

Department for Organists

Edited for December by the Eminent French Organist

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"The eloquent organ waits for the master to waken the spirit."—DOLE

Important Elemental Principles in Pipe Organ Playing

IN beginning this article on the organ and the organist's art, there comes to my mind an incident which I should like to relate: The organist of one of the great German cathedrals (an assiduous traveler, like all Germans) came to pay me a visit, some years ago, in the loft of the great organ, at Trinity Church, and later on at my invitation, came to my home at Bellevue; where I asked him to try my organ, and he played me some of Bach's works. Imagine my intense surprise on hearing him. His manner of playing was wanting not only in grandeur, but lacked clearness and precision as well, and he did not even play in time!

And I remembered that there had been a time when, in certain countries where the organ was honored and greatly in favor (as is the case in the United States and in England) the organists who desired to perfect themselves, or to learn to know other schools and other masters than their own, crossed France without stopping, or even avoided crossing France on their way to the country which was the birthplace of Bach, of Beethoven, of Mendelssohn, etc.

But it came to pass that among the organists traveling through Paris, a few stopped there, attracted at first by our French organists whose works are both well and widely known, attracted also by the fame of such masters as Widor and Guilmant, they stopped off in Paris, went no further, and studied in France. Why? They had found out the worth of our school of organists, they had learned to appreciate this school, and wished to belong to it.

What were the causes which brought about this change?

I shall endeavor to explain and indicate the causes which led to this change by giving an analysis of the principles of the French school. Having had the good fortune of studying with the two great masters whose names I have already mentioned, Guilmant and Widor, I am able to speak on their methods from experience, and I shall add to these remarks a few words of personal observation and methods of my own, which as a rule I reserve for my pupils. In a general way, our school is characterized by great preciseness in the rhythm, an exceptional clearness, an execution clear and absolutely exact, and a great respect for the authors' ideas on the interpretation.

I shall speak in turn of each of these different qualities, and shall try to indicate the way to work in order to acquire them. Thus in giving my readers an idea of what characterizes our school, I shall be able at the same time to give them different bits of advice which I hope they may find most useful and profitable.

Let us take the organist at the beginning of his studies. First of all, he must sit down before the organ, not as though

he were sitting in an armchair, but in such a way as to have his limbs perfectly free in order to be able, without moving the body (which is not only unnecessary but harmful in playing) to touch easily the lowest as well as the highest note on the pedal-board. Consequently he is to sit almost on the edge of the organ-bench so far forward as to just escape falling off; the organist must learn by experience just where to sit on the bench in order to have a firm seat and at the same time great liberty of movement for the limbs.

After sitting properly on the bench, the organist must place his heels and his knees close together, he turns the toes outward, he will be able thus to form a sort of compass, and accordingly as he opens this compass or V more or less widely, he will learn to measure easily, and, what is more important, surely, without looking at his feet, the intervals from seconds to fifths; if he wishes to play farther apart (for instance, fifths, sixths, sevenths or octaves) the knees kept close together will perform the same service as the heels for the smaller intervals. Working in this way, the young organist soon becomes very sure of his pedal-playing. And I may add, for the benefit of organists playing in public, that this position is much more graceful than if the heels and the knees are spread apart. When I was a young student at the Paris Conservatory, we used to speak of this position, very disrespectfully, to be sure, as "frog-playing."

All exercises must be begun very slowly. The first exercises should be legato, and should aim at making hand and feet quite independent of each other. I shall give here a few exercises or methods of working, which may be of help in securing the end in view and which are not to be found in the published methods or treatises on the organ.

As exercises developing independence in hands and feet (especially for the left hand) I strongly advise playing with the left hand alone, scales in thirds or tenths with the pedal, interspersed with the following exercise for the pedal:—



which will show whether the player is in proper equilibrium on his bench.

In any difficult passages, I very particularly recommend the following way or working: Practice the part of the left hand with the pedal. This way of working, which, it must be said, is rather dry, will be sure to give very evident and most excellent results.

It is also very helpful to work with a metronome, *very slowly*, at first, and to work gradually up to the proper time. When the player is at last able to play a piece in the right time, when he has quite mastered all the difficult parts, he will find it helpful to practice or to review the piece in much slower time than that in which it should be played. I may say that if he plays the piece five or six times, he should play it once only as rapidly as it should be played.

The great advantage of studying with the metronome is that the player works up, little by little, without making mistakes, and almost unconsciously to the right movement.

Metronome study develops other qualities to which I wish especially to draw attention, because they are qualities which characterize particularly certain artists of our French school—rigid exactness and perfect control in the rhythm.

These qualities add wonderfully to the beauty and grandeur of an artist's playing; they are indispensable in fine work. By an absolutely faultless rhythm, by the constant and perfectly regular repetition of the measure, beating time, as it were, very regularly, never faster, never slower, never hurrying, never lagging, the player must make his audience feel how completely he is master of himself; he must make them feel how absolutely his will controls the rhythm of the piece he is playing, and this calm and exact rhythm will force itself upon their attention and make them listen. The artist who neglects this very important principle, is sure to play poorly; his execution will be lacking in character, and will fail to hold the attention of his listeners. Although the organ is played by pianists, the only common link between the organ and the piano is the keyboard. These two instruments differ fundamentally by their structure, by their very essence; but there is another and very important difference: the organ can hold a note almost indefinitely; on the piano a note ceases to sound almost as soon as it is struck.

As a matter of fact, the organ must be considered as an orchestra, as an ensemble of wind-instruments. Taking as a foundation this rule that the organ must be thought of as an orchestra, I shall call the reader's attention to the fol-

lowing remarks, which may appear self-evident, but which are frequently forgotten or at least often neglected.

In a good orchestra, artistically composed and well directed, do not all the musicians begin exactly together? When the piece is finished, do we ever hear the bass-instruments holding their note longer than the other players? These rules must also be applied in playing the organ. Consequently every chord must be struck neatly, all the notes quite together and never in arpeggios—a habit common to many pianists, and which at the organ is entirely out of place, very ugly, and illogical. I may add that no matter how strongly one may wish to play a chord, there is no need to strike loudly and hard for a *ff*, or to attack it weakly for a *pp*; the only qualities which must be desired as well as demanded are preciseness, clearness and a perfect ensemble.

The organist must also, and for the same reason, remember in ending each piece to drop at exactly the same time all the notes of a chord, not forgetting a foot on the pedal, or holding the bass-note, a habit one meets with sometimes, but which is frightful, abominable and quite nonsensical.

Considering thus the organ as an orchestra, it becomes evident that each part of a polyphonic work must be perfectly executed, as carefully and as correctly as if it were played alone by a simple musician; consequently the legato must be perfect, excepting, of course, when the author has indicated a staccato movement; in this case, the rule is that each staccato note should count for just half its value; by neglecting to observe this rule, the execution loses its clearness; the whole character of a piece may even be changed, or become confused, as the notes which are not sufficiently cut off one from the other are not heard distinctly. It may even be said that there are two ways of playing a piece: according as the organ may be in a hall whose acoustic properties may be very favorable or less favorable, or according as the hall may be empty (in which case the sound carries easily) or filled with people, hangings, etc. (in which case the sound carries poorly). It is evident that the question of acoustics should receive a great deal of attention, and a player should take care that when playing in a hall where the sound carries very readily, his playing does not become confused.

I might add a great many more details, much more advice, on the role of the thumb, the fingering of the hands, and of the feet, on the use of the heel, of the toe, the position of the feet, etc., but it is quite impossible to explain these many important points in an article whose aim is to give a slight idea of how to play the pipe-organ. Although I have been able to give a little practical advice, I can of course not give a regular course on the organ; this is almost impossible in

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M. Quef was born at Lille in Northern France and became a student at the Conservatoire of Paris under Dubois, Widor and Guilmant. In 1888 he took the first prize for organ playing. In 1901 he succeeded the great Guilmant at La Trinité in Paris. Since then he has played frequent recitals in France and other continental countries. He has written numerous pieces for organ which have been brought out in France, Belgium and England. He also has composed suites for orchestra, piano and harmonium as well as some exceptionally fine chamber music.

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a written article, and especially in an article necessarily short. Having had the great good fortune of being one of the few pupils privileged to study under the master, Widor, during his short professorship at the Paris Conservatory, I have endeavored to show in a few words the fine qualities of his school, of his manner of playing the organ. However, before closing this article, I should like to speak of two other important points, and in the first place let me say a few words on the subject of registration.

In the works of Bach, Handel, Clérambault and others of the old masters, it is preferable and logical to approach as nearly as possible the "sonorité" or richness of sound which the old masters employed or were able to use. At this period, the instruments lacked all the strong and powerful stops of our modern organs; they had scarcely more than one reed stop to a keyboard (and this stop was only used on certain definite and very special occasions); on the other hand, the instruments had a large proportion of mutation-stops, mixtures, etc. The "full-organ" of this period consisted of an ensemble of foundation stops and mixtures; the reeds were not used in the full-organ, but were sometimes used, for instance, to sustain a grand-chorus, or as a solo-stop, to make a choral stand out, when the accompaniment was played on another keyboard. In conclusion then, we may say that in playing the works of the old masters, it is preferable to use the stops we have just indicated; that is to say, the 8-, 4- and 2-foot foundation stops, and the mixtures, excluding the 16-foot and the reed-stops.

The shading, or, to speak more exactly, the different degrees of intensity in the sound may be obtained by changing from one keyboard to another; these changes are nearly always indicated; it must however be remembered that, at this period, the pedal and the keyboard could not be coupled together; the organist balanced his pedal and his keyboard by wisely choosing his stops; it was consequently very difficult for him, and one may say impossible, to change his pedal stops in the middle of the piece, for instance, in a *Fugue* by Bach. Furthermore, when the composer changed from one keyboard to another, he did not write the part for the pedal, and we may conclude from this fact, that in works like those of Bach, Handel, etc., those passages which have no pedal part are to be played on the choir or on the swell.

I may add, that, in my opinion, the changes which I have just mentioned are the only changes of timbre, color or intensity to be tolerated in Bach's works, or in other works of this period; the organist should endeavor to maintain a unity of color, which can only be attained by changing keyboards and by avoiding any fancy registration, changing of stops, etc.; all this seems quite out of place. This way of playing may doubtless appear somewhat severe to certain organists (and even to certain auditors) but it is logical, and one may thus reproduce exactly the sonorité best suited for rendering these works. An objection may be made to this manner of playing: by omitting the 16-foot and the reed-stops, the organ loses some of its power. To this objection I shall make this reply: the music will gain

very greatly in clearness, I may even say, will be more limpid.

Bach's Sonatas, written in three parts, which are so extremely interesting, and which occupy quite an exceptional place in his works for the organ, are also interesting as studies and as exercises in independence. They are to be played as if they were a trio of instruments. For instance, on the keyboard where the left hand is playing, soft 8- and 4-foot stops may be used; on the right hand keyboard, 8-foot foundation stops with oboe, and on the pedal, 8-foot stops (without the 16-foot, which would be too heavy).

Before leaving the subject of the old works, and particularly Bach's, I wish to make one more remark: as a general rule, they are played much too fast, which deprives them of a portion of their grandeur and of their clearness.

In modern works, the composers have adopted the wise and prudent method of indicating their registration. Nevertheless, as organs differ so greatly one from the other, the composers' intentions may evidently be indicated in a broad general way only, and each organist must interpret these indications according to the stops of his own instrument. I shall consequently not insist on this question, but I should like to add two remarks based on my experience.

It is preferable:—
First. In the full-organ (swell or choir) not to use the Clarinet, which renders the sound flabby and disagreeable.

Second. Never to use a 4-ft. stop with the Vox Angelica; these two sounds combine very badly.

Let me now indicate the methods, both simple, clear and logical, employed at present in France to indicate combinations or couplings of keyboards. We indicate the keyboards by their initial, and the manner of combining these initials indicates the manner of coupling the keyboards. Example:—
G.—P. R.—means Positif and Récit coupled to Great; or, in English: G. Ch. Sw. (Choir and Swell coupled to Great.)
P.d. G.—(Great to Pedal.)

At the beginning of this article, I spoke of the Paris Conservatory school of organ, so fertile in results because quite exceptional in its studies. The tests which must be passed at examinations or at prize competitions are the following:—
First. Accompaniment and transposition of a piece of plain-chant.
Second. Improvising: taking as theme this piece of plain-chant and developing it (freely, as a prelude or an anthem).
Third. Improvising a fugue on a given subject.
Fourth. Improvising a piece (Sonata-form) on a given subject.
Fifth. Performing a piece of classical or modern music.
(In the improvising tests, two minutes of reflection are allowed before each test.)

The difficulty and complication of these different tests are so evident that any comment on the ability of those who can pass them brilliantly is unnecessary.

It may be objected that improvising is hardly useful for virtuosos concert or recital organists (so numerous in America). At first view, this seems true; how-

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