



### The Big Clue: Repeat Signs

Jazz or pop artists are rarely content to re-create the written score or repeat previous performances. They want to establish their own “signature” every time. In classical music we tend to place the highest ideal on literal, accurate interpretations of the score, as close to the composer’s intentions as possible. But what if the composer intended us to embellish or improvise?

Teachers often say, “So, you’ve convinced me, but when and how is it appropriate to do this? What about method-book pieces?” As Marianne Uszler says, “Changing, or adding to, what a composer has written is not something you do with every piece.” She offers a terrific example of when (and why) it is appropriate. (See “How to Add to the Tale,” *The Piano Adventures® Teacher*, December 2003, pp. 10, 11.)

While improvisation is not advised for much of the classical repertory (particularly in contemporary works), freedom is often expected in Baroque and Classic era music, particularly in dances. One rule of thumb: check for repeat signs, or at least repeated musical material. Little wonder that jazzers often have a special affinity for Baroque music. In both genres the repeat is a signal to “take off” and improvise!

### Start with Minuets

For starters, your best bets are easy minuets by Bach and his contemporaries (for example, those in the *Anna Magdalena Notebook*), and those by composers such as Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. On the repeats, challenge students to make at least one change in each of these categories:

◆ *Dynamics*

Does your student play soft the first time? Then suggest a louder dynamic for the repeat. Or vice versa. Or perhaps more nuances such as crescendos, decrescendos, or accents.

◆ *Articulations*

Students will likely play legato the first time. This has been the prevailing touch since Clementi. On the repeat, however, explore playing detached—very staccato, somewhat staccato, portato, or barely non-legato, depending on what seems right for the character of the piece. Generally, the faster the minuet, the crisper the staccato. Also try articulating two-note, three-note, and four-note slurs here and there.

◆ *Ornaments*

Ornaments were favored at most cadences, whether or not the composer indicated them. On repeats try using different ornaments (for example, substitute a turn for a mordent).

Want a lesson from Bach himself on how to embellish? Study his two versions (the first simple, the second ornamented) of the Sarabande movements in his second and third English Suites!

◆ *Embellish Melodies*

Add neighbor notes, passing tones, and chord fills to melodies (same as in jazz, minus the blue notes!).

Begin with adding passing notes to melodic thirds:



Note also the added “chord fill” in measure four.

Creating should have just as much importance as “re-creating.”

### Good Taste vs. Freedom

Always strive for a happy balance between good taste and freedom. Suffocating young students with excessive rules may stifle their creativity when they’re most vulnerable. I suggest erring on the side of freedom at the beginning. Later you can refer students to various tables of ornaments, stricter guidelines, and historical treatises (like C. P. E. Bach’s *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* and Czerny’s *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte*, op. 200. The English translation of the Czerny work is (sadly) out of print, but readily available by interlibrary loan.

### Be Sensible about “Purism”

Historical evidence enriches us with a fount of tasteful guidelines. These should not, however, straightjacket us! Every generation inevitably redefines “good taste” to some degree. Western civilization will survive a Baroque trill occasionally starting on the principal note. Apparently Baroque musicians didn’t improvise two against three; does that mean we cannot possibly do this tastefully?

Should we be offended by excellent concerto cadenzas written or improvised in the “wrong style” by editors, performers, and later composers (Brahms, for example)? Mozart would have been surprised to hear anyone slavishly adhering to his style when improvising. He appreciated good taste, so it’s certainly terrific to emulate his methods, especially as a starting point. But, true to the ethos of his time, Mozart would have also expected you to be yourself. He may very well have applauded the jazzy improvisations in Chick Corea’s recent recording of the K. 466 and K. 488 concertos!

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