

Be Ye Therefore Perfect Robert Cundick

After Ulysses' victorious triumph in the Trojan War, he undertook his epic ten-year odyssey. This wandering journey of discovery is paralleled in our own individual odyssey as we journey through our mortal life. We, too, finally return to our point of departure. As Wordsworth reminds us in his oft-quoted *Ode—Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home. . .

Our attendance here today is evidence that each of us has discovered music, organ music in particular, as part of our individual earthly odysseys before our return to our eternal home.

As a result of this discovery, we organists must strive for perfection as commanded by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Notice that I said “*strive for perfection.*” While the word perfect is generally used as a noun, it can also be used as a verb. The Apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Thessalonians, urges them (and us) to “*perfect that which is lacking in your faith*” (1 Thessalonians 3:10). Since our faith includes our talents, which are also our stewardships, we organists should likewise “*perfect that which is lacking*” in our organ technique. The Doctrine and Covenants gives another valuable insight: “*Continue in patience until ye are perfected*” (D&C 67:13). Perseverance is imperative if we will be successful in reaching our goal of technical mastery. Organ playing includes two characteristics that afford us organists a definite head start to reach our goal.

The first is found in the fact that organ sound initiates with the mere touch of a key. We do not have to contend with the wind, breath, pitch, or bow control problems that plague other instrumentalists. The mechanism does all the work for us. Simply touch the correct key in the correct rhythm and instant perfection results.

This leads us to the second unique characteristic of the organ. Organ performance has a basic anonymity. Screen a world-renowned string performer from the listener's view. Have them play a C major scale *legato* in moderate tempo, beginning with the instrument's lowest C pitch. Then let a competent beginner do the same, using the identical instrument and bow. Their differing ability is immediately apparent to the listener. The same would be true of two wind players, vocalists, or pianists of similar contrasting ability. Not so with the organ. Using the same registration with unenclosed sound, the competent beginner will exactly duplicate the experienced professional's performance.

The obvious conclusion is that technical perfection of music *within our ability* is a reality for dedicated organists. The satisfaction of playing single voices, then complete phrases, and finally an entire piece perfectly without equivocation, is a musical and spiritual reward for the taking by all of us.

My dear friend, the late violinist Richard Nibley, often said, “Practice makes perfect with perfect practice.”

Our brain sends a muscular command to our fingers or feet through the spinal column via a specific series of nerves. This is accomplished by an electro-chemical impulse. This surge of energy must bridge the synapse or gap between the individual nerve endings. Each successive repetition of the brain’s command is accomplished with greater ease. Unfortunately, once this pattern is established, its reversal is much more difficult. Therefore, it is imperative that we practice with meticulous accuracy. Practice does indeed make perfect with perfect practice!

But what exactly should we practice?

Brothers and sisters, I submit that as organists in the Restored Church, our foremost responsibility is to play hymns with perfection. Unfortunately this charge is too often overlooked. Any competent organist, myself included, feels that they can play or even sight-read a hymn without practice. But I am certain that if we truly play a hymn with perfection, meticulous prior preparation is inevitable. What a frustrating dilemma for our poor brains when we play each verse with a different fingering or pedaling. Add varied rhythmic simplification of the lower voices. The resulting complexity poses a near-impossible task for our brain to keep straight. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that we are frequently doing a second-rate job of accompanying a congregation in hymn singing.

But how should a repentant organist practice hymns?

During my student days, two divergent methods were taught. The first was Salt Lake City–based. It was the approach used in the twelve-lesson courses sponsored by the General Music Committee under the direction of its chairman, Tracy Y. Cannon. Hymns were to be played exactly as printed with every repeated note carefully articulated. The second was BYU–based. According to my understanding, J. J. Keeler taught that the soprano voice was to be played exactly as printed. All repeated notes in the lower voices were tied with the exception of phrase endings and downbeats.

A middle ground was much needed.

The necessary synthesis has been provided by Parley L. Belnap in his excellent publication *Hymn Studies for Organists*. It presents hymns completely edited in standard three-stave organ format with complete fingerings and pedalings. A strict and modified version of each hymn appears in easy to difficult progression. Registration and other topics relating to hymn playing are also discussed. Careful consideration of the entire contents of *Hymn Studies for Organists* is the logical starting point for rehabilitative efforts by any repentant organist who desires to perfect their own hymn playing technique.

With the much-valued collaboration of Don Cook, I have prepared a second aid for hymn playing in the form of 30 three-stave organ hymn accompaniments. Each hymn appears with the soprano voice as printed in the hymnal. Removal of non-essential repeated notes in the lower parts appear in actual note values. This eliminates most ties. Where four-part writing results in needless complications for the fingers and musical sound, simplification to three parts has been made. The bass part has similarly been altered on occasion for musical effect and ease of pedaling. The result is a much less formidably appearing score with a preponderance of white and dotted notes. The organist adds his or her own fingerings and pedalings in pencil as well as any rhythmic alterations they prefer. The resultant personalized score represents the organist's commitment to perfection. It forces you or me to decide on the precise method that we will adopt to play an individual hymn to the best of our ability—a true offering of excellence to the Lord.

Finally, a crutch in the form of automatic sixteen-foot bass doubling for a quasi-pedal effect is now available on many electronic organs in our chapels. Most would-be organists who possess sufficient pianistic skill to play a hymn with accuracy and authority are tempted to progress no further. In addition, we too often are faced with enduring our many “one-footed” organists. Hopefully their efforts are a result of ignorance or sheer desperation. They play a non-legato left foot “hot potato” bass dance in the lowest pedal octave. This is an affront to artistic hymn playing. This situation poses a serious challenge to all organists in this room. Our own playing must be exemplary as evidenced by our ongoing practice and other preparation. We are, in effect, special musical missionaries in our wards and stakes. We preach the gospel of correct and inspired hymn playing with proper technique. “Shine On.” “Improve each shining moment” with meticulous preparation. “Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel” of unflagging commitment to excellence. “Let us all press on in the work” of serving the Lord through magnifying our talents as organists. *So wake up and do something more than dream of a fugue you could play. Perfect hymns are a pleasure, a joy beyond measure, so practice a hymn ev'ry day.*

Brothers and sisters, the future lies in our two hands—and two feet! Amen.