

# The American Organist Magazine

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From time to time, these commentary pages welcome guest appearances. We are pleased to include this guest column written by Dr. Adrienne Wiley, Associate Professor of Music at Central Michigan University. Adrienne supervises the piano pedagogy program at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Adrienne specializes in both the pedagogical and concert piano literature for one-hand. She has published on the topic and recorded a number of such works. Her interest in the organ is the subject of her commentary this month.

## ATTEMPTING SOMETHING DIFFERENT

I am a pianist first, by education and training. It never occurred to me that I might decide to attempt something different, like learning to play the organ, but I did. Looking back to my early pre-college musical education, it was my grandmother who set a positive example of learning a new instrument, the organ, later in life. She had taken piano lessons, but it was not until her early fifties that she decided to take organ lessons. She and my grandfather, who was rather reticent about the whole thing, purchased a then top-of-the-line popular Hammond B-3 organ that would fit nicely into their ample-sized living room. Having an organ in her home allowed her to practice when my grandfather was gone, and I remember many times when she invited me to sit down and “play” something on the organ. My grandmother soon began organ lessons and became a member of local organ club in town.

Her interest sparked mine as well, and at the age of 14, I started to play the church services for our very small congregation. My mother, who was also a church musician, encouraged me to do this because she foresaw that this would be a more viable and worthwhile job as a teenager rather than working in the fast-food arena. Having had no lessons at that point, I played manuals only. This experience was truly wonderful for me! I learned about hymn-playing, service music, and a bit about registrations. After high school and throughout my undergraduate and graduate degrees, my association with the organ continued as I played for various local church services, and for weddings and funerals as well.

Interestingly enough, this “off and on” affiliation with the organ in the church-setting continued until about eight years ago when I was approached by a church and was offered the position of organist and choir accompanist—a permanent position. I accepted then realizing that a new door was opening for me! Organ lessons were now a necessity. I was excited, and still am, about taking organ lessons. I realized then, as I do now, that in order to do justice to the instrument, to the congregation, and to the worship experience as well, lessons were truly essential in making me a more credible organist and musician. Taking lessons has challenged me in many ways, but the biggest challenge was learning to coordinate my feet (sometimes I felt I had extra feet!), and hands. That was truly humbling!

Over the course of these eight or so years, I have continued to take organ lessons. I try to maintain a balance between both piano and organ practice daily. My skills at the organ have improved tremendously since I first started lessons, and this is due to a very good teacher, my desire to maintain consistent practice, and regular church-playing. Also, learning to play the organ has heightened my awareness of and the differences between how organists approach

articulation, touch, phrasing, and the coordination of and between the hands and feet. Since the organ produces continuous sound, I was challenged with the concept that the articulation, phrasing, and even touch would need to be completely different than what I did at the piano. Overall, however, these new concepts have opened my eyes and ears to the necessity of knowing when, how, and why these techniques must be used.

Playing the organ has been and will continue to be a wonderful and positive experience for me. I had never thought nor planned that I would play another instrument like the organ, nor even become a church musician on regular basis. Over the course of my church-musician days, I have been blessed with the opportunity to play for two large churches within my community, each with a fantastic and supportive pastoral staff and music directorship. Each situation has provided me with positive experiences and helped me to grow not only as an organist, but as a musician as well.

I am pleased to say that I did take a different and unexpected path that has taught me, and will continue to teach me and challenge me in so many ways! This past year I decided to really “get serious” and challenge myself above and beyond taking lesson and playing for church. With the help of my teacher, we selected a varied program and scheduled a solo organ recital. My program consisted of Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in G Major, the Langlais “Te Deum,” Mendelssohn’s Sonata in F Minor, and miscellaneous church-type pieces. I worked very hard and diligently on this program, focusing mainly on organ practice for nearly nine months.

With the organ recital now behind me, I will continue to work for new experiences and challenges in my organ playing. For me, everything that I learn with this instrument makes a profound impact on my “other” instrument, the piano. That is what I look forward to!