

Aikido and Creative Expression

by Bill Levine

Morihei Sensei had a certain tension in him whenever he took up the brush, I think because he always expressed his entire being through the tip of the brush. Using the ink as a medium, he transferred his ki into the characters as he brushed them. Look at his works today and you can immediately sense the amazingly strong ki imbued in them.

--Abe Seiseki Sensei, 10th Dan

Seseiki Abe Sensei, was an uchi-deshi for O'Sensei and had the honor of teaching him *shodo* for fifteen years. Obvious to the master calligrapher was how O'Sensei's Aikido practice had produced ways of being that guided and informed his creative expression in a powerful, aesthetic, and meaningful way.

In my experience with music as a form of creative expression, I similarly realized Aikido's extraordinarily strong influence on my creative development and expression. The embodied wisdom and awareness gained from the practice of Aikido flowed naturally, almost inevitably, into to my artistic process as a pianist and composer.

Between 1994-2000, I instilled the basics of aikido into my music while living in New York City, an ideal context for creative growth. Surrounded by the city's torrent of artistic passion and talent, I improvised for virtuoso modern dancers on John Cage's piano as Merce Cunningham sat 30 feet from me—in the presence, as it were, of two icons of the 20th-century avant-garde. I also worked at the Juilliard School with its regal and seductive Steinways, and did jazz gigs. I would like to share here some of the understanding I have gained as a musician in utilizing the aikido path.

Learn to understand with your body. Do not engage in a futile effort to learn a great number of techniques but rather study the techniques one by one and make each your own.

--O'Sensei

Budo & Piano

Traditionally, both the martial path and artistic paths incorporate a way of being that accumulates refinement by practice. In Japan, such artistic traditions as calligraphy (*shodo*), flower arrangement (*ikebanado*), and tea ceremony (*chado*) are considered paths as worthy as any martial art path (*budo*).

Aikido in its most evolved form also can be seen as an artistic improvisation, similar to Western fine arts, particularly time-based arts such as music and dance. When the process is “essentialized”, time-based artists are simply creating phrases of energy in time and space. *Buto* dancing or *chado* can also be seen as time-based arts, albeit at

extremely slow tempos.

It can be said that there are generally two intentions expressed in Western art: 1) ego-oriented or secular, and 2) spiritual or sacred. Simply put, ego-oriented art focuses mostly on the artists' personal form and style of creative expression. This type of art requires an audience for feedback, admiration, and remuneration. The artist attempts to "do something" with an agenda to fit into cultural expectations and contexts.

Spiritual-oriented artists try to eliminate their own personal agenda, open to something greater than the artist, and do not require an audience and performance. Yet this form of expression can benefit those who participate in its experience. Not to say that ego-oriented arts are not useful or enjoyable. They serve important functions for society, obviously. Yet they are limited. By having goals of competition, fame, and the attention of critics, one becomes more outwardly focused than inwardly focused.

In cultures as diverse as early Chinese, Indian, and Native American, one studied spiritual art with a master. In India, sometimes the master's lesson would be to improvise on one scale (*raga*) for months. The early Chinese stringed instrument, the Gu Cheng, only used for spiritual cultivation, was never performed in public.

In Japan, the concept of mastery has also been well understood; there are masters ranging from paper making to sword making, and in the fine arts, masters in every area. Stemming from this tradition, masters like O'Sensei and Abe Sensei expressed the confluence of fine arts and martial arts. Since I had learned aikido in a traditional Japanese way from Matsuoka Sensei and Abe Sensei, I eventually began to see the study of piano improvisation as a path. I started playing a total 15-20 hours a week and disciplining my practice. Let me share with you some personal reflections on the basics applied from aikido practice to piano improvisation.

Aiki & Harmony

Aikido enables you to viscerally appreciate the nature of conflict and harmony, a polar tension important in every art. After a few years of training, I was better able to kinesthetically feel the varying degrees of harmonic tension, resonating within my torso, skull, and bones, and moving towards and away from a tonal center. Tonal center, like *hara*, is a place from which music springs and to which it eventually returns. Through aikido I clearly experienced that the core of musical harmony, melody, and rhythm resides within the felt harmonic tensions in the body and emotions as musical energy moved around my center. I saw that harmony constantly involves expansion and contraction of energy.

The improvements in harmonic recognition accumulated with time. After a few years of diligent concentration on music, I could finally truly *experience* harmony. When I listened to familiar music I was able to hear their harmonic gestures and understand them as if for the "first time." When I read new pieces, I deeply absorbed them on a harmonic level, and my musical ear rapidly improved.

Bowing & Posture

Here I'm not talking about the bow a fiddler uses on his instrument! Rather, the Japanese concept of respect and reverence for being able to practice your art, and being happy that you and other human beings can express themselves. I created a ritual of preparing myself. I showed up early for gigs and stretched. I cleared my mind as much as possible. I assumed good posture on the bench. Correct distance *ma'ai* from the piano. Correct height of forearms. (I even bowed slightly as Merce said hello.)

Before and during playing, aikido wrist stretches are very effective for piano playing. Also, balancing and calming my energy field back/front, up/down, and left/right in the style of Wendy Palmer. All this changed my relationship with the piano, drawing it closer to me and into a circle of intimacy.

Ueshiba Sensei's spirit resides in his calligraphy not in the forms or shapes of the characters, but in their resonance and light. Similarly, that spirit resides in aikido not in the techniques you can see with your eyes, but in those you cannot.

---Abe Seiseki Sensei

Center

All this led up to what I recognized to be creating a strong center within me for creative stability. I now realize that being centered always resides as my choice when playing music. Sustaining it requires vigilance. Forced, overly emotional, inappropriately loud music occurs when I lose center. Non-centered practice becomes stressful and one plays wrong notes. Adrenaline kicks in and the tempo naturally speeds up or I get distracted and pulled off beat. When I forget the choice, I can put myself back by aligning my posture. Once centered, I can be more sensitive and open to musical potential. The trick: keep about 25% of attention on playing, 25% on observing the playing, and 50% on openness and expansiveness--for creativity to arise.

In aikido, non-centered anxiety produces techniques that at best don't work, and at worst, injure others. Being centered requires that you practice within your ability level. Since I'm not overly self-involved, I can then extend my ability level to the creative context while playing: to musicians, dancers, the audience, and the room itself. Just as one does not want to "fight the flowers" in *ikebana*, one wants to blend with one's instrument and with other musicians and dancers.

While centered, creativity stems from a balanced emotional source, good for playing consciously without too much passion, thus avoiding such pitfalls as sappiness, angry, and contrived music. I feel safe to explore a range of non-tonal music or very emotionally expressive music, knowing how it will manipulate the body's emotions and *ki*. As a film composer, I am also more keenly aware of how music will affect others emotions and the activity on the screen.

Breath Power

Watching Abe Sensei do calligraphy I was struck by the variety of styles in his brushwork. He demonstrated that he could put the same type of breath power, or

ki, into his brush as he did during aikido. He could draw in the style of *irimi*, with bold lines, or he could create soft strokes on the paper, spiraling like *tenkan*. He could be specific or abstract with his *ki*. I also noticed that he started each piece with the utmost concentration, and continued his focus until he lifted the brush off the paper with his breath and heart.

So it naturally occurred to me to practice breathing *ki* into melodies and harmony. This is when I began a period of beautiful folk piano music. I blissfully explored gentler harmonies and slower tempos. It was if joyful music was channeling through me. To paraphrase a metaphor used by Zen Master Suzuki Roshi, I was simply a screen door that would open and shut to let music through. My music was less dark, frustrated, and complex.

Also, at the Cunningham studio, doing soft or silent *ki-ais* to build power was extraordinarily helpful when I had 30 tired dancers at the end of class and I too was tired. Arousing *ki* helped to create strong, earthy, bassy musical energy that buoyed the dancers.

The dancers--stereotypically absorbed in themselves and their class--for the first time started to give me complements. The harmonies were more accessible and directly experienced by the dancers, like a compassionate hand supporting their backs.

Technique

I was able to focus on piano technique from the same sincere approach used to improve my aikido technique. From my aikido experience, I honed technique with the virtues of discipline, patience, and endurance. From repetitive practice, I discovered a central secret to piano technique (and aikido): relax. As soon as my wrists tensed, phrases sounded clunky. When my body tensed and the breathing halted, musical creativity stopped, and blending with the piano (or the aikido partner) gets stultified.

In aikido and dance, one secret to maintain balance is to continually expand the body in all directions. Likewise, in music it's important to expand *ki* into the instrument so as not to become technically rigid. Through relaxation and expansion, based on aikido, I am now able to create music that flows like a river; phrases connect, and I can play longer.

To compensate for their difficulties they do what almost everybody does in this art: They force when they should flow, hurry when they should wait, and tighten instead of relaxing. To their bewilderment, they are finding that aikido is not something one succeeds in by being stronger; and it's not just one more sport you can simply figure out and do. It's a complete re-programming in mind, body, and spirit

---Richard Heckler

Flexibility

While practicing in New York, I remembered from aikido that there are many adventures in music if one stays flexible. As I mentioned before, harmonies are a journey

from home, the tonal center, to a chord that is away from center, and then, perhaps back. The harmonic variations depend on whether the harmony wants to wander off constantly (chromatics) go far away (modulation) or stay close to home (drone tonality). Too much modulation disorients the listener. This is interesting for listening and playing, but for dancing people like to stay around a drone tonality a tonal center. This is why most popular dance music has few chords (such as folk music, Rap, Electronica, etc.).

Only when I consistently practiced did I approach mastering flexibility. I can now quickly maneuver through the following polarities: yin/yang, tension/relaxation, suspension or ambiguous harmony/resolution, fast/slow rhythms within tempos, complexity/simplicity, high harmonic colors/low colors, and soft/loud dynamics.

Borrowing from a mediator I know: “A wrong note is not a wrong note, unless it’s a wrong note.” As in the improvisation of aikido, I now utilize mistakes quickly. Sometimes this means evolving the “mistake” in another way creating symmetric phrasing, sounding good to the ear. I play looser and less afraid.

Authenticity & Honesty

One of the goals of making art a path seems to be authentic creative expression. One special tip: when you sit down to create, be sure you “don’t know” what you are going to do. As Abe Sensei said, even O’Sensei was like a “blank page” when he instructed him in *shodo*. Music can have honesty if you don’t over utilize what you know and get out of the way so that new music can bubble up. If you create a piece and overplay it then it will lose authenticity. It becomes mechanical and loses freshness. After a while my left hand was playing all kinds of new techniques because I was practicing so much and absorbing the NYC creative inspiration. For a period almost all that I played was authentic. But then that stopped and I was back to only about 80% authentic. I think a key secret to authenticity is to begin by essentializing music. What is essential harmony and rhythm? Explore simple modes over a drone. Move into Folk music and minimalist music. Then see what arises out of you

Merce once said that you can’t be too simple. Start with one note and go from there. The trick is not to copy someone else’s style or a cultural norm. Copying creates dishonest, inauthentic creativity. So I borrowed Merce’s practice of each day going over what you know, and then adding on to it something fresh. This is how I developed new ideas and a wider vocabulary in an authentic, centered way.

There was more of a sense of relaxation to the quality and tone of my music, supported by my more relaxed technique, and I was less driven. The music has its own innate vitality without me having to coerce and force it.

Artistic Completeness

A great by-product of combining aikido in musical practice, after finding your authentic voice, is finding your unique expression, your own *artistic completeness*. In fact, the overall function of this period of my life was to develop my authentic voice and start down the to the goal of what I have come to call artistic completeness. It will still

take me years but that's because I love complexity. For another artist it may be one unique form of expression. It will still take me years, no doubt, because of my love of artistic complexity. Perhaps my completeness is to always evolve. For another artist it may be a single unique form of expression.

Coming full circle, my identity as an artist now has expanded my aikido practice more than ever. I play with each movement of aikido as a phrase of artistic energy.