

Variations on a Nationalistic Theme:
Subjectivity and Agency in Nineteen-Century Improvisation

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1. Introduction: from Liszt acclaimed to Hendrix threatened

In a concert in Lisbon on February 6, 1845, Franz Liszt asked the audience to provide him with themes upon which to improvise. The audience complied presenting him with six themes; among them, the Portuguese national anthem, which an audience member had sung. This was the theme Liszt chose.¹ Liszt's decision to end his concert with an open request for themes, and his further choice of the national anthem among those he received attest to his savviness as a performer after many years of touring. Improvisation as grand finale in a concert combined with imaginative and dexterous variations to a national theme made for a powerful formula, sure to elicit the best possible response from his audiences. The Lisboan public did not disappoint. The next day, *O Patriota* reported that Liszt had "played an admirable fantasia based on it, which feat if possible increased the enthusiasm of his multitude of admirers" (quoted in Stevenson, 507).

This paper deals with the question of improvisation over nationalistic music. Alterations to music strongly associated with nationalist and patriotic feelings can be a delicate matter. There are numerous examples of this in both classical and popular music. Stravinsky got entangled in 1944 in a broadly publicized imbroglio when he conducted there his arranged version of the Star-Spangled Banner in Boston, where he was informed by the police that there existed a law that

prohibited “tampering with national property.” Some 25 years later, and half a century ago now, Jimi Hendrix produced shock waves with his renditions of it, of which Woodstock is but the most famousⁱⁱ. A few months before Woodstock, as Hendrix was playing the anthem in Dallas, a policeman told somebody in his entourage that the musician should stop it because “no one does that in Dallas, Texas and lives to tell about it” (quoted in Clague 2014: 459). As the Dallas cop made abundantly clear with the inflammatory language he used, the fact that the musician was Black was a key trigger of the death threat. But even when racism is not directly involved, or when the context is not the heightened patriotism of wartime, “tampering” with national anthems can be fraught with risks and it is often taken to test standards of appropriateness and the limits of freedom of expression.ⁱⁱⁱ I propose here that the degree of tolerance towards individual variations on national music depends on varying types of nationalism. I focus on the nineteenth century, approaching the topic in the context of the profound cultural and political changes that the century underwent.

2. Business and inspiration

Before the advent of public concerts in the nineteenth century, improvised variations on a theme had been greatly valued in aristocratic musical circles as a privileged way to assess the musical abilities of the musicians. The famous 1782 contest between Mozart and Clementi in front of Emperor Joseph II is a good example of this. On this occasion, the emperor himself, an amateur musician, had provided the theme (Komlos). In the early nineteenth century the interest for improvised music had reached a peak due to a complex mix of sociological factors associated with the new public concerts and with aesthetic ideals that exalted sudden inspiration and subjectivity^{iv}. In particular, improvised variations on known themes were received with enthusiasm, as they afforded highly valued opportunities to the new paying audiences. On the

one hand, familiarity with the themes allowed the listeners to be able to judge the virtuosos' flights of imagination and technical dexterity; on the other hand, when the variations were improvised, they could also be witnesses to the moment of unmediated creation, a central aspect of Romantic organicist aesthetics and cult of genius.

The publics' appreciation for these opportunities is better understood in the context of the very concept of "public": What had been until then the exclusive privilege of aristocratic circles was now accessible to non-aristocratic persons with the only admission requirement of a paid ticket. These new concertgoers did not need profound musical knowledge either. In the intimate private gatherings of the past, most guests were well acquainted with a repertoire of classical works that was acquiring a canonic status. In public concerts, on the contrary, many attendees had little knowledge of the masters. For these listeners, the often-programmed paraphrases on well-known popular opera arias, such as those by Bellini and Donizetti, offered the opportunity to appreciate and judge individual renditions. At the same time, these paraphrases allowed them to enjoy the popular hits of the season while participating in a sphere of high art hitherto closed to them. There is little wonder that the virtuosos' public appearances were such a sensation across Europe: they offered to the bourgeoisie the pleasures of the familiar along with the pleasures of listening and judging those who the aristocracy had listened to and judged.^v Folk tunes and national anthems offered the same advantages and, in addition, they stirred profound emotions of pride and love for country.

The Romantic virtuosos responded to and exploited all these factors. Playing variations on well-known opera arias or folk songs and national anthems of the places visited was more often than not a calculated strategy to please. This of course had been also true in court appearances, as for example in Ignaz Moscheles's 1830 performance in the Danish court before

the king and queen. In this occasion, when Moscheles was asked to improvise, he complied by choosing themes that he knew would please the most: Rossini and national songs. In a letter, he wrote: “First of all, I Rossinified a little, for I knew that the Rossini fever rages at the Court here. Then I was a Dane, and worked up some national melodies. The shouts of applause made me desperately confident, and I wound up with the Danish “God save the King” (Moscheles). These national songs proved even more effective than Rossini, and the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* reported that his in his Copenhagen concert of December 15, Moscheles had “elicited the greatest enthusiasm with his improvisation on Danish national songs” (AMZ, January 1830, N. 4).

Moscheles’s facetious “I was a Dane” illustrates the musicians’ commercial exploitation of nationalistic feelings, but this does not cancel the fact that the Romantic artists were also genuinely inspired by those feelings, sometimes empathetically absorbing those of people in countries other than their own. Felix Mendelssohn, for example, was greatly inspired by Scotland, and his Scottish sojourn of 1829 resulted in the composition of his Hebrides Overture (1830) and his “Scottish” Symphony in A minor op. 56. As Matthew Gelbart has written, despite Mendelssohn’s infamous outbursts about folk musics (“No national music for me!” they sing in parallel fifths!, four Swiss singing girls put away 24 bottles of wine! “ten thousand devils take all folksiness!”) (Mendelssohn Letters)—despite all of this we were saying, Gelbart writes:

Mendelssohn was of a generation of musicians that consciously sought inspiration and grounding in an idealized conception of folk music. As a fledgling liberal artist looking for an identity between Judaism, Christianity, Germanness, bourgeois society, and humanity in general, Mendelssohn was drawn repeatedly toward the values ascribed to

organic folk song: its primal and unadorned beauty, its collective sentiment, its local color, and its link to the spirit of a nation. (Gelbart 2013: 5)

3. A Romantic nationalism

Scottish nationalism had taken a strong romantic character due to a great extent to Walter Scott's works. His *Waverley*, written in 1815, and the historical novels that followed (known as Waverley novels) about Scottish traditions were very popular by the time Mendelssohn visited. But all nationalism of the first decades of the nineteenth century was markedly romantic. It was permeated by a renewed interest for the unique identity of historical communities. Deep feelings of attachment to an ancestral land were rescued from the rational critique of the Enlightenment to tradition and superstition. Folk traditions, including music and legends, became a source of inspiration and pride. The Napoleonic imperial ambitions solidified this Romantic reaction against the abstract cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment. Beethoven's change of heart about the French reformer is paradigmatic. The well-known episode of the erased dedicatory of his *Eroica* captures the shift from a looser concept of nationalism to a stronger one associated with national boundaries.^{vi} Yet, Beethoven's was still a Romantic nationalism fueled by liberal ideas of independence and compatible with the Romantic exaltation of individualism.

The much-discussed nationalism of Chopin's music needs to be understood in this context. His deep emotional attachment for the land he had left at 20 was linked to Poland's struggle for independence. Since 1795, Poland had been controlled intermittently by Russia, Prussia, and Habsburg Austria, and since then resistance movements for independence had existed. As with the nationalisms that emerged as response to Napoleon's invasions, early-nineteenth-century Polish nationalism had an affinity with the Romantic exaltation of freedom and autonomy. Chopin's approach to national music--especially his Polonaises and mazurkas,

but also other pieces based on Polish folk tunes and rhythms—is exemplary of a type of nationalism that is compatible with a strong sense of individualism. Just as the work of art was conceived as an organic whole, so was the nation: a natural, autonomous unit with deep historical roots and a sacred right to self-determination. Whereas organicism was used to justify conquest and genocide in the 20th century, at the beginning of the 19th century it was a call for the freedom of a people threatened by external forces.

According to Romantic aesthetics, the true artist was able to capture the soul of a people and, at the same time, express it in his own individual voice. When Chopin improvised on Polish folk tunes, as when Liszt improvised on Hungarian themes, he expressed his personal patriotic feelings.^{vii} To be sure, these personal variations were done within the melodic and harmonic conventions of the time and, yet, the great romantic composers did stretch to the limits those conventions. Part of the excitement for concerts by Paganini or Liszt, or many of other minor virtuosos, was that they would make audible what thus far had seem impossible and that the outcome was unpredictable. To let a romantic improviser “touch” an anthem or a well-known folk song was based on a sense of trust in their artistry, but it was also based on a more fluid concept of nationalism. And it implied that this concept of nationalism was compatible with, and it even required a strong sense of subjectivity and individual agency.

The great Romantic virtuosos gave shape to their nationalistic sentiments through music that was fundamentally subjective and hence truthful: according to Romantic aesthetics, inwardness was the path to tap into the true spirit of a people. Improvisation was uniquely suited for this, as it was considered to pour directly from the musician’s inwardness without being mediated by rules, rationality or convention. To improvise over a national anthem or a folk tune was an extraordinary display of the merging of the aesthetics of subjectivity, cultural

nationalism, and liberal ideals of the time. The genius, through his heightened capacity to discover within himself and give shape to sentiments shared and deeply felt by many, would do so on the stage of large halls crowded with people without privileges of birth. The music would be produced right there and then, in front of them, and it would have the original mark of the musician's unique vision. Yet, in the case of extemporization on folk tunes, it would also offer the extraordinary opportunity to witness how the artist, perfectly in tune with the soul of a people, could elevate, embellish, and transfigure that soul. This can also be said of national anthems, even if they had known composers. These composers had already captured the popular voice, over which the genius would embellish; and in a case like Liszt's Lisbon concert, where he improvised on the anthem composed by the former king; powerful symbols upon powerful symbols had been configured in audible synthesis. The King, a surviving pre-Enlightenment embodiment of a realm, was now bettered by the creativity of the artist, in synergy with an enthusiastic crowd of non-aristocratic ticket holders.

4. Subjectivity and democracy

The subjectivity of the genius, therefore, was compatible with democratic ideals. The genius was living proof of the extraordinary capacities all humans had beyond strict rational boundaries. The virtuosos thrilled the new middle-class audiences by staging the illusion of the impossible, but also by staging the reality of new social and political possibilities. Romantic nationalism, as Romantic aesthetics, had an affinity not only with democratic aspirations, but also with liberalism, as Breunig and Levinger have shown, "because the faith in popular sovereignty was fundamental to both movements" (207). They continue

For nationalists of this era, the French revolutionaries had provided a stunning example of what a people could achieve when they were unified under a government that they

themselves had created. The tremendous release of national energy and the stirring patriotism that had characterized the revolutionary armies impressed those Europeans who were still divided or living under foreign rule after 1815 (ibid.)

5. Parochial Nationalism and *Werktreue*

The compatibility of nationalism and liberalism had been possible during the first half of the century because “nationalism had not yet taken on the exclusive, parochial character that it assumed later” (ibid.). Indeed, the nationalism of the second half of the nineteenth century was of a very different kind. It had roots in the romantic movements for independence, which were inspired by liberal and revolutionary ideas, but after the revolutions of 1848 it had transformed into a reactionary wave of nation building. The new political conservatism was backed by a new cultural atmosphere marked by a strong rejection of romanticism, which was virulently attacked as “disease” (see Pederson). Coincidentally, after 1850, improvisation had disappeared almost completely from public performances. Concerts became well-organized formal affairs devoted with quasi-religious fervor to the works of the classical masters. Great music became canonized and fixed in scores; musicologists analyzed it applying their newly devised formal tools, inspired by the ambition of being scientifically objective. In the decades that followed, it would have been unthinkable to let any musician to offer personal variations on a masterwork or a national theme. Great music was not to be touched and nationalism was not to be individually interpreted. A thoroughly institutionalized high culture had emerged at the service of both the objective work of art and the objective nation. As William Weber wrote, “during the 1850s European musical culture entered a new era in the organization of institutions, social values, tastes, and authority” (Weber, 2008, p. 237). Raymond Williams agreed with Coleridge that the interrelationship between subjective inwardness and institutions was at the core of early nineteenth-century

culture; however, he noted that throughout the century, the two became increasingly disassociated and, as a result, culture changed in substantial ways.

In the music world, this cultural change was characterized by a turn towards the ideal of *Werktreue*, fidelity to the work. In the area of music criticism, subjectivity was associated with fuzziness (not entirely without justification). If the subjectivity of the artist had been the warranty of artistic truth, now in a spectacular reversal, it was the proof of its untruth. In their zeal to eradicate fuzziness and excess, the music world got rid of substandard performers and light-hearted programs whose only discernible purpose was to attract the greatest possible public. However, I argue that in doing that, this music world was serving the purposes of the reactionary nation-states, which, to thrive, needed to suppress as much as possible the subjectivity and agency of its citizens. Nationalistic themes were not to be altered, interpreted, paraphrased; they were to be played and sung following a score. The new form of nationalism could not tolerate any variations, even less improvised ones. The nationalism of the first decades of the century was transforming into a different nationalism; more aggressive and associated with the nation-building programs that would reshape the European cultural landscape and would plant the seeds of political convulsions to come in the 20th century.^{viii}

In previous work I have discussed the rejection of improvisation as part of this shift to seriousness in classical music, situating it in the context of post-revolutionary nationalistic agendas (S-V 2001, 2015). I argued that improvised music did not lend itself to the goals of the cultural institutions that thrived within the new political landscape of the second half of the nineteenth century. These institutions were closely aligned with the emerging discipline of musicology, which was shaped by formalist and scientist ideals. In the German-speaking world, *Musikwissenschaft*, whose first clarion call was Hanslick's *On the Beautiful in Music* (1850),

was making inroads in the universities, although as Karnes has shown, not without a fight. What was at stake was the eradication of subjectivity in the study and criticism of music.

The lax standards for public performances during the first decades of the century were corrected and substituted with formal concerts devoted to the canonized classical masters. Ostensibly, the problems the new musicologists aimed at correcting were vagueness and lack of rigor in criticism, on the one hand, and low musical standards and frivolity in performance on the other, all of which was commonly dismissed as part of the Romantic malady affecting Europe before the revolutions. The individual voices of the great composers were not suppressed, as long as they were fixed in scores, which were amenable to be assessed by objective analysis and faithfully reproduced.

Conclusion

The answer to my question of whether improvisation is suitable for nationalistic music is, simply, that it depends on the kind of nationalism. Improvisation is incompatible with authoritarian forms of nationalism according to which there is only one correct—or even permitted—way of understanding and participating in the nation. This kind of nationalism has a firm grip over culture, it is often associated with censorship, and it is supported by an official high culture whose institutions select, sanction, preserve and promote all artistic production deemed worthy.

Improvisation is compatible with forms of nationalism that allow for a plurality of perspectives and for ambiguity. Early nineteenth-century nationalism was compatible with the display of (inter)subjectivity and agency in loosely institutionalized public concerts; later in the century, a more stringent institutionalization of culture eliminated from public stages those

obvious displays. Improvising musicians could not be controlled in this regard: Improvisation would always leave the door open to subjectivity, to the expression of unsanctioned and alternative forms of nationalism. Intersubjective and unscripted, variations on nationalistic themes are only tolerated when the institutions themselves are just and nimble enough to be able to accommodate a plurality of nationalism and even a critique of nationalism itself.

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ⁱ The anthem had been composed by the Portuguese Emperor Pedro I, who had died in 1834. His composition remained the national anthem from 1827 until 1910.

ⁱⁱ Yes, it has been that long: 1969.

ⁱⁱⁱ In connection to the Star-Spangled Banner, the reactions range from the controversy about José Feliciano’s Latin jazz version in 1968, which Feliciano considered to have damaged his career, to the chuckles to Fergie’s unsuccessfully sultry version this year in the Los Angeles Forum (Hill, LA Times, February 2018).

^{iv} See Sancho-Velázquez 2001 and 2015.

^v See Gooley 2004 and Sancho-Velázquez 2015

^{vi} Steinberg has shed doubts on the authenticity of the story about Beethoven’s dedication (70-71)

^{vii} These improvisations were surely the inspiration for his *Fantasie sur l’air polonaise*.

^{viii} A direct line between romanticism and the radical nationalism of the late nineteenth century, and the national socialism of the 20th has been established by several authors, based in part on the romantic critique of the Enlightenment and the ideals of the French Revolution, as well as on the romantic recovery of the “volk” for high culture. These associations, however, ignores the revolutionary impetus of romanticism, as articulated by the saint-simonians, as well as the double defeat of democratic and romantic ideals in 1848.