

PLAYING THE ORGAN WORKS OF MENDELSSOHN

Dr. Jan-Piet Knijff, FAGO | Westchester AGO, March 2009

SOME FINGERINGS

Sonata No. 4, Andante religioso

The right-hand chords answering the baritone solo obviously need to sound legato. Most keyboard players would probably play 3-4-5 on the top notes of the first three chords—but that means that the thumb has to leap from D to G. My alternative needs almost no hand movement: it's only the pinky and the pointer that are moving to neighboring notes across the barline (I tend to tie over the A in the middle; such ties are very often left to the performer in organ music, even in the nineteenth century).

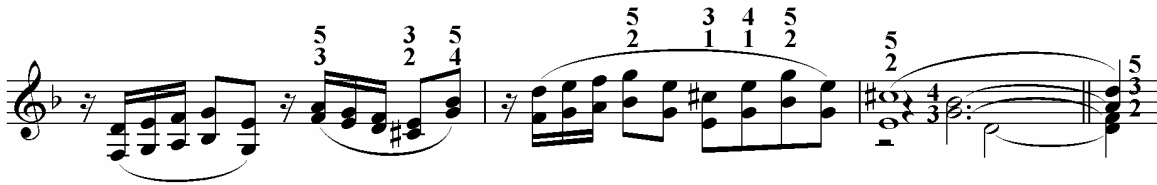


Sonata No. 6, Andante

Parallel sixths are notoriously difficult, both on organ and piano (and on harpsichord, too!). I generally try to care as much for the lower voice as for the upper one, and I try to avoid awkward “breaks” in either voice.

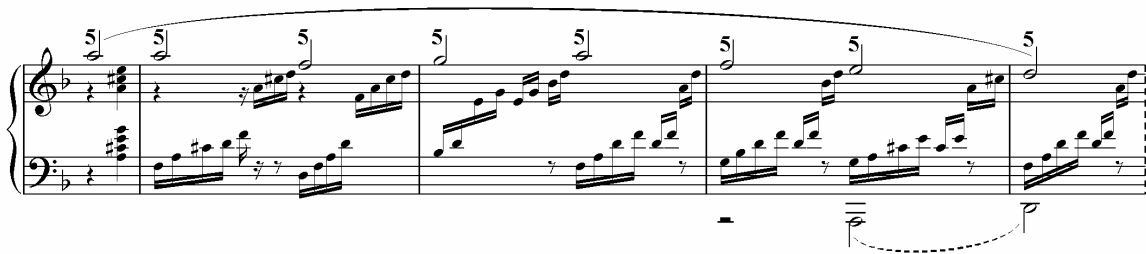
Musical notation for Sonata No. 6, Andante. The notation shows a sequence of parallel sixths in the right hand. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a common time signature. Fingerings are indicated above the notes: 4 1, 5 1, 5 2, 4 1, 5 2, 4 1, 3 1, 5 2, 3 1, 4 1, 5 1, 5 2, 3 1, 4 2, 5 1, 4 2. The notation also includes a bass clef and a key signature of one flat.

In the last few measures of the same variation, the diminished seventh chord is quite prominent. Note that I avoid the thumb on the c-sharp in the first measure below. In the second measure, while it is possible to substitute on the eighth notes in such a relatively slow tempo, for me, that breaks up the movement too much. In the last measure, right hand builds up a five-note chord; I can see only one real solution for this.



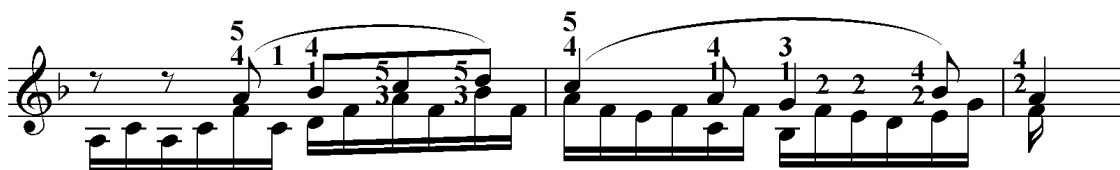
Sonata No. 6, Allegro molto

In second part, the chorale alternates between the right and left hand, surrounded by broken chords. One gets the impression that the chorale is mostly played with the little pinky. Substitution is often very awkward, whereas the repeated use of the pinky makes the cantus firmus notes sound even—and gives them just the bit of articulation they need in a “big” registration. (Note Mendelssohn’s own indication of the hand division; I have notated the pedal notes an octave lower for practical reasons.)



Sonata No. 4, Allegretto.

A treacherously tricky movement—particularly the last section, where the right hand has to play both the soprano melody and the accompaniment figure! I avoid substitution if I can; sometimes, one finger has to take two neighboring notes in succession in the accompaniment or even in the soprano melody. Keep the finger in the key as much as possible; the slower the release, the better the connection.



COMMON NOTES

Sonata No. 6, Andante

In the French repertoire of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the principle of the notes communes or common notes is well known: one is expected (by Divine Dupré's Decree) to tie over a note in one voice that occurs in the next chord in a different voice; this is the only way of making the passage sound really legato.

Some players have argued that this principle does not apply to Franck, because it was only codified by his successor Widor (and adopted as a kind of Eternal Truth by Dupré). But the idea that common notes in a legato context are best tied over was neither invented by Widor, nor by his teacher Lemmens (whose fame is infinitely greater than his achievements).

In the beautiful Finale from the Sixth Sonata, Mendelssohn clearly indicates the common notes to be tied over. But even if a composer indicates his intentions in such detail, it surely doesn't mean that he can't possibly forget anything! The d-sharp in the last measure below is best tied over from the tenor to the alto. There are many more such moments in Mendelssohn and in other organ music (including Franck).

The image shows a musical score for Sonata No. 6, Andante, in D major. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music is written in a style that emphasizes common notes between staves. A large bracket spans across both staves, indicating that notes in the same voice should be tied over. Specifically, a D-sharp in the tenor voice of the last measure is tied over to the alto voice of the first measure of the following section. The score includes various chords and melodic lines, with some notes marked with sharps and flats.

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J-P was a contributor to *The Organ: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2006). More recent publications include a piece on organ culture in New York for the Dutch magazine *Timbres*. His paper on teaching of Bach's Prelude in E-flat major was recently published in the *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*.

J-P has presented workshops/master classes on the organ music of Buxtehude, Mendelssohn, Messiaen, and twentieth-century Dutch composers for AGO chapters from Virginia to Dutchess County. He is Director of Music of Emanuel Lutheran Church, Pleasantville, NY and teaches music in the Special Needs program at Pleasantville High School as well as Latin at Ridgefield (CT) Continuing Education.