

## Zen and the Art of Musical Maintenance By Stuart Isacoff

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Making music is no simple matter. Mastering the basic mechanics alone can be daunting. Students can put in hundreds, even thousands of hours of practice, and that is merely the beginning. Once the notes are learned, the motions mastered, the technical hurdles conquered, myriad subtle issues still remain.

Rendering everything on the page accurately can't guarantee that the outcome won't be humdrum. Musicians constantly face perplexing riddles: How can one play a work for the hundredth time and still keep it fresh? What steps will lead a musician to become "one" with the music yet remain true to the composer's vision? What are the secrets of wordless communication harnessed by legendary masters to ignite the hearts and souls of an audience?

Eric Schoones, a Dutch pianist and the editor of piano magazines in both the Netherlands and Germany, has probed these issues in the light of the spiritual practice of Zen Buddhism, and the fertile results are compiled in his new book, *Walking up the Mountain Track: The Zen Way to Enlightened Musicianship* (Agreeable Place Publications). It includes over 350 piquant quotes from the likes of such celebrated musicians as Sergiu Celibidache, Claudio Arrau, Dinu Lipatti and Alfred Brendel, along with several full interviews, all offering Zen as a key to unlocking the mysteries of authentic musical performance. The parallels are clearly there.

Zen has been a mainstay of popular culture for decades, of course, featured in such books as *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig (1974) and, most influentially, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Eugen Herrigel's 1953 classic in which a Western student undergoes rigorous training and countless frustrations in order to master the psychological intricacies of "action through non-action"—hitting a target with an arrow through effortless, graceful motion, notably without the intervention of the human ego. Getting out of his own way, Herrigel's archer learns to let the arrow "shoot itself," just as a great pianist, in an ideal frame of mind, will let the music "play itself."

If the idea induces some head scratching, well, that is in itself related to a Zen technique known as a *koan*—a riddle that cannot be solved using the rational mind. The answer can be discovered not by mental calculation or through the acquisition of technical knowledge, but rather by a kind of "unlearning." The great Taoist master Lao Tzu framed the issue in cosmic terms: "The universe is a like a bellows, always emptying, always full. The more it yields, the more it holds."

The task is to become unfettered from old habits—shedding what you think you knew, and thus discarding your attachments to rigidly held beliefs, no matter how hallowed. One koan even declares: "If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him." That is, put aside your idea of what the Buddha is, since your assumptions are certain to be incorrect. As Shunryu Suzuki put it in *Zen*

*Mind, Beginner's Mind*, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."

Part of the aim is to cultivate a natural synchronicity with the world. As John Cage once said to me, "Shiver in winter, perspire in summer." To illustrate the impact this material has had on music makers, Schoones cites the source of his book's title. As he explains it, Glenn Gould was entranced by Natsume Soseki's *The Three-Cornered World*, which opens: "Going up a mountain track, I fell to thinking. Approach everything rationally, and you become harsh. Pole along in the stream of emotions, and you will be swept away by the current. Give free rein to your desires, and you become uncomfortably confined." The adept resides mindfully on the middle path.

Two gems from Gould cited in Schoones's book apply this philosophy to music. The idea "that there's a certain sequence of events necessary in order to have the revealed truth about the way one produces a given effect on a given instrument," said the pianist, is a fallacy concocted by music teachers. The process is more complex than that, and besides, a focus on systematically accumulating details can be hazardous. Consider the story of the centipede and the spider, thought Gould. The many-legged centipede was always able to outrun the spider, until the day the crafty spider posed a question: "How are you able to control so many legs? Which do you move first?" At which point the centipede, now pondering something that had always been instinctual, became paralyzed with doubt and was swiftly eaten.

In any case, the real purpose of art goes beyond achieving such short-term goals: it is, rather, the pianist asserted, "the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity." Or, as a Zen master might put it, "enlightenment."

Yet, finding the right balance is not easy. "You know of course C.P.E. Bach said that only the musician who is himself moved can move others," Brendel told Schoones. "In contrast, Diderot and Busoni claimed that actors or musical performers who set out to move others must not themselves be moved, in order not to lose control. I would say you have to be both at the same time, moved and controlled." At every turn there is a paradox.

Archery remains a powerful model of the ideal approach. The archer breathes with awareness, raises the bow, draws it back and remains still; then, at the point of highest tension, he releases the shot. It all happens as part of a continuous, uninterrupted flow. "The process," wrote Herrigel of experiencing the feeling of executing the shot correctly, was "like a living thing wholly contained in itself." His bow became Lao Tzu's bellows—moving in and out with the natural fluidity of a spring breeze, unconcerned with human desires or personal agendas, while seeming to encompass the world.

Or, as Jonas Kaufmann explains in Schoones's book: "While talking about singing, the word soulfulness is irreplaceable—because it is a condition to be achieved not by will but by letting it happen, not by power, but by simply Being. This is just as essential in singing as it is in Zen archery."

*Walking up the Mountain Track* is anecdotal in style, its structure a compendium of thoughts and stories rather than a tightly organized narrative. Most of the chapters are just a few pages in length. But it contains a rich content to draw from, gathered over a lifetime by a musical and spiritual explorer. It promises no answers, but leaves a lot to ponder.

Stuart Isacoff's latest book is *When the World Stopped to Listen: Van Cliburn's Cold War Triumph and Its Aftermath* (Knopf).