

DEAR UNCLE MAX

Max Miller, FAGO, serves on the AGO Professional Certification Committee and is a noted teacher, writer, and musician. This column offers a forum for new organists, in particular, to ask questions and seek advice on subjects dealing with organs: technique, repertoire, hymn selection and playing, registration skills needed for accompanying, directing from the console, accurate editions of repertoire, etc. Send your questions to: Dear Uncle Max, c/o Max Miller, 45 Hunnewell Ave., Newton, MA 02158.

Dear Uncle Max,
What is a mutation?

M.L., New York, N.Y.

What is generally now understood as a mutation stop is any single rank pitched to reinforce the overtone series by sounding a fifth, a third, a seventh, or a ninth above the key depressed—in other words, a non-octave-sounding rank. A Nasard $2\frac{2}{3}'$ would sound an octave and a fifth higher, a Tierce $1\frac{1}{3}'$ two octaves and a third higher, and so forth. Most organ methods will include a graph to help you visualize this; then check it by ear as you play to see how it affects the sound.

What is "skip" registration?

J.O., West Palm Beach, Fla.

Right off the bat I have to say I don't know. To the best of my knowledge, I have never

heard the term. In thinking about what it might mean, immediately the following scene came to mind: turn the organ on, skip pulling the stops out, go through the motions, concentrate hard, and hope for direct telepathic musical communication with your listeners. Unlikely meaning. The second fantasy was pull every second stop from left to right or top to bottom and see what you get, repeat with every third stop. See again what you get; hardly any registration has absolutely no use if only for the bizarre.

Last, I suspect it is a synonym for split registration, or what Barbara Owen in her upcoming book on registration calls "gapped" registration. That is, one that deliberately omits (skips) various pitches in the overtone series, such as $16'$ plus $4'$ ($8'$ skipped), or $8'$ plus $2'$ ($4'$ skipped), or $8'$, $4'$, $1'$, etc. It might even include off unisons such as $8'$ plus $2\frac{2}{3}'$. This is my best guess. You don't give a context for your question. See, however, if this makes sense. If not, one of our readers will let us know and we'll both be ahead.

Why do some pieces list stops to be used as Principal while others say Montre or Diapason? What is the difference? What if my organ stop just says Principal?

The first difference is linguistic; essentially a Germanic origin for the first, a French origin for the second, while the third is more frequently English and American. The further point is that most often the Principals were used in the casework of the organ be-

cause of the elegance of their proportions—hence the term Montre from the French "to show." Curiously, the word Diapason is also a Greek term.

If your organ just says Principal, use it interchangeably for any of the three terms above. Actually, there are subtle differences in the understandings of what a Diapason should do between European countries and certainly between builders of today. Again, use your ear to see what yours will and won't do.

How long should a prelude for church be? Should I play a whole prelude and fugue?

M.W., Florida

Customarily, churches ask or expect preludes to last anywhere from three to 20 minutes. You would do well to follow the tradition of your church in the matter until it has been discussed with the minister and music committee. In a rough way, the liturgical churches seem to expect less where people enter and say their private prayers before services, and nonliturgical churches seemingly require more, the preludes being used occasionally as a sort of musical vacuum cleaner to suck up and keep down the dust of the weekly gossip and exchange of condolences on the weather.

I certainly see no reason not to play a whole prelude and fugue if you want. It may be necessary to consider at what volume you set the level if it is longer than customary, so you may hear from someone, but it is just as likely to be positive as negative.

A bride wants me to play Clair de lune on the organ. I only know it on the piano. What should I do?

V.S., Indiana

One wonders if it is a moonlight wedding. If you choose to play it (and I am assuming the work's by Debussy), you may check at your music store for a transcription for organ. I once inherited a copy but cannot locate it in my attic at the present time and never was requested to use it. It is probably just as well to make your own arrangement from the piano version you know. It is a good musical challenge and the bride has been kind enough to pick a good piece in the first place. Watch some of the piano pedaling to see what broken chords and arpeggios require sustaining and then do some judicious holding. I suspect you can make a rather nice performance. Transcriptions are in this season—put in the bulletin transcribed by V.S., Indiana!

My minister says that I play the hymns too slowly . . . some of the people in the congregation complain when I play them too fast. Who is right? How do I know the best tempo?

J.R., Kentucky

Aha! Tempo! For many years I played chapel services for a school of theology and one of the things I came to expect from the overzealous entering classes after the first service of the year was that five students would come to complain that the hymns were too fast. I would answer, you are probably right. This was almost invariably followed by five students alarmed that I played the hymns too slowly. I would answer, you are probably right. And they probably were right, as they came from New Mexico, Nebraska, Maine, Florida, from all sizes and shapes of congregations, and perhaps de-



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nominations. After the first or second week I would hear no more about it, but when they left the school I suspect they went back and complained in the churches of their point of origin in the same manner. We like what we are used to.

A couple of generations back some hymnals gave suggested metronome markings as a guide. No one liked them, no one followed them, and I am sure the committee that set them no longer spoke to one another. Variables are too many to decide that one size fits all.

I suggest you try singing the hymns away from the organ by yourself to see what is comfortable for you to sing. If your congregation is generally older, slow them a bit, if younger, pick up a bit. Above all, keep an ear on what the congregation is trying to tell you by the way they push or pull the tempos you set.

I love to play the Carillon by Vierne but am confused about the left-hand part. Should the feet only play or should hands only play that part?

P.F., Alabama

I take it your question refers to No. 21 in the *24 Pieces in Free Style*. If you are playing it on a pipe organ and not a harmonium, I would certainly suggest that you play the bass line only on the pedals; this permits you to divide the large chords in the treble clef between the hands for ease of playing. In my copy the pedal part, though not notated on a third line, is marked thus at the beginning: Ped. G.R. That would be foundations and reeds 32', 16', 8', 4' coupled to Great foundations and reeds 16', 8', 4', and Swell, foundations and reeds 8', 4', 2'. In bar 35, the reeds come off on the Pedal and Great. The pedal drops out entirely where the marking is for Man. (Manual) just before the pianissimo and doesn't reenter until eight bars before the return of the opening musical material and is then assumed until the end.

One of the singers at our church is performing a solo with an Alberti style bass line and it really does not sound very good on the organ. How can I make it sound better?

J.C., Colorado

I shouldn't think it would sound very good. It happens to all of us. It would be easier to answer, partially, if I could see the composition. I say partially because it may never sound really good no matter what you do—hope her voice is so grand no one is listening to the accompaniment. Some quick superficial approaches to try would be:

1. Hold the bottom note and overlap the upper notes of the chord to effect a more legato style, especially if the tempo is not too fast.

2. If the upper part is too thin, fill in the chord from the implied harmony of the Alberti bass and sustain. This will mask and cover the left-hand part somewhat.

3. You may even try a new left-hand figure entirely, such as repeating the upper two notes of the broken chord simultaneously.

4. Last, do the exact opposite, emphasize the bass by a color registration of some sort, an 8' and a 2', play as is and see what you get.

So much depends on the character of the solo as well as the soloist's voice, light, heavy, whatever. As you work at it, see what gives you and the singer the best results.

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