

## AGO Webinars on Organ Teaching

### Improvisation for Beginning Organists

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#### Webinar Overview

- Why improvise/teach improvisation?
- Structuring a beginning improvisation class
- Four tips for teaching improvisation to beginners
- Sample assignments and techniques
- Time for Q &A

#### Assignment #1: Creating a Pedal Etude

Since one of the defining characteristics of the modern organ is the existence of pedals, we will start with an assignment that will force you to start using this aspect of the instrument right away.

In seventeenth and eighteenth-century Germany, pedal solos were used in prealudia as a way to introduce a key, grab the listener's attention, and show the performer's virtuosity. See Bach's pedal solo from his famous Toccata, Adagio, and Fugue in C Major as an example, or his Pedal Exercitum. A common registration for these passages was full organ with reeds, such as Posaune 16, Trumpet 8, Octave 4, Mixture (or Rauschpfeife and Mixture).

In the twentieth-century, composers would write pedal pieces as etudes to show off performer's technique. With the modern concave-radiating pedal boards, and technique using heels, performers could play thirds and chords with two feet. Modern combination action could allow quick changes in registrations. See examples by contemporary composer Naji Hakim. Modern pedal writing might make use of unusual registrations, such as Bourdon 16', Piccolo 2' or a solo Flute 4'. The main thing when choosing registration is clarity. If a combination creates a muddy sound, you might want to make some modifications.

#### Assignment for the week:

1. Practice a variety of pedal exercises from any method book. See if you can get comfortable using both toes and heels. Make up your own. Try these with different registrations.
2. Try playing through (or listening to) the pedal etude examples by Bach and Hakim. Are there any motives you would like to borrow?
3. Create your own 1-2 minute pedal piece. This could be in the form of an etude, where you focus on a particular interval or technique, or it could be more melodic. Make sure the piece has some motive to provide coherence, and a clear ending. Find a registration that provides clarity and the character you want to convey.
4. Be ready to perform your pedal piece with your chosen registration at the next class meeting.

Models (excerpts from): J. S. Bach Pedal Exercitium and Naji Hakim Études-Caprices (No. 1) BWV 598

*Duane* 2 mov. ca

I

Naji HAKIM

Scherzando (♩=44)

Mutations

Pédaler

Anches douces

### Assignment #2: Harmonizing with fifths and fourths

Using fifths and fourths to harmonize a given melody is a great way to introduce color and to explore different harmonies. Harmony in western music was born when people starting elaborating chant melodies by singing them in parallel fifths, what we now call organum. Harmonizing with fourths and fifths continues to be an important tool in twentieth century organ music, as seen in examples by Langlais, Vierne, and Dupré.

#### Assignment for the week:

1. Practice harmonizing a C major scale in perfect parallel fifths and fourths with both hands. Alter this model by transposing to other keys, introducing alternating third patterns, adding chromaticism, and modifying rhythm (see examples 1a, 1b, and 1c from Jeffrey Brillhart's book, *Breaking Free*)
2. Try playing perfect fifths in the pedal.

- Practice stacking various configurations of perfect fourths and play them in scalar passages with both hands (example 2a). Then, practice breaking those stacked fourths into arpeggios (example 2b).
- Apply the planing fifths and fourths technique to the tune(s) provided (i.e. Old Hundredth, below). Are there harmonies that this exercise creates that you like?
- Read through the short composition by Wilbur Held on the tune Old Hundredth (from *First Organ Book*, WL Editions). How does the composer use fourths and fifths?
- Create a 2-3 minute piece for manuals and pedal that utilizes harmonization with fourths and/or fifths. You can use Old Hundredth, or find your own tune. If you are looking for a way to structure the piece, consider trying the model offered in Wilbur Held's piece: short free interludes alternating with phrases of the tune, and some pedal points thrown in here and there.
- Another option is to use a figure of oscillating fourths in LH, solo in RH: Registration suggestion: RH solo: Flute 8, Flute 4, Nazard 2 2/3; LH accompaniment: Gamba 8, Flute 4; Pedal: Soft 16, 8

Example 1a



Example 1b



Example 1c



Example 2a



Example 2b



## Old Hundredth



Model (excerpt): Wilbur Held Prelude on Old Hundredth (*First Organ Book*, WL Editions)

Sw.: Trumpet 8' *f*  
 Gt.: [Principals] 8', 4', and 2', Mixture *ff*  
 Ped.: [Principals] 16', 8', and 4'  
 Gt. to Ped.

**Broadly, marcato**

**Assignment #3: Ostinato Toccata**

Ostinato patterns are a tried and true technique that work great on the organ. Using a relatively simple construction, you can create a brilliant-sounding toccata. Twentieth-century French composers were famous for their toccatas, many of which made use of idiomatic ostinato patterns.

Assignment for the week:

1. Practice different ostinato patterns and get comfortable moving them around the keyboard, adding or subtracting accidentals as you go. Use the triplet figure built on fourths from previous assignment, Example 2b, or experiment with the patterns from the models below.
2. Try ostinato patterns that fit well in the one hand. Try contrary motion RH/LH.
3. Get your ostinato going in both hands, then keep the ostinato going in left hand while the right hand introduces the first phrase of a melody (perhaps Old Hundredth again?).
4. When phrase one ends, bring in the pedal to comment on what the RH did.
5. Maybe you use the pedal commentary and interlude as a chance to move to a new harmony.
6. Work through all phrases in this manner.
7. If you are looking for a special challenge, experiment with bringing in the pedal as a canonic answer.
8. Registration: Plenum on the Great (Principals 8, 4, 2 2/3, 2 Mixture, Scharf); Pedal reeds (Posaune 16, Trumpet 8, Octave 4)

Models (excerpts): Galeries ancien by Dennis Janzer (*First Organ Book*, WL Editions)

Allegro

Manual

Pedal

Gr. *ff*

add Reed 16

L. H. emphasized

*simile*

24

27

Final from Symphony no. 3 by Louis Vierne

Récit: Fonds et Anches 16. 8. 4. Positif: Fonds 16. 8. 4. (Anches préparées.) G<sup>d</sup> Orgue: Fonds 16. 8. 4. (Anches préparées.)  
 Pédale: Fonds 32. 16. 8. 4. (Anches préparées.) Claviers accouplés.

Allegro (♩ = 120)

MANUAL

PEDAL

R.

*pp*

R.

*pp*

Ped. R.

*simile*

Prelude on Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland by Anne Laver (ostinato + canon)

$\text{♩} = 84$   
4' Flute  
Annie Laver (2013)

R. H.  
L. H. *detached*  
Ped. Tacet

4  
L. H.  
8' Octave or flute

7

10  
Ped. Tacet

## [English-language] Improvisation Resources in Print

The Education section of the American Guild of Organists website also has a number of good educational videos on improvisation: <https://www.agohq.org/online-educational-resources/>

### Contemporary Improvisation and Hymn-based Improvisation

Bender, Jan. *Organ Improvisation for Beginners: A Book of Instruction for Church Musicians*. Concordia, 1975

Techniques for hymn introductions, including imitative counterpoint, parallel intervals.

Brillhart, Jeffrey. *Breaking Free: Finding a Personal Language for Organ Improvisation through 20<sup>th</sup>-century French Improvisation Techniques*. Wayne Leupold Editions, 2011.

Brillhart, Jeffrey. *A World of Possibilities*. Wayne Leupold Editions, 2018.

Both volumes offer practical lessons based on 20<sup>th</sup> century French improvisation techniques, including song form, Messaien's modes of limited transposition, constructing multi-movement symphonies. Advanced.

Burkhardt, Michael. *Creative Hymn Playing: Improvisation, Exercises, and Repertoire*. Morningstar Music, 2013.

Beginning hymn-based improvisation techniques: harmonization with parallel intervals, theme and variation, chorale preludes.

DeVries, Sietze. *Harmonizing: A Method to Encourage the Art of Improvisation*. Boeijenga, 2007.

Hancock, Gerre. *Improvising: How to Master the Art*. Oxford University Press, 1994.

Lots of examples, less how-to. More for advanced students. Instruction on hymn introductions, preludes as well as sonata, song-form, toccata.

Johns, Michele. *Hymn Improvisation*. Augsburg, 1987.

Short lessons on techniques useful for hymn introductions/variations: bicinium, ostinato, imitation, ritornello, toccata.

Lanning, Denis. *In the Beginning: An Encounter with Improvisation at the Organ*. Wayne Leupold Editions, 2011.

Designed for beginning organists at the high school-level. Primarily hymn-based.

Lau, Robert. *A Practical Approach to Improv for the Church Organist*. Paraclete Press, 2010.

Overduin, Jan. *Making Music: Improvisation for Organists*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Discussion of progressions, forms (rondo, canon, 3-voice fugue), and some hymn-based improvisation techniques.

Rotermund, Donald. *Off the Page: Tips & Techniques for Creating Hymn-based Organ Settings*. Morningstar Music, 2007.

Rotermund, Donald. *Off the Page, Too: More Tips & Techniques for Creating Hymn-based Organ Settings*. Morningstar Publications, 2011.

Easy-to-use manuals with clear topics and examples for beginner to intermediate students. 2007 volume comes with CD. Some hymn-based sections.

Shannon, John R. *First Improvisation Book*. Wayne Leupold Editions, 2002.  
Companion to WL Editions *First Organ Book*. Includes basic theory concepts, how to harmonize short progressions.

### **Historical Improvisation**

Dupre, Marcel. *Complete Course in Improvisation. Vol 1 & 2*. Leduc, 1957.  
In English translation by Alain Hobbs. Volume 1 consists of preparatory exercises, Vol 2 advanced structures as taught in Paris Conservatory improvisation class.

Remeš, Derek and Robin Leaver. *Realizing Thoroughbass Chorales in the Circle of J. S. Bach*. Wayne Leupold Editions, 2019.  
Two volume set that provides an English translation of Bach circle pedagogical sources discussing chorale harmonization.

Ruiter-Feenstra, Pamela. *Bach and the Art of Improvisation (2 vols)*. CHI Press, 2011  
Good first resource for understanding historical improvisation. Talks about historical views on improvising, first volume deals with chorale-based improvisation and second volume deals with free works (fugues, fantasias, etc)

Shannon, John R. *Improvising in Traditional 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Harmonic Style: A Volume Based on the Musical Language of the Mature Baroque*. Wayne Leupold Editions, 2010.  
Counterpoint and 18<sup>th</sup> century harmonic principles applied to hymn-tunes from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to today.