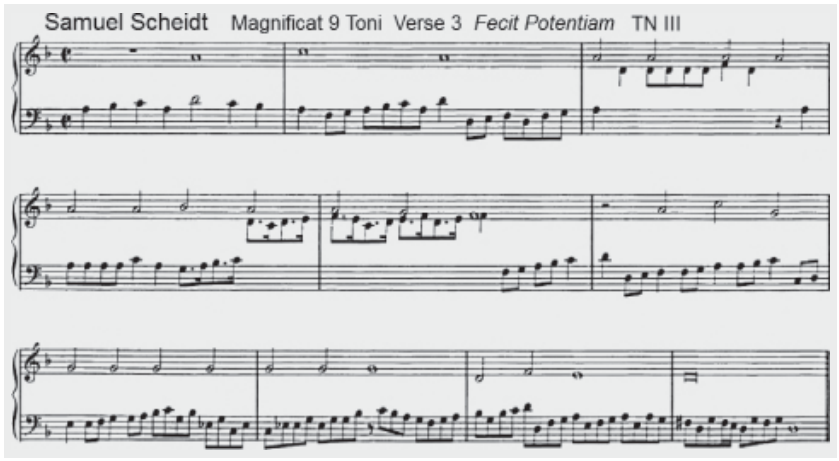
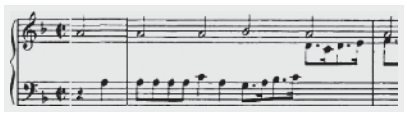
Organ Method XII

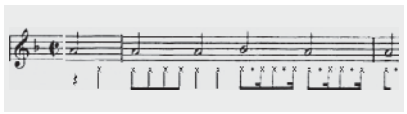
I begin this column with the last two paragraphs of the previous, for better continuity and to allow the reader to follow the process I am describing easily without having to refer to last month's issue. Also, I have again included the Scheidt piece (Example 1) as this discussion continues. My book will contain a repertoire list with annotations at the end of the method, and students will be given guidelines to find further two-voice pieces for practicing, as well as for other purposes.



Example 1



Example 2



Example 3

Once you have chosen fingering and practiced the same measure (or measure and a half) of each hand—remembering that the left hand will require more attention and repetition, and remembering to practice each hand enough that it is really learned—then you are ready to put the two hands together. You will probably have to reduce the tempo a bit from whatever speed each hand separately had reached while practicing them individually. (It is all right for the two hands to have reached different tempos in separate practicing, as long as you now slow things down to accommodate the extra complexity of putting both hands together.) In any case, since the purpose of this exercise right now is to help you become increasingly comfortable putting the two hands together, there is nothing to be gained by speed. There is a lot to be gained by good focus.

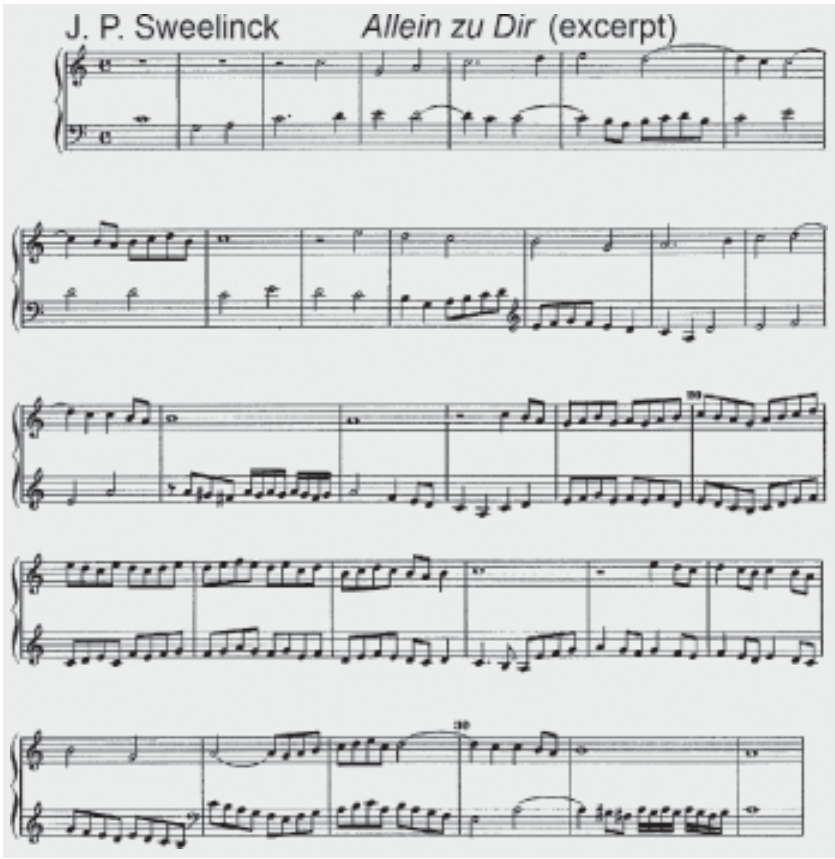
In putting the hands together in a passage, make sure that you remind yourself in advance of the note on which each hand will start—especially if the two hands do not come in together. In the beginning of this piece, the right hand comes in well after the left hand, so you should be thinking ahead a little bit to avoid hesitation at that spot. It is not necessary to have the correct finger actually touching the note before playing it, but it is important to be conscious of what the note will be and to keep your hand nearby.

I will use the section starting at the end of measure three of the piece, shown in Example 2, to discuss some details of the procedure for practicing hands together.

First, there are two assumptions: that you have already worked out fingering, and that you have practiced each hand separately until it is thoroughly learned. (A very suitable fingering pattern for the right hand would be 2-3-2-3-2-3, but, since the notes don't range very far, almost any fingering that respects the right way of playing the repeated notes will work well. For the left hand one good pattern is 4-3-4-3-4-2-4-5-4-3-2-1-2-1-2-1, and of course there are other possibilities.)

Even though you have practiced each hand separately well enough to consider it learned, you should begin the process of putting the two hands together by playing through each hand once, starting with whichever hand you think is less difficult. As you do this, you should hear or imagine the other voice, especially its rhythm. With the passage shown in Example 3, that is most important while running through the right hand part, since the left hand rhythm is more challenging

After you have run through the hands separately—more difficult hand last—start playing the two hands together. Again, the tempo for this will have to be slower than the tempo at which you were able to play each hand separately, since the level of complexity has gone up. To find an appropriate beginning practice tempo, try starting with a steady slow beat in your head that represents the shortest (quickest) note value that is found in the passage. In this case, that is the sixteenth note. Get used to this beat before you start playing. (A slowly dripping water faucet is the image that I like to use for this kind of slow, steady beat.)



Example 4

You will find yourself counting four of these slow sixteenth notes between the time that you play the first note in the right hand and the moment when you are supposed to play the first left hand note, and then the same again before it is time to play the next note in each

hand. Take advantage of this time to look ahead to what the next note(s) is/are: be ready to play it (them) on time. If it is impossible to do so, or if it feels like an emergency or a scramble, the tempo is too fast. If it happens comfortably, the tempo is right. It is important that the slow beat in your head be steady; it is not important for it to have numbers or syllables that relate it to the measures or to the time signature. If you want to do that sort of counting—one-eh-and-eh, or something similar—that is fine. However, it is not necessary or particularly relevant to this sort of practicing, and if it is even a little bit distracting or confusing, then you should certainly not do it. A steady beat just needs to be a steady beat.

During this systematic early practicing, you should look at your hands as little as possible. In fact you probably don't need to look at your hands at all. If you think you have to look to find a particular note, you should challenge yourself not to: at least try not looking every other time, or two times out of three. One purpose of not looking at your hands is to look at the music: to be very conscious and purposeful about knowing what notes come next. The cause of most wrong notes in keyboard playing is not knowing what the next note is supposed to be. The other compelling reason for not looking at your hands is that every time you find a note by looking, you pass up a chance to improve your kinesthetic sense of the keyboard and thus the security of your playing.

The next step in putting the hands together is to increase the tempo gradually. After you have played through the passage several times at your extremely slow and comfortable starting tempo, and only when you feel that that has become really easy, you should increase the tempo a little bit. Let yourself hear your slow beat get a little bit faster in your head, and then start the passage at that new tempo. If you have increased the tempo by a small enough amount, then that new tempo should work: that is, playing the passage at that tempo should be possible with accuracy and without a sense of emergency, though it won't at first be as easy or as nearly automatic as the slower tempo was. If the passage falls apart, then you hadn't practiced enough at the slower tempo, or (more likely) you increased the tempo by too large an amount at once. If this happens, play the passage a few more times at your slow starting tempo, then increase that tempo by less than you did on the first attempt.

After you have become accustomed to your new (second) tempo, you can increase the tempo a little bit more. This is the basic process for practicing anything, and any passage that you can play very slowly you can learn to play at any tempo. For the purpose of becoming comfortable putting two hands together, there is no reason to play this Scheidt piece (or other pieces) very fast. However, it is important to work on the process of speeding up gradually. You should expect to take each measure or measure-and-a-half section of the piece through three or four noticeable (though slight) increases in tempo.

(It is certainly fine to organize your practice tempos with the help of a metronome: that is, to figure out the metronome marking of the tempo at which you start the practicing process, and then use the metronome to find the next tempo, and each of the subsequent slightly faster tempos. At this stage, however, it is better practice not to play along with the metronome, but rather to call on yourself to keep a steady beat in your head. I will discuss various aspects of metronome use later on.)

When you have worked carefully on two adjacent short excerpts from this piece, then it is time to put them together: to start at the beginning of the first one and play both without stopping. In this way you will build up the whole piece. Of course, this is very careful and systematic, as practicing should always be. You will not, however, always have to break pieces up into small chunks. That is a good, effective way to begin, and you will always go back to it for pieces that are complex, long, or just plain hard.

As you work on this Scheidt piece, alternate playing both hands on the same keyboard with playing each hand on a different keyboard, in all of the arrangements that are available on the organ that your are using: adjacent or non-adjacent keyboards, right hand higher, left hand higher. Practice with all sorts of different registrations—just make sure that neither hand drowns the other out. Notice that in the middle of measure 5, the fingering will be in effect a little bit different depending on whether you are playing on one keyboard or on two. That is, on one keyboard you need not play the f' with both hands: choose one.

Example 4 is an excerpt from a two-voice piece by Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562–1621) in which the two hands are in canon with each other, and therefore play parts that are similar in complexity. You can work on this in the way that I have described above. A list of further repertoire suggestions for work on putting together two-voice pieces is found in an appendix near the end of the book.

When you have become comfortable putting the hands together in pieces in which each hand plays one line, there are two next steps that can be worked on at the same time as one another: learning exercises and pieces in which each hand plays more than one note, and beginning to put the hands together with the pedals. Putting hands and feet together is the subject of the next chapter. What follows here is a discussion of playing more than one note in a hand, with some exercises and examples.

(This discussion will be continued in next month's column). ■

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