

# IMPROVISATION

## Bringing together the instinct and the flow

David Dolan continues his series with some advice on how to begin to improvise

The most important part of the answer to 'how to go for it' is simple: to do it simply. By that I mean to let the instinct go free. Many professional musicians are so worried about 'doing the right thing' that almost no space is left for a spontaneous gesture. We sometimes forget that until the 19th century musical texts were prepared with the assumption that the performer adds his own elements where needed – be it ornamented repeats, continuo, echoing a partner's improvisation in chamber music, improvising a cadenza in a concerto or at a fermata point or improvising a fantasy. We shall see this in detail later in the series when dealing with specific styles. The same is true for 20th-century aleatoric music. The text is only a kind of a 'draft', because by itself it cannot create music. What the text – ie, black dots on white paper – can never really suggest is musical flow in real time. This flow, which is a movement, is one way to recreate contact with one's musical instinct.

Most of us, musicians and non-musicians alike, hum or sing when we are in a good mood – while taking a shower, for example. We do not 'try' something, we are not 'working' at any particular task, nor are we analysing the rhythmic or harmonic context of our humming. We are simply doing something natural and spontaneous. Free from the worry of being 'right' or 'wrong' (nobody will 'catch' you under the shower with a wrong

note), we can simply let go. This is actually improvising, or extemporising. (Let us, for the moment, put concern for the artistic level second to the encouragement of natural creative flow.) Being free – physically as well – is the first key point. So let me suggest some little exercises based at first on singing, which is, for everyone, the most basic and natural way of music-making even if inhibitions of various kinds make it uncomfortable in some situations. Make sure you sing when you are in a pleasurable situation: out for a walk, after a glass of good wine, etc.

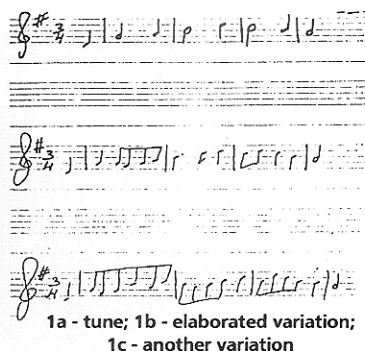
### 1. Encouraging the instinctive musical flow

Sing a simple tune you like – any tune that comes to your mind (preferably on a ternary meter with a dance-like movement). Don't get into the state of mind of 'trying hard', but rather 'join' the tune that you hear in your mind. If you miss notes it has no importance whatsoever for the moment. Continue, leaning on the rhythmic movement.

Now go to the piano and start alternating between singing and playing by ear. The idea is to play the tune in a horizontal, linear way, (ie, flowing forward). The vertical way (searching for the notes separately) is to be avoided at all costs. It is the flow and the movement that count, not the actual notes.

### 2. Elaborating

Now think of the simple tune as a theme, or a reduction of a slightly more elaborate variation. Add passing and neighbour notes. Again, alternate between singing and playing.



about being stylistically correct. We shall come back to this in depth later. For now just try to keep the flow going forward while remaining with your current harmony. In order to do so, take two steps. First, look for the notes of your melody directly from the chord. Avoid brusque jumps and try

to have your melodic line shaped with linear contours (which is naturally more comfortable). Try to go for convenient rhythmic patterns. Make sure you don't become vertical in your singing: the flow keeps moving forward. Secondly, ornament very slightly at first, and more later.

This tune itself is, of course, half of a phrase. The two ornamented variations are only examples. Do not try to do it 'right' stylistically, just sing it through several times (with trial and error) aiming to ornament the basic tune. This is actually a matter of reductions and elaborated variations, but looked for in real time.

### 3. Breaking the barriers between harmonic and melodic dimensions

Again, real time is where these two become what they should be – one. Harmony, often considered to be a vertical dimension (in relation to time) is to become a linear phenomenon. The notion of voice-leading, so vital to Schenkerian thinking, is what we are going to try to internalise by the feel of real time.

Let us take the first prelude in C major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I. The whole of this amazing phenomenon is a flow of one continuous harmonic progression (written by Bach polyphonically as a business of voice-leading). Play one chord for each bar, and try to phrase the harmonies so that it does not sound as separated chords. Now while you play the harmonic phrases you found, sing a simple melody that will fit in. (Gounod, of course, did the same thing with his famous *Ave Maria* – a linear, melodic line over the harmonic structure of Bach's prelude.)

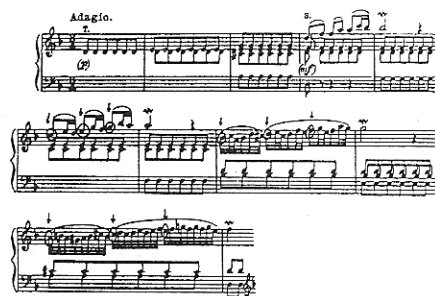
For the time being don't worry

### 4. Active listening

'Ping-Pongs'. Exchange half-phrases with a partner. The benefit of such an exercise is putting together, on the same flow of real time the active aspect of listening and the creative output process. By continuing a line you receive from a partner you experience a 'real-time analysis', or, if you like, a 'non-analytical analysis'. Exchange simple and symmetrical phrases of four or eight bars to begin with (stylistically, it can be classically oriented). Make sure you always keep the pulse and the rhythmic movement, whether you like the notes you improvise or not.

### 5. Examples from the masters

Only now (not before, in order not to disrupt the spontaneity of the first experiments), let us look at few examples from the repertoire.



Eg. 2 (reproduced by kind permission of Peters Edition)

Eg. 2 is Bach's arrangement for keyboard of Marcello's oboe concerto, the beginning of the slow movement. The consistent quavers



that characterise the first element (two bars) are Marcello's choice for the whole of the first theme. The gradually more elaborate rhythmic patterns are typical of an improvised ornamentation in some

types of themes. We can, again, consider this as an elaboration of a reduced version (ie, Marcello's original pattern). This is marked with the circles around the relevant notes.

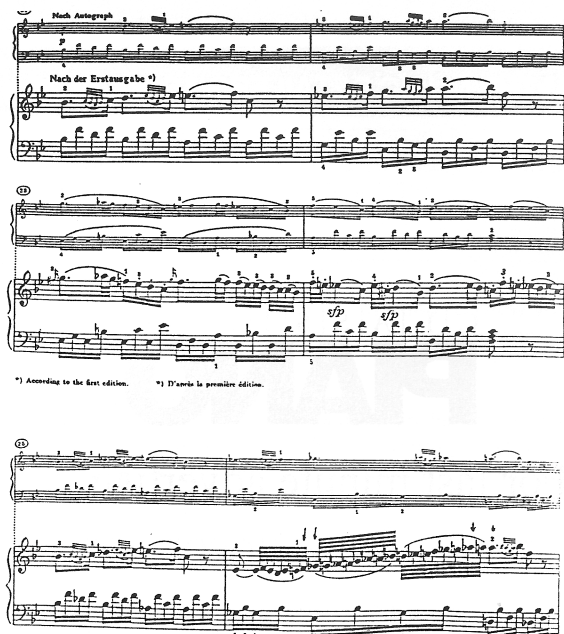


Fig. 3 (reproduced by kind permission of Herle Urtext)

Fig. 3 is from the slow movement of Mozart's F major Sonata K332. This is a free lesson from Mozart about improvising an elaborated (ornamented) version on an aria-style line. The two juxtaposed systems are original and are self-explanatory.

Eg. 4 is just a touch of the way Chopin repeats the opening thematic material in the first Nocturne. It is the central part of the motive which is elaborated with a groupetta. From the improvised part's distinguished articulation, we can learn that it had a central

importance. The contribution of Chopin to the art of improvisation is crucial, and we shall come back to it in detail later.

The next article will focus on improvisation in the Baroque style.

*David Dolan's concert and workshops at the South Bank Centre will take place on 1 May (concert) and 3 and 4 May (workshops) 1997*

Editor's note: The points mentioned in these articles are part of the author's method, detailed in his doctoral thesis for Paris University. All rights reserved



Fig. 4 (reproduced by kind permission of Edition H. Lemoine, Paris)



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