Oregon Musician

Sharing ideas about music and the teaching of music

Music and Alchemy

The Editor's Comments

About the Editor

Diane Baxter, pianist, educator and consultant, is the editor of *Oregon Musician*. She is currently Professor of Music at Western Oregon University where she has received the *Faculty Honors Award for Outstanding Creativity* and the *Pastega Award for Excellence in Teaching.* Diane teaches studio piano and courses in Ethnomusicology, Performance Anxiety, and Research Methods. Off campus Diane consults and performs far and wide, often giving workshops on doing our best under pressure. "The Science of Artistry: The Fourth String" was published in *Clavier Companion* in Nov/Dec 2013. She lives, writes, plays and thinks in Brownsville, Oregon.

Recently my husband and I visited Carrières de Lumières in Les Baux-de-Provence in southern France. The experience was called *Van Gogh: La Nuit Étoilée*, and was described as "une immersion dans l'art." A limestone quarry that closed in the 1930s has been transformed into a cavernous immersion space dedicated to art and music through multimedia. Since 2012 Culturespaces has presented a new artist each year, including Klimt, Da Vinci, Picasso and Chagall. This year, 2020, Salvador Dali will be presented. I suppose one could call these presentations "audio-visual shows" but that doesn't come remotely close to describing the experience. Moving images of the artist's work are projected throughout the white stone of the quarry, on the walls, the ceiling, and the floor of the massive 107, 639 square foot space (Jean Cocteau filmed *The Testament of Orpheus* here in 1959, the first exposure of the quarry to the world). Some of the walls are 33 feet high. Music is in-

tegrated into the presentation in a very creative and powerful way. "As soon as the music starts, 5,000 images are set in motion, creating the impression of being instantly transported to the heart of the paintings" (Explore France website). Musical genres are mixed, ranging from Smetana's soaring *Moldau* to Janis Joplin singing *Kozmic Blues* to Nina Simone's dark rich voice singing *Please don't let me be misunderstood*. The experience of moving from a very hot southern French day into the coolness and the beauty of the quarry itself was truly stop-you-in-your-tracks stunning. Like you, I have attended many concerts, many museums, many films, poetry readings, and art shows. I have never disappeared into any of them like I did in this cool, spacious limestone quarry. I was completely overwhelmed and moved to tears immediately by the beauty. I felt that it had permeated entirely through me. I vanished. If it had been the images alone the experience would have been entirely different—still powerful, no doubt. The synergy of the music and the visual imagery created the stunning experience. If you would like to see photographs and read a bit more, please refer to this *Atlantic* article (https://tinyurl.com/y34k7rxk).

Music changes things. It's that simple. HOW it changes things is a different matter entirely. For this edition of *The Oregon Musician* I invited authors to share their thoughts on the topic of music and alchemy. In its medieval infancy, the notion of "alchemy" (a precursor to modern chemistry) was not just concerned with transformation of matter. It was a system of philosophy designed to explore life and its mysteries. "Alchemy is defined as the process of taking something ordinary and turning it into something extraordinary, sometimes in

Les Baux-de-Provence—outside the quarry.

a way that cannot be explained" (www.yourdictionary.com). Please join me in welcoming these writers to *The Oregon Musician*. As always, I appreciate your comments and your thoughts. If you want to find me in person, I'm dispersed into little tiny molecules somewhere in a limestone quarry in Les Baux-de-Provence! *From Paris, catch the TGV to Avignon, rent a car, and drive the 30 minutes to Les Baux.*

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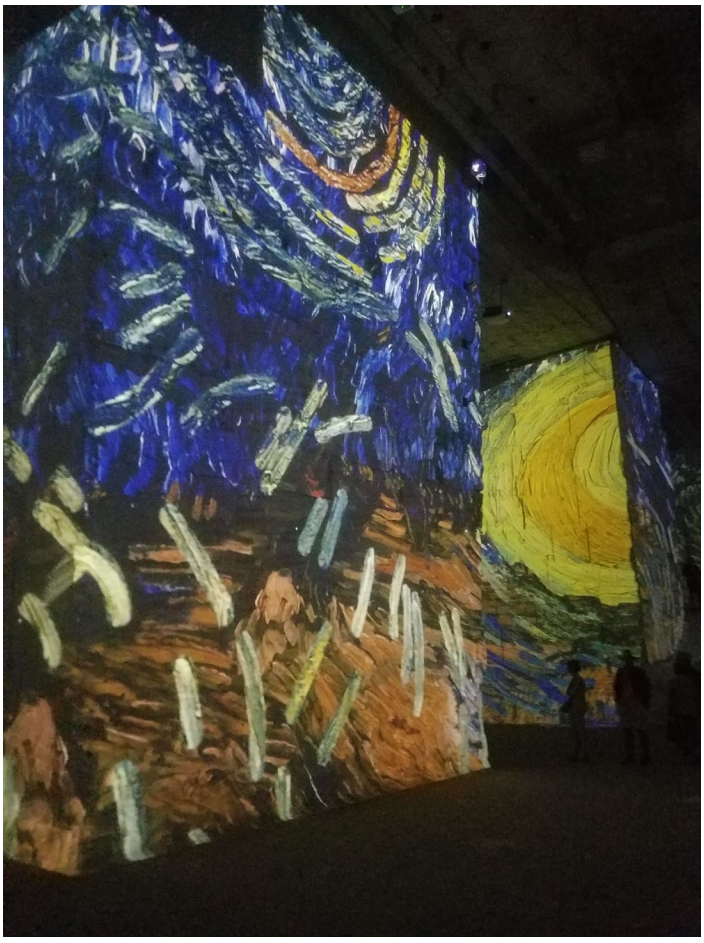

Les Baux-de-Provence—inside the quarry.

Music and Alchemy

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by James Kreiling

About James

James Kreiling's solo career has focused on music of the early 20th century, particularly the piano works of Scriabin. James has performed in the major concert halls of London, notably as a soloist at the 2007 BBC Proms. In 2008 James became a Park Lane Group young artist with solo recitals at the Purcell Room and St Martin-in-the-Fields. James has broadcast for BBC Radio 3, presenting the music of Jonathan Harvey, David Matthews, Peter Eotvos, Thomas Ades and Pierre Boulez.

In 2017 he completed a performance-based doctorate at the Guildhall School of Music focusing on the interaction of research, analysis, and performance practice in the interpretation of Scriabin's late piano sonatas. He has recorded two discs encompassing the composer's complete late piano music, released by Odradek on October 19th, 2018 to critical claim, including a five star review in BBC Music Magazine. He is a co-founder of Multiphonic Arts, mounting concerts which mix classical piano with other performance arts—poetry, drama and dance, folk and jazz.

James performs throughout Europe and the UK in a piano duo with his wife, Janneke Brits. Highlights have included a tour of France with Stravinsky's *Les Noces* as well as four-hand recitals at the En Blanc et Noir piano festival in Lagrasse, France, where the duo are now associate artistic directors.

From Metallica to Bach: Breaking Down Barriers Between Audiences and Art Forms

Start the day with Bach, the glorious Sonata in D for solo violin, followed by some early Bob Dylan, some Schubert songs, Schoenberg's second quartet, Bill Evans' 'Twelve Tone Tune,' then a couple of Metallica tracks, before winding down with some Jethro Tull and Brahms. What may seem like the result of putting one's ipod on shuffle, has, for a long time now, become a typical example of a day's listening at home.

Spanning from the medieval to atonality and the avant-garde, from genres including folk, rock, prog rock, classical, jazz, and heavy metal, to world music, my eclectic daily listening mix may appear to be a disparate collection of unrelated tracks. And yet, I will argue that many of these genres have more in common than not, and that recognizing and exploiting such connections reveals to us many examples of the alchemy of music. This is also key in breaking down barriers and building audiences of the future.

The type of listener we may associate with each of the above genres tends to differ enormously; compare your average audience seen at a classical recital with that of a Metallica concert. The contrast on the surface seems vast. But are these widely varied styles of music really that incongruent? And are their respective audiences really so different?

We certainly use different language to describe these seemingly dissimilar audiences; we wouldn't write of a Metallica 'connoisseur,' or discuss a classical music 'gig.' Yes, on the surface a Metallica connoisseur and a classical music fan often look different; one expresses appreciation through gentle applause, the other through jumping head first into a mosh pit (only reserved for really good performances of *Mahler 8*). However at heart I would argue they are essentially the same, in as much as they both share a genuine enthusiasm for the music to which they listen, music which goes some way toward defining their personal identity. Is there really such a gulf between, say, the repeated, stamping chords of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, and the distorted, driving, repetitive riffs of Metallica's *Creeping Death*, or Black Sabbath's *Paranoid*?

After all, vastly differing styles and genres—within Western musical culture at least—derive their melodic material from the same twelve note chromatic scale, which itself is organized into modes, major-minor diatonic scales, and much more. Similar rhythmic and melodic patterns and devices abound in common: sequences, imitation, repetition, ostinato, syncopation, to name but a handful. Even musical structures are common between many genres, for example strophic song form is used in romantic lieder and in many pop and folk songs. It seems inevitable that similarities will occur between different styles, but equally incredible that such relatively basic means can produce such a myriad of possibilities.

Some similarities are more obvious, and perhaps more convincing, than others, and lie outside of issues relating to melodic, rhythmic, and structural organization. Compare, for instance, the poetry and beauty of acoustic folk music with the similarly intimate and expressive nature of romantic lieder. There are similarities here on many levels. Firstly, both genres were not initially intended for the larger stage, but for more intimate per-

formance venues, such as the salon, music room, or pub. The use of very simple instrumentation—piano/voice, guitar/voice—intensifies the impact of these works, and puts maximum emphasis on the words, as well as the musical content. The themes found in the texts are sometimes strikingly similar. Consider Schubert's many depictions of the romantic 'Wanderer,' and Bob Dylan's many references to 'travelling on' and journeying in general. Take Dylan's *Don't Think Twice It's Alright*, a song about an embittered, unrequited relationship, from which the protagonist moves on, then listen to *Schubert's Die Schöne Müllerin*. These themes of love, relationships, unrequited passion, and travel, are quintessentially romantic.

Timbre also links music from differing origins. A clear example of this is heard in early twentieth century French music and the music of the Javanese gamelan. After first coming across a gamelan at the Paris exposition in 1889, composers such as Debussy began to explore similar bell and gong-like sonorities using the piano. In works such as Debussy's Pagodes, *Et la Lune descend sur le temple qui fut*, and Cloches *à travers les feuilles*, we hear clear imitation of complex gong and bell sonorities, the resonance of the piano providing the perfect medium for such sounds. Messiaen later took this even further, using harmonies in which he transcribed the overtones of bells, as can be heard throughout the final movement of his *Visions de l'Amen* for two pianos.

Other connections, a full consideration of which lies outside of the scope of this article, include the progressiveness and enormity of Wagner, and the entirely overblown and forward-seeking nature of prog rock. Bands such as ELP, King Crimson, and Yes utilized classical music in their own work and band members were frequently classically trained—ELP famously released a prog version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. A similar crossing over between genres is heard in the use of folk melodies by classical composers such as Vaughan-Williams, Bartok, Kodaly, and Copland. Next, consider Bob Dylan's *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, in which the lack of melodic line and the emphasis on words and message, is not so far removed from the way in which rap and hip hop function. How about freedom of improvisation and rhythm found in Indian classical music, and the so called 'Indo jazz' originating in the 1950s? And, surely—unquestionably—the rhythmic games of Bach and the toe-tapping syncopations of much jazz rendering many listeners unable to sit still.

A closer look at jazz reveals many underlying links to the classical art form. The development of modal jazz in the 1950s by the likes of Miles Davis and Bill Evans was based on modes previously found in the complex polyphony of the Renaissance, and before that in the beginnings of notated music itself, as heard in Gregorian Chant. The versatility of these simple scales in providing the building blocks for music centuries apart, and in doing so creating a link between two very different genres, is fascinating.

Furthermore in 1948, whilst spending increasing amounts of time with composer and arranger Gil Evans at his 55th Street basement apartment in New York, Davis came

across the music of Gabriel Fauré, Maurice Ravel, and Manuel de Falla. It is not hard to imagine the young Miles Davis being captivated by Fauré's unique approach to harmonic progression, as well as the sometimes restrained and emotionally contained nature of some of the composer's works. On Davis' seminal and deeply modal album, *Kind of Blue (1959)*, with pianist Bill Evans, it is easy to hear the influence of these early twentieth century composers. Evan's exquisite close voicings and restrained style in *Blue in Green*, and the Spanish influence in *Flamenco Sketches*, with different modes used to create compositional structure, are excellent examples.

Bill Evans studied at the Mannes School of Music, and was already an experienced classical pianist and composer before choosing to devote his performance career to jazz. He was renowned for his elegant and intense style. In both his compositions and performances one can hear a strong influence of composers such as Ravel, Debussy, Fauré, and perhaps even some late Scriabin. His style is frequently described as 'impressionist.' Interestingly, as part of a house concert, I recently performed Ravel's stand-alone *Prelude*, followed without a pause by a transcription of Evan's *Two Lonely People*. A number of audience members commented afterwards that they could not tell where one ended and the other began. Indeed, Ravel's use of seventh and ninth chords and his closely voiced dissonances make his *Prelude* uncannily similar to Evan's sound world. Beyond the many harmonic connections between classical and jazz lies Evan's *Twelve Tone Tune*, which must be one of the only attempts to write a jazz tune using Schoenberg's serial technique.

The connections between genres, styles, and even art forms, seems inevitable to me. Artists, whether they be composers, writers, choreographers, painters, photographers, or film makers, draw inspiration from many places, often from art forms other than their own. As a result, similarities abound, whether it be in sound, or through the way in which art generally explores certain themes, such as love and death.

My own personal foray into cross arts and multi genre performance has manifested itself in the founding of Multiphonic Arts, a performance series in London based in the ruined Asylum chapel. Each summer we present a series of performances which explore an ever widening range of musical genres and art forms. We include classical, jazz, folk, and world music, dance, poetry, drama, mime, film, photography, and painting. This has proven to be a very worthwhile venture, and one that sets out to break down the barriers between art forms and their associated audiences. We frequently welcome a diverse and wide ranging group to our events. Our ethos is one of openness and inclusivity through serious artistic performance.

The multi genre concept was initially inspired by my great love for the music of Alexander Scriabin, a composer to whom I have devoted a great deal of my adult life, both through research and recording. Whilst my obsessions with Scriabin's music mean that I cannot write any article without finding a way to mention him, his precepts regarding

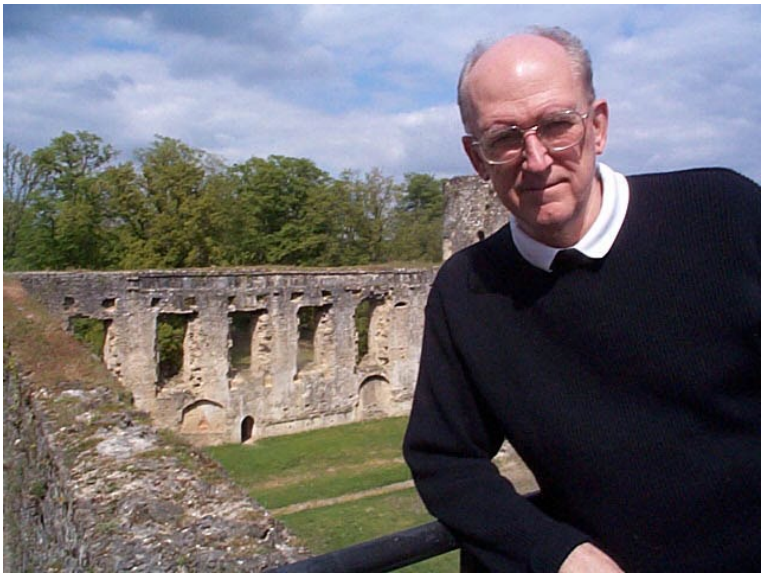
the role of art are certainly relevant here. Scriabin believed fervently that the future lay in a synthesis of the arts. He had begun this journey during the composition of his great orchestral symphonic work *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, in which the music is accompanied by changing coloured lights and various lighting effects. His ideas found their ultimate manifestation in his concept of the ritualistic and reality-transforming *Mystery*, which would be preceded by the *Preliminary Action*. Sadly only fifty pages of musical sketches exist, but in this monumental work he planned to combine music with dance, colour, scented smokes, and a libretto, which is the only element of this vast work that survives almost completed.

Unfortunately Scriabin didn't help himself when he planned for this work to be performed in a specially built temple at the foot of the Himalayas. He believed that the performance would herald a mass transfiguration of human consciousness. Sadly, even today, it is extreme ideas such as these that tend to cause some not to take Scriabin's music and artistic vision as seriously as they deserve to be. At its heart, Scriabin's vision is for a breaking down of the barriers between art forms, as well as the divisions which separate us as human beings. To me this gets to the very centre of the capabilities of great art, and has inspired me to explore ways of bringing all audiences together, albeit on a much smaller scale, and without the mass transfiguration, so far at least . . .

An Interview with Michael Johnson

François-Frédéric Guy: Conquering the Universe with Beethoven

by Michael Johnson

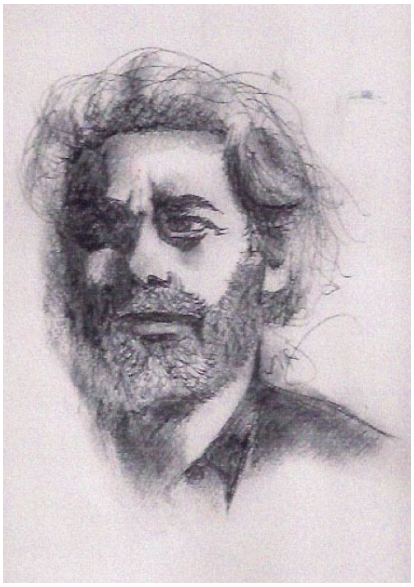


About Michael

Michael was born and raised in a small town in Indiana. From the age of 17 he never stopped traveling. After graduating from San Jose State College he went on to Columbia University, New York, on a fellowship in international reporting. In 1967 The Associated Press hired him and sent him to Moscow for four years as a general news reporter. He then worked as a business and economics writer in Paris, New York and London, finally settling in Bordeaux ten years ago where he became a music journalist, critic and portrait artist. His special interest is piano performance and composition.

An Interview with Michael Johnson

François-Frédéric Guy: Conquering the Universe with Beethoven



Artist portrait by Michael Johnson

François-Frédéric Guy was just finishing his 20th performance at the piano festival of La Roque d'Anthéron in the south of France. The 2,200-seat outdoor amphitheatre was almost full as Guy displayed his love of Beethoven—playing two of his greatest sonatas, No. 16 and No. 26 ("Les Adieux"). After the interval, Guy took his place at the Steinway grand again and shook up the audience with the stormy opening bars of the Hammerklavier sonata. It was like a thunderclap, as Beethoven intended. The audience sat up straight and listened in stunned silence. Monsieur Guy joined me and a colleague after his concert for a question-and-answer session about his playing, the role of the piano in his life, and his future as a conductor of Beethoven symphonies.

Question: Can you describe your technique for creating such a stormy opening for Hammerklavier? The audience was thrilled.
Answer: I try to achieve several things at once with those opening bars—signaling immediately the dimension of the complete work, its conquering majesty, and the vital energy that begins to build from those enormous, outsized chords. I try to give it weight and pace, as Beethoven wanted. It is as if Beethoven was saying, "Let's go conquer the universe!"

Q. And your surprising low-key encore? What were you thinking?
A. I enjoy the idea behind this little piece which is probably the best-known and simplest work of Beethoven. I chose it to come immediately after the most dense and complex of Beethoven's work, one that is relatively little known to the general public. But "Elise" is also Beethoven and can, as you say, touch people to the point of tears.

Q. What does music mean to you, as a career pianist. Since we have known each other—nearly 25 years—you have dedicated yourself entirely to music.
A. Music fills my life, my existence. Even when I am not at the instrument, even when I am speaking of other things . . . Through music, one can express things that words cannot.

Q. I see you are busy—50 concerts and recitals per year.
A. Yes, now it's closer to 60, apportioned among concertos, chamber music and solo recitals. I try to maintain a balance of about one-third for each format.

An Interview with Michael Johnson

François-Frédéric Guy: Conquering the Universe with Beethoven

Q. Your new career seems to be taking off—now you are an orchestral conductor . . .
A. Yes, I am doing some conducting. I started by conducting from the keyboard, the so-called "play and conduct" format. Seven or eight years ago I started doing the Beethoven piano concertos that way, and it's becoming more a part of my life. Now I have booked about ten play-and-conduct engagements in which I add a performance on the podium, conducting the full orchestra.

Q. Alone on the podium? What drove you to undertake this new challenge?
A. Actually it's an old dream dating back to adolescence. I started conducting from the keyboard, and gravitated to the podium. My conducting has been well-received so I am continuing. For the moment, I conduct only Beethoven.

Q. Only the symphonies?
A. Yes, I have already done the Fourth and Fifth at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées and will conduct the Seventh in October at the Opéra de Limoges, with its very good orchestra that I have worked with frequently. I enjoy it very much, and will conduct Beethoven's "Fidélio" there in 2022.

Q. Will you do what Rudolf Buchbiner did in Aix recently, all five piano concertos in one day?
A. Yes, I am scheduled to do just that in January, again at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées. We will start at 7 p.m. with Nos. 1 and 3, then a break, returning for Nos. 2 and 4, and finally at 10 p.m. the Fifth.

Q. This sounds like a major exploit!
A. That's not at all why I am doing it. I merely want to take the public on a journey with me to better understand the evolution of these concertos. I find this idea very exciting and I think the public will as well. In addition, these concertos are all works of genius and so individual—each one has its own character. They do not encroach on each other. It's like a great crossing of seas on an ocean liner. I will be taking the public with me.

Q. I was also thinking of it as a physical marathon.
A. Yes, both musically and intellectually. It's even more true in a play-and-conduct format because I have to control what's going on around the piano. We must remember, though, that in Beethoven's time all concertos were performed like this. There were no conductors. Same goes for Mozart.

Q. So you are putting yourself in Beethoven's and Mozart's shoes, so to speak?
A. Well yes, somewhat, a bit. It's a return to the concertos as they were intended. The piano is not king—it's there for a dialogue with the instrumentalists, like a big family.

An Interview with Michael Johnson

François-Frédéric Guy: Conquering the Universe with Beethoven

Q. Do you like the feeling of disappearing into the orchestra when you play-and-conduct?
A. Yes indeed. The pianist turns his or her back on the audience and is encircled by the other players. So there is a sort of fraternity—no rivalry—but it's not easy. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But when it does, there is a kind of unity, and that's what is so interesting.

Q. You have said that keyboard conducting gives you a new understanding of the music. What do you mean? Does it really change your perspective?
A. Absolutely. When you play traditionally with a conductor, one must be familiar with the orchestral parts while concentrating essentially on the piano part—that's our role. But when the pianist and the conductor are the same person, it becomes clear how completely the piano is integrated into Beethoven's concept, and Mozart too, and then later Brahms and Schumann.

Q. How did you go about studying for your role as a conductor?
A. Well I am largely self-taught, an autodidact. But I have been counseled by some eminent conductors, notably Philippe Jordan, conductor of the Bastille Opera and soon to direct the Vienna Staatsoper, when he leaves the Bastille next year. He is a fabulous conductor, an extraordinary talent. He has helped me tremendously. And another one is Pascal Rophé, conductor of the Orchestre des Pays de Loire—Nantes and Angers. He has been a big help with the Beethoven symphonies. But I am essentially self-taught and I have no ambitions to become a full-time conductor.

Q. Ah no? That was my question—isn't there a temptation to leave the piano behind? Solti, Bernstein and many others abandoned the piano to conduct.
A. No, no, that's not my plan. Conducting is an extension of my interests in music. For example, I have played practically all of Beethoven's piano music, all his chamber music, all his important piano works. And it seemed natural to try conducting. I could not imagine NOT conducting one of the symphonies. So I had to learn how to do it.

Q. Contemporary music in one of your big interests. You have collaborated with the composer Tristan Murail, I believe, and others?
A. Yes, I am currently on a concerto Tristan Murail is composing for me. What matters for me is new ideas in composition that still retain traditional structures. I want innovation, ideas that change the piano and the orchestra. Sounds we have never heard before. That's what interests me with Tristan Murail.

Q. Are you spending your life focused solely on the piano to the exclusion of all other activities? Some pianists wear blinkers.
A. I am not wrapped up in a bubble. Nothing stops me from following important events, such as Korea, or the relations between the two Koreas.

An Interview with Michael Johnson

François-Frédéric Guy: Conquering the Universe with Beethoven

Q. You are in touch with people outside the world of music?
A. Yes, I am very involved in astronomy, for example. I study mushrooms!

Q. Mushrooms?
A. Yes. The other day I found ten kilos of cepes on my property in the Dordogne. I have always had a passion for mushrooms of all types.

Q. John Cage was also a mushroom enthusiast. He wrote books about them. He even created the New York Mycological Society for the study of mushrooms.
A. I am a specialist too. I know all the names of different species in Latin.

Q. Tell us about your tenth Beethoven cycle planned for Tokyo. What does it consist of?
A. What it means is that I will play all of the 32 Beethoven sonatas from memory over a ten-day period, about three weekends, for the tenth time. Almost twelve hours of music.

Q. Do you have a loyal fan base in Japan?
A. Yes, yes. I usually play in a very beautiful hall in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo. Two years ago I played there with the Dresden orchestra conducted by Michael Sanderling. And last year I played all the Beethoven violin and piano sonatas there.

Q. If you give 60 recitals and concerts a year, as you said at the start of this interview, can you still find time to develop new repertoire?
A. Yes, I try to master one or two important works every year. I recently accepted to learn and play a concerto by Enescu. I always try to put aside time for new works.

Q. But at your age, don't you find you learn more slowly?
A. Yes, I am 50 years old. But I have many things I want to do in music. I am not stopping.

What Music Means to Me

by Dr. Linda Patterson, OBE, FRCP*

About Linda

Linda was born in Liverpool, UK. She qualified in medicine from the Middlesex Hospital Medical School, University of London, in 1975. After post graduate training in Internal medicine and Geriatric medicine, she took a post of consultant Physician in East Lancashire, UK. She became the Medical Director of the hospital, and then was the national Medical Director of the first quality regulator of the NHS in England and Wales, still working part time as a clinician.

Dr. Patterson was the Vice President of the Royal College of Physicians, London, from 2010–13. Although retired from clinical practice, she still has some leadership roles in healthcare, specialising in quality and safety. In 2000 she was appointed OBE for services to medicine. Linda lives in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, with her partner Chris.

We were sitting in a lovely salon room in a château in southwest France. It was early evening, and the summer sun came in through the open window, with trees rustling outside. We had just heard a performance by Paul Roberts of Beethoven's last piano sonata, Op 111. The music came to an end. There was absolute silence in the room which held for several minutes, a profound response to both the integrity of the performance and the music itself. The phrase "moved to tears" was very true. It was one of the most memorable musical moments I have ever experienced.

*Order of the British Empire *and* Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians

What Music Means to Me

So what is it that makes such an emotional experience happen, that sense of being in touch with the essence of life? I haven't got the answer, but it has something to do with the shared experience and understanding what the composer was trying to express.

How does music speak to us? It is a mystery. In *Metemorphosis* Kafka writes of the protagnoist, Gregor, (a man transformed as an insect), hearing his sister play the violin and he is moved. He wonders how he could be a brute beast if music makes him feel like this. Proust, in *In Search of Lost Time*, writes of the beauty of the Vinteuil violin sonata and the way it can evoke memory. The main character, Swann, is reminded of his love for Odette. Nietzsche speaks of the importance of music, saying "without music, life would be a mistake." Stephen Johnson, the music critic and author of *How Shostakovich Changed My Mind*, writes of moving from the I to the WE through music. Music brings us into the shared human condition.

The concert I described above was at one of the French summer schools for piano I have attended, run by Paul Roberts, British concert pianist, writer and expert on French music. These schools have been an important part of my life over the last twenty-four years and are an important part of my musical journey. Each summer Paul brings together amateur pianists and professionals, conservatoire students , and piano teachers, to perform in masterclasses, to practice, to listen to recitals and to share their love of music, all helped along by the ambience of southwest France.

Piano playing is usually very solitary. One practices alone, then plays in lessons for a teacher. Many amateur pianists do not often play in front of other people. It seems daunting, nerves get in the way and confidence is lost. The summer school gives one the opportunity to play in front of others in class and to take part in the final concert. This builds confidence, knowing that everyone is in the same boat and is sharing experiences over the week.

My own musical journey has been one of fits and starts. I learnt to play the piano at aged six, though I was not from a musical family. I was sent to the local teacher "down the road." I then moved to a better teacher in the centre of Liverpool who was a post graduate piano student of Stephen Wearing (an accompanist to Kathleen Ferrier, the famous alto singer). I was certainly not very talented but I did practice. At the age of nine I was awarded a piano scholarship by the local municipal authority. This paid for my lessons with teachers on their list, and I was moved on to several teachers who were outstanding musicians. My parents could never have afforded their fees if I hadn't had the scholarship. If one played a second instrument, one was encouraged to audition for the City of Liverpool Youth Orchestra. I played violin in the orchestra at the same time as Simon Rattle. He was a young boy at the time who played the tympani.

I won a senior piano scholarship at the age of 14, so my lessons were paid for until I reached age 18. We had a weekly harmony and counterpoint class after school, as well. I did the Associated Board Grade exams, getting my grade eight when I was 17. Although we didn't listen to music as a family, we had a record player and a boxed set of *Readers*

What Music Means to Me

Digest extracts from the classics, which I played constantly. I spent pocket money on cheap LPs of classical music and borrowed discs from the local library. My school had a pair of tickets for the concert series at the Liverpool Philharmonic, which I often used, though not many other girls seemed to want to go. I organized the music for the morning assembly, quite often playing the hymns, so a ticket to the concert was my reward.

Music was a big part of my life growing up. However, I was never good enough to consider doing it professionally and instead I went to medical school. Whilst at university, I played in the orchestra, played a little piano, accompanying, or in the occasional concert, but I did not have lessons, as I felt I couldn't afford them. When I started work, I stopped playing altogether, due to moving around, long hours, and no access to a piano. The piano was very much on the back burner for over 15 years.

Then! I bought an upright piano and decided to go back to lessons. That was very hard. I had to work very hard to achieve any sort of technical ability again, which was very frustrating. Fitting practice in after a long day's work was very difficult. I was often exhausted, and even getting myself to lessons felt like a burden. Having a busy medical career whilst trying to improve on the piano seemed impossible. I was on the verge of giving up again, when a fellow pupil of my teacher suggested I join her on a French summer school.

In 1995, I went to the summer school at Ladavie, an old château in southwest France near Cahors. It was a complete revelation. Taking part in the master classes was terrifying, but you realized everyone was in the same boat. There were two classes, one for the intermediate players (the amateurs) and one for the advanced class, which was mainly conservatoire students, but with some piano teachers and very gifted amateurs. I learnt that playing was not just about getting the right notes and being expressive. Touch and making the right sound was important, but equally important was conveying what the music was about. What was it trying to communicate? We learned how the structure helped that. There was the conundrum of keeping a steady pulse but playing with freedom, and keeping long lines and phrases going. Learning to have the courage to pick up the tempo and play louder was a challenge. Many amateur pianists play pieces too slowly and diffidently.

I felt I could not play the piano, but I was blown away by the total experience: hearing other people work on their pieces and how everyone improves, always, and learning how to listen, *really* listen. So, over the years, every summer I have made the trip to France to join in the musical piano community which has become a vibrant, life-affirming experience. I have heard the core piano repertoire, listening to others work in ways which would not normally be accessible to a non professional player. I have heard many recitals of a really high standard, and occasional profound moments when the music really touched me. It has remained difficult to keep up regular practice and lessons with a very busy medical practice and some leadership roles, sometimes working away from home. There is also the "burden of the amateur." One's musicality outstrips the technical ability.

Despite that, I have decided that I will only learn pieces I really want to play. I am now coming to the end of my working life, so I have more time, and more importantly *energy*, to play the piano. I still struggle with the discipline of absolutely regular practice but I am certainly playing more than I used to.

As I have grown older I am drawn more to music which seems to be reflective, such as late Brahms, where you hear memory, maybe regret, then resignation; late Schubert, with the anguish of facing death but also joy and vibrancy; and Chopin, with his expressions of love and passion.

Music expresses something of the human condition We share that with the composer and with other people who are listening. Emotions and insights which are not easily put into words can be expressed in music. Trying to define it is like trying to define beauty. It is impossible but you know what it is. My life would be poorer without music and I believe it brings me in touch with what it means to be human.

A Coherent Whole

by Janneke Brits

About Janneke

Janneke Brits is a highly respected and much sought-after teacher and keyboardist currently living in London, UK. She is Head of Keyboard at Eltham College in southeast London where she oversees a large and busy department. She performs frequently in the UK and France in a piano duet with her husband, James Kreiling. They have given UK premieres of several new works, as well as music of Peter Eotvos and Michael Finnesy. As an early music specialist, Janneke has performed with the Royal Academy Beckett Ensemble and performed on early keyboard instruments from the Cobbe Collection. As a chamber pianist, she has performed in many of the great halls in London, including the Barbican, and has participated in an exchange to Gothenburg, Sweden. She is assistant professor at *Music at Chateau d'Aix*, a piano course held in the south of France every August. She is co-artistic director and founding member of *En Blanc et Noir*, another festival for young pianists in Lagrasse, France.

As a piano teacher, I find the different stages of learning fascinating to observe in my pupils. As a performer myself, there is equally as much to explore in my own learning and connection with a piece which is an enigma to me. There are so many endless paths to explore in every lesson and practise session—the focus can constantly be shifted to find new ways to improve and grow. There is, however, a mysterious moment which happens during the process of learning and living with a piece, where it all comes together into a coherent whole in the musician's heart and mind. This is the crux of what it means to be a performing musician. We are able to bring the static and extant back to life.

A Coherent Whole

There are a number of facets which combine together to make a successful and profoundly meaningful performance of a piece possible. The jigsaw of experience, ability and artistry produces an interpretation which is indelibly unique in every performance. This is the moment that all true musicians wish for, and that teachers hope for their students to achieve. In the words of Susan Tomes, one of the UK's most revered chamber pianists:

> Musicians have an enormous task when they undertake to bring the printed page to life. So many decisions have to be made, using the printed page as a map. But there is a huge difference between reading a map and travelling through the countryside that it depicts. A good performance should make us feel that the player has seen through the map to the countryside, and can share the vision with us. But he has to bond with the piece, or this alchemy cannot happen.[1]

In a wonderful live performance, one can always sense what Tomes mentions here—the music comes first and the performer's struggle is secondary. This is especially applicable to works by Bach and Mozart which have an effortless perfection to them. Perhaps in works by Beethoven, we want to have greater awareness of the pianist's grappling with the score. But how do we as teachers get our pupils to eventually 'see through the map' and really form a close bond with something from decades, or centuries past? This is undoubtedly a very large and complex subject, but I made a helpful discovery when I tackled J. S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* as a Master's Degree student ten years ago. Even though it was quite some time ago now, I realize now that it was a significant turning point for me in my mindset as a performer, and so much of what I learned through this piece has formed the basis of my own piano teaching today. As methods of teaching and learning are infinitely unique among musicians, I acknowledge that what I learned is from a singular and personal experience and may not be applicable to everyone, but I nonetheless hope that it can be of value to most.

The *Goldberg Variations* are a true example of a piece of music which can be so intellectually challenging as to make 'seeing though the map' very difficult. The form of the piece as a whole is incredibly rigorous, with the opening *Aria* and all variations in predictable binary form, and with every third variation a canon set at an interval one step higher than the previous canon. As there is no real change of key throughout, the piece can feel dense and repetitive to the uninitiated listener if played without due imagination and a colourful sound. The stylistic mannerisms and perceived strictness of Baroque music can also appear to keep one distanced from uncontrolled emotion, which engulfs music later in Romanticism.

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[1] Susan Tomes. *Beyond the Notes* (New York, Boydell, 2004) 164

A Coherent Whole

I have always been fascinated by the ingenious architecture of the *Goldbergs*, and have longed to know what it would be like to experience performing such a large set of variations, in contrast to a large sonata. I must confess that I thought the *Goldberg Variations* were part of a certain strata of the piano repertoire which was almost forbidden to younger or unexperienced pianists. Other works which have held this fearsome reputation for me include Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata*, Liszt's *B minor Sonata* and Rachmaninov's *Third Concerto*. When it came to these works, I always felt that performing them is a serious statement about one's musicianship.

I had done my dutiful studies of some of the *French Suites*, *Partitas*, and a healthy share of *Preludes and Fugues* as an undergraduate pupil. It was however the legendary recordings of John Eliot Gardiner with the English Baroque Soloists, and the playing of British baroque violinist Rachel Podger, that sparked the audacity in me to approach the *Goldberg Variations*. There is a sense of improvisation, discovery, and freedom in Gardiner and Podger's interpretations of Bach which I was keen to experience myself as a pianist. Unlike the Preludes and Fugues, which were somewhat pedagogical in their conception, the Goldberg Variations wears its complexity a little more lightly in comparison, and is one of his most overtly ecstatic keyboard works.

I like to think that Bach's endeavour in the *Goldberg Variations* was to create a complete encyclopaedia of formal styles in his day. Every permutation of Aria (Variation 13), Lament (Variation 15), Chorale (Variation 22) and Gigue (Variation 11) is there, to name just a few. Much of this music also transcends pure 'keyboard' writing. There are clearly orchestral movements (most famously the French Overture in Variation 15) and there are Trio Sonatas (Variation 18). It felt like the perfect opportunity for me to find a fresh approach to playing Bach.

I set about learning the variations in sets of three and memorised them as I went. I very quickly realized that my typical pianistic muscle memory would be of little use in a piece which is almost exclusively all in the same key, and played within the same three and half octave range. The sort of natural confidence which grows under one's fingers with Chopin or Liszt simply does not appear on its own in this music. It became absolutely clear to me that learning this great work would demand a level of respect and commitment I had not known before in my practising.

I was therefore determined that my practising had to be intensely methodical and painstaking, but above all, to imprint every melodic strand in my inner ear was the goal. The other major challenges, such as fast virtuoso playing and the issues of stamina and concentration, were simply put aside for a long time. I first learned each contrapuntal voice individually in a natural phrase-length, or in small sections, and would then do a combination of singing and playing the different parts together. The aim was to find the

light and shade, and moments of repose in what could be perceived as relentless complexity. It felt like I was simply uncovering what was already inherent in the music itself—the expression and character of each variation was revealed to me only once I felt I knew it completely. It was revelatory for me to work in such incredible detail. The constant inventiveness and cunning of Bach's writing was endlessly inspiring to me.

There was so much to discover in shaping phrases in the same way another instrument might, such as an oboe or cello. The natural elegance and balance of every phrase became clear only once I had sung it myself and found a way to remember it. Only after I had done this type of work for a significant amount of time could I finally work only on achieving fluency and layers of sound in my playing on its own. There was a tremendous cumulative power to this kind of work—the scale of the piece was no longer a problem as I was never progressing at a pace at which I could 'lose' my progress.

Getting to know the music like this from the inside out, I now realize was hugely important in completely internalising such a large piece of music, and, dare I say, finding my way into a small part of Bach's mind. When the time came to perform it publicly for the first time, I felt that I was almost *inside* the music and that I had complete control over how I was playing it. Paradoxically, what had seemed like pedantic and almost ascetic work at certain moments, actually freed me to be far more courageous and spontaneous on stage than ever before, as I had such an immense sense of confidence in my knowledge of the piece. The foundation that I had built with so much inner ear training and with exploring nuance in great detail is what gave me the confidence to feel ownership of this music. The very perfection and complexity of this music obligated me to work and learn in a fantastic way.

These ideas have now become the cornerstones of my own teaching. Music has to live within your own 'mind's ear' first in order to liberate it from the many struggles we can have at the instrument. We all know how frustrating it can be to overcome the technical and musical challenges in great works, and when I sense that a pupil is feeling overwhelmed, I remind them that there is incredible power in working carefully, methodically and with a desire to explore, rather than to conquer. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking that issues of technique and memorization are separate from pure musicianship, but they must be intrinsically linked in how we practise.

When I decided to learn the *Goldberg Variations*, I was lucky enough to study with pianist Charles Owen, who is one of today's finest Bach players in the UK. I often think back to the series of lessons I had with him on that piece and how masterfully he led me through the learning process from start to finish and helped me to 'see through the map'. Crucially, he knew how to give me the space to find my way to that mysterious moment when a piece becomes a whole, no matter how long it took.

A Coherent Whole

Having returned to performing the *Goldberg Variations* now ten years later, I acknowledge that this conception of the "whole" is also changeable, as it should be. So many of my feelings about small details and the broader statements in this piece are now changed simply because I am also changing as a musician and person. As teachers, we are so passionate about helping our students as much as we possibly can, but we need to remember to step back and allow them to find their way to that point of creating their own fulsome idea of a piece, so that they can continue their personal growth over the years. I firmly believe that this applies to students at all stages of development. We can instill the tools of discipline and technique; we can discuss style and interpretation; we can inspire with our own demonstrations and discussions, but lifting the music from the page is something which is ultimately up to them.

Music and Alchemy

by Stephanie Mizzi

About Stephanie

Stephanie studied Law and Philosophy at Hull University in Yorkshire. Subsequently trained as an accountant, she has worked for tech companies, including AOL, Square Enix and King. Stephanie rediscovered her interest in music and restarted piano lessons in 2005. She received a Diploma in Music from The Open University in 2007, and "finally" passed the ABRSM Grade 8 piano in 2016. Currently Stephanie enjoying learning new pieces, dancing flamenco, singing with the Community Opera, and singing in a local gospel choir. She is taking jazz piano lessons because nobody in the history of the world has ever said: "You play piano, do you know Schoenberg's *Six Little Piano Pieces*?"

The word alchemy suggests transformation: the transformation of base metals into gold, the earthly into the spiritual, the dying into the healthy (vice versa), or the disdainful into the lover. How can music reflect these ideas of transformation? I think there are three major ways that music does this.

Firstly, there are representations of these sorts of transformation in the stories of opera and musicals. The world of opera is littered with stories of magical transformations from Cavalli's *La Calisto* to Turnage's *Coraline*. Potions are also very popular: from the fateful love draft in *Tristan und Isolde* to countless poisonings (the advantage of this means of dispatch is that it allows the victim, such as Simon Boccanegra, lots of time to die slowly while continuing to sing). The musical *Gypsy* contains a less magical but equally emphatic example, when the overlooked and seemingly untalented Louise transforms into the rich and successful stripper Gypsy Rose Lee by getting herself a "gimmick." The transformation in this case is underscored by the reprise of the cheesy vaudeville number from Act One "Let me Entertain You," The reprise is in a rather jazzy variation, suggestive of a more x-rated form of entertainment.

This leads us to the second type of transformation: those that occur within the music and are expressed through changes of tempo, dynamics or harmony. Cole Porter

famously wrote, "But how strange the change from major to minor, Every time we say goodbye." Anyone acquainted with the song will realize that there is no such change in the harmony that accompanies these words, but the image is perfect and reflects how our brains react to changes in harmony. We need no grounding in musical analysis to understand that a piece of music has reached a climax or that it has resolved. We feel it. We understand these things intuitively. Composers use this to suggest a moment of transformation: from the glorious move to C major in the final movement of Beethoven's 5th symphony to the key change in the vamp section of a gospel song. We understand that the ground has shifted. We feel the rush of excitement when the tempo speeds up. You can sense the energy in the overture to The *Marriage of Figaro* for example, but anything marked "presto" or "tutti" will usually have the same effect. How do we experience these changes in dynamics, tempo or harmony? We experience them as emotions. Cole Porter's point was that he experienced the emotion of loss as a change in harmony, but it is equally true that our response to a change in harmony, or dynamics or tempo, is an emotional one that takes place in our minds.

This then is the third type of transformation: the one that occurs in each one of us as we listen to, and more profoundly, when we make and perform music.

There have been numerous studies on the effects of music and it does appear that it can have truly transformative impacts on people's lives. There is some evidence that stroke victims who have lost the ability to speak can be assisted by a methodology called melodic intonation training which uses singing as a way to regain some speech function. There is also evidence that mental health benefits result from music making. Studies have shown that it can lead to a reduction in depression, anxiety, blood pressure and even pain. It can improve sleep quality, mood, mental alertness and memory. Research is continuing into why this might be the case, but some of the positive impacts from group singing, for example, may be to do with breath control. Interestingly, when choirs sing together there is evidence that their heartbeats fall into rhythm. Other studies show that learning to play an instrument can help improve brain function, even in later life, by inducing changes in regions of motor, auditory and speech processing networks.

More interesting than the changes we see from solitary music making are the changes we see when we work together with others. It is impressive to see the sense of community engendered when crowds of strangers sing together in football stadiums or at rock concerts, or the emotional impact of people singing *Auld Lang Syne* or *Happy Birthday* to celebrate a special occasion.

I have sung in the chorus with Blackheath Halls Community Opera for the past four years. Each year we produce a fully-staged opera using professional singers for the leading roles, music students for the smaller roles, an amateur choir and orchestra, together with children from local schools and special needs children. The standard of music making is very high despite the mixed ability group that makes up more than three quarters of the company. In 2019, we staged Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène*, which is a fabulously

joyous piece which was a great deal of fun to sing, though not incredibly easy. Previous productions have included Bizet's *Carmen*, Weber's *Der Freischutz*, Verdi's *Macbeth* and Rossini's *Le Comte Ory* among others. The musical rehearsals take place two to four times a week for two months, followed by production rehearsals and finally four performances.

The members of the chorus are from many different backgrounds and are of different abilities. Some read music, some learn by ear. All come with an enthusiasm for the process: some have seen many operas, for others this is their first interaction with the form. Everybody helps one another to remember where they should be and what they should be wearing for the next scene. It is great fun, but it is also hard work and can be very challenging. There are over a hundred hours of rehearsal plus homework. In *La Belle Hélène*, the chorus were on stage for most of the performance.

The special needs children that we work with all have different issues to deal with but the joy that they get from being involved in the production is wonderful to see. I had the privilege of being a buddy to one of these boys during the production. I had to make sure that he entered and left at the right time through the right exit and that he felt supported during his time on stage. It was also my job to reunite him with his carers once he got off the stage. It was quite a responsibility, especially as I was also supposed to be acting and singing at the same time. It was wonderful to see his personality come through in his acting and singing and how the opportunity to make music in this way clearly brought him out of himself.

Having seen this on a number of occasions, I can testify that something akin to an alchemical transformation takes place in each and every member of the cast during the weeks leading up to the performance. This eclectic mix of people come together through a love of making music and form a community.

In Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'amore*, the hero, Nemorino, purchases a magic potion from a travelling quack in the hope that it will make the heroine, Adina, fall in love with him. Unbeknownst to him, the bottle contains cheap wine. As a result of drinking it, he becomes more confident and in the end he gets the girl. My theory is that it wasn't the wine but the singing itself that gave him the confidence and the ability to change his destiny.

The making of music has that effect on all of us and *that* is the real magic potion.

Further Reading

https://tinyurl.com/ugtuhg4
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/mobile/sci/tech/8526699.stm
https://tinyurl.com/vx8973k
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-23230411
https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/12/171221101402.htm
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https://www.nature.com/articles/srep06130
https://tinyurl.com/sx86sjl

Alchemy: The Musician's Soul

by Dr. Jill Timmons, NCTM

About the Author

Jill Timmons performs internationally as a solo and ensemble artist and has recorded on the Laurel, Centaur, and Capstone labels. With some thirty years in higher education, she continues to prepare pianists for competitive auditions and successful performances. Her best-selling career guidebook, *The Musician's Journey: Crafting Your Career Vision and Plan*, is published by Oxford University Press. Timmons is the artist/teacher affiliate with Classic Pianos at their flagship Portland store and in their satellite locations in Seattle, Denver, Cleveland, Anchorage, Las Vegas, and Albuquerque.

Alchemy is a provocative and mysterious term. Harkening back to medieval times, it was the forerunner of modern chemistry, grounded in a supposed transformation of matter, essentially searching for a way to convert base metals into gold. While that ship has sailed, today we can look to modern alchemical processes that actually do transform matter into something new and valuable. We can also experience an internal alchemical process that can lead to a personal transformation in which parts of the self are freed from limiting beliefs, new frontiers are discovered, and personal truths are unearthed.

Either way, both the external and interior worlds of alchemy are ever-present for musicians. Externally, we can discover alchemy when composer, performer, and audience join together in a temporal performance, creating something of real gold that is greater than the sum of its parts. Most of us have been witness to this mysterious and magical moment that music can provide—an extraordinary concert, a performance that moved us (ours or someone else's), a musical moment in time we will never forget, a sense of community as we are part of an audience electrified by live music.

Internally, we can engage in our own alchemical process by learning a new work. We all have our "bucket list" of compositions we wish to master—those works that for some unknown reason speak to us in a deeply personal way. I sometimes feel that a work is "calling to me" to learn it! In serendipitous ways, the process of mastering a great musical composition inevitably leads to internal shifts in our

psyche. We can discover new truths about ourselves, musical insights, the world around us, and see our present moment through a new lens—truly alchemical.

Sometimes, if we are lucky, external and internal alchemical processes may converge. This past September, I was fortunate enough to encounter such a serendipitous moment. Once again, I hosted the *Piano Arts in Netarts* festival in Netarts, Oregon. PAN is a three-day artistic/educational immersion for adult pianist/educators that offers an opportunity to expand professional horizons; to enjoy concerts and the workshop; to acquire new information; and to spend time in fellowship with friends and colleagues in the music profession. It's a kind of "continuing education" for the MTNA artist/teacher. In designing this professional retreat, my hope was to give back something to my colleagues from the extraordinary festivals I have attended.

The opening festival concert was held in the Netarts/Oceanside Firehouse. This was also the space for all instruction, conference meals, and community receptions. I chose J. S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* for this year's opening concert, and joining me in this epic work was Italian concert pianist and professional baroque dancer, Ludovica Mosca. While I played, she danced the various baroque dances embedded in the Goldberg. To the casual observer, this might appear as a programming stretch to offer this work, from the high Baroque, in this tiny beach community of 874 people. But there's that alchemy. Audience members came from far and wide, spanning from the east coast to the west, from concert pianists to farmers, academics to hobbyists, and all ages. They all crowded into the Firehouse and joined in a moment of deep alchemy where composer, artists, and audience experience a kind of temporal melding. Moreover, there were other elements that added to this alchemical transformation: an extraordinary Bösendorfer concert grand provided by Classic Pianos, a gifted piano technician, the remarkable Firehouse staff and volunteer firefighters, the local caterer, donors and supporters of the festival, and a SRO audience. Even the weather was one of those perfect Oregon summer evenings. It was a moment that reminds one of the value and imperative mission we as artists serve—always something greater than ourselves. All of us in the Firehouse that evening were part of something transformative, and it couldn't really be explained—the essence of alchemy.

Through alchemy, a simple Firehouse became a focal point for J. S. Bach and the community, and contained porous boundaries between artist, composer, and audience. We were all one in that temporal moment, regardless of personal proclivities. That was the external alchemical reaction in the moment of performance.

The internal alchemy I experience in *learning and performing* the Goldberg was quite another story. It was a journey, and even though this word is bandied about for just about anything that takes time, it did apply to my experience. It was a long process, there were surprises at every turn, and when I came out on the other end, I was changed. I use the passive voice in this instance because it transformed me. I did not go there on purpose with the expectation that there would be a personal tectonic shift. And even

though I reached the performance endpoint of this extended work, it only served to be a new commencement. Since I am scheduled to play these variations repeatedly over the next two years, I realized that after I had learned it, and even performed it, the work ahead was just beginning.

More than anything in recent years, the Goldberg challenged me in surprising ways. I had to find new and fresh practice strategies, patience was essential since fingerings were often thrown out in favor of greater ease, sometimes not realized until I could play certain variations at lightening speed. Yes, the articulation police were out, and I was often arrested. Lastly, simply juggling the largess of those thirty intricate variations was a complex and alternate universe unto itself. It took me longer than I had imagined to master this work, I was required to practice many more hours per week than I had previously estimated, I had to develop a new kind of stamina in performance (no intermission, no going off stage between works, no carefully paced program of my own discretion). I couldn't squander my energy extravagantly in the first twelve variations just because I was having so much fun! And on and on. The decision to learn the Goldberg, to collaborate with Ludovica through dance, and to then open this preparation to countless performances created a serendipitous and synchronous alchemy, one which transformed my interior life and the lens through which I view my work.

Alchemy clearly offers the artist an opportunity for enlargement and inspiration. Externally and internally the alchemical processes work their magic in mysterious, and often unexplainable, ways. Serendipity and synchronicity can serve as the handmaidens to transformation and together with alchemy, bring the artist into surprising and expansive ways of knowing.

Netarts is my home. It's a place that is filled with alchemy as the estuary empties twice a day, transforming from a vast stretch of water to a home for the mostly resident seals lounging on the emerging sandbars. It's an ideal place to explore alchemy and to share this experience with students, colleagues, and community. Next September 11–13, we will once again open the Firehouse to *Piano Arts in Netarts* and look for new alchemy.

Alchemy Unhindered

by Susan Kline

About the Author

Susan Kline, a piano technician living near Corvallis, studied at Oberlin and at UT/Austin. She has a Masters degree in applied cello. She played in the Hamilton Philharmonic (Ontario), then did two sabbatical replacement jobs on the Canadian prairies. In 1978, she attended George Brown College's Piano Technology course in Toronto. After 12 years of sweaty piano work in Stockton, California, she happily moved to Philomath, Oregon. She tunes for most concerts and festivals in the area. She has written a series of articles for *Piano Technicians Journal.*

Today's theme is Music and Alchemy. The web defines alchemy as "a seemingly magical process of transformation, creation, or combination."

Does music transform us, or do we transform music?

How could this alchemy be anything but a joint process? Music only comes to life when it is experienced or produced by a human mind, either when listening to or producing sound or, in a more fragmented manner, when listening to memory. The rest of what we call "music" is dormant, waiting as printed shapes in closed books, or as recorded sounds waiting to be played. It is the possibility of future music, when people bring it back to life.

When we sit in an audience listening to a performance, we feel we are part of a shared experience, but it is not the same experience for any of us, because we all bring something different to it, our contribution to what we call music. Each of us has a different history, and we value different things. For some people, the dazzling achievement of what appear to be impossible feats is extremely exciting. For others, certain compositions bring back warm and happy memories. Some people bask in the sound itself, and for them, the tuning and voicing of a piano can greatly enhance their enjoyment. For some who have studied and performed certain pieces, listening to what someone else has found in them can be wonderful and inspiring, and might also change how they play the piece themselves. For those who follow the tension and resolution of musical lines, sometimes several at once, the music has a human voice.

Of course, most people will combine one or more of these experiences. Negative reactions are also possible, when people hate the particular sound someone is producing, when they remember the trauma of playing a piece badly, when they are jealous of the seemingly effortless achievement of an amazing concert artist ("I hate you . . .") choosing to ignore all the struggle and isolated work which went into it.

When I listen to a performance or a recording, I hear anything which is wrong with the piano. Any double-striking note will snap me to attention. Uneven treble voicing is so near universal in recordings that I wonder why the artists tolerate it. An unmusical octave stretch size just makes me groan, particularly that little flat sagging in octave six which the earlier electronic devices tended to produce. But then, there are the times and the days when so much is gloriously right. It all sings with a true voice, the architecture of how all the harmony fits together is perfect, the voice leading, sometimes several voices, is so transparent and delightful, and the pianist just seems—happy.

A good piano technician hopes that she or he hears better than all but a tiny few customers, but we seldom take the time to define "better." What consoles, warms, excites, and interests other people remains a mystery. In the art world, there are large paintings of a square of one color set on a background, not quite flat and uniform, of another color. I look at it and it leaves me cold. I can imagine someone saying, "well, anyone could do that!" But there are people who can sit and stare at one of these paintings for hours, having a transcendent experience, and there are enough of them that some such paintings sell at auction for over a million dollars. Obviously, some people put more on the table when looking at these paintings than I do.

To conclude, it's probably better not to be too self-absorbed when listening to music, because there is far too much to analyze. Let the attention turn outward, so the music can work its alchemy unhindered.

Here is an English translation of Franz Schubert's song "An Die Musik." (Note: The poem is by Franz Von Schober, and "Ring of Words" describes him this way: "An intimate friend of Schubert who studied law, but in his long life tried his hand at many things—poetry, landscape painting, lithography. For a time he was secretary to Franz Liszt.")

"O sublime art, in how many gray hours,
when the wild tumult of life ensnared me,
have you kindled my heart to warm love,
have you carried me away to a better world!

Often a sigh, escaped from your harp,
a sweet, solemn chord from you,
has opened the heaven of better times for me,
o sublime art, I thank you for it!"

The German, which helps when listening to or remembering the song:

"Du holde Kunst, in wieviel grauen Stunden,
Wo mich des Lebens wilder Kreis umstrikt,
Hast du mein Herz zu warmer Lieb' entzunden,
Hast mich in eine bessre Welt entrükt!

Oft hat ein Seufzer, deiner Harf' entflossen,
Ein süsser, heiliger Akkord von dir,
Den Himmel bessrer Zeiten mir erschlossen,
Du holde Kunst, ich danke dir dafür!"

Here is a decent recording, by Christa Ludwig and Geoffrey Parsons.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsjRg1XatAE

When we try to understand the interaction of music and—us—we come up against the realization that any individual's experience of music may be self-described but cannot be shared directly. The inner music must always remain a mystery, because it is different than the physical sound. It is the sound plus what our minds make of it. Since our minds are different, our experiences of music are also different.

Grand Piano Anatomy 101

by Susan Kline, Registered Piano Technician

We're approaching the last part of our grand piano anatomy tour, which should be completed in the next issue. Today we're viewing the legs, how they are held on, how they are removed, and their casters, plus something which isn't even attached to a piano: benches. In the next and last installment, we'll deal with everything pedal-related which is lower than the bottom of the key bed, plus a short look at the underside of the soundboard.

Benches, Care and Feeding Of

Not long ago, when talking with people at a church about their incredibly beautiful new Hamburg Steinway B (the 7 foot size) I said that this was the first time I'd had the care and feeding of a Hamburg Steinway. One of the church people asked, "what do you feed it?" I answered, "unlimited time and attention."

Benches do not require unlimited time and attention, but they do need some.

They come in two versions, the adjustable artist bench (usually but not always with no place to store music), and the non-adjustable wooden bench where the lid can be raised and music and other assorted articles can be placed inside.

Once in a while it's a good idea to go through all the assorted music and junk in a bench, and see what really needs to be there, removing all the rest. Maybe once a year? Never fill a bench higher than the side rails, because it ruins the hinges when the lid rests on the contents, and it can also drive down the base of the storage compartment. It's often just fiberboard held on by a few staples, and if a wad of assorted stuff is forced down onto it by the weight of a human bum, it can come loose. If it is loose, you can take everything out of the bench, turn it over, and secure the base with some 1" brads, carefully aimed so they don't come through the sides.

A bench cover can be comfortable, and it can save the top of the bench from being gummy and sticky in humid hot weather. It's easy enough to make one, and secure it to the bench by strings around each corner.

Benches which have the legs attached by corner brackets with bolts coming through them should have the nuts tightened every once in a while, certainly if the legs feel loose. They ought to have a washer, then a lockwasher, and then the nut, which can be tightened by a crescent wrench.

The other version, which has glued joints, can also have loose legs. Then it needs to be taken apart and glued back together, possibly by a professional furniture person.

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If benches which have the legs held on by bolts through corner brackets end up creaky and noisy, they can usually be made quiet by taking off each leg in turn, and putting a tiny smear of Vaseline onto the areas where they meet the sides. It's easy to see where this is by the indentations in the legs, and sometimes by the presence of a very fine powder. The shiny polyester finishes can be particularly noisy.

Artist benches also need to have the corner nuts kept tight, but they can get worn out and noisy in other ways, too. They can last many, many years in a private home, but in a stage situation they can end up very loose and noisy, and they are nearly impossible to restore. They are also very expensive, alas. Shopping the web for a cheap artist bench is not advisable, because the quality is so poor and the lifespan of an artist bench made of inferior materials is so short.

Back to the grand piano. Time to consider the legs.

Legs

Any mention of legs and/or the pedal lyre immediately brings piano movers to my mind, since every time a grand piano is moved, a professional mover is required, and they are not created equal. Grands are not amenable to homemade moves, because they must rest on their sides to get through doors, which requires tilting them onto a skid, removing the legs and lyre, and then setting them back onto their legs at their destination.

Jack in the box.

Some movers are excellent, but it's the others which always spring to mind. Like finding a dentist in a new town, it's a good idea to ask around to see who does the best piano moving. A local piano store or the music department of a university would be logical places to ask.

Piano technicians can remove a piano leg without having to tilt the whole instrument, by using a bottle jack on something strong enough to take the weight, getting the leg off the floor. A very special technical editor of the Piano Technicians Journal, Susan Graham, invented and published plans for a device she called a "jack In the box."

Crank, crank, crank, up goes one corner of the piano. If much work is to be done under a piano being held up like this, a jack stand (automotive) can be placed nearby as insurance.

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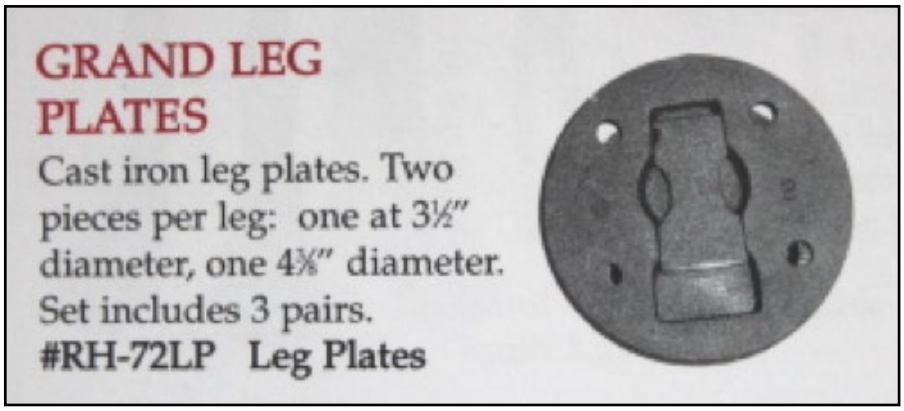
The reasons for removing a leg would be to deal with caster problems, or with lock plate problems. Most piano legs are held on by lock plates. When installing it, the leg is lifted so the two lock plates engage, and then the leg is secured by driving it with a big rubber mallet up near the top so the two halves are wedged together.



Lock plates from a piano supply company catalog..

An old Steinway A leg with a lock plate installed..

Sometimes legs and pedal lyres are held on by large bolts or wood screws. You can tell which system is being used by seeing whether there are fasteners and whether there are wedges. Wedges imply the presence of a lock plate, though some pianos have both lock plates and fasteners through the top wings of the legs.

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Steinway left leg wedge.

Baldwin leg wedge.

I have two small anecdotes about movers, showing what can go wrong:

1. Many years ago, I got a call from a Kawai grand owner. The soft pedal wouldn't work after his piano had been moved. On investigation, I found that the screws through the back of the right pedal had gone right up through the back rail of the action frame.

Then I also noted that a big thick washer for the right screw of the pedal lyre was missing. Many movers just toss all fasteners and other small objects into a plastic bag. This Kawai had shorter screws, two each, for the legs, and two longer screws, plus two washers, for the lyre. A mover had just grabbed a screw at random and muscled it into the right leg, despite how hard it was to tighten down. Then he went to put on the lyre, but the remaining screw was too short. So he just THREW AWAY the washer! And left.

2. Much more recently I dealt with a similar problem with an A.B. Chase grand at a local church. (A word about A.B. Chase: *they have been called "a poor man's Steinway" because they often are such exact copies of them. A.B. Chase was even sued by Steinway at one point. When this particular A.B. Chase was partly rebuilt by Steve Ganz, he noticed something. On Steinway B's of a certain age, the strike line for the hammers in the 1st capo section is not ideally designed. Rebuilders will install hammers at the bottom of the section with just a slight curve, so that the shanks are just a little bit shorter than they'd need to be to stay in a straight line. The tone improves. Steve found that the A.B. Chase had the same problem. We laughed a lot: A.B. Chase even copied Steinway's error!*)

The left leg of this particular grand had been kind of dodgy for a long time. The screws didn't quite line up with the holes for them, and the leg always seemed somewhat shaky. But then after two moves the soft pedal wouldn't work. We don't know which move caused the problem, which saved the church the nuisance of arguing with the movers. Looking inside the action cavity, I saw once again that a screw was coming right through the left style of the action frame. In this case, it was one of four screws holding on the lock plate, the half of the lock plate attached to the bottom of the piano. Luckily my assistant, very strong and willing, was down on the floor investigating all this, while the piano was held up by my jack in the box.

We found a batch of mismatching screws, some bent, some loose. The four screws holding on the lock plate were curious: two had been shortened by a hack saw. The screw through the action frame was there because someone for some reason had taken off the lock plate, but put it back on with one of the longer two screws through a hole which required a shorter one. My assistant and I sorted out all the screws, tossed some, provided others, used leather and white glue in some of the holes, and then the screws for the lock plate were all sound and secure. But when he went to put back on the leg, he saw that the lock plate wouldn't wedge with the leg in its normal position. You can always tell which side of a leg is supposed to go on the outside because it's the side with the scratches and dents.

When he put the leg on the other way, with the outside in, it wedged properly, (which it hadn't for many years) but it was crooked. So he took the whole thing apart again, and rotated the lock plate 180 degrees. I had no faith at all in the people who had been taking off and putting on the leg, but I was totally confident that the four lock plate holes would be perfectly symmetrical, and they were. With all the screws back in the

mended holes and the leg securely installed, we found that the two long screws through the wings of the leg magically now lined up with the holes for them.

So, knowing that many movers are just fine, the question I can't avoid for the other kind is, how on earth can they get things so mixed up and just not notice?

Casters

There are little casters and big ones, and little grands and big ones. If a big grand has small casters and it needs to be moved across a smooth floor, it can often put a crease in it. Having several people with good backs lifting slightly helps some, but sometimes it is best to put down sheets of plywood and roll it across them.

Rolling on carpet can weaken the leg attachments and can also harm the carpet.

There is a device called a grand transporter, with hydraulic jacks and large rubber wheels. It will get the piano casters slightly off the floor so it can be wheeled to wherever it's going by pulling on a handle.

When rolling a piano, always take plenty of time, and have someone with a good back to lift the tail leg slightly when it has to go over a threshold.

It's good to have caster cups under grand casters, to save the floor or carpet from being dented by spreading the weight. A piano on caster cups also keeps people from being tempted to move it all the time.

Often found on rental concert pianos are the big double-wheeled brass casters. There are a few basic rules for how to treat these, which can prevent some trouble.

Double-wheeled caster with brake.

First, be aware that some of these casters have so little friction that when the brakes are off, you can move a 9 foot grand piano with one finger. Never leave a piano unattended when the brakes are off.

Second, a grand with the brakes engaged can be forced to roll with some effort. Don't do this. The rubber inside the casters will be damaged.

Third, when releasing the brakes, a quarter or a half turn counterclockwise is all that is needed. Turning the brake rod round and round and round can make it come apart inside, which is a huge hassle to fix.

Fourth, when the piano gets where you want it to be, immediately put on the brakes, by turning the rods clockwise. Make them just firm but do not imitate a gorilla.

And once again, if moving a concert grand, have several people helping, take your time, watch out for obstacles, and take some of the weight off the tail leg when going over a threshold.

And that should do it. Those double-wheeled casters are a real dream.

The Poet Speaks

by Todd Boss

It Is Enough to Enter

the templar
halls of museums, for

example, or
the chambers of churches,

and admire
no more than the beauty

there, or
remember the graveness

of stone, or
whatever. You don't

have to do any
better. You don't have to

understand
the liturgy or know history

to feel holy
in a gallery or presbytery.

It is enough
to have come just so far.

You need
not be opened any more

than does
a door, standing ajar.

Poetry (April 2010)