DEAR UNCLE MAX

The following questions were sent to me by participants in the Pipe Organ Encounter groups.

What is a "ventil"?

The short answer to this is that a ventil is a separate chest into which air is directed by a pedal so that stops already drawn can be activated. The indications are most frequently found in 19th- and early 20th-century French music in the following manner:

Great, Choir, and Swell: Foundations 16, 8, 4; Reeds 16, 8, 4 prepared (GPR: Fonds 16, 8, 4; Anches 16, 8, 4 preparée). In other words, it was a way of gaining control over registration when pistons, etc., were few. Of course, it need not say 16, 8, 4, but it worked this way: the reeds and foundations being drawn, one could, say, begin on the Swell without the reeds sounding, move to the Choir or Great coupled and effect a crescendo, then by the addition of first the Swell reeds, then Choir, and finally Great, an enormous buildup could be achieved without moving any stops. It goes without saying that a builder could build a ventil chest for anything. Franck's ventils controlled more than reeds!

The pedals that controlled the couplers and ventils were placed conveniently where we now would expect to find expression pedals. If you get a chance, look at some pictures of old Cavaillé-Coll consoles.

One other observation is important. When the air was allowed into the chests, the buildup of air pressure produced a very musical effect and underlined the stop additions. Some organs today have "ventils," accomplished by electrical switching. When done this way, the rush-of-air effect is not duplicated. In general, American organists have preferred adequate pistons to ventils and with the advent of solid-state and multiple levels of controls, it seems unlikely the system will be much used except for historical copies.

What is good advice about how to mark the difference between general pistons vs. manual pistons in my music score?

Personally, I mark the manual piston numbers enclosed in a circle and the general pistons in a square (I once used triangles!). This has worked for me. I have no idea from whom I filched the idea, can't believe I made it up; it may even be widely used. Any system that works for you is fine. Some people vary the color, which I have done on a divided organ to distinguish between front and back. Colored pencils tend to break easily and sharpeners, for some reason, are next door.

I am trying to learn the first trio sonata by Bach. What are some practice suggestions?

You may well begin on the piano with the parts divided by an octave or more. Play it through enough to get the sense of it, then by all means get a good fingering; try different things until you have proved what is best. *Write it in.* You will save time and end up much more secure. You may also want to try the pedal line alone, then slowly with all three parts to check for the best pedaling. *Write it in.* In writing in the fingering, there is no need to notate the obvious, but anything you need to keep you on the right track should be noted.

The classic instructions go like this: Play the RH and LH alone; play the RH and PD alone; play the LH and PD alone; try them all together. Be able to sing one part and play one part, then two parts singing the third. The first part of the instructions are excellent and should be done and redone as needs and problems arise. The singing bit I was never able to buy. As undergraduates we were expected to try. Attempts were occasionally successful for as much as two bars with either pathetic or hysterical results. If you want to sing and play, look to Frescobaldi or stick with the hymnal!

I am a pianist who is interested in learning how to play an organ. What is the difference between a rank and a stop?

A rank is a set of pipes that normally runs the length of the keyboard with one pipe per key. It may not have pipes in the lowest octave, or it may have pipes well beyond its 8' range. A stop is a means of getting a set of pipes or sets of pipes to sound.

For instance, a Gedackt stop is often extended downward to a 16' pitch level to supply a pedal or manual 16' as well as extended upward to supply 4', 2⅔', or 2' pitches. Thus the one *rank* of Gedackt pipes might have *stops* to control it at 16', 8', 4', 2⅔', and 2' pitches.

It is customary to mark on the stop tab if the stop controls more than one rank. Thus, Flute Celeste II (Roman numerals usually employed here) means two ranks will be used; Mixture III, IV, or IX (whatever) tells you how many *ranks* will be sounded when you draw the *stop*. Note, it does not tell you the exact pitches of the ranks or where the pitches used break back and mix.

What is meant by a "pulled cornet"?

Let's deal first with the cornet part. A full cornet is composed of the following pitched ranks (see above): 8', 4', 2⅔', 2', 1⅗', or the unison, first octave above, second fifth above the 8', second octave, and finally the third above that. These, as distinct from mixtures, should run the entire range of the keyboard without a break back in pitch. The third gives

point to the tone and makes it ideal for melodies to soar through the accompanying texture. The ranks should be matched in tone color.

The control of this five-pitched unit may be done in several ways. First, one stop (see question above) may control all five, one stop may control the top three pitches or merely the off unison ones—a characteristic of the sesquialtera which is related—or it may be a "cornet separé," which means a separate stop for each rank. I am assuming that the expression "pulled cornet" refers to this and would mean that each rank might be pulled separately, thus 8', 8' + 4', 8' + 2⅔', but note, those are useful, but you won't have a cornet sound without at least the presence of the fifth, 2⅔', and the third, 1⅗'. This may then be filled in (pulled?) to enrich a basic 8', 2⅔', 1⅗' by the addition of the 4' and/or 2'. The cornet complements reed stops especially and is often combined with them. A sesquialtera may have the same pitches as a cornet but is often a bit more subdued.

Some experimentation is needed on any unfamiliar instrument to see exactly what the cornets will do and what their timbre is.

I play a two-manual instrument with only four generals. How can I bring variety to different hymn stanzas without using pistons?

Four generals for a two-manual seems pretty good to me! But you want to use generals for other things than hymns. OK. This is off the top of my head since I know not what you live and work with.

1. Will each keyboard support singing uncoupled? Try changing manuals. Do you have or need super couplers? Try having something on the Swell different from the Great, if possible, like a Swell to Swell super (4') there but not on the Great.
2. Omit the pedals on one stanza.
3. Most important, learn to rearrange the last chord of each stanza, if needed, so that it can be played with one hand as well as the first chord of the next stanza. If they are singing, the congregation may not be able to analyze that you have transposed by an octave the tenor part; they won't care any way. Get the other hand moving; you have the breathing break between stanzas to add and subtract stops in any way you like, reeds on and off, mixtures, 2s, whatever the organ allows. You will be surprised how rapidly you can learn to do this! Very likely, with a little practice you won't have to rearrange anything.

MAX MILLER, FAGO

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