

Introduction to Organ Improvisation: Creating Simple Hymn Preludes
Utah Valley AGO Super Saturday
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Wisdom from Great Improvisers

Gerre Hancock: “...the chief reason to learn improvisation is simply that our musical personalities are incomplete and underdeveloped if we are unable to express ourselves in a spontaneous fashion. The ability to improvise is central to our musicianship; without it, musicians are simply not ‘complete.’”¹

Stephen Nachmanovitch: “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.”²

Jeffrey Brillhart: “Initially, the greatest challenge in learning to improvise will be in overcoming your fears and inhibitions.”³

Getting Started

- Voice rearrangement (tenor solo, soprano solo, alto up and octave, etc.)
- Non-harmonic tones
 - Passing/neighbor tones
 - Suspensions
 - Pedal point
- Simple harmonic changes (fill in harmonies, substitute vi for I, etc.)

Off the Page

- Introduction/Interlude – find some characteristic melodic fragment and develop it into a theme that can serve as the foundation of your introduction and interludes between verses or phrases of the hymn
- Experiment with different textures
 - Sustained chords in LH/Ped.
 - Solo melody or duet
 - Gradually adding parts
 - Long-note melody over more active accompaniment
 - Ostinato (repeated pattern) accompaniment

1. Gerre Hancock, *Improvising: How to Master the Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), vii.

2. Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, quoted in Jeffrey Brillhart, *Breaking Free: Finding a Personal Language for Organ Improvisation through 20th-century French Improvisation Techniques* (Colfax, North Carolina: Wayne Leupold), 6.

3. Jeffrey Brillhart, *Breaking Free: Finding a Personal Language for Organ Improvisation through 20th-century French Improvisation Techniques* (Colfax, North Carolina: Wayne Leupold), 6.