

IMPROVISING AT THE ORGAN by John Riley

What is improvisation?

Improvisation...the art of creating music spontaneously...is an age-old tradition and valuable practical and creative tool in the organist's armoury. The length, mood and thematic content of an improvisation can be instantly tailored to fit a given situation within the liturgy; and as a creative tool, providing an instant realisation of ideas, including genres not commonly associated with a liturgical context, for example those containing elements of various popular music or ethnic traditions; perhaps also more experimental genres focussing on abstract splashes of colour and texture. An improvisation could range in ambition from a simple decorated version of part of a hymn or an eight bar gospel fanfare...to a Grand Potpourri on Themes suggested by The Sermon!

Improvised music is fundamentally composition in 'real time', i.e. the speed at which the music is to be performed, and with it some extra requirements:-

- Developing the intuitive and rapid **reflexes** to navigate the course of the music; there is rarely time to think every move out deliberately. Narrowing the parameters of length and complexity to what one can handle effectively; establishing, where necessary, *physical* parameters that help the fingers settle and focus. (Simple music performed with confidence and ease is far more effective than over ambitious music under strain).
- Developing **memory** to relate and constantly monitor different parts of the music, e.g. statement and answering phrase, or theme and variation, facilitating logical progression and balance of familiar and new elements. Concise and characterful 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 what has gone before or what is otherwise familiar, for example a well-known tune.

We could even liken the process of improvisation to a computer:-

MEMORY- Crucial to everything as it **files** a repertoire of possible musical building blocks, e.g. rhythms, melodic shapes etc. It also holds what material has been presented in order to develop and balance it with other material.

PROGRAMMING – learning the patterns of different styles of music through listening and performing.

COPY, CUT AND PASTE. Music can be very green and usefully re-use and adapt material.

PROCESSING POWER:- governs how fast and fluently these ideas progress and how much material can be handled at the same time, as the processor **accesses** the various options on file. However, without adequate processing power for the task in hand, everything can **run slow**, **freeze** or totally **crash**, even require an embarrassing **reboot** during the performance!

CONTINUOUS UPGRADES:- Experience leads to greater facility. Conscious and explicit structures and guides gradually become embedded into the subconscious, but they are nevertheless **running in the background**.

Simple, i.e. fewer ‘processing’ demands.	Complex, i.e. greater ‘processing’ demands.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow tempo. • Lots of repetition. • Short length, e.g. brief linking interlude on a hymn tune. • Greater ‘fixed’ and ‘known’ elements, e.g. written out melodic and/or harmonic outline, such as a hymn tune. • One active part and one or two fixed parts, e.g. melody and static drone bass. • Few compositional choices and decisions to make. • Rigid pattern – e.g. bass ostinato. Safe though inflexible. • Limited hand movement, e.g. five - note melody over I and V bass. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast tempo • Lots of different material. • More substantial length, e.g. an improvised final voluntary. • Greater ‘free’ elements, e.g. a given ‘theme’ for a concert improvisation. • Several active parts, e.g. fast moving melody and harmonies. • Many compositional choices and decisions. • Flexible pattern – e.g. a toccata figuration, based on a pattern but adapted to changing harmonies. • Many changes of hand position, including extensive modulation.

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

- Wandering and characterless interludes...
- Acres of very competently harmonised melody– albeit instantly forgettable.
- Music of stylistically limited range, often incongruous with the music preceding or succeeding it...
- 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 can shift through four centuries in as many minutes...

Such offerings might at best provide a benign, if ultimately forgettable musical ambience and form of wallpaper, ...or something more likely to cross the thresholds of pain and boredom. Perhaps though, most discouraging of all is the organist’s fear and dread of not being able to produce a musical sound at all and taking the first steps. However, all of this need not be so!

Anyone can raise their game...

With care, perseverance and a critical ear as to the result, any organist can at some level improvise music that engages well with the listener and build up a repertoire of differentiated styles.

Improvisation skills are not some mysterious or separate art available only to the select few, but mutually interdependent extensions of the skills of performing, composing, aural analysis and keyboard harmony. Nor is an improvisation plucked from thin air. Rather, it utilises the same vocabulary of musical materials as a written down composition, referring to an internalised map to shape and develop musical ideas. Creating that map is through a general experience of performing and listening to music; also specific tasks such as *scales* and *arpeggios*, not to mention cadences and exercises in modulation. Such exercises not merely enhance physical dexterity but to help us to *find* the notes and guide the harmonic and contrapuntal shape.

Once fundamentals are firmly embedded and relegated in the subconscious, the mind is freer to deal with more higher - level tasks.

Whether the limits of one's experience and comfort zones are an eight bar interlude for melody and simple bass, or a Grand Toccata as a final voluntary; the aim therefore should be the same; to produce *characterful and memorable ideas, developed in a cogent way and performed with precision and confidence*. This can be our 'mission statement'.

Hold your audience...

The first task in any improvisation is to immediately draw the listener in, then lead them on expectantly; conversely, an aimless start in the hope that a salient idea and overall purpose will gradually emerge will result in minds going elsewhere. To achieve engagement we need:-

A clear initial concept:- mood and style, reinforced by appropriate organ colour, e.g. a regal trumpet or lyrical flute or oboe stop - (always showcase the instrument!).

A 'hook', such as melodic phrase or series of phrases. A memorable rhythmic component is also significant and can provide far more personality, developmental potential and unity to the music than an amorphous string of unshaped melody **EX.1**

EX.1 Writing phrases.

The hook can also be by reference to something familiar, for example, a part of a hymn. This can provide a ready -made structure and outline in which to work. This could be whole hymn melody, for example with the original bass line broken up into rests, arpeggios and passing notes. 'Thinking time' can be created by not trying to fill every bar with notes. **EX.2a and 2b.**

Ex. 2a Ombersley

With full harmony

Continuing with melody and bass only

EX.2b Ombersley Bicium

Using the hymn or song in real time provides a lot of safety. However, it restricts the improvisation to the length of the hymn and it can also restrict the ways in which the melody can be developed. Another format is a ‘motivic’ or ‘sectional’ variation, where we use just part of the hymn or song, but develop it more comprehensively. However we can keep the original melody and harmony, whilst doing some cutting and pasting to create varied echoes. **EX.3.**

EX.3 Prelude on 'Cruger'.

Rhythm of theme in augmentation (double length notes)

The hook can also be through ***establishing anticipation***, e.g. a bare framework that hints at a theme and developments to come, e.g. a repeating chord pattern or ostinato bass. **EX.4**

EX.4 Ostinato

Alternatively through a long held open chord. **EX.5**

$\text{♩} = 78$ EX.5 Creating anticipation.

However, even the most sublime melody and harmony will be seriously undermined without **Pulse** -the heart of everything and essential for establishing confidence, authority and control. Pulse can speed up or slow down or even be momentarily halted, but must be present and established at the outset. We must also *keep in shape....* define the phrases clearly according the **metre** – single or mixed; i.e. no bars of $2 \frac{3}{4}$ beats!

Refinement of style

We refine this further through adoption of a consistent idiom. Improvisations need not be ‘modern’ in style in order to be ‘original’ or valid. A well-conceived and memorable two-part improvisation in classical style is likely to be far more engaging than a splashy offering of sub-Messiaen.

Much of idiom is governed by the types of modes or chords used and overall tonal structure. Something of real value can be produced even within a relatively limited harmonic vocabulary, e.g. in Dorian or Aeolian modes, where virtually everything automatically blends with everything else. The player can then focus on melodic shapes and structural integrity without the added distractions and challenges of modulations etc. Such modes lend themselves to music based on plainsong or plainsong-like melodies, e.g. some 20th Century French works by such composers as Dupré or English composers such as Howells or Vaughan Williams, **EXS. 6 & 7**

EX.6 Dorian mode chorale

$\text{♩} = 56$

The musical score for Example 6 consists of two staves in 12/8 time. The top staff uses a treble clef and the bottom staff uses a bass clef. The music features eighth-note patterns. The score ends with the text "etc."

EX.7 'English' Rhapsody

$\text{♩} = 96$ DORIAN MODE

AEOLIAN MODE

The musical score for Example 7 consists of two staves in 4/4 time. The top staff is labeled "DORIAN MODE" and the bottom staff is labeled "AEOLIAN MODE". The score ends with the text "etc."

Repeating modal chord patterns combined with lively dance like rhythms can create music reminiscent of Renaissance or Medieval times. EX.8

EX.8 Renaissance Dance

$\text{♩} = 52$

THEME

Dm C Dm C etc.

VARIATION 1

6

etc. Or -'Landini' Cadence.

Other modes can be defining factors in style/idiom, for example the Octatonic mode, used perhaps most famously by Messiaen as his mode II **EX.9**

EX.9 In the spirit of Messiaen

$\text{♩} = 76$

etc.

In contrast, choosing the Arabic double-harmonic mode with the characteristic flattened 2nd instantly gives the melody an exotic Eastern tang. **EX.10**

EX. 10 Oriental Dance

$\text{♩} = 96$

20th Century French and British composers often mixed modal and diatonic elements and parallel intervals are often a feature. British composers such as Walton often used parallel triads with added 7ths, 9ths and 2nds. Note in this example how rhythmic manipulation can be used to develop an idea and bring tightness to the structure. **EX.11**

EX.11 Waltonesque Fanfare

$\text{♩} = 120$

Despite the many rich possibilities of modes, the greater our familiarity with diatonic harmony and the ability to move between different keys, the greater will be our overall vocabulary of styles and ability to shape more ambitious structures. Indeed, a well-structured overall harmonic plan underpinning an improvisation is often the prime component of success. At its simplest, a Baroque or Classical style using I IV V chords. **EX.12**

EX.12 Baroque Trumpet Tune

$\text{♩} = 72$

Solo Trumpet

I V L etc.

$\text{♩} = 120$

EX. 13 Romantic harmony

1

7

II V

12

V7

16

etc.

I

Some other important considerations...

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

A modest or less forgiving instrument will focus more on the quality of the invention... and just a few finely voiced stops can be just as seductive.

Focus on the essentials...

Focus on developing a small number of ideas - Too many ideas and choices and one can drown in the sea of infinite possibilities or obscure good ideas by the sheer weight of padding!

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.

Look ahead...

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

Control and command...

Like an army commander, the player should have all elements within their understanding and controls. Adding notes that have no positive function, i.e. uncontrolled rhetoric, are loose cannon that can detract from the whole.

Know thyself...

Even within the white heat of creativity, learn to listen to how the music *really* sounds, e.g. through a recording.

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 the printed 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 skilfully developed, discretely buried or superseded by something more appealing!

.....

Improvisation skills do not emerge overnight or without time and effort. However, both methodical practice and free experimentation; seeing what works and what does not, will lead to success. Nobody learns to walk by just sitting on the floor!

Above all – be ambitious and cultivate your improvisations with the same care and value as the written repertoire, so that music lingers in the memory, (for all the best reasons), long after the final chord has died away. Hopefully, the listener will not be thinking, “He/she is improvising again”; rather, commenting “That was an interesting piece – who wrote it?”