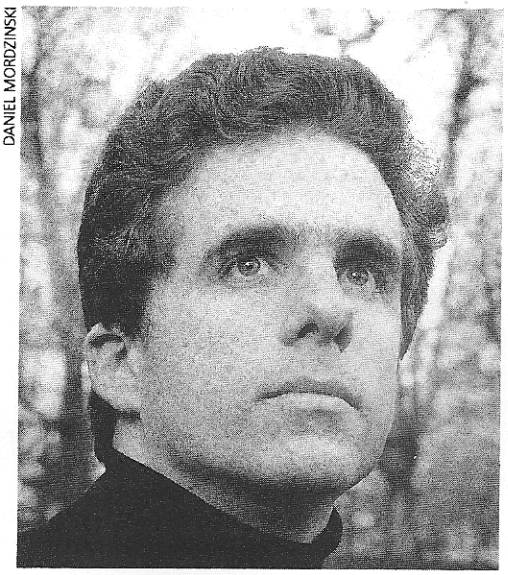
IMPROVISATION

The classical style

David Dolan continues his improvisation series with an introduction to the qualities and requirements of improvisation in the era of Mozart



DANIEL MORDZINSKI

David Dolan

The performing arts in the classical style, whether music or theatre, continued to consider the element of improvisation as elementary, even if it appears on the surface that its role had become less crucial. Most importantly, the basic concept of performance continued to seek the freshly-created quality of communication. In our 'digitally correct' times this is crucial to remember. In the classical period a performer was still expected to be able to improvise spontaneously a whole piece - a fantasy, sets of variations and, needless to say, cadenzas, as well as elaborating fermata points. Otherwise he or she was not considered a complete and real musician.

It is also important to remember that the spirit of the classical period looked for a strong as well as equilibrated dramatic expression, not the lack of it. This is as true in the composing process as it is in performance. The idea that you 'know the piece because you have heard a recording of it somewhere' was unthinkable in the classical concept - not because recordings did not yet exist. The personalities of the performing artists and of the given performances were as important and relevant as those of the compositions and the composers. Concerts started to take place, in much more intimate circumstances than today. The reason that a concert in front of 3,000 people in a concert hall did not exist was the need for a more personal contact between performer and listener. Nor was a concert pianist biased by the demands of a recording industry. There was no search for the reproduction's precision, but rather for the excitement of re-creating the music afresh each time. It is in that context that improvisation was taken and indeed expected by the classical period's musician and listener. In that respect Artur Schnabel had a very classical approach to recording the complete cycle of Beethoven sonatas. When the sound engineer suggested that Schnabel should try to record again a movement where he had played several wrong notes, assuming that a second time would be better, the pianist refused, saying, 'It may be better, but probably not as beautiful...'

As the importance of continuo gradually reduces, the two other areas of improvisation we will look at here are

1) Extemporising a whole piece

2) Improvising within the written work as part of its interpretation.

Extemporising a whole piece

It is difficult to discuss this matter with certainty, for the simple reason that no evidence remains. But we do know that Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and others did astonish their listeners with whole sets of variations and fantasies, free improvisations as well as thematic ones in their performances. Several sets of variations by these three masters could have been written-out versions of material originally improvised. One supreme example is Haydn's late double Variations in F minor. The piece ends with a wild, fantasy-like cadenza.

Improvising within the written work as part of its interpretation

We have to remember that vocal music is still a major reference point for instrumental interpretation and also improvisation. Padre Martini's words 'Notated music is but a skeleton' still dominate the concept of performance practice. The embellishment of fermata points (such as points just before the main theme returns in, for example, a rondo) and above all the cadenzas are of major importance in opera (Mozart's ultimate occupation and source of inspiration). The examples of JS Bach ornamenting Marcello's oboe concerto and Mozart ornamenting his own 'pure' version of an aria-like theme (mentioned in the preceding article in this series) can give an idea of the rhythmical gradual intensification of the movement, filling intervals with melodic gestures and keeping the skeleton's proportions clear in the improvised version while keeping the original proportions. The issue of the length of an improvised section is crucial. The length of a phrase sung in one breath is often a reference point and is very important to the question of proportion.

Although the cadenza existed in the baroque period, it never gained such importance at that time (along with the whole idea of a concerto for pianoforte). The cadenza is the most important area of improvisation within the composed work as part of the form - in arias, operas, concerto movements and sometimes rondo finale movements. It became a focal point of improvisation in performance, a moment that the audience of connoisseurs awaited eagerly. Among others, CPE Bach left 120 examples of improvised cadenzas, written out for methodical purposes, and Czerny devoted a whole set (op 200) to guiding examples of how to work extemporisations.

The problem of abuse of the liberty granted to the performers came increasingly into existence, especially as the circle of amateur performers enlarged. This was a matter of bad taste - an ultimate crime at the time - and the sense of proportions being lost. A very well-known anecdote tells of Czerny getting a very cold shower from Beethoven after having improvised on his text (probably in a reprise). The problem may well have been the quality of extemporisation, not the fact of its existence. Beethoven usually played different, improvised versions rather than his own written score of his own compositions in concerts. Mozart, having left the C minor piano concerto practically unfinished (see the recapitulation of the first movement), could not possibly have meant that the pianist should play a long, single whole-note per bar. Not only does it not make any musical sense, but the sound of the pianoforte could not sustain for that long. This is one of his most important concertos and the fact that he left it (as well as other works) without a written

cadenza is certainly meaningful. The late Christopher Kite thought that Mozart wrote down some of his cadenzas when he lacked confidence in the performer for whom the concerto was written. In his *Musical Joke* K522 there is a wonderful example of a bad cadenza.

As more cadenzas were written down (a fact that suggests how important they were in the concerto-movement form), composers started to write them for other composers' concertos as well, not always respecting the original style. (Beethoven's famous cadenzas for Mozart's D minor concerto are not exactly correct stylistically; those by Brahms even less so.) I am not going to suggest in this article 'recipes' for the extemporisation of cadenzas, but only suggest a thorough study of each of the existing examples mentioned earlier, as well as the thematic and structural links with the movement itself. An excellent recent book is *The Unpremeditated Art: the cadenza in the classical keyboard concerto* by Philip Whitmore (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991). We shall enter into practical work in that direction during the South Bank Centre event in May 1997.

Padre Martini's words 'Notated music is but a skeleton' still dominate the concept of performance practice

Another point crucial to me concerns the concept of classical forms in relation to extemporisation. Goethe's description of architecture as 'frozen music' can have astonishing implications when one starts to extemporise classical forms in real time. Form becomes more vertical and symmetrical in the classical style and the concept of arch-form starts to gain a central importance. (Or to regain it, actually, as this is one of the keys to Palestrina's concepts). These two factors, verticality and arch form, are essential to the understanding of the improvisational presence in the classical period. I often like to start extemporisation courses with elements of simple arch forms. If you think about the tunes you know, many of them will obey the following. They will start with the tonic, go up to the peak around the middle of the phrase and go down again after the same number of beats. In other words, arch form is low-high-low. The tune 'Frère Jacques' is one example of this. There are four short elements on each side of the first phrase's arch form. Let us add to that the notion of balance between tension and release, also crucial to the classical style. This balance manifests itself on the curve of time as an arch form (release-tension-release). These two basic phenomena (symmetrical arch form and the relationship of tension and release in real time) are the common ground for two or more musicians to improvise together. This will be elaborated during the two days of workshops in the South Bank.

David Dolan's concert and workshops at the South Bank Centre will take place on 1 May (concert) and 3 and 4 May (workshops) 1997.

There will be six to eight places for active participants on each day of the workshops. Piano students and teachers who would like to be considered to take part should contact Helen Donlon, Arts Management & Communication, 1 Carlton Road, London N11 3EX. Tel/fax 0181 361 3782.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of Jacques Samuel Pianos Ltd in the South Bank event.

Everyone is warmly invited to an introductory evening to meet David Dolan and hear more about the workshops on 25 February 1997, 6-8pm, at Jacques Samuel Pianos, Bechstein House, 142 Edgware Road, Marble Arch, London W2 2DZ.

Editor's note: The points mentioned in these articles are part of the author's method, detailed in his doctoral thesis for Paris University.