



# ***Taking on a New Performance Mountain***

article by Michael Smolens ©2020

Taking on a new artistic project can be exciting, but is just as often a test of one's time management skills. What I experienced with one particular project showed me how critical judgement calls need to be made at various points of the planning and execution, if everything is to go well and feel like a Victory. I have previously written about how this balancing act can be won in the context of a band situation, but this was altogether different because it was a solo concert using brand new technology.

Four months into the Covid-19 pandemic, I gave my first online Zoom solo concert to a medical group (the date was set up prior to the lockdown). Because I have done a number of solo concerts in the past, I know how demanding they are as opposed to a more "casual" event where my playing is purely in the background. I suspected that this was the case because the technology was brand new for me, and that I should probably err on the side of caution.

I wanted the best possible sound for my grand piano and voice (fortunately, I own some very high-end microphones). So I took a month to research what equipment I *had to have* (vs. being merely nice additions) to support three mics on the piano and one for my voice when going through a mixer and into the new analog-to-digital converter. Even though I did a Zoom soundcheck with both an assistant and an engineer five days before the event, we still had equipment problems that took a half-dozen trips to a local technology store to get resolved.

Meanwhile, I needed to determine how many pieces to play, along with the following considerations that would affect *any* solo presentation:

- \* piano/vocal vs. solo piano
- \* fast vs. medium vs. slow tempo
- \* major vs. minor tonality
- \* combination of styles (including novelty pieces)

However, *none* of these considerations dealt with my biggest variable. Namely, that I like to use performances as inspiration and deadlines for new pieces or arrangements. I had to look very realistically (and soberly) at what I could energetically afford to do for this performance, given that I was already stressed from dealing with all of the new technology; thankfully, I hired an onsite engineer for the performance, mostly as a reassurance.

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Given that creating new arrangements was a priority, I determined my setlist partially by how much work each piece would take to be at performance level, so that I could assess how many new arrangements I could reasonably create by the concert date. Some of the pieces I had already performed in the past, some at contemporary churches, some at retirement communities, and one piece written by a student from my current jazz ensemble class (which happened to be the most technically challenging of them all!).

My first new arrangement consisted of an opening suite that combined a modern congregational song with one of my earlier chants, both of which I had already arranged and performed separately. Because I wanted to unify them into an A-B-A structure and they were both to be sung, one piece had to be transposed, re-arranged, and re-copied while also determining the best single tempo for the entire suite. All this happened fairly quickly, in a matter of two days, and so I thought that my second arrangement would also be a quick affair . . . so I thought . . .

The second arrangement involved taking a round that one of my composition teachers created decades ago and turning it into an even-eighth jazz piece, complete with rich harmony, and an elaborate odd-time vamp. The goal was to turn this 12-bar round into a structure that would unfold and evolve in a purely additive way; i.e. starting with just the intro vamp and the first full vocal phrase. Then each time the piece repeats, a new phrase would be added. Yet, I wanted the harmony to also evolve in complexity, so I couldn't simply add new bars until the piece was finished (I also needed to find a new section to improvise over). Another element I wanted to incorporate was an evolving complexity of time signatures, so again, I couldn't simply add new bars until the piece was finished.

The real moment of truth came when I tried several times to write out my new opening. Two hours later it still didn't work, and I realized right then that it would take just about every available hour of free time to finalize and accurately score out my arrangement by the performance date; *and* that that would seriously risk the degree of polish that I could bring to the other pieces! Of course, I wanted to get a great reception and be invited back to perform again. At that moment, I came to the critical realization that I could still develop this second arrangement, *but in a more approximate way* that would still be convincing, just not fully finalized and scored out. After all, I had decades of performing experience that allowed me to "think on my feet" and make new works perfectly presentable (my background concertizing in free improvisation contexts clearly helped me with this).

One of the beauties of working with improvised music is that unlike the vast majority of classical pieces, improvised works are modular and flexible regarding how much of the work a player includes. As the performance date was rapidly approaching, I chose to omit a particularly difficult bridge of the blues song I was planning. I felt it was more important to work on the overall shape of the piece rather than revive that virtuosic 12-bar section.

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Even still, my set list was two pieces short, and I had to make some decisions — work up two more solo piano pieces (or piano/vocal works) or include two non-piano pieces for more variety (which was my original, pre-Covid intention). If this was a “normal” concert I wouldn’t have given this any thought, but in this new online environment I was very concerned about complicating the technical demands for myself. I thought of including a funny poem, however I was concerned about how to face the one camera while looking at a script. This was easily handled by taping the script to the piano at an angle that allowed me to face the camera *without* holding a visible script. The next challenge came with including my family of four West-African drums (*djun-djuns*) in the concert, as I was concerned about microphone placement since I had to return to the piano afterwards to close out the concert. Fortunately, only the camera position needed to be changed and it was simple to do. Of course, I needed to create a short story to integrate such a very different sound, but coming up with spoken word segues has always been easy for me.

The performance, in the end, turned out very well. This was clear from the presenter’s feedback and invitation to book another date, and *how I actually felt during the event*. I was especially happy with how the partially unfinished arrangement went! Sure, it was supported by decades of performing experience, but along the entire planning and practicing process I had to carefully observe how much challenge I could handle given this new online environment. Knowing that I could tackle any of the *individual* challenges was seductive, but I kept reminding myself that audiences quickly (and unconsciously) pick up on the least bit of stress coming from a performer. I am also of the belief that each of our performances get lodged into our bodies and psyches, so, *why knowingly create a stressful performance* when all performances are already imbued with varying degrees of unpredictability, and hence, stress?

Developing systems to balance your artistic goals with very practical considerations can make all the difference between creating a stressful performance (which is predicated on unreasonable expectations) vs. a performance that is a clear Victory — both for the venue and the performer, which in turn helps to build greater confidence when taking on a new challenge.