

WHY LEARN TO IMPROVISE?

Organists are often encouraged to develop their improvisation skills.

In order to promote further encouragements, here are some very common scenarios in the lives of organists, and which outline even more reasons why you should develop your skills. - JOHN RILEY

1. The bride is very, very, late; possibly having mistakenly being taken in the Rolls to the other St Mary's (of a different denomination); or down the wrong motorway carriageway going in the opposite direction. You have used up all your music, including 'Why are we waiting?', 'She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes' and 'Time to go home'... and she has still not appeared....
2. You have left your music on the bus.
3. You are on your way to give a recital, but have momentarily left your music bag unattended at the airport, and the security services have blown it up.
4. A thief has stolen your music bag without knowing what was in it.
5. A jealous professional rival has stolen your music bag knowing exactly what is in it.
6. You have just been asked to play an extremely plain and boring accompaniment for a singer of contrary gender, whose qualities are completely opposite in nature...and whom you are particularly keen to impress.
7. You are hosting a concert of world premieres of some recently rediscovered works, by an equally recently rediscovered member of the Bach family. Half an hour before the concert is due to begin, the world-famous recitalist arrives at your church in a profoundly intoxicated and less than perfect emotional state, following some less than perfect counterpoint in a recent romantic liaison. Worst still, they have just thrown the scores in the nearby river. Many of the world's leading Baroque musicologists are in the audience. In order to avoid disappointment and embarrassment all round, you must then delve into your resources of improvisational ingenuity (and Baroque pastiche).

8. During a voluntary of some modern French music, somebody opens a side door and your illegal photocopies get blown off the stand. You must quickly invent a section for manuals only (incorporating material from Taverner's *Western Wynde Mass*), in order to kick the music to one side; followed by one for pedal only in order that you can pick it all up.
9. You are playing the final, (and distinctly challenging), piece in a recital of fairly obscure Baroque music. You have not had time to get to know the work fully and are therefore relying on your very fluent sight reading skills to carry you through. Since you are due to go straight from the recital to the airport to start a Swiss hiking holiday, you save luggage weight by working from loose photocopies. As you approach the grand climax (and build a picture in your mind of the thunderous applause about to be unleashed by the audience), your page-turner inadvertently turns two of the photocopies at once. Your squeals of anguish and panic result in a process of emotional osmosis, and a reciprocal reaction in the page-turner who, albeit with the best of intentions, replaces all the pages in the wrong order, upside down or off the stand completely. You now have to rapidly collect yourself and draw upon all the stock Baroque devices of repetition, decorated cadences and extended climax within your armoury to bring the piece to a dignified and idiomatic end.
10. Certain notes on your organ have suddenly developed multiple potential ciphers à la Russian roulette, and only an especially composed piece is likely to avoid them completely.
11. You firmly believe that music should underpin elements within the service. A sermon touching upon the ethics of genetic cloning might therefore inspire a toccata on 'I wanna be like you'; or an announcement that the proposed major repairs to the organ have been cancelled with a fugue on 'There might be trouble ahead'.
12. Whilst playing an obscure contemporary work, (the composer of which is mercifully out of the country or deceased), you completely lose your place in the 'music'. Since no one knows or is capable of comprehending the work, and it is extremely unlikely to be performed again, you can complete (and probably improve), it *à la mode* with impunity.