Organ Method XVI

It has always struck me as interesting that changing fingers on repeated notes and substitution are so similar to one another in what they actually involve physically. Thus it makes sense to me to use one of them to introduce the other. It is also important to keep them straight: it is extremely common for students to fall into the habit of doing a substitution when they think that they are changing fingers from one note to the repetition of that note.

This continues without a break from last month's column.

A further practice step is to try patterns in which the hand plays more than one note at a time (Examples 1–4). The fingerings given above and below each line are alternates. There are other possibilities, for example, involving pairs such as 1/4 and 2/5. You can adapt these exercises in ways that occur to you, such as using black notes. Once again you should experiment with articulation. You can make non-repeated chords legato, and repeated chords any degree of non-legato; or try to match, as nearly identically as possible, the articulation of each of the motions from one chord to the next; or use a variety of non-legato articulations. Keep the hands light and relaxed, especially while releasing notes. Pay attention to the direction in which you release each finger when another finger is preparing to play that same note: up, down, slightly (or fully) to one side or the other. These logistic possibilities all have their place. They work out differently for players with varying relative finger lengths, and also for varying note patterns. It is your job to pay attention as you work on these exercises and figure out the most comfortable ways.

Repeated notes often occur in the context of ornaments, especially trills. The exercise in Example 5 allows you to practice that, assuming that you start each trill with the upper (auxiliary) note. You can play the opening note with 3 and each of the trills in succession with 4-3, or play the opening note with 2 and each of the trills with 3-2, or perhaps other patterns. You should adapt this exercise to other specific note patterns, including some involving black notes and the left hand. Do not worry about making the trills especially long or fast: the focus of practicing is the repeated note that initiates each trill.

Another ornament-based repeated note exercise, involving mordents, is shown in Example 6. You can play each quarter note with 3 and each mordent with 2-3-2, or other fingering patterns. For the purpose of this exercise it is only necessary that the final note of each mordent be played with a different finger from that which you want to use to play the following quarter note. Again, adapt this exercise to different specific note patterns and to the right hand.

Playing repeated notes with different fingers, in addition to giving the player more control over the timing, articulation, and sound of the repeated note patterns, also gives the player a free chance to re-position the hand. It can actually clarify and simplify fingering patterns for the passage around the repeated notes themselves. The excerpt from Rameau shown in Example 7 (part of the fifth of six variations on a *Gavotte in A Minor*) is an example of this, so extreme that if Rameau hadn't written it, anyone discussing the fingering of repeated notes would have had to do so.

For all players except those with the very largest hands, changing fingers on the repeated notes in each group of four sixteenth notes is actually necessary to permit the playing of the other sixteenth notes. The same is true in the left hand sixteenth note pattern in the sixth variation from the same piece (Example 8).

But in being necessary it also guides the shaping of all of the rest of the fingering in such a way that the passages are actually quite natural and straightforward to play. Each decision about what fingers to use on the first and second notes of each pair of repeated notes should be based on where your hand is coming from and where it is going. Example 9 shows one possible fingering for the left hand part of the preceding example.

In Example 10, from the Brahms chorale *Mein Jesu, der du mich*, there is a moment, at the beginning of the second full measure, where the use of a different finger on a repeated note makes it possible to set up a simple and effective fingering for the succeeding passage. (My suggested fingering is not the only way to do it.)

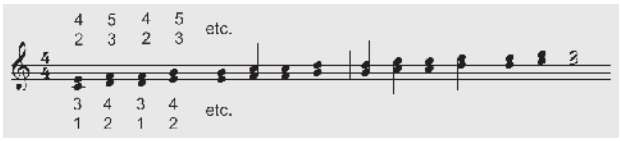
The musical advantages of using different fingers to play repeated notes can only be heard and felt if the hand is very relaxed and the touch smooth and fluid. Any repeated-note moment (such as the one in this Brahms example) is a good place to remember, recapture, and apply the feeling of lightness gained from the trill exercise described above.

Substitution

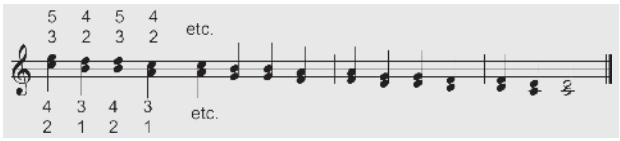
As opposed to changing fingers on *repeated* notes, the technique known as "substitution" is changing fingers on *held* notes. While these two techniques serve very different musical and technical purposes, and indeed are most typically associated with different historical periods and repertoire, they have so much in common technically as to be essentially versions of one another.

There are several things to bear in mind when beginning to work on substitution:

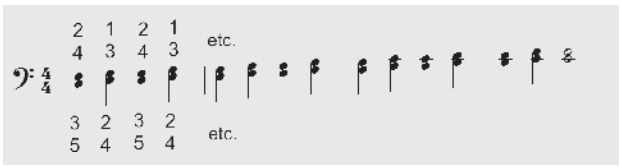
1) A substitution can be either measured—the new finger placed silently on the note at a predetermined time, probably defined in relation to the beat of the passage, or instant—that is, the new finger slides in to replace the original finger as part of the gesture whereby the original finger played the note in the first place. (Whereas the timing of finger change in a repeated-note passage is determined by the timing of that passage's notes.) A substitution can also be somewhat in-between: that is, not instant, not a one-gesture slide, but not specifically timed to be on a beat or subdivision of a beat. This latter is probably the most common in practice, though all are quite useful.



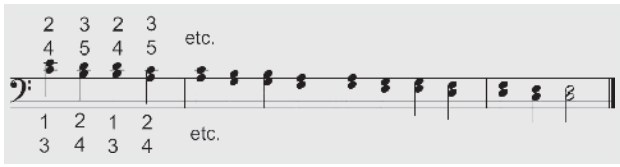
Example 1



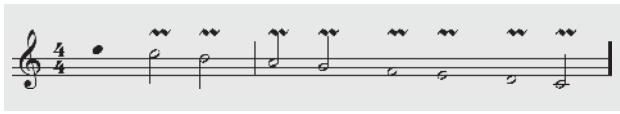
Example 2



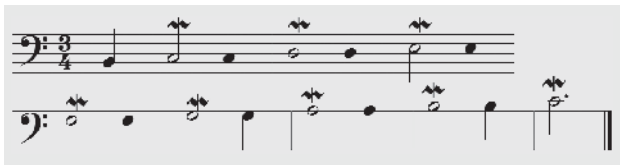
Example 3



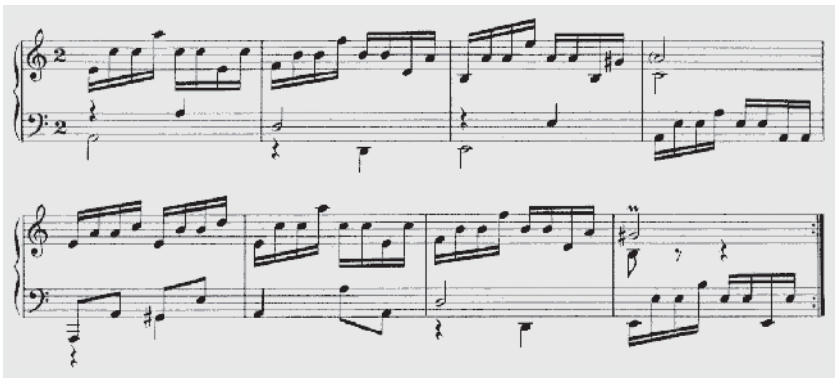
Example 4



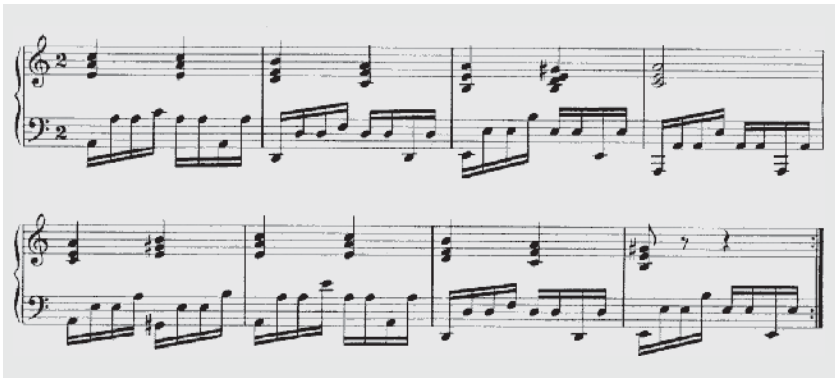
Example 5



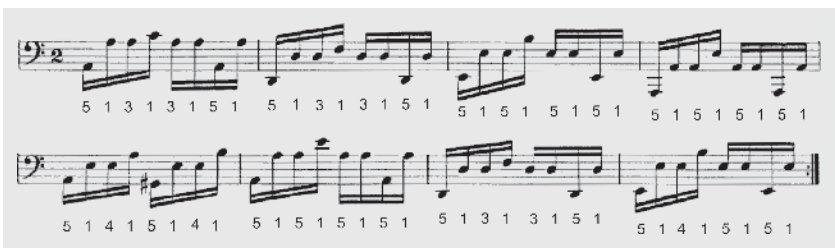
Example 6



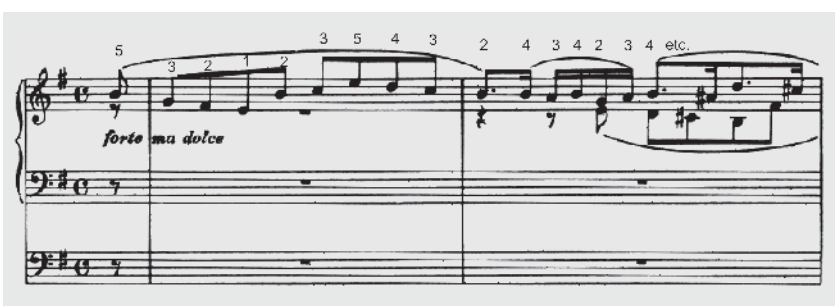
Example 7



Example 8



Example 9



Example 10

2) In any substitution there is likely to be something to observe about the specific direction in which the original finger departs and the direction from which the new finger arrives. It may make sense to get the original finger out of the way by lifting it up, moving it sideways, allowing it to curve downward, or something else, or some combination. The new finger can slide in under the old, or from above it, or from one side or the other. All of this affects or is affected by hand position and by the relative lengths of the fingers. It is not—since the substitution is silent in any case—something that affects the musical results. It is about comfort and reliability.

3) Substitution is generally associated with legato. The usual reason for introducing an extra gesture into the act of playing is to permit the hand to be in a position to play the next note or notes without having to release the existing note(s) in a way that creates an unwanted break. Sometimes, however, substitution simply seems to make a passage easier.

By Gavin Black

Different players develop different degrees of comfort with substitution and use it to differing extents.

4) Substitution is more likely to be necessary or to provide an appropriate solution for creating true legato in situations in which a hand is playing more than one note: counterpoint or chords. In single line textures, substitution is rarely necessary to effect a particular musical result. (When it is necessary, that is usually a result of something having to do with very wide intervals.) That is not to say that it is not often comfortable or convenient. Sometimes it can serve the same function as changing fingers on repeated notes in that it can allow the hand to reposition itself efficiently.

5) Substitution—unlike most of what most performing musicians do while playing—creates physical gestures that do not correspond to anything that the player or the listener actually hears. This can break or weaken or generally interfere with the player's ability to experience the rhythmic vitality of the music through the kinesthetic experience of playing. For some players this sense—almost of dancing to the music while playing, but doing so with the playing gestures themselves rather than by literal dancing—is a real and valuable aid to vivid and convincing performance. If the feeling that the hands (and perhaps feet) are doing things that aren't part of the rhythmic flow of the music seems, to a particular player, like a problem, then that player might well be inclined to use substitution less than other players. There are also ways of counteracting or compensating for that effect. At an early stage of learning organ, and of becoming comfortable with substitution, this is something to file away at the back of the mind, in case it seems like an issue to be dealt with later.

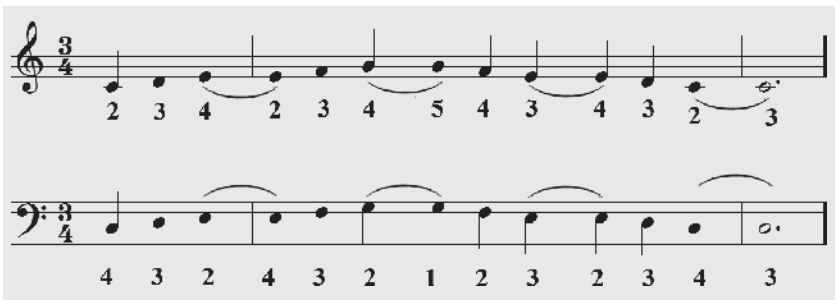
6) Sometimes a tendency to rely on substitution as an all-purpose way of finding notes (scrambling for notes, in effect) can lead a player—whether a student or otherwise—to cut short the process of working out good, efficient fingerings and then practicing those fingerings with enough focus and dedication to learn them. In this way, a heavy reliance on substitution—especially by a beginning or "intermediate" student—can actually damage the learning process, sometimes seriously. This is far from being a reason not to learn and work on substitution, since it is a valuable tool, and for some purposes a necessary one. It is simply something to watch out for.

The second exercise given above for changing fingers on repeated notes can be adapted as a good beginning point for practicing substitution, simply by tying the repeated notes, and keeping the fingering the same (Example 11).

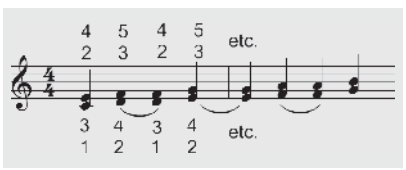
And this same note pattern can be used with an extremely wide variety of fingerings, since in principle any substitution is possible and is worth practicing. For example, the right hand fingering could be 3-4-5(1)-2-3-2-1(5)-4-3(5) (The parenthesis indicates substitution. In this fingering, the tied g' going from the second to the third measure does not have a substitution.) Another possibility would be 1-2-3(1)-2-3(1)-4-3(1)-3-2(1). These fingerings are musically random: their purpose is to help you get the feeling of different substitution patterns.

The two-note chord exercises above can also be adapted as substitution exercises (Example 12). With the same-note chords tied, the fingerings would be carried out as substitutions rather than as changes of fingering on newly played notes. This can be tried with other specific fingerings, and other similar note patterns, and of course also in the left hand.

In carrying out substitutions with multiple notes, it is important to do the individual substitutions in the correct order. The correct order is the one that is the most comfortable and natural physically. (Again, since the substitutions are silent, this is about physical comfort and reliability rather than any audible result.) Usually that means the order that keeps the hand small: that doesn't stretch the hand out any more than necessary. So, in the example above, the substitutions on the lower notes of the two note chords should be done first. It is always possible to figure out by trial and error which way is best.



Example 11



Example 12

Sometimes it is also possible to figure it out in advance by analysis of hand position. Performing multiple substitutions in the correct order also has the effect of allowing the whole hand to move in one gesture towards the next note or notes or towards its next position. It is extremely important to get this right. That can make the difference between a substitution's being easy and natural and its being both difficult and a potential source of strain or even of real injury.

Next month's column will continue with more exercises for substitution and examples drawn from the repertoire. ■

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