

[return to main page](#)

Miriam Duncan's Hymn Playing Lecture

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**Dear Colleagues:**

Frank Rippl, a fellow student of the late Mrs. Duncan, has obtained and kindly forwarded to me a transcript of a lecture-demonstration that she gave at Oberlin in 1992, with the exhortation to share as widely as possible. Aside from its thought-provoking and objective content, you will get a sense of this great teacher's learning, subtle circumspection, and devotion to her art.

Paul Emmons

PLAIN TALK ABOUT PLAIN HYMN PLAYING  
WORKSHOP ON HYMN PLAYING  
**THE HYMN SOCIETY IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA**  
**Oberlin College, July, 1992**

PRESENTATION BY MIRIAM CLAPP DUNCAN,  
Professor Emerita, Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin

**It's pretty early in the morning to be collect myself and be speaking of the things I want to talk to you about, and I just hope I can speak plainly enough to make my concerns clear to all of you at your level of accomplishment and experience. I know we're a diverse group, and I want to offer practical suggestions.**

**I welcome all of you-organists, conductors----yes, conductors; for when organists play hymns, they are conductors. Let me thank all of you for remaining in church work---poorly paid, well-paid or unpaid. You are important musicians, not sufficiently appreciated for your efforts. I would like to think you will leave Oberlin at the end of the week with renewed self confidence in your ability to lead a congregation in effective hymn-singing, with a heightened sense of responsibility and increased perception about how well you do what you are expected to do. Obviously that effectiveness doesn't always have a direct relationship to how much you get paid, nor, I'm afraid, does it always correspond to how many organ lessons you've had or how many degrees you have in music.**

**I'm not trying to put you down, so don't hasten to criticize your own playing, on the other hand, don't heap praise on yourself too quickly either. Listen to my observations about what I perceive to be the state of hymn playing today and later you will have a chance to tell me what you think. First let's talk about some basic things. You may never have thought of it, but the simple truth is that the shortage**

of organists is such that almost anything will be tolerated in organ playing, at least in some churches, in some situations. Take comfort in that fact if you want to. It's true. No matter how ineptly you play hymns, or for that matter, how fancifully you doctor them up, it will be tolerated, usually without comment.

The Englishman, G. K. Chesterton, who wrote some very serious books, some of which are also quite witty said, "A thing worth doing is worth doing badly." I don't think Chesterton was just trying to be funny, and I am not just trying to be funny. I have quoted this reversed maxim many, many times, usually to struggling but ambitious students. It puts the idea of "need" in perspective and gets at the problem of perfectionism every time. I know it contradicts the wisdom of all those well-meaning naggers in our lives---parents, teachers, guidance counselors-who are given to relying on such simplistic warnings. (They also are the ones who told us in high school that "you can do anything you want to if you only want to do it badly enough", and I've been trying ever since to reach a tenth. And I really wanted to do it too.)

Do I have to convince you that of course it's better to play the organ "badly" than not to play it at all? Perfectionism can be a paralyzing curse; but self satisfaction is intolerable. Humility is a virtue.

But you are here, which disproves self satisfaction on your part, but shows enough self confidence to try for more. I think it quite likely that here you may find the stimulation and the ability to do better what you do as a church organist. I know it's possible for all of us.

I've already said that as an organist you are a conductor, a leader of people who are dependent on you, whether there are 100 people in the congregation or a thousand. How important do you view yourself in your role as a hymn player? How important are hymns in the services in your church? Are they purely functional-to get the choir in and out, to get things rolling, to cover the taking of the collection, to give the minister time to collect his thoughts before the sermon, to let people know it's time to receive communion, to give the signal that it's time to go home and read the paper and eat? Though we could spend a lot of time doing it, I don't intend to discuss the meaning hymn singing ought to have and the place it presently has in Christian worship, but I suggest that lack of clarity of purpose in hymn singing may very well account for some of the faults in hymn playing that I hear and do want to discuss.

Let me quickly enumerate some other subjects I won't be talking about this morning, though they no doubt will come up in our other sessions: like registration, like how legato you should play hymns, whether an electropneumatic or a mechanical action organ is better for service playing, how to cope with a straight pedal board, what kind and how much articulation should be used, how to improvise hymn introductions or intonations or free harmonizations, whether you use both heels and toes or just toes, how to adapt guitar or piano accompaniments to the organ and other such important and interesting technical concerns of hymn players that will be and should be discussed this week. I want to focus on one basic concern so I'll call this "Plain Talk about Plain Hymn Playing", and here is my charge: CHURCH ORGANISTS PLAY HYMNS LESS MUSICALLY THAN IN FORMER YEARS, and I'd like to see that improve.

In the last 15 or 20 years organists have become increasingly insensitive when they play hymns; oh, they often can rattle off the notes, but they have become insensitive to both text and tune. Indifferent to textual meaning as well as musical style, some organists are playing all hymns in the same fashion; and at the same tempo. Congregations are being driven, not led. I exaggerate, of course. Because the organist has not thought about the tempo and rhythm of Sunday's hymns, has not practiced them and come to careful decisions about how they should be played, tunes are being trivialized by exaggerated tempi, the prevailing pace is often frantic, hymns sometimes sound inappropriately militaristic, and, above all, they sound nervous. (Organists who play in liturgical churches tend to treat the parts of the liturgy in the same fashion.)

I've observing that rather than leading or conducting, organists often are bludgeoning congregations, or, to change metaphors, they seem to be putting the electric cattle prod to the people. Organists compete with congregations, going against them rather than joining them in their efforts. (Wait before you declare in your mind that this is not true, or that this is not a bad thing. Hear me out. And don't assume that I am merely saying that organists are playing too fast. That would be a gross oversimplification and if that were the case then the cure would be simple.) The situation must surely stem from careless neglect and consideration of hymn tunes as music with intrinsic musical value. Of course, there is a range of suitable tempi for any musical composition, that range depending on several variables which we will talk about, but the effectiveness of the hymn as music and, incidentally, its beauty and meaning, not to mention the rhythmic stability of the playing of it and the ease of singing it by a whole congregation can be and is being lost by poor judgment and mindlessness in choosing a tempo and the controlling the rhythm.

Is this condition an intentional subversion of natural musicianship, in which case have to ask why? Has a new "geist" taken over our worship services, one mode of expression suitable for everything sung, a similar spirit for every hymn? Or that one tempo will do for all hymns, regardless of the text or the musical character of the tune? Or that such a manner of playing somehow makes the music more attractive, more contemporary, more expressive of a triumphant Christianity than a repentant people? As long ago as 1970 I read an article that said "that a cynical observer of liturgy might be tempted to observe that the 'successful' parishes are thriving on principles similar to the typical TV sit-com---to keep the people entertained with the dazzle, pizzazz and splash---and maybe no one would notice the lack of content."

I can't really believe that is the intent of pastors, music committees or anyone planning church music in most churches or that every church organist is really so hyped up every Sunday morning. I am aware that as Alexander Pope said in the 18th century, "Some to the Church repair, not for the doctrine but for the music there". In our day we may never know how many stay at home because of the music there.

So maybe it's impossible to pin point how or why this has happened to hymn playing. Let's talk about texts and how they affect our decisions about playing the hymn. We are aware that texts vary; we know how hard the Hymn Society of America has worked to encourage the creation of new, good, hymn texts. We concede that a great hymn has a wonderful wedding of text and tune---(consider

your favorite hymns in this regard---can you imagine Lift High the Cross, For All the Saints, Gift of Finest Wheat with a weaker tune?) You know the hymn tune Ebenezer, "Thy Strong Word Didst Cleave the Darkness", the wonderful Welsh tune, Ton-Y Botl, which we used to sing to "Once to Every Man-Person And Nation"-but that text of James Russell Lowell is now a no-no, of course. (I think it's arguable whether the new text fits the tune as well as the old one It takes more than an identical metrical pattern 87 87 D to achieve a perfect marriage of text and tune.) Think of "O Sacred Head", as expressive and beautiful a tune you can find for the Passion text. It may be hard to think of the tune as the secular love song it originally was. My point is that the best tune in the world with a strong text can be made ineffective, even ridiculous with a tempo gone astray or the rhythm badly managed.

Examples: O Sacred Head - fast

O God Our Help - play fast in 4/4, poor rhythm

(Yes, I've heard the likes of this)

When I Survey (Rockingham), play fast  $\frac{3}{4}$ , key of D, then slower  $\frac{3}{4}$

In the olden days we used to complain about people who had one "hymn" piston set up that they used for every congregational hymn. Now I believe organists now have a "tempo" piston built within that they plug into no matter what the style of the tune or the mood of the text.

IN SHORT, I'M TALKING ABOUT TEMPO AND RHYTHMIC CONTROL AS THEY CONTRIBUTE TO EFFECTIVE HYMN SINGING, AS THEY HELP US EXPRESS THE TEXT AND AS THEY ENABLE THE TUNE TO REINFORCE THE MEANING OF THE TEXT. Lack of control of rhythm and speed is a musical problem first of all, a technical one secondarily. We are accustomed to struggling with similar musical problems in the playing of pieces of great organ literature, and that alone is one of the best reasons for studying serious organ literature, whether you think you will play those pieces for church or not. There is a carry-over, for instance, between coping with the meaning of *Tempo ordinario* in Baroque organ literature, finding that heart beat inherent in the music, to setting a tempo for a hymn, but only if you are willing and able to consider hymns as music. Tempo setting should be easier in hymn playing since we have a strong clue about what is being expressed in the text, which causes me to bring up the word MUSICIANSHIP: the skill, insight and artistry in the performance of music should not be restricted to concert musicians only.

Other musicians often say that organists are not musical, they are not really musicians. I don't exactly know what they mean when they say this. It may mean they just don't like the sound of the organ. I hope their bias does not result from the organ's long association with the church and the way they have heard the organ used in church, if they go to church. The organ is not a defective instrument and organists CAN be musicians, with a high degree of musicianship, and we must bring better musicianship to the playing of hymns. But here is the paradox which is central to my argument: there is no question in my mind that the playing of organ literature has improved vastly in the last 30 or 35 years---technically, stylishly, interpretively. It needed to. If you will forgive a personal note, I was bored out of my skill 50 years ago when I was a student by the way the organ was being played, even by some very famous international organ recitalists, until I went to Vienna and studied with Anton Heiller in 1954-55. His name may not be familiar to some of you, but he and Gustav Leonhardt turned

my life around with their musicianship and scholarship, and of course, they turned around my teaching as well.

Ask any organ teacher who has been teaching a long time; senior recitals now would have been master's degree recitals back then. Technique as well as musicianship in the playing of organ literature is far superior now----nothing to complain about I suppose (Durufle Toccata audition?)

Though the playing of the literature has improved greatly, I will say flatly that service playing, especially hymn playing, maybe accompanying too, has deteriorated both musically and technically. The fact that so many young organists can play up a storm may only mean that organ TEACHING of the literature is now marvelously efficient and thorough and interesting. Good teachers teach an expanded organ literature in great detail, very carefully indeed, (so carefully that some say there's a danger that all that teacher's students may sound alike). There is so much unedited organ music with no tempo marking of any kind; anyone but a very musical organist indeed has to find and depend on a good and musical teacher or lamely imitate some recording of organ pieces. There no doubt is more to be learned about French Classical organ music or the performance of Frescobaldi or Bruhns or Bach and maybe its more fun, more interesting to come to grips with these great works than with the three or four hymns you may have to play on Sunday, but both areas of organ playing are a challenge to your musicianship. As a church organist it is what you can do on your own that really shows your musicianship and you play hymns ALONE, often without hearing any critical comment about how you play them. And when you play the introduction to any hymn you are imposing your judgment (or lack of judgment) on the musical expression of that hymn. (Incidentally, how many of you studied hymn playing at the college level?)

Please note very carefully that I am not referring to INTERPRETATION in hymn playing-(not possible or desirable to try to "interpret" hymns at the organ with that many people singing). I repeat that my concern is with the more basic things. I'm not advocating that we should try to make an art form out of hymn playing as an end in itself. Tempo sense and control are underdeveloped by too many organists.

More often than not hymns are played too quickly to make music, on occasion too slowly. You all know that there is no one right tempo for any hymn but a range of acceptable tempi beyond which you cannot go in either direction without doing violence to the music and affecting its singability. Think about the chorale prelude "O Mensch beweine", marked by Bach with one of his few tempo markings, "Adagio assai", with an Adagissimo in the last measure; how these tempo markings should be interpreted is open to discussion and we will hear various players play the piece at slightly different speeds, but everyone would be outraged if the tempo were wildly beyond some concept of "slow".

So what are the factors governing the choice of tempo in hymns besides the time of day and what the weather is doing? Presumably you know many of these factors: size of the church, the room itself, acoustical properties of the room, whether the congregation is young or old or is mixed, how many people are singing, the musical style and/or origin of the hymn, subject of the text, liturgical season,

certainly the notation of the hymn now has become a very big problem. That is, what note values the tune is written in, an especially tough problem for Catholic organists who don't always have the advantage of using one of the few good standard Catholic hymn books edited by experienced and competent organists. Notation is a problem for anyone having to play what I call pop religious songs, music originally intended for a solo singer probably with guitar accompaniment, written down by people with a very unsophisticated knowledge of the notation of music. Sometimes I wonder if the assumption hasn't been made that the players using these accompaniments can't read any notes values shorter than quarter notes, well, maybe a few eighth notes but certainly not sixteenths. (Can you really expect a congregation to hold the last note in a phrase for 12 quarter note beats?)

Let me talk of more traditional hymnody which has far more musical variety in meter and style than pop religious songs-and musical variety presents us with a greater musical challenge.

You know that there are different kinds of hymntunes: Lutheran chorales, plainsong hymns, for example; Calvinist Psalm-tunes, like the Doxology and other 16th century psalm-tunes now found in hymnbooks of every denomination; folk-tune hymns, tune 19th century English hymns like "The Church's One Foundation" or "Holy, Holy, Holy", dignified 18th century English hymns, like St. Anne's, or wonderful 20th century English tunes like "Lift High the Cross" and "For All the Saints", spirituals, all the wonderful American hymns written since about 1940, with freer metrical patterns and beautiful texts that take us far beyond the gospel songs of the turn of the century, to list some of them. Fifty years ago the 1940 Episcopal Hymnal made an effort to make musical distinctions between the various types of hymns with notation: plain-song hymns were notated in eighth notes to suggest a flowing rhythm, Psalm-tunes reverted to the original 4/2 time with one syllable to each half note, 19th and 20th century hymns were notated in quarter notes, besides which time words in English were placed above each hymn: e.g. with motion, with vigor, with joyful vigor, with spirit, quietly, without dragging, serenely, in flowing style, jubilant but not fast, boldly but not fast with great dignity (Old Hundred), etc. (Leo Sowerby, Canon Winfred Douglas, chief editors, ecumenically narrow perhaps, but a fine hymn book). You may resist having anyone try to tell you how a hymn should go and argue with the tempo suggestions, but there certainly is a variety of tempi and moods suggested in conformity with the nature of the tunes in that hymn book.

What is an organist to do nowadays? One organist I know with a master's degree in organ told me that the music committee instructed her to play all the hymns and the liturgy as fast as she could. Period. You can imagine the chaos. It was a ludicrous directive, (they were not performing musicians), not one argued. But I think any musical organists who think that the hymns are liturgy that have any meaning beyond time filling should have argued, and should have tried to instruct them a bit. Or quit.

Examples: Doxology (fast)

Some things ought not to be trivialized.

What can be done? 1. First, develop all the musicianship you possibly can, not only through the playing of organ literature, but by listening to the tempo and rhythm of lots of music not related to the church----symphonies, chamber music, good choirs singing secular as well as sacred music,

empathizing with the beat, subdividing the beat, singing along, marking the beat with your body, (don't use foot or hand motions, though: you need both feet and hands to play the organ), take a conducting class if you can, make judgments about tempo and rhythm in what you are hearing---I have a very old German recording of the Bach B Minor Mass where the opening Kyrie is so slow and draggy I couldn't bring myself to listen to the rest of the record for years for fear of being bored to death. It's a long work, you know. 2. Get a non-organist musician you respect to come to church and pass judgment on your control of tempo and rhythm from a purely musical perspective. 3. Develop a spatial sense. Stop playing as though you were in your living room or a small practice room at college or as though you had the back wall of the church just behind the console. Get outside of your skin and train your ear to travel. LISTEN. Cock your ear out there toward where the tone is traveling as your fingers and feet keep a steady beat. Space is a factor, especially in live acoustics but even in a dead non-reverberant room. Sound travels slowly. 4. Manage somehow to become a worshipper once in a while to inform yourself about how things sound. I'd like to meet and talk to an organist who feels that he has been a worshipping Christian while playing a service. I know a full time church musician in her mid fifties who told me she had not sat in the pew as a worshipper since she was 14.

5. Study the tunes of hymns and religious songs without the texts, but just as music. Sing them on "la" or whatever, to get the swing of the thing. We would all like to see perfect hymn tunes go with fine texts; our problems of which I speak are basically with the tempo, and rhythmic aberrations usually result from misjudgment regarding the speed of the tunes. I shouldn't have to remind you to sing along or at least mouth the words as you play hymns so it is possible to breathe, and for heaven sake, I repeat, subdivide beats and feel an inner pulse whether there is movement in the tune or not. No one ever learned to play organ literature well who did not learn to do this. Get a grip on rhythmic duration. 6. A strong text will not salvage a weak tune, something that pop religious song writers seem not to know. And I suppose we all could name some attractive tunes that are wildly popular but have sappy texts. Make the best job out of whatever tune you are confronted with; sometimes you can improve it and get rid of the crudities in it (provided you can recognize a musical crudity), but I would place greater emphasis on the importance of learning to recognize and have respect for a strong, well-written, beautifully harmonized hymn tune. (That may have become as difficult for some organists to do this as it is for the same organists to recognize a good organ when confronted with one.) 7. You all know that a suitable tempo should enable the untrained voice, including those of people over 40 years of age, to sing the phrases of a hymn on one breath; test this when you practice hymns. Hard to sing if the tempo is too slow, impossible to breathe if it's too fast. There is no law that says that people in the pews shouldn't take a breath in the middle of a phrase, and the unity of the congregation is worth working for through singing; 8. Some hymns are moving too slowly, like "Morning Has Broken", but not as many as are being trivialized by excessive speed: even the well known song, "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love"---(play portion only) play fast

Wouldn't this be improved by singing it slower so it is more in the style of "Wondrous Love". (play Wondrous Love, then They'll Know We are Christians)

I grant you that's pretty subjective and you may not agree with the idea. But remember, you're the conductor because you set the tempo when you play the introduction, so the responsibility is yours.

What if you don't "feel" music intuitively? Some useful organists don't. Is there any helpful technique for determining a suitable speed? Yes. I so think anyone can become aware of the harmonic rhythm of any hymn and that can be an important factor in determining a good tempo. Those of you who have studied theory probably remember what it is. If you haven't studied theory you can readily grasp the idea. It simply means the number of chord changes within the measure in its simplest harmonization. For example:

Happy Birthday has a harmonic rhythm of ? (1)

Holy, Holy, Holy harmonic rhythm of ? (2)

Now the Silence harmonic rhythm of ? (1)

O God, Our Help harmonic rhythm of ? (4)

Obviously, lots of tunes combine more than a single harmonic rhythm, like "My Country Tis of Thee", but it is usually fairly easy to discover whether you are going to feel one pulse to the measure or 2 or 4.

The time signature, if one is shown, affects the harmonic rhythm not at all. It's the number of implied chord changes in the tune. "Holy, Holy" is in 4/4 with a harmonic rhythm of 2, likewise, St. Anne, "O God Our Help" is in 4/4, but with 4 chord changes to the bar, etc. The Episcopal Hymnal 1940 was the first hymnal that I know about to dispense with time signatures. I never heard Sowerby say why, though he did talk of other features, such as the shift in note values to suggest style and mood of the hymn.

You have no doubt already figured out that if you have a harmonic rhythm of 4 to the bar or chord changes on every beat, then a broader tempo works better, makes it easier to breathe at the ends of phrases and is altogether more musical than a rushed tempo. Take a tune like the old *Tantum ergo*. More often than I care to think about it's played in a quick 4/4 with a very unmusical hold at the end of each phrase in order to breathe. A hard habit to break.

Example: *Tantum ergo* with artificial fermatas

Actually a broader tempo with strict quarter notes would give plenty of breathing room:

Play *Tantum ergo* broader

Tradition often has a bearing on choosing a tempo. I recently heard "Eternal Father Strong to Save", hymntune "Melita" played like this: listen how trite the modulations toward the end sound

Demonstrate "Eternal Father Strong to Save" fast

It's the Navy hymn, of course, and during the Second World War, it was sung every Sunday as the prayer it actually is.

Lest you think that my age and nostalgia for my youth are dictating slow speed for most hymns, I hotly dispute that; I was once a speed demon with no tempo sense at all; that sense develops late in many students. I'll admit that I now feel some works, of Bach for example, slower than I did when I was 20 and I'm sure I hear more in them now. But nobody wants to be told at age 20 that they will feel music differently as they age. No, I don't want everything slower now. I haven't the least inclination to return to laboring through "Sun of My Soul" like this:

Play "Sun of My Soul" slow

It has a harmonic rhythm of one to the bar and can move.

But we have to be careful that we don't make 3/4 hymn tunes sound like bar room singing late at night, meaning after quite a few drinks! It's pretty easy to turn a 3/4 hymn into a waltz, too, without meaning to.

I think I've already mentioned that I want "Morning is Broken" to go at a pretty fast clip. Even if it weren't a simple, happy Gaelic folk tune, the harmonic rhythm of the tune demands it and it certainly makes it easier to sing.

"Morning Has Broken" fast tempo

Alec Wyton has taken the tune's simplicity away in the 1982 Episcopal hymn book with a busier three harmonies to the bar version, but it seems to me that most folk song hymns suffer if played at too ponderous a pace. "Land of Rest" is another one in this category.

Play: Land of Rest "Jerusalem My Happy Home"

Plainsong hymns have to move if they are to flow as they should. "Where Charity and Love Prevail there God is Ever Found" plainsong-like hymn by Dom Benoit is quite beautiful when it goes right along. The sense of the text is preserved (charity and love surely are not heavy and ponderous requirements of the Christian faith), and the shape of the plainsong tune emerges.

Another tricky one is "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones", which has to go at a fair clip in spite of its richly moving harmonic rhythm because of the three beats in the next to the last measure on "lu".

Demonstrate: Ye Watchers

The tune has a simpler harmonic rhythm than the accompaniment we are accustomed to. The harmonic implications of the tune, not the accompaniment, determine the movement. In practicing this hymn and others like it with apparent disparity between the richly harmonized accompaniment and the simple tune it is helpful to practice reducing the tune to the simplest harmonization possible in order to arrive at a good singable speed. The people will be able to sing it and it's the problem of the organist to play all the chords in the accompaniment and get all the awkward pedal notes. The 1982 Episcopal hymnal uses Vaughan William's accompaniment, which is mostly in unison; maybe Vaughan Williams recognized it as a problem.

Ferretting out the harmonic rhythm of every tune cannot always give us the answer, for there are other factors, some of which I have mentioned: acoustical situation in the church, text, etc.

Tradition, as I have already said, also has influenced us, if we are aware of the tradition. Think of "Silent Night" for instance: one harmony to the bar but you would be in trouble if you played it like this:

Silent Night - care to dance?

"My Country 'Tis of Thee" in the USA sounds quite different as compared with the English singing of "God Save the Queen". With its harmonic rhythm of three chord changes to the bar I think it would sound better slower, but dignity doesn't have as high priority in this country, or maybe the English think more of their Queen than we do of our country. And I think anyone who has heard a fine men's choir sing "Cwm Rhondda" would never be able to get it out of their ear or want to play it any faster.

### **“Guide Me, Oh Thou Great Jehovah”**

**Of course, the Welsh sing in parts, and that makes a difference in choice of tempo. (Not many American churches sing hymns in harmony anymore, do they? I know the Moravians do.)**

**In conclusion let me say that there are no doubt nonmusical factors in present day life that have led organists into some of the bad unmusical habits they have fallen into in recent years. Too slow a tempo can usually be explained by the unsureness and lack of technique of the organist...These days time is the dearest commodity we have and time to practice is in particularly short supply, but for those well equipped with technique we have to seek other explanations.**

**Lack of attention paid to hymns as music is one. A greater interest in playing the literature for the organ is another; (and after all, a hymn is not an organ performance but a vocal piece.) Narrowness of musical perspective, or to say it another way, over-specialization, explains a lot. A balance between the achievements needed for playing the various schools of organ literature beautifully-performance practices, scholarship, etc. and the service playing, hymn accompaniment, choir accompaniments, etc. needs to be restored. I don't want anyone to abandon the serious study of organ literature; I just want more effort put into playing everything used in church beautifully and effectively.**

**There are probably sociological explanations for what has happened to church playing which we may understand in the future. Paul Langston touches on this in a fine scholarly article in the Guild magazine, The American Organist, last March. It's a thought-provoking article---may disturb you.**

**Of course, we live in a stressful time, and the pace of daily life is frenetic to say the least. This affects us all to some degree. We are working harder and longer hours and we are up tight and our playing is up tight. We live in the fast lane; many, many things in our daily lives contribute to this, our reaction time is incredibly fast; think of the speed of computers, of the remote control on your TV and the attention span of everyone, but especially of young people, is much shorter than in former years-think of all the 15 second commercials, political sound-bytes, etc. No wonder timing is off in church service playing. Last spring the reviewer of the new E. M. Forster movie, “Howard's End” said in a Time magazine article that in these days time is the dearest commodity. (“time” with the small “t”, heaven knows that Time with the big “T” as in Time magazine is a pretty dear commodity, too.) Thirty years ago I thought space was the dearest commodity and I worried that churches would all have low ceilings as well as carpeted floors and cushioned pews and be as small as our living rooms. Space still is a precious commodity, but it can be had if there is enough money. Time can not be bought at any price (one of the rude discoveries about retirement). Something has to be given up to make time; I gave up playing for church some years ago in the interest of discovering how things were being done in the churches, especially in the churches where my students played. On the basis of all the times I've heard hymn laying in churches of all denominations, on TV casts of services and radio broadcasts and the playing of organists in hymn workshops I've given, I am saying that this careless manner of diving into hymns has become widespread in the last twenty years, at least in the upper Midwest. It is so common that I felt I had to make a discussion of it the focus of this session this morning. If you can honestly say this is not happening in other parts of the country, in your church or others you know about I will be extremely happy to hear it. I can only guess when or where or why people started**

doing it, who, if anyone is being imitated, but it is against natural musicianship. It's not important to place blame, but careful and critical attention needs to be given to hymn playing, how it's being done on the most basic level and time made for practicing hymn playing. It's still worth doing badly rather than not at all, and God doesn't judge hymn playing even if I do. But awareness could make a transforming difference, awareness on the part of organists and especially, awareness on the part of organ teachers. Hymn singing can be a wonderful expression of spirituality and faith in corporate worship. Sensitivity, empathy and good leadership from the organist should empower the people to experience more fully the meaning of the words they sing, and the music then will make their spirits soar.

**THE END**

**DISCUSSION:**

- 1. Can musicianship be learned or are you born with it?**
- 2. Are Americans unmusical as a people?**
- 3. Fast prayers and slow hymns; fast hymns and slow responsive readings, slower prayers**
- 4. Hymn sings if it's just the tunes people remember and like**
- 5. European concert organists are church organists: Marie Claire, Heiller. Worth of college study of organ**
- 6. Biggs as a service player. Maybe the loss of interest in playing for church started with him?**
- 7. Reasons organ is best instrument for church**
- 8. Missed accidentals in hymns**

Lecture text courtesy of Paul Emmons.