

THE SUCCESSFUL SUBSTITUTE ORGANIST  
A GUIDE FOR THE ORGAN STUDENT  
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Good organ substitutes are worth their weight in gold—ask any organist. Being a good organ substitute, however, is not an easy task. In many ways, it is more difficult than being a regular organist.

Most organists begin their church music careers as substitutes, often during their student days. The suggestions that follow, though perhaps obvious to the veteran organist experienced in substituting, may help to smooth the way for those just beginning.

### **Getting Started**

Before you take your first subbing assignment, make sure that you are truly ready. Subbing before you are prepared to do so is embarrassing to all concerned, and will only hurt your future prospects. If you are really ready to substitute, you should be able to answer the following questions in the affirmative:

- Have you sufficiently mastered the mechanics of organ playing: fingering, pedaling, voice-leading, registration?
- Can you play hymns well with the upper three voices on the manual and the bass in the pedal, with steady rhythm and at a good singing tempo?
- Do you possess a suitable and varied repertoire of preludes, postludes, and offertories?
- Are you adequately familiar with the various forms of worship?
- Are you able to adjust to new situations quickly and easily?
- Does your teacher think you are ready?

(The skills mentioned above are included in the Guild's [Service Playing Test](#); consider preparing your self and taking the test. Having the SPT certificate in hand; would certainly open some doors for you. Specifics about the test appear each July in [THE AMERICAN ORGANIST](#).)

If you can truthfully answer yes to the above questions, it is time to take the next step. Try to find an organist (perhaps it will be your teacher or the organist in your own church) who will allow you to play part of the service on a day when he or she is there. Playing the prelude, the offertory, or one of the hymns will allow you to get the feel of subbing without the pressure of being responsible for the whole service. If possible, repeat this experience several times, playing different parts of the service each time.

Once you feel comfortable with playing during an actual service, you can begin to offer your services as a substitute. Call some local churches and introduce yourself to the pastor and the organist. Most churches welcome such calls, since reliable substitutes are in short supply. Perhaps even more important, if you are not already a member, join your

local AGO chapter. Many chapters maintain a list of recommended substitutes and may be willing to add your name to the list after an audition. Even if they don't keep a formal list, chapter officials get many calls for substitutes and are a valuable source for networking. Get the word out to your neighbors, relatives, and friends, particularly those who are choir members or are otherwise involved in church activities. Your teacher and fellow students are also excellent sources for leads.

Check the classified section in your local paper. You may be more likely to find and ad for an interim position rather than a subbing one, but short interim stints are a good way to get started, too.

A final note: As you try your wings in the subbing world, it is important to find your own comfort level. When you first begin subbing, this will probably mean planning for a service that you are familiar with and on an organ that you know well. If it's a service without choir or soloists, as is often the case during the summer, so much the better, since you won't have to learn an accompaniment at the last minute.

### **“Are You Available Next Sunday?”**

When you get a call to sub, it is helpful to ask some basic questions:

- What time is the service?
- When may I come to practice?
- How do I get into the church?
- Where is the organ key?
- What kind of organ is it: pipe, electronic, two-manual, three-manual?

Some of these questions may sound obvious but one of the problems with subbing is that you have no way of knowing the ordinary little things that the regular staff takes for granted. You can save yourself much time and trouble by asking these questions ahead of time.

If at all possible, speak to the organist. If it's the pastor or the music committee chair who contacts you, ask for the organist's phone number. These are some questions you will want to ask the organist:

- How long should the prelude be?
- Should the prelude begin on the hour (say, at 11 o'clock for an 11 o'clock service?), or should the prelude be played before the hour?
- Is there a procession? If so, does the organist wait for a signal to begin?
- Is there an organ offertory?
- Will there be a soloist or a choir? If so, what will they sing, and when will we rehearse?
- If a Gloria Patri is used, which one? If a Doxology is sung to “Old Hundredth,” is it sung in even quarter notes or in “psalter” rhythm?
- Does the service include Communion? If so, what is required in terms of music?
- What registration do you use to accompany hymns?
- Is there an “Amen” after each hymn?
- Is there anything special I should know about the organ?

- Is there anything else about the order of service I should know?

Finally, speak with the minister. Ask him or her:

- What are the hymns? It is best to ask to borrow a copy of the hymnal involved, so that you're sure you and the congregation are looking at the same text and music.
- Will the hymns be announced?
- Will all the stanzas be sung?
- Are there cues I should watch for, such as when to begin the offertory or a prayer response?
- Is there anything else I should know about the service?

### **Choosing the Music**

Once you have spoken with the organist and the minister, you should be ready to choose the music. It is helpful to keep these points in mind:

- As organist, you are there to assist the congregation in worship, not to give a recital. Make sure that the music you select contributes to the meaning of the service.
- Especially when you are just beginning to substitute, err on the side of simplicity. It is far better to play an easy piece well than to play a difficult one poorly.
- Within the bounds of good taste and sound musicianship, you should endeavor to please the people in the pews, for they are the ones who are paying you. Generally speaking, harshly dissonant music is not a good choice when substituting.
- Hymn and chorale preludes, especially if they are based on hymns to be used in the service, will add unity to the service and will be appreciated because of the familiarity of the hymn tune.

As you continue your organ studies, search you appropriate music. While the regular organist can and should draw from an extensive repertoire to suit the music to the occasion, the substitute is well advised to master a small repertoire of "generic" service music. It should be of good quality, rather short (about three or four minutes), easily registered, and appealing to a broad range of congregations and denominations.

### **Playing the Hymns**

Even more important than prelude and postlude is a style of hymn playing that encourages and supports congregational singing: good choice of tempo, accurate and steady rhythm, and "breathing" with the singers.

Once you have the list of hymns for the day, it is a good idea to photocopy them. The copies are easier to handle than the hymnal and can be marked for fingering and pedaling when necessary. Practice playing the hymns on one manual (upper three parts) and pedal (bass). For difficult hymns, practice manuals only, pedal only, each hand alone with pedal, then all together. When you experience awkward passages, such as leaping pedal parts of manual stretches you can't reach, remember that it is better to adapt (leave out a note, move it an octave up or down, and the like) than to fumble or hesitate. The

adoption should be good taste and make musical sense, of course. Fidelity to the score is important, but in the final analysis, continuity is even more so.

Advice on registration is difficult, because organs differ so greatly. Generally, principal tone supports singing best. If you have been able to talk to the organist, you probably have found out what registrations have been used for hymns. If no, try to work out some possibilities on your own. A little variety is usually appreciated, such as adding a reed or mixture for a final stanza.

Many organists play the entire tune through as an introduction to singing. However, this is often not necessary, especially on very familiar hymns. For some hymns, the refrain, or even just the last phrase, might be enough. Playing the first phrase with the melody only, in octaves, followed by the last phrase in harmony, is sometimes effective. There are many ways to apply tasteful creativity to hymn introductions, but the substitute should be cautious and not get carried away. A simple, short, clear introduction is best.

One technique that is especially useful, both in hymn introductions and in accompanying singing, is playing the melody on one manual with a prominent solo registration, the alto and tenor in the left hand on a softer registration, and the bass in the pedal. For most organ students, this is a skill that takes time to master, but it is an endlessly useful technique, and will lift your hymn playing to a higher level.

There will be times, despite your best efforts, when you won't have access to the selection of hymns ahead of time. When that happens, it is best to play the hymns "straight" and leave the creativity for another time.

A word about tempo. Some of the newer hymnals have metronome markings that are helpful. Lacking them, try to find an appropriate tempo that is comfortable for singing, and then stick to it. If the singing seems to drag, playing in a slightly detached manner may add some vitality.

Finally, sing along mentally as you play the hymns. This will help to relate your playing to the sense of the words, and will keep you from playing one too few or too many stanzas (which has been known to happen to the best of us).

### **Dealing with the Service**

One of the most important aspects of the organist's job is to underscore the cohesive structure of the service. It is your job to keep the service moving ahead, surely but unobtrusively. Ask the minister to help you to attain that goal. Get a copy of the bulletin, and go from beginning to end. Using a marker, highlight the places you have to play. Write cues in the margins, such as "wait for announcements." No two churches, even of the same denomination, do things exactly the same way (this is especially true about the offering and its attendant music), and even an experienced substitute will be more secure with an annotated bulletin as a guide.

Timing is crucial to the flow of the service. Before you begin, be sure your watch agrees with the minister's. Despite all your careful planning, you will still need to be flexible. For example, it may take longer than expected to receive the offering. When you need to extend a piece, there are several ways to do it. Here are three ideas to practice beforehand with various pieces, and to keep in mind for use as needed:

- Repeat part of the Offertory on a different manual or with a different registration (pieces with clearly defined sections are best suited to this treatment).
- To add about a minute to a hymn-based piece, play the hymn, using the four-part harmonization from the hymnal.
- Play the melody of a lyrical piece, or part of it, alone on a solo stop or on chimes (remember that organ chimes usually have a limited range).

Another important point: If the organ is situated so that you can't see everything clearly, be sure to arrange for someone to let you know when the procession is ready, when the ushers have finished taking the collection, and when the minister is ready to begin the service.

Finally, you may occasionally find yourself playing in a church whose liturgy is unfamiliar to you. One solution is to have a choir member sit with you and help you with your cues.

### **Coping with Unfamiliar Organs**

"A rose is a rose is a rose," but nowhere is it written that an organ is and an organ is an organ. As you know, organs are not standardized, and this can complicate things for a substitute. However, there are ways to deal with this problem. If you have been able to speak with the regular organist, as suggested above, you will have gained valuable insights about this particular organ. Lacking such information, you will have to find it for yourself. In your practice session, try every stop, and be on the lookout for any note that is badly out of tune so that you can avoid it. Try the expression pedals (this is especially important on electronic organs; on pipe organs it is normal to play with swell boxes fully open, but on electronic organs a fully open expression pedal often produces a distorted and disagreeable sound).

Once you have some knowledge of the organ, try some of the pieces you are considering playing. Be flexible in your choice; fit the music to the organ, not the organ to the music. Keep the registration simple and beware of trying to make numerous or difficult changes.

As a beginning substitute, you may find yourself playing on instruments that can most charitably be described as modest. Resist the temptation to criticize the organ! You were hired to be a substitute, not an organ consultant. It serves no purpose to point out the faults of the organ, which are probably already all too well known by the members of the congregation. Instead, rise to the challenge of making first-rate music on a second-rate instrument.

It is well to remember that even modest instruments afford possibilities for varied registrations, provided you take the time and trouble to discover them. Some of the following ideas may prove useful:

- A principal with tremolo can make an effective solo stop.
- Gapped combinations, such as flutes 8' and 8', are often more interesting than the more customary 8' and 4' registrations.
- If there is a 2-2/3' Nazard, "synthetic" reed sounds can be created (Salicional 8' and Nazard gives an oboe-like sound).
- Playing an octave lower on a 4' stop or an octave higher on a 16' stop can add to the possibilities for solo sounds. If the organ is supplied with octave couplers and unison offs, using a 4' flute + 16' coupler + unison off will allow you to play the melody where written.
- If the organ lacks brilliance, it may be necessary at times to use a 4' coupler. If the Great has a 16' stop but no upperwork, one can add the 16' stop and play an octave higher.

Avoid falling into the habit of pushing the same few pistons with the same few stops all the time. Instead, size the opportunity playing different organs gives you to learn more about registrations in a very hand-on, practical way. As you refine your ability to coax pleasing, musically appropriate sounds from even the most recalcitrant instruments, you will be honing skills that you can use all your life.

### **Working with Choirs and Soloists**

When you are new at subbing, working with a choir or soloist may seem like a daunting prospect. The choir director or the regular organist can help immeasurably by selecting relatively simple music, seeing to it that the choir or soloist knows the music well, and perhaps offering suggestions for suitable registrations. Always insist on a rehearsal, even if it is just prior to the service, and be prepared. Know the music thoroughly, have a tentative registration worked out, and know how you are going to handle pageturns. Again, flexibility is important. You may have to alter slightly a passage in the accompaniment if the singers are having difficulty finding their note, and of course you may have to change registration in order to match the singers' dynamic level. Remember that the singers are just as anxious as you to have things to smoothly, and an easy give-and-take at the rehearsal will help to accomplish this.

Some choral and solo accompaniments are meant for piano rather than organ. If there is a decent piano in the sanctuary, don't hesitate to switch when the music seems to require it.

Be wary of asking the choir as a whole any question you may have, because you will probably not get agreement. Instead, ask one or two singers privately.

### **Weddings**

Playing for a wedding can be a joyful experience, but for the substitute organist it has its difficulties. Weddings are often elaborate affairs involving many people who are even

newer to their roles than you are to yours, and members of the wedding party can have strong opinions about the music of the service.

As soon as a wedding comes up, set up a meeting with the bride and groom. The minister may wish to be present also. These topics will need to be discussed:

- What music does the couple want for the processional and recessional? (If they request the Widor “Toccata” and your technique is not yet equal to this piece, be honest about it and offer some alternatives that are similar in effect but within your grasp, such as the “Carillon” from Vierne’s *24 Pieces in Free Style*.)
- Do they have any special requests for the pre-service music?
- How large is the wedding party (many bridesmaids means a long processional)?
- When is the wedding rehearsal?
- Will there be any soloists? If so, what will they sing, and when can they rehearse with you?

If the church has a policy concerning the music that may be used for a wedding ceremony, it is important for you to know this before the above meeting takes place, since it will guide the choice of music. If there is no policy, try to offer tactful suggestions for appropriate music. You can mention that certain secular songs do now sound well on the organ, and might be better saved for the reception. But the substitute organist has only limited authority, and unless you have the firm backing of the pastor, it is not wise to be too dogmatic.

If the couple has special requests that include music you don’t own, ask them to provide the music. Set a deadline that will allow you plenty of time to learn the piece, and make it clear that you will need to have the music by that date, or you will have to substitute something you already have.

For weddings it is essential to have more music on hand than you expect to need, because weddings often don’t start on time and you may need to add another piece or two if things are delayed. Sectional pieces, with portions that can be omitted or repeated, are good choices.

Be sure to work out a clear signal for beginning the processional, especially in churches where the organist can’t see easily what is going on. Don’t let someone say, “As soon as the bride’s mother is seated, you can begin the processional.” Even if you can see the front pews, you probably don’t know the bride’s mother from her Aunt Maisie. Something more definite is needed.

Continue to play after the recessional until the people have left the sanctuary. Choose stately but festive music in keeping with the occasion.

### **Funerals and Memorial Services**

As a substitute, you may get calls to play for funerals and memorial services. By nature, these services occur at unpredictable times, and therefore the regular organist may be unable to play them.

Funerals are services of worship, and the same concerns apply. Secure the hymns ahead of time from the minister and go over the service with him or her. Make sure you know when to begin the processional and the recessional, particularly if there is a casket. If the order of service is to be found in the church's service book or hymnal, be sure you know where to find it, and ask about any variations or options that may occur.

For the prelude, select meditative music of good quality. In many instances, the minister and the family may prefer confident, substantial music, particularly music based on Easter themes, over music that is sorrowful or sentimental. But opinions and desires differ on this point, and in the selection of music the organist must be prepared to be guided by the individuals involved and their specific requests.

As with weddings, timing can be unpredictable, so it is well to have extra music on hand in case of delays.

Remember that you may be called to play a funeral at short notice, so it is wise to put together a folder of appropriate music and hymns that you can use at such times.

### **Fees**

When you are just starting as a substitute, you may feel that the experience you are getting is more important than the money. To a certain extent, this is true, but there is such a thing as selling yourself short. You may be inexperienced and not in a good position to make demands, but you are providing a professional service and deserve a decent fee. Sometimes the church will have a standard fee for substitute organist. The American Guild of Organists publishes a pay scale for substitutes, but of course it is purely advisory and many churches do not abide by it (or even know about it). If asked, you could certainly say, "The American Guild of Organists" recommends a fee of such and such" (AGO Salary Guidelines are posted on the Web at [www.agohq.org](http://www.agohq.org)). You may not receive that amount, but at least the church will know that you have some authority for the figure you quote.

If you are serving as interim organist, you should be paid more than a substitute, because you have more responsibility. Other items that should be considered include extra choir rehearsals and travel, if the job is out of town.

### **Helpful Hints**

*Be prepared.* Take along a supply of paper, pencils, paper clips, and self-adhesive notes.

*Keep records.* As you become known as a good substitute, you will probably be asked to play frequently in the same churches. Keep track of what you play (set up a notebook with sections for different churches). This will remind you of which music works well where, and you will not inadvertently repeat the same pieces too often. Likewise, make a note of registrations you have developed; it will save you time in the future.

*Be reliable.* Do not back out of commitments. Be punctual and conscientious.



*Take along extra music.* The ideal choice is a good all-purpose anthology containing a variety of “evergreens” (pieces that know no season). With such a book in hand, you will be ready to cope with many situations, from sick soloists to late brides.

*Begin to build a collection of hymnals.* Many churches, especially if you frequently sub for them, will give you a copy of their hymnal. Then, when you get a call, you will have the hymns at hand.

*Cultivate an unflappable attitude.* An example: You start the hymn on the Choir manual instead of the Great. If you calmly finish the first phrase of the introduction, then move to the Great, many people will assume that was your plan. If, on the other hand, you get flustered and stop playing entirely, you will only draw attention to the mistake.

*Don’t fiddle with the thermostat.* Instead, dress in layers.

*Leave things as you found them.* If you turn on fans or lights, be sure to turn them off before you go. It is helpful to count the switches: If you put seven switches on, put seven switches off.

*Be sure that the organ is off and locked.* If you have changed any combinations, it is courteous to reset them as they were (write the original settings before you make changes).

The good substitute is a competent organist, a person sensitive to the role of music in worship, and an individual who enjoys the challenge of working in new and often unfamiliar circumstances. As a well-prepared substitute, you will not only lay the foundation for a career in church music, but you will make an important contribution to the worship of many people. It is a worthy use for your time and talents.

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