

Blanche Selva : Motion & Mind

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Who was Blanche Selva?

Born in Brive-la-Gaillarde, small city in the center of France, on January 30, 1884 in a non-musical family, Blanche will enter the Paris Conservatoire in 1893 and get a golden medal at the end of the school year. At the age of 10 this was completely unusual. But nevertheless, Blanche decided to quit the conservatoire non liking at all the way the musical education was delivered there !! The family will then leave Paris for Geneva (Switzerland) and at the age of 13 she will give her first real public recital in Lausanne playing shortly after the Schumann concerto with orchestra in Montreux !!

She turned just 14, when she listened to the "*Symphonie sur un air Montagnard Français*" by Vincent d'Indy. This music made a great impression on her and she forces her parents to find the way for her to meet with the master. This will happen in 1899. Convinced by her exceptional talent, d'Indy brings her to the newly created Schola Cantorum in Paris.

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Two years after d'Indy appoints her as a piano professor at the school. She will teach there for the next 20 years, not only in Paris but also all over in France, in the different schools of the Schola.

In 1904 she will play in 17 recitals Bach's complete work for keyboard. Pierre Lalo, reviewing her concerts, wrote: "*Blanche Selva, this extraordinary almost 20 years old young woman is, for the time being, together with M. Risler,¹ what is the most perfect in the world of pianists* "



Blanche Selva will then develop an immense career as a concert pianist, playing not only Bach, but the usual pianist repertoire, including Beethoven 32 Sonatas and numerous pieces written for her by composers of her time like Isaac Albeniz (2d book of Iberia), Vincent d'Indy (Sonate op. 63, Thème varié Fugue et Chanson), Vaclav Stepan (Rêves nostalgiques), Roussel, Ropartz (Deuxième Nocturne), Déodat de Séverac, René de Castéra, Georges Migot, Ducasse, Witkowski.

¹ Edouard Risler, 1873-1929, famous French pianist.

Selva was very popular at that time and was even portrayed by Maurice Denis, a great painter of XXth century, on a fresco at the Théâtre des Champs Elysée representing the most famous artists of the time.

But for her, pedagogy was part of her life and just before leaving the Schola in 1921 she became professor at the Conservatoire in Strasbourg (1919) and Prague. Still continuing her career as a soloist she creates her own school, educating teachers being able to assist her. We know about 2000 pianists who benefited from her teaching. She will be active in Barcelona as well, where she created another school with one of her students.

The Method

At the same time, she is working on her important treatise "**L'Enseignement Musical de la Technique du Piano**"². Seven books which will be published in 1923³.



"L'Enseignement Musical de la Technique du Piano" became a method with an enormous success. More than 4000 of copies of the 7 books of her piano method were printed during her lifetime.

Blanche Selva lived at a time when Neo-classicism and the Monumental art were well established in Europe. Symbolic and allegories subjects were then very common. Parapsychology and mysticism were also "in".

As an example, one knows how Satie was involved, together with Debussy, in the "church" of Sar Peladan, and finally not happy with that, he founded his own church, calling it l'"Église métropolitaine d'art de Jésus-Conducteur" (*the "Metropolitan church of art of Guide-Jésus"*) of which he was the great priest, the treasurer and the only member".

² Blanche Selva, L'Enseignement Musical de la Technique du Piano, Rouart, Lerolle et cie. Paris 1919.

³ All drawings in Blanche Selva. L'Enseignement Musical de la Technique du Piano, Rouart, Lerolle et cie. Paris 1919.

Selva was a woman of the extreme! Educated in a very strict and rigid way, she was very demanding with herself and her surroundings. Very catholic and a strong believer, she refers quite often to "*the Book*", the bible, in her writings and advices.

Very much aware of what had been and what was written about piano playing, she is continuously using quotations from existing piano methods (C.P.E. Bach, Breithaupt, Marie Jaëll, Scharwenka, Steinhausen etc) with comments. But far from imitating her distinguished colleagues, she developed a certain kind of continuity with her own spécifique pedagogical ideas.

Some important aspects

Interesting is her address to the teachers. It depicts the general atmosphere of the components of her method. (Her way of expressing herself is sometimes quite strange, but the translation tries to keep the spirit of hers!).

To the teachers⁴

- *Teaching can only be oral.*
- *The Truth is essentially vivid. It can be hidden in the Text, but it is only by the Spirit it becomes understandable, thus active and fruitful.*
- *The Text, to be clear, has to be taught via the Tradition, which is transmitted viva voce, from man to man. We don't ignore that.*

Then, why this book?

- *To help teachers to teach, but not to replace them.*
- *To help them to understand what they know themselves, more or less, conscientiously or not.*
- *To help them facing their own consciousness, sounding the aims of their intelligence and heart, helping them finding their own Truth, existing together with their intelligence and abilities of love.*
- *Sincerity makes a shining Truth!*

More details *The gesture*

We will not talk so much about "motion", but about "gesture" which means more a conscious movement.

"Piano playing, considered! by itself, is partly a dancing motion and partly a sign

⁴ All quotations by Blanche Selva will be in presented in italic

language.

It's expression goes through the gesture.

The musical text is a design representing the waves of the musical gesture. "

An important element is how Selva conceives the teaching of motion and gesture.

She was among the first piano pedagogues at the beginning of the XXth Century to consider the whole body participating in playing the instrument.

For example she conceived exercises for her students to teach them how the body behaves while going from an upright standing position to a down laying position on the floor.



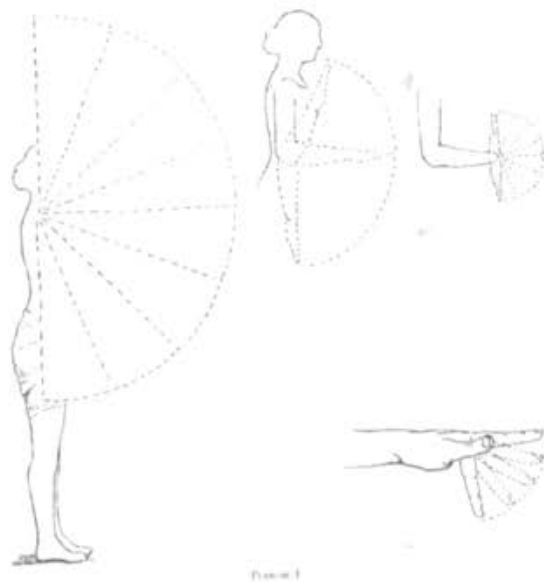
Maybe Selva got inspired by the Jacques Dalcroze method, she got to know in 1917-18, ten years after their first publications in the years 1906-1907. She was interested in his research to find a way to free the body but what she appreciated the most, was his special education of the ear.

Selva created specified exercises to liberate not only the body but also the mind. She wanted people to be aware and conscious of their motions, which means she wanted them to think before acting. Anticipating a motion, a gesture, is for her important.

¹¹ *In order to move a limb, arm or leg, one has to concentrate on the articulation following the one you want to move. Example: if you want to move the whole arm you must think of the elbow".*

If you try for yourself, you will see that this allows you to have the motion completely under control.

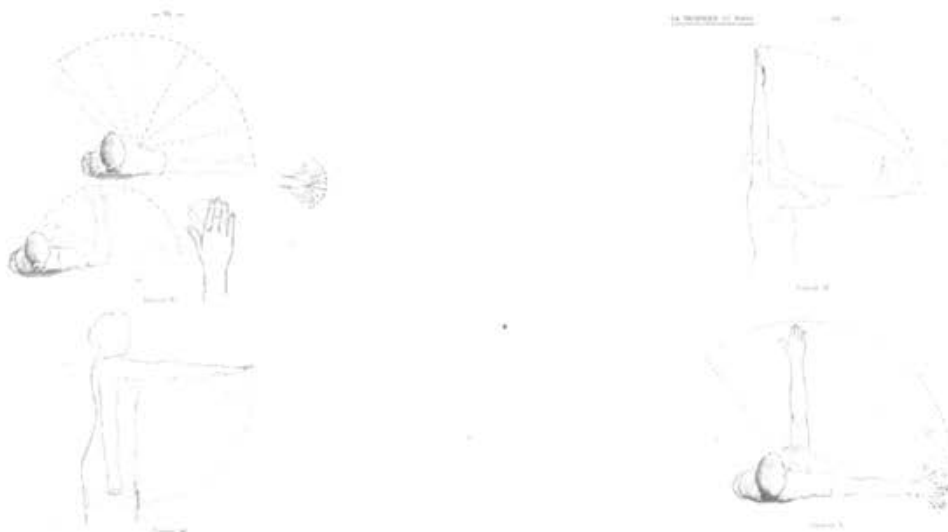
She will create all kind of exercises for the correct use of the chest, shoulders, elbows, arms and fingers



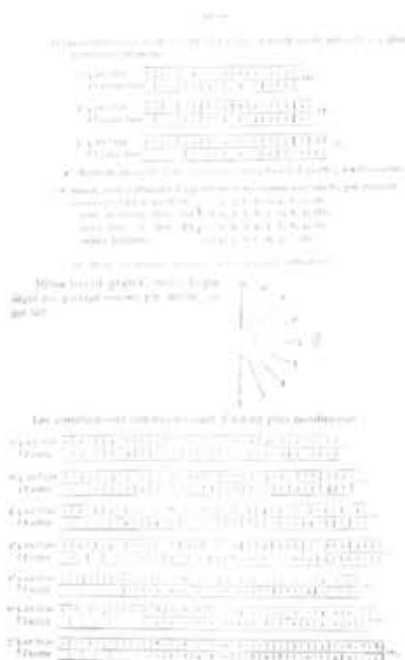
She got as well the idea of enlarging the gesture, exaggerating the motion, in order to identify the different feelings separately, when one later will be using smaller movements at the keyboard.

She detailed all the possible motions of the arm both vertical and horizontal and wanted the gesture to be rhythmic, stopping exactly at the points decided on beforehand.

Each movement has to be done, at the beginning, in a tempo of 40 on the metronome for one motion.



Moreover she advise to practice these exercises in canon and with many combinations!



The exercises were also meant to develop the independence of arms, fingers, feet (for the pedal) and to strengthen the muscles.

When I was a very young student, my teacher showed me an exercise to strengthen the fingers, not even knowing this was Blanche Selva's exercise!

It was an excellent one. Here it is:

Les mains étant décontractées sur les genoux, compter 3 temps. Au 4^e temps suivant, les rejoindre en l'air dans la position de la fig. 142 a.

Les doigts doivent s'arc-bouter fortement, ayant leurs pointes bien d'aplomb l'une en face de l'autre, se pressant mutuellement avec grande vigueur, toute la voûte de la main très ferme. Immobiliser quatre temps.



Fig. 142 a.
Position de contact des doigts.



Fig. 142 b.
Pouce gauche fixe, pouce droit mobile.

It says: "Hands on the knees, completely relaxed, count 3 beats (40= a quarter). On the 4th beat, lift the hands and join them. Pos. 142 a. The fingers have to form an arch, the tips joining precisely, fingers pressing strongly each other, the palm should be kept firmly. Keep position during four beats.

The three different touch:

Le jeu appuyé (the leaning or heavy touch)

Le jeu éclatant (the brilliant touch)

Le jeu indifférent (the unconcerned or neutral touch).

To Selva piano playing is always making music exist in the tiniest details.

A pianist needs different ways of playing according to the style of the music, the affect of the music, the melody line, the basses, the intermediate voices, the rhythmic and melody accents, etc. etc.

The psychology point of view is also very important.

When she explains in the preliminaries, that the body must be relaxed, she shows not only how to do, but also what to do if something does not work exactly, how it should. As an example: The body is relaxed without any résistance and the teacher lifts and move the arm of the pupil to check. If he/she still feels a kind of participation, instead of insisting on relaxing, Selva suggests to *try to draw the attention of the student on something else so he can free the limb completely*. This kind of observation was not very frequent in her time.

The next step will be, after the preliminary same motions, dropping the arm where ever on the keyboard, just like a stone. The student has to avoid *concentrating on the feeling of "feeling nothing"* because this will inhibit the process. She works then with the idea of *no care of reaching the "right sound" on the keyboard*.

But let us get back to the three different touch.

The **"leaning or heavy touch"** is produced by a relaxed hand dropped directly on the keyboard, carrying its own weight, adding eventually the weight of the arm if necessary to produce a very intense sound.

It is practiced at the beginning by isolating the finger going to touch the keyboard, keeping it vertical until it reaches the key. This exercise will be followed by more and more reduced motions but always able to identify the weight (arm, hand or finger).



The **"brilliant touch"** is practiced the same way, but with the difference that the fingers, hand and wrist are somehow tensed to produce voluntarily a very bright sound. The wrist has to be high, a little bit round, to enable the fingers to resist when arriving on the keyboard.



Fig. 17 a.

The **"unconcerned or neutral touch"** is played with a hand retaining part of its own weight, producing a sound which is of middle intensity, with no specified colour or timbre. The attack is produced by the finger alone, coming from a completely still hand (fig.16), still fore arm (fig. 17), from the wrist alone (fig.18) and from the finger (fig.19).

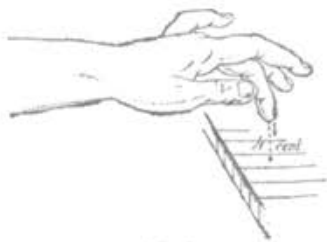
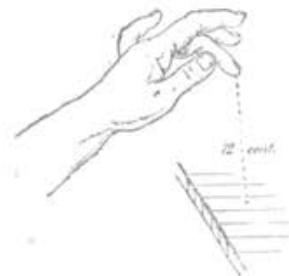
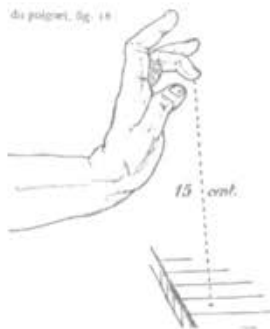


Fig. 16.



du poignet, fig. 18



du doigt seul, fig. 19

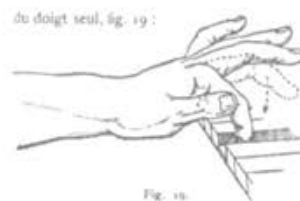


Fig. 19.

Important: Selva also points out that people think the hand must be relaxed for playing softly (*dolce*). On the contrary, the hand needs to be *"conscious, creating a slight tension enabling the necessary control on the muscles used for the "dolce" touch"*. Same attitude when you have to play both hands together, for example in chords.

The rhythm

Selva made hers the sentence of Hans von Bulow paraphrasing the gospel according to St John : *"At the beginning was the Rhythm"*.

She will insist in most of her texts on the rhythm, which she calls the *"quiet power"*,

considering it being essential, explaining, so to say, everything.

"In music, the substance of the Rhythm is the silence and the sound.

Expression is the connexion of different feelings related to each other. We are in front of the great law of the Rhythm, this law conditioning the whole Universe. Nothing exists without a relation, consequently nothing exists without the rhythm, because Rhythm is order, proportioning time and space, the rhythm is the connection between".

She insists on "the musical education being based on the rhythm. The rhythm decides of the various tensions of the muscles determining all movements.

and also:

Further on "the lack of rhythm is the most common of the musical sicknesses in the world of students, amateurs and virtuosos, not only among the pianists but by all instrumentalists and singers. We can really count the artists having a real sense of rhythm. "

Unfortunately things did not actually changed very much !

The basic education of the rhythm is rhythmic gymnastic, associated to an appropriated breathing. Breathing, being the main source of life, needs to be a conscious element in any gesture, any structure of a musical phrase.

"The education of the musical sense has to be based on the rhythm. The "breathing rhythm" influences the mass of the nerves and determines the different tensions of the muscles which coordinates all states of the body and all motions. "

As well as a musical sentence. A phrase (sentence) exists only if the sounds have a rhythmic connection.

And this brings us to consider the

The Neuma

A very strong point of her teaching is her interpretation of the "Neuma". To her "Neuma" means basically a *"written shape of one or more notes set to a single syllable"*, which is one of the definition given by the Grove's dictionary.

To Selva the "Neuma" has the same meaning as a word in a sentence.



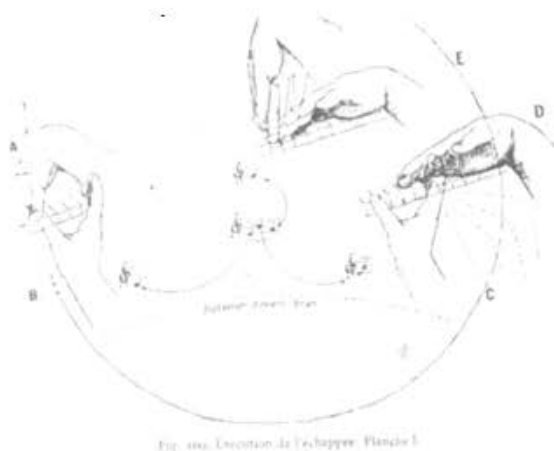
Synthesis of the neuma. a) Isolated sound (the c) only the weight (appui) is expressed. b) Dp beat. Only the arriving current is expressed. c) Masculine rhythm. Only the leaving rhythm is expressed. d) Feminine rhythm. Both currents are expressed.

She suggests a mental preparation of a pitch in space. Imagine in a slow tempo (40=quaver) in a three/four metric: a rest + a pitch + a rest, crescendo on the first rest, the sound played on the second beat and a decrescendo on the following rest.

Instinctively one is doing a gesture, preparing the finger during the rest to touch the key deeply inside the keyboard with a certain pressure, followed by a soft motion of the wrist to withdraw the hand from the keyboard.

The use for this is the "heavy or leaning touch", which means a direct approach to the keyboard, a little bit slower and entirely organized by the wrist. She says: *"The wrist is relaxed for the heavy or leaning touch and "wilful" for the rest."*

Selva will extend the "neuma" to a group of sounds making part of a phrase, or a complete phrase, taking into account the strong beats or the pitches emerging from the melody line in order of their importance in the phrase, which is shown by the following drawing⁵.



⁵ Watch a conference by Malcolm Bilson on you-tube dealing with all these details of phrasing. He explains very clearly what Selva describes in numerous pages : "Malcolm Bilson knowing the score".

The silence (rest)

"The substance of the Rhythm is the rest (silence) and the sound. And to understand the rest (silence) one has to be able to think. Thinking is only possible silently, and without silence, in modern life, the thinking is more and more absent, in spite of the educational development. "

We could quote the entire chapter, as it is still actual.

Selva points out that *"the pianist ignores that the rest has to been performed, which means thought of and done, the same way one plays a sound (tone or pitch)."*

Very seldom we can *hear* a rest which is really felt according to the music, especially by young musicians. Often the performer stops just because it is written in the score and not because what he is about to express needs a rest !

"Playing a rest", isn't that a wonderful image? As well as the one saying that *"the sound: a gem, set in the silence"*. *It is the silence (the rest) which gives the sound its profile, its meaning, its beauty."*

We know that not two rests are identical. It depends not only of the preceding sounds but also of those to come.

Selva describes how the human mind reacts to a rest: When one plays, instinctively the attention is drawn *on the sound* not on the rest, those being the *absence of sound*. If the absence of sound is not being considered, it can change completely the meaning of the music.

This is why for beginners and those who are not familiar with the question, it seems so difficult to "play" a rest, which means to integrate it in the music as well as a pitch. The difference between playing a sound or a rest, is the way the hand or the finger is acting. In the case of producing a sound the hand or finger does a down going motion, in the case of a rest the motion is up going, away from the keyboard.

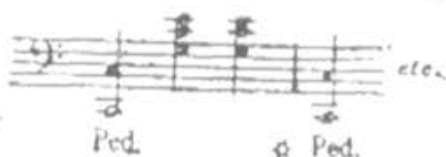
She also gives an interesting exercise which can be used for both rests and staccato. Each movement has to be done in a tempo of 40 on the metronome for a motion.



The Pedal

You will understand from the following examples, that this element was of the greatest importance for Selva.

The first example she deals with is the simplest one. Her remark consists to blame the publishers, saying that they are most un-precise in their printing !



The usual way of indicating the pedal is to put ON the pitch, ON the beat.

But actually it doesn't work that way.

The pedal always comes AFTER the beat, even in this case. The composer indicates here the musical effect, not the technical realization!

In our modern scores, some composers and pianists, who revised the classical scores, have corrected this, putting the pedal sign after producing the sound.

When you want a warm expressive Sound you have to put the pedal on the second fourth part of the value of the note and lift the hand, which makes the natural harmonies develop in a certain way (A).



But if you want a generous vibrating sound you have to put the pedal on the fourth part of the note value (B).



The third example is for leaps. You put the pedal on the second third of the value and you keep it until you have played the next bass (C).

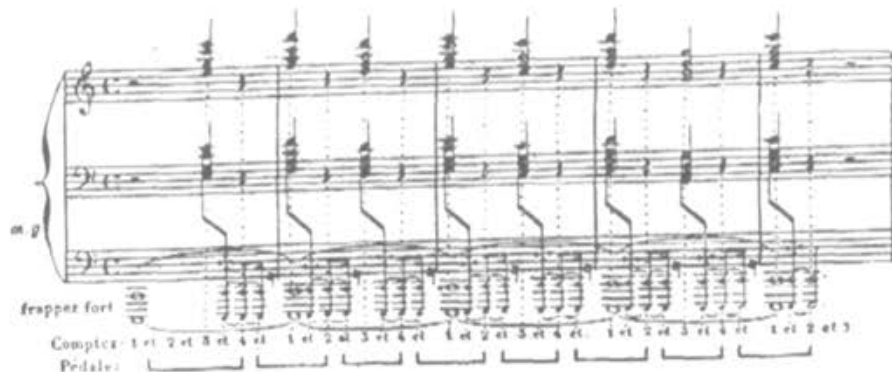


The bass note will be played with the "heavy touch", the high note being played in the up going motion.

To see how very precise Selva was, watch this wonderful example !!



How to deal with such a problem without using the sostenuto pedal, Just have a look on the solution:



What can be seen ? The pedal is pressed down after the first beat, 2) the chord on the third beat is played, 3) the hand moves quickly and press down the octave but without the sound, and 4) the pedal is changed on the second half of the fourth beat and so on....

I think this is the best illustration of how meticulous Blanche Selva was !

Conclusion

What was Blanche Selva contribution to piano playing ?

She went into the tiniest detail of how our body acts during performing.

She considered ALL motions, gestures, and affects of the music while building up a phrase, which also means building up the kind of technique which should be used for the interpretation of any pièce of music.

She gives many exercises on how to move the hands for small and big chords all over the keyboard, how to play octaves, passages, scales, (saying also that it is stupid to practice scales not knowing why you are doing it !!) how to deal with polyphony, where to put the pressure of the fingers etc; she also explains how to learn to read music "prima vista" but this is for another lecture !

What can we learn from Blanche Selva ?

That, you has to use the mind, the intelligence, not forgetting the love for your profession and the students being taught.

You must feel free to create your own exercises suitable for the person you have in front of you.

You have to adapt your teaching according to the student. Each student is specified

and
needs a specified teaching.
Any small detail will help creating the "know how" and will help your student to become a perfect pianist !!

Thank you for your attention

Diane Andersen
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