



REVIEW: BOOK

Musical Improvisation in the Baroque Era

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Historical improvisation has been the subject of growing interest in recent years, with significant results in the fields of musicology and performance practice. On the one hand, this tendency can be seen as a direct consequence of the multiple paths opened up by historically informed performance of early music, but, on the other hand, it can also be framed within a broader movement – the ‘performative turn’ in music research, extending across various chronological eras and genres. In fact, repertoires of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries constitute a privileged ground for this approach, since improvisation played a crucial role in musical life, and musicians were trained to develop improvisatory skills. Moreover, music was still primarily an aural practice and musical sources offer ample scope for the performer’s creativity.

The volume *Musical Improvisation in the Baroque Era*, edited by Fulvia Morabito, is a welcome addition to the increasing literature related to this subject. It aims to investigate the role and forms of improvisation in baroque music, as well as to set up links between creative process and practice. The contributions were drawn from talks given at a conference with the same title as this volume that took place in Lucca in 2017. This event was organized by the Centro Studi Opera Omnia Luigi Boccherini in collaboration with *Ad Parnassum*. Although historical contexts, stylistic features and aesthetic views are explored in several essays, much of the volume’s content focuses directly on the practical side of improvisation. The subjects range from specific aspects such as ornamentation, cadenzas and accompaniment to ideas and methods associated with musical training, as well as to questions of style and freedom within performance. Among the contributors are musicologists, music theorists and performers, some of them bringing interdisciplinary expertise. Most of the eighteen essays are in English, with others in Spanish and Italian.

The book is divided into four sections: (1) ‘Improvisation into Composition’, (2) ‘Issues of Performance Practice’, (3) ‘Contemporary Treatises, Pedagogical Works, and Aesthetics’ and (4) ‘The Art of Partimento’. However, several essays could also fit well into another section and address issues relevant to more than one chapter. The volume as a whole is a web in which a number of threads and concepts are interwoven – notation, memory, virtuosity, rhetoric and many others.

Improvisation is an ephemeral practice, inherently unwritten, but its study from a historical perspective can only be traced from written sources of different kinds: scores, treatises, manuals, chronicles, reports and other documents. How can a score give us clues about improvisation? And to what extent is it intended to be played as written? Can we consider certain pieces as written improvisations? What are the boundaries between improvisation and composition? How do these questions relate to learning methods? These and other questions cut across most of the essays or are implicit in their arguments.

The main topic of the first section is how improvisation was transformed into composition. Writing down an improvisation or adding ornamentation during a performance, as well as composing variations, were usual activities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Doubles* can be seen as a mirror of these practices. In this regard, David Chung ('French Harpsichord Doubles and the Creative Art of the 17th-Century Clavecinistes') examines over one hundred pieces with *doubles*, in which embellished versions of the originals had been explicitly written out, and identifies the main techniques used by French composers and harpsichordists. Concordances and multiple versions disclose relations between imitation and creativity.

Composition and improvisation at the keyboard also underlie Massimiliano Guido's contribution, 'Sounding Theory and Theoretical Notes. Bernardo Pasquini's Pedagogy at the Keyboard: A Case of Composition in Performance?'. Special attention is given to the composer's *Saggi di Contrappunto* (1695). Since it is not a treatise, but rather a set of examples that had to be memorized by the students and from which they could learn to create their own realizations, it can be considered an example of 'soft theory'. The following essay testifies to the need to write down ideas that arose during performance. Javier Lupiáñez and Fabrizio Ammetto offer an account of the manuscripts collected by Johann Pisendel, kept at the Sächsische Landesbibliothek in Dresden, especially those by Vivaldi and in particular the Concerto RV507 for Two Violins. An interesting conclusion that emerges from study of Pisendel's annotations is that the style differs from the accepted theory of ornamentation of the time, which attests to the performer's freedom.

In 'Cadenze per finali: Exuberant and Extended Cadences in the 16th and 17th Centuries' Josué Meléndez Peláez demonstrates that elaborated final 'cadenze' (a practice generally associated with later solo concertos) were already in use at the end of the sixteenth century and in the first half of the seventeenth century. He explores how these passages were performed, written out or just left to the musician's creativity and interprets them in a rhetorical light. A link between Peláez's chapter and Rudolf Rasch's in section 2, which deals with the following period, could be established, even if the approach is quite different. In 'Improvised Cadenzas in the Cello Sonatas Op. 5 by Francesco Geminiani' Rasch analyses how instrumentalists of our time perform these cadenzas, using nine recordings released between 1976 and 2015, and compares them with the rules given by J. J. Quantz in his *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* of 1752.

The contribution by Marina Toffetti that closes the first section is dedicated to the 'Written Outlines of Improvisation Procedures in Music Publications of the Early 17th Century', namely the second and third books of *concerti* by Giovanni Ghizzolo and Frescobaldi's motet *Iesu Rex admirabilis*. Comparison between successive editions of these works shows interesting features of performance practice, such as changes in the basso-continuo line, issues related to accompaniment, modal transposition and other parameters. The chapter examines how continuo players were not limited to the mere realization of harmonies, but rather frequently elaborated the notated line, thus performing it differently each time. Traces of this practice can be found within some editions of the period. Toffetti warns that all versions should be taken into consideration and editors should 'avoid fixing elements that were not fixed in seventeenth-century editions' (108).

Most improvisation in the baroque era was based on formal models and idiomatic vocabularies of motivic, harmonic and contrapuntal ideas that were to be internalized. In section 2 ('Issues of Performance Practice') Giovanna Barbati considers the application of the principles of partimento to the cello and viola da gamba ("Il n'exécute jamais la Basse telle qu'elle est écrite": The Use of Improvisation in Teaching Low Strings'). She defends a methodology in which improvisation is integrated with getting to know the repertory: students should learn to improvise from schemata, patterns and melodic figurations found in cello method books and other sources that can later be reused in different contexts and elaborated according to the level of individual creativity. In the chapter 'Re-Creating Historical Improvisatory Solo Practices on the Cello: C. Simpson, F. Niedt, and J. S. Bach on the Pedagogy of Contrapunctis Extemporalis' (section 3), John Lutterman follows a similar path. He focuses on valuable sources that can be used to recreate

historical improvisation, mainly Christopher Simpson's *The Division Viol: or An Introduction to the Playing Ex Tempore upon a Ground* (London: Godbid, 1659) and Friederich Niedt's *Musikalische Handleitung: Teil I–III in einem Band* (1710, 1721, 1717), facsimile reprint (Hildesheim: Olms, 2003), as well as Italian partimento exercises.

Most of the volume is dedicated to instrumental repertoires, but vocal music is also the object of pertinent reflections. In 'On the Borderlines of Improvisation: Caccini, Monteverdi and the Freedoms of the Performer' Anthony Pryer discusses the crossroads of improvisation and interpretation. Instead of the usual division between oral and written traditions, he draws attention to the differences between orality in popular music and in baroque vocal music and argues that when it comes to improvisation, we should focus on 'prepared or unprepared procedures' (153). The essay also discusses the limits of freedom and the ambiguity of notation, which sometimes includes fixed elements and sometimes leaves the creative decisions to the performer. The perception of the score as an unfinished entity is also a central issue in Laura Toffetti's contribution, "'Sostener si può la battuta, et iandio in aria": testi e contesti per comprendere l'invenzione e la disposizione del discorso musicale nel repertorio strumentale italiano fra Seicento e Settecento' ('Sostener si può la battuta, et iandio in aria': Texts and Contents for the Invention and Disposition of Musical Discourse in Italian Instrumental Repertoire in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries). Writings of composers such as Frescobaldi, or of theorists such as Joachim Burmeister, allow the author to demonstrate the importance of classical rhetoric in composition and its implications for performance.

In section 3, 'Contemporary Treatises, Pedagogical Works, and Aesthetics', Valentina Anzani brings improvisation and vocal virtuosity to the fore. Her chapter clarifies convincingly what actually happened in the competition between two famous singers in Bologna in 1727, and notes the subsequent mythologization of the episode, concluding that Farinelli and Bernachi represent two different musical profiles: the 'buon virtuoso' and the 'buon maestro'. Virtuosity is also the topic chosen by Guido Olivieri. He shows that it was the transfer of Italian improvisatory practices to France that opened the way for the figure of the international virtuoso. The fiery virtuosity associated with the Neapolitan musical scene, and its characteristic melodic elaboration and ornamentation, arose from a performance practice transmitted from master to student (289). Olivieri also provides valuable reflections on the aesthetics of virtuosity and its long-term impact on musical life. Ideas about virtuosity are also implicit in Neal Zaslaw's essay 'Adagio de Mr. Tartini: Varié de plusieurs façons différentes, très utiles aux personnes qui veulent apprendre à faire des traits sous chaque note de l'Harmonie' (Adagio by Mr Tartini, Varied in Several Different Ways, and Very Useful to Those Who Want to Learn How to Ornament Each Note of the Harmony). He analyses the negative reception of the *Adagio varié* that was purported to be by Tartini and that was included in J. B. Cartier's *L'Art du Violon* (Paris: Decombe, 1798). The dense notation seemed to contradict Tartini's stated intention of simplifying his musical style. After re-examining different editions, Zaslaw proposes that the earliest publication of the *Adagio varié* dates back to the 1770s.

Also in section 3, Francesca Mignona brings attention to a little-studied subject compared to the attention given to keyboard instruments: the use of the Spanish guitar and other plucked strings as continuo instruments as well as their notation systems. The rediscovery of the partimento tradition has opened up a fundamental field of research that brings together musicology, performance and pedagogy, and which continues to expand, as the final section exemplifies. In addition to practical approaches, historical approaches have been tracing the origins of partimento practice through new sources. In 'On the Origin of Partimento: A Recently Discovered Manuscript of Toccate (1695) by Francesco Mancini' Giorgio Sanguinetti analyses a large collection of pieces preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, which currently represents the earliest known document attesting to the usage of partimenti as teaching materials. The dissemination of partimenti outside of Italy is also explored by Marco Pollaci, who dedicates his chapter to 'Two New Sources for the Study of Early Eighteenth-Century Composition and Improvisation', two anonymous undated manuscripts that are kept in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin: 'Principi di Cembalo' and 'Regole per accompagnare

nel Cimbalo ò vero Organo' (Mus. Ms. theor. 1483 and 1487). These counterpoint notebooks present valuable information on the Italian art of improvising.

Simone Ciolfi suggests a possible historical link between partimento practices, the composition of recitatives and the development section of sonata form. To make this point, Ciolfi explains that from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, Alessandro Scarlatti's cantatas acquired didactic value as a result of their connection with partimento. Thus recitatives, in which partimento formulas are evident, could have been part of a composer's training, with their harmonic and tonal processes serving as models for the development section of sonata form. In the final chapter, "'Taking a Walk at the Molo": Partimento and the Improvised Fugue', Peter van Tour demonstrates that partimento skills and mental processes did play an active role in the preparation for writing fugues, based on a newly discovered counterpoint notebook (1788–1789) by one of Nicola Sala's students.

As Fulvia Morabito states at the outset, 'this volume is not the first in musical improvisation, nor it will be the last, as it follows a path much-trodden in the past few years' (xv). As a set of case studies, it benefits from the perspectives opened up by previous publications on the topic and, at the same time, suggests many directions for future research. It presents in detail a wealth of musical materials and a variety of approaches that reflect the distinct profiles of the authors, allowing music scholars and enthusiasts to rethink the concept of the musical work and how to interpret it. The numerous music examples and tables, the inclusion of abstracts and a helpful index, as well as the superb layout typical of Brepols publications, all contribute to enriching a work that will certainly be of great interest to both scholars and performers.

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