

Stravinsky in the Hospital

Igor Stravinsky was a great composer, but he was subject to the same physical ailments that normal people must suffer, so, like other old people, he spent a lot of time in the hospital toward the end of his life. One day he was languishing in his hospital bed after an operation, feeling like crap. A young nurse walked in to attend to his needs and saw from his facial expression that he was feeling pretty crummy. She tried to cheer him up by doing that Suzie Sunshine act that so many nurses try to play.

"Ohhhh, Mr. Stravinsky, you look so sad, let me fluff up your pillow for you.

"Ohhhh, Mr. Stravinsky, let me give you a glass of water.

"Ohhhh, Mr. Stravinsky, let me open the window for you. There, that's better, how about a little smile for me now.

"Ooooo, Mr. Stravinsky, you look so sad, why don't you try to compose something?"

To this barrage of Barbie-goes-to-med-school cheer, in the flattest Russian deadpan imaginable, Stravinsky replied, "My Dearrrr. I do not TRY to compose. I either compose or I do NOT compose. "

I always tell this story when in I have given a suggestion to a student on how to play a passage, and he/she says, "I'll try." I have never really understood this expression, "I'll try." It seems to say there is an element of chance involved in the performance of physical routines, as though we have no real control over our actions. The practice method I teach, running over small bits in a tempo slow enough so that you don't miss any notes, precludes the possibility of error—it is based on the idea that you can always control your actions if you simply focus and give your body plenty of time to go from one element in the sequence to the next. Error is a function of lack of attention, not lack of ability, so if we simply pay attention we can always find a way to make it happen.

After I have told this story to a student once, thereafter, whenever they say, "I'll try," I always quote that great line of George Lucas' in the *Empire Strikes Back*, where Yoda says, "To the Jedi there is no try."