

# ...Organ improvisation...

Towards achieving style and structure

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## What is Improvisation?

**Improvising is creating music ‘on the spot’....** It can be thought of as ‘composing in real time’ or ‘composing speeded up’.

**Improvising is not some mysterious art...**but one that is inextricably linked with elements that we are already very familiar with through knowledge of repertoire and hymns: i.e. melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, organ colour, style and mood.

**Why develop improvisation skills...especially when there is so much written music available?**

**Improvisation is a *practical* tool...**

- Improvised music can be made to fit a particular time frame, and the unexpected.
- Improvised music can make topical references – e.g. to a hymn that has just been sung.

**Improvised music is a *creative* tool and outlet, with immediacy** – And not just for church but in many musical styles, moods and contexts.

**Improvisation can be a confidence builder** – The knowledge that you are not totally reliant on the printed page.

**Improvising has its challenges** – Lots of demands on the brain’s memory and processing power, as we deal with many simultaneous processes (as with a computer). And unlike a composition, we cannot go back and make adjustments before it is heard.

**However, we can break it down** – Simplify and cut out the padding...and simple music is not necessarily less interesting than complex music - in fact, it can be quite the opposite.

**Simplicity allows us to focus on the essentials**, such as shaping melody lines, marking cadence points, coherent harmony etc.

**Improvisation skills are like having radar or a Sat Nav** – You are constantly being guided whilst on the move but without the ability to stop to read a road map.

**Improvising doesn’t necessarily start with a blank canvas** – We can also use existing written music or a written-out plan as the basis for an improvisation.

**Our overall aim as improvisers:** To create music that engages the ear and is fulfilling to in its own right, not just ephemeral music wallpaper!!

**And better still...** have people saying “That was a nice piece that you played - who’s the composer?”

## MEMORY IS KEY

- Memory files a repertoire of possible musical building blocks, e.g. rhythms, melodic shapes, harmonic progressions etc.
- Memory informs what material has been presented, from which we can develop and balance it appropriately with other material. Concise and characterful material will greatly help this process.

## PROCESSING POWER TOO

**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 at erratic speed, **freeze** or totally **crash**, even require an embarrassing **reboot** during the performance! For best results keep it simple!

<b>Simpler, i.e. fewer memory and processing demands</b>	<b>Advanced, i.e. greater memory and processing demands</b>
Slow tempo	Fast tempo
Simple texture	Complex texture
Lots of repeated thematic material	Lots of different thematic material
Set parameters, e.g. written-out melodic and/or harmonic outline	Few given parameters, e.g. a improvisation on a submitted theme
Short length, e.g. brief linking interlude on a hymn tune	More substantial length, e.g. a final improvised voluntary on the last hymn
Few compositional choices and decisions to make	Many compositional choices and decisions to make

## STARTING WITH A BLANK CANVAS

### Shaping melody I: *No meandering strings of notes*

For example:- using non-metrical phrase patterns, and well-defined phrases, such as:

#### *Plainsong-Style Melody*

Two staves of musical notation showing a plainsong-style melody. The first staff starts with a green vertical line at the beginning. The melody consists of a series of quarter notes, with some notes marked with a fermata. The second staff continues the melody, also with some notes marked with a fermata.

### Harmony and counterpoint I: *drone basses*

To this we can add one or two drones (fixed) bass line.

With a drone, note how each melody note of the mode creates a slightly different level of dissonance and colour, i.e. instant harmony with minimal effort!

Note how different melody notes can imply a sense of continuing on or resolution and finish.

Note also how the Dorian mode (white notes D-D') alternating with the Ionian mode (C-C') can provide contrasting 'minor' and 'major' feel and an implied cadence.

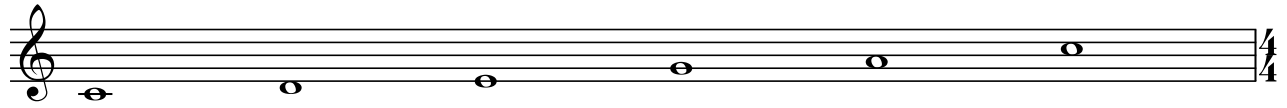
Two staves of musical notation showing a melody with drone basses. The top staff is the melody, and the bottom staff is the drone bass line. The melody is divided into three sections by dashed vertical lines. The first section is labeled "Echo with variation". The drone bass line consists of a single note held for the duration of the melody.

To this other harmonies could be added, for example, moving parallel fifths.

## Shaping melody IV: using the metre of a text

♩ = c. 88

Pentatonic mode



Words by Henry Faber (1814-63)

2 *mf*

There's a wide-ness in God's mer - cy, like the wide-ness of - the sea;

6

there's a kind-ness in his jus - tice which-is - more than lib - er - ty.

10 Coda: optional extension based on previous bar ('lib-er-ty')

10 *rall.* *dim.*

*rall.* *dim.*

## Shaping melody V: *Using a single motif*

Improvising isn't necessarily about starting with a blank canvas; indeed, using an existing melody, particularly one that is in the mind of the listener, can add connection and a reference point; the interest lies then in charting how the variation develops the original.

Identifying an appropriate part of a tune is key to a successful improvisation or composition. The 'theme' could be drawn from just the first phrase of the original hymn melody, for example: *Love Unknown*. Note also how the small shifts of harmony note render different hues to the same or similar melodic phrase

### Original theme

The musical score for the original theme is presented in three systems. The first system shows a single melodic line in treble clef, 2/2 time, consisting of a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a half note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, and a half note G4. The second system is a piano accompaniment in 2/2 time, marked *mp*. The right hand plays the melody with a slur over the first four notes. The left hand plays a bass line with a slur over the first four notes. The tempo is indicated as  $\text{♩} = \text{c.}60$ . The third system starts at measure 5 and continues the piano accompaniment. The right hand melody has a slur over the first two notes and a *dim.* marking over the next two notes. The left hand bass line continues with a slur over the first two notes and a *dim.* marking over the next two notes.

This is the briefest and most pared-down of interludes. A more extended version might include: arpeggiation in the left hand around the above chord structure; modulation, for example into E minor; using the rhythmic structure of the melody (first two bars) to create a secondary melody.

## Shaping melody VI: *Establishing and developing a memorable theme*

Even a short phrase can spawn various related phrases and create coherence whilst avoiding monotony. (Creating memorable and characterful phrases or whole melodies can be surprisingly elusive!)

This brief interlude in the Aeolian mode could be a useful template, and one that could be expanded upon, for example, though repeating the material with added arpeggios around the underlying harmony.

The musical score is presented in two systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system is labeled "Theme A1" and "A2". The melody in the treble staff begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and A4. The bass staff provides a simple harmonic accompaniment with half notes G3 and F3. The second system is labeled "Theme segmented varied" and "Theme A3 with augmentation". The melody starts at measure 5 with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and A4. The bass staff features a more complex accompaniment with arpeggiated chords and a melodic line in the right hand. Dynamic markings include *mp* and *p*.

## Shaping melody VII: *Reworking an existing melody (and harmony)*

Improvising isn't necessarily about creating music from a totally blank canvas. Sometimes, all that is required is simple cut and paste whilst using much if not all the existing harmony. Here, we can extend material by the simple segmentation or augmentation of the existing rhythms, for example on the hymn tune *Ellacombe*.

### OPENING PHRASE OF HYMN

Musical score for the opening phrase of the hymn *Ellacombe*. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two staves (treble and bass clef). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first staff is labeled 'Motif (a)' and the second staff is labeled 'Motif (b)'. The music features a simple melody in the treble clef and a supporting bass line in the bass clef.

### PRELUDE

Musical score for a prelude on the hymn tune. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two staves. The first staff is labeled '(a)' and the second staff is labeled '(b) in augmented rhythm'. The music features a simple melody in the treble clef and a supporting bass line in the bass clef. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat).

Pedal (optional).

Or on *St George's Windsor*

Musical score for the hymn tune on *St George's Windsor*. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two staves. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The first staff is labeled 'Solo Reed' and the second staff is labeled 'Tutti'. The music features a simple melody in the treble clef and a supporting bass line in the bass clef. A bracket labeled 'Segment' spans the final two measures of the score.

Segment decorated and reharmonised      Segment in augmented rhythm

Musical score showing the segment decorated and reharmonised, and the segment in augmented rhythm. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two staves. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The first staff is labeled 'Echo' and the second staff is labeled 'Tutti'. The music features a simple melody in the treble clef and a supporting bass line in the bass clef. A bracket labeled 'Segment' spans the final two measures of the score.



We can also play the original hymn in 'real time' with added decorations built around the existing harmony as in *Ravenshaw*. The variation could be a more meditative interlude at slower tempo in the manner of a choral prelude.

Original etc.

5 Decorated etc.

Alternatively, take out the middle alto and tenor parts to create a two-part chorale partita, perhaps with the top line played on a solo registration. We might also change the occasional bass note from root position to first inversion or vice-versa, or even re-harmonise the odd melody note.

Melody and bass only

3 Var. 1 etc. Arpeggiation

5 Var. 2 etc. Auxilliary and passing notes  
(X = harmony change)

7 Var. 3 etc. Octave displacement with various forms of decoration

We could also insert echo phrases based on a segment from a previous phrase. This technique would work well with other hymn tunes by Gibbons, for example, *Song 34*, but also a variety of other tunes, particularly those with their origins in the 17th and 18th centuries.

## Echo Fantasia on Song 13 (Gibbons)

The musical score is presented in two systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system (measures 1-6) is labeled with 'Segment' and 'Decorated Echo' above the staff. The second system (measures 7-10) is labeled with 'Segment' and 'Augmented Echo' above the staff. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and bar lines.

## THE CONTROLLED STOP.....

A very important role in any improvisation is to come to a halt just at the right moment. Just like a train has to draw carefully to a halt just at the right point on the platform. Avoid coming to a finish too early and then adding a coda of pointless and musically empty note-spinning until it is time to stop. Silence would probably be better than sound for the sake of sound. Better still, start a new short improvisation or best of all, make everything sound part of the same piece with any extension relating structurally to the whole, for example by retaining the existing harmonic shape. This can be done by augmenting the rhythm of the planned cadence, perhaps with some added decorative notes. If you can keep signalling the pulse to the listener, you will sound to be in control and able to shape the outcome. Here is just one example:

Standard close                      Extended version 1.

6 Extended version 2.

The image displays three musical examples in 4/4 time, each consisting of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate bass line. The first example, 'Standard close', shows a four-measure phrase in the grand staff and a four-measure bass line. The second example, 'Extended version 1.', extends the phrase to six measures, with the final two measures featuring longer note values in the grand staff. The third example, 'Extended version 2.', also extends to six measures, with the final two measures featuring a melodic line in the grand staff and a bass line with rests in the final two measures.

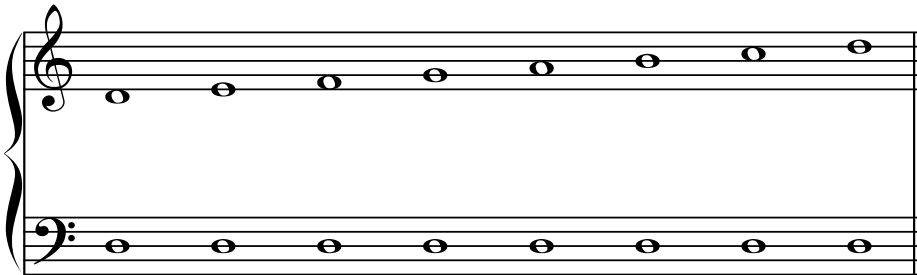
This can also be used with hymn tunes (though not as accompaniment to singing!). Simply augment the rhythms of the last few bars, possibly adding some faster-moving arpeggios and/or passing notes around the basic harmony to help keep things moving. This would work well for a hymn tune such as *Cruger*.

## Exploring harmony and counterpoint II: *Expressive harmony through the Dorian Mode*

*Harmony is perhaps most challenging and processing-intensive aspect of improvisation...*

Our thinking is often governed by diatonic harmony ('hymnbook harmony', perhaps), which at its most basic consists of I IV V chords. However, there are other forms of harmonisation which are in many ways easier to use, yet in no way lacking character, variety or historical precedents in the repertoire.

Perhaps the simplest and most flexible mode to use is the **Dorian Mode (D-D')**. Music in the Dorian mode has many historical precedents, from the Medieval to the modern day. Many composers, such as Vaughan Williams and Howells make frequent use of this mode, albeit mixed with elements of other modes and diatonicism. Even with just a fixed bass note, there are many different levels of dissonance and harmonic colour can be created between melody and fixed bass; also between individual melody notes. Each interval has its own character.



We can even add one or more inner parts, in this case using the basic rhythmic shape and metre of an existing tune, for example, *Aus der Tiefe*, to create a new one.

5

9 II *mp*

For - ty days, for - ty nights,

In the following example, note the use of accented passing notes and suspensions in creating an expressive effect, something easily achieved in the Dorian mode just as in a diatonic key.

**SUGGESTED REGISTRATION:**

Manual I: 8ft. flute

Manual II 8ft. flute and strings

I + II coupled

## Lullaby in Dorian Mode

Moderato ♩ = c.100

The musical score for "Lullaby in Dorian Mode" is presented in four systems. The first system (measures 1-8) begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The second system (measures 9-16) features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The third system (measures 17-22) continues with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The fourth system (measures 23-30) concludes with a piano (*p*) dynamic, marked with accented passing notes and suspensions. The tempo is Moderato, with a quarter note equal to approximately 100 beats per minute. The registration is suggested as Manual I: 8ft. flute and Manual II: 8ft. flute and strings, with I and II coupled.

**Exploring harmony and counterpoint III.** *Using different figurations and textures within the mode.*

Parallel intervals also enables us to use consistent hand shapes (a form of 'finger memory') to find the notes.

A musical score in 4/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a series of chords, each consisting of a perfect fifth and a major third (e.g., C-E-G, D-F-A, E-G-B, F-A-C, G-B-D, A-C-E, B-D-F, C-E-G). The left hand (bass clef) plays a simple eighth-note melody: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5.

A musical score in 4/4 time, starting with a measure rest in the right hand. The right hand (treble clef) plays chords of parallel intervals: C-E-G, D-F-A, E-G-B, F-A-C, G-B-D, A-C-E, B-D-F, C-E-G. The left hand (bass clef) plays a simple eighth-note melody: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. A fermata is placed over the final chord in the right hand.

**Parallel fifths:** perfect for fanfares!

(Note the B flat to preserve the perfect fifths; note also how the juxtaposition of fifths can create harmonic colour, tension and a sense of resolution.)

A musical score in 2/2 time. The tempo is marked as ♩ = c.160. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The left hand (bass clef) plays chords of parallel fifths: C-E, D-F, E-G, F-A, G-B, A-C, B-D, C-E. A B-flat is used in the final chord (B-flat-D) to maintain the perfect fifth interval. A pedal point is indicated at the end of the piece.

## More on fanfares!

Open fifths and triads in parallel motion have a certain archaic, even regal quality, with echoes of music of the medieval period. They were much-used in British music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by such composers as Mathias, Vaughan Williams, Walton, Leighton, albeit with very definite 20<sup>th</sup> century hues.

$\text{♩} = 96$  **Parallel fifths**

A piano accompaniment exercise in 2/2 time with a tempo of quarter note = 96. The piece is titled 'Parallel fifths'. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music features parallel motion of open fifths and triads. The first staff (treble clef) starts with a G4-G5 fifth and a G4-A4-B4 triad, moving up to A4-A5-B5 and then B4-C5-D5. The second staff (bass clef) starts with a G2-G3 fifth and a G2-A2-B2 triad, moving up to A2-A3-B3 and then B2-C3-D3. The key signature changes from one flat (F major) to two flats (Bb major) in the second measure.

$\text{♩} = 96$  **Pairs of fifths moving in contrary motion**

A piano accompaniment exercise in 2/2 time with a tempo of quarter note = 96. The piece is titled 'Pairs of fifths moving in contrary motion'. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music features pairs of fifths moving in contrary motion. The first staff (treble clef) starts with a G4-G5 fifth and moves down to F4-F5. The second staff (bass clef) starts with a G2-G3 fifth and moves up to A2-A3. The key signature changes from one flat (F major) to two flats (Bb major) in the second measure.

$\text{♩} = 88$  **Pairs of fifths with added thirds moving in contrary motion**

A piano accompaniment exercise in 2/2 time with a tempo of quarter note = 88. The piece is titled 'Pairs of fifths with added thirds moving in contrary motion'. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music features pairs of fifths with added thirds moving in contrary motion. The first staff (treble clef) starts with a G4-G5 fifth with an added A4, moving down to F4-F5 with an added G4. The second staff (bass clef) starts with a G2-G3 fifth with an added A2, moving up to A2-A3. The key signature changes from one flat (F major) to two flats (Bb major) in the second measure.

$\text{♩} = 88$  **Two parts, centred round a fifth moving in contrary motion**

A piano accompaniment exercise in 9/8 time with a tempo of quarter note = 88. The piece is titled 'Two parts, centred round a fifth moving in contrary motion'. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music features two parts, centred round a fifth moving in contrary motion. The first staff (treble clef) starts with a G4-G5 fifth and moves down to F4-F5. The second staff (bass clef) starts with a G2-G3 fifth and moves up to A2-A3. The key signature changes from one flat (F major) to two flats (Bb major) in the second measure.

**Exploring harmony and counterpoint IV.** *Employing various figurations and harmonisations within the mode*

***Dorian theme and variations***

Theme and drone bass

5

9 V.1 Theme and parallel fifths in dorian mode

13

17 V. 2 Theme and parallel fifths, harmonising melody notes, but outside dorian mode

21



*Using fluid basses and inner parts:*

V. 3 Theme in augmentation (double note values) and in Bicum

25 Solo

Musical notation for measures 25-28. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2. The melody is augmented in the final measure (measure 28), where the notes G4, A4, and B4 are held for two measures.

29

Musical notation for measures 29-32. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2. The melody is augmented in the final measure (measure 32), where the notes G4, A4, and B4 are held for two measures.

33

Musical notation for measures 33-36. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2. The melody is augmented in the final measure (measure 36), where the notes G4, A4, and B4 are held for two measures.

37

Musical notation for measures 37-41. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2. The melody is augmented in the final measure (measure 41), where the notes G4, A4, and B4 are held for two measures.

42 V.4 Four-part harmonisation ('Chorale')

Musical notation for measures 42-45. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2. The melody is augmented in the final measure (measure 45), where the notes G4, A4, and B4 are held for two measures.

46

Musical notation for measures 46-49. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2. The melody is augmented in the final measure (measure 49), where the notes G4, A4, and B4 are held for two measures.

## Exploring harmony and counterpoint V. *Using notes outside the mode for expressive variety.*

A given melody note in the mode can be used as a 'pivot' to move to a chord using notes outside the mode. The augmented triad and 'diatonic' chords outside the mode were often used by late romantic French composers such as Vierne and particularly by composers whose works are based on modality rather than diatonicism such as Langlais.

### Adagio

Musical score for Adagio, measures 1-6. The piece is in 4/4 time. The right hand features chords, with measures 4 and 6 containing augmented triads. The left hand has a simple bass line with half notes and quarter notes.

### 7 Augmented triad

Musical score for measures 7-12. Measure 7 is labeled "Augmented triad". The right hand continues with chords, including augmented triads in measures 7 and 11. The left hand has a bass line with quarter notes and half notes.

### 13 F sharp minor chord

### Augmented triad

etc.

Musical score for measures 13-16. Measure 13 is labeled "F sharp minor chord". The right hand features chords, including augmented triads in measures 14 and 15. The left hand has a bass line with quarter notes and half notes.

The same technique could also be applied to toccata-style figurations.

## Exploring harmony and counterpoint VI. *Fundamental diatonic harmony: I and V chords*

Using just one or two chords provides an orientation point - a pull of gravity that ensures that one is never too far from 'home'.

Within a single chord there is scope for arpeggiation round the notes of the chord and for passing notes.

### *Fanfares*

Solo trumpet

Pedal

Within the framework of the chord, we can add parallel fifths and notes that are alien to that chord in order to add some harmonic spice.

Solo trumpet

Pedal

Or, add introduce some added seconds and sixths. And there are numerous other possibilities within the outline of the tonic chord.....

Solo trumpet

These brief fanfares could be extended using various transpositions and modulations, and with a reprise of the opening to conclude.

Elaborate and fast-moving figurations can still be built around a very basic harmonic plan - even just one basic chord.

There are many examples of this from the organ repertoire over the centuries. Again, we can have a very basic harmonic structure, not least using a single bass/chord can provide a fixed 'home' to return to but by no means excluding passages of expressive dissonance and harmonic colour.

*Baroque - style toccata flourish*

etc.

*French - style pastorale (melody in parallel thirds and sixths)*

etc.

*Baroque - style trumpet tune*

etc.

C maj.    i            v            I \_\_\_\_\_ V

Music of the Baroque period, particularly the early Baroque, is often very 'green'; i.e. through recycling material by echoes and various forms of decoration, each statement providing some variation of the original theme. This can be expanded considerably by the use of two chords, notably the tonic and dominant.

The hymn tunes *Bristol* and *Cruger* are just two examples that would themselves well to this technique.

### Further characterful modes (i) *The Lydian Mode (F-F')*

British music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular often made use of the Lydian mode (as indeed did Bartok in his piano music). Toccatas, meditative fantasias and fanfares can all be readily made within the mode and its transpositions. Unlike music in diatonic keys, everything - melody and chords - can be shifted intact by a given interval, in this example, thirds. Notes

The image shows two systems of musical notation for the Lydian mode (F-F'). The first system consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) in 4/4 time. The first measure shows a whole note chord in the bass clef (F, C, G) and a whole note melody in the treble clef (F, G, A, B, C). The second measure shows the same chord and melody shifted up a third (A, E, B and A, B, C, D, E). The second system is marked with a '4' in the top left and 'etc.' in the top right. It shows two measures of the same chord and melody shifted up a third again (C, G, D and C, D, E, F, G).

### (ii) *The Double Harmonic ('Arabic') Mode*

The characteristic flattened second is very much evocative of Arabic - and even Spanish music. This mode is particularly suited to splitting the melody sections into two, one in the upper half contrasting with the one in the first half. The mode also lends itself well to literal transposition, for example, up a fifth.

The image shows a single system of musical notation for the Double Harmonic ('Arabic') Mode. It consists of two staves (treble and bass clef). The melody in the treble clef is split into two segments. The first segment, labeled '1st segment', consists of the notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F. The second segment, labeled '2nd segment', consists of the notes G, F, E, D, C, B, A. The bass clef accompaniment consists of a whole note chord (G, C, F) in the first measure, followed by two measures of a whole note melody (G, C, F).

### (iii) *The Pentatonic Mode*

The Pentatonic mode is most easily found by using the (normally) black keys. (However, as with all modes, it is the arrangement of spaces between each note which defines their character and they can start on any note). Any note will blend at reasonably well with any other note. *However*, rather than just thinking ... 'anything will sound good', aim to seek out the different harmonic colours and levels of dissonance, and use them in an artful and structured way.

In the Pentatonic mode we have essentially three chords G flat major, E flat minor, D flat major (useful as part of a cadence). Starting on or centring round G flat implies a major tonality (G Flat to B flat = major 3<sup>rd</sup>)  
Starting on or centring round E flat implies a minor tonality (E Flat to G flat = minor 3<sup>rd</sup>)  
Centring around D flat implies a 'dominant' of G flat (D flat A flat = open fifth)

The image shows five chords in the Pentatonic mode, each in a separate measure. The chords are: G flat major, G flat major 1st inversion, E flat minor, E flat minor 1st inversion, and D flat major. The notation is in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of three flats.

G flat major      G flat major 1st inversion      E flat minor      E flat minor 1st inversion      D flat major

The Pentatonic mode lends itself very well to Scottish-style tunes, not least as many original Scottish tunes are built around that mode.

The image shows a short piece of music in the Pentatonic mode, consisting of a melody line in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. The key signature is three flats, and the time signature is 6/8.

5

The image shows a short piece of music in the Pentatonic mode, consisting of a melody line in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. The key signature is three flats, and the time signature is 6/8. The piece is marked with a '5' above the first measure.

The Pentatonic mode can also be used as the basis of a more rhapsodic romantic style, perhaps with a smattering of notes outside the mode. Indeed, many works of Vaughan Williams are imbued with a strong pentatonic flavour.

### Shaping Melody VII: *with bass ostinato patterns:*

This can add extra drive and more flexible harmonisations...and if inspiration momentarily runs dry, the piece will keep going until you can climb back on board. Again, regular repeating patterns in the bass/harmony help create regular phrase lengths in the melody.

#### *Ostinato March*

etc.

#### 5 *Transposed*

etc.

### Shaping Melody VIII: *with a harmonic pendulum. (Aeolian/Mixolydian)*

#### *Celtic-style melody*

6

etc.

Although well-suited to 'folk-like' styles, a pendulum can be applied to many other moods and styles.

### Shaping Melody IX: *with chord patterns:*

A simple harmonic pattern, something more varied than a two-way pendulum, can help guide melodic shape - and provide further interest in the harmony and texture. For example in a Medieval/Renaissance modal style. Such patterns lend themselves very well to series' of variations.

$\text{♩} = 52$

Dm C

2

Cadence

Dm C etc.

A well-known example of this is 'What shall we do with a drunken sailor?!'

### Shaping melody VIII: *with a chaconne*

A chaconne or passacaglia is an ideal improvisation tool. As well as guiding the harmonies, it can, as with any short harmonic pattern or ostinato - based music, be quickly curtailed in a dignified and stylistically appropriate manner. Keeping the notes of the original theme - and the fundamental relationship of a third (tenth) between melody and bass - is central to this.

etc.

The bass could continue in elaborated form, such as below - but still adhering to the same basic pattern.

etc.



## Exploring harmony and counterpoint VI: *Harmonising melody with thirds and sixths*

Thirds and sixths are a very useful interval to employ and feature strongly in much British 20<sup>th</sup> century music. They have a rich sound and blend well with a melody, and assimilate easily in finger memory.

In this example, *English Rhapsody*, the music moves between the Dorian and Aeolian modes, providing a contrast in both 'key' and texture, and can act as a near literal transposition.

DORIAN MODE AEOLIAN MODE

♩ = 96

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system is labeled 'DORIAN MODE' and the second 'AEOLIAN MODE'. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 96. The score is in 2/2 time. The first system consists of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate bass line. The second system also consists of a grand staff and a separate bass line, starting at measure 6. The notation includes chords, single notes, and melodic lines with slurs and ties. The word 'etc.' is written at the end of the second system.

## Exploring harmony and counterpoint VII: *Harmonising melody with fourths and fifths*

If parallel thirds and sixths can be said to characterise (or caricature!) 20<sup>th</sup> century English composers such as Vaughan Williams or Howells, parallel fourths and fifths might be said to be the same for 20<sup>th</sup> French composers such as Alain, Langlais and Messiaen, particularly if allied with the Octatonic mode, (albeit as a huge over-simplification and generalisation of what can be a very complex language).

At its simplest, we can create a harmonisation of open fifths providing alternations of major and minor thirds with the melody:

The musical score is in 2/2 time. It features a melody in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. The melody consists of a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The bass line provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and single notes, including a prominent open fifth (G4-C5) in the first measure. The notation includes various chord symbols and melodic lines.

The Octatonic mode (Messiaen's mode II) - alternations of tone/semitone, i.e. major and minor seconds.



Astringent fourths (in effect creating second inversion chords with the melody) resolving to smoother-sounding triads can create more varied harmonic colour. (The use of both flats and sharps in the notation is to emphasise the teasing hints of key and diatonic chords that is often found in the works of Alain and Langlais.) N.B. the Octatonic mode is here restricted to the melody with other modes and elements of diatonicism featuring in the harmonies.

♩ = c.60

*Con rubato*

etc.

This style can also feature transposition and sequences.

2 ♩ = 72

7 etc.

## Exploring harmony and counterpoint VIII- *more harmonic patterns and with sequences*

Baroque music in particular makes extensive use of sequences and even the simplest harmonic patterns can be the basis for an almost infinite variety of variation and decoration in melody and bass. Predictable patterns are also the glue and outline that provides a combination of safety and creative opportunity, as seen in this aria in the style of the late Baroque, perhaps akin to that of Vivaldi.

I \_\_\_\_\_ V \_\_\_\_\_ I \_\_\_\_\_  
Possible elaborations of bass note and underlying harmonic pattern

5 etc.

I \_\_\_\_\_ V \_\_\_\_\_ I V I

9 Possible extension using sequences (melody and bass outline only)

Am \_\_\_\_\_ Dm(7) \_\_\_\_\_ G \_\_\_\_\_ C(7) \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_

14

B(7) \_\_\_\_\_ E(7) \_\_\_\_\_ Am Am

### Exploring harmony and counterpoint IX- *non-repeating harmonic patterns*

Many harmonic patterns are not rigid and repeating in form, though may have various repeating elements within. They nevertheless represent a vital foundation for the various figurations above the underlying chord structure.

**Example 'A':** Suggested style - Classical (Could also be adapted to triple time)

etc.

'Open' ending

i      V7      Vb7      i      i      I      iv      V7      ic      V

9      Repetition, perhaps with some variation

'Closed' ending (perhaps leading to a contrasting 'B' section).

i      V7      Vb7      i      i      I      iv      ic      V7      i

**Example 'B':** Suggested style - Baroque - stately processional

etc.

'Open' ending

I Ib V Vb V I Ib I IV V I V

## 5 Repetition, possibly with some variation

'Closed' ending, with option for contrasting 'B' section, e.g. with some sequences.

I Ib V Vb V I Ib I IV V V I

A harmonic pattern can be very flexible and not prescribe a set number of bars, rather just the progression of chords laid over what could be multiple bars. Some fantasias in late-Renaissance and Baroque styles can demonstrate considerable flexibility and opportunities for decorative - even improvised - flourishes, within a broad harmonic scheme.

**Example 'C':** Suggested style - late Renaissance/Baroque fantasia

4-3 susp.

i i7 IV iv V7 ic V V I

## Some keys to successful improvising...and creating memorable and characterful music for the listener

- A defined metre - or even mixed metre - (other than in certain styles, e.g. imitating plainsong).
- Slow to moderate tempi – more ‘thinking time’!
- Simple textures and without unnecessary padding – only add what has a clear function within the music. e.g. not adding chords or texture indiscriminately.
- Simple harmonies and harmonic relationships, e.g. fixed bass or just two chords, or a single mode. However, for an improvisation of any length, include at least one modulation/change of mode; avoid being interred in ‘tonic prison’.
- Short length - repeat where necessary with subtle changes.
- A definite beginning, middle and end - not just petering out when inspiration runs dry, or even when the clergy appear.
- Minimise the number of ‘events’ – fully exploit one or two ideas, rather than strings of different or even unrelated ideas; for example, through echoes, decoration etc. As with Fairy liquid, a little can be made to go a long way!
- Give each improvisation an identity of *mood and genre*: is it a march, a solemn procession, lullaby, scherzo, meditation etc.?
- Give each improvisation an identity of *style*: is it Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, 20<sup>th</sup> century English modal, French modal etc.
- Minimise the number of elements to memorise – **memory**, and the ability to retrieve and refer to material is key to success in improvising. But make each element distinctive and characterful.
- Stable hand and feet positions, perhaps with an ‘anchor’ such as a drone bass; – we can easily orientate ourselves and where necessary find our way ‘home’.
- Make some use of written templates – e.g. a simple bass pattern to embellish.
- Make some use of existing written pieces of music as your ‘themes’. Bach constantly did this for his compositions. Improvising isn’t always about starting with a blank canvas!
- **Processing powers and memory may be small at first...but with practise they will get constant upgrades!**

.....

## AND FINALLY.....

### The '6 P's'

- **Pulse...** without which all, even the most sublime melody and harmony, will be almost totally undermined and communicate lack of confidence, authority and control. Conversely, a very slow pulse or long note values marked out with certainty will hold the listener far more.
- **Prudence...**working comfortably within your technical limits and vocabulary. A simple piece done well is far more effective than a more complex one done under compositional or performing strain. No-one else can play it for you!
- **Personality...**an improvisation should set a mood and style from the outset, rather than evolve in the hope of eventually finding something interesting to say. Tempo, type of rhythm - e.g. a march, and registration are all important factors in establishing character. Consistency of styles too – avoid moving from Handel to Cochereau via Howells in two minutes!
- **Perseverance and Purpose....** keep going towards an effective conclusion - if you sound as if you believe in the music, the greater chances that the listener will too. Make even your 'mistakes' sound intentional!
- **Practise...** specific exercises or models; freer experimentation, seeing what works and what does not with constant evaluation. Improvisation skills will not emerge overnight or without effort, practice and critical awareness of the sounds that we are making. There will be knocks, bumps and occasional disasters on the way,... inspired and embarrassing sounds,... sweet harmony and uncontrolled dissonance...but whoever learns to walk by just sitting on the floor?! Even the fear of improvising lest we make bad sounds can be a healthy and hopeful sign, since discrimination between good and bad sounds are surely the key to progress in any form of musical creativity or performance!

So, surprise yourself and others with the new sounds that you and your instrument can make. Say goodbye to amorphous and anonymous musical wallpaper...or to notions that 'I cannot improvise'. You can!