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Book Review

Massimiliano Guido, ed., *Studies in Historical Improvisation: From* Cantare super Librum *to* Partimenti

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Reviewed by Tim Daly

Thomas Christensen rightly observes in the opening chapter of this volume that improvisation has lately become a hot topic in historical musicology. This recent trend in scholarship reflects a new understanding of the teaching methods and everyday practice across the centuries: Anna Maria Busse Berger, Philippe Canguilhem, Robert Gjerdingen and Giorgio Sanguinetti, among many others, have placed extemporised composition at the heart of everyday training and performance. The core of *Studies in Historical Improvisation* consists of fresh research on two of the main focuses of this trend: polyphonic improvisation during the Renaissance—known as *Cantare super Librum* or 'singing on the book'—and the *partimento* tradition of eighteenth-century Italy.

That core is surrounded by two complementary sections, the first of which, under the title '"Con la mente e con le mani": Music and the Art of Memory,' opens with Christensen's introductory essay. Christensen explores in general terms the challenges and opportunities offered by the renewed interest in historical improvisation and considers the consequences for broader historical musicology. Of particular note is his review of the consequences for the teaching of music history: a history of music that recognises a shared, continuous improvisatory practice is at odds with a history defined in terms of the canonic works of a few composers. The result is that an understanding of the *partimento* tradition, for example, implies a re-evaluation of the way we understand the development of musical style across the eighteenth century.

The following chapters by Stefano Lorenzetti and Massimiliano Guido explore the relationship between memory and the development of practical skill. Taking advantage of the close relationship between rhetoric and memory practice in this period, Lorenzetti adopts the

concept of *locus* from classical rhetoric and applies it to a category of basic musical formulae, each of which could then become the means of recalling a range of contrapuntal constructions. Sophisticated systems based on this principle could extend as far as Pietro Cerone's 'machine' for the creation of improvised vocal polyphony. Guido applies a similar approach to early seventeenth-century keyboard treatises and observes in particular that diminution exercises served the dual purpose of training technical facility and of working a series of contrapuntal formulae into the fingers. As a result, this pair of chapters illustrates with unusual clarity the connection between the rhetoric of Quintilian and practical musical training, and does so in a way that connects the principal concerns of this publication: improvised vocal polyphony shares a theoretical and practical basis with the keyboard tuition that will in turn inform keyboard-based *partimento* teaching.

Renaissance vocal polyphony is the subject of next section, which opens with a contribution from Philippe Canguilhem, one of the most prolific authors in the field. Rather than refine a theoretical profile of improvised practice, Canguilhem sets out to recover a sense of the sound world created through singing on the book by locating music identifiable as written-out improvisation. Canguilhem proposes a series of indicators of extemporised origin and examines candidate pieces against the theoretical models suggested by theorists such as Lusitano and Aranda. While he is careful to note the preliminary nature of this research, the similarity between Lusitano's theory and the work of Corteccia seems particularly persuasive, and offers the hope of further results.

The mention of Lusitano and Aranda serves as a reminder that many of the best witnesses to improvised polyphonic practice in the first half of the sixteenth century are of Iberian origin, a fact Giuseppe Fiorentino uses to advantage in examining the range of extemporised activity in Renaissance Spain. A citation from 1463 immediately establishes a dichotomy between singing 'by ear' (*por uso*) and 'by reason' (*por razón*): the former related to techniques of parallel counterpoint (*el cantar fabordón*) while the latter depended on the sort of musical training available only to those in established musical institutions. Fiorentino then considers not only the different approaches to improvisation and the training implied by each but also each method's liturgical appeal. He closes with another quotation, this time from 1724, that shows not only that the two methods of polyphonic improvisation survived well beyond the renaissance, but also that critical opinion remained consistent across the centuries.

Jean-Yves Haymoz's 'Discovering the Practice of Improvised Counterpoint' completes the second section. While remaining in constant touch with the important theorists of the period, Haymoz has created a remarkably practical document that draws heavily on his experience as the director of Le Chant sur le Livre, an ensemble that performs improvised vocal polyphony. Starting with simple parallel counterpoint in two voices, Haymoz describes an incrementally more complex progression of contrapuntal techniques that the aspiring improviser could take as a programme. The sequence is logical and compelling and, while too short to be considered an actual practical method, the ample references to sources, both ancient and modern, provide the reader with the necessary materials for further study.

The section devoted to keyboard improvisation opens with 'Composing at the Keyboard' by Edoardo Bellotti, whose examination of seventeenth-century keyboard treatises takes up where Guido left off. Taking Adriano Banchieri's *Organo Suonarino* (published in several editions between 1605 and 1638) as his starting point, Bellotti identifies the precursors of the

partimento tradition and establishes their origin not in harmonic progressions based on the rule of the octave, but in the creation of counterpoint. This process of 'composition at the keyboard' relied on the recognition of basic formulae to which could be applied decorative contrapuntal schemes, something that immediately recalls Lorenzetti's earlier contribution, and is reinforced by reference to Spiridion's *Nova Instructio* of 1670 and the early *partimento*-like exercises of Pasquini.

Peter van Tour follows with a recategorisation of the *partimenti* of Francesco Durante, perhaps the leading Neapolitan teacher of the first half of the eighteenth century. Van Tour suggests that the traditional division of Durante's *partimenti* into four categories, *regole, numerati, diminuiti* and *fugue*, represents a late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century organisation of the material that conceals Durante's method. Instead, van Tour argues persuasively for a two-part organisation: what he describes as the 'basic course' of *partimenti*, designed to teach and practise essential procedures, followed by advanced exercises that emphasise the ability to recognise and realise a library of bass motions. In making this series of bass figures the focus of *partimento* training, van Tour provides the pedagogical basis for the compositional schemata described by Robert Gjerdingen,[1] and emphasises once again the close relationship between eighteenth-century improvisation, teaching and composition.

Giorgio Sanguinetti closes this section with an exploration of the consequences of understanding eighteenth-century improvised practice. Citing examples from Handel to Mozart, he explores the range of possible response to what he describes as 'incomplete notation'. Given what is now known about the role of improvisation in period training, and aware that performers of the time were able to draw on years of experience of realising *partimenti* and filling out musical outlines, is it any longer appropriate to play only what is on the page? At the same time, how is it possible to know what is appropriate without the experience of that training? These questions present a real dilemma to performers interested in period practice; if Sanguinetti has not provided a complete answer, his tentative suggestion of the re-introduction of some amount of *partimento* training does lead elegantly into the final section of the volume.

The book closes with contributions from Peter Schubert and Michael Callahan demonstrating their techniques for using improvisation as a contemporary teaching tool. Schubert outlines his approach to training *contrapunto fugato*, a form of imitative polyphony against a *cantus firmus,* while Callahan outlines a method for teaching tonal counterpoint. Both essays contain a fascinating combination of antique process and modern technology. Each method seems in part to be an attempt to develop an efficient series of shortcuts through an otherwise time-consuming and repetitive historical learning process, and Callahan in particular employs technology as a means to this end. His students use specially configured software to complete simple *partimento*-like exercises. For Schubert, technology is more a point of reference; video gaming is his preferred example of an intuitive learning process, and he sets out to develop a system of training that exploits the same cumulative acquisition of skill. A comparison with Haymoz's earlier chapter is enlightening and it is tempting to see Schubert as providing a sort of theoretical and pedagogical basis for Haymoz's practical approach. One feature of both Callahan's and Schubert's contributions is that they reflect working with university-level music students. While the benefits of improvised practice that they detail—particularly the

[1] Robert O. Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style* (New York: OUP, 2007).

development of an intuitive sense of good musical form—are no less relevant to advanced students than to beginners, it would have been interesting to consider an extension of this approach to the teaching of first musical principles.

Aside from the tantalising discussion of improvisation as a teaching tool, the limits of *Studies in Historical Improvisation* are defined squarely by the two fields of its subtitle. This might seem both a strength and a weakness: if the concentration of material makes the book particularly attractive to those already engaged with Renaissance polyphony or the *galant* keyboard, there would appear to be less to draw those with a more general interest in improvised practice. A medievalist might hope for some consideration of the secular improvisation of Pietrobono, while an exploration of shared approaches with jazz-based and other non-classical improvisational styles would broaden the reach of the book. While these additions would be welcome, to insist on them too strongly would be to ignore the extent to which the book as it stands establishes valuable common ground across the three centuries it presently covers. Historical counterpoint's reliance on visualisation is fittingly reflected in the ample provision of musical examples and illustrations from period sources. For anyone with an interest in extemporised creation, this slender book identifies general principles that can be applied much more broadly, enabling Christensen's 'improvisatory moment' to inspire fresh approaches to many further repertoires.

About the Reviewer
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