

***Luca Chiantore: Enthusiasm on the piano.***  
*Pedro Sarmiento talks to Luca Chiantore.*

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Against the temptation to take everything for granted, what better than to meet those who open a door that has always been there and that we have failed to see. Something of this kind happens with Luca Chiantore (Milan, 1966; [www.chiantore.com](http://www.chiantore.com)), a restless musician if any, who for a few years has led a peaceful revolution of the piano world. Although he recalls a phrase from Canetti (“music is the best consolation, though only because it generates no new words”), it was also Canetti who dreamt that one word could change the world. We who naturally aspire to changing the world, hope to use the word here to say everything in which Luca Chiantore places his, not inconsiderable, interest.

Luca Chiantore’s career might be surprising, but nevertheless replies to something we see happen constantly: a good instrumentalist with a good career as such, changes the direction of his life and turns to something else also completely related to music but away from the stage, from concerts and the long hours of studying the instrument. Luca Chiantore decided that his true passion lay in studying music, in a kind of musicology practised by musicians which he defends from another “letter” musicology, but with a long tradition in Spain.

The publication by Alianza Editorial of his *Historia de la técnica pianística* (History of piano technique) in 2001 brought Luca Chiantore general recognition, as it rigorously but comfortably and broadly dealt with a subject of interest to practically all pianists. If to this we add the relative general scarcity of musical publications, from which initiatives such as that of the Alianza and other publisher’s have for some time been helping us to escape, we have a veritable publishing success, for this is a book that will surely continue to be published in the coming years, satisfying the curiosity and humanistic spirit of not few students, professionals and followers.

We talked to Luca Chiantore in a break on a course for piano teachers in Madrid, so we had to talk about his teaching work. “I am surprised at the interest of so many piano teachers capable of travelling hundreds of kilometres to continue training. They look for new tools to develop their teaching and new perspectives for their own activity as performers. There is particularly obvious curiosity for the cultural context that gave rise to the repertoire that they play and teach. The time has gone in which playing an instrument was just believed to be a question of ‘inspiration’: performing a work means being in touch with a specific style, culture and historical moment which we have to know for this music to gain meaning. Classical music is a form of reflecting on time: a chance to reflect on the world we come from and to wonder about the future that lies in wait.”

One of the questions that arises in work with piano teachers is that of their pupils’ expectations. “The figure of the concert pianist is very attractive, but it involves an enormous burden and is naturally reserved for a few youngsters with immense talent. The teachers are very aware of this, but the parents and the pupils are less so. If the whole building of musical education were there only to train tomorrow’s concert pianists, this would not make sense. But it must create tomorrow’s *listeners*, forging a mature, cultivated audience; and it must train the

musicians that the working world requires. The piano knows a lot about this: pianists, except on a very few occasions, do not live on recitals but rather on teaching and working with other musicians.”

Not to become a soloist after studying the piano is no failure then ...

“Quite the contrary! A more professional, interdisciplinary profile is needed every day. My case might serve as an example, but I am in no way an exception. Emilio Molina, to mention one very well-known case, has managed to forge an unprecedented path that is opening a new school; Albert Nieto has for years combined his teaching work with writing important books on the piano; and alongside these outstanding names we can not forget so many performers who live from their ability to read at first glance, or those who have successfully turned to the contemporary repertoire. The essential thing is to become engaged in an activity that enhances our talent and adapts to our rhythm of life, which is why it is so important that musical education should offer such a varied, transversal training. To believe that the only thing a student must do is spend 10 hours a day on the piano playing the classical-romantic repertoire is to be disconnected from reality. You have to study hard, of course, and above all you have to study *well*, but the instrument is not everything.”

Now that the new studies allow you to choose between “piano” or “piano pedagogy”, we would ask you what results you think this division might give. “Giving piano classes is an arduous job that requires very complete training, and in this sense having studies aimed specifically at pedagogy seems extremely positive to me. But it is not sufficient to have a good law, it has to be suitably applied, and this is the main problem for we come up against the system’s inertias and the resistance of a teaching staff not always sufficiently motivated to change their working habits.”

You teach in the ESMUC (Escuela Superior de Música de Cataluña – Higher School of Music of Catalonia). Tell us about your experience there.

“The approach in the ESMUC is highly innovative, and that is what appealed to me. Until I joined the ESMUC, I had never wanted to give classes in a public centre, and I immediately felt completely identified with the project. The ESMUC is the kind of higher education centre I always wanted and didn’t expect to have; a centre where all musics are treated with the same dignity, from medieval polyphony to free jazz, passing through flamenco and electro acoustic composition; a centre where musicologists are trained in direct contact with performance and in which the positivist approaches still standing in many Spanish universities and centres of higher education have been definitively overcome. I do not mean that everything is perfect, there is still a lot to be done to bring the reality into line with the approaches that sustain it. But I believe it is worth fighting for a project like this.”

In the specific case of the piano, what does this approach involve?

“Classical pianists here grow in direct contact with other forms of treating the instrument. You can choose the pianoforte as a complementary instrument and study it with a leading figure such as Arthur Schoonderwoerd, or draw up your curriculum so that jazz or musicology will play an important role. An attempt is also made to give a very complete musical education, not focused mainly on the soloist repertoire. Some might consider this a limitation, but we must remember that these young pianists have a large number of outlets, and one of the great bases offered by the ESMUC (not only to pianists, but to all instrumentalists) is that of providing a versatile training that includes the study of a second instrument, an outstanding role for improvisation and direct contact with investigation and other musical traditions.”

This last point seems particularly interesting to me. Is it important for classical music to know other ways of making music?

# Luca Chiantore

"It is essential. Hardly half a century ago there were still some in Europe who defended ours as music par excellence, justifying this presumed *superiority* with all kinds of ethnocentric arguments. Consciously or unconsciously, this was a way to celebrate the superiority of the whole of the European culture, a conviction on whose behalf western man has already caused enough harm. It is essential to understand that classical music (*our* classical music, so different from the classical musics of other parts of the world) is the product of a specific culture. Studying other musics also gives us the chance to enjoy sounds of great beauty, to approach other ways of life, to discover other ways to listen and, in a certain way, helps to make us better people."

What country or countries do you think are in a good position today with respect to the teaching of music in general and that of piano in particular? Why?

"It is not so much a question of 'countries' but rather specific institutions and people. For a long time, one of the undisputed dogmas of piano teaching in Spain was the convenience of finishing off 'abroad'. It was generally accepted that other countries could offer training that could not be achieved on this side of the Pyrenees. Today this belief is more meaningless than ever, as there are leading initiatives such as the Escuela Reina Sofía or the ESMUC, but the reality was and still is that everything depends on where and with whom you are going to study. Of course countries such as England, Hungary and Holland have managed to upgrade their pedagogical tradition more brilliantly than others, but not all centres in these countries offer training equally adapted to today's musical reality. In the end, it is the same situation as we have in Spain."

What is the predominant focus of piano technique today, if there is any?

"I often hear teachers and pupils (in fact more teachers than pupils) complaining that a lot of attention is paid to technique and not so much to expressive elements. I don't agree. Technique well understood is the base of everything, it is all of the skills that allow us to get what we want out of the instrument. It is not enough to imagine *what* a certain scene must sound *like*; you have to be capable of playing it, and without a technique at the height of our imagination we will never manage to communicate what we have in mind. This is why I say that technique must really be taken care of. Of course I am talking about a technique that is a true *technique of colour*, coherent with a strong current tendency in the concert world. But everything starts from the base, and one of the problems of piano teaching in Spain is that the technical foundations are often not adequately taught: there are pupils who finish the upper grade without ever studying scales and arpeggios, without being clearly aware of the different movements of their body and without being capable of drawing a suitable timbre from the instrument."

How has piano technique affected the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century repertoire? "Thanks to Romanticism, the piano became an emblem: the emblem of the bourgeois leading class arisen from the Industrial Revolution; the emblem of a well-to-do social, urban sector with purchasing power and time for something so unproductive as music. Consciously or unconsciously, parents dreaming of their child playing the piano (and not the bassoon, for instance, or the trumpet or the electric guitar) are taking on this same ideal. It is therefore hardly surprising that the piano repertoire is so related to that time, full of composers who were often great virtuosos and therefore capable of moulding the technical innovations to the evolution of musical language. As we go further into the 20<sup>th</sup> century the situation changes: the possibilities of musical language are multiplied and also the instrumental resources, but the repertoire preferred by the performers and the audience is still bound to decimononic models. Resources have been introduced in instrumental writing that are sometimes radically new, but only sporadically do the innovations of recent literature end up conditioning the writing of the works of the past, so the reference is still that of romantic technique. This does not mean that we play today as we did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for the reading we today give those works often has little to do with what the composers of the time had in mind. The sound hedonism now so much in fashion, the search for a sound that, above all, is

'pleasant', is, for example, a typical contribution of the second half of the 20th century to the history of performance. This is also true of waiving a clear, defined accentuation, which was so important in the past and now tends to be discarded by the pianists. I therefore often wonder what music and what kind of performance we are to expect throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let's remember that magnificent music is still being produced, which only requires imaginative performers and a little curiosity from listeners to be known."

Have you got any other publishing project?

"My many work commitments do not leave me much time to continually work on the two works I am currently on: a text I have almost finished on the technical exercises of the Kafka miscellanea by Beethoven and another further reaching one devoted to musical performance of the 19th century. In both cases they are books that will surprise, but I do not dare put forward a date for their publication; and then there is the English translation of my *History of piano technique*, which I am supervising and which I hope will come out shortly."

Tell us about Musikeon, the company to which you have recently decided to devote your time.

"Musikeon is a service company that arose from the need to bring together different areas habitually separated, which are musicology and performance. It is intended to provide those living and working in the artistic world with the knowledge of the best experts in each discipline. It has therefore created a network of people from different countries capable of developing a wide variety of projects: from the research that performers might need or the translation of texts on musical matters to advice for companies and institutions in developing music-related activities."

What projects does Musikeon have at the present time in relation to the piano?

"The Annual Course of Piano Analysis and Performance" which I have run for thirteen years in Valencia (organised until 2003 by the former 'Duetto' Music School) are the core of our piano activity. We offer piano courses throughout the year as postgraduate studies; collective courses of musical analysis, improvisation and history of performance, and also seminars, master classes and sporadic courses throughout the season."