

## On Teaching by Gavin Black



### Some thoughts about substitution

Substitution in organ playing—both with fingers and with feet—is a technique that is practiced to some extent by almost every organist. This includes both those who plan it out and know that they are doing it and those who don't plan it and nonetheless do it by chance at the last minute. It has been the subject of heated debate and disagreement—one of those subjects that can sometimes seem almost political in nature. The disagreements are usually about the relationship between substitution and various aspects of authenticity—and of course authenticity is the most political subject in the realm of performance. Indeed, it is quite certain that substitution has been more prevalent at certain times in the long history of organ music than at others, and practiced, or expected, more by some composers than by others.

It is also a technique that can be carried out in ways that are natural and easy or in ways that are awkward and difficult. In this column I want to discuss, just briefly, the history and theory of substitution and also to suggest ways of thinking about applying the technique itself.

### Before the eighteenth century

The usual succinct way of describing the history of substitution in keyboard playing is this: that it was unknown or at least very uncommon before the late Baroque, and that by the nineteenth century it had become extremely common—though more so in organ playing than in piano playing. As far as the historical record is concerned, there are no sources from before the early eighteenth century that explicitly discuss substitution or that direct a player to use it, but there are many from the nineteenth century and beyond.

The first surviving printed or written reference to finger substitution comes from François Couperin, writing in his *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*—a harpsichord method published in 1716. He speaks of it as something unusual if not downright new, contrasting it to “l'ancienne manière”—“the older way [of fingering].” Couperin's prose is concise or even cryptic, and he says very little about the thinking behind his employment of substitution, but it seems to be intended some of the time to make it easier to achieve some sort of legato, as in Example 1, or to cope with suspensions or other complicated textures, while maintaining legato as in Example 2. (Note that there are no fingerings given for the upper left-hand notes. The G in the second measure would be played with the thumb—after the substitution on the lower note is complete. But what then? A substitution to preserve strict legato in the inner voice or not?)

There are two significant pieces of evidence that substitution was not common before the time of Couperin. They are, first of all, Couperin's own attitude about substitution: that it was something new. Of course, he did not know everything about musical practices over the whole world and for all of the decades before his own time, but he probably

Example 1



Example 2



kept himself rather well informed. The second piece of evidence is simply that no one mentions it prior to 1716. During the seventeenth century there was by no means as much written about keyboard

playing and pedagogy as there was in later centuries. However, enough such writing has survived that it seems significant that substitution is not even hinted at in any of it. This is of course consistent

with much of what else is known about keyboard playing, whether on organ or on harpsichord or clavichord: in particular, that full legato was the exception, especially over long chains of notes such as the ornamented melody in the first example above.

I however have always felt cautious about assuming that no one in the time before Couperin ever used substitution, either with fingers or with feet. My principal reason for this is that it seems to me to be a natural human thing to do—not necessarily as a result of planning or artistic decision-making, but as a tool for coping with situations that might arise. I have seen many students—beginners, with no preconceptions about fingering, to whom I had certainly not (yet) said a word about substitution—in effect reinvent the technique because they found themselves at some sort of fingering dead end. Furthermore when they do this, they usually do it—because it is not self-conscious—in a relaxed and natural way that constitutes good technique. Also, substitution is a natural thing to do by analogy with other human activities. For example, arriving at the front door recently from a trip to the grocery store, I shifted the bag of groceries from one arm to the other so that I could reach my keys. This is conceptually the same thing. If a player is holding a note with a particular finger and finds that it is inconvenient to be holding it with that fin-

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ger, slipping a different finger onto the note is a natural, spontaneous human response. I put it this way only partly to make the case that players prior to the eighteenth century may well have used substitution willy-nilly, so to speak, even though it was clearly not a prominently taught technique. I also want to suggest that because it is a natural and physically obvious thing to do, when we in fact want to do it, we should remember to do it in a physically natural and comfortable way. Also, perhaps, that we should avoid it whenever it cannot feel natural and comfortable, unless there is a very strict reason for its being necessary.

The choice about whether to use substitution in playing music that was written in the era when it was, at a minimum, clearly not being taught as a core technique is of course one for each individual player to make. It will inevitably stem in part from that player's overall approach to questions of authenticity, and also from other things about technique and habit. Every teacher should frame this particular issue to students in whatever way is consistent with the teacher's and students' interactions over matters of authenticity in general. To me the bedrock caveat or concern about substitution in what we might categorize as "pre-Couperin" music is this: that if you actually need substitution to make a particular articulation or phrasing happen, then that articulation or phrasing is almost certainly not anything that the composer specifically had in mind.

### The Classic period and beyond

Substitution is referred to in printed sources only a little bit through the middle of the eighteenth century, but references to it in keyboard methods and elsewhere proliferate in the Classic era. It is interesting to note that although we organists (rightly) think of substitution as being most at home in a certain branch of organ technique, it was in early piano playing and teaching that it first caught on. This was in the era when the damper 'pedal' on pianos was usually either a hand stop or a knee lever but, in any case, was awkward to operate. Legato lines were by and large achieved through fingering. During the nineteenth century two developments shifted the emphasis on substitution from piano to organ: first, the invention and quick universal acceptance of the (real) damper pedal, and second, the use of a more legato style in organ technique.

It is worth remembering that even for the relatively well-documented nineteenth century we do not in fact know how everyone did everything. Franck, for example, left no substitutions among the few fingerings that he provided for his own organ music. There are clearly many places indeed where substitution is required, especially if the goal is to create true unbroken legato. In this passage from the *Prière* (Example 3), there is a need for substitution in, probably, a majority of the transitions from one moment to the next—if, again, true legato is to be maintained. (It is possible to play these notes without any substitution if the full-fledged legato is abandoned.)

Example 3



The section of the piece from which this passage comes is under the marking "très soutenu," which suggests legato. However, I myself cannot devise any way at all to play the last three eighth-note left-hand chords of either the second or the fourth measure truly legato, with or without substitution. There are other spots throughout the section of the piece about which I would say the same thing. Does this tell us anything about articulation? We know that Franck had large hands—much larger than mine or than those of other players whom he might have expected to play his music. We also know that most European churches, certainly including Sainte-Clotilde, have spacious acoustics in which listeners can experience the effect of legato even through subtle breaks.

The point here is not to resolve anything in general about the articulation practices of Franck. It is rather this: that we should be ready to use substitution where it makes sense, but be cautious about assuming that legato is necessary in nineteenth or twentieth century music, simply because the possibility of substitution exists. There is a kind of circular logic that says: "This passage must be played with a lot of substitution because it has to be legato, and we know that it has to be legato because players at that time used a lot of substitution." This doesn't make sense. (I have certainly caught myself thinking that way, as well as students and people who have written about these things.) The more appropriate way of thinking about it something like this: "If I want this passage to be legato and that requires substitution—even a lot of substitution—that is indeed completely consistent with what the composer might have intended or expected."

This is the fingering, just as an example, that I myself would use for part of the left hand in the excerpt from the *Prière* (Example 4). The function of most of the double substitutions is clear and normal: to create the possibility of smooth legato. There are a few specific things to say about these fingerings. The 3-4 substitution on the fifth eighth-note of the first measure is really just for comfort—better hand position reaching that chord and moving away from it. That is specific to my hands: another player might play the lower note initially with 4 or hold it with 3. Holding that D# with 3 might take away the need for the lower part of the next substitution (Example 5).

I would execute these substitutions quickly and in an unmeasured fashion

Example 4



Example 5



(more on that below), with the possible exception of the one on the chord that spans the first bar line. That one I might divide between the two beats in a measured way. The 3-4 in the second measure is—again in relation to my particular hand—an attempt to make the large jumps at that spot more comfortable and closer to legato, although, as I said above, I cannot quite reach them fully legato.

As I wrote in my column on repeated notes (January 2009), there is a relationship between the practice of playing repeated notes with different fingers and substitution, but with a difference in articulation. In playing two notes in a row with different fingers, you release the first finger before playing the second; in substitution you play the second finger before releasing the first. (It is interesting, by the way, that Couperin was an advocate of, and wrote about, both of these practices.) There is also this difference: with repeated notes you have the opportunity to get the first finger out of the way early, but with a substitution the two fingers must be able to share the key at least briefly. This can dictate the details of how the fingerings are carried out—which finger goes above or below which, and whether the finger being released is released up, sideways, or down.

### Playing substitutions

The most important thing in preparing a substitution to be comfortable and natural is working out the details of the choreography of the fingering event. In the first Couperin example, the first few substitutions are all 4-3. In these cases the fourth finger must be released down (towards the player) and slightly to the right. In the 4-5 substitution at the beginning of the second line, the fourth finger must be released up (away from the player) and probably straight or slightly to the left. These shapes will prevent the fingers from interfering with one another. In double substitutions the most important part of the choreography is the order in which the chain of substitutions is carried out. There is always an order that allows the hand to contract during the process and an order that causes the hand to stretch. It is never hard to tell which is which. The former is always better; it is always possible to tell which is which: it is important to do so.

The gesture of substitution can usually be carried out either in a way that is measured—the new finger moves onto the

note at a definable time, the old finger moves away at a definable time—or in a way that is unmeasured, with the new finger simply sweeping onto the note as promptly, quickly and lightly as possible, while the old finger is swept away. The first of these is, in a way, analogous to a measured appoggiatura in the Baroque style, and the second to a quick grace note or an acciaccatura. Furthermore, whether the substitution itself is measured or quick, it can, on a longer note at least, be positioned either right at the beginning of the note or anywhere else in the lifespan of the note before the moment when the logistics require the new finger to be in place.

On the whole, I prefer to execute suspensions quickly—the acciaccatura model—and as close to the beginning of the note as possible. I believe that I do this because I want them to have no rhythmic weight of their own. Not that they would have audible rhythmic weight since by definition they are silent. In fact, that is the point. As much as possible I like to reduce the feeling—which substitutions by their nature are inclined to create—that there is something going on physically in the playing that is not reflected by anything audible to the listener. All else being equal, I believe that a one-to-one correlation between physical gestures that we feel ourselves making and sounds that we hear our instrument producing helps to intensify our focus on the rhythmic aspect of the music and to make it more likely that we will effectively project rhythm and pulse to the listeners. In my fingering example above, I might play the substitution on the note that crosses the first bar line at the downbeat of the second measure rather than at the beginning of the note. This is because there is an implied rhythmic event there—the strong beat across which that chord is suspended. I would probably still make the gesture of the substitution a quick one, since there is only one rhythmic event going on with which the gesture might be correlated.

### The use of substitution

There are three ways in which substitution is used: 1) as part of a well worked-out fingering plan, with some specific goal in mind, usually related to achieving legato, but sometimes for comfort, reliability, or good hand position; 2) as part of an approach to fingering, even when it is not explicitly worked out in advance, but still with goals in mind, again usually having to do with creating legato; and 3) as a way of scrambling around to get notes at the last minute in a passage that has not been adequately prepared. For an observer, including a player observing him- or herself and also including a teacher observing students, these last two can be hard to tell apart. The third of these is on the one hand a useful fall-

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back if it is needed: substitution can be a powerful way of crawling around the keys and getting notes in an emergency. However, any tendency to *rely* on it for that, except in the occasional emergency, has to be resisted ferociously. If a teacher believes that a student is using a facility with substitution to avoid having to think about the best fingerings, listen for what fingering does for interpretation and performance, and practice enough and well, then the teacher must step in and ask the student to pull back from that and restore substitution to its place amongst the legitimate technical tools that we have at our disposal. ■

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## Music for Voices and Organ

by James McCray

### The many moods of May

Where are the songs of Spring?  
Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.  
—John Keats (1795–1825)

May brings a kaleidoscope of unique celebrations that usually require special music in the month's church services. Consider these May 2012 events: Pentecost, Ascension, Easter Sundays 5 and 6, Mother's Day, Festival of the Christian Home, and Memorial Day. Weaving through all of these occasions is the joy of late spring, which might also merit special music in the church services. There is a wide variety of music to squeeze into four Sundays!

The month is further complicated as congregation members become concerned with the end of the school year, the usual post-Easter exhaustion of choir singers, and the general anticipation of summer vacations. These factors often negatively influence attendance at rehearsals and services, so that while directors would like to end the church choir's season with something musically special, most are forced to use easier music.

This sermonette on May strongly suggests that the month needs careful planning. Not all items will receive attention—directors will have to choose which will survive their scrutiny and make it into the Sunday services. Clearly, Pentecost (May 27) should have priority, yet Memorial Day is the next day. Commemorating both is further complicated because many people are away that weekend, further reducing the population in the choir loft. It's like Jacob wrestling all night with the stranger—confusing!

The reviews this month will help directors choose repertoire for this overwhelming month. Musicians will be unable to cover everything; perhaps it is advisable to draw on two topics currently in the church's music library and then to add two new works on two other topics to cover the four Sundays in May. Keep in mind that those halcyon days of summer are just around the corner, so relief is just a calendar page-turn away from this busy month.

### Pentecost (May 27)

**Pentecost Prayer, Kenneth Lowenberg. SATB and organ, GIA Publications, Inc., G-6618, \$1.50 (M-).**

This easy setting often has the choir singing in two parts. The organ part has interludes and is somewhat soloistic throughout. The text, "Come, O Holy Spirit," is taken from the *Book of Common Prayer*. There are some mild dissonances, but in general this is a very effective setting that will be of use to most small church choirs.

**With a Mighty Wind and Tongues of Fire, Hal H. Hopson. SATB and organ, Augsburg Fortress, 978-1-4514-2081-4, \$1.75 (M+).**

After a dissonant sixteenth-note flourish on the organ to open the setting, the choir enters in a bold unison singing the title words. That organ flourish is used throughout the work as a unifying theme. Dissonant chords are later heard vertically. The music builds to a majestic "Alleluia," which closes the anthem. This will take an experienced choir, but will be a dramatic anthem for Pentecost and is highly recommended.

**God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind, Carolyn Jennings. SATB and organ, Augsburg Fortress, 978-1-4514-2068-5, \$1.90 (M).**

Part of the St. Olaf Choral Series, this anthem's text is a poem of Herbert G. Stemple Jr. The composer has suggestions for organ registrations, which are different for each of the three verses. The vocal music is very singable, with one long two-part section for men. The organ part is on two staves, and while not difficult, is designed to drive the music. This is an effective anthem suitable for most church choirs.

**O Come, Holy Spirit, George P. Teleman (1681–1767). Unison, violin, and keyboard, with optional cello or bassoon in the continuo, Augsburg Fortress, 11-0314, \$1.88 (E).**

This very easy vocal part is for treble voices and could be sung by a soloist or children's choir. The violin music usually consists of busy phrases played above the choir. The keyboard part is on two staves and, like the violin part, is far more challenging than the vocal music. This Baroque setting has been edited by Ronald A. Nelson and might be a simple solution to the problem of missing choir members due to Memorial Day weekend.

**Spiritus Sanctus Viridians Vita, Paul Gibson. SATB unaccompanied, ECS Publishing Co., 7681, \$1.95 (M+).**

The text, by Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), is translated above the score but is not for performance; it begins: "Holy Spirit, the life-giving Life, moving in all things and root of all that is created." Although there are some contrapuntal passages, the music tends to be chordal with short melismas. A Gloria Patri has been added at the end and it builds to a loud ending. This is sophisticated music that is gently attractive.

### Ascension Sunday (May 20)

**Psalms 47 for Ascension (God Mounts His Throne), Rory Cooney. SAB, cantor, trumpet, keyboard, assembly with optional guitar, GIA Publications, G-5937, \$1.60 (E).**

The very easy three-page setting has three verses, which are all sung by the cantor; the eight-measure refrain is sung by the choir. The trumpet plays briefly on both verses and refrain, and the short section for the assembly is included on the back cover for duplication. This is a pragmatic setting suitable for small choir.

**Psalms 47, Clap Your Hands, Alfred V. Fedak. SATB and organ, MorningStar Music Publishers, MSM-50-8838, \$1.70 (M-).**

The text has been paraphrased by Michael Morgan, with the choir on two staves. The theme recurs several times, usually in modulated keys. The choral writing is not difficult, with few actual four-part chords. The organ part, also on two staves, is easy with a mixture of sustained chords and linear lines in both hands.

**Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above, Melchior Vulpus (c. 1570–1615), arr. by Sharon Elery Rogers. SATB, keyboard, and flute, GIA Publications, Inc., G-7182, \$1.95 (M).**

There are three verses in this hymn; the flute plays in each of them but it does not have a difficult part. The familiar melody is clearly stated; in the last verse the HYFRYDOL tune is included. The organ music, on two staves, is not difficult. This has a traditional anthem spirit that moves at a very fast tempo so that the energy is strong.

### Late spring 2012

**O Blessed Spring, arr. David Cherwien. SATB or two-part, organ, optional C instrument, and assembly, Augsburg Fortress, 9781-4514-2075-3, \$1.75 (M).**

In this sweet setting that uses a text by Susan Cherwien, the alternate verse for two-part choir (verse 3) is published on the back cover as is the music for the assembly. The text states "Christ is the vine and we are to be branches." There is a long instrumental introduction and the optional C part plays throughout much of the work as a counter-melody. A charming setting.

**The Beauty of the Earth, Gwyneth Walker. SATB and organ, ECS Publishing, No. 7623, \$2.80 (M+).**

This is the third movement of Walker's work entitled "Eternal Brightness." There is an extensive organ part that is on three staves. The popular Folliott Pierpoint text ("For the beauty of the earth") receives a new treatment in that it is even more joyful; Walker suggests that both choir and organ be "bouncy through their celebration." Delightful music that is well crafted and highly recommended to skilled choirs.

## Book Reviews

**A Provincial Organ Builder in Victorian England: William Sweetland of Bath, by Gordon D. W. Curtis. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2011, 307 pages + xix. ISBN: 9781409417521 (hardbound), 978140941738 (paperback); <www.ashgate.com>.**

J. S. Bach once commented of Gottfried Silbermann that his instruments were silver in sound as well as in name, and one might similarly comment of Sweetland that his instruments were sweet in sound as well as in name, for indeed they were. I grew up in the neigh-

borhood of quite a few of Sweetland's organs, and several of the instruments described in this book are "old friends."

Gordon Curtis has made a very careful study of William Sweetland (1822–1910) and his organs, mostly based on primary sources, though it is a curious fact that while some of these are in the Wiltshire County Record Office, not far from Bath, one important source turned up in the Biblioteca Franzoniana in Genoa, Italy. This is not perhaps as astonishing as it might at first seem, since Sweetland exported pipework to Genoa and one of his former employees, W. G. Trice, lived there. Though originally built for locations in Britain, a few of Sweetland's organs have found their way around the world over the last century. One is now to be found in the USA, another in Barbados, another in Slovenia, and a fourth in Germany. The book has a useful introduction that attempts to place Sweetland in the context of the musical life of Victorian England as a whole. The rest of the book is specifically devoted to Sweetland himself and to the instruments that he built.

It is clear from Curtis's book, as well as from my own experience of Sweetland's organs, that his instruments were extremely well engineered and voiced, using the finest materials. Among other things, Sweetland refused to use zinc except for 16-foot basses. Yet he managed to sell his organs at prices somewhat lower than the major London organ-builders like Hill and Willis. Altogether Sweetland is thought to have built more than 300 organs between 1846 when he set up his workshop and 1902 when he retired. Sweetland was also something of an innovator and obtained patents for a number of improvements in organs, including an improved form of swell box, a new pattern Vox Humana (said to have sounded very "French"), a labial Euphonium stop, and a system of stop keys above the manuals, not unlike miniature composition pedals. Though William Sweetland had a reputation for absolute integrity in his business dealings, in other regards he appears to have been

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