

Before the Performance

A concert may seem magical, the performance effortless. But in reality, such an undertaking requires months—or years—of intense preparation and planning. Here, three UW faculty share what's involved before they ever set foot on the stage.

By Nancy Joseph



L to R: Craig Sheppard (photo by Cynthia St. Clair); Melia Watras (photo by Michael Lim); Cuong Vu (photo by Virginia Valdes).

The lights dim. The audience quiets. Musicians stride onto the stage, greeted by welcoming applause.

The performance begins.

For audiences, the concert experience may seem magical, with performers demonstrating effortless mastery of challenging music. In reality, performances require months—or years—of intense preparation and planning. Here, three UW School of Music professors share what's involved before they ever set foot on the stage.

Craig Sheppard: A Second Turn with Brahms

Craig Sheppard, professor of piano, has devoted his career to performing some of classical music's most beloved composers, including Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. On November 1, he began a five-concert series of works by Johannes Brahms, immersing himself in the composer's body of work.

This is not Sheppard's first go-round with Brahms. While living in England in his twenties, he performed a cycle of the 19th-century composer's complete solo piano works in London's Wigmore Hall. "I wasn't really happy with the way I did it then," admits Sheppard. "I've got 30 years on it now, and I've taught the pieces. I thought maybe it was time to bring the cycle back and see if my years of maturity will help bring it alive more for audiences."

Sheppard is intimately familiar with both Brahms and his work. He can share juicy tidbits about the composer's life, like the time Brahms showed up at Robert Schumann's house (with a

letter of introduction) at age 20 and wowed him with an impromptu piano performance—a visit that launched Brahms's subsequent career. But Sheppard also likes to discuss Brahms's growth as an artist and the impact that being touted as Beethoven's successor had on his work. All this knowledge figures into his planning for concerts. His first Brahms concert, for example, began with works by Schumann, to provide a comparison between the friends' early works.

"I've always seen one of my responsibilities as a performer to be pedagogical," explains Sheppard. "You don't want the audience to *see* that, but it's there. You want them to leave the hall with something they didn't have going in—but you also want them to enjoy it. A cardinal sin is to invite people to come and then bore them."

To please both the audience and himself, Sheppard gives careful thought to the mix—and order—of pieces in a concert. "Every juxtaposition of pieces creates a new paradigm," he says. "Each program has its different challenges and must build in a different way. Certain combinations of pieces just aren't going to do it."

Once the program is set, there's the business of practicing for hours each day. Even having performed Brahms's compositions previously, Sheppard still figures he must rehearse daily for a minimum of three hours, and preferably four or five, to be fully prepared for a concert.

"You want your audience to be transported to another world, like when you sink into a chair with a great novel," says Sheppard. "It is our duty, as performers, to make that world come alive."

Melia Watras: Total Immersion

While Craig Sheppard finds inspiration in performing the old masters, Melia Watras, associate professor of viola, has a more contemporary focus. For a recent faculty concert in Meany Hall, she performed five pieces written between 1964 and 2010, including the world premiere of a new work by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Shulamit Ran. “I’ve never played a single one of these pieces before,” says Watras. “I like to keep things fresh.”

Performing Ran’s composition was particularly thrilling for Watras. A huge admirer of Ran’s work, Watras commissioned the composer to create the piece for her concert (with support from a Petersen Faculty Fellowship). “There are so many reasons why I love commissioning work,” says Watras. “Being involved in the creation of something, being the first voice of something and truly understanding what that composer is about—that’s really important to me.”



Melia Watras (left) was thrilled when Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Shulamit Ran (right) agreed to create a new work for her concert. Photo by Christina Watras.

Watras chose “inspiration” as a theme for her recital, pairing each contemporary piece with an older work that served as its inspiration. A work by Atar Arad—a former teacher of Watras’s whom she describes as one of *her* major inspirations—was paired with a George Rocherg sonata that inspired it. Shulamit Ran’s commissioned piece was inspired by the work of Luciano Berio.

Selecting the music was the beginning of a long research process for Watras, who studies compositions like others study literature, teasing out the composer’s intentions, influences, and specific artistic language. For Berio’s *Naturale*, a work based on Sicilian folk songs, she researched Sicily and tracked down field recordings of folk songs being sung by locals “to get the soul of the music.”

Watras also listened to the only two existing recordings of *Naturale*. “They are very different,” she says. “I really struggled to decide

how literal I was going to be with the score. When I perform, I need to arrive at a point where I can defend and believe in my choices.”

All that research is time-consuming, but Watras can’t see doing it any other way. “For me, it’s a sense of responsibility,” she says. “I want to have such depth in what I do. I want to have completely immersed myself. I have to know the music so well and know what the composer wants so well that, on the stage, I can just *be*. Without the practicing and the research into what the composer wants, there’s no way I could get there.”

Cuong Vu: Rehearsing for Improv

For Cuong Vu, a musician whose concerts incorporate a great deal of improvisation, the preparation is different but no less demanding. “My preparation is ongoing,” says Vu, assistant professor of jazz studies. “I’m never *not* preparing for a performance. I’m always trying to improve and strengthen my skills.”

Vu points out that improvisation—the creation of music in the moment, in response to internal and external stimuli—is linked to jazz but has a history as long as music itself. “Improv has always been in music—even Western classical music,” he says. “Beethoven, Mozart, Liszt...pretty much all of them were known to improvise. That’s how everything gets invented.”

Vu does compose music for his concerts, but unlike “through-composed music”—that is, a piece played straight through from beginning to end—his compositions serve more as a framework for improvisation. “There needs to be time for the improvisation to unfold,” he explains. “It’s all about how to build improvisation into the music to make it a cohesive whole.”



“The audience plays a huge role,” says Cuong Vu, above, playing his trumpet. “We’re always looking for that connection.”

In rehearsals, his band, Vu-Tet, focuses on both the composed music and improvisation. While rehearsing improv may seem counterintuitive, Vu insists that trying out various approaches is essential. “We’re not just

getting on stage and doing it," he says. "There's a lot of disciplined practice and research and analyzing that goes into it so we can have the highest chance of success. But the audience doesn't need to sit through that. That all happens in the practice room."

Despite all the rehearsals, there's nothing like performing live, with an audience added to the mix. All musicians, but especially those doing improv, are affected by the mood and energy of the crowd. "In a club or hall, if an audience is really reacting to you, you play a lot better," says Vu. "If not, the band members try to do it for each other, but it's a drag. The audience plays a huge role. We're always looking for that connection."

In fact, adds Vu, performing live is the best education for any musician. "You learn much more at that moment than in rehearsal," he says. "We're like basketball players. We practice the mechanics and then it all comes together at the highest level during a game. You need both."

And just like LeBron James's jump shot, performances that appear effortless are anything but. All three of these musicians know that firsthand.

"In our society, I don't think most people realize how intensely artists work," says Melia Watras. "Our lives are devoted to this. It means so much to us. I hope people can hear, in our performances, our conviction. I hope they know that our interpretation comes with a lot of thought and care."