

# Improvisation: Practical Beginnings

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## Part I

It is a point well taken that one should study many points of style and composition before attempting to improvise in a historically remote idiom. In practice, however, I have found that teaching students to improvise is often the fastest way to promote their ability to observe and understand the historical traditions. A spontaneous familiarity with the musical materials certainly precedes analytical facility.

Improvisation is as much a training of the body and emotions as the mind. The kinesthetic memory, which is perhaps the most important faculty an improviser needs, when linked to a sense of contrapuntal tension and melodic figuration gives the student the emotional security to react instantaneously with a spontaneous interpretive commitment. A much more confident, flexible musicianship emerges if music study includes improvisation along with sight reading, scholarship, and the cultivation of musical taste.

Another benefit of the study of improvisation is as an aid to ear training. Singing the numbered names of the tones as they are played reinforces the student's recognition of intervals.

The system of naming the intervals used in the following examples is like that used in continuo figuration. The interval between a given bass note and the treble is named, not merely the name of the note reckoned from the overall tonal center of the piece. Thus, the note c in the first example is named "1" in the first measure where the bass note is also c, while in the second measure, where the bass note is B-flat, it would be

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<sup>1</sup> The present text was first published in separate articles in the *LSA Newsletter*: Part I in February 1980 and Part II in November 1980; corrections and explanatory notes for the first article appeared in the May 1980 issue of the *Newsletter*. Some minor edits of the original text have been made here, and the tablatures have been corrected (based on the May 1980 notes) and reset by Douglas Towne.

named “2.” These examples are an important first step in preparing the student for playing from figured bass; still more important is that they clearly show the relationship of tonality to rhythm.

This particular method of studying improvisation, starting with common *basso ostinato* themes, represents only one of many forms used by Renaissance musicians. It was, however, one of the earliest and most long-lived forms, dating from well before the sixteenth century, as noted by Peter Danner,<sup>2</sup> to beyond its probable zenith in the trebles of John Johnson.<sup>3</sup>

In the following examples, I have chosen the *passamezzo antico* theme in its simplest form for ease of fingering and conceptualization. The student can apply the same method to other themes, such as the *folia*, *passamezzo moderno*, *romanesca*, etc., in different keys and positions. The examples are explained in the following notes:

1. This is the theme (tenor) of the *passamezzo antico* in C.

|        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |

1

a	b	a	a	a	b	a	a	a

2. Play the bass note and the suggested interval, singing the top note by number. Here, I have provided a simple counterpoint to the theme, which forms the basis to the following examples; this serves to create opportunities to demonstrate and reinforce the principles of improvisation. The student might invent other solutions according to the basic rules of counterpoint.

|        |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |

1        3        3        5        1        3        1 5        1

2

a	b	a	a	a	b	a	a	a

<sup>2</sup> “The Lute Before Petrucci,” *JLSA* 5 (1972): 4-17.

<sup>3</sup> Lyle Nordstrom, “The Lute Duets of John Johnson,” *JLSA* 9 (1976): 30-42.

3. Play and sing by name the various consonances over each bass note, being careful to avoid consecutive fifths and octaves (which means never saying “five” or “one” twice in a row while crossing a bar line or changing to a new bass note).

	1 3 5 1	3 5 1 3	3 5 1 3	5 3 1 5	1 5 3 1	3 1 5 3	1 3 5 3	1
3								

4. When playing only consonances, a particularly popular technique in early trebles was to mix them up, changing on offbeats.

	1 3 3 5 5 3 3 1	3 5 5 3 3 1 1 3	3 1 1 3 3 5 5 3	5 3 3 1 1 3 3 5
4				

	1 5 5 3 3 5 5 1	3 1 1 3 3 5 5 3	1 3 3 1 3 5 5 3	1

5. Add passing tones on weak beats to connect consonances.

	1 2 3 1	3 4 5 3	3 4 5 3	5 6 7 5	1 2 3 1	3 4 5 3	1 3 5 3	1
5								

	1 3 2 1	3 5 4 3	3 5 4 3	5 7 6 5	1 3 2 1	3 5 4 3	1 3 5 3	1
6								

	1 2 3 1	3 2 1 3	3 4 5 3	5 4 3 5	1 2 3 1	3 2 1 3	3 1 3 5	1	
	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	
7									
	<b>a</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>b</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>

8. Explore neighboring tones adjacent to consonances on weak beats. Here, each upper neighbor is played.

	1 2 1	1 2 1	3 4 3	3 4 3	3 4 3	3 4 3	5 6 5	5 6 5	
	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	
8									
	<b>a</b>		<b>b</b>		<b>a</b>		<b>a</b>		

	1 2 1	1 2 1	3 4 3	3 4 3	1 2 1	3 4 3	1	
	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	
	<b>a</b>		<b>b</b>		<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>	

9. Here, each lower neighbor.

	1 7 1	1 7 1	3 2 3	3 2 3	3 2 3	3 2 3	5 4 5	5 4 5	
	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	
9									
	<b>a</b>		<b>b</b>		<b>a</b>		<b>a</b>		<b>a</b>

	1 7 1	1 7 1	3 2 3	3 2 3	1 7 1	3 2 3	1	
	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	
	<b>a</b>		<b>b</b>		<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>	

10-11. Try mixing upper and lower neighbors.

10

.	.	.	.
a	δ	a	a

.	.	.	.
a	δ	a	a

11

.	.	.	.
a	δ	a	a

.	.	.	.
a	δ	a	a

12-15. Experiment with various passing tones. Note the careful return to the principal note of the invented melody at the close of each measure to avoid consecutive, or parallel, fifths or octaves. This is characteristic of divisions based on descants with only one note per measure. If we made a descant with two notes per measure, its divisions would be far less monotonous but also harder to conceptualize, carrying us into a more advanced lesson.

12

1 1 2 3 1	3 3 4 5 3	3 3 4 5 3	5 5 6 7 5
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

1 1 2 3 1	3 3 4 5 3	3 2 1 5 4 3	1
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i> <i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

13

1 3 2 1 1	3 5 4 3 3	3 5 4 3 3	5 7 6 5 5
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

1 3 2 1 1	3 5 4 3 3	1 2 3 5 4 3	1
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i> <i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

14

1 1 2 3 1	3 3 2 1 3	3 3 4 5 3	5 5 4 3 5
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

1 1 2 3 1	3 3 2 1 3	3 2 1 3 4 5	1
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i> <i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

15

1 3 2 1 1	3 1 2 3 3	3 5 4 3 3	5 5 4 3 5
a	δ	a	a

1 3 2 1 1	3 1 2 3 3	3 2 1 5 4 3	1
a	δ	a a	a

16-22. Offbeat dissonances adjacent to consonances. Remember, the monotonous rhythms and frequent stopping on certain notes are devices to drill certain kinesthetic memory and ear training formulas. Be sure you go slowly, finger consistently, and keep singing!

16

1 1 7 1 2 1	3 3 2 3 4 3	3 3 2 3 4 3	5 5 4 5 6 5
a	δ	a	a

1 1 7 1 2 1	3 3 2 3 4 3	1 1 3 5 4 3	1
a	δ	a a	a

17

1 1 2 1 7 1	3 3 4 3 2 3	3 3 4 3 2 3	5 5 6 5 4 5
$\delta$	$\delta$	$\delta$	$\delta$
$\alpha$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	$\alpha$

1 1 2 1 7 1	3 3 4 3 2 3	3 3 1 5 4 3	1
$\delta$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	$\alpha$
$\alpha$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	$\alpha$

18

1 1 2 3 2 1	3 3 4 5 4 3	3 3 4 5 4 3	5 5 6 7 6 5
$\delta$	$\delta$	$\delta$	$\delta$
$\alpha$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	$\alpha$

1 1 2 3 2 1	3 3 4 5 4 3	1 1 3 5 4 3	1
$\delta$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	$\alpha$
$\alpha$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	$\alpha$

19

1 1 7 6 7 1	3 3 2 1 2 3	3 3 2 1 2 3	5 5 4 3 4 5
$\delta$	$\delta$	$\delta$	$\delta$
$\alpha$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	$\alpha$

1 1 7 6 7 1	3 3 2 1 2 3	3 3 1 3 4 5	1
$\delta$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	$\alpha$
$\alpha$	$\delta$	$\alpha$	$\alpha$



20

1 3 2 1 7 1	3 5 4 3 2 3	3 5 4 3 2 3	5 7 6 5 4 5
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

1 3 2 1 7 1	3 5 4 3 2 3	3 2 1 3 5 4 3 5	1
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a a</i>	<i>a</i>

21

1 3 2 1 7 1	3 3 2 1 2 3	3 1 2 3 4 3	5 5 4 3 4 5
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

1 3 4 3 2 1	3 1 2 3 4 3	3 2 3 4 8 7 6 5	1
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a a</i>	<i>a</i>

22

1 5 4 3 2 1	3 1 2 3 4 3	3 1 2 3 4 3	5 1 2 3 4 5
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

1 5 4 3 2 1	3 1 2 3 4 3	1 2 3 4	1' 2' 3' 1'
<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a a</i>	<i>a</i>

23-28. Divisions in continuous patterns are perhaps the most obvious device of treble invention.

23

a	δ	a	a

a	δ	a	a

24

a	δ	a	a

a	δ	a	a

25

a	δ	a	a

a	δ	a	a

26

$\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{1}$	$\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{6}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{5}$
<i>a</i>	$\delta$	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

$\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{1}$	$\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{5}$	$\dot{1}$
<i>a</i>	$\delta$	<i>a</i> <i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

27

$\dot{1}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{1}$	$\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{9}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{6}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{5}$
<i>a</i>	$\delta$	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

$\dot{1}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{1}$	$\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{1}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{1}$
<i>a</i>	$\delta$	<i>a</i> <i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

28

$\dot{1}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{1}$	$\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{5}$ $\dot{6}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{5}$
<i>a</i>	$\delta$	<i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

$\dot{1}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{1}$	$\dot{3}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{2}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{3}$	$\dot{1}$ $\dot{7}$ $\dot{1}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{5}$ $\dot{4}$ $\dot{3}$ $\dot{5}$	$\dot{1}$
<i>a</i>	$\delta$	<i>a</i> <i>a</i>	<i>a</i>

29. If desired, the student can omit the playing of the theme in the bass and concentrate solely on improvising the treble. He can either imagine or sing the theme, or better yet, have an accompanist play the chords.

29

	1 b	b	1 a	a	1 b	b	1 a	a
4	b	b	1 b	b	b	b	3 c	2 c
2	c	c	a	a	c	c	a	1 c
	a	a	3 d	d	a	a	1 c	a

	1 b	b	1 a	a	1 b	a	3 c	4 d
4	b	b	1 b	b	b	3 c	2 c	2 c
2	c	c	a	a	2 c	a	a	2 c
	a	a	3 d	d	a	a	a	a

It is, of course, the goal of every improviser to mix even the most mundane materials in novel and interesting ways. If halfway through these examples, you do not find yourself lapsing into chance combinations which you find preferable to those given, I would be very surprised.

For those interested in historical theory, singing the appropriate syllables as an early singer would have done suggests itself as a logical extension of this project. The compositional insights to be gained would be very significant. Spontaneous understanding of the theory contemporary with the lute's music, the mutation of the hexachord, et al. should be the goal of every dedicated player. (I cannot imagine a good method on lute improvisation without such a chapter.)

Practicing various figures for improvisation was probably the early musician's equivalent of the modern student's scale and exercise routine, insofar as chord progressions and playing two-octave diatonic scales for fluency seem never to have entered their minds pedagogically. Certain patterns of intervallic usage were doubtless more important to the early teacher, which suggests an approach to improvisation much as in the species counterpoint system. Perhaps at another occasion, we might look into adapting the principles of various counterpoint methods to lute improvisation, so as to have a better understanding of which of the various techniques shown here were and were not used at various times and places.

In conclusion, let me stress the final reason for the particular format I have chosen: it is essential that the beginner in improvisation pick very specific, achievable goals in things he can do spontaneously, so that he gradually develops a repertoire of usage. I did not write all the examples out in tablature for a very good reason: because reading through them is not the point! Playing, thinking, planning, feeling, and reacting, all at the same time, are what I am trying to make you do.

The following is a key showing exactly how to interpret the figures used [above].<sup>4</sup>

30

The musical notation for Example 30 consists of three staves. The top staff is a lute-style staff with a C-clef and a sharp sign (F#) above it. It contains eight measures of music with notes labeled 'a', 'b', and 'c'. Above the staff are vertical lines indicating fret positions: 1, 3, 3, 5, 1, 3, 1, 5, 1. The middle staff is a standard staff with a treble clef and a sharp sign (F#) above it, containing the same notes as the top staff. The bottom staff is a standard staff with a bass clef and a sharp sign (F#) above it, containing the same notes as the top staff.

According to this scheme, which is designed to keep the entire set of exercises within one small register on the neck, facilitating fingering, Example 2 would be played as follows:

31

The musical notation for Example 31 consists of three staves. The top staff is a lute-style staff with a C-clef and a sharp sign (F#) above it. It contains three measures of music with notes labeled 'a', 'b', and 'c'. Above the staff are vertical lines indicating fret positions: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 6, 7, 1; 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 7, 1; 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The middle staff is a standard staff with a treble clef and a sharp sign (F#) above it, containing the same notes as the top staff. The bottom staff is a standard staff with a bass clef and a sharp sign (F#) above it, containing the same notes as the top staff.

<sup>4</sup> The material beginning with this sentence to the beginning of Part II appeared in the May 1980 issue of the LSA *Newsletter* along with corrections for the examples above; the corrections have been incorporated into the appropriate tablatures.

**Part II**

In the first part of this article (*LSA Newsletter*, February 1980), the *passamezzo antico* was given a particular melodic formula which was then varied and embellished in the accompanying [examples]. Obviously, the student should attempt to frame other basic melodic solutions to the ground, like the following one, and then proceed to embellish them. Again, this should be done by playing and singing, and not by writing on paper!

32

	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	
	<sup>1</sup> b	a	<sup>1</sup> b	a	<sup>1</sup> b	<sup>a</sup> a	a	<sup>1</sup> b
	<sub>4</sub> δ	<sub>1</sub> b	<sub>4</sub> δ	<sub>2</sub> c			<sub>4</sub> δ	<sub>2</sub> c
	a		a	a	a	<sub>3</sub> δ	a	a

It is actually more common for the *passamezzo antico* to have a slightly different form, in which the third in the fifth measure of the ground gives what we now call a relative major tonality. This is shown below, followed by a common treble solution to this form of the ground. I omitted mention of this variation before for simplicity's sake.

33

						↑	↑	
	a	a	a	<sub>3</sub> δ	<sub>3</sub> δ	a	a	a

34

						↑	↑	
	<sup>4</sup> δ	a	<sup>1</sup> b	a	<sup>a</sup> a	<sup>4</sup> δ	<sup>1</sup> b	a
	a		a		<sub>3</sub> δ	<sub>3</sub> δ	a	a

A common ground closely related to the former is the *romanesca*, in which the relative major, or III tonality, opens both four-bar segments. Here it is, again followed by a simple solution for division practice.

35

36

Idiomatic fingering considerations on the lute make approaches to perfect consonances by similar motion of voices very common in some lute music. This was often, Praetorius tells us, used by composers as an evocation of Arcadian moods; the villanella style is full of intentional parallelism in counterpoint as an imitation of the “primitive” style of country and village musicians. Various contrapuntal devices such as this are common in even the simplest forms of improvisation. Here, the treble voice is held over the bar line to create a suspension, or dissonance, on the beginning of the measure, which resolves to a consonance immediately afterwards.

37

Here, the very same suspensions are “delayed” or “interrupted” by the very simple device of an off-beat lo[wer] neighbor intervening between the suspension and its resolution. If we add a few other touches to

this, the next example appears, mixing the techniques of both sections in this series of articles on improvisation.

38

39

Another simple ground on which to improvise trebles is the *passamezzo moderno*. Again, the first form I would advise the student to attempt is slightly simplified. Here, again, a sample treble is given with the ground.

40



The *moderno* often includes a minor seventh in the ground, in the sixth measure. This is very similar to the *antico* form but is a bit harder to finger in this tonality, the jump from B-flat to C chords being a big hurdle for novice players.

41

2c	4d	2c	a	2c	4d	2c a		3d
a	a	a	a	a	3d	a a	a	

Certain similarities in the fingering and tonality make the next logical step to try the *passamezzo antico* in D. Here, it is given without the relative major in the fifth bar,

42

4d	2c	a		a	2c	4d 2c	a	
1c	a	1c	1c	1c	a	1c 1c	1c	

and here, with the relative major.

43

a	2c	4d	2c	4d	2c	a 4e	a	
1c	a	1c	1c		a	1c 1c	1c	

Two versions of the *passamezzo antico*, this time in G, show a great similarity in fingering to those above in D.

44

4d	2c	a		a	2c	4d 2c	a	
1c	a	1c	1c	1c	a	1c 1c		a

45

a	2c	4d	2c	4d	2c	a 4e	a	
1c	a	1c	1c	d	a	1c 1c	a	

These, of course, suggest the corresponding *romanesecas* that end in D

							┌	
46	<sup>4</sup> d	<sup>2</sup> c	<b>a</b>	<sup>2</sup> c	<sup>4</sup> d	<sup>2</sup> c	<b>a</b>	<sup>4</sup> e
	<b>a</b>				<b>a</b>			
		<b>a</b>	<sup>1</sup> c			<b>a</b>	<sup>1</sup> c	<sup>1</sup> c
				<sup>1</sup> c			<sup>1</sup> c	<sup>1</sup> c

and in G.

							┌	
47	<sup>4</sup> d	<sup>2</sup> c	<b>a</b>	<sup>2</sup> c	<sup>4</sup> d	<sup>2</sup> c	<b>a</b>	<sup>4</sup> e
		<b>a</b>	<sup>1</sup> c			<b>a</b>	<sup>1</sup> c	
			<sup>1</sup> c	<sup>1</sup> c			<sup>1</sup> c	<sup>1</sup> c
	<sup>3</sup> d			<sup>3</sup> d				<b>a</b>

Finally, one of the most long-lived grounds, and one which has so many versions that it is almost inseparable from those associations, the *folia*. Here, the student can compare his ideas for melodic invention with *folias* from Ortiz to Corelli to Handel and further.

48	<b>a</b>		<b>a</b>	<sup>2</sup> c	<sup>4</sup> d	<sup>2</sup> c	<b>a</b>	
		<sup>4</sup> e			<b>a</b>			<sup>4</sup> e
	<sup>1</sup> c		<sup>1</sup> c	<b>a</b>		<b>a</b>	<sup>1</sup> c	<sup>1</sup> c
		<sup>1</sup> c					<sup>1</sup> c	<sup>1</sup> c

							┌	
	<sup>4</sup> e	<b>a</b>	<sup>2</sup> c	<sup>4</sup> d	<sup>2</sup> c	<sup>4</sup> d	<sup>2</sup> c	<b>a</b>
		<sup>1</sup> c	<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>a</b>		<sup>1</sup> c	
	<sup>1</sup> c					<sup>1</sup> c	<sup>1</sup> c	<sup>1</sup> c

I suppose it should be obvious by now, if you've been watching, that we are, among other things, moving on our way to continuo style here, bit by bit. It is but a small step from improvising from a treble and ground to an accompaniment.