

SHAPING THE PHRASE

By John Riley

*A brief outline of some
strategies for giving your
improvisations extra shape,
substance, and engagement
with the listener...*



Are improvised interludes within the liturgy something that should merely demonstrate sufficient craft to provide an appropriate ‘ambience’ or ‘cover’ ...but not draw undue attention to themselves, (perhaps a consideration even in some choices of written repertoire)? Or do we aspire to create something more memorable and engaging that does indeed draw the attention to the music (for all the right reasons) and encompass as much as possible the expectations and disciplines of a written piece of music? Let us assume the latter as our goal. And key to this is a sense of structure and direction, very often, –though by no means always – carried primarily through the melody. In this article we shall look very briefly at just a few basic ways in which melody might be structured. And if the opening phrases are essential in engaging the ear, and determining how the music should continue, then so is the ending in drawing the music to a meaningful and controlled conclusion.

Beware though of the traps of endless strings of shapeless phrases, particularly those that have little to do with one another. Rather, focus on establishing at least one prominent idea - i.e. a ‘theme’, and developing melodic shapes and rhythmic elements within this, and indeed other stated material. Music of course does not always consist of neat four bar phases; (how narrow and limiting if it did!). However, irregular phrase lengths and mixed time signatures should be a result of intent, not accident. Phrases may be repeated, varied to lesser and greater extents, or mixed with complementary and contrasting phrases; modulation, decoration and reharmonisation are the main ways in which this may be effected. Beware too, of complex and constantly changing harmonies; wonderful if done well, but these can also be destabilising and take up valuable mental bandwidth that would often be better spent focussing on the essential melodic phrase structure.

Shaping phrases then is an essential skill for any improviser. Creative freedom and spontaneity also has to be underpinned by internal discipline and sometimes even external and prescriptive guides.

A single, simple phrase can be made to work well over a short length, even with a minimum of variable elements. In *Meditation on ‘Love Unknown’*, (Ex.1), a harmonic pendulum could help create motion and an almost incantational effect. There are many examples of hymn phrases that could be used as the theme. Such an improvisation could be used as the basis for a brief interlude and a commentary on something that has just been sung.

[Sound file](#) 

Meditation on 'Love Unknown'

$\text{♩} = \text{c.60}$

The musical score is written for piano in 2/2 time, with a tempo marking of approximately 60 beats per minute. It consists of two systems of music. The first system (measures 1-8) features a melody in the right hand with a long, sweeping line across the top of the staff, and a bass line in the left hand consisting of sustained chords. The second system (measures 9-16) continues the melody, with the right hand ending on a long note marked 'dim.' (diminuendo). The bass line in the second system includes some chromatic movement and sustained chords. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat).

A single phrase can be repeated but with some variation through decoration and augmentation of the melody, as with *Processional Fanfare* (Ex.2) - overleaf

Sound file 

Processional Fanfare

 $\text{♩} = \text{c.60}$

The first system of the musical score for 'Processional Fanfare' consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef with a 3/2 time signature and begins with a forte (*ff*) dynamic marking. It contains five measures of music, featuring a mix of eighth and quarter notes, often beamed in pairs, and some measures with triplets. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains five measures, mostly consisting of sustained chords or rests. The system concludes with a double bar line.

The second system of the musical score for 'Processional Fanfare' consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and begins with a measure number '6'. It contains six measures of music, including a half note, a quarter note, and a triplet of eighth notes. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains six measures, including a half note, a quarter note, and a triplet of eighth notes. The tempo marking *Allargando* is placed above the second measure of the lower staff. The system concludes with a double bar line. A final measure of the lower staff, separated by a double bar line, contains a single note with a forte (*sfz*) dynamic marking.

A useful way of developing an instinctive and subliminal facility for shaping phrases is through a template of a given metre and perhaps also a text. This can be particularly useful when creating a longer piece with a number of phrases which may be similar or very different. The expressive nuances within different phrases of the text might even help determine the same within the melody. One can easily progress beyond one note per syllable and incorporate passing notes and a greater overall mix of note values and rhythms, as seen in *Prelude on a text (Ex.3) - overleaf*. The harmony is based on just two bass notes with inner harmonies formed largely of parallel thirds or sixths, (always a usefully euphonious device). Note how each phrase is different from the others whilst being related in mood and with some thematic cross-references. Note also the options that this format can provide for various types of extensions. Flexibility in matching length to liturgical context and overall choreography is a particular advantage in improvised music, and yet another very good reason for developing the art.

[Sound file](#) 

Prelude on a text

Words by Henry Faber (1814-63)

$\text{♩} = \text{c. } 88$ *mf*

There's a wide-ness in God's mer-cy, like the wide-ness of - the sea; there's a kind-ness

Optional repeat, perhaps with decorated melody and/or arpeggiated harmonies

Coda: optional extension based on previous bar ('lib-er-ty')

6

in his jus-tice which-is - more than lib - er - ty.

rall. *dim.*

As we look towards longer and more complex structures, one very useful way of shaping phrases, (and an established art form in its own right) is by the underlying harmonic or rhythmic tread. This can offer both a solid structural framework but with the means to explore within given and safe limits. In particular though, it will help shape melodic phrases into a given metre - and avoid the dangers of phrases of, say, $3 \frac{7}{8}$ or $4 \frac{1}{4}$ beats! For example, a simple pattern of alternating chords. As the 'feel' of the underlying harmony becomes more embedded, one can embellish the outline of the harmony with arpeggios and passing notes. Here is an example where you could try filling in some of the gaps yourself. *Medieval/Renaissance-style dance (Ex.4)*

Medieval/Renaissance - style dance

$\text{♩} = 52$

Cadence Alternative 'Medieval' cadence


Dm C Dm C etc.

12 VARIATION 1

20 VARIATION 2

Cadence Alternative 'Medieval' cadence

The musical score is written for piano in 3/4 time, with a tempo of 52 beats per minute. It is divided into three systems. The first system shows a simple harmonic pattern of alternating Dm and C chords. The second system, labeled 'VARIATION 1', shows a more complex melodic line in the right hand over a simple harmonic accompaniment. The third system, labeled 'VARIATION 2', shows another variation with a more complex melodic line. Both variations end with a 'Cadence' and an 'Alternative Medieval cadence'.

Another example of a template with a firm underlying ‘tread’, a very simple recurring bass line and a melodic outline based on parallel thirds above it. No matter how adventurous we become, there is a regular and predictable point at which we can ‘return to base’. *Chaconne in the style of Pachelbel (Ex.5)* [Sound file](#) 

Chaconne in the style of Pachelbel

Theme Var. 1 Var. 2



12 Var. 3 Var. 4



20 Var. 5 Var. 6



Similarly, a regular pattern of repeating or contrasting phrases within a given metrical structure will also help guide our phrases, as for example, in *Medieval-style Dance* (Ex.6)

[Sound file](#) 

Medieval Style Dance

$\text{♩} = 88$

II



The musical score is for a piece titled "Medieval Style Dance" (Ex.6). It is written in 12/8 time, with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 88$. The score is divided into two systems. The first system consists of four measures, with dynamics *f*, *mf*, *f*, and *mf*. The second system also consists of four measures, with dynamics *mf*, *mf*, *mf*, and *mf*. The score includes a repeat sign at the end of each system. The key signature is one flat (B-flat).

Medieval-style Dance p.2

11

II

f *mf* *f* *mf*

f *Rall.*

15

The musical score is written for a piano in 12/8 time. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system (measures 11-14) features a treble and bass staff for the piano. The treble staff has a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 12/8 time signature. The bass staff has a 12/8 time signature. The piano part is marked with dynamics *f* (forte) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The first system ends with a repeat sign. The second system (measures 15-17) continues the piano part. The treble staff has a key signature of one flat and a 12/8 time signature. The bass staff has a 12/8 time signature. The piano part is marked with dynamics *f* (forte) and *Rall.* (Ritardando). The second system ends with a repeat sign.

We can create added structural subtlety and refinement by using a number of phrases which relate to the ‘theme’ with varying degrees. We can also enlarge the process of segmenting parts of an existing phrase to create a new one. Although the melody is relatively complex, the harmonic scheme is rather more basic: I and IV (D and G) in alternation, or to be more precise, Dorian mode alternating with the Mixolydian mode, and with a V-I cadence to signal the end. (*Ex.7 Varied and contrasting phrases*).

[Sound file.](#) 

Varied and contrasting phrases

♩ = c.76

Main theme 'A.1'

Main theme slightly varied 'A.2'

mp

Motif 'x'

The first system of the score consists of four measures. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of eighth notes, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line of half notes. The first two measures are labeled 'Main theme A.1' and the next two 'Main theme slightly varied A.2'. A specific motif in the second measure is labeled 'Motif x'. The tempo is marked as ♩ = c.76 and the dynamics as *mp*.

5

Contrasting theme 'B.1'

Main theme slightly varied 'A.3'

The second system of the score consists of four measures. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of eighth notes, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line of half notes. The first two measures are labeled 'Contrasting theme B.1' and the next two 'Main theme slightly varied A.3'. The system ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

2

10 Repetition

mf

Measures 10-13: Repetition of the main theme. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melodic line with eighth notes and a half note. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line with eighth notes and a half note. The dynamic is *mf*.

Coda: main theme varied -
augmented form of Motif 'x' 'A.4'

14

mp *dim.*

Measures 14-17: Coda section. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melodic line with eighth notes and a half note. The left hand (bass clef) plays a bass line with eighth notes and a half note. The dynamic is *mp*, and the tempo is *dim.* (diminuendo).

The source of our material could be from an existing hymn, and again use different forms of variation, such as decoration, augmentation, diminution and segmentation, as in (*Ex.8*) *Intrada on 'Nun Danket'*. Note also another very effective device; that of transposition.

The repeating simple bass patterns seen here are another very useful means of guiding the shape of the melody, and indeed the harmonic structure.

Sound file 

Intrada on 'Nun Danket'

 $\text{♩} = \text{c.}72$

Echo with decoration

The musical score is written for piano in 2/2 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a single bass staff below it. The grand staff begins with a *ff* dynamic and features chords in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. The single bass staff contains a sequence of notes with Roman numerals I, IV, I, I, IV, I written below them. The second system also has a grand staff and a single bass staff. It begins with a measure marked with a '7' above the staff. The right hand of the grand staff includes dynamics *f*, *mp*, and *f*, with the label 'Echo with decoration' above the final measure. The left hand of the grand staff continues the melodic line. The single bass staff has Roman numerals I, IV, I written below the first three measures.

ff

mp

I IV I I IV I

7

f *mp* *f*

I IV I

2

11

As a final example, listen to this following improvisation, ‘Jig in modern style’ (Ex.9). [Sound file](#). 

As with other dance-like pieces the we have looked at, there are regular and repetitive elements but with some variation too. Perhaps it would be useful to analyse the techniques heard here in reference to other examples that we have looked at.

As we gain experience in shaping simple phrases, it becomes a more subliminal process within the creative act. At whatever length and level of complexity, this will undoubtedly lead to greater greater coherence, variety, and engagement for the listener. And from this we can develop even more complex phrases, metres and overall structures.

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Further materials on improvisation can be found on www.johnrileyorganist.com

All examples were recorded on the Kenneth Jones organ (1989) of Loretto School chapel, Musselburgh.



The Kenneth Jones (1989) organ at Loretto School, Musselburgh.

Specification:

<https://www.npor.org.uk/NPORView.html?RI=N09196>

