

IMPROVISATION

360°

*To create, discover and get the most out
of our instrument*

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INTRODUCTION

Too many times have I heard a classical musician say “I can't improvise”. My suspicion is that they never really gave it a chance.

Improvising is creating, it is giving in to spontaneity. Something very present in many musical genres throughout history. It is not novel, but, unfortunately, improvisation has lost weight in the world of classical music. It has been, though, an important part of the curriculum of many schools in the past and I consider it a tool that we should bring back to the field of “classical music”.

Improvisation has been a constant in my musical life, however, I have always been surprised by the absence of it at the educational level in the modern world. I consider that improvisation is an essential means for learning, because it is a creative, personal activity that helps us to develop in music and within our own instrument. It helps us to get ideas, to play with them - not in a banal sense -, to, in short, be artists who are masters of their art, more active within music.

Moreover, improvisation can be a complete routine when it comes to understanding and developing **musical rhetoric**, because with it we can work on our *logos* (the mastery of technique), *ethos* (our own personality as musicians, our “sign of identity”), and *pathos* (the affections we transmit).

At the **technical** level, we can make the instrument more “ours”, as if it'd be our own body. The technical assimilation is crucial for our performance as artists: greater agility, greater flexibility, and greater resources (colors, articulation, etc.).

Improvisation is an optimal resource to reinforce **theoretical knowledge**, either on a melodic level (intervals), on a harmonic level, or, also, on a more structural one.

It is also an important tool to train our **hearing**; depending on the complexity of the improvisation, we can exercise the analysis of intervals, harmonies and structures. In addition, improvisation can help us to put into practice the knowledge we have about different **aesthetics** in particular.

On a **musical** level, improvisation gives us a considerable dose of creativity, makes us more spontaneous, with a greater control of the emotions we want to convey, a better ability to react, a better and greater perspective of the technical means to create different scenarios.

As a consequence, improvisation is a tool of **creation**, with which we explore the limits of our instrument and of our musical capacity and personality. From improvisation we can create new works and techniques, and even take our instrument to different contexts than usual.

In the following pages, I will explain these ideas in detail and propose a series of exercises to make improvisation a daily activity.

I. IMPROVISATION AND TECHNIQUE: developing the *logos*

I.1. TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE

In this section we will focus on how to create our own small studies, or *etudes*. This practice is well known to us, so why spend time creating our own exercises, if there are already many written? First of all, I consider that the proactive attitude of the musician towards their technique is utterly important: a good practice is based on a good **analysis**, rigorous but patient, of the technical gestures: both of those required in a given passage (*what exactly should I do in each hand*) and of those that are not working optimally (*what am I not doing well*). We know that optimal practice is not based on repetition, but on elaboration. We must understand what kind of movements our fingers should make, where they come from and how to make those movements possible; create a working context in which we develop **muscle memory**. This concept, very necessary and highly interesting, consists of instilling a “motor memory” in the muscles involved within the different movements; in other words, and as its name suggests, making the muscles “remember” what they should do in each situation. Analyzing the movements a priori, analyzing from the sensations of each hand, as well as eliminating unnecessary movements and harmful tensions, and repeating those movements and sensations slowly and steadily (gradually adding speed), guarantees a more successful performance - as well as allowing us to play the piece in question again, even many years later, in a very fast way.

The exercises we improvise to develop our technique should always keep in mind the concept of muscle memory. In this way, they will always help us to have a solid technique in a continuous state of improvement.

Here are some examples:

1. Gallant music is full of trills and mordents. While each figure in each moment of each piece has a different function and affect, I found it helpful to work out a personal exercise in which I worked on mordents in different positions. It did not result in an extremely creative exercise, as it is based on a scale, but the musical simplicity and clarity of structure provide the necessary focus on the technical gesture:



The image shows three staves of musical notation in 2/4 time. The first staff contains a sequence of eighth-note pairs, each with a mordent above it. The second staff continues this pattern with a different fingering. The third staff shows a variation with a trill-like flourish at the end, followed by a final chord.

[Video](#)

2. The following example is based on the penultimate piece (WKO211) of the Drexell Manuscript by C.F. Abel (1723 - 1787)



The difficulty of the passage is a combination of string changes - and from playing two strings to playing only one - and position changes with the correct fingering configuration to find the right notes.

From this little passage we can derive an exercise like this:



3. Based on a passage from the same piece:



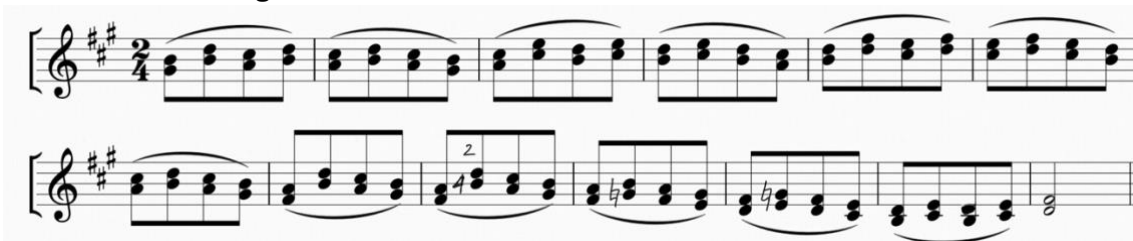
The difficulty of this motif, which appears several times, is to articulate optimally all the notes in the same bow. We can create a small exercise, going through different positions and strings. We will focus our attention on the motion of the right hand: the angle of the arm, the anticipation of the position and the elasticity and joint movement of the wrist and fingers. Let's always consider different bowings, different bow amounts, focus on the quality (and quantity) of articulation, etc.



4. Another improvisation exercise I love to do daily is to bring out the resonance of the instrument, especially with the Viola da Gamba. While it may sound simple, exploring resonance and improving the projection of the instrument is as interesting as it is necessary, and not entirely simple. Getting the non-open-string-notes to sound like open-strings is a task of the left hand (being in the right position, not just over the fret) and the right hand (right point of contact, right articulation, right speed, etc.). It is an exercise that allows us to explore our instrument, to create colors and different directions of the notes. This type of exercise can be of a rather technical nature, if what we are looking for is to train a particular type of bow stroke, for example, but it may also be a mere moment of exploration and creation, somewhat abstract. We will talk about this later.
5. In this case we will proceed from the second movement of the Concerto in A Major Graun WV A:XIII:11 for Viola da Gamba and orchestra by J. G. Graun (1703 - 1771). Let's look at these two passages:



We can see that the complexity of the passage lies in the double stops and, to a lesser but still present extent, in the trills on double stops - including the double trill at the end of the first passage. Undoubtedly, the demanding fingering configuration in the left hand hinders the ability to phrase, to create long lines without interruption and to achieve the necessary affection. Trills on double stops are a step down in difficulty from double trills, but still require proper practice. From here we can draw two exercises that, although they will work on different technical gestures, should help to assimilate and analyze the sensations in the left hand: without tension, but gaining agility and strength to have the necessary stability and fluidity in the movement of the fingers.



Improvised exercises do not really require a clear structure, since they consist of working on and assimilating technical gestures. However, trying to get something slightly musical out of them can help us, since it gives us a closer idea of what the final result should be. I think that the musical goal we have in each section should be the guide for the technical exercises partially, otherwise, if we do not have a relative emotional horizon, the practice may turn out to be somewhat in vain.

Trills exercises:

Double stops:  Musical notation for double stops exercise. It consists of two staves in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The first staff shows a sequence of double stops (dyads) with trills above them. The second staff shows a sequence of double stops with trills above them.

Double trills:  Musical notation for double trills exercise. It consists of two staves in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The first staff shows a sequence of double trills. The second staff shows a sequence of double trills.

6. As a last example of this section I would like to take up the *Drexell Manuscript* with the Adagio WKO 209. This will also serve as a starting point for the next chapter.



I would like to focus on the written serpentine ornamentations. This type of figures, very present in different aesthetics, require special care: they are not exactly equal notes, but have an important rhetorical and expressive connotation, and therefore a certain sense of gravity, of flexibility in the tempo. We need an agile, fast, but also flexible left hand, which in itself is capable of “marking” (that is to say, that we feel it in our fingers), which are the most important notes, those that offer a greater aroma, more information or affection.

Improvising in this “style”, let's put it this way now, already requires a polished technical base: it is necessary to have speed and precision; but in this exercise we must begin to pay more attention to the intention of the line, to its rhetorical and musical meaning. We could practice this kind of passages improvising something like:

 Musical notation for improvisation exercise. It shows a single staff with a complex, flowing melodic line, characteristic of the serpent technique.

This brief improvisation could be performed within the framework of very different affections: a more passionate emotion would lead us, for example, to play it faster and more direct, more *forte*; a more poetic emotion would perhaps start slower, more *piano*, with a greater difference between the forms (*rubato*) of each of the figures. We could recreate a mysterious, frightening scenario, but also a more playful one. We explore in this way, with different techniques, also in the bow, all the expressive possibilities we have at our disposal. In this context, we started to merge the technical work with the musicality.

I.II. THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE: the “invisible” *logos*

It's clear that it's no use having the technical tools if you don't know what to do with them. In other words, the more we know, the better we will be able to perform both technically and musically.

In this subsection I will talk about how improvisation can help to reinforce the knowledge of music theory, as well as to train the hearing, and vice versa (we will see the great reciprocity between all these elements in this process); but also about how the more specific knowledge about different aesthetics and periods affects improvisation.

1. Music theory: harmony, counterpoint and structure. The ear as a tool.

Improvisation can take place in very different constellations, either one or several persons, with melodic or harmonic instruments, with a repeating harmonic structure, etc.

The freedom of improvisation, however, is sometimes confused with a lack of structure or musical horizon. Whoever wants to improvise well must **listen, analyse and react** consistently to the information they receive. In this sense, it requires an **active and alert** attitude on the part of the improviser.

For this reason, theoretical knowledge and improvisation will constantly and reciprocally feed each other, since in each session the interpreter will improve in at least one of these aspects. This is why **hearing** is an important factor. Whoever has a very good ear (someone with perfect pitch, synaesthesia or a very well trained relative ear) will have, a priori, a greater facility of analysis of what happens during improvisation. However, practicing improvisation can help to train the ear in many ways as long as this alert attitude is maintained. In order to do so, we must ask ourselves the following questions:

- What interval/harmony is sounding; or, in the other sense: let's only work with x intervals/harmonies (for example, only with major thirds and perfect fifths or only with seventh chords).
- From the previous point, we can derive the following question: what key or mode are we in? Is there any?
- Rhythmic or melodic motives: let's try to repeat them, invert them, imitate them.
- Phrasing and structure: what discourse is being proposed, how long each phrase lasts, how the emotional tempo (*tactus*, breaths) is proposed, etc.

On the other hand, those who have a great knowledge of harmony and counterpoint, if they also have a good hearing, will be able to improvise in a much more complex way.

2. Aesthetic knowledge: historically informed performance.

Improvisation and historically informed performance have much in common. First of all, as is well known, improvisation has been part of the curriculum of many schools throughout history, as well as part of many different musical traditions; so it would not be unreasonable to think that it is a resource that every good musician, in general, should be able to have.

Nowadays, whoever is dedicated to historically informed performance is forced to be able to improvise (ornaments, cadences, fantasies...) within a specific aesthetic. This requires investing a lot of time in studying the characteristics of each one of them, which, finally, must be put into practice. Improvising in these styles, trying to recreate the ornaments, the melismatic turns and harmonic sequences, based on imitation, recomposition and creation itself, can help anyone who is immersed in this discipline to enjoy greater spontaneity when making music.

It is still very common to see musicians with their scores full of ornaments: ornaments that they painstakingly prepare at home and then perform on stage. While I understand the functionality of this, I think it can reduce the degree of spontaneity of the ornaments and consequently, on many occasions, the effect or affection they are intended to provoke. I think it is important that every musician who dedicates to this discipline invests time in increasing their degree of spontaneity through improvisation: from there, very beautiful results can emerge, apart from unique moments on stage, or in a recording, in which one reacts to what others suggest, to what others think of at the moment, or, simply to what one feels or suffers at that precise moment. A living interpretation.

The difficulty of this, of course, is that there is a danger of moving out of the aesthetics in which we are playing. But let us remember that, within that aesthetic framework, we enjoy a great deal of freedom and, although J.J. Quantz (1697 - 1773) speaks of Good Taste, in capital letters, because it is something concrete, to be learned and mastered; once we understand the language and the rules of the “game”, the freedom is infinite.

From our perspective, as musicians who want to play within each aesthetic as the documents of their respective contexts make us understand, this work can be very arduous, as well as extremely rigorous. Hence, many turn to pencil to fill their scores and versions with their “official” ornamentations. But my suggestion is that they let themselves be led, that they take risks in their practice, that they try out and make mistakes; that they react to what their chamber colleagues offer, that they then take the initiative. It will become easier and easier. And what can then be transmitted is much fresher, more natural and authentic.

II. IMPROVISATION AND MUSICALITY: *ethos* and *pathos*

Improvising is creating. Improvising is spontaneity.

Improvisation cannot take place without character. That character that comes only from the one who improvises: *ethos*. The *ethos* is the element that brings authenticity to the interpretation. It comes from the deepest part of the musician who is playing: what they want to express, how they want to express it, and with what elements and in what way they do it; everything comes from the “I” of the musician.

The *ethos* in music, as I mentioned at the end of the previous point, has a lot to do with the performer's aesthetic knowledge: we cannot improvise in Jazz if we have not learned it, just as we cannot improvise in baroque style or in *Empfindsamerstil* if we do not know the characteristics of these.

The *ethos* will also be determined by their technical knowledge: the more resources, the more things they will be able to tell, which they will also be able to express in very different ways.

That which they express is what we know as *pathos*, the most valuable content of a musical work: the affections.

Through music we can tell endless stories, stories without words; emotions that go beyond them. Through music we can tell all these emotions and little anecdotes in many different ways.

The one who decides it, *ethos*, depends absolutely on their technical and aesthetic mastery, *logos*, for their interpretation to be successful (this means that the *pathos* is present, that they manage to communicate it as they really want to).

The *ethos*, therefore, must be imaginative, proactive, and take the initiative. The *ethos* decides how to shape the *pathos*. This predisposition when making music is what distinguishes the musician who surprises, who is unique, who always excites, from the one who leaves others indifferent.

Improvisation, in the broadest sense of the word, can help us to train our *ethos*, that is, to challenge ourselves, but also to know ourselves.

It challenges us because we must take every initiative, we must create music, “compose” without writing, generate a discourse, sometimes without knowing what about... It helps us to know ourselves because it makes us understand, on the one hand, within which affections we move better (which emotions we transmit better), and on the other hand, we check which technical resources we use better, which ones we lack, which ones we use too much.

For those who wish to start improvising, I here propose different objectives, which can easily be combined in the same session.

1. Starting from a certain affection or personality: joy, melancholy, indifference, cockiness, anger, disappointment, gallantry; an intelligent character, an unscrupulous aristocrat, an optimistic person, an activist... the aim is to represent musically, with the greatest degree of detail, what one wants to express. It doesn't have to be long, sometimes a single note is just enough.

2. Create colours: instruments offer an immense palette of colours and effects. We can associate colours with emotions and try to find them or, on the contrary, find a colour and treat it from different affections. We can experiment with what our instrument can offer, from the most orthodox to inventing a new technique: Apart from playing *sul tasto* or *sul ponticello*, the Viola da Gamba, for example, can imitate the creaking of the wood of an old ship (holding the bow at both ends and making it move slowly with more weight than usual on the strings); what more effects can we achieve?
3. Changes of affection: same intervallic or harmonic information, but it can be said in many ways. Different colours, articulations, tempo, *rubato*, dynamics. Saying opposite things but starting from the same notes. (This particular exercise is highly recommended when we approach a new piece and we want to test what emotion or intention we want to give it).
4. Challenging the *logos*: this would consist of taking some technical or aesthetic resources to the maximum. For example, improvising with always very fast notes that test our coordination, through different registers, even the less usual ones, of the instrument; or, at the other extreme, trying to improvise a fantasy in the style of C.P.E. Bach (1714 - 1788).
5. To start from our own sensations and emotions: to translate what we feel into music. *Ethos* at its best.

All this can be combined in larger scenes, such as telling an anecdote through music.

An exercise which can be, apart from anything else, a lot of fun, is to accompany a silent film with our own improvisation. There will be, for sure, uncoordination, surprises, lack of reaction. But it is an optimal way of reacting quickly to something that happens on a screen (*pathos* interpreted by *ethos*, which will sometimes result in a secondary *pathos*), with all the resources we have in our hands (*logos*).

In addition, I propose these two types of improvisation:

a) Improvisation as a warm-up:

Technical warm-up is something present in musicians' everyday life, but what if we add a little emotional warm-up before a concert or an important event? Is it possible to warm up our emotions, to prepare our mind for what we are going to perform? In my experience, yes, and not exclusively on a mental level. We can improvise in such a way that we recreate moments of what we are about to perform.

We can, of course, improvise around the technical difficulties of the repertoire we are about to present.

b) Improvisation as meditation:

Improvisation can be a great tool to take a break from routine and relax the mind somewhat (as a strategy against burnout, for example). Although it may sound a little esoteric, meditating with the instrument can be very positive and healthy both on a personal and musical level. It is a very healthy way to internalise the instrumental *logos* through the *pathos* that our own *ethos* feels. The difference between this and the fifth objective proposed a few paragraphs ago is that the aim of this improvisation is none other than to embrace the *pathos* exclusively. Feeling for

the sake of feeling and creating for the sake of creating. A good way to do this improvisation can be to loop a harmonic base and improvise on it ([see example of base](#), [see example of realisation on the base](#)). At other times, simply playing 'whatever comes up', without any base, is more appropriate.

It can always be done in ensemble as well.

III. IMPROVISATION AND CREATION: beyond the limits

After what has been described previously, we can conclude that improvisation is a very good tool to create and discover: from new techniques and effects - improving aspects of our *logos* and exploring the limits of our instrument - to the creation of new works. The creation of new repertoire is very important for the survival of an instrument, and the use of new techniques makes it possible to move in different contexts than the most usual ones: new concert formats, new concepts in the repertoire, different aesthetics...

To create also means, as I explained above, to produce more than a given aesthetic. To be more creative in cadences, in ornaments.

On a personal level, I like to bring improvisation to my solo recitals, as well as using it every day as a resource during practice. I have been allowed to take improvisation with the Viola da Gamba into the world of cinema soundtracks (*Teresa*, by Paula Ortiz, 2023) and I have composed some works: the only one written so far, *Lamento de Sunneva*, 2021, written on paper in 2023.

I invite everyone to dare to create, to be spontaneous in a safe environment, where failure does not exist.

I invite everyone to use improvisation in their everyday life: it is a fun way to face technical difficulties; it is a nice challenge for those who want to dedicate time to the world of ornamentation.

I hope that more and more people will take up improvisation and experience its benefits at first hand.

It's child's play!