



# The System of Music Education for Gifted Children in Russia: Evaluation and Explication

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## Abstract

*Recent researches in psychology and neuroscience demonstrated the special role of music lessons in human personality and brain development.*

*We will analyze the Russian experience of music education based on the principle that "music education is an education not only of a musician, but first of all of a human being" [Sukhomlinsky]. Its mass character and availability is provided by a unique system of music schools, covering all municipalities, where every child can receive musical training at a good amateur level (5-8 grades). It is well known the highest level of Russian performing musicians (especially pianists), as proved by numerous wins at the prestigious international competitions. What is the secret of this success?*

*First of all, it is a perfect marriage of the massive and democratic character of the primary musical education provided by an extensive network of music schools, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the highest level of exclusive musical training, guaranteed by 15 specialized music boarding schools for gifted children, which provide training in the amount of 11 grades. Of these, we can name the famous Central Music School (Moscow), the Moscow Gnesins' School, Special Music Schools founded at St. Petersburg and Kazan conservatoires. Analysis of these schools' activities revealed the following basic principles:*

- *early professional orientation; involvement at the very early age (from 5-6 years old);*
- *creation of a special creative atmosphere, "full immersion" in the music;*
- *involvement of leading teachers, professors of conservatoires;*
- *mandatory performing practice, concerts outside the school;*
- *providing maximum time for the daily music self-training on the instrument;*
- *a high level of learning difficulty.*

*An important role in pianists' training still belongs to continuity with the traditions of the Russian piano school (brothers Rubinstein, Rachmaninov, Ziloti, Zverev): technical skills, beauty and melodiousness of the sound, highly artistic and spiritual performance. However, there is also a number of problems associated with the ongoing modernization of the Russian education. These questions will be examined in the report on the example of Secondary Special Music School (college) at Kazan State Conservatoire named after Zhiganov, where Pletnev, Egorov, Urasin and other famous pianists studied.*

## 1. Introduction

Achievements of Russian piano school are recognized all over the world. Young performers of the past and present win prizes in prestigious international contests whereas teachers who received education in Russia successfully work worldwide. The teachers who trained Van Cliburn and Lucas DeBargue were Russian pianists educated in Russia: Rosina Lhévinne (the student of V. Safonov) and Rena Shereshevskaya (the student of L. Vlasenko). The studying of the piano education phenomenon can become especially helpful nowadays. Thus, active recent studies in psychology and neurophysiology indicate the value of music lessons to brain development, they also show that music lessons have beneficial effect on various forms of psychic activity [1,2], while abilities for music and music activities at an early age have a positive effect on the intellectual development and learning capabilities of a child [3].

## 2. Methods

The analysis of the issue requires studying different data as a single complex from different angles: 1) from a historical, psychological and pedagogical perspective; 2) in terms of the organization of music education process; 4) from the position of the specificity of specialized music schools for gifted children. For this purpose we have used methodological educational resources, examination

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requirements, scientific and memoir literature, biographical data, interviews with famous pianists, conversations and questioning teachers and students of specialized music schools.

### **3. Historical background**

By the second half of the nineteenth century high popularity of the piano as an educational and cultural means and the formation of the powerful school of composition advanced Russia to the foreground of the world music culture and contributed to the emergence of great Russian pianists and teachers. The modern system of piano education is based on the traditions of the Russian piano school, especially on the pedagogical activity, authority and enthusiasm of the Rubinstein brothers. They invited the best teachers of that time to work in the first two conservatories. Even that time the main characteristics of the Russian pianism such as technical skills and high spirituality appeared. The requirements to technical skills were very severe. But music education was not limited to them. Nikolai and Anton Rubinstein demanded that the work was meaningful and instilled independent thinking. Students learnt different subjects which developed their horizons and music erudition. A typical feature of the Russian piano playing style is highly spiritual piano art, informativeness and thoughtfulness of interpretations, which Anton Rubinstein considered principal for a pianist and which originated from his performing style. Another source is the general influence of the Russian culture and art of that time which had specific mentality, tendency to philosophic reflection, self-knowledge and empathy. These traditions have been carefully maintained subsequently by N.Zverev, V.Safonov, A.Siloti, H.Neuhaus.

### **4. Psychological background**

A big role in the development of mass and professional musical education in the Soviet period was played by the works of famous psychology researchers and musicologists. The issues of children's creativity and talent were studied by L.Vygotsky [4]. Extensive research of musical abilities and their development was performed by Teplov [5]. They demonstrated that a musical talent includes natural abilities and the result of work [6]. Natural abilities can fully show themselves only if such work takes place. In Russia the issues of musical and creative education of children were thoroughly studied even in the most difficult years after the revolution. The Russian composers S.Prokofiev, D.Kabalevsky were actively involved in music education of children. The system of music education for pre-school children was developed based on the involvement of children into musical activity. At the same time the system of modern music schools was also established.

### **5. The general system of music education in Russia**

A unique three-stage system of music education for children, which is the only one in the world, was formed in Russia. It includes general music education within general academic school in the form of music lessons; the system of music schools where children aged 7 to 14 studying at secondary schools learn to play musical instruments, choir singing, solfege, the fundamentals of theory and music history; music colleges where teachers and accompanists receive professional education in order to work at those music schools in most cases; higher education institutions which are conservatories and music faculties of pedagogical universities. Each municipality has a music school with professional teachers available for each child. These schools are equipped with musical instruments. The system of music schools provides music education of children as prospective educated amateurs and performs the function of pre-professional education of gifted children and prepares them to enter a professional music college and conservatory. According to these two objectives of education, music schools for children have different educational requirements. Besides the system of music schools (elementary level) and music colleges (intermediate level), since the year of 1935 conservatories have started to establish specialized music schools for talented children; these schools combined the first and second stages of education - music schools and music colleges within one educational institution. Moreover, the studying at those schools was professionally oriented with a focus on the future performing activities.

All the elements of this system are constantly interacting and enrich each other. So, a wide chain of conventional music schools selects gifted children who then go to specialized schools and continue their education at a professional level. On the other hand, the achievements and the level of education at these few elite schools (now there are only 15 of them in Russia) serves as an example and a bank of educational experience for all other teachers of music. As a rule, specialized music schools were established at higher music institutions (first they were established at the Moscow Conservatory and the Gnessin State Music College), and the professors who work at the conservatories teach at these schools.



Music colleges supervise the work of music schools; music colleges are supervised by conservatories which render methodological assistance to them.

## 6. Specialized music boarding schools for gifted children

Reading interviews with successful Russian pianists, we notice that the vast majority of them studied at one of the specialized music schools. These schools can be called a real "forge of talents". What is the secret of their success?

The first and the most important fact is the compliance of the educational process organization with psychological conditions under which talents are formed. These conditions include the early detection of abilities, which ensures the development of giftedness in the childhood which is the period of maximum plasticity of the nervous system; providing a beneficial environment for the development of skills; involvement into active work directly related to a particular ability; creative nature of this work; the optimal level of learning difficulties; proper motivation and positive emotional background of studying.

Children go to such schools at the age of 5-6 or even 4 years old, they are first admitted to preparatory classes. Within 1 or 2 years in the course of general musical and creative lessons the level and quality of music giftedness as well as the prospects of the further professional education become clear.

From the first grades future musicians start to be actively prepared for performance, they have the bases of their technical skills formed and their hands posed correctly. Technical skill training started at an early age was a distinctive feature of specialized music schools, and it is simultaneously one of the most important traditions of the Russian piano pedagogy. Technical skills were especially focused by Zverev who was the teacher of Rachmaninoff, Siloti and others. In fact, if the opportunities to develop virtuosic skills in the early period of life, which is the most favorable for the formation of complex motor actions, are lost, it will be very hard to acquire them at an older age. Technical skills are necessary and very important for performers: having excellent technical skills allows a performer to forget about them onstage and completely "dissolve" in the music [7,8]. For example, the educational curriculum of the Kazan School includes compulsory performance of the most difficult etudes by Chopin and Liszt. The high level of learning difficulty, which is different from non-specialized music schools, is optimal for gifted children because a lower level of learning doesn't contribute to the full reveal of potential abilities. It is known that the brain of a gifted child should work intensively to develop, children don't perceive this work as overwork; they perceive it just as a game (Matsuev and others). The emotional factor is also very important: if a child is fond of music, music classes bring him joy even if he has to work hard to achieve a desired goal. Therefore, it is very important that only truly talented children attend such schools. Otherwise, strict requirements can cause physical and mental overloads, and in case of lack of success they can even cause deep mental traumas until the end of the life.

The distinctive property of specialized schools is a specific creative atmosphere saturated with music which is mentioned by all graduates and students. Children constantly communicate with great performing teachers, they try to be as good as the best students in their class and older students. Positive competition is also a major motivating factor: a gifted child does not suffer from the feeling of his own uniqueness, here he is one among the equal. The compulsory element of the educational curriculum is a performing practice, continuous performance in front of a live audience in schools, nursing homes, prestigious concerts and contests. It develops artistry, ability for artistic communication and resistance to onstage stress.

The organizational problem of studying at these schools is to provide maximum time for self-study at home. In addition to the compulsory general education subjects and performing classes, children seriously learn a number of music subjects. Expanding musical horizons, knowledge and erudition, the formation of musical consciousness in students is a long-standing tradition of the Russian music school. Another tradition is to develop self-sufficiency in students. The ability to learn a piece of music without a teacher is also supported at school.

Many educators believe that during the studies a prospective musician should practice at least three hours a day. This contradicts with the general formal requirements on the scope of education at a secondary school. Recently, the new Russian educational system reform and its compliance with generally accepted European and international standards made it difficult to insert boarding schools for gifted children into this system. The problem is that these unique schools exist as part of the public educational system only in Russia. Some time ago it was suggested that such schools were closed, and it took a lot of strength and energy from prominent persons of culture and science to defend just the existence of these schools. The official status, structure and orientation of these schools are under elaboration now.



## 7. Conclusions

To conclude, it is necessary to emphasize that the Russian system of music education has demonstrated its effectiveness in reveal and development of music talents. The major role in this system is played by the institution of specialized boarding music schools for gifted children. The study and development of this unique experience will help to preserve high-level musical traditions in Russia and other countries. Many of the elements and pedagogical traditions were adopted by the countries of South-East Asia from the Russian system, which has become one of the factors that caused an unprecedented growth of the piano art in this region [8].

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