

# Classical Improvisation: The Creative, Quintessentially Liberal Arts Approach to Piano Teaching

Lecture/demonstration  
Mesa State College  
3/25/09

Arthur Houle  
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Good afternoon. Thank you all for coming today to what I hope will be a thought-provoking and informative lecture/demonstration. I'd like to talk about the world of classical pianism today vs. past generations and how this relates to what we call "liberal arts."

***Let me begin by playing a little piece by J. S. Bach that I think you'll recognize [C Major Prelude, WTC 1]***

As you may have noticed, I took considerable liberties in my interpretation. I repeated the entire form and introduced my own variants on the 2<sup>nd</sup> time. This interpretation would have been frowned upon by my piano teachers. However, it would have barely raised an eyebrow with Bach and his contemporaries.

I began piano at the age of 7. Lessons consisted of learning how to play "correct" notes with "correct" interpretations. You played "good" classical music - as opposed to "bad" popular music and jazz. You played only the notes on the page - no messing around with the sacred score. You did what the teacher said, for he or she was the absolute authority figure, the very fountain of all knowledge, not to be questioned or challenged. Music was serious business, requiring strict discipline and practice. You performed in very formal recitals and festivals (which were, curiously, *anything but* festive, however).

Not all of this was bad, of course (particularly the discipline and practicing!). But where was the fun, the imagination? The creative spirit is innate to everyone - especially children, who are unsullied by the curse of "adulthood."

Fortunately, my rebellious streak made anything forbidden all the more appealing. My "ear training" as a child consisted of figuring out how to play the latest Beatles tune on the piano. In order for you to appreciate the full extent of my wayward youth, ***I invite any of you to call out some Beatles tune and I'll play bits of them at the piano (please no smart aleck requests for "Revolution No. 9" from the White Album, however).***

Would it surprise you to learn that everything in this little presentation is quite solidly grounded in tradition? Popular music has always been with us - in the

form of folk songs, theater music, etc. Franz Liszt was famous for asking for spontaneous requests from his audience members, who often requested popular melodies. Most of the great "serious" composers throughout history enjoyed the popular music of their day and incorporated themes into their music. In the early days of piano recitals, performers were composers; it was routine to hear original works. Virtually everyone embellished and improvised in performances. The improvisational abilities of the greatest composers – Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, etc. – were legendary and well documented. These composers often wrote repeat signs in their music. It was understood that you would introduce your own variants on those repeated passages.

Today, however, we rarely deviate from the printed page, believing (ironically) that this is the only way to be "authentic" and faithful to the "composer's intentions." But, as my good friend John Salmon points out, musicians of bygone days were "constantly...re-arranging, adding on, transposing, recontextualizing [their own] and others' music." As with jazz practice today, it would have been considered unusual and boring to interpret a musical score too literally - as ridiculous as a jazz pianist playing *only* the notes of a fake chart. And speaking of jazzers, let's note here that jazzers pride themselves on originality, on finding their own unique "voice." The classical musicians of yesteryear shared this sentiment. Today, however, classical music orthodoxy tends to applaud loudest when students demonstrate what I like to call "interpretive plagiarism" - that is, sounding like a composite of the last few recordings or performances you heard, or re-creating exactly what your last teacher told you to do.

Let me give you another example of a tradition that has been almost forgotten today - that of "preluding." Concerts in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and even early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were far more boisterous - considerably less "stuffy" - than those of today. People would often chat, eat, and even clap between movements of pieces (a no-no today!). So how was a performer to get everyone's attention and settle the audience down? By announcing oneself at the keyboard with a quasi-improvised "prelude," which would eventually usher in the programmed piece.

***Here is Bach's famous Invention No. 1, with my own prelude. I even threw in a short coda toward the end, just for good measure (no pun intended).***

I started composing at the age of 11. (Don't be impressed! Compared to Mozart, I was a late bloomer.) Composition was a solitary task, for, as I mentioned earlier, there was little or no place for it in piano lessons. I may have filled out my little "Fletcher Theory Worksheets," but there was no attempt to connect theory with practice. How oddly out of sync this is to real tradition, wherein the very goal of theory was to *use* all that analytical knowledge in the furtherance of composition and extemporization.

***Let me play for you a happy-go-lucky little ditty I penned at the age of 11. It's titled "To the Country."***

The comedian Jerry Lewis has some excellent life advice, which goes something like this: "Be a child at heart forever; it's not healthy to grow up." ***Given that I have tenaciously taken this to heart, it should not surprise you that I revisited this little tune recently and wrote a more sophisticated jazzed-up version of it entitled "Bright-Eyed and Bushy-Tailed," which I would like to now share [short version].***

Shortly after starting to compose, I started to teach, at the age of 13. There was quite a dichotomy between how I was being taught and how I decided to teach. From the get-go I instinctively rebelled against the authoritarian, joyless approach. Keep in mind that at this tender age I had never even heard the word "pedagogy." (If I had, I would have undoubtedly thought it meant "pet your doggie.") I was weaned on the time-honored standard middle-C methods. Alternative progressive methods were either unfamiliar to me, or not yet written. Yet, in this pedagogical vacuum, I noticed that many young students had a difficult time with reading notes on a full staff, with 5 lines and 4 spaces. So I thought, "why not start with a one-line 'staff'?"

***[Illustrate on erase board.]***

You can write three notes on this staff - one on the line, one below and one above. We call this "Ringo Starr's vocal range" (ha). After my students got comfortable with writing three-note melodies, they wrote random melodies using five notes on a two-line staff, followed by seven notes on a three-line staff, etc.

Later I started writing out fun tunes using other kinds of pre-staff notation involving letters and/or fingerings.

***[Hold up example of pre-staff notation fun tune.]***

With respect to technique, I remember how the dreaded Schmitt exercises almost drove me to quit piano ***[demonstrate example on piano]***. Yet I also recognized the "finger calisthenic" value of these drills. So I thought, "what if I assign one exercise at a time - in rote fashion - and call them 'tongue twisters'?" What had been drudgery suddenly became fun!

***[Demonstrate Schmitt 5-finger exercise at piano --  
"Rubber baby buggy bumper"  
"She sells sea shells by the sea shore"]***

I also played "Simon says" games while teaching beginning concepts. I might say, "Suzie, can you play all the two black-key groups with your right hand 2nd

and 3rd fingers? **[Pretend to be student playing at piano]** Gotcha! Simon didn't say!"

I taught this way throughout my teen years before later discovering that others were thinking along similar lines and incorporating some of the same ideas into the newer method books. I still use many of these ideas in my teaching today, by the way – even at the college level.

From the very beginning of my teaching, I was subconsciously trying to be the teacher that I never quite had.

As an undergrad in college I had an inkling that the literalist approach to classical pianism wasn't the whole story. I recall a piano lesson in which I repeated a section of a Chopin nocturne and introduced my own variants - original variants, but very much in the style of Chopin. My teacher loved it - right up until I explained that they were *my* variants. Then she got angry and forbade me from playing it this way in my junior year recital. I wish I could go back in time, for I would point out that Adolph Guttman, a student of Chopin, once commented that Chopin *never once* in his lifetime played the famous **Nocturne in E-Flat Major, Op. 9/2** as published. Chopin *always* embellished on it. This piece is the mother lode of improvisatory evidence, for Chopin often penciled his variants into his students' music scores. These variants have been assembled by diligent musicologists and are now published.

***Let me play this nocturne, but be warned: it will sound very different from any recordings or performances you may have heard!***

***[Check watch: tell Zofia Rozengart story if not past 4:30 P.M.]***

I've played this nocturne for conferences and workshops across the country; the reactions range from wild enthusiasm to shock and dismay from those who, curiously, consider themselves "purists." One famous teacher once phoned me to inquire, "Are you still playing that bastardized version of Chopin?!?"

## LIBERAL ARTS

So how did we get to a point where there is such a disconnect between modern piano teaching and the rich full creative tapestry of our real heritage? For part of that answer, let's explore this thing we call "liberal arts." When columnist Marilyn vos Savant was asked to define this, she replied, "...the word 'liberal' has nothing to do with politics. Rather, the term is rooted in 'liberty' and goes back centuries, when it referred to work or studies that one undertook freely, in contrast to activity necessary to earn a living or to train for a technical profession."

This concept does indeed go back centuries. In 1725 Johann Fux ("Fooks") wrote a treatise on counterpoint, written as a dialogue between master and student. In the opening dialogue, the master cautions that learning music is a lifetime exhaustive study. The student, however, assures the master in no uncertain terms:

"I have no other object than to pursue my love of music, without any thought of gain....[I] strive...for proficiency and a good name [rather] than ...wealth, for virtue is its own reward."

Ah...such idealism! Today, however, we find ourselves in the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. Do we just ignore the harsh realities for students who, as a practical matter, must ultimately find career paths and make a living? Must we hang on for dear life to "art for art's sake," forgoing all thoughts of material gain?

Consider the words of Dr. Ernest Nolan, Vice President for Academic Administration at Madonna University in Livonia, Michigan:

"[quote] A Department of Labor report projects that 80 percent of the children beginning kindergarten will eventually enter jobs that don't even exist today!...

...For some, ['liberal arts'] means all those required classes that stand in the way of [job] training...But, upon closer inspection, the liberal arts can be understood as the key to survival in any field that is subject to change over time. The standard definition of liberal arts education implies a program of study designed to foster capacities of analysis, critical reflection, problem solving, communication, computation and synthesis of knowledge from different disciplines. Its goal is to provide students with an intellectual, historical, and social context for recognizing the continuity between the past and future and for drawing on the human capacity of reason to understand human experience, to question the values dimension of human enterprise, and to articulate the results of this process of thinking....However, this definition doesn't fully capture the rich texture of this brand of education. ...liberal arts education puts the individual into the presence of the greatest ideas, most transforming concepts, and most powerful works of the imagination that human beings have produced. This is...an intellectual framework with which to understand and evaluate human events and interactions....[Secondly] liberal arts education is empowering; it provides rehearsal for life in the imagination; it liberates us from the limitations of our own experience and opinions by proffering alternative views, scenarios, and explanations. It helps us to appreciate the fact that neither the easiest nor the most complex solution is necessarily the correct one. We learn to think, marshal evidence, and weigh the relative merits of different factors before committing to a plan of action. [end quote]"

Larger institutions with more specialized faculty and curricula are often perceived as more prestigious and therefore can appear more attractive to students looking

at higher education. While I never impugn the integrity and good intentions of the competition (and I would definitely not want to present this as a black-and-white issue), I would argue that small liberal arts programs at schools like Mesa State College offer an historically grounded, balanced, and, in the long term, more economically viable education for many, if not most, students. (Truly a win-win!)

Did I just say "balanced" education? As Jared Burrows, a highly creative guitar teacher, once pointed out, "integration" might be a better term, for it conveys a cohesive and interconnected approach. I can achieve "balance" by consuming a lemon, a spoonful of sugar and a bottle of water, but, hey, personally - I like lemonade better. Perhaps the best mantra might be "synthesis."

It's been said that graduate study is all about learning more and more about less and less. This may be a bit of an oversimplified caricature, but specialization still seems to rule the roost, particularly in conservatory settings. I am a product of conservatory training, yet it is versatility that has played a crucial role in every single one of my teaching positions - both adjunct and full time. My very first teaching job was unsolicited. In the late 1970's, the Director of New England Conservatory's Preparatory program *created* a position for me because he had been told that I teach both classical and jazz piano. Up until then, if a student wanted to learn both styles, he or she would have to sign up with two specialized teachers.

As I just pointed out, the word "conservatory" has become rather synonymous with specialization and compartmentalization. However, "conservatory" connotes conserving, or preserving, *all* that is precious and timeless in our artistic heritage. When we look at *real* history, we find that the alternative model - one of well-rounded versatility - dovetails quite nicely with our *actual* music tradition.

Despite my reservations, specialization should, of course, be represented in academe and in the professional world at large. But it should not be the norm. In the piano world, we are seriously deluding students if we, either overtly or by our silence, allow a majority of them to think that classical solo concert pianism is a viable career option today. And even those exceptionally gifted ones who succeed despite the odds need sufficient breadth and context to be truly distinctive, credible and successful musicians in the long term. For better or worse, specialists are gradually inhabiting a smaller and smaller world. This is, in my view, a healthy "back to the future" trend. Outside of our cloistered academic halls, the days of "larger than life" personalities are waning. If you asked a typical person on the street, "Who is your favorite classical pianist?" you might be hard pressed to get that person to name *any* classical pianist, let alone their favorite.

The trend toward specialization can be seen historically as a relatively recent spillover of what economist and historian Robert Freeman calls "the struggle between two different models [for education]." In a recent commentary, Freeman

(not to be confused with the *other* Robert Freeman, former President of Eastman, by the way) writes:

"[Quote] One model views schools as a process of cultural birth, of bringing forth a new generation... who will carry on - replicate - the culture. The other model views schools as a machine, an industrial process not unlike an assembly line. Its purpose is to mass produce 'factors of production,' well trained, obedient inputs that can be used in the manufacture of wealth.

Not surprisingly, these competing models produce radically different prescriptions for how to improve our schools. The differences show up in everything from how to pay and retain good teachers to curriculum design, teaching methods, and discipline."

I especially like Freeman's next sentence:

"In order to improve our schools, getting the *model right* will prove not nearly so important as getting the *right model* [end quote]."

Freeman goes on to explain that:

"[quote] Mass public education in America was conceived and designed as a production process. In the late 1800's, millions of farmers and immigrants were arriving in American cities in search of...riches. [end quote]"

It is the factory model of education, asserts Freeman, that drives so much of the current calls for reform in the way of greater "efficiency" and "cost effectiveness."

Freeman traces the other model of education (what he calls "the cultural womb") to

"[quote] Plato's Academy and.. the universities of medieval Europe. [This model] views the student not as a factor of production to be assembled and put to work, but as a human being to be nurtured and set to thinking. Its primary goal is not mass production of vocational competence but rather individual cultivation of human maturity.

In the cultural womb model, society replicates itself by creating thoughtful human beings who will carry its 'cultural DNA' into succeeding generations. It is those thoughtful human beings who embody and therefore model society's values for those who come after them. This concept of education as cultural womb could not be more different from that of the school as a factory.[end quote]"

In a separate piece for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Freeman warns of the perils of what he views as wrong-headed educational "reform":

"[quote] Increasing efficiency means removing variability while boosting output. This is a great formula for mass-producing hamburgers or

semiconductors. It is a disaster for producing intelligence and character... Remember, intelligence and character come from carefully managed complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty, all delivered in a safe, patient, nurturing environment. This is the opposite of efficiency.[end quote]"

Wouldn't this make an exquisite school motto for Mesa State College? I can just see the brochure now: "Managed complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty, all delivered in a safe, patient, nurturing environment " I love it!

Specialization, a product of the industrial revolution, is not only at variance with our more longstanding venerable traditions. It has also, to a large extent, outlived its usefulness in today's ever-changing, information age society.

I hope and trust that all of us in this room are kindred spirits and are, as Freeman would say, choosing the right educational model. And while the "cultural womb" model may be a win-win by being, in the long term, *more* commercially viable, I hope we choose it primarily because it is simply the intrinsically better educational model for us as human beings with creative, complex spirits.

The notion persists that those who are well-rounded are excellent at nothing. The great conductor, pianist and composer Leonard Bernstein ("Burn-stine"), however, understood that versatility enriches (rather than detracts from) every part of the whole. The whole is, as they say, greater than the sum of the parts. Furthermore, great creative luminaries are naturally inclined to *embrace* what Robert Freeman calls uncertainty, ambiguity and change.

This is *real* tradition, unless we prefer to define tradition as a set of frozen precepts and inflexible edicts. Without eternal vigilance, all great traditions - art, philosophy, religion, music, etc. - run the risk of turning into fossilized rituals.

My teaching philosophy can be summed up in one sentence, which I would love to see framed and posted in every teaching studio:

***A single class may be forgotten, but a revolution in perspective and process will last forever.***

The most empowering message we can give students is this: "I can 'teach' you, or, *together* we can discover *how* to learn. I would like to put myself out of business, to help you become so self-sufficient that I will no longer be needed."

As Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote,

"It is a low benefit to *give* me something; it is a high benefit to *enable* me to do somewhat of myself." [Emphases mine]

The best teaching is rooted in the grand traditions of liberal arts education and music history. It fosters critical thinking, cooperative problem solving, open communication, self-actualization, individuality, creativity, confidence and a sense of community, teamwork and mutual respect.

Music theorist Brad Hansen from Portland State University pointed out in a recent paper:

"[quote] Evaluating a student's ability to retain facts is temptingly neat and simple. A better teaching model moves beyond mere facts and engages students, who leave the classroom with the ability to analyze and solve problems on their own....Any curriculum that focuses on performance without the integration of history and theory, or without providing opportunities for students to pose or to solve problems, is limited in its effectiveness [end quote]."

Genuine teaching involves infinitely more than information dispensing. Here's another excerpt from Robert Freeman:

"[quote] I spent 20 years in the computer industry before becoming a public-school teacher... I had risen to become vice president at one of the world's largest software companies. I know business. And I know something about education as well. Education is harder. Education is harder because cultivating human intelligence is one of the most difficult things in the world. It is far more complex and takes far longer than producing cheaper widgets or staging new ad campaigns. It takes millions of nuanced, exquisitely tailored stimuli, all reinforced at the right time, in the right context, and all delivered in a supportive emotional environment. Even then, it's not always predictable. But it is a certainty to fail without commitment.[end quote]"

In the words of Emerson, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." We should always keep in mind that students are amazingly intuitive. Who and what we are and how *we ourselves* live, teach and perform in our everyday lives have a far greater impact on them than anything we communicate verbally in classes. We teach *most* by example. It is a high calling and a daunting responsibility to be the best possible examples. Teaching is more than just classes; it is an attitude, a spirit, that permeates every course and every facet of what we do inside and outside of the academy. All of us, with our rich array of skills and real life experiences, lead by example as we strive to be the best possible mentors to students in their quest to reach their fullest potentials as whole, versatile, accomplished, creative and integrated people.

So how do we know if we've succeeded? Let me proffer that the true measures of our students' successes will not be manifest in faculty evaluations forms, nor in the mere outer trappings of careers, fame, or wealth. As Emerson put it,

"[quote] Society's praise can be cheaply secured, and almost all ... are content with those easy merits...[unquote]"

Perhaps, instead, the truest measure of success would be this: have we instilled in our students a genuine, deep and lifelong passion for learning?

Thank you all for coming. Before I take questions, I'd like to briefly mention the Festival for Creative Pianists, a venue I founded in 2001 wherein young pianists are encouraged to demonstrate the very skills that are often discouraged in classical pianism. I hope all of you will attend the evening concerts tomorrow, Friday and Saturday night, for you will hear guest artists and students showcase a dazzling variety of styles - classical, jazz, pop, rag, and original pieces. Today's presentation is merely a "teaser."

So, are there any questions? Comments? Ripe tomatoes? Time-delayed incendiary devices? :-)

**[Play Mozart?]**

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*What follows below is a transcript of the original, longer version of this lecture/demonstration. Due to time constraints, this version had to be edited.*

*It is presented herein for those who may want a fuller understanding of piano teaching and its role in the liberal arts.*

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Good afternoon. Thank you all for coming today to what I hope will be a thought-provoking and informative lecture/demonstration.

When Marilyn vos Savant, a columnist for Parade magazine, was asked by a reader, "Why are the arts considered liberal, as in 'liberal arts'?" Savant replied,

[quote] "In this context, the word 'liberal' has nothing to do with politics. Rather, the term is rooted in 'liberty' and goes back centuries, when it referred to work or studies that one undertook freely, in contrast to activity necessary to earn a living or to train for a technical profession." [end quote]

This tradition does indeed go back centuries. Johann Joseph Fux ("Fooks") was an Austrian composer and theorist who was born in 1660 and died in Vienna in 1741. He wrote a now famous treatise on counterpoint, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, which translates "Steps to Parnassus." (Parnassus, by the way, is a place where the ancient Greek muses of the fine arts were said to originate.) The entire book, published in 1725, is written as a dialogue between master and student. In the opening dialogue, the master emphasizes that learning music is a lifetime exhaustive study, "like an immense ocean." Upon hearing this, the student is undaunted, and reiterates his "burning desire to understand" music, whereupon the master replies:

"I am happy to recognize your natural aptitude. There is only one matter that still troubles me. If this is removed I shall take you into the circle of my pupils."

The student replies:

"Please say what it is, revered master. Yet surely [nothing] will move me to give up my plan."

But the master cautions severely,

[quote] "Perhaps the hope of future riches and possessions induces you to choose this life? If this is the case, believe me you must change your mind...Whoever wants riches must take another path."

At last the student assures the master in no uncertain terms:

[quote] "I have no other object than to pursue my love of music, without any thought of gain...[O]ne should be content with a simple way of life and strive...for proficiency and a good name [rather] than for wealth, for virtue is its own reward."

Mesa State College is a liberal arts institution. So, in the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression, we are nevertheless charged with carrying the torch of this noble, idealistic educational approach we call "liberal arts." It's quite a challenge - a balancing act, really, since we cannot afford to altogether ignore the harsh realities for students who, as a practical matter, must ultimately find career paths and make a living.

But perhaps I am falling into the trap of presenting this as necessarily an either-or scenario. Must musicians inevitably choose between artistry or wealth? Consider

the words of Dr. Ernest Nolan, Vice President for Academic Administration at Madonna University in Livonia, Michigan:

"[quote] A Department of Labor report projects that 80 percent of the children beginning kindergarten will eventually enter jobs that don't even exist today!...

...For some, ['liberal arts'] means all those required classes that stand in the way of [job] training...But, upon closer inspection, the liberal arts can be understood as the key to survival in any field that is subject to change over time. The standard definition of liberal arts education implies a program of study designed to foster capacities of analysis, critical reflection, problem solving, communication, computation and synthesis of knowledge from different disciplines. Its goal is to provide students with an intellectual, historical, and social context for recognizing the continuity between the past and future and for drawing on the human capacity of reason to understand human experience, to question the values dimension of human enterprise, and to articulate the results of this process of thinking....However, this definition doesn't fully capture the rich texture of this brand of education. ...liberal arts education puts the individual into the presence of the greatest ideas, most transforming concepts, and most powerful works of the imagination that human beings have produced. This is...an intellectual framework with which to understand and evaluate human events and interactions....[Secondly] liberal arts education is empowering; it provides rehearsal for life in the imagination; it liberates us from the limitations of our own experience and opinions by proffering alternative views, scenarios, and explanations. It helps us to appreciate the fact that neither the easiest nor the most complex solution is necessarily the correct one. We learn to think, marshal evidence, and weigh the relative merits of different factors before committing to a plan of action. [end quote]"

I, like many others in the music field - have been wrestling with these issues for most of my adult life. As Chair of the Idaho College Faculty Forum some years ago, I wrote on need for broad, integrated piano curricula and perhaps a bit of "out of the box" thinking to help students survive in our highly competitive music field.

Larger institutions with more specialized faculty and curricula are often perceived as more prestigious and therefore can appear more attractive to students looking at higher education. While I never impugn the integrity and good intentions of the competition (and I would definitely not want to present this as a black-and-white issue), I would argue that small liberal arts programs at schools like Mesa State College offer an historically grounded, balanced, and, in the long term, more economically viable education for many, if not most, students. (Truly a win-win!)

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As I just pointed out, the word "conservatory" has become rather synonymous with specialization and compartmentalization. However, "conservatory" connotes conserving, or preserving, *all* that is precious and timeless in our artistic heritage. When we look at *real* history, we find that the alternative model - one of well-rounded versatility - dovetails quite nicely with our *actual* music tradition. Until relatively recently, versatility was the norm. Musicians of yesteryear composed, improvised, played one or more instruments, and probably wore a few other hats as well by teaching, conducting, etc. In the early 1990's I recall asking a colleague, who was a full-time saxophone teacher, if he would play an original composition with me. He agreed to do so. But then I casually mentioned that my piece is in a jazzy style, albeit with all the notes written out. He then said, "Oh...sorry, I don't play jazz." All I could think was -- this is the very epitome of overspecialization when a major university hires a saxophonist who plays *only* classical music!

Despite my reservations, specialization should, of course, be represented in academe and in the professional world at large. But it should not be the norm. In the piano world, we are seriously deluding students if we, either overtly or by our silence, allow a majority of them to think that classical solo concert pianism is a viable career option today. And even those exceptionally gifted ones who succeed despite the odds need sufficient breadth and context to be truly distinctive, credible and successful musicians in the long term. For better or worse, specialists are gradually inhabiting a smaller and smaller world. This is, in my view, a healthy "back to the future" trend. Outside of our cloistered academic halls, the days of "larger than life" personalities are waning. If you asked a typical person on the street, "Who is your favorite classical pianist?" you might be hard pressed to get that person to name *any* classical pianist, let alone their favorite.

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semiconductors. It is a disaster for producing intelligence and character... Remember, intelligence and character come from carefully managed complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty, all delivered in a safe, patient, nurturing environment. This is the opposite of efficiency.[end quote]"

Wouldn't this make an exquisite school motto for Mesa State College? I can just see the brochure now: "Managed complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty, all delivered in a safe, patient, nurturing environment " I love it!

Specialization, a product of the industrial revolution, is not only at variance with our more longstanding venerable traditions. It has also, to a large extent, outlived its usefulness in today's ever-changing, information age society.

I hope and trust that all of us in this room are kindred spirits and are, as Freeman would say, choosing the right educational model. And while the "cultural womb" model may be a win-win by being, in the long term, *more* commercially viable, I hope we choose it primarily because it is simply the intrinsically better educational model for us as human beings with creative, complex spirits.

I'd like now to share with you a bit of my background as a pianist. I began piano at the age of 7. For the most part, lessons with various teachers consisted of learning how to play "correct" notes with "correct" interpretations. You played "good" classical music -- as opposed to "bad" popular music and jazz, which was to be shunned. You played only the notes on the page - no messing around with the sacred score. You did what the teacher said, for he or she was the absolute authority figure, the very fountain of all knowledge, not to be questioned or challenged. Music was serious business, requiring strict discipline and practice. You played classical repertory in formal recitals and festivals (which were, curiously, *anything but* festive, however).

Not all of this was bad, of course (particularly the discipline and practicing!). But where was the fun, the imagination? The creative spirit is innate to everyone - especially children who are unsullied by the curse of "adulthood." Yet where were the opportunities for composition and improvisation? Sadly, it was inevitable that composing, which I started at age 11, would be a solitary task, for there was little or no place for it in piano lessons. And my interest in the music of the Beatles (which allowed me so much deliciously forbidden freedom in my playing) would have to go underground, for this also had no place in "proper" piano training.

My passion for teaching began at the young age of 13, after only six years of lessons. As I recall, there was quite a dichotomy between how I was being taught and how I was teaching, however. From the get-go I instinctively rebelled against the authoritarian approach. I also had a bit of instinctive market savviness; I realized that if I wanted to build up a private teaching clientele, I needed to find ways to be competitive. So I did three things that most other teachers were not doing -

- 1) I traveled to people's homes,
- 2) I tried to make lessons both challenging *and* fun, and
- 3) I explored innovative ways to teach, particularly with beginners.

Keep in mind that at this tender age I had never even heard the word "pedagogy." (If I had, I would have undoubtedly thought it meant "pet your doggie.") I was weaned on the time-honored standard middle-C methods. Alternative methods were either unfamiliar or unavailable to me, or simply not yet written. Yet, in this pedagogical vacuum, I deduced, for instance, that full staff reading was too difficult for many young students. So I thought, "why not try having students write their own melodies using three notes on a one-line 'staff'?"

*[Illustrate on erase board or blank paper or simply describe to audience.]*

(This one-line "staff," by the way, is what I now like to facetiously call Ringo Starr's vocal range :-). Then I encouraged writing random melodies of five notes on a two-line staff, followed by seven notes on a three-line staff. When I got to four lines I thought, "This is so close to the full staff that we might as well skip it and go to five lines."

Later I started writing out fun tunes using other kinds of pre-staff notation – e.g., letters of the musical alphabet and/or fingering numbers.

With respect to technique, I remember how the dreaded Schmitt exercises almost drove me to quit piano [demonstrate example on piano]. Yet I also recognized the "finger calisthenic" value of these drills. So I thought, "what if I assign one exercise at a time - in rote fashion - and call them 'tongue twisters'?" What had been drudgery for students suddenly became fun!

*[Demonstrate Schmitt 5-finger exercise at piano --  
"Rubber baby buggy bumper"  
"She sells sea shells by the sea shore"]*

I also concocted the "What am I? game", which uses what I call "THE STAFF FROM HECK" and favors the intervallic, or landmark approach, over the "Empty Garbage Before Dad Flips" method of reading.

*[Demonstrate on blank sheet of paper or blackboard.]*

Students in Bach's day were expected to read in *any* clef. This intervallic approach avoids getting conceptually locked into only one or two clefs.

I also played "Simon says" games while teaching beginning concepts. [E.g., "Can you play all the two black keys with your right hand 2nd and 3rd fingers? Gotcha! Simon didn't say!"]

I taught using these methods throughout my teen years before later discovering that others were thinking along the similar lines and incorporating some of the same ideas - particularly those involving pre-staff notation - into the newer, more progressive method books. I still use many of these ideas in my teaching today, by the way – even here at the college level.

I feel blessed that I was eventually able to study with one "old school" teacher for whom integrated, "holistic" teaching was at least a bit more evident (though she did draw the line at music by the Beatles). I am referring to my teenage pre-college lessons with Gladys Ondricek (a protégé of Heinrich Gebhard, the noted Boston teacher). Lessons with Mrs. Ondricek were typically two and a half hours long and encompassed a comprehensive "diet" of varied repertory, technique and theory, including weekly four-part harmonization assignments. (Little wonder I had no difficulty with theory in college.) Her teaching was a throwback to the master teachers of a bygone era. Teachers in Beethoven's day did it all; they taught repertory, composition, technique and improvisation. With Mrs. Ondricek, I got at least three out of four (everything but improvisation). Today, in the hallowed halls of academe, we're lucky to see two of these four elements - viz., repertory and technique - covered in a typical piano lesson. A fair number of my counterparts see themselves as "artist coaches" whose sole task is to delve into sophisticated matters of musical interpretation. It is left to others to teach theory, composition, improvisation, technique, etc. And it is left to other to "connect the dots" between these various elements of music.

My masters degree program at New England Conservatory was perhaps the most "specialized" one, focused on advanced piano performance. Two things are worth noting, however -

1) During that time, I lead a kind of Superman/Clark Kent existence. By day I was intensively studying classical repertory and loving every minute of it. By night, however, I donned my alter-ego mask and cape. I wrote my own figured bass realizations of Bach Flute Sonatas and performed them with an adventuresome flutist. I composed. I learned jazz on my own. To earn a living (for I had no rich uncle to put me through college) I freelanced for every conceivable kind of venue - from solo and collaborative concerts at places such as the Harvard Faculty Club, to playing violin & piano transcriptions (many of them my own) of countless opera arias and overtures at various venues in and around the greater Boston area.

Around this time, I was also a self-taught organist for many churches and synagogues. One of these positions involved accompanying a Cantor who asked me, "Can you play chords while I sing?" "Sure," I said, "just give me the music." "Oh, there's no music," he replied. "I just improvise, so just play whatever chords make me sound good." This Cantor was a high school history teacher who could not read music. Nervously at first, I accomplished the task. Talk about a "baptism of fire" - this was *real life* ear training, folks! With these kinds of *real life*

experiences, I had little need for special sight-reading or musicianship classes in college.

It is important that we encourage students to embrace these kinds of experiences and opportunities. Education occurs inside *and* outside the classroom.

2) The second thing worth mentioning is that when I finished my degree at New England Conservatory, I felt a profound sense of inadequacy. "So," I thought, "I played my big recital - the repertory of which represents an infinitesimal fraction of the piano repertory - but does that really make me qualified to teach the great classical repertory?" You can't teach what you don't know, after all. Good pedagogy is not only about teaching methodologies and style - it's also about *content*.

Fortunately, I had taped all my piano lessons with Leonard Shure, as well as the many open master classes he gave. We were instructed, by the way, to attend *all* of these open classes. The unspoken - yet loud and clear - message at New England Conservatory was, "Do you have a life? Well, cancel it!" I was, however, delighted to sit on other students' lessons; I learned more at those sessions than I did while I was on the "hot seat" having my own lessons. This tradition - sitting in on everyone else's lessons - has, unfortunately, waned considerably, due to the ever-increasing demands on our students' time.

Anyway, I eventually amassed quite an arsenal of lesson and master class tapes. This was not enough for me, however, for I was determined to be a "master teacher" in the grand European tradition. So I persuaded other Leonard Shure students - including many former students who had studied with him at other schools throughout the country - to lend me their tapes as well. Knowing how eager I was to learn, Mr. Shure even allowed me to copy innumerable reel-to-reel recordings he had made of master classes he presented at Harvard University in the 1960's. What a treasure trove this was, for these classes encompassed much of the standard solo literature as well as chamber music and major song cycles - a veritable gold mine! (I was amazed that Shure allowed me to borrow these precious recordings, for they were irreplaceable and exceedingly fragile. Now famous personas such as Peter Serkin are heard baring their souls at a young age.)

For the next five months, I spent about eight to ten hours a day, alone in my apartment, listening intently to these tapes. I barely touched the piano in those five months. This was mental practice - listening over and over with score and pencil in hand, hungrily and eagerly pencilling in important points into my music. Later I painstakingly edited each lesson tape, distilling the most important musical ideas in order to produce a series of edited recordings that highlighted the main points.

This self-imposed reclusive "sabbatical" was a watershed in my artistic development. I could have spent those months promoting my career -

concertizing, entering competitions, pursuing a doctorate, etc. My paper credentials would have been the better for it. But I choose that path because, as the marketing people might say, "Before you sell yourself, you better have something to sell." I was inspired by the Leonard Shure legend; in his youth he chose to study with Arthur Schnabel rather than concertize prematurely as some kind of "Wunderkind."

Leonard Shure was not famous for dishing out gratuitous compliments. As a student at the conservatory, I recall once almost begging him for some positive feedback. He responded (in his inimitably intimidating and infamous basso voice), "Well, you're doing better...[pause]...than I expected." After my aforementioned period of intense study, however, I returned to Shure for a few private lessons at his home. Remember, I had hardly touched the piano - my study had been almost purely mental "practice." But I knew I had made tremendous progress, for Shure was, for the first time, genuinely effuse in his praise ("*Now we can work!*," he exclaimed, after hearing me play). I remember thinking, "Take me *now*, Lord, I'm ready. I've climbed the highest summit, for I've done the impossible - I've earned praise from the implacable Leonard Shure!" Ironically, I terminated the lessons shortly thereafter, for I realized that while I still had much to learn (we *always* do), the most fundamental lesson had taken hold - namely, I knew *how* to learn. This was an important epiphany for me, for I recognized that while content is indeed important, it is less important than process. (It comes down to that old saying about giving a person a fish vs. teaching him or her *how* to fish.)

Leonard Shure often demonstrated at the piano. This was very common and quite effective - very much in the old European tradition. As students, we were expected to listen intently (certainly a worthwhile skill to develop) and imitate what we heard. Classical performance is perhaps one of the only professional fields where "interpretive plagiarism" - as I call it - is not only allowed but actually applauded! I grant that imitation is a valid and necessary teaching tool, particularly at the earlier stages of development. But, as the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson once cautioned,

"[quote] Imitation cannot go above its model...The inventor did it because it was natural to him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of [another's] [end quote]."

Those who have listened to very old piano rolls and recordings are struck by the fact that pianists back then demonstrated considerably more variety and individuality in musical interpretations.

And the great composers whom we all revere - Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann, for example - were multi-faceted in their education, interests and talents. The notion often persists that those who are well-rounded are excellent at nothing in particular. The great conductor, pianist and composer Leonard

Bernstein, however, understood that versatility enriches (rather than detracts from) every part of the whole. The whole is, as they say, greater than the sum of the parts. Furthermore, great creative luminaries are naturally inclined to *embrace* what Robert Freeman calls uncertainty, ambiguity and change - a little something to bear in mind the next time students forget that our sacred Ürtext editions are, as my good friend John Salmon says, "necessary, but not enough." This is *real* tradition, unless we prefer to define tradition as a set of frozen precepts and inflexible edicts. Without eternal vigilance, all great traditions - art, philosophy, religion, music, etc. - run the risk of turning into fossilized rituals.

My teaching philosophy can be summed up in one sentence, which I would love to see framed and posted in every teaching studio:

***A single class may be forgotten, but a revolution in perspective and process will last forever.***

The most empowering message we can give students is this: "I can 'teach' you, or, *together* we can discover *how* to learn. I would like to put myself out of business, to help you become so self-sufficient that I will no longer be needed."

As Emerson once wrote,

"[quote] It is a low benefit to *give* me something; it is a high benefit to *enable* me to do somewhat of myself [end quote]."

The best teaching is, in fact, rooted in the grand traditions of liberal arts education and music history. It fosters critical thinking, cooperative problem solving, open communication, integration, self-actualization, individuality, creativity, confidence and a sense of community, teamwork and mutual respect.

Music theorist Brad Hansen from Portland State University pointed out in a recent paper for the College Music Society:

"[quote] Evaluating a student's ability to retain facts is temptingly neat and simple. A better teaching model moves beyond mere facts and engages students, who leave the classroom with the ability to analyze and solve problems on their own. [end quote]"

Dr. Hansen goes on to assert that

"[quote] Any curriculum that focuses on performance without the integration of history and theory, or without providing opportunities for students to pose or to solve problems, is limited in its effectiveness. It is a challenge to create a rehearsal environment where students apply knowledge to common problems and solve those problems with analytical

and evaluative thinking and action, while preparing for the next concert.  
[end quote]"

How will we know if we have succeeded as teachers? Let me proffer that the true measure of our students' success should not be merely the outer trappings - a successful career, fame, or wealth - for, as Emerson also noted,

"[quote] Society's praise can be cheaply secured, and almost all ... are content with those easy merits...[unquote]"

Perhaps, instead, the truest measure of success would be this: have we instilled in our students a genuine, deep and lifelong love for music?

Genuine teaching involves infinitely more than information dispensing. Here's another excerpt from Robert Freeman:

"[quote] I spent 20 years in the computer industry before becoming a public-school teacher... I had risen to become vice president at one of the world's largest software companies. I know business. And I know something about education as well. Education is harder. Education is harder because cultivating human intelligence is one of the most difficult things in the world. It is far more complex and takes far longer than producing cheaper widgets or staging new ad campaigns. It takes millions of nuanced, exquisitely tailored stimuli, all reinforced at the right time, in the right context, and all delivered in a supportive emotional environment. Even then, it's not always predictable. But it is a certainty to fail without commitment.[end quote]"

In the words of Emerson, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." We should always keep in mind that students are amazingly intuitive. Who and what we are and how *we ourselves* live, teach and perform in our everyday lives have a far greater impact on them than anything we communicate verbally in classes. We teach *most* by example. It is a high calling and a daunting responsibility to be the best possible examples. Teaching is more than just classes; it is an attitude, a spirit, that permeates *every* course and *every* facet of what we do inside and outside of the academy. All of us, with our rich array of skills and real life experiences, lead by example as we strive to be the best possible mentors to students in their quest to reach their fullest potentials as whole, versatile, accomplished, creative and integrated musicians.

For the last part of this presentation, I would like to discuss and demonstrate some examples of classical improvisation and embellishing at the piano.

The improvisational abilities of most of the great composers – Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, etc. – were legendary and well documented. Today, however, only a small percentage of piano teachers teach classical improvisation. As I noted earlier, we rarely deviate from the printed page, believing (ironically) that this is the only way to be "authentic" and faithful to the "composer's intentions." But, as John Salmon points out, musicians of bygone

days were "constantly...re-arranging, adding on, transposing, recontextualizing [their own] and others' music." As with jazz practice today, it would have been considered unusual and boring to interpret a musical score too literally in, say, Bach's day. (It would be as ridiculous as having a jazz pianist today play *only* the notes of a fake chart, or lead sheet.)

In 2001 I founded the Festival for Creative Pianists. I wanted to create a venue wherein students would be encouraged to showcase the very kinds of skills that are often discouraged in other competitions and in piano lessons. The great composers often wrote repeat signs in their music. It was understood that you would introduce original variants on those repeated passages. I hope all of you will attend the evening concerts tomorrow, Friday and Saturday night, for you will hear both guest artists and students showcase a variety of styles and creative skills. Today's presentation is merely a "teaser," for I have only little bit of time left to give you a short sampling...

*[Play Bach, Mozart, and/or Chopin.]*