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### Leading Worship from the Keyboard

Calvin Symposium on Worship

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*Second Reformed Church*

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## *Leading Worship from the Keyboard*

Workshop by Micah VanderHill

### INTRODUCTION

The role of the worship keyboardist has expanded over the past two decades. Churches that once relied on a dedicated organist or pianist to accompanying the congregation now have teams of musicians who draw from a broad repertoire of music styles. Modern worship has created demand for keyboardists who can read music and improvise over lead sheets and chord charts, often in the same service! This workshop introduces some essential skills to bulk up your keyboardist toolkit. Each topic area is divided into 3 skill levels allowing you to see where you might want to begin or continue developing your skills in that area.

*Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. For the word of the Lord is upright and all his work is done in faithfulness. Psalm 33:3-4*

### Hymn Accompaniment

Strong hymn accompaniment skills are a must for any worship keyboardist. Modern worship spaces often have no organ so a keyboardist sometimes must lead the congregation solo. Hymn accompaniment involves much more than playing the notes on the page.

#### BEGINNER: HYMN PHRASING

A good congregational accompanist supports singing best by paying careful attention to the phrasing and dynamics of the hymn. The first step is learning the hymn as written and then understanding the phrasing and meter of the tune and text. I'll be using Towner's "Trust and Obey (When We Walk With the Lord)". Below you see the original version of the hymn with the breaks notated as they should be played.

Rest in Soprano

Piano

When we walk with the Lord in the light of his Word, what a

Rest in all parts

glo - ry he sheds on our way! While we do his good will he a bides with us

Rest in Soprano                      Rest in all parts

still, and with all who will trust and o bey Trust and o bey for there's

Rest in Soprano

no oth er way to be hap py in Je sus but to trust and o bey.

REMEMBER: Rest in all parts between stanzas

- Play all parts legato and break wherever the breath naturally falls during singing.
- Sing the hymn by yourself and break (lift) whenever you naturally take in a breath.
- A deliberate lift of all parts should occur when there is a break between verse and chorus and between stanzas.
- The break between stanzas should fall in with the meter but it is actually more important to focus on the natural breath length between stanzas.

Once you've learned the common phrasing for a tune you don't have to relearn the phrasing if a different text is being sung underneath it (interestingly congregations phrase their singing according to tune, not text).

Introductions are another important element of hymn playing. Typically hymnals will provide brackets (  $\lrcorner$  ,  $\llcorner$  ) which enclose a suggested introduction. Make sure that between the introduction and first stanza there is a clear, deliberate break so there isn't any confusion about when to start singing.

### INTERMEDIATE: BEEFING UP THE ACCOMPANIMENT.

Most hymn arrangements are written in 4-part SATB format. It's a standardized notation that communicates the musical essentials to organists, vocalists, and instrumentalists. As a keyboardist it is important to recognize that the notes on the page do not limit you. Creating a stronger accompaniment starts with a few simple steps.

1. Moving the tenor line into the right hand range.
2. Doubling the bass line in the left hand.

This is the easiest way to "thicken" a hymn giving you more volume and giving singers a stronger accompaniment. **Make sure** to include the phrasing and breaks from before. Louder and more complex hymn playing requires deliberate breaks and clear phrasing, otherwise these get lost in the extra sound. Here are the first few measures of Trust and Obey using the technique above.

Applying these rules to most hymns will increase your sound but if overused it tends to lead to a ham-fisted hymn playing technique.

### ADVANCED: EMBELLISHMENT:

There are several different hymn embellishment techniques. A final draft of an embellished "Trust and Obey" is in the appendix and below are descriptions of the additions within the notation so you can begin to apply these to other hymns.

The left hand emphasizes the first beat of the  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter (ONE, two, three) by using half note note phasing in the bass.

Walking bass lines give movement to the hymn and can be placed with different rhythmic emphasis. I've included several in the final draft to provide examples but try not overuse these embellishment because it can become distracting and will interfere if you have the congregation singing in parts.

The most important part about embellishment is knowing what *not* to play. In the final draft the right hand is limited to three-note chording which omits some of the repeated notes, cleaning up the sound of the hymn significantly.

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A fantastic resource *Let the People Sing* by David M. Cherwien demonstrates and explains a multitude of other techniques for hymn playing. Written primarily for organists, included is a large section for pianists and most of the techniques translate to the keyboard easily. If you are a pianist and have no organ experience I highly encourage you to take some lessons. It will give you a new appreciation for hymn playing and leading congregational song.

## Playing in a Worship Team:

A solid understanding of contemporary or “pop” keyboard technique is necessary for worship team keyboarding. Not only does this include learning different styles of music but more importantly knowing how to function as a part of a team, rather than a solo musical unit. In this part of the workshop you’ll learn how to read lead sheet style music, how to “comp” or accompany without clashing with the other team member’s instruments and how to improvise using different chord voicings.

### BEGINNER: LEAD SHEET BASICS

Due to the prevalence of the guitarist’s role in contemporary worship music most worship teams have adopted lead sheets and chord charts. The difference between the two is that a lead sheet has the melody notes of the song attached with chords while a chord chart is just the words and chord symbols.

#### Lead Sheet

#### Chord Chart

Verse:  
 E  
 Lord You are good  
                   B/E                                  D/E  A/E  
 And Your mercy endureth forever  
 (repeat)

The challenge for the keyboardist is to come up with an accompaniment using only these chord symbols hovering above the words. This is often called “comping” in musician terms and it takes practice to be able to do this comfortably.

Most keyboardists can find basic major and minor chords, along with the dominant 7<sup>th</sup>. Here is some quick refresher theory for finding these in all keys.

Major chord triads stack a major 3<sup>rd</sup> interval and minor 3<sup>rd</sup> interval onto the root. Below you see a C major chord. Minor chord triads stack a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> interval and major 3<sup>rd</sup> interval onto the root. Also below you see a D minor chord.

Dominant 7<sup>th</sup> triads stack a major 3<sup>rd</sup> interval and two minor 3<sup>rd</sup> intervals onto the root. Below you see a G7 triad.

Inversion Positions

Root 1st 2nd Root

So what is the first step to lead sheet playing? The answer is total mastery of these chord structures and their inversions. It takes practice but it will pay off. Know how to play all major and minor chords in each key and the inversions for each chord. Know how to play the scales correctly but spend most of your time learning these structures and be able to play them by heart.

Once you mastered major, minor, and dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chords then learn the following; the suspended 4<sup>th</sup> chord (sus) which is often resolved to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the chord, and the suspended 2<sup>nd</sup> chord (2) which is also often resolved to the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree. Both examples are notated on right.

The reason for learning these chords and inversions is so you can readily improvise or “comp” without playing chord triads that sound jumpy. You don’t want to have to constantly move your right hand trying to find the next chord. Inversions put the music your playing in a range that is easy to play and ultimately sounds better. Notice how the steps to creating an accompaniment of Hughes’ “Here I Am to Worship” uses these inversions to support the melody line.

The image displays three staves of musical notation for the song "Here I Am to Worship". The first staff shows basic root position triads (E, Bsus, F#m, E, Bsus, E/A) with lyrics "Light of the world you stepped down into darkness, opened my eyes let me see." The second staff shows inversions of these chords. The third staff shows the chords used in a melody with moving bass lines.

- In the first line you see the basic root position triads.
- The second line uses inversions to create a tighter sound. This could be a great accompaniment using a piano or string pad sound.
- The third line shows how composers use these inversions to notate harmony under a melody.

"Here I Am to Worship" Words and music: Tim Hughes; © 2001, Kingsway's Thankyou Music; Song used by permission CCLI: 400063

In the appendix there are more examples of accompaniments for this song. Notice how the accompaniment uses sustained notes underneath the singing. Play simple accompaniment when the congregation is singing and embellish during breaks in the singing.

### Chord Reference Guide

Reading a chord chart or lead sheet is sometimes like learning a new language. And, as with languages, there are different dialects and styles of notation. For example a jazz style lead sheet will have a completely different chord symbol for a major seventh chord than a folk style chord chart. Here is a quick reference for some of the most common chords seen in the worship team setting and their different symbols that you should aware of. I've listed the most popular symbols for each chord first and then some others that you may encounter used for the same chord.

#### Type of Chord

#### Possible Symbols

C major	C, Cmaj, CMaj
D minor	Dm, Dmi , D-
E dominant 7 <sup>th</sup>	E7
F major 7 <sup>th</sup>	Fmaj7, Fma7, FM7, FΔ7, FΔ, F(+7)
G minor 7 <sup>th</sup>	Gm7, Gmin7, Gmi7, G-7
A diminished	Adim, A°
B augmented	Baug, B+
F# suspended 4 <sup>th</sup>	F#sus, F#sus4, F#add4
E ♭ suspended 2 <sup>nd</sup>	E ♭ sus2, E ♭ add2
C "power chord"	C5 *borrowed from guitar, omit the 3 <sup>rd</sup> degree from chord

C major played with an E in the bass → C/E

Resources like *Total Keyboard* by Terry Burrows contain picture chord charts for learning any chord you may encounter in your playing.

## INTERMEDIATE: COMPING AND PLAYING IN THE TEAM

A great team keyboardist compliments the sound of their other team members. Meet your 4 other common band members:

**The Bassist-** The bassist carries the bass line of the music. They play within the lower register of the keyboard so the keyboardist must be careful not to play on these lower registers. Doing so creates a muddy sound.

**The Drummer-** The drummer establishes the groove of the music. Therefore the keyboardist is not responsible for carrying the groove 24/7. Sometimes the keyboardist will be required to play rhythmically but more often they need to leave space for other instruments to carry the rhythm.

**The Vocalist-** Vocalists will sing melody and the keyboardist doesn't need to double the melody if the song is well known. Sometimes on new songs this is necessary but most of the time if the keyboard and vocals are doubled it can get messy.

**The Guitarist-** The guitarist can fill either a lead or rhythmic role. Their range is typically in the center of the keyboard. The guitarist is also the closest to the keyboardist's range so both musicians must closely listen to what each other is playing.

What does this leave for the keyboardist? The best range for a keyboardist to play in is from middle C up to the second to last C on the keyboard. Many piano players in particular find this constricting but it will dramatically clean up your team's sound. A keyboardist using a modern instrument has to learn how to use each sound available to them in an authentic way. Here is a rough guide to the most popular sounds and how to use them.

### THE SONIC SPECTRUM OF THE KEYBOARDIST

PERCUSSIVE	LEAD	KEYS	ORGAN	PAD
Clavinet Synth Bass Harp	Synth Leads Brass Horns Reed Horns Electric Guitar Flute	Acoustic Piano Fender Rhodes Wurlitzer A-200 CP80	Hammond B3 Pipe Organ	Synth Pad Strings Vocal Pads

**Percussive** and **Lead** keyboard playing are probably the least useful for worship team playing even though they can be used. Refer to the recommended books for more on these styles of playing.

**Keys** playing is the most familiar style for piano players on a keyboard but when playing with a team it must be reserved and leave room for other players. Here is an example of accompanying "Awesome God" by Rich Mullins with an electric piano sound.

The musical score shows a sparse keyboard accompaniment for the song "Awesome God". It features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The chords are C, G/B, G, and D. The lyrics are: "Our God is awesome God, He reigns from".

- Remember to avoid the lower registers and emphasize the chording not the melody.
- Sparse playing sounds the best with piano or "keys" sounds.

**Organ** style playing emphasizes sustained notes. The Hammond organ sound is a staple of contemporary and gospel music. Here is an example of accompanying “Those Who Trust” with a Hammond sound. Use gospel style riffs between verses for added embellishment.

**Pad** playing uses sustained chord structures that provide a smooth background sound for the team. String sounds also emphasize sustained chords and should be played like a synth pad. These sounds are great for teams with two keyboardists since one keyboardist can play in “keys” style while the other plays the chords on a “pad” sound which avoids doubling.

- Always play string sounds in the upper registers so they don't sound muddy.

“Awesome God” words and music by Rich Mullins; © 1988, BMG Songs, Inc; Arr. Micah VanderHill.

“Those Who Trust” words and music: Don Chaffer; © 1999, Hey Ruth Music; Arr. Micah VanderHill. Songs used by permission CCLI: 400063

## ADVANCED: CHORD VOICING

“Less is more” is the motto of the worship team keyboardist. So how can you do more with less?

### Getting that “Pop Music” Sound

Most keyboardists who've done a lot of lead sheet playing notice that sometimes their accompaniment sounds bland. All the right notes are there but it doesn't sound like anything special. The next step is learning how to add voicing to your chords. Each player will ultimately develop their own independent style but here are two essential tricks of the trade to get you started.

**Minor chords can become minor 7 chords.** Find the root of the minor chord and then find the note three half steps up from that root. Play the major triad of this note with the original root in the bass. For example Am becomes Am7 by playing an “A” note in the bass and a C major triad in the treble. It's a less intense minor chord and is a common voicing in pop music.

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> degree voice is your best friend.** Probably the most commonly used voicing is the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree. This sound is most recognizable in country music styles but can be used in any contemporary setting. One common technique in contemporary music is the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree “drone”. This is when the accompanist plays a note continuously, which creates a 2<sup>nd</sup> degree chord sound. You can see in the example of “You Are My King” which is in the key of D, uses “A” or the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree note of the G scale throughout the verse’s accompaniment.

Words and music: Billy Jame Foote; © 1997, Worshiptogether.com songs. Used by permission CCLI: 400063

Experiment with these voicings in your playing and discover which ones work best for you. For more information refer to the recommended resources.

Remember that your main role as a team keyboardist is to support the congregation in worship. Worship leadership needs to focus primarily on helping congregations sing the songs that remind them of the transforming love of Christ. It is my prayer that using these skills with this in mind, you will bring excellent praise to our Creator.

#### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

*1000 Keyboard Ideas* by Ronald Herder- An invaluable collection of articles pertaining to piano, organ, and keyboard playing. It has tons of cool tips and tricks to beef up your musical bag of tricks.

*The Hal Leonard Keyboard Style Series*- I’m a big fan of this series. Each book focuses in on a specific style of playing like, gospel, blues, or smooth jazz and demonstrates different types of licks and progressions that you can incorporate into your playing.

*The Pop Piano Book* by Mark Harrison- A method resource for learning how to play a multitude of contemporary piano styles.

*Let The People Sing!* By David Cherwien- Written for both organists and pianists, this book is great for keyboardists who are just starting to play “off the page”. Improvisation, hymn embellishment, and musical styles are all discussed with emphasis on congregational song.

*The Art Of Worship* by Greg Scheer- This book has tons of great info for all members of the worship team. For keyboardists there is a terrific section on modulations and examples of different piano accompaniment textures.

*Total Keyboard* by Terry Burrows- A great guide for technical keyboard topics like understanding MIDI, using your keyboard in a live setting, and synthesizer basics. It also has a really handy chord guide for working with lead sheets.