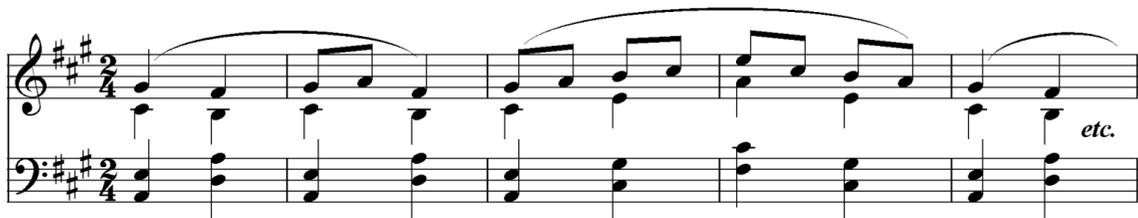


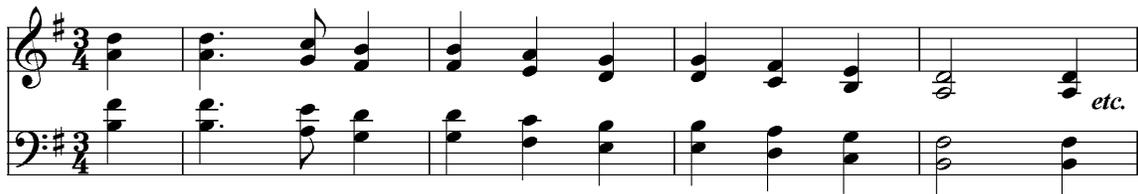
***Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day:
Gerre Hancock: Toccata Part 1***

For more than 30 years, Dr. Gerre Hancock held the position of Organist and Master of Choristers at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue in New York City, where he set the standard for church music in America. Long and highly acclaimed as one of America's foremost improvisers, 'Uncle Gerre' has taught that art at the University of Cincinnati, Juilliard, Yale, Eastman, and now at the University of Texas, Austin. His delightful, down-to-earth presence also graced the Eastman ImprovFEST, a 5-day course offered in early August. This is the first of two articles on the toccata technique he presented there. The interjections in quotes are his.

A historical model for this pattern might be found in Vierne's well-known *Berceuse* from *24 Pieces in Free Style, Book 2*.



Here we have the ultimate exploitation of the ultimate no-no, consecutive fifths. "Illegal, immoral, and probably fattening." But if you're not trying to make counterpoint in Baroque style, this is quite a tool. All but one of Vierne's chords are root-position seventh chords, with the hands a sixth apart. An easier way to spell this is to invert the right-hand interval, making it a fourth, and closing the hands to a third apart, like this:



An instant meditation on *Away in a Manger*! Fifths in the left hand, fourths in the right, a third in between. Practice scales with this pattern in the key of C at first. Notice that the third in between your hands may be major or minor, depending on where you are in the scale, just as an occasional fifth may be diminished, or a fourth augmented. Keep the motion stepwise, "just making little U-turns" to change direction.

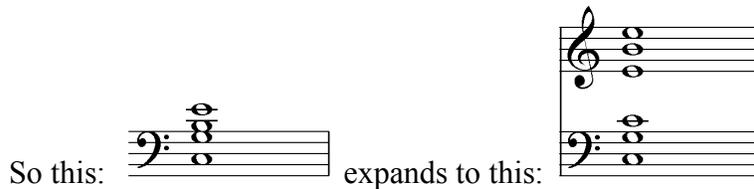
When that feels very steady, begin to modulate. Add an F-sharp, then a C-sharp, then a G-sharp, controlling those fourths and fifths all the while. Then modulate back, dropping the sharps in reverse order, then adding a B-flat, then an E-flat, then an A-flat. The relative minors will want practicing, too. Then try the chromatic scale. Notice that now the interval between the hands stays constant. If they start out a minor third apart, they stay that way. The fourths and fifths, likewise, will always be perfect.

What about the whole-tone scale? Again, intervals remain consistent. This is a bit tricky at first, as the pair of notes in each hand will not live in the same whole-tone scale, since

that scale contains neither a perfect fifth nor a perfect fourth. So establish your opening hand position with either a major or minor third between the hands. Then “just move the whole family down a step.” Remember, with all this stepwise motion, you can go up or down, so if you experience “digital confusion,” just back up to the last chord you played. It’s also ok to repeat the chord you’re on.



For our next building block, shift the right hand up an octave and double the outer note in each hand.



As you “gaze upon your hands,” notice the left-hand fifth and right-hand fourth are at the outsides of this chord, and the thumbs are still a third apart. Now the upper interval in the left hand is a fourth, and the lower interval in the right hand is a fifth. If this confuses you, practice just the outside intervals, with fingers 5-2, for a bit before adding the octave doublings with the thumbs.

With 3 notes in each hand, we have myriad options for figuration. Here are a few:



Of course, slavish adherence to stepwise motion will grow tiresome after awhile. “You may think it’s the worst thing since sliced bread.” But it is the easiest way to begin, and grow secure. Likewise, the technique works well with a cantus that also proceeds by step. Here is the second phrase from *Ode to Joy*:

The image displays a musical score for piano, consisting of three systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The first two systems feature a treble staff with a melodic line of eighth notes, each grouped in a triplet (marked with a '3'). The bass staff in these systems has a similar triplet pattern of eighth notes. The third system continues this pattern, but the bass staff has a simpler, more rhythmic accompaniment. The fourth system concludes with a treble staff ending in a triplet of eighth notes and a bass staff with a simple accompaniment, followed by the text "etc." indicating the piece continues.

Yes, there will be passing dissonances. “You may raise a few eyebrows among the usher corps.” But make this an exercise in thinking and doing simultaneously. The more you can broaden that capacity, the better an improviser you will be!