

New England Piano Teachers Association
Speaker Series - September 21, 2020

Donal Fox:

“The Art of Making Mistakes, and the Art of Discovery, Transformations, Variations and Improvisations”

The theme of the presentation was that allowing students to have fun by accepting mistakes, improvising and exploring at the piano encourages musicality, confidence, creativity and imagination. Following are a few highlights of his presentation.

Students can begin exploring the piano by improvising on the black keys. Improvising on pieces being worked on with intentional wrong notes can help foster the idea that “there are no wrong notes.” When improvising, even playing clusters should not be seen as making mistakes. Thelonius Monk would say “You’re making the wrong mistakes,” or “The piano ain’t got no wrong notes.” Hesitating in a piece tells the audience you played a wrong note. Learning to play through mistakes helps the music flow and sound more musical.

Thelonius Monk had a strange technique. Examples of classically trained jazz pianists with fine technique are Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson.

Early composers improvised, but the only way to record their music was to write it down. Bach used figured bass, and Mozart improvised cadenzas and sometime entire movements in his piano concerti. 19th century pianists who did not see themselves as composers wanted everything written down so they could play as close to the composers’ intentions as possible.

The importance was stressed of integrating music theory with the learning of repertoire and improvisation.

The following are some elements of improvisation:

- Octave displacement
- Transposition
- Rhythm
- Articulation
- Tempo
- Dynamics

In exploring improvisation, one helpful exercise is to see how many different ways one can play a single triad. Transposition in improvisation can include transposing from major to minor.

Mr. Fox improvised on Brahms’ “Die Trauernde” to demonstrate different elements of transposition.

When performing, body language should match the character of the music. For example, one would not tap the foot while playing a reflective piece.

Improvisation can be done in C major, adding black keys for “blue notes.” Amazing Grace can be played entirely on black keys, experimenting first with rhythm and then with harmony.

When practicing new pieces, don’t always start at the beginning; learn pieces in modules, and change up the order of the modules. This avoids rote learning and builds security and confidence in playing.

It is acceptable and even good to use the ear when learning new music. The eye is slower than the ear, and a good ear can help the music flow.

When introducing students to jazz piano, it was suggested to have them listen to music of pianists such as Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea and Bill Evans.

When asked about breaking habits at the piano, Mr. Fox gave examples such as playing with cardboard over the hands to train the eye to stay on the music; playing the left hand part with the right hand and the right hand part with the left hand, hands crossed; and, away from the piano, brushing teeth with the non dominant hand and practicing flow while doing everyday chores by working to be continuously in motion.

Mr. Fox ended the presentation with a jazz improvisation on Beethoven's "Pathetique" Sonata.