

THE Organist's toolkit

Improvisation

John Riley

Improvisation is an invaluable skill

Why learn to improvise? Given the profusion of printed music in all styles and levels of difficulty, not to mention the tomes of ready-made short hymn preludes and reharmonisations, why bother? Because:

- 1** Improvisation gives immediacy to the composition process, enabling a sound to be instantly evaluated and manipulated. This feeds the creative cycle.
- 2** Improvisation is a single creative conception that simultaneously encompasses all dimensions of music: composition, instrumental colour, and technical control.
- 3** The length, mood and thematic content can be chosen and adapted to fit any given situation.
- 4** Improvisation skills are a confidence builder – knowing that one is not totally reliant on the printed page is liberating.
- 5** Improvisation skills can be a life-saver too. You can use them to cover a gap in the memory or a misplaced page-turn; creating music by extrapolating from its context.
- 6** You are creating something new and expressing part of your skills and personality.

However, even experienced musicians can approach improvisation with some reluctance and trepidation, perhaps being overawed by the memory of spectacular musical feats created by seasoned improvisers in the form of fugues or toccatas, or even whole symphonies, on a tiny amount of given material. In contrast, it is all too easy for player (and listener) to equate improvising with wandering, characterless interludes that add little, other than perhaps a form of agreeable if benign

musical wallpaper to fit a particular mood or to address a fear of silence. Equally off-putting can be the often noisy acts of creative catharsis on the part of the player that do not find a reciprocal engagement with the listener.

Yet this need not be the case. With care and perseverance (and also by developing an internal template of knowledge and expectation against which to measure the result), any organist can, at some level, improvise rewarding music that engages well with the listener. They will be able to create music that inhabits a range of styles with precedents from historical repertoire, and go beyond the all-too-frequent default range of 20th-century styles. A simple but well constructed piece in, say, a classical style will be far more 'original' and musically worthwhile than a pale version of Cocheau!

Improvisation is not a mysterious or separate art, only attainable by the gifted few; rather, it is an extension of keyboard harmony and composing skills, aural analysis and performing. It uses the same musical vocabulary as composition and an improvisation will succeed or fail according to the same criteria.

Admittedly, improvisation does offer extra challenges. Unlike when writing a composition, the improviser cannot go back and rework their creation to gain perfection (other than to work towards a fixed composition); rather, he or she must develop the reflexes to operate in real-time, instantly re-calibrating with each move. Absolutely crucial to this is the strength of memory which files a repertoire of possible musical building blocks, e.g. rhythms, melodic shapes, harmonic progressions etc. Memory also informs what material has been presented from which we can develop and balance it appropriately with other

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material. Concise and characterful material greatly helps this process.

Brain processing power governs how much material can be successfully handled at the same time, as the processor accesses the various options on file. However, if the demands of the task outstrip available processing power, everything can run slow or, worst of all, erratically, freeze, crash, or even require an embarrassing reboot during the performance! The good news is that we receive continuous upgrades, whereby experience leads to greater facility. Conscious and explicit structures and guides gradually become embedded into the subconscious, and are always running in the background. For example:

Simpler, i.e. fewer 'processing' demands

- slow tempo
- lots of repetition
- short length e.g. brief linking interlude on a hymn tune
- set parameters e.g. improvising on a written-out melodic and/or harmonic outline, such as a hymn tune
- few compositional choices and decisions

Advanced, i.e. greater 'processing' demands

- fast tempo
- lots of different material
- more substantial length e.g. an improvised voluntary
- few given parameters e.g. a given 'theme' for a concert improvisation
- many compositional choices and decisions

NB: simple music is not necessarily any less worthy than more complex music!

Grab the listener!

As with any composition, an improvisation must immediately engage the listener; an aimless start with the hope that a salient idea and overall purpose will emerge will more likely result in minds (and bodies) going elsewhere. Immediately therefore we need to simultaneously establish:

Pulse... without which all, even the most sublime and skilfully conceived melody and harmony, will be

totally undermined and will communicate a lack of confidence, authority and control.

Metre – single or mixed... which, combined with pulse, provides an essential framework to shape and reference ideas. Admittedly not all music corresponds to a discernible metre but the vast majority of organ music and the contexts in which it is performed is metrical. The most expertly created prelude will suffer significantly if bars in an established $\frac{4}{4}$ metre suddenly become $3\frac{3}{4}$ or $4\frac{1}{4}$ beats long!

Mood... e.g. reflective, jubilant, melancholy; conveyed through such aspects as tempo, type of rhythm and registration. (Always showcase your instrument!)


Theme/idea... a characterful melodic phrase, harmonic combination or texture is useful for perpetuating, developing or contrasting new material. Different musical traditions emphasise different approaches such as developing an idea through transformation and contrast; or more 'circular' forms involving repetition and a sense of 'being' rather than 'doing'. A memorable rhythmic component can provide added personality, developmental potential and unity to the music.

Overall structure... effective opening material can be lost if the improvisation loses plot and direction.


Style and language... e.g. Renaissance, Classical, 20th-century French, are defined by the harmonic and melodic language, e.g. diatonic or modal. Consistency and integrity of style are important – try to avoid moving through four centuries in as many minutes!

All these qualities contribute to **identity** and **personality**.

So much for guiding principles, now let us look at practical examples.



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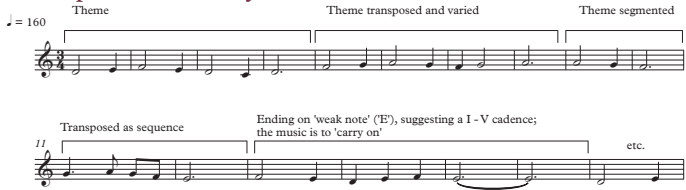
The primacy of melody

A key component of success is a melody which is full of character and which balances repeated, varied and new elements. Shape and direction are important too. Compare these two examples and ask why one seems more successful than the other.

Example 1a: Melody 1



Example 1b: Melody 2



Creativity within narrow parameters

Limiting the parameters in one area can free the mind to focus on greater sophistication in another. For example, working within a stable five-note compass might allow you to focus on creating greater contrapuntal and textural interest, as in Example 2. Note how the opening left hand figure immediately signals the march-like character of the piece and creates the anticipation of a space to be filled.

Example 2: Prokofiev-style March



Working with repeating bass patterns

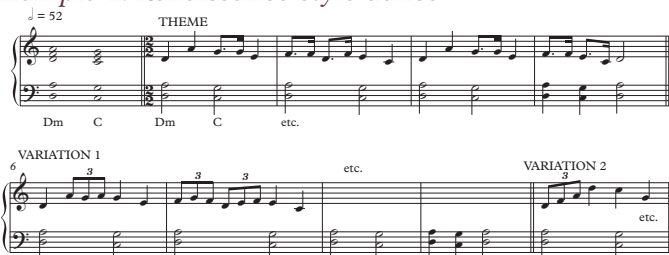
Bass patterns can provide a reliable constant or 'motor' around which to build new material; they also provide thinking time if invention momentarily flags. For example, see the bass ostinato in Example 3. Note also how the mood is immediately established, in this case by regular dance-like phrases driven by a *moto perpetuo* bass.

Example 3: Ostinato Scherzo



Bass patterns can help shape the melody as well as providing a broad harmonic structure. Renaissance-type repeating dance patterns can be particularly useful for this. Modal and parallel harmony also evoke the style.

Example 4: Renaissance-style dance

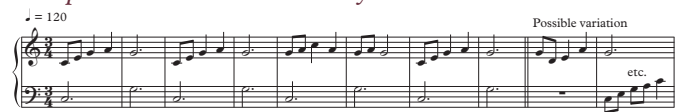


Exploiting modes

Using modes, especially the traditional church 'modes', reduces the amount of potential clashes, harmonic planning, and issues of parallel movement associated with diatonic harmony. However, modes should also be valued in their own right, as each has its own particular character, e.g. the raised 4th of the Lydian mode.

The Pentatonic mode underpins much of the musical traditions of the Far East, Scotland, Ireland, and various other cultures. It is also a stepping stone to 20th-century French organ music, which often combines modes with elements of diatonic harmony. Its chief asset is its blending and generally mellifluous and neutral quality, as in Example 5.

Example 5: Pentatonic lullaby



The Dorian mode has a much stronger centre of tonal gravity than the more ambiguous pentatonic mode. Its blending qualities can reduce the demands in contrapuntal and imitative writing making it easier to echo the works of Dupré and other 20th-century French composers, as well as the heritage of modal plainsong and polyphony, as in Example 6.

Example 6: Two-part invention



Harmonising modal melodies, particularly those based on church modes, is generally easier than diatonic melodies; the notes within a mode tend to blend well, and are easily findable using just the white notes of the keyboard. Parallel motion is also very much 'in style' and using parallel 6^{ths} suggests the work of such English composers as Vaughan Williams and Howells – and also reaches back into modal music prior to around 1600. By moving across modes and key centres it is possible to create a broader tonal structure equivalent to modulations in diatonic music (see Example 7).

Example 7: English rhapsody



Adding parallel 5th, 7th, even 9th chords, added 2^{nds} and more contrary motion between hands can place an improvisation very much in the style of such composers as William Walton – a perfect recipe for a quick fanfare (see Example 13 *Judas Maccabeus Fanfare*, below).

In complete contrast, using the Octatonic mode points towards the styles of Jehan Alain and Olivier Messiaen.

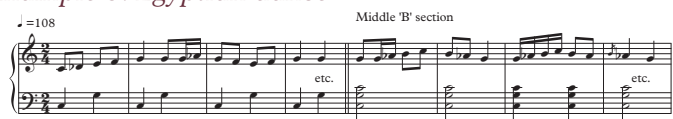
As seen earlier, the fixed parameters for tonality and physical movement allow you to focus more on thematic development and counterpoint as in *Example 8*.

Example 8: Octatonic prelude



A shift to the Arabic Double Harmonic mode would instantly suggest something – albeit perhaps as a caricature – of the Middle East and North Africa. Combinations of softer reeds could provide some suitably atmospheric tone colour!

Example 9: Egyptian dance



Harmonic structure

Underlying harmonies do much to guide melody. They also provide an overall direction, purpose and a cohesive structure to an improvisation. Complex and busy textures can be underpinned by relatively simple patterns (as already seen in *Example 4*; this bass line could support a variety of highly virtuosic melodic figurations).

If you use diatonic harmony at its simplest, even just I V chords can provide considerable scope, as in *Example 10*. This chord pattern, or ones like it, are able to support a variety of melodies, and indeed subsequent variations.

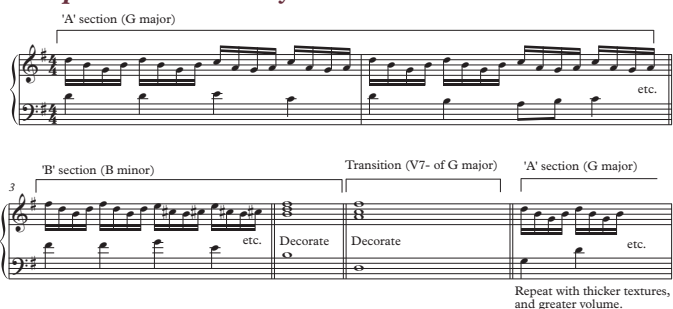
Example 10: Baroque-style trumpet tune



Adding the IV and V7 chords, and other primary and secondary chords, enriches the harmonic language further. Dissonance in passing notes points more to late Classical and early Romantic styles.

Virtuosic Baroque fantasias and toccatas are often underpinned by simple harmonic patterns, as indeed are the toccatas in a late-Romantic-French-style, such as *Example 11*. The skeletal score outlines some of the possible harmonic structure.

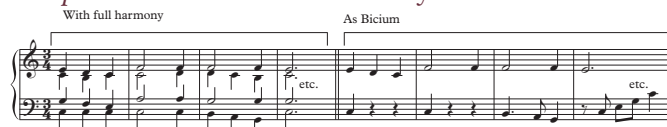
Example 11: French-style toccata



Elaborating the hymn or song

An existing melody and its harmonies can provide the theme and ‘hook’ for an improvisation as well as a ready-made structure from which to fashion various forms of variation. Improvisation is not just about starting from new – many of the great composers used the template of an existing hymn to build their creations. For example, try stripping away the inner parts and adapting the bass line, to produce a two part prelude, as in *Example 12*.

Example 12: Prelude on Ombersley



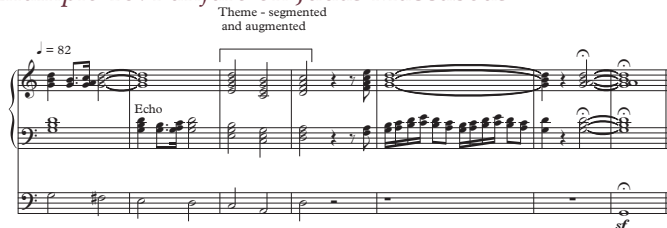
This example is in ‘real time’, but there is considerable potential for more invasive forms of variations with more elaborated melody and greater manipulation of the rhythmic and harmonic structure – as indeed in many of the chorale preludes of J.S. Bach.

Developing the motive

Very often, however, the art of improvising is to use a very short idea and develop it comprehensively using a variety of means. For example:

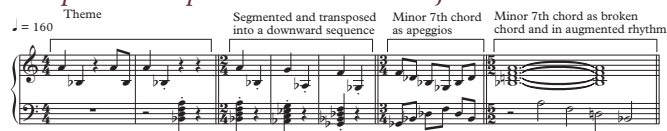
- 1 As a short fanfare, for example, using the two main phrases of the first line of the hymn tune.

Example 13: Fanfare on Judas Maccabeus



- 2 As a single element, e.g. a basic rhythm or chord, and focusing on transpositions and rhythmic and textural manipulation. It also provides an instant ‘theme’ and tonal character, in this case atonal. *Example 14* shows a skeleton score outlining some possible treatments of the theme.

Example 14: Improvisation on a major 7th



Further considerations for overall structure

- Focus on clear and purposeful beginnings and endings.
- Only work with a time frame within which you can keep a firm picture of your central idea and how it is to be developed.
- Improvisations with many transitions can be challenging. Avoid trying to say too much in one

movement; instead focus on giving each a specific character and fully developing a theme – for example through repetition with small elements of variation. Make a little go a long way!

- If necessary, finish your improvisation sooner rather than later – avoid ‘playing after the music has finished’. Music is enhanced by being framed by silence!

Making it flow

Having considered the ‘compositional’ aspects of improvisation it is also crucial to comfortably **manage** material with fluency and cohesion.

Simplify and focus on the essentials... too many ideas and choices can drown you in a sea of infinite possibilities or obscure ideas by the sheer weight of padding!

Have all elements within your understanding and control... adding notes with no positive function, i.e. uncontrolled rhetoric, are loose cannon that detract from the whole.

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

You are both creator and performer... ensure that your ideas are conveyed effectively through tidy playing and general management of the instrument. Shoddy technique will prejudice the perceived quality of invention just as much as in printed repertoire.

This guide is but the briefest snapshot of possibilities. Many of the examples are open ended. Why not try completing them or even create a wholesale adaptation at the organ using the examples as a starting point?

Whatever level of ambition or complexity you are working at, your aim and mission statement should always be the same; to **‘Produce characterful and memorable ideas, developed in a cogent way and performed with precision and confidence’**.

Above all, be ambitious and cultivate your improvisations with the same care and value as with written repertoire, so that the music lingers in the memory (for all the right reasons) long after the final chord has died away...

Further resources and recordings can be found on John's website, www.organimprovisation.net

John Riley is a freelance organist, teacher and composer based in Edinburgh. Trained at Liverpool and Cambridge Universities, he has a particular interest in keyboard improvisation and has taught on various organist courses and organists' associations workshops, as well as contributing articles on improvisation for organist journals. His tutor book on organ improvisation *The Creative Organist* was critically well received and a completely new edition is in preparation for 2016.



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