Introduction to The Organ

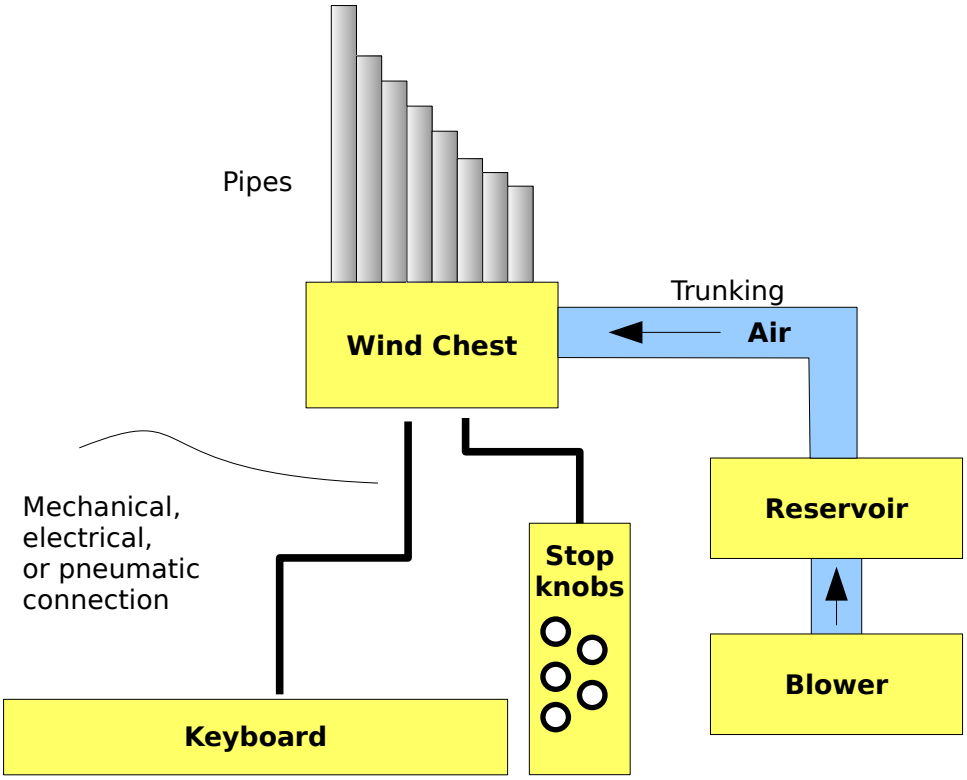
A few tips for players of other keyboard instruments

Basic principles of the pipe organ

Organs vary immensely from one to another, depending on age and style, but all pipe organs are built using the the same basic design.

Even if you play a digital organ without any pipes, you will find it helpful to know how one of the living, breathing kind work.

Different ranks for different pitches and types of sound



The sound you hear is made by air vibrating inside a wooden or metal pipe. Flue pipes have no moving parts, and work like a recorder or flute; reed pipes work like a clarinet with a vibrating metal "tongue". The sound comes out at a constant volume as long as the key is pressed down, notes do not die away as with a percussive or plucked instrument.

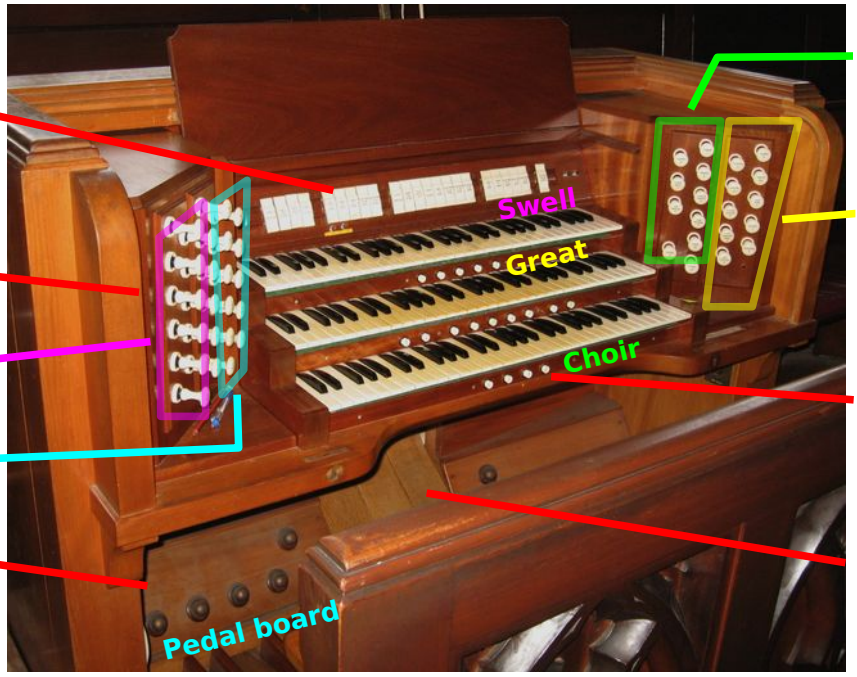
The shape and materials of the pipe determine its sound, for instance a narrow metal pipe has a stringy quality, a wide wooden pipe sounds like a flute.

Larger organs are divided into multiple divisions controlled by separate keyboards. The organ's tonal design has evolved over centuries giving each division its own character: for example on an English-styled organ the Great is the fundamental and loudest division for accompanying mass singing and grand forte passages; the Swell has a secondary chorus along with string-toned stops and a fiery reed or two; a Positive is a bright and colourful division; a Choir has softer accompanimental and solo stops. The roles overlap, especially on smaller organs.

Most – not all – New Zealand pipe organs follow the "English" tradition described above. Small instruments of one or two manuals may be designed to perform particular styles of music well, rather than attempt a full range of possibility.

The Player's view – the Console

(This is a moderately large three-manual pipe organ in central Auckland.)



How to get different sounds – or how to get <u>any</u> sounds

To make noise from an organ you need to do two things, (1) choose some 'stops' for the sound you want; (2) press down the keys!

Pitches

Fundamental
8' on Manuals
16' on Pedals

Octaves *(above and below)*
32', 16', 8', 4', 2'

Mutations
2 2/3, 1 3/5 ..

Mixtures
II, III ...

Stop families

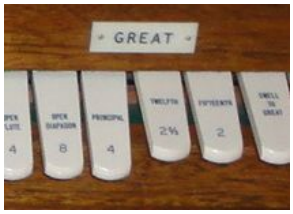
Principal
Open Diapason, Principal, Octave, Twelfth, Fifteenth ...

Flutes
Gedackt, Rohrflöte, Stopped Diapason, Claribel, Piccolo ...

Strings
Gamba, Salicional, Dulciana ...
Undulating: Celeste, Vox Angelica

"Chorus" Reeds *(usually loud!)*
Trumpet, Clarion, Horn, Cornopean

"Orchestral" Reeds *(good for solos)*
Oboe, Clarinet ...



Combining stops: Start with fundamental pitch (8') and then add in octaves (4',2') and cap off with Mixture or reeds. Combine stops of the same families.
But there are no absolute rules – experiment!
Check your balance between manuals, and manuals & pedals.
Different tactics will suit different styles of music.

The Wobbly stop!

Playing Aids

Pistons

Quickly change many stops at once

(Divisional, General, Reversers)

Couplers

Play several divisions of the organ from one manual or the pedals, or sometimes play an octave above or below

Swell Pedals

Adjust volume of pipework in a swell box.

Auckland Organ Association Inc

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Playing with the Hands

The organ keyboard **looks** much like a piano – but it doesn't **behave** like a piano! Banging the keys harder doesn't make the sound louder – so what do you do?

Don't work hard

Relax, free and fluid, light touch
Hitting keys harder makes no difference, so don't bother – go easy on yourself!

.. but not lazy either!

Hold keys down for the full length of the note, keep note durations even.
There's no sustain pedal to help hide gaps!

Louder and softer

Add and remove stops

Legato playing style sounds louder than detached playing

Use swell pedal

Accenting

Play tune in different style than rest of the notes eg more legato. Or play on a different manual.

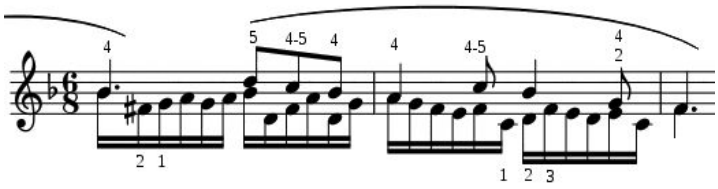
Fill out chords, play in octaves: more pipes sounding = more noise.

Leave slight gap before an accented note. Pause briefly on or just before the accent.

The sound of a piano string dies away very quickly after being struck; an organ pipe may even get slightly louder as the air in it 'gets going'

The building is part of your instrument as much as the pipes: in a reverberant space you may need to play slower or lift notes off earlier. Also, some pipes may be reluctant to speak (eg reeds) and you need to give them time.

Pay careful attention to fingering: you'll find it matters more when playing on the organ than a piano. Sometimes it helps to change fingers on the same key to get a legato effect, as in the example at right. Note, this piece (by Mendelssohn) is **not** easy!



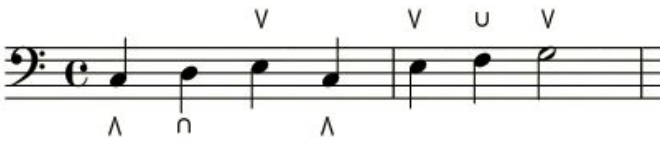
Playing with the Feet

All the same ideas apply as with the hands. Practice playing in different ways. Register with a 4' stop and play pedals alone. Try the tune even if not written for pedals!

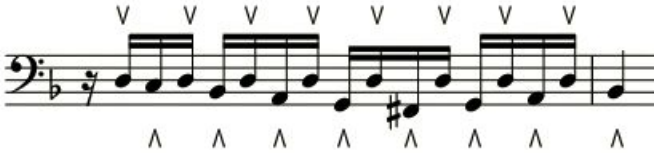
You can play with toe and heels. Music is often shown with pedalling marks, just like fingering:

Heel ∪ or ○ Above the stave ∨ Toe
∩ or ○ Below the stave ∧

Playing a pedal melody with heels and toes



Sometimes a passage can best be played with just toes:



Opinions differ as to the best technique for each piece of music. Also you may need to choose carefully so that a foot is free to operate the Swell pedal (see below) or touch a toe stud at the right time.

When there are no pedal notes to play, rest your heels on the footrest under the seat – keep away from the keys and swell pedal in case you press something accidentally.

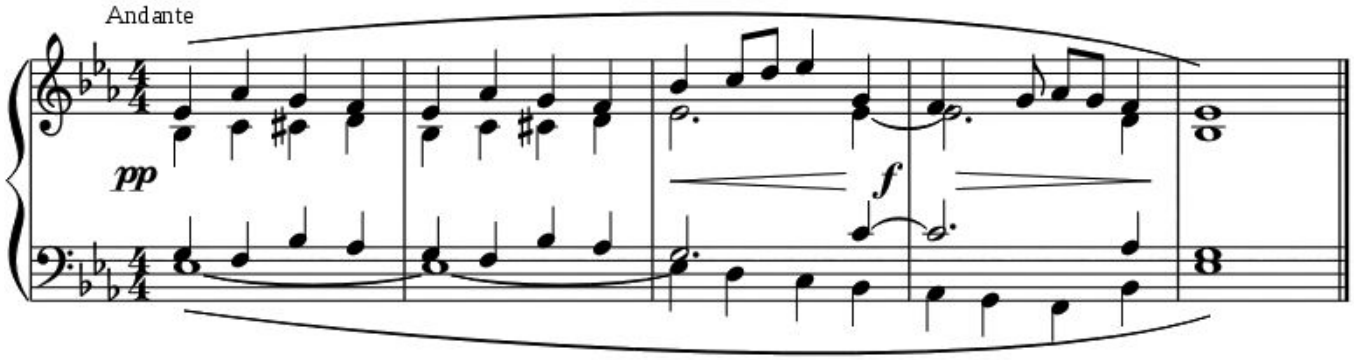
Position and Posture

When you get into the driver's seat of a car, you adjust the seats and mirrors to suit your body shape. The organ is no different.

Make sure that the bench is at the right height and positioned so you can sit with your back straight and reach the manuals, pedals, swell pedal easily. If you have a mirror, position it so you can see what is going on in the church or hall, or the conductor's hands, without moving your head from normal playing position.

Swell Pedal – crescendos and decrescendos

Practice making smooth changes in volume and try not to 'clunk' at the ends. Sometimes there is a delay between moving the pedal and the sound changing (depends on the organ).



Other sources of information

About the organ

Playing

The Royal Schools of Music “Church Music Skills” self-study course

Events

http://www.organz.org.nz