

Inspiring Quotes for Classical Improvisers

compiled by Lin Foulk • Western Michigan University • lin.foulk@wmich.edu

Improvisation is not the expression of accident, but rather the accumulated yearnings, dreams, and wisdom of our very soul.—*Yehudi Menuhin*

Improvising does not have to mean playing bebop; *it simply means making your own decisions about what to play.*—*Jeff Agrell*

Somewhere deep inside there is a sound that is mine alone, and I struggle daily to hear it and tune my life to it.—*Rachel Naomi Remen*

For any age, a childlike attitude and tenacity of search are essential, and rewarding. Not all “creative” music-making needs to be great music that lasts forever. Through the doing, something genuine occurs which enhances all future music experience for the individual.—*Gertrude Price Wollner*

It is difficult to get the news from poems [or music]; yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.—*William Carlos Williams* [parenthetical phrase added]

The joy in improvising while singing and playing is evident in almost all phases of music history. It is always a powerful force in the creation of new forms and every historical study that confines itself to the practical and theoretical sources that have come down to us in writing or in print, without taking into account the improvisational element in living musical practice, must of necessity present an incomplete, indeed a distorted picture. For there is scarcely a single field in music that has remained unaffected by improvisation, scarcely a single musical technique or form of composition that did not originate in improvisatory practice or was not essentially influenced by it. The whole history of the development of music is accompanied by manifestations of the drive to improvise.—*Ernest Thomas Ferand*

Improvisation may be an answer to reinvigorating concert audiences...Prior to the twentieth century, most concerts were part literature and part improvisation. To some extent, this tradition lives on in the popular music culture today. Do they know something we don't?—*Keith Hill*

Improvisation has played a prominent role throughout the history of world musics. Until quite recently we have tended to ignore the fact that European classical music from 1600 to the present comprises only a small fraction of the world's music. Furthermore, our general neglect of improvisation as a creative discipline stands in direct contrast to the rest of the world, where improvisation has thrived in virtually every cultural region.—*Bill Dobbins*

The highest music is where the sound does not destroy the soundless moments in between. As the musician becomes more and more refined, he can manage to create sound, and between two sounds he can give you an experience of soundlessness. The soundlessness touches the heart.—*Osho*

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.—*Ian Maclaren*

Comparison is the biggest killer of creativity.—*Brené Brown*

Rules of Improvisation (paraphrased from Tina Fey's *Bossypants*)

1. Yes (agree with and respect what you hear)
2. Yes and (agree and add something of your own).
3. Make statements (don't just ask questions or point out obstacles)
4. Remember that there are no mistakes, only opportunities

With improvisation the initiated listener is an indispensable source of inspiration. It is collectively based, socially experienced and outwardly directed. In contrast, composing portrays creativity as being highly introspective, individual-centered and creator focused. Accordingly society, or the public, is a potential source of distraction and a threat to the artist's solitude, composure and concentration.—*Ali Jihad Racy*

Improvisation should be at the core of the music curriculum. It should come first and should remain at the core of music education throughout the later years of increasing expertise. Musicians educated with improvisation at the center will have a better developed ability to think musically—to deeply understand music as well as be better prepared to interpret written scores.—*R. Keith Sawyer*

Composing will always be a memory of inspiration; improvising is live inspiration, something happening at that very moment. Do not fear mistakes. There are none.—*Miles Davis*

Many western musicians are fabulously skilled at playing black dots on a printed page, but mystified by how the dots got there in the first place and apprehensive of playing without dots. Music theory does not help here; it teaches rules of the grammar, but not what to say. The real story of improvisation is spontaneous expression, and is therefore a spiritual and a psychological story rather than a story about the technique.—*Stephen Nachmanovitch*

The idea of improvisation—the extent to which the performing artist was not only allowed but expected to improvise—was basic to the concept of the performing arts during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. A surviving text, whether it be literature, music, or choreography, is incomplete and requires unwritten additions by the performers in order to bring it to life in terms of the expectations of the early centuries. To consider any artifact without this ingredient is to see only part of the product. When viewed with the addition of improvisation, the texts take on the freshness that made them a vibrant part of their contemporary culture.—*Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (ed. Timothy J. McGee)

Composing is the "ego-trip par excellence". The musical activity most diametrically opposed to composing is improvising. We know that there are some cultures where the composer dominates—above all in Western music and others where the improviser rules, as almost everywhere else in the world. However, both improvisers and composers exist in almost all cultures, and there are borderline cases where it is often not possible to determine whether something has been composed or is being improvised. In most cases it turns out that what was

originally improvised has been repeated so often over the course of time that it has taken on the character of something composed even though it is not written down.—*Joachim-Ernst Berendt*

To work from nature is to improvise.—*Georges Braque*

Improvisation is a frightening concept for classical players at first, but before long it becomes an empowering and intoxicating activity.—*Jeffrey Agrell*

When improvisation regains its former position at the centre of Classical music-making, perhaps the gap between composer and performer, between old and new music, between vernacular and art music, and between Classical performer and audience will narrow.—*Robert Levin*

I close by recommending free improvisation in general and in every respectable form to all those for whom [music] is not merely a matter of entertainment and practical ability, but rather principally one of inspiration and meaning in their art. This recommendation, to be sure, has never been so urgent as now, because the number of people whose interest belong to the former category and not to the latter has never been so great. Even if a person plays with inspiration, but always from a written score, he or she will be much less nourished, broadened, and educated than through the frequent offering of all of his or her powers in a free fantasy practiced in the full awareness of certain guidelines and directions, even if this improvisation is only moderately successful.—*Johann Hummel, Ausführliche theoretisch-practische Anweisung zum Piano-Forte-Spiel*, quoted in V. Goertzen, “By Way of Introduction: Preluding by 18th- and 19th-century Pianists,” *Journal of Musicology*, 305.

You can never solve a problem with the same consciousness that created the problem.—*Albert Einstein*

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened. Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down the dulcimer. Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.—*Rumi*

Immerse yourself in the rapture of music. You know what you love. Go there. Tend to each note, each chord, rising up from the silence and dissolving again. Vibrating strings draw us in the spacious resonance of the heart. The body becomes light as the sky and you, one with the Great Musician, who is even now singing us into existence.—*Sutra 18, Vijnana Bhairava Tantra (The Radiance Sutras)*, translation by *Lorin Roche*, quoted in *Music Medicine by Christine Stevens*

Music—when approached through the lens of empowerment, simplicity, creativity, and calm—can provide the support we need to life's challenging moments and can become part of our daily routine for spirituality and health.—*Joan Borysenko, foreword to Music Medicine by Christine Stevens*

We spend more of our lives being dissatisfied with what we do than satisfied. There is a valuable but sometimes destructive tendency to self-critique in humans that, when seen at its worst, results in the search for criticism even in the face of creativity, discovery and joy. To be able to feel proud and joyful when improvising, we must accept and perhaps ignore imperfection. Musicians who find improvisation most challenging are sometimes experienced and classically trained musicians, and it is perhaps because they are imprisoned by aspiring to

the perfection of their 'ideal' musical selves—often driven by the influence of composers and performers significant to them. Break out of prison! Find your own music, create, explore, enjoy!—*Tony Wigram*

Creativity is the combination of talent for (intuition), and encounter with (action), the object or process. Talent, being more than exhibitionism is the inborn, instinctive ability to see, to connect with, and to give meaning to the encounter. Creativity is manifest in the act of employing talent with encounter.—*Dorita Berger*

See deep enough, and you see musically; | the heart of nature being everywhere music, | if you can only reach it.—*Thomas Carlyle*

Meaning is not inherent in music...[it is] kept afloat only because communities of people invest in them.—*Susan McClary*

Since most violinists have been limited to learning how to play from sheet music, their mental and physical training has fostered a “follow the dots” approach rather than one of origination. Sadly, this form of training has weakened listening skills and strengthened visual ones! Learning how to improvise, if you’ve been trained classically, can easily be approached with that same mind-set: “Teach me the rules. Give me something to follow visually, that will suddenly transform my style of playing.” It is essential, however, to approach improvisation with a different mindset and different practice habits.—*Julie Lyonn Lieberman*

Everyone has his or her own demons of judgment and self-criticism, no matter how experienced they are. In fact, some of the more technically expert musicians have the biggest burdens of criticism and inadequacy...When acknowledgment flows for such a basic accomplishment as showing up, it creates an atmosphere of welcome, and disarms those powerful inner critics we all may harbor.—*Jim Oshinsky*

...I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.—*Rainer Maria Rilke*

A friend once told me, “An instrument laid on the ground makes no sound. It is the musician who must bring Music forth, or not.” Notice, he did not say that we must *create* Music. There is a difference.—*Victor Wooten*

“Are you saying that you can play any instrument?” I asked. “Of course I can, and so can you! It is this knowing that separates us. A true writer can write using a typewriter, a pen, a pencil, or anything else that he chooses. You wouldn't call him a pencil writer, would you? Your understanding that the writing utensil is just a tool allows you to see past it and into the truth of what he is—a writer. The story is in the writer, is it not? Or is it in the pencil? Your problem is this: You have been trying to tell your story *with* a bass guitar instead of *through* it.”—*Victor Wooten*

The next time you set your mind on learning something, act as if you can already do it. Ask yourself, "What would it sound like if I could already do this technique?" Then, do it! If done honestly, you may not have to start from the beginning of the learning cycle. You may be able to skip a few steps.—*Victor Wooten*

Don't try real *hard*, try real *easy*.—*Victor Wooten*

Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. And today? Today is a gift. That's why we call it The Present.—*Babatunde Olatunji*

The improvisations that occurred in this concert had no preconceived rules or plans. Every one of the performers was free to play anything at any time. Rather than being a license to "go crazy," the absence of a plan was taken as a responsibility to listen carefully and to make interesting music...—*William Cahn, regarding a concert that NEXUS gave in 1971*

Improvisation, it is a mystery. You can write a book about it, but by the end no one still knows what it is. When I improvise and I'm in good form, I'm like somebody half sleeping. I even forget that there are people in front of me. Great improvisers are like priests, they are thinking only of their God.—*Stephane Grappelli*

Music is in the space between the notes.—*Claude Debussy*

To live the creative life, you must lose the fear of being wrong.—*Joseph Chilton Pearce*

The opposite of war isn't peace... It's creation!—*Jonathan Larson*

Connected with this is the proposition that improvisation cannot be rehearsed. Training is substituted for rehearsal, and a certain moral discipline is an essential part of this training. Written compositions are fired off into the future; even if never performed, the writing remains as a point of reference. Improvisation is in the present, its effect may live on in the souls of the participants, both active and passive (i.e., audience), but in its concrete form it is gone forever from the moment that it occurs, nor did it have any previous existence before the moment that it occurred, so neither is there any historical reference available. Informal 'sound' has a power over our emotional responses that formal 'music' does not, in that it acts subliminally rather than on a cultural level. This is a possible definition of the area in which AMM is experimental. We are searching for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them. The search is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician himself is at the heart of the experiment.—*Cornelius Cardew*

Dare to be dull.—*Keith Johnstone*

Be nothing special.—*David K. Reynolds*

Cultivate ordinary mind.—*a Zen saying*

It is difficult to get the news from poems; yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.—*William Carlos Williams*

Practice an instrument and you understand how to practice a religion. It happens everyday, not once a week. It requires faith as well as knowledge. It demands attention to details and the big picture. It requires both an active and detached mind. It is sensuous and spiritual. It combines work and play. It creates bonds among practitioners. It is inspiring and frustrating. It is mysterious and commonplace.—*Bruce Adolphe*

The most basic form in music is a circle: ABA. A musical circle is a sensuous abstraction of life circles: home-journey-home...day-night-day, wake-sleep-wake, health-illness/healing-health, dust-life-dust. Circles are the essence of balance; they embrace opposites: the male and female; the made and the found; the learned and the innate; the detached and the person; loud and soft; fast and slow; low and high; passionate and cool; weak and strong; flexible and brittle. You and the other.—*Bruce Adolphe*

Listening is not merely a matter of "I know what I like." Liking and disliking are not all there is. You cannot "know" something new until you have listened. "I" is not all there is. Experience music requires the suspension of judgment while the music unfolds. Think of it like meeting someone: Liking and disliking are not all there is. A good listener is willing, patient, sympathetic. A rush to judgment serves no purpose.—*Bruce Adolphe*

You can kick the spirit out of a puppy but it's hard to kick it back in.—*a cowboy saying*

He who binds to himself a joy | Doth the winged life destroy; | But he who kisses the joy as it flies | Lives in Eternity's sun rise.—*William Blake*