

Reviving the Beauty of Bach's Music

—On the Teaching of Bach's Polyphonic Works

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Abstract—The polyphonic works in piano teaching is an important teaching content, among which Bach's works are the most representative. Bach's piano polyphonic works have rigorous rules, diverse techniques and exquisite logical relations. However, due to its complicated vocal direction and varied technical skills, polyphony has become a difficult teaching problem for teachers and students. This paper starts with the analysis of Bach's polyphonic works, and puts forward effective training strategies according to his works' style characteristics and creative techniques in order to improve the teaching quality of Bach's polyphonic works.

Keywords—Bach's polyphonic works, learning significance, training strategy, notice

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is the greatest musician in human music history. His polyphonic works are regarded as a treasure in the history of human music, which has never been surpassed. The beauty of his works is not only reflected in the preciseness and balance of the musical form structure, but also in the deep emotion nurtured by the notes themselves. Austrian conductor Karajan described his music as "like a fountain flowing through the soul". Today, hundreds of years later, Bach's polyphonic works are widely used in teaching. However, due to the rigorous and complex creative techniques and changeable performance skills of his works, teachers find it difficult to teach them and students are confused. In the author's opinion, in order to play Bach's polyphony well, we need to make an in-depth discussion from the following aspects.

I. THE SIGNIFICANCE TO LEARN BACH'S POLYPHONIC WORKS

As for Bach's polyphonic works, Zhao Xiaosheng, a famous Chinese composer, pianist, music theorist and educator, said: "any pianist must have a thorough understanding of Bach's music with no exception. No other composer had such a great and profound influence on later generations as Bach."¹ This statement profoundly reflects the important status of Bach's polyphonic works in the process of piano learning. And

its significance is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

A. *It can promote students to construct three-dimensional and multi-line music thinking mode*

Polyphonic music is interwoven by many melodies, the relationship of which is equal without primary and secondary. When playing polyphony, our fingers need to be guided by our ears to control these melodic lines so that they are interwoven and clearly discernible. This is a hard requirement for students to establish a multi-line and three-dimensional way of thinking. Therefore, we need to practice polyphony frequently to train the brain, so as to establish this way of thinking as soon as possible. [1]

B. *It is helpful to train students' ability to analyze the structure of voice and music, and to promote the integration of different subjects.*

The polyphonic music system is characterized by its comprehensiveness, diversity and independence. Each part of the voice is interwoven and independent with each other. There is a set of strict operational logic and rules among voice parts. It firstly needs to have in-depth analysis on polyphonic works and find the topic and theme in order to play polyphony well, which requires the support of related music theory including the subjects of harmony, melody analysis, visual singing to train ear, instruments, the history of polyphonic music, etc. It is impossible to understand polyphony and play well polyphonic works without solid foundation of these courses. At the same time, by playing multiple polyphonic works, it, in turn, promotes the ability of students to analyze the lines and directions of the voice and analyze the structure of the music, trains the sensitivity of their ear and develops their music sense of order, etc., thus forming a virtuous circle between hearing, music sense and knowledge structure.

C. *It is helpful for the balanced development of students' hands*

There is no way to "be careless" to play polyphony well, because the workload of the two hands is similar. The fingers need to carefully control the direction of each melody line. If there is no strong finger function as a backing, it is very difficult to play polyphonic works no matter how strong the first two abilities of students. Therefore, it is impossible to balance the hierarchical relationship of each voice part and

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¹ Zhao Xiaosheng: *The Tao of Piano Playing*, Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, 2008(11) P164

process each part of the line meticulously without a strong and balanced function of both hands and fingers.

II. THE WAYS TO PLAY BACH'S POLYPHONIC WORKS

A. *It should understand the main art style of Bach's polyphonic works.*

To play a piano piece well, one must have a deep understanding of the writing background, characteristics of the times, the author's style and so on. To play Bach's polyphonic music works, it is necessary to understand the artistic characteristics and performance characteristics of music in its period and deepen the understanding of the connotation of the works, so as to improve the performance of the works.

1) *The main characteristic of Bach's polyphonic works is clear theme and melodic singing*

Bach's polyphonic works are often organized with rigorous matching rule by topics, double theme and answering. Each note is an essential component. The voice line is the most important characteristic of Bach's works, which requires beautiful singing and clear and coherent voice lines. Except for horizontal lines, Bach also paid attention to the longitudinal relaxation, requiring the entangling, contrast and resolution of concordant and discordant among notes. The undulating lines and the relaxation relationship among notes perfectly reveal the independent meaning of each note and the balanced and smooth auditory effect of the works.

2) *Polyphonic writing techniques are diverse and flexible*

Counterpoint is the most common technique in Bach's polyphonic works. In addition, compound counterpoint, reflection, retrograde and imitation are also widely used in Bach's polyphonic works. Only by mastering his creative techniques and fully analyzing the characteristics of his works can Bach's polyphonic works be better interpreted. Without comprehensive understanding on playing polyphonic works, you can only remain at a superficial level. The balance and beauty of the internal structure of polyphony music must be supported by solid theoretical basis.

3) *Ornaments are frequently used and improvised*

In Baroque period, the style of art is multifarious and gorgeous. Works are often improvised to add a variety of ornaments. In addition to the aesthetic demand, skills are often showed off. The ornaments in Bach's polyphonic works mainly include mordent, double mordent, appoggiatura, trill, echo, glissando, etc. Some ornaments also have the trill with prefix or suffix. When we play the ornaments, they should not be single and fixed. But it should play in accordance with the knowledge of music style and the use of ornaments in Baroque period as well as the good music esthetic ability. Additionally, it should also be noted that these ornaments must be completed with uniform speed and strength within the duration of the main note. Meanwhile, based on the characteristics of clavichord at that time, playing ornaments on modern piano should not be too hasty, strong, short and gorgeous. [2]

B. *The correct ways to master Bach's polyphonic works*

Bach's polyphonic works are different from music in thematic tone. Due to its own characteristics, we must not use the practice method of music in thematic tone, but it should practice according to the following methods:

1) *Practice on each voice part*

In the practice of each voice part, we should do well the following two aspects:

(1) It should analyze the nature, characteristics and creative techniques of the voice part and feel the beauty of Bach's works from the heart.

(2) It should practice each voice part carefully and deal with the fluctuation of syntax, timbre, fingering and dynamics until you are proficient in hearing and technical movements.

2) *Practice on each hand*

This practice method is recommended to be put behind the practice on each voice part, because the practice on each hand may cause the voice part lines distributed in the two hands to be split. If there are no complete smooth voice part lines in the head earlier, it is likely to deal with the voice part poorly. Therefore, before you practice on each hand, you must make sure that you are impressed with all the vocal lines. Special attention should be paid in the process of practice on each hand: even the broken lines, the fingers must be fully flowing and clear in the playing vocal part.

3) *Practice in accordance with themes*

Firstly, it should analyze works, find the combined elements of theme, matching and answering, etc. When the theme comes into the work, it should practice with different volumes of matching and answering to achieve clear hierarchy.

4) *Combination practice on voice part*

When we have a clear music structure in our head, we can have combination practice on voice part after we have reached a certain level of proficiency in the above-mentioned three practices. When having combination practice on two-handed voice part, we should keep the quality of practice on each voice part: paying attention to the prominence of the theme, the balance of the volume of the voice, the clarity of the lines of each part, the movement of the hands, the accuracy of the fingering and the situation of the two-handed clauses, so that each voice part can flow in a balanced and coordinated way.

5) *Playing one (or multiple) voice part and singing one voice part*

It is an effective way to sing polyphony by practicing the melody of voice part. For the younger players, they can first ask others to help sing a voice part. Until they are familiar with all voice parts, they can play piano while singing.

6) *Practice on reciting music notes with each hand*

In the process of playing, it should be noted that the other hand cannot secretly play in order to avoid reciting play with the help of finger inertia. [3]

In short, in the process of practicing polyphony, we should combine the above practice methods according to our actual situation. It must avoid the practice method with which music note "takes seats with granted number" in vertical manner and

avoid the fragmented playing of voice part line. Only through the practice of above methods can we achieve the minimum requirements of polyphony works.

III. SOME PROBLEMS THAT SHOULD BE PAID ATTENTION TO IN THE PROCESS OF PLAYING BACH'S POLYPHONIC WORKS

A. *Relatively slow speed*

The slow rhythm of music in the baroque period may be caused by the limitation of the production level of musical instruments at that time, or it may be influenced by the aesthetic standards at that time. In a word, when playing Bach's works, it should be relatively slow, which is one of the important factors determining the baroque style.

B. *Rigorous rhythm with appropriate freedom in some part*

Rigorous and stable rhythm is the general consensus of musicians on Bach's works. It requires them to be in a basic rhythm on the whole while playing Bach's works. However, due to the improvisation of performance in the baroque period, many performers give appropriate freedom in some parts, such as some colorful passages, which are often used by performers for improvisation or show-offs. So, appropriate freedom is allowed. In addition, the other parts are required to be unified in general. [4]

C. *Clear voice line with distinct hierarchy*

Bach's works are multi-part music, so it is the most basic requirement for performance to make sure the lines of each voice part clear and distinct. In the aspect of voice part processing, Bach first stresses the principle of balance, that is, the intensity level of each part is basically the same, even if the theme part which should not be over-emphasized. Second, the lines of each voice part must be clear and coherent. Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers should ask students to ensure the clarity and integrity of the lines of other voice parts while highlighting the theme part and require each part to flow while singing.

D. *Touching keys in accordance with the actual situation of works*

Bach's polyphonic works can be roughly divided into two styles: one is more active and fast, and the other is relatively slow in singing. Generally speaking, staccato or non-legato are often adopted in active and fast works, whereas legato or semi legato is often used in beautiful singing works. When several voice parts are played together, it is better to use different playing methods in each part. In the process of teaching, teachers should guide students to use their ears to guide the progress of each voice part of the line and to express different voice parts with different keys in order to achieve clear and distinct structure.

E. *Proper use of pedals*

Due to the combination of multi-melody, pedals are rarely used in Bach's works. The French pianist Walter Giesecking did not advocate the use of pedals in Bach's works. Therefore, many people believe that it is unnecessary to use pedals in the

interpretation of Bach's works. It is true that if the pedal is used too much, the voice part will be blurred, but if the pedal is not used at all, some voice parts will appear dry and tasteless, and even the voice part will be broken. The author thinks that it ought to use pedals appropriately according to the specific circumstance of musical composition, for instance: the difficulty in stretching fingers or the prolonged harmony in the end when playing. Thus, we need to listen carefully with ears and use them appropriately. [5]

F. *Choosing scientific version*

The version of the work is often the compass of the player, which directly affects the playing style of the player. And composers in Baroque period are often the performers of their own works, thus it is no difficulty for them to understand the connotation of the works. Therefore, composers of that era did not have the consciousness to mark their music. After the 19th century, later generations began to compile all kinds of detailed music works. And music scores were largely added with the compilers' personal opinions, and some even deviated from the composers' original intention. Muldjerini's version is relatively scientific, with a deep study of Bach's works and many original insights. But from today's point of view, its version is too detailed, which is still not worth advocating. First, it is that the more detailed the compilation, the more personal views of the compiler it contains. Second, it is easy for students to rely too much on the score information, and they are not willing to improve their own music culture to deeply understand the work. Moreover, some scholars believe that Muldjerini's version tends to be romantic and neglects the primitive simplicity of Bach's music. Therefore, only the original music score is the true authoritative version. However, because Bach's manuscripts have almost no playing marks, we can only rely on the accumulation of artistic aesthetics to understand them. Therefore, we should improve our artistic aesthetics from many aspects in daily life, such as: listening to concerts, reading more music history books and music theory books, attending music salon, listening to master class and so on. With profound artistic aesthetics, the essence of Bach's works will flow naturally between the fingers. [6]

IV. CONCLUSION

The spiritual essence of Bach's polyphonic works can be summarized in five words, namely, rationality, control, motivation, line and contrast. [3] When we study Bach's polyphony works, we should first deeply understand the connotation of these five words, strictly and carefully practice them and store them in our heart as aesthetic experience, so that we can correctly grasp the style of music in Baroque era when playing Bach's works. We are always on the way to study Bach's polyphony. We hope that with the development of the times and the unremitting efforts of all musicians, we can find a more mature and scientific way to perform Bach's works, so as to better interpret the artistic charm of Bach's polyphony works.

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