Who Do We Become?
A Piano Teacher and Her Students' Improvisational Journey in Classical Piano Lessons

by

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the
Arts Education Program
Faculty of Education

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Fall 2024

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the wisdom of improvisation and offer possibilities and perspectives for embedding improvisation in classical piano education. As a performative inquirer, I engage in performing and teaching music improvisation to recognize and perceive the transformation happening in me, my students, and our relationships. Taking my improvised performance as the starting point, I interrogated my musical journey and my commitment to improvisation and contemplated the wisdom and practice of improvisation. Surrender, listening, perfection, acceptance, forgiveness, play, and freedom caught my attention when I reflected on my learning experiences and the moments of my solo and group spontaneous performances. Embracing improvisation in classical piano lessons led my students and me to accept imperfections, forgive mistake-making, surrender to the unknown, listen to sounds within the environment in which I improvised, lived, and learned, and enjoy free play on the piano in my journey. Improvisation cultivates our resilience, courage, and abilities to self-trust and self-love.

This dissertation documents the encounters, opportunities, interruptions, understandings, and musical ideas arriving in my piano performance and teaching. I unfold my artistic self as a pianist and a piano teacher and tell the stories of my students' transformation in our adventure of piano improvisation. I ask questions while improvising my music, teaching and life: How did improvisation change me? What did improvisation teach me? What would happen if I incorporated improvisation into my classical piano teaching? How would improvisation guide my students' music learning and attitude toward living? What inquiries would improvisation open for exploration? Who do we become in a journey of improvisation? What are our roles in each other's presence? Twenty-four sound clips of my and my students' improvisation are presented in this written performance. The readers are invited to listen, to ask, and to be aware of the stop moments that call them to attention while participating in this musical dissertation.

Keywords: Improvisation; classical piano training; listening; perfection; surrender; performative inquiry

Dedication

To my grandmother, my first teacher,

for her unconditional love.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without my supervisor, Professor Lynn Fels. Thank you for offering presence and listening, invitation and trust, genuine care and endless patience throughout this journey. Thank you for being such an incredible mentor.

Dr. Michael Ling, thank you for listening and understanding me, and for your wise and inspiring insights. Thank you for improvising with me.

Dr. Yumiko Murai, thank you for helping me think clearly and explore from diverse perspectives. Your valuable suggestions and thoughtful feedback enhanced the quality of my dissertation.

To my family—my parents, my husband, my son, my siblings, my aunt and uncle. Without you, I would not have been able to complete this marathon. Thank you for your boundless love; thank you for always being there for me.

My CNIC friends, thank you for the academic opportunities and personal friendship you offered. My horizon was broadened through every discussion and Idea Jam with you.

Many many thanks to my PhD cohort friends. Your voices, encouragement, listening, and accompanying enriched my life and made this journey enjoyable.

I am grateful to my students and their parents who help with this research project. Thank you for offering your sounds and stories. Your improvisations sing beautifully in my dissertation.

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Backstage

I am waiting by the stage door, taking deep breaths, getting ready to go on the stage—a world of possibilities and risks. I stand barefoot to feel the certainty from the ground and try to imagine the coming uncertainties. In forty-five years of playing the piano, the backstage door has always been like a physical edge of chaos for me.

two more minutes…

Memories of making mistakes flash, reminding me of the existence of imperfection. But I am here, preparing to jump in without fear. Those unerasable, unforgettable missing notes no longer stop or frighten me.

one more minute…

My unsuccessful experience of improvisation happened nearly twenty years ago, and I finally have an opportunity to explore improvisation and change my life through investigating improvisation in my doctoral research. I receive a gift from improvisation and offer the gift to my students. Now, I am going to share these stories with you, my audience.

I put my shoes on, inhale, and keep my chin up, smile.

three, two, one…

Bright light is streaming in through the opening backstage door.

I am ready.

Overture

Performance

Opportunities

Surrender *Fear*

Acceptance *Vulnerabilities*

Listening

Forgiveness **Sound**

Perfection ***PLAY***

Resistance

Freedom Risks **Improvisation**

Passion

Looking back at my journey of improvisation, surrender, listening, perfection, acceptance, forgiveness, play, and freedom called me to attention like tuning sounds before a concert begins. Each of these themes came to me in a unique way through my practice of improvisation, offering various insights. As I pondered the wisdom of improvisation and sought to arrange my ideas, they sang like a musical piece, presented with various dynamics, articulations, and movements.

As a pianist and a piano teacher, music is where I play, discover, reflect, and learn. In the journey of my doctoral study, improvisation became my research topic, the praxis I engage in, and the wisdom I share with my students. My dissertation documents my and my students' journey of improvisation. *Who do I become? Who do they become? What roles do we play in each other's journey? What does improvisation bring to us?* Encounters and reflections, explorations and understandings, transformation and questions arrive during the moments I create, play, teach, contemplate, write, and live. Practicing and exploring improvisation, I recalled past learning experiences, confronted with long-forgotten successful and ever-present occasions of struggle, and reflected on those instances from the view of an improviser.

Improvisation is my adventure to discover what was missing in my classical music training and journey to self-love, self-trust and courage. In my piano teaching, improvisation guided my students to shed inner inhibitions, unleash their creativity, and learn to express their musical ideas without worry. Embedding improvisation in classical piano education offered me opportunities to relearn learning and teaching through arriving moments and relationships. Interruptions become possibilities. My students and I inspire each other and co-create transformation through improvisation in our lessons.

Art as a verb brings inquiries, transformative experiences, and discoveries in creation. To perceive and reflect on what happened in musical improvisation, I embraced performative inquiry as my approach to search and re-search. Performative inquiry is not a quiet, sitting-in-the-library, solitary studying procedure but an active, engaging, and animated adventure of exploration. Fels (1999) says, "To choose a research methodology is to throw off our clothes and hang them on a line, exposing our passions, our

imperfections, our expectations, our blind spots, our anticipations, our hopes, our failings, and yes, our quest" (p. 29). Fels (2012) notes that the performative inquiry

> …calls our attention to those moments that invite us to pause and reflect on the pedagogical significance of such moments for our work, for our relationships with others, for who we are in the world…. Performative inquiry embodies mindful attention, creative and improvisational interactions, and reflection as a way of being in inquiry" (p. 51).

Fels identifies four key requirements for the performative inquirer— "to listen deeply, to be present in the moment, to identify stops that interrupt or illuminate our practice or understanding, and to reflect on those stops, in terms of their significance, implications, and why they matter" (2012, p. 53).

Unlike most conventional research methods, performative inquiry creates an ongoing journey that requires the researcher to participate and recognize continuing transformation and exploration instead of finding a conclusion or an answer to the research inquiry. Performative inquiry opens space for emergent questions and opportunities, leading me to search and re-search, imagine and re-imagine, learn and re-learn, create and re-create.

To improvise, I must be fully involved in the moments of creation to listen to and perceive the music and ideas in my head, at my fingertips. Throughout my study of improvisation, I explored and acknowledged what happened in and between the moments that called me to attention. The unknown brought possibilities and inquiries. A new way of being and understanding emerged from chaos, and the transformations I experienced arrived through action and interaction. As I created music on the piano and encountered the unexpected, the not-yet-imagined, and surprises within stops, gaps, interruptions, risks, and uncertainties, I recognized that the qualities and actions of improvisation are intimately aligned with performative inquiry. Performative inquiry invited me to embrace its presence in my praxis of improvisation.

Performative inquiry requires creative action and interaction—engaging in arts activities to explore, understand, and perceive to create a spiral, limitless research dimension. "Practitioners of performative inquiry understand that the focus of their

research lies not in finding answers, but in realizing possible spaces for exploration" (Fels, 2004, p. 82). Exploration never ends. Each stop moment brings inquiries and awareness, guiding me to notice and investigate new possibilities.

As a performative inquirer, I actively participated in musical improvisation and my piano teaching to recognize, investigate, and enquire into each moment when I was interrupted by surprises, annoyance, curiosity, or euphoria in my research. When a discordant chord called me to attention, or a student's question tugged my sleeve on the way I attend to my exploring, I paused to listen, perceive, reflect, improvise my responses, and pondered the meaning of my presence at each stop [1] moment. Performative inquiry invited me to identify individual stop moments and to write about them, thinking reflectively and reflexively about what called me to attention, and to share my wondering and learning with my readers. My understanding and interpretation of improvisation arrived when I noticed and unfolded stop moments through performative inquiry.

Initially, I intended to focus solely on my experiences of improvisation with my piano students and my music performance. However, as my research went on, I came to understand and recognize that the improvisation I have learned is an attitude, and I wanted to bring my praxis of improvisation into multiple disciplines. Music, drama, art, writing, teaching, and living a life become different mediums to practice improvisation. Improvisation develops my willingness to surrender, listen, accept, forgive, and play, to become brave to embrace and walk into unknowing. Every improvisation evokes a series of ongoing requests and responses. I learned that improvisation is continually happening—in music playing, teaching, writing, relationships, and every occasion in my daily life.

Being a performative inquirer, I engaged and perceived stop moments from my improvisation activities that called me to attention. I received and reacted to what arrived

[1] According to Appelbaum (1995), a stop is "the time of awareness" (p. 16), "to become aware of awareness" (p. 18), "a movement of transition" (p. 24), and the moment of arrival, risk and opportunity. Fels (2012) claims that the stop moments "is the interruption, the tug on the sleeve…" (p. 51), and "emerge through performative encounters and upon reflection that call our attention to what matters" (2010, p. 3).

and discovered appearances of improvisation within my performances, teaching, learning, and life. Like clothes on a line, I hung emergent themes of surrender, perfection, acceptance, forgiveness, play, freedom, and listening on staff lines of my emerging composition. Risks, fears, vulnerabilities, resistance, passions, and opportunities sounded alongside, bringing new images, harmonies, and rhythm. These qualitative features emerged through the languages, expressions, gestures, and sounds I offered and received as I unfolded my transformation as an improviser and as I witnessed the change and growth happening when my students experienced improvisation.

On the edge of chaos[2], I am like the butterfly caught in the wind, flapping my wings to follow the disorder, or to initiate a new order. I seek a path in the liminal space between order and disorder through noticing and creating, and my willingness to surrender to the unknowing becomes the first component to initiate each improvisational journey. As I receive the gifts of improvisation, I share my learning with my students. I encourage them to experience improvisation, I hold their vulnerabilities, and guide and support them when they start their adventure of improvisation. Improvisation leads my students to understand that there is always potential in the unknown; a path that emerges within every mess leads to a secret garden.

To understand and find meanings of improvisation, I audio-recorded my improvisations by smartphone to listen to the music I created as an audience. I wrote down my thoughts, questions, and discoveries to investigate my learning and perspective of improvisation. Keeping teaching journals was essential to document and reflect on the stop moments I encountered during my teaching and learning. *How did I respond to my fear and resistance, my happiness and chances? When my students revealed a different view of improvisation to me with their unique personalities and attitudes, what did their gestures and voices tell me? How did I react to their actions and questions? How did I guide them to extend their understanding of improvisation to other disciplines and regions beyond music?* Teaching, learning, playing, living, and writing were all included

[2] See Act IV, pp. 149-151.

in my ongoing study as I perceived the wisdom of improvisation through performative inquiry.

Snowber (2002) says, "The gift of performative inquiry is to honour all stages of our life as an opening for places of birth" (p. 30). In musical improvisation, every sound is the birthplace of the next sound. Every piano lesson and every performance leads to continuous inquiry, contemplation, experimentation, and exploration. When an action initiates the next action, generates new thoughts, and creates the opportunity for renewal, performative inquiry guides me to embrace Arendt's (1958) concept of natality[3].

Playing the roles of an artist, performative inquirer and educator, I notice and acknowledge every moment of transformation and revolution. I am not only an investigator but also a participant, receiving and appreciating the gifts of learning that arrive through performative inquiry. When I played an unwanted sound in my performance, when my student rejected my invitation to improvise, when a child happily laughed while creating music, performative inquiry invited me to pay attention and look into every stop moment in my playing and teaching, pondering the meanings and unveiling the unseen stories from the position of a witness as well as an active player.

Writing a dissertation is like composing a musical piece—I seek to create a draft and polish it until the final result becomes satisfying. However, when I started my draft, I got stuck on the first line because I insisted on writing with a detailed plan, and I spent hours searching for a *perfect* format even before I started writing…

Wait!

[3] Hannah Arendt (1958) introduces "natality" as one of "the most general conditions of human existence" (p. 8), and "action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew…." (p. 9). Each birth brings a new beginning, and "It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before" (pp. 177-178).

*Did I just say **perfect**?*

After such a long time working on improvisation and trying to get rid of perfectionism,

*I still take **perfect** as the goal?*

Relax! At least I became aware of it.

Becoming aware was also progress.

Internal debates with myself like the one above frequently occurred as I tried to figure things out while writing. Sometimes, I felt annoyed to discover that I still got stuck in my need for *perfection*, but I was learning, I was changing, I was growing, and I had to keep writing.

When I got stuck and asked for help, my senior supervisor, Professor Fels, kept reminding me: Improvise!

Improvise!

Yes, I had to improvise. I had to stop myself from non-stop editing and deleting sentences and force myself to stay away from page numbers and grammar checks. It took me a while to get used to improvising as I wrote about improvisation. When opening a blank document, I might only have a preliminary idea—a phrase, a quote, an image, or just a word. But if I gave enough trust to that beginning point, words generated words, and paragraphs delivered paragraphs. Writing was a rumination. As I conveyed the occurrences and my thoughts in writing, unanticipated questions and links were revealed, and new adventures were launched.

When I started to tell my stories, a blueprint of a musical stage emerged within the lines I wrote, directing the shape of my narrative. I realized that my research would be presented artistically, and writing became a practice of performative inquiry. Unlike conventional academic writing, the scholarly writing I engage in is to find my sounds to compose an artwork of performative writing and open up more inquiries and offers. Performative writing is evocative (Pollock, 1998). Pollock explains that performative writing "…operates metaphorically to render absence present—to bring the reader into contact with 'other-worlds', to those aspects and dimensions of our world that are other to the text as such by re-marking them" (p. 80). I want to create artistic experiences for my readers to engage them in my world of exploring improvisation. I hope my readers will read and sometimes pause to listen to and contemplate the improvisations embedded in the text, respond to the stories, find answers or questions to my inquiries, become aware of soundscapes [4]in their environment when they pause to contemplate my offering, and are willing to try improvisation after joining the performance I design and offer here.

Improvising writing provided opportunities to comb my thinking and my research. Expressing my thoughts through written language was like holding an inner conversation. As I let the dialogue extend, questions and ideas arose—sometimes about the research, sometimes about the way I had conducted my research. When Maxine Greene (1995) reflects on her writing experiences, she claims that "It is by writing that I often manage to name alternatives and to open myself to possibilities. This is what I think learning ought to be" (p. 107). The trajectory and content of my writing revealed my strengths and weaknesses in the research and my emerging understanding and became an avenue that I examined and inspired myself. In different stages of my writing, the wisdom of improvisation directed me to enjoy each flow moment when one happened, to accept and surrender when I was stuck in a muddy situation yet to be resolved and allowed me to take care of myself tenderly when I was trapped.

[4] Soundscape indicates the acoustic environment in which humans live. The idea and the term of soundscape was coined by R. Murray Schafer (1933-2021), who started soundscape studies at Simon Fraser University in 1969.

I often felt puzzled or futile by the disorganizing paragraphs and repeated narratives and wondered if I had run out of ideas. But, when I went back to improvise on the piano or had a delightful lesson with my student, I could be refreshed after encountering creative moments and gain confidence and motivation to return to writing. Playing and teaching on the piano were how I researched improvisation, and these research activities provided vitality when I wrote my research. Keyboards of piano and laptop were the playground for me as a researcher, a writer, and an improviser.

The deeper I went into improvisation, the deeper I challenged myself. Writing my encounters and understandings of improvisation pushed me to face and perceive all the struggles and joy frankly. *How can I engage my readers in the dissonance I heard? How can I invite my readers to create their own experiences, to notice and listen to the stop moments? How can I let my readers know that they are reading my improvisation, of an academic dissertation?* When resistance and interruptions arrived, the attitude of improvisation led me to surrender, accept, listen, and gave me permission to free play with language, lines, sounds, and spaces. My dissertation will be a personal narrative, inviting active listening and participation, representing a circular way of learning that improvisation created for me.

I hope the readers will participate in this written performance, and become performative inquirers to listen, to ask, to be aware of the stop moments while following my narrative. When Fels (2014) describes her performative writing, she says,

> …, I play performatively with text layout…, in those places where I wish the reader to pause, to interrupt linear reading, and to evoke a poetic response, within which the reader, as with the overall intent of the writing, may be moved to reflection and inquiry and recognition. (p. 59)

Fels' statement supports my imagination about performative dissertation writing. I will show my readers my inner debates, my vulnerabilities, my discoveries by playing words and spaces, embedding poems, and inserting my piano improvisation and my students' unrehearsed music creation. My readers will have spaces and freedom to pause and think, to prepare and transit, to take a breath and sing with the music. Therefore, I have designed my dissertation to be a performance, and you, my reader, are now invited to sit

in the imagined auditorium to read and listen to my journey of improvisation. My exploration of improvisation begins with an online performance in my piano room and is developed through two threads. One looks back to my early experiences of music learning, and the other presents unfolding moments in my exploration of improvisation and encounters with my students. As in an opera, I have composed my dissertation in five acts.

Act I tells my journey of learning music and exploration of improvisation. In this act, I unfold and reflect on each stage of my music training and the culture I immersed in my education and life. I unwrap the gift of improvisation and recognize surrender, perfection, acceptance, forgiveness, freedom, and play as lessons to learn and practice.

In Act II, you are invited to explore the role of listening and to listen to my students and my improvisational performances in Scene I. Some of the improvisations in the second scene of this act were inspired by the sounds from my memories and living environment. The other improvisational pieces were mixed with the voices of my students, my child, and my friends. Every sound tells stories, and every improvisational musical piece reflects an adventure in my research. In addition to reading, you will participate in my journey by listening, and your listening may arouse new thoughts, new wonder, or new questions, to guide us to initiate the next new story.

In Act III, I introduce my students and their encounters with improvisation. I chose three stories to present the moments of struggles, joy, and revolution my students and I experienced while applying improvisation in classical music training and how improvisation led to transformation and guided us to open a new chapter from the stop moment. I could not predict what would arrive when I decided to embed improvisation in my classical piano teaching and engage my students in my research for one year. My preparation was the wisdom of improvisation that I learned from my experiences—to surrender, accept, listen to, and play with what came to me. The first story explores my student Mimi's vulnerabilities, my realizations and my actions of supporting her emotions. It was when the student's vulnerabilities were held, fear was accepted, and silent voices were listened to that improvisation could be initiated. In the second story,

forgiveness and acceptance called me to attention when my student Anna only focused on perfection while practicing the piano. We found freedom and flexibility in classical piano training and made new meanings in every repetition through improvisation. The last story is a beautiful encounter with ugliness. My student Bonnie and I challenged discomfort by improvising dissonant sounds and irregular rhythms, and we found opportunities and joy within the ugly sounds. Please, my dear readers, when you read my students' stories, do not hesitate to pause your reading for a moment to listen to their improvisation, meet them, feel them, join them, and improvise with them.

I reflect on my experiences of two group improvisation events with my colleagues in Act IV. Instead of only focusing on my thoughts and voice as I do during solo improvisation, I must listen to my fellow improvisers and sense the environment at the same time to welcome, respond, and immerse in the same creative stream in group improvisation. Surrendering to the unknowing, accepting the unexpected, and trusting myself and my teammates, I perceive liminal spaces while travelling my attention between time, space, sounds, and movements in the group improvisation.

From a dissonant sound, Act V reveals how improvisation influences my attitude toward teaching, learning, scholarship, and lifestyle. The bravery, strongness and softness that I cultivate from practicing improvisation prepare me to be able to keep moving forward when imperfect and unwelcoming situations happen in my research, writing, teaching, and life. My students and I improvise together, and while the old stories continue, new stories are happening and bringing new opportunities and inquiries.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the production of *Who Do We Become? A Piano Teacher and Her Students' Improvisational Journey in Classical Piano Lessons*. At this time, please take a moment to find a comfortable seat, turn off your cell phone, and please keep in mind that my offering of sounds and words is an invitation to you to listen, to encounter, to contemplate, to play, and to improvise.

Thank you for your presence, and please, enjoy the performance.

Act I

Who Do I Become?

Unfolding an Artistic Self through Improvisation

Music has come before the sound is there.

-Musician, by Marion Strobel

No one could see I was trembling.

Sitting by the piano, I peeked at the screen. The faces of my Zoom audiences looked curious and expectant. I smiled at them, pretended I was confident, and pressed the first keys.

Click to listen to ♫ The recording of my Idea Jam performance.

I still had no idea what to play while that sound was resonating in the space. I chose those notes because I heard the sound. A perfect fifth interval made of D and A, sounded empty and distant. It came to me, chimed like a bell inside me, and I had no time to doubt but played it out. Even though my experiences told me that the music would come, I still felt dangerous. Improvising in front of dozens of people I have never met—*was I mad? What if nothing happened? What if I could not catch that first sound? What if music did not arrive after that sound?* I spent the whole afternoon practicing before the performance, but nothing worked. I did not find the best motif nor discover any new methods to make a superb sound. There were one or two times that I produced satisfying themes as openings, but unfortunately, I could not continue to complete the pieces beautifully. How could I know if I would be lucky enough this time?

Anyway, I'd better trust my fingers. They were working fluently, following the melody appearing in my head. My right fingers played a cluster of notes, and the left ones answered spontaneously. The music sounded not too bad but seemed like a new type for me. At the same time, I kept wondering *where I should go? After this phrase, should I ascend or descend? Should I modulate or stay in this key?*

I could hear two sides of me arguing in my head. The first one shouted: "Keep going! Don't stop! Show them your genius!" while the second one frowned and muttered: "What is that weird melody? What would they think about that?" I closed my eyes, leaned my head to the keyboard, tried hard to get rid of those noises and concentrated on the sound I was making. In the meantime, the other part of me could not stop questioning where the music was from and where it was going. *Is feeling flustered while improvising normal? Maybe I am not ready yet?* All the voices from my different selves mixed with the tune I was playing, sounded like a fierce battle. However, I did not have time to find the answers. I had to go on, to follow the muse before she left.

As a classical pianist, improvisation teaches me in a radical way. Every time I start an improvisation, I launch an inside war.

The memory of the melodies I had just played soon became blurry. But in some moments, I seemed to see the image of the song I was creating. It was a watercolour painting with a light wash. There was no clear composition nor certain outlines, but airy colours flowing on the paper. The atmosphere harmonized with the light rainy weather outside the window, vague and misty, as hazy as the feelings I had in mind. There were some moments I felt calm and relaxed, bathing myself in the hues with the sounds. The sounds of my inside argument diminished, as music and colours gradually approached crescendo. Although I still saw some blanks, I could feel the finale was somewhere not far.

Let it be. Blanks are necessary.

I waited until the last vibration disappeared and listened to the silence for seconds before opening my eyes. I was still trembling, for release as well as worries. I had

revealed my vulnerability and confusion in front of strangers on a virtual stage. That was the opposite of what I was trained to be.

Improvising is significantly different from playing a classical piece. While playing classical repertoires, I read notations carefully, shaped the style rationally, arranged the dynamics and articulations delicately and practiced again and again to make sure I memorized everything precisely by heart and muscles. I would walk onto the stage to present the work with confidence and intention. In improvisation, I cannot create a scheme before the music happens. I must listen, trust, and follow all the possibilities that arrive in the moment rather than read, analyze, and regulate the music. Planning ahead didn't work for me while improvising since the frames I drew for myself would block possibilities. Even if fearful, I must spread my wings, throw myself into the wind, and let the wind carry me to the unknown land.

Surrender was my first lesson.

Surrender

surrender (v.)

mid-15c., "to give (something) up," from Old French *surrendre* "give up, deliver over" (13c.), from *sur-* "over" (see sur- (1)) + *rendre* "give back" (see render (v.)). Reflexive sense of "to give oneself up" (especially as a prisoner) is from 1580s. Related: *Surrendered*; *surrendering*.

Online Etymology Dictionary

sur-

a prefix meaning over, above, beyond, in addition, found particularly in words borrowed from older French (including some words from Anglo-French), such as *surcharge, surpass, surtax, survey*. The Old French forms were *sour-, sor-, sur-* (from Latin *super-* SUPER-), in Anglo-French, Middle French, and modern French *sur-*. (p. 1095)

The Barnhart dictionary of etymology

Render (v.)

Before 1376 *rendren* say over, recite, in *Piers Plowman*; later, hand over, deliver (probably before 1400); borrowed from Old French *rendre* give back, present, deliver, yield, from Vulgar Latin **rendere*, alteration (on the analogy of *prendere* take hold of, grasp, contraction of *prehendere*; see PREHENSILE) of Latin *reddere* give back, return, restore, hand over (*red-*, variant of *re-* back + *-dere*, combining form of *dare* to give; see DATE time).

The Barnhart dictionary of etymology

My classical piano training started before I turned four. According to my parents' description, they found I had good ears and enjoyed music a lot when I was little. My mom recalled that I could sing cartoon theme songs for the whole day and found the keys to play the melody out on a toy piano without any instruction. One of my mom's colleagues said that I might have musical talent, and her suggestions made my parents decide to buy a piano and find me a teacher. I still remember how my teacher showed me her round hand shape and asked me to imitate it in our first piano lesson. Everything on the piano was natural for me. I learned to read musical notations and was able to play with good gestures soon. Memorizing music was like one of my natural capacities, and I participated in competitions and exams at an early age.

I was lucky to work with great piano teachers, and I believed that I was a good student for them. I enjoyed learning, always completed my homework and amazed my piano teacher in class. I studied the music carefully, repeatedly played each phrase, and demanded a high standard of performance from myself. Practicing piano was not difficult nor laborious for me. Instead, I enjoyed practicing. I loved to look through the structure of the music and break down the complicated composition into simple sentences. I liked to discover the musical and technical elements of each piece, experiment with different ways to overcome hardships, and appreciate the fruit of my efforts. I also listened to pop music and tried to create songs. However, my dedication to composition did not last long since the classical piano pieces I learned became complex and longer. In addition, I started percussion lessons when I was fifteen, and I had to spend more time practicing two instruments every day.

My music learning went smoothly, and I decided to dedicate my life to music. I passed the exam to enter the best university music program in Taiwan, majored in piano performance and minored in percussion performance. In university, every student in the music department was talented and hard-working. All the practice rooms were full beginning at six o'clock every morning, including weekends and holidays. Many students stayed in the little practice rooms for at least six hours a day. While practicing, we could hear each other through the thin walls—even though the walls were all built soundproofed, eliminating all the sounds when more than fifty instrumentalists and

vocalists played and sang in the same building at the same time was impossible. Not to mention, some brass or woodwind players who could not sign up for the piano rooms in time would just practice in the courtyard.

Mixing different styles, tempos, rhythms, time, and timbres, the soundscape of the music department building created a restless and agitated atmosphere. Even now, I still remember those chaotic but energetic sound effects which were collaboratively created by the enthusiastic young musicians in their practice rooms. While I was working on Bach's Partita, there was a Beethoven piano sonata from the right side and a Tchaikovsky violin concerto from the left. The discordant symphony-like soundscape was one of the most unforgettable memories of my university life. I could hear people repeat the phrases over and over and over again, like what I was doing—developing muscle memories, trying different dynamics, fixing the missing notes, slowing down or speeding up, and memorizing one section and then the next one…. Musicians never complained about repetition because it was one of the essential approaches to pursuing perfection. I took repetitive practice for granted and even enjoyed it, not only for the flow state[5] I experienced from concentrating on continuous training exercises but for the satisfaction of growing and transcending the limitations in the progression. In the inspiring environment of the music department building, I listened, perceived, played, and learned. I could hear love and passion for music and competitiveness and ambition in the sounds made by my peers and me. Immersing myself in such music-focused surroundings, I learned how to build a silent bubble in my imagination when I needed to focus on my own practicing. I was aware that everyone could hear every sound I played in the practice room from outside. They would know how good or bad I was. So, I must work harder.

[5] The concept of flow state was named by the psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. He explains that "Flow is a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself.… The defining feature of flow is intense experiential involvement in moment-to-moment activity. Attention is fully invested in the task at hand, and the person functions at his or her fullest capacity" (2014, p. 280).

Studying with people with talent and passion in the same territory was gratifying. My university friends and I had shared experiences of making wonderful music as well as suffering from dreadful physical injuries. Practicing instruments was strenuous exercise. Most of my peers, including myself, had chronic spine or sciatica problems from long-time sitting. Muscle strains on shoulders, necks, arms, or palms inevitably occurred. However, when most people had the same issues, all the pains seemed to become acceptable and endurable. Physiotherapy or acupuncture was common for music-major students after hours of practice. Insomnia or nightmares about forgetting music on stage or not being able to find the instruments were so typical that we could even joke about it. To survive under such high pressure from rigorous classical music training, I made myself disciplined, determined and tough. There was no room for mistakes and fragility.

I obtained a music teaching position in a public high school after I graduated from university. I was in charge of developing curriculum and activities for music-major students in the musical talent program. In addition, I taught one-on-one piano and group aural training lessons. I was confident, proud, and ambitious about the future. After two years of teaching, I went to New York City for my master's degree, where I encountered jazz improvisation for the first time.

I had previously enjoyed listening to jazz music but had had no experience playing jazz before I went to graduate school. Luckily, there was a famous jazz teacher in my program, and some of my friends said the jazz course was fabulous and encouraged me to take it. I was happy to seize the opportunity to learn jazz music but did not forecast this class would eventually become a frustrating experience.

Although I could sufficiently learn all the theories, write theoretical papers and compose a jazzy song, doing freestyle improvisation at a quick pace was a demanding task for me. However, improvisation was the main activity of the jazz course—we improvised every week. Before taking that course, I thought that improvisation was nothing hard but playing out whatever emerged in my head. I soon realized the problem was that I never knew what to do when there was not an idea popping up in my head in the moment.

Most of the students in that jazz course were experienced jazz musicians. I was a newcomer, always anxious, trying hard to arrange a melody to play or sing, but could rarely generate jazzy musical ideas successfully. I felt myself sitting on pins and needles and had to suppress my impulse to escape while waiting in line to create music spontaneously every week. Everyone in the class looked smart and talented except me. I felt like a fool because I did not know how to improvise at all. Our professor was a nice elderly gentleman who always smiled at me encouragingly, but I was ashamed to meet his eyes. I was disappointed in myself since the collaborative improvisation in class often paused because of me. Even if sometimes I was lucky enough to invent a tune in time, the melodies sounded incompatible with the inventions of my classmates. *Without foreseeing what would happen, how could I design music to echo or extend other people's ideas?* Although I sat in the piano room for hours to prepare a full classical repertoire from various eras for the recital every day, I did not know how to practice improvisation. *Did improvisation require practice? How could I generate musical ideas without any hint? How could I arrange the notes and phrases and play admirably simultaneously?* I never found the answer.

Improvisation became the first failed experience in my music life. I did not know what led to my unsuccess at that time, but I thought that I was not talented in improvisation. I concluded that improvisation must require a different gift and training from classical music, and I told myself that the training must start at an early age. Inventing melodies without any reference was too hard for me after being classically trained to play with printed music rigorously for decades. I had had enough of the frustration and panic that improvisation brought me that semester and never felt so incapable in the journey of learning music. I decided not to improvise anymore.

During the first term of my doctoral studies, one of my classmates encouraged me to try improvisation again. She was not a professional musician but played the piano beautifully. I was surprised that when she showed me her way to improvise, her approach to improvisation seemed accessible to me. No one had ever taught me to improvise like that before, and I had an idea that I might be able to improvise in the same way.

Although my friend planted the seed in my mind, and I started to feel curious about improvisation again, I did not dare to try. I still resisted, and I still remembered the regretful experiences in jazz class. But I was embarrassed when my friend asked me if I enjoyed improvisation. To not disappoint her, I persuaded myself to try again. Eighteen years have passed since that futile jazz course. Maybe I was different now; maybe I was better and smarter now; maybe I could improvise now.

It was a sunny afternoon. I stayed in my piano room alone, feeling peaceful. I knew it would be alright even if I failed again since no one was watching me. Sitting quietly for a couple of minutes and trying to recall the method my friend initiated her improvisation, I checked some chords in various keys and picked the one that sounded comfortable for me at the time. I started with the chords and listened carefully to see if the music would emerge in some way, like what my friend told me. Surprisingly, I did not wait too long. Things happened naturally when some simple melodies appeared through my fingertips, much easier than my past experiences. A quiet environment without any audience helped me feel relaxed since I knew there would be no outside judgment. I found the music came without an arrangement, and the only thing I did was to concentrate on the sound itself. Without disruption, I could focus on the melodies I was creating and feel how my fingers touched the piano keys. I felt as if I already had music hiding in my head, and I was digging those tunes out from a deep memory.

Though the melody was simple and the chord progression was plain, and I still hesitated sometimes, I began improvising. The switch of improvisation in my head suddenly flipped on.

Nevertheless, I knew my improvisation was not magic and did not happen in a snap. Time has changed many things. I pondered what was the difference, what led to the difference, and what I could learn from the experience. *Did my musical abilities or my attitude toward improvisation lead to the difference? Has only my musical style or also my way of learning, teaching, and even living a life changed? What were the changes leading to my willingness to improvise?*

I was eager to learn about improvisation and explore my transformation. So, I started to improvise to launch an investigation. I recorded my improvisations and took notes. I listened to these recordings and slowed down my thinking during improvisation to perceive all the liminal moments realized. I tried to catch every fleeting thought to reflect on and discover details from vague feelings.

At the beginning of my learning to improvise, I usually stayed alone in the practice room, starting with basic chord progressions like a beginner. From my friend's suggestions, I played the basic chord patterns slowly and repeatedly: I-IV-V-I, I-IV-V-I, I-IV-V-I…, listened carefully and created a simple melody to fit the pattern. Starting with familiar music could ease my dread, so I also generated variations and improvs based on some well-known classical pieces or popular music. After these elementary exercises, I tried to start with a single note or a simple rhythmic motif and produce musical ideas with stories, images, or natural sounds. When I had an inspiration or musical ideas while driving or walking, I recorded those tunes so that I could explore these possibilities on the piano later when I had a chance.

Click to listen to #3 Improvisation from Für Elise.

I moved forward bit by bit, gave up my pride and ego as a virtuoso pianist, and became a novice again to undo and redo learning. I rebuilt my skills and perception of playing the piano with curiosity and enthusiasm, as when I was a child. This humble approach to learning improvisation calmed me down and cleared my head, guiding me to understand that only when I gave up the craving for success could I release my inner space for music. While focusing on control and the eagerness for accomplishment, I could only feel the anxiety and fear of failure. But when I surrendered and took a back seat, music moved into the center of my inner view, and my five senses opened. I became a witness to see and listen to what was happening in the moment and was able to follow the guidance from the music itself. My body, my breath, and my emotions were synchronizing with the sounds. Music was the leader of my improvisation. Immersing

myself in improvisation and genuinely tasting every moment in the journey, I gradually realized that improvisation is an attitude instead of a skill or gift.

I checked etymology dictionaries and found they all indicate that surrender means "to give (something) up" and mention "giving oneself up" in a reflexive sense. The prefix, "sur", means "over", which for me was emphasizing unreserved resignation. Looking into the retreat I took in the praxis of improvisation, I wanted to reveal what I abandoned alongside my self-centred position.

I pondered when I read Barrett (2012) describes how jazz musicians improvise. He says, "You say yes to the mess by surrendering control—by opening yourself up to the capriciousness of the crowd, with no guarantee of success for your effort" (p. 117). To open myself up and to release the space to the possibilities requires giving up control. Nevertheless, abandoning the guarantee of success was something I never thought about before. I always wanted to be the best and craved acknowledgement as being outstanding. An assured triumph was indispensable for me. In addition, when I was little, adults told me that people must be the architects of their fate. I was taught to keep the desire for success as a positive attitude to developing a good life. *If I gave up the purpose of being excellent, did I give up my future at the same time?* Full control brought me a sense of security because I preferred predictable events and would try to arrange plans for every step to make everything run as smoothly as possible so I could achieve the best results. I handled my piano playing through repeated practice to ensure I knew and could play every note accurately. Without control, I was afraid I would not be able to play flawless music, and I was so afraid of failure.

Noticing that my fear inhibited my surrender, I became curious and decided to examine my fear. Holley (2007) concludes that fear and trust are the main issues to surrender, no matter to religion, to others, or oneself. She points out, "...regardless of the psychological camouflage that we use to cover it up, fear is the primary emotion that underlies our unwillingness to surrender" (p. 310). Holley reveals her own resistance to giving up control and the reason for her fear of surrender: "... I have always been afraid of surrender. I was always afraid that if I surrendered to anything, I would be naked,

vulnerable, nothing" (p. 310). However, she also indicates that although surrender is difficult, only when we surrender to something do we become intimate with it.

Indeed, in the early phase of my improvisation, the fear of being vulnerable and unsuccessful stopped me from surrendering. Fear was like a solid high wall standing in front of me, consuming my energy and will and holding me back from moving toward the unknown world beyond the wall. Philippe Petit (2017), a high-wire artist who performs with the risk of death, describes how the fear of failure leads to physical hesitation in extreme sports performances. He concludes that fear "will do anything to block your path" (p. 214). He interprets fear as "the shadow of doubt" (p. 214)—the unseeable distrust of oneself could control people's minds and bodies. In my own experience, even though I practiced a musical piece thousands and hundreds of times and became able to play every phrase without difficulties, I always faced a deep fear of failure when I went on the stage. Distrust and doubt in myself brought deep fear. I could not stop imagining various ways of making missteps. I always worried I might forget the music or lose control of my fingers, and imperfection was unacceptable. Very often, the fear locked my bodily movements, disrupted my thoughts, and led to mistakes. Then, the shock and anxiety from the wrongness led to more uncontrollable slips, creating a vicious cycle.

Improvisation became a powerful push to change my attitude toward fear. Every first sound I made, whether I liked it or not, was unchangeably existing and waiting for my discovery and development. I had to listen to the sound and find the way from within. I was aware that when I held my finger from playing, when I became frozen or did not dare to press down the piano keys, uneasiness and suspicion dominated me—thoughts of finding the best way and avoiding failure tied me up. To be able to start an improvisation, I must put fear aside and step out, even though fear never disappeared. Surrender, for me, did not mean I could banish my fear. Instead, I acknowledged and accepted the existence of fear but shifted my focus to the sound I was making. What I gave up was the front seat of fear. In the moments I listened and followed the music, fear faded out, and surrender was initiated.

There are many researchers (Barrett, 2000, 2012; Fels, 2009; Hamilton, 2001; Holley, 2007; McNiff, 1998; Montuori, 2003; Norris, Fels, and Kandil, 2018) mention that surrender, or letting-go (Berkowitz, 2010; Fels, 2009), is the ticket that permits the artistic abilities to lead improvisers to move from moment to moment. Only through surrender could an improviser open her arms to welcome and hug the coming unknown. As a dancer, Snowber (2002) remarks that surrendering by listening with the body "...is the discipline of knowing when to go with an artistic impulse and when not to go with it" (p. 27). She shares her experiences that the deeper she digs into the embodiment inquiry through improvisation, the more awareness of the relationships between knowing and unknowing she has:

> The very nature of improvisation is one that defies definition, opening up as many questions as it does limits and possibilities. What is clear is that the very nature of improvisation lends itself to the exploration of life's experiences and knowledge in a multifaceted manner. Key to this process is the importance of the invitation to unknowing, rather than knowing. (p. 32)

Snowber indicates although paradoxes and dissonance may occur from the unforeseen, improvisation offers a transition between not knowing and knowing. Reflecting on her own experiences, not knowing brings surprise, and surprise leads to fertile creations. This insight applies not only to creation but to lives. Snowber's conception of acknowledging and perceiving all the possibilities in improvisation relates to Nachmanovitch's (1990) emphasis on surrender— "surrender is not defeat but rather the key to opening out into a world of delight and nonstop creation" (p. 141).

I found myself often making decisions under the control of fear. I chose an existing way to avoid the unknowing; I chose a conventional method to stay away from failure; I only did what I felt confident about because possible imperfection made me uncomfortable; and I hid myself to escape from judgment. Improvisation forced me to disregard all my fears and pushed me out of my comfort zone. I learned to surrender to the fear of the unforeseen, the fear of disappointment, the fear of imperfection, and the fear of judgment. I surrendered to the opportunities, to the offers, to the invitations, and to my intuition and body. I followed the music before I had time to criticize, stayed with each note, each musical phrase, listened to every moment without distraction, and acted

before I could make any plan. Even if I knew nothing about the future, initiating improvisation from surrender taught me that music would reveal the landscape through which I could create my journey. If I feared, all the possibilities would be blocked, and I could not move forward. Inside my improvisation, ideas, connections, movements, sounds, and feelings were flowing and weaving with and within the moments. There were adventures taking place in the adventures. In the moment I surrendered to the unknown future, began my musical improvisation, and devoted all my attention to the music and every happening in the moments, fear stepped back, and trust arrived.

I must trust my talent, my muscle memories, my fingers, my musicianship, my musical knowledge and skills, and all the time and effort I paid out on the piano. I must trust that even though the future was unforeseen, I had abilities to play with anything that came to me. I had to trust that the unforeseen would bring me a new world.

In retrospect, the eagerness for mastery occupied my attention, and I left myself no space to listen and perceive in my jazz lessons. I was stuck in the desire for control and made all my effort to make plans while my group peers were singing or playing. Nachmanovitch (1990) mentions that "to create you have to disappear." He then clarifies that "we create and respond from the wonderful empty place that is generated when we surrender" (p. 144). I pondered the meaning of "disappear" and "empty place" in Nachmanovitch's description and reflected on my experiences of initiating an improvisation. I focused on my eagerness of success and offered the front seat to fear of unknowing and failure. I let fear occupy my vision when I could not find a superb idea to show off my abilities. Only when I surrendered, could I give up focusing on myself and my fear of failure and learn to listen to what was happening in the moment of improvisation. Genuine surrender led to sincere listening. Every sound I heard was waiting for my response and re-creating. Improvisation was not generating music from nothing—empty does not mean nothing. Empty is a space prepared by surrender to welcome and accept what arrives.

Surrender gives me the first key to improvisation. However, although starting improvisation is huge progress for me, I still feel stuck sometimes. I notice that even a single tiny mistake can interrupt my music. These interruptions keep bothering me, and I ask myself: how can a sound be wrong, and how can I define a mistake when I play without written music? I find myself taking all the notes that sound dissonant or out of key as mistakes, and I resent mistakes so much. The uneasiness of imperfection is still the obstacle.

Perfectionism is the next threshold that I need to cross over.

Perfect

perfect (adj.)

early 15c. classical correction of Middle English *parfit* "flawless, ideal" (c. 1300), also "complete, full, finished, lacking in no way" (late 14c.), from Old French *parfit* "finished, completed, ready" (11c.), from Latin *perfectus* "completed, excellent, accomplished, exquisite," past participle of *perficere* "accomplish, finish, complete," from *per* "completely" (see per) + combining form of *facere* "to make, to do" (from PIE root *dhe- "to set, put").

Online Etymology Dictionary

per-

a prefix meaning: 1. Through, throughout, thoroughly, utterly, very, as in *perforate*, *perennial*, *pervade*. 2 .... 3. To do away, away entirely, to destruction (the meaning usually deriving from the combination of the prefix and the verb), as in *pervert*. Borrowed from Latin *per-*, from *per*, prep., through, during....

The Barnhart dictionary of etymology

Is it perfect?

I found an inspiring video on YouTube, *The Making of West Side Story* (2022), a documentary of Leonard Bernstein conducting and producing the movie of his famous

musical West Side Story. The documentary represents how these best-known great musicians, including Leonard Bernstein, Jose Carreras, Kiri Te Kanawa, and Tatiana Troyanos, made their effort to create the best take on each song of the musical. The audience could see struggles and sufferings in many recording sessions with countless repetitions and nearly nitpicking comments from Berstein and every singer. However, none of the musicians complained since every one of them took perfection as their common goal—excellent musical skills, precise pitch and rhythm, balanced sounds, and affecting and dramatic expressions. They wanted to bring the best result to the audience, and not a single imperfection was allowed because the recording would last forever.

One of the unforgettable recording sessions from this video was when Berstein criticized Carreras for singing out of tempo while recording *Something's Coming* (15:23). Bernstein was in a bad mood after several repeats of Carreras' mistakes. When Carreras kept struggling with the fast words and tempo and had to retake the phrase with the whole orchestra many times, Bernstein told Carreras, "If you make that mistake, we'll go back, you know this" (16:55) like a teacher admonishing his student. Again and again, they redid the song, and I could feel the tension even through the screen. In the other session, Carreras suddenly paused while singing *Maria*—although Bernstein thought the music was beautiful, Carreras was unsatisfied with his singing and wanted to redo the song (1:06:13). I saw disappointment and annoyance shown by their body language and expressions during the recording sessions when they could not approach perfection. Recording was never easy since the musicians needed to repeat the work until they generated the best result. There was a lot of pressure because the studio rent was expensive, the physical strength was running out, and Carreras and Berstein were working with the whole symphony orchestra and a recording engineering team. These musicians were walking on a path full of thrones, battling to move forward, and every pace must lead to a flawless result. I could imagine how hard this recording work was, and the musicians' persistence and endurance touched me. However, surprisingly, in the other session of *Tonight*, when Bernstein finally said "fabulous" to all the musicians after countless repetitions (25:46), and everyone was happy, the immediate thought that popped up in my head was: "No, it was not good enough! I want it to be faster. The music must be more flowing in that way."

I recalled another memory of watching a video recording of one of Arthur Rubinstein's [6] piano recitals. The great pianist was 87 years old then and played a complete recital with a repertoire including Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin, and Debussy at Ambassador College in Pasadena, California in 1975. Although Rubinstein's technique and musicianship were still amazing, his fingers apparently could not work as fluently as when he was young, and he hit many wrong notes in the chords and fast scales. Even so, those mistakes did not disrupt his playing and my admiration of his performance at all. The music Rubinstein played on the stage was so affecting and stunningly beautiful.

I wondered if Bernstein knew my disagreement with his tempo, would he still declare the result was excellent? I doubted if Rubinstein would mind those wrong notes even if the audience admired his performance wholeheartedly. *Can anyone decide the standard of perfection? If perfection is subjective, how can we find a common definition for it? What is being perfect? How good can be perfect? Is there anyone or anything perfect?* I considered perfection a flawless condition, but I was surprised that when I searched the etymologies of *perfect,* there were many other definitions in addition to flawless. Complete, full, finished, accomplished, to make, to do…, most of these words were about thorough processes and actions. Is *perfect* a series of actions instead of an unchangeable outcome? *If flawlessness is not the only vital demand of being perfect, is a mistake acceptable in this journey? Is there any measure of perfection? How and why did I define perfect in such a restricted manner? Did I misunderstand the meaning of being perfect?* Tons of emerging questions chased me into a rabbit hole.

There are significant differences between recording and live performance, composition and improvisation. As MacDonald and Wilson (2020) mentioned, "One distinction between composition and improvisation is that conventional composition can be a private activity, away from the public gaze and may involve significant editing and revision before the results are placed in the public domain" (p. 42). Musicians could try as many times as they want for a recording or revising a note for the best sound of

[6] Arthur Rubinstein (1887-1982), a Polish-American pianist, is regarded as one of the greatest pianists of all time. Rubinstein had his debut at the age of seven in 1894. He retired from the stage at age 89 in May 1976 after giving his last concert at Wigmore Hall in London.

composition, but there is no chance to correct an error on the performing stage. Performing artists wish to present the best performance to their audience, and this desire is where performance anxiety comes from. For some musicians, even a single mistake happening during the live performance would become a permanent glitch on the edge of an exquisite piece of artwork in their memories.

Sternbach (2008) mentions that many musicians "are taught to be highly self-responsible. Something in the music isn't quite right? Go back and practice harder" (p. 44). In my piano training experiences, I was the one who took full responsibility for perfecting my performances through practice, and I never felt enough for practice because perfection was always unreachable. One of my piano teachers once said, "You are not practicing for making things wrong" to me when I was careless with the music. I was educated to become self-disciplined and keep a meticulous attitude toward every note and detail in the music. Such an attitude could become a habit not only of music but of living a life. Woosley (2012) indicates that a classically trained pianist may be restricted by self-judgment, comparison with the repertoire pieces, perfectionism, and lack of confidence due to bad improvisation experiences. The situation he describes was what I encountered at the beginning of my introduction to jazz improvisation.

Through many years of classical music training, I regarded representing every element of a music work correctly as a responsibility of a classical musician. I considered managing a classical music piece an action of looking for an excellent result; the final goal of practice would be a flawless, complete performance. But improvisation, for its spontaneity and unpredictability, made me re-examine my concept of perfection. When I let self-judgement and undesired sounds draw my attention, the flow of music stopped. If I wanted to continue creating music through improvisation, I had to perceive perfection and imperfection in a different manner.

Reflecting on my view about mistakes and my reactions to undesired, often discordant sounds during improvisation, I wondered how I defined wrongness if I was not playing with a pre-written plan. *What happened when mistakes occurred? What could I do when mistakes took place?* According to Sternbach (2008), the strict way that many

classical musicians are trained, “can make musicians vulnerable to self-blame even when circumstances in a performance are outside the performer’s control” (p. 44). I recalled my memories of making mistakes and found feelings of regret were deeply rooted and unforgettable because I had been taught to remember each mistake as a lesson of failure. Children in piano classrooms learn not only knowledge and skills but the way they see mistakes, and the manner they treat themselves while making mistakes. The way adults deal with imperfect results becomes children’s schemes in the future.

Nachmanovitch (1990) describes two inner characteristics of a creator: a muse and an editor. The editor character plays the role of “the judging spectre” (p. 133), who is never satisfied with the creator’s performance and often gives obstructive judgment. Nachmanovitch indicates that the judging spectre might be converted from parents or teachers. I realized that when I criticized myself, I became the adult who blamed me for my mistakes when I was little. When adults emphasized the magnitude and indispensability of perfection to me, none of them ever told me what I could do if I failed to reach that impossible goal of perfection. The only thing I learned about pursuing perfection was that if I practiced but still made mistakes, it was because I did not do my best.

I will never forget messing up Chopin’s Bolero on the recital stage, hitting several wrong notes as a collaborative pianist while recording Beethoven’s violin sonatas, and missing one of the notes in the last quiet chord of Brahms’ Ballade in a final exam. All the omissions happened a long time ago, but I still felt embarrassed when I thought of those missing notes now because I believed I did not make an all-out effort. A flawed result meant I was lazy, careless, or not intelligent, and I disappointed people. I seemed to take mistakes as the synonyms of disaster, harm, and unforgivable badness. Furthermore, the action of making mistakes was an immoral thing for me. I could not stop blaming myself and taking the misstep as a great shame. Even though I was an adult now and already realized that wrongness was sometimes unavoidable, it was hard to let my need for perfection go.

When I was little, adults always said I should and could be better. They told me that I had to try my best toward perfection and not be satisfied nor feel proud of any achievement because people could hardly be good enough. In the piano classes, all my teachers told me that practice makes perfect. Correcting an error immediately and never replaying the mistake was the beginning step of approaching perfection. This concept was drilled into me when I was young, turned into my belief and made me become picky about my work and take mistakes as serious lessons. The habit of focusing on flaws influenced the way I evaluate myself. Perfection became a sacred goal that I must pursue in life. The tenacity for perfection made me always look at the unsatisfactory part of everything I did, and focusing my eyes on the mistakes exaggerated the issue and blocked my vision of the value of my offerings.

Perfectionism was like a program installed in my brain a long time ago. I never doubted the legitimacy of pursuing perfection. I let perfectionism affect not only my piano playing but every aspect of my life and to become part of my thinking and actions because the praise and approval from other people made me feel valued.

Brené Brown's insights gave me a new approach to consider. Brown (2010), a scholar as well as a social worker who focuses her research on shame and vulnerability, defines perfectionism as "self-destructive" for its unattainability and explains that "perfectionism is more about perception—we want to be perceived as perfect" (p. 57). I wanted to be not only a good pianist but also a model student, a good daughter, an admirable teacher, and a wonderful wife and mother. In addition to playing on the performing stage, I made my best effort to play every role in the best way I could. I cared about whether other people would think of me as perfect for playing every role in my life, and I decided on my success based on others' opinions.

Making mistakes in any scenario in life became as terrible as playing wrong notes on stage for me. Presenting my shortcomings to the public was like telling everyone, including myself: I was not good enough. In his book *The Perfect Wrong Note*, William Westney (2006) remarks that for many good students in the music studio, "...the public nature of music-performance failures can be particularly humiliating" (p.124). My belief

in the seriousness of the mistakes made me assume every audience would blame me for those unerasable wrong sounds happening on the stage. I felt shameful and always imagined the harsh judgments from the witnesses—*"She was awful!" "She must not work hard enough!" "She was not a qualified pianist!"*..., even though I never truly heard any of those words from anyone in my audience after the concert. These statements were actually from me, not the audience. I was the person who criticized and pressed myself down.

Pianist Seymour Bernstein talked about self-criticism and self-love in his conversation with renowned spiritual scholar and activist Andrew Harvey. Reflecting on his memories of learning and growing, Bernstein (2016) said, "We can easily learn to hate ourselves by only concentrating on the things that don't work, criticizing ourselves and focusing on our failures rather than recognizing the good in ourselves and our playing" (p. 7). Sadly, he states that "self-criticism is more normal to most people than self-love" (p. 7). I was astonished while reading his talk because it was so true when I looked back on the education I had received at an early age. Instead of appreciating my strength and loving myself, I was told that self-criticism makes me grow, so I must be alert to my shortcomings in order to improve my performance. When imperfections became my only concern, I tattooed all the mistakes in my heart and never believed I could be good enough.

My self-blame and the lasting memories of past mistakes became the heaviest burden on my shoulders. I felt bitter when I realized I did not know how to love myself—that imperfect myself.

Thus, as I engaged in my research, I played and played, spending time improvising in various ways, trying to listen to what was happening inside me when an unwanted sound occurred. I could sense my disappointment and anger when my playing was not as fluent as expected. But ironically, when I asked myself what my expectation was, I did not have an exact answer. Setting an untouchable perfect goal for everything or pushing the finish line one step further than what I had done was as natural as a habit for me. I asked myself again—*if perfection is my goal, what if perfection does not exist?*

Classical music pieces are known things in which every note is unchangeable on the printed music. I admit that right and wrong do exist while playing a written piano piece. If I played a different note from what was written on the music, not only myself but most of the audience could recognize that difference as a mistake. Right and wrong in classical musical pieces are as clear as black and white, and therefore, an imperfect result might be unmovable. *But could I modify the way I faced right and wrong? Though it seems to be a paradox, is it possible to pursue a complete performance but still keep a flexible attitude toward imperfection?*

McNiff (1998) reminds people to see the transformative feature of a mistake which could "present something we never saw before, something unexpected or contradictory, an accident that can be put to use" (p. 41). McNiff suggests artists trust the creating process:

> If we are able to stay in the situation, it will carry us to a new place. The process knows where it needs to go and if it is exclusively directed or controlled by any one person, we miss the opportunity to learn this lesson (p. 24).

Did McNiff's perspective tell me that engaging in and continuing creating would help me overcome the obstacle of mistakes? I noticed my anxiety, disappointment and displeasure about mistakes and wanted to know what would happen if I continued improvising without being disturbed by mistakes while playing. *Was it true that mistakes would bring me a new world?*

In one of my practices, I set a simple goal of playing without stopping for unexpected sounds. I told myself that since I was creating my voice while improvising, I could pretend I played the dissonant sound purposefully. In doing so, I had to force myself to continue, no matter what happened. When I made sounds that were not as expected, I would let my musical knowledge and abilities help me transform the wrong notes into passing notes or a bridge to a new tone. Even if the result was not superb, I could continue my improvisation almost intuitively if I was determined to let the music and my fingers decide the way to go.

Looking at a mistake from a different position, I found making mistakes seemed not as weighty as I thought. A mistake no longer existed when I transformed it into a new beginning. I realized that an unexpected sound was not an obstacle blocking the way but a signal to detour, to let go, and to explore a new world opening in front of me.

When Luquet (2015) talks about jazz improvisation, he mentions that the process is more valuable than the result. He indicates that "perfection is not the goal in jazz. New ideas based on old ideas that sound good to the listener and players is what is most important. That is the creative process" (p. 66). Barrett (2012) implies that mistakes are always possibilities: "…jazz musicians succeed because they have faith that whatever is happening has potential to lead in innovative directions" (p. 24). He also suggests people do not escape from mistakes but "use them as an occasion for learning and improvement" (p. 42). Barrett explains that people could not avoid mistakes in any way, "...but there was a world of learning to be found in every one of them" (p. 56). Nachmanovitch (1990) takes the mistake as an energetic turning opportunity: "The power of mistakes enables us to reframe creative blocks and turn them around…. We become, then, no longer victims of circumstance, but able to use circumstance as the vehicle of creativity" (p.92). Fels (2004) claims that "It is through our so-called imperfections that learning happens" (p. 90).

My practice of improvisation echoed these scholars' perspectives. As I paid more attention to the continuation of improvisation, I noticed that a mistake or an imperfect sound could be reconstructed if I took that sound as an offered possibility. My understanding of surrender, acceptance, and self-trust happened when I pushed myself to move forward in the journey of improvisation. While improvising, I had to carefully listen to every sound I generated in order to apply an awkward note to initiate a new tone or adopt an improper chord to modulate. The absorption I perceived in improvisation reminded me that the audience would also move with the continuance I created, and the flow would not stop for any accident unless I myself got stuck and stopped the music.

Lifting the weight of mistakes from my mind made facing the glitches and weaknesses no longer stressful. Gaining information from mistakes made the wrong notes

meaningful. I started to investigate the value of imperfection. According to Rosenkranz and Haubner (2011), a dissolution in design could lead to beautiful transformation since "it is associated with the process of becoming in the process of decaying, and thus with a differentiation, regardless of whether this differentiation leads to nonentity" (p. 104). Hamilton (2001) claims that aesthetics of perfection and imperfection are necessary ingredients in the creation of improvisation, composition and performance. Creation is a nonstop procedure in which ugliness transforms into beauty, unfulfillment turns into completion. This idea aroused my curiosity about the aesthetics of imperfection. *If imperfection must be part of an artwork, how does imperfection work in beauty?*

Figure 1. The hand-made pottery bowl from my friend.

Once when I washed the dishes, a heavy pottery bowl drew my attention. That pottery bowl was hand-made by one of my close friends, who brought it to me as a gift from 3,000 miles away two years ago. My friend apologized while handing the bowl to me: "I am sorry, this is not perfect...it's not symmetrical, and the bottom was badly glazed…I am just a beginner." However, the bowl is fabulous for me. She carried this weighty stuff in her handbag, made a connecting flight with her two-year-old daughter in arms, came to Vancouver to visit me. There is nothing more precious than friendship like this. My friend was suffering through dark times in her life during those years, and she learnt pottery art for expressing her feelings through hand-making and hoped to find new

strength for life. The rudimentary shape of the bowl and those coarse spots thoroughly demonstrated the energy of craftsmanship and her toughness as a strong single mother.

I pondered while holding the bowl in my hands. It was the glitches on my friend's clay bowl telling me the stories of her life that made this object unique. The imperfections became a part of the beauty and articulated the energy for the craft. *Was this the role of ugliness in beauty? Could I acknowledge all the undesirable defects as significant elements in artwork? Could I appreciate all the imperfections as part of my music and life journey?*

I recalled the idea of wabi-sabi—the traditional Japanese aesthetics that shows imperfection and impermanence through clay arts, Zen gardens, flower arrangement and music styles, etc. Nachmanovitch (2019) mentions the concept of wabi-sabi that a Japanese saleswoman told him: "Wabi-sabi is *balance*. Balance between happy and unhappy. Balance between growing and decaying" (p. 185). When Nachmanovitch considers music in the way of wabi-sabi, he concludes that "we enjoy perceiving things from the balance point between structure and unpredictability. That ever-shifting balance point is what we love in music, in art, in the object with which we surround ourselves" (p. 187). The "ever-shifting balance point" in Nachmanovitch's description was what made music fluid and active and how music engaged, comforted, surprised, fulfilled, pleased me and made me never feel tired of it.

Music tells the musician's life experiences and feelings, delivers happiness and passion, and shares struggles and despair, and that is why music can touch people's hearts. All the emotions in music—love, hate, joy, and grief, are authentically brought out from human beings' lives. The instrumentalist resonates with the composers by interpreting the music with unique apprehension and feelings. When the audience listens to the music, they place themselves in a world that connects their stories and musical emotions and feels the song is singing for them. Even in a classical music concert, both the performer and listener create artistic experiences with what they hear, what they go through, and what they are feeling in the moment. Every participant in a music event is improvising their musical stories. Although musicians endeavour to play beautiful and

clear sounds, they sometimes need to practice making a rough voice to articulate suffering or other disharmonious feelings in music. Music does not need to be perfect—music needs imperfection to complete balance.

Keith Haring (1984) illustrates his experiences of public art performances in *Untitled Statement*: "Many times I have put myself in situations where I am drawing in public. Whatever marks I make are immediately recorded and immediately on view. There are no 'mistakes' because nothing can be erased" (para. 4). Haring explains the circumstance of a public performance in which artists expose themselves to all possible situations, no matter good or bad, before audiences' eyes and cameras and must know whatever they have done might remain forever. There was not a chance to revise the work while improvising openly. Whether or not the performance was to his expectations, every stroke he had made would eternally become part of the artwork. An art piece is made of every movement and decision by the artist in a specific moment and space. There is no yes or no in an improvised work but approaches that the artists choose to express their identities and thoughts in the moment.

The understanding of imperfection becomes one of the most profound lessons that improvisation teaches me. The music I create mirrors my spirit, character and style, and all the sounds I make in my music represent my identity—who I am, where I am, and how I am. To learn to love and hug myself unconditionally, I must accept every sound as part of the musical work I create.

Acceptance becomes the next theme emerging to me. *As I learn to accept imperfection, can I release myself from the guilt of making mistakes?* I find several scholars mention acceptance and self-forgiveness while writing about perfectionism (Mistler, 2010; Sanderson & Linehan, 1999; Cavell, 2003). This discovery makes me consider the roles of acceptance and self-forgiveness in my music journey. *Will self-forgiveness be the key to getting over past mistakes? Will acceptance be the guide to the future path? Are acceptance and self-forgiveness the missing parts in my classical musical training?*

Acceptance

accept (v.)

late 14c., "to take what is offered; admit and agree to (a proposal, etc.)," from Old French accepter (14c.) or directly from Latin acceptare "take or receive willingly," frequentative of accipere "receive, get without effort," from ad "to" (see ad-) + capere "to take," from PIE root *kap- "to grasp." Related: Accepted; accepting.

Online Etymology Dictionary

Checking in the Online Etymology Dictionary for the meaning of *accept*, the statement "to take what is offered" caught my eyes. The actions of "take" and "offer" created a vivid, animate image of acceptance and surrender, and connected to my understanding of perfection. Considering *perfect* as a complete trajectory of learning and making, an unexpected event becomes a reminder and an opportunity provided on the way instead of a false result or an interference. Nachmanovitch (2019) suggests, "Accept the offer extended by interruptions, and you can't be interrupted" (p. 155). McNiff (1998) claims that "The creative environment is a place where mistakes are accepted as 'part of the process' and where they are perceived as opportunities for learning" (pp. 197-198). With acceptance, mistakes become offerings. A mistake is no longer a stop sign or a shameful bad result. I could initiate a new theme from an out-of-key tone, generate a new rhythmic pattern from an unhooked beat, or find a new sound from a slip-up. In addition to an adventure to find balance and completeness, *perfect* became a series of actions by which I developed an artwork with wholehearted gratitude for the offerings.

Sanderson and Linehan (1999) interpret acceptance as "the developed capacity to fully embrace whatever is in the present moment. It requires a spacious mind, an open heart, and strength to bear one's experience" (p. 200). To embrace, to open, and to bear

what is offered in the present moment—with these features, acceptance and surrender work together as a loop. To be able to "take or receive willingly" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.), I surrender without reluctance or doubt. In the meantime, genuine surrender would be a preparation to welcome all the possibilities and accept any occurrence as an offer.

Art-making is an adventure of catching moments, making decisions, and accepting the results to present one's insight, character and style, as Becker (2008) says, an artwork is a result of the choices made by artists at distinct moments. He indicates that the finished art product is "the one the artist is prepared to accept as truly representing his or her 'spirit'" (p. 194). Improvisation is like a time-lapse version of an art-making odyssey, which requires trust in every offer and receive in the journey and will truly reflect an artist's thoughts because there is no time to arrange or deceive in intuitive performances. What an artist shows in an improvisational performance must be one's true self.

Through listening to the recordings of my improvisation, I found the preparation of acceptance could make different results of my creation. In my earlier improvisation, I could hear uneasiness and uncertainty in the connections between musical phrases when I was urged to make decisions for creating new sounds by mistakes. The hesitation in the sounds showed my rejection of trusting my abilities and refusal to accept the musical work I made. Tracking the transformation in the recordings of my improvisation over months, I heard myself gradually becoming relaxed and showing a softer attitude in the sounds I played as time went by. The praxis of improvisation ushered me to abandon control, take interruptions as offers, trust and listen to myself while creating on the keyboard. I heard more and more surrender and acceptance, and the music became increasingly fluent. I had to face my true self honestly as I listened to my playing since the music I created was the artwork in which I showed my strength and vulnerability, my bravery and fear, my belief and confusion. While improvising, the sound emerging in my head might arrive less than one second earlier than my fingers. Therefore, very often, the keys my fingers pressed down were not the same as my imagination. But I did not have a chance to regret it or redo it. I had to trust my body to guide me. When I could not accept

the result or if I wanted to confirm the arriving ideas before my fingers worked on the piano, I would get stuck. The only thing I could do was to accept and keep riding the flowing moments to carry on the music. I could not hide my true feelings while playing the piano. Sounds revealed everything, whether I was playing classical music or improvising. It was me telling stories through the sounds. My nature and feelings through the sound I offered made my music unique and appealing. I was the one who lived, played, permitted, shared, and loved my music.

Surrender and acceptance brought me a sense of security in facing the unknown, and I realized that a *fearless attitude* is the most powerful brace for creating. I learned to acknowledge offers, make determinations, and accept my true self through improvisation, and this approach changed my perspective while playing classical pieces.

I thought of those great musicians' stories. Most of them did improvisation in their time. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and many other famous classical musicians did not compose in the way people thought—sitting by the piano, taking pencils and erasers, and writing down the pieces note by note. Instead, these musicians improvised and then wrote down the music they played. Sometimes, they improvised right on stage, and their pupils created transcriptions for them. Most composers followed rigorous rules while playing, but sometimes, when they accidentally broke the rules, they had a chance to change history little by little. Although each era had restrictions on styles and harmonies, musicians improvised freely in the spaces inside the frames or broadened the frame deliberately to pioneer music as transformed into the next era.

I tried to put myself in Beethoven's position when I played his music—Beethoven was stubborn, grumpy, proud, and confident with his music. I imagined I was sitting there, improvising with this legendary virtuoso—what would he say when he improvised? "This music is what I want!" "This musical style is my style." "The harmonies and melodies are expressing my happiness, despair, passions, humour, and sympathy." I realized that serious classical pieces address more messages about freedom and courage than I thought. Although framed by rules, classical musicians created music to convey their thoughts and self-identities in the notations they wrote down.

Not just Beethoven, but Chopin, Liszt…, and many other composers. I imagined their fingers on the piano, playing softly and slowly, improvising and trying various harmonies and melodies, looking for their favourite sounds in the moment. When they heard something not satisfactory, they would just keep on trying and singing without annoyance, simply enjoying their creative time. When they heard themselves generating beautiful sounds, they would have smiled, playing it again for their appreciation, and then writing down the notes, the melodies. Improvisation was the beginning of composing and the root of the classical masterpieces. Connecting these stories and understandings gave me courage to trust my talent and ability and accept myself in music as well as in life.

Taking what I have and what I encountered in my journey of improvisation as offerings, and considering every sound I generated and every mistake I made as opportunities, I receive an abundance of gifts from improvisation.

Forgiveness

forgive (v.)

Old English forgiefan "give, grant, allow; remit (a debt), pardon (an offense)," also "give up" and "give in marriage" (past tense forgeaf, past participle forgifen); from for-, here probably "completely," + giefan "to give" (from PIE root *ghabh- "to give or receive").

Online Etymology Dictionary

for-

a prefix meaning away, opposite, as in *forbear, forgo*, or completely, as in *forlorn, forsake*. Old English *for-, f(ae)r-*; cognate with Old Frisian and Old Saxon *for-*, Old High German *fra-, fir-, far-,* Dutch and German *ver-*, Gothic *fra-, fair-, faur-*, ... This prefix was commonly used in Old English to form verbs and adjectives, and it remained productive, through the Middle English period.

The Barnhart dictionary of etymology

Before searching for *forgive* in the dictionaries, I never considered the meaning of this word seriously. The simple structure and easy-to-understand prefix and root of *forgive* made me underestimate the weight of forgiving. *What does complete giving require? If I wanted to get rid of self-blaming and let my past mistakes go, what should I give to myself? What else should I forgive as I learn to give up my eagerness for success to surrender? Do I offer my forgiveness to the wrongness, the action of making mistakes, or the person who makes mistakes?*

The rigorous culture I was raised in taught me that making mistakes was not permitted since it implied failure and shame. My persistence in pursuing perfection ushered my success in some ways but, at the same time, became my barrier to abandoning the burden of past wrongdoing. Moreover, I was told that self-forgiveness was irresponsible. Even if I understood that imperfection must be part of beauty and an essential role in creating balance in an artwork, when I made a mistake, the error became a strong-willed ghost whispering in my ear: you were stupid; you were careless; you were awful; you were not good enough. Listening to those criticisms, I recognized my own voice. I was ashamed and heartlessly judged and belittled myself. Although I knew that a mistake might occur because of bad luck—accidents happen on the stage, and I understood that playing wrong notes was not affecting my worth as a human being, I did not divide myself from the mistakes I had made. When I made a mistake, I considered myself as the mistake.

When Mistler (2010) reviews the relationship between perfectionism and forgiveness, he mentions that once a defeat occurs, perfectionists "become incredibly vulnerable to future perceived failures, engaging in evaluative and critical condemnation of themselves or others" (p. 13). My sensations and emotions about imperfection could echo this explanation. I always felt embarrassed, humiliated, and even hateful of myself while making mistakes. Reflection on my mistakes brought me guilt, and recalling experiences of failure made me lose confidence in my future performance and led to my fragility.

Looking into my memories of making the mistakes, the feelings of shame kept me from noticing the error itself because I was focusing on criticizing myself. Cavell (2003) states that self-forgiveness requires people to distinguish themselves as the agent from the act, but "the emotion of shame makes this difficult, for shame tends to spread over the whole self; it does not focus on the particular action of which one is ashamed" (p. 528). In addition, perceiving self-forgiveness as immoral behaviour is common in my culture. Dillon (2001) indicates that to forgive oneself is harder than forgiving others, since other than forgiving others as a virtue, self-forgiveness is usually taken as "a self-indulgent cheat, an attempt to feel good about yourself that betrays a failure of responsibility and a

lack of self-respect" (p. 53). In my childhood experiences, if a child showed a pleasant mood soon after doing wrong things, adults must accuse the child of irresponsibility and immorality. In addition to connecting making mistakes to shame, I was taught to keep the lesson in mind as a warning to avoid the same wrongdoing in the future. However, the lesson became the shadow that blocked my vision, held my steps, and stuck me in the mud of the past. To *for-give* myself, permission to let the mistake go was what I needed. That permission was the missing part of my journey of music training.

To genuinely self-forgive, Wenzel, Woodyatt and Hedrick (2012) suggest people understand that every self "includes both positive and negative aspects, they may accept their weaknesses but also realize their basic capacity for good" (p. 625). Cavell (2003) claims that to forgive, people must know that the past cannot be changed, but we can perceive the past differently and let it go since "we are the sort of 'things' in the universe that have minds, sometimes do things for reasons, make choices, ask for and receive forgiveness" (p. 529). I was not a robot controlled by a computer program that could press the piano keys without omission. When I played unexpected notes during improvisation, which might be different from my imagination or sounded discordant, I had to play with these sounds instead of remembering them as wrongness. I practiced immersing myself in every moment of improvisation, concentrating on perceiving music and emotion, moving on with the music without remembering mistakes and blaming myself. The mistake no longer existed when it became the beginning of the next phrase. While spontaneously creating music, I was forging a complete, energetic adventure of unfolding with perfection and imperfection, not a flawless result. The practice of improvisation trained me to gradually become familiar with absolving myself from wrongdoings.

Although the progress is slow, I become aware and offer myself permission to self-forgive when I remember some embarrassing past moments again. Having tried my best to prepare for the performance, I have to let go of the result, whether or not the result is satisfactory. As Brown (2016) says, "Failure is not learning gone bad, it is not

the opposite of learning. Failure is part of the learning process" (p. 4). A mistake is not the end of the road but a learning opportunity in one's active life journey. Only when I forgive myself after learning from the mistakes I can keep moving on.

Free . Play . Improvisation

In my frail canoe, I struggle to cross the sea of desire and forget that I too am playing a game.

-from Playthings, by Rabindranath Tagore.

It took me some time to understand the meaning of *playing* the piano.

It is hard to define *play* by short and simple words for its multiple meanings and usage in English. But in Mandarin, *play* means nothing sober but entertaining, game, joke, amusement, just for fun. According to *Shuowen Jiezi*, an ancient Chinese dictionary compiled during 25-206 CE, the definition of 玩 (wán) is: to play with[7].

According to Gaskins, Haight, and Lancy (2007), *play* has various values in each culture, and parents from different cultural backgrounds would expect play to work differently for their children. Being raised in Asian culture, I was taught not to play before finishing all the solemn work since I was a child. There was always something much more important than *play*—school homework, household chores, practicing piano…, and even reading a novel had priority over *play*. I still remember my mother often saying to us: "If you have time to play, go read a book!" Traditional Chinese culture does not appreciate *play* and considers play as an antonym for hard-working. Many teachings from influential ancient Chinese philosophers and educators emphasize that play would affect children's futures. Play connects to laziness, lack of ambition, indulgence, and failure in my mother language.

Speaking Mandarin, I would specifically use *perform* as the verb while describing a professional instrumental playing, and *practice* while mentioning daily musical

[7] 說文解字: 玩，弄也。Translated and paraphrased by Ming-Yu Lin.

training. Therefore, I was confused when I learned to say "play the piano" in English at a young age. I thought there must be some other English words that could accurately and appropriately mean performing music on an instrument. According to my parents and teachers, playing the piano was a serious business with nothing about *play*. If I said I *played* the piano in Mandarin, I was afraid that people would imagine I was trying to find the sound of Twinkle Twinkle Little Star on the toy piano only with my right index finger, and of course, just for fun.

On the other hand, I was curious when I learned about multiple meanings of *play* in English. Why do people from different cultures give the word *play* different meanings? Why do people use *play* to mention music-making? It was not until many years later that I finally understood: yes, I was *playing* on the piano. I was playing with notes, keyboards, music, and myself. Playing the piano was a playful activity. This understanding reminded me that teaching and learning piano must be in a playful way. Therefore, as a piano teacher, I would arrange games and activities to guide my students to learn skills and theories in a delightful atmosphere. This method worked efficiently and made the piano lessons enjoyable, especially for young children. Nevertheless, I always felt there was still something missing in my teaching to prepare students for their emotions and attitudes in their practice and performances. Improvisation fills the gap with its innate feature of play.

The point of improvisation, as Nachmanovitch (1990) indicates, is "the free play of consciousness as it draws, writes, paints, and plays the raw material emerging from the unconscious" (p. 9). McNiff (1998) emphasizes that playful exploration of the materials helps the artist create without trying too hard, too forcefully, expecting too much, or being afraid of opening oneself to the unknown. The practice of improvisation guided me to perceive moments of free play as Nachmanovitch and McNiff bring out—no need to fit any restriction or presupposition but trust my imagination and creativity to explore and experiment without fear, like a child who does not need to make a plan nor worry about right or wrong in improvisational free play. Norris, Fels, and Kandil (2018) suggest, "With surrender, and play, comes the importance of embracing ambiguity, and the not knowing of what will come next, or how the drama or lesson or inquiry will unfold" (p.

98). To improvise like a freely playing child, I concentrate on every sound happening in each moment and move on from this nowness to the next one in my improvisation. Uncertainty and unknowing become opportunities when they are welcomed. I practiced fully engaging myself and playing with my imagination in the spontaneous music creation, learned to surrender and accept, to trust, appreciate, and love my true self.

Free play is a key component of improvisation, which led me to enjoy the inspiring adventure of creation and gradual changes in my lifestyle. However, after practicing for some time, I noticed I always improvised with classical structures and patterns. Binary form, ternary form, variations, standard harmonies and many other classical musical elements were still the main ingredients in my improvised music. When I watched videos of other music improvisers playing, I was stunned by their free shifting of tone, key, patterns, and forms of music in various ways. I was confused and wondered why I was constrained in the structures I had been trained in, and I had no idea how to change the situation. Freedom was always one of the main ideas of my interpretation and understanding of improvisation. Nevertheless, finding myself trapped in the classical music rules while improvising aroused my curiosity. *Did it still count as improvisation if I created music from what I had learned? What kind of freedom should improvisation or improvisers have? What kind of freedom was I looking for? Could I find the real freedom that I thought an improviser must have?*

I was surprised when I read Peters (2017) claims that "If you want uncertainty, then stay away from improvisation" (p. 24). Reflecting on my early understanding of improvisation, I thought uncertainty was the spirit of improvisation for the features of unpredictability and unrestricted, and I connected uncertainty to freedom. Peters explains that improvisers produce uncertainty by enacting their freedom to change certain existing forms and patterns they have. All practice and rehearsals of improvisation aim to develop certain confidence and techniques to encounter unforeseen uncertainties. Certainty and uncertainty interact in improvisation through the artist's enacting and reacting. An improviser embraces uncertainty but has a feeling of certitude while making decisions and creating the musical piece. Peters' statement reminded me that freedom in improvisation involves different definitions and concepts from what I had. Alperson

(2010) notes that "Improvisation is not completely free or autonomous activity. Improvisation depends fundamentally on routines, rituals, and practiced activities of all sorts" (p. 273). Chick Corea (2016) emphasizes that improvisations are all about decisions between rules and freedom. Both Peters and Corea point out that improvisation does not only mean no design or management. Instead, improvisation is based on the decisions between all the elements that exist in improvisers' heads. These scholars and performers challenged my understanding of improvisation. *If uncertainty was not the sole matter in improvisation, what else could I expect in spontaneous creation?*

In the performing experience I described earlier, I chose the first notes because I heard the interval, and I could only trust the rapid decision, made instantly by intuition, to play the sound. I was playing with what I was most familiar with, including musical forms, styles, and sounds, and was busy making decisions on every fork in the road throughout the whole performance. Corea (2016) says that jazz improvisations have rules and forms, and the improvisers decide when and how to make a detour. Improvisers have the liberty to play with all the materials in their minds in any way they want. They have the "power of self-determination", which is how the Online Etymology Dictionary (n. d.) explains freedom. I can choose my way of playing in the regime of known and unknown, using my existing knowledge and experimenting with new sounds to create a new musical work. This idea connects to the Japanese aesthetics of wabi-sabi that I mentioned in the earlier chapter—wabi-sabi is "the balance point between structure and unpredictability" (Nachmanovitch, 2019, p. 187). I realized I did not need to feel bothered playing with the classical music rules as I improvised because those were the most intimate knowledge I had. What I needed was to appreciate my "knowledge base"[8] (Berkowitz, 2010, p. 7) and accept every improvisational decision I made. I had the freedom to create my music with all the musical ideas I knew and the new ideas that emerged at magical improvisatory moments.

[8]Berkowitz (2010) explains the concept of "knowledge base": "Improvised performance in any tradition requires years of training to acquire the rules, conventions, and elements of the style that make up the knowledge base" (p. 7). Berkowitz concludes that the more knowledge base one could have, the more expertise she/he could in improvisation. When I improvise, all the skills, musical patterns and formulas, theory, and music I have learned in decades of musical experiences become my knowledge base.

In musical events, every participant who engages in and encounters the sounds offered has the freedom to interpret the music in her/his own way. A musician conveys insights and feelings through every note and movement in the musical pieces. The audience's listening and interpretation of every sound and feature of the composition becomes a journey of re-creating. As MacDonald and Wilson (2020) declare, "...musical meaning is in the ear of the beholder" (p. 30). Haring (1984) says, "A real artist is only a vehicle for those things that are passing through him" (para. 2). When a musical idea comes during improvisation, my responsibility is to notice and decide whether or not to represent emerging sounds in my head. Sometimes, I am lucky enough to grab the flying ideas as part of my improvisation. Sometimes, I let an idea go because that particular idea may not correspond with what is happening in the moment, as my fingers explore the keyboard. Sometimes, when everything happened too fast, I could only trust the rapid reactions of my fingers. These moments of not knowing what will arrive are the most challenging but exciting parts of improvisation for me—to seize the flashing chance to play permutations of the arriving sounds and patterns and develop these musical ideas into a musical piece without foreseeing its completeness.

In the beginning, I thought my approach to improvisation was wrong; I wondered if my classical approach was inappropriate for improvisation because it sounded not *free* enough; I eventually realized that there are many different genres of improvisation: jazz, blues, pop, atonal, and classical. I learned to trust what I had—chords, melodies, theories, and skills I had gained through decades of classical piano training, and those were what composed my unique style of improvisation. *Why not classical music inspired improvisation?* What I needed to learn was to acknowledge and appreciate what I could do. This understanding brought me the courage to free myself. Amazingly, with acceptance of my creations, I found that non-classical styles gradually became natural for me. Freedom in improvisation is an ability to make decisions and an attitude of accepting what arrives. The playful but risky action of creating is an improvisational game playing with knowing to create not-knowing. Self-confidence, self-trust, self-love, and believing in fingers, ears, and imagination, lead the improviser to true freedom.

Through the practice of improvisation and exploring improvisation with my students these past two years, I realized that improvisation was a distinctive language for conveying emotion and feelings, a playful approach to learning and teaching, and a wisdom to live by. Improvisation transformed my way of learning and motivated me to explore further possibilities of improvisation in music education.

What is improvisation?

> **improvise (v.)**
>
> **1808, from Italian improvisare "to sing or speak extempore," from Latin improviso "unforeseen; not studied or prepared beforehand," ablative of improvisus "not foreseen, unexpected," from assimilated form of in- "not, opposite of" (see in- (1)) + provisus "foreseen," also "provided," past participle of providere "foresee, provide" (see provide). Also partly from French improviser.**
>
> **Online Etymology Dictionary**

> **improvise (*v.*)**
>
> **compose or utter without preparation.**

> **improvisation (*n.*)**
>
> **1786, borrow from French *improvisation*, from *improviser* compose or say extemporaneously, from Italian *improvvisare*, from *improvviso* unforeseen or**

unprepared, learned borrowing from Latin *improvisus* (*im*-not, variant of *in*- before *p* + *provisus* foreseen, past participle of *providere* foresee, PROVIDE); for suffix see -ATION.

The Barnhart dictionary of etymology

Improvisation is not only an intellectual challenge but an aesthetic and imaginative odyssey. It requires knowledge and willingness to step out of the comfort zone and take risks, and a creative action goes through the unknown and confusion to find a new meaning and order. In the meantime, when an improviser sinks into the moment to find inspiration, she/he is exposing her/himself to challenges and uncertainties. Improvisation requires, as I learned, a frank openness to time, space, audience, and oneself, and an act of surrender, learning how to accept offers, with curiosity and imagination, and not-knowing what will arrive.

Searching for the history and definition of *improvisation*, I found The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2021), the Online Etymology Dictionary and The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology all indicate the meaning of *improvise* as unforeseen and unprepared. Several researchers and artists (Barenboim, 2006; Berliner, 1994; Berkowitz, 2010; Kratus, 1995; MacDonald & Wilson, 2020) mention that improvisation, similar to learning and using languages to communicate, is one of the natural abilities of human beings, and a "knowledge base" (Berkowitz, 2010, p. 7) is required for improvisation (Berliner, 1994; Campbell, 2009). Campbell explains that improvisers spontaneously play familiar sounds and patterns that the musician learns from the environment, community, family and culture in her/his life. The pieces of knowledge collected from all the past experiences of the musician become the fundamental ingredients of improvisation. Improvisers "use what they have learned to learn more" (Luquet, 2015, p. 61) and play with the known to create the unknown, engaging in "an active process" of spontaneous creation (Kratus, 1995, p. 28).

Being in the moment is the way to discover what is happening and the key to improvisation. Berkowitz (2010), Biasutti (2017), Chen (2005), Nachmanovitch (2019),

Peters (2009) and Sawyer (1999) all mention that the spirit of improvisation is about creating music in the moments when interactions with the environment and oneself are perceived. Paranjape (2012) finds, “In improvisation, there is new beauty at every moment— each performance, each artist becomes unique” (p. 5). Custodero (2005) claims that “To be ‘in the moment’ is to encounter the aesthetic” (p. 36). Wilson (2012) suggests that “One aspect of spontaneous creativity is being in the moment” (p. 44). Improvisation leads artists to open their senses to encounter every aesthetic moment in the creating process, and that is what Greene (1995, 2001, 2009) emphasized: the aesthetic process is more significant than the result in arts education, and experiences of encountering beauty are what art educators should bring to the students.

Montuori (2003) describes, “Creative thought seeks to make sense of phenomena that appear to be chaotic, and seeks to create a higher order simplicity—one that incorporates the complex, disorderly phenomena in a broader, more inclusive, more open perspective” (p. 243). He then claims that “...things will be right again when the proper procedures are in place, when the order is restored” (p. 245) was the message that improvisation delivers. Fels (2003) offers that “Performance is realized on the fine edge of chaos, a space where possibilities seduce and life dances into being” (p. 175). Barrett (2000) states that musicians “...throw themselves into actual playing situations ‘over their heads,’ stretching themselves to play in challenging contexts” (p. 234). Although challenging, for the immediate feedback and achievement of concentration, control, unself-consciousness, and flexibility of time, “Musical improvisation, under ideal conditions, is an excellent vehicle for the flow experience” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rich, 1997, p. 49), and the enjoyment improvisation brings is what one needs as motivation of keep playing.

Experiencing surrender, acceptance, trusting my knowledge base, and being securely in the moment, embracing not-yet knowing what will arrive, my approach to improvisation changed me. I have become relaxed and flexible and feel less anxiety about life, performing, and studying. As I grasped more concepts of improvisation, I started to apply them in my teaching, with all my piano students, as well as my group improvisation partners and participants. I encouraged my students to improvise and found

improvisation becoming an engaging pedagogy in the classroom. Most of my students refused to improvise in the beginning—they said they did not know what to play or how to play, and they were embarrassed to listen to their own improvisations. I fully understood because that was where I started. “To sing or speak extempore” is one of the definitions of improvisation in the Online Etymology Dictionary. Singing and speaking ought to be natural competencies of human beings, and I wonder how we have lost these abilities to express ourselves.

Once, a student forgot music while playing a song from memory. She froze on a chord and became totally blank. I waited for a while and told her it was fine, just take time to calm down and pick up the melody or anything that popped up in her head and keep playing. After all, she must be able to continue her performance if losing her place happens in the coming exam. However, my encouragement and consolation did not work at all. She was upset and became nervous. I suddenly had an idea to suggest she improvise from that spot—I obviously bewildered her with this curious thought. It took me some time to make her try, and eventually, we laughed together for a short phrase she reluctantly created that sounded dubious and freaky.

The point for me was not what she made, but she must realize that there was no dead end in music. She was allowed to try, play, and make mistakes. And most importantly, she could alchemize the flaw into a joyful accomplishment and convert a disaster into a celebration. Wunder (2006) indicates that the sense of freedom and unexpectedness are “the most exciting elements of improvisation” (p. 77). But “by trying to do something ‘good’ (usually the teacher’s ‘good’), we deny ourselves the freedom to search for our aesthetic values and are left with a poor imitation of another person’s creative genius” (p. 124). He suggests arts teachers “teach the students how to teach themselves and become their own best teachers through positive feedback” (p. 121). Living a life is like playing a long musical piece. We read, we learn, we practice, we do something wrong and will get a chance to relearn it, and we move on. A positive attitude toward music and life is as important as the songs and skills my students learn in the piano lessons.

Playing music playfully only happens when my students feel relaxed. My approach to improvisation has helped me build an unrestricted and reliable learning environment in the students' hearts. When they felt secure to create without worry, they trusted–trusted me, trusted their ideas and their bodies, and trusted music. I hope that each child would become confident and enjoy creating music. I hope they would appreciate the music they made and learn to love themselves through improvisation.

The waterfall sings, "I find my song, when I find my freedom."

-Stray Birds, by Rabindranath Tagore.

I look up after the last notes of my on-line improvisation fall into silence, and find everyone in the audience is looking at me, smiling. They are all muted, but I can see some are applauding, and some put applause icons on their screens. I sent each of them a unique message sincerely through the music I improvised, telling them who I was, how I felt and what I had heard in the moment. I believe they all perceived my musical message individually and interpreted it with their own stories, memories, feelings, emotions, and preferences. No matter how much they liked my improvisation, the creation is my music, my voice. It was a long journey for me to arrive here—to perform in public and allow my improvisation to be recorded and published. I am excited and nervous but surprisingly not afraid because improvisation has taught me to accept and love myself unconditionally.

Who do I become? Guide by improvisation, step by step, I unfold my artistic self. I surrender, find new meanings of perfection and imperfection, listen to my own stories and accept my true self. I play, and play, learn to step into the unknown and trust the unforeseen will become opportunities. I can see my transformation and believe it will continue. Who will I become? Even though I do not have an answer yet, I still trust. Improvisation is my freedom and my song, and will encourage me to go further, to find more.

Act II Listening

Even Winter listens, and plans to blossom.

Listening, by Dabney Stuart, 1985

Scene I

Listen to listening

After telling my stories, I invite you to shift your attention to listening in this act.

Listen to listening, listen to my students' voices, and listen to my soundscapes and music.

listen (v.)

1 : to pay attention to sound

listen to music

2 : to hear something with thoughtful attention : give consideration

listen to a plea

3 : to be alert to catch an expected sound

listen for his step

hear (v.)

1 : to perceive or become aware of by the ear

didn't *hear* what she said

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Listen to the sound

In my early experience of improvisation in that long ago jazz class, I expected I could create music from nothing. All the frustration and disappointment were from the moments when I could not generate a good idea to present. I could hear a voice in my head arguing if the tone I invented was satisfying or not as I struggled to design the melodies.

Can this one work?

No, it sounds stupid.

How about this?

No, it's not good. Can't you find any better ideas?

Hurry, you are the next one!

No, I can't. I don't know what to play! I need more time to plan.

Oh, help, what can I do?

As I mentioned earlier, anxiety, fear, and eagerness for success occupied me, leaving me no space to listen while my classmates were improvising. It was not until I had the chance to try improvisation again, and the different space and approach drew my attention from developing a musical theme to sincere listening, that I realized musical materials were around me, waiting for my discovery and development. To initiate an improvisation, I had to pay attention to the sounds within or around me before I started. I could catch the rhythmic or melodic patterns from the environment. I could recall the sounds of an old melody from my childhood, a video I watched, or a song I had heard

before. If I waited patiently, I might find a new melody emerging at that moment. Listening offered themes for my improvisation.

I was always confident with my good ears and used my listening ability well in classical music learning. Nonetheless, I misunderstood and thought that improvisation was about composing music before playing and, thus, I bypassed the role of listening in the beginning phase of my learning to improvise. Listening to sounds happening in the environment or in my music before and during improvisation brought me the musical motif that I needed to develop music. Nachmanovitch (2019) says, "To improvise, listen. ...When the music has no score, then listening is the score" (p. 136). Snowber (2014) recognizes deep listening as a key ingredient to mentoring and art-making. She claims, "Key to the improvisational process is the development of listening, not only with the mind, but with every cell of the body" (Snowber, 2002, p. 27). Applying listening to initiate improvisation encouraged new perceptions of listening, and guided me, as I learned more about improvisation. All the features of the sounds, the stories behind the sounds, the emotions and imaginations evoked by the sounds, and the sound itself could become the primary ideas of my improvisation.

Discovering, listening to, and remembering sounds have been a significant part of my life since childhood, and I have an abundance of sound memories in my head. Most of my family members enjoyed listening to music. When I was little, we had a vinyl record player at home. My parents arranged the turntable on a low shelf at a reachable height for children. There was a pile of vinyl beside the turntable, and my siblings and I were taught how to operate that magic machine properly—gently pulling the vinyl out from the envelope, placing the record on the platter, lifting the tone arm and laying it at the edge of the record. When the vinyl started to turn slowly, the sound flowed out from the speakers. I listened to every genre of music from my parents' collections—my mother's American country music, my father's old-fashioned pop music, and classical music and nursery rhymes they prepared for us. When I went to my grandparent's place, I listened to Taiwanese opera on television with my grandma and grandpa, English rock and roll with my aunty, and popular Chinese songs from my uncle's audio tapes.

Trying to represent the melodies I heard from the records on the piano was my self-entertaining game. I listened attentively and sang with the music, remembered the musical tune and harmonies and found the right piano keys to perform the songs. I did not have any knowledge about harmonies then. To reproduce the sounds I heard, I remembered the sounds and the feelings the harmonies brought to me—*how did I feel about the sounds? What did the voices sound like?* Looking back, I was surprised by how much a child could apprehend from the abstract perceptions of sounds.

After I started the piano lessons, I learned to read the music notations and was trained to translate the sounds I heard into musical notes on the staff papers. Sounds became concrete symbols on the pages, and the written music displayed the position, shape, direction, density, and structures of the sounds. Listening became more stimulating than before because of the connections with images. While listening to the sounds, I pictured how the voices moved, intertwined, and developed like an animation playing in front of me. While reading the printed music notes, I imagined the music and heard those black dots singing to me.

Not only music but many daily events began with sounds in my childhood. When I heard music from an ice cream truck or soy pudding vending cart, Grandma would give me coins to buy our snacks. Children in the neighbourhood shouted as the adventure was setting off. Adults called their children's names for dinner while we were still chasing in the playground. In summer, I could predict that the afternoon shower was coming by noticing thunder in the distance, and the buzzing sounds of cicadas accompanied every summer event. Every evening, I hid when I heard the opening theme of the TV news since it was time my parents came to take me home from my grandparents, and I did not want to go home.

Recalling my childhood memories of guiding life by sounds reminded me that for most people, hearing is one of the natural abilities to survive and communicate. People receive information or evaluate situations by hearing and listening to the sounds. However, even though hearing is the most accessible of all the senses, it could become inoperative through neglect or inattention. Sometimes, for example, when I drive with the

radio turned on but do not pay attention to what is playing, I find myself unable to recall any content, even though I hear the sound all the way. Occasionally, I worked on my dissertation in a coffee shop in which the background music was broadcast loudly. The music could not interrupt me because I did not listen to it deliberately when I concentrated on my writing. Part of the processing function of hearing shuts down when I am not alert.

Differently, listening is a delicate and sophisticated exercise that associates cognition, emotion, and body. Pauline Oliveros (2015) states that there are diverse pathways to becoming aware of sounds: "The ear hears, the brain listens, the body senses vibrations" (2:46). She then clarifies that "To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen, is to give attention to what is perceived. Both acoustically and psychologically" (4:17). Listening requires an active and deeper perception than hearing—if I want to listen to music attentively, I have to lay my focus on the sounds purposefully. My brain works at a fast pace to follow the line of the melody, interprets the emotion in the dynamics, learns the information behind the sounds, empathizes with the sound effect that the composer and the performer designed, recalls the knowledge about the work and the composer, and can even imagine the complete score appearing in my head with the sounds.

At the same time, I may tap my feet, wave my arms, hum with the rhythm and the melody, or adjust my breath spontaneously to correspond to the tempo and sentiments of the music. My body reacts to the sound I am listening to all by itself. Listening requires comprehensive body and mental engagement. Hearing, listening and somatic sound-perceiving are different approaches to grasping sounds at various levels, and deep listening must engage these three accesses to the sounds. To hear is to notice. To listen is to hear with a deeper perception. When people notice the sound, they feel it, perceive it, interpret it, and give it meaning. Hearing is an invitation to listening. When we intentionally want to hear something, we listen. As we listen authentically, we may hear features we never noticed from the sound.

Listening is the first gesture of improvisation. Meanwhile, improvisation, like a sound-creating game, could be a way to improve listening ability. Applying improvisation in classical piano teaching highlights the role of listening in music learning. Every sound is generated from the prior sound, and an improviser will be able to move from moment to moment while concentrating on listening. McAuliffe (2021) mentions that listening and hearing are the beginning of improvisation and could be well-trained. Building a habit of listening is essential for improvisation and comprehensive music learning, though it is not easy since listening is not only a natural capability but also a praxis. Some people were born with good ears. They have sensitive hearing and are good at remembering and recognizing sounds, and this gift makes their music learning more effortless than the others. For those who do not have such natural accomplishments, aural skills could be cultivated through various methods.

However, before musical aural skills, people have to develop the habit of noticing and observing sounds. Pauline Oliveros (2015) said that her practice is to listen to everything all the time and remind herself when she is not listening. I was lucky that my family offered me the opportunity to listen to music when I was little, and I knew not every family had musical events at home. Furthermore, living in a busy and noisy environment nowadays, we take the existence of sound for granted. Sometimes, we have to ignore or block the sounds intentionally to avoid interference. The way human beings live makes many people get used to neglecting the sounds, and unfortunately, not noticing the sounds could also become natural. Therefore, in my experiences of training students' aural skills, awakening their hearing and shifting attention to listening were always the first practices I suggested.

As a piano teacher, I noticed many students did not listen while playing the piano. They were busy trying hard to do things correctly—reading the notations, counting beats, and looking for the positions without listening. So, the first thing I asked my students to do was to slow down and listen, not only listen to the music but listen to the environment. We all live busy lives nowadays. Children are often chased by homework and after-school activities. *Can we allow them to stop for a while, leave all the work behind, and just stay and listen?*

I often invited my students to pick a corner at home, school or any comfortable place, stay quiet for a few minutes to discover and listen to the sounds, and tell me the sounds they found by various means. They could draw sound maps, record the soundscapes, or write about the sounds. Many of them brought brilliant feedback. Some students represented or described unfamiliar sounds they never noticed before in a familiar area. One student told me how he listened to his breath before falling asleep. A young boy seriously explained how the sound was generated, which he learned at school recently, and told me that he listened carefully to see if he could hear the vibration in the air. He said, unfortunately, there were too many other sounds that interrupted his observation.

Schafer (1976) claims that "We are all in the world symphony" (p. 155). He also points out that "everything in this world has its sound—even silent objects. We get to know silent objects by striking them. The box is empty, the glass is thin, the wall is hollow" (Schafer, 2003, p. 14). In his book *HearSing: 75 Exercises in Listening and Creating Music*, Schafer (2005) highlights the value of listening to the environment and arranges classroom listening activities for music lessons. He generated sounds from ordinary materials and movements of daily life, such as papers, keys, clothes, standing-up, and pulling-a-chair, for the students to recognize as games. Schafer's goal is to invite the students to experience the sounds, become aware of the sounds, be curious about the sounds, and be willing to discover the environment through the sounds. Maxine Greene (2001) emphasizes the importance of aesthetic encounters and takes creating opportunities for students to experience beauty as an essential responsibility of arts educators. Arts educators bring music, artworks, performances, and aesthetic objects to their students, and guide their students to notice and feel relation to artworks. The encounter with an artistic creation will become an invitation to explore further possibilities. Inviting students to notice sounds is a way to rouse the students' musical senses.

Although my students always said yes when I asked if they heard or listened to the sounds they created, many of them could not describe the music or sing the melodies they had just played on the piano. Some students only focused on physical movements

and made their effort to make things right and became too busy to attend to what they heard—they knew sound was happening but did not comprehend it. Others tried to listen but might not sense the rhythm, feel the dynamics, or perceive the emotions—they listened by cognitive understanding only to ensure every note they played was correct. Custodero (2007) states that listening and responding are the main agents that create musical meaning. Furthermore, "'What do I hear?' was the essential question of musical experience…" (p. 92). Sincere listening involves multiple cognitive, physical and psychological actions. Though reading, counting, analyzing, and appropriately locating the fingers were necessary for learning a song on the piano, without genuine listening, the students were only pressing the piano keys by the instructions of the printed music, rather than making music, not to mention appreciating the music. When I invited the students to improvise, most could not find initial ideas since these children were not aware that they could discover musical materials by listening carefully.

When I introduced improvisation to my piano students and emphasized the role of listening, I found the approach helped to build the students' habit of listening and changed their manner while playing classical musical pieces. As I reminded my students to listen to the details in the music, they could focus their attention on the various features, such as harmonies, intervals, dynamics, or melody. We slowed down to listen to the layers and quality in a tone and tried to produce various timbres with different touches, and listened to the balance between the parts and imagined the arrangement of the scenes and roles that the music described. I noticed the students could naturally make a better tone colour on the piano when they listened intentionally. Discussing the emotions and messages the sounds carried and sharing the stories behind the sounds were essential when I helped my students discover the sounds from the music they were playing. I suggested the students pretend they were improvising while playing a familiar song from memory—they must listen mindfully to find the sounds they wanted and play without fear.

I encouraged my students to listen to unfamiliar sounds on the piano. Most young students who learned classical piano were comfortable with resonant harmonies and stable rhythms and melodies but hesitant about the discordant sounds and irregular

rhythms. I sometimes suggested students make a dissonant chord on the piano, hold the keys and listen attentively to hear layers and harsh vibrations occur from conflicting pitches. Most of my students would find it uncomfortable to focus their aural attention on what they perceived as unpleasant sounds. However, this activity offered them an opportunity to learn resolution and modulation and to experiment with taking the conflicting sound as a beginning or a bridge to a new musical work. Accepting and learning to use the unenjoyable voices they created helped my students build confidence when they improvised or made mistakes while playing a classical piece. These exercises were not only the preparation of improvisation but could guide children to develop the competence of listening to their surroundings as well as to the music they created.

Aural skills play a critical role in every music genre. In classical music education, almost every level exam system and conservatory entrance exam takes the aural test as a decisive category. Recognizing pitches, intervals, chords, cadences, keys, styles, articulations and dynamics, playing back…, and even sight-reading involves the ability to listening—a good sight reader can "hear" the printed music silently while doing the prior reading. Listening ability is the channel of perceiving emotions and feelings while interpreting music and is also essential for analyzing and memorizing music. Bach's part-to-part motif shifting, Brahms' inner voices, and Schubert's chord transformation would become meaningless without being listened to. As Oliveros (2015) remarks, the goal of ear-training is not to train the ears but to cultivate the musical mind (4:00). Listening is a physical action working by the ears and correlates with mental exercises. Training listening is not a sudden change but a growing journey of preparation, development, improvement, and witnessing transformation in learning music. As I applied some aural training methods to guide the students to listen carefully in the piano lessons, I found that although transferring their focus from reading to listening requires time and practice, the result would eventually change my students in the way and the attitude they play the instrument little by little.

Many simple exercises for introducing improvisation to beginners start with listening. Creating variations of familiar pieces, a new ending to a song or adding some ornaments to a long note requires attentive listening to merge oneself in the styles, tones,

and rhythms and generate something to match or play against the music rationally. I guided my students to learn chord progression by listening and improvising—this idea was from my practice in the early phase of improvisation. I played the chords repeatedly and encouraged my students to listen carefully, hum the shape of the chords, then change the patterns or rhythms of their singing and forge melodies to fit the sounds. I also invited students to listen to themselves—to discover the sounds from their bodies as well as their imaginations. The rhythm of steps, heartbeats, and breath could become themes for improvisations. Sometimes, I asked them to reveal their feelings in the moment, find a key that could echo their emotions, and start improvisation from the key.

Click to listen to Bonnie's improvisation on chord progression

After students felt relaxed about creating from a chord progression or known music, we could start improvisation by listening to the surroundings. We listened to find the sound patterns in the environment—sounds of water drips, wind howling, or a ball bouncing have rhythms and tones. I sometimes recorded the sounds, played the clip several times, and suggested students listen attentively to find the musical elements from the sounds and apply their discoveries as the beginning of improvisation.

This sound clip was recorded in one of Bonnie's piano lessons. Bonnie was a cheerful, talkative young girl, and our piano classes were always lively because of her happy playing, singing, and talking. I once asked her to stay quiet to listen to the sound in her piano room for a while, and we found the whirr of the air purifier seemed to become louder than usual when we turned silent. Bonnie listened to that humming sound, and I asked her if she could represent the sound on the piano. Without hesitation, she started to play. Beginning with a five-note scale, Bonnie pressed down the damper pedal and invented a light and relaxing melody. Bonnie was excited and satisfied while listening to the recording, and she named her work *Air Machine*.

Click to listen to Air Machine, improvised by Bonnie

Listen to the words behind their voices

> *Sometimes people just need to talk. They need to be heard. They need the validation of my time, my silence, my unspoken compassion. They don't need advice, sympathy or counselling. They need to hear the sound of their own voices speaking their own truths, articulating their own feelings, as those maybe at a particular moment. Then, when they're finished, they simply need a nod of the head, a pat on the shoulder or a hug.*
>
> *One Ojibway's Meditations, from Embers, by Richard Wagamese*

Listening is not only a skill but a praxis in all the relationships in our lives. When Gouzouasis and Ryu (2015) discuss the importance of listening in early childhood music education, they declare that listening is an "interactive, intra-active and reciprocal" activity and can guide teachers to "transform piano learning into a much more expressive, meaningful, playful and positive learning experience, …turn technique-oriented, grade-driven, traditional piano methods and approaches into student-centred, self-directed, creative journeys" (p. 411). Although listening to the students' voices is essential to building trusty relationships and finding students' needs, as an educator, I found not every voice was audible. Communication occurs in the classroom all the time, and the messages being sent and received between teachers and students sometimes have no sound. An educator often needs to listen to the inaudible sounds in the classroom. However, noticing a hidden message is not easy since the silence can be thoughtlessly ignored. The quiet voices waiting to be listened to may happen in a gesture, eye contact, or a drip of tears. Sometimes, a muted offering is hidden behind disguised words, and sometimes, what the students need is only a gesture of listening.

My student Mark [9] encountered challenges mastering motor activities, which makes him often frustrated and he finds it hard to concentrate in piano lessons. In the early phase of our piano lessons, Mark's rejection of learning was my biggest challenge. I could understand his lack of confidence, but I did not know what to do with his non-stop complaints in every class. He always kept saying: "I can't do this. This is too hard" throughout the whole lesson, sometimes even with his head resting on the keyboards. Although I understood that for a child like Mark, playing piano was not a simple task, I considered his complaining pointless and a waste of time. Furthermore, the words he said were also like an announcement of self-giving-up. I believed those gripes were just excuses for his unwillingness to face the obstacles. So, I made every effort to encourage Mark and tell him that I believed he could do it if he could be patient and keep concentrating. But he still continually cried the same thing, like a broken record, and that almost drove me crazy.

One day, as usual, Mark repeated the same line over again: "I can't do this. This is too hard! I can't do this. This is too hard! I can't do this. This is too hard…." As he continued endlessly, I eventually ran out of my patience. I felt tired of his resistance. Trying hard to hold my temper and planning to quit this job right after the class, in the moment, I replied thoughtlessly and shortly: "Yeah, of course, it is hard. It is so hard." Surprisingly, Mark suddenly stopped his grumbles and looked at me. The sudden silence was like an alarm ringing in the noisy chaos, successfully drawing my attention. I met Mark's eyes and noticed something in the air was changing subtly. Although feeling exhausted, I had an idea and decided to give it a last try. I carried on:" Yes, it is very hard. I know it is not easy for you. And that is why I am here. I am here to assist you. I know how to make it easy to approach, and I'll help you to go through the work step by step." He kept quiet, looking at me, waiting. "Do you want to try one more time? We can do it together." I asked. He nodded lightly and started to play—slow but without emotional struggle this time.

[9] All the students' names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

I finally realized that Mark wanted someone to listen to and understand him. I was ashamed that I was not aware of it earlier. I put all my effort into making Mark create musical sounds in the piano lessons but ignored listening to the unvoiced message behind his protest. After that day, the situation of Mark's piano classes improved. I encouraged him to improvise and found improvisation helpful since he only needed to connect motions and sounds while improvising. Mark naturally improved his aural skills through improvisation, which greatly benefited his classical piano learning.

Sara Florence Davidson suggests, "I know that my students' learning relies on my ability to develop strong relationships, and that without those relationships, meaningful learning is unlikely to occur" (Davidson & Davidson, 2018, p.68). Even now, although I have been teaching Mark for more than three years, sometimes the status of the class is still unpredictable. If he was tired or in a bad mood, he complained about everything and refused to play. He would lay his head on the piano, say that musical things were too hard, and insist he could not read the notes. But I could hear his needs and have patience to listen to him now. Strong relationships between Mark and me were developed through authentic listening. My gesture of listening made Mark know that I could and was willing to listen to his voice, and this understanding created trust in our relationship.

Scene II

Singing my song

Listen to my sound, as I improvise.

On the Train

If memory is knowledge, then I know that my journey has crossed through various cultures.

The Paper Canoe, by Eugenio Barba

I haven't decided where to go.

Sitting in the Skytrain car, I looked at the changing scenes through the window, feeling bored. Stop by stop, every time the train slowed down, I tried to feel if the landscape outside was calling me.

It didn't work. I found myself couldn't concentrate on what I saw….

I was listening.

There were so many sounds in the car. I closed my eyes, and listened to the presentation that featured a montage of sounds—people talking on the phones, friends chatting, footsteps, and someone standing by the door was humming and swinging his body with the music from headphones….

Have I ever listened like this while taking a train?

The subway in New York City, the Shinkansen Bullet Train from Tokyo to Kyoto, the Metropolitan Rapid Transit in Bangkok, Mass Rapid Transit in Taipei and Singapore, the Austrian Federal Railways from Vienna to Salzburg, and the Skytrain in Vancouver…. Travelling by train is such a significant memory in my life. The rhythm of creak and clang, the tide of grinding noise, howling of the wind, people talking, the announcement of destination, door sliding, passengers stepping, car vibrating while stopping and starting, sounds made journeys. I did not feel myself listening intentionally in those travels, but now I realized that every sound was deeply printed in my mind, in every piece of my memory.

I remember my hometown, a little sub-rural city in central-southern Taiwan, nestled at the foot of Mountain Ali. Mount Ali was famous for its ancient forest, spectacular sunrise and cloud sea sceneries, and one of the world-famous mountaineering railways. The train station was not far from my home, and the rumbling sound of the train was part of the background music in my childhood memory. I was so familiar with the choo-choo and the clanking that all the railways were still built on the road at the time. I had many experiences going to Mount Ali by train. The railroad cars were old and simple. Without air conditioning, passengers would pull the windows up when the train started to climb up the mountain. The noise from the train was so loud, but the rhythm and tone of the cacophony were necessary for an authentic train tour. Clouds went in and out through the windows, as well as butterflies. I could smell the air becoming cool and fresh as the train went higher, and when the operator honked the whistle before the road crossing, there were always children standing by the railway watching trains and waving hands.

Misty forest, humid, cool air, tranquil lake, and the rhythm of the train melting deeply into my heart, synchronized with my heartbeat, pounding and humming for my memory of the train in my hometown.

Click to listen to 13 My Heartbeat, on the Skytrain

In the kitchen

What you express, you experience. What you experience, you are.

One Ojibway's Meditations, by Richard Wagamese

I spend a lot of time working in the kitchen every day, just like my grandma.

My parents were busy when I was little, and my younger sister and I lived with my grandparents most of the time before our school years. We called grandma A-Ma, shortly and lightly pronounced that A and said that Ma-sound with an accent and long, silky nasal tone—that affectionate sound was for the exclusive use of A-Ma. Every day, A-Ma spent a long time in the kitchen for her big family—my grandpa, their five children, their children's wives and husbands, and my sister and I. Whether my uncles and aunty lived in that house or not at that time, almost every family member came home for dinner every evening. Some of them even came for lunch as well. For the little me, I could feel the atmosphere start to warm up when I heard the evening news on television. With the sounds of parking motorcycles and bikes, opening doors, and greetings, family members showed up one by one. Some of them sat down in the living room talking, some joined A-Ma in the kitchen, and some others set up the dining table. It was a huge traditional Chinese-style round table, a perfect shape for sharing and communicating in daily reunions, and those bountiful feasts around that table were always bustling and exciting.

A-Ma's kitchen was always busy with non-stop food supply. It was the center of our daily life, the source of family energy. I believed that was why having dinner together became a family ceremony for me. We shared, we cared, we connected, we communicated with each other, and tasty food would be the best catalyst to enliven the big party.

A-Ma was a talented cook. She was smart, creative, skillful, and always kept everything and herself elegant. I enjoyed working with her in the kitchen. What she did there was almost like a magic performance for the little me. A-Ma improvised in her kitchen. She picked squash blossoms from her garden, coated the pretty yellow flowers with a light batter and deep fried them to make us afternoon snacks; she reused leftovers to invent a whole new tasty dish; she could make the best pickles I have ever had with any vegetables. A-Ma kept the kitchen clean and tidy even if she was working on three pots on the stove at once. A-Ma has endless energy and creativity. She passed her passion for food and cooking to me, and I cook for my family with my whole heart now, just like her. Her busy and organized kitchen offered my earliest aesthetics and creativity education. A-Ma made me understand that daily life was the best educational environment, and we could guide children by doing, without preaching.

The sounds from A-Ma's kitchen created an enjoyable symphony in my childhood memory. Sausage sizzling in the frying pan, chicken soup bubbling in the deep pot, dishes clanking, instant pot whistling, water sloshing, her delightful footsteps, and her voice answering my endless *why*, weaving into a musical piece named love and being loved.

Sometimes, I stand in my kitchen, listening to the sounds from the oven, the stove, the pots, and the sink, and the images of A-Ma's kitchen come to my mind. I hope what is happening in my kitchen will also become a part of my son's unforgettable childhood memory.

Once, I played Canadian composer Hugh Le Caine's well-known musical work, *Dripsody,* to my student Hana. She was curious about the work created from the sound of a single drop of water. Hana asked me how a drop of water could have a pitch. I opened a file with the title of Sound-Recording on my smartphone and played a clip of drips sound I recorded in my kitchen. We listened together, and then she asked how I mixed the sounds of drips. I said I didn't. Someday, after washing dishes, I stayed quiet to listen to the sounds from the pipe of my kitchen sink, and I recorded it. What we heard was the original sound without any editing. Hana was amazed by the natural musical arrangement

and reflected that maybe she never listened to the environment carefully before. I encouraged Hana to listen in the kitchen when her mother cooked for her next time. I told her that if she listened carefully, she could find every sound was singing a piece of music.

For me, the kitchen is a place from which the energy and warmth for the family are created. The kitchen is the heart of a home.

The sound of drips I recorded from my kitchen sink became the opening of this improvisational work, and I played this piece for A-Ma and the love she passed from her kitchen. And I, as a mom now, guide my son's taste of life and passion for making food, show him love through offering food in my kitchen, like what my A-Ma did for me.

Click to listen to 13 Play with Drips

Dining table play

> *I imagined the soundscape as a huge musical concert that is running continuously. The tickets for this concert are free, and we are all listeners. But we are also performers because we make sounds. To a certain extent, we could also aspire to be composers and conductors, shaping and designing its events.*
>
> *Shafer, 2003, p. 11*

My son Joseph started to learn piano before the age of four, not because I am a piano teacher, but because he, who did not go to school yet at that time, said he was bored and wanted to play piano. Joseph was familiar with piano lessons since I taught students and often had ensemble rehearsals at home, and piano was probably the instrument he knew best then. He was thrilled when I promised to find him a teacher so he could have piano lessons every week. For a three-year-old, doing the same things as mom's students made him feel like a big boy.

I was not involved much in Joseph's piano learning. He was taught by one of my good friends, and when he practiced, he usually asked my husband to sit by the piano and listen to him. My husband did not play any instruments and always applauded for everything Joseph played. I believe the positive response and delightful atmosphere my husband had created gave Joseph a lot of encouragement.

Joseph enjoyed music very much. He was always singing and often invented music on the piano. Although he learned the piano well, one day, Joseph told us that he fell in love with the sound of the violin and wanted to learn how to play the violin. He was nine years old then, and after his first violin class, he announced that he found his destined instrument. Since then, Joseph devoted time to playing the violin and stopped

the piano lessons. He still had the ability to play the piano for himself. I often heard him accompanying himself on the piano while singing Billy Joel or Elton John when he needed a break from practicing violin. And I started to play the role of his loyal, personal piano accompanist—for free, of course. Besides many shared experiences of performing on the stage and practicing in the piano room, we played for fun sometimes. We played animation theme songs, video game music, and pop music he was listening to, and we also improvised together. When something popped into his head, he would open the practice room door and call me: Mom, come to play!

I was grateful for the opportunity to play music with my child. We developed tacit agreement through music, in which we must listen attentively to correspond and negotiate each other's tempo, breath, articulations and dynamics. Music was our common language that expressed emotions, feelings, attitudes, and tastes.

Once, Joseph banged on the dining table accidentally when we were going to clean it up after dinner. At once, both of us noticed that the empty plates on the table vibrated and made a resonant trill with that bang. We were so excited and started to drum on the table spontaneously. We improvised, beating different parts of the wooden tabletop with our arms, fingers, palms, fists, and knuckles to make diverse sounds. It sounded like the plates and bowls were dancing and singing with our hands on the tabletop. We listened to each other to know when to change dynamics and tempo, and with one look, we ended our improvisation together.

Click to listen to 13 Dining Table Play

This improvisation suddenly brought me a familiar feeling—I was drumming. I did not drum for a long time, and I almost forgot that I used to play drums and many other percussion instruments because I minored in percussion performance at university.

I started to learn percussion in grade nine, and I still remember how hard I worked on those fundamental training exercises for whipping drumsticks and mallets evenly. Every evening, I spent hours sitting in my room, playing countless R L R L R L R L……,

then L R L R L R L R……on the practice pad with a metronome. I must be able to make consistent and even sounds before adding dynamics or putting accents on various beats for vivid rhythmic patterns. Drumsticks were the extension of my arms. The frequency of my wrist-shaking and the pressure my fingers applied decided the tempo of waving drumsticks and the quality of sounds. Sometimes, I held four mallets while playing marimbas or vibraphones, and the mallets looked like lengthened long fingers of mine. While knocking marimba keys with those extended limbs, my physical fingers were hidden in my fists, playing the role of supporter. The wooden stalks rubbed my hand skin with every movement, made abrasions and left marks on my fingers. Through many repeated practices, every strike on the percussion instruments was well prepared and has become instinctive. No matter what equipment I was holding in my hands, the instrument became part of my body.

Playing percussion instruments awoke my embodied senses. In the beginning, the sound of my daily practice on the drum pad sounded tedious, but my teacher told me that I would hear the difference and sense the musical features in each strike if I paid enough attention to every sound. Listening has always been a natural skill for me. I could print the shapes and sounds of a song in my head and memorize the music intuitively while playing the piano. Nevertheless, as a novice, playing unpitched instruments such as snare drums or tambourines puzzled me—what was the enjoyment of playing a "song" that was made of changeless sounds?

As I learned and listened to more percussion pieces, I gradually realized that the coordination between my body movements, my embodied senses, my musical interpretations, the sounds, and the relationships happening in the music were the things I needed to comprehend in music performance. My teacher was right—even if I was beating on the plastic practice pad, the sound of every strike was different. I must sing the phrases and feel the waves of the music. Simply moving by counting would make the unpitched sounds dull. Even a non-melodic, single-pitch piece was singable. I had to surrender my body to the instruments and the sounds, letting the rhythm and vibration guide my body, feeling how I stretched my fingers and swung or shook my palms, and sensing the weight, speed, and direction of my arms and torso. Even a simple frame drum

could sing with various sounds if I touched it with different gestures. Listening intentionally, the sounds I heard became spontaneous responses to my body, instruments and sounds I made earlier. My body shifted naturally with the twirling, tossing, spiralling, and bouncing from the sounds when I merged myself in. Drumming was like making music for my own dance.

Deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie (2007), who often plays with bare feet in order to feel vibrations from the floor, remarks that instead of hearing, she hears sound through her hands, arms, scalp, tummy, chest, legs, and so on. She tells the audience that even two pitches in a narrow interval could make the fingers and hands vibrate differently. Glennie listens and connects with the sounds by her whole body, invites people to open up and allow the body to be a resonating chamber and to experience the complete journey of the sounds while participating in a music activity. Through drumming, I learned to move with, before, and after the sounds, and I was aware of the subtle interactions between the spaces, gestures and sounds. Drumming taught me to listen beyond my hearing. With my whole body and senses, the journey of sound became broader and longer than I thought.

What is your favourite sound?

> *"Don't fall prey to dogmatic thinking. That's when creativity dies away. Changing your mind is a beautiful thing, and will often point you towards paths you would never imagine taking otherwise."*
>
> *Marcos Balter, 2022*

Click to listen to 🎵 What is Your Favourite Sound

Reminding my students to open their ears, notice and listen to the sound was one of the approaches to initiate improvisation and live a musical life. I often asked the students: *What did you hear and sense from the sound? What did you hear and sense when you were playing?* And I often asked them to describe the quality of the sound—*Was it tender or hard? What was the shape of the ending voice? If you listened attentively, would the sound lead you to a new melody?*

Listening could be a practice in everyday life. I hoped to develop my student's habits of noticing and feeling curious about sounds. When they heard a sound, they were willing to pay more attention to perceive and appreciate it. They might consider where that sound came from. *What did the sound mean? Were there any rhythmic or musical elements in the non-musical sound? Was there anything special in the sound? Was there any information beyond the words in the sound and how to react?*

"What is your favourite sound?" was one of the questions that I often asked. This inquiry was an invitation to share and to start an improvisation. Students were always excited to share their experiences while answering this question. Their favourite sounds might be from a memory, a person, a place, or stood for a life routine. My students would

describe and share the details of the sounds and how the sounds affected them, even if the sound was from an event a long time ago. These children showed good abilities to perceive sounds by this invitation, and their answers inspired me to guide them to listen more.

Listening to a single note was a stimulating activity. Noticing that most of my students felt confused when I invited them to improvise from a single note, I realized that listening to and explore a single sound could be an essential preparation for improvisation—a plain single note was the simplest sound but contained the most possibilities. The musical piece could be created from any direction to any style and key from the first single note. There was no instruction in this sound and no restriction for creation. When I started an improvisational piece by pressing and holding one key on the piano, I asked myself: *what can I hear from this voice? What can I ask and create from this single note?* This listening activity was an exercise of perceiving and exploring one's inside, releasing imagination[10], and trusting one's decision.

[10] *Releasing the Imagination* is Maxine Greene's book published in 1995. In this work, the author points out that imagination and arts play an essential role in Education. Greene emphasizes that "informed engagements with the several arts is the most likely mode of releasing our students' (or any person's) imaginative capacity and giving it play" (p. 125).

Emerging

Click to listen to 13 Emerging

How many sounds could you recognize when you listened to this piece?

Have you ever listened to your own footsteps? The pattern of raindrops striking the car roof while driving? The jingles of pouring beans into a metal pot? The murmur of the creek? A rat-a-tat of water in the pipes? The chirp of birds on the treetops? Knocking the wall with chopsticks? The rustles of turning pages while reading? The clicks of your computer keyboard while typing?

When one material hit the other one differently, they resonated particularly and generated new sounds. *What if I mixed all these ordinary sounds and made them musical?*

The roar of a speeding car might be considered a noise on a peaceful morning, but a hint of turning into the woods in this musical piece. The dining table improvisation of my son and I became the sound of battle drums. When some handmade potteries lightly hit each other, they created bell-like voices.

I improvised on four glasses, played with those four pitches for a while, and then took those four pitches as the motif to improvise on the piano.

This soundscape is a musical piece that I improvised with my improvisation.

Where am I?

Click to listen to 13 Soundscape in a Vancouver Cafe

Most people may like to find a quiet spot in the corner when they need to work in a coffee shop. But the seat closest to the counter is always my favourite.

In some popular local cafes, the counter is like the boiler of a shop, which decides the climate and sets the tone and style of the place. I enjoy listening to all the sounds occurring around the counter: greetings and orderings, coffee machines working, barista pouring coffee beans, people talking while waiting, and calling names when someone's coffee is ready. When the sounds run at a fast tempo and with vivid dynamics, the atmosphere becomes vitally lively. Strangers chat with each other because talking to strangers standing beside one's seat seems so natural and easy in the aura of pleasure. It is like participating in a festive occasion in the community and sharing energy with folks.

In some coffee shops, the background music is soft, the paces are slower, and the air is cozy and calm. People sitting in the store rarely make a sound. Everyone immerses themselves in one's realm, working on laptops or reading newspapers silently. Even clicks and clacks of tapping keyboards are bashful and modest. When someone opens the door, the sounds of outside traffic temporarily pull me out to the noisy real world. In the moment the door was closed, I felt shifted back to the former peaceful universe at once. The light dims, buzzy streets fade out, and the air turns tranquil again.

Sounds design the environment and draft the way people interact.

Today, I wandered on the street in Vancouver and randomly walked into a small corner coffee shop. The place was tidy and cozy. There were not too many people there, but I could smell low-pitched merriment and lively spirit in the air. I approached the counter to order my coffee and croissant, and the girl behind the counter greeted me with her cheerful, melodic voice. A bright, sincere smile was on her face.

Ah, this is the secret of the invisible energy in this space!

I picked the table in front of the counter and sat down. Sipping my soy latte, I watched people coming in and out, and the girl at the counter seemed to know most of them. *Small community. People in the neighbourhood probably come every day*, I guessed. I enjoyed listening to her welcoming and chatting and calling names like she was singing joyful songs.

I suddenly felt dazed about where I was. Sitting on one of the seats in one of the coffee shops in one of the corners of one of the cities on the earth, listening to a sweet voice leading the choir. The layers of the soundscape in a small cafe were presenting unknown stories, relationships, rhythms, and patterns to me.

Where is my home? What is my story?

Click to listen to 13 An Ugly Beautiful Encounter

The place in my mind

Click to listen to 13 Childhood Paddy Fields

I woke up early

Felt a bit chilly

Looked at my agenda and I started to worry

On the list laid duty, there was no time to be lazy

Waiting for me before teaching is housework and laundry

I need to go to the grocery because the fridge was empty

I ran out of ideas of cooking and thought I might need some more recipe

I cheered up one of my students who was gloomy

And encouraged the other one who failed in the exam of ear training

I will submit my writing and it brings me anxiety

I seem to forget what I was reading

And wonder if I have lost my memory

I try to live my life beautifully but sometimes I surrendered my energy

I love to teach passionately but sometimes I felt I was just making money

I miss my friends and family over the sea, but I must hold on for my dreams in academy

Sometimes I feel

LIFE IS HEAVY

When my heart was cloudy and I became weary

I closed my eyes, took a breath deeply, back to grandma's house in the country

I remember the paddy field was rich and the courtyard was grassy

Purple flowers on the meadow were dreamy

Fruits from the trees were juicy

Tropical sun shone dazzlingly

Fireflies in summer night gleamed brightly

I ran with my bare feet under the tree, and laughed happily

Grandpa bought me rings and grandma read me stories

My parents were busy, but I was accompanied by uncles and auntie

Family dinner by the round table was a reunion ceremony

We shared, we cared, we connected genuinely

I am strong and brave because they gave their love to me

I was lucky to grow with nature and lovely family

That built me peace corner in mind where I can find my harmony

I am lucky I can still sing my melody

Memories comfort me and the world is still pretty

Can you hear me?

Click to listen to 13 Can You Hear Me

Can you hear me?

Are you listening to me?

When I asked my son what sound means to him, he turned to ask Alexa—his intelligent virtual assistant, and Alexa gave us a long and detailed standard definition of sound. However, I wondered if that was the only answer I was looking for.

We may find a standard definition of sound, but the acoustic sound which happens around people must have various meanings to each person who perceives it. As I mentioned earlier, MacDonald and Wilson (2020) declare that "Musical meaning is in the ear of the beholder" (p. 30) in their book *The Art of Becoming*. We interpret the sound we hear with our emotions, life and aesthetic experiences, knowledge base and artistic vision. We may perceive the sounds with our imagination and bring out a memory, a story, a new idea, or a daydream. The sound of birds singing that brings me the memory of childhood countryside may bring you the image of an urban city park. The sound of buzzing bees that means a flourishing garden to you may recall my painful memory of bee stings.

In this sound clip, every voice has a unique meaning for me. Nevertheless, when you listen to this piece, you may comprehend it differently.

Sound is memory.

The sound of ocean waves was recorded on the eastern coast of Taiwan. That was the summer of 2020, my husband, my son, and I finally reunited after a long time of separation due to the Covid-19 pandemic. After that gathering, we were separated again

for several years. The place, which was one of our favourites, is a pebble beach. When the ocean waves rolled in and out, the pebbles were brought to drum each other and made bright, rhythmic sounds. If you listen carefully, you may hear the sounds of people talking and laughing around us. The image of the beach may emerge in your head now—families, lovers, children, gray sky, colourful pebbles, strong wind, and beautiful Pacific Ocean, played together with the sound, like a film. The sound means a memory of a place, a happy time, and family to me.

Sound tells stories, the stories behind stories, and the stories before stories.

If I ask you what the most unforgettable or beautiful sound you have ever heard is, you may want to tell me the stories of the sounds. The young boy's voice telling a story in this clip has a story, too. It was from my best friend's son Kwan, who was learning to read at the time. One day, he was reading a story, The Paperboy, in Mandarin, and my friend asked Kwan if he would like to record his story-telling and share it with me. The four-year-old was happy with the idea, and I received this sincere, innocent sound, telling his favourite story as a wonderful gift. My friend told me that his little boy practiced several times for this contribution and tried hard to show me his literacy. While listening to his own sound from the recording file, Kwan was confident and proud of himself.

I sent my friend the completed sound clip after editing it, and she told me that Kwan's eyes shone while listening. Kwan said he really loved the work from which he could hear his own voice playing with music and other people's talking. He said it sounded magical.

Sound is culture; sound is nature; sound is identity.

Some of my friends contributed their voices, saying words or reading quotations in their mother tongues. I asked my friends to say anything meaningful or interesting to them in their languages. A quote, a word, a sentence, or just a sound…, and we also said "Can you hear me" in our languages. As an audience, you may know English and maybe French, but you may not recognize Taiwanese, Mandarin, Punjabi, and Afrikaans. *When we hear people saying something we do not truly understand, do we still listen to them? Can we hear anything beyond the language? Can we appreciate the colour and shape of each language? Can we notice that each person has her/his unique timbre, rhythm, and tempo while speaking, and those qualities were all from their cultures, families, characters, and bodily senses—including what they saw, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, and what they felt in their bodies?*

I recorded one of the group online meetings of my Ph.D. cohort. While listening, you may or may not recognize or understand what we were saying since I intentionally blurred some of the sounds. Our talking and laughter articulate the enjoyable discussion atmosphere, which is the way we inspire and support each other as a Ph.D. family.

Sound is feelings.

I improvised the song on the piano for pink roses and bright sunshine beaming outside my piano room window on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. I still remember the delightful, energetic, and mighty feelings before I started to play. I still remember the sense of fulfillment and hopefulness that the colours and light brought to me. And I still remember that I kept smiling while my fingers fluently moved on the keyboard.

All these different features of sounds naturally braided together, harmonized and resonated with each other, making this musical piece.

Sounds become memories, stories, emotions, and a time-travel vehicle.

Sound is my yellow brick road, carrying me to where I long to go.

Act III
Their Stories

Inside everyone

is a great shout of joy

waiting to be born

The Winter of Listening,

by David Whyte

Scene I

I am holding you

Mimi's Story—Holding her vulnerabilities

A teaching journal— Her tears

March 2, 2022

I opened the car door, threw myself into the driver's seat, closed my eyes and sighed deeply.

What's wrong?

What's the problem?

Was it me doing the wrong things?

Why was she so nervous? Why did she cry?

I was patient. I didn't blame her at all, and I tried to make the atmosphere easy.

Was it that hard? Just a simple rhythmic pattern, wasn't it?

It sucked! I messed it up!

I had just finished Mimi's piano lesson, feeling frustrated and exhausted. Mimi was such a sweet girl, but I was beaten by her tears today.

Mimi spontaneously told me that she wanted to play "Under the Sea" last week. "Under the Sea" is a lively, fast song from Disney's animated film *The Little Mermaid* with a brilliant melody and vivid rhythm. Although that song was a bit harder than the other pieces she was playing, I agreed. I believed while willing to try, she would have enough motivation to overcome the difficulties. We read the music and practiced the unfamiliar syncopation pattern together, which was new and complicated for combining syncopation and upbeat in this piece. I guided Mimi to sing and play the song and demonstrated the whole piece to ensure she could play the rhythm when she practiced without me.

Mimi looked nervous when I walked into her piano room today. She played all other pieces smoothly, but before playing "Under the Sea," Mimi explained that she forgot how to do that syncopation rhythm in the first measure. She spent a long time comprehending the pattern in class last week but could not remember it after the lesson. Mimi said she tried to figure the rhythm out by listening to the song on YouTube, but it did not work well because the tempo in the video was too fast to count clearly.

I said it's ok, we could relearn the rhythm, and I could help her to remember it. I also told Mimi that we would grasp that rhythmic pattern before playing the whole piece since the pattern was the theme of this song.

I applied various methods to guide Mimi to understand and practice that rhythmic motif step by step. It was not easy since playing that short musical phrase involved rhythmic understanding and fast-tempo hand coordination at the same time. Mimi was lacking in confidence, and counting aloud and playing a syncopation at once, even on only one single note or clapping, was not a simple task. We repeated that phrase in various ways, and she tried hard.

I knew Mimi was stressed. I could feel it. But she was almost there, and I believed she could go through the barrier with a little more push. I should continue.

After around ten minutes of non-stop working on that syncopation pattern, I thought Mimi had grasped the concept and could have some practice in various ways. Creating music on that rhythm might be helpful and playful. So, I closed her book and asked her, “Can you improvise with this rhythm?”

Mimi’s eyes suddenly looked bewildered. To put her at ease, I said, “I’ll show you how simple it is. See! You can play these five notes on any key you want, like this…” and demonstrated on the piano to her. She was still frozen there, looking at the keyboards. I kept talking to her in an easy manner: “Come on, why don’t you try? You have the chance not to follow the printed music now.” “Don’t worry. It’s not hard! There are only five notes, any sound you want!”

Mimi sat motionless like a statue, holding her fists on her thighs without saying anything. While I was still waiting for her response, she burst into tears.

She sobbed quietly in the beginning, tears dripping down her face. I spun my brain as fast as I could, searching for an appropriate vocabulary to comfort her, but could not find a good word. Mimi then lost control and started to cry louder and louder. I was stunned, having no idea what made her so depressed. I held her shoulder and tried to calm her down, but she could not stop. She just kept crying.

“What did I do? What’s wrong? Was she too fragile, or did I go too far?”

I was so angry with myself.

Mimi was a timid and sensitive child and was always careful while playing the piano—sometimes too careful. Keeping hesitating and checking the notations, fingerings and keys several times before making every sound, Mimi could rarely play a musical piece fluently, even if she had already practiced the song for weeks or even played from

memory. Even though I told her many times that making mistakes was okay and would not hurt anything, Mimi still tried everything she could to avoid mistakes and would become frustrated while hitting the wrong keys. Mimi's piano playing was like looking for the positions note by note, and this habit held her back from becoming skilled because the connections between musical phrases and body movements could not naturally build in the way she played. For the same reason, sight-reading a short piece took her a long time, and the result of her sight-reading was usually hard to recognize as a song. I needed to be careful about the feedback I gave since any vocabulary like "wrong" or "mistake" would make her burst into tears. I must carefully say "let's check this note again", or "I heard a different sound" when I gave her suggestions. While playing the piano, no matter with or without the book, she usually paused in the middle of somewhere and turned to look at me, trying to check if she was doing right through my expression. Every song she played sounded intermittent, and the choppy music challenged my patience—sometimes, I was annoyed by those unpredictable pauses throughout the whole song. I felt upset about saying, "Keep going! You are doing excellent!" The honest sound in my heart was yelling: "Please! Don't stop again!"

Although I could imagine that improvisation might be tough for Mimi, I invited her to participate in my research. I believed improvisation could help her piano learning in some ways. Mimi's initiating improvisation was slow and full of struggle with her cautious manner. In the beginning phase, even a simple task like adding ornaments on a long note or playing an additional cadence at the end of the song was torturing her. I had to spend a lot of time persuading Mimi to press the piano keys down, and every result in the early phase of her improvisation was shorter than one measure.

Whenever I wanted to record, I had to explain and promise I would only record the sounds without any video shooting since Mimi kept emphasizing that she did not want other people to know it was her playing. Sometimes, she allowed me to record her improvisation, but after I pressed the recording button, she became too anxious to play. She always refused to listen to her recordings because she insisted the sounds must be awful. I wondered what led to her anxiety and fear. As I know, Mimi's parents are lovely and supportive and raise their children with a lot of love and patience. I once asked Mimi

if she was afraid of any punishment or consequences for playing something imperfect or had any negative experiences about wrongness, and she said no. I then asked if there was no consequence for imperfect performance, why was she so nervous about trying new songs or checking her playing? She said she did not know why but just felt terrified about generating the wrong sounds.

I hoped improvisation could help Mimi become confident, relaxed and flexible, but I could barely see progress. It seemed like something was missing in this journey, but I could not find it.

Click to listen to Mimi's 5 Notes Improvisation

I am holding you

I registered for aerial yoga lessons in a private studio near my place. After many years of Pilates and yoga, I was eager to try something new and hoped to relieve my lower back pain by aerial yoga. I watched some videos before the lesson and imagined it would not be too difficult. People moved and flew with the fabric hanging down from the ceiling like dancing in the air, and some could even improvise on the hammock. However, I soon found it was not as easy as I thought.

It was a beautiful day in April. I was excited the first time I walked into the classroom. Everyone in the class looked athletic, and they amazed me by hanging themselves upside-down onto the hammock with only one effortless flip while I was still struggling with the fabric and my limbs. When I finally bounced myself onto the hammock, the swaying frightened me. How could I stay safely on a piece of slippery, unsteady cloth? I tried to control the hammock, but it was too unstable to manage. When I grabbed the fabric tight, it became sturdy, like a solid rope. When I loosened it up, it turned velvety and wobbly. Sitting, hanging, standing, turning on the fabric, lifting one leg, then the other one. Opening the arms, clasping palms together behind the lower back, (*and I was still in the air, swinging*), jumping and crossing the legs between the fabric….

I was enthusiastic but also anxious, trying hard to find the balance and control my body and the fabric at the same time.

Luckily, I was the only new student in the class, so the teacher walked around me and assisted me with some pose-changing procedures. After she helped me to stay on the hammock safely, I finally had an opportunity to observe and reconsider the procedures and my feelings. I peeped at other people and found they all looked relaxed and comfortable with the slight swaying of the hammocks. Looking at myself in the mirror, my body was so stiff, and I could feel my muscles tense. The fabric that caught my waist and thighs was biting me sharply. I was nervous and worried about falling, so I grabbed the fabric hard, and it made my fingers hurt.

It took me a while to calm down. “Relax, you are doing well.” I heard the teacher say to me. I suddenly felt amused since that was what I often told my students in piano classes. But seriously, I knew I was not doing well. Even though I was an experienced yoga person, it was not easy at all. Doing yoga in the air was different from being on the floor. The disconnection from the earth felt dangerous, and the fear of heights and falling occupied me. *I knew I must relax, but how?* I asked myself and tried to recall the memory of my piano teaching. I always asked my students to take deep breaths and feel the weight of their shoulders and arms. *Yet when I became a student, a beginner, could I feel my body and my breath, follow my teacher’s instructions, and move my body without fear as easily as I thought?*

“Feel it!” I tried to conduct myself and started to shift my attention from my inside drama to my torso.

As I eventually turned to focus on my body and took a deep breath to loosen myself, I could suddenly feel the weight of my body sinking into the hammock and the gravity working on me. This sense of being carried released my tension little by little. As I submitted myself to the fabric, I could feel it hug and support me. Once I surrender, my body and the material hold me up as a reward for my trust.

But being able to stay on the fabric was just the beginning. I soon had to follow the instructions to move from bat to vampire pose with a slow flip. Although at a slow tempo, flipping was frightening for me. I always felt dizzy at that uncontrollable in-the-air moment and was afraid of falling—I had a bad experience of falling and breaking bones in my childhood. Besides, I wondered if I would twist my arms because my arms had to stay in the hammock through the flipping. Although fearful, I persuaded myself to move. It was alright for me to hang myself up now, but I got stuck in the middle of the slow flip, feeling so uneasy with my torso half-banded and my legs pointed to the ceiling. I was supposed to keep dropping my legs down over my head to finish the flip, but I could not move anymore. Although I knew it was because of the dread, I could not help it. My body was tied tightly by fear, and I started to feel fatigued. Hanging in mid-air helplessly and feeling I was going to fall, I suddenly felt two warm hands catching my back and legs. It was my aerial yoga teacher's voice saying:

"Don't worry. I am holding you."

I knew at once that I was protected and would be safe. My teacher brought my legs down with one of her hands and supported my back with the other hand to accomplish my posture-changing little by little. I felt relieved when my feet hit the ground again. I was physically carried and mentally supported to go through the unknown event and gained an embodied experience. Now, I knew how it felt and how to do it, and I had the confidence that I could do it again.

Oh, that's how it went.

The fabric was more secure and solid than I imagined.

There was no need to worry about slipping out or twisting my arms.

It seemed much easier than I thought.

I loved that feeling! I wanted to try it again!

"Don't worry. I am holding you" kept pounding powerfully in my heart for a long time after the class. My teacher accepted my vulnerabilities through simple language and actions, holding my worrying mind and carrying my strained body. With her support, I could try fearlessly to experience the thing that I did not dare to try. She helped me to gain the first experience to realize that it did not hurt and was not as hard as I thought. The most touching part was the sense of security during the move—I felt shielded and warm and gained the courage to try it again by myself.

When vulnerabilities are accepted, courage emerges.

I reflected on my attitude in Mimi's class. Playing the piano has become too familiar for me since I have been working on it for more than forty years. I could not remember any struggling experiences learning piano when I was little. *Did I forget the demanding parts, or was I lucky enough to be able to comprehend the difficult things quickly? How did my students feel about the techniques which were easy for me? Did they feel at risk or scared? Did they struggle or feel helpless?*

I could not imagine what if my aerial yoga teacher said, "It's easy! Just do it" to me in the moment I felt vulnerable. *What would happen if she ignored my panic and kept urging me to move?* When I reflected on Mimi's lesson, I wondered what she felt when I kept telling her the rhythm was easy and pushing her to improvise. *What attitude did I present through the language I used?* I made an effort to find diverse teaching methods for my students, but I seemed to forget to hold their vulnerabilities and accept their

emotions before asking them to jump in without fear when they were battling with hardship.

Mimi's tears reminded me to listen and react to my student's silent voices. In the class, I determined Mimi's learning pace from my position as an expert and an adult and assumed she had mastered the technique. I expected she would be able to move forward because my concern was from the time and energy I spent, not her feelings and vision. Her anxiety, her stress, her stiff body language and her fists on her thighs were asking for my beholding and holding. *How did she feel in every practice during that week when she could not comprehend a hard thing? How much anxiety did she carry in her mind when she knew the piano teacher was coming to check her result?* A beginner's feelings might be edgy and fragile since all the new learnings were unpredictable adventures to the unknown land. When I learned as a novice, expectations, disappointment, excitement, confusion, and fear were all mixed in my mind and stopped my body from moving freely. Although I tried to surrender and accept the possibilities, the physical discomfort and strangeness might have sparked my vulnerability. It did not mean I was weak. Instead, my unease was sending the request for assistance and a sense of security. Standing back in the position as a student, I realized I needed more patience and understanding to hold my student's emotions, embrace their tight bodies, and walk with them, step by step.

Although challenging, I kept doing improvisation with Mimi. I accepted her frail confidence and slowed my pace to walk by her side at her tempo instead of leading her. I noticed myself often saying: "Be brave" to her. Now, I asked myself: *if something existed before being brave, what was it? How could I prepare Mimi for bravely improvising on the piano and in her life? How could I show her my permission and trust? How could I arrange a welcoming and friendly environment for her improvisation? How could I let her believe that she could improvise?*

I asked Mimi to compose to get used to creation. I hoped she could build confidence in her creativity through inventing music. Since she kept rejecting generating music all by herself, I wrote her a two-measure simple melody on a music staff as a theme every week. Then I asked her to compose three variations from that melody before

our next class—she could play the music on the piano or document her ideas in the notebook. During the first couple weeks of doing this activity, Mimi could only write one or two incomplete variations, usually containing only five or six notes. Sometimes, I had to guide her to extend the work with several more notes. But one day, she showed me three lines of music she documented and explained that those were what she considered "very good" after experimenting with several phrases based on the theme I gave her. Even though I told her the piece she wrote was fabulous, she was still uncertain and paused after every measure when she played her composition to me. Although she did not have full self-trust yet, I was glad she started to appreciate her ideas and work. Having time to consider and write the notations was more comfortable than generating music spontaneously on the piano for Mimi. I believed this was a good beginning.

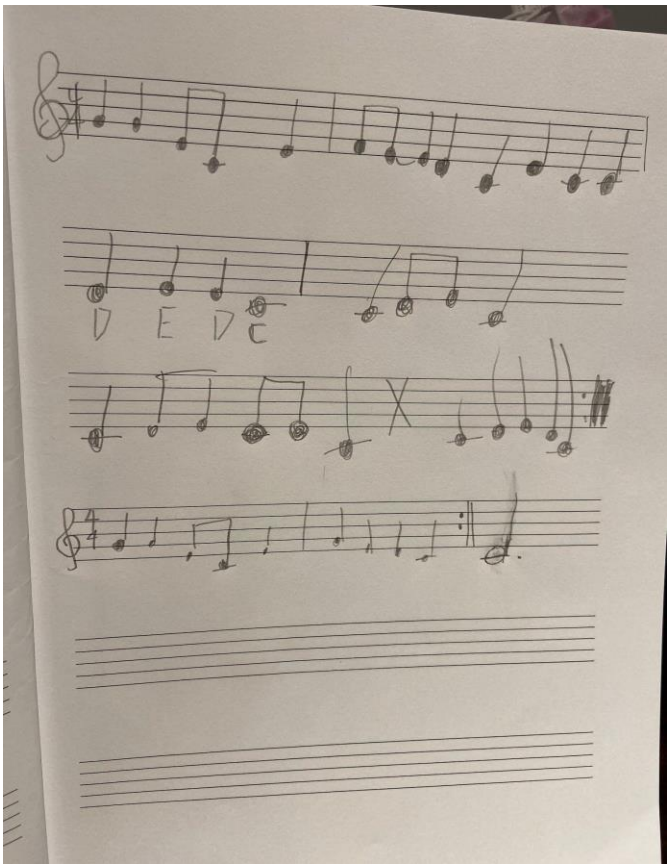


Figure 2. Mimi's variations. The bottom line was the theme.

In addition to composing variations, I applied other approaches to encourage Mimi to create. I let her design warm-up exercises for herself, write melodic decoration notes on the music, and invited her to play her creation. To prepare to improvise on the piano, we circled the repeated patterns in the song, and she simply replaced the patterns with a new rhythmic or melodic model while playing. Even though every step was small and slow, she could start to improvise some slight changes to a song without too much struggle. Although she still needed a lot of preparation before trying a new way to play, Mimi could add notes on a lasting sound, alter a new rhythm on repeated quarter notes, and play additional short cadences at the end of musical pieces. She could continue the music without stopping if she did not change the pattern successfully, and this was already a huge progress.

Click to listen to 𝄡 Mimi's Variation

Mimi usually showed her lack of confidence through body language when she could not master the musical piece. Her wrists dropped, fingers flatted, movements slowed down, and she paused and turned to check my expressions frequently. Mimi always focused on her shortcomings when she could not fully handle one thing, not to mention that she usually underestimated her ability. Developing a solid understanding and techniques could also build her a sense of security and self-confidence. When I taught her new theories or skills, I practiced with her to ensure she comprehended the new materials. I also emphasized that it was natural that we might need weeks to become proficient in a new approach.

Once, Mimi played a song, "The Dragon Hunt," that she had been practicing for a couple of weeks. I believed she must already be familiar with the song even though she seemed unconfident and played it stammeringly in class to avoid making mistakes. I closed the book and asked if she could sing the song. Mimi waffled but still tried and eventually sang the entire song out. I said, "You know the melody well and you know how to play the song. Why not try to play like you are creating the song? Sing it and play the sound out!" I told her the stories about how the composers created the music and

encouraged her to play the song again, pretending she was improvising the music. I still left the music open in front of her to make her feel comfortable, and I told her that she did not need to read it or follow it. I said even if she played something different, it would be okay since it was an improvisation.

When Mimi started to play, I knew we made it. I heard easiness and security in the sounds, and the music became more fluent and natural than she did earlier. After Mimi finished the song, I asked her if she liked the music she played better than before, and she nodded. I then asked Mimi how she felt while playing with the idea of improvisation. She said it seemed easier because she did not need to worry too much. Cautiously, I moved the point to the mistakes. I said, "You played some altered notes and rhythms from the music but did not stop. That was awesome! Did you notice those different sounds when you play?" She said yes. I asked her how she felt when she found the sounds were not the same. She replied: "You told me it's okay if I played differently when I was doing an improvisation, so I just let it be."

Playing "The Dragon Hunt" as if an improvisation was a magnificent moment in our journey. Free improvisation is not happening yet in our lessons, but we have already taken our first step. In improvisation, there was no wrongdoing. When the sound was different, we were creating a new art piece.

In-between teaching and learning are a series of two-way throwing and catching, requiring and contributing, and offering and receiving. Within those liminal spaces where back and forth happens, emotions lie before the determination to step forward because what would happen was unforeseen. Fear, distrust, resistance, anxiety and risk work actively and simultaneously in these in-between spaces (Thomasson, 2017). Brown (2016) reminds educators to recognize and acknowledge students' emotions in the classrooms since "...learning is not comfortable. It's change, it's pushing against old ideas, it's challenging. There's a lot of darkness in learning, a kind of trying to feel your way through" (p. 4). Jones and Reis (2010) also propose that in their mentoring experiences, "we all get uncomfortable as we reach our safety limits; we become vulnerable. By embracing this vulnerability, growth becomes possible" (p. 555).

My experience of approaching a new skill pushed me to re-comprehend learning and teaching from a beginner's angle. As an aerial yoga beginner, I encountered discomfort and resistance and faced fear and vulnerability in only one hour. Emotion is an influential factor, and facing and embracing discomfort is unavoidable in learning. If the educator can carry students' emotions and keep them accompanied while walking through those suffering moments, children have the chance to understand that the darkness is not endless. As Brown (2016) mentions, emotion drives when hard things happen and could stop the students from the first step. At my weakest moment, my teacher's accepting manner settled me down and guided me to understand that the movement could start without fear when she held my vulnerabilities. Her tender actions led me through the new task, which was too dangerous to complete in my imagination. As a student, I dared to try only when I felt supported.

When Bunker (1997) talks about mentorship from his experiences as a consulting psychologist, he suggests that "to understand and accept the human vulnerability in ourselves and others" must be the first step of providing effective leadership (p. 124). Bunker also advises, "If you want to take people somewhere new and different, you'll probably have to go back and pick them up where they are" (p. 134). When my students sank into the region of fear and angst, could not see what they might encounter in front, and were tied by emotions, that place of fear and angst was the starting point I must go to meet them. It was my responsibility to hear the students' quiet requests, hold their hands, and walk forward with them from where they were.

As Appelbaum (1995) declares, the stop "is the time of awareness" (p. 16), and "a movement of transition" (p. 24). Mimi's tears and my experience in aerial yoga class created stop moments, an opportunity to pay attention and change for me. It was "the interruption, the tug on the sleeve" (Fels, 2012, p. 51) and an invitation to slow my steps down to observe, witness, and embrace. "Don't worry. I am holding you," might be what Mimi needed. Holding a student's vulnerability would be the tenderness I could offer on the way I took her to encounter the beauty of music.

Scene II

Practice makes perfect…?

Anna's Story—Improvisational repetition

Anna was a *perfect* student—a dream student that most piano teachers would wish to have. She learned fast, could complete everything I taught, and never complained about challenging techniques or homework load. She could show me excellent results next week, no matter how many requirements I gave her in class. Anna started to learn violin at the age of three and already played violin maturely when she initiated piano lessons at seven years old. The kick-off of our piano lessons was effortless and smooth because she had already built great control of her fingers and gained abundant musical knowledge through the training of playing the violin.

Anna's mother played a critical role in Anna's music journey. The mother could not play any instrument but loved music. She made all her effort to support her daughter's music learning. In most of our lessons, Anna's mother sat with us, took notes and sometimes video recorded when I adjusted Anna's gestures or taught her new skills. When I asked them if they had any questions at the end of each lesson, Anna usually shook her head with a sweet smile, but her mother often inquired about related theories or interpretations. The mother was hard-working and smart, and could offer assistance when Anna needed it in practice.

If I had to point out what Anna lacked, I would say she needed flexibility while using her body. It seemed hard for her to relax her arms and upper back while playing the piano, and her tight muscles caused her difficulties when she learned advanced skills, such as big jumps or changing tone colours. It was also challenging for Anna to shift naturally after holding a long note because, for some reason, she was used to fully retaining the key for a length of time and could not lift her hands earlier to reach the following key on time, which was usually the pianists do. I supposed the habit was from her violin playing—unlike the pianists, string players have some specific skills to fill the gaps between the notes by bowing. Besides, when Anna needed to play in high or low

registers on the piano, she would raise her shoulders and stretch her arms stiffly instead of naturally changing the center of gravity of her body to reach the keys. I assumed her condition might be partly related to the way she used her body in daily life and also due to the fatigue from her violin practice. As I knew, Anna practiced violin for at least two hours after school every day before starting piano practice at that time. Other than this, her perfect performance every week often made me wonder if the pieces I taught were too easy for her since she never seemed to have any obstacles or problems completing those pieces of music, and it made me believe that I could teach her more.

Once, Anna's mother apologized to me before the class. She sincerely said she was very sorry because she was too busy to supervise Anna's every practice that week, so Anna might not be able to play all the pieces perfectly. I was surprised to hear what she said and asked if she regularly watched Anna's piano practice? She said, of course. No matter how long it took to practice the violin and piano, she always stayed with Anna. The mother explained that she must follow the notes and videos, ensuring Anna could do everything the teacher mentioned in class. She told me that she always asked Anna to practice until there were no missteps. She would ask Anna to repeat a movement or a single measure as many times as needed to make Anna's hands successfully reach the same angle or height to play the same right tone every time. The mother said, "I often needed to fight with Anna to urge her to practice longer, and sometimes I even lost my temper because she just wanted to go outside to play with her friends before finishing practice. Anyway, it must be the way we insist, isn't it? Practice makes perfect."

I was surprised in the moment since I did not know those splendid performances I heard every week were from such rigorous practices and the sacrifices of a child's social life. Anna was indeed highly talented and passionate about music, but at the same time, she was an ordinary child under ten years old. Anna's mother always said that she just wanted Anna to learn piano for leisure, but now, I realized that her concept and actions about learning piano were not aligned with my understanding. I was upset because I fell into the trap of my student's perfect outcome and did not notice what was behind those superior performances. I understood that many young musical prodigies had to give up their childhood lives and dedicate all their time to practicing and performing. But if this

was my student's goal, I needed to know it at the beginning in order to give her proper suggestions. In Anna's practice, techniques and discipline were over-emphasized. She was playing the piano without *play*, and it might cause her to remain tense and stiff in her body.

I told Anna's mother I did not need a perfect performance every week. I needed to know what Anna could do with her true abilities and willingness. I frankly told the mother I might be misled by those great results if Anna only showed me the best. I also told her she did not need to stay in every class and take notes for Anna because I usually wrote indications and reminders on the printed music. Furthermore, I hoped Anna could learn to listen, read, think, and feel the music and her body instead of following the instructions and repeating until the motions became locked. Learning and perceiving music by herself was necessary, especially if Anna wanted to become a professional. I genuinely suggested the mother let Anna learn by herself, and I promised to let her know if we needed her help.

I was grateful that Anna's mother understood and accepted my suggestions and let me change the way of teaching Anna. She wanted to support Anna and was happy to know what was helpful. I started to give Anna music in different styles and focused on her perception and interpretation of music. We spent more time discussing dynamics and articulations, feeling the weight of arms and learning to shift the center of gravity while playing. With less of her mother's involvement and urging, the progress of Anna's piano learning slowed down. But it did not bother us at all since I told Anna and her mother that spending several weeks in one piece did not mean she was not good. We could focus on various techniques and concepts and Anna could feel her body and the music better. I understood that Anna had been practicing inappropriately for a long time, and changing habits took time. It was a good restart that I could know where she could reach and what she gained, and I finally revealed her real pace of learning the piano.

I once asked Anna what she was thinking while playing after she finished a passage with stiff gestures and dreary articulation. She told me she kept warning herself not to play any wrong notes. I was curious: What if you played wrong notes? Anna

replied: “I would feel embarrassed and must be mad at myself.” I never criticized Anna for her mistakes. I always said, “It’s OK,” and encouraged her to figure out the problem and try again because I considered not drawing attention to the mistake-making a strategy to relieve the student’s pressure and unpleasantness from playing the wrong notes. However, Anna’s response notified me that glossing over the behaviour of mistake-making could not fend off self-reproach for her. “It’s OK” might not be enough for some students when they erred. Listening to her feelings, recognizing her self-guilt and self-blame, and letting her know she was allowed to play imperfectly and to forgive herself were as important as resolving Anna’s technical problems. Taking a mistake seriously might be inevitable in classical music training, but self-forgiveness should not become completely absent.

I decided to employ improvisation in Anna’s piano lessons. I illustrated the idea of improvisation and guided her to try some short variations in the first couple of weeks. Anna did not refuse and said she would love to think about it, but she also mentioned that she felt embarrassed about improvising in class. Her feelings were understandable and common for the students who did not have much experience with improvisation. In addition, we did not have much time to work on improvisation in class because Anna’s regular homework load already occupied most of the class time then, and I needed some time to modify the lesson materials. I was curious about how much she could do by herself since she already had good skills and knowledge. So, I suggested Anna improvise in her daily practice, and I also suggested she record her improvisations and share the sound clips with me if she felt comfortable. In the following couple of weeks, I received recordings of Anna’s improvisation through email, and those sound clips were fabulous—actually, too perfect for me. By years of music training, Anna gained abundant music knowledge and experiences to support her creation. However, in addition to brilliant musical ideas, those improvisational songs were complete and fluent, with titles, beautiful melodies, appropriate harmonies and even ideal structures. Listening to those exquisite pieces of music, I started to doubt if those works were spontaneous improvisation or composition.

Click to listen to Anna's Can't Go Outside to Play

I found a chance to ask Anna if she invented the songs spontaneously or practiced them before recording. She confessed that she wanted to present the best result to me, and therefore, she practiced many times to revise the melodies and find the best harmonies and patterns. Anna said she spent a long time recording more than dozens of takes for one song until she felt it was right. I told her those compositions were amazing, but I was not asking for a perfect composition, and she was not recording an album. I explained that what I wanted was an experience of experimenting with what she learned, what emerged in her mind, and what she felt in her body without self-judgment, fear, and concern. I wanted her to focus on the sounds and the feelings in each moment and learn to accept every result. I emphasized that improvisation was not additional homework from our piano lessons. I said we could try improvisation for only five minutes in class every week, and I wanted her to notice what happened when she improvised.

While improvising in class, Anna's reactions were similar to most other students. When we started, she was nervous, struggling with initiating and continuing an improvisation since she had no chance to reconsider and revise any note. Creating in front of a teacher made her uneasy because she could not guarantee the best outcome. Guiding her to start with variations, I asked Anna to create five different riffs based on the short phrases I chose from the music. Since Anna had a solid foundation and plenty of music skills and knowledge, creating short variations was not difficult for her. But when I asked her to extend the music, she frequently paused to ponder the next move and kept changing the sounds in the same spot. I understood that she might need courage to face and accept the possible imperfect result. At such a young age, Anna was trained to pursue and present perfection, and she also believed that she could only approach perfection through countless rigid practices. To help Anna step out of the frame without too much struggle, I wondered what would happen if I guided her to comprehend improvisation by changing the way she engaged in her classical piano practice.

While discussing improvisation in class, Anna asked the same questions as I did: "Does improvisation require practice? How to practice improvisation?" Before answering her questions, I asked Anna what practice meant to her. She said practice meant repeating a piece of music or action many times until she could do it well and remember it. I said I agreed. Repetition was what we mostly did in practice, but we needed to know what happened in the repetition while doing it. I told Anna that improvisers do practice, and so do I. But I practiced improvisation with a different attitude and goal from what she had, and I also improvised when I practiced classical music. I explained that while practicing improvisation, I was training myself to become ready to utilize my physical skills and knowledge fluently to react to my musical ideas as well as any unexpected sound. At the same time, I was learning to feel bold about every step and the results. When I practiced classical pieces, I engaged the same ideas even though I was playing inside the restrictions of printed music. If the score of a new piece was an unknown jungle, every repetition in practice was a footprint, looking for the solid ground and beating a path step by step. Repetition was essential for improvisation and classical music, but repetition was not duplicating a physical action to reach skillful techniques. Staying fresh in every repeat could bring stimuli to the understanding and bodily senses and made practice playful and efficient. Therefore, the way and the ideas we repeated a pattern led to different chances and results. I would not aim to find the best performance but to search for possibilities through all the exercises I worked on the piano. While practicing improvisation, I might start from the same theme and develop it into new styles from any accidental voices if I could play with the sounds I made bravely and comfortably. With the same idea, I might repeat a phrase from a classical music work dozens of times, but re-created and perceived it differently each time. I told Anna that the concept of improvisation helped me a lot when I played classical pieces because relaxation and flexibility influenced the way I used my body. Anna's solid technical training in the earlier phase had done much preparation for her playing. What she needed was an improvisational attitude toward practice.

We spent time learning how to practice classical works improvisationally. I suggested Anna read the music without playing and imagine the sounds in her head, and I inquired about the information in the score before she played: "What did you notice about

the notations on the pages?" "Is there any musical pattern in this piece?" "What did you hear when you read?" "What did you want to present with the phrases?" We decoded messages on the music before starting the practice, and I asked Anna questions after every repeat when she practiced on the piano: "What did you hear?" "How did you feel?" "What did you focus on?" "What was happening in the music, sounds, and your hands when you played?" "What did you want to keep, and what did you want to change?" "What do you want to try next time?" "Are there any other possibilities?" "Do you have any imagination about this piece of music?" Through considering these inquiries, Anna realized that repeated practice was not mechanically redoing the same thing but playing music with curiosity and imagination, with the heart and all the senses open. We also found that the approach and the view of improvisation made her practice efficient because Anna was aware of what and why she did on each note at every moment.

We employed improvisation exercises in Anna's classical music practice to gently enact free improvisation. Anna was encouraged to generate variations while repeating a single phrase or a pattern, add embellishments to long notes, change the rhythm or articulations when she worked on scales and chords, and shift loud voices between different parts. Improvising her physical sensations was essential: trying various wrist angles and touching points on the fingers to find different tone colours, locating the weight on diverse points to feel the shifting movements, and even shuffling the foot position to sense the altered support. These tasks would not bring Anna a burden since she was not aiming to produce a complete song but just exploring, and every new action was a response to the prior act. Anna's practice was playful now.

The piano education I received was rigorous and demanded high-standard skillfulness and correctness. Improvisation never became part of my journey of learning classical piano. However, employing improvisation in classical piano pedagogy was once natural and indispensable in earlier classical piano training. Carl Czerny (1791-1857), one of the most influential piano educators in music history, also Beethoven's most famous pupil as well as Franz Liszt's teacher, wrote a book, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte: Opus 200* to introduce keyboard improvisation. Beethoven was known as an extraordinary improviser, and Czerny succeeded his great

teacher, not only improvising brilliantly but providing students guidelines by categorizing various improvisation styles and approaches based on classical piano works in this pedagogical book. Besides Czerny, many other musicians and music pedagogues took improvisation as an influential tool in classical music training at the time. Nevertheless, since the Romantic era, composers had more certain opinions about their creations. They offered clear instructions about the interpretation of their works, and concert pianists started to perform the repertoire from memory. Thus, preciseness and loyalty to the printed music became requirements for an excellent performance. Embedding improvisation in classical piano education has been gradually ignored since then.

It was sad that I heard many piano students say they loved piano lessons but hated practice and considered practice a dreary task. I heard parents or teachers telling children that practice must be boring, and that is how people learn piano. For Anna, practice meant repetition but nothing else when she demanded to redo a single action mechanically over again to muscle-memorize the movement patterns. The long-time daily practice could not be enjoyable in the way she played the piano. Although for most classical piano learners, repeated practice was taken as the major method to reach a great result of accurately representing the notes on the printed music, repeated practice could not be humdrum at any moment. Improvisation, which requires fully perceiving every moment, listening to every sound, and discovering and welcoming possibilities, could build a different habit and attitude toward practice.

When Tim Ingold (2010) reflected on his repeated practice of Bach's unaccompanied cello suite movements, he conveyed that repetition is "not an iteration but an itineration" (00:50). Ingold pointed out that a classical musician also improvises while playing with the score because "the music lives on as an ever-flowing current. Each time I begin to play, I am launched once more into the current…" (1:05). Ingold then explained that a classically-trained musician, a dancer, or a hand-writer needs repetitive practice to reproduce models of the elementary movements and also needs improvisation to find "rhythmic quality" to connect the movements fluently (4:41). The features of repetition that Ingold mentioned in his lecture were how long-time practice engaged me. I never felt bored with practicing piano since music is an art that embraces and integrates

time. In my practice, music goes on without stopping, and every present becomes a new moment even when I am repeating the same phrase. Experiencing continuous transformations leads the journey of repeated practice toward exploration and experimenting.

I told Anna we were not only working on the notations on the pages but tracing our thoughts and feelings about the music and investigating the relationships between the notes by examining styles, articulations, dynamics, bodily coordination, and inner conversations while practicing. Improvisational thinking never paused. An improviser kept decoding, searching, listening, pondering, perceiving, feeling, playing, and wondering while the fingers were travelling on the instruments. Continuous aligning and unfolding varieties within repetition and discovering the relationships in the music were the most glamorous aspects of practice, and introducing this aesthetic quality of practice to the students is a piano teacher's responsibility.

It is hard to define a perfect music performance. If I interpret being perfect as flawlessness, I may miss too many aesthetic aspects of the concept. As I mentioned in the earlier chapter, imperfections are inevitable while searching for beauty. I am looking for a balanced condition in which perfection and imperfection shift and work together congenially. At some moments, I consider a playing or listening experience perfect because of the harmonious association between the time, environment, people, physical and mental condition, and my preferences. Perfection is a subjective and changeable point of view, flashing by when people feel satisfied with what is happening at a particular time and space. In a musician's journey, perfect moments occasionally occur in not only performance but also practice, and every step in practice is to explore and encounter that fulfilled feeling. Thus, perfection is not the final goal of the practice but events I keep creating and experiencing through my adventure on the piano. Perfection is open, variable, hopeful, and full of possibilities.

After becoming familiar with a melody or chord progression, brilliant and creative practice could help a student recreate the music through diverse interpretations instead of repeating to keep the playing the same. For example, the scale of a crescendo could be

changed for different spaces, moods, times, or audiences. McNiff (1998) suggests people give the repetition aesthetic value and states that "Imaginative expressions will often start with the simple repetition of a familiar theme…" (p. 183). A pianist practices to know every variety and can apply what is needed immediately in performance. The artistry and joy of music practice had been absent when Anna practiced stiffly through repetition. However, the concepts and approaches of improvisation we explored together helped her to release her imagination and perceive artistic value in each repetition. Reflecting on his own experiences with the creating process, McNiff offers an interesting idea: "Practice enables us to act and not act at the same time" (p. 174). His view points out that pianists practice to attain muscle memories and reacting ability at the same time. An ideal practice could lead to both, but an unbalanced practice only fixes the physical movements. Ito (2011) emphasizes that repetitive practice can lead to the ability to adjust to changing conditions.

Anna's earlier practices, which aimed to fix every physical motion and make herself play all the details accurately without thinking, led to her tight gestures and blocked flexibilities. The practice of improvisation requires active physical, mental, and intelligent reactions at every moment, which could help Anna unlock her body, and develop her self-trust and self-acceptance. Sawyer (1999) remarks on the related idea when he discusses the role of rehearsal and practice in improvisation. Sawyer mentions that theatre actors require significant rehearsal and practice to develop their performance creativity. He explains the importance of practices and rehearsals: "You have to improvise to learn how to improvise—there is no shortcut. And in fact, even performing from a script requires a kind of improvisational ability, because actors have to creatively interpret their lines" (p. 111).

Repetition is not an act of xeroxing—this is the fundamental difference between human beings and machines. Even if we mean to avoid any change in repetition, the result must be different every time. Listening carefully and perceiving every moment while practicing, all the diversities in the sounds, the coordination, and the artistic features in music will make classical music practice enchanting and fun. Musicians are looking for the freedom of *what if* and the beauty that may occur in countless possibilities

in the constrained discipline of music. At the same time, we find confidence in handling the performances by altering the rhythm, tempo, pedalling, dynamics, or articulations, shifting the focus on sounds and body, changing the touch to make various timbres, and singing harmonies while playing improvisationally. In my experience, those moments of perceiving sounds in the playing and solving problems through thinking and investigating while practicing made me feel brilliant and energized. The sense of fulfillment and ecstasy when I met an exquisite instant while making music created positive feedback and motivated me to consistently practice. Focusing on achieving the perfect result was like chasing a distant, untouchable goal, but perceiving every touching moment would make practice an enjoyable, flowing ride.

Inspired by Anna's practice, I recommended improvisational practice to my other students, especially those who took repetition as a task of consuming time. One of my students, Mimi, did not like fingering pattern practices. But in my opinion, finger exercises could help to train her muscles to be stronger. Mimi was mentally in pain while practicing the scales and fingering patterns as a warm-up, so I asked her to invent her exercises. We set up a musical theme every week, for example, skips or broken chords, and she designed her patterns using these themes. Mimi was excited about this homework. She wrote down her favourite invention and showed it to me in class, and she was happy to play her etudes. Ian, the other student of mine, declared he did not like practicing piano because repeating had no fun. I encouraged him to imagine he was teaching himself while practicing. Like what I did in the class, Ian had to ask himself questions before each repetition and to listen to and keep pondering the sounds he made to answer the questions. The self-teaching activity made Ian's practice engaging and urged him to observe and reflect on the music he was creating and his bodily conditions when he played the piano.

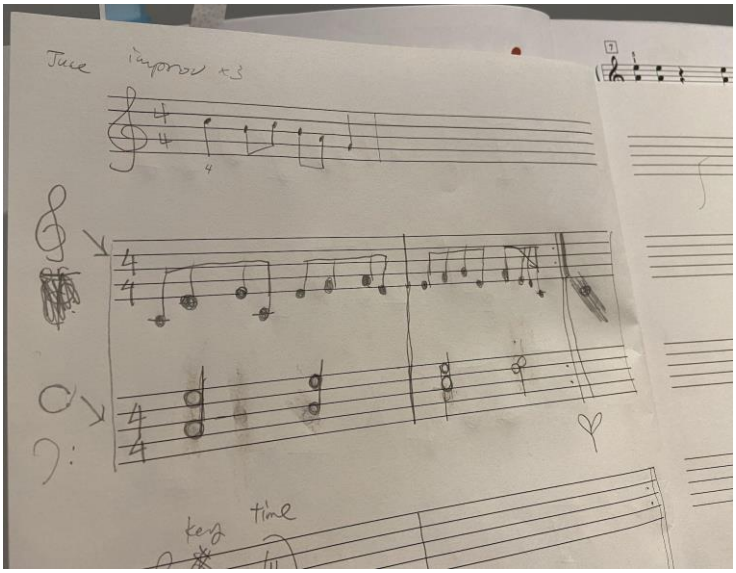


Figure 3. Mimi's warm-up exercise design—Skips.

The progress of our class was not fast since Anna had less and less time devoted to the piano, and the pieces she learned became harder and longer than before. But little by little, Anna changed her methods and attitude toward practicing and learning classical piano. I could feel her enthusiasm and energy in our lessons. She started to ask questions, and I understood it was because she could listen and think while playing. She tried different motions to find the sounds she wanted while practicing classical music, and even though Anna could not improvise an excellent song immediately on demand, as she and I once expected of ourselves, she was willing to continue the music when she improvised.

However, one day, Anna's mother told me that they decided to drop the piano lessons since Anna made up her mind to prepare for a professional career in violin performance in the future and needed to devote all her time to the violin. I felt regret and wished I could have more time to work with Anna to witness her transformation through improvisation, but I had no power to change the family's decision. Accepting my powerlessness as a teacher became part of my learning in Anna's case, and the experience of working with Anna and her family was also a reminder that I should have more communication about the students' concepts of practice and the goal of learning music.

My work with Anna on improvisation could not be completed, but I have offered Anna the gift of improvisation. Hopefully, the lessons of improvisation will support Anna in her music journey and life in the future.

Scene III

The ugliest song

Bonnie's story—Let's do it wrong

Bonnie is my youngest student, who is cheerful, talented and creative. Starting to learn piano at the age of four, this smart and hard-working little girl made rapid progress. She passes all the homework and asks for more pieces by herself every week. She loves music and enjoys playing piano, and our piano lessons are always delightful. However, soon, I found that although Bonnie rarely made mistakes, even a gentle reminder about wrong fingering or notes could upset her when the missteps happened. Bonnie would become annoyed and impatient, especially when she could not improve her performance right away. She worked hard because she wanted to avoid being criticized and corrected.

When I told Bonnie's mother about my observation, the mother said I was right. She said it might be because of Bonnie's good learning abilities and high intelligence. Bonnie could learn things quickly and was used to receiving compliments. Facing mistakes and criticism became hard for this little girl.

I gave Bonnie a staff notebook as a gift last year since she was curious about writing notes and composing music. I taught her to draw clef signs and notes, put equal amounts of counts in each measure, and encouraged her to write down the melodies she invented. She usually composed measure by measure—playing a short melody, adjusting it on the piano until she felt satisfied, and writing it down. Since she wrote slowly, during the first couple of months, she could only write a few short phrases in the staff notebook every week, and I sometimes guided her to connect the melodies and add chords to complete a song after she had several phrases. After we finished the song, she enjoyed playing the complete work, told me her thoughts about the music and named her inventions. Sometimes, Bonnie decided on the titles first. She was particularly interested in creating songs about animals and loved to tell imaginative stories of the songs she wrote.

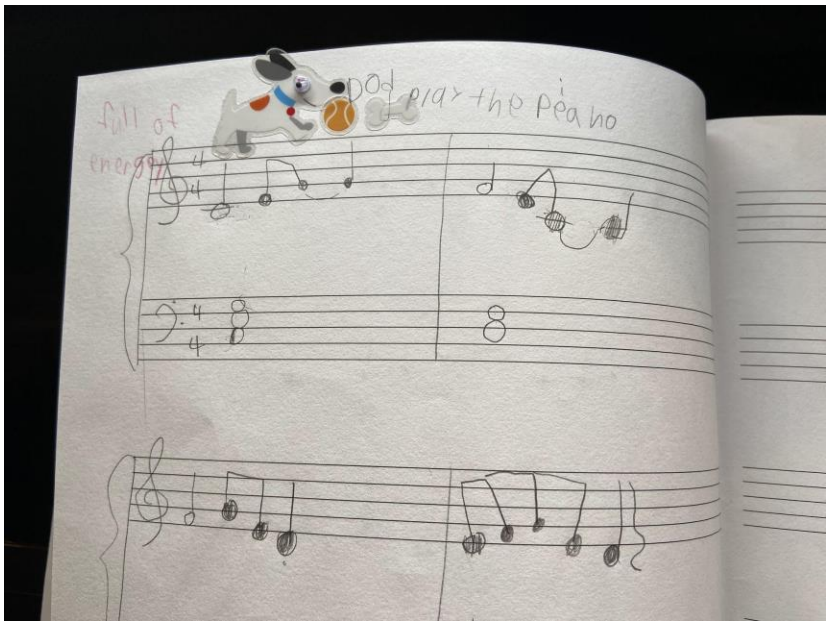


Figure 4. *Bonnie's composition: Dog Play the Peano (Piano).*

Although Bonnie enjoyed composing, the first time I invited her to improvise the whole piece on the piano before writing the notes down, she rejected it.

I told Bonnie that she could still play her melody on the piano like she usually did while composing but play longer phrases. I explained that without pausing to jot the notes on the paper, she could create complete, fluent musical ideas. She asked me what if she forgot what she played. I said if she wanted to keep the notes on the staff, I could record her improvisation and help her to notate the melody from listening to the recordings, and she could also change the unsatisfying parts then. She pondered for a while and decided not to do it. I tried to convince her to try, but she insisted that she did not know what to play and could not find any ideas in her head.

I tried to find a comfortable way for her. I suggested Bonnie start from the opening four measures of her composition, *Dog Play the Peano,* and develop it into a new piece. But she said she loved the way that song was and did not want to change anything about it. So, I turned to advise her to start with a new theme. I offered a short starting melody, and she could initiate an improvisation from it. I generated a simple five-note motif, with only four keys on the piano in the C position without any sharps or

flats—C E F D C, and I believed that must be easy enough for her to play. I told Bonnie to play those five notes, repeat them, change the order or the rhythm, or play anything emerging in her head with those sounds. I emphasized that nothing would be wrong when she played with those notes.

Bonnie put her fingers on the keys and hesitantly moved her fingers without making any sound for a while—I supposed that she was evaluating and examining if she could do it well. After a silent try, she put her hands back on her thighs and stared at the keyboard for a long time without any action. I asked if there were any questions, and she shook her head and kept silent. I asked her if she was willing to try, and she said no, firmly. Bonnie still said she had no idea about what to play.

I was surprised by her self-evaluation behaviour and the final decision she made. I realized that she must have sturdy restrictions in her heart.

I did not push Bonnie in the moment but did not give up. I explained the ideas about improvisation and improvised for her in the following several weeks. Once, Bonnie told me that she loved C minor sounds when she learned a song in the key of C minor from one of her books. I seized the chance and asked her why not create variations of the beginning motif of the song (C– – | G– – | F bE D | C– –), which she was familiar with.

Perhaps my demonstration over the weeks made Bonnie feel confident about improvisation, so she agreed to try this time. In the beginning, Bonnie stared at the printed music of the song in front of her, then started to turn the pages, seeming to look for something from the book. I was curious about what she was searching for. Bonnie explained that she was trying to remember another song from the same book that sounded similar to the theme I gave her. I told her that improvisation is not playing the song in the book. She did not need to memorize any music, and she did not need to worry if the music sounded good or not. I said we were having fun and doing experiments on the piano, whatever she played must be okay. But Bonnie struggled for a while and decided to give up again. I pondered her reactions and realized she trusted the printed music more

than herself. Following the notes in the books brought her a sense of security and gave her a guarantee of doing everything correctly. Printed music was her comfort zone.

Because of her composition experiences, Bonnie already had the basic skills and knowledge to create music but was stopped by a lack of courage. I decided to lower the threshold of improvisation for her. We went back to the books and played the next piece of homework. She made some minor mistakes while playing the song, but I decided not to correct her immediately this time. Instead, I told her sometimes unexpected notes and rhythm had the potential to make the music interesting if we could play with those accident sounds. I asked Bonnie to make simple changes to the song, such as adding chords on single notes or playing swing rhythm on eighth notes. I noticed that these tasks did not plague her, and she could do these without difficulties because the variations were based on the existing printed music in front of her. At the end of the class, I asked if she wanted to try improvisation again. I said she could simply do variations on the given theme and then produce a short ending after it. Although she still hesitated, she finally agreed. I still used the C minor five notes scale, and she created a slow, short phrase with both hands this time. Almost three months had passed after the first time I encouraged her to improvise, and Bonnie eventually started her improvisation.

Click to listen to Bonnie's Improvisation

Although it sounded uncertain and restrained, I was glad to make a start on Bonnie's improvisation. After that experience, we could do some improvisatory variations without too much struggle every week and gradually extend the variations into short pieces. It was obvious that Bonnie still strove to make harmonious sounds and tried to create music pleasant to the ear. She usually reconsidered each voice many times and often kept changing the notes she played, and thus Bonnie could rarely continue the song fluently. Even though I pointed out the differences between composing and improvising, Bonnie wanted to adjust as much as she could while doing her improvisation. She was still afraid of wrongness and potential judgments. I wondered what would be her key to opening the gate of accepting unpredictability and imperfection. I looked at her as if I

was seeing myself a couple of years ago. I could enjoy improvisation now because I was an adult with more life experiences and wisdom than she had, and I knew what I wanted and was willing to push myself out of my comfort zone. I could be aware of my feelings and perceptions at each moment while doing improvisation and kept stepping forward. But for my young student who had simple fears and unsophisticated insight about improvisation, what could I do for her to overcome the obstacle?

I got the chance when Bonnie's mother bought her a Chinese music book. Bonnie felt curious about Chinese music and was keen to learn it. I explained how the pentatonic scale was arranged and mentioned that each group of five black keys on the piano formed a pentatonic scale. I showed her that I could play black keys in any order, which would naturally sound like Chinese-style music. After my demonstration, I asked Bonnie to explore the sounds on black keys. She carefully played several sounds at a slow tempo in the beginning. After finding it was easy and sounded great, she tried again and again, faster and faster, and eventually enjoyed free improvisation on the black keys.

I was excited and also surprised at the same time. I wondered if the frame of black keys, visually narrower and physically easier to generate a *correct* sound, made her feel confident. I suddenly had an idea that for the children who feel sheltered in the frame, lifting all the restrictions at once might make them lose their sense of security and feel rattled.

So, what if I request her to do the wrong things, give her a frame of making unpleasant sounds?

With this idea, I asked Bonnie if she could improvise a song with the worst sounds she could make on the piano. I told her that the title of the song was *The Ugliest Song in the World.* I said it was a part of my research, and I needed her help to collect ugly music as data—I wanted her to consider this my duty, not hers, and she had no need to make anything with high standards. Bonnie looked at me with an expression of disbelief on her face and checked again: "You mean I have to play a song with ugly sounds?" I said yes. "Please invent a piece of music with the worst sounds you can make." With my assured approval, Bonnie did not hesitate too long and started to hit the

piano keys. After playing several dissonant chords, she seemed to disarm her mind and free her body. She started to laugh happily while making as many annoying sounds as she could. She pressed groups of keys with her palms and fists, jumped high and low, and played freely and loudly without worries. Bonnie's joy radiated and affected me. I joined her improvisation by playing some simple rhythmic patterns with one single note and sometimes knocking on the piano board. Bonnie did not refuse me nor stop her movement for my participation. It was so natural that she reacted to my invitation and started a conversation on the piano with me.

Listening to the recording together, I asked Bonnie how she felt while playing the ugliest song. She said, with a broad grin, "It was so silly, but it was fun."

The ugliest song is one of my favourite sound clips. Bonnie's laughter became part of the music and made the ugliest song sound beautiful. Every wrong note was right in this piece.

Click to listen to 𝄡 The Ugliest Song

It was a wonderful moment when I witnessed Bonnie releasing tension and enjoying freedom with the approval of creating an ugly artwork. I heard her courage and confidence sprouting through the sounds she made, and her realization that an ugly sound could be enjoyable. The gate of free creation was opened for her, and her perceived and self-imposed limitations were pushed far away. The Ugliest Song was like Bonnie's declaration of her freedom and self-acceptance. Through the ugliest song, Bonnie realized that she was allowed to try, create, experiment, and make something imperfect because no matter how many discordant sounds she created in this piece, I called it a song, not a mistake. Nothing was unacceptable since then because we have done *The Ugliest Song in the world*.

Bonnie became comfortable with improvisation and dared to try new sounds. Although sometimes she still turned to look at me when a dissonant interval appeared, she gradually stopped pausing and would not get annoyed by the unexpected sounds. We

often listened to her recordings together, and when I asked her if the accidental notes sounded bad, she said no. She explained that the wrong notes in her playing were not as evident as she imagined, and the recordings always sounded better than she thought. Bonnie could also correct the errant note with less emotional reactions while making mistakes in classical pieces. She often improvised the ending for the songs she was playing and even invited me to join her improvisation with a look. There was no need to persuade Bonnie to improvise because she always did it spontaneously in our lessons. I found she could apply musical skills and knowledge she learned from classical music to her improvisation naturally.

I once worried that the emphasis on accepting mistakes would make Bonnie thoughtless while playing classical music, but Bonnie did not have that issue at all. She still tried her best to do the right things and play the music with the style it ought to when she played with the printed music. But when she made mistakes or when I pointed out her shortcomings, she had a flexible attitude toward imperfect results.

I pondered, why do people have different preferences for sounds? How do I define sounds as beautiful, ugly, right, or wrong? Schafer (1976) illustrates his thoughts about the preferences of sounds and points out that a piece of ugly music for someone might be funny for the other one. He offers an amusing example that the loud motorcycle sound which bothered one man was considered beautiful by the other since it was a Harley-Davidson. The challenge that most classically-trained music students encounter while improvising is that they are used to presenting harmonious and balanced sounds and identifying unwanted sounds as ugliness since the students were usually advised to correct the wrongness immediately when the mistakes occur. But improvisation, which requires spontaneous and rapid reaction in one's mind and body and heart and is full of risks and unpredictabilities, cannot offer a guarantee of beauty and accomplishment. Especially for young beginners who have little experience and knowledge of atonal contemporary music, avoiding unfamiliar dissonant sounds is natural. Although music is an art involving all kinds of sound, many of my students said it sounded awkward when I first introduced contemporary music, such as Stravinsky or Kabalevsky, because most beginning materials start from Mozart or Haydn's classical harmonious voices.

Furthermore, reading the notations and accurately representing the music is usually the classical piano training required. Thus, most classically-trained piano students would take the mistakes and out-of-tone sounds as unwanted ugliness.

Classical harmony progressions and patterns are fundamental knowledge and essential for classical music learning in the early phase. However, piano teachers can guide the students to keep an open attitude toward various sounds. While sight-reading new music pieces, I noticed many students would stop on the passing notes, hold the sounds and wonder if they have hit the wrong keys because they could hear non-harmonic tones at those spots. I usually urged them to continue to welcome the following resolutions. Resolution is a Western tonal music rule to move a note or a chord from dissonance to consonance to create a stable sound, and it makes an example that conflict sounds could lead to concordance. This feature of Classical music could be a reminder for the student who gets stuck in non-harmonic sounds while initiating improvisation. How and when we use and listen to sound decides the qualities of the sound in the moment. When we learn to listen to unwanted sounds with acceptance, we will find spaces and possibilities from wrongness, and the incident of making mistakes in classical music is no longer a heavy burden.

Changing one's attitude and habits is not as simple as flipping a switch because encouraging individuals to step out of their comfort zone brings risks and fear. For improvisers and teachers who teach students to create spontaneously, improvisation is to "grapple with what had been previously only intuitive" (Berkowitz, 2010, p. 95). Most students are used to playing with instructions and hearing harmonious sounds while playing. Thus, spontaneous creation and dissonant sounds are not their tendency. In our piano lessons, students and I experienced wrestling with and needing to transform existing thinking patterns.

Starting improvisation with simple rules narrows the scale of the task and offers mental support and physical guidance for the students to gain first experiences, from which they cultivate competence, courage, and insights about the act of creation. In his research, Woosley (2012) indicates that each student needs a different way to initiate

improvisation: “For some students, the best way to start an improvisation is with much structure and little freedom. For others, however, full freedom with no restrictions (freeplay) allows them to best begin their understanding of improvisation” (p. 61). Sawyer (2011) views teaching as an improvisational activity. He indicates, “Experienced teachers do two apparently contradictory things: They use more structures, and yet they improvise more” (p. 1). He claims that the best curriculum design would include space and flexibility to enable the teachers and students to improvise. Berkowitz (2010) states that “[the powerful tools from improvisation] provide the basic elements and processes circumscribed by a style, but simultaneously allow the freedom for limitless and unique musical expression through their use” (p. 180). Improvisation is a delicate experience looking for balance by shifting between constraints and creativity. There is always space inside the frame. Discovering the space and gradually pushing the fence further to broaden the free room for the students is how I want to travel with my students.

Bonnie refused to improvise because of her fear of making errors and unenjoyable sounds, and I believed that if she could encounter ugliness in a relaxing and comfortable environment, she might be able to gain positive experiences with conflicting sounds. My strategy of inviting Bonnie to play an ugly song was to give her an opportunity to create from mistakes, to dance with wrongness, and to move forward without fear when crises occur. Woosley (2012) suggests, for beginning improvisers, “Learning to improvise involves making mistakes” (p. 11). While discussing the error management of musicians, Kruse-Weber and Parncutt (2014) indicate that “to develop a flexible and emotionally relaxed attitude toward errors” could help to avoid negative consequences and resolve the error (p. 4). They suggest that to create a positive experience of error-making, “teachers should not only tolerate errors—they should encourage students to make errors in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect” (p. 12). Learning to face and accept ugliness is as essential as encountering beauty because imperfection might be unavoidable in creation, and a gesture of acceptance is an essential factor in approaching balance. Looking at mistakes positively is the beginning point of transforming disharmony into consonance. I wrapped making-mistake in a way that Bonnie could accept easily and gave her the limitation to make her feel protected, to create a positive experience of error-making, and to build her confidence to cross the threshold to be willing to start improvisation.

Learning is an adventure of transformation, and we keep changing at every moment on the way. Students create and try in each instance, and even a tiny change will help them find they can do something differently. A playful experience could become positive feedback that will give the students courage and motivation to move on to the next step. While playing the ugliest song on the piano, Bonnie created the first experience of making unpleasant sounds without fear and felt fun. Perceiving that moment brought her a key to unlocking her restriction. Through their study, Kucharska and Bedford (2020) indicate that individuals with a learning mindset are well-prepared to accept and learn from mistakes. They conclude that accepting mistakes enables individuals to move on in the learning process and keep changing and growing, and all these transformations stimulate continuous learning. I hope I can help my students prepare to acknowledge ugliness by facing and experiencing unwanted sounds with guidance and support. The aim of encouraging students to create an ugly piece was not to tell them to ignore the wrongness of missed notes but to admit the existence of mistakes and to embrace and play with the ugliness.

There are various reasons that lead to the fear of mistakes. Some people are afraid of wrongness because they have experienced punishment for making mistakes. Some are born with cautious or proud personalities. Some others, like me, were told that making things wrong meant I was not good enough. Human beings naturally avoid facing mistakes since no one feels pleasant being punished or criticized. A careless judgment on the imperfect outcome from teachers or parents may plant seeds of fear or self-doubt in children's minds. Sadly, most adults do not notice the words or behaviour they choose as they react to the children's mistakes might become an eternal remark. Negative reactions and connections between wrongness and ugliness might become children's constraints for life.

I had some experiences of deliberately playing unorganized atonal sounds in public while improvising. I did so not because I liked the sounds or because I wanted to show my anti-tradition thoughts but to train myself to appreciate ugliness and accept the possible criticisms from the audience. I remembered the first time I improvised atonal music—it was like creating a soundscape rather than music. I heard the sounds I made

and thought to myself: “This is terrible. This ugly sound is not music! Making an annoying sound could not be musical improvisation.” Reflecting on the comments I gave to myself, I realized that these denunciations were what I was afraid to receive from the audience. I imagined people would condemn my improvisation as unprofessional for those dissonant ugly sounds. This reflection on my self-criticism pushed me to make up my mind to deliberately play more ugly, unmusical sounds in my improvisation in that phase. I forced myself to feel the discomfort and awkwardness deeply and genuinely in this way. And I asked myself: “Did it hurt anything or anyone?” “If the sounds truly expressed my thoughts, was the criticism influential?” Not every creation or improvisation must become a popular work. I need the courage to keep myself immune to outside voices and confidently, clearly express my own statements.

I started to feel comfortable playing unattractive sounds in public, and I learned to sincerely and honestly listen to my heart and follow my body. Again and again, I ponder the same questions: *“What does an unattractive sound mean to me?” “How did I define an ugly sound?” “What did I hear from an ugly sound?”* Over time, my stage anxiety was reduced not only when I improvised but also when I played classical music as I found those discordant sounds were no more terrifying. I was not ignoring the mistakes I accidentally made but accepting them. I still cared about the missteps, but I took them as reminders and lessons instead of a manifestation of my weakness or deficiency. It was a long journey of detoxification, that was not easy and sometimes painful, but gradually worked on me.

I used to say, “Be brave” or “Just let your imagination flow” to my students who were fearful of creating, but my encouragement seemed useless to them. My students’ panicky moments in improvisation reminded me to ponder whether something exists before becoming brave or releasing one’s imagination. The students might need a supportive environment, an acknowledgement of their vulnerabilities, and acceptance of their emotions. Bonnie needed an opportunity to encounter ugliness delightfully, and I brought her a chance through improvisatory teaching. Improvisation taught me how to improvise on the piano, in life, and teaching. Now, improvisation is helping my students to gain confidence and courage and find beauty in ugliness.

Act IV Opportunities

Limitless · Emergence

To improvise, first let your fingers stray

across the keys like travelers in snow:

each time you start, expect to lose your way.

Improvisation, Jared Carter, 1987

Scene I

Limitless

Imagination and improvisation

Three artist friends and I arranged a collaborative performance in the event *Limitless*, held by the Canadian Network for Imagination and Creativity (CNIC) on April 20th, 2022. Mary Blatherwick, a professor of visual art and creative education and a founding member of CNIC, exhibited a series of paintings named *Limitless*. The inspirations of Mary's artwork were from the view of the sky, ocean, and land from her Nova Scotia cottage during the pandemic, and some of the pieces were in quite large sizes. When Alexis Milligan, a brilliant dancer as well as a performing art teacher, invited me to arrange an improvisational performance with Mary's paintings at the event, I immediately imagined Alexis dancing in front of Mary's huge canvas while I improvised on the piano on the side of the stage. However, we would not have a physical stage this time. *Limitless* was to be an online event, and Mary, Alexis and I were living on the two ends of Canada. How could we work together? If I played the piano on the west coast, and Alexis danced on the east coast, how could we perform in front of Mary's work at the same time at an online event?

CNIC was founded in 2020 during the pandemic. Even though all the board members were from different areas of Canada, and many participants in our monthly open discussions, *Idea Jam,* were from all around the world, the convenience of technology helped us keep operating online meetings and events fluently. Although Alexis, Mary and I have known each other for two years, I never met any of them in person, and CNIC did not have an experience of a live stream collaborative performance. We hoped this online improvisational work with the dancer and artist on the east coast and the pianist on the west coast of Canada would be a valuable experiment.

We understood that some of the special functions offered by the online meeting application could be helpful, but what was the best way to build our stage on which we could show paintings, dance and music at once? Should we separately record Alexis'

dancing in Mary's studio with the paintings and my improvisation and combine the performances into a video? But if we presented through an edited video, we lost the purpose of improvisation.

When the three of us tried hard to brainstorm all the possibilities, Mary introduced Charles Pan, a multimedia artist and Mary's Ph.D. student, to join our meeting. Charles was filming Mary's artwork then, and we soon found that arranging the paintings as the virtual background on Zoom might be workable. Although there were still many details and technological issues to manage, we were enthusiastic about our imagination.

We started to improvise.

Hey Charles, look at your virtual background!

Oh yeah, that's one of Mary's works. I am working on her paintings.

Hey, what if Alexis uses Mary's painting as the virtual background while dancing?

You think it works? Let's try it now!

(Each of us put on the virtual background and started to play—

moved in and out, high and low, with a lot of laughter, wow, and aha!)

But how can we change it if we want to present more than one artwork?

……

What if I make a video?

Can we use a video as a virtual background?

I am not sure…let's try…I have a short video here.

Aha! Look at that! It works!

But Alexis, did you notice sometimes the end of limbs disappeared when Charles moved?

It's OK! I like it. I will look like a part of the oil painting!

Yeah, a dancing oil painting!

Since everyone had a full schedule, we could only have two short meetings before the event. We focused most of our discussions on technology, which was our biggest concern because we had to ensure everything could connect at the time. To try our best to make it possible, Charles played the role of our dream-stage builder so that Alexis would be able to dance before Mary's artwork on Zoom. He filmed Mary's paintings and edited the images into a four-minute video. Alexis made an effort to solve the problems on the hardware and software to present the best effect of the video as the Zoom background while she was dancing. Since Alexis and I decided to create an authentic experience of improvisation, we asked Charles not to show us the entire film before the performance. We only had a chance to watch the beginning and ending sections of the video for a couple of seconds in one of our meetings to learn the vital turning points.

On the virtual stage

Figure 5. I set up my piano room for preparing the performance.

I set up my piano room in the morning on the performance day and did some test recordings to check the sounds and quality of the video shooting. I moved the microphone, camera, laptop, phone, and notebook several times for the best effect and even changed the chair to avoid the creak of my old piano stool. I prepared for the coming performance with my ritual of stage setting, trying to ensure that I was ready, physically and mentally. Feeling secure about the environment was essential for me to initiate a performance.

One hour before the event, the team met for a final check-in. Alexis showed us her stunning golden dress, and I could imagine how dazzling it would be when the clothes swung with her movements. At the same time, I could vaguely feel the colour of sounds for a waving, shining dancing skirt in front of the sky, ocean and land in my head. I was ready to put myself into the scene of the improvisation. Every improvisation is an unpredictable adventure, and we were excited about the oncoming one.

I still remember how bewildered and anxious I was when the last time, one year ago, I hosted my session of CNIC Idea Jam. That was my first public performance of improvisation, and I was nervous about all the unknown and uncertainty. I was worried about the audience's perspective and was frightened by playing without a plan—*what if I could not catch the idea? What if I made mistakes? What if the audience thought I was not good enough? What if they did not like my music?*

Surprisingly, it was different this time.

I was not nervous, not at all, until ten minutes before our session started. When I heard the host introduce us, my heart hammered with the excitement we shared. Since Alexis instructed the participants to hide from the Zoom screen before we started, my view of the screen became the same as the audience's. The vision made part of me feel like a viewer instead of a performer. In that instant, I wondered from which seat I was thinking and watching. I had no idea about what was coming before it came. I felt so curious—*what would happen? What would I see? What would I sense? How could I respond?* I was thrilled about the unknown, but at the same time, I was confident that no matter what appeared, we could take it, play, create, and have fun. The praxis of improvisation had changed my thinking habits and concept of performance.

I did not have time to think or doubt when the moment came. In that instant, there was only surrender, nothing else. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and prepared to jump into the realm of visual arts and dancing to find my position. When Charles' video showed up, Mary's strokes appeared on the screen, and Alexis elegantly stepped into the canvas. I stopped trembling and sensed the tone and rhythm immediately. I looked at the screen, and sounds emerged, twirled, reshaped, and then connected to the present. *Which key should it be?* I started with one single note, listened to the sound, watched the exotic scene, and then a simple theme came out through my fingertips. It seemed easy to draw myself into the flow. Yes, it was a flow, a tide, a wave that carried all of us together, moved spontaneously, dived in and shared the moments.

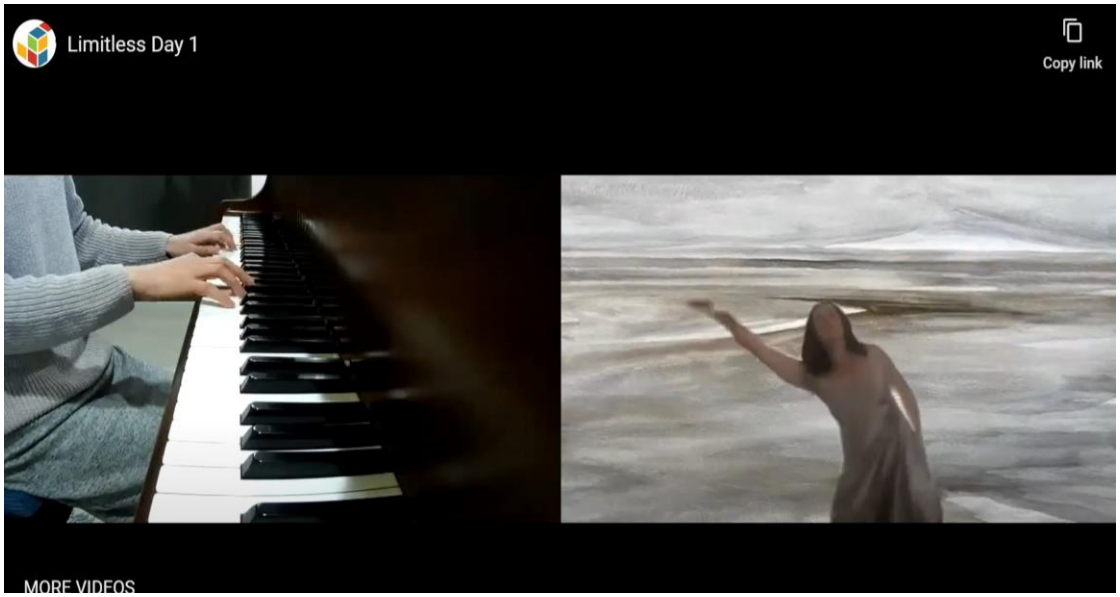


Figure 6. The screen image of our collaborative performance.

The scene I saw from the laptop screen seemed to extend beyond the frame, dragging me in to become part of the landscape. The tempo of the film was smooth, with an irregular rhythmic pattern, which made vivid movements of the images. I saw colours and strokes dancing with Alexis' arms and body, inviting my fingers to join in. Alexis' gestures and movements and the flashes from her golden skirt were naturally assimilated into the painting bringing the artwork alive. Sometimes, her fingertips became dim while she was moving, creating a visual effect that she fused with the canvas and turned into part of the painting. I listened to the music as if it was being played by someone else. The improvisation sounded like a pilgrim humming a hymn in the desert and then becoming a lonely troubadour playing an air on his lute. Those golden, gray, and blue marks turned into dunes, sky, and ocean, shined and spread, all limitless.

We made it.

In the moment, here and there

When I performed on the physical stage, I always imagined myself playing in a huge bubble in which all the interruptions were blocked from the outside. I had to

mentally isolate myself and pause all connections within my immediate environment to become fully concentrated. My vision would be focused on my fingers and keyboard while playing, and the audience came into my sight only when I stood up and bowed.

In my earlier experience of performing online, I could fully sense myself and put myself into the music, listen to the sounds and check my fingering positions since I was physically playing in my practice room, a familiar environment. Furthermore, the image of the audience was limited to the little frame of the laptop screen, and I did not stare at them while playing.

It was a whole new experience for me this time to watch myself performing when it was taking place. I could see the complete picture of the "stage" on the screen since I had to watch Alexis' movements and changing scenes to synchronize with collaborative improvisational work. In the meantime, I could view myself playing, a live stream of my fingers moving on the piano. It was dreamlike to play the roles of performer and witness at the same time, and a part of me tried to grasp this peculiar, surreal feeling in the music I was making. How curious! Looking at my fingers travelling with Alexis' dancing and Mary's paintings rhythmically, I felt an invisible connection between our fingers on the piano keys, in the dance, on the computer, and holding paint brushes. Our improvisation linked all the time zones and spaces and our artistic selves for us. Each of us offered a here and now and created another here and now. I pondered, *was this performance bringing an encounter of immersion or emergence?*

I wondered who was leading whom. *Was Alexis led by the changing canvas as the film played? When Charles made the film, did he decide the tempo and rhythm, or did Mary's colour tones and strokes of the drawings conduct his design?* I looked at Alexis moving in front of the dynamic shifting images, feeling my music was evoked and led by her dazzling performance, the changing colours, and the animated pulse from the virtual background. But at some moments, when I had to look at my fingers and keyboard, I played on my own by following the atmosphere and path we created. I let my music choose the way to go at that moment and completely trusted that we would stay in a harmonic interplay. We were all in the same artwork. Each of us became one of the

threads, weaving, travelling and following to shape the artwork. No one was the leader at the time. We were playing together.

While getting ready to modulate to a new phrase, I was surprised that Mary's photos appeared on the screen. Charles told us that the video was about 4 minutes and 30 seconds long, and Mary's photos would be the coda of the film. *How could 4'30'' be so short?* I was reluctant to leave this journey, but I had to turn the beginning chord of the next phrase into the finale of this improvisational piece.

We were all ecstatic when the audience's faces appeared on the screen again. The result was beyond our imagination. Before the performance, technology issues were the thing we worried about, as we could control the machines at each end but could not predict what would happen behind and between the machines. We had prepared to accept that mechanical variations might become part of our improvisation. However, the issue seemed out of our minds while we were concentrating on the performance. We were lucky enough that technology eventually played the role of a supporter as well as a collaborator in our improvisation, helping us to play on the same ride even though we were almost six thousand kilometres from each other.

I reflected on my own experiences of stage anxiety before. Even though I would practice my repertoire hundreds of thousands of times before the performance, I felt panic because I could not stop anticipating what would happen if any accident occurred—hitting wrong notes, forgetting music, or losing control of my fingers. I had the image in my head that everything would end if a mistake happened. *The situation would become a disaster, and I would be screwed*. This imagined scenario scared me before walking onto the stage every time. Even when I was playing an improvisational performance, I would picture tons of different ways to flub it. Although those terrible situations never truly happened, this terrifying imagination never stopped.

But strangely, I found myself not being bothered by the fear of imaginary mistakes and disasters this time. The practice of improvisation had prepared me to surrender and accept the unknown and accident—let it happen, let it be, and play with what comes to me. The unknown is not terrifying, and a crisis is not a dead-end anymore.

All my daily practices not only improved my techniques and knowledge of improvisation but also my attitude. I am now confident to accept whatever happens, welcome unforeseen risks without fear, appreciate my teammates' work, and adapt myself to the changing situation on the stage. In addition, the meetings and discussions before our performance, although short, built trust and understanding in the relationships between each of us, and that permitted us to play without worry. A stage is a place in which we trust, share, and play. We created a stage and played with its possibilities, as Nachmanovitch (2019) states: "We don't need to content ourselves with playing on the stage; we can play with the stage" (p. 152).

When I watched Tim Ingold's (2012) presentation, *Thinking through Making,* he pointed out that "every artifact is on its way to be something else" (5:42). His words beautifully remind me that creating is an ongoing journey in which a creator witnesses and follows what is unfolding on the way. Each artwork shapes and reshapes itself, and artists attend to celebrate every action during its birth. The journey never ends, and a maker will always have a chance to take, transform, make, and re-make. Looking at every performance I have done from this point of view, all the wrong notes I played were points within the "journey-landscape[11]" (Fels, 1999); I became able to appreciate my journey from a macro perspective. I was on a hero's journey; I became the journey. As I improvised, my improvisation was shaping me. As I accepted all the good and bad in my improvisation, I accepted all the good and bad of myself. From what I received, I saw possibilities.

Our performance, although stopped at 4'30", is not finished. My first experience of an online group improvisation spreads out a broader map of improvisation in my mind and will continue. We ended the performance as a fermata, and soon, it became the beginning of the next journey.

[11] According to Fels (1999), journey-landscape "is both action and space realized in interaction through time. The term acknowledges a recognition and reading of landscape and journey as simultaneously enacted through time, action and space, each embodied within and through the other interchangeably" (p. 15).

Scene II

Emergence

Invitation and welcoming

After the pandemic, people started to move back to the normal life track—friends met and hugged physically, and classes and conferences were held in person again. So, it did not take me too long when Alexis asked me if I was interested in attending the conference in Ottawa to present another collaborative improvisational performance with her and Charles. “Why not?” I replied, “I believe it’s a good time for us to do more and to see each other in the real world.”

Alexis, Charles, and I have been discussing more possibilities of discovering group improvisation for a while. Although the three of us never met in person and could only communicate through emails and online meetings, we already felt natural working as a team.

New communication methods have emerged since the pandemic started in 2019. Modern technological communication platforms have brought opportunities to experience teaching and performing through the Internet. Technologies restricted human beings in some ways, but on the other hand, new technology broadened the horizon that forced people to cross the boundaries and created new approaches to communication, performance, teaching, and learning. For performing artists, the pandemic, in the beginning, was closing every door. Artists were pushed to employ technologies to continue teaching and performing for survival and community services and soon found their engagement with technology led to a new world. My teammates and I were far apart. Before the pandemic, none of us could imagine playing together from two ends of Canada. In our earlier online performance, Alexis, Charles, and I discovered that we could create some extraordinary effects that could not be done when we performed on stage in person. Although we were excited about the journey we had embarked upon through technology, we still missed the intimacy of standing side by side on stage.

Since we were all busy and in different time zones, we did not have many chances to talk online but had to discuss the conference details through emails. We would keep improvisation as the main topic of our discussion and the scheme of our performance, and we were confident and trusted each other because we already had experience creating as a group. Besides preparing our individual speaking parts, confirming whether the conference could offer the facilities and spaces we needed was a crucial factor we had to work on. In our understanding, there was no piano in the conference place, and we did not know what kind of projector they had. These instruments played decisive roles in our presentation. However, although we had an online meeting and several emails back and forth with the conference organizers, we never received assured answers about the equipment before we arrived at the Ottawa Arts Gallery—that information arrived only half an hour before the conference opened.

Our first activity on the agenda was a welcoming improvisation party. It was an informal program our team offered to the conference, aimed to set a playful, relaxing, and creative tone and to welcome people at the beginning of the event. Nevertheless, I was a bit startled when I saw the instrument the conference provided. It was a plain electric keyboard. Though it has 88 keys, which satisfied one of my requirements, there was no damper pedal nor amplifier, and it could only make a dry sound at low volume.

I did not blame the conference staff because it was my oversight that I did not mention that a pedal and an amplifier should come with the keyboard in the email. It was the first lesson I learned from this experience—while asking for an instrument from others, do not take their knowledge and quality of the instrument for granted.

I looked at the inadequate instrument and found the drama in my mind was running fast…

What? Are you kidding me?

Oh, come on, you call this thing a piano? For a conference presentation?

How can I perform with this toy?

That's great…I crossed the whole Canada to play music here, and now, people must think I am a bad pianist when they hear this!

Calm down! You are professional, and you are an improviser.

You came here to enjoy making and sharing art with friends.

With whatever you have, you will have fun with these wonderful people!

I asked the conference staff again and felt frustrated confirming there was no portable pedal coming with the keyboard. I realized that I had to accept the reality—I got the material that did not align with my expectations, but the show must go on.

I did not have time to grumble because the next challenge came soon. In our earlier discussion with the conference organizers, we assumed we could create a smooth traffic flow by arranging the welcoming activity in an open cafeteria, where people could see and join us right after checking in at the reception table by the gallery gate. Unfortunately, when we finally stood at the place, we looked at every corner and could not find an appropriate spot with enough spaces and plugs for all of us and the facilities. Besides, the cafeteria was crowded because all the participant organizations were setting up their tables there. We had no other way but to find another space as soon as possible. Someone pointed at a studio room at the end of the hallway, and it seemed the only place we could move to at that moment.

Alright, what a disaster…

An awful keyboard and a hidden room for the first show!

No one could find us!

Think positively! No one will see how bad you are now…

Er…well…

(I rolled my eyes in my mind)

Isn't this playful?

I sighed, and kept wondering if all of these complications would work out.

Hey, are you an improviser or not? It's time to improvise!

We started to move. I put my backpack on my shoulder and held the keyboard in my arms, rushing to the workshop room. I was still worried because the time was short, and we did not have any idea about the arrangement yet.

Nevertheless, the moment was touching for the flexibility and reciprocal actions. As we ran to move and reset all the machines, tables, and chairs, I felt grateful that everyone's presence was the best practice of improvisation. We adapted to the environment and facilities without complaint or irritation. We had a goal, and we knew there were many ways to reach our goal. Although people dressed appropriately for the opening social event of the conference, none of us was disturbed by the suits or high heels while wiping the blackboard, moving tables, stacking chairs, or washing rags at the fastest tempo we could run. Besides my teammates and the conference staff, some early-arrived attendees saw our needs and came to contribute their hands spontaneously. I believed our passion radiated and must have been contagious since everyone was cheerful and energetic even though there was a lot of work in hand. The people who came to help participated in and witnessed the praxis of improvisation, and they stayed to join our welcoming activity.

In-between expectation and reality

Before I arrived at the conference, I had a picture in my head that the activity would be offered in a large, open space. We could project the images onto a wide screen or the clean white wall, and I would play an acoustic piano, and the sound was, of course, bright and loud. We planned to put huge blank papers on the wall and offer painting materials such as watercolours, pastels, and crayons. The participants would be immersed in the changing colours and sounds, dancing and drawing around the room.

But the reality was a bit different. We got a small workshop room in a narrow, long shape and could only have a couple of minutes to set it up plainly. There was a small screen, not much bigger than a home television. The projector was fixed on the ceiling, and the room lights could not adjust for the projection properly. We quickly decided not to use the screen after some simple tests since we all agreed that projecting the images onto the white wall made a better result for an interactive improvisation. I could finally have the first try on the unfamiliar keyboard and found that although it was hard to create

smooth melodies without a damper pedal, there were various sound effects on this simple instrument. What if I design a soundscape instead of melodies?

The fog started to lift.

The outline of the trail emerged.

I could see curiosity and expectation on their faces when people walked into the room. We had to start on time even though we did not have a chance to produce a new draft for the activity in the new space. But immediately, we found there was no need to communicate through language. We just started the performance naturally. Charles played one of the videos, I followed on the keyboard, and Alexis and her shadow appeared to chase the ocean waves and sunset on the screen.

The attendees watched our playing and started to join in with only one simple inviting gesture. The space was tight. Sketch papers and crayons were scattered on the floor, the images on the wall were small and high, and people could only play shadows with their hands and heads to fit the height. The sound I played was so soft that the audience in the back rows could barely hear it, and our working space was too narrow to move smoothly. But we had fun playing together. Irwin and Belliveau's (2018) words come to mind when I look back at this experience of collaborative improvisation: "The ephemeral space of the theatre, the breath we shared with viewers, allowed for the work to continue unfolding, as stories beget stories" (p. 39). Every person in the room co-created an artistic world in which people freely drew, danced and played with sounds and flowing images, shadows, colours, bodies, and senses. And I was surprised about how much we could play and invent with so few material resources. *Improvisation is an attitude*. When we are willing to play, the most ordinary things around us become extraordinary ingredients for improvisation.

Figure 7. People played with shadows and images in the welcoming activity.

This opening activity was a short session, but the atmosphere of the event was successfully introduced and settled. We accepted and improvised with all the imperfections. In between the expectation and reality, there was a capacity to play, to music, and to create.

Improvise, on the edge of chaos

Although I practiced and prepared for every performance and teaching, it was hard to escape when unpredictable, uncontrollable situations occurred to interrupt the activities at some moments. A wrong note, a student's challenging voice, or an unfamiliar musical motif from my teammate in a duet could cause a crisis. When I was trapped in the unmanageable situation and feeling dangerous and bewildered like a butterfly in strong wind, even if just an instant, "*Chaos*!" was what I cried in mind and was what I wished I could avoid. However, improvisation offered me a different insight into the chaos by its key features of unforeseen and flexibility. As mentioned earlier, Fels (2003) indicates that "Performance is realized on the fine edge of chaos, a space where possibilities seduce and life dances into being" (p. 175). According to Waldrop (1992, as cited in Fels, 2004), "the edge of chaos" is a place where "patterns of interrelations are continually created and recreated through an 'endless dance of co-emergence'" (p. 80). I

invent music inside this transition zone, on the edge of chaos, travel, discover, play, and embrace order and disorder to improvise. The continuous shifting between structure and unpredictability creates liminal spaces and brings new imaginations and vision, as Barrett (2000) points out: “chaos theory proposes that systems are most creative when they operate with a combination of order and chaos” (p. 228). On the edge of chaos, all the mess, trouble, absence, and discomfort have opportunities to transform and find a new order. On the edge of chaos, I have chances to discover hidden meanings, open concealed entrances and see what or how the thing becomes.

Through improvisation, I realized that relocating myself and discovering the threads and offerings in an unanticipated circumstance would direct me to create a new order when the unexpected moments came. Montuori (2003) explains that “Creative thought seeks to make sense of phenomena that appear to be chaotic, and seeks to create a higher order simplicity—one that incorporates the complex, disorderly phenomena in a broader, more inclusive, more open perspective” (p. 243). Nachmanovitch (2019) emphasizes that the improviser’s attitude is the fruit of all the preparation. While improvising, “Everything flows into the creative act in progress” (p. 2). He suggests that when a thing goes out of the plan, “come prepared, but be willing to accept interruptions and invitations” (p. 2). In improvisation, accepting the offerings from the chaos is the starting point of creation. Limitations turn into possibilities that could be embedded and played with.

Stepping into the unknown and keeping playing leads to transformation. The praxis of improvisation trained me to keep calm and balance while creating on the edge of chaos to discover more chances from it. I could transform chaos into the birthplace of opportunities and energy to create a new sound. My preparation was not only for one single time and space but for improvising anywhere, at any time. In between the plan I made and the reality I encountered were surrender, acceptance, and fearless play.

Thomasson (2017) mentions, “In the space between the invitation and the act of engaging, is the risk, the fear, the resistance, the tension: the active construction sites” (p. 69). Rather than being stopped by fear, improvisation helped me to embrace fear and

accept not-knowing and unwelcoming circumstances to relocate myself and go through and dwell within that risky in-between space to conceive a new beginning. Although improvisation is unsecured, unpredictable, risk-taking, and fearful, it brings new possibilities. What I have in hand could be played in any way to create colourful and enjoyable experiences. An accident is an invitation to an unforeseen adventure.

I never know what I can see before jumping in. While unwelcomed incidents tugged on my sleeves (Fels, 2012), announced a stop moment (Appelbaum, 1995) that called me to attention, fear was the first thing I perceived. Again and again, in the experiences of improvisation, I practiced facing my fear and embracing my vulnerabilities. I realized that the fear of being imperfect always held me back at the first moment because being perfect was my comfort zone and could keep me away from being criticized. Willingness to surrender and accept imperfection is the key to crossing the threshold.

I found that improvising in a conference, in front of real audiences, became a challenge for me—it was ironic and was what I could not imagine before the pandemic. I was nervous the first time I performed online because the audience was from various places all over the world. Every note I played and every word I said would last forever. However, now, playing in person, I became uneasier than online since I could not turn off the screen and pretend the audience was not there. I was not in my quiet piano room, playing a familiar piano with well-settled cameras and high-quality microphones. Instead, I could see people walking in and out and hear their whispers. I saw some of the attendees holding their smartphones to record us, and I noticed that some people stood by the door, observed for a while, and left. I could not concentrate because every act of the audience interrupted my thoughts. I must keep myself in a wholehearted openness—no matter what I saw or heard, I had to surrender to my fear and accept what arrived to keep moving forward.

Let it happen

After the welcoming activity, our team members finally had time to reconfirm the shape of the coming presentation. We checked the space, figured out all the equipment we had, and found we needed to slightly adjust our plan again. I strongly requested a better keyboard for our formal session because the presentation room was big. If I used the same instrument, the sound would be too soft to be heard. We were improvising, not only in the performance but in every step toward the performance.

Our presentation was in early Sunday morning, and according to our experiences attending other presenters' sessions, few people came for early programs. I wondered how many people would show up.

It's ok. Fewer people, less pressure.

It will be a good chance to try things out, and we might have an opportunity to have a deeper discussion with the participants.

It was a big seminar room with a high-end projector and a wide screen. Though the screen was hung high and could not be adjusted, we were satisfied and grateful. We would find a way to play with it. The space was spacious, and thankfully, I got a new keyboard with a damper pedal, various sound effects, and rich, loud sound. We arrived early, so we had plenty of time to test all the equipment and our positions. The procedure of setting up furnishings helped us to feel close to the space. The conference room became our territory and would become our playground later.

In this long procedure of preparing the presentation, I started to consider surrender in a different way. Instead of taking myself as the character who actively jumped into the unknown, I prepared myself to locate acceptance before surrendering this time. I stayed where I was, worked with and witnessed everything and action occurring

around me without presupposition and resistance, welcoming all the happenings and letting them direct me. When I surrendered before accepting, it was as if I was diving into a river and allowing the water to carry me toward the ocean. But when I opened and accepted first, *I became the ocean*. I became flexible, relaxed, and confident. I embraced countless resources.

Unsurprisingly, only a few participants showed up at the time. But a small group allowed us to start the presentation with a relaxing opening. We introduced our improvisations and gave a short performance. Later, every attendee had an opportunity to come up to play with us.

One of the participants came to the stage and danced beautifully. Her delicate and flowing movements made me believe that she must be a skilled dancer. However, when this attendee reflected on her improvisation, she conveyed she did not dance. She said she spent a long time gathering the courage to dance in front of strangers to show her support to us. I could relate to her since the group improvisation almost became a solo performance because of the small number of participants. Besides, no matter how few audience members there were, exposing one's unfamiliar skills to strangers was never easy. The fear of imperfection would stop our steps and generate judgment from inside ourselves. To step onto the stage in the circumstance we faced at that time required trust, self-trust, and willingness to surrender and accept.

The other participant, who gave an impressive performance and discussion the day before, was invited to our session. She came to the piano to play with me. In our talk later, she said that although dance is her expertise, she chose to play the piano to discover what would happen if she tried something out of her comfort zone. At the beginning of her joining in, she watched me play for a while, then just picked a key and pressed it down, *throwing out an interruption*. She was not a pianist and did not play with what I created but simply added random sounds. The rhythm she made changed the sound effects immediately. I accepted her offer and altered the style of the music to make our duet. We started to respond to each other by listening, welcoming, accepting, and answering the voices we heard. Both of us could feel the sounds, movements, and images

spontaneously interacting. When we started to listen, we shifted the way we moved to connect, and the altering gestures co-created and re-created the space. The climate in the room improvised with us. When an interruption appeared, resistance would have stopped the continuance of our collaboration, but welcoming action and friendly response led to a vital resonance.

Playground

In the conference agenda, we committed to offering a playground after our formal session for all the participants to engage voluntarily. The design of this activity was the extension of our presentation, an interdisciplinary, collaborative improvisation. Besides the conference attendees, the conference staff guided some high school students to our playground. We explained our ideas about this activity and invited people to play together. After a couple of minutes of waiting, one of the students eventually stood up and walked to the screen. It happened naturally that my improvisation teammate and the young man slowly walked toward each other from two sides of the screen and started to dance a duet and take the shadows and colours as their partners. While I was playing the music, trying to catch up, a girl came to me and asked if she could join me on the piano. I did not stop but moved to the lower register to pass her the higher sound area of the keyboard. I could feel her confusion in the beginning, not knowing when and how to add her sounds. She uncertainly pressed some keys, and when she heard my responses, she seemed to find the confidence to make more sounds and gradually found a way to improvise with me. Later, another girl came, and I retreated to surrender the whole music part to them. As I watched this happening from an audience's position, I was stunned by these young people's fearlessness and freedom. They jumped, turned, crouched low and stretched high. They reached their arms to the falling leaves on the screen and ran to the ocean waves as on the summer beach. They showed pure enjoyment welcoming and immersing in the unforeseen moments.

Click to listen to 𝄡 Piano Duet in Ottawa Conference

Every person in the room was engaged in playful, liberating, creative actions in various ways. When some of them were dancing and moving in the artwork, some participants stood behind Charles, watching and following his camera movements while he was shooting a film of this event. These observers chose to engage in this activity by witnessing the improvisation happening through a particular angle and lens. I noticed some others were moving in the back side of the screen, seeing and creating a different visual effect. I saw the shadows from two sides of the screen interact, reaching and touching their fingertips, synchronizing and communicating through their gestures. The music seemed to lead the atmosphere in the room at some moments and sometimes was guided by the colour tones and movement styles of those who participated.

This is magic! This is my dream playground.

Figure 8. Improvisation duet in the playground.

Figure 9. *Participants played the keyboard, in front of the screen.*

Figure 10. *From the back side of the screen.*

Participating and observing this collaborative improvisation is a whole new experience for me. Previously, I always stared at my fingers in solo improvisation for a sense of security and enjoyed the peacefulness and concentration in the unrehearsed musical invention. I could focus on the sounds and listen to the responses from my imagination and environment. After becoming relaxed about improvised performing, I

now have time to make quick decisions about whether I accept or how to play arriving ideas that sound upon the keyboard. Nevertheless, the experience of improvising with a group of artists from different fields pushed me to move my vision and all the senses out of my hands, keyboards and my comfort zone. One of Keith Sawyer's (1999) rules of improvisation is to "listen to the group mind" (p. 18). Taking part in collaborative improvisation, I had to watch the changing images on the screen, perceive the colours and the tempo and bring myself into a broader journey landscape. At the same time, I followed the dancer's movements, harmonized her expressions, and responded to her responses to the images and sounds. Sometimes I waited, sometimes I was pushed by the music, and sometimes I moved to synchronize. When I changed my position, I varied the way I shared the moment and space with others. The silent messages I listened to in the group improvisation were delivered by each artist's spontaneous movements, music, and images. I was wandering and playing in this changeful, lively, and inspiring space.

I did not feel busy or jittery about catching the running ideas and responses that swirled around me. Instead, I felt fulfilled and cheerful. The joy of collaborative improvisation arrived through understanding that each participant in the group listened and was being listened to, cared and was being cared for, held and was being held while we played together. When I offered a gesture, a sound, a response, I knew someone would receive; when I gave, I knew others would appreciate. Our experience of collaborative interplay through improvisation resonated with Bava's (2020) statement: "In play we improvise from within the relational space to create generative, meaningful processes of relating and co-creating. In play we have the capacity to connect socially and create the social" (p. 156). The trust, reciprocal relationship was the catalyst of playful collaborative improvisation. Hearts linked, ideas connected, no one was a stranger in improvisation.

After our playground event, I asked the girl who came to play the keyboard with me how she felt about improvising with people, images, and sounds in this experience. With a big smile on her face, she said, "It's fun!" I kept asking: "Were you afraid?" She said, "In the very beginning, yes, a little bit. But soon, I felt great and had lots of fun."

Her simple answer touched me deeply. The unrestricted, playful environment we constructed gave her permission to enter and create, to encounter the pure happiness of playing and the energy of improvisation. The participants in our playground naturally became playmates, and they improvised like children in the games. They communicated through eye contact, facial expressions and body language without oral conversation and worries. They walked into not-yet-knowing and then found their way to play on the edge of chaos through collaborative improvisation. Sounds, colours, and people collectively set up the stage of the playground for the players, and their actions kept re-shaping and making the space one of the elements in the improvisation.

What I perceived in the playground event related to Ingold's (2017) description about participating in art activities: "genuine participation is transformative, not just adopting, but carrying on a conversation" (28:12). Deep involvement in collaborative improvisation was not simply an act of fitting in but generating energy to mutate and continue a shared creation. On an individual level, improvisation requires surrender and acceptance to enter the group and create with people spontaneously. On a communal level, improvisation involves connection, communication, and negotiation to co-create. I witnessed stop moments happening between people and in the movements, moving and transforming. One might follow another's move and form a duo or reject the other one's invitation and forge a visual duel. Every *here and now* kept changing because of the players' varying, improvisational presence.

Emergence

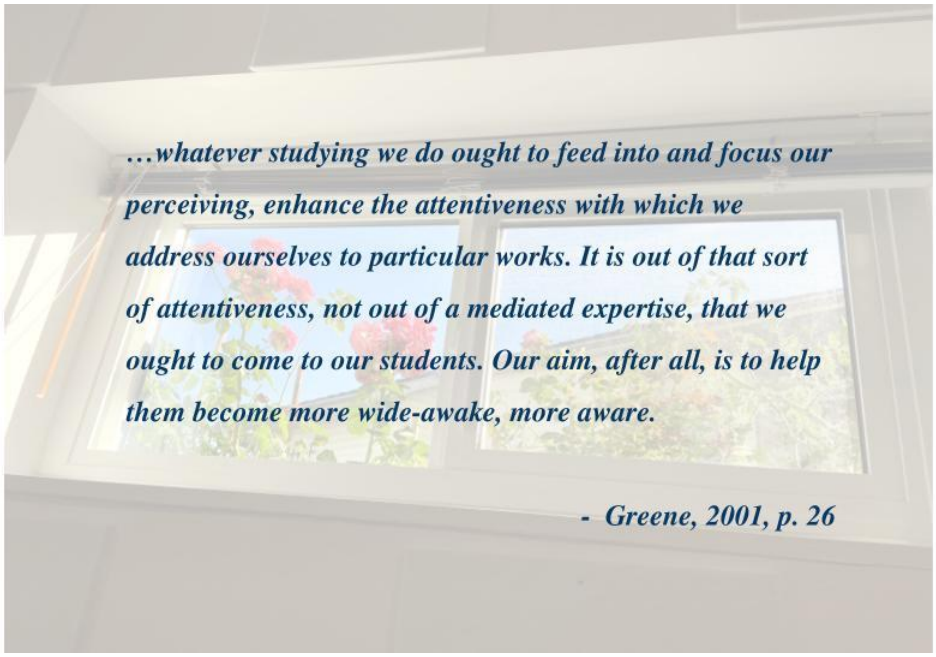
"Here and now, this liminal space of meaning-making requires your presence."

Bava et al., 2022, P. 3

While checking in the moments, I unfolded the unfolding, looking for the connections between past, present, and future. Every *now* comes from something that happened in the past and leads to future stories. Every *now* requires presence. Every *now* involves beholding, thinking, feeling, dreaming, and decisions and turns into the past immediately. Individuals in an improvisation group collage every *now* by their ideas and movements, step toward the next instant, and string the moments into an animated artwork.

Group improvisations occur whenever we are engaged in relationships. Not solely in art co-creating but in our lives, between friends, colleagues, teachers and students, parents and children, wives and husbands, employers and employees, and strangers sitting beside us on the bus. In these *betweens,* we offer and receive, move back and forth, hold and release, continue every action in the way of reciprocation. In these *betweens,* we understand and reflect, acknowledge and thank, chase and retreat, and love and hate to transform ourselves and the relationships we co-create. Every being triggers becoming. When meaning emerged, I was there, immersing, witnessing, and sharing the moments of improvisation.

Act V Finale



From a dissonant sound…

The roses outside of my piano room window were blooming again. Sitting by the piano, I looked at those bright red blossoms, stunned by the beauty and energy they expressed in the shining summer sunlight. During the past couple of years, roses came and went with the seasons, witnessing and sharing the moments of transformation inside this space. Every summer, when they bloomed, I improvised for them. And today, with their accompaniment, I laid my fingers on the piano keys, closed my eyes, and made the first sound.

Oh… a discordant chord!

Click to listen to 13 From A Dissonant Sound

The knifelike, jarring sound effects from the opening tone cluster pounded my eardrums at first instance and announced a provocative prologue. I held the keys, paused for a while, and listened to the extended disharmony. It was uncomfortable. I could hear

conflicts, collisions, and resistance hammering in the vibration. "*Well…chaos in the beginning,*" I thought. *What could I do about this harsh opening sound?* I had no clue. But I knew it was okay to try anything from there. As I moved one of my fingertips a half step down on the piano keys, the sound changed. The tension shifted, and the threads in the tangle of sound started to unwind and interact. I knew music had found its way. As the sound showed me its path, my fingers started to travel slowly. I did not know what I would create today, but I certainly knew that music would come, even though the opening sound was not as beautiful as I anticipated.

In a slow tempo, note by note, the song was initiated with an unsingable, atonal tone, not lovely at all. *Could I call it a melody? Could I call it music?* The sound I heard made me feel awkward. Anyway, I could not reject the tune because it was what was happening. Improvisation has taught me that possibilities were in the moments, in the arriving events, no matter if the sound was to my expectation or not. Refusal led to dead ends. Surrendering to the unknown and saying yes to offers led the way to launch the journey.

Bravery

Even though the tone sounded odd, and the shape of the musical piece was still unidentified, I felt peaceful while continuing my improvisation. Looking at my fingers moving on the piano, I calmly allowed myself to wait, listen, feel, and genuinely play for what was emerging. As I played, listened, reflected, and improvised my music, my teaching and my writing, improvisation and performative inquiry were integrated beautifully into my research. Improvising as a performative inquirer, I perceived and appreciated every moment of creating and every sound I played. The praxis of improvisation and performative inquiry permitted me to create and sing freely in the field of my research, writing, teaching, living, and music. Transformations are happening in me.

At the time I made that beginning sound, I could recognize my determination to trust my intuition in creating music, and this boldness led to assurance and the willpower to move forward. Looking back, it was a long way in cultivating self-confidence, self-

love, fearlessness, and the resolution to surrender, accept, and forgive before being able to trust myself. Through improvisation, I developed enough courage to make decisions and believe I could deal with unexpectedness and unwelcomeness when they occurred.

The self-confidence I sensed while improvising, especially when I pressed down the first key on the piano, still surprises me sometimes. I quite enjoy the feeling of being assured and stable but am not fully used to that certainty yet because I rarely sensed it at an early age. Cold hands, frozen fingers, tight shoulders, and shallow breath were what I felt in the performance when I was young because fear of making mistakes occupied my attention and dominated my body. Even though I tried various methods to relieve my tension and relax muscles before walking onto the stage, I struggled with performance anxiety. I was rigorously demanded to avoid mistakes and pursue perfection in classical music training. These requirements became my obsession because preciseness and excellence were my essential attempts during the past several decades. The fear of imperfection carried out threats of being blamed, being labelled, and being abandoned. The practice and effort of seeking perfection also influenced my lifestyle and health. I was always nervous, asking for a high standard on every work I did, devoting all my energy to fit the rules and frames, and I suffered from depression and anxiety.

Improvisation, to create music spontaneously without written notations, was tough for me at the beginning of my research because of its features of risk and unknown. Pursuing aesthetics and flawlessness was once my only goal in music, teaching, and life. In my early experience of improvisation, I tended to produce smooth and pretty tunes because it was a secure way to entertain my audience and receive approval. Making unattractive sounds was never my tendency since creating controversial music was risky. And taking risks, which meant the possibility of being imperfect and disliked, was what I tried to escape from. However, devoting my effort to avoiding and fixing unpleasant sounds and mistakes made me tense and frustrated while improvising. Focusing on composing adorable melodies stopped me from free-creating because I was so afraid of making unpleasant sounds. Even an accidental misstep could disturb me and become an unmovable scar in my mind. The fear of not being good enough led to my failed experiences and made me decline the invitation to improvisation. The missing part of my

attitude to treating a mistake was not found and rebuilt until I had a chance to work on improvisation again.

I asked myself what the difference was this time. *How did it happen? How did improvisation change me?* When I tried to summarize my transformation with a single word, I found *bravery* could be suitable.

Being brave did not mean over-confidence or unrealistic optimism, but having honest self-understanding, being aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, and recognizing when to move and when to pause. When the opportunities appeared, and I noticed them, bravery made me grab the emerging moments and take action. When I needed to stop, bravery prepared me to accept the situation and learn from the experience without self-blame.

When ugly moments sing

Although I tend to control risks in my life, ugly moments come unexpectedly and might happen in any situation and relationship. Dissonant sounds on the piano, a student's emotional tears in the classroom, an argument at the breakfast table, even a long waiting line in the bank could ruin an ideal daily plan and be considered ugliness from my point of view. How can I continue the work when my script is interrupted by an ugly accident? How can I move on when a beautiful musical piece is disturbed by an unintentional sound? I always remember hearing hope from my student Bonnie's happy laughter while creating *The Ugliest Song*. How can I transform ugliness? *Does ugliness contain a meaning, tell a story, or sing a song? How can I discover hope and happiness from ugly moments? Could ugliness lead the way and tell me a possible answer?*

I checked the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) and found the etymology of *ugly:* "Middle English, from Old Norse *uggligr*, from *uggr* fear; akin to Old Norse *ugga* to fear" and the modern definition: "offensive or unpleasant to any sense". The connection between an unpleasant condition and fear gave me an understanding of my

dislike of ugliness. Ugliness created my inside or outside conflict—losing balance, order, security, stability, and harmony. What I perceived and experienced before embarking on my dissertation as ugliness terrified me—missed notes, disharmonies, a slipping rhythm in my performance—the ugliness I feared would lead to dreadful risks, possible hazards, and my discomfort. *Can I reach beauty if I avoid ugliness? Is there a dichotomy between beauty and ugliness? Or is improvisation a progression of becoming which connects beauty and ugliness?*

I paused on the unexpected dissonant sounds, held them and listened to see if I could find any clue from them. Although discordant sounds were unbearable for me, I had to stay and listen carefully to find the resolution for the dissonance and find a way to continue the improvisation. Besides stopping myself from considering those conflicting tones as wrongness, funnily, I had to hold myself from doubting if those sounds were bad enough—I chuckled as I found myself trying to find a standard for ugliness. Again, improvisation reminded me to lift the restrictions and relax rules. Keeping my attitude open and loose would help me to see and seize the opportunities when they appeared in the crises.

I still remember how hard it was for me to listen to the recordings of my improvisation in the beginning. I felt awkward while listening to the sound clips, even though I did it alone. I could hear hesitation, embarrassment, and fear in my invention while listening. Even if I generated a smooth melody and harmonious accompaniment, I knew it was my pretending to be bold since the unnaturalness in the music was clearly recognizable. Sound is honest. Sound frankly articulates every thought, emotion and feeling in the performer's mind and body. The vibration in the sounds creates atmosphere, and the audience can perceive all those sentiments from what they hear and feel. When I listened to my early improvisation, I was horrified by how much fear my music expressed and the harsh judgment I gave myself. Listening to my improvisation guided me to look into myself honestly at that time—I was an anxious, uncertain, unconfident person, carrying all the old mistakes on my shoulders.

The awareness was painful but straight. Nonetheless, to find my chance, I had to say YES to the agony, to the discomfort, and to the disorder in that apprehension.

The strife in the ugly sounds invited me to walk in to explore what happened in the moment. Being surrounded by disorder and looking for ways in the catastrophe was confusing in the beginning. But, if I carefully listened, I could find the relationships between the threads, feel the dynamics in the waves, and the path would show itself from the mist. Over and over, the practice of listening to and improvising from ugly sounds nudged me to face my unwanted issues and guided me to admit and explore ugliness. Encountering and exploring ugly sounds cultivated my bravery and belief and rebuilt my thinking habits. The ugliness I perceived did not mean I was not good enough. Every unwelcome event brought an opportunity to learn and change. The more I listened to those ugly sounds, the more beauty I found from within—the beauty of transformation and the beauty in me.

I developed bravery by facing ugliness and finding opportunities and beauty from ugliness. Listening to the sound recordings gradually became pleasant for me. I did not focus on the glitches in the music anymore but appreciated the integrated soundscape I created. I had the confidence to listen to the sounds I made and acknowledged myself as having the ability to convert the unwelcome into joy.

The music I invented and how I felt while listening to my improvisation mirrored my revolution. Now, I do not judge anymore when I listen to my creation. Not fearing off-key sounds makes improvisation natural and genuine. I enjoy the music I play but also feel okay when the music I create is not that enjoyable. Without fear and criticism, I can perceive the music wholeheartedly and consider more possibilities with my musical knowledge. Sometimes, I am amazed by my creative arrangements of the sounds and curious about the hidden messages that my improvisation carries. Sometimes, I cannot wait to go back to the piano to play since the music I listen to inspires the next improvisation. Sometimes, my experience with improvisation motivates me to interpret a classical piece in a different way. I play with various dynamics, sound layers, or articulations to see what happens. I am fearless in encountering every sound I generate

and facing my true self with all the imperfections, and I am sure that I am worthy of being loved.

Being brave does not mean ignoring or escaping from badness, but having the nerve to acknowledge and listen when trouble occurs. Furthermore, to reveal the meanings, solutions and beauties from the difficulties. Nachmanovitch (2019) remarks that "The discipline of improvisation is being comfortable with being uncomfortable" (p. 59). Imperfection used to be the last thing I wanted to confront because the ugliness led to my discomfort. I would focus my eyes on the missing part and regret and blame myself for letting the mistakes happen. Through practicing improvisation, I learned to listen to the unattractive voices, face the darkness, embrace my vulnerabilities, and find a chance to resolve the unlovely situations or accept them as what they were. In improvisation, I heard ugly moments sing to me—yes, ugly moments sing beautifully if I acknowledge their existence and genuinely listen to them. The displeasure of imperfection cannot hold me back anymore.

Every sound I listened to and played was a step in my journey of improvisation. Each step opened its universe from what was happening in the present, and my journey was composed of these connecting universes. I remembered the words I often told my students that while making music, we were building and exploring the relationships between the notes, not just the note itself. *What were these in-betweens telling me? How could I take the next step? What could I see at every footprint? What existed and coexisted in those universes? Were those situations and people in the events independent or interdependent? What did I feel while experiencing every step in the journey? Where did improvisation lead me?* My adventure of improvisation was initiated by listening, perceiving, following, and revealing every sound. When I concentrated on the sounds, even an ugly sound, I became willing to walk in to search within. I surrendered and allowed myself to wait, to try, to make mistakes, to accept offers, and to appreciate what I gave back to the gifts I received in improvisation. I merged myself into the sound and accepted what emerged from the sound.

Strongness and softness

Facing and embracing ugliness brought me not only courage but bodily relaxation. While improvising, I did not arrange detailed plans or try to find the way to go but just listened and let my fingers move. I used to doubt what to practice and how to practice improvisation, and I found that the exercises for improvisation were different from classical piano practice. My practice for improvisation was like developing a database. I collected musical patterns and styles when I created or listened to the music, then rehearsed them on the piano in various ways—training the fingers, playing on different keys, making variations, and combining the patterns. The goal of practicing was to become familiar with the skills and sounds and save them as possibilities. Practice in this way was enjoyable. I could spend hours investigating sounds, creating motifs, and experimenting with various sequences. When these musical ideas emerged in performance, my fingers could respond spontaneously and fluently. I was not afraid of forgetting or failing when I played with these musical materials because I knew there would be new related tunes arriving in the moment of play.

Without fear of misstep, I let the music find its way and guide me to enter a pure musical world. In which I trusted and cherished my free will and musical abilities; in which I sang what I was playing and played what I was singing. I might have an imagination about the musical style or tell a story in my mind, but if the music did not develop into my original idea, I would be happy to follow the arriving sounds to explore a different tone. Without worrying, I could feel the flowing atmosphere—music and time were moving together, and I could fully perceive myself at every moment. My hands and fingers were warm, my shoulders and muscles were loose, my breath was smooth, and I was aware of my travelling and transforming in liminal spaces of possibility.

Participating in group improvisation became fun and exciting. I threw myself into the stream while keeping the guidelines in mind—the guidelines my teammates and I set before the performance were not barriers but the way we made the game move on. I had to know when to follow, when to step back, and when to stop, and I could play freely on the same ride when the spotlight turned to me. When I was not in the center position, I

listened and felt the synchronization by which we were creating our collaborative art piece. I was immersed in the artistic world we shaped and enjoyed making supporting sounds for my partners.

Now, when I play a classical piece with printed music, I can keep my balance in the same way. I realize that the techniques, knowledge, and discipline I earned from classical music training are supporting me to play, have fun, create, and learn more. I can recognize and play with the offerings of classical music instead of seeing them as a fixed frame that limits my imagination and freedom. I still try my best to authentically represent every note and style the composers kept on the staves, but if I do something wrong by accident, I now let it go and keep moving on without feeling guilty. In addition, I feel curious and spontaneously pay increased attention to the structures and sound arrangements of classical music. Saving musical ideas from classical masterpieces for my improvisation was like learning from great composers. In the journey of improvisation in these years, I not only worked on my skills on the piano but practiced welcoming the unknown, trusting my body when it responded, and accepting and appreciating every sound I played. I realized that every note reflected the real me in the moment, and I trusted myself as a re-creator of the masterpiece. If I played something different from the printed music, it was a reminder—reminding me to check my body, memory, mind, or the way I practiced. I practiced facing my vulnerabilities and traumas, embracing the imperfections, and permitting myself to love myself unconditionally.

My improvisation kept transforming, and there was an evident difference when I created elegant melodies. Listening to my earlier recordings, I found myself only playing basic harmonies and patterns as accompaniment to support the melody part. Although I knew keyboard harmony well, I chose the most reliable approach and almost tried to hide the accompanying part to ensure I could invent pleasing sounds. But now, when I play melodic tunes, the sound arrangement becomes vibrant and sophisticated because I am not afraid anymore. I dare to and feel comfortable following my fingers and listening and freeing my imagination. Those complex extended chords were always in my head, but I refused to use them because there was no time to calculate while improvising, and I did not believe I could play those complicated sounds without counting. Now, I sincerely

trust my understanding as well as my immediate reaction and have become confident about my ability to play. Therefore, applying stacking chords becomes a subtle, natural, spontaneous reaction rebounding back and forth rapidly between my bodily senses and imagination.

Besides satisfaction and joy, there were dark moments in the early phase of practicing improvisation. Every exercise on the piano aroused inner doubts, conflicts, and debates. Very often, the old me and the sprouting new me fought fiercely on the way when I redeveloped myself little by little through improvisation. Playing in front of people was even like an internal battle, in which I struggled to get free of the wire of perfectionism. It was a bitter experience when I turned to look into those uneasy experiences of my young age, going through and sensing the pain again. I could not forecast what would happen nor decide what to do while reviewing the circumstances since those experiences might be hazy chaos buried deeply in my memory, and I found it impossible to control my feelings about them. I could only hold the hands of that younger me, walking with her, facing and feeling the sorrow and fear she confronted on the way, and telling her that she did nothing wrong. We, together, learned to accept the incidents, and no matter if I could rewrite those scenarios or forgive and coexist with them, I felt grateful for the opportunity to reconcile with the younger me.

I practiced treating myself tenderly and gently through improvisation and gradually recognized that improvisation must be an impossible mission without self-love and self-trust. Harsh self-criticism and self-blame would build the most severe barriers to improvisation. Every time I played an unexpected sound, I urged myself to continue without judgment, and when I found a new way to create from that unsatisfying note, I reminded myself how good I was. I saw myself as a student to build new habits, which took time and effort. I found myself becoming stronger and softer at the same time. Softness made me flexible with myself and other people and led me to put myself in my student's shoes to adjust my methods and attitudes while teaching. The softness led to my strongness because with an open and relaxing gesture, I could trust the approvals and accept the offers I received, and there was no more fear of mistakes and the unknown.

Surrender and acceptance become an attitude, not a passive manner but a welcoming gesture, and I am well-prepared for the changing world and life. I become softer to be able to tune myself when unexpected variations occur. I am stronger and believe I can deal with all circumstances, no matter good or bad, by improvisation. On some occasions, when I feel fearful, I accept fear and my fragile self. I am not afraid of fear because I embrace fear as part of my preparation. Fear cannot dominate me anymore.

Improvisation is not playing without preparation. As Alterhaug (2004) describes the preparation of improvisation: "This means that the performer is prepared to handle the unexpected, to handle an error as a new creative challenge, and, thus, to break with habitual patterns" (p. 105). An improviser prepares herself from every aspect—not only skills and knowledge but also the practice of surrender, acceptance, and forgiveness. The preparation made me feel comfortable and confident in the space between structures and disorder, to release creativity, to be in the presence, and to move on to the next moment. Alterhaug also mentions that when jazz musicians define improvisation, most of them would say they were just playing. When a jazz musician tries to plan too much, the whole group loses balance and enjoyment of play. Reflecting on my experiences of improvisation, it was when I trusted what I had, accepted what I did not have, and focused on the happenings in the moment that I could have fun in free creating. It was similar to riding a bicycle or swimming in the pool—I enjoyed the activities without conducting the movements purposefully after gaining the techniques. This reflection echoes Nachmanovitch (1990): "When skill reaches a certain level, it hides itself" (p. 74). Nachmanovitch describes the condition as "to become what you are doing" (p. 51), which is my experience of improvisation. I must trust what is happening and fully immerse myself in the music I am creating. If I keep any worry in mind, the unfolding path will be blocked.

It is hard to say which lesson came first. *Was it listening? Surrender? Acceptance? Forgiveness? Trust? Or love?* The evolution of my piano improvisation shaped a circulation of endless action and understanding. I realized that listening, surrender, acceptance, forgiveness, trust, and love co-exist as facets of my improvisation. Depending on where I put my attention as a musician or music educator in the moment,

each of these aspects emerged differently to show me the wisdom of improvisation. Praxis of improvisation guided me to rebuild relationships between music, my instrument, and myself by contributing wholehearted trust and love. I recalled a moment when my professor asked us to find a space in the classroom where we felt comfortable, and without thinking, I squeezed myself into the narrow space between the grand piano and the wall. I rested my hands on the piano cover, with my back against the wall. *Did I desire more backing when I chose to stay with the piano? Was I trying to oppose the restrictions and domination of piano training while I was still loving it?* I spent most of my life with the keyboards but could not give this intimate instrument complete trust and reliance. Little by little, improvisation helped me find the missing parts in the relationship between the piano and me. Sometimes, when the wandering ghost of an old thinking habit tries to capture me, judge me, or blame me, I now know how to kick it away, collect myself and move forward without a hurdle. Improvisation revealed its wisdom and qualities to me. These competencies have helped me step into the adventure of improvisation and have changed my attitude toward scholarship and life.

Pursuing a doctoral degree is a long, long way to go. It requires creativity, patience, awareness, discipline, mental durability and physical strength to live my life as a mother, a researcher, a student, and a teacher all at once. There are senses of fulfillment, growth, and, of course, hard times. Lacking confidence, losing goals, feeling anxious about deadlines, and worrying about the future…, and very often, I had self-doubt about why I was doing this work and wondered if I should withdraw from this marathon. Sometimes, I felt myself walking in the darkness, looking for the exit sign by some uncertain glimmers. The darkness was scary. But the flashing ideas and inspirations, the stimulating discussions and readings, and the encouragement and positive feedback from the professors and colleagues encouraged me to move forward step by step. In some confusing circumstances, I tried to recall my beginning point. *What brought me here? What made my decision to choose improvisation as my research field?*

As I thought back, I found I have been improvising my life since the moment I was determined to start this journey. Initiating the adventure of pursuing a doctorate was a brave decision to walk into the unpredictability, and accidentally bumping into

improvisation again and committing myself to study this subject was a self-challenge. When I chose to follow my heart, it was improvisation that brought me here. While I was unfolding the wisdom of improvisation, the ways I teach, live, and research were changed interactively. Improvisation connected every aspect of my being, and all the revolutions and impacts were reciprocally associated.

Research improvisation, improvise research

As I conducted my research by embedding improvisation in my piano teaching, playing, and life, I found that improvisation continually and spirally led my ways of being in the research. My practice of improvisation on the piano and my experience with aerial yoga on the swinging hammock awakened me to become aware of my student's obstacles as new improvisers. Improvisation helped me to find a new understanding of perfection, enabled me to perceive my students' feelings and resistance, listen to my students' voices and in time, learn to spontaneously change the lesson plan to attend to their needs. Performative writing and reflecting on the shared experiences of improvisation with my students enabled me to look into stop moments from various perspectives, reminded me to notice the hidden messages and evoked my curiosity and insights about piano teaching and learning. I improvised my research while researching improvisation.

Although introducing improvisation to my students was more complicated than I thought, the perspective and position of becoming an improviser kept me open to witness their transformations without presupposition or expectations. I accepted the students' refusals and confusion and followed their directions to slow down, be patient, listen to them, alter my position to where they stood, and feel their feelings. Staying in the moment with my students synchronized our steps and harmonized our voices to move into the next moment. The act of slowing down and listening helped me to attend to my improvisation and profoundly comprehend the principles of improvisation. The praxis of improvisation trained me to notice and respond to unexpected voices and prepared me for

surrendering and accepting all the beautiful and unattractive possibilities that I encountered. My research became an inspiring adventure of improvisation.

Keeping teaching journals to document and review each lesson provided me guidance and opportunity for reflection that I needed to tune my teaching concepts and actions. I recognized that openness and flexibility are critical to creating and guiding an improvisational piano lesson. Thinking back, I used to set a timeline for students while arranging my teaching schemes—finishing this piece in three weeks, memorizing and polishing that piece in two weeks, or passing the exam at the end of the year. I was efficient and successful, and my clients were satisfied with the results.

However, the goal of introducing improvisation to my students was to develop their habits of thinking and attitudes toward playing the piano. A thorough agenda of classical piano training became impractical because instead of training my students' muscles and postures in a short time, waiting, supporting, facing students' vulnerabilities, and holding their emotions until they became willing to move on took time. It was challenging because there was no guarantee that the parents and I would see results in a couple of months, and I could not predict what conclusion I might obtain from my research. Furthermore, the various abilities and personalities of each student influenced their willingness to explore with me and the outcome of their improvisation over time.

I had to surrender to the not-knowing and give up my ambition to achieve rapid progress and palpable results in my teaching and research. I had to abandon my eagerness to collect applicable data promptly. I must wait and listen to my students' silent voices, hidden stories, and subtle adjustments. I improvised with my students and their parents, teaching materials, and the limited time in my research. Piano lessons became exciting because I improvised during my teaching and brainstormed after each lesson in response to my students. I learned to alter the materials and skills I tended to teach. Improvisation was not only my research subject but also my approach and guidance to conduct the research.

McBeath and Austin (2014) mention that beyond conventional features such as logic or rigour, scholarship involves innovation, including discovering new links,

questions and hypotheses and building new connections between concepts or theories. From this point of view, they emphasize that the quality of improvisation is essential for scholarship. I improvised while teaching and discovered the relationships and research questions emerging from within. The more I improvised in each lesson, the more links and inquiries I revealed from teaching. My students' reactions gave me the direction of the next step. I could not control the way or the result they gave as I documented all the changes and growth in each step as my research data. I realized that even though I needed to set an end date for this research to write my dissertation, this study has become a life-long project.

Embracing performative inquiry as my research approach and how I engage as a researcher of my life, playing piano, teaching, learning, reading, writing, and living with improvisation has awakened new inquiries. During the past two years, I encountered unexpected health and family crises at the time I was doing research and writing a dissertation. Implementing improvisation in every aspect of my life helped me to survive. There were foreseeable demanding realities for now and an unpredictable future waiting in front, and, as I learned through my research on improvisation, I learned that I could only accept the situation and surrender to the unknown. Even though I struggled from time to time, I was able to collect myself and keep moving on to take responsibility for my family, my students, my studies, and my life.

Sometimes, I wondered how I could be so tough. Soon, I understood that the softness, strength, and bravery I have cultivated from practicing improvisation created resilience. My fortitude is solid and genuine. Improvisation reinforced my attitude to accept each unwanted situation, wisdom to surrender to an unpredictable future, and an ability to discover and welcome the resources available within each moment. Through engaging in improvisation on the piano and in my students' lessons, I have restored my strength to give myself and my family love and understanding. All these abilities and wisdom offered by improvisation are what I hope my students will learn from our piano lessons together.

Teaching as improvisation

Teaching like piano playing is not just a skill. “Education is an art of process, participation, and making connections” (Cajete, 1994, p. 23), and the pedagogy through which we engage children matters. As noted arts educator Elliott Eisner (2002) recognizes, arts education leads to personal transformation, and that “what the child learns about the world is influenced by the way in which she explores its features” (pp. 20-21). Teaching is an improvisational practice that guides students to create and establish connections, engage in meaningful learning activities that enrich and challenge their ways of thinking and living; and raise their curiosities and desire to learn more.

Teaching requires patience and wisdom to see every student’s spirit, listen to their voices, and support them to find their way toward the beauty of their lives. My ideal vision of pedagogy, no matter what expertise one has, is an interactive and dynamic interaction that supports a human being to find her aesthetic living attitude and pathways through sharing and guiding.

Alas, my ambition is not easy since there are many conditions and restrictions within Education. Reflecting on my teaching experiences, I frequently needed to negotiate with time, spaces, systems, policies, cultures, students’ personalities, and parents’ expectations and concepts. But an educator’s responsibility is to keep their students company as they learn—sometimes direct the ways, sometimes wait, sometimes walk side by side, and sometimes stay back and follow them.

Regardless of outside limitations and backgrounds, I always tried to find the maximum I could offer to each student. *What materials and how many resources did I have in my hands? How far could I go, and how much space could I leave for my students?* Each student created different stop moments and offerings in response to my teaching, and therefore, being able to improvise with what I encountered during our piano lessons together was essential.

Based on my experiences and imagination, I arranged an ideal path of how to learn and what to learn by making a lesson plan. However, the students’ reactions were

unpredictable when I tried to follow the plan during our lesson together. Sometimes, my students showed emotional or physical conditions when they sat down by the piano; after a whole day of school, they might be tired, in a bad mood, or over-excited. To start a piano lesson under these possible circumstances, I found that my reactions to their actions were decisive in the class. Teaching is an adventure of looking for the balance between structure and freedom and an art of improvisation (Salvador & Knapp, 2023). *Can I start from where they are, listen to them, make a detour with their directions, find the chance to show them possible approaches and support them when they move?* I realized that the lesson plan played the role of a reminder of my teaching goals instead of an immovable scheme.

Teaching is group improvisation and is a task of reaching a balance between the structures of the curriculum and the freedom of creating. Sawyer (2011) concludes that improvisational teaching is not only to deliver knowledge but also to develop the student's abilities and tendency to use knowledge creatively to engage in a learning environment. I taught my students how to learn with the ideas of improvisation and showed them how improvisation worked when I improvised the way and the content of my teaching, and I hope what they learned from our piano lessons could help them in other aspects of their lives.

My attitude toward children's success or otherwise when playing a musical piece or improvising became a signal to how they regarded themselves when making mistakes while playing the piano. The feedback I provided for their inventions became their starting point to realize and explore their creativity. Keeping my teaching improvisational offered me opportunities to create trusting relationships with my students. They knew I would listen to them and respond to their needs. They were permitted to show their vulnerabilities and confusion, convey their thoughts frankly, and release their imagination. I hoped the ability to communicate and the connections that we built in the piano class would help them to develop good relationships with the environment and people they encountered in their lives. I knew, from my experience shared in these pages, that how children perceived and treated themselves and their work mattered, in the moment, and through their lives. As I improvised when I helped my students to learn

improvisation, teaching became playful and profound. Even if I taught the same piece, every lesson was an inspiration to me; each student opened a unique gate and invited me to enter their distinctive music universe, from which we opened a broader world together.

Nachmanovitch (2019) and Small (1999) suggest that music should be recognized as a verb instead of a noun because time, connections, and thoughts shift and are reconstructed in a flash while participating in every music activity. Taking music as an action, Small states that the question about music should be, "What does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place, with these people taking part?" (p. 13). He points out that music is an activity that involves everything in the present, including all the relationships happening in the moment. Small also emphasizes that "We do not just learn about those relationships, but we experience them in all their wonderful complexity" (pp. 13-14). He claims that how the aesthetic stimuli mutate into meaningful experiences is "an active and creative process" instead of a passive reception (p. 14).

My goal in teaching music is to guide my students to think and live musically, and improvisation is an approach that helps me to share my passion for music and life with my students. From teaching methods to the curriculum content, embedding improvisation in classical piano training guided my students to think like an improviser while practicing a rigorous classical musical piece and living their lives. While making music, they must learn to trust and appreciate themselves, build a positive attitude toward facing the ugliness they encounter and learn from their mistakes. These abilities cultivate their bravery.

Noticing and listening to the sounds created, staying in the moment and trusting the flow, and confidence and motivation to create aesthetic events are what an improviser needs. Improvisation involves attending to qualities of sounds and moments and genuine interior conversations with oneself. It is not a purpose but a praxis to take music as a verb, an initiative action, and an experience. While improvising, improvisers engage in the dynamic progress of making and perceiving sounds at every moment. Encounters occur, awareness grows, and dialogues happen—they are not creating a thing but unfolding and acknowledging every instance of breath and release, and the connections

between each moment created within an experience, with music as the vehicle. *As an improviser, can I put all my presuppositions, biases, and assumptions away to detect and respond to every appearing musical feature and relationship?* Practicing improvisation and embedding improvisation in classical piano teaching extend and deepen the meanings of music and music lessons. As I participated in my students' journey, the experience and feedback reciprocally changed my attitude toward life and teaching, creating a beautiful cycle.

A piece of music is not simply a cluster of lifeless black dots printed on the paper. When I read music notations, my thoughts run with the shapes, patterns and directions that the composers portray on the staves, and the sounds of the music can be heard in my head. My imagination starts to perform the music even if I do not have an instrument in my hands yet. While listening to the music, I imagine and connect my emotions and experiences to the sounds. Following the tune, images are represented, and stories are told in my mind. Making music on instruments, whether improvisation or following the notations is complicated. I read, imagine, listen, understand, describe, and physically make acoustic sounds to express my interpretation comprehensively while I react to the sounds I am making by creating the next sound. No matter whether reading, listening, or playing, music creates an ongoing experience of developing and perceiving. I interpret music and every other art form as an active life-long beholding and becoming. My goal in music education is to develop the student's abilities and habits to live their lives aesthetically and to notice and create beauty in their lives, even at ugly moments.

Embedding improvisation in classical piano lessons made every teaching lesson become my learning lesson, and my students' transformation gave me insights into improvisation and education. I witnessed my students face their true selves, encounter their vulnerabilities, accept their imperfections, and welcome their creativity while making music. Many paradoxes and dilemmas were happening in every action, disagreements and collisions occurring in the relationships. But these were all chances for my students and me. We searched for a balanced condition between frames and freedom, revealing a walking path from the unforeseen. When we heard ugly moments sing, we joined and celebrated with our music.

With the idea of improvisation, imperfection became an offer and the *unforeseen* turned into gifts. Improvisation led me to listen to my students carefully and sympathetically to catch all the encountering moments. I did not rush to give them answers, nor rush to say they were right or wrong. I listened to them and listened with them. I asked more questions than before to know what they thought and how they felt about the music they were playing. They told me the sound they imagined, and we discussed how to produce it. Every answer and question my students gave could be an inspirational beginning of a lesson. We worked with bodies, music, attitude, and spirit in the piano lessons. Through improvisation, my students learned to notice every sound inside and outside, listen to themselves, become aware of what they felt and dare to express their feelings in a particular way.

Who do they become? Who do I become in their presence?

> *"Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact."*
>
> *Hannah Arendt, 1958, p. 184*

Improvisations continue…and new possibilities, questions, curiosities arise….

Mimi is still shy. She smiled, shook her head, and kept saying: "I don't know," when I asked her if she felt improvisation changed anything in her way or attitude toward playing the piano. It was obvious that she became relaxed while playing classical piano pieces. Accidental wrong notes did not cause her panic anymore. Her father told me that he could feel Mimi enjoyed playing piano more than before. Mimi's grandmother said she noticed that Mimi sometimes spent a long time on the piano, playing songs and taking notes on the staff notebook, and seemed to concentrate on creating her own music.

Even though Mimi still needed a lot of encouragement and support before initiating a free improvisation, making short variations based on the songs she played became much easier than before. She could create longer phrases while improvising, and sometimes, she showed me her composition that was written all by herself. She used different marks to document her ideas, sometimes using music notations, sometimes letter names, and sometimes solfege, without considering if those were correct or good enough. I would seize the chance to explain how to record her musical ideas by appropriate notations. In this way, she had the opportunity to clarify the concepts about notations, beats, rhythms and pitches. She had melodies in her head and was willing to present her abilities and creations to me by her pace and approach. The trust she showed to me means a lot.

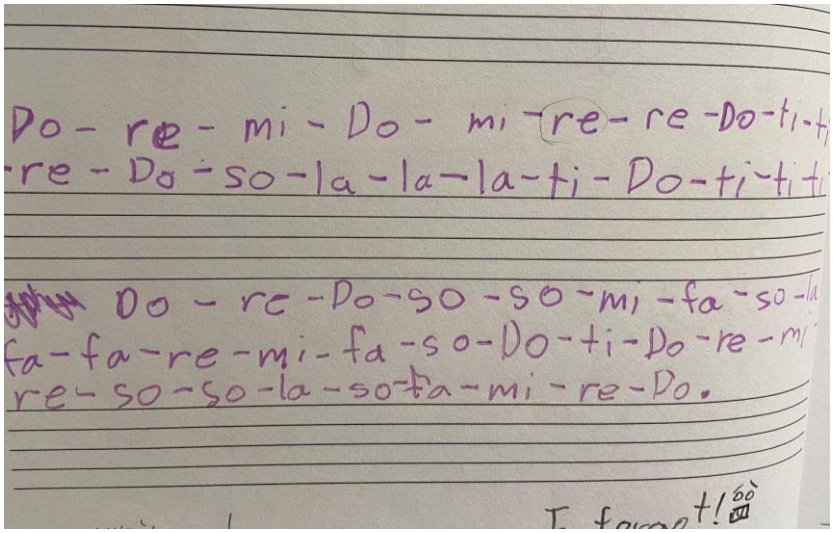


Figure 11. *Mimi noted her composition by Solfege.*

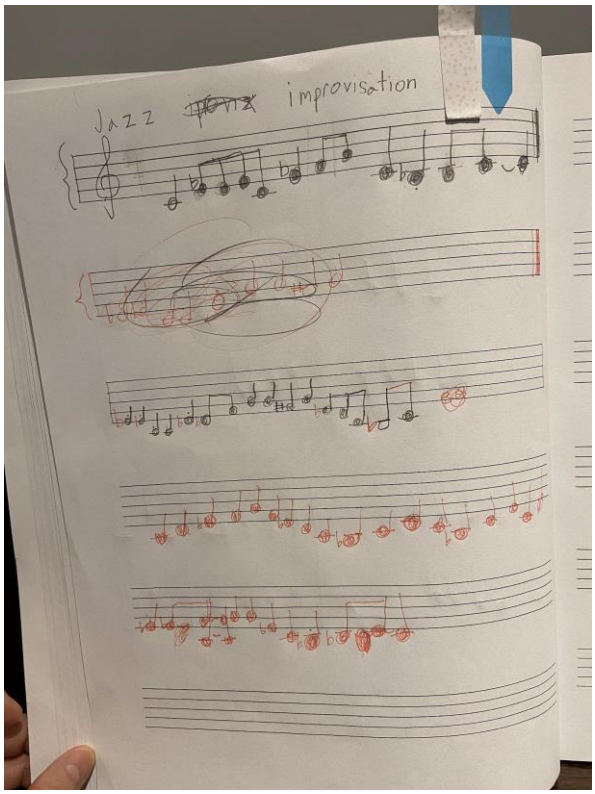


Figure 12. *Mimi's composition with a title.*

Mimi played a Czerny's exercise in one of our piano lessons recently. She practiced that piece for several weeks but still could not play with both hands together

smoothly. I noticed she kept checking her left-hand position while shifting from one chord to the next, and I believed this action interfered with her fluency.

I asked Mimi to play the left-hand part only, and she could do it fluently. I then reminded her to look at her hand while playing: “See, all the chords are in the same position. You don’t need to move your hand at all.” I grasped a book and held it above Mimi’s left hand to block her vision from seeing it and asked her to play the bass part again. Mimi surprisingly found herself could still play all the chords precisely without seeing the hand and keyboard. I then suggested she try it differently—I asked her to close her eyes while playing those chords. I mentioned the notes to her since she did not memorize the music. Even if playing in this way, Mimi could do all the chord-shifting effortlessly.

We laughed aloud together after she opened her eyes. Mimi was amazed to discover that her technique was more skilled than she thought, and the result improved when she played the complete song with both hands again because she was not worried about her left hand this time. I had guided Mimi to realize that she already had the required techniques. What she needed was self-trust. I was thankful to have become an improvisatory teacher, to have the ability to improvise when I saw my student’s need instead of only demanding her to do countless repetitions to reach virtuosity.

I checked my teaching journal and found the first class I encouraged Mimi to create melodies was almost twenty months ago. She was the first student to whom I introduced improvisation in the piano lesson. I still remember her distress and tears when I pointed out her missteps, asked her to play some more times to improve a flawed musical phrase, or invited her to improvise at that time. Through practicing improvisation, she became brave when she faced difficulties and mistakes. She could accept my suggestions to revise her performance, became aware of her abilities and challenges, and conveyed her thoughts about music without fear. Mimi was relaxed because she was being unconditionally supported in our piano class. She knew it was okay to make a different sound, have inquiries, and take more time when she needed it. Although spontaneously performing music ideas is still not easy for her, and she is still

on the way to building her self-trust, I stand by her, accept, and appreciate her way of learning. Through Mimi, I improvise, learning through her offers.

Bonnie enjoys free improvisation, and we are playing more duets now. Improvisation has become a valuable way for teaching classical music theories and techniques in our piano lessons. She releases her creativity and has fun while playing classical pieces, and often writes her imagination about the music on the pages.

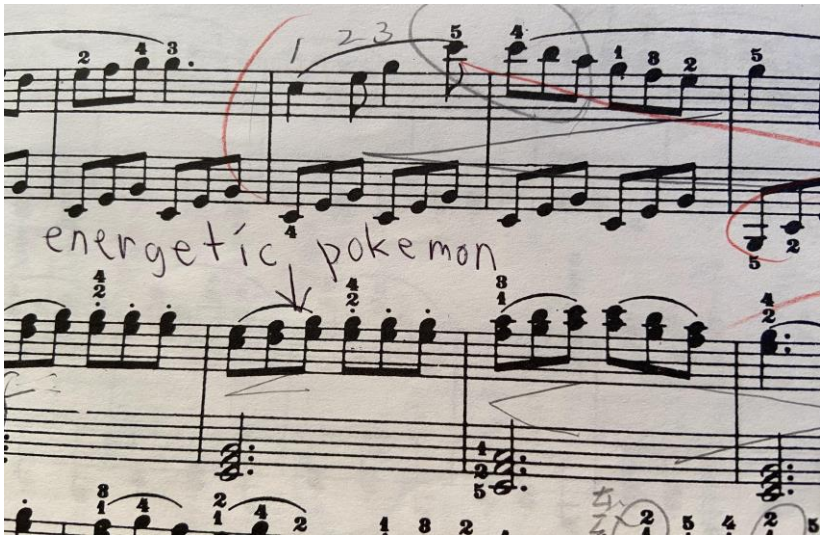


Figure 13. *Bonnie writes down her imagination about the music—energetic pokemon.*

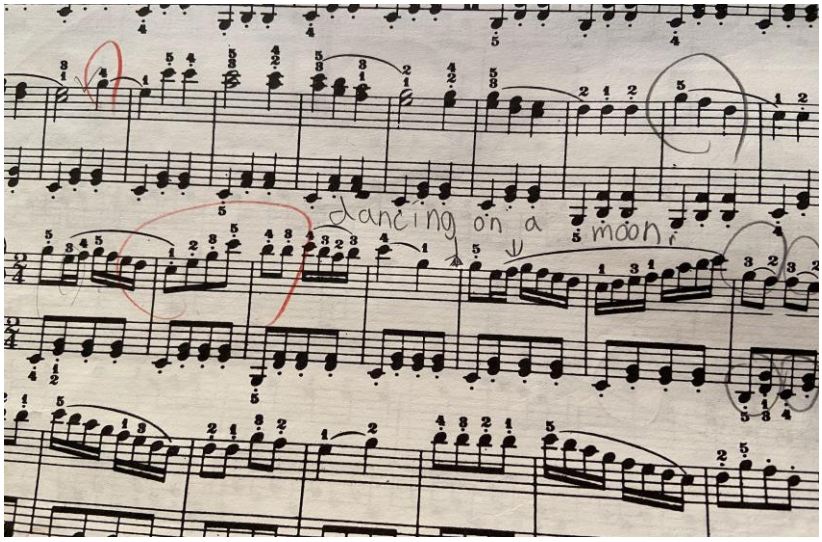


Figure 14. *Bonnie writes down her imagination about the music—dancing on a moon.*

When Bonnie was learning a song, *Petite Reunion*, from Bürgmuller's book and had almost memorized the piece, I encouraged her to improvise a duet with me, using the opening phrase of the song as the motif. It was not easy because we never used an entire phrase from a classical piece as the launch of a duet improvisation.

On our first try, as I joined her after she played the beginning motif, Bonnie seemed confused and could not decide when and how to make sounds with me. She kept turning to me, looking at my face and waiting for my instruction or approval. I tried to lead her with clear melodies and rhythmic patterns, but she chased me hesitantly, and could only play a few uncertain off-beat notes. Therefore, we could not ride on the same musical stream simultaneously. Even though Bonnie and I have had some experiences improvising together, this task was still unexpectedly complicated for her.

Click to listen to Bonnie's Bürgmuller Variation 1

When we finished the first improvisation, I told her that she did not need to wait for me or look at me. I reminded Bonnie to listen and join in whenever she heard something she wanted to react to. I said to her*: Listen, and trust yourself*.

We tried again, and this time, Bonnie could catch and answer my musical invitations immediately. She relaxed participating in the duo and naturally shifted her hand positions to play the theme in different registers to lead my response. I was surprised at how fast Bonnie could adjust and immerse herself in the music and was happy to witness how improvisation impacted her transformation and development.

Click to listen to Bonnie's Bürgmuller Variation 2

Sixteen months have passed since I introduced improvisation to Bonnie. Last week, I asked her to improvise on the G Major key. I aimed to guide her to create melodies on G major and play common chord progressions as accompaniment, so I gave her simple rules—playing F sharp instead of F and ending the song on G. Bonnie could create smooth melodies with her right hand promptly. But, without clear ideas about the left-hand harmonies, she added random chords as the bottom voice. She was not afraid of inharmonious sounds, and even though the music sounded discordant because of those off-key chords, she played confidently. After her first creation, I guided her to review the chord progressions and showed her how to select harmonies for the melody by listening and simple counting, then demonstrated and gave her some hints for choosing chords on the appropriate beat. Without any struggle, Bonnie tried again—inventing a new melody, taking time on the spots where she wanted to add chords, slowing down to ponder, experiment, listen, and adjust the sounds. She concentrated, and I could see the desire to find consonant sounds was powerfully represented on her face and actions. I noticed she paused longer when she could not find a solution for disharmonious sounds. Although she caught the points and successfully improvised a musical piece on G major, she remembered those unsatisfying sounds in the song and was eager to find a way to deal with them. Bonnie asked me what she could do with those sounds.

I played a single note D on the right hand and a C chord on the left hand, and then I asked Bonnie if that was a sound she wanted in a Major key song. She shook her head. I then moved the upper sound one step down on the key from D to C and asked her if it sounded better, and she nodded. I did not explain the music theories, such as resolution or

nonchord tones, but showed her several ways to change the upper or inner voice and asked her what she noticed. I also improvised some phrases and reminded her to recognize what I did to the discordant voices. After observing some examples I demonstrated, Bonnie concluded that when I made a dissonant sound and went on, the sound would become harmonious.

I consider improvisation an art of doing more with less. I offered time and space for my students to listen, feel, contemplate, and reflect instead of giving them direct instructions and correct answers. With or without frames and rules, Bonnie could enjoy and was confident with the results and the actions of creating. When Bonnie learned keyboard harmony by improvising on the piano, she understood that ugliness was not a closed road. Moving on when unpleasant situations occur would lead to resolution. And I hope that understanding will guide her way when she encounters a crisis in her life.

I appreciate the fruits of improvisation I received in my piano classroom. My students learned how to listen, to seek creative opportunities, and to move on when a situation was not what they wanted. Imperfections were not intimidating anymore. Combining free improvisation and classical music training brought a lot of pleasure and transformation to Mimi and Bonnie's classes, and their evolution will continue.

And new stories begin…

Listen, David!

David is in grade five and is a new student to me. He came to my studio a few months ago, bringing a stack of music books for the level exam, and I soon found that those materials far exceeded his capacity to play the piano. However, his parents had requested that I help him learn to play these exam pieces as soon as possible.

David must be the busiest one among my students. He is an athlete and has daily training courses before and after school. But David still practices piano for at least forty-

five minutes every day. He loves music and tells his mom that he is hoping for a career in music in the future. Different from my other students, David asks for two classes each week—one hour for piano and the other one for music theory and aural training.

We did not have time to start with fundamental training; therefore, I planned to develop David's abilities through the exam repertoire. In our piano lessons, I taught him the songs measure by measure, hands separated, then hands together, and each piece would take weeks. David was patient, and his parents were supportive. Although slow, David made stable progress.

During one of David's piano lessons recently, after playing Bach's Minuet, which he had been practicing for several weeks and could finally play the complete song with both hands together, I asked him if he felt comfortable while playing. David paused and thought for a while and said no. I chose a simple short phrase with the length of only two measures from the song and asked David to practice that phrase right away in class. He started to read and play intensively over and over again. I sat by him, counting quietly. After ten times of repeating, I closed the book and asked if he could play that phrase again without reading the music.

Even with his hands still in the same position on the keyboard, David tried hard but could not even find the first sound.

The result of the experiment seemed to shock him. How could he not remember how to play a brief musical phrase right after ten times repeating it? What happened in his practice? I asked David: were you listening and singing the musical phrase while playing, or were you sight reading each repetition?

David answered: "*Mm…I felt it was more like sight reading*".

I told David that I could hear his insecurity from every sound he made, and those sounds were telling the audience that this performer was only searching for the keys to match what was printed on the page. I suggested David pay more attention to listening to the sounds while playing the piano and sense his body movements at the same time. Changing old somatic habits and thinking patterns takes time. For a long time, David's

practice was to press the keys that matched the notations on the sheet music, and this approach made him forget that music is the art of creating and listening to sound.

I had always hoped to introduce improvisation in David's class, and this experience prompted our starting point. Listening is the path to perceiving sound and the beginning of creating music. David told me he did not sing. He said he could barely remember any song, even those nursery rhymes he listened to and sang at a young age. I asked him to start singing while listening to pop music because he had to learn how to listen intentionally to catch the musical lines. I suggested he sing the song and make up the tune when he forgot the melody, and this activity would be our first step together of a journey in improvisation.

Is Ian as brave as I thought? What I have yet to learn…

Ian is a seven-year-old boy. He had some informal music training intermittently before starting the piano lessons with me, and his prior experiences helped him to make quick progress in the beginning phase of learning piano. Ian was confident. He enjoyed his accomplishments and loved to perform for family members and friends. Ian told me that the songs we learned in class were easy for him, and he could play them well without practicing a lot. I explained that since he was learning to use his fingers and body appropriately, I chose easy pieces so he could concentrate on the embodied senses that were evoked in playing the music. I encouraged Ian to practice for better muscle control, and I brought him some famous children's popular music to make his learning and practicing engaging.

However, after a couple of months, Ian started to show his reluctance to play when the songs became harder and required more musical knowledge and performing techniques. Ian's mother told me that Ian always played familiar old easy pieces instead of his homework at home and was annoyed when his mom reminded him to practice new songs. Ian said he enjoyed piano lessons and wanted to be a virtuoso pianist because he loved performing piano on the stage, but sitting by the piano to practice was the last thing

he wanted to do. Even though I changed his lesson plans and materials and slowed the pace of teaching, he told me that he hated practicing. Ian's resistance to self-training made our piano lessons challenging for both of us. Lacking practice, even short-term goals became unreachable for him. Not being able to play his music smoothly made him lose confidence and interest in playing piano. Moreover, since we needed to work on every single piece for several weeks, he started feeling bored in the piano lessons.

I became frustrated. Teaching piano lessons vividly and delightfully is every piano teacher's dream; guiding students to enjoy playing piano with joy and engagement is a piano teacher's hope. But musical fluency requires practice. If I could not find a way to help Ian become willing to do technical exercises on the piano, we would not be able to continue.

I decided to introduce Ian to improvisation and invited him to participate in my research. I had no clue how improvisation could work in his case, but I hoped improvisation could help him and ignite his passion again.

I taught Ian to initiate improvisation from the songs he was playing, and he learned well and fast. I was happy to realize that improvising various sections encouraged him to play the same piece several times without feeling bored. Then I guided him to try free improvisation, and soon he could spontaneously create music on the piano without struggle. I was curious about what improvisation would bring to Ian since he had a different attitude towards improvisation than other participating students in my research.

While improvising, Ian did not care whether the sounds were harmonious and always dared to express new musical ideas. However, his little musical abilities restricted Ian to only creating short and plain pieces or experimental sound effects. I tried to teach him musical concepts and techniques by improvisation since I thought if he had better musical competence, he had the potential to be a good improviser. Ian's inventions showed his unique personality—fearless, yet sometimes impetuous and careless, and often acting without thinking. But like other children, he was eager for compliments. I sometimes found it hard to tell if Ian was improvising or just making sounds inattentively.

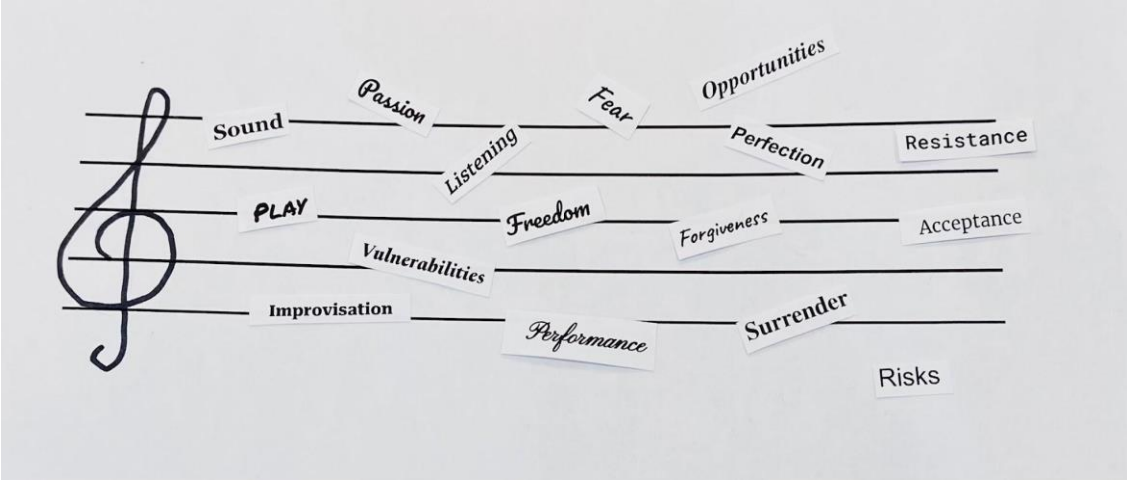
Embedding improvisation in his piano lessons eventually made a difference. Even though Ian was still not enthusiastic about practicing technical exercises and classical pieces, at least he was willing to play. I encouraged him to practice classical pieces in a way of improvisation and play the role of his own teacher while practicing. Ian gradually picked up his abilities and interest in the piano in this way, and I thought improvisation had done its work here.

Click to listen to 𝄡 Variation on Pumpkin Boogie

In one of our recent classes, Ian played a wrong note in a short movement of a classical Sonatine, and when I pointed out the error, he argued that it was not a mistake. He said he was improvising that strange sound. I knew it was not the truth because he was not improvising while playing the piece, and that note was obviously an accident caused by his wrong fingering. Although young, Ian has enough intelligence to use improvisation as an excuse for escaping from the responsibility of making a mistake by pretending the mistake did not exist. *Did his response mean that he was afraid of mistakes? Does he not want to accept imperfection in his playing? Was Ian telling me that he was not as brave and carefree as I had thought? Had I over-emphasized the acceptability of making mistakes? Had I, in my enthusiasm for improvisation, created an escape hatch here?*

At that moment, I realized that I had a new lesson to explore. Improvisation has engaged me in long-term interplay with my students, and this particular tug on the sleeve is just the beginning….

Coda



Looking back on my research of improvisation, from piano playing to teaching, from my attitude to students' thinking and playing habits, I have learned that improvisation changes our being and guides our becoming. Conducting one-on-one piano lessons as an improvisation duet with my students, we shared musical experiences and created animated communication in the piano room of my apartment. Each student experienced improvisation with her/his unique soul and launched into an adventure of finding courage and freedom. Every story is distinct. I have learned that particular challenges and inquiries emerge within each teaching and learning encounter.

As a piano teacher, I was called to listen and be present in the presence of each child's offering, as we improvised together. Improvisation opened possibilities, opportunities, and experiences of exploration, play, and learning for me and my students. I experienced Arendt's (1958) natality while creating with my students, my improvisation partners, and the audiences of my performances. Arrivals, encounters, actions, and recognition that occur in one another's presence create new beginnings and open up possibilities of who we become.

Classical piano training requires discipline and attention to detail and tends to develop professionalism and expertise. My experiences of learning and teaching improvisation remind me that when classical piano teachers focus only on accumulating flawless performing techniques and musical knowledge, they may miss the students' emotions, cognitive habits, and attitudes toward imperfections. During my research, embedding improvisation in classical piano training and embracing improvisation as praxis offered opportunities to recognize and inquire into the gaps and stop moments (Appelbaum, 1995) in piano teaching and learning. I have come to perceive surrender, acceptance, forgiveness, listening, play, and freedom as critical to creating and living. I have come to a new relationship with my understanding of perfection, a disharmonious chord that calls me to attention, to learning, to recreating, to becoming anew. Imperfection is not an interruption but a transition guiding me to create the next musical movement. Perfection is a trajectory in which I improvise my music, teaching, research, and life with offerings I receive, with possibilities I explore, with hope, with confidence. The wisdom of improvisation helps piano learners to trust, love, be patient with themselves, and simply free play with joy.

Embedding improvisation in classical piano education was the starting point for my journey, and the journey itself continues. From the landscape that my study has sketched, further questions and a broader view of what has yet to be explored now call my attention. This research presents the stories and discoveries from my personal experience and perspective as a classical pianist and a piano teacher. The unique understanding and perception from practicing improvisation are related to each person's cultural background, personality, and prior learning experiences. I wonder what additional or different stories, feelings, understandings, and reflections improvisation might evoke for music educators and learners? I am curious about how improvisation may affect my piano students' personal growth and development as musicians in the future after being introduced to improvisation early in their learning journey.

Embracing improvisation in classical piano education may be challenging for piano teachers since incorporating improvisation into lessons requires time and letting go of predictable or controllable results. As a performative inquirer and educator, new

questions emerge here as I reach the Coda of my research: How then might I introduce the wisdom of improvisation to piano teachers from different backgrounds, and encourage and support them to adjust their way of teaching the piano? How might I invite piano teachers to devote their efforts and time to helping the students learn classical piano with the idea of improvisation? Is it possible to design a piano pedagogy in which free improvisation and rigorous classical music training are combined and balanced? How might making mistakes be seen within my new understanding of perfection?

The journey never ends, and my curiosity and commitment to improvisation goes on, in my teaching, my writing, my music, and my life. My students and I, those whom I encounter in friendship, in love, in novelty, are forever improvising our music and stories, learning to embrace unexpected so-called ugly sounds, full of surprises, full of fun, and full of hope.

And I invite you, after reading my stories of improvisation, and listening to the improvisations I and my students share, to sit by your piano, pick up your guitar, or use your voice, and improvise with me. Play with your sounds, your thoughts, your bodily senses, even your fear. Don't worry, and don't stop, just keep playing. Listen to yourself, and listen to what arrives in the moments that awaken you, and in the silence between. Improvisation will lead your way, and find you love and freedom.

Click to listen to 𝄡 The Journey Reveals Horizons

Bravely, I play dissonant intervals inside the left-hand chords when improvising this work. Hidden inharmonious voices make the lower part of this work sound rich and touching. Above the chords, the steady tempo, rhythm, and smooth melody reflect my feelings of fearlessness and confidence as I reach the coda of my storytelling. In this improvisational piece, dissonant sounds move and resolve through sincere listening when I keep my creating flowing. As all sound layers of music travel up and down, new dissonances are encountered, and the next resolution is found. Imperfections are

accepted, appreciated, and embraced to complete this musical improvisation that I call The Journey Reveals Horizons.

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