Organ Method XIII

This follows directly from last month's column. For those with little or no prior keyboard experience, I have made this method's exercises simple, direct, and systematic. At the same time, assuming that the student can remember and build on what has come before, the student should be able to take the right approach to practicing the exercises and be able to concoct his or her own exercises to some extent. A student who is already experienced on another keyboard instrument should be able to get something important out of this section, since the feel and sound of playing in chords and multiple voices is critically different on organ from what it is on other instruments.

Before we look at exercises designed to get each hand used to playing patterns of more than one note at a time, there are a few general points to consider.

1) The clearest physical difference between playing one note at a time in one hand and playing more than one note in a hand, is that the latter places more limits on fingering choices. If you are called upon to play *five* notes at once in one hand—which is rare but not unheard of—then there is little or (usually) no actual choice about fingering. In the more common situation of two or three notes at once in one hand, there are often different fingering possibilities, but not as many choices as when playing only one line in a hand.

2) Hand position, already discussed earlier in this column, can be even more important when playing multiple notes at once than when the hand is playing one line, and can also be more difficult to manage well. In particular, the role of fingering choices for raised keys—sharps and flats—in determining comfortable hand position is crucial. In some passages, the position of the notes necessitates some compromise in hand position. Part of gaining experience and comfort with playing the most complex repertoire is learning how to manage these situations well. If a hand position is not ideally comfortable, then it is important to relax the hand away from that position promptly and smoothly.

3) In a piece of music, or a passage, in which each hand is playing only one note at a time, each hand's part is a musical line or voice or melody. When either hand has more than one note at a time, that texture can be *multiple voices* or it can be *chords*, or it can be some combination of the two.

4) Playing two or more separate melodies or voices with one hand in a way that sounds to an attentive listener like simultaneous melodies rather than chords is mostly a matter of attentive listening by the player. Exercises designed to address that aspect of playing are essentially listening exercises.

5) In most contrapuntal pieces with more than two voices in the hands, at least one voice migrates from one hand to the other. When this is the case, it almost always means that the piece, or that part of the piece, should be played on one manual: otherwise the sonority of that voice changes at essentially arbitrary times. It is also important that choices about which notes will be played by which hand be made carefully and sensibly. (In particular, it is important not to assume that every note printed in the upper staff should be played by the right hand, and that every note printed in the lower manual staff should be played by the left hand. These will be the tendencies, but the whole texture should be divided between the ten fingers in whatever way is most comfortable and gives the best musical results.)

6) Chordal passages often present articulation issues. If a series of chords in one hand is meant to be played legato, that presents fingering challenges, often involving finger substitution—a technique that will be dealt with later. If chords in one hand are meant to be played detached, then more fingering choices are available. Any detached fingering should be practiced first with enough space between the notes that the physical motion from one chord to the next feels easy. Once the gestures have been established, the spaces between the notes can be made smaller without abrupt gestures or tension.

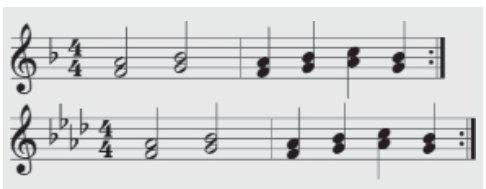
7) Just as it makes sense to practice hands or feet separately, it makes sense to practice individual components of the note picture within one hand separately. Sometimes it also can make sense to focus on *listening* to one component of the texture of the part being played by one hand over the other parts.

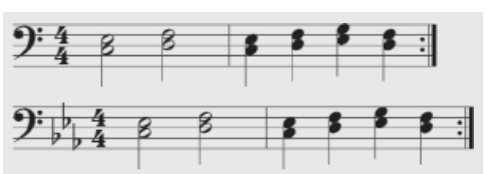
Examples 1 and 2 are simple exercises with which to begin playing more than one note in each hand.

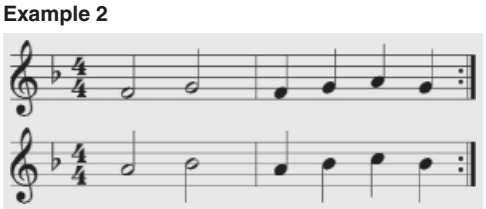
I have placed these exercises in regions of the keyboard that, for most players, will permit the note patterns to feel most comfortable, with the forearm and hand aligned well. However, as with earlier exercises in this chapter, you should move them around: up or down by octaves, or by other intervals, mixing versions with few or no sharps or flats with versions that have more.

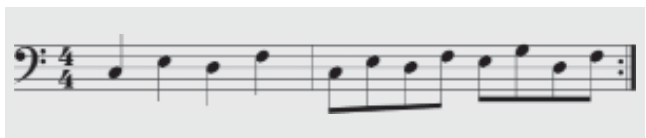
There is an obvious fingering for these exercises. For the right hand: 3/1–4/2–3/1–4/2–5/3–4/2, repeat; and for the left hand: 3/5–2/4–3/5–2/4–1/3–2/4, repeat). However, you should also try different fingerings, for example, playing all of the two-note chords with *the same* pair of fingers, and simply moving the hand smoothly and gently from one chord to the next, or a mixed fingering such as (for the first exercise) 3/1–4/2–3/1–4/2–4/2–3/1 (repeat). In any case, whenever you pick up the same pair of fingers to play the next chord, make that gesture as light, relaxed, and smooth as possible. In particular, do not try to make the space between the chords particularly short: use as much space as you need to allow the gesture to be completely without tension or any feeling that you are "snapping" from one chord to the next.

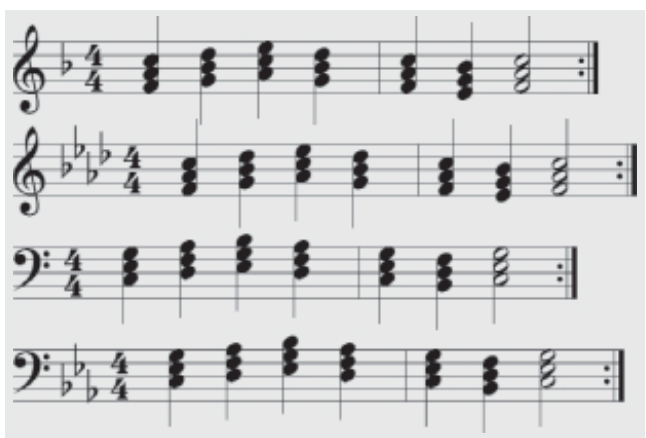
Keep the tempo slow for now, and *do not worry if you hear the two notes of each chord not quite sounding at exactly the same time as each other*. This is important: of course in the long run you need to be able to make multiple notes in one hand sound exactly together, and also indeed to make them sound not quite together in ways that you have decided on for musical effect. However, any attempt to ensure that each finger depresses its

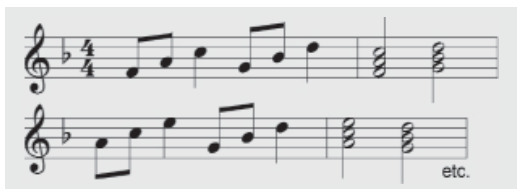

Example 1


Example 2

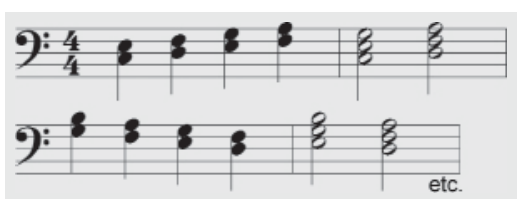

Example 3


Example 4

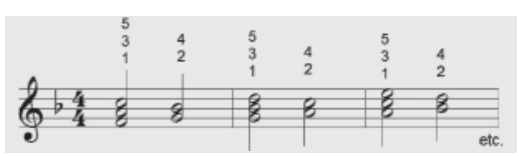

Example 5



Example 6



Example 7



Example 8

note at exactly the same time as each other finger does —before you have developed a fair level of comfort playing note patterns of this sort—will lead to a touch that is too crisp and too focused on driving each key to the bottom. This can sometimes lead to real physical tension and, in the long run, pain. The good news is this: any tendency of multiple fingers to play notes somewhat out of kilter with one another will go away naturally and of its own accord as you continue to practice.

If you have studied other keyboard instruments, you might be impatient with the simplicity of these first exercises. However, the touch and sound of the organ are different enough from piano, harpsichord, and clavichord that both the physical act and the listening aspect of playing more complex textures is very different indeed.

After taking a first look at these exercises and moving them around on the keyboard a bit, you should practice them in a couple of different ways that involve breaking them up. For example, play each line (upper note and lower note of each chord) separately, as shown in Example 3. (And similarly for the other parts of the exercise.)

Or stagger the upper and lower notes, as in Example 4. (And similarly for the other parts of the exercise. Don't make this too fast: for this purpose, the rhythm doesn't much matter.)

Note that these deconstructed versions of this two-voice chord exercise are themselves simpler than the exercises and pieces that you have already been playing.

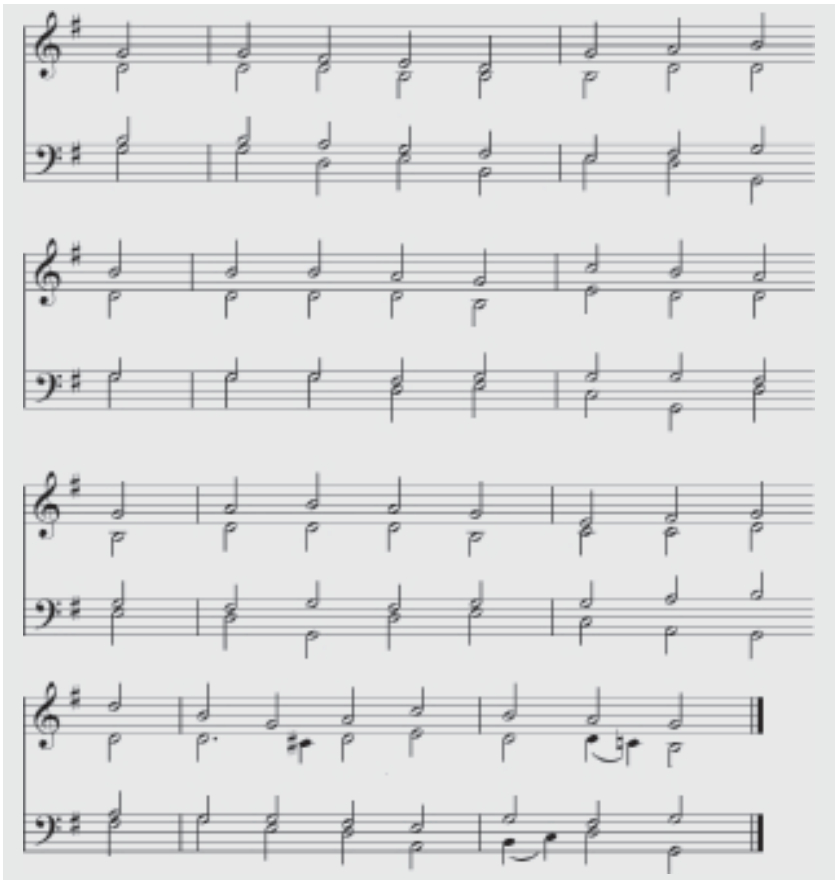
Try playing three-note chord patterns, such as those in Example 5. In this case, the fingering can well be 1–3–5 (or 5–3–1), and the same for each chord. It is important to move from one chord to the next smoothly, allowing the breaks between chords to be as long as necessary to keep the motion comfortable. Are there other fingerings that are possible or, perhaps, better? Play around with it. Move these patterns around to other notes and other regions of the keyboard as you have done with other exercises.

This set of exercises can also be broken into component parts—the lower two notes, the outer notes, the upper two notes—or played staggered. You can devise ways of moving from one of these components to the full three-voice texture yourself, as in Examples 6 and 7. Make sure that you use the same fingers for the components that you want to use for those notes when they are put back into the full texture.

An exercise such as that shown in Example 8 combines some of the above:

A traditional four-part chorale harmonization, such as that of OLD HUNDREDTH (shown in Example 9), provides material for continuing to practice moving each hand from one two-voice chord to another.

For the current exercise, you should break this hymn into short sections, and into separate hands. Then work out a comfortable, sensible fingering for each section, assuming that it is acceptable to allow a breath or break between each two successive chords: that is, to play detached. Do not worry at this point about *how* detached the chords are, but, no matter how much space you leave between chords, keep your hands light and flexible at all times. Release notes/chords smoothly and gently, and move to the next note or chord calmly. Do not necessarily expect to put the whole hymn together or to put the hands together: that is not the point at this stage, though you may very well return to it later and learn it as a piece, probably with pedal. You can find ample material for this sort of practice in any collection of chorales or hymns. ■



Example 9, OLD HUNDREDTH

Next month's column will continue this discussion, moving on to techniques for practicing the art of playing truly independent voices together in one hand.

Gavin Black is Director of the Princeton Early Keyboard Center in Princeton, New Jersey. He can be reached by e-mail at gavinblack@mail.com. He writes a blog at www.amorningfordreams.com.