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# What's the Value of Improvisation in Classical Music?

BY BRIAN WISE

## Robert Levin

*Pianist, music theory teacher at Curtis from 1968–73*

→ Earlier this year, keyboardist and musicologist Robert Levin completed a 30-year project to record all of Mozart's piano concertos with the Academy of Ancient Music. The performances feature improvised cadenzas and spontaneously ornamented solo lines, much like how Mozart would have played them. Bringing improvisation back to performances of 18th century music has been a quest for Mr. Levin, ever since he graduated from Harvard University in 1968 with a thesis on Mozart's unfinished works. That same year, Rudolf Serkin hired him to run the music theory department at Curtis.

"We must remember for whom Mozart wrote these pieces. When he's writing concertos for other people or he's writing for a student, he's got to show the student everything that is necessary. But when he's going to play it himself, we see repeatedly that he doesn't need to write down all the details of the embellishments because he knows exactly what to do.

"The written-out cadenzas were used for people who couldn't invent and improvise on their own. The idea [with a cadenza] is that the performer is telling a story, is communicating a plot, to recount to the audience. It's not about reproducing a written text. That's the problem we have had in the last century or so. We have trained people to reproduce music—not to tell stories, not to recount events, not to show the volatility of the discourse.

"If the audience not only knows the entire concerto but knows every note of the cadenza, then there's nothing exciting. It's just a re-engagement with totally familiar material, like wearing a comfortable pair of bedroom slippers. The purpose of the cadenza is adventure, unpredictability, risk. And this is the thing that I think is, if not destroying, then is creating problems with our culture of performance, which is that everybody is interested in risk avoidance. You go to an international competition, and if you play two wrong notes, the person who played one wrong note less will advance to the next round, and you maybe won't. And we need a culture where things feel and sound unpredictable and dangerous."

## Gabriela Montero

Pianist

→ YouTube is dotted with clips of Gabriela Montero improvising on themes solicited from audience members, be they melodies from a Cantonese opera or Darth Vader's theme from *Star Wars*. Along with audience requests, she regularly improvises on themes by Bach and Chopin, or songs from her native Venezuela. An improviser since childhood, Ms. Montero insists that her approach isn't rooted in any formal study of improv, and that her extemporizations come deep from within her subconscious mind.

"I never studied counterpoint or any of the theoretical subjects. I just give in to the experience [of improvising], and I don't control it. I get out of the way. My brain basically goes to sleep, and something else takes over, which is much more powerful. It's nothing conscious that I do. [An improvisation] can be a seven-minute fugue, and sometimes, for fun, it will go into a tango, but these are compositions that happen in the moment. I'm creating it but I'm not planning it and not even thinking about it.

"For me, it begins in a state of absolute non-judgment. That's the whole point. There are no mistakes in improvisation, just opportunities and different roads to travel. Everybody will be a different kind of improviser. For me, there is a logic that guides me that I'm not aware of. But for anybody, the value of improvisation is the way it widens the scope of your relationship to metaphor, to yourself with the instrument, and to who you become as a communicator. I think that's incredibly valuable for anyone."



## David Middleton

Adjunct Instructor at Curtis, guitarist, and member of the Sun Ra Arkestra

→ David Middleton is a fixture on in the Philadelphia jazz and contemporary music scenes, where he performs with everything from avant-garde big bands to DJs and Tuvan throat-singing ensembles. Together with faculty member Thomas Patteson, Mr. Middleton started a course on improvisational strategies that aims to help students develop a "toolkit" of improvisational techniques. "So, a student not only understands what improvisation is—as opposed to composition—but learns how to survive in some situations that they may find themselves in," says Mr. Middleton.

"Becoming a whole musician includes understanding what I consider the three pyramid points of musical life, which are composition, orchestration, and improvisation. Understanding all of them makes you a better musician.

"Modern classical composers and performers are recognizing the limitations of having to perform through-written material for the rest of their careers. In fact, their careers are on the verge of stagnation because of the economic and business model that the whole classical music empire is built on: We're turning out a bunch of classical musicians, but there aren't as many available, sustainable [careers]. This makes them have to become very entrepreneurial, and they may find themselves in situations where they must perform things that aren't necessarily the through-written classical pieces that they've been playing since they were teenagers.

"If you think about working in film scoring or media of some kind, a lot of times that score may be very minimal and not up to the technical expectations of what they might have dealt with in their schooling of classical music scores. Performers must understand the connection between the [instrument] families, or the harmonic texture, so they can either change what's been given to them in the moment or understand what the emotional intent is."





**Nick Kendall** (*Violin '01*), *Time for Three*  
**Ranaan Meyer** (*Double Bass '03*), *Time for Three*

→ Time for Three grew out of informal jam sessions at Curtis, where violinists Nick Kendall ('01) and Zachary DePue ('02), and bassist Ranaan Meyer ('03) were all students during the late 1990s. They would dabble in bluegrass fiddling and backstage “cutting contests.” A hook would blossom into a full-fledged composition, and the group cultivated its now-signature blend of jazz, bluegrass, hip-hop, and Americana. (DePue left in 2015 for a full-time Indianapolis Symphony job and was replaced by the Juilliard-trained violinist Charles Yang.) In October, the Grammy Award-winning group returned to its alma mater to perform with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in Jennifer Higdon’s *Concerto 4-3*.

**Ranaan:** “A lot of improvisation comes back to confidence. There have been so many examples where we go into a conservatory to work with classical musicians, to improvise, where in the first seven minutes people are looking at us like, ‘You want me to do what now?’ You

should see them 30 minutes into it. It’s like they’ve been improvising their whole lives. That doesn’t mean that if we work with 30 people, 30 of them are going to become professional improvisers. Probably not. Maybe one or two. But what’s exciting for everybody trying it is it somehow takes them to another level of their mindset.”

**Nick:** “In classical music—and I feel like we’re kind of getting over it—this idea of improvisation is such a big deal. But really, it’s a means to an end, just like learning how to play in tune. When you’re learning a piece, you want the technique to serve your music-making and not the other way around. Anyone who knows how to communicate with another person using language can improvise. We have always said that the future and the health of what we call classical music will continue evolving and reinventing itself if we keep introducing improvisation as a tool.”

**Ranaan:** “It’s about creating a vibe, creating a mood, not worrying if it must be about a million notes, and just wanting to do or say something. That really empowers classical music.”

Interviews have been edited and condensed for clarity.