

Pathways to Improvisation
for
Classical Pianists

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Improvisation can be daunting for classical pianists because we spend all our time working on playing music *one way*. Whether we are playing solo concert pieces, chamber music, or sight-reading in rehearsal, in all cases there is an authoritative written version: there is *one way* to play it right.

Improvisation deals not with one way of playing but with a range of possibilities. When one improvises, there may be two or ten or infinite ways to play at any given moment. The difference in musical thinking between scripted and improvised music is vast, and learning to improvise requires significant practice and preparation.

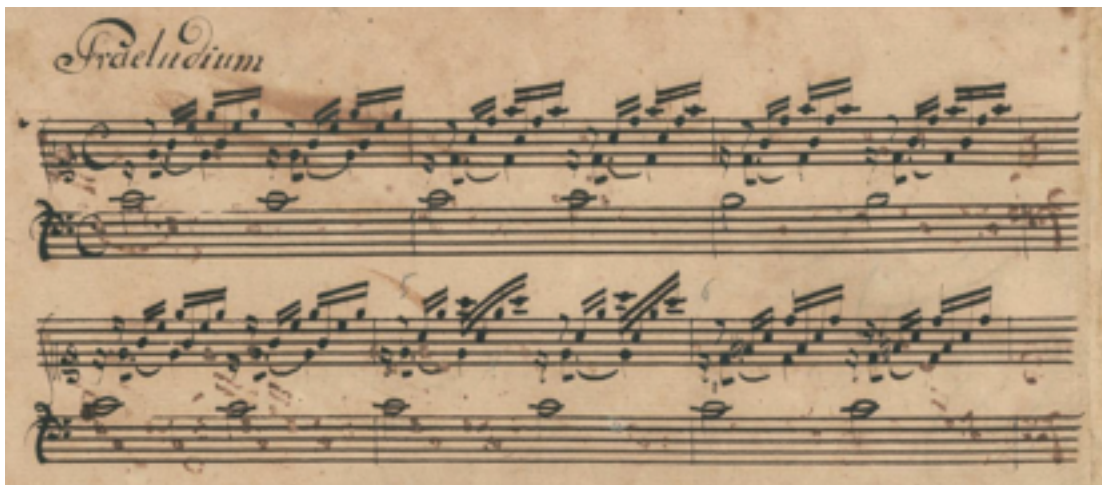
Well-known improvisers such as Keith Jarrett, Brad Mehldau, Gabriela Montero, and Noam Sivan are so excellent at their craft that they make it look like magic. This makes some pianists believe that perhaps it really is magic, or some kind of mystical gift that one either has or has not. That is not the case, however. With all accomplished improvisers, one can trace their abilities back to a long process of gradual learning. Improvisation is a craft, learned by increments over time.

Simple methods of improvisation allow classical pianists to explore the craft at an accessible level. Over time, practicing these “pathway” methods leads to greater insight and confidence in improvisation.

The Figuration Prelude

Page 1 of the Well-Tempered Clavier is a figuration prelude. It’s a composition made of a chord progression elaborated by a consistent texture of figuration. (Baroque composers loved consistent figuration.) You can make up your own figuration preludes.

1. Take the C major prelude. Keep the chords the same. Make up your own figuration.
2. Transpose it to some other keys, first with the original figuration, then with your own.
3. Make up your own chord progression, or steal one from another piece. Add figuration and transpose.



Rule of the Octave

The image displays two staves of musical notation in bass clef, illustrating the Rule of the Octave. The first staff shows a major scale with figured bass notation: 6 6 6, 6 6, 6 #6, 2 6 6. The second staff shows a minor scale with figured bass notation: 6 6 6, # 6 6, 6 6 #, 2 6 6. A '5' is written above the first note of the second staff.

The Rule of the Octave

C.P.E. Bach recommended this method for beginning improvisers. The Rule of the Octave is a system for harmonizing a moving, stepwise bass line. In its simplest form, the Rule is a set of inversions that work over a scale in the bass. Combined with the technique of the figuration prelude, it allows for spontaneous creation of short preludes. They tend to sound like “openers” because Bach and others often used this method to write introductory music, especially for organ. The Rule changes a bit depending on whether it’s major or minor.

1. Learn the Rule in major and minor, ascending and descending, in block chords.
2. Add consistent figuration.
3. Transpose to many other keys.
4. Voice something – say, the top note in each chord – to create a melody.

Improvisation, like sight-reading or scales and arpeggios, is a skill that develops through intelligent practice over time. Daily practice of basic improv techniques will quickly lead to greater facility. The two most important things to do when practicing improvisation are to stay in tempo and to transpose everything you do to multiple keys.