



THE  
*Dwell Richly*  
COURSE

leading others in singing the gospel

## 4. ARRANGING SONGS

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## 4. Arranging Songs

*My gracious Master, and my God,  
Assist me to proclaim,  
To spread through all the earth abroad  
The honours of your name.<sup>1</sup>*

### Intro

As we help the word of Christ dwell richly in hearts and minds, we are reminded of the gospel, helped to respond in worship, and changed to be more like Jesus. Our music serves that goal by supporting the singing and adorning the gospel. What we do practically as musicians can help or hinder that goal, so we need to invest time developing musical skills to help us craft arrangements that help the word dwell in us richly.

So the first thing we need to do is ask for God's help...

### 1. Pray

If letting the message of Christ dwell richly in us is our aim, then we need to approach the task of arranging songs as primarily *spiritual* rather than simply *musical*. We're aiming to build up the body of Christ first and foremost, and so we must approach this task prayerfully. Give time as you come to prepare to pray:

- That the way you arrange the song will help God's word to dwell richly in the hearts of those gathered.
- That you'll be granted wisdom and creativity as you prepare, in order to serve that end.
- That you'll be able to serve your musicians well by communicating the arrangement lovingly, clearly and effectively to your musicians, as you all together seek to serve the congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wesley, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing", Public Domain.

## 2. Know and love your people

If our purpose in gathering is to serve each other as we engage with God together, we'll seek to serve others in the way we arrange songs. Knowing what will edify our church family and encourage them to focus on Christ (and what might hinder that) is our first step in building an effective arrangement.

We need to ask: what will help *this* word to dwell in these people richly?

### Loving your congregation

We may not know every individual personally, but there will be certain cultural norms in our church families. In a more traditional church gathering of largely older members, the congregation will most likely be edified by a different set of musical choices than another church made up largely of students, young professionals and internationals. Where the first might sing more hymns with older, familiar language in a more classical style, the second might sing more new songs in a more modern style. In each case, musicians who serve those churches need to choose a style that they think will best enable the word to dwell richly in that particular group of people.

We're not united around a musical style, but through the gospel that we sing! We're not seeking to create or establish unity through musical style, but we do need our knowledge and love for those we serve to dictate our musical choices. We don't aim to keep everybody happy, we aim to make it as easy as we can for as many as we can to behold Christ in the gospel as we sing.

This aim will affect some of our musical choices. We'll set tempos that are easy to sing to, then come up with a musical accompaniment, rather than letting a musical idea dictate how fast we sing. We also need to remember that many in our congregations are not musical, and so don't have a big vocal range. Someone has helpfully suggested that it's best to avoid letting the melody of a song go lower than the A below middle C or higher than the D the octave above middle C.

### Loving your musicians

Knowing and loving our musicians will help the word to dwell richly in those we lead. Being aware of a musician's abilities and limitations means we'll arrange a song in a way which will help them grow in their skill without them being completely out of their depth. Consider whether notation or other specific instruction will help them to serve effectively and play in a way that serves the rest of the band and the congregation.

All this means that we don't start with an arrangement we heard online (beware trying to re-create what you've seen that 12-piece professional band do on YouTube!), or even with our own musical ideas and preferences. Instead, we start by asking: "what will help *this* word dwell in *these* people?" Knowing them helps us decide what style to play, which tunes we sing, what version of the words we do, and how many times to repeat choruses – all out of love for them, longing for them to behold Christ in the gospel.

### 3. Choosing songs

#### **If you help plan services...**

To think more about putting together a service, see Appendix 1.

To think more about building up a pool of songs, see Appendix 2.

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### 4. Underline the main theme musically

Each song we have chosen has many possible points of emphasis. Our aim now is to help people engage their hearts and minds with the truth, both generally in the song, and specifically with any particular truths we're focusing on during that particular service.<sup>2</sup> This helps us decide which points in each song to emphasise with our arrangements.

Once we've identified these key moments, we can begin to reinforce, emphasise and draw attention to that particular theme or idea with the music to help that word dwell richly in us. There's a lot of creative freedom here! We can use tempo, feel, song structure, dynamics and the general tone of the song to help the truths we're singing dwell richly in us.

#### **Mood:**

The mood of our music needs to complement the song, and also match the tone of the service. A song like Matt Redman's *Blessed Be Your Name*<sup>3</sup> can be sung in an upbeat, triumphant way or a sombre, reflective way. We should let the mood of that particular service shape our arrangements. We will sing that song differently in a service on the theme of suffering or after a tragedy in our church or nation than when responding with gladness to the call to follow our Lord.

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<sup>2</sup> If that idea is new to you, you might find it helpful to read Appendix 1: Planning a Service.

<sup>3</sup> Matt and Beth Redman, © 2002 Thankyou Music.

**Imagine you're leading *Blessed Be Your Name* after a sermon on Job 1.**

**How might the tone of the service affect:**

Your choice of instrumentation?

Your use of harmony (the chords you choose)?

How and where in the song you get loud and quiet?

What would you do differently in a more joyful, upbeat service?

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**Structure:**

We might choose to repeat part of a song that particularly fits the theme of the service. This could mean repeating a verse or chorus after the sermon that reinforces the point made by the preacher, or starting a song with the chorus. This might be something we plan for in advance, or it could be more spontaneous. (We'll think in a later section about communicating clearly with your band during a service.)

**Texture:<sup>4</sup>**

We can use texture to highlight the main section of a song by making that section the loudest or the quietest moment. Texture is often more about intensity than pure volume; we can think about growing texture like this:

**Pitch:**

- The wider the range of pitches, the bigger the sound will be, especially when you add the highest and lowest frequencies.
- To build the texture, try starting with the bass guitar up an octave and the keyboard in the mid-range, then have the bass drop down and the keyboard move up the octave for a bigger section.
- Save the brighter-sounding crash cymbal and the lowest bass guitar notes for the biggest moment in the song.

**Movement:**

The more movement there is in the music, the more energy it gives:

- To build the texture using movement, we could start with little movement (perhaps just the second keyboard (synth pad); or a piano or acoustic guitar

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4 How you combine different elements of melody and harmony to affect the way a song sounds.

playing only on the chord changes). Then, add in more rhythms in the drums and bass.

- Melodic instruments like flute or violin are good at adding movement by filling in gaps in the tune.
- Unifying the band around one common rhythm helps give the sound strength. Sometimes, this is called “groove”. Make sure the bass guitar is playing the same rhythm as the kick drum, and build the acoustic guitar around that pattern, in the same groove as the drums.

### **Layers:**

Generally, the more instruments that are playing, the bigger the sound. There’s lots of ways we can creatively vary the layers:

- Not all the singers need to sing down the microphone in every section of a song. Ask them to come in at specific points with harmonies or to reinforce the tune. (And to keep singing without the mic!)
- Starting a song with just one instrument and adding one more with each new section is an effective way to build a song.

Using these three techniques together will help grow the intensity of a song, and build to the main section. Don’t forget that dropping all the instruments out together after you’ve built the dynamics can be an effective way of drawing attention to certain words as well; the focal section of a song doesn’t always have to be the loudest! Let the lyrics guide you on which approach seems most appropriate.

As we arrange, it’s good to be creative and try to find fresh ways of helping the word to dwell richly in us. In our enthusiasm, we mustn’t forget the most important instrument in the band: the congregation! Our big aim is to get people singing. Being disciplined with how we use instruments will help make sure we don’t drown out the congregation as we sing. It will help serve our sound engineers too – they’ll be more easily able to build a full-sounding mix that encourages the congregation to sing without making the band the main thing we hear.

## **5. Give thought to transitions in a service**

To help people to stay focused on Christ’s word, and to avoid an awkward, distracting pause as music is shuffled and capos are changed, it is useful to

think about how to transition from one song to the next.

If the next song shares a chord with the current song, you could end on that chord, or move to that chord once you've finished the current song, for example:

Current Key	New Key	Transition
B <sup>b</sup>	F	Finish on chord 5 (F) & start next song
G	A	Finish on G, then play: D, E, A etc.

If the keys aren't related, try one of the following:

- In quieter songs, one instrument can finish the song while everyone else gets ready for the next one.
- In louder songs, one person could drop out of the end (even just the last chord) to prepare for the intro of the next.
- An elaborate and complicated harmonic transition can be more distracting than it's worth, especially if it's played underneath someone introducing the next song.

These moments can give us valuable opportunities to draw people's attention to the way one song leads to another with a gospel logic (more on how to do this in later sections and in Appendix 1: Planning a Service).

## Final thoughts

### "Crucify" your style

The biographer and Bishop of Liverpool J. C. Ryle once said he had to "crucify" his style of preaching so that his hearers would understand the gospel.<sup>5</sup> We can apply that to our music ministry. Similarly, we need to lay down our own ideas of how we want the music to sound in order to best serve our church family.

Being aware of our own tendencies will help us with this. Some of us will tend toward arranging songs with a more stripped-out, acoustic feel; others will tend to be on the louder end of the spectrum. It's worth bearing in mind our own tendencies, and allowing the lyrics to closely govern our arrangements.

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Russell, *J.C.Ryle*, (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001) p.60.

## **Accepting feedback prayerfully**

When we've spent ages working hard on a new arrangement, and then after the service we're told that it didn't work, or it was too complicated to sing, it can be hard to hear. We can all benefit from remembering:

- As we seek to serve people, we're bound to get it wrong occasionally. Isn't it wonderful that we have a gracious Saviour, whose blood has covered our every shortcoming, and frees us to serve Him!
- Be patient with those who are non-musicians and so don't know how to articulate feedback (especially if that includes our pastor or church elders). We need to listen to them, even if they don't have all the words to describe what they mean.
- Prayerfully consider what might ring true from the feedback you've received, and identify why something worked well or not. This will help you grow and get a feel of how to serve your congregation better.
- Asking others, whose opinion you trust, for some feedback on arrangements you have done will help you grow immensely.
- Ask non-musicians if they could follow your lead; if they struggled, chat more with them to work out why (e.g. was the musical arrangement too complicated?) and work on that for next time.
- We serve under leaders and God's word calls us to submit joyfully and willingly (Hebrews 13:17).

When giving others feedback, face-to-face is best, ideally one or two days after the service, so you have time to reflect before you chat it through together.

## Summary: Keep the main thing the main thing

This is only one example of how to approach arranging a song. However when we choose to serve our church family with creative arrangements, we need to remember our ultimate aim: to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly as we sing. It's easy to get distracted at many different points when working on arrangements. We need to keep praying that the Lord will give us wisdom as we serve our church family, so that we can best help magnify Christ in their hearts.

## Questions

- Take a song that you enjoyed from last Sunday. What's the main theme of the song? Why do you think it was chosen for you to sing at that point in the service?
- What was good about the way the music helped emphasise the words? What would you have done differently?
- How would you arrange that song differently for a much bigger ensemble? Or a much smaller one?
- What are your tendencies when arranging songs? Do you generally fit in one particular style?
- What songs do your church family sing most loudly? Why do you think that is (familiarity, arrangement, placement in the service...)?

## Things to read and listen to

1. Bob Kauflin, Chapter 13: "Planning Sunday's Songs" in *Worship Matters*<sup>6</sup>
2. Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship*<sup>7</sup>

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6 (Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008)

7 (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009)

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