

OXFORD ORGAN AWARDS SCHEME

Organ improvisation class with John Riley

Saturday 12th November 2022, Pembroke College Chapel

Supplementary booklet:

Towards a 20th-century French style

For further resources, visit: www.johnrileyorganist.com



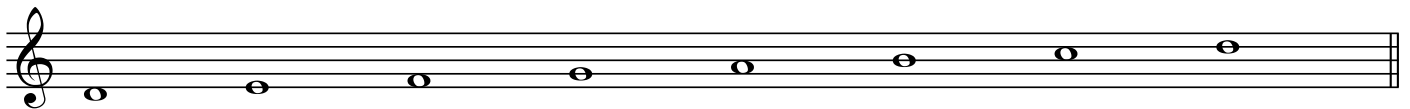
Improvising on the organ in what might be termed a '20th-century French style' can seem somewhat daunting, especially if one rightly recognises that the harmony is far more than clumps of randomly conceived dissonant chords. Yet, there are relatively simple means of achieving coherent and musically satisfying 20th-century harmony. Devices to create contrasting levels of dissonance through accented or prepared dissonance, and resolution — even cadences — are still at the heart of the music just as they are with earlier diatonic styles.

From around 1900 onwards, the diatonic relationships between melody and harmony and means of using harmonic colour to create varied hue within the music changed in many fundamental ways. The main elements of these changes were: (a) The use of modes rather than diatonic scales (b) The removal, or at least a loosening of diatonic relationships between 'keys' (c) An emphasis on 'melody-led', as opposed to 'bass-led' harmony, where chords are linked far more to the melodic line rather than a broader harmonic structure, and often running to varying extents in parallel with the melody. What was 'forbidden' parallel motion in diatonic music was now an integral part of the style.

This is seen particularly in French music, such as in the works of Alain, Tournemire, Langlais and Messiaen. We are going to look very briefly at some very simple ways of creating a suggestion of the music of these composers and of the 'French' style in general, but also acknowledge the commonality of such techniques across many different traditions and composers; for example, the influences of such composers as Bartok and Stravinsky on French composers are not to be underestimated. (Moreover, our first example is if anything more English than French in style!) Nor is it a mere exercise in imitation or pastiche; rather, it is equipping ourselves to explore the shifting colours and expressive possibilities of basic modal harmony: that certain piquancy of logical harmonisations of individual melody notes that cuts across diatonic relationships.

In what might then be called a '20th-century French style', various modes were used: the traditional 'church' modes and a variety of others. The music could be based strictly on a single mode, or a mixture of modes and even with diatonic elements. For the purposes of this article, we will confine ourselves to some of the most common modes:

Dorian Mode



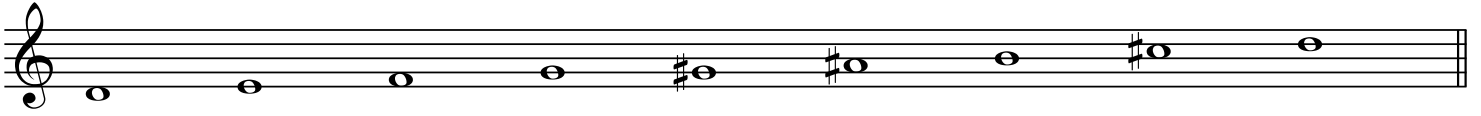
Lydian Mode with its pronounced raised fourth



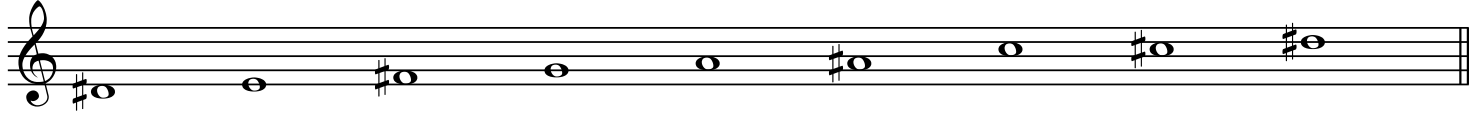
Or modified Lydian mode with flattened 7th, sometimes known as the 'Bartok mode'



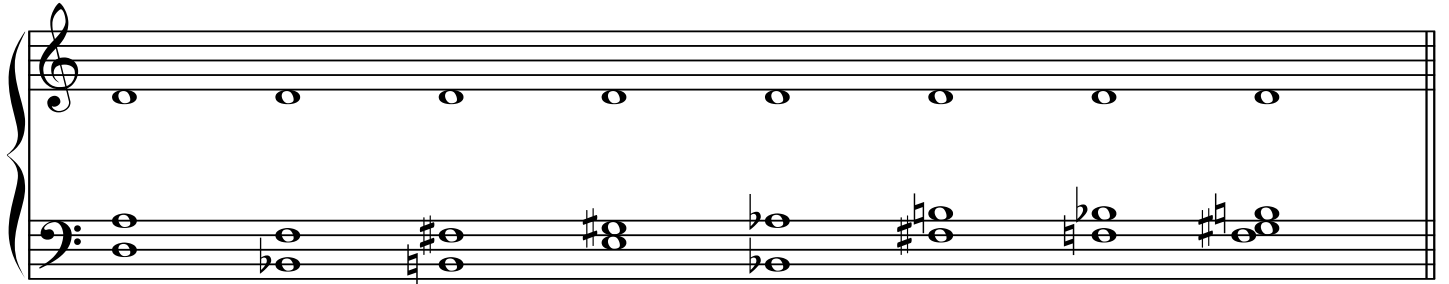
Octatonic mode, (Messiaen's Mode III), which can start on any note and is governed by an alternation of the intervals of tones and semitones:



Or starting semitone — tone — semitone etc.



Added to this, there is a very rich variety of possible harmonisations of any note. Here are just a few possibilities using just one melody note. Note how each one has different levels of dissonance and consonance, as well as texture, all of which contributes to the expressive hue of a particular chord.



As it stands though, the above example is a random sequence of chords and most of the chords would not make logical relations with their neighbouring chords; as with diatonic music, there still has to be some thought as to the transitions from one chord to another. You should be able to see this in the various examples below.

Firstly though, let us remind ourselves on what is the fundamental building block of so much music - the interval of a fifth, as in this fanfare, (Ex. 1). Note also how two strands of fifths can be used to create new harmonies, plus tension and resolution that leads to a climax and sense of cadence.

♩ = c.160

Ped.

The fifth can also become a major or minor triad if a note in the melody creates a third with the bass; here is a *Prelude* with the melody accompanied by major triads. Note also here, as in other examples, the use of passing notes between the basic triads, (Ex. 2).

♩ = c.132 etc.

Contrast this sound with when a mixture of major and minor are used. Note also the difference made with a slightly more varied rhythmic pattern in the melody, (Ex. 3).

♩ = c.132 etc.

Mixing in smoother-sounding thirds can create added light and shade. Note also, the use of the Octatonic mode for the melody, (Ex. 4).

♩ = c.60 etc.

Con rubato

As with the fifth, the slightly more astringent interval of a perfect fourth (the fifth inverted), can also become a major or minor chord with the added melody. In the *Sicilienne* (Ex.5), the underlying harmonic pattern of fourths (shown in the upper skeleton score) can underpin increasing melodic, harmonic and rhythmic freedom and colour. Note also the use of prepared suspensions and resolutions, which create a form of cadence (Bars 1–2, and Bar 4).

♩. = c.52

Min Maj/Min Min Maj Maj Maj (3rd) Maj Maj

Solo etc.

Using a contrasting interval, such as the rather acerbic augmented fourth, can also be used *en bloc* to define a contrasting section, such as in this *Scherzo*, (Ex. 6).

♩. = 92

etc.

An important skill for an improviser is to discern an underlying chord or chord pattern, and within that create a melody that fits within that chord; a mixture of notes from the chord plus passing 'foreign' notes. This is equally true of both diatonic and modal music.

In 20th-century French organ music, it is common to find a very slow progression of chords round which flowing melody is constructed. Often this is used to create an almost slow burn effect, building inexorably to a climax. Here is a short example of how this might start over two chords and using notes of the Octatonic mode, (Ex. 7).

$\text{♩} = \text{c.60}$

con rubato

4 etc.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano. The first system is marked with a tempo of approximately 60 beats per minute (♩ = c.60) and the instruction 'con rubato'. It features a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The right hand plays a melody of half notes, while the left hand plays chords. The second system, starting at measure 4, continues the piece with similar notation, ending with 'etc.'. The music is in 2/2 time and uses the Octatonic mode.

Preludes on the Octatonic mode could be further developed to include more moving parts. Note the use of sequence and roughly parallel motion that is often characteristic of this style.

2 ♩ = 72

7 etc.

This article is only the smallest and most generalised of snapshots; there is always so much more to explore. But do investigate the possibilities; practising different modes and harmonising with parallel fourths and fifths is a good start. Move on to harmonisations with minor seventh chords and their inversions. Begin on different notes of the keyboard and with different transpositions of the modes - remember it is the pattern of intervals between the notes, not the starting note that is important; this develops confidence and the ability to harmonise fluently across the keyboard.

Perhaps try slow meditative interludes, exploring the expressive resources of transitions between major and minor, gradations of dissonance and consonance — even concepts of darkness into light. There is far more to French-style improvisations than the all too common noisy and often splashy toccatas. Engage your congregation's, and other listeners' ears with subtle harmonic transitions and varied shifting colours so typical of 'going French'.

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For a very comprehensive and rigorous improviser's guide to the language of Messiaen and other 20th century French composers, read 'Breaking Free', by Jeffrey Brillhart. (Wayne Leupold Editions).