

The Classical Method: Structure and the Art of Piano Classical Improvisation & Compositional Theory and Poetic Harmony

Robert Kaye

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Robert Kaye writes that he spent twenty years developing the musical improvisational method described in this book. What a shame that he did not spend another six months working with an editor to make the book readable.

At the root of Kaye's work lie some interesting questions. How did the great classical composers—Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin—compose? How do jazz musicians learn to improvise? What is the connection between improvisation and the structure of music theory?

Kaye, a pianist, specializes in improvisation that sounds like classical music. Central to his method is the use of second inversions of triads, which he calls 5-1-3 triads, moving between these and the tonic, diminished, and dominant chords. He calls this "folding." He illustrates how he uses chord progressions to imitate a particular era or composer. While he relies on an idea he calls "binary influences," he does not explain this, other than to reference the general idea of building and resolving tension. The book assumes some familiarity with music theory at the same time as the author rejects commonly understood theoretical terms in favor of his own terminology.

Kaye may well be a musical genius; his method may be valid. However, he cannot communicate his ideas. The reader must hack through a jungle of unruly and unintelligible verbiage to find out what the book is about. Kaye rattles on for pages, rarely breaking a paragraph, and just as rarely making sense. He lurches from musical ideas to personal history to half-baked theories about pretty much anything. Here's a sample: "I've gotten negative callers while being interviewed on the radio in saying that they are not of any contention or ordeal pertaining to classical music for it arouses kings and that is the foreshadowing of slavery and demise." Or, here he discounts a reviewer from Kansas University: "By the way, if you're wondering why Kansas university. Its because it's called KU. My name is Kaye and these people are attacking the K which stands for race also. So this is what this is about. Race and not education."

The book's layout is similarly haphazard and poorly executed. Kaye's method, paintings, compositions, and rantings are all slapped together in a variety of fonts. The directions accompanying his charts are unclear.

Certainly the project of articulating a highly individual creative process is challenging. But a book is itself an art form that requires care in its making, and Kaye's product cannot fairly be called a book. This pianist did not find any new theoretical gems here, though an avid improviser may be able to excavate some ideas from the pile. However, when the author himself cannot be bothered to even number the charts correctly, a reader has to wonder why one should make the effort to read the book.

TERESA SCOLLON (March 25, 2011)

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