

AGO Super Saturday Keynote Address

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Good morning, everyone. It's wonderful to be here with you and to see so many of you here eager to learn about this wonderful instrument. My object this morning is to share a few of the experiences, decisions, and habits that have made a significant difference in my own journey as a musician and organist, in hopes that they might be of use and encouragement to you, my fellow organists. I love this instrument, and hope that some of these ideas might be of value to you as you strive to improve your organ playing skills.

I'd like to begin by telling you a little about my background, so that you can understand my perspective in all of this. I grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and began taking piano lessons around eight years of age. Like many others, within a few years of beginning, I was campaigning rather vigorously to quit. To my mother's eternal credit, she withstood my best efforts to stop, and encouraged me to keep going. Around the time I was twelve or thirteen, I began studying with a new teacher by the name of Larry Blackburn—a professional organist who had recently moved into my family's ward. Larry began teaching me on the piano, but soon asked if I would be interested in learning a little about the organ so I could play in church when called upon to do so. I agreed, and this was, for me, the "beginning of the end." Learning to play the organ turned me around; I was so drawn to this instrument that I began practicing *voluntarily* every chance I could get.

In 2001, I came to BYU to audition for the organ program, and was accepted. After serving a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in San Diego, California, I commenced my studies here in 2004. I completed my Bachelor of Music degree in Organ Performance in 2008, followed by a Master of Music degree in 2009. Following the completion

of my master's degree, I went to study with Dr. James Higdon at the University of Kansas. While working on my doctorate, I played the organ at Country Club Christian Church in Kansas City, Missouri, and taught at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. I completed my Doctor of Musical Arts degree in 2012, and continued working in these two positions until I was hired at BYU in the fall of 2014.

With that background as a backdrop, I'd like to tell you about some of the experiences and habits that have helped me grow as an organist through the years. The first thought may seem painfully obvious, but is the all-important key to progress: *spend time practicing*. Early in my time as a student at BYU, Don Cook shared with me three essential "ingredients" that any musician needs in order to have a successful career:

1. Possess some degree of natural talent
2. Work like a dog
3. Don't be a jerk

This magical combination, Don explained to me, is all too rare among musicians. Unfortunately, many who possess number 1 are lacking when it comes to number 2, and those lucky enough to have both 1 and 2 tend to struggle with number 3! Having observed fellow students and colleagues as well as my own students for many years, I can now personally attest to the truth of this sage bit of wisdom. Too many people try to rely on their innate talent as a substitute for hard work, and as a result, fail to achieve their real potential. Of course, this principle applies to many diverse endeavors, but is certainly true for musicians. The only way to improve your organ playing is to dedicate time to practicing.

In one of our classes for organ students here, we use a textbook about organ improvisation by Jeffrey Brillhart titled *Breaking Free*. In an early chapter about how to practice,

Brillhart makes a simple, but profound observation: “If you do not practice, you will neither learn to improvise nor improve your improvisation skills.”¹ Similarly, if we do not practice our organ playing (whether we’re working on manual or pedal technique, hymn playing, or some piece of repertoire), we simply will not improve our skills.

People often say to me, as I’m sure they do to some of you, “I would give anything to be able to play the way you do.” While this is certainly a well-meaning compliment, I often wonder if they understand exactly what that means. Would they give three or four hours per day for fifteen or twenty years (or more)? People who are good at something—whatever that may be—are good because they have dedicated a *significant* amount of time to acquiring that skill. People who are *experts* attain their expertise by making a sustained effort over a long period of time. With musicians, that time is measured in years and even decades.

Of course, not everyone needs to be an organ *expert*, but the principle holds true: if you want to improve your organ playing, the only way to do so is to give time to acquiring that skill. Luckily, some concepts or techniques, such as using better organ registration or positioning the bench correctly, can be applied quickly and easily. Hopefully, everyone here will walk away today with a few of these simple tips. However, others, such as understanding and using legato manual and pedal technique, may take months or even years to acquire.

As with many other endeavors, such as learning a new language, practicing the organ is most effective when done with frequency. In other words, practicing one hour, five days a week will yield better results than practicing for seven or eight hours one day each week. Progress comes faster when we are engaged with the instrument regularly, rather than in infrequent, long stretches. Through years of observing fellow students, colleagues, and my own students, I can

1. Jeffrey Brillhart, *Breaking Free: Finding a Personal Language for Organ Improvisation through 20th-Century French Improvisation Techniques* (Colfax, North Carolina: Wayne Leupold Editions, 2011), 7.

confidently say that those who “pay the price” and put in the time week in, week out, are the ones that succeed and improve themselves regularly.

My students would gladly attest that I’m not above this rule myself. They frequently come into my office and find me practicing. You might think that it’s easy for me, since I spend my days surrounded by the organ. Ironically, however, my job at BYU has nothing to do with *playing* the organ. My job is to teach students how to play the organ and to lecture on organ literature and other related topics. Other than the occasional campus devotional, I have no responsibilities for actually playing the organ. Consequently, like each of you, I have to fight for my practice time. Also like many of you, I go through periods of practicing more or less. Of course, I do the best at practicing when I have upcoming performances providing a bit of healthy motivation, but at other times, I get bogged down by administrative tasks (i.e., *e-mail*) or other concerns, and struggle to get myself away from my desk and onto the bench. What I learn through this ebb and flow is that I am happiest and most effective in my other duties when I carve out time to sit down and play this wonderful instrument. It is a privilege to play the organ, so find time to practice!

My second suggestion to you is to learn *how* to practice. Equally important to the amount of time we spend practicing is way we use that time. None of us has as much time to practice as we might like. Refining our practice habits allows us to make the most of the time we do have, and accomplish more in less time. In ten years of teaching people to play the organ, I have observed that very few people have ever been taught to practice properly. Many people simply spend their practice time playing each piece from start to finish over and over until they’re able to mostly hold it together. I’d like to suggest to you that this isn’t practicing—it is *playing*. While

playing is certainly enjoyable, actual practice is more like work. Luckily, it is very rewarding work that makes playing more enjoyable and satisfying.

I went through several years of music training before learning the value of real practice. When I was about 16, I began studying with a new teacher by the name of Steve Gentile after Larry Blackburn moved here to Utah. Steve asked me to come to my first lesson prepared to play something that would allow him to assess my current abilities. I played for him a piece that I had been working very hard on: Louis Vierne's *Carillon de Westminster*. This was, for me at the time, a piece of considerable difficulty that I had learned through months of "playing." When I finished playing it for Steve, he said to me "You're very good—but *do you ever slow down?*" to which I hesitantly responded "no...not really." In the ensuing months, Steve taught me how to use slow practice and other helpful techniques. I soon discovered that I was capable of playing more precisely and cleanly than I had ever imagined I was capable of, simply because I was truly *practicing*.

A few years ago, I came across a wonderful [article](#) by Dr. Noa Kagayama, a performance psychologist at the Julliard School, titled "8 Things Top Practicers Do Differently."² The article relates the findings of a fascinating study in which seventeen piano and piano pedagogy majors agreed to learn a three-measure passage from Shostakovich's *Piano Concerto No. 1*. The passage was of sufficient difficulty that it was not sight-readable, but easy enough that it could be learned in a single practice session. Each student was provided with the excerpt, a metronome, and a pencil. They were allowed to practice as long as they wanted, and were free to leave whenever they felt they were finished. They were instructed not to practice the passage after leaving this initial practice session until arriving for the test the next day. The amount of time spent

2. Noa Kagayama, "8 Things Top Practicers Do Differently," The Creativity Post, http://www.creativitypost.com/psychology/8_things_top_practicers_do_differently (accessed May 19, 2016).

practicing ranged among the participants from eight minutes to fifty-seven minutes. When the participants returned the next day, they were each given two minutes to warm up, and were then asked to perform the passage fifteen times in a row. Each pianist was ranked on a variety of factors including correct notes and rhythm, tone quality, character, and expressiveness.

The findings of the study are illuminating. Among the interesting points are the following:

- Practicing longer did not lead to higher rankings
- The number of repetitions completed in practice also had no bearing on ranking
- The number of correct repetitions in practice also had no apparent connection to ranking (!)

In studying the practice sessions of all seventeen pianists, the researchers found that certain practice techniques were common among the top performers, but almost entirely absent in the work of the others. They were:

- The precise location and source of each error was identified accurately, rehearsed, and corrected
- Tempo of individual performance trials was varied systematically; logically understandable changes in tempo occurred between trials (e.g. slowed things down to get tricky sections correct; or speeded things up to test themselves, but not too much)
- Target passages were repeated until the error was corrected and the passage was stabilized, as evidenced by the error's absence in subsequent trials

Dr. Kagayama ends the article with a one-sentence summation statement by George Bernard Shaw: “Success does not consist in never making mistakes, but in never making the same one a second time.”

One final thought concerning practicing: setting goals can be a very effective way to make your practice time count for something. Rather than saying “I’m going to spend an hour practicing each day this week,” you might say “This week, I’m going to learn this hymn, or this piece of repertoire.” Once you have a weekly goal in place, you can break it into a series of smaller goals that make each practice session a meaningful step toward that goal. It may take time to learn how much you can reasonably accomplish in the time you have available for practicing, but setting and working toward goals helps us waste less time and accomplish more with our limited practice time.

My next bit of advice is that you should learn to accept your own imperfection. None of us is perfect, and the sooner we accept that, the sooner we can learn to truly enjoy playing this instrument. Too many of us toil away at practicing, only to make a few mistakes in the performance (whether it be in church, a recital, or some other performance situation), and then spend the next several days beating ourselves up about it. Ironically, rather than encouraging us to learn from our mistakes and move forward, this process of self-criticism is often *destructive*, as it increases our performance anxiety as we move toward the next performance.

Dr. Jon Skidmore, who teaches the Performance Psychology class here in the BYU School of Music, encourages thinking of each performance as nothing other than “practice in performing.” If we can learn to approach our performances with this type of healthy mindset, we open the door to learning and growth. How we think and what we think about while we play greatly influence our outcome. However, this also is a *skill* that requires practice to refine.

Shaping our thought before, during, and after performance, like playing the organ, takes time, effort, practice, and patience. However, I assure you that this is time well spent. Can you imagine feeling completely comfortable playing in front of people, mistakes and all? This is a reachable goal and is worth working toward.

I learned a very important lesson about this while playing the organ for a stake priesthood meeting when I was seventeen years old. The opening hymn was “O, Thou Rock of Our Salvation.” I played the introduction, and then began playing the first verse. To my surprise, when the congregation started singing, they were singing the words to “Hope of Israel”—the hymn on the facing page. In my seventeen-year-old wisdom, my first thought was “Those idiots are all singing the wrong hymn!” Terror then washed over me as I quickly realized “They’re probably not *all* singing the wrong hymn.” I glanced over at my program, and sure enough, the opening hymn was indeed “Hope of Israel”!

At this point, I had a choice to make: I could continue playing “O, Thou Rock of Our Salvation”, I could switch to “Hope of Israel” for verse two, and simply jump from C major—the key I was currently in—to B-flat major, the key of the correct hymn, or I could switch to “Hope of Israel” and make an attempt to transpose it on the fly. By the end of the first verse, I decided that the safest approach would be to switch to “Hope of Israel” and accept the sudden key change. I did so, and the congregation quickly adjusted to the new key and sang the remainder of the hymn without incident.

As you might imagine, I was completely mortified by this experience, and spent the entire meeting reviewing what a foolish mistake I had made in front of so many people, etc., etc. However, as I talked to people in the congregation at the conclusion of the meeting, I was completely flabbergasted to learn that many of them *hadn't even noticed*. I learned an important

lesson that day: the ears of the general public are not good! This, of course, is not to say that we should go about our organ duties carelessly or haphazardly. Of course we should strive for excellence. But when we fall short of that standard, I encourage you to take a little comfort in knowing that you are often your own worst critic, that no one knows your music as well as you do, and most of the people you play for are simply grateful for your contribution.

My next bit of advice is that you take every opportunity you can to hear and play fine instruments. There is no more thrilling sound than a good pipe organ. When I was a teenager, I spent most of my time practicing on the aging electronic organ at the chapel where I attended church. While it served my needs perfectly well, it was certainly not what anyone would consider to be a particularly “inspiring” sound. Luckily for me, my teacher at the time, Larry Blackburn, would often take me to play other instruments around the city. When he was performing somewhere in the area, he would often invite me to accompany him to his rehearsals, or even take me simply so I could have a chance to experience a new instrument.

When I began studying with Steve Gentile a few years later, I had my weekly lessons at the Catholic Church where he was the organist. Experiencing that organ and the wonderful acoustic setting of the sanctuary in which it was housed was a weekly source of inspiration for me, and drove me to practice diligently through the week. Steve also encouraged me to enter a competition sponsored by the local chapter of the American Guild of Organists, which led to many opportunities to play new, exciting organs around the city.

Through these experiences, I gained a great appreciation for the soul-filling sound of a fine pipe organ. I was able to experience first-hand what it was like to command (or, on some occasions, wrestle with!) a large instrument. In my view, having frequent encounters with good instruments, whether playing or simply hearing, offers two major benefits. First, as I’ve

mentioned, it inspires us, excites us, and motivates us to work harder and practice more diligently. Second, it helps shape our musical vision and understanding. Hearing the sounds the composer envisioned and comprehending the historic context from which the music arose help us understand the music we play more fully. It helps us see our music in a new way, and strengthens our connection to the seven-hundred-year tradition of which we are a part.

To this day, there are few things I enjoy as much as the thrill of hearing—or better yet, *playing*—a new organ. From the organs on Temple Square to the Bach church in Arnstadt or Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, I have heard and played many incredible instruments, and there are still so many left to discover! I'm confident that if you will take the opportunity to experience good organs in any way you can, you will find renewed motivation to work at perfecting your craft.

I have one last bit of wisdom to share with you today, and it is this: work with a teacher who *inspires* you and can help you tap into your full potential. For nearly twenty years, I had the opportunity to study with wonderful teachers who fostered within me both desire and confidence to work harder, reach higher, and be more. Each one of those teachers has shaped my organ playing, and indeed, my life in some significant way. As I mentioned earlier, Larry Blackburn introduced me to the organ and taught me to love music. He made playing the organ fun and enjoyable. Steve Gentile taught me how to practice in a way that allowed me to achieve a new, higher level of technical refinement and precision. That technical rigor was strengthened when I arrived at BYU and began studying with Don Cook. As time went on, Don taught me how to think analytically about the music I was playing—to sense the composer's unwritten intentions and use them to make *music*. Douglas Bush opened my eyes to the incredibly rich, diverse history of the organ and its repertoire, and helped me come to understand that pieces of music

do not exist in isolation, but that they are part of a rich and complex network of stylistic evolution. He taught me that understanding this historical context is essential to truly understanding the music we play.

James Higdon, who I studied with as a doctoral student at the University of Kansas, had an incredible way of helping me understand what my strengths were and how to use them. He would also tell me very honestly and directly about areas where I was weak and help me correct those deficiencies. The first time I met him, he encouraged me to consider entering a few upcoming international organ competitions. Previous to this, I had never considered myself capable of competing at that level. However, with Dr. Higdon's guidance in the ensuing years, I was chosen as a competitor in multiple large international competitions. Though I never won anything or even made it to the final round, the experience of preparing for and playing in these competitions afforded me the opportunity to refine my playing to a new level, to experience new instruments and places, to hear and meet fellow competitors from around the world (many of whom I now call friends), and to receive helpful feedback, criticism, and encouragement from an international panel of judges. These are experiences I would have entirely missed out on if Dr. Higdon had not seen something in me that I failed to see in myself.

This, to me, is the value of a good teacher. Good teachers can see beyond the limitations we frequently impose on ourselves and help us catch the vision of what we can become. They can motivate us, help us through the rough patches, and guide us to new areas of exploration. They motivate us to work harder, knowing that we must present our work to them on a regular basis. In short, they *inspire* us.

I'm sure that for some of you here today, working with a teacher on a weekly basis isn't a feasible possibility right now. Life is busy, and for many, playing the organ isn't a top priority,

and it might not even make the top ten. Whatever your situation, I encourage you to find someone who inspires you, and have a lesson with them at least occasionally. This will undoubtedly lead you to greater accomplishment, more diligent practicing, and a more complete enjoyment of this great instrument.

The organ is an incredible instrument with a history and tradition so rich and diverse, there's literally something for everyone. Find what inspires you, and work toward it. If you don't feel inspired, take the opportunity to work with someone who inspires you. Your life and organ playing will be greatly enriched as a result.