

Are You Irreplaceable? [Part II]

Description

In Part I of this post, I suggested that we owe it to ourselves and our audiences to be able to answer the question “Why should someone pay to hear me play?” I also intimated that we are all capable of answering this question, finding our niche, and becoming “irreplaceable.” Naturally, that leads us to the question of *how*...

How Do You Make Yourself Irreplaceable?

Think back to Econ101 and the concept of supply and demand. What creates value? I won't even pretend to know anything about economics, but I think most would agree that **scarcity** is the key to creating value. Remember how hard it was to get a Wii when they first came out? People would wait outside in the freezing cold for hours (and often leave empty-handed), just for the opportunity to buy one.

What makes a musician scarce?

Yes, I know that sounds like the opening line of a joke, but in all seriousness, two things come to mind.

Imagination and courage.

Imagination

Your ideas are a product of who you are, your thoughts, your emotions, your values, your perspective – everything that you have ever seen, felt, and experienced in life. This gives you the raw material needed to create something that is personal, unique, and can only have been imagined and created by you.

Courage

Courage is what allows your imagination to see the light of day, and to take shape in the physical world. I may have a groundbreaking idea, but if I fail to take action on it, the idea will never exist for anybody else to see or hear. If I have the coolest idea about a particular sequence in the sonata I'm working on, but worry about what my teacher might think, what the audience might think, or what the critic might think, I'm liable to produce something that is not sincere, genuine, or true for me, but instead, what I *think* they want to hear (which is never quite as compelling to the listener). Courage means making a commitment to your vision, and doing what it takes to bring it to life.

What Can We Learn from the iPad?

Do you remember when the first pictures and videos of the [iPad](#) began to appear on the internet? Remember how many writers and bloggers predicted that this would be a huge failure for Apple? It may still be too soon to see what sort of impact the iPad will have on how we use computers, but this is an example of what is possible when imagination and courage intersect.

Specifically, the iPad represents Apple's vision of what the future of computing should be. Nobody has ever come out with a product quite like the iPad. As such, the Apple folks are sticking their necks out there in a very public way. There are many who would like to see them fail, yet Apple continues to focus on innovation and the development of industry-changing products rather than playing it safe or playing not to lose. Imagine the courage it takes to operate in this manner.

So How Do I Become a Linchpin?

In practical terms, becoming a linchpin begins in the practice room. Ever heard the phrase "make it your own"? This means really taking a fresh look at the score, and not taking for granted what is there. This means forgetting all the recordings you've ever heard, and looking at the score with your own eyes and ears. Don't just play things a certain way just because that's how everyone else plays it, or because it's "tradition" to do so.

Just as the iPad is Apple's vision of what computing should be, what is *your* vision of how this sonata, concerto, or excerpt should be played? Having taken a close look at the score, what is this piece supposed to sound like, according to you?

Be brave, experiment, do too much, do too little, do the opposite of what seems to make sense, just to see what it sounds like. It may sound horrible, but lead you to discover something that sounds brilliant which otherwise would never have occurred to you. Be sure that your ultimate decision is justified by the score, of course, but – and this is important – *start* by pushing the limits. Exaggerate, go nuts, jump off the cliff. Hear what this sounds like first, and then start to pull back on the reins when it is too much or bordering on inappropriate. It's a lot more effective to find the sweet spot by blowing way past it and putting things in reverse than slowly creeping up to it one teeny-tiny step at a time.

Subvert the Dominant Paradigm

I received a piano trio coaching from pianist Leon Fleisher one day, who asked us to read the message on his t-shirt and tell us what it meant. On his shirt was printed the phrase "Subvert the dominant paradigm". Essentially, he was telling us that our playing was generic. Pretty perhaps, and technically well put-together, but generic in that we were merely following convention and replicating what we had heard on various recordings we had listened to. It was not personal, and it hadn't been infused with who we were as individuals or our own original thoughts and choices regarding the score.

Finding Your Voice

Have you ever been on a date where you just had a strong feeling that the other person was totally into

you, and no matter what you said, they only appeared to like you more and more? Do you remember what that felt like? To be in a situation where you were free to be your true self without fear of judgment or rejection, instead of being tentative, cautious, and trying to figure out who the other person wanted you to be lest you say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing?

Find your voice by cultivating your imagination and courage, and you will find yourself increasingly less concerned about aligning with the expectations of others and more concerned with meeting your own expectations of yourself. You'll find yourself performing more confidently and delivering more compelling performances. Most of all, you'll find yourself becoming increasingly valuable and irreplaceable to your orchestra, to your chamber ensemble, to your community, and to the music profession as a whole.

As Woody Allen once said, "If you're not failing every now and again, it's a sure sign that you're not trying anything very innovative."

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