

Aikido and Creative Expression in Music

by Bill Levine

Prepared for the 3rd International Conference of Aiki Extensions,
Aikido of Tamalpais, CA
March 23-25, 2001

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 noticed 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 contrasting intentions that can be expressed through the creative process: 1) the ego-oriented or secular intention, and 2) the spiritual or sacred intention. 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. Although they often aim at it or inspire the transcendent, the intention is not always focused there.

Spiritual-oriented artists try to eliminate agenda and role-playing as much as possible and open to an Art greater than the artist. The impetus for the art is from their unique soul, higher intelligence, and heart. The Muses simply flow through them like wind and water.

Of course, a wide gray area connects the two artistic polarities, which is beyond the scope of this paper. And luckily I’m not talking about what is good art or bad art. I’m asking: what is good for the artist? What is the function of one’s artistic intention?

A limitation of ego-oriented arts is that they do not intrinsically promote spiritual cultivation as part of the artist’s process. In pursuing goals of competition, fame, and the attention of critics, one becomes more focused outwardly for inspiration and direction. The artistic process becomes more about honing specific skills, much like a craftsman or plumber. This is why, to get away from this orientation, in cultures as diverse as early Chinese, Indian, African and Japanese, one humbly studies with a master. And the master helps the artist look for the divine inspiration that emerges from mastering an art. The early Chinese practiced a stringed instrument that was never even performed in public. It was specifically used for spiritual cultivation.

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.

Aiki & Harmony

Aikido enables the body to viscerally appreciate the nature of conflict and harmony, a polar tension important in every art. As I applied my aikido training to music, I was better able to physically feel the varying degrees of harmonic tension, resonating within my torso, skull, and bones, as resonant frequencies moved around and away from a tonal center. (When singing in the shower, the “boom” spot is a resonant frequency.) Tonal center, like *hara*, is a place from which music springs and to which it eventually returns. Through aikido I learned that the core of musical harmony, melody, and rhythm resides within the resonant frequency tensions in the body, ki field and

emotions as harmony moves towards or away from center. I concluded that harmonic experience embodies a continuous gesture rooted in the expansion and contraction of energy, corresponding to the tonal center.

Aikido practice heightened this musical understanding clearly. 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 now feel the 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 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.

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’s embodied awareness. 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

The effect of starting with a focus on bowing and posture is emotional coherence. The heart is more open and compassionate; there is less anger and adrenaline; the energy is feeding back into the heart. This is a stable place to begin creative expression. The heart is “centered.”

At the same time, I utilized the physical center found in *hara*. This comes only from years of aikido practice. So when I use the word “center,” I mean both from the heart (love) and the belly (power).

I now realize that during the act of creative expression, being centered is a *choice* if one is mindful. Sustaining the choice requires vigilance and focused awareness, especially with master dance teachers who have a better sense of time than most musicians. Dancers taking a class can transfer to musicians a physical and energetic nervousness and excitement, and I often found myself losing center. I would realize I was off when I forced ideas, expressing overly emotional and inappropriately loud music. Adrenaline kicks in and the tempo naturally speeds up further and further. Non-centered artistic expression becomes stressful and I play wrong notes. The antidote to losing my

mindfulness and awareness is to re-center myself by aligning my posture, breathing, focusing on my *hara*, and opening the heart. Once centered, I can be more sensitive and open to musical potential.

In one class the dancers were all excited that Mikhail Baryshnikov would take Merce Cunningham's company class. Their nervousness and excitement was contagious, and I began to stampeded with emotions and the tempo at one point. The master Baryshnikov walked over to the piano, as strong and grounded as a lion, and simply draped his arm on the piano. I got the message, and quickly re-centered and contained the tempo.

In aikido, non-centered anxiety produces techniques that at best don't work, and at worst, injure others. Being centered requires practice within one's technical ability level. Once I'm not overly self-involved, I can then extend my attention 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 his or her own instrument and with other musicians and dancers.

While one is centered, creativity stems from a balanced source, good for playing consciously without too much passion, thus avoiding such pitfalls as sappy, angry or otherwise 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.

Dance is an art in space and time. The object of the dancer is to obliterate that. — Merce Cunningham

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 techniques. 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 breath and intention. 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 explored gentler harmonies and slower tempos. It was as though joyful music was channeling through me. To paraphrase a metaphor about ego 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. The inspiration seemed to spring forth endlessly.

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, bass-heavy musical energy that buoyed the dancers.

The dancers, who are often absorbed in themselves and their class, for the first time began to give me complements. One dancer showed me how helpful my music was

by placing her hand supportively on my lower back. The harmonies were less ambiguous and more accessible and directly experienced by the dancers. Another dancer remarked how beautiful my music was sounding.

Technique

I was able to focus on piano technique from the same sincere approach used to improve my aikido technique. I discovered through aikido, and with the help of a Juilliard pianist, a central secret to piano technique: relax. As soon as my wrists tense, phrases sound clunky. When my body tenses and the breathing halts, musical creativity stops. The trick is to blend with the piano, as in aikido we blend with training partners.

In aikido (and dance), I have heard that to maintain balance one can 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 principles, I began to create music that flowed like a river; phrases connected, and I played longer without fatigue. Since I was playing a total of 15-20 hours a week, these techniques became embedded.

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 realized that there are many adventures in music if one utilizes the flexibility learned from aikido. 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 tonal center. This is why most popular dance music has few chords (such as Merengue, or Rap, Electronica, and folk music).

Only when I consistently practiced over years did I approach mastering flexibility and was willing to take side routes and detours on my harmonic journeys. I can now quickly maneuver through 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. And I always know where the voyage is going, playing in control but loose, less afraid and less attached to results.

Authenticity & Honesty

One of the goals of making art a path seems to be authentic creative expression. I learned that when you sit down to create, be sure you “don’t know” what you are going to do. “Don’t know mind” is crucial for musical honesty and authenticity. When I asked Abe Sensei “what was O’Sensei like as a student?” when he instructed him in *shodo*, Abe Sensei told me: “Like a blank page. Music can have honesty if you don’t over utilize what you know, getting out of the way so that new music can bubble up. If you create a piece and overplay it then it will lose honesty. 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 direct path to my authenticity happens when I explore the essentials of music. What is essential harmony and rhythm? What harmonic functions do simple modes over a drone have? What is folk music and minimalist music?

Cunningham demonstrated that one can not be too simple. I would sometimes start with one note and go from there. I’d wait to see what would arise. The trick was not to copy someone else’s style or a cultural norm. Copying creates dishonest, contrived creativity. So I borrowed Cunningham’s practice discipline of each day going over what you know, and then adding on to it something fresh. This is how one can develop new ideas and a wider vocabulary in an authentic, centered way.

There was more of a sense of relaxation to my music (supported by my more relaxed technique) and I was less driven. The music had its own innate vitality without me having to coerce, force, or coddle it.

Artistic Completeness

Combining aikido in musical practice, finding your authentic voice, leads to finding your unique expression--your own *artistic completeness*. Looking back at this period of my life I can now see the overall function was to develop my authentic voice artistic completeness. It will still take me years but that’s because I love complexity. For another artist it may be one single unique form of expression. You are unique. No one plays music your way and forget about comparing and competing.

Coming full circle, my identity as an artist now has expanded my aikido practice more than ever. I see each movement of aikido as a phrase of artistic energy, not a serious martial engagement. I play around with variety, phrasing and self-expression. When I took up salsa lessons with the same discipline and seriousness as I employed in aikido and music, I finally understood Terry Dobson’s famous observation on aikido: “It’s a lot like dancing.”