

(RE)CREATING THE PAST: BAROQUE IMPROVISATION IN THE EARLY MUSIC REVIVAL

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Abstract:

This article explores the contentious position of improvisation in the contemporary Baroque music revival. Paradoxically, historical performers aim to obey the composer’s intentions by paying careful attention to the written instructions of the musical score yet they also seek to recreate the performative conventions—and freedoms—of an earlier era. The performance practice literature, the recording industry, and the conservatory education of historical performers reinforce a text-centered approach to music that is antithetical to spontaneous creativity. While in-depth understanding of Baroque performing conventions and repertoire is important, greater rapprochement with living improvisatory traditions might result in more liberatory performances of early music. Key words: Early music, historical performance, Baroque music, 17th century, 18th century, improvisation

Article:

Improvisation and the related practices of ornamentation and embellishment have long fascinated musicians involved in the early music revival. Those who specialize in envisioning and recreating the music of the past, especially music composed prior to 1800, have subjected the issue of extemporization to much scholarly inquiry.¹ Yet the subject remains controversial, and a number of open questions remain. For example, when and where is it appropriate for performers to add embellishments to the written score? And, more importantly, how does the issue of improvisation in performance connect to a related matter: the pursuit of authenticity by attempting to fulfill the composer’s intentions and/or recreating the conditions surrounding the premiere of a musical work? In the 1980s and 1990s, Richard Taruskin’s criticism of the early music movement placed him squarely at the centre of these aesthetic and philosophical debates. In his well-known essay ‘On Letting the Music Speak for Itself’, Taruskin attacked historical performers for their slavish attention to the written details of the musical score, and the mechanical and unhistorical interpretations which he felt resulted. By way of emphasizing his point that contemporary early music performances were anachronistic, he remarked that,

...with the possible exception of the rather ambiguous case of continuo realization, the modern reconstructionist movement has produced many scrupulous realizers of musical notation but has yet to produce a single genuine master of improvisation, which we all know to have been nine-tenths of the Renaissance and Baroque musical icebergs.²

¹ Harry Haskell has defined early music as ‘any music for which a historically appropriate style of performance must be reconstructed on the basis of surviving scores, treatises, instruments and other contemporary evidence.’ See: Haskell, ‘Early music’, in: *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/46003> (accessed 26 August 2008).

² Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, 61. This essay was originally published in 1982. The neglect of improvisation is a recurring theme throughout *Text and Act*, particularly essays seven and eleven.

With the above statement, Taruskin lobbed an especially powerful critique at the early music movement's followers by highlighting the inherent contradiction between two of their core values: the desire, on the one hand, to follow the composer's intentions literally by carefully interpreting the written notes of the score, and, on the other, to recapture the creative spirit and performative freedoms of earlier eras, which also might have informed compositional intent. It is a paradox that Henry Kingsbury has formulated elsewhere as obeying the letter versus obeying the spirit of the text, using terms derived from US constitutional law.³

I will return below to the conflicting goals of text-centeredness and text-openness in interpretation and to the validity of Taruskin's claim that 20th-century historical performers have unduly neglected improvisation.⁴ For the moment, I am interested in the implication in the above-cited passage that terms such as 'Renaissance', 'Baroque'⁵ and 'improvisation' go hand-in-hand, and the oft-mentioned truism that improvisation is an important—even indispensable—component of performing music composed prior to 1800. For musicologist and harpsichordist/organist David Fuller, improvisation is even more important in Baroque music than in any other classical music repertoire. In an essay entitled 'The Performer as Composer', included in the two-volume Norton/Grove handbook *Performance Practice*, he writes, 'In the 17th and 18th centuries, the collaboration between composer and performer, without which no music can exist that is not improvised or composed directly into its medium (like electronic music), was weighted more heavily towards the performer than at any time since and perhaps before.'⁶

It would seem difficult to substantiate such a sweeping statement, particularly considering the fragmented survival of sources for music prior to 1600. Nevertheless, Fuller's assertion that distinctions between composer (as creator) and performer (as interpreter), and between spontaneous improvisation and fixed composition, were somehow more fluid in the Baroque than in other time periods warrants closer examination. Indeed, the period is conveniently bookended by Claudio Monteverdi at its beginning and Johann Sebastian Bach at its end, composers whose works would seem to progress from a sparser system of notation, implying greater performative freedoms, to a more elaborate notation system in which ornamentation, tempo, rhythm, instrumentation and other performative concerns are more carefully indicated in the score.

Beyond advances in notation, however, there are larger forces at work during the period 1600-1750: more important are a series of developing practices and institutions that had profound implications for improvisation. Firstly, we see the emergence of basso continuo accompaniment as both a compositional technique, notational shorthand and performance practice, which allowed performers some flexibility in terms of voicing, registration and instrumentation, but also its eventual eclipsing in the latter half of the 18th century (at least in the solo instrumental sonata) by fully-composed and notated obligato accompaniment parts. Secondly, the expansion of the music publishing industry in the 17th and 18th centuries also had an impact on the practice of extemporization. Circulating works far outside the composer's immediate circle meant that the author had less control over interpretation, necessitating that the notation become more precise; moreover, the rise of the concept of authorship and the passage of intellectual property legislation gradually resulted in the prioritization

³ Henry Kingsbury, 'Sociological Factors in Musicological Poetics', *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 35, no. 2, Spring – Summer 1991, 195-219 (here 211-217). In a similar vein, Randall Dipert posits three categories of composer intentionality, ranging in their relative importance, and considers the aesthetic and ethical implications of adhering to them. See: Randall R. Dipert, 'The Composer's Intentions: An Examination of Their Relevance for Performance', *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 2, April 1980, 205-218.

⁴ Taruskin qualifies the above-cited passage in *Text and Act* in several essays on Mozart interpretation by noting Robert Levin's Classical-style improvisations as an important exception (Richard Taruskin, op. cit., 82). Significantly, he does not name any performers of earlier repertoire as skilled extemporizers.

⁵ I shall leave aside for the moment the question of what constitutes 'Renaissance' and 'Baroque' music, though it perhaps goes without saying that such categories are anachronistic, porous, and historical oversimplifications to say the least. For the purposes of this essay, I will use the dividing markers commonly used in undergraduate music history textbooks, in other words European music composed ca. 1430-1600 for the Renaissance, and ca. 1600-1750 for the Baroque.

⁶ David Fuller, 'The Performer as Composer', in: Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie (eds), in: *Performance Practice: Music after 1600*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1990, 117.

of the musical work in written form as both a commodity and as an original creative act belonging to the composer.⁷

The increase in the publication of sheet music and contemporary written sources about performance practice (such as treatises, instruction books, travelogues and the like) is indicative of a new culture of reading and writing about musical performance. With the emergence of a literate class of amateur performers during this period, an abundance of music instruction treatises could be targeted to these consumers. We can thus observe composers publishing more explicit performing instructions and written-out ornamentation, implying that amateur musicians trained outside guilds or family-based master-disciple relationships needed more precise written examples and guidelines. Thirdly, the development and expansion of institutions such as the orchestra and the conservatory gradually placed limitations on personal expression and extemporization through the prioritization of a group sound and the systematization of musical instruction. In sum, all of these 18th-century developments forced a confrontation between such seemingly antithetical concepts as improvisation and fixed notation, and oral and written forms of musical transmission; not surprisingly, they have continued to figure prominently in debates among contemporary early music performers today.

The Baroque period thus saw a number of institutional and socioeconomic changes that impacted upon improvisation, and as such it will be my principal focus here.⁸ But what do we mean precisely when, as performer, musicologist or—as in the case of many of us historical performers, embodiment of both roles—we invoke the phrase ‘Baroque improvisation’? Do we mean, as Paul Berliner asks rhetorically, ‘picking notes out of thin air’,⁹ perhaps in this case the spontaneous generation of an entirely new piece indistinguishable from a 17th or 18th-century composition? Do we mean the composition of new melodic parts above a provided ground bass, a new set of diminutions or a double for a 17th-century air de cour, or the addition of new material in a more limited fashion, such as a cadenza in a sonata or concerto? Or does Baroque improvisation imply only the addition of a few ornaments to a previously-composed score, based on an assimilation of the surviving written-out examples and treatises from the period? Is it acceptable to term such ornaments and cadenzas ‘improvisation’ if they are written down, memorized or sketched out in advance, or must they literally be performed on the spot? Would we include in a discussion of Baroque improvisation the realization of a basso continuo part, even though the chords are usually indicated above the bass line, and good voice-leading rules and contemporary treatises place significant constraints on interpretation?¹⁰ Where exactly do we draw the line between spontaneity and pre-planning, and between interpretation, composition and improvisation? Improvisation, as Bruno Nettl suggests, would seem to occur on a continuum; its definition is socially determined and dependent on cultural context.¹¹ This is true, I would argue, not only for non-western musics, jazz and other genres, but also for European music composed from 1600 to 1750—as practiced by 17th and 18th-century musicians, but also by 20th and 21st-century musicians in the early music revival.

⁷ Intellectual property legislation had its origins in Great Britain in 1709, with the passage of a copyright act, and in France, with the establishment of a bureau for collecting royalties for the authors of written and dramatic works (including composers of ballet and opera) in 1791 (see: Peter Kleiner et al, ‘Copyright’, in: *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40690> (accessed 16 August 2008). For more on the emergence of the ‘work concept’ and the establishment of the musical composition as an individual, creative act, see: Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Rev. ed., Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2007

⁸ We also cannot ignore the extraordinary commercial success of Baroque music with 20th-century audiences and record-buyers.

⁹ Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1994, 1-17. Berliner here cites jazz string bass player Calvin Hill in the epigraph to his introduction.

¹⁰ Such constraints are perhaps why Taruskin refers to continuo as an ‘ambiguous’ case in the passage cited above.

¹¹ Bruno Nettl, ‘Introduction: An Art Neglected in Scholarship’, in: Bruno Nettl and Melinda Russell (eds), *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 1-23. Similarly, Bruce Ellis Benson argues for a range of improvisatory practices to describe more than a dozen musical activities. See: Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 26-30.

It is not my intention here to provide an exhaustive survey of all 17th and 18th-century treatises or other period accounts of improvisation, a project which has been undertaken by numerous performance practice scholars.¹² It seems that we have an abundance of information confirming that extemporization was an important part of the aesthetic for musicians from three hundred years ago, though the nature and extent of such ornamentation seems to have varied widely by region, timeframe and genre. Rather, the interesting question is why much of this information is so often disregarded, resulting in the dearth of ‘modern’ Baroque improvisations decried by Taruskin in the early 1980s—a situation which, with few exceptions, continues to describe most concert performances of Baroque repertoire today. In an attempt to answer this question, I will examine the practice of improvisation in the contemporary early music revival, and will consider the three main types of sources historical performers rely upon to learn to improvise, namely scholarly writing on performance practice, recordings of other performers, and conservatory training.

1. The performance practice literature

In the 17th and 18th centuries, musicians learned to improvise mainly through oral transmission; for example, they might receive direct instruction from a more experienced musician, or they might imitate other examples heard aurally. However, the modern historical performer must turn primarily to written sources in order to recreate this process. These might include instructional treatises, ornament tables, concert reports, or written-out examples of ornamentation,¹³ such as the multiple versions of Corelli’s violin sonatas, op. 5,¹⁴ or Telemann’s *Sonate metodiche*.¹⁵ They might also consult secondary sources, written by 20th-century scholars, which strive to synthesize and interpret these primary materials—for, while improvisation itself is a spontaneous, ephemeral practice, and one that is difficult to analyze as it happens, it is possible to critically examine written texts. Among the most influential of these performance guidebooks in English are Arnold Dolmetsch’s *The Interpretation of the Music of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Robert Donington’s *The Interpretation of Early Music*, Frederick Neumann’s *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music: With Special Emphasis on J. S. Bach and Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, and the above-cited collection edited by Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie, *Performance Practice: Music After 1600*.¹⁶

Remarkably, more than half of Dolmetsch’s ground-breaking book is devoted to the chapter on ornamentation: graces such as appoggiaturas, trills, and acciaccaturas are discussed systematically along with quotations from various treatises, and explanations of ornament symbols are accompanied by fully written-out musical examples. However, apart from a brief discussion of divisions in Simpson and Quantz, there is little mention of free extemporization. As a pioneer in the early music revival, Dolmetsch’s first priority was to explain to his readers, who were accustomed to having composers write in every nuance in the score, how to interpret

¹² For an extensive bibliography, see: Michael Collins, Stewart A. Carter, Greer Garden and Robert E. Seletsky, ‘Improvisation, §II: Western Art Music: 3: The Baroque Period’, in: *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/13738pg1> (accessed 26 August 2008). See also the appendices in the twentieth-century performance practice manuals cited below (Donington, Neumann, etc.).

¹³ See Kenneth Kreitner, et al, ‘Ornaments’, in: *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/49928pg12> (accessed 26 August 2008) for an extensive bibliography. Additional eighteenth-century examples of written-out ornaments are reprinted in: Hans-Peter Schmitz, *Die Kunst der Verzierung im 18 Jahrhundert: instrumentale und vokale Musizierpraxis in Beispielen* / Hans-Peter Schmitz, Kassel and New York, Bärenreiter, 1965.

¹⁴ Arcangelo Corelli, *Sonate a violino e violone o cimbalo*, op.5, Rome, Santa, 1700. See: Neal Zaslaw, ‘Ornaments for Corelli’s Violin Sonatas, op.5’, *Early Music*, vol. 24, no. 1, February 1996, 95-116, for a detailed cataloguing and comparison of the extant versions, and H. Diack Johnstone, ‘Yet More Ornaments for Corelli’s Violin Sonatas, Op.5’, *Early Music*, vol. 24, no. 4, November 1996, 623-633, for additional sources.

¹⁵ Georg Philipp Telemann, *Sonate metodiche* and *Continuation des sonates méthodiques*, Hamburg, 1728 and 1732.

¹⁶ Arnold Dolmetsch, *The Interpretation of the Music of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, London, Novello and New York, H.W. Gray, 1915, revised edition, 1946, reprint Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1969; Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music*, London, Faber and Faber, 1963, revised edition, 1974, new revised edition, New York, Norton, 1989; Frederick Neumann, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music: With Special Emphasis on J. S. Bach*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978; Frederick Neumann, *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, New York, Schirmer, 1993; Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie, op. cit.

ambiguous notational symbols and to help them understand the unwritten conventions of a lost musical language. Later texts by Donington, Fuller and Neumann provide more nuanced differentiations between French, German and Italian ornament symbols, and explain different composer expectations for ornamentation. They tend to outline the practice of extemporization following the model established by Johann Joachim Quantz,¹⁷ distinguishing between essential graces, or small, localized ornaments in the French style; more elaborate Italianate embellishments that extend or fill in melodic lines in adagio movements or during an aria's da capo; and cadenzas.¹⁸ The implication is that early music performers should master such categories and written-out examples of extemporization, become specialists in a particular style, thus learning to master the ornaments so completely that they sound freely composed on the spot even when they are read off the page. Even more problematical, the Quantzian model is somewhat indiscriminately applied here: given that the Versuch was written in 1752, and thus at the very end of the period in question, it already reflects an understanding of composition and extemporization distinct from earlier practices.

There is a good deal of useful information in these contemporary performance practice guidebooks, and there is much value in attempting to organize, compare and codify the different types of ornaments and their symbols. Still, such books place an inordinate emphasis on the minutiae of performance practice, including such issues as inégalité and overdotting (the trill, for example, is treated particularly exhaustively by Neumann, who devotes 170 pages to it!),¹⁹ while free improvisation receives very little attention in proportion to its importance in the Baroque musician's training and sound world. Composer and performer, and improvisation and composition, are treated as distinct entities: the emphasis is on the performer's role as interpreter of an (implicitly imperfect) notational system. Thus, we see Donington remarking that, 'It is the wealth of passing detail, the felicity, unexpectedness and exuberance of the figuration which makes music out of [Baroque music's] mere basic progressions', yet lamenting that, 'Not enough modern performers are yet capable of doing this.'²⁰ He places the responsibility on the editor to provide appropriate ornamentation, rather than calling on the performer to acquire the skill of improvisation. Likewise, Neumann also calls on editors to provide ornamentation in 17th-century Italian orchestral parts, suggesting that 'collective improvisation would surely have invited chaos,' yet he seems to ignore the fact that group improvisation is not only possible, but is common in other musical genres in many other parts of the world, but also in western European musics, including the Baroque.²¹ More tellingly, Neumann writes of extemporization in the Italian style:

To what degree this ought to be done, however, is a question that has no simple answer. It will help to think here in terms of an "ornamentation belt"—that is, a fairly broad range of legitimately possible levels of ornamentation, extending from a desirable minimum to a saturation point.²²

¹⁷ Johann Joachim Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen*, Berlin, Johann Friedrich Voss, 1752. For the discussion of ornamentation and extemporization see: Johann Joachim Quantz, *On Playing the Flute*, trans. Edward R. Reilly, 2nd edition, New York, Schirmer Books, 1985, 113 and 136-195.

¹⁸ Robert Donington, op. cit., 152-153.

¹⁹ Frederick Neumann, *Performance Practices*, op. cit., 518. For references to group improvisation in western music prior to 1600 see: Imogene Horsley, 'Improvisation, §II: Western art music: 2. History to 1600', in: *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, (accessed 26 August 2008)

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/13738pg2>. For a discussion of orchestral improvisation in France see: Mary Térey-Smith, 'Orchestral Practice in the Paris Opéra (1690-1764), and the Spread of French Influence in Europe', *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. 31, nos. 1-4, 1989, 81-159 (especially 109-112). Térey-Smith's findings are striking because they indicate that orchestrally-improvised preludes were common even in French Baroque music, long thought to be more conservative in terms of extemporization than Italian music, and even after the death of Lully, who had supposedly restricted the practice.

²⁰ Frederick Neumann, *Performance Practices*, op. cit., 528.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 551.

²² This is not to imply that jazz musicians perform without *any* stylistic or harmonic constraints, or that the performance traditions of the past do not impose such limitations (for a discussion of conservatism in the jazz scene see: Bruce Ellis Benson, op. cit., 134-137). Rather, as Benson observes, restrictive language (such as Neumann's) does not typically form part of the vocabulary of jazz musicians (particularly in free jazz), and they tend to feel more at liberty to violate compositional intentions by improvising on 'fixed' tunes (*Ibid.*, 94-95).

He returns to this image of the ‘ornamentation belt’ in his discussion of German style, stating that, ‘it will be advisable for modern performers to use their best taste and judgment and exercise reserve, in awareness that it is better to err on the side of modesty than extravagance.’²³ Such admonitions to the performer do little to encourage freedom of expression: one could hardly imagine a jazz musician using a metaphor so restrictive!²⁴

In sum, relying on primary and secondary sources to learn Baroque improvisation tends to privilege music in its written form, exacerbating musicians’ reliance on the score instead of liberating them from it. This results in the persistence of the *Werktreue* aesthetic (‘being true to the work’) which, as Taruskin points out, is a 20th-century ideal whose application to music composed prior to 1800 is problematical.²⁵

2. The role of recordings

We might also consider the impact recordings and the recording industry have had on the early music revival, particularly with regard to improvisation. Recordings, like written-down ornaments, serve as another means of ‘fixing’ them in time for future study and analysis. To what extent can recordings serve as improvisational models for young early musicians? What impact do the production, marketing and editing of recordings have on the process of improvisation?

It is one of the great ironies of the historical performance movement that early musicians purportedly eschew modern instrumental technologies by using period instruments, yet have fully embraced all the technological advances of the modern recording studio, including multi-track recording, digitization, Super Audio CDs, and editing software. For early music ensembles, recordings play an important role in circulating their performances, maintaining their connection with audiences, and documenting their particular approach to a given repertoire.²⁶ Moreover, they act as a powerful recruitment tool for conservatory teachers: at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, where I was a traverso student from 1999 to 2003, I noted that many of my fellow early music students had first heard their teachers on recordings, and were inspired to come from countries all over the world to the Netherlands to study with them.²⁷

Recordings might also serve as models for improvisation. As Berliner has noted, they serve as important tools for aspiring jazz musicians, who often learn to improvise by copying the riffs off of their favourite performers’ albums.²⁸ However, there is an important distinction between how Baroque performers and contemporary historical performers study improvisation. While young musicians in the 17th and 18th centuries might have learned to improvise by listening to and imitating other performers, they would not have had the opportunity to hear the exact same ornaments played over and over again; such repeated listening is readily available to any modern musician with a CD or mp3 player, making the exact reproduction of another’s performance possible. One negative effect of recordings, some critics observe, is a tendency for historical performers to copy other musicians, resulting in a homogenizing sameness of sound and a generic ‘early music’ style applied unthinkingly to all repertoires. As Laurence Dreyfus noted, ‘What I hear far too often is an appallingly predictable approach to phrasing and articulation — perfectly adapted to the digital technology of the recording

²³ Richard Taruskin, op. cit.

²⁴ Kay Kaufman Shelemay, ‘Toward an Ethnomusicology of the Early Music Movement: Thoughts on Bridging Disciplines and Musical Worlds’, *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2001, 1-29 (here 17-18).

²⁵ Kailan R. Rubinoff, ‘The Early Music Movement in the Netherlands: History, Pedagogy and Ethnography’, Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 2006, 106-108.

²⁶ See: Paul Berliner, op. cit., 64-65; there are numerous other examples throughout.

²⁷ See: Laurence Dreyfus et al., ‘The Early Music Debate: Ancients, Moderns, Postmoderns’, *Journal of Musicology*, vol. 10, no. 1, winter 1992, 113-130 (here 115). Michael Morrow, cited in Robert Philip’s *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2004, 224-225, voices similar complaints.

²⁸ See Rubinoff, op. cit., 166-168, for a discussion of copying, originality and the conservatory environment, and note 37 below.

studio—in which the uniform lengths and conventionalized weights assigned to various note values render a cold and mechanical effect.²⁹ Early music students in conservatories are also frequently admonished by their teachers for copying their example,³⁰ thereby expressing an anxiety against imitation that is at least partly attributable to recordings.³¹

The recording process itself may also impact the performance of improvisation. In accordance with the Werkteue aesthetic, historical performers have often chosen to record pre-existing written-out ornamentation rather than their own extemporizations. This is of course true for the oft-recorded music of J.S. Bach, a composer who typically wrote in his own embellishments. Remarkably, however, it is also true for Italian Baroque repertoire, where purportedly much of the ornamentation was left to the discretion of the performer. The recording history of Corelli's op. 5 sonatas for violin (or recorder) is a notable case in point. In a review essay of eleven different period instrument recordings, Peter Walls was surprised to find how readily most performers relied upon the ornamented versions published by Estienne Roger in 1710, seemingly accepting Roger's dubious claim that they are Corelli's own. Few musicians ventured to perform other surviving 18th-century versions, or to add in their own ornaments.³² On a similar note, a reviewer of Telemann's Methodical Sonatas, performed by Barthold Kuijken, Wieland Kuijken, and Robert Kohnen, praised the overall playing and sound, but remarked that 'This is such a fascinating document for the boundaries of taste in 18th-century musical aesthetics, that it is surprising that no recording, including this one, has ever presented selected movements in multiple performances to show the diverse ways one might respond to Telemann's instructions.'³³ The net result of recording a written-down version of another musician's ornamentation (albeit an 18th-century one) is to further crystallize it as an authoritative document, moving us still further away from the practice of improvisation.

Assuming performers do choose to perform their own ornamentation, how certain can we be that the ornaments on recordings really are 'improvised'—or even, at the very least, performed in one take? As a listener, one has no way of knowing for certain, but considering the pressure on musicians and record companies to produce a flawless product, it is difficult to envision a finished result that reflects a spontaneous, live performance. While extensive editing is widely used throughout the industry, it has been especially par for the course in recordings of historical instruments, given the uneven intonation and playing standards that were typical when such instruments were first widely adopted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Robert Philip, citing correspondence from a producer at Nimbus Records in the early 1980s, notes that the Hanover Band was made to sound better

²⁹ The admonition against copying is not entirely a contemporary phenomenon, but it is voiced only occasionally by Baroque writers. The seventeenth-century French singer Bacilly, for example, critiques voice teachers who do not 'know how to do anything—neither composition, the invention of embellishments, nor their application. They are paid for performance only and are, therefore, nothing but perpetual copiers.' (See: Bénigne de Bacilly, *A Commentary upon the Art of Proper Singing*, trans. and ed. Austin B. Caswell, *Musical Theorists in Translation*, Vol. VII, Brooklyn, NY, The Institute of Mediaeval Music, 1968, 29-30; originally published as *Remarques curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter*, 1668, 62) Recordings, however, because they allow the exact replication of performances, exacerbate and magnify anxieties about copying.

³⁰ See: Peter Walls, 'Performing Corelli's Violin Sonatas, op.5', *Early Music*, vol. 24, no. 1, February 1996, 133-142 (here 138-139). John Holloway's 1996 recording with Trio Veracini (Novalis 150-128-2) includes interpretations of a number of different ornamented versions (though again, he is adhering to source material rather than improvising). On his 1999 recording, however, Andrew Manze (Harmonia Mundi HMU 907298.99) chose to perform his own ornaments, which he saw as more in keeping with the spirit of Corelli's intentions. On her 2004 recording (Naxos 8.557165), Lucy van Dael also adds some of her own ornamentation. Still, it is impossible for the listener to discern whether or not these performers are actually improvising here.

³¹ John W. Barker, 'Guide to records', *American Record Guide*, vol. 59, no. 3, May 1996, 211-212. The recording in question is Accent 94104.

³² Robert Philip, op. cit., 46 and 218. Similar comments about editing are made by Wolf Erichson regarding the recording of *Concentus Musicus Wien* in the 1960s (cited in: Dorottya Fabian, *Bach Performance Practice, 1945-1975: A Comprehensive Review of Sound Recordings and Literature*, Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2003, 39-40).

³³ Vanguard Classics 99189.

on recordings through editing than they ever could in a live performance.³⁴ Such cutting, pasting and splicing—even down to individual notes—is as important for solo repertoire as it is for orchestral works, where the greater number of performers makes for a larger margin of error.

Jed Wentz, traverso player, conductor and director of the ensemble Musica ad Rhenum, remarked that the editing process is particularly complicated when recording Italianate works, such as his own highly ornamental version of the Handel flute sonatas.³⁵ While he did compose his own extemporizations, for several reasons he had to write them out in advance rather than improvise them during the recording sessions. This is not simply because improvisation is an inherently risky endeavor. Some movements are ‘recycled’ in different sonatas (for example, the Larghetto in the Sonata in E minor, HWV 379 and the Adagio of the Sonata in E minor, HWV 375), and he wanted to be sure that the ornaments were distinct in each version. What is more, he observed that it is extremely difficult to cut and paste together takes if you truly are improvising during a recording session: matching different versions of an ornament (one with sixteenth-note divisions and another with triplets, for example) is nearly impossible should one want to correct a minor flaw such as an out-of-tune bass note. However, Wentz noted that the recording process does offer the improviser an advantage over live performance by providing musicians a ‘safety net’: once he has already made a good take, for example, he does feel more freedom to experiment and try ever more extravagant extemporizations.³⁶

Needless to say, for all genres of music, extemporization as heard on a recording is a very different animal from a live concert experience. But historical performers face two types of pressure that are distinct from jazz musicians or other improvisers. On the one hand, there is an obligation in the current market to create a ‘perfect’ recording, as measured against other versions of a work in an over-saturated classical music catalog, and against the score itself; one might call this another form of obeying the *Werktreue* aesthetic or adhering to the ‘letter’ of the text, as Kingsbury puts it above. Thus we see an exacerbation of the ‘documentary’ approach to recordings as in the Corelli violin sonatas. On the other hand, early musicians trying to convey the ‘spirit’ of the text by attempting to recapture the spontaneity of a live performance in the 17th or 18th centuries face significant barriers in the stilted and rarefied atmosphere of the recording studio.³⁷ It is a double bind that seems inherently irreconcilable.

³⁴ I am grateful to Jed Wentz for relating his experiences in the recording studio with me (personal communication, 16 August 2008).

³⁵ In a recent article, Ardal Powell makes a similar observation in reference to the effect of recorded improvisations by historical performers. He notes that, ‘The oft-heard argument when I was a student 25 years ago was that an ornamented version would become irksome if heard more than once; repetition would give it the status of something permanent rather than improvised—as in jazz recording, where recorded improvisations have achieved the status of classic compositions and are studied as texts rather than acts. But I noticed that my teachers (excepting those trained at Basel) avoided improvising in live performance, too. It might be an overstatement to suggest they were imitating their own recordings, but clearly it was the recordings that set the standards for an ideal performance rather than the reverse’ (See: Ardal Powell, ‘Early Music Performance in the Age of Recording’, *Early Music America*, vol. 13, no. 3, fall 2007, 34-38 (here 36-37)). For another discussion of the effects of the recording studio on improvisation, see Matthew Lovett, ‘The Canonisation of Recorded Improvisations and its Impact on Performance Practice,’ *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, vol. 13, no. 1, February 2008, 16-24. However, Lovett’s discussion focuses on free jazz, a genre that developed entirely within the recording age; he is not examining here the practice of improvisation in a musical repertoire that also exists in a partially ‘fixed’ written score.

³⁶ See: Dorottya Fabian, op.cit. The *Brandenburg Concertos* were first recorded on period instruments in 1953, with August Wenzinger directing the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis; he was soon followed by Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Concentus Musicus Wien in 1964, and Collegium Aureum in 1965 (Ibid., 65-68). Gustav Leonhardt was the first to record the *Goldberg Variations* on a harpsichord modeled after an historical instrument (Ibid., 70). In addition to the *Brandenburgs*, Harnoncourt recorded for Telefunken the orchestral suites (1965), the *St. John Passion* (1967) the *B Minor Mass* (1968) and the *St. Matthew Passion* (1971). Leonhardt recorded the *Brandenburg Concertos* with Collegium Aureum on Harmonia Mundi (1965); he began recording chamber works with Telefunken in the early 1960s (Ibid., 39).

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Having examined recording and production techniques, we might also consider the role record company marketing plays in fostering—or hampering—the revival of Baroque improvisation. As such, it is worth considering the relationship of early music ensembles to major record labels. Among the first major Baroque works to be recorded on period instruments or copies of historical models were J.S. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, followed by such works as the Goldberg Variations, orchestral suites, St. John Passion, B Minor Mass, and the St. Matthew Passion.³⁸ By the late 1970s, record companies had set their sights on ever-later repertoire; the Academy of Ancient Music completed the first set of Mozart symphonies on period instruments from 1978 to 1985, and a rush to record Beethoven and Haydn symphonies from the AAM and other ensembles soon followed. It is still typical, despite the recording industry's decline, for early music students (especially instrumentalists and vocalists) to get their first paid professional work experiences performing Bach Passions rather than in more experimental chamber ensembles. Such large-scale choral and orchestral works—and works by canonic composers—do not leave much space for performers to improvise. Moreover, record companies rely upon a composer's status (and an ensemble's unique image and identity) to sell product;³⁹ this makes it more difficult for historical performers to market recordings of improvised music in a Baroque style, rather than a previously-composed work already recognizable to audiences. With all due respect to Roland Barthes, when it comes to selling recordings, the (composer as) author is not actually 'dead'!⁴⁰

3. *Improvisation in the conservatory*

Finally I will turn to an examination of improvisation as practiced in conservatory early music programs, since the type of training historical performers receive most certainly has an impact on their ability to improvise. While early music has long had a strong connection to amateur music-making, by the early 1970s, institutions such as the Royal Conservatorium in The Hague sought to meet the increased need for specialized period instrument performers, marking a shift toward higher playing standards.⁴¹

When I was a traverso student at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, improvisation was a topic that was rarely discussed, though it might come up in the context of a special project or in lessons. On one such occasion, I was performing with a harpsichordist during her basso continuo lesson. Realizing that his student seemed very tense, the teacher asked us to stop playing; he suggested that she just try improvising over the passage in question (a standard progression in E minor), and invited me to join in. Rather than relax the student, however, this only had the opposite effect: she was clearly uncomfortable and found herself unable to play at all. When her teacher took over at the keyboard to demonstrate, I found myself repeating the same few arpeggios and bits of

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³⁹ See: Kailan Rubinoff, op. cit., 255-263, for a discussion of recording company advertising, with particular reference to Philips Classics, Frans Brüggen and the Orchestra of the 18th Century.

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, 142-148.

⁴¹ For a discussion of developments at the Royal Conservatorium see: Kailan Rubinoff, op. cit., 316-317. The Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, established by August Wenzinger in 1933, was the first institution to offer instruction in historical performance, but the Dutch conservatories came to the forefront of early music education in the 1970s.

memorized passagework from a Quantz capriccio over and over again—hardly a satisfying experience! Why was improvisation such a challenge for two experienced performers?

The answer lies, I would argue, in the type of instruction and curriculum offered in such an institution, which differs in numerous respects from the type of training a 17th century or 18th-century musician would receive. In my experience, the teaching of early music was isolated from other genres and practices, such as composition, jazz, and contemporary music.⁴² While an immersion in Baroque and Classical repertoire may teach some aspects of style and performance practice, it does not expose students to living traditions of improvisation. The recital and examination system also tended to emphasize the performance of musical works rather than improvisation: a typical ‘early music’ final exam structure consisted of four or five contrasting pieces from different stylistic periods and geographical areas. After all, unlike improvisations, the performance of works can be graded and evaluated for technical mastery and stylistic proficiency, and they can be compared to other (recorded) interpretations. Stressful performing situations and an emphasis on technical perfection may lead to high playing standards, but they may also discourage the risk-taking that is an integral part of the creative (not just re-creative) process. Thus the demands placed on the early music student are seemingly contradictory: they are expected to play perfectly, and stylistically correctly, but also personally (and above all, they are not to copy)!

Some concluding thoughts, and an epilogue

There are signs that some early musicians are attempting to find a way out of these dilemmas through the medium of improvisation. Harpist Christina Pluhar and her Ensemble L’Arpeggiata, for example, regularly perform improvisations over early 17th-century bass patterns.⁴³ Indeed, for plucked string players and keyboardists, improvisation seems to be a more integral part of their routine than for wind and bowed string players, though there are signs that this, too, may be changing. In recent interviews, violinist Andrew Manze has related how he and keyboardist Richard Egarr improvise regularly during their rehearsals and practice sessions.⁴⁴ Bruce Haynes, in *The End of Early Music*, cites recorder player Matthias Maute for taking extreme risks in live performances of a Vivaldi concerto, performing without music, extemporizing an entirely new Adagio movement and including a lengthy cadenza. ‘I hope,’ he writes, ‘that other musicians will have the courage to follow Matthias.’ He then calls on more musicians to compose new music in ‘Period styles’ as a way of injecting new life into the early music movement and to challenge such Romantic notions as the ‘genius barrier’, i.e., the lionizing of great works and their composers.⁴⁵ While the desirability of this is debatable, it is worth noting that both Maute and Robert Levin (cited above by Taruskin for his skill as an improviser in Classical music) are not only active as period performers but also as composers and performers of contemporary music. If musicians who bridge early and new music are more comfortable improvising, this suggests that a greater rapprochement between both forms of music-making might provide productive new directions for historical performance.

The program for the 2008 early music competition at the Brugge Musica Antiqua Festival also suggests renewed interest in improvisation amongst historical performers. In July of that year, I attended a performance by a recorder player who had entered the competition and was giving a practice recital before departing for Belgium. On her program was Christian Wolff’s *For 1, 2 or 3 people* (1964),⁴⁶ listed alongside such standard High Baroque fare as Sammartini, Handel and Telemann; this work was a required piece for the competition’s final round.⁴⁷ Wolff’s composition consists of ten pages of mostly graphical notation, leaving much up to

⁴² A notable exception, at least in Amsterdam, were the recorder and harpsichord students, both of whom were required to perform some contemporary music.

⁴³ Christina Pluhar, interview by Coralie Welcomme, *Goldberg Magazine* 32, February 2005, trans. Marcia Hadjimarkos, http://www.goldbergweb.com/en/magazine/interviews/2005/02/30634_2.php (accessed 16 October 2008).

⁴⁴ See: Timothy Pfaff, ‘Master of Early Music’, *Strings*, vol. 13, no. 7, April 1999, 58-66; Robert Maxham, ‘Andrew Manze on the Tightrope’ *Fanfare*, vol. 24, no. 1, September-October 2000, 14, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26.

⁴⁵ Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, 209-214.

⁴⁶ Christian Wolff, *For 1, 2, or 3 people*, New York, C.F. Peters, 1964.

⁴⁷ An ‘improvised and/or composed solo (without accompaniment) in free style (min. 3’ – max 5’)’ was also required of

chance, the performer's fancy, and even random environmental sounds. So, I was surprised to see the recorder player standing stiffly, avoiding eye contact with the audience, and glued to her music stand. When I asked her about it afterwards, she stated that she had difficulty understanding the score, and so she wrote out her 'improvisation' on staff paper! Later, when I considered the awkwardness of her performance, it occurred to me that 1960s chance music was just as alien to this Brugge competitor—who was born at least ten years after the Wolff was composed—as music from the 1660s would be! Like Baroque music, aleatoric music has become a 'lost' performing tradition that must also be reconstructed, though ironically both share a common place in 20th-century music history.⁴⁸ Experimentation with improvisation and greater performative liberties during the 1960s was a hallmark of contemporary music at precisely the moment when early musicians such as the Kuijkens, Gustav Leonhardt, Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Frans Brüggen were experimenting with historical instruments. This connection to the 1960s suggests that historical performers might draw inspiration from that period's sense of freedom and experimentation. It also serves as a sobering reminder of how intertwined performance, composition and improvisation are, and how we might profit from future collaborations between past and present, old and new.

all Baroque instrumentalists during the semi-final round. See: <http://www.mafestival.be/competitions.php?spId=22> (accessed 1 August 2008).

⁴⁸ I do not mean to equate improvisation with aleatoric music more generally; while improvisation is a component of this particular composition and a particular interest of Wolff, his views on the subject may differ somewhat from those of other aleatoric composers such as John Cage. See, for example, Wolff's comments in: 'Improvisation, Heterophony, Politics, Composition: Panel Discussion with Christian Wolff, Larry Polansky, Kui Dong, Christian Asplund and Michael Hicks,' *Perspectives of New Music* vol. 45 no. 2, summer 2007, 133-149.