Improvisation: Bringing Performer and Instrument Closer Together

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Abstract
If we accept that musicality in its highest form can arise in an instrumentalist only when unity with the instrument is achieved, then one of the larger problems facing applied music teachers becomes how to make the student feel at one with the instrument. Proposed solutions to this concern are numerous and include tension-releasing programs such as the Alexander Technique and Kato Havas's remedies for the basic “fears” of violin playing. Yet a different way to achieve a unity between musician and instrument exists, one that has elicited little discussion so far. This is improvisation, an approach that circumvents many of the tension-releasing methods and yet still promotes an intimacy with the instrument.

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Improvisation, Alexander Technique, technical improvisation, phrasing improvisation, improvisation on stage

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Improvisation: Bringing Performer and Instrument Closer Together

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Jonathan Sturm received his bachelor’s degree in music from Oberlin, where he studied with Stephen Clapp and Gregory Fulkerson, and his master’s degree from Eastman School of Music, where he studied with Zvi Zeitlin and Sylvia Rosenberg. While at Eastman, he also acquired a second master’s degree in musicology. He was on the music faculty at Rhode Island College, where he taught violin and early music history from 1986-1989. He is now pursuing a doctorate of music in violin with Josef Gingold at Indiana University.

If we accept that musicality in its highest form can arise in an instrumentalist only when unity with the instrument is achieved, then one of the larger problems facing applied music teachers becomes how to make the student feel at one with the instrument. Proposed solutions to this concern are numerous and include tension-releasing programs such as the Alexander Technique and Kato Havas’s remedies for the basic “fears” of violin playing. Yet a different way to achieve a unity between musician and instrument exists, one that has elicited little discussion so far. This is improvisation, an approach that circumvents many of the tension-releasing methods and yet still promotes an intimacy with the instrument. Perhaps this idea has remained unexplored because of its associations with the jazz technique and repertoire. Its scope, however, is not that narrow. Even in the classical idiom, improvisation serves to awaken in the musician a sense of the player’s and the instrument’s potentials. As the musician begins to use these potentials spontaneously, the instrument becomes more and more a part of the performer.

Improvisation is defined by Webster’s as “a course pursued in accordance with no previously devised plan, policy, or consideration.” For musicians, that definition divides into two aspects: 1) improvisation in the practice room, and 2) improvisation on the stage. The first category further subdivides into technical improvisation and phrasing improvisation. In the following discussion of each of these aspects, improvisation is presented as an integral part of every practice session as well as a way to enliven a concert performance.

Technical Improvisation

Technical improvisation in the practice room begins as a spontaneous extension of the scale and bowing routines: spontaneous, because the exercises generate each other only seconds before they are played and are never written down; an extension of the routine, because shifting and bowing patterns that do not usually occur in standard scale books are the basis for this part of the routine. Because the passages do not fall into standard patterns, they force the conscientious musician to be alert continually to every physical sensation, every motion that occurs as the passage is played. Example 1 illustrates some possible technical improvisations through which you might overcome a problem. First improvise a one- or two-measure cell from which any number of extensions can be made. The originating cell may derive from a technical passage in an étude or solo work or may be completely original.

As you practice technical improvisation, spontaneity occurs only when you devise a shift, multiple stop, articulation, bow speed/weight, and so forth for the next exercise. It is important not to let the process end here. Practice the improvisation until each new exercise feels natural and reliable. Only then should you devise another obstacle to overcome. Essentially, then, improvisation is a means for arriving at a knowledge of physical potentials so that the instrumentalist can acquire more grace and dexterity on the instrument.

How much practice time should you devote to acquiring this dexterity through improvisation? The highest yield from technical improvisation occurs when it is not relegated to a specific time in the practice session, but rather helps to overcome a specific problem when it arises. Such a problem could be a shift or style of shift in a scale passage. That style of shift, when worked on extemporaneously, could later be applied to a specific place in the repertoire.

A practice session might develop as follows: During practice of a passage,
improvisation forces the player to shift focus from notes to the muscular feelings that must become second nature for consistent playing to evolve.

Frequently, students toil over virtuoso passages in the repertoire without ever really polishing them. The problem is that the demands of the passage always present a ceiling of achievement. If the passage were to serve temporarily, instead, as the basis for an improvised set of demands that exceeded the original passage in difficulty, then the original passage, when returned to, would seem easier and more comfortable.

The improvisations should always bring attention first to the requirements of the muscles to produce the basic shift or bowing. They can then force those problems into higher relief, extending the requirements beyond the scope of the passage in the repertoire. Upon returning to the original passage after 10-20 minutes of work, the student will have moved closer to an understanding of the physical requirements that playing those shifts and those bowings require out of the context of the piece. Thus the passage fits into the broader technique, rather than the technique fulfilling only the small passage. This is the important message: technical improvisation lifts problems out of the immediate context, making solid technique the umbrella under which reper-

toire falls, and not vice versa. Creative teachers should be able to demonstrate several examples of this type of technical extension to their students, thereby initiating the students’ own pursuit of improvisation.

**Phrasing Improvisation**

Phrasing improvisation extends technical improvisation and involves putting the earlier concepts and techniques to use in a melodic/harmonic context. Once again, by temporarily moving away from the written music, the musician introduces individual creation. The personal involvement at this level in the creative process unifies not only the person and instrument, but now also the instrumentalist and the artist. As the ear becomes more attuned to options and potentials of phrase shape, the fingers begin to react more quickly and spontaneously to commands from the brain.

Aspects of phrasing improvisation are naturally inherent in much student practice and performance, but they are not exploited. Instead, the piece becomes dominant, exacting specific interpretations that are known to work from recordings and other media. As the student toils devotedly on the “right” interpretation, the potential exists for the repertoire to become an exercise. Certain aspects of such control are clearly beneficial: the security of a consistent interpretation is essential for any career, yet that security will increase as the student moves beyond one or two options to an ability to create a convincing, accurate interpretation that is new and fresh. The methods for acquiring this ability involve altering bowings, fingerings, prominence of shifts or portamenti, articulations, and so on, all on the spur of the moment and as convincingly as possible at that moment. As with technical improvisation, once the spontaneous creation has taken place, the interpretation must be practiced to solidify it as an option for the future—if it merits such a standing.

How many students practice this way? How many, instead, adopt “given” fingerings and bowings and labor to make these inherited interpretations sound meaningful? Certainly, students must start somewhere; they should be encouraged, however, to alter the teacher’s interpretations if alterations are meaningful, and meaningful alterations will come only with trial and error.
Phrasing improvisation certainly applies to written music. By reconciling your personal ideas with the printed music, you will ultimately arrive at a satisfying interpretation of a passage. First singing and then playing several original interpretations of the written music will often clarify your ideas about the direction and shape of a musical line. Through this approach, you become aware of the potentials of both the instrument and the music. The processes that led to this awareness will have brought the music inside the performer, as opposed to the musical line remaining an exterior idea that the performer applies to the phrase. Too often we hear, especially among student performances, either a tension-free and uninteresting rendition of a piece or a highly interpretive one in which the physical involvement is so great that the performer becomes constricted and contorted. Perhaps the musician who applies the processes described above will find improvisation to be a means to achieve the best of both worlds.

Improvisation on Stage

The successful application of improvisation in the practice room leads naturally to improvisation on the stage, where the musician must perform so that both musician and audience witness “the spontaneous, the immediate, the impulsive forces of music, as of life.” The vitality of a performance comes from creating and enjoying a feeling of freshness with a piece that you have lived with for months, and such a feeling can be genuine only if the performer is open to experimentation during the concert. A changed finger- or bowing—even a different mood in a passage—can transform a practiced part into inspired music. The complication that arises in a performance is that spontaneous changes must be convincing within the context of the surrounding music. An intuitive, listening ear usually satisfies this demand; then, if your attitude toward experimentation on the stage is positive, muscular tension disappears, the focus becomes the music of the moment, and you cross the boundary between a fine performance and one that is memorable.

Perhaps the most important aspect of improvisation is that, as it brings the performer and instrument closer together, the performer can begin to create a work of art instead of merely playing an already created work. Menuhin states, “It is essential that the major part of our technique should be under the control of automatic habits. Having achieved this control then our interpretive power can be allowed freedom to express itself to the full extent of its imagination.” Used carefully and conscientiously, improvisation provides a means to control the technique and free the imagination. In so doing, it boosts the musician from performer to creator.

3. Menuhin, Theme and Variations, 37.

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