

*During the Church's official launch ceremony of the 1985 Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Thomas S. Monson, then of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, said, "My prayer is that we will learn once again in the Church to really sing. We simply must do something with our congregational singing to bring out the spirit of music in the heart and soul of every boy, every girl, every man, and every woman."*

# Hymn-Playing Checklist for Organists

## Essential Ingredients for Joyful, Spirit-filled Hymn Singing

**Preparation: Prayerfully read and study the text.** Great hymn playing consists of projecting the spirit and meaning of the text. **Sing the hymn** (all four voice parts!). Doing so will alert you to potential problems for the singers, such as breathing, large melodic intervals, rhythmic challenges, etc. Also, occasionally sing along as you practice, to get a feel for the breathing, tempo, etc.

Five things to put on your check list before playing any hymn: **Registration, Tempo, Introduction, Phrasing, and Articulation.** It is the task of the organist to study each hymn in advance to determine the appropriate tempo, phrasing, and suitable organ registration for each hymn. Consider the "mood marking" of the hymn as a starting point.

### ☐ Registration: "Voicing" the Organ

The organ should provide approximately 50% of the overall volume; the congregation provides the other 50%. The organ must be strong enough to lead and yet not overpower. The organ does not merely accompany the hymn singing, it also leads out. In addition to volume, consider the timbre or "tone color" or "tone quality" of the registration.

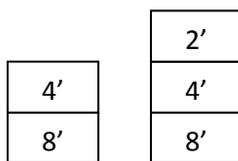
#### Two Basic Registrations for Hymn Singing:

- For reverent hymns: 8' & 4' principals; or modify to 8' flute & 4' principal
- For jubilant hymns: 8, 4, & 2' principals (+mixture)

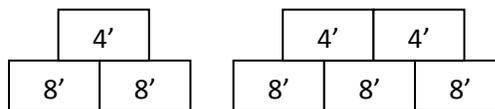
Pedal: Start with 8' principal and Gt to Ped and Sw to Ped couplers; add appropriate 16' stop(s). Listen!

#### Registration Variation:

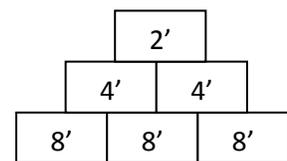
"Pyramid" registrations increase tonal depth and texture: Two 8s and one 4; three 8s, two 4s (and one 2), etc. If adding a stop does not benefit the texture or timbre, leave it off. Do not use celestes or tremolo for congregational singing. Use reeds sparingly and usually only on the last verse or chorus of jubilant hymns. In organ registration less is more; efficiency is the rule!



Two Basic Registrations



Pyramid Registrations



## □ Tempo: To Live or Die!

**Selecting the proper tempo** is vital to effective hymn singing. If a hymn is played too quickly, the congregation will not have time to breathe and sing all the words, so they won't sing. If a hymn is played too slowly, the congregation cannot endure the mental and physical energy necessary to sing and will bore easily. The result: They won't sing.

**Consult the printed metronomic markings** for tempo suggestions. Are you anywhere close? Guideline: Fast enough to sing a phrase; slow enough to be devotionally powerful. (Demo: #113 Our Savior's Love; #62 All Creatures of Our God and King)

Isolated elements in the hymn, such as long notes or long phrases, may determine tempo choices.

**Choose faster tempos** for hymns with long notes: (i.e. #109 The Lord My Pasture Will Prepare; #177 'Tis Sweet to Sing the Matchless Love), long phrases: (#197 O Savior, Thou Who Wearest a Crown), or both: (#198 That Easter Morn).

**Marcato-style hymns** (i.e. #249 Called to Serve; #250 We Are All Enlisted) are easy and fun to sing at faster tempos. But **legato-style hymns** of the faster type (i.e. #67 Glory to God on High; #28 Saints, Behold How Great Jehovah) require time for singers to create energy and power in each note. Be careful not to prod or pressure the singers beyond their physical capacities. Likewise, be sensitive to the spiritual and emotional needs of the singers, giving them ample time to express tender feelings and receive spiritual nourishment.

**Decide on the tempo** that you believe is appropriate. Play the introduction in that tempo, and avoid broadening or slowing the final phrase. After the introduction, the tempo of the first few measures must be kept solid and unwavering. Expect a pull from the singers when they begin singing and learn to gently push through it. The "push and pull" will disappear over time as they become accustomed to your leadership. Congregational trust is determined by a distinctive introduction and a steady tempo in those first few measures of the hymn. A congregation that trusts its musician leaders will sing!

## □ The Hymn Introduction: The Ultimate Example

"And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a *distinction in the sounds*, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an *uncertain sound*, who shall prepare himself to the battle? (1 Cor. 14: 7-8, italics added)

**The organist's introduction reflects the spirit of the hymn.** It may be from one line in length to the complete hymn. Familiar hymns need only a phrase or two, but need to be long enough allow time for the congregation to open the hymnal and get ready to sing. Playing the complete hymn as the introduction would be useful and more effective: 1) when the hymn is less familiar, 2) to invite worshipers to focus following lengthy business items, 3) when the occasion is celebratory (or reflective).

**The introduction announces the tune, tempo, mood, style, and volume of the hymn.** Thus, the singers will feel more confident if the execution of the introduction matches the expected outcome of the first verse. Unless it is intentional, do not gradually open the expression pedal during the introduction. Doing so sounds indecisive, contributing to that "uncertain sound"!

## □ Phrasing (& Pulse): “Music’s Exquisite Life Blood”

Hymns must be singable; the poetry is what it’s all about!

**The organist should practice good phrasing**, intelligently allowing sufficient time for physical breaths where called for, but carrying over lines which make no sense to interrupt. Careful attention to punctuation and meaning will make proper phrasing natural.

**Breathe at the ends of text phrases.** Release the chord one beat or one-half beat short of the written notation, filling the time with a rest. This encourages the singers to breathe at phrase endings.

- **Complete Lift:** Rhythmically release fingers and feet at 1) end of introduction, 2) between verses, 3) between complete phrases (periods, exclamation points, and question marks).
- **Partial Lift:** Release soprano and alto voices, while sustaining bass and tenor voices at unfinished phrases with “appropriate” commas and semicolons, as text dictates.
- **Carry Over:** Sustain voice lines between phrases where texts dictate, if reasonable.

(Demo: #175 O God, the Eternal Father)

**Mentally count the beats at phrase endings** (Demo: #201 Joy to the World).

**The organ must sound like it’s singing.** A helpful consideration to achieve a singing sound is to mentally reduce the beats or pulse per measure. It is much easier to keep a forward movement if, for example, in common time the half note is regarded as the pulse rather than the quarter note. This doesn’t always mean a faster tempo, just a better feeling of forward movement.

- Four beats become two per measure (Demo: #2 The Spirit of God).
- Three beats become one per measure (Demo: #304 Teach Me to Walk in the Light).

Play some hymns with a slight, imperceptible accelerando in the middle of a phrase, relaxing the tempo at the phrase ending (Demo: #169 As Now We Take the Sacrament).

## □ Articulation: Voice Leading

**Articulation is the key to movement.** If tempo, pulse, and phrasing pump “life blood” into hymn playing, it is articulation that ignites the spark and creates rhythm. Basically, articulation is the connection or separation of tones through a variety of touches. It is the “connective tissue” between the notes in music.

**Most hymns are comprised of vocal “lines,”** not chords. To master the art of voice leading and legato-style hymn playing, one must develop finger independence and learn the basic rules of “manual technique”: hand division, finger crossing, finger glissando, finger substitution, alternate fingering, treatments of common tones and repeated notes, legato, attack, release, etc. This list may sound daunting and tedious, but once these skills are integrated, they become natural and reflexive, and you will be better equipped to lead congregational song.

**Legato Style:** If you learn to play the pedals with both feet and distribute the soprano, alto, and tenor parts between the two hands, it is easier to play legato style. If you do not use the pedal, you must learn to play the four voice parts on the manual, while striving to execute legato lines, especially the soprano and bass. Either method requires constant study, concerted practice, and careful listening.

### Repeated Notes

The style for playing hymns is legato, but repeated notes in any voice, especially the soprano, must be played with clean, precise, rhythmic breaks. Playing repeated notes cleanly is a vital factor in solidifying the rhythmic pulse of the hymn. The habit of tying all repeated notes leads to weak, imprecise playing. However, as with everything in life, there are exceptions:

### When to Tie and Not to Tie

**Common Tones** are shared repeated notes in succeeding voice parts (see illustration #1):

- Tie ascending common tones
- Do not tie descending common tones

**Repeated Notes** in the same voice part (see illustration #2):

- Never tie repeated notes in the soprano part.
- Tie repeated notes from strong to weak beats.
- Do not tie voice parts across bar lines, unless common tones are involved.
- Successive repeated notes in all four voices require special treatment to avoid sounding choppy (i.e #152 God Be with You 'Till We Meet Again).
  - In fast hymns tie one inner voice (usually Alto), while observing all the other rules.
  - In slower hymns tie both inner voices, while observing all the other rules.

**Illustration #1: Common Tones**

**Illustration #2: Repeated Notes**

### Careful Cadences

Unless repeated notes are involved, take extra precaution at phrase-ending, two-chord cadences to play all four parts LEGATO, with no breaks.

**In Conclusion:** The conscientious organist will “challenge the intelligent interest of the congregation and charge hymn singing with thought and feeling.” ---Luther D. Reed