EDINBURGH SOCIETY OF ORGANISTS

Lecture/demonstration by John Riley:

'Organ improvisation - revealing the art'

Saturday 18th November 2023, 2.30pm - 3.45pm

The Church of the Sacred Heart, Lauriston Street, Edinburgh

(Many thanks to Fr. Adrian Porter and Nicky Fraser, Organist at the Church of he Sacred Heart, for hosting us at this magnificent venue).

For further resources, visit: www.johnrileyorganist.com

What is Improvisation?

Improvising is creating music 'on the spot'….. It can be thought of as 'composing in real time' or 'composing speeded up'.

Improvising is not some mysterious art…but one that is inextricably linked with elements that we are already very familiar with through knowledge of repertoire and hymns: i.e. melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, organ colour, style and mood.

Why develop improvisation skills…especially when there is so much written music available?

Improvisation is a *practical* tool…

- Improvised music can be made to fit a particular time frame, and the unexpected.
- Improvised music can make topical references – e.g. to a hymn that has just been sung.

Improvised music is a *creative* tool and outlet, with immediacy – And not just for church but in many musical styles, moods and contexts.

Improvisation can be a confidence builder – The knowledge that you are not totally reliant on the printed page.

Improvising has its challenges – Lots of demands on the brain's memory and processing power, as we deal with many simultaneous processes (as with a computer). And unlike a composition, we cannot go back and make adjustments before it is heard.

However, we can break it down – Simplify and cut out the padding…and simple music is not necessarily less interesting than complex music - in fact, it can be quite the opposite.

Simplicity allows us to focus on the essentials, such as shaping melody lines, marking cadence points, coherent harmony etc.

Improvisation skills are like having radar or a Sat Nav – You are constantly being guided whilst on the move but without the ability to stop to read a road map.

Improvising doesn't necessarily start with a blank canvas – We can also use existing written music or a written-out plan as the basis for an improvisation.

Our overall aim as improvisers: To create music that engages the ear and is fulfilling to in its own right, not just ephemeral music wallpaper!!

And better still… have people saying "That was a nice piece that you played - who's the composer?"

MEMORY IS KEY

- Memory files a repertoire of possible musical building blocks, e.g. rhythms, melodic shapes, harmonic progressions etc.

- Memory informs what material has been presented, from which we can develop and balance it appropriately with other material. Concise and characterful material will greatly help this process.

PROCESSING POWER TOO

Processing power governs how much material can be successfully handled at the same time, as the processor **accesses** the various options on file. However, if the demands of the task outstrip available processing power, everything can **run slow** or, worst of all at erratic speed, **freeze** or totally **crash**, even require an embarrassing **reboot** during the performance! For best results keep it simple!

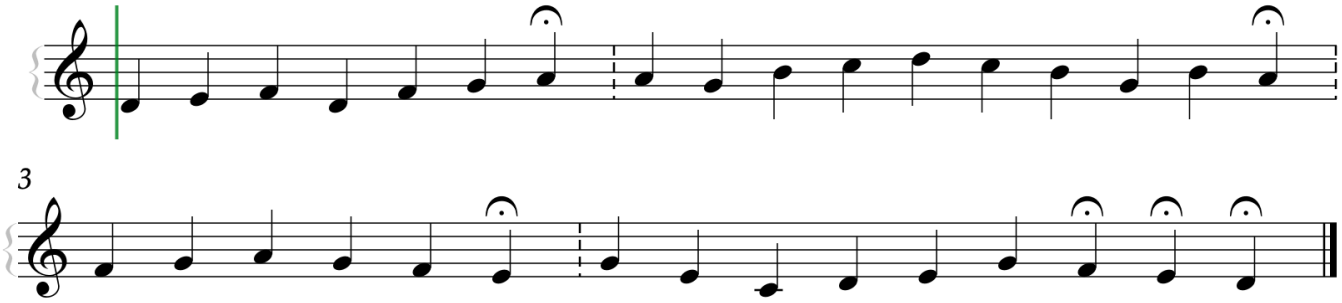
Simpler, i.e. fewer memory and processing demands	**Advanced, i.e. greater memory and processing demands**
Slow tempo	Fast tempo
Simple texture	Complex texture
Lots of repeated thematic material	Lots of different thematic material
Set parameters, e.g. written-out melodic and/or harmonic outline	Few given parameters, e.g. a improvisation on a submitted theme
Short length, e.g. brief linking interlude on a hymn tune	More substantial length, e.g. a final improvised voluntary on the last hymn
Few compositional choices and decisions to make	Many compositional choices and decisions to make

STARTING WITH A BLANK CANVAS

Shaping melody I: *No meandering strings of notes*

For example:- using non-metrical phrase patterns, and well-defined phrases, such as:

Plainsong-Style Melody



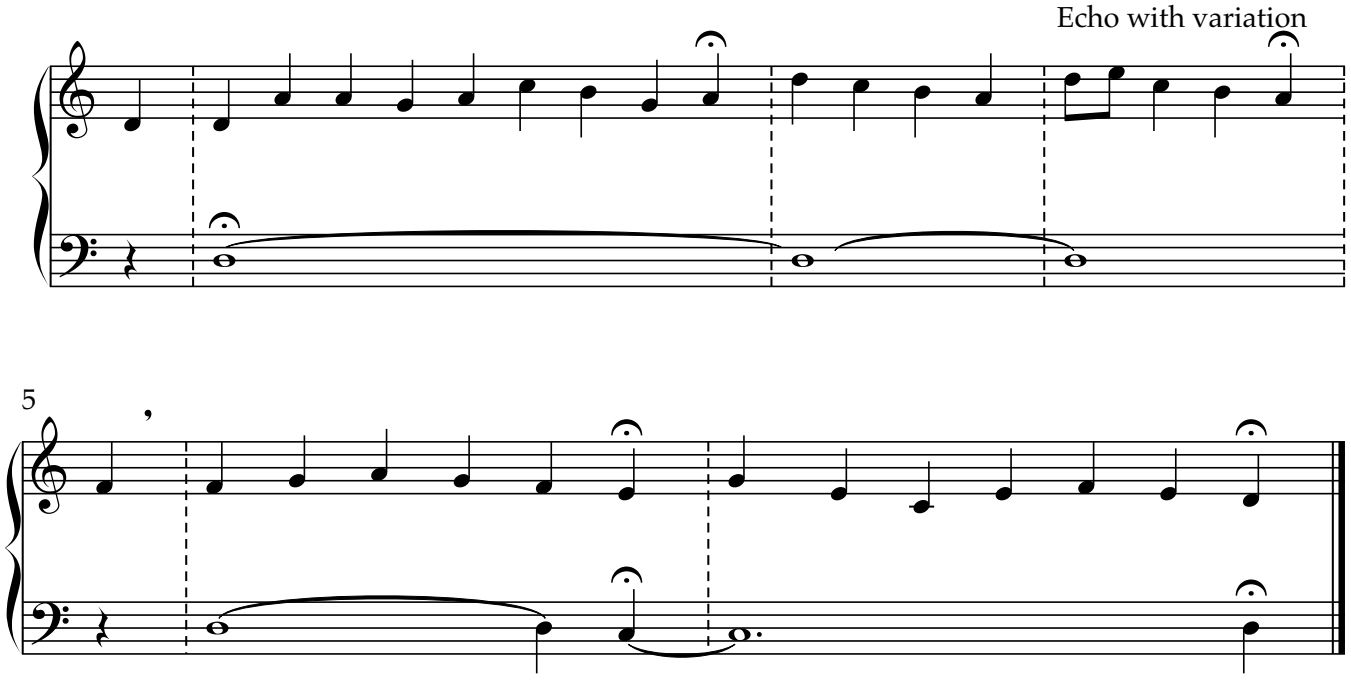
Harmony and counterpoint I: *drone basses*

To this we can add one or two drones (fixed) bass line.

With a drone, note how each melody note of the mode creates a slightly different level of dissonance and colour, i.e. instant harmony with minimal effort!

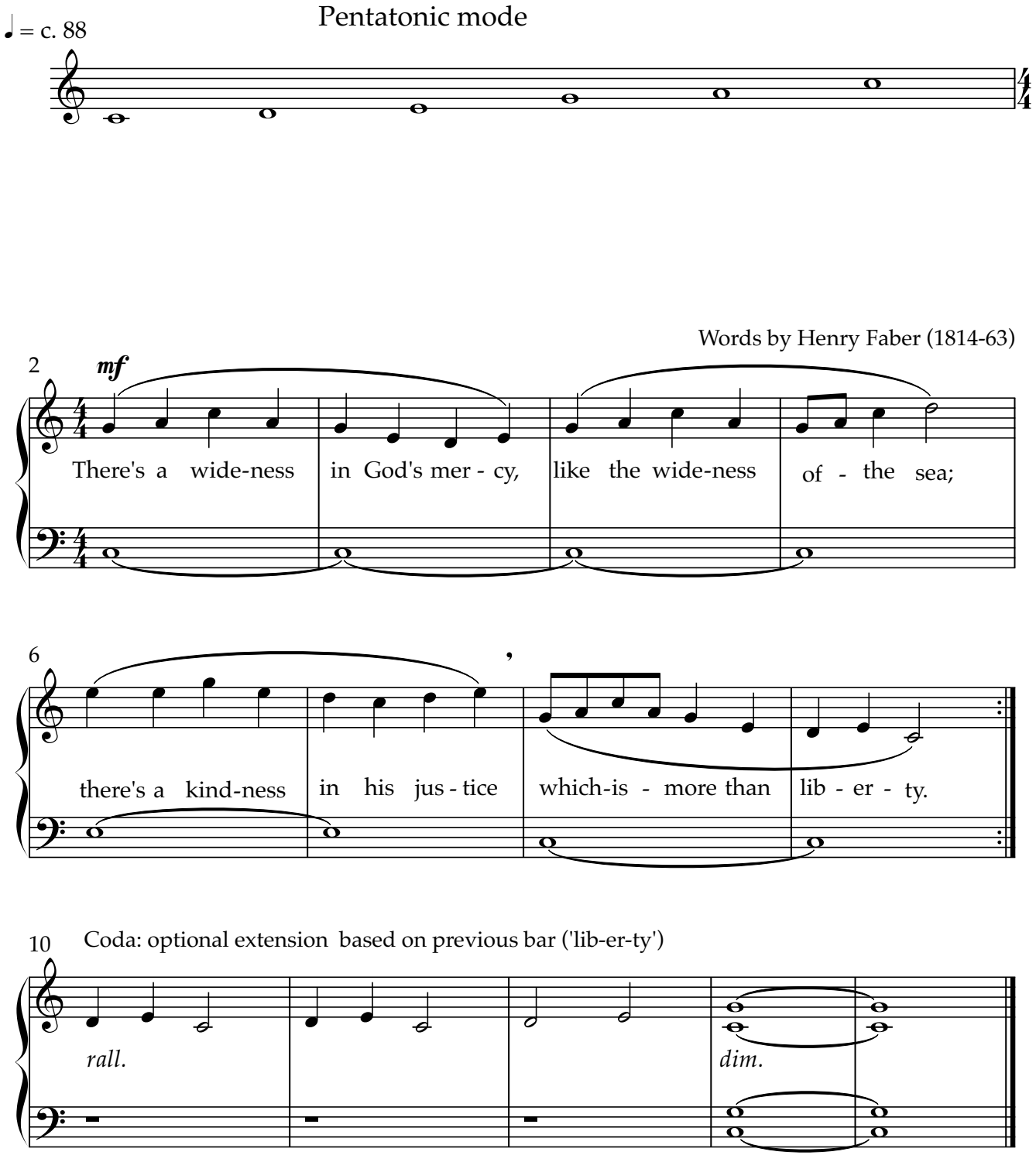
Note how different melody notes can imply a sense of continuing on or resolution and finish.

Note also how the Dorian mode (white notes D-D') alternating with the Ionian mode (C-C') can provide contrasting ‘minor’ and ‘major’ feel and an implied cadence.



To this other harmonies could be added, for example, moving parallel fifths.

Shaping melody IV: *using the metre of a text*

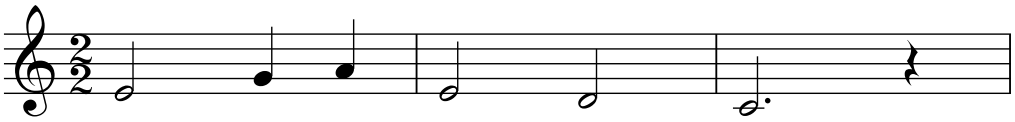


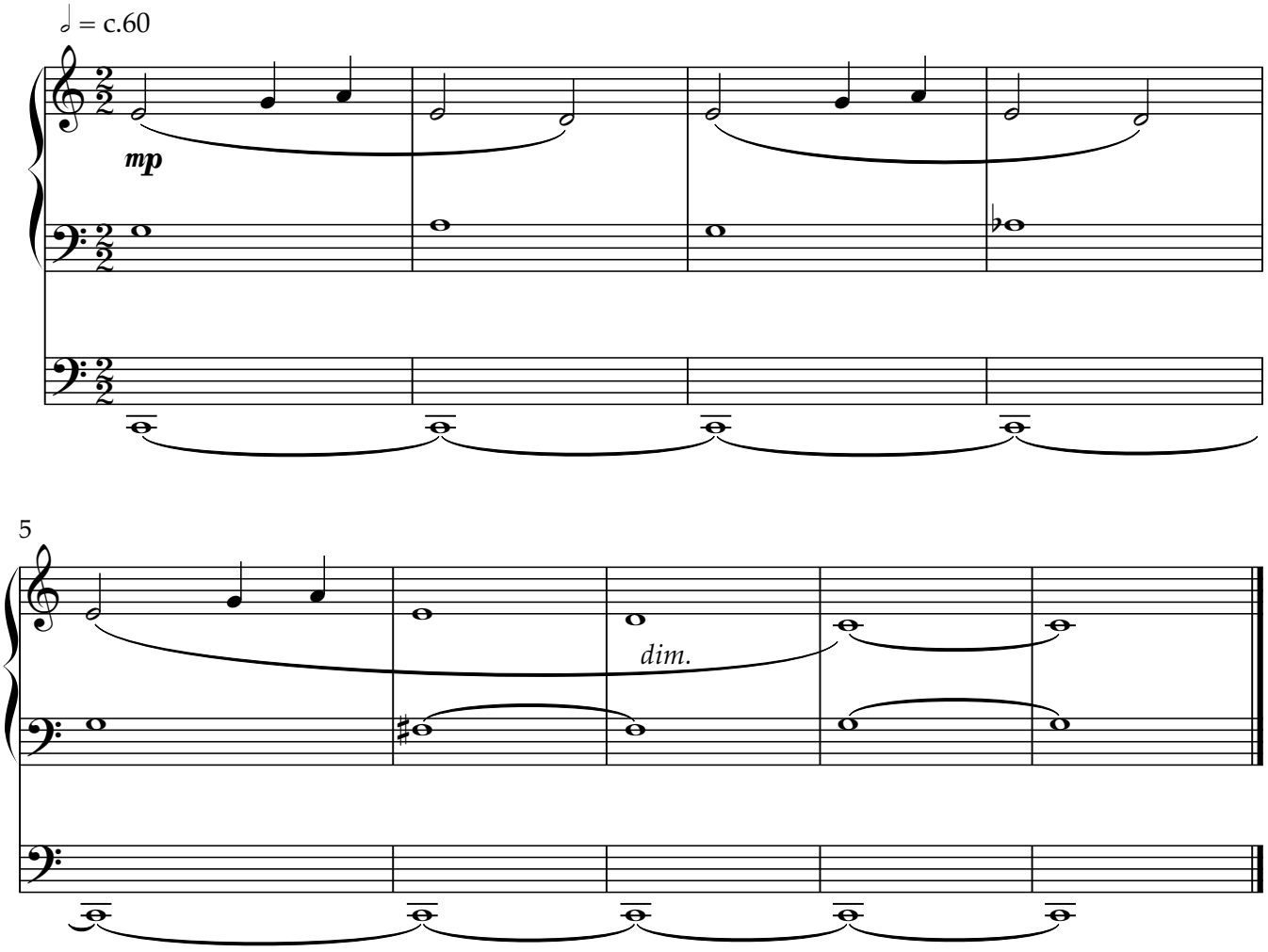
Shaping melody V: *Using a single motif*

Improvising isn't necessarily about starting with a blank canvas; indeed, using an existing melody, particularly one that is in the mind of the listener, can add connection and a reference point; the interest lies then in charting how the variation develops the original.

Identifying an appropriate part of a tune is key to a successful improvisation or composition. The 'theme' could be drawn from just the first phrase of the original hymn melody, for example: *Love Unknown.* Note also how the small shifts of harmony note render different hues to the same or similar melodic phrase

Original theme



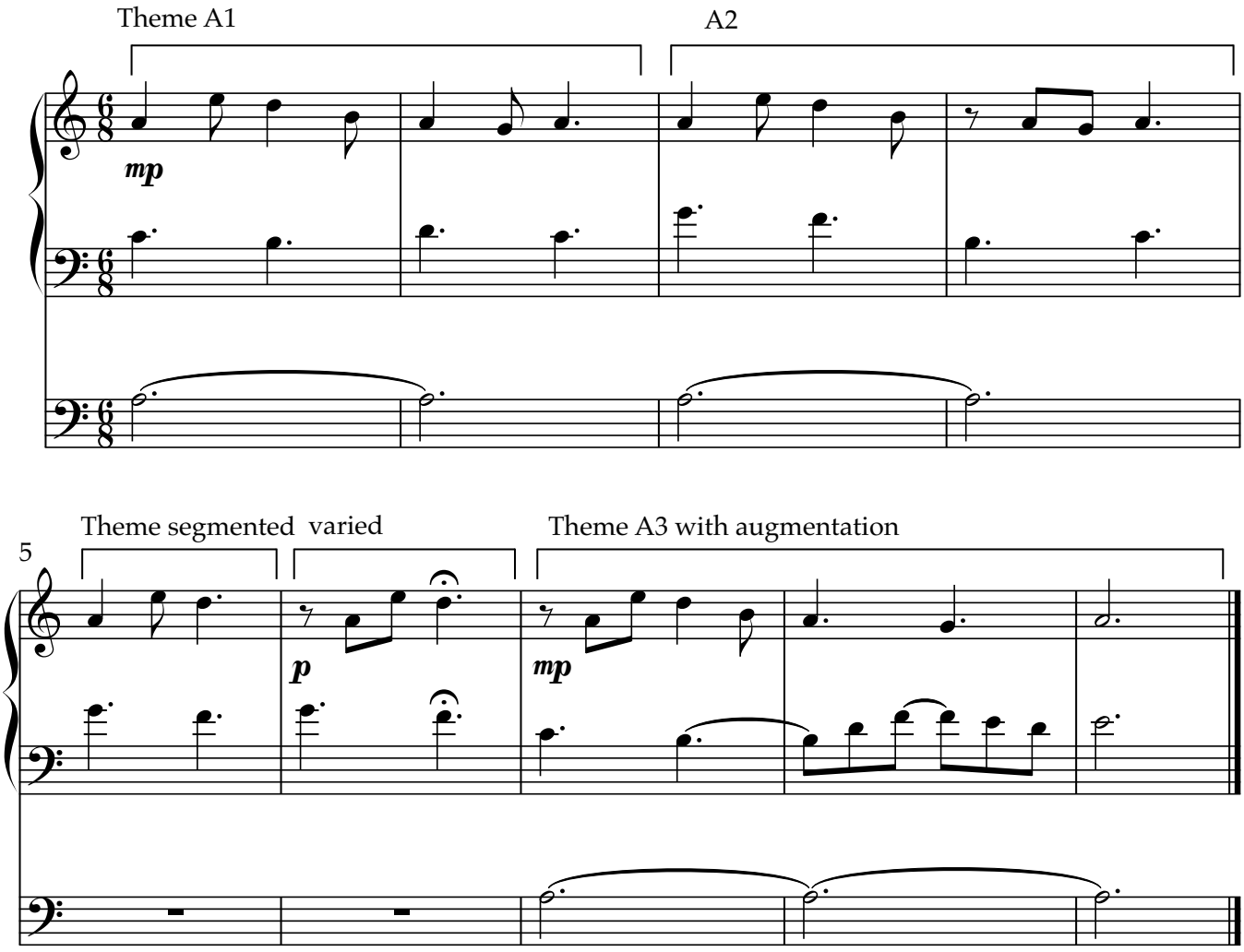


This is the briefest and most pared-down of interludes. A more extended version might include: arpeggiation in the left hand around the above chord structure; modulation, for example into E minor; using the rhythmic structure of the melody (first two bars) to create a secondary melody.

Shaping melody VI: *Establishing and developing a memorable theme*

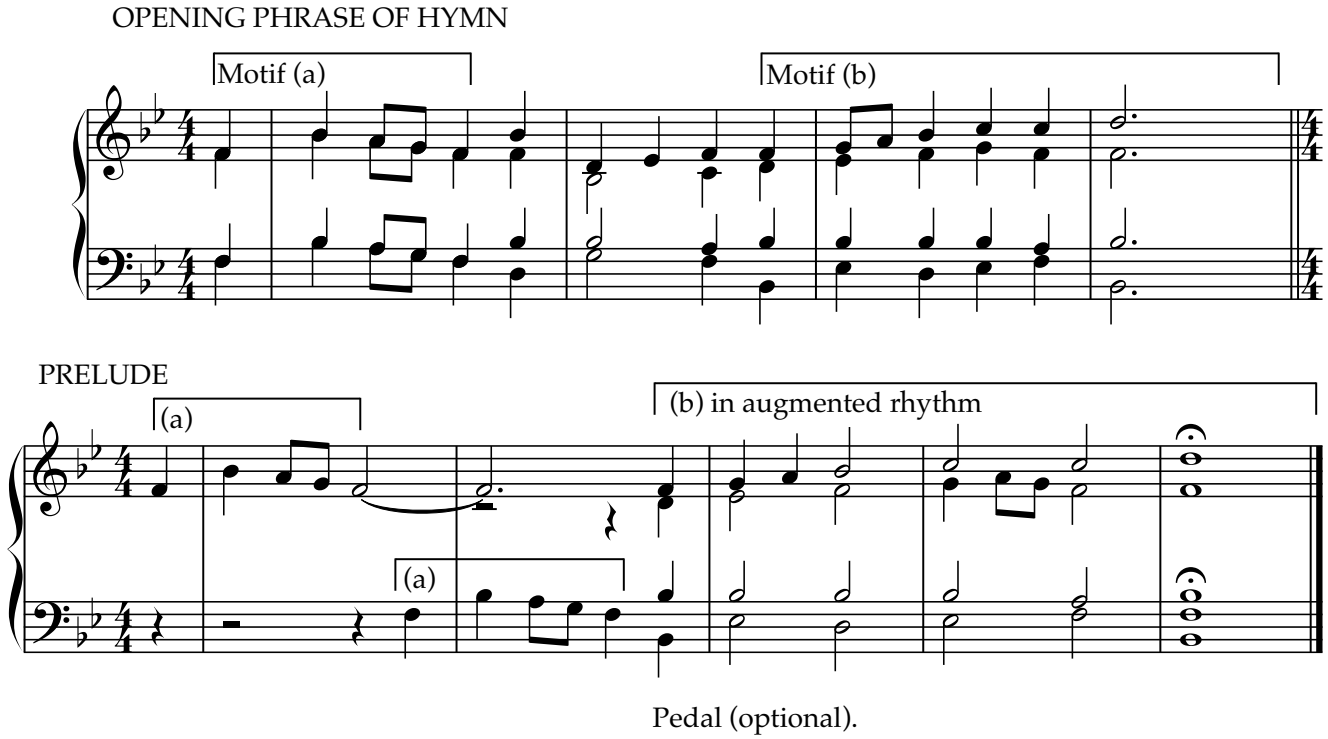
Even a short phrase can spawn various related phrases and create coherence whilst avoiding monotony.
(Creating memorable and characterful phrases or whole melodies can be surprisingly elusive!)

This brief interlude in the Aeolian mode could be a useful template, and one that could be expanded upon, for example, though repeating the material with added arpeggios around the underlying harmony.

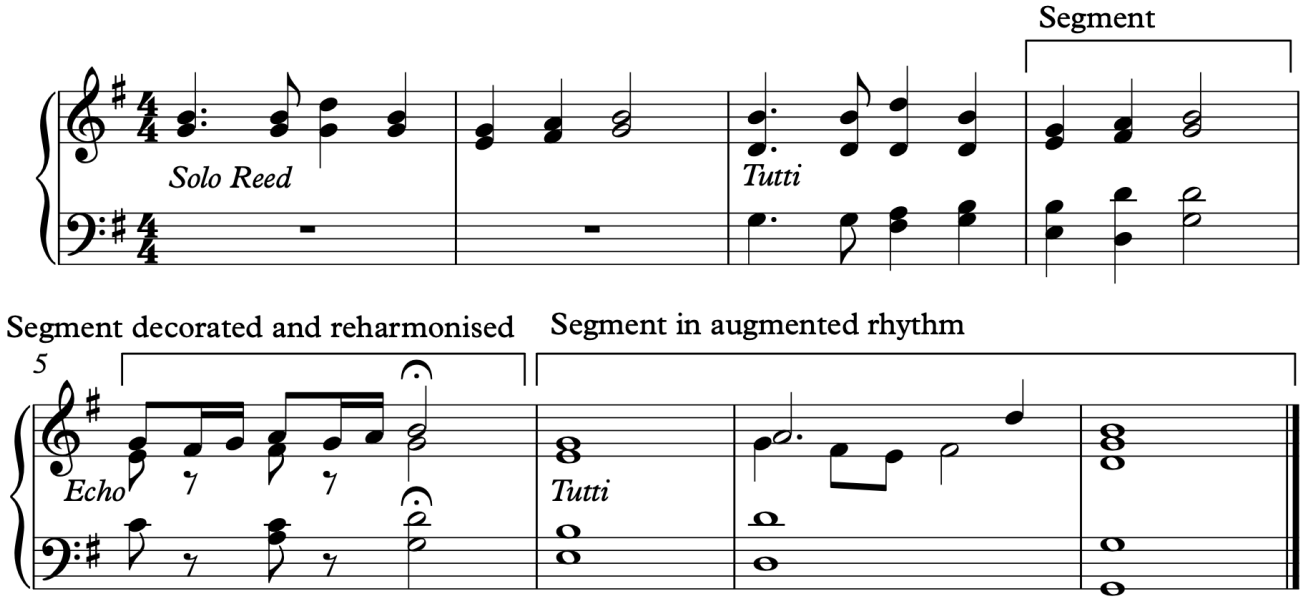


Shaping melody VII: *Reworking an existing melody (and harmony)*

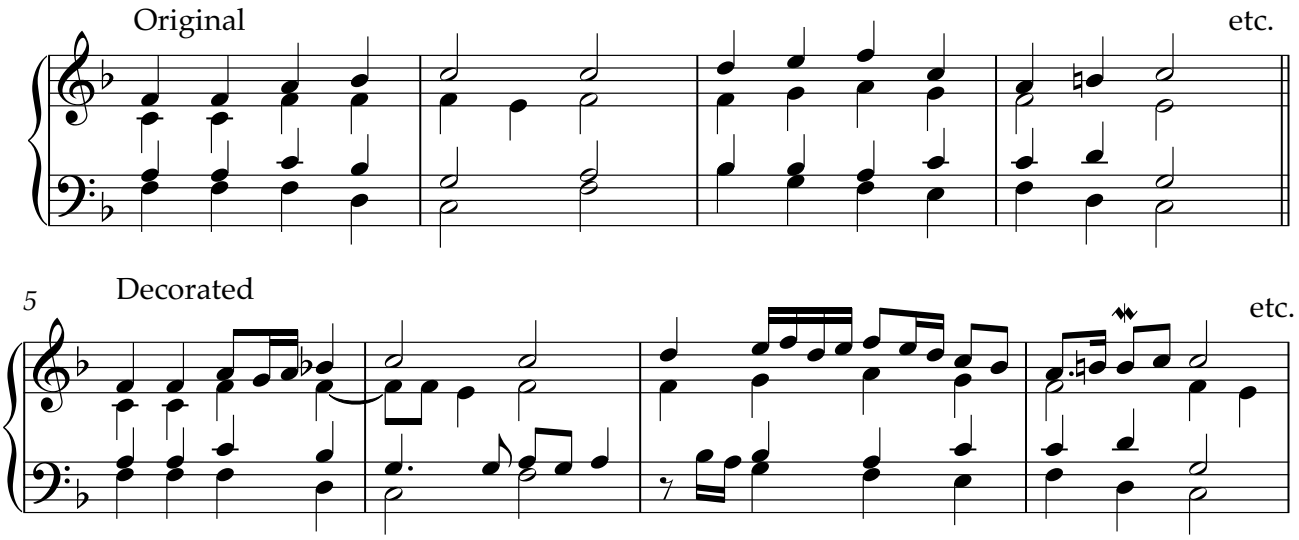
Improvising isn't necessarily about creating music from a totally blank canvas. Sometimes, all that is required is simple cut and paste whilst using much if not all the existing harmony. Here, we can extend material by the simple segmentation or augmentation of the existing rhythms, for example on the hymn tune *Ellacombe.*



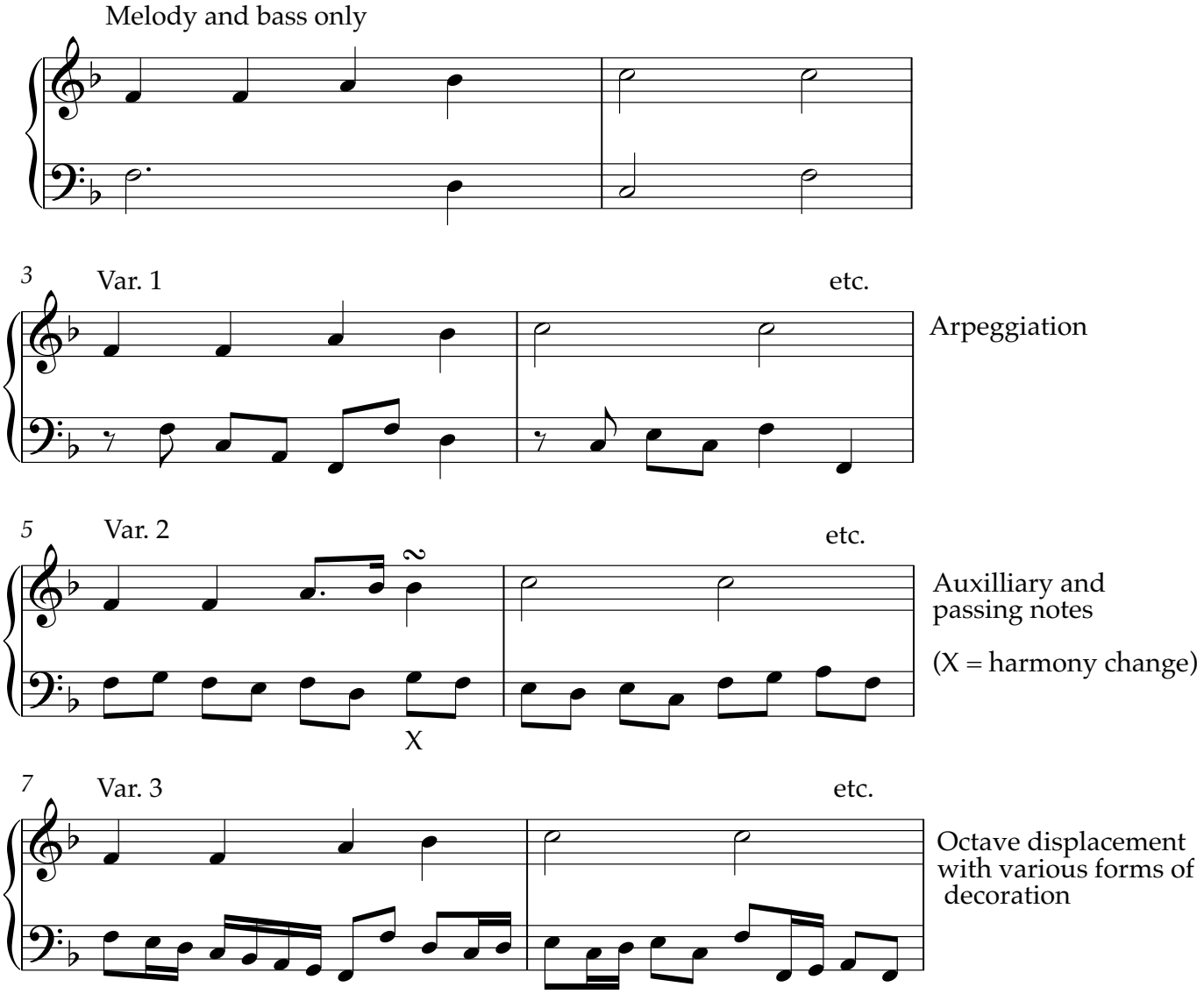
Or on *St George's Windsor*



We can also play the original hymn in 'real time' with added decorations built around the existing harmony as in *Ravenshaw.* The variation could be a more meditative interlude at slower tempo in the manner of a choral prelude.

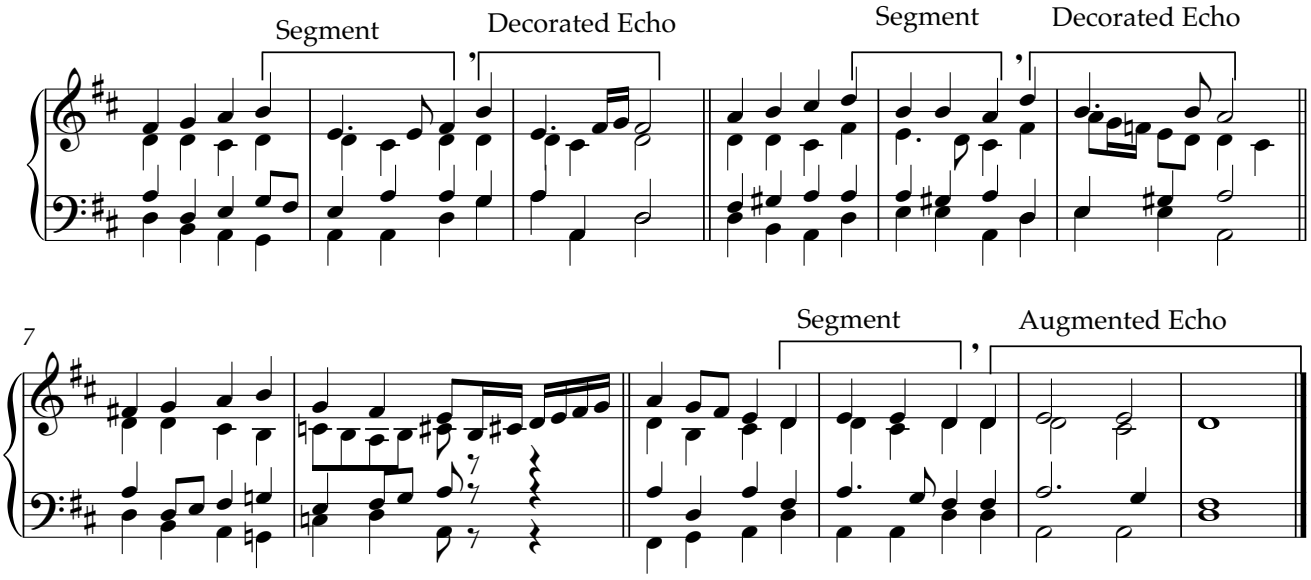


Alternatively, take out the middle alto and tenor parts to create a two-part chorale partita, perhaps with the top line played on a solo registration. We might also change the occasional bass note from root position to first inversion or vice-versa, or even re-harmonise the odd melody note.



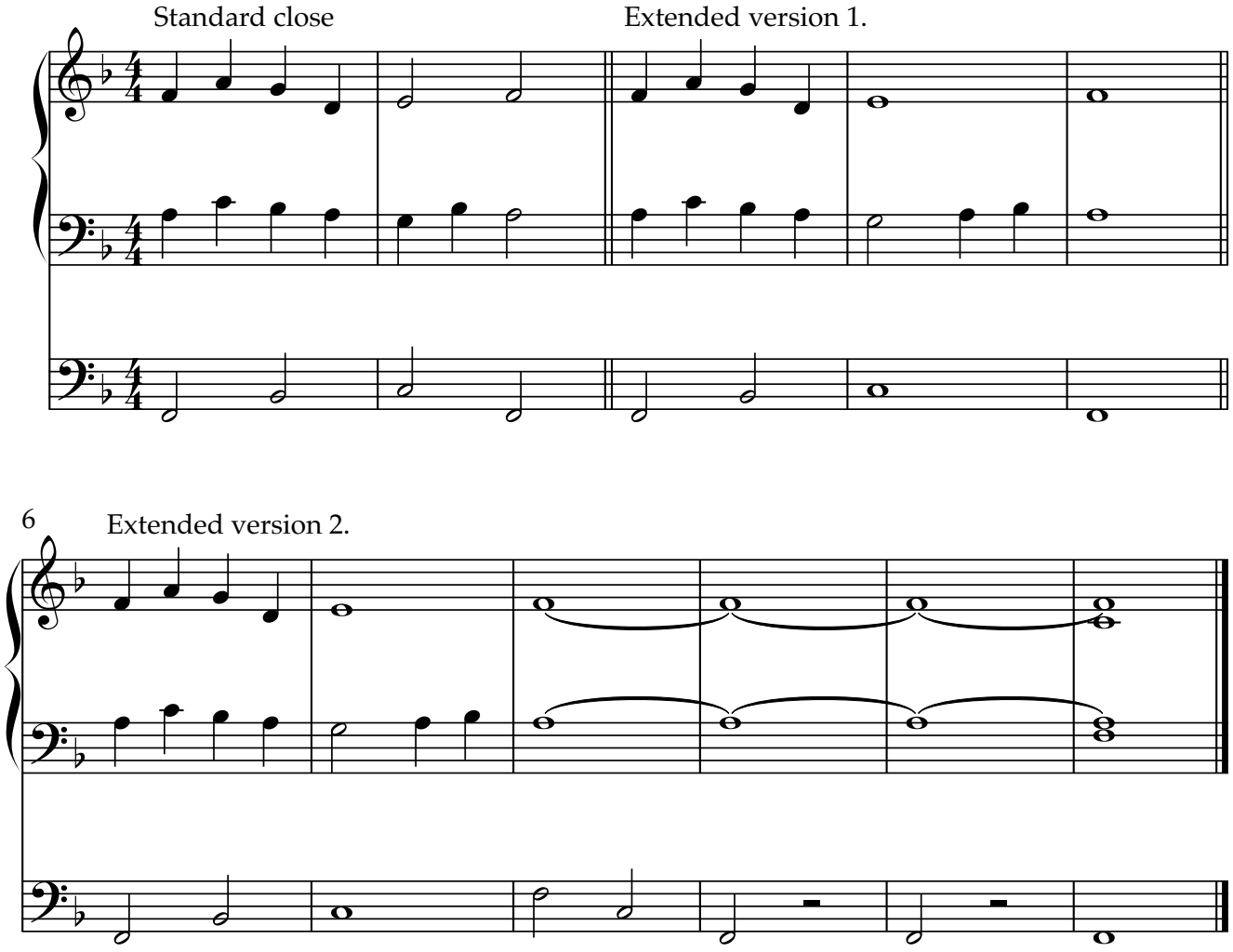
We could also insert echo phrases based on a segment from a previous phrase. This technique would work well with other hymn tunes by Gibbons, for example, *Song 34*, but also a variety of other tunes, particularly those with their origins in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Echo Fantasia on Song 13 (Gibbons)



THE CONTROLLED STOP……

A very important role in any improvisation is to come to a halt just at the right moment. Just like a train has to draw carefully to a halt just at the right point on the platform. Avoid coming to a finish too early and then adding a coda of pointless and musically empty note-spinning until it is time to stop. Silence would probably be better than sound for the sake of sound. Better still, start a new short improvisation or best of all, make everything sound part of the same piece with any extension relating structurally to the whole, for example by retaining the existing harmonic shape. This can be done by augmenting the rhythm of the planned cadence, perhaps with some added decorative notes. If you can keep signalling the pulse to the listener, you will sound to be in control and able to shape the outcome. Here is just one example:



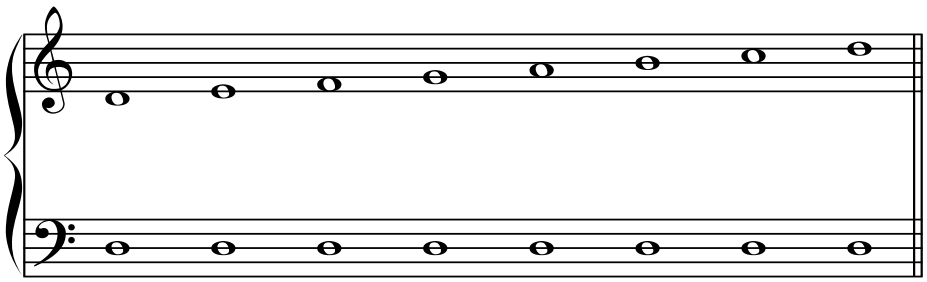
This can also be used with hymn tunes (though not as accompaniment to singing!). Simply augment the rhythms of the last few bars, possibly adding some faster-moving arpeggios and/or passing notes around the basic harmony to help keep things moving. This would work well for a hymn tune such as *Cruger.*

Exploring harmony and counterpoint II: *Expressive harmony through the Dorian Mode*

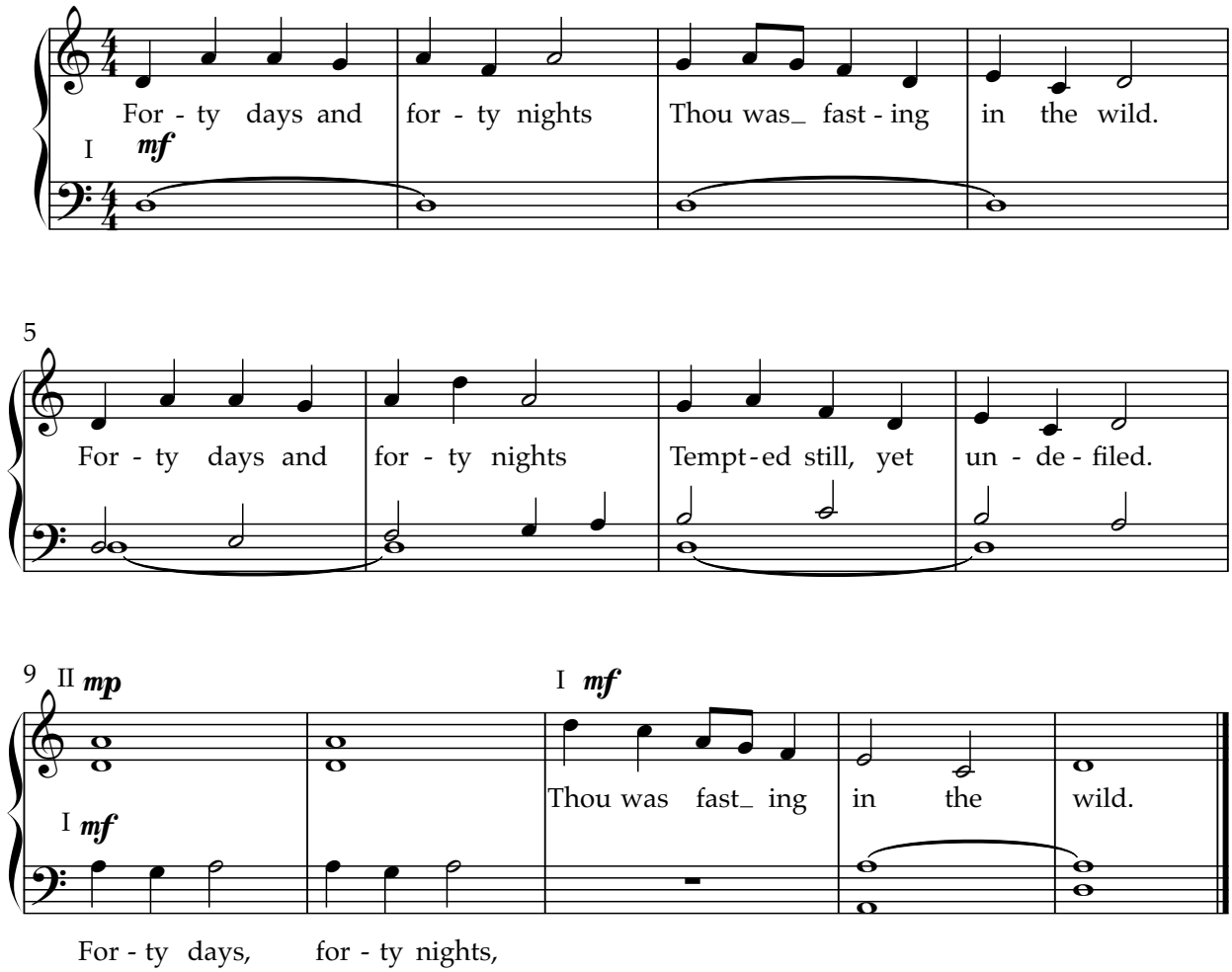
Harmony is perhaps most challenging and processing-intensive aspect of improvisation…

Our thinking is often governed by diatonic harmony ('hymnbook harmony', perhaps), which at its most basic consists of I IV V chords. However, there are other forms of harmonisation which are in many ways easier to use, yet in no way lacking character, variety or historical precedents in the repertoire.

Perhaps the simplest and most flexible mode to use is the **Dorian Mode (D-D').** Music in the Dorian mode has many historical precedents, from the Medieval to the modern day. Many composers, such as Vaughan Williams and Howells make frequent use of this mode, albeit mixed with elements of other modes and diatonicism. Even with just a fixed bass note, there are many different levels of dissonance and harmonic colour can be created between melody and fixed bass; also between individual melody notes. Each interval has its own character.

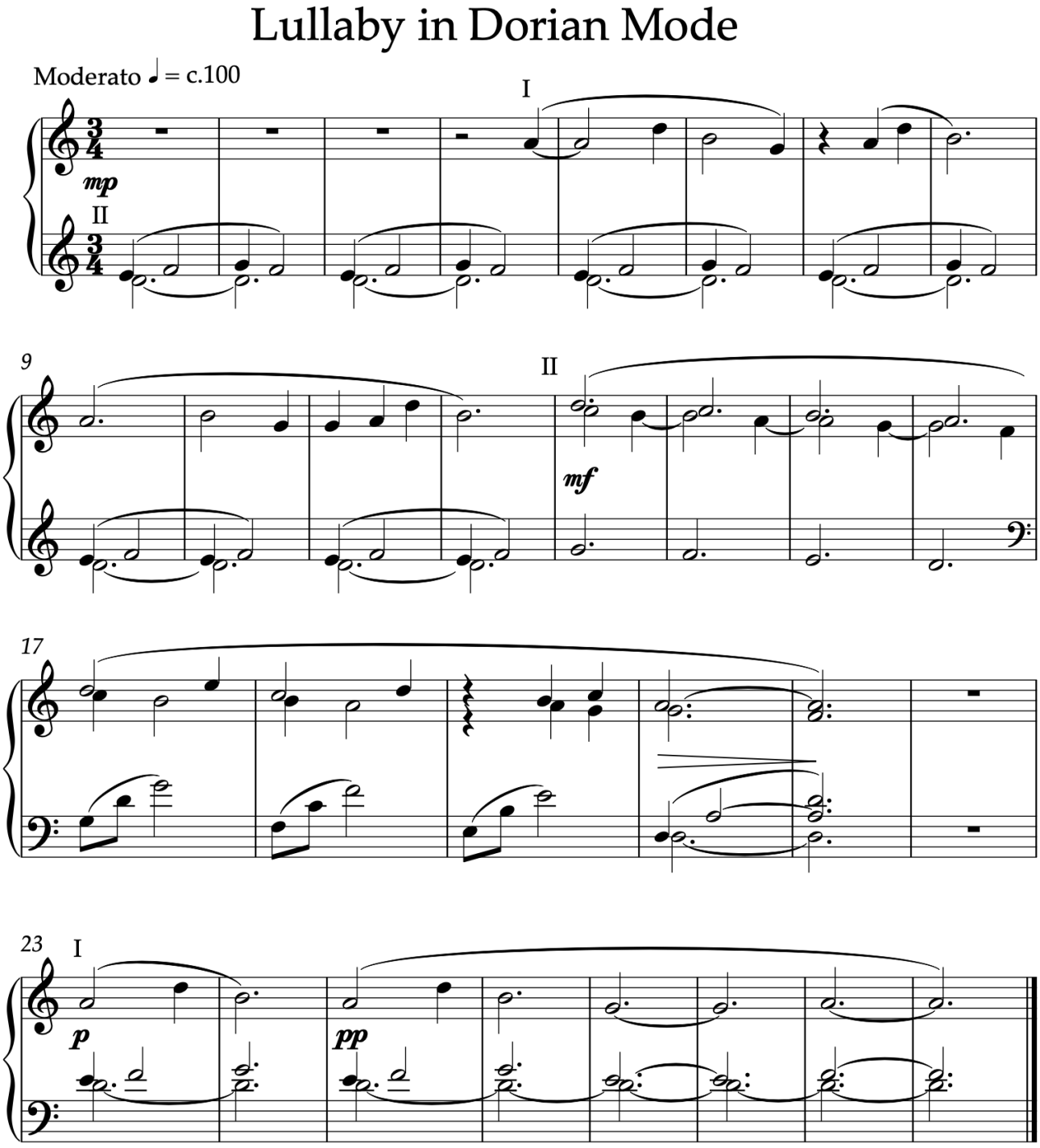


We can even add one or more inner parts, in this case using the basic rhythmic shape and metre of an existing tune, for example, *Aus der Tiefe,* to create a new one.



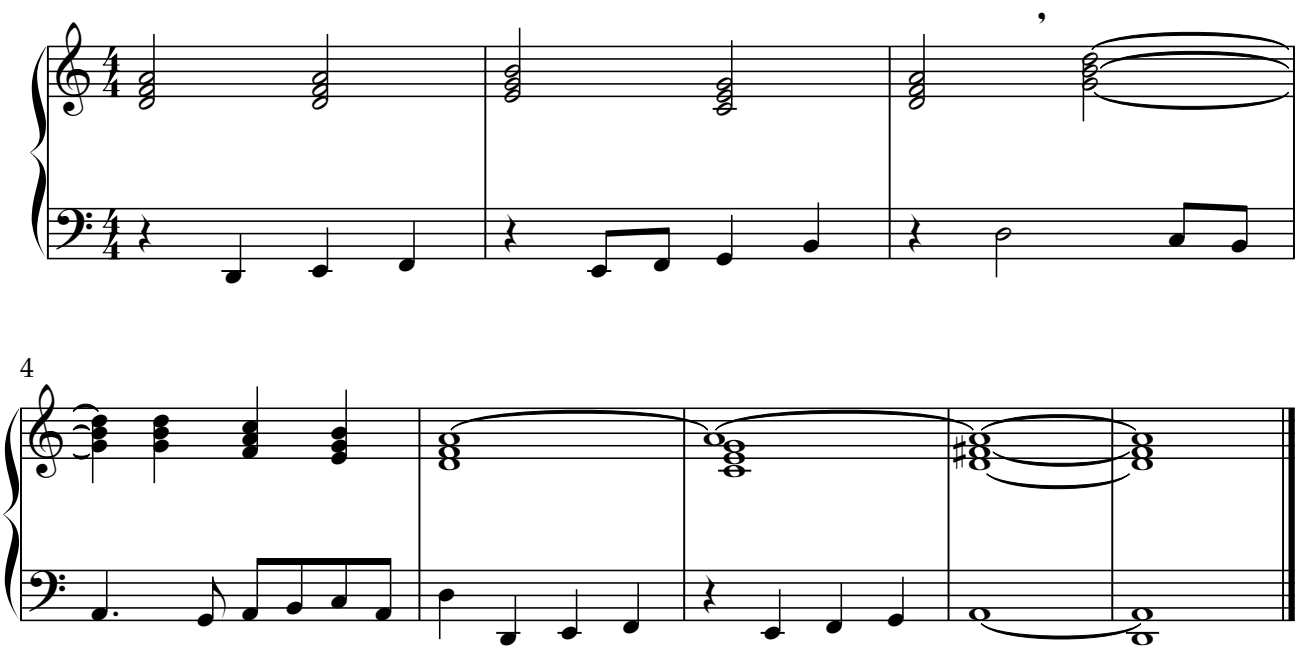
In the following example, note the use of accented passing notes and suspensions in creating an expressive effect, something easily achieved in the Dorian mode just as in a diatonic key.

SUGGESTED REGISTRATION:
Manual I: 8ft. flute
Manual II 8ft. flute and strings
I + II coupled



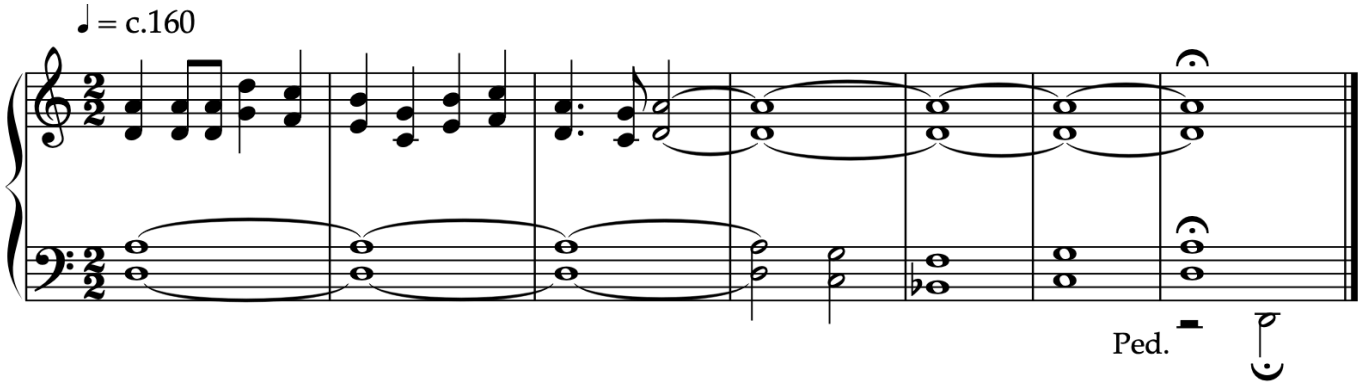
Exploring harmony and counterpoint III. *Using different figurations and textures within the mode.*

Parallel intervals also enables us to use consistent hand shapes (a form of 'finger memory') to find the notes.



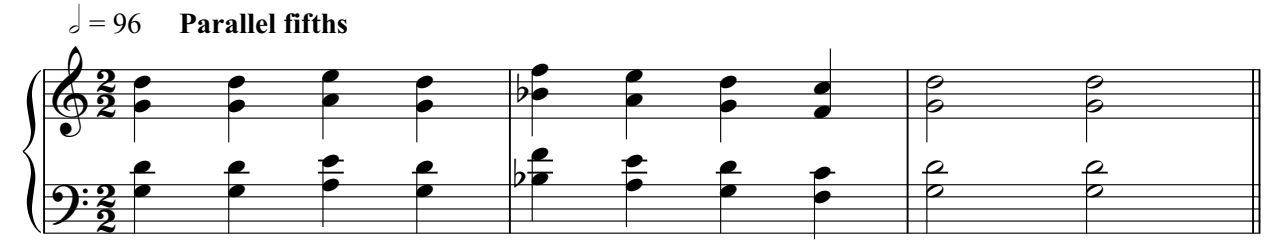
Parallel fifths: perfect for fanfares!

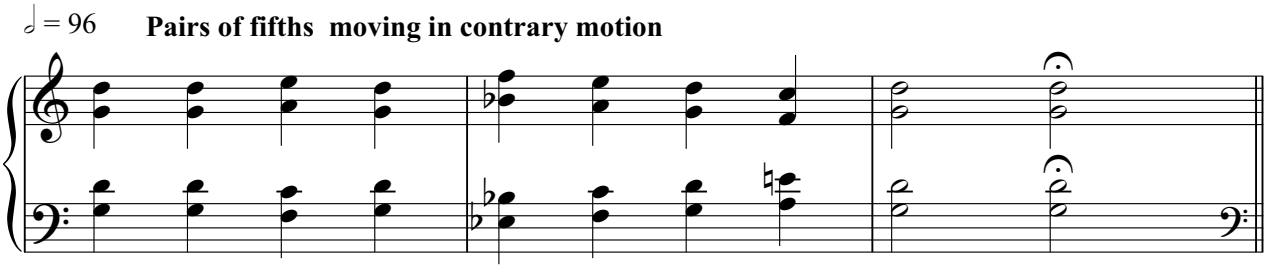
(Note the B flat to preserve the perfect fifths; note also how the juxtaposition of fifths can create harmonic colour, tension and a sense of resolution.)

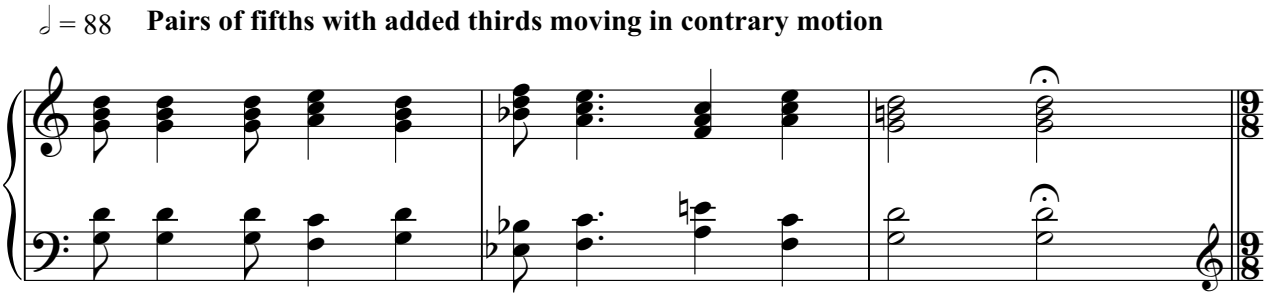


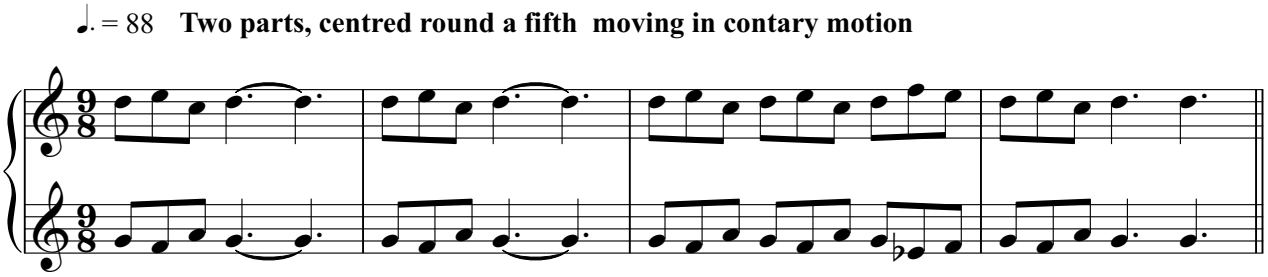
More on fanfares!

Open fifths and triads in parallel motion have a certain archaic, even regal quality, with echoes of music of the medieval period. They were much-used in British music of the 20th century by such composers as Mathias, Vaughan Williams, Walton, Leighton, albeit with very definite 20th century hues.





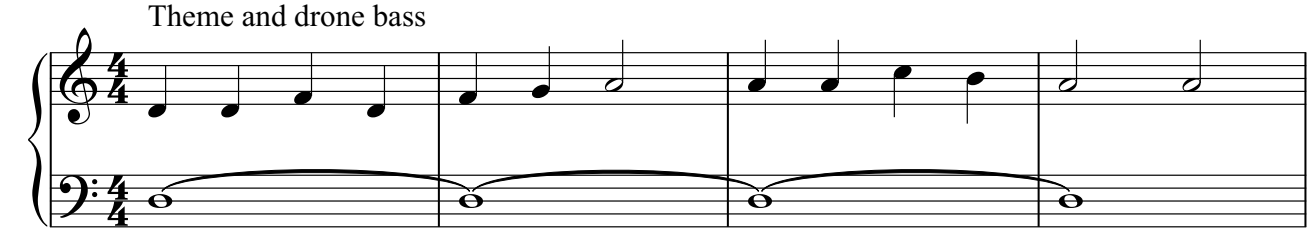




Exploring harmony and counterpoint IV. *Employing various figurations and harmonisations within the mode*

Dorian theme and variations

Theme and drone bass



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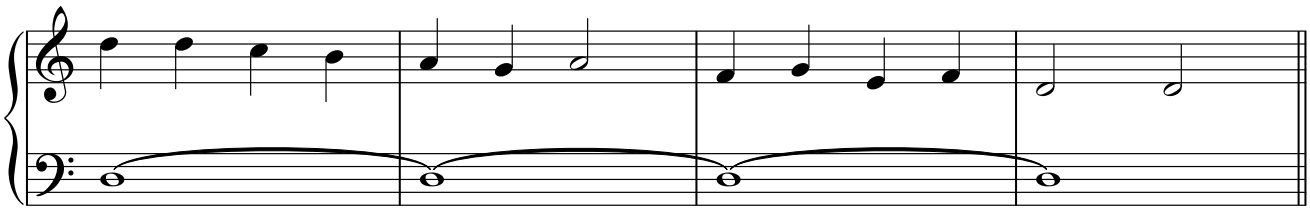
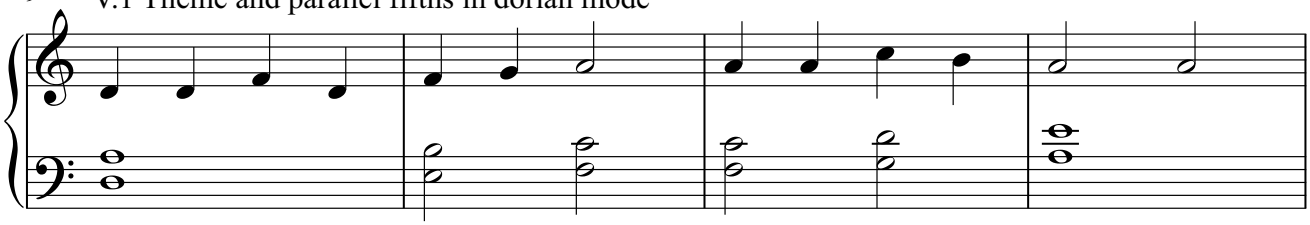


9 V.1 Theme and parallel fifths in dorian mode



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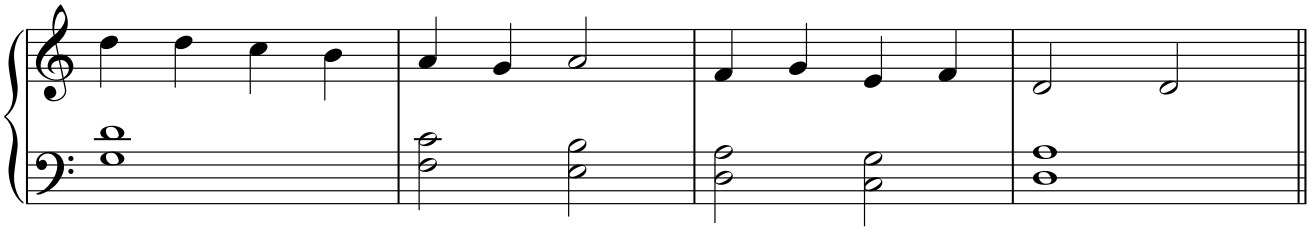
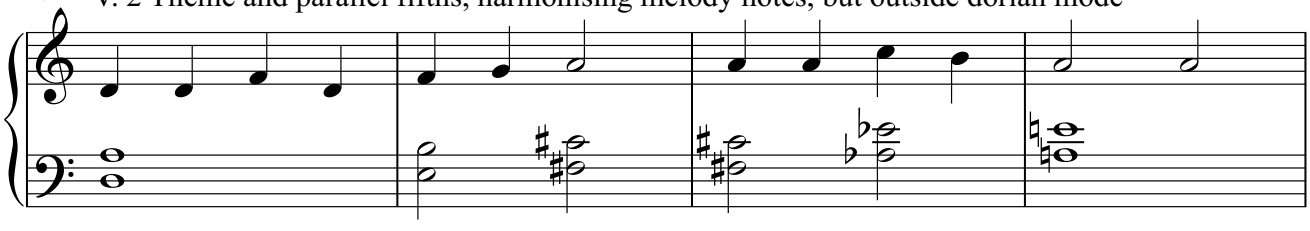


17 V. 2 Theme and parallel fifths, harmonising melody notes, but outside dorian mode



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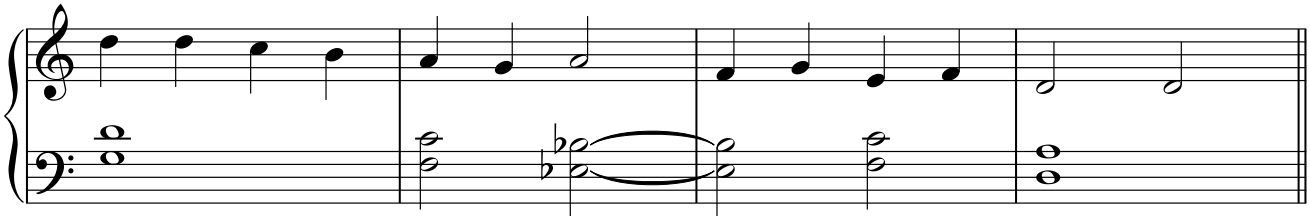
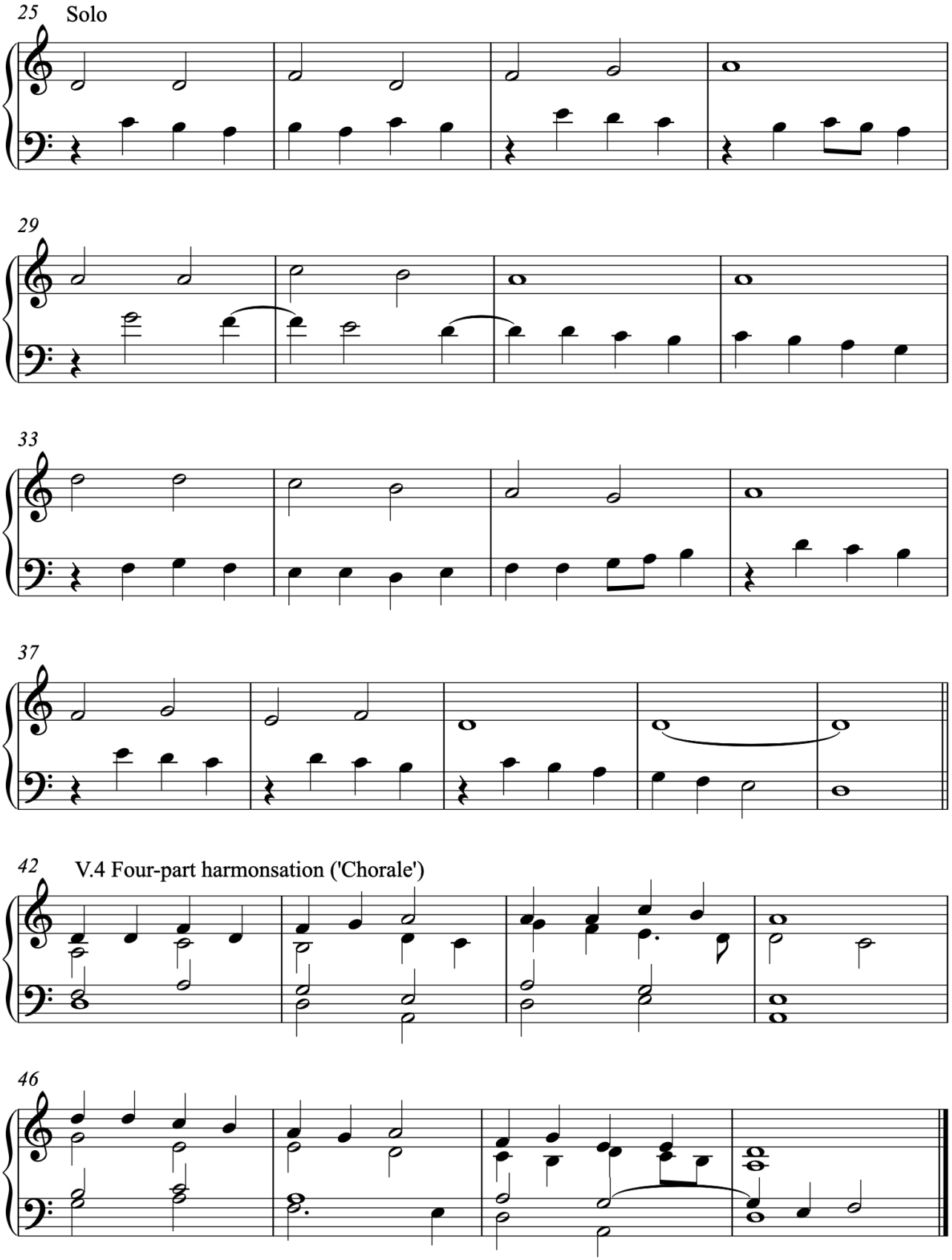


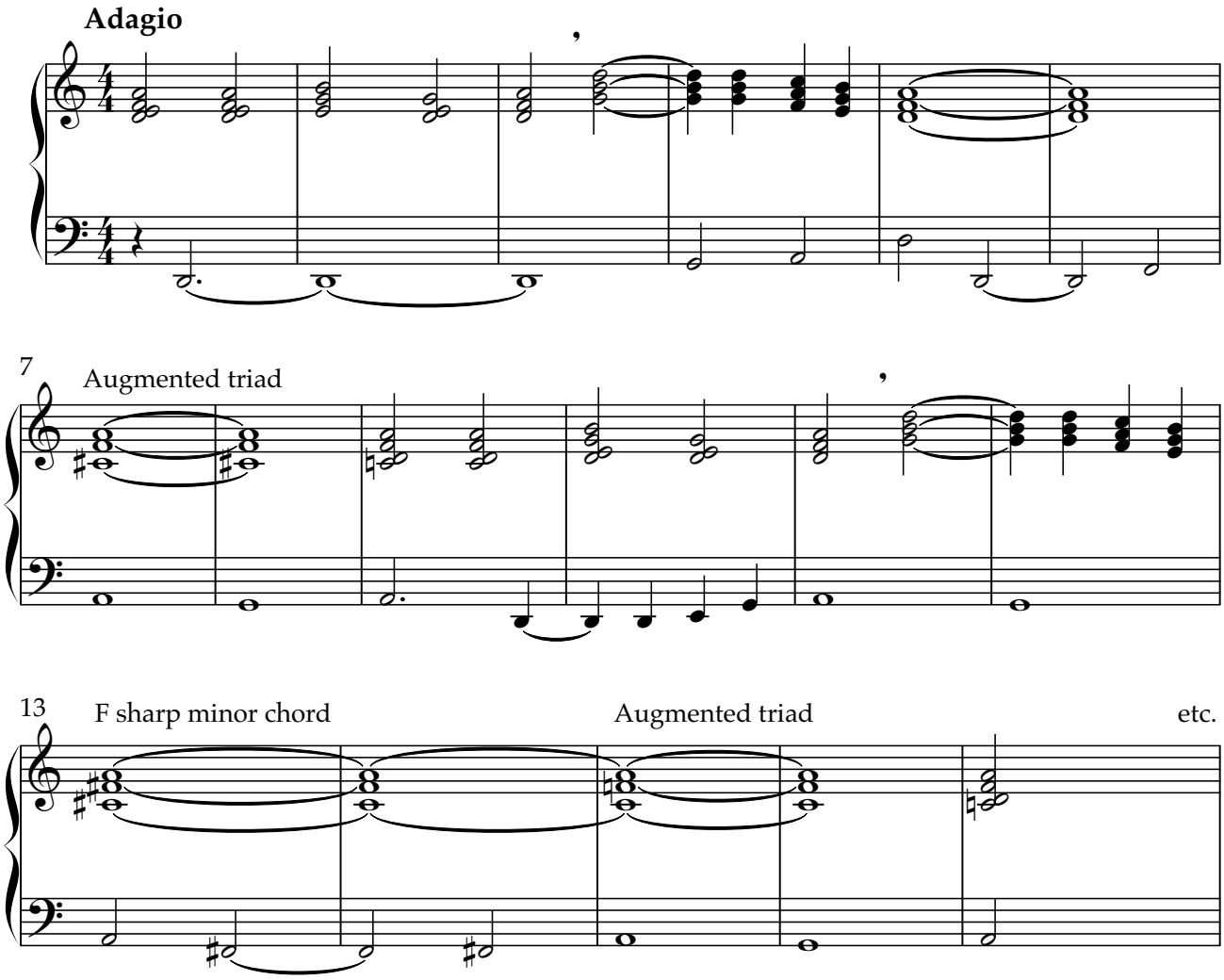
Using fluid basses and inner parts:

V. 3 Theme in augmentation (double note values) and in Bicium



Exploring harmony and counterpoint V. *Using notes outside the mode for expressive variety.*

A given melody note in the mode can be used as a 'pivot' to move to a chord using notes outside the mode. The augmented triad and 'diatonic' chords outside the mode were often used by late romantic French composers such as Vierne and particularly by composers whose works are based on modality rather than diatonicism such as Langlais.



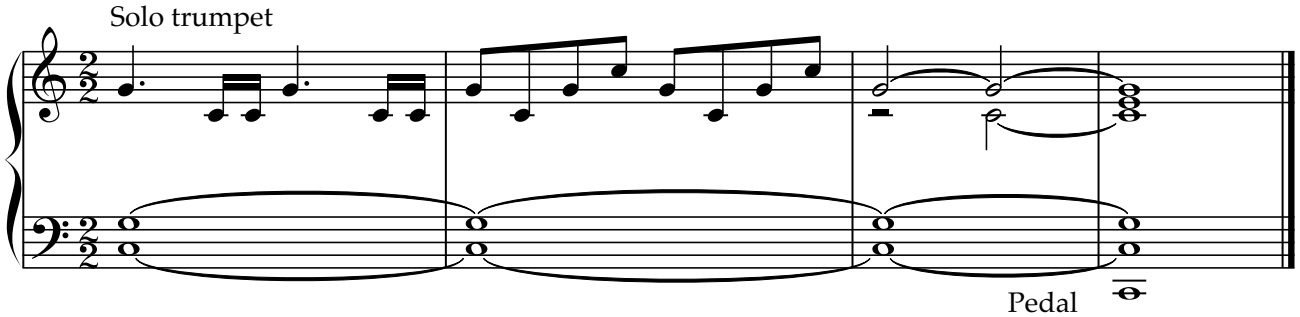
The same technique could also be applied to toccata-style figurations.

Exploring harmony and counterpoint VI. *Fundamental diatonic harmony: I and V chords*

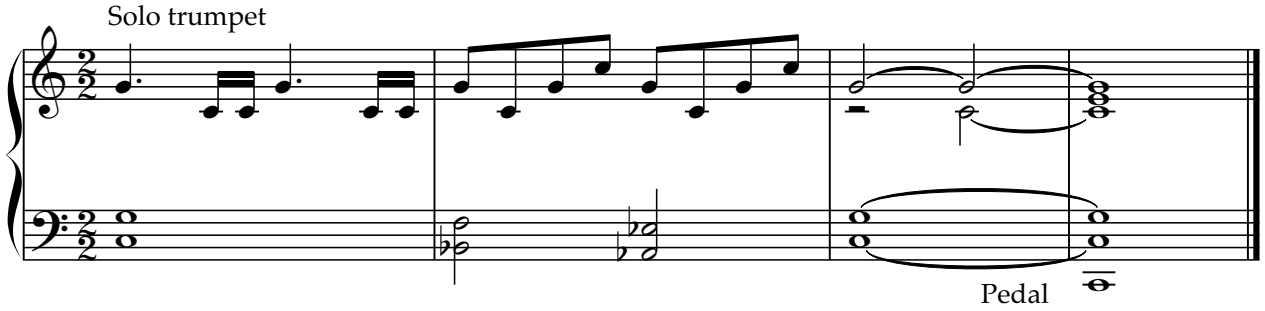
Using just one or two chords provides an orientation point - a pull of gravity that ensures that one is never too far from 'home'.

Within a single chord there is scope for arpeggiation round the notes of the chord and for passing notes.

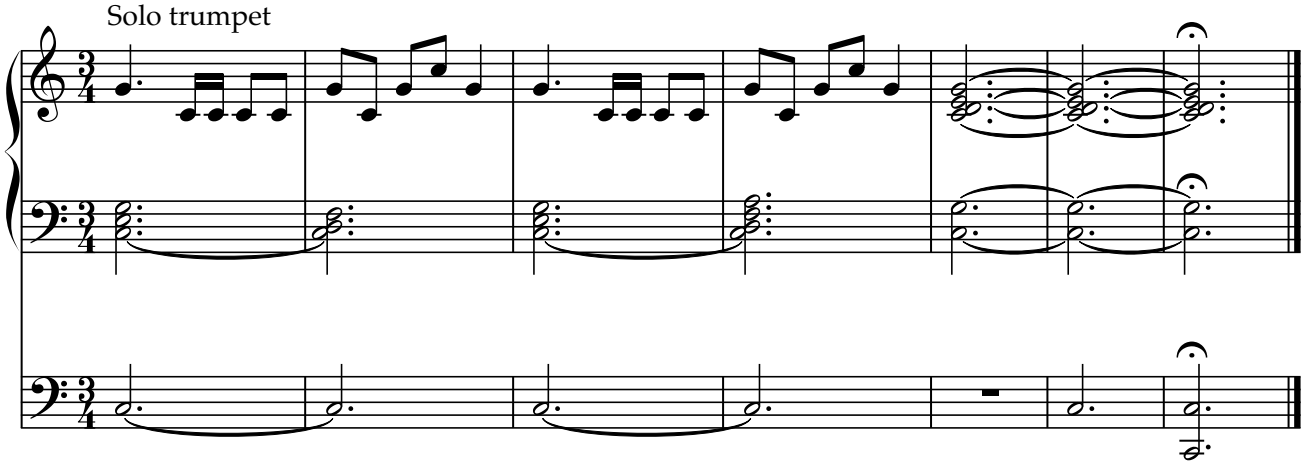
Fanfares



Within the framework of the chord, we can add parallel fifths and notes that are alien to that chord in order to add some harmonic spice.



Or, add introduce some added seconds and sixths. And there are numerous other possibilities within the outline of the tonic chord…..

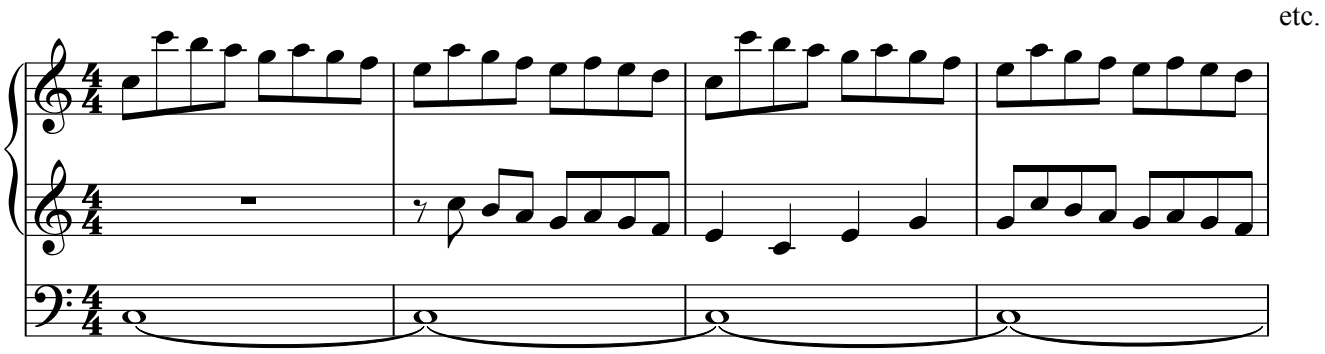


These brief fanfares could be extended using various transpositions and modulations, and with a reprise of the opening to conclude.

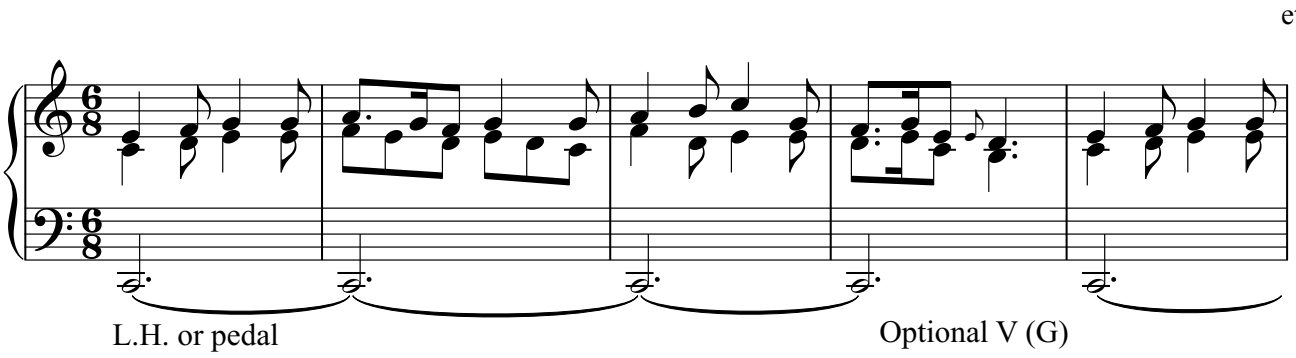
Elaborate and fast-moving figurations can still be built around a very basic harmonic plan - even just one basic chord.

There are many examples of this from the organ repertoire over the centuries. Again, we can have a very basic harmonic structure, not least using a single bass/chord can provide a fixed 'home' to return to but by no means excluding passages of expressive dissonance and harmonic colour.

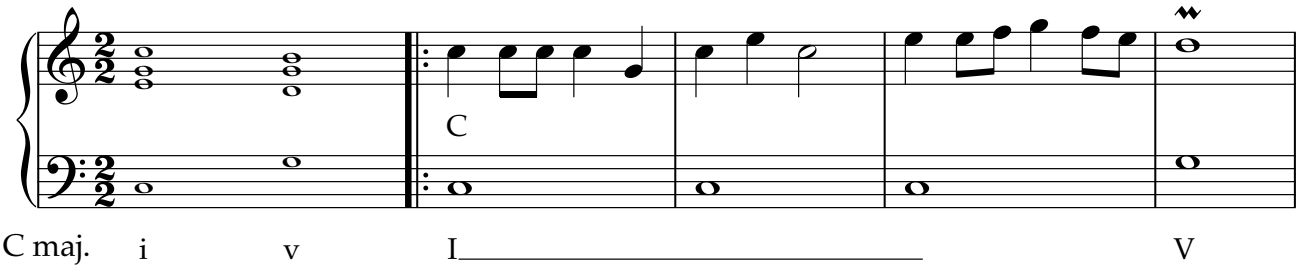
Baroque - style toccata flourish



French - style pastorale (melody in parallel thirds and sixths)



Baroque –style trumpet tune

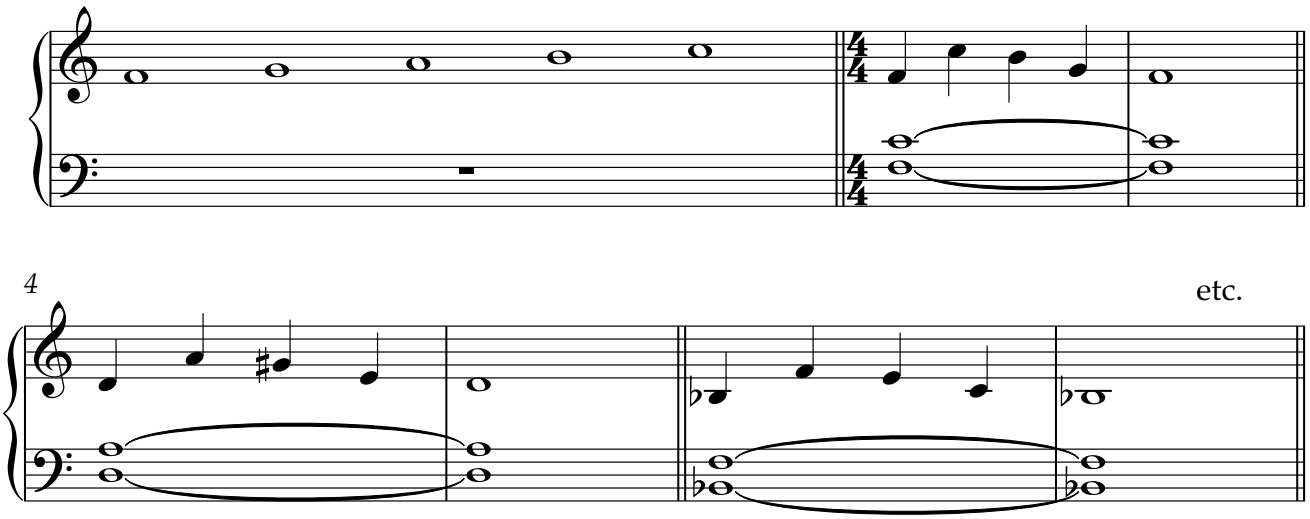


Music of the Baroque period, particularly the early Baroque, is often very 'green'; i.e. through recycling material by echoes and various forms of decoration, each statement providing some variation of the original theme. This can be expanded considerably by the use of two chords, notably the tonic and dominant.

The hymn tunes *Bristol* and *Cruger* are just two examples that would themselves well to this technique.

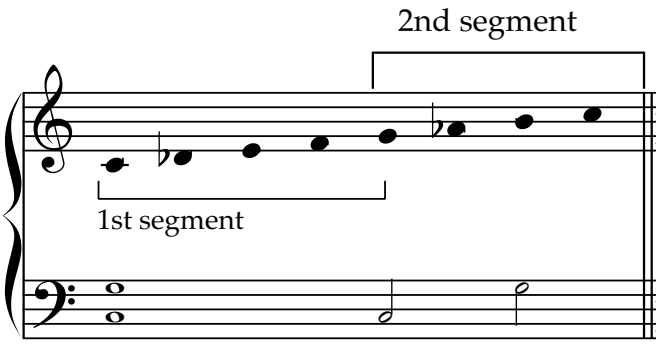
Further characterful modes (i) *The Lydian Mode (F-F')*

British music of he 20th century in particular often made use of the Lydian mode (as indeed did Bartok in his piano music). Toccatas, meditative fantasias and fanfares can all be readily made within the mode and its transpositions. Unlike music in diatonic keys, everything - melody and chords - can be shifted intact by a given interval, in this example, thirds. Notes



(ii) *The Double Harmonic ('Arabic') Mode*

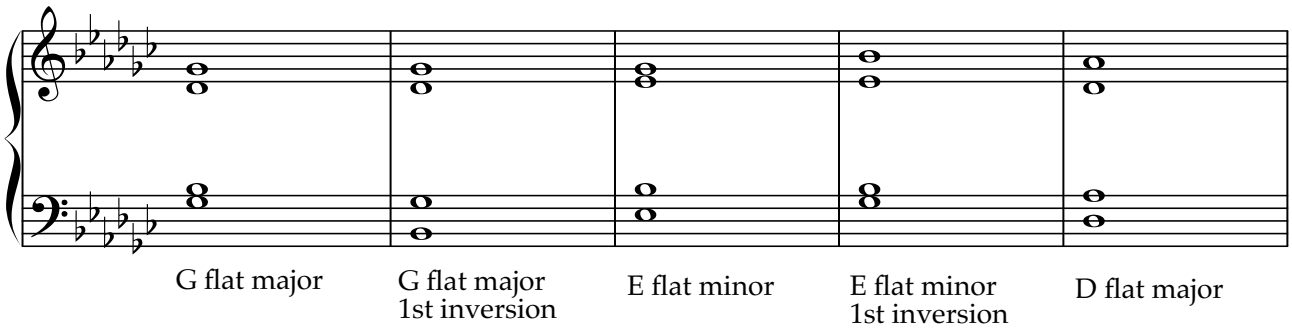
The characteristic flattened second is very much evocative of Arabic - and even Spanish music. This mode is particularly suited to splitting the melody sections into two, one in the upper half contrasting with the one in the first half. The mode also lends itself well to literal transposition, for example, up a a fifth.



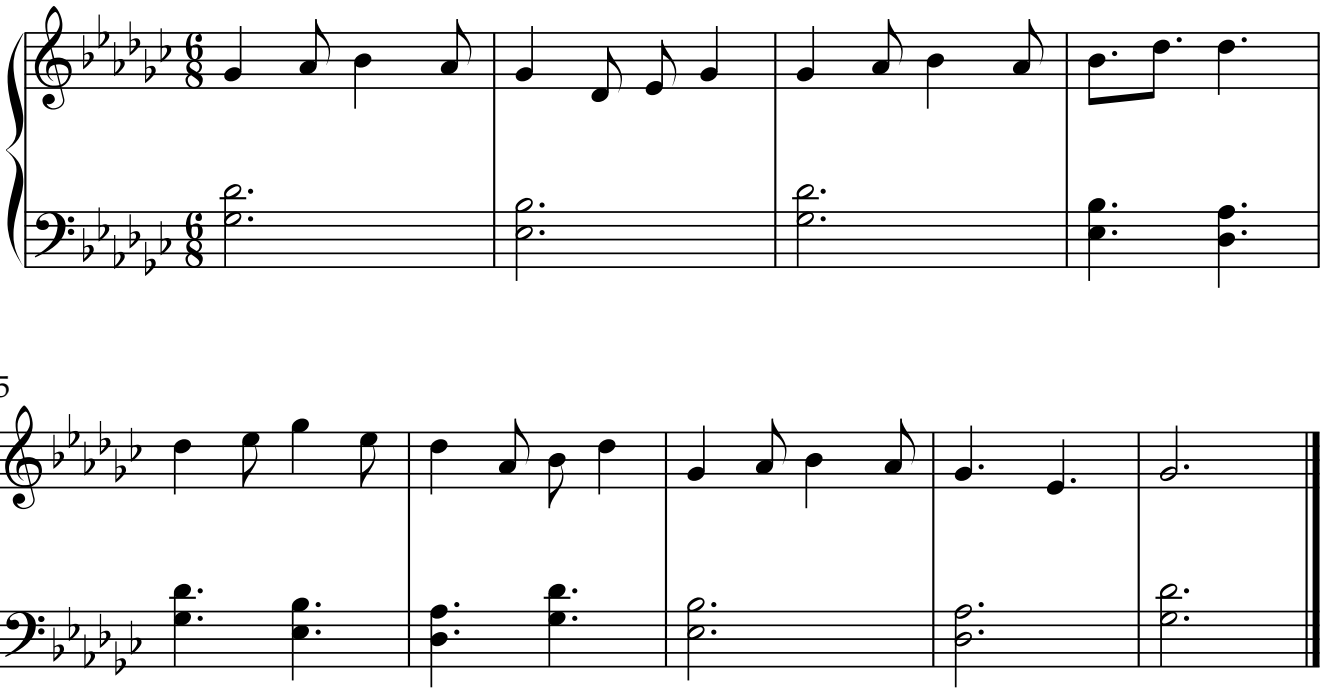
(iii) *The Pentatonic Mode*

The Pentatonic mode is most easily found by using the (normally) black keys. (However, as with all modes, it is the arrangement of spaces between each note which defines their character and they can start on any note). Any note will blend at reasonably well with any other note. *However*, rather than just thinking …'anything will sound good', aim to seek out the different harmonic colours and levels of dissonance, and use them in an artful and structured way.

In the Pentatonic mode we have essentially three chords G flat major, E flat minor, D flat major (useful as part of a cadence). Starting on or centring round G flat implies a major tonality (G Flat to B flat = major 3rd)
Starting on or centring round E flat implies a minor tonality (E Flat to G flat = minor 3rd)
Centring around D flat implies a 'dominant' of G flat (D flat A flat = open fifth)



The Pentatonic mode lends itself very well to Scottish-style tunes, not least as many original Scottish tunes are built around that mode.

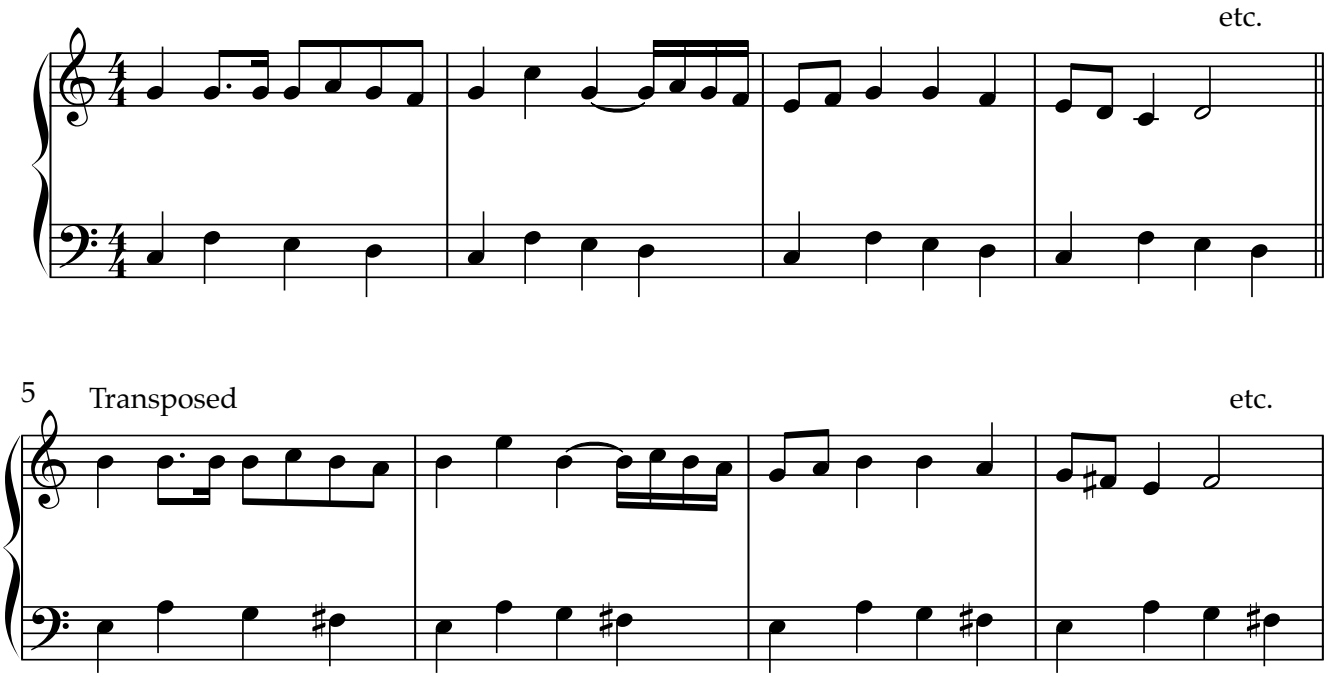


The Pentatonic mode can also be used as the basis of a more rhapsodic romantic style, perhaps with a smattering of notes outside the mode. Indeed, many works of Vaughan Williams are imbued with a strong pentatonic flavour.

Shaping Melody VII: *with bass ostinato patterns*:

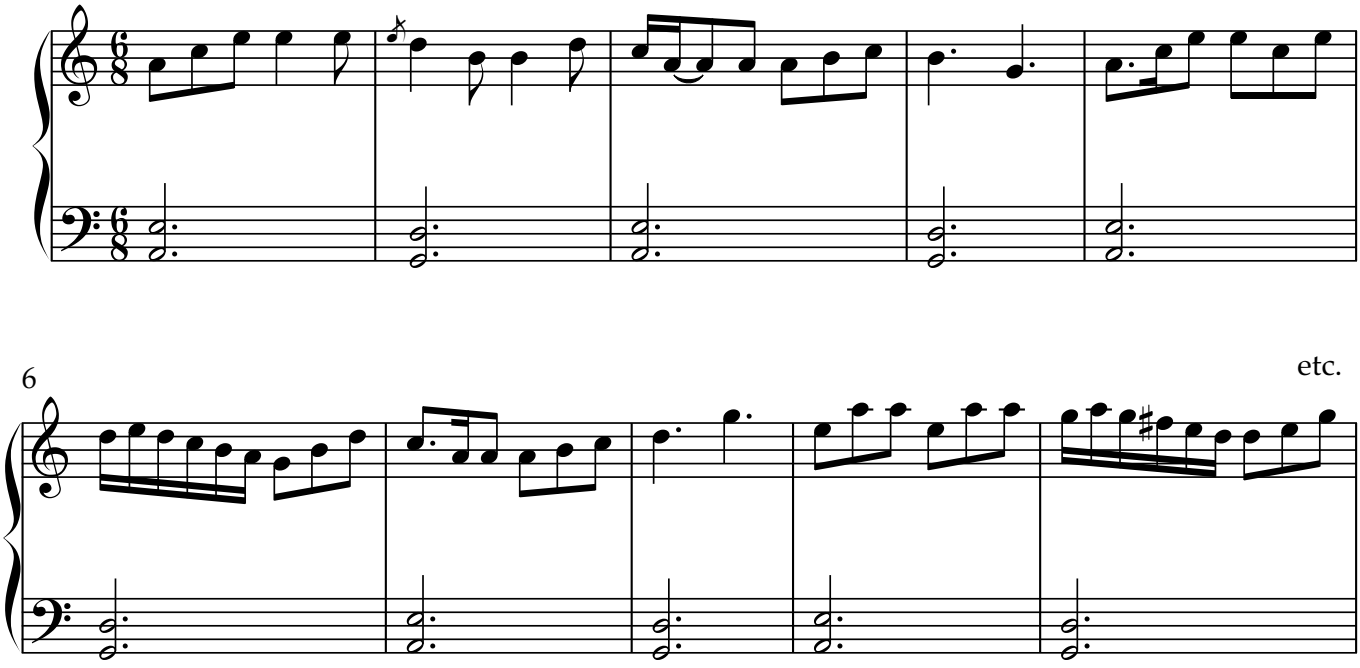
This can add extra drive and more flexible harmonisations….and if inspiration momentarily runs dry, the piece will keep going until you can climb back on board. Again, regular repeating patterns in the bass/harmony help create regular phrase lengths in the melody.

Ostinato March



Shaping Melody VIII: *with a harmonic pendulum. (Aeolian/Mixolydian)*

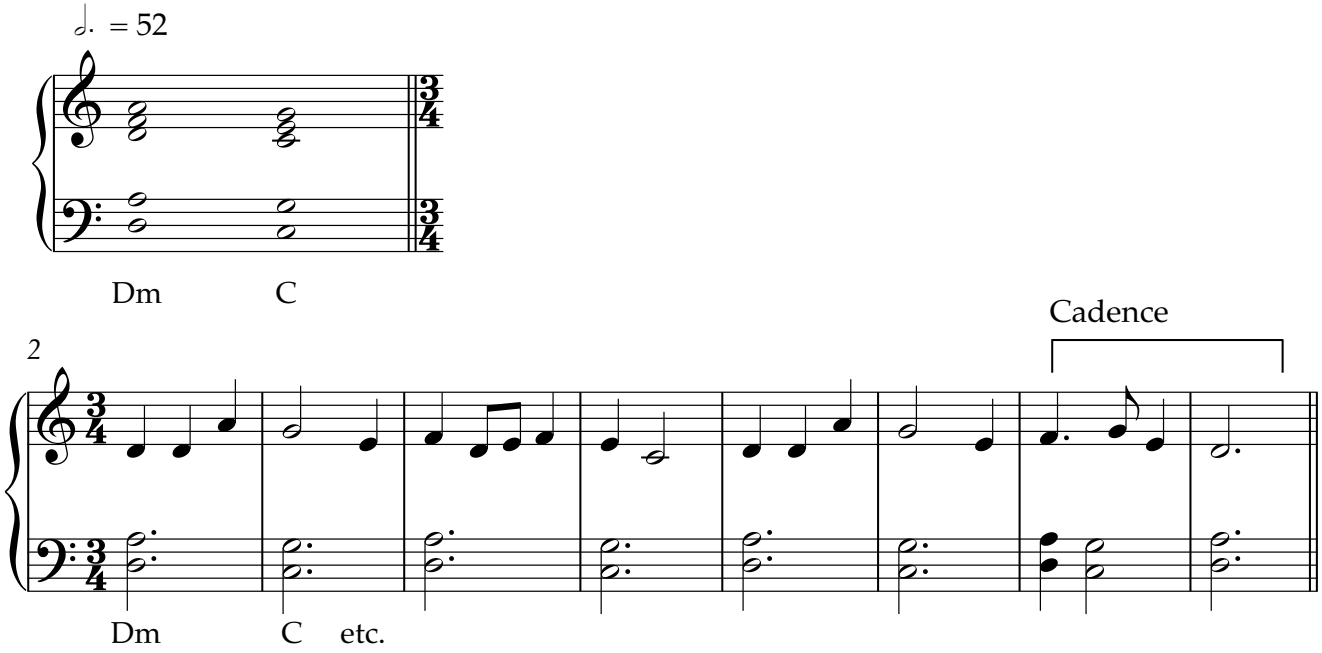
Celtic-style melody



Although well-suited to ‘folk-like’ styles, a pendulum can be applied to many other moods and styles.

Shaping Melody IX: *with chord patterns:*

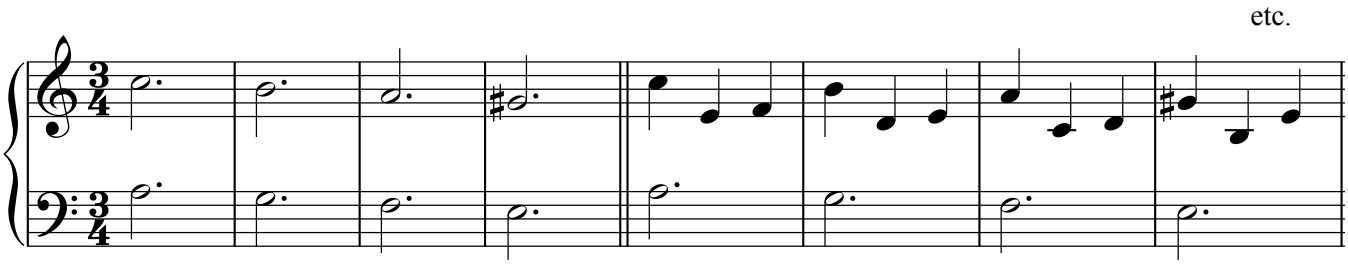
A simple harmonic pattern, something more varied than a two-way pendulum, can help guide melodic shape - and provide further interest in the harmony and texture. For example in a Medieval/Renaissance modal style. Such patterns lend themselves very well to series' of variations.



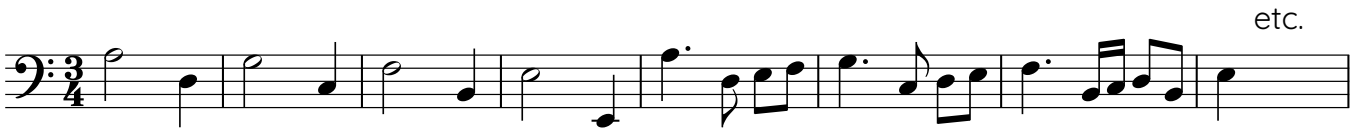
A well-known example of this is 'What shall we do with a drunken sailor?!'

Shaping melody VIII: *with a chaconne*

A chaconne or passacaglia is an ideal improvisation tool. As well as guiding the harmonies, it can, as with any short harmonic pattern or ostinato – based music, be quickly curtailed in a dignified and stylistically appropriate manner. Keeping the notes of the original theme – and the fundamental relationship of a third (tenth) between melody and bass – is central to this.



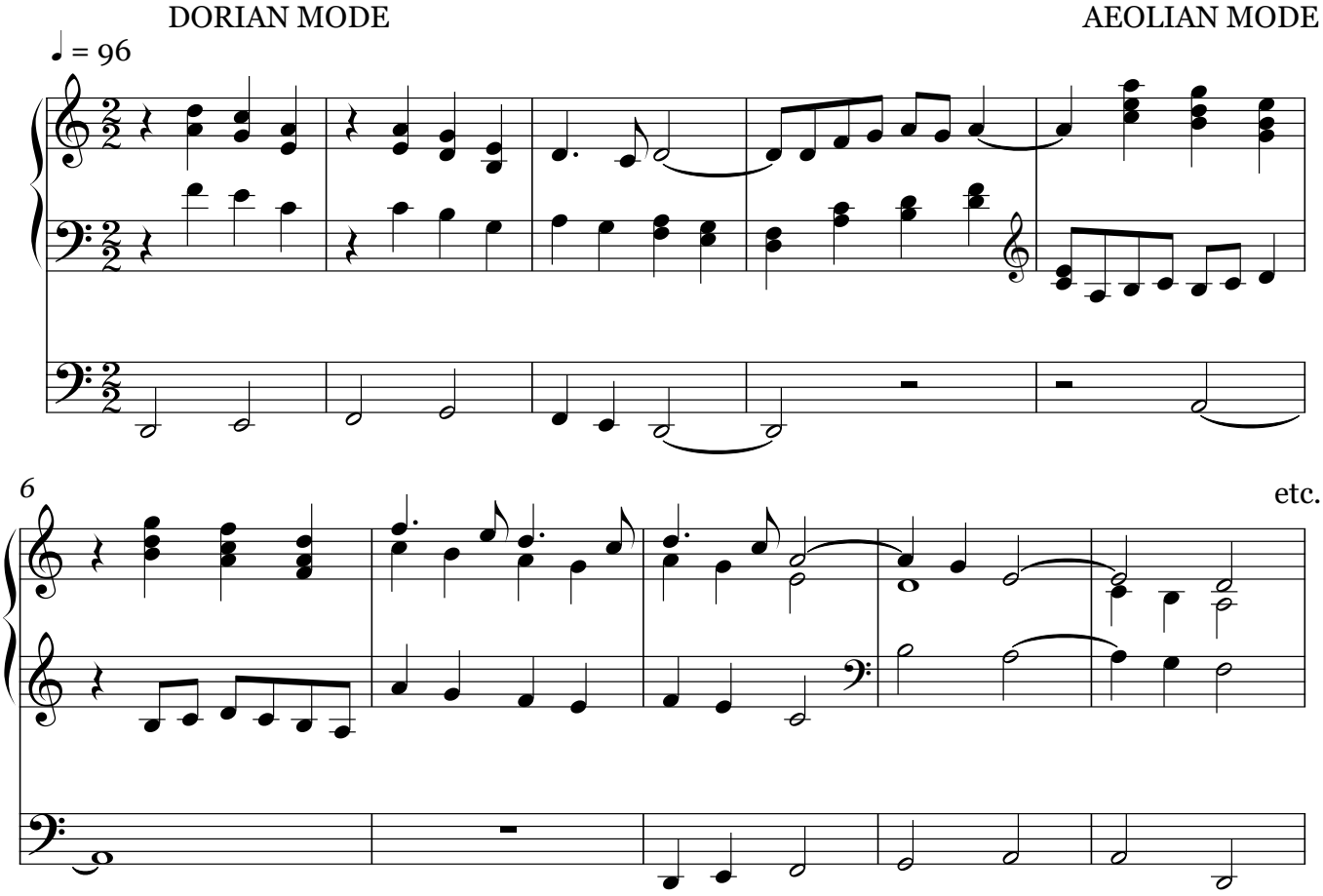
The bass could continue in elaborated form, such as below - but still adhering to the same basic pattern.



Exploring harmony and counterpoint VI: *Harmonising melody with thirds and sixths*

Thirds and sixths are a very useful interval to employ and feature strongly in much British 20th century music. They have a rich sound and blend well with a melody, and assimilate easily in finger memory.

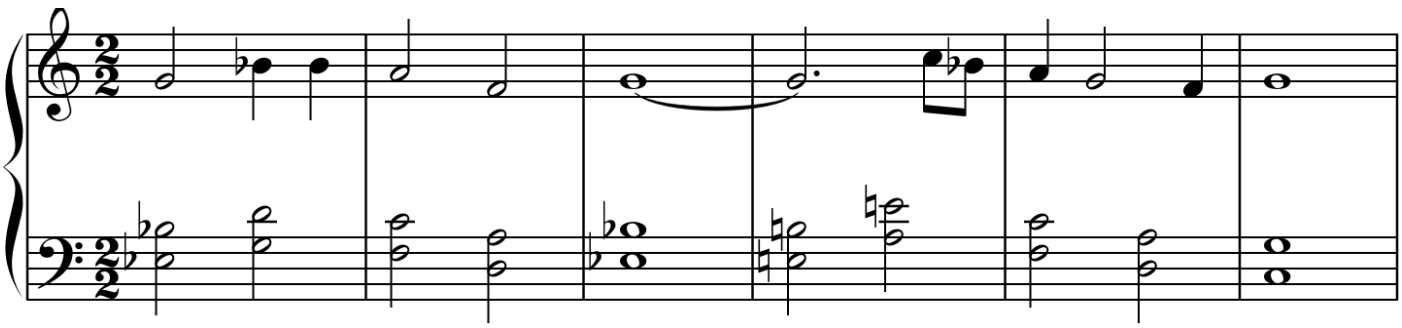
In this example, *English Rhapsody,* the music moves between the Dorian and Aeolian modes, providing a contrast in both 'key' and texture, and can act as a near literal transposition.



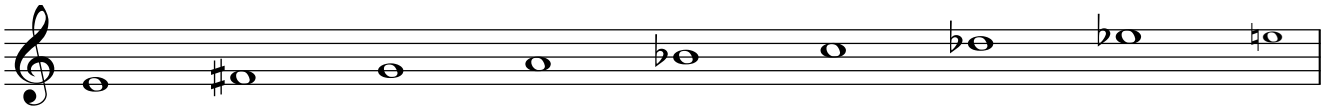
Exploring harmony and counterpoint VII: *Harmonising melody with fourths and fifths*

If parallel thirds and sixths can be said to characterise (or caricature!) 20th century English composers such as Vaughan Williams or Howells, parallel fourths and fifths might be said to be the same for 20th French composers such as Alain, Langlais and Messiaen, particularly if allied with the Octatonic mode, (albeit as a huge over-simplification and generalisation of what can be a very complex language).

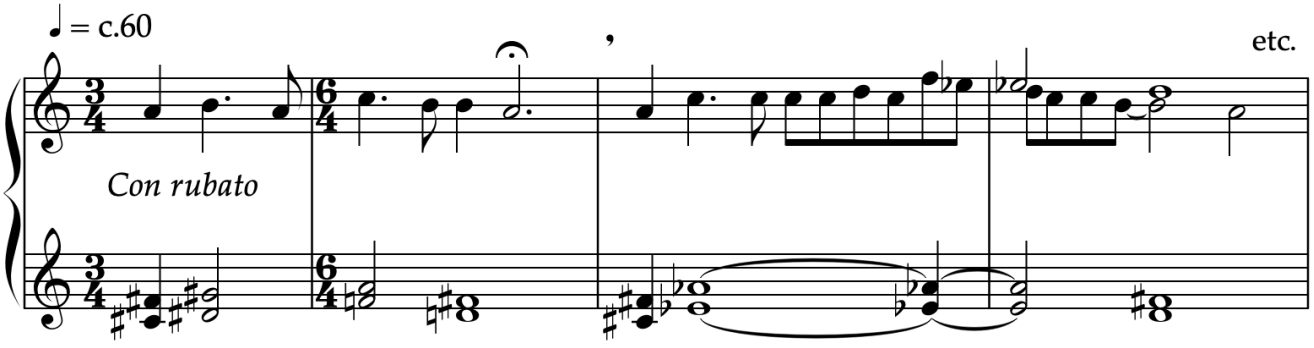
At its simplest, we can create a harmonisation of open fifths providing alternations of major and minor thirds with the melody:



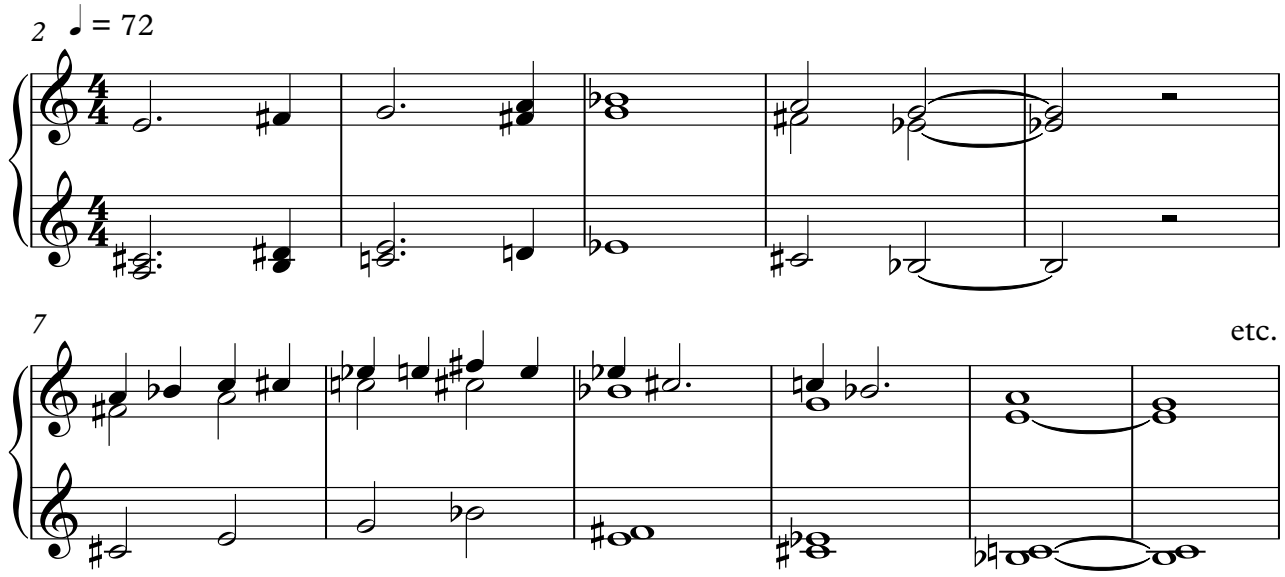
The Octatonic mode (Messiaen's mode II) - alternations of tone/semitone, i.e. major and minor seconds.



Astringent fourths (in effect creating second inversion chords with the melody) resolving to smoother–sounding triads can create more varied harmonic colour. (The use of both flats and sharps in the notation is to emphasise the teasing hints of key and diatonic chords that is often found in the works of Alain and Langlais.) N.B. the Octatonic mode is here restricted to the melody with other modes and elements of diatonicism featuring in the harmonies.

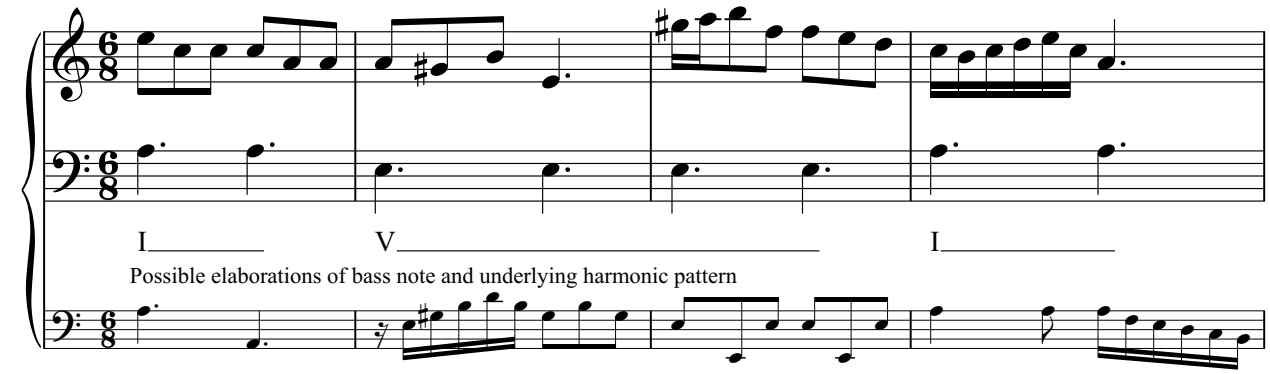


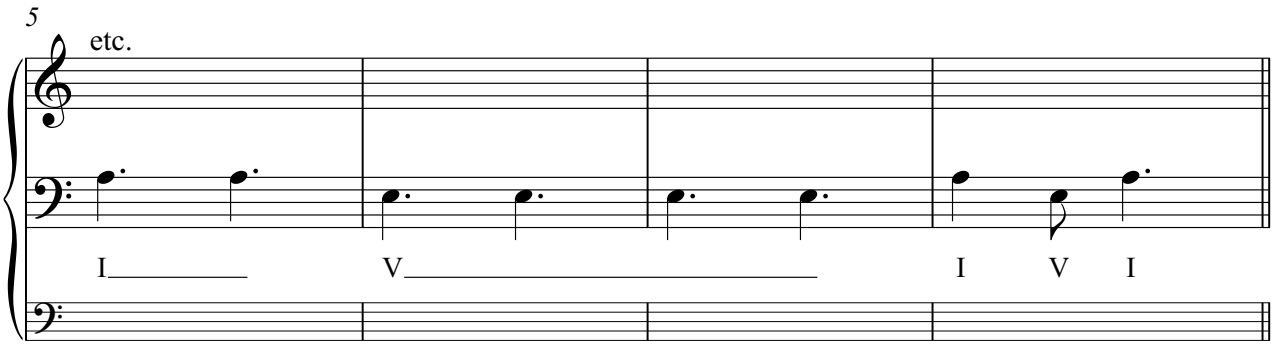
This style can also feature transposition and sequences.



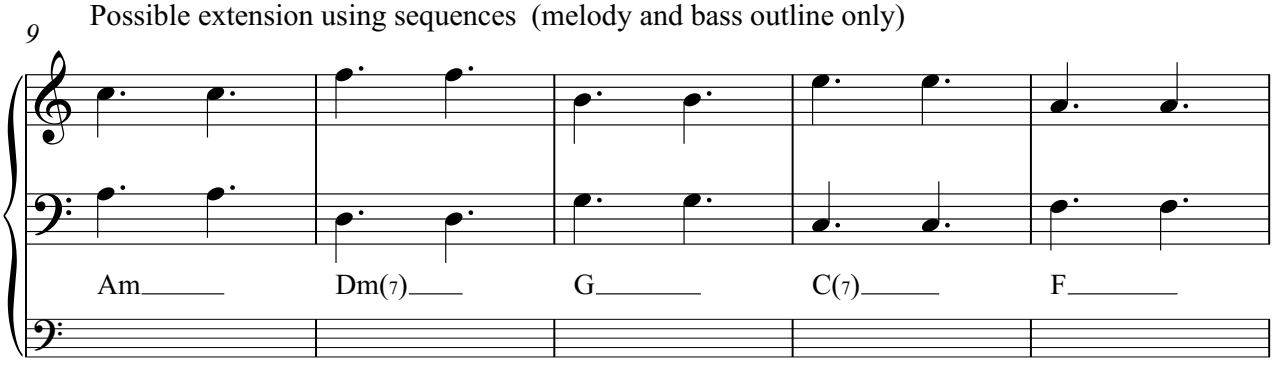
Exploring harmony and counterpoint VIII- *more harmonic patterns and with sequences*

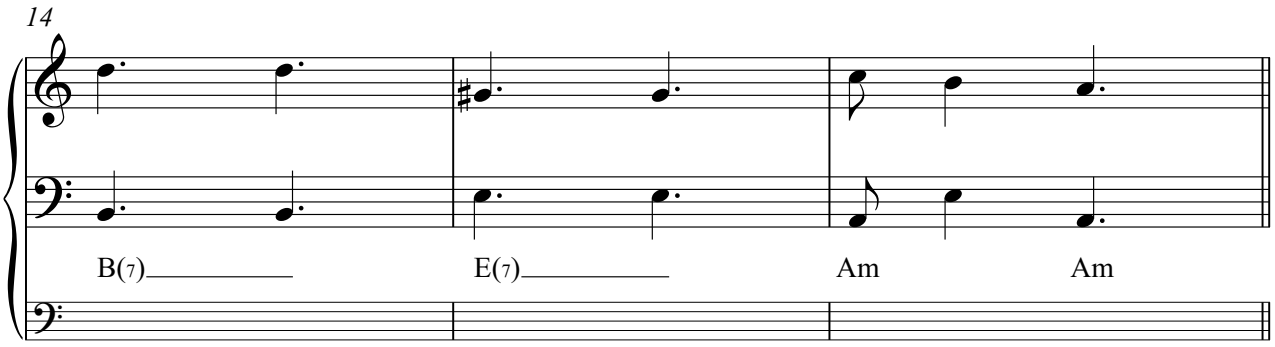
Baroque music in particular makes extensive use of sequences and even the simplest harmonic patterns can be the basis for an almost infinite variety of variation and decoration in melody and bass. Predictable patterns are also the glue and outline that provides a combination of safety and creative opportunity, as seen in this aria in the style of the late Baroque, perhaps akin to that of Vivaldi.





Possible extension using sequences (melody and bass outline only)

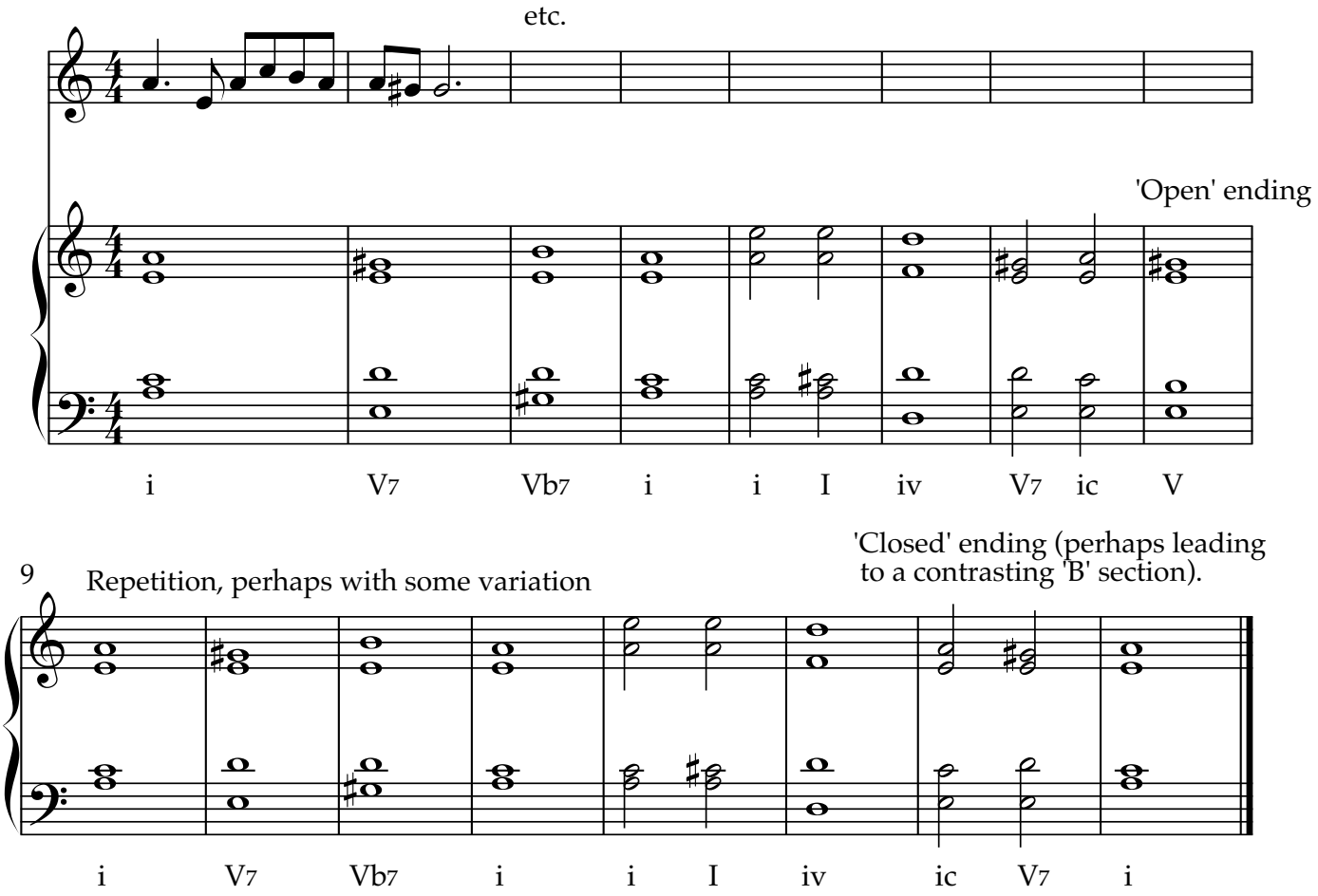




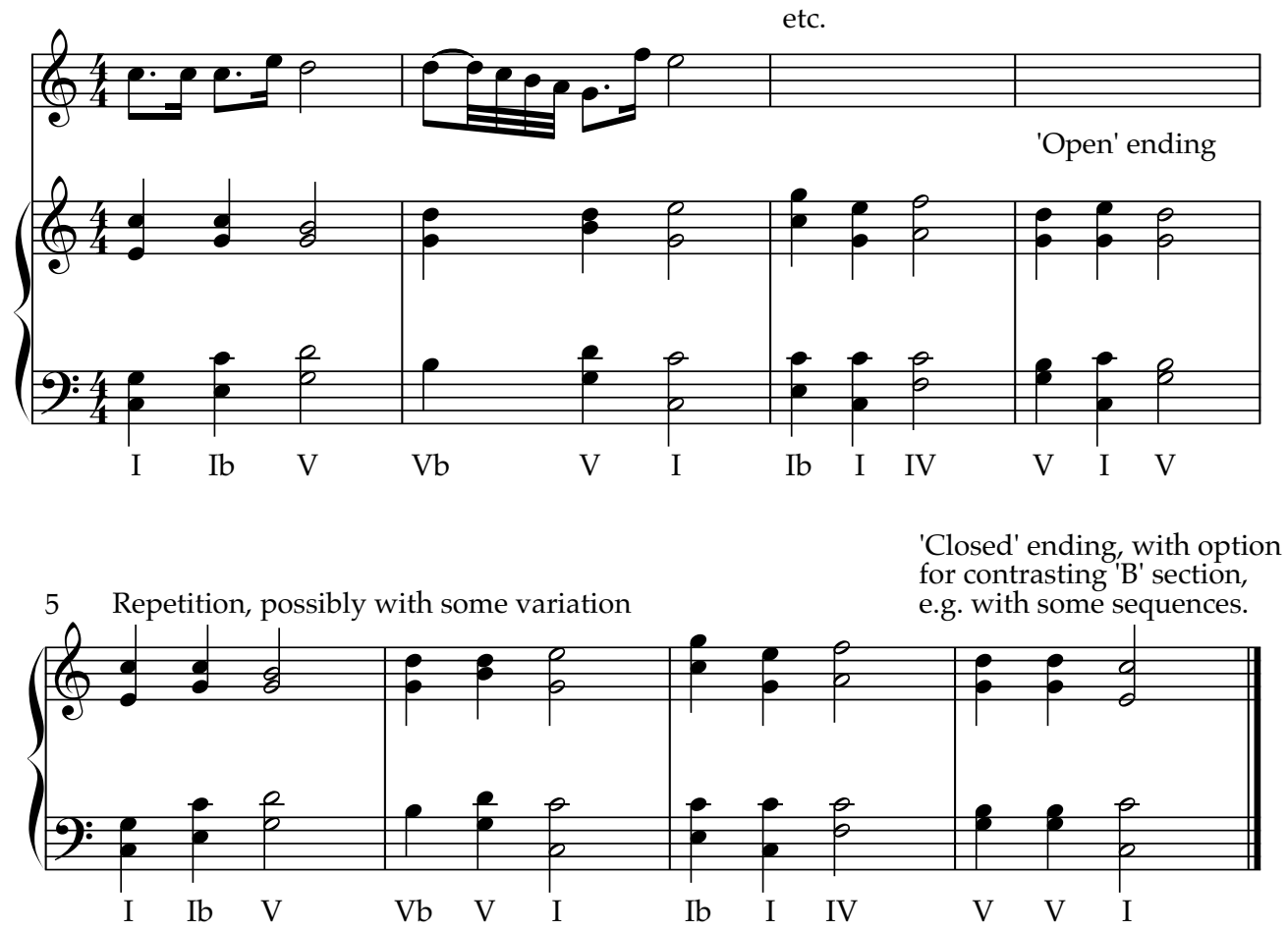
Exploring harmony and counterpoint IX- *non-repeating harmonic patterns*

Many harmonic patterns are not rigid and repeating in form, though may have various repeating elements within. They nevertheless represent a vital foundation for the various figurations above the underlying chord structure.

Example 'A': Suggested style - Classical (Could also be adapted to triple time)

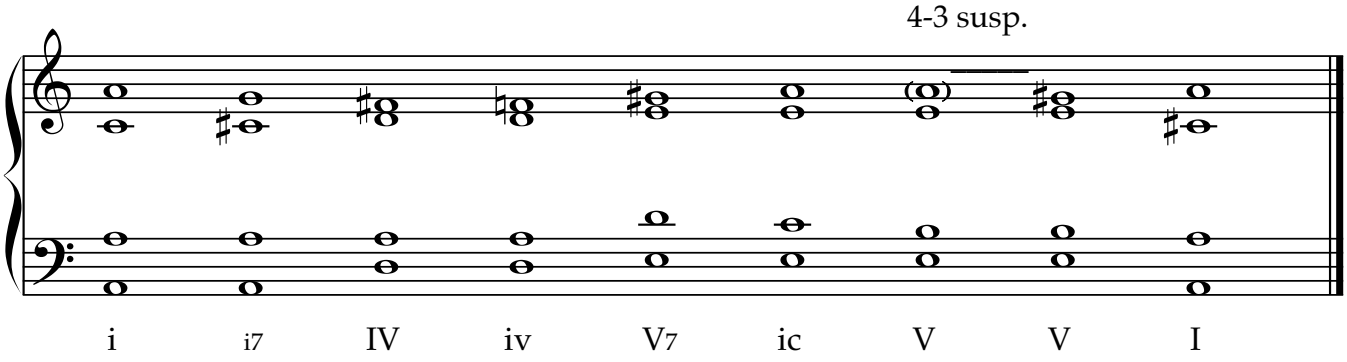


Example 'B': Suggested style - Baroque - stately processional



A harmonic pattern can be very flexible and not prescribe a set number of bars, rather just the progression of chords laid over what could be multiple bars. Some fantasias in late-Renaissance and Baroque styles can demonstrate considerable flexibility and opportunities for decorative - even improvised - flourishes, within a broad harmonic scheme.

Example 'C': Suggested style - late Renaissance/Baroque fantasia



Some keys to successful improvising...and creating memorable and characterful music for the listener

- A defined metre - or even mixed metre - (other than in certain styles, e.g. imitating plainsong).
- Slow to moderate tempi – more 'thinking time'!
- Simple textures and without unnecessary padding – only add what has a clear function within the music. e.g. not adding chords or texture indiscriminately.
- Simple harmonies and harmonic relationships, e.g. fixed bass or just two chords, or a single mode. However, for an improvisation of any length, include at least one modulation/change of mode; avoid being interred in 'tonic prison'.
- Short length - repeat where necessary with subtle changes.
- A definite beginning, middle and end - not just petering out when inspiration runs dry, or even when the clergy appear.
- Minimise the number of 'events' – fully exploit one or two ideas, rather than strings of different or even unrelated ideas; for example, through echoes, decoration etc. As with Fairy liquid, a little can be made to go a long way!
- Give each improvisation an identity of *mood and genre*: is it a march, a solemn procession, lullaby, scherzo, meditation etc.?
- Give each improvisation an identity of *style*: is it Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, 20th century English modal, French modal etc.
- Minimise the number of elements to memorise – **memory**, and the ability to retrieve and refer to material is key to success in improvising. But make each element distinctive and characterful.
- Stable hand and feet positions, perhaps with an 'anchor' such as a drone bass; – we can easily orientate ourselves and where necessary find our way 'home'.
- Make some use of written templates – e.g. a simple bass pattern to embellish.
- Make some use of existing written pieces of music as your 'themes'. Bach constantly did this for his compositions. Improvising isn't always about starting with a blank canvas!
- **Processing powers and memory may be small at first...but with practise they will get constant upgrades!**

……..

AND FINALLY…..

The ‘6 **P’s’**

- **P**ulse... without which all, even the most sublime melody and harmony, will be almost totally undermined and communicate lack of confidence, authority and control. Conversely, a very slow pulse or long note values marked out with certainty will hold the listener far more.

- **P**rudence...working comfortably within your technical limits and vocabulary. A simple piece done well is far more effective than a more complex one done under compositional or performing strain. No-one else can play it for you!

- **P**ersonality....an improvisation should set a mood and style from the outset, rather than evolve in the hope of eventually finding something interesting to say. Tempo, type of rhythm - e.g. a march, and registration are all important factors in establishing character. Consistency of styles too – avoid moving from Handel to Cochereau via Howells in two minutes!

- **P**erseverance and **P**urpose**....** keep going towards an effective conclusion - if you sound as if you believe in the music, the greater chances that the listener will too. Make even your ‘mistakes’ sound intentional!

- **P**ractise... specific exercises or models; freer experimentation, seeing what works and what does not with constant evaluation. Improvisation skills will not emerge overnight or without effort, practice and critical awareness of the sounds that we are making. There will be knocks, bumps and occasional disasters on the way,... inspired and embarrassing sounds,... sweet harmony and uncontrolled dissonance...but whoever learns to walk by just sitting on the floor?! Even the fear of improvising lest we make bad sounds can be a healthy and hopeful sign, since discrimination between good and bad sounds are surely the key to progress in any form of musical creativity or performance!

So, surprise yourself and others with the new sounds that you and your instrument can make. Say goodbye to amorphous and anonymous musical wallpaper...or to notions that ‘I cannot improvise’. You can!

The Church of the Sacred Heart, Lauriston Street, Edinburgh

Organ specification (courtesy the National Pipe Organ Register website).

Harrison & Harrison, Durham, (1971), for St John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, Perth. Transferred to The Church of the Sacred Heart (2013).

Pedal	Key action **EP** Stop action **EP**			
	1	Gedackt Pommer	16	
	2	Principal	8	
	3	Gedackt	8	
	4	Nachthorn	4	
	5	Mixture	II	
	6	Posaune	16	
	7	Trumpet	8	*Great*
Great	Key action **EP** Stop action **EP**			
	8	Principal	8	
	9	Rohr Flute	8	
	10	Octave	4	
	11	Super Octave	2	
	12	Sesquialtera	II	
	13	Mixture	IV-V	
	14	Scharf	III	
	15	Trumpet	8	*Horizontal*
	16	Tremulant		
Swell	Key action **EP** Stop action **EP**			
	17	Gedackt	8	
	18	Salicional	8	
	19	Koppel Flute	4	
	20	Gemshorn	2	
	21	Larigot	1 1/3	
	22	Cymbel	III	
	23	Dulzian	16	
	24	Trompette	8	

Console

Couplers

Swell to Pedal
Swell to Great
Swell octave to Great
Swell suboctave to Great
Swell octave
Swell suboctave
Swell unison off
Great to Pedal
Swell Octave to Pedal