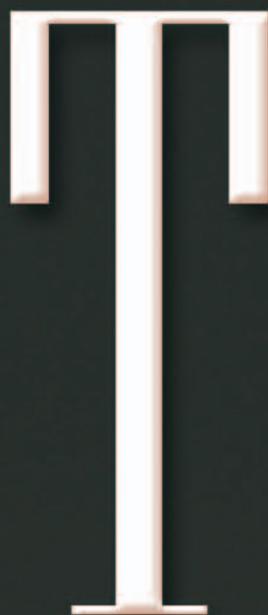
A close-up portrait of Garrick Ohlsson, a man with a grey beard and mustache, smiling broadly. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a white bow tie. The background is dark and out of focus.

Garrick Ohlsson on technique:

Mastering the paradoxical element of control

by Kathleen Riley
with John Chong



T

his past summer, Dr. John Chong and I had the pleasure of meeting with Garrick Ohlsson. The purpose of our meeting was to obtain quantitative measurements of his playing. Through the use of ProformaVision software that was developed specifically for my work with musicians, we were able to measure Garrick's muscle tension and biomechanical movement while he played on a Yamaha Disklavier, which generated correlating MIDI data on the music itself. Not only was his playing fantastic, but we also spent the entire afternoon discussing piano technique, form and tension.



KR: Do you have a definition of technique?

No, I don't. I used to have one when I was young. I thought it was playing scales, octaves, thirds and all those things. I think technique is the ability to play the right note at the right time in coordination with all the other notes, and in a musical relationship. You need musicality to be a part of it. It's not like now I'm practicing technique, now I'm doing calisthenics, and now I'm going to play. I think a lot of students get caught into practicing in a very dull, mechanical way. But you really want to practice with musical phrasing. To me, technique and musical phrasing really are indivisible.

KR: I define technique as a vocabulary of sound at your fingertips.

Exactly, and then we have to be open enough to respond to the demands of Brahms or Chopin or whatever is being played, whether the passage is demanding, physically complex, or very delicate. Looking at it this way, no one can ever really be good enough, because every aspect, every nuance, can always be a little better—a little more gorgeous or exciting. That's when practicing becomes truly creative, when you get to think about how much spice you're putting in or not putting in, or how you connect the phrases with each other.

KR: There's an interesting quote by John Sloboda, who wrote a book on music perception called *The Musical Mind*. He said that you cannot play what you do not hear. You need to learn how to listen and what to listen for. A lot of students get caught up in the physicality of playing, and they begin to perceive their sound through physical movements, as

opposed to really listening intently.

Exactly! Exactly! You have to be listening for how you want the next notes to sound. When I give master classes at Juilliard and Curtis, sometimes I discover that these young wizards can certainly play lots of notes, but they haven't thought about how they want the notes to sound. It's really important that the ear is the guide.

KR: Of course just listening intently and knowing what you want to hear doesn't mean that it will magically come out that way technically.

A trick I've been telling students in my master classes, although I'm sure other people have also invented this, is to practice very difficult technical passages with your eyes closed. I encourage students not just to practice slowly, feeling their way, but also to see if they can actually play some of the leaps and jumps with their eyes closed. You get a sixth sense of where things are. It can sharpen your physiological sense as well as your ear. When you're not so concerned with looking, you're actually hearing the sound. Of course, you'll crash and burn a lot practicing like this, but it helps the fingers to develop "eyes."

JC: Garrick, are there any special suggestions you have for warming up before a concert?

Well, before a performance you should breathe out to relax, and then actually tell three parts of your body to relax: the ankles, mid-section, and neck and shoulders.

I don't have a regular warm up routine, but I definitely don't start out "full force." When I'm backstage before a concert, I never practice anything I'm going to play in the program. I never worry about a particular passage, because I feel it's too late. I've noticed that when I've practiced a difficult spot over and over, I'll usually miss it in the concert, because I've over-focused on it. The music is much bigger than playing a few wrong notes. As far as practicing, I don't do any exercises. I start right in the music, but slowly and gently. I ease into the difficult passages. Perhaps a better way to say this is that I let them ease into me.

There is a paradoxical aspect of control—you can't muscle it. For example, let's take the opening of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto. Most students are worried about control and not the music. You must play the first chord on the exhale, like a singer. If you start with your belly muscles clenched, you'll never get through the next twenty minutes. Practice breathing in the practice room. You can recover much better from a bad ending than a bad beginning.

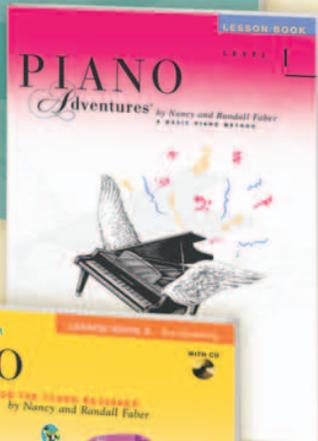
Arrau said that there's a dynamic relationship between tension and relaxation. It's not that you are one or the other. For example, the heart is a very intense organ. It gives a tremendous thrust to pump the blood through the body, but if it were to stay shut we would have a heart attack. It's a matter of degrees. Olga Barabini, Arrau's student, got me out of a technical problem when I was eighteen. She said that the idea that you can get rid of all tension is false. We have to be aware so we can get "out of it" when we're "in it." And we have to move it into larger muscles—that's where we get strength from, starting with the back.

KR: It's all related.

It's all *intimately* related.

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KR: So many of our students today aren't aware of these things, especially the larger muscles and conditioning the body. We're really doing athletic feats with fine motor control, for hours at a time.

Yes, there was a study done at the Minnesota Orchestra, where, just to give the board members an idea of what the musicians were doing, each board member was given a violin and a bow and instructed to just hold them in position for one minute. At the end of the minute, each board member was exhausted—they just couldn't do it. People tend to forget what an amazing amount of conditioning we need in order to be able to play music.

KR: When you give your master classes, what do you usually recommend to the students for conditioning?

It depends on the student. Recently I had to tell one student he was too relaxed! It was as if he had no joints! But that is the exception.

KR: What I usually recommend is swimming, stretching and yoga.

Oh yes, swimming is something we should do because it's not weight-bearing. The joints can function freely, yet with strength and flexibility. And it is good cardiovascular exercise as well. There could be some local strengthening too, but, on the other hand, you don't need that much strength.

KR: No, you just need to know how to use it efficiently. As Seashore said back in the 1930s, there are only two things we can control on the keyboard: timing and velocity. Once you strike the key, you can't make a vibrato or a crescendo. Yet it's so difficult to get students to learn that they have to let go.

Yes, and this is something I stress to all students whenever I give a master class, that just to hold the key down takes less than two ounces. It doesn't matter whether you play from the finger, wrist, elbow, or arm—the moment you strike the key you don't have to go on pressing. One of the reasons we do is that we're musical. It's not just a bad habit. For example, take the opening of the Chopin Nocturne, Op 62, No. 2. The first interval is very expressive, and of course we feel it—we want to sing it. "Da da." Because of that we just hold it in our hands, which in the case of that piece isn't so serious. It's a musical impulse.

The funny thing about playing the piano is that our bodies have to work a little bit like the piano action. It's very disquieting when you learn about an action for the first time, because it's all these disjointed things. When you play the opening interval, the hammers go "blump, blump." When you're playing the Prokofiev Third Concerto or the Liszt Concerto, that's a different thing. Take the opening of the Prokofiev—it doesn't matter how much tension you have at the beginning, you have to shake it all off and let it out. It means that you may have to sit in the practice room and teach yourself movements in order to loosen up. We're taught from the beginning to play to the bottom of the key. But that's impossible when you're playing all of these advanced pieces—it's not that you don't play solidly—you do.

JC: What happens if one of your students has pain?

Well, I don't teach, I just give master classes. Injury is something that has to be treated right away. Pain is a warning signal. I would have to see how someone was playing because sometimes pain can be caused by the way they are holding themselves, not letting something go. Or, it could be in any of the joints. I try to be analytical about it. My only experience with real pain happened when I was eighteen in a performance class of Gorodnitzki's at Juilliard. I was playing a lot of Rachmaninoff and Scriabin and I thought I was Horowitz. I didn't understand that you don't just try harder, but at eighteen that is all you do, you push for it. And, something happened here (he points to his right forearm flexors near the elbow). I don't know what it was, it probably wasn't anything really serious at the moment, but I knew something wasn't right and I was devastated. Gorodnitzki didn't have any recommendations for it other than to take a few days rest and squeeze a tennis ball.

This is when Olga Barabini called me up to say she was sorry to hear I was having problems. She had some thoughts about it if I wanted to come to see her and talk about it. So I did, and she just blew me away. She taught me how joints work, how keyboards work, how movements happen and how they release. And it wasn't that Gorodnitzki wasn't a terrific teacher—he was, but Barabini just knew so much more. She was not just interested in biomechanics—she was also a very experienced musician. It was such a revelation! She said, "You don't have to pay such a price for such brilliance." She had been watching me for years. My elbows were in, my shoulders were up, I was overdoing the finger movements, and I was tight all over. She taught me how to use my muscles and joints. After working with her I was four times as strong and four times as fast, and I had already been pretty strong and fast! It was very liberating, but it didn't happen all at once. It was slow and painstaking, but really fantastic.

So with students in a master class, I watch what they are doing. For example, one student at Tanglewood last year wasn't breathing at all. She had a hyper temperament, and I worked on just getting her to breathe. She had a lot of physical tension as well. I do pay a lot of attention to alignment and release in the students' playing, whereas fifty years ago the common theme was, "It hurts? Oh well, it hurts!"

KR: There are a lot of hurting musicians out there!

I know! But as I said before sometimes in master classes I don't know what to say because I have an unfair advantage. After all, I'm not 5'4" or 120 lbs! Life's unfair. But nevertheless, I believe that everyone can maximize what they are doing in the right way so they don't hurt themselves.

KR: Absolutely!

Irma Wolpe said that the pianist who can play a difficult passage with no problems at twenty will have to practice the same passage for ten minutes when they're twenty-five, and an hour when they're thirty-five. This is because we can't just keep doing something the same way without thinking about it, we have to evolve and be mindful.

We have to break down the mental barriers too. Sometimes people just think they can't do something, and a change of fingering may give them the chance to relax, instead of approaching the passage with tension.

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John Chong connects electrodes to monitor Garrick Ohlsson's muscle tension.

KR: With small-handed pianists, my theory has always been, “when in doubt, leave it out,” or reconfigure the chord so as to fit more comfortably between the two hands. You also have to choose repertoire that’s going to be kind. What do you think about the 7/8 keyboard?

I don’t know about them, but I can guess what the differences are. And, especially for children, why not? After all, they have smaller sized violins! And it brings up the question of why all keyboards have to be the same size. Hoffman had a Steinway on which the keyboard was slightly different from the standard. Steinway had built several keyboards that differed ever so slightly in size. Of course Hoffman wasn’t dysfunctional on a regular keyboard, he just felt better on that one.

In the old days, keyboards were different sizes—harpichords, clavichords, organs.

KR: Well, let’s begin to hook you up for the Surface Electromyography (SEMG). SEMG is a device that measures the amount of electrical activity your muscles release when they are contracting, more commonly known as muscle tension. It is similar in function to an EKG, which measures heart muscle activity.

Dr. John Chong placed surface electrodes on Garrick’s left and right shoulder (trapezius muscle) and forearm (extensor carpi radialis). We then had Garrick squeeze two golf balls and tense his shoulders as hard as he could for thirty seconds. This test indicates the condition of the muscles. If the lines representing the tension levels stay constant for the duration, without dropping, the muscles are in good condition. Garrick passed the test! Although, at the end he laughed and said that the Brahms 2nd isn’t as bad as that!

John asked Garrick if he had any existing injuries or any complaints (important to know about your students!). He said no. He does do shoul-

der stretches and feels that they are very important, especially as we get older. Garrick commented on how we spend all of our time at the piano in a position that rotates our arms and shoulders forward. We need to stretch them in the opposite direction to relieve some of the tension and avoid the overuse of certain muscle groups. We were so pleased to hear this from Garrick.

Next we asked Garrick to relax his arms at his side and breathe so we could observe the resting levels of tension in his shoulders and forearms.

We began measuring Garrick’s trapezius and extensor muscles with SEMG while he warmed up on the Yamaha Disklavier with the main theme from the finale of Beethoven’s Op. 109 and Chopin’s Nocturne, Op. 9, No. 1. All playing was recorded and synchronized with video of the muscle tension and camera views of the hands and body.

Garrick played the Chopin Ballade in G minor, and he could see his muscle tension and hand position on the computer screen in front of him.

[Garrick]: It’s really interesting how someone can look relaxed and not be.

KR: Yes and that is why I started to work with measuring muscle tension. I found it difficult to get students to understand that they were holding tension they were unaware of. To them, this level of tension was normal. (Garrick’s resting tension in both the shoulder and forearm are very low—a perfect example of what we want to see.) When I hook students up, the first thing I have them do is sit just as you are to measure their resting tension. Many of them have a bit of tension, so the lines are higher on the screen. When the lines lower, I have them lift their hands to the keyboard, keeping the tension levels as low as possible. You do this perfectly!

Being musical means being emotional and that’s not wrong—it’s a good thing. But it can take over.

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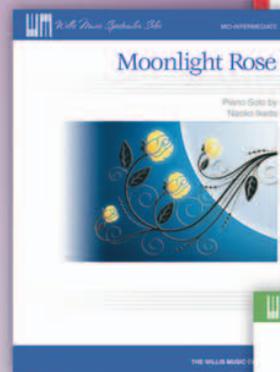
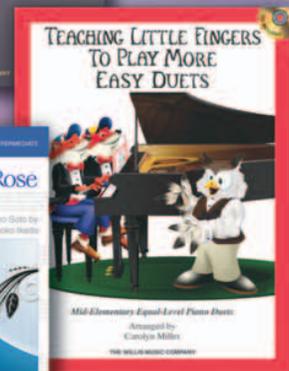
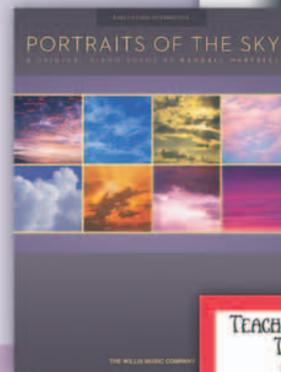
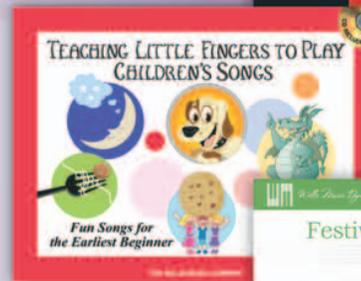
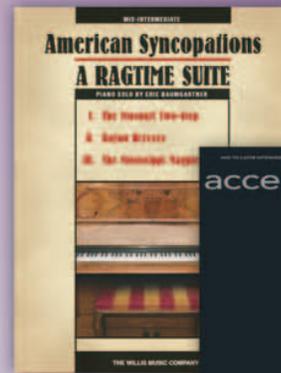
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Pianist Carol Leone with (L to R) Gail Berenson and Kathleen Riley. The graphs illustrate differences in measured tension between a 7/8 keyboard and a conventional keyboard.

KR: Right, you have to be in control of it (which manifests physiologically as muscle tension) and know how to release it. [Here Garrick “emotes” with his shoulders and then releases them. There is a big jump in tension.]

Garrick plays the Chopin Nocturne, Opus 15, No 1.

It's so irresistible to watch this! And it's not that the lines don't move (and they should), but that they go down with the release. I tried something specific at one point—I struck the key pulling backwards and nothing happened on the screen. Irma Wolpe said that it was only about applying energy to the key, this way or that way, whichever way that works. I wish she were alive to see this—she would freak!! She would say “that's exactly what I meant!” She always said that you can get a lot of piano playing for free (tension or pain free), or at least a lot less expensive!

KR: And this is so malleable especially because you're doing it in real time. When you play it back you're seeing and hearing all of this. And it all has to be reconnected to the sound because you have to go away with the aesthetic!

I began my research with feedback about fifteen years ago. I realized that many of my students did not know how to listen to music attentively. They had not grown up listening to classical music, and they had no understanding of the style of many of the great composers. So when I would begin a student on Chopin, I was having a difficult time explaining the fine nuances in interpretation, what a rubato is, and so on. Not only did they not listen to classical music, but they didn't know how to listen attentively, because they listen to music everywhere—it's on all the time. But, their visual skills are amazing!

That's right, but of course!

KR: Yes, thanks to computers and video games. So I decided to go in the back door, through the eye to “jump start” the ear! And now, with this whole system, I can get students to become aware of what's going on inside!

Yes, and the eye is the pathway.

JC: Yes it is!

KR: It's great, because after an hour of using this feedback, the students understand it. And they retain it, because they come back the next week with less tension.

There comes a point where it not only sounds good, but it feels good—it's a Zen moment!

JC: Yes!

KR: Exactly, and now we can quantify that Zen moment for someone so they can replicate it. I want to know that they know what they did and how they did it. Many years ago, there was a great story in *The New York Times* about a ball player, a pitcher, who was naturally gifted. All through his years of training, his coaches just let him develop naturally. They were afraid to touch him for fear that they would spoil what he was doing. Well, when he got into his early twenties, he went into a slump. And he

couldn't get out of it, because he never knew what “it” was when it was right. This resonated with me so strongly because you must know what you are doing. It can't just be good because of the mood of the day!

Yes, you have to have that firm basis of knowledge in order to create what you want.

Garrick plays the G minor Ballade again.

I was intrigued to see when the shoulder line was raised and when it wasn't. There are times when you're generating a lot of power and not seeing much movement.

JC: When you played the octaves the second time, was there anything different for you?

Yes, I played it musically better.

JC: Do you think there was any biofeedback going on?

I don't know. But the consciousness of the lines on the graph was intriguing.

KR: Was it different for you being able to glance up?

Oh, yes. In fact, it would be great to have this at home and play with it. I'm interested in the visceral connection between your feeling, the way you move and the sound of the music. When I practice, I notice facial tension.

KR: We can measure this too! The video angles give you so much more.

JC: By the way, your peak power this time was only 2,500. The first time it was 5,000.

Wow! And this time I felt that I was achieving what I want with much less effort.

KR: What's so powerful is, that as a teacher, you can demonstrate with this and show what works.

And I think you're right, that with this generation, the eye is the way in.

KR: Yes, it's like going in the back door, the eye to the ear.

This is just incredible. I don't know anyone else who does this. This gives you instant feedback. I think this can work at any level, even at a very early age, if the students are studying with some seriousness. And, it's not about stealing a student or saying that the teacher doesn't know this or that...

KR: This is proof of what is going on. I want to know that the student is doing it right. Thank you so much for today.

John and I look forward to sharing this with the piano pedagogy community! ▲

Editor's note: Please visit the online version of this article at www.claviercompanion.com to view video clips of Garrick Ohlsson playing and discussing his experiences with Proforma Vision.

Cover photo and photos on page pages 12-14 by Paul Body Photography. paulbodyphoto.com

Kathleen Riley, Ph.D. is known nationally as a lecturer and clinician on piano technique and injury prevention. Her work has been published in many peer-reviewed journals and she is an active performer. At New York University she teaches piano and keyboard classes and conducts research in piano pedagogy and technique. Her primary areas of research are piano pedagogy and technique, injury prevention, and improving students' listening skills, especially at the grade school level. Her work has been published in Medical Problems of Performing Artists, American Music Teacher, and the Journal of Technology in Music Learning, along with articles in The New York Times and Scientific American. She has private practices in New York City and New Jersey. She can be reached at krileyphd@ureach.com or (201) 220-6851.

Dr. John Chong, Medical Director of the Musicians' Clinics of Canada, began piano studies at age three and moved on to composition and electronic music after an injury to his right arm. He then continued on in electrical engineering, medicine, epidemiology, occupational health, and community and preventive medicine. Recently certified in medical psychotherapy, he is bringing surface EMG and neurofeedback methods to the diagnosis and treatment of performance related injuries. He can be reached at john.chong@sympatico.ca

Garrick Ohlsson: A Chopin master

It seems that every pianist in the world has jumped on the Chopin bandwagon by playing a piece or two during this year's celebration of the Chopin bicentennial, but few can touch American pianist Garrick Ohlsson. He has recorded everything Chopin has written (for Hyperion Records) and performed the entire Chopin repertoire from memory worldwide.

I first met Garrick Ohlsson in Sascha Gorodnitzki's studio in New York, and it was obvious from the first notes that he was the most talented student I had ever heard. He played a Rachmaninoff *Etude-Tableaux* for me that was overwhelming; I couldn't believe that this was a thirteen-year-old boy! In fact, he played it twice to show he could do it. Gorodnitzki, who was also my teacher, sat back smiling with pride, knowing I'd be stunned by Garrick's performance.

It was obvious that Garrick could play anything, and he proved that just a few years later in Warsaw in 1970, where he earned worldwide recognition as the first American to win the Chopin International Piano Competition.

Gorodnitzki was shocked at Garrick's victory. "Garrick is too young for this," he said. "After all he's just barely begun his studies at the Juilliard School." But there was nothing to stop him, as he was invited to Tully Hall for "Lincoln Center Presents" in New York, where he performed back-to-back recitals of Chopin's music. In recognition of the success of these performances he was dubbed the "Chopin Master" by the New York press. He just repeated that feat at Tanglewood by again playing back-to-back recitals of Chopin's music.

Chicago's Ravinia Festival showcased Mr. Ohlsson this summer as one of the world's foremost interpreters of Chopin's music. Besides giving an all-Chopin recital, he played both Chopin concerti with the Chicago Symphony. When I asked Mr. Ohlsson how he was going to play both concerti, I told him I thought only Rubinstein did that. Garrick's

eyes twinkled and he smiled his "Watch me—I can do it" smile. And so he did, to the great delight of the audience.

When asked if he enjoys playing so much Chopin, he answered, "Of course! People really respond to Chopin and the music keeps people in their seats. Nobody will leave before I'm finished playing, and they want encore after encore."

As often as Mr. Ohlsson has played these works, he genuinely shares the listeners' surprise and joy as he plays this familiar music. Every time I have heard Garrick perform, and there have been many, he always seems energized by Chopin. What is difficult for many artists seems like sheer fun for Garrick Ohlsson, and the more encores he plays the stronger he gets. Instead of wilting at the extraordinary difficulties in this music, he always rises to the occasion as his rapport with the audience gets deeper and deeper. A Garrick Ohlsson performance should never be missed.

The Ravinia audience came close to missing him, as there were tornado warnings all day on the date of his all-Chopin recital. His plane arrived an hour before the first tornado hit. Nobody thought he would make it but Ohlsson is used to living on the edge. He blithely walked out on the stage and apologized for being late and leaving his white shirt behind. Then, smiling his beatific smile, he launched into six major works of Chopin, followed by the 24 Op. 28 preludes played with a passionate ferocity.

Garrick Ohlsson's career grows and grows, and he has plenty of repertoire, including all 32 sonatas of Beethoven and 80 concertos. In spite of all the pressures of touring and constant performing he is always relaxed and obviously loves what he is doing! We love his contributions as well, and we thank him for keeping the artistry of Chopin alive and relevant, two centuries after that composer's birth.

—Dolores Fredrickson