

The Music Magic Podcast with Chick Corea

Episode 9

Mario Feninger: Chick's Piano Inspiration

Chick Corea: Yeah, I'm good.

Mario Feninger: Are you comfortable here like that?

CC: Yeah! I'm very comfortable. We're here with my old friend and my mentor and, I consider, my main piano-teaching inspiration. Mario, Mario Feninger. We've known each other since-

MF: Oh goodness.

CC: 19-

MF: It goes into the antedeluvian – before the deluge.

CC: (laughs) Before the deluge! About... 1972. Right around there.

MF: Yes, probably. Yes, around that.

CC: We're at Mario's fabulous place in Los Angeles which really feels like an artist's haven.

MF: What you mean, actually, is that there is such a disorder, my dear, that I can't find anything anymore.

CC: Oh, it feels very, very comfortable though. I'm happy that we can talk and-

MF: Improvise.

CC: Improvise, yes. Because the past few exchanges that we've had over the past couple of years have been so interesting to me and so inspiring and I think that the culture- your upbringing in music is something that is, now, in 2015, is very, it's almost missing completely and it's a part of our history that I would like to share. I would like to more about and I would also like to share with the other musicians. But going back to what we began to talk about, just to answer your question. My mother's mother comes from Messina, Sicily and my father's father comes from Catanzaro, which is the South.

MF: On the other side.

CC: The South of Italy. And he comes from – my grandfather Antonio, comes from a little town in the mountains in Catanzaro called Albi. Just to put a little flavor on that, about four years ago I played a duet concert in Catanzaro with a very well known and incredibly talented, young Italian pianist named Stefano Bollani. Great improviser and just a great musician. We played a piano duet and after the concert, backstage came 8 people who introduced themselves to me all as Coreas, Corea. They all had the name Corea and they came from the town Albi. And the spokesman was a poet and spoke very well, English. He explained they've been trying to follow me and they found documents in the Albi church and also in the Albi City Hall of my grandfather's birth certificate. They also found my grandfather's – somehow he found the document of when my grandfather Antonio landed in Rikers Island in New York, of his entry into the United States in 1901, I think. Something like that. I met who might be blood family members. It was very nice because I had never found any actual Coreas in Italy.

MF: In Italy? Really?

CC: Yeah, but like I was telling you last time, when I went to – and I played a piano solo in Napoli two years ago and I played Sorrento. The whole audience sang with me. Then you began to tell me about your knowledge of Neapolitan ...

MF: Oh, I am in love with Naples actually. Because my mother was Neapolitan. She was born in Naples. She had left Italy in 1920 or '21 and she emigrated to Egypt, where she made a great success as a piano teacher and where she got married to my father and I was born there. 1922.

CC: You were born in Cairo then.

MF: In Cairo, yes. But it was very strange because Cairo was a very international town, you know, and I was talking French at home and Italian with my mother and my father – with my father, French.

CC: Your father was French?

MF: No, he was Egyptian. He was Romanian actually. I don't know if he was born in Romania or he came up after his birth, I don't know. Documents are missing. But it was – we are a little bit diffused in the world.

CC: Yeah, as most of us are. But that's interesting. Then did you go back to Italy to study music?

MF: Well, I studied first of all with my mother. She was a diplomate of conservatorio of Naples.

CC: What was your mother's name?

MF: Teresa.

CC: Teresa.

MF: Teresa de Rogatis. D-E, a small “d,” Rogatis.

CC: Rogatis.

MF: de Rogatis. You know, she was poor and she made her way into conservatoire, into this class and this class because she was so gifted. The director of the conservatoire told her or told my grandfather, you know, terrigena. They would call her terrigena. She was a guitarist.

CC: Yes, mainly a guitarist.

MF: At the beginning. But when she came to Egypt she became established in Egypt as a piano teacher. The guitar at the time had a very bad reputation, you know. My mother was very proper.

CC: Yes. And she was a composer.

MF: She was a composer.

CC: In fact, I remember you playing me some of her music.

MF: Yes, didn't I give you some of her –

CC: Yes, you did. Very interesting.

MF: Yes, very I wouldn't say of transcendental difficulty but it had a good melody. She was a true Italian in that sense. She liked melodic music. So when she was 8 years old, her father, my mother was I think already a prodigy so a friend of her father met a friend, this friend and then he said, “Oh and how is your little terrigena doing?” And my grandfather, I think said “Oh, I she's doing very well.” “And what does she do?” “She plays the guitar.” And his friend looked at him and said, “You mean to say the guitar? You want her to starve?” It was a time when Segovia had not yet come into – how would I put it? Ennoble the art of the guitar.

CC: That was around what year?

MF: 1895, '96, '98. But my mother played in front of ground heads and I don't know what. As a child prodigy.

CC: As a guitarist.

MF: As a guitarist.

CC: And playing what kind of music?

MF: Guitar music.

CC: Yes, you mean – songs?

MF: No. What's his name? S-O-R.

CC: Oh, Sor, yes. You know?

MF: The whole repertoire of Spanish guitar.

CC: Villa-Lobos.

MF: No, no, no. Before that.

CC: Villa-Lobos came later.

MF: Much before that. 1900, 1910, 1910, '12. I don't know.

CC: I wonder if she had any knowledge of the Southern Spain music.

MF: No, because I explored that. No, she was not a Spanish guitarist. She was an Italian because you know there are schools of guitar. There's a Spanish School. Then there was contemporary at the time of 1700, there was a French School. Okay. There was an Austrian School. There was even a Russian school.

CC: Of guitar?

MF: Guitar.

CC: Like written music?

MF: Well, I have never found any, but I'm not sure whether they were not improvising only or something like that. I'm not sure.

CC: But with melody, with vocal?

MF: No, just guitar.

CC: Just guitar music?

MF: Guitar. It was extraordinary because we all think that Segovia is the guy who, how should I say it, put back guitar on the music line. Well, it doesn't seem to be totally true. It

seems that there was parallel lines going on. And, so my mother, she was the Italian school. The thing that was very interesting was that, at the time, the playing was, how should I say, like that, with the hand like that. Okay? And they were pulling the strings like that.

CC: Pulling, yes.

MF: I'm not a guitarist so if I do say anything stupid you can stop me. But, you know, that thing was invented by Segovia.

CC: That way the hand is grasping the strings, with several fingers playing.

MF: Yes. Do that with that thing. And that this also produced extreme sickness in many guitarists who were not playing like that. They were playing like that.

CC: Oh, I see. I see.

MF: And the guitar was held perhaps a bit differently.

CC: Yeah, so if the hand goes down like that-

MF: Really dangerous.

CC: Yeah, I can see how that would develop into, looks like, an unnatural position for the hand.

MF: Now, I know that because I lived through this conflict with my mother, when I was a child. People would say "Oh, that's not the Spanish way." Well, that's not the only way to play. There was quite a conflict there between guitarists. But my mother was kind of a natural genius. Because at the age of 6-7 she gave her first recital. Then she entered the conservatoire in Napoli. Then she took her diploma in composition, piano, conducting. Oh, she was quite- I witnessed one day when one of her pupils, when she came to Cairo, she developed a client of pupils and one of her pupils was playing the Greek concerto for piano and orchestra.

CC: The Greek.

MF: Greek. But the conductor wanted to be a smart aleck and he told my mother, and I was there, I was a child, said "Oh, I'm not conducting unless you increase my fee." And so mother looked at him, she grabbed a baton and she came up on the podium and she said to everybody, "Let's start." I said, "What? Mother?" I was looking at her. It was a totally different performance or personality.

CC: You had never seen that? I see. And the orchestra followed her.

MF: Like one man. Amazing. She had a kind of a magnetic strength.

CC: Yes, so did you play guitar- did she show you guitar?

MF: No.

CC: So you went straight to the piano.

MF: She taught me the piano because she was also quite the pianist.

CC: What age did you begin, about?

MF: I think I was 3 ½ or 4. And I hated it.

CC: That's amazing to consider, isn't it? It's amazing to consider.

MF: And I was wondering, "What am I doing here?" And I was looking at her and then once, because she was a rather stern person, and I said, "Why are you making such a face?"

CC: She was making a face. Stern.

MF: Stern. Serious. And she looked at me and obviously she saw that she frightened me because she was not showing me the usual face of Mama, you know? She changed instantly like that and she came and took me and said "Don't be afraid, I'm with you. I'm not moving from here." And I felt so much better.

CC: Because she was being a tutor at that point.

MF: She was being also – you know, It was the time when women were not supposed to be either conductors or do something like that. They were second-class citizens. And she somehow changed – one of those who changed the status of women. She was quite a person.

CC: Wow. Well I'm glad that her- and you've recorded her music.

MF: I have some records of – private records, ok?

CC: But they've never been published.

MF: I don't have yet the money. One day.

CC: Yeah, do you have tapes?

MF: Yeah, tapes.

CC: Reel-to-reel. 'Cause they have to be salvaged now.

MF: I know. I don't know where to go. I'll talk to Tom. Tom Solari. He knows what to do. So, I will see.

CC: Yes, yes, I would be interested to hear that for sure.

MF: Oh my dear, I'll give them to you if you want, because somebody must be able to do something with these tapes. And this is a school that has disappeared, you know, because Segovia came. I met many young artists who, after this method, couldn't play the guitar anymore.

CC: Ah, right. After Segovia's method? Yes. But your mother played with-

MF: The natural way. She was going like- It was much more natural. And she had a virtuosity on the guitar. I heard one day, I remember that I was a child, I was 6 or 7, and this has stayed in my mind, she played a scale going from the lowest strings to the highest at such speed and such purringness, diggy diggy diggy diggy. Just in itself that was something extraordinary. Because everybody is bored by the scales and "don't bother us with scales."

CC: Sometimes a beautiful technique can just be an aesthetic thing all by itself.

MF: Exactly. Yes, and she was one of those.

CC: Yes, yes. So how did you- tell me about the beginning of your musical and piano interest. Did you begin all the piano in Cairo?

MF: Yes, in Cairo. She was a very well-known teacher there. You know the European communities in Cairo were really the masters of the country because the Arabs were not interested in anything European. They were into the Muslim religion and the guy who was calling to prayer in the mosque and things like that. So it was a totally different atmosphere, culture and everything. And mother belonged to the European culture and then all these European communities were there to appreciate that. This is why she made such a success. On top of that, she was very stern, hardworking, you know?

And so the businessmen that were European and living in Egypt appreciated that because they felt that they could ask their kids to go and work with a person that was already an example. Because, you know, Egypt, at a certain moment, became the country of the playboys because there was a lot of money circulating there.

CC: Yeah, huh. Cairo, at what year?

MF: 1900, 1910, 1905, 1910, 1912, and on. It was a totally different mentality. At 5 o'clock, the ladies, the society ladies- you know, what do you think they did there? They played cards. And every day it was like that. Them playing the cards.

CC: Gambling.

MF: Yeah, gambling. Huge fortunes passed from one hand to another. Yeah, it was a -

CC: Wild atmosphere.

MF: Yes, but not wild in the sense of the far west, I hear. Something more- more aesthetic also.

CC: Yeah, right. So did you begin performing in Cairo when you were young?

MF: Well, the first time I performed I was, I think, 4 ½. But I played one piece. One little piece.

CC: Yeah, like I had a little piece. You played a little piece.

MF: What else? You couldn't play yet. I couldn't play Beethoven or even Chopin. I had a tiny, tiny hand.

CC: Did you begin improvising right away?

MF: No.

CC: Not until later.

MF: Much later. When I began taking lessons in harmony and composition, in which I said, "Oh wow, we can do this, we can do this, we can do this."

CC: Yes, well you know, one thing I'm interested to share with the musicians that might be listening in, is how the culture of classical piano that you came up through and learned and then you began to somehow observe that there were other kinds of ways with improvisation. I don't know how. 'Cause we never spoke about that or with jazz or with-

MF: No.

CC: Not jazz.

MF: I never heard jazz in Cairo.

CC: I see. So what got you interested to learn to improvise? Because I know that, as I admire the amazing command and beauty of classical piano playing, like the way you do

it and the way other great pianists do it and that's a whole culture made up of many schools, we began to talk about. Many schools. But as much as I admire that, I also know that many classical pianists and classical musicians, orchestral musicians, are very much curious about how to improvise and how to compose as well. And now there's more and more back and forth. Back and forth with that. And of course that's my interest as you know.

MF: Of course. But you see, improvisation disappeared at a certain moment. Up towards the 18th century, up to let's say 17- up to Beethoven. The improvisation disappeared. The last one that began improvising was Liszt. Chopin, Liszt. They were great improvisers. Okay? But they had- I think that Chopin improvised for the first time in public, he was 6 years old. Yeah, and Beethoven himself was a fantastic improviser.

I was not of this thing. I was just a child. And I was not mature enough and I must say that one day I was in my room and Mother and Father had invited some friends and in the evening, you know. It was very much like an evening. You always invited some person after 8 o'clock, after dinner, 9 o'clock, okay? The door opens and my mother comes in and says "I'm going to tune the guitar." And I said, "Oh, okay." So I stood up in my bed, I sat up, and Mother tuned the guitar and she played a piece and it was called "Mormorio della Foresta", The Murmurs of the Forest. Doo doo doo doo doo doo doo. I had never heard anything like that. It was like a breeze that was caressing my face. It was amazing. And I think that this was when something happened. Before that I was not showing much interest.

CC: In improvisation.

MF: In music.

CC: In music, in general. Oh, I see. This was an awakening of some kind.

MF: It opened here and all of a sudden wooo all the notes began coming out.

CC: I see, so that was very young.

MF: I was 4 ½. Perhaps 3 ½. I don't recall.

CC: I see. So how, just to scroll forward into the- I'm still sort of an incomplete conversation that we had about the Neapolitan school of piano playing. How did you become involved in this way of classical piano playing?

MF: Well, you see, piano playing, there was a number of researchers who tried to find out the secret of piano playing as there were researchers that were trying to find the guitar. The schools. The Spanish school. Ok, and so what happened is that I was more or less there and listening, I was even bored, I remember, by that.

CC: Still in Cairo.

MF: In Cairo. And then this day, Mother came into my room and then she tuned the guitar and then she played the piece, “Mormorio della Foresta,” And I think that something must have happened there. Past life, track, I don't know. Because, anything else disappeared. And I was there, looking at this woman, she was a small woman with a guitar and getting out of the guitar this kind of amazing thing. And that was the first time in which I really realized what it was to be an artist. And then it is the next day that Mother said “Did you like the concert yesterday last night where I came and played for you?” She played for me. And then I said, “Oh yes.” And she said “Suppose I teach you something.” And then I said “Yeah, okay.” I was dubious. And then she began showing me the 5 lines to start.

CC: Notation already. Music notation.

MF: Yeah. And then, little by little, I began playing little pieces.

CC: So you had a piano in the house?

MF: Oh, we had 3 pianos, 4 pianos. Because Mother had really founded this school. Almost. So it was blessed years.

CC: Yeah, that's a beautiful beginning. That sounds like a beautiful beginning. My father, in a sense, had a similar effect on me because he was so interested in the jazz music of the 40s and he had the recordings and he was played in that style and that was the music that I grew up with when I was a small boy and I listened to pianists like Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk. Then I heard Miles Davis, as a young man, play the trumpet and so forth.

MF: You played the trumpet?

CC: No, no, I heard Miles, Miles Davis play the trumpet and these were my beginnings in music. So I see how you can begin that way. So when we were talking about the Neapolitan School of Music, I need to know more about that, personally.

MF: The Neapolitan School-

CC: What is that? You mentioned Rossamunde.

MF: Rossamunde.

CC: Then you mention Cesi.

MF: Cesi.

CC: Cesi.

MF: Cesi.

CC: C-E-S-I.

MF: Yes.

CC: Who was Rossamunde's teacher. And when you told me that, it sparked off something in my memory or my feeling that a certain gracefulness and light touch and a particular beautiful sound at the keyboard- a beautiful sound, not a harsh sound, a beautiful sound, was part of that way of communicating.

MF: Absolutely. So this was a school in which you never pounded on the piano. One never pounded on the piano. I was not yet into the research of piano technique, as I became later. So, many things have not been kept in my head. But I could observe and I saw that those who were using the Neapolitan school were using more open hand. And I was wondering, because everybody else that I saw, was using more hand like that.

CC: Curved fingers, yes. Rather than-

MF: Flat.

CC: Flat fingers. Like Horowitz plays with flat fingers.

MF: Right. Exactly. And he- sometimes he goes away from that and this is when the sound gets a little bit rrr. Yeah, but he doesn't realize that, and even though he's a genius at the piano, you know, he has not made the difference of- the difference when you do that like that, you pull the sound out of the piano rather than *this*.

CC: Yeah, when you have the flat finger, you stroke the key a little bit more. Rather than pounded with the curved finger. I wish we had video of this. Put a video on, Aaron, and show the difference between the curved finger and the flat finger.

MF: You called him Jorge.

CC: Aaron. But Jorge is a good name, too. Curved finger is more like this and it-

MF: You know they, even today, some teacher teach you to keep an apple in your hand then play like that. But this has a disadvantage because you are using too many muscles here. Instead of using, making the hand play the piano, you must make the hand play the piano itself not a system. The moment you use a system, it's a dangerous thing because then you must know more than what people know usually. How not to be hurt by this thing.

CC: Yeah, that can be straining. So the free way kind of looks like this, doesn't it?

MF: May I- if you show them- I show you. Look.

CC: Yeah. Right, you stroke the key.

MF: You stroke the key this way.

CC: You stroke the key, yes.

MF: And this is fantastic because it does not tire the hand. But you also have to use a little bit of common sense of not exaggerating.

CC: Yes, and keeping all the muscles of the arm relaxed.

MF: And they go from here to the key. To the bottom of the key. So if you fragment this piece, this piece, this piece, this piece, this piece-

CC: All the joints. Yes. It has to flow all the way.

MF: All the way, yes. It's a flow.

CC: It's a flow. And I find that that flow can, and when I feel good playing, it extends throughout the whole body I think. And the body moves. It doesn't sit stiffly still.

MF: And you know how many, when I go into a conservatoire, and I see or I hear and immediately when I hear a pianist, I can tell you two curved fingers. And I go look and-

CC: And you can see the curved fingers.

MF: Oh absolutely. This takes away the human. It seems to be stopping the heart. Instead of having this kind of beautiful vibration, you know, that envelops the person that listens. You know you have tick, tick, tick, tick, tick.

CC: I was thinking about the way pianists get sound out of the piano in relation to what I know was the history of jazz piano. And the history of jazz piano comes from pianos being played, not in concert halls, they were played in bars and in salons and wherever and I'm sure they weren't tuned every other day or every month or whatever. And so when a piano, that has three strings per note, when those strings start to go out of unison, the sound no longer sustains or impinges. And then, add to that, if you're not really in concert and people aren't listening but they're partying or drinking or whatever they're doing and the piano playing is more or less a background for a party, the technique that gets developed is quite rough.

MF: Yes. Percussive.

CC: Yeah. Percussive and rough, just to get the sound out. And that's how jazz piano began and in my researches, there may be other things that I'm missing, but in my searches, the first jazz pianist that I heard that had a beautiful, light touch on the piano, even though he grew up playing in bar rooms, somehow he developed this beautiful light, graceful touch, is Art Tatum.

MF: My goodness. This is one to my ear.

CC: The great Art Tatum. It was the first time I heard this beautiful, light touch come out of the piano. Then more and more pianists began playing in more listening situations. Then finally in concert halls until finally you've come in the '50s, late '50s, '58, '59, with the piano playing of Bill Evans who then really put a classical touch.

MF: I see. The veneer. Yes.

CC: Beautiful touch on the piano. That became- I mean as much as I love the music and rhythm and experience made by the other pianists for sure, this touch and sound on the piano became the thing that attracted me.

MF: You see, when you play for a person, we have to know, why does one play? Why does one play for another person? What's the big thing, that the pianist is there and then somebody is listening and, like, opened up to receive the- what's all that? You know, it's bizarre. You know. I think that we had to, we, I mean anybody also in classical music, you know we had to come to recognize that there was aesthetics in the way of touching the key. And that that's what had to be developed also. The awareness of the aesthetic of the key of the movement of the hand. You know. And because there were people that have pounded the piano, it's amazing that the piano has survived.

CC: Well yes, I mean the awareness of doing something like that had to only come I guess when the pianists began to have listeners to listen, rather than just a bar room or party like that. That's very interesting about the touch because I remember hearing you play when we were in Clearwater after one of the events and we were up in the ballroom in the Fort Harrison Hotel and you played for us. It was like an after-event and we were just hanging out, but you were playing and you played various things but I think you played mostly Scarlatti pieces for us.

And I was watching intently your hands and that's when I asked you about how does it work out that when you move across the keyboards that your hands don't look like they're moving very much but all of these notes are gracefully flying out of the piano. And you mentioned about sideways motion of- and the speed of which the phrase goes, so rather than turning the hand every time the thumb has to come around, right, every time the thumb has to come around, instead of turning the hand, you just move to the new position. You just float to the new position and that was a revelation for me actually. I

knew that I would do that naturally sometimes but then not realise and when I'd practice, because I slowed the tempo down, I would tend to turn my hand to put the thumb there but that's not the way the phrase came. Or the way the phrase really came out.

MF: You know unfortunately- how would I put it? It's the distance between the words you can use and the reality that must come out. You know? Many times the two don't go together. You know there's a kind of abyss. Because they haven't found that- it's not that you have to be stuck to the keyboard, you know? That's also another wrong thing, okay. But the lightness of the aesthetic of the movement, voila. You know? The aesthetic of the movement in playing the piano, in playing any instrument, must be present. And then just a movement is like a dancer, a dancer who dances with fingers.

CC: Yes. If the body's not moving gracefully and freely, it can't produce what you're thinking.

MF: And then you have two things that the guy wants to do and what comes out. And I've seen classical pianists, some colleagues of mine, and I was looking at their way of playing and I said "What should I say? Should I say something?" And you know, many times I delicately explore whether I can say something and I can see immediately that it disturbs. Old habits it disturbs. So many times I don't say anything.

CC: It's a delicate thing. It has to be done with enough care.

MF: And humanity.

CC: Yes. Because it's a truth, that anyone can see if they can look and see once you speak in concepts like gracefulness. Or beauty is a very high concept, so you can't force that concept on someone but you can definitely demonstrate it and actually maybe after we talk, before we go, maybe you can play a few phrases and demonstrate the wrong way to do it and the right way to do it. You know, 'cause that might help a lot. So I want to ask you Mario about if you have thoughts about the relationship between playing music that is composed, like you're such an artist at doing so beautifully that you make it sound like you're improvising. But actually you find out that Scarlatti wrote that piece or Chopin wrote that piece.

MF: Well, let me add something. When you play the music that has been written by Scarlatti, by Mozart, it must be like an improvisation in present time. When one can achieve that, one has achieved the maximum.

CC: Yes. Yes. And so how do you compare that with what we loosely call improvisation? Like sitting down at the piano and improvising rather than playing written notes. How do you see that those two ways of approaching music-

MF: Well, first of all, I think that improvisation can be taught. It can be taught. There are some basic rules, okay, that one must know. And then, when one can apply that, then one also knows harmony, not only the basics, but a bit more than the basics. Okay. Then, there is a kind of- you begin living in that universe and this is why Mozart was such an improviser because he would go into that universe and snatch something and then bring it in present time.

CC: He probably would compose- I mean, I think the composer's mind is the one that really is senior. Like whether the- because you're constructing something- you want to construct something always that is beautiful and has some kind of order to it. Some kind of order to it.

MF: Yes, that's true.

CC: Something that tells some kind of a story or a poetry and so-

MF: That's right. Yes. A movement anyway.

CC: It's a composer's mind when you improvise.

MF: But, it is true, I agree with that mostly, okay? But if one is trained in that, a little bit, and one has a kind of understanding of the harmonic compositional way, one can take one riches where one finds it. Because after all, you know, where did it come in the mind of Mozart? From where did it come?

CC: Yes, yes. So how does- I'm trying to put myself in the viewpoint of listeners to this conversation. How would someone- how do you think someone can come into the knowledge of this harmony of music. How do you study it? How do you find that? How do you think you-

MF: Let me just ask you that. How does one begin studying harmony? You go there, you begin seeing the perfect major chord, the perfect minor chord, the diminished chord, the augmented chord and then now you have to be able to use all that. Even if it's only two or three things. You better apply. You, I mean the student.

CC: So, in other words, you're saying when you learn a few structures to immediately do something with that.

MF: Exactly. So that you get the flow going, okay, of your invention. Because it is also another thing is that you must be able to invent something. You're not going to play C-E-G, C-E-G, C-E-G for three hours. You have to move somewhere. Okay, and then this movement that has to be taught to the student.

CC: Yes, I guess we only break the notes down into patterns and forms and give them names in order to communicate with one another, but the actual music doesn't have names or –

MF: It's a flow.

CC: – to it. It's music is music but then to break it down enough to understand how this sound is this and that sound is that and you can combine this sound with that sound and this pattern with that pattern, is a method of understanding how to differentiate different little forms from one another. So you have, like you say, a major form, a minor form, yeah. But there aren't that many, actually. There's six or seven and after that it's variations of that.

MF: Yes, and after that, you're on your own.

CC: You're on your own, exactly.

MF: And the sooner one is saying, "You are bit on your own, what can you do with that?" And, how should I say, the easier for this person to develop himself because he knows that 'Oh, he can use that, he can use that, he can use that.' I think it's a training, like the beauty of music, the beauty of the creation, is a byproduct of something that you must be able to use, I think. Because when you are able to do that, there is no limit. Okay. When you consider the number of composers that have written and have improvised, and the music of Dussek doesn't sound at all like even Mozart.

CC: Who?

MF: Mozart.

CC: No, the first one.

MF: Dussek.

CC: I don't think I know this name. How do you spell that?

MF: He was a Bohemian. D-U-S-S-E-K.

CC: Dussek. Ah. From where, what era?

MF: Bohemia. Central Europe.

CC: Central Europe in 1900s? Or..

MF: Oh, much before. 1760-1750. At the time of Mozart. And Mozart himself was an improviser of fantastic abilities, you know.

CC: Yes, yes. So Mario, for our listeners to- See, what I want to do for our listeners to introduce you, so they know who's speaking to them, is I'm going to play some of your recordings. Especially the Scarlatti one which I really love. And then you can direct me to other ones to play. What kind of- I don't know how to say this without it sounding too general or silly, but I want you to give your advice, actually, to- it's hard to do because there's so many pianists that will listen, but if you could distill some advice.

MF: But then I need to know something. The advice I will give as a pianist or as a composer or what?

CC: Let's start out with as a pianist. Like the actual art of playing the instrument.

MF: The piano. Well ok. So, actually, the first thing that has to be made sure is that the student must have a teacher that knows how to open doors. When there is a teacher that says, "Ok, now here we have a major chord, here we have a minor chord. Look, we are in C major, we are in G minor, we are in D minor, we are in A major. What can you do there? Ok?"

CC: Encourage creativity.

MF: Right, because actually without creativity or some basis of creativity, what do we do, you know? The person must be enticed and not be shy, ok? He can a little bit, even three chords. Ok, let's see.

CC: So, probably, see I'm trying to be, you know the current word being a nerd, being nerdy, kind of nerd.

MF: I don't know this word "nerd." What is a "nerd"?

CC: What does "nerd" mean, Aaron? It's like someone who gets nitpicky about details.

MF: Uh-huh. Yeah.

Aaron Meekoms: Gets very down to the details that most people wouldn't care about.

CC: A detail most people wouldn't care about. To go into that kind of thing. What it looks like is to actually discuss the technique of piano in terms of fingers and muscles and it gets a little bit beyond- you can't really-

MF: Boring.

CC: Yeah, it gets boring doesn't it? It gets boring. So we have to bring- because I get asked about that and about how the hand should be placed and so forth. And actually, when you were talking earlier about that there must be a flow, is really the whole answer.

However the pianist attains that for himself, it has to be a flow. Then you can notice different ways other pianists have attained a flow and it might tweak off an idea. Just like that idea of whether you curl your fingers or you don't. Try it. See what feels like you get the best flow.

MF: Yeah. Well, yes, you know it's- we have five fingers, five fingers, ok? And nothing more than that. But what we call the passage of the thumb, you know. C, D, E, F. 1, 2, 3, 1. So this multiplies the number of fingers. Ok? So instead of having only 5 fingers, you have three and then four. Then all of a sudden you have more than five fingers.

CC: Right. Right. So show the passage of the thumb.

MF: 1, 2, 3, 1. C, D, E, F.

CC: Yeah, now I want everyone to notice how Mario did that.

MF: 1- 1, 2, 3, 1.

CC: Now I want you to notice that he didn't do this, 1, 2, 3, 1. He did this, he did 1, 2, 3, 1. Of course that's in slow motion. But-

MF: But you can do that very fast. Drrrrum. Drrrruum.

CC: So that way the piano- the hand always looks like it's floating. And that's that effect that you get when you see a great pianist like Mario, or like Horowitz. And-

MF: You can't fragment. You know, because actually you go from one finger to the other. Ok, let's say from the second finger to the third finger. Ok, now you don't play second finger and then third finger and then-

CC: And lift up and down, yes. One to the next.

MF: You go one to the next. You glide in a sense. Okay? And some people even have invented the fact that you can play with notes separate, ok. Some people do. You know. In fact, there's a school. I read about this school in which you don't play legato anymore, you know? You separate there each note.

CC: Well, you need both for musical effect.

MF: Why not? Of course.

CC: You need both for musical effect. You want to play legato sometimes and sometimes not. Sometimes all of the nuances in between legato and not legato. Nothing is fixed like that.

MF: It's up to the imagination of the one who wants to use his fingers and the piano. Because you have two sets of rules that you have to take into consideration or invent them on the spot of the moment. The rules of the piano, how does one play the piano? And then there is the rule of the fingers, the hands, the fingers, the hands. How does one use the hand? And even further than the hand. The wrist, all these things. There's a lot of people. You know, some people have a natural- they have found their formula.

CC: Yes, you know I think- it makes me think that there are two concepts, that, if you put them together, would answer all of that. Because I was recently- you know I'm doing some physical exercises to try to keep my body flowing and so forth and I learned from a practitioner a phrase that he uses. He said, "Well, what is the purpose of the body?" There's a good question "What's the purpose of the body?" And his answer, in physical terms, is "efficient motion."

MF: Oh, very interesting.

CC: Yeah, very interesting. So efficient motion would be one concept. Then, add to efficient motion a more aesthetic concept like gracefulness or aesthetic motion, and if you put those two things together and maybe encouraged the pianist to find his way to achieve those two things for himself, that's the concept that you go for. Do you consider that efficient motion? Because I find that if I'm trying to help a pianist play and I see him do something which I don't consider is efficient, I can't just tell him, "That's not efficient." Because otherwise he will feel put upon.

MF: Invalidated.

CC: Invalidated or whatever. Unless he's very, very bright. And he'll say "Really? What do you mean by that? Can you show me?" Yeah, yeah, so it would have to be on the level of "Show me a motion that you consider efficient". "Show me a motion that you consider not so efficient". "Yeah, so you consider that more efficient. Well, keep going for more efficiency." Or that kind of a-

MF: It's a way of approaching the complexities, you know?

CC: Yes, yes, it's a simplicity.

MF: Also to make it more palatable. Because the moment you talk about aesthetics, it's more palatable than just that.

CC: Yes, exactly. I think we've hit on it. That settles it in my mind about when I speak next time, I'm going to use that to talk about the relationship between the physical technique of playing and the actual music and communication and aesthetics that is what you're looking to achieve.

MF: Most people have not realized that playing of the piano touches gently like, on the side, the philosophy of living. Because we want aesthetic. And what is aesthetic? You are immediately, you know- “Yeah ,what is aesthetic? I don't think aesthetic exists.” “Oh really? Ok so, Mmmm. What is that?” “Oh yeah, yeah. I understand now.”

CC: How shall we define that, Mario? How do you define “aesthetic.”?

MF: I consider, this is my definition, okay? That “aesthetics” is a wavelength and that it’s a wavelength that- have you ever seen the design of a wavelength?

CC: Yes, they can be more gross or more fine.

MF: Not only that but also some are more like that.

CC: Some are more even like a sine wave and some are jagged.

MF: Exactly. The more jagged, and the less aesthetic the sound. At least this is my experience.

CC: Yes, yes, I see from a physics standpoint.

MF: Yeah and we can control that by looking at the design that appears.

CC: Yeah, you know I looked up “aesthetic” in the dictionary one time and I found one of the definitions- I wonder if it’s in this dictionary in my phone here. One of the definitions of “aesthetic” that I thought that was the most down-home definition, there were about three or four. Let me see- A-E. Come on, I keep hitting the “R.” A-E-S. Aesthet- Excuse me, there it is. Aesthetic. So, in this dictionary, it says “Pertaining to a sense of the beautiful or to the philosophy of aesthetics.” Ok, well, yeah, to the beautiful. “Having a sense of the beautiful. Characterized by a love of beauty.”

But, you know, in this one it doesn’t give the- not in this- in another dictionary I found a definition which I use sometimes because I think it’s very easy to understand which is when something pleases someone, could be anything. Could be food or looking at the day or a conversation. When something- when some part of life is pleasing to you, it’s aesthetic. So there’s an element of when you, as a spirit, are pleased that there’s got to be an element of aesthetics there. Like we were talking about my dear mother, Anna, who you knew. And when she’s- I don’t know if you ever ate her food, if she ever cooked for you.

MF: No.

CC: You never had the pleasure. Well, when she prepared food and presented it, it was an art form. It was an aesthetic. It was so pleasing. So that’s another definition.

MF: Well, it's related to that.

CC: Yeah, so the music must- so the sound that comes out must be pleasing. It must be-

MF: Well, you know, if we go like that, then we go into the philosophical. Saying pleasing, so what you mean to say.. etcetera, etcetera and they will find all sorts of objections, you know. I wouldn't even touch that. That part. "Did you like it?" That's all.

CC: Yeah. Well "Did you like it?" means "Was it pleasing to you?"- is another way to say it. Yeah, but I know what you mean. Well then I'm going to definitely use that relationship between the physical technique and the gracefulness and beauty.

MF: I am sure that you have found, or encountered in your life, a piano that- just looking at this piano- it makes you want to play. Isn't it? And yet you haven't even touched it yet. But the view, the years and then you go and you touch it. You know? And, to me, it happened one day. I was playing in a little town in Italy. It was beautiful, it was very well varnished, and it was nice, the colors. I touched it and I almost ran. The sound was horrible. You know? It was a ruined piano, you see. Only the external side was. So it can happen also like that. One must be ready.

CC: Well, then a piano like this, you must only look at.

MF: Yes, but, yes, and look at it and withdraw. Because immediately they tell you "Won't you play?" And I feel terrible there.

CC: Yes. Well, your piano now sounds very nice.

MF: You like it?

CC: I like it. I like it. It's very light action.

MF: Light action and, you know I was getting really- you have actually given me a reason to continue to live.

CC: Oh, you mean with the repairing of the piano.

MF: The fact of what they did to the piano.

CC: Mario, would you play a few phrases to demonstrate different things to us? Would you mind?

MF: No.

CC: You can take off the headphones.