

**Echoes of Nineteenth-Century Improvisation:  
A View from a Historical Recording by Egon Petri**

The late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century is often regarded as the golden age of solo piano improvisation. Descriptive records and published treatises attest to the wide enjoyment and popularity of this creative activity. In addition, early-nineteenth-century concert programs also bear witness to the meteoric rise of solo improvisational activity. Frequently, improvisations featuring popular melodies or operatic airs provided by the audience concluded a program. However, evidence from a large-scale survey of nineteenth-century concert programs shows there was a general exclusion of independent improvisations in public concerts, which were replaced by the performance of compositions by master composers (Kehler 1982; Weber 2008; Hamilton 2008). The ensuing scarcity of recorded documentation with regard to improvised performance has convinced scholars that such activity had met its near-extinction, at least in public concert events, from the 1840s onward. Despite this, improvisation can be noticed in very early recordings by such artists as Brahms, Isaac Albeniz, and Edward Elgar—demonstrating that the tradition of improvisation was not quite dead.

Since 2009 I have been very much interested in the topic of historical piano improvisation in Western art music. My obsession with nineteenth-century improvisation and the precious early recordings by Brahms and others urged me to not just “read” the improvisation from a verbal description or an improvisation-style composition, but also to hear it. So I began hunting for recorded improvisations, particularly those created by performers who received their music training during the second half of the nineteenth century, a period when the idioms of the Romantic style prevailed. One of my first finds was the “Free Improvisation” created by the now largely forgotten German pianist Egon

Petri (1881-1962), and produced by Julius Block<sup>1</sup>, an early enthusiast of the Edison phonograph.

This improvisation was chosen to be the core audio source for this present study. Australian jazz musician Jeff Pressing has discovered that “improvisational fluency arises from the creation, maintenance, and enrichment of an associated knowledge base, built into the long term memory” (Pressing 1998: 53). By transcribing and analyzing this improvisation and investigating Petri's musical training, career, and experiences, this paper intends to seek answers as to how Petri became involved with improvisation, what constituted his knowledge-base necessary for this activity, and how he acquired and internalized this knowledge.

Four segments of Petri's piano playing were recorded on three cylinders by Block. The recording context is hinted at in Petri's speech on two of his recordings. Before his “Free Improvisation,” Petri announced:

“Free improvisation after old classic [unintelligible] it's the old ones do much better than I do now. Ah, yes, Mr. Moór, E. Moór, inventor of the duplex, wife [sic] of Winfred Christie, formerly Christie, yes [unintelligible] thirtieth of October, 1923.” (Marston 2008: 62)

After another performance, he said:

“I want thank Mr. Block and his kind wife for the charming afternoon we have here and I hope we can another wonderful evening. [Unintelligible] keen pleasure [unintelligible] and I ask for forgiveness for my very bad improvisation to Emanuel Moór, Vevey, thirtieth of October, 1923, Vevey. I have to thank Mr. and Mrs. Moór for their kindness of giving us the pleasure of ...” (Marston 2008: 61-62)

From these announcements, we learn that the Blocks hosted the event at their residency on the evening of October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1923. In addition to Petri as the guest performer, Hungarian pianist and duplex-keyboard piano inventor Emanuel Moór, and his wife, Winifred Christie-Moór were invited as the audience. It is likely that it was the Moórs who suggested Petri improvise, and perhaps even

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<sup>1</sup> Julius Block (1858-1934) was a music lover but was assigned by his father to take over the family trading business in Russia. Recognizing the potential of phonographs to preserve musical performances along with speech, he visited Thomas Edison in New Jersey to secure a phonograph machine in 1889. He enthusiastically persuaded artists to record their music making. Among numerous musicians, piano playing by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Anton Rubinstein was documented by Block.

provided tunes to improvise, for Petri later apologized for the bad improvisation to Emanuel Moór in the other recording.

The statement, “it's the old ones do much better than I do now,” (Marston 2008: 62) suggests that Petri may have grown up in a rich musical environment and frequently heard the previous generation improvise.

Petri was born in 1881 into a family of professional musicians. His father, Henri Willem Petri (1856-1914), was a pupil of Josef Joachim (1831–1907) and a distinguished violinist. In 1883, Henri was appointed to be concertmaster of the Gewandhaus orchestra in Leipzig, which was conducted by Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann. Petri was first instructed in violin. After the age of ten, Petri's father insisted that he must learn other instruments, including piano, organ, and French horn. Although sources do not clearly show how Petri learned to play organ, it is plausible that Petri's organ study may have provided him with some improvisational techniques, for improvisation had been one of the most important performance skills for organists in that time (Benedict 1997: 19-23).

The Petri family was friends with many eminent musicians. Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Grieg, and Clara Schumann, among others, were frequent visitors to their home in Dresden. Since spontaneous playing was documented as a common social activity in friendly gatherings of that time, and considering that Clara Schumann and Brahms were well-regarded improvisers, Petri may have been regularly exposed to improvisation during his childhood and adolescence. This hypothesis, to some extent, echoes Petri's announcement—“it's the old ones do much better than I do now.”

In analyzing this improvisation, I first transcribed Petri's real-time musical creation into conventional Western notation. My transcription is intended to preserve certain aspects of the moment-to-moment music making, and does not attempt to correct what may seem like irregularities. For example, I have only notated pitches as captured by the somewhat narrow frequency response of early phonographs, and have not attempted to “fill in” pitches to rationalize harmonic progressions. In terms



In both opening and middle sections (Examples 2 and 3), Petri initiates the music from *i* of D minor, heading toward V and then terminates each section by the half-cadence progression of VI-V.

The high-level harmonic plan of Petri's "Free Improvisation" has some associations with chaconne, a genre prevailing in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The most common progression for the chaconne—I-V-vi-V—serves as the harmonic formula for Petri's improvisation. Moreover, the connection between the first two sections of Petri's performance features another common characteristic of the chaconne: a number of brief units terminating with half cadences that lead without a break into the next unit.

Musical Example 2: Harmonic Plan in Section I—d: i-V-VI-V

The musical score is divided into five systems, each representing a measure of the harmonic plan. The chords are indicated by Roman numerals and figured bass notation:

- System 1:  $d:i$  (circled),  $V$  (circled)
- System 2: **Prolongation of V** (bracketed),  $V$  (circled),  $V/iv$
- System 3:  $iv$ ,  $III$ ,  $V$ ,  $V/iv$
- System 4:  $iv$ ,  $V/III$ ,  $III$ ,  $i$ ,  $V$ ,  $d:VI$  (circled)
- System 5:  $V$  (circled)

Musical Example 3: Harmonic Plan of Section II—d:i-V-D:vi-V

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece, divided into two systems. The first system (measures 1-10) features a treble staff with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass staff with chords. Harmonic annotations below the first system include circled 'd:i', 'V6', 'V/iv', 'iv', and 'D:V'. A bracketed section in the treble staff is labeled '[ Unintelligible ]'. The second system (measures 11-16) shows a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with chords. Harmonic annotations below the second system include 'I', 'IV', 'ii', 'V', 'I', 'vi', and 'V'. The key signature is D minor, and the time signature is 3/4.

Gesturally and melodically, the improvisation is constituted by short figures and their sequences, instead of the longer phrases similar to the *cantabile* style prominent in the nineteenth century.

Rhythmically, it is less diverse than many of the compositions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

These details lead me to the suggestion that Petri's improvisation is stylistically Baroque-like, even though it was recorded in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Two questions may be brought up at this moment: What made Petri's real-time improvisation sound Baroque-like? And is there significance in his choice of D minor as the key?

To seek answers to these questions, I looked at Petri's concert programs between 1901 and 1923, the year he decided on piano as a vocation and the year he made this recording. One can observe that his concert programs regularly consist of works by J. S. Bach, including Bach's works as transcribed by Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924). His inclination towards Bach and the musical idioms of the Baroque style are also shown in his inclusion of Liszt's *Variation on a Theme by Bach* and Liszt's *Fantasy and*

*Fugue on "BACH"*. In other words, Petri may have been familiar with, and furthermore internalized, those works into his knowledge-base through preparation for his concerts. Petri once said to his students: "Practice means arranging things in your mind until they become automatic" (Petri-Libermann-Sheldon 1958: 9). Petri's practice for concert preparation may have likewise allowed him to internalize these musical materials which served as a knowledge pool and provides stylistic constraints for his later improvisation.

Interestingly, his concert repertory is often constituted by genres firmly grounded in the improvisational tradition, such as fantasy, toccata, prelude, variation, and *capriccio*. For example, Bach's *Toccatà, Adagio and Fugue in C major*, and *Chromatic Fantasy*, among others, were often concertized.

It can not be determined for certain why Petri chose D minor as the home key. However, certain D-minor works by Bach and by Bach-as-transcribed-by-Busoni were frequently concertized by Petri, such as Bach-Busoni's *Chaconne in D Minor* and Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy*.

The employment of modal mixture, i.e., borrowing elements from the parallel mode, in order to create chromaticism is both shown in Bach's two D-minor works, *Chromatic Fantasy* and *Chaconne* and in Petri's improvisation (Example 4). Moreover, the tonal plan of Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy*, which begins in D minor and ends in D major, is shared by Petri's improvisation. If we take into account that D minor is the predetermined key and that Petri's improvisation seems to follow the harmonic formula of the chaconne, it seems possible that Petri created his improvisation using Bach's *Chaconne* in particular as a model.

Musical Example 4: The employment of modal mixture creates chromaticism.

mm. 4-5 Chromaticism

The image shows two systems of musical notation in 3/4 time. The first system, labeled 'mm. 4-5 Chromaticism', features a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a harmonic accompaniment. The treble clef has a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The bass clef has a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first measure is labeled 'd:V/III'. The second measure is labeled 'V7/VI' and contains a circled B-flat note in the treble clef. The third measure is labeled 'V6/V' and contains a circled B-flat note in the treble clef. The second system, labeled 'mm. 9-10 Chromaticism', also has a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a harmonic accompaniment. The treble clef has a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The bass clef has a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first measure is labeled '3' above it. The second measure is labeled 'd:V' and contains a circled B-flat note in the bass clef. The third measure is labeled 'd:v' and contains a circled B-flat note in the bass clef.

mm. 9-10 Chromaticism

Why might have Petri been especially influenced by Bach's music? A large part of the reason would be Petri's close relationship with Ferruccio Busoni, who dedicated more than thirty years to editing and transcribing works by J. S. Bach. In 1885 when Petri was four years old, Petri's parents took the thirteen-year-old Busoni under their wing. Petri spent years growing up together with Busoni. From 1901 Petri studied with Busoni and collaborated with him in editing Bach's keyboard works until Busoni's death in 1924. Petri and Busoni often exchanged ideas on concert programming.

For example, in a letter written from Berlin on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1909, Busoni elaborated the recital program he intended to concertize in America during Christmas-time of that year. He wrote:

"I have assembled a Bach recital using my own transcriptions. I recommend it to you:

- I. Chromatic Fantasy; Preludio, Fuga e fuga figurata (D major)
- II. Toccata—Adagio—Fugue (C major)
- III. Three chorale preludes; Fatasia on motifs by J.S. Bach
- IV. Chaconne" (Beaumont 1987: 96-97)

Busoni's list of pieces contains *Chromatic Fantasy* and *Chaconne*. These two works were later included in Petri's Berlin recital in December of the same year.

The following will discuss Petri's temporal organization and how his moment-to-moment

musical decisions affected metric organization.

Petri's improvisation seems to have  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter as a predetermined metrical framework after the free-meter introduction, as shown in my transcription (Example 2). However, the metrical articulation is not clear until the middle section. My reason for suggesting a predetermined metric organization is that most of the first section can be fitted into this metric framework. Yet because the phrase structure is fundamentally asymmetric and is not consistent with the ordering of metric accents in  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter, the meter often appears ambiguous. In the middle (Example 3) and closing sections, on the other hand, triple meter is very clearly pronounced because of a consistency between metric periodicity and harmonic and phrase periodicity.

In Petri's "Free Improvisation," one may also note that in a few passages in sections where the sense of meter has been firmly established, some metrical irregularities or disruptions still take place. In those passages, Petri uses "chunks" of his preceding performance as "motives" which provide a basis for a sequence of extemporizations. However, the predetermined or the established meter is subverted when the total duration of these spontaneously selected chunks does not fit within the existing metric framework. I will discuss two examples (Example 5 and 6).

Musical Example 5 (mm. 8-14): Temporal irregularity occurred in measure 12 marked in yellow.

(d. + ♩) Sequential Mold (d. + ♩)

Musical Example 6 (mm. 31-36): Temporal irregularity occurred in measure 33 marked in yellow.

mm. 31-36

Two-beat sequential mold

\*A sense of duple or quadruple meter is generated.

In the yellow area of Example 5, one may notice that Petri plays a sequence that falls into a duple or quadruple meter. But following this, he plays chords as the downbeats to emphasize three again. Similarly, in the yellow area of Example 6, Petri's left hand gesture generates a sense of quadruple meter; in the right hand, a three-and-a-half-beat cell is grouped and sequenced, starting one beat after the downbeat-like chord in the left hand. In other words, the right-hand phrase periodicity is in conflict with the left-hand grouping. Eventually, it takes eight and a half beats to complete this sequential process, leading back to a triple-meter passage.

The notion of temporal irregularities followed by temporally regular musical passages brings up a question: How does Petri lead his creation from metrically irregular passages back to a more stable metric pulsation?

There are two strategies shown in Petri's improvisation. First, Petri places chords on the first beats of the following measures, generating a strong-weak-weak ordering of accents. He also employs rhythmic patterns which suggest triple meter, such as a half note followed by a quarter note (Example 7). Second, he adds dynamic accents to recreate a sense of strong-weak-weak pulses (Example 8). In this case, Petri places chords and employs rhythmic connotations. In following case, he adds dynamic accents.

Musical Example 7 (mm. 12-17): Strategy I to reconstruct the sense of pulse.

mm. 12-17

Placing chords to create  
downbeat accents

----- Metrically disrupted passage -----

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The first staff is a treble clef with a melodic line. The second staff is a bass clef with a chordal accompaniment. A yellow box highlights the first six measures, which are labeled as a 'Metrically disrupted passage'. In the final measure of this passage, there is a red note on the treble staff and a red chord in the bass staff. A green line is drawn under the final measure of the score.

Constructing strong-weak-weak ordering of accents

The image shows the continuation of the musical score from the previous block. The first staff is a treble clef and the second is a bass clef. Red notes and chords are placed on the downbeats of measures 7, 8, and 9. A green line is drawn under the bottom staff, indicating the construction of a strong-weak-weak ordering of accents.

Musical Example 8 (mm. 37-41): Strategy II to reconstruct the sense of pulse.

mm. 37-41

Passage with one ♪ shortage

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The first staff is a treble clef and the second is a bass clef. A yellow box highlights measures 38-40. In measure 38, there is a red note on the treble staff and a red chord in the bass staff. A green line is drawn under the bottom staff, indicating the passage with one note shortage.

Adding dynamic accents to recreate a sense of strong-weak-weak pulses

The image shows the continuation of the musical score from the previous block. The first staff is a treble clef and the second is a bass clef. Red notes and chords are placed on the downbeats of measures 37, 38, and 39. A green line is drawn under the bottom staff, indicating the addition of dynamic accents to recreate a sense of strong-weak-weak pulses.

In conclusion, Petri's improvisation is stylistically closer to Bach's work than to other twentieth-century compositions, even though it was performed and recorded in the first quarter of the twentieth century. By taking into account the environment he grew up in, and his concert programs, it seems more than likely that he was exposed to a rich improvisational environment, and, moreover, his repertoire was strongly associated with the tradition of improvisation. This provides some pieces to the puzzle of how improvisational ability would be transmitted while improvisational activity itself was neglected and in decline during Petri's time. It also offers us a window into knowing what might have constituted Petri's improvisational knowledge-base and his stylistic constraints.

Moreover, the discovery that in a real-time improvisation, a sense of metric organization may require time to construct differs from what we have learned from written-out compositions, where the temporal property must be fitted into metric frameworks. In a real-time creation, on the contrary, metric organization is not a strictly imposed or followed rule. Temporal organization may be flexibly structured. It can arise from metric organization or through the interaction of rhythmic and phrase units. This follows Petri's own thoughts on the subject: "Meter is something invented by man—like the metronome, the clock, etc. Rhythm is something in nature—nothing quite alike" (Petri-Libermann-Sheldon 1958: 12). This also suggests that there may be a set of aesthetic criteria differing from that arising from musical literacy. This paper is the beginning of a research project based on more than thirty early recorded improvisations. I expect to discover more about real-time musical design and aesthetics in the future.

## References

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