

## Leading Congregational Song from the Piano

### Hymn Playing 101: The Basics

- 1. Origin** – Where did the hymn originate? Knowing the musical/cultural background of a hymn tells you a lot about how to interpret it.
- 2. Text** – What is the story of the text? Each hymn has a mood and you need to express that through your interpretation. Your tools include articulation, tempo, register, etc.
- 3. Familiarity** – Before you prepare the hymn you need to know whether it's a beloved and regularly sung hymn or whether it is completely new. Your approach, particularly in the introduction and first verse, depends on how well the congregation knows the music.
- 4. Tempo** – Once you know the familiarity and mood of the hymn, you can decide on a tempo. An unfamiliar hymn can't be taken too briskly, nor should a reflective or somber hymn.  
  
The tempo will also rely on the acoustic of the room. If you are playing in a dry room you'll want to adjust the tempo or articulation to keep the sound active and engaging. If you are in a live acoustic you need to be cautious of a tempo that is too fast and the sound becomes a blur. But be careful not to overcompensate or to not pair the tempo with the proper articulation.  
  
You also need to consider the size of the congregation. A large group won't move as quickly as a smaller one. And a small group will feel out of breath if a hymn is too slow.  
  
Most important, once you set the tempo it must be consistent throughout the hymn.
- 5. Pulse** – Now that you have the tempo, what is the actual "pulse" of the hymn? Great flow and energy occurs when you find the "big beat" of a hymn. Try not to play a quarter note pulse but rather the half note or whole note pulse, depending on tempo.
- 6. Breath** – With the tempo and pulse set, you can decide on good places for a breath. Use the musical phrase and the punctuation in the text to help you decide where you will "breathe." Be careful that the music doesn't lose its flow.  
  
The crucial breathing point is at the end of the stanza. You may need to adjust the length of the chord at the end of the stanza but then be sure that you do the same amount for every verse. The time between stanzas must be consistent to give the congregation support and confidence.  
  
The best way to check all of the above is to sing the hymn – either physically or mentally – as you play it. There is a big difference between a singing tempo and a listening tempo. Make sure you're playing at a singing tempo with time for breathing and phrasing.

**7. Flow** – The piano has a natural sound decay that fades away, even when using the sustain pedal. The congregation, however, needs to hear constant sound in order to feel supported. The absence of sound also tends to elicit rushing. You will need to decide how to keep the sound flowing, whether that be through arpeggiation, suspensions (especially at cadences), repeated chords, etc.

The bass line often drives the phrasing and pulse, therefore you want to pay plenty of attention to the lower register of the piano. Consider playing the bass line in octaves for a stronger foundation to support the singing.

**Always remember:**

**You do not accompany a congregation, you lead them!**

**Things to Consider:**

Verse Variety – all, upper voices (women), lower voices (men), choir, a cappella, piano alone

Register – upper range, lower range, call and response, bass in octaves

Texture – articulation, adding passing motion, slowing the harmony, arpeggiation, bouncing chords, descant, reharmonize

*Never feel bound to the printed page. Add or remove as you desire because you are creating a transcription!*

**Suggested Resources:**

Cherwien, David. *Let the People Sing! A Keyboardist's Creative and Practical Guide to Engaging God's People in Meaningful Song*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997

Forster, Stuart. *Hymn Playing: A Modern Colloquium*. St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, Inc., 2013

Denominational Hymnal Companions

# 971 Come and Seek the Ways of Wisdom

[U]

1 Come and seek the ways of Wis-dom, she who danced when  
 2 Lis - ten to the voice of Wis-dom, cry - ing in the  
 3 Sis - ter Wis - dom, come, as - sist us; nur - ture all who

G D/G C/G G Am<sup>7</sup> G/B

earth was new. Fol - low close - ly what she teach - es,  
 mar - ket - place. Hear the Word made flesh a - mong us,  
 seek re - birth. Spir - it - guide and close com - pan - ion,

Am D G D/G G C/G G

for her words are right and true. Wis - dom clears the  
 full of glo - ry, truth, and grace. When the word takes  
 bring to light our sa - cred worth. Free us to be -

Am G/B D<sup>7</sup>/C Em Bm Am/C

path to jus - tice, and rip - ens, what love must do.  
 root and your peo - ple, ho - ly friends of God and earth.

B<sup>7</sup> Em G/D D<sup>7</sup> G

# Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth [U]

1 Moth-er-ing God, you gave me birth in the bright  
 2 Moth-er-ing Christ, you took my form, of-fer-ing  
 3 Moth-er-ing Spir-it, nur-t'ring one, in arms of

D A G Em<sup>7</sup>

morn-ing of this world. Cre-a-tor, source of ev-'ry  
 me your food of light, grain . . . of life, and grape of  
 pa-tience hold me close, so that in faith I root and

D Bm F#m

breath, you are my rain, my wind, my sun.  
 love, your ver-y bod-y for my peace.  
 grow un-til I flow'r, un-til I know.

G D G D

# Beautiful Savior

$E^b$   $E^b/G$ 
 $E^b$   $E^b/D$   $C_{min.}$   $E^b/B^b$ 
 $E^b$   $E^b/F$

1 Beau - ti - ful Sav - ior, King of cre - a - tion,  
 2 Fair are the mead - ows, fair are the wood - lands,  
 3 Fair is the sun - shine, fair is the moon - light,  
 4 Beau - ti - ful Sav - ior, Lord of the na - tions,

Son of God and Son of Man!  
 robed in flow'rs of bloom - ing spring;  
 bright the spar - kling stars on high;  
 Son of God and Son of Man!

Tru - ly I'd love thee, tru - ly I'd serve thee,  
 Je - sus is fair - er, Je - sus is pur - er,  
 Je - sus shines bright - er, Je - sus shines pur - er  
 Glo - ry and hon - or, praise, ad - o - ra - tion,

light of my soul, my joy, my crown.  
 he makes our sor - rowing spir - it sing.  
 than all the an - gels in the sky.  
 now and for - ev - er - more be thine!

Text: *Gesangbuch*, Münster, 1677; tr. Joseph A. Seiss, 1823–1904  
 Music: SCHÖNSTER HERR JESU, Silesian folk tune, 19th cent.

# 733 Great Is Thy Faithfulness

1 Great is thy faith-ful-ness, O God my Fa-ther; there is no  
 2 Sum-mer and win-ter and spring-time and har-vest, sun, moon, and  
 3 Par-don for sin and a peace that en-dur-eth, thine own dear

*Vs. 3 A*

shad-ow of turn-ing with thee; thou chang-est not, thy com-  
 stars in their cours-es a-bove join with all na-ture in  
 pres-ence to cheer and to guide; strength for to-day and bright

pas-sions they fail not; as thou hast been, thou for-ev-er wilt be.  
 man-i-fold wit-ness to thy great faith-ful-ness, mer-cy, and love.  
 hope for to-mor-row, bless-ings all mine, with ten thousand be-side!

*Refrain*

Great is thy faith-ful-ness! Great is thy faith-ful-ness! Morn-ing by

morn-ing new mer-cies I see; all I have need-ed thy  
 hand hath pro-vid-ed; great is thy faith-ful-ness, Lord, un-to me.

1 *Cuan-do, el po-bre* na - da tie - ne *y aún re - par - te,*  
 1 When the poor ones, who have noth - ing, still are giv - ing;  
 2 When com - pas - sion gives the suf - f'ring con - so - la - tion;  
 3 When our spir - its, like a chal - ice, brim with glad - ness;  
 4 When the good - ness poured from heav - en fills our dwell - ings;

Dm A<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>

*cuando al - quien pa - sa sed* *y a - gua nos da,*  
 when the thirst - y pass the cup, wa - ter to share;  
 when ex - pect - ing brings to birth hope that was lost;  
 when our voic - es, full and clear, sing out the truth;  
 when the na - tions work to change war in - to peace;

D<sup>7</sup> Gm C<sup>7</sup> F

*cuando, el dé - bil* *a su, her - ma - no* *for - ta - le - ce:*  
 when the wound - ed of - fer oth - ers strength and heal - ing:  
 when we choose love, ha - tred all a - round us:  
 when our long - ings, free from en - vy, seek the hum - ble:  
 when the strang - er is ac - cept - ed as our neigh - bor:

E<sup>7</sup> A<sup>7</sup> Dm

Text: José Antonio Oliver, b. 1939; tr. Martin A. Seltz, b. 1951  
 Music: Miguel Manzano, b. 1934

Text and music © 1971, 1998 I. A. Oliver, Miguel Manzano, and San Pablo Internacional—SSP, admin. OCP Publications

EL CAMINO  
 12 11 12 11 11

## Refrain / Estribillo

*Va Dios mis - mo en nues - tro mis - mo ca - mi -*  
 We see God, here by our side, walk - ing our

B<sup>b</sup> A<sup>7</sup>

*nar; va Dios mis - mo en nues - tro*  
 way; we see God, here by our

D<sup>7</sup> Gm

*mis - mo ca - mi - nar.*  
 side, walk - ing our way.

A<sup>7</sup> Dm Gm Dm

2 *Cuando alguno sufre y logra su consuelo, 3 Cuando crece la alegría y nos inunda,*  
*cuando espera y no se cansa de esperar, cuando dicen nuestros labios la verdad,*  
*cuando amamos, aunque el odio nos rodee: cuando amamos el sentir de los sencillos:*

Estribillo

4 *Cuando abunda el bien y llena los hogares,*  
*cuando alguien donde hay guerra pone paz,*  
*cuando "hermano" le llamamos al extraño:*

Estribillo

# What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine

## Leaning on the Everlasting Arms

G D/F# E/B C min. G/D C#7 D

1 What a fel - low-ship, what a joy di - vine, lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms;  
 2 Oh, how sweet to walk in this pil-grim way, lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms;  
 3 What have I to dread, what have I to fear, lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms?

G/D D/C G/B C/A C#7/D D G

what a bless-ed-ness, what a peace is mine, lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.  
 oh, how bright the path grows from day to day, lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.  
 I have bless-ed peace with my Lord so near, lean-ing on the ev-er-last-ing arms.

*Refrain*  
 "Bouncing Chords"

Lean - ing, lean - ing, safe and se-cure from all a - larms;

Lean - ing on Je - sus, lean - ing on Je - sus,

G/D D/C G/B C/A C#7/D D G

lean - ing, lean - ing, lean-ing on the ev - er - last-ing arms.

lean - ing on Je - sus, lean - ing on Je - sus,



D G D A E A

1 Bless-ed as-sur-ance, Je-sus is mine! Oh, what a fore-taste of glo-ry di-vine!  
 2 Per-fect sub-mis-sion, per-fect de-light, vi-sions of rap-ture now burst on my sight;  
 3 Per-fect sub-mis-sion, all is at rest; I in my Sav-ior am hap-py and blest,

D G D G Em D A7 D

Heir of sal-va-tion, pur-chase of God, born of his Spir-it, washed in his blood.  
 an-gels de-scend-ing bring from a-bove ech-oes of mer-cy, whis-pers of love.  
 watch-ing and wait-ing, look-ing a-bove, filled with his good-ness, lost in his love.

Refrain

D G D G D A

This is my sto-ry, this is my song, prais-ing my Sav-ior all the day long:

A7 D G D G Em D A7 D

this is my sto-ry, this is my song, prais-ing my Sav-ior all the day long.

Text: Fanny J. Crosby, 1820-1915

(A7) (D7) (E7/A) (A) ASSURANCE

# Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound

1 A - maz - ing grace!— how sweet the sound— that  
 2 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and  
 3 Through man - y dan - gers, toils, and snares I  
 4 The Lord has prom - ised good to me; his  
 5 When we've been there ten thou - sand years, bright

C F F/A B<sup>b</sup> F C/E

saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but  
 grace my fears re - lieved; how pre - cious did that  
 have al - read - y come; 'tis grace has brought me  
 word my hope se - cures; he will my shield and  
 shin - ing as the sun, we've no less days to

d F/C C/B<sup>b</sup> F/A C/G F F/A

now am found; was blind, but now I see.  
 grace ap - pear the hour, I first be - lieved!  
 safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.  
 por - tion be as long as life en - dures.  
 sing God's praise than when we'd first be - gun.

B<sup>b</sup> G<sup>7</sup> C C/B<sup>b</sup> F/A B<sup>b</sup>7 F/C C F

Text: John Newton, 1725–1807, alt., sts. 1–4; anonymous, st. 5  
 Music: NEW BRITAIN, W. Walker, *Southern Harmony*, 1835; arr. Edwin O. Excell, 1851–1921, alt.