

“IT DON’T MEAN A THING IF YOU CAN’T MAKE ‘EM SING” LEADING HYMN SINGING FROM THE ORGAN: A PRACTICAL CHECKLIST

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I. Background Information

- Know your congregation: it is your most important choir.
- Know your clergy.
- Know your instrument, acoustics and hymnal(s). Most hymnals have a companion volume to help you learn about historical and musical ideas behind the great hymns. Knowing the stories behind some of the hymns can add meaning and understanding for you, your choir, and your congregation.
- Know yourself and your purpose as a *leader of song* (you are *not* an accompanist). Use all of your skills—musical, scriptural, and theological.

II. Choice of Hymn

- What is the purpose/function of each hymn in the service?
- What is the season of the Church Year?
- Notice the mood of the congregation, the weather, and the light coming in the windows on Sunday morning. These factors should affect the way you play.
- Coordinate your prelude and/or postlude with the hymns of the service. Foreshadow the last hymn or recapitulate the first hymn. Frame the service with hymn-based literature.
- Introduce new hymns with children’s choirs, hymn-based literature, or adult choir anthems based on the tune. The middle of the service is the best place for a new tune.
- If possible, have a brief, pre-service rehearsal time with the people. Have your clergy help out by singing along. Rehearse any upcoming new hymn with your choir(s).
- Teach children intentionally. Their participation helps carry along the adults in learning the great hymn repertoire (“And a little child shall lead them . . .”).
- All choirs improve with occasional new pieces. (See Section I.)

III. Choice of Key

- Church is perhaps the last place where group singing still happens. How can we help the experience be the “peak of the week” for the people?
- Transposition**—An essential technique for finding the most comfortable key. Other keys for the same hymn tune are often given in the same hymnal.
- Methods** for transposition: ear, eye (read up/down the lines), “finger feel” (tactile), harmonic analysis, voice leading, memory, use of C, G, or F clefs. A combination of these methods is the most secure way to go.
- “When in Doubt, Write It Out.”
- Range**: the top and bottom notes. Try not to top a soprano C or D on the first hymn. Go for higher notes as the congregation gets warmed up.
Narrow (dim. fifth) *When I survey the wondrous cross* (Hamburg).
Wide (11th): *Were you there?* (Were You There).
- Tessitura**: Does the melody *stay* up high (or low)?
High in C: *When morning gilds* (Laudes Domini)—better in B-flat.
- “Vocalize” your congregation**—Begin under the written pitch and move up by half steps on subsequent stanzas with quick modulations in between. Try *O, for a thousand tongues* (Azmon), starting in F. This is exciting when done in the right situation in worship, but use sparingly.

IV. Choice of Tempo

- You must sing along with the hymns yourself.** If you can sing the phrases in one breath while seated and playing, then the people have a good chance of singing well. After all, they are standing and don’t have to play at the same time!
- The tempo of the introduction must match the tempo of the stanzas.
- Live acoustics need slower tempos while dry acoustics will allow a faster pace. Use what you have to advantage.
- In general, save *ritards* for the end of the last stanza only or at least keep them minimal. Keep the music moving.
- A broadening of tempo on the last stanza of “big, grand hymns” can be very effective. Try with *Rejoice, the Lord is King* (Darwall’s 148th).

V. Choice of Registration

- Clarity is essential.** 8’, 4’, and 2’ principals on one manual are the basic choice. *Note*: As with choral accompanying, 4’ stops are most critical. Voices sound at 8’ pitch. The ears of the singers hear the 4’ pitch.
- Volume** should be in proportion to the type of hymn. It may change at each stanza as suggested by the text. (See Section II.)
- Soloing out the melody: an essential technique. RH: reed or solo combination for soprano, LH: contrasting stops for the alto and tenor combined, and Pedal to balance the LH. Try with any four-part hymn.
- “Special dramatic effects”: e.g., adding Swell reeds and opening the swell box can be effective in some places, but use sparingly. *Praise, my soul, the King of heaven* (Praise My Soul), last stanza.
- The pedal can drop out on a stanza.
- The organ can drop out on a stanza. (See Section I.)
- Include people who play band instruments from time to time, if feasible. Make arrangements yourself or use pre-composed ones.
- Add piano to the organ with some of the late 19th-century gospel hymns and similar pieces. Try with *What a friend we have in Jesus* (Converse).

VI. Phrasing, Articulation and Style

- Know the background of the hymn: musical/historical period, poet, composer, other related music of the time. (See Section I.)
- Style example: *Comfort, comfort ye my people* (Psalm 42), is a lively, Renaissance dance tune. It falls flat if played too slowly and *legato*.
- Know what the primary *musical function* is in a particular hymn:

Melody: *Be thou my vision* (Slane).

Harmony: *Now the day is over* (Merrial).

Rhythm: *My hope is built* (Solid Rock).

Counterpoint: *Sleepers, wake* (Wachet auf).

- Find the middle ground between tying and breaking repeated notes in the three lower parts. You may create an inner rhythmic energy. Experiment with *Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing* (Sicilian Mariners).
- Pedal (bass) notes may want to hold over between phrases in drier acoustics rather than break with the other parts.

- Adding “filler notes” on phrase ends with long notes will help keep things moving along. See *Jesus, where'er thy people meet* (Federal Street).
- Look at the words: find the places where one phrase of text wants to join the next. Mark these places in your hymnal for each stanza. See *Christ is made the sure foundation* (Regent Square), third stanza (“Here vouchsafe . . .”).
- The correct length and release of the last chord in the last measure of the introduction or stanza lets the congregation know when to breathe and begin singing. This is also true between phrases. Mark your hymnal in detail! Some choices for accomplishing this are:

Add time to the last measure: Jesus Christ is risen today, (Llanfair).

Calculate the length of the last measure and the release in tunes beginning with an upbeat (“pickup”): O God, our help (St. Anne).

- A case study in chord length and rhythms changing with each stanza: *God is working his purpose out* (Purpose).
- Be consistent from introduction through Amen!**

VII. Introductions

- The full-stanza play-through: still the best introduction. Much depends on how you introduce a hymn. A good introduction gives the congregation the melody, harmony, rhythm, meter, and style, as well as a chance to remember the hymn, find the page, hum along, swallow, and “get in the spirit.”
- Simple modifications for introductions:

Add one voice at a time by the phrase: SATB (Any four-part hymn.)

Solo out the melody: (See Section V.)

*Change manuals: essential for echo effects: e.g., the “Alleluias” in *Ye watchers and ye holy ones* (Lasst uns erfreuen).*

Play melody alone or in octaves (also on stanzas): (Amazing Grace).

- Other modifications (pre-composed or improvised):

Ostinato, Canon, Bicinium, Fughetta, Reharmonization. *Brief* chorale preludes with the tune unornamented are often good introductions.

- “When In Doubt, Write It Out”

VIII. Modulations (moving from one key to another) and interludes

- Use modulations/key changes sparingly for greater effect.
- Start the interlude or modulation during the last chord of the previous stanza to help signal the congregation as to what’s coming up next.
- They can be improvised or pre-composed.
- “When In Doubt, Write It Out”

IX. Reharmonizations of stanzas

- Warning: Some people love this, some people hate it!** (Refer to Section I.)
- Types of reharmonizations and free accompaniments:
 - Contrapuntal, harmonic, melody in the tenor (fauxbourdon), melody in the Pedal (bass), thinning to three parts by combining inner voices (with or without Pedal), using open, parallel fifths for LH against melody (beautiful in minor keys), inversion of soprano and alto voices to create an “instant descant.” Soprano/tenor descants for the choir may be desirable, too.
- Use pre-composed materials, or learn to improvise.
- “When In Doubt, Write It Out.”

X. Amens

- When to do them? Options:
 - Every hymn? Last hymn only? Not at all? “If it’s printed, play it?”
 - Cancel out an unwanted Amen by holding the final chord until the congregation runs out of breath.
- Generally speaking, Amens belong on the last stanza of a hymn ending with a Doxology: “Praise to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” or the like.
- Holding over the common tone from the final chord to the Amen is still the most effective signal to the congregation to sing the Amen. An affirmation, “Amen” means “So be it!” Generally, it should be played and registered as such. (Exception: quiet prayer hymns.) Let the hymn, *Jesus shall reign where'er the sun* (Duke Street), be your guide as suggested by the last line of the text!

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