

Music Article Archives:

Classical Pianists in a Worship Band (Part 1)

- * By Branon Dempsey
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- * Piano / Keyboards

Piano 911

Okay all you pianist and keyboardist out there in worship bands – this article is for you and your worship leader! I get this question all the time and I have found that answers are rarely addressed. We are talking about what to do with the classically trained pianist or any keyboard/piano player in working with a worship band.

I have heard the many concerns from piano players of what to do in their worship band. In addition, I've heard from other worshiper leaders of what to do with their piano players. It seems that there are two polarities on this topic. On one side of the earth, you have piano players, who are the most talented individuals, yet they are without band experience. On the other side of the world, you have talented leaders and other musicians, but they are without piano playing experience. So here we have two worlds colliding; I hear frustrations on both ends. The funny thing is that each person thinks that the other has a personal problem or misunderstanding. Well, let's agree that both sets of people come from different background areas. This doesn't mean that one is right over the other. In the bigger picture, there are two larger issues at hand: the relational and the technical.

Understanding Your Pianist:

The relational issue is simple. Seek to better understand the person as you work together. Like the above paragraph, just because a person comes from a different set of background experiences makes them no less or greater than you or the group. Each one of us posses a unique and different set of skills, talents and insights. The benefit in this relationship is when we learn from one another, we draw upon both weaknesses and strengths.

Romans 12:3 says: For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

As you are a band, make it an opportunity to learn and work together. Keep in mind, not everyone shares your same strengths and weaknesses. The best opportunity is to learn from those who can help you progress in your weaknesses, as you help others improve by your strengths. Moreover, when you take time to understand people, it shows how much you care. In creating an environment of care and acceptance, you facilitate a positive learning experience, stemmed from a teachable spirit.

When instrumentalists or singers have a difficult time to adjust musically, it is because they may be learning a new set of musical rules and are competing with old habits. By fact, they want to improve otherwise they would not be there. The most challenging issue you may have, may not be the other person, but you in learning a new area of expertise or teaching method. If you are the leader in this position, it is your job to lead and equip your team. Even if the most or least you can do is find a teacher for that instrumentalist – do it. Great leaders either teach or find great teachers to help empower their teams. Education is the best tool you can provide because you are edifying and equipping the Body for the work of the Church (Eph. 4:12). Your team will thank you, as you are freed-up to move on to other things.

The Technical:

From the keyboard player's perspective, they honestly feel like a fish out of water. Here you have a great piano player that feels like they have their hands tied (I'll refer back to this point). They are at a loss of what to do. The guitar player or the worship leader are telling them they're playing the music wrong, but yet they don't explain to the pianist how to play the music in a way that's conducive with the band. Because the leader or other musicians are not as experienced to communicate musically, the piano/keyboard players are left in the dark. The main default answer is: just make it sound good, play slower or don't play at all.

Let's start off by explaining what is familiar to pianists. Most piano and keyboard players come from a classically trained background; hymns and classical piano sonatas are most common from their music experience. Because of the nature of typical piano music or hymns, the piano player is responsible for all three major forms of song: melody, harmony and rhythm - all played by two hands. Piano players are known for being the one-man band. Now if we were to create a band from each of these sections we would have three instruments: lead guitar, piano and bass. However, pianists are familiar with covering all parts in playing alone. When they join a band, they continue to play in the same mold. This is typical in many keyboard players in worship bands. What do you do? Earlier, I referred to the statement: tie the hands – this was my exact response to a worship leader and pianist's question from a clinic. I'll explain.

Instead of the piano player trying to catch all the music and play it at once, it is easier to break everything down by section. Let's use the previous analogy of the lead guitar player, pianist and bassist. Here each instrument is responsible for their individual part. Where does that leave the piano? Exactly, in the middle. This means the pianist is left to play in the middle register with tight chord voicings. It also means that the piano player is going to play half of what they normally play. Most often, individuals in worship bands typically overplay their part. The easiest solution is to either play one half or one quarter of the music. Let's try this with the piano player.

Tie the hands in the middle! Let the bass player play the notes that are normally played in the left hand by the pianist. Vice versa, the lead guitar will play the notes that are played in the pianist's right hand. Take the music down by a half. In other words, instead of the piano player being responsible for every 8th and 16th note, let's create a fourth

member of the band and call him a drummer. Sounds like God creating man and woman! Anyway, the drummer is going to pick up the busy rhythms, as they are played on the high-hat, kick and snare. There you go! The pianist is freed up from all the responsibilities in being the one man band. Each of the instruments have an equal part making up the whole. There is an uncomfortable result. Having fewer notes to play does increase the impatience factor. It's like taking a track sprinter and confining to a walk-a-thon. All musicians and piano players need to develop a calm approach and patience in playing less. What you will find in this new approach is the ability to create texture – shaping the song and sound environment.

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Freeing Your Voice (*Re-released)

- * By Branon Dempsey
- * Published July 10, 2008
- * Solo Voice

“Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.” Psalm 96:1

We sing to the Lord a new song because of what He has done in all the earth, in all of creation and mostly because of all for who he is. From a singing standpoint, when we sing new songs and old songs, are we truly singing in the newness of freedom? Do we actually sing freely with no interference or barriers in the voice?

Typically, most singers either use excessive force or little-to-none when they sing. Maybe in your experience, the singers who have the most difficulty are the ones who over-sing. There is a freedom that can be experienced naturally, just as natural as your regular speaking voice. Our facial, throat and breathing muscles function normally as we speak, chew and swallow our food and to breathe with our lungs. Depending on the intensity of our actions, the muscles automatically know and adjust to the right intensity level to produce movement. The larynx (Adam's apple, voice box) is a major part of the vocal apparatus and functions as both a voluntary and involuntary muscle. The larynx is designed to work freely – involuntary. Your speech and pitch is created by the passing air over the vocal cords, producing a vibration.

As you exhale, your lungs work with your vocal cords to produce frequency and pitch. In a very relaxed posture and breath control, the larynx can produce speech and singing freely. In creating resonance, your initial tone from the voice box is amplified through the spaces of your vocal cords as it travels to your mouth. Ultimately, your tone and timbre are produced by the shaping of your mouth (facial muscles) as the pitches finally

escape through your lips. This activity is present when naturally speaking and is ideal for singing. In speech, the larynx is at “rest position” because its not having to move up or down. In essence, the goal is to sing as you would speak. When you sing naturally, the right amount of air and vibration of the cords will produce pitch frequencies just as naturally.

Over-singing occurs in a variety of ways; when this happens, the outer muscles take control over the inner throat muscles. As muscles on the outside tighten, it can have a boa constrictor effect, preventing the larynx to move freely. When this happens, the inner muscles tell the brain to use more force, the larynx moves up or down to distribute power as the outer muscles continue to squeeze. As a result, all the muscles in your neck and throat tense up because the inner muscles are no longer able to control the tension. Therefore, the body must make up the difference. You can sense how this is a cyclic effect. In the end, your tone is unbalanced and your voice is exasperated. When your larynx is at rest position, you are able to produce balanced levels of breath control, pitch (top and bottom notes), chest and voice connectedness because your muscles are relaxed and stable.

How to be Free

How do we free the larynx and/or voice? It begins with how we speak. When you speak in a soft dynamic, the inner muscles move freely apart from the outer muscles and are not inhibited. Try speaking in a quiet manner and feel the activity of the inner muscles. You will notice that the free and isolated movement comes from the cords alone. Speak the word “you,” and hold the pitch over a few counts (p – dynamic – soft volume). Did you feel any activity from outer muscles (your neck)? Did you feel the vibration of the cords with a bit of resonance from the chest cavity? If you only felt the relaxing sensation of the inner cords, tone and resonance and not the outer muscles, you performed it correctly. At this point, your voice and speech were operating naturally.

Now try signing the same word at a stronger volume (f – dynamic – loud) and this time hold your head up. Sing the note. Did you feel your voice box move up? This will feel like your trying to climb the ceiling to reach the note. Now try the same word and volume, dropping your head – chin down to your upper chest. Sing the note. Did you feel your larynx move downward, like your trying to “dig” for the note? Did you experience a “pressing down” effect on your voice box?

Okay, there are two problems at hand. The first is when we move our head up or down in order to produce high and low notes. This causes the larynx to either jam-up or to press down, which produces top notes to splat or bottom notes to wobble. The second occurs when we move the larynx up or down without any head movement; in other words, the voice box is purely moved by the outer muscles. You can imagine the pressure and strain on the voice when combining both head movement and outer muscle tension. This may lead you to finally conclude why you either feel tired, pain and/or out of breath when you sing. When you overuse the muscles you cannot sing for long periods of time (for some 3-5 minutes is enough!). You cannot easily sing high and

low notes and you will not be able to produce an even connectedness between head and chest voice. This can cause unfavorable effects as well as injury to the cords. Again, you will not feel free, comfortable or natural when you sing.

Head and Chest Voice

Head and chest voice is produced in two different ways: the chest voice produces notes in the lower registers; the head voice produces notes in the higher registers. The meaning of connecting the head and chest together is to achieve a general balance in singing between registers. This can be attributed to a cello string instrument; all the notes across the registers are equalized and stable. In all instruments and the human voice, there is a certain amount of movement to occur for the notes to speak. Like the strings of a cello, the voice produces pitch and frequency by the applied pressure on the cords. When I say “pressure,” I am speaking in context of natural muscle pressure – not vocal strain or tension. Naturally, high and low notes speak accordingly by their given frequency. Remember high school physics class? The greater the vibration, the higher is the pitch; the less vibration, lower is the pitch. The first half of the problem occurs when we increase too much air (pressure) or add muscle tension in order to reach or dig for notes. The second half of the problem with most singers is to unlearn these bad habits of muscle tension. This anomaly stays undetected due to the lack of understanding in how the voice really works.

Singing in a “connected” manner between head and chest voice involves singing from your most comfortable low registers of your chest through your mid to upper high notes in your head all at speech level position. When you sing naturally in your upper register, both air and pressure from the cords will increase gradually for higher notes. Lower notes will require less air, but more space to achieve rich and clear low notes. As you free your voice, your register and dynamic range will maximize because the outer muscles are out of the way, leaving room for the inner muscles to function naturally. Never should you force your voice to do anything, as you may experience strain and tension.

Once you unravel the bad habits, you will notice that your voice and muscles will actually work “less” when you allow the larynx to operate freely. When you maintain a comfortable and relaxed vocal posture, you will be able to sing both high and low notes over longer periods of time with much ease. When you sing with your larynx at speech level (rest position) your voice is using the right muscles just as they were intended.

The Break

When you learn to sing through both low and high ranges comfortably, you may encounter areas of your voice where tone, resonance and muscle activity is limited in making transitions between registers. When smoothness of the voice between notes is disrupted, this is referred to as the “break.” Most often, the break is a discouragement to most singers and threatens them to discover uncharted territory in the musical space. The break occurs when the outer muscles finally initiate pressure on the inner muscles as you move between registers. This would be the famous 12 year old childlike “crack” in the voice. The outer muscles pull down and tighten (the boa constrictor effect) around

the voice box. When this happens, the pitch will try to slide down the throat. As a normal synapse of the body, the outer muscles apply more pressure to prevent tone slippage. Your vocal cords will stretch in this process in order to meet the note's requirement – next your muscles jam-up. Mechanically speaking, the cords have to naturally stretch to achieve higher notes, but how the muscles influence the cords to stretch is the key – not by the force of outer muscles.

There is a way to smoothly cross the break and to sing higher notes more comfortably. The art in achieving the smoothness of higher notes is found in using the right amount of air and pitch balance – not volume. When volume is forced on the voice box, it is translated into tension. Again, higher notes speak by themselves without human force. There are many arguments between using a lot of air or to use the least amount of air in order to sing higher notes. I have found that there is a balance between the two. When you force too much air on the cords, the outer muscles will takeover the larynx because the inner muscles cannot withstand the pressure alone – this is a normal response and recovery of the body. However, when you lessen the amount of air and use just enough to let the note speak, you allow the larynx muscles to stretch by themselves – freeing you from the blistering break and the outer muscles.

The Resolution

When you free your voice or sing naturally at “rest position,” you will find that producing notes will be easier because there is less effort involved. Your outer muscles will not takeover the larynx and your breath control will be in balance with your cords. As a byproduct, your words when sung or spoken will be clear and your tone will be transparent. Because your larynx is relaxed, you will be able to sing in all ranges with pure balance and smooth execution at every dynamic level. While you have time after this reading, sing to the Lord a new song; and when you sing – sing it naturally and free! (be sure to download the attached PDF which contains illustrations and music examples).

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Drums Part I

- * By Branon Dempsey
- * Published June 16, 2008
- * Drums

Down to the beat...

The drummer is probably one of the most largest challenges for music ministries. Some of those challenges are seen in the limitation of players, skills and availabilities, and maybe all the above. Let's look over a few points in hopes to better assist your ministry as you find what applies to your concerns.

For you drummers out there, please don't take this article personally or seriously. Please save your drumsticks for playing not for causing damage to you, me or those around you! These tips are only clues to help worship leaders and bandleaders as they face the challenge of drums in their ministries. In the near future, I will post an article just for you drummers to ease any of the ripples. Myself, in being a person who knows drums, I know how sensitive these issue can be.

Let's first start with the limitation of players. You may be in the church where there may only be one or two drummers (lucky if you find 2 or 1!), or you may not have a drummer at all. In all cases, when you were working with a small band, It may be beneficial of not having a drummer. It's better to have either a solid and reliable drummer to enhance the band, or to maintain your 2-3 instrumental group. Here's why: the fewer instruments you have, the drums will only stand out that much more. In other words, if all you have is a piano, a guitar and a drummer, it's going to take more dynamic range for the other two instruments to balance out the drums. Unless you're working with electronic drum kit, balance issues will always be a main challenge. If this is a similar scenario that you are facing, then your sound engineer would be grinning at this point. Anyway, when you're working with a three-member band, keep in mind, at your small church your players may not be pros. This means that you will have reasonable challenges, but you will reap the benefits of great solutions. As for drums, the main purpose of the band is to support the singers, the end result to lead the congregation in worship and in song. I have seen and heard many small church bands that spend way too much time on the drums, when they lack the other instrumental support to the music/singers as a whole. The drummer's job is like the band, to provide a clear sense of timing and pulse. Important drumming concerns can be volume, overplaying issues, uneven tempo control, inefficient drum stick inventory and choices, miking issues or simple drum tuning. Here is a parenthetical thought, for small band and room situations, the drums should never be miked as it will perpetuate all other volume issues. You will also need to consider what kind room you're in. Bad acoustics such as tiled floor, shotgun alley or obtuse wide sanctuaries and hard corners will add more reverberation to the room than what you're able to control.

The best situation is to have carpeted floors, a drum shield (if miked), a back sound-absorbent wall and acoustic tiling. Other lesser inexpensive ideas, can be found in using cloth material and foam to make a sound baffle and area floor rugs. I have seen other churches use decorative banners to hang on walls or from the ceiling. These ideas make great inexpensive solutions for controlling room acoustics. When you hear people in the church talk about how they do not like the drums, this is mainly what they were referring to - the noise. The better you can control the noise, the better your congregation will be able to adapt as well as your singers and musicians.

Now let's talk about skill. As said before, it is always better to not have a drummer than to have one who is uncontrollable. No matter how small your band, your sense of timing, dynamic, clarity and cohesiveness always wins in the end. Your singers will always find a space to sing in the music as well as your congregation. When a small band plays well, even without a drummer, the music will sound even, clear and consistent. As a result for recruiting new members, you will attract other musicians who will be more inclined to play. Like anything else, if you find something distracting, you will avoid it; this goes for other musicians who may be interested in joining your band. If you do not have a drummer, the most percussive yet musical instrument you can ever add to the contemporary band would be the acoustic guitar. As long as that player has a good sense of timing and rhythm, you can make up for a lot of what you're missing. Remember what Scripture says, (Forgive the pun!) love covers a multitude of sins. If this situation is you, then make sure that your acoustic guitar player and/or pianist practices constantly with a metronome. Also, if you have a drum machine or keyboard in which you can create a click track, use this device at rehearsals. For the first time, it may seem awkward and uncomfortable, but you will be amazed in a few weeks; with practice and patience your timing will improve beyond belief. Even using a drum machine in worship sets is not a bad idea. In fact, more drum machines and drum loops are more popular than ever before. Here's a cool plug: go to Praise Charts, they now have drum loops that are musically synced to music charts. You can purchase a sheet of music with a corresponding click track/drum loop (on wav or midi file via laptop) and can play along with the printed sheet of music or chord chart. This link provides a full description, instructions and all the how-to's. Even if you have never heard of this technology before, Praise Charts has the solutions for your needs. Check out the cool here: [ClickTracks at praisecharts.com](http://ClickTracks.at.praisecharts.com)

In working with drum machines/loops/clicks, it will take a responsibility and discipline on your part. You will have to make sure that you can efficiently control the drum machine/loop for starting and stopping on time without interrupting the flow of the songs. Usually, a keyboard player can operate a drum machine without problems. My suggestion, is to try the drum machine/loop/click track at rehearsal rather than on a Sunday. Make sure as you work with a drum machine that you make it conducive as possible with your instrumentalists and singers before you try it out with the congregation. A couple of months would be a good time-window for practice sake. However, if it does not sound good and the problems keep getting worse, scrap this idea and go back to what you're doing originally. Your comfort and pace is more important for your congregation. Remember, you want to help the congregation get where they need to go with as much ease as possible.

Drums Part II

* By Branon Dempsey

* Published June 16, 2008

* Drums

Now let's jump to the scenario when drumming skills are the issue. As much as it can depend on the drummer alone, I strongly encourage private lessons, practice time and working with a metronome (click track). Your drummer can work in a vacuum, if they are not working on other skills for growth. I have heard many o' drummer say, "my practice and/or instruction time is at band rehearsal." This is not being real. The rehearsal time with your church band is for your church band (worship team), not for the drummer's "practice time." When you come together for rehearsal, you are rehearsing the whole entire sound of the band and the songs. Rehearsing the overall big picture is much stronger and more important in the preparation for your singers and congregation. Individual practice time is done at home. I have also heard, like you, "I don't have the time to practice at home." I don't mean to sound harsh here, but if you cannot find the time to practice at home, you are not best serving your band and church. All of us are busy. Finding time to practice, even if it's 10 minutes a day, is doing everything in your power to better equip your team. In example, if you are on a volunteer sports team, you're always practicing your skill and position at other times, rather than on the team's practice day. You show up and know your part. God honors our self-discipline, commitment and dedication in our team settings.

It is important for all drummers to learn how to play different volume levels and tempos. It takes a lot of control for any musician to practice soft volumes at slow tempos; this well defines a musician at having superior control over his or her instrument. With this in mind, the drummer needs to use the right tools for the right musical settings. Drum grooves are not always 4 on the floor rock beats. The drummer's job is to maintain pulse and timing for the rhythm section. This could be as simple as a single high hat groove, a little kick for punch and a bit of snare for accents. Timing is everything. The best bands are the ones who can play clean and in time, every time. Again, the bigger picture is involved where the band supports the singers. Any time in which the band's volume overrides the singer, the congregation will have a more difficult time catching the lyrics. In my past experience, I have worked with outstanding drummers that are professionals, to weekend warriors and to novices who just put a drum stick in their hands for the first time. All in all, you want to have drummers play with their strengths. Let's say your drummer has a strong right-hand, but a very weak left hand, then your answer is to have the drummer play the high hat and kick drum, with limited snare. Another scenario could be that your drummer has both strong right and left hands, but their feet coordination tell a different story. In this case, have the drummer play with both hands and limited foot action on the bass. Another example, let's say both feet and hands work well together, but they're only used to play one tempo...ah here is a struck a nerve. What do you do? Who says you have to have drums play on every song? In my experience of working with inexperienced drummers, I've had them play shaker or some other hand percussion parts just to hold down the time. We would resort to other percussion instruments on similar slow or medium songs. As we would do faster songs, the drummer would switch back to his kit. As they continued to practice at home, the alternation of percussion and drums worked to our advantage for style, color and sound.

variations. I have found that it's better to look for the positive opportunities in being creative instead of deeming that things can't be done.

Last point, here is the issue of the availability of your drummer. As said before, the band is a team effort. If your drummer has (or any other band member) has commitment issues, this needs to be addressed first outside of rehearsal. The team is for the greater good, not for the silo of one. The drummer's part is essential to the worship band. However, negative attitudes and personalities are not healthy to the team (no one is critical). Okay, we have squashed that issue. If I left out something – let me know. Moving on. Let's say your drummer, being a committed team player, travels often and is not able to play every week. In today's world, and the busyness of people, this is common. As seen before, pick songs were drums are not much of a requirement, use a drum machine or train a singer to play hand percussion like shaker or something similar.

You are only able to do what you can accomplish reasonably by manpower. When drums are not an option, there is nothing wrong with completely redoing a worship set to make it more acoustic driven. Be creative and vary up the worship band sound occasionally. Don't get locked in to the idea that you cannot accomplish a full sound without a drummer. There is plenty of enjoyment that music diversity can bring. Be as open-minded as possible and try new things; it will bring refreshment to you as an artist and more importantly, to your congregation. Always remember who the worship is for: our Lord. Our God desires for us to give him our best. In situations when we are without, work the best with what you have.

More on Drums here: <http://www.praisecharts.com/live/categories/Worship-Team/Instrumental-Training/Drums/>

Guitar Week

<http://www.praisecharts.com/live/blogs/72/Guitar-Week.html>

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Tommy Walker

Lincoln Brewster
Paul Baloche
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Robert - post

Hey Branon! Love the Tommy Walker video. Great stuff. A bit biased though: we do a TON of Tommy's stuff! Also liked the Berklee guy on coloring chords. Very cool. Peace.