

Utopia Improvised

The Heavenly Lotteries of the Moravian Church

INTRODUCTION

Although the art of solo improvisation in eighteenth-century Europe and America is fairly well understood, group improvisers in the literate cultures of the time remain an enigma. How can we study a practice that traditionally existed outside the realm of written notation? Were group improvisations important, or even existent, features of eighteenth-century musical culture? Recently discovered transcriptions of improvised worship services and songs from Moravian communities in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Germany reveal a rich and complex picture of group improvisation during the Age of Enlightenment, illuminating the effects of literacy and the art of memory on improvisational techniques.

METHODOLOGY

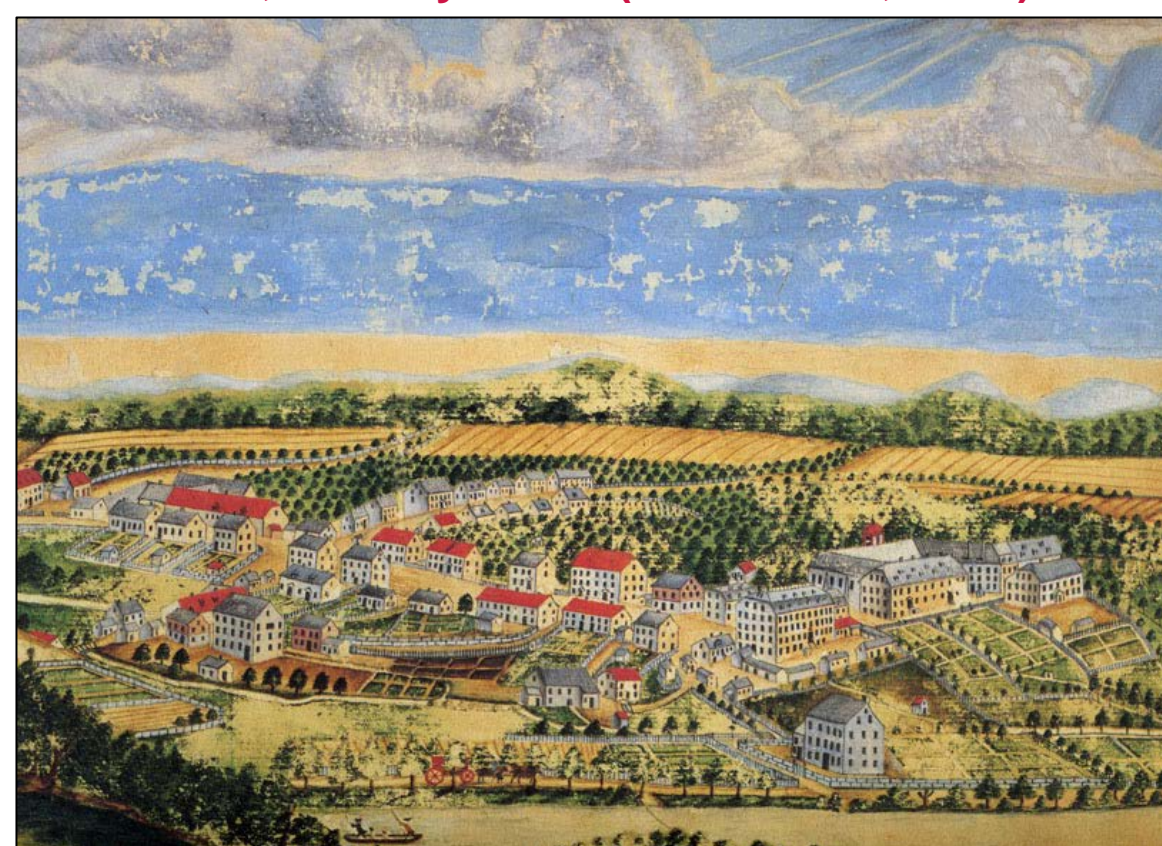
Moravian archival materials are a treasure-trove of information on the art of improvisation, a musical practice which traditionally exists outside the realm of written notation. The Archives of the Moravian Church in Herrnhut, Germany, and Bethlehem and Nazareth, Pennsylvania, contain important evidence for the pedagogy and practice of group improvisation in Moravian communities, and in the eighteenth century, in general. From transcriptions of improvised worship services, manuscript “memory texts,” guides, and hymn and chorale books, to sketches of hymns and songs notated by community members, there is simply no other archival record of improvisation in Western art music that can rival the wealth of materials housed in Herrnhut, Bethlehem, and Nazareth.

Moravian Lot Boxes (UA M.20, M.28)



Musical improvisation was not the only chance operation employed by Moravians to contact or channel the divine. Lots, both communal and personal, also allowed Christ to “have a voice” in community and personal affairs. Pictured are personal lot boxes belonging to community leaders, Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-60) and his second wife, Anna Nitschmann (1715-60).

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (Watercolor, 1784)



Nicholas Garrison's watercolor rendering of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is considered an important early American work of art, and one of the first to portray a frontier settlement like Bethlehem. The transplantation of standard German small-town architecture to the American Colonies is evident in the construction of the buildings and the layout of the town itself. Moravians were to feel “everywhere at Home,” even in the wilds of Eastern Pennsylvania.

BACKGROUND

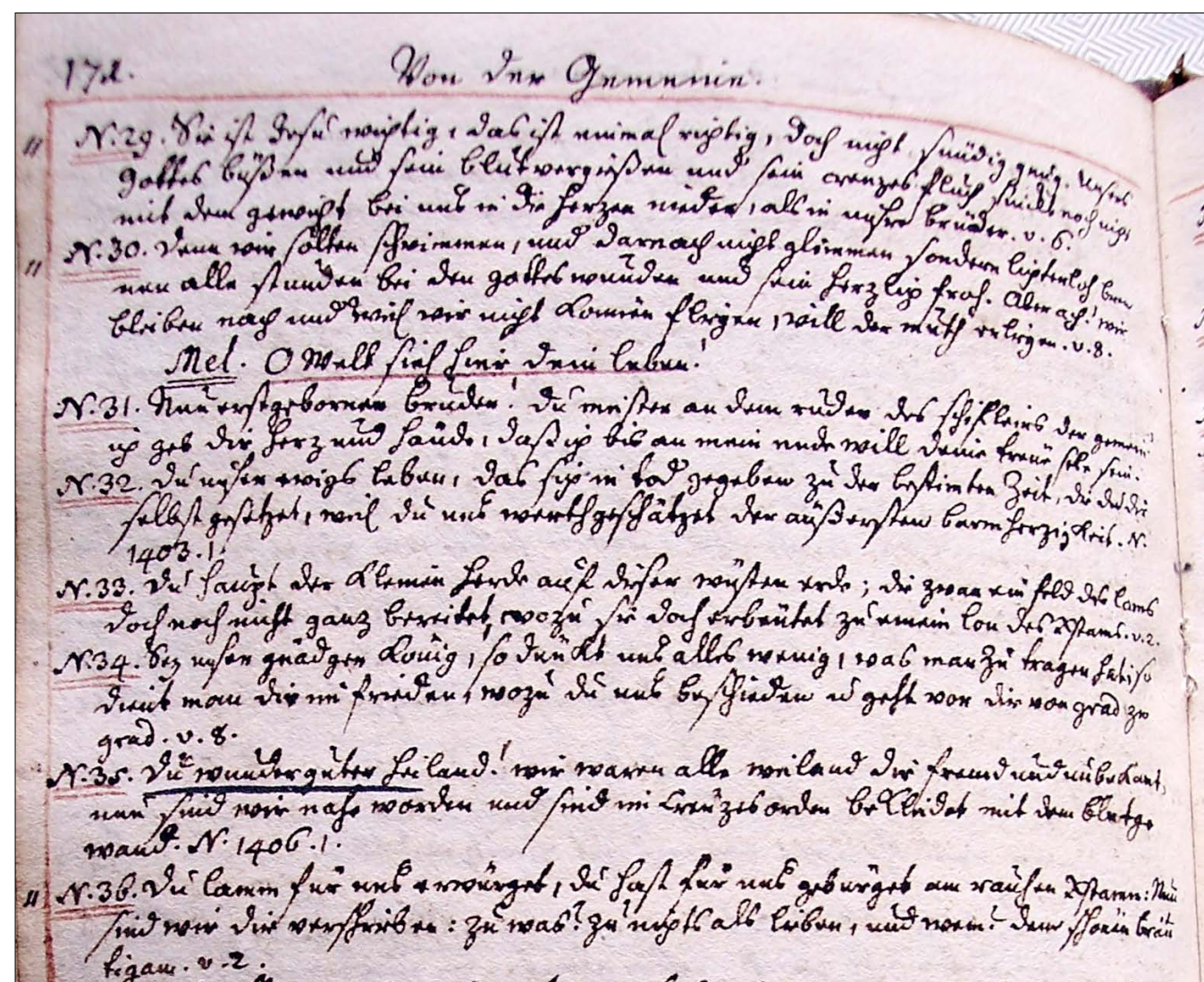
Members of Moravian communities were taught how to improvise hymns in group worship services as a way to “give voice to the divine.” Not only was this tradition of group improvisation integral to an important movement within German and Pennsylvania-German society, but it also has much to teach us about the art of the group, and the solo, improviser. Moravian archival records reveal that they cultivated a style of improvisation that was only possible in a literate context through the use of a memorized library of compositional techniques as well as memorization from written sources. Through cultivation of a memorial archive of compositional structures, techniques, and examples, community members acquired the facility to demonstrate their commitment to the utopian enterprise by spontaneously recombining material from their memorial archive, or by employing learned compositional strategies that allowed “their hearts to sing.”

Title page of the Herrnhuter Gesangbuch (1735)



The title page of the principle Moravian hymnal, the Herrnhuter Gesangbuch, portrays Moravian brothers and sisters singing in a prostrate position. Moravians believed that the vibrations of divinely improvised hymns could cleanse the body and soul, through a spiritual alchemical process reminiscent of the cleansing powers of Christ's blood. Group improvisations were often sung into the floor, so that the vibrations could be transmitted through the wooden boards to the entire congregation.

Moravian Memory Text (UA NB.IV.R1 120b 172)



Manuscript guides for creating improvised worship services, such as this Auszug [guide] preserved in Herrnhut, Germany, served as “memory texts,” reminiscent of the ancient art of memory practiced by Greek and Roman scholars such as Cicero and Quintilian. Moravians visually memorized thousands of hymn verses, matched by specific syllabic and versification patterns, and categorized into hierarchical classification schemes, out of texts such as this. This enabled them to quickly and easily recall and manipulate the information they had memorized, and recombine the memorized hymns into new patterns. Community leaders specifically devised this method of memorization, followed by spontaneous recombination, so that each person could learn to improvise, and demonstrate their faith aurally and visually to the community. This was the Moravian recipe for a “singing Utopia.”

SIGNIFICANCE & CONCLUSIONS

Reconstructing the Moravian tradition of improvisation is important, not just for its historical significance, but for what it can tell us about the art of group improvisation, and improvisation in general. Moravian improvisations teach us how a group of individuals might learn to improvise, answering such questions as: are improvisations structured? Can a group of musicians practice a particular style of improvisation? How do they learn their craft? Can a memorized repertory of compositional models affect music that is improvised? And, vice versa, does the particular style of improvisation affect how one might memorize? Can literacy affect improvisation? Do improvisers who memorize material based on written sources produce improvisations that are different than improvisers who have internalized orally transmitted models?

While musicologists have traditionally analyzed the finished forms and history of musical works of the eighteenth century like the products of the visual arts and literature, Moravian improvisations educate us about a body of hymnody that had no fixed forms. Moravians certainly compiled hymnals, but they didn't use them in their worship services. Their hymnody was, instead, a “living” tradition that responded to the needs of the moment and to the influx of divine inspiration. Their hymns are not texts, they are aural manifestations of chance operations, musical lots cast in service to God. Moravian hymn writers composed “divine dictations,” not works of individual genius.

We have much to learn about improvisations and music composed by groups, and by those who attribute their compositions to divine inspiration. Moravian improvisers show us that God does not speak randomly, but with pattern and form. His “dictations” require memory and skill. Recent research in neuropsychology and neurophysiology indicates our brains are structured to think in pattern. The way we memorize, and therefore improvise, will be determined by the categories and patterns our minds automatically generate. Improvisation, whether in jazz, the vision songs of native North Americans, the song duels of the Inuit, the Persian *radif*, classical concertos, fugues, preludes or fantasias, is, in fact, never random. It is the memorization and internalization of compositional models and a standard repertory of formulas that guide improvisatory techniques and allow musicians to easily improvise new works. Whether motivated by sacred or secular reasons, memory and skill are critical components of the art of improvisation.

PRINCIPAL ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Auszug für Singstunde, UA Herrnhut NB.IV.R1 120b, 1.

Bethelsynodalprotokoll, UA Herrnhut R 2A, Nr. 39 B, 4, 1:76.

Diarium von Herrnhut (1725), UA Herrnhut.

Jüngerhaus Diarium (JHD), UA Herrnhut.

Lieder-Entwürfe von Zinzendorf (Eigenhändig u. Copien), I Sammlung, UA Herrnhut R.20.E.19, and R.20.E.20.

Synode Protokoll (1745), UA Herrnhut.

Verlass der Interims-Arrangement Konferenz von 14. Juni 1762, UA Bethlehem.

Zinzendorf, Nikolaus Ludwig von, *Diarium meiner Gothaischen Verrichtung*, UA Herrnhut R.9.B.a.8.68.

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