My name is Matthew Thompson and I’d like to welcome you to this session on Hymn Playing.
The objective in this session is to better understand practice techniques and how to apply those techniques when playing a hymn. The material that will be covered is geared towards organists who have never played the organ, or those aren’t yet confident with their hymn playing.
The goal as organists in hymn playing is ultimately and always to invite the spirit in worship. We do this by how we communicate the hymn texts and tunes through our playing (especially by legato playing and phrasing). As organists, if we reflect the phrasing of the text in our playing, it is more likely that the singers might understand the meaning of the text.
As they appear in our hymnbook, most hymns are vocal music, and must be modified for best results at the organ. Today we will briefly look at phrasing and score preparation and then focus the remainder of our time on legato playing, developing independence in voices, and repeated notes. Fair warning, there is a lot to starting out as a beginning organist. Don’t feel discouraged or overwhelmed. It can take a lot of repetition of these concepts and a lot of practice and applying them before they really start to make sense and give you the results you want.
In most cases when playing a 4 part hymn the two top voices in the treble clef staff are soprano and alto (top to bottom). The tenor and bass voices appear in the bass clef staff (top to bottom). In organ playing typically you will play the soprano and alto voices in the right hand and the tenor voice in your left hand (with both right and left hands played on the Great keyboard or manual (which is the bottom keyboard if you have a 2 keyboard organ) and the bass voice is played by your feet on the pedal keyboard. You want to avoid playing the bass part in your left hand because it can make it more difficult to play the hymn legato.
A phrase is a complete thought or musical sentence or idea. Hearing a verse of poetry with natural phrasing helps us better understand the meaning of words. The same is true in hymn phrasing. ► If we look at this example of Nearer, My God, to Thee we can see some phrasing in the first verse. Nearer, my God, to thee, is the first phrase. Notice the solid vertical line to show completion of the phrase. Nearer to thee! is the next. There is no vertical solid line but it is obviously implied by the quarter note rest on beat 4. The next phrase spans across 4 measures. “E’en though it be a cross That raiseth me” is the entire next phrase. Because it is broken up over several measures and barlines we can put a slur marking between the words cross and That to show that the phrase continues. ►
So you can use these 2 markings: 1) the first which is a solid vertical line to show end of phrase and therefore a lift in your playing and 2) the second a slur marking showing a connection between words to maintain a natural text phrase. These markings and other markings that you can use in your music to help you in your preparation of playing hymns can be found in your packet on pg 10.
Score preparation is essentially how you mark your music so that you can apply proper hymn playing technique easier. You end up writing lots of visual cues and reminders in your music especially when starting out so that you can remember all the things you should do when playing a hymn correctly. It can be tedious and time consuming at first but I highly encourage you to do it because the more that you do the more that the techniques you are trying to learn will be incorporated into your playing. ▶ Please turn to pg. 12 in the packet as we will use this as example to discuss the different items involved in score preparation. ▶
With score preparation we start with text by underlining keywords for textual meaning.

Look at b in your music.
We then add phrase markings as shown in the measure labeled g. We saw this example previously where we used a slur marking to connect words in a phrase.
In this example, the person marking the score has decided to tie the 3 F’s in the Alto voice together rather than repeat them to smooth out the texture. I will come back and talk about repeated notes more in just a bit.
In this example you can see some fingering (1 and 3) written above the 2nd beat quarter notes for the right hand. Also a circle which represents a pedal marking of heel below the C which because it is below and not above would mean left heel. Again these pedal markings are explained in pg. 10 of your packet.
In example d you can see they wrote in stops to use for piston 1 and piston 2. Don’t worry if you don’t understand what all this means. Registration is a whole another topic but for now just know that organists often write what stops they are using in their music and what pistons they are assigned to. They often abbreviate stop names and use different forms of shorthand notation to save space.
In this final example we see a couple of markings at the end of the verses of the hymn. The first one tells the organist to take off the Principal 4 foot stop on the Great keyboard (manual) once they lift their hands off the keyboards and before they start playing the verse 2. The second marking tells the organist to press Piston 2 after they take their hands off the keyboards and before they start verse 3.
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LISTENING SKILLS

1. Perfect Legato
2. Precise Releases
3. Independence of Line

As they appear in our hymnbook, most hymns are vocal music, and must be modified for best Because of the sustained nature of organ tone and the absence of a sustaining pedal, we begin organ playing by listening to what we play in a slightly different way than at the piano. These three listening skills are fundamental to good sacred/classical organ playing. 1) Perfect Legato - while at the piano this is achieved largely through using the sustaining pedal, at the organ we must use specialized manual and pedal techniques to achieve smooth and connected playing from note to note. We will discuss some of these techniques in a few moments. 2) Precise Releases - Because the volume level throughout an organ tone is steady, one must create just the right period of silence between repeated notes to distinguish them from one another yet not sound choppy. [Play soprano part of 194 “There is a Green Hill Far Away with breaks too small, too large, then just right.] Paying attention to the timing of the releases creates a natural flow to each line and prevents a choppy effect. 3) Independence of line. Much organ music, including hymns, consists of several layers of musical lines. When a break between repeated notes or phrases occurs in one line, it must not be allowed to cause a break in another line where there should be a legato connection. [Play all four parts of 187 “God Love Us, So He Sent His Son,” with breaks in all four parts whenever the soprano has a repeated-note break.] Each line must flow independent of the others – one of the most important keys to excellent organ playing.
A lot of time could be spent on repeated notes. I will only give brief attention to them during this session but that is not because they are not important. They are actually one of the most important concepts to learn to be a great hymn player. The basic rule is the you shorten all repeated notes within one single voice by half the value of the note. In the example shown the soprano voice has 3 g's in a succession in measure 1. We never tie repeated notes in the soprano part so you see that a comma has been placed between each of these notes to show that they are repeated. In fact, in this hymn in the first measure all voices (SATB) are repeated notes. This is not very common but it does happen. So in this case you see some ties and some dashed ties have been added. The ties that have been added in the alto and bass parts are to smooth those voices out in a legato fashion. The dashed ties shown in the alto and tenor voices between beats 2 and 3 of this first measure are optional. You may decide to tie those voices or you may not.
As you saw in the previous example the way we mark repeated notes is by using a comma as illustrated on pg. 10 of your packet. This comma is placed in between repeated notes in each voice. If this is a new concept for you, you will want to mark every repeated note in every voice and practice playing the repeated notes by shortening their value by half. It becomes a lot more complicated when you are doing this in every voice simultaneously (ie SATB). Please refer to pg. 10 of your packet which discusses the combinations in which you can practice this technique by using the 15 or 7 step method.
If you are really wanting to master this technique and hymn playing in general which I strongly suggest that you do, I would highly recommend the following resource: Hymn Studies for Organists by Parley Belnap. In this book it breaks down all the voice combinations of a single hymn in small exercises with repeated notes notated through the use of rests and includes fingering and pedaling. The pedal voice is also written out in a separate stave which is helpful for people trying to break the habit of playing the bass voice in their left hand. It uses an additive approach by slowing combining 1 and 2 and 3 and finally all four voices together. Essentially, it guides you through the 7 step or 15 step processes. If you spend the time even on a few of the hymns in this book you will quickly begin to naturally be able to recognize and apply the repeated note technique.
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There are only six fingering techniques used commonly in legato-style organ playing.

1. Direct
2. Redistribution of the Inner Part
3. Finger Crossing
4. Finger Glissando
5. Finger Substitution
6. Thumb Glissando

PACKET pg. 28 - The Six Legato Fingering Techniques For Organ
Direct fingering is no different at the organ than it is at the piano. It is the most efficient of all keyboard fingerings.
Redistribution requires some adjustment in music reading, but it is simply another form of direct fingering. In this example we are reassigning the alto to be played in the left hand instead of the right.
Finger crossing at the organ can involve any finger crossing over or under another. Organists use crossing in many more ways than do pianists.
Finger glissando is very easy to execute, but for some reason we tend to overlook it in our fingering schemes.
Finger substitution is quite inefficient, but we rely on it too heavily when we play the organ. When we run out of fingers, we substitute in order to free up another finger. Instead, we should make more strategic use of redistribution, crossing, and finger glissando in our fingering plans.
Thumb glissando, although rarely needed in regular hymn playing, is extremely useful in the hymn preludes that we commonly use. It is the most “quirky” of all organ fingering techniques, but is worth the effort in learning to use it!
In spite of all this detailed info be not overwhelmed! If you are called as organist before you can play three hymns, prelude, and postlude to your usual standard of excellence, I firmly believe that the Lord is pleased with your best efforts. Try this plan: Use as much time as you can devote to your calling to prepare for upcoming organist responsibilities. Certainly the Lord is pleased with your best efforts. However, devote at least a small block of time each practice session to learning one hymn or organ piece in polish mode employing all the proper playing techniques. It may take you months to master it, but once you do, play it for a church service and then start another one. Before long you will be learning hymns and organ music to a high level much faster, and eventually your sight-reading skills will begin to emerge at the organ!

Here are a few ideas for shortcuts to get you by while you are learning.

- Play the soprano line only
- Soprano line in octaves
- Soprano and one other line (alto, tenor, or bass)
- All four voices on the Great
- All four voices on the Great with the bass coupler
- Simplified three or four-part version of the hymn
For simplified three- or four-part versions of hymns these are some good resources.

- **The New LDS Organist**

- **Easy Organ Hymn Settings**

- **Manual-Only Hymns for Organ**