

The Organ as a Solo Instrument within Liturgy

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Across Europe the organ has functioned liturgically as a solo instrument in several ways. The most historically extended has probably been in the *alternatim* performance of plainchant, the voices falling silent on alternate verses or sections, leaving the organ free to embellish the chant in its own way. In Lutheran churches, congregational hymns may be prefaced by an improvised or pre-composed chorale prelude played on the organ. The precise liturgical, devotional or didactic function of this repertoire has varied through history, and it can be difficult to know for certain how some of these pieces might originally have been used. In Anglican worship since the Reformation, the strength of the English choral tradition – for which no musician can fail to be grateful! – has nevertheless tended to displace the organ as a solo instrument to the margins, supplying voluntaries to set mood and to cover beginnings and endings, movement and transitions.

However, for several years it has been possible to explore novel ways of using the organ in church services at the small parish church of St Mary's, Kensworth, in south Bedfordshire¹. We are lucky in being a church community which (without pursuing the new for its own sake) is willing to approach thoughtful innovation with an open mind. We are also fortunate in having an organ which, though on paper it might seem limited, belongs to a type which was the fruit of a century and more of fine craft experience: of learning what can be managed without. Furthermore, it has a responsive mechanical action, and is well-voiced².

Within conventional, Eucharistic liturgy, we have found that the solo organ can be used in a range of ways. Some of these are already very familiar, such as voluntaries to begin and end the service, and perhaps while people receive communion. These voluntaries are changed, however, when they take their place in a carefully-planned sequence of organ music throughout a service. Worshippers treat them with considerably more respect than is conventionally the case, and gain much more from hearing them.

At which other points, then, do organ solos work well? The Gradual is one, and indeed it is not unusual for the organ to accompany the gospel procession in large churches, especially of high or Anglo-catholic churchmanship. We have discovered that the organ works extremely well between readings of any kind, and not merely as a fanfare but as a spiritual resource, with seasonal or theological resonance, or to modulate mood and emotional intensity; this is the whole basis of our style of meditative worship now known as *Music & Word*³. With imagination, understanding and restraint this can be applied in various places in a Eucharist, not just in the conventional Ministry of the Word: for instance after the distribution, where a mood of receptiveness is often profound. Where a post-communion hymn moves on quickly towards the dismissal, a short, well-planned reading of a few verses teamed with a finely-chosen piece of organ music can offer space for individual prayer and reflection at the heart of what can otherwise be a busy service set within busy lives. There is scope for something of this kind at the start of the service too, where a sentence or greeting often establishes the liturgical direction. There is ample precedent: communion liturgies are themselves largely assemblages of biblical quotation and allusion (indeed this was a principal aim of Cranmer and other reformers). Music during communion itself is of course helpful, but the distribution, however well-managed, is a time of movement, not of stillness. And – again – whatever is played during communion is subtly coloured by what has been played before (for instance at the offertory) and what comes after; and when it is set within a series of other organ solos, people actually listen – as they often do to the communion motet in a choral Eucharist.

A particular innovation – or a re-use of a neglected tradition – is the practice of using organ and words 'alternatim' or alternately. Where this was used historically, the words were sung to plainchant, and the organ by itself supplied alternate verses or sections (with the words, naturally, missing, or at most

imagined by the worshippers). It is of course possible to revive or to continue this practice with sung chant or polyphony between the organ versets, but this runs the risk of being a liturgical reconstruction (fine in its proper place as research into the past) rather than genuine worship, directly useful to the church and its members. We have used alternatim performance in Music & Word, where stanzas of a poem, or verses or passages of scripture, are both separated and unified by being interspersed with linked sections of organ music. Often music has been chosen which was originally conceived as alternatim versets, such as a Magnificat, a plainchant hymn-setting, or a mass movement⁴. We have also used it in Eucharistic worship, for instance ‘re-purposing’ Kyrie settings (or hymns or antiphons from the Office) within penitential rites newly-written for particular seasons or occasions, or by opening up the Gloria in excelsis into its natural sections, with a verset in between to break up the headlong rush and supply an opportunity for brief reflection⁵. Naturally the mood of these musical interpolations is of the utmost importance; when well-judged, they infuse this section of the service with both space and unity, welding the whole introductory rite into a single, dynamic span moving from gathering through penitence to praise and thanksgiving.

We have avoided mixing these approaches with singing, except in the form of congregational hymns in Eucharistic services. These have always been chosen so as to resonate with the organ music, or readings, or both. In a service where each communicant engages in acts such as receiving communion, exchanging the peace and so forth, it is right to allow the people to join their voices with that of the organ, and not to do so might well feel very excluding and – almost worse – would be a wasted opportunity. But, probably because convention and precedent run in deeper tracks than we often realise, the involvement of a choir (and certainly a robed, processing one) seems automatically to relegate the organ to its customary role in the background. To begin with we quite expected to be met with comments like, ‘Very nice, but wouldn’t it be better with more singing?’ To our surprise this has never happened; perhaps because there *has* been singing, in the form of words prayerfully spoken – and from the organ.

Indeed we have been continually surprised by the warmth and enthusiasm with which these novel approaches have been received, both by musical aficionados and by people for whom music is not an end in itself. It really does seem that the organ has a neglected, under-estimated voice of its own which can sing forth to the benefit of all, when it is given the opportunity to step out of the wings.

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¹ See <https://www.parishlink.org.uk/church/kensworth-church/>

² No maker’s name or date survives; probably late 19th century. One manual, C to g3; Bourdon 16’ (lowest octave only), Stopped Diapason Bass/Treble, Open Diapason (from c), Dulciana (from c), Principal, Flute (from c). Pedal pulldowns, C to e1.

³ See <https://adrianlenthall.co.uk/music-and-word/>

⁴ Pieces used in this way have so far included Magnificats, hymns and antiphons, or sections from them, by Tallis, G. Cavazzoni, Frescobaldi, Corrette and Dupré. Chorale preludes with several verses, or chorale variations, can also be used alternatim, but their length can hamper the sense of unity. More broadly within Music & Word we use organ music from all periods and traditions with an appropriate seasonal, thematic or topical resonance. The possibilities are vast. A book containing overviews of several branches of this historical repertoire is *The Cambridge Companion to the Organ*, ed. N. Thistlethwaite and G. Webber, Cambridge, 1998.

⁵ We have used mass settings by Frescobaldi (from his *Fiori Musicali*) and Thomas Preston (*Early Tudor Organ Music II*, available as an authorised photocopy from Stainer and Bell), and organ mass movements, including Offertories and Elevation toccatas, by various composers; and we have found that the themes and moods of the chorale preludes of J.S. Bach’s *Clavierübung III* can be accommodated within the structure of the modern western Eucharist with a readiness which is perhaps surprising. On a suitable organ, the large repertoire of French classical liturgical organ music might also be ‘re-purposed’ in similar ways.