

10.65231/ijmr.v2i2.132

Research on the Application of the Neuhaus School in Modern Piano Performance and Education

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KEYWORDS**ABSTRACT**

Neuhaus school;
Piano performance;
Piano teaching;
Practice;

As one of the world's most influential schools of piano playing, the Russian school, particularly the Neuhaus school, holds irreplaceable importance as its core representative. This article focuses on the practical application of the Neuhaus school in piano performance and teaching. Through literature review and interviews, the author analyzes the significant role the Neuhaus school has played in piano performance to date. Furthermore, the article analyzes existing problems in piano performance and teaching in China, concluding that teachers lack theoretical knowledge and practical experience, and performers over-interpret performances. To address these issues, the author offers feasible suggestions to promote the healthy development of piano performance and education.

INTRODUCTION

As one of the most famous and influential schools of piano in the world, the Russian piano school is characterized by its profound national cultural heritage and rigorous technical and musical style. They have gradually formed five major piano schools in terms of artistic and teaching achievements, namely the Igumnov school, the Gordon-Weiser school, the Feinberg school, the Neuhaus school and the Nikolayev school. These five schools have inherited the core spirit of the Russian piano school and established its position in world piano performance and teaching [1]. Compared with the other four major Russian piano schools, the Neuhaus school has well integrated the rigor of German and Austrian music, the expressiveness of Russian national music and the Stanislavsky dramatic performance system. Its core concept is to "make the piano sing" and to teach according to students' aptitude, cultivate students' humanistic heritage and personalized expression. Wang Jia pointed out in her research that Neuhaus's piano school thought not only plays a very important role in performance, but also plays a positive role in teaching [2].

In conclusion, the Neuhaus school of piano music, by absorbing excellent European cultural concepts and integrating them with its own national music, has an

inseparable connection with piano performance and teaching worldwide. This article focuses on discussing and offering suggestions regarding the application and analysis of the Neuhaus school's theory in modern piano performance and education, and the problems that have emerged in contemporary piano education in my country. It is hoped that readers will grasp and practically apply the theoretical knowledge of the Neuhaus school, thereby promoting the healthy development of piano art in my country.

1. A theoretical overview of Neuhaus school

The Neuhaus school, the most representative school of Russian piano music, centers on the concept of "musical wholeness and individual expression," emphasizing "sound as the carrier of emotion" and stressing the importance of listening attentively and playing with heart. World-renowned pianist Horowitz once said, "Neuhaus is the soul of Russian piano; his school makes the piano 'speak, sing,' representing the pinnacle of Romanticism." To this day, the Neuhaus school's teaching model continues in the teaching of the Tchaikovsky State Conservatory and the Saint Petersburg State Conservatory. The Neuhaus school

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Received date: February 01, 2026; Revised manuscript received date: February 10, 2026; Accepted date: February 20, 2026; Online publication date: February 28, 2026.

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emphasizes the control of touch. In terms of basic finger skills, it emphasizes the weight of the fingers and even the whole arm, the speed of key press, and the sensitivity of fingertips. In terms of musical expressiveness, Neuhaus emphasizes the flexible balance between sensibility and rationality. When performing a piece, the performer should be familiar with the score and interpret it according to their own understanding. It is important to grasp the balance between technique and emotional expression. [3]

In order to enable students to have a very clear logic in playing the piano, Neuhaus would explore the control of the human physiological structure on the physical properties of the piano itself and the change of tone from the perspectives of mechanics, anatomy, psychology and other aspects. He pointed out that "what kind of movement will produce what kind of force, and what kind of force will produce what kind of tone" and that the two are mutually restrictive and developing. If there are problems such as stiff arms and insufficient finger dexterity when playing, then the sound produced by the strings will definitely be harsh and heavy; on the contrary, if you pay attention to the force, speed and touch of the fingers falling naturally on the piano, then the tone of the performance will be relaxed and controlled. [4]

In terms of psychology, Neuhaus also emphasized "natural playing" by using psychological knowledge to summarize the problems that students encounter when performing on stage, and to guide students to have a healthy and natural mindset when playing, so that the sound produced can resonate positively with the audience. [5]

2. Research Methods

2.1. Literature Review Method

By reading excellent domestic and foreign journals and literature, I have concluded that the Neuhaus piano school not only plays a necessary role in promoting piano performance, but also provides positive guidance for students in education, thereby inspiring students to have innovative thinking and creative inspiration in performance and teaching. Yang Peilin pointed out in his research that compared with other piano schools, the Neuhaus school integrates different disciplines from different angles, transforms the musical image from abstract to concrete, and creates a variety of timbres through arm weight, key speed, and fingertip sensitivity, highlighting the singing and

naturalness of the melody [6]. Liu Xinxin also pointed out in her research that Neuhaus not only explored the piano path himself, but also understood music in close connection with poetry, drama and painting art. At the same time, he also had different solutions for different students' mental states at the time in teaching [7]. Bao Huiqiao said in an interview with the famous pianist Zalar Berman that Neuhaus is the most representative of the Russian piano school. Compared with other schools, the Neuhaus school pays more attention to the beauty of the sound quality itself and the romance of the music itself. Of course, Neuhaus not only analyzed the musical phrases when reading the score, but also discovered the beauty of the essence of music from different angles, thus emphasizing a natural and personalized approach to performance. [8]

Therefore, although the students of the Neuhaus school have vastly different playing styles, they all share the common goal of playing naturally, relaxing, and enjoying the music and the stage. This approach nurtured many pianists in the 20th century, including renowned pianists such as Sviatoslav Richter, Yakov Zak, and Emil Gilels.

2.2. Interview Method

To further explore the significance of the Neuhaus school of piano playing in modern piano performance and education, the author engaged in discussions with Professor Vladimir Nikolayevich Nekhanko, a People's Honored Artist and professor at the Belarusian State Academy of Music. Detailed interview questions are available in Appendix 1. In the interview, Vladimir Nikolayevich stated: "I believe the Neuhaus school of piano playing has made a tremendous contribution to piano performance and education worldwide. Even in my current teaching, I have consistently followed the Neuhaus school's principles. Unlike the other four major piano schools, the Neuhaus school, in terms of both technical skill and musical expressiveness, is a product of the academic ideals of European music academies. Specifically, this means that the performance must strictly adhere to all the expressive markings left by the composer on the score, followed by a natural technical performance, while avoiding over-interpretation. For example, Schubert's Impromptu Op. 142 No. 3..."



Fig.1. Schubert Impromptu op.142no3 analysis legend

This section is the main body of the piece, strictly speaking in 2/2 time, and can be roughly divided into three parts. The first part is a single note in the right hand, which is also the main theme of the piece. The overall style is lyrical. The right hand can be divided into two parts: a progression on the root note and a progression on the middle note. Therefore, one needs to sing along while playing, but singing is fluid, and one must also pay attention to the emotional fluctuations of the expressive terms in each phrase. These are all necessary preparations for a good performance, not just a superficial playing. If one doesn't rationally study the work and the composer's intentions while performing, it will be difficult to play good music on stage and resonate with oneself and the audience.

"The Nikolayev school might be better suited for playing Russian folk music, as their philosophy emphasizes a strong, resonant sound from finger dexterity on the piano. However, this is only true for Russian folk music; it might not be as effective for other composers. The Gordon-Weiser school, while also emphasizing the score and phrasing, is rather thin from a sonic perspective, lacking Neuhaus's focus on timbre. Feinberg, largely a student of Gordon-Weiser, largely continued his teaching philosophy. The Igunov school excels at combining classical and romantic elements, but in my opinion, this isn't beautiful. Composers of each era have their own rigorous stylistic characteristics. As performers, we should respect these styles and allow for some personal interpretation of the score, but only within the acceptable range of the piece's style; otherwise, it will be counterproductive."

3. Existing problems in piano performance and education

3.1. Lack of research on theoretical system

Currently, students lack theoretical knowledge and haven't explored the theoretical framework of piano schools of thought. This leads to basic problems such as wrist and arm pain, finger stiffness, and unstable rhythm during practice. Many believe playing the piano is simply about plucking the strings and producing sound, including dynamic contrasts, and this is largely attributed to the teacher's teaching methods. In China's piano education system, aside from the 11 major music conservatories, other comprehensive universities and teacher training colleges generally suffer from weak theoretical knowledge, including a lack of understanding of these specific school-based theories among most teachers.

China is the country with the greatest influence of the Russian piano school, but many college teachers still use the "high finger lifting" teaching method. This teaching method originated from Nikolayev's teaching method, which aims to enable young students to support their fingers when playing the piano and maintain the "transparency" of the tone. Without a sound education system to support it, people will think that playing the piano should always be done with the fingers lifted high, regardless of the stage. The finger lifting technique training itself is correct, but nowadays, for teachers and students, without multi-dimensional theoretical knowledge as a foundation, the music played will be lifeless, like a robot playing the piano, and it will be impossible to educate students to have the ability to innovate in music. [9]

3.2. Weak fundamentals skills

Fundamental skills are crucial for a pianist. The root cause of a weak foundation lies in the lack of a solid understanding and mindset regarding the act of playing the piano—the questions of "how to play, how well to play, and how well to play." Currently, most pianists experience nervousness and fear when performing on stage, largely because they haven't focused on relaxing their arms and rigorous sight-reading during independent practice. Especially in my country's piano education system, most students learn in groups at institutions. While institutional learning is beneficial for cultivating musical interest and cultural literacy, most teachers are not from professional institutions and lack

systematic academic training. This leads to a lack of mastery of professional vocabulary and language in their teaching, resulting in confused thinking among students and only superficial instruction that doesn't lead to significant improvement.

4. The Practical Application Value of the Neuhaus Piano School and Suggestions for Modern Piano Performance and Education

4.1. The practical application value of the Neuhaus piano school

In terms of fundamentals, the core of the Neuhaus school is to utilize the weight of the arm to effectively address stiff, mechanical playing. Regarding touch, Neuhaus believed that the entire finger should not be used mechanically at the fingertips, but rather with the three joints of the finger, and that the sound should not be overly loud at the moment of striking the key, but rather focused on the propagation of the sound. In terms of score, strict adherence to the composer's terminology is essential, using different touches to achieve different timbres in different phrases. In terms of stage practice, Neuhaus believed in participating in numerous concerts and competitions, not just for the sake of performing, but ultimately to allow performers to achieve a deeper understanding of the work and a profound appreciation of life through their performances. Furthermore, Neuhaus encouraged students to collaborate in chamber music, piano concertos, and vocal coaching, fostering intellectual exchange and collaboration to promote the healthy development of the piano as a discipline for future generations.

4.2. Suggestions for modern piano performance and education

By integrating multiple disciplines, a scientific theoretical system can be established. For piano teachers, when teaching students piano, they should not only teach professional knowledge about the piano, but also combine multiple disciplines such as physics, human biology, and psychology to gain a deeper understanding of students' logical thinking and practice in learning the piano. This can enhance their interest in learning the piano and also play a positive role in promoting the development of piano studies

in my country.

For pianists, when performing, they should deeply integrate the scientific theoretical characteristics of the Neuhaus piano school to improve their cognitive literacy and ability, pay attention to the combination of rationality and sensibility, so as to achieve a higher level of understanding, and at the same time avoid problems such as excessive virtuosity and excessive lyricism in performance.

Guided by the Neuhaus piano school, the program provides a multifaceted analysis of the repertoire. For example, instruction should cover touch, dynamics, tempo, harmonic progression, harmonic characteristics, and expressive terminology when teaching each phrase. Students are encouraged to participate in concerts and competitions to understand individual stage presence and to grasp the psychological state of different students, allowing for specific problem-solving approaches. This helps students rationally understand their strengths and weaknesses, effectively promoting their piano performance development. Furthermore, the program can incorporate four-hand piano duets, double piano performances, and chamber music performances to facilitate interaction and learning between students and between students and teachers, thereby enhancing students' aesthetic appreciation and cultural literacy.

Conclusion

Neuhaus, as the most representative core school of the Russian piano school, not only greatly benefits pianists in performance but also provides theoretical support for piano teachers. Firstly, in the learning process, exploring the core theories of the Neuhaus piano school helps understand human anatomy and the principles of piano sound production. Then, individual training in fundamental skills, such as rhythm training, touch training, and arm relaxation exercises, is conducted. Secondly, in performance, emphasis should be placed on the rigor of the score. A good performance requires strict adherence to the score. While adding one's own interpretation, excessive virtuosity and lyricism should be avoided, ensuring a balance between rationality and sensibility. Similarly, in teaching, the teacher acts as a guide on the student's path. This requires the teacher to possess professional knowledge and adopt different teaching methods tailored to different students, promoting a positive future for students' piano learning,

improving their cognitive abilities and overall quality, and contributing to the healthy development of the piano as a discipline.

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