

CHAPTER SEVEN

IMPROVISATION

THE FREE FANTASIA ¹

1

A FANTASIA is said to be free when it is unmeasured and moves through more keys than is customary in other pieces, which are composed or improvised in meter.

2. These latter require a comprehensive knowledge of composition, whereas the former requires only a thorough understanding of harmony and acquaintance with a few rules of construction. Both call for natural talent, especially the ability to improvise. It is quite possible for a person to have studied composition with good success and to have turned his pen to fine ends without his having any gift for improvisation. But, on the other hand, a good future in composition can be assuredly predicted for anyone who can improvise, provided that he writes profusely and does not start too late.

3. A free fantasia consists of varied harmonic progressions which can be expressed in all manner of figuration and motives. A key in which to begin and end must be established. Although no bar lines are employed, the ear demands a definite relationship in the succession and duration of the chords themselves, as we shall see later, and the eye, a relationship in the lengths of notes so that the piece may be notated. Therefore, it is usually assumed that such fantasias are in a four-four meter; and the tempo is indicated by the words which are placed above the beginning. We have already learned of the fine effect created by fantasias in Chapter III of Part I of this Essay, to which I refer my reader.²

4. Especial care must be exercised in improvising at the harpsi-

¹ A detailed study of this chapter and an analysis of the appended Fantasia (Figure 480) appear in Heinrich Schenker's *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik, Drei Masken Verlag, München 1925*. Vol. 1, p. 11 ff.

² In ¶ 15.

chord and the organ; at the former, in order to avoid playing in a single color; at the latter in order to sustain constantly and hold chromatic progressions in check. At least, they should not be introduced sequentially, for the tuning of the organ is very rarely tempered. The best instruments for our purpose are the clavichord and pianoforte. Both can and must be well tuned. The undamped register of the pianoforte is the most pleasing and, once the performer learns to observe the necessary precautions in the face of its reverberations, the most delightful for improvisation. ✕

5. There are occasions when an accompanist must extemporize before the beginning of a piece. Because such an improvisation is to be regarded as a prelude which prepares the listener for the content of the piece that follows, it is more restricted than the fantasia, from which nothing more is required than a display of the keyboardist's skill. The construction of the former is determined by the nature of the piece which it prefaces; and the content or affect of this piece becomes the material out of which the prelude is fashioned. But in a fantasia the performer is completely free, there being no attendant restrictions.

6. When only little time is available for the display of craftsmanship, the performer should not wander into too remote keys, for the performance must soon come to an end. Moreover, the principal key must not be left too quickly at the beginning nor regained too late at the end. At the start the principal key must prevail for some time so that the listener will be unmistakably oriented. And again before the close it must be well prolonged as a means of preparing the listener for the end of the fantasia and impressing the tonality upon his memory.

7. Following are the briefest and most natural means of which a keyboardist, particularly one of limited ability, may avail himself in extemporizing: With due caution he fashions his bass out of the ascending and descending scale of the prescribed key, with a variety of figured bass signatures (Figure 472, Example a);⁸ he may interpolate a few half steps (b), arrange the scale in or out of its normal sequence (c), and perform the resultant progressions in broken or

⁸ The upper signatures of the first ascending and descending scales in major and minor agree with the older *Regola dell' Ottava*, which was used by 17th- and 18th-century theorists to instruct beginners in the proper chord for each step. It was adopted with minor variants by Rameau, Heinichen, and Mattheson, among others. It formed the first step of instruction in the reading of unfigured basses, and was

sustained style at a suitable pace. A tonic organ point is convenient for establishing the tonality at the beginning and end (*d*). The dominant organ point can also be introduced effectively before the close (*e*).

Figure 472

a.

6 6 5 6 5^b 9 8 9 8 9 8 9 8 9 8 6
6 5^b 9 8 7 6 7 6 5^b 9 8 9 8 7 6 5^b

7 6 7 6 5 6 5 6 6 7 6 5^b 7 6 5^b 8 7 6 5 9 8 6 5
4 5^b 9 8 9 8 7 6 5^b 7 6 5^b 8 7 6 5 9 8 6 5^b
3 4 3 4 3 b5 - 4 3

6 6 2 6 6 5 6 7 6 5 4 3 6 7 6 7 6
7 6 4 7 6 5 4 6 6 7 6 6 5 6
3 3 2 4 3 3

5 4 6 5 6 4 2 6 7 6 6 5 6 6 5
3 2 5^b 4 3 4 2 6 7 6 6 5 6 5
4 5 6 7 6 7 6 7 6 4 7 6 5^b
b 5 -

7 6 9 8 4[#] 6 5 6 6 9 8 6 5^b 5^b 5^b
5 6 5 6 9 8 9 8 6 5 5 6 5 4 3 7 6 5^b 5^b 5^b
7 6 7 6 5^b 5^b 5 8 7 6 8 7 6
#

recommended by Heinichen as the basis of improvised preludes. The great variety of Bach's other signatures and his failure to mention the *Regola*, which he must have known, indicate that he placed little weight on it. Cf. E. Borrel, *Tribune de St. Gervais*, XXI, p. 175.

6 6 # 4 6 7 5 5 4 6 2 6 7 6 5 6 7 7

4 4 6 6 5 4 6 7 5 4 6 7 6 7 6 7 4 6 7

3 3 # 4 5 3

4 7 6b5 6 5b 7 7 5 7 5 5 6 5b

b 5b 4 3 6 7 6 5b 5 5 5 6 5b

5b 6 5b 6

6 5 2 6 5 4 6 5 2 6 7 6 7 6 5 7 6 5b 9 8 7 6 5b 5b

5 4 6 6 2 5 4 6 5 2 6 7 6 7 6 5 5 4 3 7 6 5b 5b

5 4 6 6 2 9 8 9 8 9 8 7 6 5b 5b

7 6 7 6 6 5 4 3

6 4 6 2 6 5 4 6 7 6 6 6 7 6 6 5 4 3

5 4 4 4 5 4 6 7 5 6 5 5 6 5 6 5 4 3

3 b b b # 7 5

7 6 5 4 3 6 5 4 3 5 4 3 7 6 5 4 3

b 7 # 4 6 5 5b 6 5 4 # 5 4 b 7 6 4 5

3 2 3 4 2 3

5 6 4 8 7 6 - 5 6 4 5 4 7 6 5 5

3 4 2 3 5 5 4 3 8 7 4 2 4 3 8 2 3 4 2 -

7 6b 4 b7 6b 5 5

4 b7 6b 4 -

8. When the performer is allowed adequate time to have attention directed to his work, he may modulate to remoter keys. But formal closing cadences are not always required; they are employed at the end and once in the middle. It suffices if the leading tone (*semitonium modi*) of the various keys lies in the bass or some other part, for this tone is the pivot and token of all natural modulation. When it lies in the bass, the seventh chord, the chord of the sixth, or the six-five chord is taken above it (Figure 473, Example a); it may also be found in chords which are inversions of these ⁴ (b). It is one of the beauties of improvisation to feign modulation to a new key through a formal cadence and then move off in another direction. This and other rational deceptions make a fantasia attractive; but they must not be excessively used, or natural relationships will become hopelessly buried beneath them.

Figure 473

9. In a free fantasia modulation may be made to closely related, remote, and all other keys. Strange and profuse modulations are not recommended in pieces performed in strict measure, but a fantasia with excursions to only the next related keys would sound too plain. From a major key the acknowledged closely related keys are on the fifth degree with a major third and on the sixth with a minor third. And from minor keys modulation is made chiefly to the third degree with a major third, and the fifth with a minor third. But the remote keys in major are on the second and third degrees, both containing minor triads, and on the fourth with a major triad. The

⁴ *Die Verkehrung jener Accorde.* Inversion here has a looser meaning than it had in Rameau's systematic use of the term.

remaining keys are the most distant; any of them may be included in a free fantasia even though they stand in varying distances from the tonal center. This may be seen from an examination of the well-known Circle of Keys.⁵ But in a free fantasia, the performer should

Figure 474

Figure 474 shows a musical score for bass clef, consisting of five staves of music. The notes are primarily eighth and quarter notes, often beamed together. The accidentals include flats, sharps, and naturals. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines.

Staff 1: 6 5, 6^b 5 4 #, 8^b 7 3 2 #, 6^b 7 5 6, 5 4 #

Staff 2: 4 3 4- 6 7 6 2 6 4 3, 5 6 5- 4- 6 4 #

Staff 3: # 5^b 4 5 5^b 6 #, 2 6 # 4 3

Staff 4: 6^b 6 # 6^b 6 7, 5^b 7 5^b 6 4 5 #

Staff 5: 7 # 4 2 6 5 6 4 3, 6^b 6 # 6^b 6 9 7 6 5 4 #

⁵ The Circle of Keys was invented by Heinichen, on his own testimony, after hearing from Kuhnau about Kircher's method of moving through keys by fourths or

feel no further obligation to the circle, for it would be wrong in this kind of piece to make a cyclic excursion through all twenty-four keys. I shall leave it to the private study of my reader to practice modulation to the closely related keys by means of a skillful attaining of their leading tones, and shall illustrate here, in the interests of brevity, a few particular ways to approach these keys gradually (Figure 474). We own immediately to the possibility of there being many other ways to accomplish these ends; after the initial bass note, any other may be taken be it what it may. We are stopped from attempting a clear proof of this statement by the threat of diffuseness.

10. The examples of Figure 475 illustrate slightly circuitous ways of modulating from a major key to the distant keys which were mentioned in the preceding paragraph. The close relationship of A minor to C major relieves us of the repetitious task of furnishing similar examples for the minor mode. When it is desired to reach distant keys conclusively instead of simply passing through them, it is not sufficient merely to reach for the leading tone in the belief that once it is found the goal will have been attained and that further ends may then be sought immediately. The ear, in order not to be disagreeably startled, must be prepared for the new key by means of intermediate harmonic progressions. There are keyboardists who understand chromaticism and can explain their progressions, but few who know how to employ it agreeably, relieved of its

Figure 475

fifths. Mattheson was scornful of Heinichen's Circle and offered an improved construction. Both are reproduced in Arnold, *op. cit.*, pp. 268 and 277.

6 9 8 b 7 4 8 5 2 6 5 4 3 b
 5 4 6 7 6 5 4 # 4 # # #

4 5 4 5 7 7 7
 4 # 2 6 4 - # # 4 4 4 4 7 #

b 7 6 b 5 4 # b 5 b 5 b 2 b 5 b

b 7 6 b 5 b 2 b 4 6 b 5 b 5 b 4 4 # #
 b 7 4 b 3 b

6 6 b 7 9 8 6 b 5
 b 7 4 2 5 b 6 b 5 2 6 5 b 4 b 4 3 b

4 5 b 7 7 - b 7
 4 4 # 4 6 # 4 # # # 4 4 # 2 # 4 #

crudeness. It should be observed generally, but particularly in the following examples, that the progressions which introduce remote modulations from an established key must be played more broadly than those of other modulations. By transposing these and the preceding examples, and combining them, a facility in modulation will eventually be attained.

11. As a means of reaching the most distant keys more quickly and with agreeable suddenness no chord is more convenient and fruitful than the seventh chord with a diminished seventh and fifth, for by inverting it and changing it enharmonically, a great many chordal transformations can be attained. And when there is added to this all the harmonic artistry and rare progressions of the preceding chapters, what an endless vista of harmonic variety unfolds before us! Does it still seem difficult to move wherever we will? Hardly, for we need only decide how circuitous or direct our route must be. There are only three of these chords of the diminished seventh with their three superimposed minor thirds, for the fourth chord is a repetition of the first, as illustrated in Example *a*, Figure 476. It would take too long to demonstrate all of the opportunities afforded by this chord to guide harmony in any conceivable direction. The possibilities of experimentation which are suggested under *b* must suffice for the present. We repeat that such chromatic progressions are to be played only occasionally, with artistry, and broadly.

Figure 476

Figure 476 consists of two musical examples, *a* and *b*, each showing a sequence of chords on a single staff. Example *a* shows a sequence of chords: $b7$ (5), $4\#$ (b), $b7$ (5 b), $2\#$ (2), $b7$ (5 b), 7 (5 b), $6b$ (2), $7b$ (3 $\#$), $b7$ (5 b), and a final $b7$ (5 b). Example *b* shows a sequence of chords: 7 (5), $b7$ (6 b), $6b$ (5 4), 7 (5 4), $b7$ (5 b), $9\ 8$ (5 b), 7 (5 b), $6b$ (b 4), 7 (5 b), and a final 6 (5 b 6).

12. The beauty of variety is made evident in the fantasia. A diversified figuration and all attributes of good performance must be employed. The ear tires of unrelieved passage work, sustained

chords, or broken chords. By themselves they neither stir nor still the passions; and it is for these purposes that the fantasia is exceptionally well suited. Broken chords must not progress too rapidly or unevenly (Figure 477, Example *a*). Occasional exceptions to this precept may be introduced with good effect into chromatic progressions. The performer must not break his chords constantly in a single color.* Both hands may progress from the low to the high register, or the left hand may do this alone while the right remains in its own register. This kind of execution is good on the harpsichord, for out of it there comes an agreeable alternation of devised forte and piano. Those who are capable will do well when they depart from a too natural use of harmony to introduce an occasional deception; but if their attainments are insufficient for the purpose, they must enhance by means of a varied and fine execution of all manner of figuration those harmonies which sound plain when performed in the usual style. Most dissonances may be doubled in the left hand. The ear will accept the resultant octaves in full harmony; fifths, however, must be avoided. The fourth, when it appears in company with the fifth and ninth, and the ninth at all times are not doubled.

Figure 477



13. All chords may be broken in many ways and expressed in rapid or slow figuration. Broken chords in which principal as well as certain neighboring tones are repeated (Figure 478, Example *a*) are especially attractive, for they are more varied than a simple arpeggio where the tones are played successively just as they lie under the hands. In the interests of elegance the major (*b*) or minor (*c*) second may be struck and quitted below each tone of a broken triad or a relationship based on a triad. This is called "breaking with *acciaccature*." In runs, the normal tones of chords are filled in. These runs may pursue a direct course through one or more octaves upward and downward. But an agreeable variety arises out of repetitions (*d*) and the insertion of foreign tones (*e*). Runs which contain

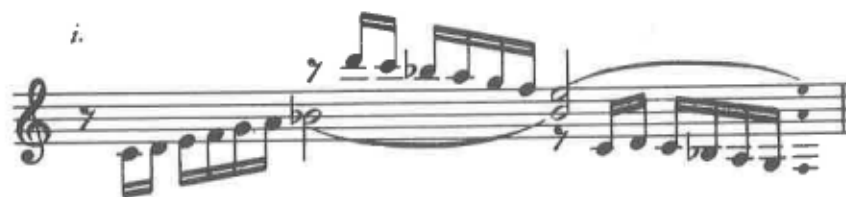
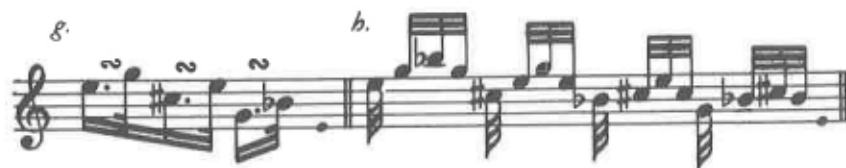
* I.e., at a fixed dynamic level.

many half steps require a moderate speed. All manner of groupings may be alternated in the course of runs (*f*). The triad and its inversions may be expressed by the same run, and also the seventh chord and its inversions. At times the augmented second is avoided in chords which contain that interval (*g*); but in certain figurations it is acceptable (*h*). Imitations in parallel and contrary motion can be very well introduced into various parts (*i*). The chromatic chords which were discussed in Paragraph 11 are best fitted to slow figuration and the expression of profound feeling, as we can see in the final movement of the last Lesson in Part I of this Essay.⁷

14. In order to provide my reader, through continuous ex-

Figure 478

⁷ Sonata VI, third movement. Cf. Pt. I, Introduction, Note 17.



amples of all kinds, with a clear and useful conception of the construction of a free fantasia,⁸ I refer him to the Lesson mentioned in the preceding paragraph, and Figure 480. Both are free fantasias; the first is interspersed with much chromaticism, while the second consists largely of natural and usual relationships. The framework

⁸ This paragraph will serve to illustrate Bach's views on musical analysis as described in a letter to a friend, dated from Hamburg, Oct. 15, 1777 (cf. Bitter, *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach und Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, und deren Brüder*, Vol. I, p. 348): "In my opinion, in instructing amateurs, several things could be omitted that many musicians do not, indeed, need not know. A most important element, analysis, is lacking. True masterpieces should be taken from all styles of composition, and the amateur should be shown the beauty, daring, and novelty in them. Also, he should be shown how insignificant the piece would be if these things were lacking. Further, he should be shown how errors, pitfalls, have been avoided, and especially how far a work departs from ordinary ways, how venturesome it can be, etc."

of the latter, in the form of a figured bass, may be found in Figure 479. The note values have been written as accurately as can be expected. In performance each chord is arpeggiated twice. When the second arpeggio is to be taken in a different register by either the right or the left hand, the change is indicated in the fantasia. The tones of the slow, fully gripped chords, which are played as arpeggios, are all of equal duration, even though restrictions of space have necessitated the superposing of white and black notes in the interests of greater legibility. At the beginning and end (1) of the sketch (Figure 479) we find long extensions on the tonic harmony. At 2 there is a modulation to the fifth on which the performer remains for some time until at *x* he moves toward E minor. The three tones at 3, joined by a slur, elucidate the transition to the repetition of the chord of the second which is regained by means of an interchange of chordal tones. This transition is performed in slow figuration, the bass being purposely omitted from the piece as performed. The change from the seventh chord on *b* to the following chord of the second on *b*-flat is an ellipsis, for normally the six-four chord on *b* or the triad on *c* would precede the chord of the second. The chord at 4 seems to point toward D minor, but the minor triad is omitted and instead the chord of the second (5) with an augmented fourth is played on *c* as if the plan were to move on to the G major chord. Instead, the G minor chord is played at 6, to be followed largely by dissonant relationships leading back to the principal tonality, on which the fantasia ends over an organ point.

Figure 479

Allegro

(1.) (2.)

(x.) (3.) (4.) (5.)

6 b7 6 7 6 5 6 4 8
 5 b 5 2 5 b 5 4 3 8 b 7 4 2 3

Figure 480
Allegro

arpeggio

The first system of music consists of two staves. The treble staff contains a melodic line that begins with a series of eighth notes, followed by a more complex, ascending sequence of notes with slurs and ties. The bass staff contains a simple bass line with a few notes.

The second system of music consists of two staves. The treble staff contains a melodic line with a slur and a fermata. The bass staff contains a bass line with a slur and a fermata. The word "arpeggio" is written above the treble staff. A circled "x" is located below the bass staff.

The third system of music consists of two staves. The treble staff contains a melodic line with a slur and a fermata. The bass staff contains a bass line with a slur and a fermata. The number "(3.)" is written below the bass staff.

The fourth system of music consists of two staves. The treble staff contains a melodic line with a slur and a fermata. The bass staff contains a bass line with a slur and a fermata. The numbers "(4.) (5.) (5.)" are written below the bass staff.

*arpeggio**arpeggio*