YOU CAN TEACH IMPROVISATION:

Myths and Methods of Hymn and Folk Improvisation
Peter Davis, MTNA, Spokane, March 19, 2019

Myth # 1. Improvisation is scary and impossible.

TRUTH: Improvisation can be fun and can be presented as a game.

SECRET: It is possible to go step by step with fun activities.

Myth #2. Improvisation is instant composition.

TRUTH: Improvisation is not about craftsmanship—it's about creativity.

SECRETS: Learning can be trial and error. Improvisation can be practiced and improved. Not all learning is linear and analytical

Myth #3. Improvisation must start with a blank slate.

TRUTH: Improvisation can be ***anything non-notated***.

Improvisation can be simply adding to pre-existing material.

SECRET: Limit the options of notes the student has to choose from.

Myth #4. Improvisation is a random, mysterious fogbank.

TRUTH: Improvisation, like language, is based on structure and "vocabulary."

SECRET: Explain basic theory and technique and apply it.

Myth #5. Improvisation is not useful for average musicians.

TRUTH: Improvisation can be educational, fun, and functional.

Myth #6. Improvisation is something average teachers can't teach.

TRUTH: Most teachers just need to know how to get started.

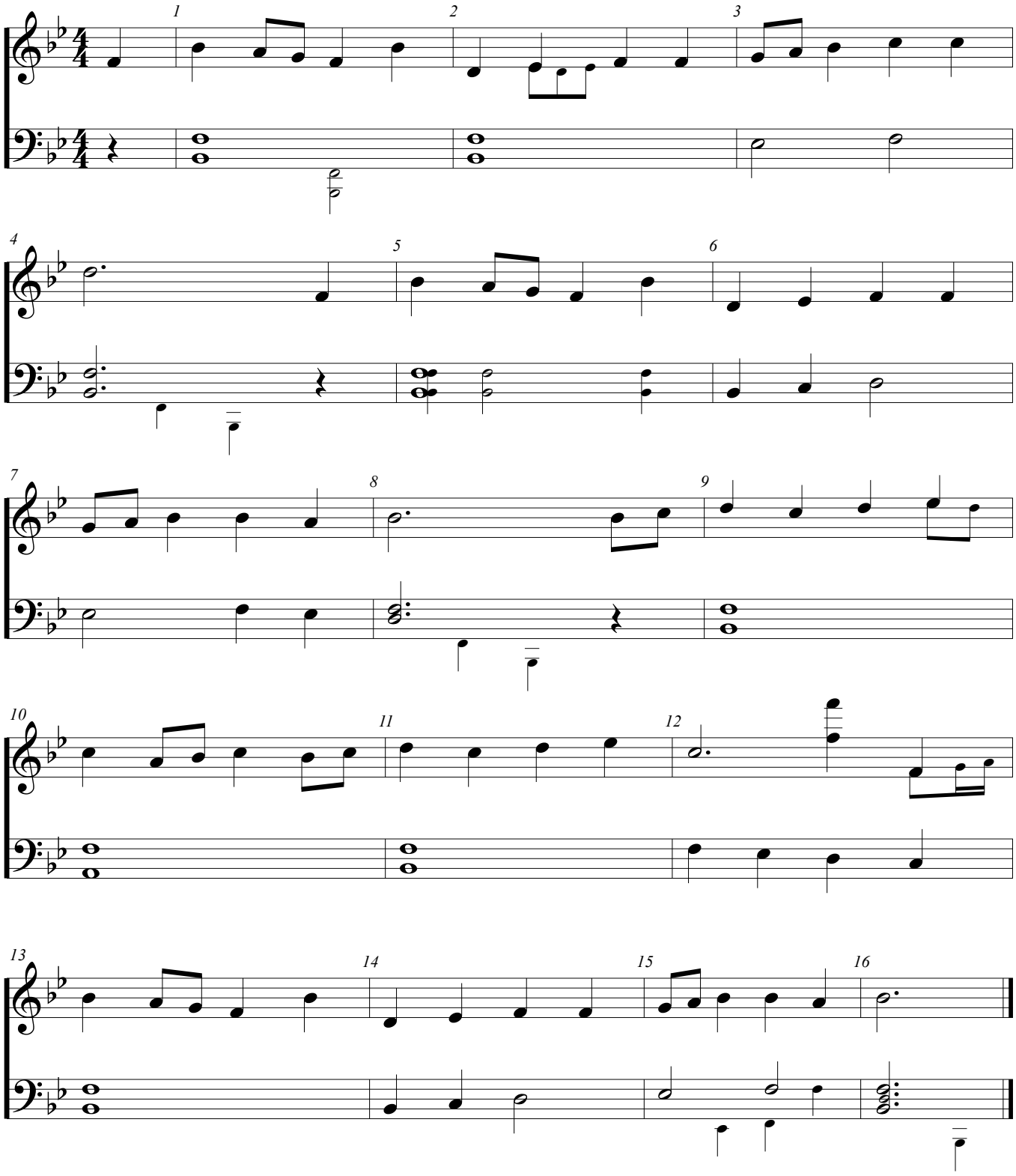
SECRET: Use the right activities, and sequence them carefully.

ACTIVITIES

1. Short "question and answer" activities
2. Tonic-dominant chord selection (teacher provides melody)
3. Melodic improvisation on the black keys (pentatonic)
4. Broken chord patterns with simple progressions
5. Basic alteration or embellishment of simple folk tunes
6. Expansion of simple four-part hymns
7. Introductions and ending formulas for accompanying singing

Tune: ELLACOMBE (I Sing the Mighty Power of God)

Small notes show possible basic improvisations or embellishments:
1. Octave leap (mm. 1, 15, 16)
2. Lower neighbor tones (m. 2)
3. Rhythmic variations (pulsations) (m. 5)
4. Passing tones (mm. 9, 12)
5. Chord tone skips (mm. 4, 16)



Improvisation Games: Question and Answer

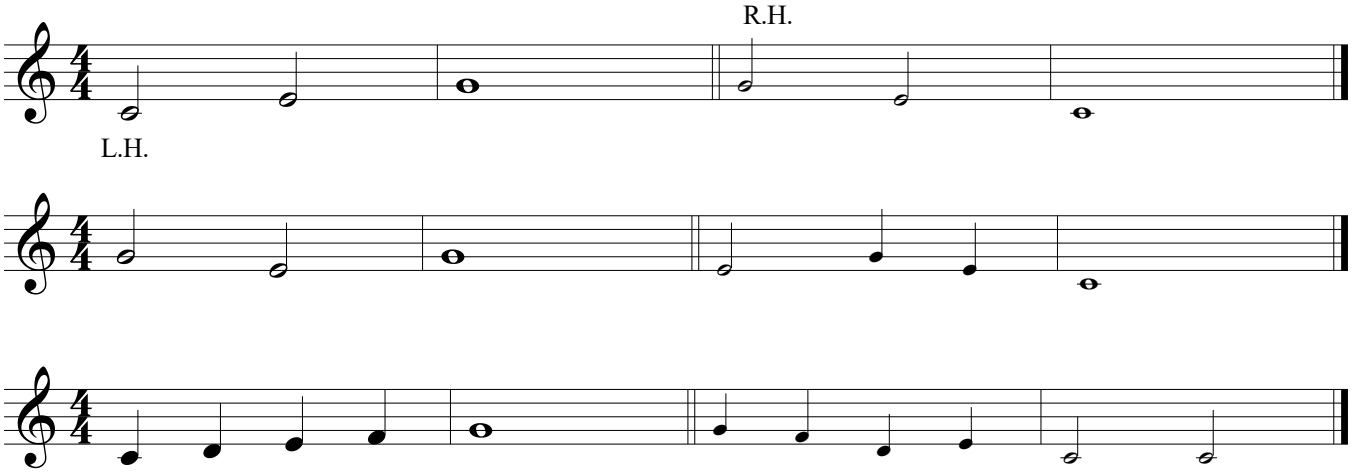
How to build success:

Limit note choices to the pentascale (5-note pattern) at first.
Play samples (L.H. question, R.H. answer)
Communicate--Any answer is acceptable.

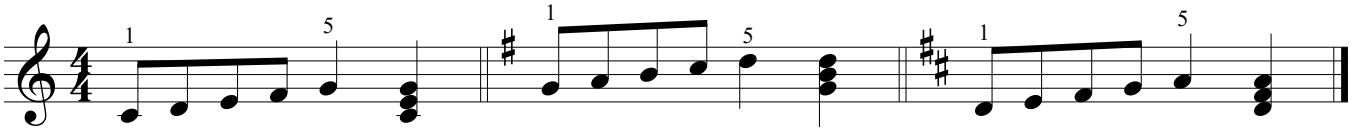
5-note Range Question and Answer (Major keys)

Teacher Samples

Questions ***Answers***



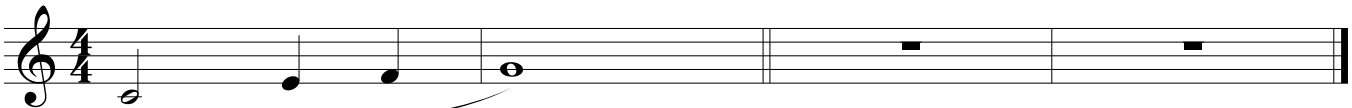
5-note (Pentascale) Review



etc.

Teacher plays questions, student improvises answers

1



Transpose to F

2

Transpose to G

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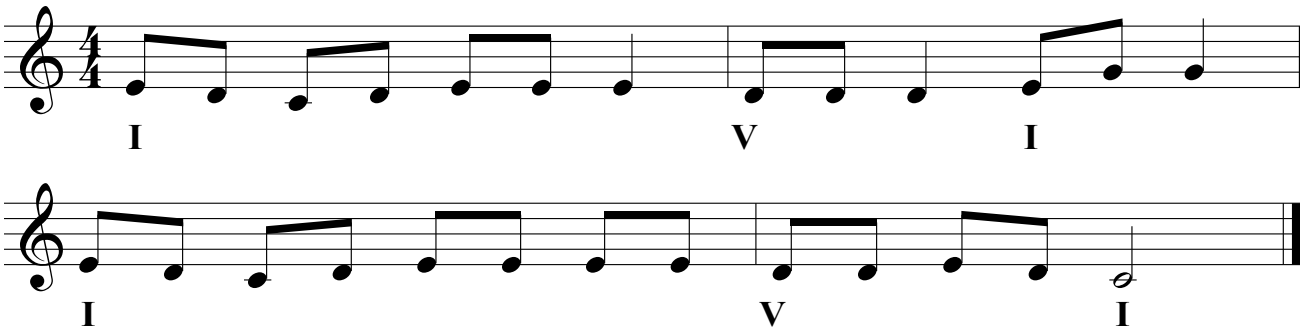
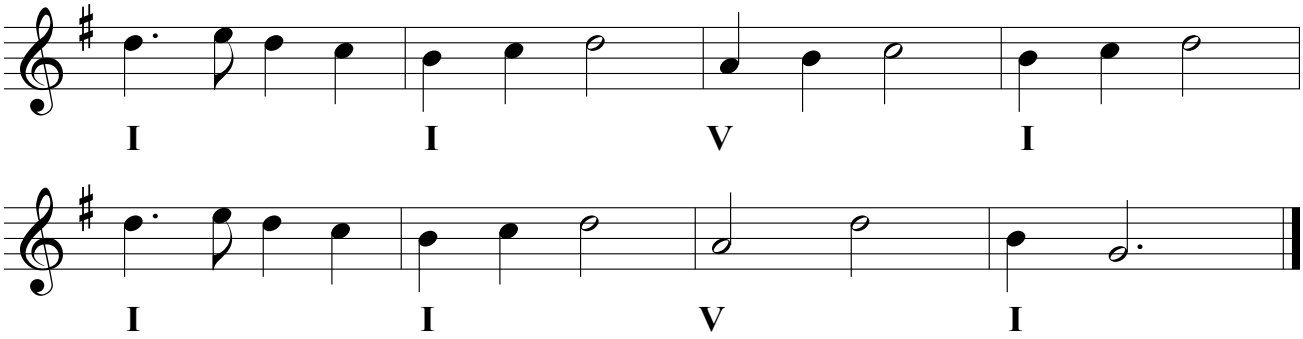
Harmonization With Tonic-Dominant (I-V)
Lead Sheets (Chord Symbols)

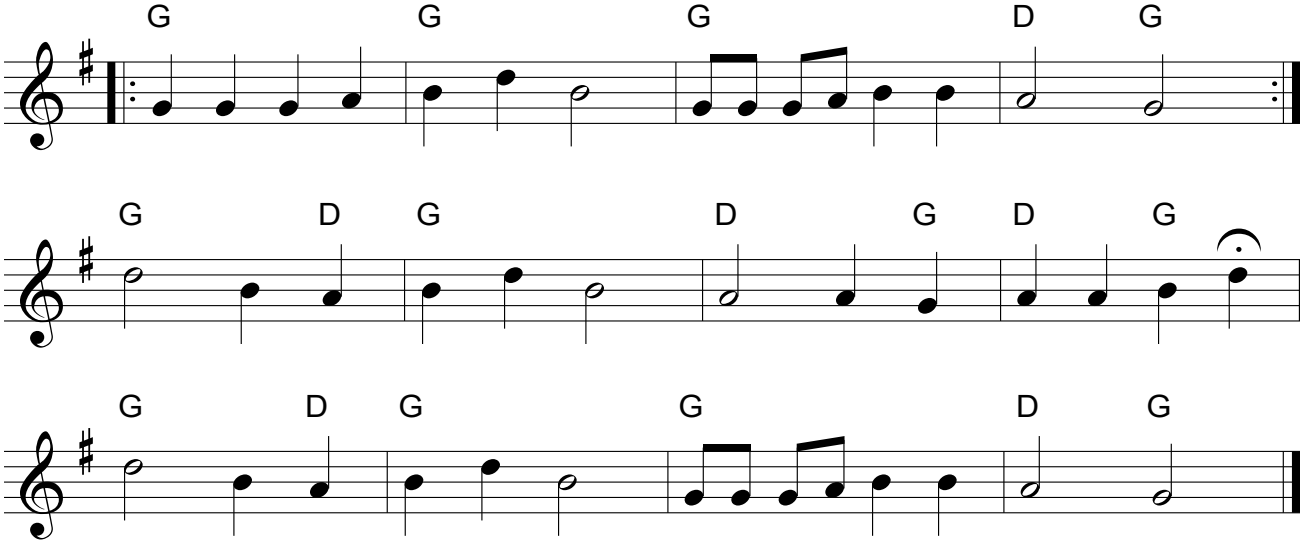
Mary Had a Little Lamb



London Bridge is Falling Down

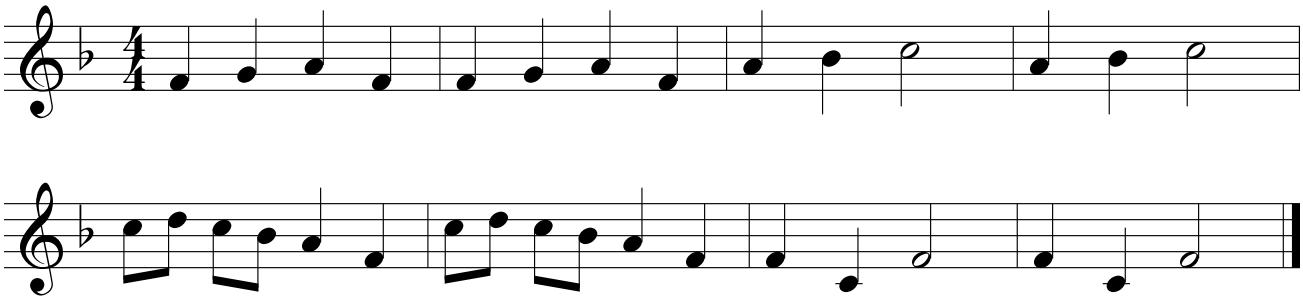


Nothing But the Blood of Jesus (Lead sheet format with chord symbols)

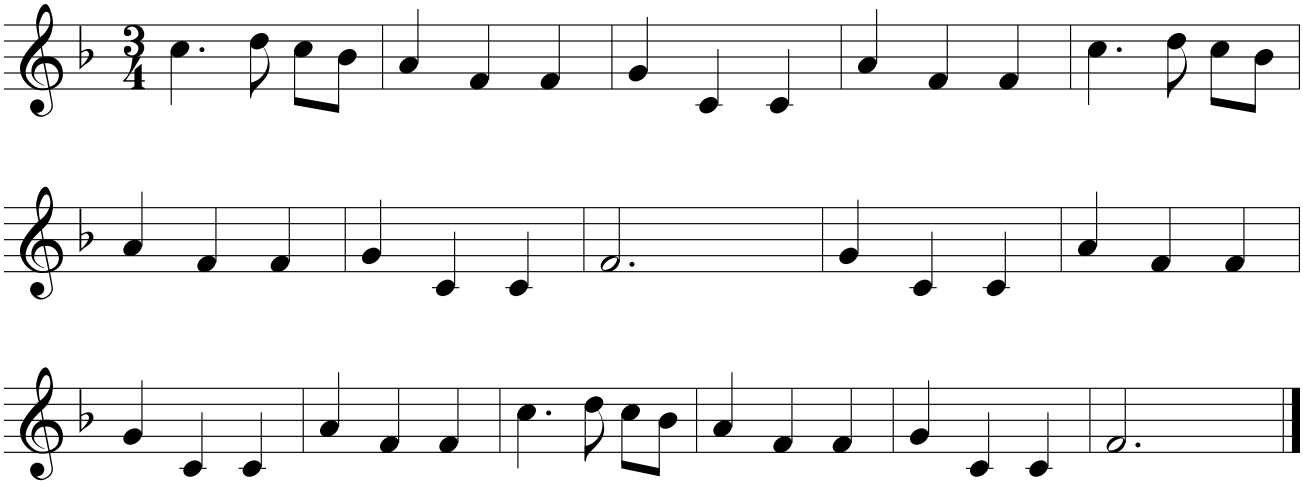


Harmonization (No Chords Supplied)

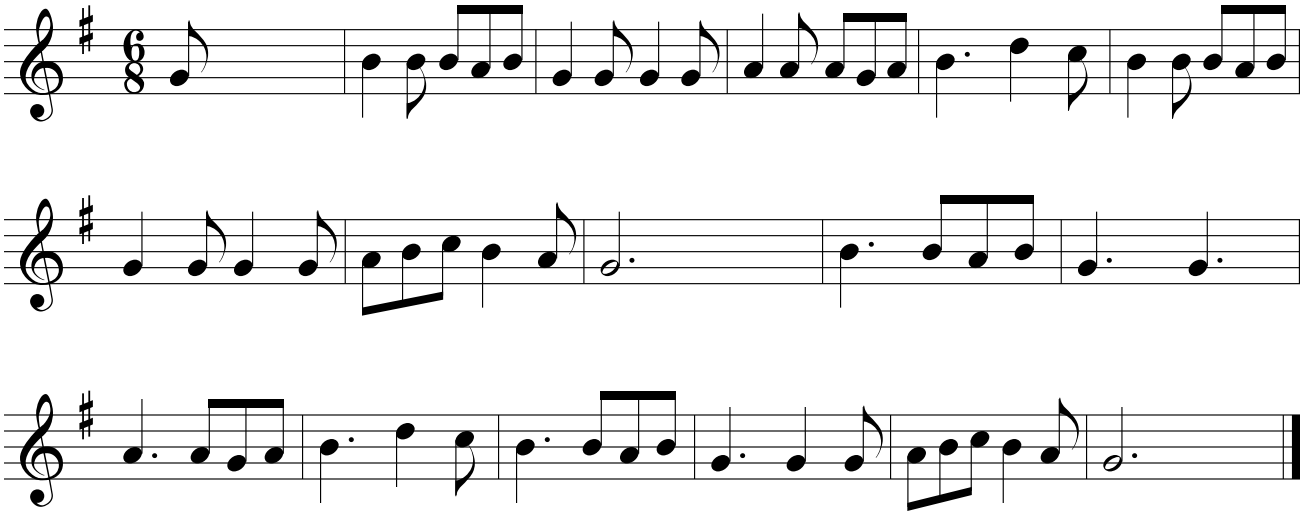
Frere Jacques



Ach du lieber Augustin



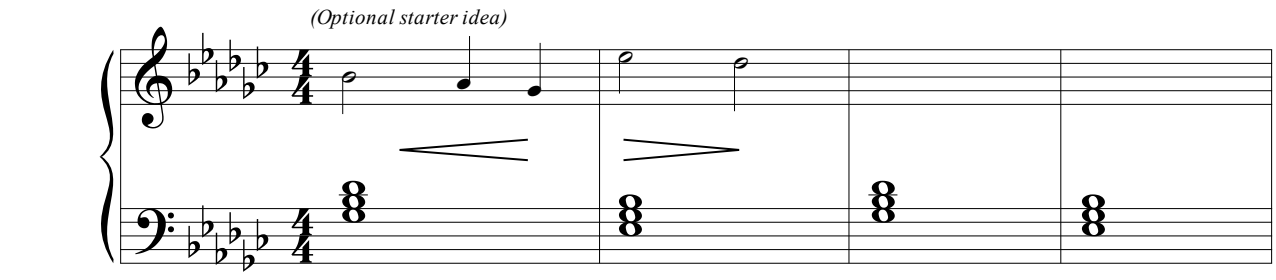
Oh, How I Love Jesus



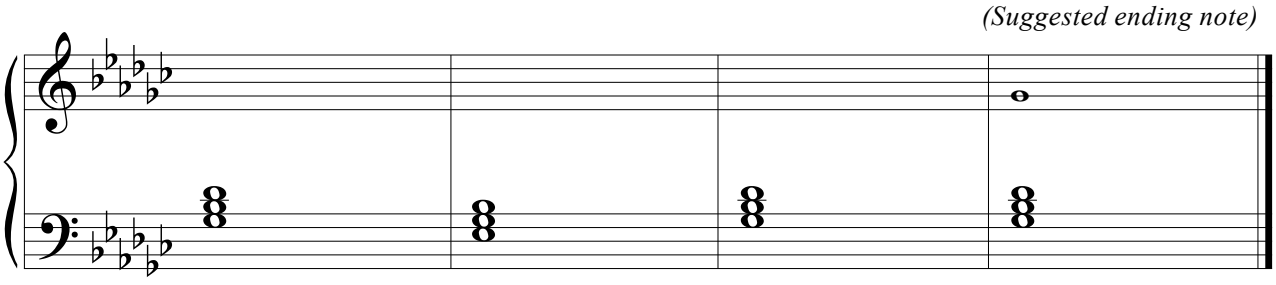
Other suggested starters with I-V only: Lightly Row, Alouette, Frere Jacques, Jingle Bells

Beginning Pentatonic Improvisation (Black Keys)

Morning Meditation

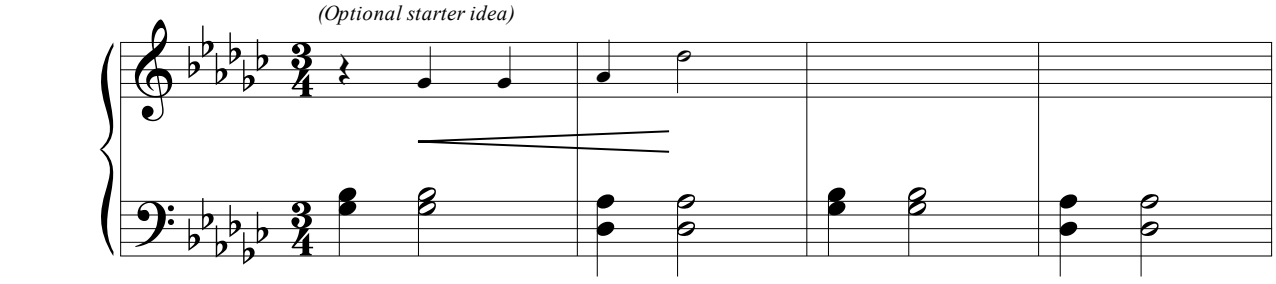


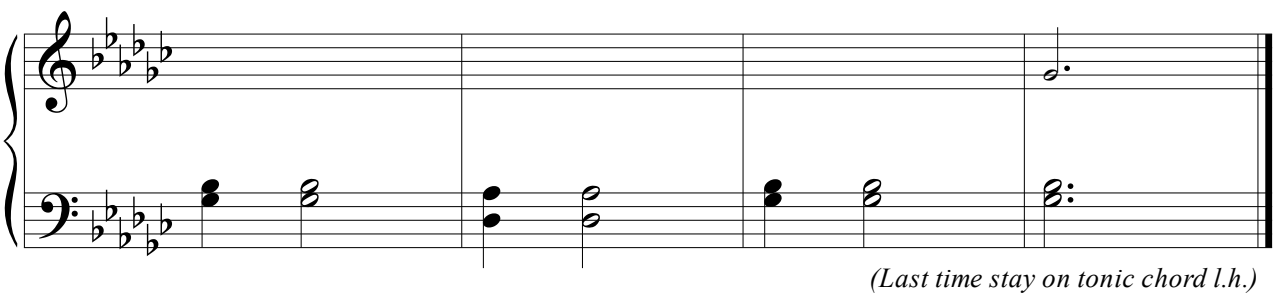
(Teacher may play the accompaniment pattern at first.)



(Last time stay on tonic chord l.h.)

Song of Hope



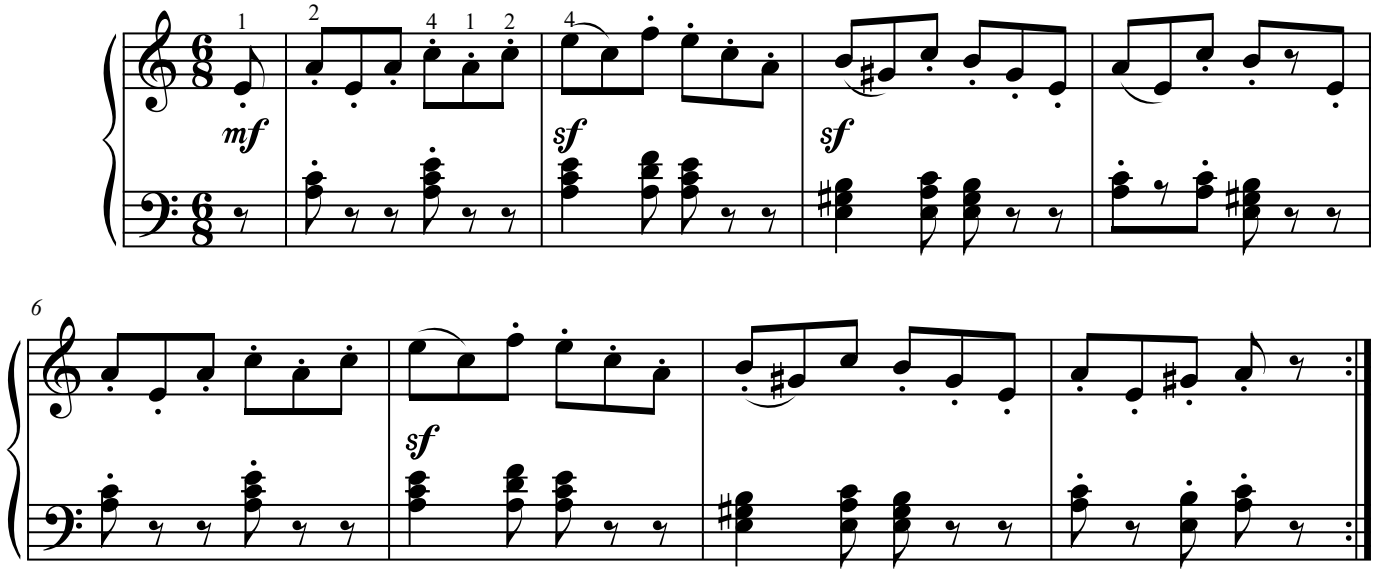


(Last time stay on tonic chord l.h.)

Improvising Theme and Variations: The Wild Rider

Lebhaft (Lively)

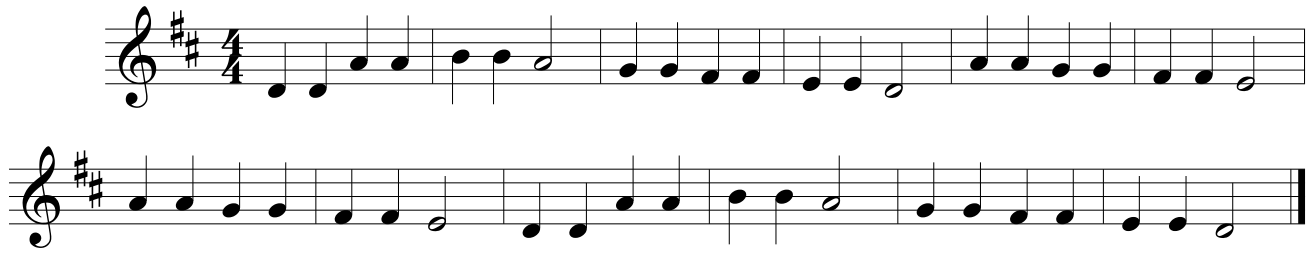
Robert Schumann (1810-1856)



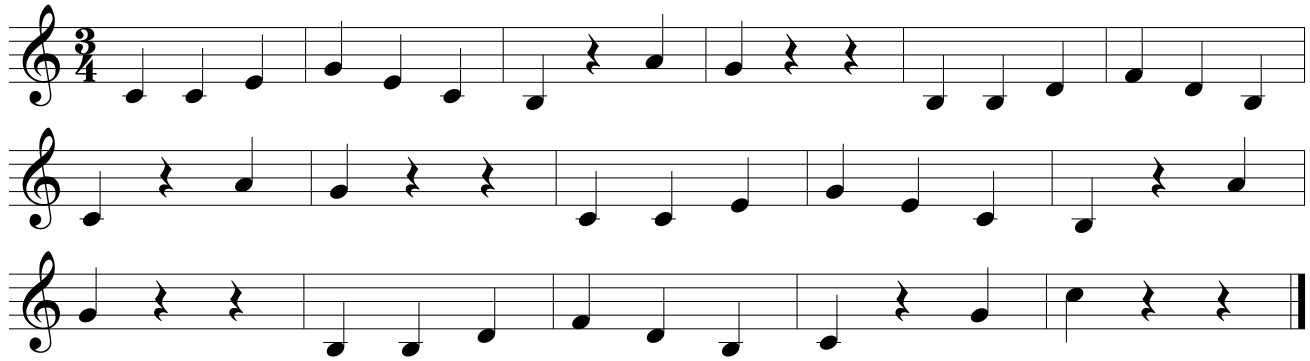
Folk Songs for Improvisation

1. Provide basic harmonization.
2. Alter the rhythm of the melody to create "Theme and Variations"

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star



Mexican Hat Dance



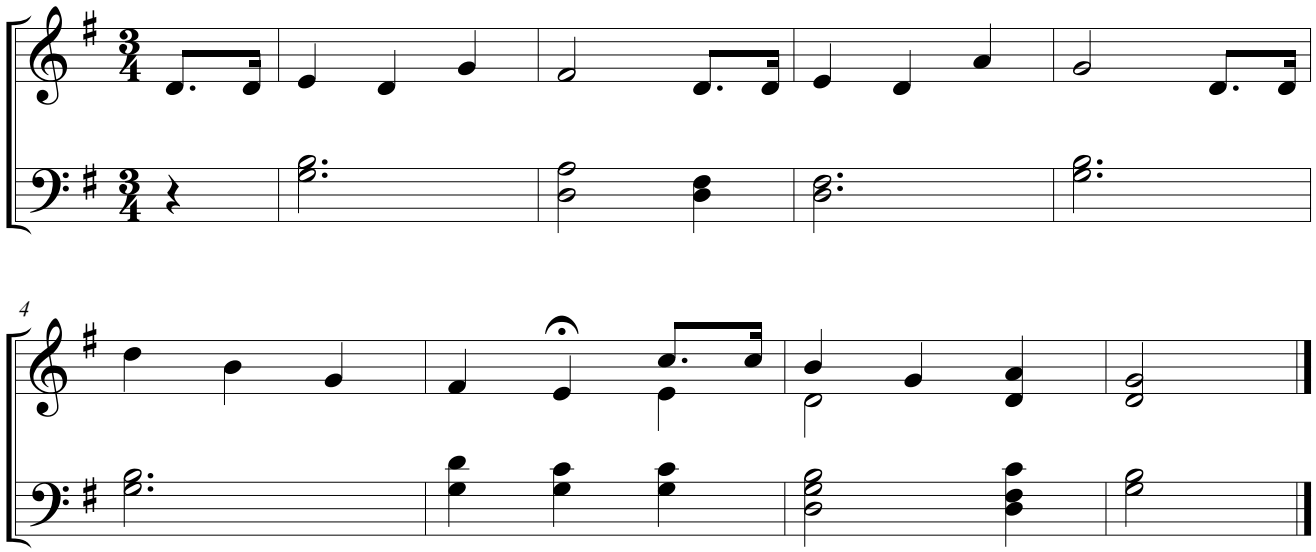
Other suggested pieces to try: Clementi Sonatina in C, Beethoven Ecosaisse in G, Schumann The Merry Farmer.
Other suggested folk tunes: Kookaburra, Ring Around the Rosy, Home on the Range, Camptown Races, Clementine, I've Been Working on the Railroad.

Happy Birthday To You* (With Basic Improvisation)

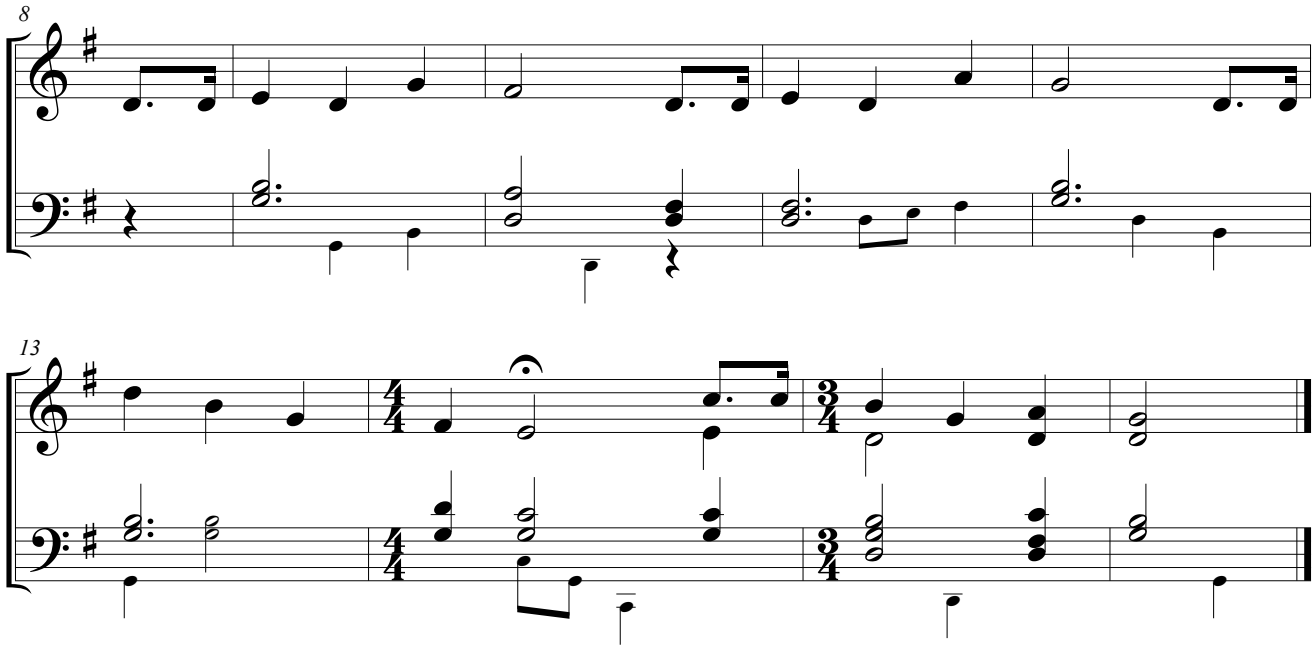
1. This song is one of the most common songs pianists are asked to play.
2. Practice either treble or bass pulsations

Where are pulsations or other fill-ins helpful?

Traditional



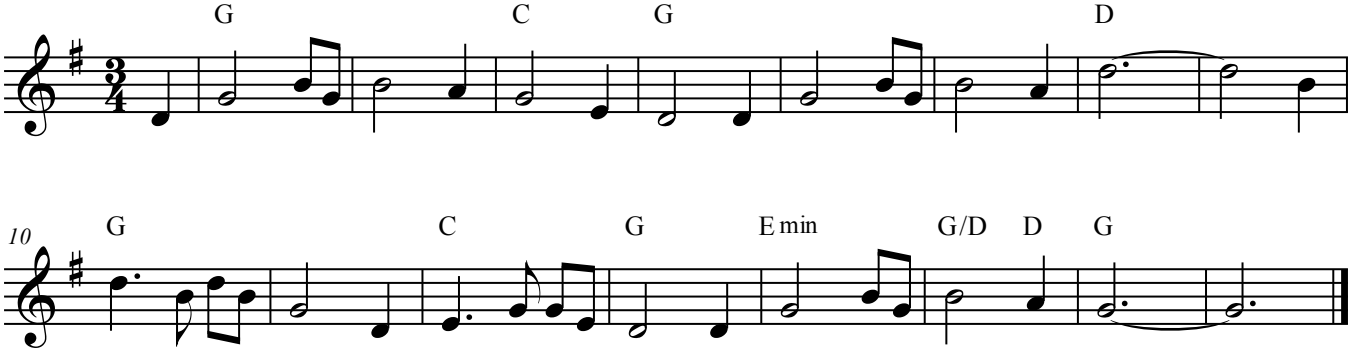
Possible Fill-ins Shown



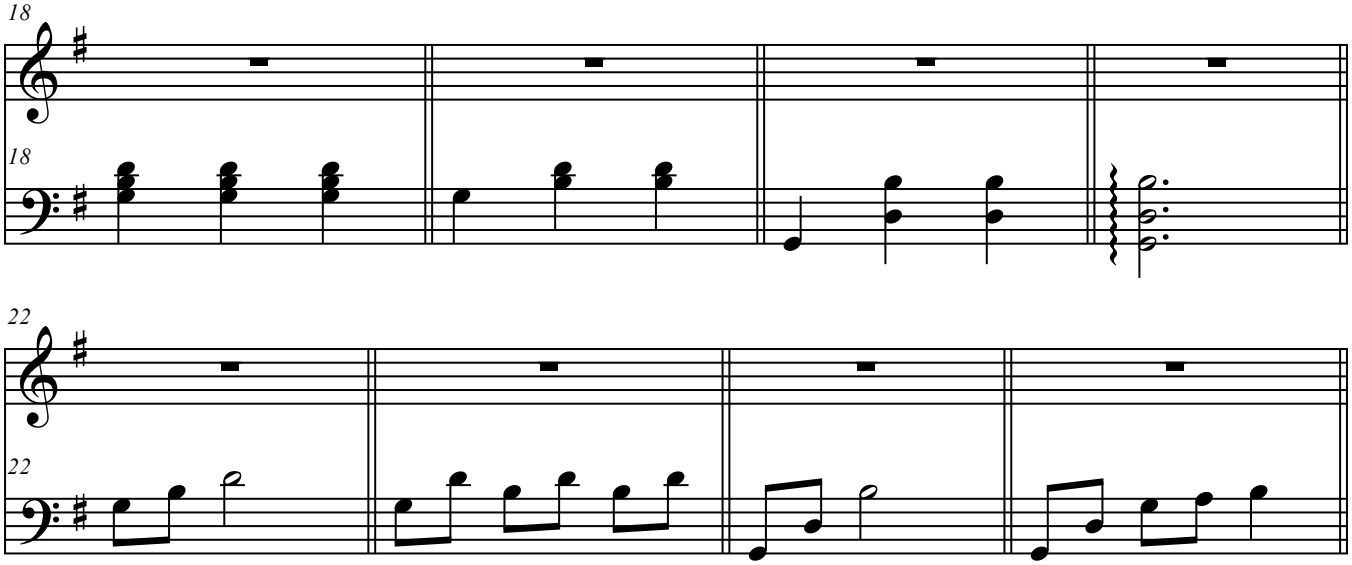
*"Happy Birthday" to You is based on a 19th century tune, "Good Morning To You."

Lead Sheet Improvisation: Amazing Grace

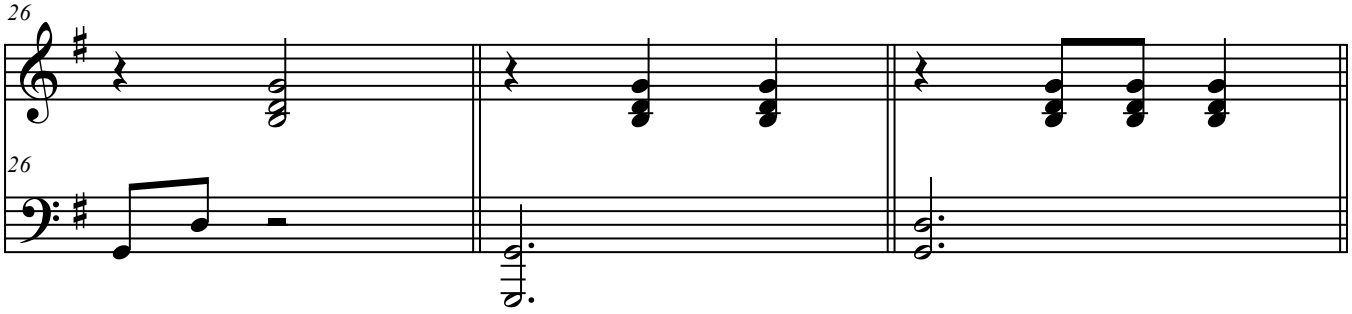
Melody in Lead Sheet Format



One-hand Accompaniment Patterns (R.H. on melody)



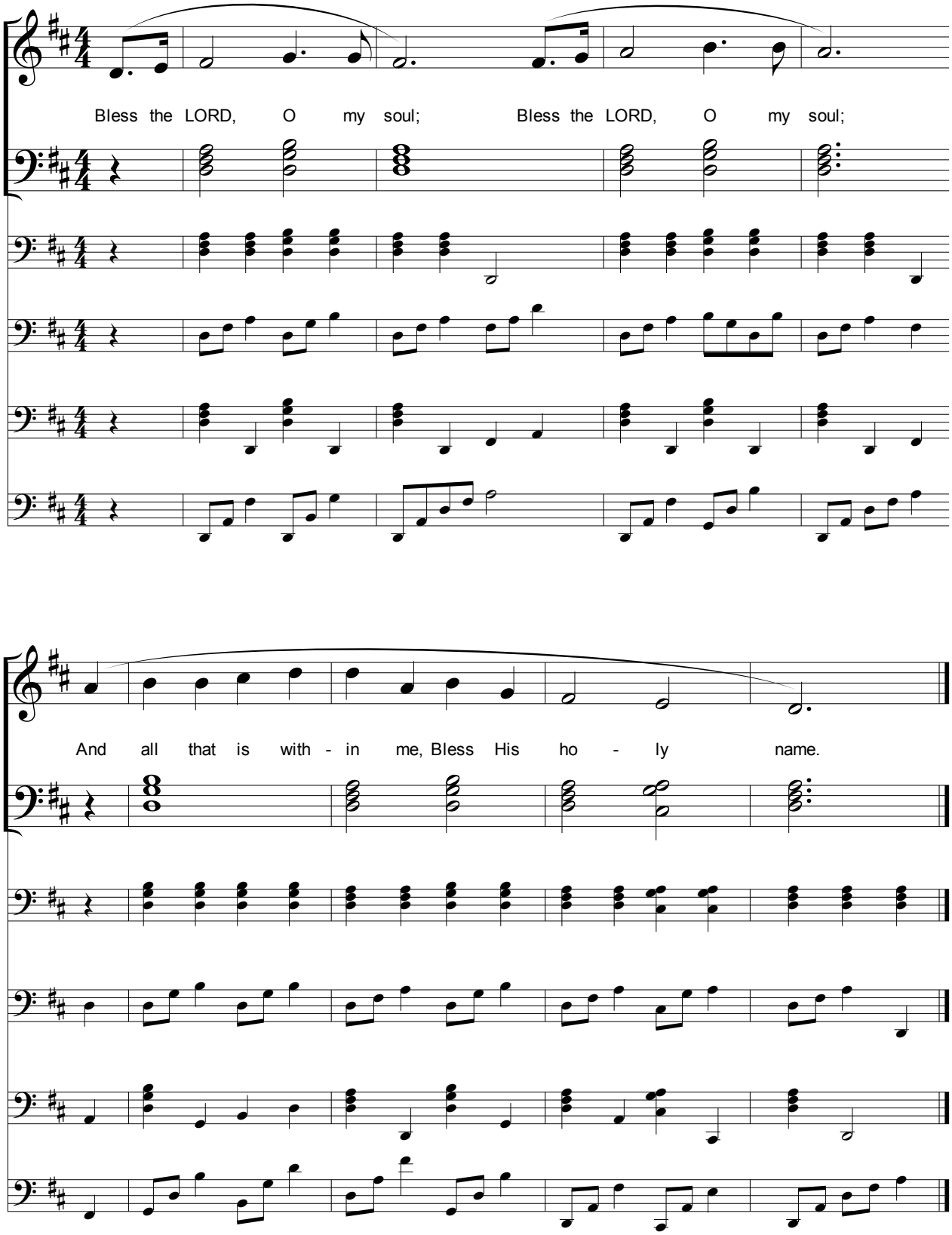
Two-hand Accompaniment Patterns (soloist on melody)



Basic Accompaniment Patterns: Bless the Lord, O My Soul

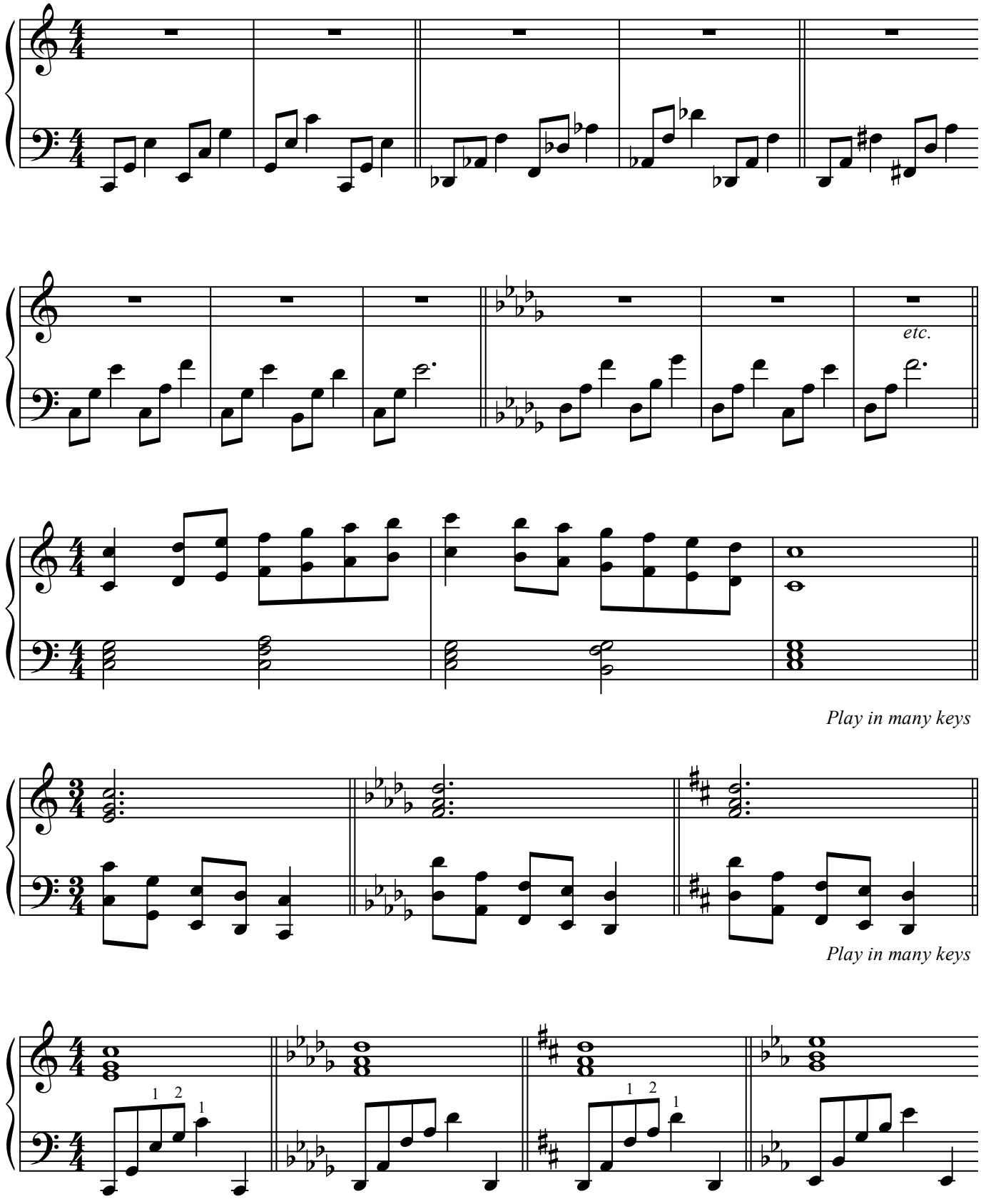
Psalm 103:1

Traditional



Other suggested starters for basic accompaniment patterns: She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain, How Great Thou Art, Viva le Compaigne, For He's a Jolly Good Fellow, Just As I Am, How Great Thou Art, For the Beauty of the Earth, Skip to My Lou, In Christ Alone, There is a Fountain.

Essential Exercises for Improvisers



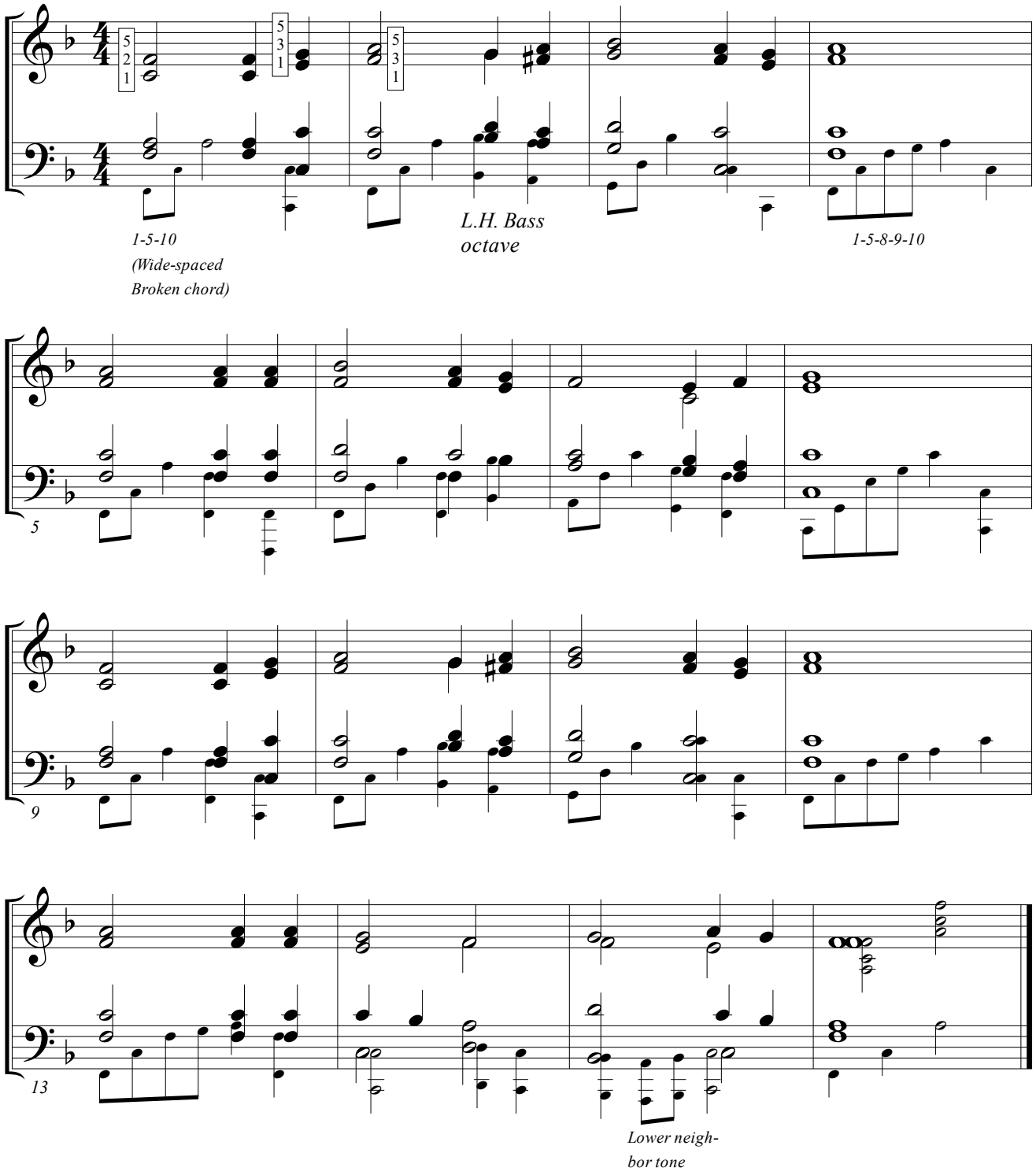
Left Hand Improvisation In Congregational Accompanying

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

Basic Congregational Style--R.H. S/A/T, L.H. Bass

St. 1 lyrics: "When I survey the wondrous cross..." MEDITATIVE L.H.

Lowell Mason



Other suggested starters with basic L.H. fill-in: HYFRYDOL; Come Thou Almighty King; Nearer, Still Nearer; My Jesus, I Love Thee; What a Friend We Have in Jesus; Abide With Me