

How Can I Improvise?

Sebastian gives John the Answers

as overheard

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(John, a Church Organist for an undetermined number of years, meets Sebastian, a veteran of the Bench, at an A.G.O. meeting. Afterwards, they repair to "Ye Olde Coffee Shoppe" where the following conversation was recorded in Tironian notes.)

JOHN: When I try to improvise, Sebastian, I seem to have neither inspiration nor facility to do anything. Any suggestions?

SEBASTIAN: First of all, John, you must deliberately cultivate what may be called the "Creative Attitude."

JNO: Of what does this "Creative Attitude" consist?

SEB: Before you learned the rudiments of piano no doubt you "banged" on the keyboard. This was the Creative Attitude at work. When you began to learn piano technique any creative impulses you may have had were probably squelched in the interests of "learning the notes," a necessary discipline, of course.

JNO: How then may this Creative Attitude be regained?

SEB: First of all by adopting a creative attitude towards the interpretation of printed music. The printed page is merely a permanent record of the composer's creative thoughts on paper. To bring them to life the ideal interpretation is to try to place oneself in the state of mind of the composer as he first composed the music. Every performance then becomes truly a recreation or reenactment of the composer's mental and spiritual states.

JNO: How can poor little me put myself in the place of a Bach, a Brahms or a Dupré?

SEB: You can't. But in trying to do so you are cultivating the Creative Attitude.

JNO: Granted that I have experienced some glimmerings of the Creative Attitude, what do I do next?

- SEB: Perhaps a practical exercise is in order just now. Select some hymn tune of which you are particularly fond. The fact that you are fond of it shows you have some affinity with the composer's mind. Play it on the organ with alto and tenor parts in the left hand, bass in the pedal and soprano melody *alone* in the right hand. Keep tempo moderate. Next, begin to elaborate the melody by filling in the skips with passing notes. Later, use appoggiaturas (putting the *off* harmony note on the strong beat, resolving to the proper note on the afterbeat), changed note values, ornaments, etc.
- JNO: Is this improvisation? I feel I have merely mutilated the melody.
- SEB: Yes, it *is* improvisation. For better or worse, you have *created* something that did not exist before. Your guilt feelings date back to the days when it was anathema for you to alter any notes on the printed page. Many of Bach's Chorale Preludes are just such elaborations — improvisations set down on paper.
- JNO: Having learned to give my imagination freer reign in the matter of the hymn exercise, is there not danger that I shall go too far afield?
- SEB: You are still holding to the harmonic basis in the left hand and pedal, are you not? This gives you some sort of design — a framework on which to hang your improvised right hand part. Hence you are avoiding the completely aimless wandering so often perpetrated in the name of improvisation.
- JNO: Do you mean to say that improvisation must be free and at the same time have design?
- SEB: Most emphatically. The Creative Attitude is the soul of improvisation but — and the "buts" we have always with us — the creative spirit must be harnessed into forms containing harmonic and rhythmic patterns.
- JNO: It is beginning to look as if an improvisation must be planned almost as much as a written composition. Must I work out everything in advance in my mind before I start to improvise?
- SEB: Not *everything*. But you must have a harmonic skeleton on which to hang your improvisation. He will have flesh of rhythmical patterns and be clothed with melodic devices.
- JNO: Please find a skeleton, Sebastian, and outfit him for me!
- SEB: Very well, John. Let us suppose our improvisation could be called "Meditation," "Prayer," "Benediction," or some similar title. Now, the most obvious form to use is the "Nocturne" form — basically the AABBA song form, 4 bars to a section, with perhaps a 2-bar introduction and a 4-bar coda — a total of 26 bars.
- JNO: Just a moment, please. What's this about bars? Must I carry them in my head also?
- SEB: No, but you must count, COUNT, *COUNT!* You will find this very burdensome to do at first but you will eventually get used to the idea.

To have rhythm, you first must have metre (counting) and rhythm is the life-breath of improvisation.

JNO: But if my improvisation sounds like a set piece, how will people know I am improvising?

SEB: When they can't tell the difference between your improvisations and your set pieces you are doing perfect improvisations.

JNO: But what about bridges, modulations, etc., so necessary to service playing?

SEB: An old Chinese proverb has it that "A journey of a thousand miles begins with but a single step." Conversely, if you can go the thousand miles a few steps will not bother you. But let's get back to the "Meditation" (Nocturne form).

JNO: Yes, Sebastian, what about the "skeleton?"

SEB: I shall sketch for you, on the back of this A.G.O. Chapter meeting notice, a simple harmonic scheme for left hand and pedal. Let us choose, say, Key of C, $\frac{3}{4}$ metre, tempo "Adagio," for our 26-bar skeleton in "Intro-AABBA-Coda" form. Notice that the B section is in the key of the Dominant (G), but change of key-signature is unnecessary; also notice repeats (AA and BB) after 2-bar intro:

Adagio ($\text{♩} = 66$)

Introduction AA BB A Coda

I. h. Ped.

Key of C Key of G Key of C

Note carefully the harmonic (chord) scheme: a simple I I for the Intro; I I V I for both A and B but in respective keys of C and G; the conventional I IV V7 I for the Coda. Now, *practice* these chords in tempo indicated, *counting out loud* 3 beats for each chord. A little device to help your practice might be suggested — instead of always saying "1-2-3," say the Roman numeral that is part of the harmonic scheme on "1," e.g., for section A, count "1-2-3, 1-2-3, V-2-3, 1-2-3." This will help to set the all-important chord sequence in your mind.

Next, *break* the L.H. chords into quarter notes, thus:

I I V I

or, for greater sonority *hold* the broken chords, so:

A

and *practice* the entire form with pedal same as above.

Finally, choose a rhythmic pattern for the R.H. melody which starts at Section A (L.H. alone for intro), e.g., dotted quarter plus 3 eighths (♩. ♪♪♪) for A, and quarter plus 4 eighths (♩ ♪♪♪♪) for B and the Coda. Put a harmony note (1st, 3rd or 5th) on the *first* beat of every bar and have the eighths lead into the next harmony note. Every section (except Intro) however, must *end* with a dotted half so that the effect will be "Pattern-pattern-pattern-stop," for the R.H. (Broken chords in L.H. are continuous from 1st to last bar.)

Now, add the R.H. part to the L.H. broken chords and pedal roots, keep *counting* and hear the results. If they are not satisfactory to you, start all over again and master each step before proceeding to the next (see *Appendix 1*.) Later on, change manuals (or registration) in R.H. part for repetitions of A and B.

Remember, John, an improvisation always seems to be much more to your listeners than it seems to you. The step-by-step mental process by which it is created seems fairly simple to you because each step is simple in itself. The finished product sounds complex to them.

JNO: I fear that, in following your procedure, I shall have difficulty in remembering what I played for the melody when A is repeated after B.

SEB: You will; but the answer lies in listening concentration. You have been trained to listen in the matter of notes played corresponding with the printed page. You must now learn in a sense to "play by ear," meaning that what you hear the first time must be indelibly imprinted on the mind so that it can be recalled and played again later. This faculty can be deliberately cultivated.

JNO: What other forms may I use?

SEB: Any written work, for any instrument or combination of instruments or voices, can be a form for improvisation. First, analyze some composition (or portion thereof) you admire; write down the analysis in terms of themes, modulations, recapitulations, etc. Then, invent your own themes and try to follow the analysis outline. One of the simplest forms is the elementary Toccata form which you might try as follows:

Select some sturdy hymn such as Haydn's "Austria" (also a noted Alma Mater), key of D, 4/4 metre, tempo about 72. Consider the *first* eight bars as A, the *second* eight as B. The form will be:

No. bars	2	8	2		8		2	8	8
	<i>Intro-A-Coda</i>			—	<i>B</i>	—	<i>Intro-A-B</i>		
	~~~~~				~~~~~		~~~~~		
	First				Middle		Last		
	Section				Section		Section		
	f				p or pp		ff		



The Intro and A will have a "perpetual motion" figure in the manuals. The easiest version is simply to keep repeating with the R.H. the 5-finger exercise, 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1-, etc. But, we are going to divide it between the hands in this manner. Play the first *four* notes of D-Major ascending with the L.H., starting on the D above middle C. Play the descending four notes of the figure with the R.H. starting on A an *octave higher*. Consider the figure to be in 16th notes. Hence the figure played *twice* through will be *one* bar. Continue this two-handed, 8-note, up-down figure for the first 10 bars (Intro-A). Practice this by counting 1-2-3-4, 2-2-3-4, etc., up to 9-2-3-4 and 10-2-3-4.

Next, have pedal enter on 3rd bar of Toccata, playing first 8 bars of the hymn-tune in single notes (A). On the 11th bar of Toccata the 2-bar *Coda* begins by having pedal go down to whole-note D (not part of hymn-tune) tied to quarter-note D on first beat of 12th bar. In the manuals, run a 2-octave D-Major scale in 11th bar starting on middle D (first four 16ths in L.H., then with R.H. eight 16ths plus two 8ths) ending on quarter-note high D for first beat of 12th bar. Accompany this first beat high D with a quarter-note D-Major chord in L.H., leaving 3 complete *rest* beats in 12th bar for both manuals and pedal.

Now, change to quiet registration and play last 8 bars (B) as harmonized in hymnbook. Change back to *f* (pedal *ff*) and repeat Intro plus A. *Omit Coda* and go directly into B (from hymn-book) *ff*, and our Toccata has ended. (See *Appendix 2*.)

JNO: Well, I am beginning to get the idea. *After* I have mastered various *forms* I will eventually be able to do any of them at a moment's notice. I can adapt any usable material (themes) to the forms I know.

SEB: Exactly; but you must analyze, analyze, analyze; count, count, count; practice, practice, practice. Improvisation is not a special gift but an accomplishment to be achieved by hard work. The hour is growing late; have you any further questions, John?

JNO: Yes. What about counterpoint?

SEB: I purposely have not mentioned counterpoint since its application to improvisation is entirely dependent upon the player's knowledge of the written aspects of the subject. If you have been through the five species of counterpoint, take a "cantus" to the keyboard and see what you can do extempore with any or all of the five species. Naturally, this will be in freer style than even the most "liberal" textbook. As you have keyboard harmony, so you can also have keyboard counterpoint.

JNO: One last question — can you suggest some "modern" effects?

SEB: Just a few practical hints: (1) Use triads with augmented fifths to

give the effect of the "organ tuner's scale" beloved of the French impressionists; (2) To achieve medieval "modal" effects, just use the *natural* minor scale with its chords (without raised 7th degree). Whether in 4/4 or 3/4 metre, add a 5/4 bar (1-2, 1-2-3) now and then to give the effect of "free" rhythm; (3) Chords built on fourths are too harsh for my ears — why not spice conventional harmonies with such chords as a perfect fifth and fourth separated by a minor third (D-A C-F).

JNO: Is there any final word you can give to improvisation students?

SEB: Yes, *John. I, Sebastian*, admonish you to  
Be Always Creative in Heart and mind.

APPENDIX 1. Your reporter took the liberty of trying Sebastian's suggestions. Here is "Meditation."

*Adagio* ( $\text{♩} = 66$ )  
Introduction

AA

*mf*

*Ped.* (Holding of l.h. broken chords optional)

BB

A

I (in G) I V I I (in C) I

Coda

V I I IV V⁷ I



APPENDIX 2. Following the directions on Page 4, the "Toccata on 'Austria'" seems to be like this:

*Maestoso* ( $\text{♩} = 72$ )  
Introduction (2 bars)

*f* perpetual motion figure

*r. h.*

*l. h.*

*ff*

*Ped.*

A (8 bars)

Coda (2 bars)

*r. h.*

*l. h.*

B (as harmonized in Hymn Book)

*p* (*ff* 2nd time)

D.C. ♦♦♦ al Fine

Fine

The musical score is written for piano in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of several sections: an Introduction (2 bars) with a 'perpetual motion figure' in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand; Section A (8 bars) continuing the perpetual motion figure; a Coda (2 bars) with a final flourish in the right hand; Section B (as harmonized in Hymn Book), which is a hymn tune with a piano (*p*) first time and fortissimo (*ff*) second time; and a final section marked 'D.C. ♦♦♦ al Fine' leading to a 'Fine' ending. Dynamics include *f*, *ff*, and *p*. Pedal points are indicated in the first two sections.

Repeat from beginning, Introduction, A (10 bars) skipping Coda (2 bars); proceed directly to B, molto maestoso *ff* to Fine.

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