

From just three notes, the 'Soul of an Actor'

by Edmon J. Rodman



William Goldstein

What if you could have your own theme song, a custom-composed track that captures your essence? It would somehow take three notes — all provided by you — and turn them into the sonata of your life.

Now imagine that the person composing this piece, who has just met you, sits down at a piano and instantly creates this "musical portrait," right before your eyes, and you have the basis for a new creative project by composer William Goldstein titled "Soul of an Actor."

Released in November and available on iTunes and Amazon, among the album's 16 musical portraits that Goldstein has instantly composed are those for Carl Reiner, Mel Brooks, Theodore Bikel and, posthumously, for Philip Seymour Hoffman.

"The first three notes of every composition were picked by the person," Goldstein told the Journal. (Hoffman's is the exception; it was created after Goldstein saw the actor's last film performance.)

After hearing the notes, Goldstein begins to play on a Yamaha Disklavier piano that records his composition, spontaneously creating an original, fully developed — there are no ditties here — three- to eight-minute piece.

Each piece, somehow, strikes a personal chord. After several years of spinning out instant compositions for students in his friend Bernard

Hiller's master acting class, Goldstein has seen that the subjects of his compositions have "an incredible emotional reaction" after hearing them.

"I was absolutely floored," said actress Ellen Dubin, who hummed three notes for Goldstein to provide a starting point for a piece on "Soul of an Actor."

"I never met Bill before," said Dubin, who grew up in Canada and lives in Los Angeles. "He sat down and played from his heart."

The actress recalled that at the time she was struggling with a parent's illness. From listening to the piece, she said she felt that somehow Goldstein was able to know she had been "thinking a lot about life."

Dubin described her song as very lyrical, in parts, even reminiscent of Chopin, who was her favorite classical composer when she was training to become a ballet dancer, earlier in life.

Musical compositions have been flowing from Goldstein's fingers for many years in the form of scores for movies ("The Quarrel") and TV ("Fame"), as well as pop music — earlier in his career he wrote for Berry Gordy and Motown. Previously, he also released two other "instant composition" albums.

Goldstein, who comes from an Orthodox background, was born in Newark, N.J., in 1942. He has composed Jewish sacred music as well: a "Ma Tovu" (How Goodly) a song expressing awe, usually sung at the beginning of a synagogue service, in tribute to his brother Jay who died in 2008, and music for "Eshet Chayil," a song of praise that a husband sings to his wife on Shabbat evening, dedicated to his mother, Sylvia, who passed away the same year.

"I believe that music is a link that connects us with what is beyond a physical reality," he said.

Early on in his career, Goldstein recognized that he was able to get ideas very quickly, he said. But only in the last few years has he explored how this ability might connect with individuals.

"I don't hear music when I look at a person," he said.

Rather, he explained, he feels an emotional and spiritual connection.

"Instead of laughing or crying, I can sit at a piano and express emotions," he said.

"The gift that I was born with is the ability to speak the language of music in real time," Goldstein said.

Does he ever make a mistake while speaking that language? Although he admits that while playing his instant compositions, "my fingers don't know where the heck I'm going," the finished pieces are not edited, and only require "minor cleanups" of things like "finger slips," accidentally brushing two piano keys.

"Very few people in the world can do this," said Goldstein, who was invited in 2011 to teach a master class as well as to judge a contest for instant composition that was held in Poland.

Although he said he has found that "you can't teach the gift," he has discovered that, by exposing it to others in the arts — like dancers who have danced to his instant compositions — he can "immediately broaden the possibilities of their creativity."

But how does he do it? Considering that Goldstein has been a musical technology pioneer — his website says that in 1985 he created "the very first completely computer-sequenced direct-to-digital score" — are his instant compositions the product of some kind of electronic keyboard acumen? Dubin, who has had roles in several science fiction TV shows, is doubtful.

"Bill obviously has an uncanny ability to tap into my soul," she explained. she said.

Dubin's reaction to the final product?

"I wept."

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