

## Organ Method VI

As usual, this month's excerpt follows directly from the end of last month's. It includes the most important practical parts of the beginning of work on pedal playing. It covers similar ground to the columns on pedal playing that I wrote several years ago, but in a way that is addressed to the student directly. In preparing this excerpt I have been reminded of the importance of explaining everything to the student in as thorough a way as possible—not simply saying “play this exercise because I tell you to: you’ll learn why later on.” This is especially true for a Method that will mostly be used by highly motivated adult students, and that may be used without a teacher. However, I also want to be sure that this thorough explanation is not cumbersome and does not make for heavy reading. I would appreciate reader feedback about this, as well as about anything else.

This stage—the introductory practicing described above—is extremely important, and you should spend enough time with it so that it becomes easy and natural, as if you had been doing it your whole life. Though it is simple—just two or three notes at a time, slow, unmeasured—it is actually the most significant step in learning to play pedals. Stay with it long enough to master it: if that occupies several hours of practice time, or if it spreads out over days or weeks, that is fine. This will save you time later on.

### Playing pedal scales

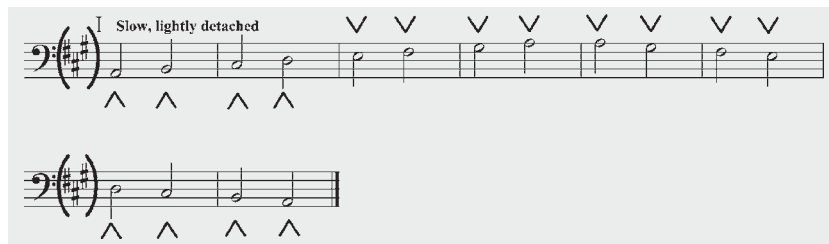
When you are comfortable with this playing of small groups of adjacent notes, then you are ready for the next pedal exercise—longer groups of adjacent notes: those that we call scales. Or, really, one set of scales in particular.

Find the note “A” nearest to where your left foot rests naturally. This is the lowest A on the pedal keyboard. Now play—slowly, lightly, and steadily—an A-natural-minor scale starting on that note. That is, the natural keys from that A up to the next A. Play the first four notes (A,B,c,d) with the left-foot toes, the next four notes (e,f,g,a) with the right toes. Observe all that you have already learned and practiced about foot position—make appropriate decisions about which way to tilt each foot, and how much to tilt it. Move from one note to

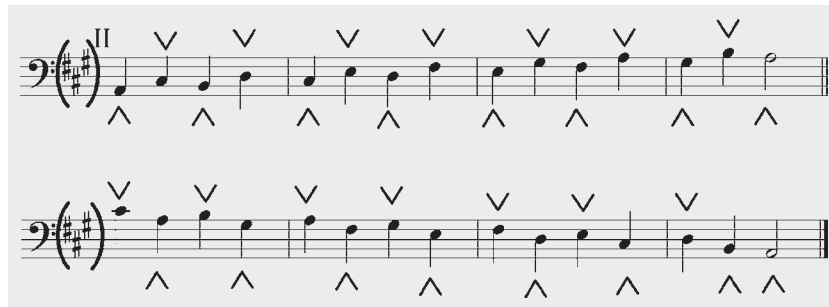
the next in the kind of small, smooth arc that you have already practiced.

Playing this scale this way adds one new element: in the middle of the scale, going from d to e, you follow a note in one foot with a note in the other foot. Many students initially fail to move the right foot in close enough—that is, far enough left—and accidentally play an f instead of the e. If this happens to you, then be conscious of the need to move the right foot a bit farther left when it is time for that foot's first note. Again, it is not important, and in fact not fruitful, to be too calculating about this. Just move the foot closer to where the correct note should be.

You will notice that as the right foot moves in to play the e, the two feet need to avoid bumping into each other. This can be accomplished in a number of ways: tilting the feet enough; releasing one note early enough to allow the next note to be played cleanly; or playing the two notes at different places along the length of their pedal keys—one closer to the sharps and flats, one closer to you on the bench. This is (like choices about whether and which way to tilt the feet) an individual matter: each player has to devise a method that is effective and correct for him or her, since it can vary with the individual physique of the player. For example, the larger your feet are, the more you will have to work consciously to keep them clear of each other when they are playing notes that are close together. In general, separating the feet along the length of the keys—one forward, one back—is the approach that is the most certain to be effective. In the case of the two middle notes of this scale, try that separation both ways: left foot forward/right foot back, and right foot forward/left foot back. Is one of them more comfortable than the other? (Here in the middle of the pedal keyboard it is quite likely that both will be comfortable. This is not always the case elsewhere on the keyboard or in more complicated passages of music. Later on I will discuss approaches to figuring this out under various conditions.) How far do you have to separate them to feel sure about the feet not bumping into each other? How does it change the situation if you tilt the feet more or less, or to the other side? (In general if you



Example 1



Example 2

are playing both feet off the big toe side, they are less inclined to bump into each other than if you are playing them off the little toe side).

After you have practiced this scale going up, try it also going down. The technical issues are exactly the same.

To recap, in playing this A-natural-minor scale you are continuing to work on moving each foot over the distance that takes you from one natural note to the next, but through more of the keyboard, and you are beginning to experience the feeling of playing two adjacent notes with your two feet in succession. You are also continuing to notice carefully the position of each foot in all aspects. All of the distances between notes are, so far, the same. The next step, however, is to begin to introduce different distances, by changing the minor scale to a major one. Both of these scales/exercises are encapsulated in **Example 1**. (Note: The key signature in parenthesis means that the exercise should be played both with and without that key signature. For most exercises that I notate this way it is best to start with all-naturals, since any sharps or flats change distances and introduce irregularities, which are better dealt with after the regular pattern has been learned.)

It is important to stay with this set of scales until they all feel really solid—minor, major, up, down. It is also important *not* to allow this exercise to become particularly fast. The awareness of distance on the pedal keyboard that this sort of practicing is meant to develop will be imprinted on the brain *more efficiently and more lastingly the more slowly you carry out the physical gestures*. The half notes in this exercise should probably never get any faster than 60 per minute, and should certainly start much slower than that: as slow as necessary to allow accuracy and comfort.

### Alternating feet

The next exercise is shown in **Example 2**. Each foot is in fact doing exactly the same thing that you have already been working on: moving up or down by step. The new elements are these: that the feet are interpolated with each other—so that you have to keep track of both feet at more or less the same time—and each foot moves farther away from its natural

side of the keyboard than it did with the first exercise. The first of these differences is one that requires only good concentration. The second also requires that you plan properly for the turning of each foot and for the positioning of the feet with respect to each other as you move up and down the keyboard. As you go up the keyboard, the left knee, leg, and foot naturally move away from the bench; as you go down, the right knee, leg, and foot do so. Pay attention to this in making choices about tilting and other positioning of the feet.

An absolutely secure sense of what the distance between two adjacent notes feels like—for the toes of one foot travelling from one note to the next through a small arc in the air above the keys—is the foundation of confident, accurate pedal playing. It is extremely important that you stick with the exercises that I have outlined thus far until they have become utterly well learned, easy, comfortable, natural, and automatic. As always, keep everything slow and relaxed, and don't look.

### Larger intervals on the pedals

The next step is, of course, to begin to move each foot over a distance greater than that from one note to the next. The first exercise for this is shown in **Example 3**. Here each foot takes a turn moving the distance of a third: the left foot on the way up, the right foot on the way down. Meanwhile, the other foot continues to practice what we have already learned. The correct way to begin to learn and internalize the feeling of moving the foot from one note to the note a third higher is this: simply tell yourself that you must move that foot a little bit farther than you moved it to go to the adjacent note. If this doesn't work the first time—if you move your foot too little and only play the next note, or overshoot to the third note or beyond—then correct the motion the next time by moving farther or less far. *This way of thinking about it works*. It is not necessary to try to analyze the distances more precisely than this: that will happen at a not-quite-conscious level, and trying to be conscious about it is distracting. It is necessary to avoid looking, and to avoid bumping the feet along the keys counting notes or otherwise trying to rely on

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Example 3

physical cues. Simply move the feet from one note to the next.

**Example 4** is a similar exercise with the roles of the feet reversed. As you practice each of these exercises, notice everything that you can about the alignment and positioning of the feet. For example, do you want to tilt either foot differently depending not just on what note it is playing, but on what note it is going to play next? On whether it is moving up or down? How is this (or anything else about posture or foot position) different between the “all natural” and the “three sharps” versions? Notice that in any exercise (or passage) in which the feet move across the body (left foot high, right foot low) it can be necessary to turn your body. At this stage it is a good idea to use your arms on the bench to brace yourself while turning, to the extent that this feels necessary or helpful. Later on, when putting hands and feet together in pieces of music, this is of course impossible. That will not turn out to be a problem: the need to do it will largely melt away with practice and familiarity.

Each of these last two exercises, and all similar pedal passages whether exercises or pieces of music, can be practiced with *separate feet*. In fact this can be quite important. It is physically analogous to practicing manual parts (or piano or harpsichord pieces) with separate hands. It differs from that musically in that the separate foot parts are less likely to make sense on their own. However, separate foot practice is an extremely efficient technique for learning pedal parts, and following the sometimes bewilderingly abstract separate parts is good listening practice, and good practice at concentrating. For Exercise III, for example, the separate left foot part starts like this: Each of the quarter notes is to be played detached—more or less as eighth notes, but precise counting is not necessary. Just make them as detached as physical comfort suggests. You can extract other single-foot parts from these and all other exercises and from pedal passages in the repertoire.

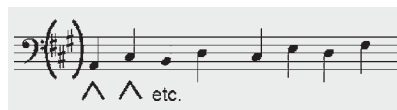
#### Practicing repeated pedal notes

**Example 5** is an exercise for practicing repeated notes on the pedal keyboard. Notice that each foot separately is doing similar things to what it does in Exercises III and IV. The feet are moving in thirds and by step. However, the way in which the two feet are interpolated with each other is different, in such a way that it creates a repeated note pattern. The repeated notes, always played

with different feet, will be detached, as repeated notes always are. Try varying the degree of detachment for the repeated notes—everything from *as smooth as they can be while still repeating on time* to *as short as they can be while still allowing the pipes to speak*. Also try various articulations for the notes that are not repeated. They can be slurred, which creates pairs of slurred notes, divided by the repeated notes, or they can be articulated in a way that exactly matches what you are doing with the repeated notes, or they can be played in any number of other ways.



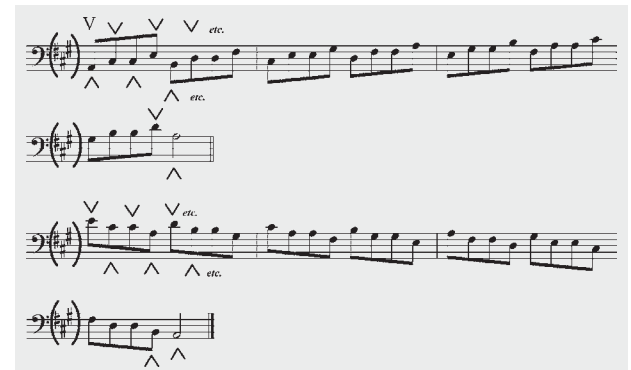
Example 4



Example 3a

Once you have practiced these exercises until they feel easy and reliable, you are ready both to go on to a selection of pedal parts from pieces—ones that are appropriate to play with toes alone—and to begin to work on a few simple exercises for heel playing. I cannot stress enough that it is important to become fully comfortable with the exercises above before moving in these two other directions. In most pedal parts in the organ repertoire—including in hymns and other accompaniment situations—almost all of the notes are accounted for by each foot moving no more than the distance of a third. Of course there are larger intervals *between* feet. But something like eighty percent of the time, or a bit more, each foot moves by step, or by a third, or repeats the note that it just played. The comfort with moving each foot over these distances that these exercises develop is the foundation for learning pedal parts from the repertoire and in general for playing pedals securely.

You the student can find appropriate pedal parts to work on as material for continuing to learn pedal playing. Almost any pedal line from a pre-1750 piece can be played by toes alone, and therefore can work as practice material at this stage. Here are a few suggestions to start you off—though the best passage to work on is one that you like and



Example 5



enjoy, or one which is part of a piece that you would like to learn in full later on:

J. S. Bach, *Pedal Exercitium*

J. S. Bach, *Tocatta and Fugue in F Major*, long pedal solos

Johann Pachelbel, *Praeludium in D Minor* (Perreault listing 207), opening pedal solo

Dietrich Buxtehude, almost any pedal passage, especially from free (non-chorale based) works

Georg Böhm, *Praeludium in C Major*, opening pedal solo

Vincent Lübeck, pedal solos from any prelude, especially those in C major and D minor.

Next month's excerpt will discuss how a beginning pedal player should approach pedal passages such as these, and go on to the beginnings of heel playing. ■

Gavin Black is Director of the Princeton Early Keyboard Center in Princeton, New Jersey. He can be reached by e-mail at [gavinblack@mail.com](mailto:gavinblack@mail.com).

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