

RAPPLab6

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Conservatory of Music *Santa Cecilia*  
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## *A journey into the territories of improvisation*

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Let's start with the game of what is...

- **Music improvisation** is the process of creating music spontaneously, in real time. It is the art of composing on the spot, where there is no temporal distance between the creative moment and listening to the sound result.
- **Improvisation** can be performed by a single musician or by a group of musicians, who listen and respond to each other. It can also be a form of communication between musicians, allowing them to create a unique *musical conversation*, in what is sometimes called the group improvisation (widespread in Jazz and ethnic music).
- **Improvisation** is often based on well-defined musical grammars and styles that have been passed down through learning processes from one generation to the next. In fact, improvisation skills are the result of specific and usually highly specialised training.



- Now, the strongly graphocentric Western art music has always looked at improvisation with ambiguity, almost showing a kind of *guilty feeling*.
- In the European art music, composition and performance have taken different paths, due to the *hegemony of writing*, of the *division of labour* and *specialisation* of production skills.
- European literate culture is at the root of the composition/performance cleavage; from this divide follows the composition/improvisation dichotomy unknown to oral cultures.
- Where there is no musical notation, i.e. in oral musical traditions, it makes no sense to speak of improvisation, as it is not possible to formulate a clear distinction between improvisation and performance of pre-composed music.



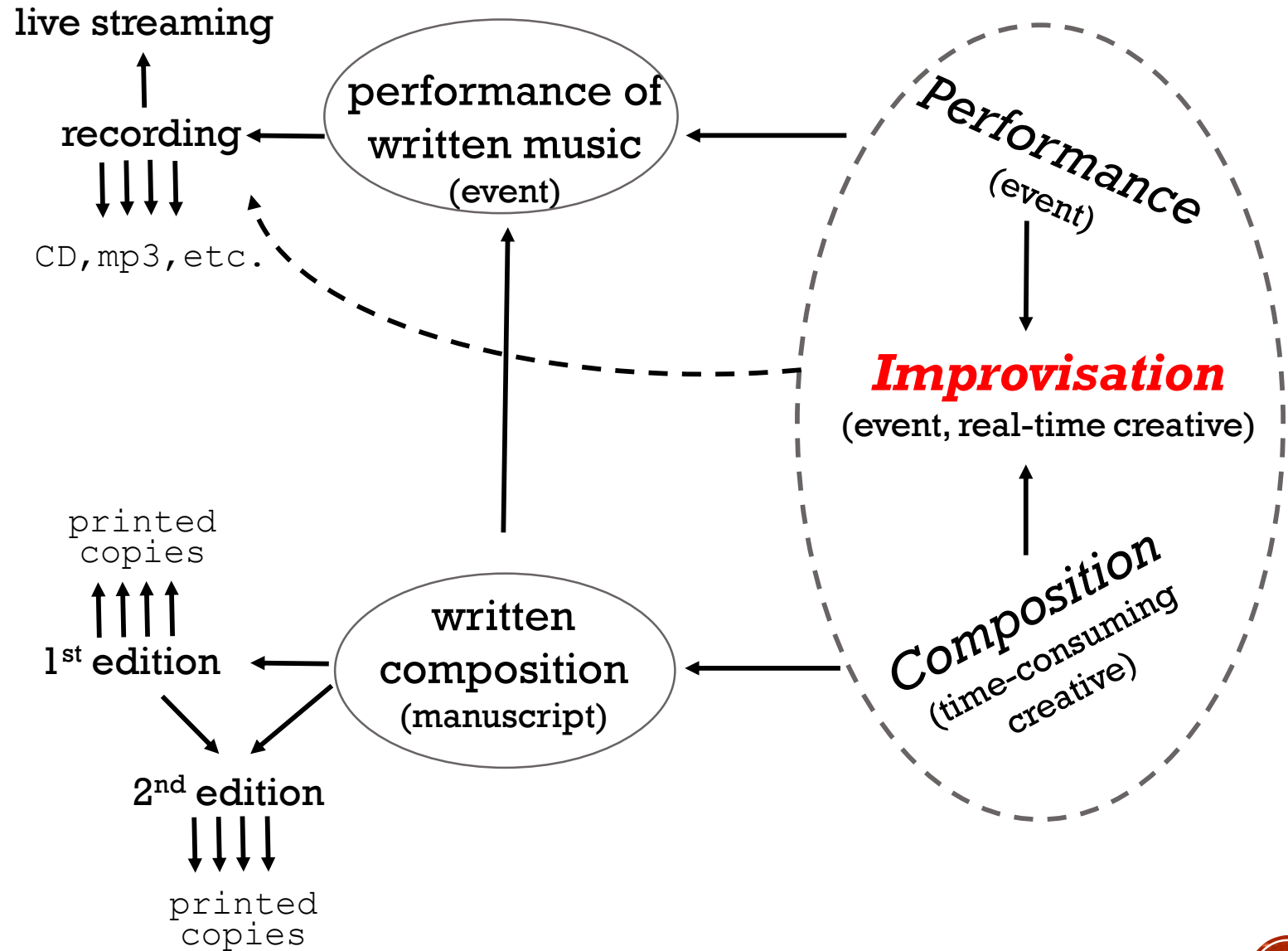
The received view on the dichotomy:

- Improvisation and composition are opposed – the one spontaneous, the other calculated; the one primitive, the other sophisticated; the one natural, the other artificial.
- **Composition** builds on tradition and relies on training in a time-consuming process that involves rational reflection and intellectual calculation.
- **Improvisation** relies on talent in an instantaneous process that involves emotional invention and intuitive impulse.
- A composed, written, piece is replicable; an improvisation is unrepeatable.



## The place of improvisation in a very simple Western music ontology

- The specialization in the performance of written music involves the radical division between composition and performance.
- Event and text become independent entities, separately belonging to the realm of music ontology.
- Improvisation represents the “opportunity” of the reunification of composition and performance in the real-time event.



- From a theoretical standpoint, improvisation is a strongly interdisciplinary issue.
- It can be approached at least (but not only) from:
  - (1) the **historical** perspective: improvisation in Western Music History;
  - (2) the **educational** perspective: improvisation in classroom;
  - (3) the **ethno-anthropological** viewpoint: improvisation in non-Western musical cultures (or Western folk-rural traditions).

We will only deal with the historical perspective, due to obvious time constraints.



## *Improvisation in the Renaissance*

- In the Renaissance the dichotomy composition/improvisation, while already clear and well-defined, was not yet so rigid.
- This is not the place for an in-depth examination of this issue. We can, however, recall how the greatest music theorist of the 15th century, Johannes Tinctoris, introduced the well-known distinction between *res facta* and *counterpoint*.
- "Counterpoint, whether simple or florid, is of two kinds: *written* or *mental*. Written counterpoint is commonly called *resfacta*; but that which is mentally conceived we call *counterpoint* absolutely, and those who make it are said to 'sing upon the book'"  
Tinctoris: *Liber de arte contrapuncti* 1477



## *Improvisation in the Renaissance*

Quoting from Ernest Ferand, the most accredited scholar of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on improvisation in Western art music:

- “Tinctoris states that the singers improvising to a *cantus firmus* from the choirbook (*super librum cantare*) need to be concerned solely with the relation of their individual parts to the tenor, whereas in *resfacta* (which he calls *cantus compositus*) the mutual relationship among all the voices has to be considered.”

Ernest T. Ferand: “*Sodaine and Unexpected*” *Music in the Renaissance*, The Musical Quarterly, 1951

Thus, although there is no unanimity among scholars, the expressions “*res facta*” and “*cantus super librum*” were generally (or popularly) used for written and improvised counterpoint respectively.





## *Improvisation in the Renaissance*

- Curiously, reflecting on improvisation in European art music involves looking back to early music, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque period. This is probably a significant symptom.
- From Classicism onwards, there is an evident decline in the art of improvisation.
- A clear evidence of this decline is retrievable already in the fact that improvisation, in the Baroque age was, so to say, confined. It was surely important, but relegated to specific domains, i. e. the technique of *diminutio* (in Latin) and the extemporaneous realization of the *continuo*.



## *Improvisation in the Renaissance*

- In the late Renaissance motets, madrigals, and falsobordoni for two, three or more voices were performed by singers able to improvise embellishments.
- Here we cannot fail to recall Bovicelli's well-known treatise of 1594, in which the theorist illustrates the technique of *diminuzione* (in Italian), diminution. The diminutions (called *passaggi*) were improvised by the singers.



REGOLE,  
**PASSAGGI**  
DI MUSICA  
MADRIGALI E MOTETTI  
PASSEGGIATI.  
I GIO. BATTISTA BOVICELLI  
D' ASSISI,

Musico nel Duomo di Milano .

ALL'ILLVSTRISS. ET ECCELLENTISS. SIG.  
IL SIG. GIACOMO BVONCOMPAGNI,  
Duca di Sora, &c.  
CON PRIVILEGIO.



IN VENETIA,  
APPRESSO GIACOMO VINCENTI.  
M. D. XCIII.

A infanzia delli Heredi di Francesco, e Simon Tini, Librai in Milano.



# DIVERSI MODI DI DIMINUIRE:

DI GIO. BATTISTA BOVICELLI D'ASSISI,

Musico nel Duomo di Milano,



Mouimento di Grado Ascendente.



Just to get an idea of the range of flourishing possibilities available to the singer:



- One can imagine that such freedom to improvise would lead to performances that we may not even get an idea of, from the written score. The same score could give rise to very different acoustic results, depending on the improvisational abilities of the singers.
- But from the late Renaissance on, there was a gradual regulation of the embellishments, which will gradually become less and less left to the interpreter and more and more written by the composer.
- How should we interpret this trend?



- The idea of the musical work as something completely defined, objective, unalterable over time, whose performance does not affect its identity, this platonic conception of the musical work has been establishing during the history of the Western art music, strengthening itself just between the late Renaissance and the Baroque era.
- The performance is a particular and unrepeatable “instance” of the piece of music, and not the piece itself. It follows that it is the **text** that takes on the essential characters of the work, and not the performance – *the tyranny of the text*.
- Another consequence: the undermining of improvisation, which relies on performance.



## *Improvisation in the Baroque era*

- In the Baroque period improvisation is still about embellishing, but it is the ***basso continuo*** the principal domain of improvisation.
- The art of accompaniment from a thorough-bass is the specific field of improvisation, with a specialized training.
- Lodovico Viadana published the well-known *Cento Concerti Ecclesiastici... con il Basso continuo per sonar nel Organo Nova inventione ...*, in 1602. It was the first work in which the *basso continuo* is used systematically. Viadana, in a long introduction, provides the reader with a set of rules for performing the thorough-bass.



## *Improvisation in the Baroque era*

- Since then, and until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an incredible flowering of treatises aimed at training in the art of *basso continuo* improvisation.
- J. Mattheson: *Kleine General-Bass-Schule*, 1734
- C.P.E. Bach: *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, 1753
- J.D. Heinichen: *Neu erfundener und gründlicher Unterricht zum perfekten Erlernen des Generalbasses* 1711. (New lessons for perfect learning of the thorough-bass)

Other important treatises of the period:

- J. J. Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen*, 1752
- Leopold Mozart, *Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule*, 1756





### *Improvisation in the Baroque era*

- This vast theoretical repertory must be interpreted. Its purpose is not only to teach the art of *continuo*. It is evident a broader educational goal. The study of *continuo* was an important step in the educational training in improvisation **and** composition.
- Anyway, the last chapter of Carl Philip's treatise is devoted to improvisation on keyboard: the free preluding on the keyboard, also characterizing the *Fantasia* as a musical genre (*Von der freyen Fantasie*).
- We can assume that he had his father's organ improvisations in mind, some of them put down in writing.



## *Improvisation in the Baroque era*

### C.P.E. Bach on the free *Fantasia*

- “In circumstances where an accompanist (harpsichordist or organist) has to improvise something before a piece, the free fantasy should be a prelude introducing the listener to the character of the piece that follows.”
- “In this type of fantasy, one is more constrained than in that in which there is no other purpose than to show off the performer's skill. ... In a fantasy that has no further purpose, the harpsichordist has every possible freedom.”

Note the two aspects of improvisation that were typical of the 18th century: the display of the performer's virtuosity and the freedom of invention.



### *The (twilight of) improvisation in the Classic era*

- But, the disappearance of the *basso continuo* and the use of writing down embellishments in the score became salient aspects of the transition from Baroque to Classicism, around the middle of the 18th century.
- This is the birth of the score, in which *everything is written*, and which will dominate the entire 19th century.
- Only one window was left open to the territories of improvisation: the *Cadenza* in the *Concertos* for soloist and orchestra. It is well known that this practice soon fell into disuse, so much so that the major classic and romantic composers wrote cadenzas for their own and others' concertos.



### *Improvisatory character: the Fantasia*

- In written cadenzas, however, we note the search for the **improvisatory character**.
- There is a poetic current in Western art music that incorporates the improvisatory attitude expressed by such musical genres as

*Fantasia, Toccata, Prelude, etc.*

- Focusing on the *Fantasia*, the instrumental genre emerged as early as the 16th century and established itself from the 17th century onwards.



### *Improvisatory character: the Fantasia*

- Now, is the *Fantasia* a sort of “freezing” of an extemporaneous performance, as C.P.E. Bach seems to suggest? Or is it a “stylised sublimation”, an off-line, pondered, thoughtful representation of the “aesthetics” of improvisation?



- As said, the *Fantasia* is the genre most closely related to the praxis of improvisation:
  1. literally, as witnessed by the German etymology of the word for ‘improvisation’, i. e. *fantasieren*;
  2. metaphorically, since improvisation is the “stylistic” reference of the *Fantasia*.
- In its primitive manifestation (in the Renaissance), the *Fantasia* should be considered as a **short contrapuntal formula** and this origin could clarify, to some extent, the 16<sup>th</sup> century nature of the genre.
- The formula is a kind of well-known fifth-descending sequence, such as:



### *Improvisatory character: the Fantasia*

- Thus, in the 16th century, the *Fantasia* is understood as composition or improvisation on specific contrapuntal schemas, and this origin continues to be influential in the Baroque age.
- As can still be deduced from CPE Bach's treatment, the *Fantasia* relied heavily on the technique of pattern variation (e.g. the harmonic scale). At the same time, it often seems to be the "written record" of a performed improvisation.



## JS Bach *Chromatische Fantasie und Fuge* BWV 903 (1723)

The image displays a musical score for Johann Sebastian Bach's *Chromatische Fantasie und Fuge*, BWV 903. The score is presented in two systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clef). The first system is labeled 'Fantasia' and 'BWV 903'. It begins with a measure number '1.' and shows a series of chromatic scales in both hands, with the right hand playing a descending scale and the left hand playing an ascending scale. The second system continues the piece, showing further chromatic scales and arpeggios. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals, all in G minor.

Note the use of sequences, as well as the “toccata” virtuosic style: the massive occurrences of scales, arpeggios, diminished chords, etc.





- In the classical period, the genre takes on a different connotation. Consider Mozart's *Fantasia in C minor*, K475 (1785).

sentence

14a Adagio

period

dotted line = improvisational style  
solid line = sonata character (tight-knight theme)



This *Fantasia* cannot be interpreted as a “picture” of a real-time improvisation.

- It is a single movement with a quite complex internal articulation. There is a clear alternation of two aesthetic characters, the fantasizing character and the Sonata style:

sonata+improvisatory	sonata	improvisatory	sonata	improvisatory+sonata
Adagio		Allegro	Andantino	Più allegro Tempo I
<b>A</b>	<b>intermezzo 1</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>intermezzo 2</b>	retrans. <b>A</b>

- Note the freedom of form; the piece does not follow a predetermined layout. This is not a sonata-form, but there are moments that recall the sonata style.



- As last case, Schumann's *Kreisleriana* op. 16 are a collection of *Fantasias*.
- The Hoffmann's title of the pamphlet in which appears the character of the Kapellmeister J. Kreisler:

*Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier*

- The *Kreisleriana* have an improvisational character. Schumann wrote: "The ability to put different things together is of great importance in the art of music".
- In the eight movements, he combines the most diverse musical characters: from lyricism to tragic style, from the *cantabile* to the emulation of the severe style, i.e. the counterpoint of the Baroque manner. Moreover, a small number of motifs recur in the eight movements, thus constituting a kind of generative nucleus of the entire cycle.



## *Improvisatory character: the Fantasia*

- What emerges from these examples is that the *Fantasia* is a kind of counterbalance to the sonata, the alternative to the schematism of the sonata. But rather than being a written down version of an improvisation, the classical and romantic *Fantasia* is a sublimation of improvisation.
- The *Kreisleriana* synthesize the improvisational character of the *Fantasia*:
  1. Deep patterns superficially emerging in different figurations, with divergent aesthetic character.
  2. Putting together different things, or fragments, without a pre-existing plan, without an overall trajectory, outside of the narrative project of sonata-form.



### *Improvisatory character: the Fantasia*

- If the form of *Fantasia* is “to have no form”, it becomes capable of incorporating the incoherence, in a sense, the “irrationality”, into musical discourse: fragmentary speech, mechanism and even the unconscious appear on the stage of Western art music.
- Approaching improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century music, it will be helpful to keep in mind this relationship between the *Fantasia* and the breaking down of the Western rationalistic “dogmas” of uniqueness, identity, cohesion, ... of the piece, and of the authorship of the composer conceived as an always clairvoyant, omniscient subject.



## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

- The avant-garde music will show the “mythological” nature of these dogmas, and the rediscovery of improvisation will play an important role precisely in deconstructing these myths.
- To introduce the discussion, I would like to tell you about a novel by the most important Italian writer of the twentieth century: Italo Calvino (1923-1985):

*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore – If on a Winter's Night a Traveller, 1979*



## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

It is a meta-novel in which the protagonist is the reader, who is reading an early short story entitled "If on a winter's night a traveller". The reading cannot continue because of a printing error in the book. So he goes to the bookshop to buy a new copy, but it has the same flaw. In this way, he enters into 10 different incipits of novels that remain unfinished, only to arrive at the happy ending of the frame story: he gives up reading and marries the woman he met in the bookstore, a reader herself!



## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

- This work is a prototype of what is meant by the “open form.”
- Open form is one of the most revolutionary aspects of 20th century radical music. The score no longer defines a single piece, but an indeterminate set of events. It is equivalent to an algorithm that randomly generates a virtually infinite collection of pieces.
- The composer becomes a demiurge who creates universes and is no longer the craftsman who produces individual objects.
- At the same time, he somehow gives up his subjectivity, delegating the determination of the piece to a mechanism over which he has no control. The open form implies an important change in the status of authorship.





## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

### Open form

Stockhausen, *Klavierstück* XI (1956)

- By its very nature, there can be an almost unimaginable number of versions of this piece. Each version could begin on any of the nineteen "leaves" and end on any one of them. The performer is asked to choose at random from nineteen fragments laid out on a large sheet of paper.





Musical score snippet for Klavierstück XI, T° 6, p, N. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. A bracket labeled '8' is at the bottom.

Musical score snippet for Klavierstück XI, T° 2, p. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. A bracket labeled '8' is at the bottom.

Musical score snippet for Klavierstück XI, T° 5, pp. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. A bracket labeled '8' is at the bottom.

Musical score snippet for Klavierstück XI, T° 1, pp. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. A bracket labeled '8' is at the bottom.

Musical score snippet for Klavierstück XI, T° ad lib., ff. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. A bracket labeled '8' is at the bottom.

Musical score snippet for Klavierstück XI, T° 1, pp. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. A bracket labeled '8' is at the bottom.

Musical score snippet for Klavierstück XI, T° 1, pp. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. A bracket labeled '8' is at the bottom.

Musical score snippet for Klavierstück XI, T° 1, pp. The notation is in treble and bass clefs, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. A bracket labeled '8' is at the bottom.

Klavierstück XI: a detail of the score



## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

- The radical music of the 20th century is obsessed with chance. The whole debate between proponents (Boulez) and critics (Cage) of structuralism, which marked the history of the Darmstadt School in the 1950s, revolves around the role of chance in composition.
- In J. Cage's famous *Music of Changes* (1951), a landmark in the history of aleatory music, the compositional process was completely random to the extent that it was governed by a process like the tossing of a coin.
- Cage's *Imaginary Landscape for 12 radios* (1951) is the maximum radicalisation of the idea of aleatory music, that is, the negation of what has been understood for centuries as a piece of music. Its value is entirely represented by the idea itself, it is a conceptual work of art.



## Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde

### Open form

B. Maderna (1920 - 1973), *Quadrivium* (1969) for 4 percussionists and 4 orchestral groups.

- The conductor is called upon to shape the piece on the spot, instructing the percussionists and orchestral ensembles, arranged in a circle around the audience, on which fragments to play each time.
- The conductor uses the orchestra to freely improvise, on a given material.



Bruno Maderna  
**QUADRIVIUM** (1969)  
per 4 esecutori di percussione  
e 4 gruppi d'orchestra

The image shows a page from the musical score for 'Quadrivium' by Bruno Maderna. It features four staves, each with a different instrument or group of instruments. The staves are labeled with numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'f' (forte) and 'mp' (mezzo-piano). The score is written in a modern, minimalist style, reflecting the avant-garde nature of the piece. The page is numbered 10477 at the bottom.

## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

### Beyond the open form

Giacinto Scelsi (1905 - 1988) offers a different but equally relevant version of (the presence of) improvisation in radical music:

action–music: the author composes *by improvisation* – that is felt as a mystical experience of catharsis.

- Playing this music means to reproduce the experience of its improvisation by the author.
- *Action-Music* (1955) for piano is similar to a J. Pollock work based on action painting, i.e. the photograph of an improvised painting action on canvas.



G. Scelsi  
*Action Music*  
for piano  
1955



**ACTION MUSIC**

Giacinto SCELSEI  
Poco più mosso

(♩ = 54)

*raff.*

*(ten. note  
la nota grave)*

*f* *f* *f* *f* *ff*

*Veloce* (♩ = 116)

*forzato*

*f* *sf* *f* *sf* *f*

## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

### Beyond the open form

Sylvano Bussotti (1931 - 2021) arrived at an even more radical form of Dadaism, leaving the performer (at least in some moments) without any real instructions for the performance of the piece.

- His “graphism” means: *let's destroy music notation*.
- Playing this music means standing in front of the score and letting yourself be guided by the images and emotions evoked by the musical 'graphemes'.





S. Bussotti  
Piece Four,  
*Five Piano Pieces for David Tudor*  
1959

7<sup>vedi</sup> NOTE

**XIV** piano piece for David Tudor 4  
disegno del 1949  
adazione pianistica: 27.3.1959

6

1 { S  
M  
P

2 Basso  
Muto

3 { sequenza  
frequenza  
timbro  
durata  
intensità

4 {   
basso il piano

5 (  )





## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

- A curious anecdote: at the premiere of this piece in Darmstadt in 1959, there was a protest. At the end of the piece, someone in the audience provocatively asked for it to be played again. It seems that it was Stockhausen himself, who was present in the hall, who prevented the repetition.



## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

- Cage's, Bussotti's and Scelsi's Dadaism, opposed to Boulez's (and partly Stockhausen's) Structuralism, is based on reviving improvisation. This aspect deserves some reflection: it has been largely neglected by historical critics of avant-garde music.
- Their works, recalling Dadaism and the conceptual art in the visual arts, not only brought about the crisis of integral serialism, but also put an end to the tyranny of the text and of a performance governed by rigid criteria of 'correctness'.



## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

- From Stockhausen's partial deconstruction of the text, we arrive at Bussotti's definitive rejection of the function of musical notation. At the same time, the predetermination of the piece is completely abandoned, totally leaving it to the performers.
- In a piece like Bussotti's *Five Piano*, the performer no longer has any limits, not even a musical track on which to base his improvisation. Improvisation thus becomes an opening into the

boundless **territories of pure indeterminacy**.

- In a way, this is a betrayal of the traditional nature of improvisation - that nature that improvisation shows in Jazz as well as in the performance of Renaissance and Baroque music. It should be pointed out, however, that in free jazz there is a high degree of indeterminacy in the improvisation.



## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

To sum up

Improvisation in 20th century radical music has several meanings:

- *The deconstruction of the classical and romantic conception of the musical work:* the open form is no longer a singularity in itself, but a cluster of possibilities; at the same time, the piece is no longer defined by the composer, but is determined by the performers.
- *Aleatory music implies the crisis of traditional musical notation.* Hence the new importance of performance as the decisive moment of musical creation. The art of improvisation, which no longer seems to require lengthy training, is also deeply revised.



## *Improvisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century musical Avant-garde*

To sum up

Improvisation in 20th century radical music has several meanings:

- The *crisis of those compositional languages* that have a strong rational basis, such as integral serialism.
- *The opening up to the limitless territories of the irrational*, the rhapsodic, the fragmentary, the instantaneous, the ecstatic, etc.
- *The crisis of the bourgeois concert*, with its rituals and clichés.



*Last, but not least*

- Improvisation, associated with avant-garde movements (in radical music, but also in the finest jazz), took on innovative meanings, often strongly critical of conventional practices.
- It became a vehicle for social and political criticism, directed against cultural and racial stereotypes – think of the *hipster movement* of the 1960s in the United States.

*Improvisation becomes a synonym of freedom,  
of the rejection of hierarchies, of polycentric and collaborative practices.*

- In an improvisation, there is never anything wrong. The error, if there is one, can be ‘repaired’.



*Last, but not least*

- In any case, there is no doubt that improvising on an instrument or with the voice is an activity with a strong playful component – this aspect seems to be rediscovered by the radical music of the 20th century.
- It may seem paradoxical, but it is not, that improvisation has a certain importance in the teaching of music, an importance which, I am afraid, is gradually diminishing from the elementary music classes to the highest levels of education.
- I would like to conclude by mentioning an obvious fact, but one that deserves or would deserve much wider attention:

*children are much more ready to improvise;  
for them improvisation is something very similar to free play.*



MILES DAVIS... finally!!  
recording of the 1960s



bebop  
fast-paced  
Jazz-style turn-based soloing  
static (and vague) key center  
a short opening and ending motif



C minor... ??

*The music we did together changed every night; if you heard it yesterday, it was different tonight. Even we didn't know where it was all going to.*

*But we did know it was going somewhere else and that it was probably going to be hip.*

Miles Davis

