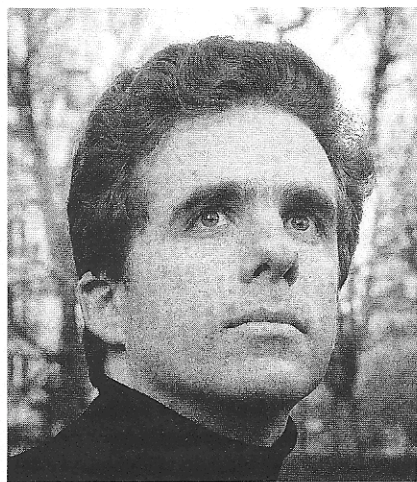


IMPROVISATION

Walking freely on a firm ground

David Dolan's series on improvisation in interpretation commences with a look at the crucial elements of time and communication

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but, musically speaking, relative. A proper rubato, for example, is, in the words of Schnabel, 'walking freely on a firm ground', which is also about making time relative. The relativity of time was brought to life for instance in the concerts of Chopin (there are many accounts of his playing in J J Eigeldinger's book *Chopin: pianist and teacher*) and from all his students and eye-witnesses it's clear that he managed to involve an absolute lack of rigidity of time by keeping the deep,

Before we go deeper into the phenomenon of improvisation, we have to look at our musical oxygen: Time, the real time in which music-making takes place. The meaning of the word 'extemporisation' actually means to externalise in time: 'ex' meaning 'out', 'temp' meaning 'time'. Time is the magical dimension in which life itself flows and exists. For science it is a relatively new (since Einstein) and shocking idea that time is not absolute, even though it can flow only forward, from the past to the future. On the way from past to future, when time reaches Now, we musicians make the magic of sculpting in 'real time'. Time is to music what breathing is to living.

Musicians have known for centuries that time is not absolute

structural pulse. We know from two particular letters from Mozart to his father that that was crucial to him as well. This is how it was possible for Schnabel to ask his pupils to play a passage faster or slower, 'but in the same tempo'.

But I would like to take it a little further. Music doesn't have any meaning until it joins the flow of time. It is not enough just to have the idea; it has to be musically alive, which means being in real time. The sense is of joining something rather than doing it - like the idea we mentioned before of letting go, letting it happen rather than doing it - joining the flow of time.

One element that can hinder us from joining the flow of time is the matter of self-judgment. It goes

without saying that without a sense of criticism - a constructive one - no progress can be made or hoped for. There is a difference between criticism and observant listening, which is something we will explore later in the series. For now, let us say that observant listening is capable of following the flow of time.

However, the idea of self-judgment is vertical, opposed to the horizontal idea of the flow of time - because judgment stops the flow of time and asks about the past, eg 'Was it good?', or the future, eg 'Will it be all right?', which are not within the flow of time. In that respect I would like to mention a book I think every musician should read, *The Inner Game of Tennis*. It is by Timothy Galway, who was a tennis trainer, and it concerns the element of doing things which happen within the flow of time and depend on another partner in relation to you. There is the business of what he calls self-balancing - one of the two sides of the brain is busy trying to control things and this is an element that goes against the flow of time. Freedom from self-judgment in playing is crucial for genuine and communicative performance. It can happen very early in improvisation because you do not know the content so you cannot do otherwise than simply join the flow of time forward.

I said before that 'improvisation to music is like parmesan to pasta' not only because I adore Italian cuisine but also because that is what makes it special. It's something that melts, that unifies it. Without improvisation, music is a series of better or worse put-together separate events, of which most listeners would say 'That was interesting but it didn't touch me, it didn't speak to me, it didn't mean anything'. 'Meaning something' means that you are working genuinely with the flow of time. We are reaching the idea of communication. When there is true communication, the time of the performer and the time of the listener become one. The two times become one time. Occasionally you can see the whole of the Salle Pleyel, 2,700 people, stop breathing for a moment. It doesn't happen often, but when it does happen you remember that for the rest of your life. You breathe in the rhythm that the artist wants you to. This is, to me, improvising with your interpretation.

Professionals and amateurs alike value music and musical performance by its 'saying something' or not. It is not a coincidence that creative geniuses

like Chopin, Mozart, Casals, Schnabel, CPE Bach and many others always took vocal expression as their first point of reference. This is why I am so concerned with putting speech and the art of interpretation together, 'parlando' in the sense not of what we say but of how we say it. Schnabel would frequently ask his pupils to speak while playing a phrase - for example, in Beethoven's E flat major sonata op 31 no 3, the opening motif would be spoken as: 'Si, papa,' and acted out with the gesture of an obedient son. This demonstrates the quality of presence and spontaneity in real time that is so universal, natural and unique to vocal expression. This too is improvising.

The same is true in the realm of movement. Jacques Dalcroze based a powerful method of music training on the natural link between music and movement. In the course of these articles we will deal with body-language and its relation to music-making and communication - both with listeners and with partners for chamber music or conductor and orchestra.

Vocal expression and body language are two major gateways to the domain of letting one's emotional expression become free. One doesn't have to go far in order to find evidence for the goal of music and musical performance being (among other things) to move the listeners' emotions.

We can recognise the flow of time, conscious presence and appropriate emotional communication in performances we hear, but to join the flow of time ourselves by improvising can seem intimidating at first. This is one reason why in our classes we work on improvisation with partners - because then you cannot escape real time. If you stop, you make both of you collapse. Little by little we add simple phrases, questions and answers; at first people can be very self-conscious and hesitant. By the time they are well versed in it, they can be improvising sonata form movements and baroque forms, etc. The only way really to plunge into the flow of real time is to do it for yourself. In the next issue we will focus more on how to 'go for it'.

David Dolan's series Improvisation in Interpretation will culminate in a live performance and workshop in association with the South Bank Centre. Classical Piano will give further details of this later in the year

Royal Festival Hall
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