

# RECORDED ACCOMPANIMENTS SHOULD THEY BE USED?

## 'KEEP MUSIC A-LIVE!'

Our carol services last Christmas were accompanied by a versatile group of musicians called 'iVirtualosi'. The Virgin Mary had a baby boy to the sound of a steel band. Good King Wenceslas bellowed for flesh and wine backed by beefy brass. We asked *Quelle est cette odeur agréable?* to the strains of the harp and the gentle, soothing flute. How did we pack in all those players? With a laptop feeding a speaker system, of course. And all from choice rather than necessity: digital accompaniments give access to a much wider tonal palette than any organ ever could.

Done properly, digital music does not consist of the truly horrid noises which came with your computer. That trumpet descant to 'Once in royal' could well be played by a member of the Vienna Philharmonic, his work 'sampled' for you to use via a sequencing or score-writing program. And providing you observe any copyright restrictions, you can share your arrangements online. The St Davids diocesan website ([www.stdavidsdiocese.org.uk/resources/accompaniments\\_index/index.html](http://www.stdavidsdiocese.org.uk/resources/accompaniments_index/index.html)) also gives examples of a 'middle way' between digitally generated accompaniments and a live organist and singers. Recording sessions with local RSCM-affiliated choirs and our cathedral choirs resulted in a 'hymn bank' which musically impoverished parishes could download to lead their singing. Many excellent CD sets of accompaniments are also available commercially.

Sometimes a digital or pre-recorded accompaniment is the only option. In many tiny churches in rural west Wales, the organist's attendance is as erratic as the instrument itself. Unless the vicar scuttles back and forth between altar and asthmatic harmonium, the alternative to a CD is silence. Keep music live? Certainly. But more importantly, keep music a-live!

*The Revd Jonathan Copus, West Wales Area*

## 'PUT AWAY THE I-POD AND BE CREATIVE!'

No one would deny that digital accompaniments can be extremely useful but I see them as something of a last resort. I think that live music is always better. Partly this is to do with encouraging congregations to sing: something of the vitality of a 'live' accompanist inspires a congregation in the way a digital accompaniment cannot. Worship is very much of the place and of the moment – a corporate activity from which a backing track is inevitably one step removed.

A good accompanist can react to local circumstance and in particular can

- ▶ Give a clear and unambiguous introduction that encourages people to start singing on the first note
- ▶ Adopt a tempo and style suitable to the acoustic/position of the song in the service
- ▶ Highlight the melody if the congregation finds the tune unfamiliar
- ▶ Add colour or vary harmony (only if the singing is good!)

But if a good accompanist is not available, what then? Accompaniment does not have to be on a keyboard. On Christmas Day at Dunblane we had a flute trio accompany *Away in a manger* beautifully. And there is no shame in singing unaccompanied (we have a fine tradition of this in Scotland!). With the leadership of a good precentor (cantor) this can be spine-tinglingly effective, though admittedly it may not be what you want every Sunday.

However, if the church has a serviceable organ it does seem a shame not to use it. At Dunblane Cathedral, alongside an Organ Scholarship, we offer Organ Studentships to youngsters who are competent pianists, to get them started on the organ. I know other large churches have similar schemes – identify good pianists from your local school and get them trained up. Hymns

can always be simplified: RSCM has resources to help. Your fledgling accompanist just needs a good sense of rhythm, good ear, and plenty of encouragement.

*Matthew Beetschen, Chair, RSCM Scotland and Director of Music, Dunblane Cathedral*

## DIGITALLY DOES IT

Various options are available for digital accompaniments, each with pros and cons:

- ▶ **Use a CD** such as Kevin Mayhew's *No organist, no problem!* and *No music group, no problem!* accompaniment CDs. If your church prefers to sing along with a congregation or choir as described on page 6, you might choose to use a choral CD (but watch out that the tempo and acoustic are suitable for your congregation) or a recording from a live worship event such as the Spring Harvest resources.
- ▶ **Backing tracks** for some hymns and songs are available to download (see, for example, [www.missionpraise.com](http://www.missionpraise.com) [www.worshiptrax.co.uk](http://www.worshiptrax.co.uk) [www.musicademy.com](http://www.musicademy.com) [www.worshipworkshop.org.uk](http://www.worshipworkshop.org.uk))
- ▶ More sophisticated **accompaniment systems** with built in MIDI players such as the Hymnal Plus ([www.hymntechnology.com](http://www.hymntechnology.com)) are a more expensive but reliable option, closely imitating the sounds of organ and instrumental accompaniments.
- ▶ **MIDI files** can be played through digital keyboards and organs, so bespoke accompaniments can be pre-recorded, for example if a keyboard player is not available every week. As with any technology in church, the person operating the digital accompaniment should be fully trained and briefed by the worship leader. Digital music needs rehearsing as carefully as – and if not more than – live musicians!

## What's your view on digital accompaniments?

You can write to us at [cmq@rscm.com](mailto:cmq@rscm.com) or at the address on page 5 or comment on our Facebook page (follow the link from the RSCM homepage or visit [www.facebook.com/rscmcentre](http://www.facebook.com/rscmcentre)).