

With Particular Emphasis on Worship Songs

James Pasley is assistant organist and a member of Wing and a Prayer at St Andrew's, Lucan. What follows is the full original version of an article that appeared in an abridged form in the Summer 2016 edition (No. 35) of Soundboard magazine.

Sometimes a music lesson does more than just teach you a few new techniques – sometimes it changes your perception of how music should be played. That's just what happened at the recent training day (31 January 2016) led by Gerard Brooks at Sandford Church. The training day was advertised as a practical workshop (partly at the organ console) on service accompaniment, with particularly emphasis on worship songs.

I should first explain why I had so eagerly anticipated this training day. I've been an organist since my early teenage years. I feel strongly that contemporary worship songs should be included in services, but like many organists I struggle to play them effectively on the organ. I was in the habit of switching to piano instead of struggling with the organ. That wasn't a satisfactory solution either. So about ten years ago I talked to my Rector about setting up a church band. We would need to find some musicians. Some time later the Rector told me that Paul McAllister (a drummer) and Barney Lynch (a guitarist) were willing to play. Almost immediately, we were joined by Gordon White (guitarist). I bought Trish (my wife) a bass guitar and with myself on piano, we had the makings of a band. We called ourselves "*Wing and a Prayer*" and prepared for the first service.

Although I had been an organist for many years, I had never played in a band before. I had a lot to learn. Luckily, others had years of experience playing in bands, just not in a church setting. So while I picked the songs we played, making them work was a group effort. The experienced band members shared many tips and tricks. Over the years I learnt that many of the defining characteristics of worship songs are actually techniques that allow multiple musicians to play together. For example, infrequent chord changes allow space for rhythm guitar. Simple arrangements make it possible to improvise. The band shouldn't overpower the singers, so some musicians will hold back during the singing and then play in the gaps between lines and between verses. So it's useful to have a song with a few extra beats where no one is singing.

As the make up of each band differs, I learned to treat the sheet music as just a starting point. Each band must arrange the music for the available instruments. The membership of our band has changed over the years. Two years after our first service, Joe Houghton joined us as lead singer. Having a lead singer increased the range of possibilities and made it easier to introduce new songs. As the years past, the children of band members became teenagers – now we had a row of backing singers as well. After seven years with the band, Joe moved on. The backing singers (now young ladies) stepped forward to lead the singing. Each change in membership

changed the style of music we play. New songs were chosen; familiar songs were rearranged or dropped from the repertoire.

The shortage of verses in many worship songs sometimes requires that a verse or chorus get repeated. I have often wished that someone would write a couple of extra verses for the songs we play. The repetition of the words requires the musicians to do something different with the arrangement to avoid monotony. As an organist, I never rearranged hymns, but as a band member it is a different matter. The simplicity of worship songs encourages musicians to make new arrangements. We often analyze commercial recordings to find an introduction, a bridge or an arrangement that could be copied or adapted.

The band plays once a month and I still occasionally play the organ at other services. I inhabit two worlds – traditional hymns on the organ and worship songs with the band. I still struggle with worship songs when left to my own devices at the organ. So it was in the hope of reconciling these two parts of my life that I set off to attend the Living Worship training day that promised to show how worship songs could be played on an organ.

Gerard Brooks started the lesson by discussing the differences between hymns and worship songs. He identified the rapid chord changes as the defining characteristic of hymns –the chord typically changes for each note in the melody. This can cause difficulties for organists. An organist might be required to extend a hymn tune with a little additional music to cover a gap. The complexity of the chord changes make this a very difficult skill to master. Gerard also recommended occasional changes to the arrangement of a hymn to keep the congregation interested. The possibilities with a traditional hymn are limited, as changes to the accompaniment must not change the harmonies. So it seems that the rapid chord changes in traditional hymns cause difficulties for both organists and band member.

Gerard then turned his attention to worship songs. He encouraged us to approach the sheet music for each worship song as just the starting point for arranging the song. For example, play a simple bass line on the pedal; isolate the melody on one manual while playing chords on the other. He advocated the idea of organists playing with other musicians. It was clear that Gerard's approach to playing worship songs on the organ mirrored exactly the approach I have learned to take when playing the same music in a band.

Alternatively, an organist could arrange a worship song in four-part harmony – thus transforming it into a traditional hymn. Of course, this takes a lot of skill. Gerard produced an example and it worked very well. Given long enough in the hands of organists, perhaps all worship song will turn into a traditional hymn. This reminded me that I had seen the reverse happen. A traditional hymn tune turned back into a worship song. When our band plays *Be thou my vision*, we use a simplified version that just uses the chords of D, G and A with a bridge added between the verses. The sentiments expressed in *Be thou my vision* have much in common with modern worship songs. It's clearly a worship song that was arranged into four-part harmony so long ago that few now see it for what it is. Once you start looking, it appears that

our hymnbooks are filled with worship songs now masquerading as traditional hymns. Many traditional melodies have been arranged into four-part harmonies. Extra verses have been added here and there.

The journey from organist to band member is one of learning to play with other musician. Playing fewer notes seems counter intuitive, but you have to leave some notes for others to play. If you are brave enough, you can abandon the melody line – the singers can take care of that. As an organist, I approach each service safe in the knowledge that even if no one else turns up, hymns will happen. As a member of a worship band, I must rely on others.

The arrangement of traditional hymns work well for organists, but can act as a barrier to the involvement of other musicians. These arrangements allow organists to get by without making any changes, but Gerard Brooks has taught us that organists should get into the habit of adjusting the arrangement of hymns to suit the needs of their church. On the other hand, many worship songs require us to make changes to the arrangements to suit the instruments and singers that are present. This is something that is expected when playing as part of a band, but might be a new experience for organists.

I see now that there is no division between traditional hymns and worship songs; it's simply a matter of how the accompaniment is arranged. Whether at the organ or in a band, I should approach all music with the same attitude; adjusting the arrangement for the situation in which I am playing. As an organist, it is easy to create a situation where members of the congregation are limited to just singing. Playing with other musicians can be a challenge for an organist, but the rewards make all the extra work worthwhile.