

PEDAL TECHNIQUE CHECKPOINTS

Skillful and confident use of the feet in organ pedal playing can be developed in a short period of time if you are able to internalize a few simple “checkpoints” so that you follow them AUTOMATICALLY whenever the feet play. When all the checkpoints operate subconsciously, a dependable reference system is activated that directs the feet to the right keys. Precision, ease of execution, and habit building—NOT SPEED—are of the essence. Observe, as usual, the cardinal rule:

ALWAYS PRACTICE SLOWLY ENOUGH TO STAY IN CONTROL

ADJUST POSITION (CHECKPOINT 1)

- **LEFT AND RIGHT.** Square the bench to the console, then CENTER YOURSELF ON PEDAL D. Be able to pivot—not slide—to reach extreme ranges, then return to center. Some suggest centering on E-flat or E. More importantly, choose one of them on which to center and be consistent.
- **FORWARD AND BACK. BENCH AND “PERSON” PLACEMENT.** Sit far enough forward to allow pivoting to reach either end of pedalboard, and to allow the right foot to set flat on the swell pedal. Sit far enough back to allow toes to clear sharps easily when crossing feet. Set the bench in the optimum forward-back position to allow both leg support and clearance of the sharp keys.
- **UP AND DOWN.** Arrange BENCH HEIGHT so that both toes and heels can play and release without leaning the torso forward or back or pressing the legs into the bench, and so that they can refrain from playing without causing leg strain or back discomfort. If the bench is not adjustable, place it on risers or 1” x 4” boards to raise it, and arrange for the bench to be shortened by at least 3/4” if necessary. It may then be raised, lowered, or restored to its original height as needed.
- **POSTURE AND RELAXATION.** Keep your back and head in straight but relaxed alignment—as though being suspended at the crown by a string. Relax shoulders, elbows, and wrists—“float” over the manuals. Curve fingers well, with a sense of pulling inward rather than pressing downward when playing a key. For pedal solos or exercises, hands might either rest on the bench, grasp the “key cheeks,” or remain suspended above the keys.

KNEES AND ANKLES (CHECKPOINT 2)

- **KNEES TOGETHER.** When both feet are involved, keep knees as close together as is comfortable through the octave.
- **MOTION LIMITED.** Use a quick, decisive attack. The sole of the shoe stays in contact with or very close to the key surface. Heels also stay close to the key surface. When playing toes, use ONLY ANKLE MOTION (knee does not move up and down). Allow minimum knee motion when playing heels. Note: heel playing involves the whole leg, so when choosing between toe and heel, if other factors are equal, use the toe.
- **KEEP FEET REASONABLY PARALLEL TO THE KEYS.** This is made easier when the knees pivot around WITH the feet in extremely high or low ranges. Divide up the angles between the feet when using heel/arch or heel/heel contact—do not let one ankle do all of the scissoring out.

SHARPS (CHECKPOINT 3) (play *only toes* on sharps)

- **COVER NO MORE THAN HALF THE SHARP KEY.** The “corner” of the sharp fits between the big toe and the “ball” of the foot.
- **TOES. TIP (ROCK) THE FOOT INSIDE AND PLAY ON THE INSIDE OF THE FOOT.** Exceptions: tip to the OUTSIDE of the right foot on the lowest keys, and to the OUTSIDE of left foot on the highest keys. The main point: AVOID PLAYING FLAT-FOOTED.
- **CONTACT.** Keep the heels together when toes span up to a fourth on sharp keys—“HEEL/HEEL”. Use a ‘scissor’ action to measure 2nds, 3rds, and 4ths. Maintain contact between the feet for these intervals whenever both feet are active. Move one foot slightly forward when playing in extreme ranges.

NATURALS (CHECKPOINT 4) (play *toes or heels* on naturals)

- **PLAY JUST CLEAR OF SHARPS.** Avoid playing forward in the gaps or back underneath the bench.
- **TOES. TIP (ROCK) THE FOOT INSIDE AND PLAY ON THE BALL OF THE FOOT.** (Note the same exceptions as in Sharps—tipping to the OUTSIDE in extreme ranges.)
- **HEELS. CENTER THE HEEL OVER THE KEY.** Place the heel carefully, “feeling” the key before playing. As the heel pivots on the key to allow the toe to move right and left, keep the heel centered.
- **CONTACT.** Keep the feet together when the toes play on natural keys that are separated by a 2nd, 3rd, or 4th. When both feet play natural keys, OFFSET the feet (place the heel of one foot in the arch of the other—“HEEL/ARCH”). Usually, place the RIGHT foot forward (unless the left foot plays a sharp).

IN GENERAL (CHECKPOINT 5)

- **PRE-LOCATE.** As soon as a foot finishes playing a key, prepare (pre-locate) the foot over the next key.
- **EYES UP.** Train your mind more quickly by avoiding glancing down at the feet except to check on details of technique during practice. Develop the “reference system” techniques (knees together, heel-arch, heel-heel, gliding from key to key, gaps for large skips), rather than depending on the eyes to locate pedal keys.