

# Worship the Lord

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## Voices Raised with Keys and Strings

By Michael Schultz

"How will it go? What will people think?" These questions were on my mind prior to making a presentation at our synod's 2011 National Conference on Worship, Music and the Arts. With the kind assistance of Dr. Kermit Moldenhauer, I had prepared new musical settings of the canticles found in the historic liturgy, settings written for piano and guitar.<sup>1</sup> Being far less than professional in both guitar and vocal performance, the thought of playing and singing in front of a group was doing a little number on my nerves. All in all, it turned out that the two sessions went well.

Four years later, this article reviews a 2014 worship conference presentation which expanded on the one just described. With Mr. Mark Davidson on the piano bench, I led two groups through 24 samples of hymns and songs written for piano and guitar.<sup>2</sup> Based on that event and other experiences, it is a privilege to share a few observations.

### Repertory and Instrumental Performance

There is no shortage of worship music written for "keys and strings." With the stipulation that texts must be scripturally sound, the question becomes, "Which solid titles/texts have music written for both instruments?" *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* included guitar chords for only 12 of 623 hymns. The guitar edition for *Christian Worship: Supplement* had a much higher percentage: 70 of 85. To be noted, however, is that not every one of those 70 supplement hymns was written with guitar accompaniment in mind. The same is true of any number of recent hymnals where guitar chords are available for every hymn or song. Without delving into technical detail, it is true that someone can analyze the chord structure of the keyboard settings and manufacture matching guitar chords. The questions become whether or not the resulting combination works musically, and whether or not the guitarist can actually manage to play the matching chords.

One of the main purposes of "Voices Raised with Keys and Strings" was to provide a sample playlist where such questions were taken out of play. The guitar chords of the sample pieces

were accessible to guitarists who play at an average or less than average skill level. The hymns and songs featured in the sessions were written in such a way that both instruments were intended to be combined.

That intent may not always be readily apparent. Early in the first session, an example arose which put a smile on my face because I expected it to happen. Rather than playing strictly from the accompaniment, Mr. Davidson was improvising the piano performance in a way that better suited the guitar accompaniment. Noting that the piano score was different, one attendee asked which score he was using and where it could be acquired. I had to acknowledge that not every congregation will have a keyboardist who can improvise in this way.

This is, however, part of the mix in seeking to have keys and strings accompaniment for worship. The well-known tune HYFRYDOL (CW 365) is available from Oregon Catholic Press (OCP #91192) as a score for unison singing, keyboard, guitar, and trumpet in Bb. The lead sheet (text, guitar chords, and melody only) carries this note at the bottom of the page: "When guitar and keyboard play together, keyboardists should improvise using the guitar chords above the melody." While such a note does not mean that this is the only way that such tunes can be played, worship planners with limited musical background will benefit from understanding whether or not their congregations' musicians can improvise.

Perhaps one of the easiest test cases for exploring a piano/guitar combination in worship is two pieces from the version

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of Morning Praise published by NPH in *Christian Worship New Service Settings* (M. Haugen; downloadable instrumental parts OL-033039E). Both the Venite and the Te Deum have an easy complementary guitar arrangement.

That brings up one further item to address in terms of WELS worship planners and repertory. Of 24 pieces sampled during the session, only four came straight out of *Christian Worship* resources, and less than half were *Christian Worship* titles. As we walk together in a synod, I have the confidence that Christian brothers and sisters will devote themselves to choosing texts which match our Christian and Lutheran confession. As worship planners search for solid texts which are also available with the instrumentation under discussion, where can we best point them?



Just to be clear (if it isn't obvious), the sample playlist of our session had no intention of being comprehensive. After vetting the texts, the titles were chosen primarily on the basis of a compatible arrangement for both piano and guitar. An ongoing question for WELS worship leaders is: "Do we give people a fish or teach people to fish?" Do we best tell people where to look for quality piano and guitar worship music, or do we generate a list and put individual pieces in their hands?

I don't believe it's wrong to ask that question. Nor do I believe it's necessarily the right question. Some congregations have people who, without advice or assistance, know where to go and who can secure quality worship music for this genre of performance. Other congregations have people who would prefer not to be given directions where to go but who would derive greater benefit from being given specific titles, links, etc.—the actual music. A difficulty with the latter is that subjectivity will always be a factor,

both for those who generate "the approved list of materials" and for those who are on the receiving end of such lists ("Why did or didn't they include such-and-such a title?").

A better question is to ask about balance. It wouldn't be desirable to limit congregations' repertory to 30 hymns which work well with piano and guitar simply because those are the hymns which can be identified or performed or made available. Nor would it necessarily be desirable to always accompany every hymn or liturgical song with these particular instruments (or to endlessly search for such settings), as if the hymns and songs weren't written with organ accompaniment in mind. Balance comes into play when we recognize that, for both music and available musicians, one genre doesn't need to cover all repertory. We're perhaps not doing our best worship planning when, in search of piano and guitar accompaniment, our first consideration is "What can we find out there?"

Seldom if ever is Lutheran worship planning going to be easy. Ask any pastor or music minister how easy it is to pick hymns or line up choir music for a year. It takes time and effort. For two reasons (one of which comes later), I maintain that the best *starting point* for corporate worship music accompanied by piano and guitar is our church body's published hymnal and its accompanying resources. The reason for starting there is that we already know what's there—texts carefully chosen for use in our churches. If we don't yet have a high percentage of 711 existing hymns, plus liturgical music, written specifically for piano and guitar, I recommend both patience and a commitment to keep working at it.

I will admit that the guitarist part of me would probably prefer to have a complete set of all of our hymns and liturgy songs written specifically for the combination of piano and guitar. But again, ask the members of Koiné or Branches Band (groups which have worked almost exclusively with CW/CWS texts) how much work it takes to produce a strong "keys and strings" arrangement that can also be used by others. It is no small task. It is a task on which the current hymnal project has its eye. While the current hymnal project may not be able to promise "a complete set," it will be pursuing the matter in terms of both piano and guitar editions as well as other instruments.

## Congregational Performance

Making a worship conference presentation is like preaching to the choir. At these sessions the attendees served as the choir. While much of the sample playlist was brand new to them, strong singing voices and ability to read music meant that the selections were well sung. Since this is obviously not always the case at the local congregation, those results were surely a bit skewed.

As much as I personally enjoy playing guitar along with the piano to accompany worship, and as well as the singing at the sessions went, I do not mean to write in a way that puts organ accompaniment in a bad light. Apart from people's personal preferences for accompaniment and apart from concerns about the ability of the organist, there are strong arguments for putting the organ at the top of the list as the premier accompaniment

instrument for public worship. At the same time, at both of my worship conference presentations, 2011 and 2014, it was easy to sense something in the room. While I didn't take a poll of how many organists were in the room, comments and discussion revealed how some felt: "In addition to the organists who serve our congregation so faithfully and so well, perhaps this is a way that I, a non-organist, can serve the Lord and the church."

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Introducing practices into the worship life of a congregation calls for the greatest care and patience. I recall the first time I played guitar in a public service in the 1990s. After the first performance, I didn't play again for another year, not because it was not well-received, but because I didn't want to push. I also took things slowly because I was the guitarist. Especially since I was the pastor, I didn't believe it was my place to play in church just because I could play the instrument. I would rather be asked to serve in that way than to imply that I really ought to be able to serve in that way.

With that kind of "public worship thinking" understood, I would hope that worship conference *presentations* such as "Voices Raised with Keys and Strings" would lead to congregational *conversations* about utilizing the gifts of as many of the congregation's instrumentalists as possible. Some common sense is necessary when it comes to deciding on which instruments are commended or not for use in public worship. In light of different skill levels, the same is true of which instrumentalists are asked to serve (or perhaps, as difficult as it may be, not asked to serve). But as the efforts are expended to educate the congregation in advance and to avoid the pitfalls and to work out all the bugs, watch how much the ownership of and appreciation for public worship increases for both instrumentalists and non-instrumentalists alike as individuals join the congregation's local orchestra, be they one or two or many.

An article recapping a presentation entitled "Voices Raised with Keys and Strings" would miss the mark if the first two words weren't also emphasized. To do so, I acknowledge the efforts of the conference presentation keyboardist, Mr. Mark Davidson, and of Rev. Aaron Christie, both of whom serve at the congregation where I now hold membership, Trinity Lutheran in Waukesha, WI. In large part, their worship planning was responsible for many of the selections in this presentation. The ensemble at Trinity includes piano and guitar, along with mic'd cantors—and also at times trumpet, percussion, digital keyboard, violin, cello, and bass guitar.

When that ensemble comes together (every other month on average), its selections number between six to nine pieces per service. The selections have never been anthems; they are always

either hymns or service music (canticles, psalms, verses of the day). Performing from a dedicated music space at the front right section of a large nave, the ensemble seeks to "raise voices." In most cases the assembly sings along with the cantors—hymns, psalms, or service music which they have sung before, just with different instruments. Trinity in Waukesha is by no means the only

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place using this approach. I write favorably about this approach not because I am a part of it but because it is transferable to the Lutheran congregations and schools whose worship leaders are reading this article. This approach focuses on the body of hymns and service music which is common in our church body.

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Adequate rehearsal time is essential. None are the times when this ensemble has played without individual and group rehearsal. It takes a lot of work. Few are the times when this ensemble has played that I haven't spent time figuring out guitar chords by



playing piano chords, transposing music to an easier key for the guitar, or organizing and marking up music for performance.

While there are some unique items about the dedicated worship space and the sound system which I could address (such as iPad controlled mixing capabilities), here's what I appreciate most about this ensemble. It is both set up and executed to involve the worshipping assembly. This is the second reason that the best starting point for corporate worship music accompanied by piano and guitar is our church body's published hymnal and its accompanying resources. Familiar tunes make for success when leading the congregation with different instruments. With a guitar on my lap and a monitor amp allowing me to hear myself play, I can't always judge how the singing is going, but comments indicate that it is going well, due in part to good mixing, but due in greater part to the use of familiar hymns and service music. In a setting which is blessed to have a magnificent pipe organ and gifted organists, occasional scheduling of this ensemble has allowed people to find "a new dimension in the world of sound" (CW 248:2).

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It has taken a few years for me to become marginally adept at performing most of a service's worship music as a guitarist, in combination with a pianist, in what remains a familiar Lutheran worship service. Unlike the weeks before the worship conference in 2011, I no longer find myself worrying or wondering, "How will it go?" or "What will people think?" I now find myself hoping and praying for something definitely more significant and decidedly more focused: "Will this strengthen the singing? Will it carry the text more forcefully toward the rafters and more deeply into the hearts of both hearers and singers?" To combine piano and guitar in accompaniment is by no means the only or best way for that to happen, but for that to happen is by all means the best reason to combine piano and guitar in accompaniment.

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## Beyond Strumming

Search [giamusic.com](http://giamusic.com) for three volumes with the title *Beyond Strumming*. From the publisher's description: "Liturgical guitar method series. Provides both the music reading skills and guitar techniques demanded of today's liturgical guitarist. Book includes compact disc."

Without endorsing every point but noting that much of the liturgical music is transferable to Lutheran circles, readers might be interested to know that Michael Joncas, David Haas, Marty Haugen, and others were featured in a one-hour documentary on KSMQ public television—On Eagles' Wings: Minnesota's Sacred Music. Search for the title on YouTube. It's about far more than guitars. But note this quote at 17:37: "While in some cases guitars were well played and invited the people's participation, in other places very amateur guitarists played and gave sacred music a bad name."

## "By Faith"

A double CD of highlights from the 2014 worship conference would make a fine Christmas gift for church musicians. Search NPH for the title track (above)—a hymn anthem by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend. Additional tracks are available by free download at [worship.welsrc.net](http://worship.welsrc.net).

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, references to "piano and guitar" are not intended to be exclusive. Many, if not most, of the arrangements from the conference sessions included options for a number of other instruments. Limiting the language of the article to "piano and guitar" simply reflects the session title and the instruments used during the sessions.
- <sup>2</sup> A repertoire list from this presentation is available at <http://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/2014-worship-conference/>. Audio samples are available for many of the selections. Recordings from publishers are not always reliable to show potential in a given parish. The vocal style may be too soloistic or too much a pop style. Your choir or a soloist may use a different vocal style. The instrumentation may be too complicated (and thus too difficult) or too busy. For example, too much percussion may make a song seem less appropriate. But the same song will "work" with less percussion.

