

NPM Rapid City Chapter Fall Meeting - September 20, 2025

Keyboard Basics - Workshop Notes

Importance of Music in Liturgy / Guiding Documents -

The Music Documents provides a compilation of *Music In Catholic Worship* (MCW) and *Liturgical Music Today* (LMT), which are the benchmark documents in providing guiding principles to music ministers. In the preface of this publication, noted liturgist and music minister Elaine Rendler notes, “MCW was drafted by the music advisory board of the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy and was approved for use in the Roman Catholic church in the United States in 1972. It is the official document of our hierarchy on the subject of music in worship. LMT (1982) was issued ten years later as a companion document. Using MCW as a springboard, LMT reaffirms the principles of musical liturgy set forth in MCW and applies these principles to other liturgical celebrations such as the sacraments, Liturgy of the Hours and funerals.”

“Among the many signs and symbols used by the Church to celebrate its faith, music is of preeminent importance.” (MCW, 23)

Rendler adds, “To serve as a music minister in the Catholic church is a privilege as well as a serious responsibility. It is a privilege because the gift of music is not given to everyone, and it is a responsibility because musical leadership must foster the “full, conscious and active participation” of the assembly.”

“Music should assist the assembled believers to express and share the gift of faith that is within them and to nourish and strengthen their interior commitment of faith ... The quality of joy and enthusiasm which music adds to community worship cannot be gained in any other way ... Music can also unveil a dimension of meaning and feeling, a communication of ideas and intuitions which words alone cannot yield.” (MCW, 23-24)

“Good celebrations foster and nourish faith. Poor celebrations may weaken and destroy it.” (MCW, 6)

To this point from the MCW, Rendler notes, “Wrong notes and bad tempos on the part of the music leaders can also contribute to the destruction of life-giving liturgical celebrations. The importance of developing musical skills cannot be overstated. One is usually asked to serve in music ministry because of musical ability, not because of liturgical knowledge; but musical skills must go hand in hand with liturgical principles in music ministry. Both can be learned and developed. No list of liturgical principles can help a weak musician strengthen musical skills; it can only inspire her or him to recognize the need for improvement. On the other hand, musical craftsmanship alone does not make a music minister ... MCW addresses the challenge to be musical, liturgical, and pastoral in our music.”

Recommended texts for further study:

The Music Documents (Music in Catholic Worship & Liturgical Music Today) – Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy (USCCB)

The Mystery We Celebrate, the Song We Sing: A Theology of Liturgical Music – Sr. Kathleen Harmon

The Ministry of Music – Sr. Kathleen Harmon

Role of the Accompanist – a leader and a follower

- Congregational hymns – YOU set the tempo (not the presider, nor the congregation)
 - Use a ‘conversational’ tempo – don’t drag, so that people need to take a breath in the middle of a phrase, and don’t speed (if people are struggling to keep up, they will stop singing)
- Psalms / Gospel Acclamations – you FOLLOW the lead of the cantor.
- If accompanying a choir with a director – you FOLLOW the director.

Volume Control –

- For congregational hymns and Mass parts – use a full sound that lifts and surrounds the congregation. The average parishioner is less inclined to ‘sing out’ if they can hear themselves much more than the accompaniment.
- For the cantor – play at a volume that supports but does not overtake their voice.

Introductions / Verse Endings / Closings –

- After the song leader announced the hymn, pause for 3-5 seconds (allowing congregation time to locate the song in their hymnal), then play either the first or final phrase of the song as an intro, using the tempo you intend to use, then rest a beat before starting.
- At the end of each verse, add a one beat rest before beginning the next verse, unless the accompaniment is written in a way that:
 - The verse ending adds some beats or measures of instrumental music only (ex. *Be Not Afraid; Hosea*), or
 - The verse begins partway through a measure (ex. *Ashes; We Walk By Faith*)
- On your final verse, ritard on the final measure or two, to indicate the song is ending. This is especially important if you are not playing every verse of the hymn.

Use of ‘Filler’ Music (Offertory, Communion)

- Preferences vary by priest, as some want music played up to the washing of hands (Offertory), or through clearing the altar (after Communion).
- Keep a good ‘visual’ on the activity taking place during these times, so you can determine which option to pursue:
 - If time allows, you can lead the congregation in the next verse of the hymn.
 - If you’ve already gone through all the verses, here are additional options to consider:
 - End the hymn, then softly replay the refrain.
 - Invest in a book of Interludes, which include many well-known hymns. It’s a powerful and innovative way to incorporate beauty into the reflective period of the Mass. Interludes are written in a way that allows for varied length of play, for repeats, etc.
 - Highly skilled accompanists can improvise an interlude to the hymn, if they choose.

Support to the Cantor (adapting to their strengths / weaknesses) –

- While noted above that the accompanist follows the cantor’s lead in psalms/gospel acclamations, the skill level of your cantor will dictate the level of support needed.

- Skilled cantors require minimal support. If they are having difficulty with any part of the psalm, they will typically call it out and ask if you can lend a feeder note (on top of the accompaniment) to provide guidance, if needed.
- Beginner, or less-skilled cantors require more guidance. You need to listen to where they may be struggling with either notes or a rhythm in the verses, then step up and play their notes to keep them on track.

Sensitivity to Hymn Text, Purpose of Hymn, Creating Contrast –

- With Scripture as the basis of most hymns, there is a broad and powerful range of emotions/moods in the text that you can, in part, help to convey in your accompaniment.
- Songs filled with messages of praise or joy – play brightly and honor the dynamics and syncopation in the score (ex. *Canticle of the Sun; Lead Me, Lord*).
- Songs of calm, peace, reflection or sorrow – employ a softer touch (ex. *Jesus, Remember Me; Were You There?; Holy Spirit; Loving & Forgiving; On Eagles' Wings*) Nothing kills the mood of a reflective hymn more than if it is played like a march!
- For organists, moods can best be reflected in your choice of stops (ex. Lighter - flutes, strings; heavier - brass, reeds). Establishing presets in your organ's memory banks allows for easy transition within verses of a hymn.
- Balancing contrast without succumbing to personal keyboarding style – this can be a delicate tightrope walk for beginner and skilled accompanists alike. Remember that you are leading the congregation in sung prayer and not giving a recital to showcase your techniques.
 - Take a common hymn, like *Faith of Our Fathers; The Church's One Foundation; Crown Him With Many Crowns* – If all 4 verses are played identically, does that enhance or detract from our effort to build a 'connection' between the hymn text to the congregation's experience? What can you do to create contrast?
 - Play hymn as written vs1.
 - In vs 2 and 3, alternate between some light arpeggiation in left hand, and play portion of verse up one octave in right hand.
 - In final verse, incorporate some lower octaves in left hand, or modulate accompaniment to a higher key.

Miscellaneous -

- If you have a substitute priest, visit with him prior to Mass to advise what is customary at your services (Mass parts used, etc.), so he is not surprised or caught off guard.
- Preludes and postludes offer an accompanist the opportunity to 'spread your wings' a bit in showcasing abilities. It is imperative, however, to be mindful of the congregation, especially before Mass, as many enjoy/appreciate some time in quiet meditation. You can focus on more meditative music at this time. After Mass ends, wait about 1 minute after the final hymn before beginning your postlude, as a courtesy to those who pray the Hail Mary immediately after Mass. Barging in with a strong musical selection can detract from their focus in the prayer.
- Accompanying for soloists at weddings or funerals – it is wise to visit with the soloist ahead of time, to learn his or her vocal range, so you can ensure your arrangement of their solo selection is suitable to their range. Make time to rehearse with the soloist, to familiarize yourself with their preferred tempo and phrasing.