Improvisation: Basics for beginning improvisers; then ideas for intermediate improvisers using La Folia

WRITTEN BY TINA CHANCEY

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She has received an Early Music America Special Education Achievement Award, and four Wammies for best classical instrumentalist by the Washington Area Music Association.

See her FEATURE article on improvisation in this Fall 2022 AR for a more complete biography.

The first part of this column is geared for those who are beginners in improvisation, especially in the style of a particular time period. After that, we'll get into ideas for improvising on La Folia.

"Making stuff up" is the first step in the practice of "making stuff up in a particular historical style." All of us have our own issues within this continuum; let's spotlight one of the most common.

A few models to get you going, if you don't know what to say

You can approach improvisation verbally; common verbal models are a story, a meditation, an argument, a speech, a stand-up comedy routine, etc. Each model would sound distinctive, wouldn't it? What tone of voice, what shape of phrase, what length of sentence would you expect with a story? An argument? A comedy routine?

Try this: in two minutes, tell me the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk* in music, using just the first five notes of the C major scale (C, D, E, F, G in any octave). Hint: like most stories, it's in ABA form. First, the story is set in motion; then, Jack goes out and engages with the Giant; and finally, he comes home victorious. (In musical terms, that's Exposition-Development-Recapitulation.)

How will you use those five notes to tell the story? I bet you'll use compositional devices like repetition, sequence (repeating musical material somewhere else), fragmentation and extension. I also bet you'll vary the rhythm a lot. And I bet you'll save some notes for later—not use all five notes the same way all the time, but focus on different note patterns. Sneaky, how I gave you a few suggestions?

If you're still thinking, "How do I start?"—may I suggest an opening motive? Maybe the first one at right? Example 1 sounds heroic, like a fan-

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1: A simple motive. This one may be a sort of fanfare with a heroic mood.

2: Melodic transformation. In this case, the motive appears as a waltz.

3: Motive transformed again. Perhaps a march would accompany Jack marching home with the goose and the harp.

fare (a good intro to the story). Then maybe you'd change to something waltz-like after that, like example 2, when the story is more downhearted.

What would you play when Jack is marching home with the goose and the harp? A march like example 3?

Melodic transformation is a big deal in free improvisation. These are just suggestions. Remember, happily, there is no "one right way" to do this.

Plan your improvisation

Did you think that all improvisation is totally spontaneous? Well, maybe it is in Free Improv (not necessarily tied to any models), but with an improv that tells a story, it never hurts to prepare a structure.

What elements of structure do you want to create? Perhaps you'll decide on the shape of the story? Make up a motive before you start? I'm assuming the story will be in your head, and you'll just tell it in music, but it's also possible to speak a few words of the story and then play them. Jot down some notes if you need to.

You might find yourself taking to

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this like a duck to water, or you might be thinking, "Hey, just give me a page of Telemann and I'll play it."

But I imagine you may be reading this because someone asked you to ornament the Adagio of your Baroque sonata, or devise an interlude between verses of a Medieval troubadour song, or create some divisions the 15th time through a Playford dance tune.

If you want to improvise, it's not enough to play the notes well. You'll need to change the way you think about the notes—from fixed to flexible, from set in stone to open to change. And you'll need to start playing around with these new approaches.

Recapitulation

Now go back to the original task, a two-minute musical retelling of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, using the first five notes of the C scale. Make a few decisions, give it a try. Record yourself.

Listen. Did it work for you? Change it. Try again. How about this time? What happens when you do this?

If you'd like to be reminded of the story, visit *The Story of Jack and the Beanstalk*: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=zurz-pL-uzw**. (Here's an interesting alternative to the original task: play the video, turn the sound off, and improvise an accompaniment to the picture show.)

And finally: this is an experimental, experiential (learn by doing) process. If you read this article, you'll learn something. If you try it, you'll learn more. If you don't succeed at first and try a few different things, you'll learn even more.

Think of it as a vehicle to take you somewhere, and you're the driver.

Read on if you still want some challenges in improvising.

If you've tried a few improvisations on your own (perhaps to the *Jack and the Beanstalk* assignment that starts this LEARN), now you may be ready to improvise on a specific piece.

Improvising variations over the folia ostinato bass pattern (discussed in a FEATURE article in this issue) was a rite of passage for three centuries of Renaissance and Baroque musicians throughout Europe and Great Britain. Like other repeating basses such as the Romanesca and Passamezzo Antico, La Folia's extended 16-bar repeating bass pattern was often associated with a tune. A simple version is at right in the first example. Visit the *AR Extras* page on the ARS website to hear all of these examples.

What would you do to vary that melody? You might repeat some of the notes in a catchy dance rhythm, like in the second example

Now you do it

Play examples 1 and 2 on the ARS website (in A minor at A=440), Since they 're not very hard, listen as you play them for the way the melody and bass seem to dance with each other. Sometimes they go in the same direction from bar to bar, sometimes they go in the opposite direction. That's counterpoint in a nutshell.

In example 2, notice how the dotted quarters in the middle of bars 1, 3, 5, etc., seem really long. Then, bars 2, 4, 6, etc., have an answering rhythm. As a matter of fact, I hear two-bar phrases throughout the piece. Can you play example 2 again, and bring out those two-bar phrases?

The harmony takes a quick trip to the relative major

I like to compare this pattern—starting in A minor, taking a peek at C major and going right back to A minor—as peering over your bifocals, a sort of Bifocal Tonality. In much of the late Renaissance and early Baroque,

musicians managed to think both vertically, in chords, as well as horizontally, in melodic lines. That meant that, remarkably, some pieces were modal and tonal at the same time.

In the folia, the E major chord (as in measure 2) has a $G^\sharp$—the raised seventh note, or leading tone, in A minor—but at the same time, there's a G major chord in bar 4. It moves to C major, and then backtracks to A minor by bar 8, like a palindrome. It sounds pretty wonderful, arching up towards the middle of the phrase like a wave and then coming down to the V chord in bar 8.

Bars 9-16 repeat that pattern, cadencing in A minor to end. It creates a real sense of traveling away and then coming home.

Listen to this chord progression on the *AR Extras* page. When you improvise over the folia bass, it's important to listen for that short trip to C major. You'll be taking a melodic pattern and repeating it over the chord progression in the bass; you don't want to be surprised.

One way to improvise over the folia bass

Keeping the simple melody of example 1 as our template (starting point), let's improvise some variations. I like to start by creating a musical nugget: a combination of a short, memorable rhythm and a short, memorable melody. The nugget doesn't have to be too complicated—but if it's too simple you won't remember it, and neither will anyone else. And you've got to remember it so that you can vary it all the way through the 16-bar pattern.

Let's keep that two-bar phrasing we heard when we create our template. In example 3 are some suggestions, just using bars one and two of the piece.

You can tell I like going down to the E at the end of bar 2. I also like lengthening the second beat of bar 1, and I like to outline a chord with my melodies. You may like other things,

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4: La Folia. A simplified version of the bass line with soprano line that fits the implied harmonies.

5: Rhythmic folia tune. Dance rhythms applied to the folia theme.

6: Possible nuggets for improvising over the first two measures of the folia bass line.

7: The entire 16-measure pattern in the folia theme. With the nugget adjusted to fit the harmonies.

Visit the ARS web site to hear and play along with these examples, **https://americanrecorder.org/ american_recorder_magazine_ ex.php**.

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Keep it simple to start with.

and your nuggets will be different from mine. You might want to make up some nuggets in advance, and then you can play with them when you improvise.

Just a word: if your nugget has lots of runs and skips, it will be hard to improvise over the chord pattern. I'd keep it simple to start with.

Once you've got a collection of nuggets, what do you do now? You play the nugget, adjusting it to the chords in the chord pattern. Sometimes improvisers change the pattern at the cadences: for instance, coming to a pause at the semi-cadence at bar 8, or adding a more active cadence pattern in bar 15. Sometimes they change the nugget a bit in the second eight bars of the pattern.

There are a lot of ways to do it, like those in example 7, but the most important thing is to make sure you move your nugget around so it harmonizes with the new chord in each bar. As you do that, a corner of your ear needs to make sure you stay in rhythm with your accompanist. No fair rushing.

Coda

Improvising over an ostinato bass isn't easy at first, but it's not impossible. If you listen to the final sound example on the ARS website, you'll hear a very slow version of the bass, so you can try your different nuggets. You can find the chords in the progression by ear, you can look at them in the sheet music or you can make yourself a lead sheet with just the chord names.

La Folia is a more intricate bass pattern than some, and you might find that you want to write down a few things in preparation. See if you can put them away as you get to know the piece better. Have fun! ✿

Music

A ground with variations, ornamentation advice, holiday music and titles from a new publisher

01	Paul's Steeple: Anonymous Variations on a Ground	edited by Joseph A. Loux, Jr
02	The Ornamentation of Baroque Music	by Manfredo Zimmerman
03	Azure Sky of Night	by Joseph A. Loux, Jr.
04	In Memoriam (for Charles Nagel)	In a set, written in memory of three musicians, by Will Ayton
05	Carols Around the World	arranged by Marg Hall
06	Motets for Four Voices, Volume 1	by Tomás Luis de Victoria, edited by Charles Nagel
07	In dir ist Freude (In Thee is Gladness)	by G.G. Gastoldi, arranged by Joseph A. Loux, Jr.
08	Music for Christmas	edited by Manfred Harras
09	Weihnachtslieder für Blockflöte: 20 leichte Lieder zu Winter, Advent und Weihnachten	edited by Klaus K. Weigele with Angela Schmauder-Scheytt

KEY: rec=recorder; S'o=sopranino; S=soprano; A=alto; T=tenor; B=bass; gB=great bass; cB=contra bass; Tr=treble; qrt=quartet; pf=piano; fwd=foreword; opt=optional; perc=percussion; pp=pages; sc=score; pt(s)=part(s); kbd=keyboard; bc=basso continuo; hc=harpsichord; P&H=postage/handling.