# CONFERENCES

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## 11. STUDIENTAGE IMPROVISATION: SATZMODELLE DES GENERALBASSZEITALTERS

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Over recent years eighteenth-century keyboard improvisation has attracted the attention of performers, musicologists and theorists as a shared area of interest. This topic blurs disciplinary boundaries, since it has a profound effect on the way we perform, hear, teach, conceptualize and contextualize eighteenth-century music. With respect to performance, it seems to be widely accepted by now that all performance practices that consider themselves to be historically 'informed', 'inspired' or 'aware' are somehow missing a crucial point as long as they are based on a 'modern' textualist paradigm instead of taking into account (and putting into practice) the manifold improvisational practices of past centuries. The ability to improvise in different styles helps today's performers both to cultivate their own musicianship and to prepare for a productive dialogue with the 'other', the latter in the form of an engagement with a historical piece of music that was in all probability composed within a general atmosphere of improvisation, ornamentation and adaptation. Something similar could be said about the practice of music analysis: it is widely acknowledged that most traditional methods of music analysis, along with a large number of theoretical concepts and widespread ideas about what music theory is (or should be), are deeply rooted in a textualist 'work' paradigm. Since, however, music theory has provided no (or at least few) alternatives, a general shying-away from analysis seems to have been taking place for some time now, deconstructing, debunking and discarding the 'old' methods of analysis without offering positive alternatives. To paraphrase Kofi Agawu, now that we have got out of analysis, how to get back in? It is possible that here, too, the study of improvisational practices may open up some new perspectives. Last but not least, for historians, insight into improvisational practices helps develop nuanced descriptions of a broad spectrum of written and unwritten practices beyond simple binary oppositions like 'romantic concept of genius versus old concept of craft' or 'modern work concept versus pre-modern concept of art as a functional object'.

Working on improvisation necessitates that the reconstruction of cultural and theoretical contexts constantly goes hand in hand with the (re)construction of musical-technical skills: a kind of art as research and research as art that tries to get the maximum out of historical evidence to make it fruitful for the demands and concerns of today's musicians and scholars. Since 1996 a group of musicians based at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis has been engaged in this task in a threefold way: researching historical documents that illuminate improvisational practices, teaching improvisation to performers and performing many different kinds of improvisation (ranging from liturgical organ playing, basso continuo realization and embellishment of musical texts to free preludes and fugues and indeed whole concerts featuring improvised music). Part of the task of the Forschungsgruppe Basel Improvisation (FBI) is the organization of an annual conference on different topics that have included fugue (2005), chorale and variation (2006), improvisation and dance (2007), and improvisation and rhetoric (2010). This year's conference focused on 'Satzmodelle des Generalbasszeitalters'. The German term *Satzmodelle* means much the same as 'voice-leading models'. The English term 'schemata' as used by Gjerdingen covers roughly the same concept in the English-speaking community at the moment, but the German term has a more historical focus compared with the cognitive and Meyerian background of Gjerdingen's 'schemata'. The link between improvisation and *Satzmodelle* is obvious: there is no such thing as 'free' improvisation. The ability to produce all kinds of pianistic music, from simple lead-ins to complex fugues or fantasias in real time, relies on the art of memory and the art of variation, that is, the ability to memorize the huge repertoire of stock formulas, polyphonic ready-mades or *Satzmodelle* and the ability to reproduce, recombine, vary, evoke, mimic or thwart these conventions in varying degrees of complexity and according to genre, location and audience.

In his opening lecture Giorgio Sanguinetti (Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata) took as a point of departure André Caplet, a pupil and colleague of Claude Debussy who in the late nineteenth century



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made great efforts to dig out partimenti in Naples. According to Sanguinetti, his letters demonstrate that interest in partimenti as a means of teaching music theory never really died out in some places, especially in Paris, where Nadia Boulanger taught partimento playing using partimenti by Caplet's student Paul Vidal. Sanguinetti then unfolded the fundamental idea of partimento scholarship, the conviction that eighteenth-century composers trained in this tradition did not learn composition by studying treatises but by learning how to improvise first on given basses and then freely. There remains the question, one might add, of why some treatises proved extremely successful and were, as a result, printed again and again for decades. Obviously, they did meet a certain demand, so the question is: which demand? Did theory simply unfold its own 'literary' discourse? Did musicians and writers adorn their talks, writings and (auto-)biographies with the names of famous treatises as a kind of name-dropping so they could participate in prestigious intellectual discourses? Indeed, the relevance of certain treatises may well have been overstated. For the moment, even just pointing out the unwritten history of an unwritten theory is an important step to take, if only to allow for a course correction in the history of music theory. In the long term, however, we should not turn an overly text-based history of music theory into the mere opposite; rather, the intricate relationship between the written and unwritten practices of theoretical and compositional instruction should become an important topic for future research.

A different line for further research on *Satzmodelle* was suggested in lectures by Johannes Menke and Sven Schwannberger (both, like all speakers mentioned hereafter, affiliated to the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis). Menke chose the *cadenza doppia* as the subject for a case study, outlining the history both of its theoretical description (from Nicola Vicentino in the sixteenth century to Giacomo Tritto in the early nineteenth century) and of its practical usage (from Isaac to Wagner). He made it clear that schema analysis shares a certain problem with nearly every other analytical method: the spotting of structural identities (finding the same schema in Isaac and in Wagner) runs the risk of overwriting the differences in context-specific realization. The identification and labelling of schemata is the starting-point of any analysis, not an end in itself, as Menke pointed out. Further research into specific schemata can be based either on this chronological approach, as was the case with Menke, or on the synchronic method of analysing a cross-section, as Schwannberger did when he pointed out how the same schema is used in an abundance of different ways in a single composition by Frescobaldi.

Further lectures concentrated on the question of how improvisation and schemata influence teaching methods. Jörg-Andreas Bötticher described how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thoroughbass manuals dealt with the delicate tasks of teaching 'vertical' chords and 'horizontal' lines. He expounded some typical metaphors used in this process; first the haptic metaphor *Griff* (grip) denoting single chords, secondly the ways of connecting these *Griffe* in a manner called *cantabel* and finally the resulting *cantus generalis*, that is, a continuous top voice running against the *bassus generalis*, thus creating a framework of two outer voices, residing beyond the segregation of 'chord' and 'line', or 'harmony' and 'counterpoint'. Hans-Peter Weber conveyed his experiences teaching ear-training based on *Satzmodelle* and improvisation. His classes are based on his own unpublished 'compendium', which gives a catalogue of the most important schemata (cadences, sequences, the different versions of the rule of the octave), comparable to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collections, and thus forms a kind of vocabulary for ear-training and improvisation. Students are trained not only to identify these schemata and their specific usage aurally but also to reproduce them by improvising on the piano or singing, either alone or in an ensemble. Weber explained that using this approach can help to handle efficiently a crucial problem involved in the intricate task of ear-training: how can musicians be trained to reduce complex musical events to simpler underlying procedures and at the same time learn (or continue) to appreciate the musical 'foreground' sensuously in all its complexity? A continuous shifting between reduction *to* and improvisational re-enrichment *of* schemata can provide a solution to this problem.

The latter was demonstrated and taught practically in several workshops guided by Rudolf Lutz, Nicola Cumer, Emanuel Le Divellec and Markus Schwenkreis. An initial workshop was centred on canonic sequences, treating canon not as a contrapuntal genre but as a basic principle of two-part voice leading, one that produces certain progressions idiomatic to baroque and classical music. For an improviser, they function


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as a shortcut to producing 'off-the-cuff' canonic strettos or imitations in fugues. A second workshop demonstrated how small preludes and fantasias can be made by stringing together several schemata against a tonal plan and by applying apt diminution and ornamentation according to the proposed style. A final workshop then demonstrated how polyphonic structures can be created in real time by using certain sequential progressions that allow for triple counterpoint and can therefore produce all kinds of inversions and combinations without much effort at all. After one experiments with these progressions on the piano, examples from Bach to Haydn make it clear that composers did not shy away from using the tricks they had learned from improvisation in many of their 'composed' works: the use of *Satzmodelle* and prefabricated polyphony is not a question of improvisation versus composed forms or 'Meister' versus 'Kleinmeister', it is an unavoidable necessity of tonal music.

To summarize, this conference clearly continued a current tendency of music theory, rethinking old, overly textualist curricula and looking for ways to complement them with something more playful, active and creative. Improvisation and *Satzmodelle* might prove to be the missing link to reacquainting theory and the history of theory with practical musicianship. They might well help performers, theorists and musicologists alike to keep alive the tension between reduction of complexity and creating new complexities, between informed reconstruction and self-conscious construction, between defamiliarization of the apparently 'well-known' and discovery of the unknown. In doing so, they help to fulfil an important need.

FELIX DIERGARTEN

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## BACH & WIEN: DIE WIENER BACH-TRADITION, IHRE TRÄGER, ÜBERLIEFERUNGSWEGE UND AUSWIRKUNGEN IM 18. UND FRÜHEN 19. JAHRHUNDERT

VIENNA, 27–28 MAY 2011

No member of the Bach family – neither Johann Sebastian nor any of his sons – ever went to Vienna. J. S. Bach entered the Habsburg Empire only twice, both times to visit the spa in the Bohemian town of Karlsbad. Nevertheless, musicologists have long been interested in the subject of 'Bach and Vienna' or 'Bach and Austria', and it remains fascinating to ask when and how the compositions of the Bach family (whose livelihood was, with the exception of Johann Christian, inextricably linked to the Lutheran church) circulated in Catholic Austria and whether they influenced Austrian music, not least so-called Viennese Classicism.

One decisive obstacle facing any studies of this topic thus far has often been our ignorance of the relevant musical sources. This has now been overcome: at the start of this conference Christine Blanken (Bach-Repertorium, Leipzig) presented her new catalogue in two volumes *Die Bach-Quellen in Wien und Alt-Österreich*, which will be published as part 10 of the series *Leipziger Beiträge zur Bachforschung* (Hildesheim: Olms) this coming autumn. It is the fruit of the 'Bach-Repertorium' research project, a collaboration between the Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften and the Bach-Archiv Leipzig. More than eleven hundred musical sources are catalogued in these volumes, with detailed descriptions, similar to those in the existing catalogues produced by the Bach-Repertorium – the studies of the Brussels Bach sources and those of the Berlin Sing-Akademie, for example. The list of cities in which the Viennese and Austrian sources are currently held is long indeed, reaching even beyond the immense ancient Habsburg Empire to the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (from the Fischhof and Fuchs collections) and to Hamburg, Paris, Cambridge Massachusetts, and Ann Arbor – in private hands as well as libraries and archives. The result of Blanken's research is impressive and surprising in its scope. As Blanken commented at her presentation, the subject of 'Bach and Vienna' is not



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