



Church Music Help Sheets

“O” Series – for Organists Playing Hymns

O4

This sheet is intended to help organists and other instrumentalists who are required to play hymns in the context of Christian worship.

Prepare. If you get reasonable notice of the hymn list, take advantage of the time to make sure that your fingers (and feet) are secure with the notes and, if you are an organist, to work out what stops you will use for the verses, given the resources of your instrument, the acoustics of the church and the expected size of the congregation. In other words practise your hymns. (See Help Sheet O5.)

Be ready. The announcement of the next hymn is not the time to start fumbling for it in the hymn book, especially when the pages are thin and difficult to turn quickly. Turn up the next hymn as soon as the previous one is finished, even if it means that the prayer, scripture reading or sermon does not immediately have your full attention. Better still, use a system of markers such as the “Post-it” or “Stick-on” notes to speed up the process. And remember, getting the next piece of music ready can be as much an act of worship for you as anything that is going on around you - if you make it so.

The “Playover”. It is usual to play at least part of the hymn before the people start singing. This is called the “playover”. Its purpose is to establish the key, the tempo and the mood and to remind the people of the tune. It also gives them a chance to find the hymn in their books if they have not done so already.

Since you do not support congregational singing during the playover, it is customary to use organ registration which is a little less robust than you intend to use for the hymn itself, but strong enough to encourage the people to get up and sing. It should also be consistent with the mood of the hymn. If you have a two-manual organ, this can be easily managed by playing the playover on the Swell and moving to the Great for the first verse. If you have a one-manual organ, add one stop to your playover when you are about to start the hymn itself. Keep your moves simple in order to maintain your rhythm.

How much of the tune do you need to play for the playover? Some suggestions:

- If the tune is short (e.g. 4 lines of words), whether it is well-known or not, play the whole tune.
- If the tune is longer (e.g. 6 lines or more or verse and refrain) and not well-known, play the whole tune.
- If the tune is longer (as above) and well-known, play a portion of the tune, e.g. the refrain only, or the first two and last two lines (especially if lines 3 and 4 repeat 1 and 2).

- Only if the tune is very well known indeed is it safe to play only the last two lines.

Whatever you choose to do should make it easy for the people to get back to the beginning of the tune. Make them want to sing!

Verses. Keep an even pace throughout the verses of the hymn, slowing up only at the end of the last verse.

If you can, vary your registration between the more boisterous and the more meditative verses, as appropriate, if the resources of your instrument (and your own skills) permit, but make sure that you are still supporting your singers even in the quieter verses. That is your role: supporting the congregation but not drowning them.

Sometimes it may be difficult for you to assess the balance between your instrument and the congregation yourself, especially when the organ pipes or the speakers are some distance away from the console. Ask someone you can trust to be helpful and honest with you to attend a normal service and report back to you. It is important that there should be a normal congregation present because people, and especially their clothing, absorb sound and deaden the acoustic of the building.

As much as you can, phrase your music to fit the phrasing of the words (see Help Sheet O2). Unless you know the words well yourself, this will involve taking a quick look between verses at the words of the verse immediately ahead. It takes practice because it must be done without interrupting the flow of the hymn. It helps if you have a singer with good diction or a choir standing close to you.

Between verses. Give some thought to the breathing needs of the congregation between verses. If you rush ahead too quickly, they are caught without enough air to join in the next verse from the first word; if you wait too long, they are caught with a chestful of air and nothing to do with it. Either way they are uncomfortable. If you are a singer yourself, whether as soloist, choir member or enthusiast in the congregation, you are not likely to get this wrong. Just breathe with the congregation. If you are still worried about it, ask that helpful, honest friend to watch and listen to the congregation and report back to you on whether you are giving them any problems.

Make sure that any stop changes you have planned (see above) do not add to the time you take between verses.

**RSCM Australia (ACT Branch) wants to help the relatively untrained organist and can send a sympathetic adviser to spend an hour or two with you at the organ in your church. Contact the Secretary of the Branch: Katharine Walker, 12 Renwick St, Chifley, ACT 2606
Phone/Fax: 6281 6666; E-mail: <act.sec@rscmaustralia.org.au> to make arrangements.**

Copies of any of these Help Sheets may be obtained from the Secretary of RSCM Australia, ACT Branch:
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The ACT Branch has no objection to further copies of this Help Sheet being made for distribution to people who might be helped by them, provided they are made without amendment.