

How does Anglican Organ Improvisation compare with Continental Traditions?

A contextual study of the Practice and Pedagogy of Liturgical Organ

Improvisation in England after 1900.

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Improvisation is the simultaneous invention and performance of music and has always played an important role in organ playing. According to Hans Haselöck (1966), organists handed down the artistic skill of improvising from the early days of polyphonic music until the Baroque era: “one thinks of... Frescobaldi, Sweelinck, Buxtehude..., but especially Handel and Bach.”

However, by the end of the Baroque period, playing written organ music became increasingly important which resulted in the gradual decline of organ improvisation across Europe. This changed at the beginning of the 20th Century. Again, Haselböck (1966) points out that “it was principally the French organ school... who cultivated improvisation constantly and also instituted the systematic training of organists.” Improvisation has also been cultivated in other parts of Europe which led to the development of other national schools of organ improvisation, for instance the German school. There were outstanding improvisers on both sides (French: Louis Vierne, Marcel Dupré, Pierre Cochereau and German: Günther Ramin, Hans Haselböck, Franz Lehrndorfer) who not only improvised regularly in concert and liturgy, but also established a firm tradition of teaching improvisation.

Having been trained as an organist in Germany, improvisation and playing organ literature were equally important aspects of my studies. When I moved to the UK eleven years ago, I realised there is not an equally strong emphasis on trained improvisation in Britain as there is in France or Germany. Organ improvisation is, without any doubt, part of English church music: it is common practice to improvise on the organ before Evensong, Mattins or other services. However, this has been and still is seen as necessary patchwork to cover gaps between liturgical actions rather than a serious form of art. In regards to English improvisation, Wills (1984) states that “...in England the systematic study of improvisation has been, and still is,

neglected, whereas, on the Continent, it has always been included in an organist's training."

In this research, it is vital to be able to describe improvisation. Bailey's (1991) approach is to differentiate between 'strict' and 'free' (or non-formal) improvisation. He argues that the former is used in concerts whereas the latter "is required by the church organist." Although Bailey is primarily a guitarist and his writing is based on conversations with English organists, this statement is supported by the majority of organists I have interviewed since September 2008. One of them pointed out that "...with regard to the ability to improvise on a particular theme in a concert, ... any purely musical criteria apply. But in the liturgical context, there are other considerations: ...the atmosphere being evoked and the position within the service."

Comparing this with the continental idea of liturgical improvisation and my personal musical background, the following hypothesis emerges: In Britain, liturgical improvisation is currently regarded as mood music which does not require any musical form. Paul Spicer told me in an interview that Herbert Howells uses in his organ compositions a technique of "complex moods", meaning seamlessly changing from one sort of feeling to another (crescendo, decrescendo). On the continent, liturgical improvisation needs to be both structured and responding emotionally to the liturgy. However, it needs to be mentioned that the majority of British organists, whom I have interviewed, complains about this lack of proper training in improvisation and are also unsatisfied about the overall standard of improvisation in the UK.

Despite the sceptical view of British organists on English improvisation, the status of organ improvisation in the UK seems to have been elevated during the last three decades. According to Bailey (1991), "extemporisation is now a completely accepted and integrated part of the organist's musicianship". This position is supported by Mason (2000) who points out that "... in recent times the English art of improvisation has undergone a much-needed recovery championed by David Briggs, Wayne Marshall, Nigel Allcoat and others." Today, the increasing acceptance and importance of improvisation in the UK becomes apparent in various ways:

- An increasing number of British organists record “improvisation only” CDs.
- More improvisation master classes are now offered (e.g. London Organ Improvisation Course, master classes run by Nigel Allcoat at Oxbridge, courses run by the Royal School of Church Music).
- The Royal College of Music is in the process of establishing a detailed curriculum for improvisation (divided into levels 1 to 3) which will be taught by the leading French organist Sophie-Véronique Cauchever-Choplin on a fortnightly basis from September 2009. Not only is the use of a such a thorough improvisation curriculum at a British Conservatoire a move in a completely new direction; teaching improvisation as an independent subject and not as part of keyboard skills classes shows that improvisation is taken seriously as a form of art and is not regarded anymore as a mere exam exercise.

“Disciplined improvisation [in the UK] with form and structure is increasingly seen as an essential part of the organist’s ‘tool kit’” (Mason 2000). Form and Structure play a crucial part in defining the style of the improvisation. The German organist Robert Knappe (2002) has outlined the following improvisation styles which are covered by various published improvisation manuals:

- Gothic
- Renaissance
- “Kantionalstil” (harmonising in the style of Schuetz)
- North German Baroque
- South German Baroque
- French Baroque
- Bach-Style (Chorale Preludes in *Orgelbüchlein* style)
- Viennese Classic
- German Romantic (Mendelssohn, Brahms, Reger)
- French Romantic
- German Modern (composers of the *Orgelbewegung*, Avantgarde)
- French Modern (Messiaen, Avantgarde)

There is a clear emphasis on French and German styles and the lack of any English style is noticeable. Since these improvisation styles are all based on compositions by French and German organists, another aim of my research is to create English styles of organ improvisation and to compile an English Organ Improvisation manual.

Paragraph 4 of the Methodology chapter will explain how this can be done. So far, I was able to classify the following English improvisation styles:

- Tudor (Mulliner Book, Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, Bull, Gibbons)
- English Baroque Voluntary (Stanley, Greene)
- English Baroque Organ Concerto (Handel)
- English Impressionism (Howells)
- English Modern (Whitlock, Leighton, Mathias)

My choice of 20th century composers is based on Hardwick (2003) who identified the following artists as principal British organ composers of that era: Herbert Howells, Percy Whitlock, Kenneth Leighton and William Mathias.

METHODOLOGY

1. Due to the lack of research on the current situation of organ improvisation in the UK, I have started to interview a number of leading British organists using the same set of questions each time. In these interviews, people were commenting on:

- what they regard as a good improvisation
- how they improvise
- how they have been trained in improvisation
- how they train others in improvisation
- how organ improvisation in Britain compares to the practice on the Continent

So far, I have interviewed nine organists and I am aiming for a total of 20. The candidates selected for this survey, are first-class organists who also have an outstanding reputation for improvisation. This narrowed the circle of candidates down to British cathedral organists, past UK winners of the St Albans International Organ Improvisation Competition (or other improvisation competitions) and improvisation teachers at UK conservatoires.

The outcome of these interviews has so far led to three hypotheses:

- LP or CD recordings have played a major part in promoting improvisation in the UK. Whereas improvisation on the continent has been fostered primarily by conservatoire teaching, British organists first got in touch with structured improvisation by listening to French organ improvisation recordings. This led

to the British phenomenon of “Cochereau disciples”, i.e. organists in Britain trying to improvise in the style of renowned Parisian organist Pierre Cochereau solely and regarding his style as the ideal way of improvising. “The availability of recordings of past masters’ organ improvisations, including those of Charles Tournemire, Maurice Duruflé and Pierre Cochereau, has undoubtedly affected today’s younger generation of [British] organist improvisers.” (Mason 2000)

- The majority of the English-speaking world used to believe that France is the only country where organ improvisation was executed at a high level. Although this may have been true at the beginning of the 20th century, there is nowadays much more an awareness of different national schools of improvisation in Europe thanks to a much higher number of cheap and affordable flights (e.g. EasyJet, RyanAir). It is also much easier today to take part in improvisation master classes abroad or even to study improvisation at other European conservatoires (Erasmus exchange programme).
- Continental organists learn improvisation during their study at conservatoires, whereas British organists acquire their improvisation skills in an apprenticeship set-up: They imitate as Choristers, Organ Scholars and, to some extent, as Assistant Director of Music the improvisation style of the Director of Music and are inspired by his/her playing.

2. The Fellowship examination of the **Royal College of Organists**, generally considered as the golden bench-mark of British organ playing, requires improvisation as part of the keyboard skills tests. All improvisation themes and examiners’ reports for both F.R.C.O. and A.R.C.O. exams have been archived and can be traced back until 1881. By analysing both themes and reports, it may be possible to reconstruct what was regarded as good or bad improvisation during the last century, whether these parameters have changed and what the overall standard of improvising has been like. My research so far has shown that the majority of exam candidates must have struggled to harmonise the given improvisation theme at least until the 1960s. In July 1935, for instance, the examiners complained that in the improvisation tests, “several [candidates] showed an inability to harmonize the theme effectively.” Similar comments can be found in subsequent years, although these were made in regards to “harmonising a melody” - a separate exam discipline. From 1963 onwards, candidates were presented with fully harmonised improvisation themes. This may be

seen as a possible attempt by the RCO to guide candidates “in the right direction” and to make matters easier.

3. Improvised music vanishes instantly and the only means of capturing it is by way of recording. **Collecting and analysing recordings** of British organists improvising is an important aspect of my research work. Nowadays, recording music is not a problem and can be easily done. However, in the 20s or 30s, this required much more of an effort and, naturally, it is much harder to get hold of improvisation recordings from this time.

The earliest evidence of English improvisation on a recording is by Arthur Meale (1880-1932) who, in 1926, improvised a “Storm” on the organ of the Central Hall Westminster. This improvisation features prominently quick glissandos on the Swell division of the organ and testifies Meale’s reputation of playing programmes which

“generally appealed to ‘popular taste’.” (Henderson 1999).

Sir George Thalben Ball (1896-1987) improvised regularly in the Temple Church (London) and some examples of this can be heard on recordings made by the BBC in 1961 as well as on some private recordings. His improvisations are mostly structured and apply imitative textures.

The most recent example of a British Organist improvising was recorded by me in Holy Week 2008 at Westminster Cathedral. The organist Martin Baker (St Albans Competition Winner 1997) improvised at various points during the liturgy of the Easter Vigil, using the colours of the organ in an effective and imaginative way – particularly the regular use of mutation stops is a special feature of his playing.

4. One of my research aims is **to develop English forms of improvisation** as opposed to German and French forms. The methodology applied here is the same used by organists in France or Germany and has been described in a recent article on improvisation by the French organist Emmanuel Le Divellec (Musica Sacra vol. 2/2009):

- to play regularly the type of repertoire which you want to imitate stylistically in your improvisations. Le Divellec emphasizes the important aspect of aural training in improvisation – you cannot improvise in a certain style if you have not listened enough to music in that style.

- to draw sketches of short sections taken from the music and to simplify it (harmonic reduction, melody only, leave gaps, etc.). This method is similar to the Baroque Partimento practice or to “Lead sheets” in Jazz.

Performance is a crucial element of this method: through constant “trial and error” experiments, I am trying to identify which musical devices need to be applied in order to create convincing improvisations in particular styles. All my organ improvisations will be recorded and chronologically logged and it is hoped that an analysis of these at a later point will help me to understand and identify how I achieved a certain musical outcome.

Having applied this method myself, it has already produced some successful results. On Wednesday, 1st April 2009 I was playing the organ live on BBC Radio 3 for Choral Evensong from St George’s Church Hanover Square in London and was granted permission to improvise at the end of the service on the Handel House Organ which is situated in the church. As it is currently Handel’s jubilee year, I was asked to improvise “in the style of Handel”. Applying the method stated above, I analysed various Handel Organ Concertos and Fugues and applied my findings in my improvisation. The response from musicians in the UK was very positive, certifying that I had played convincingly in a Handelian way.

1. ORGAN IMPROVISATION IN BRITAIN before 1900.

We have got evidence of organ improvisation in the UK going right back to the Renaissance.

- TUDOR Mulliner Book: pre-reformation Tudor Versets and music after the Reformation (Fantasias, Voluntaries). John Bull and Orlando Gibbons seem to have been outstanding organ improvisers.
- BAROQUE George Frederic Handel: Improvised cadenzas in organ concertos. Was renowned for that!
- John Stanley (blind organist of the Temple Church): most influential developer of the English organ voluntary. Handel even came and listened to him improvising.
- 19th CENTURY Samuel Sebastian Wesley (organist of a number of English Cathedrals) was, according to Philipp Barrett (Barchester), “celebrated for his extempore voluntaries after the psalms and before the anthem”. “A long

improvisation before the anthem was a common feature at Sunday Evensong in all English cathedrals! While none of these has been preserved we do have a brief introductory **improvisation**, the **Andante in D**. Played on 27 December 1846 in Leeds Parish Church, it so pleased his friend Martin Cawood that he persuaded **Wesley** to write it down for him. (from CD booklet York Cathedral Wesley CD). Sir Hubert Parry (the later English organist and composer) heard Wesley improvise a fugue on a section of his anthems.

- Barrett also states that a MIDDLE VOLUNTARY was customary at York and Lichfield Cathedrals and suggested that its purpose was to cover the movement of a reader to the lectern. (today: Gospel improvisation). Also Voluntaries before and after the service. (likely to have been improvised)
- one of the requirements at the audition for the post of organist at Durham Cathedral in 1862/63 was “to extemporize a four part fugue on a given subject”

2. Organ Improvisation in Britain from 1900

The earliest evidence of English improvisation on a recording is by Arthur Meale (1880-1932) who, in 1926, improvised a “Storm” on the organ of the Central Hall Westminster. This improvisation features prominently quick glissandos on the Swell division of the organ and testifies Meale’s reputation of playing programmes which “generally appealed to ‘popular taste’.” (Henderson 1999). Sir George Thalben Ball (1896-1987) improvised regularly in the Temple Church (London) and some examples of this can be heard on recordings made by the BBC in 1961 as well as on some private recordings. His improvisations are mostly structured and apply imitative textures.

In Part 1 of my research, I aim to determine the current practice of organ improvisation in the UK and its changes since 1900 in comparison with two Continental schools of improvisation (France and Germany). There seems to have been a major change during the 20th Century regarding the importance of improvisation in the UK: in 1900, it was merely seen as one keyboard skill out of many, necessary to cover gaps in church services. Today, organ improvisation has become more and more an accepted and respected art form in the UK which seems to be a direct result of the increasing globalisation in recent years. France and Holland, where improvisation is highly developed, seem to have a major influence on young British organists due to their close proximity. It is hoped that recordings of and

interviews with British organists will help creating an overall picture of English organ improvisation during the last one hundred years.

Part 2 tries to develop English styles of organ improvisation by means of analysing English organ compositions from the Tudor period until today. Performance will be a crucial element in this part of the research: through constant “trial and error” experiments, I am trying to identify the musical devices needed to improvise convincingly in a particular style. Both theoretical analysis of composed music and the practical approach are established methods of teaching and learning improvisation in France and Germany and has not been applied in England yet. So far, I was able to identify the following English improvisation styles: Tudor Versets (Mulliner Book), English Baroque Voluntary (Stanley), English Baroque Concerto (Handel), English Orchestral School 1 (Elgar, Stanford), English Orchestral School 2 (Howells, Whitlock) and the English Neo-Baroque School (Leighton, Mathias).

The outcome of part 1 and 2 will be used to design a tutor on English organ improvisation which will be included as an appendix in my thesis. This tutor will be aimed at keen organ students in schools and conservatoires and will put improvisation in a practical British context, i.e. improvisation in Anglican services.