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Analysing Erwin Schulhoff's Improvised Performances of the 1930s

ABSTRACT

Background

There is growing evidence that some musicians, affiliated to early 20th century modernism, engaged in forms of improvisation as a mode of composition as well as a means of performance. For instance, Erwin Schulhoff (1894–1942), the Czech composer and virtuoso pianist of German–Jewish descent, composed works such as his *Zehn Klavierstücke* or his *Fünf Gesänge mit Klavier* of 1919 that encourage interpretive freedom (Bek 1994, 50–1), which were possibly actualized at the moment of performance, and whose notated forms appear to have been the result of an improvisational practice (aWilson 2017). He also wrote out his own cadenzas for Beethoven's Piano Concertos No. 1–4 (Bek 1994, 60) and was known as a keen improviser (as a mode of performance) (Uggè 1933, 9; Stará 1958, 38–40). Moreover, after World War I, Schulhoff became strongly implicated in Dada while living in Germany (Widmaier 1994) and, having moved back after 1923 to the newly created independent republic of Czechoslovakia, remained close to the more radical artistic tendencies of the period until his death at the Wülzburg internment camp in Southern Germany in 1942 (bWilson 2017). Nevertheless, observing and analysing his improvisatory practices remains a challenge due to the relative scarcity of 'hard evidence' and the on-going claim in mainstream musicology as well as in new improvisation studies that 'modernist musicians' of the early 20th century no longer relied on improvisation as a mode of music making. According to the current narrative in the field of new improvisation studies, the practice of improvisation (as an art form perceived as aesthetically relevant) having died out by circa 1840, musicians from later periods (the early decades of the 20th century) could no longer draw on an improvisatory tradition to actualize forms of extemporization (Wangermée 1950, 244–5; Griffiths 2017; Gooley 2016, 1–2).

Aims and repertoire studied

In this talk I will analyse two instances of Schulhoff's improvisations that have been preserved on distinct media. The first is a recorded performance probably dating from 1933 of a piece entitled *Sami Dva* (*Only Two*) and whose score remains lost. This recording is a rare testimony of Schulhoff's jazz orientated piano duo performed together with Oldrich Letfus. The second is a 1936 solo extemporization known as *Optimistische Komposition*, which Schulhoff is believed to have transcribed on paper a few days after the performance (Gregor 1964, 100–1). *Optimistische Komposition* reflects his understanding of extended tonality as well as the growing influence of socialist realism on his music of the 1930s. Drawing on various analytical methods, I will show that both examples can be observed as transcriptions of musical ideas

generated at the moment of their performance. Although they draw on modern musical material, respectively Schulhoff's understanding of authentic jazz after 1930 and forms of (poly)modality and extended tonality, *Sami Dva* and *Optimistische Komposition* can be analysed in similar terms as improvisational documents from the alleged golden age(s) of musical improvisation in Western art music. Finally, I will also address some of the challenges which emerge when theorizing on Schulhoff's skills in improvisation from a historical perspective.

Methods

My work combines conventional analytical methods used in historical musicology (i.e. score based and recording analysis, computerized tools for music analysis, performance re-enactment) and notions derived from Niklas Luhmann's systems theory (Luhmann 2000) as well as from Ernst von Glasersfeld's radical constructivism (von Glasersfeld 2001). These models allow me to observe past musical phenomena and concepts from a non-ontological perspective. I also build on Michael R. Sitton's understanding of an improvisational document (Sitton 1987, 25–8.) to analyse Schulhoff's examples as forms of improvisation, forms that are also examined in terms of their respective points of departure and models, as currently defined in the field of critical improvisation studies (Nettl 1998, 13; Berkowitz 2010, 73ff.).

Implications

Whereas *Sami Dva* and *Optimistische Komposition* draw on contemporaneous musical material, both examples can be perceived in similar terms as other improvisational documents which pre-date the so-called demise (around 1840) of the medium of improvisation in Western art music. I will argue that the difficulties involved in the analysis of Schulhoff's improvisations might in fact neither be the presumed absence of hard evidence nor the lexical and conceptual thicket (Gushee 2009, 265; Blum 1998, 35ff.) which characterize the observation of improvisatory practices as an emic phenomenon in Western culture but the previously mentioned consensus in historical musicology and critical improvisation studies which has failed (to date) to identify the potential importance of concepts of improvisation (and related notions) in Western art music contexts from the late 19th century to the second half of the 20th century.

Keywords

Improvised music, extended tonality, jazz, improvisational document, second-order observation, medium/form distinction, Neue Sachlichkeit

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