

Jessica Duchen talks to David Dolan and introduces his new series of articles on improvisation in interpretation which will run in *Classical Piano* throughout 1996, culminating in a concert and workshop event in association with the South Bank Centre

# Taking the risk and enjoying it

For great performers of the past, improvisation was an essential component of musicality. Liszt remarked of one of his pupils that he could not improvise and therefore was not a musician; Beethoven's own concerts always included an improvised second half - for which the hall always filled. Bach was known as a great improviser, not a great composer. Improvisation, says the pianist and inspirational teacher David Dolan, used to be part of the daily lives of musicians.

Dolan, who was born in Israel and studied in the USA with Leon Fleisher and Claude Frank and in Jerusalem with Haim Alexander, has been devoting a large part of his working life as pianist and teacher to the art of improvisation as an aid to 'living interpretation'. His doctoral thesis for the University of Paris concerns the relationship of expression in speech to expression in music. Fleisher and Frank are two of Artur Schnabel's most important followers; this had an important influence on Dolan as he developed this method.

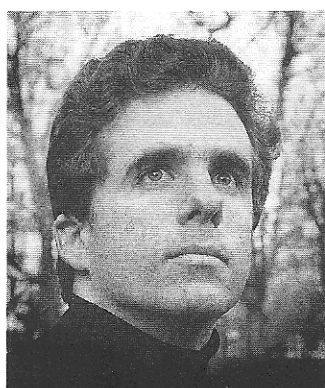
'In its deeper dimensions, improvisation means living interpretation that takes place in real time, not just reproducing the learning process,' David Dolan says. 'It involves what Schnabel used to call "re-creating the text". In the studio it means treating the text as a creator, not as reproducer. By making harmonic reductions and improvising around them or choosing something different, for example, you can arrive at a greater understanding of why a composer has made certain choices in the composition - and you understand this as living material.' One point is to put analytical ideas within the flow of real time, an important component, in Dolan's view, of high quality improvisation.

'Our horror of wrong notes leads to a horror of wrong anything, like being politically correct,' Dolan remarks with gentle irony. 'So many interpretations, without any

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**'We musicians are the only humans given permission by God to touch time'**

wrong notes at all, become sterilised by the need to play "correctly". But that is not to say that you should work less - quite the contrary. The preparation and mastery of the text is the runway before the plane takes off - being thoroughly prepared is the only way you can have the inner freedom to create a fresh interpretation while you perform. To apply this, you have to be more than prepared. For instance, when I am preparing for a concerto cadenza I work through the piece very thoroughly, making harmonic reductions of all the themes. Then I invite the audience to join me by active listening in the cadenza performance, which I improvise on stage. This is like performing on the high wire in a circus without a safety net.'

The audience is an essential part of this - the 'active listening' that Dolan describes. 'It's a totally different experience. The audience takes part in the process - their reaction immediately reflects on the artist. It's also an important aspect of the interaction between musicians in, for instance, a chamber music performance.' At his classes at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London and

the Yehudi Menuhin School, Dolan improvises with the students at two pianos, throwing out a phrase to which they then respond - 'the common basis is the metre, but you never know what will be the next phrasing, harmony and so on.' With typically pointed wit, Dolan adds, 'You can't function as a chamber player if you know the joke in advance!'

Largely, the fight against non-spontaneity is a fight against fear. 'The "correct" performance,' continues Dolan, 'is an escape from a full engagement of yourself as a performer. You are hiding behind the correct notes - but you, as a personality who should be entering into the spirit of the text, are not there.' Fear of taking risks is common to most people in most fields - as Dolan puts it, 'the risk of taking risks is very risky! And what it really means is the full engagement in what the text expresses. This is, I think, the spirit of the text.'

What he is doing, he says, is not new at all. 'It's coming back to something which we've lost. Why we have lost it is a big philosophical question, to do with the mechanisation of processes and with competitions which emphasise the average "taste" and safe, clean, intelligent, no-risks performances. If the technical mastery is not complete, you can fall down and when that happens it's painful. This approach demands stronger preparation. The work of improvisation is about how to manage risks, how not to collapse when you have a memory lapse on stage (and we all do sooner or later), but to keep within the flow of time and even turn it into a beautiful event.' The sense of metre and flow of time, with all its aural illusions and rubati, is central to Dolan's approach: as he puts it, 'We musicians are the only humans given permission by God to touch time.'

'I'm obsessed by the human voice and its musical behaviour in

an emotional context. At the Guildhall, we work with actors and musicians improvising together - the actors provide the musical parameters of the voice as they act. Everybody, in everyday life, on the telephone, gives an idea of their state of mind by their voice. Someone can say "I feel fine," but you know they feel bad. Do you believe the words? Or the rhythm, the timbre, the melodic quality, the intensity? Most likely the latter. This is pure music - and it's improvised music because you don't plan the context of the conversation.' Dolan will be defending these theories at the Sorbonne in Paris during the year ahead.

Watching David Dolan teach at Paul Roberts's Ladévie piano summer school in southern France last year, it was striking to see the transformation that took place in his students during the course of a session. At all levels of accomplishment the results were clear: a scared first-time improviser would gain confidence; an experienced performer would suddenly remember that he or she was playing for love for the music and begin to project; one way or another, each member of the summer school began to dare to give more.

'Improvisation to music is like Parmesan to pasta,' says Dolan, for whom fettucini is a wonderful excuse to have extra cheese. 'It is a goal in itself, but it is also a means to push towards creativity in interpretation.'

Starting in the next issue, David Dolan will be writing a series of articles exploring the ideas outlined above in greater depth. Topics covered will include style, communication, creativity, risk-taking and that powerful expression 'letting go'. The series will culminate in a live concert and workshop event in association with the South Bank Centre, full details of which will be announced later in the year.