

Delicate Empiricism: Piano as a Conversation

By Rukha Fuerst

“The dreamer’s faithfulness to her object is the condition for intimate reverie.”

Bachelard, 1971

Abstract:

Goethean science, and specifically delicate empiricism, is a participatory method in which the observer and the observed are in conversation. Each member of the pair takes turns questioning, listening, and finding new and deeper expression through experience (and as with any conversation, tension and silences happen). For this conversation to take place, a respect for the other partner as an autonomous and whole being is needed. In this paper, I give you glimpses through the window at my experience of immersing myself in my passion for the piano as an instrument, and as an instrument to know myself more fully. I played a piano that lives in my home over the month I delved into study. Embossed on her front is the brand – Stella – that assembled her nearly 100 years ago. Stella became the name for my partner (my piano) in my reveries of exploration – in composition, poetry and introspection. In this paper I weave together the warp of my poetic (centered and in italics) and the weft of my academic voice (straight text).

Find yourself here, and become the spaces all around and within you

This breath - the emptiness filling your chest

This body - contained in these sensations

In these thoughts, becoming purpose and meaning

And with intention, focus, respect, and listening,

Find yourself only here, all here

Beginnings: Sensing Boundaries

“[If you] get down in the pit and love somebody ... something realer than likability has come out in you, and suddenly you’re having an actual life.” – Franzen, 2011

Self expression and vulnerability have been consistent challenges for me; especially in the spheres of intimate relationships and groups of people. In the four weeks of immersing

myself in my passion for the elegance of the piano, in notes and form, this fear, *anxiety*, *wavering*, *thinking* has been the most persistent boundary.

In moments of self expression or performance or vulnerability the velvet song that is my breath and the flow of my blood erupts into a deep and seething sea of fear and anxiety

Since beginning to play piano, I remember dreading playing for anyone - including my parents, my piano teacher, and especially in recitals – from what I believe was a fear that someone might not like what I was playing. Over the past few years, however, I've started to find joy in playing for people. One song in particular, is an inseparable part of playing any piano, and tightly bound with beginning to enjoy sharing my musical fingers with ears beyond my own.

*a melancholy melody floats above a solid base of pattern,
swelling and ebbing in my breath and heart and emotions*

It is titled 'Ovation 3' by Robert Vandall. This piece has made performance easier, but playing for others is still a mental space that is challenging for me. But I've learned where the courage lives in my chest, and when I remember to breathe, and remember where my power and assurance resides, I push myself back into the flow of trust and find myself ready to say, "*Here I am. I am Here.*" This state of love and non-judgment is absolutely necessary for me to express myself – whether through playing with a breath of notes, playing a song for others, composing, reading or writing poetry, or asking for exactly what I want. When I find this inner peace and fall into the flow, and remember to let go, I found that the keys that didn't sound good together fell away, and what I considered mistakes fell away,

and my erupting blood was soothed back into its velvet flow.

In listening and opening up to my creative process of self expression, by asking questions of Stella, and questions of myself, I have found a deeper knowing of myself, greater confidence

and power within myself, and furthered my ability to enter into situations, performances, relationships, groups with greater vulnerability and whole-heartedness.

All this from a spark of trust and a black box with a steel heart and 88 black and white keys

A Delicate Empiricism: The Process

1) Initial Focus – Questions and Curiosity

“If the interaction between me and nature has no focus it can easily become chit-chat and not a conversation.” – Hodrege, 2005

When I stepped into this experience of knowing Stella on a more personal level, and her knowing me more fully, I brought *many* questions with me. Some about composing, others about sound, and my preferences, others spanning to include Stella’s preferences. I approached with some focus, but opened up so many simultaneous possibilities that I found myself wandering around the keys. I was learning something, but only what Stella wanted to teach, rather than what I knew I wanted to learn. After several days of this drifting around the keys, I was curious what it was like to play with no music, but with intention. And so I began, first with some arpeggios, which my left hand faithfully took over, and then I started singing along, and then invited my right hand to join. This process of bringing in the right hand when the left is playing, or bringing in the left when the right is already patterning away, is a challenge for me. Getting each set of fingers, and sometimes each finger, to do something totally different – in rhythm, notes, and dynamics – requires patience.

2) Process – Tension and Creativity

*“This instant of perception, once it occurs, is accompanied by a momentary pause.
the pregnant point.*

In that moment of pause, your mind is not thinking, your heart is not feeling, you are perceiving directly a specific truth that has burst on your awareness.” – Buhner 2004

A question has persistently hummed in the drum of my mind. It softly suggests reasons why poets always speak in riddles, and it constantly sings in the shower about the similitude of poetry and music composition, and the likeness among song and sculpture and paint and science and literature and poems.

Creating gaps, windows, fissures, edges of mirrors through which we can glimpse the mysterious constructs of reality and the solid foundations of thought, which have oddly vanished under the skillful painting of the poet, of the musician, of the artist

They all seek to illuminate the ineffable from new angles, with new words and shapes and colors and sounds. *But why?* To answer this, I began writing a song which I called ‘*Sending Sunshine to Stella.*’ It started flowing smoothly from my fingers through my ears and back through my fingers wielding a pen into dots and lines on a page of staves.

Compose and build and weave and bend the words of thoughts into stories of memories in voice
Shunt the grey matter to the side to play with the spores of stars

I spent several sessions playing around with the same theme and patterns. During my third session of song-writing, I cleaned up my scribbles into a legible portrait, and played with four notes, slowly evolving them into new chords and different keys. What I decided to do was have the repeating pattern in my right hand, and have my left paint the melody – the opposite of most songs I play, whether reading or creating. Forcing my right and left hands into opposite roles was challenging and I spent several hours on this third section, having adopted a new pattern, trying to fold and mold and meld my way back to the theme at the beginning in a subtle way.

Seeing through a mist of tension
And into the space of creation

I also see this tension held within the piano – which is forced into tension, and forced to hold tight so it sings notes we are familiar with. I also bring tension into music I create, and then release it, resolve into harmony. And then there is a tension I hold, the tension of questioning

why I want to create, the tension of possibilities, whenever I write, or paint or compose or express myself in any form – the friction between listening, holding, imagining, and birthing.

3) The Unexpected – Discovery

“Here where sound is so thin it could not be seen if it were turned into a thread. Weaving these invisible threads of sound is difficult.” – Sullivan, 1947

What notes come next in the piece I’m creating? If I play this pattern in the left hand, what do I want to play in the right hand? Can I play that same pattern in the right hand, and play something creative with the left hand? What happens if I switch the base cleff for the treble? – will it cause me any trouble? Could I play an entire piece backwards, note by note? I pondered all these things as I began exploring composition and playing with notes.

I listen to my hands to tell me which note to play next

And at times, I capture the dream of a moment in an unexpected breath of notes.

Never knowing where Stella and I were going to arrive, and not having a destination firmly in mind left me with mirrored fragments of thought – some in the black dots and lines we call written music, and others in the black scribble we call words. Very often I found fragments

Falling from my head to my lap, clattering from the pockets of my coat patched with wind.

Writing in snips, strips - fabric cut from the whole it was woven into.

In fragments, too, I sit shattering into the rubble of words.

When I found myself sitting in and surrounded by fragments, I tried to hold them as they were, and then at times bend them, coaxing them to weave together, into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

4) Intimacy and Respect

“Each new object, well considered opens a new organ within us.” – Bachelard, 1971

As I re-returned to questions, to greater focus, in the last week of the field study a new desire and question came:

*I want to melt into the piano
What does it feel like to be a piano?*

To see what was beneath the surface, I opened Stella's top and took off her front panels – top and bottom. I liked so much watching her inner workings while my fingers wandered their way across her keys that I left her open. As I became more sensitive to Stella, I realized the reason her panels were there - part of it was to hide the steel and metal pins and crossing strings, and another part was to protect her heart a little more from the changes in temperature and from light and dust and little sticky fingers. Though I love to see what goes on within her while I play, I also want her to stay in tune, and stay safe, so I returned her panels, one at a time. First her lowest panel, hiding the pedal mechanisms that blend or mute her sound. I took a few more days before I replaced the panel that sits before my eyes – a hard transition from seeing fluid movement,

watching the creation, birthing of sound

and looking at my own faint, wavering reflection in the shiny black paint.

5) *Meaning in Conversation – Listen and Speak*

“Gratitude for the books on the shelves/ Breathing words that write themselves/Back into mind in our reading.” – Leonard Schwartz, 2011

Inspired by *Reading in the Brain* by Deheane I pondered what it is I'm doing as I'm reading – whether it's words or music, whether the writer or composer is still alive, or now gone. Regardless of any of these variables, when I open a book and begin to translate black marks into words (silent or audible) or melodies (silent or audible) I give them life the author could never breathe into them. In addition to listening to great writers and composers with my eyes and fingers, and responding through my pen, I also began having more balanced conversations with Stella. One night, not knowing what to play I started to sing to her – sweet melancholy notes.

And her strings and sounding board sang back – for every thread I sent to her, she listened to and responded with a vast weaving.

*Strings play harmony to my voice
Unseen waves plucking in frequency.
My voice breaks and the piano laughs
I laugh (who is echoing who?)
Plucking notes and chords
With the invisible waves
Reverberating in my chest.*

6) Finding New Expression - Unity

‘As we tune that instrument, it is also tuning us.’ - Sullivan, 1947

Or in my case, as I touch and compose on that instrument, it is touching and composing me. I never start playing knowing exactly what shape the notes are going to take – whether I have played a piece many times, or have a melody in my head, I still never get precisely what I expect – my expectations are evolving, my creativity is evolving as I listen, as I playfully bring tones together into the realm of touch we call ‘hearing.’ By listening so intently to Stella, with my ear, eyes and mind, I have entered into the multi-faceted cycle of creativity - *listen, exist in tension – hold possibilities – and create.* And, through me, she has entered into the beautiful and tedious process of bringing a creation into the world, to be shared. But a piano doesn’t have the capacity to fully express itself until someone sits down, even for just a moment, to lovingly caress the keys. And there is also a part of me that can only be expressed fully on a piano.

*Dancing lightly around the timid plants sprouting in spring.
Dancing swiftly to swirl the slow-falling snow.
With each movement of my finger tips
I paint you a new season,
A new color with each stroke
Dancing out refractions of invisible light.*

7) Participation – Results of Relationship

“Pay attention to everything that happens. Language ... is not always words.”

– Buhner, 2004

I carefully avoided certain notes when Stella first came into my life. But after the piano tuner finished bringing her back into tension I reveled in every note, even though some notes were still watery and wavering or the key was slightly slanted. And now, I have begun avoiding keys again because of all the life that happens around her and on her keys and in her steel-strung heart. Each key I press down pushes the tension higher, and when released the piano relaxes a little further than before, and I again can hear that leaning in the beats of octaves and thirds.

I’m curious how these sounds I’m sending into the universe affect the life all around me. *I wonder if each key is like a stone being dropped into a pond – the pebble sinks out of sight and the ripples flow one into another, one after another. The pebble coming to a halt at the bottom, and the ripples ever reverberating off the edges and resonating together*

The Unity of the Organism – Seeing the Whole

“When your work becomes infused with a circumspect attitude of questioning wedded to a strong desire to engage in the phenomena, you can see what Goethe wanted to express with the phrase, ‘delicate empiricism.’” - Holdrege, 2005

In my persistent questioning, listening, opening, holding tension, releasing, creating, and birthing, I found my mirror in the keys of Stella, who explored so much with me.

Notes and neurons playing behind sight, beneath sound, after silence, above stars

I am in awe of the wisdom contained in and stemming from Stella, which I found through our mutual exploration. Beginning in silly questions and innocent curiosity, and proceeding into moments of tension, leading to the opening creation. The surprises along the way brought new questions, new possibilities, and new opportunities for intimacy and respect between us. We explored the power of conversations between notes. Entering into relationship with Stella

allowed me to explore a deep part of myself that fears of self-expression, of vulnerability. Through Stella, I have found greater peace around vulnerability, because she allowed me to explore the letting-go that leads to open, willing, courageous communication and creation.

Possibilities expand to include mistakes and perfection and the tense space of holding mistakes as perfection evaporates for a moment into breath and heart and presence flowing into the infiniteness of nowhere in no time where all can now breathe in the notes as their resounding ripples are flung to the spaces between stars and cells, where peace is found in the tension of possibilities before creation

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Perhaps we do this to find the ineffable ourselves, or for the joy of being present and engaged in
life, while engaging the world.