

Improvisation in the French Style

Typical Harmonic Progressions, the *Offertoire*, and the Toccata

Rochester AGO Winter Skills Workshop
February 6, 2016
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Warmups: Triads

Examples should be practiced with "locked hands": doubled down an octave in the left hand

Sequence 1: root motion up by thirds, alternating major and minor triads;
goes through all 24 major and minor keys

halfway there!

another way of thinking about it: the third of the chord you're on becomes the root of the next one; or, the root falls ...

starting on first inversion

starting on second inversion

Sequence 2: root motion down by thirds, alternating major and minor triads

the root of the chord you're on becomes the third of the next one; or, the fifth rises ...

starting on first inversion

starting on second inversion

Warmups: Seventh Chords

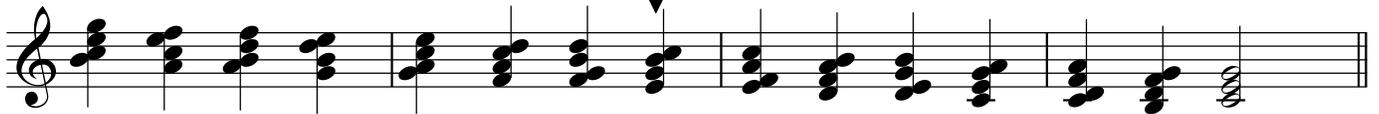
Diatonic "circle of sevenths" (seventh chords the roots of which form a circle of fifths), alternating root and second inversion



(could think of as: top two notes fall, then bottom two)

from here, pattern repeats first 7 chords with positions reversed, so all are played twice

same, alternating first and third inversion



(could think of as: outside notes fall, then inside ones)

The four most common chords in this style:

C7 C7b5 Cø Cdim7 B7 B7b5 Bø Bdim7 Bb7 the same pattern in first inversion



in second inversion

in third inversion



An alternative way of practicing the chords:

eleven different chords can be built on one bass note:

sound the same as root and 1st inversion, but it's helpful to think of as having different spelling, because will move to different goal chords

all four dim7 chords sound the same, but whichever note is thought of as the root will become a leading tone



will go to F to D to B to Ab

Another alternative for practicing:

eleven different chords can be built under one top note:



Prolongation ("treading water")

keeping root, moving third and fifth
(can be chromatically altered)

keeping fifth, moving root and third
(usually not altered)

based on Dubois, *Fiat Lux* "pinkie pedal"

sixths around inside pedal point (based on Dubois, *Fiat Lux*)

...

neighboring
dim7

neighboring
Ger7 (common in style)

neighboring
Fr7

"Scalar prolongation": alternating I and V7 with
stepwise contrary motion (idiomatic; see Grison, *Toccata*)

Similar wedge idea,
but chromatic,
based on Widor

The Widor idea extended:

G7 E7 C#7 Bb7 back to G7

the tonic and seventh
trade places chromatically,
forming a minor triad in the middle

Idiomatic Chord Progressions as Sequences

Down a second

by major second

the "Allegretto" sequence

...

by minor second

...

Down a third

by minor third

Musical notation showing a sequence of chords in G major (one sharp) descending by a minor third. The sequence starts with G major (G-B-D) and moves to E major (E-G-B), then C major (C-E-G), and finally A major (A-C-E). Ellipses indicate the sequence continues.

by major third

Musical notation showing a sequence of chords in G major (one sharp) descending by a major third. The sequence starts with G major (G-B-D) and moves to E minor (E-G-Bb), then C minor (C-Eb-Gb), and finally A minor (A-Cb-Eb). Ellipses indicate the sequence continues.

by Sequence 2

Musical notation showing a sequence of chords in G major (one sharp) descending by a major third, using Sequence 2. The sequence starts with G major (G-B-D) and moves to E minor (E-G-Bb), then C minor (C-Eb-Gb), and finally A minor (A-Cb-Eb). Ellipses indicate the sequence continues.

by Sequence 2, based on Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 4

Musical notation showing a sequence of chords in G major (one sharp) descending by a major third, based on Dubois's *10 Pièces*, no. 4. The sequence starts with G major (G-B-D) and moves to E minor (E-G-Bb), then C minor (C-Eb-Gb), and finally A minor (A-Cb-Eb). An arrow points to the E minor chord, and an ellipsis indicates the sequence continues.

the iii6 in place of V is common in the style; Fauré liked it

Down a fourth

Musical notation showing a sequence of chords in G major (one sharp) descending by a fourth. The sequence starts with G major (G-B-D) and moves to D major (D-F-A), then A major (A-C-E), and finally E major (E-G-B). Ellipses indicate the sequence continues.

Musical notation showing a sequence of chords in G major (one sharp) descending by a fourth, using Sequence 2. The sequence starts with G major (G-B-D) and moves to D major (D-F-A), then A major (A-C-E), and finally E major (E-G-B). Ellipses indicate the sequence continues.

Up a second

by major second

Musical notation showing a sequence of chords in G major (one sharp) ascending by a major second. The sequence starts with G major (G-B-D) and moves to A major (A-C-E), then B major (B-D-F), and finally C major (C-E-G). Ellipses indicate the sequence continues.

similar

Musical notation showing a sequence of chords in G major (one sharp) ascending by a major second, using Sequence 2. The sequence starts with G major (G-B-D) and moves to A major (A-C-E), then B major (B-D-F), and finally C major (C-E-G). Ellipses indicate the sequence continues.

Gigout, *Tocatta*

Ger aug 6th becomes V7

Up a third

by Sequence 1, dominant moving up

by Sequence 1, tonic moving down

by Sequence 1, dominant and tonic moving chromatically to make German augmented sixths

In minor,
Ger aug 6th built on $\flat 1$

In major,
Ger aug 6th built on 1

by Sequence 1, based on Boëllmann, *L'Heure Mystique*, vol. 1, Offertoire 3

by major third

V7 becomes Ger aug 6th

by minor third

Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 3

Other Stylistic Progressions

regular circle of dominant sevenths

more idiomatic:

based on Philip, *Toccata*
(break circle with tritone)

based on Mulet, *Tu es Petra*
(alternating augmented triads with dominant sevenths)

based on Boëllmann, "Toccata" from *Suite Gothique*

In the style, the four dominant 7ths whose roots outline a dim7 frequently jump directly to each other; all those jumps involve two common tones.

In the example, we jump from A \flat to B, then B to D.

The augmented triad is often part of a V7#5 chord, with three normal resolutions:

It can also be seen as part of a V13 chord:

any 2 of the triad's notes can be the dominant and leading tone

a sequence for augmented triad practice:

an equivalent to the Baroque "rule of the octave":

just make any 4 descending notes into a 4/2, 6, 6/4, and 5 of a key

Two ways the French 6th can resolve to a V7 with a 4-3 suspension:

outside voices slide down to make a dominant 7th with a suspension

inside voices slide down to make a different dominant 7th with a suspension

Some general guidelines for the style: just think about the chord you're on, not the key you might be in; move thirds and sixths by parallel motion chromatically; when you're on a triad, either move the tonic down or the dominant up to get things moving; avoid minor seconds sounding together.

based on Franck, *Petit Offertoire*

Dominant 7th resolves by all voices moving up a semitone

The Offertoire

These, part of a standard 5-movement form (Entrée, Offertoire, Elevation, Communion, Sortie) are almost always:

- just on manuals;
- just on 8 foot stops, usually strings, sometimes with an hautbois solo;
- keeping to either 3 or 4 voices consistently;
- with very periodic melodies (regular 4-bar phrases);
- in ternary form (ABA)

The texture is usually melody and accompaniment, usually just quarters or eighths, and mostly in stepwise motion:

Loret, *Six Offertoires*, no. 2

a pedal point at the beginning is fairly common

Franck, *Petit Offertoire*

pervasive accented dissonances in the top line are very common (also see Franck above):

Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 4

often, a short idea (usually 2 measures) is repeated and varied:

Franck, *Petit Offertoire*

A musical score for Franck's *Petit Offertoire*. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody in the treble staff is a sequence of eighth and quarter notes. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and single notes.

or it can be sequenced (sequences in general are very common in the style):

Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 3

A musical score for Dubois's *10 Pièces*, no. 3. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. The treble staff features a melodic line with eighth notes. The bass staff has a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and rests.

if there is an obligato pedal (rare), it will be simple

the diminished octave (also used by Franck)

A continuation of the musical score for Dubois's *10 Pièces*, no. 3. It shows a diminished octave in the bass staff, indicated by a downward-pointing arrow. The treble staff continues with its melodic line.

"overshooting" (to an appoggiatura) is common: leap up or down to the note on the other side of the goal note

Loret, *Six Offertoires*, no. 3

this contour is very stylistic Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 4

Two musical scores side-by-side. The left score is for Loret's *Six Offertoires*, no. 3, showing a melodic line with a leap. The right score is for Dubois's *10 Pièces*, no. 4, showing a triplet of notes. An arrow points from the text above to the leap in the Loret score.

many 13th (and 9th) chords

The dominant 13th is common at cadences
 (the first example also has the appoggiatura contour from before):

this Mozartean suspended
 cadence is common in the style

Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 3

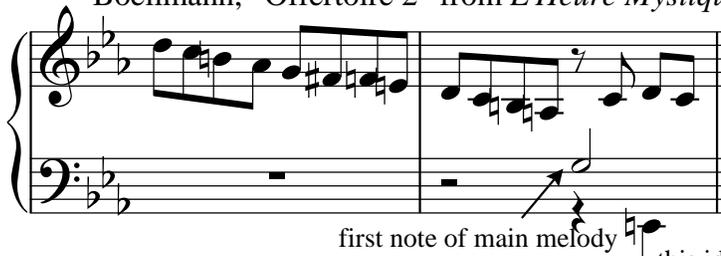


Franck, *Petit Offertoire*



At the end of the B section, there's often a little cadenza
 to come back to the reprise note:

Boëllmann, "Offertoire 2" from *L'Heure Mystique*, vol. 1



Loret, *Six Offertoires*, no. 3



first note of main melody

this idea buys time for the improviser to remember
 the key of the piece, and how the first tune begins

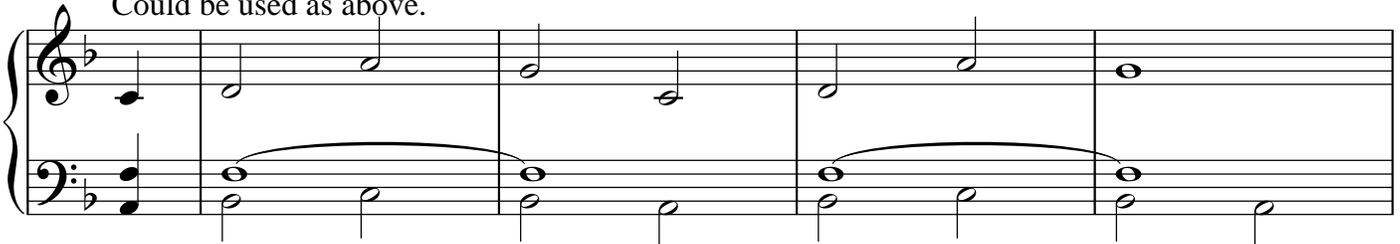
The background from Loret's *Six Offertoires*, no. 5, mm. 1-8.

The right hand line should be decorated with appoggiaturas and chromatic passing notes.
 Then repeat, but cadence in G, to form an A section.



The background from Boëllmann's "Offertoire" no. 3, mm. 1-8.

Could be used as above.



Boëllmann likes to begin on a first inversion chord,
 with the melody on the dominant



Tocatta Figurations

- toccatas are closely related to Baroque figuration preludes, so inspiration can flow both ways
- try playing just solid chords at first, keeping the number of voices consistent
- then just arpeggiate from bottom to top, and vice versa
- find or invent a pattern that feels comfortable, and keep using it
- try keeping to one or two sequential progression types for the whole piece

Four-part chords

Barié, Op. 7 no. 3

The image shows two musical staves. On the left, a four-part chord is shown in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The chord consists of four notes: G#4, A4, B4, and C#5. On the right, the same chord is shown as a four-part arpeggiated pattern, with the notes G#4, A4, B4, and C#5 moving sequentially from bottom to top in a single voice.

Grison, *Tocatta en Fa*

The image shows two musical staves. On the left, a four-part chord is shown in a grand staff with a key signature of three flats (Bb, Eb, Ab). The chord consists of four notes: Bb4, C5, Eb5, and Ab5. On the right, the same chord is shown as a four-part arpeggiated pattern. The right hand part is marked 'Réc.' and the left hand part is marked 'Sw.'.

Vierne, *Carillon de Westminster*

The image shows two musical staves. On the left, a four-part chord is shown in a grand staff with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The chord consists of four notes: G#4, A4, B4, and C#5. On the right, the same chord is shown as a four-part arpeggiated pattern.

RH can play its own pattern while
LH plays melody

Five-part chords

Callaerts, *Tocatta in E Minor*

The image shows two musical staves. On the left, a five-part chord is shown in a grand staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The chord consists of five notes: G#4, A4, B4, C#5, and D5. On the right, the same chord is shown as a five-part arpeggiated pattern.

implied parallel octaves,
even in outside voices,
are common in the style

Six-part chords (the most common; often "locked hands")

Philip, *Toccata et Fugue en La mineur*

The first part shows a six-part chord in G minor, with notes G2, Bb2, D3, F3, Ab3, and Bb3. An arrow points to the right, where the same chord is shown in a musical context. The right hand plays a continuous eighth-note pattern, while the left hand plays the chord notes with a fermata, illustrating the "locked hands" technique.

Philip, later

This section shows a more developed texture of the six-part chord. The right hand continues with the eighth-note pattern, and the left hand now plays a similar eighth-note pattern, creating a more integrated and flowing texture.

Fleuret, *Toccata*, Op. 10 no. 3

The first part shows a six-part chord in G minor. An arrow points to the right, where the chord is shown in a musical context. The right hand plays a continuous eighth-note pattern, while the left hand plays the chord notes with a fermata, illustrating the "locked hands" technique.

Boëllmann, "Toccata," from *Suite Gothique*

The first part shows a six-part chord in G minor. An arrow points to the right, where the chord is shown in a musical context. The right hand plays a continuous eighth-note pattern, while the left hand plays the chord notes with a fermata, illustrating the "locked hands" technique.

Dubois, *Fiat Lux*

The first part shows a six-part chord in G major. An arrow points to the right, where the chord is shown in a musical context. The right hand plays a continuous eighth-note pattern, while the left hand plays the chord notes with a fermata, illustrating the "locked hands" technique.

Vierne, Op. 53

The image shows two musical staves. The left staff shows a standard chord voicing with a few notes in each hand. An arrow points to the right staff, which shows the same chord expanded into an eight-part chord, with more notes added to both the treble and bass staves.

Eight-part chords

Lower neighbor notes (most often semitones) are common at the tops and bottoms of chords

Widor, from *Symphony V*

The image shows two musical staves. The left staff shows a standard chord voicing. An arrow points to the right staff, which shows the same chord expanded into an eight-part chord. The right staff includes lower neighbor notes (semitones) at the top and bottom of the chord.

(parallel dim7 chords work well for 8-part chords)

The image shows two musical staves with parallel diminished seventh chords. The chords are arranged in a way that demonstrates how they can be used for eight-part chords.

(Vierne likes playing a 7th as two dyads; cf. the *Carillon de Westminster*, or the *Final* from his 5th Symphony, Op. 47)

Vierne, Op. 53

The image shows two musical staves. The right staff shows a 7th chord played as two dyads (two-note chords). The left staff shows a similar voicing.

(this idea is repeated almost exactly in the *Final* from his Op. 59)

Historical Inspiration

Couperin, *The Mysterious Barricades*

Bach, *Little Prelude*

The image shows two musical staves. The left staff shows a musical phrase from Bach's *Little Prelude*. The right staff shows a musical phrase from Couperin's *The Mysterious Barricades*.

also cf. the first Prelude of the WTC (in five parts) both Baroque composers seem to like highlighting the hands alternately