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A Catholic Organist's Guide to Playing Hymns

Noel Jones

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Most organists learn to play hymns by opening the hymnbook and playing. Without any lessons. It's very rare for an organ student to have as part of their weekly assignment preparation of a hymn to be played at the next lesson. It is also rare for a church organist to have the luxury of having time, the money to pay and access to a fine organ teacher. The techniques used in playing a hymn are the same as used in the playing of Bach organ works. However, there are additional challenges, challenges that become difficult as organists are not playing from organ music, but from hymnbooks that are published for singing, not for playing the organ. Simple techniques used in this book make it possible for an organist to interpret how to play effectively from a hymnbook. But the music in hymnbooks is not written to be played, but instead to be sung. Why aren't hymnbooks more organist-friendly? Johann Sebastian Bach composed 354 arrangements of hymntunes, in four parts, for singing. These 354 hymns are still studied today by theory students. They are excellent examples of four part composition. With four parts being sung against each other, subtle harmonies are possible. Hymns in today’s hymnals are still presented in the 4-part style introduced by Bach. Most organ teaching methods approach hymn playing by putting the student to work playing 4-part hymns, with little or no introduction or training. “Four parts” means that four independent melodies are played against each other at the same time. Hymnplaying in four parts is on the same level of difficulty as playing Bach Preludes in four parts. Bach did not compose the 354 hymns in four parts as teaching materials for organists. They were written for singers to sing. They were not intended for basic study by an organist wanting to master the art of hymn playing at the organ. Four part hymn playing is tricky, if not downright difficult. While pianos have a sustain pedal, there is none on the organ. Organists have to hold down all four notes (chord) being played, and develop skills to move smoothly to the next four notes to be played. Some notes are held, requiring pivoting or substituting another finger to free up a finger to reach a new note. It’s like watching a many-legged spider maneuvering around the keyboard. We are confident that you will find this book useful. There is much to be said in favor of playing hymns in three parts. We’ve surveyed music directors, and an overwhelming number agree that they would rather hear an organist play three part hymns with confidence, than hear an organist struggle while trying to play in four parts out of the hymnal. The key to playing hymns successfully is learning how to adapt what is on the hymnal page to the organ. That’s what this book is all about, overcoming the fact that hymnals are for singers, not for organists.

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