



## The Compound Effect In Action

article by Michael Smolens ©2012

### **Carpe Diem**

All too often we as performers feel that opportunities that arrive on our doorstep appear to be completely random, without any logic, nor warning, for that matter. For the fearless, *Carpe Diem* (*seize the day*) is a very natural approach in which new performing situations comfortably sit alongside the accumulation of their technical and conceptual skills. For many of us, unfamiliar opportunities can feel pretty intimidating. This article addresses the issue of new performance venues through a specific lens that is rarely addressed in either academic settings or performance workshops in alternative settings.

When a new opportunity arrives at our doorstep, we naturally ask ourselves, “Am I really qualified to do this?” It feels natural and logical, for we don’t want to lie to a potential employer, nor do we want to endanger our reputation as artists. And then there’s also the stress that usually accompanies a last-minute request or ill-conceived program, as well as the psychic imprint that is created from any public performance.

### **Manageability**

When we consider an invitation to perform in a new context, *we naturally look to the past for the answer*. More specifically, we look to see if we have ever experienced that exact type of music, function, instrument, etc. in order to justify taking on the project. Would this not appear to be an accurate predictor of our success? We can also look at other factors as useful guides to assess the wisdom of a new project, such as:

Is the timetable physically manageable?

Can your current rate of learning accommodate the project?

Does it represent a growth area, or a genuine area of interest?

Would it strengthen an existing relationship, or create an entrance into a new relationship?

Is the condition of your instrument and/or equipment up to the task?

Is your general health up to the project?

### **The Compound Effect**

When we consider a new performing opportunity it’s frequently difficult to assess just how many different skills are demanded and combined in unfamiliar ways. So it’s perfectly understandable if we feel unease about predicting our qualifications. Yet, how often do we forget the cumulative nature of becoming a performing artist? All of the skills that you have put time into mastering, work together and actually synergize each other. This is so often hidden from our view because of how long these skills take to come to fruition. It is as if you’ve planted a half-dozen different crops in your garden in the same plot and didn’t realize how much your soil was going to benefit. Someone with a more financial frame of reference might see this as a “compound effect”, like making frequent but modest deposits and letting the interest compound over a long period of time.

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### Turning One Big Lemon Into Lemonade

What started out as an uncomfortable scheduling conflict became a new performance opportunity for me and the impetus to look deeper into the whole subject of performance qualifications.

I arranged for one of my groups to perform at an elementary school about five months before our scheduled date. Two days before the performance my assistant found out that the school made a serious error in scheduling – the day that we were going to perform, the school was going to be closed! Because we could not reschedule the ensemble, I posed an alternative program. I offered to present a program of world music as a soloist versus an ensemble presentation. The school was very appreciative that I was willing to come in and accommodate their scheduling snafu.

### Completely (Un)Confident

At the moment I made the offer, I felt completely confident that I could deliver two back-to-back programs completely alone – without a band and without an engineer. I stood in the power of my promise, a declaration of what I said I could deliver. And as soon as I hung up the phone I thought, “Am I nuts?! I’ve never done this before!” After thinking about this for a while, I realized that although it might be a stretch, I could probably pull it off reasonably well.

I decided to divide the program into three short sections, focusing on West-African, Turkish, and Brazilian music. For each style I used instruments that were typical to each tradition:

- *balafon* (marimba) and *djun-djuns* (small conga-like drums) for the West-African pieces
- *dumbek* (goblet-shaped hand drum), *melodica* (small reed keyboard, substituting for the bamboo flute, the *ney*), and voice for the Turkish works
- *shaker*, *tamborim* (very small mallet-played tambourine), alto flute (lower pitched flute), and vocal bass for the Brazilian song

The pieces, and even one of the styles, were not completely clear until the night before the performance. Could I actually condense a 12-minute extended Turkish suite into 3 minutes? And I wasn’t sure if I was going to ‘loop’ each piece or play some of them solo. (‘Looping’ is using an electronic device to play and record multiple layered parts in real-time in front of an audience).

### How It Turned Out...

By all accounts – from the principal, the teachers, students, and my own assessment – this assembly went remarkably well. I was frankly very surprised, like hitting a home run with not much effort. At first I thought it was either: 1) simply luck, or 2) that this particular school district was a great fit for me, or 3) that I managed to schedule the assembly for the afternoon. But when I looked more closely and spoke with a mentor, I could see that there were four distinct currents that prepared me for this solo lecture/demo:

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### 1) previous school lecture/demos in ensembles

Having participated in and planned dozens of school music programs over the last decade, I already had a good idea of what kind of pacing and variety works. I also saw that I had relied a bit too heavily on my bandmates' expertise in the past for specific areas and that researching the background material was fun rather than a chore. On the other hand, I noticed that my presence, focus, and communication skills (specifically, humor and empathy) made a much bigger impression on the students than any historical or conceptual point that I tried to put across.

### 2) recent solo Holiday music run

Several months before this school assembly I completed a series of performances that was brand new – four weekends of four-hour dates of solo Holiday music. This was not simply piano music, but the use of a half-dozen different instruments, including piano, melodica, alto flute, balafon, dumbek, and voice. Playing multiple instruments publicly was not new. But mic'ing and engineering them while playing was novel, as well as configuring the instruments and PA system compactly to work in a busy marketplace.

### 3) embracing technology with real-time looping

The process of 'looping' different instruments along with voice is more than just novelty entertainment (which certainly has its place). It turned out to be the perfect synthesis of my experience with solo playing, arranging, and playing in different ensembles. For the past three years it's been a part of nearly half of my solo performances and has helped raise the bar for my rhythmic accuracy. Looping is also important role-modeling for students – it demonstrates how much fun it is to play multiple instruments. Its rise since the early 1990s will inevitably continue!

### 4) practice in self-authorization

Empowering yourself to take risks as an artist is an essential skill, especially if you are self-employed. With the help of numerous coaches, I've learned to honestly assess any new performance possibility based upon the questions that I posed earlier in the article. By the time I have a clear idea of the timing, my interest level, the relationship possibilities, and the suitability for my equipment and my health, I feel like I entered a new situation with my eyes wide open. To my delight, this has also allowed me to appreciate more of the unpredictable benefits of each new performance. [For a deeper look at the subject, see my 2011 article *Embracing The Trust Factor—Self-Authorization At Work*].

## Almost Glacial

When I reflect on the four factors that led to my success of this school assembly, I am reminded about *how slowly each skill developed*.

### • original pieces

Take for example, the idea of incorporating an original piece into a program. Not everyone who presents at schools includes their own pieces, and many would prefer to keep their works entirely separate from their school repertoire. As a composer who has written in many different styles since my teenage years, I don't find anything unusual about featuring one

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of my pieces whenever I perform. Unless a piece is already relatively short, you're going to need to create an edited version, and doing this can feel very odd at first, almost violent. All the time and thought that went into your piece wasn't meant to be sliced and diced into a sound bite, right?

Creating demo excerpts of my compositions started just after college (over three decades ago) and developed out of sheer necessity. Gradually, I found that I could distill the most important aspects of a piece within 60-90 seconds and even give it a sense of shape. Every time I work with a student who is creating their first demo for their website, a presenter, or a grant proposal, I am reminded of how long it took for me to get really comfortable with that process.

### • 'looping'

Then there's the skill of working with a looping device. Having grown up playing acoustic and, later, real-time electronic instruments (electric piano and electric organ), looping was completely new to me. Because all of the music traditions that I presented are ensemble-based, I felt that it was essential to incorporate this piece of modern technology. Now, I could have set out to only play self-contained solo pieces, or demonstrate each instrument separately and let the students try to imagine what they would sound like together. Possibly I could have played one instrument to pre-recorded tracks or played them a recording of an ensemble version of the piece.

Truthfully, none of these scenarios appealed to me, for I wanted to show students how each part is built and demonstrate that they could be done by one musician. It took a good deal of practice before I could reliably and confidently layer many parts in front of an audience. This means without a click track (an audible metronome), or 'quantizing' (a means of smoothing out subtle rhythmic irregularities), or the ability to re-record any track after the first track was recorded.

### Back Home

All of the skills that made my school assembly a success – previous lecture/demos, a solo Holiday run, real-time looping, and practice in self-authorization – were built over many years, and were dotted with many not-so-spectacular moments of failure. There were other equally important non-musical skills that came into play that day regarding communication, negotiation, and logistics. They, too, took many years of development before seeing tangible payoffs.

After each event I always make note of the elements that worked and didn't work as well. *This reflective process is essential to making what may feel like glacial progress a true Compound Effect instead of merely treading water.* It is a habit that was instilled in me mostly by non-artists who reminded me that whatever field I chose, if I loved it, I'd be honing my skills for a long, long time. This event was no exception. Fortunately, I learned that my shortcomings that day centered on equipment and logistics, and should be easy fixes for future presentations.