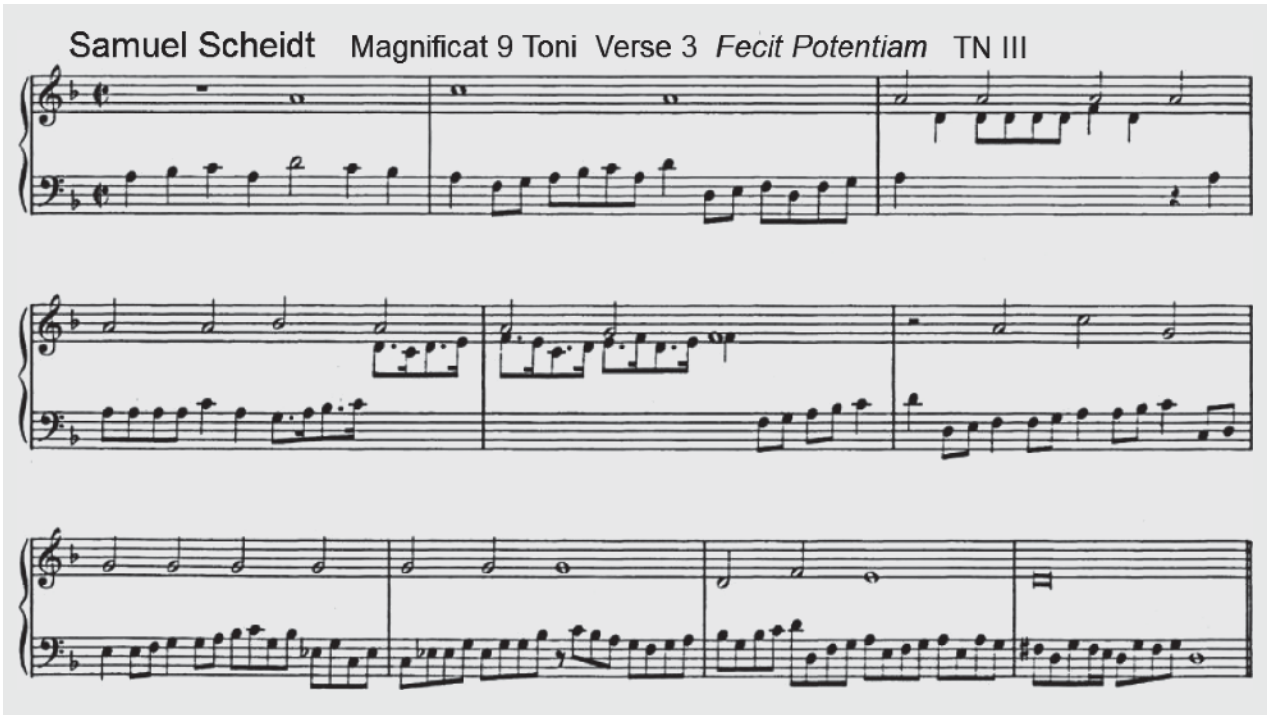
Organ Method XI

I ended last month's column with the suggestion that experienced keyboard players who are using this book to begin their exploration of organ playing could now feel ready to bring to the organ any reasonably simple two-voice piece that they have already learned on another keyboard instrument. My experience suggests that this is a good idea. It can be tricky to transfer a piece from one instrument to another (very different) instrument, and there are pitfalls to watch out for, having to do with touch, sound, and idiomatic performance. Any student should also begin quite promptly to learn new pieces from scratch. However, already knowing the notes of at least a piece or two can provide added ease. When I am working with such a student, I always suggest a mix: initially a few pieces that are already under the student's fingers, very soon a new piece or two, and a transition to mostly new pieces.

In any case, this next excerpt is intended to ground a student with little or no keyboard experience in the practicing of what will of necessity be new pieces at the organ. It provides some general guidelines, and takes the student through the process of beginning to work on a short two-voice piece: one that is not trivially easy (and therefore that adds significantly to what the short exercises from the last few columns have provided) but that is also fairly straightforward: no tricks, nothing too unusual. It is also a piece in which the left-hand part is the more complex of the two voices.



Example 1

If you have come to the organ without having played a keyboard instrument previously, and have gone over all of the above enough to feel comfortable with it, then you can now also start on simple pieces in two voices—one line of music per hand. These will not, of course, be pieces that you have played before. The repertoire is full of such pieces (Bach's *Two-Part Inventions* are probably the best known) and they are appropriate to work on, if you are willing to be careful and systematic about it, and to keep practice tempos slow. A short piece by Samuel Scheidt (1587–1654) from his collection *Tabulatura Nova* Part III of 1624 will serve as an example of how to work on such a piece at this stage in your learning process (Example 1).

Some important guidelines

1) At the beginning, **work on each hand separately**. In fact, at this stage—and indeed in many circumstances throughout your life as an organist—practice each hand separately *until it is fully learned and comfortable* before putting the hands together. (You will learn over time when this is, and isn't, necessary or a good idea for you.)

2) **Work in small chunks**: maybe a measure or two at a time. It is always a good idea to practice in small enough increments so that when you return to the beginning of what you are practicing, you remember it well: that is, the repetition has a chance to impress itself on your subconscious memory.

3) **Work out fingering carefully**. Your approach to fingering will evolve with experience. At this point you are using the piece and the fingering to help you become comfortable with the act of putting the two hands together. Later you will use what you have learned about fingering and practicing to give pieces the musical shape that you want.

4) **Always practice slowly enough**. This means that what you are playing should both *be accurate* and *feel comfortable*. If you hear yourself playing the right notes but feel yourself having to scramble to do so, you are playing too fast. There is no such thing, for purposes of effective practicing, as playing too slowly.

5) **Keep your eyes on the music, not on your hands**. Even when, in the course of practicing short simple lines, you find that you remember those lines well enough that you don't need to look at the music, do not fall into the habit of watching your hands. It is OK to take an occasional glance, but that is all. Over-dependence on looking at the hands slows down the progress of becoming comfortable as a keyboard player.

6) And, of course, **look the piece over in general** before taking it apart and working. Notice rhythms, patterns, exceptions to patterns, wide intervals, repeated notes, compass, and so on.

(I am addressing these suggestions to those who are essentially new to keyboard playing, but any player new to the organ should read and consider them, especially when approaching new pieces.)

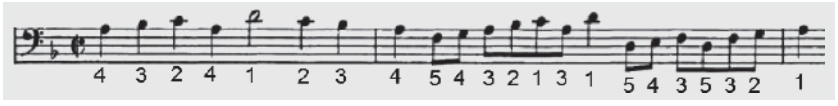
Practicing and fingering

In this piece, the left hand part is more active than the right hand. The right hand plays 28 notes, the left hand nearly five times that many. Thus you should probably expect to practice the left hand significantly more than the right hand. This piece also contains many repeated notes—mostly in half notes in the right hand, as in measure 3, for example, and mostly in eighth notes in the left hand, as in measures 3 and 4, and elsewhere. The compass of the right-hand part is one note under an octave; that of the left-hand part is an octave and a fourth. There is a spot in measure five where the two hands coincide on the same note, and a spot in measure nine where the left hand succeeds to the note that the right hand has just been holding. (These spots will feel different depending on whether you are playing the piece on one manual or on two.)

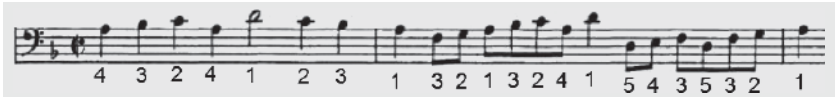
The right-hand fingering can be worked out using the repeated notes as an anchor—bearing in mind what I have already mentioned about changing fingers on repeated notes. For example, if you play the first of the seven consecutive A's starting in measure two with the second finger, and then alternate that with the third finger, the rest of the passage falls into place nicely. (This results in the first fourteen notes of the right-hand part fingered as: 2-4-2-3-2-3-2-3-2-3-2-4-3-2.) You should try a few different fingering possibilities, guided for the time being mainly by comfort and logistics.

The left hand is more complicated. You will have to spend more time working out fingerings, and you may want to change some of what you first work out as you practice it. This is, of course, normal and fine. If you have been practicing a passage with one fingering but want to change that fingering, it is necessary to back up and practice more slowly, focusing specifically on the notes where you have changed the fingering, and just a few notes before and after. Do not let fingering "change itself" at random as you practice. (To be honest, you will certainly do this later on when you have become more adept at playing and when the process of choosing fingering has become more ingrained and intuitive. But it is best not to let it happen for now.)

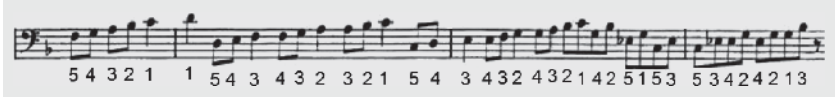
Take a look at the first four notes of the left hand. What fingers most naturally



Example 2



Example 3



Example 4

would play those notes? 4-3-2-4? 5-4-3-5? 3-2-1-3? Do these feel equally easy and comfortable? Does one fingering seem to create a more comfortable hand position than the others? Does one make it seem easier to go on to the next note than the others do? Or does one make it harder, while the other two seem about the same? What finger can most easily reach the middle D on the third beat of this measure? Is there more than one choice that might make sense? What about coming down from that D?

Examples 2 and 3 are two fingering possibilities for the first part of this left-hand line. Can you devise another possibility that does not start on 4? Or that does not use 1 to play the fifth note of the line? Or that uses 1 for the first note of the second measure? Spend some time playing around with this. Try a number of fingerings a few times each. Don't try to practice and learn each one—that comes when you have chosen one.

Later on in this left-hand part is a passage in which repeated notes occur not as groups of notes (as they do in mm. 3 and 4) but as part of moving lines. This creates interesting fingering choices, since every time that you change fingers from the first to the second note of a repeated-note pair you have a chance to reposition the hand. One possible fingering is shown in Example 4—you should try to find others.

Once you have thought about and explored the fingering of these passages and of the rest of the left-hand part, zero in on a small chunk of that line, say the first measure and a half, choose the fingering that you will learn, and begin to practice it. Practicing means repetition of the same thing done the same way, slowly and carefully, and many times in a row. As you break up a line such as this into sections for practicing and learning, bear in mind two important things: first, the increments must be small enough for the repetition to be meaningful; second, the increments should overlap or dovetail into one another, at least a little bit. The second of these is necessary to prevent the first of them from creating fragmentation or moments of insecurity in the passage.

So, for example, if you start by practicing this left-hand part from the beginning through the middle beat of the second measure (middle D, quarter-note), then it is a good idea to begin your second increment for practicing with that same middle beat, or perhaps either two or four notes before that. The principle is that **practice sections should overlap**: the details should be worked out in each case in such a way that it feels natural. The exact extent of the overlap doesn't matter. (This applies, by the way, equally to *page turns*. When you are working on a piece that requires a page turn, you must make sure that you do not always interrupt your practicing at the same spot. Either through brief bits of memorization or through the use of photocopying or something similar, you must practice across the page turn in a way that dovetails, so as not to create a moment of discontinuity.)

Start your practicing of any left-hand passage very slowly, so that it feels easy. Do not increase the tempo until 1) you have played the passage at least three times at the existing tempo and 2) the passage feels easy and natural at that tempo. Increase tempo a little bit at a time.

Once you have chosen fingering and practiced the same measure (or measure and a half) of each hand—remembering in this case that the left hand will require more attention and more repetition, and 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 back the tempo up a bit from each hand's separate tempo in the course of the

individual practicing. (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.) The purpose of this exercise is to help you to 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 starting to put the hands together in a passage, make sure that you have reminded 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.

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

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