

CHURCH MUSIC

A HOW-TO MANUAL

By David Ezell

INTRODUCTION

These pages are based on our experiences with the music program at Unity of Columbia in South Carolina, where I have been the music director since 1990. They are based on a presentation I gave at the 2007 Sound Connections Conference, sponsored by Unity Worldwide Ministries and held at Unity Village, MO, near Kansas City. The workshop, *Building a Great Music Program in a Small Church*, was presented the first year I was a member of the UWM Music Ministry Team. Since 2008, my major focus at the conference has been to arrange for and conduct the Unity World Orchestra, made up of conference participants.

It is my hope that the reader will find some useful concepts and ideas here. For further reading we recommend *Music in Ministry: A Handbook for Ministers and Music Directors* by Richard Mekdeci and Sue Riley. The book is available from empower Music and Arts.

David Ezell
June, 2012

WHAT KIND OF MUSIC PROGRAM DO YOU WANT?

Some churches have a professional music program. They hire the best available musicians, and the music director may be more attuned to New Thought than the other pros on the music staff. Other churches use volunteers from the congregation. Some churches would like to be more professional, but do not feel that they can afford it.

Some churches have a favorite kind of music, and consistently present that music every week. Other churches like a variety of musical styles.

Each minister and music director has different musical preferences and each musician has different abilities. Every church situation is unique and may change from year to year. At Unity Church of Columbia (SC), we believe that everyone has beauty within, and that if one does not express this beauty in musical performance, something crucial is missing from one's life. Thus our service to our congregants includes providing each one with appropriate opportunities for performance, based on ability and interest. Some only want to do congregational singing. Some want to come to weekly rehearsals. We have a choir, which everyone is invited to join, regardless of musical experience and ability. We have a band, Southern Light, which is by invitation only, for those with a professional level of skill. When requested by the youth department, we have a children's choir. Those who play instruments are included at various times. Frequently the music director writes parts for the them to play. There is a monthly drum circle that meets after church.

Since the closest New Thought church is over 75 miles away, we work to present a variety of music, so that everyone will hear his/her favorite music from our stage. We serve a county that is about 40% African-American, and our church attendance reflects this diversity. Our musical styles have changed over the years, as musicians with different skills and interests have volunteered. By having an attitude of receptivity towards all kinds of musicians, we have been blessed with quite a variety. We have done contemporary pop and rock, bluegrass, jazz, Southern (white) gospel, urban (African-American) gospel, blues, folk, spirituals, classical, and barbershop. At one time we had a member of Iranian descent who played the tar (an Iranian instrument) for services. We have only two paid musicians. At times, if the members of our string quartet are singing in the choir, or we want a flute or trumpet, we will pay someone on a per-service basis.

Your mission statement and philosophy for your music program may be different from ours. It is good to have a clear philosophy, and to know why you're doing what you're doing.

ORDER OF SERVICE

At Unity Church of Columbia the order of service is based on an intensity curve, just like any good drama or musical work. This can allow people the space to bring their world into church, give that world a spiritual treatment, and return to their world with a renewed perspective based on an understanding of God, themselves and the universe. Our children are taken to class by their families before the service.

During the service there is alternation between music and the spoken word. After the Prelude, we start with congregational singing. The first of the three songs is lively, the second song brings the energy down a little bit, and the third song is more meditative. The congregational songs are usually taken from *Songs for Group Singing*, which was compiled by Music Director David Ezell.

This is followed by affirmations and announcements, and then special music. Special music is usually a high energy selection. The choir and Southern Light each provide this selection once a month. On other Sundays there will be a soloist. In a month with five Sundays, or if no vocalist is available, the special music can be instrumental. We make the monthly schedule for special music during choir rehearsal on the second or third week of the previous month, choosing a Sunday for choir performance when members of the group are in town and available.

After the reading of the Daily Word, there is a quiet interlude in preparation for meditation. If the choir or Southern Light has an appropriate selection, they can provide this. Otherwise the interlude is instrumental, many times an ensemble including musicians who are there for special music.

Immediately after the meditation is the Lord's Prayer and the minister's talk.

There is then another congregational song, lively and not too long, followed by affirmations, prayers, and the offering. During the offering the congregation sings *All the Good*, by Jana Stanfield. This helps us remember that, as we get close to God individually, we can express God's love in caring and concern for the world around us.

At that point the children come in to reunite with their families, and service closes with the Peace Song, the Prayer for Protection, and the Postlude. We frequently use Hymn 195, "Life is For Living" from *Wings of Song*, for the postlude.

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING

Congregational songs work best when they are easy to sing. Karen Drucker says that if a five-year-old can sing a song, it's a good song. That means melodies and rhythms that are easy to catch on to, ranges within reason, and keys that are not too high. Traditional hymnals, written mostly in four-part harmony, are usually pitched so that sopranos can easily sing the melody. When Unity produced *Wings of Song*, they realized that almost everyone sings the melody, so they put most of the songs in lower keys, many times a third lower.

Many churches supplement or even replace a traditional hymnal with handouts or songs projected on a screen. This allows more variety of style, and more flexibility in correlating with the minister's message of the day. If only lyrics are projected onto the screen, music readers in the congregation will not sing as well as they would if provided with sheet music. One solution is to project the lyrics, and then have sheet music handouts for the music readers. In doing this it is important to follow copyright law and act with integrity. For the congregational songs available from Heart Wind Music, churches have permission to print sheet music and/or project lyrics. Our experience is that New Thought songwriters are willing to give permission for their music to be used, but not sold. It is important to ask.

In accompanying congregational singing, it is good to emphasize the melody, unless it is a song the audience knows very well.

MEDITATION MUSIC

Music played during meditation is background music. It should not attract attention, but be the “absence of silence.” Meditation music can be like a peaceful mountain creek or river. It has beauty and movement, but remains the same over time and allows you to be alone with your thoughts.

At Christ Unity of Columbia, there is an interlude of peaceful music, usually instrumental, that is designed to help the congregation to get ready for meditation. After the interlude, the minister’s meditation is accompanied by quiet, improvised music on an electronic keyboard, split so that the two hands play different sounds, or an organ. The meditation music is divided into four parts:

Part I includes chord progressions, played on the left end of the keyboard, with only one simple instrument sound. It is based on the musical material and key center of the interlude, and many times goes from quarter note movement to half and whole notes. This can help a meditator go from the world outside to a quiet place of receptivity.

Part II uses includes a long tonic chord in the left hand, using the same instrumental sound as Part I and continuing in the same key (whether major or minor). In the right hand there is a slow, unobtrusive melody with a solo sound such as pan flute, whistle, bottle or string sound. Percussive sounds such as bells or piano are not used, as they can attract attention away from the thoughts of the minister. The melody is many times pentatonic, avoids the 4th note of the scale, (or in a minor key the 6th note) and at times can include some altered tones. Every few weeks a subdominant (IV chord) creeps into the left hand part briefly.

Part III begins when the minister calls for a time of silence. During this time the musician moves from electronic keyboard to piano.

Part IV begins when the minister begins to speak again. The musician modulates from the key of the interlude to the key of Ab. This is done with the soft pedal down, in a high range, so as to be unobtrusive. An attempt is made to arrive on the dominant chord of Ab just as the minister asks the congregation to sing the Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer by Mallotte is not easy to sing because the range is an octave and a fifth. Published in various keys, we believe that Ab is the best key for the most people to be able to sing with relative comfort.

CHOIR

Selection Many of the available secular works are better for New Thought churches than the sacred works. Sacred pieces many times have ideas about God and the universe that are not in accord with what is taught in New Thought. Many secular works are about fulfilling life's purpose, feeling joyful, loving your neighbor, the power of beauty and music, and world peace. These are just the topics that a New Thought choir likes to sing about. It is good do a variety of music. There is an abundance of useful music in popular styles, but appropriate classical selections to balance the repertoire are not as easy to find. It is better to go to a website, store or reading session where one can see the music, than to order from a catalog description.

Voicing For a small choir, it may be best to use alternate voicings, rather than SATB. As long as there is a strong leader for each section, a choir can be as small as necessary and still perform beautifully. Unfortunately, most of the two- and three-part music I have found is written for adolescents. Many times these selections can work for adult church choir, but it is best to be careful about the ranges of the voice parts as well as the maturity level of the lyrics and the music. Three-part mixed and SAB usually have the men's part too high to be comfortable for bass voices, which is a majority of men. Many times two-part women's arrangements are written for two equal voices, and there may not be a part that is comfortable for adult altos. Many published SSA selections are well-suited for adult choir. If you look at enough music, you can find selections that will work for your group. Another solution is to order custom arrangements from Heart Wind Music. You can email me to get started. My address is david@heartwindmusic.com.

Rehearsals It is good to start each rehearsal with a prayer and a warm-up. If you wish, a different choir member can offer the prayer each week. It is important to always use sheet music, not just lyric sheets, in rehearsal. Some singers will be able to read music, others can learn about the meaning of the notation, and it helps make sure the harmony is as full as planned by the composer/arranger. If everyone just finds a comfortable note that sounds good, important parts of chords can be missing, and only the most obvious of harmonies will be used. Even if you don't teach music reading per se in rehearsal, you can ask choir members to notice the notes. They can see that from each note to the next is either, up, down or the same. You can also teach singers to find their notes first and then look for the words that match the notes. Otherwise, they may end up singing someone else's part. After attending rehearsals over a period of time, choir members also pick up ideas about how rhythm notation works. Diction requires constant reminders. It is important for the congregation to get the message in addition to enjoying the music. Projecting the lyrics on a screen during a selection can divide the attention of the listener, but showing a picture that relates to the meaning of the song can reinforce the message.

KEYBOARD ACCOMPANIMENT STYLE

When accompanying vocalists at the keyboard, it frequently works best not to play the written piano part, if any, because:

- The melody may be doubled in the piano part.
- The part may be the wrong level of difficulty for the player.
- There may be opportunities to add secondary lead lines or enrich the harmony.
- You can build an intensity curve creatively.
- There may be places where it is useful to play notes that will help the vocalist find pitches accurately.
- It may be useful to transpose a song into a vocalist's range by copying the chord symbols in the new key and rarely looking at the notes. (Another way to do this is to use an electronic keyboard and push the transpose button.)

Doubling the melody in the piano part is rarely a good idea, except for emphasis at a climax or when the vocalist needs help finding the notes. If you leave out the melody, you have more fingers available for other interesting things, and it leaves the vocalist free to express the melody.

When making up a secondary lead line, it is best to be active when the melody is inactive. It is really good to be able to sing the both the secondary lead line and the original melody parts together (in alternation). Sometimes the bass line can be effective as a complete countermelody. It is fun to do thematic development in a secondary lead line, perhaps taking a motive from the vocal melody to work with.

One quick way to enrich the harmony is to look at a note, and see what chord you would use if the melody note were the root, third or fifth or seventh of a chord. For example, in the key of G, the note C can be a member of the IV, ii, vii^o or V₇ chords. (The sixth note of the scale can be harmonized with any of the seven chords in a key.) It is also useful to find places where diminished 7th chords work well. In my experience, most guitar players are unfamiliar with diminished 7th chords, but they can learn them easily, since there are only three of them, each with four names. (See also the article about diminished chords.) If you explore new harmonizations, a passage that is repeated can be new and fresh.

One advantage to improvising the accompaniment is the ability to adjust the level of difficulty. You may want to play something more elaborate than what is written, or the part may be beyond the limits of your technique. I find that the parts I make up are usually parts I can play. It also helpful to practice written piano music as is, whether a choir or solo accompaniment, or a piano solo. This can challenge you to expand your technique, and gives you ideas of what the hands can do that you may not have thought of on your own.

If playing an electronic keyboard, layers and splits may enhance the accompaniment. If you can play all the harmony in the right hand, then you can use a bass guitar sound in the left hand. If so, it is best to never play 2 notes at once in the left hand, except for an occasional octave. (See also the article about musical electronics.)

MUSICAL ELECTRONICS IN CHURCH

Electronic keyboards, synthesizers, drum machines, etc can greatly enhance the presentation of your church music, using just the musicians you have available.

On a keyboard, splits (different sounds for the upper and lower ranges) and layers (two or more sounds triggered by the same key) can make one player sound like many more. For uptempo songs I like to use a bass sound for my left hand and a layer of electric piano and pad in the right. For the pad, I like something with an immediate, not delayed attack, but sometimes the layered keyboard or guitar sound can cover up the delay. Brighter sounds (like slap bass and certain electric piano and guitar sounds) work best for some tunes. At other times you want sounds that are more mellow (like fretless bass), even in an uptempo song. The bass should sound an octave lower than written. (like a 16' stop on an organ). Then the right hand octave can be adjusted accordingly, and will end up playing an octave higher than written to get the right sound. This gives more range for each sound, and for a 61-key instrument it avoids wasting an octave at the top end of the keyboard that you might not use otherwise. For more contemplative songs my keyboard is usually not split, but a layer, perhaps with harp and pan flute, makes a nice sound. With layers, at least one of my sounds is usually a sustaining sound, because I love harmony and I want to hear those chords. For meditation I use a split with a soft, unobtrusive sound in the left hand, and a quiet, sustained, but slightly more prominent sound in the right. (e.g. blown bottle or whistle). I don't use bell sounds during meditation, because they can take attention away from what the minister is saying. For meditation I usually hold long chords and play a melody over them. For jazz, I like a split with vibes or another solo sound in the right hand, and electric piano or jazz guitar in the left for comping (playing background chords). For these meditation and jazz sounds, I adjust the octaves so that both hands are playing in the same range. If you don't have instrumentalists who can play brass, woodwind or string instruments, you can substitute keyboard sounds, perhaps using several keyboardists on the same selection.

Drum machines, whether stand-alone or within a keyboard, can liven up many songs. It is good to pick a groove for the drums with the right feel, especially if a song should swing with uneven 8ths. It is helpful to have a start-stop pedal, because there will probably be times when there is a ritard or slow section. If there is not a start-stop pedal, the synchro-start button on a keyboard can be useful by starting the percussion groove when the first key is struck. It is best not to use drum machine on everything in a service, because there is no flexibility in the tempo while the machine is on.

I have heard Richard Mekdeci perform with a keyboard that would listen to his voice, compare that sound to the notes he was playing, and produce vocal harmony.

If you don't have musical electronics in your church, you can go to your local music store and see what's available. There are many great brands out there. Ones I like include Yamaha, Roland and Korg. Some players learn these machines mostly by experimenting. Others, like me, like to read the fine print in the manual. It may seem tedious to do so, but it can save time in the end, and you end up knowing more of the capabilities of your gear. More expensive is not always better, even if you can afford it. Devices with more features are usually more complicated, and harder to learn, and the sounds on recent entry level gear can be really beautiful. However, since much of today's gear is made for aggressive rock music, it is best to take care in finding the best sounds for what you are doing. Programming the sounds used for a certain song or service should be done early, so that rehearsals can take place under performance conditions.

A congregation may hear the same musicians week after week, for a period of years. Creative use of musical electronics can make our music more fresh and interesting.

This article is reprinted in Music in Ministry: A Handbook for Ministers and Music Directors, by Richard Mekdeci and Sue Riley. The volume is available from empower Music and Arts.

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENTS

In line with our vision for our music program, we use orchestral instruments frequently at Unity of Columbia. We feel that if anyone is not performing regularly, something crucial is missing from their lives, because they are missing a chance at a unique expression of the beauty that is within them. For young people studying instruments, and for adults who studied in the past, church performance can provide a short-term goal that will help them be motivated to develop or maintain their performing ability. Some people are more likely to be present in church if they have a specific function to perform. Use of various instruments in service can also enhance the experience for the congregation by adding variety to the musical offerings.

If an adult or younger person plays an instrument, we include them in the service music in an appropriate way. If necessary we write an arrangement or composition on their skill level. We can almost always find a way to include them in an ensemble, but when someone of Iranian heritage came and volunteered to play the tar, we just gave him solo spots. If you are not familiar with the technique, range or transposition of an instrument, perhaps you can find an instrumental teacher to help. A drummer is also an important enhancement to the music on most Sundays.

One of the few times that we invite people from outside the church to participate in our music program is when a choir arrangement calls for strings, flute or trumpet. Even though there are enough string players in our church to form a professional quartet, many times our musicians are singing in the choir. When we do choral selections from the Baroque and Classical periods, we usually invite guest performers to accompany upon strings. The keyboard transcriptions of the orchestral parts can be awkward to play, and sound incomplete. We frequently refer to the original score, and arrange the selection. Scores are available from Luck's Music, free at the website http://imslp.org/wiki/Main_Page and at university libraries. Recent improvements in music scanning have made it easier to produce these arrangements quickly, and anything written before 1923 is in the public domain. When guest musicians are present, we have parts for them to play during congregational singing, and during preludes, postludes and interludes. If you would like a custom arrangement for your church, you can start by sending an email to david@heartwindmusic.com.