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Process and Prowess:

A Personal Account of the Study of Historic Western European Improvisation Practices

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

by

Anahit Rostomyan

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Process and Prowess:

A Personal Account of the Study of Historic Western European Improvisation Practices

by

Anahit Rostomyan

Doctor of Musical Arts

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Elisabeth Le Buin, Chair

In this dissertation, I explore avenues of acquiring keyboard improvisation skills by (a) engaging with musical works that carry the mark of improvised traditions; (b) working from sixteenth-through eighteenth-century treatises on improvisation; (c) critically examining the history and pedagogy which informs past practices; and (d) reevaluating my place in relation to these historical musical practices from a current cultural standpoint. In the first chapter, I detailed my biography, focusing specifically on my musical training. I do so in order to familiarize my reader with the circumstances including education, musical training, etc. that have, on the one hand, equipped me with fairly strong musical abilities and, on the other, have made it difficult for me to grow as an all-around skilled organist, able—among other things—to improvise. In the second chapter, I describe and discuss aspects of improvisation practices from the Early Modern Period,

which I have come to find particularly helpful for my musical exploration, as well as for building a better understanding of the differences in the past and contemporary practices that have shaped the outcomes of my abilities to engage with improvisation. Chronicling of my firsthand experiences with improvisation, primarily based on the examination of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passacaglia in C Minor*, BWV 582 and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's *Fantasia in E-flat Major*, Wq 58/6, takes a prominent place in the third, central-analytical chapter. In the final, concluding chapter, I discuss ways of working with failure from a positive perspective and re-evaluate my place in relation to improvised musical practices.

By including both descriptions of musical processes and a narration of thoughts, derived from extra-musical texts, I outline and explore topics and sources which have, at various stages of the ongoing project, enhanced my understanding of the issues at hand such as, personal limitations and external factors, including musical training and cultural upbringing.

The dissertation of Anahit Rostomyan is approved.

Christoph Bull

Frank Heuser

Raymond Knapp

Mitchell Bryan Morris

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2019

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Introduction

What is at Stake

For today's classical musicians, learning to improvise takes more than just acquired skills and vocabulary or quickness of mind, as most historic texts claim. It takes breaking long-standing oppressive barriers that have been reinforced for centuries through social formations and particular disciplinary practices. For me, a female musician trained partly in the especially strict and inflexible Soviet era conservatory tradition, learning to improvise on the organ essentially requires engagement with the political, surpassing the bounds of the "merely musical." Ultimately, the demystification of the improvisation practices in the Western-European musical tradition and the real-life demand for improvised musical activities is what led me to pursue a dissertation in which I examine, in the broadest sense, the intersections of identity and improvisational prowess.

Why Early Music

There are two reasons why early music is an appealing area of study for me: it corresponds well my temperament and personality, and it provides the kind of liberating perspective on valuation that I so deeply missed in the early phases of my formal education. It is primarily the second point that I want to expand on, since that is the aspect which I hope will be most helpful to my readers.

When talking about "early music," I chiefly mean what is called the Early Modern period, that is to say about 1500 – 1800—a period that corresponds roughly to the first wave of development of keyboard instruments. More importantly, I am considering the historic era that

predated certain modern-day paradigms involving classification, codification, precision, replicability, and the translation of these qualities into disciplinary systems that later rule human bodies and behaviors. It is an age before the birth of the discipline in the eighteenth century, “when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanisms itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely.”¹ It seems to me that the Early Modern period is an age that—as in the case of Cartesian dualism—considers a radically different possibility of relation between body and mind, one where the two were somewhat independent of each other. It is an age before the patented invention of the metronome in 1815, a device intended for improvement of all musical performance. It is an age free from the spells of current academic grading systems and highly regimented criteria of evaluation of merits. The Early Modern is, in fact, an age of music making that was not so tied to current-day concepts of right and wrong. It is also an age where social and collaborative aspects of any musical activity often overrode the emphasis placed on individualistic aspirations and contribution, and an age predating the highly segregated boundaries between performer and audience. As such, I can view the Early Modern as an age of camaraderie, of shared musical responsibilities and compounded gains. In my studies of early music, I have found much more room to be spontaneous and to free myself from concepts of right and wrong.

Why Improvisation

¹ Michel Foucault, "Discipline & Punish," in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 138.

Just as in the study of Early Music, the study of improvisation appeals to my ideas about freedom. The act of improvising one's way out of a tight situation, that is, coming up with ingenious solutions *ex tempore*, can be a statement of personal accomplishment. It can be the cure to stagnation and a means to break free of constraints—it can be a way to translate the skills I possess into a positive and original outcome. Improvising is rewarding, it triggers a sense of gratification and relief. That improvisation contains such potential for liberation is an old concept, one that has permeated the discourse of recent decades with notable vigor through literary, philosophical, and critical theoretical work. Texts that allude to, or directly discuss the capacity of improvisation to free one's actions and state of mind have been crucial to my reevaluation of my personal narrative over the past few years. I find the critical works of Hanna Arendt, Adriana Cavarero, Danielle Goldman, as well as literary works of Jorge Luis Borges, and Federico García Lorca particularly invigorating. By developing a dialogue between my practice and these texts, I am learning to liberate myself from the constraints of centuries-long traditions of bodily and mental disciplines around music-making in order to re-engage with the music I make in new ways.² Further yet, “[i]n the musical domain, improvisation is neither a style of music nor a body of musical techniques. Structure, meaning, and context in musical improvisation arise from the domain-specific analysis, generation, manipulation, and transformation of sonic symbols.”³ Ultimately, in my quest for extemporizing music I strive to achieve a state that more closely aligns with Arendt's alternate, and ultimate definition of freedom where aims and motivations are merely comprising factors and not the determining

² Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, eds., *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, 1st ed, Music/Culture (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

³ George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” in “Best of BMRJ,” supplement, *Black Music Journal* 21 (2002): 218.

elements of the liberating action.⁴ Freedom, in Arendt's explanation, is not in the action of liberation but what results from this action, in a split moment of absolutely un-meditated expression.

Why Early Music Improvisation

Parallel to these realizations, which took place over a period of five years in the course of my studies at UCLA, I discovered a particular path to improvising through my continued study and love of the so-called early music repertoire, or the Western European traditions from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. This repertoire features a high amount of improvisation, recorded both in scores and in contemporary treatises. While perusing historic treatises on embellishment, division style, *basso continuo* realization, extempore performances of fantasias, and more I gained a hopeful perspective on improvisation. It was evident from the treatises that the ability to improvise is, for the most part, a matter of skill acquisition. Improvised delivery of music hardly appears as Athena does from Zeus's forehead.

Similarly, improvised music is not necessarily a product of a pure divine gift, unlike what the Kantian notions of abstract music suggest. In other words, the commonly accepted nineteenth-century take on the concept of the genius, which previously informed my beliefs about my own capabilities, is a limited and limiting view on the improvisational practice. Armed with this knowledge, I felt compelled to challenge the status quo by daring to learn to improvise.

The Ethics of Self-care and Critical Literature on the Topic

⁴ Hannah Arendt, "What Is Freedom" in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), 151.

The quest to learn to improvise, for me, also resides firmly in the domain of the personal ethics of care. It is driven by the desire to reclaim my personal narrative and the need to break free of the perpetual mode of self-government, instilled in me through pedagogical methodologies. This issue is delicate and complex. Not all aspects of my formal training are an impediment on my path towards becoming a capable improviser. Nor do all obstacles I experience arise from the education I received, as some of them result from my own innate limitations. Still, I find it important to examine aspects of my early training that did, precisely, serve to restrict my creativity as well as my very ability to be creatively expressive. It is important to bring these issues to light because the unique set of experiences I account for in this document are not uncommon within the discipline of classical music education and, therefore, must be questioned by other performers with similar background and musical goals, as well. The self is formed intersubjectively, in dialogic collaboration with society. Thus, an act of self-care can best be developed with a thoughtful investigation and a deep understanding of one's place within the society that shaped them.

The desire to claim a story of a narratable self is one major aspect of personal ethics that can be understood through Cavarero's work on narrative identities.⁵ As Cavarero explains, we narrate ourselves through a display of creativity, the uniqueness of imagination, characterized by musicality in improvisation. I would like to argue that the desire for the narratable self comes from not simply understanding who the particular individual is in essence but what has been lost through the cultural narration of that personal and collective identity. As Cavarero explains, the

⁵ Adriana Cavarero, "The Desire for One's Story," and "The Necessary Other," *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A Kottman (Routledge, 2000), 32-48; 81-93.

desire to reclaim one's narrative is the search for that which at birth already has been lost through the narration of ourselves by others.

Importantly, the search for the authentic musical voice in this desire for self-narration constantly interacts with the uniqueness that is already emerging from an intersubjective apprehension of the recognizable and readily presentable self. In essence, the quest for the ultimate narrative of an individual is a desire that cannot be attained. Creating a narrative of the self would require one's self to be separate and unique from society. It is a goal that is neither achievable nor desirable. Engagement with improvisation too for me is a truly an act of relational vulnerability. As an improviser, this could require me to impress a listener with all that constitutes uniqueness (talent, intellect, wit, taste, creativity, etc.) in response to the demand placed upon the performer by her or his audience.

To further my individuality, I must break from, and contend with, the Western model of disciplinary education that I was trained under. With this respect, I find Michael Foucault's interpretation of the historic development of Western knowledge and disciplinary systems to be particularly fitting with the kind of issues I grapple with in this project. Foucault's larger argument, most notable in *Discipline and Punish*, is that systems of social discipline are systems intended to control human minds and bodies for hierarchical purposes. This is especially on point for classical music training. In Foucault's view, the system of Western education, especially since the enlightenment era, and aims not to empower individuals to pursue creative outlets of self-expression and realization, but rather to train them to be obedient by internalizing disciplinary measures and by becoming one's worst critic and apparatus of surveillance. If I am to succeed in my goal of becoming a capable improviser, I have to account for the limitations my

musical training has placed on me, such as strict adherence to a musical score, the importance of perfection, self-doubt, and more.

Could, for instance, a positive outcome be achieved through complete negation of any and all external factors in this model of self-care? Could the self-interested count as ethical? Crucially, could a self-nourishing approach to voicing originality even be possible in an inherently and inescapably interrelational sphere? In ancient Greece, Epicurus was already proposing a path to a healthy and happy, and importantly pain-free, mental and physical state by prescribing resistance to intentional engagement with externally invading and oppressive matters such as politics.⁶

What My Work Does that Others Do Not

There is certainly no scarcity of literature on musical improvisation. Nor is there a limit to the ideas and support I can draw from philosophical, social-critical, and literary texts on the politics of identity and freedom. What makes the current project challenging, yet at the same time worthwhile, is the scarcity of written personal accounts of the processes of acquiring improvisational prowess. Texts on this topic, especially with respect to concrete improvisational paradigms in classical music, are still few and far between. To the best of my knowledge, David Sudnow's work in the first edition of his book *Ways of the Hand* from 1978 is the closest model I can follow in my attempts to express tangible outcomes of my experimental learning. By sharing my personal experience and describing my process of learning to improvise, and by bringing all the different aspects of the same pursuit together in one project, I intend to contribute to an

⁶ Stephen Rosenbaum, "Epicurus on Pleasure and the Complete Life," *The Monist* 73, no. 1, Hellenistic Ethics (January 1990): 21-41.

alternative understanding of the place, role, and accessibility of improvisation for students and fellow musicians whose training may, like mine, have trapped them in outdated disciplinary paradigms.

Because of the enormity of the challenge and the scarcity of available institutional support on the subject matter, I have at times felt foolish at attempting to break free of all withstanding obstacles, be they of a personal or institutional nature. However, I find that chronicling the failures is an important step towards recognizing yet-unexamined possibilities. Without a doubt, my perspective on the subject will require multiple emendations in the coming years and decades, as I make concrete, even if small, steps towards embodied knowledge about musical improvisation. The life-long project I embark on here will hardly lead to conclusive and complete results in this document. Because there is no benchmark for knowing when I will attain a certain type of knowledge or a certain amount of proficiency in the musical practice I am investigating, it is difficult for me to provide answers to questions I raise in advance.

I anticipate that this continued effort will, in time, amount to a more substantial study and that the experience gained will help me modify the ways in which improvisation is taught through university- and college-level curricula. Meanwhile, I hope that my dissertation, in all of its necessary incompleteness, will serve as a recourse for musicians who wish to reconcile the way their past training may have crystallized into restrictive or oppressive disciplinary routines with newly acquired skills in improvisation.

Who Can Read it and What do I Want Them to Get from it if They Do

I hope that this document most readily appeals to any musician, professional or amateur, who is working independently on similar issues through the study of Western European classical

music. My dissertation also intends to provoke the interest of music educators who are striving to address the needs of their students in the twenty-first century. Lastly, I hope that the current project will move individuals in academic and administrative positions in music programs nation-wide, to reevaluate the current state of their school's curricula in order to provide their students with opportunities relevant to their musical and personal growth.

Chapter 1—

Locating Self: An Auto-biography

By Way of Introduction

The moments from the past that we hold onto are undoubtedly significant. Memories, among other important functions they serve in our lives, help us understand who we are. Cognitive psychologists, writes Aden Roger, distinguish a particular type of episodic memory, call autobiographical memories, which is responsible precisely for this role.⁷ The select stories of our recollections we articulate through autobiographical memory, help us built a narrative around our identities, one that we strive to communicate to others: “We use the autobiographical memory to shape our evolving self as our life stories unfold and our awareness of preferred life scripts is heightened.”⁸ We share self-defining memories with others to explain how we have come to be the person we currently are, and to build a foundation for moving forward through life.

The autobiographic details and accounts I provide in this chapter help me portray the circumstances that have thus far driven me to pursue the present project: one of acquiring improvisational prowess through my studies in organ performance at a doctoral level. More specifically, in this first chapter, I will describe the history and the nature of my early training in music, in order to provide context for the stakes of this project, set forth in the Introduction.

⁷ Roger C. Aden, *Childhood Memory Spaces: How Enduring Memories of Childhood Places Shape Our Lives* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 6.

⁸ Ibid.

Through this autobiographical narrative, I will help the reader understand how the training I received growing up in Armenia at once enables me and restricts me as a musician.

Earliest Childhood Memories

While it is difficult for me to place the exact chronology of events, I remember that my exposure to music learning may have occurred slightly before I began studying the piano. I must have been about three or four years old when I first learned to sing songs and play a toy melodica and a toy xylophone in kindergarten. I may have played on other instruments too during music class. But, I must have liked the melodica and the xylophone the most. The instruments were colorful, which made memorization of road maps to tunes easier and more fun.

Sayat-Nova Apartment

The building:

I spent my formative years, up until the day I moved to the United States at the age of twenty, in the same apartment in Armenia. The apartment building, which was built between 1920s and 1930s, was located on a street peculiarly named after the Armenian troubadour singer, Sayat-Nova. It was the same street on which the conservatory building was located, just about six minutes walking distance away from home. Not much was changed about the apartment before renovations that took place in the late 1990s. So, for the most part, my childhood memories are associated with the old look of the apartment. The floors, the walls, the shadows on the ceiling from the lights of moving cars coming through the windows at night, the furniture pieces, the colorful rugs, and the entire array of practical and decorative objects were part of a creative arsenal. They triggered in me a vivid imagination.

The floors:

The long and wide wooden floors were made of thick planks. The hallway and kitchen floors, painted cinnamon-brown, contrasted with the red paint of the floors of all the other rooms. The floors were nothing like the smooth, polished ones of modern apartments. The unrefined cut of the planks enriched the floors with sizable cracks (wide enough for a child's fingers to carefully store and retrieve precious possessions (coins, scribbled secret notes, useless spare jewelry parts—trinkets from all walks of life)). The abundance of nails, large and small, firm and loose, which pinned the uneven planks to the structural foundation added dynamic instability: the floors wobbled and squeaked. The character of the floors was enhanced by tangible signs of wear and tear (patches of worn-out paint, exposed splinters, and dents). There was nothing boring about those floors.

Walls and the ceiling:

The appearance of the walls and the ceiling of the apartment was, like that of the floors, animate. Aside from the bathroom and the shower room, which were, with the exception of the ceiling, fully tiled, the walls and the ceiling of the apartment were covered in colorful shades of paint. The paint process in all the rooms seemed to be the same. The walls and the ceiling were first covered with a layer of solid color and then loosely sprayed with a sprinkle of fine colorful dots. The paint substance had a mat and mildly chalky feel. Still, each room had a unique decorative design, which was in part due to the choice of the base color of each room. These were blue, green, peach, and tan. The difference in the rooms was also marked by hand painted details, with framing lines on the walls and more ornamental designs on the ceiling in some of the rooms.

Rugs:

Every room had at least one rug. Some hung on the walls, others were spread on the floor. The rugs were of varying sizes. One was as large as the entire wall, another as long as the entire hallway. All the rugs being oriental in style, they were very colorful and ornate. The patterns on the rugs were often so geometrically abstracted that it was difficult to distinguish the floral motives from the symbolic representations of creatures. The older the rug, the less distinct the images of flowers, animals, and pure ornamentation were from one another. As a child, I was free to interpret the images, assigning anthropomorphic meanings to them, and narrating stories by guiding my feet, hands, and gaze through the empty spaces, the labyrinthine paths in between distinct figures.

The Petrof Piano, the Bond

My earliest recollection about a musical experience harks back to around 1985. I was then about four or five years old. Everything—from the contrast in natural and artificial light in different rooms, the wooden floors and colors of the walls, the furniture and rugs, small utility items like plastic hair combs and boar bristle hair brushes, hangers, keys on the drawers, scents and sounds—accompany this recollection. That day, there was an unusual level of liveliness at home. It was the day my grandparents had returned from a trip to Moscow. They always returned from these trips with stories, souvenirs and edible delicacies for family, friends, and neighbors. I remember a family member—it must have been either my grandmother or my father—calling my attention to what appeared to be a large box sitting against a wall in our largest room, at the end of a long hallway. It felt like I had just woken up from an afternoon nap. I was feeling dazed and was at first slow to orient myself to what was happening. I remember my older sister, who was then five or six years old, being physically present in the room, along with my father's and

grandmother's voices. My sister was making sounds on the box-like object and calling me to play with her and with it. I do not know how, maybe with someone's assistance or maybe by my own initiative, I found myself lifted up barefoot onto the box.

My first tour of the piano had commenced. I was exploring, with my feet, the new road that the keyboard spread in front of me. I walked from one side of the piano keyboard to the other, feeling the clunky unevenness of the keys and the sensations from sounds my feet were making. On the one hand, I was gaining familiarity with the instrument's physical dimensions, by stepping on the keyboard part, leaning on the top of the piano (it was an upright model) for balance and weight adjustment, and by pressing my ear against a side of the piano to hear it rumble. On the other hand, I was exploring the many shades of the strange and exciting box's personalities. The reaction I had to various noises that came out of the instrument were strong and visceral. Some sounds made me and my sister burst into laughter, other sounds, in the midst of the frenzy, provoked feelings of playfulness, mischief, and the kind of danger that is brought by an encounter of the unknown. The piano was my horse, with its white teeth protruding from under the folding lid; this creature was my new friend. This moment was the beginning of the special bond between my piano and me.

Grandfather and the Piano

It must have been only a few years later when I learned about the story behind this special piano. My grandfather, a veteran of World War II, traveled to Russia frequently, to visit his war-time friends and take part in special commemorative events. During one of his visits to Moscow, he went to a piano store to purchase an instrument for his grandchildren. My parents had been putting money aside for this purpose for quite some time prior that trip.

My grandfather did not have any musical training and knew nothing about selecting pianos, so understandably, he was basing his decision mainly on the instrument's physical attributes. My piano was the only one in the Moscow store that had a dark brown satin finish; it stood out to him, even so modestly, as all the other instruments at the store had a high gloss finish. When he approached the sales person to inquire about the instrument, he was quickly told that it was not for sale. It had been custom selected and delivered to the store for the wife of Czechoslovakia's ambassador to Moscow—and she was at the store at that very time, arranging the pickup. However, seeing how attached my grandfather was to her piano, she graciously agreed to let him purchase the instrument. This aspect of the instrument's history encouraged me to cherish it even more.

Neighbor Anna and I

When I was about eleven or twelve years old, I met Anna. Anna and her parents lived on the third floor of our building on Sayat-Nova Street. We were on the fourth floor. Anna was the person I admired the most in the entire neighborhood. She was several years older than me, tall and gangly, with very long heavy, straight, dark hair. She dressed very plainly and practically. She also never wore makeup, accessories, or jewelry, for as long as I knew her. Like her mother, she had poor eyesight and for that reason wore glasses with thick lenses, which made her eyes at a certain angle look very big and close.

Both her parents were scientists. Anna's mother, Lilik, was a chemist and a fascinating individual. Among other things, she was Anna's piano teacher outside of music school. Lilik, who went about even the simplest day-to-day tasks thoroughly and methodically, devised a series of piano technique exercises for her daughter and monitored her only child's practice from time-

to-time; but Anna was a self-motivated and diligent individual and did not need much supervision as far as practicing was concerned. A recluse, who never played outdoors with others, Anna spent at least six hours every day practicing, with a few hours on technique alone and the rest on repertory. She was so good at the piano that by the age of fourteen she could play almost all of Chopin's piano pieces effortlessly.

This was perhaps the main reason why my mother thought it would be a good idea for me to spend some time at Anna's apartment. It was also one way my parents could keep us occupied during the years of the blockade, when living conditions with limited access to electricity, gas, water, and food supplies were particularly harsh.⁹

Bonding 1, Hearing it Rumble and Bonding 2, Playing in the Dark

I loved sitting next to Anna and hearing her play. I would listen to her for hours. I was mesmerized watching her hands, and her fingers, which curved as if they were warping candles pushing against and coming off the keys on hot summer days, running nimbly over the keyboard, as she played Bach, Schumann, Chopin, Prokofiev, and others. Sometimes, I would lean against the piano, resting the palms of my hands and my head on the side of the keyboard, to feel the amplified sound of her playing. Other times, I would run home immediately after hearing her play under the dim light of an oil lamp, and greet my piano in the dark cold night. (I learned from Anna that one could practice even on a kitchen table if one had the love for and the motivation to learn music.)

⁹ After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992, a territorial conflict arose between primarily ethnic Armenian region of Artsakh (Na-Gorno Karabakh) and Azerbaijan. As a result, gas pipe-lines passing through the bordering regions were regularly blown up. Also, after the Chernobyl incident, the powerplants were shut down. This was an additional hit to the already poor infrastructure. The economic recession, the creation of new monetary systems, and the overall chaotic situation resulted in high prices and shortage of supplies in a matter of days.

I, of course, could not play like her, so I played the pieces I knew and was learning at the time. I also played the easy passages of really challenging pieces I had learned on my own, such as Beethoven's *Sonata Pathetique*, Chopin's etudes Op. 10, no. 1, Op. 25, no. 1 and no. 2, and several of his *Noctures*. And, sometimes, I just went on with whatever came to mind, pretending to be a composer at work. I cared very little about spending time with everyone else in the house, even when we had guests over. In fact, the times when the living room was booming with laughter and lively conversations were the perfect opportunity for me to be unnoticed and be left alone.

Spending time with my piano, often in the dark (even when there was electricity) provided the teenaged me the space to escape from the world, especially when I was feeling melancholy or upset. I often began by playing what music I knew that matched the current mood (it was usually Beethoven) and eventually transitioned into making my own music. When I tired of the urge to play, I listened to vinyl recordings of classical music, sitting, still in the dark, on the old broad shoulder surface of the double-window. No one understood me better than my piano and the distant dark-skied streets from the window view.

For as long as I remember, I treated the space surrounding the piano with a sense of reverence and ownership. My musical activities even at a very young age, often began and ended with a ritual, of uncovering the heavy green cloth by carefully folding it behind the piano lid, and rolling the original strip of the green felt cloth off the keys and placing it on top of the piano, then putting everything back when the practice session was over. I frequently cleaned the floors around the piano in preparation (I even used my mother's face lotion a couple of times to polish the heavy coat of the red worn-out paint when I was about twelve or thirteen years old). But the best part of the performance ritual, of the process which accompanied the creative activity, was

when I lay down on the piano stool, and spun the stool hard around its axes—using my hands and feet against the floor, and against the legs of the stool and the corpus of the piano—to let the centrifuge lift my limbs into the air and to blur all the colorful objects of the room into magic and bliss. In these happy moments, I felt unrestrained and unstoppable as I jumped back up to play the piano. I did not care what I played. Sometimes, it was a composition I was especially fond at the time, other times, glissandos with the palm of my hand as I spun the chair, silly tunes in duet with my brother, through collaborative and inventive efforts, and the like. We did not have any agenda in mind, we shared pieces we were assigned to learn and invented new versions of them with our interpretive and playful takes on each other’s assignments.¹⁰ We played with the tunes and created our own four-hand concoctions from them. Through this creative process, the spinning served as a reset button and recharge at the same time. This fueled me with creative energy and many happy moments of playing the piano, either alone or together with my brother.

Formal Training

Afterschool Music Program

I began taking music lessons around the age of five. This was not initially my parents’ intention. It was my older sister, then a first grader, whom they enrolled in after-school piano lessons at her elementary school. My sister, however bright, quickly proved to be a very difficult piano student. She refused to practice her music at home and made her piano teacher’s life during the lessons into a living hell. Because I was too young to be left at home, I was often brought along to the elementary school for my sister’s lessons. My elders, mortified of my

¹⁰ My brother Hrachya who is two years younger than me, proved to be very musical. He was two grades behind me at the Spondiaryan School of Music. For various reasons, some of which I outline in the chapter, he quit his music studies around the third or fourth grade.

sister's behavior, often sat me at the piano during the lessons, while they tried to convince my sister to get back to the instrument. My learning to play the piano, thus, was a result of this attempt at conflict resolution, as gradually my parents realized that I gravitated towards playing the piano more than my older sister and signed me up for regular lessons instead (my sister was thrilled with their decision). During this period of my musical education, I learned how to read music notation (clefs, notes, a few key and time signatures, and basic dynamics and expression marks) and play short easy compositions on the piano. These were often delivered from memory, especially during a recital.

It may be due to mere difference in personality, a difference in in-born disposition of temperament and life experiences that my sister and I already had acquired by a young age, that our attitude towards music diverged so sharply. I was, and perhaps still am, in general more gullible, malleable, patient, and obedient than my older sister. These qualities aside, it was also clear from the beginning that I gravitated towards music and that I was, according to my early teachers, innately musical.

Spendiaryan School of Music

Following the recommendation of those early teachers, my parents applied to enroll me in Alexander Spendiaryan Music School, which at the time was ranked third in Armenia. I believe it is considered to be the top music school today. In any event, with no special preparation, I passed the entrance qualifying test with reasonably good scores, and was accepted to the music school in the Fall of 1988.

My formal music training thus began parallel to my studies in primary school, in first grade. The music school, like all other specialized education institutions in the country, required

an admissions examination for all entering students. This ensured that from the very beginning only musically “qualified” children—those who could keep up with the set curriculum—would be allowed to study music at a state-funded institution.

The seven-year-long program at the Spondiaryan provided a comprehensive training in the traditions of Western European Classical music. The program requirements included semi-weekly individual piano lessons and weekly group musicianship classes, beginning from first grade, and music history, choir, and piano accompaniment classes starting from third grade.

During those seven years, the school provided me with a strong foundation.

Each course targeted specific aspects of my musical training, to insure an overall even growth in all areas. While the supplemental courses added to my knowledge, the bulk of the training was accomplished through individual instrumental—in my case, piano—instruction, and through group solfeggio classes. Every semester culminated in examinations in each of these separate areas. Additionally, students also participated in yearly school recitals.

The tested materials, with perhaps a few exceptions, were performed from memory. The one occasion I remember being required to refer to a score was during sight-singing evaluations. But, by then, I had prepared all the assigned homework assignments so well that I was not truly sight reading during the examination. I was mostly recalling the tune from memory while using the score as a reference point. Solfeggio asides, I was also, as tradition dictated, required to play from a score during the examination for the accompaniment class. But, once more, this was hardly an exercise at sight reading a score, as I had worked on the accompaniment part all semester. Everything else, including piano compositions, scales and related technical exercises, choir pieces, music history and theory materials, and more, were presented orally and from memory.

The underlying goal of all this musical training, as I have come to understand it now, was the acquisition of tonal thinking and hearing. This primary objective in the musicianship course was achieved through building, singing, and dictating of isolated, but always tonally contextualized, scales, intervals, and chords. Drilling major and minor scales in natural, harmonic, and melodic configurations—along with resolutions of their unstable and stable tones and inversions of the primary chords—was a staple in any given musicianship class. So were the frequent and systematic studies of intervals and chords along with their construction and resolution, both, from isolated pitches and within given tonalities. In short, working with and within the circle of fifths was just as important as approaching music through specific melodies. The systematic approach to tonal thinking was also reinforced through technical exercises in piano class, through repeated runs of meticulously and precisely fingered scales, arpeggios, chord inversion, and complex variants of these elementary modules. Both the ear and the muscle memories were thus training to be attuned to the standards of the Common Practice Era. In fact, “common era” practice was where everyone’s education began. Contrapuntal music and post-tonal repertory were normally introduced after the third or fourth grade.

Career Found

It was during my studies at the Spondiaryan music school when, at the age of thirteen, I decided to become a musicologist, studying what we would call systematic musicology. This decision was greatly influenced by my piano instructor, Irena Maghakyan. She recognized in me a student who was musical and smart, but also one who did not necessarily excel in technical proficiency.

She noticed long before anyone else that I was interested more in the process of learning new repertory than in performing polished compositions for audiences. Nevertheless, Irena kept assigning more and more challenging pieces for me to play. These compositions were not necessarily difficult technically, but they were often polyphonic in texture or post-tonal in style. Even when these works were not dense in compositional structure, they required an attentive ear and a certain maturity for grasping the essence of their characters. I remember clearly Irena telling me that I would hardly make a concert pianist because of my less than desirable—indeed, mediocre—technique, but that I would be a good musicologist someday.

By then, at approximately eleven years of age, I was skipping school so frequently that I was hopelessly behind my peers and had no foundation to move forward with my general education past middle school. I disliked everything about my school (unfair and mean spirited teachers, an unorganized mess...) I began ditching about seventy percent of my classes from the fourth grade onwards. Soon after, I fell hopelessly behind in all subjects, except Russian literature, the only class I attended regularly, because I liked the subject and the teacher. At the end of eighth grade, I found out that my high school entrance test scores were not sufficient enough for me to attend high schools at a regular track. I knew this was coming, but it did not matter. I had spent months preparing for entrance examinations to the Romanos Melikyan Academy and was ready to apply to the academy that summer.

Even when everybody else had given up on me, Irena still saw potential in me, and for better or worse, I took her encouragement to heart. I decided to end my regular public-school education before transferring to high school, and instead continue my education at a specialized music academy, as a musicologist. My parents were glad that I pursued any kind of education passed the eighth grade certification. They, having learned about my intentions, pulled together

some money, hired a private piano teacher, while Irena was on an unexpected personal leave from work, in addition to a theory teacher, to help me prepare for the entrance exams to the academy.

Romanos Melikyan Music Academy

The four years I spent at the Romanos Melikyan Music Academy were the most important for my growth as a systematic musicologist. This was especially true of the music theory and musicianship courses. For the most part, the instructors at the academy, like those at the Spondiaryan school, worked according to the much-quoted premise that “repetition is the mother of learning.” Independent thinking was encouraged only in particularly bright students and only as an exception to the rule. But, unlike the music history classes, where the memorization and regurgitation of information such as names, dates, compositions, and more, was the operative mode, music theory classes placed a significant amount of importance on skill acquisition, including the development of the inner ear, musical memory, compositional logic and literacy. The practical and technical skills I honed during these academy years helped me navigate through most situations I encountered in music studies later on. I felt a great degree of confidence in the knowledge of Western Classical Music traditions, knowing all too little in fact about the limited scope of my expertise.

According to the historically accepted hierarchy at this institution, musicologists, that is music historians and theorists, along with composers and conductors ranked at the very top of the trade. Then came the pianists, violinists and the rest of the strings, flautists, all other woodwinds and brass players, percussionists, and the rest (that is singers and folk instrumentalists). Ethnomusicologists and folk instrumentalists, as well as jazz musicians, were categorized

somewhat outside of the main structure and on their own terms. It still puzzles me how a student scoring lower than the required points on entrance exams to the musicology department was advised to join the choral conducting program; or similarly, how someone whose ear training score was not good enough for the piano department was encouraged to seek opportunities in the string department. In any event, musicologists were the elite class among the music practitioners. This status came with a set of privileges which I will detail below.

Additionally, by the time I was applying in 1996 Romanos Melikyan academy had the strongest, and e most competitive program in systematic musicology in the nation. The well-established status of the program was evident from the selective admission process, the small class size, and the individual attention I and my peers received throughout the four years. The admission examinations were not extremely difficult. Still, I had to study privately for about a year to be prepared for the selection process. In 1996, the admission requirements to the music theory department consisted of an oral and written examination in music history and theory, a separate written dictation component, and an instrumental performance. Typically, the academy accepted only four students, usually between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, into the program each year. The year I applied, the school accepted six students. Six other students transferred to the program from piano and vocal programs during the course of the first two years. At that point, the cohort was split into two tracks, based on the ranking of our abilities. In the systematic musicology program, preference was given to students with a strong keyboard background. The very few students who studied voice or another non-keyboard instrument struggled noticeably in their studies in the program.

Despite the hierarchy, one of the strongest aspects of the program was the amount of individual attention and lesson time each one of us received. For example, the instructor checked

the assigned homework during class time, going over each problem one by one, while all of us congregated around her by the piano or the teacher's desk. All of us also had an opportunity to hone our skills through in-class exercises, such as dictation and sight singing. A typical setup for this activity involved one actively responding student and quietly observing peers. Everyone got their turn, no one was missed. Both of these activities gave us additional opportunities to learn from each other's mistakes and accomplishments. This in return helped us regurgitate and absorb the new, and solidify the old materials.

Degree Requirements

Music theory, harmony, and solfeggio classes, along with music history courses, comprised the core of our training. Not counting the general education courses, which were the only classes that all the students at the academy had in common, the degree requirements for the systematic musicology major also included instrumentation and polyphony courses during the fourth and last year of the program. All of the courses for the degree, including the schedule of classes and instructors, were prescribed; once accepted into a major, we, the students, were not at liberty to select our own classes. In most cases, we knew from the first day in the program exactly what, when, and with whom we would study until our graduation from the academy. One size fit all. I was in fact, being molded into a specific form and for a specific purpose:

In a disciplinary regime, on the other hand, individualization is 'descending': as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized; it is exercised by surveillance rather than ceremonies, by observation rather than commemorative accounts, by comparative measures that have the 'norm' as reference rather than genealogies giving ancestors as points of reference; by 'gaps' rather than by deeds. In a system of discipline, the child is more individualized than the adult, the patient more than the healthy man, the madman and the delinquent

more than the normal and the non-delinquent. In each case, it is towards the first of these pairs that all the individualizing mechanisms are turned in our civilization.¹¹

Because of the special emphasis of the systematic musicology program, it was typically the chair or assistant chair of the theory department that was in charge of overseeing the progress of an entire cohort for the duration of their studies at the academy. Our primary teacher was Rita (Israelovna) Petrosyan, who was then the assistant chair of the theory department. She was as warm and kind inside and she was stern and strict on the surface. None of us at first suspected the capacity for compassion and care that she had for all of us. But we all knew from day one that she was an exceptionally intellectual and erudite person. The chair of the theory department at that time was Eduard Pashinyan. His classroom was directly across the hallway from ours and we were told to fear him, for he was ruthless as a teacher. Pashinyan later became my harmony professor at the conservatory, where he also taught.

Individual Subjects

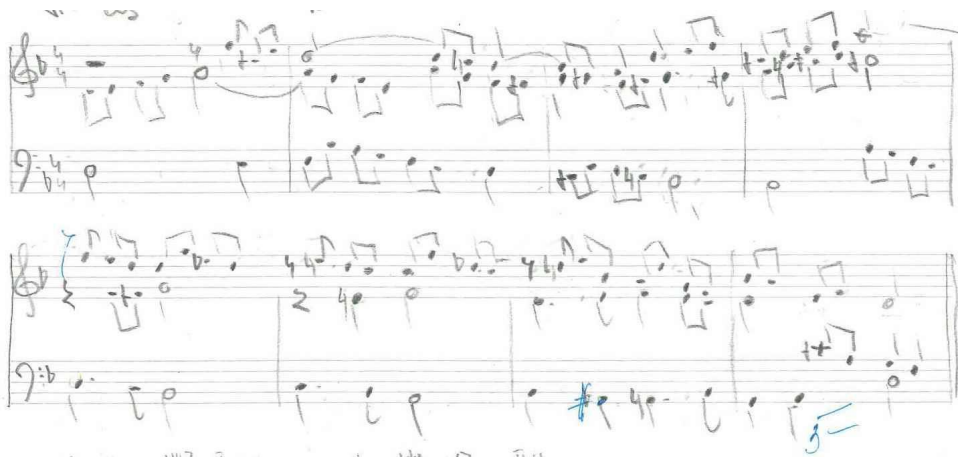
Solfeggio, activities and objectives:

The main components of the ear training class were sight singing and dictations. The sight singing assignments consisted of one- to four-part polyphonic pieces, and four-part (SATB chorale) musical texts. The bulk of the sight singing materials were assigned from compendiums of famous canonic repertoire and Russian folk tunes. The remaining portion of the materials came from J.S. Bach's compositions. Bach's works were an integral part of the sight singing class.

¹¹ Foucault, "The Means of Correct Training," in *Discipline and Punish*, 193.

Our weekly assignments always included a polyphonic piece by the composer. By the end of the fourth year in the program, we had sung all of Bach's two- and three-part inventions, and all the fugues up to four parts. The guidelines for the singing assignments were as follows: at the instructor's request, the student called forward to the piano would isolate and sing a particular part, while playing the remaining voices on the piano. The voice that was being sung was dropped from the hands. Beside the inventions and fugues, we also periodically sang Bach chorales *a capella*. The other aspect of the ear training class consisted of two main areas of training. The first of these was written dictation of one- to three-part polyphonic compositions. These musical examples, as Figure 1.1 demonstrates, were typically between eight to sixteen measures long, and they increased in tonal and rhythmic complexity concurrently with the progress made in theory and harmony classes.

Figure 1.1 An example of three-part melodic dictation



The second area of the training was harmonic dictation. I was expected to recall harmonic progressions at least eight measures long, immediately following a single hearing. These exercises were done from memory and notes were allowed. (Figure 1.2 is a rare example of notated harmonic dictation). Each one of us was given a different harmonic dictation during a

given lesson, which emphasized the latest material covered in the harmony class. By the time of the final state examination at graduation, I was expected to take down from memory a progression that was around sixteen measures long. The progression had to include four modulations, one for each degree of key relations. Additionally, each of the modulations had to be of a different type (for example, common tone, major-minor, contrasting, and enharmonic).

Figure 1.2 Two examples of harmonic dictation

Theory and harmony, activities and objectives:

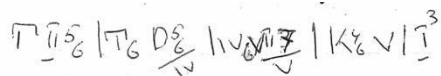
The training in music theory and harmony was similarly rigorous, as Figure 1.3 demonstrates. Besides from submitting written solutions to harmonization problems, each of us, beginning in the third year of studies in the program, played a keyboard progression on a weekly basis. The main purpose of the keyboard progression, as shown in Figures 1.4 and 1.5, was to practice modulations and build hands-on knowledge of key relations. The initial assignment was to create a four-measure-long progression, that would become the seed of a two-year-long study in keyboard harmony. With the exception of the small choices I had in harmonization and polyphonic composition exercises, a four-part fugue I wrote for the counterpoint class, this short keyboard progression was the only time I was called upon to be original in my musical output. This progression had to be in chorale-style harmonization and had to follow the same strict rules

of voice leading as the written exercises. We were also expected to be able to play this progression, along with the original voicing and voice leading, in all possible keys.

Figure 1.3 Harmony exercise



Figure 1.4 Keyboard Harmony, initial opening progression, used for all modulations



We had to commit to this initial four-measure-long snippet of a progression for the remainder of our time in the program. As we learned about new key relations and harmonization methods, we were instructed to add complementary phrases to the initial short opening phrase. By the end of the fourth year, at the state examination, we were expected to know how to play modulating progressions through all four degrees of key relations (from the closest to the farthest keys), using different types of modulations (common tone, common key, major-minor, enharmonic (German and French chords)) for each transition. And as at the beginning, we were expected to replicate the same chord and voice leading relations in all keys.

Figure 1.5 Keyboard Harmony, 3rd and 4th degree modulations

III Kurstzettel ungleichmäßige Taktarten

IV Kurstzettel ungleichmäßige Taktarten

| Fis-dis (ges-es) | C-dur (cis-dis) I+ IV+ II+ | Fis-dis (ges-es) | a-moll (a-es) |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| C-Fis | e-H | a-A | e-d; F-b; G-c |
| C-dis | e-H | a-Des | C-d; F-b |
| C-cis | d-A; e-h; a-E | a-B | C-d; G-c; F-B |
| C-dis | d-A; e-h; a-E; g-D | a-Fis | e-H |
| C-gis | e-H; a-E | a-dis | e-H |

VIII Kurstzettel ungleichmäßige Taktarten

| I | II | III | IV |
|-----|-----|---------|-------|
| C-c | a-a | Fis-dis | Es-es |
| G-g | E-e | Cis-cis | B-b |
| F-d | D-d | H-h | G-g |

The Other Curriculum Courses:

Counterpoint and instrumentation courses supplemented the main training for the systematic musicology majors. In the counterpoint class, I learned how to write short pieces in the strict style and to compose a fugue. This training was primarily based on Taneev’s counterpoint teachings, where the voice relations are determined by vertical and horizontal mathematical computations. As peculiar as this method was, it was an effective way to see voice relations from an advanced perspective. In the orchestration class, we received fundamental information about various orchestral instruments, their mechanics and their uses in literature.

Unlike the counterpoint and instrumentation classes, which were introductory in nature, individual instrumental lessons were based on a more comprehensive and individualized plan.

While all musicologists were required to take individual instrumental lessons during all four years in the program, the course requirements ran on a separate track from the performance majors' curriculum. In many cases, instructors in charge of teaching the non-performance majors, mine included, stopped emphasizing the need for technical growth and tended to assign lighter repertory: that is, inventions instead of fugues, Czerny etudes instead of Chopin, and so on. Very few instructors among those who were primarily working with performance majors cared to keep the musicologists to the same high standard. In many ways, it did not help that my piano instructor was the head of the piano department for the non-performance majors. This was, after all, a corrupt post-Soviet era culture: because of her weight in the department, she could give me passing grades on examinations even if I was not sufficiently prepared and even if we had managed to meet only a few times during the semester. This state of affairs arose in part because of her unexcused absences and general neglect, and in part because of my waning interest and confidence in myself as a performer. While some of my colleagues in the department were tackling challenging Poulenc and Chopin concertos, I was struggling with compositions that were considered suitable for seventh grade music school students.

Building Up to Success

As I have come to learn in my late twenties, the education system under the Soviet Union and into the immediate post-Soviet era, was based on a centralized plan, developed over decades under the supervision of Moscow. Accordingly, there was a strong agreement among music education institutions of various levels as to what the expectations and qualifications were for students wishing to enter the next stage of their education. Instructors at the higher education institutions were in communication with each other about matters pertaining to the evaluation of

their students' qualifications. There was consequently little guesswork about the prospective student pool, as nearly every potential applicant was accounted for. These were usually students who were applying directly from music academies from around the country. Very few students applied to the conservatory who had received musical training through an alternative path, as there was very little chance that they would be able to demonstrate skills and knowledge at a required level.

Music academy students with high probability of continuing their music education at the conservatory level were identified early on and placed under the care of a supervising mentor during the final year. In our case, the assigned mentor was Armen Budaghian, a well-respected conservatory professor and music critic. The mentor ensured that everyone was prepared for the entrance examinations to the conservatory. The year-long workshop was implemented in place of the music pedagogy practicum, which all music theory students, according to the curricular requirements, had to take during the final year. It was understood that once accepted to the conservatory, we would have an opportunity to delve into the study of music pedagogy thoroughly during the course of the first two years.

It was also the mentor's task to ensure that prospective students knew the format of each examination. Prof. Budaghian's plan, in consultation with our head instructor at the academy, was to review certain materials that we might have forgotten and to go over the information contained in that year's entrance examinations that might not have been covered during our studies. The aim of the workshop was to essentially eliminate discrepancies between the academy's and conservatory's expectations; this was accomplished by drilling memorization of certain important concepts, terms, compositions, and other trivial knowledge. This way, the only challenge we faced would be directly related to our intellectual and musical abilities.

A student wishing to study at the conservatory had to take a series of oral and written examinations. The only common examination, required of all students applying to post-secondary institutions, was native language. This was conducted at a different location, at a large university auditorium, which accommodated about two hundred applicants at a time. It was the least important examination score for students who were applying to the conservatory. The score mattered only for breaking a tie when the sum of the music specific examination points was the same between the musicology applicants. For better or worse, by 1996 mathematics, physics, chemistry, and a couple of humanities subject areas were dropped from the requirements for the conservatory's musicology program (these subjects had been part of the standard testing during the Soviet era). All other conservatory examinations in the post-Soviet Armenia were specific to the profession.

The first of the examinations was the Colloquium. It was the only examination with an oral evaluation component, during which we were asked to demonstrate our training in music history, score analysis, harmonic diction, and anything and everything else related to the music on which the committee members deemed reasonable to test the applicants. While the evaluation of music-specific knowledge was the framework of the examination, the broader purpose of the colloquium was to assess the overall cultural erudition and maturity of the applicant. Essentially the examining committee could ask any question they considered pertinent for establishing the applicant's qualification. This included knowledge of physical and cultural geography, languages, visual and performing arts, literature and poetry, important landmarks, and more.

The remaining examinations—written dictation, harmonization, and composition identification—were in written form. The solfeggio was the shortest of these written tests. Students were given twenty minutes to write a three-part polyphonic dictation. The dictation was

played precisely eight times (roughly one time per measure of music) and included a fair amount of chromaticism and one to two modulations. The only information that was given to us in advance was the key signature. We were left to our own devices to figure out the rest. The harmony examination was the longest in duration. We were given a maximum of four hours to harmonize, in four-part chorale style, a melody about thirty-two measures long, full of dense chromatic language and unexpected melodic turns. The final examination, the music repertory, was the lightest for students who had done their due diligence in learning and reviewing hundreds of compositions. It was a gentler version of the drop-the-needle testing approach, as the tested portions for the most part began from the top of an identifiable tune or a section. The fifteen- to twenty-second-long selection was played twice. We were required to list the name of the composer, the title of the composition, the correct movement, the specific section (that is, whether it was the exposition, the development, a specific variation, primary or secondary theme, etc.), the key, the date of the composition, and the opus number whenever applicable.

At the Komitas Yerevan State Conservatory

In many ways, the conservatory training was not much different from the system that was in place at the music academy. The one slight difference was in the title of the major. We were no longer applying to the department of music theory. At the conservatory, the profession that was devoted to the entire scope of the study of music, as opposed to its composition and performance, was called simply “musicology.” The musicology program itself had two tracks; every student by their fourth year, and preferably earlier, had to choose to specialize either as a historian or a theorist.

I remember that even then I had trouble deciding whether I was more interested in being a historian or a theorist. But for most of my time in the program, that was beside the point, since the coursework was essentially identical for all musicology students: future historians and theorists took the group classes for the major together, and had the same core training. The nuanced difference had to do with the angle of the master's thesis project and the choice of the main guiding adviser. The fifth and final year of the conservatory program was devoted entirely to that individual, guided project.

At the end of the day, as it was explained to us on many occasions by the conservatory professors, both theorists and historians were trained for one purpose. The primary objective of the musicology profession was to assist composers. It was the historian's task to help composers understand why they were writing their music and what it meant. It was the theorist's task to help composers "spell check" their scores for various types of errors, be that an incorrect voice leading or an inappropriate use or notation of a musical instrument. Systematic, critical, and analytical knowledge was entirely subsumed into disciplining and controlling creative output.

Foucault writes,

The discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude,' a 'capacity,' which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection.¹²

Theorists and historians were also required to take individual instrumental lessons. By then, those of us who had not received rigorous training or even just adequate attention at the academy level, were hopelessly behind the performance majors in our technique. This was an

¹² Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 138.

outcome that in many cases was preventable. Perhaps it was not by design, or perhaps this consequence was intentional in defining and limiting the parameters of the musicology profession. As for me, my performance skills by then were rather average. For the most part, this did not matter to me, because I had stopped seeing myself as a performer long before, probably since the middle school years. But the desire to play Beethoven sonatas, Chopin etudes, and the like had not been completely extinguished.

It was during my early stages at the conservatory that I decided to study the organ. It never even crossed my mind to think of this as an opportunity to perform. Rather, the motivation to play this new instrument was partially due to the fact that it no longer tied me to the history of being a poor performer at the piano. Learning to play the organ was a way to break the spell. It was not apparent to me at the time that I had an enduring desire to reconnect to the enjoyment and creativity I had once experienced playing music. Another motivation to study the organ was because I wanted to understand counterpoint better. Surely, the best way to improve at counterpoint was to study Johann Sebastian's music on his main instrument; after all who if not J.S. Bach had composed the most magnificent contrapuntal compositions for the organ? Taking this initiative seriously, two of my peers and I approached the organ professor at the conservatory. While we were encouraged to pursue the study of organ, we were advised that the priority for enrollment was given to piano performance majors. As a result, I was placed on a waitlist in the fall semester of my second year. I never took organ lessons in Armenia, because I moved to the United States in 2002, a few weeks into the second semester of the second year. My education in Armenia ended rather abruptly.

I spent my last two weeks in my native country, before obtaining green cards and boarding a plane to the US, scrambling to complete the second semester's course requirements.

At that time I hoped to return to Armenia the following September to continue my education. I ended up taking seven graded examinations and four pass/no-pass tests during the first month of a long semester, in order to pass my classes and stay in school. But I did not return to Armenia until the summer of 2013.

Tyranny of Success Part One, Gains

All in all, the systematic and continuous professional instruction I received throughout these many years was significant, as it provided me with a strong foundation, even if only in a particular area of classical music. It is only decades later that I have begun to understand the importance of my early music education. Many of the results of the training did not become evident to me until a couple of years after the fact. Undeniably, I have a highly refined ability to follow and hear music, whether with respect to its technical elements or aesthetic attributes. I find the following areas of musical growth to be the most important.

Good Ear:

The training I received helped me develop an attentive ear for hearing polyphonic and harmonic textures. The ability to hear multiple layers of a musical texture is an enjoyable experience for me. It is in part because of this ability that I gravitate towards the polyphonic aspects of musical composition, be it the interplay of fully developed independent lines, or nuanced voice leading in a harmonic progression. I also learned to hear four-part harmonic textures by concentrating on the bass line.

Good memory:

The rigorous ear training taught me to conceptualize substantial chunks of music. I was trained to hear and retain small, phrase-long compositions before writing them down. With the

exception of jotting down a few points on the staffed paper, trying to write down the tune as one listened to it was strongly discouraged during melodic dictations. During the harmonic dictations, I was not even allowed to hold a pencil in my hands. Sketching down anything was categorically prohibited.¹³ At the end of the day, harmonic dictations helped us to improve not only the sheer ability to retain musical information, but also develop the inner ear, through the recollection of sonic imprints of the familiar harmonies, chords, intervals, cadential patterns, and more, that we systematically practiced hearing.

Foundational knowledge:

Along the way, I have obtained a certain knowledge that helped me navigate through music and musical “problems.” My knowledge of music theory prioritizes/d those elements of *tonal* music language that were especially important within the specific ideological and aesthetic contexts of my education. This knowledge made the prospect of memorization easy, and conversely, the ability to hear and imagine musical sounds, through the process of audiation, helped me harmonize bass lines and melodies “in the abstract,” that is, writing in a notebook from a desk. The ability to follow a musical-syntactic process, understanding its formal organization (textural and structural), the ability to break down the components of compositions, and the ability to recognize a period style, or in some cases, the signature writing of a specific composer, which I learned through music history classes—all were reassuring of my understanding of classical music.

Keyboard skills:

¹³ I will never forget this stipulation, because the first time I tried to take down notes, my harmony instructor, Rita Petrosyan, interrupted her playing, approached my desk, and with a gentle look on her face taped me on my hand with the notebook I was writing in. I never again looked at a pencil when called out to dictate a harmonic progression aurally immediately after this occurrence.

Finally, having studied the piano continuously from a very young age equipped me with adequate keyboard skills, skills which I utilize today as a performer and a keyboardist during paid activities. All the skills I learned from taking piano lessons, including playing scales, arpeggios, and chords, learning various repertoire pieces and exhibiting expressivity through playing, are valuable skills I continue to build on.

Tyranny of Success Part Two, the Right and Wrong

Aspect One, Misery

While I have always gravitated towards music, for as long as I can remember, the joyous initial relationship with music was gradually overcome by the misery of the learning experience brought about by teachers. One of the main causes of the unhappiness and rapidly growing insecurity had to do with these teachers' inflexible application of the concept of right and wrong. In musical terms, this essentially came down to either playing the right notes at the right time, or not.

First Tears:

The first tears shed over this norm date back to the earliest days of my piano studies. I remember that around the age of six or seven I was allowed to go outside and play with other children only after I would play the assigned compositions and exercises a set number of times in a row, without making errors. This stipulation was made by my father and the practice time was overseen by my grandmother, who would patiently keep track of the number of error-free replays by moving pencils, one by one, from one side of the piano to the other. The very instant the last pencil was moved to the other side, I was free. However, the moment I made a mistake, the countdown was reset and all the pencils were moved back to their original position. Practicing

under this condition was often discouraging and frustrating, especially given that the assignments steadily became more challenging to play. Most of the time, I was more focused on the pencils than on the music I was learning to play. Even when I succeeded in accomplishing the task, by the end of the practice session I was tired and sad.

Insecurity:

The stakes of getting things right got higher as I transitioned into Spenidiaryan specialized music school. Every wrong note, wrong finger, wrong timing, expression mark, and so on now officially mattered in the form of a numerical grade deduction. The grading system in the Soviet Era was numerical, with five standing for excellent, four for good, three for adequate, and two for fail. (The numeral one was not even considered to be a real grade). It was not a very nuanced grading system. Mistakes were costly and the window for “excused” errors was very slim.

Naturally, the quarterly performance examinations in front of a committee made up of people I was not used to playing for, were terrifying. I had to somehow prove to the select group of esteemed instructors that I could execute, and execute well, the tricks I had been taught during a given quarter. Not only my reputation was at stake, but also that of my beloved piano teacher. Manipulating students to feel contrition for shaming their teachers and parents was a hefty part of the pedagogical approach in the good old Soviet era. I remember that I walked into my technical examinations already wearing an apologetic demeanor, knowing that I was going to mess up the correct fingering of scales, arpeggios, and chords. It is not that I couldn't memorize them. I guess I really did not see the point of having only one way of navigating a set path on the keys, that which comprised the “correct” fingering patterns. I also remember vividly the minutes before it was my turn to walk into my repertory examinations. The panic I felt from anticipating a disastrous performance, the doubts I had about my security with the notes, and the mistrust I

had in my abilities and in my memory and skill, were all too real—the shaking hands were real, the inability to speak up when asked to state my name was real. I tried to remind myself that my musicality was my strength and that, as my piano teacher comforted me, the committee valued that aspect as well. Playing “musically,” that is, with appropriate feeling, and intelligently was my saving grace. So I did my best to play expressively, all along hoping that the committee members would be distracted, as they often were, chatting away happily about something or enjoying their coffee by the time I had gotten through my pieces.

I was about eleven years old around that time. It was also around that age when I began to strongly consider quitting my music studies. My parents reasoned with me by telling me that I was already more than half way through with the program. They also enticed me with promises of graduation gifts. My father promised to take me deltaplan flying (a promise he did not keep because of the obvious risk factors involved with the activity). My mother, bought a large fine linen cloth and told me I could embroider an entire table cloth if I finished music school. I never got around this project either. But, their plea worked, and I, as the present moment proves, stuck with my music lessons.

Still, over the course of time, starting from fourth grade and until the time of my graduation from the music school in seventh grade, the sadness I once experienced from making mistakes when playing music was replaced by legitimate fears of failure and the feeling of regular stress and unease caused by these external factors. I dreaded getting on stage, because every recital up until that point had resulted in, what felt to me, a catastrophe.

During my very first recital, before I was a student at the Spendiaryan, I played the piece correctly, except that I played it two octaves lower, as my teacher told me afterwards. Being five, I was too little, and the bench and the keyboard were endlessly broad.

Figure 1.6 First grade recital, at the Spendiaryan music school, playing “Little Fantasia” by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach



During the first-grade recital at Spendiaryan, I could not find the little prop I was instructed to place under my feet after bowing. It was tucked in a far corner of the stage, under a table. The audience sympathetically smiled “oohed” and “aahed” as I, after looking confused for a few moments, crawled under the table to retrieve the prop. During a fourth-grade recital, I almost fell, as I walked on stage, wearing my first pair of small heeled, orange suede, shoes. I barely balanced myself on the waxed stage floor and, already being embarrassed, came up with a comical solution to skate the rest of the way towards the piano in one giant move. The last recital

I recall participating in at the end of seventh grade was the worst experience I had with performing on stage. The old-aged teacher I had for music history, threatened to show up to the event and tell the jury to fail me. For years she had been trying to get my parents to bribe her with money. All because I once, in fourth or fifth grade, moved the needle on the recording to the end of the piece when she, having had instructed us to sit and listen to Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, had stepped out during class time to have coffee with other teachers. These external factors only intensified the importance of getting everything right in the music I played. Being thrown outside of the performance headspace and pushed into the "cone of shame," I had to try extra hard to redeem myself by at least giving a good, clean musical performance. When I did not meet the goals set by the latter, I felt that I had failed at everything. As I grew up, this developed into a deeply rooted character-defining insecurity.

Paralysis:

The insecurity eventually became a paralyzing force, sometimes quite literally. By the time I was a student at the music academy, I expected brewing trepidation and sudden onsets of disorientation to undermine my ability to function when playing in front of people.

Physiologically, what I experienced can be described as having slight shortness of breath, an overall feeling of enervation, weak, almost numb hands, sudden waves of elevated heart rate—the kind you can hear and feel in your eardrums—deadlocked shoulder and back muscles, a frozen spine below the neck and a twitching neck that is incapable to keep the head straight, and, on top of it all, rapidly blinking and frantically darting eyes, unable to keep the gaze on the correct spot in the score. I do not believe I have ever experienced a real panic attack. But, I had learned that feeling out-of-control was going to accompany my experience every time I planned to approach the stage.

The debilitating feeling was also affecting my cognitive faculties. I could not maintain focus. I was slow to think and act and unable to move forward, that is, recover, after making a mistake. Additionally, I was distracted because I was hyper-aware of the surrounding and the unpleasant feeling I experienced the entire time I was playing. I knew that sooner or later I was going to step on a grenade, or get entangled in the labyrinth of nuanced, complex moving patterns. The fact that everybody, including teachers and fellow classmates, would be looking for the mistakes intensified my anticipation of the inevitable failure. That they did so not because of ill intent, but because the standards of the pedagogical and instructional practice, was no comfort. Being under a magnifying glass made it difficult to shake off the feeling that I was being judged.

Performance of compositions was not the only area of my playing that was affected by the strict standards. Perhaps the manifestation of this dogmatic, negative approach that is most directly pertinent to my inquiries around improvisational prowess took place in the keyboard harmony classes during my academy and conservatory years. Ostensibly, the point of the keyboard harmony courses was for us to learn to compose at the keyboard, or at minimum, for us to be able to sit at the piano and conjure an impromptu but coherent musical idea. Perhaps, in an ideal situation, this may have worked. However, mastering this skill in mere two years was, for most students, unrealistic.

We were all so impressed by our instructor's ability to play colorful and inventive progressions at the keyboard. Of course, she had years of experience. The only student in the group who could confidently weave flowing progression was Khandut Sarkissyan. She was the only student in our group who had perfect pitch. She also liked singing pop and folk songs while accompanying herself at keyboard. In short, she was exceptional, and for that reason, was

encouraged to pursue her own path, even if that meant breaking the rules. Mozart, after all, made many procedural errors in his compositions, as our harmony instructor would often remind us; but he, by virtue of being a genius, redefined the rules of harmony and counterpoint.

Because we were expected to replicate sometimes up to thirty-two measures of an accurately voiced progression exactly the same way from any key that could be called out, we often had to resort to mechanical memorization of the finger movements from one chord to the other when preparing the homework assignment. Remembering which fingers had to stay in place on common tone, which ones had to move by a half step or a step, and which ones had to skip by any other specific interval going from one chord of the progression to the next, in itself was a challenge. Creativity was very much sacrificed for the sake of correct four-part voice leading and adherence to written-out harmonic progression.

Every now and then, I or other students were able to resourcefully maneuver around a memorized voice leading route and resolve the chords differently. But more often than not, we were unable to haul the ever-scattering finger motions back to their intended original course without committing voice-leading crimes along the way. Like in a game of chess, playing progressions required a prior consideration of multiple steps. None of us were good enough at the game to simply let the matters be guided through real-time thinking. Additionally, while our hands were learning correct voice leading motions through drilled repetitions, the degree of difficulty of the progressions overpowered our ability to move and think. As important as these harmonic exercises were considered for developing our brains, playing the progressions was a very rigid and limiting way of approaching music-making—if I can even classify these regimented training supplements as true music. In short, the way I was taught to play harmonic

progressions proved to be directly counterproductive for my desire to engage in improvisational practices on a keyboard years later.

Aspect Two, Limitations

Narrow Lens:

The gains from the formal training I received in Armenia also came with muted undertones of ingrained musical taste, a fixed approach toward musical interpretation, and a certain logic to thinking through and about music in general. These undertones were developed through the cumulative process of musical acquisition, that is, through integrated systematic reviews and gradual expansion of the learnt material at various stages of the music education. As for early music, I learned very little about it due to the fact that no one at the academy specialized in it: the focus was on nineteenth-century musical styles and periods, with a few outliers like J.S. Bach.

Rigidity:

The crippling limitations I developed as a performer and musician resulted primarily from the rigidity of the training, dictated by the dogmatic approach. We as students were given little explanation as to why the rules were the way they were. Instead, we were instructed to follow the textbook guidelines and the teachers' (dictated) notes closely and unambiguously. Every voice-leading principle was taken for an axiom. The world of music, beyond faithful execution, was, for the most part unknown, and breaking off from the rigidity of the traditional training was almost impossible.

Take for instance the training I had in harmonic dictation. My ability to recall harmonic progressions may have been strengthened over the years of intense training, but introduce a kind

of musical logic that was not derived from the standard, drilled formulas and I would be completely thrown off by the unfamiliarity. In short, on a grand scheme of music studies, my training, even if very effective within the defined parameters, was extremely narrow in scope. Perhaps we can postulate that the goal of this kind of education was for the students to be able to apply an underlying principle to problem-solving in musical situations beyond the training. And perhaps the limitations I have described here were in fact the limitations of my mental abilities. But, I cannot help thinking that an important element was missing from this pedagogical approach, one that helped stimulate the creative drive, and encouraged us to strive to break off from whatever was holding us back. As Foucault states: “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. The celebrated automata, on the other hand, were not only a way of illustrating an organism, they were also political puppets, small-scale models of power.”¹⁴

Gaps in Knowledge:

The creative element was far from the only aspect that was pushed aside by the focused technical study of music. The priority placed on the magnified examination of the most immediate building blocks of music composition meant that, as students, we were given a correspondingly narrow field of vision on musical practices in general. The predominant focus on tonal thinking also limited the scope of the knowledge I was exposed to, albeit somewhat indirectly. Anything that agitated the clear demarcation of tonal boundaries, such as music that was modal or atonal in nature, was for the most part excluded from the curriculum, up until the conservatory level. To be more precise, the study of music at the Spendaryan and Melikyan was limited to the period between J.S. Bach’s and Prokofiev’s *ouvres*. Music literature from more recent decades was almost exclusively written by Soviet composers, whose works conveyed an

¹⁴ Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” 136.

appropriate degree of adherence to socialist realist approach in arts. While the conservatory training covered introductory topics on early modal, post-tonal, and atonal music, these discussions were obscure and marginal, to say the least. What was taught about this material was at its best biased towards nineteenth-century views and at its worst, purely incorrect.

The only benefit I derived at conservatory from the limited exposure to atonal and early music compositional styles was my gaining familiarity with the sound of unfamiliar music. As part of the early music history course, for example, we were instructed to spend several hours a week at the school's library audio-recording room listening to a large volume of compositions by Renaissance composers. It may have been the first time I heard the sound of Notre-Dame polyphony, the music of Johannes Ockeghem and Orlando de Lassus, and a handful of others from the "pre-baroque" eras. These listening examples were part of the syllabus in "early music" we were supposed to cover during the first semester of the core music history course. There were simply no experts on Western early music at the Yerevan State Conservatory, and the history of music up until Beethoven was condensed into one semester, with a disproportionate amount of attention being given to eighteenth-century German composers whose last names began with the letter B. As for contemporary music, well, I will leave out the discussion of it all together at this point, since it is not relevant to my thesis. I will only mention that my sense of early repertoires was conditioned by interpretations of borrowings by these twentieth-century composers such as Messiaen, Webern, Boulez, and others. The consideration of early music was even in this context however limited specifically and exclusively to the polyphonic aspect of the reach musical tradition.

Both the very old and the very new music were treated by Michail Kokjaev, a professor of music theory and composition, who approached them with a degree of reverence I had not

witnessed before. There was a sense of mystical importance to these rare extramural group meetings at his house, as if we were allowed an insight into the secrets of the universe, as if we were initiates of a very special society. No small part of the experience was created by the availability of the rare scores, which we viewed as we listened to compositions.

In truth, beside this introduction by proxy to polyphonic techniques, I had no clue about early music practices. My knowledge stopped with minuets being “slow dances” and trills being approached “from the note,” in an even, motoric manner. I did not know about *continuo* practice, did not know about books on division-style playing, and much, much more. My only attempt at studying the development of early polyphony, under the very close guidance of Kokjaev, merely mimicked a series of pseudo-scientific and pseudo-philosophical notions about the development of human ability to sing gradually increasing larger intervals. All of the study took place from an isolated perspective and did not take into consideration either the historic context nor fresh perspectives in musicology. Except for a few remarks here and there by professors, and encyclopedia entries I read about improvisation being an influential part of music making, I did not know the extent to which this practice mattered. Improvisation, as it were, existed only in the domain of jazz music, with which most mainstream students of music did not interact with. Improvisation was something only the rule breakers, the outcasts, did.

Aspect Three, Personal Cultural Upbringing

The remaining limitations imposed upon me, as I see them, were driven by the socio-cultural factors I grew up among. The social norms and values with which I was instilled as a young girl took place for the most part outside of the walls of institutions devoted to education. As a young girl, I was instructed and encouraged to cultivate a way of being that was in

accordance to established gender roles of the old world. As such, I was often reminded not to talk or play with the boys in the neighborhood, not to sit with my legs spread open or gathered up on the sofa regardless of what clothing I wore. I was often, to the point of annoyance, instructed to smile at guests upon request, serve them water or coffee, help with dishes, babysit my younger siblings and cousins, and all else that would equip me with necessary skills fit for womanly roles. It was considered to be especially rude to interrupt adults. This latter was not just a matter of age difference; it was also, as I have observed in many occasions, a gendered point of contention. A woman had no business interrupting, let alone correcting a male conversationalist. Men's discussion was not a place for a woman to assert her position or her thoughts on the topic at hand. The consequences for doing so were not severe as I was not, after all, growing up in an extremely conservative culture. Nevertheless, one had to expect some reprimand or commentary to follow such actions, as a general resonance of the status quo.

Formal Training, USA

My autobiographical sketch will hardly be complete without addressing the education I received in the United States. This is particularly important, since my true introduction to early music began here, first at the Glendale Community College (GCC), under the instruction of Theodor Stern and later at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), with Elisabeth R. Upton, Olivia Bloechl, Susan McClary, and Elisabeth Le Guin.

The classes I took at GCC and UCLA, provided me with a comprehensive knowledge about early music history and performance practice. They also emphasized, at varying degrees, the place of improvisation in early music practices. Still, my knowledge of improvised music on a practical level was minimal at first. Even the figured bass notation, which I was introduced to

already at GCC in a music theory class, was merely used as an assignment in written four-part harmonization. It was not until 2009 when for the first time I experienced the world of early music through performance.

How I got involved in early music performance:

In the fall of the 2008–09 school year I took Susan McClary’s graduate Baroque performance practice class. As part of the course requirement, I, a performance major in the organ program, had to perform two compositions for my classmates and discuss performance practice-related issues with them. At the time, I was learning to play Nicolas De Grigny’s *Recit du Tierce a Taille* and J.S. Bach’s *Trio Sonata in D Minor*, BWV 527. In addition to the two required presentations, everyone taking the course was asked to help classmates perform ensemble pieces. I agreed to accompany Peter Lawson, a graduate musicology student, on a short vocal piece composed by Heinrich Schütz.

When Susan McClary heard our interpretation, she encouraged Peter and me to participate in a recital of early music that was being organized by Elisabeth Le Guin for one of her undergraduate courses. At the time, the UCLA Early Music Ensemble, the EME, was not yet re-instated as an official ensemble. The concert performance experience was terrifying, because my body immediately remembered that it was time to freak out (the last time I had gotten up on stage to perform was in 1997, at an informal, low key recital during which a pair of twin sisters and I performed a song by Beatles. I believe I was singing. Not counting the entrance piano examination for the academy, I had last performed as a soloist in the seventh grade.) So, when I got on stage for the Schütz performance, my hands and knees were shaking and I was making mistakes. But to my surprise, no one came up to complain about the mistakes after the performance. That day, I found a new outlet for musical exploration.

It was not until my exposure to the Early Music Ensemble in 2009 that I became aware of performance possibilities and first attempted to put my knowledge of *continuo* that I had acquired from music history classes to use. I was not very good at playing *continuo*. Even when my eyes were still quick enough to analyze Wagnerian harmonies with reasonable accuracy and thoroughness on the spot, while the music was playing, I could not make my hands move even at *lento* speed through most basic harmonic realizations of the *continuo* parts. I had to write out the chords and jot notes for configurations of voicing and hand positions on the scores. This was challenging. Elisabeth Le Guin, who was not even a keyboard player, was faster at playing *continuo* on keyboards than I was. The point is that I felt I was so hopelessly far behind that there was no point in pursuing professional performance opportunities in early music. Yet it was precisely the study of early music which later opened up vastly different opportunities for my musical pursuits. The courses I took on historic improvisation practices with Elisabeth Le Guin, were especially indispensable for my growth as a performer of keyboard instruments. These courses gave me an opportunity to study various treatises on division-style improvisation, experiment with ground-bass improvised genres through group performance activities, and learn from other musicians about various ways of seeing and thinking through music improvisation.

Similar to the UCLA's Early Music Ensemble, I found refuge from self-criticism and a creative halt through UCLA's Omni Musicology Group (OMG). This communal ensemble, was designed to provide support and a kind space to musicians of all skill levels and musical style of training, to freely and joyously explore their creativity. As such, while the group meetings were about a particular tradition of music improvisation, we as performers were free to capitalize on any aspect of the musical activity which was most enjoyable and fruitful in the moment.

Chapter Summery, What is at Stake for Me?

From joy to misery, and back:

How did I start from a place of musical joy and end in a persistent state of terror and misery? There used to be a time in my life when I enjoyed spending hours at the piano, playing compositions in the dark and making up tunes and songs that expressed or represented my current mood. I preferred this over socializing with guests and family in the living room. There was a time when I was not afraid to put on a theatrical play for guests, friends, and family, with an original plot, stage set up, and of course, sing-songs and music that I created in collaboration with my brother. My creativity flowed freely.

As a result of the early training I received, I became aware of the difference between amateurism and professionalism. It may even have started before I began taking music lessons: perhaps, it was the snickering of the people and the playful fun they made of the tunes I composed. Or, perhaps it was the grading of homework assignments that began to close me into to these drastically differently perceived and categorized concepts. I know that soon after my creative impulses were suppressed and the desire I once had to share my little corner of a musical world with others was no longer enticing to me.

Personal growth:

Given the sum of the experiences I had, learning to improvise has been critical to my personal growth as an individual. It is an activity that helps me be aware of my personal inhibitions and shortcomings, and in the process of striving towards the betterment of my skills in this particular musical practice, I also learn to break free of oppressive barriers. It is a means through which I deal with the baggage I have accumulated through life experiences.

“Improvisation in writing makes possible new types of literary discourse, which in turn articulate

a certain set of attitudes toward authority, the body, and the constitution of the self,” writes Timothy Hampton.¹⁵ In my experience, this is also true of musical improvisation, where the exploration of the performative dimension also informs the personal narrative, self-determination, and on a grander scale, the degree of social mobilization of an individual.¹⁶

Consequently, to assess one’s improvisational prowess means to consider it with respect to one’s agency, personality, age, race, class, and gender, to list the most essential and readily recognized aspects of one’s identity; and to consider how these are affected and shaped by historical and biographical contexts. It is for this reason that I find it necessary to explore questions about improvisation that arise within the cognitive, psychological, anthropological, cultural-historical, critical-theoretical, philosophical, and other realms of knowledge. In many ways, learning to improvise is a political expression—one that most readily appeals to the concept of freedom.

The perspectives brought forth by the critical literature around improvisation have for a number of years now been integral to my understanding and development of a personal narrative with respect to improvisation. It is this kind of knowledge, sparked by one’s grasp of improvisational prowess, that propels one’s sense of self-determination and sets forth a life-long task of self-improvement. The consideration of cultural context(s) for improvisation—historical and/or ethnographic and personal—informs my sense of my own limits and my potential to improvise, both in music and in life. Conversely, my grasp of improvisational prowess depends on the specifics of my upbringing and cultivation. For this reason, the current study will

¹⁵ Timothy Hampton, “Michel de Montaigne, or Philosophy as Improvisation,” *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1* (September 29, 2016):.3.

¹⁶ “Preface,” *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1* (September 29, 2016): page rage.

incorporate insights gained from that critical literature as much as it will chronicle purely musical exploration and discoveries. These latter will mostly be discussed in the second chapter.

I see engagement with early music performance practice as a means to reclaim joy in what I do as a musician. I also see the questions of how I go about doing it, and the processes of learning historic improvisation, as focused approaches towards personal and professional self-improvement. The type of situations I encounter in the process of learning to improvise music enable me to reevaluate the state and place of my agency and build a renewed awareness of my personal and musical traits. The problems I encounter and solve help me undo the stubborn habits I previously acquired through personal life experiences.

Professional growth as a keyboardist:

The ethics of self-care aside, there is a very practical reason and an immediate need for why I strive to learn to improvise. Six years ago, improvisation was a concept far removed from my musical activities. I disassociated myself from musical practices that called for a personal creative expression (whether it meant adding notes to what was given on the page, or finding expressive pathways through a given musical text), firmly believing that creative musicking was beyond my abilities. Little did I know that the practical demands of playing the organ—an instrument that serves a major social function in religious settings—would impose an inevitable engagement with improvisation. Whether it is the pastor who forgets to get to the podium on time (forcing me to indefinitely extend the prelude), or the young candle lighters who often have trouble starting the fire, or the congregation who after the lively greeting take forever to get back to their places to start singing the hymns, or the soloist who skips a line, or me having trouble sight-reading the notes or needing to turn a page, I, the church organist, need to learn to adjust

my mind and my fingers in a split instant, to insure a satisfying and uplifting social experience for all.

Gaining improvisational prowess—that certain kind of musical flexibility, creativity, and bravura—is also essential for my growth as a performer of early music. It is well known that most solo keyboard repertory from the early periods requires an original contribution from the performer, either through added ornamentation, cadenzas, or, in the case of *preludia* and some other genres, entirely original and self-contained musical statements. A similar performance approach is also required in ensemble settings, where my primary job as a keyboardist is to provide *continuo* support—realizing harmonies on the spot and enhancing the overall sound and character of the music by manipulating the textural, rhythmic, and timbral aspects of the realized continuo part in real-time responses to the collective efforts of the group.

Finally, what is at stake for me is finding a way to reconcile the divergent and seemingly conflicting aspects of the music training I received in Armenia and in the United States. This process does not depend on a mere merger, but requires a thorough critical evaluation and deconstruction of my perceived strengths and weaknesses within the two systems. To be more precise, gaining new ground as a professional musician and learning to improvise is just as much about viewing the aspects of my education I criticize in a new light as it is about combining the apparent strengths of the two systems. It is only through a deep understanding of the reasons behind my musical inhibitions and through hands-on re-discovery of my acquired musical imprint that I will be able to find my expressive and technical musical voice.

Chapter Two— Historical Perspectives

For the reasons I outlined in the introduction, I am invested in exploring the acquisition of keyboard improvisation skills by seeking assistance from treatises on the subject from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, and by studying historic and contemporary compositions shaped by the improvisational practices of those centuries. I am intentionally circumventing the improvisation traditions from Western Europe since about 1800, that is, the repertoire tied to the rise of the conservatory system. I am trying to understand the differences in the relationship between today's teacher and student and the Early Modern era's master and apprentice. What did this exchange look like in the earlier model, and whom and what did it involve? What was the process of this kind of learning? How was a particular kind of skill, and eventually, operating knowledge of improvisation gained? Essentially, can a living performer interested in historical re-creation re-create the improvisational practices that underlie specific traditions or genres, like the *chaconne* or the *fantasia*, for instance?

Brief Historical Background

It is remarkable how much can change and be lost during the course of a few generations. Indeed, a few hundred years can alter a practice beyond recognition, as well as people's perception about that aspect of their cultural history. Such is the case with Western classical music improvisation. The changes in the improvisational paradigm and its place in the musical marketplace were a result of a complex of changes. Rather, things happened incrementally over a period of time, mashing up elements of the old with the new. Because understanding these

changes is critical for my project, my task in the current chapter is to delineate some of the ways in which past improvisational traditions differ from the present views. As there does not exist recorded sound evidence of historical improvisation prior to about 1910, most of what we know about these practices is passed to us through descriptive texts, treatises, scores, personal letters, and other forms of hard documents. Hovering over this endeavor is the question: how accurately will I be able to recreate these practices?

Achievable Skill; Commonplace and Accessible to All

What I find particularly reassuring is that improvisation in the Early Modern period was considered to be an achievable skill, rather than an inborn ability which only some possessed. Although it was understood that some individuals were naturally more talented than others, improvising was not limited to exceptionally gifted individuals. In fact, the general sentiment prior to roughly 1790 is that anyone with a desire to play or sing music could engage in improvisation. While amateurs were encouraged to develop this skill, professional musicians were expected to be able to extemporize—at a minimum, embellish their parts.¹⁷ To hone these skills, improvisation was an integral part of music education, as indicated by in historic treatises. I will review a few key treatises that have been important in my own development as a historical improviser.

Diego Ortiz, 1553

One remarkable early source is Diego Ortiz's *Trattado de glosas sobre clausulas...*,

¹⁷ Howard Mayer Brown's *Embellishing Sixteenth-century Music* Early Music Series Editor John M. Thomson. (Oxford University Press: New York): 1976, 64.

written in Naples and published in Rome in 1553. The *Trattado* is directed primarily to players of the viola da gamba. Like most publications of the period, is dedicated to a nobleman, in this case, a Spaniard by the name of Pedro de Urries, Baron of Sicily.¹⁸ This gesture, although completely standard, also points to a distinct social class for whom extemporized music-making was of central interest. Although the treatise itself is addressed to the “lectors,” readers at large, it is implicitly intended for nobles.¹⁹ Thus, as early as the mid-sixteenth century, Ortiz was summarizing his experience as a pedagogue and a master of music into a method book intended for wider reception, granted that the wider audience he addresses consists of individuals who can a) are literate, b) can read music, and c) can afford printed books. Nevertheless, his audience was necessarily limited to those individuals who, by right of birth and happenstance of education, could devote an extensive amount of time to these studies.

Still, Ortiz’s approach, as I will detail below, does suggest that improvisation was an “open access” opportunity for professionals and amateurs alike. It is for this reason that the author, a Spaniard, provides an Italian translation of his preface to appeal to his Italian audience; strategically breaks down *glosas* to various degrees of difficulty to invite musicians of all skill levels to use his method; and makes sure that his treatise can be used by players of other instruments than the viola da gamba.

Ortiz’s treatise is strategically divided into two books. The first book consists of myriad examples of cadential and melodic (intervallic) formulas, intended to be substituted into existing pieces. These examples are organized according to a strict principle, made clear from the table of contents.

¹⁸ Diego Ortiz, *Tratado de glosas sobre clausulas . . . Roma 1553*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, “Preface.”

Figure 2.1 Ortiz, *Tratado di glosas*, table of contents, book one

| Tauola del libro primo. | |
|---|----|
| Cadenze corte per b.mol. | |
| Cadenze in g. sol re vi sopr'acuto | 5 |
| Dichiaratione per far le dette cadenze | 5 |
| Altre maniere di cadenze nel medesimo g. sol re ut | 6 |
| Cadenze in ala mi re sopr'acuto | 7 |
| Cadenze in b. fa mi sopr'acuto | 8 |
| Cadenze in c. sol fa & de la sol | 9 |
| Cadenze in f. faut acuto | 9 |
| Cadenze in de la sol re | 10 |
| Cadenze larghe per b.mol | |
| Cadenze in g. sol re ut sopr'acuto | 10 |
| Cadenze in ala mire & b. fa mi sopr'acuti | 11 |
| Cadenze in c. sol fa | 11 |
| Cadenze in d. la sol & f. faut sopr'acuti | 21 |
| Cadenze nella medesima qualita senza b.mol | |
| Cadenze in f. faut acuto | 12 |
| Cadenze in g. sol re ut & ala mire sopr'acuti | 13 |
| Cadenze in c. sol fa & d. la sol | 13 |
| Cadenze corte senza b.mol | |
| Cadenze in f. faut acuto | 14 |
| Cadenze in g. sol re ut sopr'acuto | 14 |
| Cadenze in ala mire & c. sol fa sopr'acuti | 15 |
| Cadenze in de la sol | 15 |
| Cadenze in ela | |
| Dichiaratione per far cadenze in g. sol re ut graue | 16 |
| Altra sorte di cadenze nel medesimo g. sol re ut | 17 |
| Cadenze in f. faut graue | 17 |
| Altra cadenze nel medesimo f. faut | 18 |
| Dichiaratione per far cadenze di tenore | 19 |
| Altre due sorte di cadenze larghe di tenore | 20 |
| Dichiaratione per chiosare ogni sorte de punti | 20 |
| Per fallire & ballare vna seconda di breue | 20 |
| Per fallire & ballare vna seconda di semibreue | 21 |
| Per fallire & ballare vna seconda di minima | 21 |
| Per fallire vna terza di breue | 21 |
| Per ballare vna terza di breue | 22 |
| Per alzar & descendere terze di semibreue | 22 |
| Per fallire & calare terza di minima | 22 |
| Per fallire & ballare quarta di breue | 23 |
| Per fallire & descendere vna quarta di semibreue | 23 |
| Per fallire & ballare quarta di minima | 23 |
| Per montare vna quinta di breue | 24 |
| Per calare vna quinta di breue | 24 |
| Per alzare & abassare vna quinta di semibreue | 24 |
| Per alzar & abassare vn passo di semiminime | 24 |

Not only do the cadential figures have to remain in the specified mode, but they must also correspond precisely to the timing of the section that is to be substituted as indicated at the beginning of each sequence of divisions. Ortiz, assuming that his reader is already familiar with the basics of playing their instrument, asserts that by following the examples provided in the first book, the performer will begin to understand the most natural and graceful way of producing beautiful ornaments. It is only in the second book that Ortiz demonstrates several examples of his own *realized* variants over well-known tunes and ground basses.

The content of the two books is organized so that the person wishing to learn from Ortiz's expert advice would first study individual, highly specific cadential and melismatic elements as alternatives to basic musical passages, and by the second book critically evaluate his decisions. From the overall content and organization of his treatise, it is clear that Ortiz had a basic pedagogical principle in mind, to guide his pupil from the simple to complex examples.

Figure 2.2 Ortiz, *Tratado de glosas*, contents page, book two

| TAVOLA DEL SECONDO LIBRO. | | |
|---|----|---|
| Dichiaratione dela maniera che se ha da sonare il violon col cimbalo | 25 | Recercata seconda sopra il detto madrigal 38 |
| Ordine per accordare il violon col cimbalo | 25 | Recercata terza sopra il detto madrigal 39 |
| Recercata prima | 26 | detto madrigal 40 |
| Recercata seconda | 27 | Vna Canzon Francese douce memoire 41 |
| Recercata terza | 28 | Recercata prima sopra douce memoire 41 |
| Recercata quarta | 29 | Recercata seconda sopra la detta Canzone 44 |
| La seconda maniera de sonare il violon col cimbalo sopra canto piano | 30 | Recercata terza sopra la detta Canzon 45 |
| Recercata prima sopra canto piano | 30 | Recercata quarta che e' vna quinta voce sopra la detta Canzone 46 |
| Recercata seconda sopra il medemo canto piano | 31 | Dichiaratione per sonare sopra tenori 47 |
| Recercata terza sopra il detto canto | 31 | Recercata prima sopra li detti tenori 47 |
| Recercata quarta sopra il detto | 32 | Recercata seconda sopra li detti tenori 49 |
| Recercata quinta sopra il detto | 33 | Recercata terza sopra li detti tenori 51 |
| Recercata sesta sopra il detto canto piano | 34 | Recercata quarta sopra li detti tenori 53 |
| La terza maniera di sonare il Violon col Cimbalo sopra le compositioni a piu voci | 35 | Recercata quinta sopra li detti tenori 55 |
| Vn madrigale, o felici occhi miei | 35 | Recercata sesta sopra li detti tenori 56 |
| Dichiaratione per sonare sopra cose composte | 37 | Recercata settima sopra li detti tenori 58 |
| Recercata prima sopra o felici occhi miei | 37 | Recercata ottaua sopra li detti tenori 59 |
| | | Vna quinta parte sopra li detti tenori 60 |

It is also important to note that nowhere in the text of his treatise does Ortiz articulate in words how one should learn to improvise. Instead, he provides the crayons with which musicians can develop a sense for creating alternative versions, “coloring in” basic compositions. In fact, his instructions suggest that the musician selects the most appropriate or tasteful version from a dozen or so choices that he provides, and write it out on their own copy of the music. In my experience, learning to make such choices on paper, free of real-time constraints, allows the student to engage fully with the given examples, and to scrutinize each one in detail to understand the inner workings of the approach. Only after numerous applications of the tropes on paper, followed by trying each one out, would one be ready to begin making such decisions extemporaneously, in real time.

Ortiz provides three variants in which one could apply and execute each division. These various approaches, ranging from the perfect, to the desirable, to the manageable, invite musicians with any skills to partake in the improvisational practice.

Figure 2.3 A page from Ortiz's treatise



Ultimately, Ortiz tacitly conveys that extemporization inevitably involves experimentation and the trial-and-error method: it takes repetition to acquire the appropriate idioms and considerable practice to locate appropriate opportunities for extemporizing in a pre-composed piece.

Christopher Simpson, 1665

A similar strategy is evident in another influential and important treatise. Written in the mid-seventeenth century—late in the “division period”—Christopher Simpson’s *The Division-viol* is arguably the most comprehensive and accessible period text on this topic. To paraphrase Sir Roger L’Estrange’s statement to the reader in the Preface of Simpson’s treatise, the person who owns a copy of the book has one of the best tutors in the world at his side. So valuable is the book that one, regardless of his skill, is guaranteed to find guidance in it for all sorts of music

making, even if one does not play the viol.²⁰ This “marketing point” of built-in flexibility works all the better for a twenty-first-century musician. L’Estrange’s approval is of utmost critical importance for the success and popularity of Simpson’s treatise. Being a notable journalist and pamphleteer, L’Estrange who also held the position of surveyor of the imprimerie—a position afforded to him for his fervent support of the Royalist cause during the English Civil Wars—was in a position to license and control the press. Just as in earlier published treatises, Simpson’s text is dedicated to and aimed for the edification of a noble patron.

Figure 2.4 Preface to Christopher Simpson’s *Division Viol*

To the Reader.



Came with great willingness (though under the Obligation likewise of a Duty) to the reading of this Book; out of a Respect both to the *Author*, and to the *Subject* of it: the *One* being my *Familiar Friend*, and the *Other*, my *Singular Entertainment*, and *Delight*. Having now thoroughly, and carefully perused it, I should reckon my self a little wanting to the *Publique*, if I acquainted not the world, that in so doing I have received much *Benefit* and *Satisfaction*. It bears for Title, *THE DIVISION VIOL; or, The Art of Playing Extempore upon a Ground*; and it does certainly answer That pretence, both for *Matter* and *Method*, to the highest point of reasonable Expectation. And yet I cannot so properly call it the *Best*, as (indeed,) the *only Treatise* I find extant upon this Argument; which without doubt renders it the more valuable, in that it is brought upon the first essay so near to perfection: for it is a piece so *Instructive*, and of such a *Latitude*, that it meets all *Capacities*, and finds no man either too wise, or too weak to be the better for it. Briefly; As to the *Command*, and *Mastery* of the *Viol*, (in that point which is the *Excellency* of That Instrument) either for *Hand*, or *Skill*, I will take upon me to aver, that whoever has This Book by him, has one of the best *Tutors* in the world at his *Elbow*. And let me add, that although it be Calculated especially (as appears by the Title) for the *Division Viol*, yet when you come to the *Defcant*, and *Directions* for *Diminution* upon a *Ground*, you will find it a work of exceeding use in all sorts of *Musick* whatsoever.

Roger L'Estrange.

²⁰ Christophoro Simpson, “Preface,” in *The Division-viol, or The Art of Playing extempore to a Ground* Second edition. (London: W. Godbid, 1665).

previous patron to whom the first edition was addressed. According to Simpson's dedicatory letter, the treatise was specifically written for the instruction of his new patron, who was not only a music lover, but a skilled viol player himself. However, the addressee in Simpson's work, is only seemingly a single person; the content and the approach of the treatise can be customized to serve the needs, skills, and interests of many readers.

In the Preface of his treatise, Simpson also makes clear that the instruction manual was written for a wider audience. Evidently, he hoped that the Latin translation of the text would make his instruction book marketable and accessible to "wise and weak" musicians outside the borders of Anglophone states, that is England, who wished to improve their skills.²¹ As with Ortiz and other Early Modern treatises, Simpson's work can easily be generalized to apply to other instruments, and adapted to different skill levels. Howard Mayer Brown writes that, "Even when a book is written with one specific instrument in mind, like Ganassi's *Fontegara* on the recorder, the author is Careful to insist that his advice can be more widely applied: Ganassi's title page mentions voices as well as stringed and wind instruments."²²

A closer look at Simpson's treatise certainly reassures his pupil/reader that the pursuit of improvisatory expression is well within the reach of an ordinary person. The Table of Contents is thorough and comprehensive.

²¹ Simpson, quote from Roger L'Estrange's address "To the Reader."

²² Howard Mayer Brown's *Embellishing Sixteenth-century Music*, x-xi.

Figure 2.5 *Division Viol*, table of contents

| <i>Elenchus eorum quæ hoc libro Continentur.</i> | | The Contents of the Book. | |
|---|--------|---|--|
| <i>Parte Primâ.</i> | | In the First Part. | |
| C helys tractanda <i>Præcepta</i> . pag. 1. | | O f the Viol it self, with Instructions how to play upon it. pag. 1. | |
| <i>De Chely ipsâ, qualis Mimritio-ibus maximè quadret, & quomodo concinnanda.</i> | ib. | § 2. What kind of Viol is fittest for Division, and how to be accommodated. | ib. |
| <i>De Pleçtro, seu Arcu Musico.</i> | p. 2. | § 3. What kind of Bow. | p. 2. |
| <i>De Collocatione Chelyos.</i> | ib. | § 4. How to hold or place the Viol. | ib. |
| <i>Quomodo tenendus & movendus Arcus.</i> | ib. | § 5. How to hold and move the Bow. | ib. |
| <i>De Sinistræ Collocatione, motuque.</i> | p. 4. | § 6. The posture of the Left Hand. | ib. |
| <i>De Chelyos Chordotoniâ ad Scalam Musicam accommodatâ.</i> | ib. | § 7. How the Viol is Tuned, and applied to the Scale of Musick. | ib. |
| <i>Quâ ratione eadem Nota in diversis Chordis exprimi possint.</i> | ib. | § 8. How the same Notes may be play'd upon different Strings. | ib. |
| <i>Quare Dignis sinistræ in eadem sæpè sede continuandi sint.</i> | p. 5. | § 9. A Rule for Holding on the Fingers. | p. 5. |
| <i>Regula movendi Arcum.</i> | p. 6. | § 10. A Rule for the Motion of the Bow. | p. 6. |
| <i>Quo ordine Dignis Canonis applicandi sint.</i> | ib. | § 11. Of ordering the fingers in gradual Notes. | ib. |
| <i>Quis motus Brachio dextro, manusque juncturæ conveniat.</i> | p. 7. | § 12. The Motion of the Right Arm and Wrist. | p. 7. |
| <i>Quomodo plures simul notæ perstringende sint.</i> | p. 9. | § 13. How to order the Bow in double Stops. | p. 9. |
| <i>De Triplis.</i> | p. 10. | § 14. Of Tripl's. | p. 10. |
| <i>De sonorum blanditiis atq; Leporibus.</i> | ib. | § 15. Concerning the Gracing of Notes. | ib. |
| <i>Lepôres ex tremoribus oriundi.</i> | p. 11. | § 16. Shaked Graces. | p. 11. |
| <i>Parte Secundâ.</i> | | In the Second Part. | |
| M elobesicæ Compendium. | p. 13. | § 1. Use of the Concords, or a Compendium of Descant. | p. 13. |
| <i>De Intervallis.</i> | ib. | § 2. Of Intervalls. | ib. |
| <i>De Concordantiis.</i> | p. 15. | § 3. Of the Concords. | p. 15. |
| <i>Transitio Concordantiarum.</i> | ib. | § 4. Passage of the Concords. | ib. |
| <i>De Melobesicæ Clavi seu Tono.</i> | p. 16. | § 5. Concerning the Key or Tone. | p. 16. |
| | | b | § 6. How |
| | | | to frame a Bass. |
| | | | p. 17. |
| | | | § 7. How to joyn a Treble to the Bass. |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | § 8. Composition of three Parts. |
| | | | p. 18. |
| | | | § 9. Composition of four Parts. |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | § 10. Concerning a Sixth. |
| | | | p. 19. |
| | | | § 11. Use of Discords. |
| | | | p. 20. |
| | | | § 12. Of the excellive Fourth, and Defective Fifth. |
| | | | p. 22. |
| | | | § 13. Reflections upon the Concords of Musick. |
| | | | p. 23. |
| | | | § 14. The Analogy of Musical Concords to the Aspects of the Planets. |
| | | | p. 24. |
| | | | <i>Quâ ratione Bassus confirmatus sit.</i> |
| | | | p. 17. |
| | | | <i>Quo pacto Cantus Bassus adstruendus sit.</i> |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | <i>De Tripboniis.</i> |
| | | | p. 18. |
| | | | <i>De Tetraphoniis.</i> |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | <i>De Sexta.</i> |
| | | | p. 19. |
| | | | <i>Quis Discordantiis locus sit.</i> |
| | | | p. 20. |
| | | | <i>De Tritono, & Semidiapente.</i> |
| | | | p. 22. |
| | | | <i>Contemplatio Concordantiarum Musicarum.</i> |
| | | | p. 23. |
| | | | <i>Musicarum Concordantiarum Analogia ad Planetarum aspectus.</i> |
| | | | p. 24. |
| | | | In the third Part. |
| | | | § 1. O f Division, and the manner of performing it. |
| | | | p. 27. |
| | | | § 2. Several kinds of Division. |
| | | | p. 28. |
| | | | § 3. Breaking the Ground. |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | § 4. Descant Division. |
| | | | p. 35. |
| | | | § 5. Mixt Division. |
| | | | p. 36. |
| | | | § 6. Cadences of two sorts. |
| | | | p. 37. |
| | | | § 7. Concerning Fifths and Eighths in Division. |
| | | | p. 42. |
| | | | § 8. Concerning Sixths and Thirds in Division. |
| | | | p. 44. |
| | | | § 9. Of Crochets. |
| | | | p. 46. |
| | | | § 10. Of Quavers. |
| | | | p. 50. |
| | | | § 11. Of <i>b</i> Flat and Sharp. |
| | | | p. 52. |
| | | | § 12. Concerning the ordering of Division. |
| | | | p. 56. |
| | | | § 13. Of a Continued Ground. |
| | | | p. 57. |
| | | | § 14. Of Composing Division for one Viol to a Ground. |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | § 15. Of two Viols playing together extempore to a Ground. |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | § 16. Of Composing Divisions of Two or Three parts. |
| | | | p. 59. |
| | | | <i>Quâ ratione Mimritiones ad Bassum aptandæ sint.</i> |
| | | | p. 27. |
| | | | <i>Mimritionum genera.</i> |
| | | | p. 28. |
| | | | <i>Mimritio Fundamentalis.</i> |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | § 4. Descant Division. |
| | | | p. 35. |
| | | | <i>Mimritio Melobetica.</i> |
| | | | p. 35. |
| | | | <i>Mimritio Mixta.</i> |
| | | | p. 36. |
| | | | § 6. Cadences of two sorts. |
| | | | p. 37. |
| | | | <i>Cadentiarum duo genera.</i> |
| | | | p. 37. |
| | | | <i>De Quintis & Octavis in Mimritione.</i> |
| | | | p. 42. |
| | | | <i>De Sextis & Tertiis in Mimritione.</i> |
| | | | p. 44. |
| | | | <i>De Semiminimis.</i> |
| | | | p. 46. |
| | | | <i>De Fusis.</i> |
| | | | p. 50. |
| | | | <i>De b Mollis & Duro.</i> |
| | | | p. 52. |
| | | | <i>Mimritionum Syntaxis.</i> |
| | | | p. 56. |
| | | | <i>De Bassi Continua.</i> |
| | | | p. 57. |
| | | | <i>Mimritiones singulari Chely quâ ratione aptandæ.</i> |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | <i>Quâ Methodo duæ Chelys Bassi alludere debent.</i> |
| | | | ib. |
| | | | <i>Mimritiones plurimum Partium Componendi ratio.</i> |
| | | | p. 59. |

Moreover, it implies that anyone wishing to learn to play a musical instrument will wish to learn how to handle improvisation, and that they could do so from scratch and achieve a significant level of proficiency by the final chapters of the book. This is a truly remarkable take on what it means and what it takes to improvise.

Simpson's treatise, unlike Ortiz, is also a complete course on playing the viol. The first section begins with basic information about the instrument: its physical construction, tuning, and method of playing (including hand positions, fingering, and bowing). By chapter fifteen, titled "Concerning the Gracing of Notes," and sixteen, "Shaked Graces," at the end of the manual's

first part, Simpson is already introducing some preliminary steps towards improvisation.²³ The second part of his treatise is entirely devoted to questions of musicianship and music theory, such as the use of the concords and discords, the intervals, the tonality, how to compose in two, three, and four parts, and more. Only then does Simpson proceed to introduce the subject of divisions.

“[T]o play *ex tempore* to a ground is the highest perfection if it.”²⁴ But, in order to acquire the coveted skill, Simpson continues, a person first has to understand the proper use of the instrument. Crucially, developing finger and bow velocity would enable a musician to improvise, that is, execute intricate and complex divisions in a timely fashion. Through teaching his pupil the correct hand positions and execution of sequenced repetitive patterns, Simpson is on the one hand developing technique, and on the other hand already germinating familiarity with division lines.²⁵

Figure 2.6 A page from Simpson’s treatise



²³ Brown writes that not only Ganassi, but keyboard teachers Tomas de Sancta Maria and Girolamo Diruta, introduce the graces in detail early in their treatises before launching on more complex subject of diminutions. He further states that “they both seem to suggest, then, that a beginning harpsichordist or organist learned how to add tremoli early in his training, long before he was ready to master the more virtuoso and demanding passaggi.” Brown, *Embellishing Sixteenth-century Music*, 6.

²⁴ Simpson, *The Division-viol*, 1.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

Yet extemporization requires not only quickness of the hand but of the mind as well. Simson in his discussion of excellency in extemporization, writes that this “is a perfection that few attain unto, depending much upon the quickness of invention as well as quickness of hand.”²⁶ Simpson implies that while many musicians meet the required level of technical facility, many fail to meet this second requirement. His book, he adds, is specifically made to help achieve the latter. Indeed, the real significance of Simpson’s treatise is in his detailed explanation of what it takes, on a practical level, to improvise. He modifies the limiting and exclusionary idea that the ability to invent musical material on the spot is an inborn, divinely appointed talent, writing, “True it is, that invention is a gift of nature, but much improved by exercise and practice.”²⁷ He further assures the,

He that hath is not in so high a measure as to play *ex tempore* to a *Ground*, may, notwithstanding give both himself and hearers sufficient satisfaction in playing such Divisions as himself or others have made for that purpose; in the performance whereof he may deserve the name of an excellent artist.²⁸

In the third part of his treatise, Simpson gives a detailed breakdown of the learning process based on abundant musical examples. This includes what he calls “breaking the ground.”²⁹ Breaking the ground involves a) rhythmic divisions of the same bass note; b) sequencing patterns around varying bass notes; c) filling in the interval; and d) adding notes from the same concord family. It also involves descanting, using a mixed approach, and learning to cadence. The method gradually builds in complexity from stepwise motion to leaps, and from

²⁶ Ibid, 27.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ A ground in this context is the simplest form of the melodic line or a tune, upon which divisions, that is subdivisions, are added (extemporized).

longer note values to smaller rhythmic divisions, all along reminding the pupil to rely on their ear as they navigate through these passages. In Simpson's words, "Here a doubt may arise, concerning the seventh above and second below the divided-note; which, in the division, is sometimes made sharp, and suddenly flat again, according to its own nature: in which doubts the ear must always be chief umpire."³⁰

Interestingly, there is no indication in Simpson's treatise of a timeline for how long it would take an average individual to master this art, especially if one had to begin by learning how to handle the viol and how to understand basic music theory. However, it is almost certain, as it is in the case of Ortiz's treaties, that the person intending to complete the course would need to be serious about becoming an accomplished, although not necessarily professional, musician and have abundant time at hand to achieve that goal.

It is unclear from both Ortiz's and Simpson's treatises, precisely how long an average process of learning to extemporize was, as they envisioned it to be for an average pupil. I raise this question because it seems to me that the actual timeline required for a modern trained musician to fully assimilate the information provided in the treatise(s), in essence, to recreate the learning experience is protracted. Certainly, our ancestors and us are not living the same life; we are not living in the same environment conducive of these activities and our parallel realities vary with regards to the rate of exposure to information we experience and the demands that are placed on mental capacities. It is helpful to take a moment and note these differences. The slow rate at which I advance my skills in learning to improvise must not immediately be taken as a sign of resignation. On the contrary, the time it takes me to learn to improvise from Simpson's treatise and other historic sources has to be acknowledged as a natural part of the process.

³⁰ Ibid, 34.

By the end of the third part, Simpson writes, “It now only remains that I give you some little assistance, by taking you (as it were by the hand, and leading you) into the easiest way of playing *ex tempore* to a ground.” According to Simpson, the true art of improvising is as easy as one, two, ten. He summarizes the process: (1) Choose a ground that is slow enough to accommodate divisions upon it. (2) Find at least ten (the more the better) points within the ground for adding divisions. (3) Take each point at a time and begin working on it by gradually increasing the number of notes in the division to be applied. Once you have exhausted your possibilities with a point, move on to the next one. (4) For convenience, make use of the pre-composed divisions (provided in his treatise) to practice upon. (5) Once you are prepared to do this and familiar enough with multiple possibilities, you will find it easy to plug in your divisions on the spot.

Simpson then goes on to suggest his taste in playing *ex tempore*. (6) Make sure not to clutter with too many tasteless additions. (7) When performing, play the basic ground first for yourself and your listeners so that they may identify it well, and better appreciate the variations that you apply. (8) Only after doing so, you should, first, break into quicker notes and then begin skipping; pace it so that each new take upon the ground, that is each new variation, sounds fresh and pleasing. (9) Show some agility of hand at the last cadences. (10) Borrow what you like from other musicians that is worthy of imitation!³¹

That a musician could possess certain “natural gifts,” among them, the gift of improvisation, is a common sentiment across historic treatises and texts, as it is still today. But,

³¹ *Ibid*, 57.

as I mentioned earlier, period sources tend to place the idea of natural gifts at one end of a continuum of possibility; anyone may learn these skills with sufficient application.

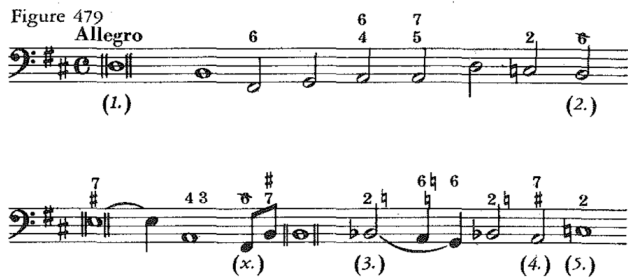
A later example of this attitude is found in the seventh and last chapter of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's 1753 *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu* (Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments), which is solely devoted to the improvisation of free *fantasias*. Young Bach explains at the very beginning of the chapter that, while metered improvisations require a thorough knowledge of composition, which presumably includes counterpoint, it is sufficient to have some understanding of harmony and acquaintance with a few rules of construction to create a free *fantasia*. He writes that in either case,

Both call for natural talent, especially the ability to improvise. It is quite possible for a person to have studied composition with good success and to have turned his pen to fine ends without his having any gift for improvisation. But, on the other hand, a good future in composition can be assuredly predicted for anyone who can improvise, provided that he writes profusely and does not start too late.³²

Young Bach then provides ample practical, succinct, and detailed explanations of what the musician should and should not do when improvising a free *fantasia*. He gives specific scenarios and provides tips on how to handle them—how to create varied textures, when to arpeggiate and when to play straight chords, what to do with harmonic progressions and modulations, and more. In this last chapter Young Bach also includes many skeletal, figured-bass-like examples for musicians to practice fleshing out with respect to various aspects of a free fantasia, such as cadential points, modulations, arpeggiations and more.

³² Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and William J. Mitchell, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), 430.

Figure 2.7a an example of skeletal fantasia from Young Bach's *Versuch*



Towards the end, he supplies a completely realized version of a fantasia, along with a skeletal version, with critical structural and harmonic breakdown.

Figure 2.7b, Young Bach's realized fantasia, based on the skeletal sketch in Figure 2.7a



The question of gender.

As encouraging as I find Ortiz, Simpson, Young Bach and many other treatises to be, I cannot help but notice a commonality among them all: the lack of any mention of female

musicians. The period-specific peculiarities of so many historic treatises, where the addressee is exclusively the male instrumentalist, raise a question about the extent of female musicians' involvement with musical improvisation. Did Early Modern women instrumentalists too seek to study the craft of improvisation, professionally or as a pastime? Were there any renowned female keyboard improvisers, or any organist at all?

Although there is little information about female musicians' practice of improvised instrumental music making prior to 1800, it is important to note that spoken and sung improvisation was practiced by women in this period.³³ As early as 1545, *commedia* troops provided women with a rare opportunity to participate in an improvisational art. In this theatrical setting, "women appeared to spectators as poets in action, professionals in the art of improvising words"³⁴ However, as Anne MacNeil explains, the very stage justified women's expression of their authority, because the frame created a separation between reality and the invoked classical ideals of ancient Greek and Roman stagecraft.³⁵

However, there are examples of exercises created specifically for female performers. For instance, Handel's figured bass exercises from around 1724–1730 was created specifically for the instruction of Princesses Anne, Caroline, Amelia, and Louisa, daughters of George II. Pictured in Figure 2.8, they are rare Early Modern examples of instruction in extempore practices written with female musicians in mind.

³³ The discussion here "brackets out" female opera singers, who practiced improvisation—sometimes at a very high level (as described in Nina Treadwell's book *Music and Wonder at the Medici Court*), as well as the famous *Opera Seria* divas of the 1st half of the 18th century.

³⁴ Kathleen McGill, "Women and Performance: The Development of Improvisation by the Sixteenth-Century *Commedia dell'Arte*," in *Theatre Journal* 43, no. 1 (March, 1991): 61-64.

³⁵ Anne MacNeil, *Music and Women of the Commedia dell'Arte: In Late Sixteenth Century*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

Figure 2.8 A figured bass exercise by Handel



There are many unanswered questions about women’s ability or even right to improvise in historical contexts, along with their right to play in public and serve as organists at houses of worship. These questions connect with long-standing cultural practices that continue to undermine any present day attempts to reset the bar. Improvisation assumes a degree of assertiveness and bravura, a kind of speaking one’s mind boldly. These characteristics have long been denied to the feminine gender, in Western cultures. As a woman conditioned within the Western paradigm, having to be in this unusual and discomforting spotlight is precisely the kind of pressure that shuts down my attempts to improvise when others can hear me.

A Brief Look Forward into 19th-century Keyboard Improvisation Treatises

Even though not much seems to change for the female instrumentalist improviser after the 1790s, there are clear changes in general attitudes towards improvisation, as evident from the renewed approach in turn-of-the-century treatises on the subject. Improvisation acquires a new status: it becomes a hallmark activity for select individuals, who, by virtue of their divinely appointed gifts altogether redefine the parameters of improvisational practice.

In his article “The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change” Robin Moore clarifies that “[f]orms such as the free improvisation, prelude, ornamented recapitulation, cadenza, as well as the practice of freely improvising upon preexistent

compositions, remained popular.”³⁶ Treatises and method books on these practices for keyboardists continue to be written into the 1830s and 1840s. Among these instructional resources is Carl Czerny's *Systematisches Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte* (1829) and Friedrich Kalkbrenner's *Traite d'harmonie du pianiste: principes rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre a preluder eta improviser* (1849) However, the material presented in these works is most certainly out of reach for an average musician, as it is shown in Figure 2.9. The virtuosic, fully sketched-out passages consist of densely harmonized large chords, octave runs, endless arpeggios, and more, and they reflect a shift in the attitude towards improvisation. What was once a practice attainable by all is no longer attainable by anyone short of a highly professional, virtuoso status.

Figure 2.9 A page from Czerny's *Systematisches Anleitung zum Fantasieren*

§. 3.

Ich wähle hier, ohne allen Vorbedacht, folgendes ganz willkührliche Thema, um die Möglichkeit des Vorhergesagten zu beweisen.

Thema. All^o

Ex: 38.

A als Allegro

B als Adagio serioso.

³⁶ Robin Moore, “The Decline of Improvisation in Western Music: An Interpretation of Changes,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 23 no.1 (June 1992): 63.

Improvising In Church

Another interesting corner of nineteenth-century improvisational pedagogy is the music of church services. The practical demands of a functional worship service continuously reinforce the need for improvisatory thinking on the part of clergyman and musicians. Because of this, improvisation never really ceases to be practiced and taught among church organists, especially in Western Europe.

How organists have passed down their knowledge of improvisation in church settings in the days preceding early twentieth century is spotty at best. Most examples appear in a form of “frozen improvisations,” that is in the form of composed pieces, for keyboards, or are presented in general theoretical works on counterpoint, voice leading, and individual genres. Among the valuable texts on church music practices from the earlier centuries is Michael Praetorius’s first volume of *Sintagma Musicum, Musicae Artis Analecta*. What is abundantly clear to me is that materials from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on organ improvisation, just like the pianistic treatises on improvisations, assume advanced skills in performance, music theory, and composition alike. All are highly systematized. Even the most clear and helpful compendiums for learning to improvise in a church context, such as Marcel Dupre’s numerous pedagogical texts and scores, are not aimed at a beginner, let alone an amateur musician. Nor is André Gédalge’s 1904 *Traité de la Fugue*, which primarily concerns itself with the improvisation of fugues at a keyboard/organ. As such, these treatises are less for instruction as they are for admiring an artform only extremely skilled musicians can exercise.

Certainly, exceptionally talented and gifted musicians exist for whom improvising a fugue is well within reason. What these nineteenth-century treatises lead one to believe is that improvising a five-voice fugue and virtuosic technical showmanship are *synonymous* with

improvisation. They present the highest achievements of the art of improvisation as starting points. The musical examples in these treatises are rarely “modules” that one can learn to plug in at opportune moments, and more like conceptually unified, fully fleshed compositions. On a more granular level, these treatises tend to resort to prescribed, textbook exercises, rather than indicating the endless directions a performer could explore from given samples. In treatises like these we see evidence of a growing gap between professional and amateur musicians, to the point of extreme specialization on the one hand, and presumed incompetence on the other.

Contradictions

To be fair, attempts to introduce improvisatory freedom to performers’ musical vocabularies through written accounts have led to contrary outcomes since the late 16th century. As Anthony Pryer writes, “[a]lthough in the 'Preface' to *Le nuove musiche* [Giulio Caccini, 1603] discuss(es) a range of effects that might be introduced by the performer, his detailed printed examples almost inevitably give the impression that the essentials of the style can still be captured in notation.”³⁷

The extent to which the textualization of music has affected improvisational practices is a complex matter, and our sense of how this might have worked before 1800 is conditioned by subsequent developments. Between the 1790-1830s, attitudes towards the written score were changing: the score was increasingly seen as an authority, an attitude that still prevails.³⁸ In the

³⁷ Anthony Pryer, “On the Borderlines of Improvisation: Caccini, Monteverdi and the Freedoomes of the Performer,” in *Musical Improvisation in the Baroque Era*, *Speculum Musicae*, volume XXXIII, ed. Fulvia Morabito (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 160.

³⁸ Lydia Goehr explores this question in depth in her *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford [England]: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1992).

case of nineteenth-century pedagogical resources on improvisation, as I describe above, written-out examples tend to be prescriptive etude-like exercises, based on a narrowly defined rubric, rather than windows of possibility. Certainly, these exercises provide room for exploration, and can be transposed. But, given how densely composed they are, the challenge for a musician can become the accurate reproduction of the details (even more so in transposition) rather than a more relaxed possibility of filling in open spaces with relevant ideas.

As John Lutterman reminds us, the modern-day conservatory education, concert performances, and even Urtext editions are byproducts of nineteenth-century traditions: “the very idea of publishing critical editions of early music is itself a nineteenth-century invention.”³⁹ The nineteenth-century notion of the score as something to be “interpreted,” the very way we understand composition, the approach towards concert performance, all continue to influence the treatment of early music today, to the point that it is hard for many musicians, even experts, to imagine what lies beyond the fixed and scripted “work” of music.

The quote Lutterman makes from a 1957 article by Arthur Mendel highlights the tenacity of these nineteenth-century practices and the ongoing efforts of early music specialists to get past them and into the heart of improvisation. Mendel states:

Western musicians of today have such strong habits of associating a piece of music with its graphic notation that they need constant reminding, by every possible means, of the limitations of notation as applied to either old or exotic music. The hunt for the authentic version of a piece by even so recent a composer as J. S. Bach [...] is a vain one. Neither Bach nor any other good musician up to at least Bach's time probably ever played a piece exactly the same way twice. And by 'the same way' we mean nothing so narrow as the musician of today may understand. We mean that he probably never played exactly the same notes twice, or played them in exactly the same rhythm.⁴⁰

³⁹ John Lutterman, “Re-Centering Historical Improvisatory Solo Practices on the Cello,” *Musical Improvisation in the Baroque Era*, *Speculum Musicae*, volume XXXIII, ed. Fulvia Morabito (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 241.

⁴⁰ This quote is from Arthur Mendel’s “The Services of Musicology to the Practical Musician,” in *Some Aspects of Musicology*, edited by Arthur Mendel, Curt Sachs and Carroll C. Pratt, New York, Liberal Arts Press, 1957.

Our desire to be authentic has shipwrecked itself on the idea that “music” is equivalent to its textual representation.

As Leo Treitler writes in his essay “Speaking of the I-Word,” much of our misunderstanding of improvisation has to do with incorrect translations of historic texts, and ahistoric assumptions about musical pasts. He points out that the greatest confusion that entered the discourse beginning with the Romantic era was between the very nature of the improvised and the composed, with incorrect understandings of the medieval *componere* and *ex improvise* as well as with the Baroque notions of *fantasia* and *fantasieren*. “There is no hint that such acts necessarily entail writing or that ‘composition’ implies pre-composition. Nor is there any hint of an opposition or distinction between ‘composing’ and ‘improvising,’” writes Treitler, stressing the point that the duality between the improvised and the composed as we understand it, for the most part, did not apply to the pre-nineteenth-century musical reality.”⁴¹ Treitler’s argument hinges on what Maurice Esses and others also bring forth: that the relationship of “the improvised” to “the composed” is fluid.⁴² How did we get into this situation with improvisation in the first place? How did the score come to dictate so much of the way we understand the way we understand music-making?

Oral and Aural Traditions

⁴¹ Leo Treitler, “Speaking of the I-Word,” *Archiv für Musicwissenschaft* 72, no 1. (2015), 3.

⁴² For a thorough discussion of the topic, see Maurice Esses’s *Dance and Instrumental Diferencias in Spain During the 17th and Early 18th Centuries, Vol. 1: History and Background, Music and Dance*. Dance and Music Series, No 2 (Stuyvesant, New York: Pendragon Press, 1992).

The main reason it is difficult to reconstruct past practices from surviving descriptive and prescriptive texts is that improvisation, much like folk music, is primarily an oral tradition. It thrives in a space that is not bound to the rigidities of texts where the specificity of musical vocabulary is shaped by generations-long participatory experience rather than theoretical study of textualized musical material.⁴³ Thus, ultimately, any fixed account of how improvisation is done directly contradicts the creative and operative procedures that govern it. Moreover, any literal interpretation of a historic score not only misconstrues the closeness between improvised and composed music but ignores altogether the wealth of “unspoken” possibilities that the notated work grants. After all, even Johann Sebastian Bach did not play the same notes of the score the same way twice.⁴⁴

Perhaps the most salient demonstration of the difference in the way improvisation was approached before the advent of music notation is tied to polyphony, central to musical traditions of the church. The majority of improvised music prior 1600, especially in the liturgical context, was polyphonic music, in which multiple melodic lines were added to a plainchant.⁴⁵ Brown in his book confirms that improvisation over a *cantus firmus* likely constituted a part of every musician’s education from the middle ages onwards, and “should be considered the chief sort of unwritten music before the Baroque era.”⁴⁶ Wegman clarifies that improvised counterpoint was

⁴³ This is what Diana Taylor calls “the repertoire,” in her 2003 book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*.

⁴⁴ John Lutterman is referring to Arthur Mendel’s “The Services of Musicology to the Practical Musician”, in: *Some Aspects of Musicology*, edited by Arthur Mendel, Curt Sachs and Carroll C. Pratt, New York, Liberal Arts Press, 1957, as quoted in Morabito, 241.

⁴⁵ Anne Smith, *The Performance of 16th-Century Music: Learning from the Theorists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 137.

⁴⁶ Brown, *Embellishing 16th Century Music*, viii.

a living practice throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and only later, with the rise of *seconda prattica* around 1600, did it become a “dead language,” when along with *prima prattica* it became known as *stile antico*.

What has changed by 1725, and certainly by Beethoven’s time is that counterpoint, which from the very beginning was both an improvised and composed practice, remains an active area of study only in the written forms.⁴⁷ Beethoven’s lessons with Haydn essentially consisted of rudimentary lessons in core rules of counterpoint, as exemplified by the example of Johann Joseph Fux in the textbook *Gradus ad Parnasum* (1725), written in the common style of a dialogue between master and student.⁴⁸

This is a dramatic alteration in the practice of counterpoint. The memory of the improvised practice of polyphonic music has been essentially erased from Western music, along with the varied sonic possibilities of its manifestation. To this point, Wegman writes that,

[w]hile it may be true that the counterpoint lessons gave Beethoven a kind of musical grammar, it certainly was not the grammar of a living language. By the eighteenth century, counterpoint was a dead language, no longer spoken, no longer evolving. It was a set of abstract theory exercises on paper, useful perhaps from a pedagogical point of view, yet for professional musicians it was perfectly possible to get by without formal training in it—as Beethoven’s early compositions amply demonstrate.⁴⁹

It is only for today’s musicians that the idea of polyphonic music is immediately associated with the point-against-point style of counterpoint. This came to be the privileged kind of counterpoint, “as the safe alternative to the polyphonic practices that the Pope prohibited in the Catholic

⁴⁷ Rob C. Wegman “What is Counterpoint?,” *Improvising Early Music: The History of Musical Improvisation from the Late Middle Ages to the Early Baroque*, ed. Dirk Moelants (Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2014), 17.

⁴⁸ Wegman, “What is Counterpoint?,” 10-12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

Church,” and it is what constitutes the foundation of contrapuntal training—from voice leading to compositions of fugues—in Western classical music schools.⁵⁰

Memory in History

In any oral tradition, memorization is vitally important for passing on information.⁵¹ For that very same reason, imitation and memory are also central to the very process of improvisation. From antiquity well into the seventeenth century, memorization was the primary means of acquiring education in Western Europe, an important cornerstone of a well-developed pedagogy.⁵²

Memorization was also a professional priority, from music-making to rhetoric to the stage. Natalie Crohn Schmitt, writes in her article “Improvisation in the Commedia dell’Arte in its Golden Age: Why, What, How” that “[w]e know that the memory of the actors was prodigious—Virginia Andreini learned a full-length musical role in six days, Vittoria Piissimi in a week.”⁵³ Evidently, composers “had an ability to keep the individual voices (polyphonic parts) in their minds to a degree that most of today’s musicians find astonishing,” writes Anne Smith.⁵⁴ Feats of memory that now seem humanly impossible were completely achievable by our counterparts a few centuries ago.

⁵⁰ Wegman, “What is Counterpoint?,” 40.

⁵¹ Smith, *The Performance of 16th-Century Music*, 9.

⁵² *Ibid*, 16.

⁵³ Natalie Crohn Schmitt, “Improvisation in the Commedia dell’Arte in its Golden Age: Why, What, How,” *Renaissance Drama, New Series*, 38 (2010): 226.

⁵⁴ Smith, *The Performance of 16th-Century Music*, 8.

Since antiquity, memory itself is understood to reside in various “places” in the mind, triggered by imagination, visual signs and symbols, and more. Anne Smith quotes Mary Carruther’s 1990 *The Book of Memory*, provides a brief overview of the workings of memory from a historic perspective; she is speaking here not of music but of verbal texts

Composition is not an act of writing, it is rumination, cogitation, dictation, a listening and a dialogue, a ‘gathering’ (*collectio*) of voices from their several places in memoryThe ancient writers frequently speak of the importance of listening to what one is composing . . . *Cogitatio* finds (*invenire*) things held in various memory-places and collects them (*colligere*) into one place ready at hand (*ad manum posita*).⁵⁵

Today, we of course rely on studies generated by the use of advanced scientific devices, such as fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), to map the human brain activities and, among other things, discern the different kind of brain developments associated with, sorting, retrieving, and working with memory. Meanwhile, our cultural understanding of these same processes has remained somewhat consistent with the systems of understanding present in historic pedagogies. As Ann Smith makes clear, memory in the Western European tradition was, from early on, seen as a defining characteristic of a moral person, and thus its training was emphasized from a very young age in a child’s education. Drawing on Carruther’s digest of historic information, Smith emphasizes that *memoria*, which at the time meant trained, educated, and disciplined memory, “was co-extensive with wisdom and knowledge, but it was more—as a condition of prudence, possessing a well-trained memory was morally virtuous itself.”⁵⁶

The fact that memorization has been central to Western pedagogy comes as no surprise to me, based on the experience I have had in my own musical education. As far as the musical practices I was taught, it seems at first that not much has changed since four hundred years ago.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 17.

⁵⁶ Smith, *The Performance of 16th-Century Music*, 16.

Firstly, developing a short- and long-term memory, for practical recollection and dictations of musical excerpts and harmonic progressions, was still considered to be a skill worth learning. Secondly, the ability to conjure up a perception of compositions through an “inner ear” prior to their audible realization was paramount to my studies. So, what has changed? To what degree am I able to have the same kind of musical memory that people in the past had? How is my evidently strong training in retaining musical progressions and melodies increasing my chances of becoming better at improvisation, and in what ways and how is it not helping the undertaking?

To begin with, the ideological objectives behind my post-Romantic-era education, which prioritized the development of an “inner ear,” that is, the internalized hearing, above all, shifted the weight of memory training from external to internal, from the practical to the abstract, and from the active to passive. Aural memory was trained in order to develop a strong associative ability, to sound sonorities in the imagination. This kind of memory training sought to enable the student to *hear* musical works from viewing a written score, without any physical iteration of the sounds represented by the notated signs. The development of an “inner ear” was a marker of true achievement of refined musicality, and in the social reality of my upbringing, its association with refinement conferred a virtuous character on those who possessed it.

The transition from aurally based activities to notated representations of them has played no little part in modifying our use of, and reliance on, musical memory for purposes of improvisation. Aural, and often oral practice, as in the case of the renaissance *cantus firmus* vocal music, requires a musician to rely on their faculties in a manner noticeably different from that of musicians engaging with a score. Musicologist, Peter Schubert, whose scholarly and performance expertise is in modal counterpoint, as well as in Renaissance and Baroque eras, explains that in aural practice of vocal improvisation, such as singing a canon at the fifth, the

person following the initial melodic line in imitation has to listen, sing, and think all at once.⁵⁷

The simultaneity of the activities involved in negotiating the time delay between the initiation of the melody and its replication a fifth above necessitates an extensive reliance on retention and recollection, as well as the ability to employ specialized musical knowledge in real time. The same mechanisms operate in instrumental music as well as vocal, though with obvious differences pertaining to the use and relation of the musical ear to the body.

Very few classically trained musicians today can manage such a feat. Our training usually does not require us to develop aural memory in this particular way. For most contemporary musicians, retention resides in the muscles (kinesthetic memory) and the mind (analytical memory). The possession all three (aural, kinesthetic and analytical memories) is a rare and coveted quality among musicians, especially those who specialize in improvisation. In this manner, improvisation is both marginalized and put on a pedestal.

Anthony Pryer makes the point that even in the Baroque era, when boundaries between oral and written transmission were not as clear as in our modern practices, there is at least one possible substitute for a score, namely, memory, “which in itself can act as a kind of ‘virtual notation.’”⁵⁸ In order to invent, one had to have an inventory of materials from which to work; and it was precisely “the compositional process that brought together in one piece the separate bits filed and cross-filed in the places of one's memory.”⁵⁹

Summary

⁵⁷ Peter Schubert, “Improvising a canon #1: at the 5th above.mp4,” published on March 13, 2012, YouTube video, 4:22, accessed on May 31, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n01J393WpKk>

⁵⁸ Pryer, “On the Borderlines of Improvisation,” 151.

⁵⁹ Schmitt, “Improvisation in the Commedia dell’Arte,” 236.

In some ways, the pedagogical practices that commence after the 1840s are reminiscent of the general outlooks of my early musical education. Another way to say this is that my education was grounded in values that were in place by the mid-nineteenth century. One hundred and seventy years is a very short time with respect to human history: nineteenth-century customs are still very much living amongst us. Essentially, living memory, for most people, goes back as far as the knowledge that is propagated through the immediate, living members of one's lineage. Within about three generations the exact reasons for certain practices are lost, and any innate wisdom behind them is manifested simply as preferences; this is the case with the reasons behind acquiring certain skills in music, which no longer connect to their original purposes.

I want to imagine that when Haydn was teaching counterpoint to Beethoven, he was doing so with specific pedagogical reasons in mind. It seems to me that by contrast, the generation of my music teachers, who for complex reasons of history and geography dedicated themselves to proselytizing Western European (chiefly Italian and German) music practices, taught the way they did without any consciousness of the originally intended reasons. The reasons for teaching things like the rules of voice leading became self-contained and were presumed to be self-evident. The lessons became detached from any original practical purpose they had served long ago, and accordingly lost their flexibility. They acquired new meanings and an axiomatic status.

It is clear to me that, soviet pedagogical ideologies aside, the models of enlightenment education, the discipline-and-punish ethic, and the rise of conservatory-style training, and the corresponding decline in improvisation in classical music, have all shaped the environment in which I received my education. This topic certainly merits a separate in-depth study. However, in the current project, I find it helpful to mostly circumvent the complicated history of Western

European improvisation traditions since the 1790s, that is, those tied to the rise of the conservatory system.

That improvisation is for the most part a lived activity comes through clearly in the historical observation of changes and disconnections between musical generations. Improvisation as a practice is contingent upon the transmittal of specialized knowledge between living bodies—typically-through a relationship established between a master and an apprentice. Certainly, as I outlined earlier in this chapter, there exists a fair number of treatises that give a more or less clear idea about a particular stream or style of improvisation in a given time and place. But, these are too few and far between to build an unambiguous or even accurate account. Furthermore—and this is particularly true of music that has been written down—even if the composer assumes that enough information is communicated to the performer regarding the improvisatory parameters of the piece, these guidelines may not be readily apparent to a twenty-first-century musician looking at the score.

Even focusing on a specific treatise creates room for misunderstandings, because the tendency, just as with a score, is to take it at face value and make it into an authority, without reference to its place in the chronology of an ever-evolving history, the shortcomings of notation, and the ephemeral complexities of wordless and textless processes. The conditions described above pose a serious challenge for scholars and performers, like myself, who are interested in acquiring the lost history of musical practice.

Chapter Three—

Two Experiments with Learning Improvisation, with Help from the Bach Family

To complete this iteration of my project, I have to focus on what is possible. It is possible, I believe, to learn a wide range of Western classical improvisation techniques through the study of a single composition. This very narrow approach is an essential *phase* in the complex and life-long process of assimilating historical improvisation to modern technique and training. It may appear that this approach is not the most effective or efficient way to learn. But bracketing what has already been explained by others and arriving at insight about what improvised practice entails on one's own terms is a way to get at the essence of improvisation, especially on a practical level. Part of what I try to do in my attempts to become more proficient in this practice is to grasp its nature and break down the underlying mechanisms. I do this by cross-examining my own engagements with the creative process via the historic materials (treatises and scores) available to me. More specifically, in this chapter I focus on two musical pieces, Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passacaglia in C Minor*, BWV 582 and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's *Fantasia in E-flat Major*, Wq. 58/6, H. 277.

It is certainly valid to argue that there is a certain amount of transhistoricity in the practice of (musical) improvisation. Some qualities of the I-word hold true for the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries alike: it is a social process, it is contingent upon prior knowledge, it involves an entire cognitive complex, and it certainly entails a great deal of metacognition.

Recreating the Master-apprentice Relationship

The dominant views about what improvisation means and has meant for the Western tradition are fraught with conflicting ideas. It seems to me that the best and most illuminating way through this is to attempt to bypass the chatter altogether, and discover one's own meanings by engaging with music directly. Much of what is marked in scores or described in treatises is next to useless without the act of *creating* musical sound. The signs and letters on the page can prepare one, but in the end, one has to simply do it. The best way to discover one's improvisational prowess is to test the practical outcomes alongside considerations of process or, one's inner (mental) workings.

In order to start describing the process of my reinventing the improvisational wheel, I will explore my imagined relationship with improvised musical practices of the past. How do I relate to them and to whom do I relate exactly in this learning process? Putting aside the debatable question of where music resides, what are my access points to these practices and processes, when so many of them are no longer evident to the naked eye or ear?

It begins with the embodiment and reenactment of the reimagined relationship with the old master musicians and pedagogues. For me, in the absence of living masters from the past, this means first of all an acceptance of the roles of the teacher and pupil both. This approach reflects historical practices of autodidacticism: Socrates' approach was alive and well during the Early Modern Era, as is evident in music treatises from the 17th and 18th centuries. This approach retains its efficacy in individual study sessions, in the absence of the living interaction with a mentor, as the dialogue model assists the autodidact in learning how to learn—one of the most valuable lessons I, as a student, can acquire. Thus, part of my attempt to work with the texts left by these masters is to revive the experiences described in words and encoded in the notes fixed on a page.

Hearing advice from an instructor in a present lived moment and modeling after their demonstrated examples is different, however, from trying to hear the guiding voice of a skilled improviser who cannot be present in the same room and converse in the immediacy of a face-to-face interaction. Between these two kinds of learning exists yet another path, something similar to Joseph Fux's approach in his *Gradus ad Parnasum* (1725), which proposes an imagined relationship between a master and an apprentice. The dialogue in Fux's textbook is between the firm but kind, knowledgeable, and older master, Aloys, and a youthful and enthusiastic student with no name. I, as the learner, can insert myself into the place of the student, and, as I embody Aloys, I can reconstruct the character and teaching style (even if idealized) of Fux myself. These are merely a few facets of the kind of complex relationship I can build with mentors who can guide my learning about improvisation—however close or far, real or imagined the interaction.

Secondly, in lieu of having contact with by now long-deceased masters, I can try to recreate the master-apprentice relationship from surviving tangible sources, namely treatises and scores. Because the score is the closest material proxy I have to the musician behind its creation (and because my goal is to learn from finished compositions, as well as from mere isolated exercises abundantly present in treatises), the score is the next logical place for me to look for instruction in improvisation. Thus, when I take the score as the primary object of my entry into the world of the old improvisers, it becomes my surrogate master, from which/whom I learn to improvise.

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship between written (notated) and oral practices, as well as the casual distinctions we make between the composed and the improvised, are particularly complex. I find Anthony Pryer's description of Caccini's printed works as "frozen improvisations" to be a particularly helpful key to thinking about these

entangled distinctions. Of Caccini's 1602 *Nuove musiche*, a collection of songs which exemplify the vocal embellishment techniques described in a preceding treatise, Pryer states "they are not records of actual (now fixed) past improvisations, but rather are tangible traces of an ongoing process through which the identity of the works continue[s] to emerge and gain meaning—not in a straight line from oral creation to written record but from a sometimes opaque confluence of the two."⁶⁰ As it stands, sometimes separating the score from the composer and the written from improvised becomes impossible, and so, what follows will inevitably involve a discussion of all these elements.

Score-as-composer-as-mentor: The Case of Johann Sebastian Bach

Keeping all this in mind, how do I channel an improviser, especially one whose presence has been so strongly felt throughout my musical life and one who is so out of reach in every possible musical way? It should come with no surprise by now that the individual I speak of is none other than Johann Sebastian Bach himself, the musical presence who has been inspiring me since I was very little and the person/musical presence who still challenges me musically at every level of my professional growth.

There is a competitive streak in the relationship I have established with J.S. Bach thus far, in the sense that I am always chasing after something unattainable. This relationship began fairly early in my life. My father introduced me to the J.S. Bach, telling me that composer, who was highly intelligent and talented, wrote the most complex music known to anyone. Showing the composer's vinyl recordings to me, my father invited me to listen to his music closely, to see if I could parse out the many simultaneously playing melodies. I was about six or seven years old

⁶⁰ Pryer, "On the Borderlines of Improvisation," 165.

when my father set this challenge—to inspire me, I suspect, in the pursuit of music studies. It is difficult for me to recall exactly which pieces I listened to at that age, since titles and opus numbers meant little to me next to the powerful and moving music I went back to regularly. Over the next few years, I had built a short list of favorite tunes, many of which were played on a solo piano.

My radar fixed on one specific piece: the *D-minor Concerto*, BWV 1052, which I set my mind to learn when I was a few years older. And I did eventually play the piece, the first two technically more manageable movements anyway, during my years at the Yerevan State Conservatory. Starting from around third grade, students were obliged to learn Bach’s music at the Spendiaryan music school.⁶¹ My progress was in part measured by my ability to play polyphonic music, that is, Bach’s music. At the music academy, too, my musical growth was dependent on my ability to play, sing, and dictate his polyphonic keyboard compositions and his chorales.

Despite my many studies of Bach’s music, as an organist, I continue to be challenged by his musically and technically demanding works. In my attempts to gain the same mastery as J.S. Bach, I have come to understand the comparative limits at which the two of us stand, and this alone has been an important learning experience for me. I have learned to find the strength to carry forward, even if the undertaking of becoming an ultimate guru of improvisation will forever remain out of my reach. But, this is not the only lesson I learned about improvisation from J.S. Bach.

⁶¹ According to the curriculum of the Spendiaryan music school, in addition to polyphonic pieces, a student was required to cover repertory from three other areas during a given semester, 1) large-scale/multi-movement compositions, 2) default small genres, and 3) etudes and virtuosic pieces. It is evident from the curriculum that, with every new grade level, more and more room was devoted to J.S. Bach’s compositions under the repertory category of polyphonic music.

However, before I move forth with a descriptive part of my engagement with his music, I have to make an obligatory acknowledgement of his greatness. Based on multiple historic accounts, J.S. Bach was the most accomplished keyboard improviser of his age. Furthermore, John Lutterman argues that the famous improviser almost never relied on his own written music. Lutterman points out that the only written account of J.S. Bach using a written score during an unaccompanied performance was when he, in the words of Bach's Leipzig contemporary Theodor Pitschel, "used [inferior] organ compositions by lesser composers as a springboard for his [superior] improvisations."⁶² And thus, I will follow his lead but with a twist: I will take the superior example he so graciously preserved in notation, as a springboard for my humble investigations.

Introducing the Piece

J.S. Bach's *Passacaglia in C Minor*, BWV 582, is perfect for exploring salient moments in the development of Western improvisation, as it both marks the limits of what is humanly possible on the organ, and at the same time provides invaluable pedagogical guidance to bridge the gap between the present and the past- between J.S. Bach and everyone else. After all, as John Lutterman states,

the written compositions of Bach and his contemporaries may be understood as more-or-less systematically organized inventories of formal models, and as idiomatic vocabularies of motivic, harmonic and contrapuntal ideas or 'inventions,' all of which are ripe for improvisatory appropriation and elaboration.⁶³

⁶² Lutterman, "Re-Centering Historical Improvisatory Solo Practices on the Cello," 242.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 242.

BWV 582, being a passacaglia, belongs to a genre closely associated with improvised practices. The chaconne and the passacaglia are two related genres that originated from formulaic social musical activities, which supported the singing of *ripresa* type songs, dancing to looping short-phrased musical ideas, and exploration of the expressive and technical limits of the guitar, through an unspecified number of variations.⁶⁴ Their histories are rich. So are the specific procedures that shaped the two along the way. But, what interests me the most in tracing the development of the two is not the comprehensiveness of the picture or the thoroughness of the historic timeline but, rather, what I can delineate from the study of the process, the salient moments I can trace in compositions at hand.

According to the *Grove Online* entry on the chaconne by Alexander Silbiger, “the only common denominator among the chaconnes and passacaglias is that they are built up of an arbitrary number of comparatively brief units, usually of two, four, eight, or 16 bars, each terminating with a cadence that leads without a break into the next unit.”⁶⁵ But this description needs to account for the various ways the two have evolved and overlapped. Chord-based progressions, ground-based thematic *ostinati*, variation-driven forms, the old traditions of *cantus firmus* counterpoint, and the relatively later harmonic-rhythmic schemata, division-style virtuosity, ornamentation, and more all come into play in late, fully fledged chaconnes and passacaglias like Bach’s. Such genres became a fertile ground for free trade among various variation techniques and improvisational practices.

⁶⁴ Richard Hudson, *The Folia, the Saraband, the Passacaglia, and the Chaconne: The Historical Evolution of Four Forms That Originated Music for the Five-Course Spanish Guitar*, Musicological Studies & Documents, v. 35, pts. 1–4 (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: American Institute of Musicology; Hänssler-Verlag, 1982).

⁶⁵ Alexander Silbiger, “Chaconne,” *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Online source. Accessed April 9, 2017.

The ground of BWV 582 is so fertile, in fact, that the organist is pushed to their limit in simply keeping up with Bach's ever-evolving compendium of improvisational possibility. No matter the amount of practice I put to securing the notes in BWV 582, there is always a possibility of slipping off the keys. Multiple treacherous instances proceed quickly, one after another. It is simply exhausting to keep the mental alertness sharp and attuned for the next treacherous moment for the entire duration of the, on average, thirteen-minute-long piece. With all the busy juggling of intricately written polyphonic lines in the pedal and manual parts, a single slip has a cumulative effect.

Observation 1. Just breath:

Summary: If only I can take a deep breath and not blink, till I make it to the next resting point and as I let the sounds roll off my fingers unrestrained and untamed. Every wrong note played signals a disaster. Every unwritten note I set my mind to try out, feels like stepping into the dark.

Improvising One's Way Out of Tight Situations

I imagine that someone with an ability to improvise their way out of such a technically demanding situation is able to maneuver around these treacherous passages and hold on to whatever nearby (for the limbs) sound opportunities—as I am often forced to resort to in the clunky way that I do. In fact, this precise misfortune happened during my final doctoral degree recital. Exhausted from maintaining focus, I started to fall apart, right as I was approaching the fermata in measure 285. I had been preparing to bust into an improvised cadenza at the fermata—as the notation sign clearly called for it—for at least a couple of months prior to that date, and I was excited to share this original addition to J.S. Bach's piece with my audience. Usually, this was not a moment when I would lose control: I had practiced the transition more times than imaginable. But it happened. My playing was somewhat shaky for a few variations

leading up to that point, and as I moved closer to the resting point of the fermata, I reached the maximum level of tension I could sustain. My body and mind gave in to the urge to relax. I slipped off all the notes, hit everything in between what I was supposed to play, and altering my intended cadenza slightly, made it to the next logical starting point in the music, just on time to play the cadential closing of the entire piece.

Observation 2: Concentration is key, or is it?

During a church service, I was tired and had trouble focusing on the score. My eyes wandered off the written path a few times when I was playing a hymn that is well-known and very familiar to me. During the introduction, I managed to hit keys that were for the most part within the harmonic contexts of the melody I messed up, get past the hurdle, and pick up with the correct notes in the following measure. I managed to do this, keeping the time flow, as if nothing had happened. Still yet, another mishap happened during the transition between two of the verses, when, in the spur of the moment I decided to change the registration to a louder setting. It was a poor choice. Changing a registration required me to free up the left hand to press the piston while rearranging all the notes of the last chord with the right hand. In the midst of managing several untested moves, I again lost the melodic line. Somehow, almost blindly, without thinking or looking at the notes, I let the momentum carry the remaining bit of the phrase, first stumbling upon nonharmonic tones in the melody and a cadential gesture of sorts, right back into the tonic resolution of the concluding verse.

I imagine that, for someone like J.S. Bach, these passages that give me so much trouble do not present even a challenge. But I will stop trying to get into J.S. Bach's head in the manner of Pierre Menardian⁶⁶ and will instead look at the question of how I can arrive at a practical understanding of the improvisational elements of BWV 582 from another angle, namely, using

⁶⁶ Please refer to Jorge Luis Borges's short story titled "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" (1939). Written in a mock academic article style, Borges's story both caricatures the inconsequential academic disputes and makes the point that textual meaning changes based on history and context. The narrator, through his careful comparative study of identical passages from Pierre Menard's and Miguel de Cervantes's versions of *Don Quixote*, proposes in the article he writes—that is, Borges's story—that Menard, based on his experiences, had no choice but to write the exact *same* novel anew, and not blindly copy Cervantes's literary work. In doing so, the narrator intends to rectify another academician's wrongful interpretation of Menard's literary genius.

the score as a purely pedagogical recourse. I will start with the first challenge I encounter: the theme, initially presented by itself in the pedals.

Figure 3.1 Pedal theme of BWV 582



order to be able to create even the simplest of variations above it in real time. I know that, at this point, I am able to hear and plan in advance for variations that are based on shorter, less complex harmonic and melodic patterns, such as the romanesca and the four-note stepwise descending. I am fairly comfortable working with shorter ground-bass patterns, like the Monteverdian chaconne. Even Buxtehude's *Chaconne in E minor*, BuxWV160, with its four-measure-long bass line, outlining a general sense of a stepwise descent on the downbeats from E to B, is a manageable task.

Figure 3.2 Monteverdi, *Zefiro torna* (1632)



Figure 3.3 Buxtehude, *Ciacona in E-minor*, BuxWV 160



Observation 3. Vanishing memory.

Before I had learned the pieces well enough to be able to play, almost from muscle memory, measures-long passages before needing to glance at the score, I tried to play a passage from memory by using ear recognition as a guide. I was curious to see what would happen if my mind had to fill in the missing spatial points by notes I would grab from thin air (with the help of subconscious muscle memory) to fill in the logic of the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic content...It was very hard... my ear can hear sounds when I look at the score, without playing any sounds. But, having to imagine/compose sounds in process is difficult. The span of time at which I could retain ideas is small, about a few seconds. After that I diverge from the thematic content and start to navigate through generic ideas of dominant seventh to tonic progressions.

One way to respond to this challenge to my musical memory is to play one of Bach's variations from BWV 582 and then immediately try to recreate it from memory, or at least the gist of it,

while looking only at the opening pedal theme. Take variation 3 or 6 for the moment. Both are built upon the division style practice of subdividing the initial rhythm and filling in the spaces between intervals with the added German keyboard style of the eighteenth century, which features a steady flow and uniformity of rhythmic subdivisions over varied rhythmic patterns.

Variation 3 presents an even eight-note rhythmic pulse:

Figure 3.4 J.S. Bach, BWV 582, variation 3, m 24–26

Figure 3.5 J.S. Bach, BWV 582, variation 6, m 48–50

Both variations are based on more or less stepwise scalar fragments in the three-part contrapuntal texture of the manuals, while the pedals maintain the theme. This kind of polyphonic texture is not challenging and is, in fact, very idiomatic for the organist. The imitative entries of ascending and descending fragments create a sense of a wider scalar flow.

Each time I attempt this experiment, I arrive at the following observations. (A) Thinking within the correct tonality is key. Not all physically imitated and mimicked scalar runs will automatically fall within the correct tonal scheme. Even though the pedal theme delineates the tonal and harmonic possibilities clearly, the fingers, which focus on a meandering stepwise motion, do not necessarily map the correct tonal pitch content effortlessly. The hands do not sync with the correct muscle memory of the ever-changing harmonic progression enabled by the bassline theme. It is easy to let the hands complete an octave run on autopilot when only in a single key, but it is an entirely different matter to operate on muscle memory when the bass theme dictates ever-changing harmonic possibilities. Relying merely on the hands to complete the task, based on what was experienced a moment earlier, is unreliable. I must keep foremost in my mind the tonal possibilities that arise from note-to-note and bar-by-bar of the theme when my memory of J.S. Bach's variation fails. At a minimum, I have to keep in mind where my home key is.

At this point during my improvisation, I try to keep in mind Simpson's advice to follow the ear when in doubt. (B) Remembering that the variation is a response to the grounding theme is crucial, as well as extremely challenging. I am not merely composing a piece in the manual parts in my hands, I am composing a response to the pedal theme. There is a correlation between what I come up with in my hands and the bass line to which I am tied. I cannot override or change the theme, and I cannot wander off freely as I invent the manual parts. In this agreement, one accompanies the other. (C) Familiarity with the idioms and specific techniques of variation is helpful because not everything that can be made up in the moment to fill in the gaps will work. This is where my experience with the division books, addressed in the second chapter of this dissertation, becomes especially useful. The numerous examples of cadential endings, which

Ortiz presents, and the many ways in which a simple musical situation—be that a stepwise motion between two notes or a more complex melodic snippet—can be varied to provide easy access to options stored in memory. And (D) sticking to a meter and rhythmic pattern both helps to build momentum through a kind of groove, and makes everything, especially in the case of J.S. Bach, increasingly difficult because the available time I have to either remember what Bach did or come up with something viable on my own is quite short.

I intentionally stay clear of the “chunking” technique, that is, breaking up the theme into smaller units, in order to set up a more manageable challenge of remembering or improvising from memory. This is because chunking, to me, is better suited for exactly the kind of effect from which I am trying to break free. In my experience, focusing on smaller portions of the score content is more useful for cleaning up the technique and solidifying the note security than it is helpful for carrying the flow of a musical idea. Improvisation is similar to my practices for creating music flow, which leaves some of the note choices perpetually—or at least for a very long time and through a higher number of iterations—unfixed.

Taking this experiment a step or two further, attempting to continue Bach’s example in other, more difficult variations, I soon find myself unable to function. It is one thing to create simple variations; it is another to combine various strains of improvisation and composition into a single piece. By variation 8, which introduces contrary motions into the polyphonic lines, I have reached my limit. Attempting to build variations upon intensified variants of the theme, as in variations 5, 9, 14, and 15, is pointless: I cannot sustain it beyond the theoretical understanding of the compositional methods employed, when I play through these later variations for the first time, with the assistance of the score (the visual crutch) taken away.

Improvising a fugue using the ostinato theme is—needless to say—an impossibility. J.S. Bach simply responded to what was delivered through the history of improvisation up until his time, including the major aspects I have outlined above, and tests it at its maximum capacity. In sum, I find myself able to “follow” him up through certain devices—division-style filling-in of intervals, an even rhythmic flow—but unable to do so when motivic or long-range polyphonic relations come into play.

Passacaglia Versus Fantasia

While both chaconne and fantasia seem to resemble a figured bass notation, they are not intended to be accompaniments—at least not on the level of fully fledged genres in the case of the chaconne. Nor are they similar in the way the bassline is approached. Chaconnes and passacaglias are ground-bass-driven compositions, which means that the ground-bass determines the harmonic rhythm as well as the (limited) harmonies with which the musician can color the variations. For as long as the ground bass is uninterrupted, the performer has to respect the somewhat narrow parameters of the musical playground. The creativity is in finding solutions within these bounds that can please the listener and the performer alike. Unlike the ground-bass-driven genres, the fantasia bass scheme is a mere suggested path of development. The performer is free to take as much or as little time as they need on a given base note or suggested harmony. The musician is also free to choose whether to extend the duration of a single harmony through scaling and arpeggiating around or to keep the sonority to a single quick strike of a vertical chord. Furthermore, the skeletal outline of harmonic structure and formal organization in fantasia, like Young Bach’s figured-bass-like sketch, included in chapter two, can be modified at the discretion of the improviser. The musician is free to take detours into other tonal areas,

develop however many characters they want, and dwell on whichever state of emotion compels them most in the moment, at any point, while working off the written bassline.

As incredibly challenging as I find improvising over a ground bass of a chaconne or a passacaglia to be, strangely, the fantasia intimidates me more. In a way, the stricter regulations set by the ground-bass-driven improvisations remind me of the difficult melodies I had to harmonize and the counterpoint exercises I had to complete. All of the decisions I make have to be approved and justified by the limitations of the rules. I have been learning how to walk this ground for quite some time. If I do not succeed, all it means is that I did not think of, or find, the answer that was needed to complete the task.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and the Genre of Fantasia

With the free fantasia, I am exposed. There are no more strict rules to hide behind, no more requirement to follow the written path of the fixed notated part. The genre of fantasia, played on the organ, brings to the surface my underlying issues of hesitation to improvise more than any other genre or practice. It exposes the “tyranny of success” for what it is, and gives me a stark choice: either succumb to the heavy weight of the self-governed regulations, or find the courage to break free of them. Perhaps, at best, I have the choice to negotiate a better outcome, some kind of coexistence between absolute discipline and unregulated freedom.

Observation 4: Soft eyes, soft and deep sinking breath, smooth, slowed (magnified) flow of time, soft joints, soft hands.

Description: I was practicing an offertory piece for a church service that was on the shorter side. And I decided to experiment with extending the introductory couple of measures into a phrase-long section, based on the already notated idea of rolling through the chordal structure of the mode of the composition. The composition was based on a gospel and was harmonized with chords that are more common for jazz music. I noodled around with the introductory chordal ideas, without worrying to much exactly what was being formed under my hands. The only aim was to start the main section when I felt like

I had arrived at a sonically natural pivoting point. Mid-way through the practice I took off my glasses, and let the blurred representation of the chords afford me more room and freedom under my hands. There was no agenda other than to enjoy the clustered sounds, which harmonized more or less accurately the altered melody. That day, I came up with many interesting variations of the same piece, as I played it over and over. And even though during the actual church service, I only dared to go off the score during the introductory section, I felt that I had achieved a new, even if modest, height of confidence in my musical abilities.

Observation 5: Poor eyesight and weak sight-reading skills often assist in accidental improvisation. Perhaps the same can be said of the relaxed ear as well. But, unlike in cases where improvising through ear, where the entire responsibility of coherent musical creation depends on unmitigated circumstances, in the former situation, the score serves as a visual “approximate” guide to the hands, in shaping sounds.

I find Seth Brodsky’s modernist and psychoanalytical take on the genre of fantasy to be so pertinent to the issues I raise throughout this dissertation, that I am going to refer to his text copiously in this section. I will do so keeping in mind my encounters at the organ with Young Bach’s *Fantasia in E-flat major* (Wq.58/6, H 277). Brodsky, when defining the essence of the genre of fantasy across centuries, writes that,

liberation is granted by a master, the master of genre. Only with its license—minimally, a contractual announcement to a listening community that “here and now will be some freedom”—can one pursue one’s wildest, most formally transgressive wishes. The logic is hence complex, and a bit contradictory: a wish to break free, and a wish to submit; to let go of oneself, and to get swept up in something bigger, stranger, other. . . It is not just some special autonomy—say, the technical facility or inventive prowess of the artist—that allows the musical fantasy to materialize. The fantasy also allows autonomy to materialize; sanctioned by the genre itself, fantasy is what turns technical facility and inventive prowess themselves into a kind of performance. They, and not simply the resultant text, become the object of desire.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Seth Brodsky, “Fantasy & Fantasy (1),” in *From 1989, or European Music and the Modernist Unconscious* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 38.

When playing Young Bach's *Fantasia* at an organ, an instrument so external and detached from the physical self, I willingly or unwillingly, let go of the ego to some degree. After all, as Anthony Pryer paraphrases Schopenhauer, "musicians may do as they will, but they cannot will as they will, that is, they cannot freely control or be conscious of all the forces that help to bring their apparently 'spontaneous' musical ideas, situated within a particular style, into being."⁶⁹ Even our ability to freely control or be conscious according to a particular set of regulations is limited, for that matter. "While remaining the seat of its actions, the ego momentarily refuses to be its author."⁷⁰

Instrument as Mentor: Timbral and Spatial Improvisation

Any individual who is a sensitive musician, and I speak here of musicians of any age and skill level, knows that the musical instrument they play on is more than just a utilitarian object. This relationship is a live one, where both the performer and the instrument are equal-part participants in the musical activity. The relationship a performer has with their instrument, either the particular one that they have bonded with over a period of time, or the one they do not have "ownership" over, is very personal. How a performer sees themselves, and how they perceive and express the phenomenological is projected onto the way they approach the instrument. But this is only part of the story. The relationship between the performer and the instrument is truly interpersonal. Much of what is projected by a performer is shaped by tangible, physical characteristics of the instrument they play—its appearance, the feel of its material, the small and large deviations of the sterile default ideal, such as a squeaky valve, a stiff and sticky key, an

⁶⁹ Pryer, "On the Borderlines of Improvisation," 151.

⁷⁰ Seth Brodsky, "Fantasy & Fantasy (1)," 45.

untuned string, and the like all contribute to the way a musician interacts with their instrument and how they engage with the activity of music making. There is still very little written about this interface, about the rich, unstable, and fruitful relationship between performer and instrument. In what follows next, I describe the relationship I have with the organ and attempt to elucidate some of the important aspects of the interaction.

In many ways, the instrument that both J.S. Bach and I play leaves us no choice but to improvise. Often, it is precisely the organ that serves the function of a mentor, with whom I interact, to whom I listen, and from whom I learn. Given that there are no two instruments alike—organs come in all shapes and sizes, with sonic possibilities and physical/mechanical variations which vary from mild to drastic—I, the person seated at the console, need to be versatile and ready to respond to the situation when I encounter an unknown element. I have to adjust, often in an instant, the nuanced ways I position my body, tune in my ear, and manipulate sounds through refined coordination. But these are only the first set of concerns for an organist.

Most organs, historic or contemporary, present a physical distance between the performer and the organ pipes. The console in electromagnetic and even some tracker organs (these are mechanically operated) is detached from the main corpus of the instrument. Many organs are essentially part of the architecture, built and voiced specifically for the designated space. What this unique physical attribute of the instrument does is to force me to get out of my shell, and play the space, which is sometimes very large and engulfs everything and everyone present. Organs, in this way, expose my inner world and make it externally tangible in the physical space of the performance. Like a ventriloquist, I speak my creative world through the pipes, and the organ, with its bigger-than-life personality, plays out its multifaceted characters through me. In one instance, I may assume the voice of the violin, in the next the harp, the trumpet or the

chimes. I may triumph one moment, lament the next, joke and terrify, comfort and tease. I thus learn to embody a mode of self-expression through timbre, which I may not dare to voice otherwise. I dare to assert aspects of my personality which I normally keep hidden from sight.

It is precisely the timbre(s) of the organ that attracted me to the instrument in the first place. The first time I had an opportunity to be alone in a space and alone with a pipe organ, around 2006, I spent close to four hours going one by one through the stops, as I practiced basic pedal exercises and learned to play Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger's lyrical *Trio no. 1, Opus 49*. I played the short minute-and-a-half-long piece over and over. At that stage, I had no skills in generating original registrations. I merely tried to match the composer's suggested registration and practice quietly, as to not disturb anyone in and around the sanctuary of Pasadena's Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church.

During my studies at UCLA, I became rather fond of the organ studio's tracker instrument whose "voice," from the very start of the bonding experience, felt immediately familiar to me. I have come to think of the studio's Noack organ, which according to the plaque was built in 1981—the year I was born in—as a dear companion, who happens to age more gracefully. The studio's Noack organ is a fairly responsive instrument because it has fewer stops—and, accordingly, fewer combination possibilities—and only a small halo of reverberation. Over the past ten years or so of playing with the Noack organ, I learned to shape the music I played in a nuanced way. I know exactly how each pipe behaves in the space and how the instrument responds to the particular "register" of my voice. The same statement does not apply to Royce Hall's Skinner organ! With its 6,600 pipes, all located above the stage and far from both the stage and off-stage consoles, the Royce Hall organ is a very difficult instrument to work with. First, compared to UCLA's baroque-style, fairly small Noack organ, the Skinner

organ has infinitely more timbral possibilities to consider. Second, being located far from where I sit and in the large space of the auditorium, it responds, at least sonically, to my key actions with a noticeable delay. The generated delay also varies from rank to rank, depending on the relative location and size of the pipes.

Young Bach's *Fantasia in E-flat Major* was the perfect medium for my experimentation with the timbres as well as the overall soundscape of the Royce Hall organ. The process of finding the right registration, at least the right one for a particular version of the musical idea I want to communicate, involves quite a bit of trial and error. Most of the time, the process of choosing the tone begins with an approximation of the sound I hear internally when I play through the score. I then try to find, among the many stops of the instrument, the one that communicates most convincingly the projected poetics of a given passage. Other times, I arrive at the choice of a stop by accidentally stumbling upon it while trying out different knobs at the console. While the process of registration is complex and multi-tiered, it usually develops around a single stop or a combination of a few sounds used in the different manual and pedal parts.

Usually, the stop that grabs my attention is rich with possibilities for exploring aspects of a mood, character, or image it invokes. Often times, timbres that are unique determine how I shape and deliver the passages assigned to them. The choice of the set registration also helps me hear a musical passage in a new light, reconsider, and adjust to another interpretive option accordingly. It expands the number of available alternatives I can pull out of my sleeve, in an instant—should I wish to do so during a reiteration of the piece.

The consideration of timbre often goes hand in hand with the articulation choices I make, as the latter can noticeably shape the meaning of the rhetorical gestures I try to convey. When speaking of articulation, I mean both the touch and the manipulation of time during and in

between the played notes. For example, the brilliant and sparkly stops used at the optimistic and confident opening of the *E-flat Fantasia* need to be articulated clearly and with vigor. The pull and push of the line is further shaped differently at its various parts. The articulation is dilated (sluggish at the lifts and returns to the keys) at the beginning and especially at the end of the phrase, and it is crisper and more punctuated around the midpoint. The overall effect of the phrase is that of a slowly awakening excitement, which quickly intensifies and accelerates as it reaches to the top of the line, hovers for a moment in an equilibrium, and tumbles down unrestrained. Within even this few seconds, the *Fantasia*, with the help of the organ, opens a number of possible ways for me to be poetically expressive.

Figure 3.6. The opening section of Young Bach's *Fantasia in E-flat Major*



Royce Hall organ registration at the opening section:

Played on the second (Great) manual

Great: First Diapason 8; Tromba 8; Octave 4; Mixture V

After an adventurous detour to other worlds, the return to this opening section naturally requires a different approach, as the experience of the reprise cannot be and is not the same. Thus, the registration in which I preserve the core of the opening's setting is also modified. The new registration, as indicated for Figure 3.7, gives the final section more substance and power. How I arrive back at the beginning of the familiar sequence of notes and work my way through to the end of the piece is also, logically, articulated differently. All of these decisions help me

communicate an added degree of confidence in knowing that I am back to a familiar place, back to showing my audience that I found my way home. This way, when the piece ends on the arpeggiated final chord, the abruptly ending line nevertheless is as resolute as it is whimsical.

Figure 3.7 The ending of the piece



Royce Hall organ registration at the return of the opening section and the end:

Played on the second (Great) manual

Great: Contra Tromba 16; Diapason 16; Bourdon 16; Bombarde 16; First Diapason 8; Gamba 8; Tromba 8; Trumpette Harmonique 8; Octave 4; Fifteenth 2; Twelfth 2 2/3; Cornet V; Harmonics V; Mixture V

A similar approach applies to another pair of passages. This arpeggiated sections, which the performer is left to flesh out from the basic structural hints, stands in sharp contrast to the opening section. The sequence of arpeggiated harmonies evoke a distant and otherworldly place. Because the two sections, which revolve around different key areas, already create a contrast, I maintain the same registration for both. I communicate this to the audience through a choice of stops, which create a subdued and eerie sound, an articulation that is more closed at the gaps between the notes, and also through the positioning of my body. At 5'2'' I must make an effort to reach the top, fifth, manual while still keeping my feet on the pedal notes and foot pistons. It is surely a theatrical gesture, which helps me communicate the change of terrain to my audience. But this physicality does more than that. The considerable movement I make helps me expand the space I inhabit, and, as a consequence, helps me get out of the comfort zone of the boxed-in

being. Playing the *Fantasia* at the organ is wonderfully fit for this purpose, as I have more freedom in exploring all corners of the organ console, and along with that, opportunities to reconnect differently with the felt and perceived reality.

Figure 3.8 The first arpeggiated section



Royce Hall organ registration for the both arpeggiated sections:

- Played on the fifth (Bombard) manual
- Pedal: Contra Gamba 16; Bourdon 16; Gamba 8; Flute 8
- Bombards: Flute Harmonique 8; Gambe 8; Flute Octaviane 4

Figure 3.9 The beginning of the second arpeggiated section



Playing the organ affords me a sense of spontaneity through the display of its colorful, broad spectrum of timbre and acoustics. For me, a novice and still a timid practitioner of improvised music, this spontaneity first of all means an expression of personality on a whim,

more than a creation of structural musical invention. In fact, “within a common-practice context ‘spontaneity’ in performance frequently turns out to be, not a compositional ‘cause’ (that is, not the process by which the music is ‘invented’), but rather a somewhat arch ‘style of presentation,’” writes Anthony Pryer.⁷¹ And so, it appears that the solution to the conundrum I face with daring to improvise for a public, at least partially, has to do not as much with the notes, but rather the kind of attitude with which I approach the task at hand. Addressing the very ways in which attitude has been shaped over millennia of traditions is a topic which deserves a fair amount of discussion, a topic which I will not be able to succinctly cover in this chapter.

Young Bach dedicates the last chapter of his 1753 *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu* (Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments) to the genre of free *fantasia*. Young Bach, whose preferred instrument was the touch-sensitive clavichord, cautions the performer that, “especial care must be exercised in improvising at the harpsichord and the organ; at the former, in order to avoid playing in a single color.”⁷² When this is done right on the organ, and the organist embraces the rich personality of the instrument in the rhetoric of the *fantasia*, the potential for self-liberation grows exponentially.

Performance as Acting

The performer becomes the space, becomes the sounds that frees the hyper-conscious self from the mortal flesh it inhabits and habituates. This sonic and acoustic depersonalization is the only way that I have found to work with the conundrum that fantasized worlds, which all of us are capable to experience in our imagination, cannot be expressed in public. At least not “before

⁷¹ Pryer, “On the Borderlines of Improvisation,” 155.

⁷² Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch*, 430–31.

processes of censorship and revision can take hold, and before the demands of formal propriety (allegedly) set in.”⁷³ According to a passage from Jacqueline Rose’s *State of Fantasy*, which Brodsky quotes,

In common parlance, fantasy is what you get up to when the surveying mind and surveying society are both looking the other way. Fantasy is supremely asocial. Doubly licentious, it creates a world of pleasure without obligation to what is either permissible or possible, outside the realm of fantasy, to do.⁷⁴

Next, in approaching Young Bach’s *Fantasia*, I pretend to be the composer who is just now coming up with the “preliminary music” that precedes the score in front of me to reenact the temporalized process of its pretended invention. I communicate this act of “discovery” to my audience via a theatrical or ventriloquist’s display, through my reactions to, and interaction with, the sounds of the organ and the timbral characters the *Fantasia* evokes. This acted-out process of creation can be applied, in fact, to any notated work of music in an “improvisational” style, through which one tries to connect to and convey the composer’s state of mind during their spontaneous, inventive process. In embodying the composer, and by diffusing the responsibility of generating an original output through the *Fantasia*, through the instrument, and the space, I partly let go of my own inhibitions. From a psychoanalytic perspective, writes Brodsky, “the primary challenge, always met by unconscious fantasy, is to position the coordinates of one’s own un-becoming, such that an other—more or less of one’s choosing—can become.”⁷⁵

Perhaps, the reason why Brodsky’s text resonates so well with the issues I have been trying to solve for years now, is that he touches upon that very factor of trauma, which in the

⁷³ Brodsky, “Fantasy & Fantasy (1),” 38.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 36.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 56.

narration of the self we tend to relive or accept as integral to our identity. “Freudian and Lacanian unconscious is an *effect*: an insistence, a repetition,” explains Brodsky, “but a curious repetition, not of a positive content, of knowledge or memory in their common sense, but of an impasse.”⁷⁶ The trauma for me is in telling the five-year-old me that the pencils will eventually make it to the other side of the piano and that the sadness I feel in that moment is only temporary, that I still have to hang on to the love I have for music. It is in the drilling of intervals and scales that I sang, up and down all the notes hundreds of times over, gradually accepting the parameters of tonal thinking and hearing as the one truth to be abided by. My trauma is in thinking that I will never truly be a performer, and in the reserved manner with which I voice my opinions.

Summary and Reflection

I often feel that the entire endeavor of the DMA project is palimpsest. My learning process is an attempt to undo earlier habits in order to make room for new ones. At the same time, my progress is in accepting that my learning cannot start from a fresh page. That the faint marks of the past will continue to accompany everything I do. The process of learning to improvise is inevitably composed of diverse layers (of my biographical past, of various historic times, of converging musical styles—of everything in the remote and immediate environment that influences my musical and personal growth), contained beneath the surface.

I count that by now I have conveyed to my reader that in order to improve further as an improviser, I have to approach the task with a certain awareness and embrace all aspects of my

⁷⁶ Ibid, 54.

training, however encouraging or debilitating they may be. It is not a selective process whereby I can separate and carry forward with me only the strengths of my former training, in order to further advance my skills in the area of music improvisation. Nor can I simply discard the intimidating aspects of that training and fill in the vacant space with newly acquired skills. Everything that defines who I am as a musician is closely intertwined. Any changes I make to my process will inevitably require an all-encompassing embrace of my training and myself. Furthermore, as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the seeming advantages of my training almost always prove to be the core of the problem.

While the obvious answer to the question of whether it is possible to improvise in a historically accurate style is affirmative, the transhistorical transactions I engage in are more nuanced. Identifying and recognizing the peculiarities of my process is the means for understanding my individual improvisational style and my degree of ability. I have gradually come to accept the fact that the lived experience of a learning process from the remote past is difficult, perhaps impossible to re-create fully and purely, and for obvious reasons. To elaborate on this point: it is futile (a) to try to avoid or bracket out the contemporary musical influences that I, as a music student living in Los Angeles, hear and engage with every single day, and (b) futile to imagine that I can circumvent my basic musical training, which obviously took place in a post-1800 musical environment and which embodies contemporary musical values (even though some of those values may, as Foucault shows, find their historical roots in the 18th century). Given these conditions, I would like to understand how my musical training, which is heavily geared towards “the common practice,” informs the content of my improvisations in historical styles, and to what extent the same training undermines my capacity to stay within those styles. Choosing to work on historical improvisation does not mean avoiding very present,

contemporary issues. In order for me to access this historical knowledge, I have to reinvent the wheel for myself and in the process, reinvent my personal narrative. For me, in particular, learning to improvise and learning to improvise in public require very different levels of demand and preparation—careful consideration of both musical and extra-musical factors ⁷⁷

Observation 6. On and off rails:

I have trouble staying in idiomatic style improvisation for more than a couple of measures. The only way I can extend it, that is not fall apart, is if I let my hands fall in whatever approximately familiar configuration they want (non-triadic chords, 9ths, 11th, etc.). It soon turns into mood music with vague outlines. I get back into the carved-out groove when I recognize ways to “operate” familiar to my training be that a cadential figure or a resolution to a chord. Almost certainly, the moments when I am able to regroup and recognize my surroundings involve an identification of a possible half step leading tone to some destination.

An important contemporary result of this historical investigation has been my learning to break free of certain repressive constraints of normative gender roles and the resulting expectations. Learning to improvise has been part of a larger process whereby I incrementally build the confidence to speak my mind, to move my body in dance and to comfortably and unabashingly express my (feminine) sexuality. As a result, I am growing to be carefree in my social interactions, in my relationality to others, which in turn enable me to participate in social activities that bring meaning to what I do through spoken language, through musical sounds, through movement, and through other forms of self-expression that were hampered for a very long time. For me, learning to improvise through early music is a vital practice in the ethics of self-care—a path towards happiness. Through this kind of musical activity, I reevaluate my past experiences, embrace my vulnerabilities, and work with failure from a constructive perspective.

⁷⁷ Sherrie Tucker, “Bordering on Community: Improvising Women, Improvising Women-in-Jazz,” in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble. (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004) 247-260.

What I have gained here may seem to be so little and insignificant. But, given the challenges that I had to work with, the accomplishment is tremendous. The minor lessons I learn are giant steps towards uncovering my personal potential for improvising in life and music.

Chapter Four—

Working with Failure, Cultivating Vulnerability

If the recognition of my abilities and limitations was a starting point for venturing into the realm of musical improvisation, then an ending point, for now, is a better nuanced sense of the reasons for my failures and successes. It is, after all, for disciplinary education, the devil is in details, so to speak. As Foucault points out,

‘detail’ had long been a category of theology and asceticism: every detail is important since, in the sight of God, no immensity is greater than a detail, nor is anything small that it was not willed by one of his individual wishes. In this great tradition of the eminence of detail, all the minutiae of Christian education, of scholastic or military pedagogy, all forms of ‘training’ found their place easily enough.⁷⁸

Back to Tonal Training: Memory and Ear

I can see and understand the interaction between the various musical lines in J.S. Bach’s composition, but cannot create even a simplified version of an eight-bar *passacaglia* variation. Why is it that my ear fails to retain the bassline when notes are added? After all, as I described in Chapter One, I was trained to hear and retain the bassline of a harmonic progression. In Chapter Two, I explored the shifting relations between orality and textuality that dictates the rate at which we and our ancestors process raw data. My training dictates how I hear interactions between various lines of a musical texture.

Pauline Oliveros, in her 2015 TEDx talk entitled “The Difference between Hearing and Listening,” explains that music schools often confuse hearing, which can be scientifically measured, with listening, which involves an entire complex of subjective experiences. *Oliveros*

⁷⁸ Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” 139-140.

speaks of the ear being merely an organ and as such it cannot be trained. What really happens in ear training classes, says Oliveros, is a cultivation of the musical mind.⁷⁹ Listening is a lifetime practice that depends on accumulative experiences with sound. And so, questions pertaining to memory intertwine with and circle back to the issues of the “trained” musical ear, as well as the hand (muscle) coordination.

The strict style counterpoint I studied as a girl in theory classes is first and foremost a technical exercise, requiring more eye-work than ear-work. And even though what I wrote on the page was working in conjunction with my memorized sound bank, developing contrapuntal skills at a desk was still a passive analytical activity, detached from the real-time performance constraints of its realization. Just because I can ascertain the separate lines in polyphonic music does not mean I can compose a piece in that technical style “on the go.”

There is also a conflict between the way I was taught to approach voice leading rules in compositional procedures and what I gained from singing J.S. Bach’s polyphonic works. What I have drilled in my memory as correct counterpoint is not what I always get with compositions I play. Much of J.S. Bach’s polyphonic writing does not, *strictly* speaking, follow the rules of point-against-point counterpoint—especially not in a virtuosic showpiece like the *Passacaglia and Fugue*. The perfectionism ingrained in me and my inability to achieve perfection, according to my training, results in my inability to create anything in a more flexible style. I tend to remain trapped within the deeply ingrained instructions to stay within the parameters of strict voice leading at all times. This limitation certainly does not alleviate my practical difficulties with improvising music on hand.

⁷⁹ Pauline Oliveros, “The Difference Between Hearing and Listening,” filmed November 12, 2015 at TEDxIndianapolis, IN, video, 11:37. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QHfOuRrJB8.

The minute difference in the way my ear approves combinations of sounds also helps me understand why a single pairing of two different pitches interferes with my ability to sustain the memory of the bassline. Take, for instance, works like Carmen Staaf's *Passacaglia in G-minor*, based on the style of J.S. Bach's BWV582, or even J.S. Bach's or Buxtehude's ground-bass driven compositions, where clashing, unprepared dissonances so easily throw me off the rails. These disorienting moments are particularly visceral when I isolate and sing the polyphonic line with the "error" while playing the rest of the parts. I notice that it becomes difficult for me to sustain my pitch and my body tenses up when the sung and played parts converge at points of particularly gnarly dissonant clashes. I have trouble moving past these instantaneous moments, without falling apart.

I have come to realize that I need to apply a fair amount of logic and knowledge to follow along with or reconstruct harmonic progressions as well. It does not help that most harmonization exercises, essentially what I trained on through the Soviet textbooks, required me to supply the lower three parts to a given melody. Building harmonies from a given bassline was almost never emphasized in harmony classes in the Soviet textbooks, even though we were taught to think and hear harmonies from ground up. For this reason, I can only follow harmonic progressions if I am able to relate the chords I hear to the bassline of the progression. Furthermore, my ability to isolate the bassline dictates my ability to hear music in this particular domain. To hear the chords I am dependent on my familiarity with the "classic" chords I have sung oh-so-many times in solfeggio and elementary music theory classes. I am not certain if I can decipher a complex harmonic progression from the impression of the individual chords only. It is also clear to me that if something falls outside of nineteenth-century "Russian Romantic" harmonic language, I am less likely to be able to orient myself in the sea of sounds.

Clearly a disconnect happens somewhere between the particular kind of training I have received, and the historic approaches I try to emulate. This becomes crucial when an element of intuitive thinking is involved. I tend to like harmonies that are familiar, harmonies that I have explored thoroughly by singing the arpeggiated chords up and down hundreds of times. Here I must take another factor into account: that the coded instructional manual, which I follow by default when called upon to act, is from the days when I was a much more impressionable and malleable student. Even though over the past decade I have been delving more and more into a new world of liberated musical possibilities, that education, which has taught me how to make sense of and navigate the world as a young adult, remains an integral part of my identity.

Radical Solutions

I have wondered if a solution to this disconnect is for me to intentionally step outside of all inculcated boundaries of my Western training, and take the process in as opposite a direction is possible. Can I—do I, in fact—enjoy clusters of sounds for what they are? Can I accept the effect of sound clusters, especially if I cannot relate to them? Can I not punish my hands for drifting away from all acceptable and safe boundaries of gestured movement? What if what I do, for a moment, sounds nothing like the music of the Western European tradition? Would such departures ease the buildup of tension around getting everything right in a teleologically timed, *logically* paced manner? Would the embrace of that which I for a long time associated with failure be the catalyst for finding a way out of the conundrum?

To take the principles of classical music all too seriously is, I think, just silly. And silliness is what I often need, in fact, in order to shake off the Foucauldian constraints that are holding me down. Harold Pickering, a professor at Hastings College of Law, opens his article

titled “On Learning to Write: Suggestions for Study and Practice” by referencing George Bernard Shaw’s remark that one learns how to write by making a fool of himself until he learns how.⁸⁰

The troubles I am having with discipline and punishment are shared by many musicians and musicologists, notably by George Lewis and Vijay Iyer, who have invested their efforts in free improvisation. Giovanni Russonello in his New Your Times magazine article called Lewis and Iyer nondimensional leaders in music.⁸¹ Lewis has for a long time has been working on answering some of these same questions I encounter through his scholarly and musical activities. Lewis studied composition at the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians’ School of Music has been trying to close the gap between the highly disciplined and more creative approaches in music making. Iyer, a self-taught pianist who switch to free jazz and exploration of the music of his Indian heritage from a scientific discipline, has been contributing his fair share to the efforts to erase genre distinctions between traditional music, western European music, jazz music, electronic music, and more, through musical communities—along with it the stiff distinctions which regulate the musical choices musicians are allowed to make within each distinct genre. No matter our background or training, there will always be some type of limitation or hamper on the improviser.

Time

⁸⁰ Harold Pickering, “On Learning to Write: Suggestions for Study and Practice,” *American Bar Association Journal* 41, no 12 (December, 1955): 1121.

⁸¹ Giovanni Russonello, “Just the Right Time for a ‘Nondenominational Leader’ in Music,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/07/arts/music/vijay-iyer-ojai-festival-village-vanguard.html>.

Finally, I have to turn my discussion to an aspect of musical improvisation of utmost importance—one which, thus far, I have only touched upon in passing. It has to do with the values we attach to the sense of pacing, with the temporal component of any musical activity. Nearly every historical account which concerns itself with describing the appropriate manner of playing music mentions the importance of keeping a steady pace. Young Bach recommends that the performer do anything that is necessary—strike accented beats within the meter, repeat sustained chords, etc.—to keep a steady flow in accompanying.⁸² He recommends this approach even when playing a free fantasia, a genre which he describes as “unmeasured” and moving “through more keys than is customary in other pieces, which are composed or improvised in meter.”⁸³ He explains that meter is not only important for the coherence of musical composition, but also for communicating affective states and meanings to listeners:

Unbarred free fantasias seems especially adept at the expression of affects, for each meter carries a kind of compulsion within itself. At least it can be seen in accompanied recitatives that tempo and meter must be frequently changed in order to rouse and still the rapidly alternating affects.⁸⁴

And yet, is this how things really happen? Did J.S. Bach never falter, did he never take an extra instant out of rhythm to think what to do next? Did singers of the Renaissance era, who had to follow carefully the timing of events in contrapuntal improvisation, not get flustered in trying to keep pace with moving music, in the midst of complex brain activities? Did there not exist an age before the invention and complete domination of the metronome? To push this line of thought further: could it be that people took tea breaks between the sections of an improvised

⁸² Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and William J. Mitchell, *Essay on the True Art*, 33-34.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 430.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 153.

fantasia, or that someone would run back from a particularly inspirational walk in the outdoors and continue with the journey of emotional exploration they started earlier that day at the keyboard?⁸⁵

The temporal aspect of musical processes intertwines interestingly with the faculty of memory as well. I cannot help but think about the amount of stress that playing harmonic progressions in four-part choral harmonization, with metronomic steadiness and accuracy, placed on my ability to function as a student. And what does the metronomic approach, which places so much modality-specific attentional demand on available resources, do for my ability to improvise today? Because in my experience, when the ear fails, the memory follows, when memory fails, the hands are unable to move in accordance to the set pace of music.

Steady pulse, can be a positive element in the efforts to improvise. After all, ground-bass driven genres such as the passacaglia, even when highly stylized, are at their roots, a dance! At least in the Common era, dance meters determined both the mood and the flow of the piece. This remains true even when diversely texturized rhythms deem a piece undanceable. When the steady meter and rhythmic patterns are internalized and felt in the bones, they can create a stable ground for improvised creativity. A corporeal sense of rhythm in particular can assist, and even stimulate invention and extemporization. However, when the metric sense loses its flexibility of breadth and becomes a mere qualitative observation of time, measured by its precise and equal increments of duration, the available mental space for a performer to act and react creatively is reduced drastically. This outcome is most apparent when a metronomic click is treated as an objective truth and the performer loses the larger sense of rhythm within a phrase or even the

⁸⁵ This very question is addressed from another angle in Annette Richards 2001 book *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque*.

entire composition. To give but one example: if I did not follow my instincts on the cadenza I conceived of in J.S. Bach's piece, if I had tried to fit my musical fancy into the $\frac{3}{4}$ metered bars instead of taking the cadenza out of metric constraints, I would have potentially lost an opportunity to improvise.

Figure 4.1 BWV 582, fermata and ending



When I worked on developing a cadenza for the Bach's BWV582, I kept arriving at a musical solution which did not fit the $\frac{3}{4}$ meter of the piece at the last moment right before I picked up with the down beat of the measure after the fermata sign. Practicing with a metronome would have precluded me from arriving at a convincing musical solution. What the cadenza needed was an extension at the end, just an extra beat or two. As Josué Meléndez Peláez writes in his article titled "Cadenze Per Finali: Exuberant and extended cadences in the 16th and 17th Centuries," most virtuosic cadences prolonged the penultimate note of a musical piece.

These cadences are mostly called finale (sometimes also accadenza) and their most remarkable characteristic is that they alter the length of the penultimate measure, prolonging it to provide space to add a richly ornamented cadence. Indeed, written

examples of ornamented cadences that are not called finale stay strictly to the number of beats given in their original unornamented figures.⁸⁶

And so, the idea of metronomic time that so troubles me is only one rather limited way of regarding musical time. The history of the very period I study suggests that dance rhythm was once much better acknowledged and understood by classical musicians than it is today.

Other Unexpected Pathways

Recalling my accidental improvisation while playing a hymn at church as described in *Observation no. 2* in Chapter Three makes me realize that sometimes dulling the visual stimuli and ignoring the dominant emotion and chatter in the mind helps sail the ship. Simply refusing something as important as the need to keep up with a score opens up other ways of focusing on the task. In this case, it was the ear that led the way, as well as the muscle memory that was activated to carry me through the remaining few steps. In the moment of panic and dissolution, it felt as if my eyes were neither searching in the score, nor fully focused on the keyboard. I think what happened in this split-second decision is that a sort of drilled Emergency Response Preparedness Manual was activated. I basically successfully “sold” the performance to the congregation as an intended course of action on my part.

As recently as several years ago I would not have been able to recover like this. I would have simply stopped playing and, as it were, dropped all the juggled objects from mid-air to the ground. Not following scripted directions was not part of the permissible. However, in improvisation:

perceptual feedback also shapes the improviser’s decisions as to the course that the music will take . . . In improvisation, the concept of error is somewhat different from that in the

⁸⁶ Josué Meléndez Peláez, “Cadenze Per Finali: Exuberant and extended cadences in the 16th and 17th Centuries,” in *Musical Improvisation in the Baroque Era*, *Speculum Musicae*, volume XXXIII, ed. Fulvia Morabito (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 63.

realization of compositions, because any event can potentially be incorporated into an improvisation, and while a sonic event cannot be withdrawn, it can be subject to retrospective “erasure,” reinterpretation, or repositioning (Smith and Dean 1997).⁸⁷

I am perhaps far from the moment when an audience member will shout out, “Olé! That has duende!”⁸⁸ But, perhaps, I ought to take note of these small moments of victory. Even if they are seemingly insignificant, instance of tangible growth like the one described above are sure markers of success, towards acquiring an improvisational prowess.

Poor Taste

Part of my project of reinventing the improvisational wheel involves not shying away from being bad at what I do. After all, it appears that in the Early Modern period, bad taste in music-making was as abundant as improvisation was commonplace. Poorly improvised music was just as integral to the past traditions as exemplary presentations were. Otherwise, there would not exist such an exhaustive amount of cautionary advice against poor taste in treatises about improvisation and music in general. In fact, warnings against bad taste given to amateurs and virtuosic musicians striving to improvise, sound suspiciously close in tone. While “[t]he canon of taste in the sixteenth century permitted a soloist greater freedom than an ensemble performer,” cautionary notes on excessive ornamentation and overcomplication were given to all.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Roger T. Dean and Freya Bailes, “Cognitive Processes in Musical Improvisation,” *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1*, September 29, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195370935.013.007>: 2.

⁸⁸ This is a passage taken from Federico Garcia Lorca’s, “Play and Theory of Duende,” first given as a lecture in 1933 and later published in his *In Search of Duende*, translated by Christopher Maurer (Second Edition) (New Directions Pearls, 2010). In the passage, on page 57, Lorca describes an experience of a Gypsy dancer, La Malena’s reaction to Brailowsky’s performance of J.S. Bach.

⁸⁹ Brown, *Embellishing 16th Century Music*, 53.

My goal here, of course is not to intentionally solidify poor improvisation. It is, rather, to cut myself some slack in knowing that everyone had to start from somewhere. Improvisation is a learning process that:

is of special interest for cognitive science since real-time processes place great demands on available resources. In relation to this argument, Pressing (1988) writes that ‘the need of the improviser is for a good solution, not the best,’ since the search for an optimum would be too time-consuming and resource-intensive.⁹⁰

I have to be accepting of my natural abilities, even as I learn to be critical of my training. I have to become comfortable with being receptive to sound clusters and sequences which may not readily please my “cultivated sensitivity,” and rhythms and meters which may not rhyme with the ideal perception of time. And I have to be patient with myself when, having set my intention to risk performing such things in public, I end up retreating back to playing it safe from a score.

Exploring Vulnerability: Some Ethical Dimensions of my Project

Acknowledging the experience of vulnerability in the act of improvisation can help that improvisation flow, but it can also help nourish aspects of a self which otherwise are dormant or conveniently suppressed. Humans have long adapted to living shielded and false lives precisely to avoid being in vulnerable positions. The underlying delight generated by improvisation comes in part from the element of originality. Arguably, improvisation is an ephemeral instance of self-sacrificing exposure of the unique self, that which under the logic of self-preservation should remain out of reach.

Thinking about ethics and aesthetics through the practice of improvisation, I am, in a sense, trying to understand how I am to live life. Knowledge, virtue, and happiness all are gains I

⁹⁰ Dean and Bailes, “Cognitive Processes in Musical Improvisation,” 3.

can potentially realize through working out the questions of improvisation. Going up against barriers under the banner of self-betterment has been an ongoing project for me for quite some time now. Learning to improvise music and learning to be comfortable improvising, whether alone in the practice space or in front of an audience, have been important ways of overcoming long-standing personal inhibitions. Trying to understand what is hindering my attempts and how to overcome it is rightfully a topic for ethical self-examination. With this observation, several questions come to mind: How do I understand vulnerability, as it relates to improvisation? In addition, what is the role and the potential of personal ethics with respect to this model?

Inability to improvise could simply be a matter of skill or lack thereof. But sometimes inability to act is a state determined by off-putting conditions. In a performance space, these conditions often arise from internalization of a need to satisfy the expectations of a culturally informed audience, or from self-inflicted criticism. One becomes hyper-aware of embodied fears when faced with the risk of judgment. Under extreme pressure, skills become undermined by fear-based physiological and mental processes. Thus, the fear of exposure and the sense of boundless vulnerability of the subjective musical self halt your sounding of musical expression. What I have come to realize is that my difficulties and limitations in improvisation are not just tied to my skills as a performer or to my intellectual capabilities, but rather they are a result of a number of external barriers, tied to my music training. They involve my personal fears and inhibitions (whatever I think I am lacking because of my personality traits, or simply because of my training as a “classical conservatory style” musician), and they also involve my gender, as it is constructed in Western European traditions of keyboard improvisation, and in my personal cultural and ethnic background.

The desire to reclaim my original story—in Cavarero’s sense—from the ways it has been determined and reshaped by the outside world might be satisfied through this self-oriented investigation of my musical potential. The narration of my potential—in effect, this dissertation—could enable me to reclaim my voice and my authority, in order to be expressive musically and, even more importantly, to be expressive publicly. The internal reexamination of the conditions responsible for my sense of vulnerability could truly constitute an exercise in self-care via a personal ethics of virtue.⁹¹ If self-care is the ethical benefit of aural vulnerability, then improvisation is one way of getting there.

⁹¹ This discussion merits a closer engagement with Foucault’s writing on the ancient Greek concept of *epimeleia heautou* (care of self), as well as with relevant works by feminist authors, such as Carol Gilligan, Diana Meyers, in my future investigations.

Appendix

The UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music
Department of Music

presents

Anahit Rostomyan

Organ

Doctor of Musical Arts
Final Recital



December 5, 2018

4:00 PM

Royce Hall

UCLA

free admission

This recital is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree at
UCLA.
Program

Dietrich Buxtehude (1637–1707)

Ciacona in E-minor (BuxWV160)

Carmen Staaf (b. 1981)

Passacaglia in G-minor, 2018 — premiere

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Passacaglia and Fugue in C-minor (BWV582)

Carlotta Ferrari (b. 1975)

Massacaglia e Fuga per organo (Dedicata a Luca Massaglia), 2014

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788)

Fantasia in E-flat major (Wq. 58/6, H. 277)

Emma Lou Diemer (b. 1927)

Fantasy for Organ, Based on Valet Will Ich Der Geben & Hyfrydol, c. 2007

Anahit Rostomyan is an avid performer on period keyboard instruments. As a keyboardist, she has collaborated with the American Youth Symphony, the Enlightenment Chamber Music Ensemble, UCLA's Early Music Ensemble, and the Los Angeles Baroque community ensemble.

Anahit started her music education as a student of musicology and music theory in her native country of Armenia in 1996, first at the Romanos Melikyan Academy and later at the Komitas Yerevan State Conservatory. Her education at the conservatory was left incomplete when her family permanently moved to the United States in 2002. Her career as an organist began under the instruction of Mark Thallander in 2006. During her undergraduate work at UCLA (2006-2008) in the music history program, she resumed her organ studies, this time with Dr. Christoph Bull, with whom she is currently studying. Rostomyan holds a Master of Music in Organ Performance and a Master of Arts in Musicology and is currently pursuing dual DMA and PhD degrees in these two fields of study at UCLA. For her dissertation in the Department of Musicology, she is working on questions related to the pedagogy of Soviet music theory, focusing on ideologies driving the cultivation of the musical ear. Concurrently, through her graduate studies in the Music Department, Rostomyan is exploring avenues of acquiring skills at keyboard improvisation by seeking assistance from sixteenth- through eighteenth-century treatises on the subject and by reevaluating the place of women in relation to this musical practice from a current cultural standpoint.



Notes from the performer:

About the DMA project

For today's musicians, learning to improvise takes more than just acquiring skills and vocabulary or quickness of mind—as most historic texts claim. It takes breaking long-standing oppressive barriers that have been reinforced for centuries through social formations. On a more personal note, for me—a female musician trained partly in the conservatory style tradition—learning to improvise essentially requires engagement with the political, and the larger task at hand surpasses the bounds of the “merely musical.” My exploration of personal improvisational prowess through present musical selections marks only the beginning of a life-long project I fervently embrace.

The program

The present program consists of three historic and three contemporary compositions. All these compositions are either derived from or invite improvisation, and they have been integral parts of my learning to improvise. In varying degrees, they help me imagine what the creative processes might have been like in the past and to what degree the set improvisational parameters (be they in a formula or a fully fledged genre) have been extended in more recent times.

Ciacona in E-minor (BuxWV160)

German or Danish composer and virtuoso organist Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707) was one of the most important and influential figures in the music world of his era. Johann Sebastian Bach admired Buxtehude's talent and studied his elder colleague's works extensively. Showcasing the technological advances in organ building at the time, the instrument on which Buxtehude primarily worked was no less impressive than the man himself. His organ in Lübeck had 52 stops, 15 of which were pedal stops, including two 32' stops. Naturally, Buxtehude's organ compositions include active pedal passages. *Cianona in E-minor* is comparatively less virtuosic and bombastic in character. It belongs to a small group of solo organ pieces that are based on an *ostinato* pattern, in this case, a gradually descending line in the pedal part from E to B and over again. The entire composition consists of a set of episodes and variations that develop out of this basic formula.

Passacaglia in G-minor, world premiere

Pianist-composer Carmen Staaf is an active voice in the New York City and global music scenes. Her skills and approach have led her to perform in a wide range of settings, with some of the most influential and important musicians of our time. *Passacaglia in G-minor* is the fruit of collaborative conversations between Carmen and me that stemmed from a course on improvisation that Carmen and I took several years ago. Taking Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passacaglia in C-minor* as a model, Carmen presents her own interpretation of the well-known composition, as well as the genre of passacaglia as a whole. Being a highly skilled improviser and a sensible mentor, Carmen provides several opportunities for improvisation for the novice practitioner of that craft. This includes the *ad libitum* opening and closing sections that frame the passacaglia as well as a few variations throughout the piece. In every one of these instances, the composer provides just enough structural guidance for the performer to complete coloring the variation.

Passacaglia and Fugue in C-minor (BWV582)

Johann Sebastian Bach's *Passacaglia in C Minor BWV 582* is perfect for exploring salient moments in the history of the development of the Western improvisation traditions, as it marks the limits of what is (humanly) possible and, at the same time, provides invaluable pedagogical guidance for moving forward, for bridging the gap between the present and the past. Bach famously derives the first half of his extended pedal line from André Raison's "*Christe: Trio en passacaille*" from *Messe du deuxième ton* of the *Premier livre d'orgue*. This pedal ostinato is both the core of the passacaglia variations and the subject of the fugue that follows.

Massacaglia e Fuga per organo (Dedicata a Luca Massaglia)

Educated at the Conservatory of Milan, the Italian composer Carlotta Ferrari (b. 1975) has composed in many genres, developing a personal language that is concerned with the blend of the past and present. *Massacaglia e Fuga per organo (Dedicata a Luca Massaglia)* is one vibrant example of her compositional style. The piece uses the idiomatic characteristics of the historic tradition of the chaconne and, simultaneously, contemporary compositional language. The transparency with which Ferrari presents her compositional process does not subtract from the imaginative potential of the composition.

Fantasia in E-flat major (Wq. 58/6, H. 277)

The early fantasias were free structured works for keyboards that were often fully improvised or, as in this case, written in an improvisatory manner. The fantasias from around 1750 to 1780 were an important vehicle for the *Empfindsamkeit* aesthetic movement in music, especially in the hands of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. They focused on the exploration of the internal fantastical world. Even though there is no specific instrument designation for the keyboard fantasias, this piece would most likely have

Will Ich Der Geben & Hyfrydol represents a later development of the genre. By the twentieth century, the fantasia developed into a slightly different type of compositional form in the hands of organists. In this later iteration of the old improvised genre, the bulk of the musical content is derived from chorale tunes or otherwise well-established themes. In addition to including elements of the long-standing tradition of fantasias, Diemer's score explicitly calls for the performer to improvise on several occasions. The only stipulation the composer provides for the performer is to play with set pitches during these free-standing passages.



As a jazz pianist, this piece presented me with what in some ways was a very familiar challenge: to create variations over a repeated bass line, finding ways to develop rhythmic and harmonic interest. An improviser composing for a fellow improviser, I wanted to leave room for seamless moments of improvisation in between the composed variations at certain points in the piece. However, there were other quite different challenges as well, not least that I had never studied nor written for the organ. Anahit graciously worked with me as I discovered the technical, timbral, and expressive possibilities available.

I also set the challenge, to both of us, of creating a dance-like forward motion in the odd meter of 5/4, attempting to fit the Baroque-influenced language I was hearing into this unusual framework. To avoid becoming repetitive, this metrical puzzle also demanded rhythmic variety, which became a mechanism for tension and release throughout the piece. In jazz, 5/4 has become a standard meter in which to play and improvise. I may be wrong, but I doubt that organists are commonly asked to do what I have asked of Anahit here. I have been incredibly lucky to have such a dedicated, talented and intelligent performer as Anahit to lead me into this world. Her registration, improvisational skills, phrasing, and rhythmic sense brought the piece to life beyond all of my hopes.

Carmen Staaf
Brooklyn, 2018

Thank you



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