

A Catholic Organist's Guide to Playing Hymns

LAMBILLOTTE
Come, Holy Ghost

SAMPLE

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TECHNICAL BACKGROUND

ON PLAYING HYMNS

Hymns began as people sang free-style melodies, beginning and ending on any note, without a regular pattern or meter in the words and not rhyming. Since the time of Bach hymns have been very structured, often beginning and ending on the same note, strong word patterns identical between verses and rhyming. The harmonies are very predictable. While early hymns used any of the 8 church modes (the order of notes in a scale) modern hymns almost exclusively use two, what we call the major and the minor scales.

The major scale is predominant and the minor scale, when it rarely appears, is almost always modified to use elements of the major scale.

At Bach's time hymns were used to teach harmonization, using four parts singing at the same time. This practice continues today, often using Bach chorales (hymn) arrangements as examples. The parts are named Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass. Normally sung music in 4 parts would be called polyphonic, meaning 4 melodies sung against each other, sometimes overlapping. Hymns never overlap and the lower three parts written to support the soprano, which sings the melody.

These four parts are spread over the range of the voice, making some intervals hard to play on the piano or organ. For example, a Bass might low G on the bass staff, but also be expected to sing 8 at the top, a reach of a ten white keys. Most people are comfortable playing an octave, 8 keys, but not much more.

The true difficulty in playing hymns on a keyboard is juggling four notes playing all the time with only 10 fingers being available. Instead of throwing a pianist to the wolves by expecting them to adapt to holding down 4 keys at the same time while preparing to play four more on the next beat, there are better ways to introduce hymn playing.

The essentials for accompanying a hymn are the melody and the bass. These two parts are the strong outline. What is missing in this case is often a third note that determines whether or not the harmony created fits into the major or minor scale.

Why is the major or minor business important? These two scales create movement in music. Early hymns followed the words. Modern hymns support the poetic nature of the text by injecting the feeling of a beginning, a middle and an end to each line. They do this with a melody, a bass line, and a third pitch, that leads the ear to understand the nature of the harmony that the composer or arranger intends.

This is done by playing the interval of a major or minor third or a seventh. The seventh creates a dissonance that needs to be resolved - making it useful when reaching the end of a line.

Four part hymns can have all four elements at the same time - three part hymns are not as “full” in harmony, but are much, easier to play.

In polls of directors of music and choir directors, when asked if they would prefer hearing someone struggle to play a hymn in four parts, or play adequately in three parts, they without exception preferred hearing a hymn in three parts.

In this book we cover how to play a melody, how to add the Bass, and then, how to play three parts.

All of this leads up to, when you are ready and confident, playing in four parts, if you like.

When must you play hymns in four parts? When playing for a congregation that sings in four parts (extremely rare and such congregations - Mennonites and Church of Christ - often to not use any accompaniment - or a choir that sings hymns in four parts.

Noel Jones, AAGO
August, 2015

Hymns combine words...

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee,
Op'ning to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!

With a melody that fits.

HYMN TO JOY

Joyful, Joyful



Words are made up of syllables...

Count the number of syllables in each line.

Alleluia! Sing to Jesus!

His the scepter, his the throne;

Alleluia! His the triumph,

his the victory alone.

Hark! The songs of peaceful Zion

thunder like a mighty flood

Jesus, out of every nation,

has redeemed us by his blood.

TOTAL

Count the number of notes in each line.

















TOTAL _____

Why are there more notes than syllables?

The earliest singing in the Church was syllabic.

One note per syllable.

Later on, it became popular to sing melismatic melodies.

Two or more notes for one syllable.

This occurs in hymns today as well.

The slurs on the opposite page shows the melismatic parts of the melody in the hymn, where the same vowel is sung to more than one note.

Understanding this helps when playing the hymns.

HYFRODOL

Alleluia, Sing to Jesus



Mirroring in the music.

Looking at just the melody of this hymn you may think, “That’s a lot of notes to play.”

But there are not that many to learn.

Music that people find appealing is generally predictable, and yet surprising. When it is totally predictable, however, when nothing in the melody or harmonies is surprising, most people find it boring.

It’s been that way forever.

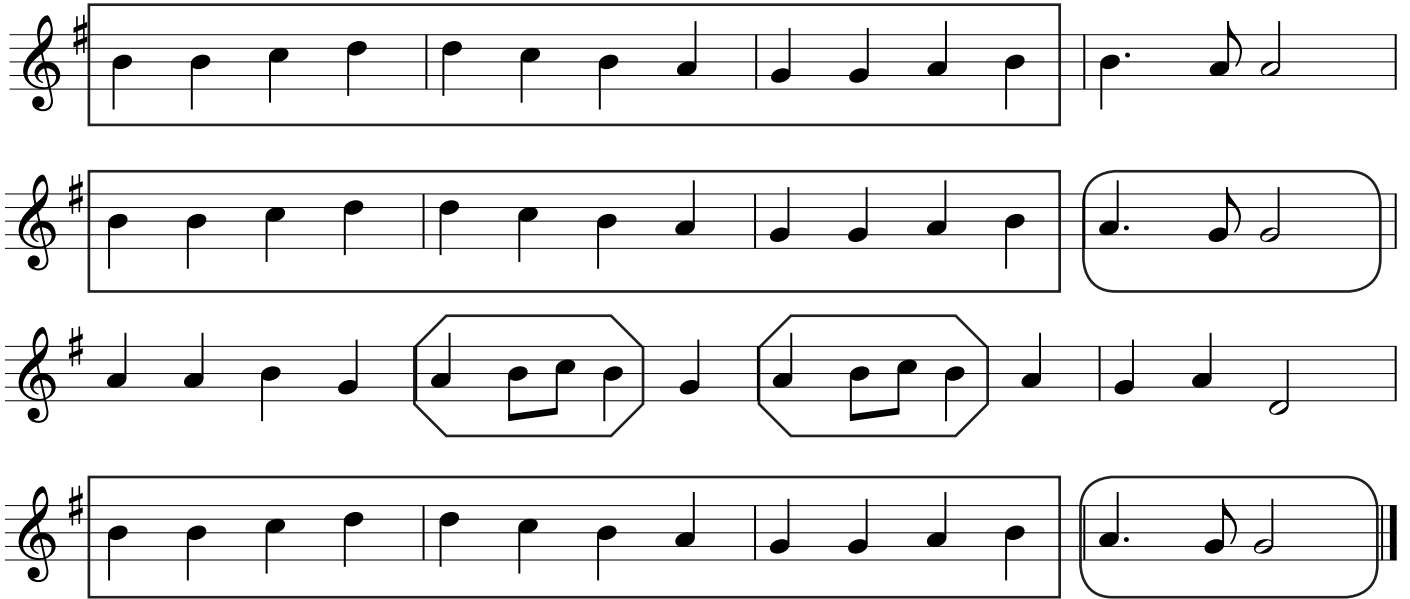
This hymn has 16 measures. But the first 3 are exactly the same in the second and last line, the last measures of line 2 and 4 are the same, and the first three beats in the second and third measures of the third line are the same.

Some hymns, like HYFRODOL repeat lines with the exact same music. This is where the very useful REPEAT markings come in handy.

In hymn writing, Mirroring means to reuse a melody or phrase.

HYMN TO JOY

Joyful, Joyful
Noel Jones



Form of the music of hymns.

As you study the hymn now, you can see the large sections of the melody that are exactly the same and, in between them, the few parts that are different.

As an organist, you need to look beyond the text, and study the music, to understand and easily play hymns.

HYMN TO JOY

Joyful, Joyful
Noel Jones



Words make the sound of the hymn interesting.

A hymn text is not just vowel sounds – Oyuoyueaoee – but a combination of vowels and consonants.

A vowel is the stretched-out, beautiful sound, that we hear when singing. But the consonants create the rhythm of the hymn.

Hearing “Oyuoyueaoee”, no matter how beautifully sung, makes no sense without the consonants. “Joyful, joyful, we adore thee”.

The organist has vowel sounds to play – the sounds of the organ stops have different tone colors – but these cannot be changed word for word, as when they are sung.

There are no consonants either – the piano inserts a form of them when notes are played with accents, but this is not possible on the organ.

For these reasons, the sound of the organ playing a hymn can be boring, as boring as someone reciting the words of a hymn in a monotone.

No excitement.

But it is possible to inject life into the sound of the organ when playing hymns. The two techniques that you will learn are also useful when playing organ music as well.

How to put excitement into hymn playing?

It’s simple – it’s not what you play, but what you do not play.

The two techniques you can easily master, to make your playing come alive, use silence.

Silence brings hymns played on the organ alive.

A quick review of note lengths

Below is music marked using the Stave Breakthrough™ technique. Read the music away from the organ, saying the length of the note and the pitch.

Download the STAVE BREAKTHROUGH App for the iPad/iPhone and Android for more practice reading and playing exact note lengths.

The image displays three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, illustrating the Stave Breakthrough technique. Each note is labeled with its duration and pitch.

Staff 1:

- 1 beat C
- 1 beat D
- 1 beat E
- 1 beat F
- 1 beat G
- 1 beat A
- 1 beat B \flat
- 1 beat C
- 1 beat C
- 1 beat B
- 1 beat A
- 1 beat G

Staff 2:

- 1 beat F
- 1 beat E
- 1 beat D
- 1 beat C
- 4 beat C
- 2 beat D
- 1 beat E
- 1 beat F

Staff 3:

- 1/2 beat G
- 1/2 beat A
- 3/4 beat B
- 1/4 beat C
- 1/4 beat B
- 1/4 beat A
- 1/4 beat G
- 1/4 beat F
- 1 3/4 beat E
- 1/8 beat D
- 2 beat C
- 1 beat rest

The important notes in hymns are the ones that you do not play.

LLANFAIR

Christ the Lord Is Risen Today



Step 1: Breathing at the end of the lines of hymns.

Cut the last note played on each line in length, and insert a rest:

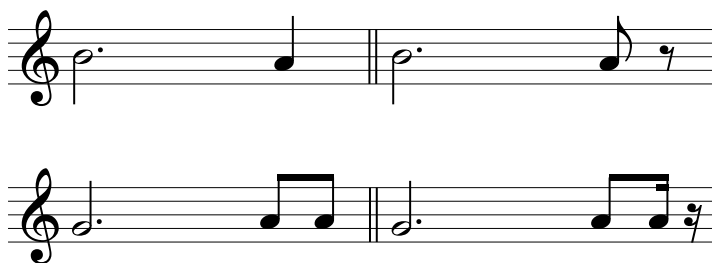
1. For whole notes (4 beats), dotted half (3 beats) and half notes (2 beats) insert a one beat rest.

The Note

The Note with Rest (Breath)



2. For a quarter note, eighth, and sixteenth, insert a rest half the length of the note.



Cutting the length of the played note by inserting a rest in this manner preserves the flow of the music and emphasizes the rhythm.

Taking a Breath: Step One in making hymn playing come alive.

When someone is reading a poem, they stop at the end of lines and take a breath.

We do the same with hymns on the organ. We stop playing at the end of a line, and breathe.

But we stay perfectly in time, like a clock ticking.

At the end of a line, the people in the pews need to get some information from you:

1. How long is the last note?
2. When can I take a breath?
3. When should we expect to sing the next note?

We supply this information by playing half the length of the last note, and inserting a rest.

Important:

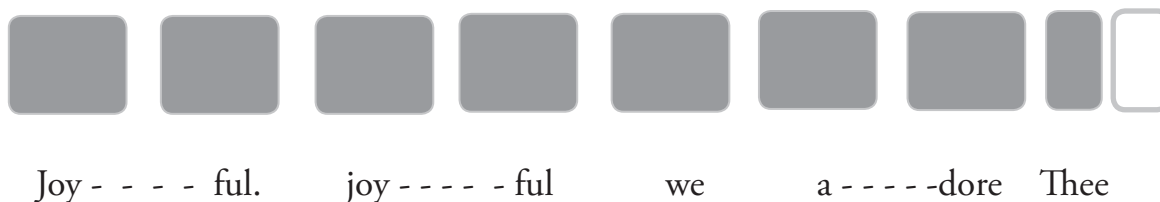
If you happen to already be playing hymns in church, this way of ending verses might seem strange. Bear with us as we establish this element of hymnplaying.

On pages 82 through 91, we show what we call “The Invisible Measure,” a very important part of hymn playing. You will never find it in a hymnbook, but almost every organist plays it.

Right now we are establishing with you a very precise way to play the final measures of hymns. Consistency is very important when playing for a congregation. By page 82 you will have mastered, and be comfortable with, playing the measures that end each verse and the hymn itself.

You will find it easy to add this final element on page 82 to your repertoire of hymnplaying techniques.

Inserting a rest.



The rule: At the end of a line, cut the length of the last note by half.

Insert a rest.

Think of it this way:

When it is time for the singers to take a breath, you make the organ take a breath as well.

The result:

A perfect conductor's upbeat.

You are setting and maintaining the tempo and the flow of the hymn.

As it looks on a hymnal page.

Listen to how this is usually played:

HYMN TO JOY

Joyful, Joyful
Noel Jones



As organists should play it, creating rhythm and flow.

HYMN TO JOY

Joyful, Joyful

Noel Jones



Play the left page, and then play the right page on all the following pages.

EVENTIDE

Abide With Me



EVENTIDE

Abide With Me



LYONS

How Firm a Foundation



LYONS

How Firm a Foundation



LLANFAIR

Christ the Lord Is Risen Today

