

Improvisation

- *Improvisation...the art of creating music spontaneously*
- *...is an age-old tradition and one particularly suited to the nature and role of the organ. Good quality organs have a range of colour, texture and power rarely paralleled by other instruments, and those with mechanical action, in particular, can prove to be just as incisive and articulate.*



John Riley

Improvisation skills are a very important part of the organist's armoury...

...Helping to break down inhibition and develop independence, confidence and flexibility; the knowledge that you are not reliant on others to provide what you need.

...As a practical tool. The length, mood and thematic content of an improvisation can be instantly tailored to fit a given situation.

...As a creative tool, enabling experimentation with a wide range of forms and styles, including those not traditionally associated with a liturgical context. These might incorporate elements of various ethnic, jazz and other popular music traditions or more experimental and abstract splashes of colour and texture.

An improvisation at its most impressive might be...

- A multi movement symphony based on plainsong of the mass...
- A five-part fugue on a popular TV tune, (handed to the performer 30 seconds earlier)...
- A gross potpourri based on themes

alluding to points in the sermon...

However, it must also be acknowledged that the removal of inhibition and a pre-defined script can create particular challenges that are not always met...

- Wandering and characterless interludes...
- Impenetrable landscapes of noise and chaos...
- Acts of catharsis on the part of the organist, which induce the opposite effects in those who have to listen to it...
- Music that shifts through four centuries in as many minutes...

Such offerings can provide an inoffensive, perhaps musically very competent, but ultimately forgettable musical ambience, ...or something more likely to cross the thresholds of pain and boredom.

The response to the challenge can also be the total opposite...just silence, even the first steps being frozen by the fear of failure. Indeed, lack of confidence or inspiring examples can dissuade even the most accomplished of organists to develop the art;

improvisation being all too easily seen as a separate and mysterious art that cannot be learnt or taught, ...but a heavenly gift bestowed upon the chosen few.

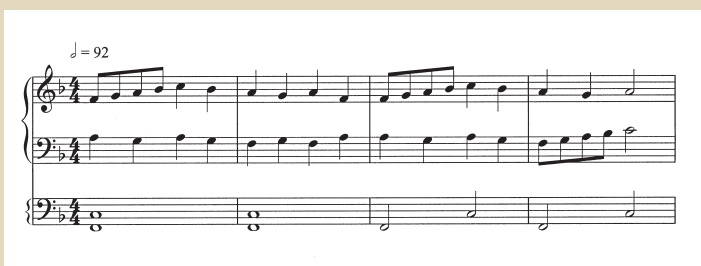
However, improvisation skills can be realised by all musicians. There is music of worth and reward at all levels and for a wide variety of practical contexts.

Improvised music is fundamentally composition in 'real time', ie the speed at which the music is to be performed, with some extra challenges...

...developing the intuitive and rapid reflexes to navigate the course of the music; there is rarely time to think every move out deliberately.

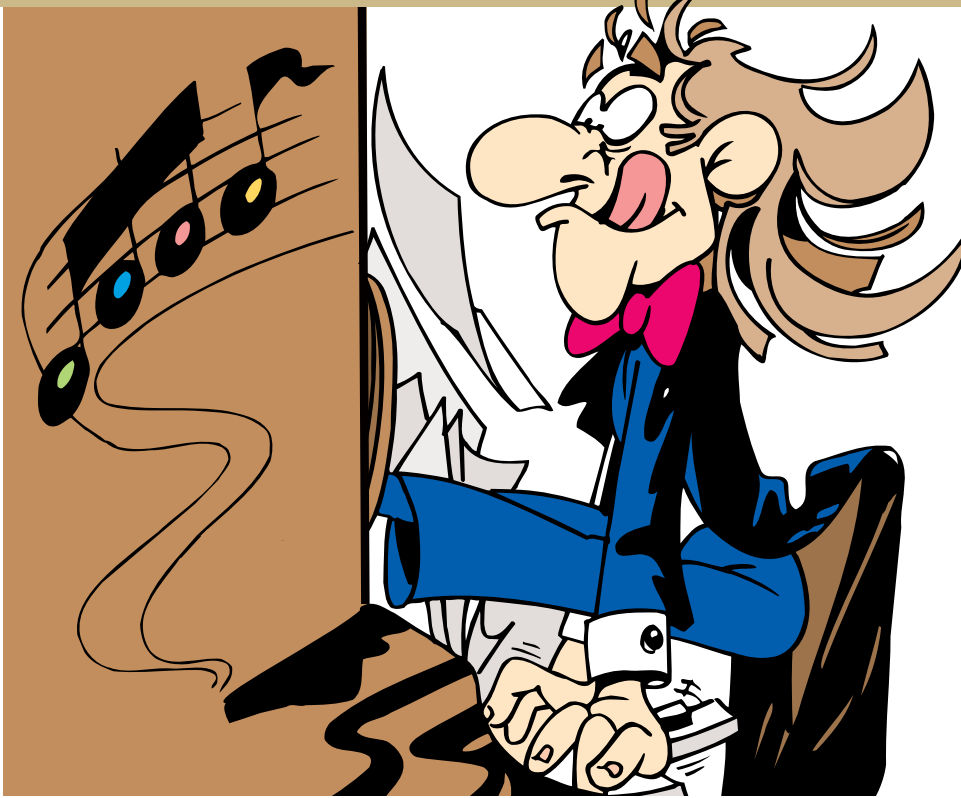
...developing memory to relate different parts of the music, eg statement and answering phrase, or theme and variation. Concise and memorable material will greatly help this. (Unlike visual forms such as a painting, a whole piece of music cannot be experienced simultaneously. Perception of structure in the mind of creator and listener therefore relies on a memory of

example one



example two





what has gone before or what is otherwise familiar, for example a well-known hymn or folk tune).

Break the task down...

Musical principles and ideals must be allied to the practicalities in realising them. Nevertheless, we can make life easier whilst facilitating a musical result.

Establish, where necessary, *physical* parameters, helping the fingers to settle and focus; also rationalise the *musical* parameters and starting points, such as an active melody part with simple harmony or vice versa.

Some examples:

- Five note single hand or feet positions, (Musette EX 1).
- A single mode; pentatonic and whole tone modes are especially useful since any note will blend at least moderately well with any other note. (Lullaby in the Pentatonic mode EX 2)
- A single mode and its transposition, (Lydian Toccata EX 3).
- 12 bars with a contrasting middle section, (Melody in Blues style EX 4)

- A repeated harmonic pattern, (Theme and Variation EX 5)
- Rhythms of words and phrases, (Football duet in two modes EX 6)
- Using an existing tune, for example with a repeated descending bass line (Ebenezer EX 7).

Character and style

A memorable improvisation requires character and style...as vast a subject as musical history itself...and something that should be evident from the outset. Have an initial concept of what you want to say, not “let’s start and see what happens”.

Some ingredients are:

Rhythmic patterns, particular those associated with movement and dance; for example, march, waltz, gigue, tango, or the more complex and mixed rhythms of jazz.

Ranges of tempo.

Types of modes or scales.

Melodic profile, (e.g. steps or leaps).

Here are some brief snapshots...

- A Funeral March (EX 8).
- A jazz style improvisation in mixed metre (EX 9).
- A taste of the Orient using a mode with the flattened 2nd. (EX 10).
- A flavour of the Medieval or Renaissance periods using drone bass, dance rhythms and parallel fourths; (*In Dulci Jubilo* EX 11).

Organ tone colour, the very first point of contact with the listener’s ear, also breeds style, character and attitude; a gentle flute, ...a majestic solo trumpet, ...or mysterious strings and celestes; perhaps evoking also particular periods of music and organ building.

Some other important considerations...

The heart of the matter...

Pulse is the essential controlling element of movement and pattern. Pulse can speed up or slow down or even be momentarily halted, but must be present and established at the outset. Without it, even the most sublime melody and harmony will be seriously undermined and communicate lack of confidence, authority and control.

Focus on the essentials...

Distinctive ideas, solid technique and an eye for overall structure and balance are what matters; for example, clear line and harmonic structure rather than an incoherent mass of chords. Material that is over complex, busy or bland will merely cloud

example three



example four



example five

example six

example seven

example eight

your intentions and suffocate the inner life of the music. Music is the art of selecting notes not playing as many as physically possible... and the rests are just as important. Less can be more!

Live within your limits...

Always work within comfortable levels of complexity, speed and length. Simple music performed with confidence and ease is far more effective than over ambitious music under strain; the essential qualities of pulse and precision being among the main casualties.

Slow Down...

Never think of slow or still music as inferior. A very slow but firm tempo can hold the listener in ways that fast music cannot. (Think of the power of the long meditative chords in some of Messiaen's music).

Look ahead...

Cruise within your known limits. As with driving, always allow thinking time and space to manoeuvre and plan ahead.

Know thyself...

Learn to listen to how the music *really*

sounds, even in the white heat of creativity. This is the key to any form of analysis and improvement of skills.

Size matters...but isn't everything...

A high quality instrument enhanced by a friendly acoustical setting will often provide a greater resonance with your creativity than an indifferent one. However a more modest or less forgiving instrument will focus more on the quality of the invention... and just a few finely voiced stops can be just a seductive.

You are both creator and performer...

Ensure your ideas are conveyed effectively through good phrasing, articulation and general management of the instrument. Shoddy technique will prejudice the quality of invention just as much as in the established repertoire.

Develop the art of conviction...

...make everything sound part of the act, even if inspiration is flagging... and above all keep going! Flow and momentum are as important as polish.

...and that of deception and bluff

As with a politician's live TV interview, ideas once sounded cannot be retracted or retrospectively modified; merely skillfully developed, discretely buried or superseded by something more appealing!

Improvisation skills will not emerge overnight or without effort, practice and critical awareness of the sounds that we are making. However, both slow and self-conscious method and boundless wild experimentation should culminate in the gathered wisdom and knowledge which leads towards success. There will be knocks, bumps and occasional disasters on the way,... inspired and embarrassing sounds,... sweet harmony and uncontrolled dissonance...but whoever learns to walk by just sitting on the floor?! Even the fear of improvising lest we make bad sounds can be a healthy and hopeful sign, since discrimination between good and bad sounds are surely the key to progress in any form of musical creativity or performance!

So, surprise yourself and others with the new sounds that you and your instrument can make. Say goodbye to amorphous and anonymous musical wallpaper...or to notions that 'I cannot improvise'. You can!

example nine

caption ten

caption eleven