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An improvisatory approach to nineteenth-century music

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Part 3

Towards 'Historically Inspired Improvisation': improvising without a score

Chapter 8. A brief history of terminology

8.1 Eighteenth-century definitions: Rousseau

Whereas part 2 of this study focused entirely on an improvisatory attitude to score-based music-making, part 3 deals with a more conventional understanding of the improvisatory in music: the practice of conceiving a piece (or a part of it) while it is performed. Just like part 2, it presents a panorama of nineteenth-century musical situations in which this type of improvisatory activity occurred, and subsequently investigates the implications for present-day music-making. As I wrote at the end of the previous chapter, the issue of acquiring nineteenth-century musical ‘languages’ is of central importance here, ultimately allowing for the option of ‘historically inspired improvisation’.

In chapter 3.7 I wrote that the idea of ‘improvising with a score’ as it has been presented in this study only occasionally corresponds with the contemporary use of the term ‘improvising’; the reference by Baillot (→ chapter 7.8) is an exception to the rule. The present chapter therefore aims to give a survey of the historical development of relevant terms, and consequently to introduce nineteenth-century views on improvisation. Concerning the terminology, most chapters of this study mainly draw on treatises and methods. To complete the picture, it will be good to widen the perspective and investigate how ‘improvising’ and connected terms were defined in late-eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century musical dictionaries and encyclopaedias. The many quoted fragments in this chapter together form a kind of narrative that sketches the development of ideas about extempore music-making.

First of all, the application to music of the verb ‘to improvise’ is not very old. An author still often referred to in nineteenth-century texts (→ chapter 4.5) is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768), Rousseau claims that he constructed the French word *improviser* from the Italian *improvisar*, which had a special meaning. He also writes:

[Improviser:] C’est faire & chanter impromptu des Chansons, Airs & paroles, qu’on accompagne communément d’une Guitarre ou autre pareil Instrument. Il n’y a rien de plus commun en Italie, que de voir deux Masques se rencontrer, de défier, s’attaquer, se riposter ainsi par des couplets sur le même Air, avec une vivacité de Dialogue, de Chant, d’Accompagnement dont il faut avoir été témoin pour la comprendre.⁶⁴⁴

[IMPROVISARE, Is to compose and sing a song extempore, with airs or words, accompanied commonly by a guittar, or any other such instrument. There is nothing more common in Italy

⁶⁴⁴ Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*. Paris, 1768. Facsimile reprint: Arles, 2007; 252.

than to see two ma[s]ks meet, challenge, attack, and form alternate couplets on the same air, with a vivacity of dialogue, air, and accompaniment, which cannot be believed but by an eye witness.⁶⁴⁵

This definition of improvising contains several elements that play a part in this study: the emphasis on the textual dimension, the localisation in Italy (Rousseau preferred Italian music to the French music of his time), the allusion to *Commedia dell'Arte* and of pre-existing characters (→ chapter 12). Closer to a modern idea of improvisation, however, is Rousseau's description of *Fantaisie*:

[Fantaisie:] Pièce de Musique Instrumentale qu'on exécute en la composant. Il y a cette différence du Caprice à la Fantaisie, que le Caprice est un recueil d'idées singulières & disparates que rassemble une imagination échauffée, & qu'on peut même composer à loisir; au lieu que la Fantaisie peut être une Pièce très-régulière, qui ne diffère des autres qu'en ce qu'on l'invente en l'exécutant, & qu'elle n'existe plus si-tôt qu'elle est achevée. Ainsi le Caprice est dans l'espèce & l'assortiment des idées, & la Fantaisie dans leur promptitude à se présenter. Il suit de-là qu'un Caprice peut fort bien s'écrire, mais jamais une Fantaisie; car si-tôt qu'elle est écrite ou répétée, ce n'est plus une Fantaisie, c'est une Pièce ordinaire.⁶⁴⁶

[FANTASY. A piece of instrumental music, which is executed when composed. There is this difference betwixt the caprice and the fantasy; that the caprice is a collection of singular and droll ideas collected by a warm imagination, and which may even be composed at leisure; whereas the fantasy may be a very regular piece, which differs from the rest only that it is invented in its execution, and that it has no longer existence as soon as it finished. Wherefore, the caprice consists in the nature and assortment of ideas, and the ideas in their quickness in presenting them. It follows thence, that a caprice may be very well written, but never a fantasy; for as soon as it is written or repeated, it is no longer a fantasy, but an ordinary piece.⁶⁴⁷]

Rousseau here brings in another (today) heavily connotative word: composing, which he clearly juxtaposes to improvising. Hans Fidom opposes comparing improvisation with composition because they are unlike concepts: 'Composers may devote themselves solely to polishing a score for months on end; they facilitate performative art but are themselves not *real time* performative.' The background of this view is the change in function of a score, as he sees it: 'Until the early nineteenth century, scores had a practical purpose, facilitating ensemble playing and helping to retain and further develop musical ideas, and to teach oncoming talents. Only later (...) the score gradually acquired the position it still has as the embodiment of a composition's identity. One of the effects of

⁶⁴⁵ Rousseau, J.J.: *A Complete Dictionary of Music*. Translated by William Waring: *A Complete Dictionary of music*. London, 1779; 199.

⁶⁴⁶ Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*; 215.

⁶⁴⁷ Rousseau, J.J.: *A Complete Dictionary of Music*; 166.

this development is that, ever since, music making with and without scores has become sharply distinct.⁶⁴⁸

Indeed, a composition in the form of a score is something fundamentally different from an improvisation, which is always a performance. The acts of improvising and composing, however, will be treated here as related activities, if only because this is a view that corresponds with contemporary descriptions. Also, one of the aims of this study is to make a reasonable case for the idea that the emergence of this ‘sharp distinction’ should be placed much later, namely in the twentieth century. To Rousseau, composing meant ‘simply’:

[Composer:] Inventer de la Musique nouvelle, selon les règles de l’Art.⁶⁴⁹

[TO COMPOSE, To invent new music, according to the rules of the art.⁶⁵⁰]

In the entry *Composition* Rousseau works out these ‘règles de l’Art’ and elaborates on the importance of correct harmony.

Fantaisie is a noun; in French, there is no etymologically related verb to indicate the activity of ‘making a fantasy’ (as there is in German, see below). The verb Rousseau uses to indicate an activity that today would be denoted as ‘improvising’ is *préluder*. The entry in the *Dictionnaire de musique* is too rich not to quote it in full:

[Préluder:] C’est en général chanter ou jouer quelque trait de fantaisie irrégulier & assez court, mais passant par les Cordes essentielles du Ton, soit pour l’établir, soit pour disposer la Voix ou bien poser sa main sur un Instrument, avant de commencer une Pièce de Musique. Mais sur l’Orgue & sur le Clavecin l’Art de *Préluder* est plus considérable. C’est composer & jouer impromptu des Pièces chargées de tout ce que la Composition a de plus savant en Dessein, en Fugue, en Imitation, en Modulation & en Harmonie. C’est sur tout en *préludant* que les grands Musiciens, exempts de cet extrême asservissement aux règles que l’œil des critiques leur impose sur le papier, font briller ces Transitions savantes qui ravissent les Auditeurs. C’est là qu’il ne suffit pas d’être bon Compositeur, ni de bien posséder son Clavier, ni d’avoir la main bonne & bien exercée, mais qu’il faut encore abonder de ce feu de génie & de cet esprit inventif qui font trouver & traiter sur le champ les sujets les plus favorables à l’Harmonie & les plus flatteurs à l’oreille. C’est par ce grand Art de Préluder que brillent en France les excellens Organistes, tels que sont maintenant les Sieurs Calvière & Daquin, surpassés toutefois l’un & l’autre par M. le Prince d’Ardore, Ambassadeur de Naples, lequel, pour la vivacité de l’invention & la force de l’exécution, efface les plus illustres Artistes, & fait à Paris l’admiration des connoisseurs.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁸ Fidom, H.: ‘Improvisation: the emancipation of an ancient musical skill.’ In: Peeters, P. (ed.): *The Haarlem Essays*. Bonn, 2014; 363.

⁶⁴⁹ Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*; 109.

⁶⁵⁰ Rousseau, J.J.: *A Complete dictionary of Music*; 74.

⁶⁵¹ Rousseau, J.J.: *Dictionnaire de musique*; 383.

[TO PRELUDE. Is, in general, to sing or play some stroke of irregular fantasy, rather short, but pairing by the essential chords of the tone, either to establish or to dispose the voice, or to place the hand well on an instrument before the beginning of a piece of music. But on the organ and the harpsichord, the art of preluding is more considerable. It is to compose and play extempore pieces filled with all that composition has most ingenious, in design, in fugue, in imitation, modulation, and harmony. It is chiefly in preluding, that great musicians, exempted from that extreme slavery to rules, which the eye of the critic imposes on them on paper, makes those transitions shine which ravish the ear of the audience. It is here that it is not sufficient to be a good composer, or to possess one's key well, or even to have a good and well exercised hand: We must, moreover, abound in that fire of genius, and that inventive ingenuity, which find and execute instantly the subjects most favourable to harmony, and most flattering to the ear. It is by this grand art of preluding that excellent organists shine in France; such as the Sieurs C[al]viere and Daquin, who were still surpassed by Mons. le Prince d'Ardore, ambassador of Naples, who, for vivacity of invention, and force of execution, eclipses the most illustrious artists, and causes the admiration of connoisseurs at Paris. ⁶⁵²]

Rousseau's first and more general description fits in with the idea of a *prélude* as a freely improvised introduction to a performance of a composition, as it was described by (among many others) Jacques Hotteterre in his treatise *L'Art de préluder* (1719).⁶⁵³ The *préludes non mesurés* that became fashionable in French harpsichord compositions from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries seem to have been based upon this type of *prélude*. Such preludes in the strict sense will be discussed in chapter 9.

In his second definition of *préluder*, namely preluding by keyboardists, the specific idea of introducing a composition seems to have moved to the background: here *préluder* means improvising freely without the context of a specific score. Rousseau brings up an interesting paradox: on the one hand, such pieces make use of all techniques that also underlie compositions; on the other hand, the players are free from 'extreme slavery' to the rules. Probably for Rousseau the structural principles (*dessein*) of music could be applied in either a less or a more strict way. The same idea can be found already in Joannes Tinctoris' *Liber de arte contrapuncti* (1477), where we read that in improvised counterpoint (*super librum cantare*) clashes may occur that would be avoided in composed music (*res facta*), though the rules are the same in both cases.⁶⁵⁴ Transposed to the field of this study, this idea implies that improvising in a particular musical 'language' does not necessarily mean copying all properties of a composition in the same style; one may, for instance, improvise in a sonata form, but not feel obliged to exactly mirror the exposition in the recapitulation.

⁶⁵² Rousseau, J.J.: *A Complete Dictionary of Music*; 323.

⁶⁵³ Hotteterre, J.: *L'Art de préluder sur la flûte traversière, sur la flûte-à-bec, sur hauboïs, et autres instruments de dessus*. Paris, 1719.

⁶⁵⁴ Sachs, K.-J.: 'Tinctoris'. In: Sachs, K.-J. & Dahlhaus, C.: entry 'Counterpoint' in *Grove Music Online*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.06690>

8.2 Eighteenth-century German sources

C.Ph.E. Bach

One contemporary notion that is absent in Rousseau's explanations is the *Freye Fantasie* [free fantasy] as it was described by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach in his *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (1753/1762). Though this book (like Rousseau's *Dictionnaire*) was published before the start of the period on which my research centres, its influence reached well into the nineteenth century. When, for example, the 10-year-old Carl Czerny was accepted by Ludwig van Beethoven as his student in 1801, Beethoven advised him to study Bach's treatise.⁶⁵⁵

The famous last chapter of this book is entirely about the *freye Fantasie*, which Bach characterises as follows:

Eine Fantasie nennet man frey, wenn sie keine abgemessene Tacteintheilung enthält, und in mehrere Tonarten ausweicht, als bey anderen Stücken zu geschehen pfliget, welche nach einer Tacteinteilung gesetzt sind, oder aus dem Stegreif erfunden werden.⁶⁵⁶

[A fantasy is said to be free when it is unmeasured and moves through more keys than is customary in other pieces, which are composed or improvised in meter.⁶⁵⁷]

In his *Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte* (1829), Czerny refers to C.Ph.E. Bach in his explanation of free fantasies, which shows the impact this text still had in the nineteenth century:

Es gibt endlich noch eine sehr interessante Art zu preludieren, welche sich der Spieler anzueignen hat, nämlich völlig taktlos, fast recitativ-artig, theils in wirklichen, theils gebrochenen Accorden, anscheinend völlig bewusstlos, gleich dem Umherirren in unbekanntem Gegenden. Diese, vorzüglich den älteren Meistern (Bach, Seb. u. Eman. &) eigenthümliche Manier lässt sehr viel Ausdruck und frappanten Harmoniewechsel zu, und kann, zu rechter Zeit angewendet und gehörig vorgetragen, sehr viel Wirkung machen. Nur darf ein solches Vorspiel nicht zu lange ausgedehnt werden, ohne einen rhythmischen Gesang einzuweben.⁶⁵⁸

[Finally, there is another way of preluding which the performer has to assimilate, namely, completely unmeasured, almost like a recitative, with some sections in chords sounding simultaneously and others with broken chords, seemingly without a conscious plan, resembling wanderings into unknown regions. This distinctive style, especially of the older masters (Bach – Johann Sebastian, and Carl Philipp

⁶⁵⁵ Czerny, C.: *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben* (Walter Kolneder, ed.). Strasbourg, 1968; 15.

⁶⁵⁶ Bach, C.Ph.E.: *Versuch über die wahre Art, das Clavier zu spielen, zweyter Theil* (Berlin, 1762); facsimile Wiesbaden, 1986; II, 325. The expression *aus dem Stegreif* literally means 'from the stirrup', so without dismounting; hence, figuratively: without preparation, extempore.

⁶⁵⁷ Bach, C.Ph.E.: *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (trans. W.J. Mitchell). New York, 1948; 430.

⁶⁵⁸ Czerny, C.: *Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte* (Wien, 1829). Facsimile: Wiesbaden, 1993; 20.

Emanuel, etc.), leaves room for a great deal of expressiveness and striking harmonic changes, and can be extremely effective if introduced at the right time and performed properly. But this kind of prelude should not be drawn out too long without interweaving a rhythmically defined melody.^{659]}

In eighteenth-century Germany, a remarkable number of musical and aesthetical dictionaries came out, which makes it possible to track how terms such as *fantasieren* (*preludieren*, *improvisieren*) were employed. A short journey through German textbooks in particular will reveal the history of such words, and will also provide beautiful vistas to the way people thought about improvisation.

Sulzer (Kirnberger), Wolf

In 1771 / 1774, Johann Georg Sulzer published his *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste* [General theory of fine arts]. The *Kapellmeister* and theorist Johann Philipp Kirnberger, possibly a former student of Johann Sebastian Bach, was responsible for the musical articles in this book. It is often assumed that for the articles after *Modulation*, Kirnberger was assisted by his former student Johann Abraham Peter Schulz. However, the musicologist Beverly Jerold has argued that in reality Kirnberger's share must have been quite modest, and that in addition to Schulz, other authors may have contributed to the articles on music.⁶⁶⁰ Because of this complicated question of authorship, I will simplify matters by collectively referring to the author(s) of these texts as 'Sulzer' in the following discussion.

Before I enter into selected articles of 'Sulzer', an autobiographical sketch by Schulz (published separately from Sulzer's book) will give some background information. It provides an insight into the relation between Schulz and Kirnberger that is interesting with respect to the relation between theory and praxis. Schulz reflects on Kirnberger's strict and theoretical approach as a teacher, and on his own tendency as a student to follow his master in this:

Nur was mir mühsam ausgearbeitet zu sein schien, zog mich an, und daher ward meine ehemals so leichte Schreibart nur mühsam und peinlich. Praktische Musik verlor allen Reiz für mich, weil Kirnberger selbst kein sonderlicher Praktiker war und auch keine Concerte besuchte. Die Orgel, ehemals mein Hauptinstrument, ward hintenangesetzt, weil ich schüchtern im Phantasiren geworden war und verbotene Fortschreitungen zu machen fürchtete. Ich hatte, mit einem Worte, durch Kirnbergers Umgang und Unterricht unstreitig an Kenntniss, Theorie und Kritik gewonnen, aber eben so viel an Genie zur praktischen Hervorbringung eigener Kunstwerke verloren.⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁹ Czerny, C.: *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte op. 200* (A.L. Mitchell, trans.). New York, 1983; 23.

⁶⁶⁰ Jerold, B.: 'Johann Philipp Kirnberger and Authorship'. *Notes* vol. 69 no. 4 (2013); 688-705.

⁶⁶¹ Ledebur, C.F.H.W.Ph.J., Freiherr von: *Tonkünstler-Lexicon Berlin's von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*. Berlin, 1861; 531.

[I was attracted solely by what seemed to have been constructed laboriously, and in this way my previously easy way of writing became laborious and painstaking. Practical music lost all attraction to me because Kirnberger was not notably a man from practice himself and didn't visit concerts either. The organ, previously my main instrument, was put on the background, because I had become timid in improvising and feared to make forbidden progressions. In one word, thanks to the contact with Kirnberger I definitely had gained a lot with regard to knowledge, theory and critical sense, but I had lost just as much with respect to my talent to produce my own art works.]

It is remarkable that already in the 1760's the possible tension between theory (understood as a prescriptive subject) and practice was articulated so clearly, and that Schulz here indirectly demonstrates the rightness of Rousseau's remark that improvisers are 'exempted from that extreme slavery to rules, which the eye of the critic imposes on them on paper'. Moreover, his remark about his organ playing suggests that for him the organ was an instrument that one primarily improvised upon.

At the entry *Fantasiren / Fantasie* in the *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste*, 'Sulzer' writes:

Wenn ein Tonkünstler ein Stück, so wie er es allmählig in Gedanken sehet, sofort auf einem Instrumente spielt; oder wenn er nicht ein schon vorhandenes Stück spielt, sondern eines, das er währendem Spielen erfindet, so sagt man, er fantasire. Also gehört zum Fantasiren eine große Fertigkeit im Satz, besonders, wenn man auf Orgeln, Clavieren oder Harfen vielstimmig fantasirt. (...) Oft fantasirt man ohne Melodie, bloß der Harmonie und Modulation halber; oft aber fantasiert man so, daß das Stück den Charakter einer Arie, oder eines Duets, oder eines andern singenden Stücks, mit begleitendem Baß hat. Einige Fantasien schweifen von einer Gattung in die andere aus, bald in ordentlichem Takt, bald ohne Takt, u.s.w.⁶⁶²

[When a musician plays a piece, as he gradually imagines it, immediately on an instrument; or when he does not play a piece that is already available, but one that he invents during playing, this is called 'improvising'. Thus improvising demands a great skill in musical setting, especially when one improvises in many voices on organs, other keyboard instruments or harps. (...) Sometimes people improvise without a melody, just because of harmony and modulation; then again one may improvise in such a way that the piece has the character of an aria, or a duet, or another vocal piece with an accompanying bass. Some improvisations move from one genre into another, this time in a proper metre, another time without a metre, etc.]

This description more or less matches Rousseau's *Fantaisie*, though the author adds the possibility of playing without a regular metre and without a clear melody, as in the *freie Fantasie* à la Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. 'Sulzer' adds:

⁶⁶² Sulzer, J.G.: *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste in einzeln, nach alphabetischer Ordnung der Kunstwörter auf einander folgenden Artikeln abgehandelt*. Leipzig, 1771; I, 368.

Die Fantasien von großen Meistern, besonders die, welche aus einer gewissen Fülle der Empfindung und in dem Feuer der Begeisterung gespielt werden, sind oft, wie die ersten Entwürfe der Zeichner, Werke von ausnehmender Kraft und Schönheit, die bey einer gelassenen Gemüthslage nicht so könnten verfertigt werden.⁶⁶³

[Improvisations by great masters, especially those which are performed from a sincere emotion and with the fire of enthusiasm, are often works of extraordinary power and beauty, just like the first sketches of painters; they could not have been produced like this when the creator was in a resigned mood.]

This passage forms a bridge to a large section about the desirability of a device which could notate extempore keyboard playing. In the twentieth century, the dream of ‘Sulzer’ would become true: by means of piano rolls, wax rolls and later developments, performances could be recorded, and more recently midi technique even made it possible to convert a keyboard performance directly into musical notation. Just like Rousseau, ‘Sulzer’ juxtaposes improvising and composing. I would argue that the fact that our generation has become used to the possibility of recording music is precisely why we are so sensitive to the fundamental difference between a score and a performance; in other words, the relation between these two has become subject to discussion. ‘Sulzer’ could only dream about recordings, and thus didn’t have to care about a difference that must have been unproblematic to him. In addition, at Sulzer’s time composed music was intended to be performed almost instantly; the idea of performing music that had been composed centuries before was foreign to his generation, as were the concomitant interpretational issues.

‘Sulzer’s’ *Fülle der Empfindung* and *Feuer der Begeisterung* recall Rousseau’s ‘feu de génie & de cet esprit inventif’. At the end of the article, he advises his readers to consult Bach’s *Versuch*. An extensive bibliography follows, which however does not mention Rousseau.

The entry *Präludiren* almost exclusively is about playing (not explicitly improvising) a chorale prelude on the organ, in a description that still looks perfectly familiar to a church organist today. ‘Sulzer’ briefly mentions preluding on the harpsichord:

So geschieht es bisweilen auch bey Concerten, daß der, welcher auf dem Clavicembal die Hauptbegleitung führet, vorher auf seinem Instrument präludirt.⁶⁶⁴

[It sometimes also happens at concerts that he who plays the principal accompaniment on the cembalo preludes on his instrument beforehand.]

Most likely, this *Präludiren* was ‘just because of harmony and modulation’, and not unlike Rousseau’s first species of *préluder*.

⁶⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁶⁴ Sulzer, J.G.: *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste*. Leipzig, 1774; II, 924.

Georg Friedrich Wolf's *Kurzgefaßtes musikalisches Lexikon* [Concise musical dictionary] (1787) largely bases itself on Sulzer's book, however with small additions. In the entry *Fantasie*, Wolf distinguishes between *freie* and *gebundene Fantasie*; the former is without fixed metre, whereas the latter is described as

(...) die Fantasie, in welcher eine Taktart zum Grunde liegt, wobey man sich mehr an die Gesetze der Modulation bindet, worinn mehr Einheit beobachtet wird u.s.w.⁶⁶⁵

[... this type of fantasy which is based on a metre, in which one sticks more to the rules of modulation, pays more attention to unity, etc.]

About *präludiren* Wolf adds to 'Sulzer':

Noch giebt es Stücke, die den Namen Präludium führen, auf die gemeinlich eine Fuge folgt, die aber keinen bestimmten Charakter haben, und selten zu Vorspielen geschickt sind. Oft sind es ganz strenge oder freiere Fugen, oft sind sie von einer Taktlosen Phantasie nur durch den Takt unterschieden, oft ist es auch ein bloßer Satz von sechs oder acht Takten, der beständig entweder in der geraden oder Gegenbewegung gehört, und womit auf eine künstliche Art modulirt wird. – Das Präludiren vieler Virtuosen, welches sie oft Viertelstunden lang vor ihren Konzerten zum Besten geben, bedarf wohl keiner Anpreisung, da es gewiß jedem geschmackvollen Zuhörer unangenehm ist.⁶⁶⁶

[There are also pieces that are termed 'prelude', which are usually followed by a fugue, but don't have a particular character, and which are rarely suitable as preludes. Sometimes they are very strict or rather more free fugues, sometimes only their metre distinguishes them from a fantasy without metre, sometimes it is just one sentence of six or eight bars which is heard the whole time either straight or in its inversion, and with which artificial modulations are made. – The prelude to which many virtuosos often treat the audience for half an hour or more before their concerts probably doesn't need any recommendation, since it surely displeases every listener with taste.]

The last remark represents an interesting counterpoint to the story of improvisation, notably in public concerts. More than one of the nineteenth-century authors who will be discussed in section 8.3 make such critical comments, particularly with regard to improvised preludes. Until the mid-nineteenth century, such critical voices were definitely more rare.

⁶⁶⁵ Wolf, G.F.: *Kurzgefaßtes musikalisches Lexikon*. Halle, 1792 (2nd ed.); 63.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 147-148.

8.3 Nineteenth-century sources

Busby

The concise *A complete dictionary of music* by the English composer Thomas Busby (1801) includes several entries that address most of the terms mentioned earlier. English is the only language that frequently uses the Latin *extempore*:

Extempore. A term applied to a performance consisting of the unpremeditated effusions of fancy. We use this word both adjectively and adverbially: as when we speak of an extempore fugue, or say, such a performer plays extempore.⁶⁶⁷

About fantasias Busby writes:

Fantasia. (Ital.) The name generally given to a species of composition, supposed to be struck off in the heat of imagination, and in which the composer is allowed to give free range to his ideas, and to disregard those restrictions by which other productions are confined. Some writers limit the application of this term to certain extemporaneous flights of fancy; and say, that the moment they are written, or repeated, they cease to be *Fantasias*. This, they add, forms the only distinction between the *Fantasia* and the *Capriccio*. The *Capriccio*, though wild, is the result of premeditation, committed to paper, and becomes permanent: but the *Fantasia* is an impromptu, transitive, and evanescent; exists but while it is executing, and, when finished, is no more. *Fantasias* being, however, daily written and published, it is evident in which of the above senses the word is now to be understood.⁶⁶⁸

‘Some writers’ might very well refer to Rousseau. It is striking that in the next entries (shown below), Busby talks about improvisation (in the sense Rousseau applied the term) as something in the past. As Angela Esterhammer has demonstrated, however, travelling *improvisatori* were still very popular in Northern Europe during the early decades of the nineteenth century.⁶⁶⁹

Improvvisare. (Ital.) To compose and sing extempore. A practice once very common with the poet-musicians of Italy.⁶⁷⁰

Improvvisatori. The name given by the Italians to those poets, or poet-musicians, who are gifted with the power of reciting or singing extempore verses. A practice at one time very general in Italy, and to his abilities in which Metastasio owed his education and good fortune.⁶⁷¹

To Busby, a ‘prelude’ has the more specific meaning of introductory music, either composed or improvised:

⁶⁶⁷ Busby, Th.: *A complete dictionary of music*. London, 1811; (no page numbers.)

⁶⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁶⁹ Esterhammer, A.: *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750 – 1850*. Cambridge, 2008.

⁶⁷⁰ Busby, Th.: op. cit.

⁶⁷¹ Ibidem.

Prelude, Preludio, or Preludium. (From the Lat.) A short introductory composition, or extempore performance, to prepare the ear for the succeeding movements.⁶⁷²

Koch

In the *Musikalisches Lexikon* which the German Heinrich Christoph Koch (like Kirnberger a theorist rather than a composer) published in 1802, the original meaning Rousseau assigned to *improviser*, i.e., extemporising accompanied verse, is maintained for the noun *improvisatori*:

Improvisatori, sind eine Art Dichter, die man nur in Italien antrifft, und die über eine ihnen aufgegebene Materie, wenn sie nur einigermaßen einer poetischen Ausführung fähig ist, sogleich aus dem Stegreife 50, 60, ja wohl 100 Verse deklamieren, oder wie es am gewöhnlichsten geschieht, im Recitativstyle unter eigener Begleitung einer Guitarre absingen. Zuweilen unterhalten sich auch zwey solche Dichter über eine ihnen aufgegebene Materie wechselsweis. Die lebhaftere Einbildungskraft solcher Personen ist allerdings zu bewundern, und zeigt von einem glücklichen Genie, obgleich sehr leicht einzusehen ist, daß in Gedichten von solcher Geburt viel Schlechtes und Zusammengerafftes mit unterlaufen müsse. Ohne Zweifel waren es einige bey diesen Dichtern sich äußernde einzelne starke Züge des Genies, die verursachten daß man außerhalb Italien das Talent der Improvisatori höher schätzte, und sich von dem Werthe solcher Gedichte aus dem Stegreife einen höhern Begriff machte, als es in Italien selbst geschah.⁶⁷³

[Improvisatori are a kind of poet one meets only in Italy, who recite up to a hundred extempore verses on any given topic which is in any way suited to a poetic presentation, or, what is most usual, who sing in the style of a recitative, accompanying themselves with a guitar. Sometimes also two such poets converse with each other on a subject that was given to them. Surely one has to admire the vivid imagination of such persons, which shows a fortuitous talent, though it is easy to understand that poems of such descent must also contain a hodgepodge of bad passages. Undoubtedly it was some strong features of genius that showed in these poets, which brought about a higher esteem of the talent of the *improvisatori* abroad, and a higher appreciation of such extempore poems, than in Italy itself.]

Interestingly, Koch represents the beginning of a shift in meaning in the German verb *improvisiren* as applied to a purely musical activity:

Improvisiren. Darunter verstehet man in dem eigentlichen Fache der Musik die Geschicklichkeit eines Tonsetzers, über ein ihm noch unbekanntes Gedicht sogleich aus dem Stegreife eine Komposition zu verfertigen und solche zugleich singend unter Begleitung eines Instrumentes vorzutragen. Dieses Improvisiren, wenn es nemlich nicht ohne alle vorhergegangene Ueberlegung des Textes geschieht,

⁶⁷² Ibidem.

⁶⁷³ Koch, H.C.: *Musikalisches Lexikon*. Frankfurt am Main, 1802; column 777-778.

kann sehr oft für den Tonsetzer ein Mittel werden, die Thätigkeit seines Genies zu reitzen, oder sich in denjenigen Zustand zu versetzen, den man die Begeisterung nennet.⁶⁷⁴

[Improvising. In the field of music, this word is understood to mean the ability of a composer to make an extempore composition on a poem that is yet unknown to him, and to perform it immediately, singing to the accompaniment of an instrument. Notably when this ‘improvising’ does not take place without any preceding meditation of the text, it can very often for the composer become a means to stir the activity of his talent, or to bring him to a state that is called enthusiasm.]

It should be noted that the activity of improvising is allocated to a *Tonsetzer*, a composer – who happens to be a performer as well. At the turn of the nineteenth century a performer, especially a keyboardist, usually also was a composer and vice versa. A musician who actually was to become famous with such text-based performances in the 1830’s and 1840’s was Carl Loewe.⁶⁷⁵

Koch’s definition of a *Fantasie* purely focuses on the *freye Fantasie*:

Fantasie. So nennet man das durch Töne ausgedrückte und gleichsam hingeworfene Spiel der sich ganz überlassenen Einbildungs- und Erfindungskraft des Tonkünstlers, oder ein solches Tonstück aus dem Stegreife, bey welchem sich der Spieler weder an Form noch Haupttonart, weder an Beybehaltung eines sich gleichen Zeitmaaßes, noch an Festhaltung eines bestimmten Charakters bindet, sondern seine Ideenfolge bald in genau zusammenhängenden, bald in locker an einander gereiheten melodischen Sätzen, bald auch nur in nach einander folgenden und auf mancherley Art zergliederten Akkorden, darstellt.⁶⁷⁶

[Fantasy. This is how one calls the playing, expressed in tones and as it were jotted down, of the musician’s power of imagination and invention, totally left to its own; or such a musical piece produced extempore, in which the performer doesn’t limit himself to either form or main key, to either keeping strict time or sticking to a specific character; instead, he presents the flight of his imagination sometimes in very coherent, sometimes in loosely connected melodic sentences, sometimes even just in consecutive and in various ways dissected [i.e., arpeggiated] chords.]

The words *Einbildungskraft* and *Erfindungskraft* have a Kantian ring and seem to foreshadow the nineteenth-century cult of genius.

Under *präludiren* one finds both the idea of the chorale preludes as practiced by church organists and Rousseau’s first species of *préluder*, namely a short warming-up or a simple introduction to the key. However, Koch applies the understanding of a prelude as a warming-up specifically to orchestral or ensemble musicians; this way of preluding must have been a common practice in eighteenth-century ensemble performances (→ chapter 9), apparently not to Koch’s liking:

⁶⁷⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁷⁵ Gooley, D.: *Fantasies of Improvisation*. New York, 2018; 116.

⁶⁷⁶ Koch, H.C.: op. cit., column 554-555.

Präludiren, ein Vorspiel vortragen. Man braucht diesen Ausdruck, theils um das vor dem Choralgesange übliche Vorspiel auf der Orgel zu bezeichnen, theils auch, um damit jede Fantasie aus dem Stegreife zu benennen, welche die Tonkünstler oft vor dem Anfange einer Musik, oder eines besondern Tonstückes hören lassen, und wobey oft der eine aus dem es dur, der andere aus dem d dur fantasirt, und die Ohren der Zuhörer peiniget. In gut eingerichteten Orchestern wird diese Art zu präludiren keinem Tonkünstler erlaubt.⁶⁷⁷

[Preluding, to perform a prelude. This term is applied on the one hand to the usual organ prelude before a church hymn, on the other hand also to the extempore fantasies that musicians often play before the beginning of music, or of a specific composition. Often one person plays in E-flat major, another one in D-major, torturing the ears of the listeners. In well-organised orchestras this way of preluding is not allowed to any musician.]

Rees (Burney)

The articles about music in the Welsh minister Abraham Rees's *The Cyclopædia* (1809) were written by Charles Burney. There is a short entry 'Extemporaneous Playing', specifically applied to music for harpsichord, pianoforte and organ. Burney also compares composing with extemporising:

There have been organists, whose abilities in unstudied effusions on their instruments have almost amounted to inspiration, such as Sebastian Bach, Handel, Marchand, Couperin, Kelway, Stanley, Worgan, and Keeble, several of whom played better music extempore, than they could write with meditation.⁶⁷⁸

Similar remarks were to be made later about nineteenth-century composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven and César Franck. With regard to improvisation, Burney writes:

Improvissare (Ital.): to sing or play extempore.

Improvissatore (Ital.): an extempore singer of verses upon a given subject. A voluntary player, an organist who is able to treat in a masterly manner a given subject of fugue, extempore, is justly allowed to be a man of considerable abilities.⁶⁷⁹

What follows is a description of *improvisatori* in poetry, a phenomenon 'confined to the southern provinces of Europe', in which Burney inserts a translation of Rousseau's description of the *masques* – suggesting that the Italian improvising poets mixed declamation with singing, which indeed seems to have been the case.

Burney then mentions (as noted in chapter 3) Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a less well-known rhetorician and historian from the first century BC. He quotes Dionysius because of his account of

⁶⁷⁷ Koch, H.C.: op. cit., col. 1167.

⁶⁷⁸ Rees, A.: *The Cyclopædia*, vol. 13. London, 1819; entry: 'Extemporaneous'.

⁶⁷⁹ Rees, A.: op. cit., vol. 18 (London, 1819); entries: 'Improvissare', 'Improvissatore'.

soldiers who supposedly extemporised verses during the mythical early years of Roman history. Burney sees this as ‘a very venerable origin to the improvisatori in Italy’. More interesting with respect to this study, however, is the fact that this early nineteenth-century author mentions Dionysius at all, thus making a connection with ancient rhetoric (→ chapter 3). Burney makes no more mention of improvising organists, however.

Burney’s definition of a prelude mainly consists of an exact translation of Rousseau’s, in addition to a short description of composed introductions.⁶⁸⁰ Also, his article about the Fantasia begins with a translation of Rousseau’s entry of the same name in his *Dictionnaire*. Burney then remarks:

These were the ideas of Rousseau 40 years ago, and are now the general ideas of all who bestow a thought on the subject. But in the 17th century, when instrumental music first began to be cultivated, the acceptance of the word *fantasie* or *fancy* was very different from the present (...).⁶⁸¹

Following this, Burney provides a survey of the history of the fantasia as an instrumental composition. When he comes to speak about such pieces by William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons and others, Burney judges that ‘contemptible as they now seem, they were the best which the first musicians of the age could then produce’.⁶⁸² Amusing as this may sound today, it shows the narrow stylistic compass of both musicians and audiences back then.

Häuser

The *Musikalisches Lexikon* (1833) of the German teacher, writer and composer Johann Ernst Häuser paraphrases Wolf in the entry *Fantasie, Fantasiren*. To the bibliography he adds two works that had been published a few years earlier: Johann Nepumuk Hummel’s *Große Pianoforte-Schule* and Carl Czerny’s *Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte*.⁶⁸³ Czerny’s *Anleitung* was already mentioned above; in the introduction to this book, the word *improvisieren* is offered as an equivalent for *fantasieren*.

Wenn der ausübende Tonkünstler die Fähigkeit besitzt, die Ideen, welche seine Erfindungsgabe, Begeisterung, oder Laune ihm eingiebt, sogleich, im Augenblick des Entstehens, auf seinem Instrument nicht nur auszuführen, sondern so zu verbinden, dass der Zusammenhang auf den Hörer die Wirkung eines eigentlichen Tonstückes haben kann, - so nennt man dieses: *Fantasieren*. (*Improvisieren, Extemporieren*.)⁶⁸⁴

[When the practicing musician possesses the capability not only of executing at his instrument the ideas that his inventive power, inspiration or mood have evoked in him at the instant of their conception,

⁶⁸⁰ Rees, A.: op. cit., vol. 28 (London, 1819); entry: ‘Prelude’.

⁶⁸¹ Rees, A.: op. cit., vol. 14 (London, 1819); entry: ‘Fantasia’.

⁶⁸² Ibidem.

⁶⁸³ Häuser, J.E.: *Musikalisches Lexikon*. Meissen, 1833; 144.

⁶⁸⁴ Czerny, *Anleitung*; 3.

but of so combining them that the coherence can have the effect on a listener of an actual composition – this is what is called: Improvising or Extemporizing.⁶⁸⁵]

Hummel also uses the word *Fantasieren*, the exact meaning of which he does not define; however, it seems plausible that his understanding matched Czerny's description, considering that both pianists lived in close proximity to each other.

The entry *Improvisiren* in Häuser's *Lexikon* combines Koch's texts about the same topic and about *Fantasieren*, adding the names of musicians who were famous for their improvisations at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

Improvisiren, die Geschicklichkeit eines Tonsetzers, aus dem Stegreife irgend ein Tonstück sogleich zu schaffen und auf einem musikalischen Instrumente vorzutragen, oder auch ein vorgelesenes Gedicht sogleich singend, bei Begleitung eines Instruments, vorzutragen. Auf dem Pianoforte sind Hummel und Moscheles die größten Improvisatoren. *Paesiello* übte in früherer Zeit das Talent eines singenden Improvisatoren.⁶⁸⁶

[Improvising, the skillfulness of a composer in creating and immediately performing an extempore piece on an instrument, or also in immediately singing a poem that has been read, accompanied by an instrument. On piano, Hummel and Moscheles are the greatest improvisers. In his early years Paesiello developed his talent as a singing improviser.]

Häuser's description is one of the few that actually use the word *schaffen* (to create). For Häuser, *Präludiren* refers only to the making of a liturgical prelude, again without mentioning the extempore element.

Schilling

In 1835 the German lexicographer Gustav Schilling published his voluminous *Encyclopädie der gesammten musikalischen Wissenschaften, oder Universal-Lexicon der Tonkunst*. Already during his life Schilling was accused of plagiarism. A review of the *Encyclopädie* in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* even has the heading *Warnung*: the readers had to be warned against this book because Schilling apparently not only assembled his text from other sources, but also borrowed freely from earlier works by himself.⁶⁸⁷ As a source of early-nineteenth-century thinking about music, however, it is still a valuable book.

His description of the *Fantasie* quotes Koch (without citation), among others. The *Fantasie* is described as 'rein improvisirte (extemporirte) musikalische Rede' [purely improvised (extemporised)

⁶⁸⁵ Czerny, C.: *A Systematic Introduction...*; 1.

⁶⁸⁶ Häuser, op. cit., 202.

⁶⁸⁷ *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* vol. 40, issue 48 (28 November). Leipzig, 1838; col. 807-808.

musical speech] – another allusion to rhetoric. According to Schilling, not many musicians are able to improvise well; it takes a fully equipped and complete *Künstler* to possess this ability, and even so

...ist auch der ganze Künstler nicht immer, nur in seltenen Stunden im Stande, gut zu fantasiren.⁶⁸⁸

[... even the real artist is not always, only at rare moments, capable of improvising well.]

He calls it remarkable that even brilliant improvisers seem to perform best when they are alone or playing for a small audience of *seelenverwandte Hörer* [sympathising listeners]. In addition, superb composers can be mediocre improvisers, and vice versa. He mentions Hummel and Paganini as examples of musicians who are famous improvisers but less successful as composers:

Hummel z.B. ist anerkannt Meister in der freien Fantasie, selbst über Cramer, Kalkbrenner, Moscheles u. A. unbestrittene Triumphe feiernd; als Componist jedoch hat er sich nicht überall zu solchem Range erhoben. Eben so Paganini u.A.⁶⁸⁹

[Hummel for instance is an acknowledged master in improvisation, triumphing undisputedly even over Cramer, Kalkbrenner, Moscheles and others; as a composer, however, he hasn't attained this rank everywhere. The same thing applies to Paganini and others.]

This is an important observation, because it contradicts the currently popular assumption that 'in the past every musician was also an improviser' (→ chapter 1.2): at that time, too, talents were distributed unevenly. Some musicians were brilliant improvisers, some were better composers. The idea that musicians of that time combined the capacities of performing, composing and improvising as a matter of course, and on an equal level, seems historically incorrect.

Schilling maintains Wolf's distinction between the *freie* and the *gebundene Fantasie*; however, he seems to apply the second term mainly to composed fantasies. The bibliography mentions only books that were already remarkably old at that time, Georg Andreas Sorge's *Anleitung zur Fantasie* 1767 being the most recent one.

The entry *improvisiren* includes traditional meanings of the word as well as newer ones. It starts paraphrasing Koch's text, and then continues:

Dann wird das Wort auch wohl für Fantasieren, das eigentliche, sogenannte freie Fantasieren (s. Fantasie) gebraucht; und endlich für Extemporiren (s. *Stegreif*, u. *Verzierungskunst* im Gesange), dieses jedoch seltener.⁶⁹⁰

[The word is also used for 'Fantasieren', the actual, so-called 'freie Fantasieren'; and finally also for extemporising (see 'Extempore', and 'Ornamentation' in vocal music), however more rarely.]

⁶⁸⁸ Schilling, G.: *Encyclopädie der gesammten musikalischen Wissenschaften, oder Universal-Lexicon der Tonkunst*, vol. II. Stuttgart, 1840; 652 ff.

⁶⁸⁹ Schilling, G.: op. cit., 655.

⁶⁹⁰ Schilling, G.: op. cit., vol. III. Stuttgart, 1836; 692.

This is one of the very few sources that connect *Extemporiren* (or improvising at all) with ornamentation in singing; the entry *Stegreif*, however, doesn't exist in Schilling's book, and the entry *Verzierungskunst* does not specify extempore ornamentation. The article finishes with a short but explicit excursion on improvised variations on a given theme.

Einen Musiker, der Gewandtheit darin hat, nennt man – wie den Stegreifdichter – einen *Improvisator*. Ist derselbe, wenn auch gewöhnlich, doch nicht immer gerade der ausgezeichnetste Musiker, darf man ferner seine Kunst keineswegs *unbedingt* für ein Zeichen großer musikalischer Geschicklichkeiten und Fertigkeiten ansehen, und beruht seine Gewandtheit darin oft auch mehr auf Uebung, Selbstvertrauen, Dreistigkeit etc., als wirklich künstlerischem Berufe, so ist es doch stets ein Beweis von vielem musikalischen Talente, ja oft von Genie, und jedenfalls von einer sehr lebhaften Einbildungskraft und reger Fantasie, wenn ein Musiker fähig ist, schnell, ohne Vorbereitung, eine Melodie zu irgendeinem Texte zu erfinden, oder über ein Thema wenigstens angenehm zu variiren, wenn gleich nur selten etwas wirklich Taugliches dabei zu Stande gebracht wird, und sind die Versuche darin endlich die Zweckmäßigsten Mittel, sich in die nöthige künstlerische Begeisterung zu versetzen.⁶⁹¹

[A musician who is skilled in this is called an improviser (just like the extempore poet). Such a person may often, though not always, be the most excellent musician; moreover, his art should not necessarily be seen as a sign of important musical dexterities and capacities, and his skill usually is based rather upon exercise, self-confidence, daring, etc., than on a true artistic vocation. Nonetheless, it is always a proof of a great musical talent, often even of genius, anyway of a very vivid imagination and keen fantasy, when a musician is able to invent quickly and without preparation a melody to any text, or to vary at least pleasantly on a theme, though it leads only rarely to something sound. Finally, attempts in this direction are the most effective way to put oneself into the necessary state of artistic enthusiasm.]

The idea that improvising serves to transpose the musician into a state of creative enthusiasm already came up in Koch. It has been documented that Joseph Haydn used to compose in this way.⁶⁹² Gradually, improvisation seems to become a private matter, something for the inner room – however, it should not be forgotten that this supposed shift occurs simultaneously with the advent of the public concert, an important topic that will be discussed in section 8.3.

The entry *Praeludium* describes liturgical preludes in great detail (including the Roman Catholic tradition), but also mentions preludes as played by *virtuosi* on the concert stage:

Indeß versteht man unter *Praeambulum* (...) gewöhnlich mehr jene kleineren Einleitungssätze oder Accorde, die Virtuosen bisweilen ihren Concert-Productionen in hyperartistischen Cadenzen oder dergl. (gewöhnlich die Harmonie der eigentlichen Schlußcadenz enthaltend) vorangehen lassen, um

⁶⁹¹ Ibidem.

⁶⁹² Griesinger, G.A.: *Biographische Notizen über Joseph Haydn*. Leipzig, 1810; 114.

eines Theils vielleicht sich selbst zum Spiel anzuschicken, andern Theils Publikum und Orchester auf sich und den Anfang ihres Spiels aufmerksam zu machen.⁶⁹³

[‘Praeambulum’, however, is generally rather understood as the short introductory pieces or chords which virtuosos sometimes play before their concert performances, in hyper-artistic cadenzas and the like (usually containing the harmony of the actual final cadence); they partly do this in order to prepare themselves for playing, partly to draw the attention of audience and orchestra to themselves and to the beginning of their playing.]

This description resonates with Rousseau’s first definition of preluding in section 8.1, applied to the early-nineteenth-century virtuoso performances.

Bernsdorf, Schubert, Paul

Several German lexica from the second half of the nineteenth century give evidence of the advance of the term *improvisieren*.

Eduard Bernsdorf, a student of Adolf Bernhard Marx, published his *Neues Universal-Lexikon der Tonkunst* in 1856. In the entry *Fantasie*, he repeats Koch’s definition (which was, by that time, more than 50 years old). In addition to this *freie Fantasie*, he adds the possibility of a fantasy on given themes, as it was explained by Carl Czerny in his *Anleitung* (→ chapter 12).⁶⁹⁴

In 1865, Julius Schubert still primarily uses the verb *fantasieren* for *nach eigener Erfindung und Empfindung spielen* [playing according to one’s own invention and feeling].⁶⁹⁵ Under *präluieren*, the improvising by orchestra musicians has given way to the habit of their modern counterparts:

Präluieren: kurze musikalische Phrasen als Einleitung; auch wird damit das lästige Wichtigmachen eingelernter Phrasen beim Stimmen bezeichnet.⁶⁹⁶

[Preluding: short musical phrases that serve as an introduction; it also indicates the annoying boasting with practiced phrases during tuning.]

According to Oscar Paul, however, *praeludieren* is

ein Vorspiel machen, besonders aus dem Stegreife, soviel wie improvisieren.⁶⁹⁷

[making an introduction, especially extempore; more or less: improvising.]

And:

Fantasieren heißt soviel als improvisieren, aus dem Stegreif spielen.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹³ Schilling, G.: op. cit., vol. V. Stuttgart, 1837; 532-533.

⁶⁹⁴ Bernsdorf, E.: *Neues Universal-Lexikon der Tonkunst*, vol. 1. Dresden, 1856; 807.

⁶⁹⁵ Schubert, J.: *Kleines musikalisches Conversations-Lexikon*. Leipzig and New York, 1865^{VI}; 99.

⁶⁹⁶ Schubert, J.: op. cit., 241.

⁶⁹⁷ Paul, O.: *Handlexikon der Tonkunst*, vol. 2. Leipzig, 1873; 281.

⁶⁹⁸ Paul, O.: op. cit., vol 1. Leipzig, 1873; 309.

[‘Fantasiren’ more or less means improvising, playing extempore.]

Fantasiren and *improvisiren* now have become equivalents in German; *pr(a)eludiren* often means almost the same, but is confined to making an introduction.

Mendel-Reissmann

The *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexikon* by Hermann Mendel and August Reissmann (the ‘Mendel-Reissmann’, 1877) speaks about *frei Phantasiren* as a practice from the past.

Das freie Phantasiren war in früherer Zeit eine, von den Virtuosen öffentlich ausgeführte besondere Kunstfertigkeit.⁶⁹⁹

[Free improvisation was in earlier times a special skill that was publicly displayed by virtuosos.]

An exception is made for organists, who have to improvise preludes and postludes during liturgy (concerts are not mentioned!), and for this often choose the stricter form of a fugue – ‘wenn sie es im Stande sind’ [when they are capable of it].⁷⁰⁰ Also, pianists who accompany singers improvise preludes, but these

... sind von untergeordneter Bedeutung, da sie hauptsächlich nur ausgeführt werden, um den Sänger in der betreffenden Tonart heimisch zu machen.⁷⁰¹

[... are of lesser importance, since they are mainly only performed with the goal of making the singer feel at home in the key in question.]

Evidently, Mendel and Reissmann consider such functional preludes artistically unimportant: by then, it had become a common view that a public concert was about presenting musical works. One may conclude, however, that in 1877 piano accompanists were apparently still improvising little preludes to introduce a *Lied*!

According to Mendel and Reissmann, the practice of improvising a fantasy on given themes might have been inspired by the genius of Beethoven as an improviser, and still existed in the 1830’s when the young Mendelssohn conformed to this usage; but

Jetzt ist sie, und mit Recht[,] erloschen.⁷⁰²

[Now it is extinct, and with good reason.]

Improvised cadenzas in solo concertos are a thing of the past, too – not because musicians would be unable to this, but because the cadenza has become an integral part of the composition. Mendel and Reissmann do not regret this:

⁶⁹⁹ Mendel, H. & Reissmann, A.: *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexikon*, vol. 8. Berlin, 1877; 72.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibidem.

⁷⁰¹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰² Ibidem.

Sie hat im Grunde genommen auch wenig ästhetische Berechtigung als öffentliche Kunstleistung; wie alle Improvisationen, gehört sie in die stillen Räume des Hauses. Das rein objekt- und ziellose Spiel der Phantasie hat ungemein viel Reiz für den schaffenden Künstler und es ist auch für den verständnisvollen Hörer von unendlichem Genuss es zu beobachten. Aber auf den Markt versetzt, in die Concertsäle unserer Tage, wird es nur zu leicht zur Gaukelei, im besten Falle Spielerei mit erborgten, nervenreizenden Klangeffekten.⁷⁰³

[In principle, it can hardly be justified aesthetically as a public artistic performance; like all improvisations, it belongs in the quiet rooms of the house. The play of phantasy, without any object or goal, is utterly attractive to the creative artist, and enjoying it is an endless delight to a listener with understanding. Put on the market however, in the concert halls of our days, it all too easily becomes a magic trick, in the best case a fiddling with borrowed, irritating sound effects.]

The entry *Improvisatoren* brings little surprise as it follows the explanation of Koch. *Improvisiren* is defined as

die von Begabung zeugende Fertigkeit, über ein gegebenes Thema ohne Vorbereitung frei zu Phantasieren.⁷⁰⁴

[the skill, showing talent, to extemporise without preparation on a given theme.]

The ingredients of the definition of *improvisiren* are familiar enough: it takes an accomplished musician to be able to improvise, one has to be acquainted with all principles of composition, and the great masters such as Bach, Handel and Beethoven were much admired for their genius in this field. Nineteenth-century names are added: Johann Nepumuk Hummel, Ferdinand Hiller, Wilhelm Taubert, Carl Reinecke (all of them pianist / composers). Striking, however, is Mendel's and Reissmann's completely different appreciation of improvisation under the entry *Improvisiren*, compared with the article about *Phantasiren*:

Uebrigens soll ein jeder Musiker im freien Phantasiren sich üben, aber mit strenger Einhaltung der Gesetze des bestimmten Ausdrucks und der logischen Entwicklung; man gewinnt dadurch bedeutend an Fertigkeit im schnellen und präzisen Gestalten der Gedanken, ausserdem, dass dadurch die Erfindung angeregt wird und mancher gute, der Verwendung und Ausbildung werthe Einfall zu Tage kommt. Daher pflegen auch viele Componisten ihre Phantasie, bevor sie an die Arbeit gehen, durch Improvisation zu beleben.⁷⁰⁵

[Incidentally, every musician should train himself in free improvisation, but strictly adhering to the rules of distinct expression and logical development; this will considerably raise the skill of designing one's musical ideas quickly and precisely, and besides, the sense of invention will be activated and many

⁷⁰³ Ibidem.

⁷⁰⁴ Mendel, H. & Reissmann, A.: op. cit., vol. 5. Berlin, 1875; 383-384.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibidem.

good ideas, well worth being used and developed, will appear. This is why also many composers tend to revive their phantasy before starting with their work.]

It is tempting to explain this difference by the fact that the *Musikalisches Conversations-Lexikon* had, in the course of its publication (1870-1883), two different authors. After the death of Mendel (who was responsible for the first six volumes) in 1876, Reissmann continued the publication with volumes 7 through 12. The entry *improvisiren* is in volume 5, *Phantasie* (here not spelled with ‘f’) in volume 8.

However, the entry *präludiren* in the same eighth volume (‘ein Vorspiel machen, eine Thätigkeit, welche bei den verschiedensten Gelegenheiten gefordert wird’⁷⁰⁶ [making a prelude, an activity which is called for at many different occasions]) is much more positive about this musical practice. It describes preluding by organists who have to prepare the congregation for the character of the following hymn, but also – in great detail – preluding by accompanying pianists who not only have to make the singer feel ‘at home’ in the key (as it was written under *phantasiren*), but also have to introduce the audience into the mood of a song.

Whatever the reason of this inconsistency may be, apparently improvisation was not completely absent on stage during the later part of the nineteenth century; it is almost certainly the case that accompanists improvised preludes before songs on stage, and also that pianists preluded in public, as will be discussed in chapter 9.

Grove, Riemann, Sawyer

The 1880 edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians* has an entry ‘extempore playing’, which is defined similar to *Improvisiren* in Mendel-Reissmann. After the definition, it provides many anecdotes about famous improvising composers – all of them already dead at the moment of publication. Indeed,

... the practice of publicly extemporising, if not extinct, is now very rare. (...) Even the cadence of a concerto (...) is now usually prepared beforehand.⁷⁰⁷

Improvisation is defined here as ‘an equivalent term for Extempore Playing or Extemporising’.⁷⁰⁸

In Hugo Riemann’s *Musik-Lexikon* (1882), *Improvisieren* has become the general term, and *Phantasieren* is associated with the *freie Phantasie*. Particularly interesting is Riemann’s remark that every decent musician should be able to improvise variations on a given melody – which is not to say that this actually happened on stage at the time.

⁷⁰⁶ Mendel, H. & Reissmann, A.: op. cit., vol. 8. Berlin, 1877; 155-157.

⁷⁰⁷ Grove, Sir G.: *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*; vol. 1. London, 1880; 498.

⁷⁰⁸ Grove, Sir G.: op. cit., vol. 2. London, 1880; 2.

Improvisation (vom lat. ex improviso, »ohne Vorbereitung«), ein Vortrag aus dem Stegreif, ohne Vorbereitung, ohne vorgängige schriftliche Aufzeichnung, Name für dichterische wie für musikalische Augenblickserzeugnisse. Die meisten großen Meister der Tonkunst werden auch als Improvisatoren auf dem Klavier oder der Orgel gerühmt. Man unterscheidet I. und freie Phantasie, indem man bei ersterer ein strenges Binden an eine Form mitversteht. So gehörte es früher zu den Meisterproben eines tüchtigen Musikers, dass er eine Fuge über ein gegebenes Thema improvisieren (extemporieren) konnte, worin besonders J. S. Bach Erstaunliches leistete. Diese Art I. setzt eine intensive Konzentration der Geisteskräfte voraus, während das sog. Phantasieren ein vollständiges Freigeben der Phantasie ist und meist mehr kaleidoskopisch bunt wechselnde Stimmungsbilder ergibt. In der Mitte steht die Variierung eines gegebenen Themas, die Phantasie über eine Melodie, eine Kunst, deren jeder passable Musiker fähig sein muß. Auch brauchen manche den Namen I. jetzt gleichbedeutend mit Impromptu.⁷⁰⁹

[Improvisation (from Latin: ex improviso, 'without preparation'), an extempore performance, unprepared, without previous written record, term for both poetic and musical products of the moment. Most great masters of music are also praised as improvisers on piano or organ. Improvisation is distinguished from free phantasy, the former implying a strict adherence to a musical form. For example, in the past it was part of a master proof of a capable musician to improvise (extemporise) a fugue on a given subject, something that especially J.S. Bach excelled in. This kind of improvisation requires intensive concentration of all powers of mind, whereas the so-called 'phantasieren' rather consists of fully releasing fantasy, usually resulting in a kaleidoscopic change of atmospheric pictures. In the middle there is the art of varying on a given theme, the fantasy on a melody, which every decent musician should be capable of. Often the term 'improvisation' is also used nowadays as an equivalent for 'impromptu'.

Phantasieren ist soviel wie improvisieren, präcludieren, extemporieren.⁷¹⁰

['Phantasieren' more or less means improvising, preluding, extemporising.]

Riemann's emphasis on formal strictness in improvisation resonates with the approach Marcel Dupré takes in the second volume of his *Cours Complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue*, which has the appearance of a composition method.⁷¹¹

Frank Sawyer, finally, addresses his 1896 manual *Extemporization* primarily to organists as a matter of course:

⁷⁰⁹ Riemann, H.: *Musik-Lexikon*. Leipzig, 1882; 410.

⁷¹⁰ Riemann, H.: op. cit., 697.

⁷¹¹ Dupré, M.: *Traité d'Improvisation à l'Orgue*. Paris, 1925. Chapter 13 will discuss the late-nineteenth-century French organ school, where this strictness was ubiquitous.

As extemporization lies chiefly within the province of the organist, this work is designed more especially for his use.⁷¹²

His definition of ‘improvisation’ matches completely with Dupré’s academic approach:

Improvisation, or extemporization, is the art of creating and performing music at one and the same time. As music is the combination of well-balanced rhythmical phrases, welded together by the symmetry of form, so the mere rambling from chord to chord, without aim or design is not extemporization, since it is not music.⁷¹³

8.4 Conclusion

Contemporary dictionaries and encyclopaedias are invaluable sources of information when we want to know how improvisation was looked at during the period under investigation, at least by theorists. The aspects of improvisation that were described in the 1760’s by Rousseau, but also in the treatise of C.Ph.E. Bach, form a blueprint of the thinking about this topic during much of the nineteenth century, which is why their texts were quoted rather elaborately here. Even the terminology remained largely the same, though the exact meaning of words shifted. Interestingly, the often used terms *préluder* and *fantasieren* were derived from the corresponding nouns (*prélude*, *Fantasie*). Therefore, the most common historical terms for what today is called ‘improvising’ tend to indicate the act of producing a specific type of piece. It was understood that such pieces were usually created extempore, but this aspect is not reflected in the verbs themselves. Historical terminology focuses on the result, rather than on the process, and it certainly makes no pronouncements about twentieth- and twenty-first-century preoccupations such as originality or the degree of innovation. On the contrary, these terms emphasise the importance of musical genres and common styles; chapter 12 will elaborate on the importance that a common ground of shared expectations had until deep into the nineteenth century.

It turns out that ‘improvising’ (German: *improvisieren*, French: *improviser*) initially was used for the specific situation of eighteenth-century Italian street improvisation and for improvising poets, where the emphasis was on the text. Only in the course of the nineteenth century did this term acquire the more general meaning of extempore music-making. The French *préluder* could be used for any extempore piece, but was also associated specifically with improvising a prelude, especially so in its German equivalent *präludieren*, as well as in the English ‘preluding’. In German, *fantasieren* (‘making a fantasy’) remained the most common term for improvising until the end of the nineteenth century. It was used for ‘aus dem Stegreif spielen’ in general, but could also refer to playing a free extempore fantasy without set meter, key or form as described by C.Ph.E. Bach. There is no English

⁷¹² Sawyer, F.J.: *Extemporization*. London, 1896; 1.

⁷¹³ *Ibidem*.

or French equivalent for this verb. *Extemporaneous playing* or *extemporising* were used mainly in English; the German *extemporieren* did exist, but was not very common.

Which improvisatory notions are articulated in the examples from lexica cited in this chapter? In almost all cases, the entries describe music that is being invented during performance. A distinction is generally made between music that doesn't stick to a metre and modulates more boldly and suddenly than usually happens in compositions (*freie Fantasie*), and improvisations that follow formal structures as we know them from compositions (sometimes: *gebundene Fantasie*). Also, the genre of the music is mentioned: the improvisation can be a prelude, a fantasy or variations on a given theme, possibly in interaction with the audience, or a free expression of the musician's imagination. With very few exceptions, the concrete examples are about keyboard players. Generally, improvising is seen as a way of creating new music, comparable with composing. Many authors stress that a good improviser needs to be familiar with compositional techniques. The opinions about the artistic value of improvising on the concert stage differ; in the second half of the nineteenth century, improvised fantasies are often mentioned as something that has with good reason disappeared from the concert stage (→ chapter 1.1).

It seems that in the nineteenth century, improvising was primarily understood as an unusual way of composing – i.e., in the moment of performance rather than at the writing table. Obviously this was not seen as something just any musician was capable of, judging from the frequent reference to prominent improvisers in dictionary entries. By contrast, the entries *Componist* and *Composition* in Gustav Schilling's *Encyclopädie* do not mention any particular composer at all!⁷¹⁴ Maybe improvisation in the sense of *Fantasieren* was not as common as some would be inclined to think today. The claim that 'in the past, all musicians could improvise' might simply not be correct, at least when it means that they all were able to improvise music that equaled the quality that might be expected from a composition (→ chapter 1.2). Perhaps Riemann's more modest requirement that 'every decent musician should at least be able to improvise variations' was more realistic in this respect.

Especially because historical terminology with respect to improvisation focuses on the result, it cannot be disconnected from what constitutes musical life at large – a notion that, in a different form, occupied centre stage in part 2 as well. In the eighteenth century, public concerts (except for opera performances) were not numerous, but music 'happened' at many and various occasions. For many centuries, being a professional musician meant having an appointment at a court or a church; in such environments music was in many senses an 'applied art', almost always serving as a part of a larger whole – as it is still the case in liturgy today, and sometimes in theatre. In this sphere, an improvisatory approach must have been crucial for adapting to ever-changing circumstances, and therefore a

⁷¹⁴ Schilling, G.: op. cit., vol. II. Stuttgart, 1840; 277-280.

natural feature of music-making. With the rise of public concerts and the growth of a bourgeois audience, entertainment became an important factor, especially during the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. This was the environment in which the genre of improvised fantasies by virtuoso pianists flourished, though disapproving voices have always sounded. Compared to earlier manifestations of the improvisatory, this specific type of improvisation had an utterly short life; after 1848 it had generally disappeared.

It may seem easier to relate twenty-first-century classical music life to nineteenth-century public concerts than to the musical situation at eighteenth-century courts. However, it should not be forgotten that beneath the surface of nineteenth-century concert life a musical culture flourished that has no parallel today. Not only were salons extremely important for building musical careers,⁷¹⁵ but the level and the extent of music-making by (wealthy) amateurs must also have been considerable. The circle of musical friends around Johannes Brahms is a fine example of the late-nineteenth-century blending of amateur and professional music-making that formed the basis of an entire musical culture.⁷¹⁶ The profusion of nineteenth-century *Lieder* and piano compositions was primarily intended for the kind of informal musical setting most associated with private homes. I argue that in this respect, the difference between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries might be smaller than between the nineteenth century and our time. When Mendel-Reissmann (→ section 8.3) relegates improvised music to more private forms of musical enjoyment, this is not necessarily a sign of a ‘decline of improvisation’, but rather a restoration of the status quo of centuries before.

Such a shift of focus towards the private chamber exceeds by far the cosiness of Biedermeier culture. To conclude this chapter, an ‘aphorism’, written by the composer and music theorist Simon Sechter, may give an impression of the elevated meaning that musical inwardness could have in nineteenth-century bourgeois society. It was published in the *Allgemeine Wiener Musikzeitung* of May 27th, 1841.

Es gibt zweierlei Kammermusiken. Eine, die man für Andere, und eine, die man für sich selbst macht. Diese letztere kann wieder in die echte und unechte Gattung eingetheilt werden, denn die unechte ist mit der Absicht begleitet, öffentlich aufzutreten. Wenn sich der Musiker in die stille Kammer zurückzieht, um dort mit leisen Tönen seine Gefühle zu beschwichtigen, oder sein Herz zur Gottheit zu erheben, das möchte die eigentlichste Kammermusik seyn. Diese allein kann frei seyn d. h. vonn der Sucht zu glänzen und von der Furcht zu mißfallen. Glücklich, wer solch ein Heiligthum hat, um sich von Zeit zu Zeit vom Treiben der Welt zu erholen, und sich des lästigen Putzes entledigen zu können, und nur dem gegenüber zu stehen, welcher unser Innerstes durchsieht, bevor wir zu ihm sprechen. Hier gelten nur wahrhaftige Gefühle, aber dafür beseligen sie auch. Kummervoll fangen deine Töne an, aber die unsichtbare Gegenwart deines Gottes füllt dein Herz mit himmlischem Troste, und die Töne, die

⁷¹⁵ Cf. Beci, V.: *Musikalische Salons: Blütezeit einer Frauenkultur*. Düsseldorf, 2000.

⁷¹⁶ Cf. Fellinger, I. (ed.): *Klänge um Brahms: Erinnerungen von Richard Fellinger*. Mürzzuschlag, 1997.

du singst, erscheinen dir als von Ihm in dich übergegangen. Noch Keinen hat diese Gattung Kammermusik ohne Trost gelassen.⁷¹⁷

[There are two sorts of chamber music: one that is made for others, and one that is made for oneself. The latter can, in turn, be divided into a proper and an improper type, for the improper one is connected with the intention still to be performed in public. When the musician retires to a quiet room, in order there to calm his feelings with gentle sounds, or to elevate his heart to the Godhead: that might be the real chamber music. Only this music can be free, namely from the desire to shine and from the fear of displeasing. Lucky is he who possess such a sanctuary, where he can from time to time recover from the commotion of the world, and drop his annoying mask, and stand only opposite to him who sees through our soul before we speak to him. Only sincere feelings count here, but therefore they make us feel happy. Your first tones commence sadly, but the invisible presence of your God replenishes your heart with celestial consolation, and the tones that you sing seem to have been transmitted from Him to you. There is nobody who hasn't been consoled by this type of chamber music.]

This spirit⁷¹⁸ also speaks in Schubert's song 'An die Musik':

Du holde Kunst, in wieviel grauen Stunden, / Wo mich des Lebens wilder Kreis umstrickt, / Hast du mein Herz zu warmer Lieb' entzunden, / Hast mich in eine beßre Welt entrückt! // Oft hat ein Seufzer, deiner Harf' entflossen, / Ein süßer, heiliger Akkord von dir / Den Himmel beßrer Zeiten mir erschlossen, / Du holde Kunst, ich danke dir dafür!

[O blessed art, how often in dark hours, / when the savage ring of life tightens round me, / have you kindled warm love in my heart, / have transported me to a better world! // Often a sigh has escaped from your harp, / a sweet, sacred harmony of yours / has opened up the heavens to better times for me, / O blessed art, I thank you for that!⁷¹⁹]

Improvisatory music-making needs this dimension of inwardness, one might say. The emphasis that was laid in part 2 on nineteenth-century music as a rhetorical art, intended to persuade and move, only seemingly contradicts this idea. First of all, the central notion in Sechter's text is sincerity, which was also crucial for Quintilian and other classical rhetoricians. Secondly, part 2 focused on the performative aspects of *elocutio* and *pronuntiatio*. Weber's musical meditation, though, belongs to the area of *inventio*, the stage in the genesis of a speech where the ideas are born. It is about a musical

⁷¹⁷ Sechter, S.: 'Von Kammermusik'. In: *Allgemeine Wiener Musikzeitung*, Jhrg. 1841, no. 63 (27 May).

⁷¹⁸ In *Composing the Citizen*, Jann Pasler shows how new developments in late-nineteenth-century French art led to a situation in which music 'became a model, a window onto the nature of inner experience, intuition, and the creative process itself'. Pasler argues: 'While these new currents might appear as a return to art for art's sake, inspired by Baudelaire, led by the symbolists, and in part responding to Wagner, I see this as a reconception, an appropriation of music's utility for nonrepublican purposes.' (Pasler, J.: *Composing the Citizen: Music As Public Utility in Third Republic France*. Berkeley, 2009; 498.) Similarly, the 'inwardness' that Sechter propagates may be connected with the political and social situation in *Vormärz* Austria.

⁷¹⁹ Poem by Franz von Schober; translation on <https://schubert.org/about/andiemusik/>

state of mind, the *Phantasie*, guided by *wahrhaftige Gefühle*. It is this area of rhetoric which forms the background of part 3.