Playing by Ear and Improvising Part 2

Learning Aims:
On completion of this workshop
you will be able to improvise, and teach improvising,
inspired by pupils' pieces,
so that you and your pupils will be able
to play in a musically satisfying way
on any piano, anywhere, without notation.

(c) Lucinda Mackworth-Young

Introduction to today's task

First I will demonstrate five ideas for improvising which you can apply to your chosen Grade 1-3 piece.

Then you will have 15 minutes to experiment with the ideas in relation to your piece, and select ONE to play to the group.

Here are the five ideas which I will demonstrate:

1. Using a broken chord progression in the key of your piece

2. Using a single line bass melody

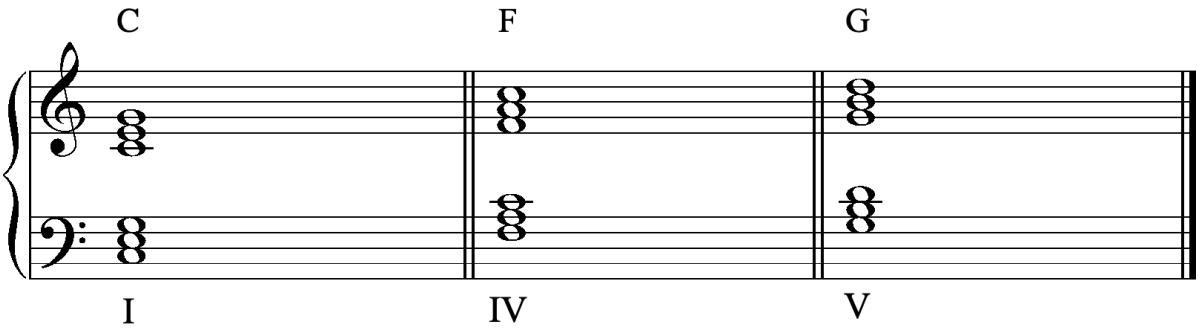
3. Using two alternating chords

4. Using a given eight- or twelve-bar structure

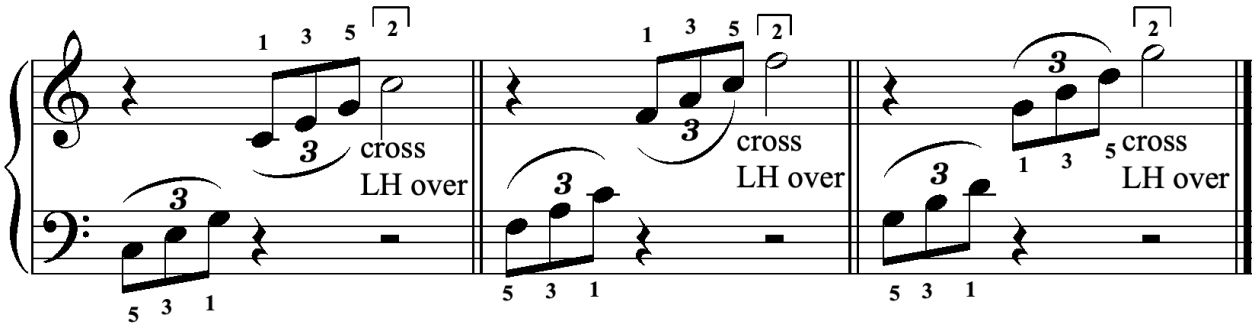
5. Using a chord progression extracted from the piece

1.Using a broken chord progression in the key of your piece

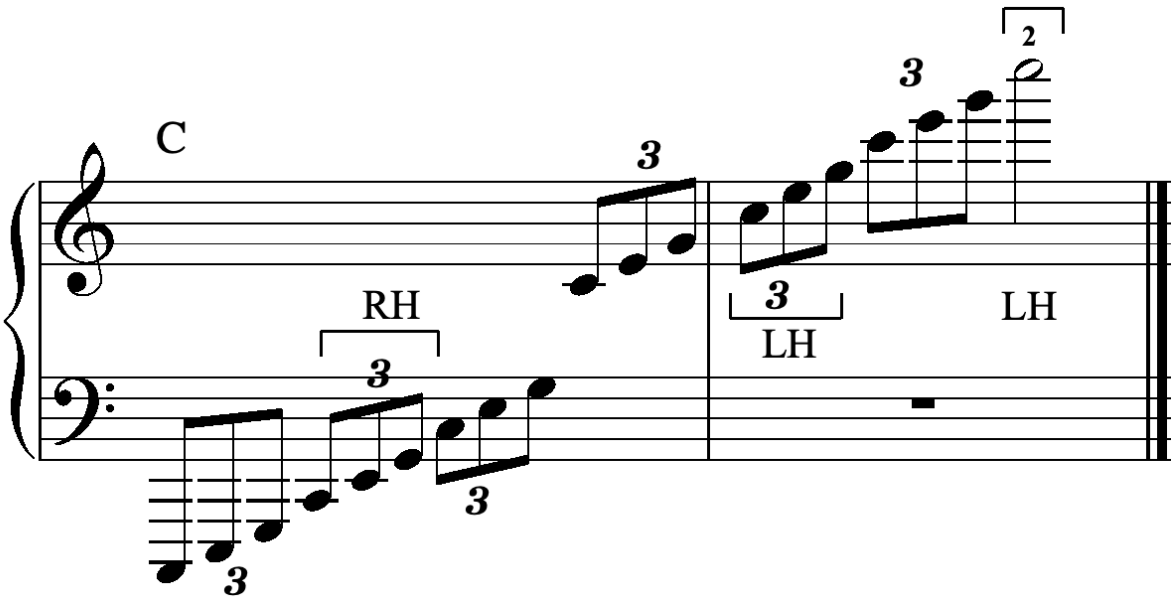
Identify the key of your piece, and work out the Primary chords, e.g. in C major:



Then practise them in short broken chords



Or long broken chords (“Grand Arpeggios”)



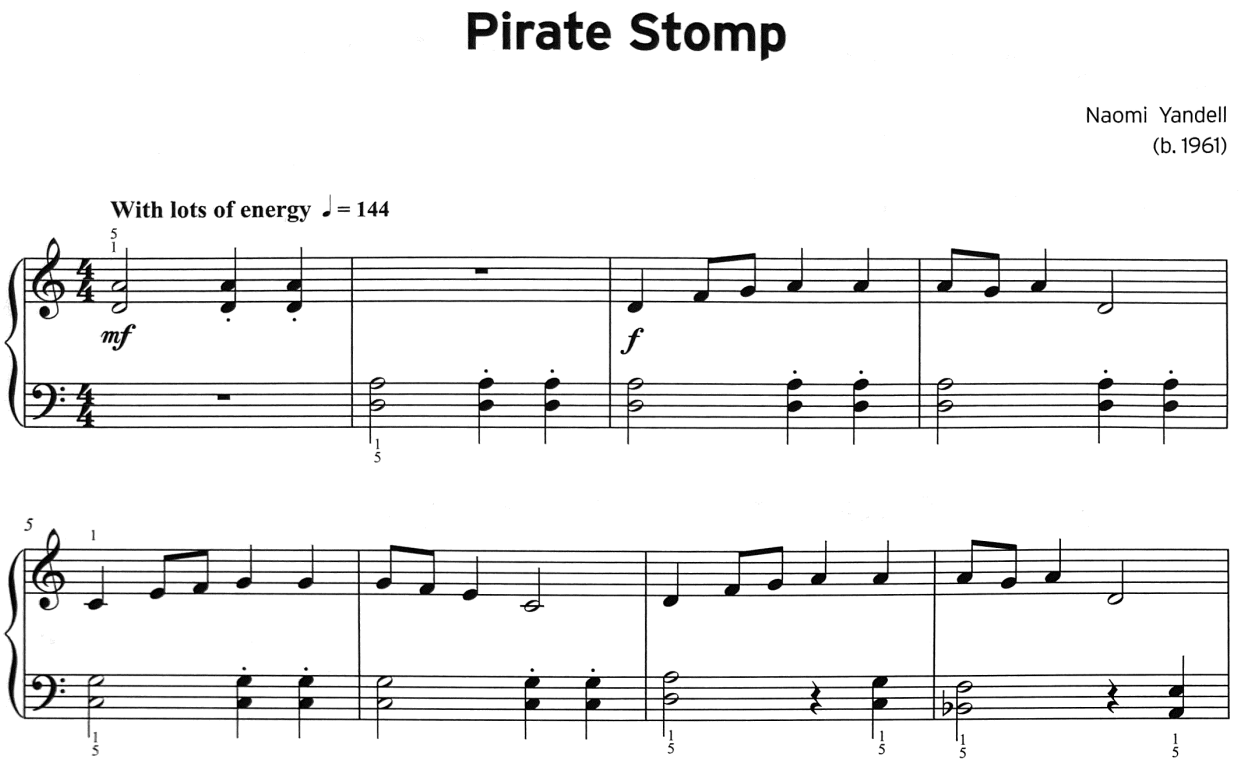
Finally, create a beautiful four- or eight-bar broken chord progression

e.g. I IV V I
IV I V I

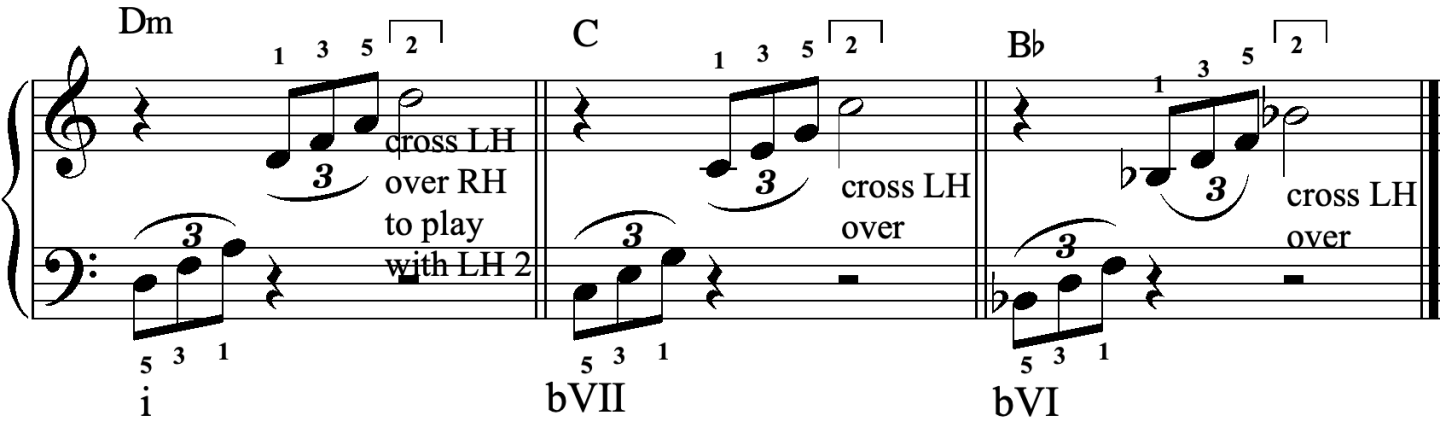
You can play it ascending and/or descending over two or more octaves

If primary chords are not in evidence in the piece, just choose two or three chords that occur frequently.

Yandell's *Pirate Stomp* (Trinity Grade 1), has frequent Dm, C and Bb chords.



These could be played as regular broken chords:



And organised into a musically satisfying progression such as:

Dm C Bb C
Dm C Bb C Dm

The remaining four ideas can all be played either as **duets** (the best way to begin)

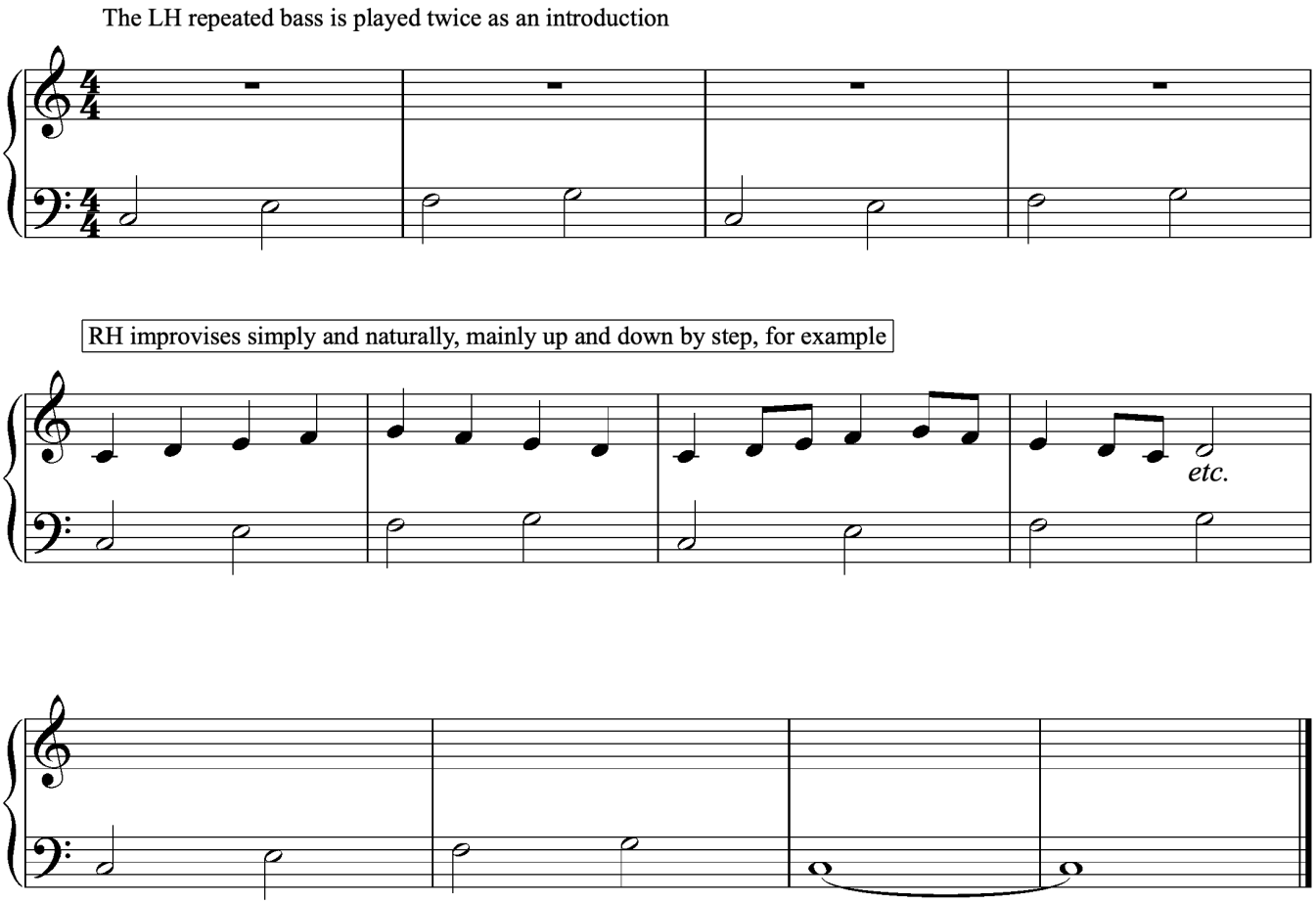
Or as **solos** (if pupils have good coordination between hands)

NB When teaching online, and for home practice, **the repeated basses can be recorded and texted or emailed to pupils** for them to improvise over.

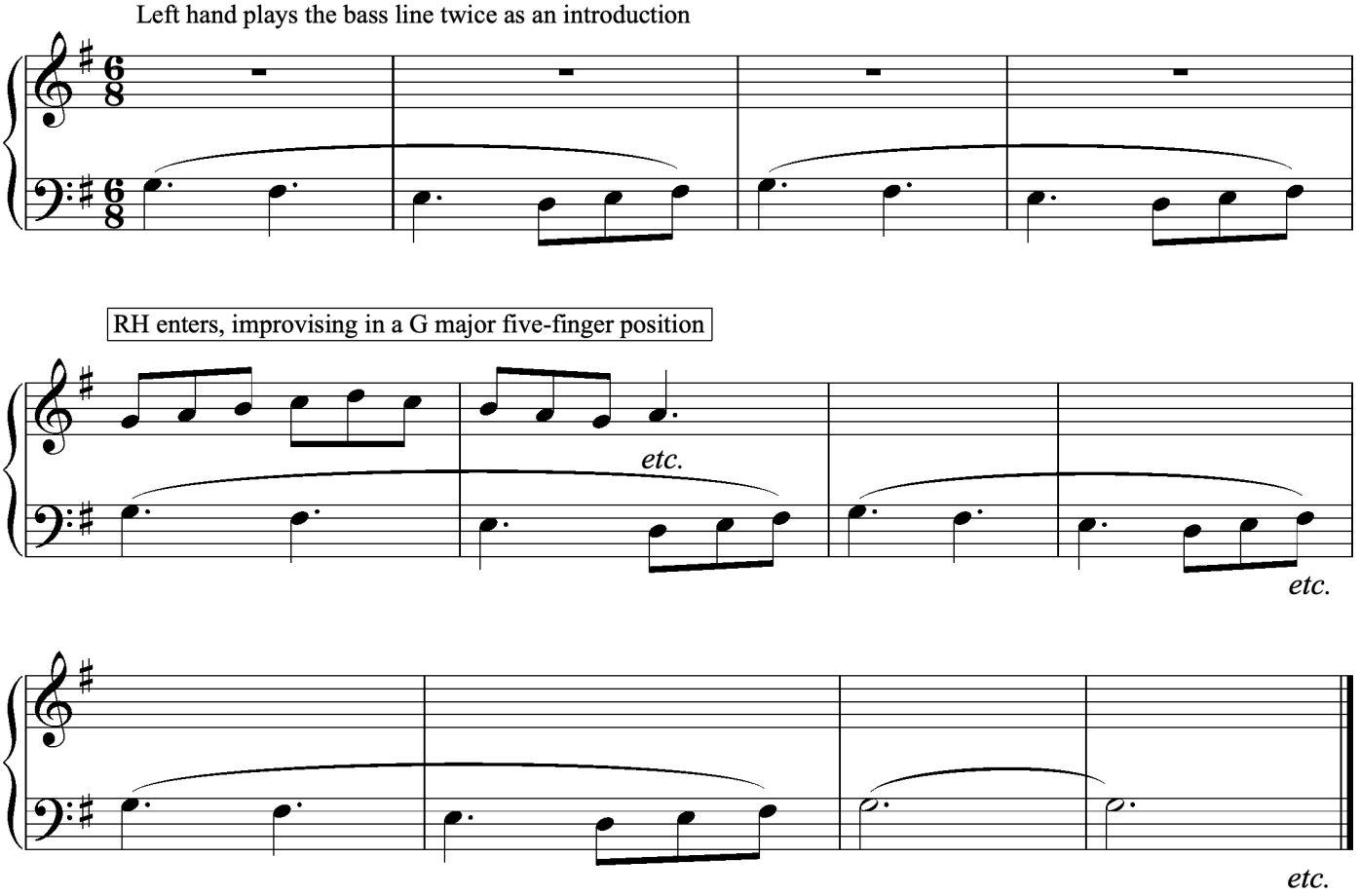
2. Using a single line bass melody

Create a single line bass melody in the key and time signature of your piece. Then improvise over it with a RH five-finger position.

Here is an example in C major, 4/4 time.



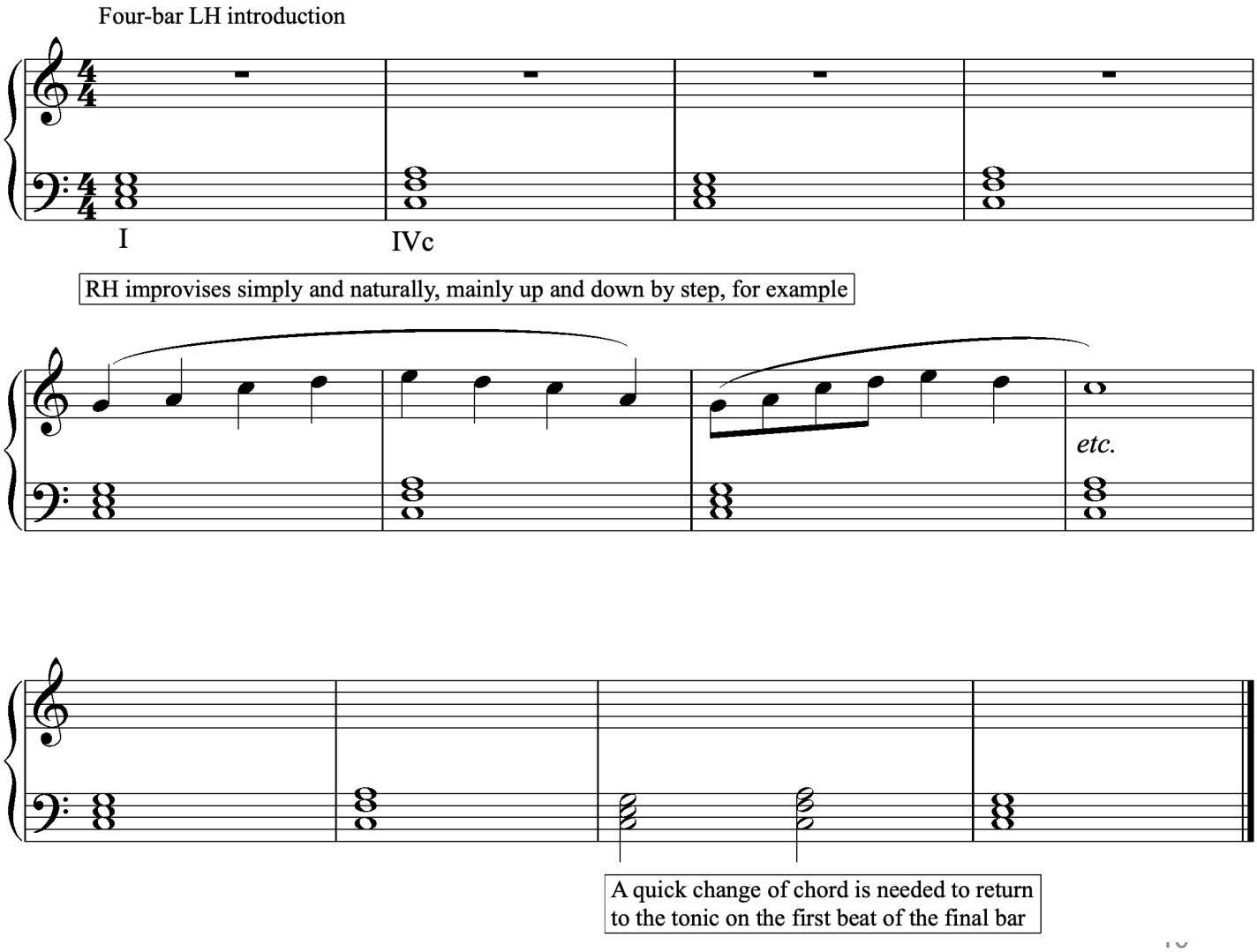
Norton's *Walking Together* (Trinity Grade 1) has a single line bass all ready for improvising:



3. Using two alternating chords

Look at the key and time signature of your piece, and choose two chords from the piece to play alternately as a repeated bass. Then improvise over the your chords with a RH five-finger position.

Here is an example in C major, 4/4 time, using Chords I and IVc.



Did you notice the RH five-finger position was **GA CDE** rather than CDEFG? i.e. it was the pentatonic scale, CDE GA, but inverted to make it more comfortable to play.

A wide variety of five-finger positions can be used. Your choice depends on what sounds best with your two alternating chords.

Options in relation to C major/minor/other modes are:

C D E F G -major

G A C D E -major pentatonic

C D Eb F G -minor, aeolian and dorian

G A C D Eb -flat 3 pentatonic

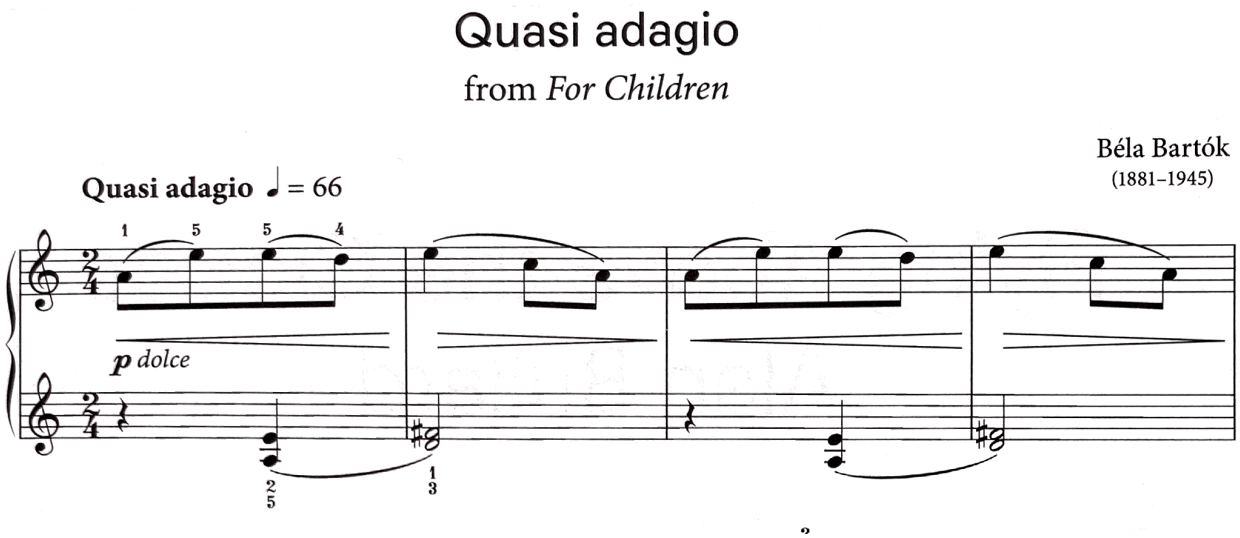
C Eb F G Bb -minor pentatonic

C Eb F F# G -blues

C Db E F G -jewish and arabian

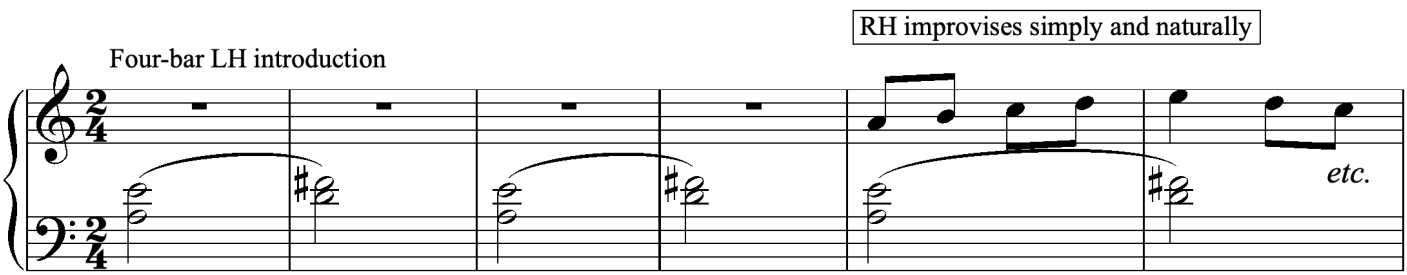
Bartok's *Quasi Adagio* (LCM Grade 1) has two alternating chords all ready for improvising.

The piece could be thought of as being in A minor, but, with the consistent F#, it's really in A dorian (A B C D E F# G A).



In the example below, the chords have been given two beats each to make them easier to play while improvising.

The RH improvises with A B C D E inspired by the rhythms of the piece



4. Using a given eight- or twelve-bar structure

Structure is important for your improvisation to sound satisfying to the listener.

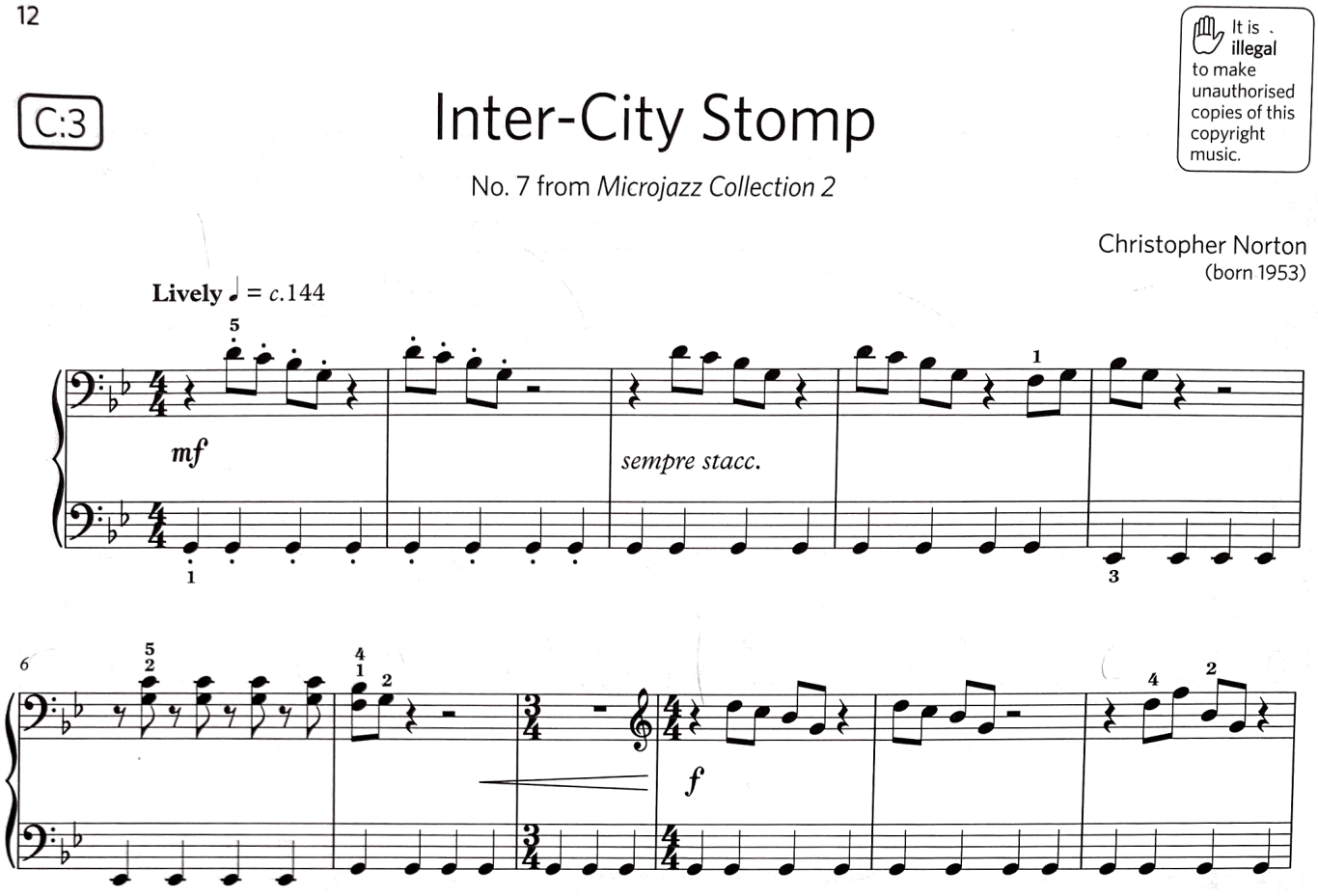
So far we've been using four-bar introductions followed by four, eight or twelve phrases of improvisation, and this works well.

The easiest way to provide structure is to improvise over a given eight or twelve-bar structure.

Below are examples from

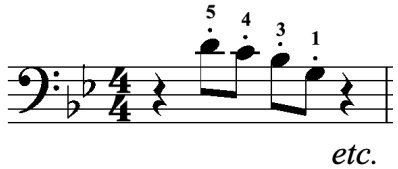
Intercity Stomp, Norton (ABRSM Grade 2)
Hound Dog, arr. Wedgewood, (Trinity Grade 3)
Disco Baroque, Bullard, ABRSM Grade 3)

The eight-bar bass line of ***Inter-City Stomp*** could be played exactly as given, although it would feel easier to give the eighth bar 4, rather than 3, beats.

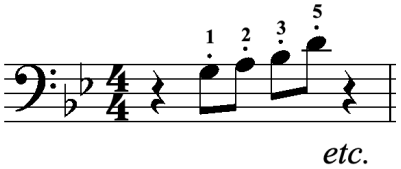


Your RH improvisation could be in the G minor five-finger position as in the opening of the piece, but begin with an ***inversion*** of the original melody.

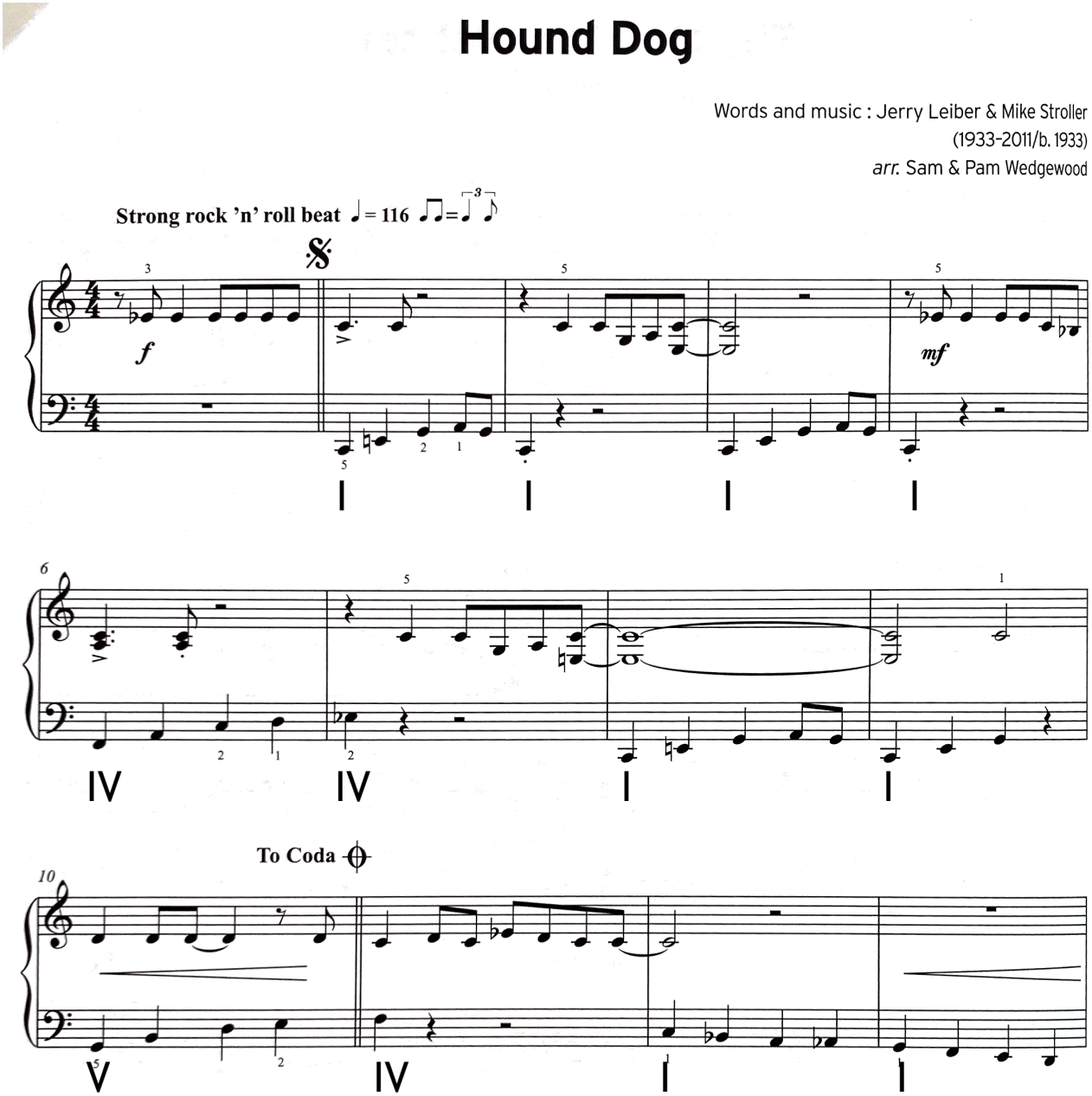
So instead of



it could begin:



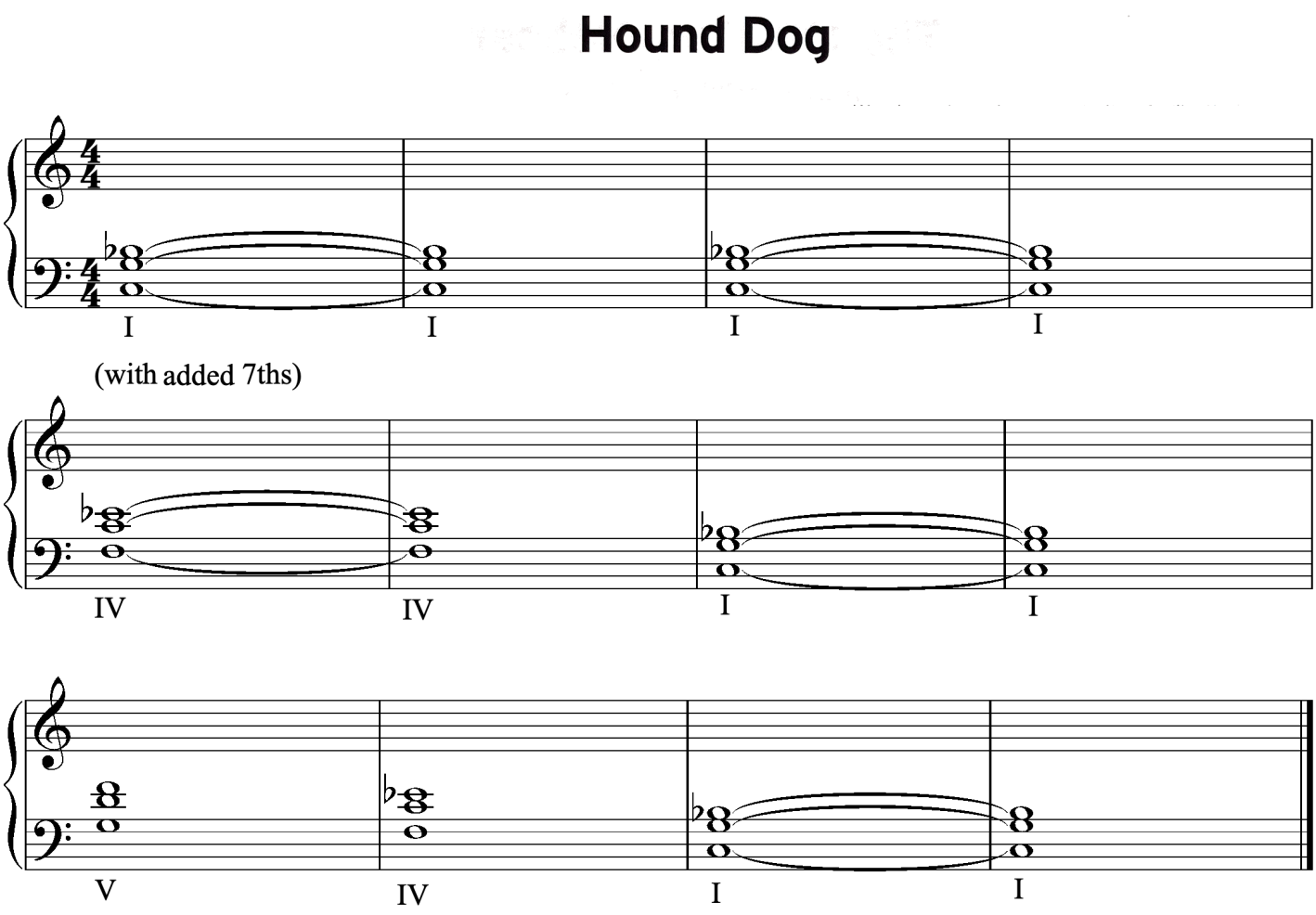
Hound Dog has a clear Twelve-bar blue structure



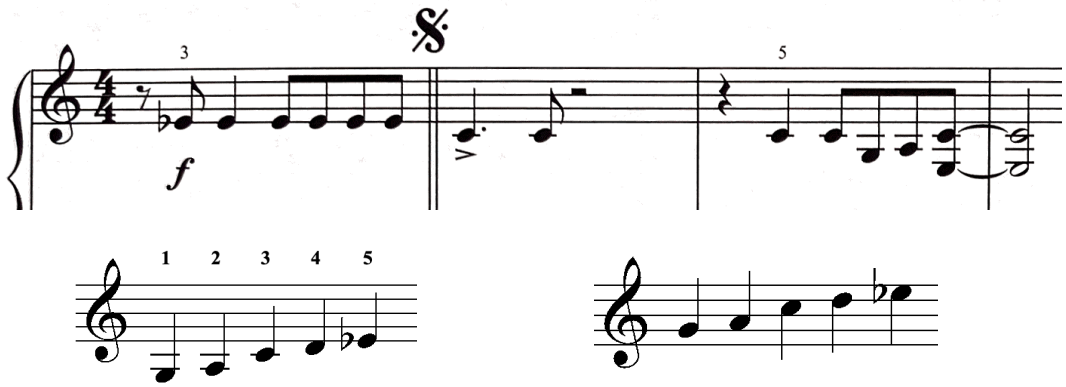
(This piece is continuing, for another twelve bars, so there is a "turnaround" here rather than the final Chord I)

The LH could be played exactly as written …

… or it could be **reduced to *block* chords**
to make coordination between hands easier



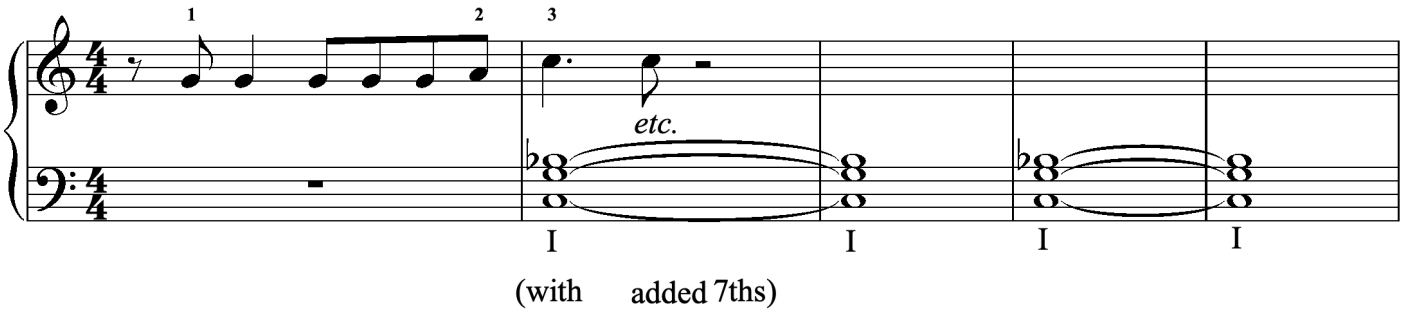
The RH could improvise in the five-finger position suggested by the piece



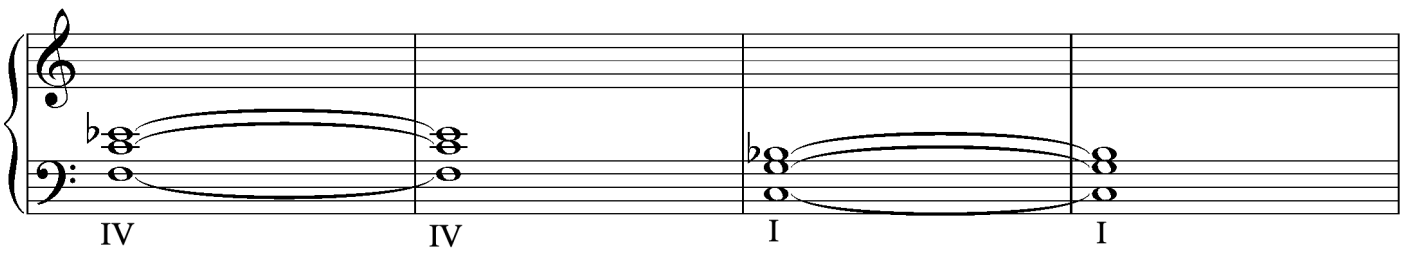
G A C D Eb

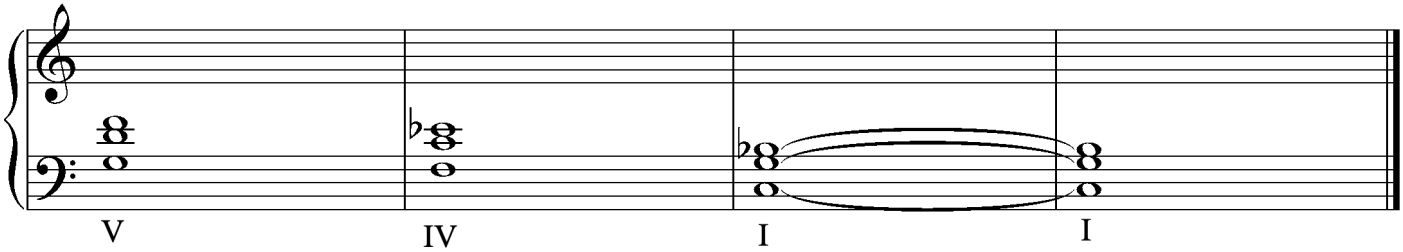
in any octave

Hound Dog

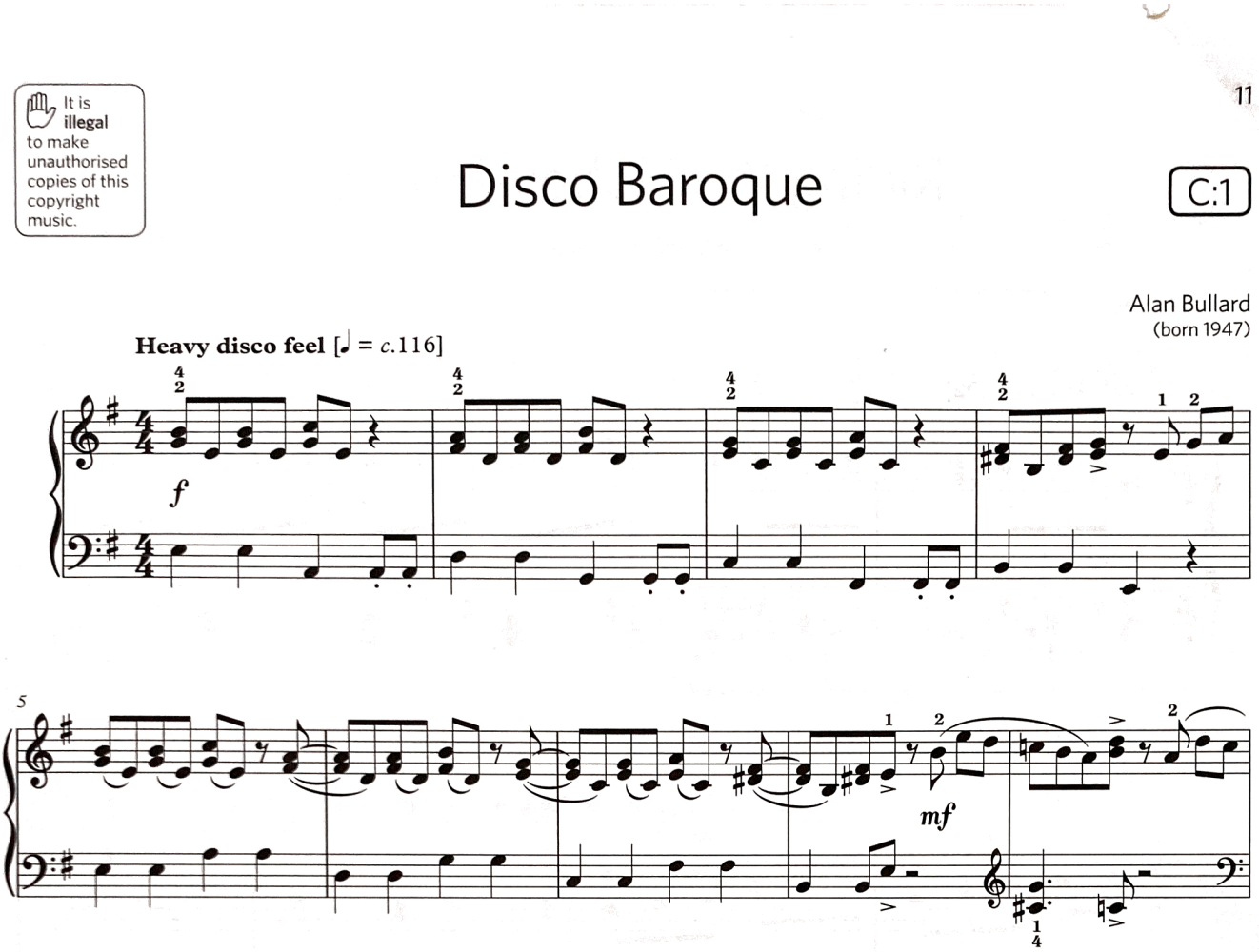


(with added 7ths)

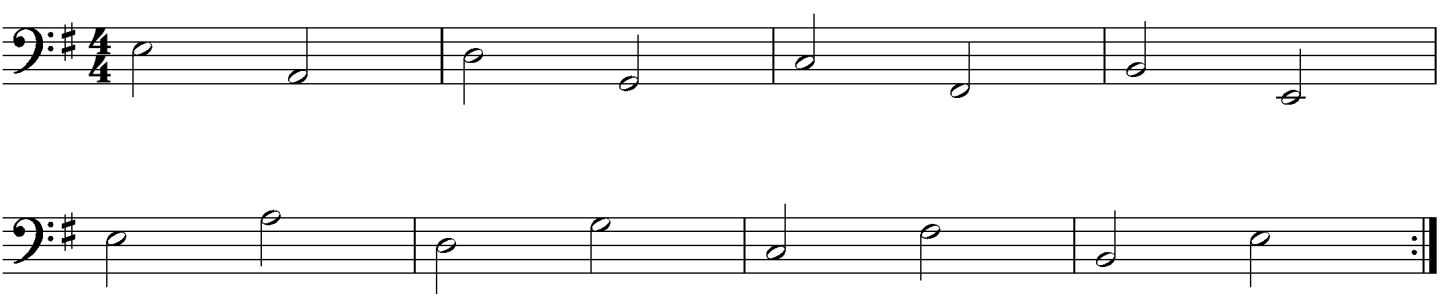




Disco Baroque has a typical eight-bar Circle of 5ths bass line: down a 5th, up a 4th, etc.



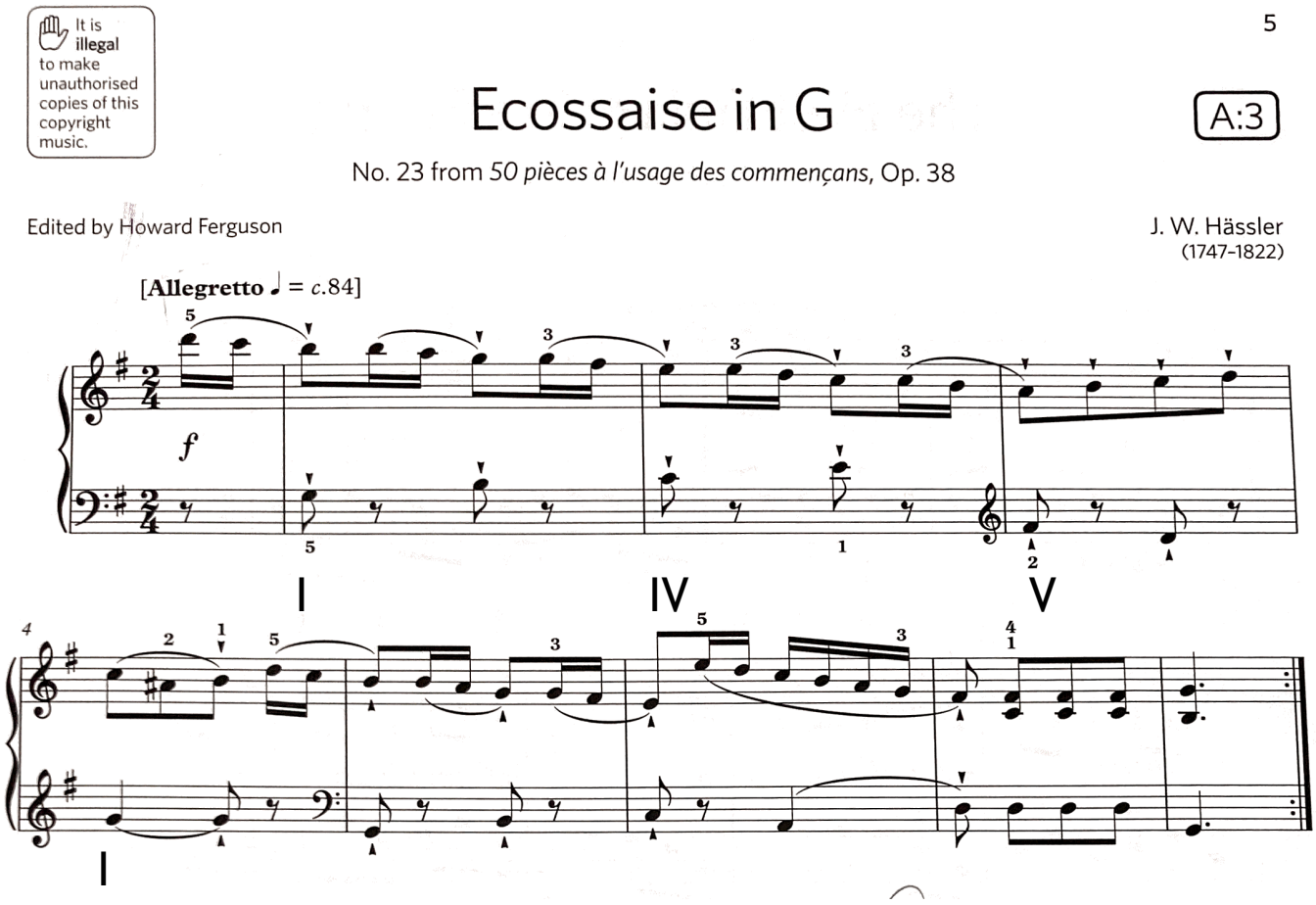
The LH bass line could be played in minims while RH improvises in E minor



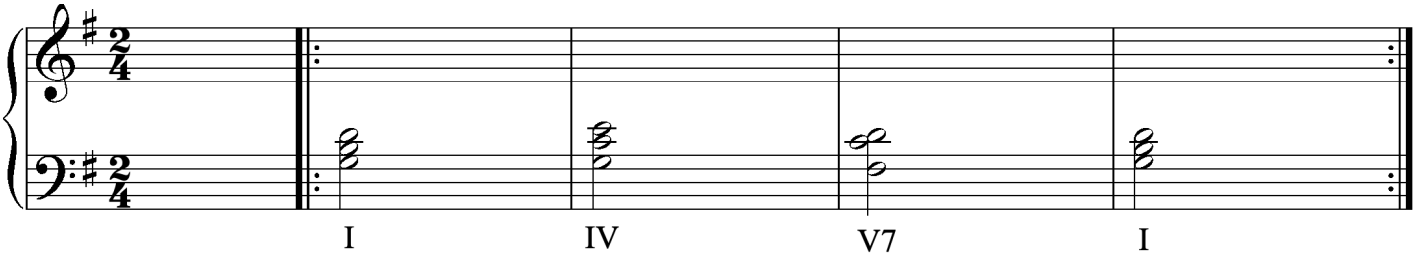
5. Using a chord progression extracted from the piece

Choose a short section of your piece -the first four bars usually work well.

Identify the chords if you can (expect them to be primary chords -they often are):



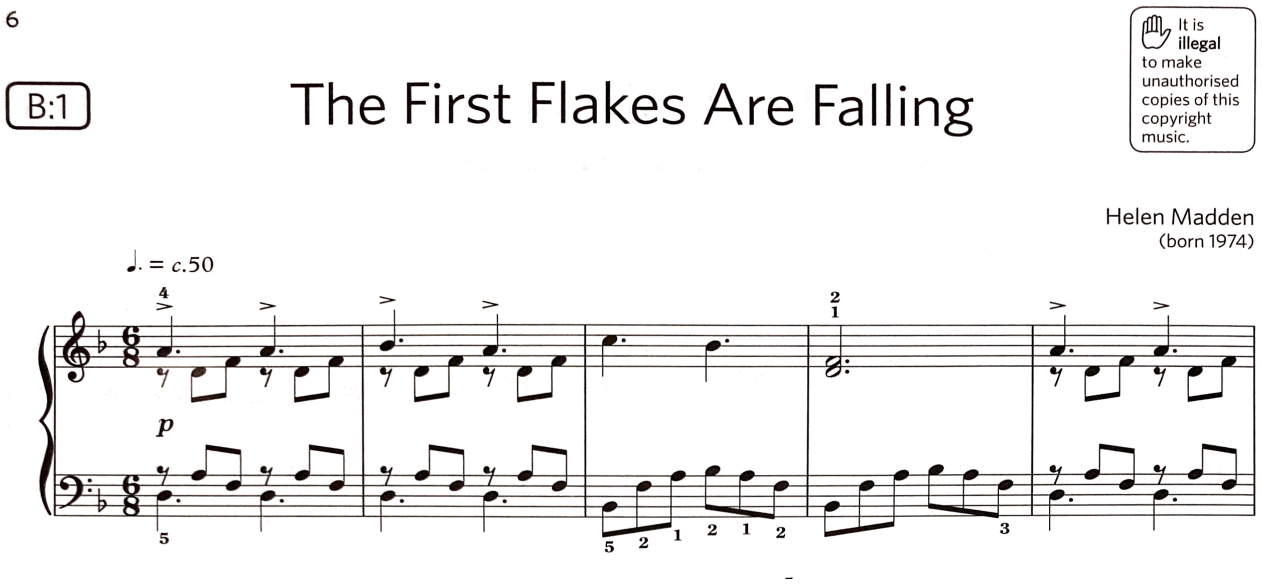
Then play the chord progression as LH block chords in their usual piano friendly inversions



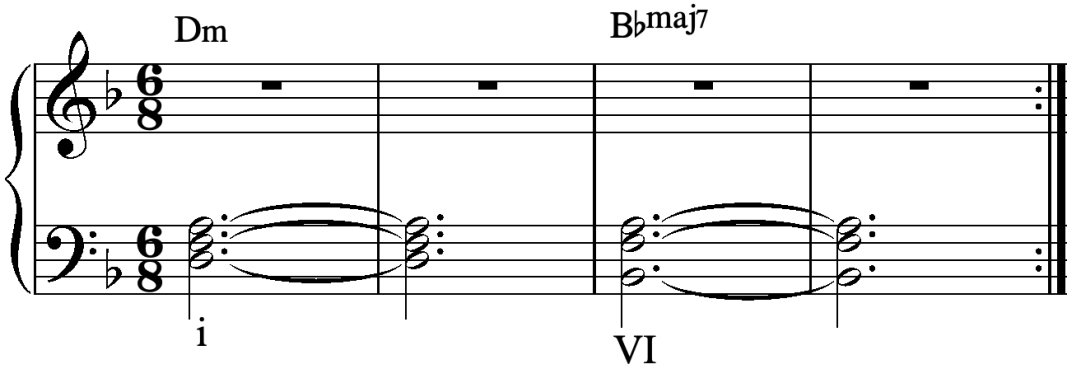
After a LH introduction, improvise in G major (five-finger position or full scale)

5. Improvise over a chord progression extracted from your piece cont'd

Here's another example with chords that are less easy to identify:



Reduce the LH to block chords, naming the chords if you can



Play the chords as a repeated bass, and improvise with the RH in D natural minor (five-finger position or full scale).

Use your musical instinct to bring your improvisation to an end either on the Bbmaj7 chord (as in the piece) or on the D minor (tonic) chord.

Tips for improvising

- Keep it simple.
- Set, and maintain, a consistent pulse.
- Concentrate on maintaining the regular chord changes or bass line melody.
- Keep the right hand so simple that it does not interfere with the left-hand flow. A five-finger position, played simply and naturally mainly up and down by step, works well.
- Use your musical instinct to provide a satisfying structure: e.g. a left-hand introduction followed by four or eight phrases of improvising. Or use a structure in the piece.
- Aim to learn your chord progression, or repeated bass, by heart. The idea is to be able to play spontaneously, on any piano anywhere, *without* notation.

Further improvising ideas can be found through these online videos and on my website:

Anyone can Improvise Practising the Piano Online Academy
https://online-academy.informance.biz/online-academy/5-anyone-can-improvise

Trinity College London Piano Syllabus and Support
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_CdH1FhToY5vv2YZbNQuRQ05-TyrWB7A

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