

The Hymnal: A Resource for Track Teaching

by Naomi Rowley

“Different strokes for different folks!” As organ instructors we frequently find ourselves applying this familiar adage in our teaching! We scramble to solve countless challenges ranging from very curious and highly motivated students to those with waning interest and little practice time. While the problems may vary, one method for their solution frequently is found in a customized, individualized teaching approach, one which primarily relies on finding the *right* solution at the *right* time for the *right* student! In other words, one which uses “different strokes for different folks!”.

While the results of this technique are very effective, often they are not achieved very efficiently. In fact, this problem-solving process can be laborious and time-consuming. However, one solution, which is both effective and efficient, utilizes teaching tracks based on topics relating to the hymnal. This idea can be customized to suit the student’s age, interest, and degree of advancement. A track may form an integral part of a student’s course of study or be a supplement to the regular lesson or even a temporary replacement for a standard lesson component. Track duration can vary from one or several lessons to an entire semester or year.

Topics relating to the hymnal are usually well received by students since hymn playing is ultimately a goal for many! However, the success of this particular approach does not rely solely on the students’ ability to play hymns directly from the hymnal. There are topics appropriate for even beginning organists. The following list of selected ideas represents only a few of the many possibilities, which can be individualized and customized to fit specific students and their particular situations.

1. **Registration of Hymns.** This topic has great flexibility. With a young or beginning organist, the teacher can play the hymns while the student pulls appropriate stops. A more advanced organist could be assigned specific hymns to register with the possible goal of playing one or two of them. Seasonal tracks for Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter are often very popular, as they can draw upon hymns familiar to the student.
2. **Hymn Introductions.** This topic has many options ranging from learning very simple introductions directly from the hymnal to composing new ones.
3. **Hymns as Technical Supplements.** Mastering organ technique is often a tedious process requiring great patience. The sagging spirits of a student, however, often can be revitalized when a technical exercise is matched with a hymn having similar technical demands.* For example, pedal exercises can suddenly seem relevant when one learns to play the pedal line of “All Creatures of Our God and King”, based on the tune LASST UNS ERFREUEN.
4. **Mastering Beginning Hymns.** After sufficient technical background has been acquired, a student may thrive on a seasonal module, which features mastery of a very easy hymn directly from the hymnal. For example, “Silent Night” could be mastered during the Advent/Christmas cycle. “Jesus, Remember Me” from the Taizé Community could be appropriate to learn during Lent.

When the need for a customized, individualized organ instruction is apparent, there are numerous possibilities for implementing it effectively and efficiently. Using the hymnal as a resource for track teaching represents one method, which can be used very successfully.

* This is one of the very effective teaching concepts featured in the *Modern Keyboard Technique* series edited by Wayne Leupold. In these publications, each technical challenge is presented first as an exercise; immediately thereafter, it appears extensively in one or more compositions that provide additional opportunities within a musical context for its mastering.

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