

# YOUTH AND THE ORGAN

## CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH UPPER ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL-AGED ORGANISTS

Mary Newton, CAGO

### Introduction

A young person's first encounter with organ lessons can be exciting and life-changing. As organ teachers, we have the chance to expose young minds to the riches of the organ, and we have "one chance to make a first impression." In order to make a positive first impression for upper elementary and middle school students, we need to be aware of special challenges that occur while teaching this age group. These challenges include the student having minimal piano background, having the ability to drive to lessons/practices, and being able to sit comfortably at the organ and reaching the pedal board. The purpose of this article is to articulate common challenges that accompany working with this age group and to propose strategies to address these issues. When teachers are more equipped to address these challenges, they will be able to provide a more positive learning experience.

### Practical Challenges

The first group of challenges focuses on practical topics. These include: (1) transportation to the venue for practice/lessons, (2) height challenges—i.e., reaching the pedalboard, and (3) organ shoes—to buy or not to buy.

#### 1. Transportation to the venue for practice/lessons

While it is common for people to have a piano in their home, it is uncommon for a family to own an organ. In many instances, young students will be taking lessons at their local church and have to go to the church to practice. Since these students are unable to drive themselves, they rely on their parents for transportation. At the minimum, parents must arrange transportation at least once a week for a practice, and maybe more. Another possible complication is the availability of the organ at the practice site. Church offices are typically open during the hours when most students are in school. If a church closes at 4:00 P.M., the student has an added challenge gaining access to the organ.

### Strategy

In our society's busy times, it may be difficult for parents to coordinate organ practice times due to their own work schedules. First, talk with the parents and students about how to practice at home when possible and how to maximize practice time at church. Many beginning organ students (and parents) might be surprised to learn that they can practice on their piano at home. Second, try to work out a practice schedule with the parents and the church office. If lessons are taking place in another location (such as a neighboring church), work diligently with that venue to create options. Other solutions might include carpooling or you picking the student up for lessons. With creative problem-solving and a commitment from the teacher and parents, solutions may be found.<sup>1</sup>

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#### 2. Height challenges—reaching the pedalboard

Because of the size of young students, some may not be able to reach the pedalboard. An adjustable organ bench might solve the problem. If there is not an adjustable bench, or it does not descend down far enough, this poses a problem if you want to commence with pedal work.

### Strategy

If a student is too short to reach the pedals, you might consider pedal extenders, which will raise the height of a pedal from 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" to 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>", in one-inch increments. These extenders cost approximately \$40 and are a wonderful option for shorter students.<sup>2</sup>

#### 3. Organ shoes—to buy or not to buy

Soccer players need cleats, ice hockey players need skates, and organists need organ shoes. Like athletes, organists have special footwear to help aid them in their practice. These special shoes usually cost \$50–\$60 and can last a long time. Parents might question purchasing organ shoes at this stage of lessons. They reason that their child is just "trying out" the organ, and young students grow out of shoes quickly.

### Strategy

Make a convincing case either for or against buying organ shoes. Arguing that organ shoes are needed, you contend that the pedagogical study and use of the pedals should begin as soon as possible. The sooner a student can incorporate basic pedal technique, the sooner a student can advance to pieces that use both manuals and pedals. Arguing against organ shoes, you theorize that most young students won't be working on complicated pedal pieces, so organ shoes would not be needed. Also, organ shoes would not be needed if a student cannot reach the pedalboard and pedal extenders are not used. Whichever side of the argument you find yourself on regarding the purchase of organ shoes, consider the options carefully so that when the issue comes up, you can wisely counsel the parents and students.

### Pedagogical Challenges

The second category of issues focuses on pedagogical challenges, including: (1) students having a substantial piano background versus limited or no piano background, (2) shaping a short lesson, (3) finding appropriate materials, and (4) how to measure success with this age group.

#### 1. Substantial piano background versus limited or no piano background

There are two general schools of thought on this topic. One is that a student has a lengthy piano background before beginning organ studies. Perhaps that was your experience in your early years of keyboard training: you first

### Strategy

Most children in this age range respond well to a variety of fast-paced activities. In a 20- to 30-minute lesson, you can spend the first ten to 15 minutes at the organ and then do other activities away from the organ. Some ideas include reviewing organ flash cards, general music flashcards, looking at different organ pictures in books and on the internet, and viewing YouTube recordings. You could also do music theory/ear-training activities. There are a variety of general music websites and music-theory CD-ROMs that are available to teachers.<sup>4</sup> Or, you could play a programmatic piece and have the student listen to it and imagine a story that goes with the music (think of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite*). Young students love to imagine stories, and this is a fun way to show students how the organ can be a master storyteller. There are a number of things that you can do to keep the lessons fun. It is up to you to choose the activities that will keep your students engaged and motivated.

### 3. Finding appropriate materials

If you asked piano teachers to list their top three lesson series or favorite solo pieces for young students, they

would probably list more than three. Organ teachers might have a more difficult time answering the same question.

### Strategy

There are a number of resources and ideas for beginning organ students. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

#### Lesson/Method books

- *Discover the Organ: A Beginning Keyboard and Pedal Method for the Organ* (Wayne Leupold). These books come in four levels:

Level 1—Includes seven books (includes pedal primers, repertoire with pedal, music for Christmas, Easter/Pentecost, and music for organ and one instrument)

Level 2—Includes eight books (similar categories as level 1 but with two additional books featuring repertoire with more pedal)

Level 3—Includes ten books (similar categories as previous levels but with two additional books on modern keyboard technique)

Level 4—Includes six books (same categories as the previous levels)

- *Discover the Basics: A Beginning Series for Any Keyboard Instrument*

(Wayne Leupold). There are five books in this series, which is designed for a beginning keyboard student, and also includes a Christmas book.


#### Technique

- Major/Minor Five-finger Patterns by Faber/Weisman (FJH)
- Major/Minor Five-finger patterns also with arpeggios/cadences by Kowalchuk/Lancaster (Alfred)
- Czerny in All Keys, Book 1 (Schaum)
- Fingerpower Series: Primer—for piano or organ (Schaum)

#### Repertoire

- Wayne Leupold resources
- Easy hymn settings such as *Easy Hymn Settings (Advent-Christmas, Christmas)* by Michael Burkhardt (MorningStar)
- Previously studied piano solos

Don't be afraid to use previously learned piano solos with students. Many piano pieces written for young students have one specific mood and can be easily transferred to the organ. Students will enjoy playing their piano pieces on the organ, and hearing how the piece takes on a different life as an organ work.



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#### 4. Measuring success

Measuring quantitative success in the subjective field of music is challenging. Simply remember that you need to understand how you will measure the success of your students, and then create an action plan for achieving those goals.

#### Strategy

There are many ways you can evaluate young students. It is best to keep the evaluations simple and to set *attainable goals*. Some goals might include: (1) getting to a specific page in a lesson book, (2) recording the student, (3) playing a piece with pedal, (4) playing a duet with the teacher or an older student, (5) learning a specific number of pieces in a semester/term, (6) playing for a small group of people, and (7) playing a piece in church. Or, ask your students to identify a goal they would be proud to achieve, and make that the goal. There are many possibilities, but the key construct to remember is that you want to set achievable goals. If the goals are unrealistic, you set up needless roadblocks for yourself and the student.

#### Summary

There are many challenges connected with working with young organ students. With some forethought and preparation, these challenges can be overcome. Remember to be willing to try new things, new teaching styles, different method books, and, yes, even the use of technology. The healthy continuation of our art depends on us being willing to help these young students experience the organ in all its glory.

#### NOTES

1. This description describes an urban environment. Rural environments have unique challenges in addition to those described here, but those topics are outside the scope of this discussion.
2. For a picture of pedal extenders or for purchase information, visit [Wayneleupold.com](http://Wayneleupold.com).
3. Wayne Leupold, *Teach the Organ! A Handbook for Organ Teachers* (Wayne Leupold, 2007), p. 1.
4. There are a number of excellent music theory CD-ROMs available, but my students have enjoyed *Music Ace* (two volumes) from Harmonic Vision ([Harmonicvision.com](http://Harmonicvision.com)) and *Music Games* by Alfred Publishing ([Alfred.com](http://Alfred.com)).

**Mary Newton**, CAGO, is organist at St. Barnabas Lutheran Church in Plymouth, Minn., and teaches organ and piano at the St. Barnabas Center for the Arts. She earned a DMA degree from the University of Minnesota, with a secondary emphasis in music education. Mary is active in the AGO, serving as the coordinator for the Twin Cities Student Competition and as a member of the national committee for competitions.

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