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## **An improvisatory approach to nineteenth-century music**

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# Part I

## Prelude



## Chapter 1. Introduction: A lost art?

### 1.1 Rediscovering the nineteenth century

This study is like the report of an exciting journey through familiar and yet unknown territory. The music of the nineteenth century occupies such a central stage in the field called ‘classical music’ or Western art music that it forms its self-evident core: whereas music from before 1800 is often termed ‘early music’, and later repertoire can be specified as ‘twentieth-century’, ‘contemporary’ or ‘modern’, nineteenth-century music usually goes without epithet. Its presence is so obvious that it is beyond discussion. This situation is reflected in concert life and in the recording industry, but also in the professional training of classical musicians. Nineteenth-century repertoire forms the unquestioned centre of the training of almost any classical performer,<sup>1</sup> even if they decide later to specialise in earlier or more recent musical styles. Generations after generations of pianists around the world have been improving their playing with Chopin’s etudes, and the violin concertos of Brahms, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius, once touchstones of extraordinary virtuosity, have become staples of the repertoire of advanced students long ago. The nineteenth century is almost too familiar.

This familiarity, however, is superficial. To be sure, it is tempting to see the nineteenth century as the period in which classical music as we know it came into being. But there are many reasons to question this assumption. For instance, it is a widely held notion that improvisation disappeared from Western art music in the nineteenth century, never to return. In his standard work *Die Improvisation in der Musik* [Improvisation in music] the Hungarian musicologist Ernst Ferand<sup>2</sup> writes that at this time, the ‘einst blühende »Kunst der Improvisation«’ [the once flowering ‘art of improvisation’<sup>3</sup>] was only practised ‘handwerksmäßig’ [as a craft] by church organists.<sup>4</sup> However, the mere fact that Franz Liszt was still world famous for his improvisations on the concert stage during the 1840’s, and that several early recordings make us witnesses of piano improvisation around 1900, suggests a much more nuanced picture. Admittedly, it was the century of *Werktreue* – but also of ad libitum cadenzas and flourishes; it witnessed the invention of the metronome that, as legend has it, never left the lid of Chopin’s piano – but early recordings sometimes show a flexibility in tempo beyond the imagination of modern performers. The Dutch literary theorist Marita Mathijsen termed this period ‘de gemaskerde eeuw’ [the masked century]; she shows how the nineteenth century has been ‘masked’ by a posterity that has exaggerated certain features and stifled other ones, but moreover, it has put on a mask to itself by pretending strictness and straightness where reality was

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<sup>1</sup> Except for players of instruments that were not in use during the nineteenth century, that is.

<sup>2</sup> Or Ernest Ferrand, as his name is also spelled.

<sup>3</sup> All translations without reference are by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Ferand, E.: *Die Improvisation in der Musik*. Zürich, 1938; 420.

much less consistent.<sup>5</sup> This certainly also applies to music. Written evidence of the teaching of improvisation at the *Conservatoire de Paris*, for example, creates the impression of a dry and rigid academicism, but recorded improvisations of organists who studied under that regime tell a very different story. There is good reason to unmask the nineteenth century also musically.

This wish has been a major motivation for this journey through the incredibly diverse landscapes of nineteenth-century music – a journey that has put a different complexion on many apparently familiar aspects. It was distantly inspired by another ‘voyage of rediscovery’: in the summer of 1823, two young members of wealthy Dutch regent families did not conclude their college years with the usual Grand Tour to the art treasures of Italy, but instead embarked on a journey through their own country (they will pass in review in chapter 6.3). The purpose of their tour was probably to inspect the young nation (the Netherlands had merged with Belgium and Luxemburg in 1815) and to reinforce their elite network.<sup>6</sup> One of them, the later writer and politician Jacob van Lennep, kept a journal which shows that during their trip of more than three months, the two travellers developed a new understanding of their country: their protestant elitist frame of reference was challenged by reality in the more remote areas where regional identities were still very strong.<sup>7</sup> The present study metaphorically entails a similar travel through a seemingly well-known area. It is only when one dives into various traditions of nineteenth-century music-making that one discovers that almost nothing is as it seems: despite some similarities, the differences between modern and nineteenth-century musical culture are diverse and complex.

More specifically, this study was stimulated by the popular notion, touched upon above, that improvisation would be an extinct skill in classical music. As ethnomusicologist Robin Moore wrote in 1992: ‘Improvisation has disappeared from Western art music during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the idea that improvisation only flourished ‘in the past’ is a topos that reoccurs time and again in history. Often it is accompanied by a feeling of regret. Ferand, quoted above, definitely saw improvisation as an art that had disappeared. Ten years earlier Gerhard Wehle wrote in the introduction to his monumental *Die Kunst der Improvisation* (1925):

So gut wie ausgestorben ist sie heute – die Kunst des Improvisierens! (...) Von Joh. Seb. Bach, Mozart, Bruckner, Liszt berichtet die Überlieferung, dass sie geniale Improvisatoren gewesen seien. Aber heute? Warum wird diese Kunst nicht mehr gepflegt?<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Mathijssen, M.: *De gemaskerde eeuw*. Amsterdam, 2007; 12.

<sup>6</sup> Mak, G. & Mathijssen, M.: *Lopen met Van Lennep*. Zwolle, 2000; 12.

<sup>7</sup> Mak, G. & Mathijssen, M.: op. cit., 21.

<sup>8</sup> Moore, R.: ‘The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: an Interpretation of Change’. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (June, 1992), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Wehle, G.F.: *Die Kunst der Improvisation*. Münster, 1925; X.

[Today the art of improvising is as good as extinct! (...) Legend has it that Johann Sebastian Bach, Mozart, Bruckner, Liszt all were brilliant improvisers. But today? Why is this art no longer cultivated?]

Wehle here positions the ‘art of improvising’ firmly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (incidentally mentioning only musicians who became famous as composers). However, at the heart of the period Wehle seems to recall with longing, Friedrich Kalkbrenner wondered:

Combien parmi nos meilleurs Pianistes en est-il, qui puissent faire un prélude tant soit peu satisfaisant? Et quant aux élèves on n’en voit pas un sur mille qui, dans ses improvisations, essaie de dépasser la cadence parfaite.<sup>10</sup>

[How many of our best pianists are capable of making a prelude that is at all satisfactory? And as for the students, hardly anyone tries, in his improvisations, to exceed the perfect cadence.]

At this time Chopin and Mendelssohn (both well-known improvisers as well) had just died, Liszt was at the height of his fame and Bruckner was still an unknown teacher. And going still further back into history, a well-known anecdote about Bach from 1720 suggests that when he was improvising for the elderly Johann Adam Reincken, the latter said: ‘Ich dachte, diese Kunst wäre ausgestorben; ich sehe aber, dass sie in Ihnen noch lebt.’ [I was under the impression that this art was dead; I see, however, that it lives in you.]

In our time as well, the wish to ‘revive’ improvisation in the field of classical music is manifest. As pianist Arcadi Volodos stated in 2014:

It is a pity that most (classical) musicians have fallen out of touch with the art of improvising. Improvising is the core of making music. If you really understand what you are playing you must be capable of improvising in that same style. Otherwise all you are doing is imitating.<sup>11</sup>

There are more well-known classical musicians who advocate improvisation on stage: the violinist Hilary Hahn, pianists such as Robert Levin and Gabriela Montero, to name just a few. In the organ world there was no need to ‘revive’ improvisation, and today, the list of names of organists who focus on improvisation in historical styles is long, though the emphasis seems to be on the Baroque and on the early-twentieth-century French post-Romantic style of Dupré and Duruflé.

Nevertheless, Moore’s statement that improvisation has disappeared from Western art music during the nineteenth century – and the ensuing idea that it should be revived – is based upon assumptions that become evident when the nineteenth-century musical landscape is examined more closely. Arguing that improvisation disappeared in the nineteenth century implies that until that time, it was still present. Present in what sense exactly, one might ask? If ‘music’ means ‘musical life’,

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<sup>10</sup> Kalkbrenner, F.: *Traité d’Harmonie du pianiste*. Leipzig, 1849. Facsimile edition Amsterdam, 1970; 1.

<sup>11</sup> The quote (my translation) is taken from an article in the programme guide to the Master Pianists series in the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. *Brochure to Meesterpianisten Series 2014-2015*; 29.

the sentence suggests that this is a stable concept, that we can compare today's musical life with its counterpart from centuries ago, and conclude that improvisation has disappeared from it. However, this comparison is hardly possible because the meaning of the term 'musical life' itself has shifted dramatically. Even if the sentence would merely be intended to say that items indicated as 'improvisations' have disappeared from concert programmes after 1850 (which is true, apart from organ recitals), the suggestion that this was the end of a century-old tradition is incorrect, since public concerts with instrumental music were rare before 1800. It would be much more precise to say that piano improvisations as programme items briefly occurred during the early stage of development of public concerts, roughly in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Pianist and musicologist Dana Gooley's study on nineteenth-century piano improvisation, *Fantasies of Improvisation*,<sup>12</sup> supports this statement with a wealth of material.

## 1.2 The improvisatory

### *Defining 'improvisation'*

However, the proposition that improvisation disappeared obviously does not refer just to programme items with that name, but to the act of improvising itself. The meaning of this word has become subject of extensive debate, especially since academic interest in musical improvisation has boomed during the past decades, not only in musicology, but also in psychology, philosophy, cognitive science and other fields. As music philosopher Marcel Cobussen writes in *The Field of Musical Improvisation*, the list of monographs, journal articles, etc., 'is already far too long and diverse to be used to provide a decent overview or a reliable enumeration of core publications'.<sup>13</sup> In music life at large, the notion of improvisation has gained considerable popularity as well; the variety of applications, however, shows that the term can be interpreted in many ways. Conventionally, it is explained by referring to its etymology: *improvisus* (Latin) means unforeseen, unexpected. Definitions in general dictionaries and encyclopaedias typically mention the idea of 'performing music spontaneously or without preparation'. However, the expressions 'spontaneously' and 'without preparation' are both problematic. 'Spontaneous', in the sense of 'voluntary and of one's own accord', ignores the fact that to improvise, as philosopher Bruce Ellis Benson writes, 'is to rework something that already exists (that is, 'conveniently on hand'), and thus transform it into something that both has connections to what it once was but now has a new identity'.<sup>14</sup> Whether an improvised performance may be called 'unprepared' depends on what counts as 'preparation'; in short, in the form shown above, the definition may unnecessarily reinforce prejudices.

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<sup>12</sup> Gooley, D.: *Fantasies of Improvisation*. New York, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Cobussen, M.: *The Field of Musical Improvisation*. Leiden, 2017; 27.

<sup>14</sup> Benson, B.E.: *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music*. Cambridge, 2003; 45.

Grove Music Online's entry 'Improvisation' initially defines the term as 'the creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed'. In the more specialised section on Western art music, musicologist Rob Wegman acknowledges that 'its precise definition depends on the stability and perceived identity of the 'fixed musical work', which varies widely according to musical culture and historical period'. Indeed, this historical diversification is crucial. Today, an early music specialist most likely associates the term 'improvisation' primarily with ornamentation, which is something very different from what occurred on early-nineteenth-century concert programmes; in fact, it comes conceptually relatively close to the understanding of a bebop musician, who can also be said to 'ornament' (or vary upon) given harmonic and melodic structures.

Very different again is the meaning of 'improvisation' in the rediscovery of improvised Renaissance counterpoint, initiated by among others Wegman and Peter Schubert,<sup>15</sup> or in the practical exploration of the eighteenth-century Italian *partimento*-tradition that has recently emanated from the work of Robert Gjerdingen and Giorgio Sanguinetti.<sup>16</sup> A further widening of the perspective is the field of 'free improvisation' that forms the background of the journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*,<sup>17</sup> focusing 'mainly on those kinds of experimental collective improvisation that are rooted in progressive black styles from bebop forward'.<sup>18</sup> There is a large distance between such an essentially collective and often politically charged understanding of improvisation, on the one hand, and nineteenth-century reports of which an overwhelming majority deals with solo improvisation, on the other.<sup>19</sup>

This diversity in the meaning of the term 'improvisation' also shows up in professional music education. Many conservatories – until recently usually bastions of the written tradition(s) of Western art music – have become interested in improvisation. Particularly noteworthy in a field that sees itself as 'classical improvisation' is the work of David Dolan at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Yehudi Menuhin School in London. More specifically focused on early music was the teaching of Rudolf Lutz at the Schola Cantorum in Basel, which resulted in a 'Forschungsgruppe Basel für Improvisation' (FBI). The variety in educational settings, however, matches the multicoloured picture sketched above. Improvisation has found diverse ways into music curricula, ranging from 'old school' improvisation classes for organists (CNSM, Paris) or pianists

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<sup>15</sup> Cumming, J.E.: 'Renaissance Improvisation and Musicology'. *Music Theory Online*, Volume 19, Number 2 (June 2013). In this respect, the work of Markus Jans (Schola Cantorum, Basel) and Olivier Trachier (CNSM, Paris) should be mentioned as well.

<sup>16</sup> Gjerdingen, R.: *Music in the Galant Style*. Oxford, 2007; Sanguinetti, G.: *The Art of Partimento*. Oxford, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Available at [www.criticalimprov.com](http://www.criticalimprov.com).

<sup>18</sup> Gooley, D.: op. cit., 3.

<sup>19</sup> Many different understandings of the term 'improvisation' came together in the first research project that was organised by the Orgelpark in Amsterdam in 2008-2011. The Orgelpark is a venue that is explicitly dedicated to the performance and study of organ music. See Fidom, H. (ed.): *Improvisation: Musicological, musical and philosophical aspects* (Orgelpark Research Reports, volume 3). Amsterdam, 2013.



(Curtis, Philadelphia) to specialised masters for ‘free’ improvisation, even with associated PhD-possibilities (EAMT, Tallinn), and from improvisation in early styles (Conservatorium van Amsterdam) to trans-stylistic improvisation groups that include students from diverse departments (ESMUC, Barcelona). Several institutions offer a variety of improvisation courses. The reasons for the interest of conservatory managements can be diverse. Sometimes improvisation is seen as a way for classically trained musicians to become more free, and in this way, more self-confident at auditions and concerts. Improvisation can also be applied as a pedagogical tool, or studied as an aspect of historical performance practice – and last but not least, it can be an art form in itself.<sup>20</sup>

A landmark in the revaluation of improvisation at a conservatory level was an EC funded ‘Erasmus Intensive Programme’ that the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague initiated. In 2012-2013, three large scale improvisation projects for classical music students were hosted at this institute, gathering students and teachers from twelve institutions for higher music education across Europe.<sup>21</sup> A follow-up of this programme was the Tallinn-based ‘METRIC’-project, that ran from 2016-2018 and resulted, among other things, in an online collection of tutorials.<sup>22</sup> Incidentally, music education for beginners also increasingly includes improvisation, especially at the earliest stages of development.

In the field of music theory – an academic discipline in some, but not all countries – improvisation has become a topic as well. Already in 2007, the Dutch-Flemish Society for Music Theory organised its annual International Conference in Groningen around this theme,<sup>23</sup> followed two years later by the German *Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* (Mainz, 2009). The (American) Society for Music Theory has maintained an Interest Group on Improvisation since 2011.<sup>24</sup>

### *Improvisation as an aspect of music-making*

Overlooking this extremely diverse field, it is almost impossible to produce a sound and encompassing definition of the term ‘improvisation’.<sup>25</sup> When, therefore, a conservatory writes that it has made ‘improvisation’ part of the study programme, or even offers a subject with that name, there is an uncomfortable essentialist touch to this. There may be valid institution-political reasons to put improvisation on the agenda in this way, but as I have shown above, the meaning of the term tends to differ considerably, depending on who is using it. Very much in line with modern attempts to

<sup>20</sup> For instance as presented on the website of the *Hochschule für Musik und Theater ‘Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’* in Leipzig: <https://www.hmt-leipzig.de/de/home/fachrichtungen/komposition-tonsatz/improvisation>

<sup>21</sup> Together with my colleague, music theorist and pianist Karst de Jong, I had the pleasure of being closely involved with the organisation of these projects.

<sup>22</sup> ‘METRIC’ somewhat puzzlingly stands for ‘Modernizing European Higher Music Education through Improvisation’. [www.metricimpro.eu](http://www.metricimpro.eu)

<sup>23</sup> The proceedings of this conference were published in: *Tijdschrift voor Muziektheorie*, vol. 13 no. 1 (2008). <https://lup.be/pages/archief-tijdschrift-voor-muziektheorie-2008-volume-13>

<sup>24</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/smtimprovisation/>

<sup>25</sup> For a survey of the history of the term ‘improvisation’ and alternative terminology, see chapter 8.

‘revive’ improvisation on the classical concert stage, it seems that a major motivation to put this topic on the educational agenda in classical music is a sense of loss: the feeling that improvisation is something that is missing today. This is not necessarily a sign of nostalgia. Perhaps one could say that fostering ‘improvisation’ is the hypothetical answer of institutions to the feeling that some aspects of classical music-making are no longer satisfactory. A worldwide decline in audience involvement and, consequently, public funding surely contributes to this awareness.<sup>26</sup> The danger of using ‘improvisation’ as a catch-all term, though, is that it creates new myths (such as: ‘in the past every musician was also an improviser’) and false expectations (such as: ‘students need improvisation to be successful on the job market’). An even bigger risk may be that improvisation will be seen as a separate activity, which will leave classical music-making as such untouched.

Nonetheless I think that it would be wise to take seriously the notion that something is not right with (much) classical music-making as it is generally taught today – or, put more neutrally: the feeling that our time asks for a different view on performing classical music.<sup>27</sup> ‘Improvisation’ may be too undefined to count as a remedy, but there seems to be a shared idea that classical music-making could (and should) be more ‘improvisatory’. The difference is that the latter term is an adjective that clearly refers to an *aspect* of music-making, thus avoiding the suggestion of improvisation as an autonomous entity. The term ‘improvisatory’ refers to aspects of music-making that are associated with the ‘unforeseen’ (*improvisus*), the unplanned. In this study, this word is understood as ‘unforeseen by the performer’, and in that sense ‘unplanned’. It does not primarily concern the listener, and therefore does not imply any ‘unexpectedness’ in the sense of originality. According to this view, someone may improvise clichéd music that, despite being disappointingly commonplace, nonetheless counts as ‘improvisation’. What defines the improvisatory in this study is its being based on decisions that have not been planned in advance, but that are made ad hoc, in the moment.

In his nuanced account of improvisation in the context of classical music in *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, the musicologist Rudolf Frisius creates room for improvisatory aspects in a performance on the basis of a score:

Auch eine der klanglichen Realisierung vorausgehende Notation (...), in der melodisch-harmonische und rhythmische Konstellationen, eventuell auch sekundäre Merkmale eindeutig fixiert sind, [kann] Möglichkeiten der Improvisation bei der Aufführung zulassen, wenn – in Befolgung aufführungspraktischer Konventionen oder dem Notentext beigefügter Anweisungen – auf verschiedene Weise aufführbare (bei der Aufführung allein auf Grund des Notentextes nicht

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<sup>26</sup> The Curtis Institute, for instance, explicitly mentions ‘giving (...) students an additional tool for community and audience engagement’. <https://www.curtis.edu/news-folder/fall-2018/curtis-announces-performance-certificate-in-improvisation/>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Leech-Wilkinson, D.: ‘Moral judgement in response to performances of Western art music’. In: Aguilar, A. & Cole, R. & Pritchard, M. & Clarke, E. (eds.): *Remixing Music Studies: Essays in honour of Nicholas Cook*. New York, 2020; 108.

vorhersehbare) Abweichungen vom Notentext zugelassen sind (z.B. eingefügte Diminutionen oder Kadenzen, mehrfache Wiederholungen mit im Groben vorgegebenen Abwandlungsmöglichkeiten).<sup>28</sup>

[Even musical notation that precedes its realisation in sound, and in which melodic, harmonic and rhythmic constellations (and possibly secondary features) have been fixed unambiguously, may allow for improvisational opportunities. This occurs when, in response to conventions of performance practice or to additional indications in the score, it is permitted to deviate in various ways (that cannot be foreseen on basis of the score itself) from the musical text (e.g., inserted diminutions or cadenzas, multiple repetitions with only vaguely prescribed possibilities of modification).]

Judging by the examples he gives, Frisius seems to see the possibilities for improvisation primarily where the score is not explicit. However, his reference to the ‘conventions of performance practice’ has deeper implications. Frisius seems to be assuming that a score may ‘unambiguously’ fix parameters such as rhythm and pitch. In this study, I will question this assumption and argue that it is also those ‘conventions of performance practice’ that make clear that any musical notation is a simplification (→ chapter 2.3). Until well into the twentieth century, the improvisatory potentially extended to anything that was only apparently fixed in scores. An improvisatory approach by performers was not only permitted – it was often expected.

The purpose of the present study is to explore several guises of the improvisatory in nineteenth-century music-making, to research what enabled the musicians at that time to perform in that way, and to look for possibilities to embed a similar sense of ‘improvisatoriness’ in today’s classical music practice. How exactly the improvisatory manifests itself depends on the situation, and various nineteenth-century musical subcultures can be very different in this respect. Focusing on the improvisatory, rather than fruitlessly trying to define ‘improvisation’, considerably broadens the scope of this project. Gooley’s book *Fantasies of Improvisation*, mentioned above, discusses ‘improvisations’ in the sense of stage performances for piano. This brings the author to the line of thought that such improvisation gave way to ‘the improvisation imaginary, where improvisatoriness, as an aesthetic effect, is mistaken for the real thing’.<sup>29</sup> The present study, on the other hand, inverts Gooley’s argument: it is the improvisatory in a broad sense on which the focus lies, a phenomenon of which concert fantasies of early nineteenth-century pianists are an example that, indeed, seems to have flourished only for a few decades. The result is an imaginary panorama of musical styles and

<sup>28</sup> Frisius, R.: ‘Improvisation – zur Terminologie’. In: *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Sachteil 4. Kassel, 1996; col. 539. Incidentally, for Frisius ‘improvisation’ implies that the ‘sonic output’ is unforeseen (or even unforeseeable) for both the performer and the listener (op. cit., col. 540). With respect to the latter I tend to disagree: as Daniel Gottlob Türk (→ chapter 10.1) already remarked, a listener generally cannot know whether a piece is improvised or has been sketched beforehand. When it is considered important that an audience appreciates the music being ‘truly improvised’, for instance during a solo improvisation recital, performers often resort to ‘tricks’ such as asking the audience to provide a theme.

<sup>29</sup> Gooley, D., op. cit., 271.

environments that will be examined in their ‘regional identities’, just as Van Lennep and his friend explored the different provinces of their native country.

### 1.3 Music and language

Besides the common assumption that ‘improvisation’ would have disappeared during a period of such central importance for classical music, this study was motivated by yet another idea which is explicitly connected with the educational context, more specifically the training of professional musicians.

In the foreword to *Die Improvisation in der Musik*, Ferand writes that the initial impetus to his book came from the acknowledgement that the ‘Improvisationslehre’ [theory of improvisation] could serve as a link between music theory as taught at conservatories and music academies, and the living practice of music-making: it is ‘praktischer Theorieunterricht’ [practical theory teaching].<sup>30</sup> The picture Ferand sketches of conservatory music theory is extremely dry and abstract indeed, and cannot count as an adequate description of theory teaching at institutions nowadays. Nevertheless, as music theoretical subjects pre-eminently occupy themselves with the structure of historical musical languages, there is potentially a mutual relation between music theory and the improvisatory. This means that music theory may inform and help improvisatory music-making, but also, conversely, that the dimension of the improvisatory is capable of challenging and enriching traditional music theory. Though there are several ways to articulate this relation, the approach chosen in this study mostly draws on the idea that music has many parallels with (verbal) language, and that it can in some respects even be said to function as a kind of language. Thus one might say that classical scores were written in musical languages that were at that time used actively – in compositions, in extempore creations, and in anything in between. Most classical musicians of today do not actively master the musical languages they perform; they are like actors who perform Goethe but can’t themselves say anything in German. This might summarise the situation classical music has got into in the course of the twentieth century: most performers learn how to transform a score (which is a musical text) into sounding music, but most of them are unable to produce even the simplest coherent new utterances in the musical language they are performing.<sup>31</sup> The will to ‘revive improvisation’, exemplified in Volodos’s pithy statement (→ section 1.1), can be interpreted as the desire to gain active command of historical musical languages again, primarily with the intention to increase the cogency of classical music-making. Supporting this endeavour with historically based material is one of the goals of this study.

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<sup>30</sup> Ferand, E.: op. cit., VII.

<sup>31</sup> This idea resonates with Noam Chomsky’s concept of linguistic competence (cf. Tienson, J. (1983): ‘Linguistic Competence’. *Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences*, vol. XI (1983); 99-194).

It has to be admitted that the music-language parallel is not without problems, especially concerning the notion of ‘meaning’: if music is a language, what does it speak about? Can music refer to an extra-musical reality in the same way language does? The old nineteenth-century debate between champions of absolute and of programme music jumps to mind, followed by the twentieth-century distinction between formalism and expressionism<sup>32</sup> – hardly a prospect of much clarification! In the fields of psychology, neurology and philosophy as well, the comparison of music with language has been the subject of still ongoing research and debate. In music theory, the theoretical framework of linguistics formed the background of theories of tonal structure, for instance in Fred Lehrdal’s and Ray Jackendoff’s *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*.<sup>33</sup>

For this study it is relevant that during the period under investigation, a close connection between music and language has been assumed on an intuitive level. Comparing a musical performer, notably an improviser, with an orator is a commonplace in nineteenth-century texts – which demonstrates the importance, still at that time, of musical rhetoric, an essentially language-related phenomenon. Moreover, traditional music-theoretical terminology (largely developed in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) shows many examples of musical events that are referred to in linguistic terms, such as ‘phrase’ or ‘theme’. In short, there are ample reasons to treat nineteenth-century music as, to employ Theodor Adorno’s term, *sprachähnlich* [language-like].<sup>34</sup>

When twentieth-century stylistic developments are considered, the language-like character of music in the nineteenth century becomes even more obvious in retrospect. One crucial shift in twentieth-century music is the emancipation of pure sound as such; I argue that this has considerably complicated the use of the linguistic metaphor in speaking about music. Nobody articulated the switch from music-as-language to music-as-sound more clearly than the composer John Cage. In a documentary film of Miroslav Sebestik from 1992, Cage said that much music to him felt like people talking to him.<sup>35</sup> The point he made in the interview was that he actually did not like very much the ‘talking’, but that he ‘enjoyed the sound acting’: any sound could potentially be ‘music’. Cage’s lucid explanation articulates a revolutionary twentieth-century change and in reverse clarifies the preceding situation: it confirms being-like-language as a very essential quality of pre-twentieth century Western art music. The present tour of nineteenth-century musical styles draws on this quality.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Meyer, L.B.: *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago, 1956.

<sup>33</sup> Lehrdahl, F. & Jackendoff, R.: *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*. Cambridge, MA, 1983. For a discussion of music theoretical views on the language metaphor, see Agawu, K.: *Music as Discourse*. Oxford, 2009; 15–39.

<sup>34</sup> Adorno, T.W.: ‘Fragment über Musik und Sprache’. In: *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 16*. Frankfurt am Main, 1978; 251.

<sup>35</sup> <https://youtu.be/2aYT1Pwp3oM>

Even for the improvisatory aspects of ‘score-based’<sup>36</sup> music-making (as will be discussed in part 2) the language parallel is of importance. A nineteenth-century score is a musical text, written in a musical language. In this study, focusing on the role of the performer, interpreting a score means entering into a dialogue with it. This can only truly happen when the interpreter masters this language. Mastering a musical language implies the ability to conceive of alternatives that were not chosen (for whatever reason) by the composer. It creates a reciprocity vis-à-vis the score, and it is this very reciprocity that justifies the term ‘dialogue’. A performer who really masters a musical language is able to use it actively and in the moment, to come up with something that makes sense, in short: to improvise.

### *Reviving a ‘dead’ language*

Continuing the language parallel, one might say that to many score-based musicians the classical musical styles have become the equivalents of ‘dead’ languages such as Latin and ancient Greek, which are (with very few exceptions) no longer spoken actively. Interestingly, the idea of re-establishing the active command of historical musical styles has its parallel in classical studies. In the case of Latin the almost complete absence of active use is a relatively recent situation: in the nineteenth century this language was still spoken actively in university lectures in some countries. Twentieth-century didactics, however, moved towards a grammar-based approach, in which the text is seen ‘as a puzzle to be deciphered or a specimen to be dissected. The usual approach was to take a text and “parse” it.’<sup>37</sup> After the second World War, dissatisfaction with its results led towards a countermovement that attempted to teach classical languages as living languages: the ‘Living Latin’ movement.<sup>38</sup>

With respect to the topic of this study, this development, though relatively modest (and certainly not universally embraced), is at least enlightening and potentially inspiring. Like reading a classical text in the (by now) traditional way, score-based music-making has become a one-way process in which a musical text is deciphered and, in a way, ‘parsed’. Translator Brian Powell puts it lucidly on a popularising website:

As far as your brain is concerned, the real language is the spoken language. Your brain is designed to absorb and internalize language by hearing and speaking it – this is how you learned your native

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<sup>36</sup> Fidom, H.: ‘Listening as a Musicological Tool: Real Time Analysis.’ In: *Improvisation* (Orgelpark Research Reports vol. 3, part 1). Amsterdam, 2013; §313.

<sup>37</sup> Powell, B.: ‘How to Speak Latin: A Beginner’s Guide to Living Latin’. <https://www.fluentin3months.com/speak-latin/>

<sup>38</sup> The Danish linguist Hans Ørberg published *Lingua Latina per se illustrata*, a method based upon the principle that a text should explain itself, and in the 1990’s the *Accademia Vivarium novum* was founded in Rome. A well-known champion of ‘living Latin’ is the German philologist Wilfried Stroh who published *Latein ist tot, es lebe Latein!* (Berlin, 2007).

language, after all. By contrast, reading and writing are an abstract, secondary representation of the spoken language. If your entire experience of a language is just as marks on a page, you will never develop the same immediate, intuitive “feel” for it that you have for your native language or other languages you’ve learned to fluency.<sup>39</sup>

In music as well, it is a well-known fact that total immersion in a musical idiom, preferably at an early age, is an important prerequisite for fluency.<sup>40</sup> Just as in the case of remastering the Latin language actively, such immersion cannot really take place anymore today with respect to musical styles that belong to an irretrievable past. However, this does not imply that a renewed active command is out of range, as experiences with Living Latin confirm. How this might work in music, and how music theory can be of importance, will be sketched in part 4 of this study.

Though this study was written against the background of professional music education, it is not intended as a method. Rather it means to develop a fundament for current and future attempts to regain access to the improvisatory in classical music. I will show how a historically informed understanding of improvisation may transform current performance practices in classical music, notably the nineteenth-century repertoire. Depicting ‘improvisation’ as a panacea may be unwise, but I will argue that an improvisatory approach to nineteenth-century music can make those practices richer, more communicative and more diverse. As I mentioned above, Ferand saw the nineteenth century as a period of decay with respect to ‘the art of improvisation’, and hence the scope of his work extended only to the end of the eighteenth century. This study aims to continue where Ferand stopped.

#### 1.4 The *Urtext*-paradigm

What today is called ‘classical music’ is in this study not seen as the imaginary continuation of a centuries-old musical practice, but as an essentially modern practice of music-making which is based upon scores that were written in a more or less remote past. Thus Western ‘classical music’ is score-based by definition: it is a literate musical practice. It is easily forgotten that this dependence on musical texts is exceptional: most musical traditions worldwide do not make use of musical notation. Clearly, the way in which classical music works cannot be seen independently from the fact that it uses scores. How music is transmitted, how it is performed, how it is enjoyed and assessed: everything is connected with classical music being score-based. Needless to say, music theory as we know it also owes its existence to the fact that in Western art music it is possible to write down music. Due to this phenomenon, classical music has two faces: there is the music-as-it-sounds, which I will term ‘music-as-event’, and there is ‘music-as-a-score’. Music-as-event is something that, like all music, is a temporal

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<sup>39</sup> Powell, B.: op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Cf., e.g., Berliner, P.: *Thinking in Jazz: the Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago, 1994; especially chapter 1.

art: it can only be experienced on a timeline; the music-as-a-score is a musical text, something concrete on paper, a static object that can be viewed at a glance.

Since classical music is essentially score-based, the often applied term ‘classical improvisation’ is in fact in contradiction with itself; it will generally be avoided in this study. What it usually refers to, though, is a type of idiomatic improvisation (Derek Bailey), style-oriented improvisation or, as I prefer to call it, historically inspired improvisation;<sup>41</sup> it aims to apply styles (‘languages’) of classical compositions and will be the subject of part 3 of this study, ‘Improvising without a score’.

Until well into the twentieth century, much newly written music was naturally understood as an organic continuation of a centuries-old tradition. This situation has changed in the course of the century, especially after the second World War, when ‘contemporary music’ became a separate sub-species, like ‘early music’ soon after: a niche with its own audience. The implications of this interruption of a living tradition are important. Classical music has become something that belongs to the past, a collection of utterances in a forgotten language. For more and more people, familiarity with classical music is rather based upon passive habituation than on active participation – a situation to which the free and unconditional availability of recorded music has also contributed. In other words: pronouncing Goethe’s words without speaking his language has become increasingly satisfactory to many.<sup>42</sup> This development has led towards a type of musician that can be called score-dependent: many modern ‘classical’ musicians are simply unable to play or sing anything coherent that has not been written down first. To a score-dependent musician improvising is *das ganz Andere* (with an apology to theologian Karl Barth), something beyond his imagination. The same is true, by-the-way, for the modern concert audience: many listeners simply don’t understand how somebody should make music that has not been composed before. It is a situation that leads to an understanding of improvisation as an isolated activity.

I argue that this increasing score-dependency has deeply changed the relation between a performer and the score. When one depends on notated music to be able to play anything at all, the musical text becomes an ultimate and unquestionable truth, and performers have no other option than to cling to it. Their task is to transform the notation into sound. (Incidentally, this task is hard enough, especially considering the extremely high and ever rising level of technical perfection that is expected.) In the eyes of a performer, there tends to be one ideal version of this transformation that every performance strives for. This ideal may very well be a personal truth, but what counts is that a

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<sup>41</sup> Analogous to the Historically Informed Performance practice (HIP), that increasingly sees itself as ‘historically inspired’ as well.

<sup>42</sup> This is not meant to sketch a too dystopian picture, for new ways of dealing with old music do not preclude true enjoyment or an improvisatory approach. However, knowingly ignoring an important part of a musical text’s meaning is artistically problematic, in my view. Similarly, one may enjoy reproduced fragments of Mondriaan’s paintings as harmless decoration, but in view of the painter’s high idealistic intentions, such commercial use still feels as an offense against these artworks.



musician is constantly trying to achieve one specific – and in that sense static – end result. Performances are thus seen as reproductions.<sup>43</sup> In the words of musicologist Ulrich Mahlert:

Der Spieler erarbeitet, lernt und automatisiert im Üben eine bestimmte, bis ins Detail festgelegte Interpretationsversion der jeweiligen Komposition; fortan ruft er das Werk nur noch in dieser gleichermassen perfektionierten wie erstarrten Gestalt ab.<sup>44</sup>

[The player acquires, learns and automatises by practising a specific interpretational version of the respective composition that is fixed in detail; from now on he will only retrieve the work in this as perfected as ossified form.]

Of course there will be small ad hoc adaptations to the acoustics, the instrument (especially when the player doesn't use his own), and the reactions of the audience. As Cobussen explains in *The Field of Musical Improvisation*, such factors also can be seen as 'actants', and the interplay with them as improvisation.<sup>45</sup> This might indeed be true in an ecological sense, when the system of a specific situation of music-making is observed by an imaginary outsider; however, focusing on the individual musician may give a different picture. The two views supplement each other: the musician can have a very definite and 'static' result in mind (which could be called an anti-improvisatory intention), and at the same time use improvising with the unique 'actants' of that very performance as a means to get to this result. 'The improvisatory' as it is explored in this study, on the other hand, depends on the attitude of the performer. If performers do not open up to it, if they don't embrace it in their music-making, it does not exist; it creates a situation in which, indeed, 'improvisation has disappeared from Western music'.

Score-dependency is connected with an interpretational modus that for many classical musicians still is the standard approach to a musical score; I call this the *Urtext*-paradigm. *Urtext* [original or primordial text] is a label that was attached (possibly for commercial reasons) mainly from the 1950's on to text-critical editions of classical music, especially by German and Austrian publishers such as *Bärenreiter*, *Henle* and *Wiener Urtext Edition*. This type of edition pretends to provide the original score 'as intended by the composer'.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the more reserved term 'critical edition', the word *Urtext* has the suggestion of representing the piece as it should be – an idea that presupposes strict obedience of the performer. Pianist and artistic researcher Paulo de Assis even calls *Urtext* editions 'an epistemological obstacle'.<sup>47</sup> This type of high quality edition of classical scores quickly became

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<sup>43</sup> One situation in which this feeling is acute is a studio recording in which editing is involved.

<sup>44</sup> Introduction to Czerny, C.: *Von dem Vortrage* (facsimile reprint: U. Mahlert, ed.). Wiesbaden, 1991; IX.

<sup>45</sup> Cobussen, M.: op. cit., 109.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion, see Boorman, S.: 'Urtext'. In: *New Grove Online* (<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.28851>)

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Assis, P. de: 'Beyond Urtext: A Dynamic Conception of Musical Editing'. In: Assis, P. de & Kanno, M. & Parra Cancino, J.: *Dynamics of Constraints*. Gent, 2009; 10.

the standard for any self-respecting performer. What I call the *Urtext*-paradigm is a musical literalism that sees the score as a musical code that has a direct relation with a specific transformation into sound: what you see is directly connected with what you hear, and the score tends to coincide with the music. I would like to emphasise that the paradigm is not associated with the editorial principles of *Urtext* editions as such; rather, it concerns the way these editions tend to be understood and handled by performers – though this seems to be incited by the suggestive label *Urtext*.

Practical editions of classical scores, as, for instance, Carl Czerny's longstanding edition for Edition Peters of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Klavier* with its many added interpretational markings and even altered notes, are today seen as distortions of the original texts. Paradoxically, it is only within the literalism of the *Urtext*-paradigm that Czerny's edition really becomes problematic. Interestingly enough, this paradigm continues to dominate many modern views on music, not only in mainstream classical music performance but also in the field of post-1950 music analysis methods, and even in the Early Music movement and 'Historically Informed Performance' (HIP). As for the latter: on the basis of research one may find that certain aspects of notation in early scores are not intended to be interpreted exactly as written – as is often the case with rhythm, for instance.<sup>48</sup> However, this as such leaves the idea of the score as a code untouched. Many HIP performances show the same lack of 'improvisatoriness' as more traditional classical performances.

Where Franz Liszt could still call wrong notes during a performance 'uninvited guests',<sup>49</sup> the *Urtext*-paradigm belongs to a musical world in which a very high level of technical perfection (perhaps unequalled in history) is the standard. It is hard to tell which is the cause of which; maybe it would be better to see both phenomena as consequences of a basic attitude that tends to take a musical text literally – from a historical perspective, too literally, as will be argued in this study.

The *Urtext*-paradigm should not be confused with 'just playing the notes'. The crux of the *Urtext*-paradigm is not that it would discourage the performers to 'do something with the notes', but that it leaves very little room for ad hoc decisions. It represents the triumph of control in music-making, minimising the space for 'the unforeseen'. This study examines the hypothesis that nineteenth-century musicians had a different mentality compared to their present-day peers, an attitude towards music-making that left more space for extempore decisions, and, much more than today, appreciated a performance as a 'reworking' (Benson) instead of a reproduction: an improvisatory approach to scores and to music-making in general. It will be argued that this attitude was (at least in part) based on the ideal of variety, as opposed to the later musical literalism of the *Urtext*-paradigm. As

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<sup>48</sup> For instance in the genre of the French Overture *à la Lully*, where in the slow part dotted rhythms are supposed to be performed over-dotted.

<sup>49</sup> Walker, A.: *Franz Liszt*, vol. 3: *The final years, 1861-1886*. Ithaca (New York), 1996; 247.

mentioned above, this improvisatory aspect could manifest itself in many ways. A freely improvised cadenza or fantasy obviously had a great deal of it – though a performer could very well incorporate premeditated material at will. However, such improvisations without a score are not the exclusive focus of this study. Without neglecting their importance, we can regard them as a possible consequence of something much more fundamental: an underlying improvisatory attitude to music-making in general, be it with or without scores. It implies an invitation to today's musicians and scholars to rethink an interpretational paradigm we usually take for granted. From performers it demands being open to the unexpected, an attitude that may be unusual and even frightening – but that, on the other hand, has the potential to bring a sense of life to music-making that is nothing less than addictive. From audiences, including critics and concert organisers, it demands a different attitude of listening, being prepared to enjoy differences instead of applying the same imaginary yardstick for every performance.

### 1.5 The artistic value of historically inspired improvisation

The series of international, cross-stylistic conservatory improvisation projects mentioned in section 1.2 has acted like a pressure cooker for thinking about improvisation on an institutional level. Much more than in the case of a musicological, music theoretical or philosophical conference, the simple fact that every idea had to be put into practice immediately gave rise to interesting and sometimes passionate discussions. A teaching project that exclusively focuses on 'improvisation' takes for granted that this term refers to something concrete and well-defined. As I have shown in section 1.2, in reality people have very different ideas about what the word actually means, and as a result, stylistic differences are almost inevitably framed as 'different types of improvisation'. From there it is only a small step to comparing the assumed 'artistic value' of these types. At the instigation of Christoph Baumann (*Hochschule Luzern*), the METRIC community found an elegant way out of this mire by adding different taxonomies, namely distinguishing by objective (improvisation as an art form in itself, improvisation as a means to an end), by pitch organisation (tonal improvisation, free improvisation, *improvisation générative*), or by discipline (extra-musical, cross arts).<sup>50</sup> Though this does not completely solve the problem, it at least avoids sometimes fruitless discussions, especially between champions of 'free improvisation' and 'classical improvisers'. In such discussions classical music often finds itself in a defensive position. Derek Bailey's tendentious words from 1980 may serve to illustrate the tone of the debate:

The petrifying effect of European classical music on those things it touches – jazz, many folk musics, and all popular musics have suffered grievously in their contact with it – made the prospect of finding improvisation there pretty remote. Formal, precious, self-absorbed, pompous, harbouring rigid

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<sup>50</sup> <http://metricimpro.eu/exercises/glossary/>

conventions and carefully preserved hierarchical distinctions; obsessed with its geniuses and their timeless masterpieces, shunning the accidental and the unexpected: the world of classical music provides an unlikely setting for improvisation.<sup>51</sup>

Though this fierce attack clearly results from the difficulty in defining ‘improvisation’, musicologist Roger Moseley’s words from 2013 still represent an uncomfortable truth:

The flourishing of improvisation studies over recent years has placed ‘classical’ music and its adherents in an unfamiliar and somewhat defensive position. For once, other musics, narratives, and disciplinary approaches are of central concern while the ‘classical’ and its associated values are revealed to be peripheral, abnormal, and even paradoxically ephemeral.<sup>52</sup>

The main objection ‘classical’ improvisers are faced with is the supposed lack of originality in their art. Whereas ‘free improvisers’ like to associate improvisation with freedom of any kind, avoiding all beaten tracks, improvising in classical styles is easily depicted as warming up what others invented long ago, and therefore as unartistic (due to its presumed lack of originality). Behind this idea is a strong focus on (and often an obsession with) ‘newness’ in music.

The position I take up draws on the already mentioned parallel between music and language, which has implications for the notion of ‘newness’. In any language, it will always be possible to say new things, even though the speaker does not invent any new words. Likewise, one may improvise (or compose, for that matter) ‘new’ music in a nineteenth-century musical language. With respect to the artistic value of historically inspired improvisation, debates as mentioned above in fact show a radically modern perspective in which music (including improvised music) is enjoyed for its own sake, primarily by listening to recordings or by visiting a concert. I will show throughout this study that nineteenth-century musical culture was much more diverse than that, and that music-making occurred in various situations that have no parallels today, but that were as such natural habitats for the improvisatory. It is this broader outlook on musical culture that will gradually unfold throughout the course of this study by traversing step by step a range of nineteenth-century musical landscapes. Historically inspired improvisation has the capacity to restore the connection with the interrupted musical tradition I referred to in section 1.4: it allows historical musical languages to live on.

## 1.6 Rationale

As mentioned above, this study provides a ‘panorama’ of nineteenth-century styles and situations of music-making that together sketch a picture of improvisatory aspects of nineteenth-century music; it subsequently investigates possible implications for the interpretation of scores from that period,

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<sup>51</sup> Bailey, D.: *Improvisation: its Nature and Practice in Music* (revised ed.). Boston, 1993; 19.

<sup>52</sup> Moseley, R.: ‘Entextualization and the Improvised Past.’ *Music Theory Online*, Volume 19, Number 2 (June 2013); [1].

and for the function of the improvisatory in modern (classical) music life. My perspective is in the first place that of a performer of this repertoire. Knowing *that* improvisation happened during the investigated period might in itself gratify curiosity, but crucial for a modern performer is the coupling to today's performance practice. This study was written by a musician, and, at least in part, addresses itself to professional musicians, including music theorists. Though there are many cross-references throughout the text, the chapters can generally be read separately.

### ***Research questions***

The underlying research was structured by means of four questions. The first two have a historical focus:

1. *To what extent and in what way did nineteenth-century music-making depend on improvisatory activity?*
2. *Is there a connection between the training of nineteenth-century musicians and the improvisatory attitude they might have had during music-making?*

The answers to these questions partly describe the 'horizon' of nineteenth-century scores: musical texts have been written with the contemporary musical conventions in mind. This affects modern musical practice ('classical music') and thus leads towards the third question:

3. *How can an improvisatory approach be incorporated in today's musical practice?*

Fundamental to this study is the idea that music can be regarded as a language, and that it is important for 'classical' musicians today to master the musical languages of the (in this case, nineteenth-century) repertoire they perform. Therefore the third question can be narrowed down:

- 3b. *How can nineteenth-century musical languages be actively mastered again?*

A characteristic of improvising is that it by definition *happens*: it is music-as-event. This ephemeral character makes improvisation a problematic subject for traditional music analysis. At the same time, it brings together in a novel way structural and performance-related aspects. The fourth question investigates this field:

4. *What consequences may the rise of stylistically oriented improvisation have for music theory as a teaching subject?*

How improvisation challenges music theory, and how theory might benefit from this, will be the subject of chapter 14, where I investigate how a more hands-on and creative approach to music theory may both be useful for an improviser and enriching for music theory as a conservatory subject.

### *The nineteenth century*

The examined time period is the ‘long’ nineteenth century, roughly starting after the French Revolution and finishing with the beginning of World War I. Though this is a long period that shows a large variety of musical styles, these styles share some characteristics that make it worthwhile to consider the music of this century as a connected whole. The end of the eighteenth century serves as a watershed in many representations of Western history. The nineteenth century was the first one in which printed music became readily available to the masses and in which musical literacy became the standard, leading towards the still familiar habit to call a score a ‘work’. It is a period in music history which by and large was characterised by major / minor tonality, only towards the end gradually dissolving into either neo-modality or chromaticism. It is a period heavily marked by the aesthetics of Romanticism – though this term has become so much disputed that it will mostly be avoided in this study. The Romantic genius cult, however, as well as the associated expectation that a composition be innovative, is a notion that provides an important context for this study. The nineteenth century was the age of the middle class and of the birth of modern concert life, and also of the growing idea that instrumental music is superior to vocal music. With the rise of an ideal like *Werktreue* it is also often regarded as the century in which improvisation disappeared – a claim that has kindled this research.

### *Research area*

Generally, the research area of this project is the historical musical praxis from which the body of compositions has arisen that is usually indicated with the term ‘Western art music’. Folk music will be discussed only insofar as it was of influence during the nineteenth century. Organ music often jumps to mind when the word improvisation is mentioned, and it certainly will play a part in this study. However, during the nineteenth century the church had already lost its central position in Western society, a shift that also moved organ music to a more peripheral area in the musical landscape. Of course, there are notable exceptions like the French organ tradition that started with Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens and César Franck, and which will be discussed in chapter 13. A special case, to conclude, is the symphonic orchestra. Though the importance of symphonic music for the nineteenth-century musical landscape is undisputed, it will hardly play a role in this study. The

reason is that especially since Richard Wagner's disciplinary reforms,<sup>53</sup> improvisatory freedom in the orchestra mainly rests with the conductor, and not with individual players.

Despite such restrictions, the topic of this study covers an extremely wide field. This was a conscious decision: one of the aims is to provide a survey of improvisatory aspects in nineteenth-century music-making, or at least a representative selection of it. Though this broadness inevitably means that some topics can be dealt with only superficially, it also enables cross-references that in a more specialised study would have remained unnoticed, such as the influence of bel canto on instrumental music (→ chapter 5). Indeed, the fact that this study regards the improvisatory as an inherent aspect of music-making rather than an isolated subfield of musical activity makes it inevitable that these rich connections will arise. It is my hope that the added value of such connections makes up for the loss of certain details. In order not to get bogged down in a fruitless attempt to describe an entire culture, I will make use of a conceptual filter that will be developed in chapter 2.

### *Methodology*

The research project took place at the crossroads of musicology, music theory and performance practice, which implies the inclusion of a large variety of sources. Concerning the musicological aspect, it makes extensive use of historical texts such as monographs, methods and treatises, but also of journal articles, letters, biographies, vanity documents, etc. In particular, the evaluation of methods and treatises demands from the researcher hands-on familiarity with performance practice. Such a practice-based approach is even more useful for another type of source: early recordings and editions. Examples in treatises or recordings do not transfer information in a straightforward way; instead of taking them at face value, it is important for the present-day researcher to be aware of what is *not* being told, and to know which choices were *not* made by the performer.

Another example of practice-based interpretation of sources occurs when teaching is involved. For instance, when Czerny shows examples of what one can do with a simple harmonic progression, these will be understood differently by a researcher who has personal experience in teaching young musicians. Anyone who knows how students tend to react to specific difficulties today will read Czerny on a different level of understanding; sometimes Czerny seems to take for granted what would need much more explanation today, and vice versa. This type of conclusion in turn stimulates deeper searching – a process that may very well be called a ‘dialogue’.

In addition, my own practice as an improvising performer is part of the methodological tissue. The most unusual research material in this study surely consists of live recordings of myself. As a performer-researcher, I may be able to bring in elements that are not accessible to someone who does

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Wagner, R.: *Über das Dirigieren*. Leipzig, 1914.

not have the experience of actually participating in the recorded improvisations. Analysing them along the same lines as other recordings may bring valuable insights. Moreover, the influence of the instrument that is used for a recording can be made more concrete in this way.

Aside from musicology and performance practice, the third area involved in this research is music theory. This is actually an umbrella term for a number of study topics that are usually distinguished according to their organisation in higher music education, with traditional subdisciplines like harmony, counterpoint and analysis. In this study, I will continuously draw on music-theoretical explanations and approaches; the reason for that is that music theory has a long tradition of expressing in words what actually happens in the music that we perform or listen to. If we want to talk about music itself, we need music theory.

In several senses, this study has been distantly inspired by the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Though it by no means pretends to be a philosophically justifiable application of Gadamer's ideas to a field that he has hardly covered himself, concepts such as 'horizon' (*Horizont*), 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*), and especially 'dialogue' (*Dialog*) serve as guiding principles more than once.

### ***Structure***

This study is organised in four parts. The remainder of part 1 will be devoted to a concept with a long history, adapted here to music: *locus communis*; it will serve as a conceptual frame for the whole study. In parts 2 and 3, different guises of the improvisatory will be discussed, employing a taxonomy that runs from score-based to 'free'. Part 2 ('Improvising with a score') focuses on 'relative' improvisation (Ferand), understood as an improvisatory approach to score-based music-making. This part (consisting of chapter nos. 3 through 7) brings together improvised ornamentation and improvisatory timing, two examples of an improvisatory approach that within the logic of this study are seen as connected. Chapter 3 introduces a number of rhetorical features that will play a major role; chapter 4 discusses ornamentation in bel canto as inextricably linked with bel canto performance techniques, whereas in chapter 5 the influence of bel canto on instrumental music will occupy centre stage. Chapter 6 introduces a new understanding of musical tempo by way of one of the most fundamental experiences of a human being, namely walking, after which chapter 7 investigates its musical implications.

Part 3 ('Towards "Historically Inspired Improvisation": improvising without a score', chapter nos. 8 through 13) focuses on a more traditional understanding of improvisation which does not use concrete scores as a point of departure, though it makes use of historical musical languages of which scores are notated examples. The term 'historically inspired' is a flexible term: it is up to improvisers to decide to what extent they actually choose to stay with a specific historical musical language, or



rather allow for a variety of stylistic influences.<sup>54</sup> Appealing examples of the former are organ improvisers like Sietze de Vries and Zuzana Ferjenčíková, while a more eclectic approach can be found in the work of Olivier Latry and Thierry Escaich; in this study, however, most attention will be paid to the acquisition of the musical languages themselves. Historical terminology around the concept of improvisation will be tracked in chapter 8. Chapter 9 is about preluding, chapter 10 about improvised cadenzas. In chapter 11 the somewhat neglected area of improvised dance music will be explored, and in chapter 12 ‘free’ improvisation, with or without compositional forms as models. Chapter 13 focuses on the famous French ‘school’ of organ improvisation that emerged primarily from the teaching of César Franck.

The fourth part, ‘Coda’, zooms in on the question of how the improvisatory aspect of music-making might be enhanced in today’s field of classical music. Chapter 14 provides a summary of the whole study and subsequently proposes an extension of the role of music theory; finally, supporting historical study material is presented in the appendix.

The title of this study can be understood in two ways that together reflect its scope. ‘Nineteenth-century music’ can be taken as the collection of scores that were published in that period and that today serve as a basis of performances. In particular part 2 advocates an improvisatory approach to these scores, as opposed to the *Urtext*-paradigm that I postulated. Alternatively, the term may refer to the practice of music-making in the nineteenth-century. When we approach this practice in an improvisatory way, we are like a jazz musician who listens to other musicians with the intention of using elements of what he hears for his own music. In this sense an improviser can be inspired by historical musical practices. Since no living person heard the playing of Chopin, Schumann or Liszt, or the singing of Malibran, scores have become the main source of information about lost musical practices. In order to take maximum advantage of such musical texts, we need the improvisatory approach in the first sense, mentioned above. The two belong together.

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<sup>54</sup> Obviously, their choice may be influenced by factors of all sorts: aesthetic and cultural conventions, for instance, but also the improviser’s personal musical frame of reference.