

IGOR PIRNAT POMYKALO

*All'improvviso...*

COMPENDIUM OF EARLY MUSIC IMPROVISATION





FONDAZIONE PIRNAT - POMYKALO, Birkfeld 2024

*In memory and gratitude to my  
family, without whom I would  
never have become what I am  
today and for 78 years.*



## PREFACE

For the main title of this study, I have chosen what frequently appears as a description of the activities of numerous improvisers during the Renaissance: "*all'improvviso*." As the subtitle indicates, the study itself serves as a **compendium** - a collection of thoughts, assumptions, assertions, a wealth of information, and the painstaking work of a number of valuable experts, both theorists and practitioners, who have been leading the "game" in the world of newly discovered early or earlier music of past musical eras for decades.

My role in this case was to make a personal selection of what I considered important, to translate some of it, and where possible, to relate it to my homeland Croatia, its (musical and general) culture, and with our time.

Working on this compendium I was specially inspired by English musicologist and musician Robert Donington (1907-1990) and his important standard work "*The Interpretation of Early Music*",<sup>1</sup> in which he quotes numerous historical authors giving information crucial for the interpretation or performance practice of Early Music.

The sources (and models) that I used and referred to in the elaboration of this study, or compendium, I sometimes use as a "reservoir" of quotes or "recount" them, always trying to make it clear to the reader what is "mine" and what is by "others." I do this by indenting quotes from other authors by 2 units, and any of their quotes (quotes of quotes...) for the next 2 units. Footnotes appear at the bottom of each page and start "afresh" with each chapter. Excerpts from cited authors are presented in slashes ("/"), mine in square brackets, while my comments in footnotes are always clearly marked with IP.

First five chapters of this study can be useful to anyone; young or old, students or graduated musicians, as well as to the musically interested new or already partly informed public. Some parts (even the whole chapters) could (depending on interest or prior knowledge) be skipped and not necessarily read in full like a novel... As is evident from the general content, Chapter 6 is almost entirely dedicated to the so-called *canterini*, and *cantori ad lyram*, singers-poets who sang (or recited) improvising their own accompaniment on the lira da braccio or lute.<sup>2</sup>

Chapters five and seven<sup>3</sup> have a clear practical purpose. They can provide all the necessary information to theorists but are primarily intended as assistance to those who (singing or playing any early or modern instrument) want to try their hand or throat at this "new" and yet ancient creative discipline of ornamentation and improvisation.

Chapter five extensively deals with exceptional practical advice from several top experts in this field (Dongois, Habert, Janin, McGee, Schubert, Thomas, and Thorn) who can be of special

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<sup>1</sup> Faber & Faber, London 1963, R 1975.

<sup>2</sup> It is mostly based on the recent book by American musicologist Blake Wilson, *Singing to the Lyre in Renaissance Italy*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2019. In this, English, version of my compendium, I decided to reorganise the order of some chapters of Croatian edition from 2021, so original sixth is now the fifth and original fifth is now the sixth.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 7, apart to most important information on lira da braccio its role and use, reconstructed playing technique and "repertory", contains my detailed proposals on how to improvise on both lira da braccio and lira da gamba.

assistance to those who (as soloists or members of an ensemble) want to learn how to ornament Early Music (hereinafter EM) and gradually improvise it, ending with basic instructions on how to improvise late medieval and Renaissance counterpoint, the so-called *contrapunto alla mente*.

At the end comes Chapter 7, which, based on what experts like Blake Wilson and others have discovered, presents a significantly expanded and mostly new version of my English study "How to Improvise on Liras" from 2018, in which I explore the possibilities of re-creating the art of Italian (and probable also Croatian) improvisers from the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

The Appendix, which is so extensive that it can be considered as a separate, eighth, chapter, is presented (and physically separated) as a distinct unit, so that the text of all chapters itself is relieved of numerous inserts with musical or visual examples,<sup>4</sup> tables, lists, or similar. In the Appendix, interested readers will find numerous musical examples and additional information seamlessly connected to the main text.

This compendium on Improvisation of (mostly but not exclusively) the so called Early Music<sup>5</sup> is based on two previous shorter or long texts of mine; the first English version entitled "How to Improvise on Liras (da braccio and da gamba)" from the end of 2018<sup>6</sup> and the (very expanded) Croatian book of the end of 2020.

Since the Croatian version was meant for the students of the Academy of Music in Zagreb (Croatia) I was guided there by the supposition that those young people (with the exception of students of organ, saxophone, jazz, musicology or ethnomusicology<sup>7</sup>) have any or very meagre knowledge of Improvisation in general and Early Music in particular. Therefore I included many topics and explanations (with abundant music examples, lists and various rules) some of which you will not find in this, English, edition. On the other hand many new information is included in this edition.

At the end of each chapter, I have included (as an experiment) two things: To remember and repeat and a list with works of authors who are particularly important and insightful regarding our topic, and I highly recommend reading them in their entirety. Most of these books can be found in an average university library, and many of the articles are available online. Additionally, you may choose to purchase those that seem most significant to you, as I have done in many cases.

This time, in the Appendix, I have included some optional materials that could expand perspectives on Lira's iconography or provide information on how the original editions appeared, etc. Additionally, there is a new section containing audio files (accessible via numerous links at the end of the Appendix) that provide an opportunity to listen to the art of Renaissance and early

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<sup>4</sup> The musical examples labeled as A are divided by chapters, while those labeled as B, and C, provide extensive material for additional information and practice, and those labeled as D offer the opportunity for interested individuals to try improvising "in the style" of *cantare ad lyram*.

<sup>5</sup> In this case I wanted to concentrate on medieval, renaissance an early baroque one, because the High Baroque improvisation is already better known.

<sup>6</sup> See the complete text and supplement with examples on my home page [www.igorpomkalo.eu](http://www.igorpomkalo.eu) or on the scientific platform [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu).

<sup>7</sup> Even those have mostly theoretical approach to the materia.

Baroque ornamentation in practice. You can also hear some real improvisations, both in free-form or based on certain models, performed by my colleagues and me.

This new version will be exclusively digital and every interested person will be able to download its textual first and mostly musical second part from my home page [www.igorpomykalo.eu](http://www.igorpomykalo.eu), like it is the case with the Croatian version and all my projects, studies etc.

Also, as it was the case with all my project (on liras, da braccio and da gamba, and others), this study will be a continuous *work in progress*, and occasional additions will be made, about which interested parties will be informed through my website, my Facebook groups, or, if they wish, directly via email: [ask@igorpomykalo.eu](mailto:ask@igorpomykalo.eu) .

In case anyone wants additional information or has any remark or comments, they can submit them through my website [www.igorpomykalo.eu](http://www.igorpomykalo.eu).

## INTRODUCTION

The immediate impetus for writing this study was given to me by my dear colleague and friend, Dr. Ennio Stipčević from Zagreb,<sup>8</sup> back in late 2018, after I gave him my English text (with numerous additions) under the title "How to improvise on Lire, da braccio and da gamba."<sup>9</sup> Ennio advised me to definitely create a "paper" version of this for the needs of students at the Music Academy in Zagreb.

Thinking about in what form and scope to do it, at the beginning of 2019, it occurred to me to start with a completely new and significantly expanded (Croatian) version of that first article. Considering that it (as already mentioned) could and should serve as the first information and aid to students of various departments and instruments at the Music Academy in my dear Zagreb,<sup>10</sup> it soon became clear to me that this study requires significantly different, much broader approach.

The reasons are clear; just as in my time (exactly half a century ago...), as students of the Music Academy, we obtained diplomas and titles of "academic musicians" or professors<sup>11</sup> without any serious engagement or "encounter" with the "humble" five centuries of early music before the Viennese classics, not to mention our Croatian traditional folklore, so it has mostly remained until today...<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> With colleague Stipčević, I played in Croatian two early music ensembles in the late 1970s and early 1980s; the Zagreb-based "Universitas Studiorum Zagrabiensis" and the Zadar-based "Fridrik Grisogono". Throughout my life abroad, I maintained close private and professional relationships with him.

<sup>9</sup> I wrote it for my colleague and one of the finest vocal soloists in the field of early music, Miss. Patrizia Bovi from Italy, as my contribution to her "Lira da Braccio Summit" held at the Royamont Abbey in the fall of the same year. I published the digital version of this study on my website [www.igorpomykalo.eu](http://www.igorpomykalo.eu) as well as on the American academic portal [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) in late 2018.

<sup>10</sup> And perhaps at other higher education or secondary educational institutions in my homeland?

<sup>11</sup> Depending on which department they studied and graduated from.

<sup>12</sup> See page 2 of this Preface.

Originally, I dedicated this study to my homeland Croatia, my family, all those people who helped me on my EM path,<sup>13</sup> all dear colleagues with whom I have performed EM and exchanged thoughts over the past half-century in concerts and in the recording studios. I also wholeheartedly thank those who, with their ideas or concrete assistance, helped this study even start "from the spot"; these include Mrs. Dr. Željka Radovinović, head of the library at the Music Academy in Zagreb, young Split musicologist Bartol (Hrvoje) Beban, osb, and once again, musicologist Dr. Ennio Stipčević, who made Croatian early music heritage accessible through a vast number of books, studies, and articles, significantly enriched its repertoire with numerous discoveries (as well as subsequent practical editions), raised a number of musicologists of the youngest generation, and - "last but not the least" - prompted me to tackle, "as God commands," with a subject that has always fascinated me and with which I have been actively involved for many years.<sup>14</sup> I want also to mention and to thank my dear colleague and friend Marco Ambrosini<sup>15</sup> who "push" me to finally finish this English version.

### **What is and what is not the Improvisation?**

Some authors are of the opinion that everything, including ornamentation, can be considered a (soft) kind of improvisation, while at the other end there are those for whom any improvisation based on some rules, patterns, modules does not "deserve" that name. This group includes those for whom the only so-called *free improvisation* (free jazz, *avant-garde* or contemporary music already hundred years old...) from the middle of the last century, is real improvisation.

If we adhered to this school of thought then neither jazz, nor flamenco, nor the exceptional art of improvisation on which the classical or traditional music of Eastern cultures of India, Iran, Turkey and Arab countries is based, wouldn't be real improvisation.

In my opinion, and based on practical and theoretical experience and knowledge of things, even more serious engagement, knowledge and application of abundant (sung or played) ornamentation of original melodies in today's performances of medieval, renaissance and baroque music could be considered a kind of (again, soft) improvisation. It is true, it is based on numerous rules, patterns and modules but certainly gives different possibilities and variations of application to the same material and (if not previously written and memorized - see latter) can be spontaneously "fresh", "new" and creative in each performance.

With the advent and development of the internet, as well as the advancement of computer technology, the possibility of recording "at home" and everything related to it, the situation in music, its accessibility, and the possibilities of its dissemination to the "world" of potentially interested "consumers" have changed significantly. This means that there is a completely new relationship with the "audience," which actually does not exist in that strictly "physical" form.

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<sup>13</sup> Because their number is big I shall restrained myself on few among most important ones: prof. Ladislav Šaban and Theo Tabaka from Zagreb, dr Dragan Plamenac, maestro Jean Belliard, Sterling Jones and Tom Binkley and dr René Clemencic.

<sup>14</sup> On the edge, I must mention the challenges that, I believe, every so called "independent" researcher must face in similar endeavours. Without the backing of any institution, numerous doors remain closed, and we must bear all expenses from our own pockets.

<sup>15</sup> With Marco, an Italian virtuoso on Nyckelharpa, vielle, and violin, I played and collaborated for many years in the Clemencic Consort, Vienna.

This has already begun to happen since the emergence of various sound carriers; LPs, cassette tapes, and later CDs, VHS, and DVDs, all the way to the latest media such as BDs and internet platforms like (free, but with tremendous "power") Vimeo, YouTube, SoundCloud, Facebook, and others that are paid but actually symbolic.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, our performances, compositions, arrangements, and even our improvisations, born and recorded within our own "four walls," can (I repeat: with minimal or no investment at all) be presented to a huge audience (as a newer and very eloquent example: see the case of the British brilliant multi-talent and multi-instrumentalist, Jacob Collier) and, after an appropriate "quota" of views and downloads, could even create a foundation for existence.

Digging deeper into the internet, it is possible to find a relatively large number of articles on improvisation in different musical styles (especially on portals like JSTOR, academia.edu, and ResearchGate - see my list with links in the Appendix), and I have extensively used them in this study.

It is understandable that all the tremendous positive possibilities of the so-called new media also harbour certain dangers and negative effects that can question someone's creativity.<sup>17</sup> However, just like in many other aspects of life, it is up to each of us to try to establish her or his own criteria and, accordingly, be able to distinguish between good and bad or superficial information, all the way to disinformation - which occasionally happen on the internet, especially on so-called "social" networks.

There are numerous books on musical improvisation, mostly aimed for beginners, especially in blues, jazz, rock, and pop music; for pianists, guitarists, and players of other instruments, such as wind instruments. In addition to these, there are many guides to improvisation for players of classical (church and concert) organ - the only ones within the realm of so-called "classical" (or to use the frequent but not adequate term: "serious"<sup>18</sup>) music where improvisation is not only

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<sup>16</sup> If someone is primarily interested in the commercial success of their creative work.

<sup>17</sup> Or according to some, especially in the case of pop music, it gives even the untalented and concerning the playing technique inferior individuals a chance to achieve "global" success, either through their unexpected popularity or financially... However, this also happens due to the weak and superficial (mis)information of the wider audience.

<sup>18</sup> The categorization of music as "serious" or "non-serious" is subjective and can vary depending on perspective and context. Traditionally, "serious" music refer to classical music genres like chamber, orchestral, opera, and oratorio music, which are often associated with formal composition and performance settings. However, this classification does not imply that other genres such as blues, jazz, rock, operetta, musical theatre, and others are inherently "non-serious" or lacking in artistic value.

Genres like blues, jazz, and rock have rich histories, cultural significance, and sophisticated musical elements that command respect and admiration from musicians and audiences alike. They may not adhere to the same formal structures as "classical" music, but they can be highly complex and artistically significant in their own right.

Similarly, suites of dances from the Baroque and Classical eras, including ballet music, hold significant artistic merit and are often performed and studied alongside other classical repertoire. These suites, kind of lighter "pop(ular)" music of past times, showcase composers' abilities to express emotion, convey narrative, and demonstrate mastery of form within the context of dance movements.

In summary, the classification of music as "serious" or "non-serious" is not a definitive measure of its artistic value, and each genre or style offers unique contributions to the rich tapestry of musical expression.



"allowed," but as we will see later, students of organ are expected to master improvisation and participate in numerous competitions in this highly esteemed discipline.

What is lacking are books that deal with improvisation throughout history; very comprehensive like the one by E.T. Ferand or another by D. Bailey, which attempts to provide a relatively concise overview as a basis for further study, see in the Chapter 1.

Especially sad is the situation when we turn to the related field of Early Music; there are countless articles scattered mainly throughout specialized musicological periodicals, some doctoral theses that "ordinary mortals" can hardly access, and a relatively small number of new manuals on this topic.<sup>19</sup>

Igor Pirnat Pomykalo, Birkfeld Spring 2024

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<sup>19</sup> See Chapter 5 and 7, as well as Appendix, 8.1 General Bibliography.

**IGOR POMYKALO: "ALL'IMPROVVISO", 2018 – 2024**

**COMPENDIUM OF THE EARLY MUSIC IMPROVISATION, English Version**

**Chapter 1: What is improvisation?**

**Chapter 2: About Early Music in general and the Tools you would need for improvisation**

**Chapter 3: Ornamentation and improvisation of Early Music of the Middle Ages, Renaissance and (early) baroque**

**Chapter 4: Cantare Super Librum / Cantare con l'occhio della mente etc.**

**Chapter 5: How to Improvise Renaissance Music, with Voice and Instruments**

**Chapter 6: The art of Italian improvisers from the end of the 15th and the first 3rd of the 16th century**

**Chapter 7: How to Improvise on the Lira**

**8. Appendix**