

ISMTA 2020 Conference Virtual Presentation  
“Translating Piano Skill Sets to the Organ Console”  
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It is increasingly common for churches and other sacred spaces to help meet their musical needs by hiring pianists in organist positions. The organ, however, is its own universe, and pianists who do not adapt their technique to the organ risk harming the very expensive instruments they have been engaged to play. Properly approached, a basic understanding of organ technique can enhance pianistic thinking of articulation, sound-color, fingering, pedaling, counterpoint, and collaborative playing. What follows are basic considerations and a list of resources.

**I. Console Basics**

- A. **Seating Basics.** Begin with good posture: a straight but not stiff back, freedom in the neck, alert relaxation in the limbs, and the trunk of the body seated at center of the bench. You want neither to be slumped forward nor leaning back like a water-skier. It will be tempting to pull the bench back in order to see one’s feet, but the method books all advise bringing the bench forward to the point at which the legs hang naturally, perpendicular to the pedal-board, ready to move with a motion of the heel alone. As with the piano, you want to avoid tension and the locking of joints. Economy of motion and efficiency are virtues here as with standard piano technique: we cannot fight gravity, so we make it our friend.
- B. **Manual Basics.** Consider the organ a wind instrument, not a percussive one like the piano. Tones sustain until they are released. Differences in weight or force applied to the organ keys do not result in differences of loudness or softness as with the piano. A healthy mezzo dynamic helps here, as with the harpsichord. On the other hand, articulation – the degree of connectedness or separateness between tones – assumes paramount importance. Accents in organ music are created by placing slivers of silence (“daylight”) between sonorities. Page turns also become trickier! The organ has no damper pedal, so it is common to play more intricate levels of finger substitution than at the piano. Organist-composer Marcel Dupré famously published a complete edition of the organ works of Johann Sebastian Bach in which he provided every fingering, pedaling, and articulation. Many organists recommend modern Urtext editions of the works of Bach, but pianists adapting their skills sets to organ may still find Dupré’s work useful.
- C. **Pedal Basics.** Treat the feet as a single unit, knees and heels together. Become familiar with the action of your toes before exploring the heels. Memorize with your body the physical distance of the perfect fifth (between toes) and the octave (between heels). If you are new to pedaling, and RH-dominant besides, you may find that your LH and your feet want to play in unison. Independence between RH, LH, and feet takes time! Be patient with yourself and the instrument. Begin applying pedals at cadences or wherever scale degrees  $^1-^4-^5$  appear in the bass. You are reentering “beginner’s mind,” something that might lead you to greater patience as you teach your students. Beethoven called the organ the “most unforgiving of instruments” with very good reason. Also, don’t practice in street shoes; socks may suffice until you invest in specialized organ shoes (mine are \$60 from OrganMaster in Guilford, CT.)
- D. **Registration Basics.** How often as applied music instructors do we ask students to play with “more color” or “new color”? On the organ, this is achieved literally through the use of different stops. You practically have an orchestra available to you. Stops can be divided into flue stops (principal, flute, and string); reed stops (solo, orchestral, or chorus); mutation stops (selected off-unison natural partials); and mixtures (compound stops of 3-6 or more ranks of Principal pipes for each note of the keyboard. Different stops sound at different octaves: 8’ stops sound at the octave, 4’ sound the octave above, 2’ two octaves above, etc.; going the other direction, 16’ stops sound one octave below, 32’ two octaves below, etc. Organs have couplers that bring all the sounds of one manual to another along with the pedals, whether at the sounding octave or a higher or lower octave as indicated by 4’ or 16’, respectively. Also note there are memory buttons that allow you to store entire combinations of stops with the push of a button, whether for a single manual or for the organ entire. *Please note that time spent registering the organ is not the same thing as time spent practicing the organ.* All of this may be a lot to take in, especially at first – and that’s okay! Get to know the sound of each stop, then play with the various combinations. Remember that Principal stops are called that for good reason. You may find it helpful to think of stops on the organ like ingredients or spices in your kitchen. A little bit often goes a long way, or as the old saying goes, “less is more.” A carefully chosen single stop per manual or pedal board can be hugely effective.

## II. Service Music at the Console

- A. **The Religious Service is Not a Recital.** There is a performative dimension to playing in a sacred space; therefore, preparing thoroughly is imperative. That said, the context of a worship service in a church or synagogue is not the same as the concert hall. In a sacred space, the focus is not on the performer or even on the music in an “art for art’s sake” way; rather, the musician *enhances* that which comes from the pulpit or the special occasion such as wedding or funeral. To this larger end is any virtuosity directed. The focus is *from*, not *on*, the performer; it is *on* the divine and the community.
- B. **Sacred Programming: General Considerations.** Select service music (preludes, postludes, offertories, etc.) that correspond to the hymns and special music already in the service – if not the same tunes, select other hymns that connect to the subject matter in the service. If you have a background in a faith tradition and prior knowledge of many hymns, this is an advantage that will serve you well; if you lack such a background, you have a very different advantage instead: that of newly acquainting with another “classic music” repertory with its own canon and repertory.
- C. **Sacred Programming: Hymn Considerations.** Typically, there is a liturgical calendar that accounts for which sacred texts appear at particular times in the Church Year – Christmas carols don’t get sung in July, for example. Sometimes clergy design a sermon series and program specific hymns to support its themes. Sometimes global or national issues take front and center of everyone’s attention and appropriate music selections must reflect this. These considerations also underlie the programming of preludes, postludes, offertories, special music, and so on. You may be assigned hymns by the Music Director or clergy depending on the size of church staff and the dynamics of its hierarchy or you might get to determine the hymn choices. It is most likely that you will have a degree of autonomy in choosing preludes and postludes at the very least. The congregational experience in any given service is greatly enhanced when its various aspects – theological, topical, musical, stylistic, and practical – are well coordinated within and across services.
- D. **A Primary Consideration.** Less is more. It is better to play simply and accurately rather than struggle through more difficult music. This is true equally of hymn support and other service music.

## III. Hymn Playing at the Console

### A. Preliminary Considerations

1. **“Know your audience.”** This is a truism in business as well as the classroom, and applies no less to a congregation and its clergy. Most congregations have a repertory of hymns they know and love. Get to know this and always respect it.
2. **Lead, Not “Accompany,” from the Console.** The difference is not just one of semantics. “Leading,” which is more *proactive*, corresponds to the superior model from the keyboard. “Accompanying,” which is more *reactive*, will slow hymns down in undesirable fashion.
3. **Know Your Acoustics of Your Instrument.** How long does sound reverberate in your sacred space? How does a full or half-full congregation affect the acoustic? This will impact your tempi.

### B. Tempo Considerations

1. **Sing through Each Hymn.** This establishes proper pacing. Remember that hymns are intended for general (amateur) usage, so if you find yourself out of breath before the end of a phrase, your tempo is likely too slow. If the sacred space acoustic is “wet” or on the reverberant side, tempo may go slower; if the space is “dry” and not reverberant, consider going faster.
2. **Clearly Establish Tempo in the Introduction.** When the congregation joins, continue to lead from the console, not accompany.
3. **A Rhythmic “Special Effect.”** Some hymns benefit from a grandly stated final verse marked by a broadening of tempo – not the same thing as slowing down to accommodate the congregation in “accompaniment” mode!) A well-paced ritardando towards the end may enhance the effect. Use any such device or “special effect” sparingly and unpredictably; otherwise, the novelty wears off and it risks becoming cliché.

### C. Key Considerations

1. **Again, Sing through Each Hymn.** Where are the melody’s highs and lows? How frequently do those peaks and valleys sustain? Chances are if you feel you’re singing too high or too low in your range, you’re not alone. A transposition may be in order.

2. **Know Music Rudiments.** Being well-grounded in scales, modes, arpeggios, triads, seventh chords, cadences, and basic applied harmony will greatly equip you for providing hymn support.
3. **Know How to Transpose.** Transposition is a valuable skill, even though hymnals provide keys. The printed key may be too high or too low, or you may wish to take a final verse up by a half or whole step. As already stated, use devices like this sparingly and unpredictably for greatest effect.

#### D. Registration Considerations

1. **Portray the Text in Timbre and Volume.** Choose stops that support each hymn's affect. Is the atmosphere one of praise, adoration, exaltation? Devotion, prayer, supplication, surrender? Personal or social holiness? Assurance, righteous conviction, strength in tribulation, hope in the life beyond this one? Determine which available sound-colors best convey the message of each text and be aware that different hymn verses often express different sentiments and ideas, even within the verse.
2. **Where Necessary, Default to Principal Stops.** Principal stops are called "principal" for a reason! When in doubt, select the 8', 4', and 2' ...or at least the 8' and 4'. Although 8' stops match sounding pitch, singers are actually better served by the 4' stops which are easier to hear.
3. **Develop Fluency with Various Musical Textures, Voicings, and Sound-Color Combinations.**
  - a. **Keyboard Style.** Have pedals play bass line and both hands play the three upper voices. Organ beginners may initially double bass line in the left hand, but pursue bass/tenor independence.
  - b. **Voiced Melody.** Right hand plays melody on a solo or reed stop (or combination) as left hand plays the inner voices in a contrasting color; the pedal color is close to that of the inner voices.
  - c. **Re-voiced Melody.** Without altering the harmony, assign the hymn tune to the left hand in tenor register or even to the bass register in the pedals. The upper voices play harmony, perhaps with figuration – just as long as doing so emboldens and not distracts the congregation.
  - d. **Special Devices and Effects.** Some organs may have a Zimbelstern, Fortissimo setting, Chimes stop, or special collection of reeds in the Swell or Choir boxes. As always for such contexts, use tasteful judgement when it comes to the application of any such effect.

#### E. Going Beyond the Page

1. **Hymn Introductions.** A good hymn introduction clearly establishes meter, tempo, melody, and character. If the hymn has a refrain, a complete statement of the refrain might be enough. You may be given time to play a complete stanza, or not. In the intro, you may exercise creative options that work better for solo keyboard than with congregational singing. When the congregation does join, continue to lead from the console, not accompany.
2. **Between Stanzas.** It may prove practical to add an extra beat – or approximate duration – before beginning the next verse. If a modulation is employed (judiciously and occasionally!), a carefully designed transition will prepare the congregation for the new tonal center.
3. **Unwritten Performance Conventions.** These chiefly involve rhythm. Sometimes in the singing of a hymn there is an established practice of pauses that have not all managed to find their way into engraved music notation. Consulting with your church's Music Director, Worship Arts Director, and clergy typically exposes which such moments may be lurking in store.
4. **Improvisation.** There is a rich tradition of classical improvisation that survives in the organ world. If one is not used to extemporizing, write out possible ideas ahead of time and test them out in practice, revising and refining as your ear guides you. Arranging has proven a gateway for many creative musicians! Become comfortable with various species of textural variation for which the printed harmonies remain unchanged.
5. **Reharmonization.** A solid grounding in music theory proves invaluable here; indeed, harmonizing a melody is one of the most practical skills anyone learns from the study of music theory. Even then, recognize that many singers in a congregation enjoy singing parts and might find reharmonization unwelcome – or at least without prior warning! The music director may announce ahead of time that "verse no. such-and-such" is to be sung in unison; this usually helps.
6. **Amens/Hymn "Outroductions."** Confirm for which hymns an amen is to be sung or any instrumental music to be played. Instances of the former include the classic "Old 100<sup>th</sup>" Doxology; instances of the latter may include a segue to an underscore for pastoral prayer. Advance decision-making in collaboration with your church's Music Director, Worship Arts Director, and/or clergy helps ensure smoothness of flow within the service.

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**Music Featured (in Order of Video Presentation):**

Cherwien, David. *Pentecost Suite, III. “Veni, Creator Spiritus” (“Come, Holy Ghost, Our Souls Inspire.”)* The Sacred Music Press, 2007.

Leavitt, John. *A Little Easter Suite, IV. “This Joyful Eastertide/ Simple Gifts.”* Concordia Publishing House, 1997.

Guilmant, Alexandre. *Paraphrase on a Chorus in “Judas Maccabaeus” (Handel), Op. 90, No. 16. The Oxford Book of Lent and Easter Organ Music*, Ed. Robert Gower, Oxford University Press, 2013.

Spiritual, arr. André J. Thomas. *Fantasy on “Walk Together, Children.” King of Kings: Organ Music by Black Composers Past and Present, Vol. 3*, Ed. James Abbingon, GIA Publications, Inc., 2017.

**Resources:**

American Guild of Organists (AGO) Committee on Continuing Professional Education. *Lessons for the New Organist: a Series of 30 Videos to Teach Basic Skills and Techniques to Beginning Organists.* 2016.  
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLSJ9JGlhsPJuklW5F3yEQSXhpjzPgAJcL>

Davis, Roger. *The Organist’s Manual.* W. W. Norton & Co., 1985.

Dickinson, Clarence. *The Technique and Art of Organ Playing.* H. W. Gray Co., 1922.

Dupré, Marcel. *Méthode d’Orgue [Method for the Organ].* Alphonse Leduc, 1927.

Freese, Faythe. *Sunday Morning Organist: a Survivor’s Guide for the Pianist.* Concordia Publishing House, 2002.

Gleason, Harold. *Method of Organ Playing, 8e.* Catharine Crozier Gleason, ed., Prentice Hall, 1996.

Grinnell, Kenneth. *“It Don’t Mean a Thing If You Can’t Make ‘Em Sing”: Leading Hymn Singing from the Organ: a Practical Checklist.”* The American Organist 40/4, April 2006, pp. 52, 54. Uploaded 2019  
<https://www.agohq.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/It-dont-mean-a-thing.pdf>

Jones, Joyce. *Pedal Mastery for Organ.* Bradley Publications Inc., 1979.

Organmastershoes.com

Soderlund, Sandra. *Touch and Technique for the Organ.* Subito Music, 2011.

Stainer, John. *The Organ: a Method.* London, 1877. James H. Rogers, ed., Oliver Ditson Co., 1910.