

## Color my world



Paint color swatches

Twenty years ago I was serving a New England Congregational church as music director, bringing the glories of the English cathedrals to the land of the Puritans. It was a dirty job, but someone had to do it. The moderator of the parish council was a curmudgeonly attorney who lived in an attractive house sited prominently on a corner lot along my route to the church. The Sunday after contractors finished painting his house, I teased that he had his house painted pink. He responded in his usual gruff way, "It's Chippendale Rose." Ha! My point. It was pink.

When placing organs in church buildings, we often leaf through the "swatch fans" provided by paint companies, and I always wonder who invents the names of paint colors. The website of the paint company Pratt & Lambert shows a cozy-looking room featuring the colors Pearl Tint, Toasted Wheat, Dusk Sky, and Gloaming. The P&L color experts deem this to be a winning combination. The first three names give clues as what the colors might be, but "gloaming?" What's gloaming? Its root, glōm, is an Old English word of Germanic origin that means "twilight," and is related to "glow." So gloaming refers to the glow of twilight. I would describe the color in the photo as a sort of dark ecru—"twilight" and "glow" mean something else to me than dark ecru.

The printer on my desk spoke to me the other day. A cute little chime rang and the screen informed me that I needed to replace the cyan cartridge. Cyan? It's a sort of light blue. My printer has three color cartridges: cyan, magenta, and yellow. I think of primary colors as red, yellow, and blue, so I googled to learn that there are now at least three basic systems of blending colors, each based on three "primary" colors.

The standard for photography, television, and video screens is an "additive" system that uses red, green, and blue. The standard for printing is a "subtractive" system that uses cyan, magenta, and yellow. (Combine those three colors and

you get black.) The website I visited says artists still prefer the additive system that uses red, yellow, and blue.<sup>1</sup> That's a relief! Seems to me that the world of art would be a different place if Rubens, Rembrandt, Monet, and Picasso had cyan, magenta, and yellow on their palettes as primary colors.

## Colors in music

I'm a devoted fan of Captain John Aubrey, the principal character in Patrick O'Brian's series of novels about the British Navy during the Napoleonic Wars. In the first scene of the first novel, Jack meets Stephen Maturin (a physician, drug addict, and elite member of Naval Intelligence) at a concert by a string quartet. They are as different as two men can be, but after their introductory dispute they become firm and fast friends, and they share a love for music. Jack plays the violin (his "on land" violin is a Guarneri), Stephen plays the cello, and through the twenty-year span of the war, they spend thousands of evenings playing together in the captain's cabin while enjoying their customary toasted cheese and Marsala.

In the second novel, Jack is promoted from the rank of Master and Commander (remember the Russell Crowe movie?) to Post Captain. That night, in his happiness, he dreamed about a painting owned by his old nanny, now wife of the First Lord of the Admiralty, the man who had promoted him:

Some exquisite dreams: the Magdalene in Queenie's picture saying, "Why do not you tune your fiddle to orange-tawny, yellow, green, and this blue, instead of those old common notes?" It was so obvious: he and Stephen set to their tuning, the cello brown and full crimson, and they dashed away in colour alone—such colour!<sup>2</sup>

When I first read that passage I immediately compared it to playing the organ. We accept the traditional system of notes, harmonies, and tuning as common with all other instruments, but the organ is unique because of its range of color. A pianist or flautist can conjure up contrasting tone colors by varying the physical forces involved in playing their instruments, but if you sit at an organ console and compare a Cromorne to a Diapason, a Trombone to a Rohrflute, or an Open Wood to a Tierce, you realize that the organ is a collection of instruments that contrast and complement each other, and like the painter's palette of colors, the organ's drawknobs allow the musician to blend a finite number of basic timbres into a seemingly infinite number of color combinations.

## Express yourself in color

I've heard that some symphony conductors consider the organ to be the least

expressive musical instrument because the basic unit of musical tone—one organ pipe playing one note—cannot be altered in volume or timbre. That fact is true enough, but it's like saying yellow is a boring color because all it can do is be yellow. Pratt & Lambert shows me Old Linen, Battered, Golden Glimmer, Bay Rum, and Colorado Sand as complementary shades of yellow, and I haven't touched the blues, reds, or greens. It's ridiculous and ignorant to say that a pipe organ is not expressive.



Stop knobs

Let's consider an eight-foot flute stop, a simple enough subset of organ tone. But is it a Flauto Dolce, Gedeckt, Melodia, Harmonic Flute, Rohrflute, Spitzflute, Koppelflute, Hohlflute, or Flûte Triangulaire? Nine different flute stops, each with a unique tone color, and each comprising pipes of different shape and construction. Could you discern between them in a hearing test? Could you name each one if shown photographs of the various pipes? Or do you just draw an eight-foot flute because you always use an eight-foot flute in this piece as if you were painting a wall yellow instead of Golden Glimmer?

Pratt & Lambert says:

The color of the sun, yellow is associated with laughter, happiness and good times. It can cause the brain to release more serotonin, which makes people feel optimistic. It even has the power to speedup [sic] metabolism and drive creativity. However, yellow can be overpowering if it's not used sparingly in just the right places. Use it to add zest to a cool palette of blues or grays. It can also work well with orange, red, olive green or brown.<sup>3</sup>

It would be easy to paraphrase this when discussing organ stops:

A Cornet can be overpowering if it's not used sparingly in just the right places. Use it to add zest to an Oboe, Cromorne, or Trompette. It can also work well with Principals at eight and four-foot.

Is your imagination strong enough to find ways to use that Cornet that will make people feel optimistic?

## Clashing or harmony?

You and your partner are getting dressed for a party. She comes out of

the bathroom, takes one look, and says, "You're not wearing that, are you?" We all think we know when colors clash, but while there are some basic rules, you have to judge each comparison separately. Otherwise, it would be impossible for two shades of red to clash. I have a pairing of red shirt and red tie that I think looks great, but there are also a couple doozies of possible combinations of red hanging in my closet that Wendy would question, rightly.

When we register a piece of music on a particular organ, we have to judge each combination separately. It's not safe to assume that because it sounded good on one organ, that it will also sound good on another.

In his wonderfully researched book, *The Language of the Classical French Organ* (Yale University Press, 1969), Fenner Douglass presents detailed information about the various "standard" registrations in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French organ music. He opens Chapter 5 (Registration in the Classical Period) by citing the prefaces to various famous "books" of organ music, the *Livres d'orgue* of Corrette, Nivers, Lebègue, Boyvin, and many others. He boils all that data down into charts that compare the registrations for *Le Grand Jeu*, *Fugue*, *Le Duo*, etc. by all these composers. It's terrific material for informing our playing today, but does it have any real meaning if we don't hear those registrations on the specific organs? One chart shows that in 1676, Nicolas Lebègue uses *Grand Jeu de Tierce* for the left hand of *Le Duo*, while Dom Bedos suggests sixteen-foot foundations. Who is right? And what organs were they using?

Assuming the Möller organ in your church has all the correct names and pitches on the knobs as cited by Fenner Douglass, does the historically correctly drawn *Grand Plein Jeu* sound anything like what Lebègue was hearing? Simply and definitively, no. Douglass has given us a great gift by collecting this information, but you still need to use your ears.

## Shutter bugs

Besides choices of colors, many modern organs have an additional dimension of expression. Enclosing a group of stops, usually all the stops of one keyboard, in a tightly and heavily constructed "box" with movable shutters on one or more of the faces, allows the organist to *simulate* control over the volume of a single organ pipe. This does not literally answer the conductor's ignorant criticism because the pipe is still only speaking one pitch at one timbre at one volume level. But it increases the organist's palette of colors exponentially.

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When I was a teenager, a mentor listening to my preparations for a recital commented that if everyone used the Swell Pedal like I was, they'd have called it a *crush*. I was closing the box at the end of a phrase, and popping it open before starting the next phrase, using only half of the device's possibilities—but I was still too green to realize that the expression is about more than volume. It's also an important tool for the creation and manipulation of tone color.

When two or more manuals are coupled together, moving the expression pedals changes the emphasis from one tone color to another, taking the organ's color spectrum from the finite number of possible combinations of stops to the infinite. Here's a simple example. You might play the opening verse of a hymn on Great Principals with a Swell Trumpet coupled in, saving the more powerful Great Trumpet for later. Add to that registration the dimension of starting the verse with the Swell Box closed, and open it gradually as the choir comes down the aisle. The sound of the Trumpet is subtle at first, and blooms into being the principal ingredient of the aggregate color.

Think of an "Old Master" painting. When Meindert Hobbema takes your eyes from the green of a tree canopy to the blue of the sky, he takes you through an infinite spectrum of colors. Compare that to the results of a color-by-number kit in which the boundary between one color and another is defined by a stark black line. And think of the artist making a drawing with charcoal or pastel, using her fingers to smudge the lines to create shading. *Smudge* is no better a description for the use of the expression pedals than *crush*, but the creative colorist at the organ can use the expression pedals to enhance the transitions from one color to another. That's painting with sound, like Captain Aubrey's colorful violin strings.

### Stop, look, and listen

In these pages, I've often mentioned formulaic organ registration. You play the opening of a baroque Prelude and Fugue on *Organo Pleno*—Principals eight, four, and two, plus Mixture. You've always done it that way. Fair enough. That implies that the opening of Bach's *B-Minor Prelude* (a high and screechy B) should be registered the same as his *Dorian Toccata* (middle of the keyboard canonic counterpoint). We are free to choose registrations that reflect the response of the specific instrument playing the specific notes in the specific acoustic.

I think of my own performances of Bach's *B-Minor*, how in the *boop-da-da-da-da-da*, *boop-boop-da-da-da-da-da*, *boop-boop* episode of the fugue I *always* reduced the registration to flutes at eight and two. Always.

As I think about the opening of that great piece, I wince at the high B. What about starting on a smaller registration (that hymn registration I described earlier?) so the opening high B is less jarring. And here's a radical thought. I know organs that simply don't have stops that can be combined to give an impressive and dignified sound on that high B, so maybe I won't play that piece on one of those organs—the ultimate registration discretion. There are other pieces.

Have you ever heard an organist play the opening pedal solo of Buxtehude's *Prelude*, *Fugue*, and *Chaconne* on anything other than pretty-much full organ, including reeds and mixtures, and manuals coupled to the pedals? Me neither. Why doesn't someone play it on a four-foot flute? One of my favorite organ tones is a good clear Koppelflute,



Stop tabs

especially in a spacious acoustic. Would the Buxtehude cops storm into the church if I played that opening pedal solo on a four-foot Koppelflute? Would the first-time listener be disappointed?

If you, as an educated and experienced organist, went to an organ recital and the performer had the nerve to do that, would you be offended or disappointed? Are you just as happy to hear the same piece played with the same registration by every organist on every organ? Or are you excited when someone offers a fresh approach to an old warhorse? If we're

not listening as we register pieces, why should we expect the audience to listen?

Once when a colleague was demonstrating the organ in his church to me, he drew a huge combination of stops and told me that was his typical registration for postludes. Yikes. Easter I? Advent I? Pentecost XVIII? Bach? Widor? Stanley?

You go to a restaurant and order a chicken breast with lemon, butter, capers, and parsley. Delicious. Next week you go a different restaurant and order chicken breast with lemon, butter, capers, and parsley. And the next week, and the next. Different chef, different cooking temperature, different weather, but same ingredients. Can we think of a different way to cook a chicken breast?

How many different colors can you paint a front door and still be correct?

If we say *Swell* instead of *crush*, why do we call them *stops*? That seems limiting. Why don't we start calling them *Go's*? No matter how many of you agree with me, we're probably stuck with *stops*. It would sound ridiculous for a politician to say, "We're pulling out all the go's." But in your mind's eye—and ear—think of them as opportunities, possibilities, or ingredients.



If you're listening when you draw stops, there aren't many wrong answers. You'll know if the tie clashes with the shirt. Have a blast. Put it on my tab. But hold the capers. They're not my favorite. ■

### Notes

1. <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/vision/pricol2.html>
2. Patrick O'Brian, *Post Captain*. William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd, London, 1972, page 421.
3. <http://www.prattandlambert.com/color-and-inspiration/learn-about-color/moods-of-color/yellow/>

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