

Performance in Past Centuries

Anecdotes and research about audience reactions, and musicians improvising

(compiled by Greg Sandow for his courses on “Classical Music in an Age of Pop,” at Juilliard and Eastman, spring 2008)

I The Audience

How a 19th century violinist made his entrance on stage to play a concerto

[From Henry Fogel’s blog, “On the Record.” Henry Fogel is the former CEO of the Chicago Symphony, and former president of the League of American Orchestras]

[I produced a radio program recently] on music by the 19th-century Polish violinist and composer Karol Lipiński. Lipiński was called by some the Polish Paganini, and was a very important musician respected by Schumann, Liszt, Spohr and others, even though he has disappeared from today's music world (which is too bad – his concertos are great fun, in the Paganini mold).

At any rate, I found commentary by the poet Franciszek Kowalski on an early performance of Lipiński’s First Violin Concerto, given in Kiev (we are talking about 1824 here), with the composer as soloist. The picture created by this commentary is fascinating:

Thus we went to Lipiński’s concert. The room could not accommodate all the people, numbering perhaps a thousand. With my heart beating frantically, I awaited the appearance of the great master. In the meantime, an excellent orchestra played various pieces, until the tones of the wonderful Tutti [the orchestral introduction] from his first Concerto could be heard, and when the orchestra fell silent the composer in person, violin in hand, stepped onto the empty podium in the midst of the orchestra. This was when I saw him for the first time middle-aged, with a pale face and dark black hair, slender, of medium height, dressed all in black with a white kerchief and vest, the way he always dressed. He was greeted immediately with friendly glances and loud cheers by the members of the public that he had already known. His modest demeanor... captivated me as it did the others, beyond all bounds. And that was still nothing compared with what was coming when with solemn silence he drew the bow and sang the first solo of his Concerto....

The premiere of Beethoven's Ninth

[From *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, revised and edited by Elliot Forbes]

The performance was far from perfect. There was lack of a homogeneous power, a paucity of nuance, a poor distribution of lights and shades. Nevertheless, strange as the music must have sounded to the audience, the impression which it made was profound and the applause which it elicited enthusiastic to a degree. At one point in the Scherzo, presumably at the startling entry of the tympani at the *ritmo di tre battute*, the listeners could scarcely restrain themselves, and it seemed as if a repetition then and there would be insisted upon.

Paganini

[From James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History*]

The artist whose genius seemed closest to divine madness was Niccolò Paganini, violin virtuoso and self-styled Faust of the popular press. Paganini's renown was enormous in France, extending beyond the regular concert and opera audiences. It was said that doormen feared dying without hearing him play; seigneurs and workers alike knew of his powers; mothers who had never been to the theater took their children to see him as the extraordinary event in their lives. When vague rumors about gambling, women, and a criminal past surfaced in Paris, Paganini's very public response to the gossip turned his musical acclaim into a more potent *succès de scandale*. Paganini never lost the tone of outrage denying the rumors, but it's also true that the denials kept his name in the papers. In a letter to the influential *Revue musicale* he meticulously recounted the gossip, he insisted, the better to expose it as calumny: he had not been a prisoner in the Bastille, he had not killed a rival in the house of a mistress, Satan had not appeared next to him dressed in red on the stage in Vienna, he did not murder a curé in Milan for his money.

The public in these early years of mass-circulation newspapers responded with that particular form of fascination that masquerades as umbrage. ("Il nous faut toujours ici un certain petit parfum de crime et de désespoir," as Alfred de Vigny wrote: we always want a little whiff of crime and despair.) A letter appeared in the *Revue musicale* making no accusations but broadly hinting that Paganini had indeed been in prison. Lithographs of "Paganini en prison" soon appeared in print shop windows. A physician contributed a lengthy physical description that accentuated the abnormal – the deathly pallor, the sharp nose, the spidery fingers and long, thin neck. When in 1834 stories began circulating that Paganini had abducted a sixteen-year-old girl in London, the virtuoso again addressed readers in the French press. She was eighteen, not sixteen, he protested, and his intentions were honorable, since he planned to marry her.

The newspaper-reading public didn't know all the details of the case, but they knew enough to take umbrage. Charlotte Watson, a gifted young singer from London, and her

chaperone had accompanied Paganini in his travels off and on for at least two years before the incident. Paganini apparently convinced Charlotte that he was serious about marriage, and she slipped away from London alone. But her father got wind of the elopement and beat her to Boulogne, where he greeted her as she stepped off the steamer. The knot of outraged spectators gathered to watch reported seeing an enormous diamond tiara on the girl.

Is it any wonder audiences flocked to hear Paganini play? (Twenty-five years later, just after publishing *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert would write, "Now I have been attacked by the government, by the priests, and by the newspapers. It's complete. Nothing is lacking for my triumph.") Upon arriving in Paris in 1831 the Opéra engaged Paganini for ten concerts over five weeks; among his audiences were Theophile Gautier, Charles Nodier, Alfred de Musset, Eugène Delacroix, George Sand, Heinrich Heine, Liszt, Donizetti, Auber, and Rossini [leading writers and poets, a leading painter, and of course some of the most famous musicians]. His performances produced a chilling sense that the man was not quite of this world. His feats were famous – the violin tuned up a half step to give it a frenetic, scrappy sound; his contorted posture, hunched over to one side with the right shoulder unnaturally high; bravura transcriptions that all but obliterated the original melody under a firestorm of notes; his ability to play entire pieces on the G string, all others having broken under the strain; the abrupt silences and looks of sharp pain; the moments when he would suddenly stop and piously cross himself; the pizzicati, double- and triple-stops, piercing harmonics, and grotesque imitations of dogs and cats.

Listeners forgot about Mozart, Paisiello, Rossini, or whoever else's tunes Paganini improvised upon. It was all Paganini, passion incarnate, genius unchained. "There's sorcery in this fantastical talent; it's all supernatural," one listener wrote. "Yes, it's him, it's Mephistopheles;" another vowed. "I saw him and heard him play the violin." The tumult was so great as he played that the roar sometimes forced him to stop. After momentarily gathering his forces he would attack the strings with yet greater fury. "It would be impossible to describe the enthusiasm that seized the public when they heard this extraordinary man. It was delirium, frenzy. After lavishing applause on him during and after each piece, the listeners would not accept that he had finished....A rumble began to spread throughout the hall, and you could hear shouts of surprise and pleasure from all sides. We simply couldn't believe what we had just heard." Fétis struggled manfully against Paganini's hypnotic pull to conclude that he was "not touched," but Joseph d'Ortigue was totally overcome, avowing that Paganini had stripped him of his human shell and transported him to places no mortal had seen. "His bow shimmers like a steel blade; his face is as pale as crime; his smile is beautiful, like Dante's Inferno; his violin cries like a woman," *L'entracte* wrote. "[He's] Satan onstage, Satan knock-kneed, bandyleggcd, double-jointed, twisted....Fall to the knees of Satan and worship him."

Bellini, on what he tried to do when he wrote operas, in the 1820a and 1830s:

[from a letter to one of his librettists. quoted in *Wikipedia*]

The opera must draw tears, terrify people, make them die through singing,

Singers and audience weeping, during a performance of Bellini's La sonnambula:

[from the memoirs of Glinka, the 19th century Russian composer, quoted in *Giuditta Pasta: A Life on the Lyric Stage*, a biography by Kenneth Stern of the a 19th century soprano whose singing and acting could be overpowering]

Pasta and Rubini [the leading tenor of that time] sang with the most evident enthusiasm to support their favorite [composer]; in the second act the singers themselves wept and carried their audience along with them, so that...tears were continually being wiped away in boxes and parquet alike...I, too, shed tears of emotion and ecstasy.

Verdi on Italian vs. German audiences

[Italo Pizzi reports a conversation he had with Verdi, late in Verdi's life. From Marcello Conati, ed., *Encounters with Verdi*]

[Verdi did not] approve the German custom of absolute silence in the opera house, and even less that ecstatic silence which, it is said, Wagner imposed on his audience; what pleased him most, he said (as long as a certain moderation was observed, and trivial, indiscreet interruptions banished), was when all the audience, carried away by a single emotion, participated in the action that unfolded before their eyes, and followed it trembling, quivering and weeping.

I then reminded him of that cry of enthusiasm which, in the Parma opera house, in April 1872, at the first performance there of *Aida*, greeted the famous phrase:

Rivedrai le foreste imbalsamate

I remember, because I was in the theatre that evening, how the entire audience erupted in an almost wild cry, entreating the Maestro to take a bow on stage and asking for the phrase to be repeated. In Germany this would have been an unforgettable scandal. But how can one control – and here Verdi agreed with me – the enthusiasm, I would almost say the delirium, that at certain powerful phrases, at certain melodies that touch and shake every fiber of the soul, takes possession of an entire audience? The Maestro, with undisguised pleasure, then told me that he remembered that evening very well, and smiled with great contentment.

Beethoven symphony performances in Paris, in the 1820s

[from *Listening in Paris*]

Francois-Antoine Habeneck, the maestro who conducted clutching his violin, opened the third concert of the 1828 season with Beethoven's Fifth, whose first movement produced "a kind of stupor visible on every physiognomy" and elicited prolonged salvos of applause. (This, apparently, despite the fact that the nervous hornist botched the opening motif every time it came around to him.) At a later concert, by popular demand, the orchestra played the Fifth Symphony in six movements – that is, with each of the last two repeated – establishing a precedent that would be repeated many times in succeeding years. Often the public would interrupt the music with applause. This is how spectators showed their delight the first time they heard the transition from the third to the fourth movements of the Fifth Symphony, as well as when they first heard the da capo return after the middle section in the scherzo of the Ninth. As late as 1834, six years after the revelation of Beethoven, bemused journalists were still devoting large parts of their reviews to describing the ecstatic transports that erupted at the end of each movement. "This was nor the light applause of etiquette," reads a typical review, "or of personal interest for the composer, or any other motive for applause other than the work itself." Another reviewer announced dramatically that the spontaneous eruptions during the Fifth proved that humans are not the masters of their own emotions.

A Beethoven symphony performance in Germany, early in the 19th century, as described at the time:

[quoted in Mark Evans Bond, *Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of Beethoven*]

What inspiring energy was in the orchestra, in the public! A mutual encounter in a shared interest toward a powerful genius brought the most magnificent to light. As the stone sprays sparks when steel touches it, so the fire of inspiration sprang from these tightly packed, listening multitudes. Imagine a public that prepares itself as if for worship in order to grasp the gigantic structure of a Beethovenian symphony. It was completely so during the performance. Here a barely repressed cry of the highest wonderment and joy, or of terror, when Beethoven in his demonic way makes night of day or day of night in the quickest transitions. There experts, with score in hand, making a sign at this or that when it seizes them as with ghostly arms. And no disruption of any sort, everywhere like-minded individuals, brothers in the best sense of the word. This was brought about by an orchestra attentive with its whole soul, from its oldest to its youngest member. The author saw how – in the fourth movement of Beethoven's C-Minor Symphony, when a violin passage traveled down from the highest to the lowest like a rip – the gentlemen of the orchestra entered into a community with the public, that they exchanged glances, forgetting all customary form.

II Improvisation

Beethoven improvising

[From *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*]

The beautiful Quintet in E flat., Op. 16, for Pianoforte and Wind Instruments, was played at a concert given by Schuppunzigh on April 6th, 1797, being number 5 on the programme which described it as "A Quintet for the Fortepiano accompanied by four Wind-Instruments, played and composed by Mr. Ludwig van Beethoven."

It was in all probability composed between 1794 and the beginning of 1797. In the minutes of a meeting of the Tonkünstler Gesellschaft under date May 19th, 1797, occurs this entry: "On the second day Mr. van Beethoven produced a Quintet and distinguished himself in the Quintet and incidentally by an improvisation." The word "dabey" (incidentally) seems to indicate that he introduced an improvisation in the Quintet as he did on a later occasion to the embarrassment of the other players, but to the delight of the listeners. Ries tells the story in his "Notizen," p. 79. It was at a concert at which the famous oboist Friedrich Ramm, of Munich, took part.

In the final Allegro there occur several holds [fermatas] before a resumption of the theme. At one of these Beethoven suddenly began to improvise, taking the Rondo as a theme and entertained himself and the others for a considerable space; but not his associates. They were displeased, and Ramm even enraged (*aufgebracht*). It really was comical to see these gentlemen waiting expectantly every moment to go on, continually lifting their instruments to their lips, then quietly putting them down again. At last Beethoven was satisfied and dropped again into the Rondo. The entire audience was delighted.

Pianists improvising preludes to pieces they played in concerts

[From Valerie Woodring Goertzen, "By Way of Introduction: Preluding by 18th and Early 19th-Century Pianists" *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 14, No. 3]

During the famous contest between Mozart and Clementi held at the court of Emperor Joseph II on Christmas Eve 1781, each contestant improvised a prelude before embarking on the larger piece he was to play – Clementi his Sonata in B Flat (later published as Op. 24/2) and Mozart a set of variations. Reviews, letters, and reminiscences refer to preludes improvised by Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann, and other pianists of the first rank well into the nineteenth century, as well as by performers whose names are no longer remembered – for example, a Mr. Kellner of London, who in 1819 prefaced one of his own compositions in D major with what was described as an

“inappropriate introduction” in D-flat major. Preludes were also improvised as introductions to songs....

Preluding gave the pianist an opportunity to try out an instrument, warm up the fingers, and focus the mind before the actual performance began. Such preparation was of particular value given the variation in tone, touch, and state of repair among pianos then in use. A prelude might serve as a kind of ritual announcement of the beginning of a performance; a means of drawing the listeners' attention and giving them time to ready themselves for the following piece. Thus it played a structural role similar to that of an opening symphony or overture in a public concert. A prelude might also provide a transition between one composition and another. It was believed that an introductory gesture could heighten both the performer's ability to communicate and the listener's receptivity, as it drew all of those involved into the musical world of the composition to follow.

Like other forms of improvisation, preluding was a vehicle for creative and technical display. In instances where a pianist performed his or her own composition, an improvised introduction continued the compositional process in accordance with the circumstances of the specific occasion – the pianist's frame of mind, the make-up of the audience, the other items on the program, the size and acoustical properties of the hall, and so on. Improvised passages and other elaborations made on the spot were opportune venues for experimentation and self-challenge; they also served as a means of personalizing and interpreting the music of others.

Improvisation by orchestral musicians

[From John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw, “Improvised Ornamentation in Eighteenth-Century Orchestras.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 39, No.3]

Johann Adolph Scheibe, in his *Critischer Musikus* of 1741, sketches a portrait of orchestra musicians who add “gems” [ornaments] to the written notes:

If everyone threw in a curlicue here and there just as he pleased, what sort of unnatural nonsense would ensue?...When many play the same part, it is very stupid to want to play all kinds of alterations and embellishments. The more naturally and plainly the notes are played, the greater effect the harmony and melody will have....Nevertheless, most players make merry at the so-called principal cadences. They trill and run divisions [play ornaments, in faster notes than those written]; they embellish and alter the cadential notes, until all clarity and all harmony disappear. A director must try to eliminate this sort of thing from his orchestra.

[Many] German, writers, along with several, others of the period, mention improvised ornamentation in the orchestra only to condemn the practice. But the condemnations

themselves serve to document the proposition that some – possibly many – orchestra musicians in eighteenth-century Germany played more notes than they saw written on the page. The wide distribution and vehemence of the diatribes against improvised ornamentation suggest not only that ornamentation took place in eighteenth century orchestras but that it occurred frequently enough to represent a threat to the aesthetic of the times.

Of the writers who describe improvised ornamentation in eighteenth-century German orchestras, most agree in condemning the practice. A few authors, however, take a more matter-of-fact approach to the issue, for example, an anonymous “Biedermann,” writing in 1779:

Most pieces of music are ruined in the process of copying them out. The copyists forget the indicated trills, slurs, and such like, and the unwitting ripienists [the members of the string sections] simply play what is set before them. This has given rise to a performance style that predominates in many localities. In passages where a songful and noble style would ordinarily call for a trill or some other ornament or where a singing rendition requires that one note be slurred to another, etc., now, where this playing prevails, the poor notes are hammered and scraped out without the slightest ornament in the most pitiable – indeed ridiculous – manner, so that to listen is painful.

The culprits in this affair, according to the anonymous “Biedermann,” are not only copyists who neglect to transmit composers' ornamentation but also orchestra musicians who do not have the skill or taste to supply the missing ornamentation. The anonymous “Biedermann” addresses his ripienists as “Herren Geiger” [Mister Violinists], so he must feel that it is the violinists who should supply the additional ornaments.

In another passage, discussing the relative merits of keyboardists versus violinists as orchestra directors, the anonymous “Biedermann” describes ornamentation, improvised by the concertmaster:

For operas in some localities, the concertmaster is placed on a raised chair above the rest of the orchestra, so that every member of the orchestra can see him and so that he can direct the whole work....The elevated violinist screeches out over the orchestra as though the opera consisted of a single violin only, or at least as though that were the essential part. But let the elevated *Herr Direktor* turn around for a moment; then the shrill music breaks off, and the remaining instruments now mumble along like frogs croaking in the camp....The first violin always plays the melody of the piece or the upper notes of the chords – with or without decoration or embellishment.

It is unclear in this passage whether all, the first violins participate in the ornamentation of the upper voice or whether the concertmaster is adding decoration alone, while the rest of the section croaks along on the written notes. In either case, the anonymous

“Biedermann” does not condemn the addition of ornamentation per se; he claims only that ornamentation exacerbates the difficulties a concertmaster faces if he tries to lead an orchestra and that most ensembles are, in any case, best led from the keyboard.

Scheibe, in a text written some thirty years before the anonymous “Biedermann's,” describes what seems to be a similar style of violin playing:

I consider it...among the greatest virtues, indeed the very most praiseworthy Duality, of a performing musician for him to content himself with what the composer has conceived, when that is reasonable...But what I have seen more often is a concertmaster who, when he is playing with a full orchestra and when others have to follow him, still plays nothing but a ridiculous variation on the part writing and on the melodies, and other tasteless, convoluted figuration, until no one can follow his lead at all.

This account implies that it is the concertmaster alone who adds elaborate ornamentation to the notes, a style of which Scheibe is evidently less tolerant than the anonymous “Biedermann.” Together, the two descriptions suggest that it may have been relatively common in mid-century German orchestras to near the first violin part performed simultaneously ornamented and plain.

In the above descriptions the concertmaster may be the only violinist adding improvised ornamentation to his part, but in another passage from Scheibe the rest of the first violins, perhaps even the seconds, seem to be involved:

At the rehearsal, the director...must see to it that the performers do not disfigure the piece by decorating the principal notes with excessively extravagant ornaments and embellishments. Furthermore, he must make sure that the violinists on each part frequently turn toward the one who, on account of his skill, is sitting in the first chair. The other violinists must apply no more and no fewer graces than he does...If they are not as clever enough to follow the first chair exactly in every detail, then he must leave off playing ornamentation altogether.

A similar passage from Quantz suggests that this unwritten ornamentation in the violin section might well have been coordinated by means of rehearsal:

Should there be some among the ripienists whose execution differs from that of the others, the leader must undertake to rehearse them separately, lest one, for example, add a shake where others play without it, or slur notes that are attacked by others, or make a mordent, omitted by the others, after an appoggiatura; for the greatest beauty of performance stems from the uniformity with which all the members of the orchestra play.

Like Scheibe, Quantz is not condemning improvised ornamentation in the orchestra per se; rather, he is criticizing its haphazard and uncoordinated application. Uniform

ornamentation added to the first violin part by all the players apparently was acceptable, perhaps even desirable, for Scheibe and Quantz, and absolutely essential according to the anonymous "Biedermann."

Improvisation at the premiere (in Prague) of Mozart's Don Giovanni

[from Thomas Kelly, *First Nights at the Opera*]

The famous finale of act 2, with its stage band playing dinner music from other operas for Don Giovanni, was evidently worked out in rehearsal, and perhaps indeed in the course of performances. First comes a melody from the first-act finale of Martin y Soler's *Una cosa rara*, probably not yet known in Prague, though in Vienna it overshadowed [Mozart's earlier opera, *Le nozze di Figaro*]. It may have been an inside joke by Mozart, perhaps appreciated by the members of the orchestra. Or it may refer back to its opera, in which two peasant couples have escaped the designs of another Don Giovanni [that is, of another nobleman who seduces women]. The other two selections seem to have been made in the course of rehearsals. One quotes the aria "Come un agnello" from Giuseppe Sarti's *Fra i due litiganti*, known from recent performances in Prague. Mozart had composed variations on the same tune in 1784. Perhaps Mozart intended it as a tribute to Count Thun, his friend and host in Prague, in whose palace theater the opera had been performed. Or maybe its text ("Like a lamb going to the slaughter, you will go bleating through the city") is a warning of Don Giovanni's fate. The third tune will have delighted the audience: the aria "Non piu andrai" from *Le nozze di Figaro*, known everywhere in Prague (remember Mozart's letter cited above: "Nothing is played, sung or whistled but `Figaro'"). And of course its original text tells a butterfly that his nectar-sipping days are over. [Or, more specifically, it tells a young page, who flirts with every woman in the palace, that he won't be able to play around anymore.]

In the surrounding dialogue the characters on stage take full advantage of the joke. As each tune is heard, Leporello praises it and identifies it... When Don Giovanni asks him what he thinks of the first tune... Leporello manages to insult both Martin and his master: "It matches your merit." [Meaning, "it's as bad as you are."] Other jokes are worked in also: Don Giovanni's "Ah che piatto saporito" ["Ah, this food tastes good"] may well be a reference to the attractive Teresa Saporiti [a singer in the production]; and when Leporello, caught in the act of eating his master's food, excuses himself by noting the quality of the cook ("si eccellente e il vostro cuoco"), he may have winked at Herr Johann Baptist Kuchartz ("cook"), the well-known keyboardist, arranger, and composer, [who was playing the harpsichord] in the orchestra pit. Kuchartz... among other things, sold keyboard versions of Mozart's operas, including this very song.

When the band plays "Non piu andrai," Leporello says, "I know this one all too well!" [The singer who sang the role] had himself sung that aria as Figaro in Prague, so his

remark...has a double sense that must have delighted the audience – though the remark is not in the Prague libretto.

The stage band was intended from the first, but much of the finale must have been arranged in Prague; it may have arisen in part from improvisations during rehearsals, as much of the dialogue related to the band's tunes does not appear in the printed libretto. In his later years in Dresden, Luigi Bassi [who sang the role of Don Giovanni] is reported as saying: "This is all nothing, it lacks the liveliness, the freedom, that the great Master wanted in this scene. In Guardasoni's company we never sang the scene the same from one performance to the next, we did not keep the beat exactly, and instead used our wit, always new things and paying attention only to the orchestra; everything parlando and almost improvised – that is how Mozart wanted it."