On Teaching

by Gavin Black

Leaving notes out

Last month I wrote about using altered rhythm as a practice technique. This month I am writing about another way of practicing that also involves changing the note picture away from what is actually on the page for the purpose of playing what is on the page better. Purposely leaving notes out of the texture of a piece at certain stages of practicing is very different from using altered rhythms. However, both techniques involve changing the notes—and both, therefore, are departures from "regular" practicing. The philosophy behind normal practicing at a keyboard instrument is, as I see it, simply that accurate repetition of a physical gesture will, in due course, lead to that gesture's becoming second nature. Most of what I have conveyed about practicing is more or less a gloss on that idea. Therefore, I think it is worth pointing out when the physical gestures being suggested are actually not those that will directly lead to playing the passage or piece accurately.

The positive effect on the learning process is less direct. Any student who is interested in altered rhythms as discussed last month, or in the technique discussed this month, must always remember that these techniques only supplement basic, regular practicing and cannot replace it. It is important to employ these unusual practice techniques in small doses, alternating with regular practicing of the same passages, so that the connection between the specialized practicing and the feeling of actually playing the passage being practiced is clear and vivid.

Expression through timing and articulation

At the organ—and also at the harpsichord—we cannot create accent, shape, phrasing, or rhythm by playing certain individual notes louder or softer than other notes. That is basic: in fact, for many pianists first coming to study organ or harpsichord it is almost the definition of those instruments. However, we *can* create accent, shape and so on at the organ or harpsichord—we do so by using, generally speaking, timing and articulation. (An interesting way to think of those two concepts, by the way, is this: that timing concerns initiating notes, and articulation concerns their release. This is also basic and perhaps obvious, but a good way of organizing thinking about execution of notes.)

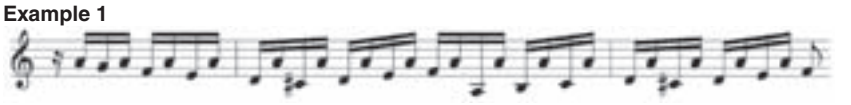
It is possible to spell out certain principles about the relationship between timing and articulation on the one hand, and accent, rhythm, phrasing, etc., on the other. For example, in general, notes that are held a bit longer than the metronome would suggest come out subjectively louder, notes that are preceded by a space—an articulation—likewise seem louder or accented, and so do notes that are delayed a little bit. Notes that are reached through strong legato often seem softer or unaccented, as do notes that are a bit shorter than the metronome would suggest, assuming that they are not so staccato as to draw attention to themselves. And so on: all of this is a bit over-simplified, though generally valid. None of it, however, is unfailingly true: a lot depends on the subtleties of the exact situation.

There is a lot that can be done, in any situation, to plan out the use of articulation and timing to create accent and shape, and doing so is important. However, there is also a danger. Schemes of articulation that are carefully thought out and mapped out can become stiff and lifeless. The act of thinking consciously about those schemes while actually playing can lead to stiff playing or can be a kind of distraction that decreases security and accuracy. I am deliberately somewhat overstating this problem: it happens sometimes to most of us; it is probably more of a problem for students. They often are vividly aware of their teachers paying attention, and they may be implementing articulation schemes and other performance ideas that the teacher helped to create or, in some case, just created. However, it is something that can happen to any player.

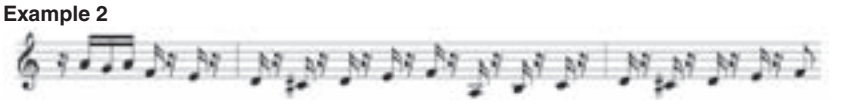
The point is this: if a player learning a passage can train the ears to *hear* more prominently those notes that are supposed to be in some way more prominent—accented notes, points of arrival, "louder" notes, notes that should seem to bloom or grow, as if a string player or singer were leaning into them after the initial attack—then the player's subconscious mind will find ways to make those notes more prominent. This process can both supplement and to some extent bypass or replace the process of logically working out what notes should be longer or shorter and how exactly the timing should be adjusted to give the desired effect. This phenomenon—the direct link between *hearing* prominent notes and *projecting* them as prominent—has an intuitive, improvisatory feel to it, which is intrinsically non-stiff and which serves as an antidote to stiffness.

It was Professor Eugene Roan who first mentioned this idea to me—somewhat cryptically. He said that "if you can hear it, it will move through your elbows to your hands" (or something like that) and invoked the idea of "magic." Whether it is magic or, as I suggested above, something to do with the subconscious—or both—I have found it very effective. From Prof. Roan's remark I have developed some specific techniques. I routinely use these myself with most of the pieces that I learn.

Example 1



Example 2



Example 3

Example 5

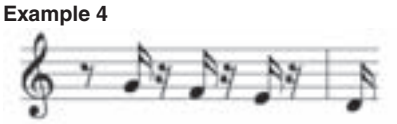
Practice procedures

Some musical lines lend themselves to the technique of leaving notes out in a way that seems almost too obvious, too easy—usually lines in which the rhythmic hierarchy of the notes is the clearest. The fugue subject from the Bach D-minor Toccata BWV 565 is such a line (Example 1).

The repeated A's—all off the beat—are notes that almost everyone analyzing this line would agree should be lighter, less accented, than the (changing) on-the-beat notes. If the theme were being played by a violin, the player would almost certainly make those notes quiet. Leaving those lighter notes out gives a line that looks like Example 2 or perhaps a line that should be thought of as that in Example 3, with variably detached eighth notes.

Notice that I have made the judgment that the first three sixteenth notes of the theme form a three-note upbeat and should not be stripped down. Someone else might see that differently and render the beginning of the theme as Example 4 and so on. This would be fine.

Example 4



The exercise is not about right or wrong: it is about thinking about what you want to hear, and then moving your ears closer to being able to hear it.

Once you have made a decision about which notes to leave out, the procedure for practicing is something like this:

1) **Play the rewritten line several times**. There is probably no reason not to use the fingering or pedaling that will be used for those notes when the whole thing is put back together. It is also not terribly important to do so. It is extremely important to keep the touch light—the success of this technique depends on that.

2) **Put the missing notes back**, and play the passage several times. At this stage (and always) it is still important to keep the touch light and fluid. Let your ears follow, as much as possible, the notes that you played in step 1. Don't pay too much attention to the notes that you have added back.

3) **Repeat 1) and 2)** a couple of times if you wish.

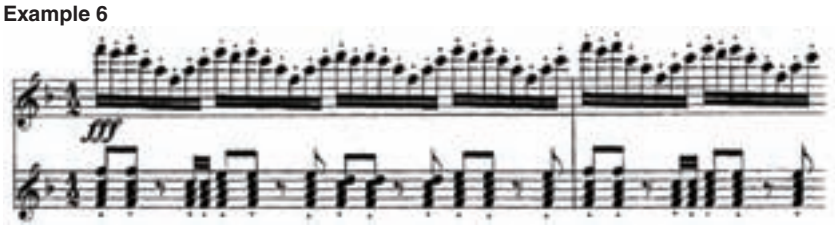
4) Now **do something else**: practice another passage—this way or "normally"—or have supper or go for a walk. When you next play the passage that you have worked on this way, it may feel or sound a bit different—more vivid, or more relaxed, or both. You don't have to scrutinize it or analyze it. If you happen to notice a difference, that is wonderful; if not, no harm done. The extra attention that you have paid to the passage will help solidify the learning of it in any case.

In the case of this Bach fugue subject, another step is putting the theme back together with the rest of the texture of the piece, or, to put it another way, continuing to use this technique as other voices come in. This immediately highlights the relationship between the fugue subject and the various eighth-note countersubjects. This piece is full to the brim of passages that can be approached this way—for example, the measures immediately following the second entrance of the fugue subject (Example 5).

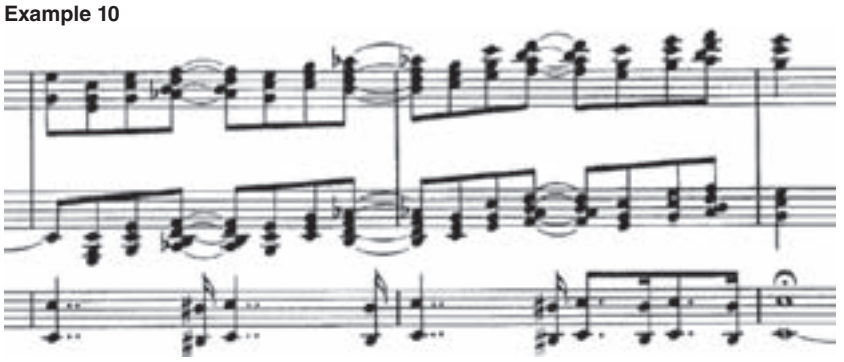
In this passage, leaving out the off-the-beat sixteenth notes in the lower voice—both with and without also playing the upper voice—is a good way to explore the rhythmic relationship between the voices. It should clarify the interaction between the implied detached eighth notes of the lower voice and the actual eighth notes in the upper voice.

In the opening of the famous Widor Toccata there are all sorts of possibilities for leaving notes out (Example 6). Any of the following might be illuminating:

Example 6

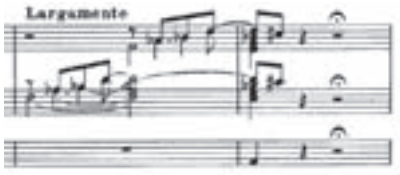


Example 10

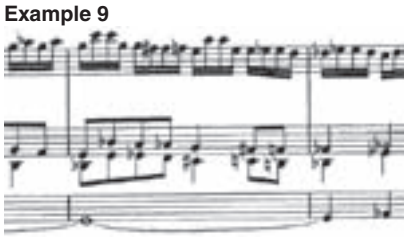


Example 7

Example 8



Example 9



1) Play the first three sixteenth notes of each beat in the right hand and leave out everything else; play the left hand as is.

2) Play the notes found on the first and fourth eighth notes of each half-note beat, in both hands, and leave out everything else. (These are the places where the pedal plays when it comes in.)

3) Play the right hand as is, and in the left hand only play the chords that fall on half-note beats.

4) An idea that is quite specialized and geared to this passage: play the right hand as is on a loud sound, and in the left hand—on a softer sound—play the chord on each half-note beat, and hold it for the entire half note. When you restore the written rhythm and texture, this will perhaps guide you towards hearing all of the off-the-beat left-hand chords as growing out of the reverberation or bloom of the on-the-beat chords.

There are probably many more possibilities as well. The process of figuring out what scheme of omitting notes might make sense is itself a good learning opportunity.

In a passage whose rhythm is less regular, or in which the hierarchy of beats is less clear, it might take more analysis to discover what pattern of omitting notes makes sense, if any. It is also probably true that the less clear it is what notes might be omitted to create an exercise of this sort, the less compellingly useful the exercise will be. However, it never hurts to try it out.

In the Franck *Choral in A Minor*, for example, there are several unusual ways of applying this idea. I like to hear each half of the opening measure as having a diminuendo to it, or, perhaps more accurately, I like to hear the last three sixteenth notes of each half measure as being an "after-beat" to the second or fourth quarter note. Therefore I would play the opening a few times like Example 7.

I like to think of the first note of measure 7 as being quiet: a diminuendo coming off the suspension over the bar line (Example 8). I would consider trying this phrase leaving the C$^{\#}$'s out. This would be jarring and unsatisfying harmonically, but might train the ears to play the notes "quietly." In various passages that have writing like that in the right hand part here (Example 9) I would try leaving out the off-the-beat sixteenth notes. And in this passage (Example 10) I would try leaving out the (double) pedal sixteenth notes. In this case, it is important to release the octave E's, which have temporarily become repeated notes, smoothly and in plenty of time, so that when you add the D$^{\#}$'s back in, your feet will not have grown accustomed to being stuck on the E's.

There are, in any piece, many possibilities for leaving out notes that you think of as being quieter. As I am suggesting, there is nothing wrong with simply trying such things out. Even if a particular practice pattern ends up seeming not to have made much difference, the process of working on it still has not been wasted. As I alluded to above (and elsewhere), anything that makes you notice more of what is going on in a piece will contribute to the learning of the piece and to its becoming increasingly solid. Students—and teachers—can play around with the idea.

It is worth mentioning one more time the importance of light touch in this particular context. In order for the magic to work—or for the subconscious to guide the hands and feet to do subtle things, too subtle to describe analytically—it is important that there be no tension. Tension or tightness will make it much harder for the subtleties heard by the ear to express themselves in the fingers—perhaps impossible. ■

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Music for Voices and Organ

by James McCray

Sacred choral music with brass

> The role of musical instruments in the worship of God has had a strange history. Even more strange is the fact that they should be questioned after 2,300 years of recitation of the 150th Psalm with its exhortation to praise Him with the trumpet, pipe, cymbals, and strings!
>
> Winfred Douglas
> *Church Music in History and Practice*

Although Easter services in America often feature brass instruments playing with the church choir, it is far less common to find them used with anthems at other times of the church year. Of course, they are sometimes used when the choir is performing extended works such as cantatas, but, in general, directors rarely have the budget to hire outside musicians for regular Sunday services. Today, the presence of brass has become a treat, not a commandment as suggested in Psalm 150.

Nevertheless, the reviews below emphasize anthems that are not necessarily for Easter, in the hope of encouraging conductors to find ways to add brass on less festive Sundays. A director's goal is to enhance the worship service in a meaningful way. As noted in Judges, chapter 6, verse 4: "The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet." So, help bring the spirit to the congregation by having trumpets (i.e., brass) blow on several Sundays throughout the church seasons, not just the first Sunday of Easter.

Directors should also seek out and purchase music for brass quartet or other combinations of brass instruments. This makes it simple to insert special music into the offertory slot or as an accompaniment to a hymn; that will more easily justify the extra expense of hiring brass to play with the choir's anthem. It is not often that churches have advanced brass performers in their congregation who are readily available to play for free; so in most cases, outside musicians usually are required. Instrumental brass music is usually published in collections and the cost is relatively modest. For example, *Hymns for Brass*, Sets I and II (Augsburg Fortress) by Miles Johnson, is a standard collection of easy, functional arrangements.

Congregations usually respond very favorably to having additional instruments in the service, *if* the volume of sound is not too loud. In my experience, I have had more complaints about the loudness of the instruments from the congregation (and the choir) than any other single concern. This has been understood throughout history and pointed out by John Tyle as early as 1580 when he said: "Instruments sound sweetest when they be touched softest." This is the problem that requires the most attention from the director; even placement of the brass within the church is paramount to its musical success. Adding brass to the choir has its challenges, but it clearly will reap benefits when they are carefully controlled and perform with effective balance with the choir.

Choir with solo brass instrument

***All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*, arr. Michael McCabe. SATB, trumpet, organ, and congregation, Paraclete Press, PPM01222, $2.20 (M).**

This popular hymn uses all six verses, with three employing the congregation; their music is on the back cover for duplication. A transposed trumpet part is not included; the trumpet only plays on the first and last verses. Several of the verses are in unison or two parts, and one is indicated for unaccompanied four-part choir. The music is majestic and not difficult, and will be appropriate for several special times throughout the church year.

***Neither Death nor Life*, Jonathan Crutchfield. SATB, solo medium voice, and organ with optional solo horn. MorningStar Music Publishers, MSM-50-9820, $1.85 (M).**

The optional solo horn part is on the back cover and it plays during only 22 of the 62 total measures. The setting opens with an ad libitum solo that leads to a four-part unaccompanied, syllabic choral passage; the vocal solo returns at two other places in the work. The organ part, on two staves, is very easy. The text, by H. Stephen Shoemaker, is comforting and reassuring. This work is also available from the publisher for brass quintet.

***The Lord Will Reign For Ever*, James Biery. SATB, trumpet, and organ, MorningStar Music Publishers, MSM-50-8920, $2.25 (M+).**

This communion anthem for Christ the King Sunday has a busy and soloistic organ part with some challenging passages; its music is more difficult than that for the choir, who generally sing syllabic rhythmic statements. The trumpet part features brief fanfare outbursts and is used throughout the setting. This triumphant anthem will be