

A Farewell to the Piano

Fifteen Memorized Minutes

by Alan Harris

THE PIANO CAN BE SEEN AS the perfect symbol of a conservatory of music. It is precisely machined and rigidly structured. By means of equal temperament, the piano's pitches are mathematically compromised so that no intervals except octaves sound exactly in tune--meaning that all eighty-eight of its notes are given an equal chance to sound mediocre.

May 7, 1968

Yesterday Mr. Banks, my piano teacher at the conservatory, reminded me again that I **have** to, it's the **requirement** that I, play fifteen minutes of memorized piano music on May 27 for my final. I suggested the short Bach piece that I have worked on intermittently, and he, after hearing me play it, thought it would be all right, but still had reservations because it only lasts about three minutes. So, fifteen minutes is now the sacred piano time. By the way, notice the more than superficial similarity between the two words "sacred" and "scared."

To think that every giant tree we see, whatever kind it is, has had its beginning in a seed that is usually smaller than the end of your thumb--somehow that thought is more impressive to me than the thought of playing fifteen memorized minutes of piano music.

This fifteen-minute requirement reminds me of that ages-old, ages-new cop-out wherein quantity replaces, or supersedes in importance anyway, quality. Or is it that quality is still the goal, but is to be measured in terms of quantity? Very lame, I would say. Few would refuse allegiance to quality, I suppose, but few also can refrain from applying quantitative measuring sticks to it.

To measure quality is like measuring the universe. To do so, the only unit of measure you can use is the thing itself which you are measuring. You can only say that the universe is one universe long, one universe wide, its exact value being one universe. The same principle holds for works of art, or intelligence, or aptitude, or skill, or preference. You can measure each of these only in units of itself. You can only try, and fail, to apply other units of measure to it. You can count and compare and make statistical charts without influencing or understanding quality.

For example, here at the conservatory this semester (a semester is exactly half of a something) we music students (music students must study music, whatever it is that "students," "study," and "music" may be) are required (requiring has a ringing, hollow sound to it, probably for the same reason that a decayed corpse does) to obtain 40 or more (40 is a nice round number because our numbering system happens to be based on ten, and four sets of those tens would be a nice number to connect with a requirement) recital (a recital is a battle staged by usually one performer who is required to impress an audience of listeners who are required to listen) credits (the

root of which, I understand, means faith, or belief--you are not believed unless you ask the official near the auditorium door for a small slip of white paper which has on it, pre-stamped, the date of the recital and the number of credits--one credit for student recitals, two credits for faculty or visitor or special recitals--a slip which you are obliged to sign and give back to the same recital official after the performance).

So, 40 recital credits somehow measure something. What do they measure? They measure the number of times a recital slip was handed to a person in charge with a certain student's name signed on it (by or not by that student) and later toted up by the secretary in charge of toting up recital slips.

To me it is just as comforting to learn that some young tree has forty or more leaves on it. Maybe more comforting.

May 13, 1968

I awoke this morning with a dull nag somewhere inside, prompting me to do something or telling me that I should be worried about something--but I couldn't immediately discern what it was. I have found lately that my worries follow a pattern--that is, I first feel a nagging doubt, a hunch somewhere inside me which does not feel quite natural, not quite comfortable. Thereupon I try to discover what is causing it. This detective work isn't usually difficult, because only a limited number of realities can cause me to worry. So I sort through the realities mentally, one by one, and try to match each one with this nagging feeling I have. Usually on the second or third try I am able to match the reality with the feeling, fitting them together like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. But if those pieces still don't quite fit, I go on to the next reality and try it.

At any rate, this morning I discovered that two things were bothering me: not having practiced the violin all week for this morning's lesson, and not having practiced the piano in preparation for the upcoming **fifteen-minute requirement** which I'll **have** to fulfill. I guess I've decided that I probably will play, or try to play, fifteen minutes of conventional piano music for the distinguished piano committee, so I need to get busy pretty soon and at least memorize something well enough that I can bumble through it.

I wish now that I had gone ahead and dropped my applied piano course a few weeks ago when I told Mr. Banks I was planning to, and was talked out of it by him. He waxed very liberal about my dilemma, or at least he appeared to wax liberal, and he told me that if I would stay on with him I could just use him as any kind of teacher or buddy I wanted for the rest of the semester, as long as I played fifteen minutes of pianalia for my final. I said okay with my head, but even at that moment my heart wasn't in it. I've continued to walk to the campus and have my lessons with him and chat about great composers and neat musical forms, but I haven't practiced the piano for more than an hour or two altogether since then. Instead, I've been writing down thoughts like these, profusely and from all corners of my head.

May 27, 1968

For my piano final exam today I began by reading aloud a quotation from the book *A Year from Monday* (Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, NH, 1967) by the composer

John Cage in his Julliard Lecture (pp 95-96). Cage quotes Zen scholar Dr. D. T. Suzuki as follows:

"Before studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. While studying Zen things become confused: one doesn't know exactly what is what and which is which. After studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains.... Just the same, only somewhat as though you had your feet a little off the ground."

After reading this passage to the jury, I announced that I would play *A Farewell to the Piano* by Beethoven, followed by 4' 33" by John Cage (during which the pianist plays nothing for that exact amount of time), followed by a composition of my own entitled *A Farewell to the Piano*. After the announcement, I did exactly that. No one interrupted, even during the silent Cage piece. It happened that my own *A Farewell to the Piano* matched Beethoven's note for note, but of course the piece was entirely different when seen as being composed by me in the 20th century (at least this was my intention). Also, the performance was unavoidably different.

When I finished my performance, Dr. Bedford Tompkins of the piano faculty asked me whether the Cage piece wasn't in three movements. I said I didn't think so. He said he had thought it was in three movements with some business about the piano lid being raised or lowered between movements. I said that if the composition is in three movements, I had left no break between any of them. No one laughed, so I could see that my remark had been both hilarious and not seen as such. Being finished, I left the stage and walked out into the auditorium as far as where the jury were sitting.

Dr. Tompkins then asked me, "Have you memorized any other music this semester?"

"I actually memorized the Beethoven prior to this semester, but there were no other pieces memorized this semester," I replied.

Dr. Dreyer, head of the piano department, then proclaimed, "Well, Fred, I don't think we can give credit for this type of performance. The applied piano course requires more than this as far as memorization goes, and therefore your performance has not been successful."

I thought about that for a few seconds and replied, "I think it's interesting that you think that. For me it was a success."

After mumbling something more about numbers and credit hours, Dr. Dreyer asked me, "So, would you like to try again?"

"No. I think I've done what I wanted to do."

"All right. Fine."

As I began walking out of the auditorium, I threw a quick glance and a weak smile at my piano instructor, Mr. Banks, who was sitting behind the jury. His face was red, even though he had known that I was going to surprise him--he had even asked me to. He met my glance and then looked down at the floor. I went home.

May 28, 1968

Dear Mr. Dreyer,

You will notice that I am writing you a letter. I have two reasons for writing you a letter instead of (or possibly in addition to) talking to you personally: (1) Cowardice (2) Relevance. I find that relevance is difficult to achieve, and if achieved, very difficult to sustain, in a personal conversation. As for cowardice, that also is bound up with relevance, being a major cause of irrelevance.

Let me make it clear that I respect you as a person, as I do all persons, so that there will be no element of antipathy which might lead you to burn this letter before finishing it. I do not know you well at all, nor do you know me well at all (but then, who knows whom well at all?). I should think that therefore we are equally (and literally) agnostic about each other. Agnosticism implies to me a large element of not knowing and a fairly large element of wanting to know.

You did not understand my performance of May 27 (yesterday). Neither did Mr. Tompkins, nor anyone else on the jury. Neither did I. So now that none of us in the room understood it, perhaps we can all place ourselves on the same humble plane--ignorance--and continue to not understand it. I thought it was beautiful. You could have. If you had let yourself.

I would not enjoy having to be in your place, in your "position," and thus having to pontificate as to what has been, is, and will be acceptable. I would not want to have to deal in "credit." Do you know the etymology of "credit"? If I'm not mistaken, it is akin to faith or belief, in a person or anything else. I am not in your position. But you are. Somehow I believe that your position was filling you yesterday (rather than you your position--perhaps both) when you objected so quickly and so strongly to what I performed. I think that your reaction was unfortunate for you, in a deep sense. It was only unfortunate for me in a shallow sense (credit hours). You will not forget what I did. It will nag you. Follow you. Burn within you. Maybe.

But, a word or two about what I was doing. Am doing. I was (am) posing a serious question, a deep one, maybe an ultimate one. Parallel to these three gradations of seriousness: what is music?, what is art?, what is life?

The introductory quotation with which I began my performance was rather crucial to the understanding of what I played. If you don't remember it, I refer you to the bottom of page 95 and the top of page 96 of *A Year From Monday* by John Cage (I memorized those page numbers, by the way, if one needs evidence that I am not incapable of memorizing).

Playing the Beethoven piece was parallel to the understanding that before the study of Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains.

The period of 4' 33" of silence by John Cage (and I thought it hilariously irrelevant how many movements of silence there were--and yet relevant) was parallel to the study of Zen, in which one is not sure what is what, and which is which.

The final composition, my own, was parallel to the understanding that after the study of Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains, except it is as though your feet were a little off the ground. Mine were. Yours could have been. If you had let them rise.

You might accuse me of plagiarism. You might say that my *A Farewell to the Piano* composition contained exactly the same notes as did Beethoven's. That is correct. The notes were the same. But my composition was composed in the twentieth century, in 1968, and Beethoven's was not. Does not that make a rather cataclysmic difference between them? My performance of this piece was unavoidably different from my performance of Beethoven's, which you could not have failed to notice--unless you were merely listening to the notes. I doubt whether you were. Even if you were only listening to the notes, the mistakes were different. And that is significant. You might ask to see whether I have written my composition down on paper. I have not. Beethoven has saved me the trouble. And of course, music does not exist on paper; it exists in the air. And then it doesn't.

In light of these comments, perhaps the last thing you can successfully accuse me of is superficiality. And the last thing I can accuse you of is openmindedness. So far. My hope is that on the day my mind closes to new experiences, new possibilities--I will die. Because if I don't die then, I will be dead anyway.

Thank you for at least allowing me to finish my performance. You do not know how much it meant to me. Or to you.

Sincerely,
Fred

Epilogue

Before my jury performance, while Mr. Banks and I were waiting for Drs. Dreyer and Tompkins to make their appearance in the auditorium, Mr. Banks had asked me, "What grade do you want for this course?" (liberal all the way)

"A letter grade," I replied.

"In other words, I'm going to have to make the choice?"

"Yes."

A month later in the mail I received an "I" for Incomplete.