



# The magic of spontaneity

**William Bracken** – who recently graduated from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and was our One to Watch back in June – discusses the revelations of adopting a truly improvisational approach to performing music

Many of us are lucky enough to be able to recall a live performance so wondrous that we are given no choice but to hang obediently on to each note as we are given it, as if the performer were simply plucking the music out of thin air. I'm sure that I cannot be the only person frequently to find myself questioning the nature of this phenomenon – how is such witchcraft possible? How can it be that a work that I have heard many times sounds as if it is

being composed in front of me, as if I were hearing it for the first time?

Concerning the cohort of concepts that we readily associate with the performance of Western classical music, the word 'improvisation' is one that for many still appears unfamiliar or irrelevant. I have come to discover that dedicating a portion of our musical lives to the exploration of improvisational practices has the potential to enrich our music-making to a considerable degree.

It may seem contradictory to talk about improvisation when most of the time we are dealing with predetermined written scores, many of which do not invite alterations. However, much like actors, when we are interpreting a musical text we frequently attempt to give the illusion of immediacy, as if the notes we are playing are reactions in real time – to use the words of André Gide, describing recollections of Chopin's playing, as if the music was in 'a state of successive formation'. It is possible to

*Seeking spontaneity:  
William Bracken*



FRANCIS WARE

connect with this kind of spontaneity, even without changing a single note of the text, through openness to the improvisational state of mind. This state of mind is now scientifically recognised thanks to the research of Professor David Dolan and his colleagues (Professor John Sloboda and Imperial College's neuroscience team led by Professor Henrik J Jensen). Professor Dolan has been largely responsible for my own personal relationship with improvisation and the improvisational state of mind, more recently resulting in my being invited to join the teaching staff in his Centre for Creative Performance and Classical Improvisation at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama.

It might be surprising to consider that all of us are improvising all the time – when we speak to each other we express and convey information spontaneously. This has to do not only with the words we choose to speak but, perhaps more importantly, the *way* in which we say those words. Speech intonation is a large part of Dolan's improvisational school of thought, and justifiably so, as one single text can have a multitude of different meanings just by changing the intonation; that is, keeping a consistent 'what' and changing the 'how' (to use Dolan's terminology). This has huge implications for musical texts – it is an exercise that anyone can try: play a short musical phrase, perhaps from a familiar work, and see how drastically the meaning of it can be changed by manipulating the nature and intensity of the sound produced and the 'goal-point' notes of phrases, just as we stress particularly important words in sentences when we speak. The possibilities are almost inexhaustible, and all valid. The beauty of this experiment is that it advocates for an opportunity to connect with a deeper and more direct sense of expression and an openness to the inevitably unexpected nature of live performance; for a sense of excited anticipation and, dare I say, enjoyment.

Improvisation also provides us with an opportunity to deepen our proximity to the composers whose works we play. I first experienced this when I attended lectures delivered at the Guildhall School by world-leading improviser and Mozart scholar Robert Levin. To hear Levin's improvisational approach to interpreting, not to mention his extraordinary demonstrations of improvised cadenzas,

embellished repeats, extended fermatas and ornamental lead-ins (you can hear many of his live performances and demonstrations on YouTube), just as we know the composers themselves did in their time, was a game-changer for me. Naturally I subsequently enrolled on Professor Dolan's Interpretation Through Improvisation (ITI) elective to see if I could engage with this exciting new approach to music-making.

Some of the improvisational 'games' on the course involved using very basic compositional structures, such as minuets, to explore improvisation in both solo and chamber group settings. The advantages of these exercises were their invitations to question and explore the characteristics of the musical languages we were addressing – the symmetrical phrasing of the Classical style, the beautiful counterpoint and voice-leading of Baroque language and the expressive and chromatic tensions and resolutions of Romantic language. We would also explore the innermost workings of our repertoire by playing harmonic reductions: that is, reducing the music down to each change of harmony, wherein lies the main musical narrative of most pre-20th-century Western classical composers' works. Stravinsky famously argued that the role of the performer is solely to deliver the musical text exactly as notated, and that any further contribution from the individual is abhorrent and unnecessary. The flaw in this view, aside from the misunderstanding that performers cannot help but present composers' works through the lens of their own personality even if they tried otherwise, is that it promotes a kind of music-making that could be likened to reading a text perfectly in a foreign language with no idea as to what the sounds being made actually mean, and by proxy delivering them without emotional or expressive intent. The beauty of examining works through improvisational practices as previously described is that it not only allows one to really get inside a composer's head and get 'under the skin' of a particular work, but it also elevates the interpreter from the role of mere executant to the role of co-creator, which we undeniably are when we perform works written by a composer other than ourselves.

As a result of the ITI elective I was also fortunate to attend the Metric Intensive Programme in Leipzig in February 2023. This was a fascinating opportunity to learn about the numerous different approaches

to improvisation that exist within other leading European institutions, many of which took a highly experimental, free and performance-art-style approach – a stark contrast to the Guildhall course's focus on the Western classical canon. The improvisation took place largely in the context of chamber groups, receiving daily tuition from a large faculty of improvisation pedagogues. This was a revelatory week that led me to discover how I could use improvisation as a tool to explore my relationship with the piano. It also drew my attention to the unfathomable complexity of the phenomenon of how we express ourselves through our instruments, which resulted in many breakthroughs in my own musical journey, involving a handful of memorable, highly emotionally charged and fulfilling musical interactions with others, sometimes complete strangers. These experiences proved to be a great affirmation of the powerful connectivity that music-making possesses and fuelled my appetite for further exploration.

The Metric Intensive Programme also gave rise to the formation of a new chamber group consisting of myself and like-minded colleagues by the name of EnsemblePlus. Improvisation takes centre stage in the identity of this ensemble as we set out to exploit the heightened capacity of improvisation to connect people, which we were proud to demonstrate at our recent debut at London's Kings Place presented by NW Live Arts. This concert involved collaborations with other exceptional improvisers and a storytelling-based community project exploring our connections to nature and the Earth.

Despite my best efforts here, the question may still be asked as to what the point of all this improvisation is. It must be noted that to ask that question is to ask the question of what the purpose is of music itself, which is a topic of discussion for another place and time. I can only speak in relation to my own beliefs, which are that that one of music's most beautiful and meaningful abilities is to connect people to each other more deeply and to connect people to the magical spontaneity of the world around us and the lives that we live. The warmth with which the approaches discussed in this article are frequently received, as well as the growing number of young musicians eager to get involved, only leads me to infer that the future of music looks very bright. **IP**