Voluntaries for Pianists

Jonathan Boksan

How many pianists find themselves sitting at the organ bench on a Sunday morning wondering, “How did I get here?” or “Can I really learn that fugue before the next service with only an hour to practice before the choir arrives?”

An organist's time is often spread very thin. Between learning new hymns, psalms, learning choral anthems, and attending meetings, finding time to learn another voluntary can seem impossible. Fortunately, there is plenty of organ repertoire that doesn't require months of preparation. In this article, we'll explore accessible works from four different musical traditions that can help pianists build a useful collection of voluntaries without being overwhelmed.

First, what exactly is a voluntary? In the United States, we more commonly refer to these pieces as preludes and postludes. Traditionally, a voluntary is a piece of organ music played before or after a worship service. The term has its roots in the English church tradition, where it referred to music that was not prescribed as part of the formal liturgy and was therefore left to the discretion of the organist. Although voluntaries are not ordinarily considered part of the liturgical rite itself, they have become an established and often expected part of worship in many traditions.

Before exploring individual composers, it is worth mentioning the many collections available to help build your organ library. Collections are an economical way to discover unfamiliar repertoire, and several excellent anthologies are currently available through Dover Publications (all purchasable on Amazon!). These include *Adagios for Organ*, *Toccatas, Carillons and Scherzos for Organ*, *A Treasury of Organ Music for Manuals Only*, and *Organ Classics: 18 Works by Bach, Franck, Mendelssohn, Reger and Others*, all edited by Rollin Smith. Another worthwhile addition is *The Oxford Book of Ceremonial Music for Organ*.

These collections offer plenty of variety, but some of the selections may be beyond the reach of a beginning or intermediate organist. So, what if you're looking for something you can learn in a few days and confidently play for your congregation the following Sunday?

Johann Sebastian Bach – The Eight Little Preludes and Fugues

When people think of the organ its, Johann Sebastian Bach. Born in 1685, Bach's music continues to influence organists and musicians more than three centuries later. Unfortunately, many of his best-known organ works are well beyond the reach of the beginning or intermediate player. A pianist may find the manual parts reasonably comfortable, but coordinating an independent pedal line presents an entirely different challenge. So, where should a pianist begin?

The Eight Little Preludes and Fugues are an excellent introduction to Baroque organ music. Although traditionally attributed to Bach, these works are now generally considered to be

by other composers, with Johann Krebs often suggested as a possible author. Regardless of their origins, they remain popular with organists and congregations alike.

Their relatively compact length and straightforward contrapuntal writing make them approachable for pianists who are comfortable with Bach's Two-Part Inventions. The pedal writing is generally more manageable than in Bach's larger preludes and fugues. Some of the pieces also provide an opportunity to develop pedal technique without requiring an overly complicated manual part.

Another excellent starting point is Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* (BWV 599–644), a collection of chorale preludes that introduces the organist to an important part of the Baroque tradition. Most of these pieces are relatively short, although their technical demands vary considerably. A particularly good place to begin is BWV 639, *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*, with a relatively easier pedal part.

Edward Elgar – Vesper Voluntaries, Op. 14

Elgar's *Vesper Voluntaries* deserve a place on nearly every church organist's music stand. These seven short pieces, are tuneful, versatile, and generally accessible to the late-beginner or early-intermediate player.

The collection is particularly useful for church services because its individual movements can be selected according to the needs of the occasion. The pieces feature Elgar's characteristic English lyricism, with moments of stateliness, warmth, and rustic charm. They also work nicely as a complete set in a recital setting.

Originally published in a two-stave format with pedal markings, the collection offers an especially comfortable starting point for pianists who are not yet accustomed to reading three-stave organ music. Those who prefer a more traditional presentation can also find editions with the pedal part written on a separate staff.

For the pianist making the transition to organ, these pieces offer an opportunity to explore a distinctly English musical style without being overwhelmed by technical demands.

Louis Vierne – Vingt-quatre pièces en style libre, Op. 31

For those interested in French organ music, Louis Vierne's *Vingt-quatre pièces en style libre* is an excellent collection to explore. These 24 pieces, divided into two books, offer a wonderful introduction to Vierne's musical language without the considerable technical demands of his famous Organ Symphonies.

The collection offers considerable variety in character and mood, making it particularly useful for the liturgical organist. Among the more approachable selections are No. 1, *Préambule*; No. 5, *Prélude*; No. 15, *Arabesque*; No. 19, *Berceuse*; and No. 21, *Carillon*. Depending on the

occasion and the organist's abilities, these pieces can serve as preludes, postludes, or even offertory music.

Some of these pieces require a good deal of musical maturity. Nevertheless, intermediate players will find plenty to enjoy in this collection, particularly as their familiarity with French Romantic repertoire grows.

Another collection for those interested in French repertoire is Alexandre Guilmant's *L'Organiste liturgiste*, Op. 65. While many of these pieces are longer than those found in Vierne's collection, Guilmant's more traditional musical language often makes them approachable for the developing organist.

Gordon Young – Organ Voluntaries

American composer Gordon Young wrote precisely the sort of music that can appeal to a pianist transitioning to the organ or beginner organist. His works are generally accessible, tuneful, and rhythmically engaging, often drawing upon familiar hymn melodies and traditional forms.

Young's *Organ Voluntaries: 11 Short Solos for Church or Recital* is an excellent collection to consider adding to your library. The pieces range from relatively simple to intermediate in difficulty. Selections such as *Offertorium*, *Praeludium*, and *Postludium*, along with *Carillon* and *Paean*, provide a useful variety of styles and characters for Sunday services.

For those looking for something a little more challenging, particularly repertoire based on familiar hymns, the music of contemporary American composer Jason Payne is also worth exploring. His collection *Sunday Jubilation* offers imaginative settings of familiar hymns, including “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” “Jesus Loves Me,” and “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty.” Some of these works venture beyond the intermediate level, but offer an enjoyable next step for pianists who are becoming more comfortable at the organ.

The repertoire discussed only scratches the surface of what is available to pianists who find themselves at the organ bench. Developing a useful rotation of voluntaries does not necessarily mean tackling the great organ masterworks right away. Sometimes a short, well-written piece that can be learned in a few practice sessions is exactly what a Sunday morning calls for.

As your confidence grows, so will your musical horizons. Explore different composers, become familiar with different styles, and don't be afraid to venture beyond the familiar. There is an enormous amount of wonderful organ music waiting to be discovered, and you don't need to be a concert organist to enjoy playing it.

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.