Jumping down the Rabbit Hole – Exploring Artistic Agency by Classical Music Performers

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Abstract

It takes 10,000 hours of practice to master an instrument, it is said. In music education, we easily fill those hours—training from childhood in technical and theoretical skills to meet the highest standards. But what happens when this framework we've trained for disappears? What remains when the certainty of a score falls away? What happened to our own creative agency? It makes you wonder—we might be missing something in the way we teach. Creativity isn't reserved for composers or improvisers—it's at the core of artistry, and that includes performers. So how do we make our 10,000 hours not a straitjacket, but a wealth of knowledge, skill, curiosity, and creative potential? I invite you to embrace your inner Alice, and take a leap with me. Dare to fail, take a risk, get back up—and eventually, create something beyond expectations—not despite, but because you didn't expect it.

Keywords: Creativity, Artistic agency, Curatorship, Performativity.

Introduction

When we hear the word Wonderland, we instinctively think of Alice: a young, inquisitive girl who stumbles into a magical world full of impossibilities, simply by stepping off the trodden path and leaping into the unknown—the proverbial rabbit hole. My own introduction to Alice's adventures came at a very young age, through a cartoon series bearing the same name. What captured my imagination most at that time, however, was not so much the surreal setting, but the rabbit hole—or more precisely, the white rabbit itself. Likely because rabbits have always been my favourite animal, I found myself identifying with the young adventurer, secretly hoping that I too might encounter a curious, long-eared creature who would lead me into an unexpected journey filled with strange encounters and fantastical adventures.

It was only years later that I came to understand Alice's Adventures in Wonderland as more than a whimsical tale. Carroll's novel is a rich allegory

about navigating complexity, embracing the illogical, and developing creative thinking in the face of uncertainty—a lesson in growing up and discovering one's identity within an often-incoherent world. In Dutch, my native language, the word "wonder" translates as "miracle," suggesting a passive experience: something that happens to you. Within that context, a world filled with magical and unrealistic creatures made perfect sense. Only much later did I realize that the English verb "to wonder" contains another, more active dimension. Miracles may occur beyond our control, but "to wonder"—to ponder, question, or feel surprised—is a more conscious act: it implies reflection, curiosity, and a willingness to explore the unknown. Seen this way, Alice does not merely undergo a strange journey—she initiates it. She chooses to go beyond the familiar, and without much hesitation, to explore what else is out there—wherever that may lead her.

Remarkably, however exciting and surprising it may be, this spirit of wondering—creative, open-ended inquiry—is precisely what seems to be sidelined in parts of our contemporary artistic world, namely in domains where control, discipline, and certainty are prioritized, such as professional Western Classical Music performance and education. After all, rather than embracing the unknown, we often work to eliminate it as much as possible through rigorous practice and rehearsal, rule-based interpretation, a pursuit for authenticity and compliance, and a seemingly deep aversion to taking risks and (publicly) making mistakes.

However, in doing so, we run a different kind of risk, namely the risk of losing touch with the imaginative spirit that fuels artistic development, of the individual performer as well as the discipline itself. Why do we seem to prioritize control over surprise, certainty over possibilities, the destination over the journey? Why do we associate wondering with discomfort and taking time for exploration with unproductivity? If we as performing artists and educators indeed pride ourselves on being critical thinkers, why does the process of questioning, doubting, or deviating from the expected path so often make us uneasy when actually we should be practicing it?

In this essay, I offer reflections on our prevailing relationship with a written score and existing expectation patterns towards its performance, on the typical approach to creativity within Western Classical Music education—and why, in practice, this approach often fails to shift our perspective. I then propose a new approach for repertoire-based performative creativity, illustrating its applicability as a continuum spanning from faithful interpretation to progressive creation. Finally, I call upon educators and performers alike to rethink their roles within the broader domain and to reshape educational and concert practices in ways that encourage and empower students and professionals to explore their agency as creative performers.

Examining Performance Practice: Searching for a Rabbit Hole

The Western classical performance tradition has long prized precision, fidelity, and discipline. These values have no doubt produced extraordinary musicians and unforgettable interpretations. But they have also constrained our understanding of what it means to be a performer. Despite spending an extreme amount of time studying, rehearsing, and perfecting repertoire—the proverbial "10,000 hours"—many performers rooted in the Western classical tradition feel vulnerable without a written score in front of them. We have trained ourselves to the maximum to achieve perfection in the rendering of complex compositions, holding ourselves to standards where flawless execution is the bare minimum—to the extent that many performers struggle with a deep-seated discomfort—often even inhibition—when it comes to spontaneous or unscripted musical expression. This discomfort becomes all the more apparent when compared with musicians from other traditions. Jazz artists, pop musicians, and performers of various world and folk music traditions, for example, seem to engage with performance more fluidly. They, too, spend years developing their skills, yet many appear more at ease when spontaneously asked to "play music". Without resorting to stereotyping, it seems fair to ask: what is missing in our Western Classical Music training, or vice versa: what is there that seems to be holding us back?

At the heart of the difference lies the (attributed) role of the score. In Western classical music, the written composition has taken on an authoritative status. This is not inherently problematic—after all, the score is a powerful tool for transmitting complex musical ideas—but the way we approach it has a major impact. We often consider ourselves *performers of music* rather than *music performers.* The difference is subtle but significant: the former implies we rely on material—something to reproduce; the latter suggests a broader role, one that includes creating and esponding in the moment. Music, in this broader sense, is not simply a fixed entity to be retrieved or decoded from a score. It is ephemeral. It only truly exists when it is performed, shaped anew each time by the performer's artistic choices and actions as well as the unique performance context.

This may seem self-evident, however, in reality this is not how Western Classical Music performance is generally practiced or taught. Over time, our reverence for the score and the composed musical work has become entangled with the belief in a singular, ideal, and "authentic" interpretation —known as *Texttreue* (fidelity to the score). This perspective casts the performer more as a faithful executor than as a creative collaborator, carrying with it both expectations and limitations. It influenced concert practice and

education well into the 20th century, and is perhaps most starkly—if hyperbolically—captured by Igor Stravinsky's statement that "the secret of perfection lies above all in the performer's consciousness in the law imposed to him by the work he is performing".

Although the above is a deliberately strong statement, this attitude still pervades classical music education today. From the earliest stages of training, students are presented with a score and expected to learn the notes—precisely, meticulously, and to a high technical standard. The emphasis is on knowledge and practice, on analysis and repetition, on achieving a polished and accurate rendition of the written work. The score thereby assumes the role of a limiting frame, shaping—and at times restricting—the performer's interpretive possibilities. And yet, paradoxically, we also acknowledge that a score can never contain everything a composer intended. It is an approximation, subject to interpretation. The limitations of notation are well known: dynamics, articulation, tempo, phrasing—none of these can be notated with complete clarity or nuance.

Because of this, a performer's role necessarily extends beyond the text. They must infer, interpret, and reconstruct the composer's intentions through a web of historical, stylistic, and aesthetic knowledge. This idea, also known as Werktreue (fidelity to the work), involves not just reading the notes but researching the historical context, understanding performance practices of the time, and making informed interpretive decisions. This notion found its most rigorous expression in the Historically Informed Performance (HIP) movement, which emerged in the mid-20th century. HIP aimed to recreate the sounds and styles of earlier periods using period instruments and historically grounded techniques. It represented a shift from mere fidelity to the text toward a more nuanced fidelity to the historical work and its context. This required performers to become researchers, to investigate treatises, to analyse different editions, to study performance practices, and to apply this knowledge in their renditions. Actually, this is precisely what we now ask of our students: not only to play the notes, but to analyse, reflect, research, and contextualize. The aim is to create performances that are both technically excellent and intellectually grounded.

Yet also this approach has its challenges. The historical norms used to guide "authentic" performance are themselves reconstructions—derived from limited written sources, second-hand accounts, and modern interpretations of historical texts. Particularly for earlier works, no recordings exist to definitively confirm how something should have sounded. In this way, the HIP movement is based, in part, on a fictional norm—one shaped as much by modern ideals as by historical reality.

Take, for example, the opening of Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2. The original score from 1901 includes basic elements: tempo markings, dynamics, articulation, and some expressive indications. But it leaves much unsaid. How gradually should the *crescendo* build? How strong should the accents be? What exactly does *con passione* mean in sound? We can turn to recordings for clues: let's compare for example Rachmaninoff's own *1929 version* with Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, *Artur Rubinstein's 1956 interpretation* with Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, or *Yuja Wang's 2021 performance* with Valery Gergiev and the Mariinski Theatre Orchestra. All are based on the same score, all have exactly the same information at hand, yet each is strikingly different. Even with the composer's own recording available, there are considerable mutual interpretative inconsistencies that nevertheless might all be suitable when compared with the written version. How, then, can we speak of the "right" version—and, if we can, are the others "wrong" and thereby less valuable?

This illustrates that *Texttreue* as well as *Werktreue* are ultimately unattainable ideals. The notion of perfect compliance with the score or the composer's intentions is a fiction. And yet, this fiction continues to shape how we teach and evaluate performance in Western Classical Music today. Typically, the classical training (or practice, or rehearsal) process begins with a score, only to end with the performance of that score, as shown in Figure 1. The entire journey—from the initial reading of the notes through the stages of analysis, historical research, and countless hours of technical refinement—reinforces the idea that the primary aim is to realize that score as faithfully and flawlessly as possible. The performer's identity becomes inextricably linked to this goal: to embody the work, to interpret it with precision, and to deliver a rendition that aligns with the highest aesthetic and technical standards.

Figure 1: A conventional performance model, with the score serving as the starting point, the final goal, and the centre around which all intermediate actions revolve.

But in this well-worn process, where is the room for wonder—for unpredictability, spontaneity, or risk? Where do we let ourselves jump down a rabbit hole?

At best, the only uncertainty lies in whether the performer can meet the expected standard of excellence. But even this uncertainty is framed negatively—as a deficiency to be corrected through further practice. We devote ourselves to eliminating error, to reducing risk, to preparing so thoroughly that there is no room for surprise – negative nor positive. In doing so, we may unwittingly marginalize some of the most vital qualities of artistic expression. If we are to move forward—toward a more holistic, creative, and confident performance practice—we must re-examine our relationship to the score, to the composer, and to the very idea of musical "truth."

Identifying the Gap

In recent decades, the field of musicology has turned significant attention to the performer's role. Scholars such as Lydia Goehr, Nicholas Cook, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, and Christopher Small have advanced perspectives that challenge the traditional score-centred paradigm. They remind us that audiences do not engage with the score—they engage with the performance. Music is not a static entity enshrined in notation; it is a living act, unfolding in a particular space and time, shaped by cultural, social, and personal contexts. In this view, performance becomes a site of creation, not merely realization.

This shift invites a reconsideration of what performance is and does, rather than simply what it refers to. Drawing on J.L. Austin's concept of the "performative", musical performance can be seen not as a right-or-wrong execution of pre-determined content, but as an act that brings something into being. A performative act, in this sense, does not reproduce a fixed object; rather it creates in itself a situated, unique event that exists only through its enactment. Thus, performance becomes not *performatic*—a mere rendition or reproduction—but *performative*: a generative, creative act.

This insight has driven much of the so-called "New Musicology," which repositions performance as central to the ontology of music. Rather than viewing music as an abstract ideal that exists apart from its execution, New Musicology considers music as something that emerges through culturally and historically situated performance. Within this framework, we are invited to move away from being *performers of music* toward being *music performers*, who engage creatively, reflectively, and experimentally with their art.

However, here lies a deep-seated inconsistency. While (academic) theory has embraced this broader, more dynamic understanding of performance, Western Classical Conservatoire training continues to focus primarily on the execution of composed works. Certainly, many conservatoires

already offer improvisation classes to encourage students to move freely on their instrument, applying theory, communication, and intuition to craft harmonic or melodic material. Research, too, plays a growing role—and rightly so: it trains students to question the familiar, contribute to their discipline, and deepen their reflective practice. Similarly, courses in Entrepreneurship are designed to equip students with professional, financial, and legal tools, and to help them position themselves within the field. This fosters reflection, self-knowledge, and career agency—all based around the idea of representing a unique, reflective artistic personality.

But how deeply are these creative and critical skills embedded in core programs, teaching practices, or assessment frameworks? Do they actually impact the main courses, such as main instrument classes, orchestra practice or ensemble training—or are they mostly additions, tokens to an already filled-to-the-rim study programme? In other words: are they really contributing to a new perspective on performance practice and on repertoire, or are they training skills that will actually not be applied within our artistic practice?

When we take a deeper look at our curricula, our pedagogies and our assessment criteria we cannot but discern a consistent pattern: while the mission statements and learning outcomes of conservatoires predominantly emphasize versatility, creativity, and autonomy, in addition to technical and theoretical mastery, deep-rooted knowledge and contextual awareness and agency, final assessments remain centred on flawless repertoire performance. In other words, although we recognize the importance of these skills and attitudes which are not merely reproduction oriented, we fail to actually integrate them in our perception of what Western Classical Music (education) should be. We train our students in reflection and improvisation; we encourage them to discover their own artistic identity, but generally speaking, our final expectations remain the same. The benchmark of success remains technical mastery and interpretive fidelity to a fixed composition. A final exam or recital still typically reaffirms the older paradigm, and the impact of these skills on conventional practice—and thereby, on the repertoire that our students perform – remains peripheral.

In other words, our educational practice has not yet (fully) caught up with our theoretical insight.

If we are serious about nurturing well-rounded, creatively empowered musicians, then we must address this disconnect. We must begin to reclaim the exploratory, improvisational, and imaginative dimensions of musicianship that have been sidelined in the pursuit of technical certainty. We must cultivate curiosity, risk-taking, and play—not as extracurricular skills, but as essential components of artistic identity.

Revisiting the Rabbit Holes

What, then, would it mean to return to wondering? Not *"How should I better play what is written?"* but rather *"What happens if I don't play what is written?"* What if the performance is no longer bound by predetermined structures, but instead unfolds unpredictably—an open-ended journey rather than a prescribed path?

This kind of engagement requires courage. It may take longer to prepare; it will likely involve failure, uncertainty, and moments of confusion. But it also opens the door to something richer: surprise, delight, originality, and perhaps even moments of artistic magic. It encourages performers not only to interpret but to invent, to shape experiences that are truly of the moment. It transforms the act of performance into a site of inquiry, imagination, and creation.

In this sense, re-integrating improvisation, risk, and creative exploration into classical performance practice is not a luxury—it is a necessity. It is how we reassert our agency as performing artists, how we bridge the gap between theory and practice, and how we ensure that classical music remains a living, evolving art form rather than an "imaginary museum of musical works". Let's explore further—and try to find a rabbit hole.

A Sidestep: Thinking about Creativity

When we consider what it is we wish to reclaim—spontaneity, surprise, and the courage to venture into the unknown—we are ultimately speaking about *creativity.* While the term is ubiquitous, its use is often undefined, assumed to be self-evident. In everyday discourse, creativity is typically linked to terms such as originality, uniqueness, divergent thinking, flexibility, imagination, playfulness, and the generation of new ideas. These associations highlight different, complementary dimensions of the creative act. To bring greater conceptual clarity, Rhodes' (1961) well-known 4-P model organizes creativity into four interrelated domains: Process, Product, Person, and Place. A brief exploration of each offers insight into how creativity operates in music performance—and, more importantly, how it can be consciously cultivated within Western Classical Music education.

Product: Novelty and Usefulness

When we evaluate creativity in terms of product, the focus tends to rest on two core criteria: novelty and usefulness. For a product to be considered creative, it must be new within its field, and relevant or valuable within a specific aesthetic, functional, or cultural context. Yet these criteria are fluid, shaped

by time, taste, and disciplinary expectations. In the 1920s, Gershwin created a new, unique and distinctly American sound through his innovative fusion of classical music with the rhythms and melodies of popular American jazz, blues, and ragtime. Similarly, Schönberg's development of the dodecaphonic composition marked a radical break with the classical music tradition. Today, however, this principle is widely known and has itself become part of the musical tradition.

In other words, creativity is not absolute. What is considered novel or useful in one era or environment may be perceived as derivative or redundant in another. Creative products are always embedded within, and evaluated against, the norms of their cultural and historical moment. Moreover, although seemingly the easiest way to evaluate creativity, the final result is hardly the only aspect we should consider in education, and certainly not the most important. This is where the other P's come in.

Process: Exploration Without Guarantee

From the perspective of (artistic) processes, creativity emerges not merely as an outcome but as an unfolding exploration that may or may not lead to a concrete result. Creative processes are contextually and socially constructed; they arise from the continuous and dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment. Even an inconclusive or "unsuccessful" endeavour can be judged as creative if it demonstrates risk-taking, ideation, and a willingness to open up the mind for the unexpected.

As mentioned earlier, the outcome of a Process—ergo, the Product—is not sufficient to define it as creative. If novelty and usefulness are achieved accidentally or without intention, the result may not be considered truly creative. This leads to the proposal of a fifth 'P': Purpose: every Process leading to a Product (or not), must have had the creation of a certain outcome to begin with—without predefining its final form. For example, while practicing a scale, a young trombonist might play a melody that sounds original and aesthetically pleasing, one never before played or documented. The result may be novel and even musically useful, but it is not the product of a purposeful creative process. Without a conceptual framework or intentional process behind the act, the outcome fails to qualify as creative in the meaningful sense.

Person: Traits and Dispositions for Creativity

Another essential lens for understanding creativity is the Person—the individual whose dispositions, motivations, and experiences shape the Process and its Potential – possibly a sixth 'P'. Traits commonly associated with creative

individuals include risk-taking, humour, open-mindedness, fantasy, rebelliousness, deep focus, and emotional sensitivity. These characteristics support not only creative outcomes but also what might be called creative learning: the ability to generate, apply, and transform knowledge in original ways.

Crucially, creativity involves both capacity and willingness: the technical skill to go beyond what is known, and the courage to risk doing so. Glenn Gould's 1981 interpretation of *The Goldberg Variations*, dramatically divergent from his 1955 version, exemplifies this. It wasn't simply his virtuosity that produced a radically different result; it was his readiness to challenge prevailing conventions. Similarly, Cathy Berberian's *Stripsody* would never have emerged without her willingness to break with tradition and playfully venture into the unknown. These are not isolated cases of genius, but instances of artists jumping, as it were, into the rabbit hole—choosing curiosity and transformation over certainty and replication.

Place: Environment as Catalyst or Constraint

Still, also personal traits and internal motivation are not sufficient by themselves. Creativity takes place within a certain Place: an environment, a domain – such as Western Classical Music performance – which is regulated by the field within that domain: the social organisation of that domain that stimulates, evaluates and/or constrains the possible contributions by individuals. Therefore, one cannot be creative in a field without truly learning it. For Western Classical Music performance, this means that repertoire study remains vital. It is how we build expertise on what will always remain one of the core elements of our discipline: the material we work with, the tradition we build upon.

Equally important is the development of domain-relevant skills—technique, stylistic literacy, conceptual understanding—in order to make a meaningful contribution. Here, the much invoked "10,000 hours" of practice return as a strength: a foundation of internalized expertise that can empower risk-taking, not limit it. In Western Classical Music, mastery is not the enemy of creativity but its enabler—provided it doesn't lead to rigidity or fear of exploring the unknown. As performers operating within a field defined by two central pillars—deep technical knowledge and the centrality of repertoire—we are not in a position to discard either without redefining the field entirely. Rather than abandoning them, the opportunity lies in rebalancing them: integrating the rigour of tradition with the openness of creativity. Ideally, then, creativity in music performance involves a dynamic equilibrium between divergent thinking—the playful, open-ended exploration and generation of possibilities—and convergent thinking, which seeks to refine and focus those

possibilities into a high-quality, situated and meaningful performance outcome.

How might we cultivate a mindset and practice that supports this balance?

Reimagining Performance as Creative Mastery in Action

These developments call for a fundamental rethinking of our educational models. While mastery of repertoire and of vocal and/or instrumental skills remains essential, they should not delay or suppress the development of exploratory thoughts and actions, nor should the former overshadow the latter to the point that they have no real mutual impact. In other words, creative capacities can—and should—be cultivated from an early stage: if encouraged only after technical proficiency is achieved, they risk being restricted and constrained by an ingrained attachment to control, perfectionism, and fidelity. This conditioning—all too familiar to classically trained musicians—often results in an overreliance on established models and an underdeveloped capacity for experimentation. Moreover, the training of creative skills should not be an add-on or an extension of the core programme. On the contrary, if we want to prepare students for a future in which artistic identity, flexibility, and creativity are central, we must teach creativity as a core competence—not on the side, but integrated into our main programme and pedagogy, as well as assessment. We must not only in theory, but in practice also, change the paradigm that reproduction of the score is the main goal of being a performer. Rather, together with our students, we must explore how their own creative agency can impact and shape the material they engage with into a unique, situated performance—and thereby into a true expression of their artistic identity.

In other words, we need a clearer, more actionable way of bridging this gap: a framework that speaks to the realities of performers who operate within a field defined by expertise and repertoire—as foundational points of departure, rather than fixed limits. From here, we can explore how to balance them with a more creative mindset: one informed by openness, experimentation, and a willingness to engage risk. Our aim should not be to replace traditional practice, but to expand and rebalance it: to integrate creative actions, traits, and intentions into our work with the goal of creating a new, situated, and unique artistic event.

While these ideas may appear self-evident or even intuitive, they often remain conceptual rather than practically embedded. What remains, then, is the question of how to make this framework actionable in real-world practice.

Roads to the Holes: Exploring the Spectrum of Possibilities

To explore this question—how performers might integrate a more creative mindset, through intentional creative actions and dispositions, while remaining rooted in their discipline—I would like to build on a classification proposed by Evelyn Coussens in the context of music theatre. She identifies four different intensities of approaching existing repertoire from a creative–performative mindset, ranging from conventional reproduction to progressive and radical innovation.

The first category she identifies, *Interpretation*, represents the most traditional relationship to repertoire. The performer follows the score closely, preserving structural elements such as timing, tempo, and form. From this perspective, performance is an intrapersonal creative activity: performers assimilate material such as the score, contextual and theoretical knowledge, stylistic conventions, and technical proficiency, and make selective artistic choices. The result remains within the stylistic boundaries of established tradition. While this may provide meaningful novelty for the performer, the creative deviation perceived by the audience is limited.

A relevant example is Nigel Kennedy's 1989 performance of *The Four Seasons.* Although Kennedy's presentation—marked by a punk-y aesthetic, combat boots, and eccentric stage presence—challenged visual norms, the musical interpretation itself remained close to standard rend tions: the work is unmistakably Vivaldi's original, in line with structural and stylistic expectations.

A second category can be identified as *Adaptation* in the musical domain. Here, the score is de- and re-constructed: elements are somewhat manipulated, reordered, and blended with new material. This may involve altering musical parameters such as orchestration, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, or incorporating interdisciplinary content. Unlike interpretation, this category introduces clearly perceptible creative input, offering a more transformative listening experience for the audience.

An example is the baroque ensemble Red Priest, whose 2003 version of *The Four Seasons* creatively reimagines the work for quartet. Their version includes changes in tempo, ornamentation, instrumentation, and improvisatory elements, while remaining recognizably within the aesthetic and spirit of the baroque period—albeit in a markedly different manner than the historically informed performance (HIP) tradition.

The third category, *Transformation,* reflects an even greater degree of creative autonomy. While original source material is still referenced, it is recontextualized to such an extent that the resulting work constitutes a distinct artistic statement. This may involve free improvisation, cross-disciplinary

integration, or extensive re-composition. The original composition is no longer the only structural or conceptual centre but becomes one of many components within a newly formed musical narrative.

Kennedy's *The New Four Seasons* (2015) exemplifies this approach. This version departs from Vivaldi's original through new movement titles, additional compositions, electronic effects, and an expanded instrumentation including jazz trumpet, electric guitar, and vocal quartet. While fragments of the original remain audible, the piece as a whole exists as a hybrid, original creation.

The final category, *Creation,* represents the most autonomous form of artistic practice. Here, performers are no longer primarily interpreters but originators. Though references to existing repertoire may remain, the performer's role as a creator—through improvisation, co-composition, or collaborative creation—is foregrounded. In a repertoire-centred tradition such as classical music, this category presents the most radical shift from normative performance expectations. A paradigmatic example is Max Richter's *Recomposed: Vivaldi – The Four Seasons.* Retaining only approximately 25% of the original material, Richter combines live instruments with electronic textures, alternate tunings, and new structures, resulting in a boldly reconceptualized version that challenges conventional listening frameworks. Still, creations could go even further, and in the end be no longer audibly or conceptually connected to their original inspiration—the only limit to creative possibilities is the limit of one's own imagination. A notable example could be *The (uncertain) Four Seasons* or *For Seasons*: an algorithm-based work re-scoring Vivaldi's Four Seasons using climate data gathered from 1725 until 2019.

These four categories—Interpretation, Adaptation, Transformation, and Creation—can be perceived as a creative spectrum, offering a framework for performers to understand and expand their creative agency within Western Classical performance practice. After all, all of these interventions, manipulations, or interpretations remain rooted in repertoire and continue to require discipline-specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes. At the same time, they each incorporate varying degrees of creativity. The more creative the intervention, the more personal the result becomes—and the less it resembles other versions of the same repertoire. We might therefore understand this as a continuum, along which performers should be able to move freely and fluidly. At one end lies conventional interpretation—the least creatively transformative approach, yet still the dominant focus of our pedagogy and assessment frameworks. At the other end lie more radical forms of transformational or progressive creation, where the performer's input significantly reshapes or reimagines the original material.

Bridging the Gap: The Role of Education

While these more exploratory practices are sometimes included in curricula—improvisation classes, research projects, or elective modules—they rarely find their way onto the stage of a final exam. In other words, we do not yet offer students the environment they need to fully develop as creative performers. Or put differently, we expect students to grow into performative creators, yet we fail to offer them the conditions in which that growth can take root. The result of this is that we still send graduates into a professional world where they are likely to reproduce the same structures and expectations that uphold the current status quo—thus perpetuating the cycle of stagnation.

So perhaps we, too, must begin to wonder—as educators, leadership, educational experts, policymakers, and practitioners: What can we do—where is our rabbit hole?

Let us therefore return to the concept of *Place.* After all, this doesn't only refer to the environment or domain—Western Classical Music Performance—but also to the broader field: the ecosystem of professionals, institutions, and audiences that shape its norms and expectations. As performers, we must not only understand the domain but also recognize how the field supports—or suppresses—its evolution. A healthy field can nourish creativity, stimulate innovation, and allow new ideas to flourish. An unhealthy one can become rigid, overly conservative, and ultimately irrelevant. In such a scenario, classical performance risks becoming little more than an "imaginary museum of musical works."

Consider the infamous premiere of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, dismissed by its first audience as *Le Massacre du Tympan.* It's hard now to imagine the outrage it provoked, given how foundational the work became. But its initial reception reminds us that true innovation is often disruptive—and that it takes time, persistence, and contextual support for a field to absorb new ideas. Importantly, *The Rite* was not discarded. It was reintroduced, reframed, and ultimately embraced.

In this sense, how a field deals with risk, experimentation, and even failure is pivotal. It determines whether ideas survive or disappear. Doubt and uncertainty are not obstacles—they are catalysts. They challenge us to reimagine, to grow, to create. They offer a way out of one-size-fits-all performance standards and into more personal, responsive forms of artistry.

Students are capable of rising to this challenge, and so are teachers—together they are the true agents of change, turning ideas into lived practice rather than leaving them as theory. At first, it may—and probably will—feel uncomfortable. It may feel like losing control, and after years of training for certainty, the experience of ambiguity is unsettling. But in a setting of

structured uncertainty—where exploration and evaluation coexist—students begin to develop a tolerance for ambiguity and a deeper, more personal connection to their artistic process. With guidance and encouragement, they discover that uncertainty can be empowering.

To support this shift, we need new forms of reflection and assessment. Creative activity doesn't lower performance standards—it reshapes them. Assessments should not only measure technical accuracy, but also risk-taking, inventiveness, and abductive reasoning: the combination of intuition, pattern recognition, and experiential knowledge that leads to artistic insight. Intuition becomes a central skill in this creative approach. It is anticipatory, embodied knowledge—built through experience, reflection, and iterative exploration. The more one works this way, the sharper that intuition becomes. But this kind of intuition must be taught and trained. It is not innate. It is our responsibility as educators to cultivate it.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Let me be clear: there is nothing wrong with traditional interpretation. The point is not to abandon the canon, nor to stop performing "what is written." The point is to recognize that we have choices—and that those choices are artistic, not merely technical. This continuum of performative possibilities, alongside the model of performative music creation outlined earlier, invites us to rethink how we educate musicians. If we truly want to prepare the next generation for the future of the discipline, we must teach more than execution. We must teach them to think with, through, and beyond the score.

That means fostering curiosity, encouraging risk-taking, and empowering creative agency. This is not about tearing down tradition. It's about shifting the emphasis—from perfection to exploration, from reproduction to creation, from reverence to dialogue.

So, here's my invitation—alongside Alice let's not be afraid to take a different route. Let yourself wonder. Ask questions. Explore. Jump into the rabbit hole and see where it leads. Yes, it will be uncomfortable. Taking risks means accepting failure—and in a world of high standards, which can feel both terrifying and liberating. But believing in yourself means stepping off the well-trodden path. It means learning, evolving, and discovering who you are as an artist—even if you can't yet name it.

Let's invite a bit of Alice into our daily practice. And if we still need a little more encouragement that it will all work out, take it from that other literary daredevil, Pippi Longstocking:

"I've never tried that before, so I think I should definitely be able to do that."

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Biography

Lies Colman is a performing pianist, soloist, chamber musician, artistic creator and pedagogue, and the Director of the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague (NL). Her artistic specialty is the romantic to the contemporary era, with a special interest in opera and music theatre, aside from performing and recording more traditional chamber music. With a Master's degree in Music, in Cultural Sciences, in Strategic Management and Leadership, and an MBA, she has a broad view on the arts, society and education, and aims to connect those both on the stage, in projects and in the classroom. Her main research areas are collaborative artistic practices: working from individual expertise in an (interdisciplinary) creative environment, and balancing tradition, creativity and innovation in practice and pedagogy.