The Unwritten Notes.

Exploring Extemporization Strategies for Classical Pianists and Their Reciprocal Impact on Interpretive Depth

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Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to my father and to my late partner David. Their passing during the course of this doctorate and only one year apart, brought everything to a halt. For a long time, I lost all motivation, and at times it felt impossible to return to this work. This thesis, in many ways, is a quiet attempt to honour their memory: to continue moving, thinking, listening.

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Abstract.

Since the late 19th century, the gradual disappearance of improvisation from Western Art Music (WAM) pedagogy has contributed to a narrowing of expressive possibilities in classical performance. Once considered a vital skill for a complete musician, improvisation – especially as a practice grounded in the language, syntax, and forms of WAM – was replaced by a focus on textual fidelity and interpretation. This research aims to address that loss by exploring practical pathways for the reintegration of improvisation into classical performance training, with particular attention to pianists.

The study takes an action-research approach, combining personal practice, teaching experience, and comparative fieldwork in Europe to investigate and apply two complementary models of learning: the "natural schemes" approach exemplified by David Dolan's work (rooted in embodied, intuitive musical flow), and the "learned schemes" framework represented by Emilio Molina's IEM method (based on analysis, pattern recognition, and applied theory). Both models draw inspiration from historical pedagogies, such as *partimento*, and offer fertile ground for re-establishing improvisation as a natural, expressive extension of interpretation.

Through case studies, classroom observation, transcription of improvisatory exercises, and the creation of original pedagogical materials (including my own collection of 24 reimagined Kabalevsky miniatures), this research examines how improvisation can support deeper *audiation* (the ability "to hear inwardly with meaning the sounds as [we] are making them on an instrument or voice"), harmonic fluency, formal awareness, and stylistic sensitivity. Drawing on Kratus' developmental model of improvisation, the thesis outlines methods for progressing from exploratory improvisation to structured, stylistic invention.

Ultimately, this project seeks not only to advocate for the return of improvisation to classical training, but to demonstrate how it can foster a more holistic musicianship; one in which interpretation, analysis, composition, and spontaneous creativity coexist dynamically. By reconnecting performers with the generative processes of music-making, this research contributes to a broader rethinking of what it means to perform Western Art Music today.

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Introduction

Improvisation is often associated today with jazz, experimental "free-form" playing, or the organ traditions that still survive in some churches. But its roots go back centuries, and for a long time it was an essential part of Western Art Music. In recent decades, research has helped paint a clearer picture of just how common and expected improvisation was (though often under different names, such as preluding or *Phantasieren*) both in concert halls and pedagogical settings. Diaries, biographies, and treatises from the 18th and 19th centuries offer concrete evidence of its role, not only as a performance skill but also in shaping the musical development of many of the era's greatest musicians.

Composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and many of their contemporaries, were celebrated, during their lifetime, for their ability to extemporize: throughout their professional lives they had many opportunities to display their skills as music creators in concert halls, courts or private settings. Moreover, we now know that improvisation was used not only as a demonstration of technical fluency but also to explore musical ideas and shape compositional practice[1]. Despite its historical significance, this skill, which seems vital in the life of many performer-composers of the time, has mostly disappeared from modern classical music training, raising questions about the implications of its absence. Could a revival of improvisational practices enrich the way musicians engage with repertoire, interpretation and performance?

Research has demonstrated that improvisation and composition abilities help musicians develop better understanding of harmonic structures, melodic patterns and formal structures – and in turn their performative and interpretive fluency. The ability to prelude, variate a given theme, or freely fantasize, encouraged musicians of the past to think critically and creatively, pushing the requirements of simple technical proficiency. These practices, coupled with counterpoint and harmony study, enhanced their adaptability, spontaneity, and understanding of harmonic and melodic frameworks, which are essential for composition and performance. Also, through improvisation, musicians developed a profound connection

[1] For a detailed historical analysis of improvisational practices from 1810 to 1880 refer to Gooley, Dana. (2018) *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth-Century Music*, Oxford.

with their instrument and repertoire, cultivating skills that allowed them to navigate the demands of live performance, engage in musical dialogue with peers, and contribute to the evolution of musical styles.[2]

Building upon these foundational concepts, the objective of this doctoral research extends beyond academic inquiry, seeking to offer practical insights and different strategies to musicians keen on integrating improvisation into their musical repertoire. At its core lies the question: *'What strategies can classical pianists adopt to enhance their proficiency in extemporization? And how can this enhance the study of repertoire and its interpretation in return?'*. The methodologies presented herein, distilled into actionable steps, are rooted in the scholarship and expertise of two distinguished figures whom I have had the privilege of studying under in recent years: Professor David Dolan from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London and Dr Emilio Molina from the *Instituto de Educación Musical* (IEM) in Madrid.

My project, situated within the framework of Action Research, involved the analysis and continuous refinement of improvisation methodologies through multiple iterations applied across my piano repertoire. In addressing the research question, the aim has been to develop a comprehensive set of guidelines and strategies or 'how-to' instructions for musicians. More broadly, this study also serves as a point of departure for educators and performers interested in the benefits of improvisation, and in exploring how extemporization can be meaningfully integrated into the pedagogy and performance of Western Art Music.

The First Chapter offers an extensive review of improvisation within Western Art Music spanning from the Baroque to the mid-19th century. It synthesizes existing literature on the topic, emphasizing the historical importance of improvisation during those eras. Furthermore, the chapter examines contemporary research into the decline of improvisation in Western Art Music during the twentieth century, as well as recent efforts to revive this tradition, which, although growing, remain somewhat scattered across different regions and institutions.

[2] More detailed references on these concepts are presented in the following chapter. Notably the research works of Dana Gooley, Kenneth Hamilton, Robin Moore and Valerie Goertzen.

The Second Chapter introduces the Action Research employed for the development of this exegesis. The chapter explains the framework of the research, its cyclical nature and the organization of the data collected during my years of study.

The Third Chapter illuminates how improvisation can enhance musical understanding, extending the concept of *audiation* (the ability "to hear inwardly with meaning the sounds as [we] are making them on an instrument or voice"[3]), which is extensively utilized throughout the research. The chapter emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between improvisation and the development of musical knowledge, which can subsequently aid in the interpretation and deciphering of written scores.

The Fourth Chapter outlines two main approaches to improvisation based on the personal experiences of working with Prof. Dolan and Dr Molina. These two schools of thought seem to complement each other, drawing respectively from natural schemes and learned schemes to incorporate improvisation into their music pedagogy methods.[4] By incorporating both those cognitive frameworks into a methodology of improvisational practices, a musician could develop a comprehensive approach to learning music that fosters both intuitive creativity and technical proficiency. Chapter 4 explores some of the techniques and pedagogical tools employed by these two main educators, offering both practical guidance and broader insights for musicians interested in exploring improvisation within classical training. The chapter also synthesises a flexible set of strategies stemming from those methods, that can be adapted to various repertoire and learning contexts, providing musicians with concrete tools to enhance their extemporisation skills and integrate improvisation more confidently into their personal practice.

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[3] Kratus, John. (1996). A developmental approach to teaching music improvisation. *International Journal of Music Education*, 26(1), 27–38.

[4] *Natural schemes* refer to intuitive, instinctive patterns and ideas that arise spontaneously during improvisation. They rely on the musician's inherent musical understanding and creative instincts, often resulting in unique and organic musical expressions. Natural schemes encourage musicians to trust their musical instincts and explore their personal musical voice.
On the other hand, *learned schemes* involve the deliberate study and acquisition of improvisational techniques and vocabulary. This approach entails analysing existing musical patterns, structures, and idioms to develop a repertoire of improvisational tools. Learned schemes provide a foundation for improvisation by equipping musicians with a set of techniques and ideas that can be applied and expanded upon during spontaneous musical creation.

Chapter 5 is based on case studies which detail the application of these strategies to specific repertoire. It delineates methods of score analysis, reduction, intuition, and exploratory play, demonstrating how these processes can foster improvisational fluency and interpretive insight. While the analyses focuses on several of Chopin's *Preludes* Op. 28, selected for their compact, uniform structure and featured in my third DMA recital, these strategies have been applied to most of the works performed in the last few years, including the *Ballades* and *Nocturnes* of Chopin (first recital), duo works such as Dvořák's *Romantic Pieces*, Bartók's *Hungarian Dances*, and Grieg's *Violin Sonata No. 3* (second recital), as well as Rachmaninoff's *Preludes* Op. 23 (final recital).

To elucidate the analytical and improvisational processes in more accessible terms, the chapter includes pedagogical applications involving simpler works, such as short studies by Czerny and Kabalevsky. In particular, I present a series of re-composed and reimagined versions of Kabalevsky's *24 Pieces for Children*, created as a playful exercise in stylistic and harmonic improvisation. These examples demonstrate how analytical insight, when combined with creative exploration, can nurture deeper understanding and imaginative re-composition even in beginner to intermediate repertoire. Improvisational tasks in the chapter are contextualised using John Kratus' seven-level model of improvisation, providing a developmental framework that supports both student learning and the performer's evolving practice.

The final chapter draws together the key findings of this research and reflects on their implications for both performance and pedagogy – particularly in relation to the ear–mind–body connection, and the essential role of ear training in developing musicianship. Put simply, our internal hearing must evolve alongside our physical technique; only by knowing what we want to hear can we guide our hands toward a meaningful and constructive path. After synthesizing the various strategies explored throughout the study, the chapter briefly addresses broader questions about the role of creativity in classical training, the limitations of current conservatoire models, and the need for more inclusive, exploratory approaches. Its concluding reflections aim at inspiring future engagement with improvisation in classical contexts, in research, pedagogy and performance of Western art music.

In short, by following this structured journey, this exegesis aims to illuminate the historical context, pedagogical approaches, practical applications, and transformative potential of improvisation in Western Art Music.

Chapter 1: The Historical Context of Improvisation in Western Art Music

Chapter 1 explores the historical context of improvisation in Western Art music. It highlights the significant role improvisation played in the lives of renowned composers and performers and some of the reasons why its practice declined in the classical music tradition.

This chapter also discusses the recent revival of interest in improvisation, the reasons fuelling it, its benefits and the efforts being made to reintegrate it into classical music pedagogy and performance. Finally, it provides a literature review of some of the research and existing documents on this field.

1.1 - A Classical Legacy of Performer-Composers

To a greater and lesser extent, most composers-performers we study today (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Clara Schumann, Liszt and many of their contemporaries) all possessed remarkable improvisational abilities. Their compositions often reflected their experiences as performers, and there are many documented accounts of their improvisatory skills both in public and private settings.

For example, Clara Schumann was known for spontaneously creating interludes between works in her public performances[5]. Liszt would improvise full fantasies derived from recognizable themes of the time, or even ask audience members for popular tunes, which he would paraphrase and improvise upon[6]. Mozart included improvised fantasias and variations in his public performances, and his concertos featured improvised elements beyond the cadenza. Both Mozart and Beethoven would conclude their concerts with lengthy improvisations that could span up to half an hour.[7] Chopin captivated listeners with the delicacy of his

[5] Goertzen, Valerie. (1996). By Way of Introduction: Preluding by 18th- and Early 19th-Century Pianists. *Journal of Musicology* 14 (3): 299–337.
[6] Gooley, Dana. (2018). *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth-Century Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[7] Hamilton, Kenneth. (2008). *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

improvisations[8], while Bach's legendary ability to improvise extended to various musical forms.

One notable figure, Carl Czerny (1791 – 1857), played a key role in the history of piano pedagogy as a pupil of Beethoven and teacher of Liszt. His publications on improvisation, such as his Op.200 "*A systematic introduction to improvisation on the pianoforte*", remind us of how important this art form was in the nineteenth century as a pedagogical tool for young pianists. However, Czerny was not alone in this endeavour, as many treatises on harmony and improvisation were written by his contemporaries during that era[9].

Some of the musical forms we now consider fixed and unchangeable in concert halls were originally meant to be improvised or served as vehicles for learning improvisational methodologies. Johann Samuel Beyer's definition of a prelude in 1703, for example, described it as "a short piece of music which an organist on the organ or instrumentalists on their instruments improvise in order to introduce the key of an ensuing work."[10] Similarly, Czerny's chapter on Preludes defines them as a form whose aim is to "prepare the listeners, set the mood, and also ascertain the qualities of the pianoforte"[11] before starting a piece of music. Preluding served as the first step for performers to showcase their "crown of distinction" among pianists[12]. Cadenzas within concertos or major works often served as the central showpiece of a public recital. Fantasies, inventions, impromptus, and variations frequently originated as entirely improvised pieces performed in public, later transcribed into written form, akin to contemporary artists recording their live performances for revenue and posterity.

Learning to improvise served pianists in more subtle ways than just impressing audiences with spectacular spontaneous performances. Czerny believed that developing improvisational skills would enhance students' understanding of harmony, technical proficiency, and

[8] Eigeldinger, Jean-Jacques. (1986). *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils*. Translated by Naomi Shohet, Krysia Osostowicz, and Roy Howat. Edited by Roy Howat. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A wonderful account of Chopin's lessons and concerts from the letters of his pupils and contemporaries. Detail is recorded on several improvised performances or his habit to embellish, change or add melodic lines when teaching some of his works (his nocturnes and mazurkas for example).
[9] More on this in the literature review at the end of this chapter
[10] Stauffer, George B. (1980) *The Organ Preludes of Johann Sebastian Bach*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.
[11] Carl Czerny. "A systematic introduction to improvisation on the pianoforte", First chapter (Longman 1983): 6
[12] Carl Czerny. "A systematic introduction to improvisation on the pianoforte", First chapter (Longman 1983): 6

musical memory. Moreover, not only is there research backing these claims, but my own refinement of harmonic knowledge and improvisation during these last few years showed me how active extemporization can foster lateral thinking and concept retrieval, moving beyond sequential memorization, even when learning and performing traditional repertoire[13]. Furthermore, for composers and performers in the early 19th century, such as Meyerbeer, Weber, Hummel, Moscheles, and their contemporaries, improvisation not only served to connect with the elite in concert halls or literary circles, but also as a tool for composition and inspiration, and to expand knowledge of earlier generations' music-making models[14].

1.2 - The Decline of Improvisation

Several factors contributed to the decline of improvisation in classical music. The rise of the virtuoso performer and the increasing emphasis on technical mastery led to a shift toward faithfully reproducing written compositions rather than showcasing improvisatory abilities. The standardization of performances became the norm, with musicians adhering strictly to the written score[15]. Additionally, the increasing complexity of compositions and the rise of the conductor-led orchestra reduced the space for spontaneous creation, as performances became more structured and rehearsed.

The influence of the recording industry and music competitions has further solidified the dominance of fixed interpretations. Recordings allowed for the preservation and dissemination of specific performances, establishing certain interpretations as the definitive versions. This has reduced the incentive for performers to improvise or deviate from established interpretations[16].

The beginning of this decline can be traced back to the time of Mendelssohn's death, coinciding with Liszt's retirement from concert tours where he extensively improvised and grappled with the conflicting roles of the improvising virtuoso and contemplative composer – a similar shift happened to Schumann as well[17]. The shift away from improvisational approaches in their composition processes during their later years may be attributed, in part, to

[13] For a more detailed list of references of studies on this matter, please refer to the following Literature review section on the benefits of improvisation.
[14] Gooley, Dana. (2018) *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth-Century Music*. Oxford.
[15] Kivy, P. (1995). *Authenticities: Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance.* Cornell University Press.
[16] Cook, Nicholas. (2000). *Music: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
[17] Gooley, Dana. (2018) *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth-Century Music*, Oxford.

the opinions of music critics (and composers themselves) who started considering composed works as a higher form of art.[18] This shift, combined with the growing reverence for composers as geniuses and the mystification of their works, as well as the twentieth-century musicologists' view of music as text rather than performance, further exacerbated the reluctance to improvise.[19]

The decline of improvisation in Western Art Music today can largely be attributed to its exclusion from formal training programs, leading to a lack of proficiency among many classical performers. In contrast, earlier musicians, and later pianists such as Liszt and Chopin were trained extensively in improvisation as part of their musical upbringing.[20] This form of training, once fundamental to a musician's education, has become increasingly rare, both in classical performance and in institutional teaching. In the past, pianists would accumulate a vast repertoire of figuration patterns, harmonic progressions, and thematic variations through years of practice, actively seeking opportunities to apply these skills in performance, much like jazz musicians do today[21]. Regrettably, the neglect of improvisation has led to the loss of an art form with immense creative potential. Even as early as 1910, theorist Heinrich Schenker lamented this decline in music education, arguing that theory instruction had been in regression since its peak in the early-to-mid 18th century. He was particularly dismayed that contemporary curricula no longer provided students with a strong foundation in improvising fantasies, preludes, and cadenzas.[22]

[18] idem
[19] Cook, Nicholas. (2013) *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[20] It's important to note that the word "improvisation" wasn't used in the modern sense until more recently. At the time Phantasiren, preluding and other terms were adopted. Liszt developed his capacities under the direct tutelage of Czerny, who recalled in his memoirs: "I endeavored to teach him free improvising [Phantasiren] by frequently giving him a theme on which to improvise [improvisieren]." Czerny cited by Gooley (2018).
[21] Gjerdingen, Robert O**.** (2007) *Music in the Galant Style*. New York: Oxford University Press.
[22] "Today's musicians are no longer able to improvise preludes or modulations, they are no longer able to execute cadenzas and fermatas in their leisure time! And which of today's teachers ... would be in a position to provide such a clear rationale for a technique like the one just described [by Quantz] for the execution of cadenzas, and thereby convince the student of its necessity!" Schenker, Kontrapunkt I (Stuttgart and Berlin: Cotta, 1910); ed. John Rothgeb and trans. John Rothgeb and Jürgen Thym, Counterpoint, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: Musicalia, 2001), 296.

1.3 - A Revival of Improvisation

In the last few decades there has been a slight change in understanding the importance of improvisation in the education and performance of Western art music: not only more research has been done on the topic, but more musicians and educators are also exploring with extemporization in their practices – to deepen artistic expression and create a more immediate connection with audiences.

For example, pianist Gabriela Montero has gained acclaim for her ability to improvise on themes suggested by the audience, offering a unique voice to her public performances and echoing some of Liszt's public performance traditions. Another notable example, Robert Levin[23], a renowned pianist and musicologist from the US, has researched extensively historical performance practices and Mozart's own improvisatory style. Through his studies, Levin has incorporated improvised cadenzas into his interpretations of Mozart's piano concertos, as well as extemporized fantasias and sonatas in his recitals. His mastery of improvisation, along with his insightful lectures available online, offer a compelling glimpse into how this once-common skill can deepen our understanding of classical music, enrich interpretation, and bring fresh vitality to extemporized performances.

These musicians, along with others exploring similar paths, show how improvisation can bring a fresh and interactive dimension to classical music concerts. In turn, this process feeds back into their interpretive language, enriching their approach to standard repertoire with a renewed sense of freedom and insight.[24]

Recognizing the pedagogical benefits of improvisation, some music institutions have incorporated it into their curricula. For example, the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London offers courses on improvisation, helping students develop not only their improvisational skills but also deeper understanding of repertoire and musical ideas through the active recreation of scores and ensemble extemporizations. In Spain, the work of Emilio Molina and the *Instituto de Educación Musical* (IEM) have been reintegrating improvisation methodologies in the pedagogy curricula of many Music Conservatories in the past few decades, and the

[23] Robert Levin's lecture on evidence of Mozart's improvisation practices through his letters and written scores: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkFdAigjmLA
[24] This idea underpins much of the research and reflection presented in this exegesis, especially in the later chapters.

presence of improvisation courses in the Real Conservatory of Madrid or the ESMUC of Barcelona, with the consequent rise of many outstanding performer-composers in the country, like Carles Marigó or Manuel Bonino, is a notable example of the success of including these strategies into more traditional classical music programmes.

Ultimately, I believe the renewed interest in improvisation in classical music can serve to enrich this art form, expand artistic possibilities, and create a more dynamic and engaging experience for both performers and audiences. By embracing improvisation, classical music is reclaiming its spontaneity, fostering innovation, and revitalizing its connection with its historical roots.

1.4 - Current Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the growing recognition of the benefits of improvisation in Western art music, there are still significant challenges to its integration into mainstream music education and performance practices. A major obstacle is the traditional focus on reproducing precomposed works, which often leaves little room for improvisation in formal training programs. The emphasis on technical mastery and adherence to the written score has led to a neglect of improvisatory skills in many music institutions.

Another challenge is the lack of standardized curriculum and pedagogical resources for teaching and learning improvisation. While some individual instructors and institutions have incorporated improvisation into their programs, there is a need for comprehensive and systematic approaches that can be widely implemented. Developing curricula that integrate improvisation from the early stages of music education can help foster creativity and musical expression in students.

Additionally, there is a need for further research and documentation on the specific methodologies and techniques of improvisation in Western art music. While historical sources provide valuable insights, modern improvisation practices have evolved, and new approaches are being developed. Research should explore different improvisation styles, contexts, and genres within the Western art music tradition to provide a comprehensive understanding of improvisation as a creative and expressive tool.

Furthermore, efforts could be made to promote improvisation as an essential component of musical performance and composition. This can be achieved through advocacy, professional development opportunities for musicians and educators, and the inclusion of improvisation in music competitions and examinations. By valuing and recognizing improvisation within the classical music community, it can regain its historical significance and become a vibrant part of the Western art music tradition once again.

In conclusion, historical evidence and recent research have shed light on the rich tradition of improvisation in Western art music. Despite its historical importance and proven benefits, improvisation has faced neglect and marginalization in formal music education and performance practices. However, there are encouraging signs of change, with some institutions and individuals recognizing the value of improvisation and incorporating it into their programs. To fully realize the potential of improvisation in Western art music, further research, curriculum development, and advocacy are needed to integrate improvisation into mainstream music education and performance practices. Research, development and advocacy have been at the core of this Doctoral study and will be the topic of its following Chapters.

1.5 - Literature Review.

I. Historical Background: Improvisation in Western Art Music

The revival of improvisation in classical music practice may appear to be a recent phenomenon, but research on its prevalence in Western Art Music throughout the centuries and its scientifically proven benefits has been the focus of renowned musicologists for many decades. However, such studies have remained relatively infrequent and often overlooked, circulating mainly among scholars already invested in the topic.

Over the past seventy-five years, a small number of scholars have highlighted the frequency with which historical documents describe musical embellishment, ornamentation, alteration, and even freer forms of improvisation in Western music. Ernst Ferand, considered one of the first leading authority in this field, emphasized the crucial role of improvisation in the development of Western art music from the Middle Ages to the mid-19th century. According to Ferand, "there is scarcely a single field in music that has remained unaffected by im-

provisation, scarcely a musical technique or form of composition that did not originate in improvisatory performance or was not essentially influenced by it. The whole history of the development of music is accompanied by manifestations of the drive to improvise"[25] (1961).

Written documentation supports Ferand's assertion about the significance of improvisation in every era of the Western classical tradition, except the present. Even well into the 19th century, improvisation remained an indispensable skill for most professional musicians. Recent evidence, including Dana Gooley or Hamilton's extensive works[26] and Eidelginger's book on Chopin[27], as well as the research of Robert Levin, Derek Bailey[28], and Goertzen[29], further support this claim.

Throughout the 19th century, numerous written guides to improvisatory performance were published. Notable treatises of that era include Czerny's *Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte* (1829), Kalkbrenner's *Traité d'harmonie du pianiste: principes rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre à préluder et à improviser* (1849), and Hummel's *Ausführliche theoretisch-praktische Anweisung zum Piano-Forte-Spiel* (1829). These works were not exceptions but representative of the era's extensive pedagogic training on improvisation, drawing from even earlier treatises such as Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach's "*Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments.*" Various forms of improvisation, including free improvisation, prelude, ornamented recapitulation, cadenza, and the practice of improvising upon pre-existing compositions, remained popular.

For example, Friedrich Wieck's surviving treatise, *Clavier und Gesang* (Piano and Song), was published by Whistling in Leipzig in 1853, and its two supplements were published by his children: *Pianoforte Studien von Friedrich Wieck* (Leipzig, 1875) by Marie Wieck and *Materialen zu Friedrich Wieck's Pianoforte Methodik* (Berlin: N. Simrock, 1875) by Alwin Wieck. All these treatises include chapters on preluding and improvisation. As a

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[25] Ferand, Ernst. (1961). *Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music: An Anthology with a Historical Introduction*. Cologne: Arno Volk Verlag.
[26] Hamilton, Kenneth. (2008). *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 4 about preluding through the centuries and improvisation as a pedagogical tool and chapter 7 about the wider style of Liszt's improvisations and written accounts of those.
[27] Eigeldinger, Jean-Jacques. 1986. *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by His Pupils*. Translated by Naomi Shohet, Krysia Osostowicz, and Roy Howat. Edited by Roy Howat. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[28] Bailey, Derek. "Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music." United Kingdom: British Library National Sound Archive, 1992. "On the Edge - Episode 1." United Kingdom: Channel 4 1992. A documentary encompassing aspects of improvisation in different arts and cultures, from WAM to India or Jazz.
[29] Goertzen, V. (1996). "By way of introduction: Preluding by 18th and 19th-century pianists." *J. Musicol.*

supplement to her teaching philosophy book, Clara Schumann's half-sister Marie Wieck published musical exercises to provide examples. In the preface to the English publication of *Pianoforte Studies* by G. Schirmer in 1901, she explains that these exercises are "taught and played in the manner intended by my father." "*Pianoforte Studies*" includes guidelines for preluding and two short pedagogical preludes.

> Before the performance of each piece of music, the pupil is advised to improvise a short prelude [*kleines Vorspiel (Praeludium)*] of a series of chords, or to play a modulation, that is, to modulate from one key into that of the composition about to be played. In order to do this quickly and with ease, it is necessary often to practice, and in every key, the chord here introduced.[30]

The decline of this art form has been documented by a few authors. Robin Moore[31] provides a detailed account of the cultural evolution that has led to the current status quo, Dana Gooley sheds an incredibly detailed light on the social and cultural phenomena that drew performers away from improvisatory practices in recital halls in the 19th century[32], and finally Leech-Wilkinson[33] explores the ethical assumptions underlying the rise of a Utopian tradition and the relationship between performance and composition. As Leech-Wilkinson states, "As ever with ethics, the underlying question is who is harmed? […] Is the listener harmed by hearing a different reading of a text?" (2016).

II. On the Benefits of Improvisation and Current Trends.

[30] Wieck, Pianoforte Studies, 41

[31] Moore, Robin. (1992) "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23, no. 1.
An incredibly detailed historical account on the way music was lived and perceived during the past centuries and the current change of focus in music pedagogy. Western art music of those years was existing in a unique, isolated, and living environment in much the same way that blues or flamenco music continues to exist today: "Art music of the 18th century was a ubiquitous element of court life, transmitted orally, most likely to a greater extent than *notationally*, from one generation of servant-performers to the next, and functionally integrated to an extent that is now difficult to appreciate". The paper further points that the Mozart of the time was possible also thanks to this upbringing.

[32] Gooley, Dana. (2018) *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth-Century Music*. Oxford.

[33] Leech-Wilkinson, Daniel. "Classical Music as Enforced Utopia." *Music & Letters* 97, no. 3 (2016): 425–454.
Why should performers not have a critical role to play in re-presenting a score, just as actors are permitted – required even – to find new meanings and new relevance in texts. Starting from the evidence of early recordings, showing that composers are misrepresented, this article unpicks some of the delusions that support classical music practice: what we nowadays consider "faithful to the text" is in striking contrast to what we can hear from recordings of contemporaries praised by the same composers of those works at the time - this article gives a detailed account and evidence on this great insight.

Despite the scientific community recognizing the positive effects of improvisation for several decades, it is still given little attention in classical music programs at higher education institutes. As a result, university students studying classical music receive minimal or no training in improvisation, making it difficult for them to integrate this practice into their future teachings and keep it alive. However, as mentioned earlier there are a few exceptions which do provide some formation in improvisation.

Various authors have conducted research demonstrating the numerous benefits of improvisation on the development of musical abilities. These benefits include enhanced precision in aural skills (Dos Santos & Del Ben, 2004)[34], increased creativity (Koutsoupidou & Hargreaves, 2009)[35], improved sight-reading accuracy, and higher quality interpretation (Azzara, 1992)[36]. Scholars have also explored different definitions of improvisation, with John Kratus' work (1996)[37] conceptualizing improvisation across seven different levels, ranging from exploratory "blabbering" in infants to the creation of one's own musical language, which includes the ability to "*audiate*" (predict a sound/gesture before it occurs) and incorporate it into form and style.

Dubé and Després (2012) [38] provide a hybrid definition of improvisation based on previous research, describing it as "the instrumental or vocal performance in which the musician generates musical material in real time, while being able to anticipate the sonic effect of their actions based on their experiences." Furthermore, researchers have begun documenting

[34] Dos Santos, A. M., & Del Ben, L. M. (2004). *Improvisation in music education: A pedagogical approach.* Research Studies in Music Education, 22(1), 59–69
[35] Koutsoupidou, Theano, & Hargreaves, David J**.** (2009). *An experimental study of the effects of improvisation on the development of children's creative thinking in music.* Psychology of Music, **37**(3), 251–278
[36] Azzara, Christopher David. (1992). *Audiation-Based Improvisation Techniques and Elementary Instrumental Students' Music Achievement, Music Listening, and Music Self-Esteem.* PhD Dissertation, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester.
[37] Kratus, John. (1996). A developmental approach to teaching music improvisation. *International Journal of Music Education*, 26(1), 27–38.
[38] Dubé, F. & Després, D. (2009). *Proposition d'un cadre conceptuel pour aider le professeur d'instrument à intégrer l'improvisation musicale à son acte pédagogique*. Revue des sciences de l'éducation, 35(2), 365–382. [Proposal of a conceptual framework to help the instrument teacher to integrate musical improvisation in his pedagogical act].

these benefits and incorporating practical elements as tools and advice for musicians. This research includes interview-based studies like those by Hill[39] and Kossen[40], as well as empirical research such as Després et al. [41] and Dolan's work (2013).

Dolan's study, *The Improvisatory Approach to Classical Music Performance: An Empirical Investigation into Its Characteristics and Impact*, seeks to address a knowledge gap by collecting data during a live professional concert performed by a chamber trio. Each of the five pieces was performed twice, once with, and once without, an improvisatory approach. The contrasting timing and dynamic features of the performances were analyzed, audience responses were measured through questionnaires, and EEG analyses were conducted on all three performers, as well as a small sample of audience members. The audience members rated the improvised performances as more improvisatory in character, more innovative in approach, more emotionally engaging, more musically convincing, and more risk-taking compared to the non-improvised (regular) performance.

III. Current Methodologies and Proposals on Improvisation

While there is a growing body of literature on improvisation, particularly in the research of Jean-Philippe Després, a Canadian scholar and musician dedicated to this field[42], practical tools for universities and musicians interested in embracing this trend in music education and reaching a wider audience are still limited. In his first paper on this topic, *Back to the future: towards the revival of extemporisation in classical music performance* (2005), Dolan explores fundamental elements related to spontaneity in improvisation, such as natural

[39] Hill, Juniper. (2017). *Incorporating improvisation into classical music performance.* In G. E. McPherson (Ed.), The Child as Musician: A Handbook of Musical Development (2nd ed., pp. 644–660). Oxford University Press.
Different interviews carried out to different affirmed musicians that incorporate improvisation in their practices and how and why it has helped them achieving a higher mastery of their craft, or enhanced creativity and interpretation, or helped tackle anxiety related issues tied to the standard pedagogic system.
[40] Kossen, Rebecca S. (2014). *An investigation of the benefits of improvisation for classical musicians* (Master's thesis, Edith Cowan University). Edith Cowan University Research Online.
[41] Després, J.-P., Burnard, P., and Stévance, S. (2017). Expert western classical music. improvisers' strategies. *J. Res. Music Educ.* A study on a set group of improvisers, recording their work and using reflective questions to explain strategies used by them to create their extemporary works.
[42] Després, J.-P., & Dubé, F. (2015). "Revue de littérature des écrits scientifiques portant sur l'improvisation musicale: identification des concepts clés et des recommandations pédagogiques liés à ce domaine" [Literature review of the scientific literature on musical improvisation: Identification of key concepts and pedagogical recommendations related to this field].

and learned schemes, emotional expression, real-time flow, and structural concepts. He partially bridges theory and practice by providing teaching and learning techniques for improvisation, as well as applications for repertoire-based improvisation.

Emilio Molina[43] (2015), in his publication of an earlier thesis on a methodology of improvisation in classical music, argues that improvisation can be nurtured through careful analysis and study of musical compositional elements. Molina's work, exemplified by the publications from his firm "*Enclave Creativa*", utilizes the analysis of musical scores as a means for musicians to develop a mastery of musical elements that go beyond the written page. In the preface of his work, Molina states that his methodology aims to "establish a new analytical system based on hierarchical levels and synthetic processes, drawing inspiration directly from Schenkerian analysis and Lerdahl's generative grammar. This system is applied to the score, yielding direct implications for the improviser and interpreter. As a result, a wide range of exercises and tools related to form, rhythm, harmony, and melody are created, offering musicians resources that can be tailored to their individual goals."

While Molina's extensive thesis primarily focused on the study of Chopin's Etudes Op.10 and Op. 25, his work has expanded to encompass many other musical works, thanks to the collaboration of a growing team of collaborators in Spain. Their published books on teaching a musical language aim to provide a comprehensive "toolkit" for improvisation. However, these works have yet to be translated into other languages, and their content can present challenges for readers who are not familiar with their courses or the language-world in which they are situated. This limits their accessibility and relevance to musicians who have not been part of their educational journey.

In Chapter 5, which will delve into providing a toolkit for improvisation using selected repertoire from Chopin and other composers, I draw inspiration from Molina's model and propose additional ideas and methods that have emerged from my experience with David Dolan and the refining processes of the Action Research I applied to these approaches and my personal study of them. By doing so, I aim to offer musicians a way of thinking and practicing improvisation that can be applied to most repertoire. The insights gained from my own

[43] Molina, Emilio. “Análisis, improvisación e interpretación. Aproximación a una pedagogía global de la música.” [Analysis, improvisation and interpretation. Approximation to a global pedagogy for music.] *Edition Enclave Creativa*

application of these methods to the study of specific pieces can serve as inspiration for musicians seeking to develop their improvisational skills and explore the creative possibilities within a wider range of musical works.

1.6 - Conclusion

While improvisation in classical music offers many benefits and has gained some attention, there is still a need for comprehensive methodologies and practical resources to support its integration into music education. Efforts such as Dolan's and Molina's provide incredible insights, but further development and broader availability are necessary to reach a wider audience of musicians interested in improvisation.

Recent exploration of improvisation in Western art music reveals an intriguing paradox. While composers throughout history have treated music as a second language, deeply internalized and personal, formal training in music institutions in the last century has often prioritized technical accuracy over spontaneous creative engagement. Though sensitive performers undoubtedly strive to express the depth of music, traditional pedagogy has tended to focus mostly on mastery of existing repertoire rather than cultivating improvisational fluency alongside it and as an integral part of a musician's upbringing.

As Nicholas Cook highlights in his book *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (2014), music in the past centuries was first an activity of the mind and of performance before becoming a written text. He critiques the dominance of a textualist approach, arguing that it has narrowed our understanding of music and restricted performance practices, often locking them into an overly rigid framework.

Chopin wrote, "We use sounds to make music just as we use words to make a language. One abstract sound doesn't make music, just as one word doesn't make a language."[44] I am particularly drawn to this quote because it reflects how some of the very composers whose works we study, experienced and understood music: as a living language. A more holistic approach, one that combines structural understanding with spontaneous creation, perhaps could help restore improvisation to its rightful place in classical training and performance, enriching in turn classical musicians' interpretations and their musical knowledge.

[44] Chopin in his preface to a never completed piano technique essay as quoted by Eigeldinger.

Chapter 2: Methodology. Action Research and its Application

Chapter 2 outlines the action research methodology adopted in this doctoral project, exploring the rationale, scope, and methods used in investigating the role of improvisation in my own study and performance of Western Arts music. It opens by defining action research and its relevance to artistic practice, before discussing the tools employed for my data collection (particularly written notes, video recordings, and reflective listening).

The chapter also contextualizes the broader pedagogical motivations driving this work, including the need to reframe traditional approaches to classical music education. A central theme is the pursuit of "better performance", understood not solely in terms of technical accuracy, but as a richer, more connected engagement with the musical material.

Through this methodological lens, the chapter sets the stage for the analysis of improvisational strategies and learning outcomes developed in the following chapters.

2.1 - Action Research: A Journey of Self-Transformation.

In recent years, my doctoral studies have been driven by a commitment to embodying change within my own practice. At the heart of this endeavour lies the adoption of *Action Research* as both a philosophical stance and a methodological approach to piano practice and study, in which I have included elements of improvisation and analyzed the benefits of those undertakings. This integration of improvisation into my practice has allowed for a nuanced exploration of its impact on various facets of musical learning, performance and teaching, serving as a catalyst for transformative insights and growth.

Action research, a concept pioneered by Kurt Lewin in 1944, is distinguished by its pursuit of transformative change through the interplay of action and research, underpinned by critical reflection. Rather than relying solely on reflective knowledge generated by external experts, action research engages practitioners in an active process of theorizing, data collection, and inquiry within their own practice settings. It challenges conventional social science

by fostering an empirical, problem-based investigation into practitioners' own experiences, with the aim of generating and sharing knowledge.[45]

Action research challenges conventional social science by transcending reflective knowledge generated by external experts who sample variables. Instead, it fosters an active process of moment-to-moment theorizing, data collection, and inquiry that occurs within the ongoing practice itself. Engaging in action research entails a problem-based investigation by practitioners into their own practice, rendering it an empirical process. As Lewin (1946) argued, "knowledge is always gained through action and for action", underscoring how action research integrates theorizing, data gathering, and practitioner inquiry within real-world practice.[46]

As music practitioners, we constantly rely on critical thinking to make decisions in everyday professional situations. Factors such as class size, student response, and practice goals influence the choices we make. Action-based research adds another layer of reflection, allowing us to systematically analyse these decisions, formulate hypotheses, and draw conclusions. This process also offers guidance for replicating successful outcomes in the future.

In the context of my work, this research involved comparative research on the implementation of improvisation in my practice as a pianist, its impact on my role as a piano teacher and performer (thus influencing my students and audiences), and its potential for encouraging critical thinking processes to redefine learning, teaching, and a different appreciation of Western art music. These levels of change encompass self-change, collective change within areas under my direct supervision or influence, and, ideally, broader social shifts.

2.2 - Outline of the Action Research Journey: Exploring Improvisation

Between the years 2020 and 2024, I embarked on an exploration of improvisation by incorporating various methodologies into my piano practice. The central question that guided this investigation was:

What strategies can classical pianists adopt to enhance their proficiency in extemporization? And how can this help the study of repertoire and interpretation in return?

[45] Lewin, K. (1946). *Action research and minority problems*. Journal of Social Issues, 2(4), 34–46.
[46] Idem

Throughout this period, I meticulously documented my progress through extensive notetaking and video recordings, with these aspects as my primary focus:

1. Exploring the available strategies for practicing improvisation.

2. Investigating the diverse benefits that may arise from the utilization of each method.

3. Synthetizing a progressive model of the study of extemporization

Given the inherently personal nature of some data, I grappled with the challenge of tracking *improvement* in the abstract concept of piano improvisation, where the examiner and the examinee are one and the same. Two main tools facilitated this tracking: real-time scrutiny of the ease with which I learned repertoire and improvised, and video recordings for external evaluation.

Improvisation was not solely evaluated based on its quality but also on its impact on the interpretation and execution of the repertoire studied. Notably, engaging in improvisation sessions led to noticeable improvements in my early recordings of specific passages, particularly in terms of phrasing, timing, and expressive depth. This suggests a deeper internalization of the music. For example, it was illuminating to see how my interpretation of the first theme of Chopin's *Ballade No. 1* or the opening of Rachmaninoff's *Prelude Op. 23 No. 4* evolved after improvising on their respective harmonic or rhythmic frameworks. The most effective improvisations drew on underlying structures - such as Chopin's harmonic progressions or the undulating left-hand patterns in Rachmaninoff - to reinforce core musical concepts, beyond just replicating the written notes.

Improvement was gauged across parameters such as flow, dynamic control, sound quality, accuracy, and mastery of larger structural elements. Pure improvisation also demanded flowing creatively without interruptions or doubts, guided by performer knowledge and intuition.

Although some of these strategies were applied in my teaching and appeared to yield positive results, a comprehensive evaluation of their impact on students would require a separate, more extensive investigation. For this reason, while Chapter 5 briefly references selected

student examples, this thesis primarily focuses on the use of these strategies in my own practice, learning processes, and performances.[47]

To comprehend the organizational framework of this Action Research, it is crucial to outline some fundamental concepts that hold together its structure. Firstly, as this research is grounded in the principles of individual and collective change, it's pertinent to briefly elucidate the nature of the changes pursued and the motivations behind them. Furthermore, given that much of the analysis centers on my personal practice, it's essential to delve into the concept of *audiation*, explaining its significance, how improvisation contributes to its enhancement, and the reciprocal benefits it offers to interpretation and improvisation. Additionally, the discussion extends to defining what constitutes "*improvement*" within the context of performing and improvising classical repertoire. These concepts are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

2.3 - Exploring the available strategies for practicing improvisation

Before applying various improvisational practices in my own work, my research began with collecting information on existing improvisation methods within the context of classical music education and performance. I initially documented several 18th- and 19th-century treatises, alongside contemporary approaches such as the Gordon method and the improvisation resources developed by the Instituto de Educación Musical.

To gain practical insight, I attended a summer school in Spain led by Emilio Molina and his team, later engaged in personal exchanges with his colleagues in Madrid, and studied the work of pianist and improviser Carles Marigó from ESMUC (Barcelona) exchanging with him illuminating conversations. I also completed an intensive course with David Dolan at the Guildhall School of Music in London, where I experienced both pedagogical and performance-based approaches to improvisation firsthand. Additionally, I attended a number of

[47] That said, I have observed a marked improvement in my pedagogical acuity over the course of this research. This seems closely linked to the development of a more refined ear – one that is more sensitive to interpretive nuance, harmonic progression, and gestural flow. As a result, I have found it increasingly natural to guide students not through prescriptive instruction, but by encouraging a deeper, critical engagement with what they are playing. Instead of advocating a single "correct" interpretation, I aim to help students hear and understand why certain renderings feel more coherent, expressive, or musically persuasive than others. This shift has also been reinforced by my use of speech as a teaching tool – a practice I witnessed during my fieldwork in London, where "talking the music" was used to great effect. Incorporating this technique into my own teaching has led to immediate and tangible improvements in student phrasing, connection, and expressive intent.

public performances in Spain and London that incorporated improvisation and observed pedagogical practices at institutions including the Guildhall School of Music, the Yehudi Menuhin School, the Salamanca *Improvisa* summer school, and the Palencia Conservatory. Across these settings, I was granted access to observe improvisation-led classes across a range of levels, including music theory and chamber music instruction.

Throughout this fieldwork, I collected extensive documentation in the form of written notes, video recordings, and audio material. I also reflected on these experiences through post-session analysis and written observations, focusing particularly on the pedagogical processes and student responses. One especially compelling example took place in a class of 14-year-old string players (violin, viola, cello), who, over the course of a single one-hour lesson, collectively created a musical structure from scratch. After hearing a melody sang by the tutor, the students identified it as being in D Dorian mode, harmonized it collaboratively, created a contrasting B section, developed a space for two-bar individual improvisations over a continuous harmonic accompaniment, and composed an ending. Intonation was not a concern, it seemed just second nature to them; and what stood out was their fluency in responding musically and interactively, evidence of an aural and embodied music education rooted in a "*spoken*" musical language rather than one based solely on repetition or reading.

Another notable experience took place at the Menuhin School with David Dolan, where I observed significant improvement in the interpretation of Bach's *Prelude from Cello Suite No. 1*. This came after an exercise in harmonic improvisation over a continuo-style bass line performed by another student, closely following the harmonic structure of the original piece. The improvisational process, while exploratory and playful, revealed a deep engagement with harmonic understanding and resulted in a noticeably more expressive and informed performance of the written work. Many more similar examples in solo and chamber music settings were noted during my days in both the Menuhin School and Guildhall.

Another powerful moment during the *Improvisa* Salamanca summer course, was observing a music theory class in which harmony was taught through collective practical engagement rather than abstract written exercises. Each student, playing their own instrument – ranging from flute to strings, piano and guitar – participated in the real-time exploration of harmonic progressions as guided by the tutor. Rather than receiving theoretical content in isolation, students developed harmonic understanding empirically, by hearing and feeling the function of chords and cadences within a musical context, collectively experiencing them as

an ensemble. This approach fostered a shared sense of discovery and embodiment of the material. It also caused me to reflect on my own experience of learning harmony in my Bachelor Studies at the Salerno Conservatory in my earlier upbringing, which had primarily relied on pen-and-paper exercises, such as harmonizing bass lines, with little connection to the sound or expressive weight of the harmonic movement itself. The contrast between these two approaches was striking, and it highlighted the value of experiential learning in internalizing musical syntax in a more intuitive, meaningful and lasting way.

2.4 - Documenting the Impact of Improvisation on My Own Practice

In addition to gathering observational and contextual data from institutions across Europe, I also undertook a parallel strand of inquiry: investigating the effect of improvisation on my own artistic development. Over the course of my doctoral studies, I prepared four distinct performance programmes, each designed to explore the integration of improvisation into classical performance practice.

My practice time at the piano utilized the cyclical framework of Action Research as its basic guideline: Plan Action (utilization of a certain improvisation strategies) → Implement (Act) → Observe & Collect Data (video and audio recordings) → Reflect on Results (fluency, accuracy, approachability of the interpretation or improvisation) → Refine Plan

(what can be changed or improved?) → Repeat Cycle (Iterate on a different strategy or passage). See diagram in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Action Research Diagram

These sessions were utilized and refined throughout the preparation of four different recital programmes performed in requirement for this DMA.

The first recital centred on Chopin's Four Ballades, performed within a traditional framework but informed by an emerging sensitivity to interpretive flexibility. This performance also served as an early experiment with the concept of preluding and interluding. Drawing inspiration from 19th-century performance practices, I introduced brief improvisations before the opening work and between each subsequent piece. The material for each interlude was derived from thematic or harmonic elements of the upcoming Ballade and, in some instances, also referenced the preceding one. In this way, each improvisation functioned not only as a transitional gesture but as a hybrid space, modulating from the tonal world of the previous piece to the new one, while allowing for a moment of creative reflection and continuity.

The second was a collaborative project with violinist Dr. Mark Menzies, in which we developed a series of improvised *fantasies* using Dvořák's *Four Romantic Pieces*, Bartók's *Romanian Dances* and NZ composer Helen Bowater *Atzinganos* as frameworks.

The third recital featured Chopin's complete *24 Preludes Op. 28*, followed by ten of my own improvised preludes, some drawing directly from Chopin's material, others freely developed.

The final recital presented Rachmaninoff's *Preludes Op. 23*, interwoven with my own improvisations, which I titled *Reflections*. As described in the programme notes, this format invited a musical dialogue between repertoire and spontaneous creation, asking both performer and audience: *what has this music taught us, and what story is left to tell?* Once again, the material was drawn from the previous piece and modulated to create a continuum amongst all the Preludes performed.

To document the developmental impact of these performance cycles, I relied on comparative listening and viewing of video and audio recordings from various stages of my practice. This self-reflective process revealed a consistent correlation: my strongest performances were those where my capacity for "audiation" (the internal hearing and understanding of musical structure and flow) had been most developed. The more effectively I could engage with the internal world of the music before and during performance, the more fluid, expressive, and coherent my interpretations became. Some of those practices, either free-flow improvisations or specific strategies are listed in Appendix B.

In recent performances of both contemporary and classical repertoire, I have noticed a significant shift. Where I was once constrained by the perceived exactness of the notation, I now engage with the score as a living structure: an interface for musical communication rather than a fixed set of instructions. My focus has expanded to include deeper awareness of harmonic weight, metric hierarchy, pulse, hypermeter, and the structural placement of notes (e.g. passing tones versus structural tones). Rather than relying on score-reading to inform the hands and ears, my *audiating* mind increasingly leads the process, enabling a more organic, embodied, and expressive response to the music.

While judgements of this kind inevitably remain subjective and difficult to quantify, I can personally attest to a marked transformation in my approach to music-making when comparing current interpretations of classical repertoire to those from earlier stages of my career.

It could be argued that this is simply the result of continued experience and maturation. However, at 41 years of age (and with about 15 years of study and performance at this level behind me), the shift I have experienced in the past five years has been considerably more pronounced than any comparable development in the preceding ten. I am no longer a young pianist in the stage of rapid technical or interpretive growth, which suggests that the change may stem less from time at the instrument and more from a specific shift in focus of my practice at the piano.

This self-perceived shift has also been reflected in external feedback. After a performance of the Rachmaninoff *Preludes Op. 2*3 alongside my own composition *Reflections* at a festival in London, several audience members and the organiser commented that the interpretations felt "fresher" and more emotionally immediate than conventional renditions. Over the past few years, similar remarks have become increasingly frequent, describing my playing as making the piano "sing", evoking a sense of musical "dialogue", or unfolding more like a spoken narrative than a fixed, rehearsed delivery. These observations, despite still within the subjective realm, align with my own experience of moving beyond a notation-bound mindset and embracing a more improvisation-informed form of expression.

As part of documenting this shift, I have included a link to a recent recording of Chopin's Ballade No. 4, made in October 2024, only a week after sustaining an injury to my right arm. Despite that circumstance, I can hear in it a greater fluidity in phrasing, a freer organisation of tension and release, and a less metrical approach to rhythm compared to my earlier interpretations. It is not meant as a declaration of arrival (if anything, I feel more than ever that the work of a musician never truly ends), but rather as a marker of one of the many small stepping stones in a lifelong process of questioning and discovery enhanced by the recent discoveries made through these studies. As the famous cellist Pablo Casals once said when asked why he still practised in old age despite his renown: "Because I think I am making progress." I suspect my life will be much the same, continually learning and being surprised by what unfolds.

Link here: https://youtu.be/HvOze15L-WY

2.5 - Conclusion: Methodological Reflections and Research Design

This chapter has outlined the practice-based, action-research methodology that underpins this investigation into improvisation and its effect on classical performance practice. As a performer-researcher, I have positioned myself at the centre of the inquiry, embracing the dual role of subject and observer. This reflexive stance is essential to action research, allowing for direct engagement with the learning process, and supporting a dynamic, iterative approach to artistic development.

The research evolved through a series of action-reflection cycles, each informed by different modes of investigation: historical study of improvisational practices; observation and analysis of contemporary pedagogical settings across Europe; implementation of strategies in my own artistic work; and comparative listening of my performances over time. These cycles allowed me to refine my understanding and practice of improvisation in a range of contexts, from traditional repertoire to fully improvised material.

Throughout this process, data was gathered from multiple sources, as summarized in Table 1:

Data Source	**Type**	**Purpose**
Historical treatises	Textual sources	Grounding in historical improvisation practices
Observations of classes	Field notes, video/audio recordings	Understanding pedagogical approaches in Spain and the UK
Performance recordings	Video/audio of recitals and rehearsals	Comparative listening and self-assessment
Reflective journaling	Written documentation after practice sessions	Tracking learning progression, identifying emerging patterns
Audience and peer feedback	Informal comments, reviews	Gauging interpretive impact and communicative effectiveness
Conversations with experts	Verbal exchanges with teachers and improvisers	Gathering insights into current improvisational pedagogy

Table 1: Data gathering in my Action Based Research

Analysis of these materials occurred through a process of thematic reflection and comparative performance review. Repeated listening to recordings across various learning stages revealed a consistent relationship between my development of audiation and the perceived freshness, depth, and flow of interpretation. Similarly, direct feedback from audiences

and colleagues, including my supervisor Katherine Austin, supported the observed improvements in communicative clarity and expressivity, particularly in performances where improvisation had played an integral role in the preparatory process.

I recognize that this methodology carries certain limitations. As a practice-led inquiry centred on one performer's experience, its findings are not generalisable to all classical musicians. However, the strength of this approach lies in its embeddedness: it reflects a lived process of discovery, situated in real-world performance contexts and rooted in direct action.

Ultimately, this methodology enables a holistic exploration of improvisation, not only as a pedagogical tool but as a lens through which to re-engage with notated repertoire, internalise musical meaning, and reimagine the classical performance process as a dialogic and evolving artform.

Chapter 3: Audiation and Improvisation

This chapter explores the role of improvisation in augmenting musical understanding. It further analyses the concept of *audiation,* the ability "to hear inwardly with meaning the sounds as [we] are making them on an instrument or voice"[48]. Audiation serves as a fundamental tool throughout the research process, facilitating deeper musical engagement and interpretation.

A key focus of the chapter is the symbiotic relationship between improvisation and the acquisition of musical knowledge. It elucidates how proficiency in improvisation can enhance one's ability to interpret written scores and foster fluency in musical expression.

Drawing parallels between speech and music, the chapter elucidates methodologies for practicing improvisation that leverage both innate cognitive patterns and learned structures. By utilizing these frameworks, musicians can refine their improvisational skills and expand their musical repertoire. While these practical methodologies are discussed in detail in Chapter 4, and applied examples follow in Chapter 5, this chapter sets the conceptual groundwork.

3.1 - The role of improvisation in music education

Classical musical learning in conservatories and universities has, over the last century, largely separated the role of the composer and the interpreter. Few masters kept the improvising tradition alive but are publicly known more for their masterful interpretations than their improvising abilities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that rich interpretative qualities were perhaps nurtured extensively by their improvisation abilities. Pianists as Vladimir Horowitz, Josef Hofmann, Wilhelm Backhaus, Ferruccio Busoni, Carl Friedberg, György Cziffra and Dino Lipatti were all adept improvisers, and we have accounts of their improvised introductions, transcriptions, and spontaneous performances in concert recordings and interviews.

[48] J.Kratus (1996) referencing Gordon (1989)

Similarly, when listening to a more recent masterclasses by Zimmermann[49] one can't fail to notice how his explanations sometimes refer to improvisation when proving musical intention, interpretation or direction of given passages. For instance, when demonstrating the introduction of Chopin's *Ballade No. 1*, he does not replicate Chopin's exact notes, but instead offers a close enough approximation of the original script stemmed from the harmonic framework underlying the passage. I have found that adopting a similar practical approach (improvising within the structural boundaries of a passage) can attune one's ear to its broader architecture rather than just the note-to-note sequence. This, in turn, supports a more spontaneous and insightful interpretation.

The separation between composer and interpreter gradually shifted music education from a focus on understanding musical language to an emphasis on accurate reproduction. This meant often prioritizing technique and the replication of interpretive choices, whether based on historically informed performance, fidelity to the score (*Werktreue*), personal preference, or structural analysis.

Several scholars have noted a decline in critical thinking skills among music graduates, as educational models increasingly favour prescriptive approaches. For example, Juniper Hill[50] documents how some students, upon completing their tertiary studies, realised they had been so thoroughly coached in decision-making that they lacked the tools to develop their own reflective and adaptive practices.

While this thesis does not call for an overhaul of the education system, it does argue for a recalibration: greater emphasis on creative autonomy, critical engagement, and interpretive agency. If the aim of music education is to cultivate independent musicians capable of nuanced, personal expression, then the development of critical listening and embodied understanding must be foregrounded.

Reading a musical score is often likened to reading a written text, each with its own syntax, grammar, phrasing, and meaning. In classical music education, the emphasis tends to

[49] Zimmermann demonstrating the improvisatory nature of the beginning of Chopin's Ballade n.1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvyUR6Mac8M. The full masterclass is available online with lots more similar examples where it is clear that Zimmermann's music retrieval is concept based rather than note based: harmony, patterns and technique are layered and interchangeable.
[50] Hill, Juniper. "Incorporating improvisation into classical music performance" (2017).

focus on technical fluency: teaching students to reproduce notation and stylistic conventions accurately. Yet this approach can leave them distanced from truly internalizing the music. As Nielsen[51] (1996) observes, classical training often positions students in "a peripheral position", discouraging critical questioning in favour of reproducing the teacher's approach or the notated score. On the other hand, Hill[52] (2020) highlights how practices such as improvisation and composition can help bridge the gap between technical proficiency and musical ownership, encouraging students to form a more embodied and intuitive relationship with the music they perform, bringing them into a more active, kinaesthetic relationship with the music and acknowledging the limitations of notation alone.

Performance anxiety may, in part, stem from this reproduction-oriented paradigm. When students are trained to execute predetermined interpretations, their creative agency is diminished, increasing the stakes of "getting it wrong." Integrating improvisation, composition, or alternative forms of expression can reframe performance as a form of dialogue, encouraging spontaneity and reducing fear.

Nicholas Cook[53] argues that musical scores are better understood as theatrical scripts rather than fixed literary texts, emphasizing their interpretive openness. This metaphor invites us to reconsider how we teach interpretation. This shift raises practical pedagogical questions: how do we guide young musicians in perceiving and shaping the weight and tension within a phrase, or in understanding the unequal value of rhythms shaped by harmony and direction? How do we cultivate an aural and expressive understanding of music as a network of interdependent phrases, rather than a purely vertical or synchronized structure?

Historical pedagogical traditions support this integrated approach. Research into 18th and 19th century conservatoire curricula reveal that harmony, counterpoint, and composition were foundational skills, not limited to composers but expected of all serious musicians (Botstein[54]; Gjerdingen[55]). Even Chopin required his students to study harmony with specialist

[51] "First, a level of taking over the music tradition, where the learner is placed in a peripheral position. Critical questions are not welcomed. The teacher's way of playing is dominating, and has to be internalised by the student". Cited in Jørgensen, Harald. 2000. *Student Learning in Higher Instrumental Education: who is Responsible?* British Journal of Music Education 17 (1): 67–77
[52] Hill, J. (2020). *Becoming Creative: Insights from Musicians in a Diverse World*. Oxford University Press.
[53] Cook, N. (2013). *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance*. Oxford University Press.
[54] Botstein, L. (1992). *Music and its public: Habits of listening and the crisis of musical modernism in Vienna, 1870–1914*)
[55] Gjerdingen, R. O. (2007). *Music in the Galant Style*. Oxford University Press.

teachers[56]. This comprehensive approach suggests that expressive interpretation was deeply tied to theoretical and structural understanding – a perspective that has diminished in many modern training models that prioritize technical mastery and repertoire delivery over musical literacy and improvisation.

For Chopin, virtuosity was always in service of musical expression. His approach, grounded in refined listening and physical ease, emphasized the quality of sound before technical display. As a largely self-taught musician, Chopin developed a highly original voice that continues to captivate pianists today[57].

As mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, in his unfinished *Piano Method*, Chopin wrote: "we use sounds to make music as we use words to make a language." A clearer analogy might be *we use sounds to make music as we use words to speak*. Tonal music, like language, has a syntax. The process of transforming notation into sound, mirrors how written text becomes speech: letters into syllables, syllables into words, words into phrases. Similarly, musical figures become gestures, motives, and phrases, suggesting that interpretation is an act of translation, not just reproduction.

This idea has become foundational in my own development as a pianist. Beyond technique and theory, musicianship requires body awareness: the capacity to translate internal hearing (audiation) into movement, tone, and expression. It is through cultivating this connection between ear and body that I have learned to convey musical ideas with more intention and fluidity than in the past.

As both performer and teacher, I view improvisation as a key tool in fostering this internal-external connection. When musical ideas are embodied, they can be retrieved as expressive gestures rather than mechanical commands. Improvisation thus becomes a training ground for audiation, enriching the performer's expressive range and interpretive freedom.

A practical example can be drawn from experiences with popular music transcriptions. Without exposure to the original performance, a student reading the score might follow

[56] Eigeldinger, Jean-Jacques (1984). *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by his Pupils*
[57] Eigeldinger, Jean-Jacques (1984). *Chopin: Pianist and Teacher as Seen by his Pupils.* Many quotes from Chopin himself and his pupils confirm these ideas: his distaste for finger exercises meant to "equalize" the sound of their different nature, his use of "supple" wrist technique, and so on. In the book there are also many mentions about his improvisations. Another interesting fact pointed out in the book is that Chopin's first piano teacher, Wojciech Żywny, was primarily a violinist, while his second teacher, Józef Elsner, was a composer and pedagogue and focused mainly on composition, counterpoint and musical theory, not piano technique.

the metre precisely yet miss the expressive inflections that define its musical character. Playing "all the right notes" fails to capture what makes the music meaningful – the phrasing, the pacing, the subtle deviations that formed it in its original inception/recording/performance.

I have experienced this firsthand in both my own playing and in teaching. When attempting to perform a melodic line from a pop song based solely on its notation (without having first internalised the original performance) the result often felt rigid or unnatural. Sung melodies, especially in popular music, typically rely on rhythmical freedom, rubato, and expressive nuance that conventional notation fails to fully capture. This disconnect is particularly evident when students, unfamiliar with the original, perform the notes and rhythms as written yet miss the expressive intent altogether. It is likely for this very reason that many contemporary composers have turned to increasingly complex notation systems, including nested tuplets or polyrhythms, in an effort to encode subtle inflections more precisely – sometimes not for performers, but to receive more accurate sonic feedback from computer-based composition tools.

Using another example, I experienced this disconnect when I tried to read back the notation of an improvisation that later became part of my third recital and one of my *Lockdown Preludes*. The transcription, included in Appendix C, felt strangely incomplete when played as written. It wasn't until later that I understood why: so many of the nuances and freedoms I had while improvising simply didn't survive being put onto paper. It revealed how much of my own "reading" of a score still lacked clarity, and how much of the expressive space I allow myself in improvisation cannot be fully captured by notation.

Much of Western art music repertoire, I believe, has undergone a similar fate. Leech-Wilkinson, D. (2016) shows for example how composers are actually misrepresented in modern times: what we nowadays consider "faithful to the text" is in striking contrast to what we can hear from recordings of contemporaries praised by the same composers of those works at the time. One example is Raoul Koczalski's 1932 recording of Chopin's *Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2*, which includes both notated and freely improvised elements[58]. Koczalski studied with Karol Mikuli, Chopin's favorite Polish student and composer, and his approach illustrates a much more improvisational insight than many modern recordings.

[58] Recording available on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvomzac5eqg

In the search for interpretive depth and expressive clarity, I realized through much trial and error, that more strategies are needed than mere repetition and technical proficiency to bring life to a music score. Some of those strategies led me to improvisation practices: by practicing the underlying elements of a piece – its harmonic structure, rhythmic patterns, and motivic relationships – we begin to internalize its expressive logic. The understanding of its elements opens cognitive and musical pathways that deepen our connection with the work.

I have often experienced this cyclical process (where improvisation informs interpretation, and vice versa) when transitioning from exploratory practice to working on specific repertoire. In Chapter 5, I will examine how I have applied and refined this approach across a range of works.

3.2 - Improvisation to practice *audiating*

Through improvisation, we ask our minds not to follow a written map of signs but to make an interiorized choice of sound, *audiating* what we want to hear produced by our fingers. This process encourages performers to practice their intentions, the direction of the music, and the alignment of sound, technique, ear, and body. Moreover, it teaches performers the intrinsic limitations of the written form for musical gestures and flow.

In retrospect, my life as a musician (both as a performer and teacher) has been a continuous cycle of action research. As a student, I was often instructed to play notes “more beautifully”, prompting me to explore what musical beauty truly meant and *how* it could be achieved.

My search for the 'how' led me to body awareness, initially through the Alexander Technique and later the Feldenkrais Method. The Alexander Technique focuses on unlearning habitual patterns of tension to improve postural alignment and ease of movement, often used by performers to reduce strain and enhance body coordination. The Feldenkrais Method, on the other hand, is a somatic education system that promotes self-awareness through gentle movement and attention, helping individuals discover more efficient ways of moving. These practices convinced me that physical awareness is a vital foundation for expressive musicianship – more than an innate gift, it is a skill that can be cultivated and refined: exploring gesture and body movement beyond the piano can provide insight into sound differentiation, expressive possibilities, and technical problem-solving.

While this thesis doesn't delve deeply into piano technique, it acknowledges the role of technique and colour exploration in developing a wide expressive palette for both interpretation and improvisation. Colour and tone, as well as technique, can be developed through improvisation practices as well as score reading.

Defining *what* makes music beautiful is difficult, as it's shaped by personal, cultural, and historical context. The *how* (producing different colours, articulations, and dynamics) is more tangible, and something we can practice. But knowing *when* and *why* to use those tools is less straightforward. It's what separates a technically fine performance from a deeply expressive one. When we listen to great interpreters, we hear how the same notes on a page can be shaped into something alive, how gestures and phrasing give the music meaning. Even contrasting interpretations can both feel authentic and beautiful. What tends to fall short is when a performance sounds mechanical or disconnected: when the transformation from notes into expression doesn't fully happen.

A strategy to avoiding mechanical music is sound awareness, which, like body awareness, can be trained. Improvisation has been instrumental in developing this awareness in myself and some of my students. As we improvise, we connect thought and felt sound to physical gesture: just as speech trains language fluency, improvisation trains musical fluency.

Chapter 4 deals with the ways we can blend learned and natural schemes to build our "extemporizer pedigree", while the next section will explain more about what natural and learned schemes are and how they have been referenced in scholarly literature and current treatises.

The search for beauty in music must consider both sound possibilities and the body awareness mastery connected to them (the 'how') and harmonic understanding (the 'what'). Developing a robust harmonic vocabulary is essential. Awakening the internal ear through audiation supports musicians in predicting and shaping meaningful sound choices.

What is more beautiful? How can one achieve beauty? Even if this answer will always remain subjective, this thesis aims to outline a pathway based on my ongoing action research in music, to find increasingly refined answers in the process. This process has helped me find a more creative approach to studying and assimilating classical music and in return has given me a more nuanced and fluid experience in interpreting notated scores. Ultimately,

it wants to inspire performers toward experimenting more, even creating their own musical language and style, as did the great masters of the past.

Drawing on Dolan's research, Emilio Molina's methodology, and my own experience, I propose a series of strategies for teaching and practicing improvisation. While I will expand on these two different schools of thought in the next chapter and apply a synthesized method to real repertoire in Chapter 5, I would like to conclude this chapter by highlighting the importance of understanding the basic parameters used in improvisation and the logic behind them. Drawing parallels between speech and music can enhance the learning process, providing a solid foundation for the methodologies I discuss and propose.

The Weight of Notes and Acoustic Phenomena

The way our brains fill in gaps within the auditory experience is an acoustic phenomenon that cannot be fully captured through language alone. It is through lived musical experience that we come to perceive the shifting weight of a leading note resolving to the tonic, or the subtle descent of a plagal cadence returning "home" to the tonal centre, or the negation of either of those, and so on. The sense of weight in a note or harmony is never fixed; rather, it is shaped by our expectations and perceptual context. As musicians, we harness these expectations (either by fulfilling them or by artfully disrupting them) to construct meaningful and expressive musical dialogues.

This understanding resonates strongly with the insights I gained through improvisation seminars, particularly when contrasted with my earlier, more traditional training in the Italian Conservatoire system.

Learning to 'Speak' Music

Research confirms a close relationship between music and speech. In many languages, including those in the Western tradition, natural schemes (such as rising tones to convey excitement or descending contours to express sadness) appear in both spoken and musical expression. Tone shapes meaning: changing tone in a spoken phrase transforms its emotional impact, just as in music. While this analogy may not universally apply across all linguistic traditions (such as tonal languages like Mandarin or Vietnamese, where pitch contours serve grammatical and lexical functions), it remains highly relevant within the cultural and expressive context of Western art music, which is the focus of this study. The

emotional shaping of melody in this repertoire can often be traced back to the phrasing and intonation patterns of the languages from which it emerged, such as Italian, French, or German.

Cohen and Inbar[59] (2002) differentiate between natural and learned schemes. The former governs tone and delivery (the 'how'), while the latter shapes content (the 'what'). In both speech and music, tone conveys emotional nuance and structure. Students who understand this parallel often shift from a note-by-note approach to a flow-based, horizontal understanding of musical progression - something I like addressing as vertical or horizontal piano playing, and that researchers have referred to as flow.

Langer (1953) emphasizes that musical duration mirrors lived time: expectation turning into now, then memory. Vertical analysis alone cannot foster meaningful music-making. Real engagement demands immersion in the flow of musical time.

> "Musical duration is an image of what might be termed lived or experienced time the passage of life that we feel as expectations become now and now turns into unalterable fact."[60]

While vertical, analytical approaches (such as recognising chords and judging intervals) can be valuable tools, they may fall short when disconnected from the temporal and expressive flow of music-making. For a deeper experience of the musical journey, these tools should be integrated with active listening and a sense of the music's movement through time. Listening in that way, and even joining in physically or through improvisation, helps build a more direct and meaningful relationship with the music than analysis alone ever could.

Improvisation as a Tool for Musical Understanding

Molina emphasizes that students often learn to read music without truly learning to "speak" it[61]. This approach limits their ability to internalize and express musical ideas naturally and intuitively. By providing musicians with the tools to internalize musical gestures be-

[59] Cohen, D. and Inbar, E. (2002) 'Music imagery as related to schemata of emotional expression in music and on the prosodic level of speech', in R. Godoy and H. Jorgensen (eds), Music Imagery, , Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger as cited by David Dolan.
[60] Langer, S.K. (1953) *Feeling and Form – A Theory of Art* as cited by David Dolan
[61] Molina, E. (2015) *Análisis, improvisación e interpretación. Aproximación a una pedagogía global de la música*. [Analysis, improvisation and interpretation. Approximation to a global pedagogy for music]. Enclave Creativa

yond the confines of the score, they can deconstruct any piece of music to its fundamental elements and develop a profound understanding of its musical language. This internalization process involves not just recognizing notes and rhythms but feeling and expressing the music as an extension of oneself.

As previously discussed, there are two complementary pathways to acquiring musical fluency. The first involves learning music as a “mother tongue” through immersive, experiential engagement: trial, error, imitation, and spontaneous play. This organic approach mirrors the way children acquire language, fostering an intuitive and embodied connection to musical sound. It encourages musicians to develop expressive freedom and responsiveness, grounded in a deep internalisation of musical gestures and patterns.

The second pathway centres on the development of learned schemes: structured knowledge acquired through the systematic study and practice of musical elements such as harmony, form, rhythm, and stylistic conventions. This more analytical approach provides the essential framework and vocabulary that allow musicians to articulate, refine, and develop their creative ideas with precision. It includes understanding harmony, form, rhythm, and stylistic conventions, which serve as the building blocks for musical expression.

These two aspects of learning – experiential immersion and systematic study – are not mutually exclusive; rather, they complement and reinforce each other. Experiential learning enriches the musician's intuitive grasp of music, making theoretical knowledge more meaningful and applicable. Conversely, a solid theoretical foundation enhances the musician's ability to experiment and innovate during spontaneous musical creation. Together, they create a holistic approach to musical education, allowing musicians to fully internalize and "speak" the language of music with fluency and confidence.

Improvisation plays a crucial role in bridging these two learning modes by cultivating the state of flow, where musical knowledge and intuition interact in real time. Flow is characterised by the seamless access and application of internalised material, allowing musicians to hear and *audiate* as they perform. This state corresponds to levels 5 to 7 in John Kratus’ improvisation development model and is similarly described as the “upper state” (Pressing, 1998) or “state of flow” (Kenny & Gellrich, 2002).

Cognitive models of extemporization in the latest models typically describe two key components: the *knowledge base* (the store of knowledge the extemporizer draws on for their

performance, built through study, practice, analysis) and the *referent*, which provides a point of departure or a set of stylistic, structural, or harmonic constraints. These *referents* can take many forms, such as a jazz cadence, a Baroque-style texture, a free-form noise piece, or a minimalist motif. Their nature determines the shape and scope of the improvisation, while the depth of the performer's knowledge reservoir determines their capacity to respond creatively.

In this framework, *flow* emerges from the intuitive and continuous retrieval of relevant musical knowledge: an interaction between spontaneous expression and accumulated experience. It is through this interplay that improvisation becomes a powerful tool for both musical learning and performance.

3.3 - Natural and Learned Schemes

Natural schemes are crucial in bridging the gaps of meaning in both music and speech. A phrase such as "I saw you yesterday on the beach" could be interpreted as a question, a surprise, a worry, or a reproach, simply by changing the tone of voice. In music, we can similarly bridge the gap between spontaneous, expressive gestures and the abstract notated form.

Learned musical schemes are specific to culture and style while natural or universal schemes are common to all human beings - or even cross species in the natural world. Learned schemes are learned consciously (practice) and unconsciously (passive exposure). The process of internalising these learned schemes – transitioning from a set of abstract rules into an intuitive musical vocabulary, much like how language becomes fluent in a native speaker – has been a major focus of interest over the past few years.

Like musical extemporisation, speech contains two main levels: the 'what' (the actual message expressed) and the 'how' (the way it is expressed). We may plan a topic or story but express it in a spontaneous and fluid manner. The emotion and nuance are shaped by tone – something equally essential in music,

Many scholars, as outlined by Dolan's research have outlined those tones and catalogued them in different emotion cues (Juslin and Persson's table of "Cue utilisation in communication of emotions[62]" which indicates findings that correspond with those of Fonagy, Imberty, Cohen, Scherer as indicated by Dolan).

The study of connections between speech and music has fascinated scholars since Aristotle. There is a universal link between tone and emotional expression; for example, the soft cooing of a lullaby across languages or the gentle sounds animals use with their young contrasts with loud, sharper sounds of threat or anger. This reflects a fundamental interdependence between tone and expression across both domains.

Heinrich Schenker's work, though focused on composition, emphasized how music grows outward from a basic plan, which is then elaborated with details. Starting from this underlying long-term structure and gradually filling in the specifics is a productive approach to both improvisation and interpretation.

In teaching, I often illustrate this concept with an exaggerated example: cadencing each syllable of a spoken phrase with equal emphasis, thereby stripping it of meaning due to its lack of tonal direction. This analogy helps students move beyond "note-by-note" playing toward a more connected and expressive flow. It highlights how both musical and verbal phrasing rely on similar underlying delivery schemes – fittingly, both domains use the word "phrase" to describe meaningful segments of expression.

3.4 – Conclusions. Improvisation as a Learning Tool

Dolan and other scholars advocate for treating improvisation not as a separate intellectual exercise, but as a musical "mother tongue" – something learned through direct, embodied experience rather than abstract reasoning. In environments such as jazz workshops or Dolan's improvisation seminars, musicians learn primarily through doing: sound precedes theory, and expression precedes explanation.

[62] Juslin, P. N., & Persson, R. S. (2002). Emotional expression in music performance: Between the performer's intention and the listener's experience. *Psychology of Music*

In the absence of such immersive mentorship, classical musicians must cultivate similar conditions in their own practice. Creating a judgment-free space, whether in teaching studios or personal routines, allows improvisational experiences to emerge organically. Recording devices become valuable tools in this context, providing a way to capture, replay, and reflect on spontaneous musical gestures. These recordings can then serve as the basis for self-analysis and refinement, helping to develop a personalised vocabulary of musical ideas.

The central aim of this approach is to internalize musical gestures so that they emerge naturally, guided by an active and responsive inner ear. From simple motifs to more elaborate forms, the musician becomes fluent in connecting intention to sound. This process strengthens the relationship between musical meaning and execution, enriching both improvisation and interpretation.

In my teaching and performing experience, I have often observed that a technically well-executed gesture may lack connection to the intended sound. This disconnection results in performances that prioritise mechanical execution over meaningful expression. Improvisation offers a remedy: by requiring the performer to imagine, initiate, and shape sound in real time, it strengthens the ear-body connection. As musicians learn to "think in sound", their playing becomes more intentional and expressive, linking internal hearing with outward performance.

The key distinction, then, is between performing music as a series of externally driven instructions and generating it from within. This internal generation, made possible through improvisation, composition or re-creation, enables musicians to connect more deeply with the written score and respond more creatively to it in performance.

By incorporating improvisation into the learning process, musicians can internalize musical ideas more deeply and deliver them spontaneously, maintaining a live connection between the internal ear and the sound being produced. This approach fosters greater expressive control and musical intention, from simple motifs to complex pieces.

To clarify how an improvisation-inclusive approach differs from traditional learning methods, the following comparison outlines key distinctions:

A Simple Comparison: Traditional Learning vs Improvisation-Inclusive Learning

Aspect	Traditional Learning System	Improvisation-Inclusive System
Primary Focus	Reproduction of written music	Internalisation and real-time creation
Learning Method	Reading and repeating scores	Engaging with and transforming musical ideas
Skill Development	Technical execution and fidelity to the score	Musical fluency, expressiveness, and creativity
Connection to Sound	Eye-hand coordination; sometimes detached from aural result	Ear-body connection; sound drives gesture
Role of Interpretation	Often received or instructed	Developed through personal experimentation
Outcome	Accurate, sometimes rigid performances	Spontaneous, expressive, and adaptive performances

Table 2: Traditional Learning vs. Improvisation-Inclusive

This comparison highlights how improvisation supports a more holistic musicianship, one in which interpretation becomes an extension of embodied knowledge rather than a layer applied over technical execution.

Chapter 4: Approaches to Improvisation

In this chapter, I will discuss three complementary approaches that have informed my understanding of what is required to gain proficiency in extemporisation at the piano. Each approach has contributed to a broader framework for teaching and learning improvisation in classical music.

The first approach focuses on historical and contemporary documents and treatises that discuss improvisational practice. These sources provide insights into the pedagogical and artistic attitudes towards improvisation across different periods and regions, and offer concrete suggestions for its application in both learning and performance contexts.

The second approach explores methods grounded in natural musical schemes – those intuitive and expressive gestures that emerge organically from our cognitive and emotional understanding of sound. In this section, I present a number of activities and pedagogical strategies I have personally explored with David Dolan, including sing-and-play exercises, bass line harmonisation, bass reduction of repertoire scores, free-flow improvisations, call-and-response improvisational duos, and the use of modal or rhythmic improvisation over static or shifting drones. These methods cultivate musical fluency in real time and mirror the way spoken language is learned and practised.

The third approach is based on the development of learned musical schemes. Here, I examine the significant work of Emilio Molina and the Instituto de Educación Musical (IEM) in Spain. Through a comprehensive restructuring of the national music education curriculum, the IEM has introduced systematic improvisation training across conservatories and music schools, leading to measurable improvements in musical engagement and literacy. This methodology supports the structured development of harmonic, rhythmic, and formal understanding as a foundation for expressive spontaneity.

Together, these three approaches form a multifaceted framework for teaching and practising improvisation – one that bridges experiential intuition and structured knowledge.

4.1 - Documents

The documentation of improvisational practices in the nineteenth century, clearly outlined in several historical and scholarly studies (as discussed in Chapter 1), offers an essential foundation. While pedagogical treatises from figures such as Grétry, Czerny, and Kalkbrenner are invaluable, they remain limited as historical sources. These writings reveal some rules and principles but often omit detailed guidance on spontaneous elaboration: techniques likely transmitted through aural traditions, direct modelling, and imitation. This is not unlike the way today's jazz practitioners develop fluency through aural transmission, jam sessions, and peer interaction.

Accounts on Liszt or Chopin's use of improvisation in their practice and performance, or reports on Georg Joseph Vogler's teaching sessions, suggest that extemporisation served not only as a compositional tool but also as a public display of virtuosity, especially in aristocratic salons. Musicians like Hummel, Moscheles, and Mendelssohn continued this tradition, cultivating improvisation in rich musical environments where pianists often challenged one another, fostering creativity and inspiring innovation.

Various documents and notes left by these musicians, hint at the methods they used or encouraged, many of which align with the current pedagogical models I explore later in this chapter (notably Dolan's natural-scheme-based methodology and Emilio Molina's systematic curriculum with IEM in Spain). These historical practices include:

- Harmonization of scales.
- Improvisation on a limited set of pitches (e.g., three-note improvisation)
- Variations on a given theme.
- Fantasy in different forms and styles over a given thematic cell or melodic idea.
- Improvisation duels or call-and-response exchanges between teacher and student
- Score study and reduction for gesture assimilation (from études and repertoire)
- Memorization and flexible use of idiomatic musical topoi (e.g., cadential formulas, figuration)

- Transposition exercises (Anecdotal accounts suggest that, at age eleven, Liszt performed a Prelude and Fugue from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* for Beethoven, who then allegedly asked him to transpose it into another key – a task Liszt is said to have completed with ease[63])

- Practice of modulations in various contexts

- Free improvisation for idea generation or compositional sketches.

- Preluding, interluding, and transitional improvisation

- Hymn accompaniment, particularly within organ traditions.

- Improvisation over ostinato basses (e.g., chaconne, passacaglia)

- Improvisation as accompaniment for spoken word or poetry readings

- Ornamentation and spontaneous variation of melodic lines (especially in earlier repertoire)

These techniques were fundamental to the training of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century performers. They suggest various avenues for structuring an improvisation-based learning process at the piano today.

It is important to remember that such practices were experienced over a solid grounding in composition, counterpoint, and music theory. Without this foundational knowledge, improvisation could become directionless or superficial. Theoretical knowledge offered a toolkit of gestures and structures; improvisation, in turn, offered a space to creatively recombine and extend them – what one might describe as a process of "abandoning oneself to the ardour of imagination" and setting out "in search of the unknown".[64]

One crucial historical insight is that improvisation was not a rare or elite practice, it was embedded in the everyday musical life of the time. It occurred extensively in private

[63] Walker, Alan. (1983) *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years, 1811–1847.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
[64] Léon Kreutzer, "Les Compositeurs contemporains: M. Meyerbeer," Revue contemporaine 2, tome 8 (July–August 1853), 636–37. Emphasis added. This essay was printed in slightly rewritten form in Arthur Pougin, Meyerbeer: Notes biographiques (Paris: J. Tresse, 1864), 13–14. It was excerpted in Eugène de Mirecourt, Meyerbeer (Paris; J.-P. Roret, 1854), 22.

practice rooms, in conservatory settings between teachers and students, and often during public recitals to entertain or impress patrons, at literary salons with musical accompaniment to readings, and in collaborative peer settings.

4.2 - Natural schemes. Intuition and exploration. Knowledge through experience with David Dolan.

David Dolan's approach to improvisation (developed and taught at institutions such as the Yehudi Menuhin School and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London) centres on learning through practical engagement and attentive listening.. This approach mirrors the traditions of many nineteenth-century performance schools, where experiential learning was central to musical development.

a. Harmonisation of a Scale: From Sing-and-Play to Performance

Dolan's approach begins with the melodic resolution of major and minor scales, echoing the *Partimento* traditions of the seventeenth century. However, unlike Partimento, which often prioritised rule-based exercises, his method follows a natural scheme approach in which rules emerge *after* experience, rather than being imposed beforehand. Much like language acquisition, where a child intuitively senses when a sentence "sounds wrong", the ear learns to detect undesirable intervals (such as parallel fifths and octaves) not by theoretical labelling but by their sonic dissonance. In this way, musical rules become organically integrated through experiential learning.

The first step in Dolan's method is singing. This re-engages the inner ear of the performer, helping avoid the common pitfall (observed in both my own practice and teaching) of letting the fingers lead before the ear listens. This exercise becomes especially valuable when free exploration reveals unexpected outcomes. When detached from the punitive label of "mistake", such surprises often serve as starting points for modulation or expressive development. Dolan frequently demonstrates in class how an unintended note can be transformed into a meaningful pivot or gesture.

As the harmonisation of scales through both singing and playing becomes internalised in different keys, the bass line gains autonomy, expanding into the realm of simple Minuets or Preludes.

This exploratory work is supported by aural modelling and imitation in class and needs to be nurtured alongside growing harmonic understanding. This contrasts with the IEM school, where music theory is studied in a linear, practical format from the outset. As discussed in the previous chapter, one can arrive at scale harmonisation either through theoretical instruction or intuitive experimentation. Dolan firmly advocates the latter. Although this route may feel slower – especially for students with little improvisational background or without access to a knowledgeable mentor with whom to test and refine ideas – it offers a fresh and effective way to develop audiation skills. With ongoing sing-and-play practice, the student gradually narrows the gap between musical intent and execution, anticipating harmonic direction with increasing precision.

As a general principle, harmonisation begins with the basic harmonic functions (tonic, subdominant, and dominant) interchanged across scale degrees. This builds familiarity with common inversions and resolutions from an empirical standpoint.

In this chapter, I share a few transcriptions from improvisatory sing-and-play sessions undertaken with Dolan in 2022. It is worth noting a limitation inherent in transcribing improvisations: once an improvised passage is written down, it inevitably loses some of the immediacy and spontaneity that characterised the original performance. These examples are not polished compositions but created in the moment, one hand playing the bass line on the piano while the voice is extemporarily singing a melody. Their value lies not in the written result but in the *process* itself: alternating between singing and playing to strengthen the connection between inner hearing and external sound production. These examples are shared not as compositional models, but as a document of a lived, embodied experience of musical exploration.

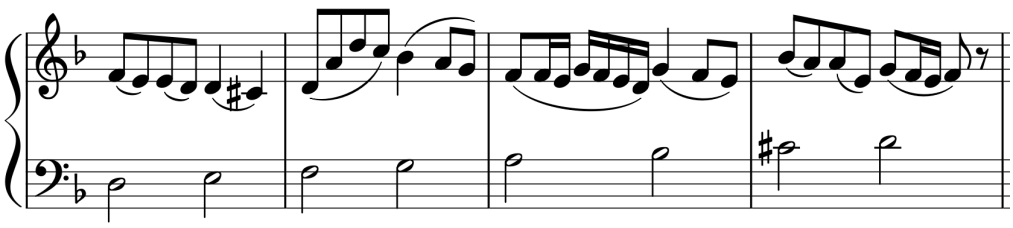

Figure 2: Voice harmonization of a D minor scale

Figure 2 presents a voice harmonisation of a D minor ascending scale introduced by Dolan during our first class. Notice the expressive use of appoggiaturas for dramatic effect, the arpeggio in bar 2 to access a higher register, and the passing notes that enhance the sense

of motion. Although the number of notes might seem intimidating at first glance (to someone not familiar with composition or improvisation), a simplified version reveals a foundational harmonic structure – essentially a standard bass harmonisation embellished in various expressive ways.

Figure 3 strips the passage of its decorative tones, revealing the harmonic skeleton that can be adapted and re-voiced according to the performer's taste and understanding. This reductive process is loosely inspired by Schenkerian analysis, and a similar method will be applied to more complex repertoire in the following chapter.

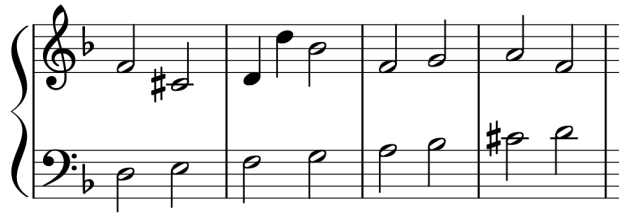

Figure 4: Simplified structure of Figure 1

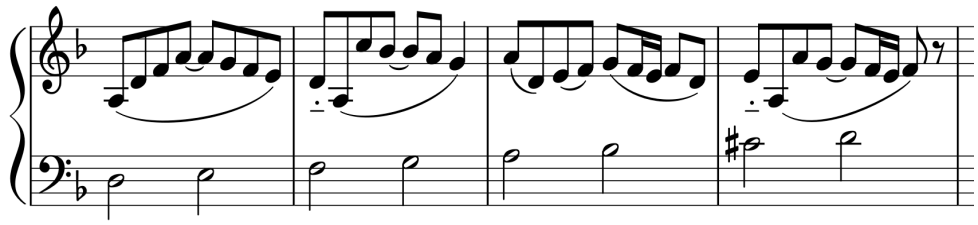

Figure 3: My own harmonization of the D minor scale

Figure 4 illustrates my own sing-and-play response to Dolan's example. My improvisation drew intuitively on my harmonic knowledge, prior experience, and the use of small motivic ideas. To avoid feeling overwhelmed by the infinite note combinations that can arise when harmonising a simple scale, Dolan recommends a step-by-step approach in which the complexity of the task increases gradually as familiarity grows.

A key principle in this process is maintaining motion in the singing voice. This encourages the student to follow the horizontal flow of the phrase, rather than focusing solely on vertical harmonic alignment or rhythmic placement. One of the common pitfalls in traditional chordal harmonisations is a mechanical approach that lacks a sense of musical direction. Even in the reduced **Figure 3**, the phrasing must follow its inherent sense of tension and release, departing from and returning to the tonic, transitioning smoothly from one harmony to another. For example, note the leading tone between bars 1 and 2 in the melody, the bass

note in bar 4, the octave leap resolving to the sixth scale degree, and how bars 3 and 4 form a cohesive unit.

When beginning to extemporise melodic lines over a bass, students are first encouraged to link just two bass notes. Only once that feels natural should they progress to connecting four-note sequences.

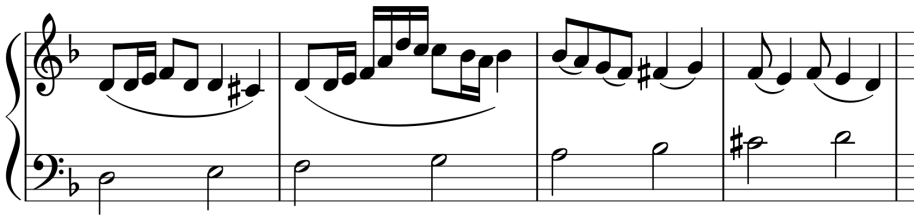

Figure 5: D minor harmonization with two notes sequencing

Figures 6 and 7 continue the D minor exploration. While in **Figure 5** each bar stands as a self-contained unit, **Figure 6 and 7** extends the phrasing into two-bar gestures, introducing a more lyrical flow.

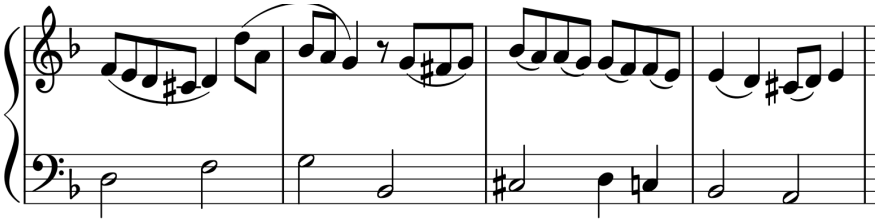

Figure 7: Freer bass and two bar gestures

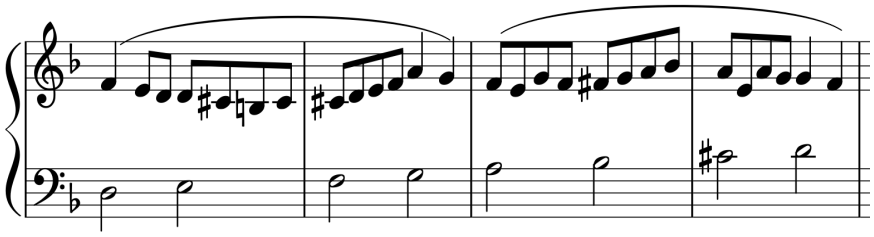

Figure 6: my own extemporization attempting a 2 bars gestured melodic line

Eventually, the rigidity of bar-by-bar phrasing can be relaxed. The bass line can break away from the strict scalic framework, using inversions to expand intervallic possibilities. Trial and error become valuable tools in refining the ear's attentiveness and musical intention. **Figures 7 and 8** are two of my many attempts at extending musical gestures over multiple bars and freeing the bass line.

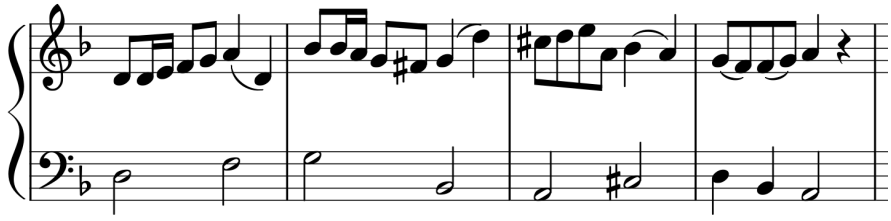

Figure 8: another example freeing up the bass from the scale framework

The final stage of this introductory pathway – prior to approaching three-voice textures, fugues, or more contrapuntal extemporizations – treats the bass as an independent melodic line. In this two-voice invention-like practice, the student alternates between moving one voice while sustaining the other. This cultivates flexibility and responsiveness in both melodic and harmonic thinking. See **Figure 9** below.

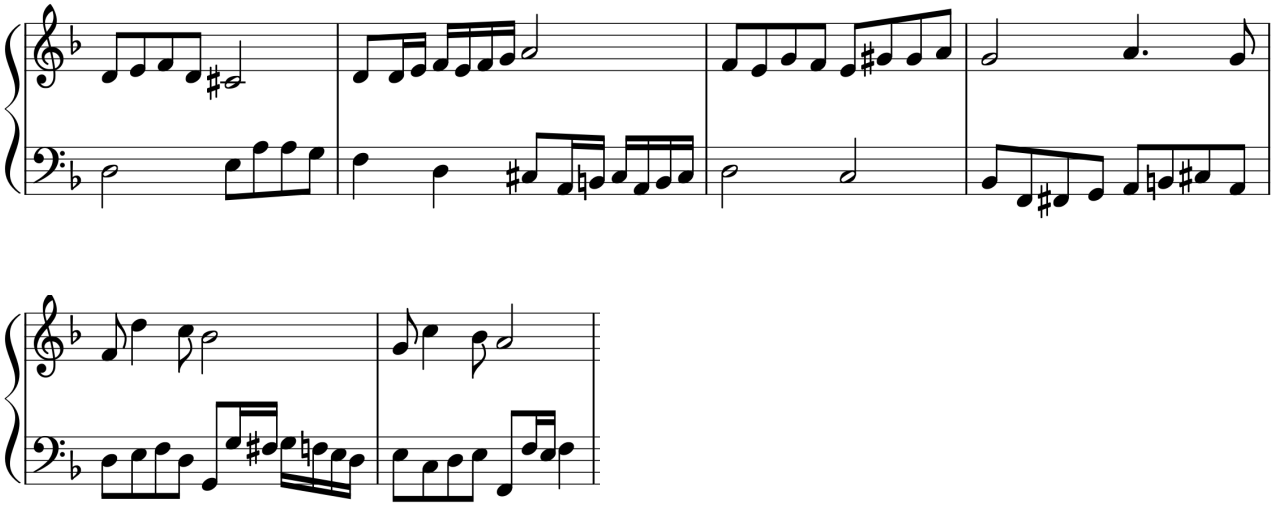

Figure 9: a more complex 2 voices extemporization, where the two voices act out a sort of call-and-response activity over a freer bass line

Such exercises stretch the student's musical awareness from an intuitive base, promoting the kind of interplay between knowledge and intuition that lies at the heart of improvisation. A harmonisation discovered intuitively can later be transposed to other keys to understand its structure and feel, while an accidental but effective solutions can become a subject for analysis. This cyclical process – trial, reflection, and refinement – requires active listening and attention to the sounds being created. It also prevents sing-and-play exercises from becoming either aimless or mechanical. Moments found by chance or intuition can be revisited and analysed to uncover *why* they worked (or didn't) within a particular harmonic or formal context.

One particularly revealing outcome of this work, in my experience, has been a growing sensitivity to what is happening beneath my fingers. After only a few classes with Dolan, I began recognising when I had used parallel fifths or octaves – not by visual identification, but by ear. Something in the counterpoint would register as harmonically unbalanced or stylistically incongruent. This exemplifies how theoretical rules can emerge naturally through embodied practice, rather than being imposed as abstract restrictions.

While the examples discussed so far use mostly diatonic harmonies and occasional chromatic passing tones, more advanced harmonies (such as secondary dominants, diminished chords, Neapolitan sixths, augmented sixths, and modulations) require a more structured approach to integrating knowledge and intuition. This is where the Spanish IEM school becomes especially valuable, offering tools for navigating unfamiliar harmonic territory and expanding the internal palette of musical gestures.

For students who find full melodic improvisation daunting, the task can be broken down further. Sing-and-play can be applied to smaller musical elements. Here, learned schemes can meaningfully support the intuitive method, offering targeted knowledge that broadens one's expressive options. For example, a melody can begin with long note values, as in Figure 2, and be gradually embellished with passing notes and arpeggios. Similarly, bass work can focus on short segments, such as cadences or three-note figures, before expanding. Moving between voice and instrument helps solidify understanding, especially when exploring more advanced harmonic concepts.

The use of focused harmony and theory exercises in this way is a key feature of the IEM method, which will be explored in section 4.3.

b. Preludes and minuets. From harmonized scales to phrases and form

The example that follows in **Figure 10** demonstrates one of many ways to transition from harmonising scales to constructing fuller, more melodic textures at the piano. Here, both hands are engaged, and the passage begins to resemble early forms of structured improvisation.

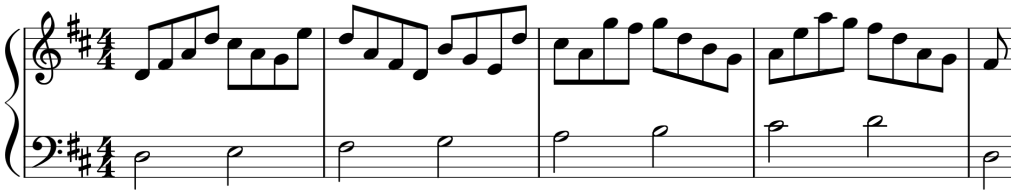

Figure 10: Preluding a scale

This type of work lays the foundation for preluding – often the next developmental step in Baroque-style extemporisation, alongside the improvisation of minuets. In **Figure 11**, which harmonises a descending scale, the harmonic framework is filled in with diatonic and chromatic passing tones (circled in blue in the first line), reflecting how ornamental material can enhance structural chords

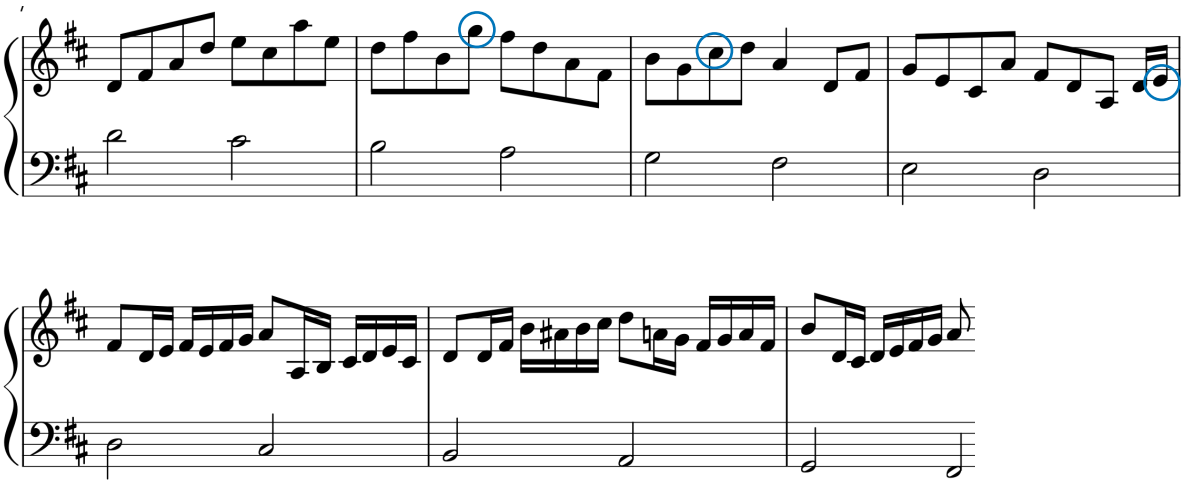

Figure 11: a broken chord Preluding and a variation with passing notes

Historically, preluding was an essential part of a performer's toolkit. It was often used to test the instrument, establish the key, or prepare both player and listener for a more structured piece. In the Baroque and Classical eras, preluding was also a space for harmonic experimentation and technical display. Musicians like C.P.E. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven frequently used this technique to introduce their performances. Preluding was often taught informally through imitation and improvisation: students learned by playing alongside or listening to their teachers.

A Prelude, once freed from strict scalic exercises, often takes a continuous gesture (a pattern or texture) and carries it through a loosely defined structure. Common structural markers might include:

1. A short cadence affirming the home key – e.g., I – ii7c – Vb – I, as frequently used in Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

2. A gradual modulation, usually to the dominant in major keys, or to the relative major in minor keys, with its own cadence.

3. A more chromatic middle section that explores harmonic tension.

4. A return to the tonic, often prepared by a dominant pedal, followed by a concluding cadence of varying breadth.

Most of Chopin's *Preludes Op.28* follow this loosely codified structure, and they are predominantly monothematic: a single musical idea or gesture is developed through harmonic progression. In my own work, I explored this method while composing the *Lockdown Preludes* presented in my third DMA recital. The *referents* (set of stylistic, structural, or harmonic constraints or point of departure for the improvisation) I used for these improvisation-based compositions were often a specific harmonic progression and a rhythmic or melodic motive – mirroring the compositional DNA of Chopin's Preludes.

As I will explore further in the following chapter, I engaged in a process of analytical disassembly: breaking down selected Chopin Preludes to identify and reuse or modify their core ideas. This allowed me to understand how a single motivic or harmonic cell could generate an entire piece. The foundational exercises I practiced with Dolan, rooted in *partimento* traditions, helped develop the audiation and internal hearing necessary for this type of creative reinterpretation.

Preluding, therefore, serves not only as technical preparation or warm-up, but as an avenue for real-time composition, pattern development, and structural awareness. It fosters harmonic fluency, a sense of direction, and a connection between texture and gesture.

In contrast, improvising a Minuet encourages more formal phrase construction. Minuets demand thematic clarity and balance, typically structured in an A–A–B–A form, with

symmetrical 8-bar phrases. This encourages students to think in terms of musical sentences that have beginnings, middle sections, and endings.

This approach aligns with the notion that pieces like those in Anna Magdalena Bach's notebook were not just technical studies, but composition exercises. Practicing Minuet improvisation has helped me address a key area in my own development. In earlier improvisations, my pieces sometimes drifted into texture-driven soundscapes without clear formal anchors. Working on Minuet form sharpened my awareness of musical structure and thematic development.

One could argue that retracing the evolution of musical style – from Baroque through Classical and Romantic periods – is a slow and potentially outdated method. However, I maintain that the complex harmonic languages of later styles (with their ambiguities, enharmonies, and extended tonalities) are far more accessible when the student has first internalised simple tonal functions through hands-on experience. Practising improvisation in this historically informed, progressive manner strengthens the performer's ability to construct, shape, and reflect on musical form.

c. Scores work. From bass reduction to the assimilations of the elements of a score

Alongside the development of improvisational fluency through harmonised scales, preludes, and minuets, another crucial practice involves working directly with existing repertoire through reduction and analytical exploration. This method, shared by both Emilio Molina's Instituto de Educación Musical (IEM) and Dolan's approach at the Guildhall School, focuses on transforming repertoire into a sourcebook of modular components that can be internalised and reused.

The principle is simple: every piece of music offers multiple layers of learnable information beyond its surface. Melodic gestures, harmonic sequences, rhythmic cells, textures, and formal patterns can all be isolated, examined, and repurposed. Through this lens, repertoire becomes not just something to interpret, but something to *mine*: a set of ingredients from which new music can be extemporised. This aligns with the concept of "learning from within the music", where repertoire is not an endpoint but a springboard for creative development.

Dolan's method typically begins with **bass reduction**, distilling a piece down to its harmonic skeleton. From this simplified structure, students are invited to re-elaborate, experiment, and expand the material, much like a modern application of *partimento* pedagogy. The process cultivates both fluency in harmonic navigation and a deeper connection to voice leading.

Conversely, Emilio Molina's IEM system introduces a more structured analytical process. Students are guided through the dissection of a score, identifying and separating its musical layers. Each element is then practised independently: a left-hand pattern, a rhythmic figure, a harmonic gesture, or even a textural device. These are treated as building blocks that can be reassembled in new contexts.

I have found both methods to be highly complementary. Molina's analytical clarity offers a systematic path to expand one's musical vocabulary, while Dolan's exploratory approach encourages intuition and audiation to take the lead. Together, they represent a cyclical model of learning: analysis informs improvisation, and improvisation in turn sharpens analytical perception.

In Chapter 5, I will apply these processes to some of my repertoire, showing how their scores can be deconstructed into elements suitable for improvisational practice. This dual engagement – reading into the music and playing out of it – has been one of the most valuable additions to my creative process. It not only enhances technical control and stylistic understanding but also nurtures a kind of musical memory that is far more flexible and generative than rote memorization.

Table 3 below compares elements extracted from scores with their potential use in improvisation.

Element Extracted from Score	Possible Improvisation Use
Harmonic Cells	Used as harmonic frameworks for extemporisation
Melodic Gestures	Adapted into new themes or developed into motifs
Rhythmic Patterns	Reapplied in new meters or as ostinato
Accompaniment Textures	Incorporated into left-hand patterns or layered textures
Voice-Leading Progressions	Training tool for real-time part-writing and resolution
Formal Structures (e.g., Binary, Ternary)	Framework for shaping longer improvisational forms
Motivic Cells	Transformed, repeated, or varied as thematic material
Cadential Formulas	Practised as modular closing gestures or transitions
Contrapuntal Devices	Used to develop two-voice or polyphonic improvisations
Ornamentation Styles	Emulated or stylised in improvisation for period accuracy

Table 3: Elements retrieval from score analysis

4.3 - Learned schemes. Analysis and exploration. Experience with IEM system by Emilio Molina.

My experience with the IEM (Instituto de Educación Musical) system, particularly during the intensive course in Palencia, Spain, provided a detailed perspective on the methodology's applications across a wide range of ages and levels. The approach is strongly anchored in bridging theory and experience: developing musical knowledge through a combination of analysis, ear training, practical application, and group work.

A core feature of the IEM system is the way harmony is taught practically: students engage in ear-based exploration of chords and progressions, learn to identify and internalize inversions and cadences (e.g., V–I, ii–V, V–vi), and repeat small harmonic structures across varying contexts – from singing, to playing, to analysing and writing. This cyclical repetition of musical elements helps build an intuitive and reusable vocabulary.

The IEM philosophy recognises analysis as a gateway to creativity rather than an end in itself. Emilio Molina believes that the understanding of a piece of music, the pure theory, despite its complexity, doesn't have any use if it doesn't serve a higher goal.[65]

In line with this view, analysis becomes a foundation for two pathways: (a) the free use of musical material through improvisation or extemporaneous composition, and (b) the design of technical exercises that sharpen interpretive and instrumental skills. The methodology encourages students to view musical works not just as fixed texts, but as sources of vocabulary, grammar, and structure that can be recombined and reimagined.

Molina outlines several aims of using analysis as a basis for improvisation:

- **To develop a good interpretation of the piece:** For example, identifying a deceptive cadence in a Chopin nocturne and understanding its expressive weight informs a performer's rubato or voicing choices.

[65] Molina, Emilio (2006). *Análisis, improvisación e interpretación: La conciencia armónica en la práctica pianística y pedagógica.* Madrid: Instituto Autor – Fundación Autor, Sociedad General de Autores y Editores (SGAE).

- **To promote the knowledge and creative use of musical elements and compositional processes:** After analysing a rhythmic ostinato in a Bartók piece, a student might use the same device to build an original improvisation.

- **To offer a global vision of each element:** Recognizing how sequential patterns in a Mozart sonata also appear in other works encourages a lateral approach to interpretation and improvisation.

- **To facilitate faster reading:** A student who recognizes a ii–V–I progression or a typical Alberti bass pattern will read and internalize music more fluently than one who reads each note in isolation.

- **To facilitate memorization:** Understanding that a piece follows a rounded binary form with harmonic cycles helps organize memory around structural pillars rather than isolated measures.

- **To foster understanding of musical language:** A simple ornament like a turn, when understood as part of a syntax, becomes more expressive and versatile in interpretation and improvisation.

- **To promote interpretation informed by analysis, rather than purely by instinct:** Knowing that a phrase modulates subtly to the dominant can support a performer's shaping of tension and release, rather than relying solely on intuition.

While the IEM method foregrounds learned schemes and theoretical analysis, it also values intuition. The cyclical interplay between analytical dissection and spontaneous exploration is at the heart of creative fluency. Like language acquisition, fluency in music emerges not solely from rules but from immersion, risk-taking, and the integration of mistake-driven learning.

Reflecting on my Palencia experiences, it's clear that IEM succeeds powerfully in providing children with tools to make music fun and meaningful. I observed how children absorbed complex harmonic structures almost playfully, and how musical learning moved beyond a graded progression of repertoire to a deep familiarity with harmonic and melodic archetypes. Through ear training, group improvisation, and progressive theory, students created their own musical pathways.

Over the past two decades, what began as a focused methodology has evolved into a broader philosophy. While this has enriched many classrooms, it has sometimes led to inconsistencies in application, particularly in maintaining technical rigour on instruments. Originally conceived for high-level performers (Molina's thesis centres on Chopin Études), the system thrived more widely in early education in the last decade and is only recently beginning to be reflected in the practices of many highly skilled performers and pedagogues across Spain.

Notably, the work of pianist Carles Marigó exemplifies this evolution. His improvisatory fluency has led him to collaborative projects that combine real-time improvisation with artificial intelligence, as well as imaginative recreations of traditional Spanish music for guitar and piano, or orchestral and chamber music settings. Marigó's ability to improvise fluently in the style of composers like Albéniz or Beethoven illustrates how the foundational tools of the IEM system, combined with advanced artistry, can lead to the development of a personal and historically grounded improvisational voice.

This trajectory, from foundational classroom practices to high-level extemporaneous artistry, points to the system's full potential – if its application can be consistently aligned with technical depth and interpretive sophistication.

In contrast to Dolan's work, primarily taught within conservatories and with advanced students, IEM's wide accessibility (and a localization of their methodologies to the Spanish speaking country) has made it harder to uphold standards necessary for recognition within higher institutions abroad. For it to gain greater traction in the classical mainstream, a strong framework must accompany the philosophy: one that balances technical discipline with creative freedom and is championed by high-level practitioners.

It is also the reason why many, including myself in titling this exegesis, are trying to find alternative nomenclature to the act of improvising. Extemporaneous composition perhaps could be a more fitting descriptor than "improvisation: it avoids associations with stylistic boundaries or the misconception of improvisation as random or unserious. Instead, it suggests real-time composition: the spontaneous creation of coherent, stylistically informed music that balances knowledge with expression.

Ultimately, the IEM method, with its emphasis on musical syntax, grammar, and contextual fluency, aligns closely with this goal. When harmonised with intuition and technical mastery, it offers a powerful toolset for the modern musician.

In the next chapter, I will apply some of these principles in detail, showing how I extracted material from analysis to use in improvisation or to develop technical fluency. By alternating analysis with exploratory improvisation, I have sought to integrate both natural and learned schemes into my own evolving practice.

4.4 - Analysis – a summary of strategies for Improvisation

Summarising the methodologies introduced so far, the following points outline the analytical process used to support an improvisation practice that integrates both learned and intuitive schemes. This dual approach (structured analysis paired with exploratory practice) builds fluency in real-time musical thinking, much like the relationship between grammar and conversation in language acquisition.

1. **Formal Analysis**
   Begin by identifying the large-scale structure of the piece. Map the form graphically (e.g., ABA', AB, AA'A''), including bar numbers, phrase lengths, and cadential points. This scaffolding provides an architectural framework upon which harmonic and melodic content can be situated and later manipulated.

2. **Harmonic Analysis**
   Analyse the full harmonic progression, identifying cadences, modulations, secondary dominants, and chromatic features. Understanding harmonic flow is foundational for both interpretation and improvisation.

3. **Rhythmical Analysis**
   Extract characteristic rhythmic patterns or textures. Études and preludes often revolve around one or two key rhythmic ideas. Isolating and working with these allows for easier memorisation and develops rhythmic improvisation vocabulary.

4. **Melodic Analysis**
   Examine how melodic phrases are constructed: are they built through sequences,

auxiliary tones, appoggiaturas, or arpeggios? How do they interact with the harmonic foundation? This supports phrase shaping in both performance and creation.

5. **Exercise Development**
   This is the heart of Emilio Molina's methodology: using analysis to generate exercises that internalize the technical and expressive elements of the piece. Common chord types, modulations, cadential patterns, and harmonic idioms can be practiced away from the score notation, transposed to different keys. Similar approach can be given to repeating patterns, motifs, scalar figures, leaps, embellishments, and intervals.

The exercises I propose to add draw on this structure but are enriched by insights from intuitive methodologies such as those developed by Dolan and Carles Marigó. The aim is to create a full toolkit for the improviser-performer: grounded in analysis, but alive with flexibility and exploration.

6. **Bass Reduction Work**
   Performance of the piece (or section) in a simplified form (similar to a Schenkerian basic plan) reduces the harmony to bass notes and the melody to structural tones. This enables the performer to perceive how passing notes, appoggiaturas, or ornamental figures relate to the "real" tones. By stripping the texture to its essentials, the performer can feel the direction and motion within the phrase.

   Once this simplified version is played and understood, one can begin "filling in" these notes with new solutions different from the original. Depending on the level of harmonic understanding and technical ease, this filling can be basic or richly elaborate. The purpose is not mimicry but the cultivation of a felt relationship with the music's inner scaffolding.

   This approach strengthens interpretative decision-making, fosters flexibility, and makes harmonic structure a lived experience. Even at an elementary level, the method can be adapted to suit the student's needs. Examples will follow in the next chapter.

7. **Transposition**

   The aforementioned anecdote of Liszt's on-the-spot transposition, I believe, says less about some innate "genius" and more about a different way of conceptualizing music – one that prioritizes movement and intervallic relationships over fixed, absolute pitches

   In my own practice and with students, I have found transposition significantly easier when ideas are assimilated as gestures or patterns rather than as a series of fixed notes. For example, an ii–V–I progression in C major can be transferred to D or A♭ with ease if it is understood as a chain of functions rather than individual notes. This ability reinforces both improvisational and interpretative versatility.

8. **Bass + Melody Improvisation**

   Starting from the key (or keys) used in the analysed score, the performer can begin improvising using only bass and melody, deriving new ideas from harmonic and melodic elements previously identified. This is essentially a reverse path from analysis back to creation.

   The performer may choose to include specific accompaniment textures, reuse harmonic ideas, or adapt rhythmic and melodic cells discovered during earlier analytical work. This step represents the re-integration of learned schemes into personal expression, while relying on the performer's evolving vocabulary

9. **Free Flow Improvisation**

   At this point, the performer returns to a freer, more intuitive form of improvisation. Here, the goal is not to consciously apply rules but to trust the ear and inner impulse. The analytical groundwork and prior exercises provide a subconscious framework, allowing for spontaneity without losing coherence.

   This return to instinct mirrors early language learning, where fluency is achieved not only through grammar drills but through fearless expression, error, correction, and play. For many students, this is also the most rewarding moment, when the boundaries between listening, inventing, and performing begin to dissolve.

Chapter 5: Bridging Improvisation and Interpretation - Analysis and Application to Repertoire

In this chapter, I explore how musical analysis can be used as a generative tool, transforming repertoire into material for improvisation, interpretive insight, and technical development. Having previously discussed methodologies grounded in both intuitive and theoretical frameworks – and outlined a range of available strategies – I now turn to their practical application through selected repertoire.

To structure the progression of improvisational ability, I refer to Kratus' (1996) model of the seven levels of improvisation, which outlines a developmental pathway from exploratory playing to sophisticated stylistic fluency and offers a useful lens for assessing and guiding both student growth and personal practice. I have applied this model in a variety of pedagogical contexts, ranging from early beginner work and piano studio settings to the reimagining of children's pieces for educational use, and ultimately to my own professional repertoire.

Kratus' clear and accessible structure provides an ideal scaffolding for organising the strategies discussed throughout this research into practical, progressive stages. As an introductory example, I include an adaptation of the folk tune *Mary Had a Little Lamb* to illustrate Level 2 improvisation. While simple, this example demonstrates a way of thinking and working that can be scaled to more advanced repertoire once its underlying concepts are internalised. The remainder of the chapter moves through higher levels of Kratus' model, presenting case studies and examples that showcase how these strategies can be implemented in both teaching and performance.

The central aim of this chapter is to highlight that interpretive depth and improvisational fluency are not mutually exclusive. Through analysis, musicians can extract elements (such as harmonic progressions, motifs, cadential formulas, and formal templates) that become tools for both understanding and extemporising. These strategies enhance not only structural and expressive awareness, but also expand the performer's creative vocabulary. As discussed in Chapter 4, the analytical methods applied here are grounded in the harmonic and

gestural work explored, drawing from both Dolan's intuitive, gesture-based approach and Molina's methodical, schematic system.

5.1 - Levels of Improvisation

Before examining specific case studies, it is important to situate improvisational practice within a developmental framework. For this purpose, I draw on the widely cited model proposed by music educator John Kratus (1996), which outlines seven levels of improvisational growth. Originally developed in the context of general music education, the model proves highly adaptable to classical training, offering a progressive structure through which students and performers can develop increasing fluency and stylistic awareness in improvisation.

The seven levels are:

1. **Exploration** – Characterised by unstructured sound-making with little or no constraints. Learners experiment freely with sound, discovering the instrument and its possibilities.

2. **Process-oriented improvisation** – Sound choices become more deliberate. Musical ideas may be repeated or slightly varied, but structure is still minimal.

3. **Product-oriented improvisation** – Learners begin to create short musical statements with discernible form or intention, often using familiar tonal materials.

4. **Fluid improvisation** – Improvisation becomes more coherent through the use of rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic patterns. This is a pivotal stage for building idiomatic vocabulary.

5. **Structural improvisation** – Improvised materials now reflect formal and stylistic coherence, often adhering to recognisable musical forms such as ABA, 12-bar blues, Rondo, Sonata and more.

6. **Stylistic improvisation** – Performers can improvise convincingly within a particular genre or composer's style, drawing upon learned idioms and gestures.

7. **Personal improvisational voice** – "Occasionally an expert musician will push the boundaries of a style so far that the initial style is no longer recognizable and a new style emerges. The new style establishes its own conventions that enable others to perform and listen to the music with meaning. […] Very few musicians attain this level."

While Kratus' model was not designed with advanced classical musicians in mind, its clear progression from exploratory to highly developed improvisational fluency makes it a valuable pedagogical and reflective tool. Throughout this chapter, I use this framework to categorise different stages of my work and teaching strategies, starting from beginner-level exercises and gradually advancing to complex stylistic improvisations grounded in repertoire.

By mapping specific improvisational tasks to these levels, we can trace not only a performer's developmental path, but also identify meaningful points of entry for integrating improvisation into classical performance training.

This progression from spontaneous sound discovery to the emergence of a personal musical voice underpins much of the extemporisation work I have explored throughout this research. As I will show in the coming examples, the goal is always to expand fluency (stylistically, harmonically, and structurally) through analysis-informed creative practice.

Level 2 – 3 Improvisation. From Process to Product Oriented Improvisations

In many traditional teaching approaches, early repertoire such as *Mary Had a Little Lamb* is used primarily for note reading and basic keyboard orientation. However, even this elementary material can serve as a rich foundation for creative exploration and improvisational development. Contrary to the belief that improvisational work must be reserved for students with significant theoretical knowledge, I argue that an exploratory, embodied, and playful approach can be successfully introduced at the earliest stages of music education. The following outlines a hypothetical beginner-level class that reimagines this familiar melody as a springboard for musical discovery

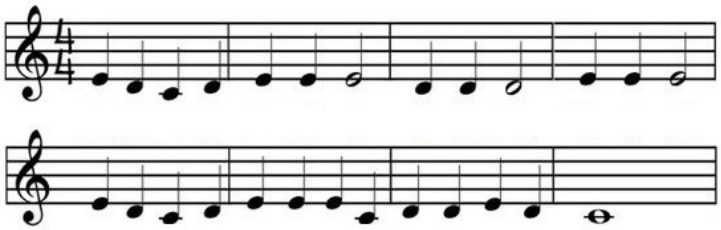

Figure 12: Mary had a Little Lamb

Form and Phrase Recognition

Because the song is familiar and often sung with lyrics, students can immediately engage with its structure. Through guided listening and singing, the student begins to understand that music is organised into phrases and semi-phrases, and that musical gestures can have a sense of arrival and departure. Though no formal terminology is required, the embodied experience of breathing, pausing, and continuing helps establish the groundwork for understanding phrasing and form. Bar structure (e.g. 4/4 time) and the distinction between strong and weak beats (e.g. Ma-ry or Lit-tle), are also introduced experientially through movement or clapping games.

Harmony: Experiencing Tonal Relationships

Although the melody is monophonic, the teacher can demonstrate basic harmonic tension and resolution by adding a simple accompaniment. For instance, introducing a tonic (I) and dominant (V) chord at appropriate cadential moments helps the student feel musical closure and momentum. The resting tone (Do) becomes a sensory anchor, and students quickly

learn to identify stable and unstable points in the phrase. This intuitive awareness of tonal gravity begins to lay the foundation for harmonic audiation.

Rhythm: Beyond the Mechanical

The rhythmic content (crotchets, minims, and a concluding semibreve) serves as a perfect context for teaching pulse and note values. Importantly, rather than drilling these values in isolation, students experience rhythm as part of a larger expressive gesture. A common moment of humour and insight occurs when students are asked to sing the song robotically (detaching each syllable) and then compare it to a naturally flowing rendition. This contrast reinforces the concept that rhythm must be felt and shaped, not simply counted.

Melody: Motions and Gestures

The melodic content of *Mary Had a Little Lamb* includes passing tones, repeated notes, and small skips (mostly thirds). This offers a rich environment for guided exploration. Students can transpose the basic three-note descending gesture to different areas of the keyboard, beginning to connect physical gestures with tonal shapes (Level 2, process-oriented improvisation). Rather than focusing solely on pitch names or hand positions, the emphasis is placed on movement and gesture, encouraging spatial and kinaesthetic learning.

Exploratory Exercises

Using these patterns, the teacher can prompt variations and re-combinations. Students might:

- Reverse melodic directions.
- Invent new lyrics for familiar patterns ("Mary had a pie", “Mary had a little kitten”, “Mary had a black cat”), which can introduce different rhythmical possibilities
- Move the gestures encountered to different registers and observe emotional shifts (e.g. bright in high register, dark in low register, modal differences when not centred around major scales).
- Explore repeated notes and patterns (e.g. "little lamb") in new rhythmic or tonal contexts.

Even at this early stage, this process creates a bridge between gesture and sound, movement and meaning. These improvisatory games, mostly Process Oriented, also serve a technical purpose: promoting freedom of the arm, large movement patterns, and expressive playing before the fine motor control of finger independence is fully developed.

Teacher-Student Interactions and Form Awareness

To avoid the risk of meandering or aimless play, the teacher can introduce call-and-response games that model musical structure. The teacher initiates a short, flowing phrase, and the student responds using the limited vocabulary they've explored. The goal is not sophistication, but the beginning of intentional phrasing and the development of aural imagination.

The teacher models phrasing across bar-lines to help the student understand continuity and motion, avoiding a bar-by-bar, disjointed feel. Gradually, the student begins to experience their own improvisations as musical "utterances" rather than random notes, aligning with Kratus' Level 2 ("Process-Oriented") and beginning to approach Level 3 ("Product-Oriented") improvisation. Which is the organization of small gestures encountered in previous games into small self-contained phrases.

The Role of the Pedagogue

At this developmental stage, the role of the teacher is essential. The teacher must provide harmonic grounding, rhythmic scaffolding, and constant feedback, either through accompaniment or guided instruction. It is important that the teacher also engages in this practice personally; improvisation cannot be effectively taught if it has not been internalised and embodied by the educator.

The teacher also serves as the "ear" for the student's early creations: modelling flow, guiding intent, and prompting reflection. Over time, students begin to recognise their own patterns and are able to critique, develop, and expand upon them. In this way, the musical learning journey becomes deeply internalised, and reading notation becomes a more intuitive process, rather than a detached decoding task.

Creative Flow and Emotional Expression

Once basic gestures are assimilated, improvisation games can evolve into emotionally expressive activities. Students may be asked to play a familiar pattern "angrily," "happily," or "like it’s going to sleep". Alternatively, prompts could be visual ("a dark cloud"), kinetic ("slow and heavy"), or narrative ("walking in the park"). These games train responsiveness, dynamic contrast, and creative flexibility.

In this way, even a piece as seemingly simple as *Mary Had a Little Lamb* becomes a rich playground for musical development. Through guided improvisation and playful exploration, the student is developing the core components of audiation: internal hearing, anticipatory listening, and expressive shaping. This approach also fosters a more holistic sense of musical agency, an empowering shift from passive reproduction to active creation.

Level 3 – 4 Improvisation. Early Technical Study and Re-composition.

Level 3 improvisation, according to John Kratus' framework, marks the transition from purely exploratory, process-driven improvisation to a form that begins to show a sense of structure and intent – what we might call *product-oriented.* At this stage, students begin to understand that what they are creating has the potential to be listened to, interpreted, and valued by others. The improvisation becomes a communicative act, not just a personal exploration.

To support students in this stage, I have applied the same methodological foundations discussed in earlier chapters to beginner-level repertoire, most notably in studies by Czerny and short pedagogical pieces. The approach combines:

- Pattern recognition
- Transposition
- Re-composition through imitation and variation
- Harmonic function awareness

Through these exercises, students are encouraged not just to reproduce a piece but to engage with it as a set of *musical ideas*: ideas that can be detached from the original context, transposed into different keys, modes, and meters, and reassembled creatively.

As noted in earlier chapters, the application of improvisation strategies as a pedagogical tool merits a dedicated study of its own. Nonetheless, I include a brief case study here to illustrate how this analytical approach can become a fertile ground for deeper learning and creative exploration at various levels of musical training.

I. Improvisation as Pedagogical Re-composition: A Case Study

Piano students frequently engage with études of varying complexity as part of their technical and musical development. From Czerny and Burgmüller to Moscheles and Chopin, these studies are designed to build proficiency with patterns, hand coordination, and stylistic interpretation. Incorporating improvisatory practice at early stages can enrich this process,

encouraging students to engage with the underlying musical language, rather than merely reproducing notated material. Such practice helps to establish a foundational understanding of harmony, voice leading, and idiomatic gesture from the outset of training.

An example of this approach can be found in a short C major study from the *Czerniniana* collection, edited by Alessandro Longo (see Figure 13 below). Studies at this level provide ideal material for introducing harmonic awareness and basic pianistic patterns. This particular piece serves as a simple entry point to scale-based playing, constructed entirely around tonic and dominant harmonies. After identifying the core elements (ascending and descending scalar passages in the right hand, broken or block chords in the left), students are encouraged to explore these gestures beyond their original form. This may include transposing the patterns to different degrees, changing their direction and rhythms, simplifying or changing the accompaniment, fostering not only enhanced technical facility but also a deeper conceptual understanding of how written notation relates to harmonic structure.

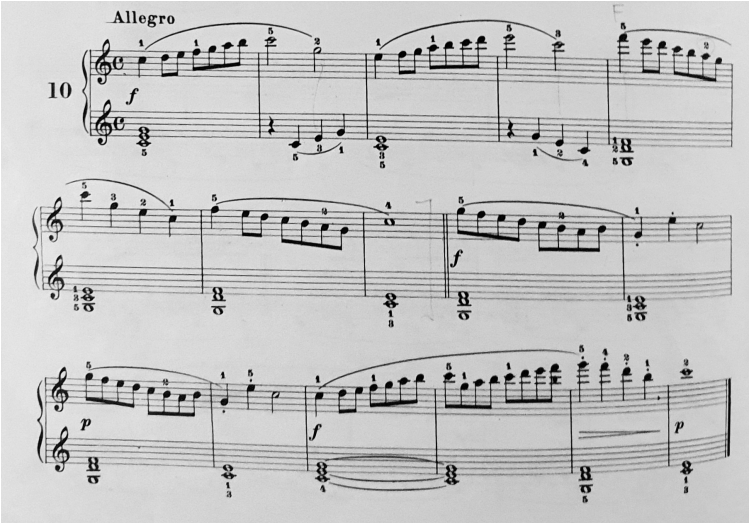

Figure 13: C Major Etude from Longo's Czerniniana

The leaps between notes, clearly traceable to tones within the supporting chord, present opportunities for students to test out alternative directions, altered orderings, or rhythmic reconfigurations. More advanced elaborations might include the addition of passing tones, simple appoggiaturas, or rhythmic variations, all while remaining within the familiar framework of tonic–dominant relationships. Once this comfort is established, the entire piece can be transposed into a new key or even a different mode. In doing so, students begin to perceive how gestural material is affected by harmonic and modal context, and how this, in turn, impacts character and expressive intent.

This kind of work is best supported by prior experimentation with simple harmonic structures. Foundational elements of major and minor tonalities (the tonic, subdominant, and dominant chords in their various inversions to start with), should be introduced and reinforced through targeted exercises alongside any repertoire being studied.

The primary objective is to equip students with the ability to recognise and reconstruct musical gestures grounded in harmonic logic. By breaking down the complexity of traditional score-based learning into manageable, pattern-driven improvisational tasks, students begin to develop an intuitive sense of voice leading and phrase structure – skills that form a foundation for more sophisticated improvisational practice.

In one example (see Figure 14 in the next page), an 11yo student who had engaged with this improvisatory framework independently composed a new version of the earlier Czerny study, now loosely transposed to the key of A minor. Although his piece diverged from the original in key and some surface details, it retained the structural proportions and overall concept of the study. The scale-based material was recognisably adapted, albeit in diminution, and the piece unfolded with a clear sense of form and harmonic coherence. Although the student employed the harmonic minor scale throughout, this prompted a valuable discussion on how using the melodic minor scale could have enhanced the melodic line and fluidity. Notably, this was the student's first attempt at recomposing a piece – an initiative he pursued independently after being introduced to some of the improvisatory strategies outlined earlier.

I have experimented with this approach across a variety of similar pieces and with different students, often yielding interesting and creative outcomes. The most significant benefit from these explorations has been a shift in my teaching paradigm: from a process-based model focused on accurate delivery of the written score, to one centred on conceptual understanding, despite the amount of time I would be able to focus fully on improvisation in my

classroom. This approach fosters deeper internalization, enabling students to retrieve and re-contextualize musical ideas across different repertoire more intuitively.

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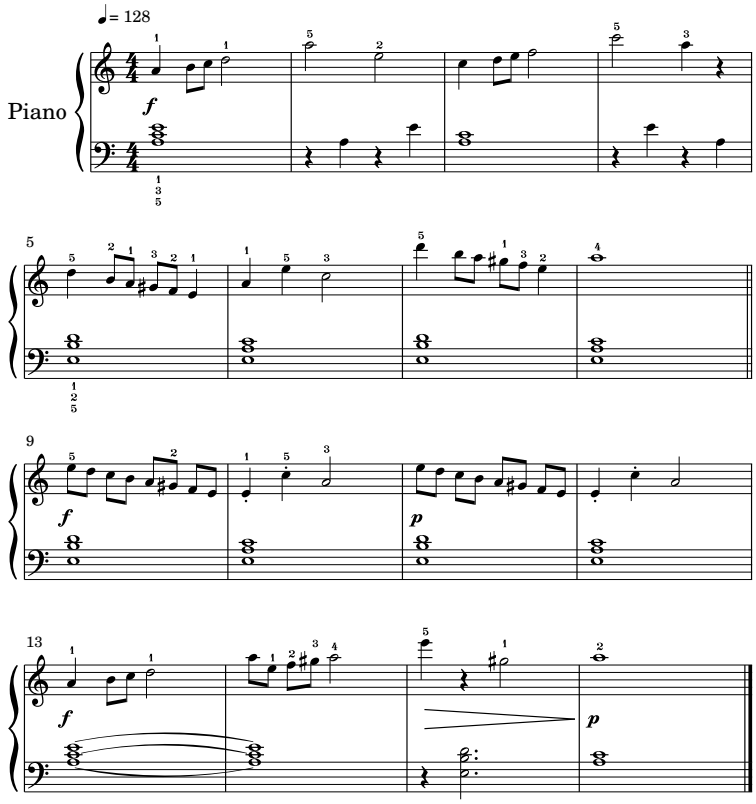

Figure 14: Re-composition of Czerny n.10 by one of my 11yo student

II. A Further Case Study: Natural Scheme Approach to Improvisation in Teaching

Another example of applying a natural schemes approach in teaching involved Scarlatti's Sonata K.209. I asked the student to improvise simple rhythmic patterns over the characteristic 3/8 dance-like accompaniment of the piece (particularly focusing on left hand accompaniment of bars 5-8, shown below in Figure 15), without initially worrying about specific pitches. We stayed within the A major scale, and later explored the same patterns in closely related keys, as Scarlatti himself often modulates. The emphasis was placed on the *horizontal* feel of movement and phrasing, rather than on vertical harmonic analysis.

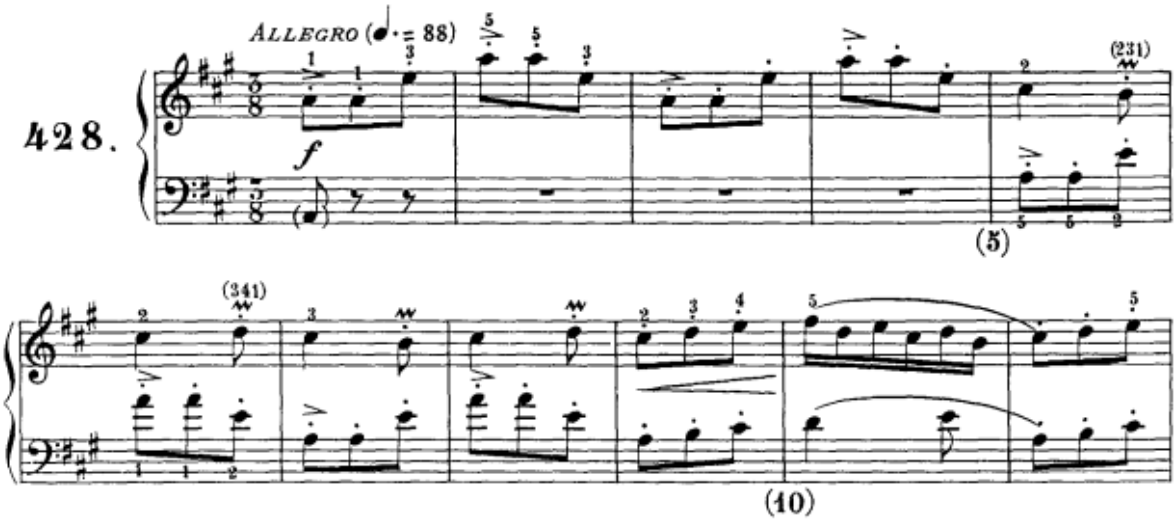

Figure 15: The beginning of Scarlatti Sonata K209

This preparatory work helped the student internalize the rhythmic and directional flow of the piece. By approaching the sonata first through play and variation, her attention shifted from executing correct notes to *feeling* the dance-like motion and expressive line. When returning to the score, her performance was noticeably more fluid and musically engaged, with clearer phrasing that extended over several measures at a time. This exercise gave her both aural familiarity and a sense of ownership: she was no longer just reproducing the music, but actively participating in its creation.

This is one of many examples where we can invite ourselves (or our students) to practice a musical *idea* rather than simply the written notes. By focusing on the rhythmic gesture, the character of movement, the underlying phrasing, or a patterned accompaniment, we can engage with the score from an alternative angle, we can ask ourselves to practice the

forming elements of the musical language rather than simply the notes on the score – and in turn come back to the original score with renewed agency and knowledge.

Level 5 – 6 Improvisation. Personal Approach with Kabalevsky's *24 Pieces for Children*

In exploring levels 5 and 6 of Kratus' framework (structural and stylistic improvisation), I developed a collection of *24 Small Pieces* based on Kabalevsky's *24 Pieces for Children Op. 39*. This project became a playground for combining analysis, gesture, and intuition. My goal was to shift from purely process-oriented improvisation to more product-oriented work, without losing spontaneity.

This reimagining emerges from both systematic and exploratory approaches. Some pieces, like Nos. 7 and 17, were born from free-flow improvisation, guided by instinct and shaped in real-time at the piano. Others were developed through close analysis: I extracted harmonic patterns, melodic gestures, and rhythmic textures from Kabalevsky's originals, then reshaped or recombined them into something new yet stylistically coherent.

The result is not a set of variations, nor a homage in the strict sense, but a crystallisation of what might emerge when improvisation is used as a compositional impulse. Each piece is a snapshot of possibility, one realisation among many that could be formed from the same ingredients.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, the music writing process is, in a way, an essential counterbalance to the limitations of notation. By engaging in composition – even at a modest level like my *24 Small Pieces* – the performer is confronted with the challenge of representing musical ideas using an imperfect symbolic system. This realisation can be liberating: it demystifies the score and shifts the performer's attention from the score as an authoritative object to the sound-world it seeks to approximate.

In writing these small pieces, I experienced firsthand the inevitable compromises and decisions that come with translating aural intention into notation – whether in terms of rhythmic approximation, articulation, or expressive nuance. This, in turn, fostered a more flexible approach to reading scores. Rather than interpreting notation as a rigid command, I began to view it as a set of cues: suggestions pointing toward a sound-world shaped as much by context, intuition, and personal voice as by written instruction.

Thus, composition and improvisation are not opposite poles but part of a continuum, both requiring a grasp of musical structure, a sensitivity to gesture, and an ability to hear beyond the page. The process of composing, however humble or fragmentary, gives performers tools to read with imagination and to play with a deeper awareness of the music's living potential.

Explanation of the Pedagogical Intent Behind the Set

The collection of 24 Small Pieces presented here represents a creative re-engagement with Kabalevsky's Op. 39. Rather than producing direct variations, the project seeks to reimagine the original pieces through a range of improvisatory and compositional approaches. Some of the resulting pieces retain clear structural or thematic affinities to their sources, achieved by subtly modifying or rearranging compositional elements such as motive, contour, or harmonic framework. Others are more freely inspired, using a single gesture, rhythmic figure, or tonal idea as the departure point for a new miniature work.

This approach invites students to interact with both the original and the reimagined pieces as a form of dialogue. By comparing the two, they are encouraged to reflect on the underlying musical structures and to consider their own possibilities for re-composition. In doing so, they begin to understand music not as a static artefact, but as a flexible, generative language – a set of building blocks that can be internalised, recombined, and reshaped creatively.

The analogy with spoken language is instructive: just as fluent speakers do not consciously construct sentences from grammar rules, developing musicians can learn to "speak" musically through play, imitation, and experimentation. This set aims to model that process by offering not just finished pieces, but musical prompts: starting points for further exploration and self-expression.

The overarching aim of the set is to foster a sense of playfulness, agency, and creative ownership in students. By engaging in re-composition, they begin to absorb the idioms of classical music from the inside out, ultimately expanding their musical vocabulary and strengthening their improvisatory instincts.

For the complete score, refer to Appendix A.

A re-play of Score Notations.

As mentioned before, one of the strategies employed throughout the writing of these small pieces was the concept of *replaying* a score not as a strict reproduction, but as a launchpad for exploration. This practice involved performing and reimagining each Kabalevsky piece and then using it as a structural and thematic base for the written versions in the Appendix. This active exploration aims to stimulate active listening, enhance audiation, and foster a flexible relationship with compositional material.

Example 1. *Echoes n.8* from *24 Small Pieces*

A clear example of this approach can be seen in my work with Piece No. 8 from the *24 Little Pieces*. During one of the four "Sounds from Home" improvised online concerts I curated during Auckland's 2021 lockdown (September–December), I recorded a short improvisational sequence based on my rewritten version of this piece. The recording of this particular moment can be viewed here: https://www.instagram.com/p/CWfRltRFxzi/.

This video is a re-play of a small composition stemming from re-composing elaborations. A sort of musical telephone game. In this video, the process unfolds in three stages:

1. I first perform the reimagined version of Piece No. 8 as it was notated by me in the set.

2. I then step away from the written frame, beginning to explore the same musical vocabulary, reusing harmonic progressions, motivic cells, or rhythmic patterns from the piece.

3. Finally, the structure begins to loosen, inviting more spontaneous invention, where the parameters of the original material still provide coherence, even as unexpected textures and harmonic turns emerge.

This method is inherently playful and acknowledges that exploration often leads to imperfect outcomes. However, these imperfections are vital: they reflect an evolving sense of audiation and real-time responsiveness. Rather than treating the written version as the end-point, I treat it as a mid-point: a crystallisation of one possible realisation among many, which remains open to dialogue, variation, and reinterpretation.

This form of improvisational re-play highlights the pedagogical and artistic benefits of approaching repertoire as something fluid, encouraging both technical consolidation and expressive growth.

Example n.2. *Waltz n.13* from *24 Small Pieces*.

The second example is based on the short waltz from my *Small Pieces*, which I used as a platform for further exploration of structural improvisation. A video recording of this process, made in 2021, is available at https://youtu.be/vuXi0CTFckA. In this example, I begin with a reading of my written re-composition, still in the early stages of familiarization. From this initial rendering, I move into a freer, exploratory phase, reworking selected harmonic elements (such as the descending bass line) into an improvised section. While some phrasing and structural continuity momentarily falter (reflecting my then-developing skill in audiation and form-building), the video demonstrates an important pedagogical insight: the benefit of navigating between fixed notation and spontaneous musical response.

At the 2:17 mark, I introduce a brief improvised prelude that leads into a second, more fluent reading of the original material. This return is marked by increased confidence and expressiveness, phrases feel somewhat longer and more controlled and the left-hand shifts from the original static crotchet texture to a flowing quaver motion. The departure from and return to the score seems to deepen the internalization of the piece's structure and expressive intent.

I have since extended this *read–explore–replay* methodology to many works in my repertoire, either in selected passages (Chopin's and Liszt's *Ballades*, Bach-Busoni's *Chaconne*, Rachmaninoff's *Preludes Op.23* and other works) or, when feasible, across entire pieces (some of the shorter *Preludes* by Chopin). By improvising within or around the formal and harmonic boundaries of a work, and subsequently returning to the written version, performers can build a more intuitive grasp of form, pacing, and gesture. This approach reinforces interpretive flexibility and creative ownership, moving beyond mechanical reproduction toward a more integrated and embodied musicianship.

Level 6 Improvisation. Case Studies on Classical Repertoire.

The following case studies illustrate Level 6 improvisation, characterised by structural and stylistic manipulation of existing repertoire material. At this level, the source material is drawn from established works in the classical canon, and the improvisational strategies employed serve a dual purpose: to deepen interpretive understanding of the notated score, and to expand the performer's reservoir of idiomatic gestures, patterns, and harmonic models as discussed in earlier chapters.

Improvisation here moves beyond exploratory or pattern-based play and engages more consciously with the aesthetic and structural identity of the original works. The aim is not simply to decorate or vary, but to recontextualise and internalise: by placing known material in new technical, formal, or harmonic settings, the performer builds a more agile and responsive relationship with the repertoire.

This section presents examples drawn from selected preludes by Chopin (Op. 28) along with a set of technical riff exercises based on virtuosic passages from Chopin's Ballades. Each example demonstrates how analytical insight, combined with creative exploration, allows repertoire to become a living pedagogical tool not just for interpretation, but for developing improvisational fluency.

Through this approach, musical material is no longer fixed or immutable, but open to transformation. The performer-composer reclaims agency in their interaction with the score, drawing on both learned and natural schemes to internalise, extend, and reshape the music.

Appendix B presents a list of links to selected video and audio recordings collecting some of the practices that have been done, especially in regard to free-flow and *audiating* sessions.

I. Technical Improvisation as Skill Development: Case Study from Chopin's *Ballade No. 1*

A simple practical application of improvisation within interpretive preparation is the technical recontextualization of challenging passages. One such example comes from my practice of a technically demanding sequence in Chopin's *Ballade No. 1*, bars 55–65, where a series of rapid broken arpeggios in the right hand must be played fluidly across shifting harmonies. Rather than isolating the passage and repeating it mechanically, I used this fragment as a base for a technical improvisation exercise: I transposed the entire passage by descending major thirds, then by descending minor thirds, creating a full cycle through all twelve keys.

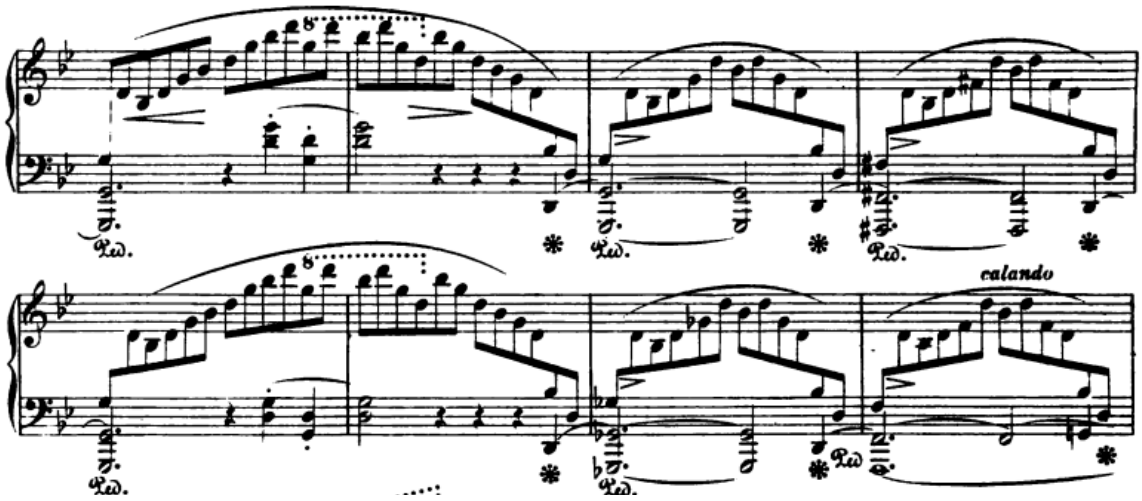

Figure 16: Bars 55-62 from Chopin Ballade n.1

This type of work echoes the approach taken historically by composer-performers who extended the use of études and technical studies beyond rote repetition, transforming them into generative exercises for idiomatic keyboard movement.[66] In doing so, the technical challenge of the passage was no longer confined to the Ballade, but became a modular skill embedded into my physical and auditory repertoire.

While this may not strictly qualify as a Level 6 improvisation in the Kratus model, it aligns more closely with product-oriented improvisation – designed to foster familiarity with

[66] Kenneth Hamilton, in *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, discusses how composers like Chopin and Liszt used études and technical exercises not merely as repetition drills but as creative tools to shape idiomatic keyboard movement. They infused these studies with expressive nuance (dynamics, rhythmic flexibility, and improvisatory elements) transforming them into generative platforms for technique and musicality rather than rote exercises.

a movement or texture that can later be integrated stylistically into one's own improvisations. Such practice is highly adaptable: it can be applied to a wide variety of patterns and *topoi* found across the repertoire, enriching the improviser's reservoir of creative tools and enhancing fluency in stylistic recontextualization.

Working across different levels – and revisiting earlier ones – is both common and beneficial when engaging with extemporization at this stage. As noted at the end of Kratus' paper, while students cannot skip developmental levels, they can (and should) continue to draw from earlier stages throughout their learning. This recursive process helps solidify foundational skills while supporting more advanced creative exploration.

A video demonstrating this process can be viewed here: https://youtu.be/hghK8jCH7es

The benefits of this patterned-practice method are numerous:

- **Pattern Internalisation**: By removing the passage from its specific harmonic and expressive context, I can focus purely on the shape, movement, and muscular coordination involved in executing the broken arpeggios, building muscle memory transferable to other repertoire.

- **Harmonic Flexibility**: Transposing the passage forces the ear and hand to adjust to new tonal centres and fingerings, enhancing overall harmonic awareness and dexterity across the keyboard.

- **Extended Vocabulary**: The pattern becomes part of my improvisational and compositional vocabulary, usable not only in performance but in spontaneous creation.

- **Audiation and Flow**: The modulation cycle through distant keys develops the ability to anticipate harmonic direction while maintaining rhythmic stability, bridging technical mastery with expressive fluency.

- **Confidence in Technical Generalisation**: Perhaps most importantly, this work builds a kind of technical confidence not confined to a single score. Like the etude-composers of the 19th century, this improvisatory engagement with technical challenges turns performance preparation into creative expansion.

This process has proven equally fruitful in other technically demanding passages where the chordal material naturally lends itself to patterned manipulation. In the *Presto con fuoco* section of Chopin's *Ballade No. 2*, for instance, the rapid descending broken chords in the right hand followed up by an alternating thumb vs. 2-5 movement, present an ideal candidate for transformation into a modular etude.

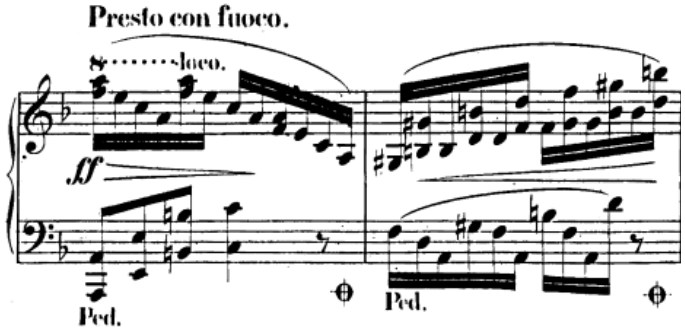

Figure 17: Pattern from Ballade n.2

Similarly, in the E major lyrical section of the *Ballade No. 1*, the arpeggiated left-hand accompaniment can be reimagined as a recurring technical cell. This allows students to explore similar harmonic patterns in nearby keys and improvise over them, helping to build confidence in hearing and sustaining a melodic line above such a rich, continuously moving harmonic texture.

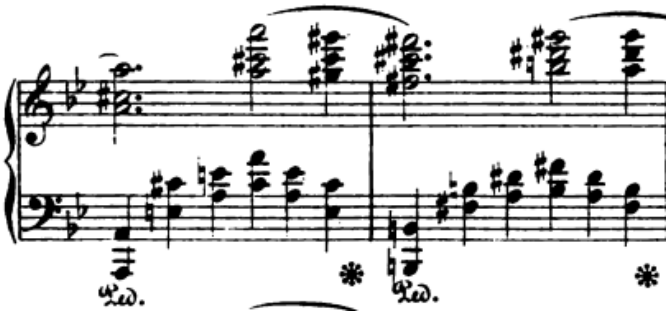

Figure 18: E Major section from Chopin Ballade n.1

Even when not extended through the full cycle of keys, this kind of flexible "play and try" approach (modulating to relative or parallel modes, or exploring rhythmic, textural, or registral variations), promotes a deeper engagement with the material beyond its fixed form on the page. This encourages the development of physical ease, musical fluency, and a sense of ownership over the technical language of the repertoire.

I refer to these modular excerpts as technical riffs: short, idiomatic passages extracted from repertoire and transformed into personal etude-style exercises. These riffs operate as micro-studies, bridging interpretation and technique through creative reapplication. Once separated from their original context, they can be expanded, sequenced, rephrased, and explored as miniature improvisational etudes, allowing the performer not only to resolve technical challenges but to generalize the gesture for future use in performance or composition.

This method mirrors the 19th-century tradition wherein improvisation and composition were integral to a performer's daily work with repertoire. Instead of reinforcing a binary between repertoire and technical study, the performer becomes an active participant in extending the language of a given passage, cultivating an embodied understanding that outlives the piece itself. The subsequent reuse of these patterns as part of one's personal reservoir of strategies can then support the improviser's vocabulary, informing spontaneous musical decisions across varied forms and contexts.

II. Case Study: Chopin – *Prelude Op. 28 No. 1* in C Major

This prelude, the first of Chopin's *Op. 28* set, presents an ideal model for initiating improvisational work grounded in structural and harmonic awareness. Its brevity, rhythmic drive, and clear harmonic logic offer fertile ground for both analytical reduction and creative expansion. In this section, I propose a twofold approach: analytical reduction (in the spirit of Emilio Molina's "learned schemes") and embodied exploration (akin to Dolan's "natural schemes") to unlock the improvisatory potential within the piece.

Formal Structure and Harmonic Outline

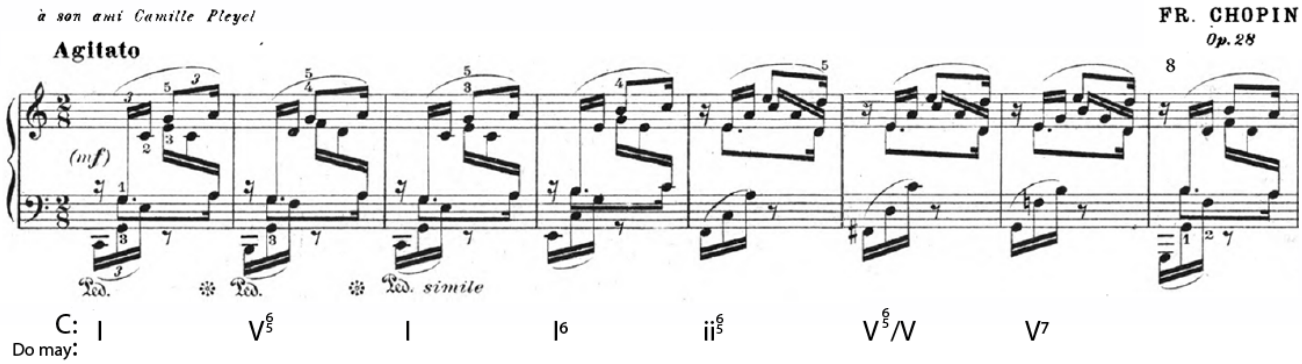

Figure 19: Chopin Prelude op.28 n.1 (first phrase) with harmonic analysis

Chopin's prelude unfolds in a condensed rounded binary form (A–B–A') followed by a codetta, all within 34 measures. The right hand sustains an unbroken 16th-note rhythmic figure throughout, while the left hand articulates the harmonic progression in a simple broken chord. The harmony follows a logical trajectory grounded in functional relationships, making it well suited to harmonic reduction and eventual improvisational reinterpretation. While the piece has been widely analysed in existing literature, this discussion limits itself to the aspects most pertinent to improvisatory exploration.

Application for Improvisation

This prelude can be reduced harmonically to a progression such as the following. Note I use also strikethroughs degrees to denote secondary dominants (non-modulating dominant chords built on degrees of the original scale).

Key: Do/C Major

| I | V^6_5 | I | I^6 | IV or ii^6_5 | ~~II^6_4~~ (V^6_5/V) | V^7 |

| I | V^6_5 | I | I^6 | IV or ii^6_5 | ~~I^4_3~~ (V^4_3/IV) | IV | ~~I^6_4~~ (V/IV) |

| IV^6 | V^6 | vi^6_5 | V^4_3 | I6 | vii^7/V(diminished chord functioning as V) | I^6_4 | V^7 |

tonic pedal: | I | V | I | V | IV | IV | IV | IV | I | I |

This reduction, once internalized, becomes a platform for various improvisational activities:

Harmonic assimilation: The harmonies used in this progression can be practiced separately in simpler forms, just as chords, or with the left hand playing the same rhythmical cell but a simplified right hand. This kind of work allows us to practice the harmonic context of the piece away from the actual notes.

Motivic development: Reworking the rhythmic cell (16th-Note Figuration) within a fixed harmonic texture.

Figure 20: The motivic cell of the Prelude

A close examination of the motivic cells in this passage reveals how Chopin enriches a relatively simple harmonic progression with a web of passing notes and appoggiaturas – both diatonic and chromatic. This reveals a rich palette of possibilities for reimagining the same segment or fragments of it. By experimenting with variations in inversion, articulation, or rhythmic emphasis, one can explore multiple versions of the same material while engaging the ear and mind in recognising harmonic anchors. This process encourages fluency in distinguishing between structural (or "real") notes and their ornamental surroundings, deepening

one's understanding of how melodic lines are constructed and how they can evolve within a stable harmonic framework.

Natural scheme: Engaging with the piece through a natural scheme approach, such as singing the bassline while improvising a melody in the right hand (or vice versa), supports the internalisation of voice leading while maintaining a strong connection to Chopin's original harmonic journey.

Transposition work: Transposing short sections of the Prelude to nearby keys can provide invaluable insight into Chopin's compositional strategies. This exercise not only deepens understanding of the material's harmonic structure, but also helps students become more fluent with key theoretical elements such as inversions, secondary dominants (notably on the I and II degrees in this piece), and diminished seventh chords functioning as dominants. Working through these harmonic shifts – whether within the original rhythmic figuration, a simplified texture, or an entirely different framework – builds confidence in navigating these gestures across various tonal environments.

Bass reduction: Creating and performing a reduced version of the score enhances the performer's awareness of phrase structure and long-range harmonic movement. By distilling the rich figuration down to its fundamental harmonic trajectory, one can uncover the simpler melodic line embedded within the complex 16th-note surface. In my reduction (Figure 18), I've used dotted and dashed bar-lines to mark hyper-measures and subphrases, drawing attention to the broader architectural pacing of the piece.

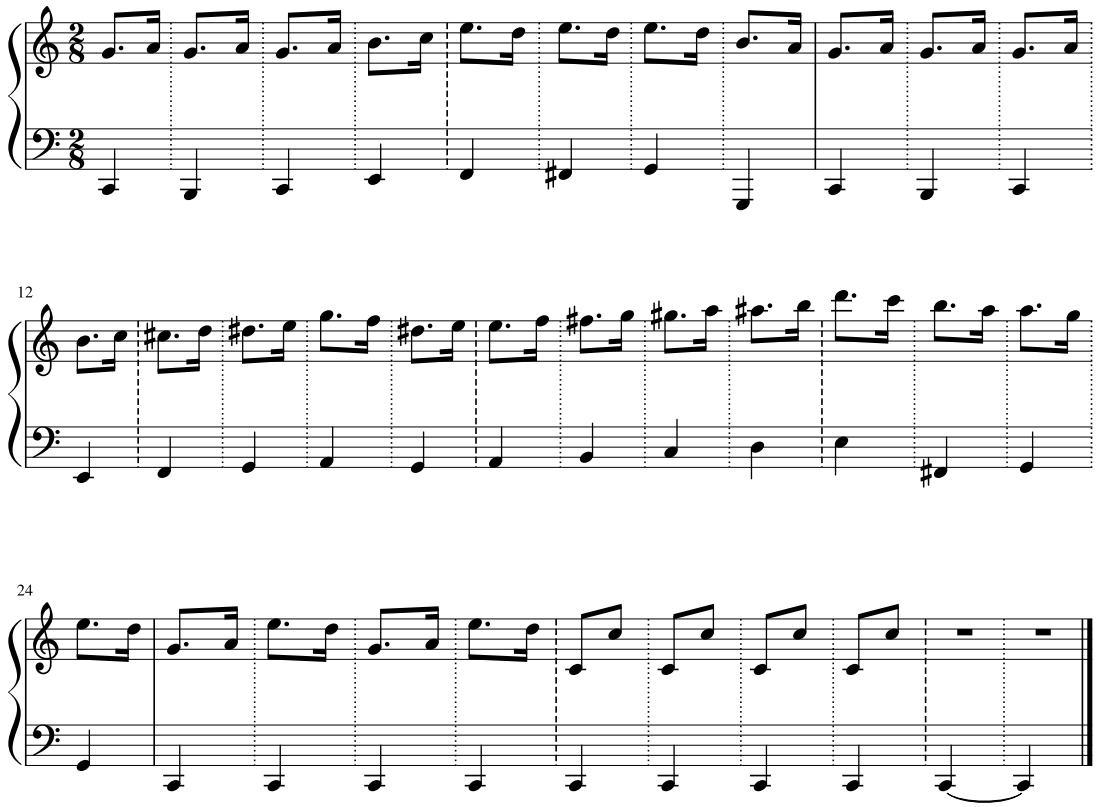

Figure 21: Simplified bass reduction of Chopin Prelude Op.28 n.1

Creative Work: Once these foundational elements are internalised, they can serve as a springboard for creative exploration. The bass reduction, for example, can be used as a framework for inventing new melodic lines or constructing an entirely different harmonic journey. What was once the structural skeleton of the Prelude can now be "dressed" with newly imagined rhythmic or melodic content, either drawn from previous exercises, inspired by other repertoire, or freely improvised. Alternatively, one could impose a new harmonic context and observe how the gestures adapt, modifying complexity to match the performer's

level of harmonic fluency. This process bridges the gap between analysis and expression, reinforcing both structural awareness and creative agency.

The more common conservatoire tradition tends to emphasize precision and accuracy, often at the expense of creative freedom. This kind of work should foster an exploratory and playful approach which hopefully aims to break the psychological conditioning many performers internalize early on: the fear of being "wrong". Overcoming this fear, and reframing "mistakes" as part of the exploratory journey, is key to unlocking one's potential.

A small example of this kind of exploratory work can be found in a short, recorded improvisation - available at this link: https://youtu.be/PaI9tz-dzW4 - where I attempted to transpose the rhythmic cell from Chopin's Prelude No. 1 into a different key and modal environment. I also explored some chromatic gestures reminiscent of the middle section and concluded with a brief pedal-based coda. This was my first attempt and by no means is a refined performance, but it serves to illustrate the trial-and-error nature of this process. The more I engaged in this type of practice, the more naturally my brain began to anticipate the soundworld I was reaching for without pauses or breaks in musical flow.

As Dolan often advised, it is crucial to accept the unexpected and continue – rather than stop to correct. Abandoning the ingrained habit of constant self-judgement and instead keeping the thread of phrase and form (e.g. 4-bar or 8-bar units) in mind has been one of the most difficult, yet transformative, challenges I've faced in these years of improvisation training (as this video can testify from my earlier attempts at this kind of work).

Recordings included in Appendix B document a progression in this work. In more recent examples, the improvisations display a greater clarity of form and expressive direction, while earlier improvisations are still mostly exploratory searches and experimentations on specific ideas or musical concepts. Even in those tentative stages, as in the case above, these creative experiments have proven invaluable in expanding my technical and expressive toolkit. They also underscore that I am by no means a master improviser – it would prove my research void if I had been already prior to starting these studies. Yet through consistent engagement in different strategies and trainings, my interpretive understanding has deepened, and my freedom at the instrument (both technically and musically) has grown consistently.

III. Case Study: Chopin - Prelude Op.28 No. 6 in B minor

This prelude offers fertile ground for exploring a range of key compositional and pedagogical elements. Unusually, the primary melodic material is carried by the left hand, making it an excellent study in voicing, balance, and expressive phrasing in the lower register (an aspect less frequently addressed in standard early and intermediate piano pedagogy[67]). A moment of striking harmonic colour appears in bars 12–14 with the use of a Neapolitan sixth chord, offering a clear entry point for introducing chromatic harmony and modal mixture in an emotionally resonant context.

The piece unfolds over a slow, descending, repeated-note accompaniment in the right hand that reinforces its sense of melancholy and inevitability. Formally, it presents a clear ternary structure with a brief coda, offering a compact yet effective framework for discussing musical form and encouraging improvisatory variation. Its sparse, chorale-like texture also invites experimentation with timing, voicing, and pedalling – elements that can be creatively extended into textural improvisations or freer stylistic reinterpretations.

[67] As some pedagogues have observed, developing expressive voicing and phrasing in the left hand requires dedicated attention, often postponed until more advanced stages of study. For example, Westney, W. (2003). *The perfect wrong note: Learning to trust your musical self*. Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press.

Formal Structure and Harmonic Outline

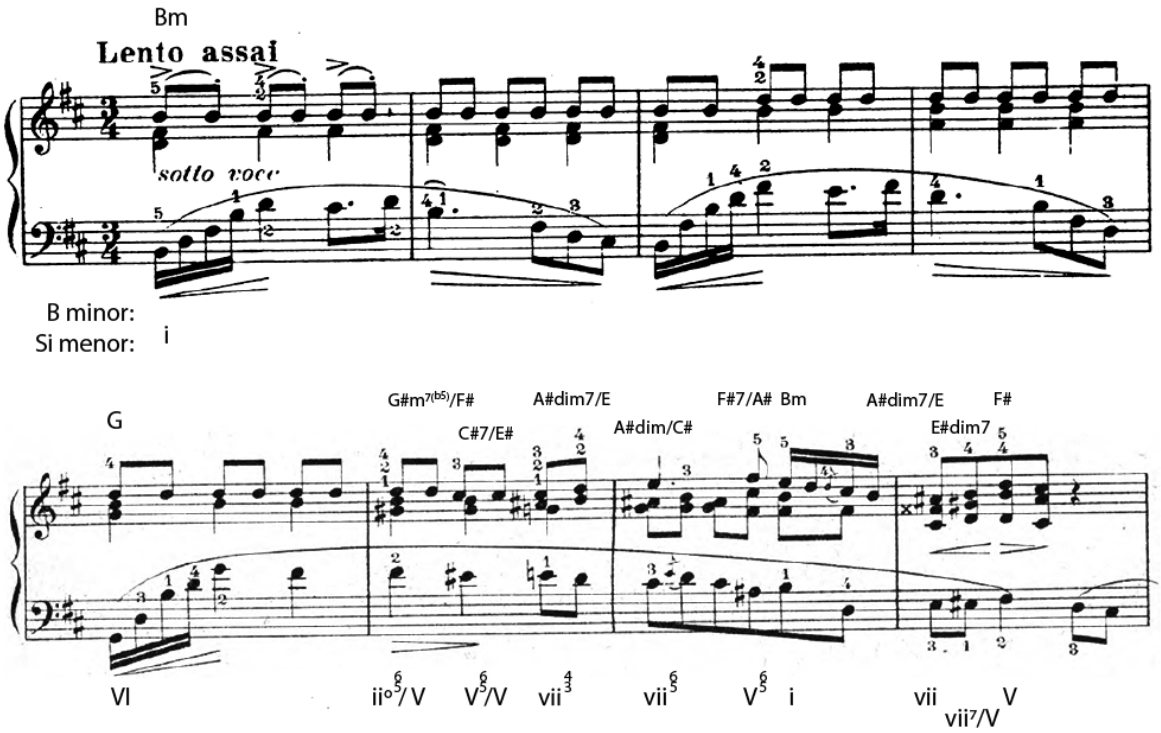

Figure 22: Chopin Prelude op.28 n.6 (firt phrase) with analysed harmony

This Prelude is composed of two main phrases and a short coda. The first phrase (bars 1–8) establishes the tonal and expressive character of the piece, while the second phrase (bars 9–21) expands and intensifies this material. The coda (bars 22–25) provides a poignant conclusion, reinforcing the introspective and resigned tone.

Key: Si/B minor

| i | i | i | i | VI | ii^{o5}/V V$^{6}_{5}$/V vii$^{4}_{3}$ | vii$^{6}_{5}$ V$^{6}_{5}$ i | vii vii^{7}/V V |

| i | i | VI V^{7}/N6 | N6 | N6 | N6 | vii$^{4}_{3}$ V i | vii$^{4}_{3}$ V i | VI V^{7} | VI |

| vii$^{4}_{3}$ V i | vii$^{4}_{3}$ V i | VI V7 | i | i | i | i | i |

Application for Improvisation

Many of the strategies discussed in relation to Prelude No. 1 can also be applied here, including harmonic assimilation, bass reduction, and transposition. This piece is especially valuable for familiarising oneself with the Neapolitan sixth and the use of secondary dominants in quick succession (particularly in bars 6–8). Transposing the prelude into different

modes or keys (such as B Dorian or B major), can highlight how harmonic relationships shift while retaining the expressive intent, particularly around the Neapolitan chord.

Motivic development: The sighing descending phrases of the right-hand motif offer excellent material for motivic development. Students can explore variations of these gestures, incorporating chromaticism, modal colouring, or metric shifts to understand their expressive potential. Moreover, the harmonic structure (arpeggiated and broken chords, chromatic and melodic movement) in the left hand can be used as a framework for improvisation. Students might experiment with rhythmic variation, suspensions, and passing tones while maintaining a clear sense of harmonic progression.

Creative Work: A natural extension of this analysis is to improvise or compose alternative melodic material over Chopin's harmonic structure. For example, the first four bars could be reimagined using different inversions of the B minor arpeggio, along with newly shaped passing and appoggiatura notes. A descending chromatic melody, as found in bars 5–8, could be harmonised with new solutions, starting with an inversion or rearrangement of Chopin's original harmony, followed by personal explorations of alternative progressions. The aim is to gradually move from analytical understanding to auditory intuition, allowing improvisation to emerge from internalised harmonic logic.

Free Preluding as Structural Echo. Inspired by the mood and structure of Chopin's Prelude, a performer might choose to improvise a new prelude that echoes its affective and formal elements. For example, one might begin with a descending bass line in a sparse texture, introduce slow harmonic rhythm, and use a Neapolitan sixth at a structurally reflective moment. In my own work, this process of drawing from referential material became a foundational tool in the creation of my *Reflections*, presented in my final DMA recital.

IV. Case Study: Chopin - Prelude Op.28 No. 13 in F# Major

Prelude No. 13 in F-sharp major offers a lyrical, intimate space for exploring vocal phrasing, harmonic nuance, and textural refinement. Its transparent texture and balanced phrase structure make it an ideal canvas for interpretive depth as well as improvisatory experimentation.

The piece opens with a long-breathed melody in the right hand, accompanied by a gentle, repeated chordal texture in the left. The right-hand line sings with a natural rubato and bel canto sensibility, inviting the performer to approach the material with expressive flexibility. Its relatively simple harmonic landscape, built on functional relationships, still manages to deliver poignant colour through subtle chromaticism, suspended resolutions, and voice-leading.

Formal Structure and Harmonic Outline

Prelude No. 13 in F♯ major is written in ternary form (ABA). It opens with an eight-measure phrase built on a simple harmonic progression. An eighth-note ostinato pattern in the left-hand features two non-harmonic tones – highlighted in the first measures (see Figure 20) – which are repeated throughout the prelude, adding harmonic colour and texture.

Section B begins at measure 20 and consists of a single extended phrase in the relative minor key of d♯ minor. The harmony moves through C♯ major, c♯ minor, and b minor before returning to F♯ major for the recapitulation. In this middle section, Chopin introduces major seventh appoggiaturas (e.g., B♯ in measure 21 and A♯ in measure 23) as well as thirteenth chord extensions (e.g., G♯ in measures 24 and 25). In the recapitulation, Chopin recalls only the second phrase of the A section, omitting the opening phrase and extending the conclusion with several new measures.

Improvisation Strategies and Creative Applications

This Prelude provides fertile ground for improvisation on multiple fronts.

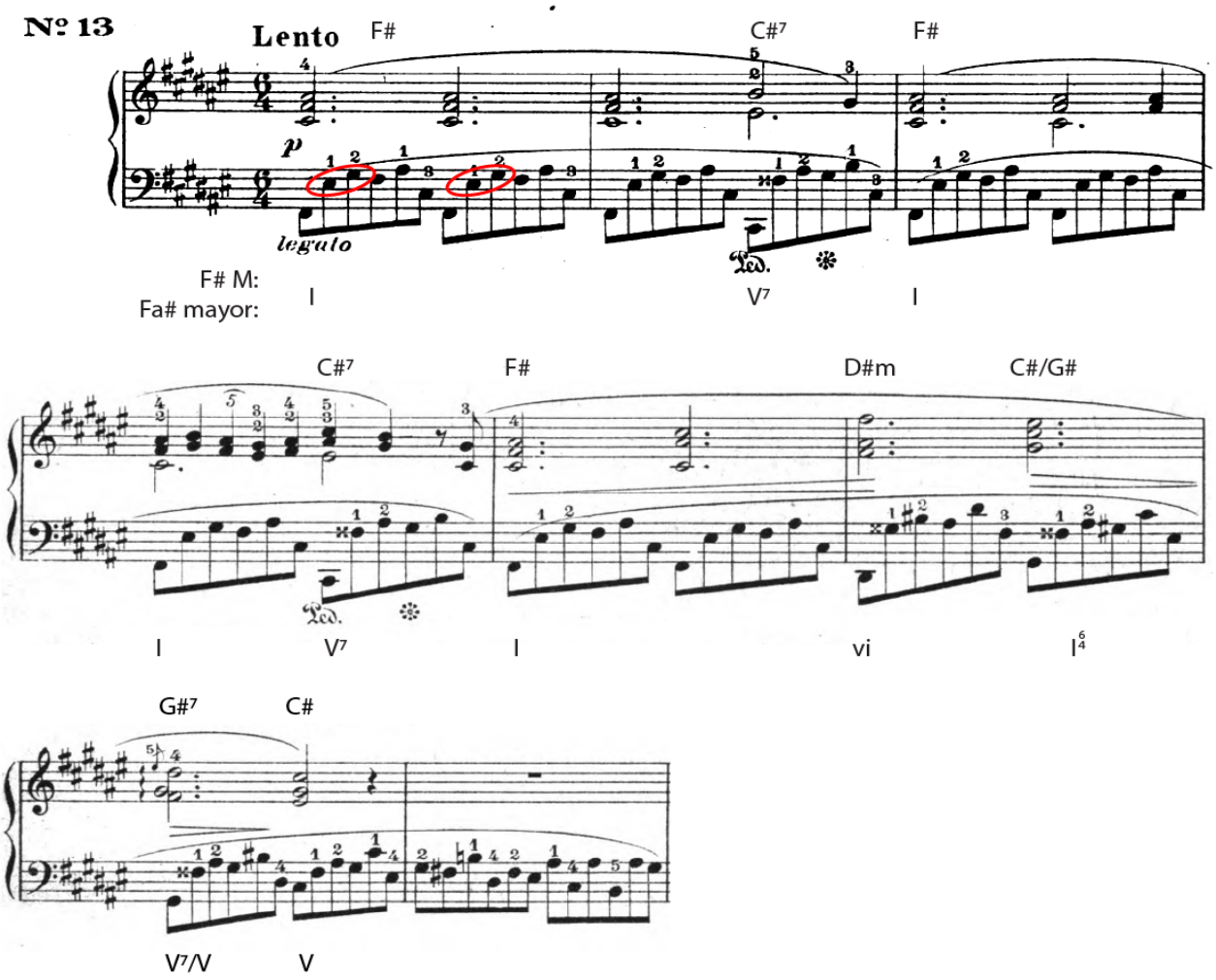

Figure 23: Chopin Prelude n.13 (first phrase) with chordal anaylisis

Motivic Development: The right-hand melody, originally chorale-like in character, lends itself well to motivic improvisation. One can experiment by reducing the texture to one or two voices, or by completely reimagining the rhythmic material to explore new expressive possibilities. In its most simple form, an improvisation might involve playing the original material as written but with the melody transposed into a different inversion, reinforcing and internalising the harmonic journey of the piece while subtly reshaping its contour.

Textural Work and Ostinato Patterns: Chopin employs an eighth-note accompaniment pattern in the left hand featuring two non-harmonic tones (circled out in Figure 20) that recur throughout the prelude, adding subtle harmonic colour. This particular enrichment of the harmony through an ostinato-like figure offers fertile ground for improvisational explora-

tion. Pianistically, this pattern can be understood as a "flourishing" of a chord tone by surrounding it with neighbouring notes, either diatonically or chromatically. This approach opens up a wide range of possibilities for creating similar accompaniment textures, allowing improvisers to vary the harmonic palette while maintaining a coherent structural foundation.

Creative Work – Free Flow Exploration: A free improvisation I recorded offers an example of this kind of creative response.

Link to the improvisation: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvRlowG3ROg

The recording begins as a distant echo of Chopin's Prelude, as discussed in the final section of the previous case study. The right hand initially mirrors the long-breathed melodic phrasing of the original, while the left hand provides an ostinato accompaniment that enriches simple harmonies by moving through neighbouring tones, much like Chopin's own approach. Around the 0:57 mark, the accompaniment expands into a more fluid arpeggiated motion, incorporating extensive use of passing tones and navigating wider modal transitions.

This improvisation further explores modulations using secondary dominants, Neapolitan (N6) and IIb chords, ambiguous major–minor overlays (2:24), and a thicker, more chordal texture (3:45), which eventually leads into a direct stylistic echo of Chopin's original Prelude at 5:20. The improvisation concludes with an introspective *coda* (a metaphorical "getting lost") that reflects both the emotional ambiguity of the original and my own still-developing capacity for shaping extended improvisational forms.

This kind of work not only nurtures harmonic intuition and technical control but also cultivates a sense of narrative in improvisation. Once again, the improvisation presented here is not a "finalized" product; it was neither pre-planned nor based on any written instructions. Rather, it represents an initial exploratory attempt, recorded as part of my process of deepening my understanding of this Prelude.

Conclusions: Integration and Creativity - The Role of Improvisation in Performance

When I began this research, I imagined it might culminate in a singular, coherent method for integrating improvisation into classical music education. However, through the course of my exploration, it has become clear that what I have developed is not a fixed method, but rather a constellation of strategies: tools that can be embedded within the pedagogical framework of classical music training to cultivate more flexible, expressive, and embodied musicianship.

A central tenet that emerged is the importance of learning harmony and music theory in tandem with repertoire. Ideally, every musical concept encountered by a student, from their earliest pieces to more advanced works, should be deconstructed and experienced from its foundational elements in an empirical way. This means engaging directly with chords, scales, and progressions not only as theoretical abstractions, but as living elements of a musical language. This aligns with the concept of *learned schemes*, where harmonic and gestural patterns are assimilated through repetition and improvisatory application.

Students should be encouraged to explore these elements actively: identifying the harmonic structure of a piece, extrapolating gestures into short improvisations, and creating small formal exercises that allow for playful variation. Sing-and-play exercises, harmonic reharmonisation, and the spontaneous invention of miniatures such as minuets or preludes cultivate audiation and support the gradual integration of learned material into *natural schemes*: internalised intuitive frameworks that guide spontaneous musical thought.

Improvisation grounded in stylistic and formal parameters (such as a known harmonic progression or a historical form), provides a referential framework for creative experimentation. Conversely, free improvisation, unconstrained by such parameters, offers a space to explore one's intuitive voice and to confront the unpredictability of spontaneous expression. Both approaches are valid and mutually reinforcing. By relinquishing the desire for a "perfect product", we open ourselves to creative risk-taking and discovery. In my own journey, what began as unstructured soundscapes in early free improvisation sessions has evolved into more

coherent musical statements. These more recent explorations, such as the improvised *Prelude* in memory of my partner and the single-take *Elegy* (Appendix B), suggest the emergence of a personal voice – what Kratus describes as Level 7 development.

Throughout Chapters 4 and 5, I have detailed a range of practical strategies that support this integrative approach:

- **Structural replay**: re-performing a piece while allowing variation or elaboration based on its harmonic/melodic framework.

- **Play-and-explore**: using the written score as a starting point and deviating freely to explore alternative expressions.

- **Bass reduction**: simplifying a passage to its harmonic foundation to aid internalisation and support improvisation.

- **Technical riffs**: extracting technically challenging material and reworking it in varied keys or textures to build fluency.

- **Style-based re-composition**: taking gestures from a piece and generating new compositions within the same stylistic idiom.

- **Read–explore–replay**: cycling between a score reading, an exploratory improvisation, and a second performance with renewed insight.

- **Melodic permutation**: modifying melodic content while preserving harmonic or formal outlines.

- **Form-based improvisation**: improvising new material within a fixed formal structure (e.g., binary form, ternary form, ABA).

- **Free-form improvisation:** Engaging in open-ended exploration with minimal or no external referents, guided by a natural schemes approach. This strategy allows the musician to discover which internalized musical patterns or gestures have become part of their intuitive vocabulary, while also inviting the emergence of new, unexpected ideas. It fosters spontaneity, deepens creative listening, and strengthens the connection between ear, body, and imagination.

Together, these strategies foster internalisation of musical material and expand the expressive range of the performer. They reaffirm the idea that classical performance need not be a static act of reproduction, but a dynamic and creative engagement with musical tradition.

Moreover, improvisation begins with the permission to explore without fear of error. It is in these early stages, free from judgement or expectations, that the seeds of musical voice are planted. These explorations are then fed by analytical insight, engagement with theory, and play with existing scores. Yet it is also crucial that, at times, all this knowledge be set aside, because it is in these uncharted, intuitive "cauldrons" of free play that the creative mind can stumble upon new textures, ideas, and emotional worlds.

Although my focus has been on idioms from the Romantic era, the methodologies explored here are broadly applicable. In fact, moving through historical styles sequentially allows for a richer understanding of how musical language evolves. For instance, the use of Debussy's hexatonic scales or enharmonic modulations becomes far more intelligible after hands-on experience with earlier harmonic frameworks. Similarly, the rhythmic asymmetries of Bartók gain deeper context when approached after immersion in classical and Romantic phrasing. Each new stylistic layer builds naturally upon the last.

This research has also reshaped my own teaching. My analytical and empathetic listening have become more attuned, and my pedagogical focus has shifted from prescriptive instruction toward nurturing autonomy, structural awareness, and expressive risk-taking in students. Echoing the methods I observed during my fieldwork (such as "speaking through" the music or embodying gesture through score reduction) I have witnessed students respond with greater immediacy and connection. This experience has reaffirmed a fundamental truth: it is the ear, not the hands, that must lead in musical growth. Only by understanding what we hear – by recognising, imagining, and anticipating sound – can we direct our physical practice meaningfully. Thus, the development of inner hearing and deep listening must be trained as rigorously as our technical skills, for they form the perceptual foundation upon which expressive performance is built.

On a social factor, this work has also raised broader questions about the role and accessibility of tertiary classical education. Current institutional models often centre on a narrow vision of success: the star student, the international competition winner, the soloist career. These models tend to benefit a small demographic: typically, those who have had access

to high-quality musical instruction from an early age, and the socio-economic conditions to support sustained, intensive practice. For many, this ideal remains structurally out of reach.

As markets and global dynamics shift, the conservatoire model must also evolve. If tertiary institutions wish to remain relevant, they must offer more than a distant promise of elite careers. They must become laboratories for creativity and collaboration, spaces where students are not just trained to replicate canonical interpretations but empowered to contribute meaningfully to the living language of music. While such aims are increasingly embraced in jazz and popular music programmes, classical training still lags in integrating these values. Improvisation, in this context, is not a luxury or an extracurricular curiosity; it is a pedagogical necessity that fosters adaptability, agency, and artistic identity.

In conclusion, this research affirms that improvisation is not merely an optional skill or an artistic supplement within classical music education, but a critical component of developing responsive, well-rounded musicianship. Drawing from established pedagogical models (Kratus, Dolan, Molina) and grounded in practical case studies, my findings suggest that improvisation strengthens harmonic understanding, structural awareness, and expressive freedom. When integrated meaningfully into repertoire-based learning, improvisation helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and intuitive artistry. This supports a much-needed pedagogical shift: away from a narrow emphasis on replication and towards a more holistic view of performers as creative, adaptive artists: musicians who engage with tradition as something alive and evolving, rather than something to be merely reproduced.

Ear Before Hand: A Personal Reflection

If I had to identify one tangible, lasting result from the past few years of doctoral research, it would be the refinement of my listening, both in how I hear myself play and how I respond to my students. More than anything else, this study has sharpened my ear and changed the way I understand musical growth.

One of the turning points came when I listened back to recordings of my own playing from a decade ago, particularly some practice footage featured in the documentary *Crossing Rachmaninoff*. While it's not easy to watch those moments now, they revealed a deep truth: back then, I was practicing with my hands first, not my ears. I repeated passages slowly, with a metronome, or drilled patterns for a set number of times, not because I was listening for

something specific, but because I wanted to feel safe that it would “work” under pressure. Much of that practice was anxiety-led and directionless.

I could hear, in those recordings, a focus on control and correctness: sextuplets played with mechanical precision but stripped of nuance. Musical ideas were flattened by the need to be “right.”

From Safety to Intentionality

In contrast, the practice I do now is led by sound. I can listen to a performance by Lipatti or Uchida and *understand* (not just admire) how their phrasing, rubato, and understanding of hyper-measures relate to the harmonic and formal structure. I can explain to a student why Brendel’s Schubert feels compelling, or how Schiff’s Bach dances forward and back with the phrasing. My ear now demands more from me, both technically and musically, and I feel better equipped to meet those demands with intentional practice and clearer pedagogical instructions.

The Connection: Mind, Ear, Body

This is perhaps the clearest "result" of my research: not that I practice more, but that I practice differently. My time at the piano now feels fruitful rather than frustrating. There’s a tighter link between my mind, my ear, and my body. When I hear something is off, I can more immediately diagnose why, and more importantly, I am less in the dark than in the past on *how* to fix it. I’m not just hoping it improves. I’m guiding it toward something I understand.

Even though I believe my improvisational voice is still developing, the process of bridging spontaneous exploration with structured score work has deeply enriched my musicianship. It has helped me both verbalise and embody what makes one musical choice more compelling than another – and given me tools to guide others in the same pursuit. While Action Research centred on one’s own practice might appear subjective or biased, the cumulative feedback I’ve received over the past few years, my own perception of my playing, and a comparative listening to recordings (past and recent) suggest that the work undertaken during

this doctorate has developed my musicianship in ways that simple 'more practice at the piano' could not have achieved.[68]

From my experience, there is now a clear distinction in how I perceive performers: between those who truly listen and *audiate*, and those who merely execute. This distinction has become one of the key factors shaping my taste and my understanding of what makes a musician compelling. It is perhaps also the reason I feel so strongly that improvisation must have a greater presence in classical music training – because of its role in training that connection mind-ear-body so crucial in the development of a rounded musician. It is the combination of trained listening and embodied gesture that allows us to bring meaning to sound. Together, they form the key to unlocking the unwritten notes behind any score, and to exploring the sounds that are yet to be written.

[68] A link to a recent recording I have made of Ballade n.4 by Chopin is shared at the end of Chapter 2 for reference

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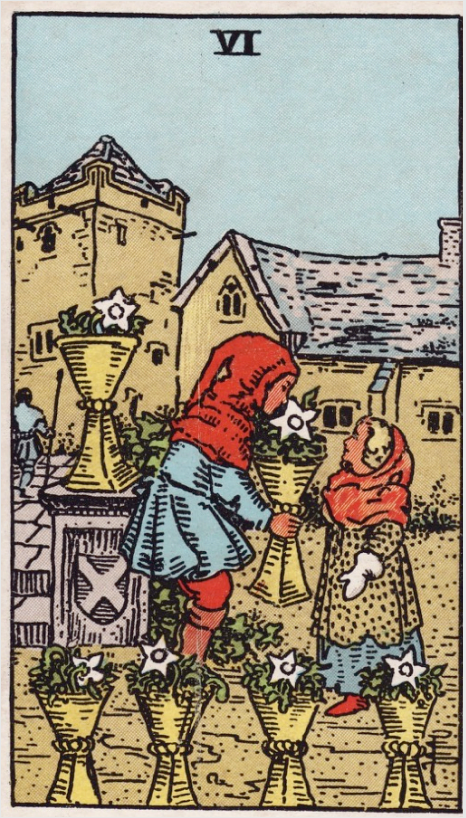
Appendix

Appendix A. 24 Small Pieces inspired by Kabalevsky Op.39

FLAVIO VILLANI

24 LITTLE PIECES

INSPIRED BY KABALEVSKY'S OP.39



APRIL 2020

Flavio Villani

24 LITTLE PIECES
FOR PIANOFORTE

Dedicated to the 6 of cups and Trick

This selection of small pieces is a play on the materials offered by the homonymous set of pieces by Kabalevsky. Each piece is reimagined in different ways: from taking the compositive elements and rearranging, transposing and slightly modifying them to using just one general idea, movement or gesture and proposing something new from that provocation.

In both cases I want to invite students to check the original piece by the Russian composer, find out what makes them what they are, try my humble ideas and come with new paths for their own recomposing of those works. Sometimes even something as simple as changing the direction of a small tune can be the source of great fun for a young musicians, to discover that music is a beautiful language of which building blocks we can learn and assimilate: "much like the way we speak, 'composing' sentences and dialogues without thinking too much about the building blocks of words and grammar, the end goal is a musical equivalent, recognising that music is only a separate toolbox of building blocks - an extra palette of expressive colours."[1]

I hope these small pieces bring you the same joy that has given to me discovering them through the sounds left from Kabalevksy's own pieces, from their witty ideas and their playful invitations; and I hope they help you adding to your palette new words and colours to safeguard in your ever-growing baggage of sounds.

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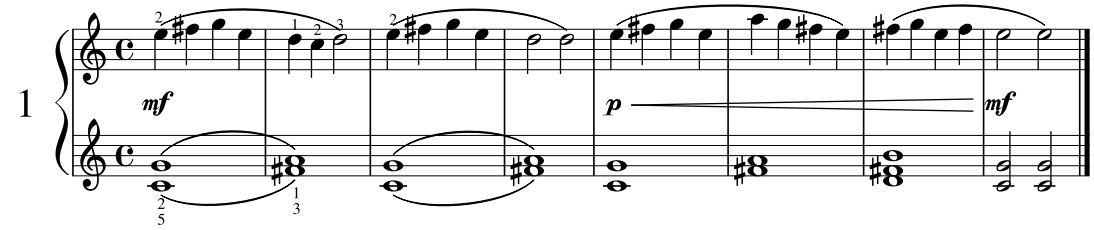
[1] Xiaole Zhan, pianist

24 Small Pieces

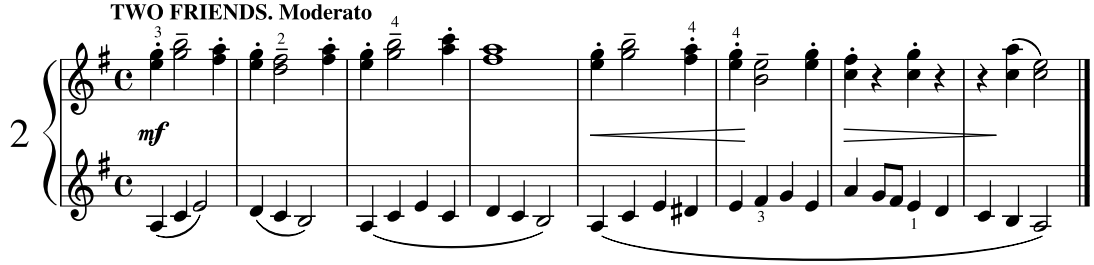
inspired by Kabalevsy Op.39

Flavio Villani

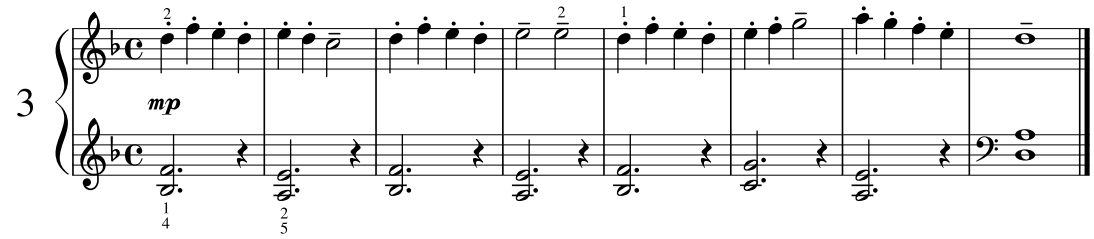
SONG. Andantino



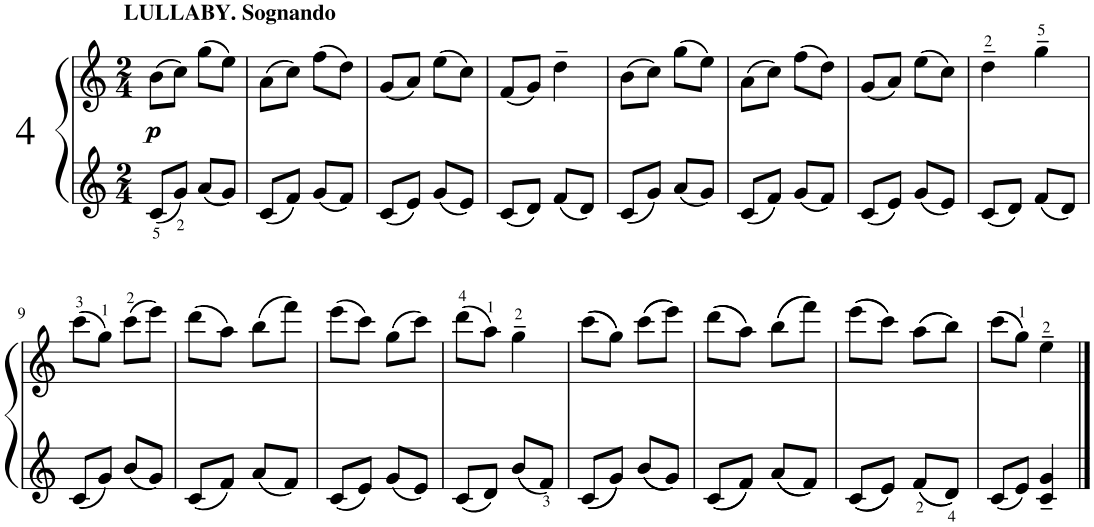
TWO FRIENDS. Moderato



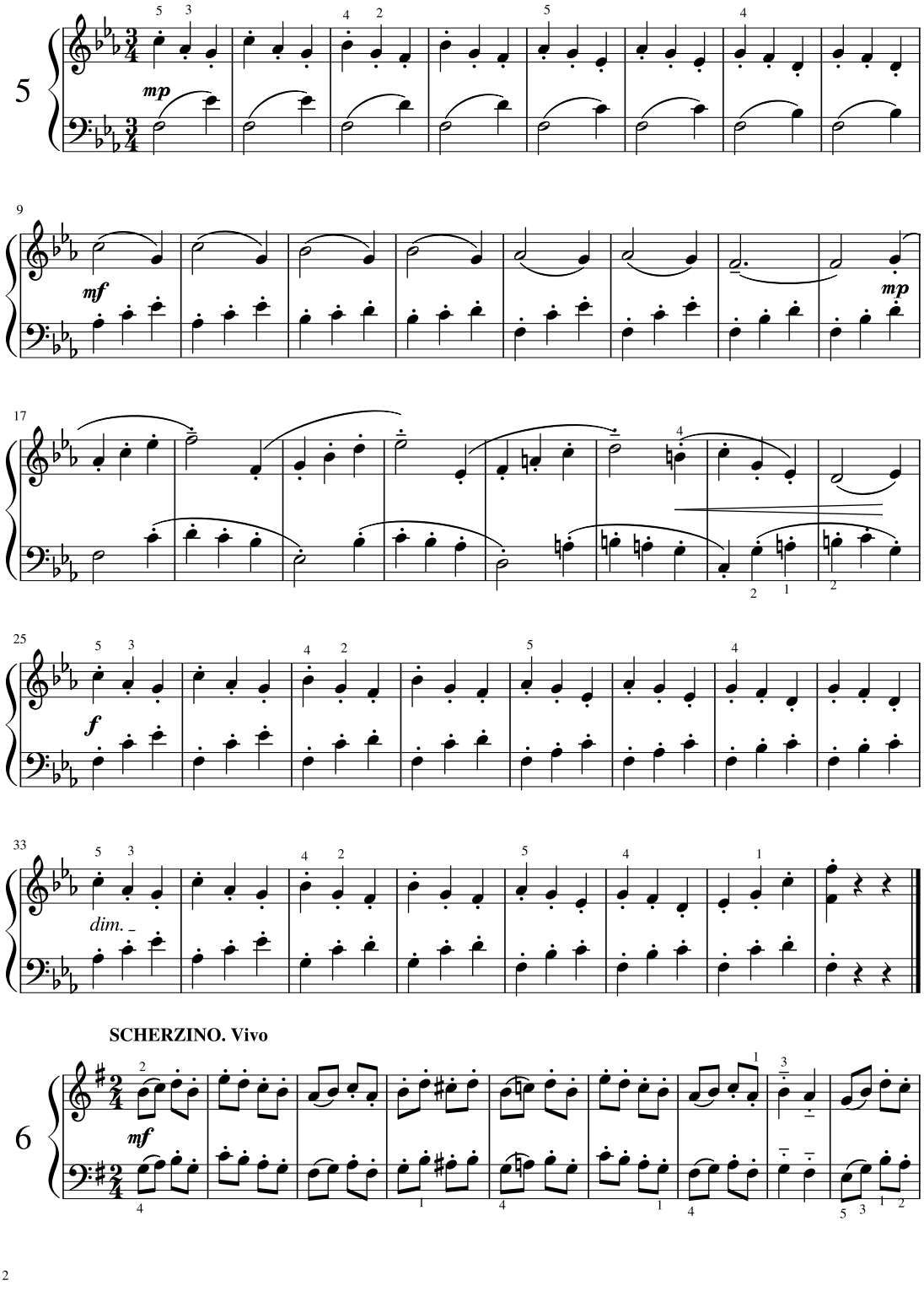
WANDERING. Alla marcia



LULLABY. Sognando

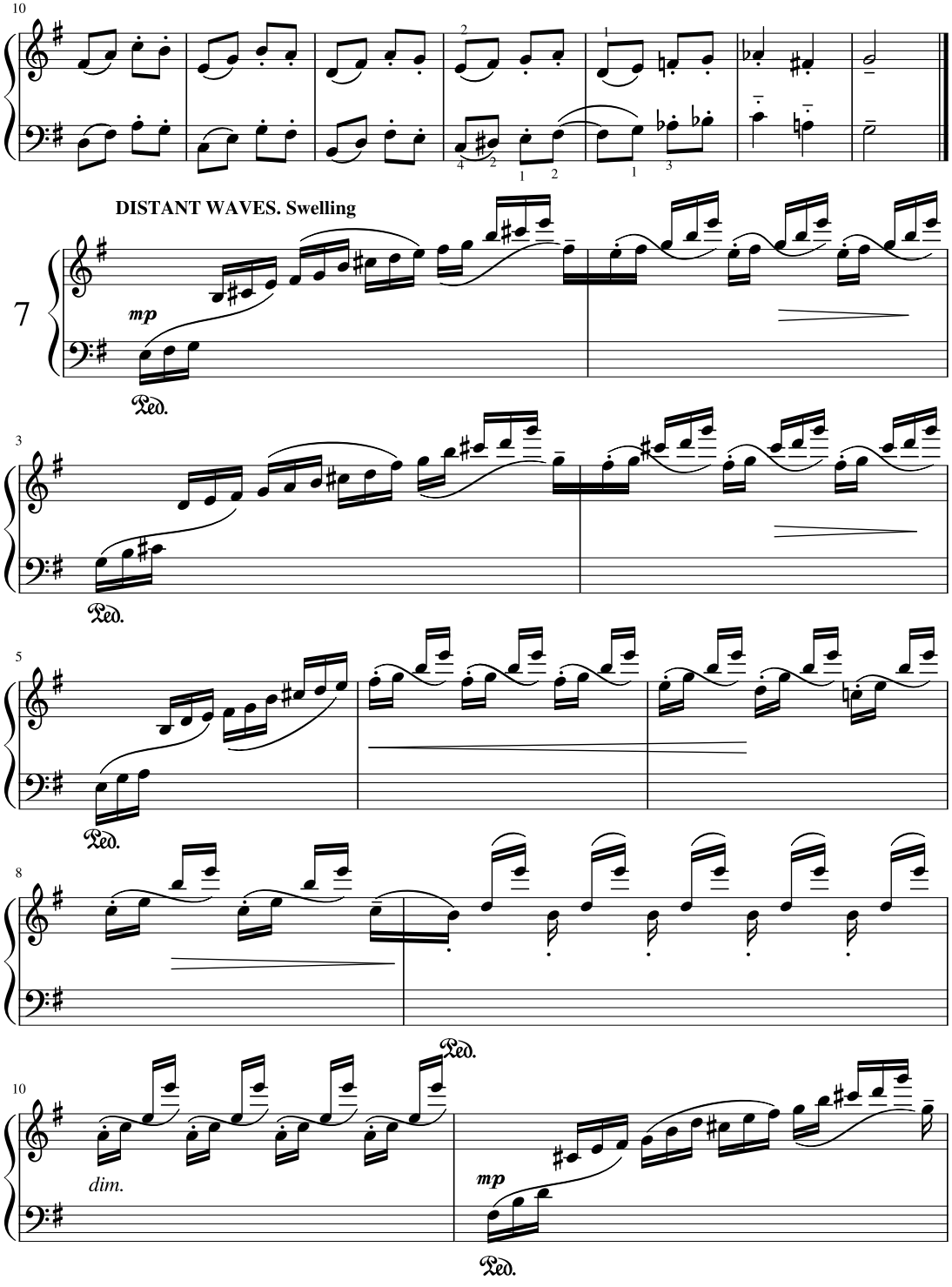


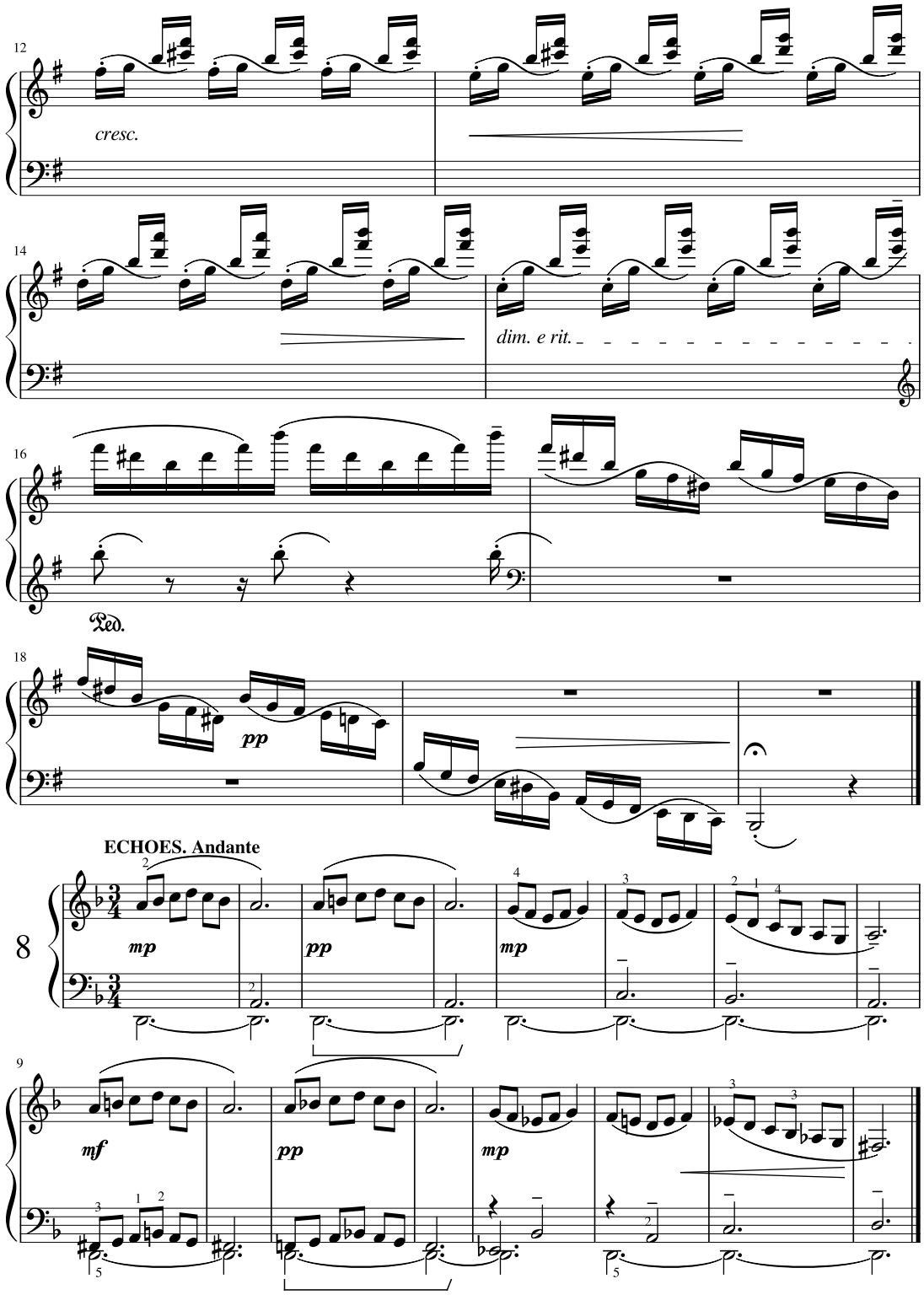
ROUND DANCE. Allegro



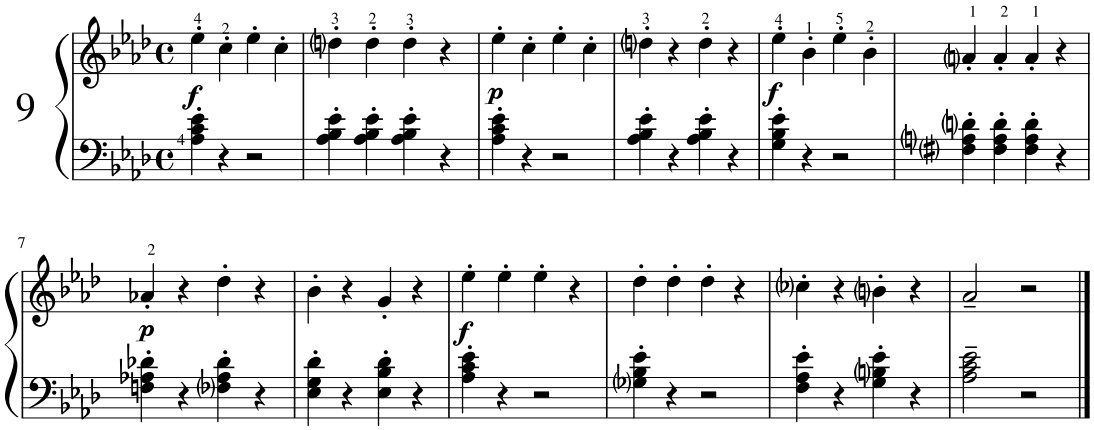
SCHERZINO. Vivo

2

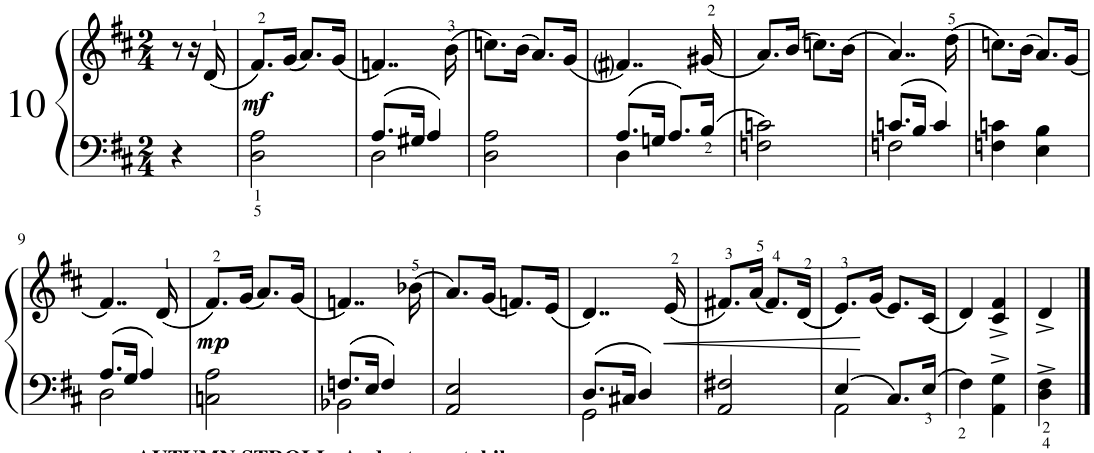

10
DISTANT WAVES. Swelling
7
mp
Ped.
3
Ped.
5
Ped.
8
Ped.
10
dim.
mp
Ped.


12
cresc.
14
dim. e rit.
16
Ped.
18
pp
ECHOES. Andante
8
mp
pp
mp
9
mf
pp
mp

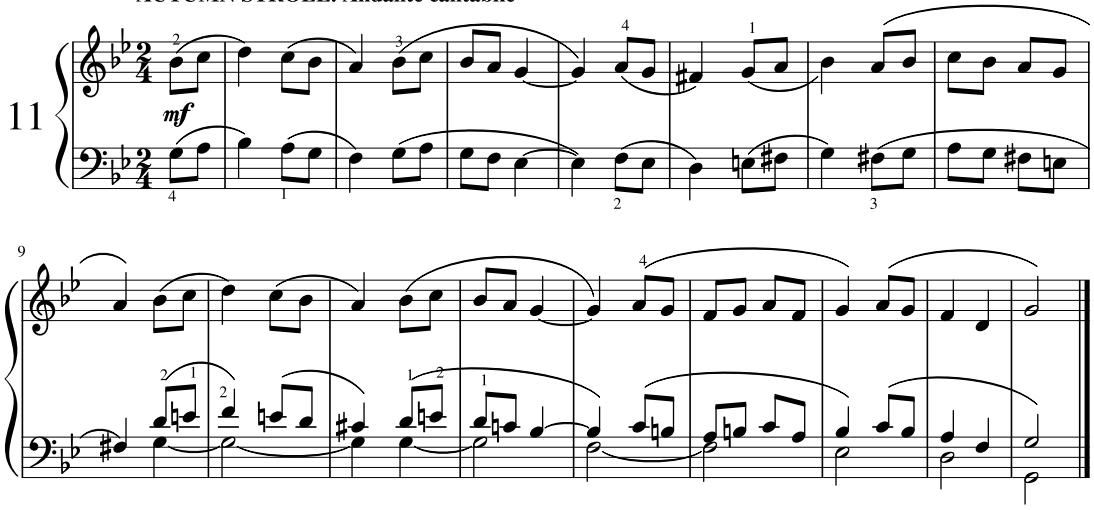
DANZA. Vivo *all the accidentals in parenthesis are optional and can be added at whim



DOLL'S MARCH. Tempo di marcia

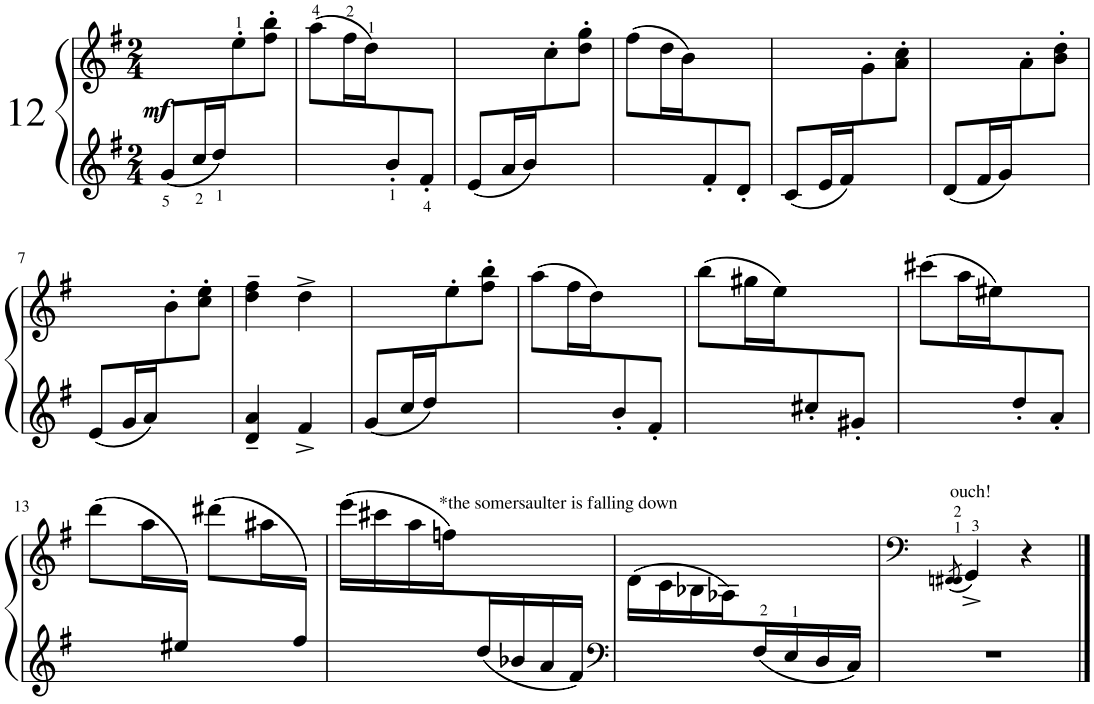


AUTUMN STROLL. Andante cantabile

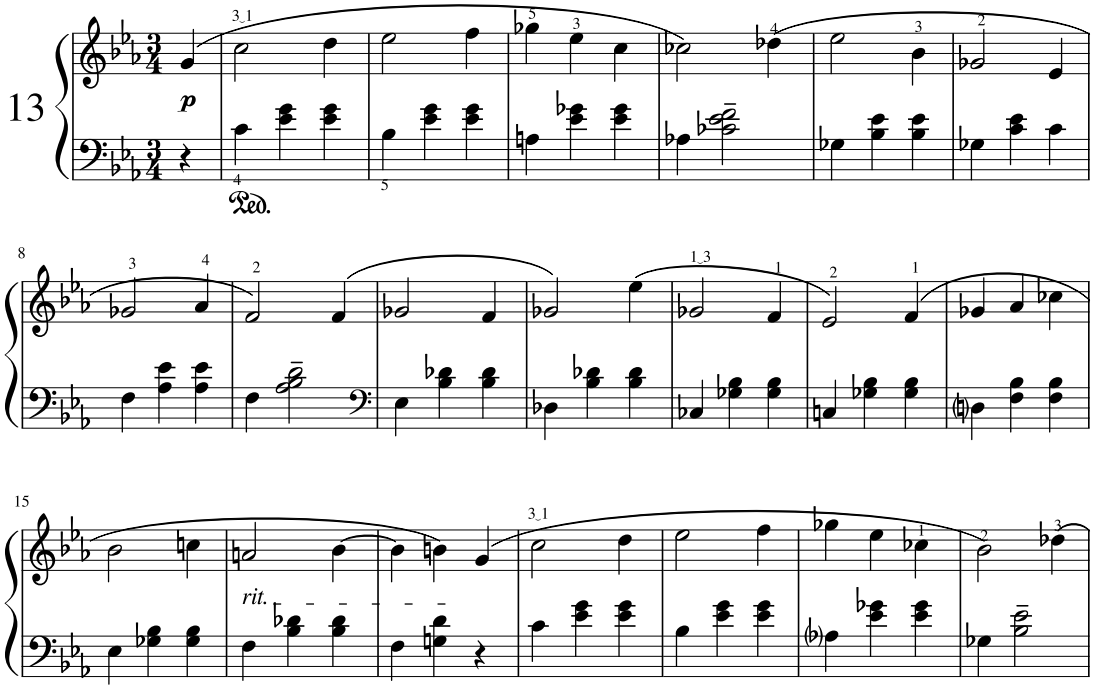


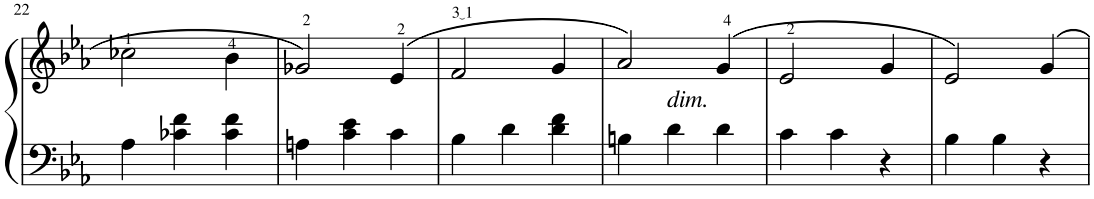
5

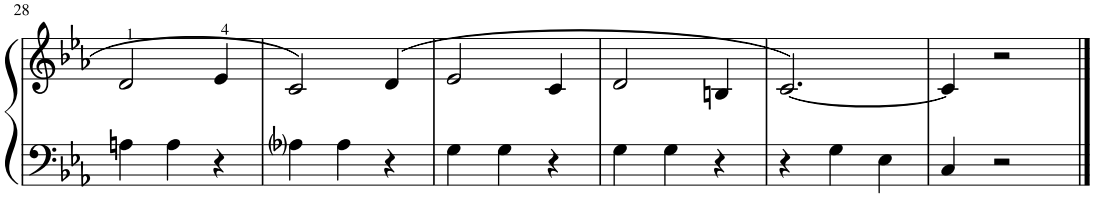
SOMERSAULTS. Vivo



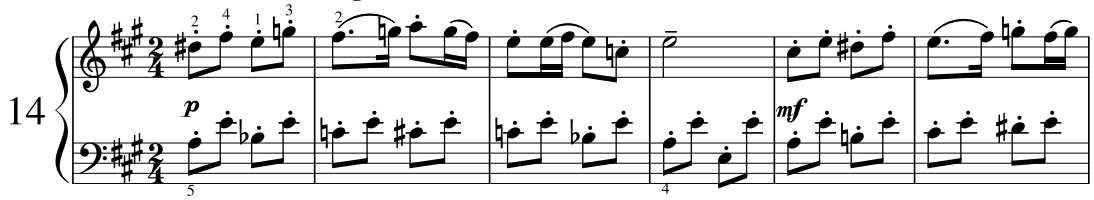
WALTZ. Moderato ed espressivo

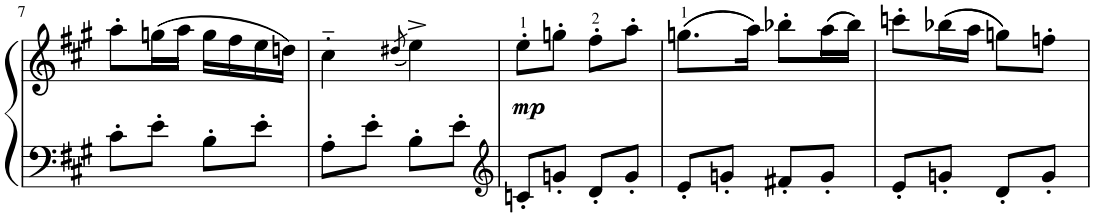


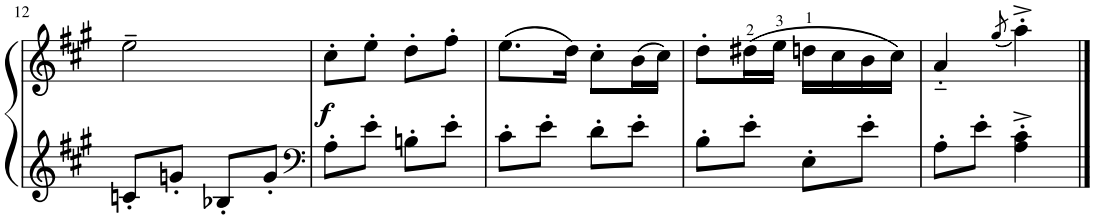




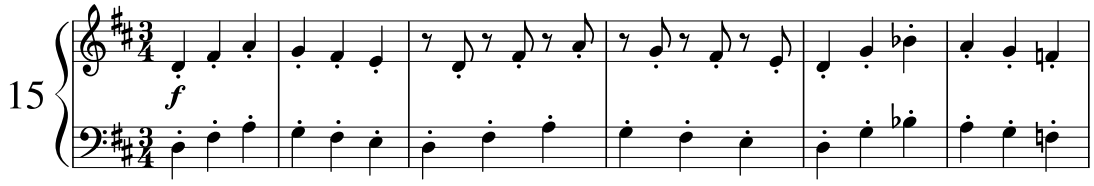
FAIRY DANCE. Allegro scherzoso

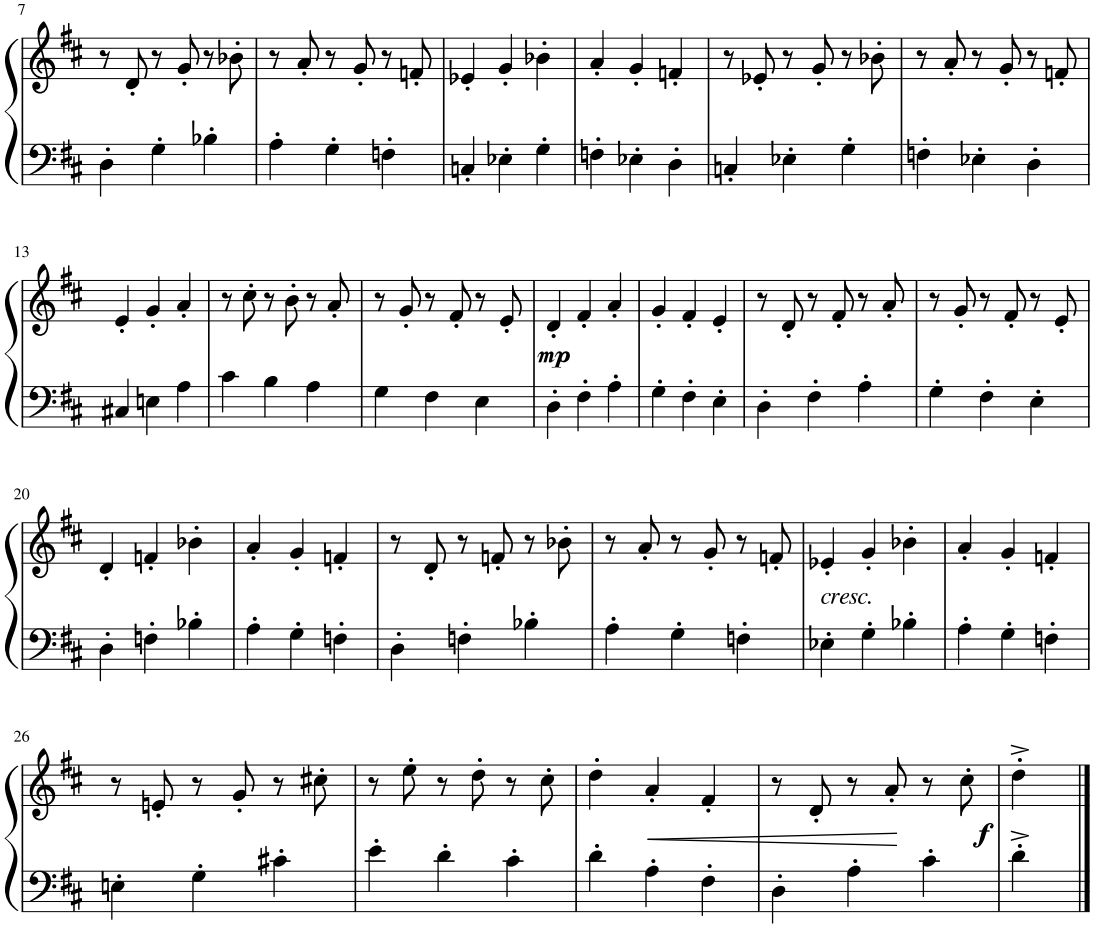




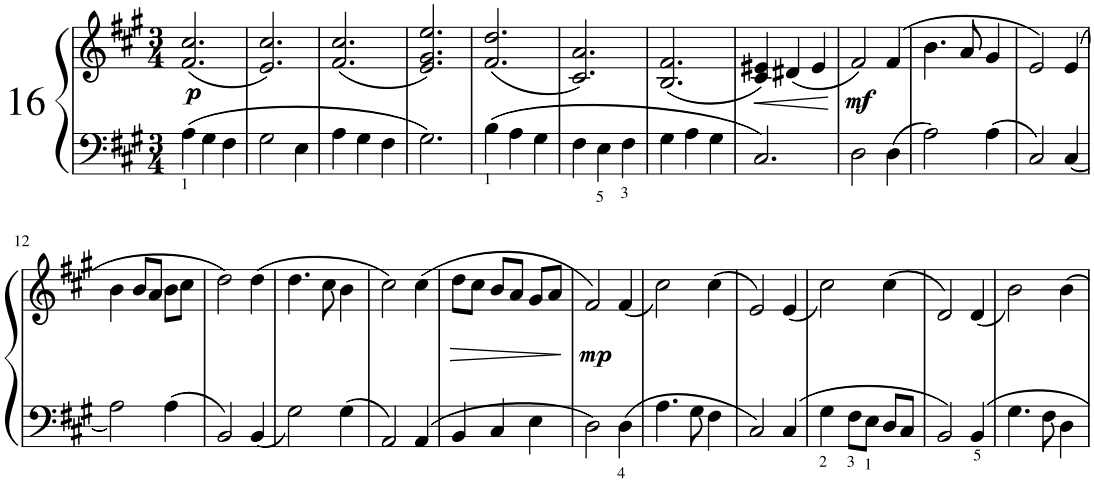


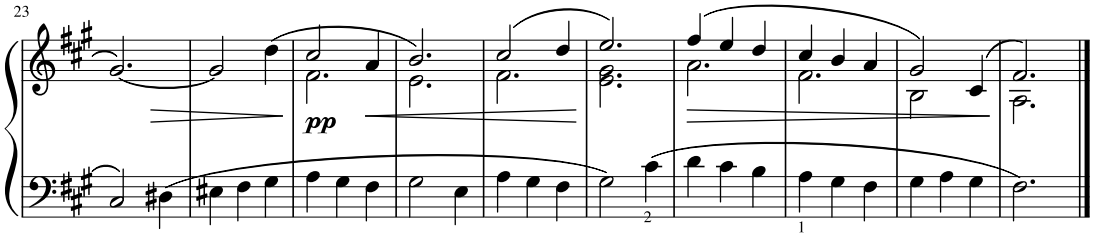
HURDLING. Giocoso

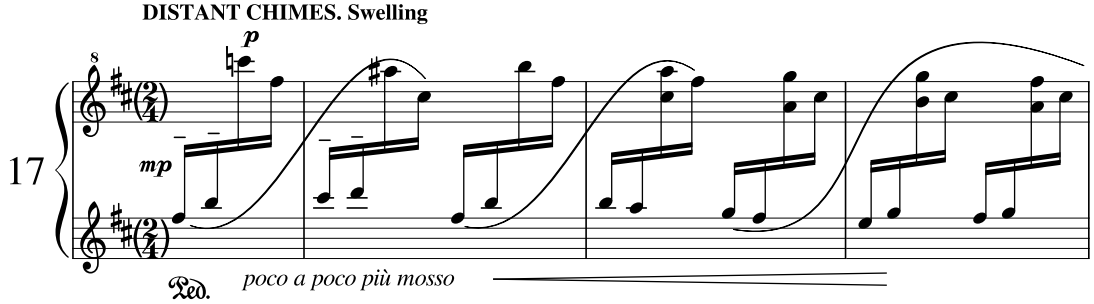


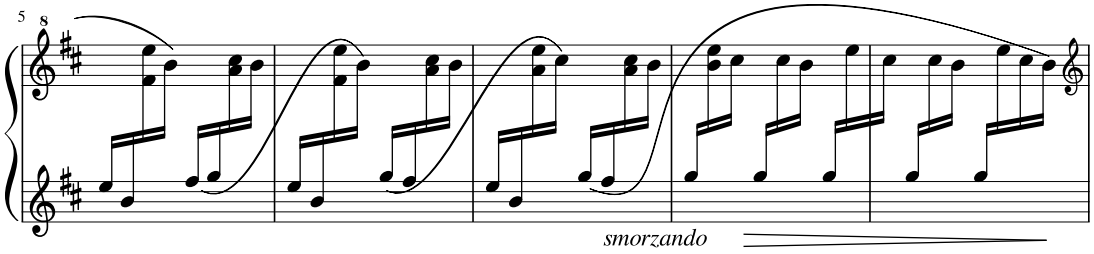


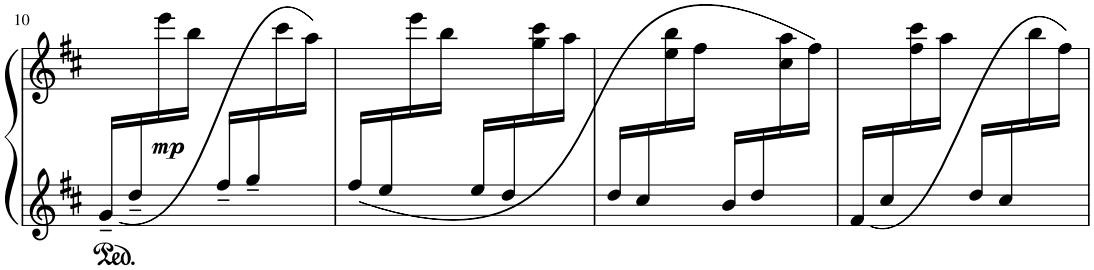
A MEMORY. Andante

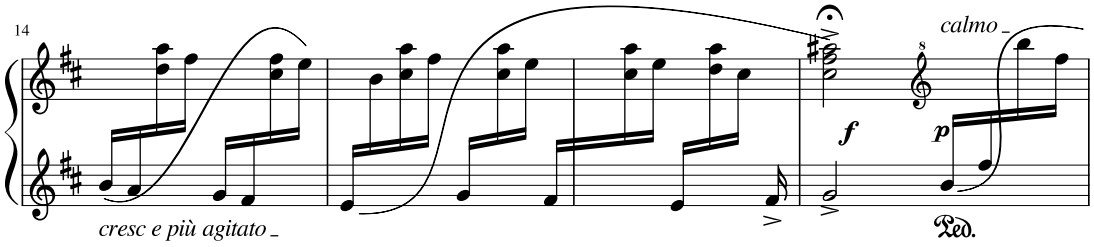


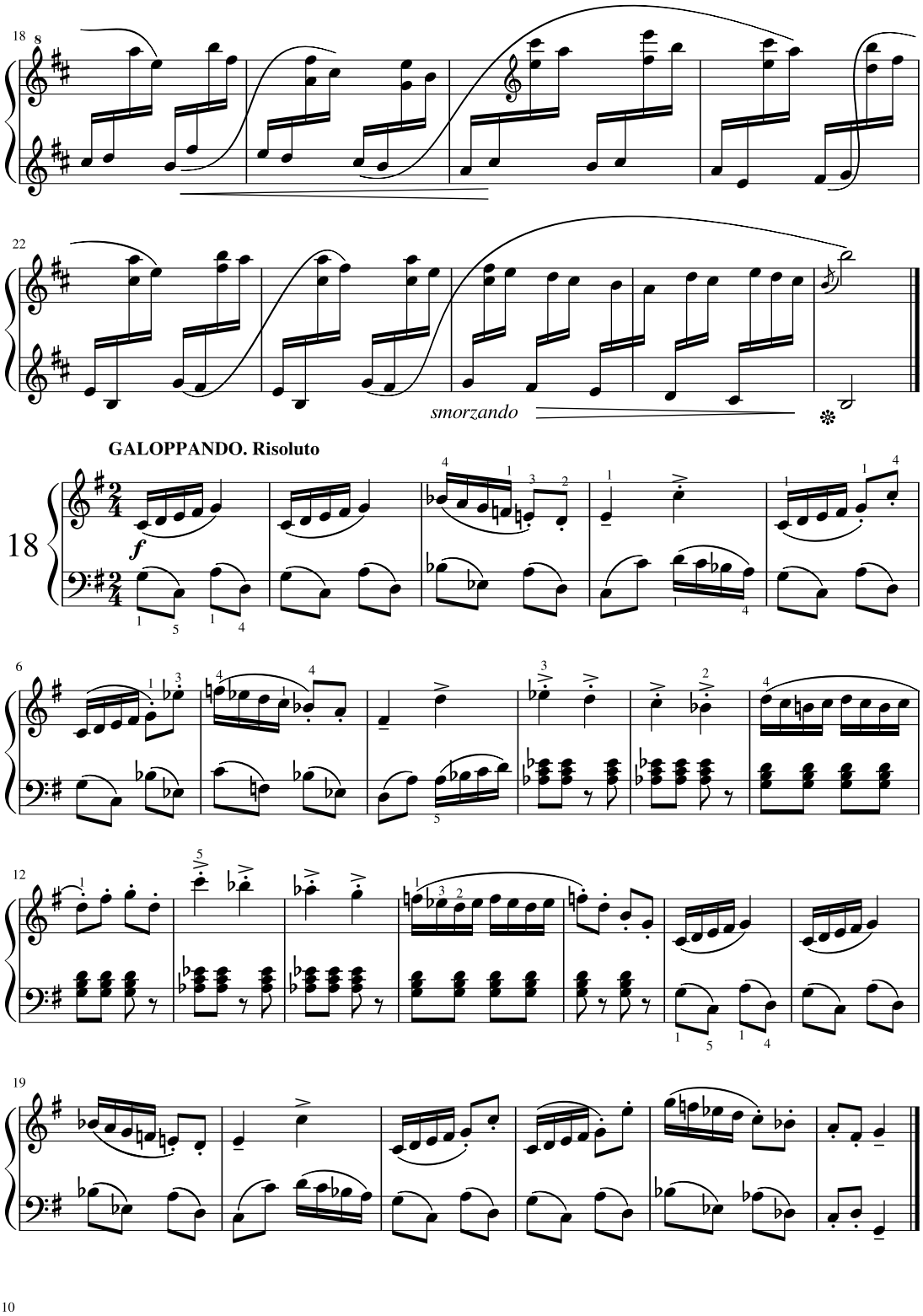

23
pp
2
1


DISTANT CHIMES. Swelling
p
8
17
mp
Ped.
poco a poco più mosso

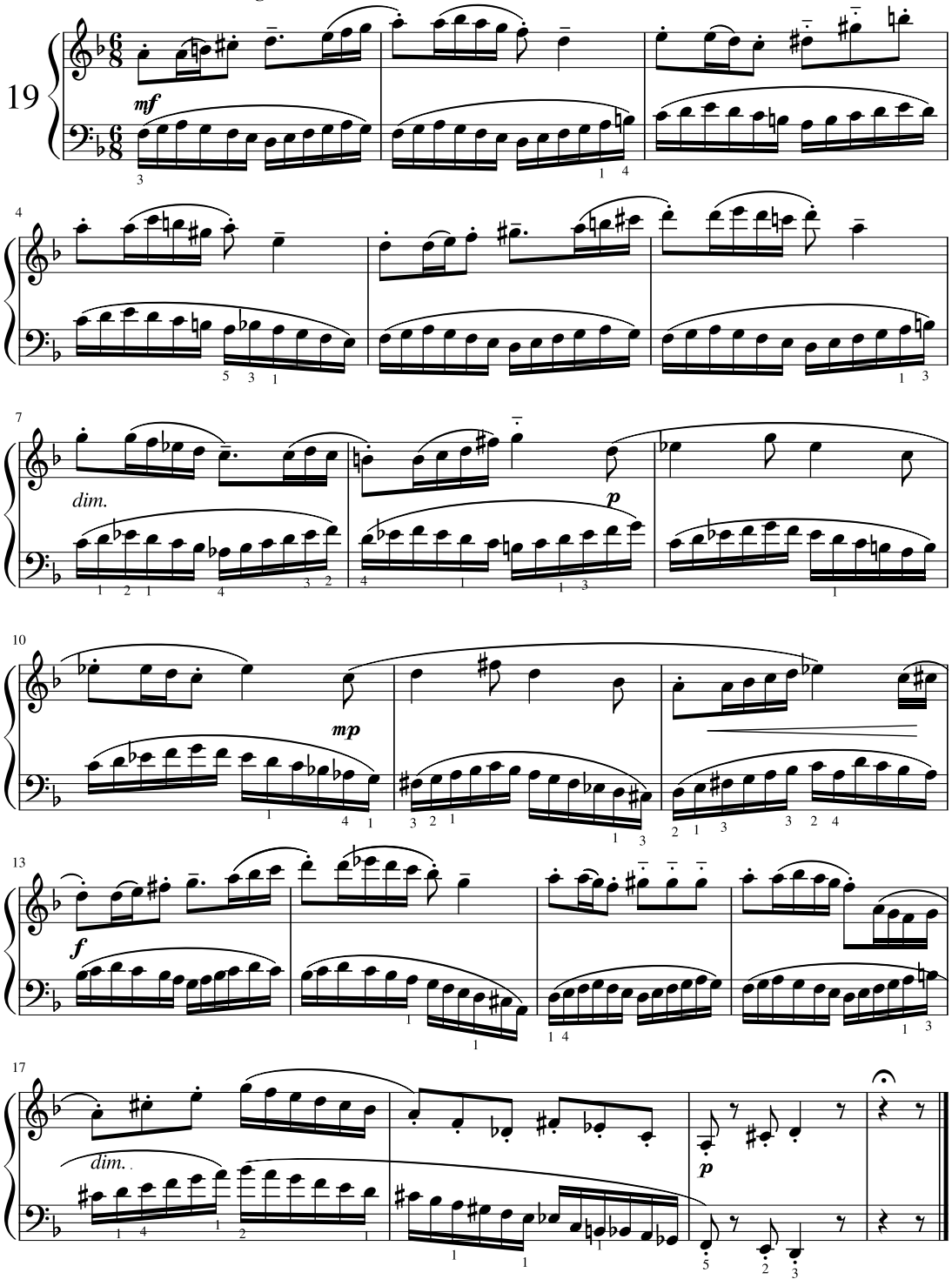

5
8
smorzando


10
mp
Ped.

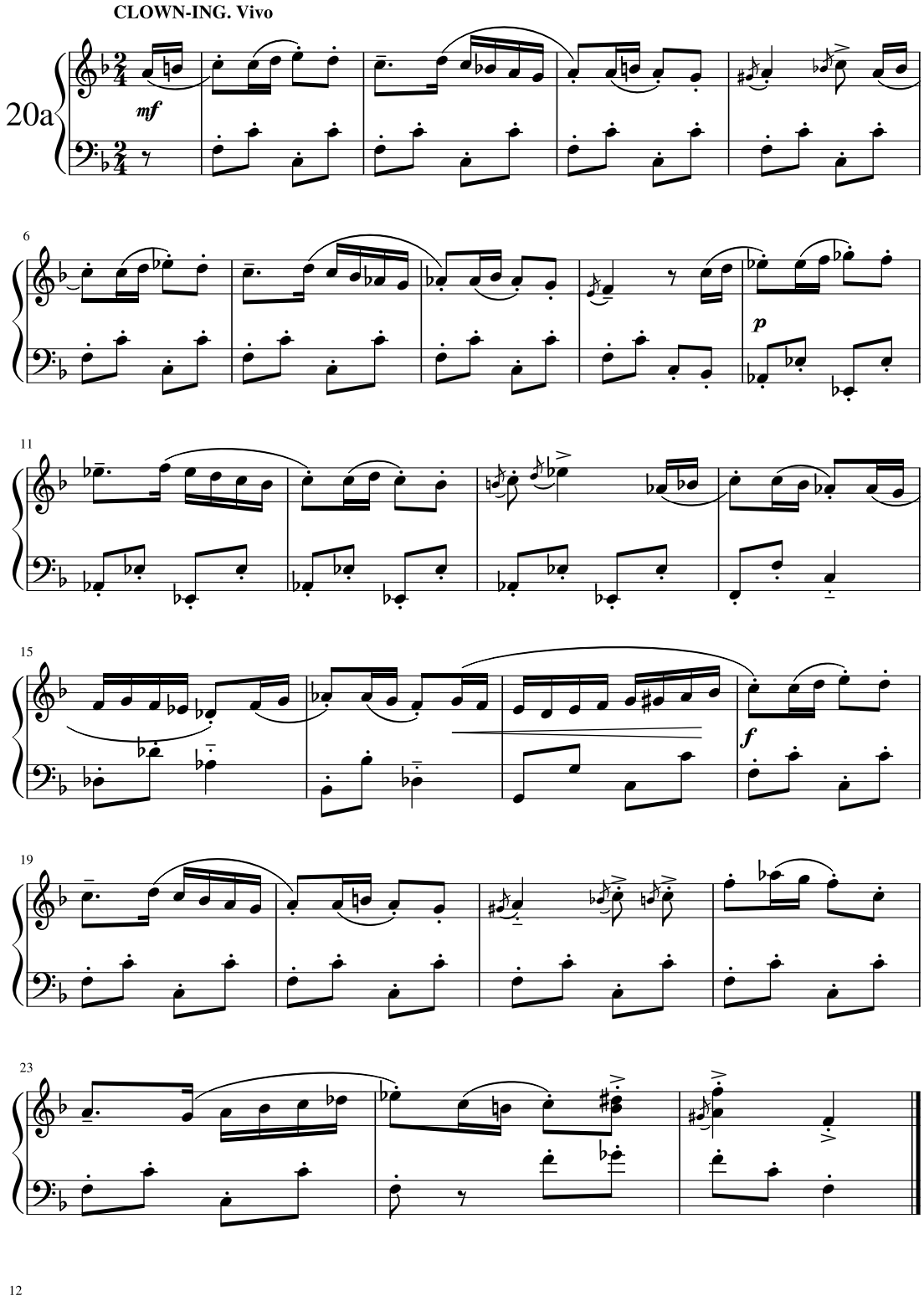

14
cresc e più agitato
f
8
p
calmo
Ped.


18
8
22
smorzando
GALOPPANDO. Risoluto
18
f
6
12
19

PRELUDIO. Allegro moderato

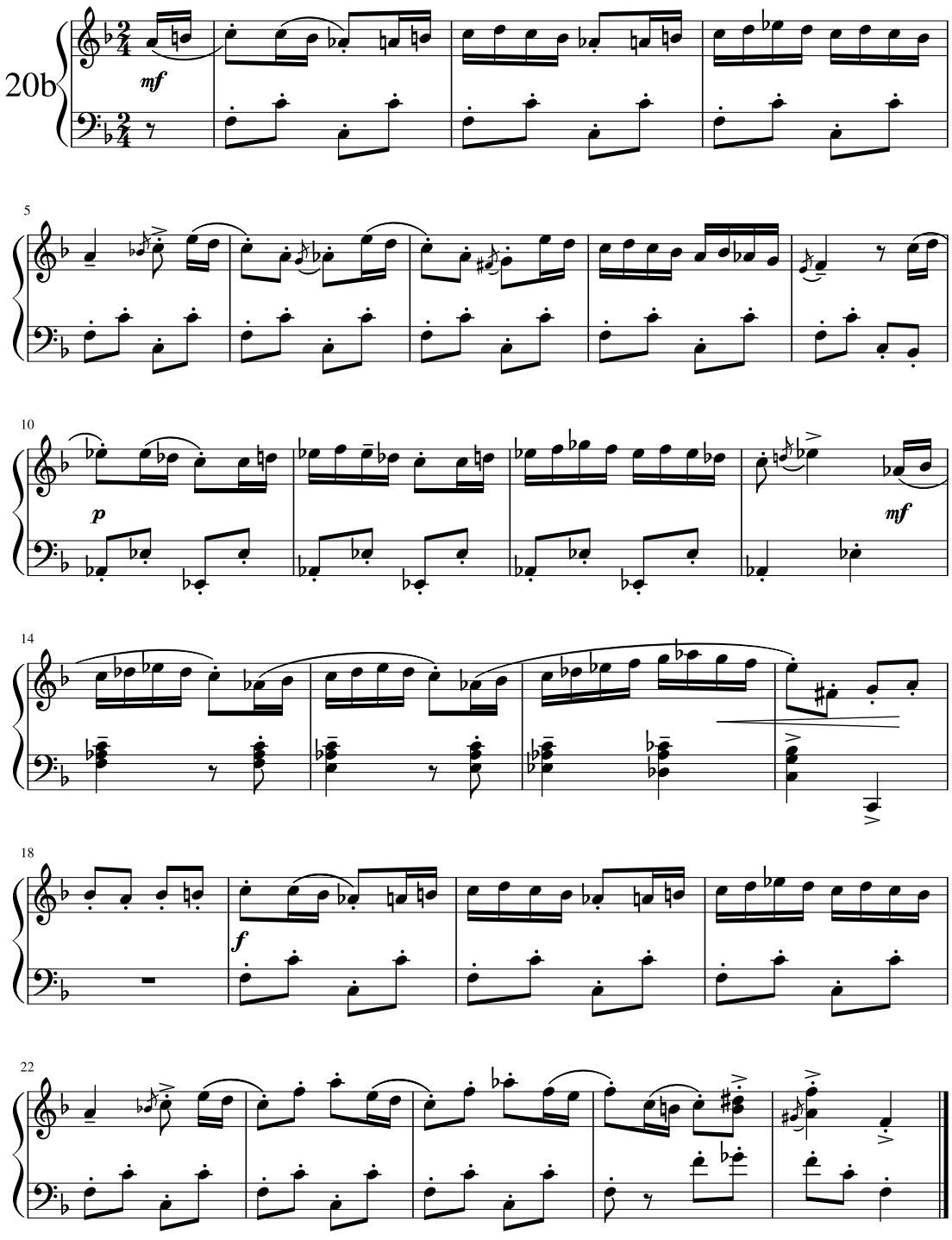


11

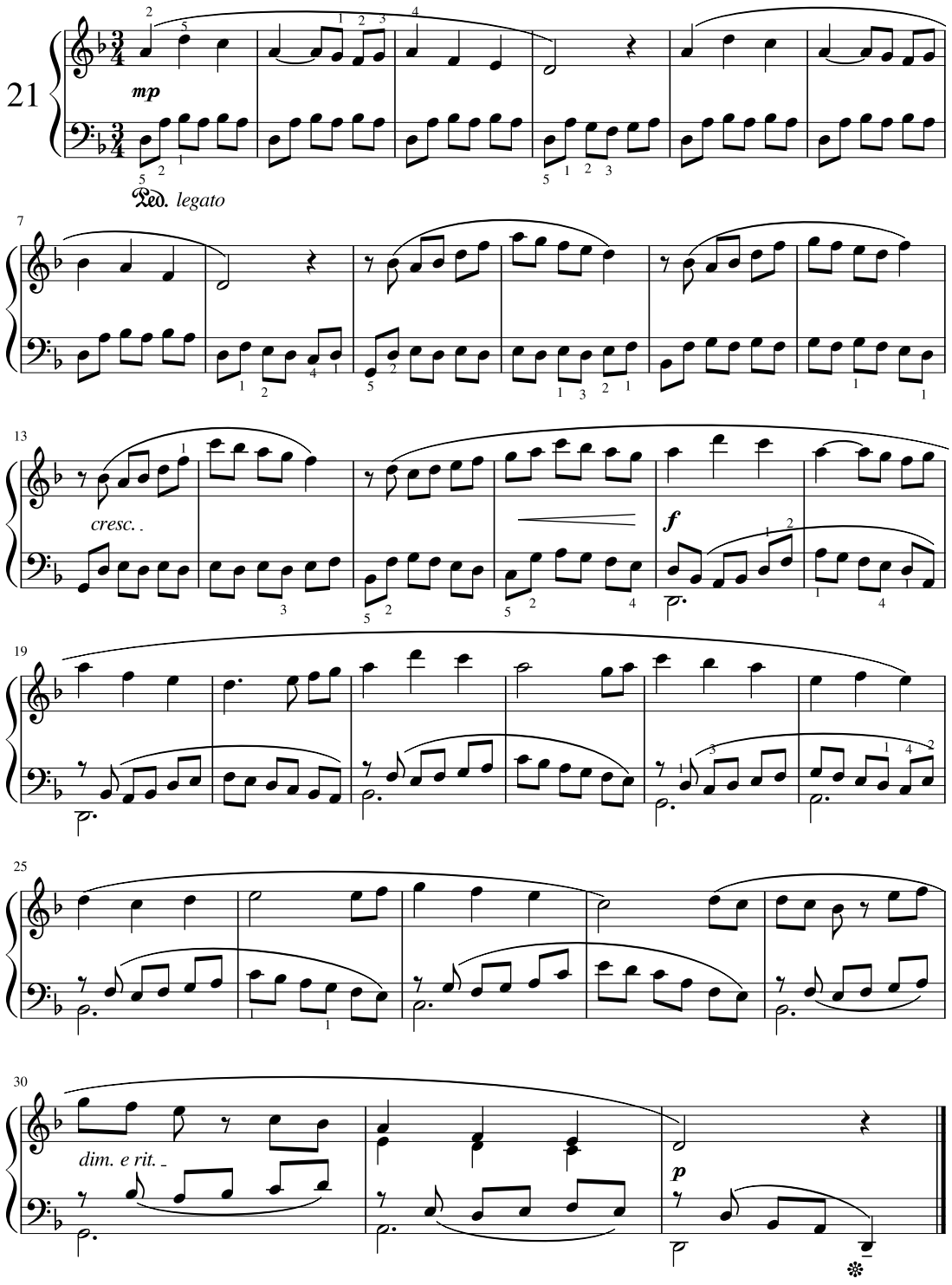


12

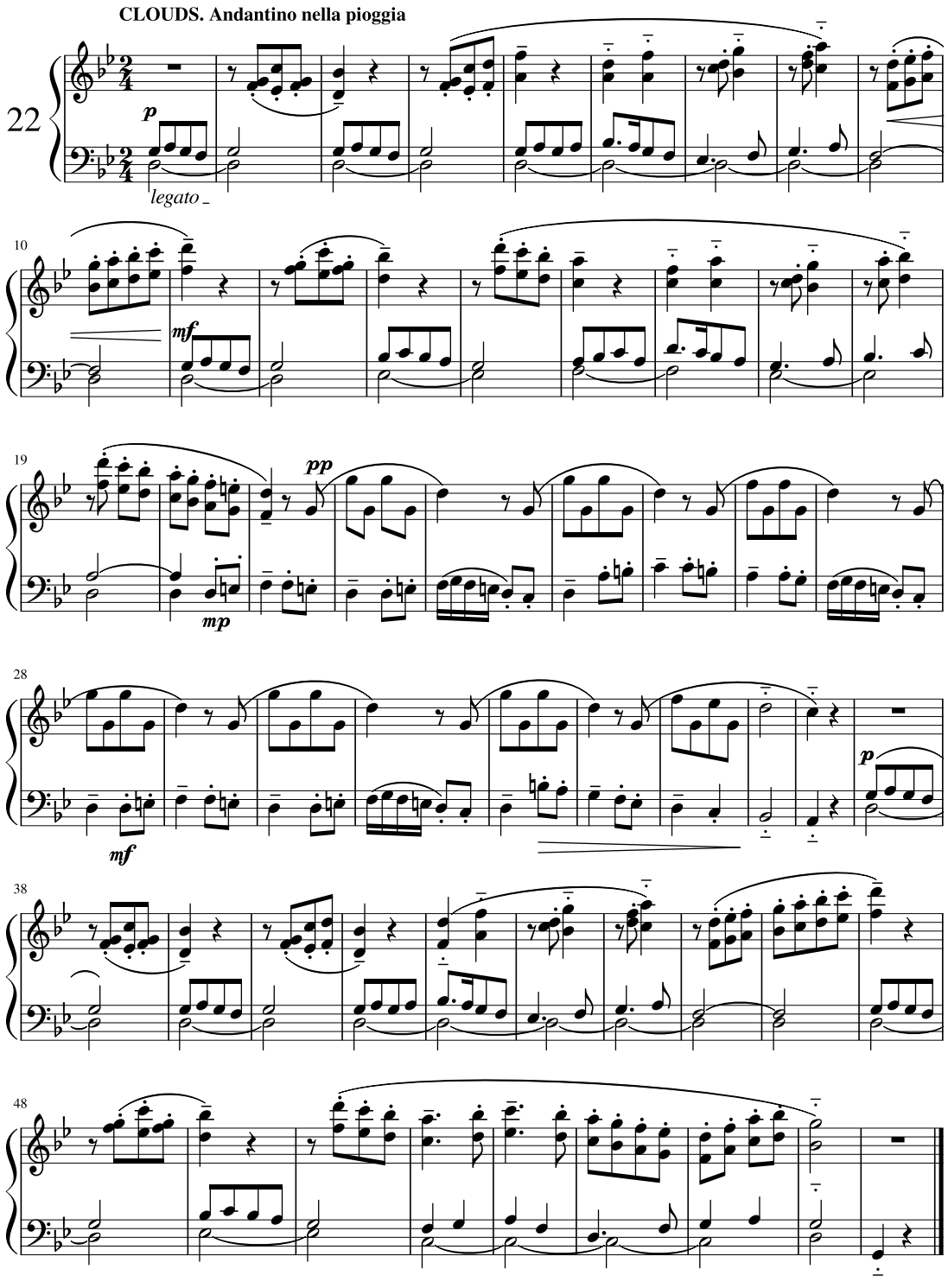
CLOWN-ING II. Vivo

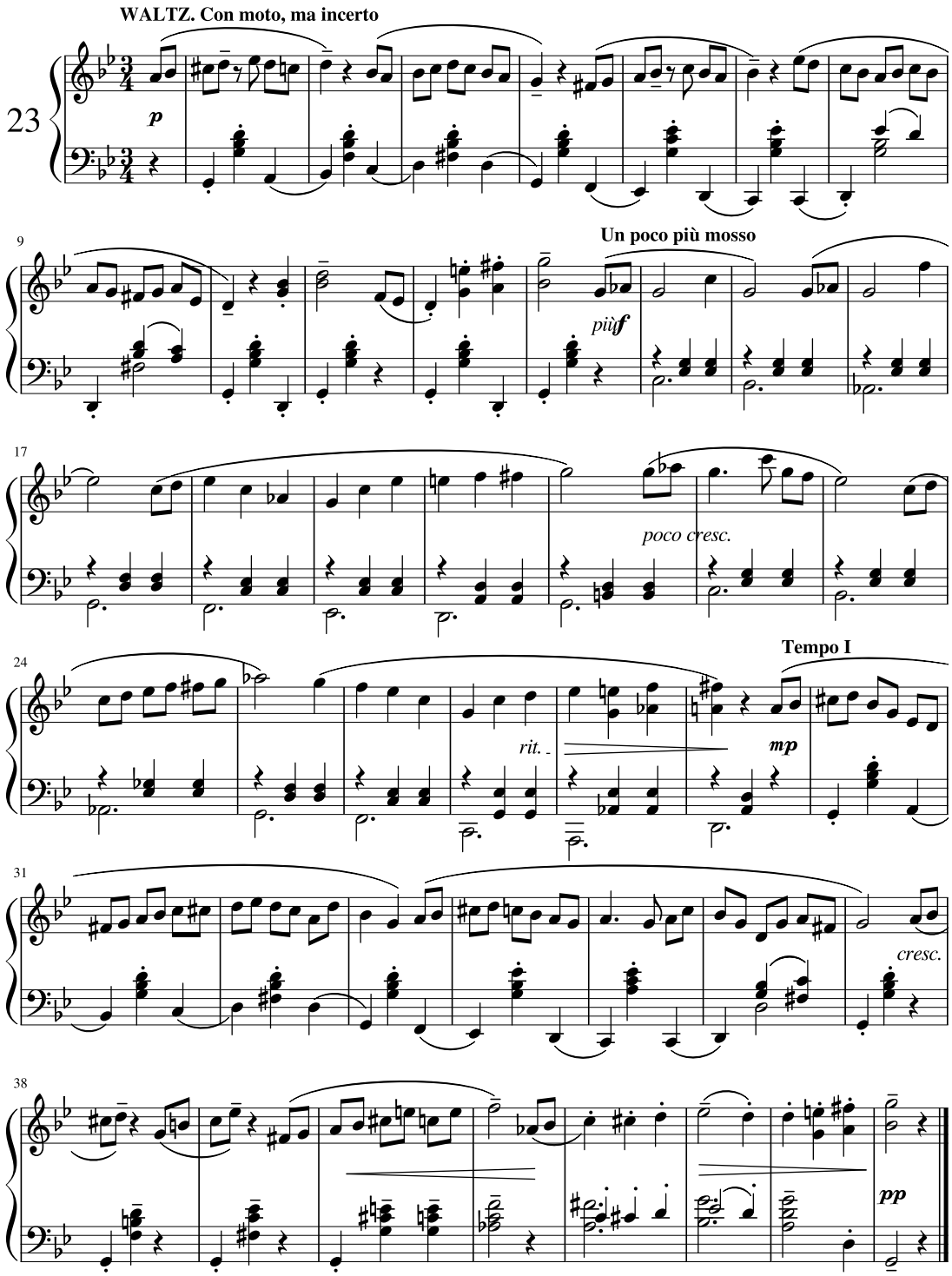


IMPROVISATION. Mesto ed espressivo

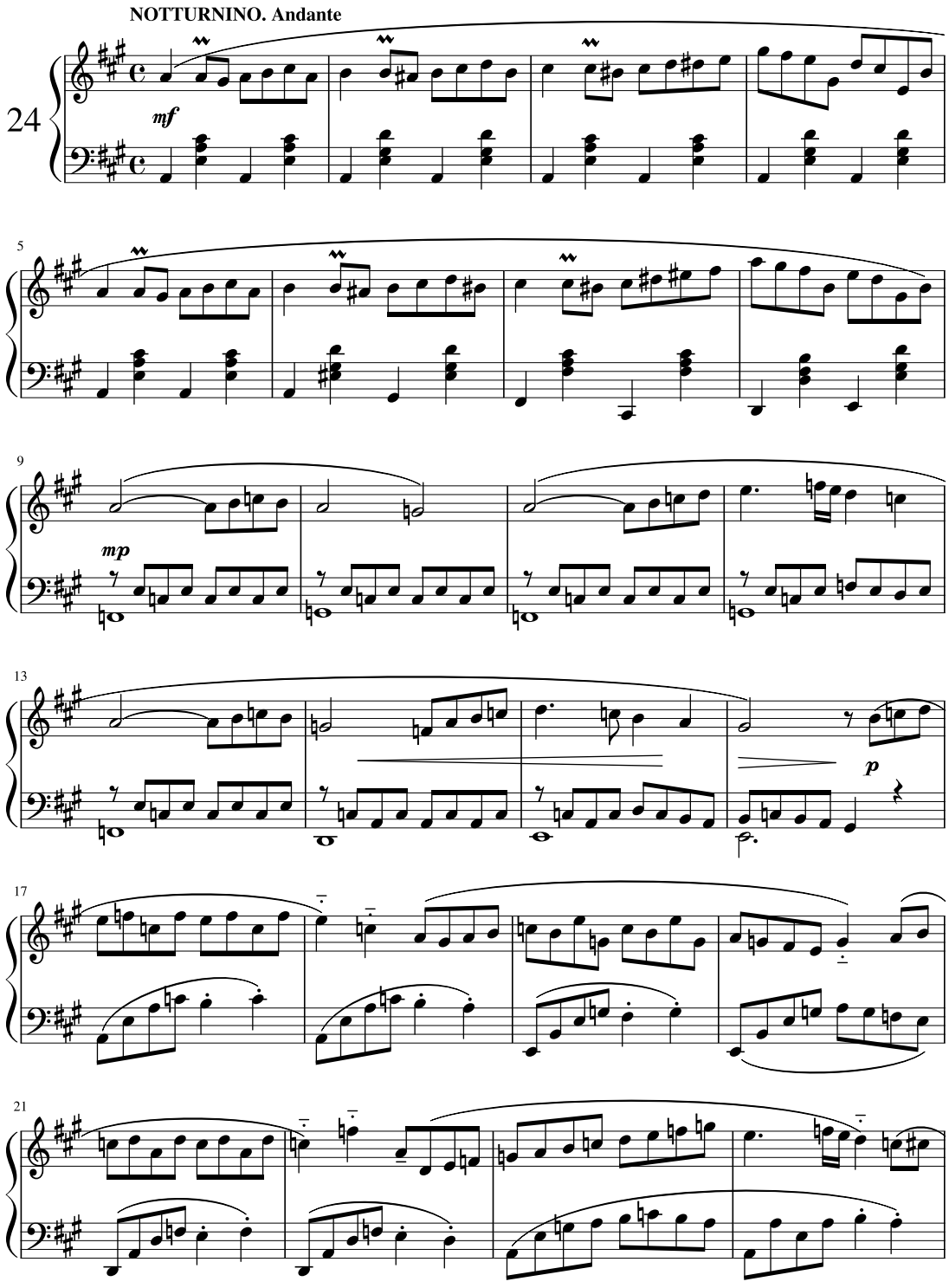


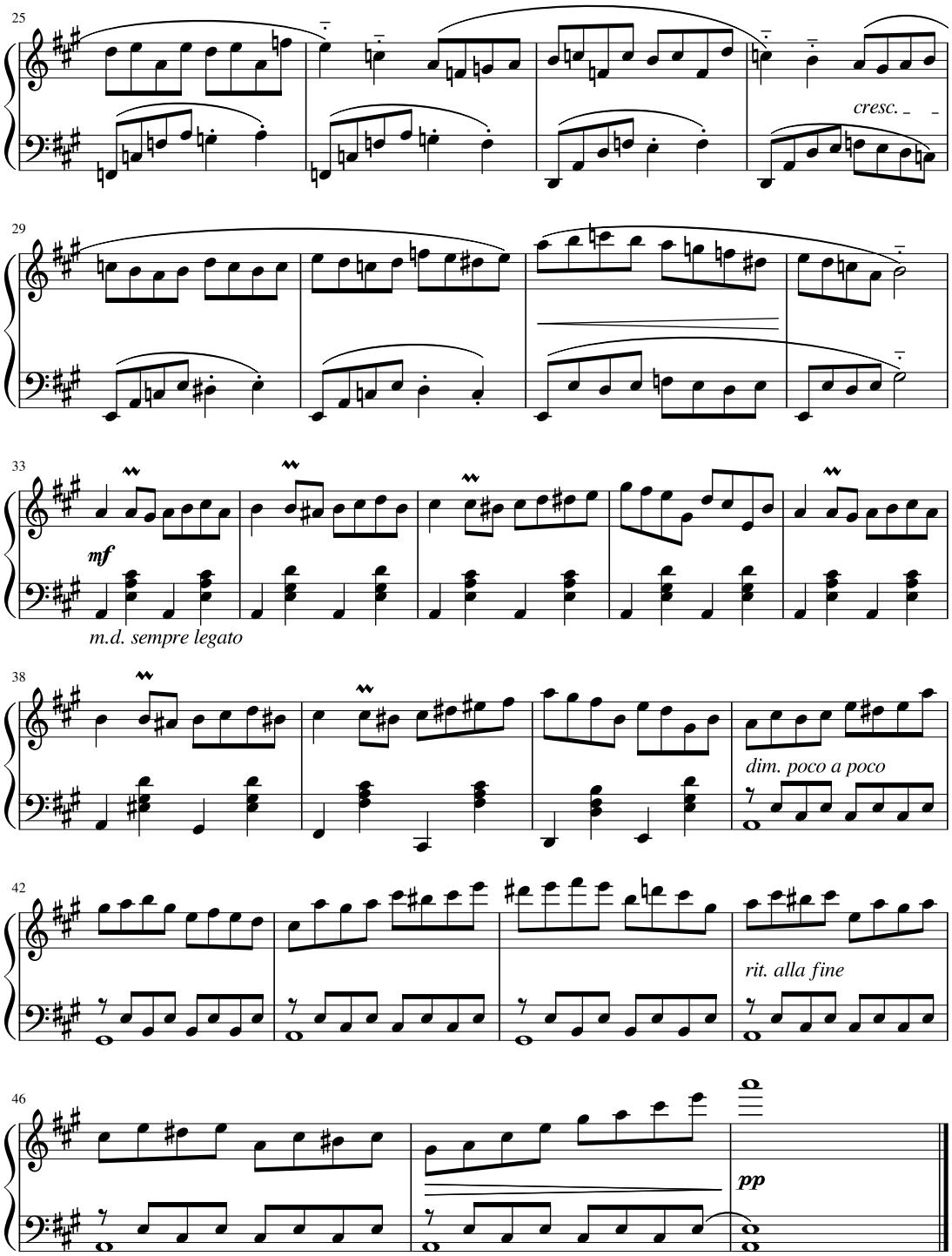
14


CLOUDS. Andantino nella pioggia
22
p
legato
10
mf
19
pp
mp
28
mf
p
38
48


WALTZ. Con moto, ma incerto
23
p
9
Un poco più mosso
più f
17
poco cresc.
24
rit.
Tempo I
mp
31
cresc.
38
pp

16


NOTTURNINO. Andante
24
mf
5
9
mp
13
p
17
21


25
cresc.
29
33
mf
m.d. sempre legato
38
dim. poco a poco
42
rit. alla fine
46
pp

Appendix B. Selected Improvisation Recordings with Commentary

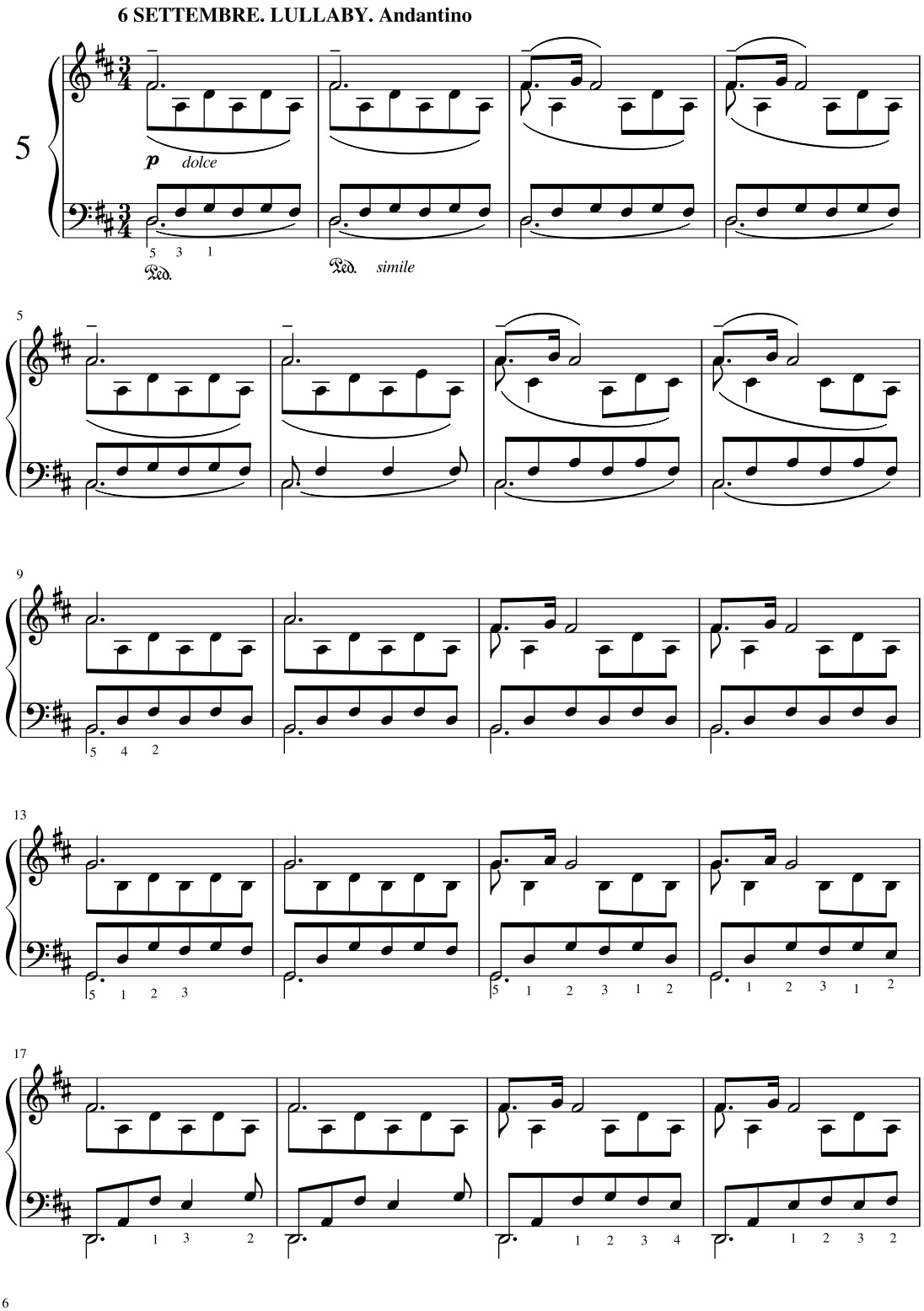
The following list includes a selection of improvisation sessions recorded during the course of this research between 2020 and 2024. These were captured spontaneously (often as practice reflections or exploratory exercises) and later reviewed to analyse aspects of intuition, form, harmonic development, and personal growth in improvisational fluency. Some recordings are referenced in Chapter 5; others serve as supporting material showing the progression from early, unstructured experiments to more integrated and stylistically coherent improvisations. Each entry includes a brief description and a direct link to the video or audio content.

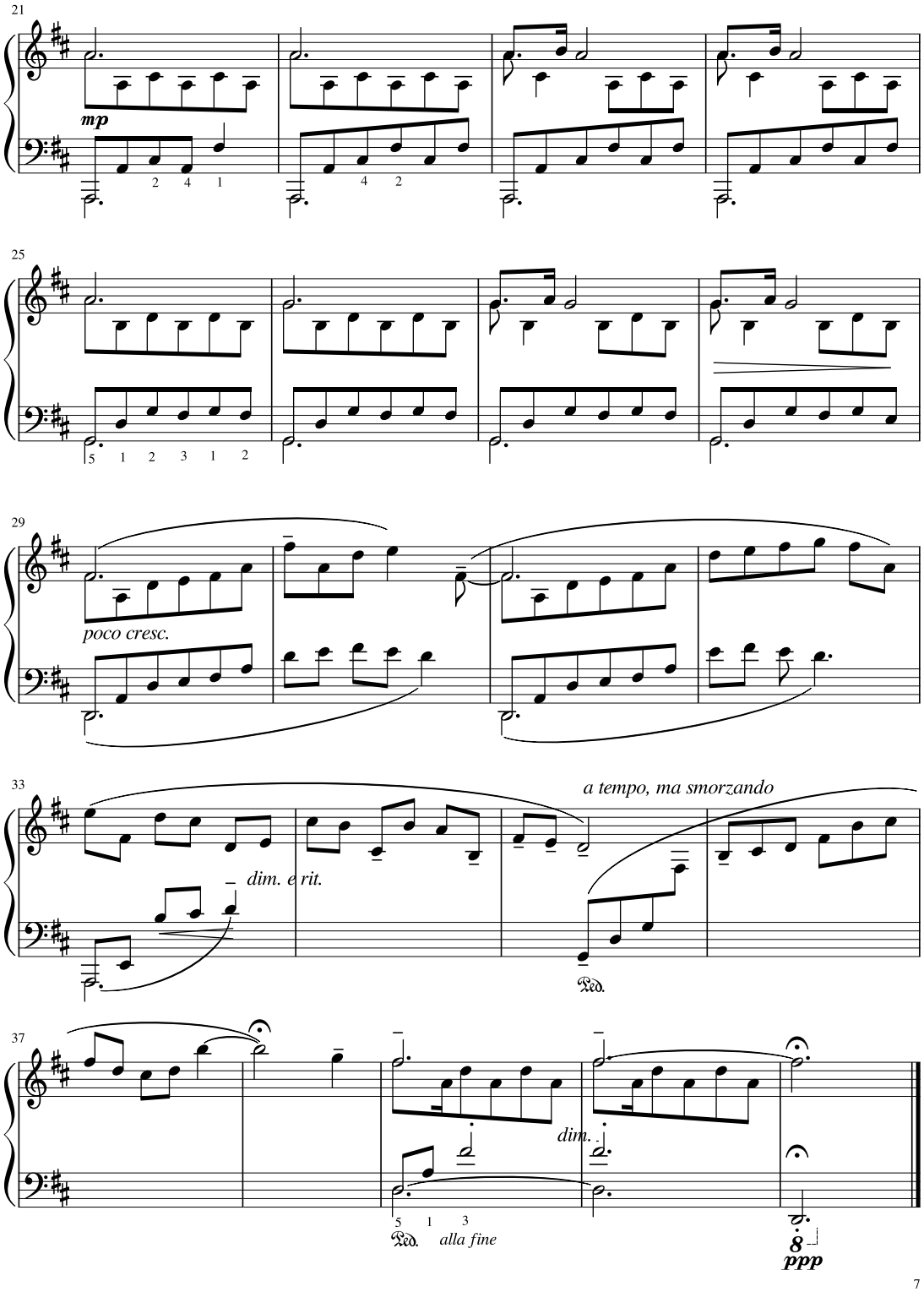
Year	Title	Commentary	Link
2020	Motivic Exploration after Chopin's *Nocturne Op. 27 No. 1*	Free-form improvisation based on the initial motivic cell of Chopin's Nocturne. The improvisation explores lyrical phrasing and tonal colour derived from the Nocturne's opening gestures, offering a brief but expressive transformation of its material.	Click here
2021	Improvised *Lullaby*	An improvisation emerging from simple harmonies and transformed into a lullaby-like piece. It explores softness, repetition, and the emotive potential of minimalistic accompaniment to create a soothing atmosphere. The piece begins with a brief section of free-flowing arpeggios exchanged between the two hands, which serve to establish its tonal landscape. A transcription of the lullaby section is included in **Appendix C**, marking a significant stage in this research: the translation of an ephemeral improvisation into written notation. This exercise revealed not only the inherent limitations of the written form but also underscored the interpretive labour required to transform notation into expressive performance – reminding us of how much of music exists beyond the page.	Click here
2021	Tonal Weight Study over Nocturne-like Textures	This improvisation explores the tonal weight of different scale degrees, set against two different nocturne-style left-hand accompaniments. The session was originally longer, here edited to capture key moments of reflection. A brief chordal cadenza at the end plays with suspended resolutions.	Click here
2021	Free form improvisation sparked by	Initial chromatic left-hand motion loosely inspired by the texture and harmony of Chopin's Prelude. The	Click here

	Chopin's *Prelude Op. 28 No. 2*	improvisation uses this chromaticism to generate a moody, layered atmosphere in a free-flow format.	
2021	*Echoes* (from my *24 Small Pieces*)	A read-and-explore improvisation built on one of my own short pieces written during lockdown. This exercise demonstrates how score-based material can evolve through free reinterpretation and variation.	Click here
2022	Chopin *Prelude Op. 28 No. 13* Inspired Texture	Referenced in Chapter 5. The improvisation begins with a texture inspired by the left-hand chromatic motion of Chopin's Prelude No. 13. It expands into an arpeggiated structure, modulates using N6 and IIb pivots, and culminates in a stylistic echo of the original Prelude.	Click here
2022	Improvisation after Rachmaninoff *Prelude Op.23 n.4*	This improvisation explores a slow, lyrical melodic line in D major over an ostinato set in a loosely articulated 5/8 meter. At the 2:01 mark, the left hand begins to loosen, and the harmonic language starts drawing material from the B section of Rachmaninoff's original *Prelude*. As with many of my earlier improvisations, the focus here is exploratory rather than formal, allowing the music to develop organically and take unexpected turns – such as the shift into a new harmonic realm around 4:17, followed by a freely flowing accompaniment in an irregular 10/8 meter.	Click here
2024	Stuck in Bb	Another modal improvisation exploring the tonal weight of different scale degrees across changing modes. While similar in aim to the 2021 tonal weight study, it engages a different stylistic reference and freer use of rhythm.	Click here
2024	*Elegy*	A nocturne-inspired, self-soothing improvisation. The piece explores vulnerability and simplicity, allowing a gentle melody to unfold over a soft, rocking Nocturne-like left-hand texture.	Click here
2024	P*relude*	Recorded in Berlin. A sort of Level 7 improvisation (Kratus) where harmonic arpeggios, modal inflections (e.g., Lydian scale), and descending harmonised figures come together into a cohesive whole. More structurally integrated than earlier attempts, this improvisation represents a personal milestone in form and fluency.	Click here

Table 4: Some of the improvisations collected from 2020 to 2024

Appendix C. Scores derived from transcriptions of improvisations.




21
mp
25
poco cresc.
29
dim. e rit.
a tempo, ma smorzando
33
Ped.
dim.
37
Ped.
alla fine
8
ppp