

AGO SERVICE PLAYING ANTHEM ACCOMPANIMENT

THOU WILT KEEP HIM IN PERFECT PEACE: APPROACHES TO WESLEY'S MOST POPULAR ANTHEM

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SAMUEL SEBASTIAN WESLEY (1810–76) is often referred to as the “natural” (that is, illegitimate) son of the organist Samuel Wesley and the grandson of the hymn writer Charles Wesley. Despite his inauspicious start—his mother was his father’s teenage maid—the young Wesley got on well in life, especially in music. At seven, he began to sing in the Chapel Royal under William Hawes; at 22, he was organist at Hereford Cathedral; and in a feat that many of us would have liked to emulate, he was awarded bachelor of music and doctor of music degrees at the same time, in 1839, at Oxford. He went on to serve the cathedrals of Winchester, Exeter, and Gloucester. Regarded as a “modern” composer in his day, Wesley is seen as a seminal figure in the great development of Anglican church music in the 19th century. (He was also at the very forefront of the movement to equip English organs with full pedalboards.)

In June 1853, the popular *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* carried an advertisement placed by Dr. Wesley, who was then about 43 years old. “Now Publishing: A Volume of Anthems, in Score, with Organ or Pianoforte Accompaniment, for the use of choirs, by Samuel Sebastian Wesley, Organist of the Cathedral and College of Winchester, etc.” Of these twelve anthems, which were listed by title, the twelfth was “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace.” The price for the volume, which Wesley printed himself, was two pounds and two shillings.¹

The work received something of a cool review in *The Athenaeum*, where the unsigned article acknowledged “. . . one of the handsomest volumes of sacred music which have been of late submitted to us,” but went on to lament a lack of “discretion” and “invention,” both of which, the reviewer felt, “must be combined if the labor is to prove lasting.”² Undaunted, in the same year of 1854, Wesley announced a second edition and reduced the price to two pounds for subscribers.³ His labor has since proved lasting!

The anthem was eventually published by Novello in Volume five of *Novello's Collection of Anthems by Modern Composers*,⁴ and it is in this edition, via H.W. Gray, that many of us are still most familiar with it. With this

background, let us turn to the piece itself.

Some of the performance issues with this piece are straightforward and comparatively easy to resolve. This includes articulation, where a conservative, dignified legato is appropriate virtually throughout, and a few distinct articulations (such as at the final repetition of text) round out a vision of peace and calm.

There is one typographical error in the commonest edition. In m. 30, the alto line contains a whole note on F. This is surely incorrect; the alto line moves to G on beat three, and the parallel passages—mm. 2 and 56—provide a half rest in lieu of the G. The best solution is probably to make the whole note a half, and rest for two beats.

Also comparatively straightforward is the question of registration. Here, a basic sense of 19th-century English organs and, again, a sense of dignity will lead one to emphasize 8' tone, with just enough 4' for clarity, and to eschew brilliance in any case. I do not believe in dogmatic registrational rules, and every organ, room, choir, and occasion is different. Still, one does well to begin with the advice given at the start: “Ch. Dul. or Diaps. and Sw. Prin.” This is not completely clear, but it is beyond our scope to look into the history of including diapasons on the Choir divisions of English organs. Use gentler flue work in the diapason family, under expression.

Later, we are asked to play on the Great with an 8' Diapason. The presence of crescendo and diminuendo marks (colloquially, “hairpins”) in those sections suggests coupling. Of course, all of this will have to take root on an American organ, probably of the 20th century. Do not violate the understated and prayerful dignity intended by the registration.

Be aware, as you practice, that the piece is in five-part texture for the most part. Be especially careful, for example, in holding a whole note while moving other voices in the same hand—see m. 2, left hand, and m. 3, right hand, for examples of this. Fingering challenges like this will arise throughout the piece.

A thornier issue emerges with the use of the pedal. In the Novello edition,

there is a very clear marking in the second measure: *senza ped.* Then, as the eighth measure begins, the downbeat is a low F, calling for “Ped. 16'.” This is followed, at the third beat, by a manual indication: “Gt. Open Diap.” (Again, as there is a crescendo marked in the organ part under the text “night is as clear,” one infers that the manuals are to be coupled.) In other words, if the score is taken literally, the pedal is first heard on the downbeat of m. 8, as if it were announcing the new material just as the opening matter concludes; a kind of “point of imitation.”

An effective musical touch, to be sure, but it raises serious problems for the preceding measures, where there are several stretches that the hand simply cannot be expected to play while maintaining legato. The best British recordings do not use an independent pedal line here, so the best solution would be to use “silent pedal” from the start through the end of m. 6. In other words, play the lowest line on the pedals, but use only 8' manual couplers but no pedal stops, in essence adding a third hand to the manual registration. In m. 7, the hands can handle the music, leaving the pedals out and the foot free to bring on a pedal stop in the gap. At the section usually marked with a letter B, at the return of the opening material, there is a useful gap in the texture that allows the reversal of the procedure.

In m. 35, just before the “O let my soul live,” there is simply the marking “ped.” and no indication of 16' pitch. This may also be an error, as the next measure is a far more logical and consistent spot for the addition of the pedal, with 16', just as in the parallel passages. The recordings I studied do exactly that; and the early Novello edition has no indication here whatsoever, probably because it takes the parallelism for granted.

A few moments after that, in m. 42, the voices enter *forte* starting on beat two. For this, I would suggest moving the tenor middle C to the Great immediately on beat two, to be followed by the other voices as they enter with the new text.

The other significant issue with this anthem is its *tempos*, particularly its metronome markings. The “refrain” is marked at 69 to the quarter-note, and

the “verses” at 100. (These tempo changes coincide exactly with both registrational changes and the appearance or disappearance of the pedal.) These markings appear in the Novello edition, and to some contemporary ears they seem awfully slow. However, the consensus of the important recordings is indeed for the “refrain” sections to be right about at these tempos (David Briggs takes it still slower with the choir of Truro Cathedral. Christopher Robinson and the choir of Clare College, Cambridge, take the metronome indications quite literally. In both cases, the effect is very musical.) At “for thine is the kingdom,” the score says “faster” and suggests a quarter-note at 80; perhaps some additional accelerando is appropriate here.

Whatever tempo you choose, avoid the all-too-common idea that the music must “move along and not die.” It won’t die, I promise you, if you maintain a sense of line, and of long breaths; and above all, observe a sense of religious dignity that can make the piece so wonderful. I find that this piece comes alive at the recommended restrained tempos.

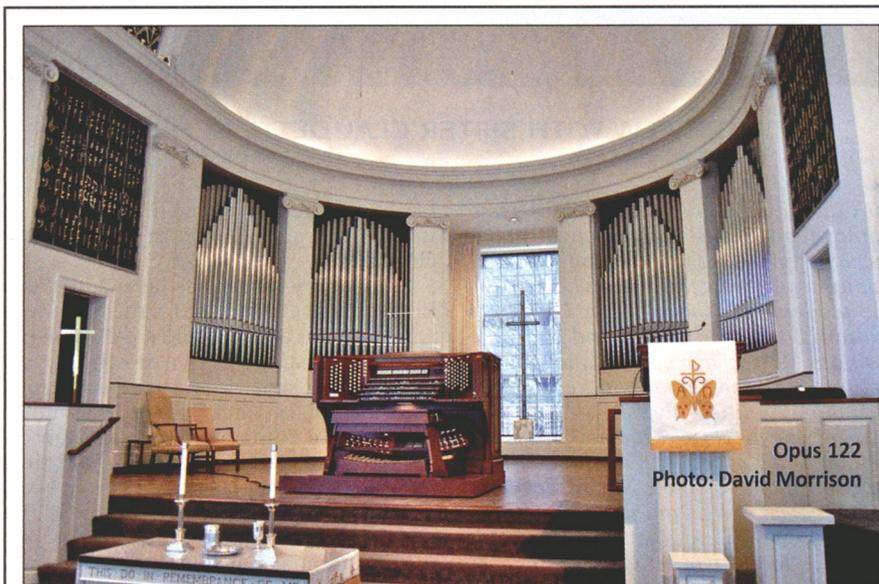
However precisely you choose to register and pedal this piece, and at whatever tempo you choose to perform it, it is clear that registration and tempo are intended to work together to emphasize the structure of the work. Consistency will be the key to success.

The greatest technical difficulties in the piece are probably at the same “for thine is the kingdom” section just mentioned. The pedal is quite active, and there are several challenging fingering issues. I feel that this section offers some tone-painting on the words “power and glory” in particular. Without abandoning legato, one could add dynamic and movement here. Bring some intensity to this section if you wish, but observe the *rallentando*, and quiet things down artfully as you approach the *tempo primo*.

I would advise particular care in the exquisite final measures. There is just enough chromaticism in the cadence, and just enough complexity in the voice-leading, to warrant extra practice. If this section is played carefully, accurately, and tastefully, with just enough ritard and just enough crescendo and diminuendo, it will form a haunting and memorable conclusion to this wonderful piece—or might one even call it a perfect piece? Happy practicing!

NOTES

1. *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 5, No. 109 (June 1, 1853), p. 208.
2. “New Publications,” *The Athenaeum*, whole No. 1392 (July 15, 1854), p. 884.
3. *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 6, No. 127 (July 1, 1854), p. 124.
4. Undated, but the Boston Public Library’s



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copy contains the handwritten date of August 14, 1894. This edition contains a far richer wealth of scriptural citations; instead of just the Isaiah 26:3 we now see, references are also made to Psalm 139:11, 1 John 1:5, and Psalm 119:175. Thanks and acknowledgment to Bill Powers, who found time during a business trip to consult and photograph this score.

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