

# Effective Service Playing:

The Partnership  
Between Organist and Congregation

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# Agenda

- Topic segments:
  - Effective use of the organ in worship
  - Organist's goals, and the partnership between organist and congregation
  - Text, pulse, conducting, and other general concepts
  - Case Study: "One Thing's Needful"
- Your Questions

## What is the organ?

Which of these best describes the organ?

Subjective descriptions abound: majestic, versatile, loud, expensive

But as a player, how should we approach the instrument? What is essential, what is accidental?

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- A keyboard instrument
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- A legato instrument
- An expensive instrument

(Which least describes the organ?)



“The organ is basically a legato instrument capable of sustained tone beyond that of any other keyboard instrument.”

*(Christian Worship – Manual, p. 312)*

“...Unfortunately, its sustaining power becomes a liability when the organ fails to ‘breathe’ naturally like other instruments.”

“Legato” – one of many terms used to describe articulations. Means “connected” or “joined together.”

“Staccato” – separated (not necessarily short)

Playing “legato” is a conscious choice; notes on the organ can also be played staccato.

The first statement shows a predisposition (or bias) for how the organ should sound without regard to its role, the acoustics, or any other variable in a performance.

The second statement is true from any wind player’s or singer’s point of view.

## Sustained Playing

- Impossible for wind players
- Doesn't imitate the human voice (our goal)
- Fatiguing for the listener
- Better to phrase according to the text:
  - Legato (connected) when vowels span two notes
  - Articulated to match consonants (and punctuation)

Thesis: when used in a role to support singing, the organ should breathe as naturally as a singer.

- Too connected or sustained -> pressures singer to match the organ (and runs out of air)

- Too choppy -> disrupts the phrase

Synchronizing articulation with consonants reinforces strong beats and keeps the two synchronized.

## Why not play vocally?

- People approach the organ as a keyboard instrument (preoccupied with technical challenges)
- It has an infinite wind supply; why not use it?
- Don't have a concept of wind playing; or were taught differently
- Nobody ever told them it was an option!

Concepts are important; how you conceive of the organ sound dictates how you will play; shouldn't be the reverse.

Even as a professional wind (horn) player, I did not recognize or appreciate the concept of playing vocally; I was merely imitating certain organ recordings I had heard. My teacher in Germany first pointed it out. What an epiphany! Not only did it make fingering a lot easier (it's harder to make everything legato), it sounds so much clearer, especially in larger rooms.

## Overarching Philosophy

- Play vocal lines vocally
  - Reinforces the text
  - Most natural for the congregation to follow
  - Articulation conveys the pulse
  - Use a “vigorous legato” technique
- Game:
  - Name That Hymn

“Vigorous legato” – term coined by Mel Butler, my teacher at University of Washington. To me it conveys

- Varying degrees of legato based on the acoustic (dry acoustic may require superlegato, wet acoustic may require extra attack or more separation in order to convey the clarity to the room) – applies to any two consecutive but different notes
- Modifying articulation of two consecutive identical notes to conform to consonants (if any), and room acoustics

# Old Habits

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Dudley Buck, "Choir Accompaniment"  
(1910, publ. Wayne Leupold Ed.)

CHAPTER II.

ACCOMPANIMENT OF THE CHORALE, OR PLAIN "HYMN-TUNE"\*

EXAMPLE 1 (AS WRITTEN AND SINGED).

*Humburg, L. M.*

King - doms and thrones to God be - long; Crown him, ye na - tions, in your song;

Adapted from a Gregorian chant by L. Massis.

His won - drous name and power re - bears; His hon - or shall en - rich your verse.

EXAMPLE 2 (AS PLAYED).

\* We purposely use the word "hymn-tune"—"hymnody," etc.—in this work, as the "psalm-tune" would, logically speak - ing, be a chant. The psalm is, in the absence of metre, essentially a prose composition, and we either chant prose or set it to another form. The hymn—verse if derived from the psalm—is a metrical composition in the strict sense.

The notion of “organ sound should be legato” goes back at least a century.

Here the example shows the various problems:

- Alto and tenor robbed of cue to proceed to a new syllable;
- Introduction of 5<sup>th</sup> voice indicates the approach here is not polyphonic (preserving 4 voices) but viewing the organ’s role as providing a harmonic backdrop to a single melody line
- Weak beats are emphasized by inadvertent syncopation (tenor m.1 beat 4 tied to m.2 beat 1 adds an accent to m.1 beat 4)

Christian Worship:  
Manual, p. 314

## New Habits?

...

The majority of the hymns in *Christian Worship* may be considered vocal settings where each syllable of the text is clearly notated in all four voices with a corresponding note, as in *Old Hundredth* (CW 323, see Example 2). With these hymns the organist need not play all of the repeated notes. In fact, in the interest of a more satisfactory accompaniment, it would be better if the organist makes an arrangement more suited to the organ. In Example 2 the opening repeated chord is problematic. If all the

The image shows two systems of musical notation for the hymn 'Old Hundredth'. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and an organ accompaniment line (bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The first system shows the beginning of the hymn with a repeated chord in the organ part. The second system continues the melody and accompaniment.

... notes are repeated as notated, the continuity of the setting is disturbed. If only the soprano and bass notes are repeated, the decisive interval of the third in the tenor remains tied. In order to achieve proper accentuation as well as articulation...

- Then how shall we treat it, as a 4-part vocal setting, or a melody with harmonic accompaniment?
- Wind players don't get the option of not playing all repeated notes; why exactly is it different for the organ?
- Who says it is a more satisfactory accompaniment, or that the arrangement should be suited to the organ? Shouldn't it be suited to the application, i.e. supporting the congregation singing?
- In what way is the "continuity of the setting disturbed?" Are consonants disturbing to the continuity of speech?
- "The decisive interval of the third remains tied..." – How many additional unwritten rules exist to determine what should and should not be tied?
- "In order to achieve proper accentuation" – then why syncopate, accenting the weak beats?

## Another Approach

...



Harold Gleason:  
"Method of Organ  
Playing", 7<sup>th</sup> ed.

1. Each hymn will have its own particular tempo, which will grow out of the study of the words and music.
2. Long phrases require a somewhat faster tempo than short phrases.
3. Do not play hymns metronomically, but with a strong rhythmic pulse.
4. Hymns with many short notes should not be played too quickly, or those with long notes too slowly.
5. Consider the acoustical environment in the church.

### ***Repeated Notes***

1. To maintain clarity and a strong rhythmic pulse there should be little, if any, tying of repeated notes.
2. Never tie the soprano part.
3. A series of repeated notes may sometimes be tied in the alto and bass parts from strong to weak beats of the measure.

### ***Amens***

1. An Amen is sung when the hymn ends. "Gloria in Excelsis Deo"

Gleason's brief chapter on Service Playing (from "Method of Organ Playing") contains an excellent summary of my main points especially with respect to articulation.

## Overarching Philosophy

- Demonstrations:
  - How to identify vocal lines (O Come, O Come)
  - Phrase according to the text (I Will Sing ...)
  - Hymns:
    - Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty (CW 195)
    - As With Gladness Men of Old (CW 83) / Crown Him With Many Crowns
    - Alleluia! Sing to Jesus (CW 169)
  - Example: Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring

A vocal line might exist even if nobody happens to be singing it.

“Christian Worship” is filled with many odd and gratuitous slurs, or notes which have been combined into larger note values. It prevents a 4-part hymn from being sung in parts. Better to do as the other hymnals have done; leave the 4-part arrangement intact, and let the organist combine them.

“As With Gladness” – use as an example of overarticulating in order to convey pulse to a dragging congregation. Dragging is usually an indication that they cannot hear the pulse; could be too connected, or insufficient tonal resources. The technique is to play non-soprano parts with (much) more space than the melody. Practice playing ATB parts staccato with a legato soprano.

“Ode to Joy” Beethoven – an example where the organ cannot produce enough gradations of articulation for the repeated notes to drive the phrase to the next measure, so the first two of four repeated notes might sound connected. (More gradations possible on a tracker / mechanical instrument; only on/off available on electric action instruments.)

“Jesu Joy” – illustrate that individual parts need their own articulation strategy. First play (as actually heard once) with:

- the alto note drone on G (taking the concept of “tying repeated notes in the inner voices” to an absurd extreme) and taking precedence over the soprano,
- totally legato bass, and
- totally legato soprano except when notes are repeated (then clip the first note).



Play again, this time patterning it after orchestral instruments (or voice) that might play (sing) the line.

## Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel

23

The image shows a musical score for the hymn 'Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel'. It consists of two systems of music. Each system has a vocal line in the treble clef and a piano accompaniment in the bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are printed below the vocal line of each system.

1 Oh, come, oh, come, Em - man - u - el, And ran - som cap - tive  
2 Oh, come, O Root of Jes - se, free Your own from Sa - tan's  
3 Oh, come, O Day-spring from on high, And cheer us by your  
4 Oh, come, O Key of Da - vid, come, And o - pen wide our

Is - ra - el That mourns in lone - ly ex - ile here  
tyr - an - ny; From depths of hell your peo - ple save,  
draw - ing night; Dis - perse the gloom - y clouds of night,  
heav'n - ly home. Make safe the way that leads on high,

A melody with basically a free harmonic accompaniment; in this setting there is only one voice (soprano) because the other lines can hardly be sung with the words. (There are however true 4-part settings of this hymn.)

253 **I Will Sing My Maker's Praises**

1 I will sing my Mak er's prais - es And in  
 2 He so cared for and es - teemed me That the  
 3 All that for my soul is need - ful He with  
 4 Since there's nei - ther change nor cold - ness In God's

him most joy - ful be, For in all things I see  
 Son he loved so well He has giv - en to re -  
 lov - ing care pro - vides, Nor of that is he un -  
 love that on me smiled, I now lift my hands in

Example of a 4-part setting with gratuitous slur (alto – denies singing “Prai” of “Praises,” or “teemed” of “esteemed”) and combining two consecutive quarters into a half (tenor). (Bass part just skips the initial words, “I will”; unusual but not disqualifying for a 4-part setting.) Slurs (as actually played) should match the text: e.g. alto v.2 first full measure, “cared” G-F, & “and” D-Eb.

## Organist's Goals

- To Lead or To Accompany?
  - “Accompany” connotes passivity
  - An “accompanist” is subordinate to the soloist
  - “Leading” could mean being ahead of the congregation
  - Or, I’m in charge – the congregation must follow me, me, me!
  - (Acoustically, you probably are ahead; else it’s dragging)

I feel that organists don’t always have a clear picture of their goals, so end up just “playing the notes.”

Compare it to our systematic study of doctrine (Catechism etc.); it brings us together, and shows us how different roles interact. (God-Man, male-female, believer-unbeliever, etc.) Why wouldn’t there be something equivalent for our musical goals? (organ-congregation, piano-congregation, organ-soloist, etc)

## Organist's Goals

- “Support” the congregation
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- “Support” the congregation
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  - Melody (pitch)
  - Pulse (tempo)

## Partnership

- Use the POLA principle – be predictable
- Respect the miracle of unrehearsed performance
- Build trust (cf. the Three Rules)

POLA – Principle of Least Astonishment. E.g., imagine if File...Print closed your document without saving it. (Maybe A is for Aggravation as well!)



# Partnership

- Three Rules to Play By

The three rules:

- Don't confuse the congregation (but they will forgive you)
- Don't trick the congregation (they will distrust you)
- Don't annoy the congregation (they will resent you)

# Partnership

- Three Rules to Play By
  1. Don't Confuse the Congregation
    - Watch and listen for signs of confusion
    - If not addressed, uncertainty leads to doubt, and eventually fear
    - Therefore better to reliably play the melody correctly at tempo than to try to do too much
    - Organists have a responsibility to notice musical problems (in real-time) and fix them

Many examples: playing the wrong thing; playing erratically (missing notes or losing the pulse)

# Partnership

- Three Rules to Play By
  1. Don't Confuse the Congregation
  2. Don't Trick the Congregation
    - Make entrance predictable (transitioning from introduction to verse)

Common trick: delaying your entrance and tricking someone into singing a solo as they anticipate your entrance.

# Partnership

- Three Rules to Play By
  1. Don't Confuse the Congregation
  2. Don't Trick the Congregation
  3. Don't Annoy the Congregation!
    - No need to show off; balance creativity with a sense of modesty
    - Start on time
    - Find out if you're annoying them before they send someone to tell you

## Partnership

- The essence of our partnership with the congregation is respect
- “All things are permissible, but not everything is beneficial”
- Make decisions with the goal of enhancing the congregation’s ability to worship (especially through singing)
- Command respect, and be deserving of it

Respect is a two-way street. (A partnership where A respects B, but not the reverse, is doomed.)

If you don’t fix (musical) problems (perhaps because you don’t want to confront the problem or the person causing it), then others may conclude that you can’t hear the problems or don’t care.

## General Topics: Text

- Combine knowledge of text and musical style to decide phrasing
  - Hymnal contains many Lutheran chorales, but also chant, spiritual, French carol, English styles
  - Read through text for sense and mood
  - Choose a matching registration

## General Topics: Text

- Each verse needs its own articulation (CW 23)
- Breathe with the congregation; play their text
- Respect the congregation
  - Articulate when they do, connect when they hold
  - Don't micromanage punctuation or breathing
  - Never leave them singing a solo
  - Examples: A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth (CW 100); p.38 service response

Avoid the two ditches along the narrow road: too legato or too choppy (imagine CW 100 where every half note is played as a quarter followed by a quarter rest).

Note that at a certain tempo (with "A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth" in mind) one could divide the half note into two exact quarters and breathe on the latter; but at the speed it is normally sung, this doesn't correspond with the speed of a human taking in a breath; instead, it clips the phrase and signals to the singers that they should stop. Closer to a dotted quarter, then breathe for an eighth note value. Don't be pedantic; just take a quick breath on the organ along with the singers. It won't always align precisely with an arbitrary subdivision of the half note.

# Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel

23

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2 Oh, come, O Root of Jes - se, free Your own from Sa - tan's  
3 Oh, come, O Day-spring from on - high, And cheer us by your  
4 Oh, come, O Key of Da - vid, come, And o - pen wide our

Is - ra - el That mourns in lone - ly ex - ile here  
tyr - an - ny; From depths of hell your peo - ple save,  
draw - ing night; Dis - perse the gloom - y clouds of night,  
heav'n - ly home. Make safe the way that leads on high,

Note stanza 2, “Free your own” starts before the barline. Don’t blindly breathe at all barlines identically; support the meaning of the text. Here, practice “breathing” in the soprano after “Jesse,” but as needed lift the accompaniment to indicate the pickup. It’s tricky and probably very subtle from the congregation’s point of view. Main goal: don’t penalize singers who want to sing the meaning of the text.



## General Topics: Hymn Introductions

- Set up melody (pitch), tempo, and mood
- Don't play the introduction at a different (faster) tempo than the hymn will be sung

## General Topics: Pulse

- Pulse is not as fast as the notes on the page
  - Usually 2x, 4x, or even 8x the smallest note value
  - Compare “Greensleeves” (CW 67) and “The Angel Gabriel” (CW 24) (both 6/8 meter)
  - Pulse matches speed of walking or dance step
  - Pay attention to mixed (duple/triple) or changing meter (e.g. CW 200, 290)

## General Topics: Breathing

- Breathe with the text, not the barlines
  - Keep the melody part sustained while other parts breathe
- That tiny breath mark ‘ is not a fermata!
- Insert space on a weak beat for breath
  - Example: “Wie schön leuchtet” (CW 49)

In CW 49, the octave leap near the end, slow the pulse slightly by relaxing the speed of the measure leading up to the octave jump, allow a (quick) breath, and resume the pulse after the jump. It's subtle but prevents the breath from seeming like it interrupts the pulse. (Very typical problem in symphonic wind playing, snatching a breath while the rest of the ensemble continues.)

## General Topics: Tempo

- Pulse: the Swing analogy
  - Count! That's what they're doing too
  - Don't lose focus
  - Put yourself in the congregation's place

The "Swing" analogy: imagine a child on a swing. You gently change their speed by adding or subtracting force at the top of the swing (weak beat, no weight on the seat, child is floating). Never stop the seat at the bottom of the arc (kid goes flying.)  
Or: consider walking on what you think is level ground, only to be surprised by a depression in the lawn. This is what happens when the organist does not reinforce the pulse.

## Transitions Between Verses

- Be a conductor without using your arms
- It takes two clicks to anticipate a third
- Those two clicks might be two pulses, or two half-pulses (depends on tempo)
- The pulse may weaken at the end of a verse, or remain steady
- Use the lift to make the entrance predictable
- Humans anticipate and are adaptable

According to rules of geometry, two points define a line.

So two “clicks” (points in time) define a time interval from which one may infer the next click.

However, humans remember time intervals and pulses (within reason) and can predict the next click from a single point. This is why it’s possible to coordinate entrances by giving only one cutoff / cue (assuming the pulse has already been established, either by hymn introduction or hundreds of years of singing the hymn at the same speed.)

## Transitions Between Verses

- What to do about quarter-note pickups?
  - Ex. CW 551 (For All The Saints); CW 355 (Take the World, But Give Me Jesus)
- Hold the end of the last verse at least as much as you did for the other verses

Once you have trained the congregation to trust you at the ends of stanzas, don't suddenly truncate the final stanza (leaving them singing.)

## Bibliography

- Christian Worship: Manual (Accompanying the Hymns and Liturgies)
- Hymn Playing: A Modern Colloquium (Stuart Forster)
- Gleason – Method of Organ Playing

In “One Thing’s Needful,” address the problem of transitioning from duple to triple meter. Essential dilemma: to keep the quarter note tempo identical, causing a 50% reduction in pulse but very predictable from congregation’s point of view, or keep the pulse steady, causing an increase in quarter note tempo (possibly confusing to congregation) but preserving the dance feel of the music?

## Examples for Discussion

- Tick marks: CW 242 (O That I Had a Thousand Voices)
- Pickup in tempo: CW 283 (Speak, O Savior, I am Listening)
- Chant: CW 361 (Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence)
- Articulation: CW 195 (Holy, Holy, Holy)



## Examples for Discussion

- Keeping pulse through manual changes (NSS Common service Kyrie)
- Fast breaths (CW 431: I Walk in Danger All the Way)
- Mixed meter (CW 445: Ich dank Dir, lieber Herre)
- Syncopation (CW 245: Sing a New Song to the Lord)

## Examples for Discussion

- Rubato (CW 256: How Great Thou Art)
- Slow enough for text, fast enough for music (CW 257: My Soul, Now Bless Thy Maker)
- Keeping the pulse steady between duple and triple meter sections? (Renaissance dance style; CW 290: One Thing's Needful)

## Examples for Discussion

- Notation is not inspired! Adjusting phrase ends (CW 307: Jesu, Kreuz, Leiden und Pein)
- When not to repeat notes (CW 327: God Be with You till We Meet Again)
- Odd-length pickups (CW 390: Salvation unto Us Has Come)
- Counting (CW 411: What a Friend We Have in Jesus)

## Examples for Discussion

- Making sense of the pulse (CW 425: Oh, Sing, My Soul, Your Maker's Praise)