

# The Reluctant Organist: From Piano to Organ

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## Know Your Instrument

- Organ *console* = where you control the organ from
- Sound comes out of pipes (if pipe organ) or speakers (if electronic) - know where they are
- If console is kept locked, make sure you know where key is kept
- Locate the power switch (key turn, button, etc.)
  - Usually located on lower right side of console
- Pipe organ needs power for air supply

## Posture

- Center your body in relation to the console as much as possible
- Have your hands comfortably rest on the main *manual* (keyboard), with other manuals still accessible without too much effort
  - The main manual (usually called the Great) will usually be the bottom on 2 manual instruments or middle on 3+ manual instruments
  - Second manual: above Great, called Swell or Recit
  - Third manual: below Great, called Choir or Positiv/Positif
- Bench height should allow your feet to dangle just over the pedals
  - If the bench height is not adjustable, you can use wooden blocks, or sturdy books such as hymnals to prop it up as needed
- Feet rest on bench footrest, or possibly on expression pedal, when not in use

## Stops and Registration

- Organ sound is organized around *stops*, discrete kinds of sounds which are used individually or in combination
- The art of combining stops to create the overall sound for a piece or section of music is called *registration*
- Each stop typically consists of a full *rank* of pipes (rank = a set of pipes which cover all the notes on the keyboard)
- Stops are controlled either by drawknobs (pull out to turn on, push in to turn off) or by tabs (flip down to turn on, flip up to turn off)
- Stops are organized into divisions, which are playable from their corresponding manual or pedal
- Names for organ stops can be based on French, German, English, Italian, reflecting different organ building traditions
- Four main families of organ stops:
  - 1. Principals - the core of the organ sound
    - Principal, Open Diapason, Octave, Fifteenth, Prestant, Montre
  - 2. Flutes - rounder, wider, less defined, projects more in treble register
    - Bourdon, Gedackt, Rohrflöte, Octavin, Stopped Diapason
  - 3. Strings - more pitch definition, thinner, narrower, projects more in bass register

- Gamba, Viola, Salicional, Viole de Gambe
- Often paired with Celeste stops - stops tuned slightly sharp which create a vibrato effect when pulled with the corresponding in tune string - never use a Celeste by itself!
- 4. Reeds - nasal, provides an edge to ensembles or colorful solos
  - ensemble/chorus reeds: Oboe/Hautbois, Fagott, Trumpet, Posaune, Bombarde, Clarion
  - solo reeds: Krummhorn, Vox humana, Clarinet, French Horn
  - "party horns": Tuba, Trompette en Chamade (horizontal pipes)
- Flue pipes (principals, flutes, strings) make sound by air hitting the lip of the mouth and vibrating the column of air; reed pipes make sound by vibrating a tongue against a shallot, which is amplified by the resonator
- Numbers after stop names refer to the pitch level of the stop
  - 8 = sounds at pitch, from 8 feet being the length of an open pipe sounding the lowest C in a manual rank
  - 4 = one octave higher, 2 = two octaves higher, 1 = three octaves higher
  - 16 = one octave lower, 32 = two octaves lower, 64 = three octaves lower
  - Mutations: pipes sounding a non-octave overtone, either in fifths or thirds with the unison
    - $2 \frac{2}{3}$ : octave and a fifth higher (Nazard, Quint, Twelfth)
    - $1 \frac{3}{5}$ : two octaves and a third higher (Tierce, Seventeenth)
    - $1 \frac{1}{3}$ : two octaves and a fifth higher (Larigot)
    - can be principal scaled (with principal chorus) or flute scaled (with flute chorus)
- Mixtures "mix" together multiple ranks at multiple pitch levels, indicated by a Roman numeral corresponding to the number of included ranks
  - e.g., Mixture III = three-rank mixture, so each note played will sound three pipes
- Encyclopedia of Organ Stops: <http://www.organstops.org/> - reference for researching stops
- Every organ is different and even stops with the same name might not sound the same, so experimentation is required!
  - Make sure you've listened to every stop on your organ by itself
- Especially on smaller organs, multiple stops will use the same rank of pipes in a process called *unification*
- Manuals can be *coupled* together or to the pedal, so that whatever stops are pulled on one manual will also sound on the manual it is coupled to
- Modern organs allow registrations to be saved to *combination pistons*, often on multiple *memory levels*
  - General pistons, typically located on the left, save the entire registration
  - Divisional pistons, typically located immediately under the corresponding manual (or on toestubs for the pedal), save the registration for that division only
  - While holding Set piston (lower left of console), press the numbered piston you want to save the current registration to
- The General Cancel piston on the lower right of console will immediately remove all stops

## Manual Technique

- Don't use weight – play from the fingers and keep everything else unengaged
  - Mechanical tracker actions will require more weight as more stops are coupled
- Articulation is everything – both attack and release
  - practice gradations from staccato through legato, connecting ears with fingers
- Finger substitution is an important technique for legato playing
- When practicing notes, use a simple registration with pitch clarity, such as an 8 String or 8 and 4 Principal, so you can hear your articulation

## Hymn Playing

- Stay with manuals only until you're comfortable to add feet
- Registration should be loud enough to be supportive but not so loud as to overpower, with a good balance of pitch clarity and tone
  - Often less is more - pulling on more stops can make the sound muddier and less easy to sing with
- Basic hymn playing registration: 8, 4, 2 Principals on the Great
  - For softer registrations, swap higher pitch levels with flutes, then take them out
    - 8, 4 Principal, 2 Flute > 8, 4 Principal > 8 Principal, 4 Flute
    - Combination of string and flute might work as quiet principal
  - For louder registrations, couple more manuals, add chorus reeds and/or mixtures
    - Can add principal chorus (8, 4, 2 Principals) from Swell or Choir
    - + 8 Oboe < < + 8 Trumpet < 16, 8, 4 Trumpet Chorus
    - + Swell Mixture < + Great Mixture < (+ III Scharf, if present)
- Another way to increase or decrease the volume is to play a thicker texture (more notes) or thinner texture (less notes)
- Keep a steady tempo
  - Lead the congregation - if you try to follow them while they're trying to follow you, the tempo is going to drag
  - Tempo choice will depend on style of tune, character of text, and tradition of congregation
- Breathe with your fingers when the congregation should
  - Let the text guide your phrasing
- Repeated notes in successive chords can often be held as tied rather than restruck to avoid awkward gaps
  - Rule of thumb: hold 2 voices (bass, alto), restrike 2 voices (tenor, soprano)
- Make sure your articulation emphasizes strong beats and deemphasizes weak beats
  - e.g., if there's a pickup note as in AURELIA (The Church's One Foundation), you could play fewer notes on the pickup to save the full chord for the downbeat
  - Similarly, if there's an anticipation as in HYMN TO JOY (Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee), I often will play just the melody note on the eighth and save the full chord for the half note
  - The rhythmic organization should always be clearly felt
- Try to keep a consistent space between verses
- Don't neglect hymn practice!

## Organ Maintenance

- Find out who you need to call if something breaks: local pipe organ technician or electronic organ manufacturer representative
- Pipes should be tuned about twice a year as a rule
- Try to keep temperature and humidity as consistent as possible where your organ pipes are
- The dreaded cipher: when a pipe won't stop sounding
  - Restriking the offending note can sometimes get it to stop
  - Sometimes you'll need to turn off the problem stop, or even the entire organ
  - Make sure you avoid using the problem stop (and any derived stops on a unified organ)
  - If you need the rest of that stop, or other steps haven't worked, you can pull the pipe that's causing a cipher

- To locate pipe in pipe chamber, first use your ears (also remember higher pitch = shorter pipe, lower pitch = longer pipe), then you can hold your hand over pipes and feel for air coming out
- Carefully pull the pipe out of the wind chest it's resting on and set it down nearby where it won't get lost

### **Pedaling Tips**

- I strongly recommend using dedicated organ shoes such as OrganMaster shoes (organmastershoes.com). Dance shoes will also work.
- Pedaling is done with toes and heels, pivoting from the ankle to make the attack and release
- Slightly tilt the foot inward so that your big toe is the point of contact with the pedal
  - This helps ensure accuracy and clarity
- Some organ methods recommend to keep your knees together, with the idea that it gives a reference point for the distance between the feet, but I recommend against that practice, due to the physical tension it builds up.
- For the high and low ends of the pedalboard, pivot from the center of the bench to allow feet to reach - don't slide left and right across the bench
- Pedal interval exercises and scales are very useful to build comfort with how the pedalboard feels - you don't want to have to look at your feet
- Pedaling should be carefully worked out at the beginning
  - Common pedaling notation is ^ for toe and U for heel, above the note for right foot and below the note for left foot
- For hymn playing, as you start getting comfortable with the pedal first try adding it to the bass at cadence points. Playing the full bass in the pedal (and reading that from SATB hymnal notation) will require careful practice at the beginning

### **Organ Methods for Reference**

- *First Organ Book*, Wayne Leupold
- *Method of Organ Playing*, Harold Gleason
- *New Oxford Organ Method*, Anne Marsden Thomas and Frederick Stocken
- *Organ Technique: Modern and Early*, George H. Ritchie and George B. Stauffer