

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.

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:

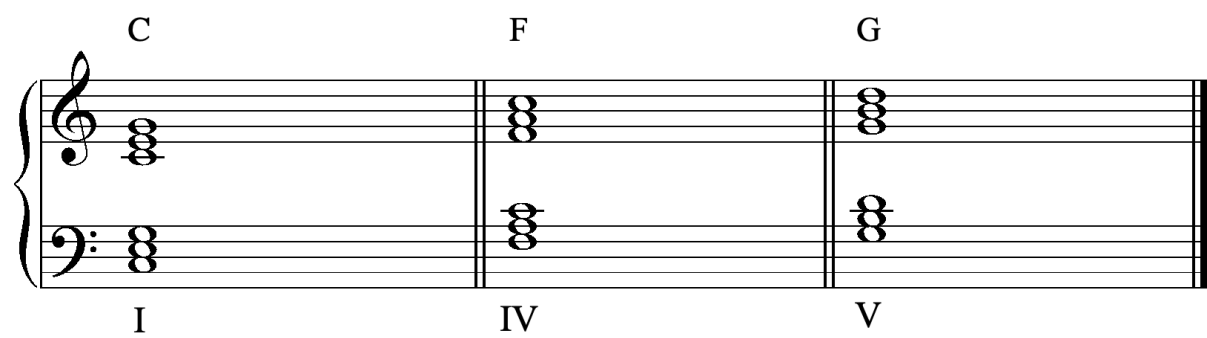


Diagram showing the primary chords in C major: C (I), F (IV), and G (V). The chords are represented by their notes on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs).

Chord	Treble Clef Notes	Bass Clef Notes	Roman Numeral
C	C4, E4, G4	C3, F3, C4	I
F	F4, A4, C5	F3, A2, C3	IV
G	G4, B4, D5	G3, B2, D3	V

Then practise them in short broken chords

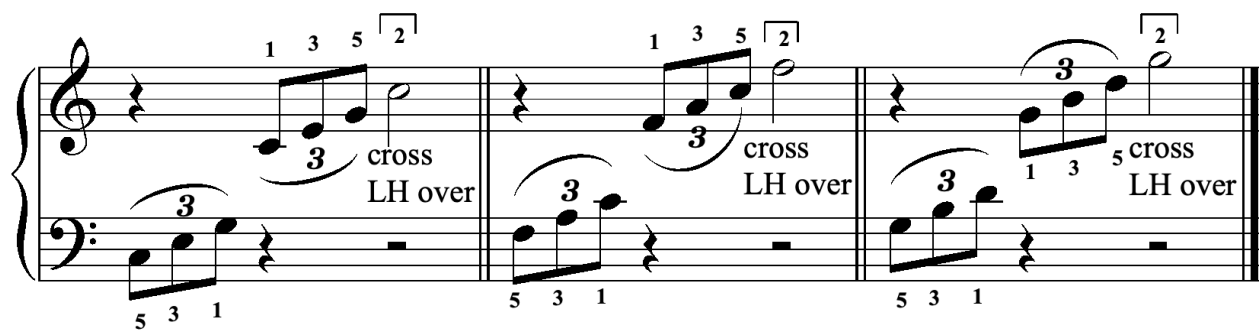
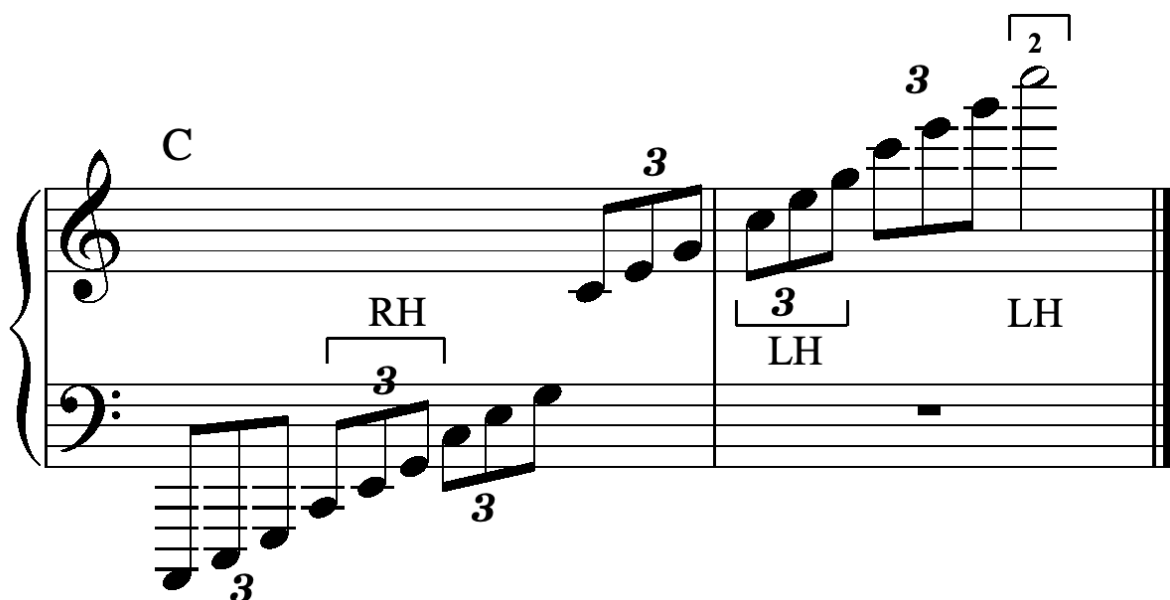


Diagram showing the short broken chords in C major, illustrating fingerings (1, 3, 5, 2) and the instruction "cross LH over".

Chord	Treble Clef Notes	Bass Clef Notes	Fingerings	Instruction
C	C4, E4, G4	C3, F3, C4	1 3 5 2	cross LH over
F	F4, A4, C5	F3, A2, C3	1 3 5 2	cross LH over
G	G4, B4, D5	G3, B2, D3	1 3 5 2	cross LH over

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.

Pirate Stomp

Naomi Yandell
(b. 1961)

With lots of energy ♩ = 144

The musical score for "Pirate Stomp" is written for piano in 4/4 time. The tempo is marked as 144 beats per minute with the instruction "With lots of energy". The score is divided into two systems. The first system begins with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic and a fermata over the first measure. The second system begins with a forte (f) dynamic. The right hand plays a melody of eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand provides harmonic support with block chords. Fingerings are indicated with numbers 1-5 above or below notes and chords.

These could be played as regular broken chords:

The image shows three measures of music, each representing a different broken chord. Each measure consists of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a whole note chord and a triplet of eighth notes in the bass. The first measure is for Dm, with the bass notes F, A, and C, and the instruction 'cross LH over RH to play with LH 2'. The second measure is for C, with the bass notes E, G, and B, and the instruction 'cross LH over'. The third measure is for Bb, with the bass notes D, F, and Ab, and the instruction 'cross LH over'. Above each chord, the notes of the triplet are numbered 1, 3, 5, and 2, with a bracket over the 2. Below the bass line of each measure, the notes are numbered 5, 3, 1, and the root note is labeled with a lowercase letter: 'i' for Dm, 'bVII' for C, and 'bVI' for Bb.

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.

The LH repeated bass is played twice as an introduction

This musical system shows a 4-measure introduction in 4/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) is silent, indicated by whole rests in each measure. The left hand (bass clef) plays a single-line bass melody consisting of half notes: C2, E2, G2, and C3.

RH improvises simply and naturally, mainly up and down by step, for example

This musical system shows improvisation in the right hand over the repeated bass line. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melody of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The left hand (bass clef) continues with the same half-note bass line: C2, E2, G2, and C3. The system ends with the word "etc." written below the final note.

This musical system shows the continuation of the repeated bass line. The right hand (treble clef) is silent. The left hand (bass clef) plays half notes: C2, E2, G2, and C3. The system ends with a double bar line.

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

Left hand plays the bass line twice as an introduction

The first system of musical notation for 'Norton's Walking Together' (Trinity Grade 1). It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The right hand (RH) part is a whole rest across all four measures. The left hand (LH) part consists of a single line bass line with a melodic line in the bass clef. The LH line starts with a half note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a quarter note B4. This pattern is repeated in the second and fourth measures, with a half note G4 in the third measure. The LH line is marked with a slur over the first two measures and another slur over the last two measures.

RH enters, improvising in a G major five-finger position

The second system of musical notation for 'Norton's Walking Together' (Trinity Grade 1). It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The right hand (RH) part enters in the first measure with a quarter note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and then a quarter note B4. This pattern is repeated in the second and fourth measures, with a half note G4 in the third measure. The RH line is marked with a slur over the first two measures and another slur over the last two measures. The left hand (LH) part is the same as in the first system. The word "etc." is written below the RH line in the second measure and below the LH line in the fourth measure.

The third system of musical notation for 'Norton's Walking Together' (Trinity Grade 1). It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The right hand (RH) part is a whole rest across all four measures. The left hand (LH) part is the same as in the first system. The LH line is marked with a slur over the first two measures and another slur over the last two measures. The word "etc." is written below the LH line in the fourth measure.

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.

Four-bar LH introduction

Four-bar LH introduction

Chords: I, IVc, I, IVc

RH improvises simply and naturally, mainly up and down by step, for example

RH improvises simply and naturally, mainly up and down by step, for example

etc.

Chords: I, IVc, I, I

A quick change of chord is needed to return to the tonic on the first beat of the final bar

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).

Quasi adagio
from *For Children*

Béla Bartók
(1881–1945)

Quasi adagio ♩ = 66



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

Four-bar LH introduction

RH improvises simply and naturally



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.

12

C:3

Inter-City Stomp

No. 7 from *Microjazz Collection 2*

Christopher Norton
(born 1953)

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Lively ♩ = c.144

The musical score for 'Inter-City Stomp' is presented in two systems. The first system consists of four measures in 4/4 time, marked 'mf' and 'sempre stacc.'. The bass line features a sequence of eighth notes: G2 (finger 5), A2 (finger 5), B2 (finger 5), C3 (finger 1), D3 (finger 1), E3 (finger 1), F3 (finger 1), and G3 (finger 1). The right hand plays a series of chords: G2-A2, G2-A2, G2-A2, and G2-A2. The second system consists of four measures, marked 'f'. The bass line continues with: G3 (finger 1), A3 (finger 1), B3 (finger 1), C4 (finger 1), D4 (finger 1), E4 (finger 1), F4 (finger 1), and G4 (finger 1). The right hand plays a series of chords: G3-A3, G3-A3, G3-A3, and G3-A3. The score includes fingerings (1-5) and a 'sempre stacc.' instruction.

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

Original melody: G2 (finger 5), A2 (finger 4), B2 (finger 3), C3 (finger 1).

etc.

it could begin:

Inverted melody: G2 (finger 1), A2 (finger 2), B2 (finger 3), C3 (finger 5).

etc.

Hound Dog has a clear Twelve-bar blue structure



Hound Dog

Words and music : Jerry Leiber & Mike Stroller
(1933-2011/b. 1933)

arr. Sam & Pam Wedgewood

Strong rock 'n' roll beat ♩ = 116 ♩ = ♩³

The musical score for the first ten measures of 'Hound Dog' is presented in a piano arrangement. The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked as 116 beats per minute. The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 1-4) begins with a forte (f) dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand. The second system (measures 5-8) includes a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic and a fermata over the final measure. The third system (measures 9-10) is marked 'To Coda' and features a double bar line. Chord symbols (IV, I) are indicated below the bass staff. Fingerings (1, 2, 5) and articulation marks (accents, slurs) are provided for various notes.

(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

Hound Dog

I I I I

(with added 7ths)

IV IV I I

V IV I I

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

The first system of the exercise is written in treble clef, 4/4 time, and one flat key signature. It begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The first measure contains a quarter rest followed by a quarter note G4. The second measure contains a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The third measure contains a quarter note D5, a quarter note E5, and a quarter note F5. The fourth measure contains a quarter note G5, a quarter note A5, and a quarter note B5. The system concludes with a fermata over a whole note G4, followed by a repeat sign.

G A C D Eb

in any octave

Hound Dog

The first system of the musical score for 'The Rose Tree' is in 4/4 time. The treble clef part begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4 (labeled '1'), a quarter note A4 (labeled '2'), and a half note B4 (labeled '3'). The bass clef part has a whole rest. The system concludes with a double bar line. Below the staff, the chord progression is indicated as I, I, I, I, with the note '(with added 7ths)' written below the first 'I'.

The first system of the musical score is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). It consists of two measures. The first measure is marked with a Roman numeral 'IV' below the bass clef and contains a whole note chord of B-flat (b) and D. The second measure is also marked with a Roman numeral 'IV' below the bass clef and contains a whole note chord of D and F. A slur connects the two measures, indicating a single melodic line.

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

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Disco Baroque

C:1

Alan Bullard
(born 1947)

Heavy disco feel [$\text{♩} = \text{c.}116$]

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):



5

Ecossaise in G

A:3

No. 23 from 50 pièces à l'usage des commençans, Op. 38

Edited by Howard Ferguson

J. W. Hässler
(1747-1822)

[Allegretto ♩ = c.84]

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:

6

B:1

The First Flakes Are Falling

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Helen Madden
(born 1974)

♩. = c.50

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

Piano by ear

<https://www.amazon.co.uk>

www.lucinda-mackworth-young.co.uk