

Improvisatory *gestures* into composition

Francesco Pollini's piano introductory movements in accordance with the improvisatory practice of his time

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Background

Francesco Pollini (Ljubljana, 1762 - Milan, 1846) was a Slovenian aristocrat, a skilled singer and pianist as well as a composer. After spending several years in Vienna, he moved to Milan during the 1790s. He was an active member of the music scene in Milan as a piano teacher and a composer and he wrote an influential piano method (1812) as well as composed a large number of piano works and chamber music.

Some of his piano sonatas, rondos and sets of variations begin with an introductory movement that seems to have been created in accordance with the then well-established practice of improvised preludes, short introductions and fantasy-like pieces.

In this poster I will shed light on Pollini's application of this practice, taking one of his introductions as a case study. This represents an example of one of the analytical approaches that I intend to adopt in my dissertation on Francesco Pollini's pianism. The analysis of Pollini's compositional strategies is particularly relevant to highlight the various commonalities which existed between the Viennese and the Milanese keyboard traditions.

Thesis

The continuity between Pollini's introductory movements and the improvisation of preludes, short introductions and fantasy-like pieces does not concern the nature of the creative act but the use of improvisatory *gestures* that refer to the *idea* (or the *topos*) of improvisation and, with it, to their way of being performed.

These *gestures*, fixed by the musical notation in the completed work(s), are articulated by the composer with the aim to accomplish the same expressive and rhetoric functions as if they were improvised: they call the attention of the audience, keep their interest alive, establish the tonality, create the impression of spontaneity, of mastery, etc.

Objective and methodology

The main objective of my research is to give an inside look at Pollini's compositional strategies and to identify new perspectives for historically informed performance practice of his compositions and, further, for the piano repertoire of his time.

The analysis of improvisational *topics* in Pollini's work and the identification of their expressive and rhetoric connotations is one way to reach this goal. To this end, I referred to 18th- and 19th-century keyboard methods, treatises and collections of preludes addressing amateurs and students and undertook a systematic comparison with Pollini's introductions, in terms of both structure, writing style and expressive meanings.

For example: improvisatory *gestures* in Pollini's Op.45

Strong thematic connection with the subsequent movement

First period (mm. 1-16): harmonically unstable, enriched by strong dynamic contrasts. It produces the image of disorientation, gives the impression that the form vacillates

The fragmentation of the first motive and its development in imitation (mm. 11-15) allows for a certain dynamic oscillation and agogic freedom. At the end, a *rallentando** could be added to arouse the expectations of the audience

Second period (mm. 17-24): elaboration of the initial thematic material (on a scale fragment) with apparent tonal stability. The *dolce con espress.* asks for a *cantabile* touch and allows a light time fluctuation (e.g. through a contra-metric *rubato*)



Figure 1. *Introduzione*, mm. 1-40. Extract from the *Introduzione ed Allegro di bravura Composto da Fran.o Pollini [...]* dal medesimo *Dedicato All'Egregio Filarmonico Sig.r Dottore Pietro Lichtenthal*, Op.a 45, 1821. Source: I-Mc I.A.458.6.

Second period (second part, mm. 25-32): a mode change and a new texture lead into a harmonic progression. The escalation of the harmonic tension coordinated with the *crescendo* encourage a certain agogic freedom

(m. 33) beginning of a pedal on the dominant of the subsequent movement with chromatic descents and final emphasis (*sf*) on the suspension on the dominant. The direction of the chromatic movement could be enlightened by a dynamical fluctuation



Figure 2. *Allegro*, mm. 1-4. Extract from the *Introduzione ed Allegro di bravura [...]* Op.a 45, 1821. Source: I-Mc I.A.458.6.

Preluding's features

- exploration of remote harmonic regions and unexpected modulations
- final return to tonal stability (generally through a pedal on the dominant of the following piece)
- heightened virtuosity
- motivic development and melodic ornamentations
- command over a range of musical styles
- syntactical fragmentation and variety of characters (often in contrast)

Conclusions

Pollini's introductory movements result in two types, named by the composer *Preludio* and *Introduzione*, respectively. The first is a thematic and focus primarily on harmonic exploration and/or the reiteration of virtuosic figures rather than on motivic elaborations; the second alternates between virtuosity and more melodic episodes (generally in a galant style, with a *cantabile* theme), and results in a closer resemblance to its subsequent movement by anticipating certain traits of it. In all of his introductory movements, Pollini resorted to some improvisatory *gestures*: melodic ornamentations, extemporaneous embellishments, cadenza-like passages; episodes that recall genres derived from improvisation, such as *Fantasy* or *Toccata*; passages that give the impression of "extemporaneousness", through their syntactical fragmentation, sharp contrasts, or subversion of formal stability. The harmonic *wandering* and hesitation is always counterbalanced by the return of tonal stability (usually at the end of the movement) and by the capitulation into a more steady subsequent movement.

More generally, the *topos* of improvisation seems to enter in Pollini's work as the result of deliberate compositional intent and becomes explicit in its way of being performed. In the case of Pollini's Op. 45, some of the improvisatory *gestures* ask for a higher degree of agogic freedom and of time and dynamic fluctuation, made legitimate in this frame of impulsive "extemporaneousness". Similar *gestures*, with their related performance implications, are also found in many introductory movements by Viennese composers (e.g. in Johann N. Hummel's Op. 75. [1817] or Carl Czerny's Op. 21 [1822], among others).

Contact

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