A Significant Upper Arm Injury Sustained While Learning Simon Preston’s Alleluyas: A Proposal for Avoiding this Malady

To the editor—Simon Preston’s Alleluyas is an organ solo of moderate difficulty written partly in the tonal language of Olivier Messiaen.1,2 While learning this piece, I experienced a slight discomfort in my right upper arm. A more severe pain developed later, over several weeks, and my right hand became partially paralyzed. Full recovery took almost 2 months. During that time, I had to forgo organ practice and daily lap swimming.

How did this injury happen? Near the conclusion of Alleluyas, there is a six-bar section (pp 22–23), played on the great, marked Presto e staccato: chords in both hands ascend in a rhythmic five-note figure. The highest pedal notes, struck with the right foot, are G#, D, and F, where F is just three notes from the end of the AGO standard pedalboard. With both hands playing mid-great and the right foot extending almost to the end of the pedalboard, I felt considerable strain in my right arm. I am certain that, over time, this “jamming” caused my injury. The rapid alternation of the three highest pedal notes with the same notes played an octave lower with the left foot—“fast and detached”—undoubtedly contributed to this strain. Nowhere else in the piece is a comparable physical demand made on the performer.

“Repetitive strain injuries,” also known as “overuse” injuries, are well known to musicians.3 My reversible injury was caused by playing just six bars, and it may owe something to the way I “handled” this brief section, or more likely, “footed” it.

After recovering the use of my right arm and hand, I resumed playing Alleluyas, initially leaving out the pedal part that caused the injury. I avoided reinjury, but harmonically, something was lost to this omission. Eventually, I had an epiphany: why not play the highest notes required by the score for the right foot an octave lower, with the left foot (Fig.)? That way, both feet stay comfortably aligned with both hands. The right arm is spared from strain, and the downward shift of an octave for these pedal notes preserves the integrity of the piece, and its harmonics.

Many organists play Alleluyas. I do not know of any who have developed the problem I had, but this does not mean that no one did. Some may have been injured and not recognized the cause of the injury. Others may have been injured and kept silent.

Every organist takes on the physical challenges of the console differently. Coming to the Presto e staccato section of Alleluyas, a player beginning to feel right arm strain may be able to head off the kind of injury I experienced by playing the pedal notes G#, D, and F an octave lower, with the left foot.

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2. A recording of Alleluyas by Jane Watts can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ytcw5J04fIQ. Posted Feb 4, 2015.

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FIGURE. Presto e staccato (transcribed and modified by Justin Porter, Technology Center, Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University).

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