

COMPOSING FOR LEARNING

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The organ can be a wonderful instrument, a key resource in providing music for worship in church, as well as being an instrument in its own right. Yet, attracting new players and continuing to reward and develop the skills of existing players is an area of continuing challenge. A chief element of this is the provision of suitable repertoire. As a supplement to teaching the very rich and varied existing published repertoire, I hope to briefly suggest some ways in which specially composed repertoire might be designed to provide material that is both rewarding to play and hear, and contains clear learning objectives; this includes some music of pre-grade 1 level, of which relatively little appears to be available.

No mountains to climb: Music and learning tasks generally should be bite sized, of a length and difficulty that enables a student to see the possibility of ‘getting a result’, and a corpus of varied repertoire completed relatively quickly; not weeks grappling with just one piece; nor assuming that a student should loyally follow received wisdom that working at something, no matter how ungratifying or seemingly pointless, will eventually yield a reward.

Music should start from the first notes: Not acres of abstract exercises before getting onto an identifiable and rewarding piece of music. Didactic purpose should be clear in the mind of teacher and student but subsumed to music of value. For example, a very basic pedal exercise might be turned into an ostinato figure to a simple melody, and march or processional. Earn while you learn!

Repertoire should be engaging: Not merely something that conveniently fulfils a particular didactic purpose or approximates to a certain technical standard; nor music that is likely to serve primarily as an appropriate ambience, albeit a rather ephemeral background – i.e. ‘musical wallpaper’. Character, memorability and the ability to say a lot with the least of means should be evident from the opening bars.

Slot into the musical jigsaw: Performing repertoire is just part of a broader appreciation of music and the mutually dependent skills of aural acuity, melody harmonisation, composition and improvisation, as well as general ‘theory’ and appreciation of music’s historical development. Transparency of structure within repertoire will do much to aid this.

Value manuals only: Music for manuals only is not a poor substitute for music with pedals, and merely for those who cannot play or reach the pedals. On the contrary, music for manuals can have musical qualities that are hard if not impossible to replicate with music with pedals, not least the agility and fine articulation required of bass lines, most especially in Baroque style music with its often fast moving counterpoint and harmonic rhythm; also where balanced and equal parts are required, e.g. contrapuntal duos. Music for manuals only can also have a particular intimacy and homogeneity of sound.

Anchor with stable hands (and feet!): In designing music for the early stages in particular, a significant aid to the player can be stable hand and feet positions. With this, other more complex aspects of the writing are that much more possible and add to the sense of reward and achievement. For example, *Carillon (Ex.1)* can provide an experience of a ‘big organ sound’, such as developing melody against faster moving repeated figures found in 19th and 20th century toccatas.

Carillon

♩ = 88

f 2 5 1 5 2 5 1 5 etc.

1 2 3 4 3 2 1 1 2 3 4

6 3 5 2 1 4 4 3 1 4 4 3 etc.

4 5 3 5 2 5 1 5 4 5 3 5 2 5 1 5

v v

^ ^

Enrich with formal integrity and variety: Even within a very short length, distinct thematic material, plus development and clear conclusion can make a piece all the more complete and satisfying; for example, in *Fanfare (Ex.2)*. Much of the piece is developed from the motif in bar 2. Note also how sparing use of the pedal can enhance a final climax.

Fanfare

♩ = 120

ff

Allargando

f

Create ‘tasters’, such as a Fugue ‘lite’: As seen in previous examples, even simple music can be a microcosm of - and preparation for - much more ambitious repertoire; albeit with shorter length and less complex writing. For example, a contrapuntal interlude, possibly echoing a previously sung hymn, focussing on fugal style entries and simple contrapuntal writing; *Fughetta on Heinlein (Ex.3)*.

Fughetta on Aus Der Tiefe (Heinlein)

♩ = c.72

5

Reach out to other musical worlds: Not everyone instantly identifies with traditional organ idioms and culture. A wide range of genres can be explored that fully exploit the various colours and other possibilities of the instrument. Whilst being fully idiomatic to the organ, pieces can resonate with imagery of other instruments and ensembles, for example the modality and rhythmic style of Scottish bagpipe music.; a few out of tune reed stops coupled together might add to the effect! *Scottish Pipes (Ex.4)*.

'Scottish Pipes'

$\text{♩} = 88$

OPTIONAL PEDAL

6 etc.

The musical score for 'Scottish Pipes' is in 4/4 time with a tempo of quarter note = 88. It consists of two systems. The first system has a treble clef staff with a melody and a bass clef staff with a bass line. The bass line features a pedal point on a low note, with the text 'OPTIONAL PEDAL' written below it. The second system starts with a measure number '6' and continues the piece, ending with 'etc.'. Both systems use slurs to indicate phrasing.

Working with different idioms does not need to run counter to traditional techniques and disciplines, for example, handling trio textures in *Organist Blues* (Ex.5).

Organist Blues

$\text{♩} = 92$

I etc.

The musical score for 'Organist Blues' is in 4/4 time with a tempo of quarter note = 92. It features a three-part texture. The top staff (treble clef) has a melody with a first ending bracket labeled 'I'. The middle staff (bass clef) has a bass line with a first ending bracket labeled 'I' and a second ending bracket labeled 'II' containing a triplet of eighth notes. The bottom staff (bass clef) has a simple bass line. The piece ends with 'etc.'.

Think Diatonic and Modal: Although much if not most organ music will be essentially diatonic, a significant proportion of 20th century, (and early) repertoire is modally based. Some modes also present rather less navigational challenges than a hierarchy of diatonic keys; for example, *Folk Melody* (Ex.6). Note the use of the Lydian mode with the characteristic augmented 4th. A piece such as this may also be a useful exercise in held notes and legato playing.

Folk melody (in the style of Bartok)

Andante con rubato ♩ = c.108

6

Make simplicity serve the music: Rather than ‘simple’ music being ‘watered down’ versions of ‘real’ organ music, repertoire can be designed to exploit the musical possibilities of less complex writing. For example, long held pedal notes, as well as reducing technical demands on the player, can accentuate harmonic colour through the tensions and releases between the bass and upper parts; also emphasising the broader harmonic structure, such as in *Pastorale on Away in a Manger* (Ex. 7). (Remember too that hymn tunes are often far from the easiest music to play, not least when used with pedals. The fast moving harmonies, often with chromatic notes, can create pedal lines that can equal quite advanced repertoire in difficulty.)

Pastorale on Away in a Manger

I

II

5

etc.

Populate with pattern: Any pattern is a form of repetition, be it of melodic phrases, rhythms, bass lines etc. Repetition reinforces memory and the ability to replicate and learn material. This also reinforces the architecture and provide signposts in the mind of player and listener. (It also economises the amount of material to learn!) Simple dance-like or ritornello movements in ternary or rondo form, for example, combine both variety and lots of repetition, as in *Medieval Dance* (Ex. 8).

Medieval Dance

The musical score for 'Medieval Dance' is presented in two systems. The first system consists of three staves: a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a separate bass staff. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 88. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The first system contains four measures. The first measure is marked *f* and the second *mf*. A section marker 'II' is placed above the second measure. The third measure is marked *f* and the fourth *mf*. The grand staff has a treble clef and a bass clef. The bass staff has a bass clef. The second system starts at measure 5 and contains four measures. The first measure is marked *mf*. A 'Da Capo' instruction is placed above the fourth measure. The grand staff has a treble clef and a bass clef. The bass staff has a bass clef. The word 'etc.' is written to the right of the second system.

Guide with harmonic patterns: A perceptible pattern in terms of harmonic direction and overall structure can serve the architecture and appreciation of a piece of music. Growing familiarity with the repeating harmonic underlay will also enable more focus on an elaborated melody. Experience of playing such music helps develop the ability to chart fundamental harmonic structures within a variety of figurations, for example. arpeggios, or displaced and inverted chords. In *Variations in the style of Mozart* (Ex. 9), each eight bar phrase contains the same underlying harmonic pattern I - V7 - I - IV - V7 (albeit with some inversions and a variation of the pattern in bar 16.)

Variations in the style of Mozart

♩ = 88 Solo flute

9 Var. 1

17 Var. 2

22 Var. 3

Exploit the Transfer Window: The ability to transfer, i.e. transpose, sections of music is an essential part of performing any repertoire, and indeed creating music generally. Encountering familiar material, albeit in another key or literal transposition in the case of modes, is a further aid to learning and understanding the broader architecture of a piece. Repeated elements are also particularly helpful in the context of challenges such as irregular meter or when becoming acquainted with an unfamiliar mode, such as the Octatonic mode, frequently used by Messiaen (his Mode II) and other 20th century composers. In *Prelude on the Octatonic Mode, (Ex.10)*, the opening theme is developed through virtually literal transpositions. (The Octatonic Mode consists of the pattern: tone - semitone - tone - semitone etc., and in diatonic terms is totally neutral; melodies and harmonies can therefore be transposed in literal form).

Transposed up a minor 3rd

etc.

Prelude on the Octatonic mode

$\text{♩} = 120$

mf *cresc.*

6 *f*

11 *decresc.* *mf* etc.

Turning very briefly to the youngest of potential learners, a very large and varied body of beginner piano repertoire exists, often successfully presented in an attractive and accessible way, and couched within strong imagery and narrative. However, given the range of tone colours that an organ possesses, is there not potential to enthuse the youngest of players with repertoire of a similar type? How many albums of what might be termed ‘fun’ music currently exist for organ, particularly for the youngest of players? Are assured piano skills completely necessary before starting on the organ? I shall leave this as an open question, and for wiser souls to answer.

Hopefully, these very brief snapshots of different styles of music will provide some useful considerations that might inform the creation of new repertoire; perhaps too, help identify required qualities within existing repertoire; for teaching students and playing within a liturgical or concert context. If the organ as an instrument is to thrive to its maximum, and attract and motivate new players, audiences and performance contexts, an imaginative approach is required; also a broader vision of the inherent possibilities of the instrument. This is perhaps a challenge and opportunity for composers and publishers alike, not least in exploring styles of music with which the organ is not traditionally associated.

