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 Rauschpfiefe 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.
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.
3. 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).

4. 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?

5. 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?

6. 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.

7. 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

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Old Hundredth

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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 though 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)

Final from Symphony no. 3 by Louis Vierne
Prelude on Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland by Anne Laver (ostinato + canon)
[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.


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

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


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

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.


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


Easy-to-use manuals with clear topics and examples for beginner to intermediate students. 2007 volume comes with CD. Some hymn-based sections.
Companion to WL Editions *First Organ Book*. Includes basic theory concepts, how to harmonize short progressions.

**Historical Improvisation**

In English translation by Alain Hobbs. Volume 1 consists of preparatory exercises, Vol 2 advanced structures as taught in Paris Conservatory improvisation class.

Two volume set that provides an English translation of Bach circle pedagogical sources discussing chorale harmonization.

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)

Counterpoint and 18th century harmonic principles applied to hymn-tunes from the 18th century to today.