

**Podcast #6 – Technique on a Universal Scale**  
**The Music Educator’s Crucible**  
**With Merlin B. Thompson**

Hello and welcome back to the Music Educator’s Crucible. My name is Merlin Thompson and I’m the creator of this podcast series devoted to exploring music and education – in particular topics related to teaching and learning to sing or play a musical instrument. So, if you’re a music teacher who teaches private or group lessons - in your own home studio or an institution - you’ve come to the right place. And I’ll also mention that this series has lots to offer schoolteachers, parents, and community leaders as well. So be sure to tune in as often as you like. And before I get any further, I want to thank Musopen.org for making available Yu-Shu Tsai’s performance of Robert Schuman’s Opus 9 Carnival. Thank you so much.

The title for this episode – Technique on a Universal Scale – takes its impetus from my 40-year teaching career – and an activity I facilitate in my music pedagogy course for undergrad vocalists and instrumentalists. Typically, the class consists of 25 musicians including singers, guitarists, percussionists, string players, wind instrumentalists, conductors, and keyboard musicians. For the activity, I divide the class into their instrumental groups – and ask each group to identify the most basic technical requirements associated with their instrument. That’s the straightforward part of the activity. What’s not so straightforward is the follow up – when I ask students to think about – technique on a universal scale – and come up with three technical aspects that are relevant to all instruments. Not just technical aspects for their own instrument – but aspects that are important for any instrumentalist or vocalist. Three technical aspects – no less – no more. How do they do? Well... let’s just say that thinking about - technique on a universal scale - can shed a lot of light on how you think about your own instrument’s technical requirements. It might even point out some gaps in your approach.

So, if you’re a singer or an instrumentalist, I suspect you’ve already got a fairly concrete list of ideas related to your own technical requirements? What happens to your list when you consider – technique on a universal scale? What stays on your list? What disappears? What do you need to add?

This podcast is an exploration of three aspects relevant to Technique on a Universal Scale – and they are - Your Core – Your Energy – and Your Breathing.

## **A First aspect of Technique on a Universal Scale**

### **Your Core**

The moment you heard me say “your core”, you might have made a quick mental check on your own core. Maybe a flash of awareness related to your posture?

What is the core? Where is it located? What does it do?

The core is located in the lower half of the torso, and is made up of diverse muscle groups, the nervous system, tissue, and numerous bones from the hips up to the sternum. Often people equate the core with the abdominal muscles, but the core is much more complex than just having six-pack abs. If you'd like an image to help out - think of the core like a covered basket. For the basket's bottom - we've got the pelvic floor muscles that sit inside the bony pelvis and cradle the base of the spine. For the basket's top - we've got the diaphragm located at the base of the lungs, below that long central bone known as the sternum. The diaphragm and pelvic floor muscles work in conjunction to regulate breathing and stabilize joints.

For the sides of our basket- we've got the multifidus - a series of muscles attached to the spine that keep it stable. We've got another group of stabilizing muscles - the transverse abdominis located deep in the abdominal wall - which compress and support the abdominal cavity and spine like a corset. Finally - we've got the abdominals, external and internal obliques - these muscles serve to flex the torso and rotate the trunk.

The core is directly involved in a number of functions. Breathing - being one huge function - which I'll talk more about later in this podcast. The other functions have to do with stability and mobility - how the core helps with stabilizing the spine and mobilizing the flexibility of the spinal column so that it may lengthen and shorten, rotate, bend forward, backward, and sideways. Also, the core functions as a central grounding base - so that we may bring control and strength to our entire body. In order to use our body to push, pull, reach, lift, or carry, the core draws support from the pelvis, legs, and feet. We mobilize power in the large muscles of the pelvic girdle and legs. We use our feet to connect firmly to the ground, support weight, and generate movement.

I appreciate how the core's functions - of providing stability and mobility, control and strength - relate to the posture we associate with vocal and instrumental performance. Stability, control, and strength confirm that an ideal performance posture has sufficient balance to keep things in place without turning performers into statues. Mobility confirms the necessary fluidity and moving characteristics of an ideal

and workable performance posture. All of which means I pay close attention to what my students do with their core and its impact on their posture.

Take for example – my student Jenny – a six-year-old beginner. During the first six weeks of her 15-minute lessons, I gradually help her get acquainted with her own core. I start by removing the piano bench so that Jenny can stand to play at the piano. It's a simple way to get posture underway for students between the ages of 5 and 8 because they're just the right size for standing up at the keyboard. Having students stand up – for me – works brilliantly because I can point out how their body works like a giant crane – with feet anchored firmly on the ground – our core acting as the central base – and arms free to reach wherever we need to. There's not much need for a detailed explanation – after all – students know how cranes operate – and standing up is something they obviously know how to do. They even know that if they stand with feet too close together, they'll most likely topple over.

I guide by saying something like – “Your core looks great! And - Those feet are anchored.” In this way, students get to know about posture through experiences of their own core, rather than me attempting to shape their posture with minute tweaking. And I should add - there's another reason why I like starting beginners with standing up - because it fits in with how I imagine their practicing at home – spontaneously running to the piano when they've got a free minute or two to play through – most likely – run through their pieces.

As students develop – it's pretty much a given that they'll spend most of their time seated on the bench. Which brings me to another student example – fifteen-year-old Francis – whose focus on certain occasions in the advanced repertoire is so intense it's almost to his detriment. With his eyes having taken over, he tracks every note with the sharpness of an eagle. His chin digs into his chest. His shoulders creep forward – squishing his core. Not wanting to interrupt his focus, I usually say something like – “check your core when you've got a minute.” And shortly thereafter, Francis takes the breath that flexes his spine and opens the space for his core. It's quite marvelous to watch.

The importance in all this is that what we do with our core is only a preliminary step. It's what I do to set the stage for two additional elements that make up - technique on a universal scale – your energy and your breathing.

## **A Second Aspect of Technique on a Universal Scale**

## **Your Energy**

Ask any student questions about energy like – What is energy? Or what does it do? And I guarantee you'll get some fascinating answers. Like eight-year-old Alex who describes energy as – chunks of power. Six-year-old Alexandra responds that energy is all about action – that can be walking and running. Fourteen-year-old Spencer reveals that energy comes in more than one level – it can be high, low, and everything in between. Fifteen-year-old Julia suggests that energy is reflected in someone's attitude and passion to do things. If you don't care about what you're doing, you're going to put as much energy as you believe it's worth. Sixteen-year-old Chris describes energy as the base for everything.

My reason for bringing "energy" into discussions with my students – even young beginners – is because I want to help them experience the connection between the "energy" they use in performance and the "energy" of the sound they produce. Energy is something students of all ages know about, because they experience their own energy for themselves. And similarly, they know about energy in sound – because – as my student Alexandra affirms – "We know sound has energy because we can feel it". Given the connection between our own energy and the energy of sound, I like to help students explore energy in three different ways – physical, emotional, and spiritual.

To give you a sense of physical energy, an episode with my student Irene comes to mind. As Irene has been playing confidently hands together for several months, it seems she's ready for playing the right hand melody louder than the left hand accompaniment. After I demonstrate the right hand louder than usual and explain how I'm also using more energy than usual, I invite Irene to give it a try. Her response – an excruciating one – is to play by pounding on the keys with her right hand.

So I say something like – "I notice the sound got louder and you used more energy – but it seems like your hand also got really heavy. Let's see what happens when we try an experiment with energy. First – just walk across the room normally and check your energy. Now – run across the room and check your energy.

Which one had more energy?" I ask.

Irene affirms, "Running had more energy. Definitely." And she returns to sit at the piano.

I ask another question – "Did your body get heavier when you used more energy?"

"No it didn't" – Irene replies, with a look of veiled annoyance.

I continue – “Let’s see what happens when – instead of making your hand heavy – you get the energy in your core to help you out.”

For the next few moments, we experiment back and forth – playing with the core, without the core, making the hand heavy once again, playing with as little energy as possible. We finish off with a look at the energy involved in tiptoeing across the room – in preparation for playing the left hand as softly as possible. Irene is making definite progress – even though she’s a long ways from being able to consistently produce loud and soft tones. That’s where practice comes in.

My goal in exploring physical energy is for students to experience the connections between their actions and the sounds they produce. And I’ll also add, that although I’m enthusiastic about exploring physical energy – we don’t really go to a concert just to hear the physicality of someone playing loud and soft. We go to hear what someone has to communicate. I want to make sure students get experience with physical energy as the foundation for expressing what they musically have to say. That’s where the explorations of “emotional” and “spiritual” energy come in to play.

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Put your heart in it – is the catchall phrase I use to invite my students to tap into the spectrum of their emotional energy. I emphasize spectrum of emotional energy here – especially in view of remarks I heard many years ago at a music teachers’ meeting.

A teacher colleague revealed, she just didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t get any of her students to put emotion in their playing.”

At the time, I remember thinking – I’ve got exactly the opposite situation in my studio. I don’t seem to be able to stop students from putting emotion into their playing.

How could there be such a dramatic difference between my studio and the teacher colleague who made the remarks? My impression is that the difference wasn’t so much a matter of emotional or non-emotional students. More that my colleague had a very specific version of what emotional interpretation should sound like. When she asked her students to put emotion in their pieces, it’s as if she was hoping students would replicate her own teacher emotions – not the students’ own personal emotions. When students were unable to replicate the emotional component she was looking for, it seemed only logical to conclude that – students were lacking in emotional expression.

My approach to emotional energy in performance is to start where students are and build from there. Asking students to – put your heart in it – means that I need to be comfortable with hearing pieces played

in ways that I might not have anticipated. Like when emotionally serious pieces get transformed into playfully spontaneous interpretations. Or the emotional finesse of a minuet is turned into a rambunctious country-dance. My follow up is always the same – “Thanks for that. Now could you put your heart in it another way? How about the opposite emotion? Could you use your energy to tell a different story?”

Encouraging students to exercise a spectrum of emotional energy means that they don't get stuck in a single definitive performance style. They develop the flexibility to express ideas that may include what the composer had in mind, students' own personally preferred approach, my favorite style, and a host of other interpretations. In this way, exploring emotional energy matches with the spectrum of emotions students may already be familiar with in everyday life.

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Finally, I want to take a look at your energy from a spiritual perspective. When I think of – spirituality – themes like faith, mystery, wonder, gratitude, hope, and love – are a few that settle in. I interpret spirituality as the cluster of beliefs, visions, and principles that we use to understand, appreciate, and make meaning from our experiences of living in the world. Spirituality encompasses a person's commitment to living their own life and an awareness of interconnection - be it with Mother Nature, mystical traditions, indigenous sacred practices, faith in God and formal religion, along with anima mundi – or soul of the world. There's a transcendent wholeness to spirituality that stretches from grandeur to sublime – from the depths of our inner landscape to the periphery of our outer reality.

Something that ties in with the topic of spiritual energy is the soul of the performer – the irreducible essence of individuality that musicians endeavor to communicate in their performances. In this musical context, the word soul may be interpreted as synonymous with the person's center – but there are more layers than the word center may indicate. There's a dynamic to soulful performances that comes from the individual's life force – from their capacity for tapping into the infinite spring that propels life itself.

By their very nature, soulful engagements channel a deep honesty and genuineness in performance – characteristics that ask for openness and implore performers to put their personality and character at the forefront. At the same time, soulful performances may be tinged with personal vulnerability as reflected in the fragility of the performer's own humanity.

The catalyst for including spirituality in my teaching took place during the 1980s as a result of my apprenticeship with Dr. Shinichi Suzuki –

Founder of the Suzuki Method. When I graduated from the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute in 1986, Dr. Suzuki presented me with a work of calligraphy inscribed with a phrase he often used in his teaching – Beautiful tone with living soul, please. Inspired by the notion of – living soul, upon my return to North America, I could see that facilitating explorations of a spiritual nature meant developing appropriate and flexible language. Let me give you some examples.

At a piano workshop in Salt Lake City during the early 1990s, I heard a teenage boy's confident performance of a Mozart Sonata. I could have followed up by suggesting he project his sound to the back of the auditorium or any number of similar technical refinements. However, knowing of his devout Mormon faith – I decided to request a performance imbued with his spiritual beliefs. I said, "Let's see what happens when you play this piece for God." A request for gratitude and transcendence that I felt was completely in keeping with the closeness of his religious background.

In another example, my student Alex was working on a Bach Prelude and Fugue. After weeks of refinement, I suggested we consider Bach's life – a deeply spiritual man who composed prolifically as a reflection of his faith. Alex informed me his church going experience was limited to his family's visiting European cathedrals where his greatest impression was the profound silence. I asked, "Is there a way you could capture that intensity in your performance." There was something amazing in Alex's response.

A final example – Jennifer is playing a piece called Mysterious Summer's Night. She's meticulous in following the composer's markings. I suggest coming up with a variety of narratives to guide her performance. What about the mysteries contained in the stars and moon. Can we travel beyond space and time to shape our own understanding of the universe? She's excited by the idea of crafting a couple of narratives to guide her performance.

What seems key for me – is that students already come with their own sense of spirituality – no matter how loosely or concretely defined that may be. My hope is to open up opportunities for students to exercise their own spiritual capacities as musicians – to develop their own language and their capacity to articulate what spiritual connectivity means for themselves. So, it's not unusual for me to ask students to consider "soulfulness" as an aspect of their performances, to invite the "spirit of the universe" into their music making. Nor is it unusual to ask them what they think about the world around them, how they consider notions of spirituality and our interrelated universal connections.

The point of such explorations is to help students develop as the spiritual beings they already are. To help them in elaborating the

spiritual understanding contained in the thoughts they hold onto, the beliefs, values, and attitudes they carry with them. To help by creating spaces for students to deepen and strengthen their own spiritual energy – encouraging them in drawing – again and again - naturally and intuitively from their own spiritual wellspring. I keep themes like faith, mystery, wonder, gratitude, hope, and love close at hand. Even now, just listing them off, I'm aware of how they induce a welcome stillness and intensity to thought processes. I appreciate how the spirituality of musical performance and study provides opportunity for students to contemplate and explore their own deeply rooted and soul-stirring ideals of life.

### **A Third Aspect of Technique on a Universal Scale Your Breathing**

On average, adults and older children breathe anywhere from 12 to 20 times per minute – that adds up to 960 to 1,200 breaths an hour. Which brings us to anywhere from 17,000 to 30,000 breaths per day – about 2,000 gallons of air - enough to fill up a normal-sized swimming pool. Most of the time, we don't even think about breathing as we go about our routines. It's just something we do.

Breathing – for all musicians – is a basic of performance. And I'm not just talking about vocalists and wind instrumentalists who most obviously use their breath to directly produce sound. I include everyone who plays a musical instrument. Let me tell you more about breathing with examples from my piano studio that demonstrate how breathing has a direct influence on the flow, tempo, phrasing, tone color, and dynamics of musical interpretations.

Six-year-old Rachel is a beginner piano student. After a half-year of lessons, her pieces often end up sounding rather unsteady as a result of her somewhat wobbly fingers.

I ask her – “Rachel – What can you tell me about flow?”

Rachel extends her right arm and slowly traces in front of her the smooth outline of a figure eight. I marvel at her creativity and join in with my own right arm. I too can feel the flow. I say – “let's add our breath. Let's make our breath match the flow”. Rachel adds her breath without a hitch – inhaling and exhaling naturally as she continues to trace the figure eight.

I continue – “Let's see what happens when you put flow into Mary Had a Little Lamb. And why not – add your breath too. Just take a breath before you start, and you'll be on your way.”



What I like about this example is how the functions of inhaling and exhaling are equal in providing ongoing rhythmic and melodic continuity for pianists. There are no restrictions on where Rachel can breathe in or out. She keeps the flow going through a seamless cycle of switching back and forth between inhaling and exhaling. This continuous breathing cycle helps Rachel with transitioning from the wobbliness of her fingers to a place where breathing carries her fingers along. That's not to say that her fingers suddenly lost their wobbliness – because they didn't. What happens is that breathing in and out added a layer of awareness and a momentum different from her usual focus on playing from one note to the next.

Another example - John is playing a one-page march that contains a series of two-bar phrases each of which begins with an accented downbeat in the right hand. I respond by demonstrating how to play the accented downbeat in a two-step process. Step one - on the upbeat – I inhale as I raise my right hand above the keyboard. Step two – on the downbeat, I exhale as I let go of my hand and gravity pulls the appropriate finger into the key – in the same way someone might jump off a diving platform into a swimming pool. The point is that inhaling and exhaling when combined with lifting above the keyboard and diving into the key are effective in producing the desired accents, and also provide a visual confirmation of what's going on. What the audience sees the performer do in inhaling and exhaling - matches with lifting and diving - which also matches the sound produced. Each time the audience sees the performer inhale and lift a hand above the keyboard - we know something is going to happen because we join the performer in the alignment between breathing, gesture, and sound.

A final example – Ashley wants more dramatic dynamic contrast in her performance. As solution, we discuss the influence of her breath on dynamics. To be specific – we explore how playing softly may be greatly enhanced by reducing her breathing to its absolute minimum. Just as whispering utilizes the least amount of air without losing the details of articulation, playing softly operates with the same kind of minute control. In contrast, playing loudly invites a kind of rambunctious over-the-top breathing that fully expands the lungs and sends fresh oxygen flooding to the appropriate muscles. It's as if the entire body is breathing – from the top of your head to the balls of your feet. Everything is involved in a full body workout.

What I find most remarkable about breathing is how it fundamentally intertwines with the other aspects of - technique on a universal scale - core and energy. We rely on our core to provide the stability, mobility, control, and strength for breathing to take place. Breathing places certain demands on our core - and how we use or misuse our core impacts what we accomplish with breathing.

When it comes to breathing and energy, I marvel at how the intensity of breathing is interwoven with the intensity of physical, emotional, and spiritual energy we use or produce - which is all done as a means of achieving the intensity of tone desired. How breathing in all its variants - blow, sniff, gasp, puff, draw in, release - accompanies the variations of energy - playful, serious, shallow, trust, mystery - to create the variants of tone - harsh, light, dark, pleasing, bright. So, when I talk with my students about tone - about producing sound that should be expressive - I'm talking about the way performers can directly influence their tonal intensities by drawing from their core, their energies, and their breath. In a nutshell - I'm talking about the undeniable relationship between expressive tone and technique on a universal scale.

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At the beginning of this podcast, I mentioned how I facilitate an activity that examines Technique on a Universal Scale with my class of undergrad vocalists and instrumentalists. It's a great way to experience how focusing outside your own instrument's technical needs may be valuable in crystalizing your vision of technique. Typically, the activity is illuminating for everyone. Posture makes its way easily into the discussion - but it seems posture is an overly generic word that pales in comparison with the involvement in activating your core. Initially, breathing seems to belong exclusively to vocalists and wind players, until someone outside their groups remembers a distant lesson on breathing - and soon all instruments are onboard. Energy is my gift to them - because for the most part - energy seems to be a term that rarely shows up in their backgrounds. With physical energy, we address embouchures, bow holds, hand positions, finger actions, relaxations and tensions necessary to tone production. Emotional and spiritual energies bring out the colors of sounds and the meanings behind them. Then there's intensity - the subtle and blatant adjustments to our energy and breathing that take us closer to and further from the expressive outcomes we're looking for.

In my own piano studio, I've used the combination of - core, energy, and breathing - for most of my 40-year career. I appreciate how the interweaving of core, energy, and breathing provides a framework for

what I'll call the big picture of teaching technique - while allowing for all kinds of detailed and impromptu explorations that entail digging more deeply. I also find that core, energy, and breath present a user-friendly vocabulary that's easy to understand and easy to put into action with students of all ages - from my beginners to my most upper-level advanced students.

For vocal and instrumental teachers listening in, my hope is that exploring Technique on a Universal Scale has given you something to think about - possibly by aligning with what you already do and possibly by shedding light on an area that feels worthwhile to examine.

If you care to let me know how Technique on a Universal Scale fits in with your teaching, please be sure to drop me a line. Until the next time - this is The Music Educator's Crucible and I'm Merlin Thompson. Cheers!