

## An Innovative Approach to Learning Musical Instruments

Instrumental instruction in general appears not to have changed appreciably for over two hundred years. This conclusion is the result of my having examined numerous writings of instrumental instruction of the past and present, and from contacts with many teachers and students, throughout a time-span of several decades. It's evident that teachers still rely heavily on the traditional demonstration-imitation approach in which the teacher demonstrates what to do and the student attempts to imitate the teacher. A similar procedure has apparently been used as the basis for learning to play an instrument for as long as music has been taught.

Recognizing that this is an immensely time-consuming and insecure way to learn, and since ours is such a scientifically oriented society, a number of teachers have attempted to use science as the basis for an improved approach to learning to play an instrument. Among these attempts are: *Sensor Motor Study and Its Application to Violin Playing*, by Poldnauer and Marks, pub. 1964 by the prestigious American String Teachers Association—a work every bit as perplexing and formidable as the name sounds. Another is *The Physiological Mechanics of Piano Technique* by Otto Ortman, finished in 1929 and published in a 395 page paperback by E.P. Dutton, 1962, a truly exhaustive work, largely ignored by teachers.

More recently and certainly more accessible and meaningful than either of the preceding is *The Art of Piano Playing*, subtitled *A Scientific Approach*, by George Kochevitsky, pub. 1967 by Summy-Birchard Co., Evanston, IL, which first came to my attention over 25 years ago. The author states that "For two hundred years (after the invention of the piano) pedagogical thought looked to the pianist's playing apparatus—to muscle work, to positions and movements of arms, hands and fingers— for the solution to all technical problems."

Then, although the writer makes copious and

unnecessary use of scientific terms that most nonscientists like myself would find distracting, the essence of what he states is that *around the beginning of this century there occurred a growing awareness of the dominant role of the mind in learning to play the piano.*

Kochevitsky provides a convincing history of this growing awareness through many quotes of scholars and well-known progressively minded teachers of that era. Then he belabors this extremely valuable insight to the point of turning the average teacher away, which is apparently what has happened. Although the 54 pages of text contain many invaluable concepts, I have rarely found a piano teacher who has heard of the book and none who use it.

Although I have mentioned only three such writings, there are various others in which scientific terms are bandied about. None appears to have ever had much, if any, effect upon the way music is taught and learned and for very good reason. I personally floundered around in the morass of trying to mix science and teaching the guitar for more years than I care to admit—long enough to become convinced that science has practically nothing to do with teaching and playing music.

Be that as it may, Kochevitsky's book came to my attention at the time I had begun a serious search for a more effective way to teach the guitar. This writing eventually prompted the thought that since the mind is dominant in all learning situations, any improvement in teaching would have to involve an improved or more efficient use of the mind. Developing such an approach has been a major focus of my efforts for several years.

Playing music well makes very special demands upon the human mind and body. The level of mental activity and the level of skillful movement required to play our more highly developed instruments well are perhaps unsurpassed in any other activity of mankind. Consequently, a very special kind of training is required in order to meet such challenges. While these observations would likely be accepted without serious question, a great deal of controversy and even confusion abounds