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Improvisation: An Integral Step in Piano Pedagogy

Lauren French
Trinity University

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Piano Pedagogy

by

Lauren Ann French

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Thesis Advisor

Department Chair

Associate Vice-President for Academic Affairs,
Curriculum and Student Issues

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to illuminate the role of improvisation as an integral aspect of the pedagogical process that leads to a greater understanding and interpretation of cultivated music. In it, I contextualize and define improvisation to distinguish it from the process of composition, and address the issues that arise from this discussion. There also will be a brief exploration of the education philosophy of Robert Pace concerning creativity and exploratory exercises, and how his ideas (and those of other pedagogues) have been incorporated into current piano method books. Finally, through an analysis for improvisatory elements in Mozart's Piano Sonata K. 457 *Adagio,* Chopin's *Berceuse,* and Bolcom's *Scène d'opéra,* I will provide simple improvisation exercises as they are applied to the interpretation of advanced repertoire.

Acknowledgements

Above all else, I owe the most gratitude to God who gave me a mind to learn, ears to hear, fingers to play, and a love for music. I am immensely indebted to my parents, Larry and Kathy French, who taught me perseverance and instilled in me an insatiable desire to learn at a very young age. Their unwavering support for my musical endeavors and academic pursuits allowed me to pursue my dreams to the fullest. I also wish to thank my grandmother, Grace Tucker Amstead, who made it possible for me to attend Trinity University and for her encouragement to always do my best.

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Improvisation Contextualized

In his extensive volume, *Anthology of Music: Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music*, Ernest T. Ferand defines improvisation as "the spontaneous invention and shaping of music while it is being performed."[1] In applying a label, many scholars give a broad description similar to Ferand's; when classifying improvisation for education purposes, it is important to incorporate the elements of creativity and preparation, and to differentiate between improvising and composition (the process of composing involves improvising to an extent). This paper will explore several definitions of improvisation to clarify misconceptions and distinguish it from the improvisatory aspect of composition.

Throughout the early development of music, improvisation's role was considered an indispensable part of a musicians' education.[2] Training was not considered complete unless musicians could demonstrate a thorough knowledge of improvisatory techniques and skills; its role as a thriving art form in cultivated music was essential until the late Romantic era. With the rise of jazz in the past century and a half, the word *improvisation* took upon a different connotation, while cultivated music shifted its focus from general training to creating a virtuoso for the concert hall. Improvisation in present times has relocated from traditional lessons to the niche it currently holds in jazz music.

Improvisation within cultivated music became something that was unexpected and undesirable in a concert. Joan Smiles sums up this reality by stating:

> With some exceptions, the great majority of musicians today are being taught to play music exactly as notated... [Historically speaking,] from the Renaissance to the Baroque

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[1] Ernest T. Ferand, *Anthology of Music: Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music* (Cologne: Arno Volk Verlag, 1961), 5.

[2] For historical data from sources (original and compiled), see Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*; Carl Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte, Op. 200*; Girolama Diruta, Il *Transilvano*; and Ernest T. Ferand, *Anthology of Music: Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music.*

> written music was often nothing more than an outline which performers were expected to complete by adding notes and musical nuances... [not allowing or encouraging improvisation] has not only stifled creativity on the part of the performer, but quite often has given us performances in which the music is virtually incomplete.[3]

Today a performance with significant deviations from the written score could be detrimental to the career of an aspiring musician, yet these deviations were once an integral part of the performance process.

In preparing today's performers, the established process of keyboard pedagogy, and piano pedagogy in particular, is comprised of skills, technique, and repertoire. Skills include composition and notation, harmonization, accompanying, and improvisation. Technique consists of exercises and etudes to improve finger dexterity and strength, while the focus in repertoire includes appropriate pieces chosen for study and/or performance. Some pedagogues continue to regard the process of improvising as a facilitator to the understanding of the harmonic language of repertoire, and support this in their pedagogical methods.[4] A current practitioner of improvisation education is Dr. Robert Pace, executive director of the International Piano Teaching Foundation in New York, who developed a keyboard method concentrating on developing every musician through creativity and exploratory assignments. A look at some current piano methods – Pace, Faber, Hal Leonard, and Clark – discloses a re-awakening to the importance of improvisation and composition training.

Primarily, improvisation can assist a musician in the interpretation of her repertoire in performance through encouraging the exploration of musical elements and bridging that experience with the application of musical concepts. Chapter three focuses on three pieces of the

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[3] Joan Ellen Smiles, *Improvised Ornamentation in late eighteenth-century music: an examination of contemporary evidence* (Diss. Stanford U, 1976. Ann Arbor, UMI. 76-13), 1.

[4] For more than a century, piano teachers have concentrated on guiding the development of technique, while skills became secondary in importance. Despite this trend, some pedagogues still emphasize the need for skills training. Carl Orff's education philosophy, centered on improvisation and creativity, is used as an effective classroom model.

standard piano repertoire providing evidence of several improvisational practices. In addition, exercises based on these skills will be provided to aid the performer for such interpretations. These examples will connect the frequently overlooked aspect of improvisation and the development of total musicianship as it relates to the interpretation of piano literature.

Improvisation vs. Composition

To clarify the discussion of improvisation within cultivated music, a precise definition should be available. However, there are numerous assumptions concerning the nature of improvisation, which makes its usage problematic. It is most often associated with jazz music for the intricate and highly recognized role in that genre, but is rarely linked to current cultivated music performances. Derek Bailey, in his book *Musical Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music,* discusses the general stereotypes surrounding the issue of improvisation when he states there are "widely accepted connotations which imply that improvisation is something without preparation and without consideration, a completely ad hoc activity, frivolous and inconsequential, lacking in design and method."[5] Subscribing to this misconception about improvisation overlooks the preparation involved behind this art form. Skilled improvisers listen to and study noteworthy performers of the past to build a repertoire of ideas, while committing hours of practice to develop both the requisite skills and a unique style. Just as scales and technical exercises do not appear on the concert hall stage, they are still considered essential facets of training. Though one should not presume that improvisation will appear again in the well-prepared cultivated concert (with the notable exception of the organ concert and in the traditional church service), its value in musical training need not be diminished.

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[5] Derek Bailey, *Musical Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), 5.

Similar to Ferand's previously mentioned definition, *Grove Music Online* defines improvisation as "The creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed."[6] Keyboard pedagogue Robert Pace describes improvisation as "the spontaneous performance of music, without the use of notation or having been previously memorized."[7] These definitions deal primarily with improvisation as a performance: the instantaneous sequence of melodies and harmonies that did not originate from a written score or form of notation. Furthermore, they only address a part of what encompasses the totality of improvisation; a crucial component of improvisation is the element of originality. Alexandra Kertz-Welzel provides a more detailed description of improvisation in an article about piano improvisation. She states "improvisation means inventing music at the moment of playing without writing it down... [it is] developed by creativity and imagination. Improvisation means more than just disorganized tinkling in order to have fun with the instrument. Rather, it implies an interaction of freedom and limitations, of certain guidelines and room for creativity."[8] Kertz-Welzel highlights the role of creativity within improvisation but also emphasizes there is an organization to the process. Most improvisations start with a previously established theme or harmonic structure, and develop through the creative process. The "interaction of freedom and limitations" indicates the relationship between the boundaries of the theme and the performer's choices within those boundaries.

Another definition extends beyond the performance and education genre to make a distinction from improvisation as a compositional method. Improvisation is often a natural part of composing while the composer writes a piece of music. (Later in the paper, the link between

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[6] *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed [20 March 2005]), <www.grovemusic.com>.
[7] Robert Pace, *The Essentials of Keyboard Pedagogy: Improvisation and Creative Problem-Solving* (Chatham: Lee Roberts Music Publications), 2.
[8] Alexandra Kertz-Welzel, "Piano Improvisation develops musicianship," *The Orff Echo* 38/1 (Fall 2004): 12.

improvisation and composition through written out improvisation will be explored through selections from current repertoire.) What then is the difference between the compositional method and general improvising? Richard Addison, in an article in the *British Journal of Music Education*, gives the following observation in an effort to characterize the difference:

> When Bach improvised fugues, or Beethoven fantasies, or when the organist improvises the choir and parson into their places, there was and is no intention to recall, repeat or write down... so when [someone] talks about improvisation as it leads to composition he is not talking about an improvisatory event at all, but about compositional method, as employed by composing musicians of all periods.[9]

The intention of the performer, therefore, delineates the difference. If one improvises with the goal of notating the work, the improvising becomes part of composing; on the other hand, improvisation as an expressive activity is for the improviser. Addison continues in his article to describe the intrinsic value of improvising as "the enabling power of spontaneous and unremembered musical utterance to release musical feeling in participants in an active, physical way."[10] Christopher Small in *Music, Society, Education* aptly characterizes improvisation by likening it to a musical journey: "In short, composed music is the account of the journey of exploration, which might well have been momentous, but is over before we learn of it, while improvisation is the journey itself, which is likely to make small discoveries rather than large, or even no discoveries at all, but in which everything that *is* found can be of interest or value."[11]

Therefore, for the purposes of this discussion, improvisation is defined as the spontaneous creation of music that has never been previously played or written. Furthermore, this expression of musical ideas has no aim of being notated and holds distinctive value to the

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[9] Richard Addison, "A New Look at Musical Improvisation," *British Journal of Music Education* 5/3 (November 1988), 257.
[10] Addison, "A New Look," 257.
[11] Christopher Small, *Music, Society, Education.* 3rd Ed. Hanover: University Press of New England, 176-177.

performer. This definition applies from the beginning exercises, where a student first begins to create their own music, to the advanced student preparing difficult literature.

Improvisation in Keyboard Pedagogy

Concurrent with the continual developments of keyboard instruments through the 17th-19th centuries (e.g., the harpsichord, clavichord, and piano), musicians compiled treatises instructing performers on proper performance practices, as well as directions for the accurate execution of technique and important aspects of musicianship. The earliest discourses contained basic instructions on early instruments with information on hand position, posture, articulation, composition, and the like.[12] With the advances in science, the pedagogy research of the past hundred years has ventured into anatomical investigations as well as research on human development.

During each period in musical history, teachers' priorities in lessons (skills, technique, and repertoire) depended on the contemporaneous function of music. The circularity of these three priorities rotated in importance according to the focus of that period. The purpose of music within the culture determined the focus of teaching, which in turn influenced resulting performances. When the music was utilitarian (for example, in religious services), pedagogical writings stressed the importance of improvising, harmonizing, and accompanying. As the role of music evolved, its function led to performances of music for the sake of music. During the rise of solo piano music in the 19th century, the inclination for a performer to exhibit virtuosity took precedent. These demands shifted the pedagogical focus to developing flawless technique. Though this remains a primary goal of pedagogy today, current research in music education also directs a teacher to emphasize the inclusion of creativity and improvisation activities.

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[12] See sources such as Diruta's *Il Transilvano*, François Couperin's *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*, and C.P.E Bach's *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*.

While the decline of improvising occurred gradually through the 19th century, improvisations were frequently performed in the late Classical and early Romantic era. Often improvisation gained recognition as a separate section within recitals and concerts. Many times the improvisatory piece was programmed last as a final showpiece. Janet Ritterman, in an essay on piano music in the early 19th century, seems to express the general situation when she writes "their place in pianists' programmes seems to have been countenanced on the basis that it was by these means that an aspiring professional's skills of musical invention were put to the test...For the most part, these pieces were based on musical material likely to be already familiar to at least some of the audience."[13]

Occasionally the audience would request a theme on which to improvise, thereby forcing the performer to spontaneously improvise instead of programming an improvisation.[14] Improvisation, however, began to decline in popularity for several reasons. First of all, composers began writing more explicitly (specifically in terms of notating improvisatory elements) in an effort to gain control over the artistic integrity of their music. Moreover, there was an increase in performances that failed to express the composers' intentions or used unoriginal improvisations. Audiences and critics complained about the predictability of these performances:

> Until the late 1820s, audiences and critics alike appear to have been unstinting in their admiration of the qualities demonstrated. But as concerts became more frequent, displays of this kind more predictable, and critics more experienced, concert reviews reflect more ambivalent attitudes towards the inclusion of improvised items. By the mid 1830s it was rare for an aspiring pianist to include an improvisation in a public concert.[15]

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[13] Janet Ritterman, "Piano music and the public concert 1800-1815," *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin.* ed. Jim Samson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 21.
[14] Ritterman, "Piano Music," 299.
[15] Ritterman, "Piano Music," 26.

In its place, performers, viewing printed music as a "reference point" rather than a strict guideline, turned to interpreting music by slightly adjusting compositions with ornamentation or additional octaves.[16] Within time, this practice was also frowned upon as scholarship promoted the pristine devotion to the score.

Marienne Uszler, in her book *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*, makes an interesting observation about the effect of method books on the disintegration of improvisation within lessons. She remarks that "since the majority of teachers taught from books, and since piano methods were largely compendiums of technical exercises and repertoire, it is difficult to imagine that much musicianship instruction was part of piano study during the nineteenth century."[17] Due to the popularity of such "compendiums" that did not address the issue of skills or musicianship and the elimination of improvisation in performances, the art of improvising was replaced by the standard of technique in nineteenth century piano study. As pianists often did not learn to improvise when they were young, they were uncomfortable in that idiom and ill-prepared to teach it effectively. As if to counteract this dilemma, a wealth of research in recent years on the importance of creativity to child development brought new approaches to piano lessons, method books, and teaching. By the mid twentieth century, several leaders in keyboard pedagogy developed education philosophies centered on fostering creativity in music studies.

The Teaching Philosophy of Dr. Robert Pace

Contemporary insights on the importance of improvisation are found in the works of Dr. Robert Pace. Pace is concerned with developing a musician through sight-reading and

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[16] James Methuen-Campbell, "Chopin in performance," *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin.* Ed. Jim Samson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 192.
[17] Marienne Uszler, Stewart Gordon, and Scott McBride Smith, *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 346.

improvisation skills. Throughout his teaching career, he observed numerous piano students that had an insufficient comprehension of the harmonic and technical language in the music they played. This lack of knowledge transferred to their inability to be expressive and create their own music. According to Pace, the major reason for including improvisation within keyboard education is that "improvisation skills can actually facilitate sight-reading and the performance of repertoire. Being able to improvise on the harmonic patterns of a piece expedites the learning of that repertoire, since students gain skill in identifying key elements."[18] The sooner students are comfortable playing in various keys, the more quickly they will learn their music and perform with confidence. He was not intending to say that students who do not improvise could not learn their music efficiently, but merely that improvising aids the full comprehension of the repertoire.

Robert Pace described the skill of improvising as "thinking in motion [which is defined as] attending to several things simultaneously while immersed in an ever-changing interplay of ideas, actions, and feelings."[19] Performing a piece of music requires cognitive skills on several levels and improvising serves to increase and develop this vital ability. He additionally observes the following features of performing a musical work:

> Since music is a 'time art,' in that performance takes place within a certain time-frame and cannot be stopped without being lost, it must be experience 'in motion'...To follow this further, not only do we respond 'in motion' but there are many different musical sounds, patterns, combinations and changes happening almost simultaneously to which performer and listener must attend.[20]

Pace highlights the facet of performing and the need to practice this kind of thinking. Because improvisation involves that particular "thinking in motion," it provides the ideal preparation for performance.

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[18] Robert Pace, *The Essentials of Keyboard Pedagogy: Improvisation and Creative Problem-Solving* (Chatham: Lee Roberts Music Publications), pg 3.
[19] Robert Pace, "Productive Practicing," *Clavier* (July/August 1992):18.
[20] Robert Pace, "A Teaching Demonstration," *Journal of the Proceedings: National Conference on Piano Pedagogy*, Madison Conference. Ed. Martha J. Baker. Princeton: The National Conference on Piano Pedagogy, 1983, 1.

In addition, Pace firmly believes that music study should be a lifelong endeavor that has a positive effect on one's life. Music should be available to everyone because it is a universal means of *expression*, not a universal *language*. Pace considers music to be a unique experience for individuals that should be approached accordingly in their lessons. This belief about music, combined with his perception of the lack of students' self-sufficiency at the instrument, formed the motivation to create a more effective curriculum.

In his essay on improvisation and creative problem solving, he begins by challenging the widespread assumption that improvisation is a skill for a few select musicians that naturally surfaces on its own. This false assumption prevents many students from reaching their creative abilities in music such as composing or improvising.[21] With years of teaching experience, Pace concluded that all children have a degree of musical talent and capacity to be creative, and the job of music educators is to cultivate that potential. He states "[there is] some degree of latent musical talent (responsiveness) in everyone, but it is a fallacy to assume that this will surface automatically on its own...the amount of talent in each person is not as critical as being sure that students are able to develop to the fullest extent whatever talent they may possess."[22] In the same way that educators cannot leave cognitive development to come about naturally, music educators cannot leave creativity to emerge on its own.

A vital part to this evolution is the role of the teacher as encourager, facilitator, and monitor of the children's creativity. The teachers are to provide "continuous opportunities and

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[21] "It is as if the ability to improvise music were a special gift bestowed on a chosen few—and that if one had this talent it would simply emerge on its own. This assumption is fallacious. It precludes millions of students from reaching their creative potential in music..." Pace, *The Essentials of Keyboard Pedagogy*, 2.
"Many teachers believe that only musicians who are born with a special talent are able to improvise, but most students can learn to create music spontaneously." Smith, Gail. "Improvising at the Piano – Almost Any Student Can Do It." *Clavier* 43/9 (November 2004): 6-9.

[22] *Robert Pace Teaching Philosophy*. [Accessed 8 Nov 2004] www.leerobertsmusic.com/philosophy.htm.

proper encouragement" to allow student creativity to grow.[23] Additionally, Pace challenges music teachers to not be passive about the creative process: "If we accept the notion that everyone has some spark of creativity, we then have a mandate to provide continued opportunities for those sparks to ignite more acts of creative musical exploration. It should never be a matter of our waiting to see which students will somehow demonstrate an innate ability to create music."[24] The ideal goal of the Pace method is the development of "musical reliance" for every student – talented or not – so they are capable of self-study should they cease traditional piano studies.

[23] Pace, *Essentials of Keyboard Pedagogy*, 2.
[24] Pace, *Essentials of Keyboard Pedagogy*, 3.

Improvisation in Current Piano Method Books

Currently in piano pedagogy, there is an abundance of method books available. Written by numerous pedagogues and published by name-brand music publishers, these books provide systematic guidelines to lead a teacher and student through a prescribed sequence of instruction. Although there is a general standard for keyboard curriculum, the presentation and emphasis varies slightly with each method. One may introduce particular rhythms earlier; another might emphasize sound quality and the thoughtful preparation of every note; several methods aim to entertain the easily-distracted child with bright colors, interesting illustrations, and variety of repertoire; still another strives to develop the student by making creativity the central focus of the methodology. Each method covers basic staff reading, repertoire, rhythms, and key relationships and most of them at least mention the importance of musicianship skills. However, these musicianship skills are either offered as optional activities at the end of units, or appear them sparingly throughout the book.

Keyboard Reading Approaches

There are three major approaches to teaching the piano that correlate to reading music: the middle C approach, the intervallic approach, and the multi-key approach. The middle C approach is very popular because it builds a solid foundation of repertoire and staff reading around middle C. The concentrated time spent on the fifths above and below middle C (G and F respectively) gives students a sense of security at an early stage. The intervallic approach emphasizes the relationship between intervals, starting from small intervals and moving to the larger ones. Note reading is introduced through a reduced staff – building from two lines to the complete five stave. The final methodology is a five-finger approach called the multi-key

method. The utilization of numerous keys at a young age develops the ability to read key signatures and function efficiently at the piano.[25] Within each approach, pedagogues and method book authors are progressively recognizing the need to incorporate skills in their materials. Uszler, in *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*, describes the role of improvisation (or "experimental activities") within each method:

> The number and type of experimental activities suggested varies considerably. In general, multi-key methods place a high priority on harmonic knowledge, which, in turn, supports and guides the improvisation of accompaniments, melodic phrase, and ostinato-based pieces. Methods advocating intervallic reading also provide incentives to accompany, but are equally likely to include specific directives for using intervals to create short pieces. Middle C methods...have been slower to include experimental or improvisatory activities, although many of them recommend supplementary theory, harmony, or improvisation books.[26]

Method Book Review

Improvisation is a way to explore and grow musically by "playing" with the music.[27] It would be difficult to argue that children are not creative beings, as they are in the process of exploring their world by making up their own songs, games, rules, paintings, stories, etc. When children play, they are discovering how objects function. Richard Addison notes that adults tend to only *play* their music; rarely do they play *with* their music. He compares improvisation to the way children play: if children learn by playing and making up things, how much more could they learn from playing with music?[28]

Examples of four mainstream methods that currently offer this "play time" within their curricula are Nancy and Randall Faber's *Piano Adventures*, Frances Clark's *Music Tree*, the *Hal Leonard Student Piano Library*, and Robert Pace's *Music for Piano*. The similarities and

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[25] Uszler, *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*, 4-7, 347.
[26] Uszler, *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*, 347.
[27] Addison, "A New Look," 258, 261.
[28] Addison, "A New Look,"258.

differences in the way they treat improvisation (within the primary teaching book – generally called "Lesson Book" or something comparable) are seen in the following chart.

METHOD NAME	Presentation of Improvisation
Francis Clark Music Tree Time To Begin	Not present; composition exercises are presented first.
Francis Clark Music Tree Part 1	Presented at the end of almost every unit (10 total) dealing with the concepts pertaining to that unit. Teacher accompaniment is provided to encourage a steady beat.
Faber Piano Adventures Primer Level	Not present; composition exercises are presented first.
Faber Piano Adventures Level One	Two definite examples on pg. 10 and 33; these provide guidelines that do not interfere with musical choices.
Hal Leonard Book 1 and Piano Practice Games (PPG)	Unit 1-2 have an activity with teacher accompaniment; PPG contains more activities where the student improvises freely or on a tune that is familiar to them.
Hal Leonard Book 2	Same as above but it occurs only twice through the book; PPG contains assignments that employ musical concepts such as ostinatos, specific rhythms, Q/A, and ABA forms.
Robert Pace *Music for Piano* and *Creative Music* Book 1	Q/A exercises comprise the bulk of improvisation (seen first on pg 23 of Book 1); Creative Music presents Q/A exercises primarily; Pace is much more structured in his approach than the other methods.

Frances Clark and the *Music Tree*

> The most carefully researched and laboratory-tested series for elementary piano students available... [that] provide(s) a comprehensive plan for musical growth at the piano...[29]
>
> -- *Frances Clark*

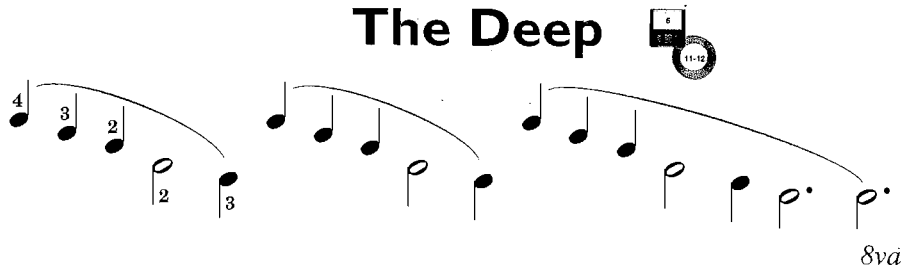
The Music Tree is an intervallic method approach that uses a lesson book and activity book to present the material. *Time to Begin* (primer level) contains nine units introducing various concepts utilized in playing the piano. By using the intervallic approach, the beginning student is able to attain comfort with intervals, rhythm, keyboard geography, and dynamics before moving

[29] Frances Clark, Louise Goss, and Sam Holland, *The Music Tree* (Miami: Summy-Birchard, 2000), preface.

to more involved concepts such as reading the grand staff. *Time to Begin* focuses primarily on composition while the improvisation exercises are found in the next book - *Part I*. However, the composition exercises encourage the student to explore the new concepts and to take ownership of their composition. The student is encouraged to write several pieces, as opposed to perfecting one piece. This way he can improvise with several different ideas.

Part I (technically the second level) is formatted in a similar way to *Time to Begin*. The creative exercises are found at the end of units. Because the student is able to read music, the method provides an example for her to read through and become comfortable playing. After she is familiar with the example, she is encouraged to "rearrange" the piece and are given a few guidelines to help them start. By the second presentation of improvisation at the end of unit two, the teacher is playing an accompaniment with the student, thereby requiring a steady tempo and commitment to musical choices.

Figure 1: "The Deep." *The Music Tree Part I*, page 14, published by Sammy-Birchard, 2000.



4. When you can play the piece easily, try rearranging it (still fitting the accompaniment). You might start with CDE, or use ♩ and 𝅗𝅥 in a different order.

The final improvisation assignment of *Part I* is the most involved; the student is asked to improvise a melody in the key of C using the pitches E and E-flat (essentially mode mixture between major and minor) while keeping steady with the teacher's accompaniment. Although

there are not numerous opportunities to improvise in *The Music Tree* method, the provided activities relate to music concepts. The emphasis on listening to the teacher's accompaniment while improvising reinforces the need to recognize harmony and beat patterns, and instantly assimilate the improvisation into the appropriate tempo. This type of listening also aids in the development of analytical and critical thinking skills necessary to identify musical concepts such tonal qualities (major or minor), changes in meter and tempo, and dynamics. The proficiency in this will help a student to form musical ideas for more developed improvisations. Overall, *The Music Tree* presents a well-integrated method book that effectively addresses a wide range of importance concepts, including brief references to improvisation skills.

Faber and *Piano Adventures*

> [A] piano method based on discovery, creativity and adventures through music making...an optional composing project is offered for each unit.[30]
>
> -- *Nancy and Randall Faber*

Randall and Nancy Faber present a bright, colorful method that follows the middle C approach. Four books are included in each level: in addition to the standard lesson book, there are also technique, performance, and theory books that reinforce concepts learned in the lesson book. The improvisation activities are found only interspersed throughout the lesson book, but are not presented until *Level 1*. The *Primer* book focuses on establishing a musical foundation necessary to move to *Level 1*, therefore objectives such as note reading, rhythm reading, and hand positions are the main principles established in the *Primer Level*.

Level I has only two improvisation exercises, each limited in scope. The first exercise asks the student to create staccato "popcorn" sounds in C position by starting out fast and

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[30] Nancy and Randall Faber, "A Note to Teacher and Parents," *Piano Adventures* (Fort Lauderdale: FJH Music Company, 1996).

growing slower. The image is an excellent way to introduce a new concept because it connects a familiar concrete idea to the new concept; the "popcorn" image segues perfectly into the staccato concept.

Figure 2: Popcorn example. *Piano Adventures Level I*, page 10, published by FJH, 1993.

Create "popcorn sounds" by playing staccato notes in C Position. Begin slowly and gradually play faster. Then slow down and stop. Popcorn's ready!

The other improvisatory exercise gives the student particular pitches and instructions to move about the keyboard in different octaves. The advantage of these two exercises is the concentrated focus of the student's attention on one idea to ensure complete mastery. Although the introduction of the book talks about the creative aspect of the method, the main creative goal appears to be composition, not improvisation.

The Hal Leonard Student Piano Library

> When music excites our interest and imagination, we eagerly put our hearts into learning it. The music in the *Hal Leonard Student Piano Library* encourages practice, progress, confidence, and the best of all – success![31]
>
> -- *Hal Leonard*

The Hal Leonard Student Piano Library adheres to the middle C approach and has four books, similar to that of the *Piano Adventures* method. One of the books, *Piano Practice Games*, focuses primarily on skills. In addition, the Book 1 lesson book (*Piano Lessons*) includes three simple improvisation exercises that are structured the same way: a set of familiar notes (such as black key groups or C-D-G) is given to the student while the teacher plays an accompaniment.

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[31] Barbara Kreader, Fred Kern, Phillip Keveren, and Mona Rejino, *The Hal Leonard Student Piano Library* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1996), Forward.

Figure 3: "My Own Song on CDE." *Hal Leonard Piano Student Library Piano Lessons Book I,* page 23 published by Hal Leonard, 1996.

With your right or left hand, choose any C D E group in the upper part of the piano.

Listen and feel the pulse as your teacher plays the accompaniment below. When you are ready, play C D E. Experiment by playing E D C.

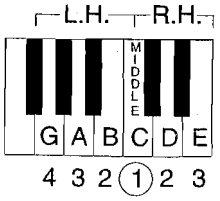
Mix the letters any way you want and make up your own song.

The merit of these exercises is far-reaching because it allows the student to become comfortable with the geographic range of notes for the exercise while playing them in a steady beat with the teacher.

In *Piano Practice Games*, three skills covered are ear training, sight-reading, and creativity (the common name for improvising and composing). Although most of the creative exercises concentrate on composition, the improvisation exercises are simple and build upon songs or concepts that the student has experienced previously in the *Lesson* book. The very first improvisation exercise is similar to the one given in the *Lesson* book: improvise on the pitches of C-D-E while listening to an accompaniment. The second exercise uses the notes in "Long, Long Ago" from their *Lesson* book and asks the student to improvise a melody on those notes while the teacher plays the accompaniment.

Figure 4: "Long, Long Ago." *Hal Leonard Piano Student Library Piano Practice Games Book I,* page 35, published by Hal Leonard, 1996.

Place your hands in the *Long, Long Ago* position.
Improvise a new piece as your teacher plays the accompaniment below.



Book 2 of *The Hal Leonard* books develops the concepts that were initiated in the previous level. Similar to the improvisation exercises found in the *Lesson* book of Book 1 (refer to Fig. 3), the student is given specific pitches while the teacher provides a structured pulse through an accompaniment. Only two of these exercises are found in the *Lesson* book improvising on the five-finger patterns of C (CDEFG) and G (GABCD).

The *Piano Practice Games* of Book 2 extends the musical vocabulary of the young student by supplying assignments that utilize an ostinato, specific rhythms, "Question and Answer" phrases, and ABA form. A successful way to practice improvisation is through daily "Question and Answer" (Q/A) exercises. This exercise gives a musical phrase (the question) that ends harmonically and melodically open; the student's job is to "answer" that phrase by closing it harmonically. The Q/A activity provides numerous possibilities for the student because there is an abundance of answers for any given question; a student could practice answering one question for several days. By requiring the student to improvise with these concepts, it not only assists the student's learning of the concepts but also strengthens their ability to identify them in other repertoire. Figures 5 and 6 provide two examples of said exercises. Figure 5 supplies a bass line - referring to it as accompaniment or ostinato - for the student to learn before improvising a melody above it; the ostinato remains simple by alternating between an interval of a fourth and third. The exercise then gives four specific pitches for the student to improvise his melody (see next page for corresponding figure).

Figure 5: "Orange Horizon." *Hal Leonard Piano Student Library Piano Practice Games Book II,* page 15, published by Hal Leonard, 1996.

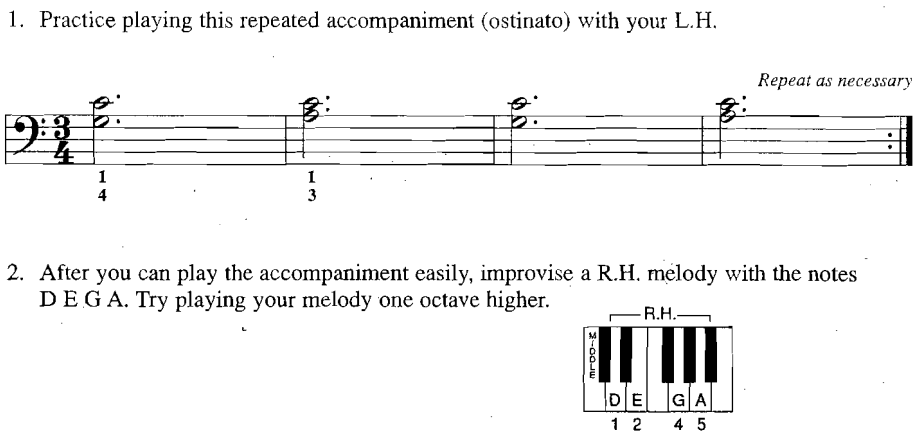
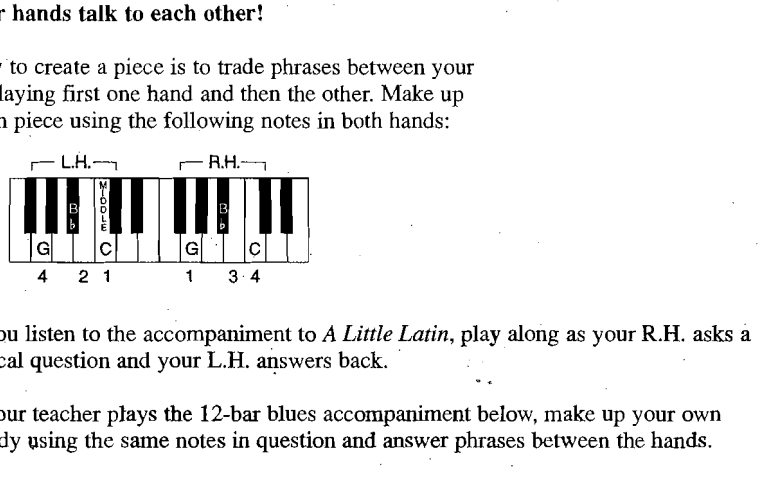


Figure 6 begins the introduction to Q/A exercises by supplying pitches for both hands to "trade phrases."[32]

Figure 6: "A Little Latin." *Hal Leonard Piano Student Library Piano Practice Games Book II*, page 33, published by Hal Leonard, 1996.



[32] Kreader, "Piano Practice Games: Book 2," *Hal Leonard*, 33.

Robert Pace and *Music For Piano*

> This series provides the essential material for acquiring an ever-expanding knowledge of music... [by] present[ing] a balanced diet of sight-reading, transposition, harmonization, ear training, improvisation, repertoire, and technic.[33]
>
> -- *Robert Pace*

The Pace method, built upon the multi-key approach, utilizes major/minor five-finger patterns to introduce various keys at an early age; this approach also relies on the importance of keyboard exploration and creativity. The philosophy behind this method is the equal presentation and treatment of keys and key signatures so that the student becomes familiar with numerous keys at an early stage. As expected, improvisation comprises a major component of this method.

The first book - *Music for Piano* - begins note reading on the grand staff immediately after the introductory activities (keyboard geography, groups of black keys, finger numbers, high and low sounds, staff reading, note values, etc.) The presentation of the C, G, D, and F key signatures are in several five-fingered melodies; several pages later, the keys of G-flat, D-flat, A-flat, E-flat, and B-flat are introduced. Halfway through the book, the sharp keys are taught so that the student can read and play the five-finger patterns of every major key. In terms of harmonic goals, the "chord study" on pages 29 and 40 teach major and minor chord patterns, respectively. These books are ideal for students who can read and are mentally ready to handle many different keys and key signatures. The exercises are written in all of the keys so it will take patience to reach this point.

As a firm believer of Q/A phrases, Pace provides numerous such activities throughout the books (see Fig. 7 and 8). In these examples, Pace provides the student with a model or pattern before asking them to attempt it on their own.

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[33] Robert Pace, "To the Teacher." *Music for Piano,* (New York: Lee Roberts Music Publications, 1961).

Figure 7: "Stately Dance." *Robert Pace: Music for Piano I*, page 38, published by Lee Roberts Music, 1979.

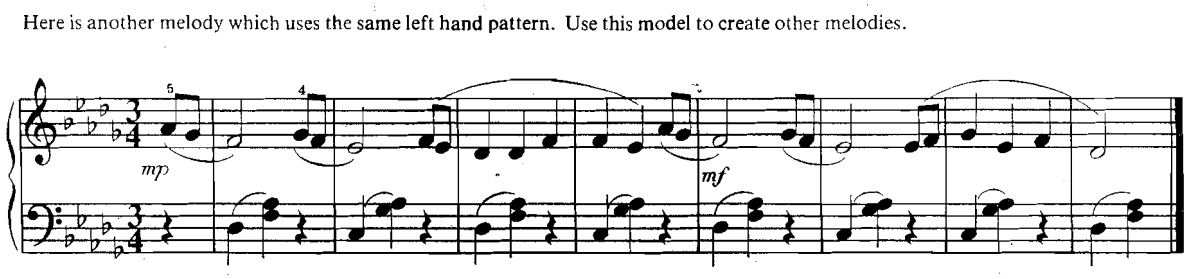
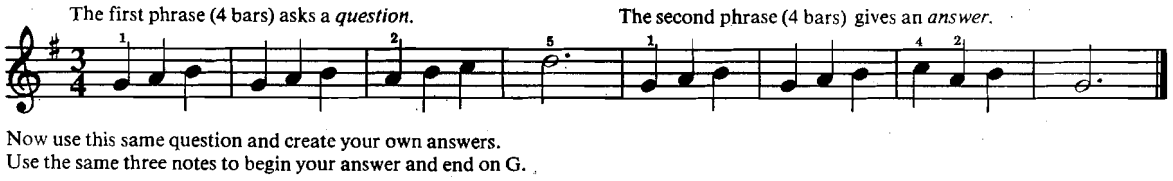
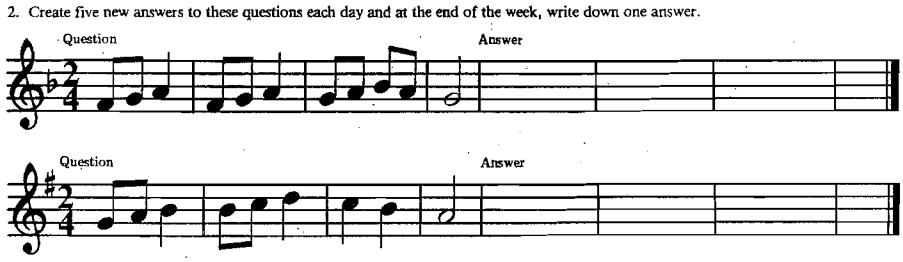


Figure 8: "Question and Answer." *Robert Pace: Music for Piano I*, page 23, published by Lee Roberts Music, 1979.



The book in this method that focuses primarily on skills is aptly named *Creative Music.* It focuses on reviewing concepts from *Music for Piano*, Q/A activities, harmonizing exercises, and sight-reading skills. This book is essential to the student who wishes to succeed in the Pace method. *Creative Music* provides various Q/A exercises to practice the exploratory process by improvising in the multitude of keys. Figure 9 is an excellent example of the reinforcement of instruction in the Pace method: one melody (or question) is provided with several answers for study purposes. Assignments then follow the example with instructions to create as answers as possible.

Figure 9: "Question and Answer." *Robert Pace: Creative Music I*, page 23, published by Lee Roberts Music, 1979.



The Pace method offers the most extensive instruction in improvisation through the daily review and Q/A activities. Links between these Q/A phrases and advanced literature explored in later detail are beneficial to any student harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically. Moreover, the presentation of multiple keys in the early stages of learning facilitates sight-reading abilities and the capacity to play advanced literature with a greater ease in the future.

The basic exercises provided in these method books prepare a piano student to address challenges presented by the intermediate and advanced literature. A student with experience and training in improvisation will transition to the advanced literature with a wealth of tools for interpretation. The Q/A and exploratory exercises help guide the student in the location of similar phrases in the repertoire, reinforce the understanding of tonality through scales and chord passages, and supply a strong conception of rhythm. From these improvisatory skills, a student will be more confident in his undertaking of performing and interpreting music. In turn, this added confidence will enable a smooth transition to intermediate and advanced repertoire.

Application of Improvisation in Advanced Repertoire

While some might believe the misconception that improvisation plays no part in composed music, many past composers linked the two art forms by incorporating improvisatory elements into their compositions. The case can be made that many examples of written out improvisation exists within the advanced repertoire. For this particular discussion, pieces by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (*Adagio* of the piano sonata K. 457), Frederic Chopin (*Berceuse*), and William Bolcom (*Scène d'opéra*) are selected to draw conclusions concerning the presence of improvisation. Alongside the examples will be simple exercises based on the themes to guide a student with the study and interpretation of the pieces.

In cultivated music, one can identify several ascertainable elements of melodic improvisation present in composed works. The following five elements are demonstrated in the selected works:

1. Fills (the filling in of intervals and longer note values)
2. Rhythmic alteration
3. Ornamentation
4. Free sections (divorced from the original melody)
5. Thematic evolution

Each composer draws on these elements in various ways. Mozart retains the outline of the theme's structure but applies ornaments and fills as principle embellishments; Chopin breaks from the contour of his theme and establishes fills and rhythm as the unifying design; and Bolcom, in a similar manner to Chopin, uses varied rhythms (but with an ostinato bass) as well as free improvisation while also expanding conventional harmonies.[34] Despite the differing approaches utilized by these composers, improvisation for them is an effective tool for

[34] "The unchanging accompaniment is the canvas upon which new kinds of figuration can be painted (chordal, harmonic, polyphonic and polymelodic), at times foreshadowing the novel tonal qualities of impressionism." Wojciech Nowik. "Fryderyk Chopin's op. 57 – from *Variantes* to *Berceuse*." *Chopin Studies*. Ed. Ed Samson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 33.

composition. In the following pages, original score examples will be denoted by figure titles, whereas the written exercises will have a descriptive title.

Mozart's Piano Sonata K. 457, II. *Adagio*

As a performer, the child genius Mozart was a celebrated improviser on the harpsichord and organ. At the age of four, he was already experimenting with sounds on the clavier while his older sister took lessons.[35] There are many documented observations of Mozart improvising for extended periods of time alone or in front of an stupefied audience. In his memoirs, the Benedictine priest Placidus Schari recalls Mozart's unique gift of improvisation: "One had only to give him the first subject which came to mind for a fugue or an invention: he would develop it with strange variations and constantly changing passages as long as one wished; he would improvise fugally on a subject for hours, and this fantasia-playing was his greatest passion."[36] This was one of Mozart's favorite activities to do alone; even at such an early age, it can be asserted that he was already formulating a compositional style through his improvisations.

The *Adagio* movement of the K. 457 piano sonata is an excellent example of Mozart's improvisatory style. The ABA structure of the movement allowed him to establish several themes on which to embellish; there are two themes in the A section and one in the B section. Every time each theme recurs, it is embellished in a different way. Within this particular movement, Mozart employs fills, ornaments, and free improvisation to vary these themes.

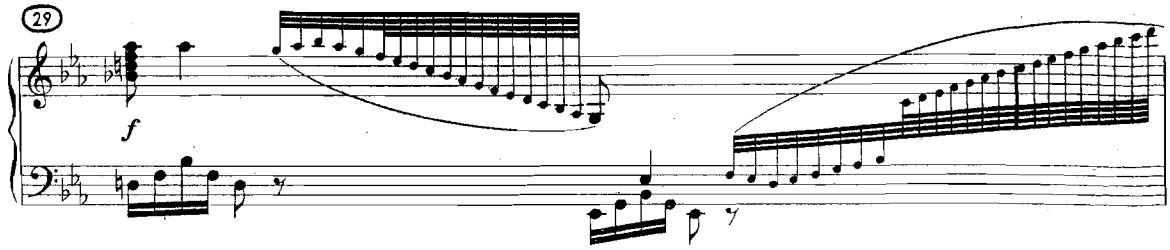
Fills

Three main types of fills emerge in the *Adagio*: scale passages, movement in the opposite direction (of the anticipated note), and leading into downbeats. Of the three, the scales are the most prominent and visible form of improvisation. They actually serve as transitions between

[35] Maynard Solomon, *Mozart: A Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995)
[36] Solomon, *Mozart,* 40.

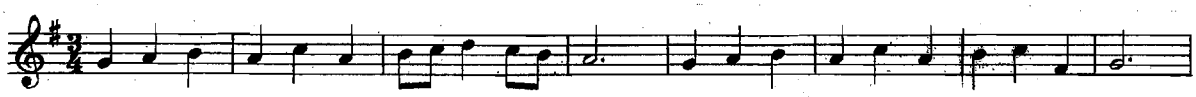
other opposing registers of motives or sections. For example, three scales of mm. 29, 30, and 50 connect the registers, whereas the extended m. 51 transitions between sections of the coda.

Figure 1: Mozart. *Piano Sonata, K. 457 Adagio*, m. 29. Large fills. Reprinted from the Theodore Presser score, 1960.

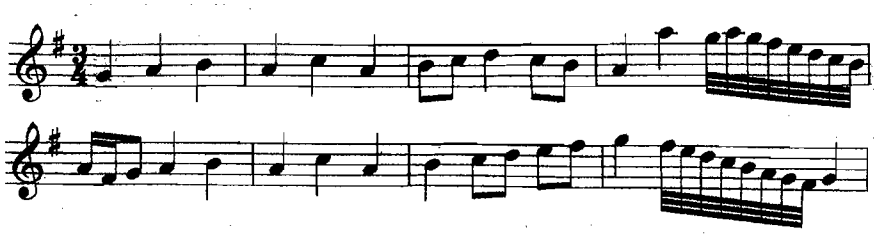


A student can insert scales in a similar fashion by creating an occasional octave displacement followed by a scale passage. Below is a simple tune with an example of this technique:

Original Melody



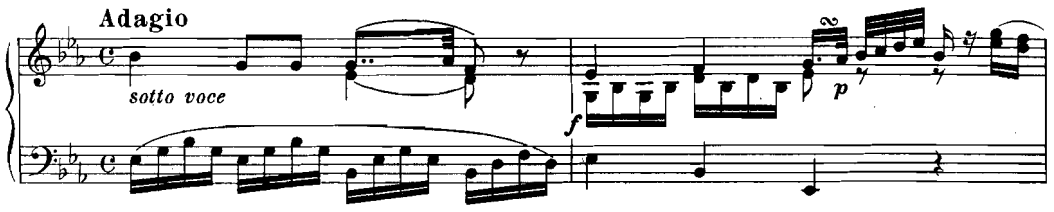
Melody improvised with fills



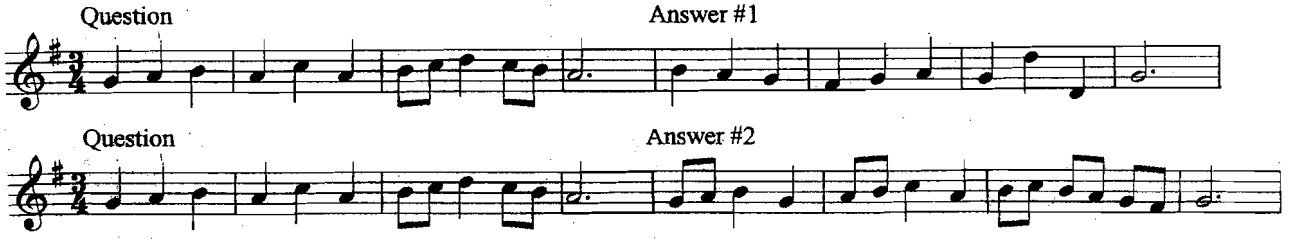
Through these exercises, a student experiences the application of scales in repertoire and how the different colors of the piano registers affect the character of the movement. They also learn how to create octave displacements and connect them by passing through the registers.

In the construction of the A section, Mozart subtly inserts an immediate improvised repeat of the theme (m. 1 versus m. 4). This not only allows a direct comparison but is also an ideal model for a Question/Answer phrase.

Figure 2: *Piano Sonata, K. 457 Adagio,* mm. 1-2. Question and Answer phrase.



The first measure ends harmonically and melodically open, permitting the improviser to close it in an appropriate way. Because the purpose is to "close" a Q/A phrase, the goal of the answer should be the tonic note. Using the tune from the first example, a student can answer the musical question in the following manner:



Q/A exercises are effective improvising tools because they train a student to think harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically within a specific period. When the chord structure moves from a dominant to a tonic chord, the student becomes familiar with the defining elements of each chord, which, in turn, will enable them to produce a melody within the provided rhythm. Because the direction of the harmony differentiates the answer from the question (by returning to the tonic instead of the dominant), it should remain at the forefront of the performer's mind.

Additionally, Mozart introduces two more types of fills with movement in the opposite direction of the anticipated note (in the first beat of m. 23), and the leading into a downbeat (in the last beat of m. 41).

Figure 3: *Piano Sonata, K. 457 Adagio,* m. 23. A fill moving away from the following melodic note.

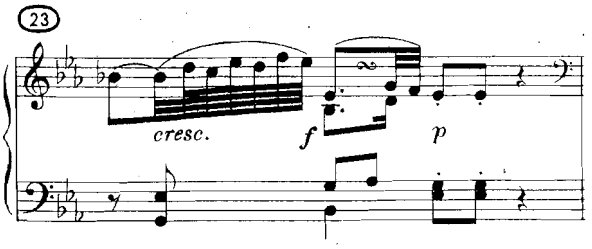
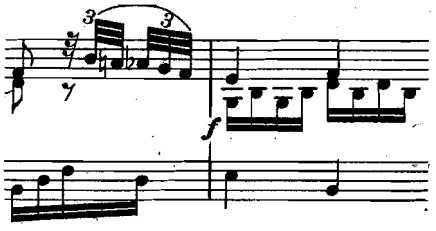
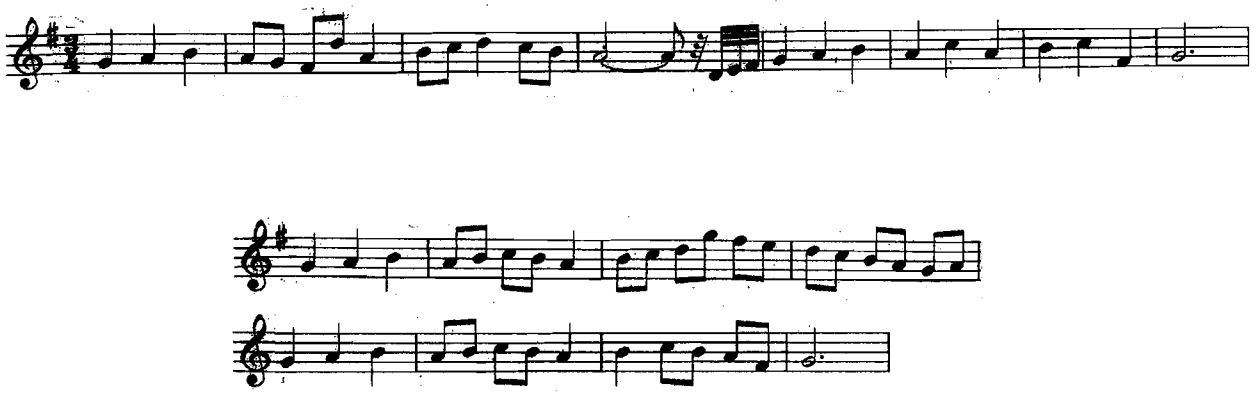


Figure 4: *Piano Sonata, K. 457 Adagio,* m. 41. A fill leading into the downbeat.



Fills, in general, focus on the upper and lower neighbor tones or close the intervals with step-wise motion.

Two examples of the melody with fills

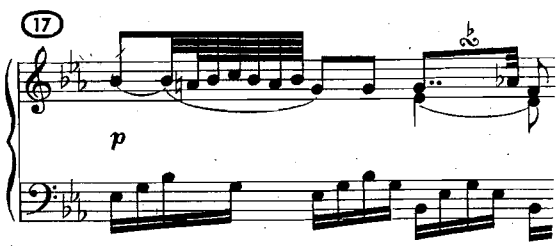


These particular fills aid one's interpretations on a smaller degree from the previously considered fills but are melodic in nature. They demonstrate the connection between melodic intervals by showing the direction of the melodic line across larger or longer note values. Students also have an opportunity to internalize the subdivision of the beat with the visual and physical reminder in the fills; in turn, these smaller fills aid in building a repertoire of ideas for future improvisations.

Ornaments

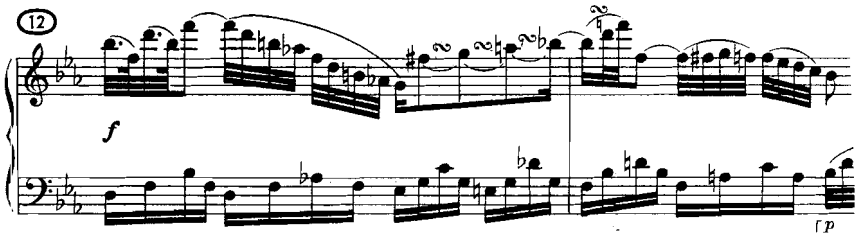
Concerning ornaments, Mozart used turns liberally throughout the *Adagio;* this favored embellishment is generally found in the close intervals of the themes, and followed by a type fill. Occasionally Mozart wrote out the turn, such as the re-entrance of the first theme in m. 17.

Figure 5: *Piano Sonata, K. 457 Adagio,* m. 17. Written out turn.



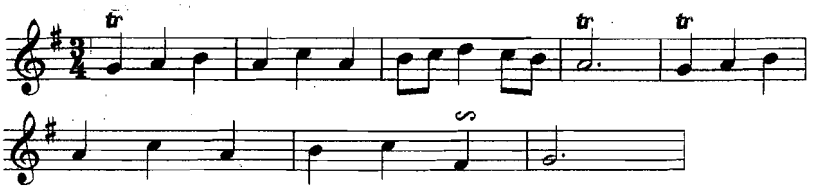
In m.12, Mozart drew attention to the chromaticism of a long melodic line by ornamenting it with turns:

Figure 6: *Piano Sonata, K. 457 Adagio,* mm. 12-13. Ornaments on a longer line.



Ornamenting is a simple way to begin improvising on a theme. Longer note values and stronger beats – such as downbeats – serve as ideal places to highlight with ornaments.

Ornaments

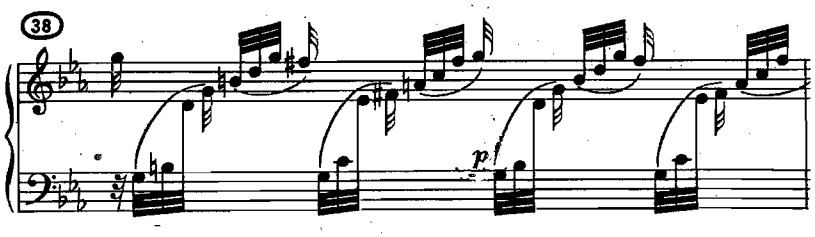


Because ornaments generally emphasize principal beats and notes in a phrase, exercises in ornamenting a melody further a student's comprehension of meter and pulse.

Free Improvisation

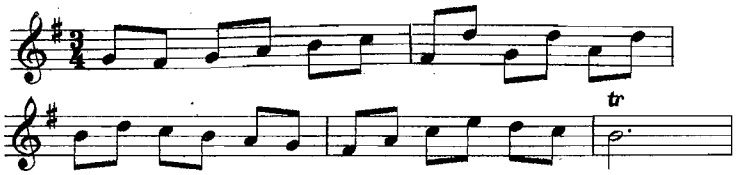
Free sections constitute the final form of improvisation in the *Adagio*. Mozart inserts one as a transition from the B section to the return of the A section in mm.38-40. This free section also serves to modulate back to E-flat major. There is no melodic movement but rather a series of arpeggios that work their way from G major to E-flat major.

Figure 7: *Piano Sonata, K. 457 Adagio,* m. 38. Free improvisation.



The free sections can be completely new or based on themes from the sonata. When improvising a free section, however, it is important to maintain the stylistic characteristics of the composer. The following example demonstrates the language of Mozart, which exploited the scales and arppeggiation of the underlying harmony.

Free Improvisation



Free improvisation requires familiarity with the important harmonic progressions associated with the keys. When improvising freely, a student is required to compile all information about harmonies and themes previously seen or heard within the piece and assimilate them with a particular style to form a cohesive statement. This is an important step in the improvising process as it is a demonstration of the student's musical comprehension.

Chopin's *Berceuse*

Chopin, like Mozart, improvised throughout his childhood. A few recollections recorded below give testament to the powerful affect of his music:

> His powers of improvisation are recalled by Marylski at about that time [1823]: "At dusk, when our lessons were over, we used to tell each other about events in Polish history... such as the battles waged by our generals, and the young Chopin transposed all this on to the piano. Sometimes the tears would run down our cheeks as we listened to his music."[37]

> He [Antoni Krysiak] recalled how Fryderyk improvised at night at the piano brought out of the Skarbek house and placed under a fig tree, and how he "enchanted his listeners and brought tears to their eyes."[38]

As a teacher, Chopin was known to change notes within his compositions for his students' scores. James Methuen-Campbell, in his article "Chopin in Performance," maintains that "whether or not the early nineteenth-century pianists played the text of the music as printed, we know from various extant copies of Chopin's works used in teaching that he himself was in the habit of altering the ornamentation, adding Fiorituras and the like, even after the music was published."[39]

The very nature of the *Berceuse* is improvisational. An ostinato bass line of two chord qualities (tonic – D-flat, dominant – A-flat) supports the piece while the melody freely improvises above:

> For here we have an innovative attempt to create an ostinato variation-form... The slight four-bar theme marks out the dimensions of the later variations... It supplies not only the basic melodic material but also qualities of 'substance' and of structure, qualities which determine the cohesiveness of the ornamental melody and the concision of the overall form.[40]

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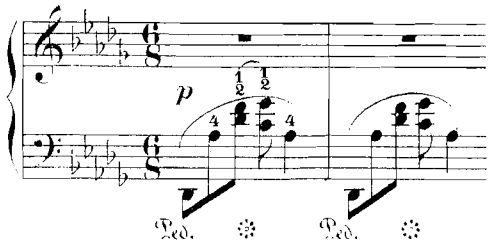
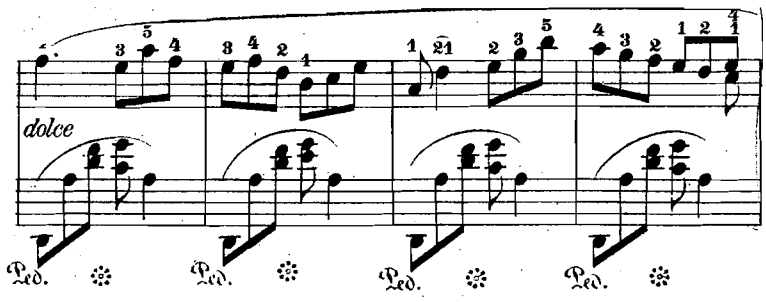
[37] Pierre Azoury, *Chopin Through his Contemporaries.* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 10.
[38] Azoury, *Chopin,* 10-11.
[39] Methuen-Campbell, "Chopin in Performance," 192.
[40] Nowik, "Fryderyk Chopin's op. 57." 33.

Figure 1: Chopin. *Berceuse*, mm. 1-2. Ostinato bass. Reprinted from the Dover score, 1989.



While Mozart retained the skeleton of his theme, Chopin did not treat his in the same straightforward manner. Rather, he used it as a foundation to create a pillow of impressionistic sound as the theme disintegrates. His four-bar melody is found three times: m. 3 in its first presentation; m. 7 with the countermelody; and m.15 - dissipating before it is completed.

Figure 2: *Berceuse,* mm. 3-6. The melody in its first presentation.

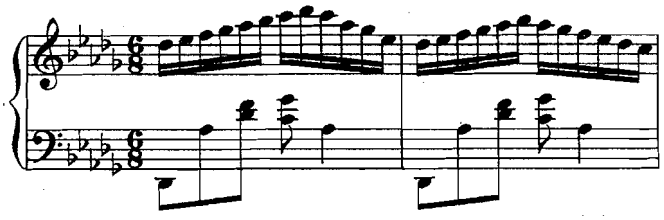


Wojchiech Nowik, in his analytical essay of the *Berceuse,* summarized the theme's assimilation when he emphasized that "the motive relations which most strongly unite the type with the variant are gradually loosened and even obliterated throughout the course of the piece's composition. The variant then becomes integrated with the model by means of more general

composition: melodic (e.g. similar direction in the unfolding of the melody), harmony and dynamic."[41]

The *Berceuse* is an ideal piece with which to explore the applications of improvisation because the ostinato provides stability and allows the improvisatory focus to be solely on the melodic movement. Once a student is comfortable with the ostinato, instruct him to sing the melody as it first appears while playing the ostinato. Singing the melody will heighten the senses to the fluid quality and natural phrasing of the line. After this exercise, replace the singing with playing the melody on the piano. While staying within the range of an octave (for beginning purposes), continue to play the ostinato but insert a D-flat major scale on the piano in place of the melody. The student can experiment with the scale by changing the direction or increasing/decreasing the quality of the rhythm (for example, making the 16^{th} notes into triplet 16^{th}s, etc).

D-flat scale over the ostinato



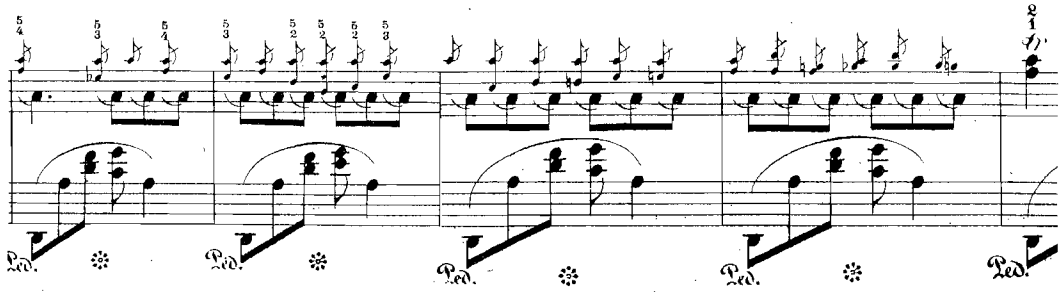
This exercise serves to make the performer more familiar with the key of D-flat, while encouraging them to move away from the established structure of the melody.

[41] Nowik, "Fryderyk Chopin's op. 57." 29.

Ornaments

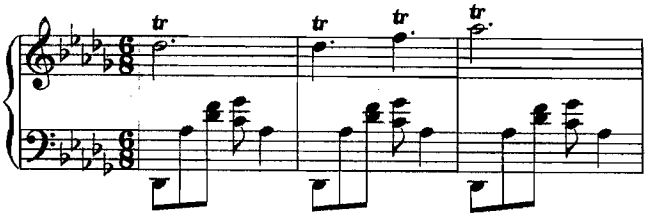
Chopin's main example of ornamentation occurs in mm. 16-19. In these four measures, the roles of melody and ornamental figure are reversed; an A-flat pedal point is ornamented by the melody in grace notes.

Figure 3: *Berceuse,* mm. 15-19. The melody as the ornament over an A-flat pedal.



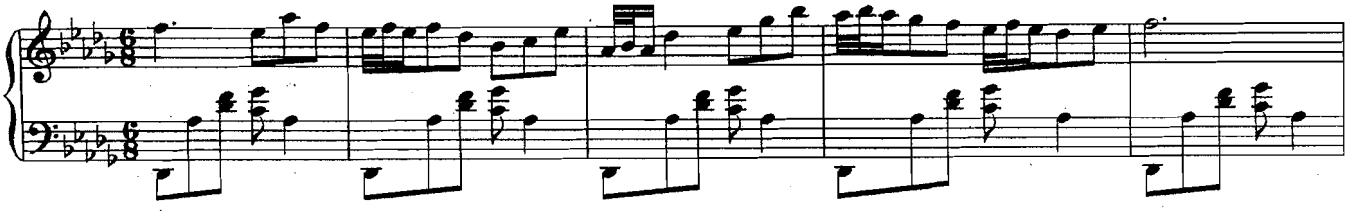
The addition of ornaments is another way to improvise on the *Berceuse*. For this exercise, ornamenting the principal notes of the D-flat major chord is an effective device:

Trills



The first exercise allows the student to experience the sound quality and harmonic sustaining power of a trill. Within the *Berceuse*, the trill is an effective improvisatory device because it unobtrusively embellishes the uniform harmony. The second exercise, in a similar manner to those in the earlier Mozart example, stresses the principal beats and notes of the melody.

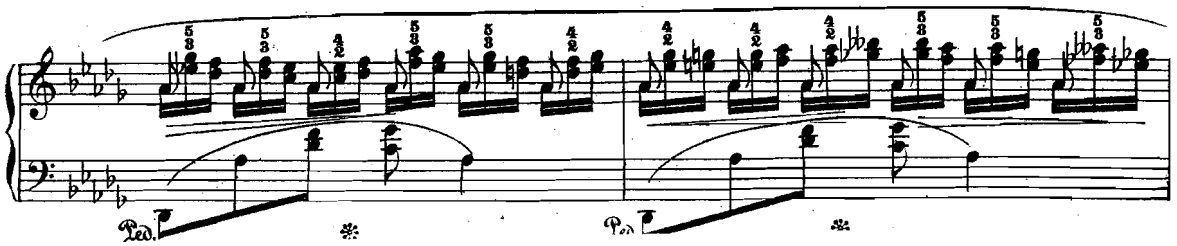
Ornaments



Fills

The fills in the *Berceuse* consist mainly of thirds and sixths, as opposed to the scale-like fills of Mozart. Chopin's fondness for lyrical lines is evident with the emphasis on these intervals as "his tendency to sweeten the melody with parallel 3rds and 6ths is strongly reminiscent of operatic duet textures."[42] The relationship of thirds and sixths dominates much of the variations and improvisations of this work. Arpeggiated thirds in m. 23 and sixths in m. 27 establish the pattern, and mm. 34-36 finds a combination of the intervals.

Figure 4: *Berceuse,* mm. 33-34. Use of thirds within the fills.

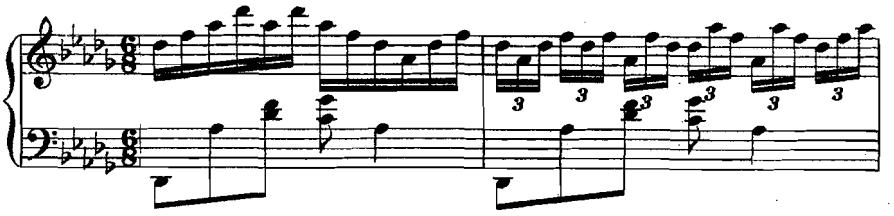


Due to the principal harmony of the *Berceuse*, thirds can be used effectively around a D-flat and A-flat chord. The limited chord progression permits the student to focus on the treatment of the

[42] Michałowskil, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

chord rather than worrying about frequently changing harmonies. The example below illustrates two arppeggiation possibilities:

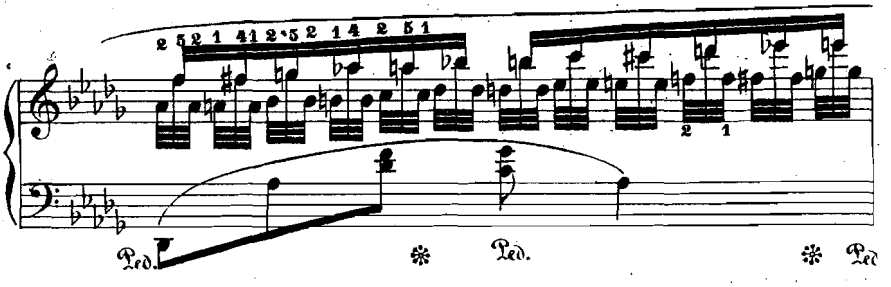
Arpeggios



Both of these exercises utilize the D-flat arpeggio but with differing rhythmic qualities. Again, they are another way to experiment with the harmony and serve as a bridge to link the familiar and the unfamiliar (routine exercises of scales and arpeggios to improvising in a piece).

Another frequently employed fill favored by Chopin is chromatic scales in thirds. M. 25 has thirds ascending while m. 31 has thirds descending; mm. 41-42 rises with a chromatic sixth ascent.

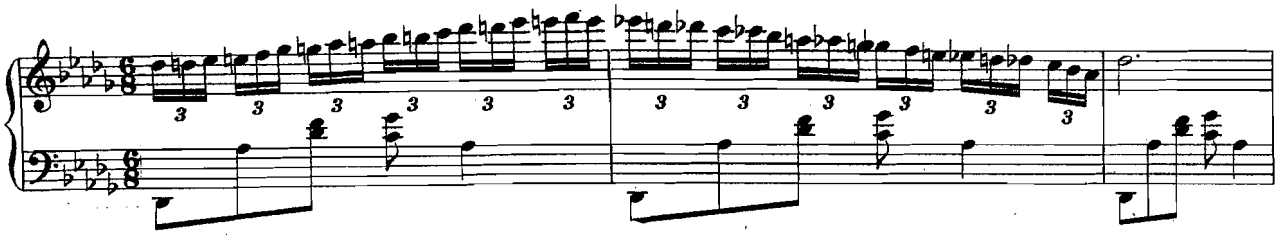
Figure 5: *Berceuse,* m. 41. Chromatic fill.



The chromaticism dramatically contributes to the ethereal sounds created throughout the work. Improvising with chromatic pitches is a comfortable starting point, for there are no "wrong"

notes. In the *Berceuse*, instruct the student to play a simple two-octave chromatic scale over the ostinato:

Chromatic Scale

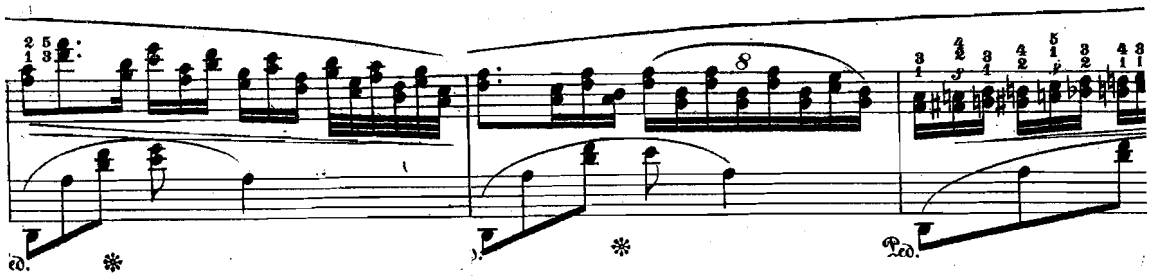


The student may even play chromatic fills over two octaves to enhance the improvisation. With pieces that have limited harmonic progressions, chromaticism creates a sense of expanding tonality. In a similar manner to the Mozart fills, these chromatic devices demonstrate how to connect a line through different avenues. Moreover, the student is exposed to the different color of a chromatic scale through its effective use in the *Berceuse*.

Rhythmic Manipulation

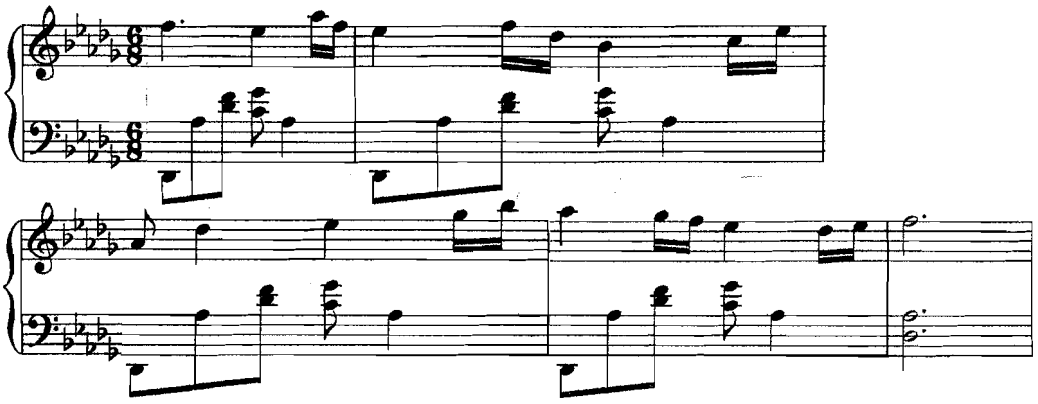
The alteration of the rhythm is a technique exploited by Chopin in the *Berceuse* to build a sense of motion. He creates tension through a series of rhythmic crescendos and decrescendos, beginning with a foreshadowing of the countermelody in m. 13. The first evidence of increasing rhythmic motion is prepared by a trill into the motion of 32nd notes in m. 19, which gradually settles into triplet 16th from mm. 23-35.

Figure 6: *Berceuse*, mm. 23-25. Rhythmic crescendo using thirds.



Alterations to the rhythm have been used in many of the preceding exercises as a way to extend the improvisation. Another way to vary the rhythm is through varying the rhythm lengths – on a very basic level, have the student lengthen the value of the principal beats and diminish the value of the remaining notes in the following manner:

Rhythmic Alterations

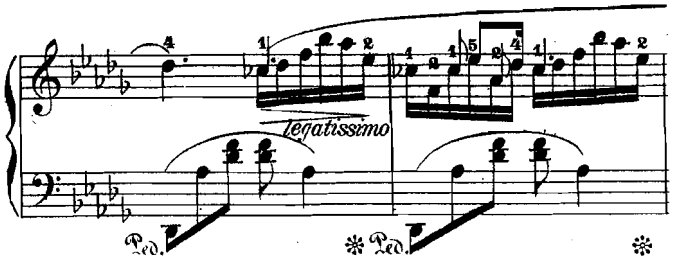


By manipulating the rhythm qualities, a student is required to make judgments concerning what beat to lengthen or shorten, how long to extend that beat, and how the remainder of the measure should be treated.

Free Improvisation

The final form of improvisation is a free section. Chopin extends the *Berceuse* with a coda (mm. 55-70) that highlights the subdominant (G-flat) by adding a seventh to the tonic D-flat chord. This change in harmony affects the shape of the melody: it meanders around the harmony freely before returning to the principal theme in m. 63.

Figure 7: *Berceuse,* mm. 55-56. Free improvisation.



To practice improvising in this manner, begin the ostinato pattern and "wander" about the pitches of D-flat major within the space of an octave. Once this is comfortable, extend the free improvisation to include another octave.

The improvisational practices in this work build on those of the Mozart sonata because the *Berceuse* ventures farther away from its original theme. The previous techniques (such as ornaments and free improvisation) are still applicable but require a different approach; the task of the student becomes the experimentation with and implementation of those differences. The student must additionally concentrate on filling the melodic line with defining aspects of the tonality such as thirds, arpeggios, scales, and chromatic notes. The interpretation of the *Berceuse* is fostered through these practices because a student discovers melodic direction through the fills and numerous options for expanding a single chord through improvisations.

Bolcom's *Scène d'opéra*

William Bolcom was awarded the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in Music for the *12 New Etudes for Piano*. Four books comprise these etudes, each containing three movements with descriptive titles such as *Mirrors, Scène d'opéra, Rag infernal,* and *Hi-jinks*. Every movement deals with a particular motive or concept relative to the title; for instance, the movement entitled *Mirrors* treats each rhythmic or melodic motive in mirror form between the hands. In *Scène d'opéra* of Book II, Bolcom borrows from the operatic idiom. The source of a well-known example of an ostinato bass in opera is "When I am Laid in Earth" from Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas.* In this aria, Dido sings of her coming death while the ostinato bass descends chromatically. In a similar manner, Bolcom utilizes an ostinato pattern in *Scène d'opéra* to support his free melodic improvisations.

Bolcom's harmonic language within the *12 New Etudes* does not adhere to the traditional tonality of the previous few centuries. With the dawn of the 20th century came a thrust to create a new musical language that evolved from the conventional harmonies and chord structure; some of the musical innovations assigned mathematical methods to pitches "to free musical style from ossification."[43] Many scholars defined the emerging styles as "atonal" because they appeared not to utilize any unifying tonality. On the other hand, William Bolcom defends the newfound harmonies, not as atonal but rather as a new form of tonality in the *Afterword* of the *12 New Etudes:*

> I now embark on a stylistic and harmonic synthesis no longer involved with any local style – that of a fusion of tonality into non-centered sound (often miscalled 'atonal')...tonality, and what composers want and need from it, has inevitably changed. I see it as a tension between contraries: at its extremes this is reinforced by the simultaneous presence of amazing stylistic evolution on the one hand and an equally amazing conservatism on the other... With the growth of skill in the management of this tension, it becomes possible to arrive at a musical speech that is at once coherent and comprehensible and in constant expansion.[44]

This breaking up of the traditional "ossified" tonality is depicted in the *Scène d'opéra* with its association to D major. While it is not centered on that tonality, particularities of D major emerge in prominent places such as the ostinato bass line and an obscure harmonic progression at the closing bars. The traditional tonality (D major) is then blended with the "non-centered sound" of the improvisations.

With the new language came a different approach to melodic improvisation as well. Previously, improvisation was constructed around specific harmonies or a melodic skeleton. Within *Scène d'opéra*, there is no discernable melodic skeleton or traditional harmonic progression. Rather, the melodic improvisations focus on rhythmic alterations and voice layering. This improvisation is considered free because it follows no melodic or harmonic

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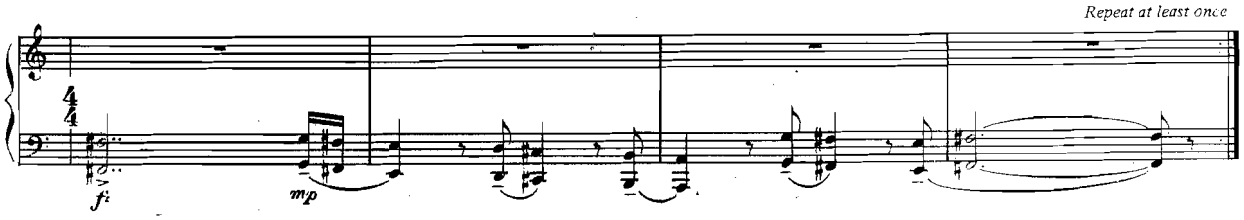
[43] William Bolcom, *12 New Etudes for Piano* (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Company, 1988), 62.
[44] Bolcom, *12 New Etudes*, 62.

pattern. Even in a descriptive note at the beginning of the piece, Bolcom describes it as "a steady, rhythmic ostinato vs. varied irrational rhythms," indicating something established versus something completely free and uninhibited. *Scène d'opéra* is organized into four sections: the first solo presentation of the ostinato bass, the rhythmic improvisations, the layering of independent voices, and the final solo presentation of the ostinato.

The ostinato bass serves as an anchor for the piece. The repetitious nature of the line provides aural stability while the melodic material improvises above it. Bolcom wrote a note about the work at the end of the first presentation of the ostinato. A repeat sign calls for a second performance of the line but he specifically states "repeat at least once," indicating that the performer could repeat at will. The ostinato is in octaves and loosely represents a D Major descending scale, starting on F# and spanning an octave over four measures.

Figure 1: Bolcom. *Scène d'opéra,* mm. 1-4. Ostinato bass. Reprinted from the Edward B. Marks score, 1988.



Once the right hand enters, the ostinato repeats eight more times before it ends the piece with the final presentation of the line.

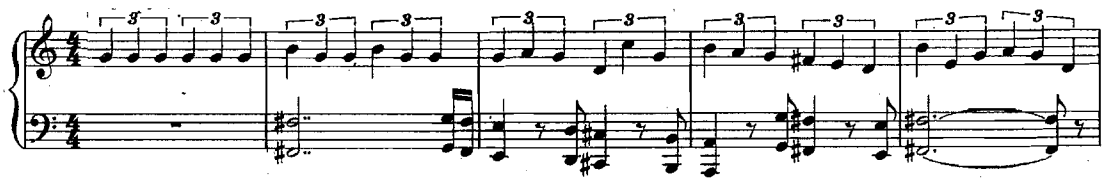
Rhythmic Alteration

In the second section, there is a general rhythmic accelerando toward the middle of the piece that is aided by a higher density of layers.[45] As the voices increase in number and texture, the note values diminish in value, creating the affect of an accelerando. After the first solo appearance of

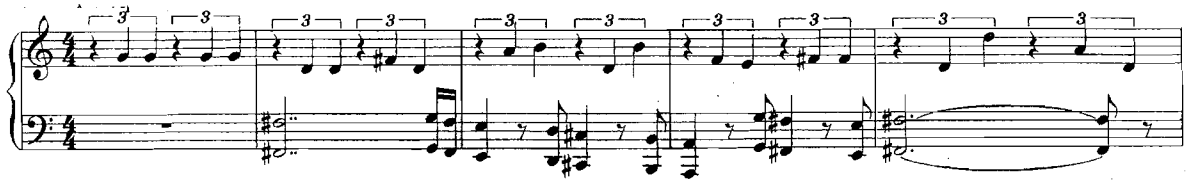
[45] The ostinato bass is not included in the number of layers unless indicated otherwise.

the ostinato, the right hand enters at m. 5 with two voices in a slow triplet figure that move up and down the register. A way to improvise with this piece is to use rhythm as the common element. Using the triplet rhythm given in the first measure of the exercises below, play random pitches (comparable to Bolcom's use in the piece) over the bass line.

Triplet Rhythm #1



Triplet Rhythm #2

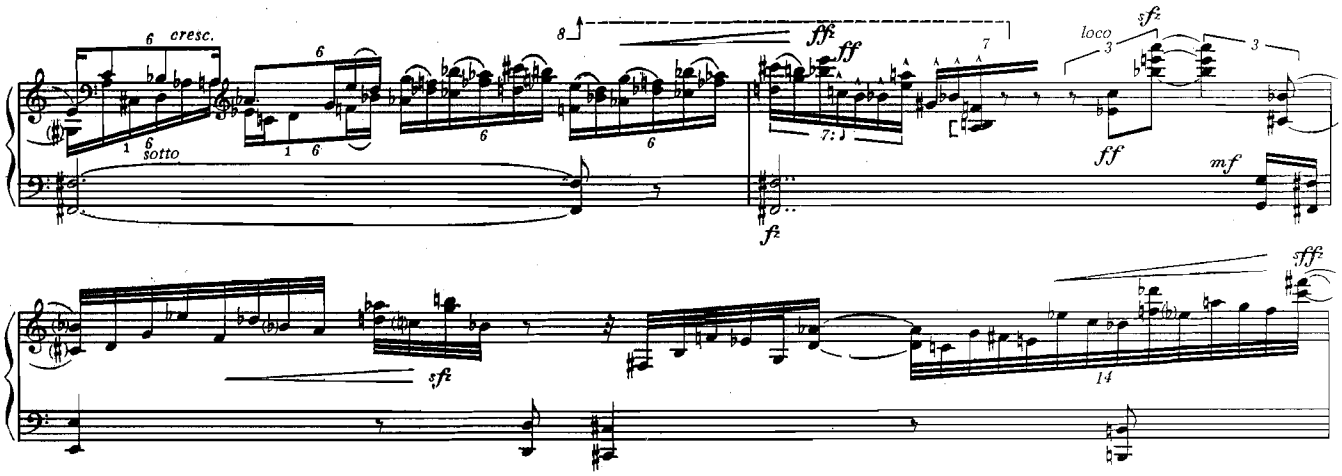


These exercises utilize the slow triplet pattern found in the first two voices of the right hand. The difficulty in the exercises lies in the juxtaposition of the two opposing rhythms – a recurring process within *Scène d'opéra.* This direct relationship to the piece can be developed further by playing the right hand in different registers and by crossing registers on the piano.

These two voices are joined after the descent by a faster third voice woven between them in m. 11. This third voice is in sixteenth notes (four per beat) but soon swells to five sixteenth notes per beat in m. 12. Over the next two measures, Bolcom experiments with this rhythm by

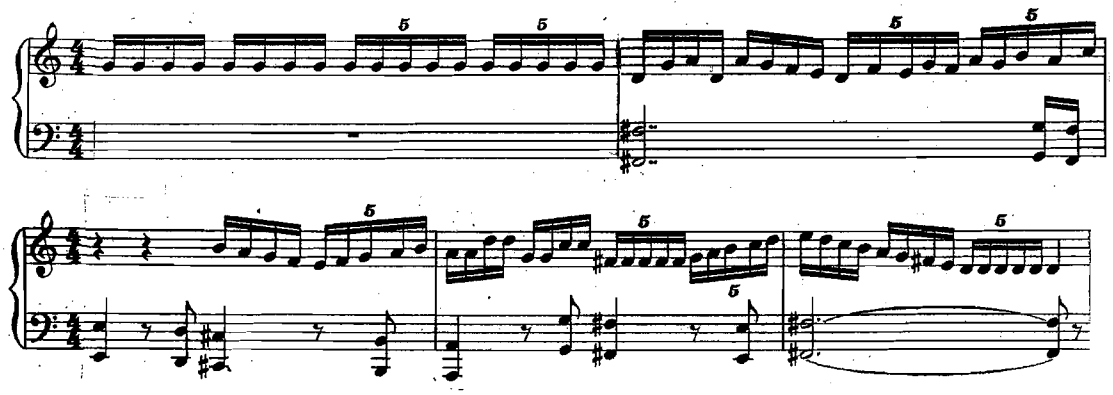
trading it between the voices, dropping voices, and thickening the voices with chords. This rhythmic crescendo intensifies in mm 16-18; the sixteenth notes per beat increase from six to eight, and finally to fourteen per beat leading into the three staves.

Figure 2: *Scène d'opéra,* mm. 16-18. Rhythmic crescendo.



These three measures represent the most free and fluid improvisations in *Scène d'opéra.* Generally starting on the low part of the staff, each motive struggles upward in an effort to free itself from harmonic tension.

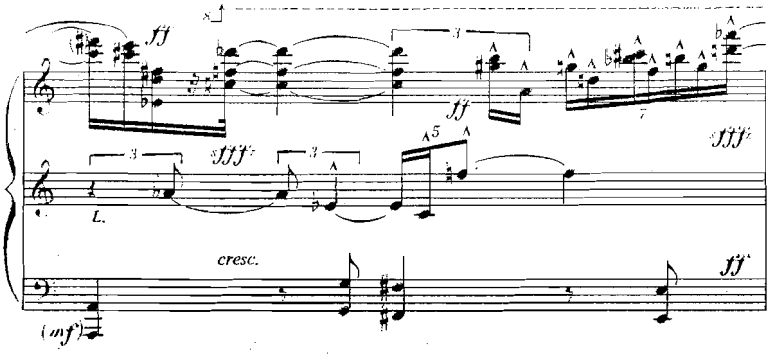
This concept of a rhythmic crescendo can be applied through an exercise that combines rhythm patterns. In the basic exercise below, the 16th notes are increased to five per beat in the second half of the measure. Through this exercise, a student practices the augmentation of rhythm patterns within a specific period.



This is a conservative approach (using only two rhythms) but can be extend to great lengths with a variety of rhythmic combinations.

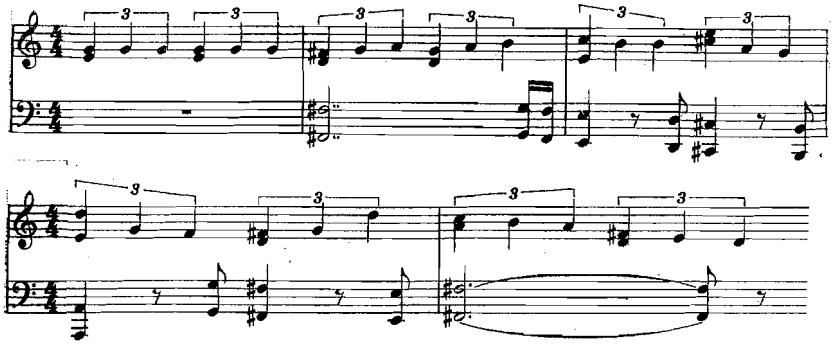
The maximum number of layers at one given time within *Scène d'opéra* is three, including the ostinato. The lowest of the layers drops to the middle stave and becomes the melodic figure of this section while the upper layers improvise without restraint. The top layer returns to the original triplet figure while the middle takes the freest rhythm:

Figure 3: *Scène d'opéra,* m. 19. Three layers over three staves.



To improvise with voice layers, a student can use a previous exercise and add an extra voice:

Triplet with voices



This exercise builds upon the first exercise by forming a chord with the first note. Although this is a sparse example of voice layering, it provides a student with a basic experience and understanding of textures that exists within the *Scène d'opéra.*

The intensity of the improvisations reaches a climax in mm. 22 and tapers from the free voices into chordal movement. The previously mentioned harmonic progression enters on the second and fourth beats of mm 28-33 and segues into the final statement of the ostinato. This harmonic progression is a surprising change of character for the melodic movement; it insinuates strongly to the suggested tonality of the piece (D Major), which is not seen in the preceding material.[46] The final section of *Scène d'opéra* is a solo re-statement of the ostinato bass.

The improvisatory style seen in the *Scène d'opéra* by William Bolcom is a culmination of compositional processes that attempted to expand and evolve from the expectations and standards of the past. Although there are improvisation techniques that are similar to those used in previously studied pieces (such as rhythmic alterations and layering of voices), there was no skeleton or harmonic shell from which the new improvisations mimicked. Rather, Bolcom wrote motives that built upon or complemented each other while the style of his music evolved from the emancipation of traditional tonality.

[46] D, Dmaj7, Gmaj7, Gsub6, Em7, Amaj7, D

Conclusion

The piano has an advantage over many other instruments because of its physical structure and the nature in which it is possible to project harmony, melody, rhythm, and textures. A pianist can produce sound with both hands, and is capable of playing up to ten, and occasionally more, notes at once. Different registers, articulations, dynamics, and tempi can be juxtaposed simultaneously. Because of these possibilities, improvisation on the piano provides innumerable avenues for the imagination.

Improvisation's presence in performance and music education through the centuries attests to its lasting value as a useful skill for musicians. Improvisation, however, should not be thought of as a quaint relic of the past or a specialized skill for jazz musicians. Current education research and method books indicate that the art of improvising still maintains a practical function in piano instruction. Due to present-day performance etiquette, improvisation today is not an accepted performance art in the cultivated realm, but there certainly is a role for improvisation in pedagogy. The thinking skills, structural and harmonic knowledge, and self-expression gained from such activities are invaluable to the learning process and interpretation of piano literature.

As previously cited, the very nature of improvisation requires the performer's mind to think in several directions at one particular time, ranging from evaluating the previous phrase to planning the next one. It compels a student to think ahead and make musical choices about the improvisation. Robert Pace's concept of "thinking in motion" is that necessary skill developed by improvisation to provide the ideal preparation for performance.[47]

The creativity of children can be tapped at an early age by introducing improvisation as "play time." As seen earlier in this paper, Richard Addison's observation of "learn-through-play"

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[47] See page 9 for the discussion of "thinking in motion."

places a new perspective on the application of improvisation.[48] The idea that children learn about their world through self-discovery relates to their ability to learn about music by improvising. Improvisation then serves as a display of students' musical knowledge and proficiency, as the improvisations will demonstrate the skills and concepts they fully comprehend. Their understandings of rhythm, pulse, keyboard geography, form, and ultimately, musical style will be evident in their improvisatory work.

The interpretation of cultivated literature is influenced by improvisation because the performer studies musical form when experimenting with it during improvisation. The process of improvisation often begins with the imitation of sounds, musical phrases, or previously heard styles. The Q/A exercises provide a structural foundation to imitate similar phrases found in advanced literature, as well as listening skills. When a student "answers" a "question," she must first identify the musical qualities (melodic direction, rhythm, and harmonic direction) of that question in order to understand how to correctly give a different answer phrase. Q/A exercises also incorporate phrase shaping in a musical manner, which immediately transfers to all literature.

The improviser also learns about the structure of harmonies and how they influence a melodic line. Learning how to fill a melodic line, ornament a melody, and alter the rhythm builds the musical vocabulary of any musician. For good technique, a musician practices scales on a daily basis for their technical value as well as their harmonic value. Scales familiarize a musician with specific keys and keyboard geography, but are also found in their various forms within composed literature. In the same way that scales are useful on both levels (educational and practical), improvisatory exercises - such as the small fills seen in the Mozart analysis - acquaint a musician with the seemingly insignificant elements in a piece. The music suddenly

[48] See page 13 for further discussion.

gains a new meaning through improvisation. For example, once a student or performer recognizes a Q/A phrase, they at once understand how to shape the phrase. If a fill (or any other part of improvisation) is present, the student perceives it as a valuable part of the line instead of just extra notes or challenging rhythms.

Finally, improvisation exercises connect the performer to music in a personally expressive way. Composed music, having been fixed through notation, allows personal interpretation within certain parameters of dynamics, tempo, articulation, and phrasing. With improvisation however, the possibilities to communicate an emotion or idea are endless; this outlet is a vital part of musical growth, as expressiveness is not a concept easily taught. Communication is crucial to any musician's performance, and improvisation allows the musician to focus "in the moment" with few or no demands on perfection. With these consequences in mind, improvisation is clearly more beneficial than just a creative diversion for talented students; it is far-reaching and advantageous to all ages and ability levels, and should be re-evaluated as an integral skill for the developing musician.

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