

But I Can't Play the Pedals: Beginners Guide to the Organ

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Have you ever walked up to an organ and thought the console looked very similar to a 737 cockpit and wondered how you will be able to control all of those buttons and knobs while playing with your feet? Do you have to be a super human or have additional limbs to control the “King of Instruments?” Of course not!

Throughout the centuries, many new organists have felt the exact way you currently do. Well, maybe organists in Bach's time didn't compare an organ to an airplane, but certainly they might have been apprehensive approaching the instrument. Luckily, in 2026, we have many more resources both technologically and pedagogically speaking than ever before.

Throughout this article, we will discuss resources for the organist to better understand and practice pedal technique, discuss some easy ways to quickly get “up to speed,” and demonstrate how playing aides can help make a pianist or someone who has issues with pedals sound like a virtuoso in a real-life situation.

While our modern instruments provide us with tools to make even the most beginner organist sound like they have been playing for years, there is nothing more enriching than learning to play the instrument as it was intended to not only expand your technical facility, but to also widen your repertoire.

Before starting organ study, it is important to have a solid keyboard technique and understand the basics. Adding the pedals will add an additional level of difficulty, and worrying about your manual technique will distract you from proper study.

First things first, there are tried and true methodologies out there that can help the beginner learn how to properly play the pedals. I recommend three texts that I have personally used in both my studies and teaching:

- 1) Method of Organ Playing: Harold Gleason
- 2) The Organist's Manual: Technical Studies and Selected Compositions for the Organ, by Roger Davis
- 3) Complete Organ Method: A Classic Text on Organ Technique, by John Stainer

- 4) These texts are designed to help the beginning organists' practice and develop a sound pedal technique by introducing exercises and simple pieces.

The Gleason text is not only recommended for the beginning organist, but also to the seasoned organist to remind them of very important articulation rules, registration information, and different schools of ornamentation.

While a strong piano technique is required for beginning organ study, piano and organ keyboard differ in subtle ways. From attack, release, and articulation, to legato vs. detaché touch, we need to learn the basics. Gleason outlines these techniques before diving into pedal technique, as should you.

Let's spend some time with the pedal technique section and discuss some basics that can get you up and running!

When first approaching pedal technique, we should remember the proper playing position:

1. Be sure the bench is properly placed
2. Sit in the exact center of the pedals and manuals. Your nose should be in line with d above middle c
3. ALWAYS play on the inside of each foot
4. Turn the legs to reach intervals with alternating toes, try not to turn your body
5. Feel "the gaps" to make sure you are playing the correct pedal notes

While exercises and method books are great to work on your pedal technique, there is nothing better than working on real repertoire and working on your technique through pieces that have practical application.

I recommend working through Bach's (Krebs) 8 Little Prelude and Fugues, The Complete Practical Organist, Guilmant, 24 Pieces in a free style by Vierne, and for the more adventurous organist with very good manual technique, 24 inventions, OP. 50 Marcel Dupre. All of these scores are available free of charge on imslp. Once you have mastered these works, you should explore the breadth of the organ repertoire and slowly introduce new rep that really excites you. If you don't like it, you won't practice!

The most important role an organist plays is leading song in worship. While we might all aspire to play Widor's Toccata to a packed audience, there is nothing quite like accompanying a packed congregation and feeling the energy of congregational singing!

So, how do we make the organ sound like an organ when we cannot play pedals? How do we even start learning a hymn?

As an example, let's go through the hymn, Amazing Grace. First with manuals only.

When playing four-parts, manuals only, all the parts are represented, however, you do not have the foundation of the pedal line. By adding the 16' stop in the GT, you add a little weight, but you have now thickened the texture and made it more difficult for the congregation to sing and get correct pitches. (Note: people sing at the 8' pitch making the 8' stops the most important for congregational singing). While this type of playing might work for small congregations, it is not ideal.

Let's discuss ways that we can quickly learn this hymn and apply this technique to other hymns and pieces.

For a hymn like "Amazing Grace," I suspect the manual part will not be a problem, and you can simply sight read these lines. If not, no problem, you can take the time learning the manual parts and pedal together.

First, go through the hymn and mark all your pedal markings. Now, go through your pedaling making sure it makes sense and feels natural. While something might work for someone else, that does not mean it will work for you!

Now that you have mastered your pedal, let's add the right hand, adding the soprano and alto lines – you are systematically learning 3 of the 4 parts. Add this next step at a much slower tempo. You should not be "a tempo" in the learning process. Speeding up too quickly will undoubtedly introduce mistakes into your playing which will be very hard to unlearn. Be mindful, concentrate and diligent in the learning process.

After mastering this step, concentrate on the tenor and bass line. Again, you should be observing slow practice. Do not speed up until you are satisfied you have successfully learned each passage.

Now, put it all together. Slowly play each chord, all parts together, and move to the next chord when ready. After going through the entire hymn, identify tricky spots and go back and work through the progressions. Inevitably, especially in more contemporary hymn writing, you will come across a progression that is not natural. Spend some time working through your fingering so when you play at tempo you are able to flawlessly play through the passage.

As you increase your skill and technique, you might not need to go through every step for each hymn, but I always recommend slow practice as that is the only way to assure you are able to learn and fully digest the part writing and intricacies of each hymn and piece.

What happens if you are called to play a funeral and you only have 2 days to learn a brand-new hymn, and you will only have about 1 hour to prepare because you do not have access to an organ?

While this is a situation many of us have been put in, luckily our modern organs can help. Why not use technology if it is available?

If you are playing a newer Allen Organ, you will have two controls that will make playing manuals only, not only a breeze, but make you sound like you are playing the pedals and even soloing out a melody. These controls are Bass and Melody coupler.

While you should always work on honing your skills and learning these important techniques, these tools are there to help you in a bind or simplify your job while learning.

Pedal technique, while something that is not entirely natural, can become more comfortable with studying a good method, working through exercises, gradually adding appropriate repertoire, and adding pedals to your hymn playing as soon as possible. Be sure to always incorporate slow practice into your routine to make sure you are executing the proper technique as well as playing the right notes. And remember, even Widor was once a beginner!

Jonathan Boksan is an organist, pianist and music scholar with a particular interest in the historical and cultural contexts that shape its performance. He holds degrees in music from Moravian University and Penn State University and has pursued further studies in musicology at The Catholic University of America.