
Hymn Playing

by Ina Grapenthin

Too many organists feel that "anyone can play a hymn!" I would like to challenge that. Smooth, correct hymn playing is more difficult than most people suspect. While hymns are usually the least interesting part of church music to an organist, they play an essential role in the service. As a communal activity of the congregation, hymns give the people an opportunity to express their "inner song." Your goal in hymn playing is to help your choir and congregation enter into the Spirit. This can't be done by drawing them out in a plodding, doleful manner!

Tempo

Even if you know a hymn well, take a moment to concentrate on its correct tempo before you begin to play. By "correct" I mean a tempo relevant to and dependent upon the text of the hymn, its meter, and its place in the service. Also consider your organ, the average age of your congregation and your church's acoustics.

Speed in hymn playing is not a virtue. To be able to sing well, the congregation needs sufficient time to comprehend the meaning of the text and follow the alto, tenor or bass lines with ease. If the organist drags, which is the more common mistake, the congregation will run out of breath and patience, and the meaning will again be lost.

If your congregation gets behind, don't hesitate or slow down; this only makes matters worse. Instead, try decided staccato playing (by this, I mean staccato playing on every note in all parts) to bring them back to time.

Many organists make it a rule to tie all repeated notes except the melody. This practice totally destroys the rhythm and confuses the congregation. When practicing a hymn, the principles of part-playing should be carefully followed. This means playing all the repeated notes exactly, and the other notes legato. If any notes are tied, they are usually in the bass or pedal lines.

Hand position

Another mistaken notion is that the treble clef is a sign meaning "use the right hand" and the bass clef means "use the left hand." Clefs merely show which notes we are to play. The pedal customarily plays the bass line, exactly where it is written. All fingers of both hands should work as one large, extended "hand," playing the soprano, alto and tenor parts with the fingers that reach the notes most easily, regardless of which voice those notes are in. When you pass the notes of alto and tenor between the hands, you will accomplish smooth voice-leading.

Registration

Registration for congregational singing should be based on clear 8', 4' and 2' pitches, rarely 16' in the manuals. The volume level should support the congregation, not drown them out. Mixtures can be added to the last verse for a special effect. I use reeds sparingly as they become oppressive.

Playing the melody on a solo stop is good for some hymns, especially those sung in unison or unfamiliar to the congregation. This demands that you play the soprano melody on a prominent registration with the alto and tenor in the left hand and bass on the pedal.

You can also omit the pedal line for a refreshing change, but remember to look the piece over first, for the left hand will now be playing the bass line as well.

Select your registrations in response to the text of the hymn. There is often a progressive flow of ideas in the text which can be "painted" through creative registration.

Variety

In fact, variety and creativity are the secrets of good, exciting hymn playing. Try something different, like beginning with a hymn introduction or intonation. An intonation provides the opportunity to reflect the spirit of the hymn and present a fresh interpretation of its text before the congregation begins singing.

Other variations you can try are free harmonizations, canons, changing keys between verses and instrumental and choral descants. To start you on your way to more interesting hymn playing, try some pieces from the following listing of published free accompaniments and intonations.

- Intonations for Hymn of the Week by Theodore Beck (Concordia)
- Hymn Introductions by Jan Bender (Concordia)
- Organ Descants for Selected Hymn Tunes by G. Winston Cassier (Augsburg)
- Interpretations Based on Hymn Tunes (Vol. 1-5) by David Cherwien (AMSI)
- The Concordia Hymn Prelude Series (Vol. 1-42) by Herbert Gotsch (Concordia)
- Eleven Hymn Intonations and Free Accompaniments (Vol. 1-11) by David Herman (G.I.A.)
- Free Harmonizations of Twelve Hymn Tunes by David Johnson (Augsburg)
- Free Hymn Accompaniments for Manuals (Vol. 1-2) by David Johnson (Augsburg)
- Ten Short Intonations on Well-Known Hymns by Paul Manz (Augsburg)
- Twenty Hymn Introductions by Sadowski (Concordia)
- Free Organ Accompaniments to Festival Hymns (Vol. 1-4)
- Hymn Preludes and Free Accompaniments (Vol. 1-15) (Augsburg)