

THE ART OF IMPROVISATION BEFORE AND AFTER BACH

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolution of musical improvisation and variation across European musical history, analyzing stylistic, aesthetic, and methodological dimensions from Antiquity to the 20th century. Improvisation, as an integral aspect of musical creation, has its origins in the Hellenic modal system and Pythagorean numerical theories, which influenced liturgical music in both the Eastern and Western traditions.

The research examines developments during the Medieval period, including the emergence of polyphony and the use of *organum* in the Franco-Flemish and Italian schools, as well as the contributions of Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, and other Renaissance masters who balanced contrapuntal rules with expressive flexibility. Baroque innovations, particularly in the works of Frescobaldi, Buxtehude, and J.S. Bach, codified improvisational techniques within formalized structures such as toccatas, fugues, and passacaglias. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* and *Goldberg Variations* exemplify the systematic integration of improvisational principles into compositional practice.

In the Classical and Romantic eras, composers such as Mozart, Beethoven or Liszt advanced the art of variation, demonstrating improvisational creativity within formal frameworks. Mozart's *Ah! vous dirai-je, maman* variations and Beethoven's *33 Variations on a Diabelli Waltz* illustrate the transmission of improvisatory practice into written scores and cadenzas. The 20th century witnessed the synthesis of symphonic and jazz idioms through Gershwin, influencing European composers such as Ravel or Rachmaninov. Their works reflect improvisational principles adapted to new harmonic and rhythmic contexts.

An original aspect of this study is that the theoretical, stylistic, and historical analyses form the foundation of the author's personal practice, both compositional and interpretative.

Keywords: Art of Improvisation; Improvisation in the history of music; Improvisation in Baroque, Classicism and Romanticism; 20th-century music and jazz influences;

INTRODUCTION

Historically, improvisation can be traced to the earliest theories of music. Pythagoras (6th century BCE) studied harmonic ratios and the mathematical structure of intervals, emphasizing the monad (unity) and dyad (duality) as cosmological principles underlying all phenomena, including music. For Pythagoras, numbers were not mere abstractions but archetypal forces shaping sound, form, and structure, a principle reflected in later modal systems and liturgical practices. Greek music theory, especially the modal system, influenced early Christian chant, demonstrating continuity between ancient philosophy, religious ritual, and early musical improvisation. In the Middle Ages, improvisation