

# Some tips for playing a church organ

Richard Godfrey (South Wessex Organ Society) | <https://sworgansociety.org>

## Touch and Articulation

Every note on an organ sounds for as long as it is held down:

The release of a note is just as important as the start. The length of notes and the gaps between them is known as articulation, absolutely fundamental to good organ playing

See how many different ways of playing of a simple 5 note exercise you can find between very staccato and ultra (overlapping) legato.

Notes must be given their full value – a minim must last a full two crotchets, lifting at the beginning of the next beat.

The touch can vary between very light and extremely heavy, depending on the type of action.

Pneumatic and electric actions are usually light, mechanical actions can be anything from light and precise to agonisingly heavy.

Play every note firmly and all notes of chords exactly together, whether the music is loud or soft.

The Swell to Great stop couples the two manuals and often doubles the heaviness of the touch. Try to play more often without this coupler drawn.

## Rhythm

The organ is difficult to make rhythmic because it is impossible to make a note or chord stand out by playing firmly, as pianists do when (for example) accenting a first beat. The organist has to employ tricks to deceive the listener:

Try to think in terms of weak notes and strong notes, even in hymns. As a rule the first note in a bar is the strongest. Even when playing short notes such as groups of semiquavers some will be stronger than others.

Appreciably shorten the weak note before an accented note (the usual method)

Make sure that the strong accented note has full value

Arrive fractionally late on the accented note (not recommended until a top professional)

## Volume (loudness)

The volume of sound from an organ depends on where it stands, the acoustic of the church, how many fur coats and carpets there are, the stops and the expression (swell) pedal – if the organ has one. Only the last two are controlled by the organist!

## The stops.

On the organ each individual stop belongs to a family – the principals, the flutes, the strings, and the reeds. Principals, flutes and strings are all flue pipes. They make their basic sound in the way of a recorder, but with much variation depending on their size, shape and composition. The reed family are different - they contain a brass tongue which vibrates inside the foot of the pipe.

Each family can work with another, but it helps to keep them separate when working out registration. Add stops within the same family before bringing in members of a new family (there are many variations to this rule!)

Add brightness rather than piling on the decibels. A congregation responds better to bright high sound than to loud rumbling. A good fifteenth or mixture (very small pipes of the principal family) adds few decibels but lots of brightness.

Reeds (oboes, trumpets, cornepeans, trombones) produce sound completely different than the rest of the stops. Work out whether the reeds on your instrument are best as solo stops or as exciting loud sounds to add for climaxes such as last verses of joyful hymns.

## What stops work well for hymns on a typical organ?

Play over – Swell Open diapason plus Principal (on one manual, Open Diapason plus Principal)

First verse – Great Open Diapason plus Principal plus Fifteenth

Loud verse - Great Open Diapason plus Principal plus Fifteenth plus Mixture. Couple the Swell (Swell to Great) and add Trumpet or Oboe etc.

## The expression pedal.

Whether the expression pedal is “balanced” and centrally placed or whether it is at the right side held by a ratchet, use it sparingly. The pedal opens and shuts a box containing the pipes of the Swell, and overuse can be distracting for both listener and player. It also inhibits use of the right foot when pedalling.

## Pedals

You don't have to be a trained organist to use the pedals – though it helps to learn proper pedal technique from the start. But to begin with, why not rest your foot lightly on the bass note of the final chord of the hymn, and press it down when you arrive there? The congregation will notice and be impressed.

## Hymns – Ten tips

1. Play over boldly at the exact speed you want them to sing. Always play over the first part of the hymn, but vary the actual amount played according to the mood and congregational familiarity with the tune.
2. Read through the entire hymn before playing. Note the general mood and spot special verses requiring registration changes (not all hymns end loudly!)
3. Try to sing along in your head with the congregation, breathing where they breathe. This also helps to get the gap right between verses.
4. Watch for punctuation, especially commas in mid-line and elisions between lines.
5. Never slow down at the end of verses, except the last verse.
6. With experience, try to solo out one line (usually the treble) on a different manual.
7. Gradually build up your use of prepared pedal notes, and start practising pedalling every bass note taking a hymn at a very slow speed and looking down to find the notes. Then start feeling for the notes instead of looking.
8. If the congregation seems to go too slowly and can't be speeded up, ask yourself if you are going too fast (and vice versa). But if you are sure that your speed is correct, adjust as follows:
9. To speed singers up: add brightness and articulate emphatically, with lots of space before the strong beats. If you can pedal, make it almost staccato to drive them along.
10. To slow them down: Play legato and give full value to the end of line chords, making them wait before charging off. In the pedal play very legato, with leisurely passing notes where they fit.

## Gap Filling – Basic Improvisation

Improvising requires a sense of freedom, but at the same time it helps to try to maintain a steady tempo and time signature. A few guidelines may help you to get started:

A safe method to fill a gap at the end of hymn is to repeat the last line or two – several times if necessary, with changes in registration to make it interesting.

Experiment with single note improvisation perhaps including parts of a hymn, but using a lot of the keyboard – right up to the top notes.

Try playing parts of the hymn in perfect fourths, accompanying quietly on another manual with the left hand

As confidence grows experiment with key changes and different harmonisations, even a short two part invention or fugue.

Loud full organ open octaves always impress!

## Next steps in becoming a “real organist”

### Are you sitting comfortably?

The Right Angle formula:

- Back straight – weight straight down through spine. Avoid leaning forward or back.
- Thighs horizontal
- Lower legs hanging vertically

Feet rest on pedals, both heels and toes in contact with the natural keys in the centre of the pedal board (seat height must be adjusted to allow this contact for the feet at rest).

Relax!

- Hands comfortably in reach of **all** manuals – adjust bench distance from keys to ensure easy reach of highest manual, usually the Swell
- Centre of body opposite middle D
- Neck relaxed, head neither tilted forward or back
- Shoulders relaxed – never raised
- Arms comfortably at sides, no flapping of elbows.
- Hands sit on manuals with relaxed “loose claw” and wrist kept low
- Keep hands as still as possible and pointing forward. Make rapid lateral shifts of hands as required by the music, whilst maintaining the basic relaxed hand position.

### How is your pedal technique?

Play two white notes (eg C and E) in the centre of the pedal board legato and steadily with alternate toes whilst answering the following questions:

1. Are my knees together?
2. Are my heels in contact?
3. Is one foot slightly ahead of the other - usually Rt ahead of Lt?
4. Are my feet horizontal and in contact with the pedals all the time?
5. Am I pressing the keys with the inside of my feet – using the first metatarsophalangeal joint as the point of contact?
6. Is the movement coming from the ankles, with my knees staying still?
7. Am I sitting erect?
8. Are my toes relaxed inside my shoes?
9. Am I playing just behind the black notes, ready to move up to them with minimal effort?

## Swivelling

Keeping the knees together, play notes at the extremes of the pedal board. Use both feet in this exercise and make sure that even the most awkward extremes can be reached – play top F with your left foot and bottom C with the right. Then answer the following questions:

1. Am I playing with the inside of my feet?
2. Are my knees above the notes I'm playing?
3. Are both my feet still in contact with each other?
4. Do I know how to swivel even when both hands are busy and can't hold the bench or key frame?

## Finding the right pedal notes

- Feel gaps, feel notes,
- Use the other foot as a guide
- Don't be afraid to look down occasionally (not for every note!).
- Always anticipate, get there early, and check notes before playing.

## Tutor Books

A few minutes with a Tutor book at the start of every practice makes a world of difference.

I recommend "*Play the Organ*" by David Sanger, published by Novello.

My favourite of all is "*The Organists Manual*" by Roger Davis, published by W.W.Norton and co.