

Introduction to Improvisation – Part I

Robert McCormick

For much of musical history, improvisation was the primary – even the only – way of making music. Correspondingly, it is likely that fewer people in years past were as intimidated by that skill as are now as well as over the past few centuries. The glorious tradition of composed art music in Western culture is an incredible gift to humankind, one that I would not trade for anything, and I suspect most of those reading this article would say the same. However, the role of improvised music, that is, the spontaneous creation of music – composing in real time – has diminished greatly in the past three to four hundred years. Jazz musicians certainly breathed new life into extemporized music and play a large role in keeping it alive in our time. Among so-called classical musicians, it is organists who have been the primary stewards of the art. Even so, however, it is a minority of organists today who feel entirely comfortable taking the risk (and it is a risk, especially in front of others) of spontaneous composition. On the positive side, it seems that number is growing again; when I was an undergraduate about thirty years ago, the only organists I knew who really specialized in the discipline were Gerre Hancock, David Hurd, Bruce Newswick, and McNeil Robinson (there were others, of course, then unknown to me). Not very long thereafter, however, I became aware others who were building strong reputations as improvisers and teachers of the same, such as Jeffrey Brillhart, Dorothy Papadakos, and Jeffrey Smith, to name just a few. In our present day, I am very happy to see and hear that there is an ever-younger and ever-increasing number of American organist-improvisers. I attribute this in large part to several schools of music emphasizing the subject in their curricula, as well as several competitions centered around it, both in the U.S. and abroad.

By the time I began my fulltime career as an organist and church musician, I had been improvising for nearly two decades. I finally began piano lessons at the relatively ripe age of nine, but I had been so impatient to learn music before then that I started to play by ear whatever my basic, homespun, technical ability (or absence thereof!) would allow. As a result, my first musical language was improvisation, albeit a very basic form of it, rather than reading notes off a page. I never learned to be afraid to “make things up.” That was a great gift to me, and I kept at it even while my incredible childhood teachers insisted that I learn to read music properly (though they kindly encouraged my elementary attempts at improvising also).

Therefore, when I began my first position out of school as Director of Music at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York City, I was determined to become truly proficient as an improviser. The ornate liturgy and long processions at that church gave me ample opportunities to improvise: it was trial by fire! Yet I loved it, and learned more and more each passing week.

A year or two later, I began lessons in organ repertoire with the astounding McNeil Robinson. He heard me improvise for an AGO event and said to me afterwards, “we have work to do.” Indeed, we did! Structure, form, counterpoint, and harmony were hallmarks of his teaching, lessons that are fundamental to how I approach improvising at the organ.

For now, without probing too deeply (just yet) into the nitty-gritty of how to practice improvising, please allow me to share that it not only can, but must, be practiced. In the earliest stages, it is a valuable part of the learning process even to prepare specific improvisations in advance; this is certainly how I began. (Even the most experienced improvisers will, at least from time to time, practice certain techniques to keep themselves in shape and to expand their musical palette.)

If you are a novice at improvising and especially if you are frightened by it, perhaps a few suggestions of things you might try at home (on the piano if you don’t have a practice organ) or in an empty church will be helpful to you. Please just give yourself permission to try things out, and above all, do not worry about how it sounds at first; just keep playing and don’t judge what you hear. I can assure you that nothing kills an improvisation faster than turning on your inner critic.)

You might take a favorite hymn tune: play the melody only, but change one note in each measure. It isn’t even important for the “wrong” notes to make sense. After that’s completed, go back and change two notes, eventually all the notes (still melody only), but keep the rhythm precisely as it is. Something else you might try is to play all the notes “correctly”, but to change the rhythm: perhaps a dotted quarter followed by an eighth could replace two quarters, or you might play two repeated eighths instead of a quarter and two repeated quarters instead of a half (in other words, subdivision). Even while still playing the melody only, you could add an ostinato bass part, pulsing the same note over and over again in your left hand or your feet.

Once you feel ready to play more than one note at a time, try playing a fifth above the melody of a familiar hymn at the same time as the melody. This creates *organum*, which is a musical device I would encourage you to look up if you're not familiar with it (spoiler: parallel fifths were "in" before they became anathema!). If you find yourself at the organ, you could play organum with both hands, with an ostinato bass (as described above) in the pedals.

Yet another thing you might try is to play a succession of triads in any order, whether major or minor (or, if you are feeling adventurous, you might toss in an augmented or diminished triad). Just three notes at a time, any triad, in any rhythm, is the goal.

I would suggest that novices should find real value simply in exploring sounds at the keyboards, an exercise in which there are no wrong notes. Merely give yourself permission to wander freely, taking abundant risks, all with the goal of getting over the fear of playing "off the page."

There is plenty of room to grow from there, but I hope some of these ideas might help you get started. Please stay tuned for part two of this article, with many more suggestions of ways to learn how to improvise.

Robert McCormick is widely heralded by his colleagues and deeply admired for his creative and ethereal performance abilities in and master teacher of organ improvisation, commanding, eloquent performances of repertoire of all styles, composer of hymn arrangements, and innovative and imaginative hymn festival leader. He is the newly appointed Organist and Choirmaster of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia