Putting it all together

by Brigitte Harris

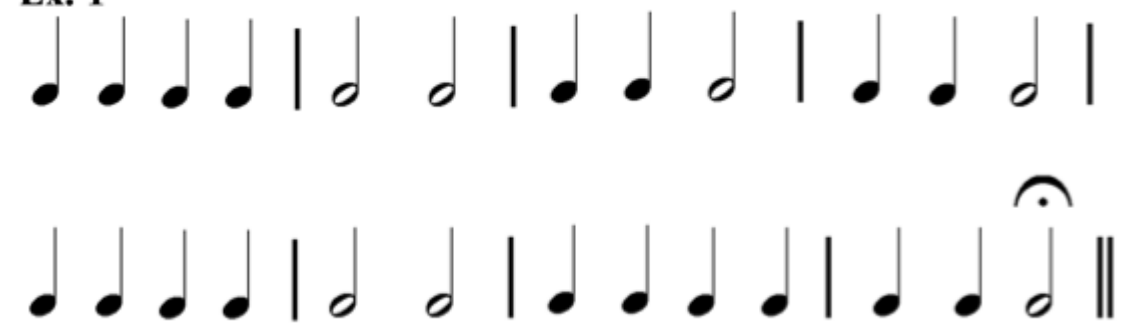
In the previous two articles we looked at inventing single lines as well as creating two-part textures. The intention so far has been to think about the playing of flowing lines without the constraints of a time signature, taking inspiration from Gregorian chant. You have experimented with freely moving lines, often over a pedal point.

In this third article I would like to explore various aspects of rhythm in improvisation, and show a possible pathway to improvising short pieces. I shall also introduce an additional scale, which will form the basis of the musical material for an improvised *Pastorale*.

1 Improvisation based on a given rhythm

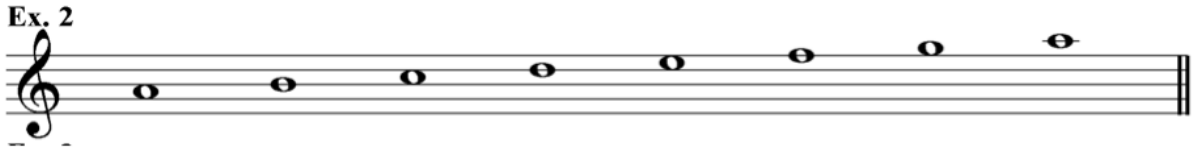
Preparation
Read through the following rhythmic pattern, which consists of four lines, and tap or clap gently through it, choosing a tempo which allows you to look ahead comfortably.

Ex. 1



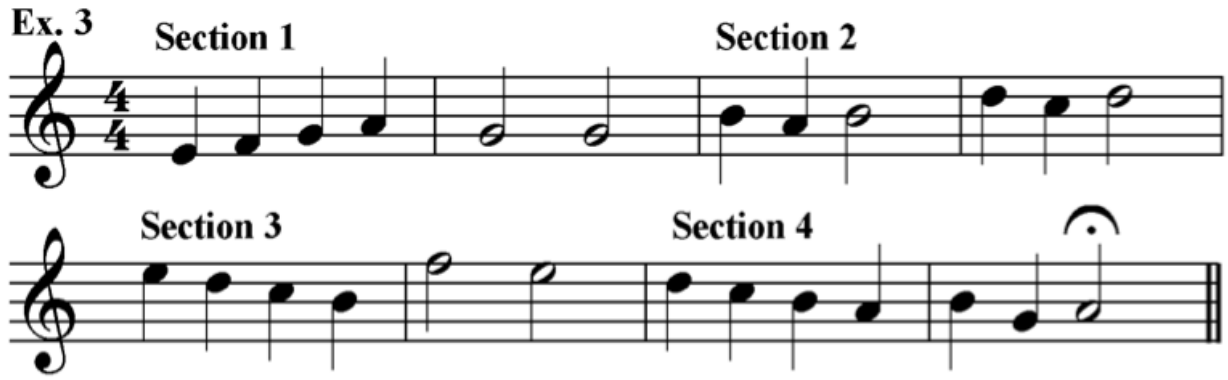
Then choose notes from a modal scale, such as the scale of white notes starting on a, as shown in Example 2.

Ex. 2



Before you combine the notes of the scale with the rhythm, you could give yourself some planning instructions. These could be as follows:

- Make use of mainly step-wise motion.
- each of the four lines should have no more than one leap, stretching no wider than the interval of a sixth.
- Reverse the direction of your playing after a leap.



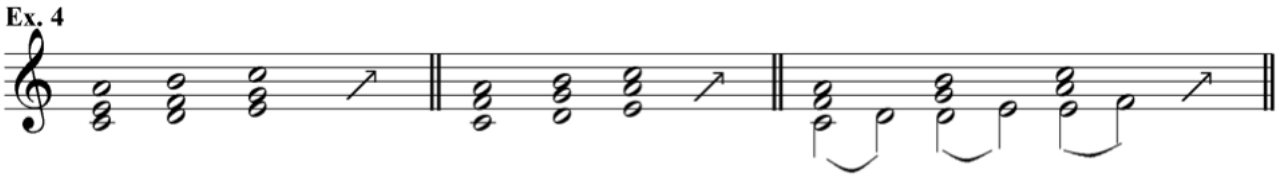
In Ex. 3 you find one leap per line in lines 2, 3 and 4. After each leap the melody moves in the opposite direction to the leap.

Now proceed to play one line in the right hand, followed by the second line in the left hand, the third line in right hand and then the last line with both hands in unison.

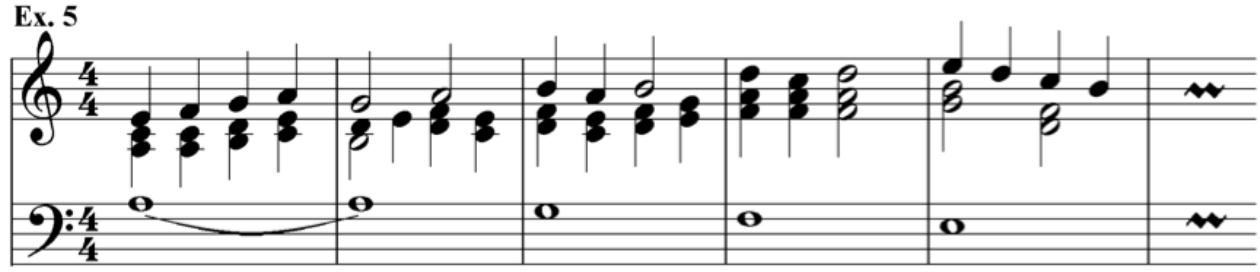
You will have noticed that a great deal in improvisation can be planned beforehand. The fact that you have planned will make itself obvious, and will attract the interest of the listener.

2 Chord chains

To turn this simple 4-line piece into a more substantial one, you could enhance it with harmony. For this you should practise scales in chord patterns such as in the following examples:

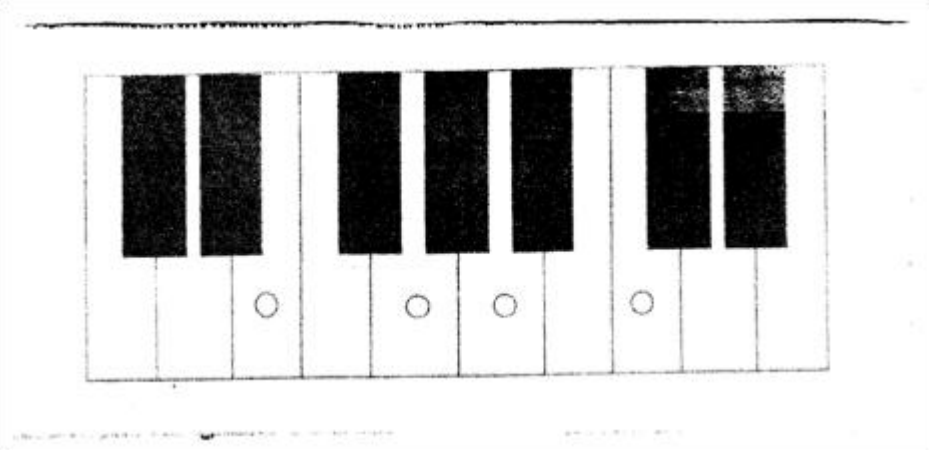


Practise these at a very slow pace. Try them with a detached articulation as well as legato. This will require a certain amount of time, but is well worth the effort! Then combine the chords, which sit under the melody, with a slowly moving scale in the accompanying hand or the pedals.

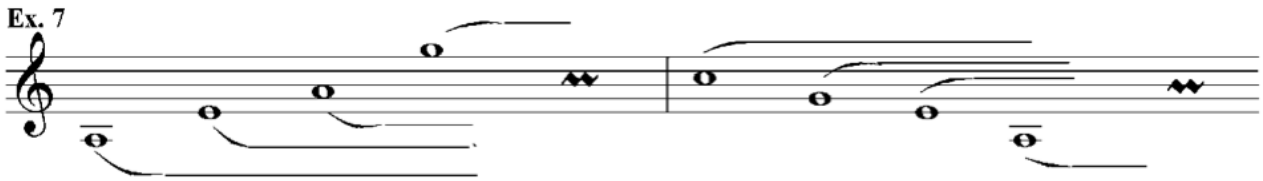


3 A Four-note scale

The musical material for our next task is a scale consisting of four notes. If you draw a line through G sharp, the two notes on each side of it are completely symmetrical. The notes are easily found by looking at the keyboard diagram below.



Start to familiarize yourself with this scale by finding comfortable fingerings for it. Now continue by building chords consisting of mainly widely spaced intervals, as in Example 7. Use a quiet flute or string stop on the organ. You may want to add one note to the pattern which is not part of the four-note scale.

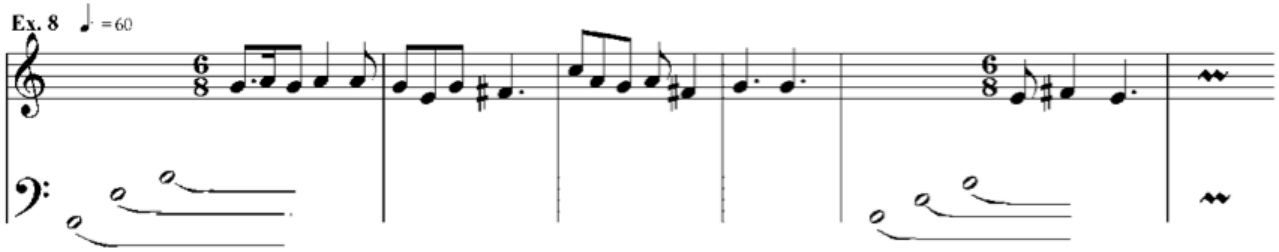


4 Pastorale

With all the ingredients in place, you can now start to improvise a *Pastorale*.

You will need a melody line, usually in compound time, e.g. 6/8, 9/8, 12/8, which should have some dotted rhythms. A *Pastorale* imitates the idea of shepherds piping, and can be copied on the organ with very good effect.

My last example begins with a slowly emerging chord (without a time signature) in a quiet registration (played perhaps on the Swell), which forms the canvas for the shepherd's tune. Play the melody in 6/8 time on a colourful solo registration, such as a vox humana or a stronger flute sound. This written-out example looks much more complicated than it is to play.



As always, reverse the roles for the hands and build a chord in the right hand, followed by the pastoral melody in the left hand or even the pedals.

The possibilities are endless …..

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