



La Campanella

If you are at all classically musically aware, you will surely have heard of La Campanella by Franz Liszt. Here is a link to a performance by Evgeny Kissin:

[Evgeny Kissin: Paganini/Liszt - Etude No. 3 "La Campanella"](#)

The piece fascinates me. For conspiracy theorists, Liszt might well be an alien come to Earth to highlight our inadequacies. It does not seem possible for a human to play, let alone compose, such an extraordinary piece. Yet he did, and Kissin, amongst many others, play it almost with ease. Lang Lang plays it as though it were a simple children's piece.

I bought the sheet music to take a look at the structure, perhaps believing deep down that I could one day play the thing and astound listeners. Well, I can't. Even if I practised many hours every day, day after day, I would not be able to play La Campanella. Why is this? We are told that we can do anything. The media assures us that 'we are worth it', we can achieve whatever we want, the sky is the limit, we are Number One, that nothing limits us except ourselves and so on. This is a lie. My brain simply cannot cope with the techniques inherent in Campanella, the spread, the complexity and the speed. I can't even play it slowly, let alone at the given speed. Equally, I could train hard but never make the British Olympic team for any event at all, unless there was a medal for sleeping.

Despite having two legs, two arms, a head and similar internal organs, most of us are universes apart from each other. Knowing our strengths and limitations is the challenge of a lifetime, and though other people often seem unduly willing to help us set our limits, with all the will in the world, it is not possible for us all to achieve our dreams. This doesn't stop us from trying, again, even if the message from the world is not to bother, because the journey is the thing, not the end result. The challenge is how we remain aware of our limitations yet not sell ourselves short in a society where support and confidence building is at a premium.

It is a delicate balance to maintain ambition and aim for excellence whilst at the same time understanding humility. Now there's a word that should be either underlined in the Oxford English dictionary or else omitted. This is definitely not the Age of Humility. It's almost a dirty word, as used by Uriah Heep. If you are humble today, you are faking it, showing false modesty. No, you need to broadcast your worth. If you don't, and you show weakness, others will fall on you like the proverbial ton of bricks. It requires mental gymnastics to do this whilst at the same time be aware in your innermost consciousness that what you write, what you paint, what music you play, what you do at work and how you think – all these things fall short of your presentation to the world.

Because La Campanella is beyond my reach, I am trying to simplify it to a level I can cope with. Purists will balk at this, but people balk at anyone trying things they can't do themselves. This conflict between our self-knowledge and projected knowledge is fierce, relentless and potentially damaging, creating stress between the real world and our struggling inner world. Nevertheless, every note of La Campanella is a reminder of greatness, and there's no harm in keeping that in mind as we battle through the days of our lives.