

# PIANO IMPROVISATION





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*Myriam Hunink*

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*Brave New Books   Amsterdam*

*For Laura and Marijn*

*And for the little girl that improvised with me on the grand piano at Heathrow Airport*

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# INTRODUCTION

Improvisation on an instrument is playing with music – playing in the true sense of the word. It really is a game. Set yourself some rules and then see what you can create within that framework of restrictions. If you find it too difficult or overwhelming, then make the rules stricter so that you have less possibilities and more structure. If you find it too easy or boring, relax the rules creating more flexibility and enhancing the piece. That keeps the game interesting. Repeat the process over and over, each time expanding on the possibilities, until there are hardly any rules and you are free to play whatever comes to mind. That's all there is to it! Sounds easy? It really is and it really is great fun.

I have been improvising classical music on the piano for a number of years. What I find the most rewarding of this pass time is the possibility to express my feelings without words. If I see a piano at a friend's house, at a party or reception, or at a station or airport, I usually cannot resist the temptation to try it out. I convinced the managers of our medical center (where I work) to put a grand piano in the hallway. I love sitting down and improvising between meetings. To my surprise people come and listen and ask what I am playing. They are amazed when I say that I am just fooling around, making up my own music as I go along. If I focus on centering, get totally involved in the musical possibilities, enjoy the instrument, let go of any concerns about the outcome, and just play what comes naturally, I seem to be able to touch people and connect with them at a very different level than I would in a conversation. This is what musical improvisation is all about. If you can improvise together with friends or family you have a wonderful bonding tool. As the saying goes "families that play together stay together".

Purpose of this book is to give the musician a framework for improvisation. Although not absolutely necessary, it helps to understand keys, scales, chord progressions, and musical notation but I give you some help and exercises to get started and appendices with the most important information. Then I go on to give you examples and ideas. We imitate the masters, creating pieces that give the same feel simply by using some features typical of those composers. Finally, and probably most interesting of all, is to pick up sounds from everyday life and to improvise on these.

I hope you will become a keen listener of the multitude of sounds around you, find inspiration, and enjoy playing (with) music.

*"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing"*  
(G.B. Shaw)

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would never have come into being without the help of countless others. In particular I would like to thank my husband Marijn and our daughter Laura for allowing me to spend hours behind the piano in the basement, fooling around with harmonies, experimenting with new sounds, sometimes playing awful dissonants, and often playing melancholic melodies. I am grateful to my friends and family who have inspired me along the way with their own musical endeavors, playing together, and discussions about music: Kirsten, Milt, Lena, Jef, Stan, Bent, Edith, Ronald, and David. Our Sunday afternoon music listening club (SunMusica) provided lots of new ideas: thank you Loes, Cees, Bernard, Astrid, John, Lize Marie, and Jos. I am very grateful to the cellist Loes and flutist Benjamin (both PhD students at the Erasmus MC) for joining me on the improvisation journey – “Imagine it” (Imagine improvisation trio) gives me enormous pleasure and inspiration.

I would like to thank Warner Fokkens, one of my music teachers, who introduced me to classical improvisation. A heartfelt thank you to Thomas Maasz for leading me to new paths, getting me to enjoy seventh, ninth, and eleventh chords, introducing me to the key features of blues and jazz, coaching me on how to prepare for a performance, and for his enthusiasm and encouragement. I thank Lorenzo Derchi, President of the ESR and Peter Baierl, executive director of the ESR, for inviting me to play during the Grand Opening of ECR2019 in Vienna. A big thank you to Alex Johansson, the arranger and conductor, for letting me compose the introductory piano solo piece, for guidance before the performance, and for the arrangement of “Imagine” which was so so beautiful - it inspired me to continue on my musical improvisation journey.



# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book can be used by anyone interested in playing music and looking for ideas. The first section of this book consists of games and exercises, which is a good place to start. There are games and exercises to practice scales, get to know the keys, learn chord progressions, practice variations in accompaniment, train your ear, play with rhythm, and get to know different styles. The section is far from comprehensive. For a comprehensive guide on improvisation games I suggest you buy Jeffrey Agrell's book: *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians*.

The second section consists of examples. Every chapter in the second section consists of a short story, a basic recipe for an improvisation, ideas on how to further expand on the recipe, an example chord progression, and a short piece in musical notation illustrating the basic ideas. The short story describes how the piece came into being and can be used as a source of inspiration in-of-itself or as an example of where to search for inspiration. The basic recipe provides an idea for an improvisation explained in words. You can also think of it as the rules of a game that you are about to play. The musical piece can be played as a short piece but it is really meant as an outline illustrating how the described recipe can be developed. I also provide ideas for variations and expanding on the piece and I suggest that you play around with these ideas using all sorts of variations. You can play around with the harmony, the melody, the rhythm, or the general style. The possible variations are endless! Think of the piece as a recipe in a cookbook: the first time round you may want to use it exactly as written but soon you will hopefully explore variations on the theme and add in your own ingredients, ideas, and flavors so that it becomes your very own work.

Although the book was written by a pianist, the games, exercises, and example recipes can also be used by other musicians and particularly by duo's, trio's, or small groups of musicians. Find some friends or family members who are willing to play with you and take turns in who improvises on the melody and who plays the corresponding harmonic part. Make sure to negotiate and agree on the chord sequence, the basic rhythm, the tempo, and who will be playing the melody at which point. Don't be afraid to get lost – you inevitably will! – the art is to find your way again with the help of your mates, keep playing, and keep enjoying yourself.

At the end of the book in section III you will find appendices which summarize the ideas of the individual chapters. The appendices on scales, keys, and chords are provided because these cover the basic musical theory that is useful to know. The appendices on harmonic, melodic, rhythm, and style variations summarize some ideas on how to play around with a piece.

You will probably want to make notes of ideas, melodies, or outlines of your own improvisations. It can be helpful to use music notation software. Various music notation software companies exist, most with a range of options going from an inexpensive or free variant all the way up to the professional notation software of a full-fledged composer. Google “music notation software” and take a look at MuseScore, Finale, Sibelius, Forte and any others you can find. I suggest you start with a simple variant so as not to get overwhelmed with all the possibilities – you can usually upgrade to a more sophisticated package if you need to.

I have some points to keep in mind while you embark on musical improvisation. Some have to do with playing music. Others are suggestions related to improvisation in a broader sense:

- Learn about music in whatever way you can. The web is a great resource.
- Embrace constraints to avoid being overwhelmed by the options and to make your music easier to follow by your audience. Key is to be creative within the context of your set constraints! And eventually to set yourself challenging constraints.
- Start slow, give yourself time to think, gradually speed up.
- Enjoy playing – that’s what it is all about. Enjoy your instrument – it is your gateway to music. Enjoy playing with others.
- Persevere. It takes time to become good at anything.
- A day without music is a wasted day.
- There is music all around you. Let the music you hear inspire you to play. Let the sounds of everyday life inspire you to make music.
- “There’s no such thing as a wrong note” (Art Tatum) – although some notes may be unexpected. Play with the unexpected. Some notes may sound dissonant – consider them a way of building tension. It’s all about how you recover so what seemed to be a mistake becomes an interesting turn in your music.
- Record and listen to what you play. Reflect on what you play. What does it tell you about yourself and what is going on inside you?
- Musical improvisation is a metaphor for living: we improvise all day to deal with our daily life at work, at home, and in our social circles.
- Improvisation requires your full and undivided attention in the present moment: center, let go, be non-judgmental, let go of the outcome, and focus on the moment. It is akin to mindfulness meditation.

**PART I**

**GAMES AND EXERCISES**

**TO GET YOU STARTED**

## A. SCALES AND KEYS

It is useful to get to know your scales and keys – they can be very helpful in making music. Playing around with scales and keys can be a very mathematical type of activity, a puzzle really, which is a challenge and fun in-of-itself. Add in some creativity and it becomes music.

### Musical scales

Practicing scales can be an awfully boring routine, until you start playing with them – then suddenly it becomes a game and is fun to do. Try playing a chord sequence within a scale with one hand and playing the scale with the other hand. You may want to try playing triads, seventh chords, and ninth chords, playing them as chords or in arpeggio – and all the while sticking to a regular scale with the other hand. It can get quite challenging! The scale itself gives you structure. You can experiment with a change in rhythm, accents, note values, articulation, tempo, ascending vs descending vs contrasting motion, triplets, playing 2 against 3 notes, etc. The possibilities are endless. Setting a constraint and being creative within it results in music.

### Try out unusual scales

You can also experiment with unusual scales. Each has its own special feel and flavor whether it be joyful (major), melancholic (minor), gypsy, oriental (pentatonic major), blues, or something else. Appendix A gives an overview of the most important and useful scales. Try them out and see what type of flavor they have. Do it in a musical way – eg. you can use syncopation when you practice the blues and jazz scales.

### Transpose to different keys

Practice your scales in all keys but especially in keys unfamiliar to you. They all have their own character. It is useful to look for the patterns in the scales – the sequence of whole notes and half notes. It also helps to figure out for yourself the transposed scale (especially the unusual scales) in another key. Figuring things out for yourself is half the fun and helps you to memorize it. Appendix A gives a chart that helps you cycle through the keys with an explanation on how the keys relate to each other.

## B. HARMONY

Starting from the harmony side is usually the easiest in improvisation, certainly if you are playing with other musicians. Appendix B gives an overview of the most important chords that you will want to be familiar with and chord progressions that can be helpful. Chord progressions provide the basic framework of a piece. Memorizing a few chord progressions will enable you to always play something wherever you are even if it is just a sequence of chords!

### Sight-read a melody, fill in the harmony

You probably have a song book at home somewhere. Or maybe you have a book with easy versions of well-known classical melodies. It can be fun to sight-read songs, or any other melody, and fill in the harmony. When you sight-read make sure to read slightly ahead of what you are playing – you need to know where you are going. Skip notes if necessary - the harmony and rhythm are more important to create the intended effect. You can play this game alone at the piano, or together with a friend with two instruments: one plays the melody and the other fills in the harmony (and remember to switch roles!).

Start with simple chords. The basic classic chord sequence is

I IV V<sup>7</sup> I in C major this is C F G<sup>7</sup> C

Although using these chords is sufficient to harmonize any melody, you will soon find this sequence boring. Then it is time to try out something else! Appendix B will help you out.

### Play chorales and preludes

To experiment with chord progressions it can be useful to simply play sequences of chords with two to five voices, which sounds like the music of church hymns or preludes. You can do this alone at the piano or with a few friends, each taking one of the voices. Alone you can experiment at will. If you are with more musicians, you will probably want to agree on the sequence of chords ahead of time. Start with a simple classic chord progression, eg.

I IV V<sup>7</sup> I

and expand or experiment as soon as you feel comfortable with it. See Appendix B for an overview of possibilities.

If you limit yourselves to 3 or 4 chords you may be able to follow one person's lead without any pre-arranged sequence. This requires listening very well or some form of signaling. You could alternate between the tonic (I) and other chords, for example:

I vi I IV I V<sup>7</sup> I.

This can be expanded with other chords such as ii, iii, vii<sup>dim</sup>. You can vary the positions of the chords (ie. use not only root positions but also inversions) to make it easier to get to the notes and make it sound more interesting. Make sure you switch roles as to who leads and