



Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750-1850 **(Cambridge Studies in Romanticism)**

Angela Esterhammer

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During the Romantic era, especially in Italy, performers known as *improvvisatori* and *improvvisatrici* extemporised poetry in public in response to subjects requested by their audiences. This type of performance fascinated Grand Tourists from northern Europe, who reported on poetic improvisers in hundreds of travel accounts, journals, letters, and periodical articles. By uncovering historical data and interpreting literary texts, Professor Esterhammer identifies patterns in the evolving responses of English, German, French, and Russian writers to the experience of improvisation. She explores how improvisation interacts with Romantic ideas about genius, spontaneity, orality, and emotional expressiveness, and relates to evolving concepts of gender and nation. Esterhammer goes on to interpret the influence that the figure of the poetic improviser had in nineteenth-century English and European fiction. In this context, the *improvvisatore* casts new light on conflicts between poetic genius and socio-economic constraints, and on the evolution of the *Bildungsroman*.

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