

THE NEW ORGANIST

PLAYING FOR FUNERALS

Margot Woolard, AAGO

Funerals are often difficult to play since one usually has little advance notice that the funeral is to take place. The purpose of this article is to help you to plan ahead so you will be ready when your services are required.

The time to prepare for a funeral is now. Meet with your clergy and determine the purpose of funeral music. Is the music meant to provide a quiet background and set a mood? Should it be soft and restrained or is the service meant to be a celebration of the life of the deceased and his or her entry into life eternal? This knowledge will help you select appropriate music for your particular circumstances.

Learn the customs in your area. How long does the organ prelude usually last? As a general rule, many organists begin the pre-

lude approximately 15 minutes before the funeral starts. Will the funeral be a large or small one? Sometimes when many people are expected to attend, you might need to begin the prelude earlier than usual. When the service is concluded the organist often continues to play until the entire congregation has left the church or synagogue.

Does the congregation sing hymns during the funeral or is it the custom to have special music by a soloist or choir? Find out what selections are frequently requested and learn them now.

The funeral service is not the place to show off your technique. Choose simple music that you play well. Most of the time the family does not require an organ concert but prefers to hear thoughtfully chosen music which fits the occasion. Try to discover what

are the family's favorite hymns and incorporate these choices into your playing.

It is not necessary to keep up a continuous flow of music. When a selection is finished, stop, pause, and get ready for the next piece. This break in the music never seems as long to the listener as it does to the organist. Remember, you are providing a ministry of music chosen specially to help those who are grieving.

On the practical side, keep a file or list of pieces which you find comfortable to play. Be sure to mark the registration and the timing on the music. Group these pieces into sets, either by season, text, key, or whatever category is most useful. Keep them in a file or binder where you will have easy access to them. Then when you are required to play for a funeral, you will already have pieces chosen, under your fingers, and grouped in appropriate categories.

If at all possible, plan to play the selections you used for the previous week's service or the music you will play the following week. This eliminates much extra effort.

Include among your selections several stanzas of familiar hymns. For example, three stanzas of "Amazing Grace": stanza 1, play only the melody on a solo stop (i.e., Oboe 8'); stanza two, play all four parts on the manual alone, using flutes 8' and 4'. For stanza three you might choose a louder registration (add a 2' flute) and include the pedals (16' and 8' flutes). This will enable you to incorporate the family's favorite hymns into the service at a moment's notice.

After the service is over, review your selection of music. Did some pieces go better than others? Would some selections be better omitted in the future? Note this information so that you will be ready for the next funeral. It is a good idea to keep a list of the music you have played for previous funerals in order to avoid an exact duplication of the music at another funeral.

The key to playing for funerals is advance preparation. It is never too soon to begin. Good luck.

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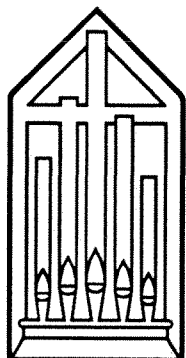
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