61KeyService
Organ Service & Repair
Box 9207, Saint Paul, MN 55109 • 612-208-7910 • info@61KeyService.com

What prevents a pianist from playing organ?

What's the big difference?

There are two significant differences between playing a piano and playing the organ.

The first is related to how you play the keyboard. The second is the fact that you have more than one keyboard, and your feet play notes instead of just controlling the 'effects'.

Some of this might be obvious, but it is helpful to take time to think about what is going on with your body (and mind) when you are playing the organ versus plaing the piano.

Leggato Playing

THE biggest difference between the piano and the organ is that the piano is a percussion instrument (no it is not a String instrument … even though it has strings). The sounds are made by hammers hitting the strings. When you play the piano, even if you don't have the sustain pedal down, there is some level of sustain that happens so that the note you played continues to sound. And when you do have the sustatin pedal down, that note can go on ringing whiile you go on to play other notes.

Shen you play a note on the piano, that sustain lasts for only as long as the string keeps vibrating, which is not all that long. As soon as you play the note, the end of the note is not far behind (even with the sustain pedal down). However, especially when you do have the sustain pedal down, your fingers can move from one note to another and you don't *hear* the fact that the finger lifeted up from one note and moved to the other.

In this case, the piano has *short term sustain* – between notes, but not *long term sustain* – the ability to hold out notes for a long time.

The organ, generally, does not have any *short term sustain* to it that is similar to the piano.[1] But it does have *long term* sustain. The organ is almost opposite from the sustain of the piano.

When you press a note down on the organ it sounds for only as long as you hold it down, but it will keep sounding as long as you hold it down. This has significant implications when you move from playing the piano to playing the organ.

The biggest *challenge* (even before we consider the pedals) is that this lack of *short sustain* can make your playing sound 'choppy'. Even if you are the most proficient pianist around, someone with some basic experience on organ and sounds significantly better when playing the organ if they have mastered this *feature* of the organ.

If you have studied piano for enough years you will have likely learned how to play *leggato style*. This means that you learn to 'connect the notes'. This is mainly done through the judicious use of fingering. Allowing you to

1 With current electronic organs, they often times have 'non-organ' sounds that mimic other instruments (like a piano) that do have sustain abilities. However, for our current discussion we're not talking about using an organ to replicate the experience of one of those other instruments.

go from one note to another while making the notes sounds like they are *connected* together – even with out using the sustain pedal.

On the piano, because it is a percussion instrument, you can't play a C with your thumb and then play a D with your thumb while playing legatto style. You would need to go from thumb to finger – keeping the thumb down on C while playing the finger on D.

This type of playing on piano is a bit more of the exception than the rule. Many young pianists might not even ever learn to play leggato style on the piano. Instead they play what is more similar to staccato style.

The organ is quite the opposite.

Because the organ note stops sounding as soon as you lift your finger from the note, it causes the 'choppy' sound when you play it the same way you would normally play a piano,

The solution to this is to use a style that is similar to piano leggato style playing almost whenever you are playing the organ, and only use the *normal* piano style of playing when you specifically want a more staccato style sound.

That is a huge over-simplification of the difference between playing the organ and the piano, but it should help you to conceptualize the difference and get you moving in the right direction.

Multiple Shorter Keyboards (and pedals)

Although the organ *playing surface* is similar to a piano there are some obvious differences.

Shorter keyboards

The piano has 88 keys. An organ keyboard generally only has 61 keys.

The pianos is limited to the sound each note can make (high or low), but the organ can add different sounds that are controlled by the same key. Each sound is called a stop. These *stops* can be set at a *standard pitch*, which is referenced by noting 8' (because the base pipe in a pipe organ for that sound would be 8-foot long), or they could sound an octave higher by the notaction 4'. They could also be an octave lower with 16'. And there are even lower tones created by stops that are 32' and even 64'. Thus there is no need for all 88 keys. In fact, the organ can produce pitches that are higher and lower than a piano while only using the 61 keys.

Multiple Keyboards

Most church organs will have 2 keyboards or *manuals*. Each of the manuals will have their own set of stops. There may be some similar sounds between the manuals, but usually each manual has different stops (or voices) that it can play.

When you have 2 manuals the lower manual is usually the 'Great' manual and the upper manual is usually the 'Swell' manual.

The Great manual usually has the more dominant sounds/voices/stops available and is the best use for congregational hymn leading/accompaniment.

The Swell manual usually has softer or more unique voices.

On most organs, there are stops that are called *couplers*. These *couple* one manual to another. The "Swell to Great" coupler, when engaged, will make all the swell sounds that are selected to sound when you play the Great

manual. By using the stops on both the Swell and Great manuals, along with the couplers, you could use the organ for congregational songs by only using the Great manual, without ever touching the Swell manual.

Having different manuals gives significant flexibility to organists; however, that flexibility is not critical for basic congregational playing and is best addressed by an organ instructor.

The Pedals

Probably THE most intimidating part of playing the organ for any pianist is all those pedals down there.

Most of the manuals will have their stops in the 8', 4', and 2' ranges. This means that their sounds are in the middle to upper range of the instrument. There are also usually one or two 16' stops on each manual; however, if you enable that and try tp play a standard hymn with just your hands you will notice that it is quite *mudding* sounding. That is because 16' (and 32') stops are not designed to be played in the traditional 4-part hymn style. They are there to give you a *good foundation* in the bass line of the piece.

If you look at the stops for the pedal manual you will notice that these stops are pedominantly in the lower ranges – 32', 16', and 8', with possibly a couple 4', but you likely won't find any 2'. This is so that you can play a clear *single note* bass line from the 4-part hymn style and have a good lower foundation for the sound.

Learnig to play the pedals is an important skill for anyone that will be playing the organ regularly. If you have played piano for any length of time then you have the basic skills necessary. The notes are the same as any keyboard with *black and white keys*. They are all in the same order, although there are generally only 32 notes avalable. If you were to just sit down at the organ you could probably play the bass line of a hymn with just a little practice *if you JUST play the pedals*.

Of course, the pedals are just like every other manual of the organ and require you to play the *leggato style*. So you will need to learn to use both feet, just like you just different fingers, so that you don't have a 'choppy' bass line.

It gets worse!

The main new skill is the ability to play the manuals while playing the pedals.

In addition to this, when you played the piano, you generally learned to play the 4-part hymn style all together, although you learned to play the bass cleff with the left hand and the treble cleff with the right hand. On the organ you have to learn to *split the staves*. The bass (bottom) notes need to be played by the pedals. The tenor (top of the bass cleff) notes should be played by the left hand, while the treble cleff is played by the right hand.

To take it a step further, an organist might play the bass notes in the pedals, while playing the tenor and alto notes in the left hand on one manual while playing the soprano notes on a different manual (so that the melody is more dominant).

And we haven't even talked about the need to adjust the volume (no you can't do that by playing the organ harder or softer) or to change voices (you don't want to use the same voices all the time when you have so many to choose from).

There is still hope for you!

The makers of Allen (and some other brand) organs understand that there may be times when a pianist needs to fill it at the organ or transition to organ, without first having had years of lessons and practice. Because of this,

they have added a number of features to many organ models that make this transition (or fill-in) be less challenging to you and helpful to the congregation.

We’ll cover those features next.

If you make a purchase using any link in this document we may get a small commission on the sale; however, this will not change the price you pay. We use this extra income to help provide you with additional informational resources like this resource.