



Hook #466, 1868 (photo by William T. Van Pelt)

home of J. P. Morgan with 250 electric lights on Thursday, June 8, 1882.² Ernest Skinner was committed to the use of direct-current electricity to operate the actions of his organs by about 1904.

The two Hook organs are pretty similar (see photo: Hook #466). Opus 529 has a Great Trumpet and a Swell 2' stop not found in Opus 466—otherwise the stoplists are identical. The voicing is brilliant and clear, and the cases are made of black walnut. The sharp keys of Opus 466 are higher and wider than those of Opus 529, as if the builders realized that they were uncomfortable to the player and changed them in the intervening two years. Both of these organs have been renovated and are in terrific playing condition (see photo: Hook #529).

The Skinner organ is about 60 years newer than those Hook organs, but 80 years qualifies it as old. It has the symphonic voicing characteristic of Mr. Skinner's vision. Many organists agree that the sharp keys on Skinner keyboards are as comfortable as any to the player. There's a simple combination action, a concave-radiating pedalboard, and Skinner's very effective eight-stage whiffle-tree engine.

(Here's our second allusion to horses—a whiffle-tree is the rig used to connect a team of horses to a carriage that allows each horse to pull independently while the horsepower of all of them is added together. Mr. Skinner's Swell engine incorporates the whiffle-tree concept to allow the pneumatic for each stage to move the shutters independently, with the motion of all pneumatics combining to provide the full range of power and motion of the shutters. Skinner made these motors in eight- and sixteen-stage versions.)

While the Hook and Skinner organs are very different, they have in common an essential element: all three of these organs are absolutely vital and appropriate for modern use. While you can say a modern organ is different, you cannot say that it's better. Automobiles and railroad trains have been improved immeasurably over the years, but a pipe organ that's 80 or even 140 years old is an organ for today. It's timeless.

It's amazing that you can play music written a year or two ago on an organ built just after the Civil War. How did



Hook #529, 1870 (photo by John Bishop)

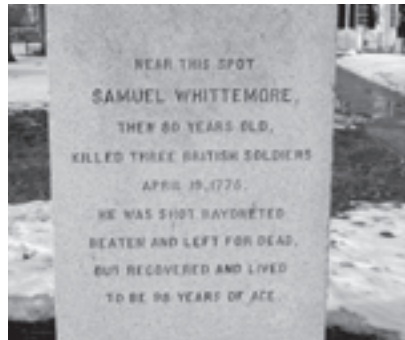
the brothers Hook conceive of instruments that would be so useful now? Did Mr. Skinner know that his organs would sound good to people living and working in the twenty-first century? (Actually, from what I've read about him, he may have thought that his organs would be the only instruments worth playing in the twenty-first century!)

Many modern organists prefer to play instruments festooned with lots of electric and solid-state gadgets. Pistons and toe-studs with sequencers and multiple memories, transposers, and programmable crescendos are the playthings of the modern organist. There's no question that gear like that allows ever more flexibility of registration, and after all, registration is one of the organist's most important expressive tools; but the three organs I'm thinking about today all have fewer than 20 ranks and each of them are easily and effectively played without sophisticated modern controls.

And by the way, these three organs are within three miles of each other in Medford, Arlington, and Lexington, Massachusetts. Let me know when you're coming to the area and I'll organize your visit. You history buffs will be interested to know that the addresses of these churches (High Street in Medford and Massachusetts Avenue in Arlington and Lexington) are all on the route of Paul Revere's famous ride on April 18, 1775 (Mozart was nineteen years old), warning the militias of towns in Middlesex County of the approach of the British soldiers ("Redcoats") in the hours before the start of America's Revolutionary War. Your visit could include a whole range of historical interest.

I'm especially fond of an historical marker in Arlington Center that tells of an 80-year-old patriot who killed three British soldiers on April 19, 1775: "... He was shot bayoneted beaten and left for dead, but recovered and lived to be 98 years of age" (see photo: Samuel Whittemore).

It may not make much sense to compare the timelessness of a work of art with the advance of technology. The use-



Samuel Whittemore (photo by John Bishop)

fulness of a modern automobile is relevant to today's conditions. We expect to be able to drive at 70 miles per hour for hours without stopping, no matter what the weather. But we look at a Renaissance painting and appreciate its content and composition as well as the technique and vision of the artist, even if we could produce a more authentic image of the same scene with our 8.0-megapixel digital camera.

I believe that advanced technology has generally added to our world. I'm pleased with the BlackBerry that allows me to check e-mails in a taxicab. While I'm annoyed by people who use their cell phones rudely, I sure find it a convenience to have one when I'm traveling. (Maybe rude people will be rude no matter what equipment they have.) But I believe the advance of technology in the world of the organ has led to the compromise of authenticity. Solid-state switching has added much to the art of organ playing, but in my opinion, digital sound has not. The majesty of air-powered sound in a large building or the intimacy of air-powered sound in a small room is not improved upon with digital reproduction. It is not a musical, artistic, or liturgical advantage to introduce the specifications of a 100-stop organ in a 100-seat room. It is not a musical, artistic, or liturgical advantage to introduce the pitch produced by a 32-foot pipe in a room with a 15-foot ceiling. And it is not a musical, artistic, or liturgical advantage to have an antiphonal organ with Trompettes-en-chamade in a room with a 50-foot center aisle. A bride can walk that far in about eight measures of Purcell—why make such a racket?

Digital instruments are often purchased by small churches whose members claim there's no space for an organ. But these churches are typically trying to get a large three-manual organ into their small room. Of course there's not enough room. A room that seats 100 people needs an organ of eight stops. Don't tell me you can't play Widor on an eight-stop organ. I know that. I don't want to hear Widor in a 100-seat room.

Funny, I don't mind rolling up the windows of the car, turning on the air-conditioner, and enjoying a cup of coffee while listening to Widor played on Widor's organ at full volume. Keeps me off the phone!

Notes

1. <www.wmfry.org>, Railway history.
2. Jill Jonnes, *Empires of Light* (New York, Random House, 2003), page 6.

On Teaching

by Gavin Black



Counterpoint III


This month I want to outline, as systematically as I can, a method for taking any contrapuntal keyboard piece apart into separate voices, practicing those voices separately, and putting the piece back together. This builds on some of the ideas discussed in the last two columns. I will also begin to discuss motivic analysis, which I will expand upon next month in wrapping up this series on counterpoint.

To begin with, I will mention some of the reasons for approaching this kind of music in this way, since it involves, up front at least, more work than it would take just to finger and practice the piece. Any student who is being asked to put in this extra work deserves to know why it is being suggested, and thus to have a chance to become convinced of it and motivated, inwardly and enthusiastically, to do it. The first reason is in a sense philosophical. If a piece is convincingly contrapuntal—written in voices that are completely or very largely consistent, that is, each is a coherent melody from the beginning of the piece to the end—then the composer certainly wrote it that way on purpose. Therefore it makes sense to assume that the performer ought to understand it that way as well, at least as a point of departure for making decisions as to how best to play the piece. This is somewhat analogous to an actor's knowing the grammar and syntax of the language in which a play is written before performing in that play. It is possible to learn a part phonetically, in a language that you do not understand, but this is unlikely to lead to convincing rendering of the phrases and sentences, or possibly even of the words.

A second reason arises out of the first one. An actor playing a part in a language that he or she doesn't understand might be able to give a convincing performance of that part through coaching. That is, someone who does understand the language could demonstrate ways of speaking the words and phrases that are appropriate, and the actor could mimic that native speaker. This could perhaps

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provide one—but certainly only one—convincing performance. However, it would deny the actor any scope to vary and develop that performance or to opt for a different interpretation. Likewise, a student working on a contrapuntal piece can certainly be coached by someone—possibly the teacher—towards a performance of that piece, through that coach's suggesting phrasings and articulations and other interpretive details. A conscientious student could realize those suggestions and thereby give a performance that might be well worth listening to. However, the student would not have much basis on which to vary or change that interpretation, and would not really have learned anything much about interpretation or performance. The notion that a teacher ought not to tell a student how to interpret a piece but rather let the student work out and discover interpretive ideas him- or herself is of course something that applies equally well (or equally poorly: it is in fact a controversial idea, though one that I believe in strongly) to any music, contrapuntal or not. If, however, we accept for the moment that a student should have maximum autonomy in shaping interpretation and performance, then certainly for counterpoint the more intimately familiar the student is with the voices the more he or she will be able to focus on shaping those voices and bringing them to life.

A third reason is that the ears and the mind can follow what they recognize. If you enter a room in which half a dozen people are talking out loud in six different languages that you do not know, you will hear a blur of sound, a cacophony. If, however, you do know one of the languages, you will be able to follow what the person speaking that language is saying. Those sounds will form themselves in your mind into words and phrases, and separate themselves out from the rest of the decibels. Likewise, if the ears and mind of a player know and can recognize each of the melodies that are going on at once in a contrapuntal passage, that player will have a good chance of being able to follow each of those voices as a discrete melody. The best way to predispose one's ears to recognize each melody amongst all of the others is to have listened to it independently, enough times to have almost memorized it, not necessarily to be able to play it without music, but to be able to anticipate in the mind where it is going next. If a student, or any player, has only heard each voice while also hearing other voices then it will be unnecessarily difficult to hear the voices independently, and difficult to come up with—or indeed to implement—any interpretive ideas.

The fourth reason is of a different sort. I said above that working out a piece one voice at a time involves more work *up front*. The fortunate fact, however, is that this approach actually saves time and makes things easier in the long run. If a player's ears and mind know—in the manner discussed in the previous paragraph—what the voices are doing and where they are going, then at the stage of fingering, pedaling, and learning the whole texture of the piece, the fingers

and feet will have much less tendency to stumble or hesitate than they would if this first stage of learning has been omitted or shortchanged. This is emphatically true even though the fingerings will almost always be different for separate voices than for those same voices as part of the complete texture.

Working out a given piece this way saves time in learning that piece. It is also true that working out several pieces in this way saves a substantial amount of time in learning the next piece and the one after that, and so on. This is especially true within a particular style or compositional type. So, for example, if a student takes the time to learn three Bach fugues by studying the voices as rigorously as possible, then the next Bach fugue that he or she works on will go very quickly, and might even seem “easy,” or almost so! (certainly “easier”). Working on these Bach fugues will not help as much with a piece by Cavazzoni, Louis Couperin, Reger or Moondog. It will help some, but each new style or type of music has its own quirks and tendencies that can best be learned by working on that type of music. Also, any piece worked out in the manner described below will be very solidly learned, and not easily forgotten.

So here are the steps to follow in taking the voices of a contrapuntal piece apart and then putting them back together again:

1) First, **it is important that the act of reading the voices not be an impediment to fluent practicing.** The student should already have spent some time going over the art of reading individual voices in a keyboard score, as discussed last month. However, if the teasing out of the voices still seems difficult, then prior to practicing the voices, this reading should be made easier. This can be done by highlighting voices in the score, by acquiring several copies of the score and highlighting each voice in a different copy, or by writing out the piece in open score. (The latter can nowadays sometimes be done most easily by computer.) Some pieces are indeed available in open score, either through a bookstore or online. In any case, the literal reading of the voices should be made as little a problem as it can be. It is also a good idea, for the first few instances of a student's working out a piece this way, to choose music that is easier rather than harder to read, say a three-part invention or a chorale prelude in which only the middle two voices are written together on a staff, rather than a five voice fugue on two lines.

2) It is a good idea, as with most kinds of practicing, to **work with small and manageable sections of music.** These can be as short as a few measures at a time. It is fine to let the working sections coincide with musical sections of a piece—a fugue exposition, or a phrase of a chorale—but this is also not necessary. It is also not necessary to start at the beginning of a piece.

3) Once a section of music has been chosen to work on, the student should go through and **play each voice of that section as many times as necessary to make each voice seem famil-**

iar—really familiar. That is, the student should stick to separate individual voices until he or she could sing those voices in the shower without having to stop and think about it. Each voice should seem as familiar as “Happy Birthday” or “Jingle Bells.” The physical practicing of the separate voices, at this stage, need not correspond particularly to the way they will be practiced later as part of the whole texture. For example, an inner voice that will end up passing back and forth between the hands should be practiced—at this point—by one hand or the other. (In fact, both hands should take turns playing it, in preparation for 4) below.) It is also acceptable to play a pedal line in the left hand, if that would facilitate this process, while also spending time practicing it in the pedals. None of this, as I mentioned above, will end up creating problems. When the time comes to put the whole texture back together, the advantages gained by the ears' extraordinary familiarity with the voices will outweigh any memory that the fingers might have of having played the notes with a wrong fingering. It is also OK to keep the voices slower than they will end up being later on.

4) Next, the student should **put all of the possible pairs of voices together.** This is the most important step in this process, and the prior steps really exist to make this step work as easily and thus as fruitfully as possible. In a three-voice piece there are three pairs of voices [SA, SB, AB]. In a four-voice piece there are six [SA, ST, SB, AT, AB, TB], and in a five-voice piece there are ten [SA, ST1, ST2, SB, AT1, and many more!]. (This count is a good reason to start with a three-voice piece in learning and implementing this technique.) In principle, all of the pairs of voices are equally important, and each pair has the potential to reveal interesting things about the ways in which the voices interact. It is important to practice all of the pairs an ample amount, but in particular not to short-change the pairs that are, just because of acoustics, harder to follow in the full texture. These are, usually, pairs involving inner voices or non-adjacent voices. Although the mere playing of these pairs of voices—with the ears becoming more and more attuned to them at a subliminal level—is the main point of this exercise, this is also a good stage at which to begin to notice specific things about the ways in which voices interact. In playing a particular pair of voices, do you hear echoes or repetition of motivic material, or anything that sounds like question and answer? Are there interesting rhythmic relationships between voices? Are there passages in which the phenomenon of quicker notes in one voice against slower notes in another voice is significant? This is a good time to notice anything and everything that happens more than once (something that I will discuss at much greater length next month). Is there a leap of a fourth in one voice, followed by a leap of a fourth in the other voice a little bit later? Are they both up, or down, or are they opposite? Is there a rhythm in one voice that is taken up later in the other voice? In augmentation or diminution? Does the soprano voice reach its highest note at the same time that the bass voice reaches its lowest? Or its *highest*? Everything like this is worth noticing, even though certainly not all of it has a definable or important theoretical role (and even though it is utterly impossible to notice *everything*: that cannot be the goal).

5) Once the pairs have all been played a lot and feel comfortable, the student should step back, **work out fingerings and pedalings for the whole texture of the piece or passage**, and begin to practice it in his or her normal way. This can, and usually should, include separate hands and feet (as opposed to separate voices), and slow practicing. I believe that it is not necessary to practice all of the groups of three voices in a four-voice piece, or all of the groups or three and four voices in a five-voice piece. If the player's ears hear the individual voices and the pairs of voices clearly, then the whole texture will fall into place nicely.

Next month I will discuss approaches to motivic analysis and other kinds of analysis in learning contrapuntal music, and will wrap up a few odds and ends. ■

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Music for Voices and organ

by James McCray

Christmas music

Let our gladness have no end, Hallelujah!
For to earth did Christ descend, Hallelujah!
On this day God gave us Christ the Son to save us.

—15th Century Bohemian Carol
Anonymous

Each year as congregations sing Christmas carols the quotidian problems of punctuations are overlooked. The music long associated with Christmas texts has morphed the words into something different in meaning. For example, notice the comma in “God rest ye merry, gentlemen”; the musical line seems to ignore it. Mentally sing the opening phrase and it seems to suggest a punctuation of “God rest ye, merry gentlemen.” Or consider the setting of the Charles Wesley text with its exclamation point: “Hark! The herald angels sing.” Many composers would probably set the first word off in some way rather than as a connected musical line. Compare this music with that sung to “Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming,” which begins with a long note on “Lo.”

Of course, to truly give proper analysis to these kinds of matters, one must look carefully at the original language used. However, the point is that as traditions evolve there is an emotional acceptance that ignores intellectual understanding. In English, the French carol “Angels We Have Heard on High” grammatically should be “We have heard angels on high”; try singing it that way to the familiar melody and notice that it is more clearly understood, especially when connected to the second phrase (“sweetly singing o'er the plains”). I guess we should just chalk it all up to “poetic or artistic license.”

A long-standing issue of the season is the appropriateness of the text to the liturgy. As mentioned so often in previous columns, Christmastide is post-birth; Advent is pre-birth. Since most congregations so enjoy the familiar Christmas carols there is a tendency to introduce them into the service earlier in Decem-



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