

LESSON 1

OVERVIEW FOR A CHURCH MUSICIAN

It's important to remember that the church worship context is different to a concert performance. The objective is not to entertain the 'audience' (or ourselves), rather it is **to facilitate worship within the congregation and everything we do should be to that end.**

- **An attitude of service is essential.** Of course that doesn't mean we shouldn't be creative or interesting in what we play, but we need to constantly be asking **'Is what I'm doing helping the people to encounter God in worship?'**. If what you're doing is a distraction, then stop!
- **All musicians need to learn to listen to the overall sound.** As team players, we need to reason from the whole to the part, not the other way round.
 - That means continually asking yourself **whether what you're playing is contributing positively to the overall sound without getting in the way of what others are playing.**
 - Sometimes it may be appropriate to stop playing so as to let the other instruments have their space.
 - We also need to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and the overall dynamics of the meeting. It is not the worship leader's job to direct every detail.
- **Play with authority.** Even if you're only playing a couple of notes at a time, play with confidence.
 - Make sure that the **team is providing sufficient support to the congregation so that they're not uncomfortable.**
 - Work on being 'tight' so that all the instruments lock together to make a cohesive and solid sound with a steady tempo.
- **Think about the musical dynamics.**
 - Allow your song arrangements to build in intensity at appropriate points and pull back at other times.
 - Think through how each instrument and vocalist can contribute to the rise and fall of volume level and intensity, so you avoid the blandness of everything being at one level.
- **Practice!** Develop your skills and become a master of your instrument. Try also to rehearse regularly as a group, don't just rely on a few stressful minutes before the start of a church meeting to figure out your arrangements etc.

LESSON 2

DRUMS

Why have drums at all? What does a drummer do?

In a standard band set-up, the drummer has the **foundational role of setting the tempo and 'feel' of the song**. He or she provides the rhythmic backbone on which the whole arrangement hangs. This is especially true of rockier, up-tempo songs, but can still be vital in providing support to slower, gentler songs.

- **Often the dynamics at any given moment are primarily dictated by the drummer.**
- **As the foundational instrument, it is appropriate for the other musicians to take their cue from the drums in terms of tempo and dynamics – when the drums build, we all build and vice-versa!**

What qualities make a good worship drummer?

- First and foremost the ability **to set and maintain a solid tempo which is appropriate for the song**, without deviating from it.
- Also a developed sensitivity to appropriate dynamics at different times. Often in worship, a simple rhythm works more effectively than a busy one.
- Sensing where to build an arrangement by increasing the intensity then 'bring it down' in more reflective moments is an essential skill.
- It's also important to be conscious of how loud you are compared to the other musicians and congregation. Unfortunately the nature of church meeting room acoustics and the disposition of the congregation often means that you need to drum more quietly than you would ideally like to - so be sensitive!

Should the drummer or the worship leader start each song?

Sometimes if the worship leader is already playing round the chords on a guitar etc, they will naturally start a song, but usually we'd expect the drummer to set the tempo and click in the band (once he's been given the nod). This actually takes pressure off the worship leader at that point, and makes it easier for the whole group to start in a deliberate, tidy way. It becomes part of the drummer's job to make sure songs are at an appropriate pace.

Do I need to use a metronome?

Sometimes it can be very helpful to have a metronome or click which will not only help you keep steady, but also make sure that you start songs at the right tempo. If in your rehearsal you have established the appropriate tempo for a song, you can use a metronome or click to bring you in at that speed, even if you then turn it off for the rest of the song. This is made easier if you have in-ear monitoring so that the metronome sound isn't heard out front. But even just a flashing light may be enough to help you establish the tempo and avoid the distraction of a song that's rushing or dragging.

LESSON 3

BASS

What is the primary role of the bass player?

- **The bass working with the drums adds depth to the foundation.**
- When the bass and drums lock together, the result is **solid platform on which to build the rest of the song.**

So in practice what is the best approach?

- A good starting point for church bass players is to **hold the root note of each chord** in the song.
- **Try and be firm and lock it with the kick drum.**
- As a song intensity builds it will often be appropriate to play more rhythmically, but make sure that it's working with the kick drum, and try and stay with the root note, rather than arpeggiating and having too many passing notes. **'Less is more'** tends to be the best policy where bass is concerned, although there will be times when bass fills and embellishments will be appropriate.
- An even bass sound (from the guitar and amp) that has enough high frequency content to give clear definition to the notes is more useful than a very bassy and woolly sound.

What qualities make a good worship bass player?

- **A good sense of rhythm and the ability to play in time and lock with the drummer** (who is hopefully also solid rhythmically)!
- Also **Discipline to keep it simple most of the time** and not get too 'carried away'.
- A good working knowledge of chord structures in every key will be invaluable.

What about using different notes in the chord (inversions)?

It can be very effective to use inversions - e.g. playing a B or D when the chord is written as a G. This is sometimes written in the chord chart as an 'essential' part of the song arrangement, but there are other times when the bass player can use inversions even if they're not officially written. **It can give a real freshness and lift to the arrangement if used appropriately.** Just make sure that the keyboard player and anyone else who might be playing low notes uses the same inversions at the same time to avoid muddy clashes. The same goes for 'pedalling' where a bass note is held or repeated while the chords change on top.

LESSON 4

ACOUSTIC GUITAR

It's just strumming the chords isn't it?

- The acoustic guitar can carry a congregation without the need for other instruments at all, but in a group setting its main job will mostly be **to add movement and some 'body' or 'sparkle' to the sound**.
- Probably best to only have one acoustic guitar playing at a time, **and let the rhythm section do the hard work!** By which I mean that strumming lightly, cleanly and in time will be better than thrashing the strings which tends to give a very scratchy sound.
- Often if there's a band playing with you, it may be appropriate to strum just once or twice per bar, rather than feeling that you need to drive the rhythm. This gives more space for the other instruments to work in, and can help with dynamics so that you can build up to full strumming for certain sections of the song. For a lighter sound, it can be effective not to include the lowest couple of strings when you strum.
- Finger picking is often a great option for gentler songs because it gives movement and rhythm but in a very mellow way.

Am I in tune?

Good question! Few things are less pleasant to listen to than a guitar that's out of tune with itself or other instruments. Tuning is really important for guitarists and although it can be a distraction if you keep stopping to tune up during a worship time, there is a lot to be said for checking it regularly. An electronic tuner that you can plug into (if your guitar has an audio output socket), or hold near the guitar will generally be more accurate than trying to do it by ear, especially in a noisy environment.

Are capos good or bad?

- A capo is obviously useful for transposing so that you can play easy chords in a difficult key. But why not take the time to learn some of the trickier chords and don't rely on the capo to do the complex stuff!
- However a capo is an excellent tool if you want to actually change the sound of the guitar. By moving it up the neck you are effectively shortening the strings so that chords will sound different. This can be a great way of moving the guitar sound into a different register and out of the way of other instruments (such as the electric guitar) that might be occupying that octave. This can open up the sound and make it easier to hear each instrument working in its own space.

LESSON 5

ELECTRIC GUITAR

Is it necessary?

The electric guitar is **capable of creating a massive diversity of tones and parts**, and is consequently **very useful in bringing colour and interest to worship music**. It can work across a large spectrum – anywhere from crunchy power chords which will help give energy and ‘drive’ a rocky song, through to delicate effected tones which can add sparkle and texture to even a mellow song.

So do I find a sound I like, then start strumming the chords from the chart?

- That’s probably not the best approach. Just strumming chords with electric guitar tends to sound too thick (not to mention bland), and will likely obscure the acoustic guitar. Whatever type of song you’re working on, it’s usually best to **think in terms of ‘parts’**. Listen to the song and be thinking **whether a melodic phrase or riff might work over any of the sections**.
- Often a simple repeated phrase (using single notes rather than block chords) or arpeggio that can be continued as the chords change underneath is really effective – obviously it needs to avoid clashing with the chords or main melody.
- Think too about the **type of sound that’s appropriate for the song**. If it’s **energetic** and rocky, then an **overdriven sound** may be fine.
- If you are using power chords, often playing fifths and leaving out the third (e.g. the chord of E without the G# note) will be cleaner and more powerful than playing the full chord. If the **song is gentle and spacious, then a more jangly sound with delay or other effects may fit**.
- Be prepared to sit out altogether some of the time so that when the electric enters it has greater impact.

My amp sounds best LOUD, why don’t people seem to understand that?

- It’s true that many guitar amps do indeed sound good when they’re loud, and heavier guitar sounds seem designed to be loud and go limp if you turn them down too much. However, in a church worship context where you’re often in room with challenging acoustics and a less than ideal PA system, it will make life difficult for the PA operator, other musicians and congregation if the guitar amp is dominating.
- There are things that can help with the volume – **try facing the amp away from the congregation and towards you so that it’s louder for you than for them**. It might then be appropriate for the amp to be miked up so that PA operator can control the level out front. Some players even have the amp in another room and mike it up, but that only works if the guitarist has good monitoring to hear clearly what she’s playing. Another great tool is an attenuator which allows you to drive the amp ‘loud’ and get a pleasing, driven tone, but reduce the level coming from the cab. The lower you can have the level on stage, the easier it will be for the PA operator to fit you ‘in the mix’. If the stage volume is too loud, the PA guy (or gal) will be helpless!

LESSON 6

KEYBOARDS

What are the main issues for a keyboard player to be aware of when playing in a worship band?

- Firstly, there's the whole question of sounds – most modern keyboards can create hundreds of sounds of every imaginable type, but you need to be thinking about what will work in your band setting. A good starting point would often be an **acoustic piano sound** as it has a proven track record of fitting well with other instruments.
- Secondly, if you're used to playing piano by yourself you may be used to playing bass notes, chords, tune, embellishments all at the same time! **However with the band, you need to play less because much of that stuff is already being covered by the other instruments.** Avoid getting in the way of the bass player with your left hand, and if you are going that low, make sure you're playing the same notes as the bass guitar, preferably with the same rhythm so there are no muddy clashes.
- **Avoid playing the tune, as there are vocalists and a congregation already doing that and it can become 'melodic overkill'.** With extra embellishments in the right hand, try to confine them to the gaps between vocal lines, and leave some space for other instruments such as the electric guitar who may also be filling.

Can't I just use the written piano arrangements in the songbooks?

- Strange as it may sound, the scored songbook arrangements aren't really meant to be played! They have the tune at the top (useful for the vocalists but not a great idea for keyboard players as we've already said), then basic rhythm and chords which can give some useful clues about how the song should sound. However, they tend to be very limited and won't for example give different parts for first and second verses. That's a problem if you're trying to develop a sense of **dynamic progression** through the song.
- Also they take no account of adapting what you're playing to fit round the other musicians.
- A much more flexible approach is to work with the chords which give you the option of creating your own parts to fit the song, the current dynamic and the overall band sound.

Any tips for when I'm playing chords?

- **The piano is great for adding 'body' to the band sound by playing the chords.** A good starting point is often a simple rhythmic vamp in the middle octave. Try playing each chord once per beat (think verse of 'Hey Jude').
- Then add more notes to the chords and try using higher right hand and lower left hand in bigger sections such as choruses.

- Using chord extensions which are not necessarily on the chart or being played by the other musicians can add harmonic richness to the sound. E.g. try playing Em7 or even Em9 when you just see Em on the chart – this can make for a fuller, pleasing sound without clashing. Similarly, adding a '2' to most major chords (e.g. the note 'D' with a C major chord) will usually do no harm at all and just thicken the sound in a pleasing way.

Okay that's piano, what about the other 255 sounds on my keyboard?

- **Worship times often benefit from a warm pad or strings sound that can be layered behind** or instead of a piano sound to give a 'backdrop' to the song without adding lots of rhythm.
- Electric piano can make an mellower alternative to piano, and Hammond organ can make a rockier song 'fatter' without being too busy.
- Synth leads can be useful to add a featured melodic element; especially to intros and turnarounds.
- Other weird and wonderful synth noises may be appropriate to feature at particular moments but are usually best used sparingly.

LESSON 7

ORCHESTRAL INSTRUMENTS

How do you fit a violin, flute, trumpet or oboe etc into a band set-up?

- Featuring orchestral instruments at **appropriate moments** can add a great **dimension to the sound**. Often slower songs with spacious arrangements will give the most room for such instruments to shine. On the other hand, certain song styles do not usually lend themselves to these instruments. I can't think of many examples of an oboe being successfully used in a rock song! So be sensitive to when you're adding something special, and when it's just 'playing along' for the sake of it.
- **Avoid playing the tune if it's being sung – a harmony part around the melody usually works better** and we don't get 'melody overkill'.
- Also, expect to use the instrument only in certain sections of the song, e.g. verse 2 and the chorus, rather than all the way through, so that when it enters it has more impact.
- Featuring a solo instrument playing a melodic 'hook' in intros and turnarounds can be very effective.

Do I have to improvise?

No, but it's undoubtedly a useful skill to be able to improvise around the chords with a solo instrument and make up something good on the spot! If you're unsure of where to start, try picking one note from the current chord and play that, and move to a new note with each chord change. Then look at adding passing notes to make the part more melodic. Think about which register you're playing in. As a rule, the lower octave will be mellower and quieter than the higher octaves which tend to cut through more.

What about pre-written parts?

It's sometimes helpful to work out parts and score them beforehand. It is a bit more work, but by sitting down and working out what you're going to play and at what point, you will probably end up with something that makes more musical sense than random improvisation. This is especially true if there's more than one orchestral instrumentalist. You can work out parts that will definitely fit and not trample across one another.

Make sure that other instruments - particularly electric guitar and keyboards are not taking up all the space when a solo instrument is supposed to be featuring.

LESSON 8

VOCALS

How many vocalists?

- **Between two and four vocalists** (with microphones) is generally a workable number for a music group.
- If you have a **worship leader singing the tune**, it's great to have someone of the **opposite sex also singing the tune to add depth** (or height!) to the sound.
- The other one or two singers can **add harmonies**; one in the **alto range** roughly a third below the tune, and one in the **tenor range** roughly a sixth below.
- Having more singers on stage will make it harder to keep the sound tight and may present monitoring and PA problems.

What are the main priorities?

- It's a given that the worship leader will usually be a singer, and he or she needs to be **very clear with the main tune of each song to help the congregation**. That will often mean **avoiding ad-libs and 'extra bits'** until the song is well established and the congregation are confident.
- **The other vocalists play a supporting role; helping with the tune and bringing in harmonies at appropriate moments.**
- It's important that you remain engaged with the worship and help lead visually even when you're not singing on the microphone. Back away from the mike when your part isn't needed **but keep worshipping!**
- Tuning and phrasing are important so you need monitoring that will allow you to clearly hear yourself and the other singers.

Let's harmonize?

- Adding harmonies to the tune adds great dimension to the music, but think carefully about where to bring them in. Rather than singing harmonies all the way through, **consider adding them to emphasise particular lines or for the chorus** etc. As with the other instruments, **it's all about dynamics**.
- You'll need to take time out with the vocalists to work out the parts and practice singing them together tightly.
- Try and phrase things exactly together.

How do I get the best from the microphone?

- Most live vocal microphones like the ubiquitous SM-58 are designed to work very close to your mouth. It's fine to hold the mike or have it on a stand, but either way, you need to be within an inch of it when you sing. If it's more than a couple of inches away the level will drop enormously, and will make PA feedback much more likely.
- **The tone of the microphone also suffers if it's too far from your mouth**, so it's worth getting used to having it close.
- You may need to back off slightly for really loud notes that you sing.

How do I sound?

Whatever level you're at, it will always pay dividends to practice your singing just as you would any other instrument. **Learning good breathing technique and warming your voice up thoroughly before you sing** (especially early on a cold Sunday morning!) will be invaluable. There are masses of resources available to help you with vocal technique and warm-ups.

Bibliography: <http://www.worshipbandadvice.co.uk/>