

Back To Basics

This summer, I attended an intense four-day seminar, studying Hyoho Niten Ichi Ryu, a two-sword Japanese martial art developed by sixteenth century samurai Miyamoto Musashi.

Partway through the seminar, several of us were grumbling over the length of time we spent practicing the first form, called Sassen. Most of the first two evening sessions were spent on it. Colin Hyakutake-Watkin sensei, who flew in from the Philippines to teach us, told us that this was nothing. "I spent seven years just working on Sassen before *Soke* said I could move on."

Everyone gasped at this. Seven years working on nothing except for the first technique? Can you imagine our students' reaction if we told them that all they could work on was the C major scale for seven years – and nothing else?

Watkin sensei explained that the essence of all the Niten techniques we needed to master is in that first form. Without a solid foundation in the basics, there's no point in moving forward. With that, we kept plugging away at Sassen - at a nice respectable distance from our partners to prevent accidents.

Once we got the green light from sensei on Sassen, we covered the remaining 11 long-sword techniques rather quickly and soon progressed to some of the two-sword and short sword techniques.

Having studied Niten and Iaido (the art of drawing a sword) for two years, I have found that there are many similarities between martial arts and music. Timing, rhythm, technique and flow are emphasized in both disciplines. Both demand passion and precision. Performing through mistakes is essential. In some ways, it's even more critical in martial arts for if you so much as flinch when you err in a grading, the jury will fail you.

Once my muscles recovered from the seminar, I decided to incorporate some of Watkin sensei's instruction into my own piano practice. After years of practicing Grade 10 RCM technique, I went back to practicing one octave scales, triads and arpeggios.

It felt *weird*.

Watkin sensei told us that without the correct spirit, you cannot complete the techniques properly. What is the correct spirit when practicing our technique? I

would think that it's the same as practicing martial arts – awareness of your body, your instrument and each movement you make, heightening your senses to guide you, being dedicated to "getting it right" and becoming one with your instrument.

Once I got over the feelings of strangeness, I varied the articulation and rhythm as many ways as I could think of. Then, I began to work through Conservatory Canada's Contemporary Idioms technical requirements from Level 1 up. I've learned that practicing modes and whole tone scales require a lot of focus as my fingers insist on playing the major or minor scale of whichever note I started on.

It's been an exciting adventure, learning these new techniques and getting back to basics. I find that I'm eagerly awaiting the new RCM technical requirements so that I can sink my teeth into them.

Now *that's* strange. I hated technique when I grew up, but now as a teacher and martial arts student – I am enjoying it much more.

Rhona-Mae Arca