

Taking the lead

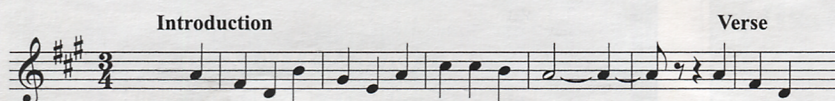
Hymn accompaniment is a skill that many organists take for granted.

Tim Rishton considers the elements of introduction and verse playing and provides some useful reminders



The introduction¹ to any hymn must communicate five essential pieces of information:

1. Which melody
2. Tempo – introduction prepared and played at precisely the desired speed. Rushing the introduction, or ending it with a *rallentando*, misleads the congregation. ‘Good’ tempo is often a compromise between the ‘ideal’ and the custom of the congregation
3. Feeling – conveyed by articulation and registration, without a great contrast in brightness between introduction and verse. It is quite inappropriate always to play the introduction with quiet stops on another manual
4. Key and starting note – chosen to suit the congregation and conveyed purely by the introduction, not by an extra ‘leading note’
5. When to begin (together) – essential for confident congregational singing



A group fully informed about the first four criteria but not counted in will not begin singing. ‘Counting in’ the congregation is achieved by two means. The introduction’s clearly established tempo creates a clear expectation that the beat will continue into the verse. A regular number of beats should be maintained between introduction and

verse – almost without exception whole bars in triple time or a multiple of half bars in duple time – with the $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 beats immediately before the congregation comes in as silence, reinforcing the signal to start.

Where a congregation has a different tradition (for instance a protracted ‘gathering note’ at the start of the verse) it may seem arrogant for an organist unilaterally to establish a new practice, but this is a change worth making.

Positive and clear leadership at the transition from introduction to verse is the single most important factor in successful hymn playing. It follows that it also requires practice, which means preparing for the real situations and challenges of the service.

In Britain, hymns are usually introduced by playing the first couple of lines, except:

1. Where the melody does not have a suitable stopping point, such as the chorus ‘Let there be love shared among us’ and the hymn *Michael* (‘All my hope on God is founded’), for which the last couple of lines are generally used
2. Where the melody is unfamiliar it is natural to play an entire verse (and preferably hold a pre-service rehearsal)
3. Where a melody has alternative versions (such as the third line of ‘Amazing Grace’) it is helpful to clarify which will be used
4. Hymns and choruses with pre-composed introductions. Where the introduction does not give useful signals (eg Graham Kendrick’s ‘Led like a

lamb') the last line of the hymn can be followed by the composed introduction as an interlude. Hymns such as *Jerusalem* ('And did those feet') have familiar composed introductions that may be used without hesitation.

By communicating five essential signals, the introduction lays the foundation for congregational security in the hymn. If these five signals have not been given clearly, it will be almost impossible to regain the congregation's full confidence. Preparing and practising it is at least as important as practising the notes.

Once the congregation has begun to sing, the organist's main function remains that of 'conductor'. He or she is responsible for supporting and encouraging the congregation, bringing them in together at the beginning of each verse, maintaining unanimity at a constant tempo, and for illuminating the content of the text. These considerations may be divided into three topics: beat, text and style.

Beat

To maintain constantly renewed momentum – and thereby free the congregation's concentration to focus on the content of the hymn – the transition from verse to verse should be exactly the same as from the introduction to the first verse. There should be no *rallentando* in the last line, except if required to reinforce the sense of finality in the last verse.

The common and unsettling sensation that the congregation seems to 'drag' is mostly an acoustic illusion. The organist who attempts 'merely to accompany rather than to lead' by following the congregation will find the hymn becoming progressively slower until it staggers to a halt. The error can clearly be seen: following the perceived beat does not constitute accompanying but is actually playing after the congregation sings. However modest the organist's aims are, rhythmic leadership is essential.

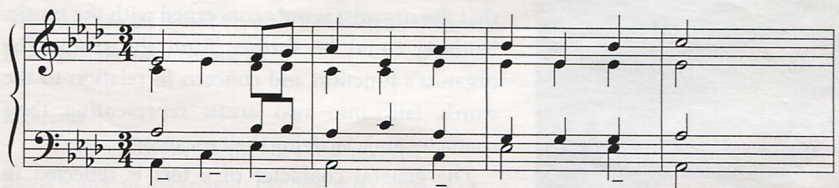
Other potential problems include the loud-voiced individual who is determined to lead. Tactful discussion may be possible ('you have a very strong voice – can you help me to get the congregation to sing in time?') but otherwise the musical leadership must simply be sufficiently unambiguous to outweigh and isolate the distraction.

Correct tempo and solid rhythmic planning in the introduction is paramount, but a number of techniques will contribute to maintaining momentum. Good articulation is essential. Uniformly detached playing may strengthen the rhythmic clarity, but the result can be unmusical and loses its effect if overdone. Carefully shaded

and varied articulation is essential to good hymn playing. A slight lift marks upbeats. Where a low upbeat precedes a high note on the main beat, particularly in lyrical tunes such as *St Clement* ('The day thou gavest') and *Crimond* ('The Lord's my shepherd'), the lift is not as necessary because the melody itself provides the accent. Care should be taken not to shorten so many notes that the tune becomes disconnected – a temptation in *St Gertrude* ('Onward, Christian soldiers'). Triple-time melodies benefit from a slight accent on the first beat of each bar (but any waltz-like tendency should be resisted). Some triple-time melodies, such as *Hyfrydol* ('Alleluia! Sing to Jesus') call for a legato style of playing and a milder articulation. Bass notes (whether played by left hand or pedals) are useful to reinforce the relationship between upbeat and main beat. The following passage:



can be given more impetus if played:



Faithfulness to the intention of the composer is important. The four-part choral notation of most hymns is, however, not intended as effective organ accompaniment. There is a crucial difference between adapting ('re-orchestrating') for the organ in order to help the congregation do justice to the hymn and changing the hymn in a way that alters the intention, harmony or feel of the composition. The former is generally permissible, the latter only in certain cases, two of which are outlined here:

1. Fundamental to musical flow is the harmonic rhythm – the rate at which the harmonies change. Where 'drag' is sufficient to confuse the beat, the organist may regard it as the lesser of two evils to simplify complicated harmonies. Conversely, a congregation can be prevented from rushing – such as in the long notes at the end of *Helmsley* ('Lo! He comes with clouds descending') – by inserting extra notes

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- Hymn singing in past centuries may now be regarded as absurdly slow.² The original harmonisation of some hymns is therefore too detailed and cumbersome to succeed at modern-day 'realistic' tempi. Following the composer's text exactly may not then do justice to the intended effect, so a conscious and well-argued decision to re-harmonise may be justified.

That we have devoted much attention to issues of rhythm and pulse is not a coincidence. Given a hypothetical choice between steady, well-planned

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and confident rhythmical playing with many wrong notes, or completely correct notes with hesitant and unpredictable beat, there is no question but that the former would provide better leadership for the congregation. Practising the notes is important but practising and preparing rhythmic leadership matters even more.

Text

A hymn combines music and words. It is a common misconception, especially among non-organists, that the organist is only concerned with the music. Nothing could be further from the truth. The organist's function and concern in relation to the words falls into two areas: representing their character and clarifying their meaning.

The general character of a text is reflected in terms of articulation, tempo, registration and general approach. Clarifying the meaning is more complicated. One may simply not bother – the approach taken by hymn-playing machines from the barrel organs of past centuries to today's MIDI and CD. The 18th-century Doncaster organist Dr Edward Miller complained of the strange and degrading absurdity of being given 'not the words, but only the name of the tune, and how often it was to be repeated'.³ Some organs incorporate counting devices to help the organist know when the last verse has been reached.⁴

At its simplest, we see the problem with this in such melodies as *Benson* ('God is working his purpose out') and 'I am the bread of life', where the notes themselves change slightly from verse to verse. Failure to play the appropriate notes for each verse causes muddle and distracts the congregation's attention. Such hymns are in a minority but almost every hymn varies the metrical structure from verse to verse. Indeed, in many hymns the

lines are not grammatically self contained but run over into the next. A well-known example of this is

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by.

As the punctuation indicates, the meaning is:

The Lord's my shepherd,
I'll not want;
He makes me down to lie in pastures green;
He leadeth me the quiet waters by.

The organist who 'plays the notes as written' not only fails to help the congregation but actively makes nonsense of the words. This phenomenon is constantly encountered, generally in traditional style texts, whether translated from another language ('Now thank we all our God', v.3):

All praise and thanks to God
The Father now be given.
The Son, and him who reigns
With them in highest heaven

or originally in English ('O little town of Bethlehem', v.2):

While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love

Contemporary hymn and song writers generally compose self-contained lines except when they are writing in a consciously traditional idiom (Kendrick, 'All heaven waits', v.2):

The Spirit comes to fill your mouth
With truth, his mighty sword.

No one reading such texts aloud would destroy the sense by ignoring the punctuation and grammar. Doing so when singing a hymn implies that the words are irrelevant – an utter travesty of the hymn's intention.

Clearly, the organist's playing must not only faithfully mirror the text, but, like every other aspect of hymn playing, must provide leadership (with a degree of pre-emptive exaggeration) to ensure that the congregation understands it. An emphatic break calls for both hands (and feet where appropriate) to be lifted together. A lesser break is achieved by lifting the hands while the pedals remain legato, or a subtle break by lifting only the melody line. Punctuation





marks are a useful prompt but are by no means a complete or reliable source of guidance. Sometimes a breath should be introduced where grammatically it is not necessary simply in order to prevent the congregation from breathing in a worse place and thereby misunderstanding the text. Here ('O love that wilt not let me go'):

That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller, be

a congregation is tempted to breathe at the end of the line (after 'flow') unless a good breath is introduced after 'depths', which easily persuades the congregation to sing through to the end of the following line. In some cases grammatically important punctuation should be disregarded. A comma after the first syllable of a verse should usually not be marked ('He who would valiant be', v.3):

Since, Lord, Thou dost defend
Us with Thy Spirit

except where a break is needed to strengthen the continuity of a subsequent long text phrase ('Nearer, my God, to Thee', v.4):

Then, with my waking thoughts
Bright with Thy praise

Caution should be applied when faced with lists ('Just as I am, without one plea', v.4):

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,

These few examples show that even observing punctuation marks is not enough: careful reflection and considered response is needed. Issues such as tempo, the number of beats between verses, the extent and nature of the introduction and even the minutiae of text in each verse are all of fundamental and inescapable importance: issues which should lay claim to a great deal of the organist's practice time.

Style

There is no room to discuss style here, but an understanding of it is essential to play a hymn with conviction and informs decisions regarding tempo, articulation and registration.

Mistakes

Playing a verse too few means the organist must frantically re-focus and join in; a verse too many makes the organist feel ridiculous. This will not usually happen if the organist sings the words along with the congregation (be aware that a one-off hymn sheet produced for a wedding, funeral or even for a Sunday service may contain a different number or order of verses from those in the organist's hymn book). Most situations can be rescued, but the organist's greatest comfort is that 'services' are all about serving God – who does not hold mistakes against us! ■

References:

1. Commonly known in the UK as the 'playover'
2. A tempo of 2-4 seconds per beat was common in pre-Victorian England, while a Scottish writer in 1787 described a semibreve as 'as long as one can conveniently sing without breathing'. (Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), Vol.1 p.92). A Swedish author wrote in 1842: 'In ceremonial and joyful hymn tunes the notes should be held for 3 seconds, apart from the last note of each strophe, which should be held rather longer. In mournful and serious hymns, the notes should be held for 4 seconds, the last one somewhat longer.' (Pehr Anton Hejschman, *Method för choralsång efter zifferor* (Carlstad, 1842) (translated from the Swedish by the present author))
3. Edward Miller, *The History and Antiquities of Doncaster and its vicinity; with anecdotes of eminent men* (Doncaster: W. Sheardown, [1804]), p.88
4. The organ copy of the official hymn book for the Church of Norway was actually published without containing the texts of the hymns to which the tunes relate: an astonishing and crass omission