Entextualization and the Improvised Past

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on recent developments in improvisation studies, the author argues that the reconstruction of improvisatory practices in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European music entails the cultivation of archaeological (as well as historical) modes of inquiry and digital (as well as literary) sensibilities. The anthropological concept of entextualization is deployed to illustrate how aspects of improvisation that defy literal forms of representation might be accessed through material culture, algorithmic processes, embodied reenactment, and simulation.

[1] The flourishing of improvisation studies over recent years has placed "classical" music and its adherents in an unfamiliar and somewhat defensive position. For once, other musics, narratives, and disciplinary approaches are of central concern while the "classical" and its associated values are revealed to be peripheral, abnormal, and even paradoxically ephemeral.[1] Although this might prompt well-founded consternation in some quarters, numerous scholars and performers of eighteenth-century music have embraced the incursion of improvisation as a means of injecting elements of historicity and contingency into their engagement with the period and its repertoire. In different ways, Robert O. Gjerdingen (2007a and 2007b), Robert D. Levin (2009 and 2011), and Aaron Berkowitz (2010) have recently demonstrated that musical thought and practice in eighteenth-century Europe were deeply informed by improvisation as a pedagogical, compositional, and performative mode. In particular, Gjerdingen's insights have issued from a consideration of the political, social, psychological, and cognitive forces that transformed Neapolitan *conservatorii* into sites renowned throughout Europe for their distinctive methods of musical training and enculturation, producing what he has described synonymously as *galant* court music and "Neapolitan ethnomusic" (Gjerdingen 2012).

[2] In what follows, I briefly address how the concept of improvisation can open up three other ways of thinking beyond the traditional historical, literary, and theoretical modes that enable musicological inquiry. First, I will suggest that attempts to model past improvisatory processes might lead away from historical narratives and toward an archaeological concern for materiality and its mediation. Second, I will claim that conceiving of improvisation numerically rather than alphabetically can allow us to register its processual, algorithmic elements more clearly than words and their attendant hermeneutics permit. Finally, I will argue that considering the performative aspects of eighteenth-century improvisation under the rubric of simulation or reenactment might be more fruitful—and historically enlightening—than adopting the rhetoric of restoration

and reconstruction that has suffused so many musical attempts to reanimate the past.

[3] To outline these modes of thought I will draw on Joel Kuipers', Michael Silverstein's, and Greg Urban's concept of *entextualization*, defined as "the process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context" (Silverstein and Urban 1996, 21; see also Kuipers 1990). In terms of eighteenth-century music, the concept of entextualization can be understood from two perspectives. On the one hand, it can help account for the means by which the discursive flow of eighteenth-century music lost contact with its cultural milieux as it hardened into a corpus of canonical texts over the course of the nineteenth century; on the other, it can outline alternative routes and methods by which musical practices were transmitted, thereby suggesting new sites where improvisation might be located. In both cases, entextualization has to do with relations between systems of representation and storage and the methods by which knowledge is transduced in the course of performance.

[4] The notion that entextualization can illuminate improvisatory practices has been advanced by anthropologist Karin Barber. In critiquing and extending the scope of the concept as defined by Silverstein and Urban, she aligns entextualization not with "frozen utterance," as they suggest, but with the creative concatenation and reordering of poetic matter (Barber 2007, 30–31). In Barber's interpretation, entextualized elements are not to be identified with the literary and scripted and thus opposed to the oral and extemporized. Texts are not defined by medium, but are created whenever and wherever "instances of discourse . . . are made available for reproduction in other contexts" (30). Barber observes that the formulations of much African praise poetry "are believed to be ancient and unchanging. . . . They are quoted; they are subjected to elaborate exegetical attention" (31). But the skillful mobilization of these canonical formulations involves the "raiding of other subjects' collections of epithets . . . and incorporating [the performer's] own observations and witticisms" with the aim of speaking to addresses "in the present context of utterance" (31). There is thus no hard and fast distinction to be made between performance and text, improvisation and recitation, or creativity and imitation.

[5] In pursuit of this idea, Barber cites Nicholas Cook's claim that playing a "classical" piece of music from a score involves the same processes as jazz improvisation in that both are generative rather than replicative. As Cook puts it, both involve the "creative synthesis of performance schemes in real time; the difference is merely in the nature of the constraints within which this creativity operates" (1990, 113). The question arises, then, of whether locating "classical" music's scores and performances on a continuum of entextualized utterances might allow them to contribute more constructively to conversations about improvisation. Perhaps it might—but the differences bracketed by Cook's "merely," I would suggest, are substantial. The synthesis of elements that inform both improvisatory and reproductive music making is crucially dependent on the "nature of the constraints" that circumscribe these practices. What both the modern score-based performance of "classical" music and historically informed attempts to revive eighteenth-century improvisatory practices have in common, and what distinguishes them from other loci of improvisation, is a reliance on literality and its attendant discourses of interpretation and analysis, ultimately guided and ratified by the nomological imperative of the archival record, which represents the past as the sum of its documentary traces.

[6] As Angela Esterhammer writes of Romantic poetry, there is a prevailing assumption that written music "is the norm against which all . . . production must be measured" (2008, 68): the literal and the oral are co-dependent in that each both enables and undoes the other. Since markers of improvisation in "classical" music are usually understood as such in terms of the notated text, they are typically assigned the form of absences: improvisation is simultaneously indicated and concealed by a fermata or "da capo." In order to bypass the Romantic dialectic of fetishism and nostalgia that interprets such indications as symbols of loss prompting futile attempts at recovery, I contend that Barber's concept of entextualization must be extended beyond oral and literal discourses in order to encompass manual, digital, and technological processes. The act of notating music and the manner of singing or playing an instrument are just as liable to be entextualized as the musical information rendered by the technologies associated with each activity.

[7] Reenacting eighteenth-century improvisatory practices in terms that are not wholly dependent on notation *manquée* or *sous rature* involves neither reifying the score nor applying knowledge gleaned beyond its confines, but rather acknowledging the performer's orthogonal relationship with both. Personal histories, psychological tendencies, physiological tics, knowledge of repertoire, familiarity with idiom, and the demands of any given instrument can all feed into the generation of a distinctive

musical experience that is improvisatory in that it issues directly from a specific time and place rather than seeking to incarnate an ideal type. In conjunction with the score, these forms of knowledge and experience can constitute a set of processes that is at once historically driven and very much of its own time.

[8] In this context, August Sheehy's (2013) thoughts on the relationship of analysis to improvisation suggest ways in which their correspondences might be illuminating. Analysis might be understood to entextualize improvised utterances by reverse engineering them, thereby revealing the reciprocal relationship between a schema (whether it be Schenker's *Ursatz*, Joseph Riepel's "Monte," or Gjerdingen's "Meyer") and its realizations. Such schemata serve both as launch pads for musical creation and as resting places for its remains. This reciprocity between preludic prescription and analytical transcription was summed up by Carl Czerny's epistolary advice to his fictitious pupil Miss Cecilia on the art of extemporizing at the piano: "You know that all music may be reduced to simple chords. Just so, simple chords conversely serve as the ground-work on which to invent and play all sorts of melodies, passages, skips, embellishments, &c." (1837–41, 80).

[9] While the latter process was demonstrated at length in countless instruction manuals aimed at amateur musicians throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the usefulness of these manuals was limited by both their medium and their audience. The idea that specialized knowledge could be widely transmitted via the printed letter and note was filtered by social and economic considerations that privileged the niceties of literary description over the harsh discipline, rote learning, and immersive practice incumbent on professional musicians. By and large, this was in the interest of reaching a relatively wealthy and far-flung readership worlds removed from the tight-knit guilds of Neapolitan musical apprenticeship described by Gjerdingen: for a combination of reasons, including her gender and class, Miss Cecilia would never have graced a *conservatorio* with her presence.[2] Neither the refined rhetoric of Czerny's letters nor his lengthy treatise on extemporization (Czerny c. 1837–41, which contains fully-notated "improvised" scores that raise the nagging question of how they ended up on the page) adequately represent the painstaking conceptual, oral, kinesthetic, and material processes by which improvisation could be entextualized.

[10] Niklas Luhmann (2000) argued that in order for written texts to produce such knowledge, they had to become algorithmic, procedural, and rule-based rather than literary and documentary.[3] Such a description applies to an extended passage from the second part of Friederich Erhardt Niedt's *Musicalische Handleitung* ([1721]). After enumerating dozens of ways to "make fancy and embellish" every class of rising and falling interval, Niedt shows how they might be combined to animate a four-measure bass line in any number of figurative, stylistic, metrical, registral, and dynamic combinations (88–109). Niedt accomplishes this by selecting, seemingly at random, from his inventory of intervallic diminutions. As Stefan Eckert has pointed out, he thereby reveals the influence of *Ars combinatoria*, and thus an epistemological debt to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, while also anticipating the rise of the *Würfelspiel* (or musical dice game) at the hands of figures such as Johann Philipp Kirnberger later in the century.[4] Niedt's method here is neither mimetic nor descriptive, but performative and algorithmic: after providing the reader with a suitable database, it instructs him or her what to do in order to generate music. This is not merely a shift in tone, but rather a shift in the medial function of the compositional treatise that brings it closer to the exigencies of real-time music making as processed at the keyboard, on the page, or in the mind.

[11] Accordingly, I suggest that the improvisatory affordances of "classical" music be understood to exceed the limits of what can be written. As proposed above, this has at least three broad implications. First, it eschews the historical mode (dependent as it is upon the literary) in favor of the archaeological mode, which attends to material culture (which in this case might include buildings, furniture, instruments, paper, ink, quills, and somatic evidence) as its primary sources.[5] Second, it draws attention to numerical rather than alphabetic operations, which is to say counting over recounting, number over letter, algorithm over sentence, and the hand's digits over the mind's analogies: it is procedural rather than descriptive. Third, as Miss Cecilia's imaginary status might suggest, it allows us to reconfigure our relationships with the improvised past in terms of simulation or reenactment rather than the melancholy Romantic pursuit of lost objects and experiences.[6]

[12] The material traces of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century music show us how the black and white matrices of score and keyboard can constitute an improvisatory gray area where the digitality of finger, key, note, and calculation intersects with the analogicity of embodiment, symbol, vector, and undecidability. No matter how schematic and mathematical its underpinnings, improvisation relies on a type of embodied knowledge, produced cognitively, socially, and

technologically, that evades rationalization and allows for the improviser to surprise even herself. As Czerny put it to Miss Cecilia, "extemporizing possesses this singular and puzzling property, that reflection and attention are of scarcely any service in the matter. We must leave nearly everything to the fingers and to chance" (1837–41, 79)—to the digital and to the aleatoric, in other words. We might consider this in the light of Leibniz's aphoristic dictum that music "is a hidden arithmetic of the soul, which does not know that it is counting."[7] In complementary ways, Leibniz and Czerny point toward a conception of contingency that allows improvisation to be understood as both calculable and unforeseeable.

[13] Czerny's discourse on improvisation reveals him to be caught between what Michel Foucault (1966) described as the taxonomical-combinatorial imperatives of the Classical episteme and the organicist-historicist tendencies of the Modern era. In other words, Czerny's puzzlement at how the human attributes of "reflection and attention" fail to account for improvisation can be understood on the one hand to acknowledge the mechanistic principles that underpinned its eighteenth-century manifestations and, on the other, to gesture toward its explication via quasi-Romantic rhetoric concerning the mysterious workings of the unconscious. But we can also understand Czerny to reveal the entextualized elements of computation, emergence, and contingency characteristic of a broader Leibnizian epistemology that underwrites European concepts of materiality, digitality, and simulation from the seventeenth-century invention of binary to the computer age. Exploring this epistemological edifice involves not only mining the archive as a repository of information, but understanding it to constitute "the set of rules governing the range of what can be verbally, audiovisually, or alphanumerically expressed," in Wolfgang Ernst's formulation (2011, 239). Engaging in this process promises to enhance our historical understanding while equipping us with the means of situating eighteenth-century European improvisatory practices in new relationships with their counterparts from other idioms, places, and eras. Such engagement entails an awareness of the procedural qualities that inform improvisation and of the processes of entextualization that have forged our musical personalities.

[14] If our efforts were no longer to be dictated by the fruitless pursuit of "authenticity" in one of its many guises, we might instead take solace in the fact that our attempts to enter historical milieux of improvisation are destined to be at once overdetermined and unforeseeable. In this sense, we could understand such attempts as playful simulations rather than sober approximations, based on a subjunctive modeling of a process rather than on the mimesis of an imagined outcome. Instead of "interpreting" music of the past, we would experience the "the logic of the distinctions drawn and the operations performed as [our] own," as Edgar Landgraf describes the phenomenon of identifying with improvisation (2009, 194). Perhaps we could thereby find ways to derive new kinds of pleasure from familiar texts when we return, yet again, to the eighteenth century; and perhaps we might simultaneously discover that the eighteenth century can in turn surprise us with new insights into the configuration of today's musical world.[8]

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Footnotes

1. For overviews of these developments, see George E. Lewis's (2013) response and Paul Steinbeck's (2013) paper from this panel.
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2. In his preface, Czerny describes Miss Cecilia as "a talented and well-educated girl of about twelve years old" (1837–41, iv).
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3. On the early modern development of rule-based technical literature (of which Johann Joseph Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* is a striking musical example), see Luhmann 2000, 198–99; see also Julie E. Cumming's (2013) paper from this panel.
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4. For a detailed consideration of Leibniz's combinatorial philosophy and its impact on eighteenth-century musical thought, see Eckert 2000, 55–100; see also Klotz 2006 on Leibniz (99–112), Riepel (223–44), and Kirnberger (245–62).
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5. "Archaeology" is invoked here not only to bring its Foucauldian epistemological connotations into play, but also to register the ways it has recently informed studies of performance and media: see, for instance, Giannachi, Kaye, and Shanks 2012 and Huhtamo and Parikka 2011.
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6. On reenactment as historical mode and historiographical symptom, see McCalman and Pickering 2010.
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7. "Musica est exercitium arithmeticae occultum nescientis se numerare animi." Letter to Christian Goldbach, April 17, 1712, in Leibniz 1734–42, 1: 241.
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8. In this sense, I both echo and respond to Emily I. Dolan's (2011) recent call to arms.
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