

CLASSICAL PIANO IMPROVISATION by John Riley

(Adapted from an article in Music Teacher magazine, August 2016)

Keyboard improvisation is not only a valuable creative tool, but also one that feeds directly into wider aspects of music, such as composition, keyboard harmony, aural training and analysis, and most particularly musical memory, i.e. the 'musical ear'.

The particular challenge is to avoid the rather amorphous and wandering creations that improvisations can so easily become; rather infuse the improvisation with character structure, and direction. Character can be determined by such features as the type of tempi, rhythmic patterns, mode or harmonic style within a diatonic framework. There will be plenty of examples of this in the following examples.

This short guide will focus on the piano, though many of the examples would work well on other keyboard instruments.

Rather than being faced with a blank canvas, one can start with a given framework or set of parameters, notably those limiting length and complexity.

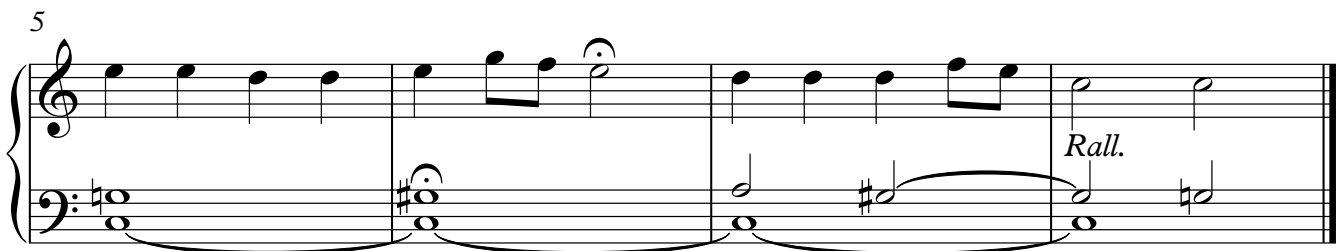
For example:- 'Simple Melody' (Ex.1). An eight bar melody with a slightly varied repetition, built above a fixed bass line. Note how just a change of the inner note can create a whole new harmonic slant and different levels of colour and dissonance.

EX.1



Simple melody

♩ = 96



The fixed bass note, or 'drone', can also achieve a full and mobile texture. Using a mode such as the Pentatonic mode allows for various combinations of notes, which blend relatively well and avoid unwanted dissonances; yet avoid the added complexities of modulation associated with diatonic keys, as in Ex. 2 Folk Melody in Pentatonic Mode. This mode is found in music of various traditions, most notably, Scottish/Irish and those of the Far East.

Folk melody in Pentatonic mode

EX.2



♩ = 88

Even within a single mode, there are many resources of harmonic colour, for example the expressive effect of repeated accented dissonances, as in Ex. 3, Lullaby in Dorian Mode. Perhaps the single element that most defines the character of a lullaby is the persistent lilting rhythm.

EX.3

♩ = 100



Lullaby in Dorian Mode

The musical score is written for piano in 3/4 time, Dorian mode. It consists of six systems of staves, each with a treble and bass clef. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 100. The score begins with a series of chords in the right hand and a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand. The melody in the right hand is characterized by a lilting rhythm and repeated accented dissonances. The score includes measure numbers 9, 17, 25, 32, and 37. The piece concludes with a final cadence in the right hand and a sustained chord in the left hand.

In Ex. 4 Hungarian Dance, the defining characteristic is the Lydian mode with its pronounced augmented 4th. The dance-like feel is also created by particular use of repeated phrases.

EX.4



Hungarian Dance

♩ = 126

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A crucial skill in improvising is that of shaping melody and harmonic movement around the pulse and metre. Harmonic direction and structure are also fundamental to cogency within an improvisation or composition, and it is important to be able to feel the underlying harmonies and broader harmonic direction within melodic phrases and different figurations, such as arpeggios and leaping chords.

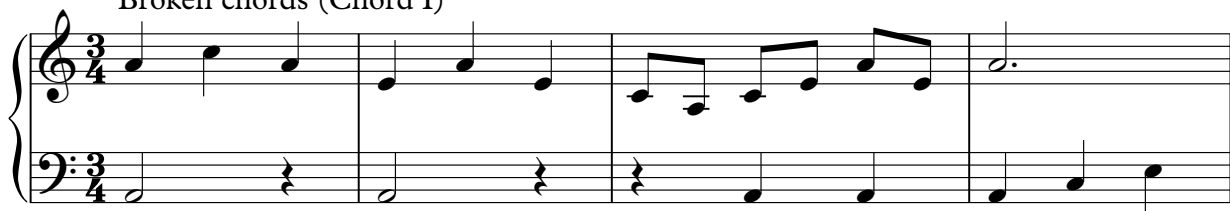
Separate exercises using a 'toolbox' can be devised to help build a repertoire of melodic and harmonic vocabulary, for example leading to Baroque or Classical style improvisations using a given pattern of simple bass or chord patterns, as in Exs. 5a, 5b and Exs. 6a, 6b, 6c. In 6c, note how the more elaborate bass line is still built around the same simple pattern of chords.

In the Theme and Variations in a Romantic style, note how adding more passing notes and accented dissonance to the same or similar pattern could create a style more reminiscent of the Romantic era, (Ex. 8). The very chromatic 1st and particularly 3rd variations stretches this even further; variations of this kind require sound awareness of underlying harmonic patterns.

Toolbox for two part improvisations on I & V basses.

EX.5a

Broken chords (Chord I)



5 Broken chords (Chord V7)



9 Passing notes (Chord I)



13 Passing notes (Chord V)



17 Cadence: I - V

Cadence: I - V (elaborated)



21 Cadence V - I

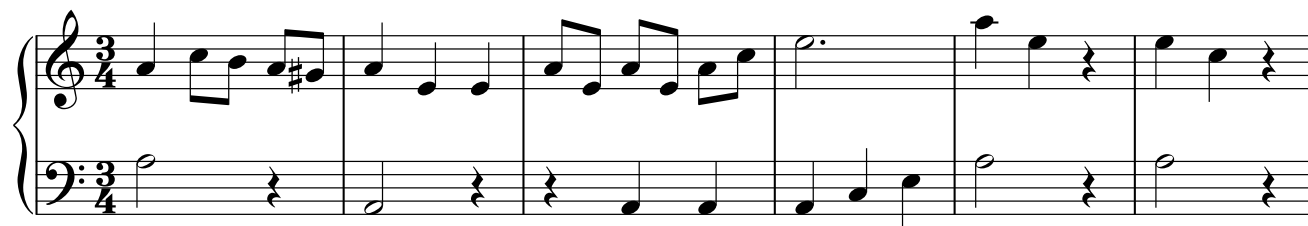
Cadence V - I (elaborated)





Baroque style minuet on I & V chords.

♩ = 120



I



V7



I

V

I

Classical Style toolbox.

Broken chords/Arpeggios

Musical notation for C Major broken chords/arpeggios. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand plays a sequence of broken chords: C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4. The left hand plays a sequence of broken chords: C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3. The notation is labeled "C MAJOR ----".

8 Passing notes within the triad

Musical notation for passing notes within the triad. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand plays a sequence of notes: C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4. The left hand plays a sequence of notes: C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3. The notation is labeled "8 Passing notes within the triad".

12 Accented passing notes within the triad

Broken chords/Arpeggios

Musical notation for accented passing notes within the triad and broken chords/arpeggios. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand plays a sequence of notes: C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4, C4-E4-G4. The left hand plays a sequence of notes: C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3, C3-E3-G3. The notation is labeled "12 Accented passing notes within the triad" and "Broken chords/Arpeggios".

G MAJOR (7) ---

21

Musical notation for G Major (7) broken chords/arpeggios. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand plays a sequence of notes: G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5. The left hand plays a sequence of notes: G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4. The notation is labeled "21".

25 Passing notes within the triad, (plus added minor 7th).

Musical notation for passing notes within the triad, plus added minor 7th. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand plays a sequence of notes: G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5, G4-B4-D5. The left hand plays a sequence of notes: G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4, G3-B3-D4. The notation is labeled "25 Passing notes within the triad, (plus added minor 7th)".

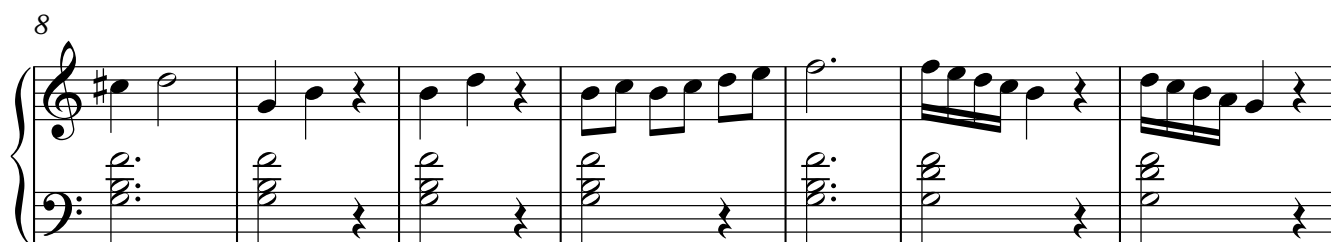
Minuet in Classical style - from Classical Toolbox

(Simplified bass)

EX.6b



♩ = 120



Minuet in Classical style - from Classical Toolbox

EX.6c



(Elaborated bass)

♩ = 120

Measures 1-7 of the minuet. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand (bass clef) provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and single notes.

Measures 8-14. The melody continues with more eighth notes and quarter notes. The bass line features some rests and chords, maintaining the harmonic support.

Measures 15-20. The right hand has a half note rest in measure 15. The bass line includes eighth notes and chords. The piece shows signs of developing tension.

Measures 21-26. The melody becomes more active with eighth notes. The bass line continues with chords and some eighth notes. The key signature changes to one sharp (F#) in measure 21.

Measures 27-32. The final section of the minuet. The right hand features a trill in measure 30. The piece concludes with a final chord in the bass and a half note in the right hand.

In the Theme and Variations in a Romantic style, note how adding more passing notes and accented dissonance to the same or similar pattern could create a style more reminiscent of the Romantic era, (Ex. 7). The very chromatic 1st and particularly 3rd variations stretches this even further; variations of this kind require good awareness of underlying harmonic patterns.

Theme and Variations in a Romantic style, EX.7 on a I & V7 chord pattern

♩ = 92

Theme

6 Var. 1

11

15 Var. 2

20

25 Var. 3

Musical notation for measures 25-27, Var. 3. The system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The treble staff contains a continuous eighth-note melody with various accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals). The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and single notes, including a prominent F# in the first measure.

28

Musical notation for measures 28-30. The system continues the grand staff. Measure 28 features a more complex treble staff melody with sixteenth-note runs. Measures 29 and 30 show a continuation of the treble melody and a simplified bass accompaniment with sustained chords.

30

Musical notation for measures 31-33. The system concludes the piece. Measures 31 and 32 continue the eighth-note treble melody. Measure 33 features a final treble staff note (a half note) and a bass staff chord, ending with a double bar line.

Improvising with several complex parameters can be challenging, e.g. complex and fast moving melody and harmony. However, simple harmony/elaborate melody or simple melody/elaborate rhythm is likely to be much more achievable. For example, In Ex. 7, the repeating simple chord pattern contrasts with – and helps highlight – the more complex melody.

Basing an improvisation on a consistent interval and hand shape could allow for focus on complex rhythmic elements, as in Improvisation on a Major 7th (Ex. 8).



EX.8

Improvisation on a major 7th

$\text{♩} = 108$

6

10

13 etc.

Using repeated material can be both economical and an aid to musical structure. This also helps develop memory and how to make slight but meaningful variations within repetitions. For example, a short folk dance like melody with an AABA phrase structure is likely to be far more satisfying than a long string of unconnected phrases.

We can perhaps summarise these guidelines with the '4 S's'

Simplicity – reducing the demands of memory and processing power, as well as multiplicity of choices and decisions to be made.

Sifting – Through structured tasks or free exploration, separating the more worthwhile material from mere padding. It is also far easier to refine and perfect a small area such as a 12 bar melody and bass, than a sprawling mass of texture.

Structure – the sense of purpose and direction with a clear beginning and end, rather than travelling aimlessly in the hope that this will eventually emerge.

Style – an identifiable personality and mood from the outset.

To this we can add the '3 P's'

Pulse, (and usually metre) - without which even the most sublime melody and harmony will be undermined.

Performance and Precision – Tidy and confident playing will enhance the improvisation no less than in performing the written repertoire

Less is therefore often more and with reduced congestion of thought, and greater transparency of sound and structure, everything is easier to chart and control; intuition and creativity can breathe and develop more easily. Improvising becomes less of a byword for the merely ephemeral or experimental and more towards music of stature and a finished product.

Therefore, as with a good speech or sermon, an improvisation should:-

- (1) Grab and entice the listener's ear from the outset
- (2) Retain the listener's interest as it develops various ideas.
- (3) End conclusively.
- (4) Leave a memory of something of meaning and worth.

The immediacy of the musical result and the sense of freedom, independence and confidence that improvising can bring make it a very worthwhile and thoroughly transferrable skill to acquire.