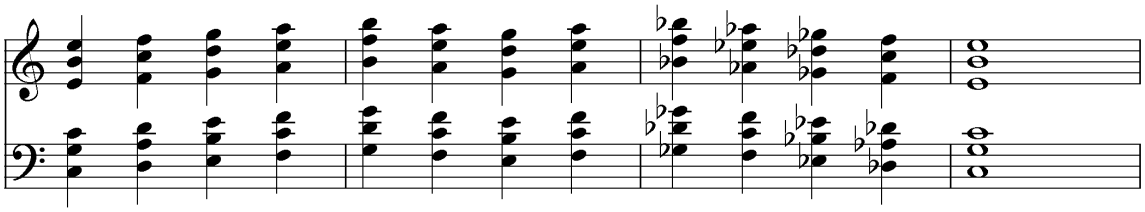
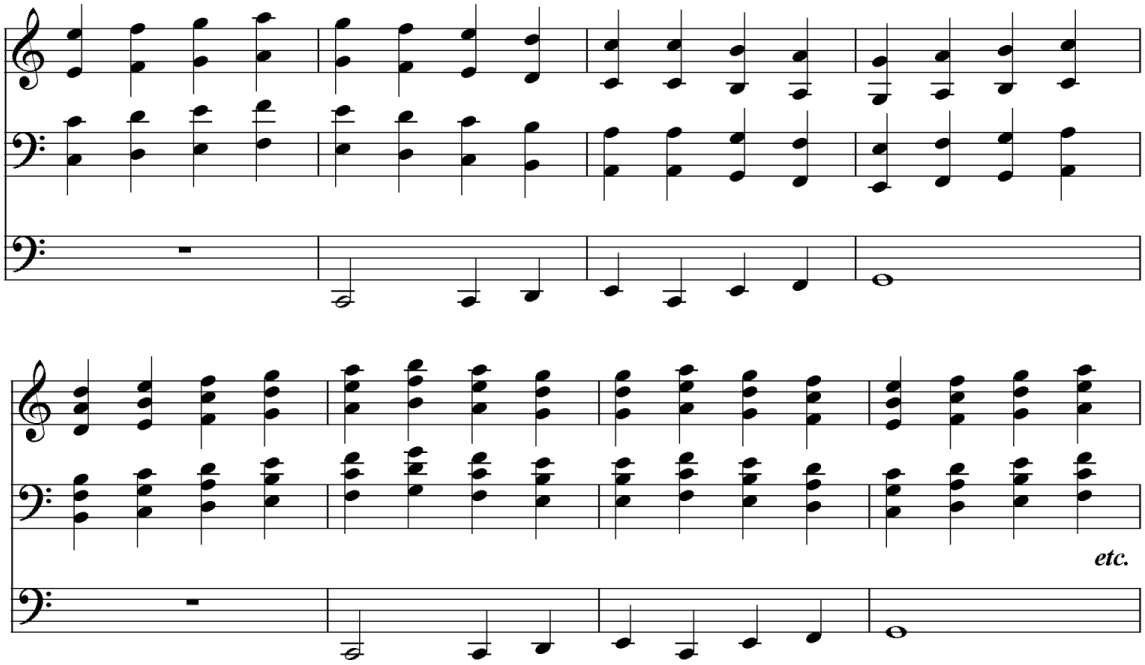
Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day:
Gerre Hancock: Toccata Part 2

This is the second of two articles describing the toccata technique Dr. Gerre Hancock shared with students at the Eastman ImprovFEST last August. In last month's article, we practiced major seventh chords in stepwise motion, 3 notes per hand, maintaining the interval of a third (major or minor) between the thumbs, for example:



We explored various arpeggiations of these chords, and put them over a cantus firmus in the pedal. Practice coordinating the hands with the pedal cantus as a separate element. Try it first with just the outer notes, with both manuals and pedal moving in quarter-notes. When that gets easy, add the middle note. Stepwise motion that is contrary to the pedal is good, but not sacrosanct. Practicing in block chords is also good. Quoting a fragment of the cantus in the manual interludes ("Vorimitation" is the perfect German word for this) is a good habit to incorporate. Arpeggiation is relatively easy, so be conscientious about getting the hard part down first.

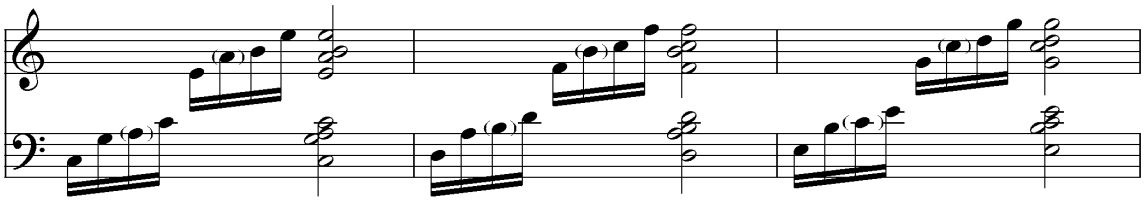


Any improvisation instruction that invokes the name of Hancock would be remiss if it did not mention structure. As you move from practicing these manual exercises to creating a piece from them by adding a pedal cantus, have a clear sense of structure in mind. Above we have 1 measure of hands alone, 3 measures of hands with cantus, 1 of hands, 3 with

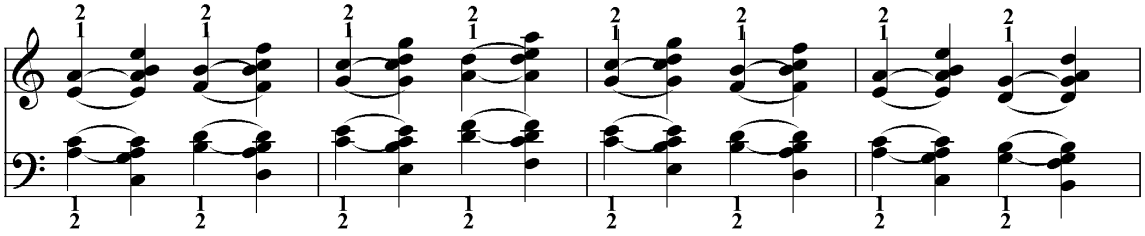
cantus. Try it with 2-measure manual interludes. Then try it with the cantus in augmentation (double note values). Let the structure derive from whatever cantus you're using. If your first phrase is 4 measures long, a manual opening of 2 or 4 measures will probably sound best. Decide on your overall plan first, then stick to it in practice.

Before we take the next step, adding a fourth note, practice something which at first seems awkward and unreasonable. Play the patterns above and others like them using the fingering 5-3-1 in the right hand, and 1-3-5 in the left. Yes, 3, not 2.

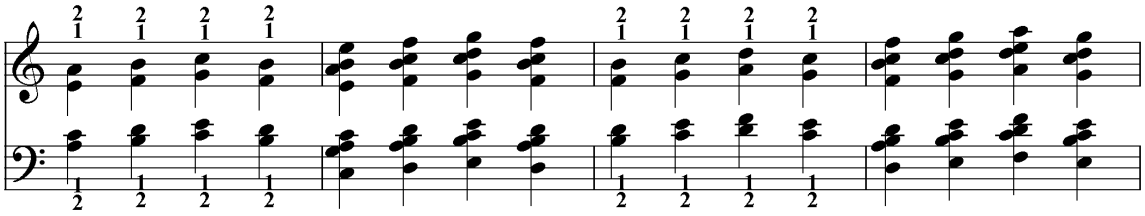
The new note we're about to add is played with the index finger of each hand, and it's the same pitch, an octave apart:



That additional note is an A in measure 1, a B in measure 2, a C in measure 3. Along with the thumbs remaining a third apart, the index fingers now act as a secondary anchor for this pattern. In fact, if you begin to feel less than steady in your faith, practice just the inner fingers together first, like this:



and then like this:



Be sure you're maintaining the thumbs a third apart, the index fingers an octave apart, and the middle fingers just a step away from the index fingers. Take your time with this, and employ all the rigors of repertoire practice. When mistakes occur, chances are one hand is at fault, not both, so don't leap to change everything. As 'Uncle Gerre' himself is fond of exclaiming, "Salvation is just a half-step away!"

A final word of encouragement from the master: Think of all the time you'd spend learning someone else's toccata. Why not be kind to yourself and give yours the same kind of attention?