

passage from *I am a Conductor*, the autobiography of Charles Munch (Oxford University Press, 1955):

The organ was my first orchestra. If you have never played the organ, you have never known the joy of feeling yourself music's master, sovereign of all the gamut of sounds and sonorities. Before those keyboards and pedals and the palette of stops, I felt almost like a demigod, holding in my hands the reins that controlled the musical universe. Walking [to work], opening the little door to the organ with a big old key, looking over the day's hymns lest I forget the repeats, finding a prelude in a good key in order to avoid a difficult modulation, choosing a gay piece for a wedding or a sad one for a funeral, not falling asleep during the sermon, sometimes improvising a little in the pastor's favorite style, not playing a long recession because it would annoy the sexton—all this filled me with pride.

"... a certain reserve built into the relationship..." Funny, I think some of my best moments on an organ bench have been when I was free of reserve.

#### Anything you can do, I can do better

What's really going on between Arnold Steinhardt and Charles Munch? Is it like a playground spat that winds up with did-not, did-too? Or is it the childish idea that one instrument is more difficult to play than another? I've certainly heard people admire the complexity of playing the organ—all that dexterity with hands and feet. But can't you also argue that the organist is only pushing buttons?

The violinist has to create an even and convincing tone through the manipulation of the bow against the strings while making the notes happen at the same time. And, while the organ produces notes that are in tune or not in tune no matter what the organist does (as long as he's hitting the right notes), the violinist has to put the finger on the fingerboard in *exactly* the right place. (No worries. They leave the fretting to the guitarist.)

The flautist adds breath control to all the complexities of manual dexterity. The trumpeter has a finicky relationship with a mouthpiece. A trumpeter with a cold

sore is like Roger Clemens with a hangnail. Neither can go to work that day. And singers? Let's not even get started with singers!

No matter what instrument you're playing, once you've mastered the physical technique you can get down to making music. As I get older, I notice that on the printed page I can track the development of my technique. I still play some of my favorite pieces from the same scores I had when I was a student, hopelessly marked up with teachers' comments and registrations for dozens of different organs. Each time I get reminded of the physical crises of 30 or 35 years ago as I play past those passages that I just couldn't get at 20 years old. You might say it's the reward of a lifetime to be able to breeze past those danger zones—a lifetime of practice, that is.

Learning to drive a musical instrument is a barrier between you and artistic expression. Whether you're learning the "pat your head and rub your tummy" thing about playing the organ, developing the finger strength and control to pluck harp strings, or the incredible muscle control of the mouth of the oboist, all you're doing is teaching your body the physical tricks necessary for it to become a conductor between your mind and the sonorities of the music.

It's the actual music that's so difficult to do right. Shaping notes and phrases, placing the notes in time and tempo, and following your instincts to express the architecture of the music form the essence of the art of music. And you get a whiff of that essence when the physical act of operating the machine that is your instrument doesn't distract you.

There is an aspect of the art of organ playing that most other musicians don't necessarily experience. A clarinetist might own the same instrument for most of his career, seldom playing on another. That is a very personal relationship that like any intimacy includes inherent danger. Imagine the master player who discovers a crack in his instrument mo-

ments before an important performance. Or worse yet, what if the treasured instrument is lost or destroyed in a fire? I suppose more than one musical career has ended simply because the musician couldn't face starting over with a new instrument. Yo-Yo Ma famously left a treasure of a cello in a New York taxicab. It was later recovered because he had bothered to save his receipt and the cab could be tracked down. When you get into a New York cab you hear a gimmicky automatic recording—the voice of a celebrity giving safety tips. Along with Jessye Norman reminding you to fasten your seat belt, there's one with Yo-Yo Ma advising you to keep your receipts!

The organist is at the mercy of whoever hires him. How many of us have arrived in town to prepare a recital, only to sit down at a mediocre instrument in terrible condition? You can refuse to play, or you can recognize that it's the only instrument the local audience knows and accept the challenge of doing something special with it. "I've never heard this organ sound like that!"

§

Busy organists might be playing on dozens of instruments each year, but there are also many examples of lifelong relationships between players and their "home base" organs. Marcel Dupré played hundreds of recitals all over the world, but he was Organiste Titulaire at Saint-Sulpice in Paris from 1934 until 1971. He succeeded Charles-Marie Widor, who had held the position since 1870. So for more than a century that great Cavaillé-Coll organ was played principally by only two brilliant musicians. What a glorious heritage. Daniel Roth has been on that same well-worn bench since 1985. I first attended worship in that church in 1998 and vividly remember noticing elderly members of the congregation who would remember the days when Dupré was their parish organist. I suppose there still may be a few. I wonder if any of them cornered Dupré after church to complain that the organ was too loud!

§

#### It's the real thing, baby

My work with the Organ Clearing House often takes me to big cities where I get the thrill of hearing important organists playing on mighty instruments. Both the organist and the organ have a relationship with the church building—the sound rings and rolls around the place, the organist has the knack of timing the echo, and the effect is dazzling.

But most of our organists are playing on instruments of modest size in "normal" church buildings. The effect of the beautiful pipe organ in a small country church is just as dazzling as that of the 200-rank job roaring away in a room with a 150-foot ceiling. There's such magic to the combination of the sound of wind-blown organ pipes and human voices, even in the setting of a small country church. The sounds meld together, exciting the collective air that is the room's atmosphere. The organ has a physical presence in the room, letting us know before a note is played that there's something special coming. We decorate church buildings with symbols of our faith. The organ joins pictorial windows, banners, and steeples as one of those symbols.

We plan a dinner party. On the way home from the supermarket we stop at the florist to get something pretty to put on the table. Likewise, we place flower arrangements on the altar on Sunday morning. In church, do we do that simply for decoration, or are those flowers a celebration of God's creation—of the beauty of nature? Are there candles on the altar for atmosphere like that dining room table, or is there another loftier reason? Does a choir sing an anthem to

cover the shuffling of the ushers as they take up the offering, or is the anthem a true part of the experience of worship? (If so, why don't they take up the collection during a scripture reading, or during the sermon? Why all this tramping around while the music is playing? But that's a rant for another month!)

The organ, that instrument that makes us "music's master, sovereign of all the gamut of sounds and sonorities," stands in our churches declaring our devotion. The pipe organ is testament to the wide range of the skills with which we humans have been blessed. We've been given the earth's materials and learned to make beautiful things from them. And for centuries the pipe organ has been part of our worship, monument to our faith, and symbol of the power of the Church.

But with the advance of technology we are deluded by dilution. We settle for plastic flowers. We buy cheap production hardware for the doors of our worship spaces. We substitute artificial sound enhancement for real acoustics. And we substitute arrays of circuits for those majestic organ pipes.

Walk through a museum and look at sculpture made of gold, jade, or ivory. Don't tell me you can't tell it's special. When we experience something special, we know it's special. Walk through a jewelry store and try to tell the difference between the expensive stuff and the fake costume stuff without looking at price tags. You will never be wrong. Of course we know the difference. If your fiancée is not a jeweler, don't bother with a real diamond. She won't know the difference. (Oh boy, are you in trouble.)

And buy a digital instrument to replace the pipe organ. "After all, I'm not a musician. I can't tell the difference." Baloney. Of course we can tell the difference. And our churches and we deserve the best. ■

## On Teaching

by Gavin Black



#### Practicing II

Last month I wrote that the "concept of 'slowly enough' is the key to the whole matter of practicing organ and harpsichord." This month I want to explore that concept further. I will also discuss a couple of other aspects of the art of practicing.

In urging that students practice their pieces slowly, I want to avoid giving particular, specific practice-tempo suggestions, and I also want to advocate that teachers not expect, by and large, to give their students such specific suggestions. One of the keys to really efficient practicing is to develop a feeling for what the right practice tempo is. That is, literally, a *feeling*, since the right tempo at which to practice a given passage at a given moment is the tempo at which that passage *feels* a certain way. The way to guide a

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student towards being able to practice well—and to know how to go on practicing well for the rest of his or her playing career—is to help the student learn to recognize that feeling.

When a student (or anyone) plays through a passage, whether it is a few notes or an entire long piece, and whether it is the whole texture or separate hands or feet, one of a number of things can happen. If the playing is clearly wrong—wrong notes, missing notes, wrong rhythm—then that is easy to notice and easy to describe. A student who is very inexperienced indeed, or, more commonly, a student who is scared or self-conscious, or who has been trained to leave all matters of judgment to the teacher, might not notice such things at first. But he or she will not have any trouble noticing them if they are pointed out, and can be taught and reminded to notice them directly. They are there for the taking. If a passage being practiced shows such problems, beyond just a few, then it should be practiced more slowly. That is clear.

However, it is extremely common for a student—especially a student with good powers of analysis and of concentration—to be able to play a passage correctly, perhaps even many times in a row, but to have that correctness be a sort of high-wire act: that is, for there to be some or many “near misses” in which the student comes very close to getting a wrong note, but manages to remember and play the right note at the very last second. Playing a passage this way is emphatically not good practicing. (I will discuss this more below.) As I wrote last month, it takes honesty with one’s self to admit that a passage that sounded at least “OK” to the listening world was in fact not OK. We are all motivated not to admit this, first of all because it is always more friendly to our self-esteem to believe that something we just did was done well, not badly, and second because this admission seems to let us in for more work!

In addition to honesty or self-awareness, however, it is necessary for a student

to know how to recognize, while playing, specific signs that a passage is in this “high-wire” state. This can be tricky both for beginning students and for anyone else who has never been in the habit of looking out for this problem. Some of the phenomena to watch out for include:

1) Very slight hesitations, especially—but not exclusively—before strong beats. This is an outward, audible sign, but a subtle one that a listener can easily miss. It can be confused with interpretive inflections that might even be musically effective. Only the player can know for sure.

2) Significant departures from worked-out fingering, especially lots of substitution that wasn’t part of the plan.

3) Tension: in the hands for manual parts, probably in the legs and back for pedal parts, but possibly also in the feet.

4) Playing certain notes with more physical force than others: banging. When a particular note takes the player by surprise and is only achieved by dint of great last-minute concentration, then that note will often be banged down hard.

5) Breathing problems or frequent catching of the breath.

(Some of the items on this list are hard for the student to notice unless he or she is otherwise playing in a relaxed manner, both physically and psychologically. This is one of the most compelling practical reasons both for cultivating a relaxed, friendly atmosphere in the teaching studio and for encouraging a light, tension-free physical approach to playing.)

To put the same thing the other way around—accentuating the positive—the playing should seem calm and serene, the hands and feet should be able to move from one spot in the music to the next at a fairly even pace, the player should be able to remain relaxed and keep a light touch. In fact, the whole thing should feel easy. *Performing* is not easy; *having the patience to practice well* is not easy; *the act of practicing* should be easy.

(It is also important to note that an occasional or rare wrong note that happens while practicing a passage is not necessarily a problem or a reason to slow

down. A recurring wrong note usually is. Clusters of wrong notes are. But the scrambling, uncomfortable feeling described here is the most compelling reason to try a slower tempo.)

If a teacher guides a student towards recognizing that a passage or piece is being practiced at too fast a tempo—without specifically suggesting a practice tempo, but instead inviting the student to try it more slowly and to be on the lookout for all of the signs described above, negative and positive—then the teacher will be helping that student to develop a lifelong ability to guide his or her own practicing effectively.

It is important for students to know that when you play though a passage in a way that has an element of scrambling to it—the “high-wire” or emergency feeling—you are actually not practicing the passage at all. Practicing a physical gesture, or set of physical gestures, of the sort we are talking about here is a matter of repeating that gesture until it becomes second nature. (I believe—from conversations I’ve had with people who have studied the subject—that this is at least in part a matter of imprinting something on the cerebellum as opposed to the cerebrum. In any case, it is something quite real and specific neurologically.) When you play a passage wrongly you are actually making the *wrong gestures* second nature: you are imprinting (on your cerebellum?) the acts of scrambling, getting the wrong notes, hesitating, hitting keys too hard, using unnecessarily complicated fingerings, having trouble breathing, etc. In the end you will have learned to do those things.

On the other hand, if you start off at an appropriate tempo, then you can practice, as I put it last month, “a genuine slow-motion version of the final desired result.” Then, following the procedure that I outlined last month, you can work it up to any desired tempo.

There are two other issues about practicing that are important to discuss alongside the basic procedure proposed in these two columns: 1) keeping it going, and 2) (not) looking.

It is always a good idea to keep whatever bit of music you are playing going steadily, in tempo (plus or minus any purposeful interpretive rubato), without letting anything distract you or derail your playing. In the context of practicing a passage, however short or long, it is important to know where you plan to stop—in order to go back and play it again—and both to keep it going until that point and in fact to stop there and go back and repeat the passage as many times as you have planned. If you allow yourself to be distracted by anything—a noise outside, your teacher’s cell phone, a light flickering—then you are in part *practicing letting yourself be distracted*. This is the last thing that you want to prepare yourself to do in performance. However, if you allow yourself specifically to be distracted by hearing a wrong note, that is even worse. If you are planning to stop, or allow yourself the possibility of stopping, when you hear yourself make a wrong note, then as you play you will inevitably divert some of your concentration onto monitoring each note for “wrongness” and to deciding whether or not something that you have just heard justifies stopping. All of your focus, however—all of it—should be on what comes next. As soon as your fingers or feet are committed to playing a given note, your mind should be on to the next note.

I have known students to stop abruptly upon hearing themselves play a particular *right* note. Either they had already programmed themselves to stop, assuming that the note would be wrong, or, again expecting a wrong note, they were astonished into stopping by the unexpected sound of the correct note! In any case, it is just a distraction. Also, often a student will hear a wrong note, stop, and play the correct note and go on. This does not even constitute actually practicing that note effectively, since practicing a particular moment in a piece actually consists of practicing getting to that moment from whatever came before it.

If a student has trouble bringing him- or herself to keep playing through wrong notes in lessons, this often comes from a desire to signal to the teacher that he or she knew that the note was wrong. It can feel humiliating to make a wrong note without, in a sense, atoning for it right away. It is worth reminding students that there is plenty of time to discuss what was good or bad about a particular time through a passage when that passage has ended, and that the teacher will think more rather than less of a student for waiting!

It is, I believe, quite important not to look at the hands or feet while practicing, and it is worth trying to learn not to, or trying to get into the habit of not doing so. But it is also important not to become so preoccupied with not looking that that becomes a distraction in itself. It is, in the end, OK to glance down a little bit, while bearing in mind the reasons to try not to do so very much.

The problems with looking at the hands or feet during practicing are several:

1) If you find a note, or several notes, or a chord—or whatever—by looking for that note (those notes) and then putting the fingers or feet in the right place and pushing, you have essentially not practiced the act of finding and playing those notes at all. The physical gesture that you are trying to imprint has not happened, or, at least, your mind has not focused on it and followed it. The brain has used an alternate, visual, route to the ostensibly correct note. Practicing that involves a significant amount of looking is inefficient: it will probably get you there eventually, but it will take longer.

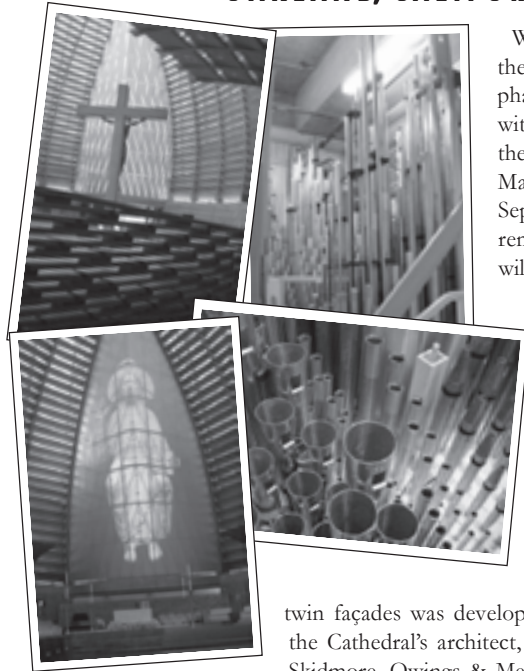
2) Whenever you take your eyes away from the page, you run the risk of not finding your place again.

3) If you are playing a passage and you are (even subconsciously) expecting to find a fair number of the notes by looking, then there will almost certainly be a large amount of hesitation in the playing. Even when your hands or feet have in fact traveled correctly, and on time, to the next note, you may well hesitate to play it until you have checked it out visually. There is often an overall jerkiness and lack of convincing pulse to playing that involves a lot of looking. This will usually go away immediately if the player quits looking so much.

4) The vast majority of wrong notes happen not because the player does not know where the notes are on the keyboard (and thus needs to look for them), but because the player does not honestly know what the next note is supposed to be.

This last point is one of the most important about the act of practicing and about learning to play. The keyboard is basically very simple, and it stays in place. Anyone who has played a little bit has, even if unknowingly, developed a strong instinct for where the keys are.

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Many players, including most students and almost all beginners, do not believe this. They assume that wrong notes and insecurity come about because they don't know where the next note is. The wrong note count in a passage, if it is at all high, will almost always go down immediately upon the player's starting to keep his or her eyes (by and large) on the music. In working on helping a student to practice effectively, this should be taken into account before choices are made about what practice tempos are appropriate.

Specifically, if there is a fairly persistent wrong note in a passage being practiced, but that passage feels generally secure enough that the tempo does not need be slowed down, a student will want to start correcting that wrong note by looking, or will assume that looking is the only technique for getting the note right. Instead of looking, however, the student should try this: first notice in which direction the note is wrong. A wrong note can only come about because of moving a finger, hand, or foot either too far or not far enough. Once it is clear which of these has happened, the student should, on the next time through the passage, simply think "all right, I've been moving too far, so I'll move a little bit less," or the opposite, as needed. This simple thought—mechanical rather than musical in nature—will almost always work. Coupled with this, the student should keep his or her eyes on the music and not lose the information that is found there.

One final thought. These two columns have been intended to outline a rigorous and efficient approach to practicing. It is certainly a good idea for students to follow this approach, or one that incorporates some of its ideas, a good deal of the time. Practicing every piece this way—in small increments, always starting slowly enough, speeding up only gradually, keeping the eyes on the music—will lead to the most efficient learning of pieces and the quickest and most secure development of a player's ability. This kind of practicing is satisfying since it gives such prompt and evident results. It should also be just plain fun for people who love the repertoire and the instruments. However, it is important to remember that not every minute at the keyboard has to be spent doing the most disciplined work. It is a very good idea for any player, student or not, to have some out-and-out frivolous fun at the keyboard as well: play pieces you already know too fast and see how well you can keep them going; sight read pieces that are too hard, just slow enough that it's plausible, and don't worry too much about wrong notes; play easy pieces on all sorts of different registrations, including outlandish ones.

Every player—and every student, perhaps with input from a teacher—can decide how great a proportion of time spent at the keyboard should be spent on well-designed rigorous practicing and how much on other kinds of playing. An awareness that you are doing enough of the former should permit you to relax and enjoy the latter! ■

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## Music for Voices and organ

by James McCray

### Choir with flute

I want to know a butcher paints.  
A baker rhymes for his pursuit.  
Candlestick-maker much acquaints  
His soul with song or haply mute  
Blows out his brains upon the flute.  
—Robert Browning, *SHOP*

The flute, one of the world's oldest musical instruments, is both popular and widely used. It is often added to choral scores, especially in church anthems. Although Theophrastus (370–287 B.C.) said that "The sound of the flute will cure

epilepsy, and a sciatic gout," more recent and accurate evaluations suggest that its tone is soothing, compassionate, and tender-hearted, unless played in a very high range with the intent of cutting through the texture. Its music can be busy with flowing, fast phrases, but more often, seems to add a line of calm tone color that has gentle beauty. This makes it a perfect addition to choral singing, especially in volunteer church choirs where the voices may have had little serious training.

Young musicians most often start with piano lessons; however, when training begins in school bands and orchestras, the flute receives considerable attention. Its small size and relative simplicity to learn makes it attractive to those in beginning situations where practicing at home is expected. School ensembles often have an abundance of flute players, especially girls, who find their sweet sound to be attractive.

The flute has been around since primitive times. There are numerous references to it in the Bible. For example, in First Kings the scripture says: "And the people piped with pipes, and rejoiced with great joy, so that the earth rent with the sound of them." Using flutes in church seems a natural opportunity.

There are numerous church anthems that include flute or the option of flute. With the large number of players in a community, it usually is easy to find someone in the congregation who is

available. The music rarely is extremely difficult, and one short rehearsal may be all that is needed. The flute music often is an obbligato line that quietly soars above the choir, which means that not having it played while the choir is learning their part causes no impediment to the process. Also, unlike brass instruments where overbearing loudness often is a factor, the flute when added to the texture does not cover the choir and dominate the sound with harshness.

An examination of current anthems finds that many call for optional C instruments. Unlike instruments such as the clarinet, the flute is pitched in C, which means that it does not have to be transposed for use with choir/organ. Performers can read directly from a choral score where the flute line is printed with the choir. Transposing instruments require a separate part that may or may not be included with the publication. This also means that a performer may read directly from a hymnal to double the melody of congregational hymns.

The range of the flute is wide, and common techniques such as trills, flutter-tonguing, and even note-bending will expand the flavor of the music. Typically, the flute part provides brief flourishes between choral phrases, or it is merely an additional line whose omission does not destroy the music.

In conclusion, using flute with the church choir is practical and easy. Avail-

able players and publications are numerous, so consider enhancing a future anthem with its addition. It should be noted that *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary*, published in 1967, reports that the flute "is a variously perforated hollow stick intended for the punishment of sin."

**Prayer of St. Francis, Michael Bedford. SATB, flute, and organ, Coronet Press of Theodore Presser Co., 392-42357, \$1.50 (M-).**

Set to St. Francis's familiar text, the choral parts are on two staves in a unison or homophonic chordal arrangement. The organ part, also on two staves, is a gently pulsating background accompaniment with occasional brief moments of silence. The flute part is included separately on the back cover; its music, which occurs throughout the anthem, is lyrical and very easy. Sweet music.

**By Gracious Powers, John Ferguson. SATB, organ, flute, and optional congregation, Augsburg Fortress, 0-8006-7549-5, \$1.90 (M).**

Both the flute part and a vocal part for the congregation are included at the end of the choral score. The organ part is on three staves with registration suggestions. Its music is primarily block chords in quarter notes. The chorus part, on two staves, has some short passages that are unaccompanied and brief divisi. There are five stanzas in various settings, with

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