

# KEYBOARD TECHNIQUES



by Cheryl Seppala



## ARRANGING

If we were to ask ten of today's finest theatre organists to arrange a particular song, we would undoubtedly be privileged to hear ten different, distinctive, beautiful arrangements. Each arrangement would express that organist's unique style and interpretation. We would surely enjoy them all and be amazed how one melody could provide the basis for so many varied arrangements. But how often do we, as students, go beyond this level of pleasurable listening and attempt to analyze exactly what techniques the arranger used? It may seem presumptuous for us to dissect the selection the organist has spent so many hours assembling, but it is through such careful analysis that we may learn to arrange for ourselves. Our goal should not be to duplicate note by note, but to recognize and reproduce a pleasing technique, rhythm, harmonic progression, style, or registration. Then we can apply it to our own selections.

It is my sincere hope that in this series of articles, we have touched upon many of the areas of harmony, rhythms, and styles commonly used in theatre organ arrangements. Perhaps you have not mastered and applied all of these ideas to your music, but at least you will recognize them when listening to others.

So let us agree that careful listening and "stealing" ideas from the pros will give you a great start in learning to arrange. And don't be ashamed to copy — the pros even "borrow" ideas from each other!

But if you want your arrangement to be truly your own, let's lay some groundwork. We must first determine which overall "feel" we want this piece to have. Will we arrange it as a syrupy ballad, a rousing opener, give it a Latin or contemporary feel, a big band sound, etc. Since most of us do our best on ballads, let's choose now to pursue that angle.

Phrasing is always very important, but especially so on a ballad. First play through the selection with single-note melody and a sustained accompaniment. Carefully observe and mark the phrase endings. We know many popular songs have eight-measure phrases.

By marking the phrase endings, we not only know where to musically "breathe," but also where to change registrations or styles. Next, make sure the given chords are pleasing to your ears. If not, dress them up or down to taste. Third, give serious consideration to the type of rhythms you feel appropriate for this selection. Try every combination you have studied, then select the most desirable two or three. Don't get in the sustained chord and 4-beat pedal rut! Fourth, experiment with different styles. Does this passage lend itself to open harmony?, do you want to build the sound with block chords?, or is a single-note

melody prettier and more effective? This is YOUR ARRANGEMENT — you must decide!

Finally, after all this is worked out, you still have the most important task ahead — selecting registrations that best capture the mood and fit the chosen technique of each phrase. A good rule of thumb is to change your registration and/or style at least every eight measures. This way, neither you nor the audience will be bored.

But wait, we still aren't finished! For a professional-sounding arrangement, try adding a pretty introduction (even if it is only a series of chords taken from the piece) and a dramatic ending (you never want your listeners to think you are anxious to be finished!)

After following all these steps, you will have YOUR unique arrangement. It may not sound like George Wright did it, but it will bring you great satisfaction to know you can start with a simple melody and chord symbol and create MUSIC.

As I conclude this series of articles, I wish to leave you with one very important idea, DO NOT BE AFRAID TO EXPERIMENT! Playing the organ is a relaxing, rewarding hobby. You can increase that pleasure tenfold by trying every new idea you come across.

I feel compelled to conclude with one word every organ teacher utters many times a day, and every student hates to hear. Unfortunately, it is the only way to improve — PRACTICE! □

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