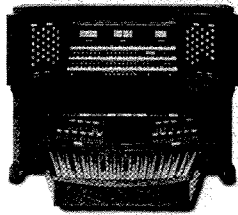
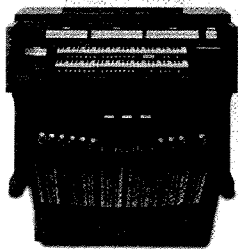


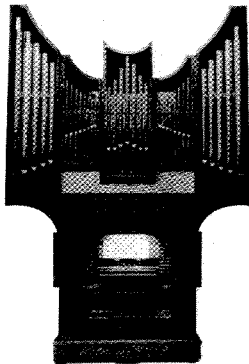
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THE NEW ORGANIST

LEARNING TO PLAY THE ORGAN

A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

Philip Gehring, FAGO

THE ORGAN AND its music occupy a strange and wonderful world, furnished with instruments that are marvels of artistry and engineering, provided with a repertoire of compositions by many of the world's greatest composers, and peopled with personalities that are well worth knowing (though some of us are admittedly a bit peculiar).

When you set out to learn to play the organ, it can often be both exciting and daunting: exciting because this new world will open up before you, and daunting because it seems hard to master the required skills. Often the focus, for the new organist, can be too much on the chore of learning the skills (not that this isn't important; it can't be bypassed), and not enough on the new territory to be explored. By being a Magellan rather than a Simon Legree, it is possible to place the labor of practicing within the context of a voyage of discovery. This lifts your work above the level of mere keyboard calisthenics and can make it all seem worthwhile.

How can this happen? Through applying natural human curiosity to this new terrain. I would like to suggest some paths of exploration under three main headings: Discovering the Instrument, Discovering the Music, and Discovering Yourself.

The Instrument

People undertake organ study for many reasons, but certainly one of them must be the allure of the instrument. No other instrument is so grand, offers so many possibilities, and can be so complete. So the first thing to be discovered is the organ itself.

■ How does it work? How does the air moving through the pipe create the sound? How can you sit at the keyboard and make a pipe sound that may be 20 feet away? Is the linkage mechanical or electric?

■ What are all the little knobs and buttons and tablets for?

■ Why are there two (or three, or four) manual keyboards?

■ Why do those foot rests move? (Surprise! They aren't foot rests; they open and close the shutters in front of the pipes.)

■ What does each stop sound like, and what does each possible combination of stops sound like? Where do those weird stop names come from?

■ How do the keys (manual and pedal) respond to your touch? Is there a small delay before the pipe speaks? Is the room reverberant? If you use the combination action, does it act quickly, and is it noisy?

■ And finally, how does this particular organ compare to others you have heard, seen, and perhaps played?

Exploring these questions is not "just playing around"; it's part of the process of getting acquainted with the instrument you will be playing. It will be time well spent.

The Music

The composing of a piece of music has already been a form of discovery on the part of the composer. Given the first phrase, what should follow? At the end of the exposition, how should the development proceed? These are not arbitrary decisions made by the composer; the second phrase is already inherent in or suggested by the first phrase, and the composer "discovers" it as the piece takes shape. How does the performer share in this process? In several ways.

■ The score from which you play is merely ink on paper; there's no music in it. The music occurs when you begin to transfer the printed notes to an actual succession of sounds. This is truly a matter of discovery.

■ What effect does the registration you choose have on the composition? Sometimes composers are specific about what stops and manuals to use, but often they are not, and you will discover that the whole personality of a piece can change when you alter the registration. For this matter you need the help of a good teacher in order to be sure you are beginning to learn how to approach registration when specific directions are not given in the score (and even when they are). But you still have to use your ear to discover how different registrations affect the musical result. Don't fall into the habit of always practicing on General Piston 3.

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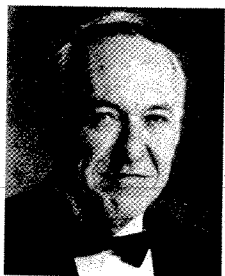
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■ What effect does tempo have on the music? Too fast, and it will be sloppy and unclear; too slow, and it will drag. Again, a teacher can help, but learn to make your own judgments through trial and error (a discovery process).

■ Search out the character of the piece. Does it seem to you like a march? A song? A chant? A dance? Exercising this judgment, subject to guidance by a teacher, will strengthen your powers of discrimination.

■ Find relationships within a piece, and between different pieces. In a Bach chorale prelude, how does the chorale tune relate to the counterpoint that accompanies it? In a Buxtehude prelude, how does the first fugal section compare to and contrast with the second?

■ Improvising, even if you aren't especially good at it, is a wonderful way to learn about how music is constructed. Try improvising a piece that sounds like a Bach chorale, or a Mendelssohn slow

movement. Try to create a piece with form and character. [N.B.: Don't do it in public unless you are confident that you can create an intelligible piece of music.]

Some of these discoveries may be fool's gold. Things aren't always what they seem at first glance. One needs information as well as experimentation. But better to make your call, then find out from your experienced mentor that it is off the mark, and why it is off the mark, than simply to wait for your teacher to tell you how to play it. Powers of judgment never develop unless they are used.

Yourself

Discover what you can do when you set your mind to it. You may have more of what it takes to be a good organist than you thought. As this new world unfolds, you may make faster progress than you would have believed possible, especially if you let your sense of discovery lead you on.

Discover what you *can't* do—yet. Only small children expect to be able to practice a new skill perfectly, immediately. True mastery proceeds step by step. Such problems as weak fourth and fifth fingers, the difficulty of reading three staves, finding pedal keys down there in that dark cellar, and coordinating hands and feet are not permanent problems. Time, practice, and experience will conquer them.

But especially for those who come to organ study in mid-life without a firm and disciplined keyboard technique already established, it is wise to face the fact that there will be things you may not ever be able to do. This is not a counsel of despair, it is simply a counsel of "know thyself." Some difficult organ pieces require skills (physical dexterity, stamina, mental agility) that are simply not available to someone starting organ late in life. There are certainly some organ works that I never have played and never will play in public. But you can still be an accomplished, musical, reliable, and well-informed player, as long as you choose your repertoire carefully. Just because the bride wants Widor's "Toccata" for her wedding recessional, you don't have to attempt it when you know perfectly well that your fingers will freeze up before you have gone more than a page or two. Tell her politely that it's not in your repertoire.

Discovery is the best of all possible motives for practicing. Your sessions at the organ, even your very first lessons and practice periods, should not be a task to be endured, like an hour on a NordicTrack. If your predominant focus is on discovery, you will approach your practicing joyfully and enthusiastically, and this great new world will begin to open up before you.