

“Worship Service Improvisation Skills for Classical Pianists”
 2023 MTNA National Conference – Reno, Nevada
 Lori Rhoden, D.M.A., N.C.T.M.
 Professor of Music Performance (Piano) – Ball State University

I. Introduction

Assumptions:

1. You understand the basics of music theory and functional harmony, including key signatures, scales, and various chord types.
2. You have developed a vocabulary of basic pitch and rhythmic patterns through hearing, singing, and performing a lot of music in many different styles. You are able to play these patterns fluently in a variety of keys.
3. You have mastered foundational pianistic skills at a minimum intermediate level. You are comfortable getting around the piano.

II. Preliminary Improvisation Skills

Practice each of these skills in a variety of keys and do everything you can to develop your aural awareness of both melody and harmony.

1. Play simple diatonic tunes by ear, especially tunes you know well.

Example #1: Amazing Grace

- Become comfortable with fingering in various keys as the keyboard topography changes.

2. Harmonize these songs with primary triads

Example #2: Seek Ye First

- Use inversions for smoother musical lines.
- Think about chord spacing/voicing relative to the range.
- Every note does not need to be harmonized - most songs can be harmonized with one or two chords per measure.
- Start with older, simpler choruses that are easier.

3. Accumulate a vocabulary of various pitch and rhythm patterns that can be used as accompaniments.

- Ostinatos
- Broken chord patterns
- Scalar patterns
- Single hand patterns or patterns split between hands

4. Practice improvising these patterns in various chord progressions

Example #3: You Are My All in All: F – C – Dm – F – Bb – F, C – F – C

III. Improvisation as an accompanist when playing with an organist or other instrumentalists

- Create instrumental/orchestral textures from hymn vocal scores
- Maintain consistent harmony and general structure
- Communicate with other instrumentalists about your improvisation plans. Sometimes organists re-harmonize melodies on the last stanza of a hymn, requiring the pianist to play the melody in octaves.

1. Play the melody or bass line in open octaves

Example #4: All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name

- Add missing chord tones as needed to the other hand

2. Fill in melody octaves with harmony in RH while the LH plays the bass line in octaves.

3. Fill in melody octaves with harmony in both hands

4. Create a descant or countermelody in the RH

Examples#5, 6: Seek Ye First (simple) and Holy, Holy, Holy (more complex)

- Use arpeggios and scales
- Change directions frequently
- Keep consistent note values primarily, with limited changes as appropriate

5. Use various chord patterns such as Alberti bass or arpeggios to create a new accompaniment

Example #7: Like a River Glorious

6. Add scalar fills, especially on long notes in either bass or melody

Example #8: Great is Thy Faithfulness

- Simple scalar fills
- Longer fills - change directions and repeat patterns
- Adapt rhythmic patterns as needed for the right number of beats
- Repeat notes with a creative rhythmic pattern
- Leave out some of the notes if necessary
- Combine scalar and arpeggio patterns
- Combine any of the above

7. Use blocked-chord inversions

8. Repeat existing motives/patterns

Example #9: Angels We Have Heard on High

IV. Improvisation as an accompanist with no other instrumentalists playing

1. Re-harmonize the melody with an ascending or descending bass line

Examples #10, 11: Londonerry Air, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

- Break at cadences
- Does not have to start on the tonic
- Experiment with different harmonies
- Vary the harmonic rhythm

2. Re-harmonize the melody using chords outside of the key

Example #12: Amazing Grace

3. Re-harmonize the melody using a pedal point

Example #13: Fairest Lord Jesus

V. Improvisation as a soloist

1. Improvise or elaborate a variation on the melody

Example #14: Shout to the Lord

- Use passing tones, neighbor tones, scales or arpeggios
- Use short motives to decorate the melody
- Reverse melodic direction
- Change the range

2. Keep the same harmonic structure and improvise a completely new melody

Example #15: Breathe

3. Use fragments from the hymn with traditional compositional tools such as augmentation, diminution, inversion, and retrograde

Example #16: Brethren, We Have Met to Worship

4. Change meters and/or rhythms

Example #17: Amazing Grace (with My Chains are Gone)

5. Practice ways to extend or shorten a piece

- Add a longer introduction using a sequential or motivic pattern. The same pattern can be used in between phrases.

Example #18: Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

- Delay the ending through augmentation

Example #19: Fairest Lord Jesus

- Delay the ending through a deceptive cadence and repeat the last phrase
- Delay the ending with other chord progressions such as flat VI, flat II chords

- Learn modulatory transitions and transpose the song to a higher key

Example #20: It is Well with My Soul

VI. Improvisation from a lead sheet

1. You need a strong knowledge of keys and chords, including awareness of what all of the standard chord symbols mean. For example, D/A indicates a D chord with the A as the lowest sounding note, usually the bass note in your LH.

2. Learn to play two-hand patterns from the chord symbols first with no melody.

3. Pick a style of accompaniment pattern that fits the song.

- Ballad style

Example #21: The Heart of Worship

- Pop / rock style pattern with dotted rhythm bass line

Example #22: How Great is Our God

- Calm, slower energy using open 5ths and 6ths, blocked chords, larger note values

Example #23: What a Beautiful Name

4. Putting it all together

Example: What a Beautiful Name

- 1st verse – open intervals higher in the range to create a reverent sense of wonder
- 2nd verse – ballad style in lower and limited range
- Chorus – add pop/rock bass line, use faster note values for more rhythmic energy and expand the range

VII. Tips to Remember

1. Keep track of where you are in the rhythm/meter and the key. Practice being able to start/stop at any point in the piece to extend a piece to make it longer or find a suitable ending to shorten it.
2. Remember that patterns need to fit the meters and harmonic rhythm. Sometimes a 4-beat pattern has to be adapted for 2 beats.
3. Don't try to combine too many techniques at one time, especially until you get more experienced.
4. Consider musical character. For example, an increase in energy and excitement can come with faster note values while a slower-moving consistent pattern will be more calm and peaceful. Think about reflecting potential orchestration, including drum set and electric bass for contemporary songs.
5. Let the improvisation reflect the spiritual text and its aesthetic. You can use different styles on different stanzas. Don't use casual or light-hearted styles for hymns with very serious or somber texts.
7. Maintain the same good piano technique for worship playing that you use for classical playing.
8. Use all of your classical musical knowledge to inform your improvisation choices.
9. There are no wrong notes, chords, or patterns, only some that might sound better than others in certain contexts.
10. Enjoy the opportunity to be creative!

VIII. Improvisation Resources

Chung, Brian and Dennis Thurmond. *Improvisation at the Piano: A Systematic Approach for the Classically Trained Pianist*. Van Nuys, California: Alfred Music, 2007.

Collins, Ann. *How to Use a Fake Book: Fakin' Accompaniments from Melodies and Chord Symbols*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Hal Leonard, 1985.

Collins, Ann. *Jazz Works*. Van Nuys, California: Alfred Music, 2000.

Collins, Ann. *Lead Lines and Chord Changes: A Practical How-To Approach for Keyboardists*. Van Nuys, California: Alfred Music, 1988.

Johns, Michele. *Hymn Improvisation*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg, 1987.

Kinney, Forrest and Akiko Kinney. *Pattern Play: Inspiring Creativity at the Piano* (6 volumes). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Frederick Harris Music, 2009.

Simon, Jerald. *100 Left Hand Patterns Every Piano Player Should Know*. St. George, Utah: Music Motivation, 2018.

Simon, Jerald. *Essential Piano Exercises Every Piano Player Should Know: Learn Intervals, Scales and Chords in All Keys and in All Inversions*. St. George, Utah: Music Motivation, 2020.

How to Read Lead Sheets

https://www.musicnotes.com/now/musictheory/how-to-read-a-chord-chart-or-lead-sheet-at-the-piano/?utm_campaign=20220309_NL_Resources&utm_source=Newsflash&utm_medium=email&cmpid=20220309_NL_Resources