

# Improvisation:

THE HISTORY OF  
UNPLANNED NOTES IN  
STRUCTURED MUSIC

# Agenda

- ① Thesis
- ① Definition
- ① Three main points
  - Middle Ages
  - Renaissance
  - Baroque
- ① Summary
- ① Questions

I argue that improvisation did exist in the medieval period, and will seek to show certain ways in which it was evident and how it developed in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

## Definition:

The creation of planned music built upon a structure in accordance to each time period.

# Middle Ages

## Discant – 14<sup>th</sup> century

- ⦿ Consonant intervals over a melody
  - Fostered improvisation with the voice
  - Planned improvisation was praised

# Example 1, Excerpt from *The Art of Counterpoint*

Contrapunctus  
Sanctus  
Tenor  
Sanctus sanctus sanctus dominus deus sabaoth  
sanctus  
sanctus  
dominus  
de -  
us sa -

The image shows a musical score for a tenor voice part, titled 'Contrapunctus Sanctus'. The score is written in a single system with two staves per system. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the basso continuo line. The music is in a common time signature (C) and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are 'Sanctus sanctus sanctus dominus deus sabaoth'. The score is divided into six systems, each with two staves. The lyrics are placed below the vocal staff in each system. The music features a complex counterpoint between the vocal line and the basso continuo line, with various rhythmic patterns and melodic lines.

# Middle Ages

## Instrumentalists

- ⦿ Played as voices
  - Improvised

# Renaissance

## 15<sup>th</sup> Century Counterpoint

- ⦿ Consonant intervals over a tune
  - Improvisation was practiced

## Faburden

- ⦿ Influenced by improvised counterpoint



# Example 2, *Quam pulchra es*

Quam pul - cra es et quam de - co - ra, ca - ri - si - ma in de - li -  
Quam pul - cra es et quam de - co - ra, ca - ri - si - ma in de - li -  
Quam pul - cra es et quam de - co - ra, ca - ri - si - ma in de - li -

ci - lis. Sta - tu - ra tu - a as - si - mi - li - ta est pul -  
ci - lis. Sta - tu - ra tu - a as - si - mi - li - ta est pul -  
ci - lis. Sta - tu - ra tu - a as - si - mi - li - ta est pul -

me, et u - be - ra tu - a bo - tris. Ca - put tu - um ut Car - me -  
me, et u - be - ra tu - a bo - tris. Ca - put tu - um ut Car - me -  
me, et u - be - ra tu - a bo - tris. Ca - put tu - um ut Car - me -

Ius, col - lum tu - um si - cut tur - ris e - bur - ne -  
Ius, col - lum tu - um si - cut tur - ris e - bur - ne -  
Ius, col - lum tu - um si - cut tur - ris e - bur - ne -

Ve - ni, di - sc - te mi, e - gre - di - a - mur in -  
Ve - ni, di - sc - te mi, e - gre - di - a - mur  
Ve - ni, di - sc - te mi, e - gre - di - a - mur

grum, et vi - de - a - mus si flo - res fruc - tu -  
in a - grum, et vi - de - a - mus si flo - res fruc - tu -  
in a - grum, et vi - de - a - mus si flo - res fruc - tu -

par - tu - ri - e - runt, si flo - ru - e - runt ma - lae Pa - ni - cae. I - bi da - bo u -  
par - tu - ri - e - runt, si flo - ru - e - runt ma - lae Pa - ni - cae. I - bi da - bo u -  
par - tu - ri - e - runt, si flo - ru - e - runt ma - lae Pa - ni - cae. I - bi da - bo u -

bi u - be - ra ros - a. Al - le - lu - ia.  
bi u - be - ra ros - a. Al - le - lu - ia.  
bi u - be - ra ros - a. Al - le - lu - ia.

# Renaissance

## 16<sup>th</sup> Century Counterpoint

- Improvised polyphony in church

# Example 3, Excerpt from *Li introiti fondati sopra il canto fermo del basso*

**ALLI MOLTO ILLVSTRI  
ET REVERENDI SIGNORI  
CANONICI DI VENE.**

**R** Erche molto Illvstri, & Reverendi Signori Canonici, tante, & tali sono le virtù vostre, ch'ogni uno vi ammira, riuersisce, & con infinite lodi insi al cielo inalza, ond'è ch' all' honorato nome vostro l'invidia istessa, non sapendo ch' opporgli, s'incina, & ammutisca, & so, che V. S. Illvstri & Reverende quando era al seruitio del suo honorato Domino, non poco si dilettauano della Musica dell' introiti, & che gioiuano à veder li miei scolari in choro nel far contraposti all'improviso l'un l'altro auanciarsi. Però io per sodisfar in parte all' obbligo, che con quelle per la molta gentilezza verso di me usata tengo, & specialmente per le grandi accoglienze, che mi si fecero, quando io da Treviso, nel cui Domino era Maestro, ueni alla magnifica Città vostra di Vene, doue dall' amoreuolezza sua, & da li gran partiti propostomi fui poi astretto à restar, & per mostrargli, che non meno di qual altro si voglia, per le sue non mai à bastanza lodate qualità, le amo, & offeruo, & di aggradirle cerco, questa mia opera dell' introiti gli dedico, & dono: opera forse non mai più con tal ordine veduta, essendo ella fatta sopra li canti fermi del Basso, & alcuni delli sopranati, con li suoi versetti secondo l' officio nouo, & con li sicut erat in canto figurato, della qual anco con diletto degl' Astanti nelle sue solennità V. S. Illvstri, & Reverende si potranno fermire. Quelli dunque con quella grata somiglianza queste fatiche mie accettarano, con la quale per manzi mostrauano di vederle, & si come parto della mente d' un' affezionatissimo seruitor suo, il quale ciò che può, fatto gli dona, alle quali pregando ogni felicità, riuerentemente mi ricomando. da Venetia il Primo di Decembre. 1573.

**D. V. S. Molto Illvstri & Reverende.**  
**Seruitor Affectionatissimo. Hippolito Chamarò.**

**Et Resurrectionis Domini. a. 4.** **BASSUS**

**R**esurrexi Et adhuc secum sum  
Alle lu ia Po sci sti super me ma  
num tu am Alle lu ia mira b lis  
facta est sci en tia tu a  
le lu ia alle lu ia alle lu ia Do  
mi ne probati me & co gnoui sti me tu co gnouisti  
sci ionem meam & resurrexisti me am Glo ri  
a patri & filio & spiri tu i fan cto Si cut es  
rat in principio & nunc & semper & in secula seculorum Amen.

# Renaissance

## Performers

- ⦿ Liberty to interpret unwritten music
- ⦿ Added embellishments
  - Cadence

Example 4, Excerpt from *Breve et facile maniera d'essercitarsi a far passaggi*



# Renaissance

## Performers

- ⦿ Improvised over repeated bass pattern
  - Dancing

# Example 5, *Passe e medio*

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Example 5, *Passe e medio*". The score is presented in four systems, each containing three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The music is written in a 3/4 time signature and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes various rhythmic values such as quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests and accidentals. The first system shows the initial melodic and harmonic development. The second system continues the melodic line with some chromaticism. The third system features a more active melodic line with sixteenth-note patterns. The fourth system concludes with a first ending (marked "1.") and a second ending (marked "2."), leading to a final cadence.

# Baroque

## Counterpoint

- *Ex centro* sound progression
- Emphasized thirds and fifths



# Example 6, Excerpt from *Orfeo* (reduction of the outer voices)

1.) "Possente spirito" Ritornello

8 3 5 | 3 5 | 5 3 5 | 3 5 3 5 | 3 3 5 8

2.) "Non vivo io" Ritornello

8 5 | 3 3 5 5 3 | 3 5 3 5 | 3 3 5 8

3.) "A lei" Ritornello

3 5 5 | 8 5 | 5 5 5 | 5 5 3 5 | 3 3 5 8

4.) "Orfeo son io"

5 5 | 5 8 5 | 8 5 3 5 | 3 5 3 5 | 3 3 5 8

5.) "O de le luci"

. 8 5 8 | 3 3 5 8 | 5 3 5 5 3 5 3 4 | 8 5 3 5 3 3 7 5 8 | 5 3 5 3 5 | 3 5 8

# Baroque

## Basso Continuo

- ⦿ Performers improvised over basso continuo
- ⦿ Accompanist improvised alternate harmonies

# Example 7, Excerpt from *The Art of Accompaniment from a Thorough-Bass: As Practiced in the 17th and 18th Centuries*

[Ex. 1]  $[a]$   $6$   $7$   $5$   $[aa]$   $6$   $6$   $5$   $[b]$   $6$   $4$   $3$   $[bb]$   $6$   $5$   $[c]$   $6$   $6$   $6$   $6$   $[cc]$   $6$   $6$   $4$   $2$   $6$

[Ex. 2]  $[a]$   $5$   $6$   $5$   $6$   $[aa]$   $5$   $-6$   $5$   $-6$   $[b]$   $6$   $5$   $[bb]$   $6$   $-5$   $4$   $3$   $4$   $-3$

# Baroque

## Ornaments

- 18<sup>th</sup> century orchestras
- Cadenza

# Example 8, Excerpt from *Sonata in F Major*

The image displays a musical score for an excerpt from a Sonata in F Major. The score is presented in two systems. The first system consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff contains a complex, rapid passage of notes, likely a sixteenth-note scale or arpeggiated figure. The bass staff features a melodic line with a slur over two notes, with fingerings 6, 5, 4, and 2 indicated below. The second system also consists of two staves. The treble staff begins with a bracketed annotation  $[ = \phi r ]$  above a note, followed by a melodic phrase. The bass staff continues the accompaniment with a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

# Baroque

## “Free ornamentation”

- ⦿ Improvised variations or melodies
- ⦿ Improvisations based on compositions
  - Stimulated creativity in compositions

# Example 9, Openings of the sarabandes of Kuhnau and Bach

The image displays a musical score for two sarabandes. The top system is labeled "Kuhnau" and the bottom system is labeled "Bach". Both pieces are in 3/4 time and G minor. The Kuhnau sarabande features a simple, harmonic melody with a bass line of chords. The Bach sarabande is more complex, with a highly rhythmic and melodic right hand and a more active bass line. Brackets labeled 'a', 'b', 'c', and 'd' are used to group specific measures in both pieces. Vertical dashed lines connect these groups between the two systems. At the bottom, a single bass staff contains a sequence of notes and rests, with a 5/3 time signature on the left and a b(4) marking on the right.

# Summary

Improvisation was founded on structure and existed in the medieval period and developed in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.



Questions?

