

Master Teacher Column* Inspired Accidents: Spontaneous Invention in Musical Performance

MICHAEL R. ROGERS

It is possible for an artist to have stupendous technical prowess, to be able to amaze and delight audiences with dazzling virtuosity, and yet there is—something lacking. We all at one time or another have had the experience of hearing a fantastically impressive performance . . . in which this mysterious something is not there. The superficial brilliance pulls an automatic reaction from us (“Wow”) . . . it’s like meeting a beautiful person . . . who turns out to have no brain, or no heart. One instinctively says “Wow,” . . . even if on second look there’s not much there.

On the other hand, most of us have also had the experience of hearing an unsophisticated performance that may be full of wrong notes, or [one] by a street musician [or even a child] in which we are moved to tears, immobilized with a palpable feeling of awe.¹

*Editor’s note: It is our observation at *JMTP* that, when it comes to pedagogy, “revered” writing is as instructive, sometimes more, than “refereed.” Reflective teachers who have completed long and successful careers in the classroom have unique insights, perhaps even warnings, to make, pertaining especially to trends, pitfalls, traditions, and the nourishment of holistic and effective pedagogies and approaches. Invited submissions from such “master teachers” are consistent with the journal’s mission and certainly within the founding spirit of the Gail Boyd de Stwolinski Center for Music Theory Pedagogy. This column, by former *JMTP* editor Michael Rogers (cited five times in this issue alone), and author of *Teaching Approaches in Music Theory*, inaugurates what we trust will become regular contributions by similarly “revered” teachers.

¹ Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1990), 119.

Even when conventionally appropriate phrasing and shaping are heard in a musical rendition, intangibles can seem missing. To distinguish not just between “the musical” and “the unmusical” but also between “the musical” and “the ultramusical” and to inquire why these magical elements—these uncanny “X-factors”—are present or absent in a performance seem among the most burning questions of music study and theoretical training.

To assist my investigation, I have constructed a “Communication Chain for Musical Performance.” [See diagram, page 121.] Three basic positions on the flow chart identify Step 1 (extreme left side), the **Composer** who imagines sounds and corresponding notation; Step 2 (far right side), the **Performer** who translates notation back into sounds; and Step 3 (extreme right), the **Listener** who experiences the resultant sounds as music. The capital “L” (for Listener) inside each of the three corresponding boxes reminds us that the composer and performer operate as listeners as well as the audience.²

Between Steps 1 and 2, the chart is exploded as various sub-stages are identified and positioned within the larger scheme of performance preparation. Once the composer’s role is acknowledged, music study ordinarily begins with relevant “**Historical Background**” information about social context; style; influence; performance practice; and comments by the composer or others. These topics are the core of music history courses in the standard undergraduate curriculum but can also often be found in music theory classes as well, particularly in a “comprehensive musicianship” environment. These topics, among others, can also sometimes be found—and perhaps *should* be found—in the applied music studio, at least when the instruction provides a full-blown “music lesson” as opposed to merely coaching in how to play an instrument. The totality of this scholarship by itself can color the performer’s attitude and understanding in positive ways but can also provide a necessary springboard to succeeding phases of learning.

² Cf. charts in Frederik Prausnitz, *Score and Podium: A Complete Guide to Conducting* (W. W. Norton, 1983); and Peter Westergaard, “What Theorists Do,” *College Music Symposium* 17/1 (Spring 1977): 143-149.

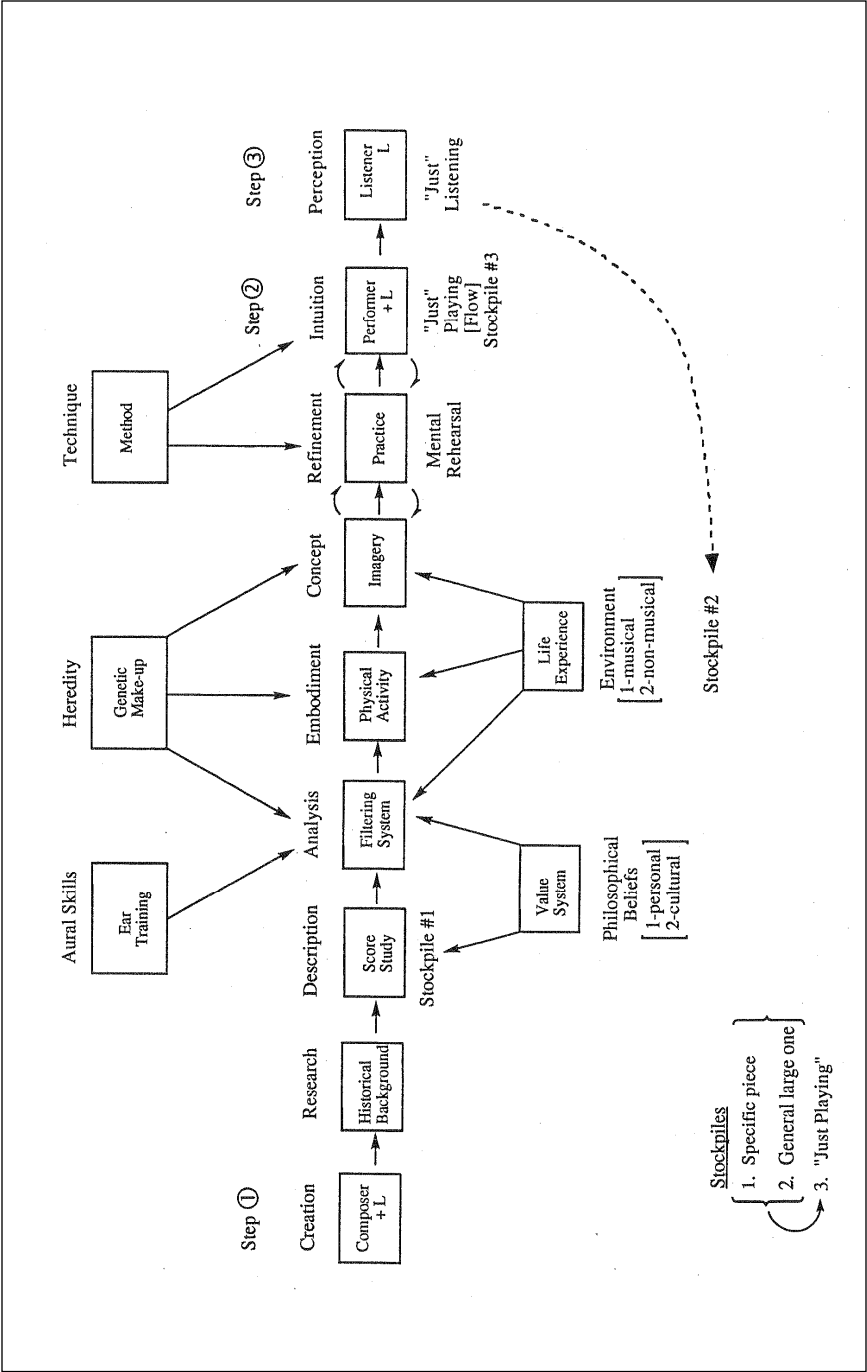


Diagram - Communication Chain for Musical Performance

Next, as we read from left to right across the chart, the category of “**Score Study**” is represented. In examining music, it is desirable to construct a sort of “table of contents” for the given composition by labeling large structural divisions; contrasts of texture and sonority; pitch materials; areas of stability and tension; movement towards and arrival of goals; and so on. Non-pitch factors are important, too, such as dynamics; duration; register; silence; and timbre. Of course, at this stage, the traditional elements of compositional devices and music theory study come into prominence.

Such “description,” however, should be distinguished from true “**Analysis**” (the next box), which focuses on “how” and “why” things happen, not just on “what” and “where” questions. Real analysis, then, doesn’t just collect facts but interprets them. Very often the analysis proper will emerge, almost imperceptibly, out of score familiarization. What starts as a convenience may well turn into an analysis.³ Although description cannot replace analysis, an analysis cannot be constructed without the foundation of meticulous preparatory work. Score study, then, is a necessary but not sufficient cause for musical understanding to occur.

Analysis explains necessary connections, relationships, and patterns. Unlike score study alone, which only requires visual inspection of notation and lists of data, analysis activates (and is activated by) one’s perceptual and cognitive filtering systems and forces active hearing: organizing, grouping, and comparing events; paying full attention; screening and sifting thoughts and responses through a conceptual sieve that has already been conditioned by previous training, aural skills, personal values, heredity, and overall life experiences (see some of these peripheral factors contributing from the sidelines as they are represented on the chart in boxes above and below the flow of the main categories). The term “score study” is frequently mentioned by conductors as an important aspect of their preliminary preparation before stepping on the rehearsal podium—as it should be. Sometimes, however, the richer contribution of analysis, in combination with score study, is not fully recognized or utilized. The same might be said of any performer, of course, not only conductors.

Doing analysis is more important than the *result*. What counts is not the outcome, but making judgments; using trial and error;

³Nicholas Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (George Braziller, 1987), 240.

testing, revising, and discarding hypotheses; sorting information, weighing alternatives, and weighting facts; endlessly debating with oneself on the significance of evidence; exercising the mind and ears—these are the habits of thinking and listening that we label musicianship. The value of analysis is for the person doing the analysis, not for the one reading it. Analysis is all those steps that make the final product possible and not necessarily the final product itself.

Another stage, “**Embodiment**,” is often overlooked as a potential resource for performers—or perhaps for any serious student of music. This activity locates and actualizes the expression of a work within the body through physical exercises. Emotion joins motion. Body language can be a form of musical performance and a form of nonverbal analysis—analysis derived from pure sensation and direct physical experience rather than through rational thought. Some things can be better “felt” than explained or intellectually understood.

When performed with music (either acoustically present or imagined), body exercises—moving, bending, swinging, swaying, stepping, shifting, balancing, counterbalancing, tensing, releasing with the fingers, hands, arms, legs, neck, and torso—can reveal gestural qualities of expression; linear contours; hypermeter; harmonic rhythm; centers of poise; comparative weights of arrival; relative intensity of climaxes; plot thickeners (and thinners); large-scale arcs of design; and silences filled with spilled-over tension, forward-looking anticipation, or simply a blank lull. Such exercises go beyond the ordinary physical maneuvers of dancing, conducting, gymnastics, or calisthenics.

Tacit assumptions about the control, flux, and adjustments of conflict and resolution at both local and global levels become exposed through embodiment training. Body knowledge about how music breathes can be returned to a performance (or to one’s listening)—not by adding contrived choreography but by integrating a more supple response to the pace and affects of the composition.

Analysis is too often done as an insipid mental activity. Embodiment honors the fusion of mind and body as a fact of our psychological/physiological make-up; it helps us to recognize music as a living organism through analogous mapping of sentient

processes into our physical being and then uniting these discoveries with the performance (or with our listening). Music can even be listened to with the whole body, not just the ears and brain. Anyone who has felt the sounds from a large cathedral pipe organ vibrating on the skin knows this truth.

Compositions are often considered as inert or immobile constructs like snowflakes or crystals. Embodiment frees us to hear music as states of energy or as a budding flower. Paper-and-pencil analysis can easily be undertaken as laboratory dissection—analysis of dry notation rather than of a living pulse. Embodiment engages our listening with a fervency and immediacy otherwise unattainable. One is ultimately after encapsulating an aesthetic reaction and then transferring that ardent response to the audience.

Contemplation of such a frequently underappreciated (or unknown) resource raises interesting pedagogical questions. Is embodiment an aspect of performance study or of theoretical study? Or of both? Is it worthy of dedicated attention in training music students? Is it just for performers or for everyone? Where would it fit in the curriculum? Where would the time for including it come from? How would teachers learn to do it? Should it be part of a theory pedagogy course for graduate students?⁴

Flowing on, “**Musical Imagery**,” could be defined as the concept of “how a piece goes”—an idealized performance likeness that is carried inside one’s head. This concept is a byproduct of all the preceding stages. Imagery absorbs the features, thought, raw sensation, and expression from research, score study, analysis, and embodiment. All the previous strands commingle and reformulate here.

Imagery, though, could include other facets besides just inner hearing, such as picturing a piece as an evolving shape of bulging pressures or deflating respites. Or the unfolding plot of a play—a narrative trajectory—could provide a conceptual analogue for

⁴ For the most comprehensive writings on embodiment and its relation to music theory, see Alexandra Pierce, *Spanning: Essays on Music Theory, Performance, and Movement* (University of Redlands, CA, 1982, by the author); Alexandra Pierce and Roger Pierce, *Expressive Movement: Posture and Action in Daily Life, Sports, and the Performing Arts* (Plenum Press, 1989) and *Generous Movement: A Practical Guide to Balance in Action* (The Center of Balance Press, 1991).

crystallizing an image. We might experience a psychological profile of a composition with emotional resonances of conflict, wit, poignancy, surprise, suspense, or stasis. Distorted or out-of-tempo time realms might be involved, too—an endless stretch of unwavering mood, or at the opposite extreme, an instantaneous spark of insight that distills the heart of a composition into a wordless impression.

Aural images could be bonded with pictorial ones: e.g., of some dramatic scenario, say, during a Mozart minuet, where imagined characters act out stylized gestures with bows, face-offs, pirouettes, or curtsies; or where a dancing lady in a swirling red dress emulates the contours and jazzy inflections of Ravel's "Bolero." Examples of interpersonal relationships; abstract geometric designs; colors; scenes from nature; optical illusions; dreams; kaleidoscopic shifts of focus; paintings, sculpture, and architecture could be visualized to reinforce fictitious or material sounds.

Bodily perceptions of listening—muscular tightening and relaxing—or of dancing or conducting music might vitalize images. Recalled perceptions of singing or playing are another resource: the feel of taking a breath; blowing a stream of air through a tube; moving a bow over strings; pressing down keys; firming and loosening an embouchure; and bending and leaning to the forces of directed motion can all be internalized. Unlike with embodiment, however, where actual physical movement is involved, we are now here talking specifically about interior activity within the imagination alone.

An alert listener will recognize the meaning and impact of the rhythmic pattern that pervades the first movement of Bruckner's Fourth Symphony: the paired quarter notes and quarter-note triplets. Such a pattern is often psychologically associated with human movement—the image of a compressed body rising, as from a crouch, slowly at first, then more swiftly to full stature. The effect of physical rising being tapped into helps to give this kinetic action its uplifting, life-affirming quality and provides a striking kinesthetic image for a conductor.

Metaphors or purely verbal connotations, as opposed to visual representation, can also link with a musical impulse. In variation 24 (a slow fugue) of Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, the concept of "altitude" could be helpful in permeating to the music's core. The top line often seems to be straining upwards with a sense of urgency or struggling as if a mysterious force was trying to push an invisible

ceiling ever higher. Without actually picturing mountain climbing, the idea of “altitude” alone suggests height, soaring, reaching, or even more lofty thoughts such as elevation and eminence. Such language stimuli might subtly augment the desired mood and character of the passage.

“**Practice**” is ordinarily realized with the given instrument, voice, or ensemble ready at hand. Many hours of such contact rehearsal are required for technical and musical acquisition. Acquiring “technique” is represented here on the chart as another outside influence. My model, however, is not mainly concerned with learning the notes of a piece or with fluency or facility on the instrument but rather places uncommon emphasis on practicing silently away from the instrument. It is based on the needs of conductors, who, because of insufficient rehearsal time with their ensemble, must often practice their interpretation in the privacy of the mind. Internal practicing, though, can often be as vivid as the real thing. In fact, making it vivid first in the mind will help ensure it being vivid later in concert. What seems initially to be an impediment for conductors—limited time with the full group—can be a blessing in disguise and offers an opportunity for non-conductors as well.

Mental rehearsal, then, done away from the ensemble, the piano, or voice should be especially prized. *What* is being practiced is the refinement of imagery. Feedback loops along the entire chain would be triggered during such practicing. Details from earlier stages would be seen in new light as mutually complementary relationships between practice and imagery are developed and explored—intertwined like braided cord.

As imagery is continuously burnished through physical *and* mental practice, its content is enlarged and enormously empowered which, in turn, affects what is being practiced. [Notice the circular arrows on the chart connecting these two categories.] This reciprocity engenders an improved version of “how it goes” that is then carried forward into the recital auditorium.

It is also possible, as a part of practice, to imagine the whole larger environment that surrounds any real performance—walking onto the recital hall stage; feeling the blood rush to your head;

feeling your legs stretch as you bow; feeling the initial contact with the instrument as you position it to your body; looking into bright lights on the stage; hearing the opening tone spill out into the vast acoustics of the concert hall (the “ringing-in-the-rafters” effect). All of these sensory stimuli are created during the imagery phase and then honed to perfection through mental practice.

The imagined and internally practiced version must eventually be wedded to the actual public performance. It is as if the aural image, after enhancement by practice, becomes imprinted on a virtual compact disc carried inside the brain. When played back, this private version escorts the real performance to fulfillment by pre-echoing, ideally, the sounds emanating from the instrument. The pianist, let’s say, wrapped in the current of sound she is producing, loses track of playing the piano and is, when everything jells, simply creating music out of a deep synchronicity between the imagined sounds inside her head and the actual sounds inside the piano—riding the waves of imagination, so to speak, into the concert hall. A psychological state of “flow”⁵ emerges and the two sources of sounds—one from the head and one from the instrument—meld into a single stream.

When an imagined act and result fuse in this way, athletes often speak of being “in the zone” or “in the groove.” Race car drivers, for example, speak about the car, the driver, and the road melding into oneness—racing on “driver’s planet,” as they say, where time slows to a crawl while traveling 300 yards per second. Similarly, climbers meld with the mountain or a team of surgeons melds into a unified group in the operating room, performing a kind of coordinated ballet. As an ancient proverb states, “The hand is the thing, not the fingers.” In music, the highest level of chamber performance, such as within long established string quartet ensembles, can often achieve a state of “concinnity” (harmonious agreement of parts as in a well-tuned engine or finely made watch), where all the members seem to be breathing together, where all their individual thoughts and impulses become one and the performance seems to issue from a single mind of potent “group think” rather than from four separate players. When a pictured image (as in sports) or an

⁵ “Flow” is here being used in its technical sense as understood in the psychological literature: “complete, timeless absorption in an activity.” See Mihaly Csikiszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper & Row, 1990).

audiated image (as in music) is strong enough, it can almost will the favored outcome into existence. The goal of mental rehearsal in musical performance is to achieve such focused concentration.

“Intuition” is the mechanism that merges the two streams—internal and external—into one. Intuition impels, on the fly, the milli-second to milli-second micro-adjustments that permit the two versions of performance to exist “in sync.” Because these rapid-fire adjustments seem to occur in a flash, I define intuition as “immediate knowing without the conscious application of reason or judgment”—knowing without knowing how we know.

The speed with which intuitive decisions can be made—and *must* be made in the real-time, semi-improvisational rush of actual performance—is truly astounding. This has given rise to the idea that intuition-based performance is the result of superficial or simple-minded “snap judgments.” True as this may be, it is also deceptive. The apparently simple algorithms used for intuitive performance are based on a complicated preparatory methodology—a background of previously established expertise. This applied expertise only seems quick when measured in action by a stop watch; in reality it is months, years, and even decades in the making. Its complexity and refinement, both of which occur offstage, are what “snap” the judgment.⁶ If asked, “How long have you been practicing for your recital?” the only appropriate answer is “All my life.”

A musician’s intuition, then, is not just an uninformed hunch. By this stage in my model (i.e., in the student’s development), the mind has already been primed with the cumulative results of historical research, score description, probing analysis, and animated embodiment—all the stages that make imagery possible. Each prior stage feeds into the next. Imagery is a coordinated summary of knowledge, insights, and responses—a sumptuous and multi-layered supply base—that is passed on, like a baton in a relay race, to our intuitive capacities at the precise moment of performance.

By the way, the box-like compartments in the diagram are not discrete stages. To keep things visually tidy, there are many overlaps and bleed-throughs not pictured. Score study, analysis,

⁶ For a fascinating view of the “snappiness” of intuition, see the recent bestseller: Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little, Brown and Company, 2005).

and embodiment, for example, blur at their edges. After all, analysis is just another (more advanced) form of score study, while embodiment, in turn, is just another mode of analysis. And the relationship of imagery, mental rehearsal, and intuition is especially permeable and coalescent. The three are practically inseparable—like water from three connected lakes.

Two common confusions need to be addressed. First, intuition should be distinguished from “instinct,” which refers to inborn patterns of response or behavior as opposed to learned behaviors. Instinct is biology driven; intuition is experience driven. Intuition is the inevitable emergent consequence of all our prior training, not something handed to us at birth. It is earned, not given. And it can be either abundant or threadbare. Training will tell.

Another deeper and more common misunderstanding, in discussions of musical performance, involves the so-called bipolarity of intuition and analysis. In my opinion, this is a myth. Analysis is not something to be pictured in opposition to intuition—for example, “reason” vs. “vague feelings” or “rational thinking” vs. “fuzzy thinking,” as it is so often mistakenly characterized in the professional literature.⁷ A corrective and more accurate view, though, has recently been incisively expressed by neuropsychologist Elkhonon Goldberg:

Intuition is often understood as an antithesis to analytical decision-making, as something inherently nonanalytic or preanalytic. But in reality, intuition is the condensation of vast prior analytic experience; it is analysis compressed and crystallized. In effect, then, intuitive decision-making is postanalytic, rather than preanalytic or nonanalytic. It is the product of analytic processes being condensed to such a degree that its internal structure may elude even the person benefiting from it. . . . The intuitive decision-making of an expert bypasses orderly,

⁷ For an example of this “opposition” view, see Wallace Berry, *Musical Structure and Performance* (Yale University Press, 1989), 7-8. Berry warns against using intuition as a “capricious guide” and offers analysis for its superior values of “logical reasoning and articulate expression.” In fairness, he does speculate that intuition could be the “outcome of deeply assimilated experience conducive to spontaneous responses,” but this idea, unfortunately, is immediately dropped and never heard from again.

logical steps precisely because it is a condensation of extensive use of such orderly logical steps in the past. It is the luxury of mental economy conferred by vast prior experience.⁸

It's not a question, then, of "analysis vs. intuition" but rather how analysis interacts with intuition—how it informs intuition. The true relationship of the two is complementary, not adversarial—"both/and," not "either/or." This necessary and more up-to-date position has immense implications for understanding the value (and limitations) of theoretical training and its ongoing ripple effect throughout a musician's life.

It is helpful to distinguish between "declarative knowledge," which can be displayed by writing or speaking—like the fact that Haydn and George Washington were born in the same year—and "procedural knowledge," which can only be demonstrated by activity—like riding a bicycle. Declarative knowledge is explicit, readily verbalized, and rapidly acquired (as in learning to write triads). Procedural knowledge, on the other hand, is implicit, hard to verbalize, and slowly acquired (as in performing music).⁹

Converting the declarative to the procedural can be learned. What starts out as a conscious step-by-step application of the rules eventually becomes automatic and internalized—as in spelling our name. What once had to be learned as a tedious exercise eventually becomes spontaneously reproducible and intuitive. The results of analysis can later pour forth as a sixth sense, as second nature during performance. Some call it "blood memory." This implicit memory can affect our behavior without conscious awareness. What is remembered was conscious when it was first learned but is not so when it is later used.¹⁰ Over time, these memories become almost as deeply embedded in our thinking habits as our fingerprints or even our DNA.

⁸Elkhonon Goldberg, *The Wisdom Paradox* (Gotham Books, 2005), 149-152.

⁹W. Jay Dowling, "Procedural and Declarative Knowledge in Music Cognition and Education," in *Psychology and Music: The Understanding of Melody and Rhythm*, ed. Thomas J. Tighe and W. Jay Dowling (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), 5-18.

¹⁰See John Kihlstrom, "The Cognitive Unconscious," *Science* 237 (1987): 1445-1452.

This view is supported by Goldberg's brain-imaging research. The right hemisphere (favoring novelty and initial learning) is activated when an individual is in the early stages of acquiring a new cognitive skill but as that task is mastered, the left brain (favoring long-term repositories of established mental routines) takes over:

The right-to-left transfer could also be demonstrated for various real-life professional skills, which take years to acquire. Novices performing the tasks requiring such skills showed clear right-hemisphere activation. But skilled professionals showed distinct left-hemisphere activation while performing the same tasks. Music is a good example. When musically untrained individuals (like most of us) were asked to recognize melodies, the right hemisphere did a better job and was particularly active. But in professionally trained musicians the opposite was true: The left hemisphere did a better job and was particularly active.¹¹

According to this view, then, and as applied to my chart, early-stage musical analysis is more closely associated with the right brain and later-stage intuition with the left. And more important, a transfer between the two is possible. This transfer is one aspect of what has recently been called the *neuroplasticity* of the brain.¹²

Imagine two bird watchers, one experienced, one a beginner. The experienced one catches a glimpse of a large yellowish bird flickering overhead and instantly calls out "evening grosbeak." Meanwhile, the novice frantically flips through a field guide, shuttling between pages of yellow birds, birds with crowned heads, birds with large silhouettes, birds that undulate while flying. The experienced bird watcher has amalgamated all that data and internalized a signature pattern, while the novice must rely on an external device—the field

¹¹ Goldberg, 204-205.

¹² See Sharon Begley, *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain* (Ballantine Books, 2007); and Ian H. Robertson, *Mind Sculpture: Unlocking Your Brain's Untapped Potential* (Fromm International, 2000). These two books report on some amazing psychological experiments that document how mental rehearsal can affect musical performance.

guide—which can only provide information, not synthesis, and inefficiently at that. Experienced bird watchers respond quickly because they rely on the accumulated wisdom of intuition.

Like the bird watcher, the performer should first build up the declarative knowledge bases of history, analysis, and so forth—i.e., their musical “field guide” should be studied—and then move gradually toward a more procedural approach. In fact, once learned, all factual knowledge should be set aside, left off the performance platform. While performing, all thinking—all conscious rational decision-making—should be abandoned. Do as much analysis as you can, then forget about it—throw away the field guide. It will continue to influence one’s actions from behind the scenes. Tracings of analysis and data-related work will linger as part of the deeper stockpile of accumulated memories like visible tracings left on ice by skaters. Not only the tracings of current recital pieces but the residual tracings of all pieces ever played, studied, or heard are stashed away for subtle influence and indirect recall. This operates as a massive emotional and expressive library stored in dormancy. Composer John Adams calls this his “garbage heap” (all the music he has ever heard since childhood including songs from the crib, TV commercials, and Elvis Presley)—his “idea bank” for writing new music, in his case, or one’s aural stockpile in my performance context.

The concept of *stockpile* as stored experience, *not* facts about music, is the ground of intuition.¹³ Most great performers play from the tacit and latent bedrock of a generalized intuition, not from consciously recalled knowledge about specific pieces. If the goal of analysis is to sensitize the cognitive ear and refine the aural imagination, as Leonard Meyer has suggested,¹⁴ then analysis of any similar group of pieces would be as useful as analysis of the ones currently being practiced. One cannot easily perform from a recipe, from a set of programmed instructions, or directly from declarative knowledge, as derived from analysis, just as a centipede cannot walk smoothly by thinking about moving each individual leg. One cannot perform with natural, musical fluidity from a consciously remembered, planned interpretation for the same reason that one cannot dance

¹³For a penetrating and original theory of human consciousness and provocative discussion of how the mind establishes and draws upon stockpiles of previous experience, see Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (Basic Books, 2007).

¹⁴Leonard Meyer, *Explaining Music* (University of Chicago Press, 1973), 17.

gracefully from painted footprints on the floor. As more than one sage has proclaimed, this would amount to “paralysis by analysis.” In a sense, intuition simplifies or screens out the stultifying clutter of analysis—the infamous “too-much-information” problem of our age—while, at the same time, drawing strength from it. One might say intuition purifies analysis.

The concept of “just listening” is useful here. The double meaning and play on words is intentional. I mean the term “just” in the sense of *merely* or *only* listening and also in the sense of *genuine* or *authentic* listening, as opposed to the kind of analytical listening that is so often done in academic settings. *Just listening* cannot result by adding outside consideration to the consciousness of the sounds—descriptive, historical, technical, theoretical, or cultural—although conscious verbal knowledge is a valid initial step in getting to the intuitive stage. Just listening can be looped back into our larger stockpile of total life experience that, in turn, reinvigorates the whole cycle. And by analogy we can call intuitive performance “just playing”—playing free from the inhibiting influence of conscious analytical thought. [See the chart.]

To “just play” requires listening without presupposing, classifying, controverting, evaluating, approving, or disapproving—listening that is not dueling with what is being performed. The beady eye of the conscious self is there during analysis but not during the performance proper. Appropriate training develops automatic skills that can be applied without the need for awareness that they are being so used.¹⁵

Artistic performance demands the paradox of “wild purity” or “controlled mania”—a mixture of reckless abandon and care. The goal is to incorporate both the methodical mindfulness of analysis

¹⁵ Tor Norrestrand, *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*, trans. Jonathan Sydenham (Viking, 1998), 264.

and the vetoless flow of intuition in music making. As Friedrich Schlegel has said (in *Athenaeum Fragments*): “It is equally fatal to have a system and not to have a system. One must combine them.” Pianist Russell Sherman has especially persuasively articulated this idea:

The spontaneity of Artur Schnabel or Thelonius Monk does not flow from unrehearsed consciousness, or because they never thought about things. It flows because they thought about things so hard and honestly that they were attuned to the puzzles and contradictions which demand a leap of faith, or play. Only from a thorough preparation which teaches all and the limitations of all can the conditions arise for inspired “accidents.” Only the anguish and amusements of hard work can train one to perceive the charms of chaos, the dynamics of its properties and improprieties.¹⁶

“**Inspired accidents**” can only happen from nurtured, well-prepared discipline and perseverance. The “inspiration” portion of the duality is not carried by a sunbeam from the sky but issues from the rigorous foundational spadework that makes intuition possible. The “accidents” portion represents “what happens”—the byproduct of spontaneous invention. Working easy at the end only follows from working hard at the beginning.

There are no shortcuts, then, for learning how to perform music well. And even though I have mainly been focusing on performance in my discussion, I just as well could have substituted the word “listener” for “performer” (as I have actually done several times already) or substituted the more general word “musician” or “theory student.” I’m thinking of performance, in other words,

¹⁶Russell Sherman, *Piano Pieces* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 29. This is perhaps the single most profound and human book on musical performance yet written—a real work of life-enhancing philosophy, not just practical advice. Every page is filled with stunning insights. I wanted to underline practically all of it. It is dense and best read in small doses (with frequent pauses for pondering) since it will constantly stir one’s thinking and subtly challenge one’s stereotyped and humdrum presuppositions about how music-making really works.

not just as playing an instrument or singing but in the broadest possible sense of “activated musicianship.” Progress in all realms of musicianship is always the result of dedication, a wise and meticulous pedagogical framework, and a commitment to artistic excellence and mastery on the highest level. Mastery on the highest level means that theoretical learning—maybe I should call it “just learning”—has been so completely internalized that music making or listening becomes the natural and elastic extension of a stockpile of musical experience. Performance and listening should flow from the student as freely as sap flows from a tree. The promise of music theory pedagogy is to provide just such experience, and the goal, seen in this light, becomes *intuition enrichment*.

Similar ideas about the value of intuition-drenched musicianship have also been forcefully stated by others. By way of summary, I offer a brief survey of increasingly concise versions.

Benjamin Britten:

“After the intellect has finished work, the instinct [he should have said “intuition”] must take over. In performance the analysis should be forgotten and the pieces played as if they were at that moment being composed.”

Pierre Boulez:

“In a paradoxical way, you become more spontaneous when you know more.”

Suzuki Daisetz (a Zen Master):

“One has not understood until one has forgotten it.”

Basho (the 17th-century Japanese poet):

“Learn the rules, then forget them.”

Pierre Boulez:

“Intuition is memory.”

And the winner for brevity is Leonard Bernstein’s pithy comment on performance:

“It’s all jazz.”

In the end, imagery spills out of its bountiful content of conceptual, cognitive, emotive, and corporeal meanings into the reservoir of intuition, by way of practice. All three, in synergistic combination, provide an unassailable coupling between our mental life and sounded music. Under such conditions, as T.S. Eliot has so eloquently stated, music is “heard so deeply that it is not heard at all, but you are the music while the music lasts.”

