

EARLY ORGAN TECHNIQUE

*A Method of Articulated Playing
for Music Composed before 1750*

The very idea of learning a second organ technique may seem intimidating. For the organist in the first year of study, or for the more advanced player versed only in modern technique, a number of questions can spring to mind: Isn't one technique enough? Is it really worth spending time learning a second method? Won't it be confusing to switch back and forth between a modern and an early manner of playing?

Modern organ technique, while ideal for the performance of nineteenth- and twentieth-century music, is not satisfactory for playing early repertory. The legato principles that underlie every aspect of modern technique are at odds with the musical precepts of earlier times. Even when "adjustments" are made to modern technique, usually in the form of foot and finger crossings and detached playing, one has to "work" to achieve the sounds that the early composers took for granted. With early organ technique, such sounds come easily. The figurations in the pieces tend to fall naturally into place, with the correct accentuation, and one no longer goes through the "contortions" that occur when substitutions, glissandos, and other legato techniques are used in a repertory for which they were never intended. The fact is, sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century works are *easier to perform* using the methods of earlier times. Learning a historical performance style, therefore, is not an esoteric or overly specialized procedure; it is simply the most practical way to play early music comfortably and well. The prominent French organist Marie-Claire Alain has written with reference to playing the early repertory:

Most of the time, substitution is useless. Giving it up greatly facilitates playing and produces the breathing that is necessary to musical discourse. The same applies to the pedal. By abandoning the general use of the heels, one produces an articulation that resembles the bowing of a cello. . . . I have noticed that switching from Romantic fingerings to more straightforward early fingerings results in a great simplification of my entire position on the manuals, and abandoning the excessive use of the heels leads to a better equilibrium on the pedal board.¹

The most difficult step in mastering a technique for early music is making the *decision* to learn it. One discovers, after a short period of adjustment, that the newly acquired technique takes its place alongside the modern method as a

¹ Marie-Claire Alain, "Why an Acquaintance with Early Organs Is Essential for Playing Bach," in *Johann Sebastian Bach as Organist*, ed. George Stauffer and Ernest May (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 51.

valuable additional tool. It soon becomes quite simple to go back and forth between the older technique and the newer one.

Treatises and musical scores from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries show that keyboard, wind, and string playing of the time differed in certain fundamental ways from today's practices. On keyboard instruments, the very connected legato touch that became standard in the nineteenth century was used only in exceptional circumstances. The "ordinary touch" of earlier centuries was more articulate: It was either an articulated legato (the type of connection that can be illustrated most easily by joining two adjacent notes as closely as possible with one finger) or a touch in which the notes were actually detached to some degree. Since the techniques of substitution and glissando were not required in order to achieve this type of articulated touch, they were used only in very unusual instances. For much the same reason, heels seem to have been seldom employed in pedal playing.

However, apart from these and a few other generalizations that can be made, there was no "standard method" of organ playing in earlier times. Practices varied greatly from country to country and locality to locality, with the result that there were many different techniques. The method presented here for performing organ music written before 1750 is based primarily on the technique of Johann Sebastian Bach. We have chosen it over other methods for a number of reasons. First, it is possible to reconstruct Bach's technique with a fair amount of certainty. This can be done from primary source materials that illuminate Bach's manner of playing. These materials (which are admirably summarized by Quentin Faulkner in *J. S. Bach's Keyboard Technique: A Historical Introduction* [St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1984]) include scores fingered by Bach and his pupils and contemporary comments about Bach's technique. Second, Bach's method represents the climax and summation of early playing practices. Surviving examples of Bach's fingering show that he mastered and refined seventeenth-century techniques in the process of formulating his own. Third, Bach's organ compositions represent the most important body of organ music in existence. A method based on Bach's manner of playing provides the player with a technique that has unusual utility. We have found that it makes Bach's extraordinary music even more remarkable, for it brings the performer closer to the playing style used by the composer himself.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, numerous writers on music and music performance discussed the common practice of grouping notes according to rhythmic and metric patterns. This practice is contrary to that of the nineteenth century, in which notes are grouped by melodic considerations, such as motives and phrases. Many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers, including a number of Bach's colleagues, explain that in a group of successive notes of equal value, some notes are viewed as "good" and others as "bad," depending on rhythmic and metrical considerations. Synonyms for "good" and "bad" are "strong" and "weak," "long" and "short." On keyboard instruments, fingerings were adopted that reinforced the position of notes within the metric pattern, that clarified the relationship of "good" and "bad" notes. This phenomenon can be traced from the late Renaissance (it was mentioned by Diruta in 1593) to the time of Bach. On string instruments, similar results were achieved through appropriate methods of bowing; on wind instruments, they were accomplished through tonguings. Writings of the time, together with fingerings, bowings, and tonguings, give evidence that the rhythmic organization of the music often resulted in a slight lengthening of "good" notes and a corresponding shortening of "bad" notes. The lengthening and shortening took place on successive notes of equal value at any value level (except very fast notes) and in all parts at once.

On one level, the unequal treatment of notes reflected meter. In duple meter, strong beats alternated with weak beats. This was equated with downbeats alternating with upbeats. The strong beats (or downbeats) were viewed as “long,” the weak beats (or upbeats) as “short.” In triple meter, the first two beats together were viewed as strong and grouped as the downbeat. As a consequence, they were considered “long” notes. The third beat was seen as weak and as the upbeat. As a result, it was “short.” Johann Adolf Scheibe, an organist and theorist close to Bach, stated that “all notes of equal length or one value are related to each other as the parts of the downbeat and upbeat are related to each other.” Thus, on a second level, the first two notes of a triplet figure, for instance, would be grouped together as strong and the third note would be weak, or in a duple pair of eighth notes, the first would be viewed as strong and the second weak. (A lengthy discussion of comments by Scheibe and other eighteenth-century theorists is found in George Houle, *Meter in Music, 1600–1800: Performance, Perception, and Notation* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987].)

To take an example from the Baroque pieces in this volume, the fugue subject of the Prelude and Fugue in B-flat Major, BWV 560, from the Bach circle, is in 3/4 meter:



When articulated according to early principles, the theme would be played with slight breaks over the barline, indicated here by vertical lines, to stress the “good,” or downbeat, notes and to shorten the “bad,” or upbeat, notes (there would be other articulatory subtleties, of course, which we will discuss later):



These breaks before the downbeats contrast greatly with the way the theme would sound if it were performed according to the principles of legato style. In their Bach edition of 1912–14, Widor and Schweitzer recommended “phrasing” the theme in the legato manner of the nineteenth century, as follows:²



It is not so much that Widor and Schweitzer’s Romantic phrasing is “inappropriate” for a Baroque work. More important is the fact that the articulation by “good” and “bad” notes rather than by melodic phrases brings the theme to life in a fashion known by the composer who wrote it.

When one employs modern fingering and pedaling techniques, the note groupings used in early times can be preserved only with much effort. The groupings emerge naturally, however, when one employs seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century fingering and pedaling techniques. The use of two-finger or alternate-toe scale patterns, the almost complete avoidance of substitution, the habit of skipping with any given finger from one note to an adjacent note, and the tendency to change hand positions just before strong beats are sometimes

²Charles-Marie Widor and Albert Schweitzer, eds., *Johann Sebastian Bach—Complete Organ Works* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1912), II, xii.

viewed as "primitive" procedures by modern players. When one tries them, however, one discovers that they reinforce the metrical and rhythmic organization of the music wonderfully well—the precise effect described as desirable by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theorists.

In fact, the practice of alternating strong and weak beats was so firmly entrenched during the Baroque Era that it lasted in some areas well into the nineteenth century. As late as 1856, Franz Liszt was forced to admonish organists to discard a playing style he considered outmoded:

. . . may I be permitted to remark that I wish to avoid as far as possible that mechanical kind of playing which, meticulously adhering to the meter, splits up the performance by perpetually emphasizing the strong and weak beats. This mode of playing is, however, still customary in some places.³

That Bach both employed and taught early fingering practices is amply demonstrated by the source material that survives; yet, it is also important to note that several contemporaries refer to Bach's "legato" manner of playing. (See the accounts in *The Bach Reader*, edited by Hans David and Arthur Mendel [rev. ed., New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1966].) In the preface to the keyboard Inventions and Sinfonias, Bach himself wrote of the necessity of achieving a "cantabile" playing style. The fact that Bach seems to have played in a legato, cantabile fashion while using early fingering methods appears to indicate that he employed these methods in a very subtle and sophisticated way. He must have communicated note groupings while at the same time avoiding obvious gaps, or "hiccups," between notes. This is the same type of subtle articulation that was achieved through well-worked-out bowing techniques on string instruments and tonguing techniques on wind instruments.

It is possible to skip with the same finger from one key to an adjacent key in such a manner that the connection is heard as a legato one. The result might be termed an "articulate legato," a connection that is slightly less connected than the closely bound legato of the nineteenth century. The relatively large number of "finger-skips" found in scores fingered by Bach and his pupils, coupled with the eyewitness accounts of Bach's "legato" playing, suggest that this legato was delicately articulated. In addition, contemporaries stated that he played the keyboard with a stroking motion, whereby each finger was drawn back toward the hand until it glided off the key. For instance, when Bach played an ascending C major scale with 3-4, 3-4 fingerings in the right hand—a technique documented in the *Applicatio* penned for his son Wilhelm Friedemann—he probably achieved an articulate legato between 3 and 4. And by means of a stroking motion low to the keys, he seems to have obtained an only slightly more articulate connection between the two-note groupings as 3 crossed over 4. The result would sound "cantabile," but it would also communicate the natural grouping of the notes.

It is clear, however, that for his mature works, Bach evolved a system of fingering that included turning the thumb under before and after accidentals. To quote the description given by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel:

The thumb of the right hand is brought in after one or more black keys in ascending, before them in descending, and the left thumb after in descending, and before in ascending.⁴

However, this most probably was for the sake of playing fast passages comfortably and did not negate the normal Baroque grouping of notes.

³ As quoted in *Ferenc Liszt—Complete Organ Works*, ed. Sandor Margittay (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1970), I, 11.

⁴ C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (Berlin, 1753), p. 24. Translation from *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, trans. William J. Mitchell (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1949), p. 48.

When using early fingering patterns on the organ, it is easier to achieve desirable results on instruments with tracker action than on those with some type of electric action. With a well-regulated tracker action, the sound begins at the very moment the key is depressed—a great advantage for articulatory control. With electric action, the sound does not usually begin until the key is depressed one-third or one-half of the distance to the key bed. Still, early fingering patterns can be used to good effect even on electric actions, especially if one's fingers are relaxed. (Of course, tense fingers usually lead to unmusical results with any type of action and any type of fingering, modern or early.)

Unfortunately, there is very little documentary information concerning early pedal technique or Bach's method of pedal playing in particular. Most scholars agree that the early players relied primarily on toes alone. One of Bach's students, Johann Christian Kittel, stated that the use of alternate toes for scales, with one foot crossing over the other, was preferable to the alternation of the heel and the toe of the same foot. (This and other issues of Bach's pedaling are discussed in Faulkner, who also presents a list of primary sources.) Additional evidence for alternate-toe playing comes from the fact that organ benches appear to have been very high and pedal keys relatively short (see Ch. 4, Fig. 2b). The use of alternate toes corresponds closely to the two-finger patterns commonly employed on the manuals. A second, apparently common practice, the use of one toe to play adjacent pedal keys with an articulate legato motion, is analogous to the skipping of a single finger from one manual key to another. When put to the test, these two pedaling methods prove to be an extremely effective way to perform the pedal lines in Bach's music. They correspond to manual techniques and can be used to produce the equivalent of ordinary touch on the pedalboard. The Bach manuscripts provide no information about pedaling, but certainly the one pedal exercise we have from the Bach circle, the *Pedal-Exercitium* (presented in the Additional Compositions section, p. 240) shows no contradictory evidence, since it is a veritable catalog of the main figurations an organist faces in alternate-toe playing. Without a doubt, the use of the heel was known to Baroque players—Schlick and others wrote passages requiring it—but such passages were very unusual.

We should point out from the start that until the nineteenth century, organ technique was not systematized. Fingering and pedaling methods were not developed in the abstract but, rather, to meet specific needs of particular composers and their works. It is clear that Bach himself maintained old devices (such as the use of 3-4, 3-4 fingerings) while adopting certain new ones (such as the extensive use of the thumb). We have systematized this approach into a technique that has wide applicability for organ music written before 1750.

The serious student is encouraged to explore other, more specialized early methods as well. For just as learning a foreign language can help one to understand the culture from which it springs, working with a specific historical technique can lead to a better understanding of the music with which that method was first linked. Sandra Soderlund's *Organ Technique: An Historical Approach* (2nd ed., Chapel Hill, N.C.: Hinshaw Music, 1986) presents detailed information on German, Spanish, Italian, English, Dutch, and French techniques from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century. It is highly recommended as a first handbook for the specialist. Examples of early pieces with period fingerings can also be found in Maria Boxall, *Harpsichord Method* (London: Schott & Co., 1977); Howard Ferguson, *Keyboard Interpretation from the 14th to the 19th Century: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Mark Lindley and Maria Boxall, *Early Keyboard Fingerings: An Anthology* (London: Schott & Co., 1982); and Julane Rodgers, *Early Keyboard Fingering, ca. 1520–1620* (diss., University of Oregon, 1971).