

Tempos in Devotional Music

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No doubt you may own a copy of Alexander Schreiner's *Organ Voluntaries*, Vol. 1, and through the years have played many of the selections in church services and funerals. I would like to point to the introduction of the book, written by Schreiner himself and published on Jan. 29, 1937, at age 35, while serving as organist of the University of California at Los Angeles. Under separate headings he writes about the voluntaries in the publication, the choice of instruments, the selection and placement of organs, and the tempo of devotional music. It is the latter subject on which I would like to focus for this brief article. He writes:

“Music which accompanies worship should never be performed in a fast tempo. Devotional music, whether vocal or instrumental, cannot be hurried without losing much of its purpose. The spirit of worship is opposed to any hurried feeling. Sometimes young organists or choristers allow their energy and enthusiasm to lead them into faster tempos, but seasoned and mature musicians always hold to moderate and slow speeds for church music.

“While slow music may be tedious to some, even to the point of dragging, yet it may be spiritually and devotionally powerful. This value can never be had from a hurried and nervous rendition. A sparkling rendition may be desirable in a concert performance, but not in a devotional service.

“Surely choristers and organists have observed that Sunday School children, as well as older people, do not enjoy being driven in a fast tempo. Church music has never been fast. Great composers, such as Palestrina, Bach, and Handel, have always written their inspiring church music in stately and slow rhythms. Care must be used not to allow the nervousness and speed of this recent age to invade God's timeless sanctuary.”

While Schreiner's instructions come from an earlier generation and were written mostly in regard to the voluntaries at hand, the same things must be said about the tempos of congregational hymn singing today. As organ registrations are carefully chosen to convey the utmost sense of devotion, likewise, tempos must be given equal attention.

It is crucial that hymns be played at singable tempos—fast enough to comfortably sing a short phrase in one breath, but slow enough to be spiritually and devotionally powerful. Consult the metronomic markings in the hymnal for a suggested tempo range. When, as a youth, I began playing for church services, I usually chose the faster tempos in the spectrum. But in the last several years I have noticed that I more and more prefer the slower suggested markings.

Many factors enter in when choosing hymn tempos, and, by demand, tempo choices may vary on occasion. For example, a hymn which could be used as an opening hymn may require a different tempo and/or mood when used as a closing hymn. Likewise, an energetic hymn that is used in a small weekly service may require a more resolute tempo in a large gathering. Tempo choices for hymns call for thoughtful consideration, depending upon the occasion, the size of the congregation, or its placement in the service. Leopold Mozart (1719-1787), father and teacher of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, wrote, “Even if a composer endeavors to explain more clearly the speed required...one has to deduce it from the piece itself, and this it is by which the true worth of a musician can be recognized without fail.”

Rehearse with the music director in advance to determine the desired tempos and styles of the hymns to be sung. Experienced organists may think this is unnecessary, but when the director is prepared, rehearsed, and confident, the outcome is much more desirable. I have spent many hours training music directors in the basics of conducting in what was supposed to have been a 20-minute preparation session for the next day’s service. Take the time to work things out in advance, and you will receive greater dividends in the end.

I hope these thoughts have caused consideration and reflection on the importance of tempos in devotional music and—most importantly—hymn singing. Chances are, if you are a church musician, someone has already mentioned something to you about the tempos of your music—whether complimentarily or critically. This is a topic on which many have an opinion but few agree. However, devotional music, including hymn singing, when carefully prepared and skillfully played, has a powerful impact on the worship experience and will bring great joy to the organist and worshiper alike.

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