

# Simple Ways to Beautify Hymn Accompaniment

*Presented at the 2013 Super Saturday of the Utah Valley Chapter of the American Guild of Organists*

## A new experience every time

“Hymn playing should never become a routine and commonplace thing. A conscientious organist must continually inspire the congregation and not allow the singing to become monotonous and prosaic.”

~Dale Wood, *Festive Hymn Introductions*

### **The foundation of beautiful hymn accompaniment:**

- Find love and joy in your calling as organist. The spirit in your heart is conveyed through your music.
- Be prepared! Practice the hymns, spend time studying the hymn texts, and select appropriate registrations, then play with confidence.
- Play appropriate, well-prepared prelude music. This is not the time to quickly run through the congregational hymns. Prepare the environment for congregational singing.
- Play hymns at their proper tempo. Invest in an inexpensive metronome, or download a metronome app for your phone. Hymns should not drag!
- Adequately support your congregation with the organ's volume. If you're too soft, the congregation will feel uncomfortable singing out. If you are too loud, they won't be able to hear themselves sing. (But when in doubt, err on the loud side!) If you're unsure, ask those who sit in the back to give you feedback on the organ's volume following the service.
- Change registration to follow the mood of the hymns and to follow the hymn text. Don't use the same registration from week to week or from hymn to hymn.
- Be sensitive to the hymn text: Breathe—or don't breathe—with the text. Keep the message of the hymn intact, and read or sing along with the verses.

### **Additional ways to beautify congregational singing, to be used in moderation:**

- Alter the introduction. It doesn't have to be anything huge, just do something a little bit differently to help prepare the congregation to sing. Some options include:
  - soloing out the melody
  - accumulating the voices (start with soprano alone)
  - utilizing pedal point
  - adding suspensions and/or passing tones
  - beginning with a fanfare
  - using something based on a published arrangement

Make sure it is very clear to the congregation when to begin singing.

- Play all the voices on one manual during the second-to-last verse, or play the pedals but remove all 16' stops. If you generally don't play pedals, remove the bass coupler for this verse. Add the pedal, 16' stops, or bass coupler back for the final verse, which increases the impact of the deep pedal tone.

- On a soprano/alto section of a hymn, mirror the soprano an octave lower on a verse, or use a pedal point on a verse to support those men who continue to sing the melody.
- Utilize a reed or other solo on a different manual, such as the fanfares in *God of Our Fathers, Whose Almighty Hand*.
- Solo out a voice of the hymn:
  - solo the soprano, especially on an unfamiliar hymn by using use the melody coupler, a publication like *The Organist's Upper Hand*, or writing it out;
  - solo out the tenor (loco or 8va) on a hymn with a beautiful tenor line;
  - raise the alto up an octave to highlight a nice alto line.
- Change keys prior to the final verse. Make sure the congregation will hear and recognize the new key before beginning to sing. A quick way to change keys up ½ a step is to step down with the pedal from the tonic two whole steps, playing the V7 of the new key on the second one.
- In appropriate places during one verse of a hymn add non-chord tones such as:
  - passing tones, which “fill in” the space between two primary notes;
  - neighboring tones, tones that step up or down, then back to the chord tone;
  - suspensions, which prolong a consonant note while the harmony changes, usually on a strong beat, and then generally resolve down by step to the third of the new chord;
- Add a pedal point. A pedal point is either the dominant (usually) or the tonic, played in the pedal and sustained throughout harmonic changes in sections of the hymn.
- Use a different version of the hymn from an old hymnal, such as the chorus of *There is Sunshine In My Soul* for one verse (watch out for different key signatures).
- Add an end of phrase fanfare or elaboration in an upbeat hymn throughout a verse.
- Utilize a short interlude between verses—begin the interlude before the congregation would feel the need to sing.
- Use a free accompaniment on the final verse of a familiar hymn. Announce in advance for the congregation to sing that verse in unison. See Don Cook's handout.

**Begin Slowly.** Don't immediately rush in and start playing a free accompaniment every week! Make a small change here and there, always evaluating whether or not it was effective, if the congregation responded favorably or not, and what you could have done to better share the Spirit of each hymn.

Make sure that you don't draw undue attention to yourself, or detract from the hymn itself. Everything you do as organist should be to share the message of the hymns more fully with your congregation. Nothing should be showy or unnecessarily elaborate, or the members of the congregation will focus on the organist instead of the music. Again, always be well-prepared. If the organist is not well-prepared, members of the congregation will feel unsure about singing.

Alexander Pope said in the 18th century, “Some to the Church repair, not for the doctrine but for the music there.” Let us strive to make music the crowning element of each of our worship services. May we enhance the music so that we can help the members of our congregation better worship our Savior through song.

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