

DEAR UNCLE MAX

When playing a pedal cadenza or scale, where do you put your hands? I have always been taught to hold onto the bench, but just recently a new teacher has instructed me to put my hands in my lap. I find this very difficult, let alone uncomfortable.

J.T.C., Pa.

There are wonderful opportunities via TV to watch the great pianists play, with close-ups of their hands and how they use them—views from the left, the right, from above. Opportunities for observing organists close up are far fewer. A 30-second TV snapshot of the pedalboard is about it—this without a synoptic view of what hands and feet are doing when they are not specifically in use. Our loss. While I really don't know what placement of the hands is more widely accepted, my impression is that most players hold onto the bench. That gives a choice of three possible hand placements while playing pedal solos.

We'll take them one by one. I am going to be forthright in what I think is the best thing to do without worrying about who agrees or not. Besides, there isn't a

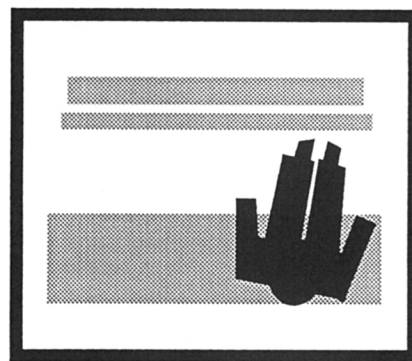
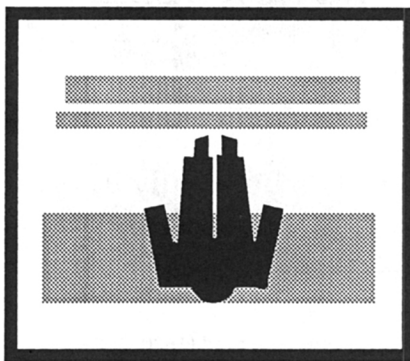
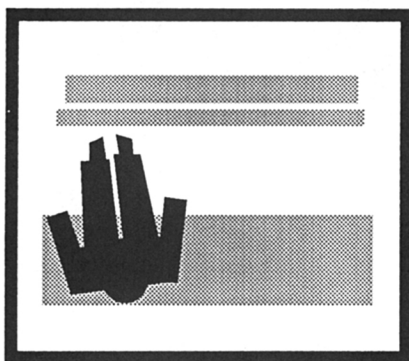
shred of originality in anything I advocate—a great many organists use the same approach. I think I am still using techniques I learned from Clarence Mader, which, presumably, he learned from Lynnwood Farnam.

Techniques are a means to an end and not the end, so if I have advanced students with different approaches to pedaling from mine, I leave them alone (after reasonable harassment!). If they are younger, not set in their ways, and more malleable, I malle them a bit on the road to conversion. Here goes . . .

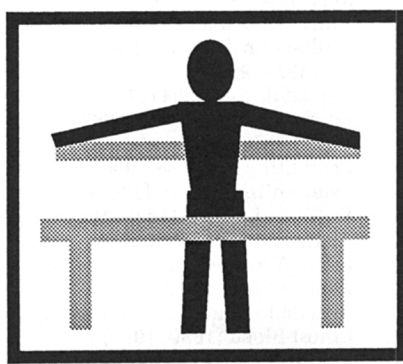
1. Hands in the lap. This is new to me. There is some old proverb that says "idle hands are the devil's workshop." Somehow the image that presents itself to mind is that of an Irish dancer—hands utterly still at the sides, feet flapping furiously. Still, I think you have called it pretty well when you say it is very difficult and uncomfortable. If the technical approach is a good one, it should do the opposite—make it less difficult and more comfortable. Ease of playing should always be a goal. Perhaps your new teacher demonstrates

the effectiveness of this approach very nicely, then follow it to see where the path leads, but if it remains very difficult and uncomfortable, there are other ways.

2. Holding onto the bench. This, it would be my guess, is what most organists do naturally most of the time when playing pedals alone. Indeed, there are times when it is almost required, whatever you choose theoretically. A very wide leap from the bottom of the keyboard to the very top requires something to assist in getting one moving other than a rocket blast-off from low E^b. With hands in the lap, how would you give yourself the boost for the projecting arch from bottom to top? Just bounce your bottom all over the bench? Five bounces? Six? Not too appealing to the viewer, I should think. With the hands holding onto the bench beside you, you propel yourself to some extent, so that your body remains above your feet, first left for low notes, then right for the high ones. Holding permits you to bounce or slide. The sliding and turning are apt to make a good pair of pants shiny in short order. The problem, after sliding, is get-



GRASPING BENCH (Viewed From Above)



KNEES TOGETHER / GRASPING KEYBOARD (Viewed From Behind)

ting back to a proper position for playing when the hands return to the keyboard. For less drastic shifts, you probably are pivoting as if you had a post running from the top of your head into the bench, thus angling your body to the left or right on that axis. See *Grasping bench* (viewed from above).

3. The third method: holding on to the side of the keyboards. This requires imagining top of the head to the toes. See *Knees together/Grasping keyboard* (viewed from behind).

This gentle rocking on your sitting extremities (upper body to the right when feet go left and vice versa) extends the reach of the feet to the extremes of the pedalboard quite nicely. You want to be rather like a roly-poly clown toy very young children play with. As you are punched, you roll, but being weighted, you return to the exact position you left under pressure. This rocking tends to make automatic the playing of the pedals with the feet properly angled—to get the feel, hold onto the side of the keyboard and move both feet to the left, upper body to the right. Notice that your feet are placed to play (heels together of course) on the inside of the left foot and the outside of the right. This will give you a quiet, focused pedal technique with the least bench movement.

Modifications most likely will have to be made for differences in body size and pedalboard sizes and shapes—straight, concave. They will suggest themselves as needed.

MAX B. MILLER, FAGO

Graphics by Harry Johnson

To get the right start

As a virtuoso, one must

Comprehend the true meaning of

Relaxation, not merely

Relaxation of the hands and arms

But of the mind and body

As well.

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