

# WHAT'S LOVE

## GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Bringing the Inspiration of Eros  
into the Music Studio

*By William Westney*



*This article is adapted from  
the book Eros at the Piano: The  
Life-Energy of Classical Music, by  
William Westney.*

**W**hat motivates us as music teachers to do what we do? Maybe it's...love. We love music. We love our students. We love the feeling of playing our instruments (or singing). We love those poignant moments when a musical performance—whether by a 6-year-old kid or an experienced concert artist—comes from the heart, springs to spontaneous life and everyone in the room can sense it.

But what if we could take the “love component” even further? What if it could solve specific problems in the studio and deepen the whole musical experience? This is where Eros enters the picture. Yes, Eros—the god of love in ancient Greek mythology.

Music has always been fairly easy to write about in a superficial way, but almost impossible in a deeper way that might truly capture some of its meaning. Words struggle to express that acute sense of *aliveness-in-the-moment* that can happen with music. As a college student in the turbulent 1960s, I was seeking that very aliveness, questioning everything, searching for relevance, wondering whether or not it would be a good idea to pursue a career in classical music.

At one point I happened on a written phrase that lodged in my brain; many decades later it became the impetus for a book I've recently written. That phrase came right at the end of the famous essay by cultural critic Susan Sontag, titled “Against Interpretation.” In it, Sontag lambasted the arts critics of the time, claiming that their über-intellectual analyses were robbing artworks of their magic, their immediacy, the “luminousness of the thing itself.” It was time to “recover our senses.” In conclusion, she said, more intellectualism won't do the trick; what we really need is “an erotics of art” (Sontag 1961, 13).

That sounded thrilling to me—and, somehow, right on target. But Sontag explains nothing about “erotics”; apparently, putting this idea into practice will be up to us. It doesn't take long, though, once we start investigating Eros, to get an idea of what's possible. To begin with, what does Eros connote for us today? Usually, two things: (1) Cupid—winged little

guy aiming his golden arrow at a love-target, and (2) all things “erotic,” i.e., sexy. Well, it turns out that this is quite a limited, narrowed-down understanding. Eros originally personified much more than these particular components; *Eros was an inspiring god who clarified, in a sweeping and glorious way, what it means to be human.*

Above all, philosophers describe Eros as the god of human creativity and connectedness. As earthly life was beginning, it was Eros who transformed it from a silent and bare environment to a buzzing realm full of “life, joy and motion” (May 1969, 64). For Plato, Eros represented “all human striving for the good, for happiness,” and personified “human nature itself” (Roochnik 1987, 119).

### Music and Eros

Some writers are quite explicit about the link between the musical impulse and Eros. “Song and music are erotic. We plunge into our depths even as we surrender ourselves to the sound. Eros cuts through ego and touches essence. We feel alive and totally present in the fullness of our longing” (Gafni and Kincaid 2017, 378).

Sometimes all we have to do is think about music as we're reading about Eros. For example, think of music lessons (and those special moments that can happen in lessons) when you read something like this: “Eros blurs that precise line between self and other, between teacher and student, between you and me” (Fidyk 2009, 62). Or consider the experience of performing when you read this: “Eros affects the soul by opening into the limitless, encouraging risk, rewarding vulnerability, and accepting that we are not in control of some essential human matters whose origin lies outside of us” (Fidyk 2009, 62). When we open ourselves to the unpredictability of performing for others, and to the beauty of music, we also open ourselves to “the limitless.” Wow.

The Eros-context is a timeless one, universally human, and there seems to be something noble about it. It can provide musicians with a handy thought-label for those expansive experiences that can be so hard to put into words.

### The Search for What's Missing

So far, we've been alluding to fairly abstract things. But what about practical day-to-day problem solving? That process is essentially "erotic" too, as the ancients tell us.

According to Greek mythology about love (as recounted in Plato's *Symposium*), humans were originally formed quite differently than they are now. They had two heads, twice as many limbs, and liked to curl themselves into a ball and careen around quite recklessly—much to the annoyance of Zeus, the all-powerful god. To teach them a lesson, Zeus decided to split humans in half. Now they were more "normal," with one head, two arms and so forth. But they continued to sense the loss of their missing part—and were thus always searching for a "soulmate," the one who would complete them (Plato 1989, 29–30).

The point is, this fable isn't just about love—there is a wider implication. *It is the search for "what's missing" that propels creativity of all kinds.* Humans are restless, perpetually looking for solutions. Every time we seek an answer, seek the thing we lack in that moment, we are engaged in an "erotic" quest for fulfillment, that is, finding the "missing piece" that feels right. Teachers search for answers countless times a day. "What is the best thing I can say to this student right now, and how should I say it?" "What is a problem-solving strategy I haven't thought of yet for this technical spot?" "What are some possibilities for captivating the beauty in that melodic phrase?"

We will never have every answer, never "get there." There will always be more to find, a new horizon over the next hill. Is this frustrating? Not at all. Constant discovery is what makes our lives so rich.

### Logos and Eros

...are two opposites, according to philosophers. Yet they complement each other beautifully. Think of other famous dualities like yin/yang or Dionysian/Apollonian. We need both sides of these dualisms to better understand the full range of life.

So what's Logos? Among the definitions:

- words
- logic
- the systematic "study of" something (as in the suffix "-ology")
- divine order
- differentiating one thing from another

In musical terms, Logos encompasses formal structure, stylistic tradition, historical context—in short, any wisdom that can be *articulated*. By contrast, we have the "messiness" of Eros: the untranslatable world of feelings, of physicality, of spontaneous impulses and transpersonal connection. We need both!

Words and concepts strive to be clear, stable, well-differentiated. But music flows through time, and that's how its meaning unfolds—ever-evolving, constantly shifting, blurring the distinctions. That is pure Eros, in philosophical terms. The great thing is that as humans we understand (effortlessly!) just this sort of indescribable "knowing."

Let's bring all this into focus by considering a particular piano piece: Chopin's deeply expressive E-Minor Prelude, Op. 28, No. 4. How might one describe its meaning or mood to a teenage student? No simple word like "sad" or "introspective" can possibly summarize this mesmerizing music.

On the Logos side, teachers can—and should!—address chord analysis, pedal technique, melodic tone production, the concept of *rubato* and so forth. This is certainly our job.



But in terms of expression, this piece typifies Eros, and how meaning can unfold moment by moment. With each exquisite chromatic change in the left-hand triads, we feel new implications. Loneliness, yearning, resignation, hope, defiance, sweetness (and more) are all in the mix, in various combinations. Feelings are not just one thing; they have nuance, texture, ambiguity. This changeability is how our lives really feel to us, this is "how feelings go" (as philosopher Susanne Langer liked to say).

How to teach such a thing? Simply by naming the fluidity of what's happening. Trust the student and honor the ineffability of Eros. You might say, "This piece expresses subtle feelings that go beyond words—that's what makes it

so beautiful. It's always changing. A lot of the feelings are rather sad, but in different ways. Let the chords speak to you; spend some extra time with each one—just listen sensitively, feel the harmony, compare its flavor to the one before and after it. This is fun to explore, and there's no right way to do it!"

### How Eros Can Be Helpful

Some quick ideas for implementation:

- **Eros in the practice room:** Pleasure and enjoyment are key, so do some warming up that reestablishes good physical experiences—the *love of doing this*. Be curious and receptive to fresh technical issues that may arise from one day to the next—think, “All bets are off!” each time. Set out to identify some specific problems and search for good solutions. Remember what Yo-Yo Ma (2021) has said about practicing (very much in the questing spirit of Eros!): “Am I trying to get it right? Or am I trying to *find something*?”
- **Eros in teaching:** Instruction in performance is very tricky, because we are teaching skills (not simple facts). Skills are elusive; they are often more than the sum of their parts. To master a new skill something has to click *within each person*—then they've “got it.” This is a mysterious and wondrous process, and clearly the realm of Eros. Why? Because it's holistic and can never be explained or broken down logically. Respect this as a teacher. Don't rely too much on explanations (Logos). If you are teaching a key skill, something subtle like breath support, tone production or arm-weight, say things like: “Just keep exploring on your own what we've been working on—your body will figure it out! And you'll know when it does.”
- **Eros on stage:** Let boundaries—between you and the music, between you and the audience—dissolve. Before the first note, take a moment to relax and open a channel within. Imagine the music is already beautiful “out there,” and let it flow through you and connect with the audience. Feel the flow and trust it. Let the bond with the audience shape the music in new ways—this allows it to come to life in that moment.

### Why Does Eros Matter Now?

The techno-world we live in makes us more accessible to each other than ever before, at the same time that our “contacts” are often virtual and isolating. But music is physical and immediate—it is vibration. Music is every bit of us: body, mind and feeling. Music is what happens in a room when people sense an uncanny *physical* bond of connection from one expressive moment to the next. The connectedness, the blurring of boundaries, the heightened feelings that have no name; one might say that this is how it feels when you are in love. And love and music share so many traits.

May we all, through our music, enliven the world—as emissaries of Eros in the 21st century.

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