

# **LDS ORGANIST TRAINING: SUGGESTIONS FOR DESIRED OUTCOMES AND METHODS**

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One of the great musical misunderstandings in church music is this: if you can play the piano, you can play the organ. This misconception produces terror in pianists as they approach the organ, and results in organists who lack the confidence to provide musical and spiritual leadership in the service. There is no substitute for the kind of training that provides confidence in the organist, and that improves the spiritual effectiveness of music in the sacrament meeting.

Stake and Ward priesthood leadership can arrange training for musicians who are called as organists in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (see Book 2 Section 14: Music, of *Church Handbook of Instructions*, “Music Training”). Priesthood leaders usually rely on organists from their own stake or ward to provide this training. These organists-teachers usually feel a need for outside help in structuring that training.

I have tried numerous approaches to stake and ward organist training. Some have proven more successful than others, but all of them have helped me improve my instruction.

During a graduate organ pedagogy course at BYU Provo in fall semester 2002, Ben Crandall, Emily Spencer, and I decided to take a new approach to developing plans for LDS organist training. We took as much time as needed to derive a new approach to small group organ training in LDS stakes and wards. In earlier coursework we had explored sound approaches and methods in teaching, so we started by identifying the outcomes that we wanted, then we used these outcomes as a structure for various types of workshops: single-session, three sessions, six sessions, and an ongoing course. In all of our discussions, we tried to avoid using the same approaches we had used before simply because we were familiar with them. We insisted that our desired outcomes dictate our approaches, rather than our approaches determine the outcomes.

We have discovered that no matter how brief or extended the course of instruction, these outcomes remain valid. They can serve as the foundation for any course of study from a single 90-minute session to an ongoing course. For this reason, we are sharing them with you as a means of developing training sessions to fit a variety of situations. In addition, you are welcome to look over some [sample course outlines](#) that we developed using these outcomes.

Following is a list of desirable outcomes in LDS church organist training. Click on any one to see an explanation.

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## **DESIRED OUTCOMES IN LDS ORGANIST TRAINING**

1. [Provide trained organists for every ward](#). A trained organist:

- Uses organ techniques fluently
- Expresses the hymn text artistically
- Uses standard and creative hymn playing techniques

- Has an artistic awareness
- Understands the role of music in serving the church

2. [Emphasize training young people](#)
3. [Spark in participants a lasting passion to learn and to teach](#)
4. [Provide tools for training](#)

## **PROVIDE TRAINED ORGANISTS FOR EVERY WARD**

Trained organists have the tools necessary to perform several essential roles in the sacrament meeting:

- To play the organ accurately and with good organ technique
- To help those who attend to prepare themselves for worship by playing appropriate prelude music
- To support the congregation, and provide interest and variety in hymn singing
- To help teach the meaning of the hymns by expressing the hymn text artistically
- To accompany soloists and choirs competently
- To help reaffirm the spirit of the meeting through appropriate postlude music
- To beautify the sacrament service with a thread of artistic awareness that runs through all organ playing
- To apply an understanding of the role of music in the church at every level, including assisting others in planning music for sacrament service

Several trained organists are needed in every ward for a variety of reasons:

- To provide a pool of organists who can substitute when the scheduled organist cannot play
- To reduce the pressure, especially on early-level organists, by dividing the weekly service playing among several organists. This also encourages greater quality and confidence in service playing by allowing more preparation time.
- To provide opportunities for organists to serve in callings other than organist throughout their lifetime
- To provide opportunities for several individuals to grow spiritually and musically from service as an organist

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## **EMPHASIZE TRAINING YOUNG PEOPLE**

Young people who catch the vision of church service as an organist can provide a lifetime of inspired service. School-aged organists are accustomed to developing skills through regular practice, and consequently seem to learn quickly. They often respond enthusiastically to opportunities to play in public, and to recognition of their efforts. They can, simply by example, inspire their peers and even older musicians to study the organ.

Every spark of interest that a young person shows in learning to play the organ should be matched with enthusiasm from parents and priesthood leaders. Long-term training should be arranged. Regular and easy access to the church organ for practice should be provided. Materials should be purchased. Patience should be exercised. Opportunities for service should be provided. Recognition should be given.

What is the minimum age for organ training? Here are a few general considerations:

- Piano ability to the point of ease in hymn playing is recommended. Fluency in note reading and finger dexterity are usually developed best at the piano.
- Pedal playing requires that the organist be able to play the pedal keys with the heel while seated stably on the organ bench (i.e., not hanging on the front edge of the bench). However, training in manual technique is possible while the legs grow.
- It is not usually advisable for a young person to discontinue piano study when organ training begins. In order to prevent reaching early technical limitations at the organ, piano study is usually recommended at least through the two-part inventions of J.S. Bach and the easier sonatas of Beethoven and Mozart.

While an emphasis on training young people is good, those of any age who wish to receive training should be welcomed with the same enthusiasm.

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## **SPARK IN PARTICIPANTS A LASTING PASSION TO LEARN AND TO TEACH**

Because of its long history, its interesting development, and its vast literature, the organ can easily inspire those engaged in its study a strong determination to do whatever is necessary to learn to play it. What may begin as a single invitation to play the organ for priesthood meeting may develop into a lifelong commitment to organ study.

All organ training should be designed to spark that fire. Time spent during the training session actually playing the organ or operating the devices, listening to live or recorded organ music, visiting actual organs or seeing pictures of beautiful instruments, touching organ pipes, or hearing about great organists may provide just the needed spark.

Once the spark is ignited, the resulting fire will be self-sustaining if given enough fuel. Over time, a motivated, well-trained organist can themselves become a trainer. When that happens, an organ teacher will have reached one of the highest hopes of any trainer, “to teach a teacher how to teach.”

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## **PROVIDE TOOLS FOR TRAINING**

A trained organist is a valuable commodity in the church. Even a small amount of intensive organ training places the organist in the class of “the precious few” who have valuable skills that can be shared.

It is widely known that the best way to learn is to teach. In every organ course, the teacher should be on the look-out for students who might become the next-generation of trainers. Once those students are identified, the teacher should talk with them about studying the organ not only with the idea of learning how to play, but learning how to teach. It is amazing how much more energy a student will expend when they think of themselves as a teacher in training!

Share your materials with potential trainers. Even with only minimal training, providing good outlines, class notes, handouts, and resource materials can give students just the confidence they need to offer training on their own.

Give potential trainers opportunities to help teach organ classes. They can demonstrate exercises and projects, observe other students play and offer comment, prepare and teach selected topics, and assist in many other ways.

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### **Sample LDS Organ Training Outlines (PDF format)**

[Outcomes and general guidelines](#)

[Three sessions](#)

[Five sessions using The New LDS Organist](#)

[Belnap 12-Week Course](#)