

STANDPOINT.

Music

Burnt Out? Try Improvisation

JESSICA DUCHEN

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Just before I started writing this article, I glanced at the latest Tweet from that doughty philosopher Alain de Botton. He wrote: "If I wasn't forced to stop working, I'd never have any ideas."

A timely observation. Just a few weeks ago, a fascinating television documentary was aired in which Ed Smith, the former England cricketer, now an author and journalist, asked: *Is Professionalism Killing Sport?* Smith pointed out that if a sportsperson works less and enjoys the game more, the result can be increased flair and better scores. Top-level players such as Mark Ramprakash and Ryan Giggs revealed that they did best when they were engaging most instinctively. Perhaps young tennis wannabes, instead of plugging away at backhand volleys for an extra three hours, would find that a rest and a bit more fun enabled them to return to the court with a clearer mind.

Is something similar true of "playing" music? Looking at the tour schedules of some of today's best-known soloists, it's hard to understand how they can function at their best. Performing the same recital programme on tour 15 times — an average of every three days, with long journeys in-between, from mid-October to early January, two or three different concertos in eight concerts spattered among them, sometimes on consecutive evenings: this is typical of a sought-after soloist. Can anyone reliably produce fresh, inspiring performances on such a schedule without ever resorting to automatic pilot? This artist (who'll remain nameless) gives about 80-100 concerts a year: average-to-heavy duty. I've met younger musicians who are giving 120-130.



Inspired Improviser: Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero

A vast level of professionalism is required to keep up this pace: rock-solid technique, a thick hide and a refusal to be thrown by airport delays, noisy hotels, uncongenial pianos, etc. But no matter how carefully a career is managed, or how much a soloist protects his/her personal space, someone will end up busking the Liszt Sonata in an important concert hall on little more than muscle memory, disappointing everyone. Is it any wonder that soloists who have been laying golden eggs for their agents at such a rate so often succumb before they're 40 to mental burnout or physical incapacity?

It's a larger issue, though: a state-of-the-nation matter. Many of us across a huge variety of jobs, from expensive lawyers to cruelly exploited food-packers, are working crazy hours. Family life (let alone "me time") is sidelined while everyone in work is scared of losing it and levels of competition have rocketed. A research scientist and university professor I know, a father of four, has found himself on 18-hour days these past few years. As he puts it: "It is impossible to think creatively when you're permanently exhausted."

Musicians are relatively fortunate: there are other ways to increase the freshness and inspiration of their work. For example, in September I spent two fascinating evenings watching classical musicians improvise. Standard for jazzers, de rigueur for classical virtuosos 100 years ago, improvisation is now virtually unheard-of in classical concerts. Note-perfect recreative performances have dominated since the recording era kicked in. The downside is that we don't often sense that the performer is enjoying communicating music to the audience. Without "play" — a sense of immediate response and the freedom to "play with" the music rather than just rendering it note-perfect — a performance can sound distinctly dull.

I went to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama to hear three Mozart piano concertos being played in chamber music format by three groups who have been studying the art of classical improvisation. The event was led by Professor John Irving, a distinguished Mozart scholar, and the pianist David

Dolan, who teaches improvisation in the classical style. The concertos, K413, 414 and 415, all featured improvised cadenzas, but the concept went further: the string players also extemporised — for instance, embellishments to repeated figures — and their colleagues would "reply". Everyone seemed energised by the necessity of living in the moment. The music danced by and the animated discussion afterwards proved that the musicians' enhanced involvement with their creative process had in turn strengthened the audience's engagement with them.

The next night, I encountered the musical volcano that is the Venezuelan pianist Gabriela Montero. In a Classic FM Live concert at the Royal Albert Hall, she played the Grieg Piano Concerto, but followed it with a solo improvisation, her trademark. She transfixed the hall with spontaneous music, rich, glistening and organic, which could have passed for a Bach-Busoni showpiece, yet was based on a melody presented to her by the lead cellist, moments before: the theme tune of *EastEnders*. While the Guildhall team approached improvisation through conscious, detailed musical analysis, Montero told me afterwards that she has no idea how she does it. "It's like water that gushes out," she said.

A case of left brain/right brain, perhaps: two approaches to the same idea from opposite directions. Both showed the joys of "playing with" music as well as "playing" it. Montero's comment is closest to Ryan Giggs: while improvising, she's at her most instinctive.

Few, though, are blessed with an instinct like Montero's or an intellect like Irving's or Dolan's. Meanwhile, the music business expects more and more of its practitioners. Currently I have the impression that young UK musicians, with one or two notable exceptions, are not matching up particularly well.

In Britain, classical music has traditionally remained a pastime for amateurs — in the best sense this is wonderful, since there is nothing nicer than to follow a pursuit simply for the love of it. But for young musicians who need to compete internationally to build a career, the general cultural attitude towards musical study in Britain is not ideal. This year, the competitors accepted for the renowned International Chopin Competition in Warsaw included not one pianist from the UK. Similarly, young British string players auditioning for orchestras often lose out to applicants from countries where musical training is much more rigorous from a much earlier age and who therefore play better. The immediate impression is that they need to work not less, but more — harder, younger and longer.

Would they give better performances if they took more time off? It's unlikely that many will risk finding out. Fun and professionalism: it's a balancing act and what's needed is the best of both worlds. Finding a creative way to strike that balance could, I hope, help the fittest to survive amid the forthcoming onslaught of cutbacks.