Improvisation article for The Organ (2014)

Improvisation…the art of creating music spontaneously…is an age-old tradition and wonderful creative tool and practical resource. It provides the means of instantly realising an act of creation; also the means of providing links or interludes for which no written music is suitable or which need to be tailored at very short notice to a particular theme or length. An improvisation can range from a short four bar gospel fanfare, or a verse of the hymn with extra passing notes and other decorative features, to an awesome five- part fugue or toccata on a given theme, e.g. the last hymn.

Alas, improvisation can also be synonymous with vague wandering chords or cacophonous loud displays…saying a lot but saying little or nothing; also mere doodling or cathartic outpourings that achieve little engagement with the listener. How easy it is to drown in the sea of infinite possibilities or obscure good ideas by the sheer weight of padding!

Nevertheless, 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 goes beyond mere ‘musical wallpaper’. The road to this is not to somehow unlock a magic door to some mysterious art that is accessible only to the select and talented few. Even with the most brilliant improvisers, their creations are still underpinned by good compositional principles, albeit subliminal and well embedded in the consciousness. Rather, it is to approach it slowly and methodically, taking our lead from the examples of a fine composition. Indeed, improvisation is best viewed as ‘composition speeded up’. Equally, some compositions may evolve as ‘improvisations set in permanent form’.

There are a number of important principles that apply to any improvisation. These apply to all styles and all levels, and whether for somebody just finding their feet in the art or an accomplished improviser further refining and broadening their skills.
Firstly, we start with our ‘mission statement’: - 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 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. Few worthwhile things come without effort!

For this we need to *gradually* unpack our toolbox of resources according to our experience. The various tones, we group into keys and modes – a huge variety of both. These are further fashioned through:

- **Melody**:- creating clear phrases that are memorable, characterful and full of motifs that can be further developed.

- **Harmony**:- diatonic and modal of all kinds, smooth and more dissonant; moving between different keys or modes; using transposition and contrasting keys and modes.

- **Rhythm**:- existing within melody and parallel to it, for example as an ostinato bass figure. A memorable rhythm will do far more to give personality, developmental potential and unity to the music than a long string of amorphous, unshaped melody.

From this, we aim not just for an interesting sound of the moment, but a successful overall structure. We enhance this with a judicious use of appropriate tone colour to create a wide palette of moods and styles; for example a trumpet or other reed stops for something regal; a solo oboe or clarinet for something more thoughtful or melancholic even; flute for something soft and lyrical.
To start improvising, it is certainly not necessary to be totally familiar with every key, mode, form of harmonisation etc. Something of value can be produced by the simplest of means within a limited vocabulary. Working in the Dorian mode, for example, has many possibilities and links with distinct styles within the written repertoire. However, the greater the familiarity with different keys and modes, and the ability to transfer between them, the greater our overall vocabulary of styles; also our ability to shape more ambitious structures.

In addition to these principles of ‘composition’ we have the added challenge of managing the elements of melody, harmony and rhythm simultaneously. The second ‘P’ ‘Prudence’ is about not overloading ourselves with constantly changing elements. For example, an active melody, moving harmonies and complex rhythms operating simultaneously can be quite a challenge. We will see this consideration in our various examples.

MEMORY AND PROCESSING

Let us look at the processes and skills required to improvise effectively. To use some computing analogies:-

Memory: - holds a repertoire of possible musical building blocks, e.g. rhythms, melodic shapes etc. We gain these from experience of listening to and performing the repertoire and often adapting them to our own styles, i.e. programming.

These building blocks must be held firmly as a reference point if they are to be logically developed and balanced with other material. For example:- (i) A decorated version of a simple phrase. (ii) Two contrasting phrases. (iii) A phrase answered at the dominant, e.g. a fugal opening. (iv) A phrase repeated in another key, or tonal centre.

Music can be very environmentally friendly too – much can be recycled very productively, particularly using copy, cut and paste tools.

Processing power: - governs how fast and fluently these ideas progress and how much material can be handled at the same time. With time and experience the improviser’s ‘computer’ continually upgrades, for example starting with the ability to create a slow single line melody and fixed bass line and progressing to handling several parts at the same time. Conscious and explicit structures and guides become embedded into the subconscious, but they are nevertheless running in the background. However, without adequate processing power for the task in hand, everything can run slow, freeze or totally crash, and in the most extreme cases require an embarrassing need for a reboot during the performance!
Working within the limits of our processing power, whatever they are, should help our creativity to flow freely and convincingly to the listener.

We can sum this up as follows:- (N.B. Simple music does not mean less worthy than more complex music).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simpler, i.e. fewer ‘processing’ demands.</th>
<th>Advanced, i.e. much greater ‘processing’ demands.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Slow tempo.</td>
<td>• Fast tempo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lots of repetition.</td>
<td>• Lots of different material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Short length, e.g. brief linking interlude on a hymn tune.</td>
<td>• More substantial length, e.g. an improvised voluntary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Set parameters, e.g. written out melodic and/or harmonic outline, such as a hymn tune.</td>
<td>• Few given parameters, e.g. a given ‘theme’ for a concert improvisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One active part and one or two fixed parts, e.g. drone bass with static chord.</td>
<td>• Several active parts, e.g. fast moving melody and harmonies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Few compositional choices and decisions to make.</td>
<td>• Many compositional choices and decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structures are more conscious, explicit and pre-determined.</td>
<td>• Structures are more subconscious, though nevertheless operating in the background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rigid pattern – e.g. bass ostinato. Safe though inflexible.</td>
<td>• Flexible pattern – e.g. a toccata figuration, based on a pattern but adapted to changing harmonies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Limited hand movement, e.g. 5 note melody over I and V bass.</td>
<td>• Many changes of hand position, including extensive modulation.</td>
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FOCUS ON MELODY

As highlighted above, the key to a successful melody is shaping the phrases and overall contour. Do not be afraid even of using just a single line – even as keyboard players it is not always necessary to harmonise everything. For example, using just the opening five notes of the Dorian mode, we can create a simple melody with four distinct and separate phrases and an overall arch structure. Ending a phrase on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} or 5\textsuperscript{th} degree of the mode provides a ‘cadence’ feel and a sense of ‘carrying on’. The style is distinctly of medieval times.

EX. 1 Ancient Melody

![Ancient Melody](image)

This might be extended further through building up the registration, adding to the texture through fifths and octaves.

As with all these examples, use them as templates for your own creations or complete them in similar style.
Melodies can also be built through the development of an initial theme. In ‘Wistful Melody’, see how each phrase is a development of the note pattern and/or rhythm of the opening ‘theme’. Note also the use of rhythmic manipulation. The piece is built on the Dorian mode, which offers many opportunities for harmony and counterpoint with minimal clashes of notes.

EX. 2 Wistful Melody

Wistful Melody

If a greater length is required, the piece could extended through a variation such as this:-

EX. 2b Wistful Melody- Extension
Melodies can also be built from a juxtaposition of **contrasting phrases**:

**EX.3 Contrasting Phrases (Tonal)**

Contrasting Phrases (tonal)

Phrase 1 - leaps and chordally based

Phrase 2 - stepwise and quaver based

etc.
Improvisations using a 12 tone scale allows us to use any note or interval. There is no hierarchy and all notes are treated as equal. The overall effect is noticeably dissonant. However, we can – and should – still aim to create distinctive phrases and an overall structure.

EX. 4 Contrasting Phrases – 12 tone

Contrasting Phrases - 12 tone

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Phrase 1 - bold} \\
\text{Phrase 2 - timid} \\
\text{Phrase 1}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Phrase 2 - varied} \\
\text{Phrase 2 - in sequences} \\
\text{Phrase 1}
\end{array}
\]
FOCUS ON HARMONY

Harmony functions to add texture and expressive colour to individual notes. Harmony is also about the broader harmonic pattern that helps provide a framework for the whole piece.

Working with just a simple major triad has much potential, particularly in styles relating to brass fanfares and emphasis on the natural harmonic series.

Using harmony and a limited choice of notes for the melody, we can focus more on more elaborate rhythmic patterns, for example in Trumpet Fanfare

EX. 5 Trumpet Fanfare

There are many other possibilities within this simple template, not least a large variety of rhythms that could be used. In addition, the C E G can appear in many registers – high and low – and different combinations.
Using two chords I V

Working between just two chords provides more variety and the ability to divide the melody into ‘statement and answer’ through cadences. Using diatonic harmony, just a simple structure using I V chords can create a good sized canvas on which to work.

EX. 6 Baroque Trumpet Tune 1

Baroque Trumpet Tune 1.
There are many other possibilities with a I -V template and such simple chord structures can accommodate a variety of styles. Try completing this one.

EX 7. Melancholy Minuet

Melancholy Minuet

\[ j = 100 \]

I V I

etc.

_______ V _______ I
Using I Ib IV V Chords and the relative minor

Adding chord IV gives us more flexibility and first inversion (Ib) chords add more to the harmony – root positions alone can sound rather bland. It is worthwhile practising this scale and its harmonisation in preparation.

**Harmonisation of major diatonic scale**

![Harmonisation of major diatonic scale](image)

Alternative bass with inversions

Practice this in progressively more keys, including the minor keys.
Even with first inversion chords or octave leaps, the same simple harmonic pattern can prevail. In addition, a minor section adds substance and variety. See how this works in an expanded version of Baroque Trumpet Tune 1.

**EX. 8 Baroque Trumpet Tune 2**

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Baroque Trumpet Tune 2

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(In A minor)
A simple harmonic pattern can guide and underpin a range of styles, even when using one that includes more passing and neighbouring notes, and resulting mild dissonance. For example, in this piece in an 18th Century Classical style. Again, use these as templates for your own creations, for example by using the given chords and filling in a new melody; also develop your own simple harmonic patterns.

EX.9 Mozartian Aria

Mozartian Aria
Even Romantic music, with their greater relative dissonance and more complex chords, can be built round a simple chord pattern. Within each chord there is more dissonance and ‘stretched elastic’, but the fundamental harmony can remain surprisingly stable. **EX. 10 Romance**
FOCUS ON RHYTHM

Rhythm is often an essential component of melody. Divisions of the beat are a classic way to achieve variation of the melodic phrase, (such as in Ex.5). However, diminution, augmentation and segmentation of the rhythm are also very useful resources in developing a melody. Indeed, developing the rhythmic dimension of an existing melody is often a more effective way of extending the music than merely seeking out more notes to spin out.

See how this works with ‘Pentatonic Interlude’, built on a pentatonic mode based on ‘C’. This mode in itself helps define a gentle feel, furnished with the opportunity to build rich but consonant harmonies.

EX. 11 Pentatonic Interlude

Pentatonic Interlude

\[ \text{\( \frac{d}{\text{c.60}} \)} \]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Theme} \\
\text{Theme segmented} \\
\text{Theme in diminution} \\
\text{Theme in augmentation}
\end{array}
\]
This could provide the basis for a longer improvisation, for example by repeating some of the material, transposed a third higher before a reprise of the original.

Rhythmic manipulation of this kind can be particularly useful in short fanfares where repetition can create further excitement and intensity. This fanfare is based on the following mode and harmonised in parallel fifths.

**EX.12a Fanfare Mode**

Note how much of the melody is built on the phrase in bar 2.

**EX. 12b Fanfare**
GOING MODAL

We have already visited some aspects of modality. Familiarity with some modes and modal harmony will open the door to many new styles. Much 20th Century French organ music is related to the French tradition of modal plainsong rather than the German chorale. In addition, modes are also rather liberating to work within, with fewer chances of extreme clashes between the notes.

Modal harmony is ‘melody led’ rather than ‘bass led’ as in diatonic harmony. This means that parallel harmony (including the ultimate sin of consecutives in diatonic harmony) is not only admissible but very much in style.

Bass patterns can also move in parallel. A simple pattern such as this could provide the basis for a set of Medieval/Renaissance dance variations.

EX. 13 Renaissance Dance

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Dm} & \quad \text{C} \\
\text{Dm} & \quad \text{C} \\
\text{etc.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]
Using 3rds and 6ths can create more of the feel of 20th Century English composers, such as Howells or Vaughan Williams. Using such modes as the Dorian and/or the Aeolian modes also allows for much more moving parts without the risk of excessive dissonances. Just moving up and down the mode(s) in thirds and sixths will certainly set the flavour. However, aim also to incorporate ‘themes’ within the melodic line. For example, the opening figure in bar 1 appears three times in just five bars. Some syncopation of rhythm and variety of texture will further add to the interest and authenticity of sound.

EX.14 English Rhapsody

English Rhapsody

\[ j = 96 \]

DORIAN MODE

AEOLIAN MODE

c etc.
Modal improvisation in 20th Century French styles such as those by Messiaen, Langlais, Jehan Alain or Cochereau is a rich area to explore, (and indeed an almost default one for many improvisers). Such composers use a wide palette of sometimes quite complex chords, mixing at times various different modes and indeed elements of modality and tonality. Exploring this area could itself easily justify an article or more. However, just to give a taste, familiarise yourself with the Octatonic mode, extensively used in 20th Century French music. Harmonise with parallel 4ths:-

**EX.14a Octatonic Mode**

![Octatonic Mode]

This could lead directly to a simple piece such as Octatonic Meditation.

**EX14b Octatonic Meditation**

![Octatonic Meditation]

Try this mode harmonised by major or minor 3rds too.

**EX.14c Octatonic Meditation 2**

![Octatonic Meditation 2]
Music in this style often mixes different types of chords. Use a mode, (or invent your own) and harmonise with different chords in parallel motion – e.g. fourths, and major and minor thirds. Also, use this as a practice in playing very slowly, whilst maintaining purpose and authority through a steady and clear beat. The slow temp also gives you ‘thinking time’ to prepare for the next move. As with ostinati, this helps cover any momentary hiatus in your creative flow. Ensure that you always move on a beat.

EX. 15 Midnight at Notre Dame

\[
\text{\textit{Midnight at Notre Dame}}
\]

\[
\text{\textit{\( \text{j = 36} \)}}
\]
OSTINATO

We have seen how fixed elements, e.g. drone bass and fifth, can add stability, security and practical ease to an improvisation; equally, so can repeated elements such as an ostinato. The repeated element also provides ‘thinking’ time for such elements as a more complex melody, whilst maintaining continuity and flow.

Repeated elements create pattern, which not only aids the processing but can add musical logic and intelligibility to the ear. The danger of constant repetition is of course monotony. However this can be addressed by building variation around the existing structure, once it is established.

An existing tune can be used and the ostinato treatment in itself can provide a new dimension to a familiar melody. This example is ‘telescoped’ and provides some basic building blocks that you could go onto develop into longer sections.
EX.16 Ostinato on ‘O Little Town’

Ostinato on 'O Little Town'

\( j = 140 \)

Echo (segmentation of rhythm)

Augmentation of rhythm

23
There are various other ways of creating a framework for a pattern, for example repeating bass lines or chord patterns, (Chaconnes and Passacaglias).

An extension of the ostinato is the Toccata. A toccata on the final hymn can make for a thrilling voluntary. Unlike the ostinato, the toccata needs to adapt and change to the surrounding harmonies if it is not to result in clashes or sound stagnant in movement.
Improvising on a song or a hymn I - Real Time Variations

The hymn provides not only a structural starting point but a link with the service. However, ensure that your improvisation offers something distinctive and attractive, rather than merely a pale stripped down version of the original.

A variation in ‘real time’ follows the pattern of the original hymn in melody and possibly harmony too. There are many possibilities.

For example, a running bass line under the original melody. Apart from melodies that are clearly modal in origin, aim to reflect the direction of the harmony in the bass. A good way to do this is by reducing the original hymn to melody and bass parts and then breaking up the bass line into rests, arpeggios and passing notes. Again, ‘thinking time’ is created by not trying to fill every bar with notes.

EX.17a Ombersley – Melody and Bass only

Ombersley (melody and bass only)

EX.17b Ombersley – Bicinium

Ombersley (Bicium)
Another possibility is adding an accompaniment part in parallel sixths. Thirds and sixths add a full sounding and blending texture. Again, try to observe the direction of harmony, most particularly at cadences; e.g. the predominantly ‘C’ based harmony at the end of bar 4.

EX. 18 Prelude on Ravenscroft

Try adding a slow moving pedal part. Try to ensure that it does not cut across the direction of the harmony.
Improvising on a song or a hymn II - ‘Motivic Variations’

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 you may wish something to last much shorter or even longer. It can also restrict the ways in which the melody can be developed.

For a ‘motivic’ or ‘sectional’ variation, we use just part of the hymn or song, but develop each part more fully. However we can keep the original melody and harmony, whilst doing some cutting and pasting to create echoes and transpositions. Within the structure of the original we can also insert decoration and create a climax through rhythmic augmentation at the end.

Motivic Prelude on Bristol
FOCUS ON STRUCTURE…. (or throwing caution to the wind!)

The focus so far has been on structures primarily determined by melody and harmony with an emphasis on refinement of both.

However, there is also an approach to improvising where the focus can be rather different and very much ‘modern’ and dissonant in character:- namely one where the structure is determined more by rhythm, texture and timbre. Refinement of melody and harmony may occur also – even better - but is not the primary aim. This is probably easier to demonstrate through audio rather than written examples. However here are some possible outlines. Use everything from single lines to complex note clusters and the full tonal range of your instrument.

For example, construct a short characterful rhythm and using any choice of notes to create a clear structure:-

- SOFT- LOUD - SOFT
- SOFT- LOUD
- SLOW- FAST
- BARE TEXTURE – FULL TEXTURE
- CONSONANT SOUNDS - DISSONANT SOUNDS
… and indeed any combination of these elements.

These elemental sounds also could be organised into standard music forms such as A-B-A (Ternary) or A-B-A-C-A-D-A (Ritornello/Rondo).

The results may not please your harmony teacher or be totally appropriate for a church service. However you might well be surprised how satisfying they are as music. They may also be instructive in terms of highlighting how much rhythm and clear overall structure contribute to a fine musical creation, even in the absence of cogent melody and harmony.

Improvisations such as these could even work as stories in music, possibly even in conjunction with a drama or visual presentation. The creation story in Genesis is one often used by improvisers. On a much simpler level it could be something of a single ‘affect’. For example, long lines of chromatic melody depicting the sense of being lost in the desert; or long held notes of open fifths to depict a wilderness.
IN CONCLUSION

We have seen how improvisations can achieve a wide variety of styles – they do not have to default to an imitation of Cochereau or Howells, for example. Moreover, in a liturgical context we are better equipped to try and match the style and mood of music that immediately precedes or follows the improvisation. This is but a tiny snapshot, and space does not permit for a proper exploration of such important forms as toccata, canon, ground basses and fugal openings, amongst others. Hopefully though, it has proved to be a useful catalyst, in showing what is possible.

In addition to trying some templates such as those above, it is good to do some daily practice – albeit with definite musical results as the goal. In particular, scales and modes with different harmonisations, some of which we have outlined here. In the heat of the creative process, this will greatly enhance fluency and compositional options.

Beware of improvisations that ‘carry on long after the music has stopped’. Short improvisations are often the most attractive to listen to – and more likely to find a practical outlet within the liturgy.

We have been emphasising the value in having some conscious underpinning structure and a clear end point. However, improvisation is also about charting the unknown, and developing longer and more open-ended formats. These are much more challenging but highly rewarding for performer and listener alike if done well. One golden rule is to use a strong theme that can lodge itself firmly in the memory. This will help hold the improvisation together and provide essential ‘signposts’ for the creator and listener alike.

Above all – be ambitious and cultivate your improvisations with the same care and value as the written repertoire. Listen to recordings of yourself – always very revealing in any form of music performance. A teacher is most valuable; not necessarily a seasoned improviser but at least someone who has a good instinct and technical background in composition; someone to help provide an auditory mirror and help you ‘see yourself as others see you’. However, take full account of the reactions of others, even ‘non musicians’ – indeed they may make up most of your regular audience.

Hopefully, before long the listener will not be thinking, “…he/she is improvising again”; rather, commenting “that was an interesting piece – who wrote it?”