



Carl Humphries

TEACHING IMPROVISATION IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

PUFF

- en skriftserie om pædagogisk udvikling, forskning og formidling i musiklivet

PUFF

Skriftserie fra VMK
om pædagogisk udvikling, forskning og formidling i musiklivet

Carl Humphries
Teaching Improvisation in Classical Music

PUFF nr. 13-09

Esbjerg, April 2009

VMK Forlag
Vestjysk Musikkonservatorium
Kirkegade 61, 6700 Esbjerg.
Tlf: +45 76104300 · Fax: 76104310 · e-mail: info@vmknet.dk
<http://www.vmk.dk/>

Redaktion:
Carl Erik Kühl (ansvarshavende)
Anne Helle Jespersen
Margrethe Langer Bro
E-mail: cek@vmknet.dk

Tryk: Fællestrykkeriet - SUN
Aarhus Universitet
Universitetsparken, bygn. 1163
8000 Århus C.

ISBN 978-87-89919-15-7

Carl Humphries

TEACHING IMPROVISATION IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

1. Rediscovering Improvisation

In modern times few classical music teachers have had to deal seriously with the problems involved in teaching improvisation – at least until relatively recently, when improvising has begun to play an increasingly significant role as an element in the musical education of young players. This change in the state of things reflects many factors, but chief among them, surely, is the fact that music teachers more and more find themselves faced with the challenge of motivating young people to become involved with classical music at a time in the latter's lives when their social and cultural aspirations are most likely to pull them in the direction of other kinds of music – chiefly those associated with 'popular' culture.

One of the first things children, teenagers and young adults pick up on when confronted by the differences between classical music and the styles of 'popular' music mostly favoured by their peers is the fact that the latter apparently offer more scope for creative experimentation and play on the part of musicians themselves. Viewed through the eyes of young people today, classical music can, when contrasted with this, easily seem like a museum culture. That is, it can seem like a culture essentially dedicated to the realization of works written by revered figures in historically remote times, in which the only role a performer can realistically aspire to is that of being an obedient executor of the intentions of others. In the context of an overtly individualistic

youth culture such as ours, with its enormous stress on young people's understanding of themselves as needing to consciously define a social identity for themselves, that can hardly seem inspiring. It is in circumstances such as these that many music teachers find themselves thrown into situations in which their own desire to introduce students to a great tradition – that of Western classical music – becomes entwined with a need to address young people's own musical aspirations.

Introducing improvisation-based activities or projects into a course of practical musical training seems like a potentially fruitful way to deal with at least some of the challenges posed by this. On the one hand it promises to show students that they can make use of whatever technical facility they have on their instrument to explore the kinds of approach to music making that are, in all probability, more closely associated in their minds with non-classical styles of music – even if the instrument they are learning or the approach to playing it are more at home in the classical tradition itself. On the other hand, encouraging young musicians to explore the ways in which the practicalities of improvisation reflect parallel aesthetic and technical concerns to those at work in the classical repertoire and its associated performance practices seems like a potentially fruitful way of connecting up young people's musical horizons more closely with the classical tradition itself.¹

The emergence of this situation in music teaching over the last few decades has coincided with the redefining of the traditional performance practices of classical music in the light of a distinctively modern, historically informed kind of understanding. This has made us aware of just how different these practices were when most of the classical repertoire was created from the form in which they have been passed down to us by the classical tradition itself. In this respect, along with a concern for historical 'authenticity' in performance has come a growing awareness of other, broader differences between how the tradition of classical music making was carried on in the past and how it is carried on today.

One of these differences concerns the role of improvisation itself within Western classical music. After being the subject of an intense but rather

superficial craze closely associated with the culture of Romanticism that took early 19th century Europe by storm, improvisation practically disappeared from mainstream aspects of public musical life. Although it has persisted in specific areas such as some forms of home-based amateur music making (and in the relatively insulated field of church organ playing), a perception has emerged since that time that classical music is fundamentally and almost exclusively a culture of composed musical works. In more practical terms, it has come to be regarded as having, as one of its distinguishing features, a clearly defined division of labour between composer and interpreting performer: one strong enough to be operative even when these roles happen to correspond to one and the same individual.

This view takes improvisation to have been a relatively marginal aspect of Western classical musical practice throughout the ages: one that, if it had not been there at all, would probably not have entailed a significantly different direction of development for classical music as a whole from that which it has, in fact, followed. Such a view has, moreover, been reinforced in the last century by the striking contrast between classical music and the overtly improvised character of jazz. However, the emergence of a more heightened historical awareness of just how far classical music making differed in the past from what it has evolved into today has led to a critical rejection of this view by some scholars. These have increasingly demonstrated the important contributions that improvisation has made at various points in shaping the musical language and creative practices of classical music, especially in its earlier stages of development.² Examples of this range from the role of ‘descanting’ (i.e. vocal extemporisation of a countermelody above a given *cantus*) in the teaching of late medieval counterpoint, and of improvised counterpoint in medieval choral performing, to the role of improvised ornamentation practices in Baroque operatic arias, and improvised sets of variations on a theme during the classical period, not to mention the improvised preludes and transitions used to introduce and link written compositions during performances in the period of musical Romanticism. What is more, this rejection of what was previously the standard view of classical musical culture’s essential character has begun to enter the

consciousness of working musicians: the best illustration of this is those well-known classical performers who seek to reintroduce practices such as the improvised cadenza in concerto performances and improvised ornamentation of melody lines in certain kinds of operatic aria or related instrumental forms.

Another significant consequence of this change of self-perception within classical musical culture has been a growing pedagogical interest in improvisation as a way of opening up musical styles of the past to contemporary performers by encouraging the latter to inhabit these styles in the more open-ended and creative way that was, in fact, the norm when they constituted the musical currency of their time. The perceived benefit to today's performers lies not only in a deepening of their understanding of structure and style, but also in the fact that they are thus brought into a relationship to the musical language of the works they are involved with that more closely resembles that which performers would have had at the time of those works' creation. This would have involved such works being experienced against the background of the full range of vernacular musical idioms then in current use, and it is significant that the player would have been familiar with these not just through having performed other works but also through their own creative efforts. (We should keep in mind that throughout the greater part of the history of classical music skilled musicians were expected to be competent not just in the performance of written works but also in improvisation and composition.)

Classically oriented music teachers now find themselves drawn more than ever before into an engagement with styles such as jazz and rock that often seem foreign to them: not just for cultural or aesthetic reasons, but also, and perhaps above all, because of the unfamiliar role accorded to the player in forms of music making where improvisation can still play an overtly significant role. Yet given the shift in the historical understanding of classical music mentioned above, perhaps this should not be regarded as a straightforwardly negative scenario, even when viewed from a standpoint that, rightly or wrongly, takes classical music as its chief reference point for deciding issues of musical value. This adjustment of the self-understanding that classical musicians have of their own activities suggests that above and beyond a pragmatic recognition

of the need to cater for the perspectives of young people, there might be other reasons for them to try to make improvisation work as an element within a broader program of musical education and training – reasons connected with the renewal and re-authentication of the classical musical language and tradition themselves.

That said, the practical and pedagogical challenges involved are considerable. For example, the account just given focuses on the idea that classically trained musicians might wish to introduce elements of improvised music making into their teaching as a way of engaging with the sort of things that make non-classical musical styles attractive to young players today. It suggests that this might not be a one-way exchange if it can also lead classically trained music teachers in the direction of a renewed awareness of some elements within their own musical tradition whose importance has been temporarily obscured. Yet it involves the coming together of relatively divergent musical cultures, each with its own distinct criteria of technical and aesthetic success and its own implicit cultural and social conventions. Each brings with it a conceptual framework whose purpose is to describe and clarify what is involved in making music of the relevant sort, yet such frameworks may sometimes be less than entirely perspicuous, even from the point of view of the musical practices they are designed to serve – let alone commensurable with one another. The misleading conceptualizations of musical practice that can arise in such circumstances may be a source of complications for this kind of cross-fertilisation of musical approaches. This suggests that trying to think through the most likely sources of confusion and subjecting these to conceptual clarification is a worthwhile undertaking.

2. Defining Improvisation

One of the main conceptual challenges that music teachers face when introducing improvisation into a course of classical musical training concerns the very idea of ‘improvisation’ itself. The problem is that arriving at an understanding of the concept of improvisation that will not create more problems than it solves is by no means straightforward. A teacher might say to a student something along the following lines: “Okay, then, here’s a motif/scale/chord, now let’s *improvise!* Just see what you can do with it! Be creative, and don’t worry too much about wrong notes!” If the student then asks *what* is meant by ‘improvising’, a typical answer is likely to be: “It’s making music up as you go along, while you’re actually playing it, rather than writing it down as you make it up and then getting someone to learn and play what you’ve written – *that’s* composing!”

As directives and definitions go, these ones are probably too vague to be especially illuminating or misleading, but we may consider what might happen if a more questioning student were to inquire further about exactly what it is they were being asked to do. A natural follow-up question, along the lines of ‘*Why do that?*’ might well elicit the following answer: “Well, sometimes it’s fun to play more freely, to just do your own thing – you know, like in, say, jazz or rock music.” At this point, what begins to emerge is an antithetical contrast between the idea of a more serious, disciplined and impersonal way of making music, in which the player is constrained by relatively strict rules of accuracy and stylistic correctness laid down by tradition, and an alternative approach to music making characterised in terms that stress the notions of ‘free’ agency and personal ‘enjoyment’ or ‘fun’, in which ‘mistakes’ are somehow ‘okay’, and which is loosely identified with some specific styles of music that the student may, perhaps, happen to like.

The underlying message conveyed by such an answer is that somehow improvisation is less bound by rules and conventions than classical music making in its currently familiar form. But this creates an awkward dilemma for the teacher. This is because it is only a matter of time before an intelligent pupil

– quite possibly one who has also tried their hand at composing – begins to wonder why it is that some of the rules for what is good or bad in classical compositions and their interpretations do not also apply when we make music up on the spot, given that they are supposed to correspond to things that *sound* good or bad, so they should sound good or bad regardless of how they were created. (Indeed the teacher, if they have an inquiring mind, may also find themselves wondering about this.)

If the teacher responds by insisting that the stricter rules generally operative in classical composition and performance (e.g. for voice-leading, treatment of dissonance, expressive phrasing, pianistic pedalling, etc.) are really not so important after all from the point of view of the audible music itself, then they undermine one of their own principal aims, which is to cultivate in their students an appreciative grasp of the aesthetic virtues tied to these very refinements. On the other hand, if they assert the necessity of these rules on some level, it would seem to follow that they are also committed to the superiority of those forms of music making that allow creative musicians to take fullest account of them, whichever these might be. Given their own characterisation of improvisation as involving a loosening of these same rules, it must inevitably seem to the student that their teacher's endorsement of improvisation is one that comes with a huge qualification, since it is issued from a perspective that implicitly regards more overtly improvised styles such as jazz or rock as artistically inferior to the now largely composed music of the classical tradition. Young people, whose socially motivated cultural affiliations tend to lie outside of the sphere of classical music, are likely to find this alienating, if not patronising. Their teacher, it seems, is happy to encourage them to explore improvisatory practices that perhaps have more in common with the music they, as young people in today's world, find most relevant to their immediate social and cultural needs – more in common, that is, than straight classical performing does – but only in terms that imply that *those* kinds of music are inferior, and are so at least in part *because* they involve these same improvisatory practices! The student receives an implicit message that in being introduced to improvisation they are really being invited to engage in an

alternative form of music making to that typical of classical music today, simply as a way of pandering to their comparatively philistine adolescent cultural horizons. Whatever one takes to be the truth about that, the fact remains that it is hard to see why a student should feel that this represents any sort of meaningful engagement with their own aspirations.

The roots of this problematic scenario lie in the particular kind of response elicited from the teacher by the student's curiosity about why we should want to improvise.³ The response given implies a conception of improvisation that imparts particular significance to the concept, given the values and assumptions typical of modern culture generally: above all, it equates improvisation with a relaxing of rules motivated by the aim of arriving at an enhanced state of individual freedom and spontaneity. This reflects Romantic ideas about the autonomy of the 'self' and the role of spontaneous expression in art that have continued to be highly influential in many areas of our culture (including both those connected with classical music and those that surround 'popular' music) long after the 'official' demise of Romanticism itself as an artistic movement.

It may be useful at this point to contrast this conception with the everyday use of the term 'improvisation' outside of music (and other performing arts), where it essentially refers just to the idea of doing something without the preparation or planning it would typically involve. There is no necessary implication here that one does what one does in this way because one has *freed* oneself *from* some set of constraining circumstances that would otherwise make preparation or planning necessary or desirable (or even just normal). On the contrary, if anything the implication is usually that one is *forced* to act without due preparation or planning *by* circumstances, and indeed even by circumstances beyond one's control – as a sort of *practical* measure. The most obvious musical correlative of this would seem to be those situations where a performer is obliged to make up some or all aspects of the music they are playing on the spot because these have not been fixed in advance, e.g. as part of what is given in a score.⁴

Stripped of its Romantic connotations and brought significantly closer to its everyday meaning, the concept of 'improvisation' nevertheless remains at odds

with the practice it is supposed to be describing when it is applied to music making. This is because the kind of scenario we typically apply it to in the case of music is one where, in fact, there is no sense that one has been forced to make some or all aspects of the music up as one goes along because circumstances beyond one's own control have made this unavoidably necessary (in a *practical* way). Typically, one improvises because one participates in a musical culture or practice in which, in certain circumstances at least, this is just *what is expected* of one.⁵ In that case, just as it is presumptuous to assume that improvisation necessarily involves a heightened state of creative freedom, it is misguided (in the case of music) to think of it as necessarily resulting from some defective or problematic situation where one is less than fully prepared for the conditions one actually finds oneself in.

Recognising the inappropriateness of both the Romantic ('artistic') and everyday ('practical') concepts of improvisation as characterisations of what goes on in the sorts of music making to which this term is commonly applied can lead us to dispense with the notion that the latter *necessarily* involves a loosening of the rules, or lowering of the aesthetic standards, associated with composed music (or, more specifically, with composed classical music).⁶ That is because it is hard to find any other basis amongst our actual ways of using the term 'improvise' for the thought that it should imply anything like this. If that is so, then the way in which this term *should* be understood when applied to music making (if we are to go on using it all) is one that treats it as having something like the meaning that another term has that is still used by some classical musicians (though increasingly only in the context of historical discourse about music), and which once served as the standard name for what we now think of as musical improvisation: *extemporisation*. (Improvised music was for a long time just referred to as music created *ex tempore*.) This term carries no suggestions of either a Romantic emancipation of the Spirit from rules that are then implicitly devalued, or of an attempt to do something under sub-optimal conditions. Instead, it *simply* denotes an alternative way of creating music to that which we engage in when we compose it in written form so that it can be performed on a distinct occasion. Understanding, defining, and explaining the

concept of musical improvisation in this more modest way in the context of teaching improvisation skills to students of classical music should have the consequence that teachers no longer find themselves having to choose between the two unattractive alternatives outlined above: on the one hand, perversely implying that other styles are inferior on account of their more improvisatory character just as they are seeking to encourage the student to explore improvisation itself and, on the other, undermining their aim of transmitting an appreciation of the practices, rules and aesthetic standards operative in classical composition and performance.

3. Evaluating Improvisation.

One recently published tutorial volume aimed at introducing students of classical piano to elementary improvisation techniques offers as a guiding principle the following maxim: “There are no wrong notes within improvisation, only some that are better than others.”⁷ This echoes something classical teachers often feel tempted to say, along the lines of ‘Don’t worry, there are no such things as mistakes when you’re improvising!’ The idea is to suggest to students that improvisation is something much less intimidating than a kind of spontaneously executed composing, which would surely require superhuman skills. (Composing music, where one sits at a table and writes the music down in a score, is difficult enough!) This relates to the broader issue, already mentioned, of whether improvisation should involve endorsing a loosening of the rules or standards normally associated with composed classical music. However, it is just as likely to reflect an awareness on the part of teachers that when improvisation is used to open up connections with non-classical, ‘popular’ styles it is necessary to take account of the fact that these tend anyway to observe more relaxed rules and standards in areas traditionally central to classical composition (e.g. voice-leading, treatment of dissonance, and the use of inversions and chord extensions) and classical performance (e.g. articulation, phrasing, precise control of dynamic levels, pianistic pedalling).

Here, too, the teacher may feel caught in a dilemma – one reminiscent of that already discussed. They may advocate the superior refinement of the rules operative in composed music or classical music or both (i.e. composed classical music), in which case it is not clear why they would be willing to endorse the kind of loosening of these rules evidenced in jazz and rock. Alternatively they may adopt a more ‘relativist’ attitude, stating that the stricter versions of these rules simply aren’t relevant to these styles, so nothing is lost by loosening them, in which case it is no longer clear why such rules are considered to be an important feature in classical music itself. However, there is a solution: it is to show that there are other conditions operative in modern styles that, were they not to be operative, would have the effect of making the stricter rules relevant in much the same way as they are in classical music. For example, jazz voice-leading operates according to a more relaxed conception of what is or is not harmonically dissonant and in need of resolution, and of what constitutes an acceptable degree of continuity and smoothness in relation to harmonic texture generally. It can be argued that this makes perfect sense, providing one accepts as a given jazz’s underlying shift away from strictly triadic harmony to a system in which seventh chords are taken as functionally basic. Moreover, the distinctive performance conditions traditionally in force in jazz music making, such as the use of poorly maintained or tuned pianos, amplified vocals, high-volume rhythm sections, and higher levels of background noise associated with audiences, all mitigate substantially the degree to which dissonance is exposed as an audible element in jazz textures. Showing a student what happens to one’s awareness of dissonance when seventh chords are replaced with simple triads, and discussing the differences between the performance conditions of traditional jazz, modern jazz, and classical music, can lead to an illuminating grasp of why and how rules become and cease to be relevant depending on wider circumstances.

In the area of performance practice, a similar approach can be taken. For example the teacher can point to the evolution of the technical standards associated with classical performing itself. The modern, highly polished and technically ultra-precise style of classical performing stands in an obvious

contrast to traditional jazz and mainstream rock playing styles, but also contrasts with early recordings of classical music itself. This highlights the extent to which the standards currently in force in classical music reflect a distinctively modern context for the production and reception of classical performances – one associated initially with the high-definition audio technology of recording studios and CD players but subsequently transferred into our expectations of how live concert performances should sound. Making a similar comparison between traditional jazz performing and the kind of polished jazz playing found on many newly released jazz recordings these days (and also in the sort of live jazz events now more likely to take place under conditions previously associated exclusively with classical concerts) can show how performing practices there have undergone a parallel evolution of sorts in response to these same factors. (One interesting conclusion to be drawn from this is that at least some of the factors responsible for mitigating the audible effects of jazz's more relaxed treatment of dissonance and harmonic continuity are now hardly operative, so that some sort of a move in the direction of stricter classical standards may then be called for. This in turn suggests that there are, at present, useful things for even experienced jazz musicians to learn from an engagement with the practices of classical improvisation.)

What this leaves unaddressed, though, is the underlying question raised by the quote mentioned at the start of this section, which concerns the sense, if there is one, in which we can still talk about things being 'right' or 'wrong' once improvisation has been introduced into music making. What does it mean to say that someone has made a *mistake* while improvising, and how does this relate to the notions of stylistic and technical correctness operative when a person learns to just compose or just perform classical music? Clearly there is a point to the idea that one should, as a practical and psychological tactic, relax the rules and standards in the early stages of learning to improvise. However, the question is whether this is best done by asserting that this is an inevitable and wholly unproblematic feature of improvisation as such – just a price one must pay, perhaps, if one wishes to have access to the heightened sense of

immediacy, involvement and playfulness that improvising can bring to one's music making.

In this regard one might be tempted to call attention to the fact that there is some evidence to show that improvised practices in the past (in classical music) did sometimes involve accepting a lower standard of artistic refinement. (To mention just one example, improvised choral textures were produced at certain stages in the evolution of medieval choral music in which all lines fulfilled good standards of polyphonic combination with a single cantus, but not with each other.) Yet what this fails to mention is that such practices almost certainly died out precisely *because* they were superseded by the artistically superior results of composed music! This last point suggests that the longer-term goals that are meant to be served by introducing improvisation into classical music teaching are not likely to be best advanced by a strategy that simply jettisons the idea of standards that apply regardless of whether the music is the result of improvisation or not.

In spite of this, the history of classical music does lend some support to the idea that improvisation necessarily involves a loosening of the rules or standards operative elsewhere in the same overall musical culture. Idioms, styles and genres in which musical improvisation played a major role certainly tend to exhibit a stronger reliance on formulaic elements (at the level of form, harmonic structure, thematic content, and textural organisation) that, precisely because of their formulaic character, lend themselves to the kind of assimilation that allows musicians to reproduce them *ad lib* – i.e. in ways that can be quite easily subjected to a large range of on-the-spot variations without undermining the underlying structures responsible for maintaining overall musical coherence and continuity.⁸ As with the harmonic and melodic formulae of jazz, the purpose of these is to ensure that *whatever* the improviser does *with* them, certain minimal and essential musical requirements will still be fulfilled. Although the use of formulaic elements in no way entails that the musical results will, in practice, *only* fulfil the minimal standards that such requirements represent, the more pronounced role that such elements play in styles, idioms and genres closely associated with improvised music making suggests an

implicit shift in emphasis. The shift in question takes us away from the idea that what matters is *just* that the music should fulfil the highest standards possible (which represents one extreme), and towards the idea (corresponding to the opposite extreme) that what matters is *just* that the artist be in a position to explore as wide a range of possibilities as possible, providing that the results do not fall below a certain threshold of musical coherence, etc. (As far as the contrast with composed music is concerned, this is only a matter of degree: the latter also makes use of formulaic elements, and does so partly in order to give greater scope to the composer for exploring possibilities without having to worry too much about maintaining certain qualities that music is expected to possess. Conversely, improvisers usually aim to exceed the minimal standards of correctness, coherence, etc, whose fulfilment is meant to be at least partly secured by the use of such formulae.)⁹

In trying to clarify this for students it can be helpful to introduce a distinction between two kinds of rule or standard that we apply to the processes involved in creating music. One of these concerns conformity with technical or quasi-grammatical criteria of correctness: the sort of thing we typically express by using the terms 'right' and 'wrong'. The other concerns our sense of the relative artistic value of the choices made, or actions performed, by the artist (or, perhaps, insofar as one can distinguish them, the results of these) in creating the artwork in question: what we typically express using terms such as 'better' and 'worse'.

When we come to apply these two kinds of rule or standard to composed music and its performance we encounter a division of labour between what, respectively, we take the composer and the performer(s) to be responsible for.¹⁰ In the case of improvisation no such division exists: we hold the improvising musician responsible for not just the play of ideas, formal construction, harmonic coherence, etc. of the music, but also for the final form and character that the music takes on as a consequence of his or her playing. In applying the rules or standards associated with a particular musical genre or idiom or style to improvised music, we bring to bear on that music criteria that also reflect our experience of composed music (and its performances), and in classical music

this happens in a historical context within which it is the standards associated with composed music that are usually the dominant ones. In this context, then, we cannot avoid talking about a relaxing of standards that is meant to accommodate the additional challenges posed to musicians when improvising, such as finds its technical correlative in the increased use made of formulaic elements in genres, idioms and styles associated with improvisation. However, the abovementioned distinction between two kinds of rule or standard operative in music allows us to observe that this relaxation only really pertains to those rules and standards which we use to determine the relative artistic value of what the artist has done. Insofar as improvising musicians still operate with reference to a determine genre, idiom, style, etc. – and having already put aside the Romantic identification of improvisation with an idealised conception of personal creative freedom we can say that they surely *must* do so – they will, by definition, still be committed to operating in conformity with the technical or quasi-grammatical criteria of correctness associated with the latter. That they succeed in doing so while improvising may elicit greater admiration, wonder, etc., than would otherwise be the case, but from the point of view of criteria of *this* sort *what* they have achieved musically remains unchanged by this. At the same time, our greater admiration, for what they have done reflects an awareness of the different demands placed on musicians when improvising and when composing (or performing composed works), where this in turn means that it would be simply unrealistic and unreasonable to expect the same standards of relative artistic quality to be as fully met in cases of the former as in cases of the latter.¹¹ Openly acknowledging this enables us to be clear about the fact that it is not really the *intrinsic* nature of the standards themselves that vary as we move to and fro between improvised music and composed music (and its performance), but just our sense of what we can (or should) reasonably *expect* in terms of how far these standards will be met in practice.¹²

4. Improvisation as a Social Practice

As has already been noted, one of the chief motivations for introducing improvisation into classical music teaching is the thought that this may help to bring to light connections and parallels between what goes on in classical music making itself and what goes on in the non-classical forms of music making likely to be more closely connected to the cultural and social aspirations of young people – forms which in our day happen to also be more closely associated with improvising. In such circumstances it is often natural for classical music teachers to wish to draw directly on elements of non-classical approaches to improvisation. However, when the introduction of improvisation into classical music teaching involves elements primarily associated with styles such as jazz or rock, there is an important issue that needs to be addressed – one which in practice tends to be ignored. This concerns the contrasting *social* character of the music making activities normally connected with these kinds of music, as distinct from that of classical music making itself.

When improvisation is introduced into a music lesson the natural form this takes is that the student, instead of performing a composed musical work they are studying, attempts to improvise – normally on the basis of some suggested possibilities given to them by the teacher. If this is something more than a one-off event, then there will be an understanding that the study of improvisation is to follow a similar pattern to the study of repertoire pieces, in the sense that the student gives over a certain amount of their individual practice time to improvising, and then improvises in the slightly more public context of the music lesson as a way of demonstrating the fruits of this. This allows the activity of improvising to fit quite smoothly into the overall format of the student's musical training without disrupting the latter, but it is not without problems.

Within the wider framework of classical music making as a social activity the division into individual practice sessions and lessons is an element of a larger structure that includes, and is fundamentally aimed towards, the giving of a public performance in front of an audience. Relative to the latter there is a

sense in which both practice sessions and lessons function as no more than rehearsals that are, in essence, preparatory activities for some future event. At the same time, though, performing a piece in the context provided by a lesson itself can represent a move away from the private setting in which individual practice occurs and towards something rather more like a public performance.¹³

The kind of improvised music making practices pursued in rock and jazz are also embedded in wider social practices that explicitly or implicitly involve the idea of public events of musical performing. However, there is an important contrast here with what goes on in classical music. Part of the very essence of *all* of these forms of music making (i.e. classical and non-classical) is that even as they are pursued in a way that reflects their implicit telos (i.e. their being aimed at a future of event of performance) they are also treated as valuable independently of whether that telos will actually be fulfilled or not. With classical music this is amply illustrated by the case of musicians – amateur *or* professional – for whom it is (or perhaps one should now say, *was*) quite normal to meet and play together with all the seriousness one might expect of players preparing for an important public concert, even though they are perfectly aware that no such concert will be given by them.¹⁴ With jazz and rock, to be sure, similar things go on, but improvised approaches to music making within these styles are frequently pursued in another way, for which there is not (and probably never has been) any exact equivalent in classical music: this, of course, is what jazz and rock musicians call *jamming*. The essence of jamming is that it is, by definition, a one-off event of performance in which one improvises in the company of other musicians without addressing one's playing to any audience apart from the other musicians alongside whom one is playing.¹⁵ The distinction between preparatory forms of music making and a final public event of performance that allows one to talk about a teleological relationship connecting the former to the latter is not operative here or, at least, is not operative in anything like the same way. (Practising various improvisation techniques in private might be considered a form of music making that is preparatory to one's participation in the jam session itself, but the idea of *rehearsing* a jam session is, by definition, nonsense.) Jamming, and

the sort of rehearsed performances that take place in front of specially gathered audiences of listeners, are two kinds of performance event that coexist alongside one another within the musical culture of jazz and rock, and while each certainly makes references to the other neither of them can be said to depend on the other in the way that a more overarching teleological connection would imply.

Jamming has, at the very least, an appearance of overtly subordinating the character of music making as a collective public event to its character as an open-ended interaction between musically active individuals. It seems intuitively obvious that, in an age such as ours that is dominated by an outwardly individualistic youth culture, this accounts for a sizeable part of its appeal to young people. Whatever the larger merits or demerits of this phenomenon, if one comes to improvisation in the hope of building bridges between classical music and the interests and aspirations of young people, then doing so in ways that exclude or marginalise this particular kind of activity start to look self-defeating. Unfortunately the straightforward incorporation of improvisation-based activities into the larger pattern created by the various sorts of musical activity associated with learning to play classical music (practising, attending lessons, rehearsing together, dress rehearsals, etc.) tends, in practice, to push improvisation away from this. It encourages students to think of improvisation as something first carried out in a preparatory fashion under the same conditions as practising and then converted into a public performance of some kind, either in the semi-public context of the lesson itself or for the benefit of a wider audience. Because it is hard to see where something like jamming fits into such a schema, improvisation invariably gets pushed in the opposite direction from it and tends to become, at least for students of classical music, a rather private and even solipsistic affair.

In this way the chance for students of classical music to take part in the sort of informal, open-ended and playful forms of artistic interaction involving music that jamming makes possible becomes a missed opportunity, and this is also to be regretted for another reason – albeit one that the nature of jamming itself may make hard to see. Jamming depends for its one-off character as

unrehearsed performance on the adoption of an extremely loose approach to musical structure – one necessarily sustained by the use of highly formulaic elements familiar to all of the participating musicians, and this feature may make it seem even farther removed from the values, conventions and techniques of classical music than other approaches to jazz and rock. Yet jamming offers a perfect opportunity for classical musicians to reanimate their sensitivity to the true nature of classical performance itself! Why? On account of the fact that in its own way – albeit one which is bound to seem crude and vulgar to most classical musicians – it manages to dramatically throw the spotlight onto the sheer uniqueness of the individual event of performance. The relevance of this is that it is just *this* sense of a live performance – as constituting a unique musical event whose unfolding cannot, and should not, be prepared or rehearsed down to the last detail – that is under threat in the culture of classical performing today. This is because classical performers now realise that they have no alternative but to aim to give performances that are technically polished in the extreme if they are to meet the expectations of listeners accustomed to the technical perfection of modern recordings – a perfection more often than not achieved artificially in the studio and made necessary in the first instance by the need to withstand repeated scrutiny under the listening conditions offered by digital audio technology. The result of this has been a general shift in the culture of classical performance away from a concern for the spontaneity of live performing and towards an approach that treats a performance as something to be ‘constructed’ – one might even say *composed* – and ‘controlled’ in every possible respect.¹⁶

5. Conclusion

Perhaps it is worth acknowledging that improvisation, by steering clear of the division of labour between composer and performer(s) that has enabled classical music to achieve, arguably, the highest levels of musical richness and subtlety known to man, renders itself incapable of achieving those same peaks of artistic greatness and profundity. However, this in no way obliges us to devalue those same achievements if we want to see improvisation as having an important role to play in the larger musical culture of today. All we have to do is recognise that the cultural achievements of composed classical music are themselves a reflection of the larger musical culture that is Western classical music as a whole – in which improvisation has played an important role for many centuries, not just by leaving its mark on the formal, harmonic and melodic structures of Western music itself, but also by playing an essential role in keeping those structures alive as part of what might be called (to use a well-worn metaphor) a living musical language – one sufficiently open to the playfulness of musicians and the new situations that life itself throws up to function in a way that is analogous to what a linguistic vernacular is meant to be for poets.

According to a certain view of what music *is*, it is an art form that, like architecture, aspires in a more or less premeditated way towards achieving the status of a lasting cultural monument (as in the great works of classical composers), but is also just as essentially one that functions, like dance, as a formalisation of the ways in which ordinary people express themselves spontaneously and naturally on a daily basis. If that view is correct, then it suggests that improvisation can play an important role, at least at certain moments in the history of a musical culture, in helping to maintain a necessary balance between the two sides of music that, when properly elaborated together, are responsible for its potentially unique richness and power – namely its character as an art of *construction* on the one hand, and as an art of *performance* on the other. Introducing students of classical music to improvisation might be one way in which it could play this role today.

NOTES

¹ Experience suggests that what excites young people about improvisation is their impression that it is ‘creative’ in some sort of more heightened way than classical music making. Leaving aside the difficult issue of what this term should really be understood to mean in such circumstances, we may observe that what they generally have in mind directly reflects their informal understanding of what it is that jazz and rock musicians do – typically when ‘jamming’. How far the association of improvisation with these kinds of activities (as opposed to with classical music making) is in fact justified is another matter. Aside from jamming itself, many (if not most) aspects of what goes in jazz and rock involve forms of decision-making that occur in rehearsal rather than during an actual public performance. According to one conception this means they are properly described as forms of unwritten composing rather than as improvisation. As for the issue of the role of improvisation in classical music making, in addition to certain historical considerations (to be explored here in due course) we should not forget that interpretative performing itself involves a similar mix of rehearsed decision-making and on-the-spot improvisation with respect to the working out of subtleties of expressive timing, phrasing, dynamics, etc. I will discuss the significance of jamming later in this article.

² For an extended overview of these developments see the entry on “Improvisation” in *The New Revised Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

³ The abovementioned scenario involving a teacher and pupil is meant to serve just as one illustrative example. Readers can imagine for themselves the many other points at which a conception of improvisation as involving a loosening of rules and/or lowering of standards might find its way, implicitly or explicitly, into the teaching of improvisation to students of classical music.

⁴ Even where this is the result of a deliberate decision on the part of a composer, it is by no means clear that it reflects a desire to free the performer from constraints that would otherwise be operative. The gaps left in the solo parts of Mozart’s piano concertos, for example, are most probably less significant as invitations to the performer to do what he or she wants in some relatively free way than they are as indications of the fact that Mozart knew that he simply did not need to take the trouble to write in the notes to get the effect that he knew was required. He could absolutely rely on the soloist to realise the implications of the bass line (and surrounding texture) in just the way he wanted. Why? Because the only soloist he had

in mind as a likely performer of those works when he was composing them was himself!

⁵ Of course, the fact that something is expected of one is really no more than a way in which one's participation in a given cultural practice is manifested, rather than corresponding to the essence of what it means to be a participant in this sense. A full characterization of the latter, and of how it differs from the practical necessities that lead us to invoke the term 'improvisation' in everyday situations outside of music, would call for an analysis of a more philosophical sort – one beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ This, though, is not the same as saying that improvised music is *necessarily* (i.e. by definition) capable of achieving the same artistic standards as composed music. Improvised music, for example, must inevitably reflect certain limitations to the capacities of human beings (e.g. connected with memory and with speed of decision making). It just *is* a fact that some of these are less operative when music is being composed. The key point is that the standards by which it is judged need not themselves be inferior, even if in practice the attempt to meet these standards is, in *some* respects at least, subject to additional limitations. I will consider the implications of this point more fully in due course.

⁷ See *Improvisation at the Piano* by B. Chung and D. Thurmond, (Alfred Publishing, 2007), p.25.

⁸ We can see this by comparing composed examples of genres/idioms/styles known to have been widely used by improvising musicians (e.g. 17th century variations on a ground, mid/late-18th century theme and variations, the early 19th century keyboard fantasy, or the Romantic 'prelude') with examples of other genres/idioms/styles mainly or exclusively associated with composition (e.g. sonata form, 'through-composed' song forms, symphonic forms, etc.). It has to be said that the fugue occupies an exceptional and, perhaps, untypical place in classical musical history in this respect: it is clearly a form whose constructional demands (in respect of both the contrapuntal combining of parts and the way ideas are contrapuntally recapitulated) are, in normally circumstances, best met through composition. Nevertheless, it is a fact that an unusually rich and enduring tradition of fugal improvisation did develop around this genre. This is partly a reflection of the special role that improvisation has played (and still plays) in the context of church organ music, but it may well also be partly explained by the thought that the sheer difficulty of improvising in such a strict and demanding form posed an irresistible challenge for musicians and thus came to function as an important measure of their ability as improvisers.

⁹ Indeed, much of the greatest composed music makes much use of formulaic elements, so there can be no talk of an inverse correlation between the extent of the role played by such elements and the quality of the music in question. Generally speaking formulaic elements occupy a fundamental place within a musical practice

regardless of whether the musicians in question are engaged in composing or improvising, and their artistic significance may well extend beyond this role of guaranteeing, or helping to guarantee, the fulfilment of some minimal set of artistic standards. The point here is just that in practical terms composers are less dependent than improvisers on such elements when it comes to maintaining these minimal requirements (even if they have other practical uses for them).

¹⁰ Naturally, each of these areas can be understood as an appropriate object of evaluation from the point of view of both of the two kinds of rule or standard mentioned above: the particular aspects of the music that we hold the composer responsible for in respect of their technical or quasi-grammatical correctness will also be those that we hold him (or her) responsible for in respect of relative artistic quality, and those aspects we hold the performer(s) responsible for in respect of their 'correctness' are also what we hold *them* responsible for in respect of their 'quality'.

¹¹ One of the virtues of adopting this standpoint is that it frees us from the temptation to try to defend the notion that the standards applied in judging improvised as opposed to composed music are simply 'qualitatively' different, rather than 'quantitatively' stricter or looser. Apologists for improvisation frequently argue that the standards by which we judge the former are less demanding in some areas, but only because they are more demanding in others – e.g. that we demand less in terms of formal complexity and cohesion from improvisations, but more in the way of unexpectedly rewarding 'moment-to-moment' developments. (This idea is often invoked to lend support to the idea that there is a distinctive mode of appreciation and listening, and thus a fundamentally distinctive musical aesthetic, associated with jazz.) The problem with this is that all of the possible candidates for features that we might expect to encounter more of in improvised music than in composed music turn out to be ones that we *also* value highly, and apply high standards to, when they occur as features of either compositions or their performances.

¹² A helpful analogy for this is provided by the way we evaluate the artistic and musical achievements of children. For example, we do not expect a child prodigy to perform a late Beethoven sonata with the kind of insightfulness that a highly mature interpreter might bring to it, but we *do* expect them to perform it in a stylistically appropriate and technically correct way – *if* they are going to perform it at all! One can argue that our sense of what it is reasonable to expect is simply the manifestation of another standard that is operative. That may indeed be so, but it is a *quite* different standard from those presupposed by the musician's commitment to following the rules and standards internal to a genre/style/idiom – one that reflects our broader perceptions of what human beings *as such* can sensibly be expected to be capable of.

¹³ Where classical music is concerned one need not ever actually give such a performance, or even intend to do so, for this goal to be central to how one goes about learning to play a piece of composed music. It is simply immanent to the

musical practice or tradition itself, and it is to *this* that both the composition and its associated performance practices owe their existence. In cases where the work performed involves more than one performer one may also make a distinction between private practice and collective practice, the latter corresponding to what classical musicians actually like to call a ‘rehearsal’. (A collective rehearsal may also be brought further in the direction of a public performance, as when a group of performers agree to be coached together or submit to the direction of a conductor. The concept of a ‘dress rehearsal’ might be understood as another kind of move in the same general direction.)

¹⁴ In fact one of the most striking changes that has occurred within the social practice (or practices) of classical music making in recent times has been the visible decline in the amount of serious music making *not* pursued in the expectation that it will lead to an actual public performance. There seems to be a growing perception that playing classical music is not something to be taken seriously unless it actually culminates in such a performance – whether it be in the form of a concert or, where children are concerned, a music exam. It is harder and harder to find examples of groups of amateur *or* professional musicians getting together to perform classical music that they do *not* intend to actually perform in public. In this respect something that was once a quite prominent and widespread practice within classical musical life has been reduced to an almost marginal level of significance.

¹⁵ If people other than the musicians themselves are present, then they are really just overhearing the jam session, not participating in it as members of an audience. Their status is comparable to that of someone who just happens to pass through a space where classical music is being performed and hears something not directed at them but at others.

¹⁶ Equally jamming, with its possibilities for fluid and responsive interactions between improvising musicians at a level that goes beyond the expressive nuances of interpretative classical performance, points to what might be called the ‘hard problem’ of improvisation theory and practice. This is the question of how *collective* improvisation practices can be opened up to the richness offered by musical polyphony – so that they begin to transcend the limitations inherent within the musical resources of jazz and rock. This becomes extremely difficult the moment one tries to move beyond the scenario of individual musicians taking turns to improvise countermelodies over fixed, given material, and looks instead to achieve a genuine form of *improvised polyphonic discourse*.

References

Chung, B. and D. Thurmond (2007), *Improvisation at the Piano* (LA: Alfred).

Sadie, S. and J. Tyrrell, eds. (2003): *The New Revised Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Oxford: OUP).

Om forfatteren:

Carl Humphries University of Bielsko-Biała, Poland, is an English pianist, writer and lecturer. He studied piano in London and composition in Berlin and Turin, and taught the piano professionally for many years. He is the author of several books designed to augment traditional approaches to learning the piano, the latest of which is *The Piano Improvisation Handbook*. He has also completed a doctoral dissertation in the philosophy of music: *Musical Expression and Performance* (Southampton University, 2006). He now works at the English Department of the University of Bielsko-Biała, Poland, conducting research into the foundations of music theory and philosophical issues connected with modern culture.

PUFF

Skriftserie fra VMK
om pædagogisk udvikling, forskning og formidling i musiklivet

PUFF kan afhentes eller rekvireres gratis på VMK, så længe oplaget rækker.

PUFF bringer primært artikler fra skribenter med tilknytning til VMK men alle interesserede er velkomne til at indsende bidrag til redaktionen med henblik på skriftlig og elektronisk publikation.

Elektroniske udgaver af *PUFF* fås på adressen:
<http://vmk.dk/om-konservatoriet/publikationer/tidsskrifter/>

I øjeblikket kan følgende skrifter i serien rekvireres:

1-07. *Mogens Christensen: Ugler i musen*

Musikkonservatorierne er skabt ind i en anden tid end vor og har et langt stykke vej fået lov til at leve med kraften fra denne undfangelse. I det nye årtusinde er vor tilgang til musik og til uddannelse dog ændret så meget, at konservatorieverdenen bør formulere et bud på, hvilke værdier den vil satse på, og hvorledes disse ideer kan levnedegøres i de krav og behov, der i dag er til kunst, uddannelse og forskning. Ugler i musen tager sig for at kridte nogle tanker op og henvise til, hvordan man kan formulere nogle muligheder for formidling af, om og med musik, der forener kunstnerisk praksis med videnskabelig teoretisering.

2-07. *Fredrik Søegaard: Lyden af Viking*

'Lyden af Viking' er en kompositionsproces, hvor virksomhedens medarbejdere komponerer musik, som skal afspejle deres oplevelser af deres virksomhed.

3-07. *Carl Erik Kühn: Lytning og Begreb*

Artiklen præsenterer en række begreber til brug ved beskrivelsen af, hvorledes et musikalsk forløb er bygget op. Begreberne er på en gang så enkle, at de kan benyttes af enhver – med eller uden musikalsk skoling – og så almene, at de kan benyttes på al slags musik.

4-07. *Hans Sydow: Tonespace – mere end musik.*

Tonespace er navnet på Vestjysk Musikkonservatoriums elektroniske projektuddannelse. Computeren er hovedinstrumentet, som bruges til at skabe, spille og formidle elektronisk musik og lydkunst. *Tonespace* er også navnet på et hus, som endnu ikke er bygget - et musikalsk eksperimentarium, hvor man skal kunne lege sig til erfaringer med lyd og musik.

5-07. *Charles Morrow: Lydkunst i det offentlige rum*

Inden for de seneste årtier er interessen for lydkunst (sound art) stadig vokset, både hvad angår publikum, museer, samlere, gallerier og offentlige kunstbestillinger. Mængden af lydkunstinstallationer i det offentlige rum vokser i takt med, at vi bliver mere opmærksomme på vores auditive miljøer. Denne artikel beskæftiger sig med historien bag samt praksis omkring lydkunsten og fremsætter aktuelle strategier for nye projekter i det offentlige rum.

6-08. *Elisabeth Meyer-Topsøe: Støtte gi'r glød, støtte gi'r brød!*

Sopranen Birgit Nilsson (1918-2005) sang de mest krævende partier hos Wagner, Strauss og Puccini, på verdens største operascener, til hun var langt op i 60erne. Læs her om nogle af hendes vigtigste sangtekniske principper om en bæredygtig sangteknik.

7-08. *Niels la Cour*: Om Bachpolyfoniens rødder i Palestrinastilen

Kvalificeret indsigt i barokkens fugakunst kan næppe opnås uden et studium af dens indlysende stilistiske hovedforudsætning: Renæssancens vokalpolyfoni. Med artiklen har det været hensigten ud fra en række korrektionseksempler fra teoriundervisningen i Bachfuga at vise, hvorledes de foretagne rettelser bedst forstås gennem et kendskab til de bagved liggende og indirekte benyttede Palestrinaregler. Afslutningsvis bringes en række almene betragtninger omkring Palestrinas musikhistoriske betydning.

8-08. *Orla Vinther*: At skabe en interesse – fra et liv i musikformidlingens tjeneste

I artiklen beskæftiger forfatteren sig med de motiver, der ligger bag mange års virksomhed som musikteoretiker og musikformidler. Udgangspunktet er en fascination af den kunstneriske oplevelse og en optagethed af at finde og beskrive de formelle mønstre, hvori den kunstneriske oplevelse er forankret. En anden drivkraft har været interessen for værket som tidsdokument. Dette belyses ved en sammenlignende analyse af Franz Liszts symfoniske digt *Les Préludes* og Gustav Mahlers symfoniske lied *Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen*.

9-08. *Eva Fock*: Du store verden!

Artiklen præsenterer historien om et konkret pædagogisk udviklingsprojekt for musikfaget i gymnasiet: *Tværsnit i Musikken*, men historien rummer andet og mere end "blot" erfaringerne fra et konkret case study fra gymnasieverdenen. Gennem overvejelserne omkring projektet præsenteres og diskuteres forskellige tilgange til musikalsk mangfoldighed, multikulturel pædagogik og musikundervisning i det flerkulturelle samfund – tilgange, som er relevante langt ud over gymnasieverdenen og som rækker langt ud over det flerkulturelle felt.

10-08. *Leif Ludwig Albertsen*: Brahms og Magelone

Musikgenren *Liederabend* udvikler sig på basis af Schuberts *Die schöne Müllerin* og *Winterreise* i løbet af 1800-tallet fra sublim privatkunst til en seriøs offentlig koncertgenre med skiftende hensyn til en eventuel handling i tekstforlægget. Schumann-eleven Brahms var selv usikker over for, om man skulle lade rækken af sange afspejle nogen sammenhængende fortælling. I artiklen redegøres for bogen om Magelone siden middelalderen og der tages afstand fra gentagne forsøg på at se Ludwig Tiecks roman med indlagte sange og tekst som et stort, romantisk eventyr.

11-08. *Palle Jespersen*: Zoltán Kodály.

Komponisten, folkemusikforskeren og musikpædagogen *Zoltán Kodály* fyldte for nylig 125 år. Hans liv og værk præsenteres hér af formanden for Dansk Kodály Selskab, Palle Jespersen.

12-08. *Peer Birch*: De tre hjørnevokaler.

De tre så kaldte "hjørnevokaler" er hjørnesten i klassisk sangteknik. I artiklen forklares dette med henvisning til resultater inden for nyere stemmeforskning, og i en række enkle øvelser vises det, hvordan man i sanguddannelsen drager praktisk nytte deraf.

Seneste udgivelser fra VMK Forlag

Bogudgivelser

Eva Fock: "Det gemmer jeg aldrig ..."

– sagt af en elev på Elling skole efter en intensiv, musikalsk sejlads. Med undertitlen 'et krydstogt i musikformidling' dokumenterer rapporten VMKs forskningsprojekt om kreativ musikformidling i skolen. I centrum af undersøgelsen står professor i musikformidling Mogens Christensens arbejde og metoder. Rapporten er baseret på en musiketnologisk arbejdsform.

Pris: kr. 125,00 (95,00 ved køb af min. 15 stk.). VMK Forlag 2009.

Mogens Christensen (red.):

"At skabe interesse ... - Festskrift for Orla Vinther"

Bogen indeholder en række artikler om musikhistorie og musikpædagogik samt en række hilsener til fødselaren af både erindringsmæssig og musikalsk art. Blandt bidragsyderne er Anders Brødsgaard, Fuzzy, John Høybye og Jan Maegaard samt flere undervisere ved VMK.

Pris: kr.225,00 VMK Forlag 2007

CD-udgivelser

Jørgen Mortensen: Portræt

Portræt rummer værker af docent Jørgen Mortensen udført af musikerne Jørgen Hald Nielsen, Christian Blom Hansen, Christian Martinez, Claus Gahrn, Christina Dahl og Michael Bjærre. Ikke mindst titlerne 'Mols' og 'Sàlasvaggi' antyder, at der her er tale om stemningsbilleder tæt knyttet til naturen.

Pris: 100 kr. VMK forlag 2008

En oversigt over alle VMKs publikationer findes på:
<http://vmk.dk/om-konservatoriet/publikationer/>

Vestjysk Musikkonservatorium, Kirkegade 61, DK-6700 Esbjerg.
Tlf. +45 76104300 · Fax +45 76104310 · e-mail: info@vmk.dk