

A Piano Teacher's Idea

by Fran Pinson, Honea Path, SC

1. Why should I attempt to “teach” organ?

How many times have we heard the expression “Money doesn’t grow on trees”? Among church musicians it’s common to hear “Organists don’t grow on trees. Wouldn’t it be nice if they did...” It is a well-known fact that across our great country, thousands of churches with organs conduct Sunday services without organists.

Background. My country church acquired a small, two-manual Allen organ in 1954. The former church pianist was lined up as organist—volunteer, of course. She took a few organ lessons and proceeded to play the instrument for the next 40 years. The RH *always* played on the upper manual and the LH *always* played on the lower manual. The right foot *always* stayed on the volume pedal thus leaving the left foot to carefully tap out the bass notes. Organ footwear consisted of the latest fashion in high-heel shoes. To keep things going, the pianist (who played along with the organist on *everything*) provided enough percussive sound to keep the congregation reasonably together during the singing of the hymns. The organ *always* had the same registration. Variety in sound was determined by how far the organist depressed the volume pedal. These were my first exposures to organ music. During the summers when I visited an “organist” aunt of mine, I was amazed that she could play a small Hammond organ all by herself. She accompanied the hymns and the choir on the organ without a pianist playing along!

I heard my first pipe organ in 1960 when I entered college. Somehow it seemed important that I become acquainted with this strange musical instrument. I actually signed up for organ lessons for two semesters. I did *not* do well playing the “King of Instruments.” Finger substitutions were horrible and painful. Play legato? Are you kidding? I clutched the keys for dear life...my hands were rigid. Foot pedals were nightmares beyond belief. I completed my two semesters of organ study with enough finesse to receive a passing grade. I vowed *never* to touch the instrument again.

My vow remained in place for some 15 years until a member of the music committee in my church asked me to substitute as organist for two weeks while they searched for a permanent replacement. The previous organist was a military wife whose husband was transferred to another state. With great reluctance I agreed to *attempt* to play the three-manual Pilcher organ for two Sundays for the morning and evening services.

You’ve guessed it. My “two weeks” substitution turned into a continuous position as organist. So, I joined the local AGO chapter, began attending organ recitals, and started weekly lessons with the organist/instructor at a neighboring Methodist church. And so began my “career” as a pianist turned weekend church organist.

In 1984 I entered grad school and studied organ as an elective. My organ professor taught me so much. I’ve used every bit of her advice in the ensuing years. She taught me as if *organ* was to be my principal instrument. It was a struggle to balance Mendelssohn’s *Organ Sonatas*, Franck’s *Chorals*, and Ives’s *Variations on America* with piano teaching, preparation for church services, and preparation for my graduate piano recital.

In the summer of 1986 we moved back home to Honea Path, SC. I had no intention of continuing by “career” as a church organist. I joined the music faculty at a small nearby college where I taught piano to academy students, as well as to college freshmen and sophomore music majors. The same Fall I was asked to be organist in a large Presbyterian church in another nearby town. *They called me!* To this day, I have no clue as to how I became known to this particular church. Though I lived in terror of the Sunday services, I played well due to hours of daily organ practice; but, at the time, it didn’t seem so to me.

Some three years later, I reluctantly became organist at a large United Methodist church near the college where I was teaching piano. It made sense to work and to go to church in the same town.

By this time I was aware of the national shortage of organists. Perhaps I could, as a pianist, teach my piano students something about the “King of Instruments.” I knew I was “good” at hymn playing, simple improvisation, the easier organ classics, and I had discovered I had a good ear for organ registrations. My goal was to acquaint the students with the workings of the organ...an intro into the meaning of “principals, flutes, reeds, strings, mixtures,” and something about the technique of playing “the thing” without sounding like a pianist at the organ. I did remember some things from that first organ instruction in college. Perhaps, I reasoned, I could share with my piano students a small amount of what I had learned and exactly how I felt as a pianist trying to make music at the organ.

2. The “first” attempt—Academy students

The students and parents “organ introduction” began in mid-spring via a group class. The culmination of the organ study would be the academy end-of-year recital. On the recital each student would be required to perform two recital pieces: one from the standard piano repertoire, the other selection to be played on the Schlicker organ. Students and parents alike were excited about the organ project.

Week 1—Each student was provided with an organ notebook containing a detailed sketch of a three-manual organ console, a weekly schedule outlining the course of organ study, and a *piano* selection that would adapt nicely to being played on an organ. Pieces assigned were linear in style and required no finger substitution. Most of the easy selections consisted of a single melodic line in each hand. Many students played from books of simplified hymns. In the final recital I adapted the duet parts printed below each hymn and played them on the swell or choir manuals with appropriate pedal notes. Other students were assigned regular piano pieces carefully marked for organ performance. Older students were assigned pieces with a few pedal notes.

Week 2—I heard the students’ “organ” pieces in the piano studio. We reviewed the labeled sketch of the organ. Each student was told that the next lesson would be at my church and their pieces would be played on an actual pipe organ. Everybody was excited about this!

Week 3—We met at the church. Four students were grouped together. I worked 15 minutes with each student. Registrations were selected and corrections made in the music. It was inspiring to see the amazement on the students’ faces when they first heard their piece played on the organ. The fact that the sound was coming from somewhere other than from under their fingers was amazing, as well as disconcerting, to them.

Week 4—Lessons were held at my church, but this time each student received a private 30-minute lesson. Many students came into class excitedly telling me about their church organs. Almost all of the students had approached their church organist after the services to share with them what they were doing in piano class with the organ. Several parents called to tell me that their children proudly announced that “Those are organ flutes, Mom!” Plans were announced for a weekend “organ crawl” in the college auditorium.

The organ crawl was a huge success. The Schlicker organ at the college is perched on the wall about 20 feet above the auditorium floor. To get to the console one must go up a flight of stairs and then walk through the organ pipes and reservoirs to get to the console. It is possible to walk directly behind the console and see the thousands of wires. This event brought parents and relatives in huge droves...everyone had to go up to check out walking inside the organ.

Week 5—The students each had a 30-minute lesson on the Schlicker organ at the college, and registrations were adjusted.

Week 6—Lessons were repeated on the college organ with good success...in fact, a few college students came to listen.

Recital day—Students “wowed” the audience and other academy teachers with their organ skills. I think the teachers were totally surprised with the style and sound of the “adapted” pieces. My kids were grinning from ear to ear!!!

The “second” attempt—more serious this time—with Leupold books and real organ music.

I discovered the Leupold books A, B, C, D, and Levels 1 and 2 in 2000. Wonderful stuff written for the organ in understandable language. It had been two years since the experience with the Academy students at the college. Because of my acquisition of the three-manual Rogers for the studio, it would be possible to teach organ to the Honea Path students.

The first semester plan (August–January) was half the lesson would be on the piano with standard piano literature. The other half of the lesson would be on the organ using the Leupold books and other simple original organ pieces. The execution of “the plan” worked like this for weekly lessons: at 3:15 the student arrived, put on headphones, and practiced on the organ; at 3:30 I critiqued the organ work; and at 3:45 the student worked at the piano with standard piano literature. Once a month, the students performed both piano and organ pieces for each other in studio classes.

At the culmination of “the plan”, sixteen students performed in the Organ Divisions of the Federation of Music Clubs auditions. It was impossible to enter all students in the auditions because the early level literature listed for organ in the Federation Syllabus included chords that would have caused cramping and rigidity in the younger students hands. The organ auditions were held at my church on the three-manual Moller. We had a rehearsal the week before the auditions and presented a recital for parents and friends the day after the auditions. Younger students not performing in the auditions played transcribed piano classics or hymns from piano books for students. We closed the recital with one young student playing *Ode to Joy* with me as an organ/piano duet. Students who performed in the Federation auditions all received grades of Superior or Excellent. I was proud of their accomplishments.

During this semester of organ study, several students were asked to play an offertory or a prelude on the organ in their church. I always visited the church with the students to assist in setting registrations. At the end of the school year, several students and parents went to Charlotte, NC, to hear and to play (yes, we did) at the Calvary Church. We topped off the rest of the day with a trip to a nearby theme park.

Now, you might ask...how, with 15 minutes weekly to practice on a real live organ...did students learn anything about playing the organ? The stops were relatively easy to explain. Students were shown how to play their organ pieces on the piano. A change of manual for the organ translated into an octave jump at the piano. Pedal notes were located in relation to specific keys and the feet placed in these locations. When the pedal note was to be played, the student HAD to move his feet. Once or twice, I had the students “sing” the pedal note as they played the piano. (We remained friends after this experience.)

What have my piano students learned?

1. The organ “ain’t” no piano.
2. What 16', 8', 4', 2', 1', IV, 2-2/3' mean and simple combinations of how to use them.
3. What are Principals, Flutes, Reeds, Strings, Mutations, and Mixtures.

4. How to create balance and expression on simple pieces.
5. To “plant” feet and hands and to check them carefully before that first set of notes.
6. To write down registrations for each piece and to carefully label Swell, Great, and Choir manual use in the score (general 1 tells you nothing...they had to name specifics.)

Conclusions. The students like the organ. They’re not afraid of it anymore. They have learned to make some music at the King of Instruments. It’s different, but it has been fun for most of them. I do plan to continue to refine teaching of organ alongside the teaching of my primary instrument, the piano. There’s little doubt in my mind that many of my fine piano students will, in the years to come, become as their teacher, weekend organists...and good ones, at that!!!