

***Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day:
Using Fugal Exposition to Create a Chorale Prelude:
The Ornamented Cantus Firmus***

In last month's column, we discussed techniques for creating a fugal exposition. We began with the subject in the tenor in the tonic key, then the answer in the right hand, in the dominant, harmonized by a single voice in the left hand. Third entry was in the pedal, an octave below the first statement, harmonized with one voice in each hand.

This month, we'll apply those skills to make a chorale prelude with the cantus firmus in the soprano. We'll demonstrate with a familiar tune, *St. Thomas*.

To expand the kind of framework we used last time:

The musical notation is presented in three systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The first system (measures 1-5) is in C major, indicated by a key signature change symbol (C major →). The second system (measures 6-8) is in G major, indicated by a key signature change symbol (G major →). The third system (measures 9-12) is in C major, indicated by a measure number '6' and the instruction 'move to strong cadence in C major →'. The notation includes various note values, rests, and a fermata over the final notes of the third system.

Now, instead of cadencing on beat 1 or 3 of bar 8, we move the cadence to the downbeat of bar 9, where our cantus will enter. Doubling the note values of the cantus will allow room for some melodic ornamentation, as well as time to think ahead harmonically.

From bars 9-17, we have two jobs to do: harmonize the cantus and ornament it. Isolate these chores and practice them separately. Just as we practiced the fugal exposition in steps, take the time to form a conception of bars 9-17 as well. Begin homophonically. Play a bass note for each note of the cantus. Write it down.

Use figures below the bass note to tell yourself what chord to play. In my example, all the chords are root position triads except those with a '6.' Those are in first inversion, i.e., the bass note is the third of the chord, or, put another way, the other notes in the chord will be a sixth and a third above the given bass note. Ah, figured bass: the improviser's best friend! But that's another column...

Time to add the left hand, playing 2 notes at a time, making 4-note chords with the cantus and bass. Be strict about the location of your inner voices: don't let the tenor wander below the bass, and don't let the alto wander above the soprano. And be strict about voice leading: avoid parallel fifths and octaves.

Again, keep the left hand and pedal perfectly homophonic. Focus on expecting a harmonic progression, then playing what you expect to hear. Once you're very stable with this, you can begin to add some quarter-note motion in the left hand and/or pedal, first some simple passing-tones, then maybe a suspension or two. If you can imitate the shape of the opening phrase, or any fragment of the cantus, anywhere in the accompaniment, bravo!

Now for our second job: how to ornament the cantus firmus? If you've played a lot of pieces in this style, you've probably noticed that more figuration happens toward ends of beats than at beginnings of beats. Below I've ornamented the first 4 notes of our cantus in two different ways. The first line sounds awkward, but the second does not:



The first line feels hesitant; it starts and stops. The second actually starts and stops too, but it does its stopping on the strong parts of beats, and its moving on the weak parts of beats. Melodic ornamentation functions largely to lead the ear to the next important note, making arrival there sound inevitable. So, as you practice ornamenting your melody, focus on the note you're moving to, not the note you're on.

Another useful tip: establish a rhythmic pattern with your ornamentation. If in beats 1 and 2 you play eighth-eighth-2 sixteenths-eighth, repeat that pattern in beats 3 and 4. If there's one thing more unpleasant than harmonic meandering, it's rhythmic meandering! So especially while practicing only one voice, organize, organize, organize! And count, count, count!

Keep looking at the framework as you practice. Give yourself the time to get really good at each of the three aspects: fugal exposition, chorale harmonization, melodic ornamentation. If you try to do all three from the start, you may find it a struggle. But if you get so good at each aspect that you can do it almost without thinking, then when you put all three together, your brain will not be overtaxed.

Here's how our framework might be expressed as the beginning of a piece:

The first system of music consists of five measures. The treble clef staff begins with a whole rest in the first measure, followed by a half note G4, quarter notes A4 and B4, and a half note C5. The bass clef staff has whole rests for the first three measures, followed by a half note G3 and quarter notes F3 and E3. The music is in a simple harmonic style with a clear melodic line in the treble and a supporting bass line.

The second system of music consists of five measures, starting at measure 6. The treble clef staff has whole rests for the first three measures, followed by a half note G4 and quarter notes A4 and B4. The bass clef staff has a half note G3, followed by quarter notes F3 and E3, and then a half note D3. The music continues with a steady harmonic accompaniment.

The third system of music consists of four measures, starting at measure 11. The treble clef staff has a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4 and B4, and then a half note C5 with a trill ornament. The bass clef staff has a half note G3, followed by quarter notes F3 and E3, and then a half note D3. The music features a more active melodic line in the treble.

The fourth system of music consists of four measures, starting at measure 15. The treble clef staff has a half note G4 with a trill ornament, followed by a half note A4, and then a whole rest. The bass clef staff has a half note G3, followed by quarter notes F3 and E3, and then a half note D3. The music concludes with a sustained harmonic accompaniment.

Notice that when the right hand gets very active, the left hand and pedal get less so. This is critical: you don't want to overtax your listeners any more than you want to overtax yourself. Balance is good. Repeating what works – very good. Jotting down your good ideas – fabulous. Isolating your weak points and practicing them – priceless!