By Gavin Black

Organ Method XVIII

This month, I begin a section on putting hands and feet together. It is surprisingly straightforward. That is, if a student has become a comfortable player of pedal parts, is also comfortable playing music at a keyboard, and has not tried to put manual parts and pedal parts together prematurely (which can result in a loss of confidence and developing of bad habits), then the act of putting hands and feet together is quite natural. Learning to play manuals and pedals together in the first place requires a lot of work, and learning any given organ piece might require patient work at any stage of a player's career. But it is possible for that effort to feel comfortable, and it should yield prompt and easily discernible results. I am trying to frame this for students in such a way that they can use this approach themselves without a teacher, but also so that a teacher can participate in the process, keep track of how it is going, and help it along.

Before they reach this point, students should be quite accustomed to keeping track of such things as hand position, overall posture, foot angle, leg position, and everything to do with tension. Therefore they should also be able to keep track of those things in the slightly more complex circumstance of playing with both feet and all fingers. To aid the student's understanding of the process and being able to monitor his or her own work, I include a lot of discussion (in general, but here in particular). Whether this discussion seems at all dense or overly complicated, and whether the ratio of discussion to exercises seems right, are two points about which I would find reader feedback especially useful. This month's excerpt has, just by chance, no examples; next month's continuation will discuss those that are referred to in the first sentence immediately below.

We now come to some exercises and discussion aimed at helping you to get comfortable putting your hands and feet together, that is, learning to play pieces for manuals and pedals. This is what is considered "typical" or "real" organ playing—though of course a healthy proportion of the organ repertoire is for manuals alone. It is what uniquely characterizes organ playing technically, and what defines the organ musically for many people. It is also what makes organ playing an activity that requires so much of the whole physical person of the performer. In putting together all of the components of a complex organ piece, your habits of physical relaxation become the most important—important though they already are even when playing a simple pattern of notes with one hand. If any tension creeps in at this stage, it will of course be damaging to the music—to your ability to control timing and articulation, to your ability to play complex note patterns reliably, and perhaps to the sound of the instrument itself. Since putting all the components of a piece together is of necessity more complicated than playing any one of the component parts by itself, the mental pressures to tense up are greater than ever. This is why it is particularly important to approach this stage systematically and patiently, both when learning it in the first place and when learning pieces thereafter. The approach outlined here should enable you to be systematic and to feel patient, but at the same time to make prompt and very solid progress.

The cardinal rule behind any good procedure for practicing hands and feet together is the same as it is for practicing anything complex that can be thought of as having simpler components: ***Make sure that each of those simpler components is learned fully and well before trying to put any of them together.*** In most organ pieces with pedal, the components to be put together are three: the right hand, the left hand, and the feet. The first step in starting to put those components together to form a whole piece is to make absolutely sure that each one is solid.

(Note: It is my experience that, although practicing separate feet in learning pedal parts can be extremely valuable, as discussed in the earlier section on pedal playing, it is not particularly necessary or even a good idea to try to play the separate-foot parts individually with the hands, or to think of the two feet as separate components at this stage. The role of separate foot practice is to assist in learning the pedal part. Then it is that integrated pedal part that is available to be joined to the hands.)

Left hand and pedal

Practicing pairs

Since there are three components to be combined in practicing, there are also three pairs of components: right hand and pedal, left hand and pedal, and the two hands together. Practicing each of these pairs is the crucial step in learning a piece for manuals and pedals—if you do enough of it, then the final step of putting all three parts together will be easier and more natural than you could have imagined.

Furthermore, of these three pairs of components, one tends to be the most important, most foundational in putting the whole texture together, and therefore should be practiced the most. This is the left hand and pedal. Of course, this varies from piece to piece. It also varies from player to player, since some of the reasons that this part of the process is so important have to do with mental habits. However, it is true as a rule, and it is a good idea to assume that **left hand and pedal should get a disproportionate share of the practice time.**

Oddly enough, this is an area in which prior keyboard experience can make things trickier. Many keyboard players come to organ playing with a strong pre-existing tendency to hear the lowest pitch as belonging to the outer fingers of the left hand. This instinctive reaching for low notes in the left hand—even when they are really pedal notes—is a source of confusion that is more powerful the "better" your ears are and the more fluent a keyboard player (and in particular, a sight-reader) you happen to be. Making a habit of practicing left hand and pedal is the best way to counteract this habit. (This habit, by the way, can be a particular problem for some players in playing hymns specifically. I will address that later on.)

Practicing pairs of component parts is important, partly to teach your ears to follow those separate parts when they are heard in the whole texture. (In this way, it is analogous to practicing separate voices in a contrapuntal piece or separate hands in any keyboard piece.) Since the left hand tends to play inner voices, or notes or chords that are neither the highest nor the lowest pitches being played at a particular time, the left-hand part is the component of the texture that you might need the most help to hear. That is one of the reasons that practicing left hand and pedal together is important. Another reason to emphasize this part of the practice protocol is that it will counteract the slight but persistent feeling that the left hand is not quite as nimble and secure as the right hand in general. (This feeling probably has nothing to do with handedness in normal life—since it is experienced by people of both types of handedness—but rather with the left hand's being disproportionately given simpler material to play than the right hand in the repertoire and in accompaniments, hymns, and exercises. This happens in part because the notes in the left-hand region of a keyboard—in a situation where there is no pedal—are carrying the harmony, and in part because on many sorts of keyboard instruments, especially older ones, the lower keys are themselves less nimble physically—harder to play—than the higher keys.)

Putting hands and feet together

Here are the steps to follow in practicing putting hands and feet together in a piece of organ music:

1) **Choose a unit of the piece to work on.** The more complex or difficult the piece seems to you, the shorter this unit should be. When in doubt, smaller units make for more focused practicing. The shorter the unit that you are practicing, the more frequently you come to each moment within that unit as you repeat the whole. This creates a more effective drill.

2) Make sure that each of the three parts is secure—that is, accurate and feels easy. Remember that this is always related to tempo. There will be a tempo that is too fast to make these elements of the piece work, no matter how well you have prepared them. For the parts to be secure means that there is a tempo at which they are secure and at which you are willing to play them. (If the only tempo at which one or more of the parts feels secure is so slow that it is tedious to play, then you must continue to practice that part until you are happy with it at a tempo that you can accept. This is a matter of your preference: for learning the instrument or any particular piece, there is no such thing as a practice tempo that is intrinsically too slow.)

3) Play through the pedal part and the left hand part of your chosen section once each. This is just to make sure that they are both fresh in your mind. Now, choosing a slower tempo than the one at which you played these parts (or the slower of them), start putting them together. As you play, keep your eyes on the music, being very conscious about reading those two parts (and not being distracted by the right hand part: we'll get to that soon). You may want your eyes and your attention to move in a well-defined way from the left-hand line to the pedal line, and back and forth, or you may feel that you can essentially read both at once. This is a matter of your own habit and reading style. If playing these lines together "works"—that is,

is accurate and steady and feels rather easy—then your practice tempo is good. If this is the case, then repeat this unit of practicing over and over, as many times as you can without losing concentration. When you take a break from it, expect to come back to it. As noted above, it is important to give left hand and pedal a lot of attention, and to allow it to become really solid. If it does not seem to work, and you feel quite confident that each separate part was well learned, then slow it down. There will be a tempo at which it feels right. Then:

4) Do the same thing with the right hand and pedal. The practice tempo for this need not be the same as the practice tempo for step 3. It could be faster, if indeed putting the right hand and the pedal together seems easier, or it could be slower if, for example, the right-hand part itself is more elaborate or just plain harder. The particular challenge of playing right hand and pedal together is visual—the two lines are not printed next to each other. You will probably have to be fairly conscious of scanning from one to the other and skipping the left-hand line as you read and play. Again, if it doesn't seem to be working, slow it down.

5) Practice the two hands together. This is something to which you are already accustomed.

6) When you have practiced each of the three pairs to the point where they are all accurate and reliable and feel good to you, then you are ready to try the three parts together. Of course, you should expect to slow the tempo down from where you left it with each of the three pairs. I would suggest playing through the left hand and pedal once, and then adding in the right hand. This concept—that you are adding the right hand to the left-hand-and-pedal combination, rather than that you are adding the pedal to the hands, is often the most efficient way to think about it as you start to play all of the notes of your passage together. If the result that you get either is inaccurate or seems uncomfortable—walking on a thin edge—then slow it down. When you are learning a new skill or practicing something complicated there is no such thing as practicing too slowly.

After you have completed this process with the passage that you have chosen, move on to the next increment of the piece and do the same thing. While you are working in an intense way on this next passage you should continue playing through the passage that you have already learned.

Next month's excerpt will continue this directly, and will move on to specific examples drawn from repertoire and from hymns. ■

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