



Flexibility First: Accompanying In Today's Church

article by Michael Smolens ©2011

If you play piano/keyboard or guitar and want to play more frequently (for profit or just fun), you're going to need to become an effective accompanist. There are opportunities for this everywhere, and the majority of them will be working with vocalists—either soloists, vocal ensembles, or both. Accompanying can also be a great way to support an individual artist or group in their vision. And if their message inspires you, it can be an excellent means to grow artistically, as well as personally.

Next to having a basic facility on your instrument and some familiarity with the style(s), *listening* and *flexibility* are the two most valuable skills you can possess. This is universally true. It doesn't matter if you're playing in a classical duo, a rock band, a jazz quartet, a musical theatrical production, a poetry reading, etc. In a church context, the leader (reverend, rabbi, minister, pastor, etc.) plus all of their staff, are counting on the music to bind everything together, to make the guests feel welcome, and help ensure that the message of the day is communicated clearly and convincingly.

This article will focus on many of the approaches I used at just such a context one Sunday morning that made the music compelling and integrated with that day's theme.

Goin' To Church

Unfortunately, not everyone's experience at their church has been a positive one, but as a professional musician I can speak about the advantages that I've discovered while playing at a church. By playing regularly at the same church (at least twice a month) I've experienced significant improvement in not only my accompanying, but also my solo piano/vocal performance. I've had the chance to deepen my relationship with certain solo pieces that I have performed periodically for years, building my confidence and willingness to take more risks as a performer. This arena has supported me in arranging pre-existing songs that I would not have been exposed to, as well as creating original chants that I probably would have never considered otherwise—both of these, in turn, enriching my composing and teaching. Financial rewards have also accrued, not only through my regular services, but with numerous composing and arranging commissions, cross-marketing for my private and group teaching, as well as performances by my various original ensembles. Last, but certainly not least, is the chance to be surrounded by a group of genuinely caring and appreciative folks who also support personal growth.

Specifically, I have played for nearly two decades in various churches that are under the umbrella of "New Thought"—churches that are usually called "Unity" or "Church Of Religious Science." Without going into too much detail, suffice to say that they are fairly liberal philosophically and musically open. A service typically includes a meditation (sometimes

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accompanied), various short sacred readings, one or more congregational songs, a solo (or choral) piece before and after the talk, a closing congregational song, and music as people exit (or stay and visit). Though the dominant musical sensibility tends to be pop, my particular church is more gospel-oriented.

Accompanying The Meditation

Although the most significant examples of musical flexibility came with my solo pieces (before and after the reverend's talk) there were numerous opportunities elsewhere in the service to tune into what the room needed musically. Take for example, the opening meditation. I generally start that piece with just two or three melody notes, softly repeating until the energy in the room feels very still and refined. Quite gradually, I might build the texture by adding one note to the original idea, add a complimentary (but very simple) motive, alter the underlying bass note, or subtly change the rhythmic density of one part. [An excellent resource for understanding this 'glacial approach' to improvising can be found in the best "ambient music" music composers, such as the early works of Brian Eno].

Depending on where the speaker is taking the group through their visualization, I try to complement their direction, sometimes by augmenting it, or sometimes by bringing my energy or rate of musical change down to allow the speaker's intention to be gently spotlighted. I recall that Sunday I made specific musical changes that were parallel to the speaker's transition points quite naturally, as if directed from some other source...

Accompanying Congregation Songs

Another type of contemporary church music that requires flexibility are the songs sung by the congregation. In the churches that I have played in, the vast majority of songs use a "vocal leadsheet" form of notation and consist of the melody, lyrics, and harmony (using chord symbols placed above the melody) all on one line. This skeletal approach to notating a song is ideal for allowing the accompanist to support what is happening with the song at any given moment.

At my church I accompany the Song Leader who guides the congregation in each piece. Their job to enroll the guests in the spirit of the song and show how that message could change their lives. Sometimes the leader might let the introduction go longer than written or rehearsed (to saturate the mood), create unexpected dynamic shifts with each new verse, stretch out the ending of the song, or even repeat an earlier section—all 'on-the-fly'! *So the accompanist is expected to not only match the shifts in performance, but even anticipate or create the environment of complete freedom for the Song Leader.*

The tools the accompanist needs to do this are many, and they can be gained by:

- 1) listening to well-known accompanists (as well as less-experienced ones)
- 2) studying with an experienced, articulate accompanist
- 3) surrounding yourself with supportive collaborators

Dynamics are a huge source of flexibility and contrast, especially if you are the only player present. Intros needn't always be quiet, though they almost always need to be very clear

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rhythmically. Deciding which register of your instrument will be the focus will have a big impact on the pacing of the song; for example, using a syncopated bass figure in octaves will create a very different energy than playing block chords in the mid and upper part of the keyboard in a simple rhythm. Another aspect has to do with the way in which you shape the harmony of the song. Let's face it—playing the written harmony while really listening to a single vocalist (let alone a group) is a challenge, especially if the song is brand new. Yet, when one gets more comfortable in this role, you will find how valuable it is to not only add new harmony-on-the-spot (passing chords, new bass motion, more extended chords, pedal point harmony), but also omitting chords can be just as powerful. Another valuable technique is adding melodic ideas in-between vocal phrases, usually referred to as “fills.” If the rhythm of what you're providing is clear, adding fills can be very useful for building energy, though it is easy to abuse this privilege and actually weaken the song.

I've found that the *most valuable use for changing an accompaniment texture is to signal a change in a song's structure*, such as going from a verse to a chorus, arriving at a bridge, or signaling an instrumental interlude (if only for four bars). This change helps keep the listener oriented as to where the song is at any given moment and inspires the performer(s) to assess what kind of energy they may want to bring to a new section. It also forces the accompanist to look for clues in the melody, harmony, or text to create textures that go beyond their habitual way of playing...I've noticed that church audiences are without fail very sensitive to changes in dynamics, versus a restaurant or outdoor festival setting. My experience has shown me that when I repeat textures within a song, for example, every time the chorus occurs I return to a particular texture, the energy intensifies, and the audience stays more engaged.

Mind you, none of this would be possible if the accompanist uses the standard “piano/ vocal score” which is what is typically available through most publishing outlets. Not only are the chords far too small and less likely to be accurate than a vocal leadsheet, but more importantly this type of score dictates that the pianist double the melody throughout, and provides very few changes in texture—neither of which are popular with solo vocalists. And because so many pages are involved (I've seen up to nine pages for a straightforward pop tune) the accompanist's attention is naturally dominated by maneuvering through the pages rather than actually listening to the person they're accompanying. Changes in form become be a major source of stress and invariably avoided.

The Pre-Talk Solo Piece

Generally, the function of the piece immediately before the talk is to set-up the mood, while the piece that follows the talk amplifies the speaker's theme. The service that I've been describing used the theme, “What Our Emotions Are Telling Us.” When I researched the various possible pieces I could perform solo, I thought that this theme was sufficiently open to afford a somewhat ambiguous piece. After all, I reasoned that our emotions are rather complex and rarely one simple strain...

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About a decade ago I made a rather elaborate arrangement of a beautiful ballad by Kurt Nurock* for my jazz quintet. An evocative solo piano interlude emerged and I thought that its elusive quality could help the congregants appreciate the richness of their emotions.

When the Assistant Minister delivered the sacred reading just before my solo piece was scheduled to be done, he did so with a clear and very forward-moving tone. I felt like my intended piece was on a collision course with his reading, and so I had about 15 seconds to select a different piece that would support the energy that he created. I pulled out my arrangement of "If It's Magic" by Stevie Wonder and played the moment he finished speaking...

Normally, I play the verse portion of this song as a rubato (out-of-time) ballad and the chorus section as a fast jazz waltz. Instead, I put the verse in a clear gospel ballad feel and kept the chorus that way but intensified it rhythmically (especially in the bass). When I returned to repeat the form, I made the verse much quieter than the first verse (for greater contrast) and the chorus much bigger than the previous chorus (for dramatic effect). Although I had never played "If It's Magic" in this fashion before, my efforts were rewarded with a standing ovation!

The Post-Talk Solo Piece

The song that I selected for the post-talk was in fact played, though not quite as I had originally envisioned it. I had been performing Bobby McFerrin's arrangement of "Moondance" for many years, and I believe that it spoke to the theme of the week—"What Our Emotions Are Telling Us"—with Van Morrison's wonderfully rich painting of our emotions. Several weeks earlier the Senior Minister, the Song Leader, and I had a meeting about our music program where the minister introduced an interesting concept. She called it "spiritualizing a secular song" and that meant taking a well-known pop song and changing just a few words to make it applicable to a church setting. She told me about several instances of how using the power of familiarity, combined with the unexpected twist of lyrics, can have a riveting affect on a congregation. I explained how I was familiar with the blurring between the sacred and secular through my reading and arranging of various Sufi poets, such as Rumi, Hafiz, and Kabir.

During the minister's talk that Sunday morning I received a clear message that I should employ this technique of adaptation to my performance of "Moondance." And so, during the talk I took note of how I could "spiritualize" this pop classic. What follows below are the original lyrics with the small number of changes I made to achieve this effect. [note: my changes appear in italicized capital letters and occur right after the original text].

* "Lost In Loving You" from the Kurt Nurock/Theo Bleckmann CD (Traumton Records 2412)

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VERSE I

Well it's a marvelous night for a Moondance,
with the stars up above your (*MY*) eyes.
A fantabulous night to make romance (*FIND SPIRIT*),
'neath the cover of October skies.

VERSE II

The leaves on the trees are a falling,
to make the sound of the breezes that blow.
And I'm tryin' to please to the callin',
of your (*MY*) heart-strings that play soft and low.

PRE-CHORUS

And all the night's magic,
seems whisper and hush.
And all the soft, soft moonlight seems to shine,
in your (*MY*) blush.

CHORUS

Can I just have one more Moondance with you my love (*GOD*).
Can I just have one more Moondance with you my love (*GOD*).

Once again, I had never performed this song in this manner before, but my efforts were rewarded with not only a second standing ovation, but also with the comment from the Senior Minister to the congregation, "I definitely want a recording of *that!*"