

**WHAT EVERY PIANIST SHOULD KNOW
ABOUT PLAYING THE ORGAN**

A QuickStart Guide for Latter-day Saint Pianists Called to Play the Organ

SAM FLEMING

What Every Pianist Should Know About Playing the Organ, Third Edition

© Copyright 2024 Sam Fleming Music All Rights Reserved

<https://www.sam-fleming.com>

Introduction

Imagine this. You've been playing the piano for several years and are quite comfortable doing so. You have been playing the hymns and other repertoire at home and at church. You enjoy the piano and love to play.

Suddenly one day you are asked to meet with a member of the bishopric. He asks you to accept the call to be the ward organist. Your heart races and in your mind you think, "I have never even touched the organ. How can I do this? There is no way I can accept this calling! The organ is just not for me!" But in your heart you remember that, "Whom the Lord calls, He qualifies." So you accept the calling.

Sunday rolls around and you open up the organ and take one look at it and ask yourself, "How in the world does this thing work? How am I ever going to get through this?"

The purpose of this guide is to help you better be prepared to play the organ and use it in our worship services and other meetings.

After reading this guide, you will be far more ready to accompany congregational singing and provide prelude and postlude for weekly worship services. This guide **will not** teach you everything you need to know about being an organist. You will, however, gain a strong foundation in the basics of how the organ works and how to play it.

Serving as a musician in the Church is the only calling in which you must have previous education and training to serve. This leaves you, as a church musician, a sacred trust to rely on your past education and experience and, more importantly, to continually increase your education and experience so that when someone walks into the chapel Sunday morning, they can instantly feel the love of the Savior through music.

To truly learn the organ, you must study and practice, just as you do with the piano. Any pianist who wishes to become serious about learning the organ will seek out a teacher and dedicate time each week to practicing regularly. As you do so, your capacity at the organ will increase, and your ability to effectively help others feel the Spirit through music will be magnified. It is my hope that this guide will be a springboard to help you feel *inspired* to increase your skill level at the organ to better serve through music.

The Instrument

The organ is the oldest keyboard instrument dating back to ancient Greece and Rome. The sound of a pipe organ is created by air passing through pipes of different lengths which create different pitches. Each and every pipe has a plug or a **stop** that stops the air from entering all the pipes at once. When the organist selects a certain stop and then plays a key, a lever moves the stop away from the end of the pipe, allowing the air to rush through, producing a pitch. Each pipe produces its own individual pitch.

On pipe organs each individual stop on the organ has a set of up to 61 pipes called **ranks**. Each rank of pipe is associated with a particular sound which coordinates to one stop tab or knob on the organ.

In a majority of Latter-day Saint chapels, we have electronic organs which simulate the sounds of a pipe organ. While electronic organ technology has come a long way, it does not (and will not ever) replace a pipe organ.

On electronic organs, like the ones in our chapels, there are around 32 ranks, or 1,749 electronic “pipes”. (To compare, the Tabernacle Organ on Temple Square has 206 ranks, or 11,267 pipes.)

The Keyboards

The organ has two or more keyboards. Most organs in our chapels only have two. Each keyboard has 61 keys. The keyboards on the organ are called **manuals** because they are played with your hands. There is also a pedal board that is used to play with your feet.

On a 2 manual organ, the top manual is called the **swell** and the bottom manual is called the **great**.

Do not let the multiple manuals and pedals intimidate you! It may seem like a lot, but do not worry! By the end of this guide you’ll see that the organ is really not that complicated!

The Buttons

You will notice that in between the manuals there are buttons with numbers and other things written on them. These buttons are called **pistons**.

The pistons with numbers are used as presets for different sound or stop settings on the organ. (A group of sound or stop settings is called **registration**.) This makes it possible to set your registration before the meeting

starts or used already set registration so that you are not selecting your stops right before the hymn starts. You just press the preset that you want and voilà you have your registration! There are **general pistons**, which will give you registration for the great and swell manuals and the pedal combined. These pistons are usually numbered 1-10 or 1-12 and are located under the Great and Swell manuals on the left side.

Pistons located under the center of the great and swell manuals are called **divisionals** because they coordinate to a specific *division* (great, swell, pedal) of the organ. The pistons are typically numbered anywhere from 1-5 to 1-8. When a divisional piston is selected, it will only turn stops on for the division to which it corresponds. The swell divisional pistons are located in the center under the swell manual, the great divisional pistons are located in the center under the great manual. Pedal divisionals will either be under the great manual on the right side or in the **toe studs** (the brass or chrome buttons by the pedals) on the right-hand side. The toe studs located on the left side of the pedals usually coordinate to the general pistons, though this varies on every organ.

Organ registrations (presets) are to different memory levels. On a majority of organs in our chapels, there are multiple memory levels available to set your own registration. Typically, memory level 1 (and sometimes 2) there are factory default registrations that are locked to the instrument, and should not be changed. These are good registrations to use if you are unsure about creating your own registration. On most newer Allen organ models there are 15 memory levels available, on Rodgers organ models 4 memory levels are available, and on Johannus organ models there are 100 memory levels available.

Before saving your own presets on a particular memory level, it is highly recommended you check with the other organists in the building where you play. There is nothing more frustrating to an organist than coming to church Sunday morning to play and find that someone has changed the registrations your preset earlier in the week.

Two other pistons that you should be aware of are the pistons that say “0” or “cancel” and “tutti”.

The “0” or “cancel” piston is used as a general cancel. It is generally the last piston to your right under the great manual. This will clear all your stops at once. It is highly encouraged to hit this piston after you finish playing prelude and each hymn. This will help you avoid any “mishaps” during a prayer or talk.

The “tutti” piston is the last piston on the right under the swell manual. In Italian the word tutti means *all* or *everything*. This piston is to automatically give you full organ. It will pull all your stops automatically. It is not recommended to use this piston at all. Using this piston when you play will blow the congregation “out of the water.” However, if you are practicing and want to experiment with it, you just simply push the piston, and when you are done push it again to go back to the registration you already had.

The next group of buttons we will look at now is located above both manuals. These rectangle shaped buttons are called **rocker tabs**. The rocker tabs are what you use to select your stops (or the different sounds) of the organ. On most electronic organs the rocker tabs are white and will light up when they are in use.

The rocker tabs are grouped by the three primary divisions. In order from left to right, there is a section titled “pedal” then “swell” and lastly “great”. The rocker tabs under “pedal” are your stops for the pedals. Under “swell” are the stops for the swell manual and under “great” are the stops for the great manual.

In addition to the rocker tabs that control the stops, there are rocker tabs called **couplers** which couple two divisions together. For example the “Swell to Great” coupler will take all of your Swell stops and add them to the Great manual, so you can play the registration of the swell and great manuals together on one manual. The most common couplers on organs in our chapels are: Swell to Great, Swell to Pedal, and Great to Pedal.

Registration

As was mentioned earlier **registration** is the technique of combining stops together to create a particular sound from the organ. Registration is very important because it sets the mood for the hymn that is being sung. If the right registration is not used for a specific hymn, it can impact the whole meeting.

Because most of the organs in our chapels have pre-set registration you will mostly likely never have to create your own. But to better understand how the organ works and what registration to choose we will look at some basics of registration and stops.

The first thing you need to understand is that the organ has four basic stop families that create the different sounds of the organ. These families are principals, flutes, strings, and reeds. All stops come from one of these four

families. Each individual stop has its own set of pipes (or digital pipes).

The **principal** family does not attempt to imitate a specific instrument or sound. Principals are the foundational sound of the organ. Often when thinking of the sound of an organ you think of the principals. When accompanying hymns, principal stops will almost always be used. Typical names of principal stops include 16' Diapason, 8' Octave, 8' Diapason, 8' Principal, 4' Octave, 4' Prestant, 4' Choralbass and 2' Octave.

The **flute** family imitates different kinds of flutes or flute-like instruments. Oftentimes you will find multiple stops of flutes on an organ, even in different languages. The flutes are most often more mellow than principal stops, and can help add warmth to the principals. Typical flute stop names include, 32' Contra Bourdon, 16' Lieblich Gedackt, 8' Flute, 8' Harmonic Flute, 8' Gedackt, 4' Spitzflöte, 4' Nachthorn, and 2' Piccolo.

The **strings** family is a collection of different string sounding instruments such as a violin or cello. This family is not typically used in accompanying hymns. Typical string family stops include, 16' Violone, 8' Gemshorn, 8' Erzähler Celeste II, 8' Viole, and 8' Viola Celeste.

Lastly, the **reed** family represents reed instruments such as the oboe or clarinet. It also represents the brass section of an orchestra such as trumpets, trombones, and tubas. These stops are usually written in red, which makes them easily identifiable at the organ. Typical reed family stops include, 32' Contra Posaune, 16' Posuane, 16' Waldhorn, 8' French Trumpet, 8' Trompette, 8' Haubois, 8' Oboe, 8' Cromorne, 8' Tromba, 8' Major Tuba, 8' English Horn, 8' French Horn, and 4' Clarion.

There are two other characteristics of stops called hybrid stops and mixtures. **Hybrid** (or sometimes called mutation) stops are those that have traits of multiple stops (such as a principal and flute stop put together in one at different pitch levels). Typical hybrid stops include 2 2/3' Nazard and 1 3/5' Tierce.

On a pipe organ **mixture** stops are those that combine two or more ranks (sets) of pipes. The ranks used in mixture stops are usually from the principal family. Mixtures are never used alone but used to compliment the other families. (On the stop a mixture will indicate how many ranks of pipes it is using by roman numerals.) Typical mixture stops include IV Mixture, IV Fourniture, III Cymbale, III Mixture.

Another principle to understand about registration and stops is that on a pipe organ the size of a pipe length is measured in feet. On the stops you will always see a the name of the stop plus a number (Principal 8').

An 8' stop is a pitch played at its original octave.

A 4' stop is one octave above the note that you are playing. (If you are playing middle C on a 4' stop it will actually sound like the C above middle C.)

A 16' stop is one octave below the note you are playing. (If you are playing middle C it will actually sound like the C below middle C.) A 32' stop will play two octaves below.

There are also stops that have fractioned numbers like $2\frac{2}{3}'$ called **mutations** that relate to hybrid stops. If you are playing a $2\frac{2}{3}'$ stop on middle C you will hear middle C plus one octave and a third higher (or the E above the C above middle C). Mutation stops are never to be played alone either, but should be combined with at least an 8' stop.

In playing hymns you always want use a minimum of 8' and 4' principal stops in the manuals and 16' and 8' stops in the pedal as your basic foundation. Do not use 8' stops only in playing congregational hymns. The 4' stop allows the hymn to be heard over the congregation, so that they can follow the melody. Often times adding 8', 4', or 2' flutes will add warmth to your registration and provide additional support. Adding a 2' principal will add a little more brightness. Adding a mixture (which should only be added when 8', 4', and 2' principals are on) will add brilliance. Typically you will add either the 8' Oboe (Haubois) or 8' Trompette (or a variety of it) with 8', 4', 2' (and sometimes mixtures) to add color to the registration. If you have an 8' Major Tuba on your organ, that is not designed to be played with both hands, but to solo out a melody on one manual while playing the other voices on the other.

Volume Control

On a pipe organ there is not really a “volume” knob to control the volume. The volume of the organ is controlled by how many stops you use. The more stops you the louder the organ will be. On electronic organs the principle is the same. But, there is a little bit more flexibility.

Above the pedal board there are two black pedals. The one on the left is

to control the volume of the great manual and the pedal. The one on the right is to control the volume of the swell manual. Generally the swell is softer than the great. If there is a third pedal, the farthest one to the right is called the “crescendo pedal” which gradually adds stops by opening or closing the pedal.

Prelude and the Basics of Accompanying Hymns

Prelude is just as important as the hymns are in a meeting. It is just as important to practice your prelude pieces, as it is the hymns. Prelude invites the Spirit before a worship service starts. Planning your prelude and practicing it ahead of time will also allow you to be more focused on inviting the Spirit, than worrying about what song you will play next.

It is appropriate to play prelude directly as written in the hymnbook. Be sure to choose appropriate registration that is not too loud and distracting. It is also important that your prelude can be heard. You do not want it so soft that people sitting in the chapel cannot hear it, but you also do not want to select registration that is more suited for accompanying a congregational hymn.

When playing prelude directly from the hymnbook be sure to play a little slower than if you were singing the hymn. Also play multiple verses. It is very distracting to members of the congregation if you play one verse of one hymn and then start flipping through the hymnbook for another hymn and play one verse of that following that pattern. It will help you tremendously if you make a list of hymns you will play for prelude beforehand. That way you already know what you are going to play next.

If you are looking for hymn arrangements to play for prelude, there are many wonderfully written and accessible books available for purchase that contain great hymn prelude settings.

If you want to add a little variety to your prelude you can select a soft reed or other combination on the swell manual and play the soprano line of the hymn on the swell and play the other parts on the great. (Make sure that the coupler that says “swell to great” is not selected.) Also make sure that the swell is heard over the great. This will give the hymn a nice solo effect.

Prelude should always start at least 10 minutes before the meeting starts. Even if there is no one there yet, prelude should always start at least 10 minutes before the meeting starts. If you are playing for stake conference or a larger meeting where people will be there earlier, the prelude should start earlier.

Lastly, when the person who is conducting the meeting stands to the pulpit to start the meeting DO NOT stop playing the hymn where you are. Just finish the verse, or at another spot where it would make sense to stop. Hold the last note out for at least four counts. Do not just play the last note and release. This leaves a feeling of incompleteness and is often distracting to the congregation too.

When accompanying the hymns, it is vital that the organ is not too soft and not too loud. Choose a registration that matches the text and mood of the hymn. How you play the hymns will determine how the congregation sings them. Do not play them too fast or too slow. There is a “sweet spot” in the tempo for every hymn. Try to play in that sweet spot every time so that the hymn does not drag or feel like the Indie 500.

A great way to determine if a hymn is too fast or too slow is to sing while you play. You should be able to sing a whole phrase of the hymn without needing to take a breath. Use the punctuation in the hymn text to determine where to breathe. When you are singing and take a breath, the organ should also take a breath. After all, the organ is one of the instruments that is the closest to the voice. If you do not allow the organ to breathe, the congregation will not breathe, or they will and it will be in awkward spots, which makes it difficult to actually worship through singing the hymns.

It is easy for an organist to fall into the trap of listening to the congregation singing and then gradually slow down. As the organist, YOU are the leader. If there is a music leader leading the congregational hymns, you and the music leader should work your hymn tempi ahead of time. When the organist and music leader are completely in sync, this really allows the music to do its job. However, at the end of the day, if the singing of a hymn goes well or does not, it is completely to the credit of the organist.

The Pedals

By now it has most likely crossed your mind, “I have no idea how to play the pedals.” The pedals are probably the most intimidating part of playing the organ. For those of you who are interested in learning the pedals here are a few things to know.

First, the pedalboard is just like a big keyboard. The notes are exactly the same. When playing a hymn with the pedals, you play the soprano, alto, and tenor lines with your hands. The base line is played with your feet. This can

require a lot of practice depending on the hymn. But it is possible to learn to play the pedals quickly if you are committed to regular practice.

For those of you who have no interest in playing or do not have time to learn the pedals, do not worry! There is a coupler that is often referred to as the “cheater” coupler. This coupler is found under the great section. It is called “Bass”. When the bass coupler is on it will play the lowest note, you play on the great in the pedal stops without having to play the pedals. Thus, giving the impression that you are playing the pedals without actually playing them. In hymn playing you would simply play the hymn with all voices in your hands.

If you are not going to play the pedals, make sure that you select the bass coupler. This gives the organ the full sound it needs in accompanying hymns. If not, the organ will sound very empty and hallow and not give the low foundational support the congregation needs when singing.

Some Tips About Playing the Organ

Now that you have learned about the workings of the organ, the basics of playing prelude and accompanying hymns here are a few tips additional tips to get you started.

1. The organ does not have a sustaining pedal like the piano. When you release a note it does not hold out longer. For example, if you want to play a half note you have to hold the key down for two beats not one and a half.
2. When playing the organ, you need to play with a *legato* or smooth and connected touch. There can be a little bit of a learning curve to playing the organ so that it does not sound disconnected and choppy, but learning to play this way will greatly help you provide support to the singing.
3. The best way to adjust to playing the organ is practicing. If you have access to a key to the church it would be good to go and practice during the week so you are well prepared for Sunday. (If you do not have access to a key, lots of times the church is open on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday night and no one is in the chapel using the organ.) In the words of one my former stake presidents, “Prior proper planning positively prevents poor performance.” Or in the case for the organist, “Prior proper *practice* positively prevents poor performance.” Do not feel like you have to learn the organ all at once, but constantly strive to improve and ask the Lord to help you!

Concluding Thoughts

Though we did not cover every detail of the organ and how to play it, you should now have a greater understanding about how the organ works. Hopefully you are not as intimidated as before.

Remember that this is Heavenly Father's church, and that music is a huge part of it. If you give 100% into preparing and playing for Sunday's, God will take care of the rest. He will make up for the missed notes and other little faults. That being said, you have to give Him your all. If you have been called as an organist, take this as an opportunity to magnify your calling and bless the lives of the members of your ward through your musical talents, which with you have been blessed. May God bless you in your endeavors in learning the organ and serving as a ward organist.

Resources and Materials for Organists

There are some great resources and materials for organists. Here is a list of some ones that you should find helpful.

Books:

Anne Marsden Thomas and Frederick Stocken. *The New Oxford Organ Method*. Oxford University Press (2020).

Roger E. Davis. *The Organists Manual*. W.W. Norton & Co (1985).

Darwin Wolford. *Organ Studies for the Beginner*. Harold Flammer Music.

Prelude Books:

Brent Jorgensen. *Organ Chains* (volumes 1-5). Jackman Music (1997).

Clay Christiansen. *Primary Colours* vol. 1-2. Jackman Music (2022).

Darwin Wolford. *The Ward Organist Music Library* vol. 1-5. Jackman Music (1996).

Websites:

- American Guild of Organists: <https://www.agohq.org/>
- BYU Organ Resources for Ward Organists: <https://organ.byu.edu/>
- BYU Organ Workshop: <https://organworkshop.byu.edu/>
- Resources from the church music website: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/music/accompanying-others>