

**Getting Un-serious about Composing:  
Monty Python, Banana Nut Preludes and Bartók's Hidden-in-Plain-Sight Primer**

**Music Teachers National Association Conference, Reno, NV  
March 28, 2023 – 11:00 AM (Sierra 5)**

**Dr. John Salmon (Professor, University of North Carolina-Greensboro)  
Dr. Arthur Houle (Emeritus Professor, Colorado Mesa University)**

**Abstract:**

Find out how the famous and hilarious mantra of Monty Python's Flying Circus – "and now for something completely different" – can be a magical and zany catalyst for inspiring students to compose. Teachers and students will be engaged from the get-go by our step-by-step, comically inspired approaches to fanning the flames of originality. Uncover how even beginning students can unleash their latent sparks of creativity with specific musical elements, extra-musical imagery, "flip" books, moods, foods, games, harmonic progressions, and more – you name it, we'll see if it sticks to the wall! Can J. S. Bach's Inventions make us inventive? Can ice cream flavors inspire composition? Can beginners write original tunes on a one-line staff (also known as: "Ringo Starr's vocal range")? Imagine a "banana nut" prelude! Let's take our cue from Chopin and conjure up some unique genre hybrids ("Tarentellianos," anyone?).

Midway through the presentation, participants will take a 5-minute brain-rejuvenating break practicing "Minister of Silly Walks" moves. O.K., we're just kidding about that part. We do promise, however, to reveal how Béla Bartók's Mikrokosmos can, if used creatively, serve as an outstanding "how to" composition primer for students of all ages.

Together we'll share ideas on how to stoke our creative juices in this no-holds-barred, free-wheeling, so-far-out-of-the-box-you'll-forget-there-ever-was-a-box fun session.

Because this is a hands-on, interactive format, participants are encouraged to bring pencils, notepads, staff paper, Book One of Mikrokosmos, and – MOST importantly – a certifiable sense of humor!

**Presentation highlights:**

- "What am I?" – an intervallic approach to reading, leading to limited staff composing from the get-go
- Bartók's Mikrokosmos (esp. Books 1 & 2) – a composition primer
- The Monty Python method ("and now for something completely different")
- Bach Inventions ("Honest method, by which the amateurs of the keyboard...acquire a strong foretaste of composition.")

A show of hands – how many of us take seriously Bach's prefatory words?

How many of us have taken a stab at writing an *Invention*, had a student do so, or, at the very least, attempted to get "inventive" with an Invention?

For example -- apply authentic "passing tone" variants from #1 to #13:



- Variants on other standard repertory
- Hybrids ("Tarentellianos," anyone?)
- "Can you give me a Hanon with that?"
- Banana nut preludes and other fun imagery
- Putting students in harmony's way
- Improvise every day!
- Audience participation, please.

• Other tools/articles/books re: composition, improvisation, and creative historical performance practices:

- Carol Klose: Piano Teacher's Guide to Creative Composition
- Wynn-Anne Rossi Creative Composition Toolbox (in 6 books)
- Jeffrey Agrell & Aura Stroschein: Creative Pedagogy for Piano Teachers: Using Musical Games and Aural Techniques as a Dynamic Supplement for Piano Teaching
- "Flip" books:
  - Christine J. Schumann: <https://www.cjjamesmusic.com/creative-teaching-composition-impro>
- Mozart's Musical Dice Game, KV Anh. 294d (imslp)
- Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger: Chopin: Pianist and Teacher: As Seen by his Pupils
- Info on classical embellishing and improvising:  
<https://www.pianofestival.org/prizes/prizeembellish.htm>
- Ideas for spontaneous creativity (archival prize page):  
<https://www.pianofestival.org/prizes/prizesponta.htm>
- Festival for Creative Pianists – current online educational program:  
<https://www.festivalforcreativepianists.org/festival-info>
- Houle's "It's Easy to Improvise"  
([https://www.abundantsilence.org/uploads/5/9/1/4/59149543/itseasytoimprovise\\_houle\\_.pdf](https://www.abundantsilence.org/uploads/5/9/1/4/59149543/itseasytoimprovise_houle_.pdf))
- Articles by John Salmon: <https://johnsalmon.com/articles.html>
- Scholarly book on the authentic creative history of classical pianism:  
Kenneth Hamilton: After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance  
Review by Susan Tomes: *"...Throughout the 'golden age' of Romantic piano-playing, it was not usual to perform whole sonatas as these were thought too severe. Improvisation was popular, as was the habit of 'preluding', or making up musical links between items. Players might give themselves breaks while they chatted with friends in the audience. Most pianists were also composers, and routinely included their own pieces. Playing from memory was not required, and sometimes even frowned on."*
- Food for thought: 2011 NCKP Keynote: The Future of Pedagogy by Pete Jutras

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Presenter bios & contact info (see links):

**Dr. John Salmon** (<http://johnsalmon.com>), pianist/scholar, is a full professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He has performed on five continents and premiered works of Dave Brubeck, Nikolai Kapustin, and Lalo Schifrin.

**Dr. Arthur Houle** (<https://www.festivalforcreativepianists.org/luke-rackers>) is founder/artistic director of the Festival for Creative Pianists, a longstanding academic professor, a critically acclaimed performer/clinician, recipient of several teaching awards, and a published writer, composer, arranger, editor and recording artist.