

## “Inside Voice”

Chris Stock

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I'd like to start by sharing one of my fondest Lowell House memories. Two years ago I was a sophomore in H entryway, and one night I received a note under my door. “Dear Chris,” it read. “We love having you in the entryway, but would you please stop singing so loudly?” There was no signature. Chagrined, I hushed my rendition of “Ten Thousand Men of Harvard” and sent an apologetic email to the entryway. I guess I've held on to certain habits all my life, and singing at home is definitely one of them. To say I was a noisy child is to put it mildly. I just didn't have a volume knob. After my parents bought me a ukulele when I was five, I'd wake up before dawn and hack at it tunelessly, while belting out “I've Been Working on the Railroad.”

And so I found at an early age that music gives me a voice often more elegant than my own. I don't speak very well: I stutter occasionally, have difficulty enunciating, and am an excruciatingly slow writer. But music speaks to me, and one of the joys of my life has been learning to speak through music.

Let me give you a sense of what I mean. Say it's the end of a long day of classes and I need to clear my head before tackling homework for the night. If I'm lucky, the JCR's empty and I'll sneak inside. There's been a tune playing in my head all day and I start plunking it out. I'm feeling mellow, so I keep things simple at first—just a chord progression in the left hand. After I get the feel for what my hands are doing, it's time to go places. I fiddle with the melody a bit, add something unexpected. Suddenly it's not so mellow anymore—there's an edge to the music, and maybe it's time to throw in some dissonances that make you wonder if I'm still paying attention. I am—I'm solving a puzzle, and the rewards are immediate and visceral. I'm shaping a story for the listener and telling it only through music. Of course, at some point I'm bound to slip up. Which brings me rule number one of improvising: it's not a mistake if you repeat it confidently.

Now that I'm warmed up, I drop the tune I was working with before and start from scratch. I decide I want a challenge, and I so stop being Chris Stock and I try to channel the style of some other composer—say J.S. Bach. Now I'm having a conversation with a composer who wrote three hundred years ago, a man who developed careful techniques of counterpoint and changed the course of music at his day job at a Lutheran church in Germany. There is a whole history, a political philosophy, a theology that his music stands for. And here I am embodying that music, peeling back those layers of understanding—or at least, doing the best I can as just some 21<sup>st</sup>-century kid who really needs to get back to his homework.

So I stop playing, but I don't get up. Because at times like these I'm thinking about what my life would be like if I hadn't stopped studying piano seriously in high school, if I had recognized that music compels me just as much as the math and science I left it to pursue. There are few times in my life when I've felt so expressive, so self-assured, so connected to this enormous world of culture, as when I'm at the piano—but every year that passes I lose a little more of that, as the technique slips slowly from my fingers.

None of this justifies annoying my entryway with noisy singing, of course. Now, I *don't* have any plans to suddenly start practicing the piano a ton, and I don't know what the future holds for my capacities as a performer. But I do know that when I improvise on the piano, when I yell along with Ke\$ha in the ski team van, and when I perform French-Canadian rafting songs for all of you at Lowell Coffeehouse—when I let music be my voice—it's because I love the way it makes me feel, and the way it allows me to understand the world. And that's something I'm very happy to be loud about.