Even single melodies make interesting music

by Brigitte Harris

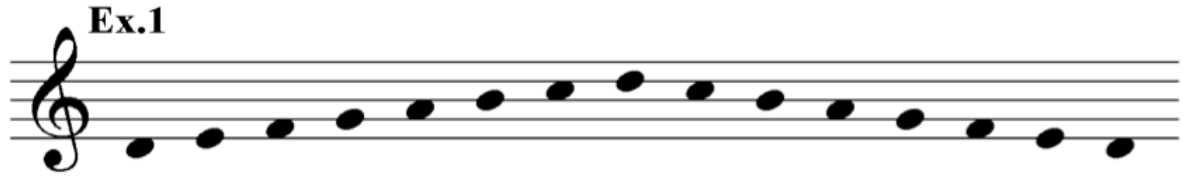
This series of articles offers an approach to improvisation primarily for church service playing and is intended for novices to improvisation. No prior experience of improvisation is needed.

Improvisation is, as is indeed playing anything on an instrument, not only an art, but also very much a discipline, and good results can be achieved with patient practice. I hope that the following ideas might inspire organists and provide them with some fresh tools to enhance their playing in services. The examples given are meant as guidelines only and serve only to illustrate the explanations. There are many other ways of realising the examples based on the suggested methods, and the aim should be to try something new each time.

The main objective of this short guide is to demystify the process of improvisation, and to encourage people to have a go. This first article deals purely with the idea of improvising a single melodic line. From this starting point future articles will explore two-part playing and the addition of chordal patterns.

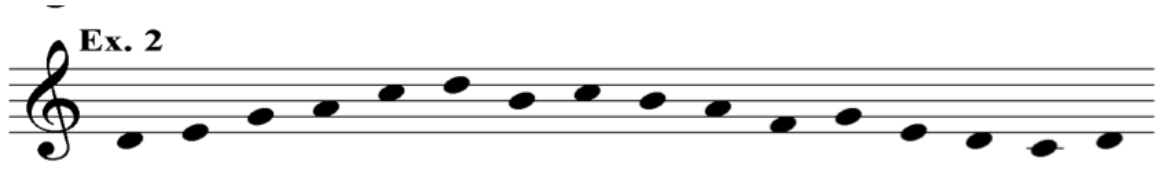
1 Melodies in Modes

Begin with melodic lines. Playing in a mode rather than a major or minor tonality is a simple way to begin. A good scale to start improvising with is a modal one, such as



This scale belongs to what is known as the Dorian mode. In its simplest form it can be realised by playing from D to D on the white notes of the keyboard. In this mode the semitones are to be found between the 2nd and 3rd degrees of the scale, and also between the 6th and 7th degrees. Familiarize yourself with this scale by playing it often and at varying tempi.

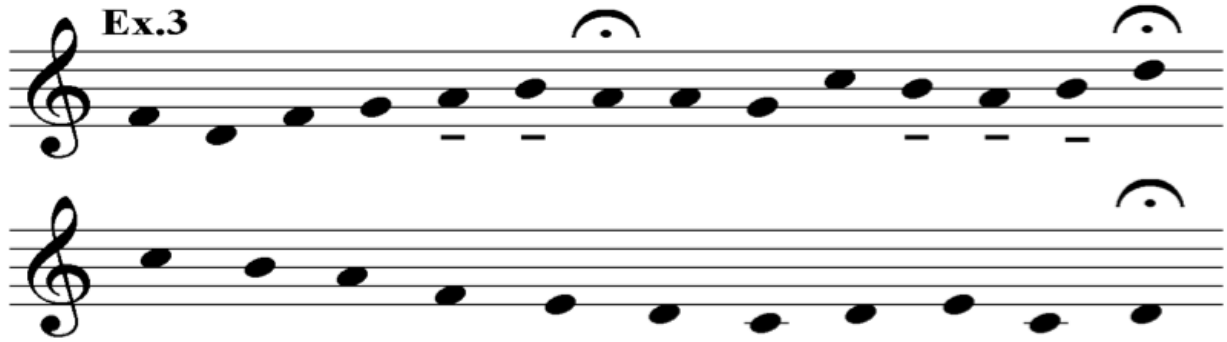
Now experiment with this musical material by leaving ‘gaps in the scale, e.g.:



Keep your playing legato and even. Let your ear anticipate the next note before you actually play it.

So far your improvising should be of a free character, as we have not determined any firm pulse or indeed a time signature. Instead, aim for flexibility in your playing. You could, for instance, linger on certain notes (pause sign) and play certain notes of your choice in a detached fashion (-).

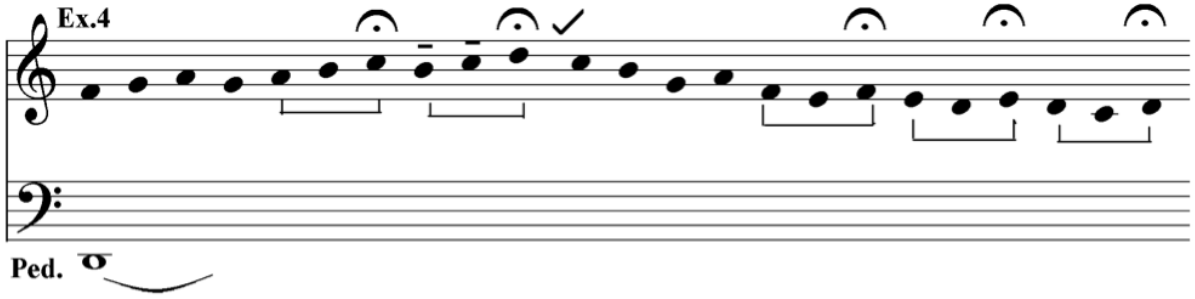
Improvise four short sections in this way, devising your own pattern based on the scale. Here is an example of how this might work:



Shape your musical line by leaving spaces for breathing (indicated here by a tick). This will divide your improvisation into phrases. The length of the phrase is entirely up to you; try including a variety of phrase lengths as in Ex.4.

Finally, add a pedal note to accompany your melody line. Right and left hand can take turns to play a phrase of this melody each. Different manuals can also be used to achieve a contrast of timbre – a flute in one hand and an oboe in the other for instance.

The last two or three notes of each phrase can be repeated, beginning on a higher or lower degree of the scale. You will find you have now created a sequence within your line! Ex. 4 shows how you might begin:

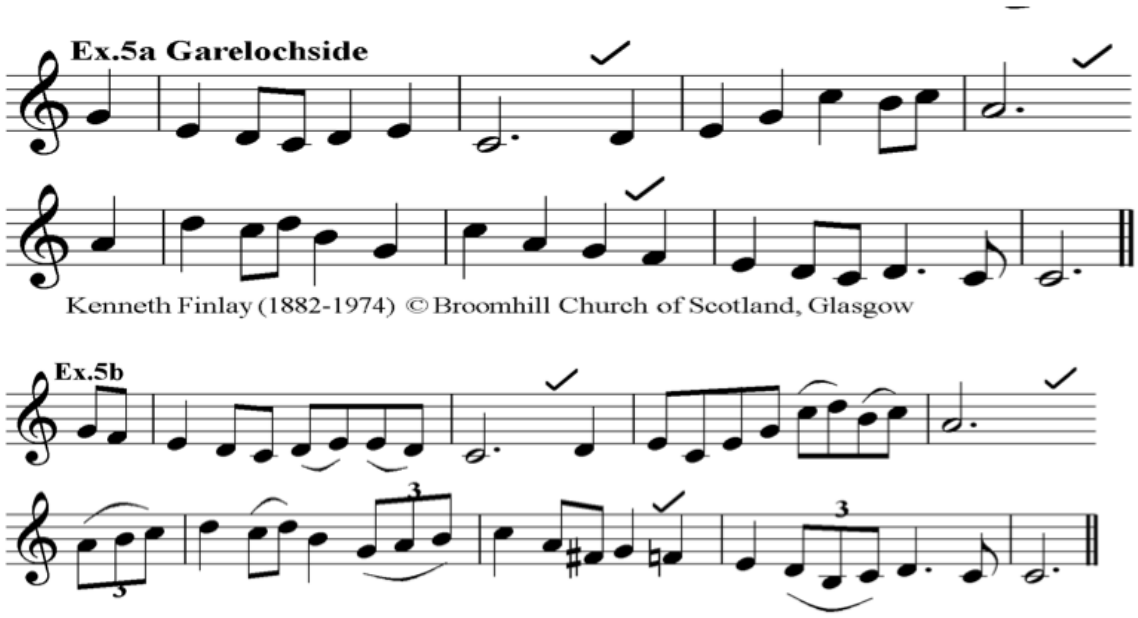


The possibilities are endless. All suggestions can be transferred to other scales, including diatonic scales. However, the ancient modes are a good training ground for your first steps in practising improvisation, as we do not have to think so strictly in keys in order to achieve a convincing result.

2 Varying a hymn melody

Short variations on melodies such as the one below can be played as a reflective meditation before or during the service. It is also a stepping stone towards a more elaborate extemporisation at a later stage. Do not be afraid to just play a single melodic line – after all, some of J.S.Bach's finest music, in his 'Cello suites, is just that!

The following example is a variation of the hymn melody Garelochside (CH4 721).



The added improvised notes are often filling the space in wider intervals, for instance as passing notes such as the 2nd note at the beginning and the last note of the first bar. The intervals of the fourth in the upbeats of both bar 5 and bar 6 have their spaces filled with a triplet.

Using notes above or below a melody note (auxiliary notes) is also an effective tool, as in the 6th quaver (d) in the third bar.>

Try varying the melody of the following hymn tunes:

Bunessan
Iona Boat Song
Dream Angus
Cradle Song (Away in a manger)

To start with, aim for one or two inserted notes per line. Simple variation will enhance the original folk tune in these hymns.

As in all music making the pleasure is found both in the preparation and the playing. Practise regularly and you will be amazed at your progress.

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