

8 *Creative Practice*

GREAT PERFORMING INVOLVES MORE than reproducing what we have practised: it requires us to create something in the moment. You might say that it requires us to *learn* as we perform: to learn the audience, the hall, our fellow musicians, if we are playing in ensemble, and finally the music itself, since in front of an audience new ideas often come thick and fast. How to prepare for these moments?

The answer to this question must lie in the way we practise. When we learn a piece of notated music, we encounter every kind of problem: interpretive, technical and not least spiritual. We should consider, then, if there are practice approaches that help us become the kind of performer who is always in learning mode – even on stage.

One such approach is to incorporate improvisation into our daily practice. Here, we mean *improvisation* in the broadest possible sense: rather than, say, soloing over a chord progression, we mean any practice approach in which in order to master what is written in the score, we practise something that is *not* written in the score.

To be sure, when we spend time on a piece, much of that time is spent simply playing it. But when the difficulties amass and deadlines get tight, it is easy to become tunnel-visioned and turn increasingly to practising what is written in the music – and only that. It's at that point that diminishing returns set in. In fact, some problems are more easily solved by treating the score as a playground, isolating difficulties and having fun with them until we make them our own.

We'll start with technical problems and then go on to questions of learning and interpretation that build on other sections in this book, including the previous section and our discussion of Bach.

Improvising for technical refinement

Example 1 shows the beginning of a study in thirds by Sor. This is a challenging passage, but not because of anything the fingers have to do; it's the arm that must move in the most refined way, carrying the left hand up and down the fingerboard in a series of small, precise shifts. If this passage is to be mastered, it may have to be played hundreds of times. And yet even then, the result, while note-perfect, may still be stiff and bumpy in musical effect: the arm's movements easily become jerky, causing each interval following the shift to sound accented.

Example 1 Sor, Study in A, op.6, no.6



The solution is simple: for each shift, the arm should move very slightly ahead of the fingers, causing the wrist to yield very slightly in the direction of the movement. For an ascending shift, the arm moves slightly to the right, causing the wrist to extend; for a descending shift, the arm moves slightly to the left, and the wrist flexes. In both cases, the fingertips remain where they are, but the fingers change their shape to accommodate the movement of the arm. For very small shifts, as in this study, the amount of arm movement and yielding in the wrist might be so imperceptible that it registers only as a feeling of ease, a sense that the wrist is not rigid but responsive.

To master this shifting approach, let's abandon the study temporarily and explore the wrist. Start away from the guitar and draw an infinity sign (∞) with your left hand. Let the whole arm follow your movement, including the upper arm. As you change direction, let your wrist go first: it'll bend back (extend) as the hand moves to the right and bend forward (flex) as the hand