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**TEXTBOOKS ON ORGAN IMPROVISATION AND THEIR
POSSIBLE USE IN MUSIC EDUCATION**

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Abstract

The paper is a part of a research project about teaching methods of organ improvisation at Czech elementary music schools. It provides an analysis and comparison of some selected textbooks. The research questions covered which organ improvisation textbooks could be used in the Czech elementary music school system and what areas of organ improvisation the selected textbooks focused on. The research aimed to analyse and compare some selected textbooks for possible use in teaching at Czech elementary music schools. The textbooks are analysed from the following perspectives: difficulty; support of creativity; and chosen musical forms and genres. The paper presents a qualitative comparative analysis of organ improvisation textbooks that are focused on exercises applicable in the Czech elementary music school system. The findings show that ways of teaching organ improvisation differed with some (often requiring vast knowledge of music theory) are intended for students of conservatories but not for beginners. The paper recommends introducing textbooks which are suitable for beginners, which do not require their users to have in depth musical knowledge, and which support students' creativity. Additionally, the outstanding advantages and disadvantages of using the given textbooks at elementary music schools are mentioned.

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1. Introduction

Organ improvisation is an integral part of the process of every organist's education. This results from the fact that organists improvise frequently - e.g. during their concerts, when applying Basso continuo¹ or melodic ornaments. Improvisations are even necessary during organ accompaniments of religious services where organists often have to create a prelude or finale to a given song or induce the atmosphere of a given liturgical celebration (e.g. Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, etc.).

Despite the fact that organ playing courses have become increasingly popular at Czech elementary music schools in recent years, there is no systematic methodology for teaching organ improvisation to beginning organ-players. That is why numerous organists often lament that they are unable to improvise or that they are even afraid to improvise. Organists are not usually taught organ improvisation until they study at conservatories or universities offering music education because textbooks available in the Czech language can be used only by students who have already acquired in depth theoretical musical knowledge, or because the existing textbooks are focused exclusively on liturgical organ improvisation.

Currently, a total number of 528 elementary artistic schools are registered in the Czech Republic, and 136 out of these provide systematic courses in playing the organ. The Czech system of "elementary artistic schools" is a relatively unique educational system within European countries. These schools offer continuous and systematic education in four main areas of arts – in music, visual arts, drama and dance. Elementary music schools can be attended in two cycles – the first cycle lasts 7 years and is completed with a graduation concert performance while the second cycle lasts four years and is also completed with a graduation concert. The age of the students ranges from 6 to 19. During these two cycles, besides the major field of their studies (playing the organ), the students are also educated in chamber music (compositions for four hands and four feet), in music theory, the history of the organ, the construction of the organ, and organ improvisation.

The main objective of this paper is to describe and compare selected textbooks which are focused on organ improvisation, and which support the creativity of students involved in playing the organ. The other goal is to offer examples of exercises whose level is suitable for both beginners and pre-intermediate organ-players.

The following textbooks were analysed: Vodrážka: *Varhanní improvizace (Organ Improvisation)* (1984), Kratochvíl: *Učebnice varhanní improvizace. Liturgická praxe (Textbook of Organ Improvisation. Liturgical Practice)* (2020), Steyer: *Učebnice improvizace pro chrámové varhaníky (Textbook of Improvisation for Church Organists)* (2021), Keller: *Schule der Choral-Improvisation (School of Chorale Improvisation)* (1939), Gaar: *Orgelimprovisation Lehrplan und Arbeitshifen (Organ Improvisation Syllabus and Aids)* (2003), Stoiber: *Faszination Orgelimprovisation (Fascination Organ Improvisation)* (2018), Dupré: *Cours Complet d'Improvisation á l'Orgue (Complete Course in Organ Improvisation)* (1925), Rogg: *Cours d'improvisation pour les organistes (Improvisation Course for Organists)* (1988),

¹ Basso continuo = an accompanying part that includes a bassline and harmonies, typically played on a keyboard instrument and with other instruments such as cello or bassoon

Rogg: *Cours d'improvisation Modale ou libre pour les organistes (Course in Modal or Free Improvisation for Organists)* (1988) and Overduin: *Making Music: Improvisation for Organists* (1998).

2. Problem Statement

In 2022, using a questionnaire, the researcher had surveyed teachers teaching the organ at Czech elementary music schools to highlight issues pertaining to the suitability of textbooks that could be used. The survey revealed that these teachers would indeed welcome a textbook or a methodology handbook on organ improvisation intended for elementary music school students. The most frequent issues which were highlighted were that such a textbook or handbook should contain: a) creative exercises based on onomatopoeia (suitable especially for complete beginners); b) liturgical improvisation, or working with a song / a chorale / a particular melody; c) improvisation based on a particular musical form; d) improvisation characterizing the period of a particular musical style (e.g. Renaissance, Baroque, Romantic music, the 20th century music).

This paper presents the results of the qualitative research focused precisely on the four issues highlighted above, and uncovers key findings related to the advantages and disadvantages of the individual textbooks analysed in the context of their application in Czech elementary music schools. Numerous organ improvisation textbooks are rather problematic in that they operate as mere manuals providing a vast theoretical introduction into the issue; but, unfortunately, they do not provide sufficient opportunities for practice which is why this practical perspective was emphasised as one of the evaluation criteria.

3. Research Questions

With reference to the purpose of the research and the author's experience, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1: Considering their difficulty, which textbooks are suitable for teaching at Czech elementary music schools?

Q2: Which textbooks are suitable for theoretical introduction and for practice?

Q3: For which sphere of organ improvisation teaching is it appropriate to use the given textbook?

These questions reflect the biggest problem faced by teachers of organ improvisation, i.e. the issue of the choice of the textbook which would be appropriate both for beginning and intermediate organists. Additionally, during their teaching practice, teachers sometimes need a textbook providing them with a theoretical insight into a specific issue, and at other times, teachers rather need more practical exercises to consolidate their students' skills. The third research question tackles the issues of how to teach organ improvisation in more varied ways and how to offer a wide range of possibilities for students, i.e. this question focuses on the choice of the "sphere" of organ improvisation (onomatopoeia, liturgical improvisation, working with musical forms, getting familiar with certain styles).

4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to identify suitable textbooks which can be used in the process of teaching of organ improvisation at Czech elementary music schools, and to offer a sufficient range of ways to teach organ improvisation, to choose diverse exercises so that teaching of organ improvisation is not merely a kind of harmony practice (which has been the case in recent years). The aim is to offer creative exercises, suited to developing students' individual abilities and further development. The study will also present tables clearly presenting the characteristic features of individual textbooks. The results of this study will also create a basis for designing a textbook focused on the methodology of playing the organ applicable specifically at Czech elementary music schools.

5. Research Methods

The research was qualitatively oriented and focused on a comparative content analysis of Czech and foreign textbooks of organ improvisation. Initially, the data were collected by perusing each text book and carefully writing down detailed notes with the aim of gathering sufficient data for the analysis of individual spheres of organ improvisation.

A significant part of the research was also devoted to playing individual exercises and sheet music pieces in order to reveal their difficulty levels in order to identify whether a particular textbook was suitable for beginners and whether it provides its users with imaginative and sonically convincing examples which are impressive even for beginners, for whom an inspiring sound image is significantly important.

After the textbooks were subjected to a detailed analysis, the textbooks were divided into two categories according to their difficulty levels - those whose difficulty is suitable for complete beginners or advanced beginners (their score points are 1 and 2 respectively) and those whose difficulty exceeds the previously mentioned requirement, or which require deeper music-theoretical knowledge and better interpretation skills (their score points are 3, 4 or 5 respectively).

Besides the descriptive method, the rating method was applied, which facilitates the reader's orientation in the final tables (the table 1 is for research questions no. 1 and no. 2 and the table 2 is for research question no. 3) because the established scales provide a clear summary of the advantages and disadvantages of the analysed textbooks. In the research question no. 1 and no 2. the five-degree scale was used and in the research question no. 3 only two-degree scale was used. This numeral rating scale method is based on the publication of the Czech methodologist from the Charles University in Prague → Váňová: *Metodologie a logika výzkumu v hudební pedagogice (Methodology and logic of research in music pedagogy)* (2017). A detailed description of the use of the rating method is described in the introduction of each research question.

6. Finding

The findings are presented as responses to each of the research questions.

Research question No. 1: Considering their difficulty, which textbooks are suitable for teaching at Czech elementary music schools?

Based on a detailed analysis that focused on musical-theoretical knowledge, on the maturity of the player's technique, on the pedal utilization rate in the given exercises and on the difficulty of harmony and musical forms, the selected textbooks were scored using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = a complete beginner, 2 = a more advanced beginner, 3 = a pre-intermediate player, 4 = an intermediate player, and 5 = a highly advanced player. Each textbook could receive more scores because exercises for both complete beginners and, for example, for intermediates were provided. The ideal goal was to look up textbooks scored by 1, 2 and possibly by even higher scores (The textbooks with scores of 3, 4 and 5 are suitable for advanced students who, apart from their wider experience in the organ improvisation, also have extensive musical-theoretical knowledge, and who are more advanced organists).

The analysis of the textbooks revealed that the following textbooks can be included in the category of textbooks suitable for beginners: The text book *Faszination Orgelimprovisation* by Stoiber, which had the best score of 1–5, and the textbook *Cours d'improvisation Modale pour les organistes* by Rogg with a score of 1–5 as well. Other convenient textbooks are *Making Music: Improvisation for Organists* by Overduin with a score of 1–4, *Učebnice improvizace pro chrámové varhaníky* by Steyer with a score of 1–3 and *Cours d'improvisation pour les organistes* by Rogg with a score of 2–4. The fact that the textbooks listed as convenient for beginners are available in several languages (English, German, French, and even in Czech) are highly positive attributes worth mentioning.

On the contrary, Dupré's textbook *Cours Complet d'Improvisation á l'Orgue. Vol 1 + Vol. 2* with a score of 3–5, Gaar's textbook *Orgelimprovisation Lehrplan und Arbeitshifen* with a score of 3–5, Kratochvíl's textbook *Učebnice varhanní improvizace. Liturgická praxe* with a score of 3–5, *Varhanní improvizace* by Vodrážka with a score of 3–4 and Keller's textbook *Schule der Choralimprovisation* with a score of 3–4 have a higher level of difficulty and were therefore, deemed more relevant for more advanced students.

Research question No. 2: Which textbooks are suitable for theoretical introduction and for practice?

This question deals with the issue of whether the analysed textbooks are rather to be used for introductory purposes (i.e., as theoretical handbooks) or, whether they are to be used for practice. Some of the textbooks offer, for example, excellently designed exercises, but without a teacher's guidance and explanations, a student may have problems with understanding how to perform the given exercises. On the other hand, some textbooks are profiled as more theoretical and sophisticated, and they lack sufficient space to practice the presented issues while performing convenient exercises. The scoring scale from 1 to 5 was again used for the final evaluation, with 1 = the worst and 5 = the best in the given sphere.

The textbooks with the best scores in the sphere of presentation of the given issue and theoretical introduction are: *Faszination Orgelimprovisation* by Stoiber with a score of 5 and *Učebnice improvizace pro chrámové varhaníky* by Steyer with a score of 5 as well. Other textbooks which present a very good introduction into the given issue are: *Making Music: Improvisation for Organists* by Overduin with a score of 4, *Orgelimprovisation Lehrplan und Arbeitshifen* by Gaar with a score of 4 and *Complet d'Improvisation á l'Orgue. Vol 1 + Vol. 2* by Dupré with a score of 4. It is also obvious that textbooks whose difficulty level exceeds the level suited to beginning organists are relevant in this criterion sphere. As a result of their more advanced demand, these textbooks contain numerous pieces of advice and recommendations valuable for teachers.

The textbooks assessed as the best in relation to the criterion evaluating the sufficiency of suitable and creative exercises aimed at mastering the improvisational discipline are: *Cours d'improvisation pour les organistes* by Rogg with a score of 5, *Cours d'improvisation Modale ou libre pour les organistes* by the same author with a score of 5 and *Učebnice improvizace pro chrámové varhaníky* by Steyer with a score of 5. The textbooks that can be labelled as excellent as they provide numerous exercises are: *Faszination Orgelimprovisation* by Stoiber with a score of 4, *Making Music: Improvisation for Organists* by Overduin with a score of 4 and *Cours Complet d'Improvisation á l'Orgue. Vol 1 + Vol. 2* by Dupré with a score of 4.

Research question No. 3: For which sphere of organ improvisation teaching is it appropriate to use the given textbook?

As mentioned above, organ improvisation itself is related to numerous disciplines and areas which can be focused on in various ways. To make teaching at elementary music schools varied and to create an opportunity for studying organists to become practically familiar with various types of organ improvisation, the third research sphere focuses on the four issues mentioned above: a) creative exercises based on onomatopoeia; b) liturgical improvisation, or working with a song / a chorale / a melody; c) improvisation based on a particular musical form; and d) improvisation characterizing the period of a particular musical style.

Within the framework of the evaluation of the results of the textbook analyses in these spheres, the essential consideration aimed at revealing that particular sphere (out of the four ones mentioned above) on which the author of the given textbook focuses. The following text gradually processes individual spheres of organ improvisation and evaluates the results of the processed analysis. The evaluation is structured on the "yes - no" basis, i.e. it presents the conclusion whether the given textbook is suitable for teaching of any of the above-mentioned spheres.

a) Onomatopoeia

The first chosen sphere is dedicated to onomatopoeia, and it opens up a wide range spectrum of possibilities for organ improvisation. Onomatopoeia helps beginning organists overcome fears of failure, and it deepens every student's inner musical thinking. The methodology of organ improvisation in the past years usually considered teaching of improvisation to be equivalent to acquiring and mastering of harmonic rules in practice, and that is why a lot of people associated this issue with a simple keeping of "some" rules, which is obviously binding. Onomatopoeic exercises, on the other hand, can "untie your hands", and they induce a feeling of being unafraid of improvising. These exercises usually work with minimal musical material (pentatonic scales, accompaniments which use *Tonic* and *Dominant*), or with a kind of atmosphere or with rendering of a story (e.g. based on a picture or photograph, but also on an animated fairy tale). This sphere of improvisation does not aim to set any boundaries; on the contrary, everything is allowed.

The most numerous onomatopoeic exercises can be found in the textbook *Faszination Orgelimprovisation* by Stoiber, followed by *Making Music: Improvisation for Organists* by Overduin and in *Cours d'improvisation Modale ou libre pour les organistes* by Rogg.

b) Liturgical improvisation (working with a song / a chorale / a particular melody)

Liturgical improvisation is a clearly dominant issue found in textbooks of organ improvisation. It is the only one out of all the four spheres which is included in every organ improvisation textbook, i.e. there is no organ improvisation textbook that would not, at least in a minor way, reflect improvisation based on working with a spiritual song / chorale or working with a melodic motif. There are varied ways in which liturgical improvisation is presented to the students - harmonizing of a melody, working with counterpoint, various arrangements (from the easiest *bicinas* to toccatas with *canto-firmo* in the pedal), then working with the general bass and its application in relation to the melody of a spiritual song, and variation working on topics of spiritual songs.

c) Improvisation based on a particular musical form

Similarly to the previously mentioned sphere, processing of musical forms also belongs to the basic skills of every improviser. That is why, apart from Keller's textbook: *Schule der Choralimprovisation*, which is rather one-sided in its devotion to the improvised processing of chorale, the issue of various musical forms occurs in all the other textbooks.

The most common musical forms included in the textbooks are: variations, *partitas*, *chacones*, *passacaglias*, three-part ABA forms, imitation forms (*fugue*), choral overture, *tocatta*, *sonata* form or organ symphony. Exceptionally, also less common forms are included, such as *scherzo*, French dance suite, *siciliana* or *ritornello*.

The textbooks which provide and process the largest number of forms are: Stoiber's *Faszination Orgelimprovisation*, Gaar's *Orgelimprovisation Lehrplan und Arbeitshifen* and *Cours Complet d'Improvisation á l'Orgue*. Vol 1 + Vol. 2 by Dupré.

d) Improvisation characterizing the period of a particular musical style

The ability to improvise while reflecting a certain style / genre is one of the top skills of any improviser. Nevertheless, getting familiar with the compositional procedures of the given periods and those of prominent musical personalities and musicians can enrich an improviser's improvisational palette with new procedures. Simultaneously, students can familiarise themselves with music history in a practical way, which is why a number of textbooks on organ improvisation introduce individual styles this way.

For example, Stoiber's textbook *Faszination Orgelimprovisation* is arranged on the basis of this principle starting with 17th and 18th centuries and continues with the music of Romanticism to the music of the 20th and 21st centuries. Rogg's textbook *Cours d'improvisation Modale ou libre pour les organistes* presents the music of old ecclesiastic scales (modes); but, it simultaneously provides Olivier Messiaen's exercises to consolidate modes of a limited transposition. Other textbooks related to this sphere are *Orgelimprovisation Lehrplan und Arbeitshifen* by Gaar and *Cours Complet d'Improvisation á l'Orgue*. Vol 1 + Vol. 2 by Dupré.

Below are the results of the analysis of the textbooks in a tabular format.

Table 1. Results of the comparative analysis of textbooks of organ improvisation – RQs 1, 2

Author	Textbook	Language	Number of pages	Difficulty (1=beginner, 5=advanced)	Presentation of theory (1=the worst; 5=the best)	Exercises for practice (1=the worst; 5=the best)
Franz Josef Stoiber	<i>Faszination Orgelimprovisation</i>	German, English	152	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	5	4
Jan Steyer	<i>Učebnice improvizace pro chrámové varhaníky</i>	Czech	93	1, 2, 3	5	5
Jan Overduin	Making Music: Improvisation for organists	English	223	1, 2, 3, 4	4	4
Lionel Rogg	<i>Cours d'improvisation Modale ou libre pour pour les organistes</i>	French	106	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	2	5
Lionel Rogg	<i>Cours d'improvisation pour les organistes</i>	French, English	60	2, 3, 4	2	5
Bohumír Kratochvíl	<i>Učebnice varhanní improvizace - liturgická praxe</i>	Czech	144	3, 4, 5	3	2
Reiner Gaar	<i>Orgelimprovisation Lehrplan und Arbeitshifen</i>	German	183	3, 4, 5	4	3
Marcel Dupré	<i>Cours Complet d'Improvisation á l'Orgue. Vol 1 + Vol. 2</i>	French, English	62 + 148	3, 4, 5	4	4
Jaroslav Vodrážka	<i>Varhanní improvizace</i>	Czech, German, English	74	3, 4	2	3
Hermann Keller	<i>Schule der Choralimprovisation</i>	German, English	75	3, 4	3	3

Table 2. Results of the comparative analysis of textbooks of organ improvisation – RQ 3

Author	Textbook	a) Onomatopoeia	b) Liturgical improvisation (working with a song / a chorale)	c) Working with music forms	d) Getting familiar with various styles
Franz Josef Stoiber	<i>Faszination Orgelimprovisation</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes
Jan Steyer	<i>Učebnice improvizace pro chrámové varhaníky</i>	no	yes	yes	no
Jan Overduin	Making Music: Improvisation for organists	yes	yes	yes	no

Lionel Rogg	<i>Cours d'improvisation Modale ou libre pour les organistes</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes
Lionel Rogg	<i>Cours d'improvisation pour les organistes</i>	no	yes	yes	no
Bohumír Kratochvíl	<i>Učebnice varhanní improvizace - liturgická praxe</i>	no	yes	yes	no
Reiner Gaar	<i>Orgelimprovisation Lehrplan und Arbeitshifen</i>	no	yes	yes	yes
Marcel Dupré	<i>Cours Complet d'Improvisation á l'Orgue. Vol 1 + Vol. 2</i>	no	yes	yes	yes
Jaroslav Vodrážka	<i>Varhanní improvizace</i>	no	yes	yes	no
Hermann Keller	<i>Schule der Choralimprovisation</i>	no	yes	no	no

7. Conclusion

This research which is a comparative analysis of textbooks (Czech and foreign ones), revealed that the most suitable textbooks for teaching of organ improvisation at Czech elementary art schools are the following: *Faszination Orgelimprovisation* by Stoiber; *Učebnice improvizace pro chrámové varhánky* by Steyer; *Making Music: Improvisation for Organists* by Overduin; *Cours d'improvisation Modale ou libre pour les organistes* by Rogg and *Cours d'improvisation pour les organistes* by Rogg. These textbooks meet the basic requirements concerning a suitable difficulty for beginning organists, and, simultaneously, they provide sufficient exercises and (in the most frequent cases) they also provide a comprehensible introduction into the material provided.

The tables presented above (see Table 1 & Table 2) reveal the advantages and disadvantages of using each of the analysed textbooks. Some of them have a narrower focus (e.g. they are focused merely on liturgical improvisation and working with forms), but on the other hand, they provide a comprehensible clarification of the given issue. On the contrary, other textbooks provide sufficient exercises to consolidate organists' knowledge and skills, and they are widely applicable in a number of improvisational disciplines. The tables also show in which languages the individual textbooks are published, which can facilitate each teacher's choice of a convenient textbook (the choice is based on the user's language abilities).

Despite the fact that a number of textbooks achieved an excellent score index, none of them was specifically tailored for the needs of teaching at Czech elementary music schools. The researcher believes that in the coming years, an effective teaching methodology based on proven didactic procedures will be created, which will provide sufficient space to engage every student's creativity. When that happens, students and their teachers will have an opportunity to choose and test different assignments of improvisational tasks, hence completing their role as accomplished organists.

Data Availability Statement

Data is available upon request.

Declaration of Conflicts Interests

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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