0. Introduction

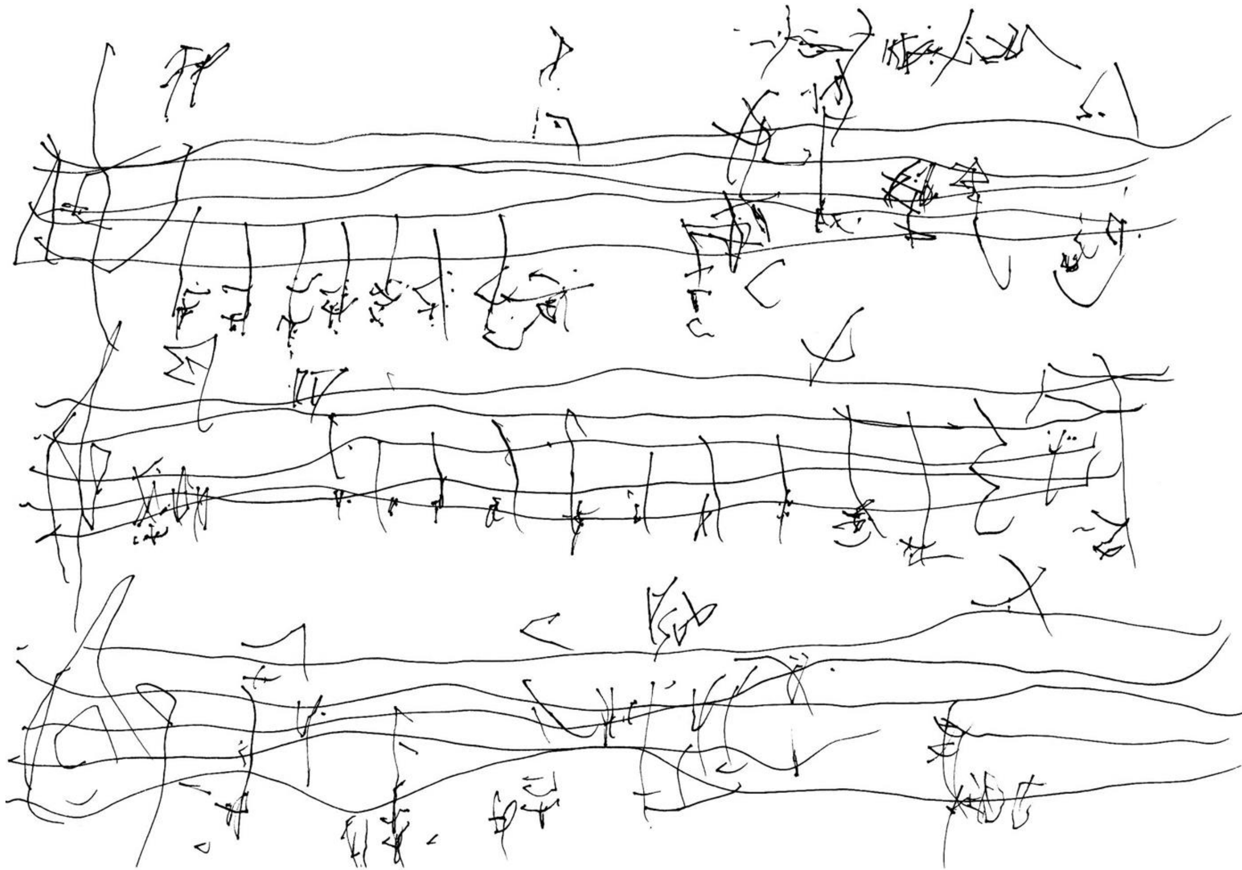

Figure 0-1. Voice Box (2019), Claudia Molitor. Reproduced with permission.

You are presented with a score that looks almost scratched into the page. It is not quite the writing of a child: details like the evenness of the leger lines, the confidence of the letters *fp*, and the equal spacing between the staves suggest that this was the work of someone accustomed to creating scores. But who? The score looks like it was made by a composer experiencing physical tremors, or under the influence of a psychoactive substance.

This is Claudia Molitor's *Voice Box*, a work that the composer wrote using her foot. With this new information, we can better see the purpose in each line of the score, the difficulty of drawing—or failing to draw—staves of five parallel, non-overlapping lines without the use of one's hands. The *forte-piano* dynamic marking above the repeated note that opens the piece now takes on a new bodily import. Knowing how the score was created, one might even perform it differently, perhaps with the easy strides of an afternoon stroll, perhaps with the stomping flourish of a tango. Molitor writes that this score is meant to "frame the compositional act as a physical expression": through this defamiliarizing maneuver, "the very physicality of writing music is brought to the forefront" (2019, 93).

I open with this score because it stresses the bodily involvement required to make music, even just to create a score. Looking at the jerky scratches of *Voice Box*, one is newly aware of composers' physical involvement with their craft. One might suddenly realize how much one's own hands are taken for granted, both in music-making and in everyday life. And not just one's hands: the coordination necessary to write without tremors, or even the habituated ease of drawing a treble clef for the thousandth time.

In this dissertation, I want to analyze this kind of bodily coordination and habituation. Molitor's piece, created in 2019, can help us reexamine what Jim Samson calls the "idiomatic figures" of nineteenth century postclassical pianism, making them more compelling, recapturing our interest (Samson 2007, 3, 46). In all, this dissertation investigates how improvisation was taught and practiced by nineteenth-century European pianists and pedagogues. I develop a theory of extemporized musical textuality using tools from linguistic anthropology and the cognitive study of skill. Here I draw out three facets of nineteenth century music-making central to my project—facets that are illuminated by Molitor's *Voice Box*.

First, this project conceives of music theory from the bottom up: short passages are its focus rather than whole works or deep structures. These passages (*Passagen*) are much like the habituated patterns that Molitor's piece emphasizes: they are learned and absorbed, they are practiced, and they become almost automatic for the musician. I posit that instrumentally idiomatic figurations were a main concern for pianists of the nineteenth century. Recent work in music theory inspired by the linguistic theory of construction grammar has also emphasized a modular, exemplar-based approach to musical structure. My approach is similar in attitude but does not set out to find the musical corollaries to linguistic meaning. Instead, I focus on the immediate physical dimension of improvised performance using concepts from the cognitive study of skill. In literary studies, this approach is akin to what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call "surface reading," an analytic mode that prefers to build up reliable theoretical constructs that are close at hand, rather than to suggest psychological or metaphysical depths (Best and Marcus 2009).

Second, I describe nineteenth-century practices that highlight the presence of the body within the musical text. Molitor's *Voice Box* is a text that does exactly this. In this project I introduce two new ideas. One is that musical improvisation, rather than being *opposed* to text, is itself a textual practice, and the other is that a musical text is co-created by its reader in a way that draws on bodily skills—skills that can be analyzed in historical depth. This brings a level of detail that is often lacking in the conception of textuality as it is depicted by theorists like Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva.

Third, this project illustrates how nineteenth-century musical improvisation shuttled between process and product in the minds of musicians and listeners. Molitor writes that her works like *Voice Box* are meant to draw attention to musical creation as "an embodied act, a tactile event" (2019, 91). This project, in the same manner, takes analytical

emphasis away from static products like the concept of the musical work, placing emphasis instead on the processes performers go through to learn and deploy idiomatic passages. My project parallels the textual theories of Jerome McGann, who has argued that texts are not objects or properties but rather a series of acts performed by authors, readers, editors, publishers, designers, and marketing agencies (1991). Instead, textuality is a particular kind of action within time: a moment of communication. Textuality, nevertheless, takes place in social spaces that revolve around the physical artifact of the written word. Improvised music-making in early- to mid-nineteenth-century Europe, likewise, can only be understood as a process occurring within time—but this process takes place in an environment where musical works (and their imagined tokens, the written score) became increasingly powerful as regulators of musical practice. By creating a vocabulary of entextualization, skill, pedagogy, and (physical) practice, I hope to recover the idea of nineteenth-century improvisation—and composition—as a process rather than as a product.

Context within the Fields of Music Theory and Musicology

This project is inspired not only by linguistic anthropology and the study of cognitive skill, but also by recent theories of musical grammar and musical schemas. The construction grammar framework, which has recently gained a foothold in music theory, is especially illuminating for the repertoire studied here. Robert Gjerdingen and Janet Bourne have outlined the similarities between the linguistic theory of construction grammar and Gjerdingen's schema-based approach (2015). The theory of construction grammar holds that linguistic structures are best analyzed through "learned pairings of form and function," visible chiefly through "surface form" (Goldberg 2013). Lawrence Zbikowski has systematized the construction grammar approach to musical structure, arguing that musical forms are intelligible through analogic comparison with what he calls "dynamic

processes"—physical movement, for example (2017). Unlike Gjerdingen and Bourne's work, this project does not allude to a musical corollary to linguistic meaning, and unlike Zbikowski's, it does not systematize an analytics of meaning. Nevertheless, the approach taken here is similar in organization and in analytic attitude.

This project is also inspired by a loose musicological subfield that might be called the bodily ontology of performance in Western European art music—an interest that has emerged in the past fifteen years through the scholarship of Elisabeth Le Guin (2006), Matthew Head (2013), Emily Dolan and John Tresch (2013), James Davies (2014), Martha Feldman (2015), Roger Moseley (2016), and Dana Gooley (2011; 2018), among others. Moseley, in his book *Keys to Play: Music as a Ludic Medium from Apollo to Nintendo,* argues that the keyboard has an ability to bring notational concepts, largely encoded in binary forms, into the material world. For Moseley, the keyboard is an instrument with two conflicting strengths. On one hand, it is the instrument *par excellence* for reading the score, for tallying and planning—but on the other, it is an instrument of play, of improvisation, and of unpredictable musical processes.

There is, then, a vacillating relationship between system and play in music-making. Play derives from an initial system—like a rulebook—but in order for true play to issue forth, some part of the outcome must be unanticipated by the system's premises. As Moseley puts it, "outcomes...are commensurate with and yet indeterminable by those premises" (2016, 138). Moseley introduces his ludomusical ideas with a sketch of a unique nineteenth-century "improvising" machine: Diederich Nicolaus Winkel's "componium." Invented in the 1820s, the componium was an organ that, to modern eyes, looks like a player piano. It used a system of coils and elliptical discs to hold and release tension, controlling its "improvisation" in a manner that was difficult for onlookers to predict.

Moseley shows that the unpredictable complexity of the componium was a central part of its improvisatory claim. A predictable sequence of notes was regarded as rule-following; an *unforeseen* sequence of notes was regarded as improvisation (Moseley 2016, 162).

The unforeseen is at the core of improvisation in its recent cultural connotations: the word's Latin roots—*im-pro-visus*—refer to the inability to foresee the future course of a performance. But, framed in this way, this notion of improvisation seems to run oblique to the present study. Here, I show that a pianist's curatorial practice and physical practice very clearly determine the what is possible within their composition and improvisation. I frame nineteenth century pianistic practice, both extemporary and compositional, as a practice of absorption, collation, and arrangement—but the objects of this arrangement are *bodily skills*, not "themes" or musical materials on the page. In this dissertation I lay out a framework for this theoretical view in detail, applying the theory to the music of Clara Schumann, Carl Czerny, Franz Liszt and the Austrian pianist Leopoldine Blahetka.

Can one say, then, that nineteenth century improvisation at the piano of the kind examined here is "unforeseen"? Stephen Blum has explored this tension in his essay "Recognizing Improvisation" (1998). A similar tension exists in other works in the fields of musical schema theory and partimento practice. As jazz guitarist Derek Bailey has pointed out, practicing improvisers rarely use the term "improvisation" (1993, xii). Perhaps the term does not sit right for these musicians because of the very tension outlined above.

Another source of tension is the ocular root of the term "improvisation." What does it mean to *see* a performance in advance, when that performance is a musical one? In chapter 1, I address this disjunction between sight-based conceptions of music theory—analysis as a study of notation, of scores—and the approach taken here, which focuses on

the bodily process of making improvised music at the piano during the nineteenth century, a process that is informed by what the pianist hears. The tension between sight and hearing goes still further: performances are seen as well as heard, after all. Both modalities need to be addressed when analyzing bodily skill at the piano. But to analyze music using "music theory" may have visual connotations as well: the term *theory* has ocular origins that the political theorist Raymond Williams has traced out. *Theory*, he writes, was used in seventeenth century Europe to refer to "a contemplated sight": thus people from that time write of "a Theory or Sight," or of the "theory" or eureka moment that one arrives at while visually contemplating an object (Williams 2015, 249–50). In this project I consider the implications of *theory* in its historical usage, pointing out the term's tangled relationship with the body and the senses. Music theory, I believe, is capable of stretching beyond these tangled relationships to address the bodily systems of transmitting and creating music.

Emily Dolan has persuasively argued for the importance of the bodily interface in her essay "Toward a Musicology of Interfaces" (2012). "Instead of thinking about music as a genus in which keyboard music exists as a species," she suggests, "perhaps it could be productive to think of the keyboard—here standing in for all immaculately controllable instruments—as the genus, while this thing we have come to know as music as a species of keyboard" (2012, 12). This cannot be taken literally, but the provocation implicit in Dolan's statement helps clarify the musical stakes here. The physicality of music-making, even in sacrosanct eighteenth and nineteenth century repertories, can no longer hide behind the scenes. The influence of the keyboard as a default channel between bodily action and musical production is so historically entrenched that *keyboard-ness*, per Dolan, can in many cases be equivalent to *music-ness*.

Dolan's essay uncovers another facet of music-making at the piano: the fantasy of control that accompanies the interface of the keyboard. Hector Berlioz imagined an "ideal orchestra" of 467 players, and he imagined the conductor who presided over this mass as a keyboard player whose movements controlled the orchestra. "In the quest to create a keyboard instrument with ever greater nuance and control," Dolan writes, "the keyboard becomes itself a model of control and organization" (2012, 10). But in this chain of control, there is more than just player and instrument: there is also the looming composer. Berlioz, for example, saw his imaginary conductor as a figure who transmitted "the directions of the composer" to the compliant orchestra. Mary Hunter has discussed the authoritative role of the composer and its effects on nineteenth century performers within the *Werktreue* paradigm (2005). One of my goals is to explore this chain of authority in improvisation—in the absence of an overarching musical work concept—by examining the musical materials granted or denied to the improvising pianist.

But in the repertoires examined here, the separation between composer and performer (and even audience) is not so clear. All of the figures whose music-making practices are discussed in this dissertation were multi-hyphenate pianists, composers, improvisers, and pedagogues. Further, the boundaries between improvisation and composition are not always clear. One of the case studies in this dissertation, for example, is the notated prelude that resulted when Clara Schumann tried to write down her improvisations.

Dana Gooley, in his book *Fantasies of Improvisation*, has addressed the methodological problems that arise when the practice of improvisation uses notated texts as key pieces of evidence (2018). He warns of the difficulty of treating Beethoven's *Fantasia* op. 77, for example, as though it were an uncomplicated exemplar of what Beethoven's

improvisations sounded like: to "round up" the piece in this way, or to treat it "as a 'close enough' representation" of historical improvisation, misses the modifications that artists make when taking a passage they created in the moment and transforming it into a printed work (Gooley 2018, 29–30). Here, my approach is not to look for pieces that resemble improvisation in order to declare: "this is what improvisation sounded like." Instead, I examine pedagogical sources as well as accounts of improvisation, looking for clues as to how improvisers (and composers) prepared themselves for their task. In some places I turn to published works for evidence of how pianistic skills can be developed and brought together into an uninterrupted whole. But this is not so much to create an aural snapshot of what a particular improvisation would have been, or to liken those works to written-down improvisations. Instead, my goal is to reconstruct a *practice*, a daily interaction with the piano in which improvisations and compositions were already intermingled.

Overview

Chapter 1 of this dissertation analyzes two Viennese thoroughbass manuals from the nineteenth century, written by Simon Sechter and Carl Czerny—both pedagogues of enormous influence. What makes these manuals noteworthy is that, in Sechter's case, all the figures are already realized, and in Czerny's case, there are no figures at all, only fully written-out exercises in the form of short pieces. I show how the use of these manuals, in accordance with Sechter's and Czerny's instructions, aligns with concepts from the cognitive study of skill. In particular, they promote cognitive generalization, which is, in short, the ability to find the essential components of an exemplar and then interpret other exemplars using the same framework. This chapter posits that the kind of bodily practice encouraged by these manuals can be seen as a "theory" of musical improvisation and composition, thus introducing bodily skill into a theoretical discourse that, through the

nineteenth century, was increasingly seen as the domain divorced from the body. Here I introduce what I call the "carnal outlook" of nineteenth-century pianism. Taking the word "carnal" in Elisabeth Le Guin's sense (2006), I describe this as an outlook where the musician reaches outward for inspiration, taking passages from the music they hear and using cognitive generalization to integrate them into their body and make them their own.

Chapter 2 describes the pedagogical techniques of Friedrich Wieck, the father and teacher of Clara Schumann, showing how they promoted the improvisatory flair that her early reviewers noted, and demonstrating the close relationship between those techniques and Clara Schumann's early compositions. Wieck created what he called "little pieces," short harmonically-closed exercises that gave the player a strong grasp of the postclassical pianistic idiom. By transposing and varying the pieces as Wieck suggests, one fosters the same cognitive generalization that was outlined in chapter 1. This method was not unique to Wieck: I show that Czerny used the same approach. I further elaborate on the concept of *entextualization* from Michael Silverstein and Gregory Urban (1996) in linguistic anthropology, showing how this method of practicing piano through "little pieces" encourages pianists to see texts not as autonomous, abstract wholes, but rather as thoughtfully curated collections of cleverly varied components.

Chapter 3 extends the framework of entextualization to analyze a prelude that Clara Schumann wrote down around 1895, first improvising at the piano and then picking up her pen to capture on the page the spirit of what she had just played. This prelude was meant to introduce Robert Schumann's "Aufschwung" ("Soaring"), from his *Fantasiestücke* op. 12. I chart the borrowings and similarities of figuration that link Clara Schumann's prelude not only to Robert's composition, but also to passages—idiomatic figurations—found in pieces that Clara Schumann was likely familiar with, as well as exercise books from the mid-

nineteenth century. Using the concepts of *entextualization* and *discursive interaction* from linguistic anthropology, I show how these links promote the reader to view Schumann's prelude as a text in itself. All musical texts, I argue, are categories of reception that are built on performance events: thus one's conception of Robert Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* as a static text, for example, relies on one's memory of actual performances of it.

Chapter 4 examines the nineteenth century practice of collecting excerpts. I analyze published collections by Czerny and Theodor Kullak (a Liszt student), who collated short, distinctive passages from the works of others. Beethoven and Mendelssohn are well represented in these collections, but so are figures less well known, like Henri Herz and Joseph Gelinek. Czerny went a step further by modifying these excerpts, rearranging their contents to make them a uniform length and even adding his own cadences to the ends of each exercise. Case studies of published music by Franz Liszt and Leopoldine Blahetka demonstrate that the idiomatic figures found in Czerny's collection can be found throughout the piano music of this time, creatively varied and remixed. I take up the theoretical tools developed in the other chapters, showing how this practice of excerpting encourages the "carnal outlook" first set out in chapter 1.

Chapter 5, too, brings together the tools developed in the other chapters, showing how the ideas of cognitive generalization and entextualization as applied to this repertoire is similar to Walter Ong's conception of orality. This provides another angle to the connections this dissertation makes between musical production and linguistic and literary theories of text. I outline the characteristics that Ong describes as central to oral art, showing how they apply to nineteenth century pianism as it has been described here. But Ong also assumes essential differences between "oral" and "literate" cultures in a way I find indefensible. I end by asking why the lens of orality—and the lens of improvisation—is

more often applied to Black music and European "early" music than it is to the musical practices of nineteenth century Europe. Orality, like "improvisation," was used by mid-twentieth-century musicologists to mark difference in a distinctively racialized manner: this rhetorical maneuver has been traced by Laudan Nooshin (2003) and Vijay Iyer (2019). Finding "orality" within nineteenth century European music can be a way of reversing, in some small way, the center-to-periphery model of music theoretics.

Improvisation, orality, entextualization, and cognitive generalization belong to a side of musical practice that is not often highlighted in studies that focus on musical works. In building my project around those concepts, I hope to defamiliarize readers' ideas of what music could be in the nineteenth century. The goal of this dissertation is not just to theorize musical text with evidence from improvisation. It is also to show how, despite the rapid canonic reification of repertoires through this time period, piano playing was still conceptualized as something bodily, adaptable, and personal.