TEACHING IMPROVISATION TO INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED PIANO STUDENTS

by

BENJAMIN TURK

(Under the Direction of Martha Thomas and Peter Jutras)

ABSTRACT

Improvisation was an important skill for accomplished keyboardists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. J.S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt are just some of the great composers who were known to improvise either informally or in a formal setting on the concert stage. As the nineteenth century turned to the twentieth, the priority on specialization created a separation between the composer and the performer. Improvisation, the perfect combination of composing and performing, was left out and mostly forgotten.

This study is aimed to give teachers the tools to teach improvisation to their students. The document is in three parts. First, exercises in improvisational practice are explained. These exercises are applicable to both intermediate and advanced piano students. Second, methods for using intermediate repertoire for improvisational practice are explained. Third, examples are given to show how advanced repertoire can be used for improvisational practice. No prior experience in improvisation is necessary for any of the methods in this study. Learning to improvise has many benefits and is a valuable tool for any aspiring musician.

INDEX WORDS: Classical piano improvisation, Teaching improvisation, Nineteenth Century improvisation, Piano Pedagogy, Romantic piano improvisation.

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to God, my wife, and my parents

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First and foremost, I thank my heavenly Father, through whom all things are possible, and who has blessed me with a gift for music. To my parents, Greg and Grace, who have given me every opportunity to do what I love. Even through years when I did the minimum, they always gave the maximum in supporting me spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and financially. The opportunities they have given me and the example they set has brought me to this point and will continue to drive my pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and caring for others. To my wife, Yumemi, who has enriched my life with joy and purpose. As I have worked on this project, she has worked even harder in managing our business, putting my needs before her own, and bringing happiness to our home every day. To Chris and Katie, who have always showed me great love and support.

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My dear friends of the Catalina Philharmonic, for the thoughtful conversations and inspiring expeditions to some of the most beautiful places on Earth.

To all these people, I offer my sincere gratitude for their profound effect on my life.

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Improvisation was an important skill for accomplished keyboardists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. J.S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt are just some of the great composers who were known to improvise either informally or in a formal setting on the concert stage.[1] As the nineteenth century turned to the twentieth, specialization was prioritized, creating a separation between the composer and the performer.[2] Improvisation, the perfect combination of composing and performing, was left out and mostly forgotten. The skill did become very important in the world of jazz, but classical musicians have since prioritized technical facility and expanding their repertoire.[3]

Focusing more time on technical exercises allows pianists to become even more capable technicians, but it is at a cost. If a pianist is to be considered an artist, I believe that there should be some time spent creating something truly original - even if only in private. The separation between the performer and the composition is large if there is nothing to bridge the gap between the performer and the mind of the composer. For college students majoring in classical music, many hours are spent learning music theory and music history to gain an understanding of the music that they perform. Improvisation is another valuable tool that helps to connect performers

[1] Kevin Daniel Woosley, "The Lost Art of Improvisation: Teaching Improvisation to Classical Pianists" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama, 2012), 4-7.
[2] Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond, *Improvisation at the Piano*, (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co, 2007), vi.
[3] Yawen Eunice Chyu, "Teaching Improvisation to Piano Students of Elementary to Intermediate Levels" (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 2004), 1-2.

to their repertoire and integrate their music studies with their performance skills. Nicole Brockmann, in her book about improvisational games, says that "Building skills in improvisation will change the way a student thinks about and interacts with music for the rest of their lives."[4]

A historical look at classical improvisation will always be limited by its nature. Improvised music is rarely written down; thus, it is difficult to know exactly what was done and how it evolved over the centuries. Nonetheless, there are some examples that give us an indication of a composer's improvisational style. Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms are just a few composers who wrote out cadenzas for their own piano concertos. (Beethoven and Brahms also wrote cadenzas for several Mozart piano concertos). However, examples like these do not sufficiently show us what improvisation was really like in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To begin a concert, it was expected that the musician would perform an improvised prelude, setting the stage for the upcoming pre-composed works.[5] Even epic programs, such as Beethoven's 1808 *Akademie,* where he debuted his fifth and sixth symphonies (among other large works), were not without improvisation at the piano. According to eighteenth century writers, Mozart's primary skill was considered to be improvisation, followed by his skills as a pianist and composer.[6]

Carl Czerny, one of the most important pedagogues of the nineteenth century, wrote two volumes of short exercises and pieces (Op. 200 and Op. 300) dedicated to teaching the art of improvisation at the piano. The teachings of Czerny helped to develop his famous pupil, Franz Liszt, who would become one of the most celebrated improvisers of all time. Though Liszt

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[4] Nicole M. Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound: Improvisational Games for Classical Musicians,* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), vii.
[5] Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 101.
[6] Robert Levin, "Improvising Mozart," in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society,* ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 143.

continued the tradition of improvisation to a great extent, he and many pianists that followed also transitioned to practices that have led to the decline in the art. Increasing demand for new levels of virtuosity, the standardization of the formal piano recital, the standardization of the "canon," and the increasing specialization of composer and performer are all possible reasons for this decline in improvisation. Interestingly, around the same time of this decline was the rise of jazz, a style of music built on improvisation.

On the topic of improvisation at the piano, it is clearly jazz that overshadows the world of classical music. However, though the art of classical improvisation is extremely rare in today's formal concert settings, it is not nonexistent.[7] Robert Levin (b. 1947) is an American classical pianist, composer, and musicologist who is known for his improvisations in the style of Mozart. He sometimes includes lectures within these performances, which may include a Mozart piano concerto with an improvised cadenza, or a free fantasy with classical themes given by the audience.

Gabriela Montero (b. 1970), a Venezuelan pianist, is primarily known for her improvisations in concert. Montero often conducts her improvisations by having an audience member sing a tune of their choice. The chosen melody might even be something she has never heard before, but she improvises on it nonetheless. Montero's improvisational style is often associated with composers such as Prokofiev and Ginastera but also draws on nineteenth century Romantic styles and Baroque textures. Her professional career as a concert pianist did not begin with improvisations in concert, but renowned pianist Martha Argerich once heard her in private and encouraged her to share her gift with the public.[8]

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[7] Phil Best, "What Happened to Improvisation in Classical Piano Music," *The Cross-Eyed Pianist*, accessed August 29, 2019. https://crosseyedpianist.com/2018/08/06/what-happened-to-improvisation-in-classical-piano-music/.
[8] Vivien Schweitzer, "One Pianist is Improvising the Revival of a Lost Art," *The New York Times*, accessed August 29, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/25/arts/music/25mont.html.

A pianist of the younger generation known for his improvisations is Charlie Albright (b. 1992). Albright asks the audience for contributions to the melodic material he will use, usually by having three or four members each call out a note. The three or four notes then become the basis for the theme he will improvise on. The improvisations are usually in a late-Romantic style resembling Liszt, Rachmaninoff, and early Scriabin. Albright, like Levin and Montero, prefaces his improvisations by speaking to the audience. This is a key skill for any performer, and the practice of improvisation could help lead to breaking down insecurities one might have in a performance setting.

Review of Literature

When researching the topic of piano improvisation, one is certain to encounter a sea of literature on jazz improvisation. Jazz is a style based on improvisation, and so pianists who are interested in improvisation will often gravitate to jazz study, even if their initial interest was not in jazz. The book "A Classical Approach to Jazz Piano Improvisation"[9] by Dominic Alldis is a resource for classical musicians who are looking to improvise in jazz styles.

For classical improvisation, there are two books and one book series which I consider to be helpful to anyone interested in the topic. *Improvisation at the Piano: A Systematic Approach for the Classically Trained Pianist,* co-authored by Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond,[10] is the most closely related to the scope of this paper. The general approach is to take a classical work, analyze the tonality and the harmonic structure, and find ways to improvise over that structure.

[9] Dominic Alldis, *A Classical Approach to Jazz Piano Improvisation,* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2003).
[10] Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond, *Improvisation at the Piano,* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co, 2007).

In Misha V. Stefanuk's *Improvisation Step by Step,*[11] each of the first ten chapters begin with a fundamental concept presented in sixteen-measure segments. Each page then presents those sixteen measures with modifications that increase in complexity and interest. There are many good concepts, though the results are not musically very pleasing. The book series *Chord Play* by Forrest Kinney[12] presents a step by step process in arranging tunes with various accompaniment patterns and styles. The series ranges from book one where basic chord progressions are explored in styles such as Classical and Ragtime, to book five where more complex harmonies such as ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords are used to create more advanced arrangements.

The place of improvisation in the history of classical music is discussed in several different sources. Kenneth Hamilton's book, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance,*[13] focuses on the culture of the nineteenth-century piano recital. The basic premise emphasizes that today's recital looks back on the days of great performers such as Liszt as being in the "Golden Age" of performance, yet our traditions have lost touch with what really went on in that time. Hamilton writes about how our obsession over the score and executing it perfectly is counter to what pianists and audiences prioritized in that day. He also notes that the concert evening was more natural and fluid, with room for improvisation along the way.

Valerie Woodring Goertzen's article, "By Way of Introduction: Preluding by 18th- and Early 19th-Century Pianists,"[14] documents some of the history in performing an improvised

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[11] Misha V. Stefanuk, *Improvisation Step by Step: Improvising Classical Music on the Piano,* (Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, 2008).
[12] Forrest Kinney, *Chord Play: The Art of Arranging at the Piano,* (Toronto: RCM Publishing, 2012).
[13] Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[14] Valerie Woodring Goertzen, "By Way of Introduction: Preluding by 18th- and Early 19th-Century Pianists," *The Journal of Musicology* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1996), 300-302.

prelude before a substantial piece. The prelude was used to set the tone for a larger work. The performer who was improvising the prelude would be able to tailor that improvisation for that audience, at that time, in that space, and on that instrument. The author notes that documentation of these improvisations is sparse, as they were only written about when something truly noteworthy happened and, even then, there are no specifics on the musical details of such improvisations. Given that, we must look to composed preludes for hints as to what they might have been like.

One final resource focused on the history of improvisation is John Robert Duke's dissertation, "Teaching Musical Improvisation: A Study of Eighteenth and Twentieth Century Methods."[15] This study documents how improvisation was taught in the past and in the present. Past composers studied by Duke include Johann Quantz, C.P.E. Bach, Giuseppe Tartini, and Leopold Mozart.

A study on improvisation, "The Improvisational State of Mind: A Multidisciplinary Study of an Improvisatory Approach to Classical Music Repertoire Performance"[16] authored by David Dolan, Henrik J. Jensen, Pedro A. M. Mediano, Miguel Molina-Solana, Hardik Rajpal, Fernando Rosas, and John A. Sloboda, intended to quantify the effects of improvised performance on both listeners and the performers. Audience members (some with musical backgrounds, and some without) were fitted with EEG sensors to chart brain activity for two different performances of the same piece ("The Shepherd on the Rock," D. 965 by Schubert). One performance presented the music as written by the composer and the other was done with

[15] John Robert Duke, "Teaching Musical Improvisation: A Study of Eighteenth and Twentieth Century Methods" (Doctoral dissertation, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1972).
[16] David Dolan, Henrik J. Jensen, Pedro A. M. Mediano, Miguel Molina-Solana, Hardik Rajpal, Fernando Rosas, John A. Sloboda. "The Improvisational State of Mind: A Multidisciplinary Study of an Improvisatory Approach to Classical Music Repertoire Performance" *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018). https://doaj.org/article/f7b6f1263b084fe5b437f19a592ff0a2 (accessed March 2, 2019).

improvisation added by the musicians. The results showed increased brain activity for the improvised version. The audience members were also interviewed and felt that the improvised version was more engaging.

Two dissertations focus on teaching improvisation. "The Lost Art of Improvisation: Teaching Improvisation to Classical Pianists" by Kevin Daniel Woosley[17] is more of a general overview of techniques in improvising. Topics include rhythmic and melodic embellishment, chord progressions, pairing melodies with chords and chords with melodies, accompaniment styles, transposition, and modulation. Although there is not much detail on how to approach these topics, there is some useful information. Yawen Eunice Chyu's dissertation, "Teaching Improvisation to Piano Students of Elementary to Intermediate Levels,"[18] is aimed at helping students at the elementary to intermediate levels. The scope here is also quite large, with significant portions devoted to jazz, various modes, and 12-tone rows. One section includes ideas on how to improvise with specific pieces from the intermediate repertoire and is useful for the purposes of this document.

Finally, no discussion on keyboard improvisation would be complete without mentioning C.P.E. Bach's *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments.*[19] This famous essay reserves its final chapter for a discussion on improvisation. Bach gives his instruction on improvising in the form of the free fantasia, which is an unmeasured musical form. Unmeasured improvisation is a great way to take pressure off the musician, allowing them to play at their own pace, instead of being locked into a specific meter and tempo.

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[17] Kevin Daniel Woosley, "The Lost Art of Improvisation: Teaching Improvisation to Classical Pianists" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama, 2012).
[18] Yawen Eunice Chyu, "Teaching Improvisation to Piano Students of Elementary to Intermediate Levels" (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 2004).
[19] C.P.E. Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments,* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1949).

Of these resources, none of them have as their primary focus the teaching of improvisation skills using repertoire as material. *Improvisation at the Piano* by Chung and Thurmond[20] uses this process to some extent, but its focus is on building techniques rather than the steps a teacher can take to make a students' repertoire ready for improvisation. The scope of this document is unique in that it gives teachers and students the tools to improvise with the vast repertoire of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

[20] Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond, *Improvisation at the Piano,* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co, 2007).

CHAPTER 2

TEACHING IMPROVISATION SKILLS USING EXERCISES

When introducing improvisation to students at any level, it is very important to understand their skill set.[21] Be mindful of the skills they have had for a year, and what skills they just learned last week. When challenging students with the exercises presented in this paper, start with the scales and progressions that are familiar to them. Too many new additions at once can discourage students from the drive they need to practice these skills. If students have learned a piece in A-flat major and they are clearly uncomfortable handling keys with more than two sharps or flats, then that piece should be used for only the more conservative improvisatory exercises. If students are uncomfortable with quickly changing hand positions, then simply isolate the sections that remain in a common register for each hand. While introducing improvisation to students make every effort to focus on their strengths. First and foremost, students should feel excitement for something new, and not fear and frustration for something that so many avoid due to a lack of confidence.

If there is one word to keep in mind as the most important teaching tool for improvisation, that word is limitation.[22] Telling students to simply improvise with no limitations forces them to make too many decisions. This often leads to a result that is either messy or without any direction or structure. Many students will try to play too many notes, which can then lead to frantic playing and a dissatisfying result. However, if, for example students are instructed

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[21] Kevin Daniel Woosley, "The Lost Art of Improvisation: Teaching Improvisation to Classical Pianists" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama, 2012), 18.

[22] Nicole M. Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound: Improvisational Games for Classical Musicians*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 6.

to play only notes on beats one and four of each measure, they can focus on just that and will have a more manageable task at hand.

As with any task, it is often best started at an earlier stage, but more experienced students will also have some advantages. With these more advanced students, their sense of rhythm, harmony, melody, and phrasing has been established to some extent.[23] Older students have (hopefully) heard many of the great works of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, among others and can use those preconceptions of music to their advantage.

One reason that teachers tend to not include improvisation as a regular lesson activity is the perceived lack of available lesson time.[24] A weekly forty-five-minute lesson for an intermediate student or an hour lesson for an advanced student is just enough time to go through technical exercises and theory, work through some new repertoire, and polish musical ideas on learned pieces. However, if teachers can combine technique and theory work while improvising, these skills can be practiced and addressed in the lesson simultaneously. Just as practicing scales and chord progressions furthers both the students' technical capabilities and their knowledge of different keys and musical patterns, adding improvisation to the plan can make better use of lesson time and practice at home.

When teaching improvisation in the lesson, teachers are reminded that an explanation will be needed to make the assignment clear for the student. And, when first improvising over exercises involving scales and chords, there will initially be less development of technique due to the fact that the student is learning a new skill. On the other hand, standard practice of scales and

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[23] Scott McBride Smith, "Teaching the Advanced Student," in *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher,* 2nd ed., edited by Marienne Uszler, Stewart Gordon, and Scott McBride Smith (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2000), 150.

[24] Patricia Shehan Campbell, "Learning to Improvise Music, Improvising to Learn Music," in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society,* ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 133.

chords in all keys can become robotic and, when these elements are memorized by rote, students might neglect the intellectual comprehension of each key. Improvising with scales and chords reduces the potential reliance on rote by forcing the student to think through each key.[25]

The following is a series of exercises created to incorporate improvisational skills into the lesson. The first exercise focuses on scale work, the second on chord progressions, the third combines scales and chords, and the fourth focuses on playing melodies in harmony with each other.

Scales in Familiar Rhythms

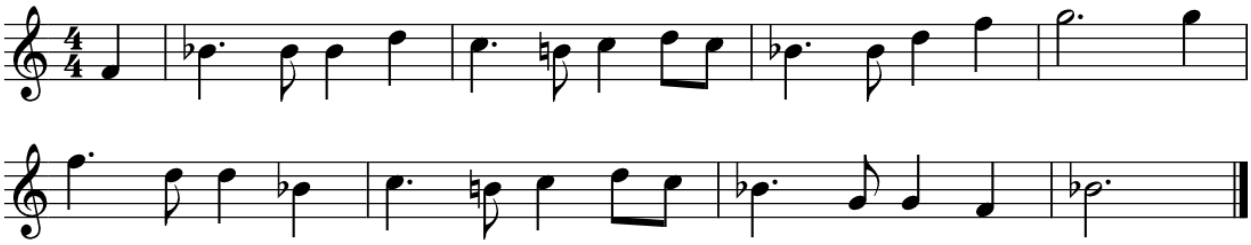
Scales can often be seen by students as a tedious exercise forced on them by their teachers. Introducing rhythmic variety can make scales feel more interesting and musically stimulating for students. Furthermore, assigning various rhythms during the lesson forces students to execute a new technical skill on the spot. This is somewhat akin to the reality of improvising during a concert, and it is a skill that improvisers cultivate.

For the first step in improvising, I will show how students can take a familiar tune and use the rhythm of that tune for their scale practice. This exercise may not make the most musical sense, but students can easily find it fun and interesting. First, choose a familiar tune that students know well. Next, find the number of notes or syllables that the first phrase requires and make sure that it is more than the notes of the scale. For these examples I will be using two octave scales ascending and descending. If it is not enough notes, the tune can either be repeated

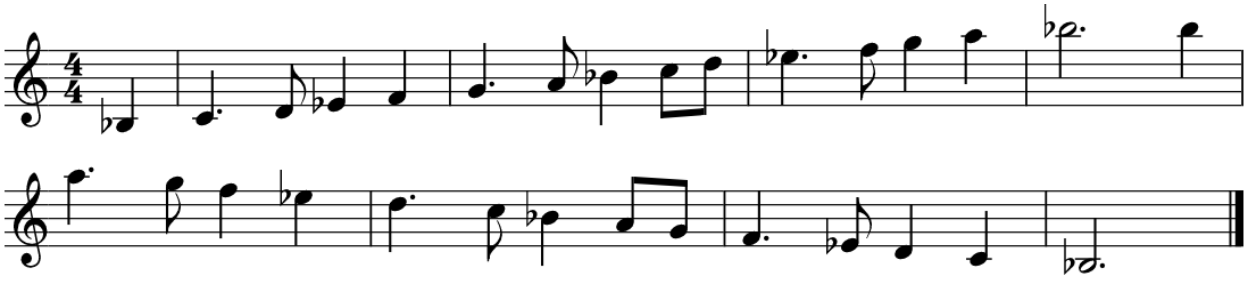
[25] Patricia Shehan Campbell, "Learning to Improvise Music, Improvising to Learn Music," in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society,* ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 134.

or the scale can be shortened to one octave instead of two. For a student's first effort the rhythm of the tune should be fairly straightforward.

I will show two example tunes: "Auld Lang Syne" and "You Are My Sunshine." Example 1 shows the original melody of "Auld Lang Syne." This is followed by Example 2 which is a B-flat major scale in two octaves in the rhythm of "Auld Lang Syne."



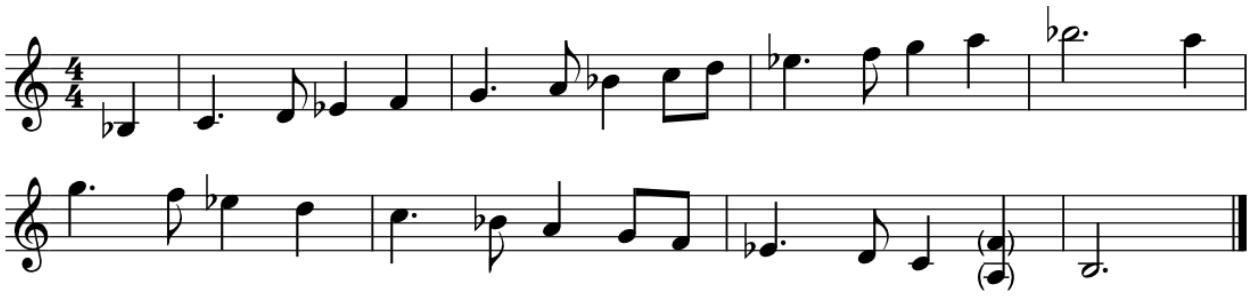
Example 1. “Auld Lang Syne” - Original melody



Example 2. B-flat major scale with the rhythm of “Auld Lang Syne”

In this example, the tonic is repeated at the top of the two-octave scale. A student may do this naturally, feeling that the meter of the rhythm warrants a restart of the tonic to mirror the beginning of the tune, with the tonic entering on the upbeat. This results in the rhythmic phrase and the two-octave scale ending simultaneously. However, it would be best to not instruct the student beforehand to replay the top note. Instead, allow the student to proceed by feel and focus

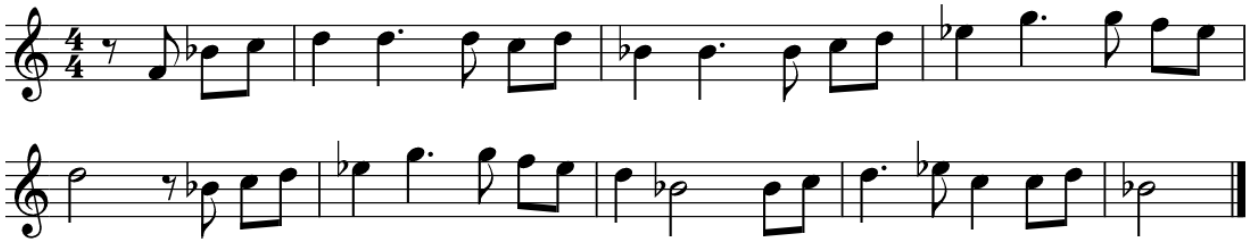
on executing the rhythm. Many students will then play the scale as they know it, without the tonic repeating at the top. This will in turn have the melody ending one note earlier than the scale. This resulting imbalance is the kind of occurrence that we need to welcome because it challenges students to conceive of their own remedy. Students might be able to devise a solution similar to Example 3 below.



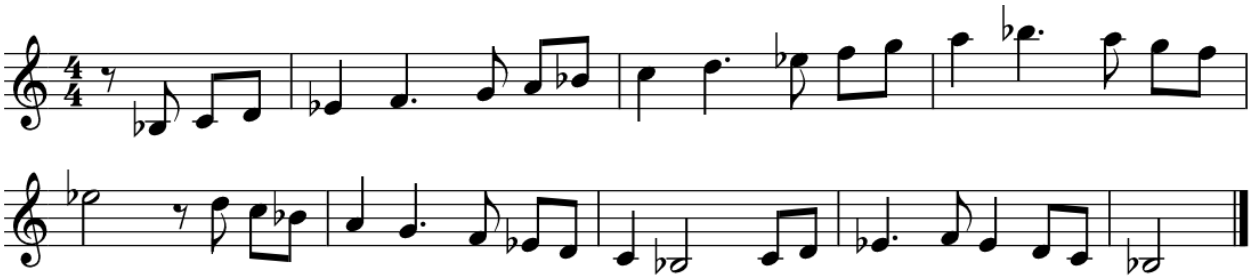
Example 3. “Auld Lang Syne” rhythm (without repeating top note)

With the scale ending and the rhythmic phrase needing an extra note, the student might simply play the tonic twice. Have the student try it a few times, encouraging a different ending each time. The example given has either the fifth or the seventh scale degrees as potential options to show the student.

For another look at how this exercise works we will use the rhythm of "You Are My Sunshine." Example 4 shows the theme with its original melody and Example 5 shows the B-flat major scale with the rhythm of "You Are My Sunshine."



Example 4. “You Are My Sunshine” - Original melody

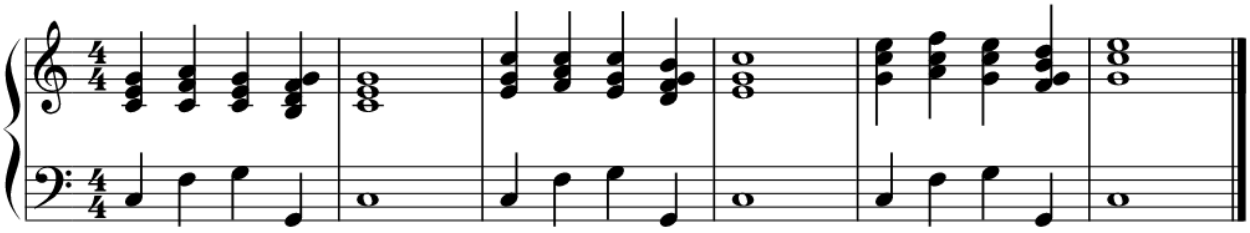


Example 5. B-flat major scale with the rhythm of “You Are My Sunshine”

As shown in Example 5, the scale descends to the tonic pitch, B-flat, then continues for another two measures. This is because the first phrase of this melody contains more syllables than "Auld Lang Syne." As a result, the scale will come to an end before the rhythm of the tune is finished. To prepare for this situation, students should be told that they will need to decide what to do in finishing the phrase. Encourage students to keep these “extra” notes within the scale, but to pay no regard to fingering once the two-octave scale pattern has finished. The only rules should be to stay in the key and to finish on the tonic. These extra tags can build a sense of timing for students, helping them to think ahead when closing out a phrase. This exercise should be done sequentially. First with one hand, then both hands in unison, then in tenths, and finally, in sixths.

Chord Progressions with Familiar Textures

Understanding chords and how they interact is fundamental in learning how to improvise on the piano.[26] Students should first be familiar with the most basic chord progressions in all keys. One of the most basic progressions is the I-IV-V^6_4-V^7-I, shown below (Example 6) in each inversion of the right hand.



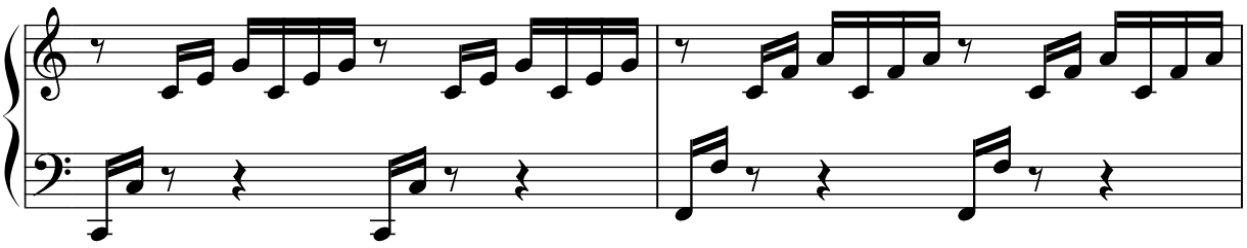
Example 6. Chord progression (I-IV-V^6_4-V^7-I) in each right-hand inversion

Playing progressions in all inversions is very important for students, as playing just one position can often lead to learning solely by rote. Students must know all the chords they are playing and be familiar with each of their inversions.

Once the student is secure in playing the above chord progression with the right hand in all of its inversions, the teacher can begin to develop the progression and increase the student's flexibility at the keyboard. The first step is to break up the chords into a pattern. We can introduce this sequentially for students by assigning something familiar with a repeating pattern of arpeggiations. An excellent example to use for this is J.S. Bach's Prelude in C major from Book One of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Example 7 below shows the progression played in the

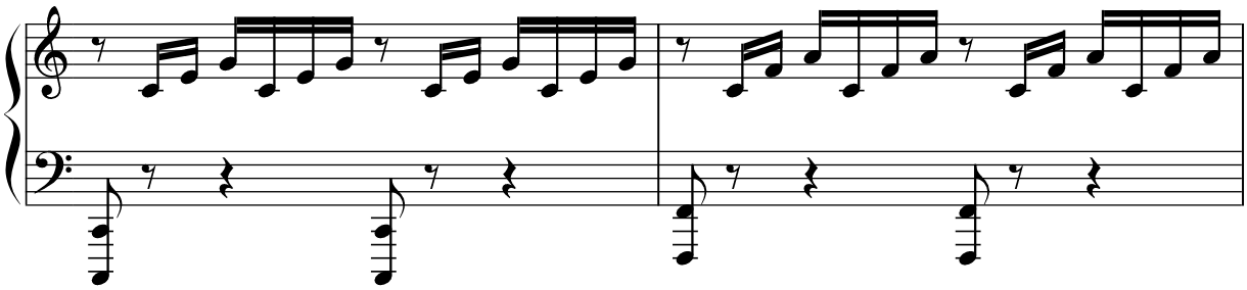
[26] Misha V. Stefanuk, *Improvisation Step by Step: Improvising Classical Music on the Piano,* (Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, 2008), 5.

same pattern as this prelude. This example can be tried with all types of progressions in all of their inversions.



Example 7. Chord progression (only I - IV shown) in the style of J.S. Bach's Prelude in C

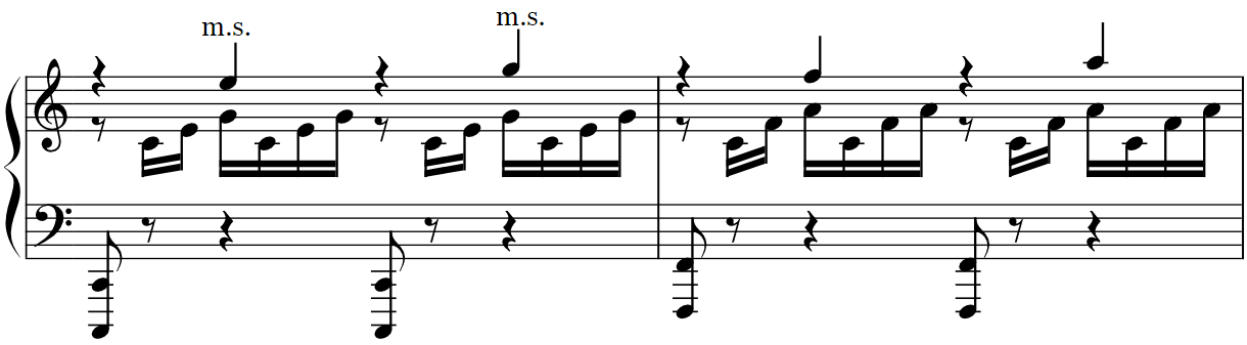
Once this has become comfortable for students, they can take steps to develop the texture further. There are many possibilities for making this passage more original for students. One idea is to make each left-hand bass note an eighth note octave instead of two separate sixteenth notes. This is shown in Example 8 below.



Example 8. Chord progression with downbeats in bass octaves

Now that the octaves in the bass are played simultaneously more time is allowed for the left hand to do something else. Instruct the student to reach over after each bass octave and play

any chord tone up above the right hand on beats two and four. Encourage the student to avoid using repeated notes on this top part once an appropriate comfort level has been reached. Example 9 demonstrates a possible outcome.



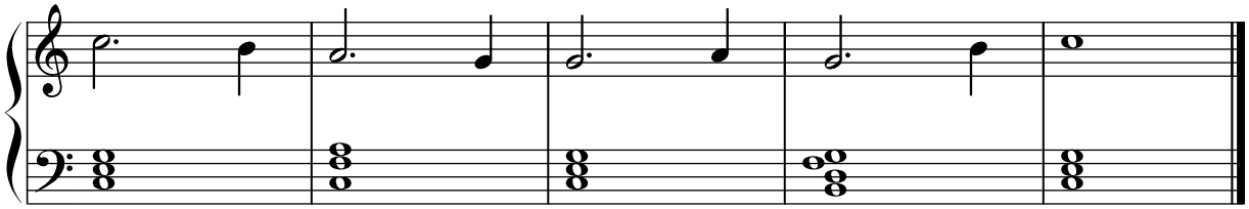
Example 9. Chord progression with left hand crossing over on beats two and four

Combining Scales and Chords

Possibly the greatest strength of the piano is the ability to play chords and melodies simultaneously. Playing chords and melodies together is also one of the most difficult skills to master. Once students are comfortable with the two previous exercises in multiple keys, they can begin combining the two.

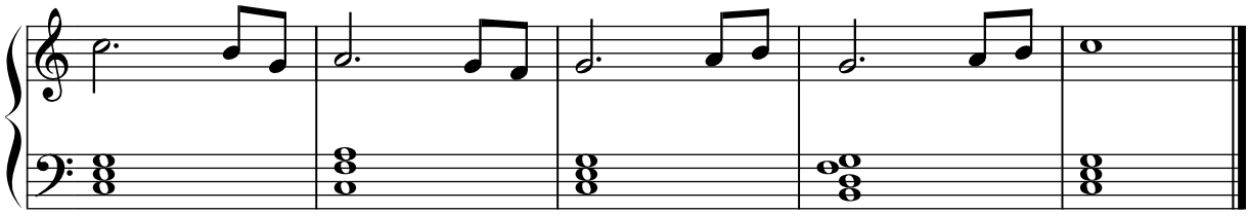
First, have the student play the chord progression (in this example we will again use the I-IV-V^6_4-V^7-I progression) a few times while the teacher improvises a melody. This will allow the student to become more comfortable with the progression in the left hand while also hearing examples of how the melody might be shaped. Next, have the student improvise a two-measure melody in the right hand alone while the teacher plays the progression. Finally, the student can attempt both the chords and melody together. To help students do this successfully, limitations should be set to ensure a high probability of success. As an example, the student can be given two simple rules for the right-hand melody. First, the student may only play a note on beats one

and four. Second, each downbeat of a measure must be a chord tone. Example 10 below illustrates a possible result.



Example 10. Chord progression (I-IV-V^6_4-V^7-I) with improvised melody

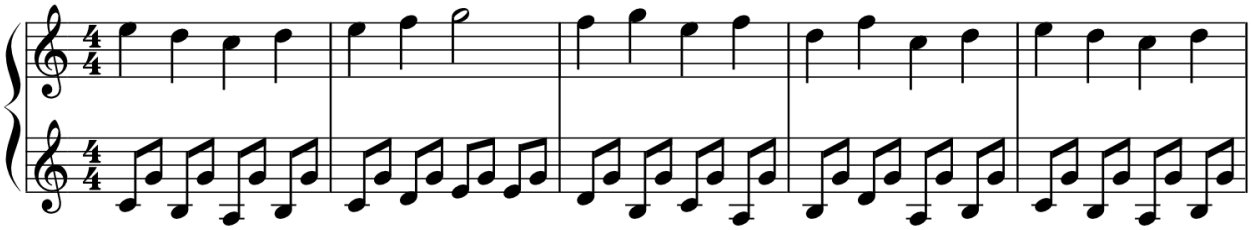
The result may not be the most impressive musical example, but as the limitations become less restrictive, the results will become more creative. The next step could be to have the fourth beat of each measure occupied by two eighth notes. This forces students to come up with more notes, while still giving three beats of space to plan their next move. Example 11 shows a similar improvisation to Example 10, but with eighth notes on the fourth beat of each measure.



Example 11. Chord progression and improvised melody with eighth notes

Parallel Motion in Sixths and Tenths with a Common Tone

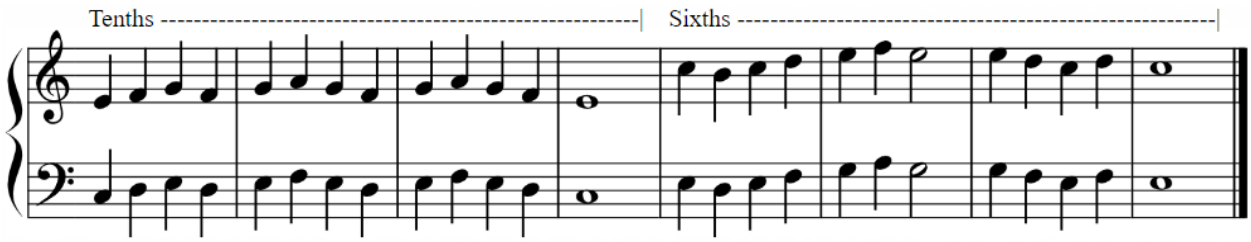
In piano music, we need to support the melody, bass, and harmony all at once. A common technique is to create parallel motion in sixths or in tenths (note that either the sixths or tenths may be spread by an extra octave) with a common tone held for the majority of the phrase length. It is essentially a prolonged tonic harmony, or dominant in some cases. This compositional tool was commonly used by composers such as Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms, among others. A clear example of parallel motion in sixths and tenths is found in Schumann's "Trällerliedchen," the third piece from *Album for the Young*, as shown in Example 12 below. Note that the sixths in this example are distanced by an additional octave.



Example 12. Schumann's "Trällerliedchen" from *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, mm. 1-5

This three-part texture can vary in many ways and create some very beautiful musical moments. Learning how to implement this technique with ease can open the door to a wide variety of directions in improvisation. First, direct students to improvise a melody in only tenths using almost exclusively stepwise motion. To begin, students should start with the tonic of the key in the left hand and the tenth (third scale degree) in the right, and finish in the same place. Next, have students try the same exercise, but in sixths. This should begin with the tonic in the

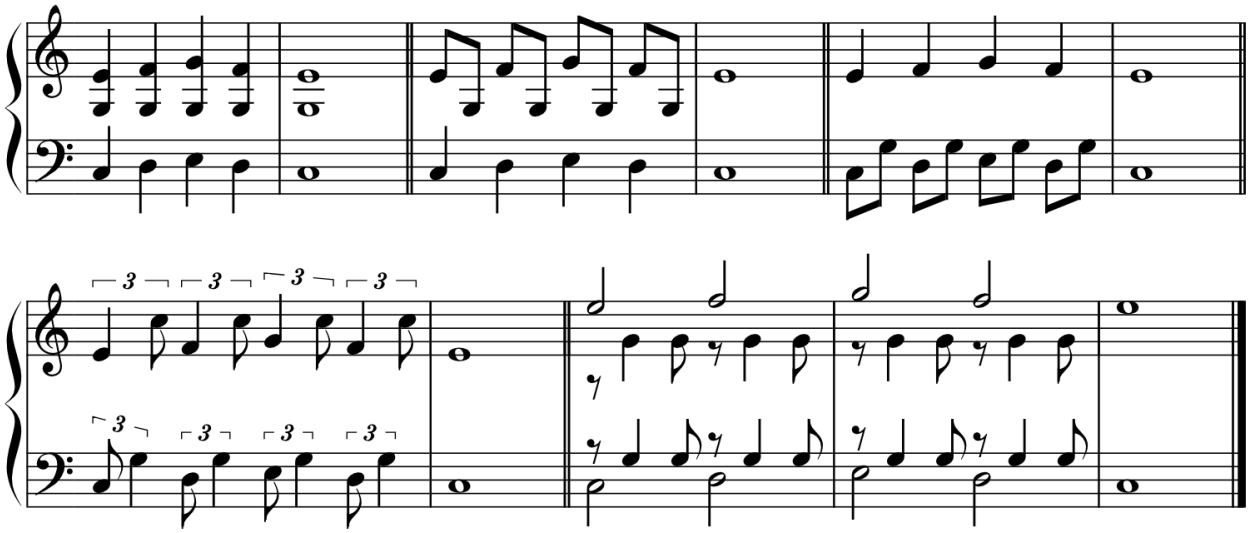
right hand and a sixth below (third scale degree) in the left. The result might be something like Example 13 shown below.



Example 13. Stepwise melody harmonized in tenths and sixths

Once students are comfortable playing stepwise sixths and tenths in parallel motion, the next step is to introduce the common tone. There is no one correct answer for which note should be the common tone, and this aspect can be a source of more discovery for the student. For our purposes, we will use the note that completes the major tonic chord implied by the initial harmony. The minor mode also works well with this technique, but playing in minor is somewhat more complicated because of the need to identify whether to use the harmonic or melodic minor scales. In the above example, we would then add a G to serve as the common tone. The G could be added in any octave and played by either hand, but the G in between the two moving lines will give the most pleasant voicing and will be the most reachable for either hand. In the example with the sixths, there are two possible G's to use. We could take the higher octave (G4) as it would allow the melody to extend upward without the bass melody interfering. The lower G (G3) would also work and might direct the melody more downwards instead. These are some of the decisions that are fluid and should not be treated as rules, but as different paths to creating a musical phrase. Students should spend at least a week, if not several weeks, learning

this technique in various keys and exploring some of the variants in texture. Once this stage is reached, students can begin to experiment with various styles and textures that are possible with this technique. Example 14 shows some of these options in intervals of tenths.



Example 14. Various textures of tenths with a common tone

These preliminary exercises are very accessible for students that are new to improvising. These exercises begin with specific instructions from the teacher and give students the opportunity to try countless variations without the pressure of improvising original material. Once students have gained proficiency with these exercises, they will be far better equipped to improvise with their repertoire.

CHAPTER 3

IMPROVISING ON INTERMEDIATE REPERTOIRE

Improvising can be done in a number of ways. The purest way to improvise would be to sit down at the piano and make up every note on the spot. However, improvisations are rarely done in this way. For instance, when improvising in most jazz settings the musicians will know the key, chord progression, rhythmic figures, and form of the piece they will use for the improvisation. If many of those same components are not decided on beforehand for a classical improviser, the options can become overwhelming. To avoid any overwhelming experiences for a beginning improviser, select previously composed repertoire. Doing this brings a level of comfort and familiarity for a student who is venturing into a new area of study. The idea of using material from an existing composition for use in improvisation is not a new concept and was employed by great composers such as Mozart.[27] Building on a solid foundation of great writing is an excellent way for students to discover what they are capable of.

Any piece can work for the purposes of exploring improvisational techniques with our students. However, keep in mind that certain repertoire will be more accessible while other material will be more difficult to develop. The first idea to consider is that fast tempos are to be avoided for new improvisers. Students will need to take time to process their next move, and a fast tempo piece will require students who are more experienced in improvisation. The second is that difficult rhythms are to be avoided. Rhythm is a central part of all music, but when focusing on a new skill, simply maintaining a steady beat can be difficult enough. The third and final

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[27] Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond, *Improvisation at the Piano,* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Co, 2007), 81.

aspect to avoid when choosing a section to work from is chromaticism. While much of it can be removed to create simplicity, chromaticism may also make the section much more foreign to students, which in turn can cause students to feel overwhelmed by all of the changes.

The process of improvising with repertoire begins after the piece has been fully learned and the student is comfortable enough to make a few changes in a single lesson. Simple musical alterations such as voicing a bass line or a secondary melodic line are great ways to not only increase musicality, but also to gain flexibility in real time adjustments.

This chapter will explain the process of first simplifying a piece in preparation for improvisation and will then explain how to direct students in their attempt to improvise over the given material. Three pieces will be discussed: Mozart's Sonata in C Major, K. 545, 1st movement; Schumann's, "Melodie" from *Album for the Young*, Op. 68; and Chopin's Waltz in A Minor, Op. Posthumous.

A complete composition can be difficult to improvise with in its original form. The composer wrote the composition as a fully formed piece, with no intention of leaving room for improvisation. (Inserting additional ornamental embellishments, which in itself is excellent improvisational practice, will not be addressed in this paper due to the abundance of resources available on the topic).[28, 29] Therefore, if we expect students to use that work to explore their own ideas, it is usually necessary to make changes to the original that allow students both the physical and the mental space needed to attempt any improvisation. Teachers should consider how to simplify passages while making sure the changes are not too difficult for the student.

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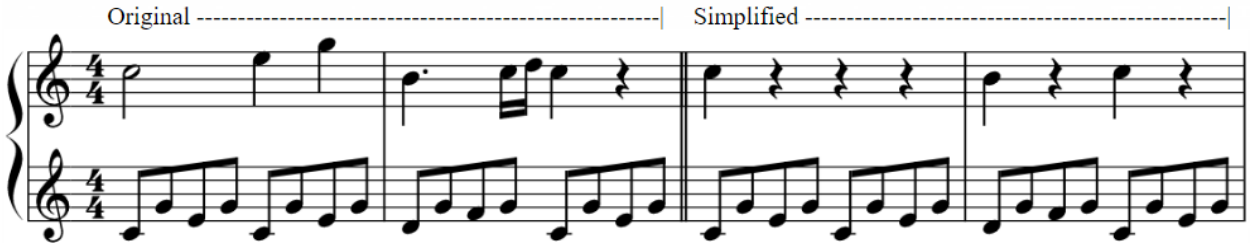
[28] C.P.E. Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments,* ed. and trans. William J Mitchell (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1949), 79-146.

[29] Daniel Gottlob Türk, *School of Clavier Playing,* trans. Raymond H. Haggh (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 191-318.

Any changes will be foreign to the student at first, but none of them should take a student more than about five minutes to learn. A piece that needs three or four changes to sufficiently simplify the material will often require the student to spend about five minutes a day for one week before the adjustments come naturally. When preparing the lesson for such a project, it is a good idea to either make one or two copies of the original piece so that markings can be made. However, it is best to keep markings to a minimum, as a heavily marked score can become confusing for a student. The student should be learning these techniques by doing much more than seeing.

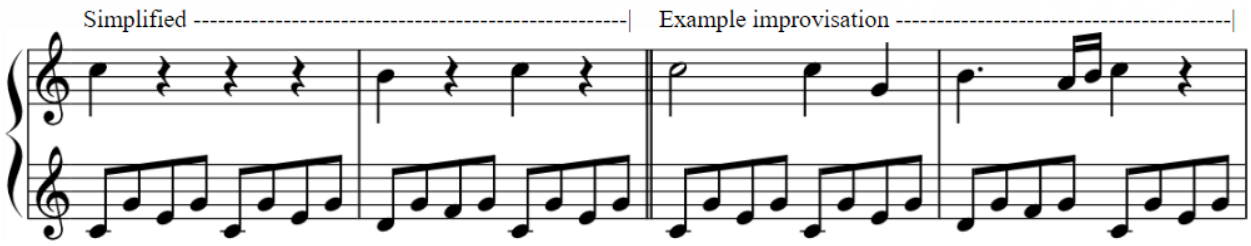
Mozart: Sonata in C Major, K 545, 1st movement

There are several tactics that can be implemented to simplify and create space for improvisation within a phrase. In a phrase with a simple alberti bass pattern in the left hand, it can be as simple as removing a majority of the right-hand notes, with nothing altered in the left hand. A well-known example of this would be the opening of Mozart's Sonata in C Major, K. 545. Example 15 below shows the first two measures of the original followed by the same two measures with all but three notes removed from the right-hand melody for improvisational space. All the right-hand notes could have been removed, but that would likely leave too much freedom for the student. This limitation as seen in Example 15 ensures that the student will give the beginning of each harmonic change an appropriate note in the melody.



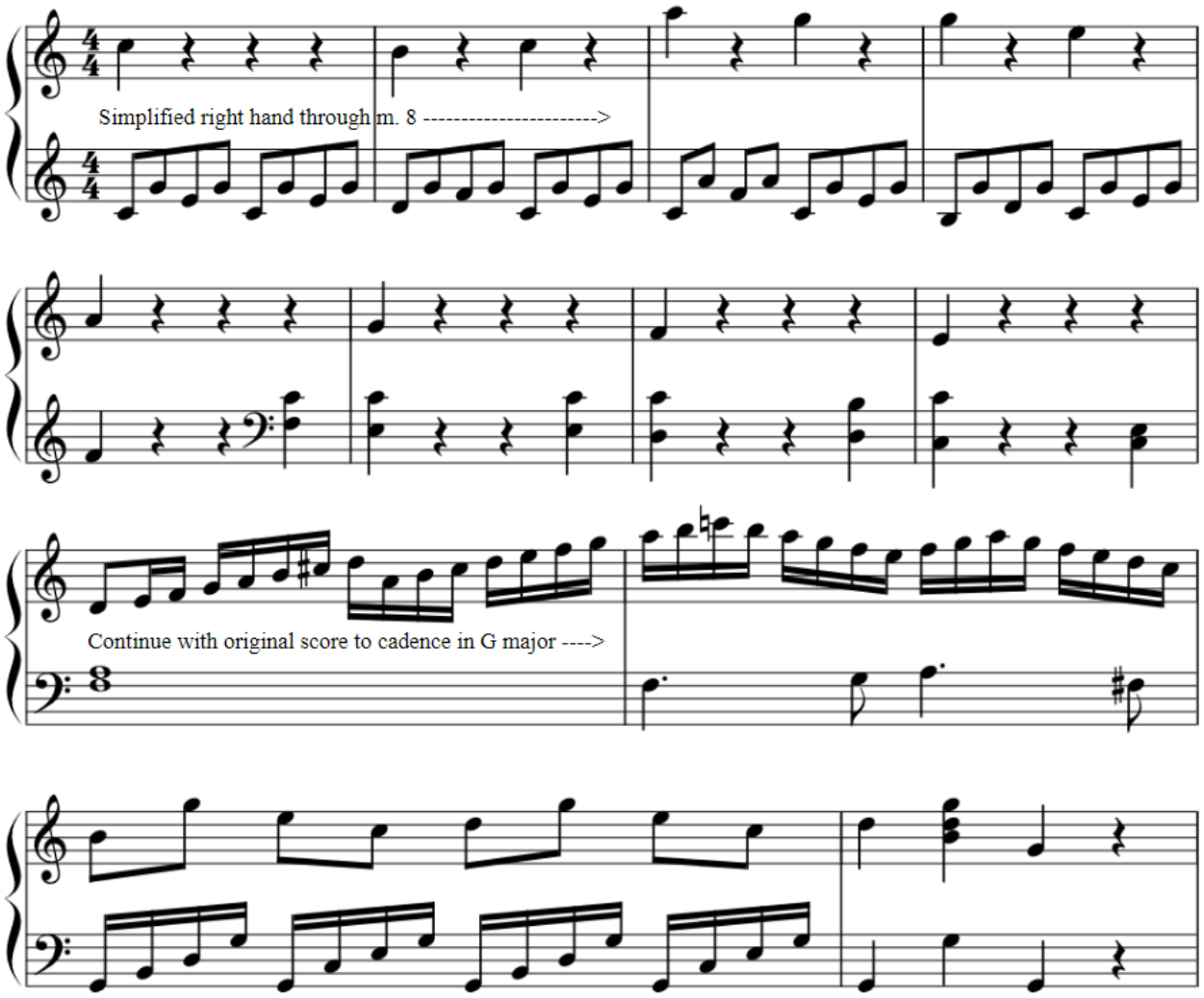
Example 15. Mozart: Sonata in C, K. 545, 1st movement, mm. 1-2, original and simplified

As stated earlier, strict limitations can help students feel more comfortable and actually give them more freedom in their improvisation. A good limitation to put on this example is to have students play the improvised part in the same rhythm as the original. A secondary limitation might be that the third and fourth beats of the right-hand in the first measure must be played with tonic chord tones only (just as Mozart did). Before students attempts their miniature improvisation, they should first sit silently and plan ahead. This can help students start with a fingering that will make sense and give them a higher probability of success. Example 16 shows the simplified version followed by a possible improvisation. In using such a short phrase, this should be continued to the point where students can play two or more times through on repeat, each time with a different option.

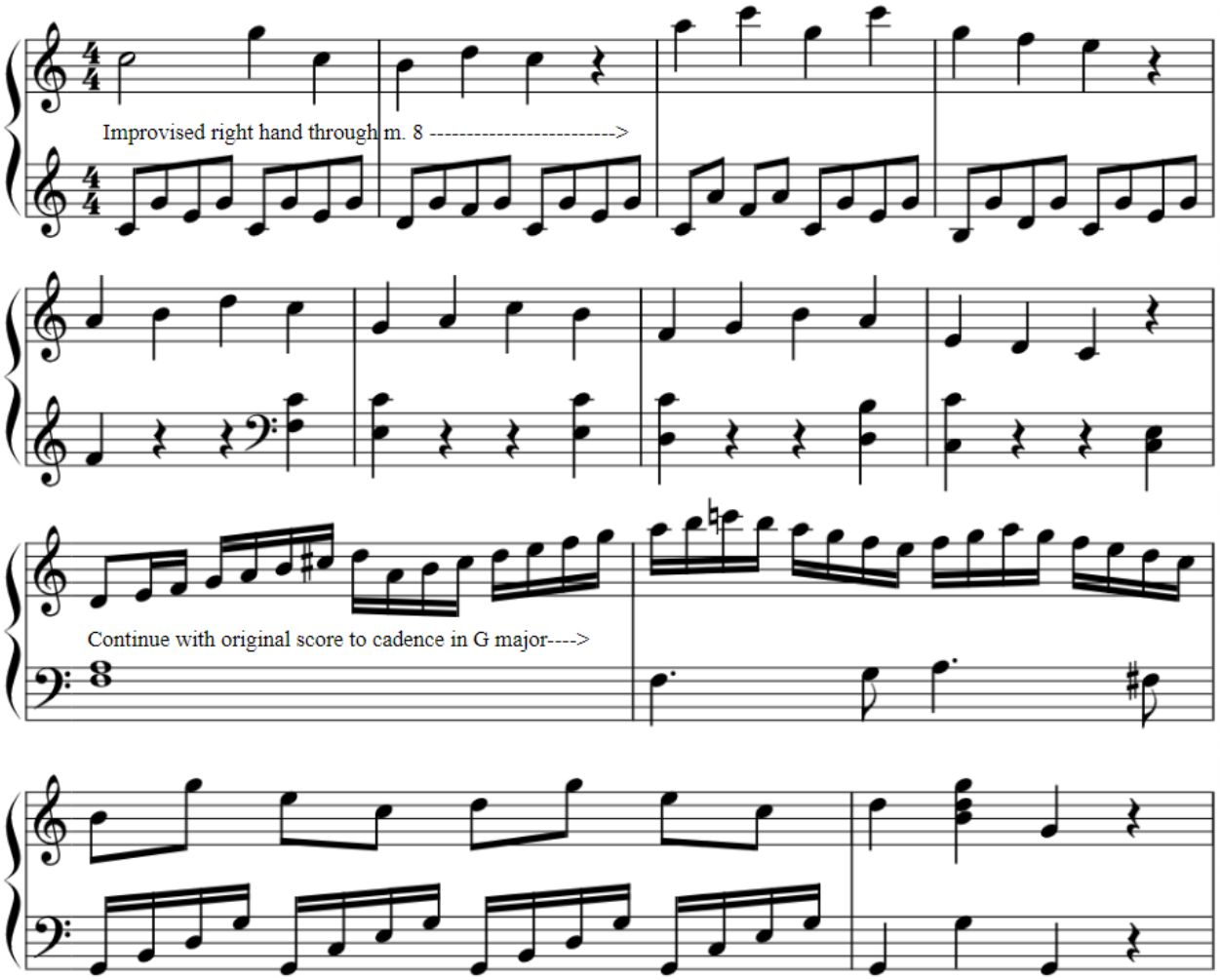


Example 16. Mozart: Sonata in C, mm. 1-2, simplified and example improvisation

Example 16 above is only two measures in length, but to achieve a more satisfying result, these tactics should be applied to a longer phrase. Continue to remove decorative right-hand notes in measures 1-8, leaving only the first melody note of each new harmony. When arriving at measure five, students should be limited to quarter notes at first and then to eighth notes (as some students may want to imitate the original with sixteenth notes). After measure eight, students can continue with the original score to measure 12 where the phrase ends in a half cadence. This gives the phrase a satisfying finish without too much improvisation to overwhelm the student. Below are two examples. Example 17 displays the phrase with the first eight measures prepared for improvisation. Example 18 shows what an improvisation of the phrase might look like.



Example 17. Mozart: Sonata in C, mm. 1-12 (mm. 1-8 simplified, mm. 9-12 original)



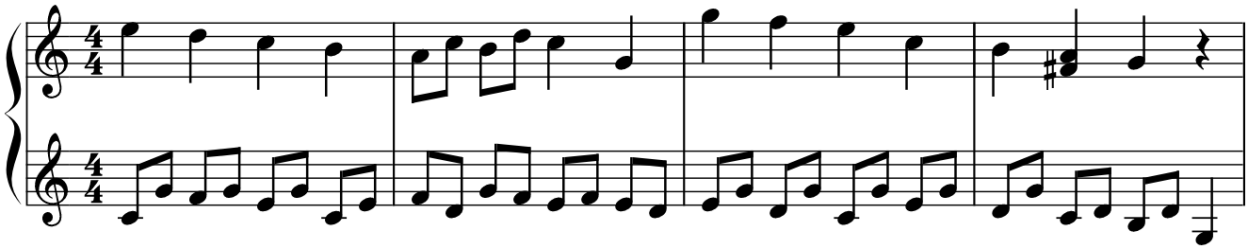
Example 18. Mozart: Sonata in C, mm. 1-12 (mm. 1-8 improvised, mm. 9-12 original)

Schumann: "Melodie" from *Album for the Young*, Op 68

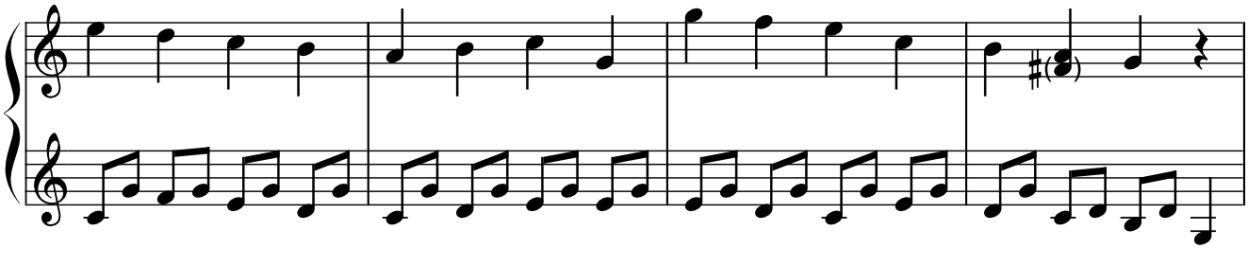
The minor adjustments needed in simplifying the Mozart example make it a great choice for a student's first attempt at improvising over existing repertoire. But, most phrases will require more preparation before being fully ready for improvisation. Compared to the Mozart example above, Schumann's "Melodie" from *Album for the Young*, Op 68 has an added level of difficulty in its opening phrase because the left hand employs a secondary melodic line. Although secondary melodic lines are typically removed when simplifying a phrase for improvisation, this

particular left-hand melodic line can remain precisely because of the parallel motion with that of the right hand.

There are three aspects of these first four measures that do need to be adjusted for simplification. First, the left-hand G's that appear on the second eighth-note of most beats should be changed to the second eighth-note of every beat for measures 1-3 (see example 20). In measure 4, the left hand can be left alone to avoid any overlap with the right hand. Second, the parallel motion that takes place between the right- and left-hand melodies should be kept as a pattern throughout. The third and final simplification will be to remove the eighth notes in the right hand, keeping only the notes that fall on each beat. These three changes would result in the four measures shown in Example 20.

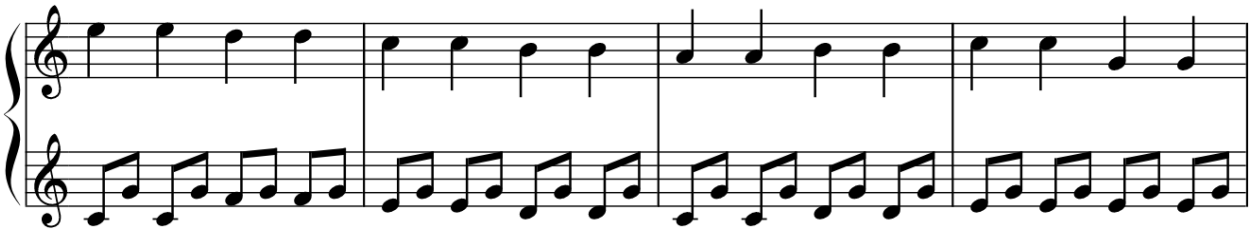


Example 19. Schumann: “Melodie” from *Album for the Young*, Op. 68, mm. 1-4, original



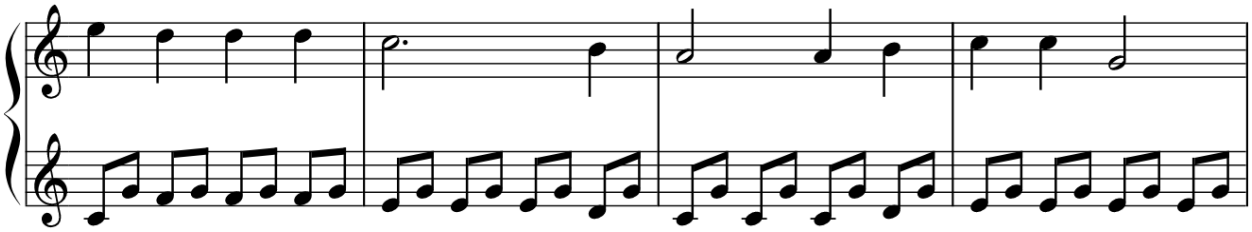
Example 20. Schumann: “Melodie” after simplifications of both hands

Because of the similar motion between the two hands, it is not necessary to remove the right-hand melody, since any new improvised melody would be difficult to combine harmonically with the left hand. There are multiple ways to approach this situation. One way to approach this phrase is to have the student repeat the notes of each beat four times before moving to the next, then three repetitions, and then two. Example 21 shows what two repetitions of each beat would look like. Keep in mind that due to the expansion of the melodic line, the example only shows the first two measures expanded to four measures.



Example 21. Schumann: “Melodie,” mm. 1-2 expanded into four measures after repetitions

Next, have the student try two repetitions of each beat again, but this time with each right-hand note held for two beats while the left hand continues as in the example above. Combine these two versions in a predictable pattern, with the right hand alternating between quarter notes and half notes. Once this is mastered, students are ready to improvise their own version of the phrase. Keeping the melodic line in its original order, students can choose to repeat a beat multiple times or not repeat it at all. Students also have the option of holding the right hand note or repeating it with the left. Encourage students to keep their eyes on the score if they are comfortable with not looking at their hands. The score can be a helpful roadmap for where they need to be next. Example 22 below illustrates how this might be realized.

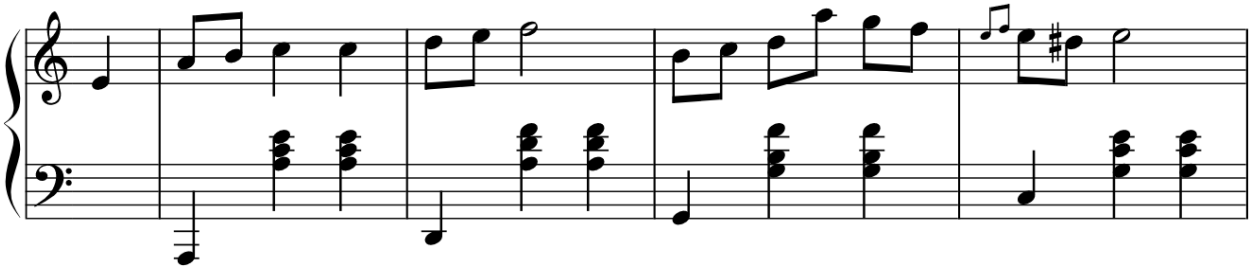


Example 22. Schumann: “Melodie,” mm. 1-2, expanded with repetitions

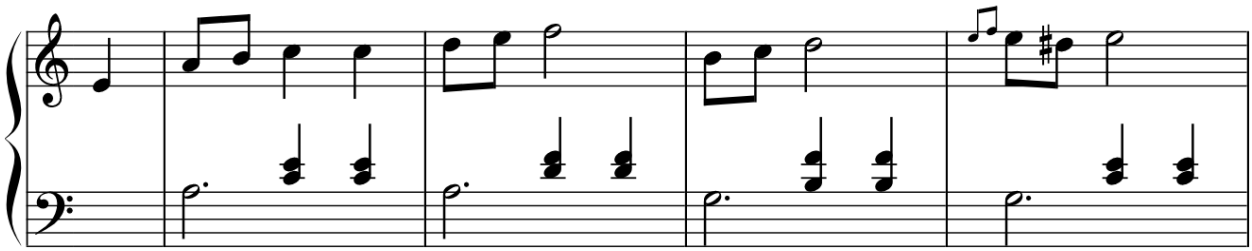
Chopin: Waltz in A Minor, Op. Posthumous

The straightforward rhythm, stepwise melody, and basic chord structures of Chopin’s Waltz in A Minor, Op. Posthumous, make the main theme of this piece an excellent option for improvisation. From this theme we can decide how many measures to work with. This is something that should be kept as short as possible while still maintaining some harmonic movement to allow for a satisfying phrase. Usually, a good starting point is four measures which will work well for this theme. The next step will be to simplify any difficulties and create space in the texture. The low bass notes force the left hand to leap back and forth in each measure. Instead, we can make the lowest note of each chord the bass note for that measure. The new bass notes will, of course, change the inversions and the way the harmonic progression sounds, but the goal is not to be faithful to the original score, but instead to create something new.

The second simplification is to reduce the number of notes in the right-hand melody in measure three. The last three eighth notes in the measure can be omitted, leaving only the first three notes. This gives measure three the same melodic pattern as the first two measures (though there are countless options on how one might simplify the measure). Example 24 below shows both the bass note and the melodic line simplifications.



Example 23. Chopin: Waltz in A Minor, mm. 1-4, original

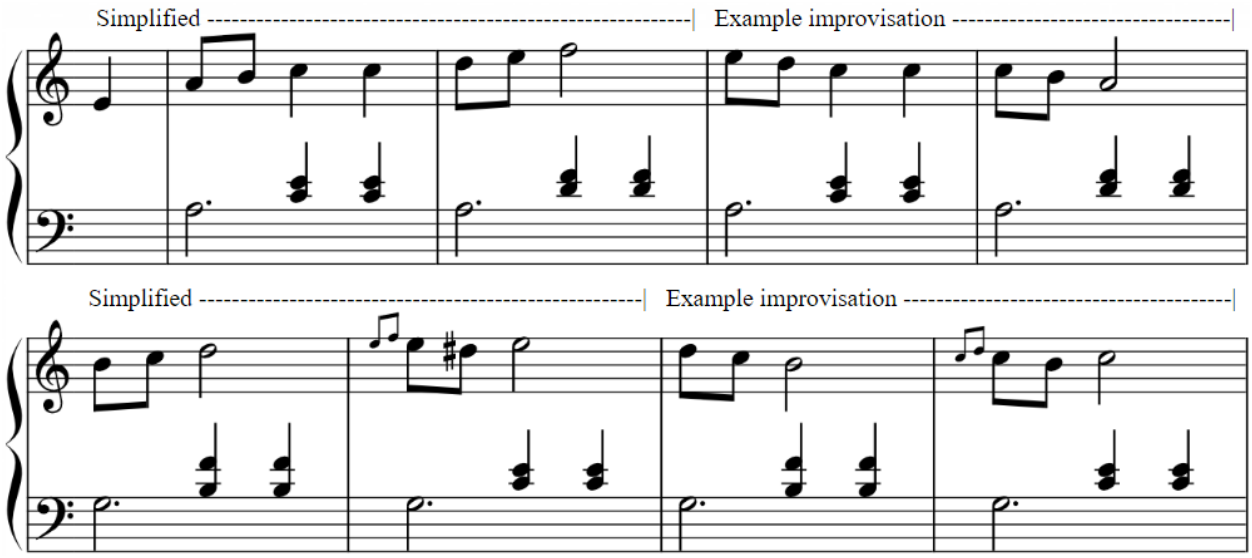


Example 24. Chopin: Waltz in A Minor after simplification of both hands

Now that the left hand has also been simplified, allowing attention to be spent on the right hand, the next step is to create additional space for the right hand to improvise. We can make it less daunting and more interesting by leaving the melody alone and instead repeating measures or pairs of measures in the left hand. Students can start with the original melodic line for two measures, then repeat the left hand while creating their own melody in the right hand. Have students fill in the added measures with an idea closely related to the original.

This is a good time for the teacher to show the student a few examples of what this might sound like. Remember that it is important to give more than one example so that students are less likely to try and imitate the teacher. When students are ready to try, encourage them to watch the score as it is very easy to lose sight of where the original part of the melody needs to continue. If watching the score is an issue, students can try some preliminary exercises by playing the

improvisatory measures with the left hand alone at first, then progressively adding one right-hand note per measure with each repetition. These added right-hand notes can start with downbeats only, then the first and second beat of each measure, then all three beats of each measure. Finally, students can attempt to perform an improvisation using the same rhythm as the original. Example 25 below shows what the result might look like.



Example 25. Chopin: Waltz in A Minor, mm. 1-4, expanded with improvisation

Making the necessary adjustments to a phrase will be time-consuming at first. However, with each new phrase, the process will move more quickly and the student will need less and less explanation from the teacher. Students will begin to find unique ways to improvise with a phrase, helping them to discover their own creative voice at the piano.

CHAPTER 4

IMPROVISING ON ADVANCED REPERTOIRE

Improvisation can feel uncomfortable for any students who have not been exposed to the practice, but often it is advanced students who will resist the most.[30] Add to this the fact that their repertoire will often be the most difficult to simplify (without making the changes too time-consuming to learn) and improvise with. Due to these difficulties, it can be better to do less rather than more when making alterations. The downside of this is less freedom in improvisation, but it is well worth it to introduce the craft to a more advanced student. Remember that a heavily restricted improvisation will allow for the highest probability of success. As students become more comfortable, they can progressively begin to remove material from the original and replace it with their own ideas.

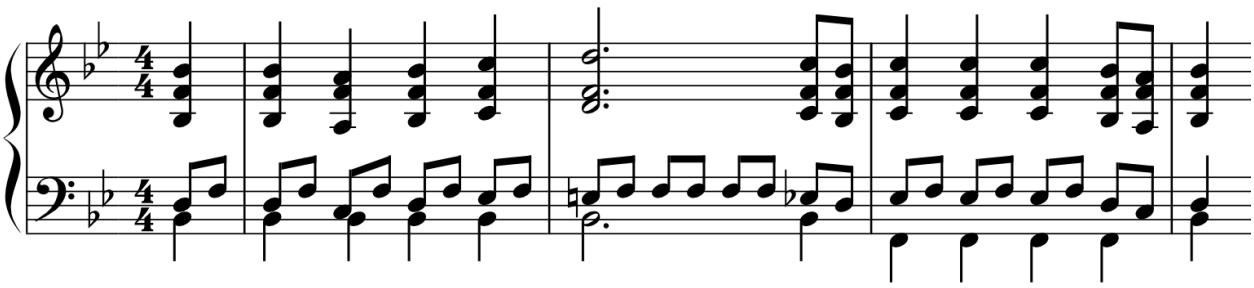
Schubert: Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960, 1st movement

The music of Schubert is already beautiful to play as written, but improvising with it can be just as rewarding if approached in the right way. The understated and reserved quality in Schubert's writing allows room for elaboration and expansion of the material without having to change too much of the original, making improvisation more accessible for the student.

As stated earlier, sections with fast tempos, difficult rhythms, and chromaticism are to be avoided. The first movement of this sonata is generally devoid of the first two, and so avoiding

[30] Scott McBride Smith, "Teaching the Advanced Student," in *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher,* 2nd ed., edited by Marienne Uszler, Stewart Gordon, and Scott McBride Smith (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2000), 147.

chromaticism is going to be helpful. With these factors in mind, the opening theme is a suitable place to start. Example 26 shows the first three full measures, ending with the authentic cadence on the first beat of measure four.

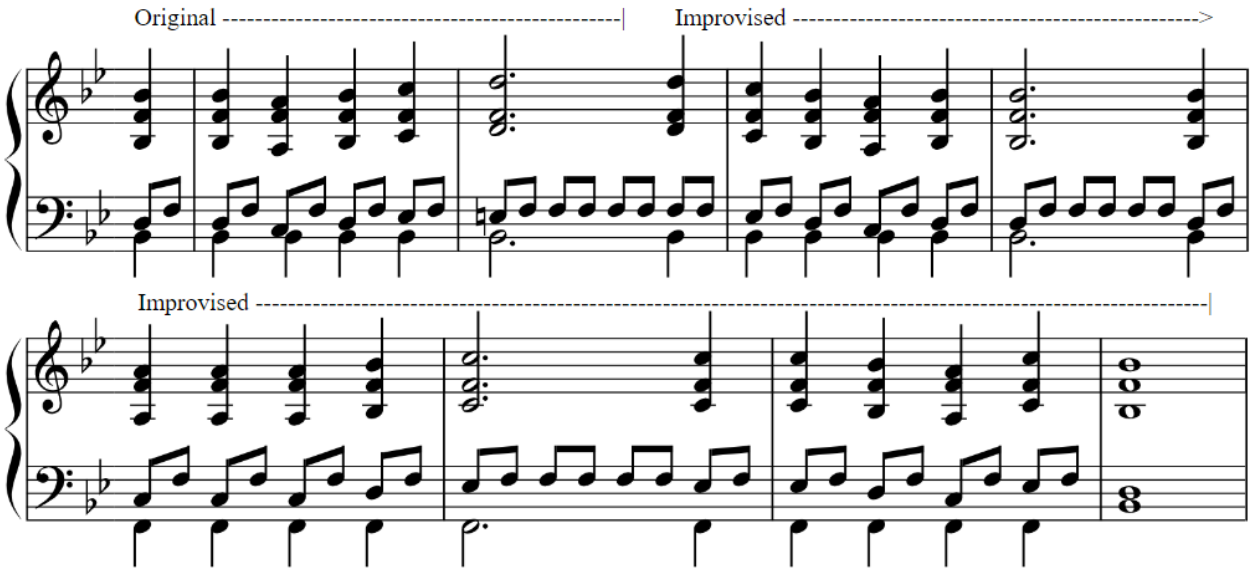


Example 26. Schubert: Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960, 1st movement, mm. 1-4

A brief discussion of the harmonic progression and voice leading with students will help them to develop the given framework. The passage is making use of the technique explained earlier in which parallel tenths and sixths are played over a common tone. In this case the first two measures prolong the tonic of B-flat and the third measure prolongs the dominant. The common tone sustained throughout is F, the fifth scale degree.

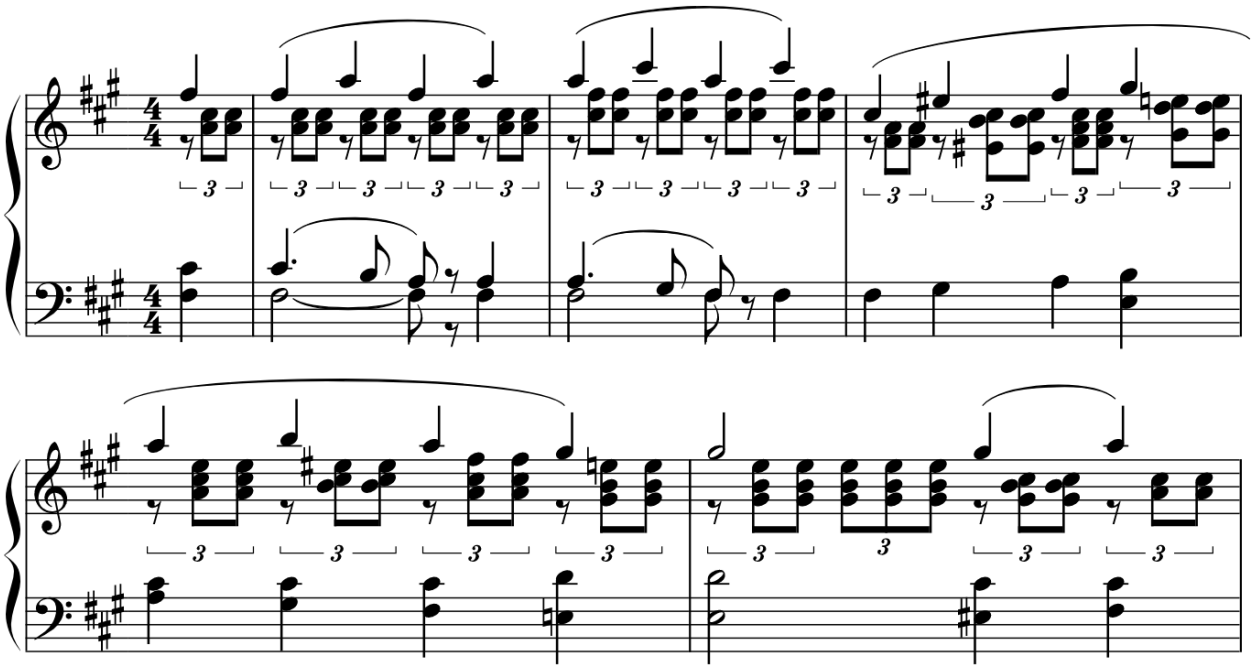
This section only needs expansion of the supporting harmony to allow improvisation. Instead of having two measures over the tonic B-flat harmony, as occurs in the original phrase, instruct the student to play the opening full measure, but then continue the stepwise melodic idea for an additional two measures. This idea will involve both hands moving in parallel motion in sixths while both the B-flat in the bass and F in the right hand are played throughout these first four measures. The tonic B-flat in the bass should continue for four measures before moving to

the dominant F in the bass for three measures, then closing on the tonic. Example 27 below shows how this might materialize.



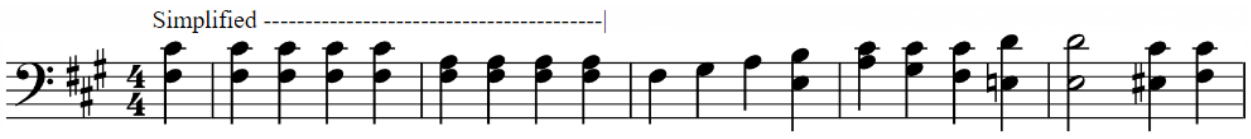
Example 27. Schubert: Sonata in B-flat Major, mm. 1-4, expanded with improvisation

Up until this point, the examples in this document have been taken from the opening phrases of a piece. The first phrase is often clean and concise, with little chromaticism, making it a good choice for practice in improvisation. However, there are usually other good options to use with a student. The next example will be taken from measures 48-58 in the first movement of the Schubert sonata. This section is in F-sharp minor with two phrases that are essentially identical. The only difference is that the first phrase cadences in F-sharp minor (m. 53) and the second phrase cadences in A major (m. 58). Therefore, this discussion will focus on measures 48-53, but in practice the same principles should be applied to measures 54-58. Example 28 shows the first phrase (mm. 48-53) in its original form.



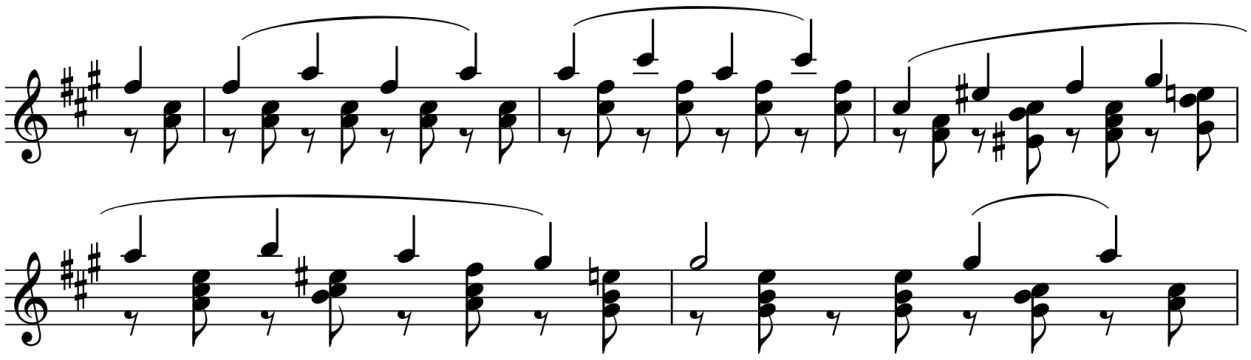
Example 28. Schubert: Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960, 1st movement, mm. 48-53

The decision one must make in this phrase is whether to simplify the melody in either the right hand or left hand. Because the left-hand melody is only present in the first two measures (mm. 48 and 49), simplifying the left hand makes sense. This phrase begins with F-sharp and C-sharp in the left hand, so the improvisation can continue that harmony in quarter notes. Measure 50 in the original begins with F-sharp and A, so the improvisation would continue with those two notes. Example 29 shows the left hand with these changes.



Example 29. Schubert: mm. 48-53, left hand simplified

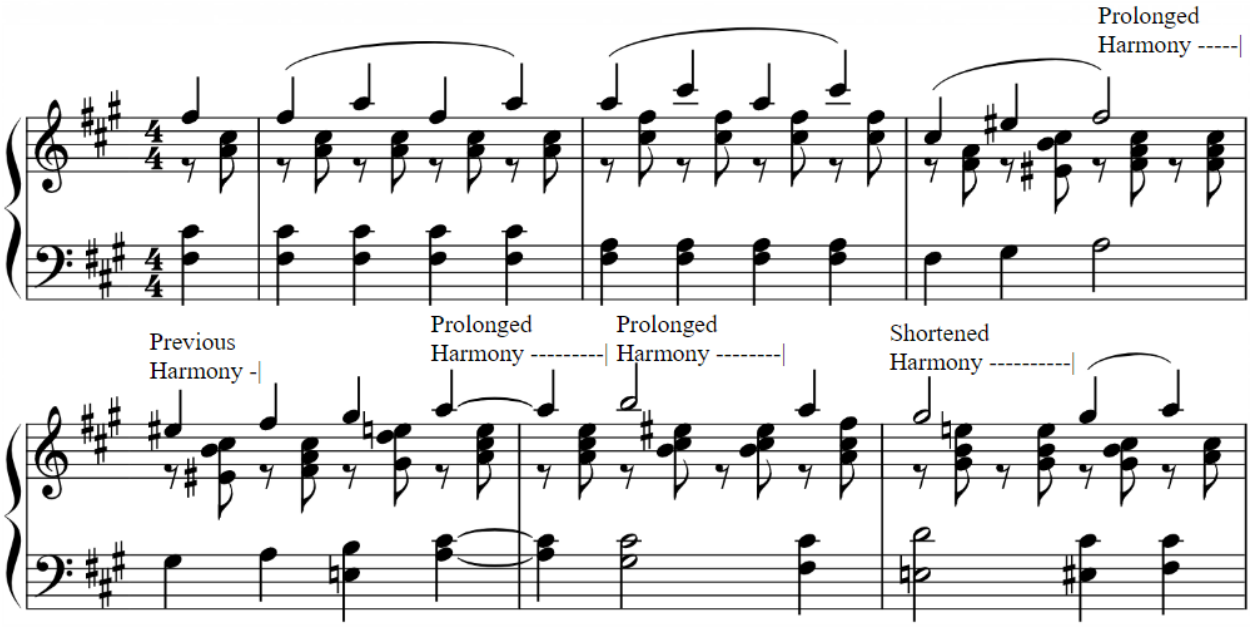
Even with these left-hand simplifications, this phrase still has a thick texture. Removing the repetitions of each right-hand chord will create a thinner texture while still providing the harmonic progression. This simplification is best made by changing the right-hand triplet accompanimental chords from the original Schubert to eighth notes. Example 30 illustrates this change in the right hand.



Example 30. Schubert: mm. 48-53, right hand simplified

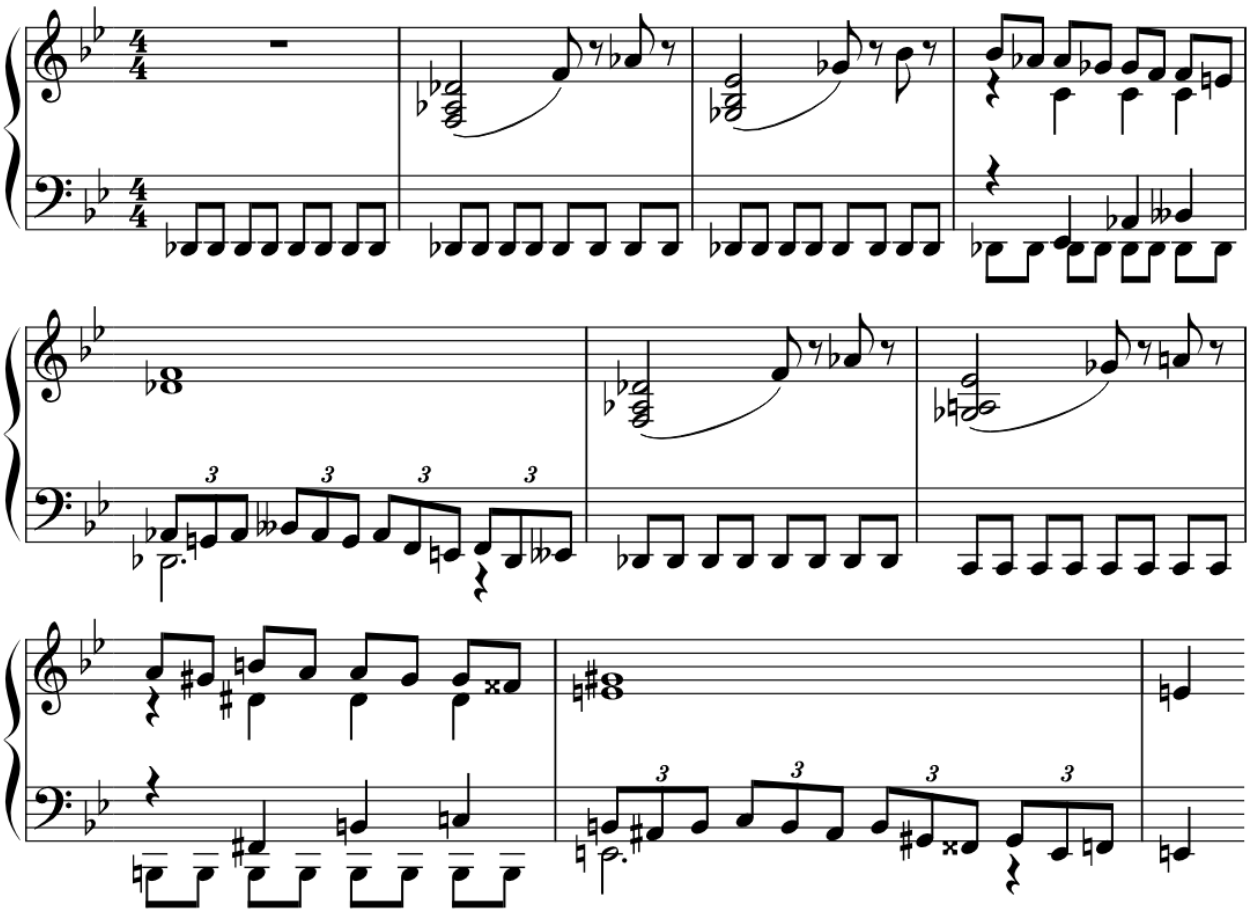
At this point the most interesting part of this phrase is the harmonic movement of measures 51-52. We can allow students to play with this progression and make the timing and order of the chords their decision. Instruct students to play the first two measures as is, but in measures 51-52 they must decide to do one of the following for each beat: prolong a harmony by one extra beat, retreat back to the previous harmony, skip over a harmony, or continue to move forward. Have students do this exercise several times and with each attempt they will likely show a greater understanding of how to create a musically satisfying phrase. If students are struggling with results it is always a good idea for the teacher to provide examples. The examples do not

need to be examples of perfection, just something for students to hear that points them in the right direction. Example 31 below shows one possible outcome.



Example 31. Schubert: mm. 48-53, improvised harmonic movement

The final phrase to be discussed in this Schubert sonata will be taken from the development section. Development sections often have excellent opportunities for improvisation due to their inherently improvisatory nature. However, phrases in development sections are often loosely knit with frequent chromatic changes. Nonetheless, they can still offer material for fun improvisational practice. Measures 150-158 will be used for this exercise and are shown below in Example 32.

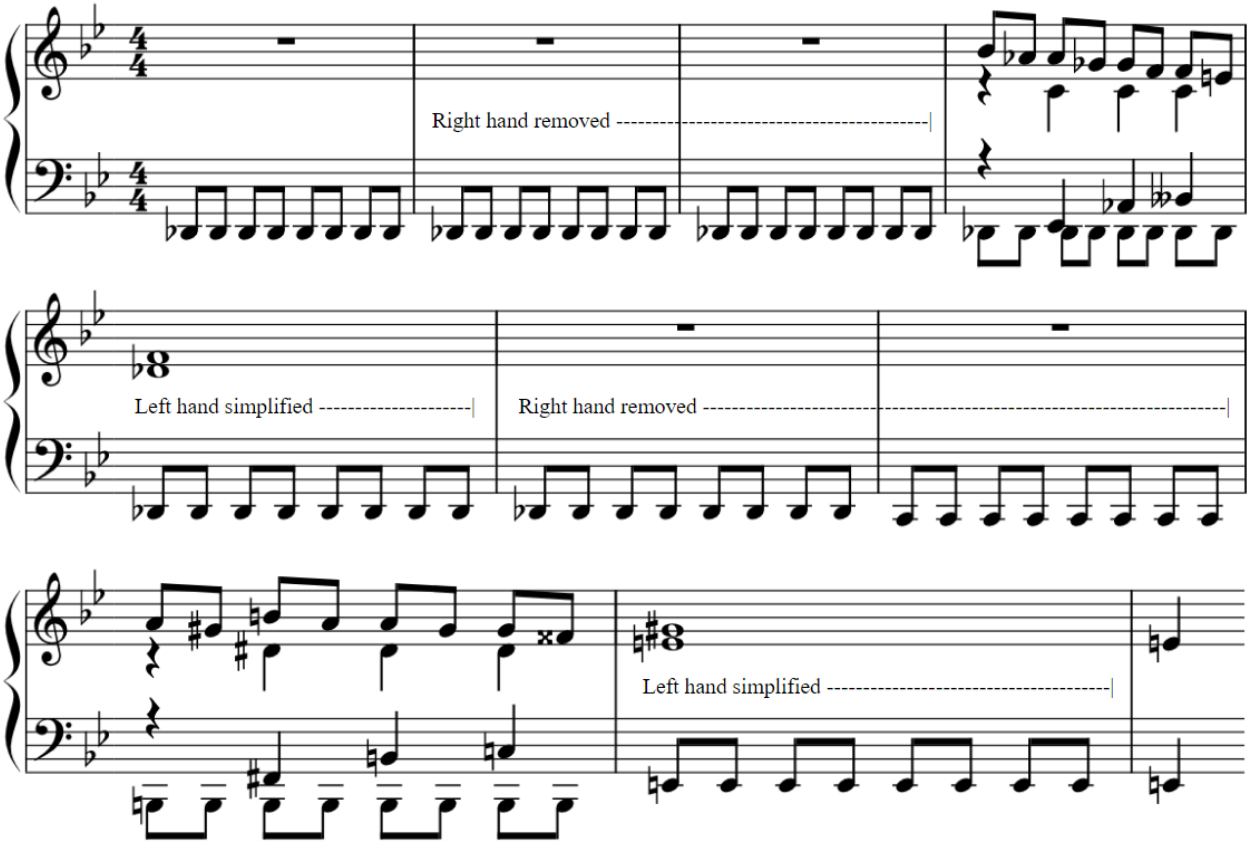


Example 32. Schubert: mm. 150-158, original

Part of what makes this phrase attractive for improvisation is the continuous left-hand repeated eighth notes. This will require fewer adjustments to be made when simplifying. In this phrase it is clear to see that there are simple measures made up of triads and arpeggiations (mm. 150-152 and mm. 155-156) and there are measures with counterpoint which add complexity (m. 153 and m. 157). Instead of working to simplify the more complex measures, these measures can be left alone, and the student can alternate between improvised measures and Schubert's measures. To create space for improvisation, all right-hand notes for measures 151-152 and

measures 155-156 should be removed. The first measure of the phrase (m. 150) would best be left as is, functioning as an introductory measure.

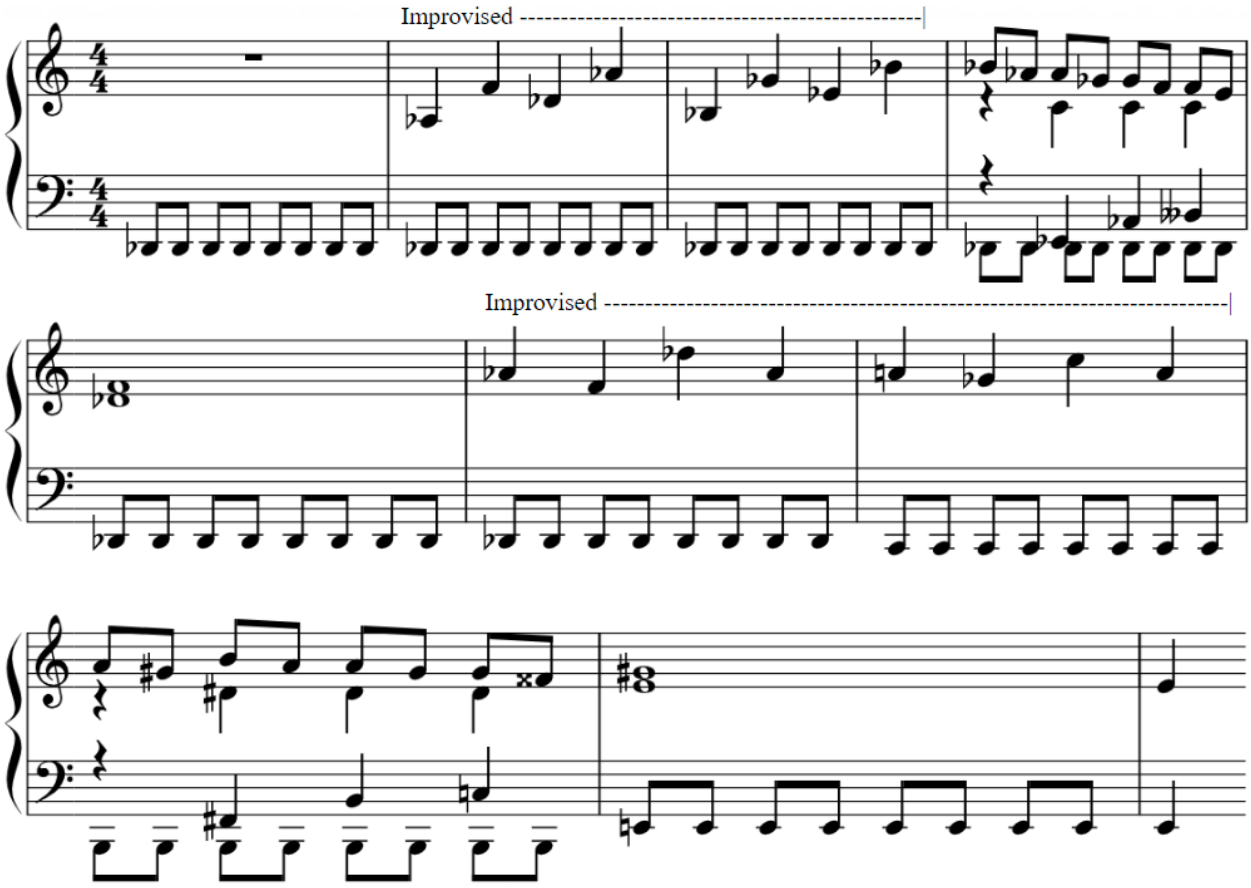
So far, we have addressed all measures except measures 154 and 158. These measures each precede an improvised measure, which will take some amount mental preparation to execute. To allow students more opportunity to think ahead, the triplet pattern in the left hand can be replaced with repeated eighth notes on D-flat in measure 154 and repeated eighth notes on E in measure 158. Example 33 below illustrates these changes.



Example 33. Schubert: mm. 150-158, simplified

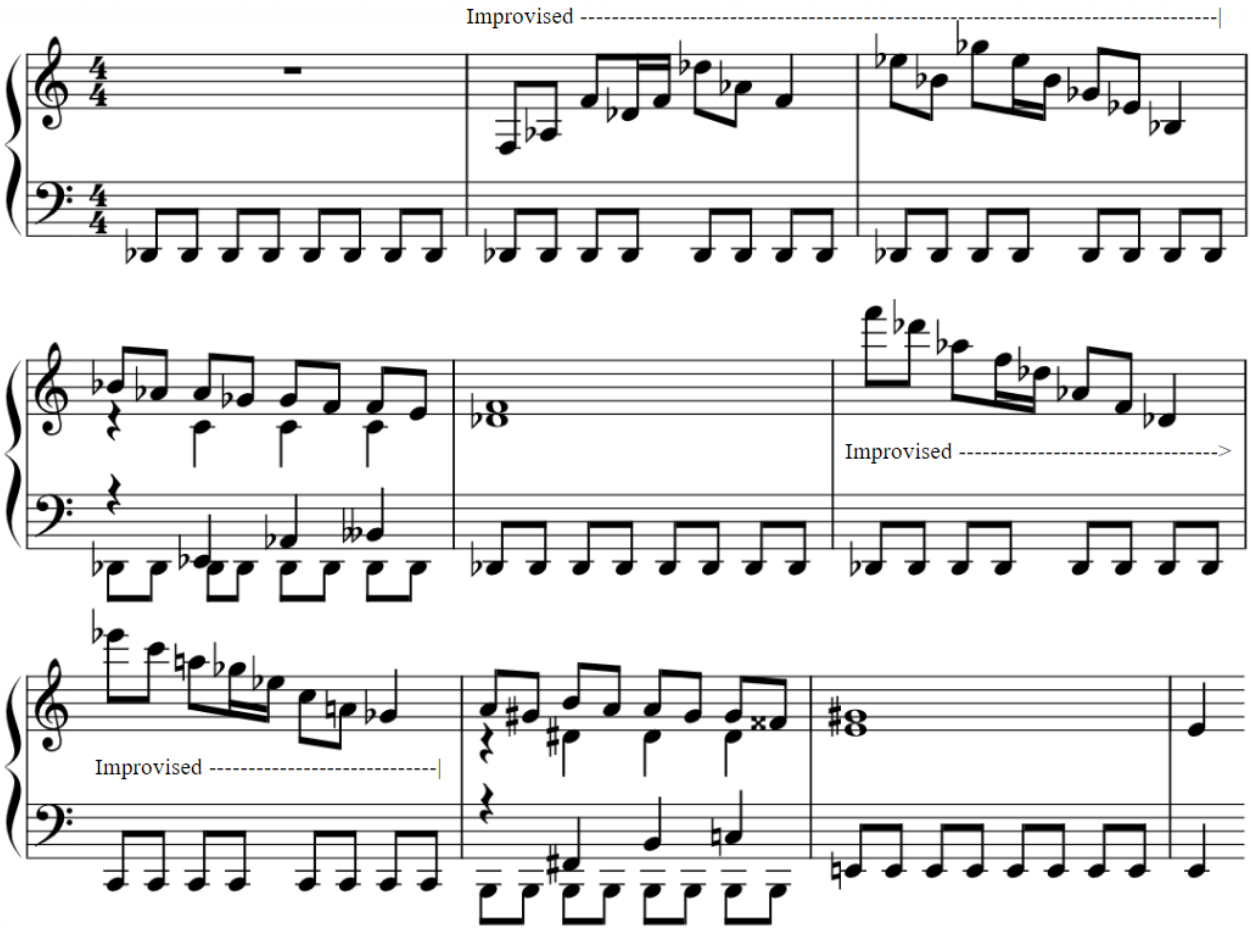
The preparation for a student's improvisation should be preceded by a discussion of harmony. The first two measures to be improvised are 151 and 152. Here we have a D-flat major chord followed by an E-flat minor chord. The other two measures of concern are 155 and 156, which contain a D-flat major chord and an A diminished-seventh chord. The diminished chord in measure 156 omits the C, but the student should be encouraged to use any of the four notes that belong to the chord. Before improvising, have the student practice arpeggios for each of these harmonies.

Instead of starting with a blocked chord, have the student begin each improvised measure with arpeggios in quarter notes. The student might be tempted to only play ascending arpeggios at first (mimicking the original version), but encouraging the student to break from that mold and try other configurations will allow for more creativity. Example 34 shows how this might be realized.



Example 34. Schubert: mm. 150-158, improvised arpeggios in quarter notes

Once students have made a few successful attempts with quarter notes they can try playing eighth-note arpeggios. To give students enough time to prepare for the next measure, have them play only a single quarter note on the fourth beat of the improvised measures. This progression could continue by inserting a pair of sixteenth notes in each measure. It should be specified on which beat the sixteenth notes should be played. Remember that limitation is very important when learning how to improvise. Example 35 (below) shows the sixteenth notes on the second half of beat three in each improvised measure.



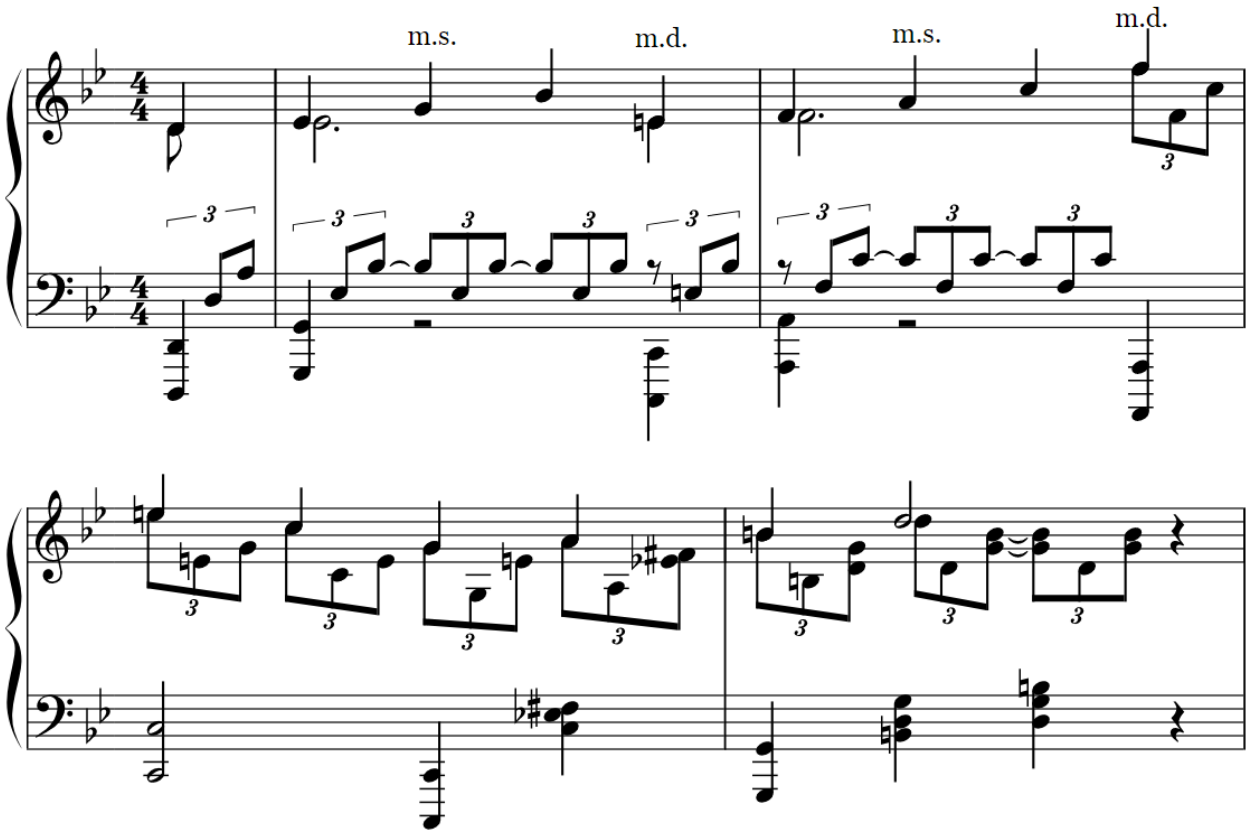
Example 35. Schubert: mm. 150-158, improvised in eighth and sixteenth notes

Brahms: Rhapsody in G Minor, Op. 79

The G minor Rhapsody, Op. 79, no. 2, by Johannes Brahms presents a good example of Brahms' compositional style when writing music for the piano, featuring a dense texture with unique layering of melodic figures and rhythms.[31] Also, Brahms often avoids strong cadences,

[31] Brent Auerbach, "Tiered Polyphony and Its Determinative Role in the Piano Music of Johannes Brahms," Journal of Music Theory 52, no. 2 (2008): 286, https://www-jstor-org.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/stable/40606886?seq=14#metadata_info_tab_contents.

and the result is music that is not easily used for improvisational material. However, I will show that even a piece such as this can offer opportunities for students to practice the skill of improvisation. Example 36 shows the first four measures in its original form.

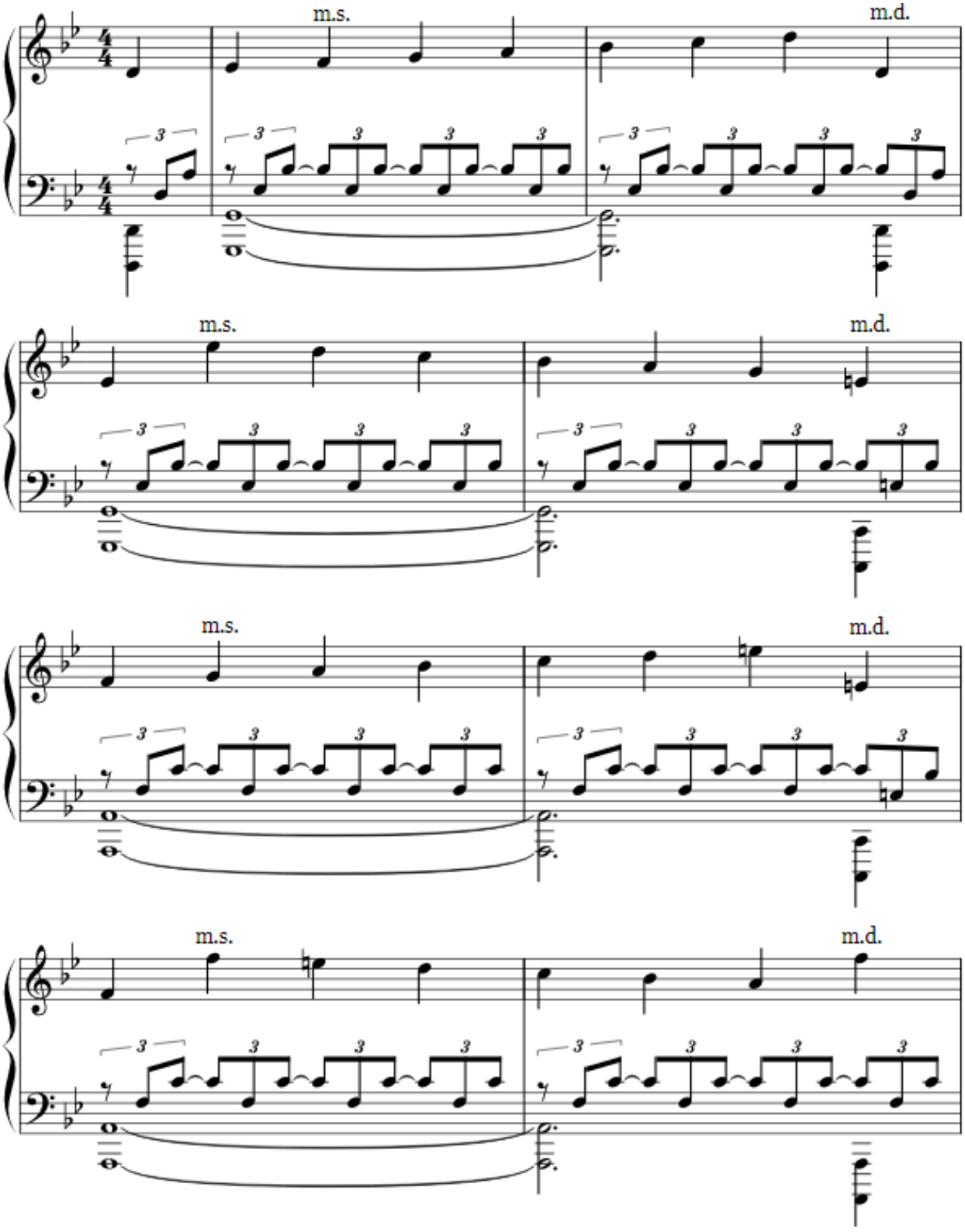


Example 36. Brahms: Rhapsody in G Minor, Op. 79, mm. 1-4, original

The opening phrase is a sequential pattern in which the right hand plays a rising chromatic line as the left hand crosses over to continue the melodic line. Large leaps of the hand are often best removed when preparing for improvisation, but as the right hand is occupied with the triplet accompaniment pattern, it will be less complicated to have the left hand improvise while crossing over the right hand. Just as was demonstrated in the Schubert sonata (example

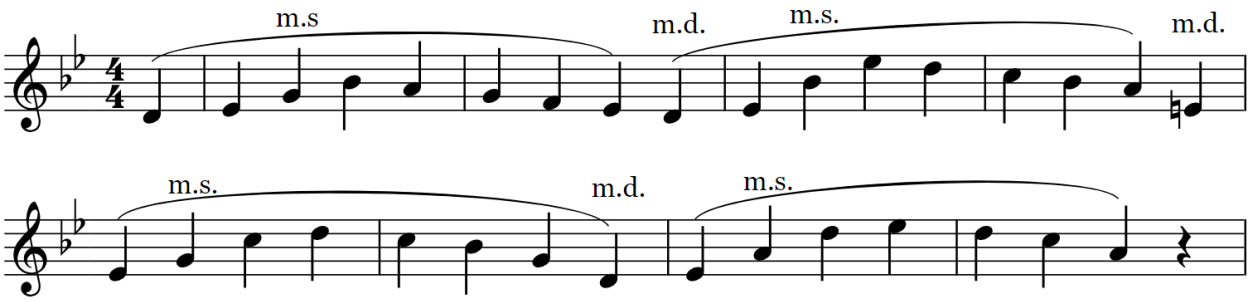
27), it is best leave most of the material as is (as opposed to simplifying) and extend the triplet accompaniment to create space for improvisation. For this example, expand the harmonic rhythm from one measure per chord to two measures per chord. To give even more time for improvisation, repeat every two measures. In total, the new phrase will be eight measures in length.

The phrase begins with the following harmonies: D major, E-flat major, C7, and F major. For this exercise, the improvising should be done on the E-flat major and F major harmonies, as those are the extended harmonies and begin on the first beat of their respective measures. Given the two contrasting harmonies, the left-hand melody needs to make use of two scales. The first harmony is E-flat major and so the melody would seem to require three flats. However, it is preceded by a D major chord (omitting the F-sharp), which has an A-natural. The precedence of this note makes the A-natural more suitable than A-flat for a melodic line in measure one. The second harmony is F major, which will use the F major scale with only B-flat in its scale. For the first exercise, instruct the student to cross over with the left hand as in the original, but then simply continue with an extra measure of playing a partial ascending scale in that position. Example 37 below shows a four-measure example, but it is best if the student repeats each two-measure grouping to allow for a longer phrase and more possibilities as it is developed. The example shows the ascending scales for measures 1-4, then descending scales for measures 5-8.



Example 37. Brahms: mm. 1-2 expanded to four measures with left hand melody

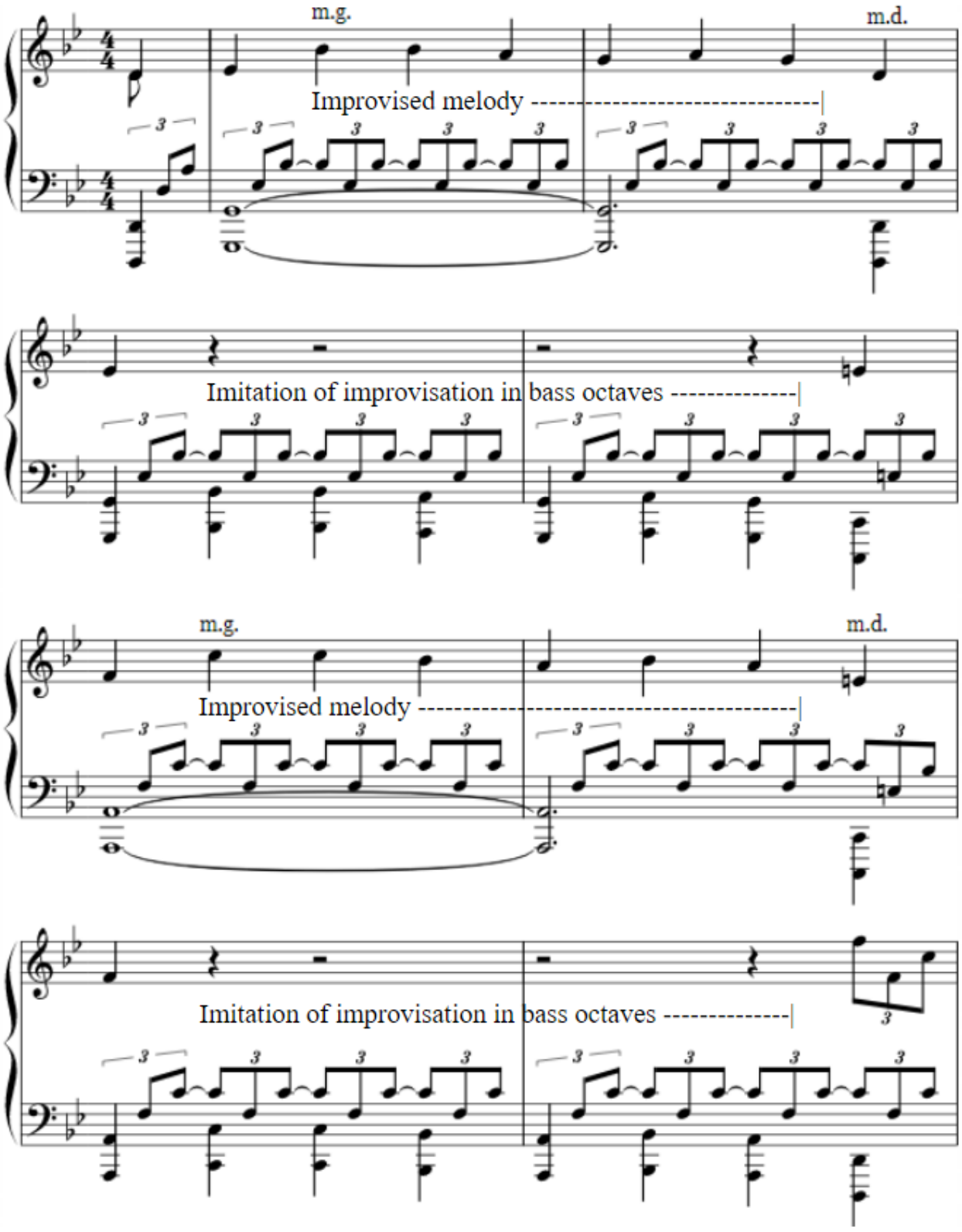
Next, have students improvise their own melodic figure with the left hand. Since each two-measure group is repeated, this can be a good time to try question and answer phrasing. Give students some time to plan a melodic idea. All students need to do is play the same or a similar melodic figure, but only higher and in the correct scale. These instructions are very minimal, but a high percentage of attempts will come out with satisfying results. Example 38 shows a possible option for this left-hand melody for the first four measures expanded into eight measures. Each phrase begins with an arpeggiation followed by descending stepwise motion with the second phrase rises to a higher chord-tone than the first.



Example 38. Brahms: Left hand melody improvised (four measures expanded to eight)

One final step is to take advantage of the left hand crossing over back and forth. The first two measures should be played with the left hand crossing over the right hand as before. However, the following two measures should be played by keeping the left hand in the bass register, playing octaves. Like before, start with partial scales and increase the difficulty incrementally. Once students are comfortable enough to improvise in this form, instruct them to improvise the first two measures, then attempt to repeat the phrase exactly in bass octaves below the right hand. Example 39 below illustrates a possible result with this variation.

Using imitation in improvisatory practice exercises the students' musical memory. They must first improvise a two-measure melody, then remember that melody well enough to repeat it in a different register over the following two measures. Building a strong musical memory is a valuable skill for improvising and playing by ear. Building these skills will not only help in learning to improvise, but also in learning new repertoire more quickly.



Example 39. Brahms: Improvised melody followed by imitation in bass

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The topic of improvisation is one with a very wide scope that reaches all disciplines of music. This document focuses on teaching just one facet of music improvisation. The idea of using a piece from the repertoire as the basis for learning improvisation has many benefits. The selected repertoire provides many of the decisions one would have to make regardless, such as the key, mode, register, harmonic progression, texture, etc. What makes this work well is that the student has practiced the composition for some time, and there will be some level of comfort in working with that material. In addition, the musicality that was practiced in working with the piece is more likely to continue when attempting to improvise with some of the same material.

Though jazz improvisation dominates the study of improvisation at the piano, there are still many resources for further learning. In addition to the resources listed in the bibliography of this paper, teachers and students alike can go online to YouTube and find instructional videos from skilled classical improvisers such as Richard Grayson, John Mortensen, and Robert Levin.

It is not uncommon for students to quit taking lessons at the intermediate stages of learning to play the piano.[32] There can be any number of reasons, but repeating the same types of projects over and over can lack the excitement of doing something new. Improvisation is a great way to bring a new element into a student's music study.

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[32] Scott McBride Smith, "Teaching the Intermediate Student," in *The Well-Tempered Keyboard Teacher*, 2nd ed., edited by Marienne Uszler, Stewart Gordon, and Scott McBride Smith (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2000), 86.

This journey is also not reserved for the select few. Remember that learning to improvise does not require a certain level of talent. Often, it can be the less talented student that can benefit most from exposure to improvisation. Pianist and organist Carl Whitmer wrote that "Improvisation ... is not dependent upon great technic nor upon great musical learning. It is just something that comes from one's fingers - awkwardly or fluently."[33] Improvisation can do wonders for any aspiring musician. It promotes a greater understanding of the compositions they will play, bringing them closer to the mindset of the composers they interpret.[34] Bridging the gap between students and their repertoire will help them to gain confidence in their playing and flexibility in a difficult performance atmosphere.[35]

In my opinion, the skill of improvisation has been overlooked by the classical world. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, performers were assumed to have improvisational skills at the keyboard. Today, it is not a lost cause, but "simply one that has been deliberately neglected."[36] Becoming proficient at improvisation requires much time and dedication. However, average students can still benefit greatly from preliminary study in improvisation, and they will gain some tools that they might not have had otherwise. At most, students may find a talent for something that could alter their course in music forever. "Building skills in improvisation will change the way a student thinks about and interacts with music for the rest of their lives."[37]

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[33] T. Carl Whitmer, *The Art of Improvisation,* rev. ed. (New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1941), 1.
[34] Dominic Alldis, *A Classical Approach to Jazz Piano Improvisation,* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2003), 158.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 138.
[37] Nicole M. Brockmann, *From Sight to Sound: Improvisational Games for Classical Musicians,* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), vii.

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APPENDIX

LECTURE-RECITAL SCRIPT

PERFORM: an improvised prelude in B-flat major

PERFORM: the 1st movement of Schubert's B-flat major sonata, D. 960 (without repeat)

Good evening. Welcome and thank you for coming and I hope you enjoy this lecture recital. You may be familiar with the piece I just performed. It was the first movement of Schubert's B-flat major sonata. However, I'm sure you did not recognize the piece that preceded the Schubert. That's because it was improvised. In the eighteenth century and most of the nineteenth century it was customary, and, in fact, a sign of proper concert etiquette, to improvise a prelude before a large work. The prelude was a way of framing the upcoming work to provide context of tonality, mood, and other aspects of the work. This practice grew increasingly rare throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. And today, it is mostly a forgotten art. Of course, it is not only preluding that has lost its place on the concert stage, but the art improvising altogether.

In this lecture recital, I will give you some tools that you can use with your students to explore improvisation at the piano.

Most of what I'll talk about will be focusing on using repertoire for improvisation. However, I'd first like to show you a couple of preliminary exercises you can do with your students. These

exercises are meant to get students doing something fun and engaging while exercising their ability to play something new on the first try (a skill needed for improvisation).

This first exercise involves taking a familiar tune and using the rhythm of that tune for scale practice. **SLIDE**

This is the popular tune "Auld Lang Syne" (**PLAY**) Now, we will play a regular, 2-octave scale pattern, but using the rhythm of Auld Lang Syne. **SLIDE** It's shown here in the key of B-flat major. This is how it would sound: **PLAY SCALE**

SLIDE (You Are My Sunshine)

Here is another tune we can use. It's You Are My Sunshine. Let's see if you can hear the tune as I use that rhythm in a scale. **PLAY**

You can see that I ended up finishing my Bb scale before the rhythm of the tune was finished. This creates an opportunity to come up with a sort of coda to their scale.

You can see that this exercise not only helps students gain skills in improvisation, but they are also getting practice with their scales. This next exercise can be used while practicing **chord progressions**: We can take a familiar texture, such as Bach's Prelude in C major from book One of the Well-Tempered Clavier **SLIDE** (**PLAY ORIGINAL**)

And we can use this pattern with various chord progressions that our students are practicing. (**SLIDE**)

Here we can see that pattern in C major, with the One chord going to the Four. This is what a I-IV-I-V7-I progression would sound like: (**PLAY PROGRESSION - different inversions**)

Once students have had some preliminary experience with exercises such as these, we can try improvising with some of their repertoire. There are several benefits to using repertoire for improvisation. Here are some main points:

SLIDE: Reasons for Using Repertoire

- Variables pre-determined
- Great composing to build from
- The student has spent many hours practicing the piece
- Easy to adjust the amount of improvisation

So many Variables that need to be decided before trying an improvisation, such as key, meter, chord progression, accompaniment pattern, etc... the repertoire will determine many of those variables without explanation, saving time.

Using high quality music as a foundation will encourage high quality improvisation.

This method allows us to make extra use of that work.

And lastly ..... it's easy for the teacher to tailor the amount of material that is left in and the amount that is omitted to leave room for improvisation. Less change is always better for the new improviser.

Today I will be improvising with some advanced repertoire, but these techniques can be applied to intermediate repertoire as well.

These are some things to avoid when selecting a phrase to improvise with:

SLIDE: Phrases to avoid for improvising

- Fast tempos
- Complex rhythms
- Chromaticism
- Counterpoint

These are all aspects that will make improvising difficult for a student who is not familiar with improvisation. However, it is important to note that each of these aspects can be adjusted somewhat to minimize their effect. If the ideal tempo of a piece is on the faster side, it might still sound good played slowly. Some rhythms are easily simplified. Chromaticism and counterpoint can potentially be removed. Of course, if we choose a phrase of a piece that needs all of these aspects to be adjusted, it will take too much work for the student to get comfortable with the new phrase. Time will be spent on breaking it down instead of on improvising and moving on to the next phrase. So, in contrast, these are the aspects we want to look for in a phrase.

SLIDE: Good phrases to improvise with

- Slow to medium tempo
- Straightforward rhythms
- Mostly Diatonic
- Melody and accompaniment

Now let's talk about this Schubert sonata. **SLIDE** Opening phrases are often a great place to start for improvisation. We can usually take the first 4 or 8 measures and we will have something that begins on the tonic and returns back to the tonic. If we're talking about just getting a student started, then less is usually more. Here are the first 4 measures of the Schubert.

SLIDE: (Play it)

In this phrase it will be helpful to show the student what Schubert is doing here. First, we can look at the bass. **SLIDE** Tonic B flat's for 2 measures, dominant on F for one measure, then back to the tonic.

Now let's look at what is left in this phrase. The remaining notes are almost exclusively F's.

SLIDE This common tone is repeated in both the right and left hands.

Next, we can look at the melody. It is in octaves in the RH, and the movement is followed by a voice in the LH. **SLIDE** These two lines are moving in parallel sixths. The one exception is the E-natural in measure 2. Since that breaks the pattern, we can simply decide to change that to an F to create a sixth with the RH melody (**click back and forth from E-natural to F)**.

Have students experience this directly by having them play this phrase with only the melodic lines.

SLIDE: Play sixths alone

Now that the student has an understanding of how the phrase is composed, we can get to some improvising.

This section only needs expansion of the supporting harmony to allow improvisation. Instead of having two measures over the tonic B-flat harmony, as in the original, instruct students to play the opening measure, but then continue with a stepwise melodic idea of their own. Then, they can move to the dominant harmony with F in the bass before resolving back to the tonic. At first, it is not important to be concerned with meter (getting the right number of beats per measure or number of measures for a phrase. However, once students have become comfortable with this technique you can give them guidelines of, say, 4 measures over the tonic, 3 measures over the dominant, then back to the tonic (for an 8-measure phrase).

Here is an example of this phrase structure with improvisation.

PLAY improvisation of mm. 1-4

And there you have an improvisation

++

SLIDE mm. 48-53

The next example will be taken from measures 48-58 in the first movement of the Schubert sonata. Here is the original score of the first 5 measures of this phrase. This section is in F-sharp minor with two phrases that are essentially identical. The only difference is that the first phrase cadences in F-sharp minor (m. 53) and the second phrase cadences in A major (m. 58).

PLAY mm. 48-53

PLAY: mm. 48-53

The most interesting part of this phrase is the harmonic movement of measures 51-53.

PLAY: blocked progression

We can allow students to "play" with this progression by altering the timing and deciding whether to go backward or forward in the progression. Have students play the first two measures as is, but in measures 51-53 they must decide to either: prolong a harmony by one extra beat, retreat back to the previous harmony, skip over a harmony, or continue to move forward. Have students do this exercise several times and with each attempt they will likely show a greater understanding of how to create a musically satisfying phrase. **SLIDE LETTERS!**

SLIDE

Here is the chord progression for measure 51. F#m C#dominant F#m(1st inv) E7

If they are struggling with results it is always a good idea for the teacher to play their own examples.

When playing the examples we can make it a bit fun while making sure the student understands what is going on. Have students put their finger on the page and follow along with where the teacher goes.

PLAY: example

To allow the student more freedom in their improvising we can alter the timing of the accompaniment chords in the RH. We can try playing them as 8th notes instead of triplets.

PLAY: 8th note accompaniment chords with improv

If the student is ready to try something a bit more challenging we can add even more interest to the phrase by breaking up the accompaniment chords into triplets or 16th notes.

PLAY: Triplets, then 16ths notes (PREVIEW what you are doing!!!)

You can see that what I'm playing are nowhere near full improvisations. But when you have students who spend all of their time at the piano playing only things that they've practiced one particular way, it can be difficult to break out of that and do something each time. So we want to make these steps subtle so students don't feel overwhelmed.

++

Next, I will perform the Brahms' G minor Rhapsody, Op. 79, no. 2.

SLIDE: Rhapsody, mm. 1-4, original

This piece is shorter than the Schubert, so in proportion I will prelude the piece with more of a tonal gesture as opposed to a prelude. I remember my first time hearing a pianist prelude in a concert setting. It was extremely short, but very effective. It was a recording of the Romanian pianist, Dinu Lipatti, in his last public recital in 1950. Before playing a Mozart sonata, he did this...

PLAY: Dinu Prelude to Mozart Am

I thought to myself - is that allowed? Wow! Who out there is doing things like that? The answer is "very few," but it used to be common practice. This is called preluding. I emphasize the practice of preluding because I feel that it is probably the easiest way for a pianist to try public improvisation without the pressure of putting an improvisation on a program and having to perform without anything else to go off of. It can be extremely short. And can make the piece

that follows much more effective in capturing an audience. So I encourage all of you to try preluding to help frame a larger work.

Now, here is Brahms's Rhapsody in Gm. After the performance, I will discuss ways we can teach a student to improvise with this piece.

PERFORM: Short Prelude

PERFORM: Brahms' Rhapsody in G minor, Op. 79 No. 2 (without repeat?)

The G minor Rhapsody, Op. 79, no. 2, by Johannes Brahms presents a good example of Brahms' compositional style when writing music for the piano, featuring a dense texture with unique layering of melodic figures and rhythms. Also, Brahms often avoids strong cadences, and the result is music that is not easily used for improvisational material. However, I will show that even a piece such as this can offer opportunities for students to practice the skill of improvisation. **SLIDE** Here we have the first four measures in its original form.

PLAY: mm. 1-4 in its original form

The opening phrase is a sequential pattern in which the right hand plays a rising chromatic line as the left hand crosses over to continue the melodic line. Large leaps of the hand are often best removed when preparing for improvisation, but as the right hand is occupied with the triplet accompaniment pattern, it will be less complicated to have the left hand improvise while crossing over the right hand. We can simply extend the triplet accompaniment to create space for improvisation. Let's expand the harmonic rhythm from one measure per chord to two measures per chord. To give even more time, we can repeat every two measures. In total, the new phrase

will be eight measures in length. This is what the original phrase sounds like with the measures repeated.

SLIDE: expanded version with material in original form

You can see that we have created a lot of space for improvisation.

Now, a student would not play this empty version, this is just shown here so you can see what we've done with the harmonic expansion.

The phrase begins with the following harmonies: D major, E-flat major, C7, and F major. For this exercise, the improvising should be done on the E-flat major and F major harmonies, as those are the extended harmonies and begin on the first beat of their respective measures. Given the two contrasting harmonies, the left-hand melody needs to make use of two different scales. The phrase begins with an E-flat major chord and so the melody would seem to require three flats. However, it is preceded by D major and followed by C and F chords. Because of this, using only 2 flats will be more suitable. The second harmony is F major, which will use the F major scale.

For the first exercise, instruct the student to cross over with the left hand as in the original, but then simply continue an extra measure of playing a partial ascending scale in that position.

SLIDE: Ascending scale on top

PLAY: Example on slide

Once the student is comfortable with this, try to develop away from it incrementally. First, have the student alternate ascending and descending scales.

PLAY: Alternating ascending and descending scales

Have them try a 'skipping up and stepping down' pattern, then vise versa on the way down.

PLAY: skip/step pattern

Once they have done this successfully a couple of times, have students to improvise their own melodic figure with the left hand. Since each two-measure group is repeated, this can be a good time to try question and answer phrasing. Give the student some time to plan a melodic idea. All the student needs to do is play the same or a similar melodic figure, but only higher and in the correct scale.

Play: melodic idea, followed by similar idea higher

We can, of course, take this in a number of directions.

One final step in this opening phrase will be to take advantage of the left hand crossing over back and forth. Instead of improvising the melody above the right hand every time, we can play bass octaves as part of the improvisation. Just as before we can start by trying some ascending scales.

SLIDE: scales with bass octaves in scales

PLAY: scales with bass octave imitation

Next, challenge students to improvise a melody up above their right hand, then imitate the phrase exactly in bass octaves below the right hand.

This approach will challenge and exercise the students' musical memory, a valuable skill for improvisation and playing by ear. They must play an improvised melody up above the right

hand, then remember what they played, and then play that same melody in the bass with the left hand.

Here is what a possible improvisation would look like on a score.

SLIDE: bass octaves improvised

PLAY: Example shown on slide

I've put these examples on a score to give you examples of how these improvisations might be realized, but when working with a student it is best to keep any re-writing to a minimum. It's okay to write things out if a student is having a lot of difficulty, but ideally students will be looking at the original score for reference, then making the necessary changes on their own. When I do improvisations on my own, I have much more success when I use the original score. It's very easy to get lost when deviating from the score and knowing how to get back, so encouraging students to keep their eyes on the page can help.

When teaching students improvisation techniques it is important to show them examples of your own. The examples do not need to be examples of perfection or anything complex, just something simple for students to hear that points them in the right direction. Mistakes are natural, even for a teacher. The student should know that part of the process is making mistakes. More important is how one reacts to their mistakes. This is one of the many benefits of learning to improvise. **SLIDE**

It increases their flexibility as a musician. An experienced improviser will be better equipped to make adjustments in a formal performance setting.

The experience of improvising will also give your students a greater understanding of their repertoire and a deeper understanding of composition in general. And of course, it is a joy to be able to sit at the piano anytime and create something new and original.

SLIDE (THANK YOU)

I hope that you have found these examples interesting enough to go and try some out for yourself. After that, I encourage you to come up with a lesson plan that can be assigned to one of your students and they can begin to experience the joy of improvising at the piano.

To close this lecture recital, I will now perform an improvisation using some of the material from the Brahms Rhapsody.

Thank you for listening this evening. If you have any questions or comments about any of the material I've discussed, I would be happy to talk with you. Thank you!