

So you have been asked to play the organ: A guide for pianists

by Mary Newton

It is likely that, sometime during a pianist's career, he or she will be asked to play the organ for a wedding, funeral, or a Sunday service. This can be daunting for pianists who have little or no organ experience. Looking at the organ, pianists might scratch their heads and wonder how to use the multiple keyboards (including the pedals) and how to figure out the different sounds on the organ. Furthermore, they might wonder what kind of music they can use for the organ. Can they use piano music they already have? Or, do they need to buy new music? These can be intimidating questions, especially if the performance is quickly approaching. The good news is that pianists who have correct and practical information can truly be successful as first-time organists. This discussion explores basic information about the organ and offers practical tips for a positive experience. Specifically, the following areas will be covered:

- the anatomy of the organ,
- the main differences between piano and organ,
- tonal families,
- pitch levels and registration, and
- music resources.

The anatomy of the organ

The layout and design of an organ is quite complex. There are many buttons and knobs on the organ, and looking at them for the first time can be confusing. The diagram (see Example 1) illustrates the nine basic parts of the standard pipe organ.

1. **MANUALS:** Keyboards played by the hands, including Swell, Great, Positive, or Choir.
2. **PEDALBOARD:** A keyboard played by the feet.
3. **STOP:** A knob or tab which lets an organ tone sound on a manual or the pedals.
4. **CANCEL:** A button which cancels or clears any organ tone from the manuals or pedals.
5. **COUPLERS:** A knob or tab which lets organ tone from one manual be played on another manual or the pedals.

6. **PISTONS:** Buttons which can be set ahead of time with various organ tones.
7. **TUTTI or SFZ:** A button which gives an instant, full organ tone.
8. **EXPRESSION PEDAL:** A pedal which makes organ tones louder or softer.
9. **CRESCENDO PEDAL:** A pedal which gradually adds different organ tones.

Main differences between the piano and the organ

There are many differences between the piano and the organ, but for the purpose of this article we will address four general differences.

- **Multiple keyboards for the hands**—the organ has multiple keyboards. Having more than one keyboard allows the organist to choose a combination of sounds and leave them set up on the different keyboards. This gives the organist freedom to make quick changes such as switching from soft strings to full organ.
- **Keyboard for the feet**—The pedalboard is a keyboard for the feet. The layout and the notes are the same as the keyboard for the hands. In organ music there is a separate staff of music for the feet, so the organist will be reading three lines

Example 1: The organ console.¹

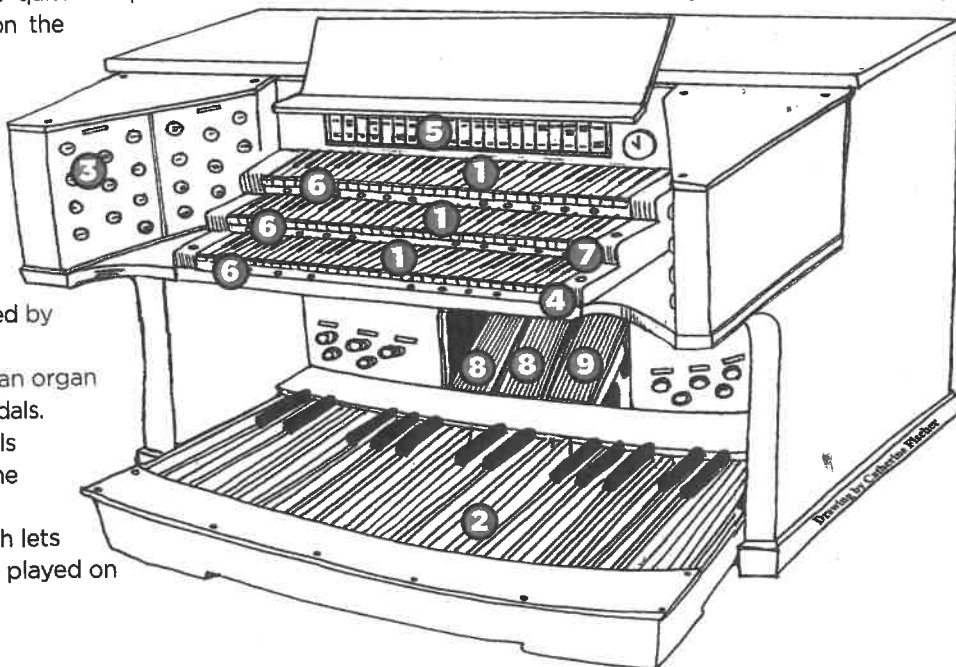


Illustration by jonskidmore.com

of music. Organists also use special shoes. These shoes have a stacked heel (approximately 1-¼ inch) that helps the organist quickly maneuver over the pedals and facilitates legato playing. I suggest Organ Master Shoes (www.organmastershoes.com) as a good place to shop for organ shoes. The price of the shoes usually starts around \$50. It is not advisable to use bare, stocking feet. This is hard on the feet and hinders legato playing.

- **Articulation**—The way that articulation is achieved on the organ is different from that of the piano. While the sound on the piano begins to decay as soon as the key is struck, the organ will sound as long as the key is held down. Because of this, if one tries to play the organ like a piano, the effect will be choppy and unmusical. A different approach is needed to achieve proper phrasing, and this is largely done through finger substitution.

- **Registration**—Organists must understand the different sounds on the organ in order to convey the aesthetic of the piece. Artfully choosing the correct stops at the desired pitch is referred to as registration. This is an important concept and will be elaborated upon later in this article.

Tonal families

While the piano has one main sound, the organ has four main families of sound. These families include the principals, flutes, strings, and reeds. Three of the tonal families (flutes, strings, and reeds) are intended to represent sounds found in the orchestral family, while the principals are sounds that are unique to the organ.

- The Principals are the foundational sound of the organ. Some examples of these stops are Diapasons, Principals, and Octaves. Principal stops (or principal chorus) are used to create a large and full ensemble sound. Some common uses include hymn playing and louder festive pieces.

- The Flute family is a common sound on the organ and there are many different kinds of flute sounds. Examples of these stops include the Bourdon, Gedeckt, and Rohrflöte. These stops are frequently used together for accompaniment.

- The String family creates a variety of string sounds. Some examples of these stops include the Viole, Salicional, Gamba, and Voix Céleste. String stops are best used for accompaniment. They may be combined with flutes to create a full and rich sound to the ensemble.

- The Reed family represents sounds that are found in the brass and woodwind sections of an orchestra. Some examples include the Trompette, Clarion, Hautbois, and Oboe. Reed stops are best used with principals (for louder pieces) or they can be used as solo stops. An oboe can serve as a lovely solo stop or to add richness to an ensemble registration.

- The Mutations and Mixtures are two categories that do not imitate orchestral families. Mutations (indicated by fractions like 1-¾' or 2-¾') are intended to be combined with other stops (such as an 8' flute) to create a single solo stop. On the other hand, mixtures are bright sounds that are best used with principal stops to create more brilliant sounds to the *principal chorus*. Mixtures may be named Scharf, Zimbel, or Cymbale.

Pitch levels

Organ stops use numbers to indicate the basic pitch of each stop. These are given in feet, and refer to the speaking length of the pipe. Therefore when looking at the organ stops, the organist sees stops named Principal 8', Octave 4', or Flute 2'. The numbers indicate pitch levels either at concert pitch or above or below concert pitch. Organist and author Joyce Jones explains this concept in the following manner:

Playing middle C on an 8' stop will result in the same pitch as playing middle C on the piano. Other pitches are in relation to the 8' stop: a 16' stop will result in a sound one octave lower, a 4' stop will indicate a pitch one octave higher, a 2' stop will be two octaves higher, and a 1' stop will be three octaves higher.²

This is a key concept to understand because if one draws a 4' or 2' stop and expects it to sound as it would on a piano, the organist will hear something different from what is intended.

Registration

The most important aspect to registering any piece on the organ is listening to the different combination of sounds and discovering which combinations work best on the organ. In organ music, it is common for the hands to play two manuals simultaneously (i.e., *RH*: keyboard I and *LH*: keyboard II). Consequently, organ pieces will give general suggestions such as *RH*: Reed 8' and *LH*: Strings or simply I: Reed 8' and II: Strings. These types of directions give the organist an idea of the intended sound.

Once an organist has decided on a specific registration, the registration can be set up in two ways: manually or with pistons. The first method is where the organist draws the desired stops and leaves them set up on the different

manuals and pedal. This is a practical approach if the piece does not call for any registration changes. The second method allows for quick registration changes through the use of pistons, which are little buttons underneath the manuals. For this process, the organist simply sets up the desired registration and saves it on the piston. When the registration needs to change (i.e. flutes to full organ), the organist hits the piston and the registration changes immediately to what has been saved on the piston. This is incredibly useful when dealing with more complicated organ pieces, choral anthems, and hymn playing.

Organists frequently experiment with different combinations of registration. They sometimes record different registrations so they can assess their effectiveness in the room. When approaching registration, the beginning organist should keep two questions in mind: 1) Does the registration achieve a good balance in the room's acoustics, and 2) Is the aesthetic of the music being expressed?

Music resources

Organ music can be expensive, but the good news is that pianists can begin by using pieces they already have in their library. One of the best places to start is with Baroque repertoire. J. S. Bach's Two-Part Inventions, Sinfonias, or various miscellaneous works lend themselves well to the organ. These pieces could be used as preludes or festive postludes and sound like authentic organ works. Other Baroque possibilities include most any keyboard works by G.F. Handel, François Couperin, Jean-François Dandrieu, or English voluntaries by John Stanley, John Bull, or William Boyce.

For pianists who are interested in purchasing some organ music, there are contemporary composers who have edited Baroque music for manuals only. One example is S. Drummond Wolff's collection titled *Baroque Music for Manuals* (Concordia Publishing House). The books in this six-volume series feature works taken from sonatas, trios, and concertos by leading Baroque composers. Optional pedaling is provided and can be used at the player's discretion. Another resource worth researching is a collection of works by J.S. Bach that is published by the Organ Historical Society. Entitled *Oxford Bach Books for Organ: Manuals Only*, this five-volume collection features pieces in a variety of styles and levels of difficulty. It includes pieces from a variety of genres, including chorale preludes, preludes and fugues, toccatas, and trio sonata movements.

In addition to using repertoire they already have, pianists can find useful pieces in organ method books. These books are a wonderful resource for finding a variety of pieces ranging in levels of difficulty and historical styles. They usually have diverse pieces with and without pedal. There are three method books that are recommended for this purpose and they are listed in order of difficulty.

- *First Organ Book* by Wayne Leupold (Wayne Leupold Editions). This is a concise and very accessible book that presents an introduction to the organ, a beginning organ method, and a collection of easy organ music. This book is designed to serve as a primary teaching resource, and the compositions allow the performer to sound skilled at the organ.

- *King of Instruments: A Short Method* by Joyce Jones (MorningStar Music). This is a short, seventy-one page easy organ method book specifically for pianists. It contains a practical guide on the fundamentals of the organ and explains the different families of organ sounds. It also includes relatively easy study pieces that can be used in church or other occasions that require hymn playing.

- *The Organists' Manual: Technical Studies & Selected Compositions for the Organ* by Roger E. Davis (W. W. Norton & Company). While this book is more academic in nature, it has a wealth of information to offer new organists. It features a variety of pieces from the organ canon, and represents pieces from each historical period. It also features a more in-depth look at the history of the organ.

Editor's note: for additional repertoire suggestions, please see the following article "Organ music for manuals only (mostly)" by Steven Elger.

Conclusion

Becoming familiar on a new keyboard instrument can be overwhelming, but with the appropriate knowledge and resources pianists can quickly become successful organists. W.A. Mozart called the organ the "King of Instruments," and this truly describes this multi-faceted instrument. In one instant it can roar like a lion and in the next breath it can whisper on an ethereal flute. Everyone can enjoy the breathtaking world of the organ. ▲



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¹Leupold, W. (1998). *Discover the Organ, Basic Organ Repertoire, Level 1*. Colfax, N. C.: Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc., p. 5. Used with Permission.

²Jones, J. (2000). *King of Instruments: Organ Teaching Method*. St. Louis: MorningStar Publishers, p. 6.