

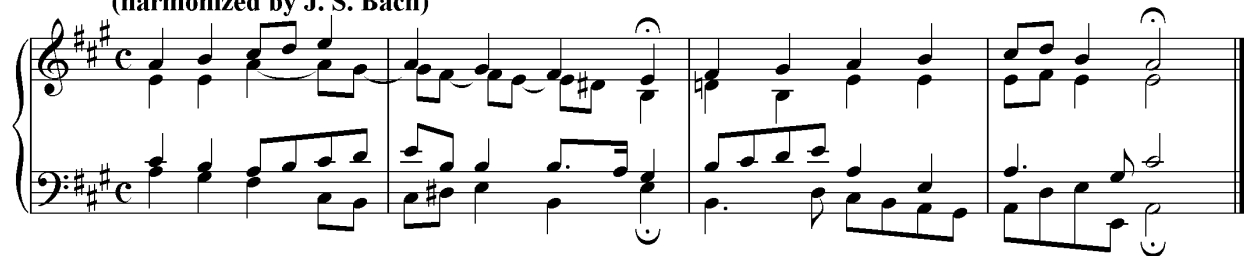
Hymn Reading 101

by Anne Sullivan

We harpists are often called upon to play hymns for church services or weddings. Sometimes it is enough to just play the chords as they are written on the music, but other times we are asked to be creative and come up with an “instant arrangement,” perhaps something we can play while the organ accompanies the congregation. While there are many creative possibilities, one of the simplest is to play one of the harmony lines (the tenor line is often nice) with two hands in octaves in a fairly high register so it floats over the singing like a lovely descant. What an easy way to wow a crowd!

And it IS easy – if you know how to read hymn music. If you’d like a quick refresher or a couple of handy tips, read on. I’ve also included four bars from Bach’s harmonization of “Gott des Himmels und der Erden” here as an example for your reference.

Gott des Himmels und der Erden
(harmonized by J. S. Bach)



The image shows a musical score for the hymn "Gott des Himmels und der Erden" by J.S. Bach. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and common time (C). It consists of four staves of music. The top staff is the treble clef, and the bottom staff is the bass clef. The music is written in a four-part vocal style, with stems pointing up or down to indicate the voice part. The first two staves are the soprano and alto parts, and the last two staves are the tenor and bass parts. The music is a simple harmonic setting of the hymn tune.

Most hymns are written in treble and bass clefs using four-part vocal style. This means that the four voice parts – soprano, alto, tenor and bass - are written out in a way that the singers for each part can follow their line. Remember that while we harpists tend to look vertically at the chords formed by the four voices, singers will be looking horizontally at the melodic succession of notes. The soprano voice is the highest part, usually sung by women or boys, and is written on the treble staff with the note stems all pointing up. This is an important feature of four-part vocal writing. The usual conventions for stemming notes up or down don’t apply to this style. Instead, the way the stems point indicates which notes belong to which voice part. The alto part, for lower women’s or boys’ voices, is written on the treble staff with the stems pointing down. The tenor part, or highest men’s voice, is written on the bass staff with the stems pointing up, and the lowest men’s part, the bass, is also on the bass staff with the stems pointing down. Simply follow the stems to follow a voice part.

Do be alert, however. Occasionally voices will cross or overlap, meaning that a voice that usually sings higher notes may for a note or two sing lower than another part. (For instance, the soprano may dip lower than the alto for a moment.) If that happens, the note your eye picks as the nearest possibility may actually belong to another voice part. Once again, the stems will point the way. In the Bach example above, in the third measure, the second beat, you can see the tenor voice cross with alto, that is sing higher than the alto, which generally sings higher than the tenor.

Accidentals are written very carefully in four-part writing. Do not assume that because the bass sang F#, the tenor will have F# in that measure also. An accidental that occurs in one voice part will be repeated as needed in any other voice part or in any other octave.

Sometimes hymns are written in an older chorale style which may include fermatas at the end of each phrase. While opinion varies on historically correct performance practice, generally the fermatas indicate a breathing point or a phrasing point, not a long hold such as one you might see at the end of a solo piece. Be prepared for different interpretations of those fermatas!

One last tip – none of these “rules” are iron-clad. They are conventions or traditions which composers, arrangers and publishers usually observe. There are two key words here. One is “usually” – sometimes the two treble clef parts and two bass parts will be stemmed together instead of separately if it seems convenient and clear. Or sometimes when the tenor part is high, you may see it join the alto and soprano parts on the treble staff. This brings us to the other key word – “observe.” Keep alert and follow closely what is written on the page and you can be an expert hymn-reader!

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