

BYU Organ Workshop Keynote Address

THE VOICE OF GOD

August 1, 2017, by Dr. Clay Christiansen

Brothers and sisters – my dear fellow organists in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. What a blessed lot we are! What a noble and unique calling we have: to lift souls through the matchless power of inspiring music in the worship of our Heavenly Father and His Son, our Savior and Redeemer! Do we fully appreciate the heavenly gift we literally hold in our hands and feet -- the gift of bringing the harmony, unity and peace of heaven directly to the hearts of Heavenly Father's children? Music aligns the very molecules of our soul which vibrate in harmony with the air around us to bring us a measure of the eternal unity and harmony that pervades heaven. We actually feel the peace of heaven in our souls. Truly, music is rightly called "The Divine Art."

Ponder with me, if you will, the unique characteristics of our particular musical instrument, the organ. Its profound, gentle low tones we sometimes feel more than we hear. Its sustained, unwavering still small voice can whisper so subtly that we must be still to hear it, and yet the glorious splendor of its unwaveringly powerful chords – tuned vibrations from lowest to highest musical range – bring the almighty power of God and the glorious exalted splendor of our eternal home back before our spiritual eyes. Is it any wonder that such god-like qualities caused the great 19th and 20th century French organist and composer Charles Marie Widor to call the organ "The voice of God!"

During the next few days you have special opportunity to further develop and hone your abilities to use this wonderful voice in the service of Heavenly Father. If you put your prayerful heart and soul into your work, you will bear testimony to all who worship just as surely as those who stand at the pulpit. If you seek to ever more effectively sing the inspired words of our hymns through the organ's voice, then the songs of the righteous will truly be a prayer unto the Lord.

As a long-standing member of the Church's Musical Instrument Selection Committee or MISC, may I now speak about the organs that we play in our meetinghouses. Please forgive me for perhaps boring you with detailed information, but experience has shown that many of you have questions regarding official Church policies. I hope that this citing of "chapter and verse" will be helpful to you. If you do not catch all of it you desire this morning, I'm told by Dr. Cook that this keynote address will be posted on the BYU Organ Workshop website.

For those few of you blessed to play pipe organs in your buildings, the Church's official policy as found in the Operations & Maintenance Policy Point Manual on page 39 under "Replacement Standards" is: "Pipe organs should be maintained as required and not replaced." If problems are identified such as broken parts or insufficient quality of sound, the organ is to be renovated using "Pipe Organ Renovation Guidelines" also found in the Policy Point Manual. These Pipe Organ Renovation Guidelines specify additions such as multiple memories, celeste duplexed on Swell and Great manuals, mutations including 2 2/3' and 1 3/5', chorus reed at 16' as well as 8' and 4' pitches on manual and pedal, sufficient pedal foundations at 16' and even 32' pitch using digital stops if necessary and

maximum flexibility of existing pipe ranks, including finish voicing to correct rough and uneven pipe speech and to transform it into smooth and warm sound.

Most of you, however, play digital organs each Sunday. The quality and variety of sound found in our digital organs has vastly improved over the 25 years that I have sat on the MISC. We have been blessed to work closely with our digital organ vendors Allen, Johannus and formerly Rodgers to produce custom 2-manual LDS instruments that have unusually comprehensive specifications. Eight foot and four foot string and flute celestes create the “still, small voice” with soft 32’ pedal perhaps felt more than heard. Beautifully colorful imitative solo reeds such as English Horn, Krummhorn, Clarinet, Oboe and French Horn sing reverent melodies, as do open and capped flutes at 16’, 8’, 4’, 2 2/3’, 2’ and 1 3/5’ pitches. A full chorus of principals from 16’ through mixtures with the added celestial fire of chorus reeds at 32’, 16’, 8’ and 4’ pitches sound the full musical range to invoke the splendor and power of God’s glory. We hope you will not be afraid to explore and use these voices to sing the hymns into the hearts of the people.

Useful examples which you may use as models for such registration combinations should be factory preset into memories 1, 2, 15 or 16 of our LDS digital instruments built since 1999. A printed “Preset Registrations” sheet was shipped with each of these instruments along with the Owner’s Manual. You may also download these Preset Registration sheets which include basic registration instructions by visiting lds.org and clicking on “Scriptures and Study,” then “Music,” then “Accompanying Others,” then “Playing the Organ” and scrolling down and clicking onto “Owner’s Manuals for Church Organs.”

We are aware that some of you are playing older digital instruments which do not allow the variety, flexibility or quality of sound found in our organs built in the last decade or two. If you long for a newer instrument and wonder what the replacement guidelines might be, here they are quoted directly, again from the Operations & Maintenance Policy Point Manual, page 38 under “Replacement Standards” for electronic organs: “Age based electronic organ replacement should be on a case by case basis. Consider the following guidelines: --replace organs 33 years old and older.”

Replacement may be also justified if the organ is in poor condition. “Poor Condition” is defined as: “The organ no longer produces a quality sound as designed and shows substantial mechanical and outer-case damage. The organ will not work properly without major repairs.”

Should replacement be deemed justified, you might like to be aware of the two “Replacement Directives” printed at the bottom of page 38:

1. Replace only with full-sized electronic organs found in the Purchasing Reference Guide (PRG). [I would add that there are two approved organs from which to choose: Allen model LD34A and Johannus model WM47-LDS.]
2. Encourage priesthood leaders to involve unit organists in selecting the new organ from the PRG.

Now may I share a few of my thoughts on accompaniment of congregational hymns which is the most important part of your role as a church organist. It can make such a wonderful difference to your playing if you can sing the words of the hymn in your heart as you play! Spend some time pondering the words. The closer they are to being memorized, the less you will need to keep one eye referencing

them as you play the notes. Conversely, the better you know the notes, the more easily you can concentrate on the words. To a certain degree they can shape your articulation and phrasing. Certainly they should influence your registration!

When I was an undergraduate organ student here at BYU I was called as organist for BYU 65th Ward. We met in the auditorium of the old Joseph Smith Memorial Building which seated maybe 1000 or more people and housed the old 80-plus rank four-manual Austin pipe organ which was taken out of the Salt Lake Tabernacle when the new Æolian-Skinner was installed in 1948. As I was called, the 65th Ward Bishopric counseled me, "This is a large organ and we are a small congregation. Please do not use too much of the organ or it will blow us away!" So I started hymn introductions and first verses with less organ than I personally desired – in this case secondary principals without mixtures. As the hymn progressed from verse to verse I gradually added stops. The congregation's singing gradually increased as the organ built with each verse. Guess what! By the last verse of a big hymn I was using full organ and they were singing their hearts out! Time after time I was told by my fellow ward members how blessed we were to have that large and wonderful organ for our sacrament meetings. So the secret for hymns of praise is: Start conservatively and build with each verse until the final verse includes 32' pedal reed chorus, manual 16' reed chorus and, of course, mixtures.

What about meditative hymns such as sacrament hymns? May I share with you two rather unorthodox registrations I use in my ward for a verse or two of a sacrament hymn? I love the rather somber but round, warm and soothing sound of what the French call *fonds d'orgue*, that is the foundation stops of the organ combined without any upper work. Pull on and couple together all 8' principals, flutes and strings without celestes, maybe adding a 4' flute or two and you should have a profound "voice of God" kind of sound that works for the first verse of a sacrament hymn. And, by the way, if you use this sound on the Great manual to play a hymn tune down an octave in the tenor range with your right hand while your left hand accompanies with strings and celeste on the Swell manual, you will hear a very useful and sacred prelude sound reminiscent of General Conference.

My second registration is definitely unorthodox for hymn accompaniment. I save it for the occasional ethereal verse of a sacrament hymn such as the second verse of hymns 181 and 182 which speak of "rev'ence sweet" and of joining "the heav'nly throng." For such ethereal verses I sometimes combine and couple together all 8' and 4' strings with celestes. Only bolster the sound with an 8' flute or principal if necessary.

While we're considering registration of sacrament hymns, may I suggest that not all verses of every sacrament hymn call for a subdued registration. More than a few of our sacrament hymns end with an exultant verse which calls for an exultant registration through mixture and reeds. A classic example is the final verse of "While of These Emblems We Partake:"

But rise triumphant from the tomb,
And in eternal splendor bloom,
Freed from the pow'r of death and pain,
With Christ, the Lord, to rule and reign.

I doubt you could show me a more triumphant verse in all hymnody! It seems to me that the power of these words is denied unless your registration lifts up the congregation. Yes, I would use Hymn Preset General 10 – full organ, including 32' reed to “...rise triumphant from the tomb.”

Other final exultant sacrament hymn verses I would urge you to consider include hymn numbers 175-6-7, 183-4, and 192 & 195. A building registration during the final lines of hymns 172, 181 and 193 seems appropriate.

The Brethren have recently called on us to renew our commitment to making the sacrament portion of our worship more meaningful. Your inspired registration of the sacrament hymn can directly contribute to this sacred experience.

Finally, I cannot leave the subject of congregational hymn accompaniment without touching on the matter of appropriate embellishment of the printed hymn harmonization. Some of you may have noticed that I am unable to get through all verses of General Conference rest hymns without adding at least a few passing tones and occasionally reharmonizing a chord of two for emphasis, particularly during the last verse. My plan is to play the first verse straight, then gradually unfold embellishments as the hymn builds through successive verses. I am more conservative in this endeavor at General Conference than when playing for sacrament meeting. Reharmonization and even an interlude with transposition up a step can be very inspiring for exultant hymns sung in your own congregation. Such practices I heartily endorse. Hymn singing is meant to be a powerful experience!

It has been an honor to speak to you about such a sacred trust as we all have as church musicians. The Church is so blessed to have you who are so dedicated to improving your talents to bring organ music to the hearts of our worshipers. That you are dedicating a week of your time and money to be here to receive this remarkable training is proof of your commitment to the Work of the Lord. May you go forth with His blessing to inspire and impart what you have learned to the training of others, especially of the younger generation, in your wards and stakes. Know that we love you and appreciate you and pray for you.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.