



# Church Music Help Sheets

## “O” Series - for Organists Playing legato on the Organ

### 01

*This sheet is intended to help organists who have had little or no tuition in organ playing, but who want to modify their piano skills to play an organ (pipe or electronic) especially in relation to hymns.*

With the organ, as with any other musical instrument, you need to be able to play legato or staccato at appropriate times. Legato is the more difficult for a pianist, however, because of the absence of the piano's sustaining (“loud”) pedal. Most organists find the “sustain” mechanism on some electronic organs of little help because, once it is switched on, it operates at all times, whether you want it or not, and smudges the melody or chording. It is best to switch the mechanism off and use your fingers. With a pipe organ, you do not have a choice.

In the following notes we will discuss the three principal finger techniques with reference in two of them to the hymn tune “Old 100th” (TiS 59, AHB 10).

**Tying Inner Parts.** If two or more successive notes in an inner part (alto or tenor) are the same, you will get a smoother effect if you play them as if they had the curved “tie” mark between them, i.e. do not move your finger until the part moves to a different note. Remember that the hymn composer is writing for voices and has to provide a separate note for each syllable of the hymn words. In each of the first three chords of “Old 100th”, the altos sing D. Tie these. Then there are three Bs. Tie these too.

Repeated notes in the outer parts (soprano and bass) should always be clearly separated, partly to make the tune clear to people who do not read music (or do not have the music in front of them) and partly to show the rhythm of the tune (as in the three Bs for the sopranos and the three Gs for the basses at the beginning of the second line of words). All four voices should be given a break at the end of a word phrase, e.g. after “mirth” in the first verse and, in this hymn, at the end of each line of words.

Most pianists have difficulty with this technique at first, so practise it. In time you will do it automatically.

**Sharing Hands.** You will meet many hymns in which there are a few chords which are spread wider than your hand can span, usually your left hand. It happens in “Old 100th” at bars 5, 7 and 10. The piano technique of skipping from the lower note to the upper will not work because the sustaining pedal is not there to keep the lower note sounding. The problem does not arise for organists with pedal skills because they can use their feet on all the bass notes anyway. You could raise the lowest note an octave, making the chord more compact, or, if all else fails, you could leave out the tenor note altogether, even if that leaves you with rather a bleak chord.

The best way is to include the upper (tenor) note in the chord for the right hand, leaving your left free for the bass. This is called “sharing hands”. It works just as well if the problem occurs in the right hand, but the alto note is within reach of your left.

**Finger Substitution.** From time to time you will have to play hymns in which you have difficulty maintaining legato from one chord to the next because you have “run out of fingers”. Sometimes the problem can be solved by revising your fingering further back in the music so that you arrive at the difficult place with fingers to spare in the right direction.

An alternative which organists use, however, is to change fingers quickly on a note at the difficult place in order to free up the ones needed to reach the new chord. Be careful that the key stays down throughout the operation. Try this: Play two notes, say a fifth apart, with one hand and see how many different finger changes you can make to the lower note or to the upper note without breaking the continuity of the sound. It is difficult to suggest where you will need this technique in “Old 100th”, but if you are tying inner parts, sharing hands and generally trying to play legato, you are bound to need it somewhere in your hymn playing. Practise it.

Copies of any of these Help Sheets may be obtained from the Secretary of RSCM Australia, ACT Branch:  
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