

28th October 2020

Improvisation

“Improvisation is too good to leave to chance.”

Paul Simon, International Herald Tribune 1990

Paul Harvey, a former concert pianist, composer and teacher, was diagnosed with dementia last year. Music remains important in his life and he continues to play the piano from memory. So his son, Nick, set him a challenge – to improvise a piece of music on four notes, F, A D and B. The resulting piece of music went viral *via* the radio and social media. And it created – to paraphrase Paul Simon’s thinking – too good an opportunity to leave to chance. One thing led to another. The piece, played on Paul’s piano at home, was orchestrated for the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra and had its world premiere on Paddy O’Connell’s *Broadcasting House* on BBC Radio 4 on the morning of Sunday 25th October – Paul Harvey playing his improvisation, along with individual parts recorded in lockdown combining to make a full orchestra. It’s entitled, *Four Notes, Paul’s Tune*, and it’s to be launched shortly as a single, with the proceeds being divided equally between *Music for Dementia* and the *Alzheimer’s Society*.

The BBC Philharmonic Orchestra’s Simon Webb has said: “Paul Harvey has demonstrated how powerful music is for people living with dementia. At the BBC Philharmonic we are just delighted to be able to play our part in amplifying that message and reaching out to audiences with Paul’s inspiring and moving music.” This music, and the story behind it, has the power to reach deep within us, to offer us much-needed beauty and wonder, and to give us hope.

It began with an improvisation. Add to that the insight of a son to keep his father’s mind creative, the willingness of a musician to go deep within himself and find new music, the skill of orchestrators to create something beautiful, and the awareness of the BBC to see what was happening and to share it more widely. Something quite wonderful happened.

So, let’s celebrate improvisation where we find it. Let’s challenge one another to value what’s deep within us all. Let’s take new and inspiring things and build round them more beauty and life. And let’s share, as widely as we can, the hope that Paul Harvey’s improvisation on four notes has given us all.

A prayer for today

Lord, may I be valued for what I am, as my notes play your tune. Amen

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