Note from the Author: *This article assumes the organist knows general common knowledge about the setup of the organ console, its mechanics, and use-cases for various types of organ hymn playing. This article also assumes that the organist is comfortable playing hymns in the standardized way: perfect legato (or trying-to-be perfect legato).*

There are various reasons why a church organist might use creative hymn playing techniques. The more important question is: what are they? And why should anyone care? Over the course of this article, I plan on addressing this question by diving into and analyzing each creative hymn playing technique and its use-cases.

Manual Only

As it can be inferred from the title (unless you're new to the organ and do not know that a manual on the organ is what pianists call a keyboard), this technique is about playing only on the manuals. That means no pedals (which I'm sure makes every pianist learning the organ very happy). Manual only technique is where all four voices in the hymn are played by two hands on a single manual–typically only on the Great (or the bottom keyboard for our Chapel Organs).

There are a few things that an organist must consider before implementing this creative hymn playing technique–the first being 'perfect legato'. Perfect legato, exactly as it sounds, is the action of playing a hymn while isolating all voices independently from one another so that there is an unbroken chain of notes as though they are being sung (but that is a topic outside of the scope of this article). The second being the registration being used: the registration can make or break the execution of this playing technique because the pedal is simply not used, and cannot provide that lower, steady, tone. The registration that should be used when utilizing the manual only playing technique is to keep the minimum requirement of an 8' principal stop and a 4' principal or flute stop. For more weight (but not a direct substitute for pedals), the utilization of a 16' stop can satisfy that need for more low-end sound. The utilization of a 16' stop should only be if the texture of the registration is thin, or you're in a large room.

The third thing to consider with the manual only playing technique is when to use it. With this, there are various opportunities to use it during our church hymn-playing each week. They include: as part of or for an entire introduction of a hymn, for any verse of a hymn in which a lighter sound is desired, or on any verse of a prelude and/or postlude. This also benefits the congregation by providing a lighter, contrasting verse (or verse in more common terms), and can be especially effective in more meditative hymns where it is more comparable to a prayer. The benefit to the organist is that this feels the most 'like the piano' which seems like a silly phrase considering this is an entirely different instrument, but I digress.

Overall, the manual only playing technique is best for: providing a lighter, contrasting timbre to the hymn, makes it 'easier' to play because of the lack of pedals for the organist, and can be a fun way to spice-up familiar hymns.

Tenor Solo

The tenor solo, or the action of soloing out the tenor on the organ can either be incredibly powerful, or surprise the congregation enough that they stop singing entirely (which makes this creative hymn playing technique the most risky in terms of not guaranteeing that the congregation will continue to sing as expected.) In this playing technique, the left hand plays the tenor on a separate manual (typically on the Swell), while the right hand continues playing the hymn as-written for the soprano and alto voices on another manual.

The difficulty in the execution of this playing technique is that the left hand, playing the tenor line, is played on one manual (the Swell), and the right hand is playing the alto and soprano lines on the other manual (the Great). Effectively, you are splitting your hands between two manuals, which not only is a difficult thing to do, but it does make you feel like you're a real-deal organist, which is a nice thing. While your hands are tied up playing the split keyboard arrangement, your feet continue to play the bass line as normal.

You're probably wondering at this point, how do I even try to make this sound good, but without overpowering the Soprano line / melody? It depends. The most common thing is to have the tenor line on the Swell so there's more access to strong, punchy, Reed family stops (Oboe, Trompette, Bassoon) that can be more easily heard than what is going on in the melody and harmony lines. Personally, I find the sound of a tenor line an octave higher than written sounds too harsh, and is too much of a contrast to the melody that you will likely lose 75% of your singers in the congregation because 'something is different'.

It is also best to use the tenor solo playing technique when the tenor solo is particularly interesting (not all the same note for half the hymn–looking at you 'Upon the Cross of Calvary'). Hymns where this could be implemented would be like 'Israel, Israel God is Calling', or, 'Sweet Hour of Prayer'. They have very melodic tenor lines that are beautiful when highlighted by a medium-pitch reed (such as an Oboe stop with the Swell expression pedal opened, or a Trompette if you want some gravity to it so it peeks out past the soprano line just a tad).

When should a tenor solo be used? It should be a middle verse of a congregational hymn, after the melody has been well established. It could also be used for a partial or entire verse of a congregational hymn, when the tenor line is interesting (as mentioned prior), or on any verse of a prelude or a postlude. The latter being my preference for this playing technique.

Overall, the tenor solo playing technique is beneficial by continuing to introduce variety in hymn playing, can provide an emphasis on the text of a particular verse or phrase in a hymn to the congregation, as well as freeing the organist from 'printed score paralysis', where they feel they can only play what's written. If that's you, that's totally okay – you probably will find the remainder of my article quite drab and not interesting if that's the case, although I encourage you to continue reading on.

Pedal Point / Passing Tones

The pedal point (although not as cool as BYU's Vocal Point) is where an organist utilizes the pedal to build anticipation within a hymn by sustaining (or holding down the note for an extended period) a bass note while harmonies are changing around it. It sounds out of place, but that's the point. It creates contrast in the best way – it signals to the congregation that you're doing this on purpose and there's likely a reason why.

More often than not, playing a pedal point is most effective on a tonic (first degree of the scale of the key the hymn is in), or on a dominant (fifth degree of the scale of the key the hymn is in). The dominant option is the most common, and is the favorite of the author. It builds a dissonance and contrast to the harmonies in the hymn that is engaging, and prepares the congregation to 'receive' the meaning of the upcoming verses. It's comparable to pointing out that something important is coming. It also adds variety, a feeling of anticipation or excitement (as aforementioned), and is very useful for introductions and singing of congregational hymns. Although it can be used for preludes and postludes, this is less common.

Passing tones, not that the tones have passed on, but that you're moving frequently in the pedals, is a common technique used by the organists at Temple Square and for General Conference. Instead of holding a single note as mentioned for pedal point, the organist moves smoothly between pedal notes to connect harmonies, create forward motion, and help enrich the hymn with new harmonies and note combinations to add further meaning. This technique adds flow and liveliness to a hymn, such as 'Come, Ye Children of the Lord', and can subtly energize slower hymns or signal that something fresh is happening in the accompaniment.

Interludes

Have you been to a long feature-film, musical, or an event where it would be way too long to endure without some sort of break during the event? That's what an interlude is for. It is the saving grace of long hymns (I know you were already thinking of 'I Believe in Christ', and there's a reason for that, but that is outside of the scope of this article). They offer the congregation a brief rest, add musical variety, and help emphasize or prepare the next verse's text (or provides the organist time to build the registration of the organ to better match the text for the coming verse).

Something that all organists must do to ensure that an interlude is done properly and effectively is to have them begin on the final chord / note of the preceding verse and end with the hymn's usual cadence–either resolving or repeating the last phrase–to clearly signal the congregation to prepare to rejoin in singing. Otherwise, you'll lose them, and then what was the point of an interlude except to get them rested to not sing because they don't know when their break is over? It is like dimming the lights at the end of an intermission. It tells everyone to come back and get back to what you were doing – singing.

With interludes, they must be communicated and made known to the bishopric, music director, as well as the congregation to ensure that they know that it's coming, and that there's no awkwardness (because it definitely will happen if you don't do this step). Commonly, this is communicated prior to the meeting, and is announced when they announce the hymn that is to be sung. Your congregation (and your music director) will thank you.

Reharmonizations (Free Accompaniments)

I know you thought what I first thought when I read the title of this creative hymn playing technique. No, these are not typically 'free' like the title may imply (though your congregation gets the upgrade for free!). They are 'free' in the sense that they are not limited to the original harmonies / as written in the hymnals.

Their better name, reharmonizations, or hymbellishments, add variety and expression of our beloved hymns by altering the standard hymn harmonies. Organists can use published options such as those by Matt Thompson (hymnharmonizations.com) or Mike Carson (carsonhymns.com), both of whom offer excellent alternate accompaniments. Another option, the truly 'free' option is to create your own reharmonizations to match the text, mood, and flow of each verse of a hymn you're wanting to 'spice-up'. I myself have a handful that I've written that I use during sacrament meetings, stake conferences, and other church events. They take time to write, but they reflect how you interact with the hymn, which is what makes writing your own so powerful.

Anyway, back to reharmonizations. When implemented, they usually replace the normal hymn that you play (if you purchase one from Matt or Mike) since they provide each verse written for organ, as well as a final 'ta-da' reharmonized verse at the end (where the congregation should only sing in unison). If you choose to go this route, please notify the bishopric that you're doing it, and to have them announce that you're doing it–similarly to when you use interludes–so that it is not a shock to them or the congregation. That is a recipe for disaster if you do not communicate this. If it's just a slightly different version without reharmonizing any of the four part harmony, then you should be all-clear to not have to announce you're using one.

The best part about the paid harmonizations by Matt Thompson or Mike Carson is that they typically provide a tabernacle-choir-like introduction to the hymn (especially for Matt's arrangements). I can attest that they definitely excite the congregation and when a congregation is excited to sing, it's almost magic. While less common for the paid versions of reharmonizations, my arrangements that I've concocted typically include an interlude that matches the intro to give a 'familiar' feel as to when the interlude ends and the final verse begins. This also means I have more time before the last verse to do a dramatic build for a jubilant finish to the hymn (especially for closing hymns).

A Word of Encouragement and of Caution

The use of these creative hymn playing techniques can completely transform you and your congregations experience with hymns on the organ for the better. Understanding them and implementing them properly not only helps the congregation appreciate the hymns more but also makes playing so much more enjoyable to the organist: a joy that can be felt in the way the hymn is performed. In my experience as an organist, these are very welcome and loved by nearly all that have heard them, and definitely can help a congregation of timid singers turn into confident ones.

Now, for the word of caution. The best approach is to use them sparingly; meaning ideally once per meeting for the congregational hymns. Overuse can diminish the impact that these techniques have. For lack of better example at the time of writing this article: it's like adding a mild jalapeno to salsa. Not necessary, but it can bring a burst of flavor and warmth that completely changes the experience for the better. Adding more than one can cause a lack of appreciation for the variety or you lose the other flavors with it. The other thing to consider is to ensure that your bishopric is okay and on the same page for these creative hymn playing techniques. Not all will be a fan of their use. Luckily, for me, I've found that each time I've used them they always get good feedback, and that the hymn 'became more meaningful than it was before'. That's the whole point. Of course, if you feel that you shouldn't do a certain technique for a certain hymn, then don't do it. All of these should be planned that if the feeling isn't right, you don't do it.

Concluding Thoughts

Ultimately, creative hymn playing is not about changing hymns, but about listening more carefully–to the text, to the congregation, and to the moment. These techniques are tools, not requirements, and they work best when used with restraint and intention. Trying even one small change can deepen both the organist's engagement and the congregation's singing. When creativity serves the hymn rather than competing with it, the result is not distraction, but devotion. With time, listening, and a willingness to experiment thoughtfully, these techniques can become a natural extension of faithful hymn playing. The invitation, then, is simply to listen closely and choose one moment where a hymn might be allowed to speak a little more fully.