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The Bass Coupler

Marilyn Nielson

Being called to play the organ for the first time, as a pianist, felt like being asked to ice skate for the U.S. Olympic team because you did such a good job walking into the arena. “You already know how to *walk*, after all,” the coaches reason. “This is basically the same thing—a stride lengthened here, a leg elevated there. You’ll pick it up in no time.”

It was terrifying. But, as I would probably do if asked to join the Olympic team, I suited up. I bought a big spiral-bound hymnbook, took a deep breath, and prepared myself for a lot of bruises. I suppose I had always known this day would come. Not the way you know you want to learn Greek someday, or the way you know you’ve aced the interview and the scholarship is yours. More the way you know the dog on the corner is someday going to do more than just stand by the fence, growling. It was almost a relief when it finally happened and I could start dealing in realities.

The first reality I encountered was that a piano is not an organ. I suppose a cursory glance would reveal similar elements: they both have white keys! And black keys! But you’d have to be in a big hurry not to notice the elephant below those keyboards (and that’s keyboards, plural, you will note): the pedalboard. And we pianists, you will further note, prefer to reserve our feet for other uses, and to play the bass harmonies with our left hands as God intended!

The second reality was a softer, deadlier one. I’d had a semester of Organ 101 in college, and I knew about the bass coupler: that helpful computerized assistant that figures out if you’re playing any note below middle C in the manuals, and if you are, slings it down into a lower

register so you can *sound* as if you're playing it with the pedals when you aren't.

I planned to make full use of the bass coupler, of course. And I did.

After a time I was released as organist, but all church musicians know that a release is really just a temporary hiatus, and each time I returned to the organist calling and slid onto the bench again, I felt full-force how the course of the Lord is one eternal round. A few more kids, same hymnbook, and the same old pianist perched up there above the pedals, trying to make my fingers crawl over the keys like crabs instead of marching along like soldiers. Oh, I learned the pedal parts to a few songs along the way. I even bought organ shoes so my heels could reach the pedals more easily. But I wasn't a real organist, and even if no one in the congregation could tell when I was using the bass coupler (though that became less likely when, of all the luck, I moved into the same stake as not one, but *two* Tabernacle organists)—I knew it.

And that was the problem, really: the fact that using the bass coupler allowed me to sound, well, so passable! It helped me achieve the pianist-organist's greatest ambition: to be Unmemorable. Of course, I'm not saying we *should* aspire to this. The two Tabernacle organists in my stake play grand, sweeping music in stake conference, the kind of thing that makes your heart come right up in your chest, filling your eyes with tears and your head with thoughts of heavenly choirs. But at my skill level, there would be no heart-leaping. The best I could hope for was not to attract attention; at all costs, do *not* attract attention. Attention would mean I was failing at what was really my only task: to direct the worshippers' thoughts toward God. Not toward the train wreck in the bass line (or the tenor, which is where the trouble really happens). Not toward the inevitable accidental pushing of one of the memory-stop buttons, making your carefully balanced flutes suddenly explode into trumpets. Not toward, heaven help you, your hymnbook falling onto the pedalboard during the sacrament prayer. No, better to play the voice parts with my hands as all right-thinking people ought to, and leave the pedals to those blessed with four independently working limbs.

And yet, week after week, as the bass coupler concealed me time and again, I found that the exhilaration was missing from my playing. I love to play the piano. The beginning of a concert finds me breathless, fearful, shaking—but determined and full of light—and the middle of a concert . . . ah. The middle of a concert is like birthday and springtime rolled into one. The middle of a concert is like prayer, both praise and supplication together. The middle of sacrament meeting did not feel, to me, like the

middle of a concert. It felt like a very, very careful opening of a door, without ever stepping out into the daylight.

I began to notice my own response to using the bass coupler. Like the ambiance tool in a photo editing program, it wiped out my highs and lows, filled in the middle with an inoffensive pudding of sound. It brought me security. I didn't get nervous; my hands didn't tremble. The meeting wasn't full of risk and uncertainty. But also not . . . a delight. And shouldn't the Sabbath be a delight?

I'm not sure when I made my resolution to try to abandon the bass coupler and go it alone, pedals and all. I think I feared admitting it was an actual resolution, even to myself, not wanting to commit to something I couldn't do. Part of me thought it was silly, even somehow prideful. I never noticed whether *other* organists were using the bass coupler or not—could hardly even tell, in fact! And what right had I to put my own growth above the congregation's need to have correct notes to sing to? But the urge persisted. At first I aimed for playing one hymn per meeting bass-coupler-less. With the easier hymns, it went fine, and I gained confidence with the pedals. If I practiced enough, I could even tackle harder songs. Then I started learning to actually sight-read pedal parts (mostly on prelude hymns when the background noise level was high). Slowly, slowly, my abilities grew.

I was making lots of mistakes, of course. But I felt gradually less flustered by them. I got used to the feeling of nakedness, knowing that as I played the introduction it was just me and my feet and my wrong notes in front of God and everyone. I repeated to myself the Known Truth (not really sure if it was meant as torment or comfort) that *No One Listens to the Accompanist Anyway*. (Its corollary, *Except the Accompanist's Spouse*, was inapplicable in this case, since Sam was always too busy corralling all seven children by himself through the sacrament to listen closely to my playing.)

And . . . I noticed each week how well the typical four-verse hymn structure allows for redemption. As I started each verse anew, I vowed to get that tricky part right *this* time through. I suppose the tenors in the ward, if they'd thought about it, would probably have wondered why they always sounded so suddenly full and supported on verse 4. It was because I was finally calming down enough to take my attention *slightly* off the pedals and put it back on my left hand.

It's a delicate balance, though. I'm still a pianist at my core, and when I play the organ, all I know is that some sort of strange alchemy takes place between brain and feet, by way of the hands. It's a complete

mystery how the notes work their way down from my eyes into my feet, and if I examine it too closely, things begin to fall apart. It's the dividing up of the four voices that does it—not with soprano and alto in one hand and tenor and bass in the other, as any *decent* person would, but with only tenor in the left hand, and bass with both feet. It goes against all my ingrained mental pathways, and, though I can now mostly *do* it, I don't know *how* I do it, and my brain doesn't appear to *want* to know. I'm not saying I can let my mind wander—quite the contrary, my concentration must be intense—but I do a sort of mental unfocusing—or hyperfocusing—like one does when looking at those 3-D “magic eye” patterns or making the dots on the wallpaper pop out of the wall. My eyes see the notes and tell my hands and feet magically what to do. Only, of course, they often don't. And so, in spite of myself, I find that now and then I am beginning to be Memorable—and not for the reasons one would hope.

Starting the introduction to a hymn is the musical equivalent to closing my eyes and bumping my bicycle down off a sheer drop—just the edge of the curb and down into the street, I hope, where I will join other cyclists and be carried along in the exhilarating sweep of traffic—but honestly, off a cliff for all I know. And, as I've said, when things go wrong it's the tenors that suffer first. You'd think it would be the basses, but nothing is quite so obvious as a pedal line that suddenly ceases, so I've learned to take a quick look downward for reference and keep my feet soldiering on. The melody usually continues to exist in some feeble form, and the alto drags unwillingly along with it. But the poor tenor often drops out altogether for lines at a time. If it weren't for the fact that one of our bishopric members has a particularly strong, fine tenor voice, which carries us through the times of famine—and if it weren't, of course, for the absolution of verse 4—I'm sure the tenors would have left the ward in droves by now.

But they stay. The whole congregation stays. And so do I. Week after week I return to my efforts. I have actually begun to feel at home on the organ bench. There is sometimes a small piece of bread nearby, which I have become fond of and wouldn't dream of moving, since it has sent me off into so many pleasant reveries imagining how on earth it could have gotten from its happy position in the sacrament tray to its precarious one under the organ pedals—none of us who sit on the stand being the bread-throwing sort. There are my organ shoes, which I, being weighed down with children and other baggage on Sunday mornings, leave tucked discreetly under a choir bench and slip on

before the beginning of the meeting. And then there is my dear familiar hymnbook, or rather my *late* hymnbook—it having disappeared from its long-accustomed spot in the organ bench some months ago, to my great misery and dismay. Of course I've turned every place upside down, searching. That book had *years* of pedal markings written in it, hard-won and long-slaved-over fingerings; hymn chains; notes about which prelude pieces are easy enough to sight-read; chord progressions analyzed. I can hardly believe, even now, that it is gone—not to anyone who means ill, certainly. But to someone who no doubt doesn't even realize they have it. Or . . . I just don't know. My mind comes to a halt trying to even think of another possibility.

At any rate, there we have the whole of it. Frantic Sunday mornings, slight musical embarrassment, and a lost hymnbook. It's so imperfect, this small, shabby sacrifice I'm trying to lay before the Lord. So insignificant. And yet, as I play the hymns with my hands and my feet—I feel a little taste of that exhilaration that comes after a good piano performance, or a race well-run. It makes me laugh to myself sometimes. I remember how, in my self-centeredness, I felt rather ill-used at times in high school because I was a fine pianist—but I happened to live in the same ward as a friend who was *internationally* renowned as a pianist. I was a fine distance runner—but I happened to run on the same team as two *nationally* known runners who left me in their dust. “This will teach me humility,” I thought to myself. But I have since learned what it is to be, not second-best, not somewhat-good—but truly *terrible* at something. Even a failure. I've learned it in motherhood, when I kneel weeping at my bedside from the enormity of the offenses I must have committed against my children that day. I've learned it in being a wife, when I've been sure there is no hope for anyone like me to find the daylight again. I've learned it in being called to work with the youth, which as everyone knows, ought only to be asked of those who are beautiful and funny and confident. And yes, I've even learned it in being an organist—in my clumsy, silly attempts to make music when making an accompaniment would have been safer.

And in those moments of utter despair and uncertainty, I have also learned for myself what it means to need God. I've learned to ask, and to hope. I've learned that personal comfort is not the ultimate good, and that sometimes great risk brings great reward. And I've learned to my surprise that failure happens only when I decide I dare not try again. And as soon as I *do* try again, it morphs magically into “that brief hiatus on the way to success.”

I define *success* somewhat loosely in the case of my organ playing, of course. I haven't left the bass coupler completely behind; nor, to be realistic, will I. In fact, if you hear our congregation singing "All Creatures of Our God and King" or "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" (two of my favorite hymns, by the way), you can be certain I'm employing the bass coupler with some zeal. I don't improve nearly so quickly as I would if I practiced more often, and I don't think my barely-held-together hymns will be causing anyone's heart to leap up anytime in the near future.

And yet something makes me keep at it on those pedal parts. Occasionally, I sit quiet and beaming after the hymn ends, enjoying the thrill of having gotten it—having finally gotten it. No one knows but me, but those moments are so meaningful, so internally sweet, that they even carry me through the other, more typical meetings—when I'm mangling the tenor line, holding out hope for a fourth-verse comeback, and wondering who will ever see or care about this unremarkable, unnecessary little sacrifice of mine.

Someday, perhaps, I will revisit this story and there will be a grand ending: a stunning solo performance, culmination of my years of gradual improvement; a ward member coming to me with moist eyes and pressing my hand as he thanks me brokenly for my hymn selection. I'd even settle for the miraculous reappearance of my poor hymnbook. But even now, as I laugh at myself trying to think of a suitable storybook finish, I hear a scripture echoing in my head: *Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things* (Matt. 25:21). Or maybe: *Well done, thou earnest and endeavoring organist. Thou hast been faithful in attempting to minimize thy use of the bass coupler, I will make thee ruler over several manuals plus a pedalboard and a whole host of stops.*

This essay by Marilyn Nielson received an honorable mention in the BYU Studies 2016 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest.