

Pedaling Pointers

by Naomi Rowley

Frequently a new organist is quite intrigued by pedaling: in fact, curiosity regarding this skill is often one of the sparks to ignite a student's interest in organ study! A perceptive organ instructor will endeavor to nurture this enthusiasm for pedaling by incorporating teaching techniques which maximize the fascination and minimize the frustration of learning to play with the feet! The following pointers are designed to assist in this process. (Hopefully, they will help the new organist "get off on the right foot" with pedaling!!)

FIRST POINTER: Keep the eyes on the music. In order to satisfy natural curiosity regarding the pedals, have the student look at them before sitting at the console. This is the ideal time to count the number of octaves of pedals and ask questions. However, when seated at the organ, the student should develop the habit of keeping the eyes on the music; this will reduce the temptation to peek.

SECOND POINTER: Adjust the bench properly. The following considerations are several which contribute to correct bench placement. They should be related to each other and may need to be customized to suit individual circumstances. (1) The organist should sit centered on the organ bench; this location can easily be found by placing the left foot on middle C of the pedals and the right on middle G. (2) The bench height should enable both toes and heels to rest flat on the pedals when the feet are placed immediately in front of middle C# and D#. However, the bench should not be so low that feet "drag" on the pedals when pedal stops are drawn. (3) One guide for locating an appropriate distance between the console and bench, is to place the feet immediately in front of middle C# and D# and position the bench so the knees form a 90 degree angle. After the correct distance has been determined, it is important that the bench be parallel to the console. (4) When sitting centered between middle C and G of the pedals, the student should sit far enough forward on the bench to enable the feet, when both knees and heels are touching as one unit, to make a quick, aerial trip over and above the black pedal notes, starting with low C# and D# and moving to the high F#. For ease in facilitating this movement, the hands may rest lightly on the key cheeks as the organist swivels or turns from left to right. Following the identification of the correct bench height as well as its appropriate distance from the console, it is important to place the bench in this same position for all practice sessions. Markers of various sorts can accelerate the "set up" process. For example, masking tape may be used to mark the bench distance on the floor; colored thumb tacks may be used to distinguish between the various levels of organ bench blocks.

THIRD POINTER: Use consistently the home-base for pedaling. A student will be more confident of pedaling and less likely to peek, if the C-G home-base for pedaling is used consistently. This location, which can be found readily by feeling and not peeking, places the left foot on middle C of the pedals and the right on middle G. The home-base not only enables the student to sit centered at the console, but also provides a point of departure for locating other pedal pitches. For example, if a piece uses low A and middle E as its two pedal pitches, the feet can move confidently from the home-base down the interval of a third to their new location. In addition, in the early stages of pedaling, it is very helpful to pencil in a reminder at the beginning of each piece which indicates the starting pedal pitches as well as which toes or heels are playing them. This system

provides adequate time for the feet to be located securely in advance of playing; it also eliminates panic while the piece is in progress!

FOURTH POINTER: Leave the foot in place until the new location is known. Accuracy is improved when a foot remains “grounded” on the note it has just played instead of “traveling” or wandering aimlessly until the new “assignment” or note is known. This plan enables a student to travel with confidence from a known point of departure to the new note.

FIFTH POINTER: Analyze left hand / pedal relationships. In the beginning stages of pedaling, it is natural to blame the feet for wrong notes. Frequently, however, the source of the problem is the left hand and not the pedal. In piano music as well as manuals-only organ repertoire, the left hand has been used to playing the bass part. When a pedal line is present, this relationship often changes. The result is a temporary disorientation of the left hand. This challenge can be conquered by identifying the location in the music where the left hand strays from its part and marking it appropriately. In addition, careful fingering of the left-hand part will minimize the temptation for this hand to wander aimlessly in search of fingerings for its next passage of music.

These five pointers represent only a few of the many techniques which can assist the new organist in “getting off on the right foot” with pedaling! May they stimulate additional ideas among both teachers and students!

Dr. Naomi Rowley, a graduate of Valparaiso University, received her advanced degrees from Stanford University. She is an experienced organ teacher having taught in community music schools for nineteen years. From 1992–2000 Dr. Rowley was the organ instructor at the Drake University Community School of Music in Des Moines, Iowa; during these years the organ enrollment grew from three students to eighteen. Most recently she moved to northeastern Wisconsin where she is Principal Organist at the First Methodist Church in Appleton; in addition, she is continuing her career as an organ teacher and workshop clinician.