CLASSICAL EMBELLISHING AND IMPROVISING

Throughout keyboard history, great composers such as Bach, Beethoven and Chopin have also been master improvisers. We seek to rekindle this important tradition by offering this prize for the best demonstrations of classical embellishing and/or improvising.

Please note that in this category the word "classical" is meant in the broad sense (classical as opposed to jazz/pop/rag) -- not classical as in "Classic period" only.

Performances need not demonstrate literal improvisation. At the least, however, performances should sound spontaneous, as if improvised on the spot.

Information for Teachers and Students

For excellent discussions & demonstrations on classical embellishing, see the following website and articles by John Salmon:

http://addonbach.com/aob/Videos.html
Adding Notes: A Reflection on Interpretive Freedom
http://www.uncg.edu/~jcsalmon/articles.html

Extemporaneousness in classical music is especially appropriate in music that has repeats. In Baroque music this would be particularly effective in dances. It is especially instructive to study J.S. Bach's own methods of embellishing, as revealed in the Sarabande movements of his 2nd and 3rd English Suites. In both Sarabandes Bach presents a simple version, followed by a more ornamented version. Presumably this was to show how to embellish on the repeats. A comparison of his simple and ornamented versions is highly recommended. You can listen to Dr. Robert Levin, Harvard Professor and one of today's top experts in classical improvisation, perform and discuss these Sarabandes on an NPR "Performance Today" 1999 broadcast – click on RealPlayer "Audio" at bottom (don't have RealPlayer? click here). Levin also demonstrates and discusses Beethoven and Mozart improvisation.

Three articles that explain Baroque embellishing in easy to understand ways are:


"Adding Embellishments to Bach's Basic Notes" by Arthur Houle, Clavier magazine, September 1994, Vol. 33, No. 7, pp. 22–36. (Note: This article contains many inadvertent misprints. For a corrected copy, contact Dr. Houle at arthurhoule@cableone.net.)


If you are looking for more tips on how to improvise and embellish on music from the Anna Magdalena Notebook, you may also purchase a recording of Houle's lecture/demonstration for the 2006 MTNA conference. Contact Dr. Houle.

Teachers and students should also check out the online FJH Pedagogy Newsletter for great ideas on creativity and improvisation.

See also Houle's "It's Easy to Improvise!"
Highly recommended:

Here's a terrific new step-by-step text on the fundamentals of improvisation, especially geared for pianists with classical backgrounds:

Improvisation at the Piano by Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond

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Schubert Wrote Fake Charts!

Schubert wrote 25 Ländler with no written out left hand accompaniments — only a right hand melody! There are no chord symbols indicated either (talk about your ultimate "fake charts!").

These Ländler can be found in the Wiener Urtext Edition entitled "Schubert: Complete Dances for Piano, Volume 2 (UT 50022)".

You can order this music from any music store.

The 25 "fake chart" Ländler are:
- Acht Ländler, D 355 in F–Sharp Minor
- Acht Ländler, D 370 in D Major
- Sechs Ländler, D 374 in B–Flat Major
- Zwei Ländler, D 640 in A Major and E Major
- Zwei Ländler, D 680 in D–Flat Major
  (the second one in this set has a Schubert realization; the first one is realized by the editor, and could be creatively changed)

So how does a student go about creating accompaniments for these Ländler? Look at the right hand melodies. Usually the first and especially last measures require a tonic (I) chord. In other measures, the second most likely chord will be the dominant (V or V7). Third most common will be the subdominant (IV). Your clue is in the right hand melody in each measure; usually it "outlines" one of these
chords. How does one know what kind of pattern to use in the left hand accompaniment? Certainly imagination should come into play. But, for starters, there is no better teacher than the master himself — Schubert! In this same Wiener collection of dances there are many other dances in which Schubert does write out an accompaniment. Study these and use similar broken chord patterns in the "fake chart" ones. Don't be afraid to "dress up" the right hand melody too! In performance, a medley of several of these quasi–improvised Ländler would be very effective.

Schubert medley – realizations by Arthur Houle:
Landler medley: (1) D 370, No. 1; (2) D 370, No. 4; (3) D 355, No. 4
followed by a reprise of D 370, No. 1

Franz Schubert
(L.H. realizations: Arthur Houle)

(1) Landler in D major, D 370. No. 1:

NOT FAST

This "oomp chuck chuck" accompaniment is Schubert's favorite pattern for his dances. See, for example, his German Dance in D Major, D 420, No. 5.

For variety, a turn figure in place of the previous trill.

L.H. based on Schubert's Waltz in D-flat Major, D 365 (op.9). No. 15. Compare also Schubert's German Dance in D Major, D 420, No. 5, 2nd half.

Schubert usually uses tonic (I) and dominant (V) chords (less often, the subdominant (IV) chord). For variety, the submediant (vi) chord is used in m. 14. It has 2 notes in common with the more expected tonic chord. (Substitute chords often have notes in common with the chords they replace).
L.H.: see German Dance in D Major, D 420, No. 5.

L.H.: see Waltz in D-Flat Major, D 365 (Op. 9), No. 15.

Chord voicing: 5th of chord ("F") is dropped, since it is already in the R.H. 3rd beat. 3rd of chord ("C#") is dropped since it is played in R.H. (last note of bar).

Accents on 3rd beats are characteristic of many landler, waltzes, and German dances (see, the Landler in B-flat minor, D 366, No. 13. Melodic embellishment with passing tones

L.H. pattern and voicing: see Landler in D-flat Major, D 145 (Op. 18), No. 11.

Substitute (VI) chord.

Substitute supertonic (ii) chord. (Bracketed notes in R.H. are in common with both the V9 and supertonic (ii) chords.
2) Landler in D Major, D 370, No. 4:

NOT TOO FAST

L.H.: Compare German Dance in A Major, D 769, No. 1.

R.H. accompaniment pattern: see Waltz in B-flat Major, D 146 (op. 127), No. 18.

Accents on 2nd beats are also a characteristic of some Schubert dances (e.g.,
the Waltz in A Major, D 365 (Op. 9), No. 18).

L.H.: compare Waltz in B Major, D 145 (Op. 18), No. 2.

For variety, tonic pedal point under V7 chord.

For variety, IV4 chord

L.H.: compare Waltz in D Major, D 146 (Op. 127), No. 8, trio section.

Tre corde
L.H. pattern: see Landler in E-Flat Major, D 681, No. 3.
A shade faster, cheerfully

21 (85)

Substitute chords (for variety, a brief excursion back to F♯ Minor the key of the 1st section)

25 (89)

L.H. pattern: see Landler in B Major, D 366, No. 11

29 (93)
Reprise of Landler in D Major, D 370, No. 1 (but without repeats)

Majestically, Triumphantly

Melodic embellishment (should preserve original melodic outline)

poco rii.
Dick Hyman, the noted jazz pianist, recently observed that Chopin would probably have been a jazz pianist if he had lived long enough. For a discussion of how it may be appropriate to improvise or embellish discretely on the music of Chopin, see the BEST PERFORMANCE OF A ROMANTIC PERIOD WORK.
See also John Salmon's article:
http://www.music.sc.edu/ea/Keyboard/PPF/3.1/3.1_PPFka.html

Note: the tradition of creatively varying repeats applies to the Classic period sonata form as well.
Malcolm Bilson has marvelous recordings demonstrating imaginative friskiness in Mozart and Haydn.
See, for example: http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00000307Y/oqid=977105793/sr=2-5/106-9726465-8619656

Other recommended recordings by Trevor Stephenson, fortepianist:
- Mozart: Music for Solo Keyboard
- Music of Frederic Chopin
Available from:
Light & Shadow
5741 Forsythia Place
Madison, WI 53705
(608) 238–6092
e–mail: trevor@trevorstephenson.com

This book is a must-read for all who wish to get in touch with our real traditions:
"After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance" by Kenneth Hamilton

Reviewer Susan Tomes writes: "Throughout the 'golden age' of Romantic piano-playing, it was not usual to perform whole sonatas as these were thought too severe. Improvisation was popular, as was the habit of 'preluding', or making up musical links between items. Players might give themselves breaks while they chatted with friends in the audience. Most pianists were also composers, and routinely included their own pieces. Playing from memory was not required, and sometimes even frowned on."
In his book, Hamilton points out that "anxiety over wrong notes is a relatively recent psychosis, and playing entirely from memory a relatively recent requirement."

More Detailed Information for Scholarly Types

One of the most important books on classical improvisation was written by Carl Czerny, student of Beethoven. It is (sadly) out of print, but there are 355 libraries that hold copies of this item. So check your local library; if they do not have a copy, ask for one via interlibrary loan. It will be well worth the trouble! Here is the full title:

A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte: Opus 200
by Carl Czerny

LC: MT68; Dewey: 786.1/092/4.

RESOURCES ON HOW TO IMPROVISE, EMBELLISH AND CREATE CADENZAS IN THE MUSIC OF MOZART (some information on Haydn & Beethoven also)
This BIBLIOGRAPHY AND DISCOGRAPHY:

Selected Bibliography and Discography

was expertly compiled by Dr. Gretchen Wheelock, Professor of Musicology at the Eastman School of Music and Trustee of the Westfield Center. It was distributed to the participants of a conference entitled "BEYOND NOTATION: The Practice and Pedagogy of Improvisation in Mozart's Time," presented by the Westfield Center and the University of Michigan on September 26-29, 2002, in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The Westfield Center serves the music community as:

- A catalyst for dialogue among players, instruments builders, and scholars
- An advocate on behalf of the organ, harpsichord, fortepiano, and clavichord
- A publisher of keyboard-related materials
- A presenter of workshops, symposia, concerts, and tours
- A Massachusetts organization with international reach

For more information about the Westfield Center:
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(or: info@westfieldcenter.org)

1122 E. Pike Street, PMB 1389
Seattle, WA 98122-3934 USA
Tel: 888-544-0619

We are grateful to Penelope Crawford, Gretchen Wheelock and the Westfield Center for their kind permission to post this valuable information on our web site.

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CONCERTO CADENZAS AND LEAD-INS

Performances need not demonstrate literal improvisation. Cadenzas and/or lead-ins may be worked out in advance. At the least, however, they should sound spontaneous, as if improvised on the spot by the contestant.

Please let us know in the application form if the student has written (or will improvise) a concerto cadenza and/or lead-in, so we will know that the concerto movement performance qualifies for this prize. Unless a contestant is improvising literally, we would encourage contestants to write out by hand (or print by computer) their original cadenza(s) and/or lead-in(s). (Lead-ins are short enough that they could perhaps be penciled into the score.) It would be ideal to make two extra copies of original cadenzas for the judges. If a cadenza is semi-improvised, it would be appropriate to present a rough (even penciled) sketch and write "ad libitum" in the places where the student may deviate spontaneously from what is otherwise written out. Since the emphasis of this festival is on creativity and spontaneity, students should feel free to deviate from their "planned" cadenza(s) or lead-in(s). A written out cadenza may be useful for the judges to look at, but it should not be a straight jacket!

We understand that students must get help from teachers, books, articles, etc. in order to learn how to write or improvise cadenza(s) and lead-in(s). In the end, however, the student must be the primary author of cadenza(s) or lead-in(s) to qualify for this prize. We will rely on the ethical assurances of students, teachers, and parents in this regard. (If the teacher -- or someone else -- is the primary author, the performance can still qualify in one or more other categories, however.)

Information for Teachers and Students

To help find and select specific concerto repertory consult:
Are you mystified as to how to write or improvise a concerto cadenza? Ask your local librarian to help locate (or get a copy by interlibrary loan) the following article:


Note especially the helpful listing of common figurations by Mozart on p. 17. Use these kinds of figurations to create your own imaginative cadenza(s)! Experiment with modulation, diminution, augmentation, mirror writing, inversions, sequences, motivic development, embellishing, etc. As a starting point, study various authentic cadenzas and lead–ins when available.

Listen to Robert Levin improvise beautifully in the style of the great classical composers (and play a bit of jazz!) on NPR's "Performance Today" – click on RealPlayer "Audio" at bottom (don't have RealPlayer? click here).

This remarkable 1999 interview covers the following:

- Bach English Suite Sarabandes, wherein Bach himself documents his manner of improvisatory embellishing.
- The difference between improvising and embellishing.
- The opening of Beethoven's improvisatory "Choral Fantasy," played by Levin on a period piano, followed by one of Levin's own alternate improvised openings.
- What is a cadenza?
- "Free" improvisation vs. communicating in the style of the composer.
- Mozart concerto # 17 with original Mozart cadenza, followed by an alternate improvised cadenza by Levin.
- Bobby McFerrin and Chick Corea improvising on Mozart
- Gershwin and Ravel
- Levin's improvisation on "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."
- The future of improvisation in classical music education.
- Levin's improvisation on an NPR theme, in the style of Mozart.

Recommended recordings by: Robert D. Levin, keyboardist:

Mozart concerto recordings on Decca/Oiseau–Lyre:

- K 271 & 414
- K 386, 413 & 415
- K 456 & 459
• K 453 & 466
• K 482 & 488
• K 450 & 537
• K 175+382, 449, & 451
• Concertos 1–4, K 37, K 39–41

On NY Philomusica Records:
• Mozart K453 on Steinway with the NY Philomusica

Beethoven concerto recordings on DG Archive:
• Concertos 1, 2 & Rondo WoO 6
• Concertos 3 & 4
• Concerto 5, Choral Fantasy and two improvised introductions to the fantasy
• There is also a 4–CD set with all of the above plus the world premiere recording of the chamber version of #4, with different improvised cadenzas.

Another wonderfully imaginative and spontaneous pianist is Malcolm Bilson (Mozart Concertos).

Stumped by just what a "lead–in" is? See the "Improvised Ornamentation" section of Chapter 7 in this book: Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music, by Sandra Rosenblum, ISBN 0–253–34314–3, 1988 Indiana University Press. Check your local library, order from your favorite local bookstore, or order online for an easy–to–relate–to example of where and how a creative lead–in would work in music by Clementi (while this is not a concerto, it is instructive to see), see the footnote of p. 50 in:


You can order this Alfred music volume from any music store.

This book is a must-read for all who wish to get in touch with our real traditions:

"After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance" by Kenneth Hamilton

Reviewer Susan Tomes writes: "Throughout the 'golden age' of Romantic piano-playing, it was not usual to perform whole sonatas as these were thought too severe. Improvisation was popular, as was the habit of 'preluding', or making up musical links between items. Players might give themselves breaks while they chatted with friends in the audience. Most pianists were also composers, and routinely included their own pieces. Playing from memory was not required, and sometimes even frowned on."

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CONCERTO CADENZAS AND LEAD-INS
More Detailed Information for Scholarly Types

This book encourages what some may see as an overly cautious "politically correct" approach. Nevertheless, the book is full of helpful information. See especially:
Chapter 16: "The Special Case of the Piano Concertos."

For comprehensive information on classical improvisation and cadenzas (esp. Mozart) see the following articles and book excerpts, all by Robert Levin (consult your local library):


There is one other book that is strongly recommended for teachers and advanced students:


While this book is not a "how to" primer per se, it is perhaps the most comprehensive descriptive overview of the history of cadenzas, with lots of common sense wisdom and helpful musical examples.

The book is a perfect antidote to the rather "purist" leanings of Fetsch and Neumann. With scholarly evidence to back him up, Whitmore asserts: "It was far from Mozart's intention that other performers should write cadenzas in his personal style." Pianists of today, terribly mindful of "authenticity," find it unacceptable to play cadenzas in a "modern idiom" — yet, as Whitmore reminds us, "Mozart and Beethoven had no hesitation in doing precisely that when performing concertos from an earlier generation. We should bear this in mind before condemning too loudly the cadenzas written by soloists from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for the concertos of the classical masters."

This book is a "must read" for the creative cadenza enthusiast! Check your local library. If they do not have it, ask them to get it via interlibrary loan or order online.