

## A PLEA FOR IMPROVISATION

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YES, I AM pleading for more cadenzas! This will seem odd. The public of MODERN MUSIC indubitably shares the indifference to the longer flourishes in concerti frequently registered by conductors during the performance of these showy passages in solo works and all but audibly expressed while the sawing or thundering soloist is setting off fireworks. Thus little can seem stranger than a plea for more of these nuisances. So let me hasten to say that the cadenzas I am rising to encourage are not the hackneyed ones, but extemporizations. Perhaps this will seem even odder. Surely if the glitter and ingenuity of the flourishes composed for the classical concerti by the Moscheles, the Hummels and Joachims pall on the ear, it would be to no bonfire, indeed to no species of entertainment at all that cadenzas produced on the platform, on the spur of the moment by a Heifetz or a Giesecking would bear a resemblance. So let me add that the particular flourishes of which I am dreaming will level no standards.

This, I suppose, seems sheer madness. Unquestionably requisite to the improvisation of significant references to the themes of a concerto, and of modulations and progressions other than those prevalent in it, are a flowing vein of inspiration and a facility with musical ideas. Now, my readers know that this creative fermentation and facility are not characteristic of the virtuosi generated by our period. The present-day tendency to extreme specialization, in vastly differentiating the functions of the composer and the performer, has developed a type of interpretive artist ultra-conscious of tradition, addressed to a mechanical perfection, by and large a perfect fiddle for other men to play on.

But the extemporized cadenzas I would like to hear would be produced on the platform either by composers who wield personal instruments or by performers who, in studying to be instrumentalists, have spent years in studying and practicing composition. Nor am I dreaming only of resuming the mere practice of limited improvisation such as takes form in the free ornamentation of solo works or free flourishes on their themes and

harmonic designs. I am dreaming of reviving the practice of *unlimited* improvisation, in the study room as well as on the concert stage: the practice of extemporizing sizable pieces either on borrowed or on original subjects.

No doubt this resumption will have to border on a resurrection. Once habitual in every branch of music, vocal, instrumental, operatic, religious – one has merely to turn the pages of Ernst Ferand's invaluable *Die Improvisation in der Musik* to realize how universal it was – of late years, the "once blooming art" of extempore playing and singing has almost died away. Yet I have reason to believe that it is not dead in the musical world, but sleeping. A few facts corroborate this belief. One of them is the recrudescence of the habit of limited, relative improvisation in the fecund milieu of the jazzbands. Among the livelier bands not only are oscillations of tempo, phrasing and nuance almost regular; incidental extemporizations on the percussion, brass and woodwinds – embellishments, variations, colorations, "breaks," free cadenzas – persistently characterize the performances. Another encouraging fact is the survival in the organ loft of the habit of absolute improvisation in the form of preludes and offertories. Nor are any of us too old to have had experience of the once flourishing type of the improvisatory composer with a personal instrument. Only a few years ago he appeared among us in the shape of Leo Ornstein. Often during the performance of one of his piano sonatas or poems, Ornstein on the spur of the moment would insert short variations or improvisations on the material into the piece, and it is certain that he never played a composition of his own twice in the same fashion. Indeed we do not have to go to stages of our culture much earlier than our present one to find very famous instances of the improvisatory ability among composer-pianists. Anton Rubinstein certainly belongs to the cultural world in which we still are living; and of Rubinstein it is recounted that while playing Schumann's *Des Abends* at a recital he lost his place in the piece, and while trying to recapture it with his fingers on the keyboard suddenly began composing a new piece on the gentle Saxon's material – a piece more poetical even than the original one. Similar feats have been recounted of Liszt. In terms of a culture's life it was only yesterday that Mendelssohn and Moscheles, and Beethoven and Wölfl improvised four-handed pieces; that Beethoven after playing the cadenza of one of his piano concerti rose from his bench and persuaded a musician who happened to be in his audience to go to the instrument and extemporize a second

flourish. And it was but a week before that, that Alessandro Scarlatti during the ceremonies of his induction into the Arcadian Academy in Rome improvised an entire cantata on verses which the *poeta Caesario*, Apostolo Zeno, handed him on pages still wet with ink. No: I am certain that this apparently artificial "revival," should it take place, would ultimately prove its resemblance to the Happy Hypocrite's act of donning his mask. Externally assumed, the habit would reveal its harmony with a profound, inner latent necessity.

This profound inner necessity is the everliving one of combining a momentary applicability in music with a universal one. The entire pertinence, relevance, usefulness of music flows from its capacity to satisfy, along with the more consistent needs of soul of the performer and the audience, their more actual needs. These continuously vary, the principle of change being inherent in the elements of mind and matter and rendering it impossible for us to "pass twice over the same stream." This capacity in turn is derived by music from its amenability to subtle variations of tempi and dynamics and fresh modelings of phrases and periods. With these variations the performer accommodates the form and the substance to the suggestions of the moment, the immediate, unprepared, unpremeditated impulses which, after all, possess an equal right with the logic which "links together as one our continually diverse impulsions."

The growing traditionalism and uniformity of performances, and mechanization of the reproductive means, are diminishing the momentary applicability of music. In principle, every concert performance should provide it, and doubtless many first-rate performances still do so. Still it is remarkable in how many cases, during the public executions of classic works, one searches in vain for a sense of what the work means to the performer or conductor at the moment in which he is playing it, the sense that every real artist is supposed to give. The fault, I think, lies with the impact of tradition, the accumulation through printed and scientific recording of previous experience with standard musical works. These subject the performer almost unconsciously to the authority of the past. To-day every conductor of Beethoven is familiar with the history of every one of the nine symphonies' previous interpretations. He knows precisely how Toscanini performed each of them. In his effort to be, as he thinks, faithful to Beethoven, he is tempted to suppress the momentary suggestions born of his own present state and that of his audience. Yet these suggestions as has been said have their own good rights and are necessary to the com-

positions's full life and relevance.

If concert music, under the influence of tradition may be thought to have diminished the art's complete capacity for pertinence and usefulness, what shall we say regarding the performances of recorded music – which by far exceed in numbers the concert performances, and through the proliferation of the discs constitute the primary vehicle of music in our age? No matter how superior in point of technic and interpretation the performance imprinted on the black disk may be, that performance embodies only a fragment of the total applicability of the composition, since it fixes only a single one of the perhaps infinite number of subtle modifications, shapings, variations of which the work is susceptible and which externalize it by rendering it continuously capable of relevance to our changing experience. In playing a record we are doing to the composition what we would be doing to a piece of architecture or sculpture in permanently, monotonously, unvaryingly subjecting it to a single one of the infinite variations possible to light – no matter how extraordinarily rich or soft that single state of light be – or what we would be doing to *Hamlet* if we insisted that its lines forever should be read by a single actor in an unchanging voice and manner – no matter how equally extraordinary that actor and that special voice and manner might be. In playing records we are forever trying to cross a stream which has ceased to flow – yesterday's river.

To these obstacles to the complete relevance of the musical performance in our time must be added the Stravinskian tendency to discourage the free, complete, creative participation of the performer in the performance of the piece. Interpreters "are not wanted." What is desired are instruments in human form who obediently will subject their wills to that of the composer. To produce this unhuman, almost mechanical, possibly unmusical, precision, dynamic markings are set like swarming bees about the notes on the printed page. Nothing is left to the inspiration of the performer. The pages, for example, of Varèse's scores are dark with these dynamic indications.

It will be said that the compensation for this traditionalism and mechanization of music is to be found in the performances of new music by our contemporaries. There is the expression of the time, the response to the promptings of the minute! But the tendency to neglect the impromptu, the spontaneous, the unpremeditated, which has diminished the practice of improvisation, seems to have affected composition as well. There too we find a sort of aversion from the suggestions of the moment, a trend

away from the methods of organic growth, a preference for the direction of abstract principles and for systematic construction.

No, the possible compensation for the present-day onesidedness of music assuredly lies in the resumption of limited and unlimited extempore playing; for the reason that as the eighteenth century esthetician defined it, improvisation is "the immediate combination of meditation and execution," the closest unity of invention and reproduction, the immediate response to the never-recurring suggestions of the living instant. It is the brother of the verdant verbalization which spontaneously and unaccountably occurs in the excitement of dialogue or triologue; which reflection later may correct and amplify, but usually strips of the color and bloom of the natal moment. Or, it may be compared to those interior monologues progressing with apparent purposelessness, in obedience to an unconscious rhythm, and which, often after recovering and varying old material and ideas, suddenly bring up entirely fresh, valuable ones bathed in their dawn-light. If improvisations among mediocre artists mainly are streams of reminiscences, among creative ones they often are the adventure into new found land, the source of new ideas and harmonic effects. So Haydn seems to have found it: it is said he regularly began his workday by extemporizing. And as Ernst Ferand remarks, it should be encouraged also as a restorative to the spontaneous delight in creation which tradition has diminished, as a gap between active music making and passive reception, and a corrective to music education too exclusively composed of interpretation, mechanical drill and imitation based on abstract theory.

Naturally, in dreaming of the extemporization of ornaments and cadenzas on the concert platform, I am not dreaming of hearing them in the course of the performances of works which do not require them; which never were composed with an eye to the performer's creative participation. The conception of the improvisation of ornaments in connection with a Brahms violin sonata is thoroughly abhorrent. Fortunately there does exist a body of superlatively ingenious music which is incomplete without these embellishments. This is the Italian and English music of the natal period of classical music in the early eighteenth century, which period incidentally was the golden age of the violin. Almost suddenly this music has been naturalized among us: over the air and in the concert-room one is beginning to make acquaintance en masse of the concertos of Leo, Vivaldi, Domenico Scarlatti, the sonatas of Torelli, Marcello, Locatelli, Geminiani and of Eccles, Freake, Jones and the rest of the gifted composers who played the



violin and wrote strong, solemn, heroic music for it. The entire period in which they flourished laid enormous value on extemporization, not only in music but in poetry and even in painting. Assemblages came together to hear poets reel off verse after verse on a subject and a meter given offhand to them. Singers were expected without preparation to embellish and color the airs they were performing; and the notes furnished the engravers indicate but a thin, partly colored version of the sonorities which actually reached the ear during the concerts and operas. The father of classicism, Alessandro Scarlatti, used to designate the portions of his scores intended for free ornamentation with the word "solo" and though his successors did not follow the practice, we are perfectly able to see that their pieces were not intended to reach their fullness of form and meaning without the performer's ingenious cooperation – able to see it by contrasting the simple versions of their sonatas with the copies in which the embellishments, the trills and mordants inserted by the virtuosi who performed them, have been indicated or inserted. Certainly, the figured basses were intended for expansion under the harpsichordists' hands, and even more than the violin parts offer a present-day opportunity to the improvisor.

What might provide him with an even more stimulating one would, it seems to me, be compositions by contemporaries intended for re-creation at every performance. Such experiments already exist, in a number of Charles Ives' pieces and songs. These compositions encourage the creative participation of the performer by allowing him the widest latitude possible to interpretation. He is encouraged to play certain passages loudly or softly in accordance with his immediate feeling, to add or to subtract notes at will. Often he is given alternative versions of a single page or passage. What I would like even more to see is the composition of pieces which permit the performer to interpolate extemporizations, variations on themes, cadenzas – assured as I am that at but the pronunciation of the master-word, the sleeping faculty will reawaken to the greater glory and vitality of the art of music.