

AGO SUPER SATURDAY, Utah Valley Chapter
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Keynote Address
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WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT LEARNING THE ORGAN?

When I was a seventh grader, our family moved into a new home in Orem. Our ward organist, Yvonne Egbert, encouraged me to participate in a twelve-week course on basic organ playing taught by BYU organist Bill Foxley. She gave me keys to both the chapel door and the organ console that I had for nine years. I decided to attend the course and to take it seriously—I took notes, followed his lesson plan, and even practiced between classes. Thus began an adventure with the organ that has intrigued me now for about forty years, and that continues to captivate my interest day in and day out. Although I waited until college to resume formal organ training, I was able to contribute as the organist for our church choir and for some church meetings during all those years until college.

Not every moment has been rosy through the years, mind you. While I have enjoyed mountaintop musical experiences with organs and choirs far and near, I have endured more than my share of musical misfortunes and train wrecks—most of which have proven only temporarily devastating.

Take, for example, my first brush with public humiliation by organ. We're back to the Orem 23rd ward, meeting in the Sharon Stake Center. I must have been fourteen—having completed the twelve-week Foxley course, I was now graduated and fully prepared to handle any organ challenge that dared confront me. Now I did not normally play for sacrament meeting—just for the choir. But I must have been substituting. The hymn was “True to the Faith.” Now this was before the 1985 hymnbook came out, in which they added some little tiny long notes for the pedal. That means that there were no little tiny long notes for me to play, so I tried to play the fast-moving eighth notes with my feet. Well, it was not a pretty sight, not to mention sound. I survived the hymn, but when I was finished I sat behind the organ console and blubbered for the rest of the meeting. At that point all I wanted was my mother, and she pampered me back to near-normalcy as soon as she could.

And then there's my Salisbury Cathedral near-death experience. For years I had heard tantalizing descriptions of the incredibly expressive Swell division of the Father Willis organs from the late nineteenth century. I could hardly wait to wrap my hands and ears around one such instrument during a choir trip in 1990. Unfortunately, the preparation and rehearsal schedule in the cathedral was very tight—about an hour to set up stops, followed immediately by the choir's 30-minute run-through, which lead right into the service in which we would perform. The organist quickly shown us how to operate the console (several items were not labeled), including a strange toggle switch to move from memory level 1 to memory level 2. First I set up the organ's ten pistons with the combinations I needed for the anthems—some wonderful pieces hand-picked for this organ and for this wonderful English cathedral environment. As setup time was running out, I threw the switch to get to memory level 2 and hurriedly set up the ten pistons on Level 2 for the hymns. I finished just in time—about five minutes before rehearsal. As I quickly ran through my pistons on memory level 1 for the anthem, to my complete horror I found instead the combinations for the hymns!! Apparently I had flipped the switch for the music rack light (which did not work), thinking it was the memory level switch, and saved the hymn combinations over the carefully-selected anthem combinations. But because “the show must go on,” the rehearsal was a mad rush, with near-conniptions at every turn. Aside from

adding to an already-receding hairline, the end result was a splendid—even memorable—experience with the Willis Swell!

Such experiences with the organ—great and small, wonderful and terrible—together with the priceless relationships that I have cultivated and continue to enjoy with my family, friends, colleagues, and students, are among the most important and cherished of my life.

“Hmmm,” you say. “Now there’s a nut, for ya.” And frankly, I don’t blame you. It has to be hard to understand how anyone could find such life-value in his experiences with an inanimate musical whistle box. Heaven knows that not all organs are even wonderful at all. Some of them can sound more like warning buzzers than musical instruments. Others have electrical problems, badly-voiced pipes, or parts that don’t work. I’ve seen spiders crawl out of some of them, and mouse nests built into others. One just about electrocuted me. And most of all (ushers, would you please block the doors *now*), it takes years to learn how to play one well. Years? Yes, years—and that’s after you’ve learned how to read the notes well! Once you have seriously studied the organ for a while, you discover that there are some very misguided notions about it. The most cruel among them is this: once you know how to play the piano, you are ready to play the organ for church. Even the very elect are deceived by this one! Most ecclesiastical leaders fall victim to this terrible misconception simply because they do not understand the differences between the piano and the organ. If it were described in scripture, in prophetic writings, in pioneer journals, in leadership training, no doubt they would catch on. But false notions persist. They deserve to be described as cruel and terrible notions because pianists routinely accept callings to serve as organists with virtually no training. They do this because of their humility and the wonderful tendency to accept callings. However, this particular calling requires some training, and attempting to execute the calling without that training frequently results in very public humiliation. Not humility—which, again, is what leads them to accept the calling. I mean humiliation—where failure in a public setting leads one’s dignity or self-respect to be lowered.

So here you are. Apparently you see differences between the piano and the organ, and you sense that the organ merits a new skill set in order to be played effectively. You are probably willing to go further than the person who called me a couple weeks ago wanting a list of usable stop combinations on a particular organ model. When I responded that I didn’t have such a list, but I knew of some resources that would help her create her own, and after an awkward pause, she confessed, “I just don’t want to have to work for it!”

The backbone of my message to you has two main parts: first of all, congratulations for showing some initiative and coming this morning! Even if you don’t yet have a calling as an organist, you are preparing yourself to be a servant of the best kind—one who is competent, confident, and contributing. You are setting yourself up to feel that rewarding sense of fulfillment after a job well done—every week!

The second part of the backbone of my message is the one that I will focus on this morning: Learning the organ is great! You can be a valuable servant (remember, competent, confident, and contributing), and have a sense of personal fulfillment and joy at the same time!

Which brings me to my main topic: What’s great about learning the organ? I’m not just talking about learning *to play* the organ, or learning *to play hymns* at the organ, but what’s great about *really learning* the organ? My goal today is to share with you a few ideas that may be new to you—ideas that might help to nudge you into a long-term commitment to take up the organ as a “lifetime endeavor” as I and many others in this room have done. So—what’s great about learning the organ?

First, learning the organ is interesting. Most every pipe organ is unique—custom designed and built for its particular location and purpose. Spending time with an organ—whether it is unique or mass-produced—is like painting a fresh tonal landscape. Every stop offers a unique color when used alone, and bends the color spectrum a certain way when combined with others. The keys are like paintbrushes in the hand—they may feel awkward at first, but through years of exploration and practice they become an extension of the creative mind. While those first few paintings may seem simple and square, every finished piece is one step closer to a true form of artistic, personal, and even spiritual expression. Even the simplest instruments harbor some beautiful tones, waiting patiently for an organist with time to spend and ears to hear. Under the hands and feet of such an organist, even a small organ with a well-matched piece of music can inspire and uplift. Becoming that organist is a journey that lasts a lifetime, as each step draws him or her forward to the next, and the vista ahead grows ever more intriguing. In other words, “ya get hooked”—in a wonderful way!

Second, the organ is both old and new. Many organs throughout the world have been thoughtfully kept and carefully maintained for centuries. Their cases and their splendid tonal qualities, along with the architecture, windows, and other artwork that surround them demonstrate artistry and craftsmanship at their best. All these together help to preserve one piece of what it must have felt like to live and worship in earlier times. Studying, visiting, hearing, and playing historic instruments can transcend the organist of the twenty-first century into simpler times, when the organ was, as Mozart referred to it, “The King of Instruments.” The organ of our time draws inspiration and energy from that history. Frequently new organs are patterned after ancient instruments. The tonal qualities of historic instruments are imitated in modern pipework, and even recorded and reproduced in today’s electronic instruments. Our technology has made it not only possible but relatively easy to create and manage huge instruments, bringing them truly closer to what Cèsar Franck referred to as “his orchestra.” Now it is even feasible to provide numerous custom-voiced stoplists within a single electronic organ, and to import synthesized orchestral voices as though they were stops. Becoming the organist who can explore and perform on the best of the old and of the new is great!

Third, the organ is both powerful and relaxing. Sometimes I lightheartedly diagnose my students of suffering from “loud and fast syndrome.” So yes, I guess I shame them into seeking out greater depth in their musical taste. But if you want to know the truth, I suffer from it too! I confess to you that the first organ recording that caught my attention was an LP that contained the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor performed by Virgil Fox. Furthermore, I still get goose bumps in the last few bars of a good French Toccata (or anything loud, for that matter)—especially in a reverberant space. It is hard to beat the “power trip” that comes from performing such a piece! But that’s not all—every good coin has two sides, and there is a flip side to power. A few months ago my Ukrainian graduate student performed the gentle and flowing “Nativity” by Jean Langlais in a room that seats eight people. Her performance was as moving even in that intimate setting as would be the powerful and exciting bursts of a festival trumpet fanfare in a huge stone cathedral. Under the hands and feet of a skilled artist, the organ can be stirring on both ends of the power spectrum and everywhere in between.

Fourth, learning the organ is a great way to serve. Churches of most denominations are full of people who associate worship directly with the organ. No wonder—it takes an organ to set the tone of the service with music, to unify the congregation in song with the support of the organ, to serve as a musical foundation for certain parts of the service, and to usher the congregation onward with music afterwards. It takes a skilled and responsive organist to create the music for all this—he or she senses when to start and stop playing, how fast to play the introduction to a hymn, how much volume to use from verse to verse, when to breathe, how rhythmic or sustained to play, and when to begin and end the postlude. Whether the organist sees his or her service at the organ as a calling or as a job (or both), those who fill the churches appreciate and respect those who refine their skills to become the organist that they need.

Fifth, learning the organ is both challenging and satisfying. Certain types of people thirst after challenge. They hike, they throw, they lift, and they run. They buy, they sell, they train, and they build. For the organist who tackles difficult pieces or hymns, the challenge is to conceptualize, to break down, to learn the parts, to reconstruct them gradually, and to refine the newly combined parts into a finished piece. Performing a challenging piece by relying on the well-trained subconscious mind is a most satisfying experience—what a way to keep the mind sharp and active throughout one’s lifetime! And that is precisely how long a deeply-learned piece remains in memory—for a lifetime. And here is a valuable side benefit for any of you who consider yourselves human: learning in this way models for the individual how to face obstacles in life. You face the challenge, you conceptualize or visualize the solution, break it down into parts, deal with each part individually, and bring the parts back together in a final solution. Becoming an organist is satisfying in itself, and a great training ground for living well.

Sixth and finally, *you* can learn the organ. You can do it! It doesn’t take eight semesters of college or conservatory training. It takes a desire, a plan, a daily commitment, and time. It took a spark of desire to come today, and there will be plenty of fuel provided this morning. Attending organ concerts, listening to recordings and radio programs, and organ surfing on the Internet are great ways to fuel the desire fire. And when it starts to get under your skin, just let it! Resistance is futile!

You are surrounded this morning by several well qualified organists, organ teachers, and a chapter of The American Guild of Organists. These individuals and organizations can help you find a plan of study that will fit your learning style, your calendar, and even your budget. Consider making a commitment at some level to becoming the kind of organist that you see yourself becoming—and then let the organists in this room help. Then dedicate time every week to the process and enjoy the fascinating ride.

What’s great about learning the organ is, well, learning the organ!