

Research Project

Concepts of improvisation and their impact on early 20th century art music

Third-party funded project

Project title Concepts of improvisation and their impact on early 20th century art music

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Organisation / Research unit

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Concepts of improvisation and their impact on early twentieth century art music

Although the first decades of the twentieth century have often been described in musicological research as a period in which improvisation (i. e. extemporization; *Phantasieren*; free cadenzas; etc.) in art music had all but disappeared, numerous accounts of improvised performances by famous artists still abound. Furthermore, early twentieth century modernism (e. g. Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism) contributed to the development of concepts such as spontaneous (or automatic) creation, chance elements, or „noise” and experimental music, concepts which in turn heralded the „modern” idea of music as an aural, visual, and physical performance. Following the growing interest for authenticity, many composers were also attracted to popular, African-American and non-Western musical genres. These notions (i. e. spontaneous creation, experimental music, etc.) and „non-classical” musical genres (i.e. early jazz, Romani music, etc.), which inherently include concepts of improvisation, interacted with „serious music” and were integrated into various compositions of the period. Finally, the above mentioned elements equally relate to our modern understanding of improvisation, an umbrella term for a variety of ideas, which arguably has contributed to the development of some of the most important innovations of post WWII art music, such as indeterminacy, aleatoricism, open forms, or experimental music.

While some contemporary musicologists have commented upon the improvisatory quality or characteristics of various avant-garde compositions of the first half of the twentieth century, an important discrepancy remains between this minority opinion and the mainstream discourse. The project’s aim is to investigate the above mentioned discrepancy using specific examples, representative of some of the most important concepts of improvisation of the period, from the works of Manuel de Falla, Henry Cowell, Erwin Schulhoff, and Darius Milhaud. By regrouping and extending the existing research on the subject, and critically analysing the historical sources (documents, partitions, transcriptions, and recordings), this study should contribute to a better understanding of the interaction between concepts of improvisation and their relationship to art music from the end of the nineteenth century to the nineteen thirties. It also aims to determine how aspects of a possible theory of improvisation for art music of the first half of the twentieth century might influence present day music performance of the period’s repertoire.

The project, funded by the [Schweizerische Nationalfonds](#), is a collaboration between the [Musikwissenschaftliches Seminar der Universität Basel](#) and the [Hochschule für Musik Basel](#). The final documents should serve as an initial step towards filling the existing gap in musicology and provide an in-depth study of the interplay between concepts of improvisation and art music of the first half of the twentieth century.

Related to the project is the on-going workshop (Autumn 2014-Autumn 2015) „Performing Schulhoff’s musical prose” organized in collaboration with Tobias Schabenberger and some of his students at the Hochschule für Musik Basel.

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Add publication

Add documents

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