

Three Truths about Organ Improvisation

Alan Saggerson reports on the:

London Organ Improvisation Course - 2009.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that every single organist in possession of a good instrument must be in need of an improvisation.

It is equally true that many of us faced with this universal truth shy away from its consequences. That's where the London Organ Improvisation Course ("LOIC") comes to the rescue. The third truth may be that most organists (from a standing start) cannot, and indeed should not, aspire to extemporise organ symphonies in the French manner. However, all organists at all levels can and surely must strive to produce music that is relevant, liturgically engaging and sympathetic to the occasion. This involves the provision of more than merely "incidental" music or "parish chords".

Many accomplished performers and teachers have written about how such an end might be achieved, even by those of limited experience. LOIC, meanwhile, illustrates and demonstrates in a practical context how to put the theory into practice. LOIC encourages the improviser to widen both the content and scope of their efforts and to break the shackles of any pre-existing limitations. New ideas abounded. The results can be startling; improvement palpable and the entertainment value appreciable.

On 20th July 2009, 17 aspirant improvisers ranging from absolute beginners to a few wizened veterans gathered at St. James' Clerkenwell for LOIC 2009 under the guidance of Course Director Gerard Brooks with international guest tutor and star, Martin Bambauer (Professor of organ and improvisation at the Musikhochschule, Cologne and organist of the Constantine Basilica, Trier). The arrangements for the Course were finely tuned and worked perfectly to combine a proper degree of formality with some fun and games.

1. Musicians were placed in 1 of 5 broadly based groups designed for people of roughly similar experience.
2. Each group surrendered itself in turn to one of 5 central London venues (including this year St. Giles Cripplegate, St. Katherine Cree and St. Botolph, Aldgate in addition to the more familiar Notre Dame Leicester Square and St. James' Clerkenwell).
3. Tutors (including Duncan Middleton, Daniel Moulton and John Riley as well as Martin Bambauer and Gerard Brooks) visited the groups in rotation for 2 hour sessions with every improviser given the option of one 30 minute private lesson at the session's conclusion.
4. The focus for each group was captured through the prism of general headings designed to kick-start the work and development for each

session: *Mastering the basics; Having Fun with Hymns; The Glory of Gregorian; Savouring the style and Free-style Fiesta!*

But what of the practical successes fostered by these arrangements? It is one thing for commentators and experienced improvisers to explain how it might be done; it is *quite another* to bring about some progress and improvement in the performance of those seeking assistance. Two examples will have to suffice.

First, Martin Bambauer and Daniel Moulton tackled the issue of making convincing chorale preludes and variations using recognisable hymn tunes or songs. One very real problem with the published repertoire is that, wonderful as it is, the tunes are now largely unknown to domestic congregations. How much more gratifying for all concerned is it for variations to be worked around a musical theme that is known from the occasion served by the improvisation, such as a familiar hymn? Taking as templates the various mechanisms adopted by Buxtehude and JS Bach (no less) students were shown how to adapt such examples (including, by way of example, decorated melodies and motivic accompaniments) to any tune. The results may not be complex nor even (at first) strictly accurate, but the outcome is invariably convincing, original, recognisable and satisfying to player and listener alike. You can *practise* this too.

Secondly, Duncan Middleton and John Riley concentrated on different styles; the former using Gregorian chant to produce a more mellifluous, atmospheric result and the latter illustrating how a change of era (from renaissance drone to classical formulae and beyond) can provide weight and reach to even the simplest improvisatory idea.

Now, let's be realistic. Some of us – perhaps most of us - will not, and should not, offer concert improvisations, but are in constant need of preludes, interludes, gospel alleluias and hymn extensions. The benefit of LOIC is that it deplores meaningless “fillers” and encourages all participants to stretch their imaginations and each individual's musical imagination and originality. It is wonderful to note that this annual course is now bedded-in to the extent that in 2009 there was a waiting list of would-be improvisers anxious to attend. Long may it be the case that organists seek practical and attainable solutions to their perceived improvisatory limitations.

Speaking of former Labour leader Michael Foot in the 1983 general election campaign, Clive James noted: *In Bradford on Friday afternoon, Michael finished the sentence he started in Bromley on Tuesday morning.* Hopefully the day will come when none of us is constrained to say or think: *On Sunday in Barchester the organist continued the improvisation his colleague at Starminster started a week last Wednesday.*

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(for more information visit www.loic.org.uk)