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The improvisation of structured keyboard accompaniments for the ballet class

Simon Frosi

Edith Cowan University

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The Improvisation of Structured Keyboard Accompaniments for the Ballet Class

Simon Frosi

Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts
Edith Cowan University

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Bachelor of Music Honours
2011
DECLARATION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr Jonathan Paget, for all of his hard work and time as my supervisor this year. His huge wealth of knowledge is just amazing. I would also like to thank Michael Brett for his assistance and for allowing me to analyse some of his transcriptions, and observing his classes. I would like to thank Stewart Smith for supervising me throughout the first semester and helping me come up with ideas for my thesis. I am privileged to have been supported and supervised such a great artist as himself. Also, thanks to my mum as well as teachers Anna Sleptsova and Peter Tanfield for their continued support and care through my final year of studies at WAAPA.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the question of how a pianist can learn to improvise accompaniments for a ballet class. It aims to examine the background knowledge required in order to embark upon such a task and to provide a theoretical tool kit for pianists to use in improvising. Additionally, this dissertation makes a detailed case study of notated improvisations by Michael Brett, an expert exponent of this genre. A thematic catalogue is provided of Brett’s improvisations for a forthcoming publication, examining accompaniment figurations and rhythmic structures. A more detailed harmonic and phrase analysis is then made of three complete pieces, examining the cadential and melodic structures that underpin these works. Similar to the Baroque *partimento* tradition, these phrase-level analyses can be used as templates, providing the middle ground scaffolding for the improvising pianist to embellish. They can also be treated as exemplars as to how a pianist may structure their own improvisations to suit any particular ballet exercise.
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I. INTRODUCTION

When I arrived at Perth this year, I was preparing myself to play for some ballet classes at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts and didn’t realise what a daunting task it is to play for class without selected music. Having worked as a sessional pianist playing for exams and workshops with the Royal Academy of Dance over the last three years I assumed it would be fairly easy as I was used to playing with set music that gave detailed directions on exactly how to play. The ballet class requires the pianist to understand dance and dance music, and to apply those detailed directions into the music when they play. This is where the idea for my thesis came. Having decided I would focus on improvisation in relation to the ballet class, I decided I would use one of Australia’s leading players and improvisers in that style, Michael Brett. From this I came up with some questions:

- Firstly, what were the requirements of a ballet pianist?
- How is the accompaniment for a ballet exercise constructed in relation to phrase, harmony and cadence?
- How could once replicate this in as their own improvisation?
- How could I learn to improvise ballet exercises from observing an expert improviser in this style?

I also became interested in historical models for improvisation and composition and began to evaluate the Baroque *partimento* tradition, examining what it could teach us about how to mould and scaffold improvisations in a tonal style. The tradition of *partimento* was developed prominently in Naples throughout the 16th and 17th century. The idea was that the student would play off instructional bass lines (called *partimenti*), which were representations of a harmonic structure. Students practiced realising these bass lines in keyboard harmony, and absorbed many compositional lessons from clichéd musical patterns embedded within them. In effect, composition comprised the stringing together of a number of stock-standard patterns learnt through practicing the *partimenti*.¹ I became intrigued with whether such a way of practicing could aid me as a dance accompanist. Could templates be derived on which to form improvisations for a dance class?

¹ Aaron Berkowitz, *The Improvising Mind: Cognition and Creativity in the Musical Moment* (publication place: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), page nr
II. A BACKGROUND TO DANCE ACCOMPANIMENT

This section describes what the expectations are for a dance accompanist in a classroom setting. The basic structure of a ballet class can be divided into three sections: barre, centre and allegro. The teacher instructs the class using French terminology and demonstrates when necessary. First, the pianist must have an understanding of ballet terminology and, by observing the dance teacher’s instructions, must play something fitting to that particular exercise.²

A key concept that the dance accompaniment pianist must comprehend is that of how dancers count music, and how this fits in with an idea of musical periodicity, and particularly the prevalence of the ‘eight bar phrase’. This is covered extensively in Cavalli’s Dance and Music,³ and I expound it further in the next chapter.

Another key publication outlining the requirements of dance accompanist is A Dance Class Anthology, produced by the world’s leading ballet examination company, the Royal Academy of Dance. This publication outlines in a nutshell what is required of the classical dance accompanist as well as providing scores to suit one or two classes’ worth of music. Some of the music includes adapted movements from ballets, opera, orchestral works, and solo piano repertoire. Therefore, it is not my intention to focus on selecting and adapting repertoire for the ballet class—as this has already been done—but instead to focus on techniques that could be used to improve a pianist’s improvisatory skills.

There is also a vast amount of literature that gives class outlines that include directions for the required accompaniment for certain exercises but not necessarily as a guide for the pianist. One of these that include musical scored musical examples is Basic Principles of Classical Ballet by Agrippina Vaganova, which teaches Russian ballet technique. A sample lesson with musical accompaniment can be found in the final chapter of this book.⁴ I am not discouraging the use of adapted repertoire, but merely suggesting that the

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dance accompanist who is able to improvise will be able to play a class with much greater ease.

The job of the ballet accompanist is very demanding, not only requiring the ability to sight-read difficult orchestral reductions, learn large amounts of repertoire (whether from ballet repertory or examination syllabi), but also to observe the instructions of the dance teacher, watch the dancers, and play in time. Not all dance accompanists have the ability to improvise, but I argue that these skills are hugely beneficial, ultimately making the job of the dance accompanist less time-consuming, and able to respond more adequately to the immediate demands of the job.

Some of the benefits of being able to improvise in the ballet class include the following:

First, as the ballet class can go for up to 30 exercises or more, usually in the space of one and a half hours (depending on the age group and/or level). The pianist may not always have time to find something in the pianist’s books or memory in time for the class to start their exercise.

Second, when playing memorised music, mental blanks can be common. Being able to improvise and having a sound harmonic sense of a piece will enable the pianist to adapt the music to the dance with as little stress or trouble as possible.

Third, another advantage of being able to improvise is the obvious fact that the pianist needs to know what is going on and watch the dancer as much as possible. Playing from scores diverts your visual focus on the music stand and merely using peripheral vision to follow the dancer.

Fourth, whilst the instructor is divulging information on how the dancer is going to approach a particular exercise, the pianist may give them their undivided attention focusing their energy on how their music can support what the teacher and dancer is trying to achieve instead of spending their preparation time sifting through their music.

To get an idea of how a ballet class is run I have presented I have included two examples of a ballet class. Figure 1 is from the A Dance Class Anthology issued by the Royal Academy of Dancing and Figure 2 is an example of a Russian ‘Sixth Year’ class from 100 Lessons in Classical Ballet written by Vera S. Kostrovitskaya. A class may be run in many different ways depending on the students level, the teacher, and whether they are preparing for an exam or performance. But most ballet classes have a fairly similar structure. Most exercises at the bar and other diagonal exercises are played at least two
times so the dancer has the opportunity to present both the left side and the right side. On occasions, the teacher may ask something on the left side to be played slightly slower as it is generally the weaker side which needs to be accommodated.

Another requirement of the ballet accompanist is to motivate and inspire the dancers. Ballet-master and choreographer of the Bolshoi ballet, Asaf Messerer, believed that musical accompaniment for advanced dance classes should always be 'artistically varied, rich in melody, and interesting.'

Figure 1. Sample class outline from *A Dance Class Anthology*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BARRE</th>
<th>CENTRE</th>
<th>ALLEGRO</th>
<th>POINTE WORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pliés 4/4</td>
<td>At Parling Harry Farjeon</td>
<td>Polka type</td>
<td>Minuet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tendus Gavotte</td>
<td>Handel/Boysen Gavotte</td>
<td>Pizzicato Polka from Sylvia</td>
<td>Minuet in F Handel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glissés Rhumba</td>
<td>Tico-tico</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronds de jambe Blues</td>
<td>At Last 16 bars + 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frappés Schnellpolka</td>
<td>Trisch-tratsch polka 32 + 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fondu &amp; ronds de jambe en l’air Habanera</td>
<td>RAD Advanced 2. Male syllabus p.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petits battements Schnellpolka</td>
<td>Thunder &amp; Lightening Polka</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grands battements Strong, fast waltz</td>
<td>The Desert Song (Waltz in D major)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adage Waltz-aria</td>
<td>Sieh dort den kleinen Pavillon duet from Merry Widow Act II (“Summer House aria”)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ports de bras Reverie (Debussy) or White Swan pas de deux from Swan Lake Act II</td>
<td>Centre Practice Wedding Day at Troldhaugen Grieg</td>
<td>1st Allegro 6/8 Flower Festival at Genzano male solo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre Practice</td>
<td>Wedding Day at Troldhaugen Grieg</td>
<td>2nd Allegro Waltz ‘Stars’ waltz from Cinderella</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pirouettes Waltz</td>
<td>Finale Waltz from The Nutcracker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adage Sarabande</td>
<td>Sarabande by William Croft</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Figure 2. Sample Outline from *100 Lessons in Classical Ballet*\(^7\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXCERSISES AT THE BARRE</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demi-Pliès Exercise</td>
<td>16 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battements Tendus</td>
<td>32 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronds De Jambe A Terre and Grands Ronds De Jambe Jetès</td>
<td>12 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battements Fondu</td>
<td>16 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronds De Jambe En L’air</td>
<td>8 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petits Battements Sur Le Cou-de-pied</td>
<td>16 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battements Developès</td>
<td>8 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grands Battements Jetès</td>
<td>16 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXCERSISES IN THE CENTER</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Adagio and Battements Tendus</td>
<td>4 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battements Fondu</td>
<td>8 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petits Battements Sur Le Cou-de-pied</td>
<td>8 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Battements Jetês Balancês</td>
<td>8 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Adagio</td>
<td>12 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ALLEGRO</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sissonnes Ferméés and Etrechats-quatre</td>
<td>16 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballonnês in Posè Effaceè</td>
<td>8 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballottes and Assembles</td>
<td>(Waltz) 16 Measures in 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Échappes</td>
<td>8 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Jetê in attitude croisée</td>
<td>(Waltz) 16 Measures in 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glissades</td>
<td>4 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointê Tendu</td>
<td>(Waltz) 16 Measures in 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coupes</td>
<td>8 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emboîtes</td>
<td>8 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brises Dessus-Dessous</td>
<td>8 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petits changements de pieds</td>
<td>8 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXCERSISES ON POINTE</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Échappes</td>
<td>8 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sissonnes Simples</td>
<td>16 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gargouillades en Dehors, and Pas De Chat</td>
<td>(Polka) 16 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jetês</td>
<td>8 Measures in 4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tours Sur Le Cou-de-pied</td>
<td>(Waltz) 16 Measures in 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tours Glissade en Tournant</td>
<td>16 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tours en Dehors with Degage</td>
<td>8 Measures in 2/4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. Required General Knowledge

1. The Rhythmic Basis of Dance

When talking dance steps and rhythm, the dancer tends to use different language than the musician. The dancer generally works in ‘counts’ where as the musician thinks of beats, measures (or bars). When converting counts one must consider the time signature and the pulse. For example; if a pianist was playing in a three four time signature for a Grand Battement exercise, each bar would be considered a count and the tempo could be much faster, perhaps a dotted minim equals 70 beats per minute. If one was to play a Battement Fondu exercise in a three four tempo, each crotchet would be considered a count and would be relatively equal in tempo to a whole bar of the grand battement exercise. Therefore in the Fondu exercise you are playing one third of the amount of notes if the exercise shares the same music and counts.

As most dance teachers are not familiar with detailed musical analysis and use different terminology, they tend to ask for a particular type of dance as an example like a slow waltz, a polka, or a rag. This facilitates the accompanist when playing from scored music, but when improvising the musician must have an awareness of other factors, which in any case should also be considered when playing off notated music. A comprehensive understanding of how rhythm, phrase and structures work will allow the pianist to make their improvisations easily understood and better synchronised with the dancer(s).

2. Cadences: Their Relative Strength

Cadence is the best way of defining the ends of phrases, as well as tonality.⁸ Cadence in ballet can help guide the dancer through an exercise. For the musical dancer, it provides them with sub-divisions of the phrase, which if played correctly can help them with their own sense of phrasing and direction.

The imperfect authentic cadence (IAC) and perfect authentic cadence (PAC) are characterized by a dominant harmony resolving in the tonic. In the US terminology I am adopting here⁹, a perfect authentic cadence refers to closed voice-leading, with the soprano

---


ending on the tonic, and the chords being in root-position. This sounds more final, and conclusive and designates the close of a musical “period.” The *imperfect* authentic cadence refers to a V-I cadence that does not satisfy the conditions of being tonally closed (as described above). As such, the IAC designates the end of a phrase, but not a complete musical period. The third significant cadence type is the half cadence (HC), which designates any cadence closing on chord V (whether I to V, ii to V, IV to V, vi to V, and so on). The fourth significant cadence type is the deceptive cadence (DC), being where a dominant chords normal resolution to tonic is evaded by substitution of the submediant. Finally, there is the plagal cadence, which appears as a substitute for the PAC in some late Romantic repertoire. **Figure 3** summarises these cadence types, their abbreviations, and the harmonies and voice leading they designate.

**Figure 3. Cadences types**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cadence Type (US terminology)</th>
<th>English terminology</th>
<th>Progression</th>
<th>Voice-leading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perfect authentic cadence (PAC)</td>
<td>Perfect cadence with closed voice-leading</td>
<td>Dominant to Tonic</td>
<td>Soprano moves either 7 - 8 or 2 - 1 while the bass moves 5 - 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperfect authentic cadence (AC)</td>
<td>Perfect cadence with open voice-leading</td>
<td>Dominant to Tonic</td>
<td>Soprano closes on 5 or 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half cadence (HC)</td>
<td>Imperfect cadence</td>
<td>Anything going to the Dominant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceptive cadence (DC)</td>
<td>Interrupted cadence</td>
<td>Dominant to Submediant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plagal cadence</td>
<td>Plagal cadence</td>
<td>Sub-dominant to tonic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3. Constructing Phrases and Periods

When assessing how many measures one would play to fit a dance exercise, it is necessary to feel the music in phrases and periods. It is also vital to the dancer that the music is felt in phrases rather than individual counts, as the dancer needs to feel the direction of the music and have a natural flow in order to give an organic performance. When discussing how phrases are to be divided and the musical impression they give, it is useful to label them by their technical names.

If a dance exercise is played on two sides, this would normally comprise two periods, each constructed in turn of two distinct phrases, one an antecedent and one a consequent.
The antecedent and the consequent phrase both combined provide ‘tonal fulfilment.’ The antecedent phrase precedes the consequent phrase, which is usually left tonally open defined by a cadence on the dominant (or an imperfect authentic cadence). The consequent is tonally closed, that is having a PAC, therefore providing tonal fulfilment. It is also useful to recall that the plagal cadence may be employed to end a phrase, although this is less common.

Therefore, in constructing a dance improvisation, an accompanist must normally choose the four cadences to be played and their relative strengths. Possible outlines are given below in Figure 4:

Figure 4. Two possible tonal plans (with cadences) for a dance improvisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period One</th>
<th>Period Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent</td>
<td>Consequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan A</td>
<td>Ends with HC in tonic, or IAC in tonic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period One (Modulates to dominant key)</th>
<th>Period Two (modulates back to tonic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent</td>
<td>Consequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan B</td>
<td>Ends with HC in tonic, or IAC in tonic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Understanding how a period is constructed, and being able to replicate this as the dance or exercise warrants, will ensure the harmonic structure and to some degree melodic design will support the dancers in a satisfying way.

Another consideration in constructing periods is motivic repetition. It is very common for the consequent phrase to imitate or repeat melodic ideas from the antecedent

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A period constructed in such a way is called a “parallel” period. If no such repetition is employed, it is called a “contrasting period.”

In constructing a pair of periods in this way, a dance improvisation may sometimes also become a recognizable musical form such as rounded binary, one of classical music’s most common formal types. Developed in the Baroque, rounded binary eventually grew into sonata form in the latter eighteenth century but persisted as the formal model for minuets, trios, as well as embedded in miniature within rondo themes and other piano forms such as mazurka.

Also known as two-reprise form, rounded binary is illustrated in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Rounded Binary Form as Illustrated in Gauldin, *Harmonic Practice in Tonal Music* 14

The first section (A) is constructed of a progressive period, the consequent phrases modulating to the dominant. The second section (B) is double the length of the first section which consists of a small development (often consisting of sequential material), and closing with a reprise of the A section that is altered such that the consequent phrase now stays on the tonic. It is easy to see that rounded binary form is like an incipient sonata form, contain some qualities of a ternary form. In adapting rounded binary for a dance class, the repeat of the B section is omitted such that the two halves are precisely equal in length.

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IV. THE PARTIMENTO TRADITION AND ITS APPLICABILITY TO STRUCTURING IMROVISATIONS FOR THE BALLET CLASS

“A new type of improvisatory piece called a partimento arose in the Baroque period with the inception of the thoroughbass.”\(^{15}\) This method was developed and practiced in Naples from the 17th century. The principal of the partimento tradition is that the keyboard player would practice small realizations/patterns until they are well ingrained and then practice applying these over a figured bass score in a variety of ways in many different keys. The idea was that the novice would have to build up a large memory of stored material then learn to harbour it in such a way that they can perform structured improvisations.\(^{16}\) Proficient partimenti players could have more than 1,000 different patterns memorized, which they could apply when needed.\(^{17}\) The result was a style of free improvised performance that could be used for compositional purposes or for the performer themselves. Figure 6 is an example is a partimento bass pattern ‘partimenti numerati’ by Francesco Durante. These are catalogued online by North Western University.

How is this applicable to dance accompaniment? Of course it wouldn’t be expected that someone would have to knuckle down and learn over a thousand realizations in all the keys and be able to apply it in many different ways. ‘Good’ improvisation is borne of logic and formal order and these things have to be learnt. It is a craft as much as an art. Developing a strategy and method of how you would practice dance accompaniment improvisations and having a solid structural foundation will provide the pianist with a repertoire of stock-standard phrases under their fingers, adding fluency and confidence to their improvisations.


\(^{16}\) Robert O. Gjerdingen, “Gebrauchs-formulas,” Music Theory Spectrum 33, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 191

Moreover, the way in which partimenti were constructed is of great interest. Firstly there is a figured bass template, which provides the structure, both the harmonic structure and phrase structure. The pianist playing off these ‘realizations’ could play the progression in any different key. The partimento practice can be adapted to not only to memorise certain harmonic progressions suited to the eight bar phrase, but also for the practice of different patterns to suit the exercise. Example; for an exercise you could play in a 2/4 meter with a repeated left hand vamp style accompaniment, or using the same harmonic outline use a 6/8 meter arpeggiated accompaniment, or even a 3/4 vamp style like a waltz. These are different styles of playing they are utilizing the same harmonic structure and outline and it is up to the pianist to be creative with the textures and motivic material.

How does one do this exactly? Obviously, memorising many harmonic patterns can take a lifetime. But the idea of a partimento as a harmonic template is also a useful concept. A harmonic template can be used to create a scaffolding for embellishment through improvisation. Firstly, the structure must be set in even eight bar phrases. Depending on the length of the exercise, the pianist may easily adapt the music by simply selecting which phrases to use, or repeating phrases.

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V. THE ANALYSIS OF FREE IMPROVISATION FOR THE BALLET USING MICHAEL BRETT AS AN EXEMPLAR

Mr. Brett has almost 30 years experience playing for professional ballet classes having worked in Germany for the Stuttgart Ballet and Hamburg Ballet; in Australia for the West Australian Ballet; and in New Zealand for the New Zealand School of Dance. He was the music director for the Royal Academy of Dance in Australia and is now the chief accompanist for the dance department at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. He is also in demand as an accompanist for visiting ballet companies, ballet master classes, examinations and continues to assist dance teachers in the musical aspects of their training. Most of the work Mr. Brett does (syllabus and repertoire work aside) is improvised. However, he also extemporizes from memory or scores. This is a skill he has developed by playing in groups and ensembles when he was younger, where he has had to improvise over simple chord progressions and play a large amount of commercial music, which over the years has been ingrained into his memory—similar to Partimenti patterns. Now he has the ability to access this information anytime he needs.

A. My Observations

When observing Mr Brett the first thing I noticed was his choice of repertoire. He tended to avoid using material from piano repertoire and use themes from either well know pieces or ballets and improvised around them. It seems to make sense as they are avoiding rhythmic repetition or metric predictability, which is vital for the ballet dancer to follow, which does against what the great masters were trying to achieve.\(^\text{19}\)

Mr Brett’s style of music was also varied depending on the class. The class itself follows a specific structure in which the dancer is working their way from some basic stretches and exercises gradually building up till they are performing great leaps and jumps. The music therefore has a sense of doing this and Michael improvises in different styles and dynamic/intensity to support the dancers.

Mr Brett’s opening gambits create an introduction to the dance, providing a clear rhythmic character to the dancers, giving them the opportunity to hear what style and pulse

they must follow. Generally he would play a four or eight count introduction allowing enough time for the dancer to ‘catch’ on. The amount of bars that would be would depend on the meter and the pulse of the music.

B. CATALOGUE AND ANALYSIS OF MICHAEL BRETT'S SCORED IMPROVISATIONS

Improvisation is defined by Bruno Nettl as follows:

The creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed. It may involve the work's immediate composition by its performers, or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between.\(^{20}\)

In this section I have catalogued the improvisations of Michael Brett, which are going to be published in an examination syllabus some time in 2012. These were constructed using a Disk Clavier piano linked to a computer, which transcribed what he was playing into scored music. As well as cataloguing these transcriptions, I have also analysed and constructed templates of a select few, which demonstrate clear harmonic and phrase structures. These structures can be embellished to create new works in a similar fashion to the partimento tradition.

---

1. **BARRE**

**PLIES**
E Flat Major
¾ Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction

Broken chord accompaniment with simple melody mostly consisting of crotchets. Gives a flowing feel with long musical line.

**BATTMENTS TENDU AND GLISSÉS**
G Minor
2/4 Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
4 Bar/8 Count Introduction

Non legato alberti bass pattern with a staccato melody constructed with small motifs accentuating the beat. The result is a light/snappy feeling, which can help the dancer, articulate their movements.

**RONDS DE JAMBE À TERRE AND ASSEMBLÉS SOUTENUS**
C major
4/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
RONDS DE JAMBE A TERRE AND ASSEMBLÉS SOUTENUS
C major
4/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

This exercise has a flowing quaver, broken chord left hand pattern. Mr Brett purposely phrased the left hand quavers in groups of four to give a sense of two counts in a bar, which the dancer will be following.

GRAND BATTEMENTS EN CROIX AND RETIRÉS
B Flat Major
4/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

BATTMENTS FRAPPÉS
E Flat Major
2/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
PETITS BATTMENTS
D Minor
2/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
4 Bar/8 Count Introduction

BATTMENTS FONDUS EN CROIX AND RONDS DE JAMBE EN L’AIR
C minor
4/4 Time Signature
8 Bar Setting
2 Bar/Four Count Introduction

DÉVELOPPÉS AND DEMI-GRANDS RONDS DE JAMBE
A Flat Major
6/8 Time Signature
9 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
EXERCISE FOR ATTITUDE AND ARABESQUE
A Minor
¾ Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction

GRAND BATTEMETS EN CLOCHE
Quick Waltz

¾ Time Signature
20 Bar Setting (4 Bar Coda)
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction
2. **DEMI-POINT**

RISES
A Flat Major
4/4 Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
2 Bar/8 Count Introduction

RELEVÉS
E Flat Major
2/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

ECHAPPÉS RELEVÉS AND RELEVÉS
A Minor
6/8 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
3. CENTRE

1ST PORT DE BRAS
C Major
6/8 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

2nd PORT DE BRAS
G minor
¾ Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

SET EXERCISE
F Major
4/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
4. **ADAGE**

**EXCERSISE FOR ARABESQUE**
D Flat Major
4/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

**EXCERSISE FOR ATTITUDES**
E Flat Major
4/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

**TEMPS LIÉS EN AVANT AND EN ARRIÈRE**
F Major
4/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
1ST ADAGE
G Minor (Tierce De Picadi Ending)
¾ Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction

2ND ADAGE
A Flat Major
4/4 Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
2 Bar/ Four Count Introduction

UNSEEN ADAGE ENCHAÎNEMENT: 6/8
C Major
6/8 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
UNSEEN ADAGE ENCHAÎNEMENT – 3/4
B Flat Major
¾ Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction

UNSEEN ADAGE ENCHAÎNEMENT – 4/4
I. F minor
4/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
**5. PIROUETTES**

**PIROUETTES EN DEHORS**
D Minor  
4/4 Time Signature  
16 Bar Setting  
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

\[\text{Tango con bravura}\]

**PIROUETTES EN DEDANS**
E Flat Major, Modulating to A Flat Major at mid-point  
¾ Time Signature  
32 Bar Setting  
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction

\[\text{Viennese waltz}\]

**EMBOÎTÈS RELEVÈS AND POSÈ PIROUETTES BY HALF TURN**
A Minor  
4/4 Time Signature  
32 or 64 Bar Setting, depending on repeats

\[\text{Alla gavotte}\]
UNSEEN PIROUETTES ENCHAÎMENT – MALE
B Flat Major
4/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

TOURS EN L’AIR – MALE
I. C Major
3/8 Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction
6. **ALLEGRO**

**WARM-UP ENCHAÎNEMENT**
G Major
6/8 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

![Capriccioso](image)

**1ST ALLEGRO**
E Flat Major
¾ Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction

![Grand Waltz](image)

**2ND ALLEGRO**
F Major
2/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

![Giacosa](image)
3RD ALLEGRO
Tempo di polka-mazurka
E Flat Major
¾ Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/6 Count Introduction

BATTERIE ENCHAÎNEMENT – FEMALE
Same music as immediately subsequent...

BATTERIE ENCHAÎNEMENT – MALE
(Male-meno mosso con bravura)
D Major
¾ Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/6 Count Introduction

UNSEEN ALLEGRO NO.1 – POLKA
C Major
2/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
UNSEEN ALLEGRO NO.2 – GIGUE
A Minor
6/8 Time Signature
16 Bar Introduction
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

UNSEEN ALLEGRO NO.3 – MAZURKA
B Flat Major
¾ Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction

UNSEEN ALLEGRO NO.4 – SCHOTTISCHE
D Major
4/4 Time Signature
8 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
UNSEEN ALLEGRO NO.5 – 2/4
G Minor
2/4 Time Signature
16 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

UNSEEN ALLEGRO NO.6 VIENNESE WALTZ
G Major
¾ Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction

UNSEEN ALLEGRO NO.7 – LYRICAL WALTZ
F Major
¾ Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction
7. **POINTE**

**RISES**
C Minor  
4/4 Time Signature  
32 Bar Setting  
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

**RELEVÈS**
C Major  
4/4 Time Signature  
16 Bar Setting  
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

**ECHAPPÈS RELEVÈS AND RELEVÈS**
B Flat Major  
6/8 Time Signature  
16 Bar Setting  
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction
UNSEEN POINTE NO.1 – 4/4
F Major
4/4 Time Signature
8 Bar Setting
2 Bar/4 Count Introduction

UNSEEN POINTE NO.2 – ¾
C Minor
3/4 Time Signature
30 BAR SETTING
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction

POINTE ENCHAÎNEMENT
E Flat Major
¾ Time Signature
32 Bar Setting
4 Bar/4 Count Introduction
C. ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION

1. Accompaniment Patterns

This next table (see Figure 7) is a tally of different left hand patterns/styles, which Mr Brett employed in his transcribed improvisations. When learning to improvise, it would prove useful to practice the patterns Mr Brett uses in the ratio of this set of pieces. As is an overall representative of how he accompanies a ballet class.

Figure 7. An Analysis of the Different Left-Hand Accompaniment Patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accompaniment Pattern</th>
<th>No of Uses</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alberti Bass Pattern</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken-chord pattern in 4/4 or 2/4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken-chord figuration in 6/8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arpeggio pattern in 6/8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arpeggio pattern in 3/4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple chordal accompaniment in 3/4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple chordal accompaniment in 4/4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple chordal accompaniment in 6/8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bass and repeated chord pattern in 3/4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bass and repeated chord pattern in 4/4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vamp style bass and chord in 4/4 and 2/4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Adds emphasis on the ‘two in a bar’ feel as the bass falls on every second beat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vamp style bass and chord in 3/4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vamp style bass and chord in 6/8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Barcarolle’ arpeggio followed by chord pattern in 6/8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gives the music a lilting feeling. &quot;Depicting the movement of a boat&quot;, is a description in the New Grove Dictionary.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Development of Motivic Ideas

From my observations of Michael Brett’s playing and his transcriptions, he usually has a theme or motive which he plays around with throughout the exercise. For example, exercise 3 (Figure 7) employs a rhythmic motive of a dotted quaver followed by a semi-quaver that gives the melody a lilted feel. This motive is repeated fifteen times. A motive is simply a short musical idea, whether harmonic, melodic, rhythmic or any combination of them.\(^{22}\)

When improvising it would prove useful to have some sort of theme or idea in mind and develop it in as many different ways as possible. Repetition creates a sense of musical cohesion and is necessary to any successful improvisation. However, repetition should not be overdone: repetition and contrast must always be kept in a delicate balance.

3. Harmonic Templates Derived from Michael Brett’s Ballet Improvisations

Figure 8 through Figure 12 are harmonic analyses of Michael Brett’s transcriptions. I have written them in figured bass so one could read off them like you would read off a partimenti bass pattern. Rather than dividing each harmony from each bar, I have structured them in counts to make it easier for the pianist to have an understanding of the dancers phrase and beat as opposed to the musical one. So if there are two or more harmonic progressions in the one count, then they will be written in the one square. It is then the prerogative of the pianist how they will divide and give value to each of these harmonies. In most cases there is either one or two counts in a bar.

Of the three tables in these templates, the first row in the top left corner is the opening gambit. The second is the first half of the exercise, and the third row is the second half of the exercise. I have marked in the pivotal cadential points and phrase names, as they provide the underlying structure of the music. For the musical dancer, structure is key to a successful improvisation, providing harmonic and rhythmic direction and stability. An awareness of these structures when practicing will help the pianist create their own structured improvisations. All good improvisations for ballet class are borne of logic and formal order.

Figure 8. A analysis of EXERCISE 1: PLÎÈS

Opening Gambit

| I | CT | V | V |

ANTECEDENT PHRASE

CONSEQUENT PHRASE

E Flat Major

| I | I♭ | V♭ | V | I | vii♭/ii | V♭ | V♭ and vii♭/ii | ii | CT♭ | I | i♭ | I♭ | V | I | I♭/iii |

C Minor

E Flat major

| i | i | V♭ | V | i♭ | CT♭ | I♭ | V♭/ii | ii | CT♭ | I♭ | C♭ | I♭ | V | I | I |
Figure 9. The Music of EXERCISE 1: PLIÈS by Michael Brett

I. Pliès

Michael Brett

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23 Michael Brett, forthcoming publication.
Figure 10. An analysis of EXERCISE 2: BATTEMENT TENDUS AND GLISSÉS

Opening Gambit

| i | i² | i | i³ |

ANTECEDENT PHRASE

CONSEQUENT PHRASE

HC i – V7

| HC III – V i |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| i | i⁵ | iv | ii⁷ | V⁷ | V⁵ | i | V⁷ | i | i⁵ | iv | IV | V⁵ | ii⁷ | III | V³ |

ANTECEDENT PHRASE

CONSEQUENT PHRASE

AC V³ - i

| PAC V⁷ - i |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| i | iv | V³_III | III | VI⁶ | V_III V | V⁵ | i | i⁴ | V³_III | III | VI⁶ | V_III V | V | i & V⁷ | i |
2. Battements tendus and glissés

Michael Brett

 Allegretto 

 simile 

 simile 

24 Michael Brett, forthcoming publication.
Figure 12. An analysis of EXERCISE 3: RONDS DE JAMBE À TERRE AND ASSEMBLÈS SOUTENUS

Opening Gambit

I ⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠ
I ⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠ
ⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡ
V

ANTECEDENT PHRASE

CONSEQUENT PHRASE

HC V Ⅶ ⅤⅤ ⅤⅤ

ANTECEDENT PHRASE

CONSEQUENT PHRASE

PAC V Ⅶ ⅤⅤ Ⅴ

ANTECEDENT PHRASE

CONSEQUENT PHRASE

PLAGAL CADENCE IV Ⅷ ⅤⅤ Ⅴ

PLAGAL CADENCE IV Ⅷ ⅤⅤ Ⅴ

- I

I ⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠ
I ⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠ
ⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡⅡ
V

I ⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠ
I ⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠⅠ
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3. Ronds de jambe à terre and assemblés soutenus

Figure 13. The Music of EXERCISE 3: RONDS DE JAMBE À TERRE AND ASSEMBLÈS SOUTENUS by Michael Brett

25 Michael Brett, forthcoming publication.
4. **Improvising from a Template**

Similar to that of the baroque *partimenti* bass patterns, this harmonic analysis can be used as the basis of improvisation for ballet exercises. It would be a good idea to work through the template practicing the chords in some different keys. I noticed from my observations of Michael Brett that he would use mostly keys with up to four flats or sharps. He would generally use keys with flats and not more than four flats, but it is up to the pianist on which keys they will be utilizing, as long as there is variety with different exercises. Perhaps, one could practice between each chord two at a time to ensure continuity. Once the pianist is comfortable with playing these chords and doesn't have to make much of a conscious effort to perform the template beginning to end it is time to start applying different accompaniment patterns and motivic textures.

If one wants some suggested basic harmonic patterns to practice they could start by referring to the catalogue of works and practice applying the different left hand patterns to the template the pianist is working on. One could also practice stock-standard tonal progressions, such as the cycle of fifths, or similar key progressions (I-vi-ii₆-V-I or the similar). It is important that the pianist practices the left hand separately to start of with to ensure that the right harmonies are being employed in the accompaniment pattern.

As far as the melody, theme and/or motivic material is concerned I can offer some suggestions of how to start practicing these, but it is really trial and error as well as listening. A good start would be practicing small sections of simple of simple melodies or motives. An example: the first two bars of J.S. Bach’s *Minuet in G major From Anna Magdalena notebook*. Play these first two bars in every harmony suggested by the template (one at a time). Make sure to use the notes of each chord, and notes not found in the harmony in the chord should be that of the scale from the key of music. Make sure modulations are taken into consideration, and that if one is playing in a minor key they should also consider employing the melodic minor scale to avoid the dissonance between the flat sixth and raised seventh, unless it is desired by the player. These are not a guarantee of a good sounding melody but merely some suggestions of how one could practice improvising a melody. The most key is listening and making sure the contour of the melody reflects that of the phrase structure and harmonic structure.
5. **Steps to Creating your Own Improvisation**

In order to create one’s own improvisation, apart from a complete template, the pianist needs to consider many factors. The logical order of steps is outlined below in **Figure 14**.

**Figure 14. Logical Steps to Creating an Improvisation**

- **Step 1:** work out the counting, metre, and number of bars required for the particular exercise
- **Step 2:** choose a key and create phrase structures and cadential/tonal goals
- **Step 3:** find a suitable accompaniment pattern
- **Step 4:** have a motivic/melodic germ to develop

**VI. CONCLUSION**

When I set out on my study for this dissertation, my main goal was to see how I could become a better improviser for the ballet class. The key question I was seeking to answer was what exactly is required in order to learn to improvise for a ballet class. First, I found that I needed to have a strong understanding of how a ballet class is structured, and what was expected of the pianist. Second, I then realised I needed to learn more about tonal harmony in order to structure an effective improvisation. I thus read extensively from theory texts on the ways that phrases and periods are constructed in tonal music. Third, I was also intrigued by the Baroque *partimento* method and its apparent historical success in facilitating structure improvisations in a known musical style. My goal was to develop my own templates to be used in similar fashion to the *partimento* tradition. Fourth, I wanted to learn as much as possible from the improvisations of Michael Brett. For the last year, I have effectively been his apprentice. I have attempted to used my new-found theoretical knowledge to analyse some of his compositions and apply them as templates in my own improvisatory practice. I have found that this project has given me enough tools to commence rudimentary improvisations. Indeed, it has layed bare the previously hidden structure underlying much tonal repertoire. In essence, theory has taught me how to structure an improvisation. But observation of Michael Brett has taught me the styles and types of accompaniment patterns needed, and the ways to develop musical motives. This has been a richly rewarding musical journey, one in which I have come far, but one presenting many further musical challenges and potentially a lifetime to master.
VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY


