

The Classical Tinge

Part 2: Bach, Bud, preludes and Pieranunzi

DAVE JONES continues his series on the relationship between classical music and jazz

There's now plenty of evidence to tell us that improvisation has always been rife in classical music, at least as far back as the baroque era (approximately 1600 to 1750), and perhaps as long ago and far away as the 13th century in the improvisation and group interaction of Italian lyrical singing. Bruce Ellis Benson, in his book *The Improvisation Of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology Of Music*, describes 15 different types of improvisation, only some of which relate to jazz, so this might tell us something about the vast amount of improvisation in numerous musical contexts, something which has been largely ignored by performers of the classical repertoire in relatively recent years.

However, there are notable exceptions in this respect, including Glenn Gould, Robert Levin, Gabriela Montero, Frederic Rzewski, Wayne Marshall and the jazz and classical pianist and harpsichordist David Gordon, who has an on-going project to explore the role of improvisation within baroque music, beyond the realms of basso continuo.

In the baroque era, the performer's role rivalled or even exceeded that of the composer, where compositions were often skeletal frameworks to be elaborated upon. It would have been interesting to observe how different our general perception of baroque music would have been had the same level of commitment been directed towards authentic stylistic performance of the music in terms of improvisation as has been devoted towards performing it on authentic instruments.

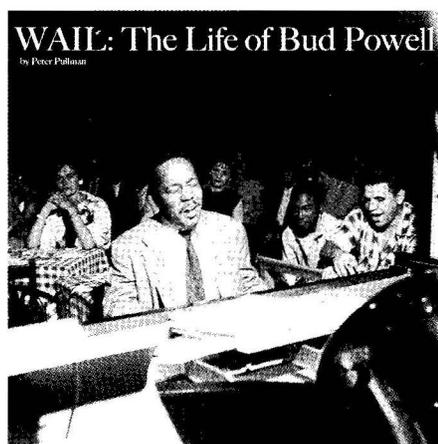
So, what were those 13th century Italian lyrical singers up to? Well, there's not enough scope here for any great detail but to summarise, lyrical singing in this context was a social rather than formal musical act which involved the impromptu joining of words and music sung by two or more persons in turn, and performed according to particular localised customs, emphasising interaction as a basic aspect of performance.

Skipping forward the small matter of a few centuries to the baroque era, we now have an evolved version of notated music, a key system courtesy of J.S. Bach, chord symbols in the form of figured bass utilised by the basso continuo (the baroque equivalent of a

rhythm section) and yes, more improvisation. Charlotte Mattax Moersch, in an excellent edited collection by Solis and Nettle from 2009, *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, And Society*, notes that "Numerous accounts from the 17th and 18th centuries document the major role improvisation played in the life of the baroque keyboard player". It's also worth noting that the presence of improvisation in this era was not confined to keyboard music, but was found in other instrumental music and even opera.

In the baroque era, improvisation moved beyond the bounds of simple musical elaboration to improvising ornaments and, perhaps more importantly in jazz-related terms, to the improvised performance of preludes and free fantasias. Apparently, in 1732, the 15-year old prodigy Elizabeth Claude Jacquet de la Guerre could entertain her listeners for an entire half-hour with her brilliant solo improvisations of preludes. Many notated preludes by Jacquet and her contemporaries survive today, and they tell us that the rhythmic interpretation was entirely up to the performer. The baroque practice of playing notated melodies in uneven rhythms, e.g. the "scotch snap", which was known in France as "notes inégales" (unequal notes), has an obvious parallel in jazz swing rhythm. Even "blue" notes, or false relations as the English called them, can be found in as early a source as *The Fitzwilliam Virginal book*.

In his *A Natural History Of The Piano*



Bud Powell as depicted on the cover of *Wail: The Life Of Bud Powell*, reviewed JJ August 2013

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(2011). Stuart Isacoff suggests an interesting parallel between J.S. Bach's melodic invention and that of Bud Powell. To illustrate this point, listen to the theme from Bud's *Tempus Fugit*, and imagine a solo keyboard interpretation where his right-hand melodic phrases are answered by suitably contextual phrases in the left-hand, and with his jazz pianist's wrist-attack replaced by a more conventional keyboard touch. The influence of the contrapuntal nature of baroque music is heard in the work of contemporary jazz pianists such as Brad Mehldau who in his improvised solos sometimes performs independent but complementary melodic lines simultaneously in both hands, rather than the more common modern jazz piano approach of right-hand melodic line and left-hand accompanying chords.

A particularly interesting example of the link between baroque music and jazz improvisation is provided by the seemingly underexposed Italian pianist Enrico Pieranunzi on his 2010 solo piano and fortepiano recording (released in 2011) entitled *Enrico Pieranunzi Plays J.S. Bach, G.F. Handel, D. Scarlatti*. On this album, Pieranunzi performs his own interpretations of works by these three baroque composers, and alongside most of these interpretations he offers improvised versions which draw on the main musical features of the original works.

There's nothing superficial about the way that Pieranunzi connects these two genres, which are historically several hundred years apart. It's rather like listening to someone making musical sense of the links between baroque music and jazz of the 21st century, via what happened in musical terms in the intervening years. His improvisations morph between contemporary sounds and something much closer to the baroque originals via a myriad of influences including his own sometimes rhapsodic and romantic-influenced style of composition and performance, film music, Chick Corea's phrasing, together with blues-inflected phrases, impressionism and atonality, some of which may derive from his substantial interest in the piano stylings of Bill Evans.

More examples follow in the next instalment, including the work of John Lewis, Uri Caine, David Rees-Williams, Claude Bolling, and Jacques Loussier, amongst others.