

Pittsburgh Chapter National Association of Pastoral Musicians



Pizza, Pipes, and Prayer

“Accompanying the Choir”

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INTRODUCTION

Mozart is famously quoted as saying that the organ is the “king of instruments.” In many ways, it is the best-suited instrument for accompanying choirs.

- Both the organ and the human voice use controlled wind pressure blown through a “pipe” to produce sound
- The vast range of timbres that the organ can produce allow for exciting and varied accompaniments

ORGAN REGISTRATION FOR CHORAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Always remember that the role of the organ is to support the choir, never to drown it out. Registration will depend on many factors, including the size of the choir, the size of the organ, the acoustic of the room, and the style/time period of the piece you are accompanying.

Three ways to control dynamics on the organ:

- opening/closing expression pedals
- adding/subtracting stops
- changing manuals

Basic principles of registration:

- Never use celestes in chorus, as they distort the pitch
- Avoid high pitched mixtures and/or loud chorus reeds that over-power the choir
- The choir and swell divisions are generally best suited for accompanying the choir
- Save the great or solo divisions for loud sections of a piece or for soloing melodies
- Exercise great caution if you choose to use the Crescendo pedal

-Don't be afraid of becoming a "piston-pusher"

Baroque registration:

- Simpler combinations of 8' and 4' foundations
- Gapped registrations (i.e. 8' and 2')
- Terraced manuals

Romantic and Modern registration:

- Treat the organ like an orchestra
- Predominance of 8' stops
- Use celestes, chorus reeds, solo reeds, and full choruses for text painting

Sample setup of a crescendo:

1. Strings and celestes with pedal to balance
2. 8' flutes and strings on the swell and choir (no celestes)
3. 8' foundations on the swell and choir, including principals
4. Add 4' to choir
5. Add 8' chorus reed to swell or choir
6. Add 2' or low-pitched mixture to choir
7. Full swell
8. Add mixtures and brighter chorus reeds to the choir or great

Changing registration:

- Plan to change pistons in time, either on the downbeat of a measure, the start of a phrase, or a particular beat of a measure
- Use expression pedals in tandem with registration changes to create a smoother crescendo/decrescendo

Ex. 1 - terracing manuals to quickly change registration

63 *mp* *mp* *ff*
Mag - ni - fi - cat, *f* Mag - ni - fi - cat, *f* Mag - ni - fi - cat, *ff*
Mag - ni - fi - cat, *f* Mag - ni - fi - cat, *ff*
Sw. Gt. Sw. Gt.
mp *f* *mp* *f* *ff*
Man. Ped. Man.

Ex. 2 - Text painting "celestial fire"

allargando

30

part of that ce - les - - tial fire.

My Eyes for Beauty Pine by Herbert Howells. Pg. 3, mm. 30-32. Oxford University Press, 2002.

PHRASING AND RHYTHM

A strong sense of rhythm is essential to successful choral accompanying. Whether you are conducting from the console or playing with a conductor, choirs often default to listening to the organ. Shaky rhythm or an unclear tactus will result in the choir slowing down or falling apart in difficult sections of a piece.

Practice emphasizing the strong and weak beats (1 and 3 in 4/4 time; 1 and 4 in 6/8 time, for example).

Practice playing all of the repeated notes.

Pay attention to how the conductor phrases the choral parts, and decide whether that phrasing should be mirrored in the organ part.

Ex. 3 - Strong/weak beats in 4/4 time.

5

W S W S W S W S W S

Ch. Sw. Ch. Sw.

O How Glorious Is the Kingdom by Philip J. Stopford. Pg. 1, mm. 5-8. Birnamwood Publications, 2015.

Ex. 4 - Strong/weak beats in 6/8 time

VOICES S.A.: mp

ORGAN mp

Andante

Man.

O Jesus, Joy of Loving Hearts, arranged by Robert J. Powell. Pg. 1, mm. 1-4. G.I.A. Publications, Inc, 1991.

Ex. 5 - Difficult meter changes

26

♩ = ♩ even and measured

♩ = ♩ even and measured

mp molto legato

O Voice of the Beloved! by Grayston Ives. Pg. 3, mm. 26-29. The Royal School of Church Music, 2006.

Ex. 6 - Repeated notes

① With dignity ♩ = ca. 58

SOLO TRUMPET

N.B. mf

[Brass]

(Organ Pedal) - SUSTAIN / LEGATO

One Faith, One Hope, One Lord by Craig Courtney. Pg. 1, mm. 1-3. Lorenz Publishing Company, 2009.

ADAPTING ORCHESTRAL ACCOMPANIMENTS

Use the orchestration of the piece to determine registration. The use of 16', 4', and 2' stops allow the organist to eliminate awkward voicing and doubled octaves.

Many times, orchestral reductions can be “thinned” on the organ.

If playing with an orchestra, consider reading from a continuo part and treating the organ as such.

Ex. 7 - Adapting an orchestral reduction

Maestoso (♩ = 66) LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

PIANO *ff*



Hallelujah Chorus from "Mount of Olives" by Ludwig van Beethoven. Pg. 1, mm 1-2.



Ex. 8 - Using a 4' stop to make parallel octaves much easier to play

6

S
A
T
B

p

When the un - known hour is come And the last great

p

8' + 4' - PLAY LOWER NOTE ONLY

Sw.

Ch.

sempre poco staccato

Summer Ended by Charles Wood. Ed. Philip Brunelle. Pg. 6, mm. 48-50. Walton Music Corporation, 1985.

ADAPTING PIANO ACCOMPANIMENTS

Layer the notes of arpeggiated chords by playing and holding the bass note in the pedal and building the rest of the chord in the manuals.

Pay attention to the register of the notes and use organ registration to create a similar sound.

Use clean registrations for clarity of notes.

Ex. 9 - Layering arpeggios

9 S.A.

mp unis.

Chill of the night - fall, lamps in the win -

p

Chill of the Nightfall by K. Lee Scott. Pg. 1, mm. 9-13. Hinshaw Music Inc, 1997.

Ex. 10 - Adapting bass lines and soloing melodies

Andante (Solo) cantabile

ORGAN or PIANO

legato

sim.

Cantique de Jean Racine by Gabriel Fauré. Pg. 1, mm. 1-4. Oxford University Press, 1986.

HYMN ANTHEMS

Change registration between stanzas much like you would when accompanying a congregational hymn.

- Consider using different color families for each stanza, such as all flutes for a women's stanza, dark chorus reeds for a men's stanza, etc.
- Use full choruses for introductions, interludes, and/or final stanzas.

Ex. 11 - What to do when the trumpet player is unavailable

E In verses 3 and 4 the people are silent
TRUMPET DESCANT *poco f dolce*

CHOIR (UNACCOMPANIED)

3. 0 en - ter then his gates with praise, Ap - proach with joy his

p

The Old Hundredth Psalm Tune, arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Pg. 2, mm. 32-36. Oxford University Press, 1953.

SUPPORTING UNACCOMPANIED SINGING

If you are asked to play an unaccompanied choral anthem on the organ, first decide whether your role will be to “hide” under the choir simply to help keep them in tune, or whether you will treat the piece as if it were a piece with organ accompaniment.

For “hiding” under the choir:

- Use the softest 8' flute or string
- Use the expression pedal to to balance with soft/loud sections of the piece
- Phrase everything the same way as the choir
- Release the last chord of each phrase early

If the intent is for the organ to “accompany” the piece, then use all of the above ideas of registration and adapting scores to create your own accompaniment.

PRACTICING CHORAL ACCOMPANIMENTS

Take time to prepare your score before practicing:

- Listen to recordings
- Decide how you will register the piece and where/how many pistons you will use
- Are there unaccompanied sections that you may end up playing? If so, be sure to include those sections in your registrations
- Write in fingerings and pedaling

Determine the sections of the piece in which you will need to pay closer attention to the conductor. Plan to discuss these with the conductor and practice them several ways:

- Will introductions, interludes, or any sections of the piece be played with rubato?
- Where will the choir have ritardandos, fermatas, breaths, etc.?
- Are there difficult tempo changes?

Have fun! There is a whole world of fantastic organ music written for choral accompaniments that is outside the standard recital repertoire.

RESOURCES

Buck, Dudley. *Illustrations in Choir Accompaniment with Hints in Registration*. Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc. Boston: ECS Publishing, 1992.

Campbell, John. *Accompaniment Adaptation Practicum*. American Guild of Organists, 1998.

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Middleton, Matthew. “Choral Accompaniment at the Organ”. Matthew Middleton, 2019.

<https://choralorgan.services/registration/>

Spillman, Robert. *The Art of Accompanying: Master Lessons from the Repertoire*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1985.