

Project

The Art of Improvisation

This didactic project 'the Art of Improvisation' is intended for singers and instrumentalists with an aim to facilitate an informative and nurturing approach to the subject.

The course focuses on three main areas, each equally important: stylistic-historical, structural-communicative and psychological. Each contributes to building an awareness of musical *good-taste* and communicative intentions while performing.

The course will cover both theoretical and practical elements, including exactly where and when to improvise, the various consequences and outcomes of different forms of communication, and the influence of theatre and dance on musical improvisation.

The Art of Improvising can be approached through three areas:

HISTORICAL - STYLISTIC:

The same content can be expressed in different ways. For this reason people in different periods and in different regions/cultures have developed various solutions (through structure, through the characteristics of a musical phrase, technique, sound etc) to describe similar scenarios. The first information regarding improvisation is in the form of descriptive remarks, but no traces exist of the actual music played before the advent of written examples of diminutions at the beginning of the 16th century in Italy. The tradition of adding extra notes to madrigals leads to the institution of florid adagios of the late 17th century, (Corelli) and to other improvisational forms (fugues, caprices, fantasies, variations on *bassi ostinati*...). By the 19th century the possibilities of spontaneous invention by the performer became more and more confined: adagios, preludes, cadences, themes and variations became written-out forms, with only a few exceptional performer/composers including virtuosic improvisations in their performances. Jazz, folk, pop and new music are modern examples which contain improvisation. Through this course we will travel through the history of improvisation in an informative and practical way, from the Renaissance to the present, employing written music, Historical Informed Practice (HIP) and cultural attitudes, according to the specific characteristics of the instruments (melodic, harmonic, rhythmical) . Instruments that use a similar kind of language (for example wind and strings) are able to develop their own individual styles.

STRUCTURAL-COMUNICATIVE:

FORM OF THE COMPOSITION: Music has continually searched for better forms to express itself and improvisation “*sur le champ*” has been a way to experiment with different models and to verify their communicative capacities. Today many written out forms of composition remain, but they were born and developed as experiments. What we have today is only a small percentage of the production of fortunate musicians, who were financially able to print their compositions. We can analyse models of improvisation as variations on a melody, variations on a bass line, improvisation on a rhythmical line, and other “free” structures (prelude, toccata, fantasia, fugue, cadenza etc.), also considering the individual characteristics of different instruments (keyboard instruments: basso continuo, harmonic variations on a bass line, polyphonic counterpoint; for melody instruments: embellishments, flourishes, virtuosic and *cantabile* variations).

FORM OF THE LANGUAGE: Each language has its own rules and musical rhetoric consists of codes that are used to express a message.

Improvisation requires the capacity to compose on the spot and for this reason it is necessary to understand the way in which specific content can be expressed. The rhetoric of theatre and dance can help to find and understand the way to express ourselves in music.

PSYCHOLOGICAL:

One of the biggest problems in improvisation is the *Horror Vacui*, the fear of filling an empty space. It is important to confront this aspect to enter into the core of the subject. An important step is to learn to have self-efficacy and confidence in order to make “*good taste*” choices and to use ones ears properly.

In addition, the course will include discussion and analysis of the theme of improvisation with equal consideration given to the theoretical and practical elements of the three main areas described above.

CONSIDERATIONS of the creation of music both written and unwritten:

- How much material was available
- The relationship between thinking and writing
- The Treatise: date of publication, content
- Sacred / secular / popular

WHAT do we mean by improvisation:

- The relationship between:
 - Content (the idea to express) and form (mode of expression)
 - Tradition and experimentation

Composition and improvisation:

Separation of careers (composer/performer)

Performance of contemporary music by the composer

Opportunity to communicate

Impromptu improvisation as a dialogue

How to improvise:

Contents: the act of composition - instinct and creativity

Form: which language to use - musical rhetoric, linguistic structure

Method: psychological mechanisms - training the ear

WHERE to improvise (appropriate locations within the various historical forms):

Locations:

Diminutions in madrigals, variations in da capo arias, variations on a theme, and decorations/embellishments in adagios and on known melodies

Variations on ground bass (romanesque, chaconne, passacaglia, La Folia, blues and other jazz forms)

Improvisations on rhythmic structures (usually dances)

Other (preludes, caprices, fantasias, toccatas, arias, cadenzas, counterpoint and fugues)

USE of different tools and their specific application:

Melodic instruments

Harmonic instruments (basso continuo)

Improvisation linked to the characteristics of the instrument

PARALLEL Worlds

Commedia dell'arte: being inspired by theatre for improvisation within an affect

Canvas of Commedia dell'Arte and the musical score: can one speak of parallelism?

Music and dance: a close relationship

Fencing: planning and improvise and action

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