

“Five Things You Can Learn to Do in a Week to Improve Your Hymn Playing”  
A Workshop for Organists by Mike Carson

## The Art of Distinctive Hymn Playing

*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? . . . What is it then? . . . I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. —1 Corinthians 14: 7-8, 15*

### I. Registration for Hymn Singing: “Get enough organ on!”

- Lead out; don’t just accompany. Congregations sing at the 8-foot pitch. They more easily hear the 16’ in the pedal and 4’ and 2’ pitches in the manuals.
- **Principal Chorus:** Principals 8, 4, 2 (for jubilant hymns). For a brighter principal chorus, add the mixture stop.
- **Flute Chorus:** Flute 8; Flute 4; (Flute 2, if it is light) for reverent hymns
- **Modified Flute Chorus:** Exchanging the Flute 4’ for the Principal 4’ gives a brighter sound to the flute chorus. It looks like this: Flute 8, Principal 4, (Flute 2)
- **Pedal Registrations:** For all of the above registrations, begin with 8’ and 16’ stops in the pedal. “Swell to Pedal” and “Great to Pedal” couplers may be used with 16’ stops. Play the pedals with both feet or use the Bass Coupler and play all four voice parts on the Great manual. A pleasing balance between the manuals and pedals is essential.
- For a fuller sound to any of the choruses above, add one or two 8’ stops (except celestes) and another 4’ stop. Softer setups than these are rarely required for congregational singing.

**Very Important:** Open the Great and Swell expression pedals all the way before beginning to play the hymn introduction, and then don’t move them. Increase the volume and/or change tonal colors between the verses or before the choruses by adding or retiring stops. Listen for distortion on electronic organs and adjust the volume accordingly by closing the expression pedals an inch or two.

### II. “Breathe” with the Singers:

- **“Complete lift” at the end of the introduction, between verses, and at the ends of sentences in the text.** To “lift” means to rhythmically release all of the fingers and feet in perfect synchronization. Silence is good! The singers hear the silence between the notes; the silence helps create the rhythm.
- **“Partial lift” at phrase endings with commas in the text.** Release the soprano and alto voices, as in “Never leave us, / never leave us” or “Come, follow me, / the Savior said.” |
- **“Carry over” or sustain voice lines between phrases where text dictates.** Mark your hymnbook with Complete Lift |, Partial Lift /, and Carry-Over ..... Singers breathe when their bodies demand air. However, congregations that are in tune with the spirit of hymn singing will appreciate the organist’s efforts to convey the meaning of the text.

### **III. Play Meaningful Hymn Introductions:**

- The organ introduction....
  1. Announces the hymn tune.
  2. Establishes the key and tempo.
  3. Demonstrates the rhythm, mood, and style.
  4. Suggests the volume with which the hymn is to be sung.

The introduction teaches the singers in just a few seconds how the hymn will be sung—in tempo, rhythm, mood, and volume. The introduction should match the desired volume and tempo of the first verse should be easy for the congregation to “hear” when the singing should begin.

### **IV. Play Hymns at a Singable Tempo:**

- It is crucial that hymns be played at singable tempos. Hymns should be sung fast enough to comfortably sing a short phrase in one breath, but slow enough to be spiritually and devotionally powerful.
- Consult metronomic markings in the hymnal for a suggested tempo range.
- Choose the tempo of each hymn that fits best into the context of the service. The same hymn used as an opening or closing hymn may require a different tempo and/or mood.
- Rehearse with the music director in advance to determine tempo and style, etc.
- Leopold Mozart (1719-1787), father and teacher of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, said, “Even if a composer endeavors to explain more clearly the speed required...one has to deduce it from the piece itself, and this it is, by which the true worth of a musician can be recognized without fail.”

### **V. Play “offertory” soft and slow while the priests finish breaking the bread**

- Close the expression pedals for a softer effect.
- Push a piston for a softer registration (and close the expression pedals!).
- Play it MUCH slower with reverent expression.
- Sometimes play it without the pedals.
- Sometimes play the melody with ONE of the other parts (alto, tenor, or bass) to create a duet and a contrasting texture.
- Mark in the hymnal some possible stopping or skipping points for a finished ending.
- Sing all the verses, so the offertory isn’t needed!
- Alert the bishop, who is the priests quorum president, that the young men can stand to begin breaking the bread as soon as the hymn introduction begins. No need to wait until the singing begins.

### **VI. Bonus Tips**

- Organize prelude music and hymns in a binder, and put the music in the order for that day’s service playing.
- Learn hymn introductions in practice sessions for accuracy and clarity. Plan ahead!
- For preludes from the hymnal, create contrasting registrations on the Great and Swell manuals that are about the same volume to provide varied textures for each verse.
- You don’t need to do it alone! Ask an experienced organ teacher to help you!