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**WHY DON'T CLASSICAL MUSICIANS (learn to) IMPROVISE?**

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## 1. Introduction.

It is often stated that, in spite of a rich historic improvisational activity, classical musicians no longer improvise. But how can this statement be understood? If musicians don't improvise, why not? Who makes the decision? Is a decision in fact made?

In the first part of this essay I examine these questions by looking at the practice of classical music from an ideological perspective. To understand how, in general, people can be persuaded to act in certain ways, without compromising their own individual will, it is necessary to conceptualise the practice of classical music as a cultural institution with its own ideology - a set of commonly-held beliefs which are implicitly reinforced rather than explicitly stated. Statements and texts, programming and practice in general, I conclude reveal hidden or implicit beliefs about music, beliefs which prevail against the expression of natural appetites to improvise.

In the second section, I consider the specific ideology - the collection of beliefs - which guides the practice of classical music. In this respect I am heavily indebted to Goehr's (1994) rich and insightful analysis of musical practice, which charts the birth of the work-concept or *Werktreue* ideal, now central to modern music-making. As the word implies, the *Werktreue* ideal, proposes that musicians be true or faithful to the *created* work, or score. Of critical importance to the *Werktreue* ideal is the belief that scores themselves represent the transcendental creative act of a composer - a belief which has led to attitudes of reverence towards scores and a division of labour amongst musicians between composers who create original works, and performers who specialise in interpreting such works. I conclude with an analysis of the *Werktreue* principle in relation to improvisation, showing how this principle with its associated ideology removes the contexts in which improvisation can be practised and learnt.

In the third part of the essay I address the fact that, for musicians steeped in the ideology of the *Werktreue* principle, the transition to improvising is not a comfortable or straightforward one, requiring considerable changes of attitude and beliefs. I examine literature in the fields of learning, attention, role models and personality types to illustrate some of the emotional barriers which await

the experience of classically-trained musicians as they attempt to improvise. In spite of much recent literature which examine improvisation from a range of perspectives, there is little consideration given to the emotional aspects of learning, yet I believe it is unlikely that musicians will succeed in developing the cognitive skills of improvisation if their experience is valenced towards negative feelings of frustration, shame and embarrassment.

## **2. Don't classical musicians improvise?**

My title “Why don't classical musicians improvise?” might seem somewhat provocative. Perhaps, it could be modified to “Why don't *more* classical musicians improvise?”, but the same objections could be raised. After all, many classical musicians do improvise, and at a very public level: names like Gabriella Monteiro and Robert Levin immediately spring to mind. Gottfried von der Goltz and others improvise in a historic Baroque style; improvisation also remains a staple item in the curriculum of organ classes, particularly in France and Germany, and it is not unknown for this to influence other departments, such as the piano department of the Hochschule in Stuttgart (Jürgen Essl, personal communication, 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2016). The appointment of prominent improvising classical musicians, for example David Dolan, to work with specialist musicians at the Yehudi Menuhin School, and with tertiary-level students at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (GSMD); the founding of a Centre for Creative Performance & Classical Improvisation in 2006 within the GSMD, and the recent inclusion of improvisation as film accompaniment at the Royal Academy of Music's *Summer Piano School*, all testify to the existence of improvisational activity within the institutions of learning in classical music; while in the wider world of online instrumental learning courses, methods which employ improvisation to achieve their results (i.e. [www.pianoforall.com](http://www.pianoforall.com)) are prominently advertised.

Statements such as: ‘The “it” in question is improvisation, which is, despite years of neglect, making something of a comeback in classical music’ Midgette (2015), perhaps argue against my title. Is improvisation making a comeback? If so, then, logically speaking, it must be coming back

from a something! Certainly, statements such as the following: ‘Ask a classical musician to improvise and the likely response will range from “What’s wrong with the written score?” to “I don’t play jazz” Dolan, D. (2005, p.91); or ‘ ... the puzzling fact that improvisatory performance has ceased to interest a majority of conservatory-trained musicians, despite the fact that performers of European art music in previous centuries exhibited considerable interest in improvisation, and continued to consider it an important musical skill until at least 1840’, (Moore, 1992, p.61), offer a different perspective, one in which improvisation is far from current. Even more bleak is Bailey (1993): ‘The petrifying effect of European classical music on those things it touches ... made the prospect of finding improvisation there pretty remote. Formal, precious, self-absorbed, pompous, harbouring rigid conventions and carefully preserved hierarchical distinctions; obsessed with its geniuses and their timeless masterpieces, shunning the accidental’ (p.19).

Bailey’s words reflect beliefs about classical musicians which are so common as to be stereotypic; at the same time these kind of statements offer little in the way of explanation. Why do musicians respond in this way to the challenge of improvisation? Has improvisation really ‘ceased to interest conservatory-trained musicians’? If so, then a hugely important, intuitive and creative side of musical practice is lacking from musicians’ consciousness, an approach to music which is central to other genres (not only jazz), and historically-speaking, was once central to classical music itself. Do classical musicians themselves not notice this? After all, many professional musicians devote their lives and careers to perfecting their musical art. Is it fair to describe their work as the ‘shunning of the accidental’? In fact we might reasonably ask if these kind of comments convincingly describe a general trend in behaviour within a cultural practice, and not are not simply individually biased opinions.

## **2.1. A critical glance at classical music as cultural practice.**

If we turn away from critical statements of classical musicians and observe instead the normal ways in which classical music is practised, we can see that the usual forms of performance

(solo recitals, chamber music and orchestral concerts) rarely include an item of improvisation however varied or innovative the programming might be. In fact, when improvisation *does* occur in performance contexts, it is clearly treated as a special or unusual event. When musicians such as Gabriela Montero or Robert Levin do improvise, their performances invariably evoke ‘the wide-eyed celebration of surprise, shock, and awe...’, as Peters (2012, p.7) cynically remarks. Even in the organ world which uniquely retains a pedagogy and practice of improvisation, organists who improvise their recitals are able to build their reputations on this skill.

Again, if improvisation was a popular, current or even normal activity, why is it surrounded by so much mystery? Even in the field of cognitive science, research almost invariably starts from a position of total ignorance. As an illustration, Berkowitz’s (2010) opening questions are typical:

- ‘1. What is this knowledge - that is, what are the elements and processes of which it is comprised?
2. How is this knowledge acquired and internalised?
3. How is this knowledge used in performance?’

Perhaps if we examine historic forms of music we might find evidence of improvisation? In particular the figured bass keyboard accompaniments, embellishments and cadenzas of the Baroque and early Classical repertoire clearly require that the performer would contribute something personal and improvised to the performance. Is it not surprising then that classical performers now resort to composed versions of incomplete scores? Or that such practice is common, even amongst specialists in historically-informed or ‘authentic’ performance (see Rubinoff, 2009 for a critical commentary). For example, Peter Walls (1996) review essay of eleven different period instrument recordings of Corelli’s op. 5 sonatas for violin (or recorder), notes that performers are inclined to accept the written out decorations of Estienne Roger as ‘exemplary’ in spite of their dubious claim to authenticity, and that ‘where the Roger version all but retreats to the original line, violinists seem generally reluctant to take up what might have been seen as an implicit challenge’ (p.138) i.e. to embellish the solo line themselves.

Another area which reveals both explicit and implicit values of cultural practice, are the contexts in which practitioners are evaluated: in the most extreme test of performance skills - the international competitions on which careers are launched - not only is improvisation excluded, it would most likely be penalised<sup>1</sup>. A noteworthy exception, is the Montreal Piano Competition (2015) which announced itself as the first international competition to award a prize for improvisation. As international competitions reflect a more intense form of the usual methods of assessment in classical music, is it not reasonable to assume that for most musicians trained in performance, the values under which they are assessed - from childhood examinations (ABRSM exams for example, only allow improvisation in jazz exams) through to the assessments of music institutions and the auditions of professional life itself - it is only the accurate performance of the classical repertoire is specified and required.

Perhaps the most telling indication of attitudes towards improvisation is the words of classical musicians themselves. In a survey (Rea, 2015) of approximately eighty classical music students within the very institution (GSMD) which saw the creation of David Dolan's *Centre for classical improvisation and creative performance* not one student mentions improvisation when asked: 'What makes an exciting musician?' (p.199). Indeed their answers only explore the question within the boundaries of interpretation, for example: 'Interesting interpretation, Command of the audience, Totally, technically accurate, Honesty - honest interpretation without being over sentimental, ...' (Rea, 2015, p.199). An 'exciting musician' then, for these classical musicians, it seems can only be imagined within certain delineated bounds. But their responses pose further questions: Why does musical practice operate within these boundaries? Who created them and to what purpose? Why does it seem so natural for the musicians and even the researcher himself, to accept such boundaries without questioning the restriction it places on musical activity and imagination?

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<sup>1</sup>. Glenn Gould's 1966 critique of an international violin competition *We who are about to be disqualified salute you*, notes that even 'originality must at all costs be discouraged' (Gould, 1987, p.254).

## 2.2 Ideology functioning as a regulative force.

If classical musicians don't improvise, why? Why turn away from creative practices which extend to the earliest practices of music. There is no explicit ban on improvisation, so what influences the decisions of so many individuals not to improvise? To explain this, I believe we need to introduce the concept of *ideology*, through which we can understand how a collection of certain beliefs about music, operating psychologically, regulates, restricts and controls the ways in which classical music is practised.

In his essay on Ideology (1971, p.143), the social critic and Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser describes how 'distinct and specialised institutions' operate 'massively and predominantly' by ideology. In other words, when people act within the ambit of an 'institution,' (i.e., the family, institutions of learning, of religion, culture, media etc.) then they are naturally compelled to act in accordance with a collection of ideas or commonly-held beliefs. Such ideas need not be explicitly stated (except under conditions of threat or challenge) because (1) they are implicitly stated through the behaviours, texts and language of all those who consciously associate themselves with the institution in question; (2) they are historically situated in a practice which 'which transcends the limits of one's own span of life in both directions' (Assman, 2015, p.326). This last point is important because it explains that cultural practice pre-empts any individual's consciousness of that practice. Thus, the learning of music for example, cannot be detached from learning the *practice* of music - the common acts and rituals of music, the behaviour of musicians, listeners, consumers and so on - in which beliefs about that practice are implicit; therefore, it cannot be thought of as the acquisition of objective knowledge, because the learning process automatically includes communicating how that knowledge is used and valued. As Althusser describes, objective knowledge is presented 'in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice' (Althusser, 1970).

Specifically, in the case of culture, this has been described as knowledge 'with an "identity-index"' (Assman, 2015, p.325) because it also describes how people should behave within a cultural

practice. In this way, culture can be described as ‘a sense-producing institution’ providing a ‘specifically human form of temporal orientation’ (Assman, 2015 p.326). For example, as I became aware of my ambitions to be a pianist, I also became aware of modes or patterns of behaviour through which I can assert this identity as a specifically classical pianist; thus by aligning my behaviour with such patterns I too hope to belong to a cultural practice which recognises me as a pianist. In this way, as Althusser stresses, ideology need not be spoken, ‘this existence [of ideology] is material’ - it is what people do to show that they also believe what others believe. ‘Indeed, if he does not do what he ought to do as a function of what he believes, it is because he does something else, which, still as a function of the same idealist scheme, implies that he has other ideas in his head as well as those he proclaims, and that he acts according to these other ideas, as a man who is either ‘inconsistent’ ... or cynical, or perverse’ (Althusser, 1971).

Assman in turn, describes ideology in terms of collective memory: ‘Groups do not “have” a memory in the way individuals do, but they “make” themselves a memory by erecting monuments and by developing a variety of cultural (mnemo-)techniques that support memory or promote forgetting’ (p.332). Such an interpretation of ideology stresses the importance with which institutions strive to maintain links with the past. It is, however, a knowledge of the past which is highly selective ‘based on fixed points in the past’ (p.334) and mediated by present needs. As Assman explains: ‘as a social construction, the past conveys a kind of connective structure or diachronic identity to societies, groups, and individuals, both in the social and in the temporal dimension’ (p.328). The importance of the past in cultural memory (socially constructed knowledge) it seems cannot be underestimated. The past gives value to the actions of the present, and such value (taking the form of ideology) is reinforced through ritual modes of behaviour. In classical music, such ritualised behaviours are particularly noticeable: in public performance represented by the dress codes of orchestras, the behaviour of musicians on stage, the listeners in the audience and so on; behaviour which is usually emulated, although in diluted form, wherever classical music is practised.

One final observation about ideology which is particularly insightful: Althusser (1971) talks

of a process of ‘interpellation’, where by individuals naturally and willingly identify with the beliefs of ideology: ‘It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes (without appearing to do so, since these are ‘obviousnesses’) obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot *fail to recognise* and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the ‘still, small voice of conscience’): “That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!”’ (Althusser, 1971, p.172). Althusser’s description of ‘interpellation’ also accords with Riley (2011) who describes the necessity for individuals to perceive their own development within the confines of a social system: ‘... the pursuit of particular interests depends on the existence of an integrated system of needs ... from the perspective of the individual in civil society this “system of needs” remains invisible as a system. When, however, the individual achieves an insight into the conditions that make his own individual freedom possible .. this leads to an understanding of a broader universal or social system that makes his or her freedom possible ...’ (Riley, 2011, Ethical life and reason section, para. 5). The ease with which individuals voluntarily accept a mediated freedom is only possible if we understand how difficult it is to identify ideology *as* ideology. In fact, ideology appears in almost every form of universal value - i.e. ambition, honour, integrity, etc. - without revealing its ultimate function, which is to regulate individual behaviour through consent. As Hegel asserts, people embrace ideology - the universal cause - ‘even as their own *substantial spirit* , and *actively pursue it* as their *ultimate end*.’ (Hegel, 1991, p.282).

It remains now to look at the particular ideology of classical music, the set of beliefs, which, through historical developments in aesthetical thought (1750-1850) accompanied by profound social change (1800 until the present day), came to regulate by consent, the behaviour of general practice of classical musicians.

### **3. Towards an ideology of classical music.**

#### **3.1 Changes in aesthetics, 1750 - 1850.**

In *The Invisible Masterpiece*, Belting & Atkins (2001) describe a curiously new attitude to-

wards art, manifested in a cult worship for Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* in Dresden during the 18<sup>th</sup> century: 'In effect, the Germans created the work anew. At that time no other work in Germany so visibly embodied the essence of art. People were fascinated by the concrete presence of a *work* in which an *idea* of art had crystallised with such clarity' (Belting & Atkins, 2001, p.53). What was revolutionary was the feelings people were learning to associate with the contemplation of art on its own terms. Such feelings involved an act of contemplation, a spiritual search for an experience which transcended the usual or everyday. Similar feelings were being described in relation to nature. In 1757, Edmund Burke described 'The passion caused by the great sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its notions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor in consequence reason on that object ...' (Burke 1757, cited in Crowther, 1993, p.118).

### **3.2 A new 'artistic' aesthetic.**

The growth of specific feelings associated with art and with nature are not unrelated. With the decline of religion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, art was in need of a new aesthetic and a new meaning as Belting & Atkins (2001) explain: '.. now art, remaining alone in the place once occupied by religion, had to be written about in a radically new way. Amid the turbulent beginnings of bourgeois culture, absolute art was the reverse side of an art that had been relieved of all its previous functions..' (p.60). The worship of nature seemed to provide such an aesthetic, but more than copying the visual effects of natural beauty was required; to become truly natural, art had to copy the generative forces of nature - to become a law unto itself. As Kant remarked in 1790, 'In a product of beautiful art we must become conscious that it is Art and not Nature; but yet the purposiveness in its form must seem to be as free from all constraint of arbitrary rules as if it were a product of mere nature (1914, p.187). Such ideals could only be pursued by artists who were free of the yoke of patronage, as was increasingly the case in art and music throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and, in the in-

stability of their new found freedom were themselves eager to establish the value of their work in purely artistic terms (Gombrich, 1964).

### **3.3 Art is separated from mere craft.**

One of the results of the appearance of these new aesthetical goals, was the separation or delineation of art, ‘Art with a capital A’ (Gombrich, 1964, p.377), from mere craft. ‘Craft products were good because of their function in the everyday world. Art was beautiful because, among other things, and as it would soon be expressed by romantic theorists, it could transport us to higher, aesthetic realms’ (Goehr, 1994, p.152). It seems strange to imagine that artists and musicians, for centuries previously, *had* been seemingly content with the idea of ‘mere craft’, but, this may have been because all kinds of artistic endeavour had been in the service of other ideologies. Music in particular had received its meaning through the setting of texts (reflecting the ideology of religion) or through accompanying the social functions of the aristocracy (the ideology of the ruling classes). With the emancipation of art from these institutions, art itself (if we accept Althusser’s critique of social bodies and their necessary functioning through ideology), had to develop an ideology of its own, an ideology that would soon be associated with a new type of aesthetic experience, described through concepts of the Beautiful and the Sublime by philosophers such as Kant (1790) and Burke (1757).

How did these significant changes in thinking about art affect the actual conditions of music-making? To answer this question, we must look at the musical practice of the preceding years, the late baroque and early classical era, in which improvisation was still an intrinsic and important part of musical practice.

### **3.4 Interlude: illustrating an historical and improvisatory musical practice.**

Under conditions of patronage, in which musicians served the church or the court, the creation of music for public performance was associated with the events of these institutions. As Goehr

(1994) explains: ‘The idea that one first composed a work which then was publicly performed here and there hardly existed. It could not therefore regulate the public activities of composers. This idea hardly even regulated their private activities ... For most music privately composed was written for purposes of private exercise, learning, and pleasurable entertainment, so that it was not always even expected that it would travel from one performer’s hands to another’ (Goehr, 1994, p.179). Any aesthetic consideration or *meaning* concerning the music, under these conditions, passed over into the use to which the music was put. If, for example, music was composed to set the text of a *Kyrie eleison*, then that music was associated with the meaning of this text and any other beliefs associated with that text; for music composed to accompany social events of the aristocracy, extra importance would emanate from the status of the persons attending. It is interesting to note that after these events, the music would be laid aside and either forgotten, or recomposed to suit the particular requirements of future events. The practicality of these arrangements meant that music was composed for the here and now, rather than for posterity, and composers like other craftsman were expected to produce music to order. Even a composer such as J.S.Bach (now regarded as one of the principle figures of classical music) ‘... had good reason to assume that his successors would not perform the works he wrote any more frequently than he performed compositions written by his predecessors; and indeed his works were as promptly laid aside when he died as theirs had been ...’ (David & Mendel, 1998 in Goehr, 1994, p.186).

Musical instruction was practically orientated towards the production of ‘adaptable and functional music’ (Goehr, 1994, p.186) and was learnt through master-apprentice relationships - at *the hands* of one more advanced in the trade. (Once again, J.S. Bach’s training through family members provides a typical example). Theory - harmonisation, counterpoint and form - could be learnt through studying the works of others, and employing these works as models. In fact, it was quite natural for musicians to ‘view scores as exemplars, in which it was shown *what could be done* as a starting point for further composition’ (Jürgen Essl, personal communication, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016). In the Neapolitan keyboard school of *partimenti*, all such theoretical considerations are illustrated

through improvisation. Such scores as were used in this training show only a bass line, figured occasionally to clarify harmonies. In Naples, as elsewhere, scholars learnt to construct musical textures above these bass lines by example, developing their skills through trial and error. Thus, every element of learning was learnt through the fingers, practically, through structured exercises in improvisation.

It's interesting that improvisation was still regarded as a valid skill, equal if not inseparable from composition until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. 'When Mozart and Clementi engaged in an extemporisation competition in 1781, few present, if any at all, thought that extemporisation was a strict alternative to the pre-composition of music, and few degraded it for being of lesser value than other forms of composition. Indeed, it was considered an enormous achievement and convenience to be able to produce well-composed music on command' (Goehr, 1994, p.189). Yet changes in the social position of composers are already represented by Mozart and Clementi, who, free from patronage, were in a position to pursue art on their own terms, and to compose music which expressed new aesthetic beliefs and ideals.

### **3.5 Social changes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century embrace the new aesthetics.**

The fact that musicians were free to choose and express their own beliefs rather than those of their masters, represents what Gombrich (1964) calls 'the break in tradition' which 'was bound to change the whole situation in which artists lived and worked. The academies and exhibitions, the critics and connoisseurs, had done their best to introduce a distinction between Art with a capital A and the mere exercise of a craft, be it that of the painter or builder. Now the foundations on which art rested throughout its existence were being undermined from another side. The Industrial Revolution began to destroy the very traditions of solid craftsmanship; handiwork gave way to machine production, the workshop to the factory' (p.377). Changes to the constructions of society led to increased numbers of citizens - the middle or trade classes, who had an interest in classical music along with all forms of high art. As Moore (1992) explains: 'Performance contexts for Western art

music reflected these changes by shifting from the court to the middle class parlour, and eventually to the public auditorium. No longer confined to a particular cultural context or group, art music became an aristocratically-derived commodity, a product which anyone could 'consume' if they cared to expend the time and money' (p.69). Most telling, was the influence these new consumers had on musical pedagogy. New academies and conservatoires (i.e. the Royal Academy of Music in London, the Paris Conservatoire), were established to provide professional tuition to 'aspiring middle-class performers' (Moore, 1992, p.71). As a result, the very language of music tuition takes on a distant, didactic tone: '... if you are tonally deaf to lovely sound qualities there is very little hope for you' (p.17) advises the pianist Josef Lhevinne (1971); and 'Woe be to you if your movement is not possessed of absolute regularity, if your will does not manifest itself with energy at each respiration of the musical phrase' (Widor, 1901, p.64).

In 1790, Emanuel Kant had proposed that the quality of originality was the product of genius and thus essential to the realisation of fine or real Art: 'Genius is the talent (or natural gift) which gives the rule to Art. Since talent, as the innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to Nature, we may express the matter thus: Genius is the innate mental disposition (ingenium) through which Nature gives the rule to Art' (Kant, 1914, p.188). In the production of music, the importance of originality of expression began to affect how composers viewed their compositions, as Goehr (1994) explains: 'When composers began to individuate works as embodied expressions and products of their activities, they were quickly persuaded that that fact generated a right of ownership of those works to themselves (p.218). Instead of the free trade and exchangeable nature of the Baroque practice of musical composition, music then had to be protected through new copyright laws from 'plagiarism' which penalised the open borrowing of another's musical ideas.

The arrival of copyright laws (the first to be passed were in France, 1793) reflect a profound change towards the process of musical composition. They reveal the fact that composers were viewing their compositions 'as ends in themselves' (Goehr, 1994, p.218), that musical works could be compared to fine art 'as discrete, perfectly formed, and completed products' (ibid., p.222). As soci-

ety began to perceive composers as original creators of works of genius, so did it become necessary to devise new ways to appreciate and consume music as fine art. Dedicated concert halls appeared in which music could be heard respectfully, in silence; the founding of conservatoires, professional orchestras and musical societies all testify to a new and active industry in which music, as an elevated art form, can be disseminated, taught and appreciated.

As composers learnt to focus on the score as the outcome of their creativity, rather than a particular performance, so scores themselves became more complete, finished, and accurate. Scores, in effect, had to be capable of informing all possible future performances, in which the composer, in contrast to all previous eras of musical practice, was no longer directly involved. By removing the composer from necessary involvement in performance, a division of labour occurred between composer and performer: the one responsible for creating a fine art work of original genius, the other responsible for its actual presentation before the public. As a result of composers' claim to originality and the possession of genius (transcendent powers), a demand for specialised performers and specialised musical events (such as the solo recital which grew in popularity through the 19<sup>th</sup> century) arose in which accurate and faithful renditions of musical works could be aesthetically enjoyed.

Through these developments, the establishment of *Werktreue* ideals - the principal of being true to the work - became established in the practice of classical music. For, in effect, performers (the majority of musicians, who were conceptually divided from the creative activity of composition) were now restricted to the faithful and accurate renditions of published works, and this pursuit - the idealised presentation of others' works - would, from now on represent the sufficiency of musical goals for performers, whose creativity beyond a professional-level of interpretation was not needed or desired.

### **3.6 Summary of an ideology for art music.**

The importance of these historic developments cannot, in my opinion, be overstated, as they established fundamental beliefs about music which continue to inform the practice of classical mu-

sic today. Attitudes towards aesthetics and the production of art and music, originating in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and integrated into musical practice through social developments of the 19<sup>th</sup>, have only been intensified through the following years as the gap between composer and performer becomes wider. As a specifically musical culture with accompanying ideology emerged, so did that culture become a ‘sense-producing institution’ as already described by Jan Assman (2015). In every act of ‘classical’ music as distinct from other musics, links to the historic developments I have described are reinstated. As Assman explains: collectively, socially, culture operates as ‘a form of memory that provides meaning and orientation in a wider, even multimillennial temporal dimension’ (p.327).

### **3.7 Improvisation under the principle of *Werktreue*.**

It would be churlish to assert that the idealised attitudes towards composition and performance which I have described had a wholly negative effect on musical practice. This would be to discount a huge corpus of music, much of which was inspired by such ideals; in addition, the ever-increasing standard of performance associated with classical music practice since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, owes much to the rigours of *Werktreue*. As Gould (1987) remarks in his critique of modern competitions: ‘It would be foolish to discriminate against a level of competence without which our musical life would be the poorer’ (p.254).

Yet there is no doubt that the effect of *Werktreue* attitudes and other developments have discriminated against the practice of improvisation, as will be seen through the following summary.

### **3.8 Effect of *Werktreue* principle and associated ideology on improvisational practice**

1. As art replaces religion in terms of spiritual feelings; people look to art as a means to a specific aesthetic experience. Such experience is associated with a new regard for the grandeur of the natural world, the laws of which can be intuited through contemplation and communion. Music, particularly instrumental music is thought to transcend everyday, extra-musical associations and be suitable to this new religious style of artistic experience. As a result, the act of

composition becomes considerably more self-conscious; artists are concerned with self-expression and their compositions take on ‘a kind of *untouchability* which, translated into concrete terms, meant that persons could no longer tamper with composers’ works (Goehr, 1994, p.222). Improvisation, under these terms takes on the appearance of vandalism, an act both immoral and presumptuous. For example, Newman (1986): I do believe that where we have an original *cadenza* it should be considered “sacrosanct” and not be replaced by a transplant that is bound to be inferior in invention, style and form’ (p.258).

2. Improvisation, which flourished through the practice of music as a craft, that is the rapid production of music for events and performances, suffers under a new distinction of music as fine Art. As music rejects its dependence on external meanings, and searches instead for *internal* meaning, the perception of its formal or structural elements takes on greater significance, as it is through the perception of these very elements that aesthetic experience is thought to depend. Ultimately, as Goehr (1994) suggests: ‘everything in a work of art, it was believed, is put there for a reason’ (p.172). An improvisation, created *ad hoc* or through techniques of *bricolage*, in the moment of performance, could only with difficulty aspire to such conditions of internal coherence. What then can improvised music offer listeners who eagerly scan internal forms in the expectation of perceiving musical meaning?

3. The perception that music could express eternal or transcendent meaning in the same way as the plastic arts, led to the belief that compositions should take on concrete and permanent forms in a similar way to the masterpieces of painting and sculpture. In the belief that ‘... a perfect work of art carries eternity within itself ...’ Belting & Atkins (2001, p.62), the act of composition became conceptually separate from performance; published scores now aimed at the highest degree of exactitude, and the lowly performer was simply expected to interpret a composer’s instructions as represented by the score. The highest aspiration of performance therefore

became transparency, in which every indication of the score becomes realised in the performance. As Berlioz admiringly remarked of Liszt's performance of Beethoven: 'not a note was left out, not one added (I followed, score in hand), no inflection was effaced, no change of tempo permitted ...' (Berlioz, 1836, in Schonberg, H.C., 2006, p.171). Whereas previously, improvisation was inseparable from both composition and performance, the new practice (still extant in contemporary practice) theoretically eliminates improvised or chance acts from both disciplines.

4. Developments in music through the 20<sup>th</sup> century confirm the establishment of *Werktreue* as the ideal for performance, and witness the further retreat of the composer into symbolic and abstract creativity. Musical training throughout society becomes firmly orientated towards the conservatoire, (as shown by the prevalence and popularity worldwide of examinations, for example of The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, and other London colleges). One effect of such training is to confirm the division of labour previously mentioned, between composer and performer; to learn music is to be trained by default as a performer-interpreter, and to follow *Werktreue* ideals of respect for the score and transparency in performance; such aspects are reinforced through the multiplicity of competitions and the rise of the recording industry. In the academies themselves, a succession of styles of new music (-isms), further distance musical creativity away from the incertitude of improvisation, the hands of performers, of amateurs, or indeed 'any reference to everyday musical experience' (Moore, 1992, p.77).<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. Emotional barriers to improvisation, as a result of *Werktreue*.**

"That's great that you are recreating a similar performance context through commissioning new works.. but Beethoven also improvised as well as composed. Have you considered improvising?" I asked. I caught a flicker of fear in his eyes before he quickly looked away and

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<sup>2</sup> This highly abstract artistic approach is taken to its logical extreme by 'early *futurismo* advocate Ortega y Gasset, writing in the 1920s, expresses these ideals, asserting that the artificiality of any medium, the extent to which it is not formally related to other facets of life experience, is the actual extent to which it should be considered art. Rather than conceiving of art as multifaceted, and capable of evoking emotional and other associative responses, he accepts as valid only its aesthetic components' (Moore, 1992, p.77)

answered abruptly “I’m not an improviser.”

#### **4.1 The emotions of learning to improvise.**

Thackray, R. M. (1965, p.15). As in many creative activities, getting started is one of the chief difficulties. This applies even more to the older student, who may be more self-conscious, than to the young child. A person who has never done any form of musical improvisation, who is suddenly asked to attempt it, may well feel embarrassed.

The process of learning to improvise is an area of particular emotional vulnerability for classical musicians. A sense of shame and embarrassment often accompanies early attempts at creating, especially for those who already possess expertise in performance; as Woosley (2012) explains: ‘when a classical pianist attempts improvisation, there can be a tendency to immediately compare the improvised music to works of the standard repertoire’ (p.10). The cognitive transition then, from intensive, detailed interpretation of given material, to creating one’s own material is exacerbated by emotional responses, as Rubinoff’s (2009) report illustrates: ‘Realising that his student seemed very tense, the teacher asked us to stop playing; he suggested that she just try improvising over the passage in question (a standard progression in E minor), and invited me to join in. Rather than relax the student, however, this only had the opposite effect: she was clearly uncomfortable and found herself unable to play at all ...’ (p.90). While Rubinoff’s account suggests a supportive environment in which to improvise, one can only conjecture that classical musicians might more often encounter unwelcome attention, criticism and even prohibition<sup>3</sup> when attempting such an uncommon or outlandish act as improvisation. In hostile environments, contexts in which classical musicians perceive others’ reactions as threatening, no doubt feelings of shame and embarrassment would be intensified, at least to the point of discouraging any attempt at learning to improvise, or to experiment and develop skills of improvisation.

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<sup>3</sup> In the course of my research a number of musicians have recounted stories of their instrumental teachers forbidding them to improvise.

Research completed by Reinhard Pekrun and colleagues (Pekrun et al., 2002; 2011; Pekrun, Goetz & Perry, 2005) provides a rich source of information concerning so called ‘academic emotions’ indicating the influence of emotion on motivation, learning strategies, cognitive resources (and) self-regulation’ (Pekrun et al., 2002, p.91). Of note, is their recognition of single emotions interacting in ambivalent or opposing ways: ‘The effects of positive deactivating as well as negative activating emotions, on the other hand, may be equivocal. Positive deactivating emotions may be detrimental for immediate performance, but may be beneficial by reinforcing long-term motivation to invest effort. Negative activating emotions such as anger and anxiety may impair achievement by reducing intrinsic motivation and producing task-irrelevant thinking, but they may also benefit achievement by strengthening extrinsic motivation’ (Pekrun et al., 2002, p.98).

The significance of considering emotional states at all stages of learning can also be justified because emotions during improvisation can, to a great extent, lead the learning process through *operant conditioning*. In this theory, behaviour of individuals is ‘shaped by its consequences’ Bloom and Lazerson (1988, p.260). If the experience is positive it will tend to be repeated, if the experience is negative, it will not be repeated. As Bloom and Lazerson (1988) explain: This basic principle is extremely important in determining what behaviours an animal or person will learn and remember’ (p.260). For example, Aragão’s (2011) research into adult students learning a second language, reveals the way in which emotions and beliefs (both self-beliefs and beliefs about the learning process) shaped the learning process itself. (The experience of language learning is often compared to improvisation (see Berkowitz, 2010, for detailed analysis), though usually such accounts are concerned only with cognitive processes of skill acquisition). Aragão’s interest in learning emotions is unusual as researchers discussing second-language acquisition (i.e. Reber, 1993; Cook, 1986; Corder, 1981) rarely consider the influence of emotions. Yet, as Aragão explains: ‘... there is a tight relationship between beliefs and emotions in foreign language learning. Observing and researching this interplay is important for understanding students’ actions in class. Feelings like shame, fear and inhibition are strongly associated with beliefs about students’ self-concepts in the

foreign language classroom. They believed themselves to be “inferior” to idealised models’ (p.307). Such considerations have particular relevance to the acquisition of improvisatory skills (i.e. L2) for classical musicians, who already possess expertise in performance (i.e. L1); indeed the feelings of inferiority could naturally transfer to situations in which musicians believe their improvising is ‘inferior’ to the canonic masterpieces of classical composition?

#### **4.2 The effect of emotion on attention:**

Successfully maintaining our focus of attention towards task-relevant goals and away from distracting, task-irrelevant stimuli, is critical to the success of our actions, particularly during a complex task like improvisation. Research into attention indicates that in the execution of complex tasks, the goals of an individual’s focus are greatly influenced by emotion (Posner & Petersen, 1990; Pekrun et al., 2002, Anderson, 1982). As Pekrun and colleagues explain: (2002, p.96). ‘Emotions serve functions of directing attention toward the object of emotion, implying that they use cognitive resources and can distract attention away from tasks’. The influence of emotion on the goals of attention range from quite subtle mood-related effects: ‘attention and recall can be focused on positive self-efficacy information in a positive mood and on negative information in a negative mood’ (p.97), or more dramatic situations, in which an individual feels personally threatened. In the latter situation, referred to as ‘involuntary orienting’ (Luria, 1973, in Posner & Petersen, 1990, p.33), the perception of threat claims a person’s attentional resources causing interference with attentional processes required for the task in hand.

In fact, the perception of threat (in this case social rather than physical threat) seems to be a predominant cause for distraction and cognitive interference. Interestingly, maintaining focus away from threat perception may not be simply a question of conscious will-power, as individuals may become unconsciously aware of potentially threatening stimuli, as shown in studies of dichotic listening. For example, Mathews (1993): ‘Prior to our attention being attracted to a particular stimulus, data from the environment must be automatically processed to some extent, to allow selection

of significant information' (p.119). If unconscious, the individual may have limited control over their own focus of attention, particularly in social contexts where the perception of threat is habitual or learnt. In fact, for musicians who are particularly sensitive to criticism may suffer more when attempting to improvise, particularly in contexts in which attitudes towards improvisation are not sympathetic; again, as Mathews (1993) explains: '...highly anxious individuals are characterised by a combination of attentional vigilance, an interpretive bias favouring the selection of threatening stimuli, but also by partially successful attempts to avoid further elaborative processing of that information... Increased subjective risk is likely to lead to increased anxiety levels, which in turn may reinforce or maintain the attentional vigilance effect. Indeed, any cognitive bias that has the effect of enhancing the selective processing of mood congruent information is potentially capable of producing such vicious circle effects' (p.120).<sup>4</sup>

To conclude, the perception of threat has a very significant effect on task performance, as Kahnemann (1973, in Eysenck 1982, p.108) and others have noted. Once the individual becomes aware of a potential threat stimulus, their focus of attention changes from task-relevant goals (i.e. the musical goals of improvisation) to evaluating 'the personal significance of that stimulus' (Mathews, 1993, p.119) and a sequence of further elaboration, i.e. . "What were they saying about me?" (ibid). Although the results of threat perception result in cognitive interference and degraded task performance, the source of the interference is clearly emotional in nature, and illustrates the importance of emotions in a task such as improvisation. The results of the interference, as the individual struggles to maintain focus, are described by Kahnemann (1973): '... anxious people engage in

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<sup>4</sup> In cognitive terms, the perception of threat alters the scope or range of attention. Under normal (unthreatened) conditions, the coordinated interaction of 'subcortical or more posterior brain regions involved in attentional mechanisms' (Foster, Eskes & Stuss, 1994, p.139) allow a person to monitor multiple task elements within a surrounding habitat. In improvisation, this could be described as attending to multiple aspects of musical form (rhythm, melody, relationships of consonance and dissonance within an historic style etc.) while attending to external factors of resonance, registration (if improvising on the organ) and other attributes of the instrument within an acoustic. This delicate spread of attention is alerted under conditions of threat to focus on 'a new need of high priority, the ongoing information processing is interrupted..' (Eysenck, M. W.,1982, p.1) and through the influence of anxiety, attention becomes fixed to the object and new goals associated with the threat. Eysenck, M.W. & Derakshan, N. (2011) attribute this fixating of attention to the inhibition of two mechanisms: the *shifting mechanism*, whereby attention is allocated 'in a flexible and optimal way to the task stimulus or stimuli that are currently most relevant', and the *inhibition mechanism* itself which 'prevents task-irrelevant stimuli and responses from disrupting performance' (p.956). In the case of task impairment through anxiety, these sequences of events repeat and intensify to produce a vicious cycle of low performance and increased effort and anxiety.

much task-irrelevant processing (e.g. the retrieval and analysis of anxiety-related information and the preparation of adequate coping strategies) over and above the processing demanded by the task itself. In essence, the anxious individual attempts to *compensate* for the performance decrements produced by task-irrelevant processing (e.g. worry) by means of an increase in attentional resources' (Kahnemann (1973, in Eysenck 1982, p.108). No doubt, such negatively-valenced experiences characterise a number of early attempts of improvisation, particularly for musicians in the socio-cultural contexts of classical music.

#### **4.3 Emotions inherent in Roles and Personality types.**

Watching an expert may well provide the initial motivation for a musician's involvement in improvisation. At some point, we become aware of how improvisation is done by other individuals, and the forms that improvisation takes in the wider practice of classical music. But what *are* the modern role models of improvisation? Goehr describes how, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, improvisation, conceptually detached from composition, found a niche of its own, as a vehicle for performers to indulge or display their abilities: Goehr, (1994, p.233) 'The practice [of improvisation] was based on the idea that performers could produce 'free and spontaneous' extemporised performances. If performers could not extemporise, they would compose or commission works designed just for virtuoso performance. Such free and spontaneous performance was defended on the grounds that it was inspirational and gave musicians immediate access to the world of transcendent truth.' Looking at the current styles of performance improvisation, it seems to me that similar ideas of virtuosity, spontaneity and a mystical kind of self-expression seem to predominate, and for similar reasons in that classical improvisers feel a tacit compulsion to justify their form of creativity alongside the far more authoritative form of composition.

In classical performance contexts then, improvisers often prepare audiences for a display of extreme risk or daring: for example, Robert Levin tells audiences to "fasten your seatbelts" (?); David Briggs announces his improvisation to be a composition in real time, while it is customary

for expert improvisers to take themes from the audience illustrating, like a magician, how nothing could be prepared beforehand. Statements made by professional improvisers, revealed through interviews with researchers (for example, Despres, 2016; Sawyer 1992, see also a special edition 25 5/6 of the *Contemporary Music Review*, 2006) often stress the ‘immediate access to the world of transcendent truth’ as mentioned by Goehr (1994). For example, “So [improvisation] is music, an extraordinary encounter, a state, a decision that both reveals your true self and wakes you up.” ... “I have realised this relationship with improvisation is an essential one. For years I wrote scores ... But one day, I realised, ... that there was something there that was essential, essential. The essential is this relationship with the mystery, which is called grace. That’s it” (Despres, 2016, p.175); or, “Improvisation is the art of becoming sound. It is the only art in which a human being can and must become the music he or she is making. It is the art of constant, attentive and dangerous living in every moment. It is the art of stepping outside of time, disappearing in it, becoming it” (Alvin Curran, in interview with Frances-Marie Uitti, p.483, 2006).

According to Ruddock (1969), the adoption of roles is inevitable if we wish our behaviour to be integrated into society, to be understood in social contexts: ‘All the component aspects of personality can be described in role terms ... As soon as the self becomes active in relation to others, it is involved in role behaviour, by definition (p.26). It is a behaviour which necessarily begins in childhood: ‘role requirements are imposed on the child and he has to learn to conform with them ...’ (p.27), and bears some resemblance to the process of ‘interpellation’ as identified by Althusser (1971). For, is it not often the case that our awareness of role models is the beginning of a process of adapting our own behaviour towards these idealised forms. That it is ultimately ideological, is because, in Althusser’s words, it is a solution to existence in the world, it ‘represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (Althusser, 1971).

The highly-idealised virtuoso role of the contemporary expert improviser strongly identifies classical improvisation as ‘an extreme sport’ (Peters, 2012, p.6), associated with risk-taking and remarkable or innate abilities. It is possibly the consciousness of this role that causes classical musi-

cians to feel ashamed or embarrassed of their own efforts when improvising, as expert improvisers seem to emerge with a ‘... discipline, control, and a sureness of touch’ (Peters, 2012, p.7) which belies the learning processes and extensive preparation involved. I would also attribute the prevalence of this role with the common assumption that improvisation is a natural calling, categorically separate from performance: “I’m not an improviser” is a common response to the suggestion to improvise in my experience. The prevalence of the virtuoso or ‘wizard’ role (as I prefer to call it), also discourages the development of other roles, ones in which improvisation would be less associated with expertise; for example, the practically-orientated improvisations of dance pianists and church organists rarely attracts the attention of musicians and researchers, yet both areas offer considerable opportunities for witnessing highly-developed skills and musical creativity. Historical practice too of the pre-Romantic eras offer further role models, for example roles in which individuals improvise as a means of musical or artistic development; as a process in which one could understand musical construction at first hand. These, and other modes of improvisation would I believe be considerably less stressful for learners than the dominant virtuoso ‘wizard’ role.

#### **4.4 Is Improvisation restricted to Personality Types?**

However, given that the ‘wizard’ role of expert improviser - brilliant, risk-taking, virtuosic - is perceived as the dominant (and most convincing) role model for the classical improviser in modern practice, then the comparison of this role with that of the performer trained in interpretation raises further questions. “Do I have the right type of personality for improvising?” is a perfectly feasible question a performer might ask themselves, on watching an expert improviser ask an audience for themes on which to spontaneously extemporise. Certainly researchers into the relationship between music and personality have noted that classical musicians tend to lack the extroverted interpersonal skills that public improvising would seem to demand. As Rea (2015) remarks: ‘with an increasing reverence for the score and a broadly introverted style of playing, it is nowadays acceptable [for performers] to appear to ignore the audience during the playing itself (p.199); while Bene-

dek (2014), who tested 120 musicians from various genres, found that ‘... folk musicians were found to be more extroverted than classical musicians and jazz musicians’ and that ‘classical musicians tend to be less open to new experiences than jazz musicians and folk musicians’ (p.119).

This would seem to bode ill for performance-trained musicians, yet one might rightly question this type of generalising of personality (can a shy person not possess an extroverted stage persona?). Perhaps it is more valid to compare the differing demands of the tasks themselves - interpretive performance, and performance improvisation of the ‘wizard’ type. As the previous sections of this paper have illustrated, the idealised interpretative performance under the principle of *Werktreue* aims at transparency, ‘... so that the truth or beauty of the work could be heard in itself’ (Goehr, 1994, p.236); thus, the interpretive performer’s personality is hidden behind the ‘personality’ of the composer, as revealed through the work itself. So naturally is this assumed to be the aim of interpretive performance, that statements such as ‘clearly, a musician’s personality should never distract from the music’ (Rea, 2015, p.200), usually go unnoticed. Yet, in improvised performances of the ‘wizard’ type, this relationship between performer and music is dramatically transformed, as the performer now becomes the focus of attention. Instead of being a spokesperson or conduit for another’s creativity, the improviser takes on the burden of composition (in real time) and crosses the carefully constructed dividing line between performance and creativity. Such an act invites the critical evaluation of listeners on many levels, particularly when an improvisation occurs as part of a programme of performed works (i.e. recognised canonic masterpieces).

I would argue that under these conditions, expert improvisers must possess significant psychological flexibility to enable them to deal effectively with the particular challenges of performance improvisation. Such skills may be more natural to some personalities than others, or simply learnt through the experience of improvising, as described by Mathews (1993, p.120): ‘... the voluntary adoption of a particular coping strategy can be seen as similar to a personality trait ... used by some individuals more than others; or as a transient option that is adopted by all or most people under appropriate circumstances.’ The actual mechanisms of coping with perceived threat invite more

discrimination of personality types, identified in medical research as *blunters* and *monitors*. For example, *blunters* tend to suppress uncomfortable speculation about threatening stimuli, while *monitors* ‘... not only engage in more intense and prolonged cognitive rehearsal of threat, but they also tend to focus more on their own negative affective state in response to aversive events’ (Miller, Combs & Kruus, 1993, p.62). Thus, qualities of self-belief (as a musician, as a performer, as an improviser) greatly characterise the particular acts of performance improvisation, in addition to advanced and flexible interpersonal communicative skills with an audience. So long as these distinctive types of improvised performance predominate, surely musicians who doubt their abilities in these fields - or at least to such a degree - will doubt their ability to improvise?

#### 4.5 Final conclusions

As a final word it might be argued that, just as individuals ‘... seek out and create environments that satisfy their basic psychological needs, so too might they seek auditory, or musical, environments that reflect and reinforce aspects of their personalities’ (Rentfrow & MacDonald, 2010, p.674). Thus, (under the *interactionist* model of personality development), one might suppose that more ‘introverted’ (see Rea, 2015) classical musicians contentedly and naturally gravitate towards *Werktreue* dominated interpretive performance (being fully aware of that style of music-making), while more extroverted, independent, ‘creative’ types develop a career as improvisers. Can we then conclude that expert improvisers possess a particular personality trait, while performers another?

Although I suspect that this assumption lies behind much research into improvisation, I have tried to show in this essay that the presence of ideology ruling, restricting and regulating the practice of classical music (as a cultural institution) argues a much more complex pathway towards improvisation than can be reduced to mere personality types. Indeed it’s true that current expert improvisers<sup>5</sup> in classical musical must develop their skills against the tide (Consider the criticism that awaits people who are accepted into cultural institutions (i.e. musical conservatoires and other insti-

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<sup>5</sup>This naturally excludes classical organists for whom improvisation is ‘a completely accepted and integrated part’ (Bailey, 1992, p.30) of their musicianship.

tutions of learning and performance) on the assumption that they share the beliefs of that culture and then begins to act in other ways, as Althusser (1971) notes: ‘... which, still as a function of the same idealist scheme, implies that he has other ideas in his head as well as those he proclaims, and that he acts according to these other ideas, as a man who is either ‘inconsistent’ ... or cynical, or perverse’.). Yet, to propose a personality type for improvisatory prowess does not consider the range of personality characteristics shown by current improvisers, nor the variety of social and musical backgrounds which constitute the biographies of expert improvisers; nor does one personality type account for the varying approaches, both psychological and musical of these improvisers. In summary, all of these factors can contribute to the development of widely varying coping strategies for the demands of performance improvisation.

To argue that classical performers naturally tend towards introversion, and (by implication) naturally away from improvisation, is to misunderstand the functioning of ideology, through which classical music exists. Improvisation, within classical musical practice, is no longer a normative pursuit, and, as such, requires some kind of justification by its practitioners. For most classical musicians, trained in interpretive performance, creativity is mediated through the goals of performance in the pursuit of which they will normally and naturally receive the support and encouragement of their peers. Yes, a musician is free to pursue their own interests, but it is a freedom mediated by ideology and cultural practice; and as Riley (2011, in Ethical Life and Reason section, para. 3) rightly remarks, ‘Mediated freedom is one’s self-awareness of the conditions in which it is possible to pursue one’s own interests.’ Under such conditions it is hardly surprising that classical musicians don’t improvise.

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