

RISK

By David Taylor

Gil Evans and I were walking in Venice one night. He told me that Duke Ellington told him: “If you keep yourself open, you never know who will come along, pull your coat, and take you left.” This article is a personal journal about how I have always believed in this principle.

My copy of Luciano Berio’s *Sequenza V* had been in the filing cabinet for literally 30 years before I attempted to play it. The piece was written for tenor trombone, had a very different performance concept, and somewhat of an “elite new music head.” Deep down I had the awareness that it required a long-thread view and internal time performance skill that was overwhelming for me. I had taken classes with Berio, Hall Overton (arranger of Thelonious Monk’s big band book) and composer Jacob Druckman at Juilliard in the ‘60s. Even though they gave me a comprehensive, different overview of classical and jazz harmony, the piece was not approachable. *Sequenza* remained one of those compositions that stayed in the back of my mind over the years, reminding me there was a composition with living structure available, and I wasn’t taking advantage of it — a world-class piece that could be personalized, different every time, open to whimsy, and audience friendly.

Do you remember the first through-composed music that really forced you out of yourself? *Angels Of The Inmost Heavens* for brass quintet by Lucia Dlugoszewski was the first for me. Although I must say, as a student, the performance that really encouraged me to have the love and guts to stick with the bass trombone was the solo in Bartok’s *Miraculous Mandarin*. I can even remember the heroic feelings I had driving home to Brooklyn that night after the concert, tooling down the West Side Highway — radio blaring ROCK AND ROLL.

Written in the 1960s, *Angels Of The Inmost Heavens* employs very fast mute changes, amazingly fast technical passages, low and high registers, complicated rhythms, multiphonics, slow-moving material and long, loud, sustained pitches — just about everything and having very few rests. However, the piece makes so much sense, and feels so good, you trust the structure. You start, and the next thing you know, it’s over. You know it’s going to be a haul. You prep, start, and somehow don’t worry about the fact that you’re getting tired, sweating, or that your



chops are hurting. You keep your eyes moving to the right, faster than your brain has time to register the note you’re playing, and you feel like you’re improvising! Improvisation in classical music! Ultimately, I think soloists and orchestral musicians who really feel their parts are tapping into that concept, playing the music they love like living-structured music. Find a cadenza you like in any instrument’s repertoire. Use it as a structure to freely improvise. Find an unaccompanied piece you like, and open it up to your free improvisation. Go in and out of the written material. (Even though it’s free, try making the transitions smooth). Try it with a Bordogni etude. Improvising will give you confidence in the overall time feel of an orchestral excerpt, or of a whole passage. It will allow you to get each fragment while thinking of the whole phrase. Thad Jones told me there were times when he could hear two choruses of changes in front.

I refer to blues very often in my improvisation. My family didn’t own a record player until I was about 15, so basically my love for music came from the AM radio stations, and old-time gangster, black and white movie scores. These old soundtracks were hot. It was the music of the ‘20s and ‘30s — infectious rhythms, with blues harmony. My regular radio fare was rock and roll and

R&B — both of which are based in blues. Blues makes me feel confident and safe because it’s so deep, open to personal expression, and immediately recognizable to every audience member on the planet. As an example, Franz Hackl, fantastic thinking composer, wrote a reconstructed version of *Ein Heldenleben*. He had me walking in the auditorium, standing in the audience and improvising while the orchestra was playing the full chords we have all grown to love. In my mind, I reduced the harmony to several very simple chords, and used that as a basis of tension and release for my chromaticism, and the related chromaticism of the piece. In this case, and generally when I play I don’t necessarily refer to blues in a finite structure, but often use the beautiful simplicity of the blues scale, or the blues dramatic chord shifts to give the listener a reference point — as an analogy, maybe much like the old European drama of plagal cadences, or German augmented sixth chords.

The Orchester der Tiroler Festspiele, under the direction of Gustav Kuhn, played the complete orchestral version of *Ein Heldenleben* in the first half of the concert. The second half featured the same orchestra, and this reconstructed piece called *U-Held*, with five soloists and electronics (based on my trombone sounds). Franz Hackl on trumpet,

Dietmar Küblböck, Otmar Gaiswinkler and Erik Hainzl of the Vienna Trombone Quartet, and myself. We played in front of 1500 people, and it was wonderfully received.

With *Angels Of The Inmost Heavens*, you look at the part and can't imagine playing all of it. You study and practice to the best of your ability. You practice and still can't see all the notes go by. At the concert, you know to just keep going. You trust the validity of the wholeness to the point that even if the notes coming out of your horn aren't all correct, the music will hold up, and your style will be intact. All you have to do is let yourself climb into the music. Once inside it, you don't second-guess yourself. You just go. *Sequenza's* structure is an enabler, similar to the things I've just described.

“Don't worry about what you don't have; use what you bring to the gig. — Gil Evans”

I was in Gil Evan's band for five years and am on several of his CDs, including his Grammy award CD, *LIVE AT SWEET BASIL, THE MONDAY NIGHT BAND*. If you've heard the CD, you might not know I'm on the sessions, because I'm listed as Dave Tucker. The producer messed up, and I don't know if it was ever straightened out. It was OK, though, because after that I became Tucker to Gil and the band. Probably one of the most amazing elements of his leadership was his presence. As soon as he walked into the room and sat behind the keyboard, you knew he was totally into the music, and it affected you directly. You were around a great musical spirit, who gave you all the room you needed to express yourself. His improvisatory advice to me — “Every now and then give them a signpost.” Thad Jones' was, “Dugger, it's only a half step away.” Joe Henderson — “float over it.” Lee Konitz — “I listen to every note.”

“Do you accept any direction the moment will take your art? That's risk.”

When you use vibrato, doesn't the speed of the vibrato affect the tempo of the music that has preceded it, as well as the tempo it might be anticipating, as well as describing the note you're playing at that moment? Do you try to live in the moment? Do you accept any direction the moment will take your art? That's risk. Are you practicing your fundamentals enough so that you can sense well enough in advance during your solo that some technical problem might be developing in the middle of

the phrase . . . and then veer? When you veer, do you tend to veer to music rather than the safety of technique? Do you think in terms of keeping the thread or structure whole, and avoid taking the safety valve of technical perfection, which might break the thread you have been developing? That's also risk. If you are a young musician, can you take the risk of being too individualized, when you feel your playing isn't known well enough? Can you really afford not to take the risk? When you're older, seasoned, and have much to protect, do you take that risk?

“Can you afford not to take the risk?”

It's funny — Berio's classes stuck in my mind all these years, not necessarily because of the factual data he imparted, but because I remember Berio teaching with joy. He spoke with firsthand knowledge of Stockhausen, Cage and Boulez. The vibe was glee. My take on his concept was that if you were going to make music your life's work, groove within the seriousness. Is that humor? Is that irony? Is that struggle? Is it divorcing yourself from conscious musical decisions by utilizing the I CHING, as John Cage composed? Isn't it fantastic that the music of Bach, no matter how much of it we think we know, is still a mystery? Can you imagine how long it took just to notate? Is THE JOY wondering how the Dutch literary, Maeterlinck, was able to be so compelling, that his writing affected such different musical personalities as Debussy and Schoenberg? Is THE JOY wondering about, and hearing, feeling and seeing individual quirks of creative structure, realizing that in soloing there is really only you to hold it together? Are notational devices “user-friendly” markings to ease the problems of technique and enhance performance style, or are they extra burdens to remember?

If you aren't a composer, try to use their problem-solving techniques of developing style, structure, validity and relevance to their era. They do all this while maintaining some relationship with historical precedence . . . and getting their music out to the general audience. Perform contemporary music. Try transcribing music. When you transcribe, try staying with material that will allow an interpretation from the soul. The great pianist and composer, Busoni writes that as soon as a composer writes his own concepts down, it becomes a transcription. Try not to forget to ask yourself, “AM I THIS MUSIC?”

When you listen to music, do you ever wonder which musician the composer had in mind when he wrote the composition? Do you ever wonder how they went about their collaboration? Who was Bach's trumpet player? Who was Prokofiev's tuba player? When John Coltrane asked Thelonious Monk about what note to play during a recording session, B-flat or B-natural, why did Monk look at him and just say, “Yeah.” Who was Mozart's horn player?

In the beginning of October 2002, my trio with Daniel Schnyder, soprano sax, and Kenny Drew Jr., piano, appeared at The Konzerthaus in Vienna. It was quite an experience for me — bass trombone — in trio and solo at one of the two biggest concert halls in Vienna. Mahler worked there. Bernstein worked there. Very impressive! But, the real high came at the end of October when I returned to Vienna to play four performances of Daniel Schnyder's *Bass Trombone Concerto*. Two of the performances were at The Musikverein. This is the other main concert hall in Vienna. This is the hall where Brahms worked and the home of the Vienna Philharmonic. Some people refer to this place as the “Holy Temple” of music!

Schnyder and I are friends, so when I get nervous before a performance, he usually says to me, “Don't worry, Taylor, the concerto was written for you and your technique. You can't fail!” This sometimes makes me feel relieved. However, for the potential encore at these con-



Dave Taylor and Daniel Schnyder with Gargoyles (Grotesque comique?)

certs in Vienna, I planned to perform a string arrangement I put together for the Franz Schubert lied, *Der Doppelgänger*. I was going to play an 18-minute, wild bass trombone concerto, and then an encore on a lento tempo vocal piece of Schubert — in Schubert’s home town . . . in a plunger mute in front of between 1900 and 2100 people for each performance. I felt it was a risk.

On arrival day, I was walking to The Musikverein to meet with the conductor, Tetsuro Ban, and saw these posters hanging in Vienna. Although they’re impressive, the sight actually frightened me, because I now had to really live up to “their” expectations.



Although I was prepared for the concerto, and the first rehearsal went well, I didn’t hand out the parts for the Schubert. I was seriously considering not doing an encore. Even though I had recorded *Der Doppelgänger* twice in the last year in different arrangements (one unaccompanied, and one with my trio with bass and drums), I love this piece, and understand its place in music history. I was having my doubts as to the validity of my concept, and questioning if I had taken this piece too far. Schubert is Vienna’s hometown boy. Performing this piece at the Musikverein, in front of an audience that was in attendance to hear The *William Tell Overture*, the Franck *Symphony in D minor*, and as a stretch, a bass trombone, could let me in for a real down. I was hearing this melody in a somewhat improvised way, and just using low strings — violas, celli and basses — in the exact way the piano part was written.

Even though this was my second appearance with the orchestra, and they had heard me do unaccompanied improvised encores based on my tunes in various mutes, this was my first appearance at the Musikverein with The Tonkünstler Orchester. The encore improvisations were successful the last time, and probably a similar thing could have been done at these concerts. My thought was that The Schnyder *Concerto’s* exciting concept required an encore with high drama!! It needed music with the same intensity, but coming from a different mindset. I wanted to contrast the virtuosity required in Daniel’s concerto, with the virtuosity of playing this amazingly compact, great, but simple lieder. I wanted to do something valid but totally different for this audience. I had a chance to really see what could be done as a creative musician on a bass trombone, in front of an audience that knew Schubert well — knew what his music was all about. This was an audience that really would listen to the piece for what it

was, without concerning themselves with “academically qualified transcriptions.” I handed out the parts at the second rehearsal. My reasoning was that if this weren’t the time to “groove within the seriousness,” that “time” would never come.

There was another reason to push myself to perform this concept of Schubert’s song. I had an upcoming performance in New York of Berio’s *Sequenza*. I was going to play it in front of Berio’s colleagues, including Elliot Carter and Charles Wuorinen, and many of his admirers on a program featuring musicians who had specialized in Berio’s music. My performance on bass trombone was going to be very different from the original tenor trombone version. I was concerned about the reaction from composers and musicians. I was concerned that although I might be performing the piece with its original intent, my different instrumental requirements on bass trombone might be pushing the piece too far. I believed my interpretation was coming from the right place, and didn’t want to let my insecurities stop me. Playing the Schubert in Vienna would be very important in maintaining my confidence. My feeling was, if the Vienna concert scene could accept these liberties with Schubert as coming from a real place, the same could be done in NY with Berio.

When the orchestra saw the music, the first reaction was a silent skepticism. The parts were simple to play — basically whole notes. At first glance, I’m sure the harmony looked very close, low, and not right. After they started playing, they enjoyed the music because the harmony was so tight, and in such low inversions. It had a beautiful and weird effect. When I started playing, it was kind of shocking for me, because I didn’t know how to read their reaction. I was playing vocal recital music on an instrument that wasn’t a trombone they normally saw, in a toilet plunger; performing lieder about a guy describing how he was watching his alter ego, while lamenting over his lost love. The musicians were looking side to side at each other, and then at me. They really seemed to like what they heard, and that made me quickly feel at ease. After the rehearsal, the orchestra was in a very positive mood, and we talked about the performer’s concerns with playing Austrian music in Vienna. This orchestra rehearsed in a building with attached café so the musicians were used to hanging out after rehearsals. They told me they felt that the Viennese had acquired a reputation of being difficult on performers who took too many liberties with Austrian music — and that this was something they felt was not quite true. For the most part, they said Viennese musicians enjoy fresh views of old master works. The brass and wind players came up to me really energized. They liked the idea behind the musical statement I was making. They interpreted what I was doing as a commentary on the song. Of course, the conversation included talk of the Schnyder. The orchestra loved Daniel Schnyder’s *Concerto*. The piece is well-written, unbelievably colorful and technically rewarding for all the instruments. The engaging rhythms are an amalgam of a lot of periods, including those of pop, rock

and jazz of today. The brilliance of his composition is that he doesn’t pander to these concepts. It’s real.

There has always been discussion about how far an interpreter can take a composition. When is the music’s intent unrecognizable? Have you ever thought about the reaction Pergolisi would have had if he had heard Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella Suite*? Have you played Elliot Carter’s, Wuorinen’s or Tavener’s Renaissance transcriptions and arrangements? Have you ever heard Luciano Berio’s arrangements of folk songs? In fact, Berio wrote a piece called *Renderings* which is based on the sketches Schubert made for his 10th *Symphony*. He goes inside and outside his own style, and at times tries to write as Schubert would have written. Have you listened to Pablo Casals’ interpretation of the Bach *Cello Suites*? When you hear him play them, it’s like witnessing a personal revelation. Casals sparked a lot of controversy with his personal approach. He sounded like he was improvising! Incidentally, how do you think it came about that many of you are using Bach *Cello Suites* as requirements for your orchestral auditions?

Whenever I hear Glenn Gould play Mozart piano sonatas, I think of the amazing relationship to Miles Davis playing Gil Evans’ arrangement of George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. It always amazes me to listen to varying genres and react to the similarities. Glenn Gould’s sound is very different in his Mozart *Sonatas* than his usual sound. It’s his light touch, “naivety” and vulnerability that makes it so similar to Miles’ sound. Gil Evans’ arrangements are very powerful and totally modern, but they’re so straightforward that they remind me of Mozart’s simplicity. How far can you go? Some music transcribes well, and some not. Part of the fun thing is finding out which is which. We all know when a transcription works. What’s the difference between an arrangement and a transcription? Does it include the investigation of copyright laws? How do you categorize my take on the Schubert in which I transcribed the piano part for the strings, and was very loose with the melody? What do you call an arrangement, if the melody appears intact, but everything else is changed?

The Schubert was played on all four concerts, and the audience reaction was good. They understood that I was into it, and while I was serious, there was fun attached to it. The orchestra liked the fact that the solo sounded different at each performance. Here’s part of the review from The Musikverein. I’m including this review not only be-



Dave Taylor performs in the Musikverein with the Tonkünstler Orchester Niederösterreich, Tetsuro Ban conducting

cause the critic really liked both the *Concerto* and *Der Doppelgänger*, but because I was amazed that he felt the four and a half minute Schubert encore was valid enough to give it so much space and importance in the structure of the review.

In the *Niederösterreichische Nachrichten* review Gottfried Sengstschmid wrote, "The motto of the Tonkuenstler-Concert... was "the Independence Of Sounds." What could that have meant, perhaps the *Concerto for Bass Trombone* by the Swiss Daniel Schnyder? In any case it was varied and refined in rhythm and instrumentation, somewhere between Stravinsky and Bernstein. The American, David Taylor with brilliant with his soli ... the applause caused an encore — an amusing arrangement of the Schubert lied, *Der Doppelgänger*."

"Over some Hollywood-like string playing, the bass trombone portrayed the lament of the disdained lover, seeing his shadow turn into a comic-grotesque state in the moonlight. It was marvelous! Once again, the fantastic soloist showed the numerous subtle nuances created through his playing."

After reading this review, I was grooved by the concept of grotesque-comique. Being a fan of M.C. Escher's use of strange creatures and subjects, certain Japanese art forms that use excess, and worldwide architectural styles that include Gargoyles, I'm familiar with the positive aspect of the word "grotesque." Some dictionaries define it as a style of art developed in 16th-century Europe, in which representations of real and fantastic figures are mixed. Many modern artists around the world still use this as an artistic technique.

By the by, the drag about believing your good reviews is that you then have to believe your bad ones!

Humor and improvisation have been a large part of my career. When I was in my thirties, I added vocals, poetry, multiphonics and extended techniques to my solos for various contemporary music genres. I have played and improvised on *Der Doppelgänger* for several years in many different ensemble combinations and found that each accompanying grouping required a different style of interpretation.

In this version with strings I had to stay much closer to the original melody's time feel, but the plunger added drama to the meter. I had to be really careful with my intonation, but with plunger I could be microtonal and still be valid. I had to have good projection because the hall is a room that seats over 2,000 people. The plunger enabled me to be as soft as I wanted without the typical pianissimo dynamic technical problems. I was able to use multiphonics, because the plunger with multiphonics has an amazing vocal quality. In fact, some orchestra members thought they heard the words of the piece. I could change octaves

when I felt it, because with all of these compositional devices going on, utilizing the style I had been developing, octave displacement becomes just another color on the palette. Octave changing is one of the most commonly used transpositions in transcription. The logic of getting to the octave jump and away from the octave jump is very important in maintaining the integrity of the interpretation.

All of the techniques I used in the Schubert song are directly transferable to the Berio. Acting, or performance art, adds an extra layer of introspection to an interpretation, and *Sequenza* forces the performer to go through all kinds of personal revaluations and technical reassessments. The acting gives you another view of what you are internalizing and expressing in your creative musical thoughts.

Non-Western "extended" sound techniques have a much longer history than the virtuosity acquired since the Middle Age's sackbut technique brought us to the modern trombone.

Sequenza V is a seminal piece for the trombone, and altered the trombone's history in the 20th century. The sound techniques in this piece are still cutting edge, and unfortunately a trombone player wanting to look the other way could probably go through his entire career without approaching most of them. But, if you look closely at wind instrument traditions from around the world, these non-Western "extended" sound techniques have a much longer history, than the virtuosity acquired since the Middle Age's sackbut technique brought us to the modern trombone. In the old days of the 20th century, a player would specialize in this kind of "modern music." Time has changed that. Now, everyone can relate to these sounds, even if they think they don't feel them. These sounds are really no longer extended techniques. They are "additional vocabulary." They must be additional vocabulary, because even though I'm a conservative musician, compared to that group of fantastic trombone trailblazers in the mid-'60s, these sounds are totally incorporated into my most creative playing — in old German lieder, even!

For me, it isn't only the "extended instrumental techniques" that make the *Sequenza* unique. One of the most elemental things to me about this piece is that it works. It has verity. Audiences can be mesmerized by it. They can hear the depth of the music but still realize that no matter how sad or deep, a composition sounds, it's still music, and through it all, the musician makes the underlying joy of art come through. That's also how I feel about the blues. Through it all, joy is the bottom line. *Der Doppelgänger* is another example. It's coming from a very dark, introspective, kind of gloom. But through it all must come the ever-present "up" that humans create in music.

Stuart Dempster and Vinko Globokar played a close part in getting this piece written. There are lots of complicated issues involved in commissioning a "front lines" composer. Money aside, sacrifice aside, the artist has to go to the composer with a technique that will spark the composer's creative juices and sustain his interest in developing the piece. He must show the composer his willingness to climb inside the composer's aesthetic and be ready to jump through hoops when the composer decides to take the performer's already virtuosic technique "a step further." Stuart Dempster and Vinko Globokar, judging by the type of work Berio wrote for them, are foresighted musical thinkers, and very soulful men.

I guess I could have practiced a bass trombone version of *Sequenza* in the house and been satisfied. Being involved in jazz and modern classical repertoire since the mid '60s, and commissioning music since 1978, this alternative didn't make sense. When a performer plays a composition in front of an audience, wonderfully different things happen for that performer. The interaction of the audience with the music creates a very spiritual relationship, especially when the performer is "real" in keeping the thread of the piece going. When a performer is really into a composition, it begins and runs through as if it were one thought throughout the whole structure. The composition is his. Every note is personal. It's like one complete improvisation. I'm not saying I get this feeling or result all the time, but if it happens once in a great while, it's worth the wait.

My first public performance of the Berio *Sequenza* was in April 1999, when Madeline Shaper of Modernworks "pulled my coat, and took me left," just as my friend (NY-based author and orchestral program coordinator) Joseph Horowitz had done with *Doppelgänger* and other Schubert lieder. With Joe's musical recommendation, I had to find the right spots for the music, and it took some time for me to feel natural enough with the transcriptions I was conceiving. Madeline's offer came with a built-in spot on one of her group's concerts. I don't know whether she was aware that I would do a bass trombone version of *Sequenza*, and I didn't ask. She called and offered me the gig one couldn't refuse. I left it hanging, almost dreading the intensity it would require after all these years of keeping *Sequenza* in the filing cabinet.

Perusing the music, the most obvious problem was reading the notation. Even the instruction sheet was hard. Although, I have to say, the more you read the instruction sheet's conciseness, the more ambiguity you will see. For example, the most obvious freedom-giving sentence appears when discussing the form of the second section: "It is expected, for each performer and at each performance, the length of the breath units to be different." OR, the more subtle instruction: "Vocal sounds at the given pitch, produced with the lips on the mouthpiece, generally while playing." It's the inclusion of the word "generally," rather than the "MUST" instruction Berio sometimes states, that gives me some freedom, or at least the confidence not to obsess over technique which



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might prevent a flexible form. This confidence allows me to invite accidents and adjustments into my performances. Cautionary note: With freedom comes responsibility.

With freedom comes responsibility!

This piece supports so many varied approaches! Looking at the actual notation, customization seemed to be important. For example, I relocated the plunger markings to make it look like the notation of more familiar muted trombone music, and highlighted the dynamics in yellow. I'm so used to the typical bar line notation we normally see, I couldn't get the flow happening, so in the second section, I put in one or two more clearly delineated bar lines. Seeing dynamics described numerically, rather than with symbols, added more variations to the dynamics than one might normally see in conventionally written scores. You even get to think of dynamics as mood differences

rather than varying loudnesses or softnesses. I customized the notation just enough to keep moving, but not to make it overly familiar. When you play a lot of fresh music, you quickly learn that it's the page turns, clearly customized accidentals, highlighted dynamics, and xeroxing that could make or break a performance. Or . . . memorize.

This music looked so different and intimidating to me, I just left it lying around the house in places where I didn't feel the need to sit down and study for long stretches. I left it in places where I could browse and ease into it. Practicing gave me brain itch real quick. There was plenty of prep time for the concert, so I started practicing in very small doses. Some of the instructed sounds were new to me and tough to feel comfortable with. Singing below the played note was the hardest concept for me. It's a very concrete sound in this piece, and because of the bass trombone's physical properties, I always found multiphonics most effective if I sang above the played pitch. I didn't even begin to think about the theatrical aspects until I absorbed very big chunks of the piece. Not quite true; the theatrical element was probably one of the main things

that drew me into the music. I just stayed away from it until I had a clearer understanding of the relationship of the acting to the music.

I don't think I've ever heard a recording of this piece. I saw two performances many years ago, both in front of student audiences. I wanted to learn this piece from my own idiosyncratic viewpoint, so I stayed away from recordings, etc. Have you ever seen the great comedian, Victor Borge? His antics at the piano were fantastic. Much of it was visual. The music usually was "concocted" from the classics, light classics and popular music. It included strange sounds, and banging on all parts of the piano. He seemed to carry on that Grock tradition. I looked around for these kinds of reference points (often wondering if these clowns' performances could work on recordings). Is Crazy Al Yankovich another of these "clowns"?

Berio's *Sequenza* focuses you, and helps you develop a concept of visualizing form. *Angels Of The Inmost Heavens* has a built-in formal aid — dance. It was originally performed with the Erick Hawkins Dance Co. In a similar way, the clown concept aids the form of the Berio. The

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Not Exactly a Familiar Italian Touch

Sequenza V (1968) in which a solo trombonist is asked to produce probably every sound possible on the trombone, including chord-like multiphonics, notes combined with singing and vocalizing, muted tones and sustained notes played while turning in a circle, with a variety of vaudeville poses thrown in for good measure. Mr. Taylor played it gamely and with an assured virtuosity.

—Allan Kozinn

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November 22, 2002

After the *Piano Sonata* came *Sequenza V* (1965) for bass trombone, Mr. Berio's homage to a great clown, Grock [sic], he remembers from his childhood. The trombonist David Taylor, wearing a tuxedo, but with white socks, black boots, unkempt hair and a harried look, was both a brilliant performer and a one-man circus, producing all manor [sic] of rude blasts with a rubber plunger mute, as well as an astonishing array of gusty chants, pants and inhalations.

—Anthony Tommasini

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awareness of the character throughout is a great unifying factor to the whole piece. Ask yourself some method-acting questions. "Can I imagine a great, sophisticated clown (Grock), staging an act with a trombone, concentrating specifically on technical, instrumental perfection?" Practice this piece, maintaining the mentality of a great, highly respected, deep performer, traveling through Europe during very difficult historical times, entertaining the populace. He's using one of the most recognizable acoustic instruments in history. He's performed in a wide variety of venues, respected by political leaders, as well as the citizenry (he's known to have refused correspondence with the politics), and is known to have used more than 20 instruments in his show, violin being the most prominent. Is he using the trombone just to be a virtuoso instrument, or could this piece be a "soliloquy for a philosopher," using a historically majestic, yet most whacky axe to denote all the emotions in the world, making the day brighter through the depth? Different areas of the globe have differ-

ent attitudes on acting personae. I've grown up with film, Broadway, TV and stand-up comedians, and I've checked out some of the great acting teachers. I've read Stanislavsky's books on acting, and found these books to be great analogous ways to get into the interpretation of music.

“Visualize the whole piece ‘like your laughing baby’s drool falling on the boss’ wife’s new white sofa.’”

Yes, get the notes right, no, don't sacrifice the vibe for the notes. Keep the wholeness going, practice the technique and forget it. It'll add to the joy. Maybe we could all loosen up a little. Visualize the whole piece "like your laughing baby's drool falling on the boss' wife's new white sofa." What I'm finding is, if you're totally involved in the structure of the music you're playing, and the music you are playing is the sound you truly love, the real you will surface. That might be a definition of style. It takes courage, but if you are a trombonist in this day and age, you already have courage. That being said, a concept of style is not so easy to achieve. For example, it has taken me four or five years of playing this piece just to realize that the vocal sounds and vowel sounds in *Sequenza* are not artifacts. These sounds are little parts of a myriad of human sounds. It's funny how things go; this really didn't sink in until the very last note in my very last performance. *Sequenza* ends with a soft E-natural alternating between the voice and played trombone note. For some reason, my voice ended with a really imperfect sound that was almost like a cry or sigh. The mood was great for the structure of the piece, but, of course, it was on my "right after the concert self-criticism" list of mistakes. After an hour, or so, I started reviewing my work from a distance, and realized how throughout the performance I had "let myself go." This vocal sound was totally logical with all the other sounds I had made, it added to the body of the interpretation, and really could be thought of as the only logical conclusion. This could lead to another problem in itself: making the good mistakes like this part of the next performance. When soloists try to repeat their best mistakes, the music becomes as false as just thinking about technical perfection — like when an improviser develops a bag of "licks."

Most of my performances of this piece have been in front of the general music-going public. The first performance, with Modernworks, had *Sequenza* as the opening piece on a program of diverse modern Italian composers. My feeling was if I came on too hard with clown-like humor, the timing for the rest of the concert would not be set up correctly. I balanced my concentration more on the virtuosic technique. This last performance was programmed on an all-Berio concert with no intermission: 1) *Sequenza*

VIIA for oboe, Jacqueline LeClair, 2) *Piano Sonata*, Ursula Oppens, 3) *Sequenza V* for trombone, and 4) *Circles* for soprano and two percussionists (Lucy Shelton, soprano). There was no intermission, and the music preceding and following *Sequenza V* was so dense and serious, it made me feel freer to explore the performance arts.

Knowing this was a high profile concert, with a sophisticated NY "downtown crowd," the organizer suggested I dress in all black. I opted for white tie (i.e., with long formal coat), because Berio requests it, and because I didn't want my performance dictated to by an audience. I know many trombonists have experimented with various costumes, stage makeup, wigs, hats, etc. That's cool, but I was aware my playing style would be stretching the material enough without that extravagance. A week before the concert, I figured that if I added a pair of white socks with my regular high-top black shoes to the formal attire, it would add a little circus atmosphere to my concept, and because of the modesty, draw this particular crowd in. Although I don't want the audience to dictate my performance, "folks is folks."

I wore a black and white bow tie, to subtly displace the concert uniform of formal attire, and found a pair of older style formal trousers that are too tight down the leg. The slim leg pants amplified my already ample gut perfectly! The pants were rolled up just enough to let the white socks show ONLY when I sat down during the sec-

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ond half of the piece. I imagined by not showing the white socks during the first section, where, for me the piece is most heraldic, and slapstick, I would create a kind of stretto effect, or “across the barline mental syncopation,” by reminding the audience of the circus during the more dense, introspective second section. Even if this concept of tying both movements together with obvious visual effects didn’t translate to the crowd, it made an impression on me, and helped me think of the composition as a whole. I remember sitting down for section B, and being at the end of the first page when I realized the second page was upside down. I made “shtick” out of throwing page one over my shoulder (it appears in a purple color behind me in the enclosed *New York Times* picture) and setting the remaining one properly. I had xeroxed, and enlarged the music. It must have looked zany. I picked a spot that wouldn’t disturb the timing, and the audience was clearly able to see the gigantic page flying, coordinated with my exaggerated adjustment of the second page. They laughed at the great gag — all part of the gestalt.

I don’t know the historical trail of conservatory education in Western civilization, but I do know that now and in the second half of the 20th century, conservatories have been a bulwark in support of contemporary music. Because of this, we sometimes forget that in the real world, human beings work in strange and sometimes illogical ways during the creation of a work of art. For instance, in bringing about a new work, there are times when the commission and composition don’t occur in a defined chronological order. A composition might be started in a different context than the way it appears in its final structure. I performed the Daniel Schnyder *Bass Trombone Concerto’s* second movement with a string quartet in Zurich, Switzerland on a



Dave and Ronnie Taylor

chamber music concert well before the first and third movements were performed.

Essay, by Luciano Berio (I.T.A. *Journal*/Vol. 22, No. 2, Spring 1994) was meant to be a composition for unaccompanied trombone. It became the second section of the *Sequenza*. *Essay* was written before Stu Dempster commissioned Berio. I didn’t know this information until reading an old volume of the I.T.A. *Journal* during the writing of this article. Seeing volume 22 was nice, and it confirmed my intuitive approach to connecting the two sections. I usually approach interpretations with traditional performance study, and “over the top” practice repetition. By this I mean, when I repeat phrases during my practicing, I most always try different ways of approaching the phrase. For me one of the joys of performance is being so prepared that every accident is another opportunity to express a deeper part of my communication with the listener. In my practicing, I try to look at as many “angles” as possible, so when I perform, I’m almost improvising. As an example, try breathing in different places and still make the phrase the way you want it to be. When decisions of performance personalization come up, I trust my overall communicative vision, historical knowledge, and “street smarts.” I’m also lucky enough to know that when you perform, all of this thinking goes away!

“Simplify! Just walk out on the stage and play!”

Daniel Schnyder’s *Concerto* was easier to envision because of the built-in nature of the movements of the concerto form, and because I’ve played many pieces he has written for me, I knew his style. Besides the unusual notation, *Sequenza* required the added responsibility of comic, musical and formal timing. How did Beethoven’s orchestra get through those first performances? Can you imagine the improvisation going on there? Can you imagine the audience reaction to the *9th Symphony*? Can you imagine how the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* must have felt to the orchestra members, compared with the thought-through practice of the modern orchestra in concert — no dancers, no crowd going nuts, no new-fangled parts to play, and no lights being turned off?

Wilhelm Fürtwängler, great conductor in the first half of the 20th century, writes about the dangers of a conductor rehearsing an orchestra until the music sounds as if it’s being preserved in a bottle of formaldehyde. So, it is obvious that besides pristine techniques, there are many elements that go into a successful concert in any genre. You know Berio clearly understands this concept, and knows opera buffa. . . . Have you ever heard the way Enrico Caruso and Maria Callas sang and interpreted libretti? For me the conclusion has to be that artists invite the beautiful accidents into the performance. It helps make the structure

alive. Besides the vitality, oftentimes it’s these wonderful accidents that define the truth of the performance. Many cultures build imperfections into their artifacts, like marks on drum skins, long loose threads in rugs — “Soul Leaks” — allowing the spirit to travel in and out. Incidentally, I taped coins to my personalized, carved-plunger to simulate the rattling effect Berio requests. (Using a rubber plunger with taped coins has become a performance tradition, especially if the metal plunger can’t be found).

Grock said, “The genius of clowning is transforming the little, everyday annoyances, not only overcoming, but actually transforming them into something strange and terrific . . . it is the power to extract mirth for millions out of nothing and less than nothing.”

Not combing my hair (it is usually tied in the “pony-tail”-type of hair style) combined with my odd-shaped reading glasses further threw the formal suit concept off kilter. Basically, I wanted to suggest elegance with oddball second thoughts — or oddball thoughts, with a touch of elegance. I wanted the audience to see and feel through simple, obvious means that I had thought this character through. Besides this attire, I brought a fold-up wooden music stand. You’d be surprised how audiences react to this kind of personalization. These elegant stands are less intrusive than the large ones we seem to find on stage. Trying to keep this touch of class, I used the leather piano bench that was left on stage from the *Piano Sonata*. Since *Circles* was the composition right after *Sequenza*, the percussion was already set up. Walking on stage between two batteries of percussion instruments, working within my own personalized “set,” acted like a honing device. It focused the audience’s attention on me, and not the clutter around me.

As I remember this performance, I quickly walked onto the stage with my eyes blazing, wanting that audience to see clearly that the music they were about to hear came from me and not the props. Although the program notes explained the composition, I wanted them to know that they were going to witness a serious comic performer, performing from inside. One who was vulnerable, yet demanded their deepest attention. I remained “in character” from the moment just before walking on stage, through to the last bow.

Miraculous Mandarin was 35 years ago. If someone would have told me that I would feel one with the music soloing on Schubert at the Musikverein, or that I would be performing the Berio *Sequenza*, or that Gil Evans would have anything to say to me, I would have thought that person totally out of his mind. Writing this “reminiscence of fall 2002” was a way for me to document a very important time in my life, review the path involved in maintaining my focus over the years, and hopefully find a way to encourage like-minded people to figure out how to expand their playing capabilities. I hope this journal encourages musicians to add to the repertoire, not necessarily because it’s a nice thing to do, but because it’s a natural way to be expressive and spread the joy.

A scene from my elementary school days, some 45 or 50 years ago comes back to me every now and then: I'm looking at a portrait of the American patriot George Washington hanging in the school auditorium. He has a ponytail hairstyle that appears prominently in the picture. Every time I passed that painting and looked at that ponytail, the same thought crossed my mind — WHY on earth would anyone want to do that? A great philosopher once said that the quickest way to get someplace "is not knowing how to get there."

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David Taylor holds degrees from the Juilliard School of Music and began his career with Leopold Stowkowski's American Symphony Orchestra. He records solo albums and presents numerous recitals throughout the world, and has performed on numerous Grammy Award-winning CDs. Taylor has won the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences Most Valuable Player for five consecutive years, as well as the NARAS Most Valuable Player Virtuoso Award. He currently teaches at Manhattan School of Music and Mannes College and is an artist clinician for Edwards Trombones. For a more comprehensive biography, visit <www.davetaylor.net>.



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