



# DON'T I HATE PRACTICE

COMPOSITION, CREATIVITY  
AND THE FORMATION OF  
THE LOS ANGELES INCEPTION ORCHESTRA

AKIRA NAKANO

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3<sup>rd</sup> Edition

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For Kai & Shea  
And Anyone Who Composes or Creates

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prac·tice /praktəs/ verb

1. perform (an activity) or exercise (a skill) repeatedly or regularly in order to improve or maintain one's proficiency
2. musicians' application – a fact of life

cre-a-ti-vi-ty /krēā'tivədē/ noun

1. the ability to create
2. ultimate goal in artistic freedom

in-cep-tion /in-sĕp'shən/ noun

1. a beginning
2. a new orchestra and music education program

## INTRODUCTION

When you write a book, there is one piece of advice in every how-to manual. Make sure you are writing for someone, even if it is just one person.

I didn't bother researching how to write a book when I first released *I Hate Practice*, and thus, I couldn't exactly tell you who I was writing for. Yeah, I can. No one.

They also tell you to solve one problem. Unless it was that by the end of the book I had discovered I was a jack-of-all-trades, master-of-uh, then that was also a bust.

This is why I am putting out this revision. (That, and my mom and sister both hated the original title.)

Since the initial publication, here's what changed.

The Los Angeles Inception Orchestra.

If you're reading this, you already know a little bit about it.

If you don't, you're about to find out a whole lot, assuming you make it to Chapter 24. Apologies in advance.

Originally this non-profit organization was formed so I could be more responsible about funding another piano concert with orchestra. At the first Board meeting, however, someone casually mentioned that we should figure out a music education program.

With that one comment, the Inception Orchestra became about solving something. About how we can find great young composers in underserved communities and pass along our knowledge to the next generation. About how we can inspire students who may not have exposure to Classical music and the symphony orchestra in an immersive and engaging way.

Once the program becomes about something more important than just

you, musicians of the caliber you never thought in your music career you would ever work with, come forward to support the mission in a hugely collaborative way.

The Inception Orchestra Music Education program is based in composition and is a creative practice. Those words are not mine, but rather Drew Schnurr's, whom you will meet. But when those are the first things he proposes about the program in your initial conversation, you know immediately he is a perfect leader for the education component.

So what is this book now about and who is it written for?

It's for you, the young composer. Or you, the curious. Or you, the creative.

It is a discussion of creative practice through piano, video, filmmaking, writing, stage plays, friendships and composition.

It is a discussion of my creative journey full of flaws, procrastination and failures, though all met with a measured degree of success.

It is meant to make you laugh, hopefully inspire and allow you to allow yourself some bumps in your own artistic journey.

Mostly it is to say...

**DREAM. COMPOSE. CREATE. GO!!!**

CHAPTER ONE  
TWINKLE THIS

My mom made me take piano lessons.

I crept into an intimidating studio at the Colburn School, sat down at a beat up Steinway with a tarnished lid and two chipped keys and played.

Twinkle Variations.

In the corner, my piano teacher, Dr. Heewon Kwon, frowned with disappointment.

This was November 2012, and not when I was five.

I had effectively quit the piano in the middle of my first quarter, freshman year, UCLA.

This was my first official piano lesson a handful of years later (if you know how old I am, you can do the math) playing Mozart's 'Twelve Variations on "Ah Vouz Dirai-je de maman"'. ("Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" for those who don't speak French.)

I'm trying to find the best way to describe the rendition. Garbage. Yeah, garbage probably works.

I had the equivalent of a high school education in piano. And for whatever reason, I pompously decided to take my limited musical knowledge and do a grandiose solo recital with the likes of Mussorgsky, Liszt and Rachmaninov on the program.

Problem. I was stuck on "Twinkle, Twinkle".

I started in the Suzuki Piano Method when I was five. Suzuki emphasizes listening and playing by ear over sight-reading. It gives kids a mnemonic device to learn rhythms.

Lollipop and Popcorn

My Doggy, My Doggy

I Hate Practice So Much (I'm sure that's not right, but the rhythmic pattern times out)

Everybody Everybody

This was cute and all, but I hated drilling with such a passion that I think I started to say "Everybody, Everybody" with a jazz swing and bitter attitude, causing me never to be able to play the 16<sup>th</sup> notes that accompany the words evenly.

Either that or I have an undiagnosed speech impediment.

So I am a product of Suzuki piano... kinda. Had I stayed with my Suzuki instructor, Koko, I would have been another in the long line of kids that started the piano and quit at age 12. The concept of playing songs for stickers didn't inspire me. (Teachers, you know what I'm talking about.) And I honestly believe that this early training of listening over reading music, really hampered my ability to sight read as an adult. Consequently, I've never been hired as a keyboardist on a Michael Giacchino film score, nor anyone else's for that matter. (It was poor training, or I'm lazy. I'm not fully ready to admit to the latter yet.)

Fortunately, Koko got married, and I got shipped off to the Colburn School and Heewon.

Heewon was a teacher who nurtured creativity, going off syllabus and playing songs you were inspired by, no matter how difficult. It kept me interested. She supported my choices when I selected pieces to learn that were completely unapproved by the piano department at Colburn. She was the person who, when I took a huge hiatus from music, welcomed me back with no questions asked and picked up from where we left off.

What her stubborn defiance of department heads allowed me to do was stay interested and engaged. Instead of the required Mozart "Rondo Allegretto" and "Sonatina" or Bach Minuets 1, 2, 3 and 3A in F-flat minor, it was Chopin and Debussy... Liszt and Beethoven... Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov. Music and composers I instantly fell in

love with.

There is no piano without Heewon.

CHAPTER TWO  
MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH FRANZ...

Liszt!

Thanks to the Colburn School, our music theory class received complimentary tickets to hear Andre Watts solo at the Dorothy Chandler with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. We were in the second row. This performance changed my life, and Maestro Watts became my idol pianist that day.

If you have ever seen him perform, you know he sings along, makes faces, yells at himself and even spits as he emotionally engages. His interpretations are energetic, thrilling and in every way, he is living the piece. Not for show, it is his complete immersion in the music. And if you were in the audience and not spellbound, you do not have a soul.

This particular afternoon, he was playing “Totentanz” (Dance of the Dead).

Liszt had an obsession with death and based the piece on the Gregorian chant, “Dies Irae” (Day of Judgment). He was also inspired by a Francesco Traini fresco, “Triumph of Death” which juxtaposes the fates of those in Heaven and Hell.

The composer attended the premiere of Hector Berlioz’s “Symphony Fantastique” which boldly features the “Dies Irae” theme in its final movement. An artist poisons himself with opium and hallucinates his way into the spiral of death.

Liszt wrote dark, medieval sounding passages, but also composed modern, percussive piano and orchestral parts. Successive repeated notes on the keyboard create footsteps of impending doom. Col legno (striking the strings with the wood of the bow) in the violins emulate the sound effect of jangling bones from dancing skeletons.

A well-constructed rhapsody of six variations on “Dies Irae”, each

segment does not necessarily build on the previous, but rather introduces a new character into the piece one by one... A gentleman, a rebellious kid, a skeptic, a monk, a military officer, a maiden and a carefree child.

The composition has crazy glissandi where you slide the back of your fingers across the keys, merciless runs and a dynamic piano sound that completely enraptured me. Liszt had, in fact, written this work to showcase his own performance superiority, and I had to learn to play it.

But there were more important lessons to learn that night.

When finishing a concerto, many pianists bow to the audience first and then proceed to turn and shake hands with the conductor and concertmaster. Andre Watts thanked the conductor and orchestra first.

The maestro was gracious enough to greet us backstage, and when we complimented him on his performance, he said, "Thank you, but it takes many musicians to make this happen." As much of a star as he was, he was gracious, humble and appreciative of his colleagues.

From that day on, whenever I was lucky enough to perform with an orchestra, I made sure to thank them first as I was only one in a collaboration. It is with this piece that I realized how much I loved playing along-side other musicians over soloing.

In music and in composition it is important to find pieces and artists who inspire you. Find music and role models you are passionate about... who make you feel and make you better... who change the trajectory of your career.

The day after the concert, I made my mom buy the Andre Watts recording on vinyl (which you had to flip over in the middle to listen to the second half). I got the sheet music and started thudding through the opening. When I took the score into my lesson, all Heewon said was, "Oh boy!" (Not sure if this was excitement or exasperation, but I'll take it either way.)

CHAPTER THREE  
BANNED FROM THE GLOCKENSPIEL

I performed “Totentanz” with several youth orchestras starting in tenth grade. The list includes the Peter Meremblum Youth Orchestra (where I played principal percussion / keyboards); the CSUN Youth Orchestra Academy (principal percussion / keyboards); and the John Marshall High School Orchestra which was led by Robert Lippre, the Meremblum conductor (principal percussion / keyboards / LAUSD educated clarinet).

Mr. Lippre asked me to solo for both his orchestras. The Liszt was obviously a flashy, showy piece which was all the substance I needed. Because when I studied music in junior high and high school, did I really have a full understanding of who composers were and what the pieces were about? No. What you were supposed to be feeling and projecting? Of course not. The internet did not exist yet. There were not always program notes in the front of scores reduced for two pianos. Was I really going to look up Franz Liszt in the dictionary of composers we had laying around the house or in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*? Not a chance. (I’m worried as I’m writing this portion that laziness might be a recurring theme.)

Look these composers and compositions up, young musicians! You have computers and iPhones now! Be better than me. It’s worth it and fascinating. Knowledge helps you get in Beethoven’s, Chopin’s or Prokofiev’s brain; gives you keys to interpreting their pieces; and may even inspire great concepts for your own compositions.

For the CSUN orchestra, it was a different story. The conductor, Wes Kenney, wanted me to perform; however, thanks to the Board, I would have to compete in their brand new piano competition that was open to anyone in the State of California.

While I may have been big fish/little pond in high school, at the Colburn School, I most definitely fell in the middle, consistently placing second

or third (or fifth or sixth) behind my friend and colleague, Wendy (more about her later), in all competitions. Well, Wendy wasn't going to be competing in this one (because it was probably not prestigious enough for her), so I assumed I had this in the bag.

That is until a brilliant pianist, Maila, arrived at Colburn from the Philippines and entered the race.

Of course I lost, and I got to play tympani and glockenspiel as Maila dazzled with the Ravel Piano Concerto. I'm not sure if this piece was actually orchestrated with glock, but I pouted while ducking behind it in rehearsal, whacking a mallet on it several times in frustration. I hate Ravel! (Fine. I don't hate Ravel.)

The next year, somehow Conductor Kenney convinced the Board to narrow the field. The entrants now had to be both a pianist and an active member of the orchestra. If I blew this, I'd be a laughing stalk. But I did not, and I had a triumphant solo debut with CSUN.

As an adult, I often wonder if my lack of competition wins boiled down to not playing beyond wanting to show off.

And more importantly, wins and losses don't matter in music.

Today, I've come to realize that music and art should be a collaborative and supportive artform.

Why do I love performing with other musicians? Not because I'm scared of the solo limelight, but because it feeds your artistry. Collaborative playing heightens your musical awareness.

I completely reject the notion of competitions for musicians at a young age. Know as you're reading this book, if you compete, no matter where you "place", you've won if you've done your best: practiced, researched, felt, emoted and were as technically and passionately brilliantly as you could be at the time. Furthermore, no matter how amazing you sound, know your performances and compositions will always continue to mature and evolve. Do that, and you're always a winner.

Incidentally, Maila ended up at my high school in the orchestra. Being a pianist, she was automatically stuck in the percussion section. So yes, when I was asked to perform “Totentanz”, she had to play the triangle or wood block or something. But I will also note here that Maila did not need the glockenspiel. She was too classy for that.

CHAPTER FOUR  
WRITING BETWEEN THE BLANKS

I met Emilie in sewing. First class of Thomas Starr King Junior High. First period. First day. She was cute. She found out I liked her. She threatened me with a seam ripper. She didn't talk to me for several months.

I came to find out there was actually bad blood between us.

In fifth grade, at the Young Authors' Conference, my book won for "Outstanding Achievement - 5th Grade", and Emilie got an Honorable Mention. True! Her mom snapped a photo of her in line scowling at me for beating her.

We hadn't met yet.

One of my award-winning poems:

*"Rain"*

*The patter of rain  
Tickles the April flowers  
Yet, they never laugh.*

I don't want to hear it. I was 11.

My haiku was accompanied by an original piece of music.

# Rainfall

Left Left Left Left

For the record, I've never written another poem. And I did use this piece of music as evidence to Board of the Inception Music Education Program that while we were absolutely not discouraging young composers, we really needed to be looking for mentees in their teens.

Here's the thing about Emilie. She's super intelligent, highly creative and the only person I've ever met who is a bigger procrastinator than me.

She is probably an even better example than I am of why procrastination is important in creativity.

In eighth grade, I wrote an awesome book called *Musical Mysteries* fashioned off of *Encyclopedia Brown*. Except my young detective, Michael Youngstrom, only took musical cases. For example, when a burglary suspect with long fingernails claimed to have been playing the violin in a concert an hour ago, she was obviously guilty.

The night before our books were due, I stopped over at Emilie's house after finishing mine, to see her and her mom frantically racing around the house like maniacs trying to figure out what else Emilie needed to accomplish to meet the entry deadline.

Em was in the middle of painting (yes, she was a great painter) and writing poetry (yes, her poems were deep and certainly far better than "Rain") to accompany each picture. Her page count was low, and to fill space — Wait, how about I just reprint her poem and watercolor on the next page so you can see her "brilliance"?

*Emptiness*

SHE WON MOST PROMISING AUTHOR OF THE YEAR!!! FOR TURNING IN A BLANK PIECE OF PAPER!!! There might have been another one, “Blackness” that was solid black. I’m not wasting ink printing it.

Instead, I am sharing one of the stories from *Musical Mysteries* in protest of the black and blank.

### ***“Trumpeter’s Trouble”***

*It was a usual day at the Youngstrom residence. Mrs. Youngstrom was in the kitchen cooking while she read “McCall’s Magazine”. David, Michael’s 19-year old brother, was watching TV and reading “Science ‘85”. Tina, Michael’s sister, was fixing her motorcycle and reading “Popular Mechanics”. Mr. Youngstrom was complaining about what a stupid case he had presided over that day and was ignoring “The Daily News”. And Mike was in the bathroom reading “Highlights”.*

*Suddenly the phone rang. At that instant, the mixer stopped, the television muted, a wrench dropped, Mr. Youngstrom stared at the phone and the toilet flushed.*

*“Hello,” answered Tina.*

*“Hi!” answered David.*

*“Hello, how may I help you?” asked Mrs. Youngstrom.*

*Mr. Youngstrom stared blankly at the phone.*

*“Youngstrom residence. Michael speaking,” said Michael.*

*“Hello, may I speak to Mr. Youngstrom?” asked the voice.*

*“Dad!” “Dad!” “Honey!” “What?” “Dad!” yelled everyone.*

*“Coming!” he exclaimed. Click, click, click. “Hello, Judge Youngstrom speaking.” Click.*

*“Hi, this is Mr. Keys, the trumpet player. I need your help.”*

And with that, Michael and his family are drawn into a case about a trumpet player using a recording to win a competition. Just prior to a performance, Michael catches him scarfing a piece of chocolate cake, which any real trumpet player would never do, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> trumpeter from the orchestra replaced the guilty cake eater in concert.

It was a lot more writing than just submitting blank pieces of paper. And there were twelve mysteries!!!

I chose to reprint this story because my mom, who helped me type the book (on a typewriter with liquid paper marks and all), rewrote me. There were no magazine titles in my draft.

Original draft:

*Mrs. Youngstrom was in the kitchen reading. David was watching TV and "reading". Tina was on her bike reading. Mr. Youngstrom was complaining about a stupid case and not reading. And Mike was in the bathroom reading.*

The flow should have been:

*Reading, reading, reading, complaining, reading.*

*Hello, hi, hello, pause, hi.*

*Dad, dad, honey, what, dad!*

*Click, click, click, hello, click!*

I'm a musician. I know pacing. And more importantly, why did she choose "Highlights" magazine?

To this day, I have a hard time being rewritten. Not that I am professing to be the greatest writer in the world.

Wait! Thank you, Mom, for typing 24 of the 35 pages of the book. If you hadn't helped me, I would not have had time to see Emilie not painting her blank page.

*Musical Mysteries* was good enough to win the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Achievement Award in Imaginative Narrative. But it shows what the judges knew. Emilie got her Doctorate in clinical psychiatry and is living a super-

successful, happily-married, mother-of-two life; and I am sitting here at 2:30 in the morning eating dry Honey Bunches of Oats out of the box writing this book.

Most Promising Author of the Year, my eye!

But a serious discussion here. When would we ever get to read Emilie's brilliant work again? (Or mine?)

There are some truly great young artists, writers and composers out there. Often schools, corporations, publishers and orchestras offer incredible competitions many times coming with scholarship money and even a performance or reading.

But then where does the work go? Most of these creative pieces are one and done. I found my book in a box at the bottom of a storage closet at my parents' house.

What if pieces lived on? What if, after the prize winning concert, original compositions could be heard by many others?

What if young artists' journeys were documented and could be presented in such a way that the kids become role models to their peers? What if students in underserved communities could find someone who looked like them and be inspired by their creative practice, not only in music, but in any art form. Or even better, could these kids not get a richer experience by being motivated by someone of a different culture or ethnicity.

Because at the end of the day, we all create in the color of imagination.

CHAPTER FIVE  
MURDER IN SHIMMERING LAKE

July 1985. Shimmering Lake. A young store worker is gunned down trying to stop a robbery. Bruce and Stacey Nakamura witness the crime and are identified by one of the juvenile perpetrators as going to the same school. The Nakamuras turn to the K.I.'s (Kelley Investigators) for protection.

It was the first in a series of annual summer videos my friends from school and I made. Shot on VHS, a bunch of us ran around shooting cap guns, using smoke bombs to power rocket bikes and Alka Seltzer as killer acid dropped in a slow stream of water to kill two of the K.I.'s and Stacey. Some little kid popped in out of nowhere to shoot one of the gang members and save the day.

My mom refused to let any of us drive because we were all thirteen, so she was the designated stunt driver of the VW Vanagon in several crucial get-away scenes. I'm not really sure what she was thinking letting all of us take over the house, my grandmother's house, and supervising the murder in a vacant lot on Griffith Park and Hyperion.

There was no intelligent dialogue or promising filmmaking, but it was sure fun

In between production and the screening, I went to summer camp and invited some of the friends I made to come to the screening. I bring this up only because one of them goes, "Akira, do you always cast all Asians?"

The truth is no, I didn't do it intentionally. I was not ahead of my time. I cast who was available. Plus, Jaime was Latino. Philip was white. Matthew was white. But then it dawned on me that the actors playing Stacey, Bruce, Tim, Michelle, Wendy, Gang Members 1&2 and me were all Asian.

It was honestly, the first time I was ever made aware of race.

\* \* \* \* \*

I grew up in Silverlake, where on my street, every house was a different ethnicity. And you know what? It didn't matter. We were all neighbors. I mean literally the houses went black, Asian, white, Asian, white, black, Latino, Asian, white.

Throughout my high school and college years, I really saw the world colorblind. As I wrote and got involved with productions, I just cast who was best for the role.

Today, however, my views have changed, especially with the current administration advocating divisiveness in the country. For me it has become important not just to accept anyone of another color or religion, but to embrace them. Be inquisitive. Find out what makes them different. Get to know them as people. Get to know their culture. Ask about their politics. Even if you don't agree, find your common ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

Each successive summer my friends and I made a film. We remade "K.I.'s" as "The Shimmering Lake Executives". I guess no one knew the definition of executives because we were all cops. Tim's girlfriend, Wendy, was gunned down. And the Nakamuras were replaced by Scott and Katie Lord, Caucasian.

We did a feature length sequel "Angelic Nemesis" where half the cast got killed off by a serial killer. What? "Avengers: Infinity War" just did it.

"Teen Crisis", a project about teen peer counselors in a high school in San Francisco, was shot in the counselor's main office at school where literally every single John Marshall High counselor took a shift on a Saturday to supervise. Amazing! We then drove to San Francisco to shoot establishing shots. The VW Vanagon broke down on the way back. My mom was refusing to drive us anywhere by this point.

No matter how young you are and how limited your resources, just imagine and create. If it's an exciting idea, your friends will rally around

you and participate. Don't be intimidated.

Incidentally, my friend Mike Wong, who I knew from kindergarten, was in every single one of these projects. He played Tim and gave a monologue ripped off from "Cagney and Lacey" when Wendy was shot.

In real life, he became a successful graphic designer. And when the need for a revamped logo came about for Inception, he graciously took on the task. It's amazing to work with someone you grew up with who now pretty much defines professionalism. His stellar work is on the cover. Again... talented friends rally.

## CHAPTER SIX FLIPPING BURGERS

Despite that long previous chapter on my summer film projects, piano and grades were still the primary focus in high school.

Thankfully, I got into UCLA... barely. I was accepted into Winter Quarter, largely because of that low, below 1200, SAT score. As many of my Asian friends can attest to, this is the equivalent of getting an Asian F on the grand scale.

Heewon, however, had scheduled an audition with a faculty member there, who heard me play “Totentanz” and arranged for a full ride, fall admission scholarship.

When I got to college, I thought, how amazing! I would get to take all these GE classes with music lessons on top.

I was wrong.

I would have to take twelve units of music: piano lessons, theory and performance or ethnomusicology, and two units of whatever general ed I could squeeze in. Additionally, there was no test to pass out of music theory, which I had taken at Colburn since I was thirteen. The icing on the cake: my new private instructor was more interested in learning “Totentanz” himself than teaching me anything.

Four weeks into my first quarter, from outside my fifth floor dorm room of Sproul Hall, I called my mother. I don’t really remember the front end of the conversation, because my ears are still damaged from the high pitch scream.

“You did what????!!!”

I told her I quit the music major, and I was giving back my scholarship.

“How are you paying for school?”

Shoot, hadn’t thought of that.

“What are you majoring in?”

Nothing, of course. I was going to major in nothing and get a film degree.

“What are you gonna do with a film degree? You need to get a real job like flipping burgers.”

People never believe me when I tell them this quote. But, in fact, more than a few of the times we’ve talked about film making, she’s told me that I needed a real job. Or a minimum wage job... so I could understand what it meant to work.

I’ve often wondered to myself how practicing the piano every day for hours at a time for many years in a row didn’t qualify as work.

Ironically, just as I was abandoning the music major, I competed in the UCLA Concerto Competition. My talented colleagues from the Colburn days had all scattered to those less prestigious, rather unknown music schools like Curtis, Julliard and the Royal Academy of Music. So clear path here. I think the actual competition happened just before the discussion with my mother, and the results were posted three days after.

I won.

The prize was performing with the UCLA Symphony in June.

The funny thing about this was, by the time the concert rolled around, I was wholly undeclared, and nobody had any idea who I was because I had long since vacated the music building.

This girl I had a crush on who lived in my dorm, did spot me in the tux before the performance, right as I crashed face-first into the glass cafeteria door while trying to smile at her.

I was fine. Only left a face print.

The concert was a successful swan song.

Of course, I played “Totentanz”.

There is a lesson here. You'll find as you read on that I came back to piano as an adult, but only because I loved it and was passionate about it. I encourage you to do what makes you feel and what you're excited about in the arts or in music or simply in creativity.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
SPACESHIPS, SATELLITES AND  
ALPHABET SOUP

I ended up with a B.A. in Film Production from UCLA and became a corporate video editor, producer, writer and live event director for twelve-and-a-half years. Ironically, I think it paid just over minimum wage to start.

As an adult, I have taken on Executive Assisting as my day job to pay the bills. When I passed my five-year anniversary as Architect/Urban Designer Bill Fain's EA, both my mom and dad separately congratulated me on the longest I've been able to hold down steady work. Apparently, my career in corporate video didn't count.

I had the best on the job training as an editor. The story goes that my mentor was the heir to a fortune, and in the living trust, his mother had stipulated that for him to receive any inheritance, he had to work while she was alive. He came in at ten-thirty and left at three and took a two-hour lunch. I did the majority of his work, often staying overnight.

The first session with him, he gave me a tip on how to be successful. He fanned out a five-page script in front of me, told me to pick any page, not the first or the last, and toss it.

Now cut the movie. What????!!!

But who was I to question him? I was seventeen years old. He had edited an Academy Award nominated short subject documentary. I sliced together the show with the middle page completely gone. I was sure I was going to be fired. I'd been on the job a month.

The next morning, the writer/producer, client, client's boss and my mentor screened the video less the page.

The client goes, "Great. Gets the message across really concisely. Short and to the point." He turns to the writer. "None of the excess verbiage you like to write. Run copies. We're showing it to Congress this

afternoon.” No one noticed the missing material.

While sitting in a fancy edit bay, there are lots of buttons. Circle wipes, dissolves, levers to fly images in and out. My mentor had only one lesson: don't press those buttons and find cool effects to use. Look at a blank screen, visualize what you want to create and use the buttons to realize what you envision.

Especially these days, when video editing comes standard on a PC and computer software makes everything from animating to music composition easier, don't let technology drive your creativity. Your creativity drives the vision.

Working at a space and electronics company made me develop a great love of Apollo, Gemini and the Space Shuttle missions. It made me appreciate the military and the servicemen who were serving our country while I was safely tucked away in an edit bay cutting shows on MilStar and BCIS military systems. PMMW cameras. MBE and MBRE microchips. GRO's, SBIRS and DSP satellites. M-SATS, COMSATS and ROCSATS. EOS, POS and MOS.

The only real qualification for working there seemed to be knowing your alphabet.

To get to be just a little part of these technologies that many brilliant engineers were spending their lives inventing and perfecting was amazing. Often, they didn't feel they were doing anything creative; but literally, their imagination, drawings and calculations were taking men to the moon.

Most awesomely, my dad (an aerospace engineer who had gotten me my job at seventeen) and I had things to talk about.

I learned, for example, that when we said he was in charge of attitude control, it was about satellite stabilization in orbit and not some psychological punishment for the way I spoke to my mother.

I loved this job. Do what you love.

## CHAPTER EIGHT FIVE SAXOPHONES

Just because I stopped playing the piano, didn't mean I dropped music. I made my parents pay for classes at the UCLA Extension in film scoring while I was concurrently enrolled at UCLA proper sorting through my GE's. I did composition old school... with pencil and paper!

Don Ray was the music supervisor/composer on shows like "Twilight Zone", "Gunsmoke", "Wild Wild West", "Gillian's Island" and "Hawaii Five-O".

He was adamant that when you score a film, you are not writing music, but rather, emotion. Also, writing less is more. If brushing a bell tree sets the scene more effectively than an orchestral chord, the bell tree is in. And if a film cue doesn't need music, don't write anything.

Don was great. He told us on set stories of Jack Lord; why to use certain instruments for different characters and what timbres were produced by various instruments. We wrote pieces for multiple combinations of strings, winds, percussion and brass – the point being to discover the range, the harmonies and overtones – and learn what sounds complemented which. I discovered that ferocious, low blasting brass I love is created by the bass trombone, not the tuba.

As our final project, we scored an entire episode of Hawaii Five-O with each student getting one cue. Mine was the opening of Act One – McGarrett driving up to a house with all the guest stars names rolling on top. It could have worse. I could have gotten the end credits.

But what was this program really? It was not taught out of a textbook or off a power point. It made living, breathing musicians and their instruments come alive as we experimented writing for them.

As we create the Inception Music Education program, I'm recalling my experience in film scoring, where creativity took over, and the assignment was to feel as you composed.

If you are not exhilarated when hearing music you write, dig deeper. Be passionate. Tell a story. Take us on a thrilling adventure. Love. Laugh. Music is the only international language. It touches anyone who listens to it. And if you expose your creative soul, it will move everyone.

Soon after the Extension program, and just before I got into film school, my friends and I shot a (very bad) movie called “The Norwood Homicide”. I decided to score it.

What I had learned from my instrumentation class was, when you are on a limited budget, use low strings, winds and percussion.

My sophomore year roommate, Stephanie, who hadn't abandoned the music major as I had, contracted 14 musicians: picc/oboe, flute/alto flute, clarinet, 2 bassoons, 2 French horns, 3 celli, percussion, tympani, piano and a keyboardist I had a crush on, to play gratis.

It's daunting to conduct your own score in front of your peers when you are this relatively inexperienced. The first cue was rough. But after getting schooled by Stephanie, basically for my nervousness, I loosened up, everyone laughed, and we had a great recording session. It's amazing to see multiple cues come together live for a movie, even an unwatchable one.

You cannot let your nerves take over an extraordinary experience when presented to you. Shake them off. You belong where you are.

Years later, I would have the opportunity to expand the score for full orchestra, which was incredible, but nothing compared to the thrill of my first real recording session.

## CHAPTER NINE CHOPSTICKS IN CRISIS

To graduate UCLA film school, there was an Introduction to Video Production class which was a requirement. I made it to half of the first meeting and never returned. Shot an indie video project instead.

“Crisis” was “Hill Street Blues” in a college peer counseling office. This time, it did not require counselors staying on a Saturday. We took over my work’s building lobby for a weekend, and we’re still not sure why security didn’t stop us rolling huge desks and phones across the campus.

There were thirty actors and a full crew. The boom operator was from “Dances with Wolves” and a gaffer was fresh off “Batman Returns”. My Director of Photography, Jesse, who I knew from my day job, pulled in a ton of favors. It was quite incredible to be on that set, and the final product ended up getting me the Fuji Professional Tape scholarship and an undergrad screenwriting award.

But here are the best things I remember from this shoot. My mom catered. She is not a caterer, but she is an amazing cook. Making two meals a day for the full crew, sometimes up to fifty people, she prepared everything in Silverlake and drove it to Redondo Beach where we were shooting. She then turned around, went home, made dinner and came back. My sister was blackmailed into helping, and she didn’t drive yet. Consequently, my mom also did all the driving. This was singularly the best part of this project.

My dad was the Production Assistant on the shoot. I don’t think he liked running errands, as my parents were paying for the whole thing.

Additionally, I met Sarah Lilly, my long-time collaborator on my film and theatre projects, on “Crisis”. She couldn’t make our day of auditions but asked if she could come in the following. We went into an edit bay at UCLA, she looked at the script for five minutes and was completely off book. I learned about professionalism from Sarah. On set, she was most generous... not just to other actors. She was fully in every scene

when she was not on camera and gave her acting partners emotion to work off of. But she also gracefully helped direct when I could not figure out how to make a scene better.

Finding someone you trust with your creativity is one of the best things in the process. I like to work with people who know more than me. They give you realistic feedback, inspire you and make you think. We don't always need to agree, because we're aiming for what's best for the production. I sponge off them and learn anything I can. This is true every time I get to work with Sarah.

Sometimes you associate one big thing you've learned with one person. I frequently talk about the importance of sound. This is all because of my friend, Matt Peterson. Matt and I met our second year at UCLA and did many film production classes together. But for "Crisis", he completely mixed the film. On top of ADR, I finally learned to really appreciate sound when he added in footsteps on top of the dialogue he had just replaced.

I always got the sense that Matt was far more interested in knowing what he was doing than I was. To my uncontrolled craziness, he was the calm in the storm.

So why, when I talk about the Inception Music Education Program App, do I always talk about spatial audio and the experience of sound? It's because Matt made me understand its importance.

Matt would come back for my college thesis project, "Chopsticks", a love story between two young pianists. He recreated almost everything that was heard in this movie filled with piano, including completely dubbing out one actor's voice with another.

Jesse Weathington, my DP, essentially shot his commercial demo reel as his images on 16mm were outrageously gorgeous.

And my big contribution to "Chopsticks"? I fell off a dolly.

Twelve minutes wasn't enough time for me to properly develop this story. That, and I still couldn't figure out beginning, middle and end.

A funny note, former Card Shark card turner, Lacey Pemberton, was our script supervisor. She has gone on to be the casting director on “The Bachelor” and “Bachelorette”. She won’t take my calls. Apparently, I don’t work out and diet enough for the show and have a negative TVQ.

I did get my film degree at UCLA. Instead of going off to intern at a studio like all my other colleagues, I stayed at the Space and Electronics firm. They are now producers on “NCIS” and “Grey’s”, went around the world with “Road Rules and The Real World” and there’s that Justin Lin guy from my class, who shaved his head playing a monk in his thesis film.

I made more of the same videos about space and defense. Tore out even more pages. Wrote the same speeches for the President and VP’s. Recycled footage to save on budget. And after twelve-and-a-half years, I wasn’t creating anything any more.

When you stop being artistically fulfilled, do something about it.

This led me to Claire.

CHAPTER TEN  
THE BIGGEST CONCERTO OF MY LIFE...

Was not written for the piano, nor any other instrument. It was written for the stage. “A Concerto for Claire” debuted at Zipper Hall, Colburn School, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2002.



“Claire” is a love story about two pianists growing up together, whose relationship is derailed by a dancer and a tragic accident. There was more than twelve minutes to tell this story.

When I first pitched the play to Sarah, she responded, “Instead of a dancer, it should be a football player.”

Dancer won out, however, because I have no real working knowledge of football – college or the NFL. I did add a couple option plays just for her. In one scene, we tossed a Hail Mary out the stage door on a botched reverse, causing our sound woman to storm all the way down from the second story audio booth, stomp on stage, point up to the three microphones hanging overhead and remind us they each cost \$2000.

I laughed because the ball was coming nowhere close. Until tech

rehearsal when a spiral pass somehow got away from the quarterback and BOOM, bounced off that Sennheiser so hard that my heart stopped.

Thankfully, we used Nerf.

I began to understand the importance of having a love triangle as the spine of the story when I saw two versions of “Titanic”... the James Cameron movie and the Maury Yeston musical.

What makes the movie compelling? Not “The Heart of the Ocean” nor the boat, but rather Jack and Rose’s complicated romantic entanglement as she decides to break her engagement to the rich and jealous Cal. Without the fight for true love, you’re left with the musical version: a bunch of people singing about being Irish, lower class and drowning.

One of my most favorite movies of all time. One of my least favorite musicals.

I was not supposed to be in this play. But the prevailing wisdom was that a show about pianists, should ostensibly feature a concert pianist.

Mind you, I was not actively practicing at this time and nothing was in my repertoire. It was pathetic how many hours, days and weeks I had to rehearse to play four little segments, including two runs from “Totentanz”.

Producing “Concerto” was one of the best creative experiences of my life. I have always been a huge lover of musicals and theatre, and now I got to discover what the magic of creating a stage play for a live audience was all about.

The character of Claire was loosely based on colleague, Wendy, from the Colburn School. This is only to the extent that she practiced all the time, was a far more accomplished performer than I was and now has a professional piano recording career. Wendy is also super humble about her talent and was one of my closest friends at Colburn. I cherish her because she never rolled her eyes at me during music theory note dictation while I was humming intervals to figure out notes. She has perfect pitch.

I did think it would be interesting if she lost her hand in a subway accident freeing her from her tiger mom. (As a side note, Wendy does not have a tiger mom and still has both hands.)

How would we show the accident? Largely percussive piano, the sound of trains screeching to a halt in a station and imagination. And how would we portray Claire's domineering mother? Corrie Graham, the actress portraying Claire would also play her mother.

You don't understand anyone's love of doing theatre until you experience the camaraderie of the cast and crew.

Matt, again designing sound, got up and drew me diagrams on how the screech of a subway would ricochet as it enters a station. Apparently, it just doesn't get louder as it approaches.

To Stewart Skelton, who was doing King Lear or King Henry the Sixth or Eighth or Nineteenth (How many Shakespeare kings are there?) who graciously made himself available to us for dress rehearsal and performances in the middle of his Shakespearean run. (Wait, it was Hamlet!) This was only a problem because he was so freaking hilarious. I had to fight so hard to keep from laughing when we had scenes together that I almost bit my tongue.

To Theresa Adams, who backed me off the lip of the stage in dress rehearsal because I have no sense of direction walking backward (or forward. I did land on my feet, jumped right back up and apparently only missed two or three paragraphs of dialogue.)

To our outlandishly fabulous dancers, Desmond James who choreographed, and Mary Pinizzotto, whom I found out later were so worried about my decision to not run the play in its entirety until the last minute, they thought it would tank.

As a live event producer, I always believe that if you hire competent people, and everyone does their best to get their portion done, everything will come together in the end. Dez and Mary's dancing made the show!

To Corrie, who got her hand lopped off, played two characters and killed

on a three-minute monologue leading into the climax of Act II. I never saw it live because she refused to perform it in front of anyone except Sarah, who directed, until dress. Even then, I was offstage waiting for my entrance. Corrie was amazing on blurry video! She was actually just plain amazing.

I had previously written speeches for execs at the space and electronics company, but never a stage monologue, so I am going to share it with you. Claire, now in college and dating a dancer, Alex, has left fellow pianist Michael behind. She just finds out her mother is coming to visit her in Boston. Lines in double quotes are Claire's mother speaking.

*CLAIRE: Michael once gave me this Murphy's Law daily calendar with a different 'if-something-was-meant-to-go-wrong-it-will' quote that you tear off each day. Of course, my birthday could have been something like 'it's when you need to knock on wood that you realize the world is made of aluminum and plastic.' But no. It was 'the day you first want to make love, your mother will decide to visit.' Happy Birthday, Claire!*

*So there she was, bundled in a fluorescent yellow ski jacket, ankle deep in snow, resting against our neighborhood tree, her elbows not two inches from where Alex had scratched our initials in a heart. I thought she might see that and freak, but then realized she was way too dense.*

*No hug. No 'hi'. She just motioned me inside. 'Hi to you too, Mom. How was your trip? What are you doing here?'*

*"Your performance showcase. All parents were invited."*

*'That's in two weeks, woman!'*

*"Let's talk about why you missed your class today."*

*'No, let's not. Hello, welcome to Boston. I'm your daughter, Claire... currently carrying a four-point-O G.P.A. Would you like to see some of the city? There's a great observation deck at the Pru.*

*No, she didn't want to see the city. She wanted to talk about why I had cancelled my lesson.*

*'But I hadn't cancelled, I'd rescheduled.' And what was she doing talking to my teacher? 'This isn't high school, Mother. You don't get parent-teacher conferences. Have you eaten? There's a great place for lobster. I could tell you what's going on with me. Aren't you curious? I met a boy. I met a boy... and we're moving to Luxembourg to raise our baby!'*

*Completely ignored. But my mother did run down the list of performances opportunities... "the Boston Symphony, Carnegie Hall... competitions in New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, New Jersey..."*

*'Mom, ssh...'*

*"This is your dream, Claire."*

*'Mom, stop.'*

*"This is your dream!"*

*'NO, IT'S YOUR DREAM!'*

*It was the first time I had yelled back. The edit function had just... failed me. But it was true. I needed some breathing room... to find out if music really was mine.*

*But suddenly, she was indignant. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it, Claire, I'll learn to live with it." Her mood swing was laughable. "No, seriously, if I'm making you claustrophobic... find what you need to find out about yourself."*

*She picked up her suitcase and turned her back on me.*

*'Mom, where are you going? I want you to stay.'*

*"You're a big girl now, Claire."*

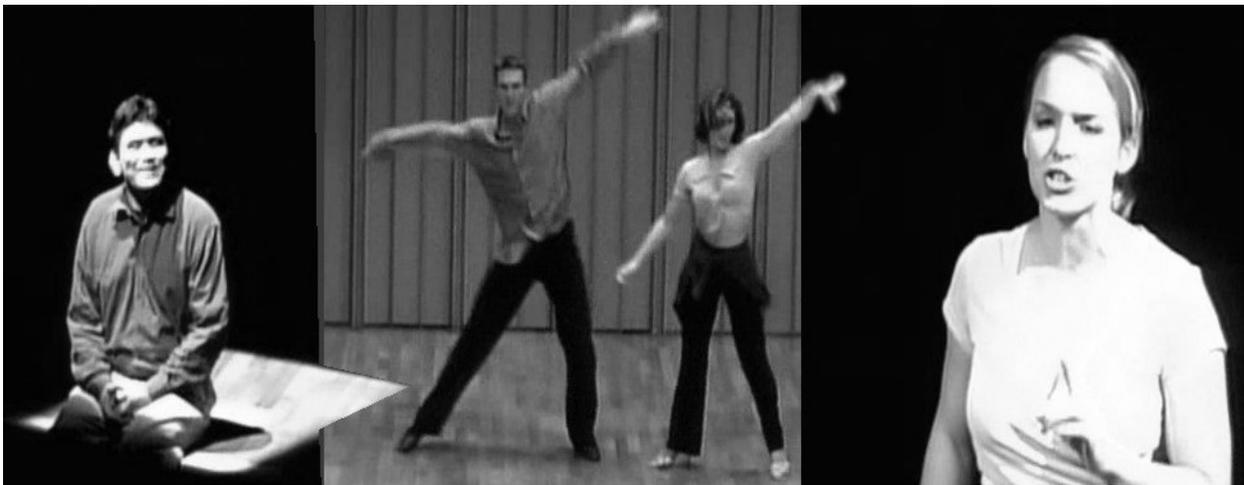
*And my mother left. My mother left. I waited an hour. Her cell phone was off. She wasn't coming back. This was reverse psychology at its unapologetic best. But even better... is when it frees you. When you're unafraid to veer from the prescribed course...*

Big fight at the train station ensues. Subway accident. Claire loses her hand. Unexpected, but satisfying ending.

I had a memorable monologue as well. Claire and her teacher (Michael's mother) are talking about her new found crush on my character, Michael. When he walks in on them, his mom tells him there's pizza in the fridge. Monologue follows.

*MICHAEL: Pizza!*

Biggest laugh of the night. Sometimes less is more.



My roommate at the time was named Fro. It stands for F-cking Roberta, all right? She earned that nickname. She left frozen taquitos in a lit oven overnight, and we woke up the next morning to the smoke alarm. TWICE!!! I was relieved when she married a fire captain and moved to Albuquerque, though incidences of three alarm domestic fires in New Mexico have gone up 763% since her arrival.

Fro was insistent that the final notes of the Beethoven "Pathetique Sonata" used in the opening of "Concerto", sound like Alan Menken's "Beauty and the Beast". So sick was she of listening to me practice that segment hundreds of thousand times over that she can no longer enjoy the animated movie. She also skipped the musical, though her boyfriend

bought her front row seats, and boycotted the live action version altogether.

Fro had to put up with a lot. We rehearsed at the house almost every day. She'd come home to the sofa upturned and the living room furniture rearranged nightly. My great way of financing the show was by shutting off cable and telling her I was not going to pay the power bill the day it was due. I hawked things left and right: a camera, a keyboard a small TV, a VCR. I was thinking about hawking her.

“A Concerto for Claire” really ended up being a big success for me. It was my first major project after leaving video editing. Lots of accolades. But the biggest compliment came from Fro... Roberta... who comes up to me after, tears streaming from her eyes and says, “I had no idea.”

When you have the opportunity to do something creatively daring and different... what are you waiting for?

CHAPTER ELEVEN  
THE HUSTLE AND THE WHORE

When my best friend in my twenties got married, there was one single bridesmaid. Every single guy, including me, tried to dance with her.

Problem. She was ballroom trained. And if you couldn't waltz or salsa, she wasn't interested.

That day I decided I would never be in the position of not being able to dance with a woman at a wedding again.

The next Monday, I marched myself into the Dance Doctor in Santa Monica, signed up for private lessons and never looked back. If you're ever wondering where my money went, as I had a substantially high paying job, it was to a slew of dance studios across Southern California over the next ten years. For the equivalent of a mortgage of a house I can now foxtrot, waltz, swing, tango, rumba, cha-cha, hustle, mambo and salsa... all with a certain degree of mediocrity.

I am not going to lie. It is a great confidence builder to be able to ask a girl to dance, move her around the dance floor, spin her a few times and keep the rhythm. I should have stopped at \$5K worth of private lessons, realized at that point that I hadn't started dancing when I was three. I already had a decent sense of rhythm through piano and percussion. I would never jive as well as the couples you see on the competitions on PBS who dedicated their lives to the ballroom and are not just indulging in an overly expensive, shockingly addictive hobby.

I had a phenomenal dance instructor at Arthur Murray. She had a thick Eastern-European accent and not the greatest command of English. I mention this only because once we were working on a salsa step, and she tells me I looked like a whore, which did not go over well.

"Why are you getting all upset?" she asks. "Whore... whore.... the animal." This is not getting better. Animal?

“What is the singular of horse?”

Ooooooh.

When I tell her horse, of course, is the singular of horses, she does not believe me.

You can now imagine how crazy our dance lessons were.

The major point about taking dance lessons though was that this was the first time I had done something musical that was completely my decision... financially and personally. That is why I didn't invite any family or friends to come watch when I competed. That is why I resisted competition altogether.

As much as I appreciate (now as an adult looking back on it) what my mother had done for me as a kid... driving me up and down Hoover to lessons at the Colburn after school and getting dinner on the table; driving me all over to youth orchestras on Saturdays from Silverlake to West Hollywood to Northridge and back; driving me, no her, all right, driving each other nuts... I needed something musical all my own. I needed something I could love and enjoy, sink my teeth into, on my own terms. The salsa, hustle, tango et al were it.

Own your artistic space, even when it's out of the box. Do something creative that is only yours as a part of your process.

## CHAPTER TWELVE I HATE FILM PRODUCTION

Without the safety net of a Space & Electronics paycheck, I set out to be a “filmmaker”. I scaled back my spending, lived off credit cards (which I’m sure I’m still paying off), got a paid-on-commission-only messengering job and wrote scripts. I was now making less in two weeks than I did per day video editing.

I previously had free access to cameras and edit bays and would crank out an indie short here and there on a shoe string budget. The problem with my filmmaking skills was that while I was technically accomplished, especially in post, I watched so much TV that all my shots were well designed for television... straight on, no low/high angles, lots of walk and talks. Also, I still had no idea how to direct actors, and Sarah wasn’t with me on every project.

I was a director for hire on an indie feature by an actor friend who wanted to cast her acting classmates. I cannot blame the exceptionally poor production on their lack of ability, but rather on my lack of training in communication with the cast. The actors I independently brought in were great, but they were terrific on their own, without any direction from me. The others, not so much.

Immediately following this debacle, I went to acting class. Not to act, but to learn how to work with actors. To understand how to listen for truth. To find techniques to guide performances.

I think it’s always important to improve yourself. Don’t stop learning as an adult.

It was here I met one of my closest friends and one dang talented actor, Kimberly Dove. Kim calls me her “brother from another mother”. I would call her my sister from another father, but it doesn’t rhyme, and I sound dumb.

Besides being an amazing actor, Kim has a work ethic and determination

that very much gelled with mine. She studied and honed her craft religiously, although she could simply have taught the seminars. She went with me to midnight pancakes at the NoHo Diner and Coral Café all the time, talked through projects, checked me when things were going off the deep end, listened to me read passages from every script on the phone (and told me what an terrible actor I was and when my dialogue sucked) and was so prepared on every project we did together, she actually made me feel far less anal retentive than I truly am.

Kim has a pet peeve when I am writing. She hates it when I cast people in my head to help with the voicing. I will forever believe she is 100% wrong, because you do need to hear different people talk to help you while you are sitting alone in front of your laptop writing in your swim trunks because you ran out of clean underwear.

A sample from “Love and a Tango”:

Violet (Kim) consoles her best friend, Allyson, after discovering boyfriend Adam is married. Violet smokes a cigarette in the back alley when Allyson plows out the back door, starting to hyperventilate. She lets out a blood curling scream.

*VIOLET: God, it's bad.*

*ALLYSON: No.*

*VIOLET: Really bad.*

*ALLYSON, No. Give me a light.*

*VIOLET: Yeah, no.*

*ALLYSON: Violet, I swear, if you don't give me a cigarette right now, I will rip open your chest and inhale the smoke accumulating in your charcoal, blackening-by-the second lungs.*

*VIOLET: I'd like to see you try, Woman. I'm only looking out for your health. Emotional smoking is how you get addicted. Now if you want me to light him on fire in twelve different places and cackle as the flames sear his scummy, lying, cowardly body that would be a different story.*

*ALLYSON: You'd do that for me?*

*VIOLET: Fifty bucks.*

Kim got married and moved to Florida and remains one of my creative sounding boards. I have lost an extreme amount of weight since she left. Less midnight pancakes.

I started specing scripts. "Love and a Tango", a dance script; a "Shield" spec; a cop script that was supposed to be shot in all one take; and a "West Wing" episode. Somewhere in there, that "West Wing" became a feature length script about corporate politics.

Kendall (Kim) enters as Jack stresses behind his desk.

*KENDALL: What???! I have opera tickets, Jack. Placido Domingo tickets, fifth row center.*

*JACK: I would think we were doing you a favor.*

*KENDALL: I'm leaving.*

*JACK: You can if you're heading to the Hill.*

*KENDALL: No.*

*JACK: We want Easley to propose an amendment to six-seventy-one.*

*KENDALL: The health care initiative?*

*JACK: Yes.*

*KENDALL: The bipartisan health care initiative?*

*JACK: Yes.*

*KENDALL: The bipartisan health care initiative flying through Congress which our company has nothing to do with? That health care initiative?*

*JACK: Kendall –*

*KENDALL: You pulled me away from celebrating my anniversary with my husband to lobby for an unattachable amendment?*

*JACK: Yes. Some of us put a lot of weight behind the Congressman before. Impress upon him the contributions which may not be available in his upcoming campaign.*

*KENDALL: This isn't something you want to do yourself?*

*JACK: An amendment for Alzheimer's research funding is a good thing.*

*KENDALL: I agree. And proposing it should only alienate the entire majority party and some of our own. And then you're looking awfully good as a replacement to run.*

*JACK: You're reading too deeply into this.*

*KENDALL: No, I'm not. If we're going to challenge him for his seat, challenge him. I won't be voting for you though.*

It is very easy to crank scenes out with Kim cast in your head as you are writing. And I found a funder for this production. A five-million-dollar funder!!! On his word and direction, we flew into pre-production. Opened the LLC, scheduled, budgeted, hired, all with the assurances of money in the bank.

The day money was supposed to hit was also the election of 2004. The Democrats lost. The day after the election we got word that no funding was coming through. You know, tell me the day before, the day of, not the day after. This same funder was open to a lower budget project a year later. I jumped through all of the same hoops and got the same result. He also had defined the word "insanity" for me several times. Should have listened.

It was during this time, I met Jaclyn, one of the leads in the art department. I was younger then, and she was even younger than me. She had a theatre background, a strong mind for story and staging and became a great person to bounce ideas off while prepping for the film. Everything was amazing.

Then I lost the project. Lost the girl. Lost the production bug. Was just lost.

What I learned from this? Failure is one of the most important parts of creativity. You have to allow for it. You have to learn from it. And you have to recover from it.

During the UCLA Extension film scoring program, each and every composer had a complete bomb one week, and it would always be followed by one of the best pieces we'd written the next go 'round.

Movies tank at the box office. Plays are bad. Original music sometimes sounds like a dissonant mess. If you create one of those things, what are you going to do about it?

Failure is everything in the moment. And more importantly, a stepping stone toward your next success.

As for the girl, she went on to be grant writer in education in Missouri. And when the Inception concept rolled around, she went through every line of our proposal, and helped us put our best foot forward to have a successful funding campaign.

Great things came from that movie that never got made.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN  
THE YEAR HALLOWEEN BECAME  
MY FAVORITE HOLIDAY

“Sit down, Bother.” My sister had called from Brooklyn. She once had inadvertently (or subconsciously) left out the R when leaving me a note, and Bother stuck. It was October 31, 2005.

“I’m going to the hospital.”

Now I’m freaking out. She was pregnant. The baby was due on Thanksgiving.

“Hey!” she finally yelled at me in the middle of my rambling. “There’s nothing wrong. He’s in a funny position, and the doctor wants to deliver him by C-Section.”

In all fairness, Thanksgiving would have been a much better holiday for his birthday. You automatically get a four-day weekend. Could she hold him in?

“Hey!”

Right, sorry. “Congratulations!”

She and Justin, her husband, then ran off to deliver a perfectly healthy baby boy.

I met Kai for the first time in Brooklyn at Thanksgiving. It remains the best day of my life. He was so gurgley and squishy. My sister placed him in my arms, and it was the first time I held a baby since her. I was nervous because I had dropped her on her head several times. It’s why it’s mis-shapen on the left.

But this was different. To hold this kid... my world had changed.

I knew I would be leading an artistic life. Getting married and having children were never my priorities. Kai (and his brother Shea born four years later) would be the closest I would get to becoming a parent.

Kai laughed and burped and farted. He spit up and peed on me more times than I could count. And he travelled. That kid flew across the country more times in his first few years than I have in my entire lifetime. New York to LA to New York to Utah to Florida to LA to New York...

My brother-in-law was trying to match at hospitals for his residency with New York, Eastern Uganda, Timbuktu Proper and the Left Side of Iowa being real possibilities. Out of the blue, my sister calls me at work and says, "Guess what? We're moving to Los Angeles!!!" Justin was going to do his first year at Harbor-UCLA (incidentally which was Rampart General for my favorite show when I was a kid, "Emergency"), and the family was moving back to California!

The next few years were amazing, as I got to be a huge part of Kai's life, and he so enriched mine. We sang songs. He sat with me at the laptop as I wrote. We watched parts of movies he liked over and over again, driving my sister nuts. We read books. Went to the beach. Outlined each other in chalk. Lined up all the cars we bought from the movie "Cars". Chased each other all over the house. Built forts.

He cried and pounded on the door when I had to go to the bathroom. I cried and pounded on the door when he locked himself in the same bathroom.

He gave me directions when we drove places. "That way. No, I said that way!"

I would ask him what Mommy's name was. "Midori". Grandma's name? "Reiko". Daddy's name? "Justin". Uncle's name? "Uncle".

Kai would make me laugh in ways that no one else could. He needed a diaper change badly one day. I put him on the changing table and took off his smelly Pampers only to find there was nothing there. I was so convinced that I did not understand what happened to his poop. He starts cackling hysterically, smiles, and says, "I have gas."

Living my life with Kai and Shea in it was the first time I experienced

unconditional love. Best kids ever!



CHAPTER FOURTEEN  
THE PATH BACK:  
ARCHITECTURE AND ASIANS

I have an odd resume. In 2009, with zero background and through a temp agency, I landed a job as an Executive Assistant to William H. Fain, Jr., an architect and urban designer.

I loved working for Bill. I had found a highly creative and artistic boss, who thought and spoke tangentially at times, but was uncompromising, focused and passionate about his work. In many ways, more an inspiration than a supervisor.

He told me that before I left the company, I had to develop a love of architecture. When I told him that would never happen, he told me to at least learn how to pick a good wine. Since all he drank was Pinot Noir, I can now tell you to order from Williams Selyem in Oregon. And his family winery, Detert, produces the best Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc I have ever drunk in my life.

Getting this job literally coincided with my return to music.

The weekend after I started with Bill, I read in the “L.A. Times” that the Lodestone Theatre Ensemble was doing “Closer Than Ever”, a musical I had seen in college.

I LOVED this production!

There were four singers with a pianist and bass player on stage. The piano part was no joke. In the middle of the first act, I turned to my date and told her if I ever had the chance, I had to do this show.

I knew people in Lodestone. It was an all Asian theatre company. I called up my friends Jennifer Aquino and Kipp Shiotani. Kipp had directed a play there, and I asked him to get me in. Never mind that I had not been playing the piano seriously in years. In fact, for my audition, I posted the video of me playing “Totentanz” with CSUN on Facebook. They didn’t have to know the truth. I had a 10:30 pm meeting

with the director, Chil Kong, at House of Pies, and two weeks later we were in casting.

“Closer Than Ever” was the first time I got to hang out with a mix of different Asian cultures... all actors, singers, producers, writers and dancers. I think that we as an audience get used to seeing one or maybe two in a show at a time, but here were ten performers plus two pianists... all Asian. It mattered what we were putting on stage.

Rehearsals were tough. Most of us were working full time, then a 7-11 pm rehearsal. Then I'd run home and practice my part on my keyboard until 3:00 in the morning. I had to work to recover from my long piano lay off. My shoulders and arms cramped. I sported wrist and elbow braces all summer. I went to the office dazed every day. Wait, I still go to work dazed every day.

Lodestone was such an open and collaborative work environment. We were allowed to change orchestrations as music creativity came alive here. We added stops for action, inserted saxophone lines, determined where random percussion and taiko drum hits fit best with the choreography. In one poignant number, a son sings about his father losing his ability to play, and we took out the arpeggios and held a haunting note on “his hands grew ‘numb’ and now he cannot ‘play’”. One of our singers was more of a brilliant actor and needed to convey the weight of her husband’s passing. I told her to speak the word “died” instead of singing it. It froze the house.

I was fierce during rehearsals. I’m sure I was overheard saying things like: “How come I’m hearing twelve different pitches when there are only ten singers singing?” “Can you sing that any flatter?” “We can transpose up half a step if it’ll sound less cow-like.” Those might be exaggerations. Might be.

It surprised everyone in the cast when I completely mellowed out for performances, because by that time I just wanted to enjoy it.

My point here, no matter how hard you work in prep, make sure you appreciate and enjoy your accomplishments and hard work during your

performance.

The run was not without its share of hilarious mishaps.

When the power got kicked out from my keyboard, and I had to dash across to the other side to play on the Roland that was programmed for drums.

When the second pianist broke up with his girlfriend, got into a car accident and I had to sight read the bass part he usually played (because I was too lazy to practice it in advance just in case). I went so fast that one of the dancers, when his choreography brought him in front of me, started snapping his fingers to slow me down. I had to buy everyone involved with this number wine.

When, during the prank show, the same second pianist, now back with his girlfriend and driving a loaner, started Act Two off with this run of Asian wind chimes that I was not expecting. It was so funny, I started laughing out loud, which caused a chain reaction of laughter from the audience.

When I forgot to reset the key after working with an understudy on a number and opened the show with the piano pitched a half a step down. I didn't realize this until the 3<sup>rd</sup> song and thought no one I knew was in the audience that night as it was dress rehearsal. Turns out there was a theatre producer I had randomly mentioned the production to.

The reviews came in, and they were excellent. We were an "LA Times" Critics' Choice noting "fine music direction" and singling out the one song we had worked the hardest on. (Only ten pitches by this performance.) And the "LA Weekly" called the music direction "creative and innovative".

The best part was, I got to work with Erin Quill who was from the original cast of "Avenue Q". Erin gave a different performance every night. You had to actively listen and respond. And it was single-handedly collaborating with her that made me excited to continue on the musical journey again. This was step one in my return to the piano and

the true unleashing of my music creativity.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN  
UNFREEZING MYSELF



In 2010, an architect, Craig Shimahara, was graciously hosting an annual show called “Unfrozen Music”... a concert given by architects who happened to play instruments. My friend, Rumi Shimasaki, was on the selection committee. I pulled “Totentanz” out of moth balls and started practicing.

That October, at the Santa Monica library, I performed a piano concerto for the first time since my freshman year at UCLA.

Yikes!!!

One of my accompanists from way back when, Natalie, came to The

Parents' house where there are two pianos, humored me with a rehearsal and graced the stage for my return.

During the holidays and for birthdays, Bill Fain always included a colorful pair of Paul Smith socks amongst overly generous gift cards and bottles of delicious wines. Because I was representing our office, I wore a striped red pair with my black suit.

My grandfather would have rolled over in his grave. A long time ago at a Meremblum concert, I had worn a pair of argyles with some yellow in them. This was not a fashion statement, but more because I am the laziest dresser known to mankind, and it happened to be the pair I pulled out from the top of my dresser. (I was lucky they matched.) My grandfather was so embarrassed, that he gave my mom money to get me several pairs of black socks. Little did he know that colored socks would become my signature thanks to Bill.

Another funny note about my sloppy dress from this Unfrozen Music concert:

For tech rehearsal, Natalie and I would be the last to go up. Architects are "creative" types. And I highlight creative in this instance because I hope in your own music and creative journey, you approach it with openness, a collaborative spirit and humbleness. It only makes you better.

This architect was adamant that the light be adjusted because the spots were casting awkward shadows on the keys, and he couldn't concentrate. I was helping Rumi with tech and wearing ripped jeans and a wrinkled T-shirt. Consequently, he started barking at me to fix the problem. He also told me I didn't understand the predicament. I was informed his face turned ashen white when I started the opening runs of "Totentanz" during my rehearsal. I don't bring this up to be arrogant. Only to note that I should dress better.

Heewon came to the performance and sat next to my mom to see if I really was making my way back. She told me my fingernails were clicking all over the keys, I rushed in several places, and the venue was

not the best for a two piano concert. But largely, she was impressed I got through it. (I know that was more a statement of fact than a compliment.)

Friends new and old, who were about to help shape the next phase of my life, showed up and got a taste of what was about to come.

They say piano is the loneliest instrument because you practice by yourself and often perform solo.

I have come to know that equally as important as the musicians who perform with you and the coaches who shape your music, are the close friends who provide you the encouragement, the space and the support to go jump off an artistic cliff. They are there to catch you.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN  
EMBRACING YOUR NUTTINESS

When you decide to dive back into music, there are very few of your friends who get the Jeckyll & Hyde nature of your personality and allow you to be who you are. But there are a handful of people who just stand by you, even in those dark moments of artistic vulnerability.

Kim, midnight pancakes, is the one person you pick to go into battle with. She works her ass off with you, has your back over and over again, and when the big movie failed, she looked me in the eye and asked, “What’s next?”

Kim is the first non-music person I discussed my future music plans with. She is the one person I would hand the reigns over to as my proxy in producing my shows. She calls and texts every day when I’m prepping for a performance to remind me how many days are left. She listens whenever I need to vent my frustrations. Most importantly, she does not judge me when I eat like crap, a necessary evil when being creative.

When Matt offers advice, there’s never an argument. Not only in sound, but in production as well, he is always simply trying to make it better. I will never try to know the most in the room. I will always try to fill the room with people who know more than me and the most in their field. Who can elevate what you are trying to create. There’s no showmanship in Matt. It is craft. What do you do to make it sound the best?

When you meet someone like Matt, work with him or her as often as you can.

Matt would eventually get married, and he and his wife, Jenice, would only support me more and more as music developed.

Miyeko is one of my mom’s best friends. But over the years she has also become an incredible supporter, cheerleader, sounding board and one of my dear friends. Always encouraging, she enquires about whatever the

next “thing” is, rounds up audience members and never lets me forget I should be creative first. Miyeko was one of the first people I asked to join the Board of the Inception Orchestra. She was a Title I administrator for the LAUSD for many years and is a great voice at the table.

More recently, my friend, Xueni, has been a huge figure in allowing me to fully embrace and discover who I am especially in regard to today’s race relations issues in the country. I feel it is truly important to feel comfortable in your own shoes and embrace who you are. Having a friend who not only encourages, but also challenges you to do so is super important. She is an engineer, I am a musician. We should be like oil and water, but instead learn from each other.

Some of my closest friends as an adult, I met at the dance studio. Stef got the unlucky assignment of being paired with me as my instructor around 2010.

Stef got to observe my true self: days I was distracted, days my short term memory failed me, days my long term memory failed me, days when I didn’t feel like learning anything, days I didn’t want to be there, days I was extremely excited about the choreography and the next day when I hated it. The result of this, though, was that we had to work at our friendship as it grew. It became one of the ones most worth fighting for. She laughs now at my wonkiness.

I have watched Stef chase her ballroom dreams with dedication and passion... right into becoming one of those gorgeous pros you aspire to be as you watch them in competition. When close friends do that, it is an inspiring reminder that you are allowed to chase your dreams. And if you don’t have a friend like that, listen to me now... Chase yours!!!

Then there are Jonathan and Nitya. To tell their story, it’s easier to just reprint portions of the wedding toast I was allowed to give. Ironically, it was the third wedding toast I had done, and all three times brides required that I prescreen for approval.

*July 14, 2013. In the love story of Jonathan and Nitya, they will tell you they fell for each other at Arthur Murray Beverly Hills. While standing*

*shyly on the sidelines, Jonathan first spotted this brilliant, attractive woman spinning circles around him while learning the salsa and waltz. And after months, he finally worked up the nerve to ask her to west coast swing.*

*On the first beat, he stepped on her foot. It broke... in twelve places. And he sat by her bedside, nursing her back to health for months. Florence Nightingale for a new generation. And now, Nitya has found her true love, Jonathan. And they were able to dance that beautiful first dance thanks to Nitya's prosthetic foot.*

*Okay, that isn't how it happened. Jonathan and Nitya did begin to cultivate their friendship at Arthur Murray. In fact, they would go out to eat once in a while, and she would clarify that they were going out as "just friends, right?"*

*In truth, their relationship started at a trendy yogurt shop, Pinkberry. And, ironically, I'm not sure that Nitya has ever been there. Every Friday night was an Arthur Murray dance party. And afterwards, our mutual friend, Suzanne, and I would walk down the street and get Pinkberry. We kept asking Jonathan to tag along, but for whatever reason, he never did... probably because of Suzanne and Jonathan's opposing views on politics, religion, gun control, the weather, movies, the time of day, the color of the sky... you get the idea.*

*But one night, out of the blue, Jonathan decided to come with us. He didn't order anything because he's a snob. I am very pleased that he did come though, because really, I didn't know much about him. At the dance studio men dance with all the women, and you kinda nod at the other guys at the end of the night. But I now got to discover what a selfless, thoughtful, fun guy Jonathan was.*

*We kept asking Nitya to join us, but she never would. Until one night, Jonathan must have danced a perfect waltz, because Nitya shocked us all and joined our Pinkberry club for dessert. Except, she didn't want to go to Pinkberry. She is also a snob.*

*To be honest, Suzanne was a talker. Nitya... a listener. For about seven*

*or eight months, I wasn't sure what Nitya's voice sounded like. When she finally did say something, the restaurant was so loud that I still didn't know what she sounded like.*

*But then Suzanne moved to Florida – and the too-good-for-Pinkberry Cheesecake Factory group became me, Jonathan and Nitya.*

*By this time, all three of us were in relationships with other people. Friday nights became like therapy – where we all got to go out and talk through our romantic hang-ups.*

*Then Jonathan and Nitya decided to wisen up, dump their people and start dating each other. So now we all went out and talked about my dysfunctional relationship and their true love.*

*In truth, Friday nights became very special to me. Because I started rehearsing piano seriously and was consumed and stressed. Jonathan and Nitya made me meet them for my one break a week.... Every Friday at 10:00. They kept me going. And that was really special for me. They kept me sane.*

Kim, Matt, Jenice, Miyeko, Xueni, Nitya, Jonathan and Stef... they hold all the dirt.

Find your people. They get you to the finish line.

Then there is Rumi.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN  
A HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION

I credit Rumi with a lot. We have known each other forever as we played in both the Meremblum and CSUN youth orchestras together and carpooled sophomore year at UCLA (so she accurately knows how many times I skipped class).

She is currently on faculty at the Colburn School.

After the Unfrozen Music concert, I wanted to continue classical piano. Was it do Unfrozen again, or was it something bigger? We talked all the time. What pieces should I play? Wouldn't it be cool to do a recital? Do you think people would come if I did? Do you think I should do it at Colburn?

Finally, after eight or so months, a frustrated Rumi goes, "Stop talking about it and pick a date!"

I was planning to go to Hawaii in the fall. In fact, I had just completed P90X, so I was in the best shape of my life and really ready to go to Kauai and Maui. In one fell swoop, I cancelled the vacation and decided I was giving a recital.

I knew "Totentanz" would be on the program, of course. But what else? My plan for this was to be a one and done deal, so I wanted to pack in as much as I could into one performance. I found out later, it was too much.

This is not to say don't be over ambitious in your planning, but also, know how to edit.

Like many of us, I was first exposed to Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" in its grand orchestral version arranged by Maurice Ravel. But it was not until I heard Barry Douglas perform it in its original form, as a piano piece, during the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1986 on PBS that I fell in love with it.

Most pianists, when approaching this virtuosic work, attempt to emulate

the symphonic version. Douglas does no such thing, making it a true piano solo and causing you to forget you ever heard it played by an orchestra.

Modeste Mussorgsky wrote “Pictures” as a tribute to his close friend, Viktor Hartmann, an artist and architect, who died suddenly of an aneurysm at age 39 in 1873. Both men were devoted to Russian art, and Mussorgsky wrote the piece in six weeks as a tour through a gallery of Hartmann’s work.

Sergei Rachmaninov’s “Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini” is based on Niccolò Paganini’s final “Caprice” for violin. “Rhapsody” is a series of 24 variations for piano and orchestra, with the 18th Variation being one of the most famous pieces of all time. In his ingenuity, Rachmaninov simply inverted Paganini’s theme – played upside down from A minor to D♭ Major to create a lush, unforgettable melody.

As Liszt had written “Totentanz” as a showcase piece for himself, Rachmaninov, one of the most legendary pianists of his time, debuted his “Rhapsody on a Theme” with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Leopold Stokowski. (Rachmaninov had also performed “Totentanz”).

I had flirted with “Pictures” and the Rachmaninov in high school, but by no means were they in my repertoire, nor were my piano playing skills even remotely legendary.

While making further decisions on programming, Stef and I went to a “Jacaranda: Music on the Edge” piano concert. We heard the Prokofiev “Toccata, Opus 11”, and I knew immediately it was going to be the opener of the program.

Turns out “Chopsticks” was easier.

There were nine months to go.

When I told everyone about this recital idea, there was the expected eye rolling and trepidation.

“You need to go take lessons,” says my mom.

“You need to come in for lessons,” says Heewon.

“Are you going to take lessons?” asks Rumi.

So here I was, at my first lesson in a couple (20+) years, playing “Pictures at an Exhibition” for Heewon. Let me reiterate. When you drop your piano performance major your first quarter of college, no matter how many musicals you play, how much you tinker, how many film scores you write, how much you practice... you have the equivalent of a high school education.

Too much pedal, hands out of balance, uneven scales, more too much pedal, too many wrong notes, too heavy, too much pedal again, too tense and too much dang pedal. This lesson was during the middle of a Wednesday, and I came back to work too exhausted and too dejected to do anything too productive except think about how not to use too much pedal.

The difference, however, between practicing when you’re 17 and practicing when you’re older than 17 with a recital looming on the horizon, is that you use your time much more efficiently and with purpose.

Yes, I felt set back a couple months with Heewon’s comments. But by the time I walked in for lesson number two a few weeks later almost all action items in the above paragraph had been checked off the list.

At this session, however, we discovered that I had developed a ridiculously bad playing habit. Heewon pointed out my fingernails were clicking still, but my nails were not long. What she suddenly realized was that I was playing on the tips of my fingers, not the pads. I was lacking proper articulation and portions of the music were not even. I was compensating by swinging my elbows or wrists wildly around, and my fingers were sliding up and down the keys vertically to catch the notes. It HAD to be corrected... immediately.

I ended up going back to Colburn that night to start working on it. It was a profound change.

This was the way I had been playing all my life, not just a habit I developed since quitting the piano performance major.

The difference was immense. The fingers became lighter and more articulate... more even and more controlled. Not perfect yet, but a HUGE step in the right direction. I also couldn't sleep that night because of the pain of using new muscle groups.

The most pleasant surprise during recital prep came when I called up another accompanist, Michael Sushel, to talk to him about doing the show. I had worked with him several times in the past, including at my senior high school recital. Amazing accompanist.

It's odd to call people twenty years later because you're not sure if they'll remember you. Michael knew who I was immediately. It took him all of thirty seconds to say yes.

In the time since, he has become not only my accompanist, but my coach, mentor and therapist all in one. Also, a tremendous friend.

The only problem now was that I had spent so many months learning the repertoire, by the time I got myself in to see Heewon and Michael for coaching, it was a matter of weeks before the recital date. My high school piano education was showing itself. It was a huge setback to have to re-learn technique that was either lost or never learned.

The clock was ticking. (I knew this because Kim texted me the countdown twice that day.)

Michael was amazing about the Rachmaninov when we rehearsed, meaning he never outwardly came out and told me how alarmingly bad it was. But by T-minus ten days to the recital, it was pretty clear that the "Rhapsody on a Theme" was going to be a bust.

The question became was this recital going to be last call? Or was I going to continue with music. If it were to be the only time I would get on stage, then the Rachmaninov should stay. It would be sloppily awesome, and my friends would support me regardless.

If I were going to continue, I could pull Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" out of this air, which I had learned in high school, and substitute one Rhapsody for another. I could fake my way through "Blue" and leave the Rachmaninov for another day.

We voted. I said Gershwin. Michael abstained. Heewon and Rumi said don't replace the Rach with anything because the program was too long. I was producing the show and am naively ambitious, so I counted triple. We went with the Gershwin.

What I had not factored in was the journey... learning at a very high level on something you were better than proficient at. This concert was not about perfection, but about sharing where I was on the path. It would be a marker in the road as I continued to study.

The support and knowledge I got from Heewon and Michael would eventually lead me to ask them onto the Board of the Inception Orchestra in 2017.

But for now... March 3, 2012, 7:30 p.m. – Zipper Hall at the Colburn School.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN  
PERFORMANCE ANXIETY



The last time I performed in Zipper Hall the audience was dark. So pitch black, in fact, that a friend of mine who was sitting in the second row for “A Concerto for Claire” was mad that I didn’t see her during the performance.

When I peeked out the stage door ten years later, the front house right seats were empty. I was sure I would not be distracted by anybody.

I took a deep breath, stepped on stage, heard all the clapping, and as I turned to take a bow, my eyes panned across the 350 people in attendance... all lit, and my heart started racing. Apparently “recital lighting” is different from “theatre production lighting” where the house is darkened.

Stef had asked me if I got nervous, and I told her no. I learned only then that this was blatantly untrue.

I opened with “Chopsticks”. Laughs. Which led into the Mozart Twinkle variations that went something like...

*Twinkle, Twinkle, little KLUNK. How KLUNK wonder KLUNK KLUNK are.*

All I kept telling myself was “please calm down”.

Variation 1 started: *KLUNK*. Variation 2: *KLUNK*.

In the rehearsals leading up to the recital, Michael suggested that while playing I really needed to be “in the moment”, a phrase many actors are familiar with. I had never heard it applied to music, and it made a lot of sense. But let me tell you, it is extremely difficult to stay present when mistakes start wildly attacking from every which way.

If you listen back to the recording, maybe it isn't as bad as I've made it out to be, BUT it sure felt like that at the start. My solution was just play it faster and faster and faster until I reached the KLUNK end.

I hadn't really performed in Zipper Hall before. Yes, I whirled through a few bars of music for “Claire”, but I had been lucky to get through those bits. And it was on the Steinway... because apparently when you want to drop a bicycle chain onto the strings for a George Crumb piece for a scene in a play, you are immediately barred from even stepping close to my dream piano, the Fazioli.

The Fazioli. The Ferrari of pianos. Rich, lush bass strings. Bass strings that are soooo grand that they overpower and drown out your right hand. Heewon had warned me about this in advance, but it isn't until you actually get onto the piano that you realize the enormity of the whole rebalancing act between your two hands. Crazy, there is no sense of this sitting on stage. Your music sounds fabulous while you're playing. Apparently, not so much in the audience. It took relying on lots of other people's ears. Even though I made this a priority and was intent on readjusting, one of the recital attendees asked me if I was left handed

because of the sometimes-thundering bass notes.

Zipper Hall itself... amazing acoustics. But with those acoustics comes the need to get your foot off the pedal and slow everything down for clarity. In theory, playing slower should be easier. In Akira world, it is insanely difficult. Fast, flashy passages that I had kinda glossed over in rehearsal, suddenly had to be played with precision and perfectly articulated. Ugh!

While much of the music felt ridiculously slow when performing it live, in reviewing the recording, the sections where the tempo was pulled back with the foot off the pedal sounded right in the pocket.

[Click here for the KLUNK Performance.](#)

Lesson learned, Heewon & Michael (heretofore referred to as H&M). Next up... PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION... or an interpretive version of.

Mussorgsky begins the piece with “Promenade”, a stroll through a museum. This theme comes back numerous times with varying meters, characteristic of walking at different speeds as one passes from picture to sculpture to painting. Mussorgsky then composed pieces to represent Hartmann’s sketches and watercolors.



“Gnomus” (The Gnome) - a sketch of a gnome-like nutcracker with large teeth and crooked legs, clumsily running

“Interlude, Promenade”

“Il Vecchio Castello” (The Old Castle) – based on a watercolor of a medieval Italian castle with a troubadour singing before it to suggest scale

“Interlude, Promenade”

“Tuileries” (Quarrels of Children at Play) a painting of the Jardin de Tuileries near the Louvre. Children arguing and nurses were added for scale. I largely remember this song being used on “The Smurfs”.

“Bydlo” – a picture of an oxen-drawn, Polish cart with giant wheels

“Interlude, Promenade”

“Ballet of the Unhatched Chickens” – was based on the production

design from the ballet,

“Trilby” featuring hatching canaries. Kim thought this should just be called “Eggs”.

“Samuel Goldenberg und Schmuyle” – based on two separate paintings by Hartmann depicting two Jewish men – rich and poor

“Promenade”

“The Marketplace at Limoges” – where two women violently argue in a city near Central France

“Catacombae & Con Martuis in Lingua Mortua” – Viktor Hartmann draws himself with friends descending into the Catacombs and exploring the dead Latin Language.

“The Hut of Baba Yaga” – based on Hartmann’s drawing of a clock, Baba-Yaga’s hut on fowl’s legs

“The Great Gate of Kiev” – Hartmann’s design for the city gates of Kiev to commemorate Tsar Alexander II’s escape from assassination. Hartmann regarded this as his finest work and won a national competition, though it was never built.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fact: I have “Pictures” memorized.

Second Fact: With the last minute changes to the program, all the extra rehearsing on the Rachmaninov that came before said changes and all the additional time spent on improving technique, I had developed something akin to a fear of failure.

Third Fact: I decided to use the sheet music with Michael turning pages.

Fourth Fact: This turned out to be a pretty big mistake, because for whatever reason, in sections that I usually played off-book, I decided to look up and could not find my place on the page.

Fifth Fact: The lid of the Fazioli is extremely reflective.

Ridiculous Fact: After getting lost in the score, I looked down and could not find my fingers amongst the black and white jumble of keys.

Pathetic Fact: The result was not brilliant.

I was certainly not “in the moment” during this whole piece. To me, it felt as if I were progressively getting worse and worse with every wrong note. In acting, mistakes are embraced. In music, not as much. But if mistakes are part of your piano performance, you are not supposed to telegraph them by reacting. (No one believes me when I tell them I may have an involuntary muscle spasm in my face.) The performance was not nearly as bad as it sounded in my head, and had I stayed in the moment, “Pictures” probably would have been better and a helluva lot more fun.

My sister came backstage at intermission and told me to stop flinching. And to my disbelief, Fro, who had driven in from Albuquerque for the recital, told me everyone was loving it.

Real fact: Failure is a part of creativity and artistry. Fear of failure is a mental block and gets you nowhere. Don't be afraid to fail.

[Click here for “Pictures at an Exhibition”.](#)

\* \* \* \* \*

The majority of my practice time leading up to the recital was on the Rachmaninov. But the hurried together rendition of Gershwin's “Rhapsody in Blue” replaced it and fortunately turned out to be a good programming choice just for a difference in musical style.

The two piano version of “Totentanz” rounded out the ridiculously long program. For me, playing the Liszt this time, on this program, with Michael, was the most meaningful rendition I have ever done of it.

[Click here for “Totentanz”.](#)

The encore was a lush version of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Movement of the Shostakovich “Piano Concerto #2”. Turns out everyone loved the slow breather at the end.

[Click here for Shotakovich.](#)

The recital was a rousing success. I had worn three different pairs of Paul Smith socks provided by the boss.

It was surprisingly my mother who said, “Who says this has to be the last concert?”

This recital was supposed to be an end-all. If I had not gone on this amazing journey of learning with H&M, then this would have been the only concert, and I would have put the Rachmaninov up and trudged through it.

At this point, though, I wanted to continue studying and maybe perform the “Rhapsody on a Theme” in a year or so.

Find what you are loving to do and pursue it. And if it’s a crazy thought, try it any way.

The desire to learn was a credit to Heewon & Michael. I’d found what I loved.



A friend of mine recently turned the Big 4-0. Her question was “How do you know you’re okay? Because you’ve made really good use of the first half of your forties.”

It was at this performance. I had not built an audience base yet, so everyone in the theatre was a friend of mine or a guest of someone I knew. They were all ethnicities and classes, representing a broad spectrum of political and religious beliefs. When they are all there enjoying a night of music supporting you, you are on top of the world.

CHAPTER NINETEEN  
WHAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF



September 28, 2013 - Aratani Theatre, Little Tokyo – The Dream Concert - Intermission.

I was sitting backstage, deciding on which pair of socks to wear for the second half. No shoes.

I happen to hear applause from the audience.

Wait, that is for the concertmaster right? The orchestra still has to tune.

“No they’re tuned. The conductor is out there,” says the piccolo player who is sitting out this number.

WHAT???!!!!!

I race to pull on my shoes and socks. Grab my nearby sheet music. Run

on my tiptoes from the greenroom, two-thirds of the way around backstage, to the wing I am supposed to enter from. I tear the mic from the stagehand's grip and dash on stage.

Fortunately, the conductor, Daniel, had forgotten to change from his tux into a matching long sleeve black shirt with a custom scarf for the second half, allowing me to improv, "You knew about the costume change, right?"

Laughter and applause. And we were off.

The Aratani had a brand new stage manager direct from the LA Opera. She was stationed off stage left with Daniel. I was to enter from stage right. With an opera background, she was accustomed to calling all musicians to the stage and everyone was supposed to take places. I'm from a theatre background, where the stage manager is supposed to check with the, quote, talent... Me. Never happened.

Fortunately, we had opened the first act with my being late and Daniel frantically dialing his cell phone trying to find me in the middle of the piece. He did the same thing to start the second half, and everyone thought it was part of the show. It got a big laugh, and the concert went on.

The result of this was, I didn't have time to bring the custom designed scarves on stage that Jessica Champion and Christopher Burdick of Studio eQ had made for the third of my performances in a row.



I was supposed to give a scarf to each of the two girls playing the rain sticks, Julia and Claire, and Daniel was supposed to wear one. It did, however, make me stand out very well against the orchestra.

Jess and Chris's amazing work has become a part of my signature at every show dating back to "Closer Than Ever".

\* \* \* \* \*

Rewind eighteen months. One week after the recital at Colburn.

I bumped into Heewon and excitedly told her my grand plans for my next performance.

She said no.

I wanted to actually play the Rachmaninov "Rhapsody on a Theme" and learn Gershwin's "Concerto in F".

She asked why.

And as I went into my reasoning, she stopped listening.

She suggested I pick up a Mozart and a Bach and continue to develop my playing technique that had suffered from the many years of not

properly practicing. Wait, many years of plain not practicing. Mozart and Bach? This was not like her.

Heewon was also concerned that debuting two huge pieces I hadn't performed before on the same program might not be the best idea I've ever had.

Weeks later, though, she introduced me to Daniel, the conductor of the Dream Orchestra. The problem with my piece selection, she told me then, was the concerti needed to be performed with an orchestra, not a second piano, and I should still consider playing only one.

After three weeks of stubbornly practicing the Rachmaninov and the Gershwin, I realized I really only had time to be studying the Rachmaninov.

I would, of course, revisit "Totentanz" and also add some original compositions on the program.

I proposed this plan to Heewon and got the stamp of approval.

The next time I tell you I'm going to produce, perform two concerti and compose several numbers for one big concert, your immediate reaction needs to be "NO!" Then pummel me in the face when I continue to talk about the idea.

That is not true. The next time you decide to do something that is going to take a year out of your life, know you're going to be living and breathing it very second. Do it and commit!

No film, theatre or previous music project came close to the magnitude of this show. It was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life and my biggest accomplishment prior to delving into Inception.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

# LIVING THE DREAM

When Daniel and I had our first meeting, we talked about finding a theatre double the size of Zipper Hall, which seats 416. He had done a concert there with Heewon, where a slew of Colburn kids get the chance to play a movement of a concerto with full orchestra. He proposed that I bring in half the house and the Dream Orchestra would bring in the other half. That number was factored into the budget with the remaining dollars to be covered by sponsorship.

The behind the scenes stuff is what makes this interesting, but after writing pages and pages, I deleted most of it, and I will bore you with a very short chapter to just touch on some of the highlights. Because the point here is to inspire creativity.

And although this was a rocky road, this might be the biggest lesson in getting up off the mat and enjoying the process and what you created.

I screwed up in sponsorship. I believed the existing Dream Orchestra patrons would bring in half the house. I raised the target number for additional funds. And because I had so many other things to do like practicing and composing, I stopped raising money. The problem became when the largest sponsor pulled out at the last minute, and Dream was unable to deliver on their half of the audience.

My family came through and bailed me out, loaning me money.

After hearing a couple earlier concerts of the Dream Orchestra, it was determined by Daniel that most of the musicians needed to be replaced. I agreed. They sounded like a high school band, and I could not in good conscience go ask sponsors for money. Daniel hired a new contractor who successfully replaced all but seven of the musicians with studio pros, but also created her own set of drama.

At midnight three nights before the performance, she threatened to pull the orchestra. This also happened two days before and the night of dress

rehearsal. She herself also decided to quit the day of performance because she had some spat with Daniel who rightly wasn't responding well to the turmoil she was stirring up. I had to talk her into showing up as she was both managing the orchestra and serving as parts librarian. During dress rehearsal, she felt she was slighted by one of the musicians she hired and was in tears in my dressing room during intermission. I had to spend my break consoling her. (Probably why I ran late for the second half.)

Daniel and I are professional performers. I got up on the morning of the concert and just promised myself to have a good day. The show itself went off extremely well, and no one had a clue of any of the issues. So just get up and enjoy the journey. Live the stress and the downs, because finding ways to overcome are what make you a creative success.

The truth is, of course, I would absolutely work with Daniel again. Financially and organizationally, we would handle things differently. But it goes without saying that musically speaking, he is great to perform with.

There were also some stellar people working to make this concert a success as well. Because no productions happen by yourself.

When you do a show at the Aratani Theatre in Little Tokyo, theatre manager Carol Onaga is like no other. Most facility people are only looking out for the venue. Carol functioned as a producer, protecting the interests of the orchestra and the show as best she could while still representing the theatre. She accommodated every request left and right and did everything from beginning to end to make sure the Aratani was the best venue we could have rented. That lifted a lot of the load. I will always be grateful to Carol and the JACCC and will work with her again in a heartbeat.

Dave Tolley at dbt Creative handled video. I walked around with him dazed during a break at dress rehearsal. He was telling me about the multiple camera positions and where he was placing GoPro's. All I can remember is asking him if he wanted to go to Starbucks. (We did.) Despite my not paying attention, he got amazing shots and did a stellar

job editing.

For once, I have a professional recording of one of my concerts. Whenever you need video production services, Dave Tolley is the guy. So much so that he has joined the Inception team.

The Sister and her neighbor, Andrea, manned the will call desk.

The Mom and The Dad folded all the programs and hung out with Kai before the concert.

Honestly, though, this performance does not happen without my family. Often unsung heroes when I tell the story aloud. In the end, it is your family who financially and emotionally allows you to create, even if they challenge you. And it is your family you are most proud to be successful in front of.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE THERAPY

The smartest thing I did while preparing for the Dream Orchestra concert was contact Michael really, really early in the rehearsal process and call Heewon for lessons.

Both of them had performed the Rachmaninov “Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini” with orchestra. Yikes! They knew it inside and out and had definitive interpretations which were not dissimilar. Their only real fundamental difference was about where to pedal. In both cases, they told me my method of pushing the pedal down to cover up my sloppy playing would not work. I alternated two-hour, bi-weekly sessions with them.

Because playing the Rach with an orchestra would be new for me, I needed to work with an accompanist early and often to understand where the entrances were and how the parts blended together.

People were telling me I was crazy because Michael was expensive, and I laughed because those same people were going to therapy every week and paying just as much. Although Michael, as it turned out, was not covered by Anthem Blue Cross.

It had now been a good nine months since the recital where the Rach had been dropped. Many more passages were falling into place, and I was shocked that I had even thought about putting it on the program before.

Michael is amazingly kind in his coaching approach.

“Have you considered practicing with a metronome?”

Uh...

“How slowly do you need to play that passage so you can play it evenly?”

I’m not sure if there’s a speed slow enough.

”Have you ever recorded yourself playing?”

Yes, I lied.

One day I turned on a metronome.

If you’ve ever practiced without a metronome and then used one, it suddenly seems like you have to play meteorically faster, then slam on the brakes, slowing down to an elderly, crippled snail’s pace and then accelerate into hyperspace fast enough to make the kessel run in less than twelve parsecs.

In reality, it is simply the first time you are playing the tempo accurately.

Once I was playing evenly, I recorded myself doing Variation 1 of the Rachmaninov which was a ton-of-bricks heavy, and I can only describe listening to it as something close to fingernails scraping down a rickety, industrial chalkboard causing everyone one of your nerves to weightily fray.

It was, though, in time.

I then had to work on lightening it up. You would think this would take the muscle strain out of playing, but the concentrated focus only sent excessive adrenaline through my veins, making the feather-like fingering the most excruciatingly painful portion of the entire rehearsal exercise.

When it was finally lightened up and metronome-even, I took it back to both Heewon and Michael who said the same thing... lacking emotion or any musicality.

Ugh.

Michael said I should envision little kids playing. There it was. The Rachmaninov “Rhapsody on a Theme” became the Adventures of Kai and Shea, the nephews. They frolic out on a quest, quarrel as they run through the forest, explore ancient caves and look out for each other.

What’s interesting about prepping the Rach, is that although the rest of the piece is tremendously difficult, you spend the most time interpreting

Variation 18... and the transition into Variation 18... and the dynamics of Variation 18. I could spend this entire book talking about Variation 18.

Heewon said one thing. Michael another. Daniel, who is Korean, said something in Italian

In fact, most of his comments during rehearsal were in Italian.

“Va bene. Va bene. Ma piu elegante, no? Uno, due, tre.” And since he’s first an opera singer, he sings all the phrases in Italian.

How do you wade through the different interpretations presented to you? Go with the one that speaks to you the most.

Michael had suggested this variation was a conversation between two lovers. Once imagining an intimate chat with the woman I was dating at the time, Variation 18 was ready.

Admission... the performance with the Dream Orchestra was only my second time playing all the way through the Rachmaninov... once with Michael a few days before orchestra rehearsals started, and once at the concert.

This is because I am dumb.

H&M were both very excited that I got through it.

Find mentors you trust and respect who have your back and are looking out for you. Of course I asked Heewon and Michael onto the Inception Board of Directors. No brainer.

Facebook posts during intermission said the Rachmaninov was “amazing” and “moving”. Reading those, I knew Variation 18 had gone very well.

As an encore, with the orchestra on stage, I played “Music of the Night” solo for the above-mentioned woman. It was her favorite song. This relationship ultimately didn’t work out. The main thing I’m mad about? Fifty-one musicians were snickering behind my back at the song choice.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO THE ORIGINALS

I won my first Young Authors' prize in 5<sup>th</sup> Grade for that book of poetry. It had nothing to do with my decidedly poised elementary-school-level comprehension of haiku. It was the composed piece of music to go with each poem which were included on a cassette of me playing. The judges dragged out a tape player for the awards ceremony, and everyone was forced to listen to the warblely recording.

I knew this was why I had won. Because the next year, when I scribbled a few bars of music as borders on top of each page, the announcer goes, "Last year, he wrote these beautiful compositions. I don't know what happened this time."

I also won the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Herbert Zipper Prize in Composition. Hopefully it was for something better than "Rainfall".

It's odd that I used to get in trouble while practicing piano when I started improvising. It was creative. I like rhythms, so a lot of it sounded percussive and loud. To my mother, it was banging on the keys and not practicing Hanon.

I also like TV shows, so many improvisations sounded like the theme from "Hunter" or "Hill Street Blues". The tune I was most proud of turned out to be a direct rip-off of the music from the last TV movie of "Emergency". But to The Mom, this only meant she had let me watch too much TV and that got taken away the next week. (Probably not true, but you get the point.)

I did not get serious about composition until much later while film scoring at the UCLA Extension to replace my lack of piano playing.

When I first started talking about putting originals on the Dream Concert, Matt was working at Avid, the company that made the music writing software, Sibelius. This was months before I got serious about concert prep, and the ideas were just conjecture.

Matt gave me a copy of the Sibelius 7 to compose away. Having written everything by hand before in pencil on 11x17 score paper, this would change my composing life.

I think to Matt this was no big deal. To me, this was the official green light of the Dream Concert and approval of original music. It meant everything.

To learn Sibelius, I began with “The Norwood Homicide” score and rearranged it into an orchestral suite for 51-piece orchestra, expanding sections and composing some new material. I could now easily substitute 16<sup>th</sup> notes for 8<sup>th</sup> notes, write faster and more complicated passages and double instruments in the orchestra with ease

To have the opportunity to revise your compositions, even years later, is important for the growth of your music.

Remember my video mentor’s advice about not substituting technology for your creative vision?

It’s a similar concept here. While the Sibelius software was miles better than pencil and paper, it was important to understand why Norwood would work in expansion.

The cues needed more development and organization to grow from a handful of 1-3 minute cues into a cohesive piece. This was not just stringing music together.

Unlike scoring for film, now it was necessary to take the listeners on a journey. How do the instruments develop? Should I add counter melodies? How is this properly orchestrated with full orchestra instead of 15 pieces?

Although the original scoring session was exciting, this fully orchestrated suite had maturity. At least I thought.

When Matt listened to the first version, he commented that it lacked a thematic through line. I went back in and connected the dots. Revision and iterations (another Drew Schnurr concept) are imperative.

Unfortunately in performance, the orchestra got lost, losing a minute of music until they got on and that particular segment introduced the main backbone of the entire piece. The thematic problem remained.

Nonetheless, I felt a certain sense of validation when the principal bass player thanked me for putting a piece like this on the program.

[Click here for "The Norwood Affair"](#).

Another of my performance signatures has become to play "Chopsticks" at the opening of each concert.

Before working on the showcase piece, I decided to write a fun intro which would not be listed on the program. It was essentially variations on "Chopsticks" for full orchestra, previewing portions from all the works to be played that night.

When initially conceiving the originals, I listened to every possible Pixar and Dreamworks Animation score. iTunes raked in hundreds of dollars from me. Those composers are the new contemporary classical torch bearers, and it was important to study their orchestrations (and thematic thru-lines). Our hope with the Inception Music Education program is to nurture the next generation.

In one cue from "Finding Nemo", Thomas Newman used harp and strings. I loved it, but had no familiarity with writing for harp. This was one instrument omitted from our film scoring instrumentation class because asking a harpist to cart her instrument from the off-campus parking lot to the music building would have put us dramatically over the materials fee budget.

I asked the Dream Orchestra harpist, Hee Jin, to give me a lesson. She dragged her instrument to my apartment and taught me everything she knew... every trick strum, what notes not to put together and how to give her enough time to reset to the low strings after a high run. At one point, I wanted to compose a piece for harp, piano and orchestra for the two of us, but she had to settle for featured soloist in the opening number (because again, I am lazy.)

Originally there was a gag where I would ride the pit elevator up with the piano, rise onto the stage and play “Chopsticks”. Because of the acoustics in the Aratani, we had to move the orchestra forward rendering the pit non-operational, and invent the vignette where Daniel steps off the podium and calls me because I was running late to play “Chopsticks”.

Daniel was brilliant and funny, and thank goodness this happened because of the idiocy of the second half opening. But pieces like this only work if you remember not to take yourself too seriously all the time in your compositions.

[Click here for “Cold Open”.](#)

The surprise hit of the night was “A Concerto in Crayon”. It was written for my nephew Kai, depicting his adventures as he drew.

Daniel was convinced that everyone would leave the theatre singing Variation 18 (Rachmaninov). I’m very proud that more people remembered and talked about “Crayon”.

Composing this piece was crazy. My birthday was three weeks prior to the concert. I was not halfway done writing the music and was eating cake instead. I was newly dating the “Music of the Night” girl at the time, and she did something so selfless. She refused to text, call or talk to me until I got this piece done. It took four days.

I realize that most of my music sounds film score-ish. In fact, many people say that to me. But I know it’s because I feel good pieces have to tell a story. I was like that in video editing, too. Every montage had to say something, even if it was just a bunch of pictures being cut together.

I was very clearly able to see the visuals for this piece. Kai doodling at table, his crayons taking him out to sea, captaining a boat, fighting off pirates, climbing a huge wall, slaying a dragon and saving a princess.

For some mentors, it is about structure. Story is also structure. Beginning-middle-and end. Make it grow. Take us on a journey.

Julia and Claire, twin daughters of our business development guy at work, were picked out from the audience and would play rain sticks. I would strum the piano strings with drum sticks and pound the keys as crashing sound effects with no specific notes. The percussion was intentionally all over the place. A bass trombone was brought in just to give the dragon that menacing low brass blasting sound I love.

In the end, “Crayon” was the show piece of the evening.

[Click here for “A Concerto in Crayon”.](#)

Our Concert Master reassured me in advance not to freak out the first time I heard the originals sight read through, because everyone would be finding their way with new material. She also told me I failed to put dynamics into all the parts.

“So the opening? Do we play loud or soft?” Grumble!

The musicians in the orchestra were AMAZING!!! And sooo supportive. I am so pleased to have had the opportunity to perform with each one of them.

At the first rehearsal, the hair stood up on my arms when they started to play the Rachmaninov, because it was the first time I was performing with such high caliber, professional artists. Humbling. Something you only imagine when you were younger.

And how incredible is it when these are the musicians playing the film scores to all the current summer block busters performing your original pieces. It is an experience we want to give to young composers at Inception. Let them hear their works by interpreted by pros.

It always amuses me that people distinguish Classical musicians from rock stars. Largely I’ve discovered musicians are just musicians. Classical musicians are more buttoned up on stage, sure. Off stage they’re equally crazy, demanding, obnoxious and freaking talented! I can admit it.

Composers, treat your musicians well, and they will forever be in your

corner. I had one pianist who was hired for every film scoring session at the UCLA Extension. He was tough on my “simple” writing at first, so I kept making his parts more complex. He got a kick out of it, and by the end told me he most enjoyed playing my scores and wanted to always get it right for me.

I’ve always had another goal of making Classical music accessible at performances. Do this, and your musicians engage. And your audience will respond.

My friend Trina said, “I went to the concert to support you, not really expecting to like it, but I really enjoyed it.”

Several people have commented it was the most fun they’ve had at a classical music concert.

Chil called me “the Rockstar of Classical Piano”. Ha!

The Dream Concert was a huge collaborative effort. I could not have done it without everybody... fellow musicians, crew, audience, sponsors, friends and family.

I will be forever grateful.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE SONG AND DANCE

A funny thing happened when I split with “Music of the Night”.

We were taking Argentine Tango lessons from Marcos Questas. This is something she wanted to do, and although I had vowed to stop spending money on dance lessons, I agreed because I had never properly learned Argentine at my former studio.

The night before one of our lessons, she and I had an argument and she didn't show up. This caused me to switch over to Marcos' partner, Ruta Maria, for a one-on-one lesson. Best thing that could have happened.

A big problem I was having was keeping my shoulders from going involuntarily up. I explained to Ruta that this was largely a function of the way I listened to music. In piano and conducting, my prep came from my shoulders. I felt everything in my shoulders... building crescendos, excruciating arm pain, fluctuating dynamics, neck kinks, quiet adagios, wrist stiffening... all stemming from my shoulders.

In Argentine, Ruta explains, we listen, feel and move with the music from our center. We spent a whole private lesson just refocusing our energy from the heart.

It changed how I breathed, how I felt... how I listened. It relaxed the stress out of my arms and shoulders. It made me inhabit music differently.

When I got in my car and switched the radio on, I realized this might be a new method for the piano. I rushed home, sat, centered myself and played.

Passages that were laborious to struggle through before were now a piece of cake. My fingers flew faster and lighter... with more grace. Suddenly my arms were not in devastating pain.

I still cannot dance the Argentine tango, but one Argentine tango lesson

had a life-long impact on my piano career.

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It should come as a surprise to no one whom has ever ridden in the car with me and been deafened by my singing, that I love karaoke. Billy Joel, Elton John and showtunes are my go-to's.

I've even recently started taking lessons with Mia Milan (Singing Studio LA), who took me from a complete amateur to a bonafide weekend karaoke warrior. She immediately found some weird habits like I moved my jaw around and I never used my diaphragm to breathe.

What I realized about singing, however, is you have those huge goose bump raising moments which you experience. You have a chance to emote and make yourself feel a song differently than when you are playing. You can create drama and passion which you experience with your voice.

Now use that sensational feeling in your composition or playing.

I have found that I now have a method as I'm writing for instruments to translate that emotional roller coaster when holding a singing note that goes into a key change and rivets everyone in the room... and put it in a score.

What is it that you can do on the piano or orchestrate that will move the musicians and audience to tears?

It may be a cheat. But I've taken music experienced differently and used song and dance to enhance the piano and composition.

My Director of Photography, Jesse, once told me that in my writing, it was important to not just type from behind a desk, but to live life. Bring those life experience into your creative practice.

Do the same thing with writing music. Do the same thing with anything you're creating. Add life to your work.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR INCEPTION

Immediately following the first publication of this book, I turned 45. I found myself performing background piano-for-hire gigs at the Huntington Library, something I said I would never do. And I was working a day job that I didn't like a whole lot, something I said was supposed to give me the cash to do something that I artistically wanted to do.

The big question now was, what did I want to be doing by the time I was 50?

I flirted with the idea of doing a concert much like the performance with the Dream Orchestra.

I hired a lawyer, Mary Tovella Dowling – For Purpose Law, to establish a 501(c)(3) to make it easier to solicit donations. Orchestra is a category of non-profits, so it was nothing out of the ordinary.

But I had done a concert already.

Heewon, Michael, Miyeko and I made up the board initially, with Rumi as an advisor.

We talked through the concert idea. Then casually someone mentioned a music education program.

When the concept suddenly becomes about something greater than you, it becomes passion, creation and investment worthy.

Inception will begin by providing in-person composition and orchestration mentorships to four teen-aged composers that represent a cross section of Los Angeles' underserved communities. Under the guidance of professional composers, our mentees will engage with and write for top-tier professional musicians, culminating with a live performance of the final compositions.

Immediately, I contacted John Wineglass, who had composed a piece, “Someone Else’s Child”, on a concert I did with the Southeast Symphony. The hair on my arms stood up when the conductor ran the trombone line to start rehearsal. Not only was this a brilliant composition, but John is the most humble and engaging man, and sitting with him for a conversation is a lot like going to church.

I have known Dana Lyn for ages. She, Rumi and I played in the Meremblum and Northridge youth orchestras together. She moved to New York to pursue a career in music and now leads a successful, creative artistic life as a composer and violinist. As a performer, she is at home with all types of music. And as a composer, she truly thinks outside the box. She is a perfect mentor for our young composers.

Michael Sushel expressed concern when I asked him to serve as a mentor, especially with the other composers being engaged. He has a background in Classical, rock, jazz, you name it. He recently took a break from accompaniment to focus on composing, arranging (and drumming). Why there is no concern with what he brings to the table? Because musically, he mentored me.

I was approaching the Four-Level in Downtown when the KUSC announcer played a piece by a local composer. Adam Schoenberg’s Mvt. IV, “Wine” from *Finding Rothko* was everything you hope for in an original composition. I had chills as I looked for place to pull off the 101 to stop and catch his info. A week after reaching out, we sat down for lunch. And while he was too busy for commissions, he wanted to make sure we were properly putting the education piece in place. His *Picture Studies* was then nominated for a Grammy in Classical Composition. And I got the thrill of attending the premiere of his violin concerto, *Orchard in Fog*. An example of how it’s done for our students? Without a doubt.

I took the Japanese instrument, Koto, to fulfill my ethnomusicology requirement my first semester at UCLA. Not a fan.... Until I heard June Kuramoto play with her band, *Hiroshima* at the Aratani. She shreds that thing like an electric guitar, and I suddenly had a new-found

appreciation for an instrument I was once very blasé about learning. When you meet June, not only is she one of the loveliest people on the planet, she is also an encyclopedia of instruments of the world. I wish I could have just recorded our conversation and thrown it up on our site. In the trajectory of Inception, we will move from Classical to Jazz to World Music. I cannot wait to share the experience with our students, and frankly anyone, of learning from June.

Tommy Faragher's bio is crazily impressive. It's on our site with all our other talented mentors. But in our first meeting, what struck me most was how we started talking orchestration. I was sitting at the table thinking about how brilliant and knowledgeable this man was. Even more importantly, I knew that every student composer we bring in needs to be mentored by him. It will just infinitely improve how they think about arranging.

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There are many amazing composition mentoring programs in town, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic. What makes ours unique?

Most programs stop after a performance of a piece. I talked about it with the Young Authors' Conference. What if our brilliant mentees' compositions could have legs, be experienced long into the future and serve a purpose? And how would we present it?

Virtual reality was not even on my radar until I happened to meet a friend for drinks just after he attended a conference on educational uses for VR. VR engages students in a fully embodied experience. VR allows students to retain 90% of information they experienced as versus 40% from what they just observe and 20% off paper.

By documenting our mentees' journey and original music, we now had a platform we could film in, create an app and roll out to schools as an innovative and immersive introduction to the symphony orchestra. Using Virtual Reality, students will engage as never before in the world of Classical music. Our mentees become role models as kids are inspired

by their creative process and original compositions.

In the App, a student would pick a young composer who looks like them, or better, a role model who does not look like them, watch a documentary on his or her daily life, follow the music composing process through the challenges and roadblocks to the incredible successes. All this in a format which puts viewers in the middle of the action... on stage with an orchestra, surrounded by musicians in a recording session or even just watching our mentee's first experience hearing his or her work performed by professional musicians.

“Virtual Reality is presently where AOL was in dial-up mode.” I heard that at a panel discussion on medical VR. The technology will be constantly evolving. Megan Lubaszka, our Board advisor on VR, keeps us not only current with what is happening today, but also what we can expect eight years in the future. She is the leader in VR/AR technologies at Gensler, the world's largest architecture firm.

Ryan Lebar who very successfully helmed the Embodied Labs medical VR demo, has a keen eye and understanding of how to tell a story in this medium and engage viewers. At our first meeting he says, “We're really going to have to focus on sound.” Match.

Azra Isakovic is a VR director and writer. She tells the immigrant story through Project Golden. Her storytelling will be paramount to presenting our mentees' journeys.

I've known David Mann since he started tuning my piano. He actually hates tuning my piano because of the number of strings I break and wants to restring it. But David Mann's real passion is as a music app designer and composer. David is the creator of UltraMusician, UltraJamSessionPro and a composition algorithm that composes on its own.

The VR team also includes Andrew Hwang who worked tirelessly with me on the film that was never shot. And Dave Tolley whom will forever automatically get a call involving video for any project after his work on the Dream Concert. Both will produce.

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It is very important to note, that we are a music education program first, with composition as the foundation.

We decided our young composers would interact with the musicians, and we needed industry professionals would not only bring musical talent to the table, but also an incredible personality to help mentor the composers. This will be one of the most important components of this program's success.

To lead the mentorship program, enter Drew Schnurr. How did I know Drew was perfect? As I stated in the introduction, the first words out of his mouth in our one-on-one meeting were "I want to be sure this class is rooted in composition and is a creative practice." Bam!

In developing the curriculum, we both understood that this was not a class taught out of textbook or off a power point. Our composition mentorship was about experiencing music. Discovering new sounds. Telling stories.

I told him for my guest lecture I wanted to talk about the importance of failure in creativity and procrastination. He immediately pointed me to the book "Wait, The Art and Science of Delay" by Art Portnoy.

Drew brings so many great ideas to the table, and at the same time is incredibly collaborative. Mentees will excel working with him

Recently, we were joined by David Tokofsky as our Board Strategist. I knew him as Mr. Tokofsky when he taught History at John Marshall High and coached the Academic Decathlon team to its first National Championship. He later was elected to the LAUSD School Board and has since become an educational strategist. He has immediately taken Inception under his wing and is pointing us toward success.

At our full team meeting this year, it was the first time the music side and VR side came together. Sitting at the table with industry professionals, top in their game, I cannot believe the creative energy working together to offer incredible mentorships and an innovative new

platform for an introduction to the symphony orchestra into schools.

I am proud to introduce the Los Angeles Inception Orchestra, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. For all of you young composers, I am excited for the journey you are about to take. For all of our partners who have come together to help support our mission, we all thank you. Our entire team believes this is an innovative and unique way to bring the symphony orchestra and Classical music alive especially in underserved communities.

As this new adventure begins, I'm going to leave you with this. Always chase your creative dreams, as they will fulfill you. Succeed and fail doing your best work –don't accept mediocrity... and further, don't not try at all. Procrastination and failure are two of the most important parts of artistic success. Work with people who know more and run faster than you. They will inspire you.

I am hopeful. The future is bright. And the music is going forward. As long as the journey continues to be about creativity, learning and new challenges for me, my colleagues and the next generation, I intend to stay on it.

And because it ultimately takes you places we have only begun to imagine, I will never hate the creative practice.



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The road to the Los Angeles Inception Orchestra has been helped shaped by all of you.

*Thank you for taking the time to read this book. Additional photos and video can be found by exploring the website [inceptionorchestra.org](http://inceptionorchestra.org).*