Integrating the Popular in Nineteenth-Century Improvisation
Immaterial labour and learning

M A T T H E W   P A U L   M A Z A N E K

PRELUDE

This article investigates the ways in which popular song intersected with improvised practices in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth. Despite the recent focus on improvisation in Western classical music (Moore 1992; Berkowitz 2014; Mortensen 2020), recent research has not fully explored the ways in which popular music was mediated through improvised practices and how it impacted instrumental teaching and learning. As I will show, historical accounts of improvisation in this period depict musicians engaging with a large repertoire of popular songs and I will argue that this engagement makes learning to improvise a unique form of labour, which is seldom integrated into contemporary teaching and learning. Focusing on the popular song culture and activities of musicians in Britain and Ireland this article will explore some of popular song's multiple mediators and how they were entangled with improvised practices. I will also explore what this historical precedent means for contemporary classical musicians who work within a culture that largely disincentivizes them from improvising on public stages.

The term 'classical musicians' encompasses a wide range of practitioners and educational backgrounds and may refer to anything from contemporary opera singers to church organists, orchestral musicians and touring soloists. Broadly defined, 'classical musicians' inhabit overlapping microcosms of traditions with different relationships to improvised practices; it might be important to performers who specialize in eighteenth-century continuo or who accompany religious services but might be completely absent from the day-to-day activities of orchestral musicians. Since the first decade of the twentieth century, educators have gradually worked to incorporate improvisation education into their music curricula (Azzara and Snell 2012). However, the formal education that produces these musicians is surprisingly uniform in its approach to improvisation, so much so that, in 2005, it was possible to uncontroversially conclude that 'extemporisation plays little part in the contemporary European classical music scene' (Dolan 2005: 91). Ten years later, Campbell *et al.* lamented that 'the lack of skill and … cursory experience in composition and improvisation was the norm for most music graduates' (2016: 17). Since 2012 influential research has been published that has expanded our understanding of historical improvisation highlighting the importance of educational devices such as *partimento* and *solfeggio* (Sanguinetti 2012; Tour 2015; Baragwanath 2020). However, despite the significance of this research there has not yet been a thorough investigation of how early nineteenth-century musicians learned to improvise as *basso continuo* accompaniment declined.[1] It seems that, while research on historical improvisation has surged in popularity, the problems of how, and why, to implement this research in higher education have yet to be fully explored.[2]

Outside of a few specialized professions, for many conservatory-trained musicians, improvisation is a skill that might appear to offer very little practical or economic benefit. Most instrumentalists working in large orchestras devoted to classical repertoire will seldom be asked to improvise preludes or accompaniments, and it is not often an expectation that contemporary opera singers improvise variations. As Jonathan Ayerst concludes, classical musicians appear excluded from improvising because of hegemonic cultural values that incentivizes non-improvisatory practices and where improvisation is largely misunderstood and misrepresented (2021). By analysing improvisation as a unique form

[1] *Solfeggio* and *partimento* were two types of educational repertoires popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Solfeggio* drew upon a hexachordal note-naming system that allowed students to recognize relationships between melodic fragments and more easily improvise variations upon a given melody. *Solfeggio* exercises were often melodies that invited the student to improvise. *Partimento* similarly are exercises that centre on a bass (and sometimes tenor) line that invites the student to improvise harmonizations and eventually more complex, often imitative, pieces. *Basso continuo* here is used as a catch-all term for the (often) improvised accompaniment of a (typically sung) melody by adding chords to a supplied bass line. This was most often practised by keyboard players but is common also of plucked string players, namely the theorbo, and baroque guitar.

[2] John Mortensen's 2020 work *The Pianist's Guide to Historic Improvisation* mostly centres on bass-centred teachings of the late eighteenth century. However, the companion website, *Improv Planet,* offers some welcomed headway into song-based improvisation by routinely encouraging the subscribers to submit videos of their improvisations over melodies typically derived from nineteenth-century classical repertoire. This article suggests that a much more varied repertoire of tunes spanning national song, music hall or operetta,

and the repertoire of ballad singers should be incorporated into this less-practised mechanism for learning to improvise.

of labour I hope to expose new challenges to this hegemonic exclusion and incentivize improvisation both inside and outside of formal education. Evoking Kurt Danziger's concept of a 'generative schema' I will show how improvisation in the nineteenth century entailed a network of activities and concepts shared among some groups of musicians. For Danziger, these networks act as a metaphorical framework with 'generative properties' that can help explain how those who share this framework organize their responses to new experiences (1990). For this article I will call this generative schema the improvisation/variation schema and will draw upon Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's conception of immaterial labour to frame these organized responses.

For Hardt and Negri, immaterial labour consists of the analysis of data and symbols and can include the 'production and manipulation of affects' – as a key feature of contemporary capitalism, this immaterial labour produces 'social networks, forms of community, biopower' (Hardt and Negri 2001: 193, 291–4). I will show how this improvisation/variation schema was a productive framework of concepts and practices that demanded a unique type of symbolic and affectual labour precisely because of improvisation's entanglement with the popular music of the nineteenth century. This entanglement is both a product of popular music's increased commercialization, including the popularity of improvised *fantasia*, but also its role in mediating socio-political thought. I will argue that learning to improvise in a nineteenth-century style today requires engaging in this type of labour and recognizing popular song's ability to comment upon and reflect contemporary socio-political thought.

For this article, I define improvisation much more broadly than recent research into this period. Where Dana Gooley (2018) restricts their study to free fantasia, I admit activities more likely to be undertaken by amateurs, including preludes, song accompaniments, and improvised variations on popular songs. To improvise in any style, a skilled musician must navigate a large database of 'cognitive, perceptual, or emotional structures', or 'referents', ranging from internalized idiomatic figures or rhythmic

patterns to large-scale patterns like chord progressions (Pressing 1998: 52). Although it is unclear when musicians considered improvisation a separately learned skill, the increased publication of treatises dedicated to the activity from 1780 to 1840 suggests, at the least, that it was in this period where learning to improvise became seen as a distinct activity that required unique ways of learning (Berkowitz 2014; Gooley 2018). However, although methods are useful for understanding historical attitudes, we must carefully approach drawing conclusions about authorial intention or contemporaneous musical behaviours from the contents of method books. As Valerie Goertzen rightfully points out, 'it is often not possible to know to what extent an author sought to reflect prevailing custom, to correct what he [*sic*] perceived as abuses, or to promote what he considered to be good habits in the student' (1996: 306). To clarify the ambiguities posed by published treatises, we must look to the various accounts of individual practices and to popular music's multiple mediators. As I will show, there was an implicit assumption that learners were familiar with a large corpus of popular songs – an assumption with important ramifications for improvisation's recent revival.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY POPULAR SONG – PRINT, ORAL CULTURE AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE

Recent studies in cheap print and tune collection have shown how popular melodies were collected and disseminated in a variety of ways, destabilizing the term 'popular' and blurring the boundaries between low- and high-brow tastes (Cox Jensen 2021; Little 2024). Well-known melodies were in a constant state of reinvention through paraphrase, arrangement, quotation or contrafactum, and as Derek Scott alludes to in *Sounds of the Metropolis,* the term 'popular' was not a fixed entity, often moving from 'well known, to well received, to successful in terms of sheet music sales' (2008: 10). Melodies from opera or music hall were often reappropriated by ballad singers, culminating in what Oskar Cox Jensen (2021: 13) calls the 'mixed mainstream' of the ballad repertoire. 'Mixed mainstream' could

also describe the diversity of melodies found in a seldom-studied repertoire I will call 'variation works': printed instrumental pieces based off popular melodies that provided amateurs with new ways of engaging with popular song. This repertoire might range from collections of instrumental arrangements to more through-composed potpourris or themes and variations and fantasias. They represent a continuum of notated variation techniques shared between song collectors, amateur musicians and instrumental composers. This continuum depicts changes in formal complexity from melodic variations to harmonic and contrapuntal additions to the free juxtaposition of new material. Additionally, the commentary on these works and their consumption demonstrates how this improvisation/variation schema included both notated and discursive modes of transmission.

Examples of variation works can be found in a variety of printed sources. Carl Arnold's *The Guitar Melodist* (1828)*,* for example, is a collection of more than eighty melodies arranged mostly for solo guitar, ranging from the popular ballads *Caller Herring* and *Auld Robin Gray* to Mozart's *Largo al factotum*. While clearly aimed at a specific instrumentalist consumer, the addition of ornamental accompaniment patterns represents one of the most common types of 'variation techniques' available to amateurs: the addition of varied harmonic support to a melody. The practice of notating melodies in instrumental forms with variations was widespread during this period for the guitar, harp, piano, violin and the so-called 'German Flute'. Harpist Sophia Dussek, who produced no less than ten books of *Favorite Airs*, demonstrates this fluid continuum between instrumental arrangements and variations. Even collections intended for 'preservation' contain traces of the variation schema, for example, many of the melodies in Edward Bunting's well known *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (1840) feature melodic variations. Adding variations to song collections was such common practice that it demonstrates an indirect connection between amateur and professional variation techniques somewhat distinct, but not removed, from the compositional genre of the theme and variations

(Sisman 1993).

Variation works often had an implicit pedagogical purpose; for example, harpist Nicholas Bochsa's *Grand Fantasia and Variations on 'Sly Patrick'* was described through its relationship to improvisation, and the reviewer suggests the student 'give it as much as possible the effect of an extempore performance' (*The Quarterly Musical Magazine* n.d.: 542–3). The fifth variation, in the style of a bolero, echoes how popular rhythmic referents exhibited a kind of autonomous power over improvisors: for example, Robert Schumann writes how the 'fandango idea came upon me at the piano' (cited in Gooley 2018: 159). The autonomy of popular referents impacting improvised practices is certainly related to the compositional technique of the 'character variation' (Nelson 1948: *passim*), but ultimately it shows how this improvisation/variation schema surfaces when it has a popular object. It provides a framework for recognizing distinct melodic and rhythmic referents and their compatibility (or lack thereof). Popular song thus both affords a variety of improvised practices and helps frame and locate them within a shared aural world.

The improvisation/variation schema clearly shaped Moscheles' engagement with the people and practices of the world around him. For example, the way Moscheles recognized the 'hackneyed *fioriture*' (florid embellishment of a melodic line) of guitarists in Venice and how he improvised on *Jenny Jones* in response to the singing of Welsh harpist John Parry reveals how Moscheles viewed variation as a framework for interpreting the world around him (Moscheles and Coleridge 1873: 377; Anon. 1837). Elsewhere in his memoirs he describes how hearing the *improvisatore* Filippo Pistrucci provided inspiration for his own free fantasias, and on several occasions describes evoking the style of another composer (Moscheles and Coleridge 1873: 79, 111, 149). In another instance he recalls how, despite promising not to include any popular songs in his improvisation, the popular theme *Das Klinget So Herrlich* involuntarily forced itself upon him (32). Here, the analytical labour of recognizing and engaging with the improvised variations of others produces communities of practice.

Moscheles' social network included both professionals and amateurs, which impacted his performance. He heard Thomas Moore accompany himself on the guitar and was acquainted with the Irish author Lady Sydney Morgan (née Owenson), whose reputation was partly built upon her engagement (via performance and publications) with national songs (118). Morgan and Moscheles admired each other's talents, and in the preface to her *Hibernian Melodies,* she describes the power of national song because of its 'idiomatic features' and 'association with local incidents or public events' (Owenson 1805: 2; Morgan and Dixon 1862: 264–5). The tension between these idiomatic musical features and their associations with a range of extra-musical concepts (be that regional histories, representations of an individual composer's style or otherwise) is central to the symbolic analysis of improvisation and its ability to produce community. For nineteenth-century musicians, improvising entailed a process of encoding this symbolic analysis within the body. It required automating not only the idiomatic features of a regional melodic style, but also the analytical labour of identifying how a particular referent's associations (musical and extra-musical) fit together – how to shape those tensions in a way that provides a pleasing effect for the listeners to which that referent holds the most meaning. Moscheles refers to this analytical labour 'gone wrong' in a comment about Hummel who 'made a mistake, in improvising on *God Save the King* while George IV was still lying dead and unburied' (Moscheles and Coleridge 1873: 161). The symbolic and affectual labour of improvisation was never an activity divorced from audiences – even the solo fantasia was entangled in a web of social relations. Improvising successfully demanded performers embed themselves in the social and political lives of the communities they performed in.

IMPROVISATION AS MEDIATOR OF POPULAR SONG

Both historical descriptions of improvisation and the pedagogical materials devoted to it demonstrate how embedded it was in popular song culture. Czerny's *Systematic Introduction to Improvisation* implies a fundamentally 'referent-aware' student and assumes the reader's familiarity with a wide repertoire of popular rhythmic and affectual genres: 'Waltz, Ecossaise, March and the like' (Czerny and Mitchell 1983: 43). Additionally, descriptions of actual musical practice suggest that expert improvisors were able to transform any subject into a variety of dance forms. Domenico Cimarosa is reported engaging in a 'musical battle' with a harpist and demonstrates his ability to morph any theme into a 'barcarola, canzona, polacca, romanza' (*The Athenaeum* 1832: 314). Moscheles was able to demonstrate his understanding of the 'martial' when he improvised a 'melange of every sort of military music that can be conceived' (Anon. 1828a: 3).

The concert *extempore*, however, required more than memorizing a wide variety of referents; musicians must also be adept at quickly analysing new material and understanding its place within wider cultural practices. Moscheles engaged with some of Britain's and Ireland's most popular figures in popular song, sharing the stage at times with Eliza Vestris, John Parry and John Braham (Moscheles and Coleridge 1873). Moscheles' affinity for improvising on national songs reflects the implicit learning that occurs when musicians engage with communities of literature and song (Rohrmeier and Rebuschat 2012). Similarly, in 1841 Pianist Pio Cianchettini improvised on the Irish national song *The Coulin* along with *Rule Brittania* and *God Save the Queen* – a pairing that must have had significant socio-political salience given the setbacks for the Irish Repeal movement in the 1841 election (Anon. 1841: 775–6). The improvisation/variation schema entailed a unique mixture of physical labour and symbolic analysis: a means of 'working out' a referent's musical potential and exploring that referent's latent social meaning. The same process could be applied to original material too – Giacomo Meyerbeer's diaries record him frequently improvising dance tunes and upon original themes (Meyerbeer and Letellier 2001). Meyerbeer's frequent critical judgements of his improvisations paint his practice as a deliberately reflective activity and, while he

tends to improvise upon his own themes, his object-oriented labour is generative, producing both new material and training his ability to form connections between musical themes.

Records of harpists or guitarists improvising solo fantasias are less frequent and, to my knowledge, Trinitario Huerta was the only guitarist to be recorded improvising solo fantasias frequently (Suárez-Pajares and Coldwell 2012). Unsurprisingly, his improvisations drew on local popular song culture; after performing his *Romance on a Scotch Air with Variations* he is reported as abandoning 'himself to the wildest improvisation' (Anon. 1833: 4). Harpist Nicholas Bochsa, whose success was partly due to his large output of 'variation works', was also reported improvising a fantasia in Leeds in 1825, and again in Brighton a year later (Anon. 1825; Anon. 1826). Additionally, a still unidentified harpist 'Master Mason' of Newcastle also improvised a fantasia from audience-suggested tunes at the Roe-Buck Hotel Assembly in 1831. Despite the relative lack in the historic record, improvised preludes or song accompaniments appear to have been a tacitly understood aspect of the amateur performance as the method books for guitar are filled with tools designed to make the student fluent in harmony, modulation, and variation technique. The numerous instances of extended cadence, modulation patterns, accompanied scales and variations figures[3] all indicate traces of pedagogical traditions where improvisation was an important component (Mazanek 2021). These traces sometimes include direct reference to improvisation treatises, as in Dionisio Aguado and François de Fossa's *Escuela de Guitarra*, which cites André Grétry's treatise on preluding (Aguado and Fossa 1825). Other times, guitar and harp methods reproduce pedagogical methods employed by renowned improvisors and the reader is left to speculate on their uses. Marziano Bruni's *Treatise on the Guitar* for example, provides a long list of chords, resolutions and modulations to help the student learn how to accompany popular songs (Bruni 1834).

The numerous modulation exercises found in methods for the guitar and harp clearly echo similar modulation devices designed to teach improvised accompaniments, for example the *Summa of Harmony* by Georg Joseph Vogler (1780) and the treatise by Carl Gottlieb Hering (1812). Hummel mentions how important learning to modulate was for improvisation in his treatise and outlines two traits that he says will aid in learning to improvise: a physical automatization of harmony and what he calls a natural gift (*naturgabe*):

> That of one's own invention (eigenen Erfindung), of acumen, of fiery momentum and flight of thought, and that of one's own development, transformation, continuation and connection, both of what one has invented oneself and of what one takes from others as material to pick up. (Hummel 1827: 461)

Hummel's *naturgabe* is the improvisation/ variation schema at its most explicit; it is a form of relating to the world through a unique type of symbolic and affectual labour. Hummel acknowledges the distributed nature of improvisation learning, how it is situated between the deliberate study of harmony and an explicit commitment to analyse and incorporate the musical materials of the communities they work within. However, this labour is equally centred on the body and its contexts. It requires trained impulses that respond to both musical and extra-musical material, which, in turn, mediate that material for its continued use within that community.

FINAL FLOURISH

I have explored how improvised practices in the nineteenth century were entwined with popular music and its many means of dissemination. Both professional performers and amateurs used popular songs and dance forms as referents for improvised play, suggesting a shared generative schema that amplified and facilitated musicians' mode of engagement with the world around them. During this period, pedagogues admitted that improvisation was a unique form of learning, but they often presupposed an understanding of and familiarity with the popular music of their time. Teaching accompaniment and harmony assumed the student's awareness of their popular song culture, and 'variation works' acted

[3] Among the *partimento* sources there are a collection of related educational devices, including harmonized scales (known today as the 'rule of the octave'), cadences, and modulation patterns. Harmonized scales provided a framework for students to memorize what harmonies to use when harmonizing a bass line, but this device was appropriated by guitarists as a means of accompanying a melody as well. Other devices such as 'extended cadences' served as patterns for musicians to improvise preludes and modulations that modulated from one key to another.

as recreational material and useful pedagogical models for learning variation technique and were important mediators for the tunes themselves.

Improvisation includes the creative analysis and manipulation of musical and extra-musical symbols derived from a musician's exposure to a network of popular cultures and operationalizing them through physical activities, often to produce affective change in their communities. Recognizing this entanglement with popular music provides an avenue for challenging the hegemonic exclusion described by Ayerst both from 'within' and 'without' (2021: 448). From 'without', dominant voices (educators and institutions) might find ways of facilitating new environments where students can engage in the type of immaterial labour described above. This might necessarily shift some focus away from pedagogical tools like *partimento* and *solfeggio* towards those that bolster a student's familiarity with popular referents (both historical and contemporary) and should recognize popular music's role in mediating socio-political issues – a recognition that might enhance the learning of music history with practical music making. Lastly, it recognizes those activities that embrace popular social customs like accompanying dance and self-accompanied singing as 'practising', opening avenues for interdisciplinary and informal learning. Engaging in the study of nineteenth-century popular song through, and for, improvisation emphasizes an inherent tension in learning an art that is simultaneously an act of spontaneity and the product of countless hours of physical and symbolic labour. As the analysis above has shown, the labour of improvising musicians embeds them within a community of practice with shared tendencies towards variation albeit with different technical and aesthetic outcomes. This is significant in our contemporary context where musicians are achieving more fluid technical capabilities than ever before but still rarely focus these technical capabilities outside of performing and interpreting written works.

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