

THE NEW ORGANIST

THINGS THEY NEVER TELL YOU ABOUT PLAYING FOR SERVICES

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No matter how many books one reads or how closely one has watched another musician, there are certain things that an organist learns only from experience. The purpose of this article is to list common problems and to suggest possible solutions for them.

Hymn Playing

Practice the hymn introductions carefully: this might be the only time the congregation is really listening to the music. Decide where to begin (try to include at least the first phrase of the hymn) and where to conclude the introduction. Choose the proper tempo and registration during your practice time: do not wait until after the service begins to decide these matters.

Demeanor at the Organ

What image do you present to the congregation? Do you hold the last chord of one selection with the left hand while you thumb through the book or hymnal for another piece to play? Do you run several hymns or selections together in order to avoid silence? Do you sort your music during the prayers? These bad habits are distracting to the person in the pew.

The solution is to plan your music ahead. If your prelude consists of several hymns, mark the place of each one beforehand. When you finish one hymn, stop, lift your fingers (keep your hands over the notes for a few seconds), then withdraw your hands. Let there be a moment or two of silence before

you begin the next selection. Silence between selections is a good idea.

Plan for the unexpected. Often, things happen to interrupt the flow of the service. Perhaps the clergy is slow to enter, an usher drops the offering plate, or the two-year-old flower girl refuses to walk down the aisle. It is usually expected that the organist will cover these awkward moments with music. Since one does not know when they will occur, plan for them. Find a spot in your music you can return to easily; in the event you reach the end of the music and the service is not ready to begin, you will still have music to play. Be sure to rehearse this during your practice times. Learn short interludes that can be played several times, once with a medium-loud registration on one manual, the second time with a softer registration on another manual. A helpful resource, which includes many short interludes, is *Play Something Quick* by Wihla Hutson (Harold Flammer, HF-5076).

The Wedding Processional

Be realistic. No matter how many times you played the processional for the wedding party at the rehearsal and regardless of how you have carefully timed your tempo and the right place to be in the music when the bride reaches the front of the church or synagogue, you can be sure the wedding party will walk at a different pace on the day of the ceremony.

Practice repeating one or two phrases of the music. Then there will still be music when the wedding party is slower than they were during the rehearsal. If you are not finished when the wedding party arrives at the altar, keep on playing. Do not stop in mid-phrase and do not change your original tempo. Finish the phrase with a cadence and draw discreetly to a close. It will not hurt if the bridal couple is standing at the altar for an extra minute; it will give guests time to "ooh" and "aah" over the wedding attire.

Funerals and Weddings

You can prepare for weddings since most people start their plans months ahead of time. Funerals, though, are usually last-minute affairs. Again, plan ahead so that you are prepared. Group your favorite pieces, those you know well and can play easily, by keys or hymn themes and keep them in a spiral-bound notebook. Mark the registration you choose and the duration of each piece at the top. This way, you will always have music at hand for these occasional services.

Handling Compliments

Be gracious. Even if you feel your music did not go as well as you had anticipated, respond with a "thank you" to any compliment. Nothing more is necessary. There is no need to explain that you forgot the sharp in the third measure.

Most of us learn by trial and error. If something works well for you, do not change it. Be aware of the music and what things go well when you visit in other houses of worship, then try them in your own situation.

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