

CPMPC 2026
Contemporary Perspectives
on Music Performance and Creation
Örebro universitet, 24-25 september 2026

Abstract

**Spontaneity and Learning in Nineteenth-Century Piano Improvisation:
Fantasizing in the Manner of an English Garden**

What does it mean to improvise in the manner of an English garden? According to the Viennese pianist and composer Carl Czerny (1789–1857), the English garden represents the aesthetic ideal for musical improvisation. This paper discusses how the meaning of this metaphor is manifested in concrete musical techniques and strategies within the improvisation instruction Czerny conveys through his pedagogical publications from the early nineteenth century. The presentation offers hands-on tools that may be valuable to pianists interested in experimenting with early nineteenth-century ideas on improvisation. Here, I build on and develop the practical, pianistic dimensions of the results in my doctoral dissertation, *The English Garden Fantasy: Rule Poetics and Transformation Strategies in Carl Czerny's Teaching of Piano Improvisation* (2025).

My contribution nuances the picture of early nineteenth-century improvisation presented in recent research. I demonstrate how the craft of fantasizing that Czerny represents goes beyond the standardized bass-line patterns, contrapuntal formulas and figuration exercises described in current partimento studies. And I argue that this craft cannot be adequately understood simply as free diminution of given harmonic patterns, as suggested in some recent research. In this connection, I emphasize two hitherto neglected aspects of this approach to improvisation: first, the essential role of ideas about genres, styles, and characters in the production of this type of music; and second, the significant use of temporal transformation of given harmonic patterns. (The function of genres in this improvisation tradition is also addressed in Bert Mooiman's work.) Both aspects constitute facets of the craft behind the English garden style.

By way of conclusion, I discuss different possible interpretations of the purpose behind adopting the English garden style in the realm of improvisation.

Martin Edin