

FDLC Webinar Series: The Art of Celebrating The Art of Liturgical Music

June 4, 2025 • Steve Janco and Dolores Martinez

Maximizing and Deepening Assembly Participation

The Accompanist/Ensemble Leads Assembly Song.

The primary role of the organist, other instrumentalists, or instrumental ensemble is to lead and sustain the singing of the assembly and of the choir, cantor, and psalmist, without dominating or overpowering.

--Sing to the Lord, n. 41

- Be clear about who is being accompanied at any given time.
 - Assembly (including choir/ensemble)?
 - Assembly in alternation with choir/ensemble?
- Which instrument/s are most suitable for this piece?
- Use an effective introduction for each piece. (See below.)
- Breathe with the assembly. Lift slightly between major phrases.
- The **tempo** needs to be appropriate to the piece of music—and stay consistent throughout.
 - Sing through the piece yourself before determining the tempo. How should it feel?—
Robust or stately? Sober or joyful? Reflective or proclamatory?
 - Be true to the genre/style/culture when determining tempo.
 - A Renaissance melody like Geneva (Comfort, Comfort) should be played at a lively tempo, perhaps with a detached feel.
 - A gospel version of Amazing Grace would be slower, played in 9/8, rather than 3/4.
 - If people are unable to sing an entire phrase on one breath, the tempo usually is too slow.
 - Sound delays can cause tempo misperceptions. Accompanists must stay consistent!
 - Accompaniments with frequent harmonic shifts generally slow down the tempo of a piece, which sometimes is not helpful (some arrangements of Nettleton, A Mighty Fortress)

For strophic hymns, **do not ritard** at the end of interior stanzas. Hold the final chord. Lift and breathe and begin the next stanza *a tempo*.

- **Respect performance customs**, even when not notated. All accompanists must be consistent.
 - “Traditional” fermatas that may not be notated in a hymnal:
 - All Creatures/, How Great Thou Art, Now Thank We All Our God
 - Add to Holy God the ornaments usually sung by Roman Catholics
 - In-fi-nite thy vast domain...
 - Repeat the last section of each stanza. A deceptive cadence cues the repeat.

Articulation

- Does the keyboardist need to play every note of an SATB hymn arrangement, or of a psalm tone accompaniment?

Volume

- It should be clear to the assembly when they are expected to sing/enter.
- Use a lower volume (or simpler organ registration) for choir/cantor.

Version

- If using multiple hymnals/resources, or if downloading music files each week, it is most helpful to use *one version* or arrangement of a particular hymn or song consistently:
 - Text: I *Received/Receive* the Living God, Joyful Joyful We Adore *Thee/You*
 - Melody variations: What Child Is This, How Can I Keep from Singing

Which key (tune) to use?

- Most music resources notate music in assembly-friendly ranges.
- In many cases it is the tessitura (the section of the range in which most notes fall) that makes a piece feel “high.”

For this reason, many find Celtic Alleluia more comfortable in G, rather than A.
- Picking a very low key may leave out those who sing an octave lower.
- A slightly lower key for a piece with a high tessitura may be a compassionate alternative for early morning Mass goers.
- For hymn texts, consider using an alternative tune (familiar, in the same metrical structure) to allow people to engage the text in a different way.

Some variation in accompaniment can help keep a piece fresh and engaging.

- variations in registration, pedal notes, melody as solo, harmonic variation, “filling in” non-harmonic tones.
- This kind of variation is difficult to do with an ensemble playing the score. Consider the keyboard alone playing a stanza alone.
- Instruments needn’t play through the whole piece. Plan for variation ahead of time.

If a strophic hymn needs to be extended to cover a lengthy/slow procession:

- Play the tune or section thereof as an interlude before the final stanza.
- Play the tune or a section after the last stanza, then repeat the last stanza if needed.

If a refrain/verse song needs to be extended:

- Play an instrumental verse before and/or after the last verse/refrain. After that, you might repeat the last verse.
- If the piece chosen is way too short (at communion, during a longer-than-usual procession), repeat the verses from the beginning.

Varying the Accompaniment when Playing Multiple Stanzas

- Add non-harmonic tones / Omit passing tones.
- Play the melody or a section thereof in octaves.

- Play the melody and base line.
- Start a stanza/phrase in unison, then add harmony.
- After beginning a stanza, drop out and let the community sing *a capella*.
- Play a stanza without pedal notes. / Play part of a stanza using a pedal tone.
- Use a free or alternative accompaniment on the last stanza.
- Make a subtle but purposeful change in accompaniment (an interior deceptive cadence.)
- Don't vary the keyboard accompaniment if the choir is singing (or instruments are playing a particular arrangement.
- Transpose the last stanza.
- Have an instrument add a descant or obligato part.
- Use a descending (chromatic) bass line and adjust harmony as you go. s.
- Use the Paul Manz kick. Play the downbeat melody-only, then add harmony on beat 2.

Introductions

The introduction does more than indicate which piece is being sung. It also sets a clear tempo, gives the assembly a "feel" for the piece, creates a mood, serves as an invitation to sing, and sets up the assembly for a confident entrance.

- For hymns and songs, clearly indicate the tune/melody. Always play the opening phrase. Play what is helpful.
- Clearly establish the tempo that will be used throughout the piece.
- The introduction generally should employ the same volume/registration as stanza 1.
- Do not ritard at the end of the introduction, as that changes the tempo!
 - The last note/chord should be held a bit longer and then followed by a clear lift, unless a harmonic resolution follows. Lifting cues the assembly to take a breath.
 - Avoid ongoing rolling or strumming chords at the end of an introduction, as this does not indicate when the assembly should breathe and begin.
- An introduction must be long enough to allow folks to pick up a music resource and find the correct page/number before the singing begins.
- If the music is new to the assembly, a more complete introduction is usually helpful.
- Using a consistent introduction for a particular piece is helpful to the assembly.
- Do not ritard at the end of interior stanzas and refrains. Hold and lift if needed.
- Do not ritard at the conclusion of the Holy Holy and Memorial acclamation, as the prayer continues afterwards. Ritard at the end of the Amen.
- In some pieces, a slight ritard leading from verse to assembly refrain may be necessary.
 - Imagine singing with the assembly to figure out what is most helpful.

Options for Introductions

Strophic Hymns

- Play the entire tune especially if a four-line hymn, a new hymn, or if the piece needs to be extended to cover the ritual action.
- Play the first and last phrases (except when the fourth phrase is the same)

- var.: Line out the first phrase in octaves or with a solo instrument/stop.
- If the first and fourth phrases are the same (i.e. if in AABA form), play the third and fourth phrase for the introduction.
- Do not play as an introduction the same phrase twice!

Responsorial psalms and refrain/verse songs and hymns

- As a rule, play the entire refrain. If the refrain is very long, perhaps first and last phrases.
- If a refrain has an A/A form, perhaps play just the last half.

Ritual Music

- An Alleluia introduction should be long enough to allow the assembly to stand and shuffling noises to subside before the singing begins.
- Entrances to familiar pieces of ritual music should be as brief as possible.
- Eucharistic acclamations are not separate pieces of music, but the assembly's sung participation in one prayer of thanksgiving. Introductions should clearly indicate which musical setting is being sung and at what tempo, but should be as brief as possible.

The Ministry of the Cantor

- The ministry of the assembly is primary. The assembly not dependent on the cantor.

Expect that the assembly will sing!

- The accompanist/ensemble sets the tempo and leads assembly singing.
- The cantor may need to support the assembly when singing new music.
- The cantor sings in alternation with the assembly (responsorial psalm and refrain/verse songs)
- The cantor does not need to be visible (nor sing into the microphone) when the assembly is singing familiar music. The assembly should hear one another singing, not the cantor's voice.
- The cantor should be at the cantor stand only when necessary.

The assembly does not need a gestural cue when singing familiar hymns and acclamations.

- Carry the hymnal, binder, or psalm book to the ambo with care, as it is a ritual book.
- Be a good model for the rest of the assembly. Participate. Engage.
- Don't sing into the microphone when the assembly is singing.
- Breathe with the assembly. Gestures must ANTICIPATE assembly entrances.
- Serving as cantor is not a "diva moment." You are at the service of the assembly.
- The text is primary. Interpret the text so that the assembly "gets" the message.
- It is harder for people not to sing when you look them in the eye.
- Be prepared. Check tempo, transitions, introductions with accompanist beforehand.
- The hymnal or choir binder contains ritual music. Rest it on your lap, not the floor!