

Odd and Awful Organs

How to get the best out of Masonic organs

Pipe Organs

To the pianist, the flight deck of an large pipe organ looks worrying, to say the least. Here are a few basic tips for a newcomer.

You don't need to worry about the pedals. Ignore all but one. The one that matters is the swell pedal. This is full foot-size and rocks gentle back and fore like a treadle, and is useful for getting louder and softer. It does not matter how hard you hit the keyboard, the organ volume stays the same; impact does not change the volume, but this big pedal does the trick.

All the stops with an 8 on them sound at piano pitch. These are your basic sounds and come in different flavours such as flues, reeds and some orchestral sounds. If you can see one called a diapason, start with this as it is the basic organ sound. Flutes are a bit more mellow, and reeds quite a lot more strident and tiring on the ears. Try them separately, and try mixing them together.

Stops come in families and by selecting similar names from those bearing the No:4 or No:2 you add a sound an octave or two octaves higher. The more stops, the more sound – roughly*. It is important to change the sound from time to time, as too much of the same becomes tedious.

Why two keyboards? This is to enable you to have a loud and a soft selection prepared in advance, and change keyboard (or manual as they are known) when you want a change of colour. More advanced players may pick out a tune on the louder manual and accompany on the softer, but this is not a trick for beginners.

Couplers. There will be a tab or stop marked Sw-Gt. Using this connects the two manuals together, which is useful for doubling the sound or mixing differing sounds. You may want this 'off' to get the greatest contrast between loud and soft that you have set on each manual.

The pedals. These are set out like a keyboard and played with toe and heel. If you can pat your head with one hand and make a circular motion with the other on your stomach, you have the sort of talent than may enable you to plays with your feet as well as with your hands - but there is no need to do so yet.

Electronic Organs

A few of these are replicas of pipe organs, but even the cheapest have far more sounds and gadgets than are good for your health. The danger here is that you will sound more like a jazz player unless you curb your passions, the excess of which deforms the very soul. So the first step is to ignore any buttons that hint of dance rhythms and electronic sounds. Keep to the church organ effects for our ceremonies. These are often given names like Grand Organ, Theatre organ, Full Tibia and it is best to stick to these.

The big difference with electronic organs is that the swell pedal gives a very wide range of volume. This might sound a good idea, but the problem is that an inexperienced player will make excessive use of this and a sudden increase in volume tends frighten the natives. Try to perfect the knack moving this pedal very gently indeed.

CD ROMs and MP3 downloads

The younger and lower ranks often try to 'improve' Freemasonry by introducing hi-tech devices in the absence of a real live organist. Avoid this - send them home. It's all been tried before and there is many a Temple with a mat black box with multiple knobs and a pile of floppy discs with smudged labels. The problem is that it is even more difficult to create a seamless flow of suitable music when you are not a musician. Those who install and operate these machines at first, soon fade away and hardly anyone can understand how and when to use them. Furthermore, apparatus of this sort has a life expectancy of less than 10 years before obsolescent sets in. How many of us can run 5¼" Floppy Discs nowadays?

Encourage anyone with moderate keyboard skills to read the first lecture in this series and then the second, and then the third. This way you'll grow your own organist and have contributed enormously to the having good music during our ceremonies.

Naunton Liles PPJGW (South Wales)