

Deanna Witkowski



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Making Hearts and Voices Sing: Creating Jazz Hymns

As an arranger, I love to make familiar tunes new, whether working with a Cole Porter tune or an 18th century hymn. In both cases, lyrics—regardless of whether or not the arrangement will include vocal—always play a part in my decision-making.

The text may influence where I choose to make harmonic changes, extend phrases or alter rhythms (whether within a melodic line or the overall feel). Working with text is a large part of why I enjoy arranging hymns.

Since much of my work involves integrating

jazz and communal religious liturgy, I'm always thinking about how to compose or arrange for group singing, which is much different than writing for a soloist. While a church congregation may vary in size from 20 to 2,000 people, whenever I work as a guest church music leader, I need to present music that invites group participation right away. Since hymns are the "standards" of church music, and thus provide an accessible way to invite group singing, jazz hymn arrangements have become an important part of my catalog.

In tandem with my 2017 trio recording, *Makes The Heart To Sing: Jazz Hymns* (Tilapia Records), I created a corresponding e-book of lead sheets and piano scores for each of the album's 14 hymn arrangements. The book was made as a response to church music directors who specifically asked how they could learn to play these arrangements themselves. Since many church musicians aren't necessarily jazz players, I created fully notated piano scores (with chord symbols) for each hymn. As of this writing, at least 100 churches around the country are using these arrangements in their services.

How do I approach creating these hymn arrangements? How are they different from straight instrumental arrangements (even if they're played instrumentally)? And how can they work when non-jazz musicians are singing—or, in some cases, playing—them? Here are a few points to consider when arranging a hymn.

KNOW THE ORIGINAL FIRST

Before arranging anything—be it a hymn or Great American Songbook tune—it's imperative to know the original melody, text(s) and form first. Here are a few characteristics specific to hymns, and ways to consider modifying them in your arrangements:

- **Meter/Text:** If you crack open the back of a hymnal, you'll see different indices: an index of common first lines of text; a tune name index with strange-looking words in all capitals; and a metrical index. This last index is extremely important, because it shows the number of lines of text and the number of syllables per line as the meter of the text itself (which is *not* the same as the meter of the music).

The text of "Amazing Grace" is a great example. Its meter is 86.86, which is known as "Common Meter," or "CM." Simply count the number of each syllable in each line, and you'll get the 8–6–8–6 meter. The familiar pentatonic tune that is usually sung with this text is called NEW BRITAIN, and will be listed—along with

many other tunes that have the same meter—under “CM” in the metrical index. If the theme to *Gilligan’s Island* were included in hymnals, it would be listed under “CM.” (Sing “Amazing Grace” to this tune and you’ll see that it works.) See Example 1.

Why is this important? If you love a particular hymn *text*, and want to create a hymn arrangement that sets that text, you’ll need to decide which hymn *tune* that you want to arrange. While some hymn tunes will work with different hymn texts, not all will work equally as well. Be sure to speak and sing the text to understand which syllables are stressed. This becomes important when you’re considering where to change the harmony, extend a phrase or add syncopation within the melody.

- **Harmony:** Hymns are often written in four-part harmony. While this facilitates congregational singing, many times it is simply the case that the sheet music you see in the hymnal is written for organ playing. You might see a chord inversion on every one-to-two beats—even though there may only be three-to-four chords in the entire tune. Consider opening up the harmonic rhythm: Look at the text and melody to decide where you want to “land” or what particular word you want to emphasize. In my arrangement of the Welsh hymn HYFRYDOL, which usually consists of F major and C dominant seventh chords, I use the F as a pedal before landing on—and extending—an E7#9 on bars 5–7 and 14–16. (See Example 2; hear the track online at deannajazz.bandcamp.com/track/hyfrydol-love-divine-all-loves-excelling.)

- **Form:** Most hymns are strophic: i.e., they have short, repeated verses that are often 16 bars in length. They may have an AABA structure, which is sometimes followed by a refrain. There are often very few places to breathe—or, at the very least, rests are not written in to visually see where to breathe. Consider extending a phrase by one-to-two bars. This simple idea gives the congregation a chance not only to breathe, but to experience a sense of resting inside of whatever harmony is being played or word is being sung. This is again the case in HYFRYDOL, where measures 5–7 and 14–16 extend the first and third four-measure bars to six bars.

- **Tempo:** There are usually standard tempos that are used with each particular hymn tune. There won’t be a metronome marking in the hymnal, so try to familiarize yourself with standard tempos before creating your arrangement. If your arrangement requires a change in tempo, be aware that this in and of itself is going to be something new to a singing congregation. Be sure to sing the text to make sure that your arrangement isn’t just workable for instrumentalists—you want the congregation to be able to sing with you.

In my arrangement of the hymn LASST UNS ERFREUEN (“All Creatures Of Our God

Example 1

Meter of text: 86. 86 (CM, or “Common Meter”)

A-maz-ing grace! How sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found;
was blind, but now I see.

Tune: Anonymous, 1829; Text: John Newton, 1779.

Example 2

Jazz waltz- loose feel
♩=150
arr. D. Witkowski

A F D \flat /F B Δ 7/F E7(#9)

Love di-vine... all loves ex-cel-ling.

7 G \flat A7(#11) E \flat A7(#11) D \flat A7(#11) G \flat ...

Joy of heav'n, to earth... come down!

11 E \flat 7(SUS) E \flat A7(#11) E \flat -7 E7(#9)

Fix in us... thy hum-ble dwell-ing.

17 G \flat A7(#11) E \flat A7(#11) D \flat A7(#11) C7(SUS) F(SUS) F

all thy faith-ful mer-cies crown.

Tune by Rowland H. Prichard, 1830; Text by Charles Wesley, 1747.
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And King”), I changed the tempo, the feel and the time signature (see Example 3; you can hear the track at deannajazz.bandcamp.com/track/lasst-uns-erfreuen-all-creatures-of-our-god-and-king). The original tune is usually in a triple meter (3/2), with one measure in 4/2, and is sung fairly quickly (half note equals 96). In my arrangement, the half note equals 66, and the meter becomes cut time.

EASY-TO-LEARN ALTERATIONS

Remember that the group you are leading will usually have sung a hymn many times in a certain way. This means that any alterations you make to rhythm or harmony need to be easily learned. Some congregations may only be seeing the words. Others may want to see every single syncopated rhythm you add because they are accustomed to reading everything that they sing.

RHYTHMIC CHANGES

If you want to change the rhythm of the melody, and especially if you add any syncopation, be as consistent as possible in where you place the syncopations. In my arrangement of “All Creatures” (Example 3), the syncopation on the “and” of beat 4 occurs in bars 1, 5, 13 and 17 (the first measure of each of these phrases). The dotted-quarter-plus-eighth-note rhythm that begins on beat 1 also occurs in measures 1, 5, 9, 13 and 17. By virtue of repetition, this gives the congregation many chances to internalize the new rhythm of the melody.

Changing the rhythmic accompaniment of a hymn is a great way to add forward movement to a tune. A hymn like FOUNDATION that consists solely of half notes and quarter notes and is in a duple rhythm can easily be overlaid with a reggae feel or a baião without needing to alter the rhythm of the melody. (See Example 4; hear the track at <https://deannajazz.bandcamp.com/track/foundation-how-firm-a-foundation>).

LEAD THE FLOCK

When you’re leading your arrangement, sing or play the entire first verse all the way through before inviting the congregation to sing. Or, teach the arrangement to the choir and have them sing the first verse. If you are extending phrases—as in HYFRYDOL—it can help to have a song leader visually show where one phrase ends and the next begins.

If you are the one playing your arrangement while a congregation sings, be sure to play any interludes between verses the same way each time. This gives the congregation confidence on subsequent verse re-entry. If an instrumental solo is part of the arrangement, have the last phrase state the melody clearly to cue the congregation as to where to enter for the next verse. Be sure to look at the congregation and not at your music or your instrument. You are the conductor.

If you only have one chance for a congregation to sing your material, send an audio file and a piano score or lead sheet to the music director in advance. That way, your arrangement can be introduced in advance of your visit.

Leading a community as they sing your hymn arrangement can be a refreshing, life-giving experience for both the congregation and yourself. Enjoy the experience. **DB**

Deanna Witkowski is a pianist, composer and vocalist based in New York City. Her 2017 trio album, *Makes The Heart To Sing: Jazz Hymns*, features 14 of her jazz hymn arrangements alongside a companion sheet-music book. Her catalog includes 80 sacred music originals and arrangements, including two jazz Masses. As a 2018 Sacatar Institute Fellow, Witkowski spent eight weeks in Itaparica, Bahia, Brazil this past spring doing research for her upcoming project, the *Nossa Senhora Suite*, which will merge Afro-Brazilian expressions of the Virgin Mary with new composition for jazz quartet, percussion and four vocalists. Visit Witkowski online at deannajazz.com.

Example 3

$\text{♩} = 66$
halftime pop feel
arr. D. Witkowski

All crea - tures of our God and King,
lift up your voic - es, let us sing: Al - le -
lu - ia, al - le - lu - ia! Bright
burn - ing sun with gold - en beams, pale
sil - ver moon that gen - tly gleams, Al - le -

Tune from *Auserlesenen Catholische Geistliche Kirchengesang* (1623)
Text by Francis of Assisi (1182-1226); tr. William H. Draper (1855-1933)
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Example 4

Baião
 $\text{♩} = 88$
arr. D. Witkowski

How firm a foun - da - tion, ye saints of the Lord, is
laid for your faith in God's ex - cel - lent word! What

Tune: American folk melody. Text: Author unknown.
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