

# Investigating ‘Improvisatory Music’ in Australia before Jazz through the Trove Digitised Australian Newspaper Database

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This article reassesses the results of my original research into improvisatory music in Australia before jazz as described in my monograph, *Playing Ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia 1836–1970* (Currency Press, 1999).<sup>1</sup> This reassessment is based on a systematic keyword search of the National Library of Australia’s digitised Australian newspaper database, Trove.<sup>2</sup> It is intended to critique specific conclusions presented in *Playing Ad Lib*, to demonstrate the actual magnitude of the various categories of improvisatory musical practices present in Australia before jazz, to identify more key practitioners and influences, and to reveal some colonial-era Australian perceptions of improvisatory musical practices. However, the primary aim is to evaluate the extent to which digital keyword searching in the Trove database as a research methodology can effectively replace the vastly more time-consuming methodology employed for *Playing Ad Lib*. Because my original research was approached from a jazz-studies perspective, this article also briefly relates the outcome of the current project to contemporary jazz studies, particularly to the widely inclusive branch of jazz studies known as New Jazz Studies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia 1836–1970* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on a paper of the same title presented at the 42nd National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia, “Conflict-/-Collaboration”, Monash University, 5–7 Dec. 2019.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards and Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds, *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

My Honours research on early jazz in Australia<sup>4</sup> had already sparked my curiosity as to whether a tradition of improvising could be traced before 1918, when the vaudeville act called Australia's First Jazz Band toured the eastern states.<sup>5</sup> A large proportion of my subsequent doctoral research, eventually published as *Playing Ad Lib*,<sup>6</sup> became devoted to researching improvising-related musical practice in popular musical entertainment and art music from early colonial times to 1918. When I began my PhD research, development of the Trove newspaper database with its ever-expanding array of keyword searchable pre-Jazz Age newspapers was still two decades away. Consequently, much of my foundational research had to be undertaken via a column-by-column, page-by-page and issue-by-issue search of those Australian newspapers that were accessible on microfilm, microfiche or archived hard copy form, alongside various other forms of archival or secondary-source material.

### **Improvisation or Improvisatory?**

The first challenge of my doctoral research was the absence of any agreement about how the term improvisation should be defined; one will, in fact, search the literature in vain for a universally acceptable definition of this term. The problem of defining improvisation arises partly because the term takes the inflexible form of a noun and therefore begs a rigid definition. The verbal form, 'to improvise,' presents comparable problems or limitations. At what precise point, for example, does spontaneous transformation of a given model—such as a jazz or pop tune—cease to be just 'interpretative freedom' and become improvising? Can 'playing by ear' be improvising, or can creative noise-making be improvising? For that matter, is any Western definition of improvisation likely to be acceptable within non-Western musical worlds?

The circular and ultimately unproductive 'what is improvisation' debate can, however, be sidestepped by substituting, wherever appropriate, the much more accommodating adjective, 'improvisatory,' which pertains to what is widely but imprecisely understood to be 'improvisation'. The term 'improvisatory' can embrace a continuum of musical practices ranging from the all-important subliminal idiosyncratic practices applied in popular music performance (groove, feel, swing, graininess, expressive micro-inflections and so forth)—which ethnomusicologist Charles Keil has labelled as 'participatory discrepancies'<sup>7</sup>—to the most spontaneous or indeterminate forms of music-making imaginable, for example, the spontaneous musical interpretation of an abstract painting as it is being created. The inclusive notion of 'improvisatory music' reverses the problematic and potentially elitist idea that 'real' improvisation can somehow be defined by select criteria and, in reversing this idea, begs the more tangible question: what categories of live music-making are *not* improvisatory in one way or another?

### **Scope of the Study**

Since all live performance is improvisatory to some degree, improvising can be viewed as 'common practice' across all genres, sub-genres, crossovers and fusions of live music-making,

<sup>4</sup> John Whiteoak, 'Early Modern Jazz in Australia: the Introduction of Bop' (Honours thesis, La Trobe University, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> John Whiteoak, "'Jazzing'" and Australia's First Jazz Band,' *Popular Music* 13, no. 3 (1994): 279–95.

<sup>6</sup> John Whiteoak, 'Australian Approaches to Improvisatory Musical Practice 1836–1970: A Melbourne Perspective' (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 1993); Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib*.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Keil, 'Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music,' in *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues*, ed. Charles Keil and Steven Feld (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 104.

whether popular, classical, traditional or vernacular. Within these broad categories, certain genres, such as jazz, are especially improvisatory in character, including music that is based almost entirely on what might best be described as ‘spontaneous composing’. The scope of my earlier study of ‘improvisatory musics’ also embraced music sometimes described as ‘frozen improvisation’.<sup>8</sup> This is written out and perhaps memorised music that is either a transcription of improvising, or else has been deliberately conceived to embody the spontaneity and energy of improvising, for example, in an elaborate cadenza, an optional written-out hot ‘break’ in a commercial swing arrangement, or a composed classical fantasia. To summarise: (1) ‘Improvisatory’ pertains in one way or another to what is widely if imprecisely perceived to be ‘improvisation’; (2) ‘improvisatory practices’ form a continuum of practices from real-time micro-interpretative freedom to spontaneous composing; (3) ‘improvisatory genres’ comprise a spectrum of musical genres that, to varying degrees, require or especially lend themselves to improvisatory practices and (4) ‘improvisatory music’ can include fantasias or other notated or memorised music deliberately conceived to embody the spontaneity and dynamism of improvising.

My original PhD study was framed within this very inclusive definition of improvisatory music as a spectrum of improvisatory musical genres and practices. I inverted the conventional thrust of traditional musicological research—with its emphasis on the creation or performance of notated masterworks—and, instead, attempted to reveal performative aspects of what Percy Grainger called the ‘unwritten music’<sup>9</sup> of a culture—in this case, the ‘unwritten music’ of European-Australian music history.

### Approved and Anonymous Genres

The initial research tasks of my study involved trying to establish or imagine what genres in Australia’s musical past were likely to have included relevant improvisatory practices, what those practices were, what they were called back then, and what types of sources might best yield data about them. Google was still over a decade away, and the earliest extant Australian sound recording is claimed to be *The Hen Convention*, a chook-yard impersonation song recorded in Warrnambool, Victoria in 1896 (which, oddly enough, features an interestingly improvisatory soundscape).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, musicians who had played professionally before Australia’s Jazz Age (1918–1929) had by this time mostly departed this world, either physically or just cognitively. One rare but important exception was the 100-year-old pianist, Carmen Naylor, who was improvising moods for silent films before World War One and was still able to demonstrate examples at the piano during my several interviews with her.<sup>11</sup>

Another research task was to categorise the improvisatory genres in early European-Australian musical history. The genres that provided their practitioners with social and cultural capital, such as improvising concert artists, opera singers or cathedral organists, were

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<sup>8</sup> The music of Keith Humble provides a particularly complex example of ‘frozen improvisation’ as the end product of intuitive creative processes. See Whiteoak, ‘Australian Approaches to Improvisatory Musical Practice 1836–1970,’ 567–88.

<sup>9</sup> Percy Grainger, ‘The Impress of Personality in Unwritten Music,’ *Musical Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (July 1915): 416–35.

<sup>10</sup> John James Villiers, ‘The Hen Convention (1896): Australia’s Oldest Recording,’ YouTube video, 2:04, posted by ‘Past Times,’ accessed 11 Aug. 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQ8TS\\_LsuPk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQ8TS_LsuPk).

<sup>11</sup> Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib*, 66–68.

categorised as 'Approved Genres'. In contrast, what I called 'Anonymous Genres' were those associated with the less socially respected forms of entertainment, such as street or music hall entertainment, circus, blackface minstrel shows, silent cinema, public dancing, vaudeville, and so forth. These were generally performed in relatively informal and lowbrow contexts that, like jazz contexts, presumably offered more scope for unorthodox improvisatory musical interaction and play.<sup>12</sup> Some individual improvisatory practices from before jazz can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Improvisatory Practices before Jazz

Approved Genres
Air and variations
Fantasias
Programmatic extemporisations (sound painting of a scene or event)
Potpourris (melodies woven together in performance)
Prelude or 'flourish'
Ornamentation: shakes, trills, roulades, cadenzas, 'cadences', jubilee singing elaborations
Improvisatory accompaniment practice including vamping systems, thorough bass or figured bass, spontaneous transposition, preludes, postludes, 'symphonies' (interpolated phrases or 'fills'), improvisatory gospel piano
Improvisatory church organ practices: extemporisation on a theme, preludes, interludes, postludes, spontaneous transposition, filling out, creative use of stops
Anonymous Genres
Patent vamping techniques for piano, reed organ, and plucked string instruments
Faking (improvising / playing by ear)
Improvising moods, entries, exits and effects for silent cinema on piano or organ
Improvising special or 'novelty' effects by theatre percussionists and others
'Ragging' (ragtime improvisation): vocal ragging, piano, minstrel parade band or theatre orchestra 'ragging'
Improvisatory song, body percussion, bones and tambourine and banjo playing by blackface (white) and African American minstrels
'Extemporised' topical song as music hall acts
Vaudeville piano accompaniment played from the first violin or conductor's 'lead sheet'

Improvisatory aspects of silent cinema accompaniment, minstrel show music, circus music and especially ragtime and other pre-Australian jazz popular genres are extensively covered in *Playing Ad Lib* and various later publications. The remainder of this article is therefore devoted to discussing what the Trove newspaper database was able to additionally reveal about improvisatory practices in the Approved Genres before the Jazz Age, especially during Australia's colonial era and specifically in the music-making contexts of concerts or recitals. I will furthermore explain why some of the findings of this study are arguably relevant to the more open intellectual paradigm of New Jazz Studies.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See the overview of the Approved and the Anonymous genres in Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib*, 1–82.

<sup>13</sup> O'Meally, Edwards, and Griffin, *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*.

### Using Trove

A range of techniques can be used to search for and filter references on Trove, but the basic technique I have used most effectively is to search for an exact phrase or word in the 'advanced search' tool, decade by decade, first by 'relevance' and then chronologically reordered. I often add an extra search term into the 'any of these terms' search box, such as 'concert', and I also try variations and slight misspellings of the exact phrase or word.

For this project, I mostly used search terms drawn from my doctoral research (those shown in Table 1). I then downloaded and read every review, article, or programme containing one or more of these terms and collated relevant extracts in chronological order in preparation for analysis and comparison with the findings of my PhD that related to the Approved Genres.

### Issues in Interpreting the Sources

One issue in reading and analysing hundreds of concert reviews and other downloaded material (besides that of often unreadable typesetting) was how to accurately interpret the terms used by colonial journalists for improvisatory practices or genres. I found, for example, that the term 'extemporised' was most frequently substituted for 'improvised', where 'cadence' was the term most used for various types of improvised ornamentation. This was seemingly because ornamentation was normally applied at cadence points, rather than in reference to 'cadence' as a Baroque-era term for various forms of the trill. 'Introduction' and 'symphony' were other terms used ambiguously for improvisatory interpolations.

Another major issue was determining how spontaneous the musical performances or practices being described by colonial journalists—many of whom had little or no musical expertise—really were. In Anne Wentzel's study of the first hundred years of European music in Australia, she fleetingly mentions that:

Most original music making was of a very informal nature ... a local virtuoso improvising variations upon a well-known operatic air or ballad, generally receiving approbation in proportion to the amount of elaborate ornamentation festooned about the melody.<sup>14</sup>

Fantasias on popular themes were very frequently listed in colonial concert programmes. These programmes often included both the name of the performer and the composer of the fantasia, such as Sigismond Thalberg or Henri Herz, whose fantasia and potpourri scores were marketed in the colonies. However, cases where the performer was also listed as the creator, or where no composer was listed, suggest that the fantasias, variations or potpourris were a showcase for dazzling improvisatory freedom. Many reviews confirm this, as shown in Table 2.

Keyword searches in Trove yielded more examples of fantasias—either explicitly listed or described as 'extemporised' or 'improvised'—than my PhD research revealed. However, some improvisatory practices, such as improvised preludes, interludes, postludes or spontaneous transposition in accompaniment practice, were so common or utilitarian that they are rarely mentioned in reviews. Encores provided ideal contexts for exciting improvisatory fantasias or potpourris and were frequently mentioned in passing. However, these were rarely detailed in a manner that offers solid confirming evidence. For example:

This performance elicited an encore, and Mr. Allpress then gave a crisp and lively rendering of [a simple jig] 'St. Patrick's Day in the Morning,' with embellishments,

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Wentzel, 'The First Hundred Years of Music in Australia 1788–1888' (MA thesis, University of Sydney, 1963), 272.

**Table 2.** Some Direct References to ‘Extemporised’ or ‘Improvised’ Music

Date	Publication	Reference
1 Mar. 1836	<i>Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser</i>	‘[William Vincent] Wallace was presented with various pieces of music, which he played extemporaneously, introducing occasionally some brilliant variations, which excited much general astonishment.’ (p. 3)
30 Apr. 1842	<i>Australian</i> (Sydney)	‘[Isaac] Nathan, who will ... preside at the pianoforte, on which instrument he will give EXTEMPORANEOUS PERFORMANCES.’ (p. 3)
27 May 1846	<i>Inquirer</i> (Perth)	(Dom Rosendo) ‘a most extraordinary natural talent for music, which enables him to improvise the most charming fugues, either upon some well-known air, or upon some theme composed by himself on the instant.’ (p. 2)
12 Mar. 1846	<i>Launceston Advertiser</i>	(Charles Packer) ‘This extemporaneous piece, occupying nearly half an hour in its execution, was a series of splendid variations on the well-known air, “The last rose of summer” ... The airs were selected at the moment by one of the audience.’ (p. 2)
4 June 1862	<i>South Australian Advertiser</i>	‘The programme contains several new classic and operatic pieces of music and some good songs; and ... a grand solo improvisation by M. Douay on the harmonium.’ (p. 2)
26 Mar. 1873	<i>Geelong Advertiser</i>	‘the two artists extemporised a version of their own ... Mr. Hill played it through simply, then repeated it, Signor Giorza improvising variations.’ (p. 3)
5 Aug. 1880	<i>Brisbane Courier</i>	(Henry Ketten) ‘the encore given being “an improvisation” of exceeding merit on the touching theme of “Auld Robin Gray”.’ (p. 3)
8 Dec. 1884	<i>Newcastle Morning Herald</i>	(Edouard Reményi) ‘His last performance on the programme was an “Introduction and improvisation on the Carnival of Venice,” in which every variety of bowing, fingering, and playing seemed to be produced.’ (p. 2)
19 Oct. 1881	<i>Express and Telegraph</i> (Adelaide)	‘[Henri] Kowalski’s improvisations [will] long be pleasurably remembered by Tuesday’s audience.’ (p. 3)
7 Oct. 1885	<i>Age</i> (Melbourne)	‘At the end of the concert [Edouard] Math[é] undertook to improvise on any theme suggested from among the audience.’ (p. 6)
1 July 1887	<i>Bendigo Advertiser</i>	‘C.H. King played an apparently extemporised cadenza of lengthy proportion.’ (p. 3)
11 May 1894	<i>National Advocate</i> (Bathurst)	(Miss Middleton) ‘in her next concert she [should] play Chopin’s nocturne No. 2 instead of an improvisation, the outcome of a suggestion from the gallery rows.’ (p. 3)
11 Apr. 1894	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	‘Mr H. Chandler ... improvised on the well-known hymn-tune of “Sons of My Soul”.’ (p. 8)
6 Feb. 1895	<i>Daily Telegraph</i> (Sydney)	‘[Auguste Wiegand], at the organ, successfully “improvised” on Haydn’s Largo Symphony and the “Marseillaise,” ... [Henri] Kowalski ... played an “extempore,” introducing the French and English National Anthems.’ (p. 6)
22 July 1898	<i>Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate</i>	(John Lemmone) ‘The audience were charmed, and gave the accomplished musician a double encore; to which he responded, on each occasion rendering a delightful improvisation.’ (p. 5)

amongst which, by the way, were some extraordinary effects, perhaps intended to suggest the eccentricities of ‘moonlighters,’ and other lawless persons.<sup>15</sup>

### Improvisation on a Selected Theme

Searches in Trove confirmed a convention in early colonial concerts that assured audiences that a performance publicly claimed as ‘extemporised’ was in fact spontaneous invention. This involved themes chosen by audience members just before the performance, as can be seen in the examples given in Table 3. The 1861 advertisement for an improvising contest explicitly describes this convention. The final quotation demonstrates the presence of public suspicion that so-called extemporisation or improvisations were not necessarily the product of spontaneous or real-time invention.

**Table 3.** References to Themes Chosen by Audience Members

Date	Publication	Reference
23 Feb. 1836	<i>Australian</i> (Sydney)	(William Vincent Wallace) ‘Extemporaneous Performance on the Pianoforte, on any subject or subjects which may be presented, (written).’ (p. 3)
12 Mar. 1846	<i>Launceston Advertiser</i>	(Charles Packer) ‘This extemporaneous piece, occupying nearly half an hour in its execution, was a series of splendid variations on the well-known air, “The last rose of summer”; “There’s nae luck about the house,” being introduced most artistically in the finale. The airs were selected at the moment by one of the audience.’ (p. 2)
26 Dec. 1861	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	‘In order to introduce a novelty at this entertainment, Signor Cutolo proposes to give a prize of TEN GUINEAS ... for the best EXTEMPORE PERFORMANCE, on any instrument, of a popular melody with variations—the subject to be chosen by the audience; the melody to be clearly sustained throughout each variation. The candidates to be accredited musicians, who will forward copies of their certificate and testimonials for insertion in the public papers ... all applications [to] H.N. Montague, hon. Secretary, Belvedere Cottages, Bourke street.’ (p. 1)
1 Sep. 1885	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	(Edouard Mathé) ‘In accordance with a note added to the programme to the effect that M. Mathé would improvise on any theme suggested by the audience, provided the “simple air was produced,” Mr. Pines stated that he had received three airs. Those being shown to the pianist, he selected “The Blue Bells of Scotland.” Report had already spoken well of M. Mathé’s power of improvising, but this had hardly prepared the audience for the grand and prompt elaboration of this theme. It was not only a masterly exhibition of skill, but a singularly poetic and artistic fantasia, through which the melody was presented in divers[e] forms and various keys, to the surprise and delight of all who heard it. To avoid any suspicion of previous arrangement, it would be well if in future the music could be handed to the pianist from the audience.’ (p. 5)

<sup>15</sup> ‘The Sydney Artistes’ Concert Company,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 Feb. 1887, 8.

## Ornamentation

A masterpiece is entrusted to you, you pervert it, mutilate it, change its character, dress it out with wretched ornaments ... laughable arpeggios, facetious trills; you insult the master, people, of taste, art, and common sense.<sup>16</sup>

Analysis of the numerous newspaper references to ornamentation yielded by searches in Trove fully confirmed my observation in *Playing Ad Lib* that ‘references in colonial literature to improvisatory vocal embellishment ... were very often generated by colonial concern over the degree of ornamentation and whether it lay within the bounds of good taste.’<sup>17</sup> This is also the case in instrumental ornamentation. In this regard, colonial Australia was founded in the wake of the Baroque era when improvising over figured bass symbols was common practice and ornamentation was—to quote the early musicologist, Sumner Salter—‘not by any means mere superficial embellishments which may be omitted at the option of the player as incidental and unnecessary to the meaning and beauty of a given composition,’<sup>18</sup> or, for that matter, to its overall structure. However, as early nineteenth-century Australian society passed through the Classical to the Romantic Era, reviews often reflected a preferred aesthetic in which ‘chaste,’ ‘classic,’ ‘tasteful,’ or ‘correct’ performance was that in which the beauty and expressiveness of the melodic line was not lost through the interpolation of embellishments that were considered by the writer to be excessive or inappropriate. Critics also sometimes expressed disgust at how gifted performers indulged the lowbrow musical tastes of colonial audiences with highly ornamented fantasias on popular tunes, instead of introducing the colonial public to classical and early romantic master-works. Examples of these criticisms can be seen in Table 4.

## Learning Improvisatory Practices

The most significant and detailed information about improvisatory practices used in the Approved Genres is that presented in methods such as Muzio Clementi’s popular *Introduction to the Art of Piano Playing* (1801), Carl Czerny’s *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte* (1836) or Frank Sawyer’s *Extemporization* (c. 1890, Figure 1), all of which were available to colonial musicians.<sup>19</sup> There were also much more rudimentary, numerous and widely marketed methods for so-called ‘vamping’ (improvisatory song or dance accompaniment on keyboard) conceived, published, or otherwise available in Australia.<sup>20</sup> However, the Trove search also verified that figured bass (thorough bass) was taught in Australia as an aspect of improvisatory accompaniment practice until the mid-nineteenth century. By 1816, lessons on thorough bass accompaniment ‘as taught by Mr Clementi in London’<sup>21</sup> were available

<sup>16</sup> Hector Berlioz, quoted in *Illustrated Australian News and Musical Times*, 1 June 1889, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Sumner Salter, ‘The Ornaments in Bach’s Organ Works,’ *Musical Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (July 1920): 392.

<sup>19</sup> Muzio Clementi, *Introduction to the Art of Playing the Pianoforte* (1801; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1974); Carl Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte*, Op. 200, trans. and ed. Alice L. Mitchell (1836; repr., New York: Longman, 1983); Frank Sawyer, *Extemporization* (London: Novello, ca. 1890).

<sup>20</sup> Locally conceived examples include Isaac Nathan, *Theory and Practice of Music* (Sydney: [s.n.], 1847); Emily Patton, *Harmony Simplified for Popular Use: An Original Method of Applying the First Principles of Harmony to the Object of Accompanying the Voice* (London: Novello, 1880; Melbourne: Allan & Co., 1880); W.M. Perrier, *W.M Perrier’s Harmonizer or, Instructions in the Art of Vamping or, Extemporizing on the Piano or Organ* (Melbourne: Spectator Publishing, ca. 1890); Mary Francis De Lacy, *De Lacy’s Book on Vamping for the Piano* (Melbourne: Allan & Co., 1889).

<sup>21</sup> Advertisement, *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 3 Feb. 1816, 1.



**Table 4.** Criticism of Embellishment and Fantasias

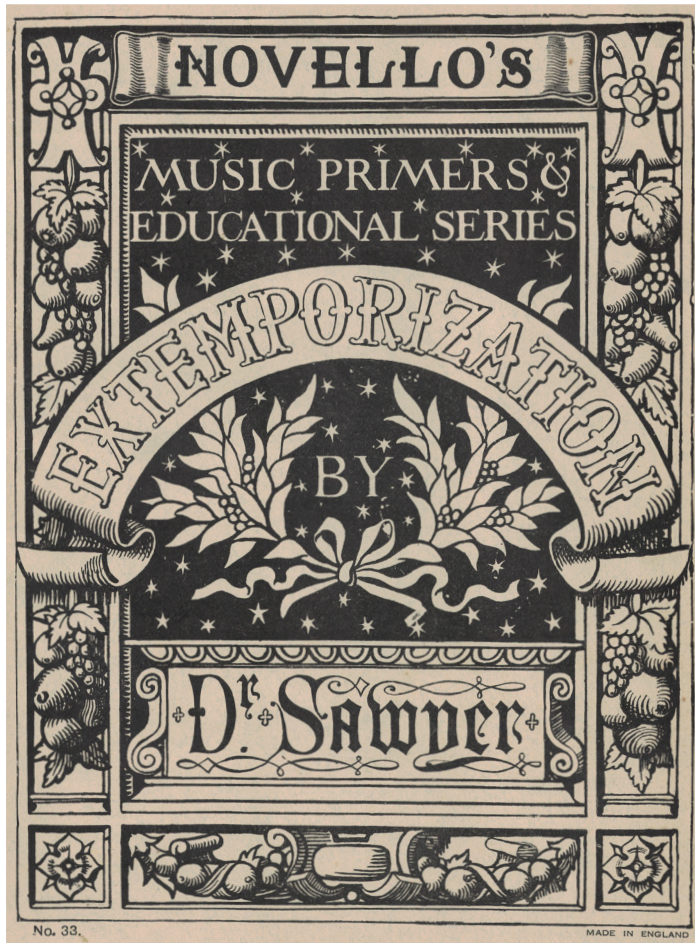
Date	Publication	Reference
12 Aug. 1837	<i>Sydney Times</i>	'Mr. Wallace finished with a violin Concerto, in which he introduced the plaintive old Scottish air "Ye Banks and Braes," apparently much to the pleasure of a gratified and encoring audience. We have been dosed "usque ad nauseam" with the brilliant trickeries, and scrambling meaningless fantasias of Herz ... we do therefore entreat Mr. Wallace when he next gratifies the public with a Concert—to ... recollect there are such time-honoured names as Mozart and Haydn, and such modern ones as Weber, Rossini, and Mendelsohn.' (p. 3)
5 Dec. 1839	<i>Australian</i> (Sydney)	(Rosalie Deane) 'Miss Deane's extraordinary fantasias on the pianoforte are very clever and very surprising, but we cannot believe them very pleasing to the majority of amateurs, who go to hear melody and not to witness manipular feats of execution ... she treated us to an extra fantasia instead, which we would have gladly excused.' (p. 2)
20 Dec. 1839	<i>Australasian Chronicle</i> (Sydney)	'On the other hand, we must say that our professional performers are to blame for creating this disgust at the higher branches of music. They have generally selected the most unmeaning and outrageous fooleries of the Rossini school, in order to exhibit their dexterity of manipulation, or flexibility of voice. Did opera music consist only of such trash, we should say, by all means, let them be discarded, and give us national airs; but knowing, as we do, the immense treasures of ennobling music that may be found in the works of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Gluck, Weber—to say nothing of the numberless composers of the pure Italian school we must protest equally against the usurpations of the balladmonger, and the worse—the tenfold worse—usurpation of the fantasia style.' (p. 4)
[29 June] 1840	<i>Sydney Monitor and Commercial Advertiser</i>	'To ladies who cultivate the harp, we recommend "The Welsh Harper" as a source of inexhaustible Pleasure to themselves and their friends. This is the true music for an instrument which, when so used, is as graceful, charming, and romantic, as it is insipid and tiresome when employed on the modern fantasias and solos, which are unfortunately too much in vogue. Many a fair performer who is listened to at present with sad civility and an aching head, while toiling through a wilderness of unmeaning flourishes, would give unmingled delight by having recourse to the simple strains and brilliant variations of the Welsh minstrels.' (p. 7)

in Sydney and by the mid-1820s there were several other Sydney teachers of thorough bass accompaniment. These included 'Mr. James Pearson, Professor of Thorough Bass' who taught the 'playing of Extempore Preludes, with the Method of adding to a Melody the proper accompaniments from a figured or thorough Bass.'<sup>22</sup> Various other teachers of thorough bass accompaniment arrived later, including Isaac Nathan in Sydney. An 1867 description of the requirements for the British College of Organists exams that a local church authority was

<sup>22</sup> Advertisement, *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 24 Mar. 1825, 3.

attempting to have established in Australia mentions that the candidate had to, among other things, extemporise an interlude and 'harmonise extemporaneously a given melody, to fill up a given figured bass at sight.'<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 1.** Frank Sawyer, *Extemporization* (London: Novello, ca. 1890)



### Comparing the Research Methodologies

How, then, did the results of a Trove database search compare with those of the earlier, manual search of print or microformed newspapers for improvisatory music in pre-1900s Approved Genres? Unlike the time-consuming difficulties involved in locating, accessing, and page-by-page reading of archival newspapers, digital keyword searching enables the validity of a research question or topic to be rapidly established. It does this by instantly revealing an array of references to the topic in question—that is, if these references are present in the database. The database also allows you to quickly download every relevant reference along with all the information required to cite each correctly. For the present study, keyword searching enabled me to assess the accuracy of the conclusions published in *Playing Ad Lib* within a few months

<sup>23</sup> 'Local News: the College of Organists, London,' *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, 25 Nov. 1873, 2.

and locate many more examples of improvisatory practices and practitioners than the much longer period of intensive doctoral research revealed.

Furthermore, the numerous additional reviews located by keyword searching provided some surprisingly detailed descriptions of the unfolding improvisations of various major improvising artists. The references also revealed that the tradition of performing improvisations on well-known themes became more widespread and popular during the last three decades of the colonial era than I had suggested in *Playing Ad Lib*. In fact, this period brought forward many prolific improvising concert artists such as Arabella Goddard, Jenny Claus, Henry Ketten, Henri Kowolski, Ilma de Mirska, Edouard Remyeni, Edouard Mathé or the Sydney City Organist, Auguste Wiegand (and others, listed in Table 5), whose spectacular improvisations on popular themes became a regular feature of 1890s public entertainment.

Incidentally, the search brought up numerous articles and references illustrating surprisingly intense early colonial interest in extemporised as opposed to pre-prepared sermons, as well as interest in the improvisatory abilities of various European masters such as Mozart, Clementi, Paganini, Ole Bull, and Beethoven.<sup>24</sup> However, the results of searching Trove also indicated that my notion of a social-cultural division between the patronage of the Anonymous and Approved Genres, with regard to the early colonial era, is partly problematic. This is firstly (as I acknowledge in *Playing Ad Lib*) because concert audiences were very socially homogeneous until the late nineteenth-century construction of lavish entertainment venues designed to attract the upper classes and dissuade the lower class via seating cost alone. Secondly, the greater array of reviews accessible via Trove confirmed a fact that I had failed to recognise sufficiently in my earlier study. I have argued in *Playing Ad Lib* and various later publications that the spirit of jazz as exciting improvisatory—or seemingly improvisatory—musical entertainment was already present in colonial-era blackface minstrelsy (1830s onwards) and later touring African-American minstrel shows and jubilee singing.<sup>25</sup> However, these reviews also appear to confirm that socially homogeneous, early colonial concert audiences reacted in a similarly extroverted way to later jazz audiences when presented with dazzling real-time variation, embellishment or juxtaposition of widely popular tunes or songs, and even the representation of spontaneous creativity in composed or transcribed fantasias, variations, and embellishments ('frozen improvisations'). In fact, even the 1861 description (listed in Table 3) of an 'extempore performance' competition by 'qualified' professionals on popular tunes brings to mind the 'ragging' (ragtime improvisation) contests that brought fame to early American ragtime artists and were also transplanted to 1910s Australia.<sup>26</sup> Some examples of jazz audience-like responses found in the Trove database are listed in Table 6.

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<sup>24</sup> For example 'Paganini the Violinist,' *Sydney Monitor*, 28 Jan. 1832, 4; Carl Czerny, 'Recollections of Beethoven,' *Cornwall Chronicle*, 28 Jan. 1857, 3; 'Muzio Clementi,' *Weekly Register of Politics, Facts and General Literature*, 28 June 1845, 303.

<sup>25</sup> For example, John Whiteoak, 'Demons of Discord Down Under: "Jump Jim Crow" and "Australia's First Jazz Band,"' *Jazz Research Journal* 8, no. 1–2 (2014): 23–51; 'A Good Black Music Story? Black American Stars in Australian Musical Entertainment Before "Jazz,"' in *Popular Music, Stars and Stardom*, ed. Samantha Bennett, Stephen Loy, and Julie Rickwood (Canberra: ANU Press, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> 'Ragtime Contest,' *Herald* [Melbourne], 12 Dec. 1913, 1; Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib*, 149.

**Table 5.** Some Colonial Era Improvising Musicians (major figures indicated in **bold**)

First Reference	Name of Musician	Instrument
1822	<b>John Philip Deane</b>	church organist
1836	Mrs Chester <b>William Vincent Wallace</b>	voice violin, piano
1838	Spencer Wellington Wallace	flute, violin
1839	Miss Deane George Peck	piano violin
1842	<b>Isaac Nathan</b> Frances Kowarzik Stephen Marsh John Howson	piano guitar harp trombone
1846	<b>Leopold Ravac [Rawack]</b> <b>Dom Rosendo</b> <b>Charles Packer</b>	violin piano piano
1854	<b>Ali Ben Sou Alle [Charles Soualle?]</b> <b>Miska Hausa</b>	improvisatory sound painter on saxophone violin
1855	<b>Edouard Boulanger</b>	piano
1856	<b>Chevalier Bochsa</b> <b>Henri Poussard and René Douay</b>	harp multi-instrument improvisatory sound painters
1862	<b>Pietro Canna 'The Drum Demon'</b> Cesare Cutolo	improvisatory sound painter piano
1866	Richard Henry Horne James (Herr) Schott Franz (Herr) Staab	guitar oboe piano
1869	Robert Heller	piano
1872	John Hill	organ
1873	<b>Paolo Giorza</b> <b>Arabella Goddard</b> Edward Armes Beaumont	piano, organ piano voice
1874	<b>Jenny Claus</b> <b>Alberto Zelman</b> Antonio Giammona <b>Martin Simonsen</b> <b>Ilma de Mirska</b> Charles Lascelles	violin piano violin violin opera singer organ
1880	<b>Ernest de Munck</b> <b>Henry Ketten</b> <b>Henri Kowolski</b>	violoncello piano piano
1884	<b>Edouard Remyeni</b>	violin
1885	<b>Edouard Mathé</b>	piano
1886	<b>Hugh Alpen</b> <b>Louis Pabst</b>	piano piano
1887	<b>Rivers Allpress</b>	violin
1894	Mr H. Chandler Miss Middelton Mrs Willmore	organ piano organ
1895	<b>Auguste Wiegand</b>	organ
1897	Mr Snow	organ
1898	<b>John Lemmone</b>	flute
1902	<b>Robert Harkness</b> [the 'Bendigo Hymnwriter']	gospel piano

**Table 6.** Some Examples of Jazz Audience-like Responses

Date	Publication	Reference
19 May 1836	<i>Sydney Herald</i>	[Vincent] 'Wallace performed various evolutions on the violin, every occasional close [elaboration] of which he was rewarded with rapturous applause.' (p. 3)
19 May 1836	<i>Sydney Herald</i>	'Master E. Deane executed a solo with variations on the violincello in which he was rapturously applauded between each variation.' (p. 3)
2 June 1838	<i>Colonist</i> (Sydney)	'[Spencer] Wallace performed a Fantasia on the Flute ... He was repeatedly greeted with applause during the piece, which gave token of the admiration which his playing excited.' (p. 3)
29 Dec. 1854	<i>Argus</i> (Melbourne)	(Concert at the Theatre Royal): 'we would call Mr. Black's intention to the whistling, cat-calling, cooeing, and other eccentric ways of demanding an encore.' (p. 5)
14 Aug. 1875	<i>Australasian</i> (Melbourne)	(Extended vocal elaboration by Ilma De Murska): 'On Monday night she finished the passage "Ah non credes," from "La Sonnambula," with an exquisite cadence in these upper notes, ending on the octave of the key note, with such an effect as lifted the men amongst the audience to their feet, and evoked a hurricane of applause throughout the whole house, while she, smiling, breathed calmly, as if she knew not effort.' (p. 19)
1 Dec. 1884	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	(Improvisation on <i>Carnival of Venice</i> by Eduoard Remyani): 'the bow seemed endowed with supernatural ability and dance up and down as if possessed ... At one moment the audience was ready to shriek with laughter at the lugubrious tones brought forth, and at others they seem ready to mourn with the player as he breathed forth some dirge like strain of woe.' (p. 10)

These arguable comparisons with jazz culture are worth consideration from a jazz studies perspective. While improvisatory musical freedom is widely, if debatably, perceived to be the essence of jazz, older American jazz histories often ignore the labyrinth of relevant African-American inflected improvisatory jazz-precursors such as minstrelsy, medicine show, circus and vaudeville bands, jubilee singing troupes and especially the vast pre-jazz tradition of 'ragging'.<sup>27</sup> Further, they fail to acknowledge other narratives of improvisatory music and practices beyond these jazz precursors, as discussed above. Some of the results of the current project may therefore be relevant to New Jazz Studies as complementary to the work of the prolific Australian jazz researcher Bruce Johnson in his confrontational new book *The Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation*.<sup>28</sup> Johnson argues for an alternative, highly inclusive jazz historiography based on a shift from a US-centric to a diasporic jazz perspective: one that must necessarily examine the heritage of jazz worlds beyond the United States including, no doubt, their jazz-related antecedents and, arguably, including improvisatory aspects of both the Anonymous and Approved Genres.

<sup>27</sup> For recent scholarly critique of this perspective see Mark Berresford, *That's Got Em: The Life and Music of Wilbur Sweatman* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 28–29; Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> O'Meally, Edwards, and Griffin, ed., *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*.

### Outcomes and Limitations

The main outcome of this Trove-based project (which will remain ongoing as Trove resources continue to expand and diversify) has been the ability to provide a less speculative account of colonial-era improvisatory music-making in the Approved Genres than was feasible before the digital era. It has not contradicted the narrative or conclusions of my original research, except as discussed above, but, instead, filled out this narrative with much more primary source data and revealed some improvisation related sub-topics that could be worthy of further research. These include a surprising level of interest in 'extempore' versus prepared sermons, 'extempore speech' (including competitions) and also 'extempore song' as popular practice.<sup>29</sup> The study is also justified by the fact that no further research into improvisatory music of the Australian colonial era Approved Genres seems to have been conducted by anyone since the completion of my own earlier research.

There are, however, various serious shortcomings with Trove-based research, which primarily provides access to newspaper sources. For example, newspaper reviews offer the voices of critics with greatly varying degrees of technical musical knowledge as well as all sorts of personal biases and preferences in performance style and repertoire. Further, they tend to be restricted to the improvising of relatively high-profile performers playing in formal contexts in which only the most competent musicians would dare to advertise beforehand that they were going to improvise or extemporise. In contrast, other primary sources beyond Trove such as memoirs, transcriptions, extant scores and methods can often provide deeper and broader insights.

Keyword searching also fails to provide the researcher with the sometimes very important contextual knowledge that can be gained through painstaking page-by-page searching. Moreover, it fosters the illusion that everything that can be known about a historical topic is present in the Trove database. For example, my PhD research involved consulting the following: numerous reference works; 133 monographs (including memoirs and biographies) and theses; forty-seven methods (created and published in, or known to have been imported to Australia, or widely used globally); numerous journal or magazine articles and unpublished papers; twenty-nine newspapers or magazines published before the Jazz Age and all searched page by page; ninety informants; and a huge body of archival sound recordings audited and, in some cases, transcribed. Furthermore, much of the rarest archival material I accessed for the research was in the hands of amateur and professional collectors and historians or practitioners, or in still uncatalogued collections. These included collections in the State Library of Victoria, where I first discovered the existence of locally conceived pre-Jazz Era, improvised accompaniment tutors. Also, by this time I had become an avid collector of archival, music-related Australiana. This greatly assisted me in becoming part of a coterie of amateur and professional Australian music collectors and historians who generously exchanged valuable information and copies of rare materials not held in public archives. Therefore, my overall conclusion about Trove as a tool for research into Australia's musical past in 2020 is that, despite being an absolutely essential and increasingly valuable for music research, it should not be considered as being more than a supplement to the examination of every other possible source.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, the stage act of Wizard Jacobs (a popular entertainer of the Gold Rush era) included improvising a comic song upon subjects furnished by various members of the audience. See 'Coppin's Olympic,' *Argus*, 14 Dec. 1855, 5.

## Conclusion

In this day, for a concert performer to suggest that he was about to offer an extempore work would probably bring smiles. Yet less than a century ago to fail to do so would be to invite the suspicion of incompetence.

‘Extempore Music,’ *Mercury*, 7 Sep. 1934, 6

Australia today has its own pantheon of jazz improvising ‘greats’ along with a more than six-decade tradition of improvising in experimental or ‘new’ art music. Moreover, the perceptual gap between improvisatory musical practice in jazz, art music, world music, rock, pop, and other genres has greatly narrowed. The recent success of research using creative practice in music scholarship has further narrowed this gap and contributed to the notion of there being a dynamic, present-day, Australian musical world of improvisatory or ‘unwritten’ musical performance. There is furthermore a colourful Australian history of the performance of music perceived to be ‘jazz’ that traces back to the final year of World War One. However, when scholars of jazz in Australia listen with fascination to the early rudimentary Australian attempts at jazz improvising on 1920s recordings, or scholars of improvisatory music in contemporary Australia research their chosen topic, they should also be aware that an entire complex landscape of improvisatory music existed in colonial and pre-jazz Australia. This included improvising musicians who would probably astonish present-day audiences with their creativity. There is no doubt that the ever-expanding Trove database, the inevitable development of more sophisticated search engines, and greatly increased inclusion of, or links to, digitised music-related sources will eventually play a major role in mapping this landscape in full and fine detail.

## About the Author

John Whiteoak is an Adjunct Professor in the Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music, Monash University. He has authored *Playing Ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia, 1836–1970* (1999) and *“Take Me to Spain”: Australian Imaginings of Spain Through Music and Dance* (2019). He was co-general editor and major contributor to the *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia* (2003) and has also published numerous articles, papers and book chapters on other music or dance-related topics (see [www.ausmdr.com](http://www.ausmdr.com)).