

***Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day:  
Making Canons***

This article might well be subtitled ‘Morning Calisthenics with Rick Erickson.’ Well known as Cantor and Organist at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in New York City, Rick was a member of the Eastman ImprovFEST Faculty this past summer, and began his classes with canon exercises such as these. They made for a terrific brain-waker-upper.

We begin with the tune *Ratisbon*, often sung as *Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies*. The opening phrase:



The first step is to consider the melody, and determine how canons can best be made. Our plan is to play the canons with the feet. This first phrase will work if the left foot leads, and the right foot follows at the octave 1 bar later. A few hints jotted in our hymnal, and off we go.



The second phrase is a little knottier, but the first 2 bars will work if the right foot leads, and the left follows a fifth below. The next 2 bars will work at the octave 2 beats apart, if we change just the penultimate note. It sounds complicated, but it is simply this:

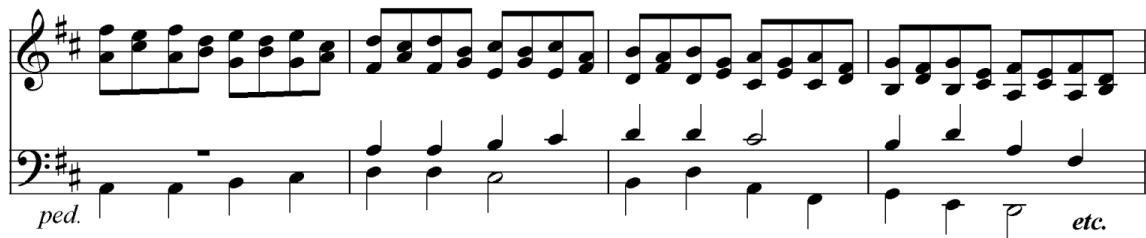


We also have the option of separating the 2-bar phrases, of course, stopping the canon and starting again. You may not need to write out your canons, though it is easier to look at just a melody, rather than a harmonization of the tune. With a simple melody on your music rack, even the most tedious sermon will just fly by!

Now that the feet have their assignment, let's give the hands something to do: harmonic filler. Think of this as creating a background “shimmer” with an ostinato pattern. Watch your workload here. A pattern where first the outer, then the inner fingers move will be easier than a 1-3, 2-5 fingering pattern. You can use any notes you like, and change them as often or seldom as you like. Chains of seventh chords are particularly delightful for this. Try 6/5, 4/2:



Notice 2 important things about the 6/5, 4/2 pattern: 1) first the inner notes move in tandem, then the outer notes; and 2) the outer voices are always a sixth apart, and the inner voices always a third apart. Practice this in the key of C, watching your hands, until that visual pattern is firmly rooted in your mind. Then start anywhere in the chain, and add whatever accidentals you need. Once you're comfortable in a given key, see how the pattern might mesh with your canon. Again, a starting cue jotted in your hymnal may be all you need.



The ostinato does not have to be a pattern of pairs of notes, either, nor need it move in duplets. One could make a chain of seventh chords using triplets just as well, or use a single-voice ostinato of sixteenth-note motion.

We have quite a lovely effect already. In fact, we could just let the right hand be our “shimmer” and let the left hand and pedal play the canon on nicely contrasting sounds. But a better idea might be to use the right hand as a commentator, to round off each phrase, or perhaps introduce the next on a gorgeous harmonic flute. Here’s one way we might end the first phrase and snake our way into the second:



It can be a stunning idea to move from a single voice to a 4- or 5-voice texture, then back again, and a dynamic way to define the phrase structure of our piece, and give the ears (and brain!) a rest from canon.