

# Creating Variety in Piano Hymn Accompaniments

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Yes, you can create musical variety when playing hymns on the piano!

## Piano vs. Organ

- The organ is a wind instrument, whereas the piano is a percussion instrument.
- Organ idioms: indefinite extension of tone, super-legato touch, coloristic variety through registration, blocked chords, polyphony between different voices
- Piano idioms: rhythmic activity, note repetition, chord and melodic voicing, arpeggiated textures, use of sustain pedal
- Organ can create tonal variety and octave doublings "for free" by changing stops even without changing the notes you play
- Playing hymns idiomatically on piano requires playing more notes more often, and departing from the page more.

## Hymn Styles

- Harmonic rhythm: how often does the harmony change
  - Fast: 1 new chord for every melodic note
    - Commonly used by older hymn tunes, such as most Lutheran chorales (Bach harmonizations such as *Lutheran Service Book* #449 will often have multiple harmonies on a single harmonic note!) and many Anglican hymns (FOREST GREEN, LSB 362)
    - Hard to do idiomatic piano figurations without changing the harmony
  - Slow: 1-2 chords per measure (or longer)
    - Hymns from the 19th century revivalist (CONVERSE, LSB 770) or 20th century gospel traditions (PRECIOUS LORD, LSB 739), or 20th and 21st century contemporary songs (Seek Ye First, LSB 712)
    - This harmonic rhythm not only makes it easier to elaborate with pianistic idioms but almost demands it.
- Singing in parts or unison
  - The ideal of hymn singing through much of the 19th and 20th centuries has been SATB singing
    - Hymns such as *It is Well with My Soul* include distinct rhythms and word placement for lower ATB parts
  - Beginning in the 20th century, much music for congregational singing is written for unison singing, not SATB
    - Sometimes these unison hymns envision an organ texture (e.g., ENGELBERG, SALVE FESTA DIES)
    - Most of the time these hymns envision a piano texture (any CCM songs such as Thy Word, Getty tunes, etc.)
  - Know whether your congregation sings parts or unison - if the latter you can get away with more harmonic changes

### **Building Blocks of Piano Texture:**

- 1. Octaves
- 2. Chords
- 3. Arpeggios
- 4. Voicing
- (practice your scales!)

### **Register and Texture**

- Play melody in octaves in right hand
  - Adding a third below higher octave or third above lower octave is a nice texture
  - Filling in with full chords also possible
- Play bass in octaves in left hand (gives an organ pedal like effect)
  - Filling bass octaves in with chords is not as effective due to muddiness of low register
- Melody itself can move to various octaves, with accompaniment being below or above in various octaves
- Octave-chord leaping bass
- Broken chord pattern accompaniment
- Arpeggio accompaniment
  - 8th notes work best, but 16th notes to build excitement is possible
  - Only up or both up and down
- R.H. S, L.H. closely voiced chord is effective for a more intimate verse
- Or even just S and B lines against each other for a spare effect
- If the hymn tune is very familiar, you can play only harmonies without melody
  - Or do a verse a capella
- Don't underestimate the effect of suddenly returning to hymnal harmony after more extensively ornamented verses

### **“Filler”**

- Figures that fill the time on long notes in between phrases
- Not just for ornamentation, but also to continue to establish rhythm so congregation knows when to start the next phrase
  - Especially important in a hymn such as Be Still, My Soul (FINLANDIA, LSB 752)
- Generally should stay within the chord the phrase finished on
  - Though making a quick fourth up and back motion can be effective
- Simplest option is repeating that chord on subsequent beats
  - e.g., left hand plays ascending chord inversions
  - rolling right hand chords in top register can be quite effective
- If you're using an accompanimental pattern (e.g., arpeggios), you can simply keep that going
- For more elaborate figures, use clear rhythm that doesn't overlap with melody

- If melody is



possible filler patterns include



- These can be adjusted to use different chord tones, to descend instead of ascend, to include octaves, etc.
- Left hand can use similar figures in the low register (but beware of being muddy)
- When using a wide spacing, you can play filler figure with one or both hands in the middle
- Whatever you do, make you sure you don't obscure the rhythm or distract from the congregational singing of the melody
  - Bach's *In dulci jubilo*, BWV 729, is not a model for hymn playing!

## Reharmonization

- A valuable tool, but use with care
- Some gentle chromatic additions (secondary dominants)
  - I - IV: lower seventh scale degree
  - IV/ii - V: raise fourth scale degree
  - V - vi: raise fifth scale degree
- Simplification of hymnal harmonies can facilitate idiomatic textures
  - e.g., HENDON (LSB 784): m. 3: vi on first two beats, ii<sup>6</sup> on second two
- More extensive reharmonizations should generally be saved for only one verse max
  - Fewer harmonies will be easier to make work than more harmonies
  - Around one chord per measure as a rule of thumb
  - For instance, you could boil the opening phrase of MUNICH (LSB 658) down to measures of I, vi, IV, I
  - Find one chord that multiple melody notes will sound good with
  - Extended chords (7ths, 9ths, 11ths) are a good option to explore
  - If you stay with major/minor harmonies within the key of the melody, you can't go too wrong
  - Always be alert to avoid chromatic clashes between harmony and melody - don't play a G Major chord if there's a G-sharp in the melody
  - Modal flavors (Lydian raised 4th or Mixolydian lowered 7th in major; Dorian raised 6th in minor) can work in the right places
- Make sure no changes get in the way of the singing

## Matching Mood of Text

- Pay attention to the text of each verse of the hymn, pick a particular mood or element to highlight
- Example: It Is Well (When Peace Like a River, LSB 763)
  - verse 1
    - “river” – use flowing arpeggios in left hand accompaniment and/or right hand filler
    - “sorrows” – use diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord
    - chorus – as written for first half, arpeggio accompaniment in second half
  - verse 2
    - “Satan”, “trials” – use relative minor harmonies, back and forth eighth notes in alto and left hand
    - open up eighth note texture in second half, back to harmonies as written
    - chorus – fill in chords, right hand eighths in second half
  - verse 3
    - “bliss” - left hand bass in octaves, fuller chords in right hand, horn call filler in right hand on dotted half notes
    - second half left hand octaves outline each chord
    - chorus – melody with lower octave, fill in bass with eighth note passing tones, additional right hand rhythmic activity
  - verse 4
    - looking to heaven – add higher octave to melody, balanced with low octave – chord pattern in left hand
    - “trump” – fanfare filler
    - chorus – filled-in bass with octaves, raised fourth before final dominant