

The RCCO Victoria Centre presents

Posture Essentials for Organists and Musicians

Fall 2021, RCCO Victoria Centre

We have created for you a 35-min **video** to make you aware of your posture at the organ and the keyboard (<https://youtu.be/HsbbzH6sINs>).

Playing the organ uses all of the muscles in your body, and **good posture with relaxation is the key to effective playing**. In the video we show in detail what is involved in a self-postural assessment at the console, how to spot both good and poor postural habits, and demonstrate effective warm-ups and stretches. We also recommend further study resources. We hope that with good posture and relaxation, you will be able to enjoy playing this wonderful instrument for many more years to come!

Postural Assessment

We recommend you **take photos** when **standing**, and **again when seated** at the organ console. Have a friend help you or put your camera or cell phone on a tripod.

WHILE STANDING:

1. Look at your posture from the **front** and from **behind**:
 - Are your feet under your hips?
 - Are your ears level?
 - Are your shoulders level?
 - Are your hips level?
 - Is your spine straight with your head centred between your shoulders?
 - Would a plumb line in the centre of your forehead drop down between your feet?
2. Look at your posture from **the side**:
 - Is your ear over your shoulder?
 - Are your shoulders back a reasonable amount or hunched forward?
 - Is your weight centred forward on the balls of your feet or backward on your heels?

AT THE ORGAN BENCH

Take pictures from behind and the side and ask those questions again!

- Is the bench positioned properly, so that you don't feel like falling forward?
- Is the bench high enough?
- Are your ears over your shoulder with your shoulders back a reasonable amount?
- Is your neck protruding forward with rounded shoulders?
- When you lean forward, do you slump?

Let's look at **five typical postures** that might occur when seated at the organ:

1. Side View: Rounded shoulders (Kyphosis)
2. Side View: Poke neck (head forward)
3. Side View: Sway back (Lordosis)
4. Side View: Good posture (body follows the head)
5. Side and Back View: Muscle Imbalance of shoulder and/or neck

Side View: ROUNDED SHOULDERS



Side View: POKE NECK



Side View: SWAY BACK (shoulders are behind hips)



Side View: GOOD POSTURE

- Ears over shoulders
- Shoulders over hips
- Elbows forward of shoulder



Side View: MUSCLE IMBALANCE (pronounced leaning to one side)



Back View: MUSCLE IMBALANCE (mild curvature of the spine)

- Slight leaning to one side
- One shoulder higher than the other



If you think you recognize some of the poorer postural habits in your own pictures at the console, **it's always best to:**

- Get a **postural assessment** done from a **professional** who can then create a proper postural awareness, exercise and stretching program that is customized towards your unique needs.
- **Not wait until your vertebrae start to fuse (Dowager's hump)**. When that happens, unfortunately no amount of strengthening or stretching exercises will reverse this damage.
- Realize that we all get some degree of osteoarthritis as **we age**, so please have realistic expectations if you are older.
- Be **kind and patient** as you work to improve your posture and alignment.

Your body would like to be a:

1. Relaxed body - if there's tension anywhere in your body, there's friction which can lead to inflammation.
2. Unique body - what works for one, doesn't work for another.
3. Today's body - meet yourself and your body where you are today.
4. Pain-free body – But, just because you are not in pain, does not mean you are playing at your optimum level. Please read this sentence again!

For good posture remember:

1. The **body follows the head**. If the head goes forward, it leads to poke neck and rounded shoulders. If you change your head position, your body will follow. Keep your chin back and the breastbone up a little.
2. **Shoulders are back and free** with your breastbone lifted a little.
3. **Hip hinge:** hinge from your hips (instead of slumping forward) to turn the page or reach up to an upper manual.
4. To play at the **extreme ends** of the keyboard, **lean to the side** as far as is needed to allow your arms and hands to be aligned properly.

What is proper posture at the keyboard?

A proper seated position at the keyboard has the **spine in neutral and the body relaxed:**

- A. The head should be centred over the shoulder.
- B. Arms: elbows are slightly in front of body and comfortably bent, forearms are parallel to the lowest manual.
 - If the elbows are by your sides, move the organ bench back a little.
 - If the elbows are almost straight when you reach to the manuals, bring the organ bench closer.
- C. Fingers: should be arched (curved loosely) with the thumb being a bit straighter.

- D. Pelvis: you are anchored through your Sitzbones (sit bones) and can shift weight from one side to another, and to the front and back (hip hinge).

More helpful suggestions:

1. Effective Warmups

Always warm up for a few minutes! If you feel safe, you can **warm up your fingers and wrists** on the steering wheel during your drive to church, then do **larger stretches** once you get to the church. The following movements and stretches are done standing. **Never go beyond any point of pain!**

- Arm swinging side-to-side (5-10x to each side)
- Arm swinging forward and backwards (5-10x)
- One-arm overhead side stretch (hold 10-15s each side)
- Two-arm overhead reach (hold 10-15s each side)
- Raise one knee to waist height, lower your foot forward on an imaginary platform, raise the knee to waist height again then lower it to the floor. (5-10x on each side)
- Additional finger warmups can be done at a keyboard, now that the large muscle groups have been warmed up.

2. Stretches while standing or when seated at the organ. These will help to maintain good posture and reverse poor posture.

- **Chin Tuck** (for poke neck): tuck your chin to your chest and drop the shoulders without collapsing in the lower back. Hold chin tuck for 15-30s.
- **Shoulder squares**: with shoulders back and free, draw a square slowly with one or both shoulders: go up, back, down, forward. Do 5 times forward and backward with one or both shoulders.
- **Reverse shrug** (for rounded shoulders): clasp your hands behind you and rest them on your lower back, then drop both shoulders, and let the shoulder blades come towards each other; to intensify the stretch, lift your clasped hands away from your lower back without shrugging your shoulders or collapsing in the lower back. Hold for 15-30s.

Recommended Reading and Videos:

1. Canadian 24hr movement guidelines (Physical Activity)
 - CSEPS 24 Hr movement guidelines (18-64 years)
<https://csepguidelines.ca/adults-18-64/>
 - CSEPS 24 Hr movement guidelines (65yrs +)
<https://csepguidelines.ca/adults-65/>
2. “Yoga with Cassandra (gentle)” has hundreds of free videos for most ages and abilities.
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCX32D3gKXENrhOXdZjWWtMA>
If you experience pain or cannot do the stretches, ask for help from a local certified yoga instructor. Very gentle yoga classes are available at yoga and exercise centres.
3. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/text-neck-study-1.4071191> Smartphone-related neck pain on the increase (April 2017)

Biographies

Before retirement two years ago, **Dr. Steven Benson** had been in Chiropractic practice for 37 years in Utah, California and British Columbia, with an emphasis on the occupational injuries of musicians and dancers. Both his parents were Doctors of Chiropractic, and his mother was the first female Chiropractor in Utah. In addition to treatment with manipulations and muscle therapies, he had an extensive nutrition-based practice. He taught neurology at the West Coast College of Massage Therapy for several years and has done research on orthotics with Ballet Victoria and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. He is a certified Aquafit instructor. He is known in the musical community as a part-time professional pianist, organist, harpsichordist and choir director and has often presented workshops for musicians on how to attain the best posture and alignment while playing. Several churches in Canada and the United States have asked him to record hymns into their digital pipe organs for use in services when there isn't a live musician available. His piano lessons began at age eight and organ lessons at age sixteen. He is privileged to have studied the organ with Clay Christianson, retired LDS Tabernacle organist, and the brilliant theatre organist Frederick Landwehr. Piano studies were with the Steinway artist Susan Duehlmeier, in Salt Lake City. His studies in sports medicine and biomechanics started in 1983 with the “grandfather” of Chiropractic sports medicine, Dr. Leroy Perry Jr., which changed the trajectory of his career. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Steven at steven.benson1@outlook.com.

Susanne Reul-Zastre is a Body BluePrint certified Personal Trainer and Aquafit instructor, registered and certified with the BCRPA as both Group Fitness instructor & Weight Trainer, and has taken additional training to teach exercise classes to cancer survivors. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Music History from the University of Victoria, a Master's degree in Organ Performance from Western University, an Associateship with the Royal Canadian College of

Organists (RCCO), and a Diploma in Sacred Church Music from the Catholic College for Church Music and Music Paedagogy in Regensburg (Germany). As the Director of Music at St Luke Cedar Hill Anglican Church, Victoria, BC since spring 2003, Susanne heads the music ministry team, conducts the choir and is actively involved in preparing the musical component for weekly Sunday and special worship services, oversees the Soloists program, and for 15+ years also coordinated the Choral Bursary program. Susanne is the President of the Executive of the [Victoria Chapter of the RCCO](#) (Royal Canadian College of Organists) for the 2021-2022 season. Since 1995 she has served in various roles on the executive (President, Past President, Newsletter Editor, Secretary, Member-at-Large) and been a member of the Centre's Hart Scholarship Committee for the past decade. She continues in her role as correspondent to Organ Canada and The Continuo online newsletter on behalf of the Victoria RCCO Centre. In addition, Susanne has adjudicated organ exams for the Greater Victoria Performing Arts Festival and the RCCO. If you have any questions, please contact Susanne at president@rcco-victoria.org.