Dear Uncle Max

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

The following questions were asked by POE and POE+ students.

Why do people say "skip registrations" are not good, when they sound so good?

A gapped/skipped/split registration is one that is lacking in the orderly succession of pitches from the foundation pitch upward. Some illustrations would include 16', 8', 2⅔' (the 5⅓' and 4' being omitted); 16' and 4' (the 8' missing); 8', mixture; 8' and 2'; 8' and 2⅔', etc. While it is logical to register straight up, say 8', 4', 2⅔', 2', 1⅗', 1⅓', or to omit the mutations, life in the fast lane is not always logical.

Lists of historic stop suggestions from every important European country—Italy, France, Germany, Spain, England, Austria—where the organ was prominent include gapped registration suggestions beginning in the first half of the 16th century. A church contract from Alençon, France, in 1537 suggests the following "for a nasard": Bourdon 8', Flute 2', and Flute 1⅓'. A manuscript from Tours, France, by an unknown writer between 1710–20 lists the Flageolet combination as consisting of Bourdon 8' and Fifteenth 2'.

Around Bach's time we find Kaufmann's *Harmonische Seelenlust* of 1733 calling for a Fagott 16', Quintadena 8', and a Spitzflote 2' as a solo for the left hand. Mr. Adlung *disapproved* of gapped registrations, and says so! Agricola suggests as having a "good effect" in a trio, Quintadena 16' and Flute 4'; he did, though, think an 8' and a 2' sounded "too hollow" to be good in chordal playing.

Dom Bédos in France (whether you consider this an endorsement or not!) suggests for an imitation of a tambourine that you draw on the Positif the 8' stops and the Larigot 1⅓', and "beat on the Positif keyboard to imitate a Tambourine." The list goes on.

You will see from the above that you, if not in the most rarified company, at least are not alone in liking skip registrations. I think the real question ought to be, not whether you like them out of hand for just any old thing, but whether your use of them fits the music and the texture better than anything else. Let discretion in use be your goal.

At Christmastime take a public opinion poll: rent a portative, station it at busy street corner downtown, register it properly (8', 1⅓'), beat on it, and see what falls in the hat. (After four hours, add carol singing.)

I want to play a 45-minute recital. What are some things to think about when planning a program?

A 45-minute recital is a nice length—no time to get restless! I think on a longer program there is a natural attention span curve where the interest stays high through the first half, relaxes more through the third quarter, and picks up again for the last quarter. I have no verification for what I have just said, though it tends to be true for me. It does have some implications for planning. During the more restful third quarter, you may find it useful to play some of your shorter pieces, as well as some of your softer ones, so that you have a real thrust at the end. Get your opening and closing numbers down first. Unless you have a bright, short opening piece, you need to get yourself settled. I would say it is wise to begin with a longer composition while anticipatory attention is high.

I am going to start a list of some contrasting ideas and some that stand in opposition to each other; you can add to it or subtract as you wish, and further, not all of them will operate in the same way at the same time, but most of the time they should operate subconsciously if not consciously. It is a good principle, regardless of the compositions chosen, to see how much contrast you can get between:

1. Loud/Soft: that is, not two or three full organ works together.
2. Harmonic/Contrapuntal: vary the textures for better listening.
3. Formal procedures, such as Chorale Prelude/Fugue/Sonata/Toccata, whatever.
4. Registrations: soloistic and accompaniment/one keyboard playing. Coloristic use of organ, solo stops/solid playing. Types of full organ, reeds, mixtures, full without them.
5. Keys: major/minor: not everything in the same key; keep varying tonal centers.
6. Driving/Meditative.
7. Motoric/More relaxed and mixed rhythms.
8. Contrast dissonant and concordant compositions.

Organ recitals are often given for didactic or illustrative reasons: development of the fugue, chorale preludes on "Such and Such a Tune," a historical arrangement from earliest to last minute organ music, etc. All of these may call for priorities different from those suggested above.

How can one decide if music is worth learning? New music either seems very difficult or extremely easy. The difficult seems very dissonant and the easy seems like everything we have heard before.

There is always a risk factor in new music. Even commissioning a new work by a well-known and skillful composer is no guarantee of a success—it simply cuts down the gamble and increases the odds.

How to decide if it is worth the time? You can ask for an opinion from someone you respect, or you can work at the music for a time, noting whether your enjoyment and understanding increase or decrease. On being asked to define what made a composition an organ classic, E. Power Biggs once remarked that "the test is if you find new depths and increased pleasure with each renewed encounter." At the time, I was very disappointed in that, hoping for a ruler I might pull out of my back pocket to measure with. Teaching, for me, confirmed his definition. No matter how many times one teaches Bach's *Eight Little Preludes and Fugues*—skip the question of authorship—to beginning students (this literature is hard to avoid even if one wants to), there is a joy and anticipation on the part of both the student and the teacher that is exciting. One does not get tired of them. I suppose the residual axiom might read like this: the better and stronger the composition is, the more repeated hearings will have to offer. Conversely, the poorer the quality of compositional workmanship, the sooner the new bloom wears off and you are left with little of worth. Like a bad novel, if by page 100 it bores you, try another book!

New music can be moderately difficult. Difficult and dissonant do not have to be yoked together. I think one of the confusions in church music circles today swirls about the use of the word "contemporary." To the well-trained musician, the term "contemporary" is apt to reflect the way one writes music so that it is distinctive, representing the outlook of the times in which it is written; it has individuality in character and is not a carbon copy of something else—the sort of music that might be worth commenting on in a music history book. To the publishers of much of today's church music, "contemporary" indicates a time line only, something written today, just yesterday, by someone still breathing, regardless of style, which may be related to Broadway of the 1950s, to grocery store music that helps you buy lettuce, asparagus, and grapes, or to 500 other chorale preludes where the tune is endlessly accompanied by parallel sixths—the music does indeed sound "like everything we have heard before." This is intentional, for what sells is, above all, comfortable with no thinking required. Good craftmanship is not too hard to spot; ascertaining inspiration takes more time.

MAX B. MILLER, FAGO