

## **Kris Davis Masterclass VTJazzCtr 2021**

[Eugene Uman]

Thank you everybody. This is our third masterclass of the day. I'd like to thank Elio Villafranca for giving an enlightening talk. I learned so much about the music of Cuba and the African diaspora, and I'm really grateful for that experience. So thank you to Elio. And I also wanted to remind people that this is a free event and we want to encourage people who have the wherewithal to please donate so that we can continue to produce events like these in the future.

All right, and just so that you know, usually the whole series of masterclasses and performances, we usually charge \$95. So if you could give some portion of that, we would be very grateful. Now, without further ado, I am really happy to introduce to you Kris Davis. I've been, honestly, this is a new experience for me.

I haven't listened to her music in the past, and it was a wonderful experience to immerse myself in her music in preparation for this particular event. And I've really come to experience music on a different, from a different perspective by listening to your music, because you have a totally different way of looking at things, and I've learned so much, and it's opened me up and gotten me to the place where I want to be able to cultivate my own personal voice a little bit more. So you've taught me a lot by just letting me listen to your music intensely for a couple of weeks. So thank you for that.

Without further ado, Kris Davis.

[Kris Davis]

Thank you. Thank you, Eugene. Yeah, I'd also like to thank everyone at the Vermont Jazz Center, Eugene for having me and Ginger for taking such good care of all the artists. And Michael, thank you for dealing with the sound.

And I threw him a curve. What's that? Julian?

And Julian, I threw you a curve ball there needing a video at the last moment. So I really appreciate you working with me. Thanks so much and I've been fortunate to check out Harvey Diamond's talk here and Elio's talk and it's just so inspiring. In fact, it inspired me to not do the talk that I was originally planning.

I'll probably touch on that a little bit. But it's especially Harvey's workshop brought to mind some things about the actual physical mechanics of the piano and connecting physically to the instrument. And you know really getting a sound out of the piano. And part of that is tied into your own physicality.

And sometimes students come to me and talk about, you know, problems, issues with pain after playing. So I thought I'd talk a little bit about some of the technique that I studied through a great

pianist named Gary Williamson. Gary's from Toronto. I went to school at UofT, and he was sort of known for teaching piano technique and all the pianists wanted to study with him.

In fact, the great pianist David Virelles studied with him and David Braid, if any of you know these names, incredible pianists. And they all studied with Gary. Unfortunately, Gary passed away last year and I was fortunate enough to reach out to him just before he passed, to ask him a little bit more about the technique that he was teaching. Because I knew that it came from (Leopold) Godowsky and was passed down through a series of pianists and somehow made it its way to Toronto where we were all studying.

So I wanted to share this email, actually, that he wrote me, just to give you a little bit of background about the technique. Okay, so he says RE: Technique I thought I might recall some of my teachers Darwin Aikens comments about the lineage of his teachers. Darwin was originally from Timmons, Ontario, and although he played gigs in Toronto, he was to a great extent, a frustrated classical pianist. In the mid to late 1960s, he found David Saperton's name in the New York telephone book and went to his address and knocked on the door.

He was greeted with an old man with a shake and a wheeze who invited him in. There were two pianos, tail to tail, in the studio and Darwin was invited to play. He chose one of Leopold Godowsky's nearly impossible transcriptions of the Chopin etude for the left hand alone, four staves of music. Saperton commented, "that was very nice. It's too bad no one ever taught you how to play piano." Saperton had studied with Godowsky and later married one of his daughters. He became George Gershwin's brother-in-law when Frankie Gershwin married Leopold Godowsky to the co-inventor of Kodachrome. According to Darwin, Saperton could not reach a 10th so his eventual mastery of Godowsky's work and performance of other difficult works was phenomenal. But I digress.

Darwin started taking weekly piano lessons on Sundays with Saperton. This was necessary because Darwin was working six nights a week at the Inn On The Park at Chucho Valdez's Latin Band. So, he would leave the gig at 1:00 AM on Sunday, drive to New York, have a lesson, and then drive back to Toronto in time to get some sleep and get back to the gig Monday night at nine. He wrecked several cars and eventually lost his house refinancing more cars.

He couldn't fly because he had some ear problems. I studied with Darwin beginning in 1973, and couldn't believe his technical abilities. His lessons were so cheap. I took him to task, tripling the rate he was charging and told anyone who would listen that he was the best piano teacher in the country.

His teaching business flourished. He bought a Steinway Grand to replace the Baldwin upright and he quit playing piano with Chico. For more information, you should look up or Google, Leopold Godowsky, David Saperton. And he says, Darwin's last word after every lesson was "Enjoy." So, I was so appreciative to get that email from him. And just a little more history about the technique because it's been really an important part of my piano practice And just kind of daily maintenance if I feel like I'm having trouble connecting to the instrument if I'm having

troubles getting a sound if I'm having physical pain, I always return to some of these ideas and exercises.

And it always helps me recalibrate some of the things that I seem to be facing at that moment. So I grew up in Calgary, Alberta. And I bring this up because I didn't grow up in a family of musicians, and I sort of figured out my own way as a young person through some teachers that were mostly church pianists that taught me through a program called the Royal Conservatory in Canada. Which is not as common, I think, in the States here.

But I felt like I didn't really have a great piano technique or great teaching in terms of piano technique and how to connect to the instrument, how to have a good sound. And I was having a lot of problems physically just from playing long gigs over long periods of time. So I studied with Gary and I wanted to just show you some of these techniques that if you're having pain or interested in diving a little deeper into the production of the sound on the instrument, some of these things might be helpful. I realized, Eugene, that I actually do need the stand 'cause I am gonna play and talk.

Sorry. Yeah, I'll pull it up a little. Thank you. Great.

Okay. So the first step... Oh, I should also mention that when I came to take a lesson with Gary, he said, well, you know, a third of of my students get this within five minutes, a third, get it maybe after a year or two and a third, never get it. So... good luck. See how that goes.

And I was just determined, I really believed in the technique And wanted to make it work for me. So the first step is all about using the weight and using gravity in the weight of your arms for sound production and to connect to the instrument. So the first thing that we would do is hold our arms up over our legs and then just drop our hands. And that's kind of the motion that you, you wanna get when you're connecting to the instrument.

So you really feel the gravity and the gravity's pull. And when you're sitting, everything should be relaxed. Your elbows relaxed, your shoulders are relaxed, your feet are flat on the floor. You're sitting in the center of your hip bones and yeah, you're just gonna hold your arms up and then drop 'em.

And sometimes people approach this by throwing them up and then throwing them down. That's not really the move. It's more about feeling gravity and dropping. So after you get this sensation, then you bring your hands up to the keyboard and try the same thing.

So the main thing is that when you're a kid, you're taking piano lessons, you're told that you hold a ball in your hand. It's like you're holding a ball in your hand, so you have a real open shape to your hand and your fingers connect at the instrument to the keys at a 90 degree angle. So that's kind of the, the hand position that you're going for. So after you drop them on your legs, you're gonna do the same thing on the piano.

And it doesn't matter what the notes are, it's just to get the sensation of gravity and connecting. And so what this does... your wrist kind of acts as a shock absorber. So if you're forcing, if you're pushing the key down, you can hear it in the sound, I am kind of over-exaggerating, but you feel the force, you hear the force coming through the sound of the instrument, if you're playing really on top of the keys. And this is what made me think about when Harvey was talking about connecting to the bottom of the key.

If you're playing on top, the sound is kind of pinched, we're not getting the full sound of the key. Where we're playing to the bottom of the key. so if you're using gravity and just using the weight, you get a nice round warm sound versus, And there's a place for all of those sounds in the music. But I find that sticking to more of the gravitational pole is the place where I can play from a relaxed state and do that for a long period of time.

So after you drop your hands on the keyboard this way, then you try to land on C, D, E, F, and G, and you can just kind of like check your wrist to see if you're loose, if this is the shock absorber. So this should be loose. If I pull my fingers off the keys, I should just fall off. So that's loose.

This is loose, this is loose. Everything's relaxed. So when I was studying with Gary, I came back every week and would do this, and then he would say, Nope, that's not it. And I would practice it every day, like, five, 10 minutes a day, come back: "Nope, that's not it." Finally, a year later, I was in the practice room and I literally felt the moment it happened, and of course I came back for the lesson and was thrilled, so excited to show him, and he was like, "Yep, that's it." You got it.

You know, and then from there, we could start to work on some of the other concepts that went along with this. But this was the hardest part, was getting the weight and feeling relaxed. So fast forward a year, let's jump to some of the extra other exercises, just so you can see like how it sort of spans out in terms of playing around the keyboard. So there's kind of an idea between the falls, and then there's also something he calls pushing, which is pushing down through the keys to create the force to move up.

So it looks like this. So here's the fall, And then I'm gonna push up and then fall. So always kind of just checking the wrist to see if they're loose. So the pushes allow you to give you some room to get up to do the falls.

And so the same thing can happen. There's a little exercise with cords that really kind of shows this well. So I'm gonna fall on the cord, push up through the cord, and go to the next cord. So I'm pushing up, Push up, push up.

When you push up, it allows you to fall to the next key, but as you're holding the cord down, then you're falling to the next chord. So this really helped when I was comping and playing three, four, or five sets a night. I used to do this gig at the Blue Water Grill that many New York

musicians know, that's six and a half hour gig. And these sorts of exercises and practices really helped with those long stretches of playing And sitting up straight.

yeah. And then the same thing with scales. So a lot of these exercises are from a Raphael Joseffy book called "Piano Technique". And also Gary was introducing some of these ideas using just some basic Hanon exercises.

So with the Hanon everybody probably knows this Exercise. So in taking this technique, you combine the falls and the pushes to get the sensation of relaxation through that movement. So you have the fall on the first note, and then you push... push. So I'm just transferring the weight to the next key.

And then on the last note, I'm gonna fall and then push, Push, Push, push. And you can see like my wrist kind of going up each time, sort of exaggerates the whole pushing. And then a little faster. So the, when you're doing it faster it's not as exaggerated.

When I do it slow, you can really see the falls and the pushes pushing through the keys and then falling again. So those were some of the sort of basic exercises that came through Gary's technique and and teaching, Godowsky's technique. Another one that's super helpful is dealing with the thumb and getting around scales. So like, if I'm playing like an E Major scale in sixths, instead of like hitting it right on so that your arms are parallel with the the keyboard here, you wanna turn your wrists in slightly so that when your thumb goes under.

It's not so exaggerated. Like you can see my wrist really has to do an extra movement. All of those extra movements slow you down. If you're trying to play something, you know, up to tempo, you're trying to get rid of all those extra movements and just boil it down to the very basic movement and the easiest way to do something.

So when you're doing the scale, you turn your wrists in, I'm exaggerating again, but turn your wrists in slightly and your elbows kind of, they don't really come out as much, maybe just a little so that you won't have to do that whole wrist flick when your thumb goes under. It's hard to even do it now 'cause I've worked on it so much. Just turning in there to get rid of those to make it smoother. And the other thing about this, uh oh, is to also, like, Harvey was saying to practice things slowly so that you can just get the sensation and the movement and work things up to speed kind of step by step.

So when you're playing the scale, you want to Plan, oh, I Know I was gonna say it. When your third finger's going over your fourth finger's going over, you prep the note. So like, In the left hand, It's always about thinking one note ahead. So as You're going along, Third finger's over, it's like one motion, the thumb comes here and the fourth finger comes over.

So at this time, I was having troubles playing faster tempos and trying to figure out what the issue was. And this really helped with that problem as well, of preparing the notes. And, you

know, any scale, like on C Major in some ways it's the hardest. When you play the E, your thumb goes under right away.

It's one movement. And if you practice it slowly like that, then as you get faster, it just becomes fluid and you're able to play things much faster, if that's what you're going for. So yeah, that's the first part of the talk. Are there any questions about this?

I know we have questions later. Use the microphone, Karen. So tell me about that moment in the practice room when you realized that you got it. Is there anything you remember about that?

It's just like, 'cause I had devoted so much time and energy and regular practice to figuring this out. It was like a difficult math problem or something. And then you finally like, you know, the physicality and the concepts and the idea came together. It was just like the best feeling ever.

The struggle was worth it. Yeah. And it's something I go back to now. I mean bad habits kick in, you know, sometimes you don't know you're doing them.

So this is a practice that I go back to if I'm feeling disconnected from gravity and the physicality of really playing. Any other questions?

Okay, cool. All right. Now I'm gonna go back to the talk about that original talk I had planned which was to talk a little bit about my journey as a pianist And combining classical, contemporary classical music And and the jazz tradition and how that sort of informed my work as a pianist and composer and still does to this day. So as I mentioned, I'm originally from Calgary, Alberta, and I grew up playing classical music and not really listening to it.

So my main entrance into classical music was playing it and checking out the scores ultimately, And when I discovered, I remember the moment also Karen, when I discovered Bartok. And my teacher was very... one of my teachers was very conservative, and, you know, it was all Mozart and Beethoven. And when I found this piece by Bartok, I just, I loved it. I loved the rhythmical aspect of it, And like the quirkiness of the harmony.

I hadn't really heard this kind of like more kind of atonal harmony, I guess. And my teacher was like, "this is not cool." You gotta focus on Mozart and Beethoven. But I remember that moment of like really connecting to Bartok's music and feeling like, wow, I really feel something, with his compositions. So right around that time, I also joined the jazz band at school, and I was about 12 or 13.

And I remember playing Chameleon by Herbie Hancock and this ballad with the jazz band, and we played our first concert. And I just thought, this is awesome. This is it. I'm gonna be a jazz pianist.

Like, it's done. That's the plan. So that was sort of the beginning of everything for me. And I started taking jazz piano lessons And playing with a bunch of young musicians that were really into jazz.

We had an amazing band teacher named Kevin Wilms, who was really supportive of young musicians, and loved jazz. So he would give us records And kind of direct us to some resources. So we'd get together every weekend, we'd play tunes, we'd listen to records and talk about music. And that was really an important educational moment for me in the music.

And then I went to Toronto, to school, and studied jazz piano. And I was playing a lot of gigs, playing standards and playing in different people's groups and their compositions and just working. I was working at the Marriott, playing solo piano a couple nights a week and putting myself through school that way. And so I really got a good foundation in the jazz tradition and in opportunities to play standards and play gigs, you know, kind of every night for a good couple of years.

And then I went to the Banff Center, which is also close to Calgary. There's a great program there that's been going for decades. And at that time, Kenny Warner and Tony Maleby and Ben Monder and Angelica Sanchez were all teaching there. And there was a real focus on free improvised music.

And I didn't know anything about freely improvised music at that time. And I just remember being confused, but really drawn to what they were doing. There was a passion in the way that the teachers talked about it, and the way they played the sound production and the timbre, and the way they were communicating with each other without having any kind of pre-ordained plan was just fascinating to me. And I knew I wanted to go to New York, after I finished school at the University of Toronto and study with some of these artists and look more into improvised music.

So fast forward two years, I moved to Toronto, I mean, sorry, to New York, in 2001. And reached out to a great saxophonist, Tony Maleby, and he was super supportive of me just coming over with a bunch of young musicians and playing every day. We were playing totally free improvised music. And he did a great job of just directing us in terms of like, well, you know, kind of almost like a right and wrong in terms of connecting and, and playing something that had no plan.

It gave some shape and ideas, and a lot of those ideas came, from composition. So then I started studying with Jim McNeely and trying to combine more ideas between improvised music and, and written music and blend those two forms. And I started practicing more classical music, again, looking at some contemporary composers like Ligeti, for one, or Berio, Morton Feldman, John Cage. All of these composers were really influential for me at that time, mainly because when I was playing improvised music, there were certain things, you know, coming from the jazz tradition, there's a certain role that the piano plays in that music.

And I found that that role was very limiting in free improvised music and didn't necessarily serve the music the way I needed it to be served. And I found that certain composers like Ligeti and,

and Martin Feldman really answered, um, some of the questions for me in terms of how to approach freely improvised music. And at this point, I even saying free improvised music, I much more prefer the term spontaneously composed music because I think that's really what is happening in free music where musicians are coming from a composer's head space and bringing those ideas to playing free improvised music. And so then it becomes a collective conversation.

And when you all share in that conversation and the ideas and languages of composition, the ideas of organized sound and how to organize sound, I just found the possibilities endless and deeply meaningful. And the practice of studying classical music, contemporary music, and bringing some of those language I was discovering into playing free music really was kind of eye-opening for me and solve some of these, these issues I was experiencing. So I guess one thing I wanted to talk about or show, show you is a piece by Morton Feldman. He was one of the first contemporary composers around that time I was really checking out and his ideas of his harmonic approach and thinking more about really the relationship between the notes and the kinds of shapes that he was getting within the chord.

Not so much when we think about more traditional jazz piano, thinking about from the root up, like, if I play this chord, we can hear that as a G minor 7, or we can, whatever we put on the bottom, is going to say what that chord is. And so Morton Feldman's music kind of broke that open because as I was freely improvising, I was trying to get away from –as the piano– directing the harmonic language as much. I wanted everybody to have more of a piece and say in all of that and really be more collective about how, how harmony might develop in the music. So Morton Feldman's music and his intervallic approach to harmony was a really important discovery for me.

So I was gonna play –if you can, thank you– this piece of Morton Feldman's called “Nature Pieces” And this is the second piece of his and we're actually gonna show the score, so you can just take a look and follow along to see some of the harmonies he's dealing with. Lula, will you roll that?

Thank you. So we can't hear it, right?

So it's going, it's going out for some reason it's not coming. Can they, can they hear the sound or, Oh, there, it's, cool. Am I back?

Am I back?

That's, sorry, I couldn't say. I think we're back. Okay. Yeah so the discovery of that piece made me think about monk's approach to kind of bending the notes.

Maybe you've heard this. Some people talk about this approach to like, let's see, like, trying to create like quarter tone, a kind of a bending like guitar, like, like a guitar would bend, certain notes, of course, it's not possible in the piano, but there's kind of an effect that you can do where

you kind of, you know, just kind of ghost the note a little bit and you get that kind of bending effect. and this piece has all sorts of little moments of bending the note, where certain chords, certain intervals hang over in the chord, like when the, you know, we get the, so then I was thinking about, you know, playing standards and playing and, and Morton Feldman for Martin Feldman's music and this piece and connecting it to maybe something like Evidence [by Thelonious Monk]

. And so I recorded that on one of my solo piano records, thinking about his harmonic approach and trying to apply that to playing a tune like Evidence. And also to take the feeling of this piece, which is so spacious and like, just, you know, everything is just, there's space allowed for everything to ring and vibrate. And, Evidence is, you know, typically played kind of like medium tempo, maybe uptempo tune.

So it's got that really cool kind of rhythmically kind of jab to it. So thinking about trying to take some of these ideas from Morton Feldman and bring it into playing Evidence. So just like quickly the tune, you know, uptempo, that's the end of the, a section of the head. So then the approach was to keep the melody and keep the root, but then think more about where half steps are falling within the chords, maybe going outside of the traditional chord symbol.

Like this first two, first chord is an Ebmaj7. So the voicing I applied to that is, Which much more like comes from that idea of, some of Morton Feldman's approach to harmonies where we get the half step on the top, which is often, you know, a thing to avoid in jazz. Because we don't hear the melody clearly. So again, breaking these rules to accomplish more of the relationship and the intervals within the chord.

So we really get all those major sevens in there. So this is kind of how I played the A section of the piece. So as we move along, it takes a little while to get through the form. But recontextualizing this piece, both harmonically and kind of energy-wise was something that I stumbled upon in my practice and study of contemporary classical music and jazz.

Yeah. Any questions so far?

I'm not so sure where we're at with time. 15 minutes. Okay, cool. So another example of connecting classical music and jazz for me and this was the title of the workshop was Monk and Ligeti.

So heading over to Ligeti's music now and his piano etudes were really big influence for me, and still are, I'm still teaching them to my students, and drawing inspiration. And one of his pieces is called "10 Exorcist". And it's kind of like a Gamelan-approach to rhythm and just a cool physical thing with the fingering and approach to just only a few notes. I also haven't played this in a while, so this, this might suck, but I'll show it to you anyway.

Yeah, On and on. And I'm kind of taking liberties there with the form but that's kind of the like physicality approach to this piece, which, usually I'll work on pieces and then draw things from

them that I feel like I could use for my own composition or own improvisation. So that was something that I was really drawn to and started to combine elements of prepared piano and prepared piano is something that I've used for many years now to alter the sound of the piano. And I'll show you some of those materials.

Basically, piano preparation is putting materials in the back of the string that give you a different kind of Timbre or pitch to the, note that you're playing. And so people like John Cage and Henry Cowell and so many, Sylvie Corvassier, who's a great improviser. and then I also went to study with Benoit Delbecq, who's a great French pianist who does some amazing things with piano preparations. So this was also a very influential for me, and that's something that I've incorporated into the piano, in combining with some of these findings.

So maybe I'll show you a little bit of the piano preparation for this particular improvisation. So the structure of the improvisation it's really just to play with that physicality. the improvisation itself, it's open-ended, there's no specific kind of form or direction. It's just kind of an approach in like found sounds and improvising with the sounds that you're finding at that moment.

So some of the things that I use are just like little erasers like this where I just cut like a slit in the middle. And depending on where you put it in the string, you get different harmonics. So, you know, it's different on every piano. You never know what you're gonna get.

And I try not to plan it too much 'cause I really do want to be improvisational and find the sound in the moment and create something with it. So we get much more of like a percussive type sound. Another cool thing is using just a little dime and weaving it in underneath the string, and you just wanna push the pedal down when you do this so that you don't hurt the dampers. So, the dime sounds like this.

So then you can start to like find the matching pitch and you kind of get these like microtonal pitches by doubling. Thank you. Yeah, so I dunno if you can see in here inside the piano here, But I use the, some of these e-bows, which are actually for guitar strings that vibrate the guitar string. So in a certain range of the piano, you can get the strings going.

One of the batteries died on one of them when I was trying to get it vibrating. And then some gaffers tapes just rolled up in the bottom here. And you can kind of move it around, get different harmonics so all sorts of colors inside the piano besides the keys. and that's been, you know, something that I've been playing around with and exploring for a number of years.

Any questions?

We had a question from Monica Herig, you know, Monica, I'm sure. And she wanted to know how time worked and your reconceptualization of the Monk piece. So I know it's not related to how you prepared the piano, but about the Monk Yeah, yeah, about "Evidence". It's really free, it's open-ended.

I'm not necessarily counting through those spaces, But I have done that in the past with a group Paradoxical Frog with Ingrid Laubrock and Tyshawn Sorey. Tyshawn had this piece that was very sparse and simple, just two notes prepared And we would play this piece. It doesn't really develop, it just exists. And in that experience, I heard the space so much louder than the notes at that moment.

And doing this in front of an audience the energy transfer in that kind of concentration and space and experiencing something so spacious and kind of pure together was really a kind of a strong memory for me. And so playing something like "Evidence" where I'm taking that idea, not necessarily developing it, but allowing the space and the in between the notes to breathe and not feeling rushed is something that, you know, it kind of came from playing with that group. Oh, and one thing I might add to that is that that piece that Tyshawn had, you would count in between, so you'd have a pitch and go like one and two and three and four, and so you'd be counting your butt off, but nobody else heard that. They just heard the spaces.

So there, you know, sometimes counting through space can help. You can like slow down the process. But then we'd play at other times where we really just tried to get that kind of feeling without counting. Okay.

Alright. Thank you.  
[Eugene Uman]

Everybody. Kris Davis. Kris, thank you so much. Thank you.

This was a real enjoyable kind of mind-bending experience. Thank you. Really enjoyed it. Thank you so much.

And let me just tell people what the rest of the day is gonna look like. So we're gonna take a lunch break from 1pm to 2:30pm, and then at 2:30pm we have performances from two emerging artists who are gonna be beaming in from Berklee School of Music: Hidemi Akaiwa and Camila Cortina. So that'll be from 2:30pm to 4pm. And then at four o'clock we have another masterclass that will be with Craig Taborn, and that'll go for about an hour.

And then at five o'clock we have questions to the panel. We've already gotten a lot of questions. It's been really nice. People have been emailing in their questions.

If you wanna email yours, we're probably already full, but I will definitely look at them and choose some. You can send them directly to me at vtazz@gmail.com, vtjazz@gmail.com. And then at eight o'clock we're gonna have a performance with Kris Davis. She's gonna do some prepared piano pieces as well as some of her other originals.

And Craig Taborn. So thank you so much. I'm hoping you're enjoying this. I certainly am.

It's a fascinating day. This is the Vermont Jazz Center. This is our fifth annual solo jazz piano festival. Thank you so much.

We'll see you at 2:30.