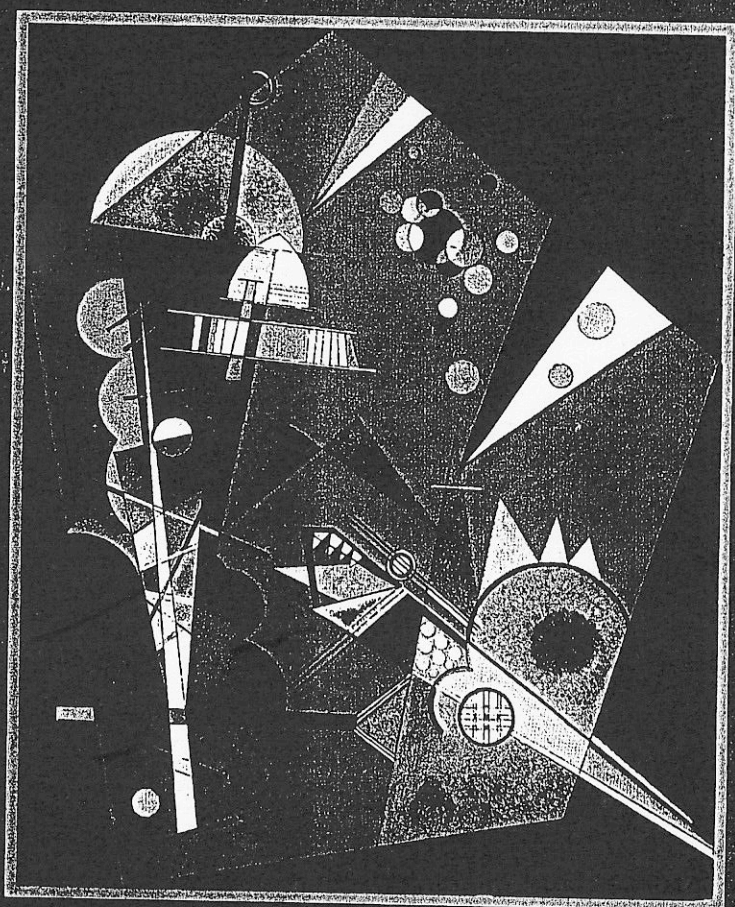


# FREE PLAY

*IMPROVISATION  
in Life and Art*



by Leonid Brezhnev



cisely because it *is* ephemeral and cannot be duplicated, retrieved, or captured. We think of precious things as those to be hoarded or preserved. In the performing arts we want to record the beautiful, unexpected performance, so we schedule a rematch for the camera. Indeed, many great performances have been recorded, and we are glad to have them. But I think the greatest performances always elude the camera, the tape recorder, the pen. They happen in the middle of the night when the musician plays for one special friend under the moonlight, they happen in the dress rehearsal just before the play opens. The fact that improvisation vanishes makes us appreciate that every moment of life is unique—a kiss, a sunset, a dance, a joke. None will ever recur in quite the same way. Each happens only once in the history of the universe.

## The Vehicle

*There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost.*

MARTHA GRAHAM

Each piece of music we play, each dance, each drawing, each episode of life, reflects our own mind back at us, complete with all its imperfections, exactly as it is. In improvisation, we are especially aware of this reflective quality: Since we cannot go backward in time, there is no crossing out, editing, fixing, retouching, or regretting. In this respect, spontaneous music resembles Oriental calligraphy or ink painting. That watery gray-black ink on the brush, sliding over thin, fragile paper, does not allow a single mark or line to be erased or retraced. The painter-calligrapher must treat space as though it were time. The single-minded impulse from belly to shoulder to hand to brush to paper leaves its once-and-for-all trace, a unique moment forever frozen on paper. And the peculiarities and imperfections, which are there for all to see, are the mark of the calligrapher's original nature. The minute particulars of body, speech, mind, and movement are what we call *style*, the vehicle through which self moves and manifests itself.

The essence of style is this: We have something in us, about us; it can be called many things, but for now let's call it our original nature. We are born with our original nature, but on top of that, as we grow up, we accommodate to the patterns and habits of our culture, family, physical environ-



ment, and the daily business of the life we have taken on. What we are taught solidifies as "reality." Our persona, the mask we show the world, develops out of our experience and training, step by step from infancy to adulthood. We construct our world through the actions of perception, learning, and expectation. We construct our "self" through the same actions of perception, learning, and expectation. World and self interlock and match each other, step by step and shape by shape. If the two constructions, self and world, mesh, we grow from child to adult, becoming "normally adjusted individuals." If they do not mesh so well, we may experience feelings of inner division, loneliness, or alienation.



If we should happen to become artists, our work takes on, to a certain extent, the style of the time: the clothing in which we are dressed by our generation, our country and language, our surroundings, the people who have influenced us.

But somehow, even when we are grown up and "adjusted," everything we do and are—our handwriting, the vibrato of our voice, the way we handle the bow or breathe into the instrument, our way of using language, the look in our eyes, the pattern of whorling fingerprints on our hand—all these things are symptomatic of our original nature. They all show the imprint of our own deeper style or character.

It is sometimes thought that in improvisation we can do just anything. But lack of a conscious plan does not mean that our work is random or arbitrary. Improvisation always has its rules, even if they are not *a priori* rules. When we are totally faithful to our own individuality, we are actually following a very intricate design. This kind of freedom is the opposite of "just anything." We carry around the rules inherent in our organism. As living, patterned beings, we are incapable of producing anything random. We cannot even program a computer to produce random numbers; the most we can do

is create a pattern so complex that we get an illusion of randomness. Our body-mind is a highly organized and structured affair, interconnected as only a natural organism can be that has evolved over hundreds of millions of years. An improviser does not operate from a formless vacuum, but from three billion years of organic evolution; all that we were is encoded somewhere in us. Beyond that vast history we have even more to draw upon: the dialogue with the Self—a dialogue not only with the past but with the future, the environment, and the divine within us. As our playing, writing, speaking, drawing, or dancing unfolds, the inner, unconscious logic of our being begins to show through and mold the material. This rich, deep patterning is the original nature that impresses itself like a seal upon everything we do or are.

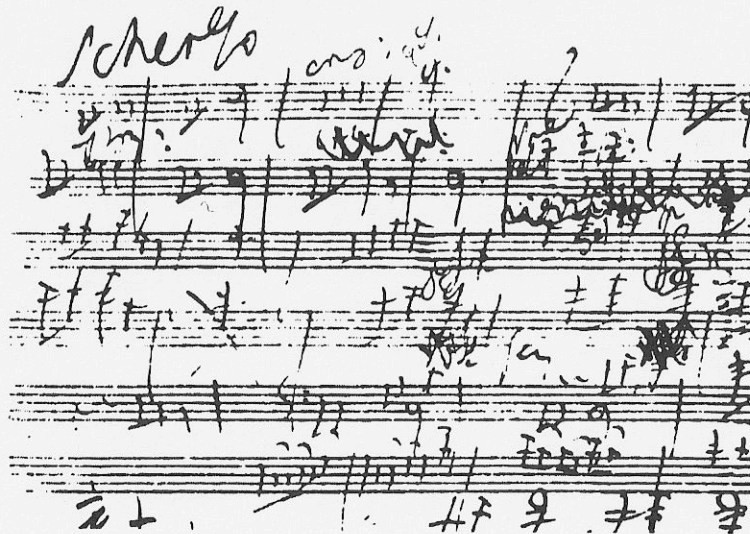
We can see character by the way people walk, or dance, or sit still, or write. Look at the impulsive scrawls and hen scratches of Beethoven's musical handwriting, revealing the uncontrived defiance and integrity of his mind. Look at the flow and clarity of Bach's musical handwriting, revealing the uncontrived tidiness and roundness of his mind. Style and personality come through in every mark they made. Style is the vehicle of their great passion, not only personal, but transpersonal.

Or look at the powerful, free-spirited scribbles of Bach's contemporary, Hakuin, the great Japanese painter and reformer of Zen Buddhism, and his artist-priest followers. Some of the artwork we particularly remember them for are their *ensos*, those portraits of mind and reality that consist of nothing but an , a circle brushed on paper with a single stroke. There's more to that "nothing but" than meets the eye. The character of that , the variations and bends of the curve, its weights and textures, its wiggles and blemishes, reveal an imprimatur that comes from a place much deeper





Bach, above; Beethoven, below



than the style of the time, much deeper than technical ability or the surface of personality.

Virtually every spiritual tradition distinguishes the self-clinging ego from the deeper, creative Self: little self as opposed to big Self. The big Self is transpersonal, beyond any separated individuality, the common ground we all share.

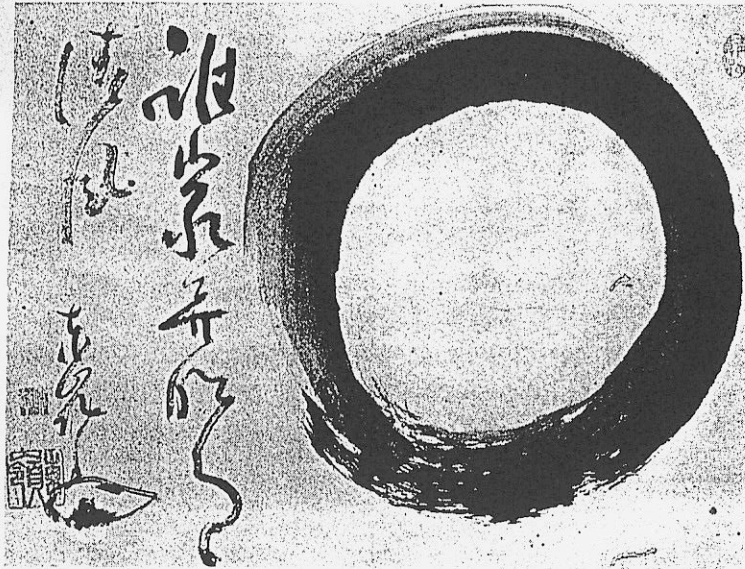
William Blake made a curious and interesting remark: "Jesus was all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules."<sup>7</sup> We usually think of virtue as something that stems from following rules rather than impulse, and we usually think of acting from impulse as acting wild or crazy. But if Jesus had followed the rules of conventional morality and virtue, he would have died old as a loyal citizen of the Roman Empire. Impulse, like improvisation, is not "just anything"; it is not without structure but is the expression of organic, immanent, self-creating structure. Blake saw Jesus as the incarnation of God, acting not according to the fixed expectations of someone else's limited ideas but in accord with a deeper, bigger Self, beyond consciousness, the wholeness of the living universe, which expresses itself impulsively, spontaneously, through dreams, art, play, myth, spirituality.

This difference between impulse and rules was explained most clearly by e.e. cummings:

*when god decided to invent  
everything he took one  
breath bigger than a circustent  
and everything began*

*when man determined to destroy  
himself he picked the was  
of shall and finding only why  
smashed it into because<sup>8</sup>*





Those Zen artists with their simple O's had the knack of concentrating the whole of Self into the simplest acts. The spontaneous, simple O is the vehicle of Self, the vehicle of evolution, the vehicle of passion. It is the big, simple breath of God, uncomplicated by was and shall, why and because. As our flute player discovers, that imprimatur can never be studied or replicated just for effect. Hakuin wrote, "If you forget yourself, you become the universe."<sup>9</sup> That mysterious factor of surrender, the creative surprise that releases us and opens us up, spontaneously allows something to arise. If we are transparent, with nothing to hide, the gap between language and Being disappears. Then the Muse can speak.

## The Stream

*There on that scaffolding reclines  
Michael Angelo.  
With no more sound than the mice make  
His hand moves to and fro.  
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream  
His mind moves upon silence.*

W. B. YEATS

Let's return to Michelangelo's idea of removing apparent surfaces to reveal or liberate the statue that had been buried in the stone since the beginning of time. Michelangelo claimed that he was guided by a faculty he called *intellecto*. *Intellecto* is intelligence, not of the merely rational kind, but visionary intelligence, a deep *seeing* of the underlying pattern beneath appearances. Here the artist is, as it were, an archaeologist, uncovering deeper and deeper strata as he works, recovering not an ancient civilization but something as yet unborn, unseen, unheard except by the inner eye, the inner ear. He is not just removing apparent surfaces from some external object, he is removing apparent surfaces from the Self, revealing his original nature.

The ancient Taoists spoke of one's own being while in the meditative state as an "unsculpted block of time."<sup>10</sup> As stone is to a sculptor, so time is to a musician. Whenever he gets up to play, the musician stands there facing his own unsculpted block of time. Over this seemingly featureless void he draws, perhaps, a violin bow, which is a device for carving or shaping time—or let us say for discovering or releasing the shapes that are latent in that unique moment of time.