

Clara Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn, and the Aesthetics of Improvisatory Performance Practice

Peter Bouffard (April 2002)

Abstract

While a methodology has been established to investigate real-time improvisation through recorded performances—especially in jazz—writing about improvisation as it relates to unrecorded performances of the past is not an easy task. The problem is compounded by the fact that improvisation in Western art music has become a thing of the past; it is almost completely absent from current conservatory training. And because improvisation is ephemeral, and does not generate a permanent product, it has been conveniently neglected in music history. Garry Hagberg makes the problem clear: “. . . we can see that any conventional conception of the perception of the properties of an art work will be interestingly unsettled when that work is improvisational, precisely because the properties it exhibits are not fixed.”

At the start of this investigation, I shared the general assumption that improvisation as a part of performance practice in Western art music, with the exception of organ preluding and the obligatory concerto cadenza, virtually disappeared after Beethoven’s death. On the contrary, my research has revealed that improvisation (especially at the solo piano) continued to flourish until the middle of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the early nineteenth century witnessed a meteoric rise in the popularity of improvisation. The improvisers included not only Beethoven and his contemporaries such as Hummel and Steibelt, but musicians of the subsequent generation such as Moscheles and Czerny. The tradition can be seen coming to its fruition with the celebrated accounts of Liszt’s improvisations toward the middle of the century. It was only during the second half of the century when improvisation as a part of performance practice underwent a sharp decline and did virtually disappear.

This paper addresses improvisatory performance practices, the level of pervasiveness, and eventual decline of solo piano improvisatory practices in the nineteenth century, with special attention given to Felix Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann. The change in the aesthetic values with regard to improvisation throughout the nineteenth century is a complex problem. It seems paradoxical that two of the greatest improvisers of the era, Felix and Clara, while valuing and cultivating their improvisatory abilities, played a significant part in the ultimate decline of improvisation as a part of classical piano performance practice. In addition, I attempt to shed some light on certain aesthetic differences between improvised and non-improvised music which may have had an impact on the changing performing practice. As for a methodology, I consider three principal sources: reports about improvisations from the era, information about improvisation gleaned from contemporary treatises on the subject, and some remarkably unique notated improvisations.