

DEAR UNCLE MAX

Send questions to Dear Uncle Max, AGO National Headquarters, 475 Riverside Dr., Suite 1260, New York, NY 10115.

It seems that no matter how hard or carefully I practice, I never give a mistake-free performance, whether in recital or during a Sunday morning service. I've been a church organist for over 30 years, so nerves are not the issue. I know about practicing in rhythms and all of those other tricks. What is happening and what can I do to rid my performances of mistakes?

V.H., Colo.

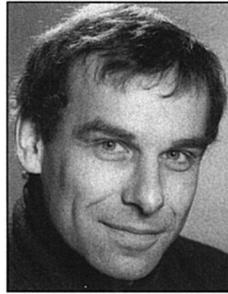
If I could answer your question, I would be a lucky person and my own playing would be mistake-free as well. No good doctor prescribes without seeing and talking with the patient if the ailment is serious. You do not say whether your mistakes are consistently in certain spots or at random—in totally unexpected places. I can put down a few things I think are important, but they have been gleaned from teaching less experienced and mostly younger students. I can only hope some of them may be of use to you.

First, the eyes. When we are young, we make more rapid adjustments to changes in distance. It may be profitable for you to measure the distances from your head position to the music rack on your organ and/or piano at home, take them to your optometrist and have a special prescription made up for use with music reading. Personally, I have bifocals with the music prescription at the bottom and a smaller lens with regular distance at the top. This allows me, with but slight movement of the eyes, to read the music comfortably, yet come out of the fishbowl with ease to check on the progress of a bride, the traipsing of a minister, the thrashing of a conductor, or other activities.

Second, movements. Keep moving—eyes, hands, and feet—so that you are always preparing ahead. Beginners are particularly apt to doze off on a whole note, jumping for the next chord at the last moment. Sometimes I ask students with this problem to take a simple hymn tune, place their hands over and then play as much of the next chord as they can while still holding the first. Musically, it is a disaster, but it does bring home the need to eliminate hasty last-moment movements. Melodically, large intervals—octaves, tenths—require the spreading of the hand as soon as possible to avoid uncertainty and anxiety. The same applies to pedal playing.

Practice playing, as much as possible, with a touch system such as is used in

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typing. Watch other players: the best do it without thinking. Feel where you are. One colleague of mine, now among the blest, used to say, "Better to look than hit a wrong note!" Well, you can't exactly argue with that; however, better still not to need to look and fortunately 97% of organ playing falls into that category. Organ music rarely requires playing chords or octaves at the extremes of the keyboard followed by crashing chords in the middle—we do it by registration. Leave the pedal light off when practicing; then, if you must, use the light for performance.

A frequent cause of mistakes is unnecessary watching of the hands, a counterproductive visual verification. Have a friend observe how frequently eyes go from page to keyboard and back during the playing of a hymn with the risk of loss of place and break in rhythm. You can get over this by wearing an apron around your neck tucked under heavy hymnals on the rack.

The varied rhythms and other tricks (you don't spell them out) should be solid techniques and very useful. However, after all the groundwork is done—notes, harmony, formal understanding—keep in mind Widor's motto, which he printed on the covers of his Symphonies: SOAR ABOVE. I take this to mean that you need to listen to what you do *as if* you are an auditor and *not* performing. Imagine yourself listening from the middle or back of the room in which you are playing. Is it really sounding as you would want it to if

someone else were doing it? Say to yourself, "*This is the way this piece ought to be done!*" and chances are you will do it that way.

On making mistakes: A famous organist commented some time back that the trouble with the recording industry was that people expected to hear live playing as perfect as that in recorded performances. Well, sometimes it happens. Two things to consider if you make a mistake. First, rhythm takes precedence over correctness. Amateurs stop and correct wrong notes, thus highlighting what has gone wrong. Keep your rhythm exact and keep going; you have a reasonable chance of doing little damage without the blow-to-the-solar-plexus effect. Analysis of wrong notes is a tricky backward glance during the flow of the music; a break in the rhythm is a disaster! Second, remember that appoggiaturas and grace notes have been around a long time. Try to make your mistakes sensible musically, which may even mean repeating a mistake to make it more convincing.

Before an important performance, take the time to go over the music away from the keyboard, imagining it in your mind as you want it to be. This requires the utmost concentration; if you don't have time to do this, before you go to sleep, imagine the performance as going smoothly and well.

If I had two pills that solved the problem forever, I'd give you one and swallow the other. Good luck.

MAX B. MILLER, FAGO