Improvising Mozart

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Editor's note: The following summary of Mr. Levin's presentation was prepared by Leon Eisenberg, Communications Secretary of the Academy.

Professor Levin was a student of Louis Martin and Stefan Wolpe in New York and of Nadia Boulanger in Paris. He is world renowned for his restoration of the classical-period practice of improvised embellishments and cadenzas. Among other books, he has authored *Who Wrote the Mozart Four-Wind Concertante?* This, I assure you, is not a trick question like "Who is buried in Grant's tomb?" The provenance of the *Four-Wind Concertante* is uncertain, and Levin's treatise takes a fresh look at the evidence.

The topic he addressed for us was "Improvising Mozart." He illustrated his points at the piano. Those privileged to be present will recognize that these minutes are a paltry representation of the excitement and enjoyment we experienced that evening.

Mozart's rhetoric is amazingly mercurial; with tongue in cheek, the speaker suggested that Mozart perhaps suffered from attention deficit disorder, citing the rapidity of changes every few measures in the accompaniment. The point was demonstrated with the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in B-flat, K. 333. Professor Levin focused on the relationship between the notes for the two hands. The excitement goes over the top in the right hand

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President Patricia Meyer Spacks, Speaker Robert Levin, and Secretary Emilio Bizzi.

in combination with the left. The point was illustrated by successively "dumbing down" the left and the right hand. Mozart's style is amazing. Suddenly the left hand stops dead and precipitates a flurry of activity on the right.

In Mozart's time, his reputation was based first on his skill in improvisation, second on his skill as a performing pianist, and only third on his compositions. We know nothing about the cadenzas he actually performed in the concerti he wrote, because they were different every time he performed them, and he didn't perform any individual concerto very often. The excitement is trying something in which one can fail. Mr. Levin illustrated the point. In improvisation, nothing can be anticipated. The only semblance we can capture of what Mozart might have sounded like when he improvised is provided by pseudo-improvisations he wrote down for his sister Maria Anna (Nannerl). Nannerl could not produce such modulating preludes spontaneously; she requested them from her brother so that she could memorize them in a simulation of improvisation.

Where did the musical rhetoric come from? Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach wrote a chapter on the free fantasy that illustrates the process. It requires imagination prodigious enough to come up with unexpected things again and again, even when the premises are simple.

Mozart was able to take a "hit tune" (something written by somebody else or a folk melody) and

subject it to remarkable variations. A mechanical exercise like the Twelve Variations for Piano on "Ah! vous dirais-je, Maman" (which we know as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star") becomes brilliant with the imaginative approach Mozart employed. Mr. Levin played it for us delightfully well.

What characterized Mozart's greatness was his ability to remember the spirit of childhood. He was able to plumb the depths of terror (illustrated by Mr. Levin). From Mozart's Fantasy in C Minor, K. 475, Mr. Levin segued to the "Liebestod" from *Tristan,* showing the similarity of chord progressions. Mozart explored the darker side of the human psyche in his later compositions, such as *Don Giovanni.*

Mr. Levin invited the audience to suggest Mozart melodies as a basis for improvisation in the style of Mozart's time. Individuals proposed four arias: Papageno's "Der Vogelfanger bin ich ja" and the Queen of the Night's "Die hölle Rache" from *The Magic Flute,* "Se vuol ballare" from *The Marriage of Figaro,* and "Ach, ich fühl's," once again from *The Magic Flute.* With this stunning improvisation, the formal presentation came to an end amid warm and prolonged applause.

In the discussion period, Donald Hornig asked about the mental process that makes these achievements possible. Mr. Levin replied that one has to have a deep understanding of the syntax and grammar of music. He linked classical improvisation to jazz in the swing era. Improvisation is very different from an actor reading a prepared text. Stilted pedagogy often distracts us from the mastery of syntax to the virtuosity of the surface. Performers become risk-averse. He illustrated, with passages from the first prelude of J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, that the listener may think he's home, but he's not at all, because there is more to be said. He compared the deep grammar of Bach with Coleman Hawkins's *Body and Soul.* There has to be a feeling of achieving truth within the performer. He recalled what Paul Valéry had said of Nadia Boulanger: "[She] ordains enthusiasm with discipline."

Mozart played most of his concerti only once. Mr. Levin has played them dozens, if not hundreds, of times. He doesn't write his own cadenzas down, lest he be trapped into repeating himself. One of the things that distinguished Mozart was his spectacular musical memory. Mr. Levin described a contest held in 1781 before the emperor by two hot-shot pianists: Clementi versus Mozart. Most observers felt that Mozart had won. Clementi had technique, but Mozart had taste and feeling in addition to technique. Mozart wasn't at all nice to Clementi and derogated his performance; nonetheless, he learned from him and later wrote a set of variations employing Clementi's technique. One of Clementi's published sonatas has a frontispiece noting that Mozart was present when it was performed at this contest. Ten years later, in 1791, Mozart used its first theme as the principal theme of his overture to *The Magic Flute.*

Mozart's memory was so sensational that after hearing the performance of the *Miserere* by Allegri in the Vatican, he was able to write the notes down hours later. The feat seemed so impossible that it was thought he had smuggled copies out of the guarded room. The nine-year old Mozart examined a sonata by Johann Schobert that he transcribed into a movement of one of his early piano concerti. Years later, its material appeared in his Piano Concerto no. 21 in C Major, K. 467. Mr. Levin illustrated the point by playing excerpts from the two pieces.

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