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## **Komparácia štýlov sprievodu duchovných piesní v Spojených štátoch, vo Francúzsku, v Nemecku a na Slovensku**

### **A Comparison of Hymn Playing Styles from the United States, France, Germany and Slovakia**

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#### **Abstract**

Hymn playing styles can vary from country to country in addition to what is sung for Masses. This article will compare those styles and repertoire, making observations about not only the accompanying styles but also about the kind of repertoire sung.

**Keywords:** Hymns, Hymn Playing, Hymn Repertoire, Hymnals, Rhythm.

#### **Theological Implications**

The subject of hymn playing is a very wide topic and has been the subject of entire publications. In this paper my aim is to compare various traditions in different countries and common hymn playing practices in those countries. The point of these comparisons is to discuss if these traditions are effective or not effective, and the positive or negative aspects of common practices.

Perhaps a good starting point would be to talk about the ideal way to approach hymns, no matter the country. First, the approach to the playing of hymns must have a theological aspect. The study of the words of a hymn text are essential in determining how the verses of that hymn are to be played. When writing about the great American church musician and composer, Paul Manz, Grant Pick writes: „He prepares for each Sunday’s program with diligence. Manz estimates he knows “thousands and thousands” of hymns by heart, and yet before a service he will check over the day’s selections and think about how to interpret them. He will look at a hymn of praise and decide, for example, that the first stanza should be rendered passionately. For the second stanza, where the theology concerns supplication, he may decide to reduce the verve. For the third stanza, in which the words constitute a prayer, he may want to turn the

organ meditative. The last stanza could merit a dash of brightness (Pick, online)“.

What I have observed from country to country is that in general, practices regarding preparation of hymns, psalms etc., vary widely. There are musicians who spend a good deal of time in thought and preparation of the hymns, in contrast to those who come in and sight-read with little or no concern for what the hymn may speak about theologically, and haven't any concern regarding matters of phrasing, tempo, registration, and interpretation. These characteristic traits cannot be defined by country although it should be noted that the person in charge of choosing the hymns is often the music director or organist. Of course if the musician is not the one choosing the hymns and one does not receive the hymns until just before a Mass or service, then adequate preparation is not possible.

The theology of hymn playing then allows for varying styles of accompanying verses or not accompanying verses. The organ can serve a variety of roles. For example, the theology of hymn playing involves the organ functioning as leader on some verses, allows the assembly to take the role of leader and the organ serving as accompaniment to that, allows for an organ solo verse, or allows for the assembly to sing without accompaniment. Hence, the need for thinking through an interpretation is crucial for successful accompaniment of hymns, psalms, parts of the ordinarium, and chants, all of which require differing styles of playing and registrations. The usual Principal 8' and 4' (2, Mixture') on every verse is again not enough to do justice to what is required by the theology of the hymn, and interpretations vary widely between musicians, denominations churches and countries. Of course these techniques would apply to well know tunes, and for sure one has to use good judgement as to which techniques to use and when or when not to use a particular treatment. From my observations of various traditions, I wish to emphasize that there is not a right or wrong way to execute an interpretation, but what is wrong, is not to have an interpretation. I believe that having no interpretation is a common problem, and one that can be changed with even a little effort.

Let us now discuss specific countries.

## **France**

There is no national hymnal for French Catholic churches. I discussed this with my colleague Michael Matthes, Titular Organist at the Church of Saint-Germain-l-Auxerrois in Paris. He writes:

*„About the hymnal, we haven't any book like this in France (when in reference to a national hymnal). Some composers used old melodies from Germany but only the refrains. I learned from the Gotteslob book during my*

*studies in Köln but in France we have no book*“ (Matthes, correspondence in private archive).

Common practice in France is to sing antiphons, psalms, or Taize music, for example during the entrance procession and also in other places where the GIRM gives the option for one of the 4 choices of repertoire for those places. Improvisation continues to play a large role in the French liturgy, and for that matter throughout the organ world in France and is taught as part of the regular curriculum. The tradition of improvisation goes back throughout history to, for example, the „organ“ Masses, and has been in place for centuries. Later, compositions were written for parts of the Mass that had been improvised in the past, but the tradition of improvisation has remained strong over the centuries.

Prior to the singing of, for example, the entrance procession, the organ will play an improvisation of some kind, and depending on the church it can be extended. For example, in Notre Dame Cathedral, extended improvisations happened regularly before the destruction caused by the fire in 2019. It is indeed a grand affair to be part of and one that I experienced many times during my years as a student in Paris. Also numbers of verses are varied to match the length of the procession, the aim being to have enough verses to cover the time until the celebrant is in place and ready to begin the liturgy. Improvisation can also happen between verses, which then functions as an organ „solo“ verse (Mass at Notre-Dame Cathedral, 20.1.2019). Although using the microphone, this particular cantor, being minimally amplified, allowed the assembly to have their voice once they were secure.

The tempi chosen for this entrance antiphon for example, are appropriate for the mood of whatever is being sung. I note that tempi tend to be quicker than say in Slovakia, (where the tradition is to play much more slowly), and that the organ plays the role as leader and holding together the singing of large numbers of people. It is also rather amazing that the coordination between the front and back of the nave is nearly perfect. Regarding the theological styles I mentioned earlier, because of the size of the space, and the large numbers of people in attendance, the role of organ as leader is the most often used. While there are cantors in the front, their lighter voices suit cantoring well and they really do function as cantors and not as soloists. Rhythm can be a problem when a hymn turns into an operatic aria rendered by a soloist singing loudly into a microphone. In those cases, the assembly listens dutifully to the „beautiful voice“, when they should be participating.

Regarding written accompaniments in France, Matthes writes: „the accompaniments are not very good, written with many harmonic mistakes, so we realize our own accompaniments. Gregorian accompaniments by Potiron for example, are not often used“. So the harmonizations of melodies continues with the tradition of improvisation which remains so strong in France. Having had the fortune to study in France for many years, some of the most inspirational liturgies I have experienced were in Paris.

## Germany

Unlike France, in Germany, Austria, and Bolzano-Bressanone the „Gotteslob“ is the commonly used hymnal in Catholic churches. The present Gotteslob was published in 2013 (following the „Gotteslob“ which was published in 1975). In addition the hymnal is used in German speaking parishes in Luxembourg, and in Liège, Belgium. The hymnal has a wide variety of tunes, and one of the interesting features included are hymns that can be sung ecumenically, including hymns from the Evangelisches Gesangbuch which is the Protestant hymnal. There is an excellent website devoted to the hymnal (Gotteslob). On that website can be found many of the hymns organized by number, with really excellent video examples of the hymns being sung. Where there are no videos, the melody is played.

I corresponded with the well known German organist, Martin Welzel. He writes: *„Although there is a four-volume edition with written-out organ accompaniments for the entire „Gotteslob“ hymnal, the common practice in liturgy is that you harmonize the organ accompaniment on the spot from the hymnal (where you have only the melody, text, and psalm tones). This is part of the sacred music curriculum in German Musikhochschulen. To learn how to improvise all kinds of harmonizations, according to the proper style of the hymns, modal harmony, Gregorian chant accompaniment, psalms, and preludes, interludes, variations, partitas, chorale preludes...Which does not imply that each organist and church musician working in a Catholic Church in Germany or Austria is equally drawn or skilled to improvise extensively and harmonize everything from the single melodies in the „Gotteslob“ hymnal. However, it is the common standard in larger churches and cathedrals, like in Munich, Cologne, or Trier, to name just a few examples“.*

Two characteristics of the hymns and hymn playing in Germany I would mention, would be the excellent quality of the hymnody, and the well trained organists playing those hymns. Listening to the hymn playing in large spaces, it is the rhythmic accents and articulation that keep large numbers of people singing in time and together. The tempi are steady and well chosen for the number of singers, and the size of the space. A good example is from 2006 with the visit of Pope Benedict to Germany (Großer Gott, wir loben Dich!, Munich). The breathing spaces are large enough to enable a full breath which allows for better vocal support. Like in France, the singing of the hymn can be prefaced by an improvisation which can be short or longer dependent on the length of the procession. A good example of this is a video from Cologne Cathedral during Easter Sunday Mass, April 2019, where the organ improvisation is followed by the choir singing „Surrexit pastor bones“ of Palestrina, which is then followed by a thrilling hymn sung by the assembly, „Christ ist erstanden“ from the Gotteslob, 318. The organ playing is rock-solid rhythmically, the tempo well chosen for the massive structure and large number of congregants, and the third verse with reharmonizations is absolutely

convincing (Holy Mass on Easter Sunday from Cologne Cathedral, April 21, 2019).

It is apparent listening to these examples, that the state of church music in Germany is enviable. Both musicians and clergy are well trained, and the liturgies in these examples are absolutely inspiring. These examples should be held up as models for students learning the art of hymn playing, and also for those who are studying liturgy. One could write an entire thesis on the musical and liturgical traditions in both Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany, and hopefully this paper will encourage further research into hymn playing and the many rich traditions.

### **The United States**

The United States is a difficult subject to undertake because of the wide range of thinking and the independence of various dioceses. I will limit my conversation to organ playing of traditional hymnody. While there are some excellent examples of great churches and great hymn playing, unfortunately there are equal or larger numbers of terrible musical examples by untrained musicians or worse. There is no national Catholic hymnal to speak of, but there are a number of hymnals that a parish can choose from, some of a very high quality, and others not as much. For example, the 4th edition of *Worship* is an excellent hymnal, and offers a wide variety of hymns from many different sources.

While this whole subject of modern „popular“ repertoire is a topic for an entire paper, often that style is unsingable by the average assembly. The congregation generally listens and are entertained by a „group“ of singers and/or instrumentalists, who are more interested in performing than they are in inspiring participation by the assembly. However, maybe the worst situation is that the organ in many parishes has been replaced by a piano, often accompanying a „singer“ (or in some cases a choir) who is overly amplified. The assembly stands and listens to the „beautiful“ voice. Despite the fact that church documents are clear that the organ has „Pride of Place“, that instruction is often ignored (GIRM, no. 393).

While the cantor's/choir's role is very important, for example, in anything of a responsorial nature, that does not apply to hymns of a chorale-type, from the *Gotteslob* for example. A loud voice on a microphone does nothing to help the assembly sing and usually just gets in the way of maintaining a steady tempo. As Michael Connolly points out in his publication on the parish cantor, „*A well designed balanced organ played properly will lead more effectively than a cantor singing into a microphone. The cantor primarily provides visual leadership and should not, generally, use the microphone at all for hymns*“ (Connolly s.34).

On the positive side, there are more and more parishes hiring well trained musicians, and as a result, the execution of hymns is becoming similar to the

examples we heard from France and Germany. Here is an example from St. Ignatius Loyola in New York City (Mass at St. Ignatius Loyola, 7.11.2021). The singing of the assembly and playing of the tune „Lobe Denn Herren“ are admirable. Although the cantor in this video is quite unnecessary, he at least does not get in the way of the assembly’s role, nor the organ’s, and the voice is pleasant enough.

Another example also from St. Ignatius, is from October 31, 2021, but unfortunately in this example the cantor is perpetually behind, and is unnecessary in such a well known tune of Beethoven. The organist does a fine job of keeping everyone together and the assembly is following the organ, so only the cantor is dragging behind the beat. In this case Michael Connolly’s advice to refrain from using the microphone would have been well heeded (St Ignatius Loyola, Hymn to Joy). Another positive attribute of these examples from St. Ignatius Parish, is that the hymns and ordinarium are of a high quality, unlike many Catholic parishes in the USA. The organ is used in accordance with the church documents, which is a delight. And despite my misgivings about the cantor’s role, he does not make an operatic aria out of a hymn.

One more example of good hymn playing is from Our Lady of Refuge Parish, in Brooklyn, New York. The tune is „In Babilone“ being sung at a good tempo with a very fine choir and organist, and surely would be inspirational to any congregation singing. (There’s a Witness in God’s Mercy, Brooklyn, New York). So it could be said that in the places where a parish has hired a well trained musician, there are similarities to Germany and France in hymn playing, that being a steady tempo, rhythmic leadership and authority. It should also be pointed out that in contrast, the German examples are executed sans an amplified cantor on the chorale type hymns.

## **Slovakia**

There are many positive things to speak about regarding Slovakia. First, and maybe the most important thing is that Slovak people like to sing. When I have visited or played for liturgies, people sing with enthusiasm, the parts of the Ordinarium are tuneful, and usually well written and the singing of these parts from memory is particularly impressive. New composers of a very high level, such as Stanislav Surin, Vlado Kopec, Rastislav Adamko, and others are writing compositions that are very singable by the average assembly, without compromising quality. Mr. Kopec has completed and is waiting for the publisher to print his versions of the Graduale Romanum, and Graduale Simplex in Slovak, which will open up a whole new repertoire in accordance with the musical documents, giving priority first to the Graduale Romanum, then the Graduale Simplex, an appropriate psalm or anthiphon third, and last to hymnals such as the JKS in Slovakia. Slovakia is not alone in concentrating on the 4th option for places where the documents give first priority to the Graduale

Romanum for example, during the entrance procession. The USA also has this problem, although there are places that follow the instructions in the documents.

Perhaps the largest area for growth in Slovakia lies in the assembly singing of the JKS. I interviewed two Slovak organists and asked questions about tempo and rhythm, since I am not from Slovakia, and wanted to know the history in Slovakia and why a hymn may be sung in a way that is not following the printed notes in the hymnal. First, tempo is always subjective. So much depends on the size of a space and the harmonic rhythm of a hymn. Many moving notes in the 4 parts harmonizations are going to result in a necessarily slower tempo.

The well known Slovak organist, František Beer writes: *„I think that the tempo of singing has a big connection with the intensity of singing- in the past in Germany, England and also in Slovakia. They sang „from a full (open) throat“ and the songs were in a very high range. Over the last 50 years, people have become quite accustomed to singing, which results in the acceleration of the tempo. Singing at a slow tempo with 20 people opening their vocal folds to 10 percent would make no sense. But playing with 200 people singing in full voice, always brings some tempo limitations, because singers need some time to „lean“ into the tones“.*

Mr. Beer's point regarding an open throat is a good one, and one I have experienced both as a singer, and also from my churches in Seattle. I noticed that when I would let the assembly sing unaccompanied, the tempo did tend to slow in relation to what was done in an accompanied verse. I also believe it is true that the tempo of singing has become quicker than what may have been done in the 1930's. Where I disagree slightly is using historical models to decide these matters. For me, it is better to get a sense of the style of the hymn, and then interpret from a wider range of what is characteristic of that style or period, rather than from recordings which may or may not have been common performance practice at the time. One can see this in Tournemire's recording of Franck's A-Minor Chorale from 1930, which is played very quickly. That worked beautifully in that situation and with that organ, but I do not believe that the piece must be played that way just because Tournemire's recording (he was Franck's pupil) is about the closest link we have to what Franck may have desired. Another tradition comes from Guilmant, who played Franck's works for the composer, and who, along with Dupré, arrived at very different interpretations. I believe we need both traditions. Similarly, I believe that when for example in JKS 257, the tempo moves so slowly that everyone is gasping for air every two beats, then the chosen tempo is being sung too slowly. It comes down to the question, is the phrase the unit of musical expression, or is the note? For me the phrase must remain the unit of musical expression, so any tempo must be chosen with that in mind. Still, it is a subjective matter and as Mr. Beer pointed out, there are many variables. Here are two examples he cited (Matkina spoved, JKS 323, Biskupská vysviacka Rudolfa Baláža 19.03.1990, JKS 257).

However, accurate note values are not subjective. In the singing of the JKS hymns, I have heard note values outright changed, and sometimes so badly it is almost impossible to recognize what tune is being sung, or what the meter may be. Additionally, I often hear organists adding beats to bars for breathing, for example, making a 5/4 out of a 4/4 bar, by adding a quarter rest for a breath. The correct practice would be to make the 4th beat of a 4/4 bar a rest, and continue on in time so the rhythm remains steady. I heard one organist playing JKS 291. She was playing and also singing into a microphone with the congregation sitting passively and not singing because of the erratic rhythm. The ¾ meter was not possible to recognize, because 3 quarter notes became a quarter and two eighths, sometimes an eighth and two sixteenths, or whatever else she „felt“ at that moment, all in the name of being „expressive“. This rhythmic inaccuracy really is the worst kind of musical destruction, and one that should never be allowed.

I asked organists František Beer and Matus Kucbel, Titular Organist of the Church of the Transfiguration in Spania Dolina about this phenomenon, that I have never experienced anywhere else in the world. Mr. Beer wrote:

Probably the biggest problem in our country is that the non-rhythmic playing is explained as being „sensitive“ or „expressive“ and is often used as a defense by the priests. Usually, if an organist plays in rhythm, and holds that tempo, it is considered „hardness“ or even „lack of faith“ because he does not know how to feel those hymns „as he should“. Mr. Kucbel said the same as Mr. Beer and also added that often the clergy prefer to work with amateur, untrained musicians, rather than those who are well trained (for obvious reasons). He also said there is little motivation for untrained organists to want to improve because of the lack of well paid positions. Often then, someone who plays the piano, the harmonica, or the accordion can be recruited to play the organ for a church (F. Beer, M. Kucbel, correspondence from archive).

My only comment is that when there are musicians such as Zuzana Zahradnikova, Stanislav Surin, František Beer, Matus Kucbel, Vlado Kopec, and many others who are well trained, then those people need to be involved in the musical education of seminarians and clergy. Large groups of people at Holy Mass require a good leader at the organ and not one who flounders rhythmically, or who wallows in a sugary display, without the rhythm being respected. Still, it is a joy and very impressive to hear Slovak congregations sing with such enthusiasm when the rhythm is not destroyed.

## **Conclusion**

It is apparent that the styles of playing hymns have similarities in France, Germany, the USA and Slovakia, when the person playing the organ or singing has good training. The high quality of the German hymnal is one to be envied, the improvisatory skills of the French are unparalleled, the wide variety of hymnals in the USA and the Slovak reverence and enthusiasm, all are traits



one could point to as characteristic. The use of the cantor should be limited to that which is responsorial in nature, and that person should not be amplified when the assembly is singing. Further, steady rhythm and singing in phrases as one sees in Germany and France, and in the better parishes in the USA, should also be developed in Slovakia, without the destruction of rhythm, and the addition of fermatas whenever one wishes. Hopefully, with the number of fine organists I have mentioned, highly qualified individuals will be involved in the musical education of clergy and seminarians.

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