

Organ Method XXI

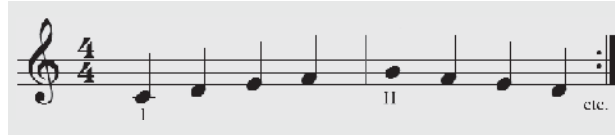
The rest of the discussion about manual changes—as found in this month's column—is the last segment of the practical part of this method. As I mentioned in the introduction to last month's column, it seems clear that a method cannot and should not aspire to include detailed instruction about every facet of organ playing. Since I consider it important for this method to discuss in some detail each of the fundamental skills that it is trying to teach—more prose and fewer examples than some method books—I must limit the scope. I cannot address everything about organ playing that might be important, or, to put it another way, cannot move on to very many of the “advanced” topics—or else the method will be too long. So this planned ongoing discussion does not include, for example, specifics about swell pedal technique or about ornamentation, just to mention two very different but important matters.

The specific exercise for learning the physical feeling of manual changing that I include below was inspired by a casual remark made to me years ago by my great teacher, Eugene Roan. He said that you change manuals not with the hands but with the elbows. This led me to think about manual changing as being concerned primarily with the planes through which the arms move rather than specifically how the fingers operate. The rest of the exercise then developed through my applying to this concept the usual notion of practicing a physical skill in as simple, direct, and undistracted a way as possible.

The rest of this method, when it is compiled into a book, will constitute



Example 1



Example 2

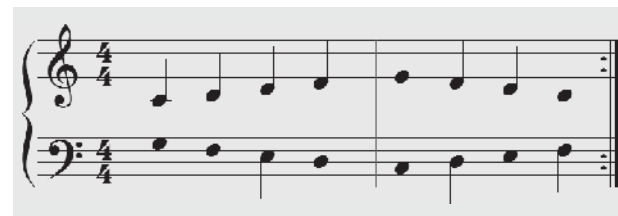


Example 3

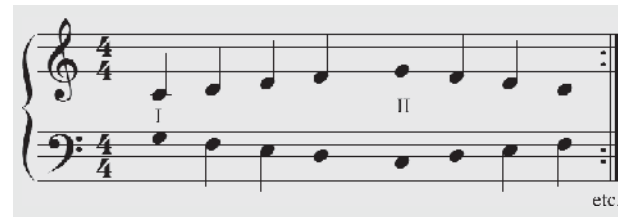


Example 4

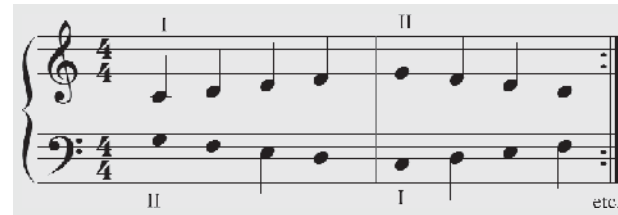
some of the type of “introduction to the organ” material that is important for beginners to encounter, and that forms part of most organ methods. Even in the couple of years since I started this project, however, the standards and practices have changed as to what people expect to encounter in printed and bound books, and what they expect to find by exploring the Internet. Therefore, I have been reassessing exactly how much organ history and other such material to include, and how much to focus instead on suggestions for research.



Example 5



Example 6



Example 7

Therefore I have decided to postpone writing that part of the method: not for very long, but for long enough to live with (and revise) the existing part, to think at leisure about how to configure the rest of it, and, especially, to receive and assimilate feedback from readers of THE DIAPASON and from my own students and various colleagues. I will, with next month's column, return for a while to “traditional” topics: writing about teaching to teachers and organists, rather than writing about learning to students.

At this point, I would be most grateful for any feedback or reaction to this whole run of columns—the proposed “method” as it now stands—and also specific thoughts about the question of how much written history of the organ or detailed discussion of stops and registration a book of this sort should include.

This month's column picks up exactly where last month's left off.

You will probably want to follow these composers' suggestions as closely as you can. The organ on which you are working may not have keyboards or stops with the same names as those that the composer has specifically mentioned. Keyboard names and stop names may not correspond perfectly in the ways that they are used or can be used, or in exactly what they sound like, especially if the organ on which you are playing belongs to a different school of organ building from what

the composer knew or expected. The Rückpositiv, Oberwerk, Grand Orgue, and Récit of the last two examples might have to be replaced by Great, Swell, Choir, Solo, perhaps Echo, and so on. And while there may be some correspondence among some of those names (“Great” = “Grand Orgue”; “Récit” = “Swell”), in fact, divisions with names that correspond or even that are exactly the same are not necessarily even similar. If you want to reproduce Buxtehude's R and O, you must try as best you can to figure out what sorts of sounds the composer expected from these keyboards and how they related to each other. The Oberwerk appears to be functioning as the echo sound, so presumably it is at least somewhat the quieter. Then, in the case of this piece, you can observe that both the Rückpositiv and the Oberwerk are played along with the Pedal division. So, if the balance is to be plausible throughout, the two manuals cannot be drastically different in volume, though they probably need to be somewhat different. You can try to reproduce these results using whatever keyboards your instrument has.

There are two important points about this:

1) If you are playing a piece on an instrument that really is very similar to what a composer had in mind, then you can rely on manual indications (and everything else about registration) quite closely.

2) The best way to learn how to use the keyboards and stops of the organ that you are using in a way that reflects what the composer might have expected is to hear or play instruments that are as much like what the composer knew as you can find. Once you internalize a sense of what the sounds indicated were like, or what a transition from one kind of sound to another was like, then you can work on finding those sounds and making those transitions work on your instrument. This will sometimes involve departing from the most closely corresponding stop names and keyboard names.

In pieces of music that do not have any indications about manual changes from the hand of the composer, a player can nonetheless decide to change manuals from time to time. The choice to do this or not to do it is in large part something that arises out of the artistic tastes (and philosophical stance) of that player. As you continue to play the organ, you

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can refine your sense of when and how (and also why) you might want to change manuals. If a piece clearly falls into sections, then it might seem to make sense to use manual changes to delineate those sections. (Be on the lookout, however, for the possibility that changes in the writing—texture, or compass, or use of rhythm, for example—might cause the same registration to sound different, as this might be what the composer had planned.) If a piece is quite unified from beginning to end, a manual change might seem disruptive—though it also might enhance interest by adding variety. If the transition points where you are thinking of moving the hands from one keyboard to another are awkward and disruptive, then you might well want to decide not to do that manual change, even if you would prefer to hear the two passages on different sounds from one another. (Awkward in this situation usually means breaking a musical line that you would otherwise want to hear as an ongoing phrase. This is not about articulation, since an ongoing phrase can include detached notes. It is only about the effect of the change of sound.) You can also look for another, more successful, transition point.

Manual changes sometimes take place in circumstances in which there is plenty of time, and the physical act of moving your hands from one keyboard to another does not seem like a challenge or like something that has to be learned and practiced. This is most clearly the case when the manual change takes place across a rest. This would be the case, for example, with a manual change from measure 9 to measure 10 in Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in D Major*, or immediately before the *Alla Breve*

section of the same piece. Later on, if you wish to change manuals to begin the section marked *Adagio*, you will probably find that the shape of the transition makes it seem leisurely enough to be physically easy, even though there is not a rest as such.

However, there are also manual changes that take place while the music is ongoing, sometimes while it is moving very quickly indeed. These might be called one-gesture manual changes: part of the choreography of the playing. For these situations, it is important to specifically practice executing manual changes quickly but smoothly.

Practicing a manual change

The key to beginning this sort of practice is to think of a one-gesture manual change as the act of *moving the arms to the plane of the new keyboard while the fingers just continue to play*. This is in lieu of thinking of this sort of manual change as a gesture led by the fingers. The following exercise will enable you to develop a solid feeling for this.

First, choose a very simple note pattern—one note at a time for one hand—that you can repeat indefinitely. This might well be a scale fragment such as that shown in Example 1, or something similar for the right hand, and an equivalent pattern—lower on the keyboard—for the left hand.

Play this pattern slowly, with whatever fingering seems simplest to you, on any organ keyboard. After a while, **move your arm and hand to another keyboard** at a point near the middle of your passage. **Then, when you arrive next at the beginning of the passage, move back to the starting keyboard.** This might look like Example 2.

Do this back and forth several times. Try not to look at your hands. Keep everything slow: not just the playing of the notes, but also the motion between keyboards. Try to feel that that motion takes place in the arm, and that the finger that is going to be first on the new keyboard each time just plays. Be sure that when you move from a higher to a lower keyboard that you do not land heavily on that lower keyboard.

When you have done this some with each hand and feel comfortable with it, **start moving between keyboards at closer intervals**, as shown in Example 3. (You should start this off at a slower tempo than where you left the example with the manual changes farther apart.)

This is still regular, planned motion. **The next step is again to play your pattern in a loop, but to change keyboards at random, unplanned times.** The simplicity and predictability of the pattern is crucial at this step: you shouldn't have to think about anything except the feeling of the motion of moving from one keyboard to another.

Next, go through this same procedure with a note pattern that is also very simple and predictable, but that covers a wider range on the keyboard, such as a scale through a whole octave or more, an arpeggio-based pattern, or a melody that you know extremely well. Continue to keep the hands separate.

The next two steps can be done in any order. The first is to go through the same process with patterns that are still utterly predictable but that involve more than one note at a time in one hand, as shown in Example 4.

If you are already getting comfortable with the process, you can probably start with the random changes of keyboard.

If this is at all uncomfortable, go back to a planned pattern for a while, such as every other chord.

The other step is to **combine the hands**. Use a parallel or mirror pattern, such as that shown in Example 5, or something else simple. Make the manual changes regular at first, and the same in each hand, as shown in Example 6. Then make them opposite but timed together, as shown in Example 7.

Next, you can make random manual changes, but still timed together in the hands. Finally, you can try to change each hand at random times, but not at the same time. This is extremely difficult: if it throws you off, you need not do it. You can come back to it later, or not. It is interesting to try, but in a sense beyond what you need to get used to for applying this technique to manual changes in music that will normally be planned. ■

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