

MAKING MUSIC FROM THE HEART: IN CONVERSATION WITH **FALI PAVRI**

Compiled by Manjula Nanavati



Born in Mumbai, trained in Moscow and London, Fali Pavri is the Associate Head of Keyboard and the Professor of Piano at the Royal Conservatoire, of Scotland. He joined a New Acropolis Culture Circle audience in Mumbai through a video conference call, from Glasgow, where he both spoke and played for us, passionately, from his heart. Here are excerpts from the insightful conversation that was interspersed with his beautiful presentations of inspiring pieces of classical music from Beethoven, Schumann, Laviniak, and Folkmar André.



NACC: A very warm welcome to you, Fali, on behalf of New Acropolis. Let me begin with a quote from Rostropovich, who said “You must play for the love of music. Perfect technique is not as important as making music from the heart.” So, Fali, what is it to make music from the heart?

Fali Pavri: Let me match you quote for quote: Beethoven said, I can't remember the exact words, but something like “To play a wrong note is insignificant, but to play without passion is inexcusable.” So basically, whatever you do, whatever you play, and I think that applies not just to music but to anything you do really, to do it with 100% commitment and honesty and sincerity.

But, to go deeper into what it is to play music from the heart, well, that is complicated. It's not just about emoting, it's a little bit more complex than that, especially with the piano and with Western classical music, because some of these great pieces that we play, actually getting to grips with the physical, technical aspects of learning hundreds and thousands of notes is a complicated business. And after that, one has to somehow delve into the emotional and musical intent that the composer might have had. So, it involves a lot of thought and time, and only once one has internalized all this, then one can try and play with honesty and commitment and, as you said, from the heart.

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There is more to making music than just playing the right notes, and audiences will never forgive you if you play a sterile performance with all the correct notes, but they will willingly forgive you if you touch them in some way, communicate something that elevates them.

NACC: In all these years what do you think music has taught you? How has it changed the way you see life?

Fali Pavri: Well, first of all, it's given me endless hours of pleasure. But playing the piano and grappling with music also teaches you a lot of fundamental life skills I think, that you can apply anywhere: it has taught me the value of patience, humility, dedication, focus, mindfulness, overcoming your fears, overcoming emotional, physical, mental challenges, all these things that you need to be a musician and a performer, but also in life. Most importantly, great music can offer you glimpses into another world, a spiritual world, which is a far cry from the kind of ordinariness of our usual humdrum daily lives. So, it provides some kind of nourishment for the soul.

We have such a short time here on this planet and we experience so many different things: joy, sorrow, love, success, failure, disappointments, loneliness, grief... and music can evoke all these feelings and help give comfort, solace, joy. So, I think it's a very valuable gift to have in your life, no matter if you're a performer or a listener, or just a lover of music.

NACC: Vladimir Horowitz, perhaps the greatest pianist of all time, said, "Never be afraid to dare." You have dared to do things, and really stepped out of your comfort zone. What drives you to do that?

Fali Pavri: What drives me or anyone to take risks, as you say, and do things outside their comfort zone, is because it's something you love doing. And the fact that as pianists and musicians we have a never-ending quest, a never-ending sense of discovery, because there's so much good music out there and so little time to learn it and play it and get to know it. That's a very, very big thing that keeps you driven.

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While I was a student in London I'd heard that Rostropovich was planning a trip to India, and so I just went to the Royal Festival Hall and went backstage, after one of the rehearsals, introduced myself to him in Russian, because I spoke Russian and just told him that I was a pianist from India and if he was going to India, could I play with him? Now, I probably wouldn't do that now. I did it then because I was still, I don't know, young and daring.

And he was taken aback and said, "Well, that's very interesting. You'll have to come and play for me." So, I went a few weeks later and auditioned for him. And a few weeks after that, out of the blue, I got a letter from him saying that we were going to India. So, you know, risks sometimes are worth taking in life. Without them, you often don't realize what you can do.

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NACC: What was your greatest learning from Rostropovich, from your tour, and from being with him?

Fali Pavri: Well, he was an extraordinary man, really. He had this unbelievable energy, drive, and enthusiasm for life, of living life to the full. He never ceased to amaze me. Even at his age, though not a young man, he had this boundless enthusiasm for everything. To give you a little example, we travelled to Delhi to give a concert, arrived late at night, and we had a concert the next day. And this was after many concerts, and it was all quite tiring. And he said, "I want to go to the Taj Mahal. Yes, yes. we have a concert, in the evening, and it's a long, long drive away. Never mind, I will play better if I see the Taj Mahal." So, we got up at 4.30 in the morning and drove hours and hours all the way to Agra, spent the day there looking at the Taj Mahal, and came back just in time to play the concert. He was forever doing things like that. He once mentioned to me one of his life mantras. He said, "I try to do something new, experience something new every day, and I want you to try to do that: whether it's discovering a new piece of music or looking at a new painting or learning a new life skill". And I think that's quite a valuable way of looking at how to live your life.

NACC: What do you think makes a good teacher and what brings you the greatest pleasure in a student?

Fali Pavri: Teaching is a difficult thing to do. I think I'm always struggling with it. It's such a big responsibility, especially when you're teaching the kind of students that I am lucky enough to teach, very motivated, young, talented students. And I know this is a bit of a cliché, but I really, truly do learn as much from them as I give them. I'm constantly humbled by the amazing energy, dedication and determination to pursue this very difficult path and, and achieve their dreams and fulfil their potential.

Teaching music is not a one formula thing. So much depends on who you are teaching, because they all have different strengths and weaknesses and need help in different ways. Some of them need basic technical guidance, others are already fully formed pianists and need just encouragement and confidence to find their own voice. Some just need a little push, some people need a kick. So, you have to be very sensitive to each student's needs and guide them along in a nurturing kind of way.

I think one of the most valuable things you can do as a teacher is not do anything destructive with a talented student. Give them the space, the time to find their own way and help them along, gently guiding them. Because as I often say to my students, in the end you will learn the most after you've finished your studies. You'll find your own way of dealing with everything that life has to throw at you, even when it comes to piano.



All I can do is provide the tools and then it's up to them really to find their own way. I think you have to give students that space to find their own individuality. You don't want them to become clones of you or play like you. You want them to explore what they are capable of. And I think if you can do a little bit of that, then you've done your job reasonably well.

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NACC: You have spoken about how music demands all aspects of the musician, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Could you explain more about the spiritual?

F.P: Well, you're absolutely right. Music does demand all these aspects. You need to have tremendous physical skills, almost the skills that are the equivalent of an athlete. And you have to always be in good physical shape. It also requires mental intelligence and alertness. And it requires an emotional openness, the ability to show your vulnerability, which is not easy to do, but the greatest artists are able to do that, and that's when they are really able to touch the listener.

I think it was Oscar Wilde who once said, talking about the music of Chopin, (but it can apply really to any great music), 'when I play Chopin, I feel as if I'm weeping over sins that I had not committed and mourning over tragedies that were not my own.' I think what he means is that music has this power to evoke feelings and emotions in you which you may not necessarily have personally experienced, but which are an intrinsic part of humanity. Which is why music can be so powerful. It can affect you in ways that are difficult to express in words. I think everybody's experienced this in some way. It may not necessarily be with music, it could have been with any other form of art, but I think particularly with music there's a directness about it.

And certainly, as a performer, there are these rare, (but because they're so rare, they're so precious), these moments where you feel this real, special connection with an audience.



You can feel some kind of a vibration going on there, connecting you with the audience, with something else. And if you can capture that and treasure it, it's very precious.

And finally, of course, I think there's something about music that can somehow give you glimpses of what are actually the really important things in life; things like love, acceptance, generosity of spirit, friendship, kindness, sharing, communication, power of silence, and having fun. And through music you can experience all of that. And it's interesting because I can't think of a single culture anywhere in the world that doesn't have music. It just shows how important it is to humanity.

I was looking through my music the other day and I found a copy of the Beethoven sonatas that my teacher, Shanti Selden, had gifted to me, after I won the competition that took me to Moscow. I just read this wonderful inscription that she had written inside. She wrote, "To Fali, for your wonderful success in music this year. Herein lie many rare treasures of the soul. Hope you will discover them and make them your own." 