

1.1 Improvisation as an “end” of study Theorists and authors of treatises have long agreed that improvisation is a complex and difficult art and that a good improviser can become so only at the end of his study. Since the improviser is obviously a performer, treatises often maintain that performers must first of all attain a total mastery of their instrument and only then will they be able to improvise. Moreover, other sources insist that an improviser must be thoroughly versed in the rules of harmony and counterpoint before he can improvise. Below I shall quote just a few extracts dealing with this issue taken from dictionaries and treatises from the early 19th century, but many other examples could be mentioned. These quotations refer to improvisation that is already fully developed both technically and musically.

“C’est composer&jouer impromptu des Pièces chargées de tout ce que la Composition a de plus savant en Dessein, en Fugue, en Imitation, en Modulation&en Harmonie. [...] C’est là [en préluant] qu’il ne suffit pas d’être bon Compositeur, ni de bien posséder son Clavier, ni d’avoir la main bonne &bien exercée, mais qu’il faut encore abonder de ce feu de génie&de cet esprit inventif qui font trouver&traiter sur le champ les sujets les plus favorables à l’Harmonie&les plus flatteurs à l’oreille.” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Art. “Préluder”, in: Dictionnaire de Musique, Paris 1768, p. 389)

“[Improvised fantasy is] de[r] höchste[,] Grad der Komposition [...], wo Meditation und Exekution unmittelbar mit einander verbunden ist.” (Johann Samuel Petri: Anleitung zur praktischen Musik, Leipzig 1782, pp. 266 f.)

“Per improvvisare però con successo nella musica, bisogna essere iniziato a fondo nell’arte, e particolarmente in tutte le specie del Contrappunto, essere padrone assoluto dello strumento su cui si improvvisa”. (Pietro Lichtenthal: Art. “Improvvisare”, in: Dizionario e bibliografia della musica, Milano 1826, Vol. 1, pp. 327 f.)

“[Per preludiare] richiederebbesi più genio e sapere, che non è per iscrivere un pezzo di musica con tutto il comodo.” (Pietro Lichtenthal: Art. “Preludiare”, in: Dizionario e bibliografia della musica, Milano 1826, Vol. 2, p. 133)

“Zum Fantasieren gehört, wie zur Composition:

1^{tens} Natürliche Anlage [...].

2^{tens} gründliche Ausbildung in allen Theilen der Harmonielehre, damit dem Spieler die Gewandheit im richtigen Modulieren bereits zur Natur geworden sey.

3^{tens} endlich ein vollkommen ausgebildetes Spiel (Virtuosität), also die grösste Geübtheit der Finger in allen Schwierigkeiten, in allen Tonarten, so wie in allem, was zum schönen, gemüthlichen und graziösen Vortrag gehört.” (Carl Czerny: Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte op. 200, Wien [1829], pp. 3 f.)

In Italian the word “fine”, like the English word “end”, lends itself to a play on words that I would like to exploit here: the end (or conclusion) of study and the end (or goal) of study. According to the extracts quoted above, improvisation would seem to come at the end (*alla fine*) of the player’s study; the study of harmony and counterpoint would appear to be undertaken precisely for the purposes (*al fine di*) of carrying out improvisation.

Certainly, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the performer was also a composer (as well as an improviser), so the study of harmony and counterpoint was also aimed at the realization of written compositions. Suggestions about how to learn improvisation often appear in treatises destined for instrumentalists (either as a particular chapter in the method for the instrument or as a specific, self-contained method), whereas this is not so common in treatises destined for composers. Therefore, it appears that the ability to improvise is an indispensable part of a complete instrumental training; but is it the last step and “crowning” of their training or a first approach to musical creativity?

The player (especially in the case of keyboard instruments) must also be able to accompany; the knowledge of harmony and counterpoint thus serves in the realization of basso continuo. In the Italian school, the teaching of *partimento* was directed towards not only the accompaniment but also the construction of entire pieces that were to be improvised on the basis of a written outline.¹ In this case too, the course of learning seems to be oriented toward the attainment of two skills seen as both an end and culmination of the training: the ability to compose and the ability to improvise (or to compose through improvisation).

1.2 Improvisation at the end of a piece: the cadenza At this point it is interesting to note that one of the places most clearly destined for improvisation, the cadenza, is generally situated near the end of a piece. Of course, the player also has the chance to show off his bravura in improvisation before the actual start of a piece (in a prelude, which we will deal with later) as well as during the piece (through ornamentation, variations, or any kind of lead-ins/*Eingänge*). However, the cadenza seems to be the most macroscopic instance of this practice. I am referring to the repertoire for keyboard, but not exclusively. In this case too, could we not consider the cadenza as the end (i.e. goal) of the piece? The structural tension of a piece generally leads us towards the conclusion, which is deferred by the cadenza. When the cadenza is thematic, it takes up again some of the musical

1 See the essay by Giorgio Sanguinetti in the present volume, pp. 57–86 and id.: Bassi senza numeri, teoria senza parole, in: *L’insegnamento dei Conservatori, la composizione e la vita musicale nell’Europa dell’Ottocento*, Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Milano, Conservatorio di musica “Giuseppe Verdi” (28–30 novembre 2008), ed. by Licia Sirch, Maria Grazia Sità and Marina Vaccarini, Lucca 2012 (*Strumenti della ricerca musicale*, Vol. 19), pp. 501–519. For a broader view see Giorgio Sanguinetti: *The Art of Partimento. History, Theory, Practice*, Oxford 2012.

elements previously presented. There is no doubt, in fact, that the cadenza is an important moment for the performer, offering him the chance to demonstrate his professional skills. Although this interpretation of the role of the cadenza might seem a little excessive, its significance in the context of a concerto for soloist, at least from the point of view of the player (and perhaps also of the audience), is nevertheless undeniable.

1.3 Free improvisation at the end of a concert Another important aspect of the development of the recital for solo instrument was the moment allocated to free improvisation, sometimes based on themes suggested by the audience. This tradition is still practiced today, such as in organ concerts with great improvisers such as Naji Hakim, among others. The practice was born between the 18th and 19th centuries; its birth actually coincides with the advent of the organ recital, and it is fortunately often mentioned in programs of the period:

Mendelssohn's Leipzig Bach Recital (Thursday, 6 August 1840)

“Orgel-Concert
in der Thomaskirche
gegeben von
Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy.

Erster Theil.
Introduction und Fuge in Es dur.
Phantasie über den Choral ‘Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele’.
Grosses Praeludium und Fuge (A moll).

Zweiter Theil.
Passacaille (21 Variationen und Phantasie für die volle Orgel) (C moll).
Pastorella (F dur).
Toccatà (D moll).
Freie Phantasie.

Sämmtliche Compositionen sind von Sebastian Bach; die Einnahme ist zur Errichtung eines Denksteins für ihn in der Nähe seiner ehemaligen Wohnung, der Thomasschule, bestimmt.”²

As can be seen, the moment for free improvisation occurs at the end of the concert, almost like a final apotheosis. In this particular case, we also have Robert Schumann's review of the concert in which he says that with this improvisation Mendelssohn “showed himself in the full glory of his artistry”.³

² Printed program in Russell Stinson: *The Reception of Bach's Organ Works from Mendelssohn to Brahms*, Oxford 2006, p. 58.

³ “[...] worin er sich denn zeigte in voller Künstlerglorie”. *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 7/13 (15 August 1840), p. 56, quoted and translated into English in Stinson: *The Reception of Bach's Organ Works*, p. 56.

This type of free improvisation also featured in the programs of piano recitals in the 19th century, and the practice was particularly appreciated in Paris. The typical program offered by Liszt in his concerts given in the 1840s (even in mixed programs where pieces for solo piano appeared alongside works for orchestra or small ensemble) included a final part dedicated to free improvisation; the reviews also give details of how the audience suggested themes for the improvisation. In one concert given by Liszt in Frankfurt, we learn that “[u]ne urne avait été placée à la porte pour recevoir les themes [sic] proposés et parmi lesquels on a choisi.”⁴

From the wealth of information provided by Valerie Woodring Goertzen regarding the concerts of Clara Wieck Schumann, we gather that Clara preferred to prepare the audience for the programmed pieces with improvised preludes and interludes (which we will deal with below), but on some occasions, such as the concert she gave in Paris on 9 April 1832, she ended the first half of the recital with an improvisation on a given theme.⁵ The typical moment for free improvisation was therefore at the end of the first or the second part of the recital.

2.1 Improvisation as the starting point for instrumental study While there is no doubt that a good “professional” improviser must possess a well-rounded knowledge of musical culture, it is interesting to note that the practice of preluding is often encouraged right from the start in learning an instrument. By “prelude” we generally mean an improvised prelude: the verb “to prelude” is almost synonymous with “to improvise” (in French and German too, *préluder* and *präludieren* signify not only “to play a prelude” but also simply “to improvise”). Those playing a written prelude are expected to perform it as if it were improvised.

Instrumental treatises therefore contain examples of very simple and very short preludes (which are sometimes used as technical exercises); here we will not go into a detailed description of these pieces since an ample bibliography already exists on this question, covering not only keyboard instruments but also various others.⁶ It is likely,

4 *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* 7 (23 August 1840), p. 437. See also Andrea Estero: *L'improvvisazione pianistica a Parigi intorno al 1830. Permanenze e innovazioni*, in: *Sull'improvvisazione*, ed. by Claudio Toscani, Lucca 1998 (Quaderni del Corso di Musicologia del Conservatorio “G. Verdi” di Milano), pp. 87–105, here p. 94.

5 Valerie Woodring Goertzen: *Setting the Stage. Clara Schumann's Preludes*, in: *In the Course of Performance. Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, ed. by Bruno Nettl with Melinda Russell, Chicago/London 1998, pp. 237–260, here p. 240.

6 The many publications dealing with this topic include Betty Bang Mather/David Lasocki: *The Art of Preluding, 1700–1830 for Flutists, Oboists, Clarinetists and Other Performers*, New York 1987; Valerie Woodring Goertzen: *By Way of Introduction. Preluding by 18th- and Early 19th-Century Pianists*, in: *Journal of Musicology* 14/3 (1996), pp. 299–337; Maria Grazia Sità: *Suonare prima di suonare. La prassi*

though, that in the first stages the preludes have to be learned by heart, but then, as soon as possible, pupils are expected to invent their own preludes. Memory and improvisation are thus closely linked, and the prelude that is memorized and performed as if it were improvised soon becomes a prelude that is totally improvised.

The following illustrations show keyboard sources that come from Italy (and thus are probably less known); they are written for pupils who are almost beginners (or at least in their early stages of learning) and prescribe the study of the prelude with a view to improvising. These sources predate the better-known methods, such as those of Carl Czerny (op. 200 and op. 300). Speaking of Czerny, we should not forget his *Letters to a Young Lady* (c. 1830): improvisation is dealt with in the last letter, and in this case, he exhorts the young pupils to begin this practice right from the start, as soon as they have begun to consolidate their performing skills and have their first knowledge of harmony.⁷

Figure 1 shows a page from a manuscript collection of elementary pieces for keyboard, kept in the library of the Milan Conservatory, entitled *Fondamento* and dating from the second half of the 18th century.⁸ The collection is introduced by a page that presents the musical notes, the clefs, the note values, the rests, the main tempo markings and accidentals. The pitches are given in alphabetical notation, and the written indications are in German. The page of elementary instructions is completed by a *Preludia* [sic] in C major consisting of seven bars, illustrating a simple procedure for affirming the tonality. Although the piece is very basic, it is highly unlikely that it was written as a first approach for a beginner (it contains full chords, octaves in the left hand, a sixteenth-note passage in the right hand, and a final trill), but the prelude clearly forms part of the skills that the pupil is expected to master early on; most probably it had to be transposed into all the keys and memorized.

Another elementary method that proposes preludes from the very first lessons is Ignazio Michele Pfeiffer's *La bambina al cembalo*, published in Venice in 1785 (figure 2).⁹ We learn from the preface that the text was written for a five-year-old girl and was

del preludio improvvisato nella trattatistica per tastiera tra Settecento e Ottocento, in: *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia* 31/2 (1996), pp. 303–326; Claudio Bacciagaluppi: *Die Kunst des Präludierens*, in: *Zwischen schöpferischer Individualität und künstlerischer Selbstverleugnung. Zur musikalischen Aufführungspraxis im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Claudio Bacciagaluppi, Roman Brotbeck and Anselm Gerhard, Schliengen 2009 (*Musikforschung der Hochschule der Künste Bern*, Vol. 2), pp. 169–188.

7 Czerny: *Systematische Anleitung*; id.: *Die Kunst des Präludierens* op. 300, Wien 1833; id.: *Briefe über den Unterricht auf dem Pianoforte vom Anfange bis zur Ausbildung*, Wien [c. 1830]. See the essay by Michael Lehner in the present volume, pp. 69–97.

8 I-Mc, Nosedà Z 5-II. See Sità: *Suonare prima di suonare*.

9 Ignazio Michele Pfeiffer: *La bambina al cembalo o sia metodo facile e dilettevole in pratica per apprendere a ben suonare, ed accompagnare sopra il clavi-cembalo o forte piano*, Venezia [1785]. See Sità: *Suonare prima di suonare*.



FIGURE 1 Fondamento, ms, I-Mc, Nosedà Z 5-11 (with the kind permission of the Library of Conservatorio “G. Verdi”, Milano)



FIGURE 2 Ignazio Michele Pfeiffer: La bambina al cembalo o sia metodo facile e dilettevole in pratica per apprendere a ben suonare, ed accompagnare sopra il clavi-cembalo o forte piano, Venezia [1785], p. 49

organized in a way that would make the material particularly enjoyable. It is divided into “Classes” (which correspond to sets of topics or what today we would call “teaching units”), and Class III deals with elementary notions such as *Modo di imparare la posizione della mano per tutti i salti, per avezzare la voce all’intonazione e per conoscere le note in chiave di basso* (The method for learning the position of the hand to perform all skips, to accustom the voice to proper intonation, and to read the pitches in bass clef). However, in this Class we also find the first *Cadenza, preludio o sia intonazione*, and from this point onwards each Class contains a prelude of this type of varying lengths (from two bars to two staves) that presents scales, arpeggios, et cetera.

In the book by Carlo Gervasoni, *La scuola della musica*, published in Piacenza in 1800, the prelude again appears among the first instrumental lessons (figure 3).¹⁰ In the section dealing with *Lezioni di cembalo* (Parte Seconda, Capo VI), as early as the second lesson (§ 2) we find *Dell’intonazione o sia cadenza o preludio sul cembalo in tutti i toni maggiori e minori* (About Intonation, or the cadenza or prelude, for harpsichord in all major and minor keys). After a general definition, some examples of preludes are given for the purpose of practice (“onde addestrarsi pertanto in siffatta intonazione”): twelve pieces in the major keys and twelve in the minor, organized according to the circle of fifths, each lasting four bars. The preludes are all the same; maybe the method is aimed at a pupil who is at such an early stage of study that he is unable to transpose even the simplest of pieces.

Other examples are well known and frequently quoted in the literature on this subject: in Muzio Clementi’s *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Pianoforte* (1801), there are short preludes by Clementi himself that precede pieces proposed as exercises by different composers. This practice is continued in the separate collection of *Preludi ed esercizi*.¹¹

Between the 18th and 19th centuries, an increasing number of collections of preludes in all the keys were published, even though the technical level often exceeds that of a beginner. This type of publication continued to flourish throughout the whole of the first half of the 19th century. Here too I would like to give some examples of Italian sources from the second half of the 18th century.

The *Intonazioni ossia Preludij per tutti li toni sul cembalo [...] per uso de’ Signori dilettanti* by Raimondo Mei (born in 1740 and died after 1812), chapel master of Pavia cathedral, date from 1787 (figure 4). The manuscript is kept in the library of the Milan Conservatory. It consists of 30 short preludes that cover all the major and minor keys (and also

10 Carlo Gervasoni: *La scuola della musica*, Piacenza 1800, p. 235. See Sità: *Suonare prima di suonare*.

11 Muzio Clementi: *Appendix to the Fifth Edition of Clementi’s Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Pianoforte, containing Preludes, Exercises, National Airs and Variations, with other Pleasing and Instructive Pieces*, London 1811 and 1821.

CFEMBALO LEZIONE II. 27

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for a cembalo (early keyboard instrument). The title at the top is "CFEMBALO LEZIONE II." followed by the page number "27". The page contains four distinct musical exercises, each labeled "Fig. 1" through "Fig. 4" on the left side. Each exercise is written on two staves: the upper staff uses a treble clef and the lower staff uses a bass clef. The notation includes various note values, rests, and articulation marks, characteristic of 18th-century manuscript notation. The exercises show a progression of melodic and harmonic complexity.

FIGURE 3 Carlo Gervasoni: La scuola della musica, Piacenza 1800, p.27



FIGURE 4 Raimondo Mei: Intonazioni ossia Preludij per tutti li toni sul cembalo [...], ms, I-Mc, Nosedà L 16-14 (with the kind permission of the Library of Conservatorio "G. Verdi", Milano)

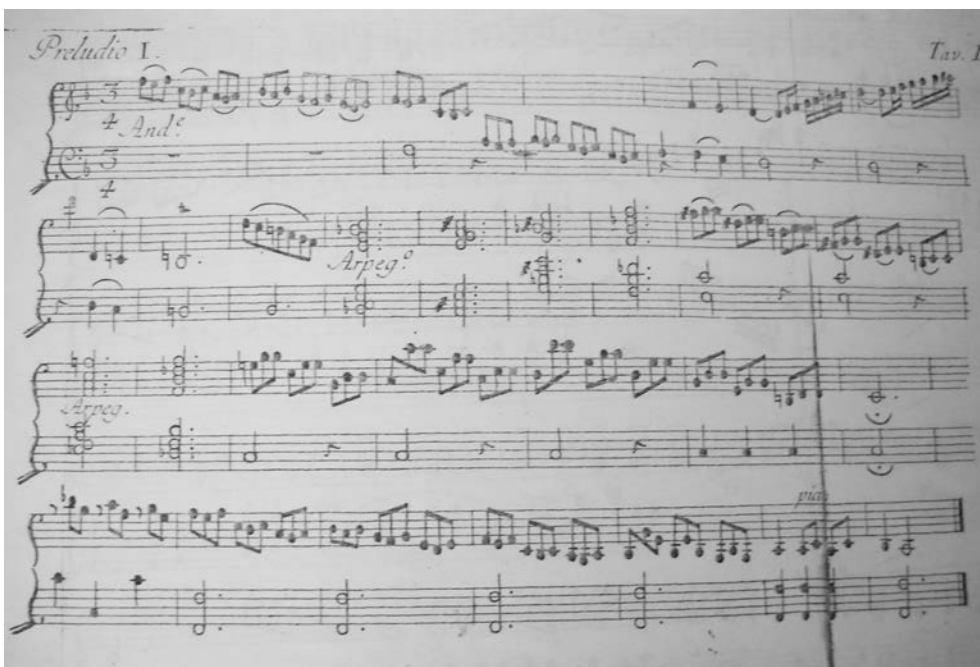


FIGURE 5 Vincenzo Manfredini: Preludi o piuttosto capricci, Tav. I, in: Regole armoniche, Venezia 1775, Appendix

include some keys in their two enharmonic forms – for example C-sharp and D-flat).¹² The simplicity of the writing and their designation “for beginners” bring this publication in line with many others that present the prelude in an early phase of musical education.

The prelude shown in figure 5 belongs to the collection of *14 Preludi o piuttosto capricci ne’ toni più usitati* by Vincenzo Manfredini (1737–1799), which constitutes an appendix to the treatise *Regole armoniche* published in Venice in 1775 (reissued in 1779) and dedicated to Paul Petrovich (Grand Duke of Russia), to whom Manfredini gave harpsichord lessons during his stay in St. Petersburg (1758–1769). The book doesn’t explain how to compose a prelude; it simply provides these examples “for the aid of beginners”. A partial list of the better-known and more frequently quoted publications is given below, which I believe bears witness to the extent and popularity of the practice.¹³

It is possible to note that in some cases the definition of “preludio” is alternated with that of “capriccio”. The use of such terminology (preludio, fantasia, capriccio) is very interesting, and some distinctions are surely possible, but for the moment it is best to consider them as synonyms, taking their general meaning to be a piece of an improvisatory nature.¹⁴

The last collection cited in the list, Joseph Christophorus Kessler’s *24 Preludes op. 31* (1834; dedicated to Chopin) offers a possible link with Chopin’s *Preludes op. 28* (the German edition of which was dedicated to Kessler); in fact, it is a matter of debate whether

- 12 Raimondo Mei: *Intonazioni ossia preludi per tutti li toni sul cembalo composte da Raimondo Mei maestro di cappella della cattedrale di Pavia per uso de’ Signori dilettranti* 1787, ms I-Mc, Nosedà L 16-14. See Pinuccia Carrer: *La didattica preludiente. Alessandro Rolla interprete di una tradizione*, in: Alessandro Rolla. *Un caposcuola dell’arte violinistica lombarda*, ed. by Mariateresa Dellaborra, Lucca 2010, pp. 267–275.
- 13 See, for example, Josef Antonín Štěpán: *40 preludi per diversi toni scritti e dedicati alle illustrissime signore sue scolare da Giuseppe Steffan*, Vienna [c 1762]; Tommaso Giordani: *Fourteen Preludes or Capriccios and Eight Cadences for the Piano Forte, Harpsichord, Harp or Organ*, op. 33, London [c 1785]; Jacopo Gotifredo Ferrari: *48 Preludes for the pianoforte, two in each of the twelve keys Major and [...] Minor* op. 42, London 1783–1819; Bernard Viguier: *Douze préludes dans les tons les plus usités pour le pianoforte* op. 13, Paris [c. 1805]; Johann Nepomuk Hummel: *Vorspiele vor Anfänge eines Stückes aus allen 24 Dur und mol Tonarten zum nützlichem Gebrauch für Schüler*, Wien [c 1814] (*Répertoire de Musique pour les Dames, Ouvrage périodique et progressif*, Vol. 2/9); Johann Baptist Cramer: *Twenty-six Preludes or Short Introductions in the Principal Major and Minor Keys for the Piano Forte*, London [1818]; Carl Czerny: *48 Etudes en forme de Préludes ou Cadences* op. 161, Leipzig [c 1829]; Frédéric Kalkbrenner: *Twenty-Four Preludes for the Piano Forte, in all the Major and Minor Keys, being an introduction to the Art of Preluding*, London [1827]; Ignaz Moscheles: *50 Preludes in the Major and Minor Keys, intended as short introductions to any movement and as preparatory exercises to the author’s studies, for the piano forte* op. 73, London [1827]; Joseph Christophorus Kessler: *Vingt-quatre Préludes op. 31*, Breslau 1834.
- 14 Maria Grazia Sità: *Modi dell’improvvisazione per tastiera tra Sette e Ottocento. Il “Principio artistico” del capriccio*, in: *Sull’improvvisazione*, pp. 63–85.

Chopin's op. 28 can be associated with this type of literature.¹⁵ Personally I think this is plausible even though the collection also features a wide range of other artistic influences and was probably conceived as a unitary cycle.

The above list covers only the piano, but it is not hard to find examples of this kind for other instruments as well. In the following table, which lists works for violin, it is evident that pieces in groups of 12 or 24 keys can also be called "capriccio" (or "intonazione" or "étude"), a reference to a tradition of violin writing that can be linked to Paganini's *Capricci* of 1818. In the case of Rolla, some of the *Intonazioni* (especially those in the minor key) are preceded by a *Preludio*.¹⁶

Jacques-Pierre-Joseph Rode: 24 *Caprices en forme de d'études pour le violon dans les 24 tons de la gamme*, Paris 1815

Alessandro Rolla: 12 *intonazioni a foggia d'esercizi per il violino nei toni di terza maggiore composti per gli allievi del Conservatorio*, Milano 1826 (and Leipzig 1828)

Alessandro Rolla: 12 *intonazioni nei toni di terza minore a foggia d'esercizio per il violino, dedicate agli allievi del Conservatorio*, 2 vol., Milano 1836/37

The proliferation of publications seen in this period might lead us to think that performers, particularly the amateurs, no longer knew how to improvise; therefore, they needed ready-made preludes to be memorized and used in their performances. Certain considerations, though, may lead us to draw different conclusions. In the first place, we can observe that, in the past, collections of this kind (from the *Intonazioni* for organ by Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli onwards) were printed at a time when, without a shadow of a doubt, this type of piece was normally improvised.

Moreover, studies carried out in other areas have shown that oral (in our case, improvisatory) and written practices could exist side by side for long periods; it has also been observed that writing can stimulate new methods of memorization and different types of creativity.¹⁷ I therefore wish to suggest that the trend toward publishing repertoires like that of the prelude in written form is not necessarily symptomatic of a decline in the

15 Valerie Woodring Goertzen (*By Way of Introduction*, pp. 330 ff.) discusses this in relation to the opinions expressed by Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger: *Twenty-four Preludes op. 28. Genre, Structure, Significance*, in: *Chopin Studies*, ed. by Jim Samson, Cambridge 1988, pp. 167–193; later published also in French: *Les Vingt-quatre Préludes op. 28 de Chopin. Genre, structure, signification*, in: *Revue de Musicologie* 75/2 (1989), pp. 201–228.

16 See Paolo Mechelli: *Alessandro Rolla e il "violinismo didattico". Le 24 intonazioni (1826–1837)*, in: *Alessandro Rolla. Un caposcuola dell'arte violinistica lombarda*, pp. 241–266.

17 See, for example, the considerations made in Anna Maria Busse Berger: *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2005, and, for "bel canto" repertoire, Damien Colas: *Improvvisazione e ornamentazione nell'opera francese e italiana di primo Ottocento*, in: *Beyond Notes. Improvisation in Western Music of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by Rudolf Rasch, Turnhout 2011, pp. 255–275, here p. 257.

practice of improvisation. The increased diffusion of written publications may even have provided fresh stimulus for improvisation.

In the second place, as is well known, both in the past and in the period under examination, treatises dealing specifically with improvisation – in particular dealing with the improvisation of the prelude – continued to be written, including the well-known treatises of Czerny (translated into Italian in the 19th century). Czerny's op. 200 is said to have been the first systematic method on the prelude, and this may well be true, given the breadth of the treatise.¹⁸ However, various previous examples exist, like that of Grétry,¹⁹ and we could of course go back to the indications of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach on improvisation. I would briefly like to mention, among other things, that C. P. E. Bach's first suggestion for those wishing to learn improvisation is to start by harmonizing the ascending and descending scale. I have noted, in fact, that most of the (written) preludes I have examined from this period seem to be based on this very system (elaborated with a variety of figurations).²⁰ The harmonized scale therefore appears to be a kind of "mother form" for preludes.

In the third place, the growing body of documentary evidence regarding the practice of improvisation during concerts in the period that extends to the early 20th century (see below) provides ever more convincing proof that the publication of forms that were traditionally improvised did not automatically cause a decline in improvisation practices, at least for another century.

2.2 Improvisation as the starting point for teaching The practice of the prelude-exercise, undertaken from the early stages of study, helps the pupil to master finger patterns and harmonic sequences that can be used as a technical exercise and also as material for new improvisations. Moreover, the act of memorization involved in this type of exercise could take place naturally, without the aid of written texts; this sort of practice appears to have been usual in the Italian teaching tradition, where learning developed mainly through imitating the teacher.

An interesting documentation of this fact dating from the early 19th century can be found in the memoirs of the violinist and conductor Nicola Petrini Zamboni (1785–1849). Zamboni recalls the lessons he received from the Piedmont violinist Domenico Giorgis as follows: "Non mi faceva suonare nulla di scritto, ma mi insegnava a mente dei passi di

18 Woodring Goertzen: *By Way of Introduction*, p. 301, n. 6.

19 André-Ernest-Modest Grétry: *Méthode simple pour apprendre à préluder en peu de temps, avec toutes les ressources de l'harmonie*, Paris 1802.

20 Maria Grazia Sità: *Preludi, fantasia, capricci. Modi dell'improvvisazione nella musica per tastiera italiana tra Settecento e Ottocento*, unpublished thesis, Corso Superiore di Musicologia, Conservatorio "G. Verdi" di Milano, a. a. 1991/92 and Sità: *Suonare prima di suonare*.

concerto, dei capricci, infinite scale ascendenti e discendenti, arpeggi modulati, e cose simili, sempre passeggiando per la camera dopo la mezzanotte.”²¹ Giorgis was a highly skilled improviser and is remembered as a master of the extemporized variation (using the typical Italian style of performance, which at the time was much admired also in Paganini). Memorization and improvisation were therefore still fundamental moments in the teaching of an instrument in the early 19th century.

In a quite different cultural context, we find further evidence in the method of study that Friedrich Wieck adopted for his daughter Clara:²² in this case too no score was used during the first steps of learning, and it seems that for at least a year Clara didn't learn to read music. Her father's teaching aimed instead to develop touch, singing tone and sense of rhythm alongside the knowledge of harmony. Clara learned short pieces and cadential sequences by heart in all the keys and learned to transpose and improvise. We also know that in Wieck's method, the pupil was asked to transform the main chords of a key into new figurations and passages.

This approach is not unlike the system proposed in the initial phases of Czerny's well-known treatise, *Systematische Anleitung* op. 200, and is even more similar to what we find in the first pages of *Die Kunst des Präludierens* op. 300: simple cadences (dominant chord and tonic chord) in all the keys, followed by different ways to expand the sequence, at first just as a harmonic scheme and then involving various figurations.

We can therefore conclude from these sources that teaching through example, that is to say, using an approach based on imitation, continued to thrive in the 19th century both in Italy and elsewhere, even in an epoch when the publication of instrumental methods, treatises on improvisation, and technical exercises was starting to become widespread. A combination of memorization and improvisation still held an important place at the beginning (as the basis) of musical experience.

2.3 Improvisation at the start of a piece or concert While the preludes mentioned above can be said to have a more or less overtly educational scope, there is evidence that improvisations also took place in the first part of a performance, even in the context of a solo recital or a concert in the modern sense of the word. A first instance can be found in published pieces that start with a prelude (or a section similar to a prelude): generally

21 “He didn't make me play anything that was written, but he taught me by heart extracts from concertos, capriccios, infinite rising and descending scales, modulated arpeggios, and so on, always while walking around the room after midnight.” Nicola Petrini Zamboni: *Memorie di un violinista cesenate (1785–1849)*, ed. by Franco Dell'Amore, Cesena 1995, p. 29, quoted in Carmela Bongiovanni: *Testimonianze sulla prassi improvvisativa dei musicisti italiani tra Sette e Ottocento*, in: *Beyond Notes*, pp. 35–47, here p. 42; English translations by Mike Webb unless otherwise stated.

22 See Woodring Goertzen: *Setting the Stage*.

speaking these opening parts feature a style of writing that is quite different from that of the piece that follows and seem to suggest a freer type of performance, almost in fact like an improvisation.

In many of the examples I have examined, the musical material presented in such introductions is not taken up again in the course of the piece; this could be seen as proof that these introductory sections could be interchangeable (and could even be replaced by a new improvised prelude). The opening section usually establishes the key (closing either on the tonic or the dominant) and does not always reflect the atmosphere or emotional tone of the main piece (especially in the examples from the 18th century).

Some piano works by Beethoven have been identified as having introductory sections that appear to have this function: for example, the start of the *Sonata* op. 78 (No. 24), or of the *Sonata* op. 31 No. 2 (No. 17), even if in the latter case the arpeggio of the opening *Largo* is subsequently integrated within the form since it reappears in the course of the movement.²³ I will not go into other, still more macroscopic and well-known cases, such as Beethoven's *Fantasia* in c minor, for piano, choir and orchestra (1808), which starts with an introductory *Adagio* on the piano; we know that at the first performance, Beethoven didn't include this introduction but instead played his own free improvisation (a sort of lengthy improvised prelude).

It is quite clear, then, that in the period when the public concert was beginning to establish itself, pieces like this that start with an improvisation (or a pseudo-improvisation) could appear both at the start of the performance or during it. This leads us to an interesting topic regarding the private or public function of introductory improvisation: in a private context, this type of improvisation could be considered a kind of warm-up, an expressive soliloquy or a way of becoming familiar with the instrument. Some 19th-century theorists maintain that this practice was confined exclusively to the private realm: Castil-Blaze states that "le prélude est interdit dans les concerts publics et au théâtre",²⁴ whereas it was permissible in more limited gatherings.

However, an ever-growing body of evidence suggests that introductory improvisation continued to be practiced throughout the whole of the 19th century, also in recitals destined for a wider public.²⁵

23 See Kenneth Hamilton: *A Suitable Prelude*, in: *After the Golden Age. Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, Oxford 2008, pp. 101–138, esp. pp. 108f. Hamilton also points out some examples of this type in Mendelssohn's *Songs without words* (p. 125).

24 "Ce n'est que dans les réunions particulières que les musiciens préludent avant d'exécuter la sonate ou le concerto. Si le prélude est interdit dans les concerts publics et au théâtre, il prend bien sa revanche dans les assemblées d'amateurs". Castil-Blaze [François-Henri-Joseph Blaze]: Art. "Prélude", in: *Dictionnaire de musique moderne*, Paris 1821, Vol. 2, pp. 162f. See also Estero: *L'improvvisazione pianistica a Parigi*, p. 93.

Nevertheless, improvisation in a public setting – in other words destined for an interlocutor – may have followed a different set of rules concerning communicative rhetoric compared to that destined for private use. For example, Warren Kirkendale made an in-depth study on music from earlier periods about the parallels that might be drawn between introductory forms such as the *ricercar* and the *exordium* in classical oratory.²⁶

In the early 19th century, as in former eras, the prelude may have served to mark the start of the performance in a context where it was necessary to ask for silence before beginning to play. It may have served to put the audience in the right frame of mind or else for the performer to try out all the registers of the instrument (considering that instruments of the time differed greatly one from the other, with notable differences in timbre, especially among keyboard instruments). The prelude may also have helped to increase the sense of expectation among the listeners before a particularly significant piece was heard. And there are still, of course, the traditional functions of the prelude, mentioned right from the earliest sources: to warm up the fingers and to test the acoustics of the room and perhaps also the reactions of the public.

Valerie Woodring Goertzen tells us that in her public performances, Clara Schumann used to link together short pieces with preludes and transitions in order to create longer pieces of music, characterized by a variety of styles, characters and keys. To execute these transitions in a satisfactory manner, the performer would therefore have to know how to modulate from one key to another in a gradual and interesting way; exercises based on the “*giro armonico*” (harmonic progression), still present today in the study programmes of Italian conservatories, most certainly had their origin in this practice.

Once more the literature and treatises can provide us with evidence of this usage. For example, Francesco Pollini’s treatise (published in Milan in 1812) contains no fewer than 40 pages of “*Giri d’armonia*” provided precisely to give the pupil “*i mezzi di preludiare*” by linking the keys together.²⁷

Further confirmation of the presence of “preluding” pieces within a concert made up of different pieces comes from Pollini’s *Tre Suonate per Clavicembalo* op. 26, “*ultime delle sei annunciate nel suo Metodo adottato per il conservatorio medesimo [di Milano] non che per le Case di Educazione del Regno.*”²⁸ In the *Sonata terza* there is a section

25 Many such references can be found in Hamilton: A Suitable Prelude.

26 Warren Kirkendale: Ciceronians versus Aristotelians on the *Ricercar* as *Exordium* from Bembo to Bach, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 32 (1979), pp. 1–44. See also George Barth: *The Pianist as Orator. Beethoven and the Transformation of Keyboard Style*, Ithaca, NY 1992.

27 Francesco Pollini: *Metodo per pianoforte/Piano Method*, ed. by Leonardo Miucci, Rome 2016, pp. 87–117.

28 “The last of the six sonatas contained in his method adopted by the same conservatory [of Milan] and by the Case di Educazione del Regno.” Francesco Pollini: *Tre Suonate per Clavicembalo*, op. 26, Milano [c. 1812/13].

marked *Introduzione: Adagio* (in c minor, with solemn double-dotted fortissimo chords followed by a sweeter cantabile phrase with an accompaniment and a *Più mosso* with dramatic figures and a “tempestuous” bass) that opens the first movement, a *Presto* in c minor (even though the movement ends with an extended coda in C major). This is followed by a second movement that again starts with a short *Preludio: Allegro* which establishes the key of B-flat major in which the subsequent *Giga* is set. On this occasion, then, the *Preludio* is in the middle of the sonata.

2.4 Improvisation as the starting point for musical creativity The combination of memory and improvisation, which we have seen described in instrumental methods, does not usually appear as such in the literature for teaching composition. This may derive from the fact that the word “composition” refers specifically to written composition (historically a *res facta*, often set in opposition to *cantare super librum*, or *stil a penna* as opposed to *stil a mente*). If we consider composition simply as the doctrine of counterpoint, then this may be so, but if we are speaking of the practice of basso continuo and/or *partimento*, then obviously the situation changes quite drastically.

On the other hand, if we venture into the realm of theory and philosophy, we find that the concepts of memory and improvisation are held to be very close to the concepts of imagination and fantasy. The concepts of imagination/fantasy (fancy, genius, inspiration, et cetera) are in turn considered close to the general concept of creativity.

I have had the opportunity to investigate this concept in theoretical texts from the end of the 18th century (especially those appearing in Italy);²⁹ in these texts, the notion of “fantasy” is considered a faculty, and a lively debate exists among the various authors as to whether fantasy is passive or active. Fantasy often coincides with the imagination, which is the place where images of objects are stored (this being a typical function of the memory dating back to Platonic philosophy), and in this sense imagination is passive, given that it receives images from the senses. It may happen, though, that the stored images are then combined and correlated in the memory; in this sense the imagination is active.

When the stored images are recalled from the memory and become once again alive and real, the activity of the memory/imagination is called fantasy. This type of imagination/fantasy that is active and able to revivify images from the memory is considered one of the faculties that an artist must possess, since it can touch the human soul (“muovere gli affetti”, in the terminology used in the 18th century), that is to say, touch something that resides in the more hidden parts of the human body and soul. In the words of the

29 Maria Grazia Sità: *Il concetto di fantasia nella trattatistica musicale italiana tra Settecento e Ottocento*, unpublished thesis, Università di Venezia, Ca' Foscari, academic year 1993/94.

Milanese writer and philosopher, Pietro Verri: “Forse la memoria, quando è vivacissima, e chiamasi *fantasia*, cagiona una irritazione nelle parti più interne della mia macchina.”³⁰

To be a true artist, however, it is not sufficient to merely have fantasy: the fantasy needs to be stimulated, excited, fired. Only when fantasy is active and fruitful can it become creative (and is sometimes called “fancy”). At this point the combination of images already in our possession can also give rise to something new, as Eximeno writes in 1774: “L’estro consiste nella vivacità della fantasia per ravvivare e combinare le immagini degli oggetti.”³¹ The same concept is reiterated in 1826, when Pietro Lichtenthal suggests that fantasy “crea nuove idee ed immagini dalla composizione d’idee ed immagini già avute. Essa differisce dall’immaginazione, la quale non è altro che la facoltà di richiamare alla mente le idee già avute.”³²

Fantasy is often referred to as hot, alive, fiery; to achieve artistic creativity, it is thus necessary to have a “heated” imagination/fantasy:

“imagination échauffée” (Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Art. “Fantaisie”, in: *Dictionnaire de musique*, Paris 1768, p. 218)

“il fuoco della poetica Fantasia [...] si riaccendono ancora l’idee confuse” (Antonio Planelli: *Dell’opera in musica*, Napoli 1772, pp. 96 and 105)

“fantasia riscaldata, e stravolta” (Giuseppe Pintado: *Vera idea della musica e del contrappunto*, Roma 1794, p. 77)

“quel fuoco Divino, che Estro volgarmente s’appella” (Francesco Galeazzi: *Elementi teorico-pratici di musica*, Vol. 2, Roma 1796, pp. 245 f.)

“ed è qui appunto dove spiegar si dee quell’interiore veemenza di fuoco che inspira mai sempre canti nuovi e piacevoli, espressioni vive, naturali e commoventi, e un’armonia soprattutto pura, toccante e maestosa” (Carlo Gervasoni: *La scuola della musica*, Piacenza 1800, p. 362)

“in forza di quella spontaneità dettata da una estemporanea fantasia riscaldata” (Bonifazio Asioli: *L’allievo al clavicembalo*, Milano 1821, p. 69)

“la sua fantasia troppo ardente per essere ammorzata” (Giuseppe Carpani: *Le Haydine. Lettere su la vita e le opere del celebre maestro Giuseppe Haydn*, Milano 1812, p. 39)

30 “Perhaps memory, when highly active and called fantasy, prompts an irritation within the innermost parts of my being.” Pietro Verri: *Discorsi del conte Pietro Verri. Sull’indole del piacere e del dolore*, Milano 1781, p. 37.

31 “Fancy is constituted by the liveliness of our fantasy that revives and combines the images of objects.” Antonio Eximeno: *Dell’origine e delle regole della musica*, Roma 1774, p. 121.

32 “Fantasy creates new ideas and images from the composition of ideas and images already possessed. It differs from the imagination, which is simply the faculty to call to mind the ideas already possessed”. Pietro Lichtenthal: Art. “Fantasia”, in: *Dizionario e bibliografia della musica*, Milano 1826, Vol. 1, pp. 270 f., here p. 270.

“fuoco interno che arde nel Compositore [...]. L’aridità geometrica delle regole raffredda l’immaginazione la più ardente”. (Pietro Lichtenthal: Art. “Genio”, in: *Dizionario e bibliografia della musica*, Milano 1826, Vol. I, pp. 289 f.)

Coming back to the affinity between the notions of fantasy and improvisation, we could say that improvisation is fundamental in order to prepare models, examples, and formulas that can be deposited in our memory. It is also necessary to have our hands ready and to react promptly. Musical, physical and finger memory must work together rapidly, and only in this manner can new combinations arise.

Already in 1768, in its definition of “Préluder”, Rousseau’s *Dictionnaire* states that, in addition to a full grasp of technical skills, in order to prelude, “il faut encore abonder de ce feu de génie & de cet esprit inventif qui font trouver & traiter sur le champ les sujets les plus favorables à l’Harmonie & les plus flatteurs à l’oreille.”³³

Moving towards the 19th century, the terms “fancy” and “genius” (taken as faculties possessed by the artist) are gradually joined by the word “inspiration”, seen as a faculty that presides over artistic creation. The moment of improvisation was always seen as a moment of extemporaneous musical creation, but in the writings of the 19th century this aspect starts to assume greater emphasis. The combination of memory and practice, which lies at the base of improvisation, begins to take second place. Preference is now given to underlining the act of “creation”: the moment in which ideas are born (perhaps out of nowhere).

We can therefore distinguish between at least two different facets of improvisation as practiced by the professional musician in the 19th century: on the one hand, we have the performance in a concert, which displays technical skill and also the ability to combine or develop pre-existing elements (themes supplied by the public, for instance). This is the type of free invention that concluded a performance. On the other hand, there is the idea of improvisation that seems to stem more from the preluding side of the practice: improvisation as a private moment of reflection that generates the idea, the inspiration that can give rise to a new composition. Improvisation is thus an “original moment”: a searching meditation that occurs not only before the performance but before the creation true and proper. The outcome of this meditation, though, may perhaps require a written version in order for it to be perfected.

The historiographer Georg August Griesinger, who in 1810 published his famous biography of Haydn, described the composer in an intense moment improvising at the keyboard in private in a sort of musical soliloquy: at that moment the idea is born (like a sort of original chaos) that will be subsequently developed in the written work following the rules of composition. Even if this description does not necessarily reflect Haydn’s

33 Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Art. “Préluder”, in: *Dictionnaire de musique*, Paris 1768, p. 383.

true way of working, it nevertheless reveals the idea that Griesinger had regarding musical creation in 1810: “Haydn dichtete seine Werke immer vor dem Klavier. ‘Ich setzte mich hin, fing an zu phantasieren [...]. Hatte ich eine Idee erhascht, so ging mein ganzes Bestreben dahin, sie den Regeln der Kunst gemäß auszuführen und zu souteniren.’”³⁴

The following testimony regarding Mendelssohn similarly appears to underline the fact that improvisation is a private affair in which the composer sees the ripening of the fruits of his inspiration, which are still in a primitive state: it is the moment of musical creation, but to attain the finished product, further work needs to be done. In 1831, Mendelssohn admits that he is never satisfied with the results of his improvisations and even vows never to improvise again in public (which, of course, he does on many occasions): “[...] daß es ein Unsinn sei, öffentlich zu phantasieren. Mir ist selten so närrisch zu Muthe gewesen, als wie ich mich da hinsetzte, um meine Phantasie dem Publikum zu produciren. [...] ich war ärgerlich, denn mir hatte es mißfallen, und ich werde es öffentlich nicht wieder thun”.³⁵ The audience, on the other hand, was delighted with the improvisations of Mendelssohn (and of many other improvisers), both on account of the technical display and the unpredictability of the result.

With the passing of time, the idea increasingly takes root that when listening to an improvisation, one is witnessing the creative process “in action”, a birth, a poetic parturition. The emotion of listening grows hand in hand with the conviction that what is happening is unrepeatable. In this way the idea of improvisation takes on a new (romantic) nuance and becomes associated with that *authentic beginning*: the starting point for any musical journey.

(English translation by Mike Webb, edited by Dalyn Cook)

- 34 “Haydn always composed at the keyboard [Klavier]. ‘I sat down [and] began to fantasize [phantasieren] Once I had seized upon [erhascht] an idea, my whole effort was to develop and sustain it, according to the rules of the art.’” Georg August Griesinger: *Biographische Notizen über Joseph Haydn*, Leipzig 1810, p. 114; english translation by James Webster: *The Rhetoric of Improvisation in Haydn’s Keyboard Music*, in: *Haydn and the Performance of Rhetoric*, ed. by Tom Beghin and Sander M. Goldberg, Chicago/London 2007, pp. 172–212, here p. 174.
- 35 “[...] it is an absurdity to extemporize in public. I have seldom felt so like a fool as when I took my place at the piano, to present to the public the fruits of my inspiration; [...] I was annoyed, for I was far from being satisfied with myself, and I am resolved never again to extemporize in public”. Letter to his father, 18 October 1831, in: *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Reisebriefe aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1832*, ed. by Paul Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Leipzig 1861, p. 283; english translation after Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: *Letters from Italy and Switzerland*, ed. by Grace Wallace, Philadelphia 21863, p. 303. The reference is to a concert given by Mendelssohn in Munich in 1831. Mendelssohn still improvised in public for example in the Gewandhaus concerts in 1837, 1839 and 1843. See also Woodring Goertzen: *By Way of Introduction*, p. 334.

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DAS FLÜCHTIGE WERK

Pianistische Improvisation der Beethoven-Zeit •

Herausgegeben von Michael Lehner, Nathalie Meidhof

und Leonardo Miucci unter redaktioneller

Mitarbeit von Daniel Allenbach

MUSIKFORSCHUNG DER
HOCHSCHULE DER KÜNSTE BERN

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