

# Marie Jaëll: *Le Toucher*: Nouveaux principes élémentaires pour l'enseignement du piano en 2 volumes (1894)

The 1894 edition of *Le Toucher* is the first in a series of pedagogy manuals for pianists that focuses on a rational study of touch. Jaëll insists that a beautiful pianistic touch can be acquired; it may be innate to some performers, but it can be instilled in others (1). This idea will become central to Jaëll's pedagogical program, which, notably, Jaëll first characterizes as "modern" in this offering.

The manual is divided into three volumes (The third volume was appended in 1894. The first two were conceived as a pair the year prior). The first outlines several basic premises, chiefly a tripartite theorization of how touch is to be learned: "1. By evenness of the fingers (par l'égalité des doigts), 2. By the flexibility of the movements of the fingers and hands (par la souplesse des mouvements des doigts et des mains), 3. By the quickness of the production of sound" (par la rapidité de l'émission du son) (1). Important here is Jaëll's emphasis on the pianist's attention and its relationship to their musical thought ("pensée musicale") (3). Contrary to the long tradition of teaching piano with vacuous finger exercises and drills, crucial for Jaëll is forging a link between thought and action.

Following this basic premise, in a section titled "Application des principes précédents" (6), Jaëll produces 39 graduated exercises. These consist primarily of simple pentachords in half- and quarter-notes meant to be performed at an array of tempi and at different dynamic levels. The simplicity of these exercises belie Jaëll's laser focus on the pianist's consciousness of their touch. In a passage on rests, she insists that equal attention should be paid to rests as to notes. In terms of the pianist's body, she advises that students sit low at the keyboard to immobilize the elbows. Similarly, students should not play on the edges of the keys but use the full pad of the finger whenever possible, only later practicing the sensation of gliding the finger along the key. These exercises are therefore about honing one's focus on the association of touch with sonority; they are not for the acquisition of speed or agility.

The micro-attunement to sensation Jaëll describes is essential for pianists, as the instrument must be made to produce a full tone. She writes: "If one cannot, on the piano as it is known, as with a bow on a string, make the sound swell, one cannot become skilled quickly enough to play successions of notes while increasing the sound, as to give the feeling of unity that a single growing sound produces. One would do well to have this idea present to mind while working on these exercises. The one concern must be to not play the last notes as loud as possible; each finger has its particular mission; making them all obey requires a sustained attention that compels the mind to a salutary discipline, as that to which we subject the fingers (28)." (Si l'on ne peut pas, sur le piano comme avec l'archet sur une corde, enfler le son, on ne saurait devenir assez tôt habile à jouer des successions de notes en augmentant la sonorité de manière à donner la sensation d'unité que produit un seul son enflé. On fera bien d'avoir cette idée présente à l'esprit en travaillant ces exercices. L'unique préoccupation ne doit pas consister à jouer les dernières notes le plus fort possible ; chaque doigt a sa mission particulière ; les faire obéir tous, nécessite une attention soutenue qui assujettit le cerveau à une discipline aussi salubre que celle à laquelle on soumet les doigts.)

In other words, unlike a violinist, whose bow can link multiple tones with a single gesture, owing to the piano's inability to sustain pitch indefinitely, it is incumbent upon the pianist to give the impression that multiple tones should be grouped as such. More notably, perhaps, the fullness of tone rendered possible by certain kinds of

touches emerges from the pianist's changed way of thinking more than any physical training.

Volume 2 is composed of a total of 25 exercises, each including prose to explain its goal. As an introduction to those exercises, Jaëll includes a section that outlines seven principles for good playing and, ostensibly, study. They are as follows:

1. Avoid focusing on passagework alone; in so doing, one risks becoming "a body without a soul" (I).
2. When beginning to study a piece, do not observe notated nuances, including articulation and dynamics. Instead, strive for an even touch across all passages.
3. Do not repeat wrong notes.
4. Sit low for practice, and high for performance.
5. Reduce the time devoted to practice. Three to four hours daily is deleterious.
6. Do not apply "special work" to nuances.
7. Work exclusively on pieces that have musical value. The composer, rather than the pedagogue, is the real teacher.

The "exercises" that follow Jaëll's introductory remarks are unconventional. They are complete pieces from the literature, all of which presume a high level of skill. (Jaëll does not, for instance, address how to read music.) Among these are several preludes from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, preludes by Chopin, Schubert's Impromptu in A-flat, op. 90, no. 4, and several short pieces by Robert Schumann. Additionally, the pieces are not graduated in terms of the difficulties associated with particular physical maneuvers (arpeggios, scalar runs, etc.). Rather, each work is marshaled in service of an advanced, perhaps more esoteric musical function. Number 2, "Petit Morceau" from Schumann's *Album for the Young* trains the student to accentuate bass and melody notes in more complex textures. In the Gigue from Bach's B-flat major Partita, BWV 825, Jaëll neglects to mention that the student must cross the left hand over the right; instead, she includes an array of specialized markings to signify the length and type of touches pupil should practice. Remaining committed to the thrust of her pedagogical program, Jaëll reminds the reader that "exercise" should be about training a pianist's attention to musical detail, which in turn renders the fingers more sensitive and adept at revealing artistic beauty.

Volume 3 is composed of an introduction, a section that outlines the two principal touches Jaëll believes are the building blocks of any piano technique—staccato and legato—and a section on "mixed" touch. Jaëll concludes the 1894 treatise with two additional sections: the first titled "Exercises in Parallel Movement," and the second, a brief commentary on Liszt's compositions for piano. Jaëll's use of the word "exercise" is again unconventional. In this case, it denotes physical exercises to be performed away from the piano. Volume 3 is also interspersed with complete pieces, all of which are annotated using the notations of Jaëll's invention to indicate the type of touches the pianist should use when studying the musical work in question.

The introduction to Volume 3 only underscores the point of Jaëll's pedagogy; that is, to train the fingers to work expediently and efficiently in response to the pianist's consciousness, which ought to be fully consumed by its attentiveness to the musical work. In a section on staccato articulation, Jaëll's primary concern is the consistent length of several notes in succession. For rhythmic precision, Jaëll suggests first measuring the speed at which a beginning pianist can play the same note using the same finger. While doing so, he or she should also recite the number associated with the part of the measure in which that pair of notes is found, i.e. "un-un, deu-ux, etc." In subsequent treatises, Jaëll will return to the use of speech as a tool to focus concentration and increase accuracy. In combining staccato with legato, Jaëll presents a series of examples the student can use to practice playing groups of two or more notes, first with several notes legato followed by one staccato, then in single- and double-dots.

The 1894 treatise is a bold and exciting introduction to the kinds of philosophies and techniques Jaëll will continue to develop in the decades following. It would be easy to

dismiss her pedagogy as merely idiosyncratic. Worse, one might accuse Jaëll of promising to impart pianistic touch in all its elusiveness to a cottage industry of amateurs. She makes no attempt to dispel such an assumption, writing as follows: "It goes without saying that, when practicing, the blend of these two touches has infinite variations within the same piece. What's here is simply a beginner's introduction, since the idea of fixing the interpretation [of a piece] for each person within determined limits would be anti-artistic and incompatible with the wide-reaching spirit that comprises all teaching in relation to personal interpretation (51)." (Il va sans dire que les applications du mélange des 2 touches sont variables à l'infini pour le même morceau. Il s'agit ici simplement d'une initiation à faire, car l'idée de fixer pour chacun l'interprétation dans les limites déterminées serait anti artistique et incompatible avec l'esprit très large que comporte tout enseignement par rapport à l'interprétation personnelle.)

Stated differently, acknowledging the fine gradations of touch that remain infinite, Jaëll proffers no one "correct" interpretation. Instead, she only wishes for us to remain open to the possibility that a) touch is mental as much as physiological, and b) that it can be improved with practice. Moreover, Jaëll's methodology is, according to her, required for a "modern" art (I). Jaëll's use of "modern" in this context is paradoxical. The repertoire she includes in her manual is dated and conservative, even for 1894. However, Jaëll intends for us to view her piano *pedagogy* as modern; it is meant to counteract the nineteenth century's mechanical school of piano training, which is inartistic. The real modern art to which Jaëll refers is "the art of making the piano expressive and of acquiring a musical technique [jeu]" (I).

**Michael WEINSTEIN-REIMAN**

12/02/2024

To quote this article: Michael Weinstein-Reiman, "Marie Jaëll: Le Toucher: Nouveaux principes élémentaires pour l'enseignement du piano en 2 volumes (1894)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 12/02/2024, <https://preprod.dicteco2.ihrim.fr/book/48736>.