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Style-oriented Improvisation and Music Theory

ABSTRACT

It is an *idée reçue* within the field of ‘classical’ or Western Art Music (WAM) that improvisation is an extinct skill: something that has disappeared from music making – a claim that inevitably goes hand in hand with a supposed exception regarding organ players, who still can be heard improvising both in liturgy and during organ recitals. Nonetheless, some well-known classical musicians outside the organ world also advocate improvisation both in teaching and in performance: the violinist Hilary Hahn, trombonist John Kenny, pianists like David Dolan, Robert Levin, Gabriela Montero and Arcadi Volodos to name just a few. Improvised music is both popular and extremely diverse outside WAM, so it would seem to be more promising to designate the specific domain in which one would like to discuss improvisation, rather than looking fruitlessly for a definition. In this paper, the focus will be on improvisation in 19th century ‘classical’ styles: a form of stylistically oriented or ‘idiomatic’ (Derek Bailey) improvisation.

Improvisation as a phenomenon has attracted a renewed interest in the fields of cognitive science, musicology and music philosophy in the last three decades or so; most likely because of its process-oriented character. The interesting thing with improvisation – be it in the form of freely invented new music or of the free treatment of a score – is that it by definition *happens*: it is music-as-event. This ephemeral character makes improvisation a problematic subject for traditional music analysis. How improvisation challenges music theory, and how theory might benefit from this, will be the subject of this paper.

Music theory’s uneasy relation with an ephemeral phenomenon like improvisation might be caused by the fact that music theory necessarily makes use of concepts. In order to be able to speak about music it has to identify and label classes of phenomena. This already happens with single tones: something that is experienced in time (the sounding of a particular tone) is attributed to a class with a name (e.g. ‘A’, or ‘la’). Similar things happen on many levels and in many areas of music theory: a combination of tones might be identified as a ‘pitch class set’, a succession of chords labeled a ‘falling fifth sequence’, a particular musical discourse seen as a ‘sonata form’. In all cases, music-as-event is represented by a static entity. As such, there is nothing wrong with that – it is even inevitable, as stated above. Isn’t a score also a static representative of music-as-event? As a way of thinking this however contains a risk, as the concept might start to assume a life of its own. As Theodor Adorno pointed out, concepts tend to ‘be taken in isolation’; the mind ‘absolutizes what it, itself, makes, thereby tearing it from its context and ceasing to think of it further’ (Lewis, 2016). Adorno called this phenomenon *Verdinglichung*, ‘reification’. A musical gesture becomes a *res*, a thing, without the temporal dimension of sounding music. Reification is necessary when we want to speak about music, and at the same time it alienates from sounding music.

The problematic side of reification becomes particularly obvious when teaching music theory, and especially in teaching improvisation. The traditional music-theoretical training of young musicians in conservatoires and universities typically consists of three areas: ear training, harmony / counterpoint and analysis. Because these subjects are usually seen as ‘theory’ as opposed to ‘practice’ the role of language tends to be paramount, and concepts consequently form the starting point of much theory teaching. A concept, however, is an abstraction induced from the experience of many musical events that are in some way similar to each other. The reverse order does not necessarily lead towards an active command of a musical language. A music-theoretical concept should be based upon pre-theoretical knowledge. When this experiential basis is not present there is no short-cut: it has to be addressed before conceptualization makes sense for a student. The task of a theory teacher should not be to explain a student what a ‘fifth’ is – his task should be telling the student that a combination of tones with which they are already familiar, is generally called a fifth! Unfortunately, an international tendency seems to be that students arrive at the conservatoire with ever less training in this sense.

That this unfortunate situation often leads towards mutual misunderstandings between ‘theorists’ and ‘practitioners’ is clear. Actually, students (and teachers...) have a point when reproaching music theory for being too distant from the practice of music. It is however not really the theory itself which is to blame; it is the way in which these musicians were previously trained. From early childhood, a typical classical musician practices playing from scores, and all energy is directed towards converting musical notation into sound. As a result, many future classical musicians enter the conservatoire with at best a very passive aural imagination.

The musical languages that, at the moment of composition, formed the ‘horizon’ (Hans-Georg Gadamer) of the score, are no longer learned actively. If we imagine a similar situation in the drama world it would be an actor performing in a language they can’t speak themselves, having merely learned by heart the pronunciation of the written words using phonetic transcription. Teaching the grammar of the performed language to this imaginary unfortunate actor would be comparable to teaching music-theoretical concepts to a student without pre-theoretical knowledge. It is not unlikely that this actor would similarly consider such grammar lessons ‘far removed from practice’.

In my view, the great challenge for the theory teacher is to help the student to master actively the musical languages that they have previously only known passively. Nobody would demand from the aforementioned actor to come up with phrases that are the equivalent of Shakespeare or Goethe – but they could at least be expected to be able to go to the shops using the language they perform on stage. Similarly, we might expect music students to be able to come up with some coherent music in classical styles – in short: to improvise. The benefit of this ability surely reaches beyond what can be touched upon here. As late as in 1909, Hugo Riemann stated that ‘every decent musician should be capable of improvising variations on a given theme’ (Riemann, 1919). How can improvisation in classical styles be taught? It is tempting for a music theorist once again to relapse into the old well-proven, but reified, concepts here. However, the ‘reversed’ route – from theoretical concept to sounding music – works at least as badly here as it did in the traditional theory class. This is because many concepts (necessarily) discard time. A harmonic progression, for instance, might be labelled a ‘falling fifth sequence’, and in this way it becomes, literally speaking, a timeless object. We can state though that it is not the timeless concept of a ‘falling fifth sequence’ that kindles a musician’s imagination, but the musical gesture itself to which the concept refers. An improvising pianist for instance will imagine the sequence as a movement towards a tonal goal: a path through musical time, creating a strong sense of expectation, not only of the goal itself but also of the moment when it will be reached. They are led by the pre-theoretical imagination of something specific, not by the concept as such.

On the basis of experiences in my improvisation classes and in my own extemporizations, I have come to the view that there are in fact countless familiar ‘gestures’ like this sequence in tonal music – some of them seemingly rather similar to other well-known theoretical concepts – that play a major part in improvisation. These can be harmonic patterns like the sequence mentioned, but also melodic shapes or narrative tendencies (usually referred to as musical ‘forms’). It is possible to see tonal musical styles as (for an important part) characterized by musical commonplaces that are generally known to everybody familiar with the style in question. To avoid the negative connotation, I termed these commonplaces *loci communes*. Being fluent in a specific musical language in fact means being at least familiar with the *loci communes* that make up that particular musical style.

At the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague, these and similar considerations have led towards a remodeling of the Aural Skills subjects into a form that incorporates tonal improvisation. Though this subject is classified as a theoretical subject the students are constantly using their instruments or voices, and in this way they are more engaged as musicians. The lessons consist of musical ‘games’ based on basic capacities such as imitation, variation, playing over chords etc. This bachelor course covers three years, the third year entirely being devoted to group improvisation.

It is not only in harmony, counterpoint and aural training that reified concepts play a part. It can be said about much musical analysis that it tends to think in (literally) timeless concepts and structures that are not necessarily relevant for music-as-it-sounds. Schönberg’s famous analysis of the principle theme of the first movement of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony for instance, reducing the melody to a structure of successive thirds, can be called a reification. To be sure, the aim here is not to question the value as such of this type of analysis. I do however believe that it is good to be aware of limitations in the scope of much music analysis, and that it should rather be seen as score analysis. Improvisation draws attention to the inherently time-bound character of music-as-it-sounds, and in this way is a challenge to music analysis. The idea of *locus communis* looks promising in this respect. Instead of conceptualizing a *locus*, with every risk of reification, one could also try to communicate it as a musical gesture, in this way exploring the music narratively rather than as an object. There are several traditional analytical strategies that could possibly be approached in such a non-reified manner (just as the idea of a ‘falling fifth sequence’ itself is not at all useless per se). Most logically, such an approach would try to avoid reification by being expressed in music itself, instead of using words and symbols. In this sense, it would be comparable to Hans Keller’s ‘Wordless Functional Analysis’. The music at issue could be clarified by, for instance, performing variations, variants, reductions, and other ‘reformulations’. It is also my conviction that score-based music making can benefit from this type of ‘analysis’ – and vice versa.

Aims and repertoire studied

The paper aims to show how stylistically oriented improvisation can put music theory as a conservatoire subject in a different light.

Methods

This project is an example of Artistic Research.

Implications

It will be argued that a more generative approach of music theory, as it is a natural thing for an improviser, may also be an enrichment for music theory as a conservatoire subject.

Key words

Musical language. Tonality. Improvised music. Musical praxis.

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