Breaking Free

by

Jeffrey Brillhart

Finding a Personal Language for
Organ Improvisation through 20th-century
French Improvisation Techniques
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Merci à Olivier Latry et Philippe Lefebvre
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: What is Improvisation?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: How to Practice</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Analyzing the Theme</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Developing the Theme</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: The Exposition</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Harmonization with Perfect Fifths</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: The Pentatonic Mode</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Harmonization with Perfect Fourths</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Harmonization with Major Seconds</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10: Harmonization with Major and Minor Thirds</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11: Harmonization with Major and Minor Sixth</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12: Harmonization with 6/3’s, 6/4’s and 6/5’s</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 13: Harmonizing a Motive</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 14: Harmonization with Sevenths</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 15: Harmonization with Dominant Sevenths</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 16: Charles Tournemire</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 17: Ecclesiastical Modes</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 18: Dorian Mode</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 19: Phrygian Mode</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 20: Bartok Mode</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part IV</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 21: Olivier Messiaen’s Musical Language and Its Importance in Organ Improvisation</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 22: The Second Mode of Limited Transposition</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 23: The Third Mode of Limited Transposition</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 24: The Chord on the Dominant</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part V</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 25: The Development</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 26: Climax Chords</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 27: Passacaglia</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 28: Song Form</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 29: Louis Vierne’s Improvisation Structure</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 30: Scherzo</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 31: Sonata Allegro</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 32: Toccata (Prelude)</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 33: Cochereau Style Variations</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 34: Free Improvisation</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 35: Improvising on a Literary Text</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part VI</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 36: Claude Debussy</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 37: Maurice Ravel</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

*Breaking Free* aims to help the reader develop a personal musical language for improvisation at the organ. To accomplish this we will explore numerous improvisation techniques in practice in France from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day. My hope is that this book will take you on a musical odyssey that you will find fascinating, gratifying, and perhaps, even surprising. If you work with focus and a positive attitude—no thinking “I’ll never be able to do this” is allowed—you will grow.

The most important advice I have received on the subject of improvisation came from Philippe Lefebvre. Philippe, Olivier Latry, and Jean Pierre Leguay share the distinguished organ bench at Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, France. Each weekend these remarkable musicians inspire thousands of worshippers through improvised preludes, responses, meditations, and postludes. I am fortunate to have heard hundreds of improvisations while sitting in the great tribune of Notre Dame.

While attending a weeklong organ improvisation seminar in Toulouse, France in 1993, Philippe said to me, “Jeffrey, *il faut chercher.*” (“Jeffrey, one must search.”) Philippe said this to encourage this inexperienced improviser! These words transformed my attitude toward improvisation (and toward all music making) and marked a turning point in my musical development. One must search if one is to grow. To improvise is to search.

Writing a book on organ improvisation is no simple feat. There is no “one size fits all,” in learning to improvise or in teaching someone to improvise. What may work for one student may completely stymie another student. So it may be with this book. I must confess that at times you may have to sound bad in order to learn. But, isn’t that the way of learning a difficult piece in the repertoire?

During an interview for the *New Yorker* magazine, legendary French jazz violinist Stéphane Grappelli told jazz critic Whitney Balliett: “Improvisation, it is a mystery. You can write a book about it, but by the end no one still knows what it is. When I improvise and I’m in good form, I’m like somebody half sleeping. I even forget that there are people in front of me. Great improvisers are like priests, they are thinking only of their God.”

Improvisation is a mystery. We do not fully understand what happens within the mind of the improviser while improvising. Improvisation is a search. It is a search for a personal musical language. It is a search for musical coherence. It is a search for personal self-expression. It is a search for beauty. Indeed, improvisation is a lovely search. May this book help you in your searching.

*Allons-y!* Let’s go!

“*It is a question of renewed creative power; it is also helpful to be in complete possession of one’s faculties, and to have a bit of genius . . . One can see, it is not easy. In a word, it is a gift. Carried to the extreme, one can expect—with extensive development of this gift—spectacular results.*”

Charles Tournemire

("César Franck," translated by Ralph James Kneeream, 1989)
Part I

“The way to improvise is to improvise.”

T. Carl Whitmer, The Art of Improvisation (1934, out of print)

Chapter 1

What is Improvisation?

“Improvisation: Quintessential domain of the mysterious. The ability to construct spontaneously a battle plan, a discourse, a musical work. Napoléon, Vincent Ferrer, J.S. Bach, Beethoven, César Frank were great improvisers.”

César Frank, Charles Tournemire (translated by Ralph James Kneeream, Jr., D.M.)

What is improvisation?

Improvisation is considered by some to be “composition-in-performance.” The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines it thusly: “to invent or make something, such as a speech or a device, at the time when it is needed without already having planned it.” At its best, an improvisation can sound like a finished composition with well-developed melodies, intriguing harmonies, and coherent structure.

I like to think of improvisation as a kind of conversation. In a conversation, one decides what to say right before saying it. What you say depends on your experience and the conversational circumstances. Improvisation requires making choices. One must choose how to develop the theme, harmonize the theme, and organize the improvisation (e.g., sonata allegro, rondo, variations, fantasy, etc.) As with great conversations, great choices lead to great improvisations.

How does one define improvisation in the modern French style?

This is a difficult question. I recall an encounter with one of my students, a young French organist from Paris. While I was demonstrating some harmonization techniques of a melody, he smiled and said, “oh that is SO French!” I asked him why he thought it sounded French. His response, “well . . . it just sounds French!” What are the qualities that lead an improviser to sound French? In contrast to 20th-century German musical practices, French music of the 20th century leans toward a more fluid and poetical approach to music: less directional, yet more colorful, with phrase and rhythmic structures which relate to the non-accented character of the French language. It is more about harmony than counterpoint. It is strongly inspired by Gregorian Chant.

I looked to several composers and improvisers in my research for this book: Louis Vierne, for his exquisite sense of formal structure, chromaticism, pedal points, and parallel motion; Olivier Messiaen, for his use of the modes of limited transposition and his unique use of the tonal resources of the French symphonic organ; Charles Tournemire, for his use of church and exotic modes, parallel motion, fifths, ostinatos, pedal points, and freedom of structure; Jehan Alain, for his use of harmonies in inverted positions, exotic melodies, and colorful registrations; Jean Langlais for his use of church modes, chromatic harmonic language, and rhythmic drive; and, of course, one must also understand the harmonic language and musical ethos of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, for their immense influence on every French composer of the 20th century. Thanks to recording technology and the internet, we may hear historic examples of the improvisations of Louis Vierne, Charles Tournemire, Marcel Dupré, Jean Langlais, Pierre Cochereau, and Olivier Messiaen, and modern examples by Philippe Lefebvre, Olivier Latry, Jean Pierre Leguay, Thierry Escaich, Jean Guillou, Pierre Pincemaille, Loïc Maillé, Daniel Roth, Sophie-Véronique Cauchefer-Choplin, and many, many more.

Why learn to improvise?

I like Charles Tournemire’s answer to this question! In his chapter on improvisation in Précis d’exécution de Registration et d’Improvisation à l’Orgue (p. 104), Tournemire writes:

L’importance de cette branche de l’orgue est telle que l’on peut affirmer, que l’organiste qui est frappé de “paralysie” – au sens figuré du mot – et, partant, dans l’impossibilité d’improviser, ne peut être considéré, en dépit d’une grande agilité des pieds et des mains, que comme une moitié d’organiste!
(The importance of this branch of playing the organ is such that one might affirm that the organist who is struck by “paralysis”—in a matter of speaking—by his inability to improvise, in spite of his great ability with the feet and hands, is only half an organist!)

**Can one learn to improvise?**

The answer is a qualified yes. To be sure, some musicians seem born to the art; improvising simply comes easy to them. Their intuitions are more natural. Their ability to hear in advance may be more keen. They may simply have more courage than others.

With enough self-motivation, discipline, hard work, and a willing, open attitude, anyone can enter into the act of improvisation in an authentic, confident, and musical way. I have seen this happen over and over with my improvisation students.

Initially, the greatest challenge in learning to improvise will be in overcoming your fears and inhibitions. You may feel as though you have no idea what to play. To ease those inhibitions, you will find many examples to study in this book. As you work through these examples, you will begin to absorb the building blocks of improvisation, which will ultimately lead to the growth of your own improvisation voice.

Stephen Nachmanovitch, in *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, wrote, “the fruits of improvising may flower spontaneously, but it arises from soil that we have prepared, fertilized, and tended in the faith that it will ripen in nature’s own time.”

*That is what we will attempt to do in this book.*
Chapter 2
How to Practice

You Must Practice
If you do not practice, you will neither learn to improvise nor improve your improvisation skills. It is essential to develop a daily ritual of practice. The reason for this ritual is simple: when you do something frequently, it begins to take hold! Whatever time you carve out to practice, be sure that it is quality time. Thirty minutes of focused work is most certainly better than two hours without focus.

Let me tell you a true story. Some years ago I attended an organ academy that included group lessons on repertoire and improvisation. Students were encouraged to sign up for practice time with the academy registrar. Upon looking at my course load (one for repertoire, one for improvisation), the registrar remarked that practice time was incredibly limited and, since I was signed up to study improvisation, I obviously wouldn’t need as much practice time! She didn’t realize that improvisation study actually required more practice time than repertoire study. I repeat: you will not learn to improvise if you do not practice.

Perfection
In the beginning do not be too obsessed with perfection. To be quite honest, your first attempts may not sound great. You may become frustrated from time to time. You may grow impatient with yourself. You may wonder whether you will ever learn to improvise. Do not be discouraged! Studying improvisation is intense work and requires you to be vulnerable, to open up in a very public, not always comfortable, way.

Tell a Story
From your very first attempts at improvisation, try to tell a story that has a clear beginning, middle, and end. As you tell that story, play with lots of rhythmic integrity and finish the improvisation when it needs to be finished. In your first attempts you may have a hard time remembering precisely what you did at an earlier moment in the improvisation. At this stage in your development as an improviser that is just fine. It is more important to focus on the overall shape of the improvisation and to maintain a consistent harmonic language.

Rhythm
As you are telling your story with a consistent harmonic language, try also to play rhythmically. I believe it is safe to say that, if you play a few “wrong notes” rhythmically, the listener will not hear them as wrong notes. And the converse is true, that if you play “right notes,” but in a rhythmically unsteady way, the listener will sense that something just isn’t quite right.

Phrasing
I’ve heard many musicians, in both jazz and classical music contexts, speak of the importance of elegant phrasing while improvising. They feel that it’s not so much what you play, but how you play it! As you maintain a keen rhythmic drive, play in a way that breathes and has a clear sense of melodic shape.

Track Your Progress
While learning to improvise, progress may initially seem to come slowly. In fact, in the beginning you may think that you are making no progress at all. Yet during your daily practice routine you will experience breakthroughs, some minor, some major. I encourage you to keep a journal that lists the things you learned this week, be they complex or simple. Be objective with your comments: answer the question, “what am I doing well right now?” Referring to this journal on a regular basis will remind you of what you have learned. It is a critical part of helping to check your progress.

Along with keeping a journal, I encourage you to record your improvisations. Why? Several months after making those recordings, listening to how much you have improved will be your reward!

Recollection
Finally, remember what you already know. Your journey toward being a fine improviser is dependent on building a large inventory of techniques. As you accumulate knowledge, grow in confidence, and become more skillful in combining the techniques that are offered in this book, remembering what you already know will lead to fluid and inspired improvisations.

Remember what you already know.
Great improvisation is born from the improviser’s insights into the musical character of the theme. Technical prowess or harmonic cleverness is for naught if the improviser hasn’t developed the skill of analyzing a theme—which contains the inspiration for the improvisation—and developing it to its fullest potential. From your analysis of the theme, the character of your improvisation will evolve. From your insights into the musical character of the theme will come decisions about harmony, texture, form, and registration.

The primary musical quality of a theme may be:

1) Harmonic,
2) Melodic, or
3) Rhythmic

While any of these qualities may be present in any given theme, one is likely to dominate.

Let’s take a look at the sinuous flute solo in Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*:

Example 3-1

Debussy’s theme is arresting, interesting, and memorable. To be sure, the rhythmic gestures in this theme are important, but it is the *melodic* quality that most captures the listener.

You . . . must form an opinion . . .

You may disagree with my observations. That is fine, because it is you the improviser, who must form an opinion about the character of the theme, and from that opinion, the music may begin.

Let’s explore three themes that demonstrate these different qualities.

The first theme, *À la Claire Fontaine*, is primarily *harmonic* in nature. While the melody has memorable moments, it is rhythmically and harmonically static. There is simply no escaping the continuous reinforcement of an A-major triad:

Example 3-2

Harmonic

The second theme, composed by James Woodman for the final round of the 1994 American Guild of Organists National Competition in Organ Improvisation (NCOI), is primarily about *melodic* interest. This theme spans nearly an octave-and-a-half and, with appoggiaturas above or below the B-natural, exhibits great expressive qualities:

Example 3-3

Melodic

The third theme, composed by Petr Eben for the pre-elimination round of the 1994 Haarlem International Organ Festival Improvisation Competition, is all about *rhythmic* interest. The sense of drive brought about by the pair of sixteenth notes, followed by the sixteenth note triplet, is quite rousing:
Let’s pose a few questions about each of these themes.

1) Where is the summit?
2) Where is the resting point?
3) What keys or modes are suggested?
4) What is the most expressive musical gesture?
5) Does the theme suggest a particular mood?
6) Is there an interesting pitch or collection of pitches that might be developed in the improvisation?
7) Is there an interesting rhythmic gesture that might be developed?

The answers to these questions will help to determine the musical character of the improvisation. That each improviser will likely answer the questions differently than another improviser makes improvisation all the more fascinating.

This is a search, after all!

... from that opinion, the music may begin.
Chapter 4
Developing the Theme

In this chapter we explore various techniques the improver might use to develop a theme over the course of an improvisation. This is the first step on the path to improvising well.

Let’s focus first on how to ornament an interval, here, a major second:

Example 4-1

Notice that we stayed within a diatonic language, avoiding sharps or flats. Let’s add a few accidentals:

Example 4-2

Immediately we have something that gives an entirely different effect. To that, we add a pedal point and, in the left hand, an ostinato:

Example 4-3

With the simple addition of a pedal point and an ostinato in the left hand, you are now improvising! After exploring the interval of a 2nd, move to a 3rd, 4th, and so on. Create an improvisation in ABA form, where A explores the interval of a 2nd and B explores the interval of a 5th. Il faut chercher!

Now let’s see how some of the techniques found in example 4-1 might be used with the opening bars of the chorale HERZLICH TUT MICH VERLANGEN:

Example 4-4

How many additional possibilities can you improvise?

Let’s explore ten additional techniques for developing a theme: Repetition, Melodic Variation, Rhythmic Variation, Change of Meter, Call and Response, Elimination, Interversion of Pitches, Change of Register, Change of Mode, and Change from Tonal to Modal.
Here we use the opening bars of a British folk tune, TRUE THOMAS, as our model:


1) Repetition. After you play a phrase, repeat it or a variation of it. Here we build a sequence based on the first two bars:

Example 4-6

2) Melodic variation. This might include alteration of key pitches in the melody or perhaps starting at a different point in the measure (such as on beat three instead of on beat one):

Example 4-7

3) Rhythmic variation. Here dotted rhythms add a playful quality to the tune:

Example 4-8

4) Change of meter. Now we freely enlarge some note values:

Example 4-9

Or we might change the meter to 2/4:

Example 4-10

5) Call and response. Consider the theme as the call and create a response. In developing a response, you might include musical elements that are missing from the original theme: for example, an interesting rhythmic pattern:

Example 4-11

6) Elimination. Elimination (sometimes referred to as liquidation) consists of repeating a fragment of the theme, then successively taking away a part of its notes. Here one might end an improvisation by taking the opening two bars and, through elimination, creating a short coda:

Example 4-12

7) Interversion of pitches. Used in serial composition and to great effect by Olivier Messiaen, *interversion of pitches* changes the order of the pitches of the theme. Here do so judiciously, changing only the pitches within each bar:

Example 4-13

WL500023
8) **Change of register.** Low notes of the theme pass to the extreme treble, the treble notes to the extremely low, creating abrupt leaps:

Example 4-14

9. **Change of Mode.** Place the tune in the major, rather than the minor key:

Example 4-15

10. **From tonal to modal.** Change the tune from g-minor to G Phrygian:

Example 4-16

Variety in the treatment of the theme may also come from registration changes, dynamics, articulation, pitch range, tempo, and ornamentation. Over time, the creative improviser will learn to use not just one technique, but multiple techniques.

Try out these techniques with the following hymn and chorale tune fragments. At all times, play expressively!

Example 4-17

**NUN DANKET ALLE GOTT**

**ST. DENIO**

**SLANE**

**NEW BRITAIN**

**ST. ANNE**

**GOTTES SOHN IST KOMMEN**

**SCHMÜCKE DICH, O LIEBE SEELE**

**JESU MEINE FREUDE**