Speaking Classical Music: 
An Argument for Improvisation in Classical Music Education

by

Nathan Shane
Class of 2013

A thesis (or essay) submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Music

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2013
Contents

Preface 4

Acknowledgements

Introduction. Speaking a Musical Language: A Theory of Musical Improvisation 8
   a. Overview of Arguments 13

1. Chapter One. Improvisation in European Classical Music: From the Baroque Era to the Present Day 16
   a. Improvisation in Baroque Musical Practice 17
      i. Embellishment 18
      ii. Figured Bass Accompaniment 21
      iii. Spontaneous Composition 22
   b. Learning to Improvise 24
      i. Immersion 25
      ii. Education 27
   c. The Decline of Improvisation 30
      i. Societal Change in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Europe 30
      ii. The Rise of Middle-Class Music: Amateur Musicians and the Public Concert 33
      iii. From Improvisation to Canonization 38
   d. The Current State of Improvisation 41
      i. Exceptions to the Rule: Classical Improvisation 43

2. Chapter Two. Musical Creativity and its Basis in Education 46
   a. Self-Expression and Personal Creativity 48
i. The Joys of Self-Expression 48
ii. Improvisation, Imagination, and the Instrument 52
iii. Composition and its Improvisatory Foundation 55

b. Passive Music-Making and the Ear 56
   i. The Classically-Trained Ear 57
   ii. Passive Musical Techniques for Training the Ear 60

c. Developing a Creative Relationship with Music 61
   i. Universal Creativity and Worshiping the Composer 62
   ii. Encouraging versus Discouraging Creativity 65
   iii. The Risks of Improvisation 68

3. Chapter Three. Fluency for the Classical Musician 71
   a. Building Fluency 72
      i. The Vocabulary and Grammar of Classical Music 72
      ii. The Rift between Theory and Practice 75
      iii. Improvisation: Bridging Theory and Practice 79

   b. The Value of Fluency in Classical Music 86
      i. Improvisation within Compositions 87
      ii. The Insider Perspective 89
      iii. Spontaneity and Flexibility in Performance 94

Conclusion. Choosing a Musical Path 99
   a. Historical Authenticity for the Classical Improviser 100
   b. Beyond Authenticity 101
   c. The Music of Today 104

References 106
   a. Bibliography 106
   b. Personal Communication 109

Appendix I. Survey: Classical Musicians and Improvisation 111
Appendix II. Quantitative Analysis of Survey 117
“I close by recommending free improvisation in general and in every respectable form to all those for whom [music] is not merely a matter of entertainment and practical ability, but rather principally one of inspiration and meaning in their art. This recommendation, to be sure, has never been so urgent as now, because the number of people whose interests belong to the former category and not to the latter has never been so great. Even if a person plays with inspiration, but always from a written score, he or she will be much less nourished, broadened, and educated than through the frequent offering of all of his or her powers in a free fantasy practiced in the full awareness of certain guidelines and directions, even if this improvisation is only moderately successful.” – Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1829? [in Goertzen, “Introduction” 305])
PREFACE

The music of Johann Sebastian Bach fills me with an incredible optimism for life. Since I first heard Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier, what I have most wanted from my music education has been to learn how to create my own music in that style, so that I can give to others what Bach has given to me. Unfortunately, I have had little luck finding a teacher to help me achieve that goal. My piano teachers have all taught the performance of compositions, so they could not help me express myself in a Baroque style. I took a course in eighteenth-century counterpoint, and loved it, yet the class was only a small step towards fluency in the Baroque musical language.

The ideas that I present in this thesis developed as a direct result of this experience. Conversations with my classically trained peers showed a dissatisfaction with their musical education that mirrored my own; a few of these have lingered in my memory. A pianist friend told me that although he would love to learn classical guitar, he did not want to learn a second instrument on which he still could not express himself freely through music. Another friend tried taking jazz piano lessons for a semester, because he no longer wanted to feel confined to musical scores. An acquaintance of mine who plays jazz called classical musicians “technicians,” and even though I defended interpretation to him as a form of creativity, that discussion planted a seed of doubt about classical music in my mind. As that seed grew, I began to feel an acute tension between my wish to explore my musical creativity and my interest in Baroque music.

These feelings grew progressively stronger. I considered switching to jazz piano, but I didn’t, because Baroque music is closer to my heart than jazz. About a year ago, my disillusionment culminated in a personal crisis. Only when I realized that it was not the music itself that was at fault, but how it was taught, could I resolve these feelings. I observed how other
kinds of education, musical and otherwise, help people develop their creativity. Jazz teachers help their students learn to improvise in the jazz idiom, and writing assignments are a central aspect of courses in school. The clearest condemnation of classical music education, however, seemed to be the pedagogical practices used to teach second languages. When I studied abroad in Germany during my junior year, I saw how learning German for four years in high school had given me a strong foundation upon which I could improve my expressive ability. I spoke with an accent, but I still loved to communicate with Germans in their native language. While abroad, I also came to understand that Bach and the other classical composers did not just compose. They improvised, and this made me draw an analogy between speaking and improvising. If I could learn to speak German, then it seemed that I could learn to improvise in a Baroque style as well.

My thesis emerged out of these observations. When it came for me to choose a topic in the spring of 2012, I knew that I wanted to write something related to Baroque music, but also make a meaningful contribution to people’s practical relationship with music. Writing about improvisation in classical music education has allowed me to do both: it has expanded my knowledge of the role of improvisation in classical music history, and also given me the opportunity to talk to many classical music students and teachers about their own experiences.

I have taught music lessons, and I improvise often, yet my experience in both of these areas is limited. Rather, the background that I bring to this thesis is primarily that of a student and a classical musician. My experiences in classical music education have shown me ways in which I believe that classical music teachers could alter their teaching for the benefit of the student. My exposure to other styles of music at Wesleyan, such as South Indian classical music, traditional Georgian polyphony, American hymnody, and those of the Javanese and Balinese gamelan, have provided me with valuable, alternative perspectives with which I approach this
topic. Finally, I have not relied on myself alone, but have built this thesis out of the views and experiences of many other classical music teachers and musicians.

I have great respect for my classical teachers: I owe many of my musical skills to them, not to mention my passion for music. By writing this thesis, I merely hope to persuade classical music teachers and students of the value of improvisation. If this thesis has a positive influence on the musical experience of even one classical musician, then I will have accomplished my goal.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As with most everything that I have accomplished in my life, this thesis would have been impossible without the support of my teachers, friends, and family. Eric Charry, my advisor, did not let any weak arguments slip by, forcing me to confront many of the difficulties of my topic. In addition to Professor Charry, I also want to thank my other music teachers at Wesleyan, for providing me with a broad and deep musical background that was crucial in this process.

My thesis mentor, Rachel Warner, gave me invaluable advice every time we met. Her feedback improved both the overall quality of this thesis and my ability to write. My housemates at 277 Pine—Ali Ellerbeck, Gemma Smith, and Noah Klein-Markman—helped me maintain a sense of perspective on this project; moreover, they have made my senior year at Wesleyan one of the best years of my life. Special thanks to Ali, my thesis writing companion, for helping me through structural issues more times than I can count, and commiserating with me whenever I felt stressed.

Lastly, I want to thank my parents, Francie Weeks and Scott Shane, for everything they have done to bring me through this process. They encouraged me when my ideas first began to develop, offered advice whenever I was stuck, and helped me push through to the end. Without their endless support in all areas of my life, this thesis would not exist today.
INTRODUCTION

Speaking a Musical Language:
A Theory of Musical Improvisation

Two old friends meet for coffee at the neighborhood café. Their conversation jumps quickly from topic to topic, ranging from a brother’s upcoming marriage to last night’s exciting soccer game on TV. An ambulance driver takes an alternate route back to the emergency room because of bottleneck traffic. An amateur cook throws together a meal on a weekday night, and modifies the recipe because of a missing ingredient. A student quickly chooses what to wear from his closet, so that he can make it on time to the bus stop. A teacher answers an unexpected question, and feels lucky that she prepared her lesson plan so thoroughly.

Improvisation is ever present in our lives. We improvise in our reactions to the many unexpected events that happen every day. Our actions are composed of two parts: an improvised component, which we decide upon in real time, and a predetermined or fixed component. Creativity always occurs within a defined space; without such boundaries, a person would have infinite options, rendering any decision impossible. Improvisation is an integral and natural part of every person’s life, crucial for the ability to function as a human being.

Improvisation is not just a matter of necessity, however, but enriches our daily lives by challenging our minds and helping us maintain a flexible, evolving relationship with the world around us. Musicians express themselves not just through composition, which creates a fixed structure to be interpreted in performance, but also through improvisation within established frameworks. Such improvisatory practices include the alapana improvisation of a Carnatic singer, a drummer’s solo in a jazz performance, and the elaboration of a melody on instruments like the gender in a Javanese gamelan.
While improvisation is a part of all music-making, some musical traditions provide considerably less opportunity for the average musician to improvise than those mentioned above. Western classical music, which I define as a broad genre representing European art music from approximately the eighth century to the twentieth century, is one such tradition.\(^1\) The genre revolves primarily around a canon of compositions written by composers in that time, place, and cultural environment. In the performance of these compositions, classical musicians traditionally adhere to the instructions on the written page. Improvisation in this context is limited to interpretation, which includes aspects such as dynamics or articulation not notated by the composer. The proportion of improvised to fixed content is lower than in other kinds of performance, in which not all the notes are fixed.

Unlike classical music, however, the musical traditions in which the classical canon originated—especially those before the nineteenth century—had a high degree of improvisation. Until the end of the Baroque era, and continuing in some respects afterwards, improvisation was central to musical practice, and a vital skill for professional musicians. Music was not bound to a canon of unchanging compositions, but was rather a flexible entity in constant change. Only in the nineteenth century did a myriad of social forces converge to cause the decline of improvisation in European art music.

The disappearance of improvisation from the performance of classical music does not seem to be problematic in terms of musical practice. Whether a musician chooses to improvise is a matter of personal discretion. The absence of improvisation in classical music education, however, has serious consequences. Music education strongly influences the musical abilities a

\(^1\) Lumping together such a diversity of music under one label is problematic, yet I have two reasons for doing so. First, the term classical music is in widespread usage, making it easily understood by readers. Second, classical music is often treated as one entity in musical practice and education today, and it is this form of education that is the focus of this thesis.
student develops, and the relationship with music a student will have later in life. Furthermore, most people want to develop their creativity to the fullest extent possible, in any kind of education. Combine these two points, and classical music education suddenly seems out of sync with the musical skills people want to acquire.

Classical musicians do improvise in interpretation, however, which arguably provides students with plenty of creativity. But by drawing a comparison between music and language, we can make a clearer distinction between interpretation and other forms of musical creativity. Like music, language occurs first and foremost in sound, and can be recorded using written notation. The four main skills of language are speaking, reading, writing, and understanding. Music has a counterpart for each: the invention of notes, reading music, composition, and aural comprehension, respectively. The similarities between music and language make the analogy a natural, useful comparison.

The analogy is nothing new, of course, having been used by musicians, musicologists, and ethnomusicologists to a variety of ends. The minority of classical musicians that improvise often use the analogy as an implicit critique of classical music education. Two texts that teach improvisation in classical music styles demonstrate this trend. In the foreword to *The Langloz Manuscript: Fugal Improvisation through Figured Bass*, an eighteenth-century collection of partimento fugues edited by William Renwick (2001), Peter Williams writes, “May the present book help to revive the ‘practical theory’ of music, producing an intimate understanding of the language of music” (Renwick viii). Similarly, in the preface to *Improvisation with Ostinato Basses from the 16th to 18th Centuries* (Trans. N. S.), Martin Erhardt writes, “The musical language of the Renaissance and the Baroque is not unfamiliar to us, yet today it is more often ‘read out loud’ than ‘freely spoken’. This book is a contribution towards the effort to make this
language as alive as possible again today” (Erhardt 5, Trans. N. S.). Both of these writers use the music-language analogy to advocate for the return of improvisation, but they do not further pursue its implications.

The concepts of fluency, vocabulary and grammar, which provide a basis for understanding how a person can speak, bring out these implications. A person who can speak a language is said to be fluent in that language. Fluency means that a person can draw upon a large repertoire of vocabulary in the moment, according to an internalized set of rules, called grammar. To train fluency, then, a person must absorb the vocabulary and grammar of a language. These terms work equally well in music. The common musical patterns of a style constitute its vocabulary, and the ways these patterns are connected form its grammar. In this thesis, I define musical vocabulary to be the units of music that make a style recognizable to multiple people. Such a definition includes melodic phrases, rhythmic motives and harmonic progressions, among others.² Any musician who can instantly invent new music using a style’s vocabulary and grammar is fluent in that style.

I have used improvisation so far in its broadest sense, to refer to the creative component of any action. In music, this means “the practice of making compositional decisions in the moment of performance” (Solis 1). From this perspective, reading a book and interpreting a composition both incorporate improvisation. Indeed, both the reader and the interpreter are responsible for bringing the text to life. No two performances are the same, even when interpretive aspects are written out by the composer.

In language, however, anyone would admit that there is a considerable difference between speaking and reading a book. In this thesis, I define improvisation as analogous to

---

² For in-depth analysis of the relationship between the units of music and language, see Powers (1980) or Bright (1963).
speaking: in this sense, improvisation occurs whenever the musician makes up notes on the spot. The advantage of this definition is that it allows for an easy distinction between interpretation, a creative skill mastered by many classical musicians, and improvisation, which few classical musicians ever learn. Both speaking and improvisation occur in a variety of situations: the former ranges from freestyle rap to a speech with notecards, the latter from the invention of a whole piece in performance to the improvised embellishment of a composition.

The purpose of this definition is not to cast interpretation as inferior to improvisation. Rather, the definition is meant to distinguish between two very different degrees of creative input from the performer. In interpretation that occurs in the moment, such as in sight-reading, the performer decides upon aspects like dynamics, articulation, and rubato, but confines the actual notes to those on the page. To invent notes in a stylistic manner, by contrast, requires knowledge of all the elements of a musical language, such as harmony, melody, and rhythm, in addition to the interpretive skills already mentioned. For this reason, improvisation not only allows the musician a greater degree of self-expression, but also requires more fluency than interpretation. Just as the ability to speak is a test of fluency in language, the ability to improvise is the corresponding test of musical fluency.

A person fluent in a language can communicate ideas and feelings, make a strong argument in an essay, listen to the radio, or read about events in a newspaper. Musical fluency is just as empowering. Fluency in the style of traditional jazz, for instance, means that a musician can appreciate the details of a saxophone solo that a less experienced listener might miss. The same musician can play a solo herself, and can quickly learn new compositions. In traditional Javanese music, a fluent musician is likely to play all the instruments in the gamelan, and can react intuitively to minute changes by other musicians. If she makes a mistake in performance,
she is unlikely to lose track of the piece. No matter what kind of music, fluency is the key to musical expression and comprehension.

From this perspective, the absence of improvisation in classical music education seems limiting, even self-defeating. Improvisation lets the musician express herself freely in a musical language. More generally, it trains a musician’s fluency, which underlies all aspects of musicianship. By choosing not to teach improvisation, classical music teachers fail not only to help their students speak the language of classical music, but also to immerse their students in that language.

OVERVIEW OF ARGUMENTS

The argument above is largely theoretical, yet its conclusions are supported by interviews and surveys (in Shane) with current and former teachers and students of classical music. The primary purpose of this thesis is to synthesize these sources into a framework for understanding the role of improvisation in classical music education, describing why it should be taught and how it can be taught to classical music students.

In chapter one, I provide the reader with the necessary background for understanding this framework. The chapter begins with musical improvisation and education in the Baroque period. Delving into the improvisational practices of a specific tradition illuminates how improvisation can serve a variety of functions. Following this case study, the chapter explores what happened to improvisation after the Baroque era, attributing its decline to the rise of a new middle class and a movement to perform the works of composers from previous eras. I conclude the chapter with a description of the current state of improvisation in classical music, emphasizing its
predominant absence in education but also drawing attention to notable exceptions, especially in the areas of church music and early music.

Chapter two explores the value of improvisation as self-expression, and how teachers can develop and encourage musical creativity without teaching a specific musical language. In the experience of improvisers, improvisation allows for a greater degree of self-expression than performing compositions. It brings the musician closer to her instrument, and forms a basis for compositional expression. Improvisational ability depends largely upon the musician’s ear; therefore, I argue that classical music teachers should further supplement their focus on notation with other techniques to train the ear. Finally, I show how classical music students are often discouraged from being creative, and describe how music teachers can encourage creativity.

In chapter three, I discuss improvisation in the context of musical language. I argue that teaching stylistic improvisation directly improves fluency in that style, which is immensely helpful even for musicians who are not interested in improvisation. By dividing music into practice and theory, classical music education artificially divides a student’s education into performance and understanding. In order to teach stylistic improvisation, a music teacher must help the student absorb the vocabulary and grammar of the musical language. I argue further that this process of training fluency is important for the classical musician. Some classical compositions require improvisation from the performer. More broadly, however, fluency in a musical language—internalization of the language’s vocabulary and grammar—is helpful for learning, understanding, and performing compositions, all of which are critical skills for a traditional classical musician.

In the conclusion, I combine these arguments for creativity and fluency. I reason that by teaching both notation and improvisational skills, the teacher provides the student with the
freedom to choose her own approach to music. If the student wants to pursue the traditional methods of classical music performance, then learning to improvise will provide her with the tools to do so even more effectively. The improviser, however, can also choose to take a more personally creative route, either by working with classical compositions in new ways, by improvising in classical styles, or by developing a personal style founded in the languages of classical music. In order to impart creativity and fluency to every classical musician, improvisation should be treated as a central component of classical music education.
CHAPTER ONE

Improvisation in European Classical Music: From the Baroque Era to the Present Day

Imagine for a moment that you are seventeenth century royalty, and you call upon your harpsichordist to play something for you. Rather than run to retrieve a score, she sits down at the instrument, thinks for a moment, and begins to play. You realize with a flash of excitement that what she’s playing is completely new—it’s not that she wrote it down and memorized it, she’s actually making it up on the spot. A prelude comes first, then a romping dance suite, and finally, a magnificent four-part fugue to finish off the night’s entertainment.

The musician in this hypothetical situation could well be the French harpsichord prodigy Elizabeth Claude Jacquet de la Guerre, who served for a time under Louis XIV (Borroff 5). Apparently, she could “entertain her listeners for an entire half-hour with her brilliant improvisation of preludes” (Moersch 160). Other, less talented musicians were proficient improvisers as well, and improvisation played a role in all aspects of Baroque music-making.

Now think back to the last time you heard a classical music performance. Most likely, the musicians did not improvise at all, but rather played compositions exactly as they were written.

The contrast between these two kinds of performance begs a few questions, which this chapter sets out to answer. Improvisation was a central component of musical practice in the courts and churches of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as it had been in preceding eras. Thus, professional Baroque musicians learned to improvise out of necessity. This improvisatory ability did not develop randomly: Baroque musicians grew up immersed in the musical language

---

3 Robert Gjerdingen argues that the word Baroque is problematic, because musicians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not use it to describe themselves (Music 5). Like the term classical music, however, I use Baroque here because it is in common use today, and is thus accessible to readers.
in which they would later improvise, and their education was tailored to training musical fluency. After the Baroque period, however, a period of social revolution and philosophical changes led to a separation of the roles of composer and performer, followed by canonization of musical works from bygone eras. Together, these forces brought about a decline of improvisation in Western art music. Despite notable exceptions in the areas of church music and early music, improvisation is a rarity in the practice and education of today’s classical music genre.

There are a few reasons why a background in the history of improvisation is important for this thesis. Improvisation is complex and diverse. The nature and significance of improvisation vary between different kinds of music-making, and it always operates within specific boundaries set by the style and the improviser. The only way to gain a nuanced understanding of improvisation in practice is to examine its multi-faceted role in a musical tradition in depth. By exploring the Baroque period, the reader can gain a specific knowledge of improvisational practices at that time, and to a certain extent in preceding and succeeding eras. Finally, the classical canon emerged out of improvisational traditions, and these traditions continue among a minority of classical musicians, showing that classical music is not inherently adverse to improvisation. Like Baroque musicians three centuries ago, today’s classical musicians can learn to improvise.

**IMPROVISATION IN BAROQUE MUSICAL PRACTICE**

Modern performances of seventeenth and early eighteenth century music differ remarkably from the musical practices of that era, especially in the role of improvisation. For the contemporaries and predecessors of Bach, music without improvisation would have been
inconceivable. Nonetheless, the term improvisation was not in common use in the time of Bach. Rather, musicians spoke of a few, distinguishable practices, all of which involved the invention of notes in real time. These practices can be divided into three categories: embellishment, accompaniment from a figured bass, and spontaneous composition. Each of these practices evolved out of earlier kinds of improvisation. Improvisation existed side-by-side with composition, a manifestation of the dual nature of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century musician as both composer and performer.

Embellishment

During the Baroque period, musicians adorned pre-composed music with extra notes in a practice called embellishment. Musicians had embellished music in performance since the beginning of notation, so this was nothing new. The practice of embellishment was ubiquitous, occurring in all countries and in all kinds of vocal, instrumental, secular and sacred music (Ferand 15). Each musician nonetheless had a personal style, his “own specific manner of embellishment” (Horsley, “Improvisation” 43). By embellishing a piece of music, a performer had the chance to make a considerable creative contribution to the musical performance.

The German word for embellishment was Manieren, or “manners.” Like good manners at the dinner table, well-played embellishments added grace and elegance to otherwise sparse pieces of music. Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach, the son of Johann Sebastian Bach, wrote that the need for embellishments when playing the keyboard is indisputable, because “They connect and enliven tones and impart stress and accent; they make music pleasing and awaken our close
attention. Expression is heightened by them; let a piece be sad, joyful, or otherwise, and they will lend a fitting assistance” (79).

Treatises also describe two different kinds of embellishment, referred to as “essential” and “arbitrary” (Ferand 15), or French and Italian (Moersch 153). The “essential” category contained ornaments whose characteristics were relatively consistent, and were marked by symbols, yet sometimes allowed the performer to make certain choices. In the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century French composer Francois Couperin, for example, the performer must determine certain aspects of the ornamentation himself, including “the speed and number of repercussions in the trill, the length of the appoggiatura, and the rhythmic placement of the ornament” (Moersch 153). The second category of “arbitrary” or Italian embellishment gave the performer more freedom to play with the music in the moment (Ferand 15). It was closely related to the old practice of diminution, in which the performer would fill in slow rhythms with new notes. C. P. E. Bach wrote of “arbitrary” embellishments that “their use is governed chiefly by taste; as a result, they are too variable to classify” (80). Because he was writing in 1761, he reflected changes in the musical culture by arguing that these embellishments should be written out by the composer, not left up to the whim of the performer.

A lively tradition of embellishment existed not just among keyboardists, but also amongs musicians playing melodic instruments and singers. The vocal art of improvisation was most dramatic in the cadenzas of arias, such as those in Handel’s Messiah, for which multiple versions have survived (Ferand 17). String and wind players often adorned their lines, especially in slow movements (Ferand 16). In the first of his Twelve Sonatas, Op. 5, composer Arcangelo Corelli wrote down an embellished version of the violin part (Figure 1.1).
Besides Bach’s essay and the numerous other treatises from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, evidence of the practice of improvised embellishment is found in compositions like Corelli’s violin Sonata. Some composers wrote both plain and embellished versions of the same pieces, often for pedagogical purposes (Ferand 15). Tobias Michael, the cantor of the Thomasschule (Thomas School) in Leipzig, Germany, from 1631 to 1657, did so in his composition, *Musicalische Seelen-Lust*. Some sections of the composition show optional embellishments, which provide the performer with a guide on how one might ornament the melody. “Since I have found that many who have the desire, the naturalia [talent], and the courage lack the instruction,” wrote Michael in the preface to his piece, “I have introduced something of the coloratura style singly and in some pieces, but in a way that two versions are presented and anyone who finds my work pleasing in any way may choose whichever he wishes” (in Ferand 15). Such an approach provided a model for less experienced musicians of how to embellish a melody, while allowing more skilled performers to invent their own embellishments.

The Baroque practice of improvised embellishment shows that seventeenth and eighteenth-century views on improvisation and composition went hand-in-hand. The
composition was a blueprint, a structure, upon which the musician would add things here and there, according to an internalized language of embellishment. The creative approach of the performer is not always taken into account in today’s performances of compositions from Baroque and earlier eras. “The simple appearance of much Baroque music is deceptive,” writes Imogene Horsley, because “what is seen on the printed page was often merely an outline to be amplified in performance according to regularized patterns of improvised embellishment” (“Embellishment” 3). If Corelli were to find himself attending a twenty-first-century performance, in which his Op. 5 sonatas were played in unembellished form, one could imagine him mistaking the performer for a novice.

_Figured Bass Accompaniment_

Similar to chordal notation in jazz, figured bass, also known as thorough bass, served seventeenth and eighteenth century musicians as a harmonic and contrapuntal basis for accompaniment. Like notes for a speech, figured bass offered flexibility and convenience: the same score could be adapted to different circumstances of performance, and composers could save time by writing a figured bass rather than every individual note. Figured basses were performed on instruments that could provide full harmonies, such as the lute, harp, and especially harpsichord and organ. The art of the figured bass was so important between 1600 and 1750, claims historian Ernst Ferand, that one could simply call that century and a half the ‘thorough-bass period’ (18).

While playing from a figured bass requires much skill and experience, understanding how it works is relatively

_Figure 1.2 (Niedt 43): Figured bass with possible realization_
straightforward. Its key ingredient is a bass line in normal staff notation, often enough by itself for an experienced continuo player to realize a fitting accompaniment. Musicians receive more guidance from the “figures,” which consist of numbers (e.g. 3-5, 6-4) and symbols (sharp, flat) that indicate the harmony to be played over a notated bass note. Thorough bass realization occurs within the Baroque language, so the musician must learn to fluently navigate the counterpoint, making each line its own, semi-independent melody.

The improvisational decisions a continuo player could make depended on the composition. For some pieces, a specific approach to playing the accompaniment was necessary, as in the sparse arpeggios of recitatives. Other times, however, the continuo player had considerable freedom as to how to play the figured bass. In The Musical Guide (Die Musikalische Handleitung), an exhaustive figured bass manual from the early eighteenth-century, the theorist and musician Friedrich Niedt describes how the musician can create numerous variations of melody, rhythm, and harmony over the same figured bass (73-132).

Spontaneous Composition

The invention of pieces on the spot, or ‘spontaneous composition,’ was well within the capability of many Baroque musicians. Soloists improvised all kinds of pieces, from the free fantasy, which allowed the improviser to “follow the dictates of his or her freely ranging imagination” (Arnold and Cochrane), to strict forms, like the fugue. Spontaneous composition was especially common on the organ, but occurred on many other instruments, like the viola and lute. A musician could build pieces around a particular theme, or simply choose a form as a structure for improvisation. While anecdotes typically describe the impressive improvisations of
musicians like Bach and Handel, the skill was much more common than those anecdotes might imply.

Of the instruments on which such solo improvisation occurred, the organ has the longest and richest history. The blind organist Francesco Landini was renowned in the fourteenth century for his beautiful playing on the portative organ, a relatively small, portable organ (Ferand 10). Despite the reputation of his playing, and his many extant vocal works, no instrumental pieces by Landini have survived, indicating the predominance of instrumental improvisation over composition at that time (Ferand 10).

Four centuries later, Johann Sebastian Bach was considered the greatest organist of his day. Bach’s first biographer, Johann Nicolaus Forkel, writes that compared to Bach’s compositions, “He was even freer, more brilliant and expressive” in his improvisation (59). Forkel elaborates further on Bach’s improvisatory ability and the endless creativity of his imagination: “Strangers often asked Bach to play to them between the hours of divine service. On those occasions he was wont to select and treat a theme in various ways, making it the subject of each extemporisation even if he continued playing for two hours” (67).

Bach was one of the greatest musical geniuses of all time, so it is not possible to make a general claim about Baroque musicians based solely on his ability to improvise. Yet the evidence shows that other, less well-known but competent musicians were very capable in this area (Collins and Seletsky). Organists, especially, needed to have advanced improvisation skills in order to be professionally employed. In its search for a new organist, a church would test each musician’s ability to improvise a variety of pieces, and only briefly set notation in front of the musician to ensure he could read music (Rampe 60). The eighteenth-century musician and theorist Jacob Adlung wrote, “It is much better for a keyboardist if he does not have to borrow

---

4 See Tandberg (2008) for an extensive history of improvisation on the organ.
all of his ideas. A preacher who must learn his sermon word for word, or read from it directly, and a musician who always needs to memorize his music, or must lay it right in front of his face—I consider these to be plagued creatures” (731, Trans. N.S.). This excerpt exemplifies the common view during Adlung’s life that improvisation was a basic, necessary skill for any musician.

Organists and other keyboardists did not have a monopoly on solo improvisation. The Dresden lutenist Sylvius Leopold Weiss was renowned for his skill at extemporization; he was a friend of Bach’s, and the two would engage in friendly competitions, and play fugues for each other (Ledbetter 269). Improvisation was also quite common on the viola (or viola da gamba) in the early seventeenth century. The French gamba-player Jean Rousseau described one such kind of viola improvisation: “The player is given a motif comprising five or six notes, over which he is to add extempore any chords he likes and to proceed from one diminution to another until his imaginative faculty has drawn from the theme ‘all the beauties and all the science’ that it can be made to yield” (Ferand 16). This description illustrates the process underlying all kinds of theme-based improvisation, regardless of the instrument.

**LEARNING TO IMPROVISE**

There is no magic in improvisation, no hidden creative wellspring that only a great artist can draw upon. The best improvisers almost always share a similar musical background. Improvisation is no more of a miracle than speaking: Each of us learned to speak a language because we grew up surrounded by native speakers and had many opportunities to practice; our education further refined our ability to articulate ourselves. In the same way, the most fluent
improvisers are immersed in a musical style from the first days of their lives, and sometimes receive intensive training in that style as well.\textsuperscript{5}

The musical environment in which Baroque musicians developed their skills was highly conducive to training fluency in their musical language. For the most part, professional musicians grew up in families of other professional musicians, forming a tightly-knit group that transmitted the music orally from generation to generation. Children in these families heard music played around the clock on all sorts of instruments. When they were old enough, they began their musical training, which incorporated all the skills necessary for a musical career. In the course of a musician’s practically-oriented education, he absorbed the vocabulary patterns necessary for fluency in the Baroque style, and thus for improvisation.

\textit{Immersion}

Before the advent of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, music in Europe was not considered an art, but rather a craft, and its practitioners not artists but craftsmen. Like any other craft at the time, the profession of music was highly hereditary. There were “two main professional spheres” for the eighteenth-century musician: the courts and the “municipal-church sphere” (165). Music in the courts, writes Robin Moore, was “transmitted orally, most likely to a greater extent than notationally, from one generation of servant-performers to the next” (68). Considering the overlap between the two spheres, this must have been true for all professional musicians at that time. The vast majority of orchestral musicians, for instance, came from musical families, where music was either the profession or at least an important activity. “There

\textsuperscript{5} For insight into the development of improvisational ability in musicians of another genre, see Berliner (1994).
was a tradition that had to be carried on... It was considered necessary that at least one son carry on the father’s profession, if talent permitted it” (Mahling 229).

The upbringing of J. S. Bach is a case in point. Bach’s extraordinary musicianship did not come from nowhere, but developed as a direct result of his circumstances:

The musical experiences that shaped Sebastian through his formative years are almost unparalleled in their quality, variety, and extent. Besides being born into a family of musicians that included great-grandfather, grandfather, father, three brothers, and numerous uncles and cousins, and being in the constant company of journeymen, apprentices, and colleagues around his parents’ and uncles’ houses, the thoroughly professional surroundings in which he grew up exposed him to all major facets of musical culture: instrumental and vocal, ensemble and solo, sacred and secular, performed at home or in town, court, or school. (Wolff 50)

Bach’s two oldest sons, Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emmanuel, excelled among their peers as well, because they were exposed to a similar quantity and quality of music as children.

Growing up in a family of musicians was also important for the early musical training that a parent or relative could provide. A musician’s first teacher was often someone from within his own family (Mahling 231). Beyond instruction, family connections provided a young person with opportunities to garner experience for a later career. “It was usually possible for him [a young musician] to play along with his father in the ‘home’ court orchestra, often without compensation” (Mahling 230). A musician’s family was thus responsible for boosting him into the world of music.
Education

Early exposure to music sets a foundation for improvisation and other musical abilities. In the Baroque era, music education often formed this foundation into the necessary skills for a career in music. One of these skills was improvisation, so it comes as no surprise that teaching methods helped students gain fluency in the language of Baroque music.

Many Baroque musicians received the central portion of their musical training in an apprenticeship. Organists typically entered into an apprenticeship between the age of eight and 17, and would stay there for three or four years. During the course of the apprenticeship, the organ student had lessons every day, on the instrument, in theory, in improvisation, and sometimes in composition (Rampe 44). The numerous pedagogical manuals that appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attest to the need to educate students in these same areas.

The predominant attitude toward music encouraged students to develop their own creativity. One historian claims that most keyboard compositions originated in order “to educate the student in improvisation by means of a model” (Rampe 60, Trans. N.S.). This point may be exaggerated, yet pedagogical keyboard works were not just intended to train technique; they were also there to inspire creativity on the part of the student. On the title page of his two-part inventions and three-part sinfonias, which are played often today, J. S. Bach wrote that their purpose is “most of all” to show a clear way “to achieve a cantabile style in playing, and to acquire a taste for the elements of composition” (1). Like many aspects of Baroque musical culture, the pedagogical advantages of Bach’s pieces maintain a fine balance, simultaneously
training a student’s ability to play music and to invent music. Bach’s students, by witnessing him compose and improvise music, would have been further inspired to develop their own creativity.

Even when an aspiring musician does not have an extensive background in music, a good teacher can help him achieve fairly high musical proficiency. It “attests the excellence of Bach’s method,” writes Forkel, that even Bach’s pupils who did not come from musical families “took high rank in their profession and distinguished themselves in one or other of its branches” (100). Although these pupils may have not reached the same level as Bach’s sons, the quality of his teaching brought them quite far indeed.

Of all that is known about educational practices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Italian pedagogical tradition of the partimento stands out. Partimenti were similar to figured basses, yet were performed as whole pieces by a single musician. A music student learning to play partimenti kept a zibaldone, a notebook containing rules and exercises for the student to absorb (Gjerdingen, Music 10). Partimenti “progressed from the very simple to the fiendishly difficult” (Gjerdingen, Music 24), and trained students in a musical vocabulary often used by court musicians during improvisation. As opposed to sheet music, partimenti were useful in that they did not supply the student with all the information necessary to create music. Instead, the student needed to step in and create the other parts, forcing him to absorb the hallmarks of the musical style while simultaneously developing the student’s creativity.

Partimenti were mainly taught at Italian schools, most of all at Naples, yet they were “central to the training of European court musicians from the late 1600s until the early 1800s.” The conservatories had humble beginnings, as schools to train orphans in the practical skill of music. With the success of the partimento training method, “The Italian conservatories became magnets for talented students and teachers from all over Europe” (Gjerdingen, “Partimenti”).
Many famous non-Italian musicians, including Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Mozart, studied or taught *partimenti* as well (Gjerdingen, “Partimenti”). Robert Gjerdingen even contends that “Galant practice was so widely disseminated, and so carefully taught through partimenti, solfeggi, and other rituals, that one can easily speak of an international musical style” (*Music 412*). The Langloz Manuscript, which originated in Bach’s area and time period and is the largest surviving collection of *partimento* fugues (Renwick ix), linked the practice of the thorough bass with the organists’ ability to improvise multi-voice fugues.

By delving into the improvisatory practices of Baroque musicians, and how they learned to improvise, we can begin to see how they fit into the pattern of improvisatory traditions around the world:

If one adopts the perspective of twenty-first-century ethnomusicology, eighteenth-century galant musicians in Naples, Dresden, Versailles, or London do not look so very different from eighteenth-century court musicians in Tehran, Dehli, Yogyakarta, or Seoul. All these artisans worked in preindustrial cultures where highly trained, often hereditary musicians catered to the refined tastes of noble patrons. Training in any of these traditions took years and required the memorization of huge amounts of musical vocabulary and repertory. (Gjerdingen, *Music 370*)

That Baroque music bore much similarity to these other traditions is no big surprise. In fact, what is astonishing is not the pervasiveness of improvisation in Baroque music, but its disappearance from musical practice. The reasons why today’s classical musicians do not improvise can be
found by examining the major changes that occurred in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

**THE DECLINE OF IMPROVISATION**

Beginning in the first half of the eighteenth century, broad societal and philosophical forces swept across Europe that would lead to the decline of improvisation. The Industrial Revolution, along with the French Revolution, replaced the nobility and the church with an emerging group of middle class amateur musicians and concertgoers. This new arrangement resulted in the separation of the roles of composer and performer, ending the practice of embellishment. By successfully orienting musicians toward the performance of previous eras’ compositions, the canonization movement all but eliminated the remaining practices of improvisation by 1850.

*Societal Change in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Europe*

Until roughly 1800, a small group of people managed to retain and hold an enormous amount of power and influence throughout Europe. The nobility made up only one or two percent of their countries’ populations, yet they held a dominant share of power, money, and influence (Dewald 1). Considering their position in society, “Nobles could scarcely have avoided playing a central role in determining the shape of the art and literature around them” (Dewald
157). For this reason, courts played a central role along with the church in the patronage of art music from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century.\(^6\)

By contrast with the nobility, the lower and middle classes had little to do with art music before approximately 1750.\(^7\) Arthur Loesser, in his social history of pianos, writes that “a burgher might possibly have been able to hear skilled execution of complex music either in church or—if he were so exceptionally lucky—as a nobleman’s invited guest” (94). Learning the music oneself would have been even more difficult than hearing it, because the costs of musical instruments and instruction were too great (Moore 69). Besides, the lower and middle classes had musical traditions of their own (Moore 69-70).

Beginning in the eighteenth century or so, Europe began to go through a period of change that would significantly rearrange the distribution of wealth and power. Besides the increasing quality of life in the German countryside (Loesser 48), growing ranks of merchants meant that cities like Hamburg, Berlin, and Leipzig, were all becoming richer. The Industrial Revolution, in the decades preceding and following the turn of the nineteenth century, continued to increase the size and wealth of the middle class. Leipzig architecture, most notably the fancy, adorned facades that remain throughout the city, is a remnant of the rich merchants that once made Leipzig their home.

In addition to these gradual social and economic changes, the French Revolution, beginning in 1789, dealt a devastating blow to the European courts:

Specific privileges attaching to noble status were abolished almost immediately, and the status itself disappeared soon after; significant numbers of nobles went into voluntary

---

\(^6\) The relationship between the nobility and music in European history is described in Hogwood (1980).

\(^7\) There are some notable exceptions to this statement. See, for instance, the chapter “Municipal Musicians—the Amateurs,” in Raynor (1972).
exile, and the French government arrested others whose loyalty to the Revolution seemed 
suspect; some forms of property from which the French nobles had benefited were 
abolished, and the government confiscated lands belonging to suspects and exiles.

(Dewald 188)

French military achievements quickly spread the new social order to other parts of Europe, 
including “the Low Countries, the Rhineland, and much of Italy” by 1799, and Spain by 1808 
(Dewald 188-189). The French Revolution was eventually defeated by the other European 
powers, yet the nobility never fully recovered. Half a century after the start of the French 
Revolution, writes Henry Raynor, the European middle class had consolidated its power: “In 
1789 these people had been insurgents; but their grandsons in 1848 were the ruling group that 
stood pat on their millions, their machinery, their foreign connections, their control of the 
parliament and the executive” (Social History 419). This new group of people had more time and 
money, much of which they spent on music.

Aside from the courts, the other main source of patronage for musicians up to this period 
was the church. Although specific changes in the church’s relationship with musicians during the 
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are little documented, the overall decrease in the church’s 
power is beyond dispute. Owen Chadwick argues that in the nineteenth century, the people of 
Europe became more tolerant of other religions, beliefs and traditions. Earlier, Christian ideas 
had been “accepted unquestioningly,” but now, “When religion was in the market-place 
acceptance could hardly be so automatic” (343). Hector Berlioz writes that “The decay of 

---

8 Considering the importance of this relationship, it is curious that the changes affecting the church’s artistic 
patronage during this period have been the focus of so much less attention than similar changes in court patronage. 
For example, The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change by Robin Moore is a 
fascinating article, yet ignores this aspect of change entirely.
absolutism,” a philosophy closely associated with earlier European religious beliefs, “spelled the end of artistic patronage on the part of the aristocracy and the church” (Weiss and Taruskin 348). The French Revolution also had its effect, causing the Catholic church in France first to be “restructured, then abolished” (Dewald 188). The new era of change thus brought about a decline in the power of the church that corresponded with the fall of the nobility.

*The Rise of Middle-Class Music: Amateur Musicians and the Public Concert*

With more time and money for leisure activities, the newly prosperous citizens of Europe became the primary consumers of art music, leading to an increase in public concerts and amateur musicians. Whereas professional, hereditary musicians had been the norm for many years before the eighteenth century, members of the middle class increasingly became involved with art music in these new times. The separation between composer and performer widened, and composers gradually began to write out every note in their music, stifling the tradition of improvised embellishment. Figured bass also fell out of practice, although that was at least partly due to the evolving musical style.

The transition of power from the nobility and church to the middle class had enormous implications for art music. As these two sources of patronage became less significant, those people associated with art music, which previously had been limited to a small group of professional, hereditary musicians, began to expand to include middle class amateur musicians. Families with new time and money bought claviers—first clavichords, later pianos—on which to entertain themselves. “By the middle of the century,” writes Loesser, “considerable numbers of modest, middle-class families—none of their members tainted with the slightest stirring toward
making music a profession—were acquiring claviers” (57). This trend accelerated over the eighteenth century. With a clavier, families could enjoy music in the comfort of their own home (Loesser 52-56); in addition, familiarity with aristocratic music was “an excellent means of achieving distinction on many social levels” (Moore 74).

The new, clavier-playing middle class had little basis in the musical language of art music, and therefore could not improvise in its style. Sheet music, which spread with the improvement of printing technology, “Became a means of learning aristocratic music for those who had no exposure to it in its original context” (Moore 72). The emergence of amateur musicians caused two parallel changes to occur: it sharpened the division between composers and performers, and gave composers a monopoly on creativity (with the exception of the performer’s interpretation, which the composer often partially specified as well). Before, the primary role of every musician had been that of a musical craftsperson, combining the roles of composer and performer. Composers had performed, and many performers had composed. The new division upset the balance of creativity upon which improvisatory practices like embellishment and figured bass had depended.

The predominant perspective in earlier times on the composer-performer creative balance was summed up by Tobias Michael (the same cantor of the Thomas-Schule who had provided both plain and embellished versions of his compositions). Michael wrote,

My own experience has been that when a skilled, experienced, and qualified Musicus who not only has good naturalia [talent] but has developed a fine manner performs such a work, he can help the piece more with his art and give it character than if one wrote everything down for him first. . . Consequently I cannot agree with those who want to tie
everything together to one manner, and still less with those who are not satisfied with anything unless it is of their own making and baking. (in Ferand 15)

Some unlucky composer must have provoked this response by attempting to write out all of his ornamentations. In general, however, most seventeenth-century composers left embellishment up to the performer.

This approach changed during the eighteenth century. Because of the increasing numbers of amateur musicians, composers no longer trusted performers’ improvisational skills, and gradually began to write out all their ornamentation, stifling the long tradition of improvised embellishment. Tobias Michael would have been appalled at J. S. Bach, for instance, who was known for writing out the ornaments in his pieces (Ferand 16). (Of all Baroque composers, Bach is the least likely to roll over in his grave when his music is performed in unembellished form.)

Probably influenced by his father, and certainly by the changing times, C. P. E. Bach argued that composers should not leave ornaments up to the “whims of tasteless performers” (79). He and other mid-century writers attempted to lay out strict rules for ornamentation in treatises, warning musicians “that nobody should dare to embellish unless he had fully grasped the art of composition and had sufficient taste and talent to invent melodic lines more beautiful than the composer’s” (Horsley, “Improvisation” 43-44). Besides the period’s trend towards writing out embellishments, composers pushed even further into the creative space of performers by increasingly notating interpretive aspects of music, such as dynamics and articulation—a change obvious to anyone who compares seventeenth and nineteenth-century scores.

The decline of improvisation in this period is pointedly revealed by the evolving role of the cadenza, another form of improvisation, in the music of the composers Wolfgang Amadeus
Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven. For Mozart and his contemporaries, the cadenza was a combination of embellishment and spontaneous composition: it occurred within the context of composed music, most often a concerto, yet was improvised by the performer (Badura-Skoda and Drabkin, “Classical”). Although Mozart did write some cadenzas, he did not consider them part of his compositions, and left the cadenza’s implementation up to the performer, who was often himself. Concertos were too difficult to be played by amateurs (not to mention the need for an accompanying orchestra), so Mozart did not need to worry that an untrained amateur would cast an ugly light on his concerto with a poorly played cadenza. Not long after Mozart, composers began to notate their cadenzas; in some of Beethoven’s compositions, for instance, the cadenza is just another section of his highly structured, prescriptive music (Badura-Skoda and Drabkin, “Beethoven”). Possibly out of the belief that they themselves could do a better job than any other musician, Beethoven and many of his contemporaries (Liszt, for instance) did not leave the cadenzas up to chance.

The figured bass began to fall out of practice a half century before cadenza improvisation. Composers increasingly wrote all the notes out where they would earlier have used figured bass notation, a trend illustrated in the orchestral music of Joseph Haydn (Wilson). The forces behind the disappearance of figured bass are not so obvious as with embellishment. The decreasing number of musicians who had grown up with the music and could reliably realize a figured bass may have had something to do with its decline. The primary force, however, may have been that figured bass was specific to the contrapuntal musical style of the Baroque era, and the new style of the classical era—with its orientation towards the melody and the bass—had no room for such a practice. With the disappearance of the figured bass, the last traces of ensemble improvisation vanished from European art music (Ferand 19).
Aside from playing music at home, the middle class’s interest in art music also manifested itself in the proliferation of public concerts in the eighteenth-century. “Concerts were clearly a middle-class institution. . . Now he [a burgher] was free to buy himself entrance to a more or less professional concert for a moderate sum of money” (Loesser 94). Orchestral performances were a grand affair, sometimes gathering two to three thousand people (Weber, “Mass Culture” 12). The music played by orchestras was just as grand, matching the new Romantic approach to composition, expressed by Beethoven in 1808: “It must be the striving and goal of every true artist to achieve a position in which he can completely devote himself to the working out of larger works, and where he will not be distracted by other obligations or by economic considerations” (40).

The evolving role of the orchestral musician in this period shows that the growing gap between composer and performer did not correspond strictly to the division between professionals and amateurs, but was apparent among professionals as well. In an earlier era, it had been customary for a musician “to construct a musical education on as broad a base as possible so that one could have the greatest flexibility for later professional opportunities” (Mahling 232). It was not uncommon for musicians to be proficient in multiple instruments, meaning that musical fluency had greater importance than technical mastery. The new style of composition, however, demanded more of musicians’ technical capabilities, pressuring them to specialize in just one instrument. The effect was to place the orchestral musician “beneath the composer, the virtuoso, and finally, also the conductor, who were no longer, from an artistic and social point of view, ‘his kind’” (Mahling 257). These new demands deprived orchestral musicians of both the space to improvise and the education to learn improvisation.
Although improvisation had mostly disappeared from musical practice by 1800, virtuosic, solo improvisation continued well into the nineteenth century, even flourishing under the Romantic ideal of the artistic genius. The movement towards the performance of works by the “old masters,” however, eventually overtook this improvisational practice, chasing away the last traces of improvisation. Conservatories trained ranks of musicians with a focus on the masterful compositions of bygone eras, solidifying the new orientation of Western art music towards the past.

Unlike embellishment and figured bass, spontaneous composition by a soloist did not depend on a balance of composer and performer, so it was not compromised by the increase in notation detail. Furthermore, the Romantic philosophy, which had significant influence over all the arts between 1800 and 1840, elevated spontaneity above all other forms of expression, and rewarded the boldness needed by a musician to improvise in performance.

These conditions led to frequent and ever more virtuosic improvisation by performers, including practically all the famous Romantic composers. This kind of improvisation included preludes and fantasies, as well as other kinds of pieces. In her foreword to Carl Czerny’s *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte*, first published in 1836, Alice Mitchell writes, “Improvisation, before large audiences as well as in elite private circles, had now become a crucial vehicle for the display of the virtuoso’s special gifts” (Czerny xi). Clara Schumann is one example of an extraordinary nineteenth-century improvising pianist. She was trained by her father, Friedrich Wieck, rather than at a conservatory, and improvisation was a central component of her education (Goertzen, “Schumann” 238-239). Even as a child,
Schumann amazed audiences with her ability to improvise on a given theme, and when she was just 19, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Journal of Music) paid her a tremendous compliment by ranking her improvisatory skills as “second only to Liszt’s” (Goertzen, “Schumann” 240).

Even before virtuosic improvisation had become a fixture of public concerts, however, a varied and complex movement had already begun that would wipe out this last improvisatory tradition. Around the turn of the eighteenth century in England, various groups began to advocate for the performance of music by the “Old Masters,” the masterful composers of bygone eras. Beginning with the Academy of Ancient Music in the 1720s, these groups successfully spread the music of composers who had been long dead (Haskell 14; Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics* 1). The movement soon spread to other countries, and in Vienna, a few rich individuals led a revival of old music in house concerts. On March 11, 1829, in Berlin, Mendelssohn conducted a historic performance of J. S. Bach’s St. Matthew’s Passion—historic both because the work had not been performed in 79 years, and because the performance itself signaled a new era in Western art music. The concert sold out three times in a row (Haskell 13-14).

The exact forces behind the canonization movement are difficult to discern. The Romantic philosophy likely contributed to the movement: the revival of Bach, for instance, fulfilled the need for an artistic genius shared by the national consciousness. Yet philosophical changes seem unlikely to have been the only cause of canonization, considering that the Romantics had plenty of living musicians that they could idolize. Henry Raynor puts forth a brief but compelling argument about another origin of canonization. In reaction to the French Revolution and general trends of liberalism the Austrian Chancellor Count Metternich established a policy of repression which lasted until the mid-eighteenth century (Music and
Composers did not want to risk being accused of sowing disorder, and “the result was that until after 1848 the intellectual life of Central Europe became almost dormant,” causing “the extension of the repertoire into the forgotten world of baroque composition” (Raynor, *Music and Society* 5).

Whatever the reasons behind canonization, there is no doubt that it occurred, or about the reality of its consequences. In concerts organized by Vienna’s *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* (Society of Music Friends), for instance, works by living composers constituted 77 percent of the music from 1815-1824, and plummeted to a paltry 18 percent by 1849-1858 (Weber, “Mass Culture” 18). Describing the change, one writer points out wryly that “in Rhetorical times, being dead was a definite disadvantage to a composer. After 1800, however, it was almost required in order to achieve greatness” (Haynes 96). Along with the change in concert repertoire, editions of music by deceased composers, as well as works of historical musicology describing the lives of these composers, proliferated as a result of canonization.

The first conservatories also began to appear around this time. These institutions provided “a means by which aspiring middle class performers could acquire expertise in aristocratic musical traditions” (Moore 71). Because of their origin in the middle class, such performers had likely not been immersed in the musical styles they would learn at the conservatory. The absence of such a background, coupled with the focus on notation in conservatory pedagogy, ensured that the majority of the musicians who went through these educational institutions did not have the ability to improvise. Conservatories also had ties to the canonization movement: the first conservatory in Vienna was founded in 1817 by the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* (Moore 71), the same organization that increasingly performed works by dead composers.
Conservatories and the classical canon struck down the last traces of improvisation in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The transition of art music to the middle class was completed by the conservatory system, which replaced the family and the apprenticeship as the place where most professional performers received their training. Meanwhile, the movement of canonization discouraged musical creativity, both for composers, who now had to compete with the masterworks in trying to get their music performed, and for performers, whose improvisations were now viewed as insignificant at best, and disrespectful at worst. The steady decline of improvisation and corresponding ascent of composition, gradual changes in the balance of musical creativity that had begun with the invention of notation a millennium earlier, ended with composition in the dominant role. Whereas European art music had once been a living, evolving language spoken by a small group of musicians, it had now become a museum of the musical past.

**THE CURRENT STATE OF IMPROVISATION IN CLASSICAL MUSIC**

Since the decline of improvisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the role of European art music traditions in society has undergone much change, seeing itself become increasingly marginal in comparison to other musical genres. The twentieth century also saw the rise of experimental music and new music, which emerged in part out of European classical traditions. For most people today, however, classical music refers to the genre containing composers from these European traditions, rather than new music. Classical music remains a
musical museum, in which improvisation occurs very little in performance and is rarely taught to music students. There are exceptions, however, and improvisation in classical styles is practiced by church musicians and early musicians, among others.

In a survey of people with backgrounds in classical education (Shane), respondents were asked to rank their association of improvisation with three different musical genres from 1 (No Association) to 5 (High Association). Respondents gave average answers of 4.85 for jazz, 3.73 for American folk music, and 2.17 for classical music; they explained these answers by referring to their own experiences and perceptions of the genres.

Survey responses strongly indicate a dearth of improvisation in the genre’s education, both in practical and theoretical training. Each respondent was asked to “describe any instrumental and/or vocal education that you have had in classical music, with a specific focus on improvisation” (Shane). 9% of respondents described improvisation as a central aspect of their training under classical music teachers, 13% wrote that it was incorporated a little bit, and 63% wrote that they were taught no improvisation on their instruments (the answers of the remaining respondents were unclear) (Shane). The teachers of the latter group typically set goals oriented towards the development of notation and interpretation-related abilities, rather than improvisation and the free expression of creativity.

Compared with practical education, the survey indicated that improvisation was slightly more common in music theory. Respondents were asked to “describe any education you received in classical music theory and/or composition,” once again with a focus on improvisation (Shane). 11% wrote that improvisation was a part of their theoretical education, 17% wrote that their theory teachers incorporated a little improvisation, and 37% wrote that it had no role in their

---

9 Excerpts from this survey appear throughout this thesis. See Appendix I for a description of the survey, and Appendix II for quantitative analysis of the survey.
theory education (remaining respondents either had no theory education, or gave unclear answers). When improvisation was a small part of education, says one respondent, it was “the exception rather than the rule… we were usually composing and analyzing through-composed music” (Zach Sulsky in Shane).

These results about classical music education align with what most people assume about the genre. Besides performance, the activities of a professional classical musician are most often limited to reading, interpreting, and analyzing music. Pedagogical practices are tailored to training these skills in a musician, after a fashion. Classical music focuses on the compositions of the past, so improvisation may seem an irrelevant skill for those classical musicians who are not interested in improvising.

*Exceptions to the Rule: Classical Improvisation*

What many people do not know about classical music is that in a few subgroups of the genre, improvisation is an important part of both musical practice and education. One of these areas is church music, in which organists learn to improvise in styles ranging from the Medieval period to contemporary music. Improvisation lets an organist adapt the music directly to the needs of the service, both in timing (an improviser can start and stop whenever necessary) and in content. For these reasons, improvisation is still employed by many church musicians, and church music and organ programs at conservatories often teach improvisation. In Germany, organists improvise the accompaniment to hymns in all denominations, because hymnals only include the melody (Ebrecht, Email). All church music programs in German conservatories teach
improvisation (Timm, Personal Interview), and teaching organists to improvise is standard practice elsewhere as well (Levin, Email).

Unlike church music, in which improvisation has played a continuous role, early music has experienced a resurgence of improvisation in the past half-century. Early music is considered to be the Medieval and Renaissance musical traditions, and sometimes the Baroque as well. It has been characterized by a focus on authentic performance, and while this movement has focused mostly on historic instruments—advocates say musicians should not play Bach on the piano, for example, because Bach did not have pianos—some musicians have gone farther and actually learned to improvise in the musical languages they study. One early musician compared his stylistic improvisation to speaking in Latin—many people study the language, but only he and a few others go so far as to speak it (Erhardt, Personal Interview). Authentic performance in early music requires embellishment, and thus improvisational skill, whereas the music of later traditions does not, offering a possible explanation for why this trend towards improvisation has not occurred outside of early music.

The proportion of early musicians who go beyond the written composition is difficult to ascertain. It seems that quite a few embellish compositions, whereas only a minority improvise full pieces. The center of early music improvisation is arguably the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, a conservatory in Basel, Switzerland. The conservatory aims to teach musicians early music as it was taught centuries ago (Albach, Personal Interview), when the traditions were alive and in constant flux. Other conservatories, such as those in Weimar and Leipzig, require students of early music to take lessons in improvisation as well.

Besides church music and early music, improvisation occurs in a few other contexts of classical music. Improvisation workshops, by church musicians, early musicians, and others,
help spread the practice to those who have little exposure to improvisation. Improvisation is often used to accompany dance, where it plays a similar role as in church services: it allows the musician to begin and stop the music as necessary, and to invent music that fits the feeling a dance director wants to achieve. One composer describes how his composition teacher employed improvisation as an instructional method (Bruce, Personal Interview 2011), a pedagogical technique likely employed in many composition programs.

Classical musicians need not be part of these contexts in order to improvise, of course. The highly respected Venezuelan-American classical pianist Gabriela Montero improvises in her performances and her recordings.\(^{10}\) Less visible are those classical musicians who can improvise, but do not do so on stage. Likewise, a number of classical music teachers incorporate improvisation into their teaching, as shown by the minority of survey respondents who were taught to improvise and who teach improvisation themselves (Shane).

Predominant practices in today’s classical music and its education show a striking lack of improvisation. Yet, the significant role played by improvisation in the history of classical music, as well as the improvisatory ability of church musicians, early musicians, and others, shows that an inability to improvise is far from inevitable for any classical musician. Like essentially all musical traditions, classical music has a long, complex history of improvisation. Integrating that history into the mainstream history of classical music would go a long way in educating classical musicians about a neglected aspect of their musical legacy, opening up new avenues for musical exploration.

\(^{10}\) See Montero’s albums “Bach and Beyond” (2006) and “Baroque Improvisations” (2008).
Elina Albach, a keyboardist and student at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, describes the music education of her seven-year old brother with indignation (Personal Interview). Her brother had taken up the cello a year earlier, and his teacher had begun teaching him how to read and play music. But like many children, he did not enjoy playing and resisted attempts to make him practice. Hoping to change his perspective on music, Albach taught him to play a very simple bass line, over which she improvised. The result was astounding: he had so much fun playing music with her, freely and without notation, that he now began to play on his cello much more frequently.

The natural inclination of Albach’s brother was to develop his creativity and to connect with the music on a personal basis. Yet, his teacher wanted to take him in a different direction, one in which personal creativity was only a small part. This tension, between what he wanted for himself and what his classical teacher wanted for him, is mirrored in the experiences of classically-trained musicians of all ages. To the question, “How important do you think it is for musicians to learn to improvise?”, respondents to my survey gave an average answer of 4.09, on a scale from 1 (“Not Important”) to 5 (“Very Important”) (Shane). Since most classical music educators do not incorporate improvisation, the following answers were unsurprising: 61% wished that improvisation had been a more significant part of their education, 22% were satisfied with the amount of improvisation they were taught (all 10 of these respondents stated that they
can improvise), 4% would not have wanted more improvisation, and only 2% (a jazz musician) indicated a hesitant wish that he had been taught less improvisation (Shane).¹¹

This chapter explores the importance of improvisation as a means of self-expression, and how classical music teachers can alter their methods to help encourage creativity in their students. Improvisation allows for greater self-expression than interpretation, brings the musician much closer to her instrument, and provides a creative foundation for compositional expression. Besides training students in the vocabulary and grammar of music, a process described in chapter three, classical music teachers can make two primary changes to help guide their students towards self-expression. First, educators should focus less on notation and more on the student’s ear, a critical foundation for improvisation. Second, teachers need to steer their students towards improvisation by encouraging them to improvise.

Unless otherwise specified, the type of improvisation advocated in this and the next chapter as the ultimate goal of a classical music student’s improvisational study is that of spontaneous composition, in which all the notes are made up on the spot. In this chapter, I argue for any kind of spontaneous composition, whether or not it is confined to a style. I narrow this definition in the following chapter to spontaneous composition within stylistic boundaries, such as the invention of a Baroque style fantasy or fugue. Although I argue for spontaneous composition as the objective in both cases, I absolutely recognize the value of other forms of improvisation, such as embellishment or figured bass. These kinds of improvisation are not just stepping stones to spontaneous composition, but also offer musicians the chance to develop their fluency and creativity.

¹¹ See Appendix II for a complete breakdown of answers to this question.
Musicians who can improvise believe that their improvisation lets them engage with music in a very different way than playing compositions written by someone else. Recent neuroscience research supports this view, showing how improvisation activates certain areas of the brain associated with self-expression that are not activated in playing pre-composed music (Limb and Braun 2-4). In comparison with composition, the advantage offered by improvisation is that it connects the mental and physical aspects of music-making in a continuous flow. This flow helps musicians gain intimacy with their instruments, and forms a basis for composition.

The Joys of Self-Expression

Musical improvisation and composition let a musician transform inner thoughts and feelings into sound. By contrast, playing music written by another person immerses the musician in the product of someone else’s inner feelings. Neither kind of music-making, creative or interpretive, is superior to the other—they are simply different. It is not as if the two skills are exclusive, however, and focusing solely on the interpretive aspect prevents a musician from experiencing the joys of free musical expression.

Those musicians in my survey who improvise identified a difference between their experiences of improvising and playing pre-composed music. They were asked, “Do you feel that improvisation allows you to express yourself in a different way than strictly adhering to a composition?” (in Shane). Their answers are revealing:
Yes! A thousand times yes! You're simultaneously creating and listening to the music in your head. It's much better than playing something that someone else thought of. I personally do not have a better form of self-expression. (Tennessee Mowrey)

Yes. When I played classical piano, or when I play covers that are faithful to the original, I am certainly displaying my skill as a musical technician, but only through composition and improvisation do I feel I am expressing my own creativity. (Zach Sulsky)

Yes… Improvisation gives you an opportunity to express whatever emotions and stresses you're feeling at a given time, and more beautifully it gives you the opportunity to direct these emotions yourself. Reading music may pull emotions from you, but it then directs it as it pleases - the player is but a vehicle to express someone else's emotion. (Lauren Burke)

Sure. I get to try to play exactly what is in my head and heart. (Joe Hetko)

Yes, definitely. Having your own interpretation inputs your own voice and expression much more than simply regurgitating or memorizing something that has already existed. It also pushes you to have an opinion, in a way. It pushes you to have a voice and an expression. (Melanie Hsu)

Interpreting a composition is experiencing the flow of emotions of another individual which can be an incredibly beautiful thing, but improvising allows you to be directly in
touch with the world through your being, not to mention the direct connection gained through improvising with other people. (Sam Friedman)

Obviously! Would it be more effective to express yourself in someone else's words, or in your own? Improvisation lets you say what you feel in a moment, not what you or someone else felt at some other time. (Matt Chilton)

For these musicians, and presumably for many others, improvisation is a more direct form of musical self-expression than interpretation. Self-expression has strong intuitive appeal, so it is not surprising that many respondents to my survey, including both musicians who can and cannot improvise, wish that improvisation had been a bigger part of their music education.

The field of neuroscience revolving around musical improvisation is still in its initial stages, yet the research so far provides a second, fascinating perspective on musical expression. Neuroscientists use brain imaging technology to examine what happens in the minds of musicians as they improvise. In one such study, researchers Charles Limb and Allen Braun had jazz pianists improvise, using memorized material as the control conditions (2). In comparison to the memorized music, improvisation was found to activate a part of the brain associated with “the production of autobiographical narrative… As such,” the researchers continue, “one could argue that improvisation is a way of expressing one’s own musical voice or story” (3-4). The researchers also found that self-monitoring parts of the brain were deactivated during improvisation (5), allowing for uninhibited self-expression. In freestyle rap, which crosses the

\[\text{12} \text{ The pianists performed C-major scales and a memorized jazz composition, and then performed analogous improvisations, confined to quarter notes within C major and then in a jazz style (Limb and Braun 2). In the “Jazz paradigm” (the jazz-style composition and improvisation), the researchers “aimed to reproduce the high degree of musical richness of a jazz performance” (Limb and Braun 2), so the pianists were likely able to express their interpretive creativity in playing the composition.}\]
boundary between music and language, researchers found similar results (López-González and Limb 7). These studies provide a cognitive basis for understanding why survey respondents differentiated between improvisation and the performance of compositions.

Beyond its expressive side, improvisation is also wonderfully liberating for a musician because of the infinite opportunities it provides for variation. A classical musician who does not improvise is tied down to pre-composed music, whereas an improviser has endless possibilities for creating something new. “For the pleasing entertainment of the trained ear,” writes Friederich Niedt, in the figured bass manual from the early eighteenth century described in chapter one, “nothing is more appropriate than the skillful and unrestrained variety of musical sounds” (74). With improvisation, the musician can create completely new music, or easily alter the interpretation of a piece to keep it fresh.

To be fair, the classical repertoire is almost infinitely large, and a classical musician can always find something new to play. Yet, unless the musician is a very talented sight-reader, each new piece has to be learned and brought up to a performance standard before the musician can play it reliably—and by that time, the piece is hardly new anymore. Sophia, a pianist from Germany, writes that she wishes she could improvise, because despite her 12 years of piano lessons, she does not know what to play when she finds herself with a piano (in Shane). Her improvisation would likely be clumsy, since she has not played in a long time. But at least she would be able to play something, to reengage with her instrument and immerse herself in music without having to devote hours of practice to learning a new composition.

The wish for more improvisation is not universal, of course. Some musicians simply feel no need for more creativity in their music-making. “I wanted to present the music, and to place myself in the background—I found that quite comfortable,” says Sophie Hasler, a classical
pianist and student at the Leipzig Conservatory in Germany (Personal Interview, Trans. N. S.). Hasler grew up playing classical piano, and she does not feel trapped by the classical piano literature. When she plays music memorized, she even begins to feel free.

Interpreting a piece of music can be an opportunity for personal expression. An anonymous respondent in my survey writes, “Improvisation isn't my forte, and I actually really enjoy simply learning a piece of music and being able to perform it for the pleasure of others and myself. Interpreting an already written piece of music in the playing of it seems as valuable as improvising or composing” (in Shane). The point here is not to belittle the value of interpretation, which can be a wonderful experience. Music means very different things to different people, and it would be condescending to tell any of these musicians that they would enjoy making music more if they would only improvise. Still, as shown by my survey, many musicians wish that their music education had incorporated more improvisation, and so students should be taught both to interpret and to improvise.

*Improvisation, Imagination, and the Instrument*

Unlike playing compositions, in which most of the music originates from outside of the musician, improvisation connects the musician’s imagination directly to the physical source of sound, the instrument. By channeling mind into matter, improvisation gives the musician “a sense of friendship and intimacy with the instrument that can be acquired in no other way” (Chase 67). In the experience of guitarist and teacher Joe Hetko, it can also “help you relax with your instrument” (in Shane). Through experimentation and improvisation, the musician begins to develop a natural connection to the instrument, strengthening her understanding of the sounds
that it can create. Being capable of fluent improvisation means that the musician can effortlessly translate her imagination into sound, so that she becomes one with her instrument.

Many musicians speak of the importance of improvisation for connecting physically with an instrument. When he sits down to play, the well-known keyboardist, conductor and early music teacher Ton Koopman typically improvises for ten minutes before doing anything else—and he encourages his students to do the same (Personal Interview). This allows him to be free with his instrument, to break out of the confines of the scores that are the focus of his musical activities.

In the experience of pianist and conductor Nicholas Spice, the connection between music and mind in improvisation makes it easier to be musically sensitive in improvisation than in performing the music of others (Email). After practicing the piano everyday for a year, he recorded the pieces that he had “slaved over,” and was unimpressed. He then recorded himself improvising, and although the “musical content was incoherent for the most part and banal”—probably because he had little background in improvisation—“the playing was SO much more musical and sensitive than my playing of Bach and Mozart” (Email). He attributed this difference to the way his brain interacted with the music in both cases. When he improvised, his brain sent messages directly to his fingers, whereas when he played Bach, he was “caught up in structures that are not of my making or thinking—hence, the messages I send to my fingers are rather imprecise and it takes a lot of practicing to get them more precise… When you improvise, this gap between mind and musculature does not exist” (Email).

This direct connection is also apparent in the way that improvisers learn new instruments. Ton Koopman says that if you are new to an instrument, you should not play from literature but “just let your fingers go” (Personal Interview). Amanda, a pianist from Saudi Arabia who is
teaching herself to play the ukulele, says it is easier to learn the picking technique by making up
music rather than playing specific songs (in Shane). Instead of playing from sheet music, which
takes attention away from the instrument itself, it is best for a musician to build up physical
understanding of an instrument through improvisation.

Multi-instrumentalists Tennessee Mowrey, Matt Chilton, and Sam Friedman each point
to improvisation as the key to their process of learning a new instrument (in Shane). Their shared
perspective, summed up by Friedman, is “the most free way I've found to
naturally get a feel for how my body interacts with these physical objects to make sound” (in
Shane). Having learned to improvise, these musicians already have a lot of music in their heads,
and need only learn the physical characteristics and peculiarities of a new instrument to become
comfortable with it.

Besides the intimacy it builds with an instrument, the direct implementation of the
imagination in improvisation has the advantage that it does not require a score. Instead, the only
necessities are the instrument and the willingness of the musician. Writing of a musician friend
who is “amazing at improving,” violinist and singer Gemma Smith observes that he “will
always be able to pick up his harmonica, or sit down at a piano, and play with people” (in
Shane). The same freedom can be obtained by memorizing a piece of music, yet fixed pieces are
inherently less flexible than improvisation. Playing for friends in a bar calls for very different
music than accompanying a church service, for example, and the improviser can adapt her
musical choices to the situation in which she finds herself.
Improvisation and composition originate from the same source, a musician’s creativity. But whereas improvisation draws upon the musician’s imagination continuously, composition breaks up a musician’s creative flow so that it can be recorded. For this reason, improvisatory skill helps a musician to compose more quickly, and to maintain a sense for the natural flow of ideas in a composition.

Composer and keyboardist Neely Bruce says that “the entire technique of composition is built upon improvisation” (Personal Interview 2013), and the experiences of musicians both past and present show his position to be true. Pianist and singer Simon Riker says that his improvisational ability allows him “to write more intricate compositions faster,” and describes composition as “slow-motion, directed and recorded improvisation” (in Shane). The enormous creative output of many composers, such as Bach, Telemann, or Handel, would hardly have been possible without the ability to write down music continuously and without hesitation. Even pianist and singer J. G., who hates “the everlasting imperfection of improvisations,” relies on improvisation in her band to come up with new parts (in Shane).

For J. G. and many others, improvisational skill is not just a foundation for composition, but is employed directly in the compositional process. Both Matt Chilton and cellist Melanie Hsu use improvisation to find ideas for composition (in Shane); the same was true of the composer Joseph Haydn (Webster). When flutist and singer Shauna Pratt cannot think of how to continue a piece, she plays what she has already composed on her flute and then improvises for a little while afterwards; her improvisatory instinct sometimes helps her figure out what to write next. Jazz pianist and saxophonist Zach Sulsky uses improvisation in an exploratory sense during
composition, “as a way of testing progressions, melodies, and rhythms and finding new sounds” (in Shane).

Using improvisation to explore new musical possibilities is not only a compositional method, as shown by Sulsky, but can considerably expand a composer’s imaginative powers. Neely Bruce describes how a large part of lessons with his composition teacher Hubert Kessler involved trading improvisations back and forth (Personal Interview). Bruce would improvise, and Kessler's improvised response would take the ideas in Bruce’s improvisation in a different direction. Few words were spoken in the course of each lesson, conjuring up a powerful image of musical communication between teacher and student.

Composition, of course, has distinct advantages of its own. Musicians can gain distance from their own musical ideas by composing music, helping them refine their musical creativity and improve their sense of musical structure. In terms of individual compositions, it allows musicians to create more complex music: Nathan Friedman, a clarinetist, composer, and free improviser, writes, “I generally compose things I could not improvise” (in Shane). Finally, composition lets a person create something that is separate from them, and can live a life of its own. Bach probably never imagined that his music would be played two and a half centuries after his death, and in places he had never visited, yet his compositions nonetheless made that possible.

PASSIVE MUSIC-MAKING AND THE EAR

The fundamental medium of music is sound, and improvisation occurs in that medium alone. Therefore, the process of learning to improvise is inextricably linked with the
development of a musician’s ear. “More than any learning tool,” writes Ran Blake, “the ear offers a straight line to your musical DNA and allows you to access and communicate your most honest, most original music” (Blake 1-2).

Despite the fact that much aural growth occurs outside of formal education, the teacher nonetheless plays a significant role in the development of the student’s ear. The musician can train the ear through self-expression, but also through forms of passive music-making, in which the musician does not make up notes herself. Among these kinds of music-making, playing from notation is the least capable of improving the musician’s ear. Thus, a central reason that classical music education fails to teach improvisation is its narrow focus on notation. To teach students to improvise, classical music teachers need to employ a greater proportion of pedagogical methods, such as singing and imitation, that directly develop the student’s ear.

*The Classically-Trained Ear*

On some instruments, playing from notation can directly train a musician’s ears. A violinist, for instance, must constantly adjust her fingers to the auditory feedback of her instrument to stay in tune, forcing her to listen to herself. On other instruments, however, such as the piano, a musician can translate notated music directly into physical action, without ever absorbing the music through her ears. Although a pianist must mentally process the rhythms on the page to read the music, the pitches are a different story: All that must be done to play from notation is to identify the keys that match each of the notes on the page, and then depress those keys.

---

13 This subject is discussed in the “The Insider’s Perspective” section of the following chapter.
Thus, when a pianist plays from notation, there is always the risk that the act of playing music will become a matter of deciphering a visual code. In such cases, playing the piano is analogous to matching a flash card labeled “apple” to the same fruit lying on a table. A beginning piano student, who has learned to “read” music notation but cannot hear the notated music in her head, will inevitably match notes to keys in this manner. Of course, the sounds created by the piano do enter the ears of the musician, and can improve the musician’s ear. Yet, reading music and playing the piano keys take up a significant portion of a musician’s concentration, so that listening takes a secondary role in a musician’s mind. Thus, learning to play music by reading notation on the piano cannot directly develop the ear, because notation and technique take precedence over listening and the imagination.

Many teachers of classical music lessons recognize the importance of training the ear, and they implicitly acknowledge the educational limitations of notation in that regard by incorporating other kinds of music-making into their teaching (see below). Nonetheless, classical music lessons typically place the development of notation skills at the forefront of a classical musician’s education. Representing many of the experiences of survey respondents with classical music education, an anonymous respondent writes, “I learned primarily by reading and memorizing music” (in Shane).

Some students are even discouraged by their classical music teachers to use their ears. Amanda, for instance, tells how her teacher was “pretty strict on me learning by notation – my tendency was to search for the right note by listening for what 'sounded right,' but she wanted me to read the music and 'know' the note instead” (in Shane). The inexactness of what a student thinks ‘sounds right’ might annoy the classical music teacher, but the alternative—undermining the student’s impulse to listen—is certainly worse.
The ear training component of theory courses often helps to fill the gap in a classical musician’s listening skills. Such training helps the student gain oral comprehension of basic building blocks, like intervals and rhythmic units, and larger sound units as well, like melodies and harmonic progressions. It provides students with an opportunity for close listening, to try to hear and understand the details of what occurs as the music passes by, a crucial skill for improvisation. Ear training in music theory is one of the most effective aspects of classical music education. Unfortunately, most students do not receive such training until courses in high school or college, at which point much of the ear’s potential for development has been lost. Moreover, not all students have the opportunity to take such courses. It seems that ear training in music theory is not enough, and methods for improving the ear need to be incorporated into practical education as well.

Beyond ear training, music theory does not particularly help students develop their ears. In my experience, a major component of music theory is teaching students compositional rules, such as those for correct voice leading. This process occurs entirely on the written page, outside of a musical context, and therefore does not help students to hear how these rules work in practice. Being able to track down parallel fifths and octaves on a piece of paper does not mean one can hear them in music, and such purely theoretical, notation-based learning is of a more mathematical than musical nature.

**Passive Musical Techniques for Training the Ear**

Some classical music teachers already employ teaching methods that are useful for training the ear. One such method is to go beyond the instrument, and to sing, a tool that has
significant advantages in education. Singing allows the musician to gain an aural understanding of music, while avoiding “unnecessary guesswork when playing an instrument that might frustrate technique or exhaust endurance” (Berliner 96). By learning to sing a melody, the musician takes a fully active approach to producing the music, helping to reduce the hesitation that accompanies it on an instrument. Singing music from notation helps the musician create connections between the written page and the musical sounds it represents. If you can sing a melody from notation, then you can also hear it in your head, which is of infinite value when you try to play it on your instrument.

Musicians throughout the world recognize the importance of singing in education. The Leipzig-based organist, conductor, composer, and teacher David Timm says that it is important for children to sing at home, so that the voice and brain get used to singing songs in different keys (Personal Interview). In the traditional “guru-shishya system” of Indian education, described by Gerry Farrell, there is a “notable emphasis on the use of voice, even in instrumental teaching, with a corresponding lack of written notation” (61). Considering its power as a pedagogical tool, classical music teachers should make sure to incorporate singing into music lessons.

Imitation is a second tool by which teachers can train their students’ listening skills: the teacher plays something on the piano, or maybe sings a melody, and the student follows suit. Imitation has incredibly high pedagogical value; like singing, it is an integral part of the training of South Indian Carnatic musicians (Farrell 61). By repeating what she has just heard, without any visual aid, the musician learns to translate the music in her mind (she must remember it to play it) into physical interaction with the instrument. Thus, imitation simultaneously trains the ear, memory, and technique of a musician.
Imitation is also effective training in the absence of a teacher. Jazz students often practice by playing along with recordings, trying to repeat whatever they hear (Berliner 95-119). David Timm learned to improvise through imitation and alteration, and he considers this to be the best path to improvisation (Personal Interview). One time as a child, his sister refused to give him the sheet music for a piece she was playing: “The Puppet’s Lament” by Cesar Franck. Instead of giving up, he remembered what she played, and then reproduced it by memory.

Singing and imitation are two of a number of ways of engaging with music that train the ear more effectively than playing from notation. Classical music teachers should incorporate such methods into their lessons, not just to help students learn to improvise, but to improve their overall musicianship. When students are steeped in these methods as children, they gain a foundation for improvisation later in life. Still, these ways of engaging with music are passive, in which the music originates from outside of the musician. To learn to improvise, the musician must make the leap into active music-making.

DEVELOPING A CREATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH MUSIC

The almost god-like status given to the composers of the classical canon can make it seem as if only a talented few are privileged with creativity. This division is not only counterproductive, it is false; every person has the potential to be musically creative, especially when given the right education. Unfortunately, many classical music students feel that their classical teachers discourage them to improvise. Even when teachers do incorporate improvisation into lessons, they must be sure not to inhibit their students’ creativity with too
much criticism. In order to improvise, a musician must come to terms with the risks of improvisation, and accept whatever happens in performance.

*Universal Creativity and Worshiping the Composer*

All children have music in them, and they often use it to call attention to themselves, as when they cry out. At other times, the “child produces sounds seemingly for the sheer pleasure of doing so” (Love 133). The sounds created instinctually by babies are a crucial step towards language, as in the babbling of an infant that steadily develops into words (Love 134). Without such babbling, and the auditory feedback of this experimentation, a child would hardly be able to learn to speak. As with language, children are biologically prepared with “the mental and physical equipment to perceptually organize the sounds they receive and to logically and inventively organize the sounds they produce” (Campbell 169). Every child, given the proper encouragement and training, will retain the improvisatory relationship with sound with which they were born.

Classical music education treats the average musician from the outset not as a composer, with infinite creative options, but as a performer, thus limiting the development of the musician’s creativity to interpretation. Such an approach does not allow the creative potential of a person to emerge. “My piano teacher had never mentioned improvisation,” says Zach Sulsky, “And talked about composition as though it were something that only happened before the 19th century” (in Shane). When we devote so much time to just a handful of composers, we cast creativity as the privilege of rare, talented geniuses, rather than something we all have.
Considering that their education provides little opportunity for the development of creativity, it is not surprising that classical musicians believe they are less creative than the composers whose music they perform. When asked why classical musicians should not improvise on top of compositions, even though composers like Bach played with other people’s compositions all the time, pianist and Juilliard student Suejin Jung’s answer is that Bach “was a composer. And we are not… He can do that, because he’s Bach” (Personal Interview).

The composers idolized in classical music achieved their glory by exercising their full creativity, so it is strikingly ironic that classical musicians do not strive to develop their creativity beyond interpretation. Besides the irony, however, there are three main problems with the inferiority complex adopted by many classical musicians. First, such an understanding of creativity is based on the false view that quality is the only measure of music. The attributes of music go well beyond a one-dimensional scale labeled “good” at one end and “bad” at the other. Bach is widely considered the master of the late Baroque musical style, yet that does not prevent people from appreciating Handel as well, just in a different way. Every person has something worthwhile to say, even classical musicians who have never improvised before; it is just a matter of helping them say it.

Second, treating music as complex portrays the path to creativity as difficult. “If you say that it is extremely complicated,” says Ton Koopman, “Then it will be complicated” (Personal Interview). Equating creativity with the output of the greatest classical composers ignores the fact that improvisation was widespread until the 19th century. The musician should remember that at that time, people of all levels were musically creative, so there is no inherent reason why the same cannot be true today.
Finally, by refusing to be creative because of a composer’s supposed superiority, the musician creates a vicious circle in which she never gets the chance to improve her own creativity. Worse, this perspective in music teachers prevents young musicians from developing their creativity as well. The composer Arnold Schönberg believed that “the interpreter is the servant of the work—‘He must read every wish from its lips’” (Hamilton 323). It is deeply unfair to treat a child as the servant of a long-dead composer, because the child has no choice in the matter. A musician should only be allowed to make such a decision for herself, after her teachers have provided her with the tools to pursue whatever musical path she wishes to take.

Patricia Campbell describes how this stifling conception of musical talent is “Eurocentric,” evoking “thoughts of Mozart, the wunderkind, composing at five and performing in the grand European courts as a schoolchild” (169). She lists a number of musical cultures that have no such extreme view:

The Venda of South Africa consider all members of their society musical, although some may be better performers than others… In Bulgaria, virtuosic instrumentalists are seen as the products of the time and patience required to hone a skill, rather than as a result of some mysterious endowment… Among the Suya of the Amazon River basin, singing and dancing are not an option but an obligation—events in which everyone participates… [In these cultures] music belongs to many, and they engage in it because they can and because it is a cultural expectation to do so. (170-171)

Many cultures outside of the European classical tradition treat musical talent as no rarer than the ability to speak, and the musical creativity exhibited by children indicates that to be an accurate
perspective. In any case, the perspective that every person is creative is much more conducive to
the overall development of a musician, and specifically to improvisation, than the perspective
represented by classical ideology.

Encouraging versus Discouraging Creativity

A music teacher can help the creativity of her students bloom, yet she can also be an
obstacle in the creative development of her students. In my survey, respondents were asked, “In
general, do you feel as if your classical music teachers encouraged or discouraged you to
improvise, experiment, or play around on your instrument?” Responses broke down in the
following manner: 13% felt encouraged, 9% did not feel encouraged, 26% felt discouraged, 15%
felt both encouraged and discouraged by different teachers, 33% were neither encouraged or
discouraged overall, and 4% gave unclear responses (Shane). While the results were not
completely clear, it indicates that for the most part, classical educators do not encourage their
students to improvise.

Among those respondents that felt clearly discouraged to improvise, some describe being
told to stop ‘goofing off’ whenever they played something other than what the teacher had
assigned. “Sometimes I would be fooling around with different chords,” pianist Holly Everett
writes, “And Mark (my teacher) would come in and say, ‘But that's not what's in the piece!’ or
‘That's not this week's scale!’” (in Shane). Such comments imply that anything outside of the
piece is not worth playing, a notion that is not only ridiculous, but can cause irrevocable harm to
a young and impressionable musician’s creative instincts.
Even when classical music teachers do not explicitly discourage their students from improvising, they rarely bring up improvisation as a possibility. About a third of survey respondents wrote that their teachers neither encouraged nor discouraged improvisation; it was just never brought up. Since the teacher is most often the central figure in the student’s musical education, the lack of improvisation in the lesson—or the absence of any encouragement to improvise on one’s own, at least—can be a form of discouragement itself. Guitarist Rachel Connor writes, “I strongly feel that I was discouraged from improvising because the whole point of the lessons was to learn pieces, and improvising was irrelevant to that goal” (in Shane). Not surprisingly, the respondents whose teachers never mentioned improvisation did not learn to improvise from those teachers, so the ultimate effect of that teaching style is clear.

The way pieces are taught by some teachers, in which only one version is “correct,” can further remove the traces of creativity that might have remained in the act of interpretation. “We had to practice things not until we got them right,” writes singer and saxophonist Lauren Burke, “But until we couldn’t get them wrong” (in Shane). Students are given an ideal version of a piece of music, and then must struggle to meet that goal. Any deviations from that version are considered mistakes, a mindset anathema to learning to improvise. For Melanie Hsu, teachers were not actually the problem, but rather music competitions. “I would audition for the state orchestra and get points taken off for not being ‘forte enough’ in measure 33,” she writes, noting, “I am still bitter about this” (in Shane).

While the short-term effect of discouraging a student to improvise almost always stops the student from improvising, the effects in the long-term are less clear. Organist Nora Dumont feels that her training prevented her from improvising. “I learned to read music right when I learned to play for the first time—it was when I was four—so for me, that’s what music is,”
Dumont says. “Music has never really existed outside of the sheet music that I play from” (Personal Interview). The few times Dumont has improvised have been scary for her, because she doesn’t know “if the notes are right or wrong” (Personal Interview). In comparison to someone who has never played music, Dumont believes it would be even harder for her to begin improvising, because of her improvisational block.

Others provide a slightly more optimistic perspective. Simon Riker did not improvise until college, but by his third jazz piano lesson in freshman year, he “was creating improvised melodies over improvised comping in the left hand” (in Shane). The pedagogical techniques of Martin Erhardt, who teaches improvisation at the conservatories in Leipzig and in Weimar, are designed to build up the skill of improvisation (see chapter three), and Erhardt’s success in that endeavor implies that an effective teacher can almost always help guide a student towards improvisation.

Music teachers are clearly capable of encouraging improvisation in individual music lessons, yet they can do so in groups as well.14 When Martin Erhardt works with multiple musicians, he gathers them into a circle, and has them play a game in which each student adds one note onto a melody created by the previous musicians (Personal Interview). Such a game trains both musical creativity and memory. Hannah Cressy, a one-time member of the Essex Children’s Choir in Vermont, describes how the choral conductor employs numerous improvisatory games and techniques to help singers improve their musical abilities (in Shane). The conductor at Mount Holyoke College, Lindsay Pope, describes an experience she had in graduate school, in which conductor-in-residence Gary Graden taught choirs various kinds of improvisation. “He would teach us a chant in a certain mode,” writes Lindsay, “And then ask one

---

14 See From Sight to Sound: Improvisational Games for Classical Musicians, by Nicole Brockman, for ideas for group improvisation.
section (i.e. tenors) to sing the chant while all other sections improvised within the mode” (in Shane). By using such methods, choir directors, conductors of youth orchestras, and other group leaders can help numerous musicians experience the freedom of improvisation.

A music teacher should not pressure a student to improvise against her will, of course. As a child, Sophie Duncan found improvisation on the piano to be intimidating, and trying to improvise made her anxious (in Shane). Her teacher could have tried to provide her with the tools for improvisation; such an approach might have alleviated some of her anxiety. Yet, improvisation should not be forced upon anyone. Still, most music students do enjoy exercising their own creativity, and their teachers can help them do so by nudging them in that direction.

The Risks of Improvisation

When he first began to improvise the cadenzas of Mozart concertos, pianist, musicologist, and Harvard University professor Robert Levin would brainstorm in the afternoon before a concert, making up a “road map” for his improvisation. He would plan the structure of his cadenza, in the same way that one might figure out the directions to a friend’s house: “get off at exit 27,” turn right “at the traffic light,” and make a left “at the Shell station” (Personal Interview). In the moment of performance, however, with adrenaline pumping through his body, Levin would sometimes end up turning left rather than right at the traffic light, and would be forced to make up the rest of the cadenza. Gradually, Levin came to the realization that there was no point in planning the cadenzas, and decided to “hang by my thumbs and do whatever the hell happens.” Especially in the beginning, but even now, Levin describes letting go like that as “terrifying” (Personal Interview).
The risks inherent in improvisation are made clear by Levin’s anecdote, and are further discussed by David Timm, who points out that the musical quality of an improvisation is decided in the moment. By contrast, a musician can practice every measure of a composition 100 times (Personal Interview), and be reasonably sure that the piece will appeal to the audience. She does not need to make any critical decisions in the piece’s performance, only play what she has prepared. In addition, the improviser fully exposes her own musical creativity to any listeners present, so any judgment of the music is not shared by the performer and composer, but rests entirely on the shoulders of the improviser.

Despite the risks of improvisation and the large amounts of time and effort required for its development, musicians of all levels must feel comfortable improvising in order to delve into it. In less than an hour, Ton Koopman pointed out four separate times that musicians should not be afraid of improvisation; this point is stressed by other improvisers and teachers as well (Personal Interview). Improvisation, especially in front of others, requires the musician to have a high level of confidence in her own abilities, and fear implies that she lacks that confidence. Daniel Beilschmidt, the Leipzig University Organist and a teacher of church music at the Evangelical Conservatory of Church Music in Halle, Germany, offers some philosophical advice: what is most important for a musician, in all kinds of performance, is to accept whatever happens (Personal Interview). While constructive self-criticism may be useful, negativity will only be an obstacle in your musical development.

Music teachers have a similar responsibility to choose their criticism carefully, lest they inhibit their students’ willingness to express themselves. Robert Levin says that he teaches improvisation by avoiding saying things that might make his students negatively self-conscious.
Instead, “By inspiring confidence and pointing out what they do well… you make it possible for them to become more fluent and also more imaginative” (Personal Interview).

Martin Erhardt offers a reason that classical musicians should not be afraid of improvising. Erhardt describes how one of his students, who was fairly new to improvisation, improvised a simple allemande on stage during a concert (Personal Interview). The student had some difficulties, and felt that he had barely gotten through his improvisation—so he was surprised when he looked out at the audience and saw so many faces beaming up at him. Although there were problems with his improvisation, says Erhardt, it nonetheless had an overwhelmingly positive effect on the audience. He believes that as long as it is clearly expressed, an improvisation at any level of complexity can move listeners (Personal Interview).

In this chapter, I have attempted to show the value that musicians place on improvisation as a form of self-expression. I have also described how developing the ear and encouraging creativity are two foundations necessary for a student to learn improvisation in any musical tradition. If improvising is like speaking, however, then stylistic improvisation might be understood as akin to speaking a specific language. The next chapter explores this aspect of improvisation, both in education, and in its importance to overall fluency and musicianship.
CHAPTER THREE

Fluency for the Classical Musician

The phrase, “I speak English,” implies not just that the speaker can express herself, but that she is fluent in the language as a whole. The fact that the ability to speak is synonymous for fluency, rather than the ability to understand, read, or write, is not arbitrary. None of these three other skills require the same knowledge of a language as speaking: a person can understand a sentence without knowing all the words or grammar that it contains—can write without the ability to express herself in a continuous fashion—and can read without either of these aspects of fluency. In order to express a complex idea through speech, a person must know the words and grammar she employs, understand how to use them correctly, and draw upon them in an unbroken flow.

Spontaneous composition in a musical style—the ability to express oneself freely in that style—requires similar abilities in a musical language, and thus should be a central goal for every classical musician’s education. This chapter addresses how classical music education can be altered to teach students to improvise in the specific musical languages of classical music, and how that process develops musical fluency that is of extraordinary importance for a classical musician. Each musical language consists of patterns, and by incorporating theory into classical musicians’ practical education, a music teacher provides the students with the tools to improvise while simultaneously developing the student’s fluency in that language. Such fluency is useful to classical musicians in compositions that require improvisation, but also helps musicians learn, understand, and perform pre-composed music.
BUILDING FLUENCY

For a student to express herself in a musical language, she must internalize the language’s elements through a process of memorization and application. In classical music education, the division between practice and theory means that students do not learn to apply these musical elements in a practical setting, a necessary step for improvisation. A teacher can bridge this divide by providing a student with clear exercises that train him in the vocabulary of a musical language, thus improving a student’s fluency and improvisational skill.

The Vocabulary and Grammar of Classical Music

Spoken language consists of individual units, called vocabulary, strung together according to a set of rules (and exceptions), called grammar. Similarly, a musical language—whether Baroque music, New Orleans jazz, or that of the Javanese gamelan—can be described in terms of its most common characteristics, including melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, textural, and structural patterns. For this reason, one can speak of a musical vocabulary and grammar for each musical language.

The concept of a musical language or style is flexible, however. Baroque and Romantic music are considerably different from each other, yet they share many traits as well; the same might be said of the French and German Baroque styles. Thus, musical vocabulary might be thought of as falling somewhere on a spectrum from general to specific. The most general vocabulary applies to all European classical music styles, and even other traditions around the
world; the interval of a perfect fifth is one such element. At the other end of the spectrum, one might find a certain melodic phrase that is distinctive of compositions from 1750s Paris.

Classical music students learn to apply some of the basic vocabulary of classical music in practice, and study a broader range of vocabulary in music theory. In music lessons, classical music students often learn critical elements of tonal music (the broad musical language that subsumes the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic styles), such as scales and arpeggios. In theory courses, students are taught to recognize, write, and hear the typical functions of various harmonies (i.e. stable tonic and unstable dominant), and to combine harmonic and melodic knowledge into counterpoint. Bach chorales are often a focus of analysis, because they offer contrapuntal material of the highest quality. Students also learn a variety of musical structures, like sonata form, or the sections of a fugue. The problem with classical music education is not the material taught in music theory, which is important to learn, but rather that students do not apply more than a basic level of theory in their practical training, as discussed below.

In his book *Music in the Galant Style*, Robert Gjerdingen describes the musical vocabulary specific to central Europe from approximately 1720 to 1780. Galant musicians expressed themselves using “a particular repertory of stock musical phrases employed in conventional sequences” (*Music* 6), and Gjerdingen categorizes these phrases into musical schema that occur throughout the music. Each schema is a “packet of knowledge” (*Music* 10), with a name like the Romanesca. It contains information about voice leading, the contour of outer voices, and metric position. Every individual schema has a certain probability of coming before or after other specific schema, forming a grammar of galant music that Gjerdingen shows in his matrix of “transitional probabilities” (*Music* 372-373). Thus, a galant musician could improvise a brand new piece using the following sequence of schema, each of which he had

---

15 Piston (1978) and Kostka (2004) are popular music theory texts that contain these musical vocabulary.
played many times before: “Romanesca → Prinner → Cadence → Fonte → Prinner → Cadence” (373).  

In order to be fluent in musical vocabulary, in the galant style or otherwise, the improviser must be able to apply that vocabulary in multiple contexts. For the classical musician, this means being able to apply the same cadences in all twelve keys, for instance. David Timm refers to this process as musical conjugation (Personal Interview). In English, the verb “to run” refers to one action, yet to use the verb in a sentence, the speaker must put it into a specific context, such as “he runs” or “I run.” By the same token, a guitarist who wants to play along with a 12-bar blues in the key of B-flat needs to be able to apply certain musical vocabulary (like the I\(^7\), IV\(^7\), and V\(^7\) harmonies) in that key.

In his description of the vocabulary of the galant style, Gjerdingen does not notate schema in standard music notation, because it is too detailed:

The schema ‘Romanesca,’ that is, a mental representation of a category of galant musical utterances, is likely in no particular key, may or may not have a particular meter, probably includes no particular figurations or articulations, may be quite general as to the spacing of the voices, their timbres, and so on. All that useful indeterminacy would vanish were the schema to be presented as a small chorale in whole notes, probably in the key of C major with a 4/4 meter. (Music 453)

---

16 For another, fascinating analysis of musical vocabulary, see Thomas Owens’ dissertation, “Charlie Parker: Techniques of Improvisation.”
In order to implement the Romanesca in a specific musical context, a galant musician had to contribute all the musical information that the Romanesca did not include. Likewise, in all European classical traditions, an improviser must be able to “conjugate” musical vocabulary into various contexts, including different time signatures and the twelve keys. For this reason, learning flexibility with musical patterns is a crucial aspect of learning to improvise.

*The Rift between Theory and Practice*

It might seem strange that the predominant pedagogical techniques of classical music education do not teach students to improvise. After all, students gain technical facility and learn basic vocabulary in music lessons, and in music theory, they have the opportunity to study the inner workings of classical music more closely. It is not so much the content of a classical music education that is to blame, however, but the structure: the division of music into practice and theory hinders a musician on the path to improvisation. When theory is taken out of practice, and practice out of theory, neither aspect of music education can directly train musical fluency.

The scales, arpeggios, and exercises taught to most classical musicians form a basic vocabulary of skills that can be applied in the study of classical music. They can also be useful in learning improvisation. In my survey, improvisers often referred to scales as being part of their

![Figure 3.1](Gjerdingen, *Music* 454): Notation of the essential elements of the Romanesca

- Metric position:
- Melody scale degree:
- Harmony:
- Bass scale degree:
improvisatory education. Joe Hetko’s first guitar teacher encouraged him to improvise tunes “using the notes in the scales he was teaching me” (in Shane). Rachel Connor was taught “blues pentatonic scales for the point of improvising with them” (in Shane). In my own experience, learning to play scales in all twelve keys gave me a framework for learning to improvise and for better understanding tonal music.

Ironically, the effectiveness of learning basic vocabulary such as scales reveals how classical music education is deficient, in that it does not take a musician beyond such basic vocabulary. Just because a musician can play scales and arpeggios does not mean she can invent pieces of music in a Baroque style, and learning the vocabulary necessary for the latter would logically improve her knowledge of Baroque music much further than scales.

Besides teaching such vocabulary, classical music lessons focus upon the compositions from the classical canon, such as pieces by Chopin or Beethoven. The extent to which a musician can learn musical vocabulary from a composition depends very much on the approach taken in practicing the composition. To learn individual musical vocabulary from a composition, the musician must break down the piece into its component parts. Each musical “word” needs to be small enough so that the musician can store it away in his memory. Treating a piece of music as a whole, rather than the sum of its parts, means that any gain in the student’s vocabulary can only be indirect. For the student to integrate a musical element into her musicianship, she needs to become flexible with it, so that she can conjugate it in new contexts. Always playing a piece of music as it is written confines the musician’s practical knowledge of the piece’s vocabulary to the same key, time signature, and surrounding musical parts.

While understanding and becoming flexible with the individual parts of a piece helps to develop a musical vocabulary, it is just as important for getting to know a piece, and is thus
reflected to a certain extent in the practice style encouraged by classical music educators. Students are told to practice one measure at a time, or hands alone. Teachers sometimes instruct their students to alter the rhythm or key of a piece of music, so that they can strengthen their understanding of the piece in its original form. Suejin Jung says that when a piece modulates, her teachers encourage her to try modulating into a different key, so her ear can identify new and different feelings (Personal Interview). These practice techniques are a step in the right direction for teaching students to improvise.

Where practical education ends, music theory is supposed to supplement the musician’s knowledge and skills, and in some cases it does. Yet the shortfall of all theory is that it does not force students to internalize their knowledge in practice. Rules, like “Thou shalt not write parallel fifths,” can only go so far in developing a student’s musical fluency. Of course, students often apply these rules through composition. Learning a repertoire of musical vocabulary requires repetition on an instrument, however, to make each musical pattern enter a student’s ears and fingers, an opportunity rarely provided by writing on a page. Composition is another productive step, yet without improvisation, students will be unable to gain true fluency.

Besides its limitations for developing fluency, learning music through a set of rules without applying those rules on one’s instrument seems a strange way to approach a musical language. The priority becomes what the student cannot do when playing music, instead of what she can do. Music is a beautiful, flexible thing, contained within boundaries that a fluent musician can bend. Take, for instance, Bach’s treatment of parallel fifths and octaves, which would call down the red pen of any theory teacher who had not internalized the Baroque musical language:
To speak in detail of Bach’s transgression of recognised rules. To begin with, he admitted octaves and fifths provided they sounded well; that is, when the cause of their being forbidden did not arise. Everybody knows that there are positions in which they sound well, and others when they should be avoided, owing to the harsh effect or thin harmony they produce. Bach’s octaves and fifths never produce bad or thin harmony, and he was very definite as to when they could and could not be used. (Forkel 76)

As a highly fluent musician, Bach created music that was primarily meant to be musical, not adhere to a list of rules. By learning theory outside of practice, students do not learn when parallel fifths and octaves should and should not be used, or why.

The compositional rules learned in music theory can hinder the development of a musician’s creativity. Coming from a classical background, Melanie Hsu found her jazz education in college “incredibly liberating… In my mind, theory is no longer this oppressive structure that dictates how one must play… By learning theory, I feel as though I have more building blocks to choose from” (in Shane). In her experience with jazz, Hsu was able to apply everything she learned in theory to her own improvisational skills, exemplifying how theory can be put to positive use.

Finally, learning music from a theoretical perspective alone can distract a musician from the real purpose, to create music that is meaningful to the musician and to others. The bassist Clyde Reed says that the “fundamentals of music—having great time, playing in tune, being able to hear—as important as those are, I don’t think those are the ends” (in Burrows 52). Instead, Reed wants to hear musicians who can take those fundamentals and put them together to tell a story, a feeling I imagine is shared by most musicians. When the purpose of theory is to expand
one’s knowledge about music, without putting that knowledge to practical use, it impedes the student’s journey to the real goal, of becoming a musical communicator with an appreciation for the stories of others.

*Improvisation: Bridging Theory and Practice*

The act of improvisation requires the musician to internalize the vocabulary and grammar of a musical language. To improvise a Baroque fugue, for instance, the musician must be able to fluently implement knowledge of fugal structure, harmony, melody, counterpoint, and rhythm, as well as interpretive skills, such as articulation, ornamentation, and dynamics. By comparison, sight-reading a pre-composed piece only requires fluency in notation and interpretation. For this reason, the music education of every classical musician should treat improvisatory ability as a central goal, so that students gain fluency in all aspects of musical language.

Learning to improvise is most straightforward when a young musician is thrown into a scenario that requires improvisation, such as accompanying a church service. Nonetheless, much can be done in an academic setting to help students learn to improvise. Martin Erhardt often reminds his students that “there is a difference between improvisation and practicing improvisation” (Personal Interview, Trans. N. S.). This one remark has vast implications for musical pedagogy, especially for those musicians who do not grow up immersed and improvising in a musical language. From the perspective of second language teachers, it is not altogether surprising. Especially at the beginning, a student’s language training incorporates many hours of memorization and other exercises that require little if any creativity. Slowly, the student expands creative skills by learning to combine memorized material in ever new ways. A
good teacher will always provide an exercise or a lesson that is challenging but nonetheless possible for the student to complete.

Erhardt’s own method, which is tailored to teaching improvisation to those musicians who are not yet fluent improvisers, mirrors this approach. In guiding a student towards improvisation, he assigns clear exercises that are within the student’s abilities (Personal Interview). He illustrates this method with the following example. In teaching a musician to improvise, a teacher might tell the musician to invent a second part over a given melody. Supposing that the student is willing to do so, the exercise will be very useful as a way to explore creative options for a certain melody. Erhardt would take an alternative approach, however, instructing the student to play the given melody with the left hand, and only to play intervals of a sixth on top with the right hand. This gives the student a manageable goal, which can be broken down into smaller steps as necessary. Furthermore, achieving this goal tangibly improves the student’s musical skills.

Once the student can play sixths on top of the melody, Erhardt might loosen the reins, allowing either sixths or octaves in the right hand. Suddenly, the student is forced to make choices while playing. Yet, because of her training in the previous exercise, these choices become easy and manageable, and the musician can devote her skill to what sounds good.

For some, the approach to teaching improvisation advocated here might seem dry, as opposed to just sitting down to play. Memorizing the vocabulary of a spoken language is similarly tedious, however, yet all agree that it is an important part of second language education. The method allows Erhardt to help his students build up a repertoire of musical skills and vocabulary that, with much practice, coalesce into musical fluency and the ability to improvise.
The advantages of Erhardt’s method of teaching are described in an article called the Writing Revolution in the Atlantic Magazine (Tyre). The article explains two ways of thinking about teaching students to write. In the first, creative writing is encouraged and put into an enjoyable context, under the idea that kids “will ‘catch’ what they need in order to be successful writers” (Tyre). This philosophy of teaching became popular in the 1990s, but has mixed results: some kids “catch quite a bit, but not everything” (Steven Graham in Tyre), while “others don’t catch much at all” (Tyre).

By contrast with the catch philosophy, students may be trained with a formula, one that gives them the essential skills that they need for writing. This philosophy—which is analogous to the concepts underlying Erhardt’s method for teaching students to improvise—has produced impressive results in writing education. Judith Hochman, who developed the writing program at Windward School, a private school in New York, teaches children “how to turn ideas into simple sentences, and how to construct complex sentences from simple ones by supplying the answer to three prompts—*but, because, and so*” (Tyre). These exercises become steadily more complex, and train straightforward skills that the student can later put to use in her writing. “The thing is,” says Hochman, “Kids need a formula, at least at first, because what we are asking them to do is very difficult” (Hochman in Tyre). By applying Hochman’s method, New Dorp High School, a school on Staten Island, experienced “an extraordinary blossoming of student potential, across nearly every subject” (Tyre), making it a model for struggling schools across the nation.

In the context of writing education, students unconsciously incorporate what they learn into their everyday speaking. In music education, it is similarly important that a student feel capable of free, uninhibited improvisation. Still, there is a stark difference between encouraging creativity and providing the student with the necessary tools to be creative. In the experience of
Nora Dumont, for instance, encouragement was not enough to break through the years of notation-focused practice:

The first time I was trying to improvise, my piano teacher in high school sat me down at the piano, and said, ‘Okay, you’re going to improvise now!’ I sat there, and was like, ‘I don’t know what to do.’ And she said, ‘Draw a bouquet of flowers with the piano!’ And I said, ‘Umm, I don’t know what to do.’ And I just sat there for five minutes, and she said, ‘Fine. Just draw one flower on the piano. Make it purple.’ And I said, ‘Uh, I have no idea what you want me to do.’ And I literally sat there, and we were having a stare down, and then she just gave up. (Personal Interview)

Considering that Nora had never played freely on the piano, drawing a purple flower with music sounded ridiculous to her. Yet, if her teacher had built up her skills in a more concrete manner, and had saved such metaphors for a later stage, then Nora may have been able to get around her improvisational block. Indeed, Martin Erhardt says that he has been able to take away the fear of improvisation in his students in all but one case. With some students, Erhardt was only able to teach a basic level of improvisation, yet at least they were no longer afraid of self-expression. Erhardt’s success in teaching improvisation provides an optimistic perspective on the many classical musicians, young and old, who have not learned to improvise, implying that if they wish to learn, they have the means to do so.

A significant point about Erhardt’s method for classical music educators is that Erhardt teaches notation and improvisation side-by-side. Recognizing the importance of notation in classical music, Erhardt teaches even his youngest students to read music. He warns, however,
that children can be accustomed very quickly to playing solely from notation. For this reason, he tries to “communicate from the beginning that reading music is not the only way to make music” (Personal Interview). Erhardt thus shows how a classical musician’s education might provide a balance of training in both improvisation and notation.

The approach taken by Erhardt, of building the musical vocabulary of his students from the ground up, is often the same for other improvisation teachers. David Timm and Daniel Beilschmidt, described similar methods for teaching improvisation (Personal Interviews). Both begin with chorale harmonization, the most basic improvisatory skill of any organist. From David Timm’s perspective, an organist should be able to harmonize any hymn in the musical language of its composer, such as a sixteenth-century harmonization for a hymn by Martin Luther (Personal Interview). Thus, students learn the harmonic vocabulary of the musical languages represented by the hymns. With that harmonic background in place, Timm and Beilschmidt can then guide their students into more complex musical forms.

This philosophy of teaching is also put to use by teachers in improvisatory traditions outside of Western classical music. David Nelson, who teaches solkattu—rhythmic language of South Indian Carnatic music—and South Indian percussion at Wesleyan University, designs his pedagogical process in order to “communicate the core, the essential forms and processes, the language” of the music to his students (Email). In the introductory level solkattu course, Nelson teaches each student the “core features of the idiom, without expecting you to master it well enough to ‘converse within it’” (Email). Having attained a foundation in this rhythmic language, Nelson’s students are given more freedom in subsequent courses.

Nelson always tries to “spread the difficulty” of everything he teaches (Email). He demonstrates this with the trikala, an essential concept of solkattu with which he begins his
introductory course. The *trikala* involves speaking a syllabic phrase at three speeds over the *tala*, a repeating rhythmic cycle that is demonstrated with hand gestures (Figure 5.1). Nelson begins students with the short, three-beat *tala* “as a kind of trick to get people in contact with polymetric texture” (Email). Once *trikala* has been learned in this context, “the underlying concept is already in place” for more challenging implementations, such as dropping a syllable or going to a longer *tala* (Figure 3.1) (Email). By breaking down the rhythmic language of *solkattu* into its foundational concepts, and then teaching those concepts in their most basic forms, Nelson trains his students’ fluency in the rhythms of South India.

*Figure 3.2*: The South Indian *Trikala*

| *Trikala*: phrase “ta ki ṭa” over a three-beat *tala* |
|---|---|---|
| 3-Beat *tala*: | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| First speed: | ta | ki | ṭa |
| Second speed: | ta | ki | ṭa | ta | ki | ṭa |
| Third speed: | ta | ki | ṭa | ta | ki | ṭa | ta | ki | ṭa |

| *Trikala*: phrase “ta ka ta ki ṭa” over a five-beat *tala* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5-Beat *tala*: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| First speed: | ta | ka | ta | ki | ṭa |
| Second speed: | ta | ka | ta | ki | ṭa | ta | ka | ta | ki | ṭa |
| Third speed: | ta | ka | ta | ki | ṭa | ta | ka | ta | ki | ṭa | ta | ka | ta | ki | ṭa |

Note: The first syllable of each phrase is underlined to demonstrate how the spoken phrases and the hand gestures of the *tala* together form polymeters in the second and third speeds.

Returning to classical music, we can look to the origins of Robert Levin’s improvisatory ability to see how training a musical language creates a foundation for later improvisatory development. Levin studied with the famous music teacher Nadia Boulanger (Personal Interview), who taught an astonishingly high proportion of the best-known classical musicians in the twentieth century (Monsaingeon 72-76). Boulanger’s philosophy of teaching was fascinating.
She believed that a musician needs “an established language and then, within that established language, the liberty to be yourself” (Monsaingeon 53-54). Although she did not feel she could “provide anyone with inventiveness,” she was convinced that she could lead her students “by an established process, by an imposed discipline, to retrieve the essentials of language” (Monsaingeon 54).

Having studied with Boulanger, Levin had a broad musical vocabulary upon which to base his later training, a “toolbox with every conceivable thing that I would need” (Personal Interview). As a young musician, Levin became interested in the incomplete works of Mozart, and began to finish them himself. In doing so, he realized that “the more of Mozart’s habits that I could see, quantify, and internalize,” the more “they became things that I could use spontaneously” (Personal Interview). Levin would examine Mozart’s compositions to identify the composer’s habits, then would use them in his compositional process. Eventually, they would work their way into his improvisation.

The latter part of Levin’s training shows how, by slowing down the creative process, a musician can employ composition as a step to learning musical vocabulary. Yet unlike theory students, Levin did not merely examine Mozart’s pieces for techniques to use in composition, but also in improvisation. By improvising in Mozart’s style, Levin had the opportunity to solidify his new knowledge by implementing it in the moment. Unlike improvisation, composition does not force the musician to apply musical knowledge in a continuous flow, which is why improvisation should always accompany it in education.

Boulanger, Beilschmidt, Timm, Nelson and Erhardt together represent those teachers who explicitly set out to train the fluency of their students in a musical language, by helping them learn the necessary vocabulary and grammar. Yet conceiving of improvisation as the result
of a process that is sometimes devoid of creativity (as when a musician plays just sixths over a melody) brings up a fundamental question: if the improviser employs musical vocabulary that she has spent a long time learning, then is she really being creative? For Daniel Beilschmidt, “improvisation is an illusion” (Personal Interview, Trans. N. S.). Musicians do not randomly discover that they can improvise, but spend years practicing, entering the depths of a musical tradition, and all the while developing their musical freedom and expressive capabilities.

Despite the extensive preparation of the improviser, improvisation is nonetheless a creative and spontaneous act. The musician makes many decisions in the moment of performance, causing completely new music to emerge. These decisions, however, are made simple and straightforward by the fact that the musician has made similar choices thousands of times before. Rudolf Lutz, over his many years as a professor at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, has become increasingly sure that the better one prepares oneself, the better one’s musical spontaneity (Email). Using the techniques that have been described in this section, a classical music educator can thus guide a student to spontaneous expression and to fluency in a musical language.

**THE VALUE OF FLUENCY IN CLASSICAL MUSIC**

Many classical musicians do not need to be able to improvise to fulfill their current roles as performers—otherwise, they would all be trained in improvisation. Axel Straube, a choral singer and student, points out that choir members need little to no improvisational skill (in Shane). For the members of an orchestra, or even solo performers, the necessary musical skills
often have little obvious connection to improvisation. “If you’re just learning a specific, dated tradition,” writes Simon Riker, “There’s no need to introduce extraneous techniques” (in Shane). From this perspective, a plausible argument could be made that it would be a waste of time to teach improvisation to classical music students.

As a foundation of musicianship, however, improvisation is arguably important for all musicians to learn, including classical musicians who only wish to play repertoire. First, early music compositions and others call upon the performer to improvise, and composing rather than improvising in such cases compromises the authenticity of the performance. Second, learning to speak a musical language gives a musician an insider perspective on that music, easing the process of learning compositions and providing insight into the creative process behind the composition. Finally, the improvising musician can infuse performances of compositions with the spontaneity and flexibility of the improvisatory act.

*Improvisation within Compositions*

Most pieces written before the Romantic period—and basically all before the year 1700—were meant to be an outline of a piece that would then be filled out in performance. These pieces often appear to be rather stark on the written page, and certainly, a composer would have been surprised to hear his composition performed as the notes he had written down. The separation between composer and performer had not yet come into being, and anyone performing a piece would have been expected to add their own creative touch.

Ton Koopman makes a point of incorporating embellishment into such music. Depending on what he feels is appropriate for a composition, he might add anything from “a few notes, to
many notes,” including “trills, ornaments, appoggiaturas,” and any other kind of diminution or ornamentation (Personal Interview).

Koopman’s additions to a piece depend upon his view of the composer. He restrains himself when playing Bach, because he believes that “the music is too genius, and when you add something, it should become better, not worse” (Personal Interview). When playing other composers from the same period, however, he will often add a lot to a piece. Koopman’s recordings of Buxtehude’s harpsichord works show how he uses embellishment to enliven a piece of music. Like other classical musicians, Koopman has “great esteem for the composer—but the composer himself would never play exactly” what he had written (Personal Interview).

Koopman is a strong believer in figured bass improvisation as well. Learning to improvise is as much a matter of efficiency for him as anything else—writing out figured bass is “just too much work. There’s no time for that, I have better things to do… And of course,” he continues, “everybody could do it in the sixteenth, seventeenth-century, so why can’t we?” (Personal Interview).

In music after the Baroque period, the cadenza remains as the last significant example of improvisation within a compositional context. Robert Levin has made a significant contribution towards resurrecting this improvisatory tradition. After the Classical era, composers expected performers to adhere to the composition, strongly discouraging improvisation.

In all compositions that require improvisation, there is a loophole that performers might take to avoid having to improvise: either compose the “improvised” parts beforehand, or use a fully composed version by someone else. In teaching musical embellishment, Ton Koopman first asks his students to come up with something themselves; if they do not think of anything, then he will make a suggestion (Personal Interview). For compositions with figured bass, it is not
difficult to find a “fully realized” edition for many works. And for a performance of Mozart’s concertos, Mozart conveniently wrote whole examples of cadenzas that have survived to the present day.

One might argue that if you want to sound like Mozart, there is no better way than to play the cadenzas written by the composer himself. Yet, this approach defies the spirit of improvisation out of which the compositions arose. It fixes the composition in one place, so that every time the piece is played, the notes are the same. If you want help in learning the process of improvisation, like Koopman’s students, then you obviously should not feel bad borrowing the ideas of others. But if you claim to follow the composer’s intentions, then it is your responsibility to improvise those parts that call for improvisation. The difference between the improvisations of the great jazz pianist Art Tatum, and performing transcriptions of those improvisations, says Robert Levin, “is something that the Buddhists would be able to see in a minute” (Personal Interview). The performer “is trying to play specific notes, whereas those are the notes that Tatum got that day, but not some other day” (Personal Interview). By removing the spontaneity from a composition that was meant to be improvised, you risk taking the life out of its music.

*The Insider Perspective*

If a musician devotes his or her life to the piano sonatas of Beethoven, must she really learn to express herself with her own notes in Beethoven’s style, or in the style of the Romantic period? The straightforward answer is no, because performing fully notated music requires no improvisation.
Nonetheless, improvisers often point to a connection between their improvisational skill and their other musical abilities. Having internalized a repertoire of musical vocabulary, the improvising musician can easily identify patterns in written music, making it easier to learn and memorize compositions. Furthermore, improvisatory skill helps the musician see alternative paths that a composer could have taken in a composition, so that the musician can understand the path that the composer did take.

Daniel Beilschmidt believes that “for comprehension, improvisation is very important” (Personal Interview, Trans. N. S.). He illustrates this belief with a story involving the cadence, which occurs everywhere in classical music and provides closure to a musical phrase—sort of like the period at the end of this sentence. One of Beilschmidt’s conservatory teachers described to him how many of the teacher’s students, despite being talented pianists, had never learned to play cadences. The teacher had them practice playing basic progressions involving the tonic, subdominant, and dominant chords, and soon, it became noticeably easier for them to learn compositions.

When asked to explain the exact connection between cadences and an improved ability to learn compositions, Beilschmidt responds, “The cadence is a framework in tonal music… and when one has the framework, one can understand a lot” (Personal Interview, Trans. N. S.). In their work with cadences, the students of Beilschmidt’s teacher were taking a first step towards learning improvisation, and they were already reaping the benefits of such an approach. If one of these students were to go further and train a style of tonal improvisation, she would learn to wield other musical vocabulary besides cadences in a wide range of keys, time signatures, and other musical contexts without difficulty or hesitation.
The effects of this process, of course, would not be isolated in her improvisation, but would influence all her musical abilities in that language. Specifically, a firm foundation in musical vocabulary would make it easier for the student to learn compositions containing that vocabulary, making the process of learning to improvise very significant for classical musicians. For a musician to employ cadences in improvisation, she must be able to hear them in her head, and use the necessary physical movements to create them. Both of these aspects of fluency are useful in learning the cadences in a composition. Beilschmidt reinforces this view of improvisation’s relationship with fluency, contending that the composer Frédéric Chopin—and by implication, the other composers of the classical canon—likely did not spend much time practicing compositions. Instead, Chopin’s prodigious improvisational talent would have meant that he could pick up pieces quickly, without learning their individual parts from scratch.

Learning improvisation not only expands vocabulary, but improves the ear. Zach Sulsky writes, “I think my experience as an improviser has made my ear better, making it easier to learn music both from a score and by rote” (in Shane). Just like practicing a piece of music makes it easier to orally comprehend the piece, practicing musical patterns can train the ear to hear those patterns. Improvisation helps Lauren Burke “distinguish different instruments/lines/voices” (in Shane), which makes sense, since many kinds of improvisation involve the simultaneous invention of multiple parts. For Joe Hetko, being able to improvise means that he has a “much stronger sense of how chords and melodies relate to each other than friends who do not improvise” (in Shane).

Beyond its influence on the learning process, fluency in a musical language helps musicians gain a deeper understanding of the pieces that they play. Any composition in the classical canon could have turned out as a completely different piece, had the composer felt
differently on the day that she composed it. All composers make thousands of choices, large and small, in the process of writing a piece of music. Compositions constantly arrive at crossroads where it would not only have been possible, but even beautiful, for the composer to take a different path than the one chosen. For a classical musician to truly appreciate a composition, she must be able to recognize the alternative paths it could have followed, and comprehend why the composer did not choose those paths.

The idea of a musician choosing between musical paths during creative expression has been explored in depth by Robert Gjerdingen in the context of the galant style. By identifying the style’s schema, and then showing how they connect to each other, Gjerdingen illuminates the alternatives that are available to the improviser in performance (*Music* 379) (see Figure 3.3). Someone new to galant music would “hardly be aware of any of the paths not taken,” whereas a galant composer “would have known several alternatives at each fork and understood their implications” (Gjerdingen, *Music* 379).

**Figure 3.3** (Gjerdingen, *Music* 379): The alternative paths of a galant composition, M, N, O, and P.
In Robert Levin’s experience, “It’s not the minute and a half when I’m playing the cadenza which is important,” but how the cadenza improvisation changes his perspective on the rest of the piece:

What happens is, when you do that, every moment in the piece suddenly becomes dangerous. That is, you see crossroads, where other people just simply see a magnificently written piece which goes where it has to go. And you realize that at this point it could go to the right, it could go to the left, it could go straight ahead, it could turn around. (Personal Interview)

By pointing out that the cadenza itself is of less significance than the understanding it imparts to a musician, Levin makes an argument for improvisation deeply rooted in classical music ideology. For Levin, the central importance of a musician’s expressive capability is not necessarily in the creative expression itself, but in its connection to the musician’s comprehension of a composition.

Some improvisers directly employ their improvisatory skill to test and identify the alternative paths in a composition, strengthening their understanding of a piece. To get to know a Bach fugue, says Elina Albach, a musician should try inventing new contrapuntal lines against its theme (Personal Interview). With this approach, the musician learns what does and does not work with the theme, and gains a real appreciation for the artistry in Bach’s counterpoint.
Improvisational ability can help breath life into fixed pieces of music. Having improvised means that a classical musician has personal experience of spontaneous expression, and can therefore call upon the feeling of that spontaneity in performance. Through improvisation, says Robert Levin, “The extraordinary volatility of the creative act of the composer suddenly becomes available to you, and you can play it [the composition] as if you’re making it up… Then the whole piece becomes an adventure, not just the two minutes” of the cadenza (Personal Interview).

Erika Schroth, who teaches classical piano, also speaks of the intangible importance of improvisation when playing pre-composed music, writing that “the spirit of improvisation plays an important role in the creation of an organic, intimate, and personal performance” (Email). If a musician makes it abundantly clear in the performance of a Beethoven sonata that every note is pre-determined, then the listener’s experience becomes like watching a recording of an old sports game—it might be exciting, but the outcome is predictable. If you play the sonata as if you are improvising it, though, you can convince audience members to suspend their disbelief, and bring them to the edge of their seats in their excitement over every new turn in the music.

To really bring a performance alive, the performer needs to see compositions as the stories, the adventures, that they are. This perspective can most easily be achieved by learning to improvise in the musical language of the compositions. Elina Albach, speaking of some of the singers that she accompanies on continuo, says, “It is so artistic, yet it is not a story, and that is a great pity. It’s always artificial, and it’s actually just language… They just need to improvise a
recitative, and then they would sing differently” (Personal Interview, Trans. N.S.). By learning to
tell a musical story herself, the musician can hone her ability to reproduce the stories of others.

Similarly, improvisation can help a classical musician develop her own expressive voice,
a component crucial to a good performance. Even when the performer does not stray from the
composer’s intentions, her contribution will come through. “Otherwise,” as singer Hannah
Cressy points out, “we’d all sound like MIDI tracks” (in Shane). Expressing oneself through
improvisation leads the musician to form her interpretive instincts into a beautiful and cohesive
style specific to the performer herself. Until she started to improvise, says Melanie Hsu, she
“didn’t know how to infuse the music with [her] own meaning” (in Shane). The fact that
classical music education does not teach improvisation takes a lot of potential variety out of the
genre. “Everybody can play the piano really well,” says pianist George Fu, but “what makes
things interesting” is when someone has a “very distinctive voice” (Personal Interview).

improvisation as “the art of thinking and performing music simultaneously” (in Bailey 66).
Derek Bailey points out that this is a rather harsh condemnation of musicians who cannot
improvise (66), and the act of playing a composition is an impressive feat of concentration in and
of itself. Yet, the right-note-wrong-note mentality that accompanies playing pre-composed music
often makes classical musicians cautious about making spontaneous decisions in performance.
Nicholas Spice writes that performers “like to claim they are expressively spontaneous in
performance, but the truth is that they aren’t really. They cannot afford to be, because of the risk
of mistakes” (Email). Although this does not hold for all classical musicians, the fear of making
a mistake can nonetheless be a strong inhibition, and experience in improvisation—in which
there is no wrong note—can banish much of that fear.
The flexibility of improvisation explains why it never went out of practice in church music. The organist can play music whenever it is needed, and can adapt her playing to the content of the service. While a classical musician does not need it for these reasons, the flexibility available to the improviser is highly practical in all performance, allowing the musician to react quickly and easily to any problems that arise. When performing memorized music, for instance, many classical musicians worry about the potential of a memory lapse, which could force them to stop the piece and start over. If the musician has experience in improvisation, however, then she can respond easily and naturally to her forgetfulness. When David Timm loses track of a composition, he plays “something similar to the composition,” giving himself time to remember how the piece is supposed to continue (Personal Interview, Trans. N. S.).

Even when a classical musician has played a piece by memory a hundred times, there are parts of a performance that are outside of the musician’s control. Organist Alan Rodi describes how, while performing a piece by Buxtehude in his church, something started to go wrong with his instrument. Instead of stopping, he kept his presence of mind enough to play an earlier variation from the piece, while identifying and fixing the problem. Unfortunate surprises can occur on any instrument. If a piano key sticks in performance, or a guitar string snaps, the improviser might be able to alter the piece to avoid playing the key or the string. These kinds of risks are essentially unavoidable, and being able to improvise can help a musician deal with them.

Perhaps most importantly, the improviser knows that she is capable of dealing with anything that goes wrong. For jazz pianist Sam Friedman, being comfortable in improvisation has helped him take a “go-with-the-flow approach” to pre-composed music (in Shane). He does
not need to worry about any problems that may arise, because he is confidence in his control of
the music.

There are, of course, exceptions to everything, and while most improvisers see their
improvisational experience as having a positive influence on their ability to play compositions,
some do not. In my survey, such musicians are in the minority, and in general learned
improvisation in a genre other than classical music. Asked whether his ability to improvise
influences his ability to play pre-composed music, Simon Riker writes, “Not really, I think
they’re super separate skills” (in Shane). Riker never improvised until taking jazz piano lessons
in college, so the clear division that he draws between improvisation and performing
compositions might be the result of only learning to improvise in a jazz style.

Two jazz musicians went farther than Riker, explaining that it is difficult for them to play
compositions because of their experience in improvisation. Matt Chilton finds that improvisation
“makes it hard for me to focus on through-composed musics because I’m always inclined to
improvise off of what I’m reading” (in Shane). Likewise, pianist Carina Caligiuri Kurban had
“always been taught to play the rhythm very loosely and embellish it here and there. And for
classical music, you generally need to stick to the written rhythm and notes” (in Shane). The
trouble that Chilton and Kurban have with notation likely results from their background in jazz.
Had they been trained in classical styles, they would have learned a disciplined approach to
performing compositions, and would not have this problem.

Learning to improvise is a highly valuable process in music education, even for those
musicians whose creativity is satisfied by interpretation. The free expression of creativity is
essential to the growth of fluency, and by removing this aspect from their relationship with
music, classical musicians have put themselves at a significant disadvantage in all their music-making.
CONCLUSION

Choosing a Musical Path

In this thesis, I have argued that classical music teachers should teach their students to improvise. In the first chapter, I discussed improvisation and music education in the Baroque period, and its subsequent decline after roughly 1750. In the second chapter, I explored the benefits of improvisation as a form of self-expression, and argued that classical music teachers should lay a foundation for improvisation by training the ears and encouraging the creativity of their students. In chapter three, I showed how teaching the vocabulary and grammar of a musical style trains the student’s ability in stylistic improvisation, and I reasoned that this process is important for classical musicians because of the fluency it provides.

By only teaching the compositions of others, classical music teachers set their students on a narrow creative track confined to interpretation. The solution is clear: teach both notation and improvisational skills, and the student can decide upon her own musical path. If she wishes to devote herself to historical styles of music, then learning to improvise will open up new ways to relate to those styles and to display them to audiences. On the other hand, improvisation gives the musician the tools to take a personal, creative approach to music, one unconcerned with historical authenticity. Finally, a classical musician who can improvise has a stronger foundation for learning improvisation in other genres of music.
Robert Levin, speaking of his approach to historically-informed performance, draws an analogy to making historic films. Researchers working for the film examine the period in which it is set, to ensure that everything—the automobiles, the existence of certain buildings, the style of dress—is accurate to that period. Occasionally, though, they make a mistake, and you can spot an airplane in the background of a nineteenth-century setting (Personal Interview).

European art music is a treasure of great beauty, and classical musicians bring this beauty into our lives. When classical musicians interpret the music of the past, they aim to immerse the listener in a specific sound world, and their detailed, disciplined approach is just as important as it is for historical films. A classical musician serves a similar role to that of a museum curator or an actor in a contemporary performance of Shakespeare: none of the three create works of art themselves, but rather bring the artistic achievements of the past into people’s lives today.

Performing compositions, however, is a decidedly limited way of representing what were once fluid, living musical languages. Learning to improvise expands the ways classical musicians can engage with these languages; as long as musicians set specific boundaries for their musical creativity, they are still able to claim authenticity in performance.

One option available to classical music improvisers is to imitate a composer. By learning to improvise in the style of Elizabeth Claude Jacquet de la Guerre, for instance, a talented musician may recreate for the audience an experience similar to that which Louis XIV received three centuries ago (see introduction to Chapter One). Imitation puts strict limitations on a musician’s creativity. When Robert Levin sets out to finish one of Mozart’s incomplete compositions, he only allows himself the musical techniques used by the composer. The
resulting piece of music is “more limited than an authentic work,” says Levin, because “there is a tendency of a great genius to do something in one piece that happens only in that one piece, and is an epiphany” (Personal Interview). This limitation is equally true of both composition and improvisation (Personal Interview).

Expanding the boundaries of creativity beyond imitation, a musician may improvise in the language of a particular period. Doing so allows the classical musician to develop her own personal style within that language. Improvisation gives classical musicians the opportunity not just to interpret and preserve, but to resurrect the music of a historical style.

_Beyond Authenticity_

Many improvisers choose to go beyond the boundaries set by composers and styles, sacrificing authenticity in order to take full advantage of their own creativity. For many musicians, the freedom to take a piece of music and do what you want with it is crucial. David Timm says that altering a piece of music is “always a joy” (Personal Interview, Trans. N. S.). When done well, changing a piece can also be exciting for listeners. Glenn Gould was often criticized for ignoring the instructions of composers like Mozart and Beethoven. Yet, because he had no qualms about altering a composition, Gould always offered listeners a new and original take on the music of those composers.

The traditional approach to classical music does not allow a musician to play a composition differently than the way it is notated, because doing so is seen as disrespectful. Suejin Jung tells how, at a recent concert, a pianist improvised during his performance of
compositions by Chopin. Jung says, “It was nice, it was wonderful,” but describes how some of the audience was bothered by it, because it had strayed from tradition (Personal Interview).

Survey respondents had a wide range of beliefs on this subject: some believed that a performer should never alter a composition, others advocated for a performer’s creative freedom, and some tried to find a middle ground. Joe Hetko gave one of the most sensible answers: “I have no problem with people playing around with the notes or even the form of a concert piece as long as they tell the audience that that is what they are doing” (in Shane). Hetko’s solution seems ideal, because it satisfies all parties involved: the musician can exercise full creativity, the composer is not disrespected in the way classical musicians often fear, and the audience is not misled.

In any case, a classical musician who wants to alter a piece need not worry about causing any permanent damage. When Robert Levin first considered trying to complete a piece by Mozart—a fugue based off of sketches at the end of the composer’s Requiem—he eventually realized “it was not as if someone gave me a chisel and a hammer and said, here’s the unfinished Pieta by Michelangelo in Milan, go to it boy!” (Personal Interview).

Improvisation can be used to many other creative ends besides altering compositions. Those musicians fluent in multiple styles can combine these styles together in stimulating new ways. David Timm tells of one of the favorite musical tricks of his father, an organist, who would play variations on a folk tune, and pretend to be a different kind of pianist in each variation (Personal Interview). He would begin the tune with lots of mistakes, and then speed up near the end, as if he were a young child who had gotten bored of practicing. Next, he would play with big, chorale-style chords, pretending to be a pastor. Following these first two characters, he would play the tune as if he were a piano student, then with the swing of a jazz
pianist, and finally, with a sensitive touch meant to conjure up the image of a graceful, old lady. Despite its simplicity, the gag was loved by everyone who heard it. Timm has taken the idea even farther, replacing the five characters with composers like Schumann and Wagner (Personal Interview).

While Timm’s father combined musical styles within the context of a whole performance, Neely Bruce mixes such music together in his own style of free improvisation (Personal Interview 2013). Bruce attempts to improvise without any pre-conceived notions of what he will play, and the result is a combination of all the kinds of music inside of him. One such improvisation incorporated Baroque trills with atonal harmonies, for instance. He encourages his students to try to improvise in this same manner. In this style of improvisation, says Bruce, it is not the specific musical content that is important, but rather the story told by the music.

Daniel Beilschmidt also has a personal, modern style of improvisation, which he uses to accompany church services along with the normal stylistic improvisation that all organists employ. Pointing to Picasso as an example, he says that what interests him most is when a person creates something “120 percent” new (Personal Interview, Trans. N. S.). In Beilschmidt’s experience as a teacher of organ improvisation, students can learn many styles of music, yet they do not “take over responsibility for the music they create” until they are given absolute creative freedom (Personal Interview, Trans. N. S.).
The Music of Today

Modern technology has brought an astonishing variety of music into people’s lives, and individuals often listen to and appreciate many different kinds of music. Even when a child grows up in a family that listens exclusively to classical music, she will be exposed to other genres outside of the home. Under these circumstances, classical music educators should design their methods in such a way as to allow for the possibility that their students will want to explore other kinds of music later in life.

Teaching improvisation provides a foundation for such future exploration. In comparison to classical music, other genres are highly improvisatory, so to switch to these genres, the student must feel comfortable being creative in the moment. Furthermore, many genres, including jazz, pop, rock and folk, are highly related in musical content to the languages of classical music. When David Timm teaches his students the basic level of jazz that he believes every organist should know, the connection between jazz harmony and the classical musical languages his students have already learned means that he does not have to start from scratch (Personal Interview). Thus, fluency in classical music languages can boost a musician into other musical genres.

In the context of such a plurality of music, classical music might appear to some people to be too old and traditional to be of much interest. Holly Everett laments that even though she “can play you some Bach with really nice tone and articulation,” she cannot “do anything in a social setting that would be considered fun or relevant to most college-age people” (in Shane). While some might call Bach irrelevant because he died over two and a half centuries ago, the bigger problem seems to be the lack of creativity in his musical language today. If Holly were
able to improvise in the style of Bach, not just play his compositions, she would be better equipped to awaken the curiosity of her peers about his musical language. Teaching classical music students to improvise would thus renew interest in its musical traditions.

Of course, plenty of people already consider classical music to be “fun and relevant.” Indeed, some hold it more closely to their hearts than any other kind of music. For Ton Koopman, the music of the eighteenth-century is “avant-garde music; that’s not old music, it’s just music from now” (Personal Interview). Unlike Koopman, however, most people who love classical music are not lucky enough to be able to express themselves through its musical languages. By teaching improvisation, classical music teachers would help students claim the music for themselves, so that each student could call classical music, in Koopman’s words, “my musical language.”
REFERENCES

Bibliography


**Personal Communication**

Albach, Elina. Keyboardist; Student at Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Basil, Switzerland. Personal interview. Student 11 July 2012.
Beilschmidt, Daniel. Organist; Professor of Music at Evangelical Conservatory of Church Music in Halle, Germany. Personal interview. 16 July 2012.
Bruce, Neely. Composer; Professor of Music at Wesleyan University. Personal interview. 28 April 2011.
Bruce, Neely. Personal Interview. 4 April 2013.
Dumont, Nora. Organist; Student at Wesleyan University. Personal interview. 7 May 2011.
Ebrecht, Ronald. Organist; Artist-in-Residence and University Organist at Wesleyan University. “Organ Improvisation.” Email to author. 5 April 2013.
Erhardt, Martin. Multi-instrumentalist; Professor of Improvisation at The Liszt School of Music in Weimar and the Felix Mendelssohn College of Music and Theatre in Leipzig. Personal interview. 25 July 2012.
Fu, George. Pianist; Student at Harvard University. Personal interview. 27 July 2012.
Jung, Suejin. Pianist; Student at The Juilliard School. Personal interview. 27 July 2012.
Koopman, Ton. Keyboardist; Professor at The Royal Conservatory of the Hague in the Netherlands. Personal interview. 13 July 2012.
Levin, Robert. Pianist; Professor at Harvard University. Personal interview. 11 July 2012.
Lutz, Rudolf. Keyboardist; Professor at Schola Cantorum Basiliensis in Basil, Switzerland. “Improvisation im klassischen Musikunterricht Interview.” Email to author. 25 Aug. 2012.
Nelson, David. Carnatic Drummer; Professor of Music at Wesleyan University. “Teaching method and improvisation.” Email to author. 5 April 2013.
Rodi, Alan. Keyboardist; Student at Wesleyan University (at time of interview). Personal interview. 6 May 2011.
Schroth, Erika. Pianist; Classical Piano Teacher. “Improvisation!” Email to author. 8 May 2011.
Timm, David. Organist; Professor of Church Music at Felix Mendelssohn College of Music and Theatre. Personal interview. 9 July 2012.
APPENDIX I

Survey: Classical Musicians and Improvisation

A significant portion of the research for this thesis was conducted in an online survey from February 3rd to March 7th, 2013. Respondents hailed from a variety of locations, although most were students at Wesleyan University. The only requirement of each respondent was that he or she be a current or former student of classical music. Besides classical musicians and students, some respondents were jazz musicians, music teachers, or people who no longer play music, among others. There were 46 total respondents to the survey.

There are a few problems with this survey, which, in the interest of transparency, are described below:

- There is not enough variety among the survey respondents to prove any generalizations about classical music education beyond a reasonable doubt.
- Some respondents know me personally. Although I did my best to eliminate all leading questions, I did discuss my views with a few of these respondents, so their answers may have been influenced by my perspective.
- Ideally, this survey would have been included a greater number of multiple-choice questions. For example, respondents should have been directly asked whether their classical music teachers taught them to improvise, and then asked why. Instead, they were asked to “describe any instrumental and/or vocal education that you have had in classical music, with a specific focus on improvisation.” For this reason, I had to extract information from survey answers for some of the quantitative analysis that I performed. Whenever I felt unsure about a respondent’s answer, I marked it “unclear.”

Despite these issues, the survey is useful in two ways. First, it indicates certain trends about classical music education, even if it does not prove them beyond a reasonable doubt. Second, the individual experiences of survey respondents stand alone; as such, they are quoted often throughout chapters two and three.

The survey was conducted using Google Forms, so it is impossible to reproduce it completely. The copy below is a close approximation, with all wording reproduced exactly as it was seen by respondents.

Survey: Classical Musicians and Improvisation

If you have learned classical music at some point in your life, or you are learning it now, then please take this survey! By conducting this survey, I hope to gather information for my undergraduate thesis, the topic of which is improvisation in classical music education. I will ask you questions about your music education, music in your life today, and your thoughts on improvisation. If you have 30 minutes, I would appreciate your participation a lot! The deadline is February 28, 2013.

If you are confused about something, feel free to contact me by email at nwshane@wesleyan.edu.
Many thanks,
Nathan Shane
nwshane@wesleyan.edu

P.S. Once you have taken this survey, feel free to pass it on to friends and family! I will be accepting surveys until the end of February, 2013. The more the merrier!

P.P.S. In case you're curious, I define the lower limit of improvisation to be spontaneously changing the notes of a piece of music, whether by adding or by taking away notes. Under this definition, improvisation includes anything from improvised embellishment and ornamentation to the creation of whole pieces in performance. Spontaneous interpretation (i.e. dynamics, articulation, and rubato) does not count as improvisation.

BEGINNING OF SURVEY

Preliminary Questions

What is your name? (If you do not want to have your answers quoted by name in my thesis, simply write “Anonymous.”)

What is your email?

What city/state/country do you live in?

Where did you live growing up?

How old are you?

Music Education

What kinds of music did you listen to growing up? Approximately how much of each genre?

Did your family play or sing music? Together or alone?

Describe any instrumental and/or vocal education that you have had in classical music, with a specific focus on improvisation. (For instance, what instruments did you learn to play, and at what age? Did improvisation play a role in the process of learning your instrument? If so, how? How much did you learn to play from notation, and how much by ear?)

Describe any education you received in classical music theory and/or composition. Did your teachers incorporate improvisation into their teaching methods? If so, how?
In general, do you feel as if your classical music teachers encouraged or discouraged you to improvise, experiment, or play around on your instrument? Explain your answer.

Describe any non-classical music education. Did your teachers incorporate improvisation into lessons, and if so, how?

Did your non-classical music teachers view music, and especially improvisation, differently from your classical music teachers? If so, how?

Describe any informal experiences of music education, such as playing in a band with friends or teaching an instrument to yourself. Was improvisation a part of these experiences?

If you did learn to improvise, to what do you attribute that skill?

Do you wish that improvisation had played a larger or smaller role in your education? If so, why?

Music in your Life Today

What is your primary relationship with music? (Professional musician, music teacher, just play casually, just listen to music, etc.)

What kinds of music do you listen to? Approximately how much of each genre?

Do you play or sing music at least semi-regularly? (If not, the survey will skip to the “Thinking about Improvisation” section when you go to the next page.)

1. Yes
2. No

Music in your Life Today (Continued)

What kind(s) of music do you play?

What instrument(s) do you play? If you sing, say so.

Approximately how much of the time do you play from notation and how much by ear?

1. 1: Play from Notation
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5: Play by Ear
Do you play music with other people? If so, list the types of group-playing in which you take part.
- Band
- Choral Group
- Orchestra
- World Music Ensemble (ex. Gamelan orchestra)
- Casual (jamming, singing, etc.)
- Other

Do you improvise?
- Yes
- No

Questions about Improvisation
(Only answer these questions if you improvise.)

What kinds of music do you improvise?

Describe how you use improvisation. (Examples: Embellish pieces while playing them, just play around on the instrument, improvise whole pieces of music, etc.)

Approximately how proficient are you at improvisation?
- 1: Not Very Proficient
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5: Very Proficient

Does your ability to improvise influence your ability to learn and perform pre-composed music? If so, how?

How is your ability to improvise related to the way you hear or comprehend music?

If you compose, does your ability to improvise influence the way you write music? If so, how?

Do you feel that improvisation allows you to express yourself in a different way than strictly adhering to a composition? If so, how?

Questions about Improvisation
(Only answer these questions if you do not improvise.)
Do you believe you cannot improvise, or do you choose not to improvise? Explain your answer.

Have you considered learning to improvise? Why or why not?

If you decided to learn how to improvise, would you know how to go about doing so?

______________________________________________________

**Teaching Music**
(Only answer these questions if you teach or have taught music.)

What kind of music do you teach?

Do you incorporate improvisation into your teaching? If so, what role does it play? How do you go about training students in that skill?

______________________________________________________

**Thinking about Improvisation**

How important do you think it is for musicians to learn to improvise?
- 1: Not Important
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5: Very Important

Do you think improvisation can be taught? Why or why not?

How much do you associate improvisation with classical music?
- 1: No Association
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5: High Association

How much do you associate improvisation with jazz?
- 1: No Association
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5: High Association
How much do you associate improvisation with American folk music?
- 1: No Association
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5: High Association

Explain your answers to the last three questions.

Do you think it is important to play a composition exactly the way it is notated, or should the performer be allowed to alter the music as he or she wishes?
- 1: Strictly Adhere to the Composition
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5: Freedom to Alter the Composition

Explain your answer to the last question.

Do you believe that classical music students should or should not be taught improvisation? Explain your answer.

If you have anything to add about your experience with or views on musical improvisation, please do so below.

Thanks for helping me out!!! - Nathan

END OF SURVEY
APPENDIX II

Quantitative Analysis of Survey

Total Respondents: 46

Question: Describe any instrumental and/or vocal education that you have had in classical music, with a specific focus on improvisation. (For instance, what instruments did you learn to play, and at what age? Did improvisation play a role in the process of learning your instrument? If so, how? How much did you learn to play from notation, and how much by ear?)

Number of respondents whose instrumental and/or vocal education…
- Incorporated improvisation: 4 (9%)
- Incorporated a small amount of improvisation: 6 (13%)
- Incorporated no improvisation: 29 (63%)

Unclear response: 7 (15%)

Question: Describe any education you received in classical music theory and/or composition. Did your teachers incorporate improvisation into their teaching methods? If so, how?

Number of respondents whose theoretical and/or compositional education…
- Incorporated improvisation: 5 (11%)
- Incorporated a small amount of improvisation: 8 (17%)
- Incorporated no improvisation: 17 (37%)

Unclear response: 10 (22%)

No theory education: 6 (13%)

Question: In general, do you feel as if your classical music teachers encouraged or discouraged you to improvise, experiment, or play around on your instrument? Explain your answer.

Number of respondents who felt…
- Encouraged: 6 (13%)
- Not encouraged: 4 (9%)
- Discouraged: 12 (26%)
- Both encouraged and discouraged by different teachers: 7 (15%)
- Overall neither encouraged nor discouraged (not the focus of studies, or never presented as an option): 15 (33%)
Unclear response: 2 (4%)

**Question:** Do you wish that improvisation had played a larger or smaller role in your education? If so, why?

Number of respondents who...
- Wished for a larger role: 28 (61%)
  - Wished strongly for a larger role: 2 (4%)
  - Unclear how strong: 20 (43%)
  - Hesitantly: 6 (13%)
- Satisfied with education: 10 (22%)
  - Improvisers: 10 (22%)
  - Non-improvisers: 0 (0%)
- Do not wish for more improvisation: 2 (4%)
- Smaller role: 1 (2%)
  - Strongly: 0 (0%)
  - Unclear how strong: 0 (0%)
  - Hesitantly: 1 (2%)

Other responses:
- Wishes for music theory as a basis for improvisation: 1 (2%)
- Unsure: 2 (4%)
- Question is irrelevant: 1 (2%)
- Unclear response: 1 (2%)

**Question:** How important do you think it is for musicians to learn to improvise?

- 5 (Very Important): 15
- 4: 23
- 3: 6
- 2: 1
- 1 (Not Important): 1

Total: 188/46 = 4.09

**Question:** How much do you associate improvisation with classical music?

- 5 (High association): 1
- 4: 2
- 3: 8
- 2: 28
- 1 (No association): 7

Total: 100/46 = 2.17

**Question:** How much do you associate improvisation with jazz?

- 5 (High association): 39
- 4: 7
- 3: 0
- 2: 0
- 1 (No association): 0

Total: 223/46 = 4.85

**Question:** How much do you associate improvisation with American folk music?

- 5 (High association): 6
- 4: 17
- 3: 12
- 2: 2
- 1 (No association): 0
- Unsure: 9

Total: 138/37 = 3.73