

THE NEW ORGANIST

ERASING EXCUSES

Donna Zierdt Elkin, AAGO

Lutheran church organists in central Pennsylvania have had a unique opportunity for the last four years. The Upper Susquehanna Synod has provided an organ teacher who will often teach where they play each Sunday. This program is not directed toward the new organist (although young organists have entered the program), but to those who have often been playing for services for many years but have not had actual organ lessons. As the synod cantor, I have been teaching and administering this program since its inception. We have learned much about what these dedicated individuals need as they work each Sunday leading a congregation in worship. Often we work to fill in the missing skills that are lacking as a result of no or poor instruction.

When the program began, our first goal was to locate all musicians working in parishes in the synod. Using the initial list of nearly 250, we sent a newsletter announcing the plans to bring organ lessons to those who

wanted them. Within a few months, the cantor's schedule was full. The first newsletter also announced workshops and other services provided by the synod cantor to the synod's musicians. The cantor is available to work with individual churches to fulfill needs as they arise. Work has included such important tasks as training choir and handbell directors, teaching classes on hymnody, guiding churches in selecting or repairing organs, and helping to fill vacancies. These aspects of the program are important and also have been successful, but I consider organist training as the backbone of this venture.

Fear of formal study, distance, time, and cost are the reasons many forgo the opportunity for lessons. Some organists believe that they are not good enough players to study organ! We are attacking the excuses, trying to eliminate them, so that all who need help or improvement might seek it. This means a non-threatening program and patient teachers. We encourage a trial period by asking or-

ganists initially to enroll for a ten-lesson package. Most come back for more after the first ten, but the initial commitment is important.

Training organists varies with individuals. However, some basic approaches surfaced as we worked with our students. (I can now use "we," as the program has grown to include five teachers.) After asking the student to put the left shoe back on and turn off the tremolo, we proceed to teach the skill the organist wants to improve. This is often the use of the pedals and the expansion of repertoire. Calming nervous students and encouraging their continual improvement through lessons have required that our seeking perfection be tempered by the actual needs and situations of the students.

1. We use a method book, but have not found one that goes slowly enough to build a secure foundation. Either progressing too rapidly or dwelling on a particular exercise too long can cause frustration. We strive for a balance that will not discourage the stu-

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dent. It is easy to supplement the method book, but this becomes costly as these organists are often paid very little for their work. Hymns and service music are good foundation builders if the price of buying many new books becomes prohibitive for the student.

2. We use literature rather than exercises to teach skills. These organists must have music ready every Sunday, and should spend more time on music they can use rather than on exercises.

3. We try to keep assignments interesting. Perfection may not be reached before moving on to a new piece. Reviewing learned music is the way to strive toward perfection without creating bored dropouts. As a very successful high school instrumental teacher who has seen many of his students become members of the country's best symphonies explained to me, "Teach using the pyramid system—the broader the base, the higher a student will rise." His approach is to encourage gently while always working toward the highest levels of performance. It works.

4. We use a metronome only occasionally. A person with rhythmic difficulties will be frustrated with a mechanical monitor that expects perfection immediately. Instead, use a "teacher" metronome that can kindly bend the tempo, a little less each time until perfection is reached.

5. We do not usually emphasize historical techniques, performance practices, and improvisation. We subscribe to Bach's advice—play the right notes at the right time. Accomplishing this is our main goal.

6. We listen to the pipe sounds. Basics of registration are taught, but with an emphasis on using the ear to judge the effectiveness of a registration. I must admit that some unusual registrations have worked well on poor quality instruments where conventional registrations failed. We do, however, advise against "registration by the inch," where tabs are depressed starting at the left and added in order until the desired dynamic is achieved!

7. We listen to the music. "Make it sing. Make it beautiful. Relax and enjoy your music!" This is our final goal.

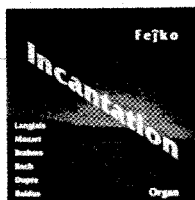
The associated teachers have developed a great respect for organists working for many years without the benefit of proper training. Their needs are the same as those listed by the archdiocese training program in this column in November 1992: learning more music and improving techniques for playing service music. The Upper Susquehanna Synod Cantor Program has been successful in attracting and holding many organists in its training program. Improvements have been noted by pastors in the leadership qualities of the organ playing. Leading the congregation in worship is the basic job of a church organist, the job that needs to be done well, and to the glory of God.

Patience and a sense of humor have accomplished much in passing on the skills of our profession. Creativity must be used by each of our teachers to meet the individual student's needs. Apprentice programs, workshops, classes, lessons, conversation, and supporting AGO chapter meetings are ways to help with this vast and important task. What are you doing to "pass it on"?

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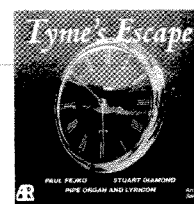


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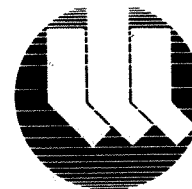
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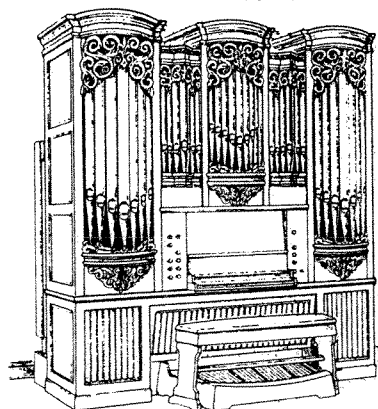
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MEASUREMENTS

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