

Improvising with scores

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Within Western art music, improvisation can be seen as an aspect of music-making in general. Thus ‘the improvisatory’ (considered here as the quality of the unforeseen, the unpremeditated) potentially pervades many aspects of music; it can be detected in score-based music-making as well. In this paper, I will focus on the idea of an improvisatory approach to scores. An influential line of thinking during the twentieth century (and beyond) stresses the reproducing nature of a performance of classical music. When performance is seen as reproduction, it strives for a specific and well-defined final result. In combination with the idea that a performance should be as the composer intended, this approach entails a musical literalism that is still very present in professional music education and in classical concert life. It constitutes a true interpretational paradigm that I termed the *Urtext*-paradigm. In the nineteenth century and before, a performance of composed music was generally seen as recreation rather than reproduction. To the performer, the score served as an interlocutor rather than as an instructor; the musical text functioned as a starting point of ever new musical adventures. An active and participating attitude was expected from performers, even by the composers themselves: it was a part of the score’s ‘horizon’, as Hans-Georg Gadamer would have it. One aspect of such an improvisatory approach to scores is timing. In addition to multiple written indications of a free and improvisatory treatment of scores, the earliest recordings and piano rolls constitute a unique source of information about timing habits at the end of the nineteenth century, notably the various types of rubato. I argue that rubato is to be seen as an inner necessity that intensifies the expression of a passage. Rubato implies a search for variety and enhancement of musical gestures that leads towards a more outspoken individuality of phrases and other musical units, which may result in ‘dislocation’ between the hands of a pianist or even between different musicians.