Organist 101

# What is the role of the Lutheran church organist?

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Most people would probably answer (and not necessarily incorrectly), “The organist’s job is to lead the congregation in worship.” I prefer to think of the organist as a servant, an enabler, a supporter, a helper, one who assists the congregation to worship.

The organist is not a performer or entertainer, although that is what some worshippers, consciously or unconsciously, are looking for, which is obvious when they comment, “I liked or didn’t like the music or some other this or that about the service.” It’s not about what the people like (although they shouldn’t be turned off or disturbed by shoddy playing).

Marva Dawn, a Reformed conservative author and musician, once commented to a critic who didn’t like the service, “Whom do you think we are worshipping? You or God?” It *is* about God. It’s all about hearing and proclaiming the Gospel. What an awesome privilege and responsibility for pastors and musicians.

Your role is to help the people participate. You proclaim the Gospel as you intone the hymns that contain the Gospel as well as when you play service music which tunes bring to the minds of the people the messages of God’s Word.

I quote from a letter I got 11 years ago from Prof. James Tiefel. I saved it because it helped me so much in knowing what I needed to understand about my work as organist. He wrote, “Worship of the Christian Church is essentially a dialogue. God comes to His people in the Word and Sacraments with the message of His love. God’s people come to God with their loving response in confession, praise, and prayer.

“Organists have a similar role to that of the pastor or presiding minister. They also have been called or appointed to serve in the public ministry to represent both God and God’s people. They are God’s representatives as they use music to carry the message of the Savior’s love to God’s people. They are also the people’s representatives as they respond to God with praise and prayer.”

Look at hymn CW 391. Stanzas 1-5 proclaim the Gospel. Stanza 6 is the believer’s response in faith to God.

Tiefel also writes, “When believers respond to God by repeating the message of His love, they are also proclaiming God’s love to the people who have gathered together with them in worship. This is another important reason for our public worship.

“The organist is very active in this aspect of worship too. By accompanying their hymns and liturgy, the organist assists Christians in speaking about God’s love to one another without fear and hesitation. The organist, therefore, is carrying out the mission to which God has called all believers.”

Look at CW 377 stanzas 1-4 and notice what one Christian is saying to other Christians.

Look at CW 420 and note what comfort one Christian is giving other Christians in this hymn.

Rev. Joel Gerlach, who once served at St John in Wauwatosa, explained proper worship to me this way. Christian worship is like a cross. The vertical dimension is that God talks to us in Word and Sacrament first. Then we talk back to him as we pray and praise. However, we don’t just say, “Praise God, Praise God!” We praise Him by repeating the marvelous works He has done. As we do so we are also telling of the wonderful works of God to the folks in the pews with us, and this becomes the horizontal dimension of worship.

Tiefel concludes, “What a privilege the organists have! They serve God and they serve God’s people in the most important dialog the world knows. The organist brings the message of God’s love to believers and then brings the response of the believer’s faith to God!”

Finally, after all the church’s tasks on earth have been completed, God’s saints will continue to worship Him in heaven, so your task includes preparing God’s people for activities in eternity.

How can we carry out this very awesome work?

Since the work is so important, it is important to do it well. God demands and expects our best, but in His grace, He accepts all gifts great and small when given from a heart of love. However, this is no excuse for not practicing.

Let’s set priorities. Your first task is to practice the hymns and liturgy until you can play them smoothly. I can’t emphasize this enough. Even experienced organists work with the hymns ahead of time (or should do this). Read through each hymn stanza and determine what kind of registration you will use and at which tempo you will play. Practice, practice, practice until you can play the hymn without mistakes and at an even tempo.

If you are unable to master the four-part harmony of all the hymns, just accompany in octaves, or you can omit the pedal and play all the parts on the manual. This is a better choice than making a lot of mistakes and deterring singing. It is better to be unnoticed because all went smoothly than for the congregation to go home talking about how many mistakes the organist made today.

Use your personal hymnbook and make notes so the next time you play this hymn you don’t have to figure out from scratch things you had planned before. Write in the fingering and pedaling and any accidentals which are troublesome. Mark any key changes. Do the same for the liturgy. Play it through even if you’ve done it dozens of times and make sure also that it is the one that has been chosen for that service.

If you are not receiving information about the service from the pastor early enough to facilitate the practice time you need, by all means speak with him and explain that you want to do a good job and need more lead time to prepare. Do this in a collegial not confrontational way. Most pastors understand, but there are some who have no idea of how much time it takes to prepare for a service.

If this is the extent of your time and talent, don’t worry about service music at first. We’ll get to more on that later.

Here are some ideas on how to introduce and play hymns.

1. If the hymn is new or unfamiliar, play through the whole hymn in harmony or in octaves. Perhaps even take the tempo a little slower than you eventually will when the tune becomes more familiar. You could also have the choir, the school children, or other church groups practice it ahead of time. You could also have a soloist or the choir sing a verse or two and have the congregation join in on the remaining stanzas. Example: CW 91 or 544 -same tune.
2. If the hymn is very familiar, you need not play through the whole hymn. You could play just the first and last phrase unless that is harmonically awkward. Play both in harmony or play phrase one in octaves and finish with harmony. This works best with longer hymns. With shorter hymns people might need the entire hymn played to have time to find the right page. I have found that playing just the last phrase, unless it is very familiar as is the Doxology, may leave the assembly unsure of the beginning. Examples: CW 201 and 486
3. Be sure to play the intonation and the hymn accompaniment in the same tempo. Example: CW 103
4. Plan a metrical interval at the end of each stanza and a lift or space of a breath so the congregation knows when to start singing. If the hymn ends in 4 beats, that may be enough space. If the hymn ends in 2 beats, you may need to add 2 more beats. This illustrates the advantage of singing with the organ rather than with the piano. The sound of the piano begins to die away as soon as the keys are struck. The organ sound continues until the fingers are lifted and produces a definite start and stop effect. Example: CW 315 – add beats. CW 316 – don’t need to add beats.
5. If you can master the art of playing trio style, this is a nice way to intone a hymn or to accompany one of the verses. The melody is played on a solo stop, the left hand plays the alto and the tenor on another softer manual, and the pedal takes the bass. This may seem difficult at first, but it is worth the effort. Example: CW 402
6. There are many printed materials which contain hymn introductions and alternate accompaniments. Some are easy and some are more difficult. When making your selection make sure the melody is prominent, the tempo is indicated, and that the intro is not too long and the accompaniment not too obtuse. The last thing you want to do is confuse or frustrate singers and cause them to stop singing. I use alternate intonations for one or several hymns for festive services especially if the choir is present to help lead. I tend to keep contemplative services like midweek Lenten devotions simpler. Example from Hal Hopson’s volume 4: The Creative Use of the Organ in Worship p. 106 on the tune *Old 124th* for CW 309 or 543. One could also start at bar 3 and use this as an alternate accompaniment or, since 309 is a communion hymn, this arrangement could be used as an interlude between communion hymns, assuming your congregation sings several hymns during the distribution.
7. Hopson’s book contains 190 pages of useful ideas on how to introduce hymns, alternate accompaniments, interludes, and the complete index to his other volumes for choir, descants, handbells, and instruments. Although some are more difficult, many are easy.
8. There are other useful sets of hymn preludes. There is the 47 some volume set The Concordia Hymn Prelude Series, which is now out of print. I hope your congregation has it. There is a 10-volume set for organ and a parallel one for piano called Intonations and Alternate Accompaniments from Augsburg. I use these a lot, but they are a little more difficult. There are dozens more books by various composers of easy short preludes. Publishers I use more than others are NPH, Concordia, Morning Star, and sometimes Hope. Google these publishers and get on their mailing list.
9. Choosing the proper tempo can sometimes be determined by playing the hymn through several times and singing along. You’ll often sense what feels right. This can vary with the culture of your congregation. Some congregations are used to fast upbeat tempos, and some are used to draggy slow tempos. Don’t try to change their habit overnight. Do it gradually if you feel it needs changing.
10. Short 2-line hymns are usually (but not always) played more slowly, and 4 and 5-line hymns are usually played faster. Examples: CW 467 and 523
11. Think the pulse on the half note to keep the hymn moving forward as in CW 605, 226, 287, 224. There are others. Try thinking 1,2 3, 4 on certain hymns and then try big beats 1,2, and you will sense which is better.
12. On hymns with no half notes between phrase to allow breathing, don’t add extra beats. Rather play the hymn a little slower and give a lift to allow for a breath. Example CW 382 or 85. Give special thought to the last line of CW 49.
13. Gospel hymns sometimes are better on the piano as are some of the newer contemporary hymns in the Supplement. Example CW 451. An authentic accompaniment would take a slow tempo. This is well suited to a piano/organ duet. Don’t be afraid to add to or alter the accompaniment in CW, but be sure you are prepared and confident to do so.
14. Registration – This depends a lot on the organ, the acoustic of the house, and the size of the worshiping community. A standard hymn presentation would include an introduction on the Swell and an accompaniment on the Great using 8’, 4’, and 2’ Principal stops and adding the Mixture for larger groups or cutting back to 8’ and 4’ for variety on assorted verses or playing only on the manuals for a stanza. The text of the hymn can give you clues as how to choose stops. It’s obvious that CW 346 or 341 would demand more exuberant sound than would CW 115 or many other Lenten hymns or CW 588.
15. Some hymn accompaniments are vertical in style and some are horizontal, meaning they are more chant like. Example CW 522 or 23. One could successfully play these hymns in octaves, stressing the free forward movement. On CW 176 I often play one stanza in octaves. Use the pedal also if you feel comfortable doing so. Play the Alleluias in harmony.
16. On high holidays when the church is full, the choir is present, and the hymn is very familiar, it’s okay to drop out for a verse. On Easter this works well with CW 152. Give the congregation a few notes of accompaniment to start them out and then let them continue on their own. It’s exciting. They may even burst into harmony.
17. For the liturgy you will also want to alter the volume and tempo. For example, in the Service of Word and Sacrament the *Agnus Dei* on p. 35 is more subdued. The *O Lord, Our Lord,* p.28,demands to be accompanied with more gusto. I often play the *Kyrie* responses, p.27, on just the manual. Most liturgical response have an introduction prepared in the accompaniment book. However, if the congregation is very familiar with a certain liturgy, it is okay to omit the intro and jump right into the accompaniment. For Psalms, play through the refrain once as an intro and then repeat for the congregation to sing. Professor Bruce Backer has a set of 31 intonations for the Psalms in CW. The set is available from NPH.
18. Organ shoes are a necessity in my opinion. If you are presently playing in stocking feet, you may be successful, but you will not advance your technique appreciably. If you are playing in street shoes, they may work, but once you consistently use Organmaster shoes with the thin narrow suede sole you will, after getting used to them, find pedal work a lot easier. The heel is 1 ¼ inch high to facilitate easy pedal heel toe, heel toe accuracy. Go online to find Organmaster shoes. They often have money off coupons as well. I have also used Tic-Tac-Toe shoes. They have a web site also and sell wonderful shoes for organists.
19. Other tools I find useful are a metronome and a stopwatch of some kind. You may have these as apps on your smart phone. I use the metronome sometimes to check that I am playing preludes or hymns in an even tempo. If I have settled on a comfortable tempo for a hymn, I make note of it in the hymn book so I have it ready for a repeat of that tune. Service music often has a tempo marking indicated. Often it is too fast or sometimes too slow for your skill level or the acoustic in the church. Note the tempo you are comfortable using. Also use a timer to time the service music so you can end your preservice music as close as possible to when the service is scheduled to begin. At my church the offering takes about 3 minutes, so I try to plan for that and plan for some cuts or extensions if necessary.

Therefore, my first suggestion is to practice the hymns and liturgy until you know all the notes well. Then if you have the time and ability, work on the auxiliary music.

1. *Worship the Lord* is a bimonthly publication from the WELS Commission on Worship. Bryan Gerlach is the editor. Contact Bryan at [bryan.gerlach@wels.net](mailto:bryan.gerlach@wels.net) to get on the mailing list.
2. Handling criticism is an art. Welcome comments even if the words sting a little. It helps to know what you are doing in the eyes of the people. The comments might not be legitimate in your opinion, but it is good for members of the congregation to know you are willing to listen. The last thing you want to do is irritate or frustrate the people. Your job is to help the people sing better.
3. Some organ music you will want to have in your own library. Be sure to make a computer index by hymn tune for each new book you buy. If your church does not have a budget for organ and piano music, talk to the finance committee or other appropriate person to get an amount in the budget designated. Certain sets of accompaniments which all the organists would use could become church property. The Hal Hopson book mentioned earlier would be a good investment for a church to own.
4. Some other ideas—use another hymnal or old TLH for an alternate accompaniment, but be sure to check that the melody, key, and meter are the same as in CW.
5. There are some hazards you may encounter. If you are using hymnbook in a box, be sure to pull out both pages on longer 2-page hymns such as CW 257.
6. Don’t worry too much ahead of time, but always be prepared for emergencies, such as the hymn board and the bulletin having different numbers for the same hymn slot. Or,

* The pastor makes a last-minute change in the liturgy to accommodate a baptism.
* The organ makes a peculiar sound and a pipe begins to cipher.
* The power goes off.
* A fly, bee, or ladybug flies in and alights on your music, the keys, or on you.
* A loose page flies off the music rack (tape it on next time) or the overhead fans keep blowing your page shut (have paper clips or small clothespins on hand.)
* The pastor or choir director gives you last minute instructions while you are playing (and it seems to always happen during the most difficult bar of the music).
* You forget to turn off the transpose button.
* Your page turner is slow or turns two pages instead of just one.
* You find you copied and taped the music for ease of page turning in the wrong order.
* You forgot to press cancel and or close the crescendo pedal when getting off the bench and subsequently make a lot of unwanted noise when returning to the console.
* You discover too late that the introduction to the hymn is not in the same key as the accompaniment in the hymnal.

All these hazards have confronted me at some time in my career. (I know that in heaven the worship will be perfect, but while on earth we will have to settle for just working, preparing, planning, and doing our best.)

1. I advise using a small spiral notebook to note the names of the music I am playing for prelude, offering, and postlude. I also make notes on how I will intone and accompany the stanzas—alternate accompaniments, octaves, drop out, manuals only, etc. I also note on the back pages of the notebook names and sources of music that I have found which will work for future services.
2. A good time saver is to prepare two special files, one for weddings and one for funerals, so you don’t have to search through your whole library when you are called on to play for those events. In the wedding file have at least a good version of Pachelbel’s *Canon in D*, Bach’s *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*, and Jeremiah Clarke’s *Trumpet Voluntary*. These are the most requested numbers. It is also useful to have a funeral file because you often don’t have a lot of lead time to practice. Dale Wood has several volumes called *Softly and Tenderly,* and Robert Hobby has 2 volumes called *For All the Saints,* which are very handy.

There may be frustrations and conflicts involved at times, but it is a glorious privilege and responsibility to be a Lutheran church organist. I hope you take the job seriously but also have a lot of fun and find a lot of joy in the task of planning, practicing, and performing. It is not a small task nor is it a trivial one, but it is rewarding, and it is your special thanks offering to your Savior who saved you and, along with numerous other blessings, promises eternal life in heaven. Finally, you have a special gift which is not given to many others. Thank God for it and use it for His glory. Your music ministry is your special personal offering to the Lord at the same time as it is a special service to your congregation.