DEVELOPING A PEDAGOGICAL METHOD OF STYLISTIC KEYBOARD IMPROVISATION

by

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Abstract

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Developing a Pedagogical Method of Stylistic Keyboard Improvisation

Thesis directed by Professor Alejandro Cremaschi

Although improvisation today is often associated with jazz or contemporary music, it played an important role in Western Art Music performances until recently. For many great composers of the past, improvisation was a central element of the music-making process. Often, pianists and composers would include improvised portions of music in their concerts or would alter their compositions in real time during performances. Many factors led to the decline of this type of music, including composers' desire for more control with regard to their compositions and the advent of recording technology. As technological advances came to allow for note-perfect recordings, improvisations became less popular. Meanwhile, increased focus on technical accuracy in piano teaching resulted in a decrease in improvisation being taught to students.

This paper asserts that a revitalization of improvisation teaching is needed and proposes an outline for a new method book that could be used to teach improvisation to modern-day students. In particular, stylistic improvisation—improvisation in the styles of composers or eras—has innumerable benefits for keyboard students, promoting greater artistic individuality, analytical skills, more versatile technique, enhanced memory, better aural perception, and decreased stage fright, among other benefits. Such a method could change the pedagogical landscape of piano teaching, generating renewed interest in this highly valuable and endlessly rewarding art.

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Introduction

Few resources exist for modern-day students to learn the art of stylistic improvisation—that is, improvisation in the styles of composers or eras. Although many methods (pedagogical systems) do incorporate some form of improvisation into their curriculum, most address it briefly, in an unsystematic manner, and without any reference to styles. In this document, I propose an outline for a new method on stylistic improvisation. In the first section, I discuss the history of improvisation practices and how they relate to modern-day improvisation pedagogy. It is important to be informed of these practices, as historical exercises and approaches towards improvisation remain highly useful to this day and can be enormously informative in creating accessible and effective stylistic improvisation exercises. After this, I compare currently available methods that incorporate improvisation in some form. Their exercises, layouts, and guidelines are examined, determining their efficacy and applicability to the method on stylistic improvisation. In the third section, I propose examples for a preliminary-level method book on stylistic improvisation, informed by the research gathered in the previous two sections. This leads to a discussion of idiomaticity and more advanced levels for the proposed method. Finally, in the last section, I discuss practical uses for the series, including how it might be used in a private lesson or classroom setting.

There is a need for a method on stylistic improvisation, not only because of the beauty of the art and the important role it could play in revitalizing modern-day concerts, but also because of the innumerable benefits it can provide to keyboard students of all levels. By studying it, stage fright can be alleviated, memory increased, theoretical knowledge expanded, and musicality heightened, among other benefits. This document explores the art form, its history, and how it can be taught, laying down the blueprint for a method that could address this need.

Improvisation Practices Throughout History

The history of improvisation practices in Western Art Music is extensive. In the early stages of the development of keyboard music, improvisation was a central component of most musicians' lives. It was one of the most prized skills to have as a performer, and it formed an important part of the numerous pedagogical treatises that were written about various instruments. Over the past century, the mystification and marginalization of these practices has culminated in the almost complete disappearance of improvisation from most pedagogical curricula across the globe, though certain small groups are attempting to bring back some elements to modern-day concerts. This is a real problem, as musicians often emerge from significant periods of musical study without a real understanding of harmony, counterpoint, style, and other valuable facets that can be learned from the study of improvisation. In this section of the document, I explore some of the all-but-forgotten improvisation practices that were common during the Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical periods and highlight their applicability to modern improvisation pedagogy. These periods have been chosen for analysis since most pedagogical methods for improvisation were developed in these eras. Although additions were certainly made to the field afterwards, the principles remained largely the same from the nineteenth century onwards. Understanding the processes from these periods will greatly inform the creation of a pedagogical method for stylistic improvisation.

Perhaps one of the most mystifying—and yet widely documented—practices of the Renaissance is that of improvised vocal counterpoint. This was a central component of the lives of church musicians, who were said to have been able to improvise complex counterpoint that was both contrapuntally accurate and yet musically meaningful. Musicians undertaking this practice followed rules that would later be set out by Joseph Fux in his *Gradus ad Parnassum*

(1725), commonly referred to as 'species counterpoint' today. While even the composition of species counterpoint can seem intimidating to present-day musicians, the improvisation of multiple vocal lines in this manner is actually not as difficult as might be expected.

Peter Schubert, one of the world's current experts on this practice, describes the process in Christensen's "Counterpoint Pedagogy in the Renaissance."[1] He also gives a demonstration of this type of improvisation on his YouTube channel.[2] The rules are as follows: If a vocalist sings a line that adheres to certain intervallic restrictions, and another vocalist imitates them in canon at a corresponding interval, both lines will be contrapuntally correct. For example, if the imitating line starts a fifth below the leading line, the latter can be improvised using the following intervals: Down a third, down a fifth, up a second, and up a fourth. The repetition of a note can occur once, except for at the start, where multiple repetitions can occur. Practicing vocal improvisation such as this would be highly valuable for modern musicians, since it trains the ear and develops the ability to react to other musicians in real time. Further, although this was primarily used by vocalists during the Renaissance, the principles could easily be applied to other instruments.

Schubert provides the following as an example of this practice:

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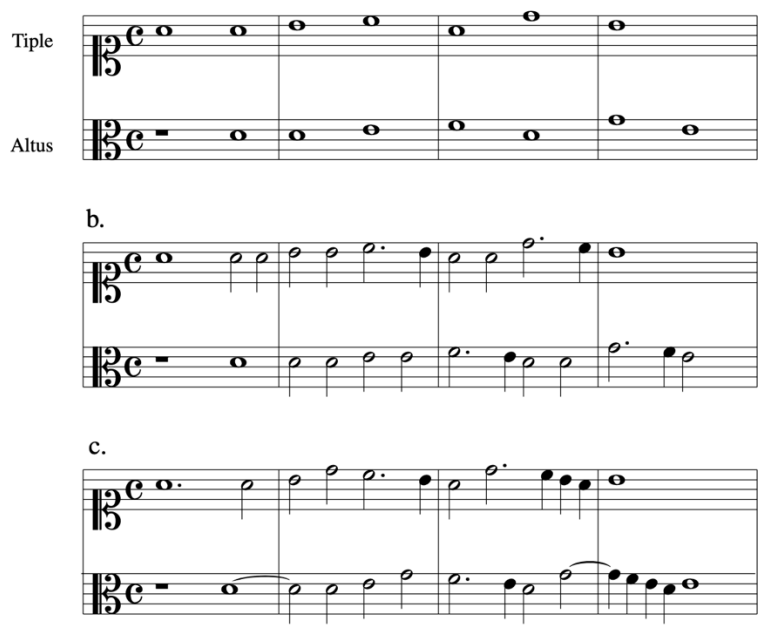
[1] Peter Schubert, "Counterpoint Pedagogy in the Renaissance," in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 504.
[2] Peter Schubert, "Improvising a canon #1: at the 5th above.mp4," YouTube video, 4:22, posted by "Peter Schubert," March 13, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n01J393WpKk.



Ex. 1.1 – Example of improvised vocal counterpoint from the Renaissance[3]

Here, the soprano (*tiple*) voice starts, and the alto (*altus*) imitates at the fifth below. Examples of how this might be embellished are included in the subsequent two versions of the same material. In the second version, homorhythms are avoided by adding note repetitions and passing notes, while in the third version, even more complex embellishment is added, including ties across the barline and double neighbor notes. Note that when a third voice is added, the rules change slightly. If, for instance, a third voice were to imitate the lower voice one octave above, then the leading line would have to exclude of the interval of a second, since this would lead to seventh-chords in three-part canon.

Equally worthy of study for modern-day improvisers is the art of embellishment—the process of altering the notes and rhythms of a melody in order to add melodic interest. This is the most highly-documented improvisation practice of all Renaissance treatises. Embellishments

[3] Ibid., 518.

were commonly called *diminutions*, though they were also known as *passagi*, or *gorgie*. Essentially, the pedagogical premise of *diminutions* was that if a student could learn specific melodic patterns that could be used between certain intervals, then they could subsequently apply them to a melody without necessarily having a deep understanding of counterpoint or composition—they were learning what modern jazz musicians call 'licks.' Practicing these is still an excellent method for learning improvisation today, so exercises of this nature will be considered while developing a textbook for stylistic improvisation. The most important and thorough treatise on this subject is Diruta's *Il Transilvano* (1593), which provides many different examples of *diminutions* for students to learn.[4] Other important treatises that deal with *diminutions* include Giovanni Battista Bovicelli's *Regole, Passagi di Musica* (1594) and Girolamo Dalla Casa's *Il Vero Modo di Diminuir, Con Tutte le Sorti di Stromenti* (1584), while the oldest known treatise on the subject is Sylvestro Ganassi's *Fontegara* (1535). A change came to this practice around the turn of the seventeenth century, when composers began writing *diminutions* into their music, instructing instrumentalists to play exactly what was written on the page; for instance, Giulio Caccini indicates for players to do this in his collection, *Le Nuove Musiche* (1601).[5] Composers' desire for more control with regard to their music represents of one of the common ways in which improvisatory practices faded away over the course of time, ultimately resulting in the shortage of teaching and performance of improvisation that exists in Western Art Music today.

The practice of *viola bastarda* is also discussed in these treatises. This was a common procedure in which instruments with wide ranges were expected to play the most important parts

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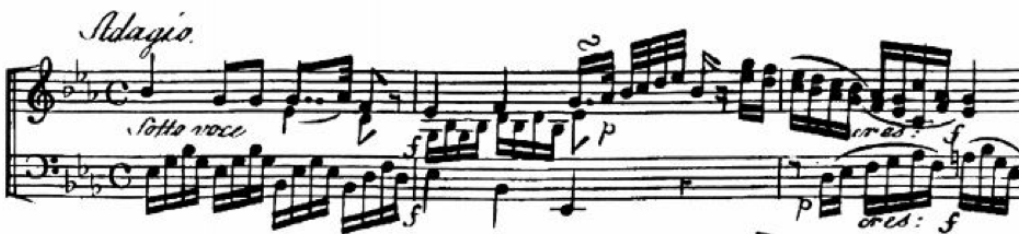
[4] Girolamo Diruta, *The Transylvanian (Il Transilvano)*, ed. and trans. Murray C. Bradshaw and Edward J. Soehnlen, vol. 2 (Henryville: Institute of Mediæval Music, 1984), 20.
[5] Giulio Caccini, *Le Nuove Musiche (1601)*, trans. Sion M. Honea (n.p., n.d.), 3.

of a composition while adding their own *diminutions*, reducing a multiple-voice polyphonic work to a single line. Practicing *viola bastarda* could be useful for modern non-polyphonic instruments when learning how to improvise, since it is still important for improvisers of monophonic lines to have an understanding of harmony, keeping it in their ear as they play; improvising compound melodies is an ideal way to practice integrating harmony into monophonic lines.

Embellishment in the Classical era differs substantially from the practices of the Renaissance, so it will be discussed here briefly. It was expected of all performers, and numerous sources give credence to this. Turning to Mozart, several documents can be found in this regard. Particularly notable is the autograph manuscript of his sonata in C minor, K. 457. The second movement of this is a delightful *adagio* in the relative major, shown below.



Ex. 1.2 – Opening measures of Mozart's *Adagio*, K. 457[6]

Expected performance practice of the time would have been to embellish this melody on each repeat of the theme. Luckily for modern-day scholars, Mozart included several extra leaves in the manuscript with directions on how the theme should be embellished each time it returns. This is an excellent resource for anyone interested in learning about embellishment in the Classical era.

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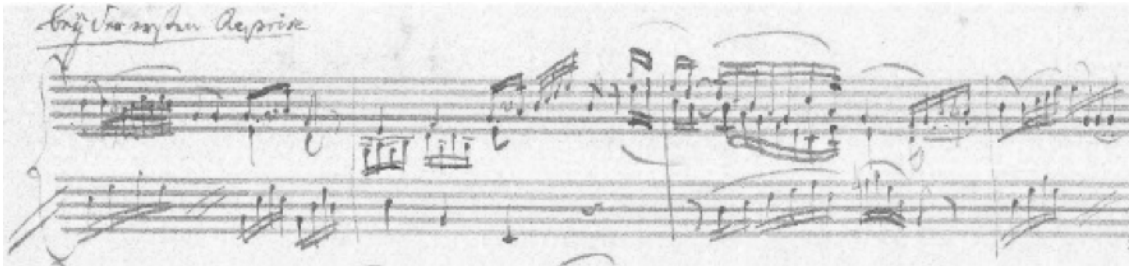
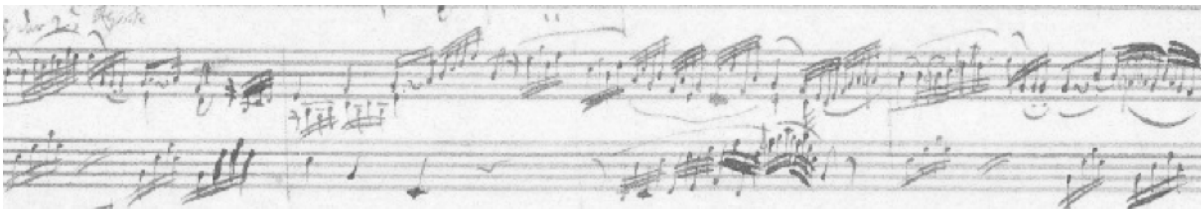
[6] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Fantaisie et Sonate Pour le Forte-Piano, K. 457*, first ed. (Vienna: Chez Artaria Comp., n.d., ca. 1785), 15.



Ex. 1.3 – Mozart's embellishments for the first reprise of the *Adagio*, K. 457[7]



Ex. 1.4 – Mozart's embellishments for the second reprise of the *Adagio*, K. 457

It can be assumed from these written-out embellishments that this is how Mozart himself would have improvised. In Ex. 1.3 and 1.4, which show the embellishments included in the manuscript, we see that the amount he used was extensive and included many elements, such as syncopation and melodic alteration. Modern-day improvisers might take this into account when learning to improvise in the Classical style, since the quantity of improvised elements that would be stylistically appropriate might easily be underestimated.

Also of importance from this manuscript is evidence that Mozart used shorthand when composing, since he often performed from his own manuscripts and did not need to write out textures in full. This reflects the quite casual nature that he and many of his contemporaries must have had towards performance and is something that might be considered when thinking about the accessibility of modern-day concerts, which often have a reputation of being old-fashioned. Improvisation—including small embellishments or improvising whole sections of a piece,

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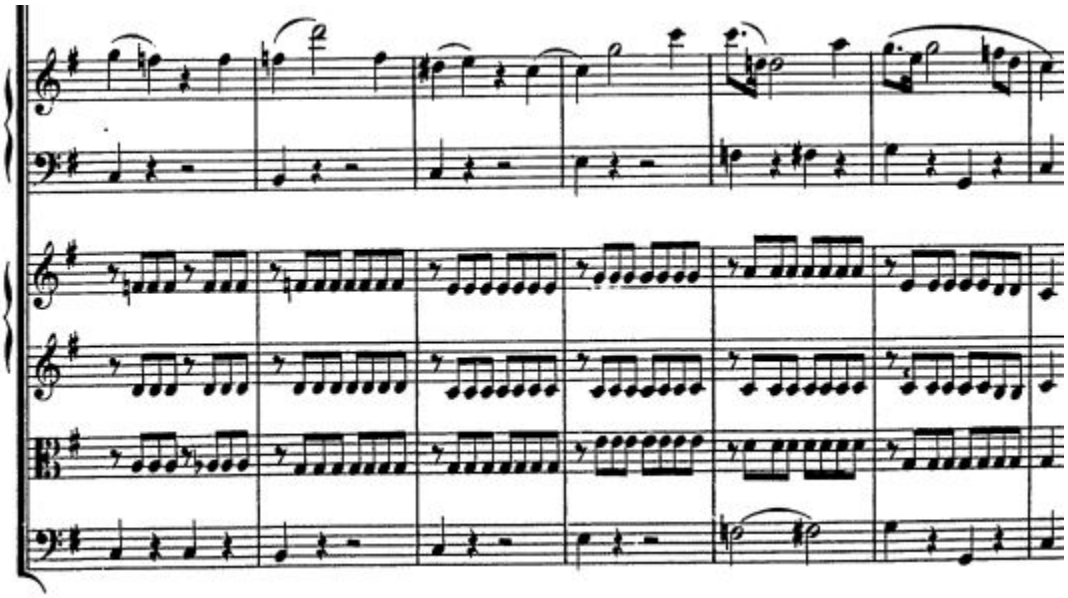
[7] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Fantaisie et Sonate Pour le Forte-Piano, K. 457*, manuscript (Vienna, 1784).

similar to Mozart's shorthand—can be used as a tool to heighten audience engagement by ensuring a unique experience in every concert. Shorthand often appears in Mozart's concertos, where textures appear strangely thin in passages where Mozart would have filled in the gaps if he were performing them. His interactions with his sister, Nannerl, are important in understanding his process of filling these sections out, since he sent her completed versions of his shorthand. In correspondence with Mozart, after receiving the score of his concerto K. 451, Nannerl notes that something is missing from a passage in the second movement.[8] Her confusion is understandable; the piano texture in Ex. 1.5 below seems very sparse compared to the rest of the movement.



Ex. 1.5 – Mozart Piano Concerto K. 451, Mvt. II, mm. 57–63[9]

Mozart later sends a completed version back to her that is remarkably more intricate and interesting, indicating his true intent for the passage. Similar sections with sparse textures appear in other concertos, including a passage in K. 501, as well as one in the second movement of K.

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[8] Robert Spaethling, *Mozart's Letters, Mozart's Life* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2005) 371.
[9] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Piano Concerto No.16 in D major, K.451*, ed. Series XVI editors, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozarts Werke, Serie XVI: Concerte für das Pianoforte, bd. 2, no. 16 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1878), 29.

488, which one of his students, Barbara Ployer, attempted to write out in full. Her version of this is another important document that substantiates the amount of embellishment that was expected in the performance of these concertos, and Hummel's arrangements of Mozart's piano concertos do the same. Learning how to embellish melodies in this way was an important part of being a performer during Mozart's time, and it could still be useful for today's music students. Doing so develops awareness of melodic expression and could help students develop a more personal approach to lyrical passages of composed music; consequently, exercises that promote this type of improvisation might be included in a modern method of stylistic improvisation.

Another practice that is often associated with Mozart is that of improvising cadenzas in concertos. This is something that is rarely seen in contemporary concerts, as the idea of improvising something virtuosic is highly intimidating, and rightly so. However, it is not as difficult as it might seem once insight is gained into the process. Numerous documents describe techniques for improvising cadenzas, some of which will be addressed here. The principles given in these descriptions can be applied not only to the process of improvising cadenzas, but also to improvisations of all kinds.

The term 'cadenza' was initially used as early as the fifteenth century, where it referred to taking time on the penultimate bass note of a cadence to add more *diminutions*.[10] When instrumental concertos as we know them today came into existence around the turn of the eighteenth century, it was expected that performers improvise their own cadenzas. One of the

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[10] Eva Badura-Skoda, Andrew V. Jones, and William Drabkin, "Cadenza," in *Grove Music Online*, accessed March 26, 2019 (Oxford Music Online, 2001), https://doi-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.43023.

best sources on the practice of Classical cadenzas is Türk's *School of Clavier Playing*, in which he includes several guidelines for improvising cadenzas.[11] His states the following points:

1. Cadenzas should provide a summary of the piece they are played in
2. They should not be long, especially in sad compositions (this stems from the vocal origins of the practice, where cadenzas were performed in a single breath)
3. Repetition of ideas should be avoided
4. Dissonances should be properly resolved
5. Modulation should be avoided
6. They should not be difficult for difficulty's sake
7. Cadenzas should give the impression of 'ordered disorder'
8. It is possible to improvise cadenzas, but this is risky
9. They should be performed as if they had just occurred to the performer

Mozart's concertos follow these guidelines precisely; for instance, in his A major concerto, K. 488, he starts with a motive that is heard frequently in the first movement—an arpeggiated series of tenths between the right and left hand. He subsequently includes more thematic material in m. 12 of the cadenza before starting a virtuosic fantasy-like passage in m. 16. Further, all of his cadenzas give the impression of 'ordered disorder,' and none of his cadenzas ever modulate.

Robert Levin, a leading expert on Mozart and improvisation, gives guidance on the subject of improvising cadenzas in an interview in Berkowitz's *The Improvising Mind:*

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[11] Daniel Gottlob Türk, *School of Clavier Playing: Or, Instructions in Playing the Clavier for Teachers & Students*, 1789, trans. Raymond H. Haggh (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 298–301.

Cognition and Creativity in the Musical Moment.[12] He derives his points from his own study of Mozart's cadenzas and includes the following suggestions for improvising them:

1. Cadenzas can start with an optional virtuosic flourish
2. After this, a theme should be introduced, often derived from the first group; tonic harmony should also be avoided (by playing the theme over the dominant, for example)
3. Another virtuosic passage may follow
4. A secondary theme should then be introduced, often derived from the second group; this is usually made more chromatic than the original
5. The cadenzas should end with a virtuosic flourish in preparation for a trill on the second degree

Again, these ideas can be seen in Mozart's cadenzas. Levin's own live improvisations of cadenzas are enlightening in their wit and astounding in their virtuosity and are an indication of the standard of improvisation that can be achieved with sufficient practice. Although improvising cadenzas is a difficult process, modern-day students could become accustomed to the process if training of this nature were included in standard teaching practices. This could enhance the student's knowledge of the concerto they were working on, give them more confidence to play the written-out sections. It could also significantly develop their musicianship by encouraging them to analyze what thematic material they might include in their improvised cadenzas, what textures they might use for the virtuosic passages, and what overall form their improvisations might take. As well as this, many of the principles listed above can be applied to other forms of improvisation and could be considered when developing a method book for stylistic

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[12] Aaron L. Berkowitz, *The Improvising Mind: Cognition and Creativity in the Musical Moment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 158.

improvisation; for instance, improvising cadenzas in the Classical style could be included as a segment of the Classical chapter of the more advanced levels of the method.

Returning to the Baroque period, a well-known practice that warrants considerable attention is the art of figured bass, also known as *thoroughbass* or *basso continuo*. This comprised adding voices—usually three—to a given bass line that included numerical figures underneath. Figured bass should not be confused with *partimento*, a pedagogical technique in which a player was expected to create a new composition from a bass line; rather, figured bass was used to support an existing piece. In *basso continuo* practice, a performer was expected to interpret the figures and add appropriate counterpoint on top of the bass. This would typically support a corresponding composition and ensemble of musicians. Reducing harmony to its basic components in this way can aid the understanding of musical syntax and can act as a memory aid for performers if practiced regularly. Consequently, more of a focus could be given to the practice of creating harmony from figured bass notation and manipulating the resulting counterpoint in today's music schools to help alleviate the memory issues that many keyboard students experience.

The first treatise to discuss *basso continuo* is Agazzari's *Del Sonare Sopra'l Basso con Tutti li Stromenti* (1607). In this, Agazzari gives guidance for realizing figured bass in an ensemble setting, suggesting that players should not improvise too much, since this would disturb the existing composition.[13] He also says that players should wait their turn and not all play at once. These ideas are still applicable to modern group improvisations and might be taken into account when teaching ensembles to improvise together. A subsequent important treatise on

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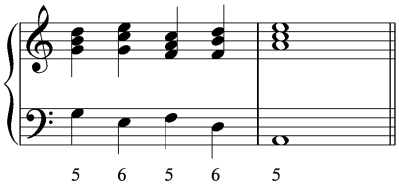
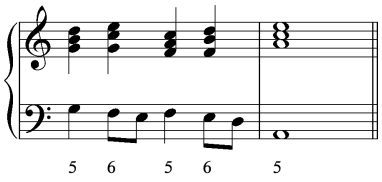
[13] Agazzari, Agostino, *Del Sonare Sopra'l Basso con Tutti li Stromenti*, trans. Bernhard Lang (n.p., n.d), 12.

the subject is Heinichen's *Gründliche Anweisung* (1711), in which the musical circle—the modern-day circle of fifths—is discussed for the first time.[14]

A noteworthy *basso continuo* practice that provides interesting insight into the types of sonorities that were expected of performers in the Baroque period is the *transitus irregularis*, or accented passing note. This was a way to add interesting and yet aesthetically pleasing dissonances to a texture. It could be added to the progression in Ex. 1.6 as follows:



Ex. 1.6 – Basic progression



Ex. 1.7 – *Transitus irregularis* added

In Ex. 1.6, a *transitus irregularis* might have been added to the bass line on both of the 6 chords, as in Ex. 1.7. Dissonances would then occur as a result of the bass note F in the second chord and on E in the penultimate chord.

A related figured bass practice was that of playing *pieno*, meaning 'full.' This became common near the end of the seventeenth century in an effort to add more harmonic interest to *basso continuo* lines. It was achieved by adding many *acciaccature* and by adding unusual harmonies, making the textures denser. Strange dissonances were even included, such as adding the diminished ninth to a dominant chord in a cadence. Both the *transitus irregularis* and the practice of *pieno* reveal that dissonances were an important component of Baroque sonorities. This is notable for anyone interested in stylistic improvisation, since it contradicts the notion that

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[14] Johann David Heinichen, *Gründliche Anweisung (1711): Comprehensive Instruction on Basso Continuo, with Historical Biographies*, trans. Benedikt Brilmayer and Casey Mongoven (New York: Pendragon Press, 2012), 173.

Baroque textures are primarily consonant in nature. This might be a welcome relief to students learning to compose or improvise in the Baroque style, since a desire to always be 'correct' can suffocate the creative process.

A practice that is perhaps one of the most useful to analyze when thinking about developing a methodology for stylistic improvisation is one that became popular near the end of the seventeenth century—the art of realizing *partimenti*. As mentioned above, this was similar to *basso continuo*, but instead involved the creation of a new musical piece as opposed to supporting an existing composition. The origins of the practice stem from the Catholic church in Italy in the early 1600s, when organists were expected to play a large amount of different types of music at various points in services. Even the services themselves changed on a weekly basis, resulting in a need for different music each week. In order to remember what they had to play for each portion of the service, a form of musical shorthand was invented—the *partimento*. This was a single bass line, with or without figures underneath, from which a player was expected to invent appropriate harmony, melody, and counterpoint in the creation of a new musical phrase or entire piece. Sometimes, multiple polyphonic lines could be implicitly suggested within a single *partimento*. Many examples of this can be found in Giorgio Sanguinetti's *The Art of Partimento: History, Theory, and Practice* (2012).[15] *Partimenti* became the standard way of teaching harmony, counterpoint, and improvisation until the nineteenth century and were learned by practicing *solfeggi*—prototypical musical lines that could be added to a bass line in order to realize them. Usually, this was done by singing, so that even if someone could not play an instrument, they could still learn to improvise. Similar to the practice of *diminutions* in the

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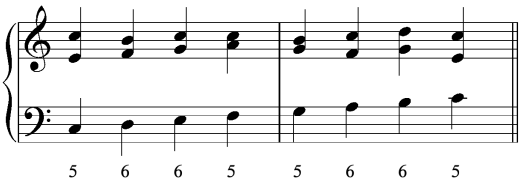
[15] Giorgio Sanguinetti, *The Art of Partimento: History, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Renaissance, these were essentially what are called ‘licks’ in jazz today. Derivations of *solfeggi* might be included in a modern improvisation method on stylistic improvisation.

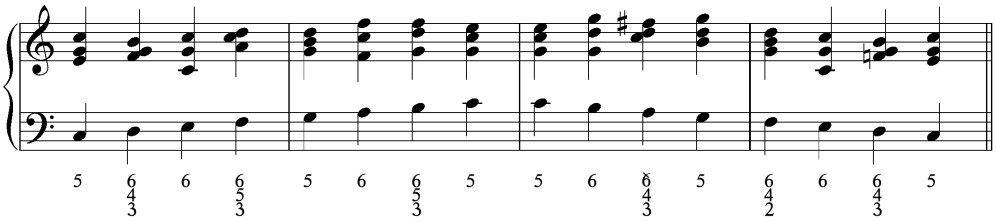
Robert Gjerdingen is one of today’s leading experts on this practice, and he has created a website that is an excellent resource for anyone interested in practicing *partimenti*, called “Monuments of Partimenti.”[16] In his writing on the subject, he discusses ‘schemata,’ describing them as prototypical textures or patterns that can be learned in order to realize bass lines. One of these is the ‘rule of the octave,’ a schema that was common when *partimenti* were still widely used. As with other schemata, the premise of this is that a bass line can be harmonized with certain standard chords, and these common chords can be applied to bass progressions when realizing *partimenti*. The standard chords are derived by associating 5 chords with the stable scale degrees 1, 4, 5, and 8, while associating 6 chords with the rest of the scale. This results in the following progression for the C major scale:



Ex. 1.8 – Standard chords of the C major scale

Dissonances are then added to the chords that precede the stable scale degrees, as well as both degrees that surround scale degree 3. The same process is applied to the descending chords. This results in the following progression:

[16] Robert Gjerdingen, ed., “Monuments of Partimenti,” accessed March 24, 2019, http://faculty-web.at.northwestern.edu/music/gjerdingen/partimenti/index.htm.



Ex. 1.9 – The "rule of the octave"

Learning standard harmonizations of bass lines in this way is an excellent way to learn how to improvise freely and could still be highly useful in modern improvisation pedagogy. In jazz, this is usually incorporated into lessons by learning to harmonize ii–V–I in every key, since this progression forms the basis of many jazz standards. A similar process could be applied to a multitude of progressions, allowing students to get a grasp of harmony that would enable them to create their own progressions and short pieces in the form of a fantasy or prelude.

The practice of freely improvising preludes and other standalone pieces based on harmonic progressions such as the ones mentioned above was common from the Renaissance to the Classical period and beyond. In the Renaissance, these types of pieces were often called *Intonations*, *Toccatas*, and *Fantasias*. *Intonations* were played to introduce the key of a piece so that singers could find their notes, while *Toccatas* were more virtuosic and typically longer than *Intonations*. *Fantasias* were sometimes called *Ricercars* and were more fugal in nature, often based on liturgical melodies and performed in the context of *alternatim*. An important early treatise on this subject is Thomas Sancta Maria's *Libro Llamado el Arte de Tañer Fantasía* (1565), which describes the process of improvising *Fantasias*, noting that voices should interact with each other by repetition or elaboration when improvising.[17]

[17] Fray Thomas de Sancta Maria, *The Art of Playing the Fantasia*, trans. Almonte C. Howell Jr. and Warren E. Hultberg (Pittsburgh: Latin America Literary Review Press, 1991), 387.

Improvising *Fantasias* was also an important skill for Baroque and Classical composers. Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*, for instance, is a prime example of how he may have improvised. In the Classical period, meanwhile, Mozart's 'modulating preludes' serve as an excellent example of how free fantasy was improvised. It was common practice for performers to improvise between pieces in a concert, since it was considered distasteful to jump from one key to another without a modulating transition. Luckily for modern-day researchers, Mozart wrote out some examples of short improvisations in this style for his sister, Nannerl, so that she could learn them by heart and pretend that she was improvising them between pieces in her concerts. What is remarkable about these modulating preludes is how similar they seem to a Baroque fantasy—the process did not change much over the course of time. As in Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy*, Mozart relies heavily on contrapuntal textures, virtuosic arpeggiation, free rhythm, and chromatic harmony. C. P. E. Bach lays out excellent directions for achieving improvisations of this nature in his *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (1787).[18] He states that in order to improvise free fantasy, a bass line should first be conceived of. Syntactically strong harmonies should then be added to this line so that a player is free to use the framework as the basis for a strong improvisation. These guidelines are still useful to bear in mind when considering modern exercises for free improvisation.

Although improvisation of free fantasy may be seen as the pinnacle of successful improvisation practice, it is certainly achievable through practicing preparatory exercises, including many of the ones that have been mentioned here. Expanding our understanding of these topics could greatly inform today's musicians and teachers so that a more complete

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[18] Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, trans. and ed. William J. Mitchell, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), 430–45.

musicianship could be achieved in music schools. Further, practical insight could be given on the improvisational processes and expected performance practices of these eras. Many of the principles discussed—including the use of the voice in learning to improvise, practicing embellishment, using pre-composed bass lines for the foundation of improvisations, and practicing standard harmonic progressions and licks—can be informative when considering how a modern improvisation methodology might translate these exercises into a useful and practical textbook for a private or classroom setting. A survey of currently available method books in the US will now be given to examine their strengths and shortcomings, and ideas for a new methodology that focuses on stylistic improvisation will be proposed.

Current Improvisation Textbooks in the US

Teaching improvisation and musicianship skills from an early age of musical training can be of enormous benefit to young students. Doing so helps them develop into a more well-rounded and versatile musician and can prove useful to them throughout the course of their musical career. Further, musicianship skills are interconnected; thus, the development of one will develop others. Practicing improvisation on a regular basis can help with memory, listening skills, theoretical understanding, technique, stage confidence, and the development of an independent musical voice, among other benefits. This is substantiated by statements from many professional musicians, including the pianist Mark Tanner, who notes that “the practised improviser possesses something rather valuable that the score-dependent pianist does not—a resourcefulness which comes directly from the heart in commune with the intellect; a willingness

to savour the moment and delight in the possibilities of what is not yet fully known."[19] With all of these benefits, it seems reasonable that improvisation could be taught to young musicians as a central part of a musical curriculum.

Both the National Association of Schools of Music and the National Association for Music Education mandate the inclusion of improvisation at the K-12 and college levels, but this is often overlooked, since improvisation is often seen as a skill of lesser importance.[20] Even if teachers want to teach improvisation to their students, they may not have been taught the requisite skills and may feel unable to teach improvisation. I do not think that teachers should teach what they do not understand, but the skill can be learned. Most teachers could easily learn to acquire more proficient improvisational skills through self-study and then teach those skills to their students. Yet there are simply not enough accessible and useful resources for teaching or learning improvisation for Classically-trained musicians. Textbooks on the subject are frequently outdated or impractical, while many standard method books either ignore the subject completely or address it less effectively than books that teach technique or repertoire.

For the purposes of the upcoming literature review, two popular American method books will be examined in detail, while others will be referred to briefly. Two specific methods were chosen because improvisation is a central component of both of their pedagogical systems, and both of them utilize textures that are more similar to Classical ones rather than jazz or blues textures. Specifically, the two methods are: Christopher Norton's *American Popular Piano* series, and Akiko and Forrest Kinney's *Pattern Play: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*. The

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[19] Mark Tanner, *The Mindful Pianist: Focus, Practise, Perform, Engage* (London: Faber Music, 2016), 108.

[20] NAfME *2014 Music Standards*: https://nafme.org/wp-content/files/2014/11/2014-Music-Standards-Guitar-Harmonizing-Instruments-Strand.pdf; NASM *Handbook 2019–19*: https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/01/M-2018-19-Handbook-1-7-2019.pdf.

former is available in eleven volumes and comprises two books at each level—*Etudes* and *Repertoire*. The latter, meanwhile, is available in six volumes and comprises one book at each level. The following primary questions will be considered to compare the methods and determine the quality of their pedagogical content:

1. Is the material well-structured, progressive, and sequential?
2. What practical practice techniques/recommendations are included?
3. Are teaching guidelines included?
4. How are the topics of rhythm and continuity (flow) addressed?
5. How are harmony and theory addressed?
6. Is the topic of stylistic improvisation addressed?
7. Which text is most effective for encouraging manageable practice exercises that can be incorporated into a regular routine?

These are some of the most important aspects of effective improvisation methodologies. If a method is not well-structured and sequential, the student will not be challenged according to their ability as they progress. The efficacy of the method as a practice aid at home and in the lesson is also important, as students often have difficulty regularly incorporating improvisation into their practice; consequently, concise instructions are necessary, especially for teachers who struggle with improvisation. Developing rhythmic awareness and theoretical understanding while learning to improvise is difficult, especially for young students, so this must be taken into account. Lastly, the question of whether or not styles are covered to any degree in the methods is meaningful, since the skills gained from learning to improvise in specific musical languages are significantly greater than those gained from exercises based on vaguer ideas, such as moods, note groups, or images.

Literature review

Although many improvisation method books other than *American Popular Piano* and *Pattern Play* exist, they will not be discussed in depth for the purposes of this overview, as most are based on jazz or blues exercises; consequently, only a few will be referenced here briefly. Lee Evans' series, *Discovering Blues Improvisation*, provides the student with series of skeletal pieces to use as the basis for an improvisation.[21] It is not really an improvisation methodology; rather, it is a toolkit to help the student create some basic improvised pieces in a jazz or blues style with little guidance or structure. Evans' method series would not be suitable for a beginner student, since the material starts off by assuming a significant amount of prior knowledge. Meanwhile, Bradley Sowash's *Creative Chords: Keyboard Improvisation Method* takes an all-encompassing approach to improvisation and the piano as a whole, giving the student technical exercises, theory, fully written-out pieces, and improvisation exercises.[22] While this all-purpose piano book may have certain benefits for a student simply wishing to learn the piano using standard pedagogical methods, it is not as effective as it could be as an improvisation methodology.

Christopher Azzara's *Developing Musicianship Through Improvisation* is an excellent series for developing improvisation skills, though it is not specifically intended for keyboard instruments.[23] Azzara's series is notable for its pedagogical strengths. Materials are well-organized, instructions are concise, and exercises are sequenced in order of difficulty. The focus

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[21] Lee Evans, *Discovering Blues Improvisation*, 2 vols. (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Piano Plus; Hal Leonard Corporation, 2006).
[22] Bradley Sowash, *Creative Chords: Keyboard Improvisation Method*, 2 vols. (San Diego, California: La Holla Music Company; Neil A. Kjos Music Company, 2015).
[23] Christopher D. Azzara, *Developing Musicianship Through Improvisation*, multiple series and vols. (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2006).

of these texts is the development of melodic and rhythmic improvisation skills through use of *solfège* and echoing exercises. Students are asked to improvise echo phrases after listening to tracks on an accompanying CD and create rhythmic patterns using nonsense syllables, using short lead sheets as inspiration. Although the text would be an excellent resource for developing students' aural abilities, it is not intended as a keyboard improvisation method. Further, stylistic improvisation is not addressed, so fluency of this kind could not be developed from it. Nonetheless, the method is designed extremely well and could be referenced as a model of improvisation exercises for a method on stylistic improvisation.

Glenn Mack's *Adventures in Improvisation at the Keyboard* is akin to a stylistic improvisation method book, providing useful patterns and textures for a student to learn some basic stylistic vocabulary.[24] However, the text is outdated and lacks important components. Firstly, the content is not structured sequentially; the student is expected to start off with basic five-finger pattern improvisations on p. 1 and quickly expand into multiple hand positions and self-accompaniment by p. 8. Modes are introduced in the second chapter, and octatonic improvisations are suggested by p. 13. There are no guides for the student to use the text at home or for the teacher to use the book in a lesson, and harmony and theory are not addressed; rather, theoretical knowledge is assumed. The best parts of the method are the example textures and patterns that are included for the student to use in their improvisations. These would be more useful if the exercises were presented in a way that allowed for sequential learning.

Another book that warrants mention in this section of the literary overview is Richard Grayson's self-published e-book, *Improvising at the* Keyboard.[25] Grayson was on the faculty at

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[24] Glenn Mack, *Adventures in Improvisation at the Keyboard* (Illinois: Summy-Birchard, 1970).
[25] Richard Grayson, *Improvising at the Keyboard* ([Los Angeles, California?]: n.p., 2014), https://sites.oxy.edu/rgrayson/Richard%20Grayson%20improvisation%20handbook.pdf.

Occidental College in California and was famous for his improvised concerts. In these, he took themes from the audience to improvise on in various styles. His book is the only one of its kind, providing the reader with a compact resource for improvising in the style of certain composers. Recordings of his improvisations are available on YouTube, demonstrating his extensive knowledge of various styles and the extent to which one can become acquainted with them.

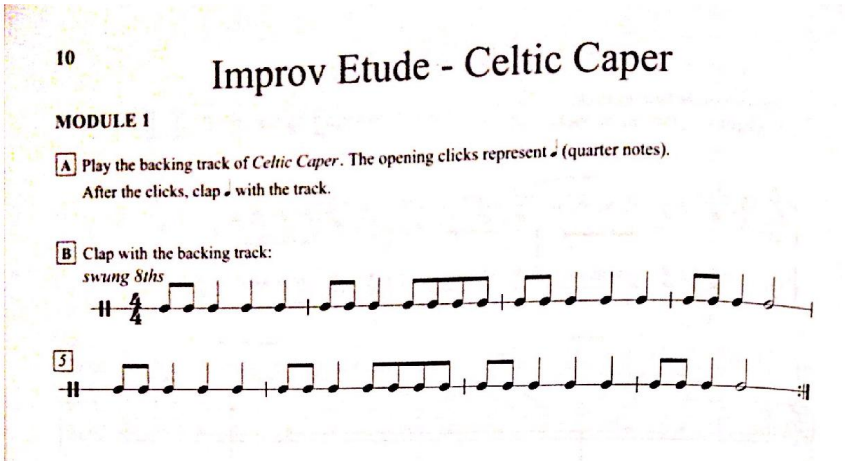
Unfortunately, although Grayson is an excellent improviser, his text has many weaknesses as a pedagogical tool. Knowledge of harmony is assumed, and the exercises are too difficult for most students at earlier stages in the learning process. Most exercises are based on advanced harmonic progressions, where the student is expected to improvise both chordal accompaniment and melodies at the same time. The material gets even more advanced as the book progresses; modulation, form, and counter melodies are all covered by p. 38. However, the extensive section on stylistic improvisation at p. 44 makes this text stand out from all others. In this chapter, Grayson provides many examples of textures and harmonic sequences in the styles of various composers for the student to use and incorporate into their own improvisations. Although the material is not sequenced in any way and would be far too difficult for most students to attempt, this is the only section of any method book that I am aware of that covers this topic in such detail.

Jazz-based methods that could inform a method on stylistic improvisation include Jamey Aebersold's *Miles of Modes*, which includes lead sheets with explanations of modes for the student to improvise with, and Coker et al.'s *Patterns for Jazz*, which provides hundreds of licks for students to use in their improvisations, based on various types of chords and harmonic

progressions.[26] Both of these methods pose pitch content, melodic patterns, and harmony (modal and tonal) as central to the process of learning to improvise, a structure that could be transferred to improvisation exercises in Western Art Music styles.

Christopher Norton's American Popular Piano

Norton's *American Popular Piano* series is a highly useful methodology with many inventive exercises for developing a student's improvisation skills while also helping them to learn standard repertoire pieces and play in ensemble settings.



Ex. 2.1 – *American Popular Piano 3 (Etudes)*, p. 10[27]

Example 2.1 shows the start of the *Celtic Caper* exercise from the level three *Etudes* book. It instructs the student to clap with the backing track for *Celtic Caper*; the inclusion of a backing track is useful, since it encourages the student to develop an internal sense of pulse and forces them to keep going while playing alongside it.

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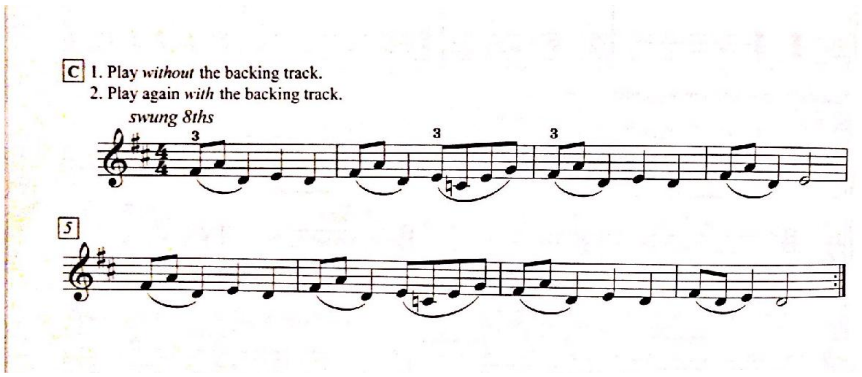
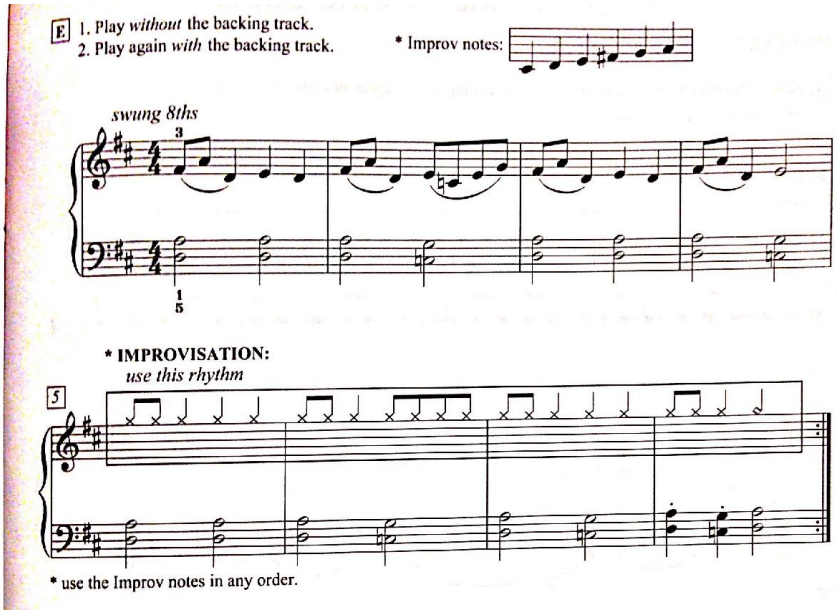
[26] Jamey Aebersold, *Play-A-Long: Miles of Modes*, 133 vols. (New Albany, Indiana: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 2007); Jerry Coker et al., *Patterns for Jazz* (Lebanon, Indiana: Studio P/R, 1970).
[27] Christopher Norton, *American Popular Piano 3: Etudes*, ed. Scott McBride Smith (Ontario, Canada: Novus Via Music Group, 2006), 10.



Ex. 2.2 – *American Popular Piano 3 (Etudes)*, p. 10[28]

Further down the page, the student is instructed to play their right hand and left hand with the backing track separately (Ex. 2.2). This is a useful way of practicing any piece—i.e., breaking it down into smaller, manageable chunks. Each of the exercises in Norton's series are logical and sequential in this way. This is certainly a good aspect of the method, since it is easy to follow and gives clear directions for both the teacher and student to follow.

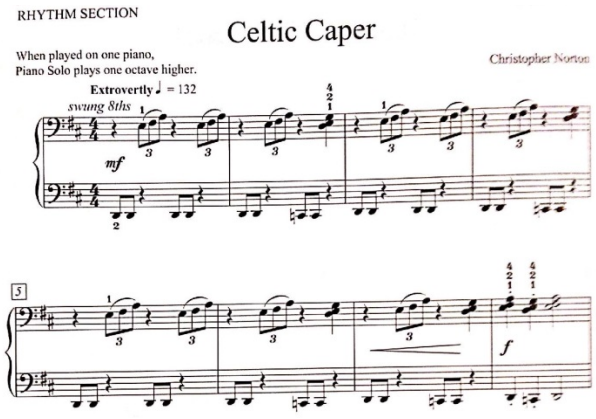


Ex. 2.3 – *American Popular Piano 3 (Etudes)*, p. 11

[28] Ibid.

Once the material has been broken down between the hands, the full texture is provided for the student to learn. At this stage, the second line contains unpitched rhythms for the right hand to use while improvising with a given set of notes (see Ex. 2.3). Questions are also included underneath the exercise to help the exploratory process, including: “Does each note sound good with the backing track?”; “Are you keeping a steady beat and staying with the backing track?”; “Play several different improvisations and choose your favorite. Play it for your teacher.” This helps the student become a true improviser by allowing them to determine the quality of their own improvisations immediately after they have played them. All of these exercises prepare the student to play the entire *Celtic Caper* “Performance Etude,” which is located on p. 51 of the *Etudes* book. The progression is logical and sequences the material nicely for the student, who might subsequently attempt to play an extended improvisation using the simple skeletal material.

A great benefit of the two-book system for each level is that the student can also practice playing the written-out or improvised versions of the piece with a partner using the *Repertoire* book. In this, a fully notated version of the piece from the *Etudes* book can be found alongside a rhythm section, such that the student can play alongside a friend or teacher instead of with the backing track (see an excerpt of the accompaniment part in Ex. 2.4).



Ex. 2.4 – *American Popular Piano 3 (Repertoire)*, p. 36.[29]

They can choose to play the fully notated part as a solo piece, or they can play their own improvised version. Either way produces different benefits for the student. Playing the improvised version encourages the student to approach the piece from the mindset of a composer rather than just a performer, crossing the boundary between these usually distinct modes of musicianship. Consequently, a teacher might find that the student has more stage confidence while playing the fully notated version, since they know the component parts of the music, including its pitch contents, harmony, and rhythms. Students will be less likely to have memory slips because of this and will be more likely to shape the music in a convincing way because of their embodiment of the musical material.

Overall, the *American Popular Piano* series is largely effective as a method for developing improvisational skills in students. Its emphasis on ensemble playing and the inclusion of a backing track CD works well to encourage a consistent rhythm while improvising, since the student is forced to keep going. As well as this, the use of two books for each level effectively juxtaposes the fully written-out material with easier exercises, helping the student to understand

[29] Christopher Norton, *American Popular Piano 3: Repertoire*, ed. Scott McBride Smith (Ontario, Canada: Novus Via Music Group, 2006), 36.

the score (found in the *Repertoire* book) from the perspective of the composer (when studying the broken-down components in the *Etude* book). Specific directions, concise instruction, and many musical examples make this method easy to incorporate into regular piano lessons.

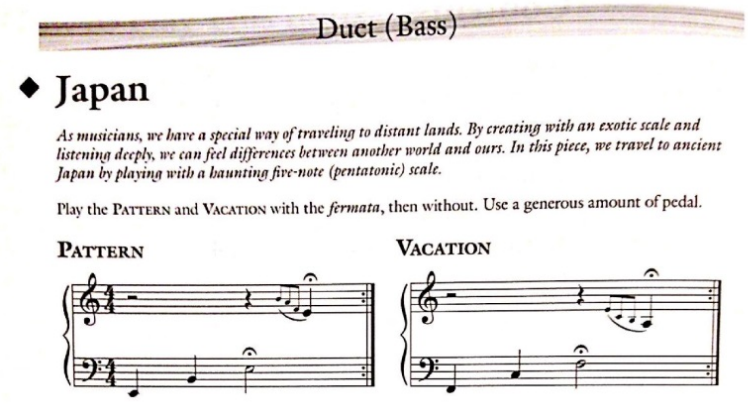
Negative aspects of the series include its lack of theoretical explanations, even in more advanced levels of the method. Students are told to use certain notes and rhythms but are given little explanation as to why. This might prevent a real understanding of musical syntax over time. Further, although different styles are included, there seems to be no logic to their order or sequencing; they are often difficult to distinguish and are only recognizable because of the musical material and the title hints (*Celtic Caper*, *Spider Blues*, etc.). Possibly the most inhibiting aspect of this method, however, is the lack of freedom that is given to the student. Everything is safe—with precise notes and rhythms given to improvise with, mostly in a single hand—and there is no real encouragement to venture outside of the skeletal material, even in the later levels. As a result, students could become dependent on the book and not be able to freely improvise their own harmonies and melodies.

Akiko and Forrest Kinney's *Pattern Play: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*

Pattern Play: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano comprises an entirely different, yet effective, system. Each of the six volumes are structured in the same way—every module is four pages long and comprises two modes of playing: duet and solo. Some also contain exercises for trios and quartets. Each module starts with the duet mode, placing an important emphasis on ensemble playing throughout the series. Further, the modules each comprise unique styles that contain distinctive pitch and rhythmic content without necessarily prescribing specific rhythms

or harmonies; this creates a sectioning of stylistic material within the book that is free enough to allow for a student's individuality in each exercise.

The first page of a module provides the bass part for a four-hand piano duet, as in Ex. 2.5. A "pattern" is given alongside a "vacation"; this is an inventive way of using very basic repeated material for improvisation, similar to how jazz musicians use chord progressions from lead sheets when learning to improvise. One player—usually the teacher—plays the basic pattern while the other improvises a melody on top, using material from the adjacent page. Positions can then be switched so that the person playing the melody plays the bass part.



Ex. 2.5 – *Pattern Play 2: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*, p. 4.[30]

The vacation material is ingenious—the person playing the bass can use this whenever they feel like it to alter the harmonic material. This forces the person playing with them to listen and react so they can alter their melody to fit the harmony when it changes. The vacation also highlights another important quality of this method—the imaginative writing that is used in conjunction with the exercises to inspire the improviser to create inventive musical ideas rather than just using a set of notes to create something that 'works.'

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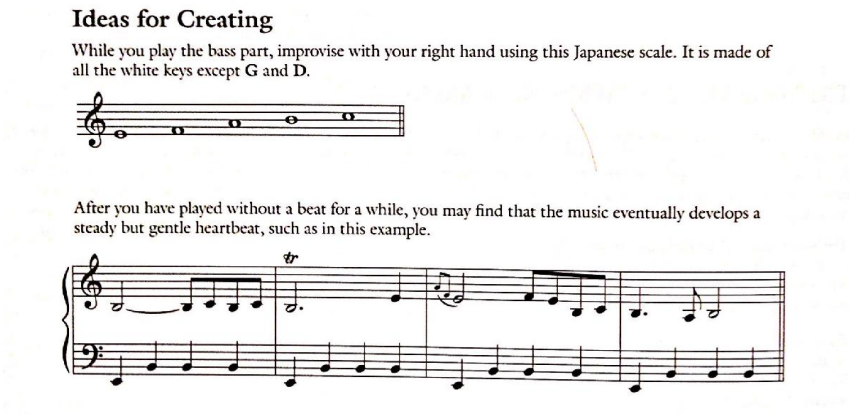
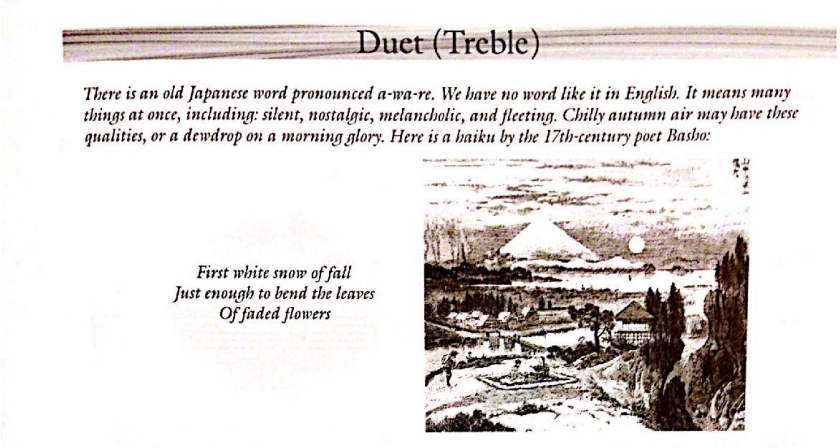
[30] Forrest and Akiko Kinney, *Pattern Play 2: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano* (Ontario, Canada: Frederick Harris Music, 2010), 4.



Ex. 2.6 – *Pattern Play 2: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*, p. 4.[31]

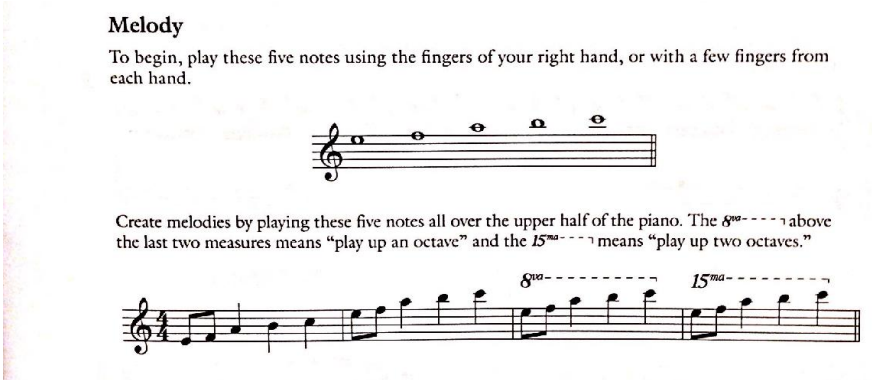
Further down the page, more ideas are provided to help the bass player be inventive with their part, including adding a countermelody to the melodic part played by the other person (see Ex. 2.6). The extent to which a student playing the bass part is free in this exercise is noteworthy. In contrast with the Norton series, the rhythms are freely alterable, as are the textures and range of the notes, to a degree. This creates many more opportunities for individuality and expressive inventiveness while still being constrained enough that there are rules to follow; this is an important aspect of a good improvisation methodology.

[31] Ibid.



Ex. 2.7 – *Pattern Play 2: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*, p. 5.[32]

Ex. 2.7 shows an important aspect of the *Pattern Play* method series that has already been mentioned—its language. By using creative images and evocative language, students are encouraged to be creative with their improvisations. This image and corresponding haiku are placed on the top of the second page of the *Japan* exercise, before the instruction on how to improvise the treble part of the duet.

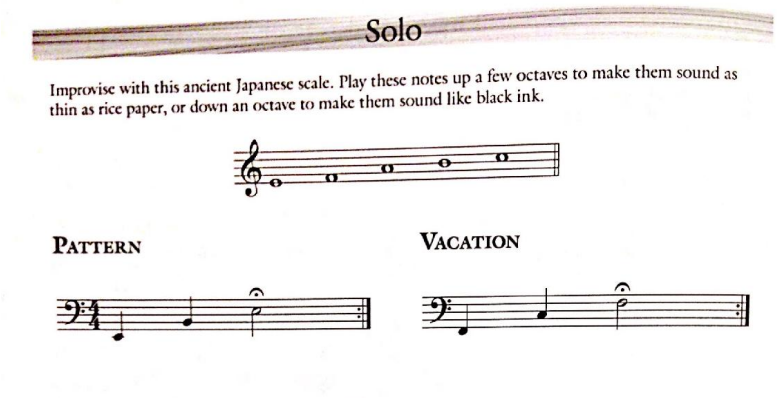


Ex. 2.8 – *Pattern Play 2: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*, p. 5.

For the melody of the person playing the treble part, five main notes are given to improvise with. The instructions are that these should be played "all over the upper half of the piano";

[32] Ibid., 5.

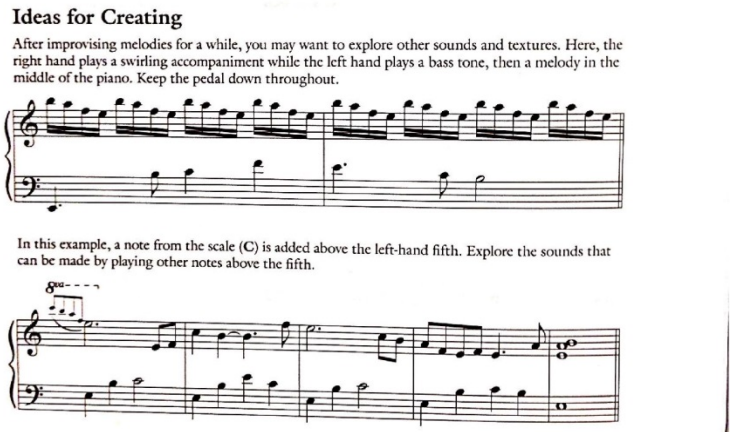
encouragement is given to use as much of the instrument as possible. A small amount of theory is provided underneath this; in this case, it is an explanation of the Phrygian mode. While this is an admirable endeavor to provide context to the student, the briefness of the digression makes it somewhat unnecessary; it might have been more effective if the theoretical concepts that are discussed could have been followed up with in subsequent chapters of the method.



Ex. 2.9 – *Pattern Play 2: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*, p. 6.[33]

Over the page, instructions are given on how to use the treble and bass duet material to improvise a solo piece. The student is reminded of the melodic notes for the right hand as well as the "pattern" and "vacation" material for the left hand. Further down, patterns are given so that the student can "explore other sounds and textures," seen in Ex. 2.10. These are much like the *solfeggi* of *partimenti* or licks (or even full transcriptions) that jazz musicians might study to expand their improvisational vocabulary.

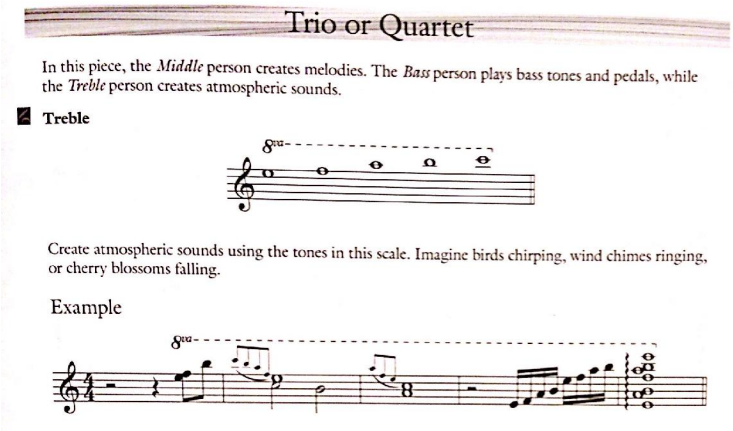
[33] Ibid., 6.



Ex. 2.10 – *Pattern Play 2: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*, p. 6.

Instructions are given on how to turn the piece into a trio, quartet, or larger ensemble on the last page of the exercise (Ex. 2.11). The authors provide the following guide on how to use this section at the start of the book: "If you have two pianos, four people can play. Usually this is simply a matter of two people taking turns playing the *Treble* part. If you have more than four people, play 'musical chairs' by taking turns playing the parts *without stopping the flow of the music*!"[34] This is a great resource for any type of group activity; it could be used in a class piano setting, a studio, or among friends.

[34] Ibid., inside cover.


Trio or Quartet

In this piece, the *Middle* person creates melodies. The *Bass* person plays bass tones and pedals, while the *Treble* person creates atmospheric sounds.

Treble

Create atmospheric sounds using the tones in this scale. Imagine birds chirping, wind chimes ringing, or cherry blossoms falling.

Example

Ex. 2.11 – *Pattern Play 2: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano*, p. 7.

Overall, the *Pattern Play: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano* series is very successful in creating useful, imaginative improvisation exercises that could easily be incorporated into a typical piano lesson. Instructions are succinct and precise to allow for a directed focus of attention that is not too broad, but at the same time the exercises are open enough to provide creative freedom for both the student and teacher. The imaginative writing that accompanies the exercises is one of the best aspects of the series, encouraging the student's imagination, which is one of the most important aspects of successful improvisation. Further, the emphasis on ensemble playing forces the student to listen and keep a steady rhythmic pulse while improvising.

Negative aspects of the methodology include its somewhat tangential theoretical instruction, which could lead to a lack of understanding of the theoretical side of improvisation, as well as its lack of diversity of real styles rather than simply varying moods. Like the Norton series, improvisation in the styles of Western Art Music is not addressed at all; this poses a significant gap for the student who wishes to develop improvisational fluency. Ultimately, however, this method series is a more successful and effective venture than the *American Popular Piano* series.

The comparative analysis covered within this short study leaves a simple conclusion—more work needs to be done to fill the gaps in improvisation pedagogy. One of the main issues with the materials that are currently available is that they are not structured in a way that encourages regular practice of improvisation at home. Either the material is inaccessible because it is too rigid and there are too many rules to follow, or the material is too vague, resulting in the student not having enough guidance on how to develop their playing in a structured manner. The *Pattern Play* series comes close to achieving the proper balance, but it is missing another essential ingredient: stylistic improvisation. None of the method books that were examined for this study address improvising in the styles of Western Art Music to any significant degree. This is important, as the learning potential for a student improviser is significantly greater when attempting to mimic the styles of past eras and composers. Ex. 2.12 provides a selected list of topic areas that are developed simply by attempting to imitate a particular style.

Baroque	Classical	Romantic	20th Century
• Imitation • Active left hand • Sequences • Call and response • Ornamentation • Voice leading • Fugue • Agogic/tonic accents	• Alberti bass • More virtuosic • Singing melodies • More adventurous harmony • Articulation • Surprise • Rests	• Intensity • Melodies in different voices • Rubato/timing • Wide variety of textures • Complex chromaticism • Extreme registers • Left hand patterns	• Non-tonal harmonies • Modes • Percussive rhythms • Extensive use of dissonant intervals • Polyrhythms

Ex. 2.12 – List of selected improvisational topics to study by era

This list could be expanded to include more styles, including Impressionistic music or Renaissance music, or it could include more specific elements, such as individual composers. Even at the most basic level of improvisation, developing and working on these elements is possible. Consequently, I think that a method book should exist that is structured around this idea, containing elements of stylistic improvisation from the most basic level (e.g., rhythmic improvisation) to the most advanced (e.g., fugal improvisation).

Much more could be done if future pianists are to be taught stylistic improvisation. A method book that sequences different styles of Western Art Music with evocative language and imagery, succinct instruction, inclusion of ensemble exercises, varied activities, and a comprehensive breakdown of patterns and textures into styles, composers, and forms would allow teachers to encourage their students to practice the material in an easily approachable way

from an early age. Regular practice of this material could allow for a higher level of musicianship to take place within conservatories and music schools. The next section of this document will explore an outline for such a method, providing example exercises that build on the conclusions gathered from this short study.

Developing an outline for a preliminary-level method book on stylistic improvisation

Over the past few decades, research on the effectiveness of various methods of improvisation pedagogy has increased significantly. However, the plethora of methods that exist on improvisation in different styles—though not the styles of Western Art Music—has resulted in the research being somewhat scattered and difficult to draw conclusions from. If a new method book on stylistic improvisation is to profit from this research, it seems appropriate that the principles it is based on might reflect its ultimate purpose of creating proficiency in various Western Art Music styles. Consequently, research that focuses on acquisition of harmonic and stylistic fluency and the cognitive functions that underlie this process will be examined to inform the development of the new method, as opposed to research that deals with other aspects of improvisation learning.

Biasutti proposes an interesting five-dimensional model that is process-oriented and based on cognitive research.[35] The five dimensions of his model include: anticipation, use of repertoire, emotive communication, feedback, and flow. Exercises based on anticipation (planning of improvisations), in particular, rarely occurred in the methods that were examined in the previous section of this document. Further, although ideas for motives and certain textural

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[35] Michele Biasutti, "Pedagogical Applications of Cognitive Research on Musical Improvisation," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, article 614 (2015): 6, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00614.

patterns appeared regularly in the methods, real study of repertoire—including form, harmony, and idioms—did not. Such exercises could be highly useful for students to practice, and as a result, some exercises for the new method will incorporate these ideas.

Huovinen, Tenkanen, and Kuusinen make an interesting assertion in relation to the types of instructions that typically exist in improvisation pedagogy.[36] In their view, two different approaches broadly exist—the "dramaturgical" and the "music-theoretical." The former centers on personal expression and often incorporates descriptive, abstract, or evocative verbiage, while the latter uses music theory to help students understand improvisation. Huovinen et al. notice, however, that these approaches are difficult to reconcile and put into practice. This was demonstrated in this document in the literature review; neither Norton's nor Kinney's books incorporate theory to a significant degree, while other methods, such as Ann Collins's *Jazz Works*, focus so much on theory that the exercises are difficult to put into practice.[37] In their study of learning outcomes for these two methods using computers and human experts, Huovinen et al. ultimately conclude that "our results confirm some important aspects of a trade-off between the music-theoretical and the dramaturgical," implying that both are necessary for successful improvisation learning.[38] This is important to consider for a method, even if a healthy balance between the music-theoretical and dramaturgical models is difficult to achieve. One conclusion could be that theoretical exercises might be presented in a way that promotes conceptual understanding through physical practice rather than a more traditional method of

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[36] Erkki Huovinen, Atte Tenkanen, and Vesa-Pekka Kuusinen, "Dramaturgical and Music-Theoretical Approaches to Improvisation Pedagogy," *International Journal of Music Education* 29, no. 1 (February 2011): 82–100, https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761410372761.
[37] Ann Collins, *Jazz Works: Beginning Techniques for Intermediate- to Advanced-Level Pianists* (California: Alfred Music Publishing, 2000).
[38] Huovinen et al., "Dramaturgical and Music-Theoretical Approaches," 96.

writing answers onto paper. Further, evocative language could play an important role in the effectiveness of the exercises.

One of the most well-known and often-cited papers on improvisation pedagogy is John Kratus's *A Developmental Approach to Teaching Music Improvisation*, in which he discusses a method to sequence the early stages of improvisation learning to more advanced ones.[39] His approach lays out the following seven levels of development that learners go through, regardless of age or ability: exploration, process-oriented improvisation, product-oriented improvisation, fluid improvisation, structural improvisation, stylistic improvisation, and personal improvisation.[40] It is interesting that he places stylistic improvisation at level six, posing it as one of the most challenging forms of improvisation. This assertion is purposefully contradicted in this document, where stylistic improvisation is posited as something that can be achieved at every level of music learning, though the difficulty of the exercises changes. Nonetheless, his outline of difficulty levels for improvisation learning has implications for a successful method book. Firstly, students at early stages of development might not be able to incorporate structural or formal designs within their improvisations; rather, useful exercises might include repeated patterns or a focus on one textural or melodic idea. Once students have some fluency, they can then move on to structural improvisation, though other elements may be introduced before they reach this. Secondly, the role of the instructor varies from stage to stage. Teachers can focus on elements particular to each stage of improvisation learning rather than introduce students to broader concepts too early. The new method book might be formed in such a way as to facilitate

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[39] John Kratus, "A Developmental Approach to Teaching Music Improvisation," *International Journal of Music Education* 26, no. 1 (November 1995): 27–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/025576149502600103.
[40] Ibid., 30.

this natural progression from one stage to the other. All of the above ideas will be taken and combined in the proposed new method book for stylistic improvisation.

Overview of the method book

Taking into consideration the historical practices of improvisation, conclusions from analysis of current method books, and ideas from the available research on improvisation pedagogy, the groundwork will now be laid out for a stylistic improvisation method. It should be borne in mind, however, that the ideas discussed in this section will remain in a period of gestation until the method is finalized. As with most piano method books, the new method will be divided into a number of levels for students of various abilities, starting with a 'preliminary' book and subsequently working up to higher levels. Since the focus of the method is stylistic improvisation, each level will break down into various subsections that cover specific styles. These styles will remain the same from each level to the next and will be in chronological order; specifically, these will be: Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Impressionistic, and Late Romantic/20th Century. As well as this, in the later stages of the method, these individual styles will again divide into smaller segments that cover specific composers from each style period. A full list of these subsections is in the table below.

Baroque	Classical	Romantic	Late Romantic/20th Century
• Bach	• Haydn	• Chopin	• Rachmaninoff
• Scarlatti	• Mozart	• Liszt	• Schoenberg
	• Beethoven	• Brahms	• Bartók
	• Schubert	• Grieg	• Prokofiev
			• Debussy
			• Ravel

Ex. 3.1 – Subsections of the new method book

Although the composers chosen for these sections are largely arbitrary, effort has been made to choose those who represent the widest possible variety of styles and textures for the piano. In order for logical sequencing of materials within each level to occur, these composers will remain constant throughout the various levels, which unfortunately neglects innumerable other great composers, and even other styles; however, narrowing the selection is a necessary stage of developing the method. To counteract this limiting effect, students will be encouraged to replicate the exercises in the book for other composers and styles they are interested in. Note that the selection of composers grows larger as diversity of style increases within each era, broadly speaking. This is another attempt to introduce the student to as many different styles as possible within each level of the method book. Ultimately, it is hoped that the range of styles covered would allow a student to branch off into related, distant, or even personal styles without too much difficulty, given their acquaintance with the diverse musical languages of these composers.

Specific areas of focus in the method will include: Rhythm—prompts at the beginnings of exercises will address this by encouraging the student to improvise rhythms for their melodies in advance of playing them or singing them. Exercises will also include repetitive rhythmic

structures for the student to adhere to, since many exercises will include ostinato bass patterns. Textural awareness—example accompaniment patterns and melodic shapes will provide the student with improvisational vocabulary. Aural perception—accompanying audio files will aid the student's ability to perceive melodic shapes, textural patterns, harmonic progressions, and transfer them to their own improvisations. Phrase length and structure—exercises will be presented largely in conventional four- or eight-bar phrases so that the student intuitively feels the standard phrase lengths. Through this process, they will also become more aware of deviations from regular four-bar phrases when they occur in higher levels of the method. Discourse consistency—students will gain self-awareness with regard to their improvisations as they move through the exercises. Specific and directed guidelines will help the student and teacher analyze improvisations to ensure that appropriate pitch collections are used and that rhythms are intentional. Stylistic exploration—students will be encouraged to examine both standard repertoire pieces and the accompanying audio files to find musical elements to include in their own improvisations. Regularity of practice—the inclusion of guided sections for practice at home will ensure students work regularly to improve their improvisations. This is a central part of the method, as improvisation practice is often neglected at home. Harmonic and theoretical awareness—students will learn theory through practicing harmony at the keyboard. This will be sequenced through each level so that the student can gain harmonic fluency over time.

The series will comprise ten levels, from preliminary to level 9. The complexity of the materials will increase with each level, as laid out in the following table:

Level	Goals
Preliminary Level	*Harmonic*: Basic chord progressions; 'extra' (non-standard, such as secondary dominants) chords only in breakaway patterns *General*: Short, one-voice melodies within a rhythmic framework
Level 1	*Harmonic*: Short fill-in-the-gaps exercises introduced; minor tonalities *General*: Longer melodies; basic ability in self-accompaniment
Level 2	*Harmonic*: Longer fill-in-the-gaps exercises introduced *General*: Basic sense of style; more intentionality
Level 3	*Harmonic*: Fill-in-the-gaps exercises asking for 'extra' chords *General*: Further intentionality and accuracy; chromatic melodies; student can string several phrases together to form complete improvisations
Level 4	*Harmonic*: Fill-in-the-gaps exercises with modulation to a closely-related key *General*: Basic fluency in most era styles; student's 'individual voice' starts to emerge; public improvisation explored
Level 5	*Harmonic*: Fill-in-the-gaps exercises asking with modulation to closely-related key and back *General*: Exploration of the styles of individual composers; focus on natural flow and expressivity of melodies; motivic consistency
Level 6	*Harmonic*: Fill-in-the-gaps exercises with more complex modulation; figured bass introduced; focus on voice leading (chorale textures) *General*: Flexibility of technique and virtuosic improvisational patterns; multiple voices within textures; more frequent public improvisations
Level 7	*Harmonic*: Harmonic goal points given, but no other materials

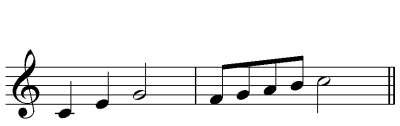
	General: Basic fluency in styles of individual composers; ability to identify patterns and idioms specific composers and replicate them in every key; improvisations based on given themes
Level 8	*Harmonic*: Full small-scale structures based on chord progressions (ABA, for example) *General*: Consistent improvisational flow; focus on sound and expression rather than harmony and notes; natural sense of style
Level 9	*Harmonic*: Full large-scale structures based on chord progressions (sonata form, for example) *General*: Stylistic individuality; frequent public improvisations; fluency in all styles; consistency of form, motive, and expression

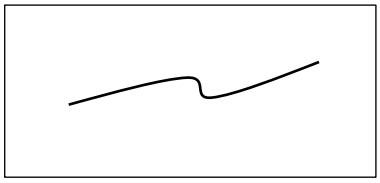
Ex. 3.2 – Curriculum of the method

This structure ensures that the method will challenge the student at every level of their development, inviting them to constantly develop their abilities and the standards of their improvisations.

Each section of the method book will include elements of each facet of Michele Biasutti's model of anticipation, use of repertoire, emotive communication, feedback, and flow. Anticipation will be encouraged by having students roughly plan their improvisation before they play. A small area for scratch notes will be provided on each page for this purpose, and short directions will be given with the exercise, such as: "Plan your improvisation by drawing the melodic shape in the scratch box." For example, a student might draw—and subsequently improvise—the following shape:

Use this space to plan your melody!





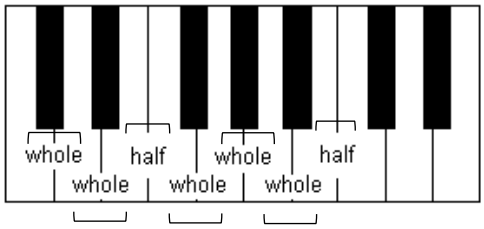
Ex. 3.3 – Example planned melody

Regarding repertoire, students will be provided with brief written-out examples to examine at every level that are related to the particular textures and harmonic progressions that are used for the exercises at that level. An accompanying CD or accessible online mp3 files will also provide examples of the styles they are imitating. Emotive communication will also be encouraged through evocative language and imagery, similar to those found in the Kinney method (see Ex. 2.7). 'Question and answer' exercises for work with partners will allow feedback to be given to the student, while clear exercises and goals will promote states of flow. Further, the exercises will be at a level at which the student is challenged and yet feels encouraged to keep playing and trying new things. As well as this, Kratus's seven developmental levels will be taken into consideration when determining the difficulty of the exercises, and the research conclusions from the study done by Huovinen et al. will be borne in mind, being careful to strike a healthy balance between theoretical and dramaturgical instruction. Specific examples of exercises from each portion of the method at different levels will now be given to see how all of these elements might take shape.

Examples of Baroque exercises

Starting with the Baroque period, opportunities will exist for the student to focus on the fundamentals of improvisation. From day one of studying with this method, they will be introduced to the concepts of counterpoint and harmony, as even a basic exercise will have some harmonic movement, and most of the beginner exercises will focus on two contrapuntal voices.

At this level of the method, generic Baroque traits will form the basis of the exercises, as the idiosyncrasies of individual composers are too subtle to include; however, the specific sections on composers in Ex. 3.1 will occur in later levels. For the first exercise in the preliminary-level book, the student will initially explore the concept of five-finger patterns and whole steps and half steps. These can be played in any key, but the student will first start with C, G, and F. The top of the page might include an explanation similar to the following:[41]



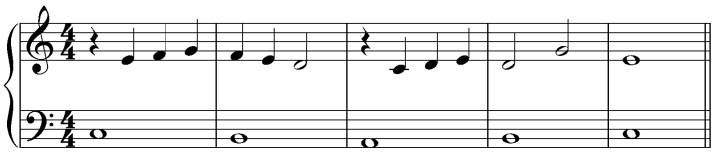
Whole and half steps
Half step = No notes in between
Whole step = One note in between

Can you find other whole and half steps on the piano?

Ex. 3.4 – Explanation of whole and half steps

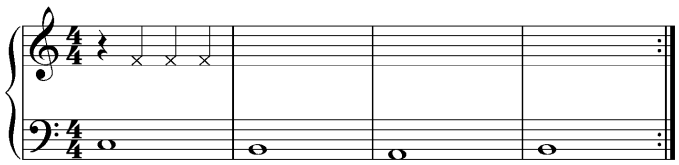
Explanation of the whole-whole-half-whole pattern that underlies the basic five-finger pattern will occur alongside this; the student should try to find as many five-finger patterns as they can in different registers of the instrument. The next instruction will be to listen to one or two of the Baroque-style improvisations on the accompanying CD or mp3 files to get a feel for the style. Once the student is feeling interested in the musical language and is excited about learning the style, the student can practice the first improvisation exercise. One exercise that would suit well at this initial stage would be a simple bass line, repeated indefinitely. The notes used here will be do–ti–la–ti, and the student will be encouraged to improvise on top. A fully-notated version of the exercise will appear alongside this so that the teacher can demonstrate it, as in the following example:

[41] Image downloaded from: http://www.teoria.com/en/reference/u-v-w/whole-half.php.



Ex. 3.5 – Example of a fully-notated do–ti–la–ti exercise

The student could then use the bass line to improvise using notes from the five-finger pattern, and they could plan the shape of their melody in the scratch box, as in Ex. 3.3. Instructions will encourage them to start with longer note values (half notes, for example) and progress to shorter values, as in the example below:

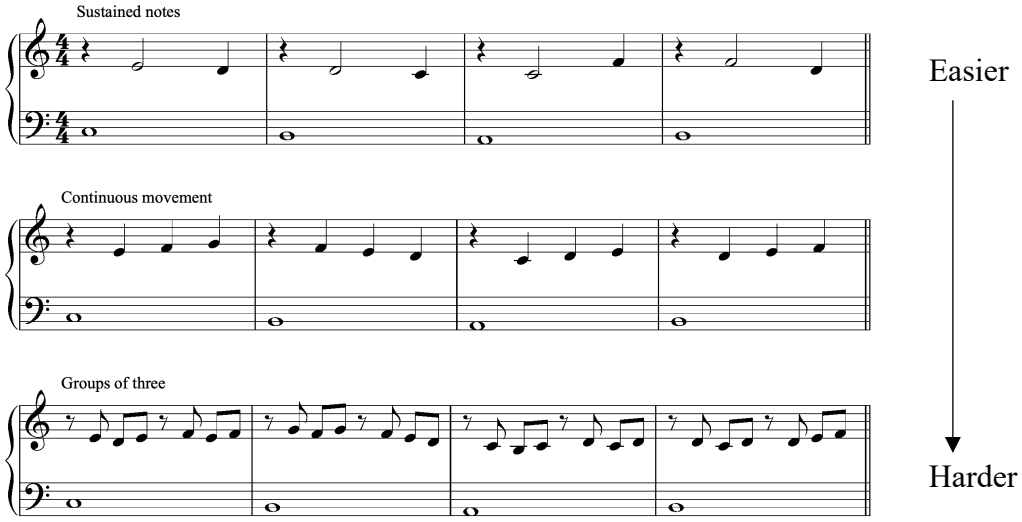


Improvise using the five-finger pattern! Ask yourself: How would Bach have improvised?

Use **long** notes first, then use **shorter** notes.

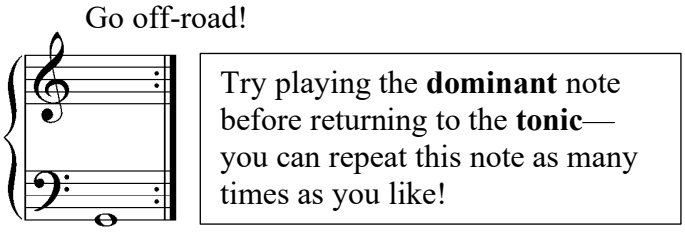
Ex. 3.6 – Example of a skeletal do–ti–la–ti exercise

Options will also exist for more elaborate versions of the exercise, such as improvising with the whole major scale in the right hand instead of with a five-finger pattern. Further, example patterns for the right hand will be given, rated from ‘easier’ to ‘harder,’ so that the student can experiment with different types of patterns while they improvise. The following is an example of this:



Ex. 3.7 – Patterns for the right hand

Other simple bass lines will appear for the student to practice improvising over; for example, do–sol–la–ti or do–mi–fa–re. Each bass line will be in a different time signature and will incorporate a different hand position for the student to try. This will give them different options to vary their practice so that they remain interested. A breakaway pattern will also be included so that the ostinato bass is changeable. Inspired by Kinney's ingenious vacation idea from *Pattern Play*, this will allow the student a greater level of freedom to be creative, since they will be able to determine how long the phrases of their improvisations are. An example of this is shown below:

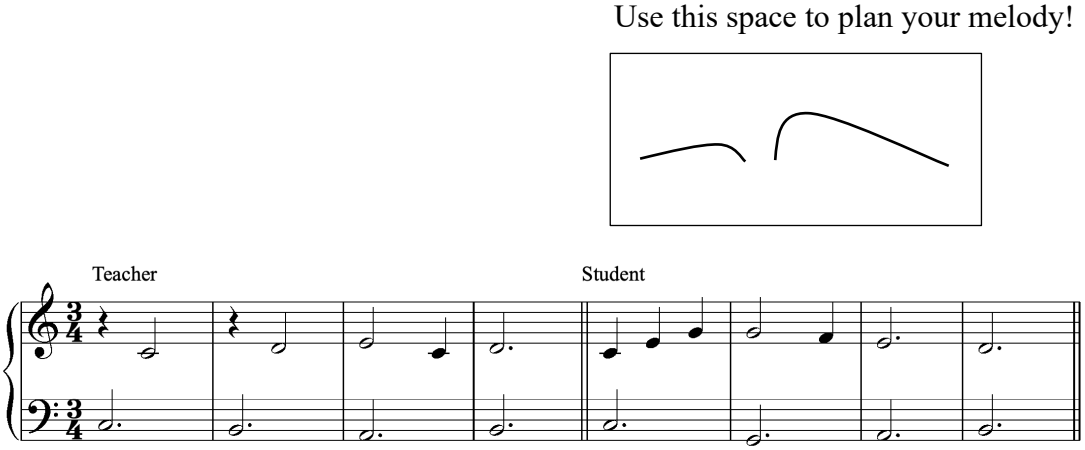


Ex. 3.8 – Breakaway pattern

The student will next try these exercises in different keys, having been prepared to do so after exploring different five-finger patterns prior to starting the solo exercises. This is an important

part of improvisation exercises in general, as fluency in every key is a necessary part of becoming acquainted with harmonic language. Fun pictures will also appear alongside the pages of these exercises, since the preliminary-level book will be primarily used by children and young adults. An example of this might be a picture of someone riding a dirt bike next to the "Go off-road!" exercise.

The next segment of the Baroque chapter of the method will focus on ensemble playing. Playing with others is a fundamental part of learning to improvise; in doing so, states of flow can occur more naturally, since students who are prone to over-thinking while playing are forced to engage more with their ear and trust their abilities. The first portion will be a call-and-response exercise in which the teacher could improvise a melody for the right hand while using one of the bass patterns from the solo exercises in the left hand. The student could then respond with a different pattern in the left hand while improvising a melody in the right hand. The nature of this highly dynamic and interactive ensemble practice would facilitate the student's development of pulse and overall form in their melodies, as they are encouraged to respond to the character of the antecedent phrase with a consequent shape. Again, the scratch box from Ex. 3.3 would be useful for this exercise, so it will be replicated beside the instructions. The result might resemble the following example:



Ex. 3.9 – Call-and-response exercise

This could be easily reversed so that the student starts and the teacher responds, and the "off-road" element could also be included; these variations would appear in the instructions for the exercise.

The final Baroque exercise ventures into an area of almost complete freedom for the improvisers. The goal is for either the student or teacher to improvise a bass line similar to those used in the previous exercises. The other person would then follow, improvising a complementary melody. Real-time response is a central aspect of good improvisation, based on Biasutti's learning dimension of "feedback," which was discussed earlier. Consequently, this exercise would be highly valuable to practice for any aspiring improviser, even for those who are just starting. An example of this exercise could take the following form:

Follow the Leader! – Plan out the following elements:

Time signature	Key	Who leads?
4/4	D maj	Ⓣ/ S

RH thumb on:	LH thumb on:
T: S: A	T: D S:

Ex. 3.10 – Following an improvised bass line

The last portion of the Baroque chapter would include a daily practice guide for students to use at home. This is an aspect of other method books that works extremely well, encouraging students to engage with the material regularly outside of the lesson. One example of a book that includes a practice section such as this is Helen Marlais' *Sight Reading and Rhythm Every Day*.[42]

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[42] Helen Marlais, *Sight Reading and Rhythm Every Day*, 14 vols. (Florida: FJH Music, 2005).

Marlais includes different exercises for the student to complete five days out of the week while at home, and each day has a tick box next to it so that the student can indicate whether or not the exercises were completed. The following example is based on this format:

Day 1 ☐ Did it!

- Write down the five-finger pattern using W or H:_____
- Now, play the five-finger pattern in the following keys: C, F, A, E
- Improvise a melody using the following bass line. Draw the shape of your melody in the scratch box provided.

Use this space to plan your melody!

Ex. 3.11 – An example practice day from the practice section of the Baroque chapter

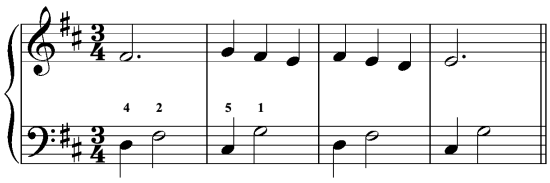
This is an essential part of the method, since it gives students structure when practicing at home. As with all other keyboard skills, improvisation must be practiced regularly in order for progress to occur. Although this does not guarantee the student will practice each day, it makes it far more likely and allows parents and teachers to check to make sure they are practicing each exercise.

Examples of Classical exercises

In each book of the method series, the exercises will progress naturally from the easier Baroque exercises to slightly more complex Classical ones and eventually on to more complex Romantic and 20th-Century textures. This paces the material nicely throughout each book in such

a way that each chapter poses a slightly greater challenge for the student. Exercises in the Classical portion of the method will focus on counterpoint, similar to the Baroque exercises, but there will be more emphasis on distinctly Classical patterns, including a reduced version of Alberti bass for the left hand and more difficult melodic sequences for the right hand. This section will not be covered as in-depth, since many of the principles will remain the same from chapter to chapter. Again, generic traits will form the basis of the exercises in this chapter, though the styles of specific composers will occur in later levels of the method.

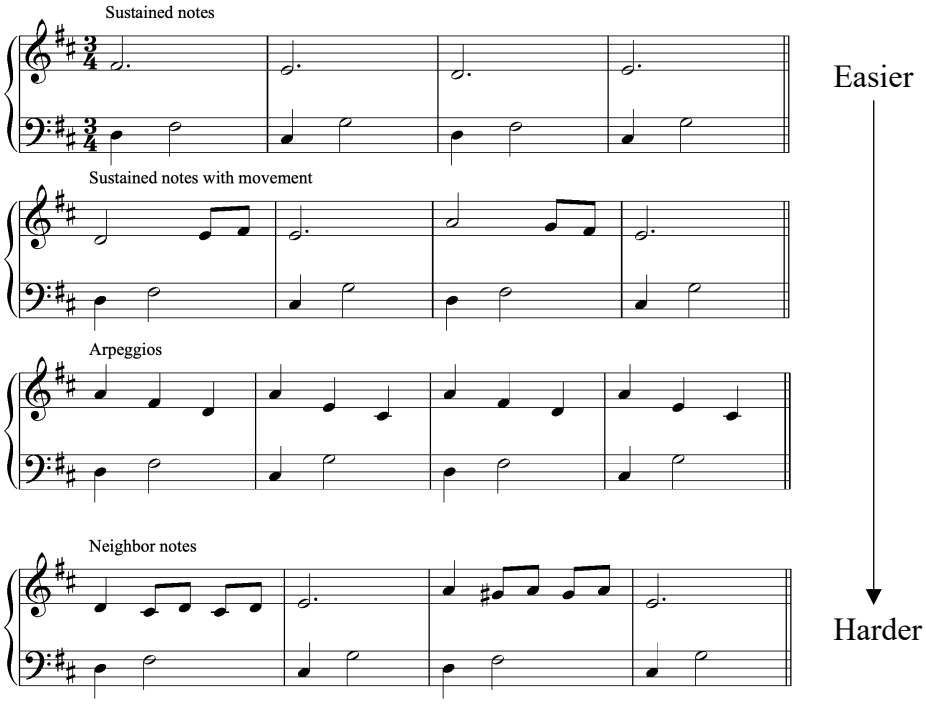
As with the Baroque exercises, the Classical exercises will be based on five-finger patterns. The diagram from Ex. 3.4 will appear at the top of the page, and the student will again explore the patterns in different areas of the piano. In this chapter, however, they will try more difficult keys, including D, A, and B-flat. After doing this, the student will listen to the example Classical improvisations on the accompanying CD or downloadable mp3 files. Questions might accompany the listening exercises, asking the student what they notice about the left-hand passagework, or prompting them to notice the difference between the Classical and Baroque styles. The teacher will demonstrate the written-out version of the first exercise (see Ex. 3.12), and the student will subsequently practice it by themselves by improvising material in the right hand. Note that as the textures and patterns get more advanced throughout the method, the student will be encouraged to see connections that make the patterns intuitive. In the example below, for example, the notes in the second measure of the left hand are one half-step away from the notes in the first measure. Asking the student to find physical connections such as this is an excellent way for them to develop improvisational fluency, as the intervallic relationship between the notes remains the same in every key.



How do the left-hand notes in measure two relate to the left-hand notes in measure one? Can you find a pattern? Ask your teacher to help you.

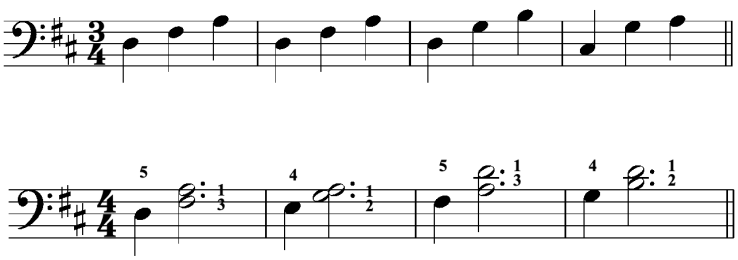
Ex. 3.12 – Written-out example of a Classical improvisation

The student should improvise on the repeated bass pattern, starting with long notes in the right hand and progressing to short notes (see ex. 3.6). Melodic patterns will then appear, but in this chapter, they be slightly more complex, as in the example below.



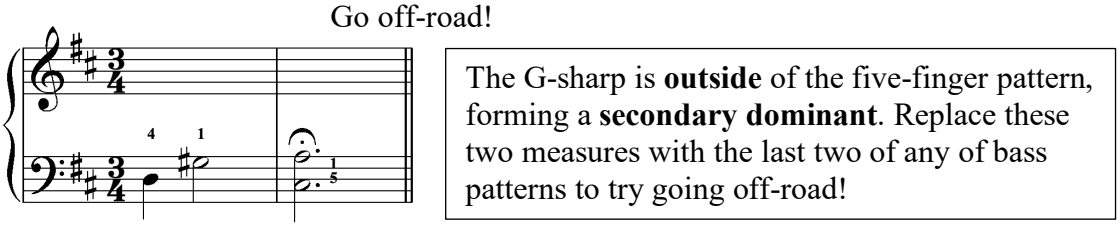
Ex. 3.13 – Patterns for the right hand

Different bass patterns will subsequently be given, though these will be more complex than in the Baroque chapter. The following are examples of this:



Ex. 3.14 – Ostinato bass lines

The student should try to play all of these exercises in different keys, particularly in D, A, and B-flat. Meanwhile, the breakaway pattern for this section will be more complex than in the first, introducing the student to the concept of secondary dominants. Although this is quite advanced for learners at this stage, introducing it in a way that is digestible allows the student to understand its feel before its function, resulting in a more intuitive understanding of harmony.



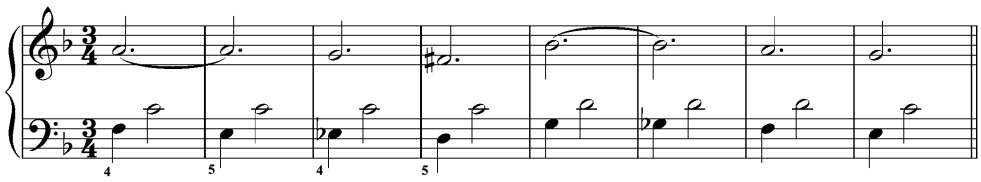
Ex. 3.15 – Breakaway pattern

All of the same ensemble exercises from the Baroque chapter will occur at the end of this chapter, using the same methods outlined in Ex. 3.9–3.11. Including these is an extremely important aspect of the method, allowing the student to develop the basic textures that were learned in the first chapter by expanding them to the more complex left-hand patterns, more advanced keys, and more challenging rhythms in the second. If the leap from chapter one to two is too much for a student, it would be possible to simply repeat the exercises in chapter one for a second or third week until sufficient fluency with the exercises is reached. The daily practice guide will also occur at the end of the chapter to give guidance for home practice throughout the week.

Examples of Romantic exercises

Progressing to the Romantic era in the preliminary level book, the student will start to explore chromatic harmonies. They will improvise more complex melodies, with chromatic passing and neighbor notes, and hand position will be more fluid, with the left hand moving into multiple positions within the ostinato line. These comprise some of the generic traits of keyboard music from the Romantic era, introducing the student to the 'feel' of the language from this time period. This is a natural progression in difficulty from the previous chapter and will pose a significant challenge to any student moving sequentially from chapter to chapter.

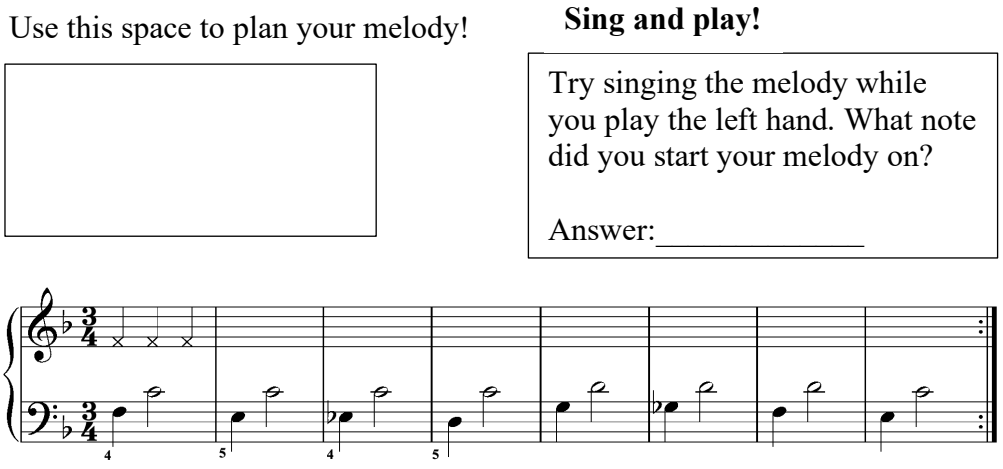
At this stage, the entire major scale will appear for the student to reference from at the start of the chapter. As in Ex. 3.4, the whole and half steps will be made clear in a diagram form, and an explanation will occur beside it with encouragement to find different scales all over the instrument, focusing on the ones that have already been mentioned: C, G, F, D, A, and B-flat. Again, the student and teacher will listen to the accompanying example improvisations to get acquainted with the musical language, and the teacher will provide a demonstration of the first bass pattern by playing the written-out version below. Here, the left hand comprises a descending chromatic line with a repeated note on top; the student should try to notice the pattern.



Ex. 3.16 – Written-out example of Romantic exercise

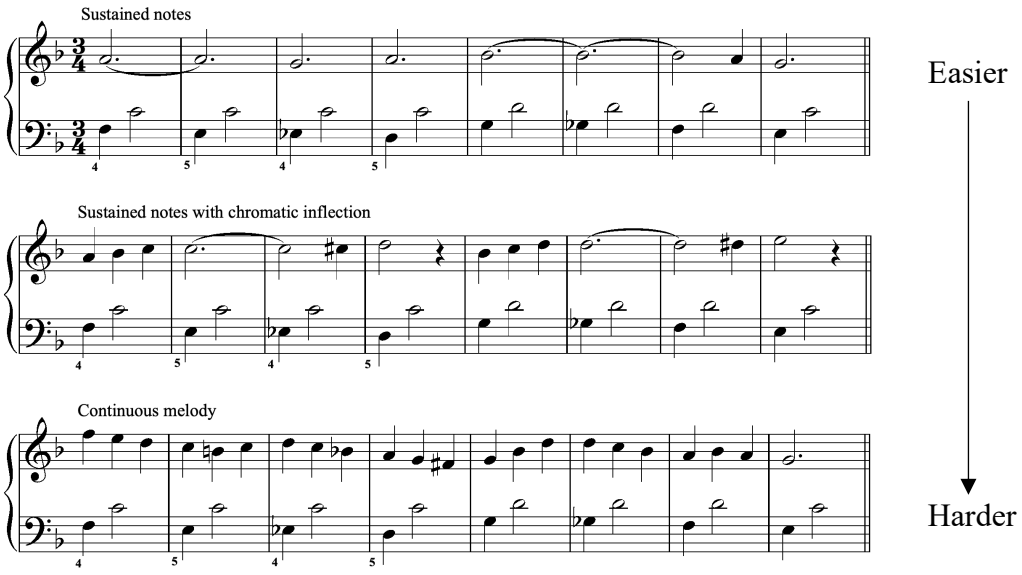
Since this is the first time the student will move outside the realm of the five-finger pattern when improvising a melody, a new concept will be introduced to aid the development of aural skills—sing and play. In this exercise, the student will sketch their melody onto paper first.

This might be followed by singing a melody while playing the left-hand pattern on the keyboard. They could subsequently practice improvising right-hand material after practicing the left-hand pattern, making an effort to introduce chromatic passing and neighbor notes when possible. By singing their right-hand melodies, the student can learn to improvise effective melodies without the constraints of having to be able to play the notes on the keyboard; with their voice, they can create any melody they like. After doing this, they could transfer the melodies to the keyboard, a practice that would significantly aid their aural skills.

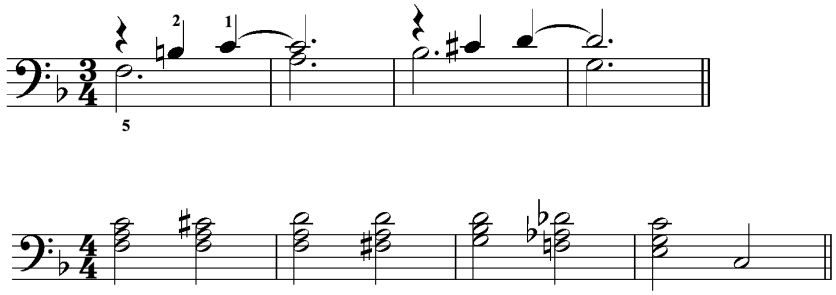


Ex. 3.17 – Skeletal Romantic exercise

Note the changes of hand position in the right-hand patterns and the increasing complexity in the ostinato bass lines:

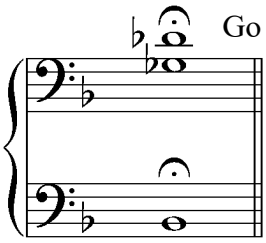


Ex. 3.18 – Patterns for the right hand



Ex. 3.19 – Ostinato bass lines

For the breakaway pattern, the concept of Neapolitan harmony will be introduced. As mentioned previously, although this is advanced for a student at an early stage of development, introducing it at this stage allows for them to inhabit the language more naturally. Similar to how the left-hand patterns were broken down into more intuitive terms, relating the physical distance of the notes to each other (‘the top note moves by half step, while the others remain the same’), the student will have instructions to do the same for the Neapolitan harmony, as in the example below.

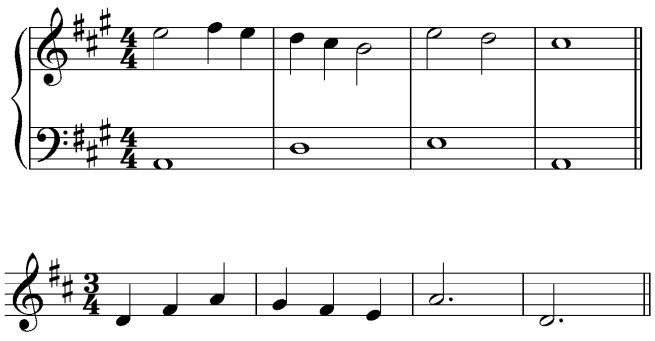


The **Neapolitan** chord is formed from *the triad one half-step higher than the first note of the scale*. Replace this chord with any measure to go off-road. Just be careful to get back on track!

Ex. 3.20 – Breakaway pattern

As with the other chapters of the method, it is important for the student to transpose these exercises into different keys, focusing on the ones that have been worked on up to this point (C, G, F, D, A, and B-flat). Small comment boxes on each page will remind them of this.

A new exercise will occur in this chapter of the method to ensure the student does not become dependent on the bass lines that have been provided so far. Harmonizing melodies is an excellent way of doing this, allowing the student to aurally experiment with what notes might complement a melody without necessarily having a deep understanding of harmony. Doing this further promotes the development of an intuitive understanding of tonality. The student can examine a fully-notated example exercise with several other melodies provided beneath for them to try. They can write in the bass lines if necessary, but they will also be encouraged to try harmonizing the melodies in real time without writing them down.



Try harmonizing these melodies as in the example provided. Try not to write down the bass lines you come up with. Test out different notes from the scale to see what sounds good!

Ex. 3.21 – Harmonization practice

This practice encourages the student to think about music from the perspective of a composer, which is a necessary part of learning to improvise, as the improvisational process is largely similar to a sped-up version of composition. It also helps prepare the student for the exercises in the ensemble section, where they are asked to create a bass line for the teacher to follow in the "Follow the Leader!" exercise. In doing this exercise of free improvisation, it is not necessary for the student to be stylistically accurate; rather, emphasis should be on flow and rhythm. The student will digest elements of style over time, and they will become ingrained once they proceed to subsequent levels of the method.

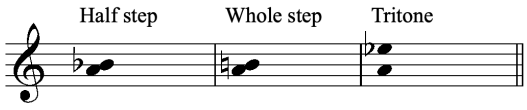
The chapter will end with the practice guide for home use, as in Ex. 3.11. Included in this will be exercises that were not part of the practice guide in previous chapters, such as harmonization and sing and play exercises. Regular practice of the materials covered is essential for development of stylistic awareness and improvisational skills.

Examples of late Romantic/twentieth-century exercises

In the final chapter of the preliminary level method book, students will cover patterns and textures from Late Romantic/20th-Century composers. Only one specific style will be discussed here, though more will appear in the method book itself. It is difficult to pin down specific traits that generalize music from the era; however, as atonality was in the forefront of many composers' minds around 1900, it will form the basis of the exercises that will be discussed in this document. Voice leading and counterpoint will remain important aspects of the exercises, but instead of tonality, a tonal center will form the basis of the improvisations. It is important to stress that students should maintain rhythmic integrity in these exercises to develop their ability

to improvise; it is easy to pick tempi that are far too slow and vague for improvisational development to occur.

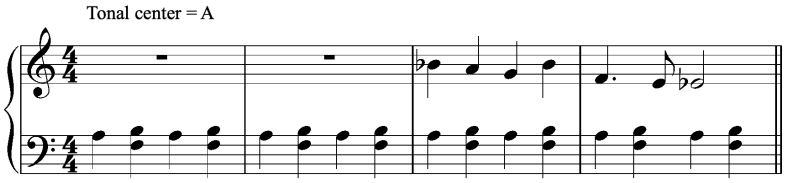
Rather than presenting the student and teacher with a scale at the beginning of this chapter, intervals will appear that can be used to add dissonance to textures. Instead of conceptualizing harmony and thinking about correct use of notes, in atonal improvisation the student will focus more on intervallic patterns and exploring sound worlds.



These intervals can be used in your improvisations to add **dissonance**. Can you find the same intervals using different notes in other areas of the piano?

Ex. 3.22 – Explanation of dissonant intervals

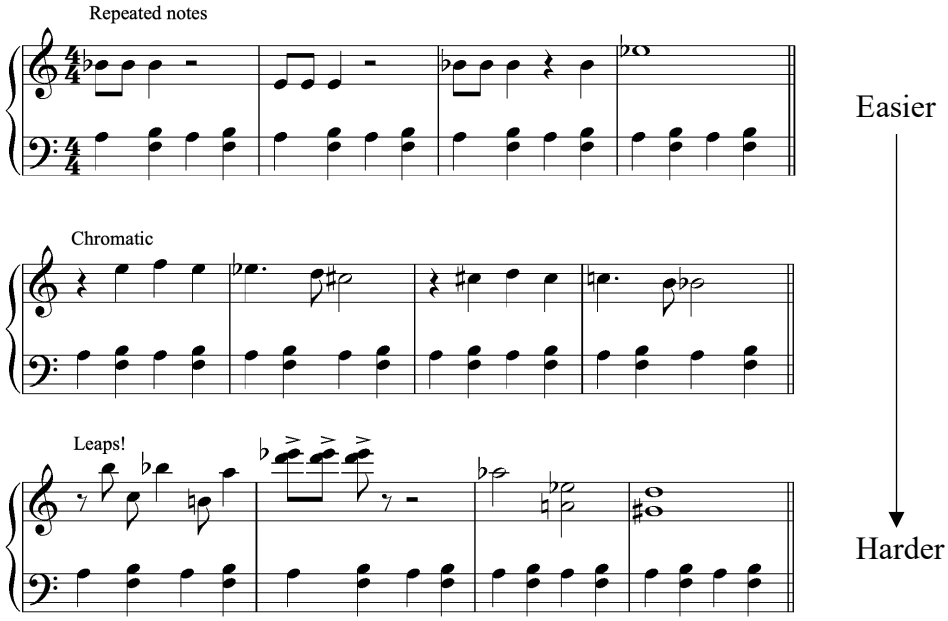
These intervals might be played in simple or compound forms so that they are recognizable in various displacements on the keyboard. The student and teacher will again listen to the accompanying audio files to get a feel for this style of improvisation. The teacher will then play a fully written-out exercise to the student, who could practice improvising the right hand over the left-hand ostinato.



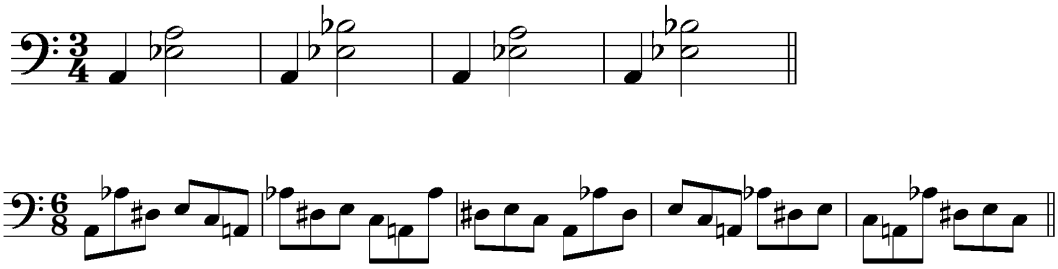
Ex. 3.23 – Written-out example of atonal style

Note that the melody in Ex. 3.23 incorporates all of the intervals presented in Ex. 3.22 between the melody and bass. The student should try to notice these intervals so they can attempt to incorporate some of them into their own improvisations. Not all the intervals used need to be dissonant; rather, the student might focus on selecting a few moments to play dissonances, such as the downbeat of each measure, for example.

These intervals will form the basis of the right-hand patterns in this chapter, while the tonal center of A will form the basis of the left-hand ostinato patterns (Ex. 3.24). These can be transposed and applied to all other tonal centers.

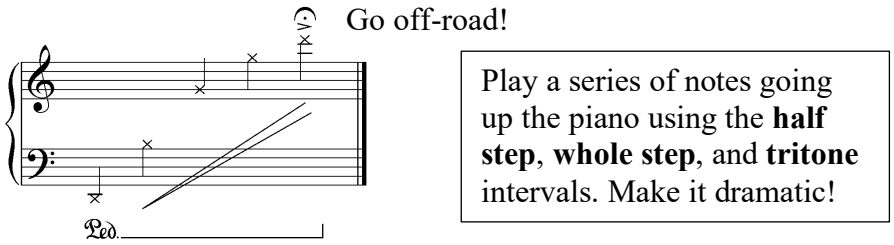


Ex. 3.24 – Patterns for the right hand



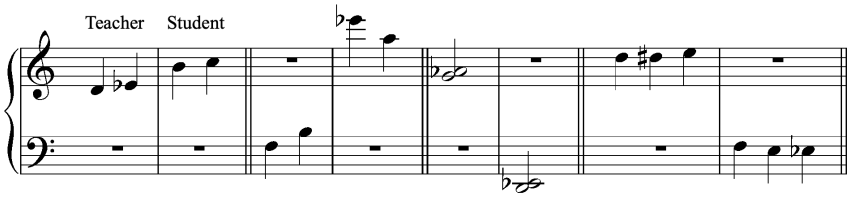
Ex. 3.25 – Ostinato bass lines

The student should again try to notice the physical connections within these patterns, such as the top voice of the tritone between E-flat and A moving a half-step up to E-flat and B-flat in the first line of Ex. 3.25. Meanwhile, the breakaway pattern for this chapter will be simple:



Ex. 3.26 – Breakaway pattern

The ensemble section for this chapter will be slightly different from the others. The first exercise, call and response, can remain the same; however, the "Follow the Leader!" exercise must be different, as there is no tonality to create a bass line from. Instead, it will take the form of a copycat exercise in which one person plays an interval, either as a chord or a melody, and the second person copies the interval using different pitches. This can advance to more than two notes, as in the end of the following example:



Ex. 3.27 – Ensemble exercise for copying intervals

Copying intervals in this way is an excellent method for developing aural skills, as students will come to recognize intervals by their sound, rather than just by how they appear in spatial dimensions on the keyboard. The chapter will conclude with another daily practice guide, as in Ex. 3.11.

Premises and examples of advanced exercises for higher-level method books

Each level of the series will become progressively more challenging due to a number of factors. These include more complex harmonies, multiple voices in textures, technically

challenging passagework, idiosyncrasies of specific composers' styles, and formal elements on the small and large scale. For the sake of brevity, each of the styles from the previous section of the document will not be discussed in detail here, as many of the exercises will merely comprise more challenging versions of the ones already presented. Instead, this chapter will explore specific advanced exercises in which facets that have not already been covered form part of the exercise. These will approximately appear between levels five and six of the series, with some easier versions of the exercises occurring in lower levels.

Idiomaticity

Idiomaticity is difficult to define among composers, though it is certainly present. Although particular traits of individual composers can be identified, there is often an overlap between one and several others, contemporary or otherwise. Simonton has noted that computers can identify composers from the first two notes of their themes, and originality of a particular composer's content can even be assessed in relation to other composers.[43] This demonstrates that it is possible to quantifiably make a distinction between composers after analyzing their traits and is important to note for the creation of exercises in this method, as the improvisational styles will be based on the idioms of specific composers.

Earlier in this document, generic traits of the Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and late Romantic/20th-Century eras were used as the basis for exercises in the preliminary-level method; however, the question of what exact traits make a texture or harmonic sequence sound 'Bach-

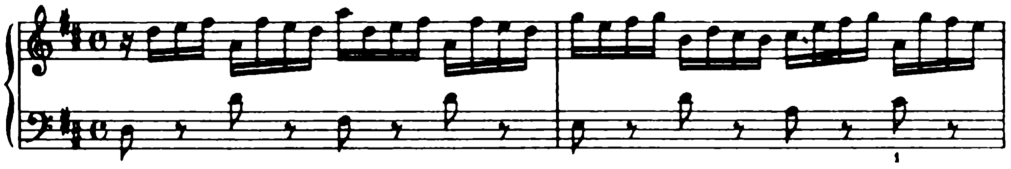
[43] Dean Keith Simonton, "Computer Content Analysis of Melodic Structure: Classical Composers and Their Compositions," *Psychology of Music* 22, no. 1 (April 1994): 31–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735694221003.

like' or 'Chopin-like' remains. I propose the following factors as determinants of the general idiomaticity of individual composers' keyboard music:

1. Texture—specific forms of arpeggios, scales, and chords that are used, as well as their registral distribution
2. Rhythm—use of polyrhythms, hemiola, metric displacement, accentuation
3. Rubato—how much is used, and when
4. Harmony—use of specific progressions, chords, and modes, as well as the overall complexity, simplicity, or absence of
5. Pedal—how much is used
6. Virtuosity—how technically demanding the music typically is
7. Melodic tendencies—linear, chromatic, compound, simple, amount used
8. Contrapuntalism—how voices typically interact with one another
9. Embellishment—types, frequency, or absence of
10. Form—associable forms and specific manipulations of them
11. Articulation—what types are used, and when

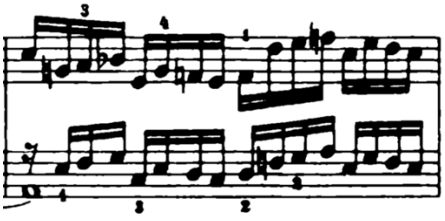
Note that these determinants must apply to a significant portion of the composer's output in order to constitute idiomaticity, and as a result, the determiner must be well acquainted with a composer's oeuvre to make assertions. Further, some of these factors may apply more to certain composers than to others. Many composers share similarities in several of the determinants, but the determining element of what makes a composer's style recognizable to a trained ear is the combination of several factors. Score analysis is the best method for assessing what particular combination of the above-mentioned determinants results in a recognizable idiomaticity for a particular composer. An example will be explored here.

Taking an excerpt from the Baroque era, we will now examine Bach's Prelude in D major, BWV 850, for traits, though other works would also suffice.

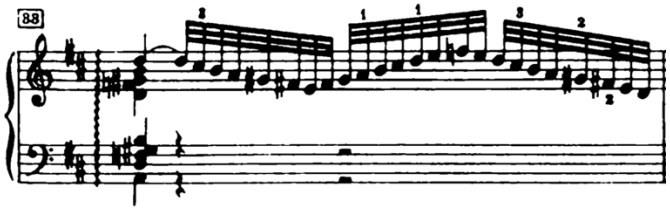


Ex. 4.1 – Bach's Prelude in D major, BWV 850, mm. 1–2[44]

From the first two measures of this prelude, many of Bach's idioms are evident. The texture is contrapuntal, and the left hand provides rhythmic support with notes on each beat of the measure. The rhythm is consistent and stable, with little rubato, while the melody often leaps to other consonant notes within the harmonic progression. Further, the harmony is simple—Bach establishes the key by moving from tonic to dominant and back again (in m. 3). This is one of Bach's harmonic traits, as he often first establishes a key with a I–V–I progression over a tonic pedal, or a close variation of it. Later in the prelude, other traits also emerge, including consonant parallel motion at m. 29 and a virtuosic flourish comprising a single, melodic line at m. 33 (see Exs. 4.2 and 4.3).



Ex. 4.2 – BWV 850, m. 29



Ex. 4.3 – BWV 850, m. 33

This particular combination of idioms creates part of the 'Bach-like' quality of the prelude, making the style distinct from other Baroque composers. Although others may have also

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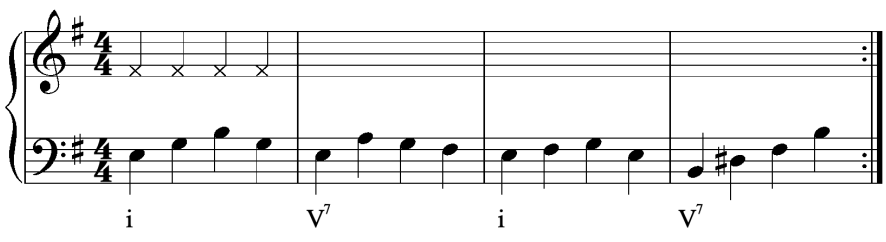
[44] Johann Sebastian Bach, *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier: Erster Band* (Leipzig: Edition Peters, 1969), 24.

composed with primarily contrapuntal textures, their use of the other elements—such as rhythm, harmony, texture, and form—distinguishes them from Bach's language. This is important to recognize as a stylistic improviser, as becoming acquainted with the particular set of idioms that comprise a composer's style is essential to stylistic fluency. Other elements can be found in Bach's keyboard works that are distinctive to his style, but they will not be discussed here.

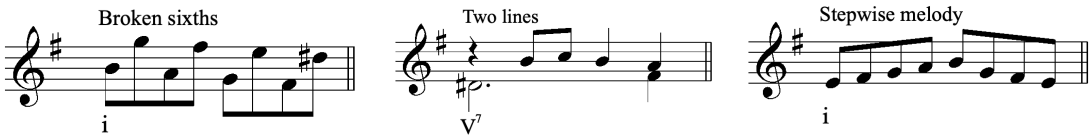
Advanced exercises

In the new method series, textural, rhythmic, and melodic idioms will appear in example patterns that are provided for students to study, using the same format as Ex. 3.7, Ex. 3.13, Ex. 3.18, and Ex. 3.24. Notes on the side of the page will cover other idioms, asking the student to think about certain aspects of the music. Students should listen to the accompanying audio files to recognize where these idioms are being used, and they should also try to find idioms that they recognize but that may not be included in the method; this process can be applied to composers that are not covered but that the student is interested in.

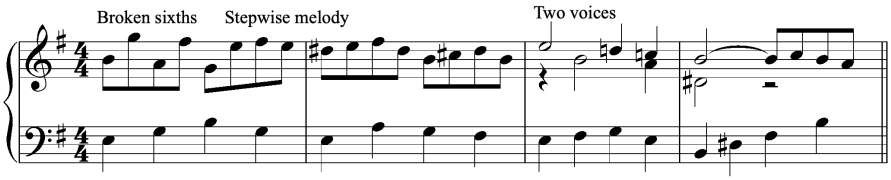
The following is an example of an advanced exercise that a student could use to practice one of these idiomatic features in the style of Bach. Note that the piece is in a minor key, as minor tonalities will have been covered in earlier levels of the method, breaking away from the major keys of the preliminary level:



Use some or all of the patterns below to improvise a melody in the right hand. Remember to think about the harmony!



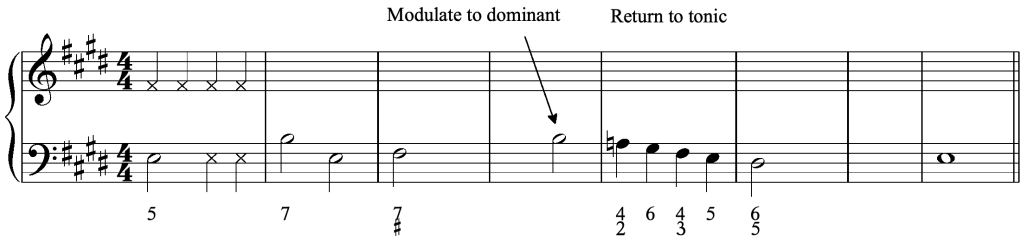
Ex. 4.4 – Advanced exercise in the style of Bach



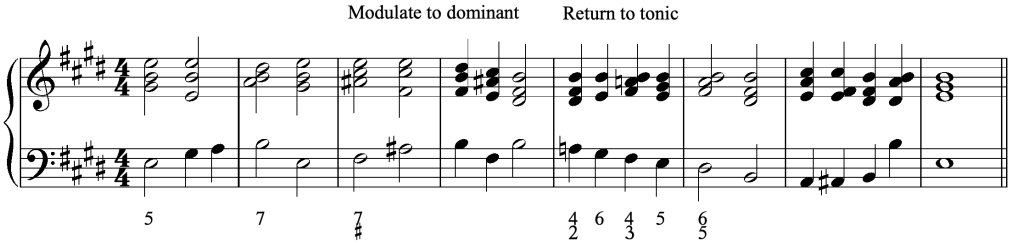
Ex. 4.5 – Completed advanced exercise

This is essentially a more advanced version of the ostinato bass exercises mentioned previously, but this time the student is asked to use specific patterns in the right hand. As well as this, the left hand is far more complicated, and the student must take harmony into account. Chords and tonality will have been covered in earlier methods, in a similar manner to how some concepts of harmony were introduced in the exercises from the preliminary-level method.

Harmony would be covered in earlier methods through a multitude of exercises, such as providing a skeletal chord progression where goal harmonies are set in which the student must fill in the gaps so that the progression progresses naturally. In later levels of the method, this might also include more challenging concepts, such as modulation and figured bass notation, as in the Ex. 4.6, but this would not be appropriate for earlier levels. This type of exercise is not specific to a particular style, as harmony and figured bass are applicable to most idioms. Such challenges would also occur in the daily practice guide, as mentioned in the discussion of the preliminary-level method.



Ex. 4.6 – Harmonic exercise with modulation and figured bass



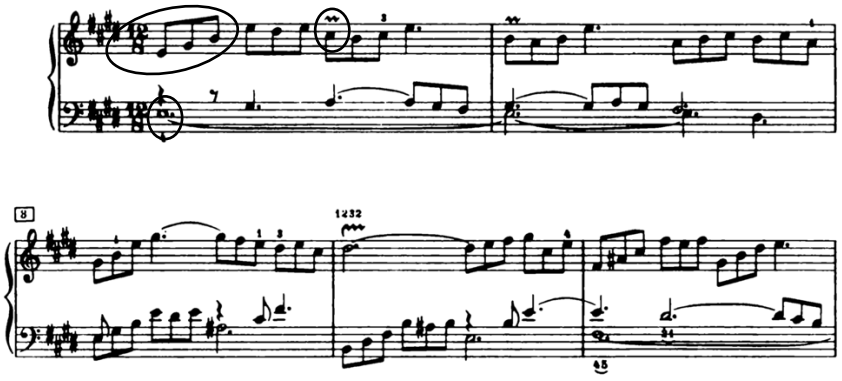
Ex. 4.7 – Completed harmonic exercise with modulation and figured bass

In more advanced levels of the method, this exercise could expand further to introduce concepts of form. To practice this, the student would first be given the outline of a harmonic progression in a basic binary form and would then attempt to fill in the gaps. Once the student is comfortable with the harmonic progression, they could then try to use stylistic patterns to turn the improvisation into a short prelude. The student could also use particular themes at the start of the A and B sections, building on the work they have previously done with harmonization of melodies (see Ex. 3.21). This is excellent practice for using audience themes as the basis for improvisations and prepares the student for more advanced forms, including theme-and-variations form and sonata form. Although exercises such as this might prove to be highly challenging to a student, they would be far easier if each level of the series is followed sequentially. As with all exercises, fluency could come about by practicing these regularly by using the daily practice guide at the end of the chapters.

Another exercise that could appear in certain chapters of the later methods would be "Spot the Idioms," where a student could study a score to try to identify stylistic patterns by

circling them. This type of exercise might appear at the beginning of a chapter to prepare the student for the patterns that will subsequently be presented to them. The following is an example of what a completed version of this might look like.

Spot the Idioms!



Circle the stylistic idioms of Bach! Remember, these do not have to be *unique* to Bach, but they should be commonly found in his music.

Note what you find in the blank spaces below.

Idiom 1

Mordent

Idiom 2

Pedal point

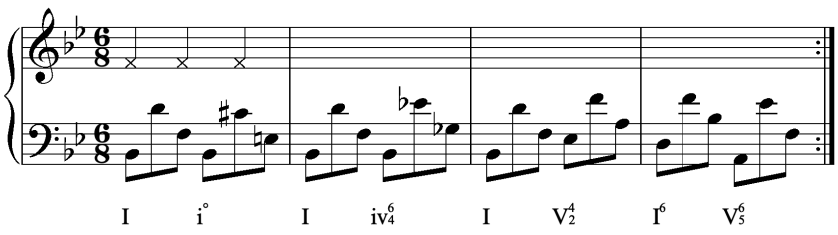
Idiom 3

Arpeggiation

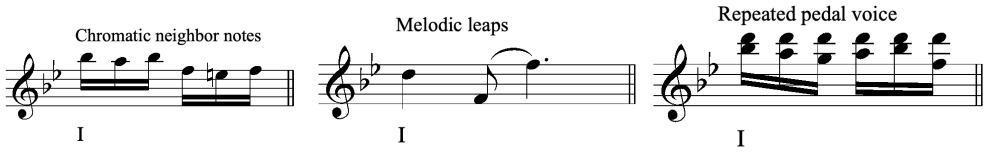
Ex. 4.8 – Completed idiom identification exercise

Doing this encourages the student to be stylistically inquisitive so that they can continually expand on the idioms they know. The process would enable them to start recognizing idioms within the composed pieces they are playing and incorporate what they notice into their improvisation practice.

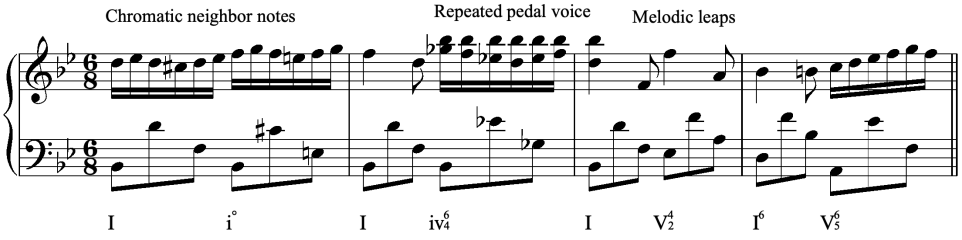
Although Bach is the only composer that was covered in this discussion of advanced exercises, the basis of the exercises for other composers is the same. To demonstrate this, the following is a parallel example to Ex. 4.4 and Ex. 4.5 in the style of Chopin:



Use some or all of the patterns below to improvise a melody in the right hand. Remember to think about the harmony!



Ex. 4.9 – Advanced exercise in the style of Chopin



Ex. 4.10 – Completed advanced exercise

Advanced exercises such as the ones shown in this portion of the document are only suitable when the student has reached sufficient fluency with the materials in the earlier levels of the method series. Other exercises may also occur in the higher levels that have not been discussed here; for instance, some composers may require specific exercises to practice specific idioms, such as ornamentation of melodies in Mozart's style, virtuosic patterns in the style of Liszt, or modes in the style of Debussy. These would be tailored to each composer and would help keep the material in the method series interesting and engaging, rather than repeating the same exercises at each level. Further, corresponding appendices could come with some levels so that the student has more exercise material to practice should they need more during the week. In subsequent editions of the method series, it would even be a good idea to release a "Daily Practice Guide" book that coincides with the "Lesson Book" so that the student could access the practice-at-home exercises in one location with extra materials included in the back. This delves into the subject of how the book might be used on a practical level, which is the subject of the final portion of this document.

Practical uses for this method series and final thoughts

Many elements were considered in proposing exercises for this new method series on stylistic improvisation. Firstly, historical practices were examined to understand how improvisation was taught before its decline in mainstream keyboard pedagogy. Exercises from these practices were subsequently reframed into a modern context in the method, making them more accessible for today's students. The use of the voice to aid improvisation learning, for example, played an important role in canonic improvisation in the Renaissance and the learning of *partimenti* in the Baroque era. The principle of using the voice to overcome the mechanical challenges of improvising on an instrument was then used in Ex. 3.17, while the use of ensemble practice—derived from the practice of canonic improvisation—formed the basis of the ensemble sections of each chapter of the method. Figured bass was used as a tool for understanding harmony and form, as in Ex. 4.6 and Ex. 4.7, while the schemata of *partimenti* informed the exercises in which patterns were provided for the student to use in their improvisations. All of the practices talked about in the section on historical improvisation practices have influenced the exercises in the new method.

Following the section on historical practices, current improvisation textbooks in the US were examined to see what specific materials were covered by the authors, what form the exercises were presented in, whether or not stylistic improvisation was addressed, and how effective they were in a general sense. Successful components of the methods were subsequently incorporated into the exercises in the new method series. Norton's method of providing bass outlines for the student to work with and an accompanying CD for them to listen to was used. Kinney's ideas of "vacation," "ideas for creating," and the ensemble section were also incorporated in the breakaway and pattern ideas. This ensured that the forms and types of

exercises that were included in the new method were varied and interesting, yet also progressively challenging and easy to incorporate into lesson and home practice.

Lastly, pedagogical research was referenced in order to be informed about effective strategies for teaching improvisation. Principles from Biasutti's five-dimensional model of anticipation, use of repertoire, emotive communication, feedback, and flow were taken into consideration; students were encouraged to plan melodies (anticipation), study scores and use patterns (use of repertoire), and play and react to partners (feedback), while the language and pictures used in the structure of the exercises was intentionally evocative (emotive communication), and direct and concise instruction allowed for ease of use (flow). Further, attempts were made to create a careful balance between Huovinen et al.'s dramaturgical and music-theoretical methods for teaching improvisation, while Kratus's seven levels of development were considered in determining the difficulty levels of the exercises. Doing this informed the process of composing exercises such that the final product would be most effective, accessible, and practical for students and teachers alike.

Using the method

The possibilities for practical applications of this method are numerous. In a private lesson, this could be used as a standard textbook to enhance improvisational skills on a weekly basis, similar to how sight-reading proficiency is often developed. The main portion of the method could be used at the beginning of lessons, complementing other 'warm-up' exercises, such as technical work or sight reading, while the practice guide section could be used to give guidance to students at home to ensure that their practice is directed. The method could also be used in a similar way in group keyboard classes and might be highly valuable as a resource for

developing keyboard skills over the course of a semester. Using this method, class piano students could become acquainted with the basic principles of improvisation, but they could also gain insight into styles of composers and develop aural and theoretical skills.

This reinforces the argument that practicing stylistic improvisation is important for all aspects of musicianship. In practicing the exercises in the method, the student develops aural and theoretical skills while also increasing their overall proficiency at the keyboard. Their versatility as a musician is increased, and the confidence that is gained from improvising fluently in front of others decreases their stage fright. Further, understanding the music that they play from the perspective of a composer enhances their memory, while the act of improvising in general increases their technical ability, since playing technically challenging passages that have been learned is entirely different from playing technically challenging passages that are improvised.

With more common use of a method such as this, improvised pieces may start to form an essential part of a student's performing experience from a young age. Ideally, students would be given permission to add improvised pieces to recital programs as part of their graded performances in a college or conservatory. A requirement might be for them to improvise a piece on an audience theme in a particular style, for example. The student would then be graded using different criteria to those traditionally used in prepared recital programs. These might include the student's accuracy of style, coherence of harmonic language, overall shape or form, expressivity, and motivic consistency. Allowing this to be a part of the curriculum might encourage more interest in the subject, as it is often currently seen as an extra activity that is unessential and separate from the practice of standard repertoire

Conclusion

I believe that a method such as this is long overdue in the pedagogical world of keyboard music. For years, the practice of stylistic improvisation has remained elusive to many in the field of Western Art Music due to the lack of writing on the subject or pedagogical material that is available to teach it. Many keyboard players have developed without knowing that the practice of improvising in various styles even exists, while the few that do improvise in various styles are seen as geniuses or gifted. This is not the case—improvisation of all kinds, like sight-reading or other keyboard skills, can be developed if practiced regularly.

The benefits of doing so are numerous, some of which have already been mentioned. One issue that issue that is worthy of further discussion, however, is performance anxiety. Kathryn Ladano notes that

> several recent studies show promise that the practice of free improvisation among musicians with performance anxiety may help alleviate symptoms … Recent work by music therapists has also shown that the practice of improvisation holds benefits that go beyond performance anxiety, helping musicians to engage in more creative forms of music making where the pressure of playing wrong notes is eliminated.[45]

This has significant implications for music schools and conservatories, as performance anxiety is a debilitating issue for many students. If free stylistic improvisation were practiced by these students, it is likely that many of their fears would be alleviated, since allowing the level of freedom that is required for free improvisation to occur during performance is a liberating experience. It could also be argued that musicians' performance levels in recitals and

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[45] Kathryn Ladano, "Free Improvisation and Performance Anxiety in Musicians," in *Improvisation and Music Education: Beyond the Classroom*, ed. Ajay Heble and Mark Laver (New York: Routledge, 2016), 48.

competitions could be increased if this were practiced, since psychological factors can often be an impediment to achieving states of flow.

On top of the potential benefits for performers that practicing stylistic improvisation could provide, it could also have substantial impact on audience engagement levels. The element of danger plays an important role in concert attendance, as belief that what is being experienced is risky and could go wrong adds to the excitement of live performance.[46] This element is heightened even further when watching someone improvise, as the likelihood of something going wrong increases. As well as this, the novelty of experiencing something that will never be heard again is enticing to listeners. This can be heightened even further by improvising using themes from the audience, as it allows listeners to feel that they are part of the creative process of the performer and breaks down the elitist connotations of modern-day concerts that can be deterring to many.[47] One of the best concerts I attended was by the pianist Gabriela Montero, in which the second half of her performance was improvised, using themes from the audience. She played fluently in a wide variety of styles, and the atmosphere in the concert hall was electric.

Keyboard players, music schools, and audience members of all kinds could benefit from a more widespread appreciation for the art of stylistic improvisation. This new method book could provide a path for those interested in exploring the topic to engage with it in a way that is intuitive (as it is similar to many other methods) and engaging so that the process might become demystified and accessible. Students growing up with such a method could transform the format of future music exams and concerts such that improvisation is something that is expected rather

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[46] Sarah M. Price, "Risk and Reward in Classical Music Concert Attendance: Investigating the Engagement of 'Art' and 'Entertainment' Audiences with a Regional Symphony Orchestra in the UK" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2017), 158, http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/16628/.
[47] Ibid., 189.

than something that is fringe. It is my hope that a printed copy of the method will be developed shortly and will be available in the near future for students and teachers to use.

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