# **On Teaching**

### **Organ Method XIV**

This month's column is a continuation of last month's discussion of learning to play contrapuntal passages.

In the second movement of Felix Mendelssohn's Sonata in C Minor, Opus 65, No. 2, the left-hand part is mostly in two voices. Any part of that movement makes wonderful material for practicing multiple voices in one hand in the way that we have been discussing. Here are the first several measures of that piece, shown in Example 1.

There are more than thirty measures that are constructed like this. Each of the two left-hand voices (marked Clav. I) is quite intricate by itself, so, in practicing each of them separated into two hands, you will have to take some care with the fingering and a fair amount of time. For using this piece to explore this method of practicing, it is not necessary to work on all of it at once: any few measures will be fruitful.

Example 2 shows another Bach passage with two voices in the right hand. It is from the *Sinfonia in D Major*, BWV 789, beginning just after the downbeat of m. 5.

In this passage, the two right-hand voices briefly cross, and in one spot, one voice passes through a note that is being held by the other voice. In playing the two voices separately on two keyboards, none of this causes any problems or is particularly noteworthy. Can you use this exercise to make it possible—or more natural—to hear those voices clearly as they cross, when you put them back together?

We now move on to three special issues in manual playing. Two of them are approaches to fingering that apply to certain types of writing that are common in the repertoire. These are 1) the fingering of repeated notes, and 2) substitution. The other is an exercise designed to help with the playing of trills and other passages that call for rapid, light playing. I will describe the trill exercise first, and then move on to the other two, which are in fact closely related to one another.

This exercise is not written in music notation, and does not involve playing passages of music, but rather only simple pairs of notes. Its purpose is to create an awareness of a feeling of lightness and ease of touch, which can then be carried into the playing of other exercises and

passages of music, especially of trills, other rapid ornaments, and rapid passages in general. It is physically easy to do, though it requires a certain kind of focus that can take a while to achieve. It is equally appropriate and helpful for seasoned players, for absolute beginners, and for anyone in between. It goes like this:

1) **Choose two fingers on the same hand.** (The first time you play this exercise, the fingers should be 4/3 or 3/2, in either hand. Later on it is especially

and as lightly as you can: a quick, light two-note gesture. While you are playing these two notes, your hand and wrist should feel more as if they are floating upwards than as if they are bearing down. This two-note gesture will leave you holding the same note that you played first, and it will have created at least a little bit of tension in your hand. Once again you should wait for your hand, arms, etc., to completely relax. Then repeat the two-note gesture, and do this a few times in a row. It is

7) The following "special cases" of the exercise require extra thought: the thumb, sharps and flats, and non-adjacent fingers. In these cases, particular care must be taken about hand position. Make sure that the alignment of the fingers with respect to the notes permits the hand to remain in (or constantly regain) a tension-free state. For example: using 2/1 on adjacent naturals is usually too awkward to be good for this exercise; however, using 2/1 or 3/1 on a natural and a sharp/flat is often



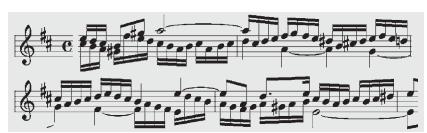
Example 1

valuable to play it with 5/4, and any two fingers can be suitable, even nonadjacent fingers.)

2) Choose two notes—at first they should be adjacent naturals, but later on it is valuable to include sharps/flats as well. As with some of the exercises from earlier in this series, it is important that you choose notes that lie in the part of the keyboard where your arm and hand are naturally more-or-less straight when you are playing (that is, your wrist not cocked or twisted). This is, of course, normally near the top of the treble clef in the right hand and near the bottom of the bass clef in the left hand. It is a good idea to position the fingers near the ends of the keys, and to let the thumb float in the air in front of the keyboard. (But see below for using this exercise with the thumb.)

3) Once you have chosen the two notes and the two fingers, rest the two fingers on the notes and **relax** your hand, arm, neck, shoulders, etc. Sit in a comfortable position, and take a deep breath or two. Then **play one of the notes**—either one—lightly and smoothly, **and hold it**. When you feel completely relaxed, then:

4) Play the other note and the original note in succession, as quickly

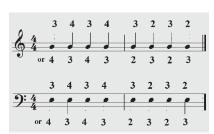


Example 2

crucial to wait each time for your fingers, hand, arm, shoulders, neck, back, etc., to completely relax. Thus, it is not appropriate to develop a steady rhythm or beat in doing this exercise. If you do, you are probably not allowing yourself to relax thoroughly enough between playing notes.

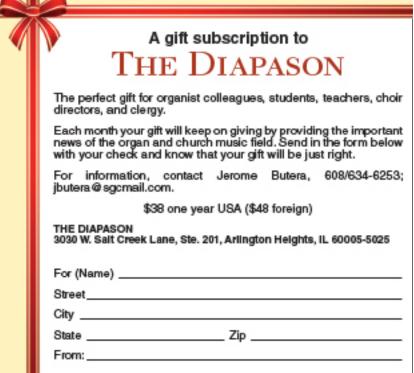
5) After you have done this a few times with a particular pair of fingers and notes in one order, play it with the same fingers and notes in the opposite order. It is important to stop before it begins to feel "routine" and thus impossible to achieve a combination of concentration and relaxation. Usually it makes sense to play it about 4 to 6 times each (up/down and down/up) and then leave it. This varies from one person to another. It is better to do a little bit of this often than to do a lot of it in one sitting.

6) It is not necessary to segue from this exercise directly into playing a trill or other fast passage. Rather, the point is to remember the feeling of the exercise when you next play a trill or fast passage. If you do a little bit of this exercise most days, spreading it around to several pairs of fingers (not neglecting 5/4), and working with both hands an approximately equal amount, the feeling of it will spill over quite naturally into your playing.



Example 3

very comfortable, and indeed a good thing to practice (thumb on the natural, obviously). Using 4/2 on F# and D (right hand) is usually fine, but using 4/2 on A and F# (right hand) is usually not. Using 3/2 on a natural and a sharp/ flat is usually OK if 2 is on the natural, but not if 3 is on the natural. The point is to make sure that the wrist is not cocked or twisted outwards very much (ideally not at all), that the fingers are not so curved that they don't have good leverage in pushing down the keys, and that it is possible to remain near the ends of the keys. (These are all normal considerations in organ fingering, but this exercise only retains its purpose if the hands are very comfortable, whereas in playing repertoire, the complexity of the music often makes some compromise in comfortable fingering unavoidable.)



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An important note: In 4) above, I use the phrase "as quickly and as lightly as you can." The most important part of this is "as you can." Quickness is the point, but it cannot be pushed. If you try to execute this simple gesture faster than you can comfortably do it, you will defeat the purpose of the exercise.

#### Playing repeated notes

Repeated notes on the organ are often seen as something of a problem-and with some reason. In order to repeat a note on organ, you must release it all the way. This is also true on harpsichord, but not on piano, and not consistently on other instruments. When you combine this need to release a note before you can sound it again with the sustaining quality of organ sound, you get a situation in which repeated notes can stick out: they can sound disconnected from the rest of the sonority, texture, and musical shape of a piece or passage. If a line or passage is being played fully legato, then two notes in a row that are the same will be articulated differently from the nonrepeated notes around them. Repeated notes cannot be fully legato. Even in a line or passage that is being played in an overall detached style, repeated notes can stand out, since the way in which they are detached can sound different-more crisp or abrupt.

It is a reasonable goal to be able to play repeated notes as naturally as possible, that is, to reduce as much as possible the extent to which they stand out or draw attention to themselves. It



the more at risk you are for introducing tension into the hand. The paradox arises that trying to make the repetition more "legato" actually makes it more abrupt: more of a conspicuous break.

If you repeat a note with a different finger, then you can be preparing the new finger to play the note before you have released it with the old finger, and you can release the note smoothly. Sometimes it will make sense to release down and towards your body sitting on the bench or off to one side, rather than straight up above the note that you are holding and that you need to play again. The new finger can move in and replace the old finger smoothly. This gesture creates less tension and gives you the greatest possible flexibility in timing and articulation. The repeated note still must be detached, but, if you want, it can be only slightly detachedalmost imperceptibly.



Example 4

is also a good thing to be able to control and shape the playing of repeated notes—timing, articulation, sonority—with as much flexibility as possible. This is true of all notes and all playing, but with repeated notes it calls for some extra thought.

In general, the discovery made by organists over many centuries and through all sorts of different schools of organ composition and organ playing is that it is a good idea, when possible, to play repeated notes with different fingers—to change fingers from one note to the repetition of that same note. This is not always possible to do. Repeated notes that are octaves or that are embedded in chords, especially four- or fivenote chords, sometimes must be played using the same fingers. However, the changing of fingers on repeated notes is a practice that is important to learn and to get used to.

If you have just played a note with a given finger and you are still holding it, then in order to repeat it with that finger you must do all of the work of releasing and replaying the note with that finger. You need time to move the finger up off the note, and then bring it back down. This sets a limit on how little time there can be between the release of the first note and the playing of the second. Not only must there be a break between the two (same) notes, but that break must be a certain length. Also, the gesture of moving a finger up and back down is likely to produce tension. The shorter you try to make the break between the two notes,

Start getting used to using different fingers on repeated notes with the simplest possible exercises, such as that shown in Example 3.

You can move this to different notes and use different fingering patterns. (For example, try 2-3-4-3-2-3-4-3, or 2-1-2-1-3-1-3-1.) Remember to keep hands, arms, shoulders, and so on completely relaxed. Release notes smoothly but cleanly: that is, do not inadvertently slip the new finger onto the note prior to releasing it. If you do that, you are in fact practicing substitution—which we come to next—but not playing repeated notes with different fingers. Experiment with different amounts of articulation, and with patterns of differing articulation between the different notes.

Another useful pattern for practicing is illustrated in Example 4. The fingering given is just one set of possibilities. You can devise and try others, preserving the principle of changing fingers on the repeated notes. Try different things with articulation: making the non-repeated notes legato, with different amounts of break at the repeated notes; articulating all of the notes the same; using varied detached articulation for all of the notes, and so on.

 ${\it To be continued}.$ 

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