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Expressing the Inexpressible: The Issue of Improvisation and the European Fascination with Gypsy Music in the 19th Century

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## Expressing the Inexpressible: The Issue of Improvisation and the European Fascination with Gypsy Music in the 19th Century

Improvisation as a musical phenomenon in contemporary musicology is approached from a variety of different points of views and angles. Prevailing perspectives include analytical one with the emphasis on the style (e.g. improvisation in jazz), discussing comparative aspects (e.g. contrasting with composition), instrumental preferences (e.g. organ improvisation<sup>1</sup>) as well as historical outline. Authors of most definitions – referring to parallels with other forms of human creativity, either notated as in case of composition or transmitted orally (like poetic improvisation) – seem, however, to agree that improvisation is connected with the element of unexpectedness and unpredictability. Rudolf Frisius claims even that the surprising factor in improvisation is not only directed – as would be suspected – towards the listener, but in fact characterizes the whole process of improvising also on the side of the

<sup>1</sup> See for example Marcel DUPRÉ, *Traite d'improvisation à l'orgue*, Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1925.

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### Abstract - Résumé

Improvisation as a musical phenomenon has been described from various points of views and angles. Most authors concentrating on the historical perspective underline the steady growth of its popularity in the European artistic music and the decline by the mid of the 19th century. At the same time, when improvising became relegated from artistic music, the (re)discovery of Gypsy music in European culture took place and the figure of Gypsy virtuoso substituted the professional musician – a virtuoso as a great improviser. The key role in this process can be assigned to Franz Liszt as a composer, performer and an author who wrote influential book on Gypsy music. Hence in this article I will claim that the refusal of performers to improvise (publicly) in the second half of the 19th century was, inter alia, indirectly connected with the romantic fascination with exotic cultures and especially with Gypsy music.

**Keywords: Improvisation • Gypsy music • 19th Century • virtuoso • Franz Liszt • art music**

executor.<sup>2</sup> For Barry Kerrfeld improvisation enables the spontaneity within musical experiments leading to the discovery of new territories.<sup>3</sup>

Generally, improvising is viewed either as creating a completely new piece of music, or as elaborating a pre-existing theme (often suggested by listeners), alternatively it is understood as adding new variants to older compositions.<sup>4</sup> Almost unanimously it is often claimed that, above all, improvising is an act of human creativity. There are, however, different opinions, considering the inner regulations governing improvisation. For example Christian Munthe says that musical rules in improvising are merely helpful tools,<sup>5</sup> while other authors go as far as to call improvisation a method of composing<sup>6</sup> and equal the status of improviser and composer treating them both as creators.<sup>7</sup>

Most authors describing improvisation in the historical perspective underline the steady growth of its popularity in the European artistic music and the decline by the mid of the 19th century. The numerous reasons – well known and widely discussed – which caused the rejection of improvising practices are interwoven into the net of mutual relations. The popularity of improvisation suffered as a result of a critical campaign against virtuosity. In the early 19th century it offered a long lexicon of musical tools willingly used in improvisations, thus becoming a natural domain fostering such practices. But by the middle of the century improvising virtuosi seem to have failed to excite the same level of enthusiasm as their predecessors had done. The decline of popularity of improvisation was also brought about by the favoured idea in theoretical writings of the composition as a finished piece of work, the product of a genius. Finally, the rejection of musical improvisation can be directly referred to the lowering position of poetic improvising. The resemblance between romantic improviser and ancient rhapsode was noted and the debate on the nature of improvising (in poetry) negatively influenced the general approach to it. Yet, the influence of the discussed ancient rhapsode on the decline of musical improvisation might be much greater than noted so far: improvisation lost its impact in the 19th century also as a result of associating it with oral cultures (as represented by rhapsodes) and linking it with less ‘advanced’ cultures (the approach stimulated by adapting social

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf FRISIUS, *Improvisation*, in: Friedrich Blume (ed.), *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Sachteil*, vol. 4, Kassel-Basel: Bärenreiter, 1994-1998, 539.

<sup>3</sup> Barry KERRFELD, *Improvisation*, in: Barry Kerrfeld (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary Of Jazz*, vol. 2, London: Macmillan Publishers, 2002, 313.

<sup>4</sup> Józef M. CHOMIŃSKI, *Improwizacja*, in: Andrzej Chodkowski (ed.), *Encyklopedia Muzyki PWN*, Warszawa: PWN, 2006, 378.

<sup>5</sup> Christian MUNTHE, *Czym jest free improvisation*, in: *Glissando*, 3, 2005, 2, at: <http://nowy.glissando.pl/wp/category/teksty/numer-3-3-2005/>. Access: 18. 07. 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Dariusz BRZOSTEK, *Improwizacja, anarchia, utopia*, in: *Glissando*, 3, 2005, 2, at: <http://nowy.glissando.pl/wp/category/teksty/numer-3-3-2005/>. Access: 18. 07. 2011.

<sup>7</sup> J. M. CHOMIŃSKI, *op. cit.*, 379 («Improwizujący soliści są nie tylko odtwórcami, lecz i twórcami, a ich kreacje przeważnie przerastają walory samego tematu»).

Darwinism in writing about musical cultures). Improvisational practices observed in primitive cultures were linked with less refined forms of musical life and associated with cultures without notation preferring oral transmission of tradition. Around the same time when improvising became relegated from artistic music, the (re)discovery of Gypsy music in European culture took place and it was the Gypsy virtuoso who substituted the professional musician – a virtuoso as a great improviser. The key figure in that swap of positions played Franz Liszt: as a composer and performer as well as an author who actually wrote admiringly about Gypsy music. Hence in this article I will claim that the refusal of performers to improvise (publicly) in the 19th century was indirectly connected with the romantic fascination with exotic cultures and especially with Gypsy music.

Gypsy people were already stigmatised in the 19th century with a heavy burden of romanticised visions of free, independent people, but also marked by very strong stereotypes concerning their apparently evil nature. They were credited with kidnapping children, stealing, dishonest trading (mainly horses). Despite that in 19th century the immoral Gypsies were also hailed as very skilful musicians, especially gifted at improvisation. It was believed that their improvisation – suspended between melancholy and joy – reflected their tormented soul.

Abilities of Gypsy musicians to accompany any social event (especially gatherings, meetings and balls) were famous throughout the whole Europe. In 1846 Hector Berlioz (upon his visit to Hungary) wrote to his sister Nanci about »those great Hungarian balls to which only noble Hungarians were admitted, and where they only performed national dances on national themes played by the Zingari.«<sup>8</sup> When in 1839 Hungarian-born Liszt visited his native country as a famous and well established piano virtuoso he was enchanted with music performed by Gypsies and actually believed it was their own music.<sup>9</sup> Liszt especially admired Gypsy instrumentalists and was deeply affected by the virtuosity of their performances, technical possibilities, as well as improvisational skills.

In 1859 he eventually published a book *Des Bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie* constituting a major breakthrough in the study of Gypsy music. Not only was it an attempt of scholarly work, but it also contributed much to promoting Gypsy music throughout the whole Europe. Although Liszt was not the first composer to introduce ethnic coloring into his own music, yet he made one of the earliest serious attempts to approximate Gypsy music to the cultivated audience. In his book he tried to present Gypsies as valuable musicians. The composer was deeply influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau's concept of a »noble savage« whose personification he found in Gypsies, writing that they were »exquisite as they are

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<sup>8</sup> See Hector BERLIOZ, *Correspondance Générale* III: September 1842-1850 [nos. 776-1367], Pierre Citron (ed.), Paris: Flammarion, 1978, no. 1029.

<sup>9</sup> Anna G. PIOTROWSKA, *Topos muzyki cygańskiej w kulturze europejskiej od końca XVIII do początku XX wieku*, Kraków: Musica Iagellonica, 2011, 72-82.

intense, produced by Nature's marvels.«<sup>10</sup> Needless to say this portrayal was deeply rooted in the collective imagination and the 19th century conscience, where Gypsies – naïve and sentimental – still represented, even in Liszt's sympathetic portrayal, the non-European dimension.<sup>11</sup> As Susan Bernstein suggests, Liszt considered Gypsy people as less civilized, or as she says 'improper', but was nevertheless willing to participate in their culture.<sup>12</sup> He famously stated in one of his letters to Caroline Sayn Wittgenstein that he felt »zu einer Hälfte Zigeuner, zur andern Franziskaner.«<sup>13</sup>

The impact of the book (that stirred a lot of confusion triggering off the discussion about the relation between Gypsy and Hungarian music<sup>14</sup>) was strengthened by the fact that after the events of 1848 a lot of Gypsy musicians confided so far to Hungary, decided to find their luck playing in other places, especially in Paris, some even ventured American tournees. Thus their presence in European salons enabled more and more listeners the direct contact with acclaimed Gypsy music.

Gypsy musicians cultivated the tradition of improvisation which – by the time they entered European musical venues – was cherished less and less among professional musicians. In fact (as among others Joachim Ernst Berendt noted) the decline of improvisation practices started already in the early 19th century<sup>15</sup> and was mostly connected with the slow process of eliminating virtuoso practices. With the vanishing popularity of virtuosity – which became near-extinct around 1840s<sup>16</sup> – improvisation followed its fate. Additionally such factors as the growing importance of the performer as an interpreter, the split between composition and performing, and drifting away from the preference towards bass oriented organization of musical material towards more melodically oriented<sup>17</sup> as well as privileging professional musicians (playing notated music rather than by ear) over improvising dilettantes took their toll leading to the abandoning of improvisation practices during most performances.

Still in the very early 19th century improvisation was one of the most typical form of music performing. This popularity was attested by a number of guides to improvisatory practices written, among others, by Carl Czerny (*Systematisches*

<sup>10</sup> See Michael MURPHY, Introduction, in: Harry White – Michael Murphy (eds.), *Musical Constructions of Nationalism. Essays on the History and Ideology of European Musical Culture 1800-1945*, Cork: Cork University Press, 2001, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Susan BERNSTEIN, *Virtuosity of the Nineteenth Century. Performing Music and Language in Heine, Liszt, and Baudelaire*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>13</sup> Franz LISZT, *Briefe*, vol. IV, La Mara (ed.), Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1893-1905, 316.

<sup>14</sup> A. G. PIOTROWSKA, *op.cit.*, 72-82.

<sup>15</sup> Joachim E. BERENDT, *Od raga do rocka*, Kraków: PWM, 1979, 154-61.

<sup>16</sup> Rob C. WEGMAN, *Improvisation (II)*, in: Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol.12, London: MacMillan Publishers, 2001, 117.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

*Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf die Pianoforte*, 1829) or by Friedrich Kalkbrenner (*Traité d'harmonie du pianiste: principes rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre à preluder et à improviser*, 1849). Accomplished improvisation was an essential component of concerts given especially by piano players since – as Leo Botstein argues – the piano was the instrument well suited for improvisation enabling the real-time experience.<sup>18</sup> It is speculated that Franz Schubert improvised at his concerts,<sup>19</sup> so did Frédéric Chopin. Improvising largely added to the fame of young Liszt, who was regarded in Paris incontestable as a virtuoso improvising on themes from Schubert's *Lieder*, Chopin's *Preludes*, etc.<sup>20</sup>

Achieving almost a status of 'cult object'<sup>21</sup> virtuosity – with its preferred brilliant style – offered an abundance of possibilities for improvisations with trills, ornaments, as well as lyrical fragments.<sup>22</sup> In order to achieve these effects virtuosi were known to play »at the very edge of technique, at risk, what one scarcely imagined could be played.«<sup>23</sup> While improvising musicians could present their abilities to the best extend since – as Marc Pincherle observed – »improvisation implied the development of manual dexterity, the constant drive towards new deeds of prowess.«<sup>24</sup> Many instrumentalists, especially pianists and violinists boasting uncommon, almost prestidigital skills regarded as outstanding virtuosi by means of their improvisations responded to the demands of frivolous public that would – in return – take delight in feats of their agility.<sup>25</sup> Virtuosi as adroit performers striving to please the audience by showing off their mastery over the instrument were influential in the formation and growth of audience by means of their specific ability to move the public. Especially the improvising virtuoso was credited with singular abilities beyond the comprehension of the audience.<sup>26</sup>

However, soon the dexterity of the improvising virtuoso became to be questioned as a threat to the artistic nature of music making, and treated as a demonstration of purely mechanical abilities.<sup>27</sup> The accusations were connected with the superficiality of many virtuosic practices. Since virtuoso performance was occasion-bound, instrumentalists were preoccupied with the overall effect

<sup>18</sup> Leon BOTSTEIN, *A Mirror to the Nineteenth Century: Reflections of Franz Liszt*, in: Christopher H. Gibbs – Dana Gooley (eds.), *Franz Liszt and His World*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, 555.

<sup>19</sup> R. C. WEGMAN, *op.cit.*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Paul BEKKER, Liszt and His Critics, in: *The Musical Quarterly*, 22/3 (1936), 277.

<sup>21</sup> James PARAKILAS, Review of Virtuosity of the Nineteenth Century. Performing Music and Language in Heine, Liszt, and Baudelaire by Susan Bernstein, *Notes*, 2nd ser., 57/3 (2001), 650.

<sup>22</sup> R. C. WEGMAN, *op.cit.*, 120.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph KERMAN, *Concerto Conversation*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Marc PINCHERLE, Virtuosity, in: *The Musical Quarterly*, 35/2 (1949), 237.

<sup>25</sup> Irving PICHEL, In Defense of Virtuosity, *The Quarterly of Film and Television*, 6/3 (1952), 229.

<sup>26</sup> Angela ESTERHAMMER, *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750-1850*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 198.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

they could make on their audience. Hence the figure of virtuoso was associated with such temporarily factors creating the scenic persona as the looks, apparel, the choice of colours for clothing, the overall impression. Also other, less tangible tactics were used in creating personal fame, namely calculated effects involving the choice of tempo or the sense of timing<sup>28</sup> including the prolonged wait before the appearance on the stage, »the bows to acknowledge the applause«, etc.<sup>29</sup>

Virtuosi, and especially improvising virtuosi were then seen as figures manipulating the audience, hence untrustworthy. The whimsical nature of improvisation being an act of free creativity undertaken by the virtuoso whenever he felt overcome by the fervor of playing escaped the norm of conventionality and was difficult to harness. Virtuosi were able to unleash the imagination in order to break down regulations and confinements, on one hand providing innovation and novelty<sup>30</sup> but on the other hand displaying rebellious character (indeed improvisation is described by some authors as an anarchic form of creativity<sup>31</sup>). Consequently improvisation was treated as a sign of genius and madness, often at the same time. Revealing the mystery of fortunate creativity, spontaneous and escaping rational explanation was defined by sir Francis Galton in terms of »hereditary genius.«<sup>32</sup>

In that respect improvisators sustained in the first half of the 19th century a rather ambiguous position. Obviously they were admired by the bourgeois down-to-earth society, but nevertheless marginalized as either madmen or mystics.<sup>33</sup> The supernatural aspect of improvisational abilities of virtuosi was defined as a divine inspiration, characteristic of geniuses, yet it was feared as an abnormal deviation. Improvisation was connected with some kind of nervous disorder, illness or even psychosis. In 1845 William Hurton published the book entitled *Maniac Improvisatore* clearly indicating the direction of these associations. In the second half of the 19th century Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) claimed in his influential treatise *Genio e follia* (1864) that genius was a state of hereditary insanity:<sup>34</sup> consequently virtuosic improvisation as a sign of genius was associated with unnatural or even inhuman capabilities of the mind and body alike, especially

<sup>28</sup> S. BERNSTEIN, *op.cit.*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Boris SCHWARTZ, *Great Masters of Violin*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983, 181.

<sup>30</sup> See Morse PECKHAM, *The Romantic Virtuoso*, Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> D. BRZOSTEK, *op. cit.*, 2 (»Improwizacja ma być dziedziną anarchicznej wręcz swobody twórczej, kompozycja – domeną ładu i konsekwentnej realizacji artystycznego zamierzenia«).

<sup>32</sup> See Beate KUTSCHKE, *Improvisation: An Always-Accessible Instrument of Innovation*, *Perspectives of New Music*, 37/2 (1999), 151.

<sup>33</sup> A. ESTERHAMMER, *op.cit.*, 206.

<sup>34</sup> See A. G. PIOTROWSKA, *Modernist Composers and the Concept of Genius*, in: *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 38/1 (2007), 230.

as the exposure of mechanical skills of the player called for great physical agility and often entailed visible exhaustion.

The battle against virtuosity fostering improvisation began in 1840s, as Dana Gooley says having analysed a number of original texts, especially German ones, from that period.<sup>35</sup> As she points out »the battle against virtuosity was neither a centralized movement nor a particularly self-conscious one.«<sup>36</sup> Evaluation of virtuosity – and as a consequence also of improvisation – shifted from that of artistic revelation and prodigy into mockery at its mechanical and reproductive nature.

It was music journalism that was one of the leading forces in the battle against virtuosity. Although virtuosi owned a lot to the press coverage creating their image as a 'socio-historical figure'<sup>37</sup> appearing in a certain moment of history and within specific economic context connected with the rise of bourgeois society, it was the same medium that prompted the decline of virtuosic practices, including improvisation. Angela Esterhammer noted that by the mid-19th century ended the »romantic flourishing of the discourse of improvisation.«<sup>38</sup> By 1870s virtuosity was usually described with the »recurrent adjectives such as cheap, superficial, dishonest and flashy.«<sup>39</sup>

In the meantime the significant shift in evaluating performers took place which relocated the stress from dilettantes to professional musicians. In the period of 1800-1830 the attractiveness of dilettantism was confronted with the tendency to alleviate the status of a musician as a professional. Dilettantes were finally replaced by artists, although during the transition phase, it was the figure of a virtuoso that dominated European musical life. When the battle against virtuosi began in 1840s they were often viewed as homeless strangers, associated with the typical imagination of homeless, free Gypsies, symbolizing constant wanderers. The itinerant virtuoso bore striking similarities to the Gypsy musician »hopelessly divorced from his roots,«<sup>40</sup> as Gooley aptly writes. The ambiguous position of the virtuoso between professional and amateur, often understood as being nothing more but a famous dilettante, made him even more susceptible to associations with a wandering and improvising Gypsy.

Furthermore, the assessment of virtuosi in the 19th century was a subject of two systems of evaluation as Lydia Goehr suggests.<sup>41</sup> On one hand they were

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<sup>35</sup> Dana GOOLEY, *The Battle Against Instrumental Virtuosity in the Early Nineteenth Century*, in: Christopher H. Gibbs – Dana Gooley (eds.), *Franz Liszt and His World*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, 76.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>37</sup> S. BERNSTEIN, *op.cit.*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> A. ESTERHAMMER, *op.cit.*, 212.

<sup>39</sup> D. GOOLEY, *op.cit.*, 105.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>41</sup> Lydia GOEHR, *Conflicting Ideals of Performance Perfection in an Imperfect Practice*, in: Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice: On Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, 140.

assessed as performers of masterpieces created by great composers of genius, but on the other hand the medieval category of entertainers, enchanters (being even at the devil's disposal) still applied. Here the similarity with Gypsy musicians – jongleurs and dancers at the same time – seemed even more compelling. In the first case, *performance-of-a-work* demanded high fidelity to the composer's intentions, the performer was the transparent transmitter of the ideas to such a degree that he could even become unimportant. The other type of performance – in which improvisation might play a vital role – was the *perfect musical performance*. Here, as Goehr writes, the emphasis was placed »upon the actions involved in the total context of the performance that upon mediating language conceived in isolation from this context« and the value of such a performance resided »in the creative acts of individuals which give meaning to music in each moment of their act of performing or engagement with music.«<sup>42</sup> Improvisation was then part and parcel of the *perfect musical performance*, entailing close associations with Gypsy musicians.

Improvisation takes place in time and consequently – as lacking the notation – is difficult to analyze and cannot be treated as a material for historic research favoured by the 19th century *Musikwissenschaft*.<sup>43</sup> Indeed the new born by then discipline preferred notated compositions over improvisations as objects of investigation. *Musikwissenschaft* was closely connected with the historical approach ignoring the social context of the performance and focusing instead on researching written sources, analyzing musical 'texts', and defining the hypothetical development of notated, not merely performed, music. The notion of individual, autonomous work of art deserving (at least descent) *performance-of-a-work* prevailed. *Musikwissenschaft* was then foremost concentrated on analyzing sources, be it sketches (idea propagated by Gustav Nottenbohn who began collecting Beethoven's manuscripts), or completely finished compositions. Improvisation and composition were viewed as oppositions where composing was credited to be connected with the idea of order and persistence,<sup>44</sup> calculated and sophisticated act whose effect was an artistic artifact, whereas improvisation was characterized by such adjectives as primitive, spontaneous, natural, used also in reference to non-Western cultures, as well as towards Gypsies.<sup>45</sup> As late as in 1939 Ernst Ferand in his book on improvisation dedicated one of the initial chapters to 'primitive and oriental' peoples and their improvisational practices asserting that the production-reproduction cycle as observed in composing-performing process is characteristic for more complicated

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>43</sup> B. KERRFELD, *op.cit.*, 314.

<sup>44</sup> D. BRZOSTEK, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Bruno NETTL, Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach, *The Musical Quarterly*, 60/1 (1974), 4.

cultures, whereas less advanced resign to improvisation.<sup>46</sup> He also claimed that Gypsies were among the best improvisers.

The appearance of the prestige of an author in the 19th century (entailing the rise of importance of such subjective forms of art as poetry and music hailed especially high in the romantic era<sup>47</sup>) provoked nevertheless the debate on the relation between the authorship and the delivery since the dependency on performance in music is unavoidable. The composer who creates the work is obliged to trust the performer who thus becomes »the usurper of his identity.«<sup>48</sup> Even in the realm of *performance-of-a-work* the performer – often a virtuoso – possesses the autonomy allowing him to contribute to his image as a skillful virtuoso, enjoying adequate prestige. However – despite this spurious freedom – the performer is always re-enacting somebody else's ideas, while improviser may be creator of his own ones.

The conflict between composition and performance was reflected in the competition between two figures: that of composer and of performer. Divorcing these two roles was illustrated by the formula 'Wagner versus Liszt' since the former privileged the importance of the authorship promoting logocentric rules governing the composition,<sup>49</sup> whereas the latter certainly agreed with the vision of the performer who »has the right of life and death over the works [...] the composer has momentarily entrusted to him.«<sup>50</sup> Not only did Liszt become a symbol of the 19th-century virtuoso, but he also blurred the border between the composer and performer being active as a music propagator transcribing other composers' works as well arranging them. Moreover, it was Liszt who appreciated the Gypsy virtuosi acclaimed for their improvisations. And finally, Liszt's compositions show the tendency to incorporate elements of improvisational character.

In the 19th century it was Liszt who not only equaled the rank of performance with composition, but in fact – by adapting improvisation into his compositional métier – he was able to transgress the border between the composer and the performer, dangerously undermining the privileged position of the composer. Very soon after the first visit in his native Hungary (1839), and after his rediscovery of Gypsy music (he encountered Gypsy musicians as a small boy in the first place, while still in Hungary), the composer started composing his *Hungarian Rhapsodies* – not only alluding to the improvising character of Gypsy music and thus prompting their 'uncivilized' origins, but clearly incorporating certain compositional practices preferred in improvisation. The very name 'rhapsody' was used to underline the unorthodox approach to the issue of genre.

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<sup>46</sup> Ernst FERAND, *Die Improvisation in der Musik. Eine Entwicklungsgeschichtliche und psychologische Untersuchung*, Zurich: Rhein Verlag, 1939, 35.

<sup>47</sup> S. BERNSTEIN, *op.cit.*, 83.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Franz LISZT, *The Gipsy in Music* (transl. Edwin Evans), London: William Reeves, 1960, 267.

Since in the 19th century improvisation and composition were considered as opposites,<sup>51</sup> improvisational elements were drawn upon in genres departing from the traditional formal outlines in order to explain their oddity.<sup>52</sup> The 19th-century preludes, impromptus, fantasias as well as rhapsodies were defined in terms of their alleged connections with improvising. The acknowledgement of the name 'improvisation' as a title of such free compositions came much later – in the 20th century as attested by a number of compositions.<sup>53</sup>

The assimilation of practices reserved for improvisations into compositional technique (understood as harnessing it and 'captivating' in ink) partially led to the decline of improvising<sup>54</sup> in the 19th century. Indeed, certain compositional techniques and devices prevail in improvisation: »repetition, simple variation of short phrases, melodic sequence, the tendency to start two successive sections with the same motive, the tendency to increase the length of sections as the performance progresses.«<sup>55</sup> However, they are not unique for basically improvisatory thinking but are to be found in notated compositions as well. Bruno Nettl even suggests that these two types of music making use »similar kinds of building blocks.«<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, Nettl argues that the same models are involved while composing and improvising: »notes, cadential figures, section types identified by length, melodic phrases, or lines, rhythmic lines or formulas, entire tunes, chord sequences, and modal concepts to which are attached a large group of traits-scales, motifs, and typical sequences of focal points in range and tonality, as well as rhythmical tendencies.«<sup>57</sup> The difference between improvisation and composition – in musical terms – refers not to the essence but to the degree these elements are exploited.

Also one of the most influential musicologists of the 20th century, Carl Dahlhaus, claimed that improvisation – not necessarily original yet always novel – is organized around certain models.<sup>58</sup> The existence of the frame, later only embellished in the actual process of improvising<sup>59</sup> is stressed by John Sloboda. Improvisations usually use what is called »the point of departure« (for example the tune from an opera, consequently such an improvisation may follow the

<sup>51</sup> See for example Lukas FLOSS, *Improvisation versus Composition*, *The Musical Times*, 103/1436, 684.

<sup>52</sup> B. NETTL, *Improvisation (I)...*, 95.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Francis Poulenc, *Valse-improvisation sur le nom Bach pour piano* (1932), Pierre Boulez, *Pli selon Pli. Nr 2. Improvisation I sur Mallarmé »Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui«* (1977).

<sup>54</sup> R. C. WEGMAN, *op.cit.*, 121.

<sup>55</sup> B. NETTL, *Thoughts on Improvisation...*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>58</sup> R. C. WEGMAN, *op.cit.*, 120.

<sup>59</sup> John SLOBODA, *Umysł muzyczny: poznawcza psychologia muzyki*, Warszawa: Akademia Muzyczna im. Fryderyka Chopina, 2002, 168.

operatic plot<sup>60</sup>) and possess compositional basis.<sup>61</sup> In that light, some authors, like Michał Libera, claim even that improvisation and composition are not opposites at all but differ as far as the method of the work is concerned, especially in terms of time limits occurring while improvising.<sup>62</sup> Like composition improvisation possesses internal rules forming its integral logos, but seems less stable with respect to its identity.

What in fact Liszt managed then as a composer was the transformation of improvisation into a jotted down composition. Being open to romantic ideas as a vivid reader of the press in German and French Liszt was not only able to absorb and imitate various trends, but rather »transcended them.«<sup>63</sup> Drawing heavily on what he believed to be real Gypsy tradition the composer set to express the inexpressible. David Malvinni suggests even that »Gypsy music, as understood by Liszt and others in the nineteenth century, is not simply a musical style, nor another exoticism (the German-centric view), but a consciousness of the communicative essence of music; differently put, it is the power of musical performance to convey a 'passionate' impression on the listener.«<sup>64</sup>

Liszt's piano music, rejecting the instrument's limitations, imitated the sound effects of other instruments including the ones commonly linked with Gypsy music: violin and also cimbalom. Symptomatically, when Liszt – an accomplished improvising virtuoso – discovered Gypsy music he abandoned his career as a performer because – as Botstein suggests – the growing »dissatisfaction with his virtuoso career« being »the result of his extensive internal musing regarding the inadequacy of performance alone as realizing the higher calling of the artist and the elevation of the new public's taste.«<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, virtuosos were blamed for drawing away the public's attention from the work itself in favour of emotions. So for Liszt composing started exactly where improvising ended. He incorporated a number of musical figures on which improvisation thrived into his musical compositions focusing on the role of melody unifying the work. He never shunned – so characteristic for improvisations – repetitions and digressions, yet the structural logics of his compositions followed the inner plan reflecting the improvising path. Consequently, some musicologists argue that for Liszt musical composition »remained tied to the musical event as a performative experience.«<sup>66</sup> Framed within an audible entity, a

<sup>60</sup> R. C. WEGMAN, *op.cit.*, 121.

<sup>61</sup> B. NETTL, *Improvisation (I)...*, 96.

<sup>62</sup> Michał LIBERA, *Czym jest free improvisation*, *Glissando*, 3 (2005), 2, at: <http://nowy.glissando.pl/wp/category/teksty/numer-3-3-2005/>. Access: 18.07.2011.

<sup>63</sup> L. BOTSTEIN, *op.cit.*, 519.

<sup>64</sup> David MALVINNI, *The Gypsy Caravan: from Real Roma to Imaginary Gypsies in Western Music and Film*, New York-London: Routledge, 2004, ix.

<sup>65</sup> L. BOTSTEIN, *op.cit.*, 544.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 555.

piece of music inspired by improvising practice represented a new musical quality. It was the try to conjure up in the form of a written text the emotions of the moment – the compromise between the dilettante and the professional artist, an attempt to marry two opposites, an attempt to sustain the ideal of improvisation while not rejecting the new ideas of the higher status of the autonomous, written down piece of music.

Improvisation seen as a departure from the text (that is not actually written down for a variety of reasons<sup>67</sup>) might also be the natural preference of oral transmission over notated. The written – improvised distinction appeared as an issue of notated improvisations: it is widely speculated that some compositions by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart or Ludwig van Beethoven may have originated as notated improvisations since these composers were celebrated for their excellent improvisational skills and their concerts often featured them improvising. Mozart is even suggested to have conceived his fantasias as improvisations performed at concerts.<sup>68</sup> The possibility of shorthand notation of improvisation was widely known in the 19th century also among poetic improvisators as some of them like Maximilian Langenscharz (1801 - before 1860) actually had their improvisations speed written.

The decline of improvisation in the 19th century was attributed by Robin Moore to changing conceptions of music and performance on one hand, but on the other hand to the change in pedagogy.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, many authors postulate that possessing certain knowledge is indispensable in the process of composing, whereas it is not essential for improvising.<sup>70</sup> Hence composition is interpreted as an emanation of erudition while improvisation as a sign of intuition.<sup>71</sup> Since Gypsies in the 19th century were credited as intuitive and sentimental, improvisation clearly remained in the sphere of their activities, but not composition which was reserved for educated musicians. Heavy burden of stereotypes prevented Gypsies from being recognized as worthy of composing music in the form of a written-down piece since – as H.R. Haweis claimed in 1871 – »a man's work is always a true index of his character.«<sup>72</sup> As the result of the tendency claiming that »the Morality depends upon the Artist, not upon the Art«,<sup>73</sup> the virtuosity of Gypsies articulated in their improvisations was linked with the characteristics of Gypsies underlying negative aspects of their nature. Improvisation seen as the basic means of musical expression among primitive cultures (such as Gypsies)

<sup>67</sup> R. C. WEGMAN, *op.cit.*, 98.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>69</sup> Robin MOORE, *The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art: An Interpretation of Change, International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 23/1 (1992), 68-80.

<sup>70</sup> M. LIBERA, *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>71</sup> D. BRZOSTEK, *op. cit.*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> H. R. HAWEIS, *Music and Morals*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 22<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1912, 84.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

began to be looked on in the intellectual circles of Europe with certain disdain, so, consequently, improvising practices lost their impact and popularity cherished in the first half of the 19th century.

When conservatory education appeared in the early 19th century in Paris and Vienna, it caused the growth of importance of notated music as a pedagogical tool. On one hand more accessible printed editions (stimulated by the development of *Musikwissenschaft*) created the demand for the formal training, and on the other hand the process of education required printed materials in the form of codified compositions rather than relying on illusive improvisations. Dilettante musicians associated with improvisatory practices were gradually replaced by professionally trained musicians able to perform classical music of Western repertoire considered in 19th century as one of the symbols of refinement and prestige, and suggesting – as Moore writes – »the associations between conservatory musicians and high culture«<sup>74</sup> as opposed to primitive cultures (non-Western and encountered in Europe alike) linked with improvisation rather than with notated composition. Already in the 1840s the thorough knowledge of the findings of theory of music was demanded from a professional performer and from a composer a set of rules governing musical works.<sup>75</sup> The stress laid on the musical education often put improvising virtuosos in a handicapped position, especially as alleged lack of proper learning was commonly attributed to less advanced cultures, most notably linked with improvising Hungarian Gypsies.

As mentioned, improvisation was trivialized in the 19th century as a consequence of several factors, including the unspoken agreement among musically educated intellectuals to associate more closely improvisational practices with less sophisticated musical cultures. The fascination with Oriental musical traditions (especially after Napoleonic wars) entailed the increase of printing books dedicated to the non-European cultures, including some notes on music<sup>76</sup> and resulted in the growing knowledge on improvising practices cultivated in so-called primitive societies. Improvisation began to be linked with departure from the aesthetics and compositional norms of European music. This type of reasoning affected scholars deep into the 20th century.<sup>77</sup> Since the mid-19th century it has often been underlined that improvisation – where inventor and executor is the same person – is a concept relevant to non-Western cultures<sup>78</sup> (including Gypsy cultures) and possesses ‘primitive’ pedigree.<sup>79</sup> In that context in the 19th century

<sup>74</sup> R. MOORE, *op.cit.*, 74.

<sup>75</sup> D. GOOLEY, *op.cit.*, 84.

<sup>76</sup> See Philip V. BOHLMAN, The European Discovery of Music in the Islamic World and the ‘Non-Western’ in 19th-Century Music History, *The Journal of Musicology*, 5/2 (Spring 1987), 150.

<sup>77</sup> See E. FERAND, *op.cit.*

<sup>78</sup> B. NETTL, Thoughts on Improvisation..., 2.

<sup>79</sup> [n.a.], *L'improvvisazione nel jazz*, in: Angelo Solmi (ed.), *Enciclopedia della musica*, Milano: Rizzoli-Ricordi, 1972, 320.

improvisation – as Robin Moore once observed – became to be treated as »threatening, unfamiliar or undeserving of interest.«<sup>80</sup>

Improvisation was associated with primitive, even barbarous, peoples, or at least with dilettante musicians (enchanters<sup>81</sup>) for whom the awareness of the author of the work was unimportant, with the preference given to the actual process of music making enclosed in the performance situation. Improvisation – spontaneous creation undertaken on the spot<sup>82</sup> and fulfilling the immediate demand – was interpreted as expressing the whole range of (even primitive) emotions and as aiming at maintaining an illusion of real time experience. The European intellectuals treated similarly exotic music and Gypsy music – as very emotional, melancholic, full of inner contrast.

Indeed the musical narration cultivated during the improvisational performance stimulates the wide range of emotions credited to possess their own dramatics. As identified by Ali Jihad Racy, improvisation is characterised by a number of features including: intuitiveness, practical aspect, creativeness, personalization (individualization), inspiration, power, specific musical idiom, balance between the familiar and the novel, direct contact with the audience, mystical or emotional transcendence, freedom, and finally naturalness.<sup>83</sup> Virtuosity as a mere skill helped to sustain the high level of emotions encompassed in the performance. The mixture of virtuosity, emotions and improvisation – coincidentally? – characterizes also the representation of Gypsy music in European culture. This perception was reinforced in 2001 by Michael Beckerman in his short, yet persuasive article published in *New York Times* where he claimed that Gypsy music can be characterized according to a simple formula:  $I + V = E$  where I stands for improvisation, V for virtuosity and E for emotions or expressiveness.<sup>84</sup>

Playing with emotions and virtuosity determined the success of an improviser dependent on the immediate recognition by the audience. The unanimous and demanding public was the severest critic, not only challenging but often unexpectedly whimsical, making the performer follow their caprices.<sup>85</sup> Gypsy musicians were known to improvise on any tune<sup>86</sup> for the sake of money. As a consequence they constantly chased the possibilities of performing and travelling,

<sup>80</sup> R. MOORE, *op.cit.*, 63.

<sup>81</sup> See L. GOEHR, *op.cit.*, 151.

<sup>82</sup> D. BRZOSTEK, *op.cit.*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> Ali JIHAD RACY, The Many Faces of Improvisation: The Arab Taqasim as a Musical Symbol, *Ethnomusicology*, 44/2 (2000), 304-7.

<sup>84</sup> Michael BECKERMAN, Music: Pushing Gypsiness, Roma or otherwise, *New York Times*, 2001, April 1.

<sup>85</sup> See Robert WANGERMÉE, Traditions et innovations dans la virtuosité romantique, *Acta Musicologica*, XLV (1970), 11.

<sup>86</sup> See for example Ignacy DANIŁOWICZ P.P.Z., *O Cyganach wiadomość historyczna czytana na posiedzeniu publicznem cesarskiego Uniwersytetu Wileńskiego dnia 30 czerwca 1824 roku*, Wilno: w drukarni A. Marcinowskiego, 1824, 117.

what was immanently written into their occupation. The wandering lifestyle coupled with improvising were in the 19th century features already widely discussed in case of ancient rhapsodes. Since poetic improvisation as much as musical one is connected with timing and »virtuosity permeates equally discourses and practices of both music and language,«<sup>87</sup> the close links between musical and poetic improvisation included not only structural similarities but also referred to the prosaic use of musical instruments (e.g. guitar, piano or even the whole orchestra) during performances.<sup>88</sup> Susan Bernstein convincingly presented the analogies drawn in the 19th century between improvising poets and ancient rhapsodes. It seems that Gypsy musicians as great improvisers also fell into the orbit of these associations. The 19th-century connection of Gypsy music with the tradition of rhapsodes was overtly evidenced by Liszt who decided to write Hungarian epos (taking form of 'nomen omen' *Hungarian Rhapsodies*) alluding to this ancient tradition.

There are symptomatic similarities between perception of rhapsodes and Gypsy (improvising) musicians in the 19th century as they both represented professional economic groups interested in money-making and interested in gaining recognition enabling future engagements. The existence of rhapsodes as well as Gypsies on the verge of the society and its norms prompted further comparisons. The improvising performer just like the rhapsode »stands between his world and its representation«<sup>89</sup> and in the act of improvisation combines and repeats old and new ideas. Consequently, while adopting this technique rhapsodes were conceived as the source of corruption of the tradition and in the 19th century Gypsies were similarly treated as the main propagators of distortion in music. As ancient rhapsodes were openly accused of corrupting the poetry in the process of transmission, so were Gypsy improvisers who – in their need to prove innovative and novel – felt obliged to incorporate new elements into old structures. Thus they became the target of criticism accusing them of contaminating music. Although Liszt tried to put some positive light on Gypsy improvisational practices writing that: »... only the Gypsies have understood how to give them [i.e. tunes they were supposed to perform] the full artistic value, their illumination and their renown...«<sup>90</sup> yet the ideas perpetuating the 19th-century Hungary were quite the opposite, and finally explicitly uttered by Béla Bartók in his writings in the early 20th century.<sup>91</sup> Gypsies were not only thought to be contaminating authentic music, they were also considered as incapable of composing their own music. Gypsies were denied abilities to conceive art: Zoltan Kodály in 1960 wrote

<sup>87</sup> S. BERNSTEIN, *op.cit.*, 13.

<sup>88</sup> A. ESTERHAMMER, *op.cit.*, 200.

<sup>89</sup> S. BERNSTEIN, *op.cit.*, 93.

<sup>90</sup> F. LISZT, *op. cit.*, 270.

<sup>91</sup> Béla BARTÓK, *On Hungarian Music*, in: Benjamin Suchoff (ed.), *Bela Bartók. Essays*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992, 301.

openly about »the conspicuous absence of gipsy composers»<sup>92</sup> and asserted they were »never more than second rate imitators of the regular Hungarian style.«<sup>93</sup> Indeed as Susan Bernstein wrote »like the rhapsode, the virtuoso is simultaneously the possibility and the impossibility of composing.«<sup>94</sup> Gypsy improvising virtuoso especially fell prey to this type of reasoning.

The 19th-century ambiguous attitude towards improvisation – including fascination, denying its inner organization and logics, even despising – is deeply rooted in the epoch and its cultural modes and fads. The factors that led to the decline in the popularity of improvisation in the 19th century intermingled for instance with the romantic admiration for Gypsy musicians. The symptomatic role that Franz Liszt played in the whole process reflects the degree of sophistication connected with the delicate balance of such influential tendencies as virtuosity, alleviating the role of composer, finally creating new genres. Despite the 19th century decline of popularity, the improvisation as a musical practice never ceased to exist and in the 20th century it was again acknowledged in jazz music, was practised on regular basis in organ music and most visibly infiltrated artistic compositions as recognized in their titles.

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<sup>92</sup> Zoltan KODÁLY, *Folk Music of Hungary*, London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960, 9.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> S. BERNSTEIN, *op.cit.*, 100.

Sažetak

**Izražavanje neizrecivog: improvizacija i europska fasciniranost  
ciganskom glazbom u 19. stoljeću**

Improvizaciju kao glazbeni fenomen opisivalo se iz različitih gledišta i uglova: povijesnih, analitičkih, komparativnih, usredotočenih na jedan stil (npr. jazz), itd. Često se ističe da je do sredine 19. stoljeća improviziranje u europskoj umjetničkoj glazbi izgubilo svoj istaknuti status. Tvrdi se da je propadanje improvizacije bilo rezultat kritičkog pohoda protiv virtuozičnosti i posljedica sklonosti spram ideje skladbe kao dovršenog savršenog umjetničkog djela, kao i povezanosti s tendencijom srozavanja stava o pjesničkom improviziranju.

Međutim, istodobno kada je improviziranje bilo izopćeno iz umjetničke glazbe, u europskoj se kulturi dogodilo (ponovno) otkriće ciganske glazbe i figura ciganskog virtuozu zamijenila je onu profesionalnog glazbenika-virtuozu kao velikog improvizatora. Ciganski glazbenici – osobito oni iz Mađarske – već su bili slavni kao vješti izvođači koji su pratili razna društvena događanja. Ključna uloga u širenju poznavanja ciganskih virtuozu može se pripisati Franzu Lisztu koji je 1859. objavio knjigu *Des Bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie (O Ciganima i o njihovoj glazbi u Mađarskoj)*, hvaleći njihove improvizatorske vještine. Kao skladatelj i izvođač Liszt je njegovao ideale koji su bili bliži pojmu *savršene glazbene izvedbe*, shvaćene prije kao glazbeno iskustvo što se zbiva u stvarnom vremenu, a manje kao *izvedbe djela*, shvaćene kao vjernost skladateljevoj zamisli instrumentalnog izvođenja izraženoj notama zabilježenim u partituri.

U ovom se članku dokazuje da je odbijanje izvođača u drugoj polovici 19. stoljeća da (javno) improviziraju bilo, među ostalim, neizravno povezano s romantičkom fasciniranošću egzotičnim kulturama i posebno ciganskom glazbom. Također se pokazuje kako su i drugi čimbenici koji se tiču percepcije improvizacije bili povezani u mrežu međusobnih utjecaja, što je imalo za posljedicu snižavanje popularnosti instrumentalne improvizacije.