

Beginning Organ Registration

Super Saturday, January 10, 2026

Rebecca Bennion (MM, CAGO)

Four Families of organ stops

PRINCIPAL	FLUTE	STRING	REED*
Clear, rich, full sound	Softer and darker than principals, sweet, muted tone	Softer and brighter than principals, thin, bright	Vibrant, penetrating, loud, brassy, spicy, buzzy
Principal (Open) Diapason Montre Prestant Choral Bass Octave	Bourdon Gedeckt Nachthorn Stopped Diapason Subbass	Salicional Viola Gamba Dulciana Voix Celeste	Clairon (Trumpet) Posaune (Trombone) Fagott (Basson) Hautbois (Oboe) Krummhorn/Cromorne

Hybrids: share characteristics of more than one family, blend well (Gemshorn, Erzähler, Spitzflöte)

Mutations: (fractions) $2/3$, $13/5$, $11/3$ color sounds that add harmonic interest (Nazard, Tierce)

Mixtures: (Roman numerals III, IV, etc.) offer a mixture of high overtones for every note you play

Pitches of organ stops

LENGTH	PITCH
8'	Normal pitch
4'	One octave higher
2'	Two octaves higher
16'	One octave lower
$2 \frac{2}{3}'$	One octave plus a fifth
$1 \frac{3}{5}'$	Two octaves plus a major third
$1 \frac{1}{3}'$	Two octaves plus a fifth

HYMN or Chorus Registration**

- Principals are the basic foundational stop. Begin hymn registrations with an 8' principal
- If principals are too strong for a reflective hymn, substitute a flute or two
- Typical minimum registration for the manual is 8' and 4' and for pedal, 16' and 8'
- Make additions in this order: 2', $2 \frac{2}{3}'$, mixtures (manuals) and 4', 2', mixtures (pedals)
- Balance the pedal with the manual by selecting pedal pitches that are an octave lower than the manual pitches (or use Great to Pedal or Swell to Pedal couplers)
- For clarity, BUILD UP, one stop per pitch. For example, 8' 4' 2' (Baroque music, 17th and 18th c.)
- For richness, BUILD OUT and then upward in pyramid fashion. For example, 8' 8' 8' 4' 4' 2' (Romantic music, 19th c.)
- Use reeds sparingly, judiciously
- Keep the expression/swell pedal OPEN and the crescendo pedal CLOSED
- **Avoid** célestes (tuned out of pitch), tremulant (wobbly) and 16' manual stops (muddy)

Food for thought: (Know your ingredients)

- Principals are the meat and potatoes, strings the vegetables, flutes are fruit
- Reeds might be anchovies on a pizza (use sparingly!)
- Mixtures are the whipped cream on top of an ice cream sundae, and a chorus reed could be the cherry on the very top
- Hybrids are like tomatoes, both a fruit and vegetable (versatile, blend well)
- Work with the ingredients (stops/pipes) you have available

Homework ideas:

- Write out a list of stops on the organ you play regularly; identify families (principals, flutes, strings, reeds, hybrids) plus mutations and mixtures, along with accessories or non-speaking stops (Swell to Great coupling, tremulant, etc.)
- Listen to each sound. Notice how principals add a punch, flutes add plumpness, strings add edge, reeds may buzz or snarl, 2 2/3' adds an octave and a fifth, etc.
- Try recording your registration ideas from a congregational seat
- Experiment with different hymn registrations, building upward gradually between verses (or between a verse and chorus/refrain); consider playing manuals-only for a verse (no pedal)
- Overplay a bit (be bold) to support congregational singing, especially for festive music

SOLO & accompaniment Registration

- For prelude music, play hands on separate manuals
- Solo on one manual with a flute (8) or flutes (8 & 4; 8, 4 & 2; 8 & 2, or 8 & 2 2/3), or perhaps a reed (Oboe, Cromorne); accompany on a different manual with a string (Salicional), soft flute, or hybrid (Gemshorn)
- Consider softening a solo reed (Cromorne) with an 8' flute
- Enjoy céleste warmth in your accompaniment

Interpreting registration prompts in music

- Dynamics offer a clue to registration (*p* = soft string or flute; *f* = principal). If right-hand part is marked *forte* and left-hand part is marked *piano*, play solo and accompaniment on two manuals
- Manual I = Great, Manual II = Swell
- Crescendo/diminuendo marks indicate playing on Swell manual or with Swell coupled through

*A chorus **reed** (Basson, Fagott, Clairon) blends well with a principal chorus and adds fire and strength, while a solo **reed** (Cromorne) is imitative and used mostly as a solo stop against a soft accompaniment on another manual.

**Hymn registration = “chorus registration” where all voices are equally important, played on a single manual. Bach preludes, toccatas and fugues use chorus registration.