

With Our Eyes Closed

By Thomas Lanners, NCTM

Most of us are aware that when we close our eyes, our other senses are heightened. Vision tends to be dominant even as we are making music, when sound should naturally be of paramount importance. Instrumentalists may stare at their hands as they play or be mesmerized by the scores they are reading. Singers may focus their vision on audience members or on the practice room wall in front of them. Yet the aural, tactile and kinesthetic senses in particular must be honed to very high levels if we wish to become fine performers. Simply closing the eyes while practicing can greatly raise the acuity of these other vital senses.

Have you ever been outside in a park on a sunny summer day and closed your eyes, even for an instant, to genuinely feel the sun warming your skin, the breeze wafting past, the sounds of birds in nearby trees or the conversations of passersby, the scent of food on a distant grill, the hardness of the wooden bench you sat on? If so, you probably noticed that the “volume” was temporarily increased on all this non-visual sensory input. The input had always been

present but largely ignored, as when our brains routinely disregard the sensation of clothes against our skin. Perhaps you even became more aware of your mood as you briefly turned mental focus inward.

As musicians, this simple method significantly raises our awareness of the sounds we produce and how our bodies move in relation to our instruments. If students don't currently have memorized music they can play with eyes shut, they can revisit previously memorized works or utilize this tactic in their daily practice of scales or other technical exercises. To illuminate the value of this approach, I'll begin by examining how it impacts other senses in specifically musical contexts.

Aural

The sounds we produce are our primary mode of communication with listeners; therefore, anything that boosts our listening skills will make us finer musicians. Any flaws in the dynamic contours of our phrases, the smoothness of our legato or the precision of our staccatos, the vitality of our rhythms, and the like, are magnified when we eliminate visual distractions. Until we hear these shortcomings for ourselves, there is no hope of eradicating them. The connection between physical gestures and resultant sounds comes into greater focus. As a pianist and piano teacher, I find this method also assists students in observing the natural decay of each note they play, which is essential in producing the “singing line” pianists strive for despite each note diminishing in sound after the hammer strikes the strings. The difficult skill of balancing multiple voices

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within a pianistic texture improves as students hear more distinctly whether a given melody, bass line or other prominent voice is projected precisely as it should be, not too much nor too little. Closing the eyes and picturing the page while hearing an ideal sound image is extremely beneficial, particularly when in the midst of memorizing scores. This tactic has the additional virtue of training crucial inner hearing skills, through imagining ideal sounds *before* playing instead of trying in vain to adjust after tones have already been produced.

Tactile And Kinesthetic

The tactile and kinesthetic senses share similar qualities, but are distinct in significant ways. Our sense of touch comes into play when we truly *feel* the keys on the piano beneath our fingers, or the strings on a guitar, the air entering our mouths and lungs as singers and so forth. We should perceive these sensations as keenly as we would the velvety softness of a cat's fur or the coarseness of sandpaper, yet how often do we actually do so? Most musicians use far too much force in playing their instruments, believing on some level that every bit of that effort is necessary. When we perceive the excess pressure exerted on our fingertips when depressing piano keys that weigh only about 50 grams (less than two ounces), for instance, we've taken the first step toward playing with greater efficiency. This tactile sensation, though, already leads toward a discussion of kinesthesia, the most underappreciated of our senses and surely the most critical in developing the technical skills to master any instrument.

Kinesthesia is our true sixth sense, mental telepathy notwithstanding. It is defined as the awareness of the positioning and movement of one's body in space, by means of sensors called proprioceptors, located in muscles and joints throughout the body. It is employed when we navigate a completely dark room, knowing how far each of our steps takes us, how long our arms are when reaching for the light switch and so on. To begin honing kinesthesia, close the eyes and direct your attention toward bodily balance, starting with the comfortable positioning of the head on top of the spine, not craning forward as is often the case. The ideal equilibrium for pianists—and other instrumentalists who sit when playing—is to feel your body weight grounded in your hips on the bench or chair, with feet positioned solidly on the floor to allow the upper body to lean left or right, forward or back with ease. The skeleton supports the body's weight against the force of gravity, leaving the muscles free to function as the necessities of the music and our instruments dictate. Balance involves constant, minute adjustments that are executed at a subconscious level. We need only pay attention to whether we feel comfortably balanced.

Pianists might next play a scale or any memorized musical excerpt silently, without visual stimuli to interfere with kinesthetic perceptions. Keys should descend slowly to their key beds without excessive pressing, the pianist sensing keenly the precise depth and weight of each one. As mentioned above, using unwarranted force is the norm, so this simple exercise may be revelatory. The pianist might proceed to playing various intervals, alternating skips and steps, to gauge the distance between keys without relying on sight.

Improving kinesthesia produces finer coordination, which trumps brute strength when playing any instrument healthfully, with fluidity, economy of motion and ease. Coordination involves the proper muscles contracting to the proper extent at the exact instant they need to, for only as long as necessary, while antagonistic muscles (biceps versus triceps, for instance) release and elongate with similar precision. This is a very complex process in which the parallels between musical technique and athletic performance are most obvious. Coordination *cannot* be controlled through conscious means. For instance, we can't stay upright on a bicycle by analytically determining which direction to lean or how far to turn the handlebars. While the rear sectors of our brains are the seat of subconscious activities, the frontal portion—which evolved more recently and controls language, reasoning and other conscious thought—often attempts to micromanage the technical aspects of our playing. While it is valuable to learn basic, healthy technical principles and anatomical realities related to our instruments, providing a compass of sorts while developing technical skills, proper coordination and virtuosity only manifest when the ego “lets go” and allows the subconscious to fulfill its leading role.

In Figure 1, the performer will likely use the following movements in executing just the first six notes of the right-hand part: 1) Rotate the forearm side to side (pronating and supinating), slightly rocking the hand toward each note as it zigzags in pitch; 2) slightly lift the fingers in turn, to articulate cleanly; 3) temporarily elevate the wrist somewhat to accommodate the A-sharp played by the middle finger, as it is the longest finger and follows the fifth finger, which is the shortest; 4) after allowing the wrist to settle back to its “neutral” position, lift it again to subtly taper the G that concludes the motive.



Figure 1: Ludwig van Beethoven, *Piano Sonata No. 10 in G Major, Op. 14, No. 2*, measures 1–4. (Munich: G. Henle Publishers, 1980; Used by Permission), page 177.

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This may seem like a complicated explanation of the movements required to play these six notes, but it merely scratches the surface because we've examined only the most plainly *visible* parts of the anatomy we see while playing. Technical problems usually arise when we forget we play instruments with our entire bodies. While most work ever harder to develop laser-sharp *focus* on musical or technical concerns, a broader grasp of how our bodies move and create sound yields far superior results. The motion to accommodate the middle finger, black-key A-sharp, for instance, actually emanates from a tiny forward movement of the collarbone (clavicle). The pattern of pitches in the motive, played up to speed as a unified whole, requires a loose undulation of the whole arm that originates from the shoulder blade (scapula). If the pianist's posture is slumped—or rigidly upright in a “military” fashion, for that matter—the muscles needed to execute such integrated gestures will be unavailable. Were one to play the entire line of music, subtle shifting of weight from left to right at the feet and hips would be required to accommodate the sequential rise of the melodic line. This is far too much for our conscious brains to conceptualize and execute simultaneously without eventually short-circuiting, yet the ego may repeatedly lead us down this unproductive path. Ultimately mental strain produces physical strain, and a vicious cycle of tension may take root. A reliable path to breaking this cycle is to close the eyes and observe the natural motions your body *suggests* as you play, rather than predetermining stereotyped, “correct” motions you dutifully apply to the passage.

Another topic related to highly coordinated movement is visualization. We've all likely seen Olympic skiers, or other world-class athletes, on television, with their eyes shut, mentally trekking through the twists and turns of an entire ski run before beginning their descent. Visualization can be equally beneficial for musicians in refining bodily movements related to specific problematic passages or entire pieces. Envisioning the efficient movements of great musicians we admire may also prove helpful.

Mind, Body And Spirit

Closing the eyes can accomplish more than just heightening other senses. It can be the on-ramp to exploring our inner selves, profoundly changing our approach to music making. A discussion of breathing is a logical starting point when exploring this concept. Clearly singers and wind players must breathe to generate sounds, but breathing is just as vital to the wellbeing of pianists, percussionists and string players. From a strictly musical perspective, it enables more natural phrasing and pacing and aids in ensemble precision when collaborating with singers and wind players. It can also “settle” the body, melting away accumulated tension

from head to feet. One need only sit still, close the eyes, draw in a slow, deep breath through the nose and calmly release it through the mouth over a count of 8 to 10 seconds to experience this sensation of settling and whole-body alignment. Breathe in this fashion several times consecutively, and you will enter something of a meditative state that is especially conducive to productive practice. When instrumentalists hold their breath, or when singers' breathing is constricted, the body enters a panic mode wherein muscles constrict as though imminent danger is present. Perhaps this is the body's natural reaction to the perceived threat of suffocation.

Healthy breathing also can moderate emotions. All musicians have experienced frustration when faced with difficult passages that seem never to improve, regardless of how much time and effort we expend. The harder we try, the more we mentally and physically “bear down,” which exacerbates the underlying difficulties. Frustration mounts, causing muscles to tighten, beginning with the face and neck and continuing downward throughout the entire system. If this cycle continues unabated, our brains associate the seemingly intractable task with anger or depression. Playing the musical passage then cues the negative emotions.

To clarify this point, it's worth noting that the human brain is the most complex living structure in the known universe.¹ It contains approximately 100 billion neurons, specialized cells that transmit nerve impulses to one another through a network of as many as 1,000 trillion synaptic connections.² The brain not only empowers us to think and act, move, speak, dream and perceive sensory stimuli, it also allows us to experience emotions. As we learn a piece of music, neurons carrying information related to notes, rhythms and the like, are interlinked in synaptic networks with details of our emotional state at the time the network was formed. While neurologists are still learning about these elaborate interconnections, their existence is simply illustrated: If you hear a favorite song from childhood, you may be transported to the moment you first heard it, experiencing instantaneously the sights, sounds, smells and other sensory images of the time and feeling vividly every emotion it evoked. These memories materialize as a “package,” with sensory and emotional features bundled. Regrettably our brains also construct damaging negative association chains, so we must vigilantly monitor our thoughts and emotions as we play. If we are depressed, we're likely obsessing on the past; if we are anxious, we're likely worrying about the future. Attention to breathing, an eternal necessity of life, anchors us in the present, the only time in which anything can be accomplished.

Fear of failure, especially among those prone to perfectionism, is a powerfully disruptive force that often goes

undetected. Sensing distress is integral to overcoming it, and closing the eyes can assist by raising emotional awareness. If we are approaching a problematic passage we have struggled with for a long period, fear may cause the body to brace the instant *before* the passage begins, as though we subconsciously “hit the brakes” at this pivotal juncture. We may recognize the physical tension and tell ourselves again and again to relax, only to fail repeatedly. This occurs because both motor skills and emotions are the purview of our subconscious minds, which respond to emotional impulses rather than verbal commands. Ultimately we play as we *feel*, not as we *think*. If students are skeptical of this assertion, it is relatively easy to prove: When working with a piano student who struggles continually trying to execute a task such as a quick multi-octave leap upward from one chord to another, I suggest that he or she, just once, *purposefully* miss the upper chord. Almost invariably the student then sits more comfortably, unknowingly releases underlying fear (failure is essentially impossible under these circumstances) and plays the chords flawlessly, all notes correct and with no hint of excess exertion.

Some fear stems from lack of trust. The exercise shown in Figure 2, from composer-pianist Ernst von Dohnányi’s *Essential Finger Exercises*, may serve as an effective confidence builder. Dohnányi indicated in the score that the exercise is “to be practiced with the eyes closed,” which is challenging given the four-note chords in each hand and the wide leaps between them.³ Mastering this study refines kinesthesia, as one has to navigate broad intervals, raised black keys versus lower white keys, chords that require different hand shapes and wrist positions and so on. Yet a palpable boost in self-confidence may be its greatest benefit.



Figure 2: Ernst von Dohnányi, *Essential Finger Exercises for Obtaining a Sure Technique*, No. 25a, measures 1–4. (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1950; Used by Permission), page 36.

This raises the question of whether we should not only occasionally practice with eyes shut, but *perform* in that fashion. I certainly never mandate that my students do so. Consider, though, blind pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii of Japan, 2009 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition co-Gold Medalist, whose stunning virtuosity demonstrates that most of us rely on vision more than is absolutely necessary. Franz Liszt, an extraordinary piano virtuoso and teacher of many great performers who succeeded him, advised against lowering the head to look at the keys, believing

that keeping the eyes straight ahead heightened listening capabilities.⁴ Any who have played a good deal of chamber music realize that you cannot bury yourself in the score, or continuously gaze at your own hands. In rehearsals and performances alike, fine collaborative musicians pay at least as much attention to others’ parts as their own, having mastered their own part in the privacy of a practice room. In this setting, playing your instrument without excessive visual dependence frees you to watch others’ fingers, bows, breathing, cues and so forth.

Perhaps most importantly, if we close our eyes and turn our attention inward, we can more readily connect with our core spiritual selves. Of course the term “spirit” connotes different things to different people, religious and otherwise. Here I’m simply referring to that elemental, ageless part of ourselves that we intuitively sense—distinct from our conscious egos and personalities—when we quiet our insistent, chattering thoughts. Setting the ego aside to allow for natural, unimpeded movement was discussed earlier, but it is equally important from a musical standpoint. Interpretive insight deepens when we no longer focus on the physical act of playing, or even on the multitude of information in the score we spent so much time dutifully learning. Intellectual concerns take a back seat. I doubt anyone reading this was first drawn to music because they wished to perfect the performance of it, but because it spoke to them on the deepest possible level. Rather than aiming to give history’s first “perfect” performance, our primary goal becomes *communicating* directly from our soul to the listeners’. The greatest musicians excel at this transcendent skill.

While periodic practice with eyes closed is not a panacea, it is a valuable tool for musicians who wish to gain greater insight into all aspects of their playing. ♪

Notes

1. Mastin, Luke, “The Human Memory: What It Is, How It Works and How It Can Go Wrong.” Human Memory.net, last modified 2010, <http://www.human-memory.net/brain.html>.

2. Ibid.

3. Ernst von Dohnányi, *Essential Finger Exercises for Obtaining a Sure Technique*. (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1950), p. 36.

4. Fee, George, “Performing Liszt’s Piano Music.” Dersnah-Fee.com, last modified September, 2011, <http://www.dersnahfee.com/Essays%20and%20Educational%20Material/Liszt%20Thoughts.pdf>.

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