

Why is Improvisation So Difficult?¹

BY WILLIAM PORTER

Dear friends, it is an honor and a privilege to speak to you this evening, and I thank you all for coming to what promises to be a stimulating and fascinating three days together enjoying improvised music making and discussing how to craft a future for improvisation at the organ that will build upon the rich foundations that we have inherited in order to encourage a continued flowering of the art in which improvisation plays a central role in the world of organ playing, a world which we often characterize as small, but one which shows many signs both of health and of growth. I should warn you, however, that this address is not an improvisation, as you can see from all these papers in front of me. It may or may not be a good improvisation model, though it does, in its structure, reflect some sort of classic rhetorical disposition. Its title is due to the fact that improvisation seemed particularly difficult on the day that Hans said, "I need your title, TODAY."

What I would like to do is to speak of some of the concepts and situations that weigh on my mind as contributory to the fact that many people find improvisation to be not only difficult, but well nigh impossible for some of us to engage in, with the hope that some of the ideas expressed here might be pursued further in the panel discussions which will take place in the next few days, as well as in our informal conversations.

That, by the way, was the exordium. We proceed to the narratio.

Why is improvisation so difficult? I have chosen this title for this evening's address mindful that the question itself begs some further questions. For instance, why should we begin a conference with reference to what a difficult topic it is which we are about to celebrate? Why begin with focusing on difficulty rather than on beauty or inspiration or even – fun? Or – one could ask – why do we say that improvisation is difficult, when there are clearly people who do not find it difficult at all? True, there are such people, but they seem to be few and far between, and we all know that some of our most gifted performers, superb musicians, find improvisation not only difficult, but downright scary. Or at least discouraging. The late Canadian organist, Charles Peaker, used to characterize his own

¹ Editor's note: This unedited keynote address was delivered by Prof. Porter at the 2011 Eastman-Rochester Organ Initiative Festival.

improvised preludes as “low D on the pedal Bourdon, followed by vague rumblings.” Surely that is not difficult to achieve, and it might even be fun, and I suspect we all have done it. His conclusion was that he should stop improvising his preludes and play what he referred to as “real pieces.” For Mr. Peaker, improvisation, at least his own improvisation, was the inferior form of music making, to play compositions the superior form. I believe that many of us, even those of us to whom improvisation comes relatively easy, hold a similar view; one might even say that it is the dominating view today. We may enjoy improvising, but we don’t regard the music we make in this way as being up to the standard of “real” composition. Contrast this with a number of remarks made by seventeenth and eighteenth century musicians, which tell us that playing a written-out composition for a church service or – in particular – for an audition was the inferior form of music making, and that improvising constituted the superior form.

Before we ask how we got from there to here, let us just notice the implications. At least until the middle of the eighteenth century we can generally say that improvising, or – perhaps better – what we now call improvising was the normative way by which organists in the church made their music. Not only that, but not to do so was considered to be a fault, a weakness. We have records of what skills organists were required to display in an audition for a church position in this earlier time, and they all involve the ability to make one’s own music on demand, not to play written out compositions by others. Those whose skills in this area are particularly known to us today, Sweelinck, Santa Maria, Banchieri, Frescobaldi, Weckmann, Reincken, François Couperin, Louis Marchand, and Bach, to name only a few, have also left us wonderful written-out compositions, and it is inevitable that we should want to know what we can about how closely these pieces represent what their contemporaries heard when they improvised. On this matter, perspectives are changing, and I would count myself among those who find, with increasing study and experience, that the gap between what was written down and what we can reasonably imagine as having been improvised has steadily become narrower and narrower. But these musicians, whom we revere today as exceptional, simply expressed on a very high level ways of music making which were normative for everyone. How then did we come from a musical culture in which improvisation was the norm, to one in which even some of our most gifted performers find it to be exceedingly difficult?

That is a complicated story, and there are signs of this happening even in the eighteenth century. One could oversimplify the story and say that it was related to the waning emphasis on the study of counterpoint as a performance skill. And that it had to do, in Protestant lands, at least, with the changing requirements of liturgical organ playing. But whatever the combination of factors that led to the present-day situation, we should still regard the nineteenth century as being more similar to the eighteenth than to the twentieth-century, in terms of the role that improvisation played in the professional life of the organist. At the same time, a new concept of improvisation was taking shape, one which we still have with us today, and I believe it is a concept that is severely detrimental to any kind of recovery of improvisation as central to the organist's life as a musician.

So now we come to one reason why, in my opinion, improvisation is so difficult, and that is, since the variety of creative activities – across time and cultures – for which we use the word improvisation are so diverse in nature and so diverse in terms of their presuppositions, we are left in a state of confusion about what the word improvisation itself really means. Nonetheless, there are prevailing ideas about what it means, and some of those ideas miss the mark when applied to different traditions of improvisation, and only impede our understanding of those traditions, and therefore impede our ability to train ourselves and our students to realize these traditions in performance. Sometimes I think we would be better off with a different word, one with less baggage, or – better still – different words for different traditions.

These ideas have to do with our understandings of spontaneity, originality, and the distinction of improvisation from composition. You may now note that here endeth the narratio, and we proceed to the confutatio, which will be in three parts, or – as organists love to say – sections.

Let us consider first the idea of spontaneity. Charles Tournemire, in his *Précis d'exécution de registration et d'improvisation* (1936) contains the statement that “all preparation is opposed to this special art.” One sometimes sees this remark, lifted out of its original context, to support the idea that improvisation is an art for which preparation is not only not required, but for which preparation is actually detrimental. This of course is a slippery slope to the idea that the ability to improvise is really a special gift from on high; either you have it or you don't. In fact, we don't even need Tournemire to get this idea; it is to be found just about everywhere. It is in the air we breathe.

But before we indict Mr. Tournemire as a culprit in furthering a misunderstanding about the nature of improvisation, we should read a little further in the *Précis*, and find what else he has to say, for to take this remark out of its context is to do him a grave disservice. Tournemire, who was not known for his consistency, sometimes makes apparently contradictory remarks, and apparently means them. But if we take him at his word in what he has to say about spontaneity, perhaps we should also take just as seriously what else he has to say about improvisation. For he goes on to say that disorder in an improvisation is not acceptable, and – and here is the main point – that in order to improvise well, one must undergo rigorous training in preparatory exercises, and acquire a deep understanding of harmony and – above all – counterpoint. One does not learn to improvise without rigorously practicing its procedures, just as one does not learn to compose without practicing the procedures of composition. Tournemire thus seems to be saying that in order to improvise without preparing, one must...prepare. In other words, the regular practice of harmony and counterpoint allows one to choose the spontaneous moment in performance.

A similar view is echoed by Alan Fletcher, sometime Provost of New England Conservatory, in a letter to the faculty on the subject of improvisation, dated October 2, 1997. Here he says,

“There is no aesthetic problem for me in reconciling the varying degrees of preparation involved in different instances of improvisation. Just about every performance involves preparation, even to the point of memorization. The happier experiences of performance are those where the unexpected element was hoped for and prepared for – was chosen.”

My dear late father-in-law was a shy man. A distinguished academic, he did not enjoy the public attention he sometimes received as a result of his intellectual accomplishments, and, as quiet folk often are, he was a creature of habit. So he very much attracted the attention of the household one day when he announced that he didn't think that he was spontaneous enough, and he was therefore going to undertake a campaign to practice being spontaneous. There were raised eyebrows at this remark, particularly from my mother-in-law, who was an accomplished eyebrow raiser, having practiced the art over a long period of time. My father-in-law had bushy eyebrows, but did not raise them much. His eyes, however, twinkled when he made this remark, for he knew from conversations with his daughter concerning her scholarly work in traditions of

literary improvisation in other cultures where internalization of process, imagination, and memory play a major role, and can be learned only through disciplined concentration over a long period of time. I believe he got it right: improvisation is about practiced *spontaneity*. Spontaneity does not exist in a vacuum.

When we consider, however, *originality* as a goal of improvisation, we have a different kind of dynamic, one which easily contributes to the difficulty of the art. Spontaneity may not exist in a vacuum, but the imperative to originality can create one. The imperative to originality was a hallmark of the twentieth century, so much so that it was often confused with creativity. Composers and other artists were often subjected to this imperative, so that one's own sense of authenticity as a creative person was bound up with doing something new, something which had never been done before. Imagine if you are a serious improviser, operating under the assumption that you can do whatever you want as long as it is something that has not been done before. It may work for a while, but it almost certainly will eventually lead to a kind of paralysis, the more one realizes the vastness of what has been done before. Now if you are a composer or an improviser, or – better yet – an improvising composer, and you are not conversant with much of the music written in the past century, you may enjoy the exhilaration of originality, thinking that you are doing something new, but the more you know about what is out there in the world, the more difficult it becomes, the more futile the search for originality becomes. One might even say that the imperative to originality only works to the extent that you are ignorant of what has already been done. How can creativity flourish under such a regime?

But wait. There is a flip side to this coin. (Remember we are still in the middle of the confutatio, and we are about to invert the subject.) And this flip side is equally problematic: it is the notion that one of the goals of improvisation is the ability to sound like somebody else. With no down payment and for just pennies a day you too can sound like Tournemire, or Bach, or Messiaen. Call now, operators are standing by. And indeed they are. If improvisation is a party trick, of course there is good entertainment value in sounding like somebody else. I really do love Victor Borge. And, it is true, one of the most beautiful improvisations I ever heard was one which was essentially like a second Mendelssohn sixth sonata, but based upon Christ lag in Todesbanden rather than Vater unser in Himmelreich. But what made it beautiful was not its resemblance to Mendelssohn

so much as its compositional integrity and its responsiveness to the implications of the chorale melody. The performer was someone so deeply immersed in the many traditions of organ improvisation and so confident of his own voice that the momentary reference to Mendelssohn enhanced, rather than diminished, the realization that we were hearing authentic music of a high order. (That performer, by the way, was Rudi Lutz. I hope that you all will have the chance to hear him some day.) But – for the most part – I do not think we get to that point of authenticity by teaching our students how to imitate someone else.

Is there no way out of this double bind, this tension between improvisation as necessarily original and improvisation as imitation? I believe that there is, and it requires that we first of all distinguish between originality and creativity. To be original is to do something that has not been done before. To be creative is to engage in both the joy and agony of making something that you believe in, something that you care about. If you are an orator, the best way to be compelling and convincing is to say something that you are yourself compelled by and convinced of, and to care enough to work at the techniques of oratory so that others may share your passion. Such an orator may not be primarily concerned with whether her thought is original, but rather with whether the thought has its own integrity. The imperative to originality is at best a mere distraction from the matter at hand, and at worst, a demon. It is the same way, I believe, for an improviser. It is better to be interesting than to be original, and it is better to be interesting than to try to sound like Buxtehude. So we may say that both the imperative to originality and the imperative to imitate are twin demons, waiting to distract us from the business at hand. The business at hand is to develop the compositional skills that – over time – will allow you to say something interesting and communicate it effectively, the skill to develop one's creativity. So let us banish the demons and move to the business at hand.

So far I have talked about the imperative to an unpracticed spontaneity and the imperative to originality as two of the reasons why many of us find improvisation to be so difficult. These reasons we could call attitudinal reasons; that is, our attitude, or how we think about something like improvisation affects how we work at it, or don't work at it, as the case may be. If we could help our students develop a taste for the concentration and preparation that allows a practiced spontaneity to emerge, we shall have done something

important towards making improvisation less difficult. And if we can help our students to steer themselves on a course which does not get mired in the imperative to originality at the same time avoiding the distraction of a crass imitation of someone else, we shall have helped them further on the way. But the third reason I mentioned earlier, that of our ideas about the distinction between improvisation and composition, while attitudinal, also presents us with some concrete course of action, which I believe can perhaps be the most help of all.

So here is a question: why do we sometimes operate as if we thought that improvised music is by its nature a fundamentally different kind of music from what we tend to think of as composed music? We sometimes hear – or use – phrases such as “in an improvisatory style,” or “that passage sounds improvised.” We seem to have a habit of labeling as “improvisatory” musical passages that call to mind the words in the book of Genesis describing the universe before the first day or creation: “without form and void.” Or perhaps the word “improvisatory” comes to mind when we hear music that has no perceptible meter, or development of material.

Ad libitum music may be improvisatory by tradition, but not all improvised music is ad libitum, historically speaking. The rich history of musical improvisation includes far more than cadenzas and homophonic preludes. And even if we speak only of improvisation in western cultures, and then only of improvisation at the organ, we know that from the earliest days of the use of the organ in church, organists made their music on the plainsong melodies of the day, that they wove polyphony around the appointed chants for the mass and the office, day in and day out. We are fortunate to have some documents which give us a window into how they did this at some times and some places: the *fundamentum organisandi* of the mid 15th century, along with some other similar sources show us how an organist learned to play into being organ works based upon a cantus firmus; we know from Tomas de Santa Maria how a 16th century keyboard player could learn to make a polyphonic fantasia in the act of performance; we know from surviving contrapuntal studies how the students of Sweelinck learned to build the rich tradition of composition in performance that flourished in northern Europe in the 17th century, and we know some of the pedagogical materials that organists in southern Europe worked with at the same time. Therefore we know that the music that resulted from such learning included *ricercars*,

canzonas, fugues, chorale preludes, and chorale fantasias, as well as the shorter versets, which have come to us from all over Europe. So a *ricercar* by Frescobaldi and a chorale fantasia by Buxtehude also deserve the term “improvisatory” if we are going to retain the word as a synonym for composition in performance. Otherwise, we risk using the word only for that music which we can imagine someone making up as they go along, so to speak. This would be too bad, for we often see that our imaginations fail us, and we end up imagining too little about what was possible then, and about what is possible now.

But let us trust the capability of our imaginations to imagine grand things, as if that is what our imaginations were made for, and imagine that some of the most sublime music that we know of the past, not to mention the present and future, was generated in compositional performance, that is – improvisation. How did they do it? They practiced compositional procedures at the keyboard. This means that for our ancestors, even some of our recent ancestors, counterpoint was learned by playing and composing it at the keyboard. How do we teach counterpoint today? Is it not a classroom activity, involving much paper and chalkboards? How many students of counterpoint are actually encouraged to listen to the exercises they produce, much less to generate them by playing rather than by writing? Have you ever known of a course in counterpoint to take place primarily at the keyboard? I hope so, but I expect not.² Can you imagine, for instance, a course in continuo playing that took place in the classroom, rather than at the harpsichord or organ? How could a keyboardist ever achieve skill in continuo playing if all she were required to do was to produce written out realizations of figured bass? But do we not do precisely the equivalent with the teaching of counterpoint? One could say the same for the teaching of harmony, and while some schools laudably continue to teach keyboard harmony, it all too often takes a back seat to the teaching of harmony on paper, away from any musical instrument. Is it any wonder then that few people can improvise a proper fugal exposition, or improvise meaningful harmony with attention to voice leading? Is it any wonder that improvisation is so difficult, when so many of the essential skills in composition –

²Editor’s note: In his 2012 article “Teaching Baroque Counterpoint Through Improvisation: An Introductory Curriculum in Stylistic Fluency” Michael Callahan presents a detailed discussion of precisely the sort of course that Porter describes here. (Vol. 26 of this journal)

regardless of style—if they are taught at all, are taught as classroom activities, in which the keyboard plays either a minor role, or no role at all?

So thus beginneth the peroratio, which I promise will be not much longer than the exordium. In framing the questions in this way, I hope to have begun to point to some answers. Apart from questions of spontaneity and originality, improvisation is difficult because our systems of musical education make it so, to the extent that they deprive our students of the means by which it could be made much easier.

What's a body to do in such a situation? One answer may be found in one word in that question: the word "body." Improvisation, to be sure, involves the intellect and the imagination, but it also involves the body, and so many of the skills I have mentioned, which we recognize as essential to improvisation and composition, are taught in such a way that they become disembodied skills, learned with the mind, but learned in the body in a diminished and at times impoverished fashion. What if we could return those skills to the performer's body with the same kind of dedication that we value when we teach keyboard technique as a bodily art? Can you imagine how much easier improvisation might become for our students, and for us as well, if we understood counterpoint with and in our bodies to the extent that making counterpoint at the keyboard is as much a physical response to stimulus as it is a mental one? What if our bodies knew voice leading as well as our minds do? Or if we taught ear-training at the keyboard with at least as much emphasis that it is given in the classroom? Or if the movements of harmonic progression could flow more directly from our inner ears to our fingers as a result of our bodies already knowing those movements? Or if any number of compositional techniques of more recent times were already practiced in our bodies by the time that our imaginations want to use them? If we do not teach our students these skills as bodily skills, then anything we do in a course called improvisation will never lead to the creative freedom that it could.

I believe passionately in creative freedom. I do sometimes think, however, that in teaching improvisation we often run the risk of doing something like encouraging people to play in a sandbox without giving them either good sand or the box. (We might think of the "good sand" as being intensive instruction in ear-training *at the keyboard*, and counterpoint and harmony, *at the keyboard*, along with whatever else we value in building the skills of musicianship,

done *at the keyboard*. The “box” is a structured curriculum necessary to rigorous learning.³ All this needs to be done before we teach whatever we call improvisation, otherwise improvisation risks being little more than “self-expression,” done without our having given our students the skill to express something of substance.

When I began preparing to speak to you about why improvisation is so difficult, I put the question to our students. Here is what some of them had to say:

“It is difficult because it happens so late.” This is from a gifted graduate student, who had no opportunity to learn these skills at an early age.

“It is difficult because it so often lacks the requirement of structure. I have plenty of ideas; the problem is to know what to do with them particularly regarding harmony.”

“It is difficult because it is difficult to develop the skill of being coherent.”

“It is difficult because improvisation involves learning a musical language, having its own vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.”

“It is difficult because I am afraid to do something I have not been prepared to do.”

³Editor’s note: Peter Schubert introduces and develops this very image in his recent article “Thinking in Music (2011) in this journal. He writes: “Improvisation, for instance, is a “play-in-the-sandbox” exercise intended as a voyage of discovery. It’s important to do it.... This tongue-in-cheek term refers to a serious activity in which we acknowledge that beginners must be allowed to make mistakes. The results are often horrendous, but that’s the point, letting the student wrestle with the material (my TAs complained that some of the students were “eating the sand”). Dissonant downbeats, parallels, etc. are a small price to pay for giving the student a chance to feel around in the dark, and students should not be penalized for such mistakes at this more exploratory stage; the instructor can explain what was wrong but moves right on to the next thing. Play-in-the-sandbox institutionalizes the process of discovery by making time for it under the teacher’s supervision but without the pressure that results from being graded.”

I am particularly touched by the last remark. Rather than to tell them that preparation is not important (they won't believe you if you tell them this, because they know that it is important), our task is to prepare them better, and as I have suggested, this means teaching things that are not generally called improvisation. Nothing would make me happier than if one of the outcomes of this conference would be a new enthusiasm for working together to find new ways of teaching the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of diverse musical styles as keyboard skills, that is as embodied skills, even from the first years of musical study. Some of these things are already happening, one of the happy developments of the past decades, but so much more can be done, and it will probably fall to the performance faculty in our music schools, rather than to theorists and composers, to make it happen. It might not really qualify as improvisation as we understand it, but I have a growing confidence that it might gradually bring us to the point where the difficulties are so much less than the joy of playing into creation something that was not there before, the product of imagination nourished by skill.

