Practical example: Improvising in the style of George Frideric Handel

Live organ improvisation during a BBC Choral Evensong broadcast from St George’s Church, Hanover Square (London) on 1st April 2009 at 4pm.

1. Considering Form and Timbre

The English Baroque Voluntary is the most commonly used type of organ composition in the UK and consists – at least in most cases - of two movements: slow & quiet – fast & loud. Organs in Britain in the Baroque era had no (independent) pedal – therefore, composers like Handel would compose for manuals only. The chamber organ in St George’s used in this recording is a copy of Handel’s own house organ.

The following registration has been used for this recording:
1. Andante: Stopped Diapason 8
2. Allegro Fugue: Stopped Diapason 8, Open Diapason 8, Principal 4, Fifteenth 2

Although Handel did compose a small amount of organ music using the concept described above, he mainly focused as a composer and performer on organ concertos. However, I decided to use the traditional English Voluntary form as this seemed to work best on the organ available.

2. First Movement: ADAGIO

The basic harmonic progression was taken from Handel’s Organ Concerto op.4 No.1 in G Minor:

A common feature of Baroque music in general is the use of cycles of fifths which lend themselves for developing motifs. IDEAL for improvisations: they do not require lots of the performer’s concentration! In this recording, I used a series of (figurated) seventh chords:
Another typical Handelian feature of such a slow movement is to **finish on an imperfect cadence.**

![Imperfect Cadence](image)

3. **Second Movement: ALLEGRO FUGUE**

The **subject** of the fugue is not originally by Handel, but is partly derived from his chorus “And he shall purify” (from Messiah).

![Fugue Subject](image)

The number of **voice parts** in both movements is (mostly) **two.**

Whilst practising in this style, I tried out different ways of **embellishing cycles of fifths** and playing the musical outcome in different keys related to G Minor. Although I did not use figuration models taken from Handel’s work, I came up with something similar in concept. The following excerpt is taken from Handel’s Organ Concerto Op.4 No.1. and gives a good idea of what I did on the recording:

![Fugue Excerpt](image)

In this movement, I used the cycles of fifths for **modulating** to the key of the next subject entry.

Finally, in the last major entry of the subject I make use of another typical fugal feature – the **stretto.**