Free Transcription for Performance:

Composing Additional Material for Average Repertoire

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As any student of the instrument can tell you, extemporaneous playing, adding ornaments and runs to literature that lends itself to the practice, and composing the occasional cadenza are all part of what it means to become a competent organist. However, the ancient practice of troping, literally adding parts to an already finished score, is something that is normally only reserved for the sporadic descant augmentation to a hymn accompaniment. Being a concert organist, I have of course performed a fairly large number of pieces many times, hopefully developing my interpretation of these works over the years rather than simply reiterating them. Nevertheless, there are some compositions in my repertoire that I have actually begun changing in substantial ways. These tend not to be masterworks or extremely well known pieces, simply genre works that I felt needed more - improving, to be sure.

As a composer as well as organist, I have always been interested in refashioning old forms and styles anew - writing fugues and pieces based on chorales, etc. Now I find myself starting to add little pencil dots to my organ scores, not just to remind me of fingerings and some embellishments, but adding material, motifs, harmonic alterations and amplifications, as well as a host of other alterations. At first this may seem heretical

- we are taught that what's on the page is what's on the page - but over time and playing these pieces in my new transcriptions I have recognized, ultimately, the only intention truly important is to want to bring an exciting and emotional musical experience to the listener and not just presenting a hermetic reproduction of a score.

Regarding the composing of new types of tropes in the free transcription of older literature, one must begin by asking a few questions about the work at hand: what can be added? where should one draw the line stylistically and harmonically with what would have been appropriate for the period? indeed, must one keep with this style? These can only be answered by going through the process of composing 'around' a piece over and over again. The principles that I abide include the following:

1. Only add ornaments and embellishments that contribute to unifying motivic and thematic material within a work.

2. Introduce figuration that can be incorporated into the piece at various points to enhance the structural connectivity and motivic variety.

3. Add voices where the texture seems too thin or inconsistent with previous material.

4. Suspensions, appogiaturae, passing and neighboring tones, etc., can all be added judiciously. However restraint here is necessary if one wishes to avoid monotony; again, primarily use to enhance structural correlations.

5. Climactic points should be augmented appropriately both harmonically and texturally.

6. The introduction of an out-of-the-ordinary harmonic progression or voice-leading idea can bring attention to a particular section and make a 'moment' that may strengthen the listener's understanding of the formal elements. (This last principle is

the one I find most engaging as a composer, but also the one with which I am the

most cautious in dealing.)

In no way should these 'moments' sound out of place or like an obvious intrusion, or

(worst of all) as if it was intentionally forced through the prism of a 21st century ear, but

something that is enhancing and flows organically from the material.

To explain a technique is one way of teaching it, but as an educator I have always

found that instruction from example is preferable. The example I have decided to use

exemplifying these principles of free transcription is the *Toccata in g minor* by Pachelbel

- an admirable piece to begin a concert with or before a fugue by the composer.

However, I found the prevailing two-voice texture over the sustained pedal notes

sometimes wanting. I have provided here the original followed by my free transcription

and an explanation of each addition. I chose this work because it is one that I have

somewhat considerably altered. The lesson I have learned in my years of performing is

that a little freedom with a work can make the description of 'playing' the organ more

accurate.

Annotations for the transcription:

1. The trill is used sporadically in my interpretation, primarily in descending motives and

at moments of reiteration (such as in bars 19 and 23).

2. Pachelbel's recurring textural ambiguities, with a third manual voice frequently

entering and departing without much nuance, exasperated my sensibilities. By gradually

allowing a second drone to emerge from the left hand tenor line in bar 3, and rise to

create a series of retardations in bar 4, this discontinuity is abated. Bar 5 rhythmically

embellishes the original quarter note suspension. It is in this bar that Pachelbel reduces the manual texture to two voices, but I allow the tenor voice to outline the sequential descent of the busy upper voices in broader strokes. Creating strata of different rhythmic activity is a key to free transcription.

3. A new motive is introduced into the sixteenth note patterns at this point; I felt the motoric rhythm associated with toccatas of this nature can become a bit one-dimensional without the inclusion of some kind of punctuation. As well, this brief idea can be used again at similar junctures throughout to hold and enhance the structural integrity on a larger scale.

4. The notion of rhythmic strata resurfaces here, especially with the wide gap between the almost static bass and the hyperactive soprano. Through the introduction of a rising eighth note passage in the tenor voice, a connection is made with the opening excerpt at bar 3 in the soprano.

5. Similarly to 4., a connection with bars 2-3 is made with the scalar tenor motion. In addition, the chromatic B flat to B natural signals the imminent transition to the dominant as well as creating smoother voice leading to the C# in the following measure.

6. Similar to 2., a second drone allows better connectivity between textures. In bar 15, the rising eighth note tenor passage supports the treble line and also creates a moment of harmonic ambiguity.

7. Imitating the rhythmic strata approach of measures 5-7 within a descending sequence, a fuller texture is created, bringing with it a more chromatic, slightly ambiguous, and somewhat strident harmonic progression, making the release into the dominant more conspicuous at the end of bar 18.

8. Bars 20-23 are the most heavily modified within this transcription. I reserved this for the climax of the work, blending all of the previously stated ideas. First, for greater connectivity with earlier motives, I re-introduced the rising eighth note motive twice into the musical fabric in measure 20. The texture expands here to four manual voices, which continues until the climax subsides. Block chords dominate bar 21, while 22 introduces a new chain of suspensions that the original simply begged for.

9. & 10. A descant is juxtaposed as the coda approaches, here supported once more by an emerging second drone.

11. This is another case of simply creating a bridge between two textures in which the original allows a voice to drop out, thus disrupting the flow.

12. The last two bars had to be extended to allow for this brief cadenza.

13. To complement the weight of the climax, a fourth voice is allowed to continue on to the conclusion, enriching the harmonic fabric.

14. A minor change here has the tenor and bass descending rather than re-ascending at the conclusion of the work. This is primarily a voice leading question, but the thick quality of the overtones that is created by allowing the bass to drop down to just a third over the pedal tone gives greater authority to the Picardy cadence than the original.

Toccata in g minor

Johann Pachelbel
(1653-1706)

Toccata in g minor

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(1653-1706)
free transcription by Justin Rubin