

The art of stylish organ improvisation

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Prologue

The spontaneous musical activity of a man was the main source from which the entire musical culture of humanity was born. Before musicians started composing repetitive works, improvised music was used both for entertainment and for the needs of worship. For centuries, along with the development of instruments, the development of playing techniques has continued. The adaptation of the organ for the use of the Western Church implied a dynamic development of this wonderful instrument. The flexibility of the liturgy meant that improvisation was the most optimal way of implementing live music during worship. In principle, until the early second half of the 19th century, improvisation was the dominant form of organ playing. At that time, where organs in concert halls were located (e.g. Albert Hall in Sheffield, The Royal Albert's Hall in London, Palais Trocadéro in Paris), and with the regular giving of concerts in such venues, printed organ literature began to appear more regularly.

The subject of this article is the issue of showing the methodology of the performer's approach to the art of stylish organ improvisation, which, after a period of stagnation at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, has been experiencing its renaissance in recent decades. Detailed analyses will be provided on the base of the 19th-century French symphonic era, but the same approach and methodology can be used for each epoch and each style.

Definitions

The dictionary definition of improvisation is "to compose a work of art on the spot, spontaneously, often under the influence of emotion or on a given topic, without any preparation".¹ The phenomenon of improvisation occurs in every field of art: in literature, music, theatre, or fine arts. Musical improvisation is a creation that combines elements of creativity and reproduction (performance)² in a spontaneous and one-off process.

In musical creativity, three types of improvisation are distinguished depending on the role of the performer-composer:

1. creativity based on a specific topic, in close communication with the form (e.g. fugue, variation, partita) or consisting in adding some of its elements to an existing work (e.g., parts, or implementation of basso continuo);

2. creativity consisting in introducing one's own part into an existing work (e.g. cadenza in an instrumental concert), and

3. creation which results in a completely new and independent work (e.g. free fantasy,³ impression).⁴

Improvisation includes the tension between the objectivity of a given model (form) and the subjectivity of spontaneous production.⁵

Musical improvisation, in the sense of experimenting, especially in monophonic cultures (e.g. Gregorian chant), was a phenomenon that preceded the formation of the first musical works: first tried out, then remembered and transmitted orally, and subsequently written. Improvisation is also credited with the rise of polyphony.⁶ Over the centuries, new forms and achievements owe their development to improvisation;

the treaties on improvisation began to emerge.⁷ The development of keyboard instruments, including organs, was particularly favourable to improvisation. For classical music, organists remain today's leading improvisers.⁸

Learning goals

As in every field of art, so it is in the case of organ improvisation; the key is improvisational talent, which according to many is an unteachable element⁹ but to others an educational process, is when fully taught possible to convey,¹⁰ aimed at shaping talent into a certain framework that allows the creator to communicate an artistic work with audiences. In artistic education, organ improvisation is a practical subject taught for group activities (e.g. secondary education) or individuals (music academies and universities). It should be emphasized that the learning of improvisation brings the best results when it has the character of an individual work, with a master-student relationship. In the education process, the student learns to construct and develop a musical theme in many ways. Due to the varying degrees of creative abilities and technical skills to learn for improvisation, the scope of material used in the learning process is usually adjusted individually – to the level of the group and to the level of individual students. An important task in the process of educating the improviser is to help break down their mental barriers and launch any ideas aimed at arousing motivation and encouraging individual work on particular issues.¹¹

The results of the learning process by the student of organ improvisational art should be the following skills:¹²

1. the ability to reach necessary information (books, recordings, music materials), their analysis and interpretation in a proper, stylish way;
2. the ability to use knowledge of

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harmonics, metro-rhythmic aspects and the creation of forms and genres;

3. the ability to consciously use mutual relations between the theoretical and practical elements in the process of improvisation and the ability to integrate the acquired knowledge;
4. the ability to create, implement and express their own artistic concepts and independent improvisation based on their own creative motivations;
5. the ability to master the technical skills needed for professional improvisation;
6. the ability to practice in the right way, avoiding the hazards often resulting from daily hour-long contact with the instrument;
7. ability to deal with stressful situations resulting from public performances, including reactions to

various acoustic conditions of interiors in which the improviser will perform;

8. ability to speak on the subject of interpreting, creating and reproducing music, and on issues related to broadly understood general humanist themes;
9. the ability to consciously use one's emotionality, imagination and intuition (using one's self-esteem); this also applies to the ability to constructively evaluate the performances of other improvisers;
10. ability to use professional musical terminology in the field of improvisational activity.

Studying methods

The contemporary canon of organ improvisation textbooks includes the following items:

1. Dupré M., "Methode d'orgue" en deux Parties, Leduc, Paris 1927;

2. Dupré M., "Traité d'improvisation à l'orgue", Leduc, Paris 1937;
3. Gaar R., "Orgel Improvisation", Carus, Stuttgart 1996;
4. Schmid K. N., "Schule der Orgel Improvisation", Regensburg 1981, and also
5. a recently published two-volume work (textbook and exercises) in Polish prof. Roman Perucki "Improwizacja organowa".¹³

From the historical position in the German circle, mention should be made of Keller's "Schule der Choral-Improvisation für Orgel mit 121 Notenbeispielen".¹⁴

The improvisation course of Marcel Dupré's "Traité d'improvisation à l'orgue", published in Paris in 1937, dedicated to Paul Fauchet, contains of the following sections:

- a. a detailed discussion of the technique of playing the organ;

- b. discuss the role of bass in song's harmony;
- c. presenting the elements constituting the musical theme;
- d. learning counterpoint;
- e. suites;
- f. fugue;
- g. variation and triptych;
- h. discussions on symphonic forms, i.e. Allegro, Andante, Scherzo and Final;
- i. discuss free improvisation on the example of purely musical forms (Fantasy, Rhapsody) and descriptive forms (Fileuse, Barcarole) and
- j. an allowance for improvisation used in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church, in which the author describes the places in the liturgy accurately (matins, masses, vespers), where improvisation is desired and indicates previously discussed forms particularly predestined to be performed at a given moment.¹⁵

The improvisation course prepared by professor Roman Perucki for students of the Stanisław Moniuszko Academy of Music in Gdańsk, Poland in the form of a textbook and a separate notebook of exercises contains the following chapters:

- a. the genesis of the phenomenon of improvisation and terminology;
- b. a description of the objectives, scope and organisation of the improvisation teaching process at the faculty of the Academy;
- c. initial exercises on theoretical and practical knowledge (melodic line, harmony, metre and rhythm, compositional workshop);
- d. material related to choral partita;
- e. improvisation of chorale prelude and choral fantasy, Italian-style toccata, French-style suite;
- f. imitational forms, canons, inventions and fugues and free fantasies in any style;
- g. ostinato forms (Chaconne and Passa-



caglia). It is worth emphasising that each of the chapters of this work contains additional examples and tasks for particularly gifted students.¹⁶

Keller's course of improvisation, divided into five chapters, consists of:

- a. teaching harmonically harmonic accompaniment to the singing of the community conducted by the organist in a four-part system with a short introduction and ending, as well as simple modulations;
- b. learning how to run cantus firmus in soprano and conducting richer movement in other voices (including changes of rhythm, transitional notes, figuration), learning duos (bicinium) and figured cantus firmus;
- c. learning to tune in a tenor (also using a 4' stop in Pedal part) and bass;
- d. learning imitative and fugal techniques; and e. learning larger forms of choral preludes with the use of imitative technique, interlude technique, and the use of various techniques simultaneously or interchangeably.¹⁷

The performer who wants to imp-

rovisate in a historically oriented way should achieve a number of preparatory activities before proceeding (or in parallel) to work on the instrument,¹⁸ i.e.:

1. familiarise themselves with the instruments of a given epoch and cultural circle;
2. get to know the views of the composers of a given era regarding the implementation of agogics, dynamics and articulation;
3. to study the source scriptures and treatises in which the spirit of a given epoch is reflected.

In this way, the performer, equipped with theoretical knowledge and the recognised historical context, can – in a historically oriented way – proceed to the implementation

of the studied assumptions practically on an instrument. Starting from these assumptions, every epoch, cultural circle, and even composer, has its own unique, historically oriented performance style, which is worth studying.

In the context of further considerations and the complexity of the organ playing process, the words of the French music theoretician Albert Lavignac (1846-1916) will be relevant: "as the organ is truly an instrument of instruments, in accordance with their Latin name 'organa' means instruments, so the organist is a musician of musicians; he must possess the skills of all techniques, harmony, counterpoint and fugue ..."¹⁹

Role in the liturgical practices of the 19th century

The organ is an instrument closely related to the Western church, the Roman Catholic Church, and from the 16th century also the majority of its Protestant factions. Obviously, organ composing creativity until the mid-19th century was intended in the vast majority for use during the liturgy. The

important role of organ improvisation stemmed from the fact that the main task of church organists was to perform music for a living liturgy.²⁰ Because the duration of the various phases of the liturgy varied depending on many factors (including the personal features of the celebrant, the number of the faithful), improvisation was a flexible way of reconciling the requirement of performing 'live' music during the variable time periods assigned for this purpose. In such dynamic circumstances, the organist had to follow the liturgical action on an ongoing basis so that the music would correspond to the character of the liturgical phase and would last the required amount of time. In the case of organ literature – even with the most intense attempts by the composer to adapt the length of the work to a given stage of the liturgy (Introit, Offertoire, Communion) – the organist often had to finish the piece beforehand (when the liturgical action went faster), or compose an additional piece live (when the action lasted longer than predicted by the composer).

Due to the dominance of other fragments of the Christian Western church, each of the major European cultural circles (German, English and French) developed their own separate pattern of liturgical organ improvisation.

German circle

The German liturgical scene was dominated by the Protestant scriptures, which introduced to the liturgy the chorale sung by the whole community. These songs constituted (and still are) an immanent element of the liturgy uniting the prayers of the faithful, and not just an accompanying element, as it was in the then Roman Catholic Church. Most of the introductions (preludes) to

singing through the whole community were made, which aimed at presenting the melody of the chorale, its character and tempo. Larger pieces of organ music – based on the melody of the chorale – were also improvised, allowing the theological content of the chorale to be contemplated by the faithful. The power of the words of Protestant chorale can be extremely important for the development of improvised music. An example is the pre-romantic choral works of JS Bach, as well as the romantic studies of the majority of organists of the aforementioned period operating in the German circle.

English circle

In turn, the English scene is dominated by the Anglican Church. Until the mid-19th century, there were basically no organists in smaller city churches and most of the rural churches. Liturgical

music was played on music boxes equipped with a mechanism to activate the pipes with special projections or perforations on a rotating cylinder. Until the end of the 1870s, redundancies of professional organists were confirmed by low fees and the use of occasional amateur musicians.²¹ A measure of the liturgical level of English music was the use of fragments from Handel's oratorios.²² Concluding with the features of contemporary organ literature (Stanford, Parry, Elgar), the harmonic language of improvisation was probably conventional, diatonic in major and minor scales with little use of chromatics (mostly for modulations).²³ The dominant feature of British music of the 19th century was the need to enrich court ceremonies that were often held in temples. The characteristic features of this music were.²⁴

1. fanfare style;
2. the use of folk songs and melodic expressions typical of them, and
3. a procession style consisting of passages of rhythmical accompaniment, on the background of which long melodic lines were developed.

French circle

How much improvisation was important in educating the organists at the Paris Conservatoire in the 19th century is evinced by the fact that the annual exams (called contests), which all students of this instrument had to stand, consisted from 1834 of the performance of:

1. accompaniment to the Gregorian monody (carried out in soprano or bass),
2. improvisation of the fugue on the topic given by the examination committee, and
3. free improvisation on a given topic.



Thus, basically all the tasks concerned improvisational issues, not executive art (although the commission certainly also took into account the artistic quality of the works' implementation). It was not until 1852, as the fourth point of the exam, playing of the fugue with the pedal part from memory, was added; from the list of a few works prepared by the student, the commission chose one. It can be safely said that during the first half of the 19th century, improvisation was the dominant field of teaching in the organ classes of the Paris Conservatoire, which directly resulted from the fact that the organist – mostly during liturgical duties – performed improvised music. Only the second half of the century brought more emphasis on performing arts; although the science and the position of improvisation was still high. This fact is also confirmed by one of the organisational changes in the category of teaching made in 1848 at the Paris Conservatoire, which included organ education in the composition and harmony category in accordance with the principle that the ability to compose and use harmony is a natural area for the organist, which is the source of organ improvisation.²⁵

Romanticism in the culture of France, despite the anti-religious turmoil caused by the Great Revolution (1789-1799), is still dominated by the Catholic Church. Catholic masses (according to the Tridentine rite) celebrated in Latin and back to the faithful were a totally different field for organists to Protestant musical expression. French culture developed the following forms that were used in the Roman Catholic liturgy: Introit – a work for the beginning of the liturgy, Offertory – a work during the Eucharistic prayer, Elevation – a work for raising, Communion – a piece during the communion of the faithful, Sortie – a piece for the end of liturgy.²⁶

As for the musical content that filled these forms, the period from the early 1860s was an exceptional time. At that time, secular works of operatic provenance were dominant in the churches,

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street songs were the subjects of liturgical improvisations, waltzes and gallops were played during Offertoire, and hunting songs as a substitute for sequences; clerics even demanded this type of music from their organists, believing that it attracted people to churches.²⁷ It must be remembered that until the end of the 1860s, there was a relaxed atmosphere in French churches – far from the contemplative devotion that we associate with the sphere of sacrum. Men, like women, entered churches with their hats on; they vividly reacted to music, turning to the organ during the liturgy and applauding the pieces they liked. Since the 1870s, there has been a breakthrough in improvised liturgical music and adaptation of its character to the seriousness of liturgical content. An important role in this process was played by educational institutions: 'L'École Niedermeyer' (with lectures of Weckenthaler, Niedermeyer and Gigout) and later 'Schola Cantorum' (Bordes, Guilmant, Vierne).²⁸

Compared to the Protestant foundations, the Roman Catholic liturgy was different: Saint-Saëns postulated that French organists (similar to the German ones, enriching the organ literature through works composed on the basis of Protestant chant) should do the same with Catholic melodies, or Gregorian chant. He believed that this direction is desirable for French organ music. In

turn, Guilmant considered the possibility of composing and improvising polyphonic pieces on modal scales as an extremely interesting phenomenon.²⁹ Another continuator of this postulate was Dupré.

The style of French romantic organ improvisation

From the accounts of young Vierne (a pupil at the class of improvisation at the Paris Conservatory), we know what elements particular professors paid attention to in teaching the art of improvisation. Franck was focused on detail, melodic invention, harmonic innovation, subtle modulation, elegant figuration – on everything related to musical purity and appropriate expression. Franck – as a student of Anton Reicha (1770-1836) – was very demanding in the matter of fugue science; he carefully prepared the subject for each lesson, which was then used by the students. Widor, in opposition to Franck, focused mostly on the formal side of the structure and logical development of the fugue; the themes drew from every possible source, modifying them in rhythmical needs if necessary. Widor conducted two groups of organ improvisation lessons per week, and devoted one lesson per month to the analysis of various symphonic forms using the work of Ph.E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven (he focused a lot on these last two composers), Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann and modern symphonists. Widor was an opponent of the playing without understanding, believing that this is a natural feature for a parrot, not an artist.³⁰

Trying to go one step further into the arcana of stylistic improvisation, we should study the compositional styles of important figures of the epoch. We will do this on the base of French symphonic organists. The first and original case is Louis James Alfred Lefébure-Wély (1817-1869); his style was described in detail in "The Organ" No 388.³¹ The most important factors characterising the composing workshop of César Franck



(1822-1890) include:

1. the structure of the work based on strongly contrasting themes, which are developed significantly and undergo evolution processing (complex interlacing and joining especially in the final stage of the work);
2. rich harmonics (intensive modulation movement, frequent generation and discharge of the tension);
3. operating wide musical images of a dramatic and lyrical nature;
4. extensive use of polyphony;
5. characteristic sound colours.³²

Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937) was a supporter of calm tempos, comparing musical creation to the expression of a good orator, who is valued more for what he says and how he says it: calmly and clearly; speed is not a feature of a good orator. The change of manuals was not a result of the artist's arbitrary preferences, but was a precise function of the intelligent change of the work's sound plans.³³ Widor's comments on the registration referred to stop families and their tonal patterns rather than to individual registers; he pointed out to the students' groups of stops (their quantity, volume proportions) adequate to achieve a specific effect. Achieving progressive crescendo was suggested by adding fonds stops while playing in the lower keyboard scales, while adding

'anches' while playing the upper keyboard scales.

Features of Louis Vierne's (1870-1937) music are:

1. legato: "is the most natural way to play the organ; the homogeneity of all the sounds in a given organ register naturally requires them to be combined"; legato also applies to middle voices and playing a pedalboard;
2. repeated notes: in moderate tempos they should be shortened by $\frac{1}{2}$, and in slow tempos by $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{8}$; in three-way rhythms, the value should be shortened by $\frac{1}{3}$ or $\frac{1}{6}$ (or a multiple of 3); the striking and removing the chord should apply to all its components at the same time;
3. common notes in different voices: generally combine, but subject to exceptions that depend on melodic clarity;
4. pieces are ended with very long, drawn-out ritards;
5. tempo-rubato as an important factor of the music; music shouldn't be mechanical, it should be like rubber;
6. common trills;
7. fermatas over rests; which is the consequence of performing in large spaces;
8. using of swell box to underline important and less important fragments;

9. phrasing is depending more from the performer than from the work;
10. appropriate tempo to the acoustics of the space; the listener should always be able to understand the rhythm of the piece.³⁴

The style of improvisation, or its compatibility with the patterns of French symphonic music of the 19th century, consists of the following elements:

1. characteristic music forms: Sonata Allegro, Prière, Reverie, Offertoire, Scherzo, Meditation, Marche, Toccata, Sortie;
2. harmony rooted in the major-minor system with rich chromatics and modulations, the application density of which grew with deepening into the 19th century;³⁵ the use of modal scales and harmony;
3. the use of specific stops combinations resulting from the aesthetics of French symphonic organs, e.g.:
 - a. basic sound based on labial stops called 'jeux de fonds', often coloured with reed Hautbois,
 - b. solo parts played on 8-foot reed stops like Hautbois or Trompette or 8-foot labial stops like Montre, Gambe, Flûte harmonique,
 - c. characteristic sounds like 'choir de voix humaines' and 'choir de voix céleste',
 - d. negligible use of the tremulant – with the Voix humaine only; Guilman and Vierne considered this effect undesirable, a relic of earlier eras in organ construction and denoting a lack of taste when used;³⁶
4. smooth dynamic changes implemented by operating an swell box, copulations and stop combinations ('jeux d'anches');
5. metro-rhythmics with an important role of tempo-rubato:
 - a. school of Franck, Vierne and Tournemire using tempo-rubato broadly,
 - b. school of Widor and Dupré using tempo-rubato slightly;
6. legato application (with varying



intensity depending on the interior acoustics);

7. creative invention;
8. the use of relatively slower tempos, which resulted from the great interiors of French cathedrals and the key action; supporters of "peace and religious majestic splendour" were Franck, Guilmant, Widor and Vierne,³⁷
9. smooth tempo modification (accelerando and ritardando) to build and discharge tension (Lefébure-Wély).³⁸

The above elements are also criteria for the evaluation of stylish improvisation as an artistic performance.

Epilogue

Equipped with element in such theoretical information, we need to start or to develop our adventure with organ improvisation. We should treat this adventure as an equal to performing the literature part of an organist's work, not as a special gift given to a few. Practice, patience and accuracy should be our best friends on this field, from which beautiful fruits have been grown for many centuries. ■

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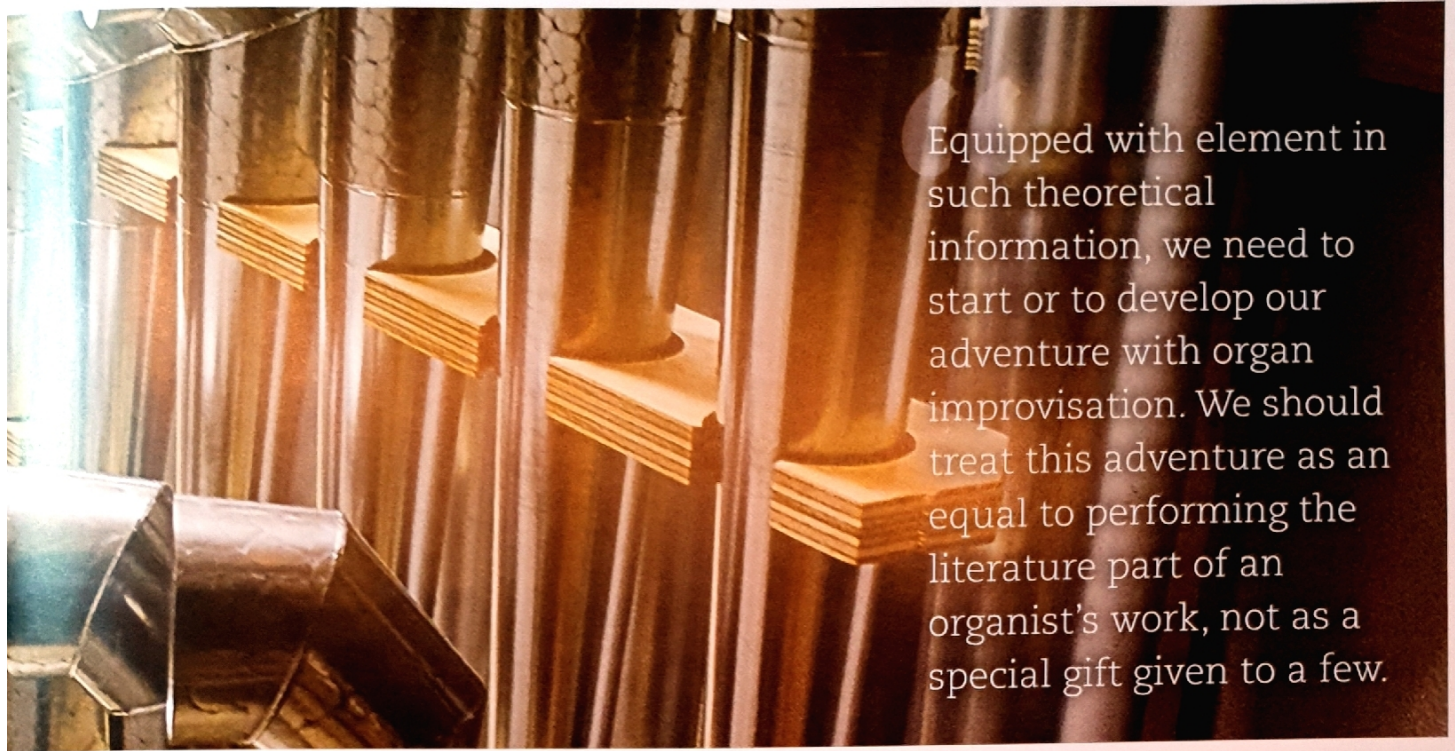
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