

Artistic Organ Registration by Ross Ellison

We've all heard them: organists who seem to have an uncanny sense of registration. Sadly, most of us have also heard organists whose registrations are lackluster, uninteresting, and unbalanced. What makes the difference? Can an "average" organist develop a special skill in registration? Twenty years of university teaching, working mostly with students who have had little or no prior experience with the organ, has convinced me that those with a desire to excel in the area of organ registration can do so, provided they are willing to listen critically, think about their musical goals, and be willing to experiment. Let's start with two of the most common "traps" that many organists fall into:

1. Many organists select registrations that seem good on paper: that is, one's training would suggest that a particular registration should work, and so the organist simply sets his registration accordingly and accepts the result. The organist does not take the time to explore alternatives, or to carefully listen to the quality of each and every stop and how it combines with the others.

2. Other organists slavishly follow the suggestions for registration printed in the music. They do not question why each of the indicated stops is in the mix, and they do not take into account the fact that the same stop nomenclature on different instruments can yield very different sounds.

Remember, we should not merely seek to develop registrations that are acceptable—we should attempt in every case to find the best registration! But how can we accomplish this goal?

First, get to know every stop of your instrument intimately! Listen to it carefully, and be able to verbally describe its tone color, its stop family, its dynamic level, its clarity in different ranges of the keyboard or pedalboard, its suitability as a solo or ensemble stop or both, and whether it seems to retain or change its characteristic sound at differing dynamic levels. In order to artistically combine stops, it is first necessary to know the detailed characteristics of each of the stops being combined. It will be helpful to explore your instrument by stop family, comparing all the principals, then the flutes, then the strings, and finally the reeds. Listen for tone color, brightness, loudness, speech characteristics, and the like. Start with the 8' stops, and then progress to the other pitches.

Next, try combining some of the stops and listen very carefully to the result. If your instrument is fairly large, select similar registrations on several different manuals and compare them with respect to tone color and dynamic level. Listen to the different mixtures and how they affect the ensemble. Combine the individual mutation stops with the 8' flutes, then with various combinations of flutes at several pitch levels. Combine mutation stops with the reeds, and listen carefully to how they change the tone color and whether or not they blend seamlessly with the stop to which they are added. Add a tremulant to each of the 8' and 4' stops on your instrument, listening for subtle changes in tone color and evaluating whether the sound might be suitable for a solo line.

Although you should always listen carefully to the tonal characteristics of a stop, you must also pay attention to its relative clarity in differing ranges on the keyboard. Some stops

will sound both beautiful and clear only in a limited range; you'll need to exploit their best characteristics while limiting the downside. Get to know which of the stops provide relatively uniform clarity throughout their compass, and which provide clarity in only a specific region of the keyboard. The same goes for tone: many stops will sound best within a compass of several octaves; flutes in particular tend to sound their best in the mid-to-upper ranges of the keyboard.

As you proceed to the registration of actual music, ask yourself some pertinent questions: Is the registration beautiful? Is it stylistically appropriate? Is it balanced dynamically, or is one part overly prominent? Is it balanced tonally, or is the overall effect boomy or shrill? Is it clear? Will it accomplish its intended purpose? Does it fit the text? (Consider registering your hymns verse by verse, taking into account the meaning of each verse, rather than merely registering the hymns at varying dynamic levels.)

As you develop registrations for the music you are playing, ask yourself three very important questions: (1) What is the music itself saying? (2) What am I trying to accomplish? (3) How does this registration sound in this acoustical environment?

With respect to the first question, it is readily apparent that the music itself will often suggest potential registrations. Highly contrapuntal music, for example, will require registrations of utmost clarity, while music that is more homophonic may suggest a broader and warmer overall sound. Other musical elements that might affect your choice of registration include tempo, range, density of parts, and degree of articulation.

With regard to the second question, it is always helpful to define overall musical goals: bringing out a beautiful solo line, exquisitely balancing a contrapuntal texture, creating a warm and lush sound, balancing the organ with a choral ensemble, condensing an orchestral scoring into an organ registration, etc. Finally, one does not play the organ in a vacuum—its acoustical environment has a tremendous effect on the overall sound of the instrument. Learn the acoustical characteristics of your building, and use them to your advantage when registering music on your instrument.

What are the benefits resulting from a personal focus on artistic registration? First, you will learn to listen to sound in a much more critical way, balancing dynamics and tone colors in a manner that produces a beautiful result. Second, as you learn to verbalize what you are hearing you will become a more articulate and discerning musician. Third, you will learn to make personal musical judgments that are informed and appropriate. Fourth, you will gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the organ as a musical instrument. Finally, your playing will make a better emotional connection with the listener, which after all is your overarching musical goal.

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