A World of Possibilities



Master Lessons in
Organ Improvisation

Jeffrey Brillhart

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"What we find is that if you have a goal that is very, very far out, and you approach it in little steps, you start to get there faster. Your mind opens up to the possibilities."

-Mae Jemison, first African-American woman to travel into space

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Preface

Over a decade ago I began a lovely adventure, teaching organ improvisation at Yale University. When I started my teaching career, I had no idea that my work with dozens of talented graduate students would lead to the publishing in 2011 of my first book, *Breaking Free.* Nor did I anticipate just how much I would grow to love teaching or that it would become one of the greatest passions in my life. My heartfelt thanks go to Professors Martin Jean and Thomas Murray for their support of my work at Yale University and for entrusting their students to me.

Having used *Breaking Free* as a teaching resource at Yale, in workshops, and with private students, I eventually realized that there was room for another book. Whereas *Breaking Free* functions as a source book for improvisation exercises and ideas, *A World of Possibilities* serves as a companion to *Breaking Free,* taking the form of teaching units, each with several detailed assignments. These assignments come from the experience of using *Breaking Free* in my teaching where I have experienced first-hand what works most effectively in learning how to improvise.

I once heard renowned Swiss organist and improviser, Rudolf Lutz, describe his students as a garden and himself, as the gardener. I also like the analogy of a science laboratory. While some experiments might yield less than expected, most teach a great deal. Perhaps the experiment will lead to a moment of self-discovery. Perhaps it will inform the student about what *nearly* worked. Perhaps it will lead to a wholly new direction of exploration.

The reality in teaching improvisation is that ten students will typically take the same assignment and go in ten different directions. This makes sense! After all, each student brings a different personality, a different level of experience, and a different preference for musical language to every assignment. One student will add an unexpected canon to an assignment with great ease, while the next will struggle to maintain an ostinato pattern. The next student will come in to the lesson having experienced a huge breakthrough in how to combine sonorities. Another will come into the lesson drained from an exam and be totally re-energized through the catharsis of improvising. Such is the joy of teaching.

What are the keys to success in studying improvisation? My students have discovered the answer to that question. They go beyond their weekly assignments. They take risks, be it in harmony, rhythm, registration, musical textures or development of the theme. They are willing to tackle a new musical language, even if it is outside their level of comfort. They are not afraid of making a mistake in front of their peers. They look for ways to combine learned concepts into new ideas. They learn to stay upright while improvising!

In her book, *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up (Random House, Bell Tower Books),* Stanford University professor Patricia Ryan Madson, draws a parallel between riding a bicycle and improvisation. She writes that, "Improvising has much in common with riding a bicycle, surfing, or skiing. Things are not stable, linear, or predictable. The situation is always in flux. Our footing keeps changing."

Professor Madson continues with, “This approach may be uncomfortable or unsettling at first, and it is natural to seek out security…” but “in the act of balancing we come alive. Sensations change moment by moment, sometimes we feel secure, sometimes precarious. In the long run we develop tolerance for instability.”

I think that is why I love teaching improvisation so much. Improvising is as much fun as riding a bicycle (I neither surf nor ski!) Just as riding a bicycle through new terrain can be exhilarating, so can the process of learning to improvise.

University students have the distinct advantage of having a professor present to mentor them through their improvisation journey. The mentor is there to provide constructive feedback about the student’s improvisations – what was *(or was not)* successful *(and why)*; what were the strengths and weaknesses; what specific techniques would most help the student. Perhaps most important, the mentor provides encouragement throughout the learning process.

For those of you who are out in the trenches making music, you may believe that studying improvisation without a professor-mentor is impossible. My advice to you is to find someone in your part of the world who is also interested in learning to improvise. Work together, using each other as a sounding board. Start at the beginning, with Unit 1. Devote as much time as you need on each unit and its assignments, playing the completed assignments for your colleague. Give each other feedback and encouragement. Perhaps there is a respected improvisation teacher or experienced improviser within a few hours drive. You and your colleague might set up a coaching with that person every month or so.

Finally, I owe so much to my students, who are willingly in the center of an improvisation laboratory. Sometimes that laboratory is uncomfortable. Sometimes the breakthroughs are positively exhilarating. Without a musical score in front of them, they are invited to create something that has never been heard before and will never be heard again. I’m especially grateful to my students who willingly filled out weekly evaluations for each unit of this book and were very much a part of the process that led to the final draft of *A World of Possibilities.* Their influence may be felt in every page!

I wish you, the student of improvisation, a wonderful journey. You are about to discover a world of possibilities!

Unit 1 Melody

We begin simply, with monophonic improvisation. Developing the ability to improvise a memorable, elegant, and unaccompanied musical line will be one of the most important steps you will take in your path toward becoming a skilled improviser. Begin by looking at composed monophonic passages or works. Look beyond organ repertoire. For example, your inspiration might come from a cadenza in a Chopin piano nocturne, Claude Debussy's *Syrinx* for solo flute, or from one of J.S. Bach's unaccompanied cello suites.

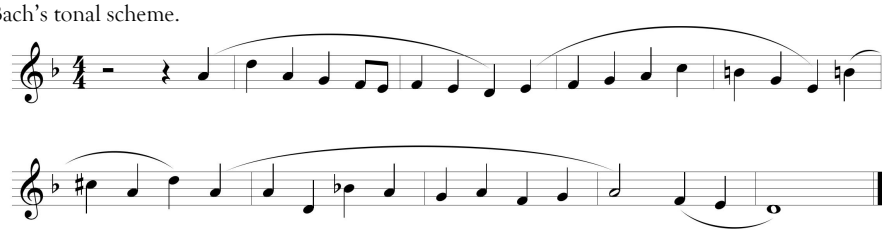
Play through the "Sarabande" from Bach's *Second Suite for Cello, BWV 1008.*



Note the two-part (binary) structure of the piece (the B-section starts in measure 13). Note how Bach moves from "d" to "f" in the first two measures of the piece. Note the tonal centers, starting in d minor, then moving to the relative key of F major and finally, moving back to d minor. Note the four-measure phrase lengths.

ASSIGNMENT 1:

Using the following theme by Jean Sibelius, improvise a monophonic piece in *binary form*, following Bach's tonal scheme.



In *binary form,* when the theme is in the major key, the **A**-section will conclude in the dominant. The **B**-section then begins in the dominant and returns to the tonic by its conclusion. When the theme is in the minor key, the **A**-section will conclude in the relative major or in the dominant. The **B**-section then begins in that key and returns to the minor key tonic by its conclusion. Note also, that the musical ideas of both sections will be similar, with both sections lasting roughly the same duration.

What are the qualities of this theme? The first five measures are largely linear; the final measures contain more leaps. Rhythmically the theme is rather static. These observations are important because they provide cues that shape the development of the melody into a full-length piece.

For example, we could create a sequence out of the fourth and fifth measures:



We could introduce rhythm into the second half of the theme:



As you continue to explore this exercise, experiment with registration. Perhaps you began with a flute stop. Try something poignant, like a cornet or an hautbois or a clarinet. Play the first half the piece on one stop and the second half on another. Play it in the tenor or in the bass range. Play it in octaves. Explore how you might move from the first "a" to the next pitch, "d". (See Chapter 3: Analyzing the Themes, in *Breaking Free* for additional ideas about varying the theme).

ASSIGNMENT 2:

Using the same theme, improvise a monophonic piece in *ternary* form. In *ternary* form, the **A**-section is repeated at the end of **B** (to complete the three-part ABA organization). The tonal directions taken by the **A** and **B**-sections are also different. In *binary* form, the **A**-section cadences outside the tonic key and the **B**-section picks up this thread and subsequently steers us back to the tonic. In *ternary* form, the **A**-section concludes in the tonic both times. The **B**-section is in a new key and may now be more independent, introducing a new musical idea, texture, and meter. You might consider using a

chant or hymn tune for this section. Unlike *binary* form, the **B**-section need not be the same length as the **A**-section.

Binary	**Ternary**
A-section cadences outside the tonic key	**A**-section cadences in the tonic
B-section starts where **A** ended and concludes the piece in the tonic	**B**-section is in a new key and may now be more independent, with a new musical idea, texture and/or meter. Consider using a chant or hymn tune.
	A-section is repeated, concluding the piece in the tonic

ASSIGNMENT 3:

Using what you improvised in the previous assignment, support the **A**-section with a pedal point in the left hand (either a single pitch, or the interval of a fifth) and the **B**-section with a melodic ostinato, again, placed in the left hand. This assignment, along with many in this book, may be practiced at the piano. *You don't always have to be at the organ to learn to improvise.* Here is an example of a melodic ostinato:



Compose a melodic ostinato and use it in your **B**-section:

