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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 non-repeated 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 detached—almost 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 five-note 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.

To be continued.

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