

Holly Bright

I told you the story of how I became a violinist playing Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*. My defining moment as a pianist came much later—it was at a Christmas concert in Lewiston, playing the piano part to my piece for chorus and jazz band, *See the Holly Bright* which I wrote to for the LCSC Concert Choir.

This piece was exactly 10 minutes long, the piano part was eight pages. Most of it was typical choral accompaniment level stuff, but there were two pages in the middle of the piece that were extremely difficult—they contained, in fact, the hardest piano music I had ever played in public. Don't ask me why I wrote such hard music for myself to play; it just sort of happened—the music took over, and had to be what it had to be—when inspiration struck, I was just the puling piano player.

Now, there was a lot that depended on this single performance I was going to get of my piece—there was a lot at stake: first, the Christmas concert was the most-attended musical event of the college year; second, all my students would be there, and it was my intention to show them "how it is done", because I am not one of those music teachers who is willing to *teach* it but can't *do* it; and, thirdly, it was my one chance to get a good recording of my piece.

So I began preparing in September, slowly, practicing small bits with the metronome, over and over and over. During the next four to six weeks, I played those difficult two pages around 3000 times. Then I took a break from the piece for a month, so I could forget it, so that when I began relearning it, all the holes in my first month's preparation would be more apparent, and I would know exactly what I had to practice. From the middle of November to the middle of December I played those difficult two pages another 3-4000 times. The day of the performance alone, I slaved over this passage another 70-75 times, right before we went onstage.

You see, I was terrified of this passage; I was terrified that I would launch into the section and fall apart, as I had done several times in the past, and that I would lose my one and only chance to get a good recording of my composition. I knew myself, and I knew that I was capable of very strong

piano playing, but that I was also capable of crashing and burning in a major way, especially when technical passages were at involved.

We launched into that difficult section, and I missed my first note. You cannot imagine the panic that overwhelmed me in this little moment. My inner monologue sounded something like this, "Ah! Ah! Ah! I blew it! I blew it! My piece is ruined! I wrecked it! Ah! Ah! Ah! I'm going to fall apart! No! No! No!" Well, while I was internally freaking out, my body just took over, and I found myself watching myself playing the piece from about three or four feet over my head. I was not willing the piece, I wasn't even actually aware of playing it, my body was just doing it, and I was watching. With the exception of that one note, I played the passage perfectly, and the recording makes me look like a really accomplished pianist.

The moral to this story is this: there is no preparation for a performance like lots and lots of perfect repetitions. You also have to put yourself on the line. My teacher tells the story of how he played the Ravel *Valse Brillante* in college. He had secretly made a pact with himself to fling himself off the top of the Music Building if he made a single mistake; he has no recall of the actual performance, he just remembers sitting down to play, then standing up to take his bow. He always said, "there is much too much going on onstage for your mind to remember what you're supposed to do when you're playing a piece—your body has to remember."

These stories always remind me of one of the few pithy aphorisms of J.S. Bach: "If you hit all the right notes at the right time, the harpsichord plays itself." For years I have understood this passage to mean that when you train your body so thoroughly your mind does not have to occupy itself with giving your fingers routing instructions, you may achieve a state of mental transcendence in which you can observe (from above) your body making the music happen, while the essential you is somewhere else, taking it all in, unencumbered by physical involvement. This is, by now, a familiar experience for me, but that does not diminish the surprise and the delight of it every time it happens. The experience is always the same, but it is also always different. Just as, in the *Paradiso*, Dante observes the timeless, changeless face of God changing with every change in himself, my experience of my transcendent self changes as time passes and the subject of the experience (me) knows more about what is happening to him. The

experience of losing myself, my consciously defined ego, is a primary objective of all my music-making, and I do not feel satisfied with my teaching until I can give this experience to my students.