

Hymn Playing, Tempo and Meter
American Guild of Organists Super Saturday
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Tempo is the speed at which music is played. It is measured in beats per minute.

A metronome is an indispensable tool for church musicians.

- Mechanical
- Electronic
- Watch. Indicates 60 and 120 beats per minute. Has limited usefulness. Everything else must be guessed.

If you have never played with a metronome, give yourself some time to learn to do it.

- Choose a setting and listen to it for a while and try to internalize it.
- Count and tap to the clicks.
- Choose something easy that you know well. Begin playing along and continue to count.
- Don't give up if at first you don't succeed. Like any skill, it comes with practice.

The best organists sing. It isn't necessary to be a trained singer but it is essential to put ourselves in the position of the congregation. Hymns are written to be sung. If we only play the hymns, we don't understand what we are asking the congregation to do.

Tempo must be thought out carefully before hand. It should never be arbitrary or decided on the spot.

While tempo can be a matter of personal taste, there are a number of things to consider when choosing a tempo.

A range of tempo indications have been suggested by the editors of the LDS hymn book at the top of every hymn. They are general and allow for a number of considerations.

1. The age of the singers.

- Youth tend to sing faster than adults.
- Women tend to sing faster than men.

2. The size of the congregation.

- Smaller congregations (wards) can sing faster.
- Larger congregations (Stake Conference) tend to sing slower.

3. The acoustical environment.

- A live acoustical environment will help slower tempos sound more dynamic.
- A dead acoustical environment will increase the monotony of a slow tempo

4. The length of the phrases

Consult the metrical index (p. 405) or count on fingers.

- *Sing We Now at Parting* (no. 156). Short phrases. Breathing places occur on long notes. Plenty of places to breathe.
- *Prayer of Thanksgiving* (no. 93) 12 12 12 12 -- Longer hymn. Longer phrases. Some breathing places occur on quarter notes which decreases the time to take a breath.
- *I Stand all Amazed* (no. 193) 13 13 13 13 18 6 5
- *The Spirit of God* (no. 2) Long meter. Long hymn. Ends of phrases tend to fall on quarter or eighth notes which decreases the time to take a breath.

Hymns that are composed entirely of long phrases can leave the congregation out of breath and uncomfortable by the end of the hymn.

- *Lead Kindly Light* (no. 97) 10 4 10 4 10 10 -- Hymns that mix long and short phrases are easier to sing.

The numbers do not always tell the full picture. Always sing to get a feel for how it feels.

5. Length of the hymn.

- *A Mighty Fortress* (no. 68) Long phrases mixed with short ones. One verse. Slower tempo can be effective.
- *I Believe in Christ* (no. 134) Short phrases. Long hymn. Faster tempo should be considered.
- *Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow* (no. 242) Short phrases. One verse.

6. Harmonic structure of the hymn

- *Count Your Blessings* (no. 241) Hymns with few chord changes can benefit from a faster tempo.
- *Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow* (no. 242) Chord changes on nearly every beat. A slower tempo allows time for each chord to settle in.

7. Meter of the hymn (Compound meter and cut time)

Always check the editorial suggestion at the top of the hymn. The note preceding the equal sign is the one suggested to get the beat.

Hymns in compound meter. An eighth note gets the beat. A quarter note gets two beats. A dotted quarter gets three beats, etc.

- *Master the Tempest is Raging* (no. 105) Two beats to the measure.
- *Love One Another* (no. 308) Two beats to the measure.
- *A Poor, Wayfaring Man of Grief* (no. 29) Eighth note is suggested to get the beat.

Hymns in cut time, 2/2 and 3/2. A half note gets one beat. A quarter note gets one half of a beat. A whole note gets two beats, etc.

- *Because I Have Been Given Much* (no. 219)
- *High on the Mountain top* (no. 5)
- *Sing Praise to Him* (no. 70) In 3/2
- *All Creatures of Our God and King* (no. 62) In 3/2

Some suggestions for moving the tempo and creating more energy.

No bill of rights in meter. Not all beats are created equal.

- 4/4 meter: Primary stress is on the first beat. Secondary stress is on the third beat.
- 3/4 meter: Primary stress is on the first beat. Secondary stress is on the third.
- 2/4 meter: Primary stress is on the first beat.

Both music and words have strong and weak beats. Being aware of the stresses in both the text and the music helps us to

- Play more musically and
- move the hymn along.

When playing hymns in triple meter, try counting only on the down beat:

> > > >

Now let us re-joice in the day of sal-va-tion (more musical. Naturally increases the tempo.)

Compare with counting in three:

> > > > > > > > > >

Now let us re-joice in the day of sal-va-tion (Every beat has a stress. It is less musical and has less buoyancy. Has a tendency to slow the tempo)

When playing meditative hymns in 4/4 meter think in 2/4 rather than 4/4.

1 2 1 2
> > > >
Where can I turn for **peace** (no. 129)

as opposed to

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
> > > > > >
Where can I turn **for** **peace**

This is especially effective with hymns composed of a half note followed by two quarter notes:

Jesus of Nazareth (no. 181)
Though Deepening Trials (no. 122)
Come, Ye Disconsolate (no. 115)

Once a suitable tempo has been decided,

- Practice with the metronome until the tempo is learned.
- Practice without the metronome and check yourself.
- During rehearsal, always take a few seconds before beginning each hymn for a silent review of the tempo before playing the first chord.
- Be sure and do the same thing before beginning to play each hymn during the Sacrament Service.
- Check yourself often to see if you maintain a steady tempo.
- If you can't maintain a steady tempo, use the metronome more. However, don't become a slave to the metronome.