

Photography as Performance Art

Great musicians are able to transform a melody created in the mind into music through the technical and fluid mastery of an instrument. Many photographers have studied music, and a great number throughout history have been performers. Ansel Adams, himself a proficient pianist, once stated, “The negative is comparable to the composer's score and the print to its performance. Each performance differs in subtle ways” (“Even More Quotations”). Creating a photograph allows a photographer to communicate a thought using his or her chosen instrument, a camera. Like a musical performance, subtleties, nuances, and the personality of the creator permeate a photograph. As performance artists, photographers have much to gain from a closer examination of how musicians learn and polish their craft.

Music is preserved and taught as a language. Traditionally people in western cultures sing “Happy Birthday” when attending a birthday party, and if the song begins in public, strangers often join in the melody without missing a beat. Styles, genres, and even musical slang pass from generation to generation. Much as we learn accents and develop a dialect from the environment surrounding us, the same environment teaches us to see. Enveloped by images and visual stimulus, we cannot avoid the impact of culture on photography, shaping the way we view and communicate with the world.

Immersion into language is essential for fluency, and it would be reckless to think one could make music without first hearing it. In a 1995 study titled “Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children,” it was found that children raised in working class families were exposed to over 26 million words by age four (Hart and Risley). In sharp

contrast, children raised in homes that are more affluent were exposed to over 45 million words by the same age. The study demonstrated that children with greater language exposure also had superior comprehension and a greater aptitude for school. Similarly, if we view the arts as forms of language, our exposure to visual and auditory stimulus directly affects our intellectual development. Learning to listen more critically and comprehend nuances is essential to a musician's growth. Equally important to one's growth as a photographer is the development of a keen eye.

Musicians are bred to have a heightened sense of history, something that is rarely instilled in photographers today. There is a saying among jazz musicians: "If you want to learn jazz, all you need is a stack of records and a syringe." This expression is hyperbole, yet there is truth in this proclamation. A jazz musician will often spend hours listening to a section of music, learning to play it note for note. These passages are then transcribed, or written in musical notation, and edited for accuracy (Liebman). Transcription takes years to perfect, and once mastery is established a musician can learn to execute a passage of music with the same subtleties, dynamics, and fluidity of the original performer.

When a musician learns from another through this method, they may fall into a habit of patterning or cloning these nuances. For example, as a saxophone player is working on the transcription of a John Coltrane solo, for a time he or she may begin to imitate Coltrane's playing habits. For this reason, a well-rounded musician will transcribe a diverse range of recordings and artists. By subjecting a musician to a wide vocabulary and with a diligent practice regimen, they become a melting pot of influences, breaking free of patterning and developing a personal style.

Photographers must take care in developing a relevant vocabulary, learning to become critical viewers and thus becoming the audience. Just as a syringe and a stack of records may be

a road to learning jazz, a stack of magazines and a razor blade are essential learning tools for a photographer. Gathering images from magazines, photography books, and the Internet is one of the photographer's forms of transcription. By narrowing the review of selected images, a photographer can control immersion to visual stimulus, aiding in the development of a critical eye. This method allows a viewer to travel throughout the photographic world from his own studio, developing individual preferences and critiques of the various images. Learning to view images critically is vital to the refinement of a photographer's performance and shapes one's photographic vocabulary and compositional skills.

One of the most important times in music history is the Common Practice Period (CPP), which musicologists place circa 1600 ("Common Practice Period"). Up to this point, written music (also known as notation) was inconsistent and varied throughout different regions of western culture. The CPP codified notation in Europe and established standard instrumental scores for performance, along with a standard tuning system and many rules for chordal structures and harmony. During this time, a true system for writing, performing, and teaching music was born. In 1685, Johann Sebastian Bach was also born (Sadie 785). In Bach's era, Germany and other regions of Europe were incubators for musical development and he was highly regarded as an organist. Although his technical ability as a musician kept him in high demand, his peers considered Bach's compositions obsolete during his lifetime. It was hundreds of years after his death when scholars began to unravel the great legacy created by this one man, and numerous modern historians have spent their careers studying his work.

Bach's fellow composers considered his compositions old-fashioned. Similarly, today, newer photographers may look down upon their classically trained peers for reliance on the classical foundations of lighting, posing, and composition. However, it is these basic

photographic principles that may allow a photographer to step ahead of those who have not studied the fundamentals of photography. Students learn to light an egg in a beginning photography class, just as apprentice painters have sketched and painted the image of an egg long before the camera obscura was even a thought. The rich traditions of painters, sculptors, architects, and countless other disciplines are the foundation of portrait lighting, posing, and composition. Waiting in galleries and museums throughout the world are fine art lessons that many of the current generation of photographers often dismiss. Viewing artistic works first hand provides an essential and crucial experience to improving one's craft.

Photography has also experienced an era similar to the Common Practice Period. In the 1930s, many photographic and darkroom techniques were developed and codified. The Zone System, created by Fred Archer and Ansel Adams in 1939, provides "photographers with a systematic method of precisely defining the relationship between the way they visualize the photographic subject and the final results" (Meek 6).

The Zone System affords photographers with a wider depth and tonal range in printing. It also frees a photographer to create "visualized" images with fewer restraints, further liberating and enhancing a photographer's performance (Schaefer 131). The Zone System is so fundamental to photography, it is still taught in formal photographic education today. This methodology has radically changed and codified the way many photographers approach their craft. It is also the basis of numerous principles in digital photography (Meek 6). Adams once said, "Just as a musician hears notes and chords in his mind's ear, so can a trained photographer see certain values, textures and arrangements in his mind's eye" (Schaefer 131).

Too many photographers overlook the two-sided approach of Adam's craft, exalting his work in the darkroom while discrediting his work with a camera. In the same way, Bach was

celebrated for his skill at playing the pipe organ, not for the timeless value of his musical compositions. For both creators, an audience only witnessed one part of the creative process. Both men understood, however, that execution and development require a structured method that takes time to perfect.

The Common Practice Period was also a time of prolific musical performance and composition, and it was essential that scores be legible and meticulously precise. The time-consuming task of reproducing a single piece of music was done by hand with pen and ink. This tedious work was the vocation of a musical copyist, which by today's standards would seem undesirable. If we consider the education from studying a piece of music note for note as written directly by the hand of Beethoven or Mozart there is much to be gained from the practice. Many copyists believe that by duplicating an original work, they can absorb and re-create its shapes, phrases, and ideas in their own composition. As copyists valued duplicating notation, musicians in later years would also learn through transcription to hone their craft by studying the subtleties and melodic vocabulary found in recordings.

Photography has also provided us with a contemporary variation of the copyist. Fine art printers often apprentice with established photographers long before their own work hangs in a gallery. Printing images exposes an apprentice to the original works of a master teaching them the techniques fundamental to creating a final print (Adams 277). John Sexton, for example, who served as Ansel Adams' lab technician from 1979 until Adams' death in 1984, is now one of the most prolific educators of the Zone System and a highly regarded fine art photographer in his own right.

Photographic fluency cannot be gained instantaneously. While learning cognitive concepts, we must also learn to control the physical elements of handling a camera and other

material entities. The dials, screens, menus, and other components of a camera function in the same manner as the keys and valves of a musical instrument. As a great musician performs, the notes will flow from their instrument as freely as breathing, which cannot happen without muscle memory. Muscle memory (also known as motor memory) is the idea that repeated motion or physical routine will cause one's body and brain to recognize patterns and movements. With frequent repetition, a musician will be able to play an instrument without the need to perform each note consciously. Just as it is impossible to create a fluid musical idea while focusing on each technical aspect of an instrument, to obtain fluency in photographic performance the photographer must break his or her dependence on the conscious control of their camera and other aspects of image creation.

Musicians have learned to develop muscle memory in a structured fashion and often refer to extended practice as "going to the wood shed" or "shedding." Practicing a transcription is an effective way of establishing muscle memory, as musicians are able to train their bodies to perform in the manner of more established performers. In addition, the practice of scales, exercises, and other structured routines is essential. Charlie Parker was known for spending ten to twelve hours each day practicing scales and other fundamental techniques. He followed this discipline throughout the entirety of his short life. Parker once said, "You've got to learn your instrument. Then, you practice, practice, practice. And then, when you finally get up there on the bandstand, forget all that and just wail" ("Jazz Quotes").

The importance of a practice routine involving photographic fundamentals is crucial to the development of consistency and growth in the art of photography. It is essential to control our practice habits and the manner in which we develop our muscle memory. After a performance, a musician dissects the many aspects of performance, breaking down deficiencies

and focuses on eliminating bad habits. Similarly, a photographer must do the same to develop and expand his or her scope to progress beyond any current physical limitations. Unfortunately, few photographers take the time to examine their processes critically. It is essential to sharpen one's skill-set outside of client sessions. Much as it is poor judgment on the part of any musician to exercise scales in front of a paying audience, photographers must commit to developing their craft through self-assignments.

In the words of Ansel Adams: "A sloppy performance of a photographer is as obnoxious as a sloppy performance of music" (Schaefer 131). As performers, the technical aspects of the craft cannot plague photographers. Without knowledge of photographic composition and vocabulary, a photographer's ability to perform is profoundly inhibited. He or she must be able to react in a fluid and efficient manner, and this kind of fluency in performance is not achievable through passive interaction or by repetition alone.

Creative freedom is a fundamental that gives joy to musician and listener; to photographer and viewer. Without joy, a musician would scarcely be able to tolerate a lifetime of refinement and growth through a regimented process, and a listener would simply find something else to do. Photographic fluency, so necessary for creative freedom in image making, is a process that requires an active and calculated approach to learning. Self-assignments, critical viewing, selective immersion in visual stimulus, and the frequent practice of fundamentals are but a few lessons that are gained from closer inspection of music history.

Greater understanding of our own artistic history, photographic principles, and technique will lead to greater depth in our work, so that a camera simply becomes the instrument through which we perform, sharing our unique vision with the world.

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