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Back to Basics: Using Effects Pedals, Part 2

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In [Part 1](#) of this two-part feature on the basics of using effects pedals, we looked at the accepted standard order for connecting stompboxes in front of your guitar amp, as well as a few alternatives. This time we'll examine ways to connect more complex setups and pedalboards and throw in a few tips and tricks.



Stereo Pedals

Many delay and chorus pedals, and a few others, come with stereo outputs that enable you to make the most of the wide soundstage that these effects can produce. If you only have one amp you will of course use only the mono output from such effects. With two amps and a single stereo pedal on the floor, you obviously just connect one to the left out and one to the right out, but often it's not quite so simple. Effects chains with multiple pedals might throw up conflicts in connecting order — perhaps you have a stereo chorus or Uni-Vibe-style pedal that you prefer to use *before* your overdrive, but you also want to make use of the width of the stereo field. Ideally, you would connect any stereo pedal last in the chain, but in the above scenario you would have to decide either to run the overdrive after only one of the stereo outputs and keep the other output clean, or compromise your tonal ideals and put the overdrive before the stereo effect. That, or buy a second overdrive pedal ... and deal with the tap dance of stepping on both at once!

Other conflicts arise when you have two stereo pedals in your setup. Sometimes more complex stereo delay and reverb units will have stereo inputs as well as outputs, and this makes it easy to — for example — connect a stereo chorus pedal before it and get the full stereo effect of both units. Otherwise, you will have to decide whether the sound of stereo chorus or stereo echo or stereo reverb, whatever the case may be, is most important to your sound. Try all the alternatives, and go with whatever feels like the least obtrusive compromise.

Split Chains

Sometimes it's extremely useful to split your signal chain to achieve an asymmetrical, non-identical (ie non-stereo) sound from two amplifiers. For example, imagine your pedalboard runs *compressor* → *stereo vibe* → *overdrive* → *echo*. With two amps to play through, you could split the left output of the vibe pedal to amp 1, and send the right output on to the rest of the effects chain and ultimately to amp 2. Now, when you step on the overdrive that's after the vibe pedal, you get crunch and lead tones in amp 2, while amp 1 stays crisp and clean to retain better definition. Or, set amp 1 to always be a little crunchy, to beef up your clean and rhythm tones, then you'll go into a thick, rich lead tone when you step on the overdrive, which will result in pedal-based clipping in amp 2, and milder amp-based clipping in amp 1.

If you have two non-identical amps, or one big amp and one smaller amp, try using the smaller, less powerful of the two in the amp 1 position (with the split from earlier in the effects chain) and cranking it up to achieve some natural tube distortion. Often this blend works great with a larger, cleaner amp (which,



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Parallel Paths

You can also make use of multiple signal paths with just one amplifier, providing that amp has two channels, or even two inputs. Say you want to maintain some definition and clarity in your tone, even when you're using overdrive for leads, and the dirty amp/clean amp blend described above appeals to you. With a two-channel amp (that is, an amp with two independent channels, *not* a channel-switching amp), split your signal before your overdrive or distortion pedal, and run it to channel one set for clean, then send it on to the rest of the effects and out to channel 2. Even two channels in the same amp, but set with different gain and EQ levels, can yield a richer, more complex tone than just one channel. (Note: when doing this, ensure that the two channels are working in-phase of each other; if your sound is notably thin and "hollow" sounding when you try both channels together, one is most likely out of phase. Some effects pedals reverse phase signal between input and output, so splitting the signal before that pedal could cause such a reversal; many Fender blackface and silverface amps of the '60s and '70s have two channels that are out of phase with each other — splitting to different signal paths might cure this, or retain it. You will have to experiment to see what works. Also, you can often use input 1 and input 2 in a single-channel amp with two inputs to achieve some of the same results.)

Effects-Loop Pedals

Looper pedals, which are really just signal-chain-routing devices with footswitches to select either of one, two, or even more "loops," can be very useful if you have a lot of effects on your board, and don't want to run your signal through them at all times, thus potentially depleting its quality. If you use pedals that are notably noisy even when off, or that result in a loss of highs, lows, or general signal fidelity when they aren't switched in, a looper is a great way of rectifying the situation. And you can use any number of pedals within even a single loop, to take them out of the signal path when not in use. Run a patch cable from the loop pedal's "send" to the input of the first pedal in the loop and string the rest together as normal, concluding with a patch cable to the "return" of the loop pedal. Any pedals that you use frequently and which aren't problematic regarding noise or tone sucking — a good overdrive or compressor, for example — can still go before the loop pedal (ie between guitar and loop pedal). If you have just one pedal in the loop, leave it on at all times, and let the loop footswitch take it in and out of the signal path. With more than one pedal in the loop, you'll need to switch effects on at the start of the song that requires it (with the loop still off), and bring it in with the loop switch as needed, or use a looper with multiple loops to, once again, leave all the looped pedals on all the time.

Buffers

There's a lot of talk about true-bypass pedals these days, and in many cases true bypass is a good feature. The term "true bypass" (also referred to as "hard-wired bypass") means that a pedal routes the signal directly from input to output when switched off, and the feature is intended to preserve signal quality, rather than routing it through a portion of the effects circuitry even when "off," as some pedals do. Using a lot of true-bypass pedals in a row can still deplete your signal, however, even when they're all off (or, in fact, *particularly* when they're all off), because they still route it through a lot of extra wire. Also, the use of a long guitar cord both before and after a string of true-bypass pedals adds up to a long distance for that signal to travel, with the result of some inevitable loss of fidelity. A quality buffer, either in the form of an individual unit or a buffer built within one of the pedals in your chain, can help to resolve this problem. Essentially a clean, unity gain (or low gain) preamp that is always on, a buffer enables your signal to travel through much greater lengths of wire without losing volume level or tone. If you find your guitar sounds noticeably flatter and muddier when played through your chain of true bypass pedals (all switched off) than it does when plugged straight into the amp, a buffer might be the answer.

In the end, there are no fixed rules for the use of effects pedals, many, many variations in the "traditional" setups exist, and when rules do seem to exist, there are always exceptions. Experiment with whatever you can get your hands on, keep your mind open to the alternatives, and determine what works best for you and your music.