Confessions of a Self-Taught Improviser

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THAT IMPROVISATION SHOULD BE AN essential part of every classical musician's training is in many ways self-evident. We all know what an essential role improvisation played in the careers of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt, to cite but some of the most famous names associated with this art (and it is an art). Yet, in our museum-like classical musical culture dominated by what I like to call the "Urtext mentality," performances are judged by their trueness to the "intent" of the composer (whatever that means), faithfulness to the printed text, and "taste"; there is little emphasis on a performer's own creativity, as if such is unworthy to be heard in the company of the masterpieces of the past.

Needless to say, such a view leaves little excuse, much less encouragement, for spontaneous divergence from the printed text or for reviving improvisations as a *regular* part of the (classical) concert experience. (The path-breaking activities of Robert Levin and a few others deserve recognition here, but these artists are the exceptions that prove the rule.) Even in recent decades, when courses in historical performance practices have become commonplace and issues such as ornamentation, temperament, the nature of older instruments, and the like have been stressed, there is little evidence that improvisation is taken seriously (except among organists, especially in Europe).

Indeed, after years of teaching historical performance practice my own conscience began to gnaw on me. As a harpsichordist I could, of course, realize figured bass at sight and in fact loved playing continuo. This provided a first avenue into the art of improvisation, but the thought of improvising in the sense that those composer-keyboardists cited above improvised seemed a challenge quite beyond my training and experience. Nonetheless, I realized that any teacher of performance practice who could not improvise in historical styles was a bit of a fraud — telling students on the one hand how essential and important improvisation once had been in actual music making, yet not being able to do it or to teach them how to do it. And so I set out to at least begin to remedy my shortcomings in this department by teaching myself to improvise.

In doing so I have focused on three types of improvising, all of which I touch on as a matter of course in my performance practice classes in the D.M.A. program at the CUNY Graduate Center as well as in my private teaching of both harpsichord and piano. The first is improvising over a ground bass (most appropriate for harpsichord); the second is cadenzas (mainly in the classical style, hence for piano and other instruments, as well as voice); and the third is free preludizing, which has the oldest history. In the process I have learned that practicing these types of improvisation can yield deep insights into a composer's or period's style, and can cause a performer to think like a composer, not merely as an interpreter.

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I must credit Peter Williams for revealing to me the usefulness of using variations on a ground as an entry into the world of improvisation. At the 1985 Aston Magna Academy, to which I had invited him as a faculty member, he held a master class in which he had a harpsichordist take a simple bass pattern, then accompany it with one note, then two, then three – producing two-, three-, and four-voice harmony — and then trying the same while varying the rhythm of the accompanying voices. The result was that the player accumulated a number of ways of creating variations over that bass (which itself could be subject to pitch and rhythm variants). Of course, the possibilities for harmonizations, for embellishments and diminutions are infinite, and there is also the possibility of modulations, cadenzas, changing the bass pattern itself by extending or (less likely) shortening it. Thinking of all these techniques as musico-rhetorical figures — developed through experimentation and repetition (but *never* by writing out) — allows them to be used as devices spontaneously employed at a particular moment in a particular context. But all of these techniques of variation and embellishment are the basic techniques of music composition itself, and the scope and originality of the improvisation is therefore both enhanced and limited by the same kind of musical imagination required by a composer; hence, improvisation can restore to some extent the close, but largely lost, bond between composition and improvisation that we associate with those composers cited above.

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In the matter of cadenzas, I like to suggest to beginning students of improvisation that they should think of a large cadenza, such as that for a concerto, as having three components: a beginning, middle, and end. (There are, of course, no absolute requirements other than getting from the tonic six-four at the beginning to the dominant at the end of the cadenza.) The beginning is typically an opening flourish of some sort, often non-thematic in nature, consisting of arpeggios, scales, and other figurations to enable the performer to grab the audience's attention. The middle part focuses on the thematic manipulation of various themes, and the ending part is, of course, the passagework (leading from the return of the tonic six-four harmony that introduced the cadenza) that culminates in the final cadence as the orchestra returns. Beginners should start with the last because a simple, harmonically complete (albeit not completely satisfying) cadenza could consist of it alone; moreover, it is possible to omit the introductory flourish. My advice to students is to work out several different beginning and closing sections which are, naturally, subject to variation in performance and which can be used in various combinations. Thus, for example, if a performer has three different ways of opening and three different ways of closing a cadenza, (s)he has a total of nine different opening/closing combinations from which to choose at the moment of execution. Of course, once fluency has been developed in creating such opening and closing sections, totally spontaneous openings and closings will not be difficult to create on the spot.

The middle, and most interesting, section of a cadenza is of course that featuring the performer's manipulation of thematic material of the movement. Here it helps (again) to prepare a checklist of possible ways of manipulating thematic material. These can include: ornamenting a theme; changing the theme's mode; altering or inverting intervallic content; changing the texture of the accompaniment; reharmonizing themes; modifying the rhythms; putting a treble theme in the bass, or vice versa; and combining different themes and their accompaniments in various ways. (I usually ask a class to name as many specific techniques they can think of and then write them on the board, often under general headings such as melody, rhythm, harmony, texture.) These musical ideas can be worked out on the instrument, finding patterns and modifications that "work" and practicing them in many keys not only so that the cadenza will have harmonic interest but also so that the performer will feel comfortable no matter into what key area (s)he might wander. Practicing thematic materials in sequential patterns is also extremely helpful — this can not only extend the cadenza using a minimum of thematic material but it also helps gives shape and logic to it.

Harmonically, as noted above, a cadenza can be thought of as beginning on a tonic six-four chord, to which it normally returns at the end of the middle section, leading then to the dominant seventh that terminates the closing

THEMA

Example 1 *Robert Schumann,* Symphonic Etudes, *Op. 13, Theme*

section of the cadenza. Getting to that second tonic six-four convincingly is in fact the most critical aspect of cadenza improvisation, and there are a number of ways to do it. My advice to students — when creativity gives out or it simply seems right to bring the cadenza to a close — is to maneuver into a diminished-seventh chord/arpeggio on the semitone below the dominant note (thus F♯ in the key of C), which then moves to the tonic six-four, which in turn leads into the cadenza's final cadential flourish.

I do not mean to suggest that this blueprint for an improvised cadenza has universal validity. It merely offers one path to the development of one's own style, and the functional division of beginning, middle, and end enables a student to focus on each section individually, which is less daunting than trying to improvise the whole from scratch.

A question that students often raise is whether the cadenza should be in the style of the composer of the concerto or other work. My answer is always that whatever "works" is acceptable. It is probably more natural to try to imitate the composer's style (which is a valuable exercise in itself), but there is certainly plenty of historical precedent for cadenzas not in the style of the composer.

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A third type of improvisation is the unwritten prelude. In times past, such pieces were so common as to be almost obligatory, and they really ought to be welcomed back as a standard part of our modern concert life. For that reason, I often do improvise preludes, whether it be an unmeasured harpsichord prelude before a group of *pièces de clavecin* by François Couperin, a lead-in to a German Lied without an introduction, or, most recently, as a preamble to the Symphonic Etudes, Op. 13 of Schumann that incorporates thematic material and harmonic progressions of the theme. This last is exactly what Clara herself did, so the model is certainly there. In practicing such preludes (for, I reiterate, improvisation needs to be practiced), I try to incorporate into the flow of things characteristic melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic snippets from Schumann's theme (see Example 1, on which I have labeled motives and passages I typically employ). Thus, the descending chords that open the piece (a), the iv-i harmony closing the opening phrase (b), the trill in the bass (e), which I imagine to be suggestive of a drum roll appropriate for the funeral march that the theme — given to Schumann by the father of Schumann's then fiancée — was conceived to be, are but some aspects of the theme I can choose to incorporate in an improvised prelude to the Symphonic Etudes.

The recorded examples on the accompanying CD contain three preludes I improvised at the beginning of a recording session in 2007. The agenda for that session did not include music by Schumann, but the improvisations on the theme of the Symphonic Etudes actually served the function that a prelude did in the past: as a means of getting settled at the instrument, taking its measure and warming-up the hands. For purposes of this article, I went back and analyzed their thematic content, which I have schematically indicated in Table 1 with timing indications (i.e., where the various motives are employed).

Prelude 1		*Prelude 2*		*Prelude 3*	
Motive	Time	Motive	Time	Motive	Time
g	0:00	*a*	0:00	*e*	0:00
a and *g*	1:00	*f*	0:15	*b*	0:07
g	1:24	*d*	0:23	*c*	0:48
a	1:42	*a*	0:40 *(as dim. 7th)*	*a*	1:01
d	1:52	*a*	0:52	*a*	1:28
g	2:17	*c*	1:10	*c*	1:41
a	2:30	*a*	1:38	*a*	2:12
d	2:41	*d*	1:57	*e*	2:29
		b	2:12		

Table 1 *Motivic Content of the Recorded Preludes*

There was no previous planning of the shape of the individual preludes nor had anything been written down beforehand. Nonetheless, improvising freely at the keyboard on earlier occasions had given me ideas that now reemerged spontaneously when they seemed appropriate. Hearing the preludes now, I note a certain affective similarity that may be due to the fact that all were recorded on the same occasion but also because of the serious nature of the Symphonic Etudes and especially of the Theme itself. Awareness of that connection directly affected the character of the third prelude in particular. Moreover, I was very much aware of the importance of the iv-i progression in the opening phrase of the theme — a progression that can be heard frequently in the preludes.

I should note that drawing from thematic material that will be heard in the music to follow is no requirement for an improvised prelude; a free fantasy would be equally valid, as in the piano opening of Beethoven's Choral Fantasy, which, it is said, was characteristic of the composer's free improvisations. However, I find myself stimulated by the challenge of incorporating recognizable thematic/motivic material or harmonic progressions, whereas often my attempts at free improvisation give me little satisfaction. In the end, what is most important is that the improvisation be a genuinely moving experience for the listener as well as a genuine expression of the performer's own musical personality.

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Once one overcomes the initial fear of improvising in public (and this fear is the single most inhibiting factor), a musician will feel less trepidation about venturing into other areas of improvisation. Thus, I was recently prompted by the challenge of improvising a prelude on a non-tonal piece by a colleague (Leo Kraft's *Garden of Memories*), which I found a wonderfully liberating experience by virtue of the fact that one was not hemmed in by the constraints of a tonal language. However, by incorporating certain harmonies and harmonic progressions in the piece, splashes of tone-clusters, and the like, I found it possible to create on the spot an improvisation that prepared the listener for what was to come.

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As I implied at the beginning, the "Urtext mentality" can interfere with the artistic freedom that should be exercised by every artist. Of course, one should always use the best editions available. But there is more to musical art than simply converting a composer's score into sound. Recognizing that until the twentieth century, performers always made the music of others very much their own, a modern interpreter at ease with improvisation can, and, I believe, should, put his or her personal stamp on the music of others.

I have been doing this as a soloist for some time, but more recently have joined with the violinist Janet Packer (Chair of Conservatory Strings at the Longy School of Music) to perform some of the classical violin and piano literature with a view to applying historical performance practices to modern instruments. (Such practices are much too important to be left only to period-instrument players!) In this spirit, not only do we treat matters of articulation, bowing, vibrato, etc. differently than in standard modern practice, but we also introduce improvisatory elements, by varying repeats and elaborating fermatas with cadenzas in music by (for example) Beethoven and Schubert. (I dare to add that I vary the repeats even in so sacrosanct a work as the finale of Beethoven's Op. 109.)

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As a self-taught and very much part-time improviser, I am fully aware of both my limitations and the distance yet to be traveled to raise my skills to another level. However, the point I wish to underscore is that it is critical that musicians trained in the classical tradition, and especially those who take courses in historical performance practices, at least be introduced to methods of improvisation so that the mystery and fear that are now associated with it may be replaced with the joy of a fuller degree of self-expression through music than current professional training in music encourages or even allows. For this reason, improvisation should also be part of international competitions for

all instruments and voice, which would do much to reestablish its presence in recitals — and to liberate the poetic voices currently locked up in the souls of virtually all gifted musicians. The result will be not only pleasure in hearing musicians at their most personally inventive, but also much greater stylistic variety in interpretations of the musical canon, which currently are so predictable and often so boring.