

Choir Accompaniment at the Organ.

Felipe Dominguez

<http://dominguezorgan.blogspot.com/>

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Choir accompaniment is a great part in the life of an organist. Where there is an organist in a religious service, there is likely to be a choir which most of the time will require the assistance of the organist. The organ provides a wonderful array of possibilities that can enhance dramatically the performance of the choir. There are some guiding principles that a choir accompanist should follow when performing the duties of playing for a choir:

1. **The conductor is the last voice.** You could disagree in some points, which you can talk about, but ultimately, you are a resource for the conductor, and he/she is in charge.
2. **Be a versatile resource.** Be always ready to do what the conductor asks, i.e. play two or three choir parts, slower, faster, play from measure 26, etc. The best way to be a sharp tool during rehearsal is to PRACTICE well beforehand, so you are very familiar with the score and you don't have to focus on the mechanics of playing the piece, but on the conductor's instructions.
3. **Enhance, don't overpower the choir's performance.** You are part of the choir. Don't be a rock star or a secret agent. Use the golden mean principle.
4. **Study and understand the piece.** This is important especially when dealing with non-organ arrangements of music. In this case you are taking the position of arranger. Make sure you understand the flow of the music and the function of the accompaniment (sections where the organ modulate, interludes, preludes, organ coda, etc.) so you can decide what to do.
5. **Be adaptable.** Remember that you need to be musical and a strong asset to the choir. Be ready to make the necessary changes for the choir to be successful. Nothing is set in stone.

Types of scores used for choir accompaniment

1) Organ or generic keyboard score

There are several types of organ scores. Some will have more organ instructions than others, like registrations, manual changes, etc. Some will only have some technical specification i.e. use pedal or manuals only, and very little or none registration instructions.

KYRIE.

Andantino. $\text{♩} = 84.$

SOPRANO.

TENOR.

BASSE.

Contre-Basse.

ORGUE.

Andantino.

p

Mass Cesar Franck

Possibilities at the organ

As far as registration, the easiest score is the organ detailed score. This type of score will have specific registration instructions, manual changes, pedal use, etc. You will want to follow this kind of score closely. This kind of detail in the score denotes an understanding of the organ from the composer/arranger that should be respected. When you come across either an organ score with little or no registration instructions or a generic keyboard score, there is more freedom in the possibilities. Be creative. Find melodic patterns in the score that can be brought out with a solo combination.

2) Choir parts

These types of scores consist only of the choral parts with text that will be sung by the choir, with no accompaniment part. These types of score can be found in open score, or regular hymnbook score.

$\text{♩} = 46$

S
C

1) O Sa - lu - ta - ris Ho - sti - a Quæ cœ - li
2) U - ni tri - no - que Do - mi - no sit sem - pi -

T
B

Hymnal choral score

Et in - car - na - - - tus est de Spi -

Et in - car - na - tus est de Spi -

Et in - car - na - tus est de Spi -

Et in - car - na - tus est de Spi -

Open score

Possibilities at the organ

Unless you decide to write a more elaborated arrangement, you will mostly be playing the choir parts. There are some options in a piece like this that you can consider:

- Use registration changes.
- Solo out the tenor or alto melodies either in their original range or an octave above. Make sure the alto or tenor parts have a nice melodic shape.
- Play a phrase as an interlude.

3) Orchestral reduction

Orchestral reduction is a transcription of an orchestral piece for a keyboard instrument, which is usually for rehearsal purposes.

Excerpt from the Oratorio Achilleus, Op. 50 (Bruch, Max)

Possibilities at the organ

You will mostly find situation like this when performing music from the “classical” repertoire, like the famous Handel’s Messiah. When you encounter such an accompaniment I will suggest you to obtain the **original orchestral score** and a **recording of the piece**. Compare your reduction to the recording and the original score. Many times the reduction will have many notes, including doublings, because the editor tried to be as faithful to the original as possible, or it will have many notes missing, because the arranger wanted to simplify the task for the performer. Either way, you should make that decision. You should simplify the score for the organ most of the time by first, **eliminating doublings** (ex. 1) and eliminating **non-keyboard gestures**

Andante mosso *BARITONE SOLO* *mf*

Andante mosso

p

When blossoms flowered 'mid the snows Up-
 Je - su Re - demp - tor o - mni - um Quem

Possibilities at the organ

- a) Arranging the score. You could rewrite the score completely on finale or some other notation software. However, a more practical approach is to be able to arrange the piece with minimal notes directly in the original score. The piano score will usually have many arpeggiated gestures in the bass clef. The lower note will be the note that will define the quality of the note. If you have an arpeggio, you will probably want to sustain the lower note until the next arpeggio. This will create a nice flow and a legato feeling and a firm harmonic foundation. If the texture is too thin or consists of arpeggios in both hands, consider analyzing the harmonic structure, and holding down the chords that the arpeggios are outlining.
- b) Registration. Piano accompaniments are usually very rich in melodic material. Find those and play them in a solo combination so they can be brought out.

(ex. 2). When the bass line of the piece is constantly moving, or “walking” don’t hesitate to use only manuals.

[Ex. 1] Eliminating the bass doubling by only playing the top line of the bass will help you shape the line better. A 16’ foot stop can help create the bass effect.



From Handel's *Judas Maccabeus*

[Ex. 2]

a) Non keyboard gestures make it difficult to perform and shape lines. In this case you can only play the top line which belongs to violin 1 and is the most audible part in an orchestral performance.



From Handel's *Messiah*

b) In this case, you can repeat the whole chord, only the top line, or alternate between repeating the top and bottom line of the chord, pivoting in the center note.



Excerpt from the Oratorio *Achilleus*, Op. 50 (Bruch, Max)

c) In this case, you need to simplify the score. Too many notes will make it difficult for you to play musically in a legato style and to support the choir
[Example from Lizst choral]

4) Piano accompaniment

These accompaniments are designed to be played on a piano, with features proper to that instrument. You will probably run into many scores that fall into this category, especially in the LDS context.