


Improvisation *with Robert Levin*

It's something we practice every day, as a way to get through life's unexpected predicaments: improvisation. But how many of us are able to improvise musically, to conjure up melodies, harmonies and rhythms, seemingly from thin air? In this hour of *Milestones of the Millennium*, our host Melinda Whiting takes us on a tour of the mystery and magic of musical improvisation.

Nowadays we associate contemporary improvisation with jazz or bluegrass, not classical music; we don't often get the opportunity to hear a classical musician improvise. However, this wasn't always the case. In previous centuries, the occupations of composer and performer were inextricably linked. The one who composed music also executed it, sometimes spontaneously. Organists such as J.S. Bach improvised during church services. In the nineteenth century, after the establishment of public concerts, performers such as Beethoven used improvisation as a way to show off their abilities and attract attention to themselves.

Many great composers were masters at improvisation, and some of them incorporated improvisation into their written compositions. Mozart and Beethoven not only improvised variations on popular themes of the day, but preserved some of these improvisations of paper. Sometimes, a composer was required to improvise a passage of an otherwise notated composition, as was the case with the 1808 premiere of Beethoven's Choral Fantasy, Op. 80. Beethoven was so overwhelmed with concert preparations that he had no time to compose an introduction for the Fantasy. When it came time for the premiere and Beethoven still had no introduction, he simply sat down at the piano and improvised one.

One place in classical music where it is not unusual to find improvisation is the cadenza. As master improviser and Harvard Professor Robert Levin points out, a cadenza is a musical freeze frame in the midst of a concerto. While the orchestra pauses, the soloist takes a single chord and through musical reflection and invention blows it up and prolongs it. The manner in which the cadenza is improvised varies among musicians. Some performers, such as Levin, prefer a more historically informed and stylistically

 consistent approach, one that remains faithful to the composer's own musical language. Levin finds great satisfaction in the challenge of restricting himself to a particular style, especially one that is readily familiar to the audience. Other performers, such as violinist Nigel Kennedy, take a more post-modern and eclectic approach, weaving into the cadenza a variety of historical styles and techniques.

What's the future of improvisation in classical music? Levin believes that improvisation is on the upswing. With contemporary composers writing in a more accessible language and many young performers willing to take risks, we will be sure to find improvisation taking a more visible role in performance. Improvisation is music at its most spontaneous, unexpected and exciting. Levin remarks, "I think the most important thing in performing a piece of music, and likewise, even more so in the listener's apprehension of what's going on, is a sense that anything that's happening could have been something else." A performer's ability to spontaneously summon an improvisation requires a combination of discipline and fantasy, as well as a willingness to share and communicate with the audience in a magical way.

Listen to Robert Levin's exploration of musical improvisation. *(This stereo audio segment requires the free [RealPlayer](#) 5.0 or higher. You can also listen with a [14.4](#) connection)*

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