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Practical Tools

Vern Sanders

Do-It-Yourself Hymn-Anthems

With a Pencil, a hymnal, and some creative energy, new anthems are just a few minutes away...and without any financial outlay...

The following information was originally published in the September/October, 1987, issue of Creator. Author REBECCA SMELSER gives some practical tips to creating an anthem "out of thin air" if and/or when you need one at the last minute...

Choir director dilemmas: Music budget in the red...file cabinets stuffed with over-sung anthems...lead singers out of town...demanding cantata leaves no time to rehearse Sunday anthems... congregation rebels at singing new hymns...etc...etc...etc!

Believe it or not, the answer to all of these problems is as close as the nearest hymnal — the **Do-It-Yourself Hymn-Anthem**. Simply rearranged versions of hymns, D-I-Y Hymn-Anthems retain their original form, changing only the way in which they are sung. They are free for the taking, available in varying degrees of difficulty — from rhythmically complex SATB to simple unison, easily rehearsed, and made-to-order for teaching new hymns to a reluctant congregation. With just a bit of practice, you can create a Hymn-Anthem which the congregation would never believe came from a hymnal.

The secret to D-I-Y Hymn-Anthems is variety — variety in style (marcato, legato, etc.), in dynamics, in voicing (full choir/quartet, unison, SATB, etc.), and in organ registration or accompaniment style when a creative organist or pianist is available. Hymns may be chosen from the body of unsung hymns in the congregational hymnal, or from an alternate hymnal which offers a wider variety. Choir copies of a second hymnal can be an economical purchase for the choir which uses Hymn-Anthems frequently; although expensive at first, the nearly-endless supply of anthem material easily pays for itself in the long run. In my church for example, the congregation sings from the **Presbyterian Hymnal**, but most of our Hymn-Anthems come from choir copies of **The Worshipbook**.

The convenience of these "quickie" anthems is not their only asset; **Hymn-Anthems are also excellent teaching tools for both choir members and congregation**. For choir members, they present a perfect vehicle on which to hone the solo skills of intermediate-level singers who are intimidated by more difficult solos. Also, they provide for the use of a set quartet, which can improve the blend of the entire choir; as the

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chosen four sing together regularly, they learn to listen more closely, thus improving their blend within the choir as well as within the quartet. Once established, a quartet can be a handy secondary ensemble to add variety to your service music, or as a substitute for the choir on low-attendance Sundays.

For the congregation, **D-I-Y Hymn-Anthems are an ideal way to introduce a new hymn.** After singing the hymn-Anthem one week, recycle one verse of it the next week as a choral Call to Worship or Benediction, or both. The third week, use it as a congregational hymn, with the choir singing Verse 1 and perhaps a children's choir or youth choir singing Verse 2. By the third stanza of this third week, the congregation should be ready to sing, and a new hymn has been added to their repertoire.

When singing the Hymn-Anthems, punctuation marks should be carefully observed for breaths or short breaks to illuminate the text, unless such breaks are musically awkward. When the arrangement calls for unison or less than four parts, the organ/piano should play only these parts to accentuate the difference. On organ, play solo or ensemble accompaniment on one manual and full choir accompaniment on another with different registration. Perhaps the easiest hymns to arrange are those with a repeated section, which lend themselves to unison/parts or ensemble/choir form. For example:

Come Christians, Join To Sing (MADRID)

Each verse has four lines of music; lines 1, 2, & 4 are alike. The instructions for each verse will be in two parts: the first part will apply to lines 1, 2, & 4; the second part only to line 3.

- Introduction: Last 2 measures
- Verse 1: Unison choir/SATB on "Alleluia;" Line 3 — Quartet
- Verse 2: Unison women/SATB on "Alleluia;" Line 3 — Soprano solo
- Verse 3: Maestoso. Same as Verse 1; Line 3 — SATB choir

Another easily-arranged hymn is one in which the opening phrase is immediately repeated with different words. Taking advantage of the echo effect, we use solo voices on the first phrases, followed by all voices on the repeat, as in Verse 4 of this example:

Holy God, We Praise Your Name (GROSSER GOTT, WIR LOBEN DICH)

- Introduction: Phrase 1 —rit. last two measures
- Verse 1: Quartet
- Verse 2: SATB choir
- Verse 3: Omit
- Verse 4: Phrase 1 — Soprano solo; Phrase 2 — Soprano/Alto duet; Phrase 3 —tutti Soprano; Phrase 4 — tutti Soprano/Alto; Phrases 5 & 7—SATB choir

When using fewer voices than the full choir, encourage lighter, softer singing to highlight the difference in texture. The following Hymn-Anthem example makes extensive use of large group/small group singing:

Christ Is the World's True Light (ST.JOAN)

- Introduction; Phrases 7 (unison) & 8
- Verse 1: Phrase 1 — Unison choir forte, marcato; Phrase 2 — Quartet legato; Phrase 3 & 4 — repeat; Phrase 5 & 6 — Quartet legato; Phrase 7 — Unison choir forte, marcato;

Phrase 8 — SATB choir forte

- Verse 2; Phrases 1 & 2 — Unison men mezzo-forte, legato; Phrases 3 & 4 — Unison women mezzo-forte, legato; Phrases 5 & 6 — Unison men; Phrase 7 — Unison choir mezzo-forte, marcato; Phrase 8 — SATB Choir "Verse 3: Phrase 1 — solo; Phrase 2 — SATB choir mezzo-piano, legato; Phrases 3 & 4 — Repeat; Phrases 5 & 6 — Solo, crescendo; Phrase 7 — Unison choir forte, maestoso; Phrase 8 — SATB choir forte, maestoso, rit.

Although hymns are written to be sung in four parts, an occasional hymn will lend itself to duo or trio singing. Sometimes the bass and soprano lines harmonize well, as in this hymn example:

Holy Spirit, Truth Divine (SONG)

- Introduction: First & last measures
- Verse 1: Quartet, mezzo-piano;
- Verse 2: Phrases 1 & 2 — Soprano solo; Phrases 3 & 4 — Bass solo
- Verse 3: Omit
- Verse 4: Soprano/Bass duet
- Verse 5: SATB choir, forte

Occasionally SA and SAT voicings can be used, as in this example:

O Jesus, Joy of Loving Hearts (FEDERAL STREET)

- Introduction: Phrase 4
- Verse 1: SATB choir, mezzo-piano
- Verse 2: Phrase 1 — Soprano solo, Phrase 2 — SA duet, Phrase 3 — SAT trio, Phrase 4 — Quartet
- Verses 3 & 4: Omit
- Verse 5: Phrase 1 — tutti Soprano, mezzo-forte; Phrase 2 — tutti SA, mezzo-forte; Phrase 3 — tutti SAT, mezzo-forte; Phrase 4 — tutti SATB, forte

A collection of fine hymns, both old and new, is a treasure trove of Hymn-Anthem possibilities, such as the following Christmas hymn from **The Worshipbook**. Likable and easily learned in one rehearsal, it is useful for mid-December, when the Christmas oratorio or cantata demands extra rehearsal time.

On A Bethlehem Hill — harm. Wetzel

We will consider this hymn to have four phrases, each of the first two including the response, "Glory be to Israel;" the last two phrases are identical. The entire hymn is sung in unison. Because of the solo/choir form, the arrangement for each verse is the same, except for Verse 4, Phrase 4.

- Introduction: Phrase 1
- Verse 1: Phrases 1 & 2 — Solo, choir on "Glory be to Israel;" Phrases 3 & 4 — "Glory, Glory" — Solo, "Glory, Glory" — Men, "Glory be to Israel" — Choir
- Verses 2 & 3: Same as Verse 1
- Verse 4: Phrases 1 & 2 — Same as Verse 1, Phrase 3 — "Glory, Glory" — Solo 1, "Glory, Glory" — Solo 2, Phrase 4 — "Glory be to Israel" — Choir, Solo Descant: last 4 notes sung an octave higher

Now it's time for the do-it-yourself part. Armed with hymnal, pencil, and a mental list of possible soloists, you are ready to become a Do-It Yourself Hymn-Arranger. Select a hymn — preferably one with repetition — and try some of these suggested devices, perhaps adding a few of your own. Sing or play through the verses until your arrangement fits the hymn. At the next rehearsal, try it; if it's not quite right, take it home and rework it. For some of you, it may sound too easy to be true, but it works!

During rehearsals, have the choir mark directions (using pencil only) in their hymnals, and suddenly you have a new anthem! Change your mind, and the arrangement is altered as easily as changing a breath mark in a printed anthem. As you become more adept, your arrangements will hit the mark nearly every time — as with everything in music, practice makes practically perfect.

The next time half the choir suddenly decides to take a vacation at the same time, or the budget is cut or gone, or the files have been exhausted, and you need an anthem fast — just turn to the trusty hymnal and Do-It-Yourself.

Note: All hymns given as examples are from The Worshipbook, published by Westminster Press.

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Final Thoughts

As Smelser indicates, this sounds too easy to be true...but if you look at any of the hymn anthems in your choral library you'll find that they fall into certain (sometimes predictable) patterns, from which you can learn. I remember attending a workshop at which the noted arranger **Alice Parker** talked about hymn arrangements, particularly those that she and **Robert Shaw** concocted for the **Robert Shaw Chorale** (many of which are published by **Lawson-Gould**). In essence, Alice had her own formula: a unison verse, a two part verse (perhaps in canon) and a four part verse. For variety, give the men the melody and let the women sing harmony. It really is not that complicated...and, as I said, you probably have a number of examples in your own library which might serve as models. Try it...you may find that your arranging skills are better than you think...

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Blessings.



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Vern has served in some form of church music and worship leadership for 40 years in a variety of denominations both in the US and in Canada. He is currently Director of Music at First Presbyterian Church, Templeton, California. His new Ebook [The Choir in Modern Worship](#) is available by [clicking here](#). He regularly consults with churches and church leaders. [Click on his name above to email him](#).

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