

Talent or Training?

DR. LEONHARD DEUTSCH

All the mental skills of everyday life can be developed by almost everyone. There are, however, other skills that seem to be accessible only to a small number of privileged persons, to whom a particular "talent" is attributed.

In opposition to this idea, Individual Psychology assumes that the character and mind of a normal human being are the totality of *acquired* qualities, independent of inborn dispositions. Inheritance of mental abilities and of biological characteristics are altogether different matters. Some of the latter come forth automatically, and thus, indeed, might be the outcome of inborn disposition. Mental abilities, however, have to be acquired by the individual himself. A skill is developed by training, and no skill can ever grow without adequate training. The "untalented" do not fail in spite of proper training; they just fail to use it.

According to some theory of inheritance, the faculty of training adequately is bound to "inborn talent," and the "untalented" person is supposed to be unable to do any effective training from the outset, in spite of his effort. From this viewpoint, "talent" is the innate and latent image of a skill, comparable to the latent image of an exposed photographic plate. Accordingly, training and instruction have to take the place of a photographic developer, which serves merely to make the picture visible. Individual Psychology, however, assumes that dispositions are undetermined potentialities, comparable to some plastic material of uncertain shape which has to be molded. Accordingly, the development of character and mind is not a mere mechanical, but an altogether *creative, dynamic process*.

How can the one or the other assumption be verified? Inborn dispositions are not perceptible. "Lack of talent" is evident only if and when in a given case it could be proved that a person has definitely no chance of acquiring the respective faculty of learning. As long as the conditions of acquiring that faculty are not *yet* thoroughly studied, no definite statement can be made about the "inborn" disposition of that faculty.

"Innate talent," which so far has been presented as an indisputable fact, is virtually a mere hypothesis, far from being verified. Science should offer certainties, not assumptions. Whenever science makes an assumption, it should help to build up a theory for starting research work. The hypothesis of inherited mental faculties works in exactly the opposite direction, offering the most pessimistic aspect, and thus impeding the research. Belief in inheritance puts the blame for failure on the pupil's inadequate endowment, and thus handicaps the work of both teacher and pupil. If, however, inadequacy of instruction is suspected, the chance should be given to improve it, to a point where the teacher may take the full responsibility for the results. Thus Individual Psychology, historically

younger than the theory of inheritance, is also more constructive and progressive.

Alfred Adler has shown that the character traits of an individual are symptoms of his social attitude. He also described how a person's social attitude is developed. Here we deal with a comparatively simple problem. For the development of skills, however, we may not expect to find such a universal formula. Here we are confronted with a large variety of problems, and each of them needs particular research work.

This essay is especially concerned with the development of *musical skill*, using my previous studies in this field.* Music is the most popular example of a rare skill. Sense of music is prevalent in certain families throughout generations and is even typical for whole nations. This fact has been related to a particular "inherited" quality, the so-called musical ear. It was believed that a person who lacked that quality *was definitely excluded from music*.

Actually, "musical ear" is but the ability to understand the specific language of music. Understanding a language is learned through speaking it. Musical understanding is learned through singing. The natural way of learning to speak and to sing is by imitation, especially in early childhood. In this period the ability, as well as the tendency, to imitate is at its peak. Through imitation an infant adjusts himself to his environment. All the skills that are learned by imitation are basically trained in the first few years of life.

Every human being is potentially able to learn singing, just as everybody is potentially able to learn speaking. Everybody learns to sing the kind of music that his environment offers him, just as everybody learns the language of his environment. Whenever a child is brought up in an environment where words are sparse, he will not easily learn to speak or understand a language. Similarly, a child without a musical environment will not develop any sense of music. Thus we may understand the sense of music in families or nations. With them, musical ear is not the cause but the consequence of their music making.

A person who has missed the start of his musical training in his favorable age nevertheless has a chance to start successfully, even though with a greater effort, at a later age. Nowadays there exist systematic methods of ear training for the so-called unmusical. Virtually any kind of music study, properly done, helps to awaken and to improve the student's sense of music.

Musical ear, however, does not offer a sufficient explanation of the real "musical talent," as talent is apparent in particular skills. Obviously such skills include additional abilities which are still rarer than musical ear itself. Even a musical skill as simple as piano playing so far has been

*A detailed study on this topic is published in my book, *Individual Psychologie in Musikunterricht*, Steingraeber, Leipzig, 1931.

accessible only to a very few. This concerns not only the rarity of virtuosos, but also the fact that the average nonprofessional piano pupil fails to achieve even a moderate command of the instrument.

"Pianistic talent" was formerly held to be bound to outstanding manual dexterity. The "untalented" piano pupils, indeed, move their fingers on the keyboard very clumsily. The well known and ill-famed "technical exercises" should help to make the pupil's fingers more supple; actually those exercises cannot help him to overcome his awkwardness and so to make up for his lack of "pianistic talent."

In analyzing the pianistic finger movements we will find that they do not demand any more highly developed dexterity than the finger movements of ordinary functions. The specific pianistic difficulties are caused by the task of coordinating the movements to music, not of doing the movements as such. Thus we understand that "pianistic dexterity" means but the ability to coordinate finger movements to music. This ability encompasses an almost unlimited variety of tasks, including the most complex and intricate combinations of finger movements. Thus we also can understand that the traditional "technical exercises" which deal with but the simplest combinations, cannot help to improve the essential pianistic dexterity.

Coordination of finger movements to music does not demand any particular ability except musical ear and can be developed by everybody through an adequate training. It needs, however, a tremendous mental effort and perfect working discipline, namely, patience, accuracy and endurance. The degree of a student's working discipline on the piano is the measure of his pianistic "talent" and can be tested at any time by simple tests. Whoever has built up perfect working discipline by himself has "natural talent," and makes headway by the traditional methods of piano study. Development of working discipline by a person himself likewise is to be traced back to his childhood. A child who is persistently stimulated and encouraged to working by his environment will acquire and strengthen his self-confidence. He will learn to face difficulties and to love working as an end in itself. He may keep his approach all his life.

Men of outstanding abilities have usually started working in their field very early in their lives. This fact has been interpreted as the outcome of their "natural talent." Actually the early start of training is not the result, but the cause of "talent."

It is by no means unusual for a child to approach the piano at an early age and to finger the keyboard. Sooner or later it will happen that the child by mere chance will strike a sequence of a few notes in which he recognizes the beginning of a tune that he knows well. Now he might try to pick up the whole tune. If, owing to his education, he has acquired working discipline, he will start over and over again, until he succeeds. Gratified by his success he will definitely turn his planless toying into serious work, and he will continue picking up one melody after the other.

He will love that working for itself and will like challenging tasks, Every new success will lead him to new successes. Exactly this is the typical start of child prodigies.

If a child starts his piano lessons at a somewhat later age, he will show considerable "talent" if he has sufficient working discipline and a good musical ear, even if he did not start playing by himself. A pupil, however, who takes up piano lessons at a still later age will show quite a different picture, as he has lost his naive, impersonal childhood attitude. He sees the huge tasks still looming ahead, and by comparing himself with others he will realize how far away he still is from his ultimate goal of perfection. He might become impatient; he might try to force his progress and might practice, though under a constant tension and pressure. Whenever he faces a difficulty which he cannot overcome right on the spot, he might become discouraged. Furthermore, with ever-increasing age a person's interests become fixed, and it will become harder and harder for him to take up new interests. Most adolescents and adults who start the usual piano study fail in their working discipline, even though they are good workers and even talented in other fields. So it looks as though an "innate talent" if it is not developed very early, would degenerate.

A person who was pampered in his childhood has neither the initiative to start working nor the guidance to keep it up. Such a person may have the sincere desire to master the piano, but is interested merely in the result, not in working for it. So he shuns the necessary effort. Moreover, pampered children, and also neglected children, have not learned to cooperate with their teachers. Persons of these types are fundamentally, and generally, "untalented." They will fail in their studies whenever they might start, unless they change their attitude toward piano work.

"Talent" will remain rare as long as working discipline is not yet generally understood to be part and parcel of education. Knowledge of the principles of education will, in the future evolution of mankind, help to make use of the potentialities with which every human being is endowed by nature. Then talent in any field, and so musical ability, will no longer maintain its rarity. The problem of today is to spread those principles of education, and to convince parents and educators of their validity.

That does not mean, however, that "untalented" pupils are definitely doomed to failure. They must indeed fail when they are subject to a method of teaching which depends upon the pupil's "talent" from the outset. That is exactly true for the traditional methods of piano teaching. This method assigns the typical "repertory work" to every pupil from the beginning. Every beginner, like an advanced pupil, is expected by those methods to work on every individual piece until he can perform it in a tolerable manner. The "untalented," who are awkward and

slow, have great trouble in achieving those results; they have to spend much time and effort at it, and need a great deal of help from their teachers. They learn chiefly by means of mechanical repetition and are limited to the simplest tasks. Therefore they progress extremely slowly and do not change their basic attitude toward piano work. Soon they come to a complete standstill.

Instruction can become independent of the pupil's initial faculty of learning only if it includes the task of helping the pupil to improve his working discipline. His deficiencies in this respect are most obvious when he plays a piece at *first sight*.

Improving his working discipline means to improve his manner of playing at first sight, and vice-versa. That can indeed be accomplished with the teacher's help. Accordingly the first period of piano study should be based on sight-reading exercises under the teacher's guidance, radically excluding any kind of mechanical repetition and repertory work. Then the full variety of tasks in a steady and rapid progression can be used for every pupil, not only for the "talented." All pupils who are cooperative and have good working discipline in any other field respond to the sight-reading method very favorably. They progress easily and rapidly, even those who start in a later age and would fail at the traditional repertory method. For all the others, the sight-reading method means, above all, re-education to working discipline, self-confidence, and cooperation with the teacher. This process takes place only gradually and depends greatly on the teacher's attitude toward the pupil. It is the same attitude of understanding, encouragement and patience which Individual Psychology has described as the most effective attitude of the educator in general.

It is certainly not the goal of general piano instruction to make a brilliant pianist out of every pupil. The complete mastery of the piano is a life's work. The nonprofessional musician can afford only limited time and effort for piano work. Yet experience with the sight-reading method over a period of many years, and with multitudinous students of all ages and types, has shown that practically every pupil, irrespective of his initial ability and attitude, improves thereby steadily in every respect. Exactly this general musical development is, from our standpoint, the most important characteristic of the "natural talent," more important than the popular measure, which is the absolute degree of the skill achieved by the student. Apart from the practical results, the sight-reading method offers a satisfactory explanation of the "pianistic talent." A child prodigy no longer appears to be a miracle. Rather we should like to think of ourselves as merely frustrated prodigies.

Every kind of "talent" is to be examined by tracing it back to basic education. Whoever starts any training early enough will solve the problems of that training almost automatically. That is particularly true for

those skills which imply a certain inventiveness and imagination. These qualities can easily be stimulated and cultivated with every child.

Similar methods of instruction may be worked out for other musical skills. I must, however, for the present, exclude from our view the creative artist. True, some inventive musical activities, such as building up a form of given themes or of inventing themes in a well-known pattern, can be developed by a training which is, in principle, accessible for every musical student. From a critical viewpoint the greatest part of musical production at any period is based on mere routine. But to create an original composition transcends any acquired skill. It is the privilege of *genius*. Goethe said that "genius is perhaps only diligence." He was cautious enough to say "perhaps." True a man of genius must be enormously diligent to put his ideas into form. He must have a high degree of skill in addition to his creativeness, but skill alone, diligence alone, can only make for "talent," never for genius.

Creativeness is inherent in every normal human being and is peculiar to man, giving him supremacy over all other creatures. But among the millions of men there are only few who reach a height where they create immortal masterpieces. To clear up this mystery might be reserved for the future.*

*The question of genius is still very controversial. Even among the students of Individual Psychology contradictory points of view exist. It is planned to devote a future issue of the Bulletin to a discussion of this subject. (Editorial note.)