

Improvisation in Current Concert Practice

With specific reference to the work of the Scroll Ensemble as case study

**Theatrical lecture recital performed in the Imprintensive Seminar, 2nd
November, 2013 at the Royal Conservatory of the Hague.**



The Scroll Ensemble:

Robert de Bree: Recorder/oboe

James Hewitt: Violin

Iason Marmaras: Harpichord/voice

Florencia Bardavid: Viola da gamba

Introduction

The Scroll Ensemble performs an improvised ciaccona, which continues while Robert introduces the Scroll Ensemble in declamatory style.

Robert

The Scroll Ensemble consists of Florencia Bardavid, Robert de Bree, Iason Marmaras and James Hewitt. Improvisation is the backbone of the group's existence. Within the field of improvisation the ensemble focuses on historical improvisation: improvisations inspired by the past.

The topic of the seminar is improvisation in the current concert scene. We will look at this from the point of view of Early Music. The Scroll Ensemble will be taken as a case study; how does improvisation enrich the concert practice? This is done by giving the ensemble's aims, the approach and a few examples of concert programmes.

Finally we conclude by relating our experiences to what we see as the general benefits of improvisation in today's concert practice.

So, "What is improvisation?"

Music stops abruptly

James

Presenting a lecture one also improvises: you may know what you are going to say, but how you say it, the intonation and rhythm, are all spontaneous. Improvisation stems from speech.

Iason accompanies text with Gregorian chant

In the beginning of modern western music, Gregorian chant was notated with neumes, small signs over the text indicating whether the voice should go up or down. Only the contour was notated. The melody was not exactly improvised, but was carried by an aural tradition which did not rely on printed music for its transmission. Between the important structural points there is considerable freedom in the ornaments.

This principle is carried through centuries: improvisation consists of how you move between structural points, and the vocabulary which you use to do so.

James plays an improvised prelude in the style of Hotteterre, continuing while Iason speaks.

Iason

Improvisation is especially important in the performance of what has come to be referred to as “early music”. In repertoire before the 19th century, notation often only indicated the structural points of a piece, or in any case a suggestion of how to move between them; composers did not necessarily expect performers to follow these suggestions to the letter, and in any case performers seldom did. This is evidently the case with unnotated ornaments as well as with the (then-unnotatable) nuances of expression, both of which were admired in great performers. Not only did notation thus imply the array of possible interpretations; but the mastery of improvising those was the mark of musical greatness.

James

As an example, the famous violin virtuoso and composer Arcangelo Corelli would never have intended performers to imitate his ornaments. There are many examples of ornamentation throughout the 18th Century. Each performer had his or her own individual voice, within the style in which he or she was working.

The Scroll Ensemble performs an improvised Bergamasque. Robert sings melodies, which are taken up by the audience.

Approach and aims of the Scroll Ensemble

Florencia

The ensemble takes stylistic criteria and musical examples as its starting point.

The study of primary sources (such as improvisation and composition treatises and musical examples from different periods) allows the improviser to get in touch, not only with the musical material itself, but also with an approach to “music making”.

In this sense, the material is a pedagogical help and inspiration to create one’s own improvised pieces. The ensemble is constantly learning individually, but especially within the context of the group. Ensemble improvisation highlights learning from each other. Rehearsals are workshops in which one learns pieces and experiments creating improvisations, looking at what works and what does not.

Regarding the improvisation itself, the aim is not only to be able to improvise individual solos on an accompaniment, but to approach improvisation as an ensemble matter. How can an improvised piece and concert programmes be created as a group, with the instruments we have?

The aim in relation to the audience is to involve them with and to let them take part in the performance, by using melodies they might know or by actually asking them to take part in the creation of a musical excerpt.

Some of the elements that the ensemble uses in rehearsals and presentations are:

- Oral tradition: for example, bass patterns and melodies are often taught by one member by ear, and learnt all together in order to improvise on them.
- Playing without scores: in all our concerts and presentations the aim is to always play without scores. This implies all the patterns on which we improvise have been learned by heart. The reason for that is that we have seen how much it changes the way we play within the ensemble, the stage presence and the communication with the public.
- Interacting with each other: maybe the most interesting experience as an ensemble is to observe the interaction which takes place when improvising all at the same time.

The scroll ensemble improvises a toccata, demonstrating musical interaction within the ensemble.

Programming improvisation: the challenges

Robert

Presented like a recitative, Iason playing accompanying on the harpsichord:

The Scroll Ensemble did not start as an improvisation ensemble. It is only out of the enthusiastic reactions to an improvised encore, that this group as such was born. And this is the crux of the problem when it comes to programming a whole improvisation concert. It is

lovely for the audience that one piece is improvised, jolly and “breaks free from the form”. But, as we all know, mere freedom does not necessarily make for interesting music. So, it was hard to find a way to present improvisation to the audience, although for the ensemble members the personal path of developing the improvisations became clearer and clearer.

Finding ideas for programmes, the following three challenges arose:

1. Generating potential audience: What might lure in the audience?
2. Giving context to the audience: What is it that we are doing?
3. How do you find enough variety and depth in a whole programme, avoiding a dry ‘lecture recital’ approach?

Different solutions to connect more to the audience include the use of a composer, a story, historical evidence, dance, inspiration of other artists or specific interaction with the audience. In this field there is still a lot of room for experimentation. One of the experiments is in fact this lecture, in which improvised musical examples, text and movements are choreographed.

Solutions: Specific programmes

Use of a composer: Bach’s Workshop

Iason plays first four bars of Goldberg Variations:



Iason

Do you recognise this piece?

(James and Florencia continue improvising on the Goldberg theme, pizzicato)

It was the ubiquity of the Goldberg Variations that is used in creating the programme *Bach's Workshop*, both as a beacon to draw the audience into the world of our improvisations, and as a compass to guide us in enriching that world.

This double function of the Goldberg Variations ran through the whole process of conceiving and putting together the programme.

As a starting point for musical conception, we explored the stylistic and compositional devices used by Bach, and the music which inspired Bach: building a dance suite on the simplified bass on which the Goldberg Variations are based, creating an "ensemble toccata" based on 17th-century keyboard toccatas, and improvising a contrapuntal fantasy.

We also explored the link between the familiarity of a well-known piece of music, and the exciting ever-newness of improvisation. The link having been established as the conceptual basis of the programme, it offered fertile ground for sometimes daring or abstract explorations which the audience could still connect to.

Use of Theatre: *Bockxvoetje*

Robert

The programme *Bockxvoetje* came into being through the use of a story and historical evidence. Many historical theatre texts have cues for music which did not leave a paper trail. Often the music would be well-known songs which the musicians or actors would approach with improvisation. After all, the distinction between composition, performance and improvisation did not nominally exist until after the 18th century. Even though the actual sheets of music are missing, the Scroll Ensemble can use sources from that time to improvise fitting music. On top of that a stage director is given many more possibilities with a group of musicians that does not need stands, could be on stage and can adjust the length and other parameters of the music to the drama of the spur of the moment.

This led to the idea of using a 17th-century Dutch song as a little libretto for a street-theatre type performance, shedding light with our improvisations on the subtleties of the text.

The final stage of this project was to include a dancing master. The dancing master teaches the audience to dance on some of the improvised music. Historically, the *intermedii* would have often been danced by the audience. The audience thus partakes in the joy of the music, whilst familiarising themselves with it. They will become more aware through multiple listening and tying movement (dance) with music. As a consequence the audience will be more aware of what the improvisation constitutes whilst enjoying themselves.

Use of unspoken drama: *O solitude*

James

Another approach to creating programmes of improvisation is to consider the programme as an unspoken drama. In the past, the study of rhetoric (how to make a convincing and moving speech) was one of the cornerstones of education, and music borrowed rhetorical devices in order to keep the audience's attention and move the audience. Some are related to structure (contrast, repetition, variation) others are related to specific affects or characters.

A programme built dramatically in this way can be held together by a theme or concept, while allowing for a variety of contrasting styles- even outside early music. And it can be physical: where do we move on stage, what is the effect of where we are, which is often related to music, an obvious example being echo or antiphonal effects.

One example is a programme in concert hall "*Orgelpark*", with Guus Janssen and Cora Schmeisser. The overarching theme here is that of exploring the relation between past and present, and is inspired by a quotation from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

"Time present and time past is perhaps present in time future and time future in time past".

This theme of 'solitude', alienation from the past, gives the opportunity to bring together *Dido's Lament* (1689) by Purcell and jazz standard *In Walked Bud* (1947) by Thelonious Monk, to follow *O Solitude* (1698) by Purcell with jazz standard *In My Solitude* (1934) by Duke Ellington; to move between early music improvisation and contemporary improvisation.

It also gives the opportunity to use space in a way that distance represents time, for example when Cora is left alone after *O Solitude*, or, in a piece which I wrote, *Still Point*, playing from different parts in the gallery, in order to represent as it were, coexisting multiple realities. The idea, inspired by quotations by T.S. Eliot, is that past, present and future are really omnipresent but it is our own perspective that is responsible for the linear concept of time.

James, Robert and Iason make circles with the arms, improvising with the words 'past', 'present' and 'future', each word coming on the impulse of the circle, before improvising for a moment only with movement.

Florencia enters, and the ensemble freezes. Florencia puts some cards into the hands of each member of the ensemble, before explaining the 'card game'.

Audience Participation: *The Card Game*

Florencia

The Card Game is based on a contraption proposed by Athanasius Kircher in his *Musurgia Universalis* (1650). According to the treatise, any lay person could compose a decent piece of music, even four-part counterpoint, using this "musical arc". The arc works through the manipulation of different cards which interact with each other in what looks like a filing cabinet, the secrets of which you had to be initiated in. Several Royals received this honour.

There are four sets of cards: character, rhythmical motive, instrumentation and texture.

After showing the cards giving the possibilities for each parameter, four audience members are given a set to choose a parameter. According to the outcome the ensemble improvises a little piece, as it were composed by the audience.

Conclusion

Florenca

Improvising is important for every performer, even if maybe the goal is not to improvise in a concert situation. As it is hoped we have shown here: it increases the profile of the performer.

Improvising changes the way one plays because it widens the scope of attention: it makes you more aware of the harmony, and therefore of the direction of the music. It creates more awareness of the ensemble playing because you have to listen to what the others are doing in order to find your way. It makes you more aware of your role in a certain moment in a piece. Any musical proposal (for example dynamic, character, tempo, instrumentation changes, etc.) must be very clear and present for the other players to understand what is going on.

Robert

In the current musical world there is an incredible plurality of styles in music. A recent fashion is for all those styles to meet in concert and festival programmes. A great approach to learning from all these different cultures and styles is to improvise. Each improvisation gives the performers a canvas, to which they bring their backgrounds and idiom. Through improvisation performers can find an understanding, a language, consisting of all their backgrounds, whilst still being able to make the end result a comprehensible presentation: the improvisation functions as a cultural glue.

This versatility is one of the great things about improvisation. Beside interaction with different people, it also gives the opportunity to cross the border to different spaces, to react directly to the surroundings. It creates thereby new areas of performance. For example, one might be able to get more work, if stage directors know you are able to improvise stylistically, moving or dancing freely on the stage, or commenting on the action. Jam sessions in pubs open up contact with people that may never have heard classical music and can relate to the energy resultant from the forces of creation in the present. Commenting on other forms of art and communicating in unexpected places are other ways to cross the borders of our world. With a decline of audience interest in classical music and the decrease of performance places, one could say, that the openness learned from improvisation directly leads to an increase of the profile of the performer.

James

We would like to end with another quotation by T.S. Eliot.

“We will never cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we first started and know the place for the first time”

Improvisation keeps the performance tradition alive. Not necessarily because it creates something radically new, but because it sheds new light on the old, and keeps bringing fresh perspectives to everything we know already.

The Scroll Ensemble improvises a fantasy on an ascending hexachord. This theme is passed around the ensemble, always present in one part. To conclude an improvised Ciaccona.

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