

DEAR UNCLE MAX

My question concerns notes, written in both pedals and manuals, that are unplayable because the key doesn't exist on the keyboard or pedalboard. A famous example is the low pedal B in Bach's BWV 572. There are also several spots in the organ solo for Janáček's Glagolitic Mass (e.g., page 4, fourth staff/page 5, third staff) that don't fit on an organ keyboard. Here are my questions (feel free to pick and choose):

1. Why do composers write notes that are not playable on an instrument?
2. Other than the somewhat obvious answers of octave transposition or rescoring, are there solutions to be found for the above problems (for example, short octaves or particular individual instruments) that would allow for playing the notes as written?
3. Not to put you on the spot, but would you list other examples from the literature with similar problems, and suggest solutions?

Your questions may be divided and subsumed under one or another of the following three categories:

1. The instrument itself—its changes through the centuries, differing keyboard ranges, etc.
2. The performers—their physically varied sizes, or other limitations.
3. The composers'
 - a. often limited understanding of the organ, its controls, registration, how to write for good effect, how to dispose of the hands over two manuals or more, etc.
 - b. indifference to technical problems.
 - c. I write it/you solve it outlook.
 - d. attachment to a musical idea in progress, which, in the abstract, is so important it is best left, playable or not. That is, the musical idea as a philosophical entity with its own life.
 - e. writing as an indication of color and, possibly, mood.
 - f. terror when writing for the organ.

Regarding the Bach *Fantasia*, BWV 572, the low B in the middle movement, m. 66, one half step beneath the current pedalboard range, has caused a lot of speculation and comment; none of it, so far as I can tell, is very conclusive. Here is the passage:

Schweitzer, Vol. 1, page 49, m. 66



Most authorities will refer you, in speaking of the composition, to the French influences, especially that of Nicolas de Grigny. "A sovereign exercise in French style," says Christoph Wolff in *Bach: The Learned Musician*. It needs to be noted that in most surviving copies, the title is "Pièce d'Orgue di Giov. Sebast: Bach," sometimes, more fully, "Pièce d'Orgue à 5 avec la Pedalle continu composé par J.S. Bach." It is also the only Bach organ work in which French tempo indications are given (but not consistently in the various manuscripts): très vite; gayement; lentement. Whatever the actual French influences may be, and certainly it has much of the character of the French Plein Jeu ("a particular musical style, usually sustained, with constant

and slowly resolving suspensions, in four or five parts, massive in texture rather than strictly contrapuntal," so state Peter Williams and Barbara Owen in *The Organ*). At the least, Bach does explore the possibilities inherent in the style more fully than any of the French composers writing in the genre.

The following possible reasons have been proposed for explaining the low B:

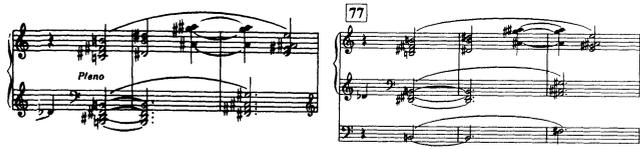
1. The low B would have been playable on several old French organs—not being able to play the note would then represent a change in organ pedalboard sizes. (Was Bach writing at someone's request? For a friend who was French or going to France?)
2. The piece may have been transposed down from A major.
3. The low B is kept as an abstract musical thought. Hermann Keller, *The Organ Works of Bach*, page 96, observes, "In a similarly abstract fashion, Bach later wrote down a B₁ in the Ricercar for six voices from the *Musical Offering*, and both a B₁ and an A₁ in *The Art of Fugue*."

The middle section of the *Fantasia* is built on an ascending pattern used as a free ostinato (rather like a whole-note cantus firmus from one's counterpoint classes). It varies in length from four to 14 measures, often being preceded by a rhymed cadence figure that includes the dropped octave used in measure 66. The bass cadential figure usually consists of four quarters followed by two half notes with the octave drop. This is generally used as a red flag to announce the arrival of a new tonal area, as in the approach to the dominant in measures 19 and 20 before the new ostinato begins. It doesn't happen with total regularity, but when it is there, it serves a fundamentally important function in alerting the listener to the overall structure of the composition. That seems to me a good reason to keep the B below the keyboard in print if not in fact playable. Look for the other cadences that match.

The second example you cite, the organ solo from Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass*, is less well known. The *Mass*, in toto, is an enormously stunning work; the organ solo is virtuosic in impact. There are incidental organ entries throughout the *Mass*, plus one stunning cadenza for organ in the Credo before the "And was crucified." Leoš Janáček (1854–1928), remembered today especially for his operas, was certainly no stranger to the organ, having founded and been a teacher at the Brno Organ School for 40 years. His total output for organ is small, less than a dozen works, which may be found in the *Compositions for Organ* (Vol. 2 of the Complete Critical Edition, Editio Supraphon Praha, Bärenreiter, 1992). With the exception of the organ solo from the *Mass*, they are all early works, some rather curious, none mainstream organ literature.

It is difficult to account for the position of the chords in measures 72, 77, and 90—Janáček knew they were, as written, unplayable. It seems to me to be a combination of my 3.c, d, and e—importance of the musical idea; writing to indicate color or mood; and c (you solve it). It certainly suggests low brass with plenty of brilliance (a pleno marking for the organ as well!). If one wants to approximate that, about the only way is to take the bass notes, play them an octave higher in the pedal with as much 32' and 16' tone as you can get. It is too bad to have to mess with the C^b (m. 72) as well—but, hey, we organists didn't give ourselves the problem.





The Universal editions—the solo published as a single work apart from the Mass, the vocal score, and the orchestral score—are all substantially the same, with only a few minute changes in the vocal score accompaniment. The collected works edition must have a most interesting story! It would seem that Janáček approved the Universal editions from which the work has been performed for years. However, there are a considerable number of changes in the copy offered in the collected works from 1992. The addition of key signatures: E major, A-flat, A, D, B, B-flat, A, E, B-flat, B, etc., ending with a G[#]-minor chord instead of an A^b-minor chord is but one; alterations in notes and held chords are others. Library shelves do not seem to be sagging from works about Janáček, and one needs to understand more about his theories of tonality to understand if these are truly good changes. G[#] and A^b are not synonymous. I am not able, with the information I have, to evaluate the changes, but somehow it seems to be a more integrated composition as printed over the years by Universal. Smoothing out the enharmonic spellings takes away some of the inner tensions of the piece for the performer. That, we can agree, is just my opinion and not, at that, so solidly grounded. However, at the end of the Collected Organ Works is given a facsimile of the copy of Fr. Michaleks—a three-staff version throughout. Here is how he wrote out and presumably performed measure 72:



This version lacks the “growl” of the Universal edition—a shame to put the whole of it up an octave. Easier to play, though.

Before I jump off with some other examples, I would like to mention a phenomenon I have seen many times, which I refer to under 3.f. at the beginning. It is a composer’s terror when confronted with writing for the organ the first time. Throughout my teaching career I have been blessed by being in a music division with a large and famous composition department; in addition, there are often excellent composers among the other faculty. On asking them if they have considered writing for the organ, the usual response is, “I would like to but just don’t know anything about the instrument!” The offer to try things out for them and let them hear a work in progress is not rebuffed but put on permanent hold. It’s too bad. After a few compositions, most get the knack—look how many non-organists write well and copiously. What can we do? Continue to commission works?

I am sure everyone has favorite examples of notes that are not playable, I will mention just a few that have struck me through the years. Little commentary is needed. The first example falls under my outline as No. 2—performers of varied sizes. It is in the Allegretto cantando of the *Fantaisie in C* by César Franck (a slighted work). In the Allegretto cantando (m. 27 ff.), there is no more use trying to give this to a student with small hands than to give a Munchkin from the land of Oz the pedal part of the Sowerby *Pageant* to play. The wedge-shaped accompaniment figure with the sixth, the octave, and the tenths is so typical of Franck (who, we are told had a large reach) that any attempt to “correct” or simplify ends in a mangled performance and despair for performer and listener alike. It needs a legato as is. Sorry, that’s it.

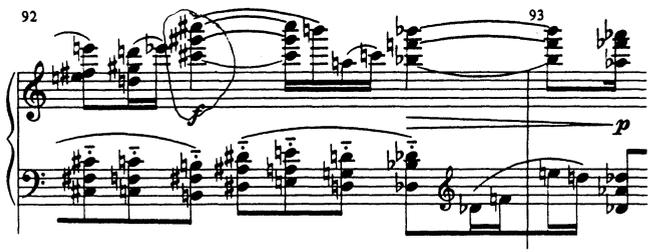


The second example is from Reger’s *Fantasy on “How Brightly Shines the Morning Star,”* Op. 40, No. 1. The Introduction begins so:



One remembers E. Power Biggs saying, “I would play Reger if someone would edit out the extra notes!” If your hands are nearly normal (whatever that means), try knocking off the lower octave doublings of the right hand when necessary, and do the opposite with the left—knock off the upper doublings when you have to. If your instrument requires super-couplers to get a full sound, you have your octaves restored; if not, use a full registration. The theory is, inner voices are the most difficult to hear; thus, keep the directionality of the top and bottom line of the hand parts intact, dropping, where necessary for your hand size, unnecessary octave doubling in the middle voices. Little will be lost. Try it; perhaps none of us will find it necessary to omit the same notes—the harmony *must be complete*, however.

My final examples come from Schoenberg’s Opus 40, *Variations on a Recitative*. They are not as bad as they appear—you must understand that Schoenberg wrote what he wanted to hear, including writing the pedal part down an octave when a 16’ pitch was to sound rather than considering what the ranges of the keyboards are and how organists use them—this is my 3.c—I write it/you solve it. (Please note that I am using the edition from the Collected Works and not Carl Weinrich’s edition for H.W. Gray, where solutions are included.) The first is an over-the-top to a high C[#] (m. 92), which somehow one has to maneuver downward to a foundational 4’ pitch. No real problem.



The second is from mm. 59–60. It, too, is easy to solve registrationally; however, at first glance, one thinks, “What ho! Do I know a four-legged organist?” or, reading as I am C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* (my grandchildren will

want these read to them soon), “Is that a centaur I see lurking in the woods behind the fir tree, waiting to come forward to perform this with its four feet and two hands?”



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