

Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day: A French Toccata

The past two articles have presented an octatonic scale, specifically, the second mode:



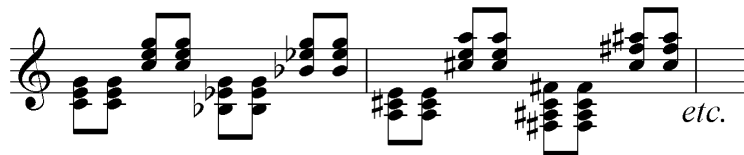
We've made various patterns and clusters from this scale, and octatonicized hymn tunes. And we've played with one of Messiaen's chord progressions derived from this scale:



We've also noted that the scale contains traditional triads on C, E-flat, F#, and A, in major and minor modes. Our next step will be to practice these triads, first in major, then in minor, and get good at hopping from one to the other, using one hand only, constantly changing rhythmic patterns and inversions:



The manual part of our toccata will make patterns from these chords, adding the occasional second above, as Messiaen did. As you move from chord to chord, keep in mind the third relationships within that diminished seventh chord, C, E-flat, F#, A. Whatever chord you're on, the next one can always be a minor third or a tritone away, up or down. Here's a starter pattern:



Since any melody within this octatonic scale can be harmonized by any chord within the scale, we could in fact use these two measures as an ostinato, and put any octatonicized hymn tune in the pedal. If your congregation zips out of church as quickly as mine does, that's plenty of music. Or, if it starts to annoy, shift to minor chords. Try it with a bass line of *Noel Nouvelet*. Here's the beginning, octatonicized:



Even the dissonances will sound “correct.” We could get more freedom, though, if we let our chords be defined by the current melody note. One hand at a time, practice identifying chords that fit beneath each note of the tune.



Notice I don't even bother to accommodate the quarter notes in the melody in measure 5. It's a simple step from here to arpeggiation. Here's one way that might go:



You can think up other patterns, or steal one or two from your favorite composer in the style. We could begin our postlude with the repeated chord ostinato, let the pedal declare the first phrase, hold the last note as a pedal point while the hands incorporate some of the chords from Messiaen's sequence. When you're ready for phrase 2 (second phrase, same as the first!), begin with the same opening pattern. Then another Messiaenic interpolation. Phrase 3: arpeggiation. Give your feet a rest. Maybe move to the swell – got smothered reeds? Phrase 4 (also same as the first): keep arpeggiating, but let the feet enter – could you handle a canon here? Or maybe an ostinato tune fragment?

How to end our masterpiece? Messiaen to the rescue once again. Any sequence from his progression above would make a resounding finish.

