

Practical Organ Improvisation

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What this is not

- “Concert” improvisation
- Accompanying congregational singing

Liturgical improvisation

- Accompanies liturgical action
 - Processionals/recessionals
 - Offering
 - Communion – preparation of altar or distribution
 - Children’s message – children coming forward or returning to seats
 - Introducing or transitioning between hymns or service music
 - Special liturgies (e.g., stripping of the altar on Maundy Thursday)
 - Preludes/postludes
- Fills time when action takes longer than prepared music (e.g., after hymn or anthem)
- More than just “filler” – establishes appropriate mood
- Helps teach music to congregation

Basic improvisation principles

- Prepare ahead of time
 - Improvisation can and should be practiced just like repertoire
 - I typically have a melody, structural skeleton, and registration decided in advance
- Know music theory, especially harmony
- Know your instrument
- Be flexible in timing - know how to close off or extend as needed
 - Make sure you can see the liturgical action from the organ console!
- Know what the purpose of the improvisation is
 - Are you introducing a new tune which the congregation will be expected to sing later in the service? Then you'll want to keep that tune pretty close to the form in which they'll be singing it.
 - Are you providing a moment for quiet reflection, such as during Communion? Then you'll want to use softer stops and a more relaxed tempo.
 - Are you trying to encourage excitement, such as on Easter morning? Use a fuller sound and a more active rhythm.

Source material

- Use melodies that will appear later in the service to reinforce them
 - e.g., improvise on recessional hymn during offering
- If improvisation functions as a "coda" to a sung melody, use what everyone just sang
 - e.g., improvise on the processional hymn when children are going up to the front for the children's message
 - improvise on last distribution hymn while distribution concludes

- Hymn tunes that complement the liturgical occasion or message theme
- Non-hymn liturgical music (Gloria, Sanctus, Nunc Dimittis, canticles, etc.)
- Choral anthems or other special music
- Band songs in mixed worship settings
 - Good way to help unify services with both organ and praise band
- Original melody
- Harmonic pattern or just basic chords
 - Good option if providing background for spoken word

Melodic ideas

- Put in top, middle, or bottom voice
 - could change voice placement each phrase
- Augmentation
 - particularly effective in pedal
- Melodic elaboration
 - passing tones, neighbor tones, appoggiaturas, trills, turns
 - Use the notes of the original tune as the framework and throw as many notes as you like in between them
 - Note that the more ornamented the melody becomes the less useful it is for teaching melodies to the congregation
- Rhythmic transformation
 - Extend some notes while compressing others
 - Transform from duple to triple meter or vice versa
 - Using an irregular meter (5/8, etc.)
- Develop a motive or motives from the tune

Harmonic ideas

- To end quickly, always be ready to find the quickest path to a cadence
 - Doesn't have to be in the original key
 - A 4-3-2-3 melodic figure on the final chord can make it feel more final
- Conversely, to extend from a tonic cadence, move into closely related key areas such as IV or vi
- Work off of a long pedal point
 - Can use complete harmonic stasis or harmonies that all refer back to it
- Harmonic progressions against a descending bass
- Modulate between phrases (finding appropriate pivot chords)
- Extended chords: 7ths, 9ths, 11ths, etc.
- Cluster chords
- Harmonies that slowly shift voice by voice
- Modal inflections
 - in major: raised fourth or lowered seventh
 - in minor: natural minor, raised sixth, lowered second
- Borrowed chords from opposite major-minor mode
- Freely dissonant triads against tonal melody

Structural ideas

- Ostinato
- Ritornello: alternate phrase of source melody with new recoccurring melody

- Looser harmonic or melodic interludes in between melody phrases
- Canon
- Undulating accompaniment
- Pedal plays source melody while two voices in manuals trade imitative passages
- Contrast legato chords against staccato melody or figures
- Or vice versa, contrast legato melody against staccato accompaniment

Registration ideas

- Solo voices
 - Principal 8 or String + Flute 8
 - Flute 8 (in higher register)
 - Reed 8 (can add Flute or Principal 8 for body, esp. for chorus reeds)
 - Gap registrations (esp. with flutes): e.g., 8 and 2; 16 and 2; 8 and 2 2/3; 4 and 1 1/3; etc.
 - Can add light reed to the above
 - Look for pleasant Principal or Reed 4 in pedal
 - Add tremulant to any of these
- Accompaniment registration to balance with solo
 - Look for 8 foot flue combinations, adding 4 foot with louder solo voices
 - Basic pedal accompaniment: soft Flutes 16, 8; loud Principals 16, 8, [4]
- Set up contrasting solo voices you can move between on different manuals or divisional pistons
- Or vamp in one part while you adjust stops in another
- String chorus: strings + celeste + super/subcouplers + tremulant + manual couplers
 - expand or contract as desired, from quiet meditation to dramatic emotional climax
- Trumpet chorus: can use for fanfares or to state chordal hymn in between interludes
- Mixture by itself can be used for staccato figures or arpeggio texture
- Don't forget possibilities of expression pedal
- Experiment!