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Introduction

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

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

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

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

*Il
faut
chercher*

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

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

Allons-y! Let’s go!

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

Charles Tournemire

(“César Franck,” translated by Ralph James Kneeream, 1989)

Part I

“The way to improvise is to improvise.”

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

Chapter 1 What is Improvisation?

“Improvisation: Quintessential domain of the mysterious.

The ability to construct spontaneously a battle plan, a discourse, a musical work.
Napoléon, Vincent Ferrer, J.S. Bach, Beethoven, César Frank were great improvisers.”

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

What is improvisation?

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

*Great choices
lead to great
improvisations.*

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

How does one define improvisation in the modern French style?

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

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

Why learn to improvise?

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

L’importance de cette branche de l’orgue est telle que l’on peut affirmer, que l’organiste qui est frappé de “paralysie” – au sens figuré du mot – et, partant, dans l’impossibilité d’improviser, ne peut être considéré, en dépit d’une grande agilité des pieds et des mains, que comme une moitié d’organiste!

(The importance of this branch of playing the organ is such that one might affirm that the organist who is struck by “paralysis”—in a matter of speaking—by his inability to improvise, in spite of his great ability with the feet and hands, is only half an organist!)

Can one learn to improvise?

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

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

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

*Quintessential
domain of the
mysterious.*

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

That is what we will attempt to do in this book.