

***Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day:  
Trio sopra la Bergamasca***

Western music enjoys a long tradition of improvising over a given bass line. A good place to start experimenting with this is to use a simple I-IV-V-I pattern. A fundamental harmonic sequence for centuries, it lends itself to a wide range of singable, friendly melodies. Among the oldest of these is the *Bergamasca*. Here it is, with our bass line:

A musical score for a 4/4 piece in D major. The melody is written on a treble clef staff, and the bass line is on a bass clef staff. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes, while the bass line consists of whole and half notes. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Most keyboard players will flash instantly to Frescobaldi's *Fiori Musicali*. Published in 1635, the collection contains a stunning set of continuous variations on this tune. I like to play it as a prelude on the Sunday in January that falls closest to Martin Luther King's birthday. I list it in the program as 'Variations on *We Shall Overcome*.' J.S. Bach, of course, wins the prize for the cleverest implementation of this idea, in the final quodlibet of his Goldberg Variations. The melody *Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben* is the same tune.

But there are hundreds of other implementations of this, and not just for keyboard. It was a standard in the lute/guitar repertory of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and well into the 18<sup>th</sup> various ensemble combinations used it. So we can steal ideas from lots of sources. Marco Uccellini (1603-1680)

Why a trio? We have a straightforward bass line that's easy to play with the feet. We could play chords above it, of course, but if we limit each hand to one voice, we can exploit complementary colors, imitation, echoes, etc., and discipline ourselves toward playing gestures that matter, rather than just reaching for gobs of notes. Start with a clean harmonization of the tune.

A musical score for a 4/4 piece in D major. The melody is on a treble clef staff, the harmonization is on a second treble clef staff, and the bass line is on a bass clef staff. The melody and bass line are the same as in the previous score. The harmonization consists of eighth and quarter notes. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Adhering to the simple can open possibilities that we usually think of as complex, like invertible counterpoint. Look what happens if we switch hands:

After two variations, forget the melody and focus on your I-IV-V-I pattern. You'll automatically be thinking in 4-measure phrases – a Good Thing. The *bergamasca* will be your safety net. If an usher distracts you by whispering in your ear that the bride is delayed, just return to the opening, simple harmonization. This will give you time to think up your next rhythmic pattern. It's a good idea to end your piece with a simple statement, too.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned uses of the *bergamasca* in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The omission of the 19<sup>th</sup> was bothersome until I recalled Brahms' Academic Festival Overture, in which he sets the tune *Gaudeamus Igitur*, of course in a much flashier way than this:

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