

## The Forth in Praise Organist Blog Archive

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# PIANISTS COMING TO THE ORGAN

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### [Pianists coming to the organ: the basics](#)

*(Experienced organists please find another blog, because you'll be very bored by this one. Or stay and criticise, if you prefer...)*

Most pianists who play the organ have been dragged there unwillingly by the clergy. The priestly approach is either sad and pathetic ('Please, please help me out') or domineering, like the priest who 40 years ago dismissed all my protests that I knew nothing about the organ with 'Nonsense! Black keys, white keys, they're all the same. You don't need to worry about the pedals – we've taken them off. See you Sunday!'

I have to say that once I got to appreciate the organ I never looked back, but I still remember the horror of those nerve-racking early days. There was no one who could tell me how organs worked. I would automatically thump the thing to make it louder, and didn't dare pull any stop that might sound above *mf*. And everything was so *public*. Every mistake of any kind would blare out, and all I wanted to do was go home. Many pianists have gone through this, and some have not felt able to take the strain, and have given up. This is a great pity, because playing at Mass can become really rewarding once confidence is established.

So here are a few notes taken from a beginners' training day. I hope they might be of some use and encouragement to pianists who are either beginning to play the organ in church, or still thinking about taking the plunge.

### **SOME VERY BASIC THINGS ABOUT THE ORGAN**

All church organs work the same way. They have **MANUALS** (keyboards), **PEDALBOARD** (most of the time but not always), **STOPS**, **COUPLERS**, some kind of 'PRESET' arrangement and some kind of **VOLUME PEDAL**. The organ specification is simply a list of these for a particular organ.

**MANUALS** If there are two manuals, they are called Great and Swell. The Swell is the upper one, it's less strong than the Great, and the volume can be controlled by a foot pedal. There can be more than two manuals, of course.

**PEDALBOARD** A full pedalboard is two-and-a-half octaves or more and goes right across the bottom of the organ. A single octave on the left – usually found on ‘home’ organs – requires a quite different technique and cannot be used for serious organ pedalling.

**STOPS** They can be drawstops or tabs. The figure (16', 8', 4', 2') denotes pitch – the smaller the number, the higher the note. 8' is the middle range. Middle C on an 8' stop sounds as Middle C. On a 4' it sounds an octave higher, and on a 16' an octave lower. The name tells us the tone quality, and what tonal family (diapasons, flutes, reeds, etc.) the stop is in. For more about stop families see the stop chart in the [blog post of 8 January 2010](#)

**COUPLERS** join up different sets of sounds. They can combine the sounds on two manuals, add a manual sound to the pedals, or add an octave above or below the stops being used. On electronics, there can be an ‘automatic bass’ feature which brings the pedal sound into the bottom of the lower manual.

**PRESETS** I've used this term to cover all ways of setting combinations of sounds so that the organist can find them again easily. They can be buttons, thumb-pistons, toe-pistons or combination pedals.

**VOLUME PEDAL** This is known as the ‘Swell Pedal’ on a pipe organ because it controls the Swell manual. There can be more than one pedal, especially on electronics. Be wary of the ‘crescendo’ pedal, which takes the entire organ to its loudest!

**REGISTRATION** is the way the organist sets up the instrument for a particular piece of music. In hymn-playing, careful registration can really inspire the singing.

**And always remember that unlike the piano:**

- the organ is *not touch-sensitive*
- there is *no perpetual diminuendo*
- there is *no sustaining pedal*

And also remember, it's worth it in the end. Honest!

## February 24, 2010

### [Pianists: when you've finally been hooked ...](#)

*(Experienced organists, this is yet another boring blog post which you may wish to skip)*

Once priestly persuasion has been successful, and you have agreed with many misgivings to have a go at playing the organ, next comes the fateful moment when pianist and organ meet face to face for the first time. This should always happen in an empty church. If an organist is there to advise, well and good. Otherwise, priests, relatives and church hangers-on should be banished while you very carefully examine the tabs, stops, couplers, pistons, pedals and other bits and pieces. The main question is of course 'How do I know which of these things to push, pull or press, and when?' Have a notebook ready to write down the answers.

Here is a quick start guide:

First, check out which items are **STOPS** and which are **COUPLERS**, and **PARK THE PEDALS**.

**Stops** will have a pitch number – 8', 4' etc (some electronics have each tab consecutively numbered as well; try to ignore this.). Stops will be grouped according to their location (Swell, Great, Pedal – on some electronics, unhelpfully, I and II).

**Coupler** tabs or knobs will name the bits of the organ which they join up (e.g. 'Swell to Great', 'Swell Octave', 'Great to Pedal', or the less easy to spot 'II/I'). They won't have pitch numbers, and their lettering is sometimes a different colour from the real or 'sounding' stops.

Best to leave the **pedal keyboard** alone for now. You can stop it sounding by pushing in or switching off all stops in the Pedal group, and any couplers with 'Pedal' written on them. That way, if you kick one accidentally it won't make a noise. Later, when you're confident, you'll enjoy getting to know the pedals. Volume pedals are a different matter (see below).

Then, explore the **STOPS**.

Look for **diapasons**. Diapason is the basic organ hymn-playing sound. They come as 8', 4' and possibly 2' (remember 8' is in the middle of the pitch range, 4' an octave up, and so on). Apart from *Stopped Diapason*, which is a flute sound, everything else called 'diapason' is a diapason. Other names for diapasons are *Octave*, *Principal* and *Fifteenth* (a 2' stop). Sometimes their spellings are foreign, like *Prinzipal*, *Oktave*. Try playing a hymn on an 8' diapason, then add a 4' for the next verse. If there's a 2', add it to the next again verse. Try out the couplers. Listen carefully to the results.

Now check out the **flutes**. Again, there will be an 8' and a 4', and possibly a 2'. You can get a 16' flute (usually called *Bourdon*), which can be a bit growly. Their names vary more than the diapasons. Look for anything with 'flute' or 'flöte' in the name, like *Rohrflöte* or *Wald Flute*. Other flute sounds are *Stopped Diapason*, *Bourdon*, *Clarabella* or similar, and anything that looks like or includes *Gedackt*. Try playing voluntaries on the different flute sounds. Some flutes are strong enough to include in

hymn playing. Again, listen carefully. Your ear will tell you what sounds good and what doesn't.

With flutes and diapasons a pianist can get going on hymns and voluntaries right away. The other kinds of stops – string, mutations, mixtures and reeds – can be explored in a more leisurely way once confidence is established and the organ touch is comfortable. A great help in identifying peculiar-looking or sounding stops is a website called [Encyclopaedia of Organ Stops](#). Here you can find just about every stop in the world, and you can listen to some of them, too.

Finally, examine **PRESETS** and **VOLUME PEDALS**

**Presets** will reveal what stop combinations the previous organist decided to keep handy. You may find some useful, but don't rely on them, as other people may have been messing around in the interim. Eventually you'll create your own.

**Volume or Swell pedal(s)** If there is only one, you are lucky. It should apply to the upper or Swell manual. If there is more than one, find out which does what, and practise locating them without looking down. The dreadful 'Crescendo' pedal is usually on the extreme right. This will take the organ to its loudest whatever stops you are using, with a resulting shock both to you and to the congregation. Identify it, then see if there isn't a switch to disable it.

By this time, you should have a notebook full of useful information, to be used when you practise. On the Sunday itself, when the church is full of people, you will almost certainly find that you'll need more stops or volume, so it's worth planning for that, too.

Good luck!

# March 3, 2010

## Pianists (3) Electronic organs (3)

*(Same message as before to experienced organists)*

Following from last week's post, here are some photographs of organ stop groups. See how quickly you can spot the diapasons and the flutes.

The first one is from a very straightforward pipe organ (the Salicional is a string stop, and the Twelfth a mutation).



Next, part of an electronic.



Diapasons 8', 4' and 2' are there, but the word 'diapason' doesn't appear at all. Note the consecutive numbers running across the top of the stops. These can be helpful if you just want to note a setting without thinking it through, but you don't learn anything from them. The important numbers are the 16, 8, 4 and 2 at the bottom. Also note the 'II/I', second from the right. This is a coupler.

If you are in a showroom trying to assess the potential of an electronic organ, it's a good idea to take with you

- one or two rousing hymns
- something more thoughtful like 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind'
- a quiet voluntary
- a strong recessional voluntary
- the SCOTS chart of organ stops from the [blog post of 8 January 2010](#).

Always check out the diapasons and flutes first. If their sound isn't right for what you want in your church, go no further and turn to the next instrument. If the sound *is* OK, have a look at the other stops – reeds, mutations and mixtures – which we haven't gone into, using the chart. Try reeds such as Trumpet or Oboe as solo stops against, say, flutes on the other manual. Listen to the string stops. Try each mutation and mixture on top of one or more basic hymn or voluntary settings. Test out the couplers.

Lastly, as I've said before, avoid unnecessary gadgetry. What you *don't* need are automatic rhythms, non-organ voices (e.g. orchestral or jazz), recording facilities or any other similar gizmos. They don't help in mainstream church services, and they add to the price, sometimes quite considerably. There is usually a much simpler model, and if the supplier hasn't got one in stock for you to try, it is worth either waiting until he has, or finding out which local church has one installed and asking to try it.

And finally, just to demonstrate that nothing changes, here are the Great and Pedal stops of my own 1874 instrument, which is not a large one. The Gamba is a string stop, and the Bourdon is the only Pedal stop. But diapasons and flutes are all present and correct.

