



Courage within and between

an opening provocation for the eavesdropping festival forum on 'Cultivating Courage: Trouble-Makers & Risk Takers'

The courage to create something from nothing.

The courage to push through your own doubts.

The courage to keep turning up when you feel you don't fit in or you're not quite good enough.

The courage to change direction just when people finally seem to grasp what it is that you have been trying to do.

The courage to face the world after a bad review.

The courage to choose a life of precarity.

The courage to turn down unpaid work.

The courage to say, again, "Yes, I make my living doing this."

The courage to keep practising when you hate the way it sounds.

The courage to admit it never gets easier.

The courage to set aside a week of your life to do a funding application, knowing that you probably won't be successful.

The courage to get up on stage.

The courage to stay up on stage.

The courage just to keep going.

The courage to walk away.

eavesdropping is always a celebration of courage, but this year I wanted us to take the time to unpack and acknowledge explicitly the particular courage that it takes to commit oneself to risky, troublesome, experimental work. For many of us, the struggle is as much within ourselves as within the industry, so this is an opportunity to gather, to exchange ideas and experiences, to bolster one another and to be provoked into fresh thinking and, hopefully, renewed determination.

It turns out that it's difficult to write about courage without sounding like a self-help book or a bit of a twat. It's a difficult word to use with precision and sensitivity. For example, it's a common adage to speak about 'the courage to be different'; I have been wondering how we define, precisely and sensitively, 'difference' in artistic terms. Isn't this a changeable metric, standing in opposition to whatever the dominant 'sameness' is? For example, in the 1930s, writing atonal music was different, whereas by the 1970s it absolutely wasn't; in the 1960s, including electric guitar in classical music was a radical move, and today it no longer is. When experimentalism is all about trying things that may not have been done before, what does 'difference' mean?

When assessing the provocations for this year's forum, we panellists observed a large number of proposals for projects that are about the performer's life experience. Twenty years ago this might have been unusual and would have marked the creators out as 'different'. It's interesting to me that the tide has turned so dramatically: just as in literature, with the trend for auto-fiction, contemporary classical music has become much more explicitly autobiographical in recent years. That's no bad thing—we still have work to do in broadening the stories that are told—but making the personal public is no longer a new idea, all thanks to Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović, Tracey Emin, Maggie Nelson etc.

Another thing that struck us was the number of proposals that referred to improvisation as courageous. This surprised me, and ultimately clarified for me in a very positive way that no technique or discipline is inherently courageous in and of itself; rather, it is the first forays into a *new* discipline that require courage, because we feel unskilled and vulnerable as we attempt something unfamiliar. To a seasoned improviser, therefore, it may require more courage to sight-read notated music than to improvise in front of a large audience—it's all a question of perspective. Many of you are trying something new this weekend, and are brave enough to share these experiments with us. A provocation is an opening onto a new perspective: for you as performers or presenters, and for us as witnesses.

The courage to change direction, to begin again, is surely crucial in a long career. Ours is not a scene that celebrates one-trick ponies! Zosha Warpeha, one of our festival artists, did just that when they went to study the Hardanger fiddle in Norway. In her podcast interview, she told me about the odd sense of homecoming that finally emerged from the confusion of starting again, and she will talk to us tomorrow more about this process.

Late one night last summer in a hotel lobby in Darmstadt, over whisky, a group of us were debating what it takes to be 'successful' as a musician. I remember Jen Torrence saying, 'This is an endurance sport.' Success, she was saying, is largely about sticking at it for long enough. This is where courage comes in, and talent, and hard work, and luck. It takes courage simply to persist, through the training, through the early years of trying to establish yourself in some way, through the dangerous middle years when either you wonder if you'll ever be recognised or you burn yourself out from the fear that it will all come crashing down, and then through the later years when you wonder what the hell you'll do when you can't do this anymore! I don't say this to discourage anybody, but we must acknowledge that the music industry—particularly this small, strange corner of the music industry—is fuelled by the enduring courage of artists.

And what fuels courage? Perhaps it is self-knowledge. Perhaps it is that spark of inspiration that fires up the imagination to envision something urgent and necessary. We know the creative path may be costly, but we are determined to pursue it. There's this wonderful image by Hélène Cixous that haunts and inspires me:

'...and there, in those zones which inhabit me and which I don't know how to live in, I feel them, I don't live them, they live me, gushing from the wellsprings of my souls, I don't see them but I feel them, it's incomprehensible but that's how it is. There are sources. That's the enigma. One morning, it all explodes. My body experiences, deep down inside, one of its panicky cosmic adventures. I have volcanoes on my lands.'¹

But all of this talk is focused on us as individuals. What if we want to try and *change* our small, strange corner of the music industry, or indeed our corner of the world? I am very much into the idea of 'stealth activism' and believe 'that ripples do make waves', to quote eavesdropping's mission statement, but there are moments when a huge gasp of collective courage is necessary to disrupt the status quo. It's not for me to define your mission, your battles, your quiet or clamorous fury, but we are alive at a time in which we will surely be

¹ Hélène Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', *Coming to Writing and other essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 10.

called upon to make a stand. I ask myself what the dominant models of activism are achieving, and what ‘otherwise imaginings’, to quote Lola Olufemi, may not yet have occurred to us.

Marianna Ritchey is doing important work imagining otherwise; I turn to her often to challenge and refresh my thinking. In her essay ‘A Critical Perspective on Diversity and Inclusion in US Classical Music Discourse’, she challenges us to think more courageously. Ritchey makes the point that some of our best efforts may merely be reinforcing the neoliberal order:

‘as scholars as well as activists have been pointing out for decades, [such] carefully managed representational diversification actually strengthens the system, by making it seem like it is flexible enough to address all our demands and give us all the things we want...’²

She argues for a more radical reframing of diversity and music itself, in which the broader, intersecting bigotries are confronted and in which collective flourishing takes priority over individual success. Not survival of the fittest, then, but solidarity.

When I stuck my finger in the air and chose this topic last year, I didn’t know that the geopolitical darkness was about to get even darker. I feel at a low ebb, myself, and courage takes on a whole new dimension when reading the stories coming out of Iran or Lebanon or Gaza or Israel or Ukraine or Sudan or... the list goes on. Music is not peripheral. Last month, Tom Service wrote in *The Guardian* about the burning in Afghanistan of musical instruments and equipment, where the Taliban have outlawed music³. Earlier this week I was reading about the Tuareg band Tinariwen who use their music to draw the world’s attention to mass displacements and atrocities taking place in Mali.⁴

Erin Johnson-Williams will speak to us today about what she terms ‘activist hearing’. Listening remains a radical act. If we are to shift our thinking, first we have to listen. This is a festival of listening. Cafe OTO has cultivated a culture of attentive listening, which is why I am happy for our festival evenings to be held there. Listening well, for me, is about letting go of the judgy thoughts (“Is this right?” “Is this good?”) and rolling with the waves of familiarity and surprise, comfort and discomfort.

In her International Women’s Day lecture for Edinburgh University, Caroline Criado Perez looks at this metaphor of the wave that we use to talk about the history of women’s rights and the fight for gender equality. This is a woman who has doggedly exposed the gender data gap and who, I discovered when browsing her website, has an enormous plastic necklace that says, simply, ‘COURAGE’. ‘The backlash always seems to take us by surprise’, she says, because ‘[...] we have a tendency to see progress as linear’. But waves roll forwards and then draw back; in this rhythm, they redefine the coastline. In her lecture, she says:

² Marianna Ritchey, ‘A Critical Perspective on Diversity and Inclusion in US Classical Music Discourse’ in *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession*. Eds. Anna Bull and Christina Scharff with Associate Editor Laudan Nooshin (OUP, 2023), 98.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2026/feb/25/the-taliban-are-burning-musical-instruments-in-the-name-of-morality-it-is-an-assault-on-all-culture>. Accessed 19 March 2026.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2026/mar/13/tinariwen-imarhan-interview-tuareg-music-desert-blues>. Accessed 18 March 2026.

'And just as the history of women's rights is the story of how we won, it is also the story of how we lost, and lost and lost and lost. And above all it's the story of how we got back up and fought all over again.'⁵

I hope we can be courageous in our thinking this weekend, and compassionate in our interactions. Anything we can do, together, to strengthen anti-solipsistic forms of collective care-giving can only be for the good. I am always so moved by the heart and soul that goes into the provocations, by the trouble-making and risk-taking that is going on in so many homes and studios around the country. I want to thank you all for being part of this year's festival. I will close by suggesting that this forum is not a performance, it is a laboratory; or, a great big pot-luck dinner that allows us all to taste new things and exchange our simple gifts.

Juliet Fraser, 21 March 2026

⁵ Caroline Criado Perez, 'Nevertheless, we persisted'. <https://substack.com/home/post/p-188032219>. Accessed 18 March 2026.