

DISTILLING THE HYMN

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There are occasions when it is appropriate to insert an improvised or pre-composed organ interlude, lasting even just a few seconds; for example as a fanfare, hymn extension or to cover some part of the liturgy.

A hymn tune is a logical starting point for such an interlude as not only can it provide a link with what has just been sung, but also a source of thematic material and a general template; creativity doesn't necessarily involve re-inventing the wheel! Unlike a much longer prelude, there is not the same level of challenge in terms of sustaining and developing a coherent musical discourse and listener interest. In fact, the process is rather more one of telescoping material in concentrated form in a very short space of time, which is a discipline in itself. Part of the art lies in identifying appropriate thematic material from a given hymn. Using the whole melody, for example in decorated form, as in a chorale prelude, is not an option for a very short prelude. One therefore needs to choose salient melodic and rhythmic elements, which would normally be at, or very close to the start of the hymn tune. For example in (Ex. 1) *Fanfare on 'St Fulbert'*, the whole fanfare is built on just one part of the opening phrase and modified through rhythmic diminution (via the faster tempo) and augmentation.

OPENING PHRASE OF HYMN FANFARE

The score is written for piano in G major (one sharp) and 2/2 time. It is divided into three sections:

- Opening Phrase of Hymn:** Measures 1-4. Labeled 'Motif (a)'. Tempo is marked $\text{♩} = \text{c. } 96$. The melody is a half-note sequence: G4-A4-B4-C5, with a descending bass line: G3-F2-E2-D2.
- Fanfare:** Measures 5-8. Labeled 'Motif (a) in diminution'. Tempo is faster. The melody is a quarter-note sequence: G4-A4-B4-C5, with a descending bass line: G3-F2-E2-D2. Dynamics include *f*.
- Motif (a) in augmentation:** Measures 9-12. Labeled 'Motif (a) in augmentation'. Tempo is slower. The melody is a half-note sequence: G4-A4-B4-C5, with a descending bass line: G3-F2-E2-D2. Dynamics include *ff*. The final two measures (11-12) feature a *Ped.* (pedal) section with *sfz* (sforzando) dynamics, showing sustained chords in both hands.

Using an existing hymn means that we also can have the harmony provided, the variation on the original being in terms of the texture and again diminution and augmentation of the rhythm. For example, in this prelude on 'Ellacombe' (Ex. 2).

OPENING PHRASE OF HYMN

Musical score for the opening phrase of the hymn 'Ellacombe'. The score is in 4/4 time and features two motifs. Motif (a) is the first four measures, and Motif (b) is the next four measures. The melody is in the right hand, and the bass line is in the left hand.

PRELUDE

Musical score for the prelude on 'All for Jesus'. The score is in 4/4 time and features two motifs. Motif (a) is the first four measures, and Motif (b) in augmented rhythm is the next four measures. The melody is in the right hand, and the bass line is in the left hand. A pedal point is indicated at the end of the piece.

A melody can also appear in transposed and slightly modified form as in the prelude on 'All for Jesus' (Ex.3 - overleaf). The harmony is rather more developed than in the previous two examples but demonstrates the possibility of using a fixed bass line; this creates a very useful anchor and orientation point, but also a genuine artistic device as it creates an agreeable degree of harmonic tension which is propelled forward towards a point of resolution. Also evident is the use of thirds and sixths between the moving parts. Not only does this create a warm texture but goes a long way to smoothing harsh dissonances that could otherwise occur between moving parts and a fixed bass. This hymn tune is built virtually entirely on crotchet movement and has not the obvious rhythmic motivic material found in many other hymn melodies. Yet, the four-square and rather insistent character of that opening bar creates its own opportunities through appropriate treatment. (In the original hymn, Stainer does this by the use of rich harmonies and overall harmonic structure.)

(Ex. 3 'All for Jesus')

OPENING PHRASE OF HYMN

Motif (a)

etc.

PRELUDE

Motif (a)

(a) transposed

Ped.

(a) modified

6

One of the most enduring and effective forms of thematic development is the fugue and its ancestors such as the polyphonic *ricercar*. Taken at its stripped down level it can function as a three-stage imitative opening moving to a cadence, for example in *(Ex. 4) 'Southwell' (overleaf)*. Fugal openings starting from the bass upwards are the easiest to devise as one is effectively harmonising melody rather than bass or inner parts. Choose short subjects as these are far easier to memorise and manage than longer subjects.

So far we have utilised harmony derived from the original hymn. However, it is useful to replace this with one's own harmony, or be alert to melodic phrases where the melodic shape lends itself to alternative harmonisations, or indeed just by a single chord or bass note. In the latter case, there is less cerebral bandwidth taken up with managing harmonic changes, releasing more that can be devoted to developing motivic and textural elements. One such example is that of *(Ex. 5) 'Woodlands' (overleaf)* where individual motifs and sub-motifs can be redeployed in the variation, albeit in different parts of the texture and with some rhythmic alteration.

OPENING PHRASE OF HYMN (Ex. 4 Southwell)

Motif (a)

5

OPENING PHRASE OF HYMN

(Ex. 5 Woodlands)

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

5

FANFARE

(a)

(b)

(d)

(b) Ped.

So do explore the many possibilities of the miniature hymn-based prelude. Not only can this provide much appropriate material within the liturgy, and without having to start with a totally blank canvas; it is also an excellent way of honing skills in the development of material and overall concision of expression. An augmented version of this article with recordings will appear in October on: www.johnrileyorganist.com 'Publications and Resources'.