Background notes and examples

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10-14 Using fixed or slow-moving bass lines

15. Modes with their transpositions

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26-28. French 20th century-styles

29. 'Rudolph's thematic development!'

For further resources, visit: www.organimprovisation.net
Organ improvisation .... some starting principles

• Organ improvisation is 'composition speeded up' or in 'real time' - not a mysterious or unattainable art.

• Organ improvisation is rooted in the written music repertoire, and allied skills of keyboard harmony, transposition, as well as aural analysis.

• Organ improvisation should - and can - be more than musical wallpaper that provides merely appropriate if rather ephemeral background sounds to the liturgy.

• Organ improvisation should - and can - be in a wide variety of styles, especially in matching the style and spirit of the music that surrounds it. It does not have to be 'modern' to say something interesting or that is individual to the player.

• Organ improvisation should - and can - be an art that is valued and cultivated in its own right. Aspire to create music that can sit comfortably and seamlessly alongside music from the printed page!

• A simple, well-constructed melody above a single bass line can be far more engaging than acres of rambling chords. Say a lot with a little, and - like Fairy liquid - make a little go a long way!

Hopefully, these examples will provide extra ideas and possibilities that you can develop in your own way...

As a starter ....create a simple phrased melody in meditative or wistful style such as this

Transform it with a catchy dance-like rhythm, such as here.

Chords - how many different ways could we treat this sequence to decorate and elongate it?
BUILDING PHRASES, HARMONY AND COUNTERPOINT
(SINGLE MODE)

Dorian theme and variations

Theme and drone bass

5

V.1 Theme and parallel fifths in dorian mode

13

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

21
V. 3 Theme in augmentation (double note values) and in Bicium

25 Solo

29

33

37

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

42

46

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SUGGESTED REGISTRATION:
Manual I: 8ft. flute
Manual II 8ft. flute and strings
I + II coupled

Lullaby in Dorian Mode

Moderato $\frac{q}{4} \approx 100$

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MELODY HARMONISED WITH PARALLEL TRIADS

Parallel triads on single mode
(Mixolydian - modified to avoid augmented triads)
Style - 20th century English

.....or a march/processional

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HARMONISING MELODY WITH THIRDS AND SIXTHS

Melody and independent thirds (or sixths)

\[
\text{\( \frac{4}{4} \)}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Melody} \\
\text{and} \\
\text{independent} \\
\text{thirds (or} \\
\text{sixths)}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\text{Or Parallel 6ths}
\]

DORIAN

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Melody and parallel thirds and sixths

\[
\text{\( \frac{4}{4} \)}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Melody} \\
\text{and} \\
\text{parallel} \\
\text{thirds and} \\
\text{sixths}
\end{array}
\]

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Thirds and sixths (two modes)

Style- English 20th century

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\[ \frac{4}{4} = 96 \]

DORIAN MODE

AEOLIAN MODE

\( \frac{6}{4} \)

\( \frac{11}{4} \)

DORIAN MODE 

etc.

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HARMONISING MELODY WITH FIFTHS

Useful for fanfares in a 20th century English style, e.g. Mathias, Walton, Leighton.

\[J = 96\] Parallel fifths

\[J = 96\] Pairs of fifths moving in contrary motion

\[J = 88\] Pairs of fifths with added thirds moving in contrary motion

\[J = 88\] Two parts, centred round a fifth moving in contrary motion
FIXED OR SLOW MOVING BASS LINES

These can be very useful as an 'anchor', holding an underlying harmony firmly in place and offering considerable security. They also have considerable expressive potential as they create a wide selection of harmonies and degrees of dissonance and consonance with the upper parts. Baroque composers in particular often used these to create a form of 'stretched elastic', creating considerable harmonic tension before a final consonance and release, particularly as the final climax to a piece.

The following examples show how a fixed or slow moving bass can work in various styles. The example by Domenico Zipoli is a particularly pertinent one, (composed, we understand, as part of a volume of '100 emergency pieces for ciphering organs'!)}
BAROQUE - STYLE ON SINGLE CHORD
(With optional modulation or cadence using V chord)

SCALIC (HORIZONTAL) FIGURATION - Carillon Toccata

CHORDAL (VERTICAL) FIGURATION - Trumpet tune
Solo
Echo
Solo

MELODY HARMONISED IN THIRDS AND SIXTHS - French style Pastorale - Noel
L.h. or pedal
Optional V (G)
MODES WITH TRANSPOSITIONS - The Lydian mode is extensively used in 20th century music. Benjamin Britten, Kenneth Leighton, Geoffrey Burgon and many others make extensive use of this mode. Toccatas, meditative fantasias and fanfares can all be readily made within the mode and its transpositions.

Lydian Mode - with transpositions

Possibly not for evensong, but a good exercise in techniques of variation within narrow parameters, e.g. augmentation of melody, counterpoint and decoration.

Egyptian Dance in the Arabic double harmonic mode.

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Mode transposed up a fourth
REPEATING CHORD PATTERNS

Renaissance-style dance on repeating bass

\[ \text{\textit{Theme:}} \]

\[ \text{\textit{Variation 1:}} \]

Renaissance-style ground bass
(with possible extension through variations)

Other possibilities include a fantasia (renaissance or later styles) with much freer patterns within a simple harmonic structure. These can easily be elongated or contracted to tailor-fit points in the liturgy.

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Baroque style aria (above bass patterns)

Possible elaborations of bass note and underlying harmonic pattern

Possible extension using sequences (melody and bass outline only)

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Repeating basses - ideal for quickly bringing improvisation to a tidy close
Focus on the descending 3rds (10ths) in the first four bars, which can provide the starting points for various embellishments.

Chaconne in the style of Pachelbel
HYMN-BASED IMPROVISATIONS

One of the most useful practical outlets for improvisation. These will in most cases be relatively brief. A final voluntary based on a hymn can be a wonderful crowning moment to the service, and possibly something possibly to aim at, but the concentration and memory required to sustain a cohesive structure over a substantial length is considerable. Depending on the context, (voluntaries in some parish services can just be the signal for a lot of chatter!), the final voluntary is one of the parts of the service where listening and a critical ear on the part of a congregation is most focussed.

Hymn-based improvisations could take the form of:

1. Using the whole tune in 'real time' with elaborated accompaniments (e.g. Ravenshaw variations)

2. Using segments of the melody (and possibly all the existing harmony) to create echoes or other forms of extension. This could be a simple case of knowing where to cut copy and paste without the need to invent any actual new material! (E.g. Song 13)

3. Using very short segments of the hymn to create motivically-based preludes, e.g. fanfares.

4. Ostinato accompaniments. These can add an interesting alternative slant to a familiar hymn. Some hymn or carol melodies can work surprisingly effectively with a fixed bass. The consistent pattern of an ostinato can also free the mind to focus on elaborations in the melody; also, enabling 'thinking time' and for the piece to keep going if inspiration momentarily falters.
Fanfare on St George's (Windsor)

Segment decorated and reharmonised

Segment in augmented rhythm

Fanfare on 'Judas Maccabeus'

Theme - segmented and augmented

Elements from the second part of the tune

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Echo Fantasia on Song 13 (Gibbons)

Try a fantasia in similar style on 'Crüger'
Extending a theme by transposed echoes and sequence.
Theme from 'Die güldne Sonne voll Freund und Wonne'

Try a prelude using similar techniques based on 'Bristol'.
Variations on 'Ravenshaw'
Ostinato on 'O Little Town'

\[ \text{\text{\textbf{\textit{Echo}}}} \]
\[ \text{(segmentation of rhythm)} \]

\[ \text{\text{\textbf{\textit{Augmentation of rhythm}}}} \]
20th CENTURY FRENCH-STYLE (1)

A very brief, over-generalised and simplistic bluffer's guide to the sounds of late romantic and early 20th century French organ music, particularly that of such composers as Louis Vierne. Also the development of later plainsong-based works by such composers as Dupre and Langlais.

* Increasing breakdown of diatonic relationships and increased use of modal melody and harmony, often with multiple modes modified by accidentals and elements of diatonicism

* 'Top down' harmonisation of melody rather than as part of broader diatonic scheme

* Particular use of augmented 4ths and minor 7th chords

LATE ROMANTIC STYLE - could also be adapted with slow held chords in r.h.

G flat chord (2nd inversion)--------------------- Aug. 4th on D flat ---------------------

G flat (2nd inversion)                        D7 (3rd inversion)---------------------

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VENI CREATOR - HARMONISATION

Solo

Harmony drawn from Mixolydian mode

D7 (2nd inversion) Mixolydian

Aflat7 Mixolydian Aug. 4th

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20th CENTURY FRENCH-STYLE -2

Another brief (and extremely simplistic!) guide. Notably the language used by Alain and particularly Messiaen.

* Use of the Octatonic mode
* Harmonisation in parallel thirds, fourths and fifths
* Extensive use of 2nd inversion triads and 3rd inversion minor 7th chords

Octatonic Prelude

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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).
'Rudolph' - thematic development possibilities, (skeleton score)

$J = 172$

Main theme built (mostly) on Pentatonic Mode

Phrase 1

Phrase 2

Theme (segmented) transposed up by minor 3rds

Further segmentation, melodic alteration and alternating Pentatonic with augmented chords

Theme in augmentation

e tc.

Theme (phrase 2.) segmented and with transpositions

Phrases 1 & 2 (segmented) played simultaneously

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