

Reaching the Junior High Organ Student

By Ardyth J. Lohuis, Richmond, VA

For many youth the junior high school years are musical turning points. Young pianists may abandon their lessons, perhaps because it's not "cool" to concentrate on classical music, or perhaps because of the relative isolation of piano study which contrasts with the social music making in band and other ensembles. Those who find the King of Instruments fascinating may face additional challenges. Some seeking an organ teacher are rebuffed, for our traditional orientation has discouraged organ study until a certain skill level on piano is attained. Those who do connect with a teacher may find that the justly honored standard organ tutors progress too rapidly, or that the repertoire is of rather limited appeal, or that making suitable practice arrangements is difficult for one who does not drive and is too young to be entrusted with a key to the church.

With the 1996 publication of the test edition of *Discover the Organ*[®], I undertook a new approach to reaching and reaching junior highs. The idea was to captivate their interest in the organ during that awkward time when they are looking for new worlds to explore. I hoped that focusing on learning a new instrument might keep them actively involved in music. Perhaps in becoming "special" by playing the organ, they would find a new social niche. The plan was to gather a small class which would meet monthly and to combine these sessions with private lessons. The objectives for meeting as a group included fostering their awareness that they were not unique in their interest in the organ, developing camaraderie, and facilitating peer teaching. There also would be teaching efficiencies, as well as tuition economies. My ideal group would have four students: sufficiently large to have community, but small enough so that each could try new techniques and to perform. A modest amount of publicity through local media, our AGO newsletter, and direct mail elicited a group of eighth graders who auditioned successfully. They came from different denominations and geographical areas, had varied keyboard skills, and remarkably different talents. Once a month from September through May we met together for an hour to view portions of the AGO videos, *Pulling Out All the Stops* and *The Organist—A Total Musician*, to explore effective ways of practicing, the console and registration basics, and to learn new manual and pedal techniques. Half-hour private lessons filled the intervening weeks and facilitated repertoire study. In December families and friends were guests for an informal mini-recital in which all performed and gave a short oral presentation on something "organic," which was of special interest to them. Our guests were not only delighted with the music, but so intrigued with the presentations that during our party time they crowded around the console and asked for more information.

The basis of many organ tutors has been German chorales that are unfamiliar to many American congregations. In contrast, repertoire in the *Discover the Organ*[®] series is centered on hymns familiar in most churches and spirituals cast in charming, short settings with a 20th century bent. Although my junior high class has fairly sophisticated piano skills, they have not considered the easier works "babyish." They are not only delighted with the variety of styles, but proud to accomplish readily the easy manuals-only compositions. Their rapid progress has allowed time for experimenting with alternate registrations and devising pedal parts, to their great delight! None of the students have limitations of stature or lack access to an organ with full pedalboard, so we have quickly moved through fundamentals of pedal technique and supplemented the *Discover the Organ*[®] books with *Easiest Hymns*^{*}.

The first year of our experiment has concluded, and we are now working solely in a private lesson format. Each your organist's efforts have been supported by home church musicians who have facilitated practice at odd hours. My supportive AGO colleagues have celebrated the students' achievements and graciously found opportunities for them to play portions of services when suitable music is ready. Their encouragement—and the approbation of their congregations—has been invaluable, and so far, there are no signs of impending drop-outs. A bonus for me is that the *Discover the Organ*[®] repertoire has been a refreshing change of pace to the standard method books for other students, and I often look to it to find just the right piece to teach a particular technique or style.

^{*}*Easiest Hymns*, Volume I, edited by Wayne Leupold, Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc. (WL600037).

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