very different for each student depending on their foundational skills. Sometimes you must work a long time on certain difficulties the student has. This has nothing to do with being a good student or good teacher. Sometimes things just take time to grasp, so you must give the student time and patience.

However, you must know that timing is very important. When you sense the student is almost there, you must [does fist pumps]. It is like my mom says: When water is about to start boiling, do not turn off the flame or else you will have to start from scratch the next day. While protecting the student, you must also push them at the right time and help them get it.

B: *In your opinion, how important are competitions to the growth of a student’s playing?*

Z: Competitions are definitely a way to gain experience and challenge oneself. There are limits on time, criteria, repertoire, and quality of execution. Competitions also involve stage presence, adjustment to the concert hall, and organization of practice time. When all these things are put together, what is the student's overall grasp of everything? It is very comprehensive. When under the guidance of a teacher and at appropriate times, I think competitions are a great motivator for students.

I used to not like competitions, because they involve unfairness. You do not know which judge will like you, which is something you cannot speculate, but there is still this partiality. When a child has not fully developed their self-confidence yet and prepares very well for a competition, but it is still not enough, then they will be very hurt. Some children will not mind this hurt as much and will get over it quickly with smiles and play, while other children will take the hurt harder. There are pros and cons.

When my student participated in a competition, everyone thought she was fantastic. After she got off stage, I told her not to expect anything. She acted like she did not care, but think of how much work and heart she put into it. Actually, people will always have this anticipation. The results came out and she was last place. Afterward, I told her, "It doesn't matter at all. You know, our experience is the same. ... Fate brought us together." (Dr. Zhao also participated in a competition where her teacher was not a judge and in the end, the judges' students were selected). This situation is not uncommon.

Nowadays, I still have my students prepare for competitions with the intention and hope that they will benefit from the preparation process. A large-scale and small-scale competition are very different. If you ever prepare for a large-scale competition like the Tchaikovsky or Chopin competitions, then you will know the requirements of each

round and how to organize playing three or four rounds of music all at once, including a concerto. It is very hard work.

We participate in competitions on our own initiative and must prepare many things, but to play piano well, have talent, and participate in competitions does not guarantee winning anything. This “winning” is a perception.

B: Maybe the process is what is important.

Z: Yes. The process, and then doing what you wanted to do. The rest depends on the heavens.

B: You mentioned before that some students will feel very hurt when they do not win. Do you have them not participate in competitions? Or do you have them participate and feel hurt as part of the learning experience?

Z: I will still have them prepare. People are peculiar—they have an innate ability to protect themselves. If they feel very uncomfortable, they will back out. Sometimes students are actually very prepared, but they do not think so and in the end, their instinct to protect themselves tells them not to go on stage.

B: Then it is best for them to decide.

Z: Yes. By that time, you leave it up to them.

B: *What are some tips you would give for students preparing for competitions? Do you have specific ways for preparing your students for competitions?*

Z: This varies with each individual. The requirements are different for students preparing for small-scale versus large-scale competitions, and for students with no competition experience versus students who are always competing. Sometimes you must let a child slip up a few times before they can do it. But whether it is a competition or non-

competitive performance, you must communicate with them what the requirement is for preparing the music.

This requirement should set a standard for how all their studies should be mastered. For example, fluent playing without stopping, technical problems sorted out, and a certain musical expression. Only after this has been mastered can they then touch the listener. Otherwise, as soon as the music is touching, then the music suddenly stops. Students should definitely participate in some competitions and prepare well.

*B: Are there other performance opportunities for your students apart from competitions?*

Z: Yes. There are practice performances. I might have them participate in some of my events or have them perform when I am teaching. Performing on stage is very important. Some children are not stage material. They might be a thousand times more hard working than I am and never miss notes when they play off-stage, because they practice so much, but as soon as they get on stage, then they are in trouble and it is a mess. Their mentality is not that of a stage person. Some people are stage people. They can take what I teach them and suddenly perform it on stage the best they ever have. This requires a certain ability.

#### Piano Education in China

*B: Have you seen piano education in China change since you were young? How so?*

Z: When I studied piano, there were not so many people learning piano. I have lived inside the music conservatory since I was little. My family and I never left. My house has a door squished in the middle—on one side is where I live and on the other is a practice



room. Ever since I was little, I heard everyone practicing next door, upstairs, and downstairs every day. All repertoire became familiar to my ears. I could sing and play everything. This was the type of environment I lived in, but this was not the environment others had, whether today or in the past.

When I was young, everyone was very eager to learn. If a teacher came, everyone would go to learn from them. I remember when (Isaac) Stern came for a masterclass and everyone from school squeezed into the concert hall. Seiji Ozawa, Annie Fischer, and Menahem (Pressler) also came. But when I was young, all I thought was a master teacher has come to play and I will listen. It was nothing extraordinary. It was a normal part of the world I grew up in. Everyone was extremely interested to learn.

Nowadays, I think this type of curiosity in everyone's studies is not like before—not like the older generation of pianists and educators. I remember my mom and dad taking many notes on scores of music. They would all go to listen. Now when someone comes, you must tell your students they are required to go. This might have to do with everyone online saying this and that, but in reality, to really do things accurately and seek authenticity is rare. Everyone thinks they know. There is now a so-called “Lang Lang craze” with all these things like building a Lang Lang center. Every day, his team is doing this and that.

Have things slowly drifted away from the original faithfulness to music itself—from that simplicity and passion—and turned into some trendy thing? Some children tell me, “I want to study with you. Listen to me play.” Then they will play very hard pieces. This really worries me. I do not know what everyone is thinking when doing this—that if you go to a competition and play an extremely hard piece only for the sake of winning,

and then play it very messily, that you will still get points because of the difficulty? But look at the Olympics: you can choose a very difficult move to dive into the water, but if your quality of execution is not good enough, they will still not give you points.

This way of thinking exists in piano competitions and education. I am very against it. I think the prior teacher should leave the student with knowing what pieces they can understand and play wonderfully at each stage of their learning process. This should be in accordance with the student's age, hands, skill, intelligence, and sense of language. In contrast, the student who suddenly jumps into the adult world as a hero, not having enjoyed the things of childhood, then ends up with all sorts of bad habits that I (as the next teacher) have no way to fix. Does this ruin the student's future path in piano or help them?

Recently, I have seen a lot of children like this, such as in some competitions. People think, "Oh, they are playing this and that!" [Makes enthusiastic gestures]. So what? Food must be eaten one bite at a time. Having not finished a bite of this first but then eating something else—this is not possible. This is a condition in history that I cannot simply fix by pointing it out, but I do not think it is a healthy thing. Some children mature very young, and if they really have the ability then you can give them some (challenging pieces) as appropriate. I am not so old-fashioned. But you cannot teach all children in this same way.

B: It turns into a way to show off.

Z: Yes. And what's more, there is nothing to show. If you are not able to grasp a piece and only play superficially, then what is there to show? It is bad guidance to give a child

this type of pursuit. The child will think that music is only like how they are expected to complete it in this way. This is not good. ...

Piano education in China has definitely changed since I was young with changes for the better. There are still many children who play very well. Nowadays, since they grow healthy and with good nutrition, some children indeed can play very well early on. There must be leveled steps, though, and perhaps they will learn very quickly.

*B: What do you consider some of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of piano education in China today?*

Z: It is a strength that there are so many piano related things in China, which can be found all over social media. At the same time, a good article might be plagiarized and then passed around. One day, I saw an article saying it was written by my mom. My mom said she did not know of this. [Laughs]. Everyone's love for learning is a good thing, but the method and objective of learning needs time to help everyone mature.

*B: What do you hope for piano education in China in the next thirty years?*

Z: I think mistakes are allowed. Everyone must make mistakes in order to mature over time. I just hope everyone will understand things for themselves and make changes for the better. I think there will be a lot of growth.

I also hope those who boast endlessly about themselves can be a little quieter. [Laughs]. This idea of fame and wealth, and attitude of being too good for things perhaps is different for those of us who grew up in the music school since we were kids. For example, when people tell my parents, "You have made great contributions," my parents think to themselves, "What contributions did I make? Every day I am just doing my own things." In contrast, many people boast of themselves from nothing. [Motions bigness

with hands over head]. To seek the truth and be realistic is really the only way to be grounded and content. When you study, it becomes your own.

So what do I hope? I hope everyone can become grounded and quieter, because we have so much potential to do better. We have so much potential in our studies and exchanges, but right now the exchanges are superficial. For example, you and I do not know each other very well. I could tell you I am really great. [Does various poses and laughs]. I can tell you when you play piano, you should have this type of feeling and this type of artistic ambience. And what is this? Oh, that is a colorful cloud in the heavens!

Well, how do I play? In your practice and teaching, don't you want to be more specific? I hope there can be practical teaching. That if it should be played like a colorful cloud, then I can tell you exactly how to do so, so that you are able to with time. I hope this process will be in place.

*B: Do you feel China offers its pianists opportunity to fulfill their artistic development and achievement? Why?*

Z: Nowadays, China has many institutions and music stores. They are doing their best to develop people, and many new people emerge, so they have many opportunities to fulfill artistic development. I also give applause to the publicity. [Laughs]. I have had several things be publicized, and as soon as everyone shares it then it goes viral. There is definitely this type of opportunity. Also, there are financial and material resources, and great music halls and pianos. All of this provides the best conditions. The capacity and capabilities are there.

Nowadays, maybe there are too many musicians who want to become famous. Originally, before Covid-19, everyone could come and go, and the world was placid.

When you went abroad, maybe people knew about you, while those at home did not. Now it seems (your reputation) is only what is condensed online. Pianists who finish their studies abroad and want to come back to find a good position right away must publicize themselves as someone huge. For example, saying, “So-and-so says I am an incredible pianist.” People always use other’s words to say good of themselves. This is partly attributed to the environment, and partly to the individual.

Actually, I have seen my parents constantly studying their whole lifetime—always listening to others and reviewing. Sometimes after they finish a lesson, they will say, “Today, this child was like this and that. Do you think I should play some of this for them? How would that be? I cannot fix this problem. Do you have some good method you could share with me?” I do not think I see this with others, or maybe people are not willing to communicate with me like this which is fine, but I see my parents still doing this consistently their whole lifetime.

What right do we have to do anything else? It is good to simply keep studying and say to others the things we want to say. For the rest, something is not good just because you say it is good, or bad just because you say it is bad. This is not how it is, though I think there is this attitude toward art.

*B: Can you describe the teaching of your piano teacher(s) in China? Do you teach this way as well or differently? If differently, then how so?*

Z: In China, I had four teachers: my mom and dad, then teacher Zhihong Guo and teacher Guangren Zhou. One was this method at home. Of course, to this day, the one I am in contact with the most is my mom. It used to be my mom and dad (who recently passed away). My mom is still advancing and adjusting her teaching methods, and we are still

investigating. I think this way of teaching is very scientific, because each student's problems and way of expression are different. Fundamentally, my mom's teaching is simply telling you what types of rational methods to use, how to use your strength, and how to train your fingers and technical abilities. Then she adjusts and conditions her methods to best meet your needs.

I think teacher Zhihong Guo is an extremely talented artist. His father, Mr. Moruo Guo, is a great writer in China and Zhihong Guo is his youngest son, so his keenness toward art, music, and everything in the universe is like electricity. Even though I only studied with him for a short time, I am still very thankful for him. Teacher Guangren Zhou is an extremely gentle elderly woman. She would not force me to do anything. She gave me many opportunities and took me to competitions. I am extremely grateful for these teachers.

B: I noticed that you, Yuja Wang, and Lang Lang all seem to have these big personalities and laughs—to be the type to really enjoy life. I feel the three of your piano playing is also full of this liveliness. Is this an attitude toward music taught by your parents, since the three of you all studied with them?

Z: Yes, I think it is an attitude toward music. Actually, when my parents were a bit younger, they really loved life. They would go swimming and look after kids and students. Our house was constantly full of kids. My parents would watch recordings, movies, and music concerts with them, and then speak to them about it. They used their heart and blood to influence them.

While they were working very hard, I happened to be in Germany for over ten years, so I lost that time and there are many things I do not know. They mentioned times

when my dad would bike his student back after they played a recital and make them late night food. Sometimes after a stern piano lesson, he would bring them home for a meal just like he would for his own children. This is actually a kind of home-styled education.

B: Music was just a part of life that could be enjoyed.

Z: Yes. I think what was conveyed was a love for life, a love for music, and sincerity.

B: *Do you believe studying in countries outside of China made significant contributions to your teaching? If so, how did it?*

Z: Education abroad, as I recall, is different. When I was abroad, I had German, French, and Japanese students who all seemed to differ from students here in China. They did not put in all their strength and had their own lives. What they wanted was not like the children here in China who think, “I must be like this.” It seemed they wanted to enjoy life with this and that, and when asked if they will come to class, they would say, “Oh, today I have something else. I will go to my friend’s.”

In my education, my mom was clear and precise. My dad would make changes through reasoning and explaining how to do things. Teacher Guo would speak of the music’s many special characteristics. Teacher Zhou would say, “This is very quiet. You can capture it at this moment.” When I went abroad (to Germany), my teacher (Franz Massinger) was a student of Michelangeli and was very honored to have studied with him. He was very humorous and not pushy. It was in this humorous and non-pushy manner that he would tell me things, and this helped me remember all of it very well. I would be amazed at his demonstrations on the piano. I also took lessons with Leon Fleisher.

All these teachers influenced me. I was lively and somewhat naughty as a kid, but I was unconsciously influenced and able to put their teachings to use. At first glance, my way of expression might seem like my parents, but in reality there are subtle influences from many people—their methods, way of thinking, and how they view and explain music. I use many different things from them with my students, so I cannot say that a certain person made a significant contribution. But of course, always being by my parents' side is an extremely important influence.

*B: What would you say contributed the most to your development as a piano teacher?*

Would it be your parents?

*Z:* Yes. My parents greatly influenced me. Also, there are many practical methods in Chinese education. My childhood, growing up, and some parts of my foundation were all here. After seeing the world and coming back, I recognize more and more the extreme importance and usefulness of this foundation. You must tell your students how to practically do something, even if they only come for one lesson with you. This is a very critical issue. My core is still here with my parents. ...

Of course, throughout your lifetime, you meet many different teachers—you listen to their classes, take a class temporarily, or accompany a fellow musician. Any situation is a contributing factor that influences you. Out of all these teachers that taught me, I still think my family is the largest contributing factor.

*B: How important do you think studying abroad is for students? Why?*

*Z:* Very important. The language, environment, and comprehensive ability to manage your life with studying, practicing, and competing is very important. A person must be able to manage their life before they can do important things. Children in China have



everything done for them. They cannot do it themselves. This is a real pity and disables them. But if you study abroad, you must have a way to solve problems.

If you are in America, then you will use an American way of thinking to communicate with others in English. It is a direct way of thinking and not a translation. If I am in Germany, then of course I will use German. If I do not know French or understand some word, I will get a sense from the person speaking and only then will I understand what it means. This cannot be done while sitting in front of your computer without going abroad.

### Technique

B: *What would you define as good technique?*

Z: You know what each of your fingers should do and how to do it, and you are willing and able to do it. You know all of it. This is good technique. It sounds simple enough. [Laughs].

B: I noticed that you, Yuja Wang, and Lang Lang all have similar technique—the kind that seems limitless, like you can control with great ease and cleanness however you want to play.

Z: Actually, this is really training. You must train intelligently until it becomes your own. Talent that is not tidied up to meet a certain standard will not be seen. There still needs to be standards and disciplines. You must know everything clearly. This is good technique. It is not something done subconsciously.

B: *How do you teach technique? Do you teach technique differently to younger students compared to the older? Do you have your students practice certain technique exercises (such as scales, arpeggios, finger strengthening, etc.)?*

Z: These are necessary and I will check them every lesson. The technique will differ according to each student's hand, strength, and what they can grasp, but this portion of nutrition must be given. To the larger students, give what larger students need. And to the smaller students, give what smaller students need. They must train a certain amount before there is a certain amount of change. You must teach according to what they need, and train whatever aspect of their playing is poor. Like my mom says, it is like treating an illness. Wherever it is not well is where it needs to be treated.

B: Do you teach any specific exercises besides scales and arpeggios?

Z: Some, but it is different for each person. For example, picking something up, like a phone, pencil, or something else. [She pretends to hold something in her hand and makes circular motions with her wrist]. Usually, when we pick something up, then here [rounds her fingertips] will be tense and here [points to her wrist and rotates it] will be relaxed. Without picking something up, you might not have a reference for how the proportions of tension and relaxation should feel (when playing piano).

B: Do you have your students practice finger strengthening exercises?

Z: Definitely. There will be certain exercises and a certain quantity as well.

B: Which teaching materials do you use for finger exercises?

Z: Chopin's five-finger and seventh chord exercises are very useful. Also, Dohnanyi, which is a little harder; Brahms; Marguerite Long; Pischna; Cortot; and so on. There are

always lots of methods if you want to practice. First, see how each student is. Some students have lots of interest in doing this, while most do not.

B: What did you use when you were younger?

Z: I always ask my mom, and she tells me that she used me as an experiment. [Laughs]. She gave me a lot to use. At that time, some situations in history restricted many western things. At first, I used some Soviet Union materials when I was young. Later, when western things were not allowed, I used finger exercises written by Chinese teachers. Through this course of events, I used a combination of Chinese and western materials.

B: *Do you teach physical motion and arm weight? If so, how do you approach these concepts?*

Z: I teach these concepts when they are being used. It is impossible not to have motion or arm weight, because they are connected. It [motions along her arm] is only a connecting link. This weight is simply from coordination and assistance. All the strength should be in front and not behind, but without the behind, then the front is unable to get to the strength. This is something that cannot be separated.

B: When you teach scales and arpeggios, do you want your students to have high fingers?

Z: Definitely. This is a process. If you do not raise the fingers then you do not know how it moves, which part of the hand it comes from, which joints and places need to work, and what is connected with each other. But as you raise the fingers high, these distinctions are made. It is very important.

B: Do you want high fingers even when playing very fast scales?

Z: This motion will follow the increasing speed to become lighter and smaller. It is like running. When running long distance, you might make long strides, whereas sprinting

will require more condensed motions. But using condensed motions does not mean this movement stops. In the beginning, this is just a training process to tell you how things should function like mentioned before, so that when it is played fast, the vigor and clarity can be guaranteed.

*B: Do you have any particular approaches to teaching touch and how the fingers contact the keys?*

Z: I do not have particular approaches. Maybe what I want to emphasize is different.

Everyone is saying the knuckle and joint closest to the fingertip should be tense.

Regarding tension versus relaxation—if it is perpetually tense then there is no way for the fingers to run, but if you only relax then you are not able to have a certain stability, so how will you control other things? The relationship between tension and relaxation is key to deciding when to use each when playing, where to stand, and therefore what other places can relax. This requires investigation and discernment.

*B: Do you find any common issues that you have to work on with transfer students? If so, what are they?*

Z: Each student is extremely different. Some students have a great foundation, so the issues that need to be worked on are relatively few. I think a common issue is when students who have musical ability do not have a rational enough way of playing, and therefore have no rational way to manifest the music's voice, depth, and everything else. Some students need complete rearrangement. Some students only need minor adjustments, because they are pretty well-developed. One example is my current student. (She took Dr. Zhao's piano pedagogy class and found her advice helpful to a problem she

struggled with for years). When teaching, you might not be so aware of fixing problems they have had for years, but I am still very happy it was fixed.

B: What was the problem and how was it fixed?

Z: Her hands were always very good, but her body was constrained so that her arms were very tight. This made her range very small. When she played piano, she still had fire in her heart, but you could not hear it. Before being able to work on this [moves fingers], in the back here and here [touches forearm, upper arm, and shoulder] all must really coordinate. Now when she plays, she is able to sit like this [sits back], whereas before she was leaning forward like this [sits with back hunched over].

B: Now it is relaxed.

Z: Yes. Actually, only when you use your strength at a place [moves fingers] can what is behind it then relax. This tension is only an outward appearance. It is just that what you see seems to be tense, but it is because the places that should be used are not being used, so only then is it tense.

B: What would you say about sporadic tension in the fourth finger while playing?

Z: Actually, tension in the fourth finger is because the other fingers did not stand, so the fourth finger will “help” them by going into use and therefore taking all this strength. (The finger that is playing) must stand well, and then the other places will relax. If it is not standing enough [collapses playing finger so it is unstable], then the other places will definitely help and use the strength [her other fingers fly up tensely]. If the strength (at the knuckle to the fingertip) is not completely settled, then as soon as (the area around the wrist) is tense then here [straightens fingers] will all be tense.

B: So the focus should be on making places that should be tense [points to knuckles] more tense.

Z: No. It is not that places that should be tense should be more tense. It is the fingertip that should stand well. When it stands well, what is behind it can then relax. If it does not stand well and only the knuckles are tense, then everything [straightens fingers and touches back of hand] will tense up. The knuckles are only relatively tense and this tension is in order to transfer the strength to the fingertip—it is not for the sake of the knuckles being tense. If the tension is in the knuckles, then everything will be tense and unable to run.

B: The fingertips should stand stably.

Z: Yes. The fingers standing on the keys is not only standing. It is like us standing on our legs. When we walk, we do not put our strength into the leg that is being raised, but into the leg that is standing. However, we often put our weight into the leg that is being raised in order to lift it up and then the center of gravity is wrong. When the center of gravity is on the raised leg, then the standing leg is not able to stand stably and the raised leg that is using lots of strength is still not able to lift up. When the leg on the ground is standing well, then the other leg is relaxed. To stand is not to [grunts tensely] but to relax the weight into standing. Then the raised leg can lift. This relationship is very amusing and fun.

B: [Laughs]. It makes one feel so silly to not be able to control the fourth finger and have it spontaneously tense up.

Z: This is because the other fingers did not stand well, so the fourth finger will help them, but the more it helps then the more they are unable to stand well.

B: What suggestions do you have? What exercises should students do to help this?

Z: Play small exercises that can be grasped. First put the hand obediently in place and let the strength only be concentrated here [rounds fingertips on palm of other hand]. Then have the fingers walk in a line (one by one). This [one finger straightens tensely as another finger plays] is definitely not letting the finger walk and the strength has already run off to another place, so first let each finger walk to the bottom. Now maybe this problem will arise [over-curled fingers], so that when the strength is (in the over-curled fingers), then the sound is not in the fingertips anymore.

B: Maybe only when playing slow enough can one be attentive to this.

Z: Yes. It cannot be practiced too fast. If it is fast, then first lessen the force and see. [Walks her fingers in a line one by one about 300 bpm per note]. Without independent voicing, it is probably [demonstrates forceful playing while non-playing fingers fly up]. Each finger should come to the key equally one after another.

B: It should not be forced.

Z: Yes. Do not force, push, nor stress it. You do not want any extra or forced energy. ... First practice slowly and send every note into the key. Everything should be comfortable first.

## Expectations

B: *What are your criteria for accepting students?*

Z: At the very least, I hope their attitude toward music is one of interest. I think this is very important. They have a willingness to work hard and happen to have a certain

amount of ability and well-roundedness. First of all, there has to be a willingness to do this. Otherwise, what I do is just wrong. [Laughs].

*B: How do you define talent? How important do you think talent is to a student's success in learning piano?*

Z: It is not that important. If a so-called "talented student" has more interest and pleasure in music than other children, a greater level of concentration toward piano than others, and is willing to make sacrifices, then that is what is important. This is for sure.

*B: What do you require of your students (practice time, talent, attitude, etc.)?*

Z: Practice time must be guaranteed and there must be an attitude of wanting to do this. It does not matter if I want to or not. If you want to study, do this well, and understand, then you can. If it is just me at the side scolding you, then it is of no use. Therefore, talented students are not always successful in the end.

B: How long do you think they should practice?

Z: It does not matter what I think, but I think four hours at the very minimum.

B: What about for very young children such as seven-year-olds? Also four hours?

Z: No. Not for very young children. Depending on time, they might practice in 15- or 30-minute chunks. But during the entire 30 minutes, they will really practice. Then they will rest and then go back to the piano again. To practice earnestly is very important.

*B: Do most of your students have time for other interests outside of school besides piano—such as sports or another instrument?*

Z: Nowadays, I do not know if students have time to do some activities outside of school, but I think they should. I did when I was younger.



B: *What do you consider the role of the parent to be in their child's piano education?  
What are your expectations for their involvement?*

Z: Parents should be a good companion and strike a good balance. They should not just be a supervisor by their child's side but should guide them in seeing many interesting things.

B: Are they there during piano lessons?

Z: In China, not necessarily. Abroad, they will not be.

B: I have noticed that parents here in the United States generally do not participate as much as those in Asia.

Z: When abroad, I generally did not see parents in lessons. I think this is very good. It lets the student know that this is their own, so that they take responsibility and not the parent.

B: Do you hope the parent will accompany their practice?

Z: They can supervise. If they really sat in the lesson and listened, then they can go back and participate rather than me writing notes for them to practice themselves.

B: *What do you do in situations where the student is or becomes unmotivated?*

Z: Lack of motivation has many causes. You must adjust according to the situation. This is the student's matter. You need to see whether you can do something to help them or if you are unable to for the time being. This is outside of your control.

### Teaching Methods

B: *Who are some of your favorite composers (and/or compositions) to teach? How do you have your students approach these pieces?*

Z: Before, I used to choose some pieces I like to play, but I realized that pieces should be chosen according to what the child needs. If I give a student a piece I do not know, maybe I will first study the piece and some methods, so I can tell them how to approach it.

B: *In your opinion, which composers (and/or compositions) are most difficult to teach and why? What have you learned in how to effectively teach these works?*

Z: Some pieces are difficult musically and others structurally. Each difficulty is different. Some students will really feel the music, but struggle technically. As soon as you fix the technique, then the music comes alive. For others, the music is never able to come alive, but the student likes the piece. This is when it becomes quite difficult. You can only guide them a little step-by-step.

When something is not there, then you cannot make it into existence. If someone's sense of music is lacking, but their reasoning or emotion tells them they like this piece and are willing to play it, if they have this passion and you think the timing is suitable, then you can still give them these pieces. However, it will be particularly difficult to teach. It does not matter whether you want or tell them to be inspired. You can only explain note-by-note. Sometimes this carving process is very painful.

B: Then the difficulty depends on the student and not the composer.

Z: Yes. When I have students sing or feel the music, some can and others cannot. Then what can be done? They should be able to, but how many can?

B: *How do you help to cultivate each student's unique artistic development?*

Z: Like mentioned before, this is really timing—to guide them at the appropriate time. There is no way to plan this. You can have aspirations, but it depends on the timing.

B: *How much do you analyze the music with students? How important is this in your methodology?*

Z: I think it is very important. Analyzing music must be used when teaching. If today you build a house, then you must explain the structure. It is like Chinese medicine. You must know the network of blood vessels or the underlying structure before you can slowly start to learn how to work on things yourself. I think the process of a student learning how to work is extremely important, so at first, I might guide them and gradually let them do a little more and more. Then I will correct them and give them some suggestions, and then watch them as they slowly start to do it themselves and work independently.

B: *What do you believe makes your teaching unique from other piano teachers?*

Z: My teaching is definitely influenced by my family. I try to use and adapt all that is in my grasp to help students according to their needs. I think I gradually use bits and pieces from what each teacher has taught me.

B: You have become a combination of your teachers' many different characteristics.

Z: [Laughs]. I don't know at what time which person will emerge. Sometimes after teaching, I go home and tell my mom, "You are so smart. That thing you told me so early on, I suddenly understood it when teaching today." She will say, "Oh, I said this?"

[Laughs].

B: "The Three of Us" (memories Dr. Zhao writes and posts on WeChat of her parents and her) is very heart-warming. ...

Z: First, I organize a draft and let it sit, and then think of more interesting ways to write it. ... It is like teaching piano. You think the student plays well in the end, but why is it not fascinating? What is still needed?

B: What parts of your piano learning process do you hope will be similar for your students? What parts do you hope will be different?

Z: I hope they will be adept at using their brain and being perceptive. Being perceptive is something you constantly work on. Whether more or less, it always needs to be present. I can go without always practicing piano, but if this stops [points to brain] then I am unable to do things. Different from me, I hope they can take what they learned with me and use it creatively, and to continue learning. I am just one part of their journey—an *intermezzo*.

B: Studying with each teacher has a time limit.

Z: Yes. I am very fortunate, though, to have studied with my parents all my life. You will all change teachers. Then later, I am still here. [Laughs].

B: *What advice would you give to aspiring piano teachers for how to become a successful teacher?*

Z: Study. Also, play piano yourself. All of us are studying and watching things on the internet. Everyone understands the principles, but if you cannot use it or demonstrate by playing for your students, then it is not enough. The so-called successful teacher must be able to play piano themselves and first be able to demonstrate for students. This is where I hope teachers will go and what I hope they will aspire to. Apart from this, they can do many other things, but this is the minimum.

B: What suggestions do you have for piano teachers who are bad at sight reading?

Z: Sight reading is actually a skill that becomes easy with practice. With lots of practice, you find its patterns. With good ear training, you know what type of harmony should come next, so that you are half reading and half knowing. All of this is a process to proficiency.

The sight reading process is very important. If a teacher has bad sight reading, they can first find some easier pieces to practice. After seeing and hearing, they will know, “Oh, this is the first phrase, second phrase, third phrase, fourth phrase.” “Oh, actually things in classical music are like this.” Then romantic music just has some more content or added things, or the form is lengthened or expanded, but the core and foundation are actually the same.

### Repertoire and Interpretation

*B: Do you use any teaching materials such as method books or leveled repertoire books? If so, which materials do you use and why? I saw you have your own teaching material (Lingdian qibu xue gangqin [Start learning piano from nothing]).*

*Z: Yes. Actually, it is not only mine. What I published was a collection of everyone’s ideas—what I thought I needed and was useful.*

If a student’s fingers are not that great, then I will use certain teaching materials like finger exercises. Other times, (a student’s sensitivity to music is not great). I have a five-year-old student who is able to work very hard and practice piano a lot, but he is not sensitive to music. It is a pity. Music should be the most intuitive and straightforward for children. They should be able to discern that this sounds pleasant, this sounds happy, etc. He does not have this. Perhaps this is indeed innate, where you either have it or not.

But he can really practice a lot, so I will choose and play some beautiful pieces for him—maybe different types of pieces like lyrical, polyphonic, and classical pieces, or pieces with strong rhythms or pulses. ... I told his mother that I want him to play some

things he probably never has before but that make me very happy when I test and play them for myself. She told me, “I understand. You are looking for a key to open the door.” This is correct. ... This requires me to look all over for the materials. Before when I was in Europe, looking for these materials was more convenient even though it was more expensive. Nevertheless, the more standard books can still be bought in China. Most of my books are still in Germany, so I am not able to just go home and easily pick up some scores like before.

It is difficult to proportion so-called leveled repertoire. How much to proportion is like eating food—sometimes you have more salad, sometimes more meat. You must see what the student needs and at what time. In short, I think this student always needs a sense of freshness toward learning. When there is a sense of freshness, then they will always have antennas like those on insects.

B: A desire to sense these things.

Z: Yes. They must always have this for their curiosity to be aroused—for them to have a willingness to explore and do things. This is an ongoing process. My father was always very curious about new things even to an old age—wanting to look at this, study that, try this. My mom is the same way, but for many things, if she thinks she cannot do them, then she will not carry it out. [Laughs]. She is very smart. ... Not all new things are interesting or beneficial, so some things can still be left unwanted. Levels in piano are also like this.

I do not have fixed levels, but levels are based on what I perceive and discern of each student, so I cannot say my teaching materials are set a certain way. For example, I have recently been looking at ABRSM. It has some suggested repertoire that might be

much harder than what is in the level a student should test. They will not always use the same level of difficulty within one level. This principle, to follow your discernment for each student, also applies here. It comes back to basing what the student does on what they need.

*B: Do you have your students learn from specific editions of music?*

Z: I recommend for students to use some of the most authoritative original editions, such as Henle Verlag, Polish editions, French editions for French music, etc.

*B: What is your process of teaching interpretation?*

Z: It is how you practice and master a piece based on the piece's structure and your playing methods. I think some children learn very quickly, so you first must help them keep balance. Some first act on impulse without listening to any of it. They are filled with chaotic excitement. When I was young, I was also chaotic and excitable. [Swings her hands wildly and laughs]. So you must help them stay balanced and tell them which places are important. My dad was very even-tempered and calm. He would share his reasonings one by one: "This is saying this. This is how you should say this. This is like this." My mom as well. I saw this a lot from regularly watching them teach or experiencing it myself. I am mostly the same way probably, with some minor adjustments.

*B: How do you teach interpretation and freedom of expression in relation to being faithful to the details of the score? Does this change with different composers?*

Z: It definitely does. The details of the score, such as slurs, depend on the style. For example, some editions of Mozart will include long slurs that are perhaps just showing the direction of a phrase, where the slur is not really one unit that cannot be separated but

many subphrases that create a long phrase. (Other details of the score also depend on the style), such as where to *sforzando*, *ritardando*, *ritenuto*, or *sostenuto*—“Ah? the *sostenuto* I just played is suddenly gone!” [Laughs].

For many things, what is appropriate will be extremely different. According to the style, you will make changes. In the piece’s entirety, what function does it have at that specific place? This is very important, so you must tell students that the proportions must be suitable—only how much can be used and in which ways can it not be used. In order to be completely faithful to the score, certain things must be done, but these should be decided in accordance with the situation.

*B: Do you incorporate Chinese piano repertoire in your students’ playing? If so, do you find your way of teaching these pieces to differ from teaching Western music? How so? Which Chinese pieces are especially important?*

Z: Actually, there are no traditional Chinese (piano) pieces. Originally, piano is a foreign import. In my opinion, Chinese pieces innovated on this western instrument are not authentic. Many Chinese works are folk songs. The piano, however, is not an instrument that can sing, so it is only similar in sound, form, and mood but not genuine.

Chinese piano repertoire is characteristically Chinese in its expression of language and musical phrasing, and therefore easier to connect with. At least before, it was easier to connect with. I have realized that nowadays it is not easy for children to play Chinese pieces. When we were kids, we would sing folk and children’s songs. Then when we played them on the piano it came naturally. Nowadays, children must study English when growing up, so this is actually not very easy. Sometimes a Chinese piece is somewhat harder to explain. It is strange.



So back to the question: Are there differences between Chinese and Western music? To say it this way is really to have preconceived notions. For anything, you first see and study it before forming opinions about what it is like. For now, it does not matter if it is Chinese or Western music. First, give it a try and then see how you interpret it. Of course, now Chinese composers will fill their works with elements of Chinese opera or folk, which is something not found in Western works. I think this makes it fun and great. It should definitely be played and is certainly a very enriching process, even if it is not that easy for students.

B: It seems Chinese piano repertoire is getting more and more complex.

Z: Yes. Some time ago, they said an extremely famous composer wrote a new concerto and originally had (a very renowned Chinese pianist) play it. She was not able to, so they switched to a young pianist who learned it quickly. The world is developing. ... I think each person's place of ability is different. Some people have this ability to sight read modern pieces. ... My brother's ability in this area is particularly outstanding. Xiaogang Ye and Tan Dun, two composers who are now very famous, tested (into Central Conservatory of Music) with him. The new works they wrote at that time were hard to play, so the first person they would ask to sight read and record them was my brother. Then for other people, reading modern music is just [crosses her eyebrows at a pretend score while calculating with her fingers].

B: I did not know your brother was also a pianist.

Z: Yes. We have five pianists in our family: my dad, mom, me, my older brother, and my brother's daughter. ... From when I was little, my parents and brother—who was the best at school and older than me by ten and a half years—were all amazing. So every time

before I went on stage to perform, the three of them sat there. I was nothing in comparison. It was scary.

B: Your parents must have had a very pure type of love for learning music and passed this on to you and your brother, because without this, it is so easy to study a little and then not want to study anymore.

Z: My brother also loved music very much. When I was young, whenever he came home, he always seemed to turn on the record player or radio—forever listening to music. My father was also forever practicing piano. Even now, my mom will have the energy after teaching and preparing lessons to practice piano sometimes. Then she will say, “See, my fingers don’t seem to be working right here. My sound is not very good today. Help me see if it’s right or not.”

B: It changed so now you are her teacher. [Laughs]. This attitude of still wanting to learn is really pure.

Z: Yes. I was looking through some old videos and found one where I am recording my mom practicing a Chopin Scherzo. In the video, I say, “Why aren’t you listening to your left hand?” [Covers her face and laughs]. Actually, this is just retaliation.

B: Was there anything else you wanted to share?

Z: At the very least, I think my experience is unique. I have always had a close distance with music, since everything happened within my home and my home was inside the conservatory. ... I am still living inside it. I have been here from beginning to end. ... I think my family gave me a great environment to grow up in, which perhaps subconsciously told me what kind of attitude to have toward music and how to be human and work.

Nowadays, there are many people who share how great and impressive they are: “I am like this and this, my teacher was the student of this teacher who was the student of this teacher, and I’ve won these prizes, etc.” I think these types of things do not exist to my parents, so they also do not exist to me. I am not interested. So when people say, “You don’t play too many recitals,” I say, “When I play a recital, I play what I want and for who I want,” rather than me showing off. I do not need to. I do not need to be well-known. I do not need to be wealthy.

Before, when I was in Germany, my good friend would say, “Why don’t you play that recital? You could earn lots of money. Why don’t you go meet this person? It will give you lots of opportunities and such.” I do not sell my art. I play because I want to play and have you listen, so if this is not in place then I simply do not play. This is just how I am. ... I think for those in music to be this way is a bit cleaner, because you are focusing on the things you should be focusing on. Everyone’s energy is limited. Just do the most needed and important things. It is enough.

Everywhere, people are establishing art centers or an art this or that. People say, “Aiya, when your parents were younger and in good spirits, why didn’t you establish something? You would all be like this and this.” My mom and dad never paid attention to or looked at these things. Someone creates some lousy competition and puts a name on it—how is that? My mom does not want this. We do not want this. People who are really like this might be few, but it is good just to do the things you want to do and be the person you want to be. I think this is the attitude (my parents) gave me toward being a teacher or musician. So when I find this thing to be good, then I simply work to do it

well—make this music well and teach this thing well to this student. I think music should not be something for publicity.

In German, a most exquisite word in music is *innig*. It is the word most used at the beginning of Schumann's pieces. *Innig* describes the innermost being. It is very internal. It cannot be translated by other words. In reality, I think you know its significance in here [places hand on her heart], so then you know how you should be as a person and do work. I think this is critical. It is not: you make me do something so then I do it, and then I will be like this and this. This is irrelevant to me and unnecessary.

Since I was little, I have seen everyone travel thousands of miles to pursue their studies in the conservatory. How many people have I seen come to my parents for lessons saying they want to study, and then for their own sake think, "Aiya, these two teachers do not strive for fame and profit on our behalf, so let's switch to a different teacher who can help us be like this and this." I have seen it a lot.

B: It is just meaningless and tiring.

Z: Yes. For a person to be able to make music for a lifetime is a fortunate thing. It really is a fortunate thing. You are so fortunate to be able to get closer to music the more you live with it. This type of situation cannot be found, so it is good just to be happy and take your time doing it.

## CHAPTER 6

### TEACHING METHODS OF LING ZHAO

#### Order of Sections

Lesson Environment

Grasping with the Palm

Lifting Fingers from the Knuckles

Standing Stably on the Fingertip

Thumb in Relation to the Other Fingers

E Whole-Tone Five-Finger Exercise

Chords and Octaves

Pinky in Relation to the Elbow and Thumb

Following the Fingers

Thumb Independence Exercise

Thumb Crossing Exercises

Scales and Arpeggios

Open Body Movement and Sound

Phrasing and Grouping

## Lesson Observation Information

Dr. Ling Zhao’s teaching was observed through video recordings of lessons with three of her students ages five, eleven, and nineteen. The video recordings were sent to the author and included two lessons each with her eleven- and nineteen-year-old students, and video clips from seven lessons with her five-year-old student. Zhao taught the five- and eleven-year-old students from a single upright piano and the nineteen-year-old student from one grand piano while the student played on another. Zhao and her students spoke in Mandarin Chinese. Paraphrases and quotes have been translated to English by the author.

Table 2

Student Information for Dr. Ling Zhao’s Lesson Observations

Name*	Chelsea	Eva	Sheila
Age and school grade	5 y.o. / kindergarten	11 y.o. / 4 <sup>th</sup> grade	19 y.o. / 2 <sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate
Number of years studied with Zhao	4 months	1 year	1 year
Average daily practice time	3 hours	6 hours	6 hours +
Pieces played in the lesson observations	<i>Preparatory Exercises</i> (Five-Finger Exercises) <i>for the Piano</i> Op. 16 Nos. 11-12, 14-18, and 24-27, by Schmitt; <i>Thirty New Studies in Technics</i> Op. 849 Nos. 3-6, by Czerny;	Etudes Op. 740 Nos. 3, 4, and 13, by Czerny; Introduction and Variations on the German Air “ <i>Der Schweizerbub</i> ” B. 14, by Chopin;	Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109, by Beethoven; <i>Étude en forme de valse</i> Op. 52 No. 6, by Saint-Saëns;

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<i>The Virtuoso Pianist</i> (in Sixty Exercises) No. 1, by Hanon;	Tarantella in A-flat major Op. 43, by Chopin;	Fantasia Op. 28, by Scriabin
“Cockatoo,” by Elissa Milne;		
“The Swing,” by Chee-Hwa Tan;		
“Down by the Salley Gardens,” arranged by David Blackwell		

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\*Names have been changed for anonymity.

### Lesson Environment

Zhao’s animated personality creates dynamic and lively lessons with loud laughter and sometimes very stern tones. With a responsive and reactive persona, Zhao encourages all her students to ask questions and speak freely during lessons. She often holds her youngest student’s hand or warmly places her hand on her students’ backs. To help students understand what to improve, Zhao demonstrates how students play incorrectly and how she wants them to play. She often molds students’ hand positions and bodies into place and checks for any tension.

Zhao’s lessons with five-year-old Chelsea and eleven-year-old Eva begin with technique, which includes finger exercises and scales, and additional arpeggios and chord progressions for Eva. For some lessons, Zhao spends the majority of time teaching technique. To ensure students understand the principles behind different exercises and therefore the mechanics of their body, she asks questions such as, “Where should the strength come from?” or “What part of the finger should stand?”

During Chelsea's lessons, Zhao focuses on improvement and often says, "It can still be better." She explains, "There is never an end on top to this getting better, but if you can be a little better than right now's 'not bad,' then you will again improve a little from yourself."<sup>80</sup> Zhao encourages Chelsea to "*jiayou*" (come on), which Chelsea imitates by telling herself to "*jiayou*" before playing. To motivate Chelsea, Zhao draws smiley faces or stars next to finger exercises she played well. Stars represent the highest level of accomplishment, which Chelsea receives with crying excitement.

Chelsea's lessons include an involved mother who oversees Chelsea's practice. During lessons, the mother asks many questions, makes sure to understand all that Zhao teaches, guides Chelsea to stay focused, and sometimes interjects her own teaching or directions. She also shares in Chelsea's excitement when earning stars and amazement when Zhao demonstrates. Though less involved, Eva's mother also attends lessons.

Zhao focuses on concepts in technique during lessons with Chelsea and Eva, such as strength from a grasping palm, lifting from the knuckle joints, the interconnectedness of the fingers, and standing stably on the fingertip so other parts of the hand and body can then relax. While Zhao also teaches concepts in technique to her nineteen-year-old student Sheila, Sheila's lessons focus more on repertoire. Sheila first plays through a piece uninterrupted before Zhao guides her through the piece with attention to phrasing, musical direction, and body movement.

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<sup>80</sup> Ling Zhao, lessons with Chelsea, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.



## Grasping with the Palm

Preparation to play begins with the palm grasping, teaches Zhao, which allows the fingers to then stand stably. To demonstrate, she makes and loosens a fist with her hand.<sup>81</sup> The palm side of the knuckles is what links together all the fingers, or “soldiers,” and then moves them from place to place.<sup>82</sup> Zhao’s method book, *Lingdian qibu xue gangqin* (Start learning piano from nothing), hopes to make beginners’ “disobedient” ten fingers “nimble and effective.”<sup>83</sup> Students are instructed for “each finger to get power and play down from the palm”<sup>84</sup> and to “maintain a certain ‘grasp of the palm’”<sup>85</sup> when playing.

Zhao has students maintain “a round hand position with a slight grip.”<sup>86</sup> *Lingdian qibu* instructs students to “naturally form a half-fist with the hand.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>82</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>83</sup> Ling Zhao, *Lingdian qibu xue gangqin* [Start learning piano from nothing] (Beijing: Zhongyang yinyuexueyuan chubanshe [Central Conservatory of Music Press], 2013), cover page, translated from Mandarin by author.

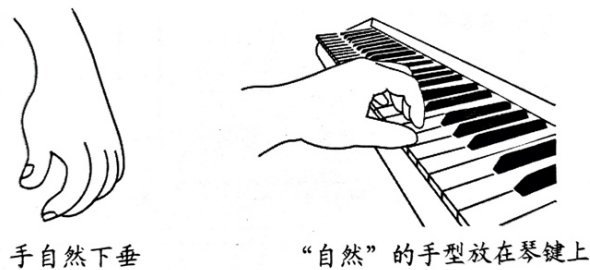
<sup>84</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 64.

<sup>85</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Ling Zhao, “Zhao Ling—Cheerni Gangqin Lianxiqu 599” [Ling Zhao—Czerny Piano Etudes 599], accessed August 13, 2023, Youku video, 6:25 to 6:35, [https://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNTE3OTYwNTM0NA](https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNTE3OTYwNTM0NA), translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>87</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 45.

Figure 13. “Half-Fist” Hand Position from *Lingdian qibu xue gangqin*<sup>88</sup>



The introduction says, “The hand shape for playing piano should be the most natural hand shape, similar to when it often hangs down naturally and forms a half-fist in a half-circle shape.”<sup>89</sup>

To play the right hand of Czerny’s Etude Op. 849 No. 6 “Allegro leggiero,” Zhao wants the student’s palm to control their fingers.

Figure 14. Czerny’s Etude Op. 849 No. 6 “Allegro leggiero,” mm. 1-2<sup>90</sup>



To play the right hand with a clear sound, Zhao wants Chelsea’s fingers to line up inside her hand and play one after another with the weight following the direction of the notes. She tells Chelsea to simply “say a hello” with each slurred group of the right hand.<sup>91</sup> Zhao wiggles Chelsea’s hand and fingers, reminding her they should be relaxed and to

<sup>88</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 1.

<sup>89</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 1.

<sup>90</sup> Carl Czerny, *Études de mécanisme Opus 849*, ed. Adolf Ruthardt (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, n.d., ca. 1892), 10, [https://imslp.org/wiki/30\\_Études\\_de\\_mécanisme,\\_Op.849\\_\(Czerny,\\_Carl\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/30_Études_de_mécanisme,_Op.849_(Czerny,_Carl)).

<sup>91</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

not complicate the motions. Strength should be in the front of the fingers, while the palm should simply control the fingers not to run all over the place as opposed to grasping in a fixed and immovable position.

Zhao explains how the presence of the palm in a grasping position is enough and does not require exerting so much strength. She likens it to a mom being present at home with her child without always having to sit by her child's side. To demonstrate the simplicity of the palm grasping, Zhao holds a small eraser with her five fingers and slightly rotates her wrist from her pinky to thumb and thumb to pinky while humming the melody. Zhao wants Chelsea to maintain this grasp of the hand with the fingers rounded inward both when playing and picking up her hand in between.<sup>92</sup>

### Lifting from the Knuckles

Zhao has Chelsea and Eva practice finger exercises, scales, and arpeggios with high fingers and a penetrating type of sound. Each finger lifts high from the knuckle joint and plays with strength from the palm and stability in the fingertip. The penetrating sound does not come from exerting all one's strength to push down but rather comes from the finger's fast motion from high above the key that confidently and without hesitation penetrates deep into the key bed.

Five-year-old Chelsea plays various Schmitt five-finger exercises legato and at a slow tempo (about 50 bpm per sixteenth note). Depending on the direction of the notes moving from one finger to the next, fingers other than the one about to play may also lift

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<sup>92</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

freely alongside it as momentum shifts from one part of the hand to the next. To play the first note of Schmitt's Preparatory Exercise for the Piano Op. 16 No. 14, Zhao wants Chelsea's hand to lift and come down from above for a singing and penetrating sound.

Figure 15. Schmitt's Preparatory Exercise for the Piano Op. 16 No. 14<sup>93</sup>



As Chelsea continues playing, Zhao has her isolate and play repeatedly between her right hand's fourth and second fingers to better focus on lifting from the knuckles. Zhao explains how the sense of singing must come from up in the air by lifting each finger in preparation to play, rather than expecting the note to sing after the finger is already on the key. To encourage Chelsea to lift her finger higher, Zhao tells Chelsea that "the mouth must open"<sup>94</sup> and to step out and climb up to the fourth finger and then go back down to the second finger.

Zhao explains how the process of playing with high fingers teaches students how different parts of their hand must function and coordinate together when playing: "If you do not raise the fingers, then you do not know how it moves, which part of the hand it comes from, which joints and places need to work, and what is connected with each other. But as you raise the fingers high, these distinctions are made."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Aloys Schmitt, "Preparatory Exercises," in *Preparatory Exercises (Five-Finger Exercises) for the Piano* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1922), 4, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Etudes,\\_Op.16\\_\(Schmitt,\\_Aloys\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Etudes,_Op.16_(Schmitt,_Aloys)).

<sup>94</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>95</sup> Ling Zhao, interview over Zoom by author, August 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

Similarly, Zhao's mother Yuan Ling, who was piano teacher to both Zhao and Yuja Wang, explains how her students play with a relatively penetrating, clean, and concentrated sound due to practicing with an "excessive" lifting of each finger from the knuckle. She calls the knuckles the foundation and motor of the fingers' movements. Through this high finger training, her students develop finger independence.<sup>96</sup>

The extent of the finger lifting motion will adjust to the speed of playing. Zhao explains: "This motion will follow the increasing speed to become lighter and smaller. It is like running. When running long distance, you might make long strides, whereas sprinting will require more condensed motions. But using condensed motions does not mean this movement stops. In the beginning, this (high lifting of the fingers) is just a training process to tell you how things should function ... so that when it is played fast, the vigor and clarity can be guaranteed."<sup>97</sup>

Through lifting the fingers from the knuckles, students understand how the knuckles transfer strength from the palm to the fingertips. In *Lingdian qibu*, students are instructed to "concentrate strength in the knuckle and finger joint closest to the keyboard."<sup>98</sup> Zhao explains that "the knuckles are only relatively tense and this tension is in order to transfer the strength to the fingertips."<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Yuan Ling, "Zhongyang yinyuexueyuan Ling Yuan jiaoshou Zhao Ling jiaoshou zhibo Xiaobang qianzouqu jiangzuo luping 1" [Central Conservatory's Professor Yuan Ling and Professor Ling Zhao livestream Chopin's Preludes lecture screen recording 1], posted on February 23, 2020, Youku video, 3:20 to 5:30, [https://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNDU1ODM2MjI0NA](https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDU1ODM2MjI0NA), translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>97</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>98</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 45.

<sup>99</sup> Zhao, interview.

## Standing Stably on the Fingertip

For clear pronunciation of each note and to allow other parts of the hand and arm to relax, Zhao wants students to play with fingertips that stand stably on the keys. Zhao describes the fingertip, or finger joint closest to the keyboard, as being like a front tooth that must be strong and cannot shake.<sup>100</sup> As Chelsea plays Schmitt exercises, Zhao asks her to “bite” into the keys with her fingertips.<sup>101</sup> *Lingdian qibu* also directs students to have fingertips that “stand firmly,”<sup>102</sup> to “consciously stand on the fingertip’s fulcrum,”<sup>103</sup> and to “fully prepare each fingertip.”<sup>104</sup>

Zhao explains that “to stand is not to [grunts tensely] but to relax the weight into standing.”<sup>105</sup> To stand well on the fingertip, the center of gravity must be on the finger playing rather than the finger lifting. Zhao refers to the relationship between the playing and lifting finger as “amusing and fun.”<sup>106</sup> She compares it to walking, where putting weight on the leg standing allows the other leg to relax and lift:

When we walk, we do not put our strength into the leg that is being raised but into the leg that is standing. However, we often put our weight into the leg that is being raised in order to lift it up and then the center of gravity is wrong. When the center of gravity is on the raised leg, then the standing leg is not able to stand stably and the raised leg that is using lots of strength is still not able to lift up.

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<sup>100</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>101</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>102</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 64.

<sup>103</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 14.

<sup>104</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 45.

<sup>105</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>106</sup> Zhao, interview.

When the leg on the ground is standing well, then the other leg is relaxed (and can lift).<sup>107</sup>

Similarly, relaxing weight into the standing finger allows the raised finger to relax and lift up. However, if weight and strength is focused on lifting the finger, then the center of gravity shifts away from the standing finger and makes it unable to stand well.

Standing well on the fingertip not only allows the other fingers to relax but also allows what is behind the fingertip to relax as well, including the forearm. When teaching Schmitt exercises, Zhao reminds Chelsea to grasp with her palm so her finger can stand. While holding Chelsea's fingertip to stand strongly on the key, she wiggles her forearm. Zhao explains how the forearm should be relaxed and light—so light that if a balloon was tied to it then it would “just fly away.” When the forearm is heavy, then not all the strength is in the playing finger.<sup>108</sup>

When teaching the right hand of Czerny's Etude Op. 849 No. 4 “Allegro,” Zhao has Chelsea carry the strength of each finger into the key and relax the lifting finger.

Figure 16. Czerny's Etude Op. 849 No. 4 “Allegro,” mm. 1-2<sup>109</sup>



<sup>107</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>108</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>109</sup> Czerny, *Études de mécanisme Opus 849*, 7.

Zhao sits by Chelsea's side and constantly feels her forearm, wrist, and lifted fingers to check for any tension. When Zhao senses tension as Chelsea plays, she often holds Chelsea's hand and lifted finger mid-air to reveal its tension and points out how she is using lots of strength to lift her finger or put pressure on her forearm. Zhao then reminds her of the "magic formula" to stand on the key with her playing finger so her lifted finger can then relax.<sup>110</sup>

To play each note clearly, Zhao wants Chelsea to "walk" with her fingers standing stably on the keys from one finger to the next, and to lift up and down rather than simply pressing down without lifting first. Zhao uses her own hands to lift Chelsea's right-hand thumb and pointer finger up and down to guide the motion. Just as Chelsea can clearly pronounce each character when reciting Classical Chinese poetry, Zhao also wants her to clearly pronounce each note to create music "with substance."<sup>111</sup>

### Thumb in Relation to the Other Fingers

The positioning of each finger, particularly the thumb, affects the other fingers' ability to play. When playing, the palm should maintain a grasp with the fingers gathered together. To demonstrate this gathered and grasping position of the fingers, Zhao uses her five fingers to "bite" Chelsea's hand like a "tiger's mouth."<sup>112</sup> In contrast, she sticks her thumb out to the side and loses the biting grip on Chelsea's hand. Just as Zhao's "tiger mouth" hand cannot bite or grasp when her thumb is off to the side, Zhao comically

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<sup>110</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>111</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>112</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.



demonstrates how she cannot bite when her jaw is off to the side with her bottom and top teeth misaligned.

When the right hand's thumb and pointer finger play back and forth repeatedly in the first measure of Schmitt's Preparatory Exercise for the Piano Op. 16 No. 17, Zhao wants Chelsea to maintain this grasping hand position.

Figure 17. Schmitt's Preparatory Exercise for the Piano Op. 16 No. 17<sup>113</sup>



Zhao makes a circle with her thumb and pointer finger pinching together to demonstrate. Just like this position is needed to hold something, it is needed for the pointer finger and thumb to play back and forth between each other.<sup>114</sup>

As Chelsea plays her right hand's fourth and fifth fingers in the second measure, her thumb loses this grasping position. Chelsea relies not on the hand grasping but instead relies on the wrist and forearm area to substitute. While this gives the impression that Chelsea can still play her fourth and fifth fingers, she is unable to play inside the grasp of her hand and cannot manage or get a hold of all her fingers together. This means when she plays back down to her thumb, the circle and grasping hand position is already scattered. Instead, the thumb must maintain its position when the fourth and fifth fingers play.

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<sup>113</sup> Schmitt, "Preparatory Exercises," 4.

<sup>114</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

When Chelsea struggles when playing her fourth finger, the problem is not always in the fourth finger itself but rather in the thumb. “If my stomach hurts, I do not press my stomach,” says Zhao, “I press the Zusanli (ST36 acupuncture point on the leg). It is the area under my control.”<sup>115</sup> Similar to pressing acupuncture points to treat other parts of the body, Chelsea can fix her fourth finger by controlling her thumb rather than focusing on the fourth finger itself.

Zhao explains how the thumb and pointer finger, with the web of the hand in between them, is one unit. The other unit is the third, fourth, and fifth fingers. These two units work together to form a grabbing motion with a somewhat rounded palm. Zhao motions all her fingers bending inward like a half circle.

Figure 18. The Thumb and Pointer Finger Unit and the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Finger Unit Forming a Half Circle<sup>116</sup>



In contrast, when the palm is not rounded but flat with the fingers outstretched, then none of the fingers can play within the hand’s grasp, and in Zhao’s words, “no one has anything.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>116</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>117</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

Zhao reminds Chelsea to manage her fingers with the palm leading. The knuckles should round prominently with the fingers curving inward as though holding something. The thumb must participate in this framework of the hand by being in its proper position and relaxed, and the fingertips of the playing fingers should stand stably on the keys. *Lingdian Qibu* gives additional directions for playing five-finger exercises: “Each finger gets power and plays down from the palm, fingertips stand firmly, accomplish weight transfer, and the wrist does not push or press.”<sup>118</sup> Students are also told to “consciously strengthen the fourth and fifth fingers that are relatively weak in five-finger exercises.”<sup>119</sup>

The thumb and fifth finger are brothers and good friends, explains Zhao. When the fifth finger plays, the thumb “must always care” and be present in a gathered position. The thumb cannot be indifferent and stick out away from the fifth finger. Likewise, the third, fourth, and fifth fingers are like triplets of one family who depend on the thumb to manage them. As soon as the thumb makes trouble, then all the other fingers do not do what they are told. With this analogy in mind, Zhao reminds Chelsea to put her thumb obediently in place to help. The thumb’s relaxation and “level of concern” toward the other fingers, shown in the thumb staying in or straying from the hand’s gathered and grasping position, is very important.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 64.

<sup>119</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 64.

<sup>120</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

## E Whole-Tone Five-Finger Exercise

Zhao spends over twenty minutes teaching eleven-year-old Eva a five-finger exercise through which Zhao explains how to slightly press the two sides of the hand inward and maintain a rounded hand position that allows the fingertips to stand stably. Eva plays a five-finger E whole-tone scale in blocked form with both hands two octaves apart.

Figure 19. Five-Finger E Whole-Tone Scale in Blocked Form<sup>121</sup>



While holding down all ten fingers, Zhao has Eva play both hands' thumbs repeatedly (the left hand on C and the right hand on E). Next, the thumbs hold down with the rest of the fingers while both hands' second fingers play repeatedly. Then the third, fourth, and fifth fingers play repeatedly so that the two hands play in outward contrary motion before going back inward to the fourth, third, second, and first fingers again. Each note is repeated between five to thirty times as Zhao gives directions in between. After this, Eva plays the pattern continuously without repeating each note, while still holding down the non-playing fingers.

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<sup>121</sup> By author.

Yuan Ling, Zhao's mother and former piano teacher, also uses this finger exercise when beginning to teach a child. She explains how it trains the student's coordination of their fingertips and knuckles and is compatible with their small hands. Ling wants students to play with a hand position of "grabbing an apple" with concentrated fingertips.<sup>122</sup> This positioning of the hand is needed for classical music, like Mozart and some etudes, explains Ling. When the students' hands grow larger and they play arpeggios, Ling teaches the same exercise but on diminished seventh chords, which spreads the fingers apart and trains the palm to open. By doing these exercises, their fingers become very agile, says Ling.<sup>123</sup>

When Zhao teaches this exercise, she has Eva lift her fingers high and play with a bright sound. She reminds Eva that the first and second fingers "manage" the third, fourth, and fifth fingers and create a rounded hand position.<sup>124</sup> To round Eva's hand position more, Zhao reminds her to lift her palm forward so that the knuckle joints round more prominently with the fingers standing in front.

Zhao refers to the thumb and pinky sides of the hand as "two chicken legs," which she wants the student to press inward from both sides of the hand.<sup>125</sup> The "two chicken legs" create a solid foundation that allows one to play at ease. If the hand finds this feeling and the strength used is connected well, "then the hand will immediately be hot" and the "palm will emit heat," says Zhao.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Yuan Ling and Ling Zhao, "Taidouji gangqinjia Ling Yuan he Zhao Ling jiaoshou gaosuni: guaiguai de lian zhege!" [Eminent pianist Yuan Ling and Professor Ling Zhao tell you: obediently practice this!], posted on February 6, 2020, Tencent video, 3:00 to 4:40, <https://v.qq.com/x/page/s306206bq3d.html>, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>123</sup> Ling and Zhao, "Taidouji gangqinjia Ling Yuan he Zhao Ling," 3:00 to 4:40.

<sup>124</sup> Ling Zhao, lessons with Eva, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>125</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>126</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

Eva has trouble maintaining the “two chicken legs” in her hand and often allows the structure to fall apart. This causes her to play with unnecessary tension. To help Eva recognize the strain in her playing, Zhao explains how Eva locks her arm into a fixed position so that she can only push her entire arm forward. Zhao imitates this fixed position in her own hand and arm so Eva can analyze and feel for herself how stiff and unhelpful it is.

To alleviate this stiffness, Zhao emphasizes Eva’s need for the “two chicken legs” to provide stability and therefore relaxation. Without this, Zhao says it is like trying to build a house before setting up the pillars first. Without putting up pillars that stand, the student throws them out and goes on to stack bricks. This process can only go in circles without getting anywhere. However, if the “two chicken legs” are simply present, then natural playing can fall in place.

To demonstrate, Zhao picks up a cup with her fingers grabbing around the rim, rotates her wrist some, and puts it back down effortlessly. When picking something up, tension is naturally in the fingertips, while the wrist naturally relaxes. “Without picking something up,” says Zhao, “you might not have a reference for how the proportions of tension and relaxation should feel.”<sup>127</sup> The grasp in Zhao’s hand with the appropriate distribution of tension and relaxation allows her to pick up the cup with ease. Similarly, the grasp in the student’s hand with the presence of the “two chicken legs” will allow them to play with ease. To contrast, Zhao pushes down on the top of the cup forcefully and rhetorically asks if it can still be held, just like the student’s hand cannot grasp when they push forcefully with a locked arm.

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<sup>127</sup> Zhao, interview.

This concept impacts many things, Zhao explains to Eva, but “if a person does not search for this ease themselves, then each time they will have to start over” and life will be very strenuous.<sup>128</sup> When teaching repertoire, Zhao teaches these same concepts. Zhao wants the student to have a rounded hand position that maintains its grasp with the “two chicken legs” and to come down on each note uprightly with the fulcrum of their fingertips. “If I were you, I would use one way of thinking to play everything,” Zhao tells Eva. “I think it is a very simple thing. ... My core is the same.”<sup>129</sup> She makes a grasping motion with her hand and rotates it from her wrist.

Whether preparing the hands on one’s lap or holding a long note on the keyboard, Zhao wants the student to maintain this stability in their hands. To demonstrate its simplicity, Zhao picks her phone up from her lap and puts it on the table. “When I put my phone up on the table, I do not drop my phone,” says Zhao. The grasp in the hand is maintained when picking up one’s phone to move from place to place, just as the hand should maintain its stable position when moving from one’s lap to the keyboard or from note to note.<sup>130</sup>

### Chords and Octaves

“Chords train the hand’s ‘sense of position’”<sup>131</sup> with the palm grasping and fingertips standing stably. For two-note chord exercises, *Lingdian qibu* asks students to

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<sup>128</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>129</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>130</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>131</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 36.

“maintain a certain degree of tension in the palm and fingers.”<sup>132</sup> When instructing students how to play three-note chords, this degree of tension is further explained as generating power from the palm and “biting” with the fingertips.

The full instructions are as follows: “When practicing, form a half fist with the hand, refer to fingering requirements, prepare the three fingers well, concentrate strength, generate power from the center of the palm, draw support from the arm’s natural strength, actively ‘bite’ into the keyboard with the fingertips, and send the strength into the keyboard.”<sup>133</sup> Students are also taught to play all three notes simultaneously and tidily, “use strength evenly,” and create a “full and sturdy sound.”<sup>134</sup>

Playing chords requires a relaxed forearm and a “certain grip in the palm like going to grab something,” says Zhao.<sup>135</sup> A relaxed arm should lift and then send the fingers into the keys. When playing from one chord inversion to the next, the hand should lift and prepare the position of the next chord inversion while still “keeping the sound inside the hand.”<sup>136</sup> The thumb and pinky sides of the hand, or “two chicken legs,” should maintain a position of rounding slightly inward toward each other.

Zhao wants Eva to carry these “two chicken legs” from one octave chord inversion to the next. Eva wiggles her hands on each inversion, playing with excessive movement and tension. To relax this unnecessary tension, Zhao has Eva prepare her “two

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<sup>132</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 30.

<sup>133</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 36.

<sup>134</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 36.

<sup>135</sup> Ling Zhao, “(Yi) Zhongyang Yinyuexueyuan qiangqinxi jiaoshou Zhao Ling jiang wei dajia jiangjie zuixin Zhongguoyinxie gangqin kaoji jiaocai” [(No. 1) Central Conservatory’s piano professor Ling Zhao explains for everyone the newest Chinese Musicians’ Association graded piano exam materials], posted on November 1, 2022, Bilibili video, 11:30 to 12:20, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1KP4y1U7fz>, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>136</sup> Zhao, “(Yi) Zhongyang Yinyuexueyuan qiangqinxi jiaoshou Zhao Ling,” 11:30 to 12:20.



chicken legs” before playing each chord inversion, as opposed to wiggling around to try to find this position after having played. By maintaining a certain grip in the palm with the “two chicken legs” slightly rounded, the core remains the same from chord to chord and the hand and arm can then rest assured atop stable fingers. Without the “two chicken legs,” then as soon as the chord is played, “all your things have nothing,” says Zhao.<sup>137</sup>

Zhao reminds Eva to play on the fulcrum of her fingertips similar to the motion of “acupuncture.”<sup>138</sup> To demonstrate, Zhao gathers her fingers together and “plays” her third finger on top of the table going from one note to the next with her palm naturally resting its weight stably above her playing finger.

Figure 20. The Palm Atop a Stable Playing Finger<sup>139</sup>



To contrast, she lowers her palm so it no longer rests its weight above her finger and pushes down each note with forced strength. Preparing the hand position and playing on the fulcrum of the fingertips allows the student to play each chord inversion with ease and precision.

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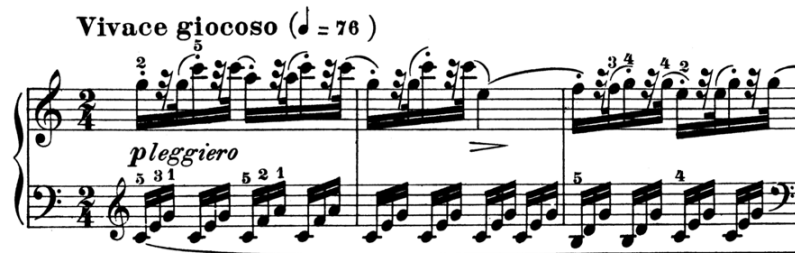
<sup>137</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>138</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>139</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

To play broken chords, Zhao also wants the student to maintain a certain grip in their palm. When demonstrating the left-hand broken chords of Czerny’s Etude Op. 849 No. 5 “Vivace giocoso,” Zhao holds down her left-hand thumb on the key while opening and closing her hand with her other four fingers to show this grabbing motion.

Figure 21. Czerny’s Etude Op. 849 No. 5 “Vivace giocoso,” mm. 1-2<sup>140</sup>



With this feeling of the hand grasping, Zhao wants Chelsea’s left hand to play the broken chords with a motion of little circles.<sup>141</sup>

For octaves, Zhao wants the student to play “in the hand” with the hand’s axis point near the thumb side of the hand as opposed to tilting the hand toward the pinky side, which offsets the balance and leads to strained playing. Zhao points out how the axis on the thumb and pointer finger side of the hand is connected to the forearm. With the hand centered on this axis, Zhao wants Sheila to play the octaves in Saint-Saëns’ *Étude en forme de valse* Op. 52 No. 6.

<sup>140</sup> Czerny, *Études de mécanisme Opus 849*, 9.

<sup>141</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

Figure 22. Saint-Saëns' *Étude en forme de valse* Op. 52 No. 6, mm. 9-12<sup>142</sup>



To help Sheila feel the axis near her thumb more strongly, Zhao has her first play the right-hand octaves without the top notes, so she feels the rotation between her thumb and the single notes in between the right-hand octaves.<sup>143</sup>

#### Pinky in Relation to the Elbow and Thumb

A central concept to Zhao's teaching is that relaxation of the body relies on the finger's ability to stand stably on the key, so that other body parts do not need to substitute their strength to "help" the finger and, therefore, become tense. Specifically, she explains that when the pinky stands well on the key, it enables the elbow and thumb to relax. On the other hand, if the pinky does not stand well or the thumb tenses as the pinky plays, then the elbow locks in a fixed position.

As Chelsea holds down the last note of Schmitt's Preparatory Exercise for the Piano Op. 16 No. 27, Zhao inspects how her left-hand pinky is standing.

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<sup>142</sup> Camille Saint-Saëns, "No. 6 en forme de valse," in *Six Études pour le Piano Opus 52* (Paris: Durand, Shoenewek & Cie., n.d., ca. 1877), 28, [https://imslp.org/wiki/6\\_Études,\\_Op.52\\_\(Saint-Saëns,\\_Camille\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/6_Études,_Op.52_(Saint-Saëns,_Camille)).

<sup>143</sup> Ling Zhao, lessons with Sheila, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

Figure 23. Schmitt's Preparatory Exercise for the Piano Op. 16 No. 27<sup>144</sup>



To send the strength more toward her pinky's fingertip, Zhao moves Chelsea's palm forward, so that her pinky's knuckle is more prominently rounded. By moving the palm and knuckle forward, and therefore moving the axis forward, the palm is better able to support the finger to stand stably.

Zhao shows how the line from the pinky along the side of the hand, wrist, and forearm to the elbow is one interconnected unit. When the pinky is standing well, then it allows the elbow to relax. However, when the pinky is unstable, then the entire unit becomes stiff with a locked elbow. Zhao uses one hand to maneuver Chelsea's palm forward to support her pinky and the other hand to move Chelsea's elbow in little circles until she feels her elbow release. "Eh, now you are at ease," remarks Zhao.<sup>145</sup> She has Chelsea's mother feel how Chelsea's elbow is not heavy when her pinky stands stably.

Zhao explains how a released and open elbow allows the student to play outward in positions all over the keyboard, whereas a locked and rigid elbow constrains them to one fixed position. As Zhao guides Chelsea to support her pinky inside the palm and free her elbow to open flexibly, Chelsea comments on how comfortable it is. "The feeling of music is also open like this," responds Zhao. "Then you are natural and relaxed."<sup>146</sup> At

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<sup>144</sup> Schmitt, "Preparatory Exercises," 5.

<sup>145</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>146</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

the end of playing the exercise, Zhao guides Chelsea's hands and arms to lift away from the keyboard in a relaxed motion, as though her hands have a "good relationship with the keyboard."<sup>147</sup>

To relax the elbow, not only must the pinky finger stand stably on the key but the thumb must also relax as the pinky plays. If the thumb tenses, then the elbow cannot release. Zhao wiggles Chelsea's thumb as she plays Schmitt's Preparatory Exercise for the Piano Op. 16 No. 24 to remind her to relax it.

Figure 24. Schmitt's Preparatory Exercise for the Piano Op. 16 No. 24<sup>148</sup>



Zhao relates the body's relaxation or rigidity when playing piano to riding a bike or pushing a three-wheeled cart. When comfortable, the body naturally follows the motions of riding or pushing without thinking, but when afraid, the body instinctively uses strength to protect itself and therefore becomes rigid. When the student plays their pinky, Zhao points out how their thumb tries to "protect" by using strength and becoming rigid, and therefore prevents the elbow from releasing. Only when the pinky stands stably with the support of the palm and a relaxed thumb can the elbow then relax.

From when the pinky plays or "bites" the key, Zhao already wants this positioning of the palm forward, finger standing stably, and thumb relaxed. This immediate

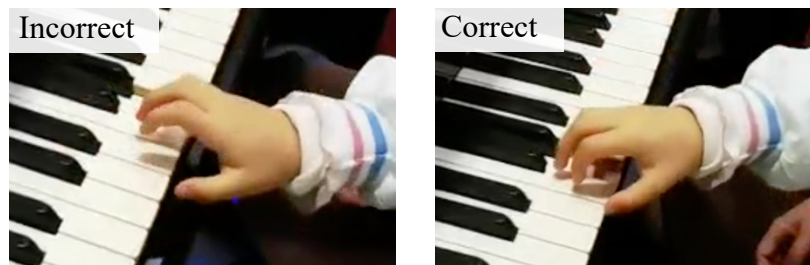
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<sup>147</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>148</sup> Schmitt, "Preparatory Exercises," 5.

positioning contrasts with the student first playing the note and then moving the palm into position. To help Chelsea better understand, Zhao has Chelsea place her hand on the back of hers as she demonstrates correctly and incorrectly. Chelsea plays the pinky several times until mastering this correct positioning of the hand upon playing.

Figure 25. Landing on the Pinky with the Hand Position Incorrect and Correct<sup>149</sup>



Zhao describes Chelsea's sound as penetrating and relaxed, unlike before when she used strength and played with some rigidity.<sup>150</sup>

### Following the Fingers

Zhao wants the hand to support the fingers by following them with the wrist moving slightly up and out when the fingers play toward the pinky and back down and in when playing toward the thumb, which creates a circular movement. The student must maintain a rounded hand position that grasps with the palm to fluently transfer playing from one side of the hand to the other with this motion. When playing toward the fourth and fifth fingers in Hanon's Exercise No. 1 from *The Virtuoso Pianist*, Zhao wants the

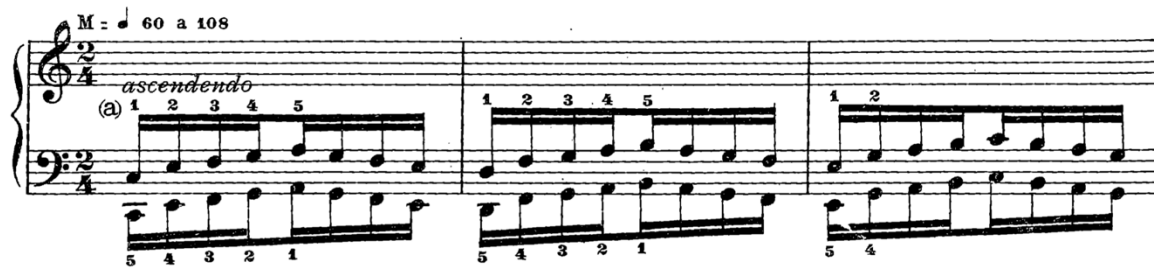
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<sup>149</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>150</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

student's wrist to follow and deliver the fingers into the keys, as opposed to the wrist staying in a fixed position.

Figure 26. Hanon's Exercise No. 1 from *The Virtuoso Pianist*, mm. 1-3<sup>151</sup>



As Chelsea plays toward her pinky, Zhao guides her wrist to move slightly outward and lift to accommodate the fingers' shorter lengths and positioning at the side of the hand. By doing so, the connection between the pinky, hand, wrist, and forearm is brought into balance and makes it easier to play. Zhao alternates guiding Chelsea's left and right wrists and tells her to "draw a circle."<sup>152</sup>

To play the right hand of Czerny's Etude Op. 849 No. 3 "Allegro non troppo," Zhao also wants Chelsea's hand to follow the fingers with a motion of little circles and reminds Chelsea to "transfer" and "come back" between fingers as the fingers play from one side of the hand to the other.

<sup>151</sup> Charles-Louis Hanon, "Parte Prima No. 1," in *Il Pianista Virtuoso*, ed. Giuseppe Piccioli (Milan: Edizioni Curci, 1947), 6, [https://imslp.org/wiki/The\\_Virtuoso\\_Pianist\\_\(Hanon,\\_Charles-Louis\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/The_Virtuoso_Pianist_(Hanon,_Charles-Louis)).

<sup>152</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

Figure 27. Czerny's Etude Op. 849 No. 3 "Allegro non troppo," mm. 9-11<sup>153</sup>



When playing fast, Chelsea's hand shape depresses with collapsed knuckles, which disrupts the flow of the circular motion and leads to strained playing. Zhao reminds Chelsea that strength must come from the palm grasping with a round hand position and arched bridge that enables transferring between the far distance of the thumb and pinky. It is through the palm that the fingers are distributed, so one must play from the palm rather than try to use strength from outstretched fingers with depressed knuckles. "Actually, you do not need to use that much strength," instructs Zhao, "but you must follow the feeling of music and walk the path clearly."<sup>154</sup>

### Thumb Independence Exercise

*Lingdian qibu* explains how thumb and pinky strengthening exercises are important, because of the five fingers, "the thumb is the fattest and most stupid and the pinky is the weakest."<sup>155</sup> Zhao shows how the thumb and pinky form two strips along the hand (the "two chicken legs") with the thumb's fatty strip delineated by the web in between the thumb and pointer finger and going all the way to the wrist.<sup>156</sup> Even though

<sup>153</sup> Czerny, *Études de mécanisme Opus 849*, 6.

<sup>154</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>155</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 49.

<sup>156</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.



the thumb is duller than the pinky, Zhao explains how it must be practiced until it is just as agile so that the “two chicken legs” are practiced to about the same capability.

For the following thumb exercise, students are instructed to “maintain a half-fist with the hand” and to move the thumb up and down “from the base of the hand.”<sup>157</sup>

Figure 28. Thumb Exercise: “Right Hand Climbing Bars (pinky supporting)”<sup>158</sup>



As Chelsea’s right-hand pinky stands stably, Zhao guides Chelsea’s palm to lift along with her thumb so that her hand opens and allows her thumb to play into the key from a greater height. Zhao wants Chelsea to actively drive her thumb up and down independently from her thumb’s muscle at the base of her hand near the wrist. This creates more power than to play only passively with the entirety of the hand from the hand’s rotation movement. To help Chelsea better feel how the thumb should move independently, Zhao moves Chelsea’s thumb up and down. After Chelsea repeatedly plays both hands’ thumbs separately as needed, Zhao has her hold down her thumb and repeatedly play her pinky finger instead. Similar to the thumb, Zhao wants Chelsea’s pinky to play from her palm with the hand opening and lifting along with the pinky.

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<sup>157</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 49.

<sup>158</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 49.

## Thumb Crossing Exercises

Zhao uses thumb crossing exercises to teach the student how to center their weight on the standing finger while the thumb moves itself to cross rather than other parts of the body trying to move the thumb instead. The exercises “act as precursor training for running scales” and are introduced after a student plays well in the five-finger hand position and the changing hand positions of Hanon.<sup>159</sup> “As long as it involves the thumb, it is all difficult,” Zhao tells Chelsea, whose thumb gets stuck when crossing in the scales of a Czerny etude. “So this matter must definitely be resolved well. Otherwise, it will be troublesome later.”<sup>160</sup>

*Lingdian qibu* explains how the thumb is not only the “most stupid” of the fingers but also “has the most work.”<sup>161</sup> In addition to moving up and down, the thumb must also move horizontally when crossing. To practice this horizontal motion, Zhao has the student practice their thumb going in and out of the “cave” created by the finger it crosses under.

Figure 29. Thumb Horizontal Training: “Thumb ‘Going through a Cave’ Exercise”<sup>162</sup>



<sup>159</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 76.

<sup>160</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>161</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 69.

<sup>162</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 69.

Chelsea plays this exercise separately in each hand with her thumb repeatedly crossing back and forth under her second finger before switching to cross under her third finger. When the thumb crosses under, Zhao wants the center of gravity to remain on the finger standing on the key rather than on the thumb crossing. The fulcrum at the fingertip of the finger playing in between thumb crossings is like the landing point of a compass leg. When the weight rests on this compass leg, then the thumb is free to relax when crossing.<sup>163</sup>

The thumb should actively move itself to go “through the cave” without tensing or using strength, which would throw the balance off the weight of the finger standing on the key. When the thumb does not move itself, then other parts of the body such as the hand, wrist, elbow, or arm may try to push or pull the thumb to cross. This is unhelpful and leads to sloppy playing. While the wrist may “naturally accommodate” the motion of the thumb crossing, it “does not push or press.”<sup>164</sup> For the thumb and other fingers to move themselves independently, a rounded “half-fist”<sup>165</sup> hand position is needed. “With this rounded shape,” says Zhao, “each finger must learn to play itself and not use the wrist to push it in.”<sup>166</sup>

Though Zhao has Chelsea play the exercise slowly, she wants the motions of her fingers to be sharp and fast. As soon as the finger in between thumb crossings plays, the thumb must move quickly to find its place above the next note. To help Chelsea feel the

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<sup>163</sup> Ling Zhao, “(Er) Zhongyang Yinyuexueyuan qangqinxi jiaoshou Zhao Ling jiang wei dajia jiangjie zuixin Zhongguoyinxie gangqin kaoji jiaocai” [(No. 2) Central Conservatory’s piano professor Ling Zhao explains for everyone the newest Chinese Musicians’ Association graded piano exam materials], posted on November 1, 2022, Bilibili video, 9:50 to 10:50, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1EV4y137Sw>, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>164</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 69.

<sup>165</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 69.

<sup>166</sup> Zhao, “(Yi) Zhongyang Yinyuexueyuan qangqinxi jiaoshou Zhao Ling,” 7:30 to 8:10.

speed of this motion, Zhao moves her second finger to play while moving her thumb to quickly cross under at the same time.<sup>167</sup>

To give more space for Chelsea’s thumb to cross under, Zhao has her play a variation of the exercise with a black note in between the thumb crossings.

Figure 30. Thumb Agility Training: “Chromatic Exercise”<sup>168</sup>



*Lingdian qibu* instructs students to play this exercise with the hand position “gathered together.”<sup>169</sup> The standing finger in between thumb crossings should round prominently from the knuckle joint. The motion between the finger and thumb should be like grabbing together to form a circle as though holding something. Zhao demonstrates this rounded grasping motion as she plays her second, third, fourth, and fifth fingers in between thumb crossings. Chelsea is assigned to practice each finger variation one hundred times hands together in parallel motion. Zhao reminds her not to move her wrists but to relax her thumb as it actively moves itself.<sup>170</sup>

When introducing scales, *Lingdian qibu* trains the student’s thumb to cross within scale fingering groups.

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<sup>167</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>168</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 76.

<sup>169</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 76.

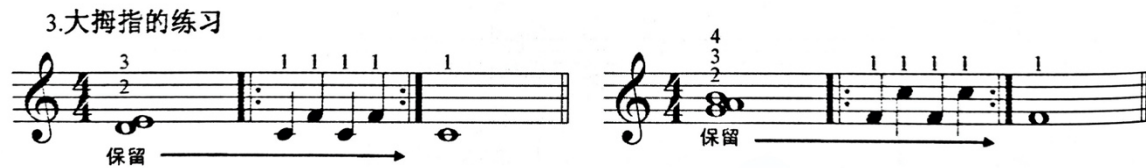
<sup>170</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

Figure 31. Thumb Crossing in Scale Fingering Groups: “Shortcut for Remembering Fingering”<sup>171</sup>



Students are to “memorize the scale fingering patterns like multiplication tables with skillful grasp and firm remembrance.”<sup>172</sup>

Figure 32. Thumb Crossing in Scale Groupings: “Thumb Exercises”<sup>173</sup>



To play the exercises in figure 32, the middle fingers sustain notes while the thumb crosses in and out by playing the notes on either side of them with a steady tempo “like a clock.”<sup>174</sup> The fulcrum of the hand’s weight should rest at the sustained middle fingers. Zhao instructs students to relax their wrist, arm, elbow, and upper body when playing.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 80.

<sup>172</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 80.

<sup>173</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 80.

<sup>174</sup> Ling and Zhao, “Taidouji gangqinjia Ling Yuan he Zhao Ling,” :00 to 2:15.

<sup>175</sup> Ling and Zhao, “Taidouji gangqinjia Ling Yuan he Zhao Ling,” :00 to 2:15.

## Scales and Arpeggios

Zhao uses scales and arpeggios to train students' finger dexterity and hand positioning and to highlight weaknesses in their technique that Zhao meticulously adjusts. For different students, this training includes the hand following the fingers, playing within the grasp of the hand, and standing stably on the fingers. "To the larger students, give what larger students need," says Zhao. "And to the smaller students, give what smaller students need. ... You must teach according to what they need, and train whatever aspect of their playing is poor. Like my mom says, it is like treating an illness. Wherever it is not well is where it needs to be treated."<sup>176</sup>

At age five, Chelsea plays scales of different keys in the pattern of one octave in quarter notes played once, two octaves in eighth notes played twice in a row, and three octaves in triplets played three times in a row. As Chelsea plays, Zhao stops her in between to give directions. Zhao wants more stamina and concentrated vitality. Each finger should lift high to play independently with a clear and pronounced sound, as opposed to simply pressing the keys without lifting. To help Chelsea understand the motion, Zhao demonstrates correctly and incorrectly with Chelsea's hand on the back of hers. She wiggles Chelsea's fingers up and down, reminding her not to tense the lifting finger. Even when playing fast, the student must maintain a hand position with prominently rounded knuckles from which the fingers lift.

For the hand to follow the fingers at the top of scales, Zhao teaches the right hand to "carry" the fourth and fifth fingers into the keys with the palm moving forward to

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<sup>176</sup> Zhao, interview.

support. As the scale reaches higher registers, there should be a sense of “unfolding.”<sup>177</sup>

*Lingdian qibu* reminds students to “make fingers of different conditions play evenly and cleanly” and “use the metronome to practice from slow to fast.”<sup>178</sup>

At age eleven, Eva plays four octave scales of different keys in intervals of octaves, thirds, sixths, and tenths and also in a pattern that alternates between parallel and contrary motion between the hands.

Figure 33. “Parallel and Contrary Motion Scale Exercise”<sup>179</sup>

The image shows a musical score for a piano exercise. It is written in C major (C大调) and 4/4 time. The score is divided into four systems, each consisting of two staves (treble and bass clef). The first system is labeled 'C大调' and '8va'. The second system is labeled '(8va)'. The third system is labeled '8va'. The fourth system is unlabeled. The music features parallel and contrary motion scale exercises.

<sup>177</sup> Zhao, lessons with Chelsea.

<sup>178</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 80.

<sup>179</sup> Aloys Schmitt, *Shenmite gangqin shouzhi lianxi* [Schmitt piano finger exercises], ed. Baili Fang (Shanghai: Shanghai yinyue chubanshe [Shanghai Music Publishing House], 2013), 58.

Zhao reminds Eva to “grasp inside the hand” when playing.<sup>180</sup> The “core” should be maintained with a feeling of the hand grasping and the thumb and pinky sides of the hand (the “two chicken legs”) pressing inward from both sides. Zhao explains how Eva exerts a lot of strength in vain by playing with her fingers more spread apart and less rounded in a fixed arm and hand position. When the fingers are spread out apart from the palm, the core is lost and the fingers are unable to play from the hand’s grasp.<sup>181</sup>

To play the corresponding arpeggios in four octaves, Zhao also wants a grasp in Eva’s hand. Particularly at the top of the arpeggio, Zhao wants a prominently rounded hand position to be maintained within which the fingers stand stably. *Lingdian qibu* explains how arpeggios exercise a larger hand position and gives the following practice instructions: “1. Thumb turns of its own accord. 2. Transfer strength between fingertips with a legato sound. 3. Steady movement of the wrist and arm. 4. Have a feeling of direction.”<sup>182</sup>

As Eva plays the arpeggio, Zhao holds Eva’s wrist and guides her fingers to stand stably. “You are always afraid the sound is not enough,” Zhao tells Eva, “so at the same time sound comes out, you will give it lots of baggage to carry. One did not stand well yet, but you cover them with quilts and everything.”<sup>183</sup> This “baggage” is manifest in excessive body movements and effort, particularly when the thumb crosses. When the right hand ascends and the thumb crosses under, the thumb must move itself without the arm and elbow trying to pull the thumb. Likewise, when the right hand descends and the

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<sup>180</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>181</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>182</sup> Zhao, *Lingdian qibu*, 100.

<sup>183</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.



hand crosses over the thumb, then “the whole hand follows over.”<sup>184</sup> The finger on the key must stand well while the finger crossing must actively shift with relaxation rather than being pulled or pushed by other body parts. To help Eva understand the motion, Zhao holds her thumb in place on the key while shifting her hand to cross over.<sup>185</sup>

### Open Body Movement and Sound

To create a more open sound, Zhao opens the student’s playing posture, coordinates their movements to be freer and more fluent, and helps them choose a tempo that allows time to capture the music’s essence. Sheila plays each note of the Beethoven Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 opening very cautiously while hunched over the keyboard. Zhao describes her playing as lacking meaning with a vertical and closed sound.

Figure 34. Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 Mov. 1 “Vivace, ma non troppo,” mm. 1-4<sup>186</sup>



<sup>184</sup> Zhao, “(Yi) Zhongyang Yinyuexueyuan qiangqinxi jiaoshou Zhao Ling,” 8:55 to 9:00.

<sup>185</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>186</sup> Beethoven, “Sonate, Opus 109,” 273.

“Everywhere is ‘careful, careful, careful!’” says Zhao as she bends her head over different areas of the keyboard. “Look out here! Be careful stepping there!”<sup>187</sup>

“Actually,” says Zhao, this opening is “boundless as the sea and sky.”<sup>188</sup> While demonstrating with relaxed arm movements, Zhao leans back slightly, opens her shoulders, and looks upward. She explains how this openness of the body begins before the “opening comes in” as opposed to sitting motionless over the keyboard to start which does not provide a way forward. Playing the opening and Tempo I sections with an open body posture also makes the structure of the movement clearer at first glance.

Zhao interprets Beethoven’s writing of *dolce* in the opening not as warm like hugging something close but rather a “contentment in the heart” that leads to opening one’s posture. There should be a feeling of a “large piano” where the sound goes out beyond the piano rather than staying restrained to the pianist’s closed body.<sup>189</sup> Zhao explains that, when one plays hunched over the keys, they have a false sense of safety and accomplishment and are misled to believe their sound is playing outward.

To demonstrate, Zhao comically pretends to sing loudly with her head down thinking the sound is booming when it is constrained. “No one can actually hear what they are doing.”<sup>190</sup> Not only does a closed position prevent the sound from playing out but also causes unnecessary aches. “Where it is sore is where something is not right,” says Zhao. “Except for your hand being a little bit sore, there is not any place that should

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<sup>187</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>188</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>189</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>190</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

be sore. If you go back after practicing today and your lower back is sore, then you are definitely doing something wrong.”<sup>191</sup>

To guide Sheila in opening and relaxing her shoulders, Zhao pulls her shoulders back from behind. Zhao compares Sheila not allowing herself to lift her hands in between motions to steering a car jerkily this way and that. Instead, Zhao has Sheila lift her hands and pause at each half measure to notice how both hands move in the same direction left or right with the left hand following the right hand. To guide Sheila’s hands to lift, Zhao lifts Sheila’s upper arms from behind. Zhao suggests playing a half measure repeatedly until the motion feels fluent. After the direction of the motions is correct, then the student can reason how to balance the voicing between hands.

The opening not only needs openness in body movement but also in timing to capture the music’s essence without being rushed. Starting in Beethoven’s late period, “he really went to search for God,” says Zhao. “It is this type of: ‘What does the world have that is extraordinary?’” Zhao points out that of all the openings Beethoven wrote, this one is the most like sunshine. “This is seeing sunlight,” says Zhao as she looks upward with her hands raised. She demonstrates lyrical openings of different Beethoven sonatas. “But this,” says Zhao as she plays the opening of Op. 109 again, “‘Wow.’ Absolutely liberated. Transcendent. Enlightened. What else do I have that is urgent?”<sup>192</sup>

With this mindset, Zhao wants Sheila to choose her tempo. Zhao explains how most people play this piece as though “they are too busy” and in a hurry without time to think and feel. Rather than playing like the majority, Zhao wants Sheila to be intentional

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<sup>191</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>192</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

and think for herself. The actual tempo played fast or slow is not what is most important, but “if one has time to capture (the music), then that is precisely their tempo,” says Zhao.<sup>193</sup>

To help Sheila maintain a relaxed position of leaning back with open shoulders at the Adagio espressivo section, Zhao sits back-to-back with Sheila as she plays.

Figure 35. Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major Op. 109 Mov. 1, “Adagio espressivo” Section, mm. 9-11<sup>194</sup>



Sheila’s back, head, and shoulders lean against Zhao’s as Zhao hunches slightly forward, which allows Zhao to immediately feel when Sheila is tense or when she is relaxed and leaning back against her. Even at the sudden *piano* markings, Zhao wants Sheila to maintain this position rather than to suddenly hunch over when the dynamics change.

“These *subito pianos* do not affect your direction,” says Zhao.<sup>195</sup>

Zhao wants the right hand to simply paint the first arpeggiated chord from left to right like a paint brush. Then when the left hand comes in, it should be one coordinated motion between the hands and not a separate motion as though the hands were

<sup>193</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>194</sup> Beethoven, “Sonate, Opus 109,” 273.

<sup>195</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

fighting.<sup>196</sup> Zhao teaches Sheila to transfer and relax weight into the keys rather than forcing the sound with hard work as though scolding the piano into doing things. Without transferring weight, the sound becomes forced and choppy.

### Phrasing and Grouping

To give direction to the music and a sense of cohesion, Zhao has the student think intentionally about how to phrase and group notes. To structure phrases, she has the student consider where each phrase begins, where it will go, where the phrase ending begins, how the phrase after will follow, and how each similar phrase can be different from each other in timing and dynamic. She wants the student to be careful not to end a phrase too early by deflating the sound before reaching the climax, which sounds out of breath with no energy to finish. Rather, they should pay attention to how each phrase ends in feeling, volume, strength, and syntax.<sup>197</sup>

Zhao guides the student to work well with the keyboard and never force the sound with excessive use of strength. “The important thing is finding out how good you are with the keyboard,” Zhao tells Sheila. “Actually, I will use so many ways to speak sincerely with it. What do I want it to say for me? It is not you using endless amounts of strength on the outside, which does not have any use.”<sup>198</sup> Zhao uses imagery to inspire the student’s phrasing and characterization of the music. For example, she impersonates how a parrot bounces to different tempos of music to inspire more lively playing, relates a

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<sup>196</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>197</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>198</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

repetitive motive to a revolving lantern with decorative horses spinning round and round, and describes the left hand holding back the tempo as sounding like “a horse stepping on mud.”<sup>199</sup>

To create a more cohesive and continuous sound, Zhao simplifies the student’s body movements and groups notes together, since excessive body movements and gestures lead to choppiness. Zhao often has the student play from one maintained, stable hand position to prevent unnecessary movement and “stumbling on the road.”<sup>200</sup> To group running notes together, Zhao has the student think of the notes as “one breath”<sup>201</sup> or play them with movement like fast little ballet feet rather than playing the notes separately with uncontained movements and a choppy sound.<sup>202</sup> Similarly, Zhao has the student organize chords into groups instead of sounding “wordy” by playing each one separately.<sup>203</sup> She sometimes has the student group left hand broken chords into blocked chords to hear the changing harmonies or bring out certain lines within the harmonies.

Zhao also shows the student how the composer groups and structures the music, such as pointing out how the composer creates tension in timing by writing an increasing number of grace notes or how elongating the phrases builds greater climax. Understanding the music’s organization helps the student make interpretive decisions and not rush through it. To help Eva understand how Czerny’s Etude Op. 740 No. 13 is organized, Zhao plays while outlining its structure.

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<sup>199</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>200</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>201</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>202</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

<sup>203</sup> Zhao, lessons with Sheila.

Figure 36. Czerny's Etude Op. 740 No. 13 "Vivace," mm. 5-16<sup>204</sup>

Zhao wants the touch to be light and nimble like “a dragon fly skimming the surface of the water.”<sup>205</sup> The left-hand chords guide the structure and changes in tone and dynamics. In mm. 5 to 7, the left-hand chords repeat every measure like three separate questions before a response in the following measure, while the next phrase is elongated with the left-hand chords in mm. 9 to 12 repeating every two measures instead. Rather than playing each measure separately, Zhao wants Eva to play mm. 9 to 12 in two

<sup>204</sup> Carl Czerny, *L'arte di rendere agili le dita: 50 studi brillanti per pianoforte (op. 740)*, ed. Luigi Finizio (Milan: Curci, 1948), 56, [https://imslp.org/wiki/The\\_Art\\_of\\_Finger\\_Dexterity,\\_Op.740\\_\(Czerny,\\_Carl\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/The_Art_of_Finger_Dexterity,_Op.740_(Czerny,_Carl)).

<sup>205</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

measure groupings, which then builds to the climactic four-measure ending with the first chord of m. 13.

The ending's rolled chords should have a sense of arrival on the downbeats and crescendo to the double *forte*. Rather than skewing the hand position with a rolling motion, Zhao teaches Eva to play the rolled chords with an upright hand position and simple motion. Zhao wants Eva to hear the left hand resolving at m. 15. To stay in line with the piece's brilliant and sparkly character, the last chords should be played in-tempo, clear-cut, and not too heavily.<sup>206</sup>

### Summary

With a dynamic and animated personality, Zhao very practically helps students understand the mechanics and interconnectedness of their fingers, hands, and arms when playing so they can achieve ultimate ease and utilize strength from a grasping palm. By teaching the finger to stand stably on the key with the support of the palm and knuckles, other parts of the student's body can then relax. With persistence, Zhao lays a strong foundation for her students' technique while also guiding them to play with an open body position, open sound, and musical direction in their phrasing. "In the end," says Zhao, "there definitely must be lots and lots of hard work before there can be so much 'freedom and ease.' It is like my father says: 'Love music and music will love you.'"<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Zhao, lessons with Eva.

<sup>207</sup> Ling Zhao, "Baba shuo: ni ai yinyue, yinyue ye hui ai ni" [Dad said: love music and music will love you], Gangqinjia Zhao Ling [Pianist Ling Zhao], posted on July 3, 2021, WeChat video, :00 to :16.



## CHAPTER 7

### INTERVIEW WITH VIVIAN LI

#### Order of Questions

##### BASICS:

How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching at your current institution?

How many pre-college students do you teach? How many collegiate students do you teach?

What does a typical week of teaching and work look like for you?

##### TEACHING GOALS:

What do you enjoy most about teaching?

What are some of your main goals in teaching piano?

What do you consider your role as teacher to be?

Do the goals you have for your older students differ from those for the younger? Does this cause you to teach them with different approaches?

##### TECHNIQUE:

With transfer students, do you find any common issues? If so, what are they?

Do you have any specific ways of teaching arm weight?

Do you have any particular ways for teaching release of tension?

What would you define as good technique?

Are there certain technique exercises, such as finger strengthening or other things,  
that you do with students?

Do you have any particular approaches to how you teach touch?

#### EXPECTATIONS:

What type of environment do you seek to create in lessons?

What do you do in situations where the student is or becomes unmotivated?

What do you consider the role of the parent to be in their child's learning piano?

What are your expectations for their involvement?

Are there any criteria for how you accept students?

How do you define talent? How important do you think talent is to a student's success  
in learning piano?

Do most of your students have time for other interests outside of school besides  
piano—such as sports or another instrument?

What do you require of your students practice time?

#### REPERTOIRE AND INTERPRETATION:

Who are some of your favorite composers (and/or compositions) to teach? How do  
you have your students approach these pieces?

How much do you analyze the music with students? How important is this in your  
methodology?

Do you use any leveled repertoire books?

How do you teach interpretation and freedom of expression in relation to being  
faithful to the details of the score?

What editions of music do you use?

How do you help to cultivate each student's unique artistic development?

#### PERFORMANCE:

In your opinion, what is a meaningful and inspired performance? How do you help your students to get there?

What are some tips you would give for students preparing for competitions? Do you have specific ways for preparing your students for competitions?

Do you have all your students participate in competitions?

#### PIANO EDUCATION IN CHINA:

What do you believe makes your teaching unique from other piano teachers?

Can you describe the teaching of your piano teacher(s) in China? Do you teach this way as well or differently? If differently, then how so?

How important do you think studying abroad is for students? Why?

Do you feel China offers its pianists opportunity to fulfill their artistic development and achievement? Why?

What do you consider some of the greatest strengths of piano education in China?

Is the way that you teach Chinese repertoire different from how you teach Western repertoire?

#### TEACHING PHILOSOPHY:

What does music mean to you? What do you hope music will mean to your students?

When are you most proud of your students?

What do you hope students will remember most about your teaching?

What advice would you give to aspiring piano teachers for how to become a successful teacher?

## Introduction

Transcribed by the author from two days of interviews spoken in English over Zoom with Dr. Vivian Li on August 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. Material from both dates was combined into one transcript to maintain fluency. “B” represents the interviewer Burton and “L” represents the interviewee Li. Original questions are italicized and follow-up questions are not.

After accompanying her student to Warsaw, Poland for the preliminary round of the 18<sup>th</sup> International Chopin Piano Competition, Dr. Li and her student returned to China where they quarantined in a hotel for two weeks due to COVID-19 regulations. During this time, Dr. Li taught piano to students over Zoom and participated in this interview.

L: I have been doing Zoom lessons with my student, but he is right next door. I can hear his metronome simultaneously from next door and on my cell phone. [Laughs]. ... My other student has a very important national competition (the Chinese Golden Bell Award for Music) coming up in October.

B: That is the biggest competition in China, right?

L: It is like “the” biggest one. What is funny is to many of the school leaders, it is even more important than (international) competitions like the Van Cliburn or Chopin, because it is organized and certified by the national government. It is very important for the school whenever they apply for funding from the country. ... Those funny pictures (posted on WeChat of her students and her wearing ancient Chinese costumes) are from the trip when I took my students to the preliminaries of this Golden Bell in Xi’an. All

three of them passed to the next round, but it is in October, which means my student (who will compete in Stage One of the 18<sup>th</sup> International Chopin Piano Competition in October) will have to withdraw from Golden Bell, and I will go to Warsaw with him. I feel bad abandoning my other students.

B: Then you have to quarantine after and cannot even go straight to the other competition.

L: Exactly, which means all four of us will be extremely busy in September, because I will try to prepare all of them in advance.

### Basics

B: *How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching at your current institution?*

L: I started teaching at Xinghai Conservatory of Music in 2006. I think I first started teaching when I was in high school in Toronto. I taught music theory to my classmates, because the Royal Conservatory exams required theory. Sometimes, I was also my dad's teaching assistant.

B: He was teaching piano in Canada at that time?

L: Yes. When he did not have time, I would guide some of the more advanced students in their practice. I think it was a very good experience for me.

B: *How many pre-college students do you teach? How many collegiate students do you teach?*

L: The number of students will keep changing. Right now, I have seven pre-college students in the middle school (attached to Xinghai Conservatory of Music),<sup>208</sup> nine undergraduate students, four master's students, and two private students of elementary school age. ... I do not want to take more college students, but sometimes you have to take orders from leadership. ... It is a very difficult balance to maintain. If I could choose, I would devote most of my time to pre-college or even pre-pre-college students, because I started teaching all my pre-college middle school students when they were kids, ... so their path is very smooth and straightforward. Then it is easier for both them and me.

B: Do you take beginning students?

L: Not the very beginning students. I used to when I first moved back (to China) and in the States. Maybe six or seven years ago, my time became very limited and I had quite a few very reliable teaching assistants who had undergraduate or graduate degrees, so I started letting beginners study with them first. My teaching assistant will start them, but I always keep track of their progress. Then after a year or so, I will take over.

B: Is there more freedom in the pre-college attached middle school as opposed to the more established undergraduate and graduate college?

L: Yes. That is why the most talented and promising students tend to be in the attached middle schools—not only in most Chinese conservatories but around the world. ... I think we should all consider why. What happened to all these kids after they went to

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<sup>208</sup> Xinghai Conservatory of Music's attached middle school is for students ages twelve through eighteen. When Dr. Li refers to "middle school students" or "middle school kids" throughout this interview, she is referring to students at the middle school who are in this age range and not necessarily students of middle school age.

college? ... That is why I try to pay more attention and give more time to the middle school kids. I want to make sure that at least this bunch of them, my kids, will go further—that they will not suddenly disappear when they are at the college level.

B: *What does a typical week of teaching and work look like for you?*

L: Ideally, a typical week is where I divide my time well between the middle school and college. The two campuses are very far away from each other. My faculty position is in the college, so to teach middle school students is just like volunteering. It is very tiring, but of course I will never give it up. This means I must fulfill my college workload first. There is a patrol team that walks around the building and checks if you are teaching according to your timetable, which I think is impractical, because performing artists need flexibility. What if you have a performance or suddenly this or that student has a competition, rehearsal, or performance? Then I immediately have to adjust the lessons.

I am usually at the college three days a week. Besides piano lessons, I also teach music analysis and piano literature to undergraduates. Then if there is still time, I try to get to the middle school before eight, so I can listen to my kids for at least two and a half hours. ... Sometimes I go directly to my home studio, because one of my middle school students usually practices there after he gets off school. I save those three evenings for him and the other four days of the week for all the kids.

B: No rest day?

L: Not really. To me, teaching some of my middle school kids feels like a rest day. Most of the time, I teach them at my studio, because I have two secondhand Steinways in very good condition. It is at home with my rabbits. All my kids make themselves at home. I



have two practice rooms. Whenever my husband or father is not teaching, my students will practice in one room and I will teach in the other.

B: Do your students get one or multiple lessons a week?

L: Normally one lesson a week. If they have important competitions, concerts, or juries coming up, then I will give extra lessons according to the level of urgency. For the Chopin Competition, I practice with my student whenever I have time. He was staying at my house almost every day. He always has competitions coming up. ... He consumes most of the time, along with my other middle school student who also does a lot. ... I teach her maybe two or three days every week. ... Then two of my (younger) middle school students are growing very fast, so I want to devote more time to them. They receive at least two lessons a week. ... They grew up together just like my two older middle school students did, so they are like brother and sister or a sweet couple.

### Teaching Goals

B: *What do you enjoy most about teaching?*

L: A lot. It is part of my daily life. Recently, I enjoyed being in Poland with my student experiencing so many amazing things, but I miss all my students. I connect with them on Zoom and WeChat every day. Right before (this interview), I was chatting with the little boy of the sweet couple, because he just started one of his new Beethoven sonatas and had some trouble and questions. I am glad I discovered early enough in my life that I really love teaching, so I could start doing this thing that makes my life more complete.

B: *What are some of your main goals in teaching piano?*

L: I think for any teacher, not just piano teachers, one major goal is to help the student find what they do best and help them develop a path that takes them very far in life with confidence, respect, and enough skills that enable them to keep going and contribute not only to their path as a human being but also contribute to the path and development of the entire humankind. This way, they can have a more meaningful existence.

I try to choose students who will make the best use of my skill in piano performance and have the most potential, but sometimes you will find out along the way that they are also good at something else. They probably developed, through piano and music, some other interest that they are also very good or even better at. That is very good, too. No matter what we do, I think if we do one thing very well, then good things will happen. You either stay on the same path doing very well or you find a new path that you can do well on too.

B: *What do you consider your role as teacher to be?*

L: To lead, inspire, and grow them, and help them find themselves. I do not want to call ourselves “instructors.” [Makes serious face]. That sounds very boring. We are a guide, gardener, farmer, or even a maid/nanny. [Laughs].

B: Your role seems beyond piano teacher. You take them to different places, take care of them, and practice with them. It seems very comprehensive.

L: I think it is very important. I try to shape their personality and bring out the best in them, because I think that will have long term effects. To only teach them how to play this passage or scale is too limited.

B: *Do the goals you have for your older students differ from those for the younger? Does this cause you to teach them with different approaches?*

L: Extremely different. I am sure you are aware of how many people in this nation apply for the piano major at the college level. Every undergraduate audition is just crazy. In most cases, all the top-notch talents go to Central Conservatory and Shanghai Conservatory, so Xinghai Conservatory will get the third batch from the national audition. There are some extreme cases. For example, if some of my students from the middle school do not go abroad—because I want most of them to go abroad—then they will stay with me in the college. Those are the very easy ones. There is no different approach with them.

But for those who did not study with me before and suddenly come to me as freshmen, I have to start over with them. Technically, we must adjust many things. I cannot use the same technical training process that I use with kids. It is more difficult. First, I need to erase all their bad habits, and then start from the beginning. Also, they usually lack much fundamental repertoire that should have been learned when they were younger. I must be more careful and sensitive about their feelings and personality, because they are more developed with their own ideas. At the same time, they are more vulnerable, so I try to find a good balance.

B: There is more expectation when you are older. When younger, you are in a learning stage. When older, you think you should already be at a certain stage.

L: Exactly. I will be attentive to guide them away from misleading peer pressure. I think this is a serious problem among college level conservatories around the nation.

B: Do you mean peer pressure in other areas of life and not piano?

L: Overall, including piano. At the college level, they think they should be able to perform this and that very difficult repertoire, but they are not ready. I especially want to

restart freshmen. I want them to first have the right technique and idea, and to catch up on learning more basic repertoire before they move on. If they can tolerate this period, then they will be very good by the time they are in the second semester of sophomore year, and well established in the third year. But many college students cannot survive this, because they think they should be better than the middle school students, which is not the case.

That is why we divide the middle school and college undergraduates when we have school competitions like for scholarships, auditions, etc. Whenever we combine them, basically all the prizes go to the middle school students, which I do not think is good. It is discouraging for the college students even though it is the truth. You need to find a healthy and positive way to let them know that it is not because they are not as good but because we need to fix something and reload the order of the learning progress.

When I take college students, I would rather take someone maybe not as talented or with as much potential but who really has a passion to do well in music and whose goal is just to learn and improve. Then we will work together very well. If a freshman comes to me with all these unrealistic plans—"I want to enter this competition. I want to learn this"—then I will be a little scared.

B: Then it is harder to have them be in a place where they are willing to restart and learn.

L: Exactly. I think it is more difficult for us and any conservatory other than Central Conservatory and Shanghai Conservatory, because their college students are the best from the entire nation.

B: For the national audition, does a panel of pianists grade students for the whole nation?

L: First, they have two exams. The first is the provincial general art exam, usually taken in December when they are a senior in high school. Piano majors take the piano exam, which is only an etude and fast movement of a classical sonata. They also must take the sight singing/aural skills and singing/vocal exam, but it is very simple. For all of this, the jury members will be teachers from the music departments of universities. Students just need a passing grade. Then in March, they audition on campus at every conservatory they want to apply for and face jury members from the piano department faculty of that conservatory. It is a long process.

The reason they have this national general exam in China is because there are too many students. Last year, the statistic was ten thousand applicants (for the performing arts exam) in Guangdong province. ... Of course, not all of them will apply for the conservatory piano major, because it requires a lot more repertoire, so only some of them will try. The rest will go to music education and other departments.

Last year, there were six hundred applicants for the Xinghai Conservatory piano department. We had two rounds. For the first round, we spent eight days just listening to the prelude and fugue and two etudes. Among those six hundred, we probably took two hundred to the second round where we listened to a sonata and their choice of repertoire from either the Romantic period or twentieth century. Then we took forty students. ... It is crazy.

### Technique

B: *With transfer students, do you find any common issues? If so, what are they?*

L: Usually, the biggest problem is being very tight—tight wrist, [points along her arm up to her shoulder], and body. Technical issues. I think adult students are more intellectually mature and understand the music better, so they have a lot more things to say. This makes it even more difficult for them to express, because their tools are not natural enough.

They still have this barrier.

The second problem is having very weak knuckles/bridges. You need time to develop this and the muscle [touches the palm of her hand]. (The knuckles are) related to body tightness, because in piano playing, you need to have very intense support [touches knuckles and fingers] and extremely loose, natural weight in your upper body. But many college students who come have the opposite. They are very loose here [moves fingers from the knuckles] and very tight (in the upper body). So first, we need to switch this.

Another common problem is not understanding the levels of difficulty in repertoire.

B: What types of exercises do you use to restart them? How do you loosen the upper body and create strong knuckles?

L: I make them go all the way back to Hanon. But it will be a very different approach. I have some special exercises using the notes/patterns from Hanon to first establish the support of the knuckles and then loosen up the wrist, so they know their wrist can contribute to or control here [points to knuckles]. Then they will have the confidence to sink their weight [touches shoulder] down.

Once this starts to happen, they will realize they can play very effortlessly with the body's natural weight. Then we can apply this natural feeling to very small repertoire like Songs Without Words by Mendelssohn and start with some Scarlatti and Bach. Bach is very important. I think the ears and mindset for contrapuntal compositions is much

easier to start when they are young. If they lack this process, then I will make them learn the three-part inventions before they start the Well-Tempered Clavier.

B: Do you have them do high fingers when practicing Hanon? How do you approach it?

L: No high fingers. I think high fingers is just one of the essential types of technique.

Before you can have high fingers, you must have very solid knuckle support first.

Otherwise, it will just be a very mechanical movement and you will not have any singing tone. You will just attack the keyboard.<sup>209</sup>

The method I use is to make them feel the keyboard. It is the opposite of high fingers. In the first exercise, your fingertips cannot leave the keyboard. Use the knuckles as a united support and bridge. Then just use your weight to go down. [With her fingers in playing position on the palm of her other hand, she slowly moves her wrist down and up]. Then try to focus your weight on different fingers like five and then four. This is so they know, “I can support my weight. I can just land my weight on certain fingers without even raising or lifting them,” because that would be an extra movement.

I want them to feel this very natural connection from here [touches shoulder], like a waterfall flowing very naturally all the way down. [With her fingers in playing position on the palm of her other hand again, she slowly lowers her wrist]. Then when you pass a certain angle, you start to need this [points to area around side of pinky knuckle (see fig. 37)] to grab onto the keyboard so your hand does not fall.

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<sup>209</sup> Li discusses the high finger technique in the “Piano Education in China” section of this interview on pgs. 208-210.

Figure 37. Area Around Side of Pinky Knuckle that Grabs onto the Keyboard



It is not attacking the keyboard but sinking weight into the key while supporting it with your knuckles and each finger joint. It is not teaching them how to play with fingers but how to sink and support weight using their fingers which are already on the keyboard. If you do this when you are a kid, then you can develop this close relationship and affinity between your fingertips and the keyboard, which is very important. Later on, the keyboard will become like an extension of you. Everything will be very natural.

(After I sent old videos of my students' lessons when he was younger to the Chopin Competition's documentary director), he said it was interesting to see how I spent more time on this process than repertoire. But after the first year, you suddenly see the progress, because I did not even need to tell him anymore. Piano playing became very natural for him. Then I only had to tell him ideas of certain repertoire, and he would naturally adjust to a way of playing that could express his sound and ideas.

B: For maybe one year when students are first starting, how long will they do this every day?

L: When they are younger, I will suggest maybe an hour every day.

B: Of just Hanon?

L: Yes. Hanon plus very slow scales. It depends on each kid. For kids who are more disciplined, you will already see the effect within the first three to four months if they do



it correctly and well. Then you can slowly reduce the hours/time. In the beginning, maybe one exercise will have ten steps. Then by month four, we condense these ten steps into two steps, so it is more efficient. Then within one year, it becomes a part of them and we do not have to do all those small steps. We can just practice scales evenly with three different tempos on the metronome, which will help them maintain this. From that point on, they do not need to drill those exercises. They just have to maintain them, apply them intelligently in different repertoire, and develop them.

That is for younger kids, which is why it is much easier. For college kids in the beginning, probably one and a half hours in the first few months.

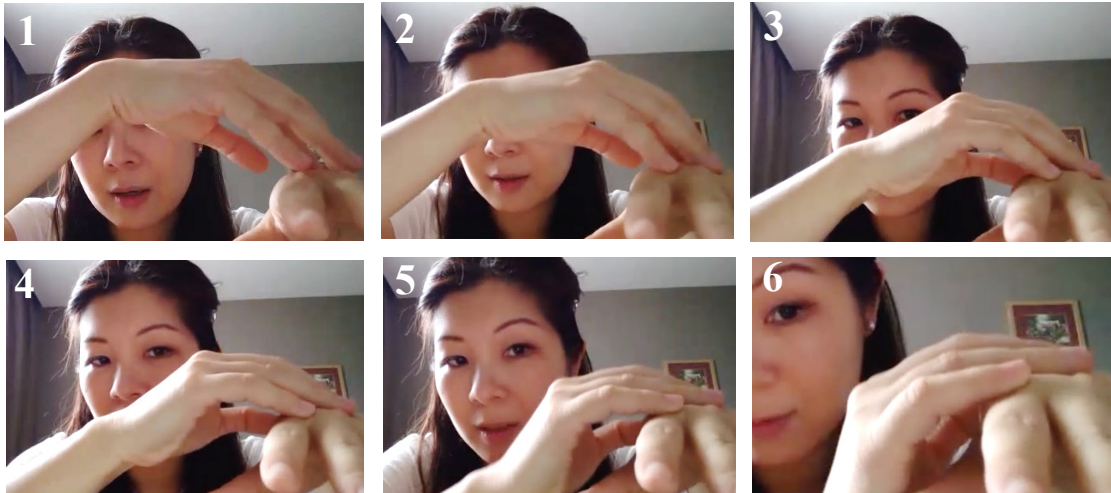
B: Of scales and Hanon?

L: Yes. And I will probably divide the steps into even more, smaller steps to help them understand. Of course, they will understand very quickly because they are much older. They need less time here [points to brain] but more time here [points to hand].

B: What are some of the steps? Are they from the arm weight?

L: Yes. That is the very first step—from the arm weight with fingers close to the keyboard. Then the next step is to divide this drop. [With her fingers in playing position on the back of her other hand, she lowers her wrist from higher than knuckles to below where fingertips rest]. The first one is just one drop to play the sound. The next is, with fingers still on the keyboard, to divide the drop into different angles.

Figure 38. The Drop Divided into Different Angles



The first time is all the way down, but there is only one sound [lowers wrist to below fingertips (see fig. 38 pic. 6)]. The second is to find the middle point [lowers wrist so it is about parallel with her fingertips (see fig. 38 pics. 3 and 4)] and then another sound here [lowers wrist to below fingertips again (see fig. 38 pic. 6)] to help them feel that the bridge [points to rounded knuckles] can support their weight from any type of angle.

Of course, I will adjust the specific angle according to their physical condition. Some girls have smaller hands and some boys have bigger hands. Students feel different angles so they will know, “I can contribute differently at different angles, but one thing remains the same: I need to support from (the knuckles) to (the fingertips).” And from here on [motions upward along her arm] it is all very natural and free weight.

After this—this already takes a long time—we will start to move the fingers to transfer weight ... horizontally ... like from second finger to third finger to fourth finger. Changing positions [motions thumb crossing under] requires another few steps of training. Their thumb should be smart and quick. Also, how the palm grabs positions

when practicing scales going up and down. ... Whenever you transfer weight, it must be very natural and effortless. This will be many steps.

We must adjust along the way according to the student's ability, progress, etc. I think that is the fun part about teaching. It is not like reading off a menu. You have to keep thinking and changing. When I teach my current student at the same age I taught my former student, it is much easier, because I learned along the way. ... I am growing, too.

B: Should the knuckle always be showing? [Rounds pinky knuckle prominently]. Is it not supported if it is like this? [Flattens pinky knuckle so it is not protruding].

Figure 39. Flattened Pinky Knuckle



L: That is probably not supported. Do not force yourself. Do not force it into an awkward position, but always feel the arch [touches the palm side of her knuckle area]. It is the bridge that is supporting the weight.

Put your hand on something flat and then stretch out your hand. Slowly use your fingers to pull in and grab to about a 45-degree angle. [As she grabs, her knuckles rise, so that her pinky finger and flat surface beneath form a 45-degree angle]. That will be the most ideal. Not too much [over-increases degree of angle]. Then you can feel the bridge/arch being used, because when we grab anything, we are using this part [touches the palm side of her knuckle area].

Do this very slowly a few times but not with too much force, just to get to know your body. Which part am I using [touches upper palm again] to form this bridge? Then you will slowly realize that you are mainly using the knuckles, but at the same time, every small finger joint will be involved. They take turns. First the knuckles, and then as your arch wants to build up [does slow grabbing motion from flat surface again], then you slowly use the other parts. I find this motion similar to an accurate sit-up. When you sit up, first your core must be very strong, and then slowly your upper back and neck also curl in. ...

With any finger exercise, never force yourself with any extra or unnecessary motions, because then you will develop other bad habits. Be very natural and just get a feeling first [does grabbing motion again]. Then do the weight going down [slowly lowers wrist]. ... It is a long process. When I used to work out a lot, it was very useful to listen to the trainer's instructions and understand my body better before I could really control it. I found all their analogies very useful to piano, because this [wiggles hands and fingers] is also an athletic ability, like training an athlete. And even more delicate, because we can only use certain parts of our body.

B: Are most transfer students able to renew this kind of technique? Or is it difficult once they are older?

L: The older, the more difficult, because we need to get rid of their old habits first. When young, you just absorb a new thing, so it is easier. It is like learning a language. But it depends. Some people, born with better athletic ability, can maybe feel it more naturally.

B: For transfer students who are really dedicated and want to learn, how long does it usually take before this becomes natural in their playing?

L: If they are willing to do the exercise every day and be very consistent, probably in four to five months they will start to get a feeling of it. It is difficult but does not take that long. As long as they are supervised, use the right method, and are consistent, then it can be done. There is no mystery. It should be less than half a year.

B: *Do you have any other specific ways of teaching arm weight?*

L: It all originates from the very core idea of natural weight. From up to down like sinking, from left to right or right to left, pushing forward from behind, and (pulling) backwards from in front—all of this is about how to handle or contribute your weight. It is one of the main things you need to think about when trying to produce different tone colors or qualities of sound. ...

I also do this exercise with some younger students: I ask them to put their hands very relaxed like spaghetti on their knee or thigh. Then, completely relaxed, I will lift their hands [lifts her other hand from the wrist]. You will find that nine out of ten students will start lifting their hands themselves. It is a normal reflex. I will do this until they completely trust me and do not react to my motion—just let me lift their hands. At that moment, they will feel the natural weight of their arms. Then they will start to trust themselves too and will drop the weight and support it with their knuckles.

B: *Do you have any other particular ways for releasing tension?*

L: I think once they develop very good support here [points to knuckles], then there should not be any tension. There should only be tension in the music, and also the fingertip. Your fingers should have a lot of tension and be very sensitive and active. Then everything else is just relaxed.

I always joke with my student, “Your music and fingers have lots of tension. That’s very good, but your facial expression also has lots of tension.” Some pianists have too many feelings they need to let out, and if there is not enough outlet, then it comes out on their face. ... Of course, you cannot ask them to stop making faces, because that will somehow restrain their music. It is a natural way of expression. So now you have to find a way to divert their attention. For example, listen to their sound more and express more with their fingers. ... I found it helpful for my student to suck on a mint.

B: Then he has to close his mouth.

L: Exactly. ... It is tasty, keeps him awake to listen better, and then slowly he realizes, “I don’t have to move my face just to express myself.”

B: *What would you define as good technique?*

L: To be able to express all your ideas under any type of pressure or condition and on any instrument—good or bad. To be able to adjust immediately and still express your music naturally. Horowitz and all the legends play wrong notes, but what is amazing is even with the wrong notes, their ideas go into your ears so directly. Immediately, you know. It is like they are speaking to you. I think that is the best technique—that your fingers have this power as though the instrument becomes a part of you. You know the instrument down to very small details like the action and weight of the keys. Immediately, your ears and feet—not just your fingers—respond. Your reaction to the hall, acoustics, and audience—I think all of this is piano technique. It is not just physical. It is a lot.

In ancient Chinese kung fu novels, there is always a magical saying about how the best kung fu master combines themselves with the sword: “*Ren jian heyi*” (The person and the sword become one). ... I think this idea can apply to the piano: “The person and the

piano become one.” It becomes part of you. There is no barrier. Through this instrument—the keys, pedals, and strings—you can express everything you want to say for the composer and make the score come alive again.

That is what I think is so amazing about music. It is just a score, some notes written on a paper, an antique from a long time ago, but we need to keep it alive. This score can live in a small practice room in China and it can also live on the big stage of the Chopin Competition in Poland. It can live anywhere. To make it come alive, I think the best technique is to make the instrument become part of you naturally.

B: You already talked about doing Hanon and scales. *Are there other certain technique exercises, such as finger strengthening or other things, that you do with students?*

L: I have specific exercises for the purpose of relaxing, like the exercises I mentioned, but not for finger strengthening. I do not want them to have this idea of strengthening [pumps fist] or “I’m powerful,” because this instrument must sing in the end. To give them this idea is very dangerous, especially for boys. ...

At age ten, eleven, or twelve, their hormones start to accelerate, their body grows, and their hands become big. Then they can make big sounds very easily without being taught. They will want to [grunts] and everything is [plays banging motion with hands], so it is very dangerous to add this idea that they can strengthen their power. Instead of strengthening, I will guide them with more legato training, which actually requires strength—how to support your weight, sink more weight, and use one weight longer for

an entire phrase. Through practicing this, they gain more strength here [points to upper palm].<sup>210</sup>

B: Do you use scales to teach that primarily?

L: Exactly. Also, lots of Bach, because Bach has lots of legato playing and phrases simultaneously. That is even more difficult.

There is a way to prevent them from banging on chords. I will ask them to hear and bring out different voices, and to play all the notes of the chord very together. I do not forbid them from playing loud or banging. There is no use. They will just bang even harder. [Laughs]. So you distract them and give some other ideas: “Can you bring out the top melody? Can you make them more together?” Then they will listen. In the process of listening, they will suddenly be closer to the keyboard. Then they will not bang.

B: Do you teach arpeggios? Do you have a certain way of teaching arpeggios, too?

L: It is the same technique as scales. You just have to spread out your fingers, and your thumb has to turn a lot faster.

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<sup>210</sup> Li encourages teachers not to work on students’ technique from such a young age with demands such as lifting the fingers. She cautions teachers not to force the student’s hand position or create any strained tension in their body. First, says Li, the child must learn to “relax, understand their own body, feel their own (upper body) weight,” support their weight with the knuckles, and keep their fingers close to the keys. “This way, from a young age, they can feel their technique is natural, because technique must be natural,” says Li. “Only when your technique is natural can your music be natural.”

When the child is four or five, Li explains that having a small mountain peak shape with the knuckles is enough and the child’s relaxed weight will provide enough sound. Like toddlers who can only crawl and not yet walk because their legs do not have enough muscle, children also need to slowly build their hand muscles before being asked to stand on and lift the fingers. “What do we do in the time we wait for their muscle to develop and strengthen?” asks Li. “We use it to develop musicianship.”

(Suirong Li [Vivian Li], “Xinghai yinyuexueyuan fujiaoshou Li Suirong tan shifang haizi de qianneng 1” [Xinghai Conservatory’s Associate Professor Vivian Li speaks about releasing a child’s potential 1], posted on February 13, 2022, Bilibili video, 20:00 to 23:00, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV13Y411V734>, translated from Mandarin by author.)



B: You talked about having tension in the fingertips and feeling like your fingers are an extension of the piano. *Do you have any particular approaches to how you teach this or touch?*

L: It all starts with the Hanon exercise I mentioned, where you cannot lift your fingers. They will realize that if they do not want their hand to fall off the keyboard when they drop their weight, they need every single (joint) [points to knuckle and two finger joints] to grab from the keyboard. Their fingertips stay on the keys. Then they will develop this connection.

Also, when they practice polyphonic pieces like Bach and more legato things, they will realize it is best to have their hands and fingers close to the keys. More legato practicing means more time for the fingers to be connected to the keyboard. Then slowly, the habit just develops. It becomes a part of them. I think that is the only way. You cannot categorize each technique into a different manual. That is too mechanical. You have to develop this natural feeling in the hands.

### Expectations

B: *What type of environment do you seek to create in lessons?*

L: I do not want students to feel it is too severe. It is a very delicate balance. I want them to feel comfortable, but at the same time there should be some pressure or motivation that “I need to do my best and absorb the most I can in this limited time. I need to be efficient.” In my studios, I have lots of plants to have a more natural environment and

make students feel comfortable. In between lessons, sometimes we will have bubble tea and snacks. ...

In every lesson, we need to have certain goals and be motivated. For example, this afternoon I am about to give my student a Zoom lesson and today our goal is to clarify his ideas about the first movement of Chopin's Sonata No. 3 to help him better understand the special qualities of this structure and how Chopin builds this complicated movement. ... The goal for each lesson needs to fit within our more long-term plan. For example, we only have from now (August) until the end of September to prepare four rounds of repertoire (for the 18<sup>th</sup> International Chopin Piano Competition), so we need to make small goals for each lesson but long-term plans for every one or two weeks and be very efficient.

*B: What do you do in situations where the student is or becomes unmotivated?*

L: This happens many times. It depends on the personality of the student. Whenever I feel they are in an "unmotivated mode," I will not point it out, because I want to have this secret period of observation. Maybe the problem is not from them, but maybe their family is going through some difficult times or they are going through some confusing times among friends or classmates. First, I want to find out these types of reasons that are not related to piano playing.

For younger students, like nine or eleven years old, usually lack of motivation is because of parents. Sometimes parents are too eager and involved. For example, parents who yell, shout, or are very discouraging after a lesson when they are at home: "Why aren't you as good as so and so? You see, your classmates are already playing this and you're only playing this." When parents are discouraging, overly protective, controlling,

or dominating, then that will really de-motivate the student. They will become less confident. The student will start to think the reason they are playing piano is because they want to make their parents happy or so they can be better than somebody else but not because they like playing or want to learn this piece. So I will talk to the parents.

That is why from a very young age, I do not allow parents to come in. Parents help me watch the very beginning students initially, since they do not have self-discipline and probably do not understand as well. But after the student develops certain concepts of piano playing, then I will politely ask the parents not to come anymore.

B: At about what age? Like a year after starting?

L: Yes. Some kids are more independent and others more reliant. It depends, but usually after a year or so, I will ask the parent to wait outside and record the lesson, so they feel better. At least they can re-watch the lesson, but I just do not want them to be in the same room.

B: To influence the child's thinking.

L: Yes, because this is very independent and something you need to do alone. You are going to be on stage alone, so you need to have very independent thinking and be able to execute your ideas and plans alone.

For teenagers, lack of motivation could be from all sorts of problems—girls, boys, classmates, etc. Then I try to solve them. Then in college, there will be peer pressure or other mental health-related things. Actually most of the time, it is not about their piano lessons or playing but things that happen in their life. I think all these things are actually good for their music or them as a person. They need to learn how to solve all these

problems and keep growing. In the process, they will become stronger as a person and pianist.

B: *What do you consider the role of the parent to be in their child's learning piano? What are your expectations for their involvement?*

L: I think the ideal role for the parent is a partnership with the teacher. We should communicate with each other as a good team. We are not superior to the student. The student should be the main thing, and we are just guiding them together. The student is like the ship, and we are just the sailor and captain. If the ship sinks, we sink.

B: How do you find balance if the parent's goal is not aligning with your goal? Or if they do not see themselves as guiding?

L: Maybe sixty to seventy percent of parents of piano students in China have a misguided original intention for making their kids learn piano. Basically, their first step is already in the wrong direction. For those parents, there is really no solution. You either stop teaching them or help them see the real path or way, and then start teaching. Otherwise, it will just be a waste of time. ... Sometimes I think there is nothing you can do, because in the end, you just want the kids to be better. But those are the kid's parents, so first you need to make them understand. ...

For young students, I choose parents over students. It is from my experience. ... I always choose parents who have a very pure intention or natural goal which is similar to mine. We need to—in Chinese it is said, “*Zhi tong dao he*” (Have the same aspiration and follow the same path)—have the same goal and passion. If the parents love music for themselves—but probably did not have a chance to learn an instrument when they were young, so they want their kids to learn—do not have unrealistic expectations, and will not

use their power to control the progress, (then this is good). Parents need to trust the teacher. So many of them will make comments to the kids when practicing: “I think you should play louder here. It sounds better. I heard somebody else play like that.” ... It is distracting. ...

When a parent’s goal is just hoping their kid can learn music and have a special skill to themselves that later in life they can slowly develop into their own career and make a living—that they can do well at what they like—then that is very pure. Then we are on the same boat. All my little ones’ parents are like that. ... We are like family. I really thank them for not just taking good care of their kids and my students but actually helping my parents whenever I am away. All my best students have the best parents.

I have had a few bad experiences with very dominating parents. I do not like confronting people, but you need to confront and actually wake up those parents.

B: In the U.S., I think the parents tend to be the opposite, where they are more uninvolved, and it is harder to get them to be more involved and make them discipline their child to make sure they are practicing.

L: This type of problem is seen less in China. Most of the problems among Chinese parents are them being too motivated. Especially after they read the book written by Lang Lang’s dad. It is like a Bible to them. ... Lang Lang really accelerated the piano industry, making it bloom suddenly within a decade. But at the same time, because we do not have such a long tradition or solid idea of what the art of piano playing is, or how deep and difficult it is, then suddenly the piano industry became too commercialized. The process was too fast. ... As teachers, we always need to handle this balance.

B: Do you have parents practice with their child? Do you expect them to watch over them practicing?

L: When they are younger, and also for boys who have very little self-discipline, then yes, but the degree of involvement must be very delicate. Parents cannot tell them what to do. They can point out, “Probably this is wrong. You need to find a solution,” but parents cannot tell their child the solution. Most of the time, I tell the parents their job is just to make sure they have a good practice environment. For example, try not to put the piano in the living room with the TV where the grandparents watch Korean dramas or even worse, the uncle and aunt are playing mahjong next to them. Prepare a quiet environment for them.

Also, make sure each interval of their practice is sufficient. Just time their practice. For example, “You only practiced this scale for two minutes. That is not enough.” Suggest maybe another five or ten minutes. Or remind them, “I thought you had a jury coming up and need to play this etude. You haven’t practiced that today. Maybe you should practice that.” The parents’ role becomes helping the student in how to manage their time. Other than that, do not interfere.

B: Do you require parents to watch the lesson video after lessons?

L: It is not really required, but it is better if they watch it. Most of the time, I want them to watch not because I want them to know what I taught but to know how their kids react in lessons.

B: For their behavior and attitude?

L: Exactly. So they can know and handle their kids better.

B: You mentioned one criteria for accepting students when they are young is the parents and their attitude. *Are there any other criteria for how you accept students?*

L: I have different criteria for different ages of students. Of course, the parents, and then potential and talent. I think potential and talent include not just musically—of course, they need to have very natural musical feeling for all kinds of music—but also physically, they need to have a natural almost athletic ability. And intellectually, they do not have to be super smart but they must have a natural motivation to think and solve problems. I find it very difficult to teach kids who are just hard working but do not seem very eager to find problems. ... Also, I think a major part of musical talent is passion—passion for music, different sounds, and how sound communicates. Without this, it is quite difficult. You will always run into problems. I think passion is the core battery for a long-term career.

B: *How do you define talent? How important do you think talent is to a student's success in learning piano?*

L: Like I described, talent includes physical, intellectual, and musical ability, and having passion. You need all of this. Also, personality. I think personality will determine one's specific path later on. Everyone will start at the same point. The lineup will be the same if they learn the right repertoire with the right method, grow stronger, develop more knowledge, etc. But then personality will put them into different paths.

My main priority is for my students to become concert pianists, but there are just not so many concerts. Not everyone can be a concert pianist as their only career. First, they cannot have stage fright and must be able to handle all types of pressure and travelling. They need to be able to socialize and communicate with many different

people. It is a whole different package. But it is not necessary that every piano major becomes a concert pianist. We do not need that many. We also need piano teachers/educators who can pass on this great tradition of piano playing to keep all this music alive.

They all need very good training and a solid foundation in order to grow. Then later in life, they will still do well with whatever choices they make according to their personality. That is why it is very important to do well in the beginning.

*B: Do most of your students have time for other interests outside of school besides piano—such as sports or another instrument?*

L: I force them to have other hobbies. Luckily, they all do. The last line of my students' biographies for recitals or competitions is always hobbies, so they can feel this is also a part of themselves that they can share with the public—not just when they started playing piano and what awards they received but also what type of person they are. ... For one student, it is sampling desserts, roller coasters, and swimming. For another, studying the art of Disney. ... They constantly look forward to this part: "Teacher, can I update my bio? I have a new hobby now." [Laughs]. I am very happy they have this passion not just for music but for life. If you do not even have a passion for life, then your music will be dull.

B: Is it ever hard to balance the two with time?

L: Of course. They have so much dedication and repertoire to learn, but I will make sure they at least have time to exercise. All my kids live on campus in the middle school, so every night after they practice, they jump rope together. ... Also, I bring them on swimming trips. Actually, I taught some of them how to swim. ... When my student and I



were on the road this past month, he wanted to swim every night after practicing. ... They are still kids. I will bring them to the movies and amusement parks. ... Every time we travel to a different place, I will bring them to the most authentic restaurants to taste the local flavors. I think taste is one of the most direct senses to stimulate their inspiration. Sound is already not that direct.

B: You have to interpret.

L: Exactly. I am sure that tasting so many different foods around the world will make their playing more interesting. Also, I can use many different dishes as metaphors in lessons.

B: *What do you require of your students practice time?*

L: It is very flexible and according to their plans and goals. ... The very, very minimum is practicing scales and arpeggios whenever they have time. If they do not have a keyboard then that is another case, but if they have limited time to practice and lots of repertoire, I will still ask them to run through scales and arpeggios every day, because that is the best way to keep in shape.

B: Do they always practice scales and arpeggios no matter what level they are?

L: Yes. This time in Poland (at the 18<sup>th</sup> International Chopin Piano Competition), even the documentary film crew noticed ... every morning, my student started with very even scales with the metronome. It awakens the best senses in your fingers. When you are awake and more sensitive, your whole practice will be more efficient. It is like when you wake up and eat breakfast, then you have oxygen in your brain and function better. It is the same.

Then they have to make plans according to their upcoming obligations. Usually, all my students will have repertoire in their hands covering etudes, polyphonic pieces like Bach, something classical—a sonata or variation—and a free choice from either the Romantic period or twentieth century. ... I will ask them to choose at least one or two pieces to concentrate on—to really break them down and go deep, and then maintain the progress of the rest of their repertoire. Then the next day, they alternate. They concentrate on some other pieces and then maintain the rest. I think three to four hours is the minimum to maintain good progress with this method. For students preparing for major competitions, then at least six to eight hours, and they need to make even better plans.

B: How do they do that with their coursework?

L: I always need to fight with the school.

B: To allow less coursework for a certain time?

L: Yes. I think it is very difficult for the middle school kids. ... Most middle schools of conservatories have somewhat fewer academic courses, so students usually have lots of time to practice. ... I strongly agree that they need to have a very good academic foundation in literature, English, math, geography, and history, (but as music majors in the middle school of Xinghai Conservatory), they still need to learn chemistry, physics, and politics—two to three classes on different political issues—which really takes time. They have lots of homework, and a lot of it is just brainless copying.

Whenever they have major competitions coming up, I will ask the school to maybe exempt them from certain homework and talk with the course teacher. When we were in Poland just two days before my student had to play (at the Chopin Competition), he still had to take the online final exam for six courses. ... It is very difficult. Sometimes

I think the Xinghai leaders have the wrong emphasis. They need to be more flexible. ... Most of them are not instrumental (music) majors, so they do not understand how much students need to practice. At least they are improving, so I am very grateful.

B: Would you say three hours on average is the same for even the very young students?

L: No. That would be too much. For beginners, I think one hour is the most in order to leave them with a good aftertaste every time. The best would be after an hour, you actually pull them away from the piano: “You can’t. You have to do something else.” Then they will say, “But I want to play more.” “No. Tomorrow, tomorrow.” You leave them with some expectation. So not too much. It is a very important way to develop this interest—to always keep the interest alive and hot. Then later on, you slowly increase the involvement.

### Repertoire and Interpretation

*B: Who are some of your favorite composers (and/or compositions) to teach? How do you have your students approach these pieces?*

L: It is different for different ages. You ask who my favorite composer is, but actually I will ask them—especially the older students or those starting to develop their own learning skills, because most of the time, they will have more motivation when learning a new piece if it is one of their favorites or they really like it.

For beginners, I usually use Bastien. When (my husband and I) first came back to China (in November 2005), we were the first ones to use Bastien. I was still using scores I brought back from Houston. ... Very soon after, they started selling the Chinese version

in China. I think that really helped spread piano method books to most cities, especially the second-tier cities that are not so connected with the outside world and can only buy books in China. ... Before in China, even when I was a kid, we always used Thompson or Beyer, which I found very boring. Also, some Chinese method books with lots of Chinese compositions. ...

I think the mentality and progress in Bastien—the timing of each level—is more suitable for today’s kids. Most kids nowadays are not as hardworking and dedicated as those in the past, because in our generation there was no computer, cell phone, or anything, so it was easier to concentrate more. Materials like Thompson, which advances very quickly—by book three or four, you are suddenly performing small repertoires—is not very suitable for most kids here. That is why I found Bastien to be a very good book to use.

After Bastien, we might play the more interesting selections from Czerny Op. 599. Only selections. I do not like Czerny, especially not Op. 599—the early ones. I think his most useful one is Op. 740, which is very useful, but (we do not use it until) later on. We also play lots of Bach, starting with the Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach. At the same time, we might have some etudes by Burgmüller and Heller, but the main thing is still Bach, supplemented with other pieces. After that will be two-part inventions, along with some sonatinas like those by Clementi, Kuhlau, etc. That will be like the first two years. There is always Bach.

Then when the student gets more advanced, my second favorite composer is Mozart. In order to play some easier pieces by Mozart, they need to have a foundation with lots of sonatinas and probably some very easy Scarlatti pieces. Then we will also go

into Haydn. I will not go into lots of detail but still make them learn a lot just to get a feeling of the Classical era's form, rhythmic sense, and liveliness. Then we will go into Mozart where I really go into detail. At that point, they are ready for tone color, delicate and sensitive things, balance, individual ideas, etc.

For each stage of learning, I always choose maybe one or two composers to be the main focus to really dig into details and inspire the student's ability and personality, but I use lots of supplementary composers to make the main composers even more fulfilling and thorough. The first composer is Bach, second Mozart, and third is Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn is like a gate opening into the Romantic era. Of course, the student probably studied a lot of Burgmüller and Heller already—these are all romantic—but it is different (having a romantic composer) as the main composer.

Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words* are so useful for letting the student know how a composer can deliver such a small idea in a very romantic, delicate, and singing way with very functional harmony but lots of imagination and still flowing. His accompaniments are always very flowing with colorful harmonic progressions, but at the same time, very symmetrical. The phrasing is very clear and the melody is very *cantabile*. If you want to shape it well, you need to learn how to sing and breathe on the keyboard. Basically, these pieces teach every fundamental thing about playing Chopin, Schumann, and Brahms later on.

And because all the *Songs Without Words* are smaller and shorter, it is easier for the student to find the structure and see the big picture—to get a sense of how they should perform this piece in one big gesture—but still show lots of touching details. This is a very important step for them to understand. Then many years later, when they learn

other big romantic pieces—because most romantic pieces are huge—the highest form of playing will still be to make it one big gesture, even if they are playing Liszt’s B-minor sonata or Chopin’s third sonata. I try to plant this idea when they are little kids and playing just a rounded binary form.

Then we see which composers the student likes. Of course, some are essential. They have to understand Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven’s early works before they can move on to other big things. After studying classical pieces with Mendelssohn’s *Songs Without Words*, then we can go into some more complicated variations, which I think is a very good form to bring out the student’s personality. In a theme and variation, you need to understand how everything is based on the same theme—which is like yourself—but then act out different characters or costumes in each variation, while still letting people know that it is you. It is the same person in different situations. I think the variation form is very useful and is one of my favorite forms.

Later on, it is just up to the student. I will try to find a piece suitable for them at their level by whatever composer they like. Then as they grow up, they need to build their repertoire. It is very important to build repertoire when they are young. It will strengthen their ability to learn notes, quickly grasp the overall structure, and quickly spot all the places that are going to be difficult. This is the first step to being able to learn independently, because then they can make an efficient study plan for each of their pieces in its early stage. Then it will be very quick.

B: Do you have a certain approach for how your students memorize music? Or do you just let them memorize naturally?

L: Kids memorize naturally, but you still need to teach them methods. Otherwise, when they get older and start learning harder pieces, to memorize naturally is not enough, especially with Bach, big sonatas, or many contemporary pieces where the patterns are hard to find.

I start making them memorize when they are beginners, so it becomes a habit. When they are a kid, it is easier for them to use their ear. When they sing along with the melody, their ears memorize very quickly, so we first develop memorization of the ear. Then when they grow older, we can develop more muscle memory by memorizing and practicing repeatedly lots of etudes. I ask them to memorize one hand only. For example, just practice and memorize your left hand but while thinking about your right hand. Always do the left hand first, because that is the hand we always neglect. Melodies are very easy to memorize, but harmony and some rhythmic patterns are harder. Then when they are playing Bach, they try to memorize each voice.

B: With the same fingering they use when playing all the voices together?

L: First, I will ask them to use any fingering—just fingering they feel comfortable with to play each voice, so at least they can hear what the shape and phrasing is like. Then they use the same fingering as they would playing both hands together but only play one single line and try to memorize it. If they develop these three steps when learning pieces when they are younger, then it will be very easy for them to memorize things later on.

When they grow older, the next step for memorization is just to meditate—to think about the score in their head and practice away from the piano. They all use this method now and it is very helpful. Every night before they go on stage, I tell them to just sit in front of the keyboard and look over their piece without playing. Their eyes can see

everything that they play and see their fingers, like a movie slowly replayed in front of them.

*B: How much do you analyze the music with students? How important is this in your methodology?*

L: I think it is very important, but do not do too much in the early years, because kids like to be part of activities and analysis is not an activity. This is activity [moves her fingers]—playing and making sound. So you just slowly point out things for them to think about. Then they will slowly accumulate those ideas and start to realize, “Oh. I actually have to use my brain.” When that happens, you will notice. When they start to ask those questions, then you will know that now is the time for me to throw in more analysis or theory to help them think more rationally.

Of course, I will still talk about forms even in Bastien, which has forms and very basic cadences. I will not go into harmonies and such too early, but because cadences are so important for phrasing, they have to recognize at least two or three types of important cadences. In the very early years, they just practice scales going up and down, but later I will add a perfect authentic cadence at the end—just the second, cadential dominant, and tonic—so they hear the complete sound of each key.

*B: Do you use any leveled repertoire books?*

L: I just pull things piece by piece. I still have not found a good leveled repertoire book, because there is just too much piano repertoire. I do not want to be restricted. In the early stage, you do need leveled books like Bastien, but after that, I just give pieces according to the student’s ability. Some students love piano but also excel academically and are not sure if they want to do piano performance as a major, so sometimes they do not practice



as much. Then I give them less or try not to progress too fast. Leveled repertoire books are not the best to give to all students.

In extreme cases, for some really talented students, there will be a certain point when you suddenly start to realize they are different. ... I remember when my student was like eight or nine, I gave him three two-part inventions for that week. Then the next week, he came back with almost the entire book memorized. ... He practiced almost four hours a day. ... Then I realized that starting from that point, I needed to adjust his plan and pull in other pieces, because I knew he was ready. Then within two years, he played all the Chopin etudes. It can happen very quickly. ...

Each talented student is different. My one student is very good with his ears. He can just listen to something and then play it back. For my other student, it is muscle memory. And then my other student is like a philosopher. She can just look at something and then play it back slowly. When kids start to reveal their talents, you need to analyze: What are they best at, but what are they lacking? ... Because it is crucial that you quickly pull in other things that they need.

The really talented ones will do things very fast, so the danger will be they develop very quickly in only one thing. Then later in life, they will rely on that one ability but still lack others. Then they are talented but not complete, which means they will still encounter lots of problems. So I need to observe and analyze: What are they lacking? What kind of nutrition? Everything is about balance and timing. It is fun.

*B: How do you teach interpretation and freedom of expression in relation to being faithful to the details of the score?*

L: That is also a hard balance to maintain. A very accurate and respectful score reading skill is important. Of course, we need to start with the right edition.

B: *What editions of music do you use?*

L: For most classical music, Henle Urtext is the most reliable. Then it depends on different composers. For Mendelssohn, Breitkopf; for Chopin, I used to use Paderewski, but now we need to use Ekier; and for Debussy and French music, Durand. But for classical and baroque music, Henle Urtexts.

Even when students are young, I really reinforce the habit of reading all the articulations. It is very important. Understanding each composer's style of using articulations is like understanding their language. You can discover their habits and style of phrasing. Even for sonatinas, I will ask students to get a good edition. In China, there are so many fake editions and online versions. Always stick with the right edition. Then students will develop good habits in score reading and doing the right articulations, which is not just to follow some signs like red or green lights but to interpret. Why did he put a tenuto here? Why did he end the phrase here? What does this staccato mean to this phrasing? Start to relate all the markings to the purpose of each phrase.

Once they have this skill, then we need to get to know the composer, which is the fun part, because all kids love stories, especially funny ones and not serious ones. They are not interested when I tell them how hard Bach worked. They like to know: "He has so many kids. Why? How can he have so many?" And of course, all the ambiguous relationships, like who was Chopin's first love? Why does he like a woman who looks like a man? You start to throw in lots of very vivid stories to let them get to know the composer like someone who could be in their life, so they have this affinity with them.

Then during lessons, they have something to relate to when you talk about the musical background of repertoire.

When we were in Poland, the first place I brought my student was the church where Chopin's heart is buried to let him get very close to the composer. He was in awe. ... We passed by Chopin's apartment and then went to the Chopin Museum. ... My student noticed, "He has lots of accessories." I told him, "See. That's why he writes such delicate ornaments—every single detail." "No wonder." Getting to know each composer—their personality, habits, and interesting things about their life—is more important than memorizing certain dates or very boring historical facts.

*B: How do you help to cultivate each student's unique artistic development?*

L: It is basically everything I have said, because I think this is the main goal of my teaching. Art is very individual. I think the ultimate goal is to become very unique. The more unique one is, the more value one's art has. Of course, this needs to be based on the right foundation. One's playing cannot be: "This is so unique and interesting. I've never heard anyone play like this" and it does not sound like Chopin. Then there is no point. Then go write something yourself and then play.

One must respect the composer first, which requires good training to understand the core of each composer and their repertoire. Then on top of this, one throws in their own things to make it better. I always try to bring out my student's personality, but it is very dangerous. You really need to make close observations. Otherwise, sometimes strange things can happen. The more talented the student is, the stranger it could be. ... I always let my students take risks, especially when they are younger. I will let them challenge themselves, so (one time, my student played very new pieces at an important

competition). ... I let him start his own ideas a little too early. When you are on stage, many things will be exaggerated. ... He played with lots of passion, ... but it was not exactly Chopin.

We always gain experience from adventures. Then I know that next time, I need to have some reservation, especially when using a new piece. I will let this piece become at least sixty percent solid with all the right and fundamental ideas before I let them throw in their ideas. ... I think it is very essential for me to bring out the student's individuality in my teaching. It is one of my main goals. I am still learning and observing what the best timing would be for each piece at different stages with each student. It is always different, so I need to know my students very well. That is also the fun part.

## Performance

*B: In your opinion, what is a meaningful and inspired performance? How do you help your students to get there?*

L: I think a meaningful performance to the performer themselves would be feeling they delivered well all the ideas they wanted to deliver. A feeling of satisfaction that they finally embraced everything they wanted to say. That good feeling will become a very positive energy later in their learning process. We need this type of energy, which is very meaningful for improvement and progress. But of course, this sense of satisfaction should be rational and accurate. It cannot just be that you thought it was good, but actually...

B: That is why it is scary to listen to your own recordings.

L: Exactly. It is always good to listen to your own recordings.

I can still remember some of the most inspiring performances down to every note, even after like ten or twenty years. At that moment, it is like the pianist opened a new gate to my imagination—like a mind- and ear-opening moment in my life. I am very impressed with how a pianist can create different atmospheres with sound. Some pianists are like magicians. My favorite aspects of a performance are the inspiration, sound, imagination, and when a pianist makes me feel, “Wow. This music is alive again.” Like Bach, Chopin, or Brahms is suddenly alive. I think, subconsciously, these will be the aspects I try to help my students have.

Good sound is very important and also very helpful in competitions, because there are just too many interpretations. ... The jury members have their own ideas, traditions, and personal tastes. You just cannot please everyone. But I think there is one thing that will never offend anyone which is to have good sound. A quality sound is always very pleasing. Of course, then we need good pianos. I usually teach in my home studio, because the pianos there are better than the ones at school. ... Central Conservatory and Shanghai Conservatory have very good facilities with Steinways in all the faculty and practice rooms, but Xinghai Conservatory still does not have this level of facility. ...

Regularly, I will bring students to a bigger space for lessons to hear what their sound can do in different acoustics, because a small room is very straightforward. The sound comes right back to your ear. In a bigger space, they develop an ability to adjust. We also need to listen to lots of very good recordings and read lots of books—good stories that they like. Before they can become very inspiring and influential performers, they first need to develop a good taste for sound and for interpreting the style of each composer. Then the rest will be up to them. They need to experience life.

*B: What are some tips you would give for students preparing for competitions? Do you have specific ways for preparing your students for competitions?*

L: This is also fun. There is a lot of excitement when preparing for competitions and performances. For competitions, you need to have a better strategy. For performances, it is less troublesome. I will just choose whatever repertoire is suitable for the situation. For example, in China, you must always have something very fast and loud to end the program. But for competitions, there are certain requirements. Then I will think, “How can I present the best of this student, but at the same time, try my best to hide their weaknesses within the frame of requirements provided?”

Sometimes for bigger competitions, I will even look at the jury panel to see who is judging. A smaller competition is just a challenge and experience to have, but a bigger competition is a bigger platform to expose yourself. We are not just there to compete but to try to show the best of you to the rest of the world. It is very important for your career if you want to be a concert pianist, because your recording will be forever left on YouTube for anyone to see. Also, there will be music critics, many important audience members, and there could be opportunities, so I will be more careful with what I want and do not want to show. Choosing repertoire is the first key to having a more well-rounded experience at a competition.

Then I think the second key is the process of preparation. I want all my students to maintain healthy progress and not always practice old pieces, so I will always ask them to maintain two lines of repertoire. One line is new repertoire that we keep learning, collecting, and developing. From this, we discover along the way which pieces the student will play really well. Then we put those pieces in the other repertoire line where

we really dig in and polish every single detail to maintain and keep those pieces. They can keep them for their lifetime. The goal is for these to become their signature pieces that nobody else can play better than them. One line is for building repertoire, and the other line is for polishing and collecting more pieces. The more they learn (in the building repertoire line), the better they will play and polish pieces (in the piece-maintaining line), so I will always throw in a mixture of new and old pieces to maintain a good balance.

Each of my students has their own signature pieces that they have been playing for years, but they are improving even those signature pieces, which means they absorbed nutrients from (the building repertoire line). I have found that if someone only plays old pieces, even for kids, their performance will be very solid but lack a sense of freshness and spontaneity. The curiosity of new things to a kid will keep him or her motivated on stage. The new things will keep the old things alive, and the old things will give the new things more confidence and solid ground, and this creates a complete performance.

The third key is timing the progress of each piece during preparation. When should I let the student perform this piece? Not too early and not too late. The latest (to perform the program repertoire) is two weeks before the competition, because they need time to reflect and think. I think performing and also recording are extremely important. Sometimes students even feel like they are practicing on stage, because they learn so much. It is risky but develops a brave heart. In Chinese, the saying is “*hou lian pi*” (thick-skinned). Do not be afraid to make mistakes. Embrace the feeling. Just go on stage and perform. I try to arrange as many opportunities as I can for them to perform and try out their pieces before a competition.

B: What kind of performances?

L: Concerts. ... I have very good connections with some of the “smaller” concert halls. They let my students perform there quite often. After every concert, I am very touched that the audience really loved them and many will say to me, “We watched them grow up.” My students started performing at the Guangzhou Steinway gallery when they were eight or nine. Now they are already sixteen, seventeen, and twenty and still performing there.

B: Do you have studio classes also?

L: All the time. Randomly. Many of them practice at my home studio anyway, so there will be at least three to four people there at the same time. Suddenly, I will grab all of them and say, “Now come. Everyone play something.” All of them live either on or next to the middle school campus, so when I teach on campus and suddenly feel they are ready to play for each other, then I just call them and they come down. It is normal for them to play for each other, which I think is very important. If there is not enough time or opportunity for them to run through their pieces in a big hall before a competition, then I will ask my dad to sit very close to the piano in a small room with them to make them nervous. That is another way to simulate the feeling of being on stage.

Then the final key, also one of the most important keys, is to feel like it is a performance when you compete. Every time we go to a competition it is just so much fun, because we can travel to a new place, meet new people, see different things, and eat different foods. Being on stage at a competition is just part of the entire journey, so just embrace that moment and do not feel like you are competing, because having a good and healthy attitude is very important. When you are more relaxed, enjoy the entire journey,



and are excited to be there, then that gives you more energy to devote to your performance. You will play with love and passion. Then even if you make some mistakes, you will not have regrets.

Just experience the whole thing without any regrets. Then whatever the result is, it is not really important, because you already gained very happy memories. If you get an award, then wow, that is even better. Then you have a bonus and big gift to your journey. When we were in Arizona (competing at the Yamaha USASU International Competition), we went to lots of places like a botanical garden, and took several walks along the river. All of this was part of very good memories. Actually, my students remember all these interesting parts even more than their performances. ...

As a teacher, one of the reasons I always bring my students to competitions is because I want to observe and see what their reactions are. Then if something goes wrong or I feel they need any help or support, I can immediately be there to guide them and solve their problems. At the same time, I learn a lot in the process. Talking to jury members gives you very helpful and inspiring ideas. And very importantly, you listen to other contestants from all over the world. When I was a student, I went competing a lot too. Then suddenly, I will realize many things I could have done better that now, as a teacher, I understand better. By combining my experience with all the blind spots I used to have as a student, I think I can help my students better. Sometimes it is very emotional to have the same experience but now from a different angle.

*B: Do you have all your students participate in competitions?*

L: Yes, but only the competent ones and only at the right time. Competitions are helpful and essential but at the same time, actually very dangerous. There are too many bad

amateur competitions in China, which is dangerous for younger students. Basically, you just pay the application fee, play, and then get a prize. I think this gives the wrong idea, especially to parents. They will get used to getting prizes and then associate prizes or fame with learning piano. They will completely skip the part that competitions are just part of the learning process and not the goal. I never let my students enter any of these poorly organized competitions.

It is important for students to enter competitions but to choose which ones very carefully. When they are younger, I will choose competitions that are challenging and professionally organized with reputable and good jury members. And very importantly, I will look at the repertoire requirements, because I do not want them to pay the money and just play three minutes before being stopped. That is a waste of time. If the competition requires substantial repertoire, gives enough performance time for them to have a good experience playing something complete, and has a reasonable fee—some competitions are too commercialized—if all these criteria meet my standard, then I will encourage my student to enter. I want them to be in a more competitive and professional atmosphere.

If I know some very good young pianists are entering a competition, then I will let my student enter also, because there will be good competition. Then when my student goes to compete, they can listen to those good players and feel they need to improve, so the purpose of the competition will be to give them a healthier and more positive attitude. It is important to develop this at a young age. Then as they move on, I will see who is ready for the bigger, more professional national competitions, and after that we will try more international ones and slowly build their experience.

B: That is very smart to be intentional about protecting the attitude they have.

L: It is very important. Kids do not have the maturity to judge the situation or their own attitude, so you can only help them develop the right idea. And of course, I also need help from their parents. Luckily, most of my students' parents are very cooperative and listen to my advice. It is only very occasionally when some of them get a little greedy or too aggressive. Maybe their son was very lucky and suddenly won a major competition. Then the mom will think, "My son is a genius. Now I think he is ready for this big..." I will talk to them, explain the situation, and try to make them understand that no matter what happens in a competition, we still need to stick with the progress we are making. Competitions are just part of this improvement. Do not get distracted.

### Piano Education in China

B: *What do you believe makes your teaching unique from other piano teachers?*

L: Of course, everyone is unique. I will just be myself. I also pay attention to the student's life away from the piano.

B: Your teaching seems very comprehensive. It is not just piano but every aspect of your student's life and how it affects their music or them as a person.

L: I think it is very important, because art and music are part of our life. Then why don't we ever think from the perspective that we need to get to know music from life? Music is not just a score. I think getting to know a student better will absolutely help you teach them better. Every student is different, so you need to constantly adjust your approach, method, repertoire, timing, and everything accordingly. There is a very old Chinese saying: "*Yin cai shi jiao*" (Teach students according to their ability).

B: Do you think this kind of comprehensive teaching not just for piano but different aspects of life was influenced by your dad being your first piano teacher? He was your piano teacher, dad, and was teaching you about the world.

L: Of course! He is a very big influence. He is a pianist and was also the director of the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra, so I grew up in that community. In China, each work unit or organization has their own community, like dormitories for all the staff and orchestra members to live in. Also, my mom was a ballerina at the Guangdong Dance and Opera Company, which was in the same big community, so all my neighbors were either ballerinas, singers, or instrumentalists. It was normal for me to think of musicians as just everyday normal people.

B: *Can you describe the teaching of your dad and your other piano teacher(s) in China? Do you teach this way as well or differently? If differently, then how so?*

L: One very important thing I learned from my dad's teaching was to build repertoire. When I was a little kid, he did not assign me "pieces." He just gave me the book.

B: He would say, "Learn this whole book?"

L: Yes. This entire collection of sonatinas: "Learn the whole book." And these etudes: "Learn the whole book." Technically, I think my dad discovered his own way of playing. My dad has huge hands, which are very different from mine. His technique is extremely relaxed and very natural, which is very different from some of the old school Chinese teaching of high fingers. My dad never really forced me to do high fingers. I never realized the benefit of this until I went to college and my teacher Monique Duphil said, "You are very different from other Chinese students. You don't have the high finger technique problem."

Later when I started teaching, especially after coming back to China, I started realizing that the old school of Chinese teaching involved very high, fast fingers to attack the key with velocity and even worse, a very stationary wrist. Many teachers ask the student not to move their wrist, because a low and stationary wrist allows a more solid high finger technique that attacks from here [lifts her pointer finger up and down from the knuckle]. We need the high finger technique and a very stable wrist, but we should not start a child with this. Only after you develop a very supportive, solid, and firm bridge [touches knuckles] can you then naturally have the high finger technique for passages that need a very articulated sound or fast running passages that need to be very crisp. We need to associate each technique with the right sound to deliver the right music. High finger technique is just one of them.

We should not have too much wrist movement, but that does not mean having a rigid wrist. You need a very calm, quiet, and subtle wrist, but not rigid, because the wrist is very important in distributing your weight from here [touches shoulder]. If you station your wrist and it becomes stiff and rigid, then you cannot use anything from here

[motions to shoulder area]. Then the quality and variety of your tone and sound will be very limited, and there will be no way to play legato.<sup>211</sup>

B: Did you also learn from your dad how you teach the knuckles?

L: Probably because I was young, my dad never really had any specific exercises or drills for me. He would repeatedly say, “Relax. Just relax and move your fingers.” I think the

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<sup>211</sup> Li considers the high finger technique “very, very necessary” and important for students to develop when younger. However, Li emphasizes that students must first understand the relaxation of the shoulder and wrist; have good, firm palm/knuckle support; and master the legato technique with fingers that stay close to the keys before high fingers can be introduced. Then, when students begin playing scales a little faster, teachers can ask them to not only play evenly and legato but with more articulated fingers for a fast and light sound.

Li refers to this slightly more articulated, quicker, brighter, “but still very nice and light” sound as the “crystal sound,” which results from the lifting of the fingers. This contrasts with a rounder and fuller sound Li calls the “pearl sound,” which results from a legato touch used to play fast running passagework and scales. In addition to fast scales, Li suggests teachers can also teach a light, articulated, and focused sound in music by Scarlatti. When to introduce the high finger technique depends on each student’s growth and not their age. “Never be impatient,” says Li. Relaxation, legato playing, and firm palm support must always come first.

For slow scales and passages, Li does not have students practice high fingers but rather a legato touch with relaxed, supple wrists and fingers that stay close to the keys. However, if a certain passage needs an articulated sound when played up to performance tempo, Li asks students to practice being more aware of the part of the finger between the knuckle and joint closest to the knuckle actively lifting after playing in order to release and transfer weight to the next playing finger. This slight lifting of the finger after playing creates a more non-legato and articulated sound.

To avoid students “attacking the keyboard,” Li does not ask students to lift the fingers to create more height from which to strike the key nor does she use the term “high fingers.” Instead, Li has students be more “active with the fingers” or “fingertips” by releasing weight faster after playing each note. Li shares that about ninety percent of the time, she has students prepare their fingers on the keys to reduce the “attacking sound.”

The speed in which the key is attacked determines the sound’s brightness. Li explains how a quicker attack where the finger lifts very high before striking will have a “very bright and penetrating sound, but not heavy. High fingers cannot create a heavy sound, because there is no weight—there is only velocity. . . . (This sound) does not go far enough, especially in a big hall, because there is no weight. We call it the *yintou*—like the head of the note. You can only hear the beginning of the note, but the sound does not sustain long enough.” While Li does not usually prefer this “attacking sound,” she recognizes its need in specific parts of some music, such as that by Stravinsky, Bartok, Ginastera, and Prokofiev. However, this sound must still be played in a “physically natural and efficient manner,” says Li. If a very loud and bright sound is needed, then both weight and velocity should be used.

(Vivian Li, WeChat audio and video messages to author, November 12, 16, and 17, 2023.)

words he repeated most were “relax” and “listen.” He always asked me to memorize things, and once I memorized them, then immediately: “Okay. Next one.” My dad never really explained technique theoretically. I think he relied on my natural athletic ability and always said, “Don’t worry. You inherited that from me.” He was a very easygoing teacher.

B: Would he have you do scales?

L: Oh yes! Scales every day, every morning. This was very strict. I certainly inherited that from him. He would always tell me stories of how difficult it was for his generation during the Cultural Revolution. They did not have access to any pianos, keyboards, or Western music, but he still kept practicing scales.

B: Just on the table?

L: There was not even a table. In the cowshed. On whatever surface he could find, he would move his fingers, remembering all the fingerings and pretending to play very even scales. Then whenever he had a piano, he would start practicing scales first. That is how he kept himself in shape like an athlete, so he could perform any time. Then he made me do scales every morning before I went to elementary school. If not, then I could not go to school. If I got up too late, I still had to do all my scales. It did not matter if I was late for school. If I got punished at school for being late, then I would get up earlier the next morning.

One very important teaching philosophy I learned from my dad and my other teachers was: Understand the consequence, take responsibility, learn from it, and improve. The result is fixing it yourself and discipline. My dad’s attitude was: “You have to do your scales, and then if there is a consequence, you take it.” I thank my parents for

doing that. My dad would teach me and then my mom would watch me practice and make sure I practiced enough. My mom was very, very strict. I think without them, I could never do this. The environment and role my parents each played in my childhood growth really shaped the core ideas of my teaching philosophy.

Then later on, I met my teacher at Oberlin, Monique (Duphil), who had this strict French teaching. It was a mind-opening turning point in my life. Suddenly, I realized that I needed to take piano playing seriously. She gave me this strong dedication. I still remember my very first lesson with Chopin's second ballade. She spent almost three hours on just the opening four measures. When I walked out of her studio, I thought, "Can I survive these four years?" Then I learned so much. The European mentality has very delicate, polished, and strict ideas down to every single detail. She helped me sort out and categorize everything that I learned from my dad, and at the same time gave me very clear paths and methods for how to continue.

Then I went to Mrs. (Nancy) Weems who taught me how to package everything and be more glamorous, and the final touches of a performance. Without Monique's foundation, it would be harder for me to really grasp the specialty of Mrs. Weem's teaching. After Mrs. Weems was Mr. (Horacio) Gutierrez. He basically finished everything. He is a great concert pianist, and I saw a lot of similarity between my dad and him. The entire journey of my education was very good. I got the right type of nutrition at the right time, so I try to give that to my students also. Timing is very important. What type of knowledge and skills do they need at certain ages according to their ability?

*B: How important do you think studying abroad is for students? Why?*



L: Piano is a western instrument, which involves a certain culture and atmosphere. Since the nineties and especially after the twenty-first century, the music industry in China has developed with lots of international connections and a lot more good concerts. Foreign orchestras and musicians started coming to China to perform more often. This has created a very good atmosphere in China, so it is better now. But before these developments, I think it was very essential for students to go abroad.

Everything is different—the mentality, philosophy, and even just the daily habits. I think because Chinese culture is too complicated and has a little too much restriction—it is good and bad—students need to free their minds. I think the best process would be to first have a very good, disciplined, and solid foundation built in China as a pianist, because China’s preparatory schools at conservatories are very good at developing kids’ technique and understanding of the instrument. Then when they grow up, when their physical ability and mind is mature enough, they go abroad and absorb.

They need to see and walk in the paths that the composers experienced by going to Europe. Early in their studies, while they are still a student in China, they should go to festivals and competitions abroad, especially in Europe. Then I think the perfect time and maturity for them to go abroad to the States or Europe would be for an undergraduate or master’s degree. I think going to the States for a master’s is very important, because the course curriculum in the States is more comprehensive and well-rounded with all the music courses: theory, literature, how to do research, and everything. That is very important for their later growth.

Then either before or after, they should go to Europe to do an artist diploma or performance degree, because Europe’s atmosphere and environment is just so gorgeous.

There are so many places you can bring students to just sit and observe. It is better than a million things you talked about in lessons. For example, I remember the first time I brought my students to Italy and we just sat by the lake. A church bell started ringing, and then suddenly: “Teacher, this is like when I play Debussy’s preludes.” You do not even need to explain anything to them. Or in a Catholic church, when they hear the organ and see the grand architecture from the sixteenth century, then suddenly their Bach or even Franck or Saint-Saens is so much better. I think studying abroad is extremely important not just for the degree or certificate but for the experience.

If they are not ready and mature enough as a person, then I do not think they should go abroad, because there are too many distractions and attractions. Especially when you are in a new environment by yourself, lots of things could happen. We have seen many, many very talented young pianists go abroad way too early with outcomes that were not nearly as good as those of the talented kids who stayed in China but kept very healthy improvement both as a person and music major. Those kids will go further in life as a good pianist and person. It is very, very important to plan when to go abroad. Going abroad is important, but the question is when will be a good time.

*B: Do you feel China offers its pianists opportunity to fulfill their artistic development and achievement? Why?*

L: Oh yes. I think they are doing very well now. ... Because the market is so big, there are more opportunities for kids to perform and be involved in activities. But among these tons of opportunities, there are many bad ones too. There could be traps, so we need to pick the good ones for kids. But in terms of opportunities, the Chinese government has done a good job encouraging and helping the development of this western performing art

to bloom more. I think China has the biggest market right now. It is crazy when you realize how many people are studying piano.

I think the next step the government needs to take is to start a system that ensures the quality of amateur teaching. Nowadays, too many parents want their kids to study piano, but there are not enough reliable, capable, and suitable teachers, so many, many people who are not even music majors started teaching piano. Parents have no idea how to choose teachers, so tons of kids have been misled or even wasted their early studies, which is very sad. I feel there are many more bad cases than before. Many students come to me to study or their parents want me to evaluate them, and at least half of them or more have very terrible technique, so I think we need to do something.

I think a lot of organizations and schools are doing the right thing by starting workshops, lectures, and piano festivals not for students but for young teachers to teach them. This is key. You need to have good teachers before you can have good students. Most good teachers are already busy in conservatories and do not have as much time to teach beginners, so what we can do is teach young teachers how to teach them. Each generation needs to do the right thing. That is why, especially for master's students, we do not just concentrate on their playing in lessons but also on how to teach, because they are about to graduate and become piano teachers themselves.

*B: What do you consider some of the greatest strengths of piano education in China?*

L: The quantity of piano education in China has created this huge market and web, almost like an ecosystem. It is amazing that all types of different roles have a place in this ecosystem, because of the quantity of people and music conservatories. We used to have

nine conservatories, but now there are eleven. I think they play a very important role in maintaining a good balanced ecosystem in each area of China.

The other strength I found is that most Chinese kids or Asian families are willing to be more dedicated to the performing arts. They take it more seriously and do not just learn it as a hobby but want to do it well. That is why it is easier for the teacher to go further when training them as kids.

*B: Is the way that you teach Chinese repertoire different from how you teach Western repertoire?*

L: I have always looked at Chinese piano pieces from a very Western approach, but I think it works, because there are still forms, structures, and articulations. I need to learn more about the cultural characteristics—there are so many different cultures and minorities in China—and Chinese music theory. I left China at age twelve when we had just started learning Chinese music theory, so whenever I teach Chinese music, I still have this Western approach or just go with my intuition. I emphasize the dance and singing element in Chinese music, just the same as all folk music which is about dance and song. Many Chinese piano pieces are transcriptions from songs, so you can just sing the song and listen to the original version.

### Teaching Philosophy

*B: What does music mean to you? What do you hope music will mean to your students?*

L: Music is just part of your life. In order to love your life, you need to love your friends, your family, your food, and your music. Have a passion for life, which means to want

your life to be better, including all the things that you love. Have certain goals to make your life better. I hope my students will have this love and passion for life that will give them endless motivation.

B: *When are you most proud of your students?*

L: When they are extremely happy and excited about something. Sometimes during a practice session, they will suddenly realize, understand, or discover something: “Oh! No wonder he wrote this.” It could be something you mentioned so many times but that they suddenly grasp for themselves. That is a very important moment. I am also proud when they are proud of themselves, but of course it needs to be accurate (to what they did). ... Always be encouraging and positive first, but always leave room for them to improve and help them see from different perspectives.

And of course, there are specific moments I almost have to hold back my tears, such as my student walking on stage at the Hamamatsu International Piano Competition, which was his first huge competition like that for adults. ... Or when my other student walked on stage at the International Chopin Piano Competition. I was very nervous. Whenever I am nervous for my students at competitions, it is because I know them so well. I know what will happen with every single thing they do. I just hope they can play at their best and share every single bit of their music with the audience. Then I will be extremely happy and proud of them. ...

When my student walked on stage, I suddenly felt relaxed, because he gave me confidence. He looked at me, bowed, and smiled. He was like, “Don’t worry.” Suddenly, I became part of the audience and enjoyed his performance. Immediately after, we went for ice cream. I think the energy is from both sides. Many times, my students give me this

confidence and make me proud. At the same time, I should give them good energy and positive thoughts. ... But of course, the day after the excitement, we will still talk about the performance. What could be better and even more special?

*B: What do you hope students will remember most about your teaching?*

L: I hope that whatever my students remember will help them and encourage them to face any type of difficulty or challenge that lies ahead. I want the most suitable ones to go far and have a performing career, because they really love this. I think the luckiest people in the world are those who can do well at what they love. I think my students have this potential, so I want them to be able to go through any type of struggle and still be very dedicated. I want whatever memories they have of my teaching or time spent with me to become long-lasting energy they can use for a lifetime, because that is what I received from my teachers. It was their attitude toward life and teaching that kept me going.

*B: What advice would you give to aspiring piano teachers for how to become a successful teacher?*

L: First, keep practicing yourself and learning new pieces. You need to keep playing, practicing, and learning. Never forget that you were a student. Always look at things, especially difficulties and challenges, from the student's point of view and put yourself in their shoes. Then use your experience and knowledge to help them solve their problems. At the same time, enjoy and be a part of their improvement and growing process. Do not just stand far away or even worse, stand above them giving instructions and watching. That does nothing good. Be involved, and then you will benefit from the enjoyment.

## CHAPTER 8

### TEACHING METHODS OF VIVIAN LI

#### Order of Sections

Lesson Environment

Running Passages Played with One Weight

Melodies with Singing Tone

Ornamental Notes

Imagery

Melodies where the Fingers Detach

Melodies Played by the Thumb

Hooking and Grabbing Notes for Voicing and Clarity

Hearing Harmonies

Leaping Accompaniments

Evenness of Eighth Notes and Repeated Broken Harmonies

Score Markings and Dynamics

## Teaching Observation Information

Dr. Vivian Li’s teaching was observed through video recordings of lessons with three of her students ages ten, fourteen, and twenty-one. The video recordings were sent to the author and included two lessons with each student for a total of six lessons. Li taught from one grand piano while the student played on another. Li and her students spoke in Mandarin Chinese. Paraphrases and quotes have been translated to English by the author.

Table 3

Student Information for Dr. Vivian Li’s Lesson Observations

Name*	John	Hannah	Fiona
Age and school grade	10 y.o. / 5 <sup>th</sup> grade	14 y.o. / 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	21 y.o. / 3 <sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate
Number of years studied with Li	1 year 2 months	3 years	2 years 6 months
Average daily practice time	4 hours	7—8 hours	4—6 hours
Pieces played in the lesson observations	Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor Op. 2 No. 1 Mov. 1 and 2, by Beethoven; Arabesque No. 1 in E Major (L. 66), by Debussy; Prelude and Fugue in G Major from WTC Bk. 1 (BWV 860), by Bach	Preludes Op. 28 Nos. 15—17, by Chopin; Transcendental Etude No. 10 in F minor (S.139) <i>Appassionata</i> , by Liszt	Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514), by Liszt; Piano Sonata in C Major Hob. XVI:50, by Haydn

\*Names have been changed for anonymity.



## Lesson Environment

Lessons begin with the student playing through a piece. Li then addresses the main overall issues before going through the piece chronologically with attention to details in the score and using colorful language to evoke the student's imagination. In between demonstrating beautifully and in tempo, Li explains her body movements and technique to allow the student to imitate, such as how to control and manipulate one's natural weight most effectively to create the desired sound. As the student plays in response to Li's teaching, Li often sings in fixed-do solfege what she wants the student to hear. She often calls out directions such as "relax" or "stay close to the keys."

Li adjusts her teaching pace and questions based on the student's needs at various ages. With her ten-year-old student John, Li demonstrates and explains more concisely, so that lessons are a constant back and forth between teacher and student playing. John absorbs through listening and responds by playing rather than talking. Li asks questions to direct John's attention to certain things, such as what he is able to hear in his own playing, what he remembers from Li's teaching, and what he notices from the score and Li's demonstrations.

With her older more independent students, Li gives more information at once. For example, Li explains and demonstrates for longer periods of time with her fourteen-year-old student Hannah. She asks questions that encourage Hannah's independent thinking, such as what imagery she has in a piece, where in the piece she struggles, and why she thinks the composer wrote certain score markings and what they mean. With her twenty-

one-year-old student Fiona, Li teaches at a faster pace with more starting and stopping, and Fiona independently asks her own questions throughout the lesson.

### Running Passages Played with One Weight

Throughout Li's teaching, she focuses on how to release, support, and transfer arm weight. Li wants her students to relax their arm weight and then support it with arched knuckles, fingers that stand stably, and wrists that follow and guide the weight. For running passages, Li teaches that one weight can be used to play many notes by simply carrying it over from finger to finger. The fingers simply support the transferring of weight rather than trying to lift on each note for strength. Depending on where there are breaks in the motion, one weight can be used to play a measure of running notes or can be used to play an entire piece of running notes, such as Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 16 in B-flat Minor ("Hades" prelude) where the right hand plays running sixteenth notes for three pages.

Figure 40. Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 16 in B-flat Minor, mm. 1-3<sup>212</sup>



To match Chopin's marking of *Presto con fuoco* ("fast and with fire"), Li wants strength in every note. She explains that "everything needs to hang with very heavy weight and completely relies on the knuckles."<sup>213</sup> During Hannah's lesson on this piece, Li teaches an exercise to help Hannah feel how her arm weight should hang.

Figure 41. Exercise to Feel One's Arm Weight Hanging<sup>214</sup>



First, she has Hannah place one of her hand's fingers, except for the thumb, on top of the piano with all four fingers' knuckles rounded to support her arm's hanging weight.

<sup>212</sup> Frédéric Chopin, "24 Préludes, Op. 28," in *Sämtliche Pianoforte-Werke: Band II*, ed. Herrmann Scholtz (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, n.d., ca. 1879), 508, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Preludes,\\_Op.28\\_\(Chopin,\\_Frederic\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Preludes,_Op.28_(Chopin,_Frederic)).

<sup>213</sup> Vivian Li, lessons with Hannah, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>214</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

Figure 42. Li Holding her Student's Hand to Loosen her Arm Weight<sup>215</sup>



At first Hannah's arm is stiff, so Li holds Hannah's hand in her own to support her weight until Hannah feels how her arm weight should hang with a relaxed wrist and arm.

Then Li has Hannah support her arm's weight from each finger individually, while keeping all her knuckles in a rounded position and standing well on the finger supporting the weight. However, when Hannah tries hanging her weight from her fifth finger, her other fingers tense up and her hand changes shape. Li explains how this tension is the result of starting to use her other fingers to "help" rather than standing stably on her fifth finger. Li demonstrates and has Hannah feel Li's relaxed arm weight by pushing it like a swing and feel the tension in Li's pinky muscle on the side of her palm as her arm weight hangs from her pinky finger.

After Hannah feels how her arm weight should relax and how each finger should support the weight, Li explains how this same feeling applies to the right-hand sixteenth notes in Chopin's prelude: "From the start, even though I am not exerting lots of strength,

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<sup>215</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

I am sturdy. I am very relaxed here [wiggles arm] and then one weight goes down. I am just transferring the weight on different fingers. As soon as each finger feels that weight, then it immediately supports it, so actually I do not move my fingers but just use them to support (weight). All of it uses weight to play. For each of my fingers, it is just ‘stand stably,’ ‘stand stably,’ ‘stand stably.’ Then I save strength.”<sup>216</sup>

Li emphasizes that the focus should always be on supporting the arm weight rather than focusing on the strength coming from the fingers by lifting them to strike each note with force. “You cannot just use fingers,” says Li. “When you only rely on the fingers, the fingers raise too much and (the wrist) starts to push down. Then there is no weight. ... and I can’t hear the arched shapes.”<sup>217</sup> Instead, Li explains how the goal is for each note to have weight coming down from the arm so that lines can form with dynamic fluctuations while still saving strength. If the piece is practiced slowly with this goal in mind, then when played fast, “it is easier to play, because one weight can play many notes.”<sup>218</sup>

On the other hand, if the piece is practiced slowly with focus on raising each finger for strength, then when played fast, it will be tiring. When played fast, Li explains how the fingers are raised even though they stay closer to the keys, but that the raising motion cannot be the focus. She compares it to running:

When we run fast, we definitely raise our legs, but if we only think of raising, then we are not actually moving forward. ... If what you are focusing on is not right, then the effect will be different. ... Lifting my leg is for supporting

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<sup>216</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

<sup>217</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

<sup>218</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

(weight), so I will not think “raise” but rather how to step forward and then suddenly support. I must coordinate that moment well. In this process, I will plan for my leg to raise, but the height raised will be just right, because my aim is to make a bigger stride and then support comfortably and smoothly.<sup>219</sup>

Likewise, when the focus is on using the fingers to support weight, then the arm’s weight will provide the strength needed and the fingers will not over-lift and exhaust themselves.

Li encourages Hannah to regularly think for herself about how to make her motions most efficient and fluent when practicing. How can she make rises and falls in dynamic with one weight? How can she repeatedly use the same weight by transferring the weight between fingers? “The most important thing in playing piano is fluency,” says Li. “If at any place, especially when fast, it is uncomfortable or awkward, then there will definitely be problems. Then you can stop and think, ‘In movements and exerting strength, where do I use too little? Where do I use too much?’”<sup>220</sup>

When teaching the running notes in the right-hand melody of Debussy’s Arabesque No. 1 in E Major (L. 66), Li also emphasizes having weight that continuously flows.

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<sup>219</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

<sup>220</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

Figure 43. Debussy's Arabesque No. 1 in E Major (L. 66), mm. 76-79<sup>221</sup>



Li relates different composers' music to different countries with unique foods, and imagines Debussy's music is where caviar and soufflés are eaten. She describes Arabesque No. 1 as “very flowing and smooth, but the texture is like velvet.”<sup>222</sup> To play this, Li teaches flattened fingertips kept close to the keys with relaxed shoulders and “extremely soft and gentle wrists” that drive “the direction of the musical figure and direction of weight distribution” for a very smooth transfer of weight between fingers.<sup>223</sup> Sometimes Li has a student look at their wrist to see if it is following their arm weight and helping the weight get to where it needs to go.

### Melodies with Singing Tone

In slower music, Li also focuses on the same weight being shifted by each finger with the support of the knuckles, guidance of the wrist, and relaxed weight of the upper body. Additionally, Li often emphasizes a singing and legato sound and will sing certain lines and notes in solfège for the student to hear. In the opening of Chopin's Prelude Op.

<sup>221</sup> Claude Debussy, *l'ère Arabesque*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1904), 4, [https://imslp.org/wiki/2\\_Arabesques\\_\(Debussy,\\_Claude\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/2_Arabesques_(Debussy,_Claude)).

<sup>222</sup> Vivian Li, lessons with John, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>223</sup> Li, lessons with John.





Li suggests using the fourth and third fingers in other important notes of melodies, such as the right-hand top notes of double thirds and a peak note that needs to be emphasized in a string of running fast notes. In order to use the most suitable fingers for a legato sound and singing tone, Li also has students switch fingers on long notes where needed.

In the Adagio second movement of Haydn’s Piano Sonata in C Major Hob. XVI:50, Li also wants a rich singing tone that sounds smooth, steady, and noble.

Figure 45. Haydn’s Piano Sonata in C Major Hob. XVI:50 Mov. 2 “Adagio,” mm. 1-3<sup>227</sup>



For this Adagio movement, Li teaches sinking weight down into the notes to sing and generously speak out, as opposed to an emptier sound that is “like it does not have breath.”<sup>228</sup> To create a somewhat thicker sound, Li tells Fiona that if she is imitating the human voice then it should be a little richer, and if imitating an instrument then it should have more resonance. To give more substance to certain notes detached from the note prior, such as long notes at the peak of a scale or arpeggio, Li teaches slightly pushing the weight forward.

For quiet legato passages, such as that in Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor, Li has the student keep their fingers close to the keys.

<sup>227</sup> Franz Joseph Haydn, “Sonata in C Major,” in *Sonaten für Klavier zu zwei Händen*, ed. Carl Adolf Martienssen (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1937), 9, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Keyboard\\_Sonata\\_in\\_C\\_major,\\_Hob.XVI:50\\_\(Haydn,\\_Joseph\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Keyboard_Sonata_in_C_major,_Hob.XVI:50_(Haydn,_Joseph)).

<sup>228</sup> Vivian Li, lessons with Fiona, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

Figure 46. Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor Mov. 1 “Allegro,” mm. 20-25<sup>229</sup>



“Make each finger a little flat,” Li tells John when playing this passage. “Press down with the fattest part of the pad of the finger, but the knuckles must stand up.”<sup>230</sup>

### Ornamental Notes

For faster moving notes or ornaments in slower music, Li teaches a very legato sound with fingers that stay close to the keys and a subtle and flexible wrist that guides the natural upper body weight. She reminds students to simply transfer arm weight between notes and that “the place where you press the key is where your weight falls in.”<sup>231</sup> For ornaments in faster music, Li teaches playing with an extremely steady and quiet palm, knuckles that stand well, and fingers that lift and actively run while feeling each fingertip.

<sup>229</sup> Ludwig van Beethoven, “Sonate f-Moll, Op. 2 No. 1,” in *Klaviersonaten: Band I*, ed. Frederic Lamond (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1923), 1, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Piano\\_Sonata\\_No.1,\\_Op.2\\_No.1\\_\(Beethoven,\\_Ludwig\\_van\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Piano_Sonata_No.1,_Op.2_No.1_(Beethoven,_Ludwig_van)).

<sup>230</sup> Li, lessons with John.

<sup>231</sup> Li, lessons with John.

To make ornaments more even, Li has the student isolate and practice the ornament notes alone until even or play the main notes without the ornament notes to first hear where the subdivisions fall. For slower music, Li sometimes assigns a metronome marking at a subdivision of the main beat to make the subdivisions clearer. She explains how in relatively slow music, “the difference between the longest note durations and shortest note durations is quite large, so you have to be very clear towards its proportions.”<sup>232</sup>

### Imagery

To encourage students’ imagination, Li uses imagery and colorful language throughout her teaching. For example, referring to a grace note as wooing someone, telling her student to layer on each new harmony like cake, and characterizing the voices of a fugue as “everyone coming and congratulating you for arriving” at a joyful coda.<sup>233</sup> Li also uses imagery to help students create an overall sound and environment in the music. “Sometimes when we pay close attention to details, then we forget what the overall big picture should be like,”<sup>234</sup> says Li.

To help Hannah connect all the details and imagine the entire atmosphere of Chopin’s Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major (“Raindrop” prelude), Li describes the opening as being in a dark lonely corner inside where one feels comfortable and safe while it rains outside during the day. It is quiet outside except for the sound of rain falling

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<sup>232</sup> Li, lessons with John.

<sup>233</sup> Li, lessons with John.

<sup>234</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

on the leaves. There is a contradiction between the outside being large and beautiful while one hides in a corner, and being calm while feeling lonely.

Figure 47. Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major, mm. 1-5<sup>235</sup>



By imagining the atmosphere, Hannah plays more comprehensively. “I finally feel there is one breath,” remarks Li. “One state of mind is changing” rather than having separated parts.<sup>236</sup>

Li often demonstrates different parts of a piece chronologically while telling a story or describing the music's characteristics to inspire images in the student's playing. For example, Li tells a story beginning in the B section (within an ABA structure) of Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major (“Raindrop” prelude).

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<sup>235</sup> Chopin, “24 Préludes, Op. 28,” 505.

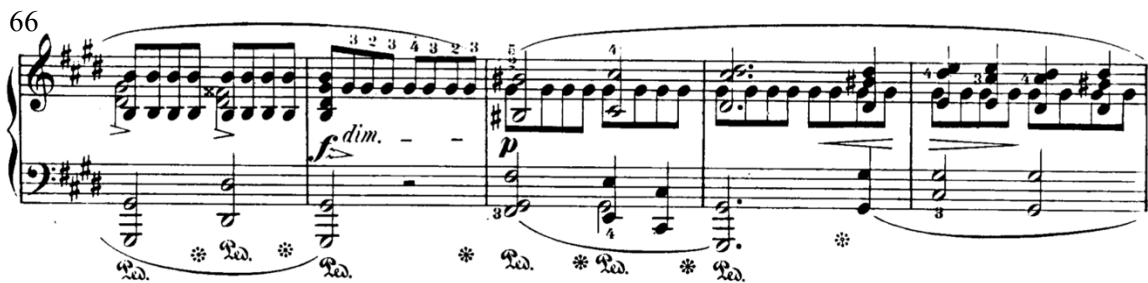
<sup>236</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

Figure 48. Chopin’s Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major, Beginning of “B Section,”  
mm. 28-32<sup>237</sup>



She explains how the ascending notes in the left-hand melody that fall by a step each time want to move up but always come back down before finally reaching the mountain’s halfway point when resting on the whole note at m. 31. They fall back down again, but as the B section’s opening motive repeats itself and crescendos, there is a sense of not being overcome. Li describes the repeat of the B section’s first sixteen measures as already knowing the pain of the path being taken. “To take such a difficult path yet again takes strength, so be braver the second time,”<sup>238</sup> explains Li as she crescendos. The repeat of the sixteen measures ends on a *sforzando* at m. 67.

Figure 49. Chopin’s Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major, mm. 66-70<sup>239</sup>



<sup>237</sup> Chopin, “24 Préludes, Op. 28,” 506.

<sup>238</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

<sup>239</sup> Chopin, “24 Préludes, Op. 28,” 507.

Li explains how the *sforzando* disrupts the feeling of ease from the resolving harmonies, so that the *sforzando*'s contrast with the *piano* marking in the next measure leaves you heartbroken. The repeated eighth notes “are sighing, because it is very painful,”<sup>240</sup> says Li. At the end of the B section, there is a sense of being unwilling to part with something. Then when it feels they are about to give up, the A section returns with calmness and then disappears.

Li also helps build a storyline in the first movement of Haydn's Piano Sonata in C Major Hob. XVI:50.

Figure 50. Haydn's Piano Sonata in C Major Hob. XVI:50 Mov. 1 “Allegro,” mm. 1-6<sup>241</sup>



Li describes this movement as fun, wacky, and humorous with an opening that is positive and curious. As Li demonstrates, she describes the crescendo at m. 5 as talking more pressingly with more things to say, and then the fermata at m. 6 like a car that suddenly stops. The exposition ends valiantly before the development suddenly starts in a minor key with sections that are unsettled, tense, pushing forward, or torn with many twists and turns. When the music is more settled or confident, there are still hesitations and worries

<sup>240</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

<sup>241</sup> Haydn, “Sonata in C Major,” 1.

from before—always wondering if they should put their mind to rest or not. Then at the recapitulation, it seems the situation has finally passed.<sup>242</sup>

For repetitive motives, Li also uses imaginative language to inspire different layers and tones in the sound rather than focusing on contrasting dynamics. For example, making the first one fun, the second vigorous, and the last one sneaky. Which one is energetic, which one urgent, and which has a feeling of taking a step back? Especially because the sound in small piano practice rooms is often explosive, Li encourages students to not only listen to the sound's volume but also to its quality and meaning.

### Melodies where the Fingers Detach

For melodies where the fingers lift between notes, Li often teaches a motion of pushing weight forward on each note. For example, in the first *Un poco meno mosso* (“a little slower”) section of Liszt’s *Mephisto Waltz No. 1* (S. 514), Li wants the music to have texture, weight, and loving expression by pushing the weight down and forward on each melody note.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Li, lessons with Fiona.

<sup>243</sup> Li, lessons with Fiona.

Figure 51. Liszt's Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514), First "Un poco meno mosso"

Section<sup>244</sup>



As the weight sinks down on each note, Li teaches making a hook by bending the playing finger's joint closest to the key and then grabbing the note to create a sound with more substance as opposed to a floating sound.

For melodic octaves, Li also teaches pushing weight forward. She wants the weight of the upper arm pushed forward into each octave note while grasping with the palm side of the knuckles. When the octaves leap, Li reminds students to prepare each note by feeling the keys first before playing, hear the uniqueness of the moving intervals, and create phrases. Similarly, for melodies played in the top line of chords, Li has students push weight into the top notes and calls out reminders such as "grab," "give weight to each one," "relax" the shoulders, and "fingertips."<sup>245</sup>

Li also teaches the wrist pushing a little on each staccato melody note in the opening of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor.

<sup>244</sup> Franz Liszt, "Mephisto Waltz," in *Klavierwerke: Band 5*, ed. Emil von Sauer (Leipzig: Edition Peters, n.d., ca. 1913-17), 78, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Mephisto\\_Waltz\\_No.1,\\_S.514\\_\(Liszt,\\_Franz\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Mephisto_Waltz_No.1,_S.514_(Liszt,_Franz)).

<sup>245</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah and John.



Figure 52. Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor Mov. 1, mm. 1-4<sup>246</sup>



Li has John stay close to the keys with a steady wrist. “Every time you press down the key,” says Li, “the wrist very quickly pushes a little, and every joint (of the finger and knuckle) maintains a grasp. The fingertips should be very sensitive.”<sup>247</sup>

Figure 53. Haydn's Piano Sonata in C Major Hob. XVI:50 Mov. 3, mm. 1-8<sup>248</sup>



Similarly, Li teaches playing with the wrist a little higher and motioning forward in the opening of the lively third movement of Haydn's Piano Sonata in C Major Hob. XVI:50. However, in the first movement of the sonata, Li teaches a different approach.

<sup>246</sup> Beethoven, “Sonate f-Moll, Op. 2 No. 1,” 1.

<sup>247</sup> Li, lessons with John.

<sup>248</sup> Haydn, “Sonata in C Major,” 12.

Figure 54. Haydn's Piano Sonata in C Major Hob. XVI:50 Mov. 1, mm. 1-3<sup>249</sup>



To play the first movement's quiet detached opening notes, Li wants the fingers flattened to create a clear sound that is not so empty.<sup>250</sup>

### Melodies Played by the Thumb

In loud and fast music where the thumb plays the melody in rotating octaves, Li teaches voicing to the thumb by flinging the thumb into the melody notes with a relaxed wrist. To keep strength in the sound, Li has the student group the notes based on phrasing and renew their arm weight with each group. Similarly, for loud and fast octave scales played in one hand, Li has the student fling down into the notes and stay close to the keys.

Li teaches a different technique when the thumb plays the melody in slower music, such as in the second *Un poco meno mosso* section of Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz No. 1* (S. 514).

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<sup>249</sup> Haydn, "Sonata in C Major," 1.

<sup>250</sup> Li, lessons with Fiona.

Figure 55. Liszt's Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514), Second "Un poco meno mosso"

Section<sup>251</sup>



The left-hand thumb plays the melody in between moving to other notes. To play this, Li teaches an up and down motion with the wrist where the thumb stands stably and then digs into the melody note as the wrist comes down. Before putting the weight down, Li wants Fiona to first feel the key to make sure the weight transfers to the right position.<sup>252</sup>

### Hooking and Grabbing Notes for Voicing and Clarity

To voice certain top notes in chords, Li has students use a technique of grabbing or making a hook with the playing finger's joint closest to the keyboard by bending it slightly to create a more pronounced sound. For example, to bring out a two-note slur above broken chords in Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor Mov. 1 (m. 69), Li teaches grabbing the first top note and hooking the second.

<sup>251</sup> Liszt, "Mephisto Waltz," 83.

<sup>252</sup> Li, lessons with Fiona.

Figure 56. Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor Mov. 1 "Allegro," mm. 69-71<sup>253</sup>



Li demonstrates and explains that the weight goes down on the first note of the two-note slur and as the wrist goes down, the fourth finger grabs. "Then move the weight from the fourth to fifth finger," says Li. "... To help us make (the fifth finger) clearer, the joint closest to the keyboard should hook a little ... and once the weight moves to the fifth finger, then I let go."<sup>254</sup> Li lifts her wrist upward to release the weight.

Similarly, in a quiet phrase Li describes as the "most broken-hearted" in Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major ("Raindrop" prelude), Li teaches Hannah to hook the top note of the first chord in m. 68 with her right-hand fifth finger to make the note a tad brighter.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Beethoven, "Sonate f-Moll, Op. 2 No. 1," 2.

<sup>254</sup> Li, lessons with John.

<sup>255</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

Figure 57. Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major, mm. 67-69<sup>256</sup>



Li isolates the intervals between the top and other notes of the chord to show how the interval of a tritone with the bottom note is the most provocative. By bringing out only the top and bottom notes of the chord, it creates an empty sound that is a bit cold and hollow to match the heartbroken tone of the music and sets up the ear to follow the top and bottom lines as they move horizontally.

Li also teaches hearing the lowest and highest notes of *forte* arpeggiated chords to create a bright sound. Li explains how the arm weight flings over toward the top note of an arpeggiated chord to help the right hand fifth finger grab and dig into the top note with the joint closest to the keyboard.<sup>257</sup> As soon as the wrist pushes the arpeggiated chord, the goal is to have the fifth finger grab the top note.<sup>258</sup>

The hooking and grabbing technique is also used to create a clearer sound for fast sixteenth notes in Liszt's Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514).

<sup>256</sup> Chopin, "24 Préludes, Op. 28," 507.

<sup>257</sup> Li, lessons with Fiona.

<sup>258</sup> Li, lessons with John.

Figure 58. Liszt's Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514), "Allegro vivace" Section, mm. 30-34<sup>259</sup>



To play this passage, Li has the student push their hand forward with very active knuckles and fingers. When pushing forward, the fingertips hook into the notes and the palm side of the knuckles grasp tightly and then grab down. Even though the notes roll away fast, each needs to be able to stand on its own. Li has Fiona first play only the last two notes of each slurred group and then the last three notes before playing all four together. By applying this technique, Fiona is able to play with more pulling force and clarity.

To play accompaniment double thirds cleanly, Li also teaches grabbing with the fingers in Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor.

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<sup>259</sup> Liszt, "Mephisto Waltz," 70.

Figure 59. Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor Mov. 2 "Adagio," mm. 19-22<sup>260</sup>



Li teaches that the left hand should stand firmly without needing to exert strength. “The thirds must be clean and tidy,” Li tells John. “Do not exert so much strength. Moreover, after you put all your fingers on the keys and prepare, there should be a small feeling of grabbing. One wrist carries it over. Each finger takes turns feeling the keys and grabbing. Reduce motions. ... You do not need weight. ... It is all about controlling and pressing the keys tidily.”<sup>261</sup>

### Hearing Harmonies

Li often draws students' ears to the harmonies in the middle and bass voices by isolating them or playing them isolated with the melody line to hear the counterpoint between them. Li explains that one of the techniques Chopin uses to write such tension in his music is the harmonic progressions within, so she wants the middle voices in Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major (“Raindrop” prelude) to be sung. “If you hear the harmonic progressions clearer when playing just the left hand, then you will

<sup>260</sup> Beethoven, “Sonate f-Moll, Op. 2 No. 1,” 5.

<sup>261</sup> Li, lessons with John.

already feel the direction of the music,” says Li. “... Then when your right hand is added, it is *ru hu tian yi*” (like a tiger that has grown wings / furthered its strength).<sup>262</sup>

When bass notes change every downbeat, Li often wants the student to hear the connection between them, particularly at resolutions or when the bass line moves by step.

Figure 60. Liszt’s Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514), “Allegro vivace” Section<sup>263</sup>



In this passage from Liszt’s Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514), Li wants Fiona to not only hear the phrasing of the soprano line but also hear the bass line moving down chromatically while the alto line moves up chromatically.

In order to hear a bass note downbeat carried from one measure to the next in a resolution, sometimes Li has the student extend the pedaling of the first bass note.

<sup>262</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

<sup>263</sup> Liszt, “Mephisto Waltz,” 76.



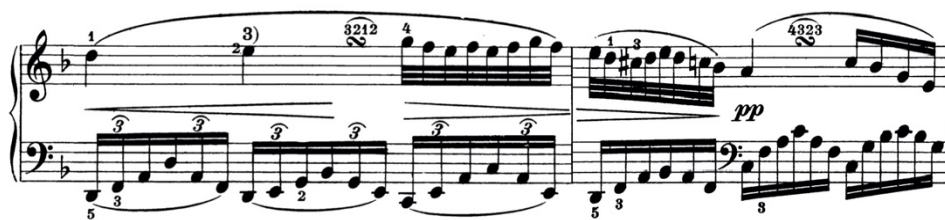
Figure 61. Debussy's Arabesque No. 1 in E Major (L. 66), mm. 75-76<sup>264</sup>



In Debussy's Arabesque No. 1 in E Major (L. 66), Li has John pedal longer on the dominant "B" downbeat in m. 75 before lifting later in the measure in order to better hear the resolution to the tonic "E" downbeat in the following measure.

More often than adjusting the pedal though, Li has students "finger pedal" by using their fingers to sustain the bottom bass notes of accompaniments or to connect bass notes that form lines in between other accompaniment notes.

Figure 62. Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor Mov. 2 "Adagio," mm. 37-38<sup>265</sup>



In Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor, Li has John hold down slightly the first bass note of each quarter beat with his left hand fifth finger, so that the bass note can be sustained without the soprano voice being muddled by the pedal.

<sup>264</sup> Debussy, *l'ère Arabesque*, 4.

<sup>265</sup> Beethoven, "Sonate f-Moll, Op. 2 No. 1," 6.

Li also wants students to rely on their fingers to play a legato bass line when possible, rather than simply relying on the pedal to connect notes.

Figure 63. Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major, mm. 4-5<sup>266</sup>



In Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major ("Raindrop" prelude), Li has Hannah play the last two bass A-flats of m. 4 with her left hand's fourth and then third finger, so the transition into the next measure's D-flat can be played legato with her fingers.

### Leaping Accompaniments

When teaching leaping accompaniments, Li emphasizes the importance of preparing hand positions, playing with weight and supporting it with the knuckles, and playing chords with different angles and motions for fuller harmonies. To prepare for leaping notes, Li wants the student to think in advance and feel the keys for a split second with their knuckles/bridge already standing before playing. Li compares a well-prepared hand to an arrow positioned on the bowstring before being released and going far, while an unprepared hand is like an arrow released before being positioned well on the bowstring and falling short. Li teaches that before playing "position A," one needs to

<sup>266</sup> Chopin, "24 Préludes, Op. 28," 505.

think of “position B,” because as soon as one plays “A” then one must have direction to go to “B.” With the right preparation, the movement of leaping notes becomes comfortable without any extra movements and with an accurate feeling of distance.

Li explains how preparing leaping notes in advance gives one the confidence to relax their body and therefore have arm weight to play with fullness: “When your hands feel and eyes see that it is correct, then you will have confidence. When you have confidence, your body relaxes, and when you are relaxed then you have weight, and when applied then the sound is right.”<sup>267</sup> Relaxing in between motions allows faster leaps and gives weight to the sound, whereas stiffness in between motions makes it easy to play wrong notes and the sound is not able to come out or is explosive. In between motions, as Fiona plays Liszt’s Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514), Li calls out, “Relax. Relax. Relax.”<sup>268</sup> Li encourages Fiona to practice slowly to better prepare notes in advance.

Leaping to notes fluently also requires being familiar with the different angles and motions needed to play each chord. Li explains how using only one angle to press down the keys results in an empty or slapped sound that can lack the inner harmonies or feeling of the rhythm. For different chords, Li teaches different motions. For repeated octave chords, Li wants a relaxed wrist that pushes forward toward the fallboard, while the knuckles stand and grab firmly. Strength should be exerted on the last of the repeated chords or else the wrist will press down if strength is exerted too early. For single accented octave chords, Li wants the chords to be grabbed with spring. For any chords

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<sup>267</sup> Li, lessons with Fiona.

<sup>268</sup> Li, lessons with Fiona.



Figure 65. Liszt's Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514), "Allegro vivace" Section<sup>271</sup>



In Liszt's Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (S. 514), Li has Fiona play down on the first octave and then up and pushing forward with the wrist on the second. She reminds Fiona to push toward the top note with her right hand's fifth finger and to play with a concentrated sound that stays close to the keys when practicing slowly.

In slow and melodic pieces, Li has the student play leaping accompaniments with active hand movements and weight supported by stable knuckles and fingertips.

Figure 66. Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major, mm. 10-14<sup>272</sup>



Li demonstrates the left hand of Chopin's Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major ("Raindrop" prelude) and explains: "The left-hand fingertips must stand stably and with weight going down. Otherwise, it is just empty. After having weight, if the knuckles do not stand up, then as soon as it goes down it is empty. I need to feel each note first,

<sup>271</sup> Liszt, "Mephisto Waltz," 71.

<sup>272</sup> Chopin, "24 Préludes, Op. 28," 505.

guaranteeing I am first in position, and then release the weight down. The fingertips are extremely sensitive. Even though it is a slow piece, the movements of my hand are very active, because I must feel the notes first before I dare to release the weight.”<sup>273</sup>

### Evenness of Eighth Notes and Repeated Broken Harmonies

Li teaches evenness of eighth notes and repeated broken harmonies to create a continuous and unchanging type of sound in a phrase or piece. Throughout the Allegro first movement of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor, eighth notes keep the flow of the music and connect different parts.

Figure 67. Beethoven’s Piano Sonata Op. 2 No. 1 in F Minor Mov. 1 “Allegro,” mm. 22-27<sup>274</sup>



To make the eighth notes more controlled and even, Li has John play the left hand alone slowly and with the metronome. Li wants all the rotating octave eighth notes to be equally quiet, clear, and even so that later when the intervals begin to change at m. 25, John can bring out the moving bottom notes and it can sound unique.

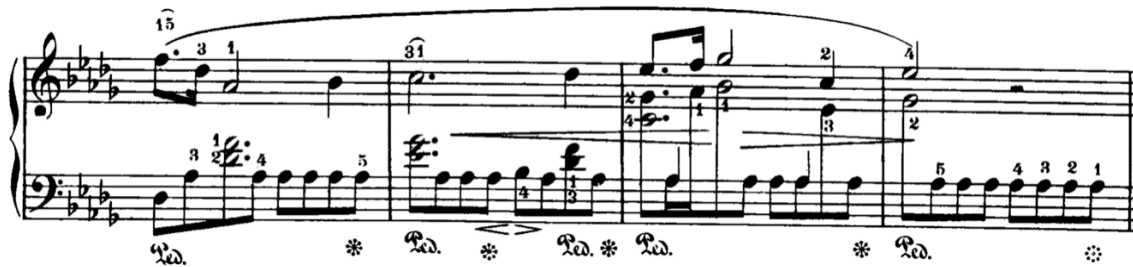
<sup>273</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

<sup>274</sup> Beethoven, “Sonate f-Moll, Op. 2 No. 1,” 1.

Li explains how to play the rotating octave eighth notes: “The knuckles must stand very steadily, the fingertips be very sensitive, the wrist relaxed, and in the heart be very clear of the four subdivisions—One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.”<sup>275</sup> To help John focus on playing evenly with the metronome, Li plays one hand while John plays the other and then they switch. Li assigns three metronome markings for John to practice: slow, medium, and fast.

Li takes a different approach when teaching the continuous eighth note accompaniment in Chopin’s Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major (“Raindrop” prelude).

Figure 68. Chopin’s Prelude Op. 28 No. 15 in D-flat Major, mm. 24-27<sup>276</sup>



Li teaches evenness of the eighth notes with an ability to still rubato and move forward. Instead of using the metronome, Li sings the melody while playing eighth notes on an A-flat to show how the eighth notes should follow the melody in moving forward and slowing down but always come back to the original tempo. The eighth notes are “continuous, unchanging, and always moving,” says Li. “You must let me hear this. Do not get stuck. If you let this ball stop moving, getting it to roll again is awkward.”<sup>277</sup> For

<sup>275</sup> Li, lessons with John.

<sup>276</sup> Chopin, “24 Préludes, Op. 28,” 505.

<sup>277</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

quiet repeated eighth notes, Li teaches gently pressing the key without extra motions, too much weight, or leaving the key.

For rotating notes and repeated broken harmonies in Haydn's Piano Sonata in C Major Hob. XVI:50, Li also wants a steady sound that is continuous and unchanging. She encourages the student to focus on the purpose of the notes. For example, when rotating notes gradually build momentum and increase the clarity of the harmony, Li wants the student to hear the harmony and not the notes going up and down.

### Score Markings and Dynamics

Li has students pay close attention to details in the score and understand them in the music's context, which comes from her belief that "one must respect the composer first" before adding one's own unique personality to a piece.<sup>278</sup> "Understanding each composer's style of using articulations is like understanding their language,"<sup>279</sup> says Li. She often draws the student's attention to markings on the score they overlooked: breaks in slurs, connecting slurs, dynamics, rests muddied with the pedal, and unique things the composer wrote to bring humor or create different moods.

To help students understand the meaning behind certain score markings, Li guides the student in thinking through the composer's intention in writing them. For example, asking the student what they think is meant by the composer's descriptive words and tempo markings, describing how detaching after a slur contributes to a feeling of

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<sup>278</sup> Vivian Li, interview over Zoom by author, August 2021.

<sup>279</sup> Li, interview.



fragmentation to contrast with legato singing later in the phrase, or explaining how a *sforzando* is placed after a crescendo's peak in order to extend the sound's fullness.

For Classical music, Li teaches in line with the period style by focusing on clarity and evenness. For example, playing exact note durations that are not too long or short, making repeated accompaniment chords even in rhythm and dynamic, and not over-pedaling so each note is pronounced clearly. Li wants students to play rests with complete accuracy, so the rest can fulfill its intended purpose. For example, rests in Haydn's music that create humor and surprise, or downbeat rests in Beethoven's music that create excitement. Note durations are interpreted within the music's context, though, such as playing note durations slightly longer to give a little tail after each note when the music has more voices in order to prevent it from sounding noisy.

Li wants the students' dynamics and phrasing to respond to the composer's intention in the music. Depending on the phrasing, Li will divide a crescendo into three or so sections and demonstrate how the composer slowly grows the music's tension with each section, which results in a more gradual and even crescendo. Other times, Li has the student hear the agitation and friction between different voices and rhythms to guide them to naturally crescendo, or hear the resolution of an *appoggiatura* to guide them to naturally decrescendo.

When teaching dynamics, Li also teaches how to think of arm weight. For example, telling the student to drop fresh arm weight or sink weight down into accented notes, or telling the student to put on the brakes after pushing weight and then relax at a sudden *piano* marking. "In this place, suddenly the weight disappears,"<sup>280</sup> says Li. By

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<sup>280</sup> Li, lessons with John.

teaching skills in interpretation and technique, Li helps students express everything they “want to say for the composer and make the score come alive again.”<sup>281</sup>

### Summary

With a gentle and friendly disposition, Li patiently teaches in detail until students understand clearly. Li trains students to think practically about how to use and support their natural arm weight to create different types of tones and sounds most efficiently. Through demonstrating, explaining, and letting students try, Li teaches various techniques for all types of musical contexts, so students can achieve fluency in physical motion and express imaginative music.

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<sup>281</sup> Li, interview.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

#### Overview

With distinct personalities, Tang, Zhao, and Li emphasize different concepts in their teaching. Tang focuses on the music's characterization and imagery to inspire different ways of speaking and a balance in timing and sound; Zhao focuses on how to practically move and position the hand and fingers for effortless control; and Li concentrates on how to manipulate natural arm weight with different motions to create a variety of tones and sounds. While differing in teaching emphases, the teachers share similar teaching methods and philosophies regarding interpretation, performance, caring for the comprehensive growth of the student, and fostering students' independent thinking. Additionally, Zhao and Li teach similar techniques, such as the finger standing stably on the key and grabbing with the hand. However, Zhao emphasizes the high finger technique with young students, while Li stresses the importance of students' fingers staying close to the keys. All three teachers face similar challenges particular to piano education in China with its rapid growth, yet share a hopeful outlook on its future.

#### Interpretation and Performance

To equip students to faithfully interpret the score, Tang, Zhao, and Li teach the music's historical context and the composer's style and way of writing articulations.

They encourage students to consider what the composer is trying to say and bring it to life by speaking through the music. With colorful language and imagery, the teachers inspire different stories, characters, and emotions in the students' playing. Additionally, they guide the student in how to organize phrases, group within each phrase, and listen to changing harmonies. As masterful piano performers themselves, Tang, Zhao, and Li demonstrate frequently in lessons with ease and musical understanding to which students can aspire.

The teachers encourage students to perform regularly and participate in appropriate competitions as a challenge and motivator to work toward a higher level of playing. Tang and Li point out the importance of competitions to provide opportunities that further students' careers as pianists, like exposure on a world stage or playing with an orchestra. In performance, Tang wants students to say what they want to say with an audience that receives it; Zhao wants students to use all their abilities; and Li hopes students will express all their ideas by adjusting immediately to the situation and instrument, so they can still express the music naturally.<sup>282</sup>

### Comprehensive Growth

Tang, Zhao, and Li aim to understand each student, so they can give the right “nutrition,” as Zhao and Li call it, and teach what is most needed according to the students' weaknesses. Tang and Zhao relate this to a doctor treating a patient.

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<sup>282</sup> Zhe Tang, interview through audio recording sent to author, November 2021; Ling Zhao, interview over Zoom by author, August 2021, translated from Mandarin by author; Vivian Li, interview over Zoom by author, August 2021.

Additionally, the three teachers' care extends beyond the piano. They believe that music is an interconnected part of one's life that cannot be separated. This belief guides them to care not only about their students' time at the piano but their life as a whole. For Tang and Li, this means bringing out students' personalities, encouraging them to have other interests besides piano, and helping them love music more no matter what life path they end up taking—whether a career in music or not.

Li is especially involved in her students' lives by taking them to different places for fun, traveling with them to international competitions, and often allowing students to practice at her home. She wants them to love and experience life, which also allows them to become better pianists. "If you do not even have a passion for life, then your music will be dull," says Li.<sup>283</sup> Tang also sees a direct correlation between loving music and other areas in one's life. "They have to love and care for other people in order to love and care for the music," says Tang.<sup>284</sup> Like Li, Tang involves himself in students' overall growth, saying, "I will oversee their overall activities and behavior to help them be a better person and musician."<sup>285</sup>

Tang, Zhao, and Li view studying abroad as an important way for students to grow both as musicians and people. Zhao explains how it helps students manage their time and improve problem-solving skills: "The language, environment, and comprehensive ability to manage your life with studying, practicing, and competing is very important. A person must be able to manage their life before they can do important

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<sup>283</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>284</sup> Zhe Tang, interview through audio recordings sent to author, June and July 2022.

<sup>285</sup> Tang, interview, 2022.

things. Children in China have everything done for them. ... But if you study abroad, you must have a way to solve problems.”<sup>286</sup>

Tang points out how studying abroad helps students understand life and communication in the Western world compared to that in China. “The language I think is very important,” says Tang, “because music is about language—the tone and comprehension of language. That is also very important for a student to learn music better.”<sup>287</sup> Li sees studying abroad as a way for students to open their minds: “Everything is different—the mentality, philosophy, and even just the daily habits. I think because Chinese culture is too complicated and has a little too much restriction—it is good and bad—students need to free their minds.”<sup>288</sup> At the same time, Li cautions that timing is very important, explaining that students who go abroad before they are ready or mature enough often have bad outcomes.

### Independent Thinking and Parents

Tang, Zhao, and Li desire students to know how to learn by themselves and are most proud when their students understand what the music is about and how to apply their teaching where needed. To encourage students to think for themselves, the teachers ask and welcome questions throughout lessons. They help students understand the reasons and principles behind what they teach, so students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and practical tools to apply similar concepts to other parts of their

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<sup>286</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>287</sup> Tang, interview, 2021.

<sup>288</sup> Li, interview.

playing. Tang tells students, “My task is to teach you, but my goal in teaching is that you will not need me anymore.”<sup>289</sup> Both Tang and Zhao relate their teaching to a “walking stick.” Zhao describes its purpose: “You are just a walking stick that supports them for a certain period of time. You have to tell them how you help them and how to not hurt themselves, so that when you leave, they can continue working and go even farther without you.”<sup>290</sup>

Li explains how the solitary nature of playing piano requires the ability to think independently: “You are going to be on stage alone, so you need to have very independent thinking and be able to execute your ideas and plans alone.”<sup>291</sup> When asked to define talent, Tang and Li both mention the importance of intellect, or the “talent of thinking” as Tang calls it.<sup>292</sup> “They must have a natural motivation to think and solve problems,” says Li. “I find it very difficult to teach kids who are just hard working but do not seem very eager to find problems.”<sup>293</sup>

Parents who overstep their involvement can hinder students’ independent learning skills. The parents Tang and Li encounter in China tend to be more overly involved than not involved enough. Tang describes an overly involved parent as “not allowing the student to think and listen by themselves when they practice at home.”<sup>294</sup> Li explains that when parents are too involved in every part of their child’s practice, it inhibits the child’s ability to think and learn independently. Then when faced with difficult pieces, the child

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<sup>289</sup> Tang, interview, 2021.

<sup>290</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>291</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>292</sup> Tang, interview, 2021.

<sup>293</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>294</sup> Tang, interview, 2022.

lacks the ability to overcome challenges themselves. This leads to slower improvement and a vicious cycle of decreased confidence and focus.<sup>295</sup>

At the same time, Tang, Zhao, and Li view the parent's well-balanced involvement in the student's progress as very important. Zhao expects parents to "be a good companion and strike a good balance. They should not just be a supervisor by their child's side but should guide them in seeing many interesting things."<sup>296</sup> Tang explains how the parent's involvement guides the student's positive attitude toward studying: "My opinion is that no matter the level of the student, parent involvement is not only to help the student maintain an attitude in how to study and revive what they learned from the lessons, but it is also very important for the student's growth. The parent's attention to the student makes them at least feel that studying is important."<sup>297</sup>

Because of a parent's great influence, Li chooses "parents over students" when accepting students.<sup>298</sup> Li explains how the parent and teacher should be a team whose goals must align. "When a parent's goal is just hoping their kid can learn music and have a special skill to themselves that later in life they can slowly develop into their own career and make a living—that they can do well at what they like—then that is very pure. Then we are on the same boat."<sup>299</sup> Li has parents practice with young students but does not want parents to tell the student what to do. She believes parents should make sure the

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<sup>295</sup> Suirong Li [Vivian Li], "Xinlang yuer zhuanfang: Li Suirong (3)" [Sina Parenting exclusive interview: Vivian Li (3)], posted on July 17, 2020, Sina video, 1:20-2:10, <http://video.sina.com.cn/p/baby/2020-07-17/detail-iivhuipn3520140.d.html>, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>296</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>297</sup> Tang, interview, 2022.

<sup>298</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>299</sup> Li, interview.



student has a good practice environment, manages their time well, and then let the student solve problems on their own.

### Approach to Technique

Tang, Zhao, and Li describe different aspects of good technique. Tang considers good technique to include controlling the keyboard to sing and create “tone colors” and “layers of tones.”<sup>300</sup> Li describes good technique as a oneness with the piano where one knows it so well that it naturally becomes a part of them.<sup>301</sup> Similarly, Zhao teaches working well or having a “good relationship” with the piano. Zhao defines good technique as “you know what each of your fingers should do and how to do it, and you are willing and able to do it. ... You must know everything clearly. This is good technique. It is not something done subconsciously.”<sup>302</sup>

Technique is not a rote learning process for Tang, Zhao, and Li but a means to help students understand how to control their body and the sound. They explain the purpose and principles behind techniques to guide students to learn and work independently. “We do not give them the fish,” says Tang, “but we teach them how to fish.”<sup>303</sup> For example, when Tang teaches motions to cushion chords and prevent a slapped sound, he explains how the motions control the speed in which the key is pressed and therefore the speed of the hammer hitting the piano strings.<sup>304</sup> By understanding the

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<sup>300</sup> Tang, interview, 2021.

<sup>301</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>302</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>303</sup> Tang, interview, 2021.

<sup>304</sup> Zhe Tang, lessons with Sherry, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

reason behind motions, students can think critically about applying different motions to other passages as well.

Likewise, Zhao and Li guide students to think for themselves about how to gain greater ease and fluency in their playing and how to center their weight correctly in the fingers. To solve any difficult or uncomfortable places, Zhao and Li encourage students to consider which positions and motions are needed. For example, Li teaches Hannah to stop and think, “In movements and exerting strength, where do I use too little? Where do I use too much?”<sup>305</sup>

Of the three teachers, only Zhao taught scales, arpeggios, and other technical exercises in the lesson observations. Despite Tang and Li not teaching these exercises in their observed lessons, it is important to note that they all expect their students to spend significant time practicing technical facility as a crucial part of their piano foundation. Tang explains that when students are young at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, they have “examinations on technique with the twenty-four keys of scales, arpeggios, etc., so we assume they will solve their technique problems when they are fifteen or sixteen years old.”<sup>306</sup>

Similarly, Li expects students to practice scales and arpeggios every day. “If they have limited time to practice and lots of repertoire, I will still ask them to run through scales and arpeggios every day,” says Li, “because that is the best way to keep in shape.”<sup>307</sup> For young kids, Li suggests an hour every day practicing Hanon and very slow scales. Similarly, Zhao’s method book for beginners instructs students to practice

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<sup>305</sup> Vivian Li, lessons with Hannah, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>306</sup> Tang, interview, 2021.

<sup>307</sup> Li, interview.

“fundamentals” (which could include scales, arpeggios, finger exercises, etc.) at least thirty minutes every day.<sup>308</sup>

Of the three teachers, Zhao and Li incorporated the most technique in their lessons. Though differing in emphases and wording, Zhao and Li both teach standing stably on the key with weight settled at the knuckle to fingertip and playing with a grasp in the palm and finger joints. Their approaches to high fingers, however, differ. Zhao teaches the fingers to lift very high above the key for greater velocity when playing each note, while Li does not ask students to lift for a greater attack but to lift in order to release weight after playing. Both Zhao and Li share the same goal of helping students better understand how their bodies and hands function—wanting students to consider where strength should come from and how it can best be supported.

### Tension versus Relaxation

A common understanding between Tang, Zhao, and Li is that tension and relaxation are always interconnected when playing. “Relaxation and tension are always combined,” says Tang. “You cannot have absolute relaxation when playing, because you use energy when you play.”<sup>309</sup> Where energy is used therefore determines which other parts of the body can relax. All three teachers teach the need for relaxation to transfer the

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<sup>308</sup> Ling Zhao, *Lingdian qibu xue gangqin* [Start learning piano from nothing] (Beijing: Zhongyang yinyuexueyuan chubanshe [Central Conservatory of Music Press], 2013), 2, translated from Mandarin by author.

<sup>309</sup> Tang, interview, 2022.

arm's weight to the key. To accomplish relaxation, Zhao and Li emphasize the importance of the finger standing stably.

For the finger to stand stably on the key, Zhao and Li want the student's weight to settle at their knuckle to fingertip. When students use excessive strength and motions, both teachers have the student focus on where their weight should stand and how to support it, which naturally releases tension in other areas. Both Zhao and Li relate this coordination to walking. Weight must center on the standing leg rather than the lifting leg, just like one must stand stably with weight on the playing finger. When the playing finger is not standing stably, sometimes other fingers tense to try to "help" as Zhao and Li describe it.

When the finger stands stably on the key, it allows the other fingers, wrist, elbow, arm, and upper body to relax. Likewise, when the body relaxes, it allows weight to be sent into the finger standing on the key. While the arm provides weight, the wrist helps transfer weight from finger to finger. Li wants a subtle and flexible wrist that follows and guides the weight, while Zhao teaches the wrist to follow and deliver the fingers into the keys.

Zhao and Li use different methods to teach students how to bring their arm's weight to the key. Zhao refers to the arm as a connecting link for weight. "All the strength should be in front (at the fingers) and not behind, but without the behind, then the front is unable to get to the strength," says Zhao.<sup>310</sup> For weight to be in front at the fingers, all the different body parts must coordinate. Zhao often reminds students to position their palm more forward and stand on the fulcrum of their fingertips. To help

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<sup>310</sup> Zhao, interview.

students understand the relationship between tension at the fingertips and relaxation in the wrist, Zhao demonstrates by picking something up and rotating her wrist.<sup>311</sup>

Li helps students understand how to bring the arm's weight to the fingers by teaching various exercises for the purpose of relaxation. These exercises include hanging arm weight from fingers on top of the piano or having students relax their hands like spaghetti on their lap while Li lifts them to let students feel the natural weight of their arms. She often tells students to push their weight forward to give certain notes more substance. Tang also has students push with their arms and relax their elbows in melodic sections. "Your arm's weight needs to push to the bottom and from this produce this slightly plumper sound," says Tang.<sup>312</sup>

### Grabbing with the Hand

Zhao and Li want students to feel a sense of grasp in the palm and joints of the fingers when playing, which requires rounded knuckles. Li emphasizes the arched knuckles of the hand and Zhao emphasizes the grabbing motion of the palm. To feel the hand's grabbing motion, Li teaches stretching out the hand on something flat and slowly pulling in the fingers so the knuckles lift to about a 45-degree angle. "You are mainly using the knuckles, but at the same time, every small finger joint will be involved," says Li.<sup>313</sup> She wants students' knuckles to stand well by rounding and therefore support the arm's natural weight.

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<sup>311</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>312</sup> Tang, lessons with Sherry.

<sup>313</sup> Li, interview.

Zhao demonstrates grasping with the hand by making and loosening a fist. She teaches how the hand forms a grasping palm by grabbing inward with the thumb and pointer finger as one unit and the third, fourth, and fifth fingers as another.<sup>314</sup> The thumb and pinky sides of the hand (the “two chicken legs”) should round slightly inward. Zhao teaches strength coming from the palm and often reminds students to play inside the grasp of the hand. The thumb and pointer finger must maintain this grasping position to enable the other fingers to play inside the hand’s grasp.

With these different emphases on the knuckles and palm, Zhao and Li both want students to feel a sense of grabbing with the hand when playing chords. Li has students prepare the chord’s hand position with the knuckles already standing before playing, while Zhao has students prepare by maintaining the position of the “two chicken legs” slightly rounded inward. Additionally, Zhao and Li teach students to grab with the finger joint closest to the keyboard, which Zhao often refers to as “biting” with the fingers and Li often refers to as “hooking” or “grabbing.” While Zhao teaches this technique to play all the notes in a passage more clearly, Li will teach it for specific notes to give them more substance, voicing, or clarity.

### High Finger Technique

Zhao considers playing with high fingers an important training process to help students understand how the fingers move, how they are connected with other parts of the

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<sup>314</sup> Ling Zhao, lessons with Chelsea, video recording, 2021, translated from Mandarin by author.

hand, and which joints and places need to work.<sup>315</sup> To practice this technique, Zhao has her two younger students lift their fingers from the knuckle joints high above the key and come down with a fast motion that penetrates the key for a clear sound. On the other hand, Li first teaches students the opposite of high fingers where the “fingertips cannot leave the keyboard.” With the student’s fingers on the keys, Li wants them to use their knuckles as a “united support and bridge” to support their arm weight going down. The student first learns how to play and support weight without lifting the finger, which Li calls an “extra movement.”<sup>316</sup>

While Zhao has students practice both slow and fast scales with high fingers, Li only teaches the lifting of fingers for faster scales to create a light and articulated sound. Additionally, Li does not ask students to lift their fingers for the purpose of creating more height from which to strike the key, but rather teaches students to lift after each finger plays to release and transfer the weight to the next finger faster.<sup>317</sup> Both Zhao and Li agree that as speed increases, the degree of lifting the fingers becomes more condensed. Li explains that when students only rely on the fingers, then “the fingers raise too much and (the wrist) starts to push down. Then there is no weight.”<sup>318</sup> Instead of focusing on lifting the fingers to attack, Li wants the student to focus on using the fingers to support weight from the arm, which provides the strength needed so the fingers do not over-lift and exhaust themselves.

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<sup>315</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>316</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>317</sup> Vivian Li, WeChat audio and video messages to author, November 12, 16, and 17, 2023.

<sup>318</sup> Li, lessons with Hannah.

Li considers the high finger technique needed for certain music but does not think a child should start with this technique. “Only after you develop a very supportive, solid, and firm bridge can you then naturally have the high finger technique for passages that need a very articulated sound or fast running passages that need to be very crisp,” says Li. “We need to associate each technique with the right sound to deliver the right music. High finger technique is just one of them.”<sup>319</sup> Tang teaches the technique for particular passages, such as having his student play with high fingers to make their right hand sound brighter when using the soft pedal.<sup>320</sup>

### Piano Education in China Today

Piano education in China has seen staggering changes and growth in the past century. Previously banning Western music during the Cultural Revolution, China is now populated by the largest number of children taking piano lessons in the world. “Lang Lang really accelerated the piano industry,” says Li, “making it bloom suddenly within a decade. But at the same time, because we do not have such a long tradition or solid idea of what the art of piano playing is or how deep and difficult it is, then suddenly the piano industry became too commercialized. The process was too fast.”<sup>321</sup>

Zhao wonders if learning piano in China has become “some trendy thing” with a so-called “Lang Lang craze,” children playing pieces too difficult for them, everyone saying different things online, and “too many musicians who want to become famous.”

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<sup>319</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>320</sup> Zhe Tang, lessons with Tammy, video recording, 2021.

<sup>321</sup> Li, interview.



“Have things slowly drifted away from the original faithfulness to music itself—from that simplicity and passion—and turned into some trendy thing?” ponders Zhao. At the same time, Zhao sees “everyone’s love for learning” as a good thing, even though “the method and objective of learning needs time to help everyone mature.”<sup>322</sup>

The vast quantity of piano education in China has created a “huge market and web, almost like an ecosystem,” says Li, in which there are many opportunities for performances and activities. However, among these opportunities are “many bad ones too,” such as poorly organized competitions that teachers must discern for their students.<sup>323</sup> Tang also points out that “when (students) grow, unless they really play well, it is hard to find opportunities to expose them to perform, because there are too many people.”<sup>324</sup>

Another result of piano’s sudden growth in China is a lack of capable teachers. “Nowadays, too many parents want their kids to study piano,” says Li, “but there are not enough reliable, capable, and suitable teachers, so many, many people who are not even music majors started teaching piano. Parents have no idea how to choose teachers, so tons of kids have been misled or even wasted their early studies, which is very sad.”<sup>325</sup> Tang agrees that teachers are not “balanced in quality and quantity throughout the country.”<sup>326</sup>

To help improve the level of teaching not only in big cities but also more remote areas, Tang explains how certain activities “activate the circulation of knowledge and expose what is happening outside of China and outside of a teacher’s city and teaching

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<sup>322</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>323</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>324</sup> Tang, interview, 2022.

<sup>325</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>326</sup> Tang, interview, 2021

room. In recent years, many teachers have improved due to these international and national activities that exposed them to what is happening.”<sup>327</sup> Additionally, organizations and schools are “starting workshops, lectures, and piano festivals not for students but for young teachers to teach them,” says Li. “This is key. You need to have good teachers before you can have good students.”<sup>328</sup>

As piano education rapidly evolves in China, there is great potential for growth. “There are financial and material resources,” says Zhao, “and great music halls and pianos. All of this provides the best conditions. The capacity and capabilities are there.”<sup>329</sup> In addition to material resources, China also has a culture that values music education. “The society, government, parents, and family see music as a very important part of life and their children's education,” says Tang.<sup>330</sup> Li agrees, sharing her experience that “most Chinese kids or Asian families are willing to be more dedicated to the performing arts. They take it more seriously and do not just learn it as a hobby but want to do it well.”<sup>331</sup>

As piano education in China matures and develops in response to rising demands, a hopeful foundation is set with dedicated parents and students and passionate teachers. As three of China’s most prominent piano teachers, Tang, Zhao, and Li have devoted their lives to the complex intricacies of guiding the next generation of pianists to think critically, love life and music more, and create imaginative and skillful music. They

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<sup>327</sup> Tang, interview, 2022.

<sup>328</sup> Li, interview.

<sup>329</sup> Zhao, interview.

<sup>330</sup> Tang, interview, 2021.

<sup>331</sup> Li, interview.

contribute to an international dialogue where piano speaks through and to people across borders.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT INFORMATION FORM AND TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(ENGLISH AND CHINESE)

## **LESSON OBSERVATIONS:**

Two pre-college students (with one at least age 10 or younger) and one college student

### **STUDENTS' INFORMATION FOR LESSON OBSERVATIONS**

- Student's name (will use anonymous name in paper):
- Student's age and school grade:
- Number of years taught:
- Music education background (teachers, other instruments, school programs, etc.):
- Average practice time every day:
- Length/number of lessons a week:
- Pieces working on (to have the score available while observing):
- Anything else to know about the student:

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:**

Feel free to elaborate on each question with as much or as little as you would like. If you feel uncomfortable answering any particular question then it can be skipped.

### **PART ONE:**

#### **BASICS**

1. How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching at your current institution?
2. How many pre-college students do you teach? How many collegiate students do you teach?
3. What does a typical week of teaching and work look like for you?

#### **TEACHING PHILOSOPHY**

1. What do you enjoy most about teaching?
2. What are some of your main goals in teaching piano? What do you consider your role as teacher to be?
3. Do the goals you have for your older students differ from those for the younger? Does this cause you to teach them with different approaches?
4. What type of environment do you seek to create in lessons?
5. What does music mean to you? What do you hope music will mean to your students?
6. What do you hope students will remember most about your teaching?
7. When are you most proud of your students?

## EXPECTATIONS

1. What are your criteria for accepting students?
2. How do you define talent? How important do you think talent is to a student's success in learning piano?
3. What do you require of your students (practice time, talent, attitude, etc.)?
4. Do most of your students have time for other interests outside of school besides piano—such as sports or another instrument?
5. What do you consider the role of the parent to be in their child's learning piano? What are your expectations for their involvement?
6. What do you do in situations where the student is or becomes unmotivated?

## TEACHING METHODS

1. What are some of your favorite composers (and/or compositions) to teach? How do you have your students approach these pieces?
2. In your opinion, which composers (and/or compositions) are most difficult to teach and why? What have you learned in how to affectively teach these works?
3. How do you help to cultivate each student's unique artistic development?
4. How much do you analyze the music with students? How important is this in your methodology?
5. Do you find any common issues that you have to work on with transfer students? If so, what are they?
6. What do you believe makes your teaching unique from other piano teachers?
7. What would you say contributed the most to your development as a piano teacher?
8. What advice would you give to aspiring piano teachers for how to become a successful teacher?

## PART TWO:

### REPERTOIRE AND INTERPRETATION

1. Do you use any teaching materials such as method books or leveled repertoire books? If so, which materials do you use and why?
2. Do you have your students learn from specific editions of music?
3. What is your process of teaching interpretation?
4. How do you teach interpretation and freedom of expression in relation to being faithful to the details of the score? Does this change with different composers?
5. Do you incorporate Chinese piano repertoire in your students' playing? If so, do you find your way of teaching these pieces to differ from teaching western music? How so? Which Chinese composers/pieces are especially important?

## TECHNIQUE

1. What would you define as good technique?
2. How do you teach technique? Do you teach technique differently to younger students compared to the older? Do you have your students practice certain technique exercises (such as scales, arpeggios, finger strengthening, etc.)?
3. Do you teach physical motion and arm weight? If so, how do you approach these concepts?
4. Do you have any particular approaches to teaching touch and how the fingers contact the keys?
5. Do you have any particular methods for teaching release of tension?

## PERFORMANCE

1. In your opinion, what is a meaningful and inspired performance? How do you help your students to get there?
2. In your opinion, how important are competitions to the growth of a student's playing? Do you have all your students participate in competitions?
3. What are some tips you would give for students preparing for competitions? Do you have specific ways for preparing your students for competitions?
4. Are there other performance opportunities for your students apart from competitions?

## PIANO EDUCATION IN CHINA

1. Where did you learn piano as a child? Have you seen piano education in China change since you were young? How so?
2. Can you describe the teaching of your piano teacher(s) in China? Do you teach this way as well or differently? If differently, then how so?
3. Do you believe studying in countries outside of China made significant contributions to your teaching? If so, how did it?
4. How important do you think studying abroad is for students? Why?
5. Do you feel China offers its pianists opportunity to fulfill their artistic development and achievement? Why?
6. What do you consider some of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of piano education in China today?
7. What do you hope for piano education in China in the next thirty years?

## 课堂观察：

一名大学生和两名 18 岁以下的学生（其中一名学生的年龄需要在 10 岁以下）

### 学生信息

- 学生姓名（将在论文中使用匿名）：
- 学生年龄和年级/学历：
- 跟随其教授的学琴时长：
- 音乐教育背景（指导教师、其他乐器、学校课程等）：
- 平均练琴时长/每天：
- 专业课时长/每周：
- 曲目（该曲目是指旁听课时可能要演奏的曲目）：
- 关于此学生的其他信息：

## 采访信息：

您对每个问题回答的信息量完全由您决定，如果不便回答也可以跳过。

### 第一部分：

#### 基础信息

4. 您教书多久了？您在目前的学校教书多久了？
5. 您现在教多少个大学生？教多少个 18 岁以下的学生？
6. 您一周的教学和工作安排一般是怎样的？

#### 教学理念

8. 您最享受教学的什么方面？
9. 您教钢琴的主要目标是什么？您认为您作为老师的角色是什么？
10. 对于年龄大与年龄小的学生，您会有不同的目标吗？您会因此采用不同的方法教他们吗？
11. 您希望在课堂中营造什么样的教学氛围？
12. 音乐对您意味着什么？您希望音乐对学生的学生意味着什么？
13. 您希望学生以后最能回忆起您教学的什么方面？

14. 您什么时候最以您的学生为荣？

#### 期望

7. 您招收学生的标准是什么？

8. 您如何定义“talent”？您认为 talent 对学生学好钢琴有多重要？

9. 您对学生有什么要求（练琴时间、talent、态度等）？

10. 除了钢琴，您大部分的学生是否有时间去做课外活动——比如运动或其他乐器？

11. 您认为父母在孩子学习钢琴过程中扮演的角色是什么？您对他们的参与有什么期望？

12. 当学生没有动力时或变得没有动力时，您会怎么做？

#### 教学方法

9. 您最喜欢对哪些作曲家(和/或作品)进行教学？您让学生怎么去对待这些曲子？

10. 您认为哪些作曲家（和/或作品）最难教？为什么？您如何有效地教这些作品？

11. 您如何帮助每个学生去培养其独特的艺术发展？

12. 您带学生做多少音乐分析？这在您的教学法中有多重要？

13. 您教新转来的学生时是否有遇到要改善的一些常见问题？如果有，是什么样的问题？

14. 您觉得您的教学有哪些与众不同？

15. 您认为什么因素对您的钢琴教学发展贡献最大？

16. 您有什么建议如何成为一名成功的钢琴教师？

#### 第二部分：

#### 曲目与诠释

6. 您是否会使用一些特定的教材呢（例如系列教程或按等级划分的教材）？如果是，您使用了哪些教材？为什么？

7. 您是否要求学生用一些特定版本的乐谱？

8. 您教授诠释的过程是什么？

9. 您指导学生遵从谱面要求的同时，如何教授诠释和表达自由？这个会随着作曲家的不同而改变吗？



10. 您是否在学生的曲目单中加入中国钢琴作品？如果是的话，您觉得您教中国音乐和西方音乐有所区别吗？有哪些区别？哪些中国作曲家/作品是特别重要的？

### 技术

6. 您如何定义好的技术？
7. 您怎么教授技术？对于年龄小的学生和年龄大的学生，您所教授的技术会有所不同吗？您有没有让您的学生去练某一些特定的技术练习呢（如音阶、琶音、加强手指训练等）？
8. 您教授动作和手臂重量吗？如果有，您如何教授这些概念？
9. 您有什么特别的方法来教授触摸以及手指如何触键吗？
10. 您有针对于缓解肌肉紧张的教学方法吗？

### 演奏

5. 在您看来，有意义和有启发的演奏是什么样的？您如何帮助您的学生达到这样的演奏？
6. 您认为比赛对学生的弹奏发展有多重要？您是否让您所有的学生都参加了比赛？
7. 对于准备比赛的学生，您有什么建议？您让您学生做的比赛准备有什么具体的方法吗？
8. 除了比赛，您的学生还有其他的演奏机会吗？

### 中国钢琴教育

8. 您小时候在哪里学的钢琴？从您学琴起，中国的钢琴教育发生变化了吗？如果有，是怎么样的变化？
9. 您能描述一下您在中国的钢琴老师（们）的教学吗？您也这样教学吗？还是您使用不同的教学方式？如果不同的话，有什么不同呢？
10. 您认为在国外的学习对您的教学有重大贡献吗？如果有的话，有怎么样的贡献？
11. 您认为学生出国留学有多重要？为什么？
12. 您认为中国现状是否为中国的钢琴家提供了实现艺术发展与成就的机会？为什么？
13. 您认为当今中国的钢琴教育最大的优缺点有哪些？
14. 您对未来三十年中国的钢琴教育有何期望？

APPENDIX B

TEACHER, STUDENT, AND PARENT CONSENT AND ASSENT FORMS

(ENGLISH AND CHINESE)

**Teacher Consent Form**

*"The Teaching Methods and Philosophies of Three Contemporary Chinese Piano Teachers"*

My name is Natalie Burton – I am a doctorate piano student under the direction of Professor Hannah Creviston at Arizona State University. I am conducting research to study the teaching methods and philosophies of three outstanding piano teachers in China.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve an interview (expected to take about 2 hours) and six lesson observations (with two precollegiate students [including at least one below the age of ten] and one collegiate student). Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop participation at any time. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

The interview transcript will be included in my doctorate final research paper. Your responses to the interview questions will be quoted and paraphrased to describe your teaching methods and philosophy, with examples included from the lesson observations.

Participation in this study will give you a platform on which to share your expertise and broaden your reputation to a larger population. It will also provide other teachers with inspiration for their own teaching, and provide insight into piano education in China. It is my goal to accurately portray your teaching methods and philosophy in a way that is beneficial to both you and those who will read the paper. There is no compensation for participation. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

The interview and lesson observations will be audio and video recorded for reference as I write my paper. The recordings will not be used for any purpose other than my doctorate final research paper. De-identified data collected for the purposes of current study will not be shared with other investigators for future research purposes.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: hannah.creviston@asu.edu and nataliejb@outlook.com. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at +1 (480) 965-6788.

By signing below you are agreeing to be part of the study.

Name:

Signature:

Date:



### Student Consent Form

#### *"The Teaching Methods and Philosophies of Three Contemporary Chinese Piano Teachers"*

My name is Natalie Burton – I am a doctorate piano student under the direction of Professor Hannah Creviston at Arizona State University. I am conducting research to study the teaching methods and philosophies of three outstanding piano teachers in China, including your teacher.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve me observing two of your piano lessons in order to learn more about your teacher's teaching. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

I will ask your teacher to provide some information about you; such as your age, school grade, music education background, average practice time every day, pieces working on, and other information to help me better understand your situation when observing the lessons. The results of the research study may be published in my doctorate final research paper, but your real name will not be used. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

The lesson observations will be audio and video recorded for reference as I write my paper. The recordings will not be used for any purpose other than my doctorate final research paper. De-identified data collected for the purposes of current study will not be shared with other investigators for future research purposes.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: [hannah.creviston@asu.edu](mailto:hannah.creviston@asu.edu) and [nataliejb@outlook.com](mailto:nataliejb@outlook.com). If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at +1 (480) 965-6788.

By signing below you are agreeing to be part of the study.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

学生同意书

《中国当代三位钢琴教师的教学方法和教学理念》

我叫 Natalie Burton, 是亚利桑那州立大学 Hannah Creviston 教授指导下的一名钢琴博士生。我正在研究中国三位优秀钢琴教师的教学方法和理念, 也包括您的老师。

我诚邀您的加入, 我将观察您的两节钢琴课, 以了解您老师的教学法。您参与这项研究采取自愿原则。如果您选择不参加, 或在任何时候您退出这项研究, 将不会有任何影响。

我会让您老师提供一些您的信息: 比如您的年龄, 学校的年级, 音乐教育背景, 每天平均练琴时间, 在练的曲子, 以及其他信息, 以帮助我将观察课的时候可以更好地了解您的情况。其研究的结果可能会发表在我的博士毕业研究论文中, 但不会使用您的真名。对于您的参与, 不涉及到任何可预见的风险或不舒适。

课堂观察的情况将会录音和录像, 以便我在完成论文期间提供我参考。这些记录将不会用于其他任何目的, 仅用于我的博士毕业研究论文。为当前研究目的收集的识别数据将不会为未来研究目的与其他研究者共享。

如果您对本次研究有任何疑问, 请给我发邮件至 [nataliejb@outlook.com](mailto:nataliejb@outlook.com), 或发给 Hannah Creviston 教授至 [hannah.creviston@asu.edu](mailto:hannah.creviston@asu.edu)。如果您对您作为研究对象/参与者的权利有任何疑问, 或者您觉得您被置于危险之中, 可以通过研究诚信和保证办公室联系人类研究机构审查委员会主席, 电话: +1 (480) 965-6788。

在下面签名, 表示您同意参加上述研究。

\_\_\_\_\_  
签名

\_\_\_\_\_  
打印名字

\_\_\_\_\_  
日期

**Student Assent Form**

*"The Teaching Methods and Philosophies of Three Contemporary Chinese Piano Teachers"*

My name is Natalie Burton – I am a doctorate piano student at Arizona State University.

I am asking you to take part in a research study because I am trying to learn more about the teaching methods and philosophies of three outstanding piano teachers in China, including your teacher. Your parent(s) have given you permission to participate in this study.

If you agree, I will observe two of your piano lessons in order to learn more about your teacher's teaching. You can choose if you want to participate in this study or not. If you choose to participate, you can still choose to stop at any time. Feel free to ask any questions about the study at any time.

Signing here means that you have read this form and that you are willing to be in this study.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

学生同意书

《中国当代三位钢琴教师的教学方法和教学理念》

我叫 Natalie Burton, 是亚利桑那州立大学的钢琴博士生。

我邀请你加入这项研究, 是因为我想更好的了解中国三位优秀钢琴教师的教学方法和理念, 其中也包括你的老师。你的家长已经同意你可以参加这项研究。

如果你同意的话, 我将观察你的两节钢琴课, 以了解你老师的教学法。你可以选择参加这项研究, 也可以选择不参加。如果你选择参加, 你仍然有随时选择退出的权利, 而且你随时都可以向问题。

在下面签名, 表示你以阅读并同意参加这项研究。

\_\_\_\_\_  
签名

\_\_\_\_\_  
打印名字

\_\_\_\_\_  
日期



*"The Teaching Methods and Philosophies of Three Contemporary Chinese Piano Teachers"*

PARENTAL LETTER OF PERMISSION

My name is Natalie Burton – I am a doctorate piano student under the direction of Professor Hannah Creviston at Arizona State University. I am conducting research to study the teaching methods and philosophies of three outstanding piano teachers in China, including the teacher of your child.

I am inviting your child's participation, which will involve me observing two of their piano lessons in order to learn more about their teacher's teaching. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate or to withdraw your child from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Likewise, if your child chooses not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

I will ask the teacher to provide some information about your child; such as their age, school grade, music education background, average practice time every day, pieces working on, and other information to help me better understand their situation when observing the lessons. The results of the research study may be published in my doctorate final research paper, but your child's real name will not be used. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your child's participation.

The lesson observations will be audio and video recorded for reference as I write my paper. The recordings will not be used for any purpose other than my doctorate final research paper. De-identified data collected for the purposes of current study will not be shared with other investigators for future research purposes.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your child's participation in this study, please email me at [nataliejb@outlook.com](mailto:nataliejb@outlook.com) or Professor Creviston at [hannah.creviston@asu.edu](mailto:hannah.creviston@asu.edu).

By signing below, you are giving consent for your child \_\_\_\_\_ (Child's name) to participate in the above study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you have any questions about you or your child's rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you or your child have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at +1 (480) 965-6788.

《中国当代三位钢琴教师的教学方法和教学理念》

家长同意书

我叫 Natalie Burton, 是亚利桑那州立大学 Hannah Creviston 教授指导下的一名钢琴博士生。我正在研究中国三位优秀钢琴教师的教学方法和理念, 也包括您孩子的老师。

我诚邀您孩子的加入, 我将观察他的两节钢琴课, 以了解老师的教学法。您孩子参与这项研究采取自愿原则。如果您选择孩子不参加, 或在任何时候让您的孩子退出这项研究, 将不会有任何影响。同样, 如果您孩子选择不参加, 或在任何时候您孩子退出这项研究, 将不会有任何影响。

我会让老师提供一些您孩子的信息: 比如他们的年龄, 学校的年级, 音乐教育背景, 每天平均练琴时间, 在练的曲子, 以及其他信息, 以帮助我将观察课的时候可以更好地了解他的情况。其研究的结果可能会发表在我的博士毕业研究论文中, 但不会使用您孩子的真名。对于您孩子的参与, 不涉及到任何可预见的风险或不舒适。

课堂观察的情况将会录音和录像, 以便我在完成论文期间提供我参考。这些记录将不会用于其他任何目的, 仅用于我的博士毕业研究论文。为当前研究目的收集的识别数据将不会为未来研究目的与其他研究者共享。

如果您对本次研究或您孩子参与本次研究有任何疑问, 请给我发邮件至 nataliejb@outlook.com, 或发给 Hannah Creviston 教授至 hannah.creviston@asu.edu。

在下面签名, 表示您同意您的孩子\_\_\_\_\_ (孩子的名字) 参加上述研究。

\_\_\_\_\_  
签名

\_\_\_\_\_  
打印名字

\_\_\_\_\_  
日期

如果您对您或您的孩子作为研究对象/参与者的权利有任何疑问, 或者您觉得您或您的孩子被置于危险之中, 可以通过研究诚信和保证办公室联系人类研究机构审查委员会主席, 电话: +1 (480) 965-6788。

APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL NOTICE

APPROVAL: MODIFICATION

[Hannah Creviston](#)  
[MDT: Music](#)  
 480/965-3823  
[Hannah.Creviston@asu.edu](mailto:Hannah.Creviston@asu.edu)

Dear [Hannah Creviston](#):

On 6/4/2021 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Modification / Update
Title:	The Teaching Methods and Philosophies of Three Contemporary Chinese Piano Teachers
Investigator:	<a href="#">Hannah Creviston</a>
IRB ID:	STUDY00013893
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• _____.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• _____.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• _____17____.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• _____18____.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li> <li>• translation certificate.pdf, Category: Translations;</li> </ul>

The IRB approved the modification.

When consent is appropriate, you must use final, watermarked versions available under the “Documents” tab in ERA-IRB.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Natalie Burton  
 Hannah Creviston  
 Natalie Burton