

# Hymnspiring Your Congregational Singing

Hymn Accompaniment Workshop for Church Organists

## FOREWORD

I have long appreciated being the beneficiary of kind and forthcoming mentors, coaches, and colleagues in my music career. I've found that useful techniques have emerged from all sorts of observations and discussions, casual or professional. I'm delighted to help distill and organize a lot of suggestions, and hope that a few techniques will fit your situations and styles. Get those parishioners revved up!

## SUMMARY

**Hymn-playing is the church organist's bread-and-butter task.** We do it every week without thinking much about it. In this workshop, we help you hone your congregational accompaniment skills. If you're just beginning, the tips demonstrated will open your eyes to a vast array of techniques that await your exploration and incorporation into your tool bag; if you're an old pro, you'll enjoy reviewing a thorough list of hymn treatments to refresh your approach to this weekly task. Note that most all of the tips presented can be implemented by any organist with basic keyboard skills—we are not suggesting advanced improvisatory accompaniments, but rather simple recipes that you can apply occasionally to spruce up those early Sunday mornings, and solve some awkward moments due to the way a hymn is written or notated.

Because this is what we do and do often, some may have strong opinions that "*their way*" is the only way to play a hymn. While this may be true for that person's context (i.e., their congregation, context, job description or local church cultural practices or constraints), there are other situations where a different approach would be helpful. We present a variety of tips and solutions to awkward notations and compositional predicaments for you to consider if anything is adaptable for your situation. In any case, only one or two techniques (out of the many demonstrated here) would be incorporated into any given accompaniment, and we suggest introducing your congregation gradually to any new styles that you want to adopt.

This workshop handout information is being distributed prior to the workshops in order to encourage interest and attendance, to acquaint you with the workshop content in order to formulate questions ahead of time, and to help those *in absentia*.

## WORKSHOP APPROACH

In this workshop, we explore basic aspects of successful hymn accompanying on the organ. Because of the limited time allotted, many tips are identified and explained and demonstrated at a high-level (enough to convey the concept)—most topics could serve as the main theme of an entire workshop just focusing on that single aspect.

The workshop style is one of an organized presentation of tips and rules-of-thumb. The handouts may appear at first intimidating, but they are simply a method of capturing/presenting the many combinations and possibilities for accompaniments.

An analogy for one of the presentation styles can be made with TV cooking shows: Too often, the presenter shows the correct method without detailing “how you got there” and how it could have gone wrong. For instance, I’ve often seen the host stick a toothpick into a cake to test for doneness, but I’m hard-pressed to recall seeing a demonstration of what the toothpick results are if the cake is (a) not done enough or (b) overdone. Hopefully in this workshop, we can let you hear, for instance, when there is too much separation or not enough separation between chords—and thus let you hone your listening skills and awareness to later judge your own playing for what is just right for your own situation. After all, listening (to our own playing) is often the best teacher, but most difficult to do because we’re focused on the notes or technical aspects as opposed to the musical results in the acoustics of the room.

For instance, workshop attendees will serve as the singing congregation and try(!) to sing along with the demonstrated accompaniment examples so you can experience what it’s like to be “on the other side of the fence” and then you will express observations and suggestions for the accompaniment just played. These demonstrated accompaniments will be *intentionally sub-optimal* in several ways (followed by a recommended treatment for the acoustics and mood at that moment) so we can all hear what the demonstrated effect has from the perspective as a singer (whom the accompaniment is supposed to be supporting) for various techniques: too long/too short (or too-whatever). We’ll explore what Goldilocks would prefer as “just right” for a hymn accompaniment.

## HISTORY OF HYMNODY & GOALS OF HYMN PLAYING

A hymn is a lyric poem, reverently and devotionally conceived, which is designed to be sung by a group (communal assembly) and which presents the text in a way that is better expressed through music rather than just spoken word. It is usually straightforward and metrical in form, genuinely emotional, poetic and literary in style, spiritual in quality, and in its ideas so direct and so immediately apparent as to unify a congregation in spirit and in sound while singing it.

In ancient and medieval times, stringed instruments such as the harp, lyre and lute were used with psalms and hymns. During the Middle Ages, a rich hymnody developed in the form of Gregorian chant or plainsong. Later hymnody in the Western church introduced four-part vocal harmony as the norm, adopting major and minor keys (and less dependent on modes), and came to be led by the organ and choir.

Congregations are inspired to sing more enthusiastically when accompanied/led by confident and unambiguous organ accompaniments, skillfully registered and articulated to match the church service context and acoustics. Organ hymn playing is not a recital, but rather a foundation and encouragement for robust and spiritual singing.

## HYMN PLAYING STYLE/TREATMENT DETAILS

These lists serve as a details appendix/reference for the accompanying chart.

### 1. Styles of Introductions

- a. Ver batim: “Last line” or last phrase; first phrase + last phrase
- b. Phrases above with melody played on a solo stop
- c. Accumulating voices: begin with soprano, and every measure or so add the next voice down.
- d. Pedalpoint (PP) with one of the above
- e. Fanfare (based on thematic material from the hymn) – rhythmic (dotted, triplets, etc.) chords (often open fifths in contrary motion) played on reeds
- f. Snippets based on published free-harmonizations
- g. Published/composed introductions / intonations / chorale preludes – adapt/excerpt or ver batim
- h. Improvisatory

### 2. Styles of Soloing Hymn Melody

- a. Solo reed
- b. Solo principal chorus or Festival Melodia/Cornet/etc.
- c. Same octave as written; down an octave (but with more powerful registration) ex: Willcocks’ Adeste Fideles where the melody is in the tenor
- d. Accompany with left hand as-written, adapt tenor+alto, block chords, etc. (but practice!)

### 3. Middle verse(s)

- a. Avoid fiddling too much with every verse or providing too much contrast in registration or style
- b. Leaving all verses the same is perfectly fine
- c. Omit pedals on one verse
- d. Add a 16’ flue to thicken the texture
- e. Add passing/neighbor tones for interest (practice!)
- f. Switch to full swell reed chorus
- g. If it’s a well known, solid, 4-part hymn: try *a cappella*. In order to orchestrate this, start the verse with a reduced registration on an enclosed division and bring down the shades (fairly quickly) over the first few measures, and then drop one voice at a time (omit soprano first for a few notes), and by the end of the first line or so, you’re down to playing the bass only and then nothing. (Restart the organ accompaniment on next verse where the singing normally resumes.)  
Trust that the choir (SATB) can lead, perhaps you can direct if it starts to be sluggish. Don’t be paranoid: trust your congregation. Remember that some congregations sing without accompaniment all the time. Even tho all this is about leading with the organ, they’ll appreciate you more when you return on the next verse!

4. Transitions between stanzas (verses)
  - a. Whatever you do needs to be metrical (Count!)
  - b. Physically breathe/inhale in the rest/lift between stanzas
  - c. Be consistent for all verses, and all hymns
  - d. Acknowledge the acoustics (which may differ depending on how many are present)
  
5. Styles of Leading to Interlude
  - a. Continue with the last note, attacca
  - b. Alter harmony of the last (few) chord(s) either to a deceptive or modulatory cadence
  - c. Registration: crescendo, perhaps with “boiling swell” (reeds), as a signal to the congregation that something is going to happen
  
6. Styles of Interludes
  - a. Make sure an interlude is not interrupting the text flow (completing the thought)
  - b. Interludes are common between the last two verses of the hymn; however on festival occasions, it’s fine to insert additional interludes for heightened excitement.
  - c. *Interlude content:*
    - i. Repeat last phrase or last line
    - ii. Excerpt part of altered harmonization
    - iii. Modulate in preparation for last verse
    - iv. Thematic
    - v. Improvisatory
  
7. Styles of Last Verses
  - a. Big registrations
  - b. Altered harmonizations (tip: make Xeroxes from your purchased book collections and organize per-hymn-tune-name in a manila folder)
  - c. Last verse stately tempo
  - d. Ritard only on the last few chords
  - e. Passing notes/chords in the last phrase leading to an exciting conclusion
  - f. Boiling swell crescendo in the last line
  - g. Add solo reed “licks” (melodic theme/descant or fanfare-ish fifths/triads) between phrases and during long/held notes
  - h. Add solo reed descant/ossia in the last line

## 8. Styles of Amens

- a. In many churches & hymnals, hymn-ending Amens have been phased out.
- b. Registration: No change, or decrease (via a piston at the instant of release of the last chord—any burp in the tied common tone is not noticed because of the acoustics and singers still hanging on)
- c. Separation: slight separation in the chords
- d. Passing tones/passing chords
- e. Descant notes added (by organ and sopranos too!) (could be integrated/coordinated with a sequence begun in the final cadence of the hymn)
- f. Altered harmony (for those familiar, festive hymns)

## PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

- **Downbeat is a rest or bass note.** Ex: *Finlandia*, *Engelberg*, *Sine Nomine*, *de Tar* (THE HYMNAL 1982: 456, 659), (*On the*) *Wings of a Dove*, *Victory*, *Charterhouse*  
**Tip:** Clearly demonstrate at the end of the introduction for how the 1<sup>st</sup> verse starts (and keep the “formula” consistent at the start of each subsequent verse) a separation prior to the downbeat and a clear downbeat. If the bass is the downbeat, make sure the note can be heard (for instance if only a 16’ and 8’, it probably won’t be noticed) – you may need to double with your left hand and perhaps even an octave in the left hand to reinforce. If there’s no downbeat, consider adding a bass note as a mile-marker. Above all keep the intra-verse timing consistent.
- **First Chord is “Long”** When the first note is a whole or dotted note, no one knows where the beat is. (ex. *Gloriose*, *Oh Freedom*)  
**Chord at end of phrase is long (or fermata)** People are unsure where to come back in. (ex. *Down Ampney*, *Lilft Every Voice*, *Mount Zion*, *Aberustwyth*, *Lux Benigna*)  
**Tip:** Add passing tones or chordal arpeggiation or repeated notes (ex: as if double bass or string bass); add a consistent rest (slight break) to signal “*let’s continue.*”
- **Each verse has a “printed intro”** Some hymns have a written-out introduction that seemingly would be played at the beginning of each verse. (Ex: *National Hymn*, *On Eagle’s Wings*, *Personent Hodie*)  
*... and similarly...*  
**The Choreography of Refrain vs. Verses is confusing.** Does one repeat the introductory refrain or not? (ex: *Victory*, *Precious Lord*, *Come Sunday*)  
**Tip:** Depending on the hymn (and the “nature” of the extra measures), the context, and your congregation’s customs, you may or may not want to play the extra measures. Whichever way you choose, be consistent and deliberate. If you do include the extra measures, perhaps don’t ritard/hesitate between the end and the extra measures. Print in the bulletin/order of service instructions (and/or have the minister announce).

- **Verse begins with a pickup (eighth) note(s).** Similar to a rest on the downbeat, a pickup note can be difficult to synchronize. (ex. Ackley/He Lives, (In the) Garden, I'm Gonna Sing, Battle Hymn, Carol, In Dulci Jubilo, Greensleeves, St. Clement, Amazing Grace)

**Tip:** If you have a choir, visibly give the downbeat; always carefully count whole measures from the ending of the introduction or the previous verse.

**Note:** For some hymns, only *some* verses have pickup notes (where most start on the downbeat) (ex: French Carol, Adeste Fideles, Cranham/In the Bleak)

**Note:** Some hymns technically begin with an *on-beat pickup note*, but “everyone” would parse it as a downbeat for synchronization purposes, and thus it's usually not an issue. (ex. St Anne, Leoni, Nun danket, Lasst Uns Erfreuen, St Denio/Joanna, Aurelia, McKee, Lancashire, Munich, Let Us Break Bread, St Michael, Tallis' Canon, Land of Rest, Materna, How Great Thou Art, Lyons, St. Louis, Mendelssohn, First Nowell, God Rest Ye, Dix, Passion Chorale, Ellacombe) - You would still want to keep the measure-timing between verses to be as written. *Footnote:* please don't misinterpret this point – I'm not saying that rhythmic structure is unimportant or to be ignored, rather, even though these hymns do not begin on a downbeat, they are not as problematic as other beginning rhythmic formulas.
- **Sluggish Congregation.** Congregation is lagging due to mood/context/acoustics/barometric pressure.

**Tip:** Be steadfast in pushing ahead (don't give in to slow down); slightly separate chords (entire chords, or legato melody and separated A-T-B); solo out the melody; add passing notes to sub-divide the basic pulse (see above suggestions also)
- **Hymns Published with differing rhythms.** Several hymns are famous for having various “editions” (ex: Hymn to Joy, Old Hundredth, Westminster Abby)

**Tip:** Demonstrate the rhythm to be used in the introduction and stick with it consistently, perhaps emphasize with separated notes the chords that are different. Perhaps note in the order of service the version you'll be using.
- **Plainsong has no strict beat.** Chants are often printed only with eighth note melodies.

**Tip:** Ahead of time, work out a chordal and rhythmic structure that will be intuitive for the congregation. Demonstrate this in the introduction (without variation or creativity!) and stick with it consistently throughout. It's not really possible to include the chant “rubatos” when leading a congregational hymn.
- **Printed Accompaniment is not suited/scored for organ.** The printed score is really for guitar or piano or a *cappella* “round”, or is a chant, folk, or cultural hymn that needs special treatment that has not been provided by the hymnal editors.

**Tip:** Adapt (and practice!) a slight variation/arrangement to make your accompaniment more organistic and supportive of congregational singing through the usage of registration and orchestration techniques.
- **Non-intuitive rests or commas.** Some hymns will include a rest that may seem “severe” to place a break in the texture at that point. (ex. Far-Off Lands (*Hymnal:1940*, p262), Lytlington).

**Tip:** Likely the acoustics will not carry the previous note through sufficiently, so you would want to extend the note to extend thru the rest (*Pilgrim Hymnal* has the quarter note+quarter rest printed as a half note, which seems logical). In *Far-Off Lands*, the text would be incorrectly interrupted if a musical break were put in.

- **Congregation complains the organ is “too loud.”** This perception may result from a number of factors:
  - High-frequency hearing loss: People with top-octave hearing loss may be easily aggravated with music (and any sound!) that has high-frequency content (partials/overtones for instance, above 10KHz). It may sound distorted or shrill, since from their aural perspective, it’s the very top-end of their spectrum and has the effect that most of us would experience with the proverbial chalk scraping on the chalkboard.
 

**Tip:** eliminate mixtures and high-pitch ranks (2’, 1’, mutations) for most verses (save these for the most climatic verses or festival days).

**Tip:** eliminate high-pressure Festival/State Trumpet (& en chamade) reeds that are both loud and laden with high-frequency overtones.
  - No offense, but some people will label music too loud (either unknowingly or just being polite) when it’s a matter of their responding to wrong notes.
 

**Tip:** Practice thoroughly so in the heat of the battle you are rock-solid for voice leading and chord progressions.

**Tip:** Get in the habit to commit the “sin of *omission*” instead of *commission*. In other words, if you’re in doubt, train yourself to NOT PLAY a note in the manuals or pedals, rather than risk a noticeable wrong note.
  - You’re wanting to invigorate the musical enthusiasm by “turning up the volume” with Full Organ, Crescendo pedal, or festival reeds and mixtures.
 

**Tip:** Use large registrations sparingly – when used less frequently, they’ll have more impact when you do use them.

**Tip:** Use large registrations only when there’s a full house. Just like each adult human emits heat energy equivalent to a 100-watt light bulb, each body present in the sanctuary absorbs a certain amount of sound, thus the more people present, the more sound absorbed (and less acoustics/reverberations!).

**Tip:** “Do unto yourself as you do to others” (This one is not really possible, but the concept makes my point) Position your console vantage point directly in front of or INSIDE the pipe chambers so that you the performer are subjected to the full Decibels of the instrument.

(In high school band, our section sat directly in front of the trumpets. Try having a trumpet blasting 1’ behind your head for an hour per day 😊 )

### **Attachments:**

- Nicaea: Pictorial Hymn Illustration Tips/Suggestions
- Hymn Treatment Overview Chart (category chart for this document)

### **Further Reading:**

#### **Books**

- [\*Let the People Sing!\*](#)/Cherwin/Concordia. (\$24) Workbook-style with examples; discusses piano and organ styles; second half is dedicated to (simple) improvisation tips.
- [\*Leading the Church's Song\*](#)/ Augsburg. (\$17-25) Concept of leading (rather than accompanying); quite detailed tutorials for eight(!) traditions from European to African American to Latino – a useful stylistic resource to know how to faithfully interpret various cultural styles. [Online excerpts](#)
- [\*Creative Hymn Singing\*](#)/Parker/Melodious. (\$5) Discusses the style and sound of hymns from different historical periods.
- [\*Hymn Studies for Organists\*](#)/Belnap/BYU. (\$16) Includes details about fingering, repeated notes, registration.

#### **On the Web**

- [STEPS FOR PREPARING A HYMN](#) - Carol Dean - Utah Valley AGO Chapter Workshop - 11/07/02
- [EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS FOR PIANISTS](#) - Dr. Parley Belnap - Utah Valley AGO Chapter Workshop - 11/07/02
- [How to encourage and inspire congregational singing](#) - David Chamberlin 4/2007
- [Hymn Society of America](#) (official web site) includes 2012 “Hymnic” Anniversaries
- ***This perhaps is the best one to read of the entire list:***  
[PLAIN TALK ABOUT PLAIN HYMN PLAYING - Miriam Duncan's Hymn Playing Lecture](#) – Oberlin College 7/1992  
(Hymn Society workshop)  
“... the shortage of organists is such that almost anything will be tolerated in organ playing, at least in some churches, in some situations”