

The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts

Edited by
Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta

ISBN: 978-0-367-20364-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-01649-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-17944-3 (ebk)

Chapter 24

Freedom and Form in Piano Improvisation in the Early 19th Century

Katrin Eggers and Michael Lehner

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003179443-28

Funder: Bern Academy of the Arts

FREEDOM AND FORM IN PIANO IMPROVISATION IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

Katrin Eggers and Michael Lehner

Determining the significance of improvisation in current classical music culture is easy. With very few exceptions, it is simply nonexistent. Pianists play compositions from the past (on rare occasions, even from the recent past) within a well-established, near-ritualistic concert setting. And they play those pieces as flawlessly and as close to the score as possible. Even passages with an improvisational background, such as the cadenzas in a piano concerto, are usually performed in written-out versions that have been memorized note by note.

The notion that classical piano music should be so strictly bound to the letter of its score is actually a rather new development, historically speaking. The importance of improvisation for keyboard players only began to decrease in the early 19th century, despite the fact that it had been regarded as a crucial ability for every professional performer until then. Our modern recital culture emerged over the ensuing decades (Hamilton 2008: 33–71), with improvisational elements completely disappearing from standard concert formats in the 20th century. This is a remarkable development, if we consider that improvisation had in earlier times often marked the climax of a recital, as can be seen in announcements, program sheets and reviews of concerts by Felix Mendelssohn, Franz Liszt and others (Sità 2019: 17 f.). Along with this shift, playing by heart became the new standard, which encouraged the gradual disappearance of extempore skills. It is worth noting that the effect of reproducing complex pieces without the score is similar to that of instantaneous improvisation. When the practice of playing from memory emerged in the 18th and early 19th centuries, some commentators regarded it as treacherous and dishonest (Felbick 2019: 42 f.). Nor did the practice apply only to complete compositions. Memorized snippets of existing pieces can also be put together in a collage that then sounds like a newly improvised piece. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was reputedly one of the greatest keyboard improvisers of his time, and he distinguished between a fantasia that “emerges from a good musical soul” and one that “consists of passages learned by heart or of stolen thoughts [welche] [...] in auswendig gelernten Passagen oder gestohlenen Gedanken bestehen)” (Bach 1753: 123).

After a brief historical overview of improvisation and its development, we will here consider how and why it went out of fashion, and how this connects to an underlying aesthetic and to cultural tensions between freedom and form – the very factors that make improvisation so special.

This shift in improvisation practice occurred for various reasons. Professionals had not necessarily needed an exactly notated score before, but by the early 19th century, an increasing number of amateurs among the bourgeoisie were learning to play the piano and required a large repertoire of music that was notated precisely. Parallel to this development, it seems that composers became determined to fix their written score, thereby “solidifying” it into a “work of art” by reducing the

number of liberties available to the performer in terms of added notes, embellishments, dynamics, tempi and so on (this issue is of crucial importance to the present chapter). We can observe this gradual process by taking even a cursory look at the piano scores of C. P. E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Bach's works require one to fill out the voices now and then when they are indicated by a figured bass; Mozart's piano music sometimes has passages in a skeleton score that needs to be transformed into a lively, ornamented musical line. Beethoven's music marks a turning point in this regard. His early piano works are still in the older tradition, but over the course of his career he tends more and more to give precise performance indications. The beginning of the repertoire culture and the increasingly virtuosic demands of 19th-century piano music required a great deal of time for practice. This resulted in a gradual process of alienation between the composition and instrumental performance or reproduction. Clara Wieck-Schumann is a representative example of this. At the age of 36, when her husband died, her compositional activities came to a standstill (Reich 2001: 211–48), after which she became one of the most influential figures in creating the modern repertoire for pianists. She incorporated more and more historical works in her concert programs, contrasting and combining them with piano music of her time.

1 Decline and Distrust

The Classical era was the last epoch when improvisation at the keyboard was both a common practice and regarded, to some extent, as a basic skill for every professional performer. Furthermore, the requirements made on a virtuoso, and the complexity of the extempore fantasias expected by an audience became extremely demanding. Carl Czerny (1791–1857), a Viennese pianist, composer and well-known piano teacher, is an interesting figure who can exemplify these historical developments and their context and impact on the relationship between freedom and form, improvisation and written composition. In his treatise *Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte*, op. 200 of 1829 (Czerny 1983: 3), he describes improvisation as a “special obligation and a crown of distinction [Pflicht und Zierde]” for every keyboard virtuoso. But by the time of his *Pianoforte-School* op. 500 just ten years later, he had already reduced the significance of improvisation to two small chapters, dividing it into “preluding” and “extemporaneous playing.” Here, improvisation is merely a “highly interesting and honorable art,” and a virtuoso need only possess this ability “at least to a certain degree,” even though “he may not possess any decided talent for the art” (Czerny 1839: 124). Czerny's contemporary Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837) offers us another prime example of why the first three decades of the 19th century may be regarded as a highpoint of piano improvisation. Several reports of his performances confirm his audience's amazement at the complexity of his extempore playing, which constituted what was regarded as “composing in the moment.” In the second edition of his treatise *Ausführliche theoretisch-practische Anleitung zum Piano-Forte-Spiel* of 1830, he added a final chapter on extemporizing. Unlike Czerny, he stated right at the beginning that: “Actual instruction on this matter can neither be given nor received” (Hummel 1830: 461). Improvisation had, thus, been transformed from a necessary skill that every performer had to master into a subject that one should at least know about, and finally into a gift that a virtuoso either possesses or does not (with Hummel naturally being one of the few who still possessed it). In the final passage of his piano school, he states with a certain degree of nostalgia that while many pianists are interested in mere “entertainment and dexterity,” even playing well from the score would never “nourish” the mind in the way that free improvisation can, even if the performer in question has only a modicum of skill (Hummel 1830: 468).

But the times were changing, and Hummel's generation was no longer in charge. Just twenty years later, Robert Schumann (1810–56) was already warning young musicians of the danger of improvising too much. Only the “solid signs of the script” guarantee the “mastery of form,” he says, and he insists that they should “write more than [they] improvise” (Schumann 1854: 303).

Schumann's negative view of improvisational skills proves that there were also aesthetic reasons for the disappearance of a culture of improvisation, above and beyond the reasons already given above. In its openness and freedom, improvised music began to be regarded as amorphous and lacking "the power of a clear structure," in Schumann's words. The excitement of witnessing something exceptional and unrepeatable has now turned into a distrust towards an unshapen, inconsistent musical performance.

This did not come from nowhere, because aesthetic shifts are usually a complex cultural matter. Certain prominent figures in the Age of Enlightenment already harbored suspicion towards improvisation, such as Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–66). He focused initially on the meaning of the term "fantasieren" (an expression that until the late 19th century was far more common in treatises than its synonyms "improvisieren" or "extemporieren"). This term does not have an exact English translation, and has a twofold meaning: "to fantasize" on the one hand, and simply "to improvise" on the other hand. The word thus already implies the significance of imagination or creative power, though Gottsched in fact draws attention to its more dubious equivalent: "Phantasiren" is like dreaming, being a product of the imagination while sleeping or having a "high fever" that occurs "without the observation of an adequate reason." That is why artists – Gottsched mentions painters, poets and composers – would only create "monstrosities" ("Mißgeburten") if they relied on it. Such products might be called "waking dreams," and he uses terms like "grotesque" and "unbalanced [ungereimt]" when describing them (Gottsched 1733: 224; this passage is discussed in Felbick 2019: 52).

These arguments about the dubious value of improvisation, thus, began in the 18th century, were reinforced by Schumann and others of his time, and remained important in the 20th century. Allegations of a lack of form, of unity and of careful planning run through the anti-improvisation arguments of numerous figures from Schumann to Theodor W. Adorno and Carl Dahlhaus.

2 Mere "Improvised Effects" vs. Compositional Complexity

Criticism of improvisation in Classical music is always about form. The analytical problem seems to concern the relationship between the form as a whole and its individual sections, and how details can shape a complex form and provide structural balance. Structural complexity and motivic-thematic development are still the analytical cornerstones for understanding music of the Classical and Romantic periods, and are – to a certain extent – regarded as instruments for determining the aesthetic value of a musical work. In order to demonstrate how this discourse has become as influential as it lacks historical awareness, we shall take a brief look at the arguments of the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno and the musicologist Carl Dahlhaus.

For Adorno, the temporal dimension that composed music is capable of bringing before our eyes and ears can only be conceived within the frame of literacy. In comparing music to painting, he claims that: "Highly organized music is impossible without notation; the historical difference between improvisation and composed music is identical to the qualitative difference between what is articulated loosely and what is stated in binding fashion" (Adorno 1978a: 632). It is already revealing that he offers a simple distinction between improvisation and composition, understanding the latter exclusively as written music, though this is historically incorrect (as we shall see below). He argues that the role of "real improvisation" had always been "excessively overrated" in history (and his understanding of "history" had its limitations) because "great music still speaks to us today [...] since improvisation retreated to make room for the fixed work of art with its unambiguous text" (Adorno 1977: 806). Elsewhere, he claims that "the second half of the 18th century was able to eliminate improvisation step by step without any loss in favour of authentically notated scores" (Adorno 1973: 94). In concrete historical terms, it is his advocacy of formal complexity that lies behind his rejection of improvisation, for he claims (quite incorrectly once again) that

even in the Baroque basso continuo tradition, “improvisation became restricted to ornamenting the harmony, without ever intervening in the musical substance” (Adorno 1977: 807). He goes on to state that “whatever memory [...] survives of it in certain fantasies of Viennese Classicism is notable for its lack of motivic–thematic dynamism” (Adorno 1978b: 517). A similar approach was taken by Dahlhaus, though with more musicological detail. For him, differentiated forms only originate in written compositions, while improvisation is necessarily focused on details (Dahlhaus 1987: 268 f.). He states that

Improvisation tends to become a potpourri of isolated stimuli, a succession of momentary effects. Either the overall form and basic design is crudely schematic and externally prescribed, or it is of no consequence and left to chance. A form which is both differentiated and unschematic, and which is nonetheless clear and comprehensible – the aim of compositions with artificial ambitions – can hardly be attained by means of improvisation.

(Dahlhaus 1987: 270)

While every element should be carefully and equally developed in composed music, improvisation has to focus on one single feature. It is thus able, according to Dahlhaus, to create surprises or exciting moments, but unable to treat all the other musical elements in an equal way: “everything else, being a mere foil, remains conventional and formalised” (Dahlhaus 1987: 269). Like Adorno, Dahlhaus takes 18th-century fantasies into consideration. Here,

it is harmony that departs from the norm and that transgresses the rules of regulated voice leading by means of abrupt chord changes or peremptory dissonances which seem like rents in the musical tissue. Melody on the other hand is not developed.

(Dahlhaus 1987: 269)

So in his view, even in the genre of the fantasia, the very name of which is rooted in the idea of freedom and immediateness, nothing really new can be invented that goes beyond temporary effects, because form and melodic development cannot be built on effects alone. Of course, Dahlhaus has a point. It is obvious that during the creative process of developing and writing down musical ideas, a level of complex differentiation and relatedness can be achieved that is by no means possible in a spontaneous realization at a keyboard. But it is striking how he denies improvised music the general capacity of doing so, and insists that it is incapable of creating something that is artistically new. However, we must bear in mind the status of musicology at the time. Historical musicology, which is traditionally based on philological methods and research into written sources, found it difficult to deal with a historical culture that cannot easily be stored in a library. With Dahlhaus, this two-century-old, negative understanding of the historical and aesthetic value of classical improvisation came to a preliminary halt. It has since been corrected by musicians and researchers in the field of historical performance practice.

We shall, nevertheless, focus on two issues touched upon by Adorno and Dahlhaus, because they can help us see the bigger picture. The first is the relationship between improvisation and composition, which is not as clearly characterized by a simple division as Adorno claims (the same applies to the terminology used for each); the second is the relationship between freedom and form that Classical treatises, in fact, consider extensively, as we shall see.

3 Improvisation and Composition in Historical Documents

Historical sources for the techniques and aesthetics of improvisation at the piano offer us three pairs of oppositional concepts. The first is the conflict between freedom and form, which deals

with the relationship between single moments of performance and their overall coherence. The second is rarely mentioned directly; it is the constant process of negotiation between individuality and conventionality. The third is how the improviser's mind oscillates between intuition and reflection.

We shall begin here with Carl Czerny's definition of improvisation:

When the practicing musician possesses the capability not only of executing at his instruments the ideas that his inventive power, inspiration, or mood have evoked in him at the instant of their conception but so combining them that the coherence can have the effect on the listener of an actual composition (Tonstück) – this is what is called: Improvising or Extemporizing.

He continues to write that the “talent and the art of improvising” means to spin out

at the spur of the moment [...] each original or even borrowed idea into a sort of musical composition which, albeit in much freer form than a written work, nevertheless must be fashioned into an organized totality as far as is necessary to remain comprehensible and interesting.

(Czerny 1983: 1)

4 Freedom and Form

Although Czerny differentiates between “fantasieren” and “actual composition,” he states that if the improvisation is executed in masterly fashion, it might (and should) sound as if we are listening to a composed piece. He later even calls the result “a sort of musical composition.” As we saw before, Czerny marks a turning point at which the modern concept of composition begins to be understood strictly as a written work. Before that, even in the early 19th century, this separation was by no means a given. As Felbick has recently observed, the older understanding of composition did not exclude spontaneous execution, as we can see from terms like “Composition extemporanea” or “comporre all'improvviso” (Felbick 2019: 39–49). Rather like Arnold Schoenberg's famous remark that the process of composing can be regarded as a “slowed down improvisation” (Schoenberg 1976: 69), the classical sources stress the link between extemporizing and writing music, though they do so from the opposite perspective, understanding spontaneous musical creation as “componere” in the moment, in real time. With regard to their effect on the listener, “freedom” and “construction” do not simply signify improvisation and notated composition respectively. For example, there are passages in Hummel's composed-out *Fantasia* op. 18 whose 18 quasi-improvisational fluidity and sudden musical gestures and tonal surprises seem much freer than the fantasias in Czerny's op. that he wrote specifically to demonstrate the process of improvising. Since these are all notated and published, they naturally cannot be regarded as actual improvisations. But unlike Hummel, Czerny wrote his pieces as pedagogical examples, not with the aim of creating a fixed work of art. His stated aim is to depict a realistic situation that might mirror extempore practice, carefully restraining the editorial process so that the emerging music may constitute “censored protocols” of his playing (Czerny 1993: XII). Hummel's piece, on the other hand, is based on complex structural planning that could not be achieved through ad-hoc invention. For instance, complete sections in Hummel are repeated several minutes after their first appearance, whereas Czerny states that “Repetitions are hardly possible while improvising, because the music one has just played rarely remains so long in the memory” (Czerny 1993: 55). However, there are exceptions to the rule. At the beginning of this chapter, we mentioned that playing by heart, without a score, can seem like an extempore performance. But there are cases that can invert cause and effect; Beethoven reputedly had such an extraordinary capacity for memorization that he was able to repeat an entire improvised fantasia immediately afterwards, without

any changes (Kopitz and Cadenbach 2009: 10). If this report is true, would an improvisation that is repeated identically still merit the title of “improvisation”? (Dahlhaus argues against this; cf. Dahlhaus 1987: 268). Or ought we rather to refer to it as a memorized piece that has not yet been committed to paper? And if Beethoven had in fact “composed” the piece in his head in advance of playing it, would it even be an improvisation at all? The ultimate question to ask here is: if the performer is excessively talented, as it were, does improvisation then automatically constitute instant composing?

Czerny’s examples are, nevertheless, much closer to a realistic improvisational approach in that they avoid recapitulation and limit repetition to direct iterations, though he follows sonata form and a “logical” development of his themes by using a “construction kit” comprising several models and patterns. According to Czerny, a successful improvisation is similar to a notated piece in that it needs to be “fashioned in an organized totality.” Later, he uses an architectural metaphor for this. While a “well-written composition” may be compared to a symmetrical edifice, “a fantasy well done is akin to a beautiful English Garden, seemingly irregular, but full of surprising variety, and executed rationally, meaningfully and according to plan” (Czerny 1983: 4). Daniel Gottlob Türk (1750–1830) offered a similar description of improvisation, namely, that it constitutes “apparent disarray” (Türk 1789: 312).

It is significant that Czerny’s descriptions often underline the dichotomy between a lack of form (in terms like “surprising variety”) and coherence (“rationally,” “according to plan”), not in order to play them off against each other, but instead to balance them out. Musical freedom is for him the key feature of every improvisation and, therefore, needs space, while also needing to be contained to some extent. He does not explain precisely how that might work, but we can trace these ideas in the fantasias he offers to illustrate what he writes (as discussed in greater detail below). Opinions differed on how to even out these two extremes. Sources from the early 19th century often warn of a lack of coherence, though Türk’s piano treatise of 1789, published one year after the death of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, remains closer to the idea of the “Freye Fantasie.” He seeks both “unity” (“Einheit”) and “diversity” (“Mannigfaltigkeit”), both being equally important: “This is why a cadenza should include as much as possible that is unexpected and surprising” (Türk 1789: 311 f.). Too much unity (“Einheit”) might lead to monotony (“Einförmigkeit”), which is one of his major concerns when it comes to improvising a cadenza.

Hummel’s piano school – published at roughly the same time as Czerny’s treatise – also discusses this topic, and offers greater detail about the dangers of freedom and how to counter them when practicing. Dahlhaus’s abovementioned concerns (“potpourri of isolated stimuli” and “melodic underdevelopment”) were already well known and much discussed Hummel’s day. Rather like Czerny, Hummel also warns against playing merely a sequence of “constantly new, peculiar, beautiful ideas,” because one’s inventiveness must, rather, be contained by a “firmer sense of order” (Hummel 1830: 465). For him, the main problem (“Hauptübel”) is the ephemerality of the principal musical ideas that arises from the human mind’s lack of concentration and the capacity to memorize. But Hummel regards these skills more like a muscle that can and must be trained. This is why only an experienced performer (thus, Hummel) should start an improvisation without due preparation. He otherwise recommends first repeating and memorizing the theme(s) on which the improvisation is to be based, then trying out assorted variations, ornamentations and imitations on the instrument before starting the improvisation proper. The performer’s capacity for recollection is, thus, crucial if he is to avoid playing a series of unconnected effects.

5 Individuality and Conventionality

Besides preparatory exercises, Hummel suggests another “cure” for the problem of creating order. For this, he frequently uses the term “noble direction.” Rather than suppressing creativity,

“common forms, sequences and phrases of strict style” are just a means of guiding ideas in an orderly manner (Hummel 1830: 465). Of course, Hummel is here also referring to the fact that all improvisational practice is, in some way, Janus-faced. On the one hand, it is guided by regularity, by patterns, sequences and phrases that have been learned and that together form a repertoire of musical “ready-mades” for improvisers. The more of them they know and are able to vary and combine, the more diversified and interesting the performance will be. On the other hand, the unpredictability of performance can result in un-plannable moments of bliss – unheard-of harmonic progressions or turns of phrase – that might go beyond the norms of the time and that are derived from the individuality of the performer and the uniqueness of an unrepeatable situation. Several reports of C. P. E. Bach’s extemporizing underline how he made just such an impression on his audience. Boundaries that one would not cross in notated music may be crossed on the spur of the moment and are, therefore, linked to the ephemerality of performance. In his final statement in his piano tutor, Hummel stresses the link between what is not regulated and the performer’s “most personal individuality” (“eigenste Individualität”) and “inner self” (“innerstes Wesen”) (Hummel 1830: 468).

The regular and the irregular may occur successively, such as when a meandering chromatic passage is followed by a well-known sequential type; we often find this in composed-out fantasias too, as in Mozart’s K. 475. But they can also be superimposed and interact with each other at the same time. Typically, some elements will be fixed by the choice of a model such as a chromatic bass line, regardless of whether such a model is chosen spontaneously or planned in advance. Such templates can determine the succession of musical events, thereby letting improvisers focus their attention on something else. This leaves a broad spectrum of expressive possibilities to the moment, such as harmonic progressions, figurations and the shape of the melody. In this sense, established patterns provide a guide or skeleton for the improvisation, while at the same time remaining open to substantial harmonic change or enhancements such as chromaticism and alternative metric versions.

6 Intuition and Reflection

There is another aspect to this that directly links up with the contemporary concept of “creative genius.” The underlying question here is: is one playing, or being played? (for more on this issue, see: Eggers and Stollberg 2021). The creative process during the act of performance is described by several sources as a state of unconsciousness, with invention being something intuitive rather than a product of reflection. Musical art proceeds in time and, thus, needs to span a comprehensive, meaningful, temporal course. Czerny describes this ambivalent situation as follows:

By extemporizing we are to understand that the performer, on the impulse of the moment, without preparation, and often also without reflection, plays something that we might say comes spontaneously under his fingers, and which nevertheless possesses to a certain degree all the properties of a written composition, meaning that melodies and brilliant passages alternate in a tasteful or elaborate manner.

(Czerny 1839: 124)

But to achieve this, one has to be in clear command of the general intent and direction of the piece. Türk underlines the first, “unconscious” aspect. Like Gottsched, he uses the metaphor of a dream, but not in a nightmarish sense: “It might not be improper to compare the cadenza with a dream.” When dreaming, he writes, we are often able to “relive within just a few minutes actual events we have experienced and that made an impact on us; we experience them most vividly, but without any connection between them, and without any clear sense of consciousness”

(Türk 1789: 312). In this metaphor, the whole movement represents real life, while the cadenza represents reliving that life unconsciously in a dream. This comparison between improvising and dreaming is a very common one, and can also be found in 19th-century sources. Czerny similarly describes this state of mind as an “almost subconscious and dream-like playing motion of the fingers” that succeeds all the better if the performer does not anticipate too much, “just as the orator does not think through each word and phrase in advance” (Czerny 1983: 43). This state of being truly in the moment is one of the most common ways of describing improvisation at different times and in different disciplines. It places an emphasis on the key attribute of subjective freedom that provides the basis of an ephemeral experience of art that no predefined process can offer us. The most famous such example is Beethoven’s remark, made on sketches held today in the H. C. Bodmer collection:¹ “One improvises only when not paying attention to what one plays, surrendering oneself unconstrainedly to what crosses one’s mind – this would also be the best and most truthful way to improvise in public, too.” But significantly, the very same source of this famous comment includes sketches and notes for improvisations as well. Clearly, from time to time even Beethoven did not take the risk of extemporizing without preparation, at least when he was performing before a large public. But the above quotation should not be mistaken as some kind of ideal that even he could not attain, because the statements we have also quoted from Türk (over twenty years earlier) and Czerny show that preparing for an improvisation was generally regarded as a valid approach. As contradictory as these two concepts might seem at first, they have to be brought together and linked to the other two dichotomic pairs: mediating and alternating freer passages and preplanned musical materials not only provides variety while guaranteeing an equilibrium of freedom and coherence, but also allows the performer to slip into that “intuitive” state of mind. When employing an overall structural design, it is possible for improvisers to control when to leave it and when to return to it; the orientation provided by the overarching design ensures that they do not lose themselves in the state of rapt contemplation that Hummel regarded as the principal danger when extemporizing.

7 Large-Scale Structures: Improvisation and Double-Function Form

The relationship between improvised and written music is manifold and variable. They are, in practice, inseparable – or at least linked directly to each other – and they are also regarded as opposing principles of musical invention. For Czerny, however, sonata forms (i.e., guided motivic development) and improvisation are not oppositional concepts. On the contrary, the sonata provides the basis for his improvisational concepts, as can be seen in his exemplary fantasias. We can observe similar trends in the composed fantasias of the same period, such as Hummel’s *Fantasia* op. 18, a work that was well known at the time and that Czerny himself recommends for further study (Czerny 1993: 63). These pieces deviate from the older, more rhapsodic types of the 18th century that were situated in the tradition of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Mozart’s contributions to the genre still followed this older type, in particular his *Capriccio in C major*, (K. 284a), which in part dispenses with a time signature, and his two famous *Fantasias in d minor* (K. 397) and *c minor* (K. 475). The latter was published together with the *Sonata in c minor* K. 457 and was intended as a contrasting, written-out, but quasi-improvisational introduction to it, and therefore avoids any hint of sonata form itself. But in the early 19th century, the two genres of fantasy and sonata became increasingly similar until they reached the point of interchangeability, as is evident from a famous remark by Robert Schumann: “So write sonatas or fantasias (it’s not about the name), but meanwhile do not forget the music” (Schumann 1839: 134). What is noteworthy here is that there was a mutual process of interaction between these two concepts. Formal designs adopted from written music were used to structure improvised music in a well-balanced dramaturgy, in order to provide the listener with a guide and orientation points, especially in

long performances. But compositional innovation was also influenced by improvisational practice, because the latter promoted opening up established schemata, freer progressions and more open formal concepts (such as we find in Beethoven's two Sonatas op. 27, both marked "quasi una fantasia"). There are numerous reports of piano improvisations lasting thirty minutes or longer during the Classical period, especially in the case of Beethoven. By applying a preplanned format to an improvisation, a performer could create large-scale forms that were diverse yet consistent, and adhered to the tonal concepts of the time, stupefying an audience with an ad-hoc performance full of subjectivity and unexpected turns yet within a regular, familiar structure.

If we take a closer look at Czerny's op. 200, we can conclusively prove Adorno and Dahlhaus wrong in their refusal to acknowledge the ability of improvisation to create new forms. Czerny proposes that performers should practice working out every type of individual movement extempore. In addition to allegro movements in sonata form, he proposes training the ability to improvise rondos, scherzi, variations and slow movements – in fact, all the individual movements of a sonata. The principal theme ("Hauptthema") must be followed by a subsidiary melody ("Mittelgesang"), i.e., the second subject, which must then be concluded with a cadence in the "tonality of the dominant" ("Dominanttonart"), or on either III or V in minor pieces. While the dualistic understanding of two contrasting themes already reflects the innovations of Beethoven's sonatas, the option for minor keys shows that Czerny's concept of sonata form is, partly, an older one. By the late 1820s, this was already outdated. He also understands the sonata as a bipartite form, writing that the first part is followed by a second (the development and recapitulation) that lets you "surrender [yourself] to the freest imagination [der freyesten Fantasie] and fulfillment of ideas and to all sorts of modulations, imitations, etc." (Czerny 1983: 51). The development section thus offers greater room for free figures and musical ideas, though one should not recall the previous song-like sections ("Gesangsstellen"), and must ultimately return to the main key. This last instruction does not apply to combinations with other movement types; such combinations are the goal of a large, multipartite fantasia. Czerny admits that this kind of improvisation is "the most difficult of all" (Czerny 1983: 52). In this case, the sonata form breaks off just before the recapitulation and modulates into the key of the following section. Czerny's examples show this strategy mostly by approaching the main key, but then avoiding any stabilizing cadence and instead shifting towards a new key (e.g., Ex. 42, bars 65–76; Czerny 1993: 46). The overall structure of a fantasia that combines different genres is described rather cursorily:

One might begin with Allegro, for example, develop it for some length of time, then proceed into an Adagio or Andantino, interweave it with a fugal section and with the kind of modulatory section discussed in the first chapter, and conclude with a lively rondo.

(Czerny 1983: 52)

Czerny's concept of a continuous form consisting of single, connected movements combines an opening sonata movement with a slow movement and a concluding rondo. This corresponds to a three-movement sonata but with an additional section or transition consisting of "modulation passages" at the end of the Adagio. At least in terms of its tonality, this can, thus, also be understood as a large-scale sonata form with two contrasting themes, a development section and a rondo in the place of the final recapitulation. Czerny's description can be read as a so-called "double-function form," which musicologists have usually assumed began with Liszt's tone poems for orchestra and his one-movement piano pieces in the mid-19th century (Newman 1969; Hamilton 1996: 28; Rosenblatt 2002: 281–307; van de Moortele 2009: 20).² This formal type is found in the development of Romantic orchestral and piano pieces, and associated with an increase in complex compositional planning that is achieved by superimposing two distinct formal strategies. One common explanation of its origins is the blending of the single-movement overture

in the tradition of Beethoven with multipartite tone poems or program symphonies (Altenburg 2001: 19). This assumption fits the beliefs of influential thinkers such as Adorno and Dahlhaus that innovation in musical design is linked to sketching and planning works on paper. Research into compositional sketches (“Skizzenforschung”), especially in Beethoven’s case, is regarded as the most promising way of approaching the origins of musical creation and invention. But that might well be misleading, at least in this case. Instead of deriving double-function form from Liszt’s compositions, we might assume another origin, based on our observations of Czerny’s op. 200, namely, that the improvisation of these large-scale, multipartite fantasias ultimately became a model that was transferred to piano and orchestral compositions during the period when the genres of sonata and fantasia drew closer together. This supposition is supported by the fact that Liszt (who was a pupil of Czerny, *nota bene*) wrote several piano fantasias in the 1830s (mostly based on operas, what Czerny called “potpourri”), thus well before the compositions of his Weimar period. He was also widely acclaimed for his stupendous art of improvisation at a time when that ability had already lost its mandatory significance for a virtuoso. We also know that Liszt was very impressed by Franz Schubert’s *Wanderer Fantasy*, which inspired him to create a version of it for piano and orchestra (op. 15, Catalogue Searle 366). Schubert’s Fantasy, the improvisational roots of which are already alluded to in its title, is an early notated example of the formal type described above; it is also one of the few examples of a printed fantasia on a single theme, consisting as it does of thematic sections with transitional, impromptu passages, almost exactly as Czerny describes in his fourth chapter. A closer look at the two model Fantasias in Czerny’s op. 200 reveals that he uses the formal design he prescribes, but in four movements like Schubert, not in the three he himself stipulates. As already mentioned above, there are several indications that these pieces are provisional in character and that suggest further possibilities for extension or alternative solutions. We can see this in the way Czerny deals with repetitions. For long stretches, he repeats motives or themes as a means of providing unity, though he never repeats entire phrases. He avoids one of the most powerful tools for creating formal unity, namely the recapitulation of the main sections. Instead, his focus is more on tonal coherence. He turns the final rondo into a tonal recapitulation (in Ex. 42 it is in the related major key) and presents it as an approximation to the basic motif of the opening allegro movement. In the first Fantasia, the reappearance of the dotted motif of the first section is transformed into an ascending *Romanesca* sequence ($G^7 - C - B^7 - e$ minor), a common sequential pattern in music of the 18th and 19th centuries (Gjerdingen 2007: 25–44). In the second example, the main motif starting with a rising fourth is moved to the bass in the final section.

Thanks to these two features – tonal and motivic reappearance – the outer movements frame the whole piece, with the final rondo sections assuming the function of a recapitulation, as defined by double-function form. The modulating transitions are very similar to the development section in a sonata, and their appearance right before the final rondo emphasizes its recapitulatory effect. But in both examples, Czerny switches the place of the scherzo and adagio sections, which weakens the function of the slow movement as a secondary subject group in a large-scale sonata form. In this regard, his written description of a fantasia is more coherent than his actual example. His main idea is still to offer a sequential series of different types and genres connected by transitional (often virtuoso) passages. The examples he offers in the ensuing chapters show how great were the possibilities for providing variety. Nevertheless, his goal is still a fantasia that builds up an “orderly totality, one in which unity and a distinct character can prevail” (Czerny 1983: 52). Czerny’s pieces represent a prototype that later became the double-function form in large-scale compositions (with Schubert’s *Wanderer Fantasy* a case from Czerny’s own time).

To sum up, improvisation was historically understood as a craft that could be learnt, albeit an extremely demanding one, and that enabled a performer to compose in the moment. Its ultimate ambition can be seen as achieving an equilibrium between moments of bliss and unexpectedness and the subjectivity of the performer, on the one hand, and coherence, comprehensibility

and creating a meaningful unity, on the other. Of course, these two principles sometimes come into conflict with each other – emphasizing the first weakens the latter, and vice versa. But in general, Classical improvisation was guided by the musical aesthetics of its time, and aimed to achieve balance and resolution. To meet these high standards as a performer, however, required a time-consuming process of practice that was no longer viable in the virtuoso culture of the 19th and 20th centuries.³

Notes

- 1 Sammlung Bodmer, HCB Mh 75, Bl. 3r (digitalized and online at: <https://www.beethoven.de/de/media/view/6362106559463424/scan/4?fromArchive=5736895317278720> (accessed November 11, 2020).
- 2 Rosenblatt interprets his works of the 1830s as compositions written in double-function form, for instance, his *De profundis* of 1834/35 (Rosenblatt 2002: 302)
- 3 Many thanks to Chris Walton for proofreading this article.

References

- Adorno, T. W. (1973) *Dissonanzen: Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 14, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
- (1977) “Replik zu einer Kritik der ‘Zeitlosen Mode’,” in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I/II (Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10), Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 805–9.
- (1978a) “Über einige Relationen zwischen Musik und Malerei,” in *Musikalische Schriften I–III (Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16), Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 628–42.
- (1978b) “Vers une musique informelle,” in *Musikalische Schriften I–III (Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16), Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 493–540.
- Altenburg, D. (2001) “Franz Liszt und das Erbe der Klassik,” in M. Brzoska and M. Heinemann (eds.) *Die Geschichte der Musik*, vol. 3, Laaber: Laaber, pp. 1–19.
- Bach, C. P. E. (1753) *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, Berlin: self-published.
- Czerny, C. (1839) *Vollständig theoretisch-practische Pianoforte-Schule, op. 500, Dritter Teil: von dem Vortrage*, Vienna: Diabelli.
- (n.d.) *Complete Theoretical and Practical Piano Forte School, Third Volume: On Playing with Expression*, J. A. Hamilton (trans. and ed.), London: Robert Cocks & Co.
- (1983) *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte, op. 200*, A. L. Mitchell (trans. and ed.), New York and London: Longman.
- (1993) *Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte, op. 200 (1829)*, U. Mahler (ed.), Wiesbaden: Breitkopf und Härtel.
- Dahlhaus, C. (1987) “Composition and Improvisation,” in D. Puffett and A. Clayton (trans. and ed.) *Schoenberg and the New Music*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 265–73.
- Eggers K. and Stollberg, A. (2021) *Energie! Kräftespiel in den Künsten*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Felbick, L. (2019) “Der *Compositor extemporaneous* Beethoven als ‘Enkelschüler’ Johann Sebastian Bachs,” in M. Lehner, N. Meidhof and L. Miucci (eds.) *Das flüchtige Werk. Pianistische Improvisation der Beethoven-Zeit*, Schliengen: Edition Argus, pp. 34–56.
- Gjerdingen, R. O. (2007) *Music in the Galant Style*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gottsched, J. C. (1733) *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit*, vol. 1, Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf.
- Hamilton, K. (1996) *Liszt. Sonata in B Minor*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2008) *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hummel, J. N. (1830) *Ausführlich theoretisch-practische Anweisung zum Piano-Forte-Spiel, Zweite Auflage*, Vienna: Tobias Haslinger.
- Kopitz, K. M and Cadenbach, R. (eds.) (2009) *Beethoven aus der Sicht seiner Zeitgenossen in Tagebüchern, Briefen, Gedichten und Erinnerungen*, München: Henle.
- van de Moortele, S. (2009) *Two-Dimensional Sonata Form. Form and Cycle in Single Movement Instrumental Works by Liszt, Strauss, Schoenberg, and Zemlinsky*, Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Newman, W. S. (1969) *The Sonata since Beethoven*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Reich, N. B. (2001) *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Rosenblatt, J. (2002): “Piano and Orchestra Works,” in B. Arnold (ed.) *The Liszt Companion*, Westport: Greenwood Press, pp. 281–307.

- Schoenberg, A. (1976) "Brahms, der Fortschrittliche," in I. Vojtech (ed.) *Stil und Gedanke*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, pp. 54–104.
- Schumann, R. (1839) "Sonaten für das Clavier," *NZfM* 10/34: 134 f.
- (1854) "Musikalische Haus- und Lebensregeln," in *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*, Leipzig: Georg Wigand, pp. 293–304.
- Sità, M. G. (2019) "Improvisation and the Rhetoric of Beginning," in M. Lehner, N. Meidhof, and L. Miucci (eds.) *Das flüchtige Werk. Pianistische Improvisation der Beethoven-Zeit*, Schliengen: Edition Argus, pp. 15–33.