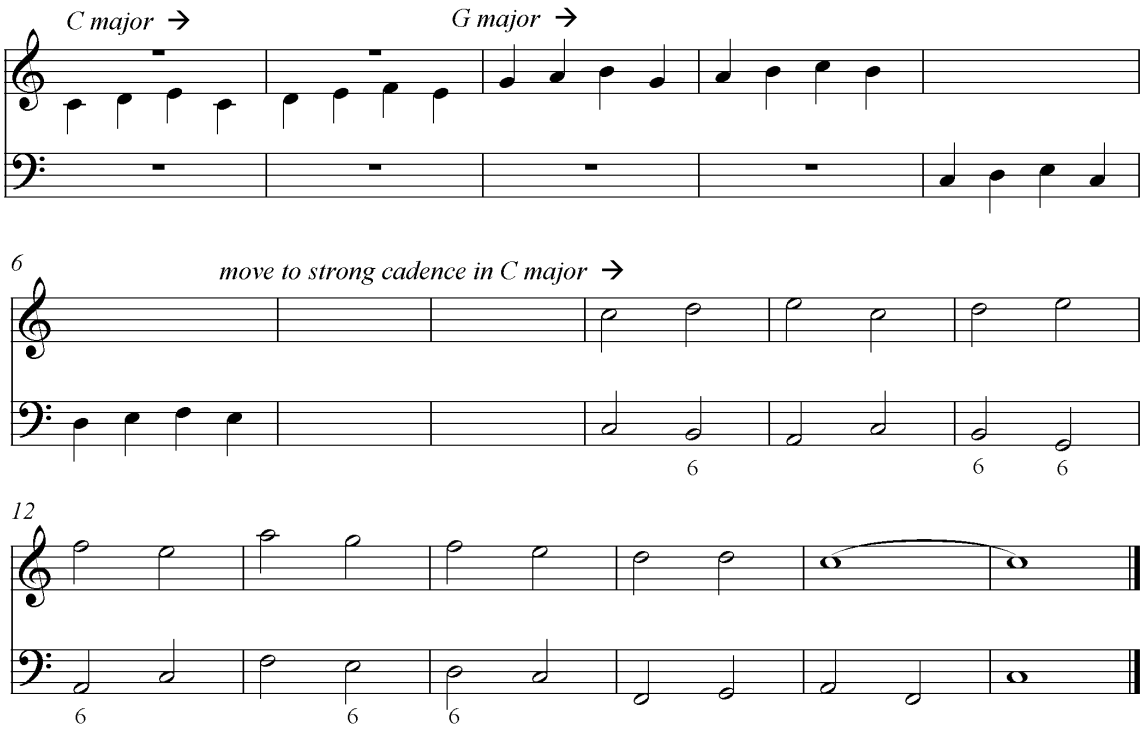
Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day:
Using Fugal Exposition to Create a Chorale Prelude:
The Ornamented Cantus Firmus

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:



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.

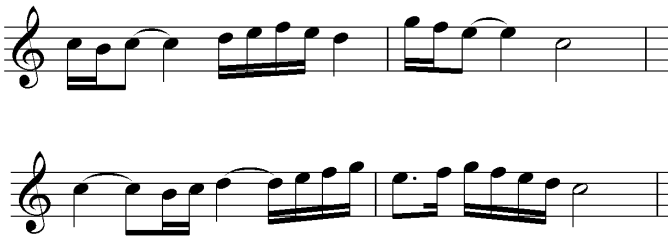
From bars 9-17, we have two jobs to do: harmonize the cantus and ornament it. Isolate these chores and practice them separately. Just as we practiced the fugal exposition in steps, take the time to form a conception of bars 9-17 as well. Begin homophonically. Play a bass note for each note of the cantus.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

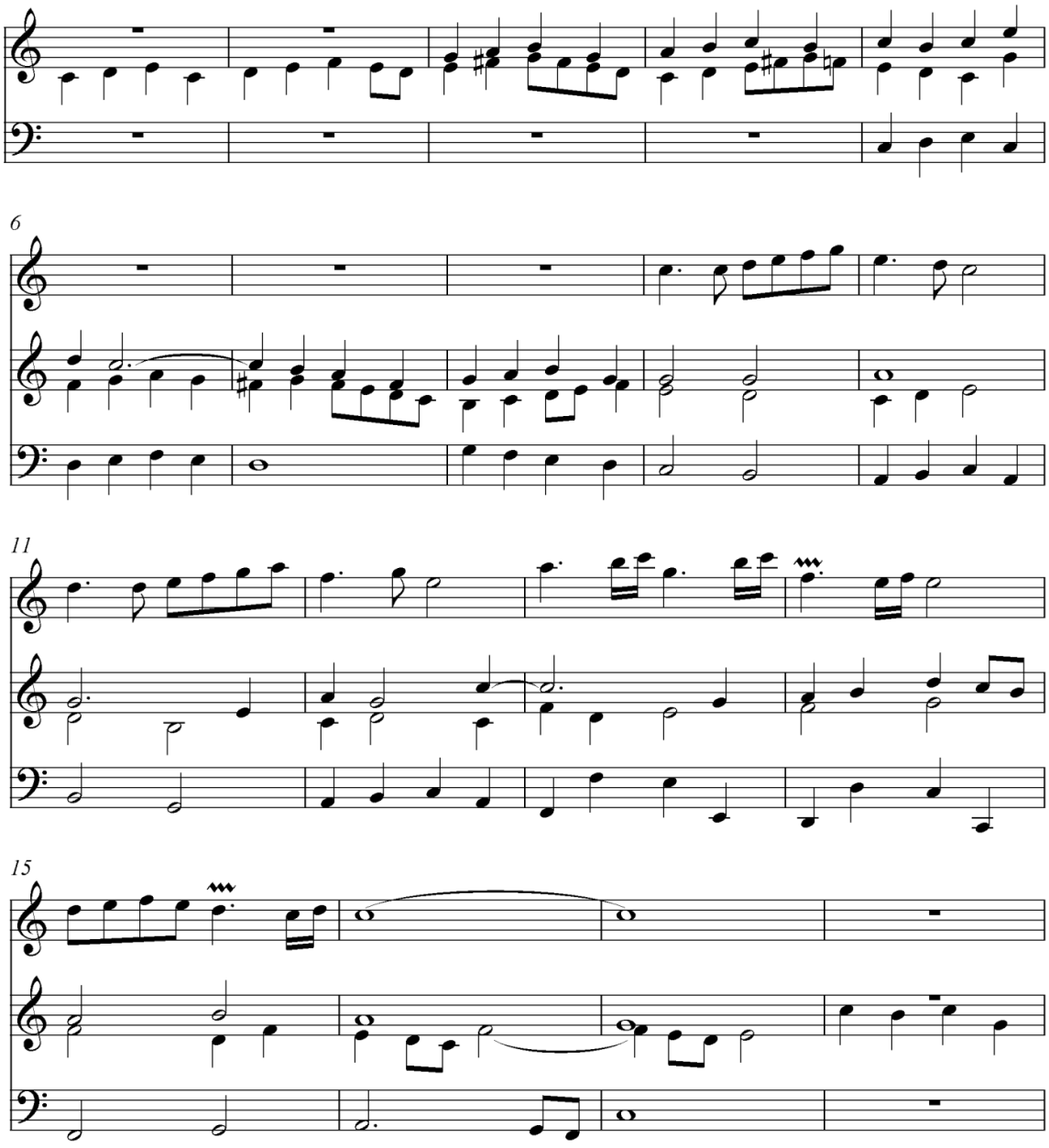


The first line feels hesitant; it starts and stops. The second actually starts and stops too, but it does its stopping on the strong parts of beats, and its moving on the weak parts of beats. Melodic ornamentation functions largely to lead the ear to the next important note, making arrival there sound 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:



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!