

HYMN PERFORMANCE

SUE MITCHELL-WALLACE

As an organist, my interpretation and leading of hymns comes through my fingers, the registration of the instrument, and articulation. To be effective, I must first read the text carefully and consider the melody and harmonies in detail.

Often, when preparing a hymn for singing, we organists are called upon to make decisions about the punctuation of the poetry. The way we articulate a hymn for singing does not always agree with the rules of grammar or the spoken renditions of the text; singing may stretch words well beyond the length we are accustomed to when speaking them. Organists must also consider breathing places and contiguous meaning when deciding whether to connect or separate phrases, and if so, how best to do it.

Isaac Watts' Lenten text "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" offers striking examples for interpretation. In *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990), this splendid text is set to two long meter tunes: ROCKINGHAM in triple meter and HAMBURG in duple meter. From a musical viewpoint, ROCKINGHAM seems to fit the text more successfully, in both word stresses and interesting melodic/harmonic rhythms.

In my experience, the duple meter HAMBURG is more frequently used, though ROCKINGHAM has a wider melodic range that sings the text beautifully, especially the line, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross Tune: Rockingham

Love so a - maz - ing so di -
vine, de - mands my soul, my life, my all.

HAMBURG's range is a diminished fifth. The 39 melody notes in HAMBURG are set in F major. Sixteen of those notes are *a*'s ("mi" in solfège terms) and 8 are *f*'s ("do"). Thus, 24 of the 39 notes, or 61 percent, are just two pitches. There are two notes higher than *a* (*b-flat*) and only one note lower than *f* (*e*).

Sue Mitchell-Wallace is Organist and Director of Music at St. Luke's Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA. Her video, The Art and Craft of Playing Hymns is available from The Hymn Society.

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross Tune: Hamburg

This modest melodic range seems antithetical to Watts' profound text. Though this tune would not have rated highly in composition class, it is lovingly sung year after year.

Triple meter can lumber along with tedious iambic stresses unless we work very hard to sing/play in legato phrases of several measures' length. To achieve legato playing, we must use correct, consistent fingering patterns on specific notes and listen carefully to the voice leading of each part. A good music microscope for examining our playing is a tape recorder. Often, listening to ourselves on tape reveals that what we think we are doing as we play is not what the congregation hears.

We also need to be aware of keeping a forward motion. This means looking ahead and thinking ahead as we play. An easy way to measure forward motion is to subdivide the beats mentally into eighth notes and to feel those smaller pulses in both quarter and half notes. This is also a good way to separate phrases for breathing. In a slower tempo, such as this hymn suggests, in surroundings of somewhat resonant acoustics, we would probably separate by allowing the space of an eighth note. A caveat from my experience: the drier the room, the shorter the separations need to be, but if the singers are lagging, the separations must be longer and more definitive.

A most effective way for stressing the text is to take slight breaks as commas indicate, as in the phrase "See, from His head, His hands, His feet." When the congregation sings those words slightly separated, they profoundly underscore the heavy pain He endured. Another phrasing choice I have made is to play "Love so amazing, [break] so divine [break] demands my soul [connect], my life [connect moving parts] my all." This phrasing stretches the singers, and they end the hymn by feeling that they have, indeed, given their all.

Hymn playing is never boring; it provides challenges beyond measure. The more time we invest in studying texts and practicing the hymn performances, the greater the benefits for all who will be singing.