



Tips for Congregational Accompanying at the Piano

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The type of congregational accompanying that fosters vibrant corporate singing necessitates a skill set that is unique from other forms of accompanying. In comparison to choral accompanists or collaborative pianists, the congregational accompanist plays a larger leadership role. The pianist assumes the responsibility of a conductor by providing the musical components such as tempo, pacing, and entrance cues. This brief article identifies five specific leadership requirements of congregational accompanying along with suggestions for enhancing the pianist's skills.

The hymn's introduction is the first aspect to consider. An introduction establishes both the song's melody and a clear tonality. Hymnals usually identify the introduction with brackets. When an introduction is not specified, however, it is important to establish enough phrases to familiarize the congregation with the hymn before they begin singing.

The introduction must be played in the same tempo as the hymn is to be sung. This is of great importance, as a steady tempo provides rhythmic stability to the congregation. When the introduction is long, the pianist often feels the temptation to rush. For the congregation's

benefit, it is wiser to play with a disciplined, steady beat in the same tempo as one would expect to sing the hymn. One can adjust slightly when the congregation begins singing.

The hymn's tempo is the second aspect that the pianist must evaluate. Prior to a solo vocal performance, the pianist and singer decide upon a tempo. A congregational accompanist, with the advice of a strong singer, should likewise plan tempi prior to accompanying hymns. The pianist might also hum or sing with the congregation so that he breathes with the congregation. When the pianist fails to consider breathing, the hymn is either too fast to catch one's breath or too slow to carry the phrases. The accompanist is responsible to establish and maintain an appropriate tempo so that the congregation can participate in singing without unnecessary distractions.

A third concern for the pianist is the register in which he plays. The congregation must hear their pitches above (soprano) and below (bass) the voices in order to carry across the congregation. Organists add 2', 4', 16', and mixtures to 8' pipes because the 8' pipes share the same range with the human voice. Similarly, it is important for the pianist to play an octave above the written pitches so that the congregation can hear the melody above their voices. When a congregation cannot hear their accompaniment, their singing inevitably suffers from pitch and rhythm insecurity.

The pianist can double the soprano and bass lines whenever possible. If playing octaves is too difficult, the pianist should loudly play the soprano line an octave above the written pitches. Descants and accompanimental figures can be added once the congregation is settled in tempo and pitch, which usually happens on the later verses.

Fourth, it is critical that the pianist play assertively. This principle does not mean that the pianist should force or punch the tone, but rather he must sustain a controlled forte (or even

fortissimo). Depending on one's hand size, the congregation benefits when the pianist plays with thick chords across several octaves with full volume.

Finally, endings of stanzas have to be carefully timed. Hold the last note for its full duration, and avoid the temptation to rush long note values in general. Make sure that the congregation can hear a breath leading into the beginning of the next stanza. If not, the stanza will begin clumsily.

Although this article is not an exhaustive treatment of congregational accompanying, one can see that it requires different skills from accompanying a soloist, choir, or other ensemble. The pianist must lead the congregation with strength and assertiveness so that the congregation's singing will have the potential to be more spiritually exuberant and musically fulfilling.