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Kyle Schick

Cedarville University, kschick@cedarville.edu

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Improvisation: Performer as co-composer

Kyle Schick
Department of Music and Worship
Cedarville University
251 N Main St.
Cedarville OH, 45314 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Sandra Yang

Abstract

Elements of musical improvisation have been present throughout the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque eras; however, improvisation had the most profound recorded presence in the Baroque era. Improvisation is inherently a living practice and leaves little documentation behind for historians to study, but however elusive, it is still important to trace where instances of this improvised art appear throughout the eras listed above. It is also interesting to trace what role improvisation would later have in realizing the Baroque ideals of emotional expression, virtuosity, and individuality. This paper seeks to focus on a few of the best-documented mediums of improvisation within each era. During the medieval period, improvisation took on the form of improvised counterpoint against a plainsong. In the Renaissance, improvised harmony of *faburden* and the *contenance angloise* is this paper's selected example. In the Baroque, this study seeks to describe several areas where improvisation appears such as the art of improvised accompaniment from figured-bass symbols, the practice of expressive ornamentation on a written melody, and improvised vocal embellishments and cadenzas of the *da capo* aria. A final aim of this research is to provide examples to clarify the definition of improvisation as the degree to which the composer of a musical work has given control of its realization to the performer. Treatises and ear witness accounts of improvised musical forms provided primary sources. Other sources used in this research included writings on performance practices of different historical eras and writings on the changing relationship between the composer and the performer. This paper also consults writings on how improvised music was perceived historically as opposed to composed music.

Keywords: Improvisation, Prelude, Ornamentation

1. Body of Paper

Elements of improvisation have been present throughout the Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque eras; however, improvisation had the most profound recorded presence in the Baroque era. Music is a unique art in that it requires a mediator between the creator of the work and the audience. This mediator is called a performer or sometimes, an interpreter. In the past 400 years, this interpreter has become increasingly more important to the audience. This was especially true in the Baroque with the rise of the virtuosic soloist.

No composer creates a musical score entirely complete in its details. No number of symbols can accurately communicate to the performer the exact sounds that he or she must produce. At best the musical score is only a rough sketch and this may be more or less true depending on the composer's wishes. Therefore, the performer must make certain interpretive decisions. In cases where the composer and the performer are the same person, a less detailed score is required; or, in another case, a less detailed score is required when the composer purposely wishes to give the performer more control over the end musical result.

Improvisation, therefore, can be defined in degrees rather than as one specific activity. Improvisation is the degree to which a composer turns over control of a musical composition to the performer. This puts the performer in a peculiarly close relationship to the composer when he is allowed, in many cases, to change the very notes of a

composition. This improvising performer can be viewed as a special type of musician. He or she can even be called, to some degree, a co-composer of a given work. Rather than meticulously writing out each specific note of a composition as a composer would, the improviser composes and performs simultaneously, making him a unique type of artist, and allowing the audience an equally unique perspective into the art's creation. There is little gap in time between the art's conceptualization and its realization. This idea of a co-composer is further supported by the fact that improvised and composed music are judged by the same criteria. To the audience, the sounds released into the air are absolute. The source of composition is irrelevant in the music's evaluation.

First, let us take a look at what form Medieval improvisation took. Though improvisation of this time is the most difficult to trace, the most thoroughly documented instance of improvisation was in improvised counterpoint, particularly on a sacred chant. Johannes Tinctoris makes several references to the well-established practice of improvisation on a chant. He spells out the difference between composed and improvised music in his treatise, *Liber de art contrapuncti* (published 1477). What was written down was called *res facta* and what counterpoint was conceived aurally during the performance was called absolute counterpoint or singing *super librum*.¹ Singers would improvise lines to fit over the chant that the tenor part would sing. Tinctoris believed that improvisation created variety and interest. Singers would learn to hear which intervals above or below the tenor made consonances or dissonances. The main thrust of Tinctoris's treatise is to teach these intervals. In the *super librum* style, it is recorded that the other voices needed only to make consonances with the tenor rather than with other voices who may be improvising. This differs from composed counterpoint in which all the voices are thought of in relation to each other rather than only in relation to one, the tenor.

To a modern mind, treatises of the Medieval period are often interpreted as referring to written music. This may be an incorrect assumption. It is more often accurate to assume by default that they refer to music conceived aurally. It is assumed by Tinctoris in his manuals that counterpoint was primarily aural. Rob Wegman says, "Nowhere in his *Liber de arte contrapuncti* does Tinctoris imply that one must learn to devise correct successions of consonant intervals by actually writing out examples such as he provides."² The idea that counterpoint should be written down comes relatively late and only incidentally in treatises.

Improvisation in the early Renaissance period took the form of improvised harmony in the *faburden* style. This practice first developed in England and involved singing in parallel thirds and sixths. It was called *cantus supra librum* or "singing upon the book." The approximate date of the first account of this practice was around 1430 but there is some debate among scholars.³ Some try to push the date back further to the fourteenth century. Several English discant treatises record references to this *cantus supra librum* during this period. Some scholars argue that this improvised style may have developed in England before this time but was not recorded because it may have been lumped under the broader category of organum.⁴

Faburden is somewhat distinct from other music of the previous medieval period in that it developed not just in liturgical practice but also outside the church as a popular art form. The presence of this improvised harmony was not just recorded in treatises but also in theatrical scripts and in the chronicles of large urban centers. There are several accounts written in plays that prove this practice was a popular art. In Wakefield's *Second Shepherd's Play*, several ordinary characters are shown as having the valuable skill of *faburden*. Another theatrical example is the fifteenth century Flemish mystery play, *Het Spel van de V vroede ende van de V dwaeze Maegden*.⁵ This play was based on the New Testament parable of the wise and the foolish virgins. In this story the virgins are trying unsuccessfully to assemble themselves to sing in discant for the coming bride. The presence of this musical skill in theatre illustrates how much it was considered a particularly common pastime, so much so that it would be known in household terms and not just among professional musicians.

The style of improvised parallel harmony originating in England was often referred to as the *contenance angloise*. This English sound spread not just through the reading of English treatises but as an aural tradition. The dissemination of these discant practices among urban populations was rapid because of an increase in performance opportunities during that period. Ordinary citizens as well as professional musicians in Paris were excited about the new practice. Martin Le Franc is recorded referring to the style as "so good... that they astonished all of Paris."⁶ Due to the popular nature of this art form, it is unlikely that Martin Le Franc was exaggerating.

There are several disagreements among scholars concerning *faburden*. The first debate is on the name of the practice itself. There are several terms including *faburden*, *fauxbourdon*, *discant*, and the word, "counter," that all may have associations with this style. *Faburden* and *fauxbourdon* are often used interchangeably to refer to the parallel 6/3-chord style started by the English. Some historians believe the two developed independently, requiring separate terms, but most cannot find enough evidence to prove the two performance practices different enough to require a distinction. Most scholars use the words fairly synonymously. Originally the practice could have been lumped under the organum category or referred to as *discant*. Eventually, as scholar Sylvia Kenney claims, *discant* became distinguished from *faburden* or *fauxbourdon* in that *discant* primarily involved two voices moving against

each other in mostly contrary motion.⁷ It is believed that the names *faburden* and *fauxbourdon* were given to this English practice by continental musicians rather than the English who created the style. English musicians then applied the terms to their own insular procedure.

Another aspect of *faburden* that is somewhat unclear among scholars is the actual technical details of performance. What is known is that *faburden* was improvised, three-voice polyphony in a parallel style emphasizing consonant thirds and sixths. After that point the debates begin. How the different voices were positioned in relation to the others is one point of disagreement. Where the *cantus firmus* was placed in relation to the other voices and what intervals were sung above or below the *cantus firmus* is not completely agreed upon. One explanation is that singing above the *cantus firmus* was termed “discanting” and singing below was termed “countering.” Some historians believe that the *cantus firmus* as the middle voice is what distinguishes *faburden* from *fauxbourdon*. One other, perhaps more convincing explanation of the terms *faburden* or *fauxbourdon* has more to do with how the improvisation was conceptualized in the performer’s mind. *Faburden* was most often learned through a system of “sighting” a note or imagining a note above the plainsong but singing it an octave below where it is sighted on the staff. The word “burden” in England or “bourdon” in France referred to the lowest voice in a polyphonic piece. In Pseudo-Chilston’s directions for *faburden*, the part that sounds the lowest is actually imagined above the plainchant. The plainchant, however, appears as the lowest voice on the manuscript but in actuality is the mean or middle voice. Because of this discrepancy, the plainchant could be considered a “faux” or “false” bass to a singer who used the printed plainsong as a guide.⁸

How this practice was taught and spread throughout urban populations is somewhat mysterious to scholars because, like most improvised music, little remains by way of documentation. Like most improvised art forms, *faburden* was a living practice and was transmitted mostly by rote. However, we do know that some treatises in the vernacular aided in the transmission of the idea. As suggested earlier, with a modern mindset that depends very much on written music, one often incorrectly assumes that treatises address only composed music on manuscript paper. This is an unwise interpretation and one could more accurately assume that the treatises of this and earlier periods most often refer to music imagined aurally rather than composed on paper. By the fifteenth century, treatises on this subject began to be circulated in the vernacular languages. The best-known examples of these treatises were from England, further supporting claims of the practice’s English origin.

However, even though treatises on the subject of *faburden* exist, it is most likely that these were not necessarily the primary way an individual of the time period learned to sing in this style. Communal music making may have played a key role in *faburden*’s development and group lessons would be given on discanting. It is likely that at most, the teaching materials used would be limited to a slate showing a monophonic melody. Discanting, like so many improvised art forms, was taught as a living practice and did not necessarily require the use of manuals or methods. What mattered most to the performers was to sing the correct consonant intervals. We know that teachers were appointed to instruct singers in this style by the record of Jacob Tick’s career.⁹ On October 16th, 1454 he was appointed choirmaster at the church of St. Peter. In his contract it is specified that he must teach the choirboys discant and they were to adorn the liturgy everyday. Tick further agreed to instruct schoolboys whose parents wished them to learn discant. This fact proves that the magistrates of the city of Leiden viewed this skill as valuable both for liturgical purposes but also for general secular ones as well. In a typical lesson on the subject, the master would then sing the tune and the pupils would then, either in turn or as a group, improvise harmony with the melody. The popular designation for this singing was to “sing upon the book.”

The practice of *faburden* became so attractive that many traveled large distances to hear it sung in different regions. Erasmus observed in England when he visited several times between 1499 and 1518 that the English were singing in a manner that written notes did not indicate.¹⁰ In other words, the English were improvising in a way with which he was not familiar. Continental musicians such as Erasmus were fascinated by the new sounds of English *faburden*.

It would not have occurred to musicians of this time to write down *faburden*. To take music and put it on paper was often seen as taking music out of its intended aural sphere and putting it in the foreign sphere of the visual. Rob Wegman states, “To handle the elusive complexity of polyphonic music sound on paper, to capture and manipulate it as an object, to reflect upon it as a finished ‘work,’ was to take it out of the sphere of actual music making into the world of clerics and intellectuals.”¹¹ This idea further supports that claim that *faburden* was an art form of the people. The fact that certain instances of *faburden* can be found in writing does not disprove that it was an improvisational practice as well. These composed instances of *faburden* can be explained by discrepancies in the style. *Faburden* that composers wrote was not necessarily true *faburden*. Composers wrote down instances of *faburden* when they wished certain alterations to be sung that would not come about naturally in improvisation.

Improvisation took on a much more significant role in the Baroque period. As the focus shifted from the composer to the performer as an individual, virtuosity came to be a highly-desired characteristic. Performers began to push the

boundaries of technical ability and individual emotional expression. At the same time as this shift in focus to the performer, improvisation also became an expected skill of a proficient musician.

The ability to improvise accompaniment was an expected skill of a keyboard player in the Baroque era.¹² This applied to the clavichord, harpsichord, or the organ. Just as sight-reading or good technique is expected of modern musicians, improvised accompaniment and reading figured bass was just a part of being a competent musician. The figured bass written by the composer was often incomplete, lacking, or sometimes completely incorrect so the keyboard player would be expected to take on the role of a co-composer to fill in the missing or incorrect harmonies mid-performance. This required a complete knowledge of harmonization theory and an ability to follow the general outline of what the composer intended. The rest of what was involved was an improvisatory skill that could realize principles of voice-leading, rhythm, and chord voicing. C.P.E. Bach thought that such musicians who had the skill to edit figured bass symbols in the midst of a performance, should be commended.¹³

Improvisation is often improperly thought of as completely free. This is incorrect as one examines the principles taught to Baroque keyboard players in improvised accompaniment. Many composers and teachers gave general guidelines that constrained the good improviser. The first of such guidelines was that the improvised accompaniment should always maintain the proper balance between not covering up the soloist's part and still giving adequate support.¹⁴ The knowledge on how to achieve this balance only came with experience. C.P.E. Bach is quoted as saying, "It is hardly possible to make a good continuo realization without taking risks."¹⁵

One debate about convention in accompaniment was the use of imitation. Many accompanists started to add imitations of the vocal line to their supporting harmony. Musicians agreed or disagreed with whether this was an acceptable practice. The fear in introducing imitations was that attention would be drawn away from vocal line. Eventually it was judged that this practice could be acceptable so long as the improvised basso continuo accompaniment was servant to the soloist.

Lorenz Mizler said of J.S. Bach's realization of figured bass symbols that his accompaniment sounded so natural, it deceived the hearer into thinking it was completely composed ahead of time.¹⁶ Bach would use perfect harmony as indicated in the figures but also introduce counter melodies that could stand as independent musical lines and yet would not improperly take attention away from the soloist. He was the master at such improvised accompaniment. This account also further illustrates that much improvisation is not completely free as some falsely interpret the term. It, in most periods, follows many of the same conventions that precisely written music would follow. The improvised and the composed elements of music were both judged by the same criteria. In actuality, an improviser is composing just as one would write out a melody on manuscript paper. The difference is only that the performer composes in real time. Neither the improvised nor the composed should be judged as having more or less musical or artistic worth on the basis of its origin, be it spontaneous or long-pondered and edited.

There were also several complete genres that grew out of improvisational forms. The toccata, prelude, *ricercare*, fantasia, and *intonazione* in lute and keyboard music that all contained elements that were originally improvised.¹⁷ These forms originated out of a need to warm up a player's technique, test the tuning of an instrument, or set the mood and key of the following piece. These forms were also united under their independence from vocal music.

One can focus on the Baroque prelude as a key improvisational form. The prelude was most often performed on a keyboard instrument and was often paired, and therefore contrasted, with other stricter forms such as fugues and canzonas. In 1703, Johann Samuel Beyer defined the prelude as "... a short piece of music which an organist on the organ or instrumentalists on their instruments improvise in order to introduce the key of an ensuing work."¹⁸ The keyboardist was expected to look at the score of the ensuing work and familiarize himself with it so as to provide an introduction to the mood of the piece as well as the key. A good instrumentalist may even use themes from the ensuing work as part of his improvisation. The prelude also allowed instrumentalists to tune and accustom their ears to the temperament without disturbing the audience. A good preluding instrumentalist would choose keys that facilitated the tuning of stringed instruments. The chief characteristic of the prelude was its free style and improvisatory passages.

Evidence suggests that most of J.S. Bach's preludes were in fact improvised at the organ. Bach's excellent ability to improvise was well-known by his contemporaries. It has been surmised that Bach heard the entire composition in his head as he sat to improvise it. He heard each theme and understood how each would be worked out. It is theorized that the preludes of Bach were improvised as part of the Lutheran church service and then copied down by his pupils as they sat in the balcony. One supporting evidence for this theory is length of the Lutheran church service. It was indeed very long, often several hours from beginning to end, and there were many places in the service that the organist would be required to provide a prelude.¹⁹ Since Bach worked for many years as a church organist, it is logical to assume that he would have had to play many more preludes than the relatively few we have written down. Since he must have played many more preludes than were written down, we can assume the vast majority of his performed preludes were improvised at the organ. Also, the preludes that do exist in written form are

from his years as an organist rather than his years as Capellmeister or Kantor, creating a direct connection between the time of the prelude's performance and its transcription.²⁰ It also suggests that Bach was most likely not composing his preludes abstractly, away from the organ. The preludes of Bach were most likely the result of his improvisations produced during his years as an organist.

Bach was often asked to play for organ recitals and examinations. In an examination, church leaders wished to hear how well the organ builder crafted the instrument.²¹ This gave Bach yet another frequent occasion to improvise. A free organ piece suited this occasion well. Only limited documentation is left from Bach's organ recitals but it is clear that some free preluding was also used during these occasions.

Ornamentation can also be analyzed as an important form of improvisation in the Baroque. Like improvised accompaniment as a musical proficiency, improvised embellishment and ornamentation was also a required skill for the Baroque musician, especially vocalists. Robert Donnington has said, "Baroque ornamentation is more than a decoration. It is a necessity. It is of course a fluid necessity; but there has to be enough of it and of the right kinds."²² The ornaments were not just a decoration as the term suggests. To not put in certain ornaments was like playing or singing wrong notes. In fact, by the end of the Baroque period, some ornamentation had become so habitual and codified that it could hardly be considered improvisational, but rather common performance practice. The composer would assume that the performer would know where specific ornaments would go, and a distinction should be made between ornamentation that was improvised and ornamentation that was so rigidly used that individual improvisation was ruled out. Nevertheless there are plenty of other instances of improvised embellishment that can be explored in contrast to the more strictly taught ornaments.

Some ornamentation of melodic lines was used in an ensemble setting. Though the ensemble is not typically a place one would look for Baroque improvisation, it does show up in some orchestras of the time. There exist several writings condemning the practice by Quantz and Leopold Mozart in the eighteenth century.²³ These writings prove the existence of improvisation as part of ensemble playing. It was common in Germany for the concert master on the first violin part of an orchestra to add limited embellishments at will to the melody line so one would commonly hear the melody being played plainly and ornamented simultaneously. Condemnation of the practice was mostly directed toward ornamentation of the inner voices as it created a more chaotic sound.

Lastly, the da capo aria was an important instance of Baroque improvisation. Edward Menerth says, "As the essence of re-creating vocal literature of the Renaissance is in the subordination of the performer to medium, in the Baroque period it will be seen to be in the exploitation by performer of medium."²⁴ In that spirit, the vocalist singing a da capo aria would be expected to show off his or her skill in the repeated A section. The vocalist would use ornamentation lavishly, putting in turns and scales, filling in the spaces between longer held notes of the aria. Cadence points gave vocalists a particularly fitting place for very free improvisation. An example of this can be seen in George Frideric Handel's aria, "V'adamo, pupille" from Giulio Cesare. The cadence and fermata at the end of the second A section would be an ideal place for the vocalist to display her virtuosity and improvise a cadenza.²⁵

The improvised variation of the repeated first section of da capo arias required free ornamentation. This ornamentation of the vocal line in a da capo aria set the performer in a peculiarly close relationship to the composer. To some degree this is always necessary so that one may define a musical practice as "improvisational" or good interpretation, but alteration of the actual pitches of a written melody is taking a big step away from mere expression. It can be said that the improviser in this time period became increasingly a co-composer of the piece of music and the creative partnership was extended even further to the side of the performer.

Elements of musical improvisation have been present throughout the Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque eras, however; improvisation had the most profound documented presence in the Baroque era. Though the practice of improvisation can be traced through several eras, it makes sense that its presence would be more profound in the Baroque. Improvisation fits well into a Baroque set of ideals. Baroque artists valued the affections and promoted their free expression. This gave rise to the soloist and the virtuoso because, less bound by the constraints of ensemble performance, these artists had the greatest amount of freedom to freely express emotion. Improvisation is paired very well with the new value of the soloist in that improvisation is inherently an individualistic art. The value of this musical skill is one of the unique features of the Baroque.

When the performer of a given work is so closely related to the composer through the act of improvisation, the idea of a performer as co-composer is justified. This performer should be recognized along with the composer because of the individuality and spontaneity of the art. No two performers improvise in the same way just as no two composers desire to create the same music. Fortunately for the audience, this allows a unique perspective as they are witnesses of the artist in the act of creating. Improvised music is simultaneously created, heard, and then lost. It can be a profound moment as the improviser is a unique and specialized kind of performer and co-composer of this art.

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