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An improvisatory approach to nineteenth-century music

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Summary

The context of this study is nineteenth-century Western art music. It argues that within this field, improvisation is not to be seen as a quasi-autonomous skill or art form, but as an aspect of music-making in general. Thus ‘the improvisatory’ (considered here as the quality of the unforeseen, the unpremeditated) potentially pervades many aspects of music; it can be detected in score-based music-making as well. On the other hand, even ‘historically inspired’ or idiomatic improvisation is never fully independent of already existing compositions.

The study sketches out a panorama of nineteenth-century spheres of music-making and examines improvisatory aspects in a diversity of historical situations. Its goal is to show how, based on such historical information, the current performance practice of classical music can be enriched. Three questions are central: *To what extent did nineteenth-century music-making depend on improvisatory activity? Is there a connection between the training of nineteenth-century musicians and the improvisatory attitude they might have had during music-making? How can nineteenth-century musical languages be mastered actively again?* A concept from classical rhetoric functions as a common thread: *locus communis*. In the context of the creation of tonal music certain guiding principles (*loci*) have a key role on many levels: they are ‘sources of invention’ that represent a degree of shared expectation without defining the detailed course of the music. Knowledge of *loci* is essential for (historically inspired) improvisation, but also for the interpretation of scores because *loci* are bearers of musical meaning and make ‘improvising with a score’ possible.

After the introduction, part 2 of this study articulates the idea of an improvisatory approach to scores. An influential line of thinking during the twentieth century (and beyond) stresses the reproducing nature of a performance of classical music. When performance is seen as reproduction, it strives for a specific and well-defined final result. In combination with the idea that a performance should be as the composer intended, this approach entails a musical literalism that is still very present in professional music education and in classical concert life. It constitutes a true interpretational paradigm that I termed the *Urtext*-paradigm.

In the nineteenth century, a performance of composed music was generally seen as recreation rather than reproduction. To the performer, the score served as an interlocutor rather than as an instructor; the musical text functioned as a starting point of ever new musical adventures. An active and participating attitude was expected from performers, even by the composers themselves: it was a part of the score’s ‘horizon’, as Gadamer would have it.

In the nineteenth century, music was generally experienced as a wordless language. As the influence of ancient rhetoric was still vivid, music-making was understood in a fundamentally rhetorical way. One important rhetorical principle that directly translates into music-making is *varietas*. In music it applies to variety, both within a performance and between performances: never say something again in exactly the same way. This implies an improvisatory approach to scores.

This study focuses on two aspects of variety in nineteenth-century score-based music: extempore ornamentation and improvisatory timing. An example of the former is Italian bel canto, in which ornamentation, preferably extempore, is part of a continuing eighteenth-century tradition. The goal of ornamentation is to increase the effect of a passage by variation, or even to ‘improve’ a composition. Bel canto ornamentation is to be seen as embedded in an elaborate complex of interpretational habits offering many ways to shape the vocal line. The application of ornamentation presupposes the inclusion of all other means of expression.

Analysis of notated fragments of bel canto ornamentation reveals clues for modern performers who intend to learn this musical language. Bel canto ornaments are always based on the accompanying chords, and they tend to be modelled around ‘anchor tones’. Often ornamentation enhances musical gestures. A key concept for such gestures is the musical phrase. In bel canto, the harmonic structure within a phrase is often very ‘common’ and predictable: it is a harmonic ‘locus communis’ that prompts a multitude of melodic inventions. This circumstance fosters improvised ornamentation.

Ornamentation in bel canto, often remarkably virtuosic, made use of a repertoire of basic figurations. The fluency of nineteenth-century singers in extemporising with such material can be explained from the vocal teaching at that time. A large part of the training consisted of endless technical exercises with precisely such patterns, enabling singers to ‘play with’ them during performance. Challenging though it may be, this study advocates enriching modern practice by exploring the hidden world of bel canto performance.

‘Vocality’ can be seen as a central quality of all nineteenth-century music, and the influence of bel canto performance habits can be perceived even in instrumental music until the 1850’s. Instructions for ornamentation in instrumental treatises closely resemble those found in singing methods. Even the types of patterns match: vocal and instrumental ornamentation made use of one and the same body of figures that can be considered trans-idiomatic. Thus the idea of a performer who ‘plays with’ the score can be made explicit for early-nineteenth-century instrumental music. This study focuses especially on the close relationship between vocal repertoire and music for piano. The connection with bel canto provides us with a historically informed view on the rhetorical dimension of original piano music, in particular the work of Chopin.

Besides ornamentation, a second aspect of an improvisatory approach to scores is timing. Indications of a free and improvisatory treatment of scores with respect to timing can be found throughout the nineteenth century. The earliest recordings and piano rolls constitute a unique source of information about timing habits at the end of the century. Today, timing is often understood in terms of deviation from a normative tempo; in this study this is called a ‘transcendental’ tempo conception. For earlier music a different conception is more appropriate: ‘immanent’ tempo. Immanent tempo exists within the music: it is the result of the musical ebb and flow and therefore it is in a continuous state of flux.

A crucial aspect of nineteenth-century timing are the various types of rubato. Within immanent tempo, rubato is not to be seen as a deviation from a norm, but as an inner necessity that enhances the expression of a passage. Rubato implies a search for variety and enhancement of musical gestures that leads towards a more outspoken individuality of phrases and other musical units, which may result in a ‘counterpoint of layers’ between musicians or between the hands of a pianist.

An improvisatory attitude to score-based music-making presupposes the ability to extemporise in the same style: to a certain extent, a recreator has to be a creator. The second main area explored in part 3 of this study is ‘historically inspired improvisation’: the extempore creation of new music that is stylistically connected with compositions from the same field. This concerns a modern performer’s ability to master nineteenth-century musical languages actively. Carl Czerny’s *Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte* shows that extempore music-making occurred in many performative contexts, each with its own assumptions and expectations. ‘Locus communis’ is a suitable concept for the description of such expectations. In the case of both ornamental preludes and solo cadenzas, for instance, harmonic *loci* are prominent. From a variety of sources it appears that a repertoire of harmonic progressions and sequences has consciously been used to shape the harmonic structure of such pieces. Of special interest is the treatment of modulation in nineteenth-century textbooks, most of all the emphasis on common tone modulations. In dance music *loci* on the level of rhythm, phrase structure and characteristic melodic features emerge. In free pieces genre-specific *loci* communes turn out to have been much more important than is usually acknowledged nowadays. The French organ school of César Franck and Charles-Marie Widor provides valuable insight into how students learned to apply such *loci* on the spot, even to the level of improvised fugues.

All discussions of ‘the improvisatory’ in this study significantly rest on a body of practical and theoretical knowledge that is known today as ‘music theory’. In general, nineteenth-century

theoretical teaching was still primarily practical in nature, whereas the approach from the second half of the twentieth century on might rather be characterised as reflective. By consequence, there is a strong tendency towards reification in modern music theory. A fourth research question addresses this problem: *How can stylistically oriented improvisation be of importance for music theory?* This study argues that attention for ‘the improvisatory’ puts a stronger focus on the fact that music primarily unfolds in time (as opposed to the traditional ‘architectonical’ view on composed music). A ‘practical turn’ in music theory will make the subject more useful for an improviser.

Summarising, there are good historical reasons to develop a more improvisatory attitude to nineteenth-century music. This will invite musicians to feel more like co-creators of the music they perform – and in this way renew classical music from within.