

Sarah Takagi on :

“AUTHENTIC MUSICALITY AND UNDERSTANDING THROUGH IMPROVISATION”

Summary, Nepta Teachers' Exchange, 11-24-15, written by Natacha Rist

• **The Lost Art of Improvisation**

Classical musicians study three to four centuries of music: Baroque, Classical, Romantic and Modern. It's a long training that starts earlier than any other, including memorization and scrutiny of every musical detail, using the correct edition.

Improvisation used to be part of any composers's skills (think Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt); let's reclaim the joy and creativity it fosters (double the size of the room by getting in touch with your inner child); it amounts to speaking the language of music fluently, creating music “in the moment”, as in the practice of “mindfulness”... It helps with memory slips....

• **Let's bring back “Play” into playing the Piano**

As teachers, many of our clients are children, we need to bring back our inner kids with us. Improvisation can be a scary thing. We've been told from the beginning what to play, what to learn, we see playing as “work”. We need to find the courage to bring back a playful spirit, joy and spontaneity in the equation: as in art class, we can bring a clean slate, there's no right or wrong.

In the age of specialization, since the romantic era, scores have grown more complicated, composers demand loyalty to score in performers' interpretation, so composers and performers have gotten one their separate ways. The requirement for memorization adds to the pressure for accuracy, loyalty, perfection.

• **What is the image of the classical pianist?** Uptight? Boring? Among young people, the interest in music lessons and concert attendance have plummeted. Why? Have we made piano playing “work”, not so much fun with constant criticizing? There is a lack of accessibility and exposure to classical music in our culture. How can we bring it back ?

There used to be salons, concert halls have replaced them. Technical progress, competitions have added to the pressure for perfection in music-making, and lead to predictable interpretations.

- **“Music is a universal language”**: When learning a new language, we learn to speak first, then learn to read and write.

Think of having “88 sonic crayons” at your disposal, find out which ones you prefer, you’ll appreciate better what composers did.

- **Performing requires constant adaptation**

Sarah demonstrate playing Beethoven G Major sonatina, and “Für Elise” using Beethoven’s beginning, then branching out into a pastiche for the rest of the piece. For performances, pianists need to adapt to a new piano every time, as Sarah had to when she performed the Grieg Piano concerto with the Melrose Symphony and the Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” with the Lexington Symphony. When she had the honor of premiering a Leon Fleisher new piece while a student at NEC, the composer changed the score until the last minute. When she had planned to perform a Chopin Nocturne at an Art Festival, she decided to improvise instead, adapting to the instrument/audience/space. When she lost her older sister Naomi in January 2015, Sarah played at the memorial service in Brussels, and decided to improvise as well.

- **Some suggestions for inciting students (or yourself) to improvise:**

- Look at Piano. Play black and white keys (“black and white forest”), find animals in there, explore sounds; have kids guess what animal you’re illustrating. Black keys (pentatonic scale) are the easiest. Try Q & A, ostinatos, duos. Play for students, and have them explore sounds. -Four notes improvisations, pick with eyes closed (teacher can pick two, student can pick two), change order, teacher can play recurring pattern in bottom, etc...

- Free-style improv with word play, create atmosphere. Kids will accept crazy situations.

- “Guess my emotion” listening game Intervals games

- **•Musical “Salons”** : Finally, Sarah recommends recreating Salons for performers, to bring people together and relieve the pressure of the concert hall.