

**FROM THE SCRAPBOOK**  
**Playing the Organ: Country Style**  
by Dr. William Randall

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Emma has a Scrap basket. From it she showed me an item, which I want to share with you. It's about Church Organists. Emma, my wife of nearly 56 years, is my favorite organist. On our first date (A blind one – Emma had never seen me), her father suggested we have a sing and I wondered who would play. It was Em. Through all these years she has played in many, many churches and funeral parlors, so this item sounds its echoes in her memories.

**PLAYING THE ORGAN - COUNTRY STYLE**  
By Jean Fahlman

Playing the piano and organ for a quarter of a century in a country church must make me an expert – at knowing all the things which can, and invariably do, go wrong.

For example, never buy a new hymn book. It will resist all efforts to remain propped open and in the middle of a hymn suddenly you will be confronted with a closed book. My books are in tatters and that is the way I like them because they will stay open better than crisp new pages.

Losing one's place is something to battle every Sunday. When your eyes roam down to determine the verse the congregation is singing they may return to the wrong place. That leaves the organist playing one stanza and the congregation singing another; one of them is bound to finish first.

A little blunder like belting out another verse of a hymn when all the verses have been sung is nothing compared to the embarrassment of stopping one verse too soon and hearing one quavering singer bravely start out alone.

You must be prepared to be handed an unfamiliar tune now and then. This might not bother an accomplished organist but most volunteer musicians are just trying to serve with whatever talent they can muster. Mostly they possess more courage than training.

The country church is full of nasty surprises for unsuspecting organists. Sometimes the minister gives the wrong number and the congregation struggles valiantly to fit five words into two beats. It isn't easy. Or the organist may get the numbers mixed up and start playing the wrong tune until she becomes aware of an embarrassed shuffling of feet and stifled giggles, leaving her to wonder if she is the cause of the hilarity or if someone's zipper is open.

Electronic organs, like organists, are not without fault. Some Sundays they sulk. A familiar tune becomes unfamiliar when several of the notes won't sound. There is no use trying to explain to the congregation that the notes won't work. With my record they would never believe it is the organ which is malfunctioning.

Sometimes someone has dusted the organ and moved all the stops so when you start the dignified prelude sounds bleat forth that would frighten the most intrepid musician. The local congregation is polite and appears not to notice but visitors look a little startled.

When I first started playing for church I thought if I played quietly nobody would notice when I hit a sour note. but they couldn't hear me well enough to follow with confidence so I switched tactics. Now it is full steam ahead, Onward Christian Soldiers, loud and clear. Not necessarily note-perfect, you understand.

Remember, you have to play with your feet as well as your hands. If you relax and let a foot

drop onto the bass foot pedal during a quiet time it sounds like God's deep-toned reprimand booming into the silence.

Even your shoes can get you into trouble. My heel got caught in the volume pedal crack; the sound was thunderous as I struggled grimly to disengage it. As the music rumbled out the steeple the startled congregation, not understanding my heel was caught, must have thought I'd finally gone over the edge. They'd been expecting it.

If you relax for a moment it is easy to start playing a piece in flats when it is supposed to be sharps. Since anything over two sharps is beyond my limited ability I have to convert all the music to flats to handle it.

I never entirely trust the uneasy partnership the organ and I share. Once during a World Day of Prayer service, with an ecumenical crowd, the organ gave out completely. It had to happen when we had a full church rather than our usual 10 people, naturally. As the sound faded away I debated what to do. Since no special effects had been planned for the service I mustered what dignity I could and crossed the floor to the piano while the congregation struggled along *a capella*. I picked up smoothly from where I left off but naturally the congregation was far ahead of me. And they were also singing in a different key by then.

Real trouble started when I had to get bifocal glasses. That little line blurred out a whole portion of the score so either I had to tip my head high to bring it in focus or move the seat back so far to use the upper portion of the glasses that I couldn't reach the keys. If I used the lower portion I had to be so close my chest covered the ivories.

One Sunday the lens fell out of my glasses; it doesn't take much imagination to know how bad the music sounded that day. Finally I was fitted with reading glasses, which worked fine as long as I remembered to take them along.

Every time we had a change of minister the organist had a whole new adjustment because they all have their favorite hymns - mostly hymns the congregation has never heard, let alone sung. Nobody can ever accuse the United Church of having lively Gospel music but once when a minister came who didn't like to choose the hymns (and let me do it) we came close. Then a musical minister arrived and showed us the error of our ways and the singing went back to pathetic.

We have been introduced to sound church music over the years but nobody but the minister seems to enjoy it. In fact sometimes I glance over my shoulder to be sure the people didn't sneak out because you sure can't hear them singing.

We had one minister who couldn't tell C from G but what he lacked in a musical ear he made up for in enthusiasm. I got the full benefit of his warbling and got so rattled by all the discord that I couldn't tell if I was playing in the wrong key or if he was singing off-key. During that minister's tenure I developed a stiff neck and blinding headaches every Sunday but was miraculously healed when he was called to another congregation.

One minister had a habit of singing slowly to savor the words. He would fall half a line behind by the end of the eighth verse. One Sunday I decided to follow him at that slower pace and we had dragged to a virtual halt by the time we hit the last verse, but we sure had time to understand what the hymn writer was saying.

One thing about playing a country church - nobody tries to steal the job. You can't give it away for more than a few Sundays a year. I have managed, over the last quarter century, to cajole people into spelling me off, but the minute it looks like it might become permanent they fade away like a melody.

Because it is so difficult to find a replacement I have played with cut and sprained fingers,

raging fevers and deep depressions. I have played with head colds so bad I had to play one-handed because the other was needed to wipe my nose. I have crawled off my deathbed, fought my way through snowdrifts, had my husband blow out the driveway or break trail to town over impassable roads, to play for church.

I have missed bonspiels and rodeos, flower and art shows, because our church hour fell at inopportune times. Right at noon, actually, so I also missed lunch.

I have left my trucking job at harvest, scraped the dirt off or covered it with makeup, to dash in and play for church. Then I dashed back to the field changing my good clothes for work clothes as I drove.

I have risen after a late Saturday night dance to practice hymns which came late from the minister, knowing that I can never practice enough to avoid all the embarrassing things that happen to a volunteer church organist.

I played for church the day after I learned my father had terminal cancer because I thought if I stuck to my routine maybe things would somehow get back to normal. They never did.

Playing for a country church keeps a person humble - but surely nobody needs to be this humble?