Improvising melodic accompaniments

J.S. Bach

Playing countermelodies in the style of Irvine, Moynihan, Lunny, Finn, and others

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Accompaniment in Irish traditional music is a fairly recent phenomenon with few exceptions (notably the harp repertoire), it's thought that backing up melodies with chords or countermelodies is essentially a product of the modern recording era. When Michael Coleman, James Morrison and other early greats were brought into the New York studios in the 1920s and '30s, it was expected that any gramophone performance would include an accompanist. Some of the "piano drivers" on early recordings by Irish greats were not well-equipped to accompany the music effectively and sensitively (though some were). However, the 1960s boom in the use of guitar, and later bouzouki and keyboards, led to the development of a range of new accompanimental conceptions, from the powerful polyrhythms of DADGAD guitarists like Micheal O Domhnaill and Daithi Sproule, to the filigree of bouzouki players like Alec Finn and Andy Irvine, to the thunderous powerchords of Brian MacNeill and Roy Gullane. Generally speaking, those playing guitar tended to play in "guitaristic" fashion, combining flatpicked chords and bass lines in new ways that accomodated modal harmony, while the keyboardists found models in Cape Breton and Irish-style piano vamping or in the synthesizers of pop music.

However, the seminal Irish bouzouki players people like Finn, Irvine, Johnny Moynihan, and Donal Lunny, and many who came after them tended to conceive this "new" instrument in a new fashion. They tended not to simply play chords "as if it were a guitar," but instead to develop accompanimental vocabularies which took advantage of the instrument's ability to drone beneath melodies or through chords and to punch out melodic counterpoint or bass lines.

This is why some novice bouzouki players, particularly those who come as many do from a background in guitar backup, have trouble conceiving accompaniments in the style of their heroes: because those influential players were not thinking like guitarists, but more like string players in an orchestra, developing linear melodies which were subordinate to and supportive of

the main melody.

The solution is to think of the bouzouki not so much as a chordal instrument, chunking out vertical slices of harmony in a regular rhythm, but as a melodic instrument, which can play composed or improvised linear parts which support the main line without either overwhelming it or tying it down rhythmically. This is the key conception behind Andy Irvine's mandolin and bouzouki playing, Donal Lunny's playing in Planxty (less so in the Bothy Band, where his function was more percussive and less contrapuntal), and even Alec Finn's syncopated vamping in De Danaan.

How to do this sort of counterpoint in an arranged/band situation is fairly straightforward: you combine whatever harmonic knowledge you have with the structure of the melody to be accompanied, experiment with a bunch of different possibilities, make sure that your line fits both the implied chords of the piece and with the existing melody, and build up a complete part, which you then practice until you can execute it consistently every time the arrangement is played. However, this is not possible in the session setting, wherein the order of tunes is not fixed, and in which you may not have developed contrapuntal parts for, or may not even be familiar with, many of the tunes played. If you wish to continue to use this contrapuntal approach a la Finn, Irvine, and Lunny in a session setting, then you have to learn how to improvise counterpoint.

I've tried both approaches: painstakingly constructing a contrapuntal part which fits the harmony, supports the melody and can still be played, and contrastingly jamming away in a playing situation, experimenting with melodic ideas until some things fell into place. In my opinion, the best way to arrive at a contrapuntal conception is actually to combine these approaches, rather in the way that an improvising jazz musician combines theoretical knowledge, rigorous practice, and improvisational experimentation.

If you can understand what makes contrapuntal lines work, train your ear to hear those possibilities, and then devise ways to practice using them, you can become quite skilled at improvising counterpoint. This is particularly feasible in the repertoire of Irish traditional dance repertoire, whose harmonic requirements are quite specific and quite different from most other idioms, but whose harmonic vocabulary is manageably small.

So the goal becomes multiple: 1) to understand the harmonic requirements of the music; 2) to know your way around your instrument well enough that if you think of an idea (e.g., "hear it in your head") you can play it; 3) to develop a vocabulary of contrapuntal ideas and build on that vocabulary in a playing situation.

We accomplish these goals with study and practice: 1) study of the music's harmonic implications, the chords that the melodies call for, the ways of shaping and substituting for those chords, practice with the rhythmic requirements of the music; 2) practice of scales, chords, and arpeggios on our instruments so that we really know our ways around, experimentation with musical ideas in all fingerings, necessary keys, and registers; 3) development of contrapuntal ideas and experimentation with their use in context.

Various resources exist for the study of (1) and (2) above: (1) master musicians, formal lessons, various printed sources (for basic harmony, any college music theory textbook; for harmony as it works in Irish music, Celtic Backup for All Instrumentalists has an extensive discussion of modal harmony in the Irish tradition), and (2) treating individual tunes as "etudes" to work on specific technical issues; developing scale and arpeggio exercises from books or experimentation, and so on. The goal of this article is to focus on (3): concepts and exercises that develop one's ability to conceive and execute improvised counterpoint.

SAMPLE EXERCISE:

1) Take a tune in the D Ionian mode you know and can play well but for which you haven't yet worked out an accompanimental part (Ionian mode is identical to the major scale: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-1; for more on modes in Irish music see Celtic Backup).

2) Play the tune into a tape recorder. As you play it, listen to the tune, and ask yourself simply "where does my ear 'want' to hear some kind of a change in the accompaniment?"

3) As you play the tune, or while playing back on the recorder, try to locate the tonic note of the tune: the note that the tune's mode is based on (this is the "1" of the mode; often tunes will start or even more often end on their tonic notes, though not always). Generally speaking, the tonic note will sound more logical than any other note when sung or played as a constant drone through the whole tune.

4) Play back the tune, droning on this tonic note. Think of this drone on the tonic as the "home note." While doing so, listen to the tune against the drone, and ask yourself where your ear wants to hear some kind of shift away from the drone; that is, to an "away" note.

For a tune in Ionian mode (1-2-3-4-5-6-7-1), think of "1" as the "home note" and, for the moment, "2" as the "away" note. For the moment, your accompanimental vocabulary on this tune will consist of just these two notes (we limit the vocabulary so sharply in order to force us to really concentrate on working out all the possibilities of just two notes, before adding more. Otherwise, we are likely to be swamped with too many possibilities, and not do justice to any of them).

5) Play back the tune again, droning on the "home note" (tonic). At the point or points where your ear wants to hear a shift in the drone, move to droning on the "away" note. See how well you can make this shift from "home" to "away" (and back again) work at various spots in the tune.

Now, add another note to your vocabulary, which will function as a second "home" note. For a tune in Ionian mode, you can think of "1" and "3" as "home," and continue to think of "2" as "away" (Note: you are allowed to leap from one "home" note to another within the same phrase: for example, playing 3 and then playing 1 in the same phrase is okay).

6) Play back the tune. Begin by droning on the tonic ("1", a "home" note), and, when your ear wants to hear a shift, move to an "away" note (in this case, "2"). When your ear wants a shift

back to a "home" sound, realize that you now have two options: you can move back to the original starting tonic note ("1"), or you can move to the alternative "home" note (in this case "3"). Continue to experiment with permutations of these three notes (two as "home" and one as "away").

What this means is that now you have multiple options, because you can combine different permutations of 1, 2, and 3 as "home" versus "away. This in turn means that you can improvise small 3- note melodies which simultaneously fit with the implied harmony, work with the tune itself, and which can vary from repetition to repetition.

Example (8-measure tune section):

If the tune seems to "want" a combination of "home" versus "away" sounds like the following:

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Tune:

||Home     |     |Away      |     |Home      |     |Away      |Home||



Then you might play

||1        |     |2         |     |3         |     |2         |1    ||
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Now add in a fourth note, to serve as a second "away" sound (in Mixolydian, this might be "4").

7) Do the same sort of playback and experimentation. When your ear wants a "home" sound, you can play the tonic, or the other "home" note (in this case, "1" and "3"); when your ear wants an "away" sound, you can shift to the other "away" notes (in this case, "2" and "4").

Example: If the tune seems to "want" a combination of "home" versus "away" sounds like the following:

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Tune:

||Home     |     |Away      |     |Home      |     |Away      |Home||



Then you might play

||1        |3    |2         |4    |3         |1    |2         |1    ||
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You can continue this process until, one by one, you've added back in all the 7 notes of the mode in question. But do not ever skip spending sufficient time on each added note: realize that every time you add in another note to the basic vocabulary of "home" and "away" sounds, you are increasing the number of different sequences of notes logarhythmically. By the time you've added back in all the 7 notes of the mode, you will have an almost infinite number of combinations of "home" and "away" notes, which you can vary every time the tune is repeated. But never play a note combination if you're not sure of what it will sound like before you play it. The way to be sure is to build very gradually on the basic vocabulary of note combinations and to spend lots of time with each addition to that vocabulary.

So far, we have only been playing single notes in various "home" and "away" phrases, and we have only been playing notes that fit those categories (e.g., only "home" notes in a "home" phrase, and only "away" notes in an "away" phrase"), but we can actually find ways to incorporate each in the other, depending on where we place them. The key to this distinction is to be aware of which notes in an improvised line are accented and which are not.

Generally speaking, we can play notes that don't fit the "home" or "away" category (that is, "dissonant" notes) within "home" or "away" phrases if the notes that don't fit are falling on unaccented beats; that is, if the dissonant notes are played on upbeats, or where the foot is not tapping. Accented beats want to have "consonant" notes "home" notes in a home phrase, "away" notes in an away phrase but unaccented beats can have dissonant notes.

This lets us fill in lines that move in smooth, stepwise motion, by combining consonant notes on strong beats and dissonant notes on weak beats.

Example: (Notes in parenthesis are falling on "weak" beats, and are allowed to be dissonant, because the ear hears them as "passing" tones, not mistakes.)

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Tune:

||Home    |    |Away     |       |Home   |    |Away      |Home||

Then you might play

||1  (2)  |3  1|2   (3)  |4  (1)2|3  (2)  |1   |2  4  (3)2|1    ||
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In turn, this means that our improvised lines can be very smooth, moving mostly in whole steps and half steps. This is especially important when we are changing between chords ("home" versus "away" sounds): we want the transition from a "home" note to an "away" note to be, ideally a half-step (3 to 4, for example) or failing that no more than a whole step (2 to 1, for example).

As mentioned above, it is okay to leap more than a whole or half- step within one phrase, but the transition between phrases should be as smooth and small a leap as possible. In classical music, this is known as "smooth voice-leading," a reference to the use of this practice in writing vocal parts for choirs.

This gives us extraordinary flexibility, provided we remember, and manage, to keep "consonant" tones on strong beats and "dissonant" tones on weak beats: it means that our improvised lines can have lots of changes of direction, combinations of fast and slow notes, and so on.

8) To practice this, play back the tune again. Focus on hitting "consonant" notes on the downbeat (1st beat) of each measure in which a shift from "home" to "away" (or vice versa) occurs; use dissonant notes to smooth out the leaps between consonant notes, but keep the dissonant notes on less-emphasized beats.

You'll need lots of trial-and-error for this. This is not wasted time, but is time very well spent. It is how we learn to hear the possibilities for this approach, and to develop a personal vocabulary of phrases we know will work in certain situations. (Note: this is also precisely the same process that jazz horn players go through to learn how to improvise solos. They are improvising melodies that are the focus of attention; we are improvising melodies that serve a backup function, but in both cases the demands are the same: we want a smooth, musical, interesting line that fits with the implied harmony but also contains rhythmic and melodic variety.)

If at any time you feel this process "getting away from you" getting confusing then back up one or two steps, and spend more time with the basics. You may even find it very useful to sing the improvised ideas first, and then find them on your instrument. This way, you will not get stuck on questions of physical technique, when what you should be concentrating on is listening to and experimenting with melodic ideas.

Followup steps:

1) Now do the above 8 steps with tunes in D Mixolydian, D Dorian, and D Aeolian modes. Work out similar, simple 2- or 3- note melodic ideas that "fit" with the tune's implied harmony.

2) Now do the above 8 steps with tunes in Ionian, Mixolydian, Dorian, and Aeolian, but which are based on different key areas commonly used in Irish music (G, A, E, B, etc).

3) Now take ideas developed for the four modes, based on different key areas, and shift them: for example, take all the "D Mixolydian" ideas and shift them to "A Dorian," changing individual notes where necessary to accommodate the change in mode.

If you can stick with this process, if you can find ways to keep it fresh and interesting, you will see very immediate results: you should be able to improvise simple, workable countermelodies in your first practice session. In the longer term, you should find your ability to imagine, construct, and play improvised lines enormously enhanced.

This kind of training is also extremely effective in learning to hear, remember, and play back melodic ideas that someone else plays. It's just excellent overall ear-training, and it will really help you to know your way around the idiom and around your instrument. These are the basic ideas used by improvisers in most Western musics (especially jazz, blues, and related styles), as well as by the classical composers of the 18th century who were one strong influence on Irish

traditional music.

Remember also that you can derive very useful insights into this approach from listening to instruments in the tradition that play in this style. Overwhelmingly, the most useful information in this fashion comes from listening to the way that different uilleann pipers play the regulators. There is a huge range of approaches to this among pipers, everything from the occasional tap on the tonic note, to an unceasing drone on the tonic or fifth or lowered seventh, to complex combinations of drones and moving lines. As an accompanist, it's useful to listen to the accompanimental ideas played by this instrument which is at the heart of the tradition.

It is also useful to note that the above approach can be used by any instrument (plucked strings like guitar, bouzouki, mandolin; bowed strings like fiddle and 'cello; keyboard and free reed instruments like piano, accordion and concertina; winds like flute, tin whistle, and pipes) to improvise melodic accompaniment. In fact, it is very educational to take the above ideas and work through a tune with them, playing them on something other than your primary instrument. Having less technique on this secondary instrument actually helps prevent one's fingers "running away with themselves," keeps us from falling into typical habits, and makes us listen and think much harder about why we're playing the notes we're playing.