

ORGAN IMPROVISATION

John Riley

What is improvisation?

Mention ‘improvising’ – the art of creating music spontaneously, and what comes to mind? Perhaps music to ‘cover’ a few moments of the liturgy, or an embellished play-over of a hymn... to an ambitious final voluntary based on the final hymn, or even a virtuoso’s four movement symphony (including a 5 part fugue!) on some given themes.

Improvising is also to be valued as a creative act in its own right, in which ideas can be instantly sampled and honed. Moreover, the organ is an instrument of a huge variety of tonal resources, able to inhabit the world of some orchestral instruments and in a wide range of styles, not just those associated with the liturgical context.

Whatever one’s experience or ambition, or whatever style one is working within, improvisation provides an opportunity to create music of character and substance, to be honed and accorded stature just as with the repertoire. Admittedly, improvising can prove a daunting prospect even for experienced musicians. However, I hope to be able to provide a few pointers on how to demystify the art and manage some of the challenges, as well as some practical examples; also suggest some litmus tests on quality, applicable to improvising at all levels and in all styles. Improvisation of any kind is

obviously a very broad topic; this can only be the briefest of snapshots, and the focus here will very much be from the point of view of Western Classical music traditions, and relatively conservative and accessible stylistic language.

Improvising – freedom of expression?

Indeed, improvising is a chance to explore different sounds; combinations of melody, harmony, rhythm and timbre. From constant evaluation of the sounds produced can come refinement and enhanced skill. Equally though, an improvisation that is to be satisfying to player and listener has to embody musical craft no less than in a written work. Musical expressions verging on the merely cathartic, or searching interminably for an idea and purpose, may work to an extent on a well-resourced organ, or in an impressive acoustic, (how easy it is to be seduced by the allure of fine organ tone itself!), but if lacking musical craft may well ultimately mean far more to the performer than listener.

With the notion of ‘freedom’ often comes the idea that in order to be ‘original’ an improvisation should be ‘modern’ in style; moreover, that working with dissonant and much freer musical language and being free of ‘rules of harmony’ etc. is actually easier.

On the contrary, such styles require the application of melodic and harmonic structure just as much as for example Baroque or Classical styles, albeit of a different kind; indeed the demands can be considerably more.

Conversely, a simple but well-crafted melody above a fixed bass (drone) or tonic or dominant chords, or working for example within a single mode, e.g. the Dorian mode, can be far more original and telling than what might come across as a featureless if intense landscape of sound.

Improvisation – just part of the musical jigsaw

Improvisation therefore is not some mysterious art whereby the player somehow draws music from the ether, perhaps in the process jettisoning all preconceptions of music; nor something only attainable by the selected few. Rather, improvising is something to be viewed as an extension of mutually interdependent skills such as performing, composing, playing from figured bass, aural analysis and keyboard harmony; skills that all organists are to some degree at least familiar and regularly engaged with. Indeed, improvising can be summed up as ‘composition speeded up’, or ‘composing in real time’.

The focus should be on melody; characterful with elements that are distinctive enough to be developed. The more effective that the melody can be when played with no or minimal accompaniment, the more durable it is likely to be. Harmony can add colour, direction and texture, but can take many forms. It need not be ‘conventional’

diatonic harmony; just a fixed drone bass with single line melody will create many different harmonies, levels of consonance and dissonance, and overall colour and expressive possibilities. As we will see, styles with modal harmony provide lots of opportunities too. The essential approach though is that harmony notes are calculated for the effect that they provide and fit the melody in the chosen style; not merely notes thrown in semi-randomly to bolster texture.

Composing but with extra challenges

In addition to composition skills, creating an effective improvisation is dependent on ‘management in real time’, i.e. not placing more higher-level demands on the mental processing than is possible to manage comfortably.

An improvisation creates many extra challenges in terms of simultaneously processing all the different musical components, and is absolutely dependent on a fluent and accurate performance in order to be effective. To re-iterate; simple music is not liable to be appreciated any less than complex music – quite the reverse in some cases, not least if the ideas and performance are confident and secure.

Therefore use general levels of complexity over which one has good control and understanding; not lots of elements that just add padding and extra resources to manage. The following table provides some examples, though of course an improvisation of moderate challenge can still be achieved with a judicious balance of both lower-level and higher-level demands.

| LOWER - LEVEL DEMANDS | HIGHER - LEVEL DEMANDS |
|--|--|
| Slow tempo | Fast tempo |
| Simple texture | Complex texture |
| Simple harmony and harmonic relationships, e.g. a fixed bass or I IV V chords. | Complex harmony, e.g. late 19 th Century style harmony and distant modulations. |
| Short length | Extended length |
| Lots of repeated material | Lots of new material |
| Few elements to memorise | Many elements to memorise |

For example, a limited number of hand positions and key changes will also allow greater stability, as in *Ex.1 French Style Carillon*

French style Carillon

♩ = 88

Measures 1-4: *f* 2 5 1 5 2 5 1 5 etc. 1 2 3 4 3 2 1

Measures 5-8: 1 2 3 4 3 5 2 1 4 4 3 1 4 5 3 5 2 5 1 5

Measures 9-10: 4 4 3 4 4 3 2 1 4 5 2 1 etc.

Articulation: V, ^, ^

Memory – the vital key

As alluded to before, the most crucial element of improvising is the heightened reliance on memory; that of a vocabulary of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic patterns; applying memory also to create reference points from which ideas can be developed and a balanced structure between these ideas be created. (There is no opportunity to visually cross-check and amend a written sketch before committing to a final version!)

Without memory we can end up with a patchwork and succession of unrelated ideas. With memory an improvisation will be based on a much more cogent and meaningful structure.

Whether one's current limit of ambition and comfort is an eight bar interlude of a single line melody and bass, or a substantial voluntary based on a single theme, a satisfying improvisation is therefore one where all the content of the improvisation is within the performer's ability to hold everything structurally in balance, and with cogency and mastery of melody and harmony. Conversely, an improvisation that is overly long or complex can come over as wandering and aimless. Again, it is about working within comfortable limits. (The very same can be seen in the published written repertoire where a great composer and one of their lesser gifted and known contemporaries work within a similar musical language but with discernibly different levels of success.) Predictable

and regular patterns and overall structure can greatly help memorisation too, (see below).

Establish purpose and confidence

A clear **pulse** from the outset is essential; without this even sophisticated melody and harmony can sound vague and directionless. Essential also is **Meter – single or mixed**, or at least clear shaping within the melody, for example if in a plainsong style. (Beware of such things as an accidental 3 ½ beats in bars of 4/4 time!)

Establish character

...rather than 'let's start and see what it turns into and where we end up'.

For example, is the improvisation to be a slow meditation; a dignified march; a lively dance; a triumphant fanfare? This we can establish primarily through rhythm, tempo and registration, (as seen in subsequent examples).

Establish style

For example, Medieval, Classical, Late Romantic, 20th Century Modal. Improvisation does not have to be 'contemporary' in style to be relevant, interesting or even 'original'; far better to have a simple improvisation in an 18th Century Classical style, based on I IV V chords than a sprawling acreage of pseudo Messiaen or pale imitation of CocherEAU. Harmony and overall tonality will be key factors in determining this.

Establish structure

No matter how fine might be individual ideas, ultimately success depends on how those ideas are balanced and developed. Whilst there is clearly a place for an ambitious final improvised voluntary, the most telling and practically useful applications of the art are often short, even aphoristic pieces, several if there is more space to fill. These can be extended using the existing material or theme(s) in varied form, e.g. using decoration or modulation into another key or transposed mode. Longer improvisations require in general much longer stretches of concentration and retained memory. Repeated elements, perhaps with subtle variations, reinforce themselves within the memory of creator (and indeed the listener), providing signposts on the journey and a balance of

the familiar and new. As with a sermon or even a TV advert, the listener will engage far more if they have a clear beginning to command attention, and hold interest whilst moving discernably towards a logical end. Here is a possible template for a very short meditative improvisation. However, this could be applied to improvisations of a wide variety of styles and moods *Ex. 2 Theme and Variations*

Theme – Four bar melody with a clear ‘peg’ or thematic material

Development -Variation of melody using decoration and augmented rhythm

Harmony – Single line or groups of sixths or thirds, and echoing the rhythmic motive in the opening bars.

Tonality – Built around the scale of C major, with a strong hint of the pentatonic mode.

Theme and Variations

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system, labeled 'solo', contains measures 1 through 6. It features a treble clef with a melody and a bass clef with accompaniment. The second system, starting at measure 7, continues the piece with more complex melodic and harmonic textures. The key signature is C major and the time signature is 4/4.

The improvisation self-references, i.e. re-uses thematic material, adding cohesion and a sense of clear beginning and end. The use of cadences further reinforces structure, direction and conclusion.

For a longer improvisation, this could be extended from bar 10 using a decorated version. *Ex. 2b*

Decorated version of theme etc.

It could be further extended by a middle minor section, and followed by the decorated version, to create a balanced structure. *Ex. 2c*

Middle section in E minor etc.

Even in simpler form, e.g. melody and single bass note C throughout, this improvisation will still be effective; imagine perhaps a duo for flute and cello; organ music does not always have to be made up of chords! Again, the simpler and more direct the language, the more likely it is to impact on the casual ear.

Predictable patterns

Dance forms or chorus and verse structures can be very useful templates - and with an established musical heritage. They also extend the useful life of particular ideas; the repeating chorus or ritornello 'A' sections are balanced by contrasting verses or 'B' and 'C' sections. This creates helpful patterns to orientate both creator and listener.

In *Ex. 3 Medieval Dance*, there is lots of repetition within the phrases, and of course the piece could be extended considerably by the further addition of contrasting 'C' 'D' 'E' sections etc. Harmony is based on a fifth or octave between melody and bass with parallel fifths between the hands, giving something of an archaic feel.

Medieval Dance

♩ = 88 'A' section

II

Last time only

6 'B' section

Da Capo

etc.

Predictable patterns of a different kind can be found in repeating bass lines or chord patterns. Underlying many pieces of music, even with busy textures such as a North German Baroque prelude, can be relatively simple harmonic patterns. Round these can be built all manner of variations – albeit with stretched pieces of elastic that bind us to a given pattern, such as **Ex. 4 Dance Chaconne**

Dance Chaconne

♩ = 60

I IV V I Ib IV V I

9 etc.

I IV V I I Ib7 IV V I

Not always a blank canvas

Improvisations can be built around existing material. We don't have to totally re-invent the wheel! Not only can this give a framework as an aid, but in making reference to an identifiable idea it makes musical sense; if using part of a hymn that has just been sung, a liturgical one too. The blend of old and newly created – i.e. familiar and unfamiliar – might be said to be 95% existing and 5% new if improvising some simple decorations within the existing hymn tune. In contrast, this might be 5% existing and 95% new if improvising a whole voluntary on a couple of bars of

the given theme...and of course every point in between. The concept of blending familiar and new also includes the very important art of last verse reharmonisations, a topic that could occupy a whole book, and not one alas that can be explored here.

Examples of using existing material include that of some form of variation on a hymn tune. For example, a decorated version of the whole tune in style of a Baroque chorale partita, e.g. *Ex. 5 Ravenshaw Variations*. (Just the first two bars of each possible variation are shown).

The image displays musical notation for 'Ex. 5 Ravenshaw Variations'. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system shows the 'Original - melody and bass only' and 'Var. 2'. The second system shows '6' (likely measure 6), 'Var. 4', and 'etc.'. The notation is in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The original melody is a simple sequence of notes, while the variations introduce more complex rhythmic patterns and ornaments.

Alternatively, rather than using the whole tune, just a fragment or two, i.e. motif(s), can be used and developed in a variety of ways, for example in *Ex. 6 Fanfare on St. George's Windsor* (over). Another approach would be to use just one part of the original tune; for example, extending

the opening phrase by a rising and falling sequence to create a very short hymn postlude in a 20th Century modal style, *Ex. 7 Flourish on Moscow* (over).

Fanfare on St George's (Windsor)

Musical score for 'Fanfare on St George's (Windsor)'. The score is in 4/4 time and G major. It consists of two systems of music.

The first system (measures 1-4) features a *Solo Reed* part in the treble clef and a *Tutti* part in the bass clef. A bracket labeled 'Segment' spans measures 3 and 4.

The second system (measures 5-8) features an *Echo* part in the treble clef and a *Tutti* part in the bass clef. A bracket labeled 'Segment repeated' spans measures 5 and 6, and another bracket labeled 'Segment in augmented rhythm' spans measures 7 and 8.

Flourish on Moscow

Musical score for 'Flourish on Moscow'. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. It consists of two systems of music.

The first system (measures 1-5) features a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble clef staff contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the bass clef staff contains a harmonic accompaniment of chords.

The second system (measures 6-10) features a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble clef staff contains a melodic line with eighth notes and a final measure with a long note. The bass clef staff contains a harmonic accompaniment of chords. A bracket labeled '6' spans measures 6 through 10.

Pathways to enhancing skills

Having examined various creative ideas, what specific skills are to be honed in order to improvise?

Firstly, we need reference points. As musicians we are all relying on internal templates of how any particular type of music should sound. Innate ability and acquired skill of any kind is essentially about how embedded and finely differentiated those internalised templates are, and our ability to match them with music that is being performed or in the process of creation. This is as true for playing composed music as it is for improvising. Without this, everything might sound fine to the performer, even in instances where by any objective standards it is patently not.

From this we endeavour to create competent melody and harmony, and according to a consistent style; for example music that sounds identifiably Classical rather than 20th Century. With further refinement can come differentiation between say, Messiaen, Langlais and William Mathias.

Furnishing those templates is through experience of performing and listening to different types of repertoire and acting upon informed advice.

Specific skills and ‘exercises’ to hone these might include:-

1. Creating cogent melodic phrases – just a single line perhaps with a drone bass can sound beautiful.
2. Familiarity with, and moving between different diatonic keys.
3. Practicing scales and arpeggios in specific diatonic keys and different modes. (The dreaded scales not

only cultivate dexterity but the knowledge of where particular notes lie!)

4. Harmonising melody – many different styles; for example, diatonic, or parallel 3rds 4ths or 5ths.
5. Developing ideas through repetition and transposition; of whole phrases and individual motifs. For example, repeating a harmonised melody in the dominant or a relative minor, or as part of a sequential passage.
6. Decorating hymn tunes in ‘real time’, perhaps to the actual singing.

Parallel to this, there is no substitute for freer exploration; creating whole improvised pieces and constantly evaluating through trial and error; what works and what doesn’t. Therefore, at whatever level of experience you find yourself at, consider further elevating the art of improvisation to one that commands further musical respect and attention, ...and hopefully receive more comments such as ‘that was a fine piece of music – who is it by?’

JOHN RILEY

John is a freelance musician based in Edinburgh, Scotland. He has contributed to various journals and provided workshops and masterclasses for organists groups, including organ scholars at Cambridge University. For further details about John, and many free resources on organ improvisation, including full versions and sound files of some of these examples, please visit www.organimprovisation.net