

HYMN PERFORMANCE

Improvisations, Interludes, and Embellishments

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The organist's primary duty within worship is leading the hymns and service music so that the congregation can sing thoughtfully and well. In any given service we organists are soloists, accompanists, and hymn leaders, working from a large repertoire. Improvisation, a regular part of an organist's craft, adds depth and dimension to worship.

Improvisation is simply the spontaneous creation of music. Based on preexisting music or not, improvisation allows for whim and fancy, though it must be tempered with discipline, sound technique, and above all, respect for music's role in worship.

Throughout history, improvisation has played a larger role than is sometimes realized. In liturgy's earliest days, because little music was written down, improvisation was the norm. Centuries later, and continuing to the present day, many major compositions had improvisatory aspects or began as improvisations: consider pre-Baroque music and the works of Bach, Buxtehude, Bruhns, Handel, Tournemire, Peeters, Alain, and Messiaen, among others.

All organists must improvise at times, perhaps simply by adding chords at a hymn's end or by bridging the gap when a fan blows parts of a score under the pedals. Yet improvisation remains unfamiliar territory that many shy away from. If that is your situation, be assured that with some guidance and practice, you can develop skills and confidence. At that point, you will find many opportunities for improvisation in and around hymns and service music. Perhaps you feel a hymn needs extra clarity because of unfamiliarity or you wish to highlight a seasonal or upcoming new hymn. Reharmonizing a verse or changing the key can add contrast, highlight a text or theme, or add needed time for a procession.

Here are some principles to remember:

- Make sure that the direction of the hymn or service music is clear and sung well. The congregation and organist must be "on the same page."
- Apply basic concepts of voice leading, traditional harmony and traditional forms, though the church modes and scales other than major and minor can add variety and color. As you gain skills, you may find occasions to venture into atonality or experiment with disjunct rhythms.



1 All crea-tures of our God and King, lift up your voic-es, let us
 *2 Great rush-ing winds and breez-es soft, you cloudsthat ride the heavens a-
 *3 Swift flow-ing wa-ter, pure and clear, make mu-sic for your Lord to
 4 Dear mo-ther earth, you day by day un-fold your bless-ings on our
 5 All you with mer-cy in your heart, for-giv-ing o-thers, take your
 *6 And e-ven you, most gen-tle death, wait-ing to hush our fi-nal
 7 Let all things their cre-a-a-tor bless, and wor-ship him in hum-ble-



1 sing: Al-le-lu-ia, al-le-lu-ial Bright burn-ing
 2 loft, O—praise him, Al-le-lu-ial Fair ris-ing
 3 hear, Al-le-lu-ia, al-le-lu-ial Fire, so in-
 4 way, O—praise him, Al-le-lu-ial All flowers and
 5 part, O—sing now: Al-le-lu-ial All you that
 6 breath, O—praise him, Al-le-lu-ial You lead back
 7 ness, O—praise him, Al-le-lu-ial Praise God the



1 sun with gold-en beams, pale sil-ver moon that gen-tly gleams,
 2 morn, with praise re-joice, stars night-ly shin-ing, find a voice,
 3 tense and fierce-ly bright, you give to us both warmth and light,
 4 fruits that in you grow, let them his glo-ry al-so show:
 5 pain and sor-row bear, praise God, and cast on him your care:
 6 home. the child of God, for Christ our Lord that way has trod:
 7 Fa-ther, praise the Son, and praise the Spi-rit, Three in One:



O praise him, O praise him, Al-le-lu-ia,



al-le-lu-ia, al-le-lu-ia!

The refrain may be sung antiphonally, by phrase; all join in the final Alleluia.

Words: Francis of Assisi (1182-1226); tr. William H. Draper (1855-1938), alt.
 Music: *Last uns erfreuen*, melody from *Auserlesene Catholische Geistliche Kirchengeseng*, 1629;
 adapt. Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1938)

88. 44. 88 with Refrain

- Pay attention to the musical and literal possibilities a tune or text affords. Practice text painting using themes found in the text, such as rushing water or the breath of the Spirit. Different sound textures, from monody to two or more voices in polyphony to chords, are useful for musically evoking images.
- Practice separating the voice lines of a hymn, playing them with different hands and feet for flexibility. Try changing meters or rhythms, though always in ways that your congregation can follow.
- Try sets of variations on a cantus firmus.
- Listen to the music of other cultures to expand your repertoire of possibilities.

The music examples below show some of these techniques applied to the hymn tune *LASST UNS ERFREUEN*. Both the opening phrase and the conjunct motion of the refrain provide rich material for improvisation.

Example 1, based on the opening phrase, uses the whole-tone scale in the bass and soprano and the basic harmonies I, V/vi, vi, I to create an extended introduction.

Example 1

Example 2 uses block chords as an alternate accompaniment. The pedal could play the melody as reinforcement for the congregation or as a solo line.

Example 2

Example 3 juxtaposes the melody against itself. Written or improvised accompaniment could be added.

Example 3

Example 4A uses parallel chords for verve and sparkle. 4B adds notes in the chords (seconds and sevenths) for color. 4C uses these chords to move from one key to another (D to E).

Example 4

Example 5A uses an ostinato pattern which could easily be harmonized. This pattern is also shown in triple meter and with different note values juxtaposed. 5B uses the scale as an ostinato pattern against the cantus firmus, which could be played, sung, or both. Here, too, the example shows juxtaposing of different note values.

Example 5



Example 5 cont.

Improvisation done well flows from, complements, and enhances worship. The possibilities are unlimited. Yet let us never forget that underlying all we do is our knowledge that in worship, it is the Spirit of God that leads us.

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