

An Interview with Melanie Spanswick

Shortly after I started publishing *The Piano Bench Mag* I ran across a blog by Melanie Spanswick. So much valuable information! What was different from other blogs was her series of interviews with pianists. Fascinating.

This summer I was introduced to Melanie (the wonders of the internet). That led to this interview. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed giving it.

PBM: While some readers may be familiar with you and your blog, others may not. Can you share a little about your background?

MS: I was a concert pianist for around fifteen years, performing solo concerts and accompanying singers and instrumentalists. I also taught as well as examined for the ABRSM (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music). I played around 60/80 concerts a year, many of them as a guest entertainer on cruise ships (giving solo recitals), so I've had the good fortune to travel around the world. Then, almost five years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer and overnight my life changed completely. After recovery, I decided to ring the changes and explore as many different musical avenues as possible; my blog is just one aspect of this journey.

PBM: I think one of the first times I ran across your website was in connection with your Classical Conversations interviews. How long have you been doing these and what inspired you to start these interviews?

MS: I have been interviewing eminent concert pianists and teachers for just over two years, and am about to film the fortieth interview. I'm fortunate to have a mentor who has advised and helped me significantly. He's an IT expert and keen piano lover. One day he sent a video camera (with instructions on how to use it), saying that I must put myself 'out there' online. Editing and

uploading is very simple actually, I do it all myself. I started with a collection of short, basic videos about learning to play the piano, which are essentially associated with my book. They are all on my YouTube channel and are gathering popularity. Then a concert pianist friend, Nick van Bloss, asked me to interview him at Steinway Hall; we filmed two interviews (although only used one in the end), and the idea took shape. I've always presented my concerts anyway, so am accustomed to public speaking. Pianists, Lucy Parham and Alexandra Dariescu also kindly offered to be interviewed, and then my mentor managed to secure an interview with Ukrainian concert pianist Valentina Lisitsa, who at the time was just emerging, and the rest is history. Valentina's Classical Conversation, which was the first in the series, has nearly 43,000 views (or hits) and I marvel at what she has achieved through sheer hard work and persistence.

PBM: Do you have a favorite interview or any that just really stand out in your mind?

MS: The interviews are all different, and I don't have a favourite. I do tend to ask the same questions though, in order to keep some semblance of format. The answers are so diverse. I try to vary the venue because it enhances the series and is less limiting. Some are filmed at the artist's home, others have been filmed at a conservatoire or concert venue (such as the Wigmore Hall), and many have been shot at Steinway Hall (London) and Jaques Samuel Pianos (I will be eternally grateful for their kind permission to allow me to film). Some pianists are naturally more chatty and effervescent than others, so I probably gravitate to those who talk a lot! It makes my job easier. It isn't a job however, but rather a privilege to speak to these marvelous musicians and I've learnt so much from talking to them. A few have now become friends.

PBM: Similar to the Classical Conversations interviews, you've also done a series of interviews you call Music Talk interviews. How long have you been doing those and what inspired you to start this series?

MS: Japanese pianist, Noriko Ogawa, enjoyed her interview so much, she asked if we could do some more filming. So we made a couple of videos, one about my book (which she really endorses), and the other about her wonderful charity work. Also, I interviewed a few colleagues and associates who are connected with the Classical music industry but who aren't necessarily pianists, so it seemed logical to have two concurrent video collections. This series has been running for a little over a year now.

PBM: You recently added author to your list of accomplishments when you published your book *So You Want to Play the Piano?*. Congratulations by the way, that is a big accomplishment! Why did you decide to write this book and did it take you long to write it? Was it difficult to write?

MS: Thank you. I wrote the book back in 2011. I had always wanted to write down my thoughts about the copious elements which need consideration before piano playing even commences. I've much experience in this field having taught since I was fifteen. Pupils have come for lessons in the past having very bad habits already. These habits are both time consuming and upsetting (for the pupil) to correct. It would be so much better if parents and students knew how best to begin. There is very little help available on this subject, and my hope and aim is to offer some guidance. The book took three months to complete, but the research took longer. I knew what I wanted to write, so it wasn't difficult really.

PBM: Who did you write *So You Want to Play the Piano* for? Teachers? Perspective students and their parents? What do you hope readers of the book walk away with after they read your book?

MS: I wrote the book for anyone who is thinking about learning to play. Especially those who have yet to play a note. I want my readers to really know what to look for before they start. They need to know what instruments are best to acquire, so they don't waste time and money on unsuitable keyboards or pianos which barely work. Most importantly, they need to know what to look for in a good teacher. This area is seriously over looked and there are no regulations to stop anyone setting up as a piano teacher, which can be disastrous for a student. Bad habits are so difficult to eradicate, and technical issues which are addressed incorrectly from the outset (issues such as posture, hand positions, note learning and rhythm), are challenging to put right later, as they become ingrained. I have frequently taught students (particularly in workshop situations) who have been learning for five years and still can't read the bass clef (left hand notation) properly, for example. These problems are totally unacceptable and the majority originate from poor teaching. The book also looks at suitable piano tutor books, basic technique, music exams, and the value of music festivals. Hopefully it's akin to a manual; something to keep on the piano for reference.

PBM: How can teachers make the best use of your book and videos you have made that are related to the book?

MS: The book is primarily for pupils, parents, grandparents and learners of any age. It wasn't intended for teachers, but some teachers have subsequently contacted me saying they have found it useful. It provides a guide to posture, basic technique, what is expected in the first lesson, the 'ins and outs' of piano lessons in general, and a resource for piano tutor books (although I only mention nine in all). There's also some advice on practising and preparing for exams, festivals, and mental preparation for performance too. Similarly, my videos look at many of these aspects, with just a few simple ideas in each short presentation.

PBM: This month we are focusing on practice in the magazine. You have written a number of blog articles on various aspects of practice. Do you have any words of wisdom to impart when it comes to practice? Getting students to practice consistently can often be a problem, any suggestions regarding that?

MS: I help my students to build a workable practice schedule. Something simple and realistic, which can be easily maintained. Practice depends on so many variables; I teach at a highly academic school where time is at a premium, students don't tend to do much instrumental practice, but they do achieve good results. It's all to do with mental focus, which is paramount, and many forget this surprisingly. A little and often approach can be very fruitful.

I also help piano teachers who are preparing for diplomas; they have much more time to practice, but need regular performance opportunities to gain confidence, so I encourage them to set up their own groups and play to each other frequently. Nerves can undo so much good work, and this element is crucial in my experience, particularly for adults.

I'm very thorough (some would say strict), insisting on technical practice; all my students work at exercises and studies. These are only useful if practised correctly. Merely 'playing' over and over again is a waste of energy. Finger power and sound must be cultivated via free body movement, and this is one aspect which features heavily in my lessons. I also spend a proportion of each lesson teaching students to sight-read. This is such an important element, and one which I was never really taught. You can learn how to do it and every pupil slowly improves with careful, consistent practice (I run classes on sight-

reading and memorization techniques). The ability to read makes learning pieces that much easier and quicker. Being able to pick up a piece and play it immediately is fun.

PBM: If you were to recommend one resource to piano teachers, what would it be and why?

MS: I'm unsure as to whether books and publications are really useful for piano teachers. There are great publications in the UK, such as the *Pianist* magazine and *Piano Professional* (published by *EPTA* or the *European Piano Teachers Association*, which is a great association for teachers) and I like the website, www.pianoeducation.org, but there's only so much you can 'learn' from reading. Setting up a practice, scheduling pupils, and basic teaching ideas can all be sought from books etc., but teaching technique and musicianship requires years of playing and observing. It's this type of detailed teaching which will allow you to 'shine' and be effective as a teacher. Going to master classes and workshops can be a good idea; observing master teachers. I learnt so much from my Russian teacher, but it was all via playing myself. To teach effectively, you must be able to do it all yourself.

PBM: And finally, here's a question you like to ask in your interviews – what does playing the piano mean to you?

MS: It's interesting - as it's one I've asked so many times! At one time, playing the piano meant everything and I loved it. When I was ill, however, I didn't touch the piano for well over two years and never missed it once. I'd done too much, killing any love or joy I once had. Now, I'm gradually returning to the piano, but I'm having lots of fun exploring other different musical possibilities. I wouldn't be able to achieve any success with my teaching, writing or interviewing if I hadn't got a professional background. I'm very grateful for my training and early career, it really has made all the difference.

PBM: Thank you Melanie for taking the time to do this interview. I wish you much continued success in all your endeavors!

You can find Melanie's blog at www.MelanieSpanswick.com. There you will find links to her Classical Conversations Series and Music Talk Interviews. You can also subscribe to her *YouTube* channel. Melanie can also be found on *Pinterest*, *LinkedIn*, *Google+* and more.