

The Rhythm of the Second Curve: A Musician's Perspective

Introduction

Today, you are a student in my African Music class. You and I are getting ready to perform for the school's annual Talent Show. We're both on stage, and I assure you that it'll be a cute little act: a teacher and student showing off their musical skills!

We begin playing a traditional composition on our marimbas. Our school is quite small, but the musical spirit here is infectious. The whole school has come to watch our performance. This is a song you know well; we've been practicing every day for the past two weeks.

You are playing your part well, the worn-out mallets in your hands bouncing off the wooden keys of the instrument. Our two instruments are facing each other. You don't miss a single beat in the cycles, and everyone is enjoying your music. But then you hear something new coming from my instrument.

In fact, even though the audience doesn't notice, it throws you off your game temporarily. I keep shifting some notes, changing the rhythm, playing around with the melody lines, affecting our harmony. You start hearing the song as though it were new, and yet at the same time, it is exactly the same song we have been playing for the last two weeks. The song feels like it is growing, and the audience's energy is growing with it. I give you our cue, and we end the performance, receiving a standing ovation.

As we carry our instruments backstage, you have a look of deep curiosity. I can tell you want to say something.

"Sir, what was all that you were doing back there?" you ask, pleasantly surprised.

"Oh, that!" I chuckle. "Well, I was improvising."

The Second Curve and Improvisational Music: Unlikely Companions

Charles Handy defines the Second Curve as:

"An organisation must encourage change when business is good and motivation is high, rather than in a decline stage when desperation and complacency might influence decision-making."

In this paper, I would like to approach my thoughts on his philosophy from an artist's point of view, to explore this very important concept in terms anyone may understand.

What I will show is that the Second Curve shares a lot in common with the art of improvisation.

Improvisation is defined as spontaneous creativity within structure, and I will be focusing on this creativity in terms of African music.

You see, both are concerned with the concept of change—sometimes sudden, sometimes slow and drawn out.

Improvisation involves inventive change that can occur in rhythmic time, melodic lines, or the arrangement of harmony. It considers what are called dynamics—how you change the speed of a song, the volume, the pitch, and so on.

The Second Curve is about innovative change too—whether changing a brand, expanding access, pivoting to a new career, recruiting new team members, altering a product, or introducing a new line entirely. When I look at the Second Curve, I see something deeply improvisational about it.

One may ask why the Second Curve is necessary, and there are many ways to answer this question. If we think about the Second Curve as similar to improvisation in music, we can see that growth and innovation cannot be born from the status quo. Our favorite songs say something to us, often before the lyrics do. The way they change and shift makes us keep listening, and makes us keep hooked.

We need the status quo—but only so we can evolve beyond it. If our ideas loop on repeat like a broken record, they stop producing anything new. There's an almost ontological itch within African improvisational music to not remain the same for too long. That itch exists, I think, in all human endeavors and forms of work. Even in the most conservative of societies, change finds its way in, not so brash and loud, but quiet and subtle.

The Second Curve is a wake-up call to ready ourselves for change—to improvise on our existing cycles of song. It calls us to depart from a well-worn path and venture into new directions, and to do so before we have peaked. But it is not just a call for change; it is a call for the courage to change before we absolutely have to. It is a gospel of trusting our intuition while relying on experience and research—to think one step ahead while our success lulls us into complacency.

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.” – Peter Drucker

Back when I was a lad, whenever we visited my grandmother in the countryside, I experienced a pleasant shift from the sounds of the city to those of nature: the drumming of late summer rain, the gentle whispers of the wind, the quiet rhapsodies of *makurwe* crickets in the vegetable garden. My grandmother always said those sounds were rhythms—songs about nature's activities. They had much in common with Zimbabwe's traditional music: no two performances were the same, yet they felt familiar. The rhythms outside her house followed nature's mood; Zimbabwe's traditional music follows the artist's.

It is sad to say that, as I pen this paper, the diversity of Zimbabwe's traditional music and dance is diminishing. During colonial times, much of it was suppressed, leading

Zimbabweans to feel shame in their heritage. After independence, artists carried the trauma of censorship and fractured communities. Urbanization scattered families. My own parents moved to Chegutu town from the countryside, and I had nowhere to learn traditional music. It wasn't taught in schools, and I didn't know any musicians.

I had to teach myself to play and improvise by listening to my grandfather's old cassette tapes. This was hard, because each artist had their own take on the traditional repertoire. On Wednesday evenings, my parents would tune into Dzemagwenyambira, a radio show airing mbira music since the 1980s. It brought traditional sounds into homes all across Zimbabwe. The songs told stories and prayers—about hardworking farmers, deceitful witches, and brave hunters. I longed to play with them.

Today, as I navigate what it means to be a traditional musician in this world, it is the concept of the Second Curve that stands out to me. I believe that both individually and collectively, we must answer its call.

Why should you listen to an artist speaking on management?

Because I see a world closing in on itself—obsessed with progress but neglecting culture. Artists are the priests of sanity. Their ability to articulate generational anxieties through media is sacred. As we lose grip on our culture, we lose our humanity, and that paves the way for disaster.

“If you want to change the culture of an organization, you have to change the conversations.” – Charles Handy

The Second Curve imagines a world where we can shape our future. I believe all jobs are forms of art, and that our work should be extensions of our lives. The world feels small and impersonal—but art offers us a conviction that we matter. Art is life, and life is art in motion.

But Isn't Improvising Random?

A common misconception is that musical improvisation is unplanned. I dislike this idea. The ability to create radical yet sensible shifts in rhythm takes years of training.

Improvisation is informed by what has already happened. Before a musician of traditional African music changes the rhythm, they ask:

- What is the mood now?
- How and why do I want to change it?
- Am I in sync with my fellow musicians?

Improvisation is precise. It strikes at the core. There is humility in it because you can never do it without another person. The Second Curve is the same. It requires that we shift while we still have time and resources. In African music, just as monotony sets in, the drummer changes the rhythm, enticing the ear. Too early, and it's confusing. Too late, and it's boring. The same is true for change in life or business.

Improvising is not random. It is a deliberate way to shift. The changes must make sense and stay true to the song. Every improvisation has integrity and remains faithful to the melody. When I improvise in the music I make, I change the rhythm, melody and/or the harmony.

Rhythm, Melody, Harmony

Rhythm is the pace at which we approach the Second Curve. Change too slowly and you run out of time. Change too fast and you alienate people. Rhythm is being in tune with the times and those around you.

Melody is identity. It is what gives a song its signature. In the Second Curve, your melody is your mission: you must not lose your mission. You grow, yes—but meaningfully.

Harmony is about synergy. It's teamwork, humility, shared purpose. Just as improvisation builds on others' parts in music, so must change in an organization. Let others lead sometimes. Listen. Learn. Believe in your people.

“The most important task of an organization's leader is to anticipate crisis. If you wait until the crisis hits, you're reacting, not improvising.” – Peter Drucker

So, How Do I Initiate the Second Curve?

In music, one does not shift alone. It takes listening, patience, and practice.

Be confident. Face your doubts with courage.

After graduating abroad, I moved back to Zimbabwe. It was hard, but I knew that if I wanted to make this music accessible to young people in ways it hadn't been for me, I had to come home. It was a huge shift in my life, to return to a country that has a struggling economy and political problems. But this was my Second Curve moment. I set goals, created a teaching space within my workplace (where I was actually hired to teach English of all things!), thought ahead for my students, and stayed adaptable in an unstable environment. I shared what I knew and kept listening. I established feedback loops for myself so I would not slip into monotony. Even today, I'm still learning.

I am improvising all the time—not just in music but in everyday life. And that's where the Second Curve lives.

Conclusion

As Charles Handy says:

“We need to challenge orthodoxy, dream a little, think unreasonably, dare the impossible if we're going to have any chance of making the future work for us all, not just the favored few.”

Improvisation and the Second Curve teach us not to get too comfortable, and not to wait too long to change. But they also tell us that our change must be rooted in our values and our purpose—and in the happiness of others as well as ourselves.

After all, is music really that fulfilling to play if no one is there to hear it?

References

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- ***Do a more thorough grammar and spellings check***
- ***Format the references section to be more presentable***
- ***All the text in this essay (other than the quoted sections) are my own original work***