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Chapter 22

Competing Ontologies of Musical Improvisation

A Medieval Perspective

Uri Smilansky and Marc Lewon

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The idea of improvisation, broadly defined, has been integral to our imagination of the medieval musical past. It can be related to many elements of production: to the act of un–notated creation; to the manipulation and amplification of notated materials; to our observance of rigid rules and formulae; or to spontaneous freedom. Whichever we chose, we seem happy to apportion improvisatory discourse more room within the Middle Ages than we do in nearly any other period. At least in part, this is maybe with good reason. After all, many studies have highlighted the importance of orality and memory to medieval culture, even when dealing with written materials. Within the musical sphere, improvisation advice and collections of "exempla" span the entire period: from the very earliest references to liturgical polyphony in the 9th century, to virtuosic instrumental performance in the 15th. Furthermore, some scholars have highlighted the importance of orally circulating melodic material, shared by a community of performers and listeners to style development, be that chant in monastic environments or refrains in courtly circles. Others go so far as to say that audiences may often have been unable to distinguish between the execution of improvised and notated music, challenging modern assumptions about the separation of the two activities. Of course, the fact that uncountable musical sources did not survive, and that those that did lack numerous parameters that we consider essential elements of musical notation, does not improve matters.[2] Indeed, this provided a space for retrospective interpretative and performative inputs that have more to do with the preoccupations of the time in which they are undertaken than with the point of origin of the materials studied or performed.

In what follows, we would like to pick up on the improvisatory stance as a social construct, as an ontology. We will, therefore, briefly outline the friction between, on the one hand, the experiences of current practitioners and audiences of medieval music and, on the other, those of their original counterparts. We begin with an overview of surviving evidence relating to improvisatory practices in the Middle Ages. This will be compared with the characterization of medieval musical improvisation within modern education and practice, and how these efforts interact with audience expectations and musical culture more widely. Throughout this process, questions will arise as to what it is we mean when we discuss improvisation. A parallel discussion considers improvisation from the societal point of view, as a point of engagement between performer and audience. Here we discuss the social value placed on improvisation rather than on the technical details of its execution. This structure will enable us to investigate how historical inquiry and current discourse around improvisation can constructively interact and identify where our vocabulary should be refined to better describe changing phenomena. We will come to suggest the usefulness of history in reminding us of the non-universality of our ontologies and how this in turn may

affect a wide range of our current musical and improvisatory activities: from how we educate to how we measure, from how we analyze to how we perform.[3]

Historical Overview I: The Improvising Performer

Let us begin with a brief overview of what we know. Before going into details, however, some qualifiers must pre-empt the discussion. The term "medieval" is inherently non-specific and non-musical. It was not constructed to inform analysts of any unifying intellectual, aesthetic, linguistic, technological, or practical characteristic, and it is singularly unsuccessful in terms of musical periodization. On all these fronts, medieval culture is as heterogeneous as any other randomly selected 1000-year span of world history. Thus, the tag "medieval improvisation" is intrinsically uninformative in comparison to others that are more clearly grounded within discernible temporal and geo-political boundaries, or that consider explicitly sonic and stylistic qualifiers. While "Jazz improvisation," for example, is also a complex construct that underwent multiple transformations and elaborations of practice, as a tag, it allows an audience wanting to enjoy an evening's musical entertainment to form relatively specific and reasonable expectations.

When approaching the issue from the historical point of view, the outlook is by no means better. Here, we are inevitably bound by having to deal with what materially survives from the past – but writing in the Middle Ages was never neutral. For example, during the early Middle Ages the Church had a near monopoly over writing. This resulted in the suppression of pagan and pre-Christian notations and, more widely, of musical repertoires in which the Church was either not interested or of which it disapproved. This, of course, does not mean other music did not exist, only that it was not recorded and does not survive. But orality is a mechanism that neither necessitates nor rules out improvisation, or, to put it differently, a lack of notation does not automatically qualify the performed repertoire as improvisatory (Reichl 2012). The question that remains is: how does one discuss improvisation in an oral culture? Or more widely: how can we incorporate lost materials into our intellectual model of musical technique and practice? Similar "black-spots" persist also in the High and Late Middle Ages when musical notation had become established and subtle. Indeed, they persist throughout history to this day. Furthermore, the decision to notate may have little to do with practice. Luxurious books with musical notation were often intended not for performance but for presentation. Alden, for example, shows not only how the visual elements of such sources attracted more attention to the notes themselves, but also to the social expediency of being seen to be looking at them (Alden 2007). The greater the value and the better the quality of the material artifact, the less likely performers were given access to it. Even personal manuscripts were often more an assertion of intellectual proficiency and cultural exposure than tools for practice: they projected their owners' ability to read and write music (regardless of whether they really could), as well as their taste and repertoire knowledge.[4] As a result, any patterns emerging from our necessary reliance on surviving materials offers, at best, only a distorted mirror through which we can look at the past. Dealing with the ephemeral practice of improvisation markedly increases this danger. We must accept that our outcomes are skewed by the origins of the available materials and their position along the seam between written and unwritten production. Each artifact is the result of a specific cultural and intellectual milieu in which notation was important, and its creation often involved personal, localized agendas. Neither individual artifact nor their entire corpus was ever intended to present a complete picture of wider practice.

Our historical survey begins in the 9th century with the *Musica enchiriadis* treatise, which – like the vast majority of the specific evidence we possess – relates uniquely to religious music-making. No parallel transmission of writings about secular improvisation survives. Likely a product of the Carolingian Renaissance, this is the first medieval music treatise to address an aspect of chant

performance that does not only relate to a memorized repertoire, but includes an unwritten practice of extemporizing an accompanying voice to a pre-given melody (Erickson 1995). This practice is labeled *diaphony* or *organum* and was used to augment and beautify the monophonic chant for solemn occasions. Although this constitutes the earliest evidence of polyphonic singing in Europe, it is not treated as an innovation but as an already established practice. The *Musica enchiriadis* describes the possibility of doubling any melody at the fifth and octave, but its real focus is on the interval of the fourth, which requires a set of rules to avoid the undesired augmented fourth dissonance. In doing so, these rules create a simple two-voice texture that does not rely on parallel motion alone but includes oblique melodic movements, ultimately leading to a greater independence between the voices. However, when applied strictly, the set of rules results in a very limited number of possible solutions. This enables a group of learned insiders to perform *organum* spontaneously to any known melody. Even though the *Musica enchiriadis* introduces the first notational system of the Middle Ages that allowed to record precise pitches, its use was confined to this treatise and employed only to illustrate its teachings with notated examples, not to record a repertoire. This means that the *Musica enchiriadis*' method for extemporizing organum was developed, used, and taught within an entirely oral musical culture, without recourse or reliance on notation. This orality, and the real-time generation of previously non-existent voices, do not mask the mechanical and communal characteristics of the activity. Improvisation, in this case, was not geared towards individualism, creativity, or self-expression. After all, the treatise, and many of those that followed, hailed from a monastic, non-professional context, and many such works were geared towards the education of children.

Such a specification is found in Guido of Arezzo's early 11th-century treatise, the *Micrologus*, which (along with other writings of his) revolutionized music teaching and introduced a new method of notating pitch using clefs and staff lines. In this treatise, he also describes a method by which "anything that is spoken can be made into music" (Babb 1978: 74). By assigning certain pitch levels to certain vowels, his method allows for the semi-mechanical composition of a melody to any given text. Although a version of this method could probably have been used by a trained singer to "improvise," Guido does not explicitly suggest this and it is not reported anywhere else. His revision of the *Musica enchiriadis*' rules for improvising polyphony, on the other hand, had lasting repercussions: according to his own words, his refined rules – which sorted intervals hierarchically and sustained the original melody's modal integrity – made the *organum* "smooth." Finally, Guido introduced his principle of the *occursus*, which essentially marks the beginning of the polyphonic cadence and remained a defining element of polyphonic practice from this point onwards. Guido's rules made *organum* more flexible, yet it could still be extemporized by a practiced group of singers. Nevertheless, as these new rules started to allow for different solutions and were neither comprehensive nor all-encompassing, performers needed to either agree upon a particular path for a given piece in advance or follow a common tradition of interpretation. With Guido's rules, the *Musica enchiriadis*' mechanical model of extemporization began to be complemented by a more creative one that required more decision-making and thus a more individualistic approach. Nevertheless, despite the tendency towards even freer models by the end of the 11th century, the older, communal, and mechanical methods continued to be used and elaborated in parallel with more creative ones for centuries to come (Berentsen 2016). Practices of non-mensural polyphony, such as "fifthing" for instance, would remain a part of the musical life until well into the 15th century and can be traced in certain sacred as well as secular repertoires (Lewon 2020; Strohm 2020). Nor were such techniques confined to conservative, communal practice. A famous, sought-after, and innovative composer such as Guillaume Dufay (1397–1474) wrote numerous chant-settings based on the parallel-motion improvisatory model (by this time using a three-part texture with thirds and sixths called "fauxbourdon"). Indeed, it can be claimed that "mechanical" improvisation practices conceptually comparable to the techniques of early *organum* laid the foundations for later

functional harmony. For example, Guilielmus Monachus' late 15th-century treatise *De preceptis artis musicae*, expanded earlier models for unembellished note-against-note counterpoint to include three- and four-voice progressions (Park 1993). His rules provided an easy method for creating chordal progressions with triads in root position while avoiding parallels in perfect intervals. His models were not only used for simple group harmonization of chant melodies, but were expanded and ornamented by professional soloists, and adopted and reworked by renowned composers as the basis for complex compositions. The models, like the *organum* rules, therefore allowed for further development in both extemporized and worked-out styles.

Turning back to the 11th century and to Guido: his new and precise musical notation was adopted outside his own writings to record chant repertoires and provided the means with which the polyphony conceived via the *organum* rules could have been recorded. However, surviving written-out organa in this style are confined to one source: dated ca. 1000, the *Winchester Troper* is a collection of plainchant that includes a substantial section of *organa*, and, thus, represents the earliest surviving repertoire of polyphony (Rankin 2007). This situation opens an ontological problem for the modern analyst, which is duplicated in many later repertoires. In order to reconstruct a practice, it is necessary to create a category of "written down improvisations," which is by no means representative of original attitudes. This designation also separates the "improvised" from the "composed," often according to modern notions of quality. Below, we argue that such a differentiation may miss the point both of a practice governed by strict rules (even if considered creative), and of the act of notation. The style of the Winchester corpus is reminiscent of but does not strictly follow Guido's roughly contemporaneous guidelines, showing how flexible the practice had become in a short space of time and when applied by trained singers. Indeed, a deviation from the rules can be seen as a natural result of the transition away from the classroom. Regular, functional application would have gained its own momentum, transforming and liquefying the rules into a living practice.

The creative model of extemporization had already received written, independent justification by the late 11th century, in a group of four short treatises collectively summarized under the label *Ad organum faciendum* (Eggebrecht and Zaminer 1970). The flexibility of the new rules required a move away from group extemporization as a communal effort. Forsaking a note-against-note counterpoint allowed a hitherto unheard-of amount of freedom that required foresight in mapping out a path for the improvised *vox organalis*, which in turn called for professional soloists. The *Ad organum faciendum* treatises discuss extemporization only of the core structure of two-voice improvisation, its scaffolding, so to speak. One of the treatises indicates a practice (called "coloration") of ornamenting this core, which is not governed by the rules. A small, surviving repertoire of "colored" or "florid" *organa* in the *Codex Calixtinus* (ca. 1140) can be linked to the style of these treatises and demonstrates how inventive and resourceful the singers were in creating their *organa* by the mid-12th century, and how little of their actual practice is covered and reflected by the theory treatises. This gap between the teachings of the treatises and the traces of an actual practice is owed to the monastic theoreticians' attempt to describe, rationalize and capture practices for the purpose of education. They necessarily lag behind the developments of real-life musical practice and mirror them only faintly. The rules of the treatises, however, bear witness to an important conceptual leap towards the extemporized *vox organalis*: it was to be considered a seemingly free voice with the external appearance of independence, liberated from the constraints of parallel movement to the chant melody – this being the trademark of all earlier practices. With this new type of *organum*, we can, for the first time, truly speak of "polyphony," and comparisons with improvisatory practices we recognize today become more meaningful.

In the search for remnants of unwritten practices, we necessarily seek out the exceptional sources. The next step in the development of extemporized polyphony, the *Vatican Organum Treatise* (early 13th century), is such an exception (Godt and Rivera 1984). After a short introduction

which lays out basic principles, the treatise consists entirely of musical examples. These contain a systematic catalogue of sample two-voice progressions that appear to be intended for memorization and mark a significant change in attitude towards "coloration": the embellishments of the core progressions are now in-built and spelled out in the examples. Apparently, by this time, they had become an essential part of the practice. The treatise is linked to a major notated corpus, that is, the *Notre Dame* school (Immel 2001). Thus, while the florid, professional style of the 12th and 13th centuries is often associated with the rise of the idea of named composers (Léonin and Perotin), the association with this treatise suggests that the notated repertoire was conceived to a large part from an unwritten, extemporized practice. The length and scale of some of the surviving organa attests not only to the high standards of professional singers but also to their feats in memorization as all of this was performed by heart. This emphasis on memory merits further consideration, as it marks a consistent medieval approach to the generation of "free" improvisation, even to the very idea of creativity (Carruthers 2008). Novelty does not arise *ex nihilo*. Instead of relying on inspiration, it consciously uses, reuses, and manipulates materials from a memorized store of previous experiences, both personal and learned from external sources (Busse Berger 2005). In practice, learning to improvise in many later styles uses a not dissimilar technique (see Lara Pearson, this volume). This supports the view that improvisation does not have to be equated with individuality and expressivity. It also questions notions of temporality and the uniqueness of the improvisatory act. A performer with a trained memory could, after all, pre-decide and repeat the contours of performance without annotation. Nevertheless, remembering that theoretical rules were designed for instructing children (Fuller 2013), expert singers would have developed their own bank of examples and personal aesthetic language, transferring the locus of individualism to the area of preparation and learned experience rather than to technique during the momentary act of creation. Another section of the *Vatican Organum Treatise* consists of a collection of monophonic stock-phrases complementing the sample progressions. The presence of such melodic phrases devoid of polyphonic context in a treatise on two-voice polyphony shows the importance given to melodic beauty and consistency in the newly created voice. Though the *Vatican Organum Treatise* bears rare testimony to this phenomenon, it does not stand alone: The *Berkeley Treatise* from the second half of the 14th century concludes its chapter on the principles of two-voice counterpoint with a collection of melodic phrases (here called *verbula*), applicable for ornamenting polyphonic core structures (Ellsworth 1984). Once more, the horizontal melodic line is the center of attention. The most remarkable difference to the monophonic phrases of the *Vatican Organum Treatise* is a refined rhythmical element that governed polyphony by the time of the *Berkeley Treatise,* and which pervades its teachings. Stock-phrases are here sorted according to rhythmic groupings and thus add another layer of intricacy to the singers' art of "descanting."

The art of "coloration" or the ornamentation of a line, whether polyphonic or monophonic, had been an integral part of extemporization since at least the time of the *Ad organum faciendum* treatises. The practical examples of the *Vatican* and *Berkeley* treatises appear to shed some light on this, but statements from other theoreticians qualify any universality we may want to draw from them. Hieronymus de Moravia, for instance, meticulously described the habits of Parisian singers and the ways they performed and ornamented ca. 1300. Nevertheless, he is keen to stress that these practices are not observed by all, and that in some matters all the nations disagree in singing (Weber 2009: 393, 395). Similar separations between French, English, and Italian improvisatory practices are hinted at by Guilielmus Monachus. A different separation is offered by the author of the *Tractatus figurarum*, who, in an attempt to codify the notation of the extremely complex style of the late 14th and early 15th centuries, introduced his work by asserting that "it should not be that theorists cannot notate things that performers execute" (Schreur 1989: 72 f.). That the resulting rhythms were described as not having been replicated until the works of Stravinsky hints at the high level of sophistication of improvisatory practices now lost to us (Apel 1973).

All traces of extemporized practices discussed so far were confined to sacred vocal perfor-mance. By the 15th century, we have manuscript evidence that this phenomenon was extended to instrumental practices, specifically to the organ. *Fundamentum organisandi* is a title shared by a group of sources that also contain organ tablatures, most prominently the *Lochamer Liederbuch* (ca. 1450) and the *Buxheimer Orgelbuch* (ca. 1480). While the tablatures themselves consist to a large part of ornamented versions of vocal music, the *Fundamenta* sections present a collection of polyphonic discantus (i.e., upper voice) movements over pre-given tenor progressions (i.e., a *cantus firmus*). In this they resemble the collection of the *Vatican Organum Treatise*. "They were clearly conceived as models for extemporizing right hand gestures upon a slow moving *cantus firmus*. They offer a "Spielvorgang" (i.e., a process of playing): a practice separate from free improvisation, com-position, or the diminution of a preexisting line (Zöbeley 1964).

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As previously noted, the cultural context in the Middle Ages did not encourage the notation of codified extemporization practices outside the church. We are thus lacking information on how comparable practices were applied in secular environments. From iconographical evidence and descriptions of performances, we know, for example, that instrumentalists accompanied monoph-ony, that wind bands performed dance music, and that lute duos improvised with great virtuosity upon chanson melodies. Where they learned their craft and which techniques they employed, however, remains educated guesswork. One place of exchange and of learning must have been the minstrel schools – annual meetings during Lent, to which courtly instrumentalists from all over Europe travelled and which are recorded to have taken place mostly in Flanders between ca. 1300 and ca. 1450 (Wegman 2002). Professional instrumentalists also often came from musician fami-lies and would have learned at least part of their trade at home.

Even though the techniques of instrumentalists were not described in theory treatises, some cursory references confirm that they were aware of the rules of counterpoint. Hieronymus de Moravia's treatise, for instance, provides tunings for the vielle and states that accompanying drone strings on this instrument were only to be played if they resulted in certain consonances against the main melody (Weber 2009: 500). Thus, modern performers tend to transfer techniques from monastic treatises and sacred music collections when performing secular music. Similarly, the polyphonic amplification of dance melodies often adopts either Guilielmus Monachus' "harmony by numbers" models or the ornamentation techniques of the *Fundamenta organisandi*. Beyond our problematic knowledge of the past, modern practitioners are also hampered by the limited, patchy, and inconsistent provision of education in this field (Potter 2018: 620–4). Nevertheless, if we as-sume a general background within "classical" musical education for those choosing to specialize in medieval music, it may be safe to assume a widespread reticence towards improvisation, with prac-titioners viewing the activity as unstructured and bound up with mystical notions of inspiration.[5] The institutional history at the heart of this friction is not our focus here. It is brought up for its wider resonances in relation to audiences, and as a nod towards the need for awareness in planning educational approaches, where techniques cannot be effective without considering style-specific requirements.

When considering contemporary audiences, it is important to note that, on the whole, they tend to have minimal exposure to or background knowledge of medieval music in compari-son to many other areas of the contemporary entertainment "mainstream." Its appeal, therefore, is (and always has been) closely intertwined with both non-musical projections of "past-ness" and expectations formed by the consumption of other music (Haines 2018). There is, therefore, no contradiction between the notion of value through age – be it religious, national, racial, or of less-specific "otherness" – and the suffusion of the actual musical presentation by other

recognizable traditions, however incongruous to the Middle Ages they may be (Haines 2001; Meyer and Yri 2020). At least nominally, audiences are thus attracted to an authority external to the performers, wanting to hear something of an often vague or imagined "then" rather than of the "now." This problematizes the position of improvisation within the performance of medieval materials. On the one hand, improvising necessarily new material can be understood as a dilution of any authoritative "past-ness," as it muddies the boundary between current and past temporalities. On the other hand, for a performance to be convincing and to be deemed personally "genuine" (rather than historically "authentic"), it has to overcome exactly this boundary (Mariani 2017; see also Garry Hagberg, this volume). Here, improvisation acts as a byword for cultural assimilation and, therefore, as a demonstration by performers that their access to the past is both superior to that of their audiences, as well as mystically communicative. At least in relation to the performance of certain medieval repertoires – for example, the incorporation of instruments into the performance of monophonic song – an expectation exists for improvisation to be part of the currency of authenticity. This, however, does not necessarily imply intrinsic creativity and expression, nor does it relate directly to reconstructionist interests (Kreutziger-Herr and Redepenning 2000; Haug 2009).

The next question that arises relates to the communication of improvisation. After all, it is rare for audiences to know and recognize the medieval materials performed, and when such knowledge exists, it usually arises from exposure to other performances rather than to the original material itself. How, then, can audiences discern the presence of improvisation in real time? Of course, this can be communicated through a range of non-musical means that cannot be considered here. Within the musical offering, audience expectations are routinely channeled through a number of technical and structural frameworks, which necessarily rely on wider contemporaneous practices rather than on the medieval materials. As both performers and audiences have grown up and been educated surrounded by other kinds of music, their actions are measured up against other practices. For example, it is common for instrumentation to be used for demarcating authorial materials performed vocally from improvised materials performed instrumentally. This is often combined with structural segmentation, whereby preludes, interludes, and postludes make space for improvised or pseudo-improvised materials that can relate to their model without obscuring it. Alternatively, technical differentiators may be applied, such as the contrasting between sections of measurable and "free" rhythm to mark the separation between old and new (which can work in both directions). A cynical view of our current cultural constellation may even claim that the successful public conveyance of historical authenticity requires sacrificing even the little nuggets of historical truth that we can still discern. All this raises questions relating to the original consumption of improvised materials, requiring a second historical overview: this time, not from the point of view of improvisers, but from that of the consumers of their efforts.

Historical Overview II: Consuming Music in the Middle Ages

Any attempt to discuss the medieval appreciation of improvised music must first outline a more general model for musical consumption. This complex task underlines how different past attitudes are to our own and, thus, how problematic it is to compare cross-cultural improvisatory practices. The ontology of musical consumption can be broken down into several constituent parts. These include social attitudes towards music and musicians; cultural attitudes to the act of listening; intellectual concepts of authority, flexibility, performance, and reproducibility; and, finally, the designation of importance and value. In the following sketch, we briefly follow these four elements in turn, apportioning a paragraph to each one.

It is becoming increasingly evident that medieval consumers were entirely at ease with separating an abstracted idea of music from the practical experience of sound. This is most visible

within the educational context, where the Seven Liberal Arts placed *Musica* as one of mathematical *quadrivium* subjects. Its main objective was to teach the (mathematical) rules of proportion as well as their presence and influences within the hermetic medieval world view. Its tuition had nothing to do with sound-production or its cultural enjoyment (Dyer 2009). This separability, however, can be transferred also to the production, procurement, and use of music books. Above, we have already mentioned the social and functional separation between the act of writing or owning books and the performance of their contents. To these examples can be added the inclusion of musical notation in luxurious liturgical manuscripts, even in contexts where performance did not rely on notation or was not at all envisaged.[6] The special case of polyphony adds another distancing layer, with the near ubiquitous medieval tendency to notate it in separate parts rather than in score format. While the modern preference for scores results in much wasted page-space, it allows readers to equate vertical alignment with simultaneity, and so form an impression of an entire musical texture away from performance. The medieval layout, with voices copied out in full one after the other or side by side, is spatially more efficient, but results in each voice moving at a different speed within its distinct geography on the page. Thus, even polyphonic reading during real-time performance was all but impossible, let alone the mental realization of music away from it (Smilansky 2011). The audible consumption of such music cannot be conflated with the visual consumption of its notation. This independence enables also a separation in both time and place between the two activities: as the visual consumption of the musical artifact was not focused on musical understanding, its non-musical elements could be consumed just as successfully away from performance and with little to no reference to sonic content. Consequently, the value of musicality was separable from the figure of the performer. Even during performance, audience attention would just as likely be directed to a musical artifact, to other members of the consuming group, and, in particular, to socially superior patrons (Page 1997). It is, therefore, not surprising that the social standing of professional musicians was not high, and only on rare occasions would attention and interest be directed towards their creative process (Salmen 1983).[7]

This leads us directly to the medieval understanding of listening and participation. The graded model of liturgical involvement offered by Daniele Filippi presents a much wider range of engagement levels than we are likely to accept now as appropriate or satisfying (Filippi 2017). Of course, the liturgical experience has its own emphases, involving also architectural, material, and other non-musical sensory input. Still, it is important to recognize that an intention to participate and a general proximity to a church where a service was taking place – while far from ideal – could under certain circumstances fulfill the spiritual requirement of attendance and religious observance. Likewise, hearing without understanding was acceptable for considerable portions of society. Interestingly, the highest form of consumption was not deemed to be rapt attention to the proceedings, but an individualistic, internalized meditation, instigated by – but not limited to – the specific external cues on offer. It seems likely that audiences transferred similar listening techniques also when exposed to the secular soundscape. If preference was given to personalized meaning constructed by the consumer, it follows that the performance itself cannot pretend to communicate a specific, authoritative and pre-determined meaning to be shared by the listening community. Communication is further undermined by the acceptance that this "listening community" can be wider than those of its members that can physically hear (let alone, understand) the performance. The entangled roles of composer and performer are thus problematized.

Beyond the general non-conflation of the written and the heard discussed above, it should be remembered that musical literacy among both public and musicians was lower in the Middle Ages than it is now, forcing a reliance on memory instead. When notation did occur, many parameters that to us seem integral are missing from the surviving sources, including instrumentation, articulation, dynamics, some chromatic inflections, and any expressive annotations.

Consequently, those who could read music did not expect a full set of instructions able to support a consistent reproduction. It appears that consumers did not expect reproduction either. Indeed, it seems much more likely that uniqueness was deemed more attractive than reproducibility, and that musicians took drastic measures in order to make their offerings contextually appropriate (Smilansky, 2021). At the very least, the partiality of the instructions provided by notated artifacts meant that realizations based on them required a creative, interventionist stance, not one limited to detached execution. The expectation to adapt, amplify or simplify materials in performance suggests that a similar approach pertained also to music learned by ear. All in all, a practical disinterest in the notion of *urtext* and a functional expectation of variety support the continuing questioning of the notions of "work" in performance.[8] At the same time, "works" were allowed to flourish intellectually, conceptually and in notation. This situation has clear implications on our ability to distinguish a framework within which we can analyze the idea and practices of improvisation. Not because they were not present, but because our vocabulary and conceptualizations do not apply.

Finally, this discussion leads us to inquire what medieval consumers listened out for – once listening eventually occurred. Here, we are hampered by the difficulty in creating analytical models that deal with medieval expressivity as well as compositional technique (Smilansky 2017; Leach 2019). Nevertheless, compositional attitudes and medieval descriptions generally suggest that a prominent model of creativity involved a proposed synthesis between old and new, between authority and experimentation (Plumley 2013). At first sight, this model may seem intrinsically supportive of extemporization. Still, while it certainly supported musical and poetic creativity (both pre-composed and forged in real time), the main loci for improvised engagement were on the other end of the spectrum. For musical expansions of both liturgy and dance accompaniment to function successfully, the improvised performance needed to privilege the integrity of the pre-given materials. They were the vehicles through which either mystical communion in prayer or the rhythms and structure of dance were to be regulated. However much expanded or hidden, it was the chant or the dance melody that mattered, with any embellishment or manipulation remaining subservient to the preexisting material on which it was based. Here, the improviser's role was not to go beyond, challenge, or imprint their personality over the base material, but to support it, engage with it, and make it more pleasing or effective for social consumption. At least in these contexts, the notion "improvisational phronesis" (as explored by Bruce Ellis Benson in this volume) does not hold. Even when improvisation was used to ease the passage of time (for example, during communion), it was not supposed to distract from the devotional activity at hand. It was the inner life of those partaking in the action that mattered, not that of the performer providing the musical accompaniment. The improviser's effort, therefore and once again, could not make too many claims on consumers' attention or be primarily concerned with projecting individual expressivity.

<p style="text-align:center">★★★</p>

Of course, not all the characteristics described above hold for every instance of musical performance at each point of time and place within the vastness of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the cultural forces that sustained them point towards a context in which the discussion of improvisation becomes more and more difficult. On the one hand, we have seen a blurring (in relation to many later practices, though by no means all) between the roles of the composer and performer. The expectation that musicians adjust their offerings to the needs and opportunities of changing contexts becomes an extreme form of the symbiosis between the two roles of improvisation, as explored by Robert Valgenti in this volume, but with society affecting changes as much as the performer's personal style. This, and the preference of uniqueness over reproducibility promote

improvisatory elements as essential for professional success. On the other hand, none of these adjustments had to occur in real time during performance. From the consumers' point of view, the audiences' inability to follow written versions, to relate performances to other hearings, and a general disinterest in any author-sanctioned singularity destabilized the division between the improvised and the composed. Even if listeners had the capacity to distinguish whether materials were improvised or not, it is unlikely they would have dedicated time and effort to such an activity (Wegman 1996; Lehmann and Kopiez 2010). After all, the center of attention in performance was on them and their needs, not on the creativity and status of the performer. For the most part, musicians derived status from their patrons, not the other way around. What, then, is improvisation for, if it is not noticed, appreciated, or deemed interesting by its audience? To what degree does it matter whether creativity was pre-planned or momentary, especially in a context where memory training challenges the validity of such a duality, and which did not privilege spontaneity or inspiration? Was improvisation a badge of professional pride primarily within a closed community of musical practitioners? Was it a "secret of the trade" that the un-initiated did not even know existed?

This, perhaps, would be taking things too far. After all, we have seen a consumptive expectation for notated materials to be realized differently in each instance and thus an acceptance of performative, temporally bound input. We also have some evidence of real-time competitive creativity (though more often literary than strictly musical) and, towards the end of the Middle Ages, of a number of famed improvisers making a career out of extemporization. At the very least, we can construct a joint currency of opulence and ephemerality. A grading of opulence allows the same notated materials (or shared oral knowledge) to sound more or less special according to accepted sonic parameters that defined the momentary artifact: the number of voices offered, the use of certain musical techniques or effects, and varying levels of virtuosity, complexity, and subtlety. This has both temporal and social potential: it can be used to mark special days or events (and thus, audiences) as of higher status, and the ability to maintain musicians capable of providing such services project patrons' economic clout and aesthetic sophistication. A reliance on improvisation and the ephemeral uniqueness with which it is infused enhances the geo-temporal component of an opulent performance. Being impossible to reconstruct, it stresses the importance of personal access to the event, while subsequent attempts at its notation and circulation allow for at least elements of its grandeur to reverberate more widely. Still, the performance of uniqueness, does not necessitate real-time creativity. As multiple analyses of improvisation attest, it can be both minutely planned, rehearsed, and – to all practical extent and purposes – repeatable. But where do all these questions leave us?

A Synthesis?

In collecting and presenting the materials above, we did not attempt to define an essential ontology – or even multiple ontologies – of improvisation in the Middle Ages, nor, indeed, a unique approach promulgated by modern practice or expected by current audiences. The various stances considered – across time, but also across the performer-consumer divide – were chosen in order to highlight the multiple ontological frictions between what can be experienced as axiomatic fundamentals of musical interaction and the cultural constructs of the medieval past. By showing similarities with the preoc-cupations of the discussions presented here, as well as the alternatives offered by a culture both remote and linked to our own, we hoped to dislodge the separation between past and present. On the one hand, history has much to contribute to the evaluation of current philosophical discourse. On the other, it is open and receptive to new ideologies and approaches. For example, the separation between designer-centric and player-centric analysis in Thi Nguyen's contribution to this volume can easily be mapped on to our discussion of the performer-audience relationship.

Furthermore, whether one is interested in integrating creativity into education ; unlocking the mental processes or practical techniques of improvisers; or understanding the social resonances and public perception of improvised music, the foreignness of medieval perceptions forces us not to take any parameter for granted. Thus, when analyzing audiences' experiential response to improvisation, we must first clearly define what it is that is perceived to be improvised and the contextual host-culture's approach to listening to, engaging with, and understanding its own aestheticized sound-world. Similarly, we must clarify that the neural mapping of the improvisatory act is underscored by the cultural processes, practices, and educational background of the mapped individual. They offer local, culture-specific data that cannot readily be abstracted into universals across time and space. Finally, any inquiry into performers' discipline, creativity, and expressivity cannot be undertaken in the abstract. They too require contextualization into the needs and opportunities of the society in which they are found.

When planning our ontological inquiries, we would do well to remember the possible existence of creativity that is not inspired, or ephemerality that is not performer- or expression-centered. By acknowledging the specificity and sophistication of entirely foreign medieval practices we take more care in claiming universals, or in downplaying the importance of education, economics, and consumer-expectations in shaping what it is practitioners do. It even affects how we construct the meaning of the term "improvisation" at any given time and place.

Related Topics

Benson, B. E. (This Volume) "Improvisational *Phronesis*."
Hagberg, G. (This Volume) "Jazz Improvisation, Authenticity, and Self-Expression."
Moruzzi, C. (This Volume) "Improvisation as Creative Performance."
'Nguyen, C. Thi (This Volume) "Creativity and Improvisation in Games."
Pearson, L. (This Volume) "'Improvisation' in Play: A View through South Indian Music Practices."
Valgenti, R. T. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Ontology of Formativity."

Notes

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2 For a statistical model of loss relating to 14th-century Italian music see Cuthbert 2009.
3 John Haines, for example, takes one medieval repertoire and traces the changing attitudes towards it across the centuries (Haines 2004).
4 Martin Kirnbauer, for instance, reconstructs Hartmann Schedel's process of mechanically copying his song book to compensate for a lack of musical proficiency, leaving it unusable as a musical collection (Kirnbauer 2001).
5 It is worth noting here that the discussion of improvisation is often not flexible and varied enough to accommodate distinctions between temporal and aesthetic trends within the Western "classical" (and pre-classical) tradition, and that historically, the subject has been ideologically and morally charged, usually against preoccupation with improvisation. The former issue is exemplified by Siljamäki and Kanellopoulos (Siljamäki and Kanellopoulos 2020), while the negative value-judgment of improvisation as a tag for phenomena unworthy of study is discussed by Laudan Nooshin (Nooshin 2003).
6 For example, Wright discusses the bad lighting in Notre Dame in Paris and the need to rely on memory also when books were actually present (Wright 1989).
7 It is worth noting, however, that one can identify a fashion for explicitly musical stardom and celebrity developing during the 15th century (Starr 2004; Blackburn 2018).
8 For the position of pre-1800 practices in the discussion of the musical "work," see, for example, Strohm 2000. This characterization greatly expands the range of admissible versions encompassed by Caterina Moruzzi's notion of "repeatability" discussed in this volume.

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