

The Practice of Play

At what point did playfulness disappear from classical music? We 'play' things through, we 'play' music for an audience, but where has the sense of play gone?!

I know there is playful classical music being written today — composers such as Alex Paxton, Amber Priestley, Carola Bauckholt, Matthew Shlomowitz and Øyvind Torvund come immediately to mind — and this is a good thing. If we're supposed to be worried about audience figures, elitism, relevance etc., simply celebrating the diversity of new music¹ out there would help. It's not all terrifyingly cerebral! Some of it is entertaining! Whatever your taste, new music today is certainly pluralistic.

Following a recent performance of Øyvind Torvund's *Plans for Future Operas* in Oslo, several audience members commented that it was a relief to listen to a concert that made them laugh. Øyvind's piece certainly has humour; it has whimsy. It is also profound and expertly crafted. I adore it, although performing it sometimes feels like a high-wire act: the vocal flexibility, the comic timing, knowing when to get out of the way and when to grab the limelight requires an all-encompassing virtuosity that I find very demanding and occasionally elusive. When I nail it, though, it is SUCH FUN.

For a performer, then, there can be a big difference between *performing* play and actually playing. Play, in any context, is spontaneous, unstable and fizzing with creative imagination. It depends on a good deal of freedom. Play is not pretentious. Play is not perfectionist. New-music scores tend to use a notational precision to control and contain the affect, meaning the energy, any humour and the whole game of playfulness may be something of an illusion.

Improvisation, by contrast, places all that play in the hands (or voice) of the performer — liberating, I imagine, if this is part of your practice, but famously a little terrifying for many classically trained musicians. I gather that improv scenes can also be perfectionist, elitist and unplayful, but perhaps improvisation can nonetheless offer one way back to playfulness. More and more I think that any musician's home practice should plunder joyfully from other traditions.

THE DISCIPLINE OF PLAY

When in Glasgow recently, I had the chance to meet and hear the vocalist (and theremin wizard) Koichi Makigami. He was in town for Tectonics Festival and, ahead of his performance, he agreed to lead a workshop for my VOICEBOX² students. This was two hours of joy. Despite a bit of a language barrier, Koichi told us his story, and then took us all on a whistle-stop tour of his extraordinary armoury of vocal techniques, using call-and-response to give each person the chance to have a go at finding the sound in their own voice.

¹ By 'new music' I mean everything including contemporary (Western) classical music, experimental music and music that strays into those disciplines or contexts from other starting points.

² [VOICEBOX](#) is a programme I am running for advanced singers specialising in contemporary vocal performance.

Now approaching his 70s, this is an artist with a boundless curiosity about sound. He shrugged at intellectual questions about his ‘approach’ or about ‘studying’ specialist techniques. “Do”, he said; “I follow my nose”. This was gold for a small group of singers ground down by the narrow pedagogy of the classical voice. This, at last, was a directive to use their imagination, to let their body lead the way towards a sound, to treat instinctive mimicry (surely the most time-honoured vocal technique) as a legitimate creative strategy. His performance the next day with drummer Roger Turner revealed to me the incredible mastery and expressive freedom that can emerge from a practice based on play. What I find especially sophisticated (democratic, even) is that the torrent is utterly playful yet never played for laughs. You can watch it here (until April 2025): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0hx7671>

THE GREAT UNLEARNING

I am finding a lot of inspiration these days within a little book called *Practical Performance Magic*³. Its sequence of tiny chapters, each formed of a ‘spill’ of ideas followed by a ‘recipe’ for practical engagement, explores ‘techniques involved in creating and curating contemporary performances through practical magic’. When preparing to write this essay, naturally I wanted to see what wisdom it might offer on the topic of play. The chapter on ‘Unlearning’ seemed most apt. Since they’re short, I’ll quote the spill and the recipe in full:

UNLEARNING

Spill

One unlearns something by sequences of resignation. What replaces an unlearned pattern, movement, thought, habit, routine? What comes instead? A lot of possibilities are held in that shift.

Unlearning by learning something else?
Unlearning by pulling out a carpet underneath our feet?
Unlearning by gentleness?
Unlearning by going another way?

I’m a sucker for anything that mentions habit. There is so much about my artistic practice — and indeed my artistic identity — that seems formed by habits accidentally accumulated in my early twenties (or earlier), habits of thinking around job insecurity, self-worth, power structures, risk-taking etc. It would be a fun exercise to imagine how I’d go about things today if I could unlearn all that accumulated baggage... And play, to me, seems a lot about unlearning at high speed: turning away from our habits of perfectionism or fear, and our familiar patterns of sound-making, so as to go helter-skelter another way.

Recipe

There is something about unlearning
that feels like an act of love.

Seeing old patterns and letting them go,
walking away just a tiny bit lighter.

Imagine if we unlearn the premiere.
This ridiculous concept of a “finished work.”
What sense does it make in the performing

³ *Practical Performance Magic: Recipes and Spills* by Maija Hirvanen & Eva Neklyaeva.

arts space, which centralizes a continuous
flow of incarnations, a breath in/breath out
movement, and the expansion into confronting
audiences and retreating into
rehearsal studios?

What if we deconstruct the whole mechanism
of stress, pressure, and complicatedness
of the premiere? "The World Premiere,"
"The National Premiere."

What if we see it for what it is,
just one of the many moments of how the work
comes out into the world? Feel it now, in your
body, as just one moment of many—
of many before and many after.
Doesn't this make it more vivid,
more alive?

I wasn't expecting to see the word 'premiere' appear here. But yes, I say yes! Delivering a premiere often feels so pressurised that bringing a sense of play to the occasion is almost impossible. I've written before about this, but when I have the rare opportunity to perform a new piece several times, I realise, afresh, how many outings it takes for me to bond with material to the extent that I can begin to be playful with it. I'm just finding the play with Øyvind's piece, and that's after eight performances. What evolves, above all, is a particular sort of feeling in the body, because it is there that the confidence settles, as the muscle memory develops, which then allows the mind the freedom to follow its little flights of fancy. This state is 'vivid, more alive', yes. It seems the ideal state in which to try and make music.

WHY SO SERIOUS?!

And so to work. But no, to *play*!

I have an odd pile of scores on my music stand at the moment. Bach, Saunders, a brand-new score (to be premiered in just over a week!) and some Couperin. I am trying to bring play to the early music because I am hoping not to follow the habitual way of singing it that has been taught to me and, instead, to find my way towards a slightly different sound and feeling in the body. The brand-new score also requires play because I want to enjoy this process of stitching it together in just a few days. But, more generally, and inspired by Koichi, I want to see if I can rekindle the playful side of my singing practice.

As a first step, we can cultivate an attitude of play, even when the material or the context is quite fixed. If we commit to play, we may need to throw out the well-worn rule book: this gives us permission to experiment with fresh approaches to *all* material. As a next step, our play can include improvisation in which, crucially, all sounds are equal.

To put it simply:

We can play within the material.

We can play with the material.

We can make play into the material.

The art is in the balance. Each piece and each context calls for a different kind of play, and it is our job, when performing, both to respect and to flex the expectations. But what we do at home or in the rehearsal studio can be much wilder. I don't need any encouragement to be serious. I like to be rigorous. But there is rigour in play, too; it's simply that the rules of the game are different.

Juliet Fraser, 17 May 2024