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The idea was for the student to begin a free improvisation with this incipit while I accompanied him at the piano; that was about all that was agreed upon in advance. The session was recorded (Sound file 1).¹ The player in this case, an oboist, had virtually no experience with improvising before he came to the course, and the incipit was never practiced in class. Still, the music sounded more or less ›right‹: there were no real clashes, and the form seemed to be in balance as well. My experience is that this type of result is not an exception. How is this possible? How can two players produce something in a style that rests on classical harmony, without making any previous agreement about the course of the music?

2. *Loci communes*

Indeed, classical musicians who are not familiar with improvisation (which is the majority of them) can be puzzled about the sheer possibility of such an improvisation. Their underlying assumption seems to be that, when there is no score to play from, the musician has no guidelines whatsoever. In this view, just anything could happen, which makes a joint improvisation like the one on the recording a matter of telepathy – or luck. It is an assumption that results from a late 20th century idea of music making, which takes the translation of a score into sound as the only (but, admittedly, complicated) task of a classical performing musician. It is a one-way process: the score tells you what to do, and your job is to do it as precisely as possible. Like Latin, a language that is (with very few exceptions) no longer used actively, musical languages from the past have almost become ›dead languages‹. However, when one starts to reverse this development, valuable information about the structure of musical language comes to light. Since music theory can be regarded as a subject that not only researches the structure of musical compositions, but also the very nature of musical idioms, this information has music-theoretical implications as well. It even yields important insights into score interpretation (though this will not be discussed here). This essay focuses on the mutual relation between improvisation and music theory as it is generally taught at conservatories.

As soon as an improviser decides to say something musically, there are all sorts of factors guiding the process, which together form a kind of reference

1 The recording can be accessed via a QR code (see p. 510) or via <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/450178/450179> (last visited: 02-10-2020).

system. Some of these factors may be of a private nature, known only to the performer; the focus of this essay, however, will be on more general musical conventions that together form an immense and multi-faceted body of tacit knowledge. The conventions can be understood as elements of a musical language.

In the case of the recorded performance, a couple of hints were given by the teacher. First of all, a title was included on the assignment sheet: *Lied ohne Worte*. This is a designation of a genre, and it already has important implications: it makes one roughly expect a stylistic environment (Mendelssohn, or some later Romantic salon style); it suggests a certain character and texture (a singing melody with a clearly separate accompaniment); the style makes us expect certain melodic gestures; we expect a certain form (ABA, with the middle movement in a contrasting key, usually the dominant or the relative major/minor); we might even expect a melody that is generally built on four-bar phrases. On a more detailed level, the suggested opening phrase (the incipit) can easily be seen as the first half of a classical period, implying a subsequent phrase that opens symmetrically and then either closes in the home key or modulates. Secondly, the piano accompaniment itself was strongly guiding the oboe player; this is because tonal harmony tends to follow specific patterns, depending on whether you are at the beginning, middle, or end of a section.² At the same time, the harmonic progressions chosen and how they were arranged depended on the possibilities offered by the melody of the oboe player. His melodic gestures created expectations as well, resulting in the accompanist choosing one of the harmonic options available at a specific moment. In this way the improvisation really was an ongoing process of give and take.

The musical conventions that guide improvisers during a performance clearly illustrate Bruce Ellis Benson's view on improvisation; that is, »to rework something that already exists (that is, ›conveniently on hand‹), and thus transform it into something that both has connections to what it once was but now has a new identity.«³ They are musical commonplaces in the original sense: musical elements (phrase forms, harmonic patterns, textures, rhythmic structures, etc.) that are generally accepted, recognized, and shared among musicians and listeners within a specific stylistic domain. Unfortunately, the word ›commonplace‹ has gained a pejorative connotation – both in English and in many other mod-

2 In particular, an intuitive awareness of formal function (Caplin 1990) can help the performer in this regard.

3 Benson 2003, p. 45.

ern languages. This seems to have happened in the translation from the Latin *locus communis*, originally a term from rhetoric. More distinctly than the Latin *communis* (general, collective), the word ›common‹ has ›vulgar‹ as a usual second meaning, resulting in ›commonplace‹ receiving the connotation of ›having nothing original‹ as early as the 1600s.⁴ Nonetheless, ›commonplacing‹ (writing striking passages from books, facts, or recipes in a ›commonplace-book‹) became extremely popular in 17th century Europe, and remained so until into the 20th century.

To avoid the hint of triviality, I would like to propose the original term *loci communes* for these conventions. The reader might wonder why I am not simply using the word *topos*, which is much more well known – originally used in literary theory, it became the subject of an entire ›topic theory‹ in musicology, initiated by Leonard Ratner.⁵ The reason is that *topos* is often used in a way that connects music to an extra-musical meaning.⁶ The concept *locus communis*, as described above, has its scope specifically in the structure of the musical language itself.

Where do these conventions come from? How do we, as modern players, know the *loci* of a musical language from a remote past? In the case of the presented classroom improvisation using a musical language from the first half of the 19th century, there can be only one answer: we are using a language that we know from scores. Or, put more precisely: the players are improvising with material (*loci*) which they took from a modern practice of music making that is based upon scores from an earlier period – a practice that is also known as ›classical music‹. As a result, the recorded improvisation as it sounds reflects our view on, say, the German repertoire from Mendelssohn's time. It would be a mistake to take this for something ›authentic‹, as if the musicians were doing exactly the same kind of thing as what Mendelssohn did back in the 1840s. What really happens is a process of appropriation: the musicians actively use the musical language of around 1840, and create on the spot new music in this language. Whether and in what sense this could be an interesting artistic activity in itself is a discussion that I will not go into here; however, the pedagogical value and the importance for score interpretation of bringing the ›extinct languages‹ of classical music to life by actively using them can hardly be overstated.

4 <http://www.etymonline.com> (last visited: 02-10-2020).

5 Ratner 1980.

6 Cf. McKay 2009, pp. 159–183.

It is important to stress the role of musical expectation here. One mechanism at work when two musicians are improvising together is the action – reaction principle: one player does something, the other one reacts. This is possible because, as in a conversation, there is usually one person who leads. Of course, also as in a conversation, this leading function may change continuously between the improvisers. This mechanism is not confined to ›free‹ improvisation: it also occurs when musicians play from a score, for instance when one player takes the initiative in changing the dynamics or the tempo of a passage on the spot, or when one player adds ornamentation to a phrase, inviting the other one to do likewise. Regardless of the reaction speed of the ›following‹ musician, there will always be a certain delay between action and response. When the leading musician starts to behave capriciously, it might become impossible for the follower to avoid disturbances in the music. In free improvisations⁷ this effect is even stronger, which shows that in collaborative music-making, another principle is at least as important as the ability to react quickly: a certain level of shared musical expectation. The follower should not only be able to react to the initiative of the leader, but should also know what the leader might do next. For the musicians to be able to play together, even a free improvisation needs a certain amount of predictability. This predictability can be located in the *loci communes* as described above. The reverse is also true: when the improvisers don't play according to the *loci*, when they step out of the reference system, they change the musical language – or make it impossible to understand. To use the metaphor of a piece of music as a game: they change the rules of the game. There might be very good reasons to do so, but the new game will be a different one.

3. Reification

Some categories of *loci communes*, like those related to form, melody, and harmony, show a remarkable resemblance to music-theoretical concepts. A crucial difference however is that, unlike *loci communes*, concepts in music theory (and especially in the teaching of music theory) have a tendency to become a thing, an object, that can be written down and labelled. A musical event in this way becomes a ›cadence‹, a ›ternary form‹, a ›motivic connection‹. This is because music-as-it-sounds is described in another medium, abandoning the temporal

7 In the context of this essay, ›free improvisations‹ refer to tonal improvisations in which all factors (melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, formal) are decided on the spot.

dimension that music always has – indeed, very much like what happens when music is notated in a score. In this case, though, the distance between the musical gestures and their symbolic representation is even much larger than when we deal with the divergence of score and music-as-it-sounds. The reason for this is that the level of abstraction is much higher here: not only is the music represented in timeless symbols on paper, like words or abstract schemata, but it also is not just one specific music being represented, but a generalized concept, abstracted from many pieces of music. This process of concepts becoming objects can be termed reification or *Verdinglichung* (no Marxist connotation intended). A musical gesture becomes a *res*, a thing, without the temporal dimension of sounding music.

However, this temporal dimension is crucial for an improviser! If a musical *locus communis* is supposed to serve as material for improvisation, it needs to possess this temporal quality. Many music-theoretical concepts, as they are generally understood by students, do not meet this requirement. As an example, I would like to examine one passage from the improvisation that formed the starting point of this essay (Sound file 2).⁸

A transcription of the music as it sounds on the recording, written in the form of a figured bass reduction with added oboe melody, is shown in Example 2.

The image shows a musical score for Example 2. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff (top) and a bass clef staff (bottom). The key signature is one sharp (F#), indicating G major. The piano part is written in the bass clef and consists of five measures. The oboe melody is written in the treble clef and consists of five measures. The figured bass is written below the piano part, with figures: 7 5# (under the first measure), 7 # (under the second measure), 7b (under the third measure), 7 (under the fourth measure), and 4/2 (under the fifth measure). The number 6 is written below the final note of the piano part.

Example 2: Transcription of passage heard in Sound file 2

Here, the piano part leads because I play a distinct harmonic *locus communis*. It starts with a half-diminished seventh chord, which in this style and at this moment of the piece indicates the beginning of a falling-fifth sequence. Describing this progression in such terms from a music-theoretical point of view does the job: ›falling-fifth sequence‹ seems to be a description in words of what the progression ›really is‹. Put more accurately, however, it is rather a description of an abstract *category* that this harmonic event belongs to. On the basis of innumerable similar events in music, certain common properties have

8 The recording can be accessed via a QR code (see p. 510) or via <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/450178/450179> (last visited: 02-10-2020).

been brought together in a definition, summarized as a ›falling-fifth sequence‹. Identifying this categorization with saying ›what it really is‹ might not be a very good idea.

Of course, there are several ways to analyze the harmony of this passage, and preferences tend to vary according to national or even local professional traditions. One widespread method of harmonic analysis is a combination of *Funktionstheorie* and *Stufentheorie*, based on Louis and Thuille's *Harmonielehre* from 1907.⁹ An analysis of Example 2 along these lines reads as follows:

D major: (II⁷ | V⁷) → | II⁷ | V⁷ V² | I⁶

Less well-known is a modern representative of the *Fundamentalschritt-Theorie* as presented in *Harmonik* by Zsolt Gárdonyi and Hubert Nordhoff¹⁰, which distinguishes two classes of chord connections, namely plagal and authentic; in this theory, the harmonic progression of this passage would be described as a series of *authentische Hauptschritte* (AH).

The *Stufentheorie* and the *Funktionstheorie*, I argue, are primarily methods of harmonic analysis rather than creative tools; they ›explain‹ a harmonic progression by expressing it in terms of a referential frame, respectively the diatonic scale and the perfect authentic cadence. What does the ›Louis and Thuille‹ analysis of this passage show? An experienced reader can deduce a series of falling fifths – as such a timeless structure. As a general analytical technique, however, this kind of analysis determines the position of the chords within the local tonality, and interprets progressions by comparing them with an abstract version of the perfect authentic cadence. One could say that this type of analysis relates to the sounding music like a list of GPS positions to a walk through the landscape. The *Fundamentalschritt-Theorie* on the other hand classifies the progressions from one chord to another, and in this way, analyzes the moment-to-moment harmonic process. It describes, as it were, the individual directions of the different steps along the walk.

Compared to the classification of this progression, namely by calling it a representative of the category ›falling-fifth sequence‹, the analytical methods do something different: they translate the musical event into another ›language‹. Admittedly, it is possible to convert the symbolic reproduction back to sounding music, especially in the case of the Louis and Thuille analysis, which specifically refers to chord qualities; general labels like ›falling-fifth sequence‹ are too un-

⁹ Louis/Thuille 1907.

¹⁰ Gárdonyi/Nordhoff 2002.

clear in this respect. Much harmony teaching in conservatories and universities across the world is based upon this possibility, resulting in, for instance, modulation exercises by way of a series of chord symbols. This activity (making music on the basis of symbols) is not essentially different from what happens when we make music from a score. However, the distance between the harmonic symbols and the sound is much greater than in the case of traditional music notation, making the relation between symbol and sound very indirect. In fact, an analytical tool is used here as an alternative for score notation: a description is turned into an instruction for music-making. The bass line, for instance, which was still represented straightforwardly in the figured bass reduction, disappeared in both formulas. For a reified analysis, this may be fine, but when the purpose is to create sounding music, the symbols definitely fall short.

This is because for an improviser, or more generally, a creator of music, clearly a category as such does not lead towards musical ideas. One doesn't think during an improvisation: »now it is about time for a falling-fifth sequence.« Moreover, the analytical symbols will not trigger the imagination; it is not a scale degree or a harmonic function as such that one imagines, but rather an actual sound, or better: a sounding musical gesture! This has an expressive value, which seems to be located in the combination of the harmonies and the melodic power of the voices (though not all of them in the same amount).

In the recording, we can hear that the half diminished chord creates the expectation of a falling-fifth progression – i.e., the *locus communis*; the oboe player catches it, but expects a harmonic rhythm that is twice as fast (but would be equally possible on the basis of the preceding music). He seems to expect something like what is shown in Example 3.

Example 3: Alternate harmonization of first two measures shown in Example 2

The pianist indeed starts with the falling-fifth gesture, but cannot adjust the timing so quickly; changing the harmonic rhythm during the *locus communis* halfway through the gesture of the falling-fifth sequence would definitely sound like a mistake. The oboist discovers the misunderstanding after a few beats

(resulting in a slight clash¹¹, which is, however, more or less acceptable as a possible dissonance within this musical style), followed by an adaptation of his melody to the timing of the pianist. This, I would say, is musical expectation at work.

4. Towards a generative music theory

What leads the musicians is not chord symbols, not even Gárdonyian chord relationships, but the imagination of the sound of a musical gesture, the *locus communis* usually conceptualized as a falling-fifth sequence. I would like to emphasize this view on the process of music making: an improviser is led by the imagination of sounds, of sounding musical gestures, not by chord symbols or scale degrees as such. The symbols and numbers are finally nothing more than names or labels; they enable us to speak about sounds, to analyze music, and to reflect on it. The true and indispensable basis of music-making, however, remains the imagination of sound. Though this may sound simple enough, in the real world of the conservatory, classical music students are so focused on the translation from score to sound that their ability to imagine music that has not been composed (and practiced) in advance is at an almost rudimentary level. Music theory teachers find themselves in a dilemma: they are supposed to make the students reflect on something that has hardly been experienced before.

The natural reaction of most theorists is, I believe, to choose the theoretical approach. Labels, terms, and symbols, are a convenient way to transmit concepts to the students – and that is exactly how much theory teaching works. It is pretty much like learning a language with the grammar as a starting point. The underlying assumption must be that, through intellect, the musical experience will be molded, leading towards internalization of concepts. There might indeed be musicians for whom this works, but they seem to be a minority. When it comes to real improvisation, the practical value of the theoretical concepts themselves is very limited, as was argued above. A personal experience may serve to illustrate this point. As an improvising organist with perfect pitch, I frequently play on historical instruments with a different diapason (e.g. A4 = 415 Hz). When the improvised music remains safely in the same key, I can ›transpose‹ the imagined music to the keyboard in the ›wrong‹ temperament; however, when I start to

11 Namely the D# on the third beat against the half-diminished seventh chord.

modulate, and especially when sudden and fast harmonic changes occur, I tend to grab the wrong notes because my fingers translate the imagined chord to a keyboard on A4 = 440 Hz. Whether or not more improvisers have this experience, I don't know, but it seems to prove the point to me: it is the imagined sound itself that directs the improvisation, not a theoretical abstraction.

At the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague, this and comparable insights have driven the music theory department unanimously to change the theory curriculum in a way that gives a central role to musical experience. Aural skills, for example, are no longer taught in the traditional way with musical dictations, but in a class that makes the students play their own instruments, also using elements of improvisation. The last year of this three-year curriculum is even almost completely devoted to (group) improvisation.

Improvising in musical languages as we know them from scores can put also music theory as a conservatory subject in a different light. There are good reasons to stress and develop the generative aspect that music theory also can have.¹² The concept *locus communis*, as proposed here, might be a useful tool to describe the process, and also be a way to connect improvisation with the interpretation of a score (which could not be elaborated in this essay). I would like to conclude with the wise words from the last page of Johann Nepomuk Hummel's *Anweisung zum Pianoforte-Spiel*: »Selbst wenn man mit Geist immerwährend nur Noten spielt, wird derselbe viel weniger genährt, erweitert und ausgebildet, als durch öfteres, wenn auch nur mässig gelingendes, doch mit vollem Bewusstsein, Aufbietung aller Kräfte, nach gewisser Richtung und Ordnung geübtes freies Phantasiren.«¹³

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12 This is definitely one of the purposes of Gárdonyi and Nordhoff's *Harmonik*.

13 »Even if you always play with spirit, but only from scores, your mind will be nourished, broadened, and educated much less than by frequent, free, albeit mediocre, improvising, assuming that this is practiced in a specific direction and in a well-structured way, with full consciousness and using all your powers.« Hummel 1838, p. 468 (author's translation).

Bert Mooiman

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Sound file 1: Student's free improvisation on the incipit shown in Example 1

Sound file 2: Excerpt from student's improvisation (transcription provided in Example 2)

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