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Moving early music: Improvisation and the work-concept in seventeenth-century French keyboard performance

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Summary

Since its inception, historically-informed performance (HIP) has evolved from a radical yet flexible method of inquiry into an established aural tradition. It now encompasses at least two distinct practices. On the one hand, HIP-as-method seeks to develop new styles of performance inspired by historical evidence. It moves from historical inquiry to creative experimentation, ultimately re-creating musical styles from the past as wholly new styles within the present. HIP-as-tradition, on the other hand, now exists independently of its foundational method. Like other musical traditions, it depends upon the authority of expert practitioners, critics, and other taste-makers. It encourages creativity within the boundaries of generally agreed-upon norms and standards. It also remains beholden to the authority of *Urtext*, scholarly, and facsimile editions, and above all, to the aegis of the work-concept. Although the two faces of HIP ought to be independent, the doxa of HIP-as-tradition constrains the practice of HIP-as-method, thereby limiting the possibility of imagining and re-creating alternative, heterodox practices. The work-concept's prominence within HIP—despite its widely-acknowledged historical contingency—thus carries with it a number of limitations for the development of new performance practices, since it also diverts performers' attention from fluid musical processes to fixed musical products.

This study attempts to circumvent the influence of the work-concept by replacing it with an alternative constellation of concepts and practices. It asks the question: what kinds of new practices might have once been, and might still become possible without the influence of the work-concept? It uses the music of the seventeenth-century French harpsichordists, the *clavecinistes*, as a central case study. In particular, it examines the musical culture surrounding the so-called father of the *clavecinistes*, Jacques Champion de Chambonnières. It considers a variety of historical evidence and

musicological argument, including Chambonnières's documented practice of varying his works each time he played them, his imputed practice of oral composition without notation, and the high degree of variance observed in sources for his music, including sources penned by the composer. The performance-variance suggested by the evidence gestures towards a musical culture with flexible boundaries between composing and performing activities, in which a piece can only come into being through acts of performance. This study therefore proposes understanding a piece's fluid range of identities using the concept of *mouvance*, which is a kind of variance that arises within performances and is acknowledged by cultural participants (audiences and performers). Moreover, this study attempts to re-create this practice of *mouvance* by also re-creating the improvisational practice upon which *mouvance* relied. To that end, I synthesize a number of music-theoretical approaches to the study of historical improvisation, with the aim of developing a pedagogical approach to improvisation in seventeenth-century French style. Having acquired a conceptual and practical understanding of improvisation, I use these tools to construct an experimental practice in which to explore and re-create the *mouvance* of the *clavicinistes*.

Chapter One describes the problem of the work-concept in HIP. In order to step outside the limitations of the work-concept, it argues for replacing habitual musical practices of repertoire-performance with alternative ones. Consequently, it also examines HIP's capacity for constructing experimental practices that might enable this conceptual-practical shift. Chapter Two presents the central case study, the keyboard music of Chambonnières. Following musicological evidence regarding source transmission, this chapter posits that Chambonnières's published pieces behave less like a series of musical works and more like the transcription of an oral practice. Moreover, it argues that tacit, embodied, improvisational knowledge necessarily informs such a practice. In this light, a fixed musical score is more productively viewed as only one provisional reading of a fluid, "moving"

piece, formed and varied through improvisational technique. This chapter therefore proposes that a re-creation of this practice should also require the performer's adoption of an alternative set of concepts and practices, including *mouvance* and improvisation. Chapter Three then takes a wide survey of the field of historical improvisation studies with the aim of constituting a pedagogical approach to Chambonnières's improvisational language, fashioning an individually-tailored method by way of analogy with better-documented practices, such as galant schemata and Neapolitan partimenti. Chapter Four documents and analyzes the process of learning to improvise in this style, paying particular attention to the constant reflective feedback loop between musical exemplar, analysis, and performance. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which a performer's intuition, or aesthetic sensibility, may develop and be informed through this practice. It also discusses a variety of techniques for the transformation of musical texts into sources of embodied improvisational knowledge, culminating in the construction of a simple computational model of Chambonnières's improvisational style. Chapter Five then brings this improvisational experience to bear upon the performance of French keyboard repertoire. It effects a shift in orientation from fixed musical works (products) to flexible musical activities (processes), examining the workings of *mouvance* within a variety of musical genres. It presents these results in the form of a musical suite, each movement dealing with a different facet of *mouvance*. It argues that improvisation enables the deterritorialization of familiar practices, forming a creative space for experimentation that resists usual binaries of surface/structure and performer/composer. Through this process of experimentation, the performer feels out and discovers the boundaries defining a piece's range of potential identities. Finally, this chapter also reflects upon the ways in which this re-created practice relates to and participates in the larger tradition in which it is embedded, HIP-as-tradition. It asserts the continuing relevance of historically-informed performers in shaping a piece's identities, finding that *mouvance* is not solely a matter of notes and rhythms, but also of touch, sound, color, and affect.

The central contribution of this dissertation is two-fold. While recent research on historical improvisation has sought to counter the ossification of HIP-as-tradition, wider musical practice within HIP has not yet followed suit. First and foremost, this dissertation provides a unique perspective on how performers might apply knowledge and insight gained through historical improvisation to the performance of musical repertoires. It explores the concrete ways in which improvisation may be brought into conversation with musical repertoire, enabling new styles of performance that employ improvisational technique and promote performance creativity. Second, this dissertation also offers a concrete approach to the use of HIP-as-method for questioning the conceptual-practical frame by which HIP-as-tradition exerts its authority. It shows how performer-researchers can thus develop new and unique styles of performance in tandem with their internalizing of new concepts and practices. It therefore also intervenes in longstanding debates within HIP on the limits of authenticity, as well as in philosophical and musicological debates on the status of the (pre-nineteenth-century) musical work.