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## How to understand the musical creation on the key of improvisation

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### Abstract

I propose a short history of the art of musical improvisation, a technique present in both liturgical and secular music. Although constantly present in the interpretive practice of Baroque, Classicist and Romantic musicians, musical improvisation is associated in the twentieth century with jazz music. The composer who made the bridge between “classical” and jazz music was George Gershwin, whose creation was a model for the great European composers.

*Keywords:* Improvisation art, composition and improvisation, improvisation history.

## Cómo entender la creación musical en clave de improvisación

### Resumen

Propongo una breve historia del arte de la improvisación musical, técnica presente tanto en la música litúrgica como en la profana. Aunque constantemente presente en la práctica interpretativa de los músicos barrocos, clasicistas y románticos, la improvisación musical se asocia en el siglo XX con la música jazz. El compositor que hizo el puente entre la música “clásica” y el jazz fue George Gershwin, cuya creación fue un modelo para los grandes compositores europeos.

*Palabras clave:* Arte de improvisación, composición e improvisación, historia de la improvisación.

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## Introduction

Professional musicians are confronted with a dichotomous perception of the art of sound. On the one hand, it refers to music from the physical perspective of the sound phenomenon - in fact, the reference to a frequency standard that has been changed periodically is of paramount importance in the high-profile interpretive act - and on the other hand, it tries to decode the message. score and pass it on, putting the physical-technical components at the service of a subjective message of an emotional nature, with an aesthetic component.

Above I mentioned the term "dichotomous" which describes the reality of dividing a concept into two parts, without losing its original meaning. The dichotomous perception of music has two components: 1. physical, objective, measurable perception. 2. the non-physical, subjective, non-measurable perception, but with the possibility to be described by referring to the aesthetic categories.

The physical perception of music is based on the rules of acoustics, a science that includes complementary fields such as mathematics and physics. Following the thread of history, we learn from Pythagoras that in order to understand the phenomena of a physical nature, we must appeal to an esoteric, metaphysical science.

The concept of archetype (as a pre-existing non-material model of the material world) is also present in the Pythagorean numerology, where the unit or monad (he monas) is the generator of numbers as a principle, the essence of things, because everything is one (is a unit). Pythagoras argued that unity is not a number, it is a generator of numbers whose fundamental property is parity and oddity. The unit contains both valences. Pythagoras goes further and states that from unity are born numbers and, from them, things; therefore, unity is also called the „mother of things". Aetius (1st or 2nd century AD) is the one who described the fact that Pythagoras called the pursuit of wisdom „philosophy" and considered as prime principles the numbers and symmetries that exist between them, which he calls harmonies...etc. He argued that the second cosmological principle is the *indeterminate dyad* (duas aoristos). He said that the dyad is indeterminate because it has a pure nature, so unlimited, indefinite. In order to understand what Pythagoras was referring to, we should turn to the exoteric doctrine, The Book of the Sealed Mystery - *Siphra Dtzenioutha*, being of real help.

On closer inspection, we notice that the evolution of music was quite slow in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages. Historical data indicates that Pythagoras theorized his untempered system with the differences between the diatonic (limma) and chromatic (apotome) semitones, as well as the musical scale based on the 3: 2 fraction, the interval generated by harmonics 2 and 3 (fifth). It happened around the 6th century BC.

From the point of view of the Pythagorean musical practice, the Pythagorean monochord is also a musical instrument, in which musical improvisation was practiced, as well as one of the first, mobile research laboratories", for this reason being called a „sound level meter.

At the beginning of the second millennium A.D. the emphasis was on church vocal music. As important elements in pre-medieval liturgical music, two important moments must be mentioned. In the Eastern church, with its center in Constantinople, in the sec. VIII-IX appears one of the first liturgical (imnological) books with musical notation *Octoechos*, attributed to John of Damascus (676-749 AD). It seems that previously, there was another liturgical book, *Tropologion* at the Patriarchate of Antioch, since the century VI, but John of Damascus and Cosmas of Maiuma created a cycle of „stichera anastasima" or resurrection hymns, and John of Damascus is mentioned as the creator of the Hagiopolitan *Octoechos* in the treatise *Hagiopolites* which survived only in copy dated sec. XIV, its origin being dated from the period after the Council of Nicaea (787).

A turning point, this time in the western church centered in Rome, was the approach of Pope Gregory IX. Gregorian chant, as it is known in history, was named after the Carolingian Empire (800-888) which referred to Pope Gregory (540-604 AD), with the aim of unifying the liturgical repertoire.

Gregorian chant used 8 modes of ancient Greek origin, but scholars claim that there were clear influences from the Jewish cult music. The Gregorian chant was based on the *cantus planus* (smooth singing, with gradual gait for the human voice). The voices sang in unison and the diversion technique was used for diversification by dividing the singers into two groups that sang in turn. The technique of responsory singing was also used, where the solo parts alternated with the group ones (a practice also taken from the cult Jewish music). As the documents show, in both Jewish and Christian ritual music (Eastern and Western) there is a constant improvisational technique through melismatic singing.

One of the first known musical treatise that contains rules for making polyphony is *Musica Enchiriadis*. Historians have fixed the ninth century as their date of birth, but there are discussions about the author. Some musicologists have attributed it to Hucbald, others to Odo of Cluny or Abbot Hoger. The treatise contains 19 chapters and chapters 10-18 deal with polyphonic music. It is very interesting that the author(s) show how consonant intervals should be used to compose or improvise the type of early medieval music called the organum (a note-by-note polyphony).

In France, history records the famous Notre Dame School, with its two prominent figures, Leonin and his successor, Perotin. The library in Florence has manuscripts from that period which show that Leonin (ex. Organum duplum for Christmas - *Viderunt Omnes*), who lived between 1150-1201, wrote with his name on the 4-line notebook. The same sources indicate that Perotin also used the 4-line portable, the two musicians being the initiators of the introduction of vocal polyphonic music in the church. The organum was a polyphonic form in which musical improvisation was practiced in two possible forms: a) of heterophonic type by improvisational deviation from unison; b) one of the voices sang the written song and the other (others) performed by ear (by ear) an improvised parallel structure "vox organalis". Leonin and, in particular, Perotin developed the organum through variants of *duplum*, *triplum*, *quadruplum*, making the polyphonic syntax clearer.

In 1722 appears the Treatise on Harmony by the French composer and theorist J.P. Rameau. *Traite de L'Harmonie reduite a fes principe naturels* being the first scientific and theoretical approach that demonstrates and structures the vertical thinking/vision of music and the organization of homophone syntax.

In the same year (1722) appears the first notebook from Bach's *The Well - Tempered Clavier* from the series of 24 Preludes and Fugues composed in the 12 tones (doubled by the homonymous variant) from the chromatic scale of the temperate system. This creation dated 1722 (notebook I) and continued in 1742 (notebook II) represents a musical revolution on several levels:

- the transition from modal to tonal polyphony
- coexistence and metamorphosis of polyphonic syntax into the homophonic one

The variational technique is based, on the one hand, on the science of applying style figures, and on the other hand, on the metamorphosis of the thematic material depending on the degree of improvisational creativity.

W. A. Mozart paid special attention to the variational technique, demonstrating flashes of genius with a solid foundation in the science of the art of musical discourse. A handy example in this regard is the improvisational-variational version (12 variations) of the famous song *Twinkle, twinkle little star*.

To stay on the variational register, Beethoven offers a lesson in variational technique and demonstrates unlimited improvisational creativity in the 33 *Variations on a Diabelli theme*. The history of these variations made by Beethoven is linked to the year 1819 when Diabelli, as editor, proposes to several composers, who had connections with Austria, the realization of variations on the theme of a simple waltz of his C major. It seems that about 50 composers responded favorably. Among them was Carl Czerny, Franz Schubert Ignaz Moscheles, Johan Nepomuk Hummel and a son of Mozart, Franz Xaver. Very interesting is the fact that Franz Liszt, 11 years old, being a student of Carl Czerny, was

asked by him to make a variation on the theme of Diabelli. He composed the variation in 1822, which was published in 1823. It is clear evidence that Liszt was a brilliant child, both as a performer and as a composer-improviser.

This event, determined by Diabelli's experiment, marked the history of universal music by two exceptional elements. The first is related to the genius of the early child, Franz Liszt, who made a variation by changing the tone to the homonymous one and the ternary meter to a binary one (thus classifying them among the variations of character) thinking everything as a study of virtuosity. The second and most important aspect is that Beethoven's 33 (!) Variations represent, along with Bach's Goldberg Variations, a very high level of variational/improvisational compositional mastery, becoming a benchmark for this style.

In the 1920s, the attention of the international music world was focused on a creator who revolutionized musical thinking both technically and aesthetically. Jacob Gershowitz, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, was born in New York City in 1898. At the age of 20, he achieved significant success with the *Swanee* song composed for *The Capitol Revue*, and „Harms Publisher” proposes a contract, at which point it is decided to change the name from Gershowitz to Gershwin. His brother Israel takes the pseudonym Ira.

The 1920s were prolific for Gershwin, with universal music benefiting from the creative input of this talented and visionary pianist and composer. In the midst of segregationism in American society, Gershwin took elements from African-American music (the blues idiom) and early jazz (ragtime) and made a symbiosis with European-style symphonic music.

The history of music shows that the musicians who participated in the premiere of Gershwin's Rhapsody were influenced by the new stylistic concept of symbiosis.

Igor Stravinsky composed the 1945 *Ebony Concerto*, dedicated to jazz clarinetist Woody Hermann. The composer himself worked on rehearsals with Hermann's jazz orchestra, the premiere taking place in 1946 at Carnegie Hall, the conductor of the jazz big band being the classical conductor, Walter Hendl. Earlier, in 1919, Stravinsky composed - inspired by the incipient ragtime jazz style - *Piano Rag music for piano*, dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein, but the premiere was made by the Spanish pianist Jose Iturbi.

As I mentioned above, Rachmaninoff was also present at the premiere of Gershwin's Rhapsody. This landmark event in the history of music had a great influence on it as well, with *Concerto No. 4 for piano and orchestra* being composed under the influence of Gershwin's rhapsody. Less known to the general public, this work was presented at the first audition in 1926, the premiere being considered a failure, after which the composer made two changes: in 1928 and 1941, respectively, the last current form included in the pianists' repertoire. An eloquent example of the influence of jazz on it is the following passage (which is a leitmotif) in the work *Variations on a theme by F. Chopin*. As a theme for the 22 variations, Rachmaninoff used the first 8 measures from *Prelude No. 20 in C min.* Thus, in variation no. 1 we observe this motif with a sinuous melody which - if taken out of context - can be confused with a fragment of the improvisations of saxophonists or clarinetists of jazz or modern jazz piano players:

This reason, which was exposed in variation no. 1 on the C pedal, at the end of variation no. 12 is extended and performed counterpoint on 2 voices, the left hand making a line that mimics the double bass in the jazz ensemble:

An extraordinary success based on the influences of jazz music - especially Gershwin's compositional approach - is Maurice Ravel's Sonata No. 2 in G major (1923-1927). The second part of the sonata is called Blues, which manages to reproduce the African-American idiom with an extraordinary technical mastery, doubled by a talent that makes the difference and - from our point of view - is the most successful creation of classical-jazz symbiosis of a European composer in a global context.

Third Stream is a new synthetic music genre in which the symbiosis between „classical” and jazz music is realized. In 1957 the American musician Gunter Schuller called this musical practice, but the beginning of this symbiosis is found in the musical concept of George Gershwin, who inspired European composers such as Maurice Ravel who declared in 1928: *“Abroad we take jazz seriously. It is influencing our work. The Blues in my sonata, for example, is stylized jazz, more French than American in character perhaps, but nevertheless strongly influenced by your so-called “popular music”.*

## Conclusions

What I proposed was a practical resolution of the dichotomy between *empiric* and *scientific* in the act of the extemporaneous musical creation. The term *dichotomy* is explained as a division between two parts of a concept, without losing its initial sense. In our case, the concept – root is the musical creation known as “compositional art.” The ramifications of this concept are in this case: 1. spontaneous musical creation – improvisation; 2. extemporaneous musical creation – composition.

The techniques or variation artifices are constitutive elements of the axiom – which the philosopher Francis Bacon saw as an empirical rule and/or a generalization based on experience” and Kant saw it as a synthetic intermediary sentence (in the sense of being the summary of various opinions) that must be considered a priori towards the speech about a certain theme”.

Therefore, if we consider the definition of the axiom as Bacon saw it, as generalization based on experience, the musical improvisation is present as a creation act in all the musical cultures of the world, being governed by empirical laws.

On the other side, considering the definition of the axiom that Kant gave, the musical improvisation is an a priori act in the musical creative approach, being closely related with the variation or the variance that Dufourq saw in the music synonymy. Analogically, we can realize our own axiom: *improvisation = variation = music*.



Fig.1. S. Rachmaninoff, Variations on a theme by F.Chopin (frag. from Var.no.1)

A black and white photograph of a musical score page. It shows two systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The notation is complex, featuring many notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as 'f', 'ff', 'dim.', and 'pp'. The paper is aged and slightly blurred.

Fig. 2. S. Rachmaninoff, Variations on a theme by F.Chopin (frag. from Var.no.12)



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