

Presenting the Past

The Experience of Historically Inspired Keyboard Improvisation

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Prelude

IMPROVISATION STANDS AT AN OBLIQUE angle to the powerful forces, both antiquarian and futuristic, that have shaped the contours of Western music history. By foregrounding the contingency that underpins the deceptively smooth flux of time, improvisation dramatizes the process through which the limitless possibilities of what might be coalesce into the inevitability of what was. Improvisation is concerned with spatial and temporal presence, with the here-and-now rather than the there-and-then, and therein lie both its power and its fragility: to adopt a phrase from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, improvisation “undoes itself, quite literally, as it emerges.”¹ To extemporize is to make music “out of time”; time is the rope that constantly threatens to bind the improviser while simultaneously offering the only means of escape.

From Léonin to Boulez, musical repertoire and the musicological discourses that are entwined around it share a common medium: the encipherment of audible experience as written sign. As a result, the dominant historical and critical mode of Western music scholarship has been hermeneutical, predicated on teasing meanings out of scores and literary texts. Since improvisation is heard rather than seen, it has occupied a marginal position within this literate tradition. Prior to the advent of sound recording, it could only be registered in the form of prescription (as in the case of manuals that instructed the student how to improvise), transcription (in which improvisations were notated *ex post facto*), or the recollections of witnesses (who typically strike a wistful tone in memorializing a moment forever lost to them).² Prescription lays the

¹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 114. Gumbrecht is referring to an especially beautiful play in a team sport, but his description fits musical improvisation equally well.

² Examples of prescriptive texts on improvisation include Christopher Simpson's *The Division-Viol, or, The Art of Playing Ex tempore Upon a Ground* (London: n. p., 1659); Carl Czerny, ed.

groundwork for future improvisatory activities, whereas transcription is the imprint of past improvisation: neither is capable of conveying the experience of improvisation in the present.

Recognizing that presence is integral to improvisation, however, need not entail a denial of its historicity. Even Derek Bailey's claim that the notion of free improvisation defies all scholarly attempts to pin it down can be rooted in a Romantic belief in music's ineffability: the conviction that the ephemerality of improvisation liberates it from convention has itself become utterly conventional.³ Improvisation has accumulated its own set of protocols according to which "spontaneity" is pre-determined, "originality" is orthodox, the perception of individual expressivity reveals the degree to which cultural expectations are met, and momentary failure is a virtual pre-requisite for ultimate triumph.⁴ To point this out is not to denigrate improvisation or to accuse its practitioners of disingenuousness, but rather to acknowledge that improvisation is always already historical in that it emerges from a context of shared norms and experiences. In the words of the theatrical improviser Keith Johnstone, "the improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future."⁵

Johnstone's analogy suggests a way in which we might seek to present the past through improvisation. In her recent account of improvised poetry in the Romantic era, Angela Esterhammer points out that "a given theme and a limiting framework ... make meaningful invention possible, precisely by

constraining the possibilities of totally free creation."⁶ The data, knowledge, and experience accrued by scholars and performers can thus facilitate improvisation by narrowing its parameters. The acknowledgement that historical and stylistic boundaries exist allows improvisers to bounce off them and relieves them of the onerous and tedious obligation to be completely "original."⁷

But what is the ontological status of historically inspired improvisation? Can it ever become anything more than an ersatz exercise, a visit to a musical theme park? I would argue that it can, so long as we remain aware of the extent to which our entanglement with the past — and the past's with us — is born of what Gumbrecht calls a "desire for presence [that] makes us imagine how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects (rather than ask what those objects "mean") if we had encountered them in their own historical everyday worlds."⁸

Let us imagine that one such object is a fortepiano built by Anton Walter. Those in pursuit of its "meaning" would likely dwell on its technical attributes, on its qualities relative to similar instruments built by Johann Andreas Stein, and — above all — on the insights it might provide into Mozart's piano music, given that he happened to own one. Those concerned with presence, on the other hand, would be less interested in the fortepiano's hermeneutic potential than in the experience of encountering it. Would its keys feel familiar or strange under the fingers? What kind of musical instincts would it reward or discourage? How would its action respond to broad arcs of the arm or flicks of the wrist, and how would its temperament redraw the landscape of harmonic possibility? The best way — perhaps the only way — to explore such questions would be to improvise, and the knowledge and experience thus gained would enrich the player's knowledge of the instrument and its musical potential.

It might be argued that a Mozart-centric approach will yield far more valuable musicological results than a focus on presence. If we consider the

and trans. Alice L. Mitchell, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte*, op. 200 (New York and London: Longman, 1983; originally published in 1829); and Frédéric Kalkbrenner, *Traité d'harmonie du pianiste, principes rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre à préluder et à improviser*, op. 185 (Amsterdam: A. J. Heuwekemeyer, 1970; originally published in 1849). An example of transcription was provided by Norbert Ignaz Loehmann, who heard Mozart improvise on the organ in Prague's Strahov Monastery in 1787 and provided a notated record of the event thirty-one years later (published in Wolfgang Plath (ed.), *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe IX/27/2* [Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1982], 166-68); see also Katalin Komlós, "Mozart and the Organ: Piping Time," *Musical Times* 143/1880 (2002), 59-61.

³ "Any attempt to describe improvisation must be, in some respects, a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of voluntary improvisation which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation." (Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* [New York: Da Capo Press, 1992], ix.)

⁴ See David Borgo, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

⁵ Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 116.

⁶ Angela Esterhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

⁷ In the theatre, Johnstone warns improvising actors against the overzealous pursuit of originality: "No two people are exactly alike, and the more obvious an improviser is, the more himself he appears People trying to be original always arrive at the same boring old answers." (*Impro*, 88.)

⁸ Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 123. See also Bruce Haynes's chapter entitled "Passive and Active Musicking: Stop Staring and Grow Your Own," in *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 203-14, in which he makes a fervent case for "period composition."

example of Mozart's own Walter, however, a different story emerges. The instrument was recently the center of international attention when Florian Birsak performed two newly authenticated works by Mozart on it, despite the fact that they were conceived for the harpsichord and written more than a decade before Mozart acquired the fortepiano.⁹ In any case, the Walter has been subject to such a degree of damage, repair, and alteration over the last two centuries that its very identity, like that of the philosopher's axe which has had both handle and blade replaced, is open to question.¹⁰ Notwithstanding these significant discrepancies, the International Mozarteum Foundation was happy to foster the impression that Birsak's performance in Mozart's residence came as close to "the real thing" as possible. The IMF's act of musically inspired historical improvisation blurred the boundary between authentic evidence and mere verisimilitude: awkward discontinuities were smoothed over in order to forge a compelling connection between Mozart's life and his work. Rather than presenting the past in all its messy complexity, the IMF took advantage of the opportunity offered by the new discoveries to perpetuate myths under the imprimatur of historical authenticity.

If ostensibly positivistic research often covertly conveys the agendas of those who commission and invoke it, historical investigations into presence overtly reflect and contribute to the self-knowledge of those who pursue them. Although each individual must take responsibility for how this impinges on the tenor of his or her research, I would suggest that in the most cases a sensitivity to presence will limit the scope of any claims being made and sharpen awareness of their contingency. To valorize musical presence is not to privilege an individual's "special" experience over that of the faceless multitude or to encourage solipsism for its own sake, but rather to recognize the complexity that attends every encounter with music. The phenomenon of presence is at once remarkable and commonplace, idiosyncratic and collaborative: if musicians and historians harbor any curiosity to hear the sounds of late eighteenth-century Vienna, their best chance of satisfying it lies in sharing and extending the full breadth of their own knowledge and experience rather than in attempts to reverse-engineer Mozart's genius.

⁹"Two New Mozart Compositions Discovered," unattributed press release from the International Mozarteum Foundation, 2 August 2009, accessed at http://coblitz.codeen.org/dme.mozarteum.at/DME/objs/audiorecs/xNannerlNPresse/PressRelease_2newMozartPieces_2.8.09.pdf on 19 August 2009.

¹⁰See Richard Maunder, *Keyboard Instruments in Eighteenth-Century Vienna* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 66-69.

This is much easier said than done, and I must admit that I am not immune from the tendencies I critique: as will become clear, the process of producing this essay forced me to confront my subconscious indebtedness to some of Mozart's best-loved music, which I mistakenly thought I had improvised. (Perhaps this is the greatest risk of improvisation: not the common fear that nothing will emerge, but that something all too familiar will.) In any case, I happily marvel at Mozart's extraordinary musicality and intellect, but I claim that it is also significant — indeed, wondrous in its own way — that he, like me (and you, in all probability), was a human being in possession of eight fingers and two thumbs who played keyboard instruments and was thereby familiar with the sound, the sensation, and the concept of a C major triad. Such an observation is only trivial if we allow it to be.

What follows is an exploratory attempt to account for my improvisation of an Andante in B flat, which can be heard on the accompanying CD. The Andante could be described as an example of "compositional improvisation" (to adopt James Webster's term) or "extemporaneous composition" (to borrow Ed Sarath's): while it was not consciously based on a preexistent work, it was nonetheless conceived in the form and idiom of a slow movement from a late eighteenth-century sonata.¹¹ Rather than improvising within the generic norms of the fantasy, prelude, or cadenza, I was interested in exploring the kind of real-time play through which some of the period's archetypal works could conceivably have emerged. The movement's historiographical mode is analogous to passages from two recent books on late eighteenth-century music: *Boccherini's Body* by Elisabeth Le Guin and Melanie Lowe's *Pleasure and Meaning in the Classical Symphony*.¹² In their attempts to convey the historical qualities of music's sensual presence, both authors venture beyond the confines of traditional musicological discourse and into epistolary and fictional realms, at times verging on a form of historically inspired literature: they invent and animate characters who give voice to the diverse experiences that musical performance can evoke.¹³ Through improvising the Andante I was aiming to

¹¹James Webster, "The Rhetoric of Improvisation in Haydn's Keyboard Music," in Tom Beghin and Sander M. Goldberg (eds.), *Haydn and the Performance of Rhetoric* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 173-74; Ed Sarath, "A New Look at Improvisation," *Journal of Music Theory* 40/1 (1996): 26.

¹²Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006); Melanie Lowe, *Pleasure and Meaning in the Classical Symphony* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007).

¹³While some critics may be suspicious of such ventriloquism, others might point out that

strike a similar balance, shuttling between the speculative and the historical as well as the past and the present.

When listening to the movement it might be helpful to imagine that the year is, say, 1797, and that it is being improvised on Mozart's Walter fortepiano, which has already undergone some of the misguided modifications and repairs that irrevocably altered it from the instrument that Mozart knew. Equally, it might be useful to know that I recorded the improvisation in August 2009 on a weathered but trusty Steinway grand in the Department of Music at the University of Chicago, armed with a collection of schematic prototypes and musical topics. Robert Levin has pointed out that when faced with an unfamiliar keyboard instrument, Mozart "would improvise a short piece to give him an idea of [its qualities]"; perhaps my Andante could be conceived as a similar kind of experiment in testing the generic and aesthetic limits of historically inspired improvisation.¹⁴ But before addressing the movement in any more detail, I want to outline what I perceive to be the most important historical, physiological, and social factors that contributed to its coming into being.

Pleasure

In *Boccherini's Body*, Le Guin shows how the movements and gestures that lie behind Boccherini's notation can be brought to bear on the somatic experience of modern-day performers (and vice versa), while Lowe investigates the pleasurable sensations that can — and quite possibly did — derive from listening to Haydn in public. Improvisation touches on both aspects, bringing pleasure through the exhilarating embodiment of musical form and content. The high-wire risks associated with popular phenomena such as cadenzas and piano duels often constructed a symbiotic relationship between improviser and audience. Mozart's extraordinary facility allowed him to tailor his performances to suit specific occasions, as was the case when he extemporized variations on "Non più andrai" in response to a request by a member of the audience at a wildly successful concert in Prague in 1787: Mozart listened to his audience just as attentively as they listened to him, and all seem to have reveled in the collective pleasure that resulted.¹⁵ The relationship between improviser and

evoking the composer's singular authority itself entails acting on his presumed behalf, just as the International Mozarteum Foundation does for Mozart.

¹⁴ Robert Levin, "Improvising Mozart," in Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (eds.), *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 147.

¹⁵ See Komlós, "'Ich praeludirte und spielte Variationen': Mozart the Fortepianist," in *Perspectives*

audience could become problematic, however, leading to alienation rather than social harmony. When Mendelssohn, under royal instruction, improvised variations on the same theme to great acclaim in Munich forty-four years later, he felt humiliated, describing his ordeal as "an abuse and an absurdity... I have seldom felt so like a fool as when I took my place at the piano."¹⁶ As for Beethoven, Czerny recalled that he took sadistic pleasure in tugging his audience's heartstrings before proceeding to compound injury with insult:

In whatever company he might chance to be, he knew how to produce such an effect upon every hearer that frequently not an eye remained dry, while many would break out in loud sobs; for there was something wonderful in his expression in addition to the beauty and originality of his ideas and his spirited style of rendering them. After ending an improvisation of this kind he would burst into loud laughter and banter his hearers on the emotion he had caused in them. "You are fools!" he would say. Sometimes he would feel himself insulted by these indications of sympathy. "Who can live among such spoiled children?" he would cry.¹⁷

These three contrasting improvisatory episodes may be seen simply to reflect Mozart's shrewdness, Mendelssohn's status anxiety, and Beethoven's haughtiness, but they also reveal a potential disparity between the pleasure of the improviser and that of the audience that widened over the first decades of the nineteenth century. Aficionados of jazz or free improvisation know how easily pleasure can shade into self-indulgence, and how often conflicts of interest between improviser and audience are resolved in the former's favor. When improvising in a late eighteenth-century idiom, it seems desirable that any enjoyment should ideally be shared, in accordance with Mozart's famous pronouncement that "music, in even the most terrible situations" — such as, presumably, a rambling ten-minute cadenza — "must never offend the ear but always remain a source of pleasure."¹⁸

on *Mozart Performance*, ed. R. Larry Todd and Peter Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27-54: 34-35. Such a strategy carried the dual benefit of pleasing the audience while also providing evidence that the improvisation was not prefabricated.

¹⁶ Quoted in Goertzen, "By Way of Introduction: Preluding by Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Pianists," *Journal of Musicology* 14/3 (1996): 334.

¹⁷ Quoted in Alexander Wheelock Thayer, rev. and ed. Elliot Forbes, *Life of Beethoven*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 1: 185.

¹⁸ Letter of 26 September 1781 to Leopold Mozart, quoted in Hermann Abert, ed. Cliff Eisen, trans. Stewart Spencer, *W. A. Mozart* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 672.

Manuality

Le Guin's eloquent and often poetic descriptions of what it feels like to play Boccherini's music offer pleasure and inspiration to the would-be improviser, who can treat them as stimuli as well as responses. Her notion of "carnal musicology" places the performing body on center stage and opens up a discursive space in which musical actions are no less important than thoughts and words: as Cornelius Cardew put it, "often what we do is what tells us what we have in mind."¹⁹ In the case of keyboard players, what they do is virtually synonymous with what their hands do.

The legendary jazz pianist Bill Evans compared the practice of improvisation to the rigors of a Japanese school of painting in which alterations or erasure are impossible without damaging the parchment: "These artists must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere."²⁰ Given the right disciplinary conditions, Evans suggested, the improvising hands will only err if conscious intention gets in their way: it is enough to know what the hands know. Czerny had made a similar point more than a century beforehand, claiming that the improvisation of fantasies involved "an almost unconscious and dreamy moving of the fingers."²¹

A satisfying improvisation will often feel like a (re)discovery — even a memory — rather than an invention. This sensation is, I believe, particularly pronounced for keyboardists of all kinds. Despite huge variation in size, materials, and construction, keyboard instruments share a common topography. Although such tactile and sonic elements as key depth, spacing, and resistance may vary, certain constants — the comfortable grasp of a major $\frac{3}{4}$ chord, the skittering motion of a diminished-seventh arpeggio — will remain. For me, this vocabulary of touch is the foundation of improvisation. The particular patterns and pathways accessible to the fingers are shaped by experience: some become so entrenched that they assume the status of tics,

¹⁹ Cornelius Cardew, *Treatise Handbook* (London and New York: Peters, 1971), xx.

²⁰ Quoted in Andy Hamilton, "The Aesthetics of Imperfection," *Philosophy* 65/25 (1990): 338.

²¹ Quoted in Ernest T. Ferand, *Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music: An Anthology with a Historical Introduction* (Cologne: A. Volk Verlag, 1961), 21. Czerny himself was echoing a similar observation made by Daniel Gottlob Türk, as Annette Richards points out in "C. P. E. Bach's Free Fantasia and the Performance of the Imagination," in Mark Franko and Annette Richards (eds.), *Acting On the Past: Historical Performance Across the Disciplines* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 122.

while others will fade in and out of use; others still are reserved for special occasions. Cumulatively, they amount to the lexicon of expressions at an improviser's disposal.²²

Insofar as the hands are capable of claiming responsibility for both extemporized material and the mode of its delivery, it follows that developing fluency in a particular idiom will require close acquaintance not only with its theoretical protocols but also with its gestural and physiological vocabulary. Recent neurophysiological research has suggested that the hand's "cognitive" abilities lie primarily in its gestural eloquence, which is closely related to the development of language.²³ If historically inspired keyboard improvisation is to be led by the hand, then, it would seem that the most promising idioms would offer a combination of clearly marked gestures and well-defined musical syntax. In general, music from the second half of the eighteenth century fits these criteria well. In the case of a minuet in the style galant, for instance, balanced phrases, a pared-down harmonic vocabulary, and the graceful motion of real or imagined dancing bodies combine to guide the improvisatory quest for a convincing tempo, hypermeter, affect, melodic contour, topical profile, and formal design, and decisions concerning these considerations are often handmade.²⁴

²² For an unusually detailed account of a jazz pianist's acquisition of such a lexicon, see David Sudnow, *Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1978) and *Ways of the Hand: A Rewritten Account* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2002).

²³ See Frank R. Wilson, *The Hand: How its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Raymond Tallis, *The Hand: A Philosophical Inquiry into Human Being* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003); Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Susan Goldin-Meadow, *Hearing Gesture: How Our Hands Help Us Think* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003); David McNeill, *Gesture and Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Michael C. Corballis, *From Hand to Mouth: The Origins of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and John Sutton, "Batting, Habit and Memory: The Embodied Mind and the Nature of Skill," *Sport in Society* 10/5 (2007): 763-86. The widespread propensity to gesture with the hands while talking has been adduced for the connection between gesture and language.

²⁴ See Wye Jamison Allanbrook and Wendy Hilton, "Dance Rhythms in Mozart's Arias," *Early Music* 20/1 (1992): 142-49, and Lawrence M. Zbikowski, "Dance Topoi, Sonic Analogues, and Musical Grammar: Communicating with Music in the Eighteenth Century," in *Communication in Eighteenth-Century Music*, ed. Danuta Mirka and Kofi Agawu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 283-309.

Collaboration

Whereas composition and musicology both rely on the production of texts largely through single authorship, the practices of improvisation most commonly arise from fleeting collisions of desire, ability, and opportunity on the part of performers and listeners whose roles are not necessarily predetermined or mutually exclusive. Such social networks are no longer operative in the case of late eighteenth-century music, but they still thrive in the world of jazz. Two books by ethnomusicologists have shown in exhaustive detail how such networks sustain improvisatory traditions across generations and within peer groups. Paul F. Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* explores how the requisite skills and materials for improvisation are transmitted pedagogically, while Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* demonstrates how improvisational expertise is transferred among performers via "interaction with an ever-changing community of musicians functioning as a learning environment, a musical process that defies explanation by traditional musical analyses of self-contained works."²⁵ Rather than sharing sheet music or theoretical knowledge, professional jazz performers trade licks, allusions, ideas, and experiences. Although based on a notated repertoire of standards, the vast majority of their knowledge is articulated and communicated orally, aurally, and manually.²⁶

Sadly, the historically inspired improviser is usually bereft of a thriving network of this kind, which severely impedes the pursuit of fluency; left to one's own devices, the process is analogous to learning how to speak a dead language using only a textbook. A musical idiom can only be said to be living when at least two people can converse in it. From that point on, ideas can be exchanged, new expressions developed, and musico-linguistic competence tested and extended.²⁷ Robert D. Levin, one of the very few pianists with the combination of expertise and bravery required to improvise freely in late eighteenth-century idioms, recounted an experience of playing piano duets with Malcolm Bilson

(another of those very few): while Bilson's embellishments were "thoroughly idiomatic to Mozart's language, they [were] different from the ones that form my personal vocabulary."²⁸ Thus even such distinguished improvisers as Levin and Bilson can learn from one another, thereby adding to their stockpile of musical resources. But given the scarcity of such individuals, how might those devoted to historically inspired improvisation begin to establish networks for sharing such information, skills, and experience?

One answer is to model them on networks that existed when and where improvisation flourished. An example of such a network is provided by the circulation of social, musical, and pedagogical capital throughout the courtly chambers, churches, theatres, and conservatorii of eighteenth-century Naples.²⁹ Under the influential Francesco Durante (1684-1755), Neapolitan musical training revolved around the *partimento*, a bass line — typically unfigured — that was to be fleshed out into a contrapuntal and melodic whole at first reading by the student at the keyboard. This non-verbal mode of musical instruction was designed to familiarize students with the skills necessary to improvise and compose music across an array of sacred and secular idioms. Robert O. Gjerdingen recommends that "we might engage with the surviving *partimenti*... for their readiness to offer a still-viable method of musical training," promising that "for intrepid twenty-first-century voyagers... there are intense experiences to be shared with the elite musicians of the eighteenth century."³⁰ However, would-be apprentices might balk at the time commitment required to master these schemata: Gjerdingen reports that eighteenth-century students would spend seven to ten years at a conservatorio, "studying six days a week from dawn to dusk."³¹ How might we learn from Durante and his fellow *maestri di partimenti* without committing ourselves to such an arduous schedule?

²⁵ Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 73.

²⁶ This is not to imply that jazz musicians are unthinking or unreflective; on the contrary, it is to suggest that notions of musical intelligence should not be confined to the brain, as will be discussed below.

²⁷ By "musico-linguistic competence," I mean the ability to extrapolate new and effective expressions in a musical idiom and to reject unconvincing ones.

²⁸ Robert D. Levin, "Improvised Embellishments in Mozart's Keyboard Music," *Early Music* 20/2 (1992): 233.

²⁹ See Robert O. Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 465-80, and his "Partimento, que me veux-tu?," *Journal of Music Theory* 51/1 (2007): 85-135, and Daniel Hertz, *Music in European Capitals: The Galant Style, 1720-1780* (New York: Norton, 2003), 69-78.

³⁰ "Partimento, que me veux-tu?," 131-32. It is perhaps significant that Nadia Boulanger "was one of the last French teachers in an unbroken *partimento* tradition, including both her father and her grandfather, that extended back to the first years of the Paris Conservatoire in the 1790s" (Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style*, 480); her pupils include Robert Levin.

³¹ Gjerdingen, "Partimento, que me veux-tu?," 105.

Since September 2008, I have been facilitating a workshop in Historically Inspired Musical Improvisation at the University of Chicago.³² Meeting for only two hours per week, the workshop’s members have attempted to share the cognitive burden of gaining fluency in the style galant by learning with and from one another through collaborative improvisation. Rather than making the singlehanded attempt to master every contrapuntal permutation inherent in each partimento, each individual works and plays within small vocal and instrumental ensembles to hone the skills apposite to his or her specialized role: cellists focus on bass-line patterns and formulae, for instance, while violinists develop soloistic melodic figuration and strategies for complementing one another. The devolution of responsibility for the musical whole places a premium on listening skills: collaborative improvisation confronts its practitioners with instant feedback from themselves and their fellow performers, enabling (and often requiring) them to make quick corrections and adjustments: a “wrong” note can thus be transformed into a poignant appoggiatura. While progress has at times been slow and fitful, our collective endeavors have demonstrably improved our fluency in the style galant, and these improvements carry over into our solo improvisations.

Schemata And Topics

Gjerdingen’s groundbreaking book *Music in the Galant Style* was not intended to be an improvisation manual, but it serves the purpose admirably. Through careful and astute analysis of innumerable galant movements, Gjerdingen distills a set of eleven schema prototypes — or schemata for short — that composers varied, elaborated, and combined in assembling their music.³³ Although Gjerdingen arrived at these schemata inductively, he presents them as a guide to the cognitive development that an aspiring composer would undergo.³⁴ The schemata — which concisely convey metrical patterns,

³² See the Appendix for further details of the inspirational people and texts behind the workshop’s inception.

³³ The eleven schemata are summarized in Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style*, 453-64.

³⁴ On cognition and improvisation, see Jeff Pressing, “Cognitive Processes in Improvisation,” in *Cognitive Processes in the Perception of Art*, ed. W. Ray Crozier and Antony J. Chapman (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1984), 345-63; “Improvisation: Methods and Models,” in John A. Sloboda (ed.), *Generative Processes in Music: The Psychology of Performance, Improvisation, and Composition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 130-77; and “Psychological Constraints on Improvisational Expertise and Communication,” in Nettl (ed.), *In the Course of Performance*, 47-67.



Example 1 Transcription of bars 1-4 of improvised *Andante* and Gjerdingen’s “Do-Re-Mi” schema

voice-leading for both melody and bass line, and harmonic sonorities — can be memorized with relative ease, especially with manual reinforcement at the keyboard, and it is thus possible to use them as generative templates for improvisation. They offer a means of acquiring the basic grammar and syntax of the galant idiom from the ground up, presenting an alternative to the thankless task of imitating the idiolects of individual composers: by experimenting with the possibilities inherent in each schema, the improviser learns the vernacular of the style galant while simultaneously discovering his or her own voice.

Before improvising the *Andante* in B flat, I had decided on the schema that would underpin its opening theme: for fairly obvious reasons, Gjerdingen terms it the “Do-Re-Mi.”³⁵ The schema is reproduced in Example 1 beneath a transcription of the opening four bars of the improvised *Andante*.

The “Do-Re-Mi” is one of the most common gambits in the style galant; while I was under no illusion that my melody was “original,” it was only later that I discovered — or perhaps simply remembered — that both Mozart and Beethoven had got there first, as illustrated in Example 2.

The second main thematic idea in the *Andante* (at 2:04 in the recording) was based on what Gjerdingen calls the “Monte principale,” initially codified by Fedele Fenaroli (a student of Durante’s) in an influential collection of partimenti (see Example 3).³⁶

³⁵ Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style*, 77-88.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

a) **Allegro**

b) **Allegro molto**

Example 2 a) Mozart, *Piano Concerto no. 9 in E flat, K. 271*, first movement, mm. 87-91
b) Beethoven, *Sonata for Piano and Violin in E flat, op. 12 no. 3*, third movement, mm. 1-5 (transposed from E flat to B flat for ease of comparison)

Andante

Example 3 Transcription of the second theme from the improvised *Andante* (2:04) and Gjerdingen's "Monte principale" schema

This time my deployment of the schema was unwitting, although it turned out to be another favorite of Mozart's.³⁷ Harmonic and melodic considerations aside, I also realized that my choice of meter and rhythmic gesture for each theme — a sarabande for the opening, and a courtly minuet for the passage at 2:04 — bore prominent similarities to two of Mozart's most celebrated slow

³⁷ Among Mozart's works, celebrated instances of the "Monte principale" can be found in the last movement of the *Sonata for Two Pianos in D, K. 448* (375a), mm. 85-100, and the second movement of the *Clarinet Concerto, K. 622*, mm. 17-32.

a) **Andante cantabile**

b) **Andante**

Example 4 a) Mozart, *String Quartet in C, K. 465*, second movement, mm. 1-4
b) Mozart, *String Quintet in C, K. 515*, second movement, mm. 1-4

movements, as shown in see Example 4.³⁸

Other elements of my improvisation, however, are not Mozartian in the slightest. Perhaps the rather melodramatic detour to D flat major (flat-VI relative to the local tonic of F major) at 3:08-3:20 is redolent of Schubert, while the poorly concealed parallel fifths and octaves that litter the whole movement are unprintable by anyone's standards. There is also the issue of structure, which inevitably became more of a memory test than a matter of

³⁸ Allanbrook points out that Mozart's sarabandes often feature the characteristic rhythm [quarter] [dotted quarter] [eighth]; the dance is noble, with a serious affect, and yet passionate (*Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983], 37-8). The courtly minuet often features "a motto rhythm consisting of a quarter and four eighths (often on a repeated note or chord) . . . Its percussive repeated notes in thick chordal texture intensify the dance's traditional even movement and restraint" (*Ibid.*, 34).

design. Although the movement could be said to be cast in a truncated sonata form, there are elisions and deviations that were the result of misremembering rather than conscious alteration. But is that a meaningful distinction to draw? In the course of improvisation, my unreliable memory did not impair my concentration on the moment; indeed, it might be more accurate to say that my immersion in the present led me simply not to care about what I had played three minutes earlier. It was only afterwards that nagging anxieties about unconscious plagiarism, technical infelicities, and structural flaws began to set in, and they were exacerbated each time I subjected myself to my iPod's all-too-flawless recollection of what I had played. What had been ephemeral qualia of presence were now pinned down as a record of the past, and improvisation had become text.

Postlude

Andrew Cyprian Love has argued that the spread of Cartesian dualism over the course of the eighteenth century helped to engender a distinction between musical thought and action that helped to polarize the former (represented by the intellectual pursuit of composition) and the latter (embodied through the handcraft of performance). The much-lauded exploits of C. P. E. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven tell a different story, however, one in which the full measure of a musician lay in the ability to improvise. The aging Bach claimed to have been urged to write down his free fantasias “so that after my death one could see what a Fantast I was”: his unusually precise notation sought to preserve the idiosyncrasies of his improvisatory gestures, uniting mind and body in memorializing his presence. As for Beethoven, Czerny recalled that his improvisations were comparable in quality and difficulty to his published works and featured sonata-form movements as well as fantasias and variations: “Beethoven’s improvisations (with which he created the greatest sensation in the first years of his sojourn in Vienna and even caused Mozart to wonder) [were] of the most varied kind.” There was no suggestion that improvisation is inferior to composition; on the contrary, Bach and Czerny both indicated that improvisation was capable of combining the most rarefied qualities associated with written music and its performance. In Hegel’s words, an improvising instrumental virtuoso could bring together interiority and exteriority in a “wonderful secret” that appears “like a flash of lightning.”

As adumbrated above, it is no coincidence that the decline of improvisation and the concomitant rise in prestige of the musical work during the nineteenth

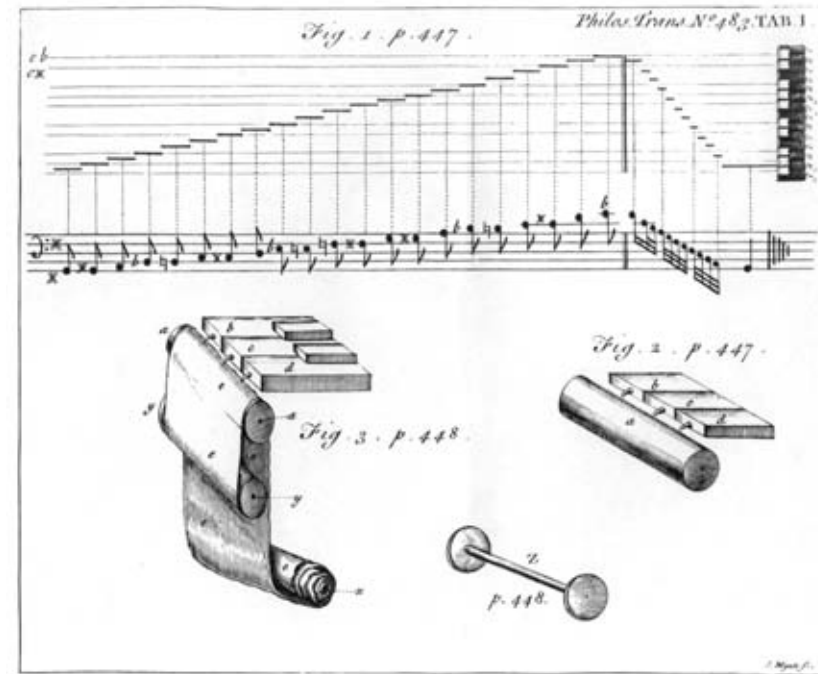


Figure 1: John Creed’s proposed “Machine to Write Down Extempore Voluntaries, or Other Pieces of Music”

century was coeval with the growth of networks and technologies that facilitated the reproduction, transcription, and transmission of musical texts. As a result, the hybrid role of the improviser gave way to the dual identity of the composer-pianist: stranded between score and keyboard, improvisation was forced to ally itself with one or the other. In the former instance, exemplified by Schubert’s Impromptu in F minor, D. 935/1, the composer carefully cultivated the impression of spontaneity (via sketches and revisions) while the pianist’s task was to imbue the work with an improvisatory air (presumably through repetitive practice). In the latter instance, typified by the preluding of Clara Schumann, the pianist improvised in order to forge connections between the composed items on a recital program. In both cases, the improviser’s art was ultimately subordinated to the composer’s authority.

The score was only the most widespread medium through which improvisation could be commodified and disseminated. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a series of technological innovations allowed inventors to pursue the goal of capturing the fugitive traces of

improvisation with greater fidelity than even C. P. E. Bach's notation would permit. In 1747, the Royal Society published "a Demonstration of the Possibility of making a Machine that shall write Extempore Voluntaries, or other Pieces of Music, as fast as any Master shall be able to play them upon an Organ, Harpsichord, &c." conceived by the clergyman John Creed (see Figure 1); six years later, J. F. Unger presented a similar proposal (along with a prototype of his "Fantasiermaschine") to the Berlin Academy.

Both machines were designed to be attached to keyboard mechanisms in order to record on paper the timing and sequence of notes struck in the course of improvisation. But while the avowed purpose of such machines was to capture the incomparable qualities of a certain individual's musical presence, the result was to reduce it to a sequence of enumerated pitches and durations that was less expressive than the crudest musical notation.

Viewed retrospectively, Creed's invention marked a fascinating collision between musical improvisation and information technology: the morphology of a piano keyboard met the functionality of a typewriter. A direct lineage links Creed's machine to the barrel organ, the Welte-Mignon player piano, the computer punch card, and even to the streams of 1s and 0s that captured my improvised Andante on the hard disk drive of a MacBook Air (my very own Fantasy Machine). After improvising the movement, it felt jarringly anachronistic to jump from the warm glow of my imagined 1797 to the cold light of 2009 in order to document the experience through audio files, transcriptions, and the typing of these words. But Creed's invention shows that the play of keyboard improvisation and the impulse to register it have been digitally codependent for at least two and a half centuries. Perhaps the QWERTY and the Steinway keyboards are more akin than I had thought: after all, anyone who replies to an email could be said to be a historically inspired keyboard improviser. Could it be that the liberation offered by improvisation is best understood through our attempts to capture it?

APPENDIX

My efforts to cultivate historically inspired improvisation spring from David Dolan, whose life-changing course on interpretation through improvisation I took at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London in 2006-7. From a distance, Robert Levin's astounding gifts as performer and extemporizer have revealed the artistic heights that improvisation can attain. Moreover, a growing collection of publications aimed at fostering improvisational practices in schools and conservatories has offered much stimulation: see Bruce Adolphe, *The Mind's Ear: Exercises for Improving the Musical Imagination for Performers, Listeners, and Composers* (St. Louis: MMB Music, 1991); Jeffrey Agrell, *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2008); Dolan, "Back to the Future: Towards the Revival of Extemporisation in Classical Music Performance," in George Odam and Nicholas Bannan, eds., *The Reflective Conservatoire: Studies in Music Education*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) 97-131; Nicole M. Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound: Improvisational Games for Classical Musicians* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009); Gerre Hancock, *Improvising: How to Master the Art* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); William Westney, *The Perfect Wrong Note: Learning to Trust Your Musical Self* (Cambridge: Amadeus Press, 2003); Alexandra Pierce, *Deepening Musical Performance Through Movement: The Theory and Practice of Embodied Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007); and Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000). In addition, there is a large number of eighteenth-century treatises on composition and performance that also address improvisation. See in particular Daniel Gottlob Türk, *Clavierschule oder Anweisung zum Clavierspielen für Lehrer und Lernende* (Leipzig and Halle: n. p., 1789); Joseph Riepel, *Anfangsgründe zur musicalischen Setzkunst* (Augsburg: n. p., 1765); Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, 2 vols. (Berlin: n. p., 1753/62); Johann Joachim Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Berlin: n. p., 1752); Francesco Galeazzi, *Elementi teorico-pratici di musica con un saggio sopra l'arte di suonare il violino analizzata, ed a dimonstrabili principi ridotta* (Rome: n. p., 1796); Heinrich Christoph Koch, trans. Nancy Kovaleff Baker, *Introductory Essay on Composition: The Mechanical Rules of Melody* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); William S. Newman, "Kirnberger's 'Method for Tossing Off Sonatas,'" *Musical Quarterly* 47/4 (1961): 517-25;

Friederich Erhardt Niedt, trans. Pamela L. Poulin and Irmgard C. Taylor, *The Musical Guide* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 73-109; and Joel Lester, *Compositional Theory in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 175-92, which paints an intriguing portrait of Mozart as pedagogue.