"An Organist's Monopoly: The Art of Improvisation"

by Ronny Krippner

Improvisation: A skill, not a gift!

It is probably true to say that improvisation is one of the most challenging and, at the same time, most fascinating disciplines of the organist's art: being able to make up music on the spot, seemingly off the cuff, instantaneous. Once part of every professional musician's training, the art of musical improvisation disappeared almost entirely towards the end of the 19th century and it is arguably organ and jazz music which kept it alive until today. But how does the concept of improvisation work? Is it really simply just like a Monopoly game (as Charles Waters suggested[1]) where 'success' is only a question of luck/talent, or is it a skill which everybody can learn? In short: the latter is the case: improvisation *can* be studied and *can* be practised and this article aims to give practical tips on how to get started with the basics. I would like to begin, however, by giving some interesting background facts about organ improvisation in general and its role in Britain in particular.

Different National Styles

Over the centuries, different national schools of improvisation have developed - probably due to the specific liturgical requirements of each country. Organists in Catholic France, for instance, tend to improvise on Gregorian Chant in a variety of contrasting modal styles whereas Lutheran organists in Germany focus primarily on chorale improvisation techniques. In the *English Cathedral Tradition*, there is an emphasis on 'atmospheric' improvisations before Evensong (as exemplified in Herbert Howells's organ output), Gospel fanfares and hymn extensions, all of which have the power of lifting people's minds and enhancing the beauty of the Anglican liturgy. Over recent years, improvisation styles seemed to have become much more varied and 'international' in flavour in Britain. Globalisation and the development of recording technologies have had a huge impact on the way British organists improvise today and may well have helped initiating what could be considered a 'Renaissance' of organ improvisation in the UK.

The Teaching of Organ Improvisation in Britain

At the beginning of the 20th Century, British organists regarded improvisation as a useful tool to cover gaps in church services, but certainly not as an art form. There was a common understanding that young organists would naturally 'pick up' the know-how of improvisation if they had the talent. Some even suggested that improvisation is not meant to be studied at all as "the principal object of

[1] Waters, C., 1930. *An Organist's Monopoly: Extempore-Playing.* In: The Musical Times, Vol. 71, No. 1045 (Mar. 1, 1930), pp. 246-247

Improvisation is the giving scope to the *personal mood* of the moment."[2] It doesn't really come as a big surprise, therefore, that the standard of improvisation in general was not very high - although there were some noteworthy exceptions (Sir John Stainer, for instance, used to extemporise voluntaries in sonata form at St Paul's Cathedral!). The French organist-composer Camille Saint-Saëns tells us why improvisation was at such a low ebb in Britain during the first half of the 20th century: "You have many fine organists in England, but few good improvisers. It is an art you do not sufficiently practise or study, and it requires to be practised or studied... you have not worked on it as we have in France, where the art of improvisation has always been a feature of the organ class."[3]

Today, more than 100 years later, it is amazing to see how dramatically things have changed for the better. The majority of British conservatories now offer tuition in organ improvisation as a discipline in its own right. Sophie-Véronique Cauchefer-Choplin, *Titulaire Adjointe* of the Grand-Orgue at Saint-Sulpice Paris, has recently been appointed Professor of Organ at the RCM and teaches improvisation there regularly. The fine tradition of improvisation teaching at the RAM continues under Gerard Brooks (Director of Music at Westminster Central Hall) and the writer of these lines takes great pleasure in passing on this crucial skill to the organ students at Birmingham Conservatoire and Trinity Laban College of Music London. The RCO as well as RSCM regularly run courses for organists of all ages and abilities which focus either entirely or at least partially on developing *ex tempore* playing skills.

Learning Improvisation

Improvisation as a form of music making without any premeditation seems to mean different things to different people. For those who allow absolutely no preparation, the concept of practising improvisation doesn't make any sense either as this is already a way of preparing one's performance. Others, on the other hand, see no problem in applying prepared **building blocks**, amongst them J. S. Bach. Like all musicians in the Baroque period, Bach regarded improvisation as an *extemporaneous composition:* he "quilts together thoroughbass, composition, and improvisation as part of the same fabric of musicianship."[4] Bach's Arnstadt Chorales are a perfect example of sketched-out improvisations and I believe that using blueprints is a very effective way of learning improvisation, albeit not the only one.

As a teacher of organ students at both school and conservatory level, I have come to realise more and more that learning improvisation starts with *practical harmony*, or in other words: harmonising hymns (Bach would have also added Figured Bass here). The Victorian improviser Frank Joseph Sawyer (1857-1908) states that students should "take the melodies of a thousand hymn tunes, and harmonize them at piano or organ. In this way you will learn how to *use* chords. It is *this* knowledge

[2] Harding, H., 1907. *Musical Form: its influence upon the art of Improvisation.* In: Royal College of Organists: Lectures 1907, p. 52

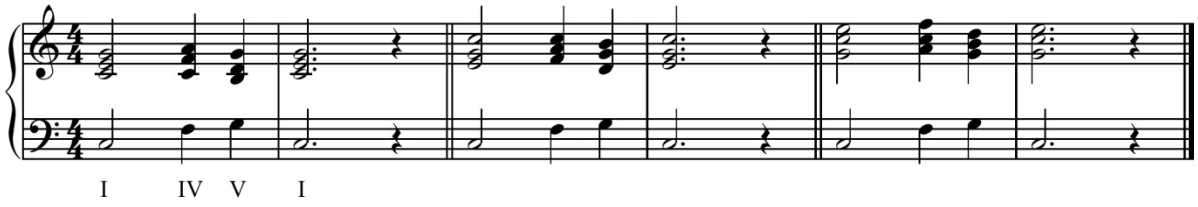
[3] Henderson, A., 1937. *Memories of some distinguished French Organists. Saint-Saëns.* In: The Musical Times, Vol. 78, pp. 534-536

[4] Ruiter-Feenstra, P., 2011. *Bach & the Art of Improvisation. Volume One.* Ann Arbor: CHI Press, p. 8

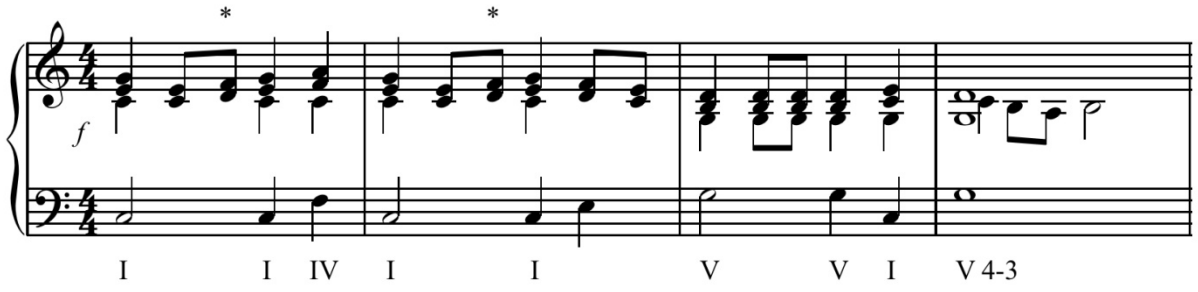
which is so necessary in extemporizing."[5] However, a profound knowledge of keyboard harmony, counterpoint and musical form doesn't automatically produce a good improviser. What it needs is a gradual merging of all these disciplines and the following "Improvisation Lessons" are designed as initial guidelines for those teaching organ students as well as those who wish to further their own skills.

Lesson 1: Cadences I-IV-V-I

The quickest way of getting started with **tonal improvisation** is by getting to grips with playing cadences. Start with the most common cadence (I-IV-V-I) and practice it in all major and minor keys. Make sure you practise with manuals only (l.h. bass, r.h. triad) as well as manual & pedal (bass in the pedal; chords shared between both hands):

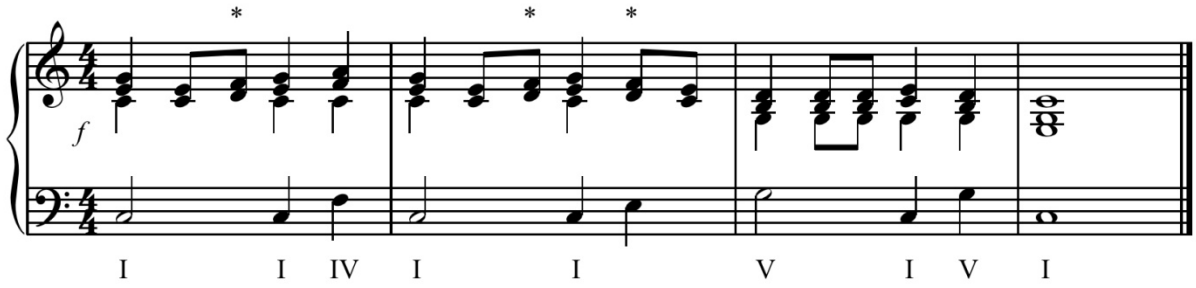


This already gives you enough harmonic vocabulary for improvising short Preludes. Important: always have the particular character of the piece you are going to improvise in mind (martial, sorrowful, cheerful, majestic etc.) – it helps getting the creative juices going. Here is an example of the first four bars of an improvised *Festive Prelude in C*, based on the previous cadence exercise:



The asterisks indicate passing notes which help keeping the voices moving. Listen carefully to your playing and try to memorise this phrase as quickly as possible. By doing that, you automatically develop two crucial key skills for improvisation: a **creative inner ear** and a **good memory.** If we think of the first four bars as being a 'question', then make up the 'answer' by repeating the first four bars but changing the ending slightly so it finishes on the Tonic:

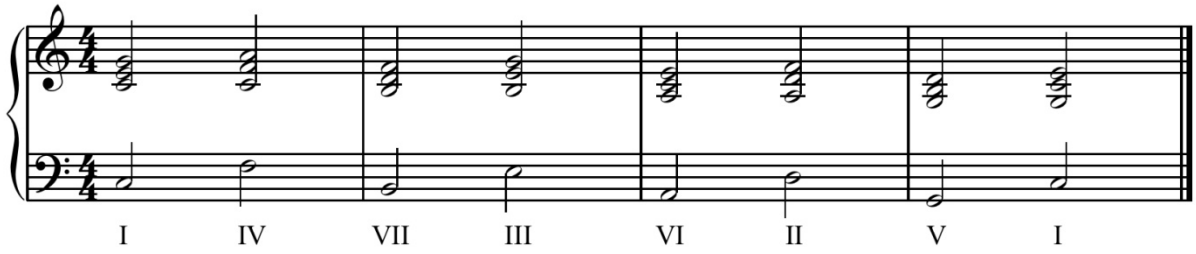
[5] Sawyer, F., 1907. *An Organist's Voluntaries with special reference to those that are improvised.* In: Royal College of Organists: Lectures 1907, p. 45



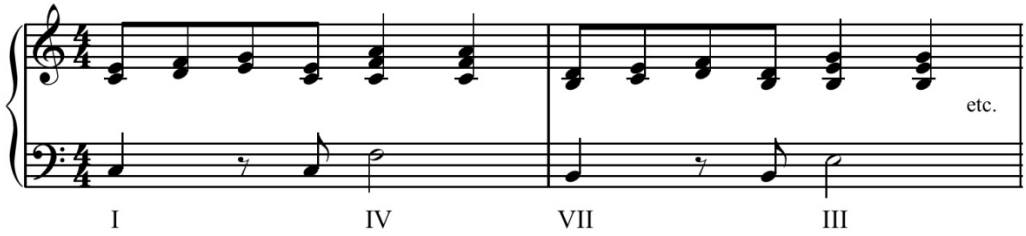
Both phrases together make up a simple, yet convincing Prelude in the Baroque style! Now try **transposing** it up a tone to D major – it helps consolidate what you have just learned and makes you a more flexible improviser.

Lesson 2: Cycle of Fifths

There are a number of useful chord progressions well worth memorising and one of the most commonly found in Baroque music is the **cycle of fifths.** Again, practise the following example in different keys on manuals only as well as manual + pedal. Once you have completely mastered and internalised this chord progression, it will serve you well as a *safety net* in your improvisations:



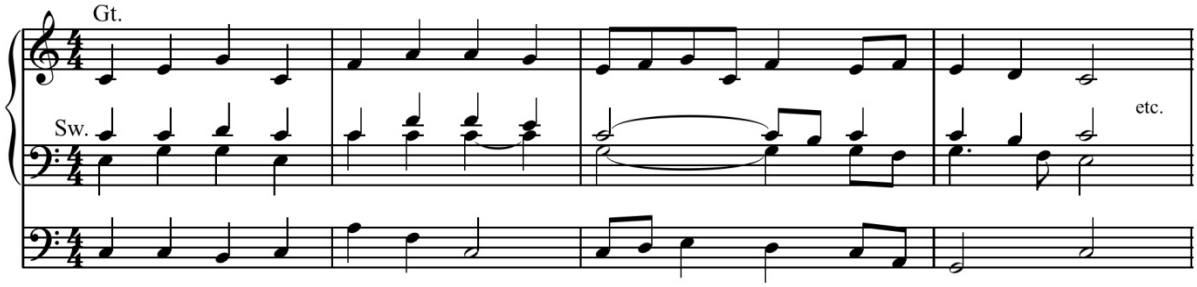
Next, try and figurate the chords by 'breaking' them or creating passing notes between them. If possible also include a short motific idea in the Bass – otherwise, steady minims in the pedal quickly become tiresome on the ears:



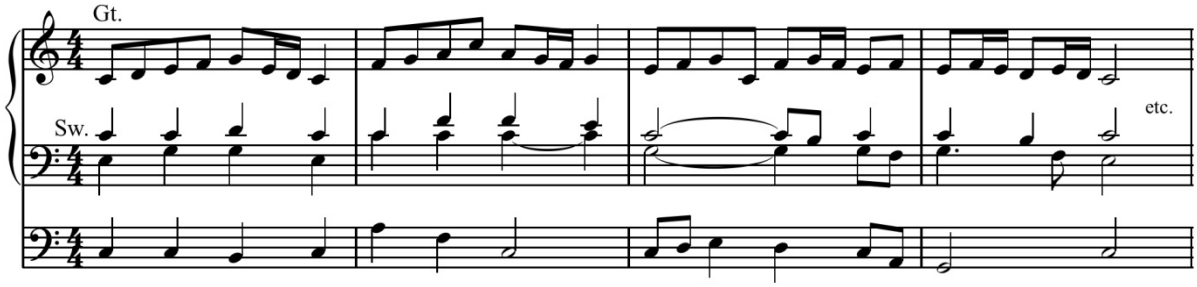
You will find that placing a one-bar pattern such as this on top of your cycle of fifths will come naturally to you very quickly. And what a great way of extending your *Festive Prelude* from Lesson one!

Lesson 3: Hymn Improvisation

Any church organist who is worth his salt needs to be able to improvise on hymn tunes. Creating an introductory voluntary before the service based on the opening hymn or making up an 'emergency' extension after the offertory hymn are just two of many possible situations where the organist has to engage creatively with hymns. The importance of being able to harmonise hymns has already been mentioned before. However, there are ways of using the written-out harmonies of hymn books as blueprints for your improvisation (this is particularly useful for students who still struggle with harmonising at sight). For example, soloing-out the melody with your right hand on a separate manual whilst the left hand is playing the Alto and Tenor part on a softer manual together with the Bass being played in the pedal. Take the hymn "Jesus Christ is risen today" (NEH 110) and have a go:



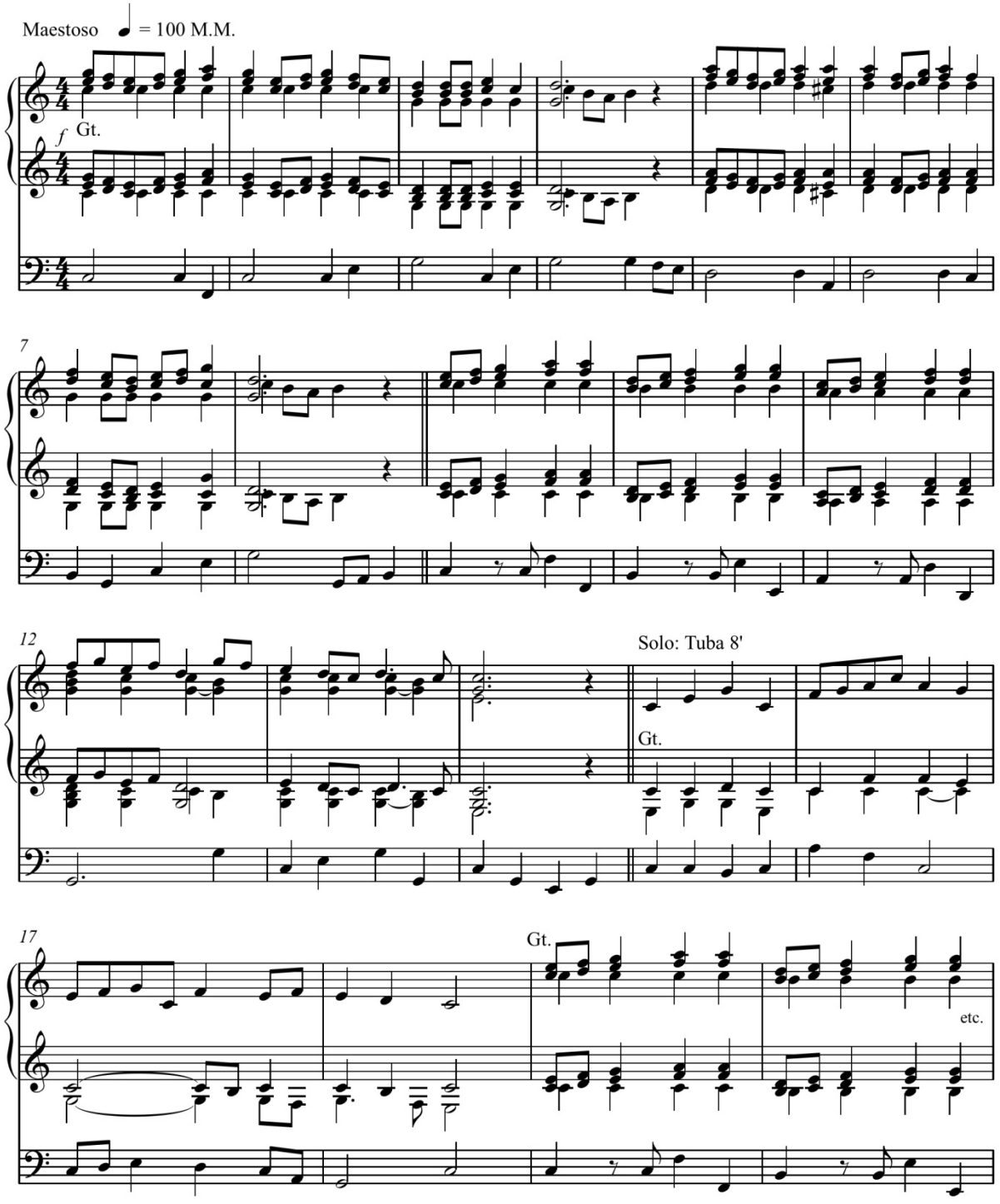
This in itself is already of great practical use as you can easily liven-up your hymn play-overs by bringing out the melody with a strong 8-foot Trumpet, for instance. Once you are comfortable with this way of playing, you can take things even further: try and vary the melody by applying passing notes and auxiliary notes (the accompaniment is identical to the previous example):



Although you may not necessarily want to embellish the tune in your improvisations all the time, it is an important skill which requires regular practice. And again - if used with care - this can add some extra sparkle to your play-overs.

Lesson 4: Putting things together

Having mastered cadences (I-IV-V-I), cycles of fifths and hymn improvisation techniques opens up a world of possibilities in improvisation. Here is the outline of a *Ceremonial March* on "Jesus Christ is risen today" which could be used, let's say, before the service on Easter Sunday: starting off with a free section based on cadences and cycles of fifths, the first line of the hymn is then stated (slightly varied) on the Tuba, followed again by a cycle of fifths:



This blueprint also lends itself for improvising hymn extensions and therefore may be of interest to all those preparing for organ scholarship auditions. A word of advice: do consider well the tempo of the hymn before starting out on your improvisation! It is easy to misjudge the tempo of the free section in relation to the hymn, something which is a most frustrating experience (for both player and congregation!).

Epilogue

It takes considerable effort to practise improvisation regularly on top of everything else, and by regularly I mean *every day* for at least 10-20mins. There is, alas, no quick fix: like all other skills, improvisation needs time to grow and develop. I hope this article has given some helpful insights on what improvisation is, how to practise this particular art form and how to prepare your *extemporaneous compositions* for services or, indeed, concerts.