

Extemporisation on the piano

Sometimes called Improvisation; both are rather undignified words implying that one is doing one's best having mislaid the music or forgotten to bring it. No --- one should call it, or at least think about it as, creative activity.

The first step towards it is to master the instrument, gradually to discover what lies hid beneath the ivory and ebony notes.

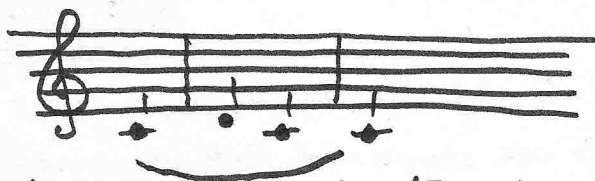
Play middle C and hum it. Then put your finger ready to play any other note within the octave either way, and hum what you think that note will sound. Then play it and see or rather hear whether your prognostication was correct.

Do this (if necessary) over and over again until you have achieved absolute certainty. Be honest and take care that your voice (or your imagination) is in ~~touch~~ with the reality of a well tuned piano.

Make it ~~into~~ into a habit that you never play a note without first hearing it in your imagination.

Don't just let your fingers ^{merely} follow instructions from music notation — you must teach them to play by ear, just as your voice speaks by ear when you read ~~words~~ aloud, or when you imagine yourself reading aloud, or, of course, in conversation.

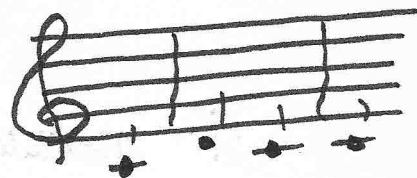
The next step is to cultivate what one can only call reverence, which implies an active interest in what you are doing. For example, such a phrase as



(hear it first in your imagination before you play it)

Consider that word 'play'... it has many connotations and implications. Think of a child playing with its toys, totally absorbed in imaginative creation. Think of the curtain opening for a Play. Consult the dictionary - see what a long dissertation is deemed necessary to do justice to the word Play. (Unfortunately the OED slips up badly when it asserts that 'playing by ear' is playing without Technical Knowledge of music. You must have created quite a lot of Technical Knowledge even if 'only' Subconsciously, to be able to play by ear). ^{And} However much Technical knowledge you have, in order to play well you must play by ear. The great performers of music are those who have so steeped themselves in the music they are playing, that ~~the audience~~ it flows from them as if they themselves were creating it extempore and they were playing it by ear (as indeed they are)

Now in this phrase of music



there are hundreds of ~~possible~~ possibilities ^{that} it can lead to. Here is an example that has sprung



into my mind, setting myself a rule to use only adjacent notes (2nd intervals, as musicians agree to call them)

Counting two in a bar ($\text{♩} = 60$ or 58 or thereabouts)

hear this progression of tones in your imagination, and use it as a vehicle for a mood of reverent awe, such as would be consistent with the lighting of the candles on the altar. But just as the server must needs be practical in the application of the taper to each wick, so do you have to be practical, taking care that each tone helps to build each phrase, each phrase leading towards the next, each pause accurately determining the rhythm; infinite care is necessary so that you become one of the listening congregation, hearing what your fingers have said in their presence just as they hear it.

Meditating on this melody, I imagine it as a succession of major triads thus



Be careful to play major triads throughout; you must be prepared to use sharps and flats where necessary. So practise the scale of C major thus



and familiarise yourself with the hazards at E and F and at A and B

Imagine yourself playing: -



what could 'happen' next? :

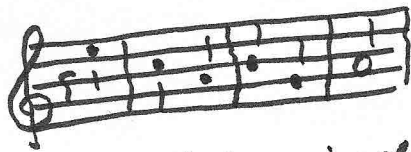
What I heard was



Then I thought "why not this: -



And to end: -



Then I find, to my joy, that a simple scale of minims will give a bass

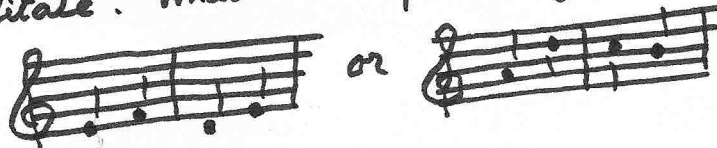


Conventional? Monkish? Unoriginal?

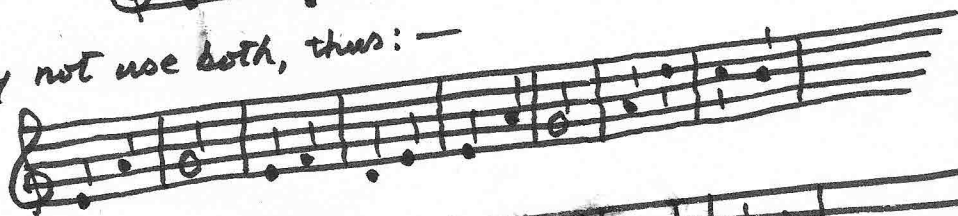
Well, what do you want to hear? Try to find out how to make it happen. But you need to practise, perhaps with music manuscript. For instance, start with three notes



and meditate. What are they leading you to hear? It might be



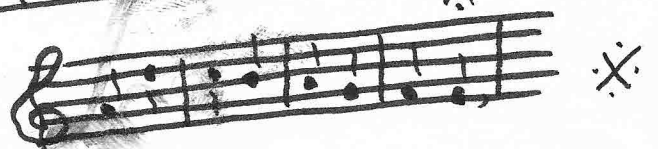
Why not use both, thus: -



Then perhaps



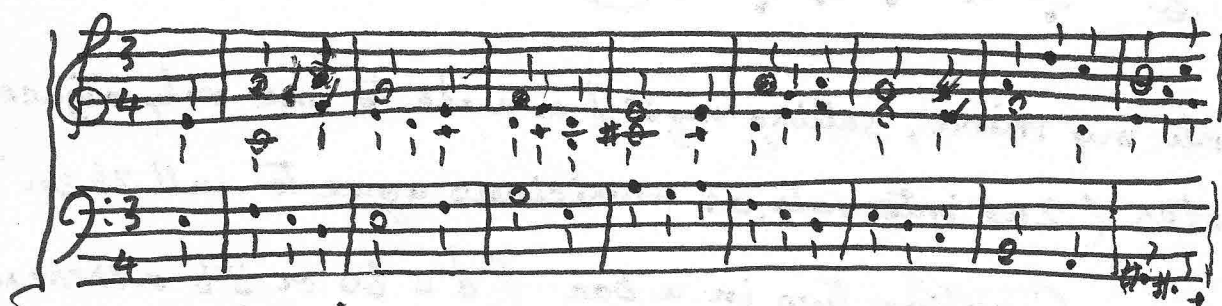
and end with a sequence



✱ Meditating on this, I found myself thinking :-



My left hand after years of practice, would ~~add~~ supply a bass, and my right hand an alto, and I would play it perhaps thus, very strong and solemn :-

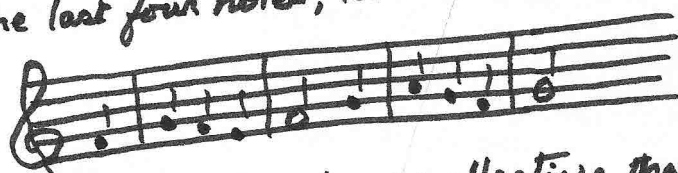


Notice that I made an adjustment of the opening phrase to avoid St Patrick's breastplate

If you find yourself getting bogged down in some fixed idea, make a fresh start in another rhythm. E.G.:-



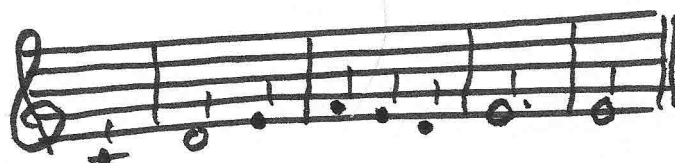
what I like in this is the last four notes, so I make a rising sequence thus:-



And then, what could be simpler and more effective than to continue thus



and perhaps end



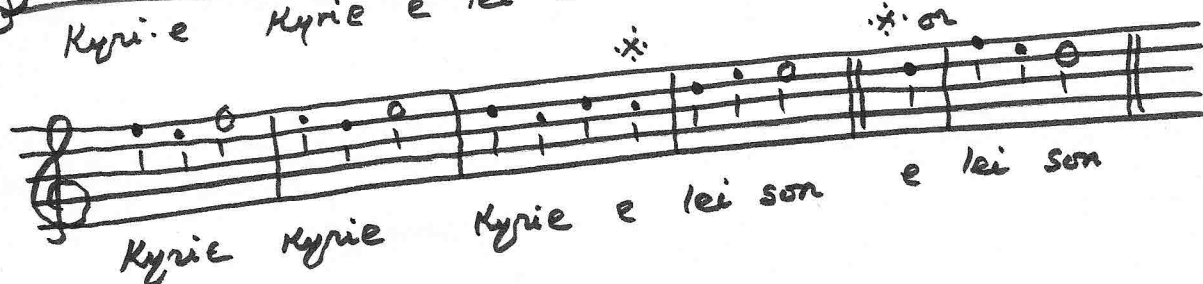
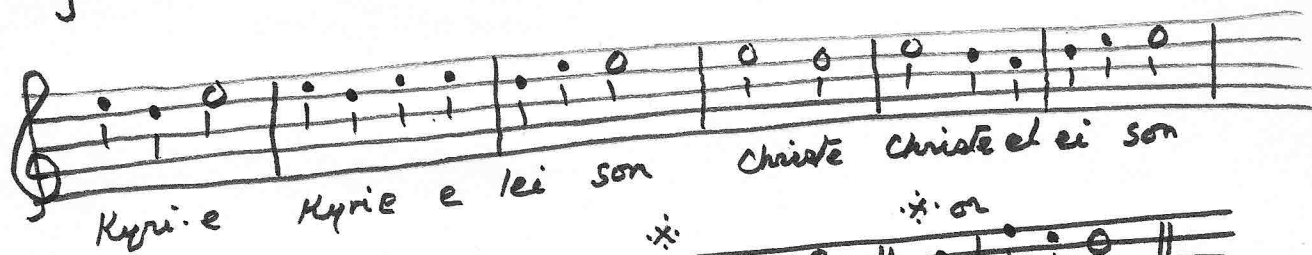
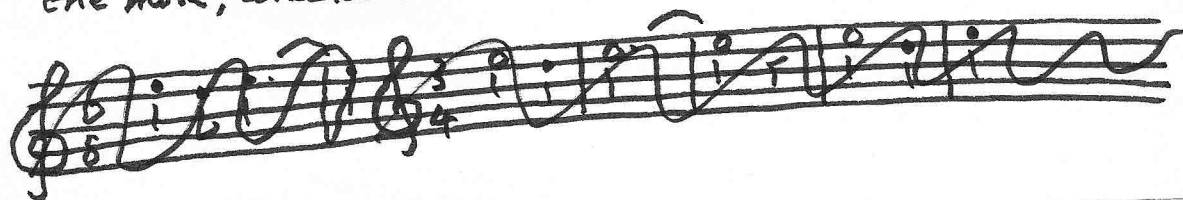
and find to my surprise that I have ended with the original four notes which I liked in the first phrase.

Now, what can be done for a 'second part'—your left hand is longing to help, to put a sprinkle of salt as it were. Try this:-



Then apply the same formula to the continuation; keep your presence of mind when you get to the last six bars, where the formula will need slight modification. But above all, try to feel, as you play it, the majestic nature of music. If it does not sound sublime it will sound ridiculous.

It is good sometimes to confine yourself to two notes and
see how far you can get before you are compelled to add
one more, and so on

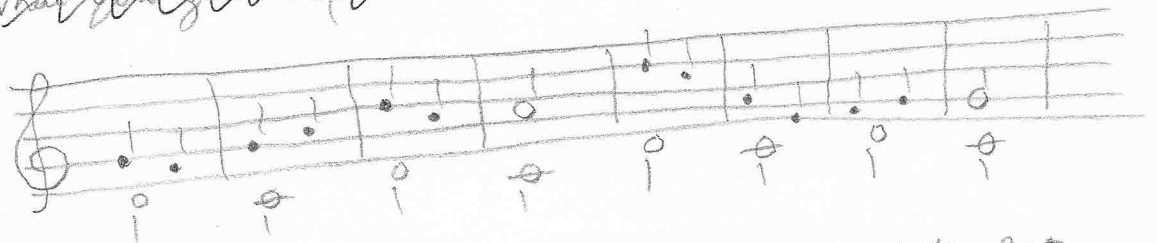


An idea has just occurred to me which may be useful for those who have no technical knowledge of harmony and counterpoint or who wish to break away from conventional idioms. (Although it must be admitted that any idiom can become conventional)

This idea can be practised, using one finger only in each hand
First, put down both pedals and keep them down

Left hand plays  throughout.

Right hand extemporises a song-like melody. ~~Try writing down~~
~~what you gradually achieve~~ E G



The important thing is to listen with interest to what is happening. Try not to break off in despair when you think it's all gone wrong, rather, try to rescue the situation without being overwhelmed by remorse!

~~O Christ Thou Son of God~~ ~~hallelujah~~

The most important thing to do while improvising is, to listen to the logic (the chain of reasoning) ~~of~~ that each sequence of tones produces, and to feel the same kind of sympathy that arises when you are eg making an effort to counsel a fellow human being

