
Articulation and Pedaling

By Ina Grapenthin

Does Your Right Hand Know What Your Left Foot is Doing?

If you're a pianist who's been drafted to become a church organist, you'll probably never forget the first time you sat down to play. ("What? Three lines of music? I'm expected to play notes with my feet?")

As a clinician and teacher, I can assure you every pianist turned organist has struggled with the same problems. And as a church music director, I applaud you for accepting the challenge. There is a severe shortage of church organists in this country, and I hope the following tips and techniques for using your hands and feet will encourage you to develop your skills further, both for your own pleasure and the enrichment of your church's music program.

The Hands: Mastering Articulation

The most familiar area of an organ to a pianist is undoubtedly the keyboard, or manual. But articulation - the connection or separation of tones through a variety of touches - is very different on the organ than it is on the piano. Organ touch is legato; think of your touch as depressing the key, rather than striking it.

Stravinsky once called the organ a "monster that never breathes." If so, this isn't the fault of the organ, but an organist who is not articulating. To avoid a plodding, continuous sound, the organist must control the duration of the note in the attack and the release, as opposed to the pianist, who is concerned only with the attack.

Hand position is as important to the organist as it is to the pianist. Strive for relaxed wrists and rounded hands, with the fingers well forward on the keys. As a student in Germany, my own poor hand position was brought to my attention one day when my teacher suddenly exclaimed, "Ze zum, ze um!" Realizing I was baffled by

this unfamiliar "German phrase," he took my thumb, which had been hanging below the keyboard, and placed it where it belonged.

Voice-leading is another important technique in "making the monster breathe." I define voice-leading as the ability to simultaneously attack two or more keys with different durations using one hand. For example, the altos might be holding a whole note, while the sopranos are simultaneously singing four quarter notes, and the music calls for you to play them all with the same hand. To master correct voice-leading, you will need to develop finger independence, or the ability to operate each of your fingers separately and easily without involving the others.

You can judge your degree of finger independence by placing your hand on the manual in good position. Depress fingers two and four on a quiet keyboard. Now, keeping two and four depressed, play the thumb, release - third, release - and fifth, release. With a good hand position, two and four can be held down through the entire exercise. Finger substitution, or changing from one finger to another on the same key without interrupting the sound, is another important manual technique, and it must be done rhythmically. This is a technique few pianists perfect, because they can achieve the same effect with the damper pedal.

Repeated notes present another problem. To articulate repeated notes clearly in a quick or moderate tempo, Widor advises the organist that "there must intervene between repetitions periods of silence equal to the duration of the sound. In other words, every repeated note loses half of its value." Obviously, this applies only to notes of shorter duration. In the case of repeated whole notes, only one-eighth the value should be dropped.

How do you make the organ "sing"? It's possible to have mastered good articulation techniques and still play mechanically. C.P.E. Bach advised singing instrumental melodies to "understand their best performance." He advocated making the organ "sing" by not only "taking breaths" between and within phrases, but also adopting a singer's approach to individual notes and sub-phrase groupings.

Your church's acoustics will also affect your articulation. Does sound die quickly in your building? Is there adequate reverberation? Listen to your playing and practice the touch you need to achieve the best

musical effects.

The Feet: Conquering the Pedalboard

Because it's so foreign to the pianist, the pedalboard is probably the most dreaded feature on the organ. To become a good organist, what you do not want to do is permanently position your right foot on the expression pedal and abandon the left to work the pedalboard alone.

An organist plays the pedalboard with both feet, and a comfortable position on the bench that leaves them free to move is absolutely necessary. The most important thing to remember is to keep your knees together in all use of the pedals except where your feet must reach to the extremes of the pedalboard. This position keeps your body essentially one member from the knees up, and allows your feet to move about freely without the extra effort required to move each foot separately from the hips. Don't position your feet too far back on the keys, and make the attack with the ball of your foot to prevent sliding.

To practice pedalboard technique, it's best to begin with the center notes and work outward: Place your left foot over the note "C" (in the center of the pedalboard) and place your right foot over "G". Now play the rhythm indicated in Figure 2. Moving from the hips, go down the pedalboard one note. Continue moving down to "E" and "A" and "D" to "G".

To coordinate keyboard and pedalboard you might want to practice "Hymn to Joy" by Gordon Young, which uses this exact pedalboard rhythm and set of notes as an ostinato figure in the bass. It is found in the collection "Chorale Preludes on Seven Hymn Tunes": published by Harold Flammer.

You might also want to practice simple trios (three-part counterpoint) with each hand taking a separate part, and the feet playing the third. Examples of these can be found in any good organ instruction book. An excellent and very complete text for the serious organ student is Method of Organ Playing by Harold Gleason, published by Prentice-Hall.

Organ techniques, like piano techniques, improve with practice. I

recommend using pieces from the following repertoire and building your skills gradually from the easier pieces to the more difficult. As you abilities grow, you'll soon discover the organ is a creative, exciting challenge--not a "monster" after all!