

Choosing Effective Fingerings: Guidelines

Jennifer Morgan, CAGO

Fingering is deciding which combination of fingers to use to play a group of notes. The goal of choosing fingerings is to utilize natural finger combinations, while minimizing awkward stretches and finger crossings. When you use good fingering, your hand will be balanced and in control. Taking the time to find a way to play each passage as efficiently as possible will greatly aid your hymn playing.

In some passages of music, notes are arranged conveniently for the fingers, moving within a narrow range with the same number of notes as there are fingers to play them. These passages can be played with direct fingering, without using complicated finger combinations or shifting of the hands.

Other passages are much more difficult to play, requiring finger acrobatics and many hand shifts. In these passages, there aren't enough fingers to play all the notes, so other fingering techniques must be utilized. You may have to cross your thumb under your fingers or cross your fingers over your thumb. You might play a key with one finger and, while holding it down, switch to another finger. These techniques are covered on the next page of the handout. Whether a passage is easy or difficult to play, good fingering is always important.

Following are some general rules for good fingering:

1. Mark breaks in the hymn text first, to show where complete breaks (hand shifts) will naturally fall.
2. Place the fifth finger of your right hand on the highest note in the passage, and the fifth finger of your left hand on the lowest, then use the most convenient finger on each key as you play the notes leading to and leading away from that note, compressing and extending as needed.
3. If you run out of fingers, go back and try stretching your hands to distribute them over a wider area of keys. If you still cannot make direct fingering work, incorporate different techniques.
4. Never use your fifth finger before you arrive at the highest note in the right hand or the lowest note in the left hand, without planning for effective finger crossing, glissando, or finger substitution.
5. Try several different fingerings for complicated passages, keeping in mind efficiency and economy of motion. Choose the one that feels most natural to your hands. Sometimes you will need to work backwards, knowing how you need to land on a certain chord then figuring out how to get there.
6. Once you have chosen the best fingering for a passage, pencil the finger numbers above or below the notes on the page, also marking where redistribution of the inner part occurs.
7. Use the same fingering patterns for similar passages to facilitate muscle memory.
8. Always use the same fingering when practicing a hymn or a song, to build muscle memory. Good fingering will improve the smoothness of your playing, help you learn a song more quickly, and give you confidence against slipping or playing a wrong note.

(Information on this page is borrowed from Keyboard Course, pg. 133, published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with additions and changes by Jennifer Morgan)

Additional Guidelines:

The best approach for hymn playing is a legato touch, while preserving independence of line. This means that the released repeated notes in one voice, such as the alto voice, cannot effect the legato of changing notes in another voice, such as the soprano voice. The ability to play one part legato while playing another part detached is one of the great challenges of organ playing.

- Lift repeated notes with precise releases (give them a consistent eighth or sixteenth rest)
- Connect non-repeating notes in each voice part
- The soprano line is king, and must be protected, even if the first two rules must be broken
- A repeating bass line can be connected, judiciously, as long as strong beats are accented
- Playing the bass line with the feet frees up the hands to play just soprano, alto, and tenor lines

Become very comfortable with independent movement, where one finger sustains notes while another lifts. Remember that different horizontal lines (soprano and alto, for example) operate independently, while being played by the same hand. Since the organ has no decay, the timing of a note's release is as important as the timing of its attack. Repeated notes are a great place to shift fingering!

Legato organ fingering techniques to utilize:

Regular, or Direct Fingering

Placing fingers on adjoining keys, the fingers play and stretch or compress to play the notes without crossing or utilizing any other techniques—the notes fall naturally under the fingers.

Redistribution of the Inner Part (combines well with Direct Fingering)

Since the bass line is played with the pedals, the left hand only needs to play the tenor part. Many times the soprano and alto parts are difficult to finger with the right hand alone, so the left hand can grab the alto part, redistributing it to the left hand. As needed, the left hand can grab the soprano note as well, or the right hand can play the tenor note.

Finger Crossing

Finger crossing is utilized in scale exercises. Generally, a longer finger crosses over a shorter one, or a shorter finger crosses under a longer one, but exceptions can be made in different circumstances. A very common application is for ascending or descending thirds to be played by fingers 4/2, then 5/1, then 4/2, etc.

Finger Glissando

A finger glissando is when the finger or thumb slides from a black key to the adjoining white key.

Finger Substitution

In finger substitution, one finger is replaced by another during the same note so that finger is freed to play another note.

Thumb Glissando

This technique occurs from white key to white key, or white key to black key, and utilizes the thumb as if it were two fingers, one being the base of the thumb and the other the tip. While it's a tricky technique to master, thumb glissando is an essential way to play certain passages of organ music.

Exercises illustrating these techniques from *The New LDS Organist* are found on the next page.

The Six Legato Organ Fingering Techniques

Direct Fingering

Musical notation for Direct Fingering in 3/4 time, key of D major. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. Fingerings are indicated above the notes: 3 1, 2 4, 3, 5 2 3 5, 5 1 2, 4 1, 4 3 2 1.

Redistribution of the Inner Part

Musical notation for Redistribution of the Inner Part in 3/4 time, key of D major. It features a two-staff system with treble and bass clefs. Fingerings are indicated above and below the notes. Treble clef fingerings: 5 4 3 5 1, 3 4 3 4 5 1 3, 4 5 2, 4 1 3 2 3 4 4 1, 5 4 3 2. Bass clef fingerings: 4 1 2 4, 4 4 2 1 2 1 4, 5 4 5 4 4, 5 2, 4 5 2 5 4 4 2 2.

Finger Crossing *(circles added for emphasis only)*

Musical notation for Finger Crossing in 3/4 time, key of D major. Circles are drawn around specific fingering sequences to highlight finger crossings: (4 1 2), (3 1 2), (4 5 4), (3 2 1), (4 5 4), (3 1 2).

Finger Glissando

Musical notation for Finger Glissando in 3/4 time, key of D major. Circles are drawn around specific fingering sequences to highlight glissando techniques: (2 3 4), (1 - 1), (4 - 4), (5 - 1), (5 4 3 3 2 1), (5 - 5).

Finger Substitution

Musical notation for Finger Substitution in 3/4 time, key of D major. Circles are drawn around specific fingering sequences to highlight substitution techniques: (5 3 2), (5 4 3 4), (5 4 2), (4 5 4), (4 5 1 2).

Thumb Glissando

Musical notation for Thumb Glissando in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. The first part is marked 'Slow' and features a sixteenth-note glissando. Fingerings are indicated below the notes: 1 2, 1-1-1, 2, 1-1-1, 4. The second part features chords with fingerings: 1-1-1-1-1-1, 3 2-3, 2-3 2, 3-2 3-2, 1-1-1, 3 5 4-5, 4-5 4, 5-4 5-4 5.