

Get Classical

Donal Fox – Playing with the Classical Imperative

By Ilona Oltuski | September 2014

When pianist/composer and improviser Donal Fox appeared live on WQXR's *All Ears With Terrance McKnight* in 2013, classical music's agenda, addressing its cultural divide, was tangible on air. As rare as it may be for a classical musician to improvise in jazz and Latin American vocabulary, it is probably even more unusual for a jazz musician to be at home with the classics. Improvising in the classical style with **a pianistic technique that knows no boundaries between a jazzy scale slide and Chopinesque arpeggios** is right out the exception. Fox, a classically-trained musician, felt the need early on to stray the course from the "sacrosanct score," dismissing it as a notion of today's conservatories that was not at all the idea that the great masters like Bach and Beethoven had in mind, in his opinion. "When they performed, they improvised...there were strings breaking," he says.

Donal sees improvisation in the foreground of the creative process. "The more I read about the history, it was clear to me that improvising was part of what a great musician had to do. Mozart was improvising. Beethoven was improvising! He may have written the score down later on for his great patrons or the publisher, but his composition process is based on improvisation, and this is the real genesis of creativity," he explains in our meeting on the eve of his recent *Jazz at Lincoln Center* duo performance with the virtuosic vibraphonist Warren Wolf. **"Whether it is the great classics, or whether it's jazz, they come from the same creative place.** In most classical music, the melody and harmonic structure dominate, while the rhythm comes more to the forefront in jazz. Many classical composers, for example Stravinsky, have been influenced by jazz, the musical language that is the African-American cultural language of the melting pot fusion, and," he continues, "that reminds me of something: a very young Mick Jagger said on a talk show interview, before he became Mr. Rolling Stones: 'I am really trying to be James Brown – this is how it comes out.'" Fox says, endearingly: "In this sense, **I am trying to improvise like Beethoven – what comes out is Fox.**"



Fox is no mutineer, and he certainly does not look to connect the disparate worlds of classical and jazz via crossover; he is also not a classical concert pianist who would perform the Beethoven Sonata cycle. "There are people that can do that much better than I ever could, and who devoted much more time to the

rigorous training it takes,” he says. In fact, playing piano became a vehicle rather than the mission of his early musical career. Donal’s improvisation seems to indicate his simple refusal to deny classical music’s greatness on the grounds of being a jazz musician, and he takes it from there, venturing to sonic spaces above these two worlds. Whether he is teaching improvisation to members of the orchestra at the Symphony Hall, a process Fox compares to the fun and freedom of “playing in the sandbox,” or taking his original programs based on Brahms or Schubert to the jazz pub, Fox is equally likely to improvise over Thelonious Monk as he is to offset jazz with the contrapuntal structures of Johann Sebastian Bach. **“In principle, baroque and jazz are so much alike, they both share the walking bass line,** and I often compose with a part of the score written down and a part improvised, giving me room to engage in improvisational communication. I like to draw audiences’ interest with arrangements that respect the melody, but bring the swing,” he says, **“this is not crossover; it’s opening up your thinking about music that is informed by history,** but it also feels like it is part of our time. More important is the question: Does this music touch you? Music is so powerful and there should not be any stigma attached to playing what moves you; it has to come from a true place in your heart.”

Studying at both Boston’s Berklee College of Music, renowned for its strong jazz faculty, and New England Conservatory of Music, Donal frequently got carried away in different directions improvising while practicing classical repertoire, despite his teachers’ insistence that he focus on the classical composition at hand. Other forces were stronger for Fox: **“My focus on creating over recreating became stronger and stronger,”** he says. He is certainly not alone in this; other pianists, like Gabriela Montero, who Fox greatly admires, have been improvising from the beginning of their studies while simultaneously discovering the piano’s classical repertoire. And yet, the stigma of the written score as the only suitable homage to the great composers of the past, as opposed to the self-created tune, has sustained overwhelmingly. In Montero’s case, as celebrated as she is for her spontaneous improvisational interpretations of the classical masters in the concert hall, it took personal encouragement from the great pianist Martha Argerich to allow her to dare explore her special talent.

Fox grew up in a rare, artistic home in which Bach Cantatas occupied the family playlist right next to Miles Davis, which was next to Igor Stravinsky. But music’s limitations and stigmas were quite clear to him early on, when most of his friends did not follow him on his classical concert hall explorations. “When I performed at a jazz bar it was cool, when it came to a concert hall performance, no one came.” Fox did not want to miss out on social solidarity entirely, defined by a mutual musical identity, but he certainly did not care to toss out his great respect for the classical tradition to stay popular with his friends either. In fact, for a long time, Fox hid his improvisational talents, afraid of being frowned upon by either side of the musical fence. “The contemporary music scene is just as stiff in its ways,” he confesses, “and every venue is worried for their audiences. It gets complicated, sometimes” says Fox, who has been able to reach both concert hall and jazz club audiences with his individual style and adaptable pianistic technique. **His skills brought him from the Rockport Jazz Festival to Tanglewood and Carnegie Hall,** where, as composer/performer and improviser, Fox received standing ovations and a gleaming review by *Times* critic Anthony Tommasini, for the world premiere of his concerto “Peace Out” for Improvised Piano and Orchestra in 2009.

Donal’s international career took off, after serving as the first African American composer-in-residence of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra. He participated in a vast array of collaborations and recordings with artists ranging from new music’s *Bang on a Can* contemporary players, to jazz celebrities at Lincoln Center. “Still, black people don’t usually come to the concert hall,” he comments, “and at the same time, jazz is getting much more institutionalized now that it is an established discipline of its own in schools. What happened to learning on the road, from the great masters? Today’s performers have incredible facility, amassed a large amount of repertoire and a great technique, but rarely carry their own voice. It is rather difficult to get people to listen to either jazz or classical these days; there is the need to produce new things, for people to go out there and hear live concerts.”

If audiences are particularly defined by their music tastes, **perhaps it’s time to overcome borders within music presentation by letting audiences mingle in more intimate venues with more social context.** The divide may not lie as much with Bach or Monk, but rather with the strong affinity for one’s own identity. Perhaps more common traits can be discovered over a glass of wine and a good show than one might expect; after all, good music opens horizons, carrying the bass line beyond one’s own small world.