

AGO COLLEAGUE EXAMINATION 2013 IMPROVISATION QUESTION

THE MODULATING BRIDGE

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FOR MANY who take the Colleague examination, the improvisation task (C8) is one of the most challenging items on the test. Since most candidates choose the “c” option, creating a modulating bridge between two hymns in different keys, this article will deal with that task. All too often, the bridge resembles the experience of driving across unfamiliar terrain, not knowing where one is going, hoping to find a familiar landmark. The candidate keeps playing chords without any particular pattern until one shows up that has a function in the new key. The candidate arrives finally at the new key, but the modulation has no recognizable rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic shape—thus, no real musical character.

Before the reader responds, “What do you expect? I got there, didn’t I?,” I would like to propose an approach to the bridge that will not only ensure safe arrival at the new key but will create an interesting little piece of music as well. Some features of this procedure could also be used in the other two improvisation options, C8a and C8b, since they also involve modulation.

In making this proposal, I am aware that there is a limit on preparation time for this question: the candidate has only 20 minutes in which to prepare all four questions in section 2 of the test. But if you have practiced this method, selecting some pairs of hymns that are in closely related keys and some that are more distantly related, sketching your modulation should not take more than five or six minutes of your preparation time.

From the beginning, it must be made clear that some knowledge of music theory is a necessity for this task. One must know key signatures, triads and their inversions, seventh chords, and voice-leading. If one is faced with a distant modulation, e.g., G major to D-flat major, it is very helpful to know chromatic progressions, such as augmented-sixth chords, doubly-diminished seventh chords, and the Neapolitan sixth.

The instructions for C8c ask the candidate to begin by playing the final phrase* of the first hymn, play the bridge, and conclude with playing the first phrase of the second hymn. The goal of my method is to produce a short contrapuntal piece that leads into the new key. The bridge will begin, of course, in the key of the first hymn, but I suggest using a motif from the second hymn for the melodic material, and immediately switching to the meter of the second hymn (if different from that of the first), so that the key change is the only concern, other than making the bridge a shapely and graceful musical miniature. If the modulation can be accomplished by using the circle of fifths, the procedure might go like this:

1. Chart the keys you will have to move through. If the first hymn is in C major and the second in E-flat major, the key plan would be C to F to B-flat to E-flat.
2. Think in terms of the meter of the second hymn.
3. Select a melodic motif from the second hymn. The opening phrase usually works well, but a middle or closing phrase is also good. This will be the “fugue subject,” so to speak, for the bridge.

4. On staff paper, sketch the plan:
 - a. Motif, selected from the second hymn but transposed into the key of the first hymn.
 - b. Follow this with the motif a fourth or fifth up or down, like the second entry of a fugue subject, according to your circle-of-fifths plan.
 - c. After reaching the new key with your motif, sketch a short coda to bring the bridge to a satisfactory close before beginning to play the second hymn.
5. If you have time, begin to fill in the accompanying voices. If your time is up, you can take the sketch to the organ and play the test, assured that you won’t be wandering aimlessly, hoping to happen upon the new key. The result may not be as smooth as Bach, but it will have a sense of direction and some musical character.

Here is an example of how this might work, taking the hymn tunes “Abbot’s Leigh” (Examination Hymn Booklet 2013 Revised Edition, Hymn No. 2) and “Divinum mysterium” (No. 14). The first is in C major, the second in E-flat major.

Step 1: Circle of fifths will work well in this case.
C to F to B-flat to E-flat.

Step 2: Choose the opening phrase of the second hymn (the first nine notes) as the motif on which the bridge will be built. The first hymn is in 3/4 meter; the second is a non-metrical chant tune, but we will treat the chosen motif as being in 4/4, to prevent rhythmic amorphousness in the bridge.

Step 3: Transpose the motif to the key of the first hymn:



Step 5: Fill in the details. Adding a three-measure coda, the final result might sound something like this:

If the circle of fifths should involve more than three steps, the motif can be passed back and forth among the voices as the key changes occur.

This was a fairly easy example. More complex would be a bridge between “Wondrous Love,” EHB No. 4, in D-Dorian (D minor for our purposes) and “Germany,” No. 16, in A-flat major. In this case, the hymns are in distantly related keys, one is a minor key and the other a major, and they are in different meters. The major/minor issue is not important; the ear readily accepts the change without any transition. Likewise, the meter change is not significant; we simply begin the bridge in the new meter. But the plan of modulation is more troublesome. The circle of fifths would be possible, but it would be a long process and sound rather forced. A better choice, beginning in the old key, would be to aim for the doubly diminished seventh chord on the raised fourth degree of the new key. The raised fourth in the key of A-flat would be D-natural, and the chord and its progression would look like this:

Select the first four measures of “Germany” as the motif and transpose it to D minor:

Construct the bridge by playing with the motif but remaining in the old key until time for the pivot chord (the doubly-diminished seventh on the raised fourth of the new key). Once safely in the new key, add a coda using the final measures of the new tune. This would be the result:

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The modulation scheme was as follows: D minor–pivot chord–A-flat major. An alternative choice in this case would be modulating by way of the chord of the augmented sixth, so that measures 9 and following might be:

One final caution: Be sure to make a complete break after playing the end of the first hymn before beginning your bridge, and another complete break after your bridge before launching into the beginning of the second hymn.

Those who are gifted in improvisation can of course choose other structures and musical ideas. My intention here is to provide a reliable musical formula that will serve the less confident candidate well under the pressure of limited preparation time. “Musical formula” may seem to be an oxymoron, but formulas are ingredients in all styles of composition. All great composers use them. For the bridge, rather than launching into a series of chords and hoping for the best, it is better to adopt a plan and a style, and execute it concisely, using your own imagination to make it into a modest but real piece of music.

*What constitutes the “final phrase”? This depends on the character of the tune and the phrasing of the text. Often it will be the last system of music or the last few measures. If the tune has a refrain, it could be the whole refrain (No. 6 in the EHB) or the last part of the refrain (No. 13). For No. 3, be sure to use the second ending. For No. 5, use the coda. The point is to establish the old key clearly before you begin to modulate. Avoid playing the whole tune either before or after the bridge.

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