

Planning, Preparing, and Playing Devotional Preludes from a Hymnal

Introduction

“An organist who has the sensitivity to quietly play prelude music from the hymnbook tempers our feelings and causes us to go over in our minds the lyrics, which teach the peaceable things of the kingdom ...” (President Boyd K. Packer).

The organ prelude:

- is a “call to worship”
- “...should create an atmosphere of worship that invites the spirit of revelation and testimony into Church meetings” (*LDS Church Handbook of Instructions*, [Music] section 14, 289).

“Volume, registration, tempo, and selection of music should encourage a thoughtful, gentle mood with careful attention to smooth rhythms, smooth keys, and graceful transitions from one hymn to another” (“Operational Memo”; LDS Temple Department; Jan. 4, 2006).

“Strive to be more punctual to meetings, sit quietly and listen to the prelude music, and experience reverence and revelation” (Elder Jay E. Jensen, “The Nourishing Power of Hymns,” *Ensign*, May 2007).

“Any hymn setting for organ should always point to the message of the hymn text and not to the organist” (Darwin Wolford).

I. Planning

- A. Rather than flipping through the hymnal at random, use hymns of the same topic, i.e. “Hymns of the Savior,” “Hymns of Comfort,” “Hymns of Supplication,” or seasonal hymns.
- B. For convenience, photo copy the hymns and arrange them in a three-ring binder using clear protective sheets.
- C. Obtain an erasable, fine-point marker to make notes and marks on the clear protective sheets.

II. Preparing

- A. Use hymns in complimentary key signatures. This approach gives the feeling of a “hymn medley” and creates an easy transition to the next hymn that is pleasing to the ear.
- B. Begin with a hymn in two or three sharps. Play each succeeding hymn, subtracting one sharp each time until reaching the key of C (no sharps or flats). After playing the hymn in the key of C, continue to the next hymn in the key of F (one flat), adding another flat in each hymns’ key signature until the final hymn in the series has three or four flats. (See diagram below.)
- C. Use the LDS Church Music site at www.lds.org to easily transpose and print hymns into different keys.

D > > > **G** > > > **C** > > > **F** > > > **Bb** > > > **Eb** > > > **Ab**
 2 sharps 1 sharp none 1 flat 2 flats 3 flats 4 flats

- D. Why is this order of keys pleasing to the ear? _____
 E. The following is an example of a series of hymns arranged into a topic and in the order of the complimentary keys illustrated above:

Hymns of the Savior

- D Major: Where Can I Turn for Peace? (#129)
- G Major: Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee (#141)
- C Major: Come, Follow Me (#116)
- F Major: How Great the Wisdom and the Love (#195)
- Bb Major: Come unto Jesus (#117)
- Eb Major: There Is a Green Hill Far Away (#194)
- Ab Major: I Stand All Amazed (#193)

- F. Would you like to have a numerical listing of all the LDS hymns grouped by keys? DeeAnn Stone has compiled such a list on her Web site: *Resources for LDS Organists*. Copy this URL into your Web browser: www.ldsorganists.info/key.htm

III. Playing

- A. Rather than always playing the hymns in the traditional four-part style, utilize a variety of “voicings” that interpret the text, while using the written harmonization of the hymn.
1. For example, begin by playing the solo melody line with the right hand.
 2. Then, add a “duet” accompaniment on the other manual derived from the best moving lines in the alto, tenor, or bass parts with the left hand. (It may be helpful to mark your chosen duet part in the score by drawing lines connecting the desired notes in the alto, tenor, and bass parts.)
 3. Next, play a “trio” by using the soprano, alto, and tenor lines using both hands on one manual at written pitch or both hands very softly one octave higher.
 4. Finish by playing the four-part voicing, with or without pedal, on one manual.
- B. When playing the duet voicing, keep in mind that the most pleasing harmonic intervals at phrase endings are unisons, 3rds, or 6ths. “Your ear is the most useful resource of knowledge” (Verena Hatch). If it sounds pleasing, it is right. Study voice leading principles in a good theory book or music dictionary to better understand this concept.
- C. Another very effective voicing is called “soloing out,” achieved by playing the melody line on one manual with the right hand while playing the alto and tenor lines on the other manual with the left hand. After the skill of “soloing out” is mastered on the manuals, you may begin to play the bass line simultaneously on the pedals! “This skill requires time, patience, and practice to develop, but—when coupled with the ability to select effective combinations for melody and harmony—the results are striking” (Darwin Wolford).

Note: An excellent book containing a selection of hymns with the melodies already “soloed out” is *The Organist’s Upper Hand* by Darwin Wolford, published by Jackman Music Corp., Orem, Utah. This book also contains a helpful list of various registrations that work satisfactorily for solo/accompaniment combinations.

Helpful Hint: While playing prelude music, “solo out” the melody in the treble register of the organ and you will hear a shift toward more reverence. The organ’s 8’ stops are in the same tonal register as the human speaking voice. While playing the melody an octave higher, the congregation begins to notice their irreverence and will respond almost immediately to your subtle “call to worship.”

D. Indicate on the score the voicings you have selected for each verse:

1. Two-part voicings: SA (soprano/alto), ST (soprano/tenor), SB (soprano/bass).
When using the bass line as a duet accompaniment, you may choose to play it an octave higher for better effect.
2. Three-part voicings: SAT (soprano/alto/tenor), SAB (soprano/alto/bass), STB (soprano/tenor/bass).
3. Four-part voicing: SATB
4. Beside the “S” put an arrow pointing up or an arrow pointing down to indicate playing the soprano melody up or down an octave.

E. To express the meaning of each verse’s text, repeat the hymn several times, using the recommended voicings above and a variety of the registrations suggested below.

Two Organ Registrations for Playing Hymn Preludes: Chorus Registration and Solo Registration

- **Chorus registrations** are used when both hands play on the same manual. Select one or two soft 8’ stops such as strings, Gemshorn, Dulciana, soft flutes, and celestes or combined with a soft Flute 4’ stop. Listen as you practice to determine if the registrations and volume are pleasing to the ear and are not intrusive to the spirit of worship.
- **Solo registrations** are used to “solo out” the melody. Begin by locating stops soft enough for accompaniments, most likely the same ones used in the chorus registrations above. Try various stop combinations, listening for blend and balance. The melody must be a little louder than the accompaniment, and the accompaniment should be somewhat softer than the melody and of a contrasting tone color, containing the quality of “transparency,” with “sufficient body to give support,” but having a “certain reticence” (Joseph W. Clokey).

Examples of common solo registrations:

- any Flute 8’ played at pitch or up an octave
- any Principal 8’ played at pitch or down an octave
- Flute 8’ with Flute 4’
- Flute 8’ with Flute 2’
- Flute 8’ with Flute 4’ and Flute 2’
- Flute 8’ and Nazard 2^{2/3}
- Oboe

Occasionally, tremolo could be used on the solo manual.

IV. Pedal Registrations

- A. Experiment with the pedal stops. Sometimes a soft 16' is sufficient alone or combined with a soft 8' stop. The accompaniment manual may also be coupled to the pedal with or without a soft 16' stop. If you tend to play the pedal notes an octave lower than written with the left foot, try omitting the 16' stop.
- B. The pedal should never sound thick, muddy, or opaque, but should blend clearly with the other organ voices.
- C. While not always possible on smaller organs, a third, distinct tone color can be used in the pedal, but it should be less dominant than the melody while matching the accompaniment in volume.

V. Registration Changes

- A. Keep registration changes simple, one per verse, adding or removing just one stop.
- B. Make registration changes with the fingers off the keys in between verses.
- C. If a registration change is desired between phrases of a verse or for a refrain, simply move the melody hand up or down an octave without changing stops. Simple!

VI. Harmonization from the Hymnal

- A. Remain faithful to the hymn harmonization in the hymnal. Likewise, improvised suspensions, passing tones, pedal points, and the like, if used too much, can hinder the listener's concentration on the text of the hymn and draw unwanted attention to the organist.
- B. The listener needs to be able to follow the melody without too much trouble.
- C. “[Prelude] music should not call undue attention to itself, but should leave the thoughts and feelings of the [worshippers] free for prayer and introspection” (“Operational Memo”; LDS Temple Department; Jan. 4, 2006).

VII. Benefits of Using This Interpretive Approach to Playing Devotional Preludes

- Lends stability, nobility, and unity to the worship service
- Prepares worshippers spiritually for effective hymn singing
- Helps worshippers feel more comfortable with less-familiar hymns
- Alerts the worshippers to the topic of the meeting
- Focuses the listener's attention on the hymn texts, which “if we will listen..., are teaching the gospel; for the hymns...are, in fact, a course in doctrine” (President Boyd K. Packer).

VIII. A Form of Improvisation

In a way, playing hymns as preludes in this manner is a form of improvisation. Some organists would be terrified by the thought of improvising a hymn prelude, but it need not be elaborate or complicated. Experiment with some of the additional styles listed below to create “improvised” hymn preludes.

- A. Begin with the melody on the first phrase and add voices one at a time as the hymn progresses.
- B. Alternate phrases of unison and harmony.
- C. Alternate phrases between manuals for contrast, dictated by the text.
- D. If you play a “published” hymn setting in the service, try introducing it with the hymn from the hymnal first.

IX. Using Hymns as Postludes

The organ postlude:

- is a final aid to worship.
 - reflects or sustains the spirit of the service.
 - "...the mood may be joyful on occasion, but will often be reverent and thoughtful" (Handbook).
- A. To reflect or sustain the spirit of the meeting, play a hymn that was used in the service.
 - B. Play the postlude in a related key to the closing hymn: If the closing hymn is "Come, Come Ye Saints" in G major, play the same hymn as the postlude in C major from the men's section of the LDS hymnal.
 - C. When playing hymns as postludes, begin at a phrase other than the beginning, or begin the postlude at the refrain.

"Exit meetings more reverently, allowing the postlude music to extend the spirit of the meeting" (Elder Jay E. Jensen, "The Nourishing Power of Hymns," *Ensign*, May 2007).

X. In Conclusion....Technical Aspects of Devotional Organ Playing

- A. "Organists should be sufficiently accomplished in their playing to achieve a spiritual tone" ("Operational Memo"; LDS Temple Department; Jan. 4, 2006).
- B. Learn proper manual and pedal technics: hand division, finger crossing, finger glissando, finger substitution, alternate fingerings, treatments for common tones and repeated notes, legato, attack, release, etc.
- C. Hold notes their full values. Mentally count the beats at phrase endings. This aids the listeners in "thinking" the text in their minds.
- D. Sustain repeated-note voices with the shorter moving voices. Best example is in LDS hymnal, #186, "Again We Meet Around the Board." Refer to measures 3, 6, 7, 13, 14, and 15. If the half notes are released too soon, the moving eighth notes become "orphans."
- C. "Breathe" (lift the fingers) at phrase endings and between verses. You don't need to keep your fingers down all the time. Silence is good.

Hymn preludes creatively planned, carefully prepared, and skillfully played "from the hymnbook," have a major impact on the worship experience and can bring great joy to the organist and worshiper alike.

Mike Carson is a ward and stake organist, choir director, and stake cultural arts co-director with his wife, Cheryl, in the Pleasant Grove Utah Grove Creek Stake.

Additional examples of hymn preludes from the LDS hymnal arranged by Michael Moody into topics and keys:

Hymns of Comfort

D Major: Prayer Is the Soul's Sincere Desire (#145)

G Major: God Is Love (#87)

C Major: When Faith Endures (#128)

F Major: Nearer, My God, to Thee (#100)

Bb Major: Dearest Children, God Is Near You (#96)

Eb Major: Abide with Me; 'Tis Eventide (#165)

Ab Major: Lead, Kindly Light (#97)(Transpose to A-flat at www.lds.org.)

Hymns of Supplication

D Major: More Holiness Give Me (#131)

G Major: O My Father (#292)

C Major: Sweet Hour of Prayer (#142)

F Major: How Gentle God's Commands (#125)

Bb Major: Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me (#104)

Eb Major: Abide with Me! (#166)

Ab Major: I Need Thee Every Hour (#98) (Transpose to A-flat at www.lds.org.)

The following list of materials is provided here as a resource for developing proper hymn-playing technics:

Easy Organ Hymn Settings; Cook, Don; Orem, Utah: Jackman Music Corp., 1992

Hymns from the LDS Hymnal Marked for the Organ (Beta Version); Dean, Carol; Provo, Utah: Carol Dean, 2003

Hymn Studies for Organists; Belnap, Parley L.; rev. ed., Provo, Utah; BYU Creative Works Office, 1998/2004

Interpretive Hymn Playing: A Course of Study for Latter-day Saint Organists (CD); Hatch, Verena; Provo, Utah; 2004. (The CD is available for \$3.00 from Laura Pettersson, editor, (801) 373-3541. Print on 24 lb. laser paper.)

OrganTutor Organ 101 [complete or workbook only]; Cook, Don; Provo, Utah: BYU Creative Works Office, 1998/2004. (Note: *Organ Essentials* has been retitled *The OrganTutor Workbook*.)