The Royal Canadian College of Organists
Le Collège royal canadien des organistes

AN ORGANIST'S "HOW TO PRACTISE"

by

H. Barrie Cabena

ISBN 0-9690765-7-6

Royal Canadian College of Organists
112 St. Clair Avenue West, Suite 403
Toronto, ON M4V 2Y3
(416) 929-6400
www.rcco.ca

Published by the RCCO
National Standing Committee for Publications, 1987

Updated February 2007
Education & Resources Committee, Simon Irving & Nicholas Fairbank, Co-Chairs

An Organist's "How to Practise"
by
H. Barrie Cabena

For the organist the question of how to practise is a more serious one than for those working at other instruments. An organist's practice time is fraught with many obstacles: the finding of a willing church in the first place, the secretary's sensitive ear, the caretaker's penchant for using the vacuum cleaner to kill the sound of the organ, and so on. Because the length of time a budding organist can secure for practice is so often minimal, the quality of practice becomes of paramount importance.

And so, for the organist more than anyone else, we must consider the purpose of practice – no organist can indulge in wasteful doodling. I see three specific goals; a) mastering the notes, b) getting to know the music, c) the performance aspect – the projection of the musical content.

Technique

All the great teachers have recommended slow practice. Drilling is the object of the exercise. We must impress on our grey matter the various movements and actions that are required. This is achieved by first knowing what must be done, and then doing it at the slow speed at which it is possible to be fully conscious of every detail. It goes without saying that the drilling must be done exactly the same way every time. Any variability here, and, under pressure of performance, the by then automatic activity will let you down. In the end it is the thinking that really counts. Think first, and think afterwards to check that what you have done is what you intended to do. And think about that which you are doing! The shopping list or the boyfriend can wait! The one single factor I have found to be common to all the really great players has been the high quality of their concentration. Aim for that when you practise.

Having engaged in the three-part process: think the music, play it, think a post-mortem; then, if it was imperfect in the playing stage find out why and do the necessary repair work. When the playing part is satisfactory repeat it six times to prove it!

If your fingering habits and pedaling habits are somewhat developed one could begin by playing the music at sight and then writing in the important events in fingering that worked. For those passages that did not work some scientific planning must be applied. When the best result is arrived at, stick to it without deviation. It is a good idea to aim for legato fingering first; articulations can be added easily, but the other way round is less easy.

Never let a wrong note go uncorrected in the early stages of practising a piece. Always stop and make the correction and drill the right note into the learned passage.

The post mortem part of the activity of practice is very important, especially for organists. The listening part of musical life is the area where separation of the sheep from the goats takes place. For an organist the listening has many more problems than for other musicians. Different stops have different kinds of speech, come from different locations, have different strengths, combine producing odd harmonics and so on. In the area of touch one has to deal with the way the note

begins (on tracker action, anyway), and ends, and how the connection is made with the next note. In this place of connection the whole art of organ-playing comes to life (or doesn't!). The effective calculation of these durations and spaces can be done only with the ear.

In an age when the possibility of listening is becoming more and more difficult (the assault on our ears from increasing noise and perpetual radio, TV and i-pod background is creating a generation of people very skilled in non-hearing) the effort given to attentive listening must be greater and greater.

As an aid to some aspects of listening it is a good idea to do much of your practicing on one stop of crisp speech and clear tone. The more stops the greater effort at listening is needed, and the greater the temptation to attend to the organ sound in itself rather than the work your fingers and feet are doing.

A brief note about vanity! I used to be very proud of playing from a virgin copy. All fingerings, pedallings, registrations, divisions, etc. were in my head. In those days my memory was sufficiently good that I could get away with it (for whatever it was worth) but now I have to relearn everything from those days because I have quite forgotten the fingerings, etc! How foolish! Mark your copies with your final decisions about these matters.

To repeat: never play correctly by accident, but rather go over and over the successful passages until they are being playing in complete consciousness. Teach the fingers and feet to play through this conscious activity and then, in performance, let them do what you have taught them to do freely and without interference (in other words, then perform in a very relaxed manner).

In the area of registration we face a technical matter that is unique to the organist. Every organ console is different, and therefore it sometimes seems difficult to practise on one organ what you will be doing on another. The trick is to practise doing something, regardless of whether it is precisely the thing that will be in the final version of the performance. Sir George Thalben-Ball recommended to his students that they practise moving an eraser from one position to another at the points in the music where a registration change has to be made. Any action will do as long as it is done consciously and with precision.

Reading music is, for some students, a difficult activity. An organist, more than any other musician, must be able to read fluently. Not for the organist is the luxury of years of preparation on one piece with a career of then performing that piece. Every week the organist has to perform different music - hence the value of all those irritating studies in score reading, transposition and the like. Stretch your reading skills and ordinary reading will seem easy. And then, in using ordinary reading in practicing pieces, read ahead. If you expect to teach the subconscious mind (or whatever it is that we teach) you must be able to give it clear and precise instructions in plenty of time. There is no other way.

To sum up: Know what it is you are trying to do when you sit down to practise, and then do it with concentration and full consciousness.

The Music

It would be difficult to say what is more important – the technique or the musicianship. One without the other will not work. However, one grows tired of those technically masterful players who seem not to care about the music or the style and are only interested in a flawless performance of the notes. The purpose of technique is to serve the music-making.

Although many teachers separate these two functions, I would make a strong case against it. Musical sensitivity is a delicate and, in some students, evasive gift. Therefore, every note you play should be a part of a music-making activity. The components of music (rhythmic precision, rhythmic distortion, phrasing, breathing, placements of notes and chords, the sense of line, cadence, textural independence, etc.) should be present at all times – leave out some of these components and the gift from them will vanish through the process of atrophy.

The organist, with limited time at the console, can do a great deal of work in the area of musicianship away from the organ. Sorting out the rhythm of a movement is best done away from the act of playing. Rehearsing the music in the mind, while conducting with the arms, is strongly recommended. Asking questions about the score (the key, the modulations, the form and its relationship to both articulation and phrasing, and the registration, the registration plan, the proper steps for the style and period, the phrase structure and harmonic analysis, etc.) should be done away from the organ which, at this stage, can be a distraction. Textbooks and scores needed for this very necessary study are usually in another place, anyway. Time at the console can be reserved for work with the fingers and feet.

Organists play, in the main, contrapuntal music. The only way to bring such textures to life is to know every voice intimately. Sitting at the organ is not way to get inside contrapuntal scores. Each voice must be studied and learned separately – and sung. This part of the work is best done away from an instrument. Even putting it together as music (quite aside from trying to play it as organ music) can be done well on the piano. Having studied music this way it is a very good thing to attempt to hear it mentally before going to the organ. If you do not learn how to do this, then what your fingers do at the organ will tell you how the piece should go rather than you telling them!

The Performance

Practising performing is difficult. One must seek out opportunities and occasions for this very necessary activity. In performing one must first have clearly in mind exactly what the piece should sound like, in your opinion. Then you must attempt to realize this picture in sound. Gone are the times for correction, stumbling and audible swearing! Gone are the second chances of the practise period. Keeping going, "though the end of the world should come", is the need now. And after it is all over comes the time for remembering how it went, for an objective assessment. The activity is a clearly different one from practice. Technical worries must be put aside and the overview must be put first – the projection of the composer's intention, the expressive effect, and so forth.

Too often one hears a performance which is the very first time the player has played the music in a non-practice frame of mind. Try to create opportunities of playing to friends (enemies are even more useful, if you can endure them!) in a serious, concert-like atmosphere.

Attitudes

Making music is a very great privilege. Awareness of this fact should be the beginning and end of practice as well as performance. One should endeavour to bring a suitable attitude to one's practice sessions.

Try to leave your worries outside the practice-room. With them you will get nowhere. To be able to do the very demanding physical and mental work practice requires you must be physically and mentally relaxed. To approach the mighty music we, as organists, are so very privileged to work with we must come with an attitude of reverence and awe. Without this attitude we will never draw out the secrets of the music. And to communicate fully the content of the scores we must be willing to lay aside our egos (in as much as they become the centre of the stage) and serve the composer and the great art of music, which the composer also serves.

Here are three quotations which might be relevant. In the area of technique: "Surround every action with a circle of non-hurry" – Baron von Hugel. "The whole duty of the artist is to listen to the voice of God" – Hugh Walpole. If there is any truth in this, silence will have to become the companion of the musician, and the ego's prattling will have to shut up. And Beethoven speaks of an attitude that we might well bring to our work sessions to give focus and aim, "There is nothing finer than to approach the Divine and to shed its rays on the human race". What a wonderful vision to encourage us to practise wisely and well.

This brief article has been written in great haste and I lay no claim to any kind to completeness. It may be that someone will begin to think about the activity of practice in a new way, and that could be a good thing. There are some excellent books available on the subject and I include a few titles below for those who might wish to do some more reading on the subject.

With your own two hands – Self-discovery through music
Seymour Bernstein, Schirmer Books, New York

This book may be the best ever written on the subject. It deals very helpfully with stage-fright.

Two other books, both with the piano in mind, are:
How to Practise
Hetty Bolton, Elking and Co., London
Practising the Piano
Frank Merrick, Barrie and Rockcliff

For those with courage, and the desire to get behind the mysteries:
New pathways to piano technique
Luigi Bonpensiere, Philosophical Library

While few books have been written with playing the organ specifically in mind, much can be gained by studying books about playing the sister instrument – the piano.

H. Barrie Cabena, FRCO FRCL ARCM FRCCO(hon), is Professor Emeritus of Church Music and Organ at Wilfred Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. A noted teacher, organist, and composer, he is a Past President of the RCCO (1967-69).