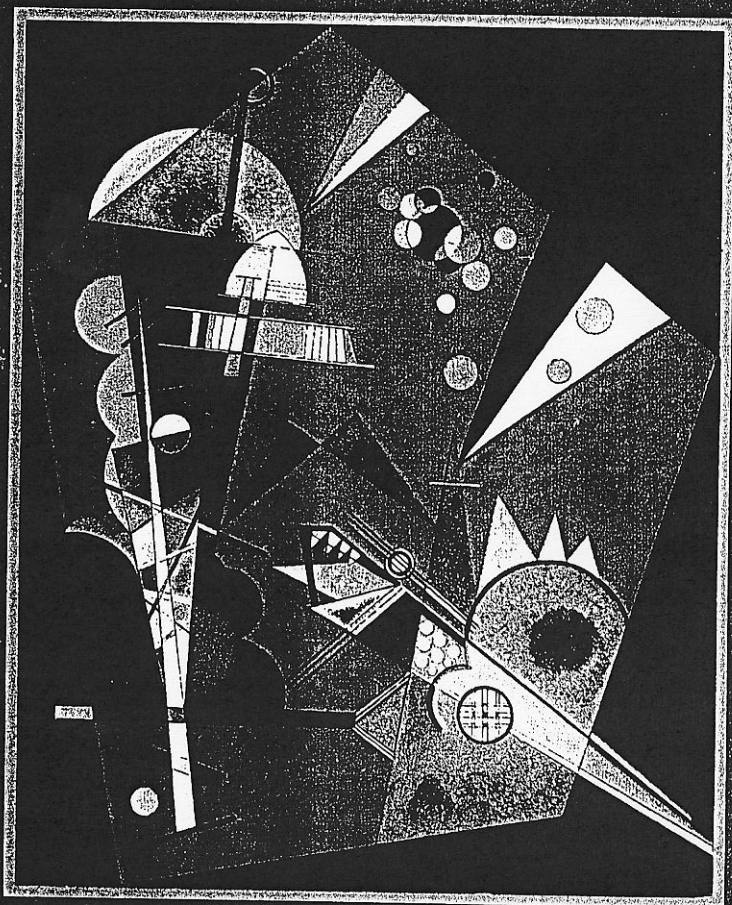


FREE PLAY

*IMPROVISATION
in Life and Art*



by Nicholas M. Pechmanovitch

Practice

The very act of putting my work on paper, of, as we say, kneading the dough, is for me inseparable from the pleasure of creation. So far as I am concerned, I cannot separate the spiritual effort from the psychological and physical effort; they confront me on the same level and do not present a hierarchy.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Unless you have been thoroughly drenched in perspiration you cannot expect to see a palace of pearls on a blade of grass.

Anyone who studies an instrument, sport, or other art form must deal with practice, experiment, and training. We learn only by doing. There is a gigantic difference between the projects we imagine doing or plan to do and the ones we actually do. It is like the difference between a fantasied romance and one in which we really encounter another human being with all his or her complexities. Everyone knows this, yet we are inevitably taken aback by the effort and patience needed in the realization. A person may have great creative proclivities, glorious inspirations, and exalted feelings, but there is no creativity unless creations actually come into existence.

Conservatories and music departments have long corridors lined with rows of tiny practice rooms, each containing a piano and a music stand, with walls more or less sound-proofed. Once I was walking down such a corridor when I came upon a room that had just been converted into an office. A sign was taped on the door: THIS IS NO LONGER A PRAC-

PRACTICE

TICE ROOM. Some trickster had come along later and jumbled underneath: NOW IT'S PERFECT!

Our stereotypical formula, "practice makes perfect," carries with it some subtle and serious problems. We think of practice as an activity done in a special context to prepare for performance or the "real thing." But if we split practice from the real thing, neither one of them will be very real. Through this split, many children have been irrevocably taught to hate the piano or violin or music itself by the pedantic drill of oppressively boring exercises. Many others have been taught to hate literature, mathematics, or the very idea of productive work.

The most frustrating, agonizing part of creative work, and the one we grapple with every day in practice, is our encounter with the gap between what we feel and what we can express. "Something lacking," said the flute player's master. Often we look at ourselves and feel that *everything* is lacking! It is in this gap, this zone of the unknown, where we feel most deeply—but are most inarticulate.

Technique can bridge this gap. It also can widen it. When we see technique or skill as a "something" to be attained, we again fall into the dichotomy between "practice" and "perfect," which leads us into any number of vicious circles. If we improvise with an instrument, tool, or idea that we know well, we have the solid technique for expressing ourselves. But the technique can get too solid—we can become so used to knowing how it should be done that we become distanced from the freshness of today's situation. This is the danger that inheres in the very competence that we acquire in practice. Competence that loses a sense of its roots in the playful spirit becomes ensconced in rigid forms of professionalism.

The Western idea of practice is to acquire a skill. It is very much related to our work ethic, which enjoins us to endure struggle or boredom now in return for future re-

wards. The Eastern idea of practice, on the other hand, is to create the person, or rather to actualize or reveal the complete person who is already there. This is not practice *for* something, but complete practice, which suffices unto itself. In Zen training they speak of sweeping the floor, or eating, as practice. Walking as practice.

When we explode the artificial categories of *exercise* and *real music*, each tone we play is at once an exploration of technique and a full expression of spirit. No matter how expert we may become, we need to continually relearn how to play with beginner's bow, beginner's breath, beginner's body. Thus we recover the innocence, the curiosity, the desire that impelled us to play in the first place. Thus we discover the necessary unity of practice and performance. It was this tasty sense of process that first clued me in to the practical relevance of Zen to music.

Not only is practice necessary to art, it *is* art.

You don't have to practice boring exercises, but you do have to practice something. If you find the practice boring, don't run away from it, but don't tolerate it either. Transform it into something that suits you. If you are bored playing a scale, play the same eight tones but change the order. Then change the rhythm. Then change the tone color. Presto, you have just improvised. If you don't think the result is very good, you have the power to change it—now there is both a supply of raw material and some judgment to feed back into the process. This is especially effective with classically trained musicians who think they can't play without a score, or can't develop technique without exact repetition of some exercise in a book. But it also applies to the scales of dance, drawing, theater. In any art we can take the most basic and simple technique, shift it around and personalize it until it becomes something that engages us.

Exercise of technique is not boring or interesting in and

of itself; it is we who manufacture the boredom. "Boredom," "fascination," "play," "drudgery," "high drama," "seduction"—all are names of contexts that we place on what we do and how we perceive it.

Improvisation is not "just anything"; it can have the same satisfying sense of structure and wholeness as a planned composition. But there is a case to be made for the opposite side. There is a time to do just anything, to experiment without fear of consequences, to have a play space safe from fear of criticism, so that we can bring out our unconscious material without censoring it first. One such sphere is therapy, in which we enjoy perfect confidentiality that enables us to explore the deepest and most troubling matters in our lives. Another is the art studio, where we can try things and throw them away, as many times as necessary. Brahms once remarked that the mark of an artist is how much he throws away. Nature, the great creator, is always throwing things away. A frog lays several million eggs at a sitting. Only a few dozen of these become tadpoles, and only a few of those become frogs. We can let imagination and practice be as profligate as nature.

It is well known that one can jump-start the creative process by automatic writing, just letting words flow without censoring them or judging them. One can always throw them in the trash later. No one needs to know.

The social form of automatic writing is brainstorming, in which a group of people sit together and blast out ideas without fear of shame or foolishness. The therapeutic form is free association, drilling down into preconscious and unconscious material and letting it emerge in a free-form way. In the visual arts there is automatic drawing—let's call it handstorming.

If you are a touch typist and have a computer, close your eyes and type. Just let the words go from heart to fingertips.

Don't let eyes or brain get into it at all. You can go back later and have the computer check the typos. If you do not type by touch and do not have a computer, if you paint or sail or carve wood, invent your own way of doing this. Just invent some channel of flow from heart to reality and a way of recording it so that at a later time, in another mood, you can judge the work and correct it. Practice this totally judgment-free, discrimination-free pouring out of heart. Then, maybe months or minutes later—and this is where your art form comes to resemble musical improvisation—begin to merge the mode of free play and the mode of judgment into the same moment. Slowly open your eyes as you write, let your knowledge of language and literature, culture and craftsmanship, filter into the pouring of heart onto paper, heart onto computer screen, heart onto wood.

I like the feeling in my fingers when I have been playing the keyboard on which I write this book. There is an increasing ease as I move my hands over the keys, playing with the pure kinesthetic feel of moving my hands, touching, marking, releasing in rhythm. I can cultivate this feeling whether the medium I am handling is a computer keyboard or a yellow pad or some napkins I scribble on in a restaurant.

In automatic writing and other forms of free experimentation we allow ourselves to say anything, no matter how outrageous, no matter how idiotic, because the childish, repetitive, singsong iteration of seeming nonsense (as in *Finnegans Wake*) is the pay dirt from which creative work is mined and refined. In practice we have a safe context in which to try not only what we can do but what we cannot yet do. Before we improvise with musical instruments on which we have some skill, we might improvise with our voices, bodies, household objects, simple percussion instruments, and explore the essence of sound. Dogs make excellent impromptu percussion instruments, and love the attention.

We can focus in on small acts. In automatic writing, the



words may be nonsense, but I may focus on the clarity of handwriting, if I am writing on paper, or the accuracy of keystrokes, if writing on a keyboard. On the violin I may play any musical content at all, but focus carefully on all the ways to subtly vary finger pressure. Strangely, the nonsense often turns out to be quite beautiful precisely because I am looking

elsewhere, concentrating on making one micro-aspect of technique interesting and impeccable. Making the small acts impeccable entrains body, speech, and mind into a single stream of activity. It is this physical exercise that joins the inspiration with the finished product.

For the artist this is one of the most delicate balancing acts—on the one hand, it is very dangerous to separate practice from the “real thing”; on the other hand, if we start judging what we do we will not have the safe space in which to experiment. Our practice resonates between both poles. We are “just playing,” so as to be free to experiment and explore without fear of premature judgment. At the same time we play with total commitment. T. S. Eliot said that each word, each action “is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea’s throat.”²⁴ And artist Rico Lebrun said, “I am never agitated in executing forms, but travel rather as if the terrain of the paper was land-mined. When this journey is completed, a drawing is born.”²⁵

Practice gives the creative processes a steady momentum, so that when imaginative surprises occur (whether they be thrown toward us by accident or brought up from within by the unconscious), they can be incorporated into the growing, breathing organism of our imagination. Here we perform the most essential synthesis—stretching out the moments of inspiration into a continuous flow of doing. Inspirations are no longer mere flashes of insight that come and go at the whim of the gods.

Thomas Edison’s famous adage about inspiration and perspiration is absolutely true, but in practice there is no dualism between them; the perspiration becomes in and of itself inspiring. I come to relish solving, with my own hands, every challenge. I *meet* my material, encounter the instrument, encounter mind and body, hand and eye, encounter collaborators and audience. Practice is the entry into direct,

personal, and interactive relationships. It is the linkage of inner knowing and action.

Mastery comes from practice; practice comes from playful, compulsive experimentation (the impish side of *lila*) and from a sense of wonder (the godlike side of *lila*). The athlete feels compelled to run around the track just one more time; the musician feels compelled to play that fugue just one more time; the potter wants to throw just one more pot before going to dinner. Then just another, please. The musician, the athlete, the dancer, move through their practice in spite of aching muscles and breathless exhaustion. This level of performance cannot be attained through some Calvinist demands of the superego, through feelings of guilt or obligation. In practice, work is play, intrinsically rewarding. It is that feeling of our inner child wanting to play for just five minutes more.

This compulsive side of practice is especially easy to experience in the new art of computer programming. The program we write is itself a responsive activity, which talks back to us in real time. We get into a loop of conversation with the program, writing and rewriting it, testing it, fixing it, testing and fixing again until we get it right, and then we find more to fix. The same applies to practicing an instrument or painting or writing. When we’re really doing well and working at our peak, we show many of the signs of addiction, except it’s a life-giving rather than a life-stealing addiction.

To create, we need both technique and freedom from technique. To this end we practice until our skills become unconscious. If you had to think consciously about the steps involved in riding a bicycle, you’d fall off at once. Part of the alchemy engendered by practice is a kind of cross-trading between conscious and unconscious. Technical how-to information of a deliberate and rational kind drops through long

repetition from consciousness so that we can "do it in our sleep." A pianist can sometimes play Beethoven or the blues beautifully while talking about the price of fish. We can write in our native tongue without thinking at all about the laborious practice that we as children put into learning the act of making each letter.

When skill reaches a certain level, it hides itself. Many an artwork that looks simple and effortless may have been a life-and-death battlefield when the artist was creating it. When skill hides itself in the unconscious, it reveals the unconscious. Technique is the vehicle for surfacing normally unconscious material from the dream world and the myth world to where they become visible, nameable, singable.

Practice, particularly practice that involves *samadhi* states, is often characterized by ritual. Ritual is a form of galumphing, in which a special ornament or elaboration marks otherwise ordinary activity, rendering it separate and intensified, even sacred. This dawned on me one day when I was first given the opportunity to play on a Stradivarius. I simply had to wash my hands beforehand, even though they were already clean. The handwashing was a context-marker—shifting from the nine-to-five world into a sacred space defined by a beautiful and sacred implement.

I learned from such experiences, and from the trouble I have gotten myself into by ignoring them, that much of the effectiveness of practice resides in the preparation. Since practice is a repertoire of procedures we invent for ourselves, everyone's practice is different, everyone's art and craft are different. Here are a few of the preparations I have learned from my own practice. I find, paradoxically, that in preparing to create I am already creating; the *practice* and the *perfect* have already merged.

My general preparations include everything I do to be healthy and ready for surprises, with a full palette of re-

sources available. I need energy to acquire skill, energy to practice, energy to keep going through the inevitable setbacks, energy to keep going when things look good and I am tempted to sit back and relax. I need physical energy, intellectual energy, libidinal energy, spiritual energy. The means to tapping these energies are well known: Exercise the body, eat well, sleep well, keep track of dreams, meditate, enjoy the pleasures of life, read and experience widely. When blocked, tap into the great block-busters: humor, friends, and nature.

The specific preparations begin when I enter the *temenos*, the play space. In ancient Greek thought, the *temenos* is a magic circle, a delimited sacred space within which special rules apply and in which extraordinary events are free to occur. My studio, or whatever space I work in, is a laboratory in which I experiment with my own consciousness. To prepare the *temenos*—to clear it, rearrange it, take extraneous objects out—is to clean and clear mind and body.

Even creative blocks and their resolution may be seen as one of the preparations. We will have a great deal to say about blockages later in the book, but for now, look at blocks not as a disease or anomaly, but as part of the starting procedure, the tuning up. I am, in the beginning, an object at rest; I have to come up against some big laws to get off that immobile place. Attempts to conquer inertia are, by definition, futile. Start instead from the inertia as a focal point, develop it into a meditation, an exaggerated stillness. Let heat and momentum arise as a natural reverberation from the stillness.

When the demons of confusion and the sense of being overwhelmed strike, they can sometimes be cleared out by clearing the space. When really wrought up, try this: Clear the work table completely. Polish the surface. Get a plain, clear glass, fill it with clean water, and put it on the table. Just

sit there and look at the water. Let the water be a model for stillness and clarity of mind. From clear mind, hands and body begin to move, simple and strong.

Prepare the tools. From buying the tools to cleaning and maintaining and repairing them, develop an intimate, living, years-long relationship with them. The tools need to work not only individually, but together. As I clean the room and the instruments, rearranging them, watching their relations shift, I handle elements of my life and art, moving them around, shifting their contexts. I am likely to resee the implements to my practice in new ways that may unstick my out-moded or tired ideas.

Say good-bye to distractions. Let the session flow through its three natural phases: invocation . . . work . . . thanks.

The opening ritual, taking the violin out of the case, setting up the computer, getting into the dance clothes, opening the books, mixing the paints, is pleasurable in and of itself. Having taken the instrument out of the case, explore it, feel it: How am I holding it? I tune up, including tuning the instruments, tuning the body, tuning attention, exploring and subtly balancing the feeling of bones, muscles, blood.

When I give a live performance, the stage and the whole theater become the *temenos*. The stage has to be made clean, the wiring hidden, the instruments arranged for easy use and beauty, the lighting adjusted, the ventilation made comfortable. Then I retreat and do a little meditation, a little invocation. Then I walk out on stage and begin. If at that point something is missing, I make do without it.

I eventually learned to treat each solitary writing session at home the same way I treat a live performance. In other words, I learned to treat myself with the same care and respect I give to an audience. This was not a trivial lesson.

These rituals and preparations function to discharge and clear obscurations and nervous doubts, to invoke our muses however we may conceive them, to open our capacities of mediumship and concentration, and to stabilize our person for the challenges ahead. In this intensified, turned-on, tuned-up state, creativity becomes everything we do and perceive.