

# The Vincenzo Vitale piano school: Famous school but little known

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This paper introduces some aspects of the Vincenzo Vitale piano school; a twentieth century Italian school generated from the intersection of the Neapolitan piano school and other European musical realities. Although the School is recognized to be important by many, there is very limited specific literature about either the School or Vincenzo Vitale (1908-84). The thesis entitled *The Piano Teaching of Vincenzo Vitale*, undertaken toward the completion of a Bachelors degree and specialization at the University of Bologna in 2005, is still to my knowledge the only in-depth scholarly study on the topic so far. The focus of the thesis was on the principles of Vitale's teachings, his theories, the formulation of these theories, and their background.

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Alongside the German, Russian, and French schools of piano playing during the 1800's in Naples, the Neapolitan piano school, founded by Francesco Lanza (1783-1862) and subsequently by Sigismund Thalberg (1812-71), was flourishing. Well into the first part of the 1900's, Naples with its conservatory was the center of piano playing in Italy. Pianists such as Michelangeli, Ciccolini, Pollini, and most of the Italian pianists have their roots in this school. Furthermore, the Neapolitan school's prerogatives of piano playing have been exported outside of Italy—for example, Beniamino Cesi (1845-1907) taught piano in St. Petersburg, Vincenzo Scaramuzza (1885-1968) in Buenos Aires, and Vincenzo Vitale (1908-84) in the US. During the second half of the twentieth century, the Vincenzo Vitale piano school was considered the apex of the Neapolitan piano school and Vitale one of the most important Italian piano teachers (e.g. Campanella 1994, Di Benedetto 2004, Valori 1981). Although Vitale died in 1984, his name appears in many curricula vitae, some of whom, in many cases, were just auditors to Vitale's lectures; it would seem that his

name stands as a sort of “brand” of good piano playing and professionalism. Because Vitale himself did not write his method of teaching in a volume, the important legacy risks to be misinterpreted or even become extinct. Since 2002, I have addressed this problem by completing a 64,000 word thesis entitled *The Teachings of Vincenzo Vitale* (2005) at the University of Bologna, and I am continuing the research into the application of Vitale’s teaching principles toward a PhD at the University of Melbourne. The focus of the thesis completed in Bologna in 2005 was on the principles of Vitale’s teachings, his theories, the formulation of these theories, and their background. Schematically, now we know that the Vitale school was generated from Vitale’s teaching dating back into the 1930s. The school is informed by two main principles: (1) technique and interpretation cannot be separated and (2) piano playing is manifested through sound production. Furthermore, sound production is at all times resulting from a combination of two fundamental techniques—weight technique and percussive technique—that originate from the only two antithetic actions of the finger on the keyboard (sustainment of weight or percussion action). We also know that the school is based on a specific system of training and Vitale’s teachings are propagated today through the teaching of Vitale’s disciples and their students. This paper aims to report on the results of the Bologna thesis as well as on the aims of the current research into the evolution of the Vitalian system of teaching.

### MAIN CONTRIBUTION

The Vitale piano school is predominantly an Italian phenomenon that is centered on the Neapolitan figure of Vincenzo Vitale (Naples, 1908-84). Vitale’s piano teaching took place mainly in conservatories, academies, and summer schools, in Italy, in many European cities, as well as in Buenos Aires, Bloomington (Indiana, USA), and Cairo. Students from many parts of the world have come into contact directly or indirectly with Vitale’s teachings. Vitale was also active as a historian, writer, journalist, and promoter in the field of music—activities that significantly enriched his teaching. Vitale developed by intuition, experimentation, and rational process a pedagogical system of training intended as a tool in piano teaching, in its technical/interpretative aspects, from preliminary to the highest level. His pedagogy can be intended as an amalgamation of elements derived from the “finger school” (Clementi/Lanza and Thalberg), through the Neapolitan piano school, as well as the “weight school” (Liszt, Steinhausen, Deppe, Breithaupt, Matthay) filtered through the Neapolitan Attilio Brugnoli’s treaties on the dynamics of piano playing published in 1926 by Ricordi: *Dinamica Pianistica, Trattato*

*sull'Insegnamento Razionale del Pianoforte e sulla Motilità Muscolare ne' suoi Aspetti Psico-Fisiologici.*

The Vitale piano school does not refer to a finite institute because such an institution never existed. It came about spontaneously in the Italian pianistic entourage (pedagogues, students, journalists, music critics) as a way to identify a specific and prolific phenomenon. Its specificities were denoted by the technical drill that was part of the Vitalian training, the particular typology of a fundamental sound (intense, full, round, direct, very clear), and a significant number of skilled and/or successful professional musicians (pianists, conductors, musicologists, pedagogues, journalists) who have referred to his teaching, such as Michele Campanella, Bruno Canino, Carlo Bruno, Riccardo Muti, Renato Di Benedetto, and Paolo Isotta.

Vitale seemed to have embraced and “officialized” the entity of his school of teaching by releasing, in collaboration with Fonitcetra, three sets of recordings between 1974 and 1981 with annexed booklets: *La Scuola Pianistica di Vincenzo Vitale* (1974), *La Scuola Pianistica di Vincenzo Vitale [2]* (1980), and *Muzio Clementi, Gradus ad Parnassum: Incisione Integrale dei 100 Studi* (1981). In the opinion of the critics, the recordings appeared as a showcase of both the sound production and the principle traits of the school. If the 1974 booklet was an introduction to the school, the 1981 booklet was intended as lessons on how to approach pianistic interpretative/technical issues. Today Vitale’s concise comments can be of little practical use in piano pedagogy in general without a more expanded knowledge of Vitale’s teaching. This seems to confirm that Vitale believed that knowledge can be transmitted between teacher and student only directly and that any written suggestions can be misunderstood or non-productive due to the incapacity to adjust the explanation to the real needs of the student. The three sets of recordings with the annexed booklet are the only historical reference points authorized by Vitale himself, so therein lays their historic importance as a basis for further study in Vitale’s teachings.

Rattalino (1981), reviewing the Clementi album, placed Vitale’s teaching as a successful modern realization of the concept of the virtuoso pianistic sonority. The term “pianistic sonority” does not refer to the timbre by itself but rather the timbre as an integral part of the expressive “lexicon” of pianistic composition. More precisely, this lexicon is formed by the specific pianistic use of an extensive use of scales, arpeggios, double thirds, double sixths, octaves, and pianistic modulus that seem to originate from the interaction of the pianist’s physiology of the arm complex and the specific sound qualities generated by the mechanism of the instrument (Rattalino 1983). Furthermore, Rattalino suggests that the piano compositions of Clementi, Liszt, and Ravel

provided Vitale with an axis that exemplified this concept of pianistic lexicon, and that axis stands as a referential typology of pianistic sonority. Interestingly enough, Vitale sourced the fundamental ingredients of the specific typology of sound, the *cantabile* and the *brillante* sound, from the brief introduction in Thalberg's *L'Art du chant appliqué au piano* volume published in 1850 by Girard in Naples. As Rattalino (1983) observed, Thalberg modeled these two sonorities on the singing voice (*cantabile*) of the *bel canto*, specifically on the distinction between *cantar di petto* and *cantar di grazia*.

Schematically, Vitale's interpretation toward the realization of the two fundamental ideas of sound on the instrument concerned the amount of weight of the arm complex (shoulder, forearm, and hand) released on the keypad. The *cantabile* sound requires a major amount of weight to be released on the keypad and the *brillante* sound requires a major amount of suspension of the weight to be released on the keypad. The following was deduced in this line of thought: (1) the more weight released on the keypad, the more the finger must sustain the weight which limits its percussiveness; and (2) the more weight that is suspended (in other words, the weight of the arm, forearm, and even hand is sustained by the appropriate muscles that have this function), the more the finger has the right muscular/articular condition to solve its percussive action on the keypad. These observations brought Vitale to assert that sound production on the piano can be categorized from the point of view of touch mechanisms in only two fundamental techniques: the weight technique (*tecnica di peso*) and the percussive technique (*tecnica percussiva*).

The two different technique typologies were inferred from what Vitale believed the only two fundamentally different possibilities of physiological action of the finger on the keypad. The finger can either sustain, as a point of support, the weight of the arm (necessary in delivering the expressive effects in legato, *cantabile*, and in polyphonic passages), or it can execute a percussive action (what is commonly known as articulation) necessary in the performance of fast passages. In Vitale's theory, the two technical categories (weight and percussive) serve as a referential point of piano playing. In reality, Vitale spoke openly of a compromise of the two mechanisms, as piano performance (*l'esecuzione pianistica*) necessitates a "continuous technical construct"—the hybrid technique.

Vitale's necessity to find practical solutions in piano playing made him realize that there is no separation between interpretation and technique of execution, as one informs the other constantly. In fact, Vitale in his notes (undated notes transcribed by the author) writes that the Greek terms *techne*, which stands for "art," and *technicos*, which means "serves art," clarify the

inseparable dichotomy: imagination and concretization. The first generated from *Sehensucht*, the other from the means of expression (Vitale, Document 9 in Ferrari 2005). Vitale intended technique as the functionality of interpretative means: it can be velocity, precision, or timbre. Technique represents the means of appropriate sound production in order to deliver the musical piece. The executor's expressive capacity is manifested through the pianistic execution by achieving varied sounds in intensity, giving each note its appropriate accent with the appropriate touch dictated by the pianist's interpretation of the composer's indications. The more the technical means are controlled and precise, the more the interpretation can be exteriorized with precision of intent. A virtuoso pianist is one who achieves control over all the means involved.

Thus, Vitale insisted that the first thing a student must know is the use of the physical element that is in direct contact with the keys: the fingers. The third phalanx of the fingers constituted the focal point of attention: its action is the result of complex muscular processes that involve the entire organism. For this reason one must know the physiological mechanisms that preclude the motor activity. According to Vitale, without a proper understanding of fundamental physiology at least of the upper limb, there is a greater risk of imprinting an erroneous foundation for technique and consequent interpretation. Vitale's aims were to give the student sharp, clear guidelines in how to resolve interpretational problems without limiting the student by imposing one's own interpretational views. The practicality of theories interested him, not their abstract value. This is reflected in his considerations about the use of concepts and terminology such as relaxation, weight, and muscular dissociation. Vitale stated that any description of the act of piano playing from the point of view of muscular activity can be only approximate and any definition on weight technique, arm technique, dissociation, relaxed arm, cannot be considered differently.

The Vitale technical drill is probably the most famous element of the school. It consists of a series of concise exercises set in a progression that respects the assimilation of physiological difficulties. These range from the single note mechanism (four notes and five notes and chromatic exercise, scales, arpeggios, trills, and repeated notes) to the double notes mechanism (double thirds, sixths, octaves) as well as the combination of the weight and percussive mechanism (one, two, or three fingers sustain the weight over long notes while the other fingers act percussively on notes of a shorter value). All exercises are to be executed in all tonalities, with different graduations of volume (from *forte* to *piano*, as well as in *crescendo* and *diminuendo*), at different *tempi*, and with different accents determined by a fixed set of

rhythmic variations (groups of two, three, or four notes). Vitale did not compose the exercises; these were sourced from traditional piano pedagogy and were assembled by him within a system of rational criteria of determined aims.

### IMPLICATIONS

The underlying problem is: what is, or can be, the use of the Vitale system of teaching in the larger panorama of piano pedagogy? Possible solutions stand in presenting the findings to a larger audience, and thus encourage scholarly attention and debate to a substantial pianistic phenomenon.

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