



# Challenging wisdom

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‘After all, an improviser must anticipate before playing, and composing is a slowed-down improvisation; often, one cannot write fast enough to keep up with the stream of ideas.’ The central part of this sentence from ‘Brahms the Progressive,’ one of Arnold Schoenberg’s most renowned and influential writings (in *Style and Idea* (New York, 1950), 98) is set as an *exergo* in Claudio’s paper on ‘improvisation and time,’ published in 1999. This quote does not appear there only as an embellishment, but it bears witness to his love for music, both art and popular music.

As a musicologist specializing in the Second Viennese School, I must add the comment that Schoenberg was the only composer who practised *bricolage* to such an extent that a whole conference could be devoted to this topic in his life and work 2 years ago in Vienna.

Claudio’s writings on improvisation bear only marginal remarks on music, but he was eager to deepen his understanding of this topic, and he had planned a new paper. The tentative title he wrote to me in October of last year is

IMPROVISATION REVISITED

Extemporaneity, Moods and ...a little Music

We had discussed frequently the role and meaning of musical improvisation, looking for suggestions about new ways of organizing teamwork. In our discussions, we did not limit our investigations to the commonplace that associates improvisation only with jazz music. As a matter of fact, improvisation is a central feature of both Western and non-Western music throughout its history. Its role can be traced in Western music from ancient documents through the Middle Ages, becoming crucial in the Baroque era with thoroughbass and cadenzas for singers and instrumentalists. At the time of Johann Sebastian Bach, the margin between composition and improvisation was a flowing one. ‘*Preludieren*,’ ‘*fantasieren*,’ and ‘*extemporieren*’ were common terms for improvisation, a usual activity for Bach himself. The historical word *extemporieren* suggests that something ‘out of time’ was to be created and heard, and that the formal frame of music organization was less consistent than one might imagine – that these terms referred not only to moods but to the question of time as well.

Furthermore, at that time, the ‘maestro al cembalo’ coordinated individual skills, instead of bearing the whole responsibility for the performance, almost ‘signing’ it. His role was different from the one we now customarily assign to the conductor. This observation may be easily transferred to organization models, and it offers some insight into Claudio Abbado’s way of conducting and the reasons why Claudio and I considered him the authentic ‘Maestro.’

The ‘unformed form’ of the *impromptu* is well known in the Romantic era, while improvisation represents one of the major concerns in 20th century music. During the last century, the growing importance and diffusion of jazz almost forced scholars to consider only such performances when looking for some insight into music for their nonmusical studies. But this is somehow a shortcut approach to the question, somehow an impoverishment instead of an enrichment of the potential of cross references between organization and music theories and practices. The

creative role of performers is shared both in jazz and 'classical music,' a firm competence being the common basis for improvising in both fields, but contemporary research music gives much more freedom than jazz music from the frame of 'technical' rules – together with more responsibility. From the 1950s, most composers employed improvisation (for instance, John Cage and Morton Feldman in the United States, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Bruno Maderna, Sylvano Bussotti and Franco Evangelisti in Europe), and performers were forced to respond to such a provocation: their situation as 'actors' in the performance gives rise to different reactions to the same score, that is, to singular 'readings' (and hearings) of the same work, whose different objectivations depend upon the moods of the involved actors. The 'situated action' of composers/performers/listeners calls into question their usual individual roles and offers unheard and unlimited possibilities of interaction/intersection. This is a short summary of what I long discussed with my dear friend Claudio, both alone together and at seminars with his students at Bologna and Milan Universities.

The host/guest-ghost relation between music and technology from the 20th century onwards offered further themes for our conversations, held while sitting side by side in his or my car; in opera houses, concert halls, and cinemas; or at restaurants or his or my flat for breakfast, lunch or dinner; or looking at 'X-Files' on TV; or walking in town or at the seaside or in the mountains; or at art or architecture exhibitions; or even dancing

somewhere. Hospitality was our mood; therefore, we were personally attuned to the deconstruction of this concept in Jacques Derrida's recent works. Claudio's friends know about WOW: *Words of Wisdom* was the title of his last book, which was finally published as *The Labyrinths of Information*, and 'hospitality' is there a keyword.

Actually, Claudio was a strange '*ingegnere*,' as my son Pietro and I teasingly called him, because of his degree from the Milan Polytechnical School. Despite his strong scientific background, Claudio was sceptical about the 'truth content' (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) of science (what about his love for Philip K. Dick and science fiction in novels and films?), and he was looking for insights somewhere else, in music but also in philosophy, to carry the issues of organisation and AI theory along new paths.

As an editor of the philosophical journal 'aut aut,' I helped him discover what we were not taught at school. I passed him unpublished papers by contemporary philosophers, and he focused his attention on the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. With Derrida, a long-term 'friend' of this journal, Claudio's thought shared some crucial topics: margin, friendship, hospitality, responsibility, pardon, gift, legacy, etc.

I see Claudio's smiling eyes hearing the words Derrida wrote to be spoken at his own funeral: 'Souriez, comme je vous auriez souri jusqu'à la fin. Préférez toujours la vie et affermez sans cesse la survie... Je vous aime et vous souris d'où que je sois.'

### About the author

Born and living in Milan, Morazzoni was Claudio's class-fellow at 'Liceo' and is presently a professor of Music

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