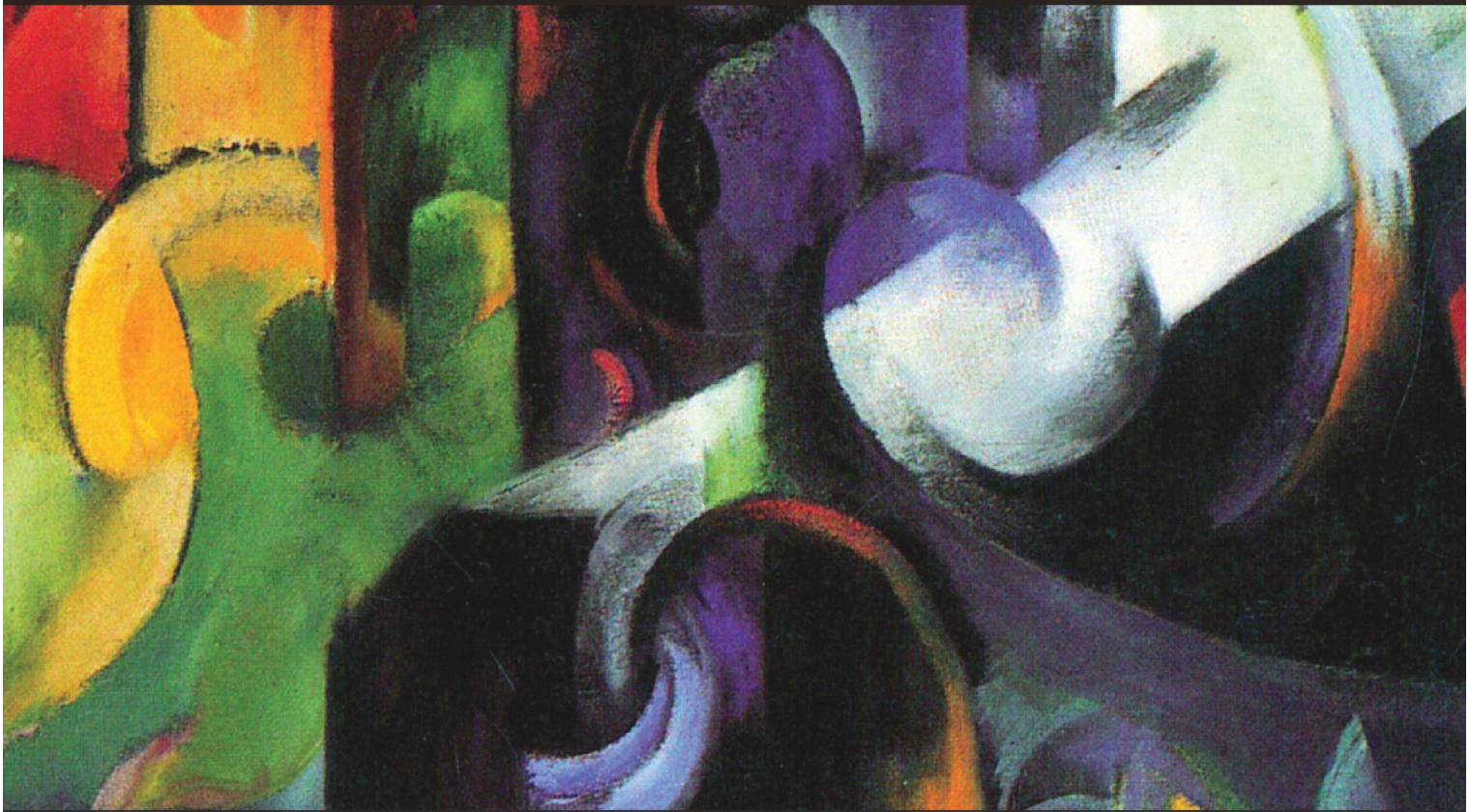


# **CREATIVITY TRIGGERS FOR MUSICIANS**



**STEVE TRESELER**

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## Foreword

What does it mean, to be a creative musician? In other art forms and disciplines, the act of creation is naturally tangible. Ceramicists can mold and squeeze; painters can brush and layer; dancers can leap and step.

For every music maker, and every instrument, there exists a personal vocabulary of sound, space, texture, and line. The language of music is not singular. These vocabularies—YOUR vocabularies—are fluid, transducing context and creating meaning.

Steve Treseler’s *Creativity Triggers for Musicians* provides prompts from which you can imagine and explore. Whether you self-identify as an improviser, a reader, an enthusiast, or a pro, actively engaging in the reflective practice of creativity and self-assessment will develop your personality in music and beyond.

That said, I invite you to enjoy a poem by Judy Brown.

### **A reservoir within**

Each of us needs  
A reservoir within,  
Because life doesn’t happen  
On an average.  
It has its hurricanes  
And droughts,  
And lovely days.  
So also joy.  
So also deep despair.

Go forth with *Creativity Triggers for Musicians*, and develop your own “reservoir within,” from which you can draw, paint, sculpt, animate, and perform.

### **Randy Wong**

Executive Director, Hawaii Youth Symphony  
Faculty, Music-in-Education at New England Conservatory of Music

# Introduction

How do we generate new musical ideas? The process may seem mysterious or magical, but it turns out creativity is a practice. As research professor and bestselling author Brené Brown tells us, “There's no such thing as creative people and non-creative people. There are only people who use their creativity and those who don't. Unused creativity doesn't disappear. It lives within us until it's expressed, neglected to death, or suffocated by resentment and fear.”

*Creativity Triggers for Musicians* will help you express your unused creativity, break through barriers, and create an abundance of original music.

*How does one learn improvisation? The only answer is to ask another question: What is stopping us? Spontaneous creation comes from our deepest being and is immaculately and originally ourselves. What we have to express is already with us, is us, so the work of creativity is not a matter of making the material come, but of unblocking the obstacles to its natural flow.*

– Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*

## Who This Book is For

- Classically-trained musicians who want to get off the page
- Jazz musicians who want to expand their creativity
- Aspiring improvisers, composers, and songwriters in any genre of music
- Bands and ensembles that want to develop spontaneity, trust, and new material
- Educators who want to bring creative music into the classroom

## Practices and Triggers

Chapter One presents an overview of eight creative practices that underpin idea generation in any creative discipline. In Chapters Two through Six, we put these practices into action through *Creativity Triggers*: prompts and exercises that serve as frameworks for musical improvisation.

Creativity Triggers will help you draw from your skills, intuition, experiences, and culture in order to:

- Make connections between seemingly unrelated ideas
- Rearrange existing material
- Imagine something that doesn't exist and bring it into the world
- Experiment and play

As social psychologist Karl Weick puts it, “creativity usually means putting new things into old combinations and old things into new combinations.”

### **An Expanded Practice**

A compelling body of research from Anders Ericsson shows us that “deliberate practice” is the most effective strategy for mastering a skill. Ericsson describes deliberate practice as “a training activity aimed at reaching a level just beyond the currently attainable level of performance by engaging in full concentration, analysis after feedback, and repetitions with refinement.”

Deliberate practice helps us build technique and learn repertoire, but we need to expand our practice in order to create original art, which is a messy and non-linear process. When we dive into a creative experiment, we may not have the clear and measurable goals required for deliberate practice. Our best results often surprise us.

The creative practices outlined in this book complement and overlap with deliberate practice. They help us create with the technique, knowledge, and intuition we have already developed.

### **Instant Composition**

Improvisation is the intersection of spontaneous composition and performance. The process gives us raw musical material we can shape into compositions later on. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin were renowned improvisers, and many of their pieces are improvisations captured through notation.

Whether you seek to perform live improvisations or compose your own music (or both), the practices in this book will help you unblock and unlock your innate creativity.

### **Engage and Collaborate**

This book is a hands-on musical experience. Familiarity with a concept is no substitute for experiencing and internalizing it.

Assemble a group of musicians to work through the *Group Triggers*. If you think your friends will be intimidated by the word *improvisation*, invite them to join you for some musical games. Building community through creative music eases fears about the process.

# Chapter One: Eight Creative Practices

This chapter distills wisdom received from musicians, composers, artists, writers, scholars, and entrepreneurs into eight creative practices. These practices explore the strategies and mindset necessary for creating original work. Although there isn't a step-by-step dummies guide for creating art, these eight practices can serve as a compass as you draw your own map.

## 1: Experimentation

Like scientists, creative musicians follow their curiosity and design experiments. Some experiments lead to compelling music. Others flop.

Author James Clear encourages artists to treat failure like a scientist. He notes that in a scientific experiment, “some results are positive and some are negative, but all of them are data points. Each result is a piece of data that can ultimately lead to an answer. And that’s exactly how a scientist treats failure: as another data point.”

Scientists add to their body of knowledge every time they confirm or disprove a hypothesis. Adopting this detached mindset allows us to try new things without taking a failed experiment personally.

In *On Writing*, Stephen King tells us, “Try any goddam thing you like, no matter how boringly normal or outrageous. If it works, fine. If it doesn't, toss it. Toss it even if you love it.”

## 2. Play

Although we “play music,” tedious technical drills, high-stakes performances, and personal insecurities can disconnect us from a playful practice. When a little kid plays, she doesn't worry about measuring incremental improvement or becoming the best player in the region. Play is the purpose. Embracing play helps us connect with the intrinsic value of playing and practicing music.

In *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, Stephen Nachmanovitch writes,

*Anthropologists have found “galumphing” to be one of the prime talents that characterize higher life forms. Galumphing is the immaculately rambunctious and seemingly inexhaustible play-energy apparent in puppies, kittens, children, baby baboons . . . We galumph when we hop instead of walk, when we take the scenic route instead of the efficient one, when we play a game whose rules demand a limitation of our powers, when we are interested in means rather*

*than in ends. We voluntarily create obstacles in our path and then enjoy overcoming them. In the higher animals and in people, it is of supreme evolutionary value.*

He also speaks to a more powerful type of creative play:

*There is an old Sanskrit word, **lila**, which means play. Richer than our word, it mean divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos. Lila, free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment, and the play of God. It also means love.*

### **3. Limitations**

Although it may seem counterintuitive, self-imposed limitations inspire greater creativity.

*My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit.*

– Igor Stravinsky

Confronting a blank canvas can feel overwhelming and paralyzing. To get the creative juices flowing, artists across many disciplines use limitations to generate new ideas. Creative writing prompts inspire authors and poets, actors create spontaneous scenes by playing theater games, and contestant chefs on the reality cooking shows create new dishes on the spot with surprise ingredients.

Narrowing our focus inspires greater resourcefulness. When we are constrained in one area, we are free to play and experiment in other dimensions.

### **4. Listening**

*Contrary to popular myth, improvisation has almost nothing to do with virtuosic playing, and everything to do with virtuosic listening.*

– Nicole Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound: Improvisational Games for Classical Musicians*



As creative musicians, we need to deeply listen to:

- Performances and recordings by great artists
- Our ensemble members
- Imagined music in our inner hearing
- Recordings of our own music
- Sounds in our environment

Deep listening inspires us, helps us improve, and informs our musical decisions in the moment.

## 5. Flow

Have you ever been so absorbed in an activity that hours passed like minutes? Maybe you were playing a game, learning a skill, playing music, or deep in conversation. This joyous experience of deep concentration is known as a “flow state” or being “in the zone.”

Flow is an optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best. When we are in flow states, we experience heightened creativity and accelerated problem solving.

*[Flow is] being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost.*

– Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, psychologist, author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*

We can reliably enter flow states by:

- Indulging curiosity
- Striving toward attainable challenges
- Seeking novel and unpredictable environments
- Engaging in communities with shared goals and equal participation
- Working in a distraction-free environment

## 6. Risk

Creating art requires that we push ourselves out of our comfort zones—playing it safe isn't an option. We have to risk, and actually allow, failure on our path to putting remarkable art into the world.

Our desire to seek comfort and safety is biological. We avoid creative risks because the fears of being judged, criticized, and humiliated are wired into the fight-or-flight center of our brains. Even though public performances aren't actually dangerous, they can activate the same neural alarm system as a physical threat.

*When [music] sucks NOTHING BAD HAPPENS. We are not surgeons. You are free to experiment and no one will die. If someone dies at your gig, it's not your fault. It was just their time.*

– Adam Benjamin, keyboardist for Kneebody

We can manage and ease our fears, but they will never go away entirely. Insulating ourselves from risk feels safe in the moment, but it keeps our original contributions bottled up inside.

## 7. Quantity Leads to Quality

Great artists don't wait around for fully formed masterpieces to fall out of the sky. They develop a practice of creating every day—even if the results are mediocre or worse.

*It's widely assumed that there's a trade-off between quantity and quality—if you want to do better work, you have to do less of it—but this turns out to be false. In fact, when it comes to idea generation, quantity is the most predictable path to quality.*

– Adam Grant, *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*

Grant notes that the most renowned classical composers also produced the greatest volume of compositions. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven wrote hundreds of pieces in order to produce a much smaller canon of masterpieces. Brahms once said that the mark of an artist is *how much he throws away*.

The key to this practice is a willingness to produce lousy work. Lots of it.

*One way to become creative is to discipline yourself to generate bad ideas. The worse the better. Do it a lot and magically you'll discover that some good ones slip through.*

– Seth Godin, bestselling author and entrepreneur

Creative blocks come from the need to love everything you create.

## 8. Suspend Judgment

*Don't try to create and analyze at the same time. They're different processes.*

– John Cage and Sister Corita Kent, *Ten Rules for Teachers and Students*

This is a challenging practice, because as artists we are constantly assessing and judging our work. As performance psychologist Noa Kageyama puts it, “your self-monitor is your best friend when you’re practicing. And your worst enemy when performing. So in order to get better at ‘performance mode,’ you’ll have to practice turning the self-monitor off from time to time.”

Sometimes our initial judgments are misguided. This was the case when my friend Raymond Larsen recorded an album of free improvisations with his quartet. Initially, he thought the music wasn’t clicking and the first day in the studio was wasted. Weeks later, he listened to the session and discovered the material from day one provided the most captivating music from the session. Ray finds more enjoyment with subsequent listens.

Accessing flow states and recording your music will help you focus on the present tense. You can save the analysis, judgment, and editing for later.

### Let’s Play

Now it’s time to put these practices into action. Return to these eight creative practices to regain focus and overcome barriers if you get stuck.

## Chapter Two: Creative Limitations

*Practicing can be a game, the goal is a deeper knowing of musical sound. One strategy is to draw the greatest variety of music from the smallest amount of material . . . [These] games are the kind master and beginner can play with skill.*

– W. A. Mathieu, *The Listening Book: Discovering Your Own Music*

This chapter introduces *Creativity Triggers*, frameworks for improvisation that draw from the eight creative practices. Creativity Triggers are similar to creative writing prompts and improv theater games—these exercises help us narrow our focus and generate new ideas through experimentation and play.

Although many of the triggers reference “playing” music, they are designed for vocalists and instrumentalists alike.

### Menus

When my wife and I were planning our wedding, we didn’t have a clear vision for the ceremony. Our minister offered us her “Chinese Takeout Menu of Wedding Ceremonies,” which listed options for openings, readings, vows, and closings. This framework was a huge relief and helped us put together a personal and meaningful ceremony.

The experience inspired me to assemble menus for musicians, because having a list of options can help us break through indecisiveness. If you don’t know what to order at a restaurant, at some point you just pick something on the menu and eat lunch.

### Creativity Trigger: Pick Two

In *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, Stephen Nachmanovitch suggests “two rules are more than enough. If we have a rule concerning harmony and another concerning rhythms, if we have a rule concerning mood and another concerning the use of silence, we don’t need any more. The unconscious has infinite repertoires of structure already; all it needs is a little external structure on which to crystallize.”

The *Creative Limitation Menus* on pages 13 and 14 list limitations for structuring improvised pieces. The challenge is to create interesting music within a narrow set of musical restrictions.

- Choose two limitations from different categories.
- Staying within these limitations, play a short improvisation (30-60 seconds) that has a clear beginning, middle, and end.
- As W. A. Mathieu suggests, treat the limitations as a musical game.

## Creative Limitation Menu: Basic

### **Dynamics**

- Very soft
- Very loud
- Gradual crescendo
- Gradual diminuendo

### **Pitch**

- Choose a single pitch
- Choose two pitches
- Choose three pitches
- Pentatonic scale  
(Scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 5, 6)

### **Range**

- Upper register
- Lower register
- Gradually transition from high to low
- Gradually transition from low to high

### **Articulation**

- Detached
- Connected
- Accented
- Rapid articulation

### **Rhythm**

- Rubato
- Slow pulse
- Medium pulse
- Fast pulse
- Gradually speed up
- Gradually slow down
- Rhythmic ostinato (repeated rhythm)

### **Density**

- Short phrases, short rests
- Long phrases, long rests
- Constant sound, no silence
- More silence than sound

## Creative Limitation Menu: Expanded

### Dynamics

- Gradual crescendo
- Gradual diminuendo
- Very soft
- Soft
- Medium soft
- Medium loud
- Loud
- Very loud
- Extreme contrast, only *ppp* and *fff*

### Pitch

- Choose a single pitch
- Choose two pitches
- Choose three pitches
- Choose a scale from one of the scale menus in Chapter Four

### Range

- Upper register
- Middle register
- Lower register
- Extreme registers (highest and lowest register only)
- Transition from high to low
- Transition from low to high
- Stay within range of a perfect fifth

### Mood

- Solemn      • Joyous
- Silly        • Aggressive
- Despondent • Nostalgic
- Romantic   • Anguished
- Celebratory • Angry
- Stressed    • Peaceful

### Articulation

- Detached    • Connected
- Accented    • Rapid articulation

### Rhythm

- Rubato
- Tempo of your choice
- Groove/style of your choice
- Meter of your choice
- No pulse
- Gradual accelerando
- Gradual ritardando
- Rhythmic ostinato

### Density

- Short phrases, short rests
- Long phrases, long rests
- Constant sound, no rests
- More silence than sound
- Sparse as possible
- Transition from sparse to dense
- Transition from dense to sparse

### Phrasing

- Call and response
- Repeat a short phrase, make small changes over time
- Pointillistic
- Trills

### Tone Color

- Dark      • Bright
- Rough     • Smooth
- Dry        • Warm
- Cold      • Thick
- Thin      • Extended techniques

### Pitch Inflections (if applicable)

- Constant vibrato:
  - Wide      - Narrow
  - Fast      - Slow
- Variable vibrato
- Pitch bends

The magic comes from experimenting with the musical elements that aren't restricted. For instance, if your two limitations are "choose two pitches" and "slow pulse," you can drastically alter the dynamics, rhythmic values, density, articulation, and tone color.

Work through several sets of limitations. If you don't like the results, you have the power to change them. Remember, Brahms wants to see how much material you throw away.

## **Repetition and Variety**

Balancing thematic unity with unpredictability is the key to crafting an interesting improvisation. Recurring themes bring unity to a piece, and surprises defy listeners' expectations. The ratio of repetition to variety can vary depending on the musical effect you want to create. Hypnotic minimalist pieces feature excessive repetition, and through-composed classical music and avant-garde jazz are highly unpredictable.

If you think your improvisations are random and disjointed, focus on repeating and developing themes. If you think your improvisations are boring, experiment with more variety and surprise. Chapter Five: Variations on a Theme presents approaches for developing a theme.

At any point in an improvisation, you can make one of four decisions:

1. Repeat what you just played
2. Vary/develop something you previously played
3. Play something new
4. Rest

## **Creativity Trigger: Two Pitches**

Improvise a short piece on the piano with the pitch A, in any octave. To end the piece, play the pitch D once.

## **Listening**

**György Ligeti. *Musica Ricercata*. I. Sostenuto – Misurato – Prestissimo. 1953.**

This movement follows the structure of the Two Pitches trigger above (experiment with the prompt before listening to the piece). Listen to how Ligeti shapes the dynamics, range, articulation, rhythm, and density to craft a compelling piece.

*I set myself such problems as: what can I do with a single note? with its octave? with an interval? with two intervals? What can I do with specific rhythmic interrelationships which could serve as the basic elements in a formation of rhythms and intervals?*

– György Ligeti

In the second movement of *Musica Ricercata*, Ligeti restricts himself to three pitches. In the third movement, he restricts himself to four pitches, and so on. In the eleventh movement, he uses all twelve pitches.

## More Creativity Triggers

### Three Movement Piece

Choose three sets of limitations to structure a three movement improvisation.

### Themed Improvisation

Think of a person, place, emotion, object, or story to serve as the theme for an improvised piece. Choose limitations that effectively express your theme.

### Image Piece

Improvise a piece inspired by a painting or photograph.

### Chance Piece

Choose limitations randomly.

### Custom Menu

Add your own limitations to the menu.

### Groove

Improvise with a drum groove from the [Drumgenius](#) mobile app. The app features 400 jazz, rock, and Latin American drum loops.

### Free Play

When creative writers “free write,” they write continuously without editing, judging, or censoring. Similarly, we can “free play” music. Set a timer for 5, 10, or 20 minutes and play continuously. Record your free play because you may find material to develop in future improvisations or compositions.



### **Horizon Piece**

Step outside or gaze out the window. Scan the horizon from left to right, and let the outlines of the landscape and/or buildings shape the contour of your improvised melody.

### **Develop**

Choose limitations that develop over time. For example, begin with the limitations “rubato” and “connected” and gradually transition to “medium pulse” and “detached.”

### **Goal-Oriented Play**

We can use limitations and improvisation to overcome technical challenges. For example, if a specific interval is difficult to execute on your instrument, improvise a piece that centers around the challenging interval. Bringing play to a technical challenge helps to unify deliberate and creative practices.

### **Extreme Interpretation**

Experiment with mood, rhythm, and/or tone color limitations to play extreme interpretations of a notated piece.

## **Creativity Triggers for Groups**

### **Pick Two Together**

As a group, play with the Pick Two, Three Movement Piece, Themed Improvisation, Image Piece, Chance Piece, Custom Menu, Groove, Free Play, Develop, and/or Extreme Interpretation triggers. If you chose to limit the pitch, musicians can choose pitches individually, or your group can agree on a common set of pitches.

### **Strange Meeting**

Ask each musician to choose two limitations without sharing them with the group. On cue, musicians begin playing together.

### **Graphic Scores**

Divide into two or more groups, and ask each group to sketch pictures and/or symbols to structure an improvised piece. Swap drawings, discuss strategies for interpreting the scores, and perform for one another.

### **Follow the Leader**

A lead musician introduces a musical theme. The other musicians imitate the leader to form a unified texture. The followers do not need to match every pitch, but rather copy the shape, rhythm, dynamics, and mood. If the leader changes or develops the theme, the group listens and follows.

### **Layers of Contrast (Growing and Shrinking)**

One musician improvises unaccompanied. After 15-30 seconds, a second musician enters with a new part that contrasts with and complements the first player. Remaining players enter one at a time, adding new layers of counterpoint. Once everyone has entered, players exit the piece one by one.

### **Role Playing**

Assign each musician one of four roles (more than one musician be assigned to a role):

- **Leader** – Introduce a new musical theme or texture
- **Accompany** – Provide support for a lead musician
- **Copycat** – Imitate how another musician is playing
- **Contrast** – Add a new layer

At any point, musicians are welcome to drop out and listen. Once players are familiar with the roles, they may freely switch.

## Reflection Questions

Reflecting on our performances makes us stronger musicians and collaborators. You can ask and answer the following questions:

- Immediately after playing
- After listening to a recording (this helps us suspend judgment while playing)
- Letting weeks or months pass before listening to the recording

Listen and reflect with a detached and compassionate curiosity.

- When was the music most compelling? Why?
- When was the music not effective? Why?
- What surprised you about the performance?
- What patterns emerged?
- What changes would make the music better?
- Did you discover any material you would like to explore in a future improvisation or composition?
- What did you learn from the experience?

## Additional Questions for Members of an Ensemble

- When was your playing an integral part of the music? Why?
- When was your playing a distraction? Why?
- When was your playing nonessential (it could be removed without changing the character of the piece)?

## Chapter Three: Inner Hearing

*[You] really have to practice the coordination between the mind and the fingers, the ideas and the body. You have to practice finding the ideas on your horn, getting there at the same time the idea comes into your head. It's a matter of developing instant touch.*

– Art Farmer, jazz trumpeter

Inner hearing (also known as “audiation”) is imagined music. Have an earworm stuck in your head? This is your inner hearing in overdrive. Your musical imagination is a wellspring of new music waiting to be discovered.

When I attended the Banff International Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music, guitarist Anthony Wilson led a brilliant workshop called *Composition: Uncovering and Revealing the Already Complete Idea*.

He asked a few dozen musicians to sit in silence and deeply listen for melodies in our inner hearing. We silently wrote down our inner melodies to the best of our abilities and performed our compositions for each other. Hearing the music that we silently composed on the spot was a beautiful experience, demonstrating the power of intuition and inner hearing.

*Where do we go to listen to the music that has not yet been heard? There is a place in our body to which we can turn and listen. If we go in there and become quiet, we can start to bring the music up.*

– Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*

These practices will help you develop a connection between your imagination, intellect, emotional center, body, and instrument.

## Creativity Triggers

### Play by Ear

**1. Imagine**

Find a quiet space and listen to a familiar melody in your inner hearing.

**2. Sing**

Slowly and accurately sing the melody.

**3. Trial and Error**

Find the pitches on your instrument through trial and error. Making mistakes is part of the process.

**4. Analyze**

Identify the form, key, and meter. Write out the scale degrees of the melody. (“Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” in scale degrees: 1, 1, 5, 5, 6, 6, 5, 4, 4, 3, 3, 2, 2, 1.)

**5. Practice**

Practice the melody until it is ready to perform. Transpose the melody into other keys by using the scale degrees. Notate the melody. Improvise your own variations (see Chapter Five).

Working through this process many times will help you transcribe music from recordings and capture original melodies that pass through your inner hearing.

The process can be humbling. Lean in and treat failure like a scientist.

### Intuitive Melody Writing

1. Sit at a piano. Take a few deep breaths to let your mind and body relax.
2. Sing a pitch.
3. Match the pitch on the piano through trial and error.
4. Play and sing the pitch and listen. Let your inner hearing reveal the next pitch. Sing the second pitch and find it on the keyboard.
5. Play and sing the first two notes and listen for the third. Let the pitches appear intuitively.
6. Repeat the process until the phrase reaches a natural ending.
7. Play/sing your melody several times and experiment with rhythmic and dynamic phrasing.
8. Write down your melody in a notebook.
9. Repeat.

### **Expanding Intuitive Melodies**

Once you have composed dozens of intuitive melodies, revisit them in a separate session.

- Write melodic and rhythmic variations (see Chapter Five)
- Write a contrasting B phrase to answer your melody
- Combine variations with a B phrase:  
A (original melody) A' (variation) B (response or answer phrase)
- Write a countermelody—you can record your original melody and sing/play along to create a second part
- Write a bass line to accompany your melody
- Turn the intuitive melody into a bass line and write a new melody above it
- Write a rhythmic groove to accompany your melody

### **Environment Piece**

Play a duet with the ambient sounds in your environment.

## **Creativity Triggers for Groups**

### **Communal Melody**

Collectively compose an intuitive melody by asking musicians to take turns adding one pitch.

### **Straight to the Page**

Ask each musician to imagine and notate a melody without playing or singing. Perform your melodies for each other (Anthony Wilson's exercise).

### **Pass the Sketch**

Each musician writes a composition using the melodic sketch of another player.

## **Deep Imagination**

Inner hearing goes beyond hearing melodies. The practice allows us to imagine the instrumentation, texture, form, and emotional impact of larger works. Skilled composers and improvisers have the experience, skills, and guts to transform imagined music into artistic realities.

## Chapter Four: Drones

A drone is a sustained tone that accompanies a piece of music. Drones provide warm and meditative sonic environments for musical traditions all over the globe. Improvising with drones helps us develop a deep relationship with melody.

### Recommended practice drones:

- Download 12 drone tracks for free at [stevetres.com/bonuses](http://stevetres.com/bonuses)
- [\*Cello Drones for Tuning and Improvisation\*](#) by Marcia Sloane
- [\*iTanpura\*](#) or [\*iTablaPro\*](#) mobile apps

### Listening

#### Ravi Shankar. *Three Ragas*. World Pacific Records. 1956.

The classical music of India features intricate melodies and rhythms layered over a constant drone. Hindustani (North Indian) Sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar brought Indian classical music to Western audiences through his collaborations with George Harrison in the 1960s. *Three Ragas* is a beautiful introduction to the brilliance and expressive power of Indian classical music.

### Creativity Trigger: Sing In Unison With a Drone

Sing in unison with a live or recorded drone on the pitch C.

*Singing in unison with a drone is an intrinsic aspect of learning North Indian classical music—possibly the most pitch-sensitive music in the world . . . Sound the drone and listen for a full minute. Listening is the key. Let the expansiveness of the drone’s sound, even if it is soft, fill you up. Take an ample breath and, using [the syllable] **sa** with vowel wide open, sing the drone’s pitch within the sound of the drone.*

– W. A. Mathieu, *Harmonic Experience: Tonal Harmony from Its Natural Origins to Its Modern Expression*

## Creativity Trigger: Major Scale With a Drone

Solfège (movable do) and North Indian sargam are systems of syllables that represent each scale degree. These syllables help us internalize the distinct character of each interval.

In any key, *do* and *sa* are always in unison with the drone (scale degree 1).

Scale Degrees:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
								
Solfège Syllables:	Do	Re	Mi	Fa	Sol	La	Si (Ti)	Do
Sargam Syllables:	Sa	Re	Ga	Ma	Pa	Dha	Ni	Sa

Slowly sing the pitches of the C major scale with solfège or sargam syllables along with a C drone (or change the pitch of the drone to a key that fits your vocal range).

Deeply listen to how each scale degree resonates with the drone. You will notice some intervals sound smooth and consonant while others are more dissonant and harder to sing in tune. Some pitches have tendencies to pull toward other tones—scale degree 7 is called the “leading tone” because it strongly leads toward the tonic a half step higher. Take time to explore all of these sounds and tendencies.

Once you feel comfortable singing ascending and descending, mix up the notes. Freely change direction, incorporate skips and leaps into your melodies, and expand the range beyond an octave.

Next, improvise melodies from your inner hearing through your instrument. If you are a wind player, also improvise on the piano so you can sing as you play.


Change the pitch of the drone and work through this material above in other keys. Each interval/syllable retains its character in any key.



## Chromatic Solfege Syllables


When you want to explore intervals outside the major scale, sing the corresponding solfege syllables:

8   
**Do**

7   
Tay **Ti**

6   
Lay **La** Li

5   
Say **Sol** Si

4   
**Fa** Fi

3   
May **Mi**

2   
Rah **Re** Ri

1   
**Do** Di

## Melody as Mood States

You will expand your expressive power as you internalize the character and mood of each interval.

*When you are improvising, be sure to keep the drone sounding in the air as well as in your ear. Try to appreciate your melody not so much as an up-and-down ride, or even as a series of intervals, but rather as a succession of related harmonic states, a succession of moods. The secret of melody is that it is a thread of feeling-states.*



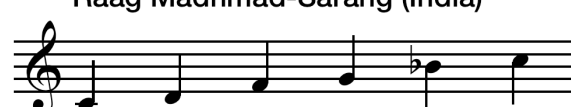

– W. A. Mathieu, *Harmonic Experience*

## Creativity Trigger: Scale Menus

The Pentatonic Scale Menu and Mode Menu give pitch combinations to explore with a drone.

1. Choose a scale from the Pentatonic Scale Menu on page 27 or the Mode Menu on page 28.
2. Sing the scale ascending and descending (using chromatic solfege syllables) along with a drone. If you have trouble finding the pitches, play them on the piano as you sing.
3. Freely improvise melodies with your voice and instrument. Download the scale menus for bass clef, alto clef, and transposing instruments at [stevetres.com/bonuses](http://stevetres.com/bonuses).
4. Write down any associations, visualizations, or emotions the mode evokes.
5. Record yourself and/or write down interesting melodic phrases so you can shape your improvisations into compositions later on.
6. Repeat the process with a new scale.

## Pentatonic Scale Menu

Major Pentatonic	Minor Pentatonic
	
Major b6	Minor 6
	
Minor #3	Major b2
	
Minor b5	Split Third
	
Raag Hamsadhvani (India)	Raag Shivrangini (India)
	
Raag Madhmad-Sarang (India)	Raag Durga (India)
	
Raga Amritavarshini (India)	Hirajoshi (Japan)
	
In Sen (Japan)	Iwato (Japan)
	

# Mode Menu

Lydian	Major
Mixolydian	Dorian
Natural Minor / Aeolian	Phrygian
Harmonic Minor	Freygish (Klezmer)
Ukranian Dorian (Klezmer)	Melodic Minor (ascending)
Lydian Dominant	Lydian Augmented
Harmonic Major	Whole Tone
Octatonic (Diminished) half step - whole step	Octatonic (Diminished) whole step - half step



Note that the modes borrowed from Japan, India, and Eastern Europe are outside their original cultural and musical contexts. Pitches in each Indian raga unfold in a specific way:

*A raga is a scientific, precise, subtle and aesthetic melodic form with its own peculiar ascending and descending movement consisting of either a full seven-note octave, or a series of six or five notes in a rising or falling structure called the Arohana and Avarohana. It is the subtle difference in the order of notes, an omission of a dissonant note, an emphasis on a particular note, the slide from one note to the other that demarcate one raga from the other.*

– Ravi Shankar

With this in mind, the equal tempered approximations are fascinating to explore in free improvisations.

## **More Creativity Triggers**

### **Modal Modulation**

Change modes in the middle of an improvisation.

### **Create Your Own Mode**

Alter a mode from one of the menus or build a new mode from scratch.

### **Drums and Drones**

Improvise with a drone and a drum/percussion rhythmic groove. Play with the [Drumgenius](#) and [iTablaPro](#) mobile apps.

### **Transpose**

Change the pitch of the drone and transpose the modes in your head.

### **Multi Menu**

Incorporate the Creative Limitation Menus from Chapter Two.

### **Free Play With a Drone**

Freely improvise without a pitch limitation.

## Creativity Triggers for Groups

### Collective Modes

Explore the Creativity Triggers on page 29 with a group.

Download the scale menus for bass clef, alto clef, and transposing instruments at [stevetres.com/bonuses](http://stevetres.com/bonuses).

### No Drone

Collectively improvise with a scale from one of the menus without an accompanying drone.

### Oblique Motion Duet (from W. A. Mathieu)

Musician 1: Sustain a drone.

Musician 2: Improvise, end on a sustained tone as the cue to switch roles.

### Drone Episode

Structure a drone section or movement within a larger piece.

## Pure Harmonic Tuning

In the Western tuning system of equal temperament, every interval besides the octave is deliberately detuned. Although the purity of the harmony suffers, this compromise gives us the benefits of modulation, the circle of fifths, and a smooth chromatic scale.

Indian classical music is one of many traditions that employs a pure tuning system called “just intonation.” Consonant intervals in just intonation sound smoother because they are at unity with the harmonic series. Singing and playing with drones is one of the best ways to experience the purity of just intonation.

A stark contrast between the two systems is the tuning of scale degree three. Sing *mi* or *ga* with a drone and let the pitch settle into a pure consonance with the drone. If you play a variable pitch instrument, match this pitch with your instrument. This “just” third is noticeably lower in pitch than an equal tempered third. When it resonates with the drone, you will hear the dissonance beats disappear. Turn off your electronic tuner and find the pitch by ear.

Take a deep dive into the practice of just intonation through W. A. Mathieu’s book *Harmonic Experience: Tonal Harmony from Its Natural Origins to Its Modern Expression*. Mathieu masterfully reconciles the purity of just intonation with the utility of equal temperament.

## Chapter Five: Variations on a Theme

The theme and variations form in classical music features the statement of a melody followed by repetitions with melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and textural variations. Musicians in the Baroque and Classical eras were trained to improvise their own variations on popular themes.

*Nowadays we associate contemporary improvisation with jazz or bluegrass, not classical music; we don't often get the opportunity to hear a classical musician improvise. However, this wasn't always the case. In previous centuries, the occupations of composer and performer were inextricably linked. The one who composed music also executed it, sometimes spontaneously.*

– NPR's *Performance Today*

### Listening

**W. A. Mozart. 12 Variations on "Ah, vous dirai-je maman" ("Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"). K.265. 1781.**

During his lifetime, Mozart was more famous as an improviser than as a composer. Mozart's variations on this simple french folk melody showcase his virtuosity and imagination.

**Louis Armstrong and His All Stars. "When the Saints Go Marching In." *Jazz Is Back in Grand Rapids*. 1956.**

Spontaneous embellishments of blues, folk, and march melodies marked the birth of jazz improvisation in the early 20th century. Today, the most common form of jazz improvisation is a theme and variations form: musicians improvise new melodies over a repeated harmonic cycle.

In this recording, Louis Armstrong improvises ten variations on the traditional melody "When the Saints Go Marching In" (seven on trumpet and three on voice). Listen to how Armstrong manipulates the theme melodically, rhythmically, and tonally. The piece features fiery improvised accompaniment and solos by clarinetist Edmond Hall and trombonist Trummy Young. During the improvised solos, listen for the theme of "Saints" in your inner hearing.

### Creativity Trigger: Improvise Variations

Choose a simple melody you can play or sing without notation (see Play by Ear on page 21). Play your own variations using limitations from the Theme and Variations Menu on page 32.

## Theme and Variations Menu

### Rhythmic

- Repeat pitches, e.g. turn a quarter note into two eighth notes
- Turn a long note into a short note and leave space
- Syncopation – move some notes to off-beats
- Change the tempo
- Displacement – shift an entire phrase by starting it early or late
- Change the meter
- Extreme rubato
- Stretch out or contract phrases (augmentation and diminution)

### Melodic

- Embellish the melody with passing and neighbor tones
- Change the pitch of a few melody notes
- Add fills between phrases
- Omit notes from the melody
- Change register

### Lyrics

- Change a few words
- Add or omit words
- Write your own lyrics

### More Variations

- Pitch inflections
- Dynamics
- Tone Color
- Articulation
- Add an introduction, interlude, and/or coda
- Play in a different style
- Change tonality – major to minor or vice versa, use a scale from the Mode Menu in Chapter Four
- Retrograde – play melody backward
- Inversion – reverse the direction of each interval

## More Creativity Triggers

### Multi-Movement Variations

Compose/improvise variations of a famous melody.

### Original Piece

Compose/improvise variations of an original melody.

### Into Abstraction

Improvise variations on a theme that progressively get more complex and abstract.

### Motivic Development

Play variations on a single phrase or motif from your theme.



## Creativity Trigger for Groups: The Card Game

The Card Game is an adaptation of an activity in Jeffrey Agrell's book, *Improvised Chamber Music*. Musicians are assigned specific roles that dictate how they will interact with the ensemble.

1. Write down the sixteen roles on cards:

- **Theme** – play the melody, as composed or with variations
- **Long tones, Long Silences**
- **Ostinato** – a continually repeated phrase or motive that can gradually develop
- **Percussion** – rhythmic accompaniment, key clicks, knocking, body percussion
- **Response** – answer the theme during sustained tones or rests
- **Accompany** – focus on supporting the lead voices
- **Imitate** – play only what you hear
- **Drone** – constant sustained tone
- **Extended Techniques** – nontraditional sounds
- **Sparse as Possible**
- **Pointillism** – staccato phrases
- **Arpeggios** – with or without predetermined harmony
- **Bass Line** – with or without predetermined harmony
- **Interrupt** – surprising interjections
- **Soloist** – featured improviser
- **Free Agent** – free from any specific role

2. Choose a familiar theme.

3. Give one musician the “Theme” card, and distribute cards deliberately or randomly to the rest of the ensemble.

4. Improvise a group variation, staying within the limitations of the respective roles.

5. Experiment with different combinations of accompaniment roles.

6. Record and listen to your variations. Answer the reflection questions on page 19.

## **Multi-Movement Group Variations**

Choose roles from The Card Game to structure a set of variations. For example:

### **Quartet Variation 1: Rubato**

Musician #1 Theme  
Musician #2 Drone  
Musician #3 Ostinato  
Musician #4 Percussion

### **Variation 3: In Parallel Minor**

#1 Interrupt  
#2 Theme  
#3 Extended Techniques  
#4 Sparse as possible

### **Variation 2: Medium Swing**

#1 Arpeggios  
#2 Counterpoint  
#3 Theme  
#4 Bass Line

### **Variation 4**

#1 Free Agent  
#2 Free Agent  
#3 Free Agent  
#4 Theme

## **Two Cards**

Give each musician two cards. Players can switch roles at their own discretion, or the entire ensemble can switch from card one to card two on cue.

## **Conducted Improvisation**

Set aside the “Theme” card. A leader assigns roles to musicians and conducts a piece. The conductor cues entrances and cutoffs for each player and may exchange cards in the middle of the piece.

## Chapter Six: Text Setting

The creativity triggers in this chapter explore the deep-rooted connection between poetry and music.

*Poems are rough notations for the music we are.*

– Rumi

### Listening

**Esperanza Spalding. “Little Fly.” *Chamber Music Society*. 2010.**

Spalding, a groundbreaking vocalist and bassist, crafted a brilliant setting of William Blake’s 1794 poem, *The Fly*.

*I remember being in Portland and picking this book—the painting on the cover of the book struck me. I had no idea what it was; I just saw the painting. And the first page I turn to was this poem. In the store, I read the poem about ten times. It's just an incredibly powerful, simple little poem. I bought the book and put that poem above my desk. It's been in front of my face for eight or nine years. Two years ago, practicing this melody, [I thought] I definitely want to put lyrics to this, and I realized that it fit the poem to a T. Somehow, my subconscious really wanted to sing this to the people.*

– Esperanza Spalding

**John Coltrane. “Part 4 - Psalm.” *A Love Supreme*. Impulse. 1964.**

At the peak of his popularity, jazz saxophone legend John Coltrane recorded his spiritual and musical masterpiece *A Love Supreme*. Coltrane wrote a devotional poem for the liner notes, and in “Part 4 - Psalm,” Coltrane narrates each word of the poem through his saxophone. The music evokes the cadence and musicality of an African American preacher.

Listen to “Psalm” synchronized to the text of the poem (in Coltrane’s handwriting) at <https://vimeo.com/38345026>.

## **Creativity Trigger: Melodic Text Setting**

### **1. Choose a Short Poem**

Choose a poem that resonates with you. If you write poetry, use an original. Search for poems on the Poetry Foundation's website at [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org).

### **2. Recite the Poem**

Speak the poem several times. Does the poem imply a meter? What syllables have emphasis? Consider how the theme, mood, and character of the poem can be expressed musically.

### **3. Listen For the Song**

Michelangelo famously said, "Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it." Your poem has a song to sing. Listen for it.

As you recite the poem, listen to your inner hearing and sing the words. Consider recording your voice so you don't lose a fleeting melody. If a melody doesn't reveal itself, experiment with different melodic shapes and rhythmic phrasing until something pops out.

### **4. Text Painting**

As your melody takes shape, experiment with unifying the words with the melody through text painting.

If a phrase from the poem depicts rising or an uplifting theme, your melody can ascend to match it. If a phrase describes decent or a dark theme, you can pair it with a descending melody. Words that describe speed, space, volume, or direction can be reflected in the music.

### **5. Capture Your Piece**

Record or notate your piece so you can perform and/or expand on it in the future.

## **More Creativity Triggers**

### **Set of Poems**

Use several poems by one poet to craft a multi-movement piece.

### **Accompaniment**

Compose a countermelody, bass line, and/or harmonic progression to accompany your melody.

## **Creativity Triggers for Groups**

### **Accompanied Recitation**

Choose a narrator to recite a poem, and compose or improvise a musical accompaniment. You can draw from the Creative Limitation Menus in Chapter Two.

### **Card Game**

Choose roles from the card game in Chapter Five to structure an improvised accompaniment to your melodic text setting or narration.

### **Perspectives on a Poem**

Ask several musicians to independently set the text to the same poem. Share your compositions and note the similarities and differences.

## Conclusion

I hope this book moved you forward on your journey toward full artistic expression. Now that you have experienced the flow of the creative practices, you can design your own frameworks to trigger creativity in yourself and your musical collaborators.

This book is free to share. Please pass it along to anyone who might find it useful. The pdf is available for free at [creativitytriggers.com](http://creativitytriggers.com).

I would love to hear how you use and adapt Creativity Triggers in your practice and teaching. Please email me at [steve@stevetres.com](mailto:steve@stevetres.com).

### Connect

*To create and perform great music, we need to connect with other people. Our creative practices are often stuffed into a practice room, isolating us from our peers. If we can break out of that sense of isolation, we can create more and connect with wider audiences.*

– Kaley Lane Eaton, composer and Game Symphony Workshop facilitator

If you have been creating music in isolation, now is the time to get out of the practice room, collaborate with other musicians, and connect with an audience. The only way to touch another person with your music is to share it.

Seth Godin tells us, “We need to care enough to connect, care enough to put ourselves at risk emotionally in order to touch other people . . . But we have to be brave enough to ship it before it’s ready, because it’s never ready.”

Connect with a worldwide community of musicians to share music, collaborate, and ask questions. Join us on Facebook at [facebook.com/groups/creativitytriggers](https://facebook.com/groups/creativitytriggers).

### Game Symphony Workshop

I founded the Game Symphony Workshop in 2016 to help musicians collaboratively create and perform original music. A team of facilitators and I guide musicians through Creativity Triggers, Soundpainting, and musical adaptations of theater games.

We lead a summer workshop at Seattle Pacific University and travel to bring the program to student, amateur, and professional ensembles. Learn more at [gamesymphonyworkshop.com](http://gamesymphonyworkshop.com).

## Additional Resources

### Free Resources

Visit [stevetres.com/bonuses](http://stevetres.com/bonuses) to download:

- 12 drone mp3s
- 17 drum groove mp3s
- 10 *Improvisation Games for Ensembles*—fun icebreaker games for large and small ensembles
- Pentatonic Scale and Mode Menus transposed for B-flat, E-flat, F, bass clef, and alto clef instruments

Read and subscribe to my blog at [creativemusic.blog](http://creativemusic.blog).

### **The Living Jazz Tradition** **A Creative Guide To Improvisation and Harmony**

If you want to apply creative practices to jazz, check out my 2014 book published by CMA Press. Learn how to improvise over chord changes without getting bogged down in a confusing jumble of scales, chords, patterns, and licks.

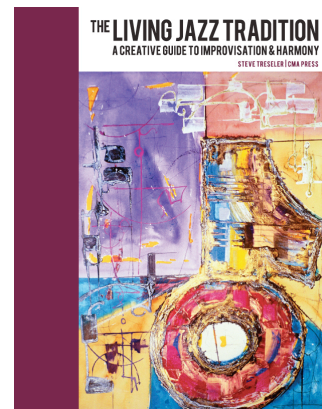
Part One helps you play by ear, develop a strong time-feel, and apply creative practices. Part Two presents a comprehensive guide to jazz harmony with hundreds of musical examples, integrated repertoire, and creative assignments.

*Steve Treseler has produced a truly brilliant book . . . He has found a way to explain a tremendous amount of information in a very accessible way.*

– Wayne Horvitz

Composer, pianist, and keyboardist with Bill Frisell and John Zorn  
Professor of Composition at Cornish College of the Arts

Learn more and order at <http://stevetres.com/the-living-jazz-tradition/>.



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## About Steve



Photo ©[Daniel Sheehan](#)

Steve Treseler is a Seattle-based saxophonist, teaching artist, and author. *DownBeat* calls his music “beautifully crafted ensemble pieces—whether free, through-composed, or somewhere in between.” The Kenny Wheeler Tribute Project that Steve leads with renowned trumpeter Ingrid Jensen was featured on NPR’s *Jazz Night in America*.

Steve performs and leads creative music workshops across the U.S. He teaches at Seattle Pacific University and is the founder of the Game Symphony Workshop, which helps musicians unlock creativity through group improvisation.

Steve lives in Seattle with his wife and daughter.

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