Ready by Christmas Eve

An Advent plan for organists

By Aram Basmadjian

Advent and Christmas are very busy times in the life of the church organist. Four Sundays of Advent, each with its own hymns and readings, lead straight into Christmas Eve. This will be my 16th year playing Christmas Eve services at my current church. The more prepared you are, the more calm you can remain during the service.

So here is a plan to help you prepare for the Advent/Christmas marathon. It runs from the First Sunday of Advent, November 29, to Christmas Eve, Thursday, December 24. I'm not going to tell you how many hours to practice; that depends on you, your music and your week. I will suggest what to work on and when, so that by the time the candles are lit, the hard work is behind you.

First, keep the seasons straight

Before you open a single score, remember where you are in the church year. Advent is a season of anticipation and expectation, and it has its own look. I particularly like the purple or blue paraments that accent the church during this season. Advent has its own music, too. There are the great Advent hymns that are typically heard only during these four weeks: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (Veni, veni, Emmanuel)", "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus (Stuttgart)", "Lo! He comes with clouds descending (Helmsley)", "Savior of the Nations, Come (Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland)", and "Sleepers wake! (Wachet auf)". Play them, and play them well. They are not a warm-up act for Christmas.

The traditional Christmas carols wait. They belong to Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and the days that follow, all the way to the Epiphany on January 6. That gives your preparation a natural shape. On Sunday mornings you are leading the Advent hymns, while during the week you are quietly getting the music ready for a night that has not arrived yet. You are living in two seasons at once, and the plan below keeps both in view.

The readings will help you choose the music. This Advent begins Year B of the lectionary, the set calendar of Sunday readings, and the gospels move from "Keep awake" on the First Sunday (a perfect time to use the hymn "Sleepers wake!"), to John the Baptist crying in the wilderness on the Second and Third, to the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary on the Fourth. Read them before you choose your music. A hymn that answers the gospel lands with far more weight than one that merely fills a slot. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel is closely tied to the O Antiphons cycle (December 17-23), making the Fourth Sunday of Advent a natural and traditional time for this hymn.

Anthems for Advent

The choir needs Advent music too, and the season has its own classics. A few that work nicely: "Christ is the world's true light" by Walter Kendall Stanton, "Hark, a thrilling voice" by Eric Thiman,

Stephen Cleobury's setting of "Let all mortal flesh", and "Lo! He comes with clouds descending" by John Rutter, which shares its title with one of the hymns above. Another stunning, and relatively new Advent anthem is Philip Stopford's setting of "Adam lay ybounden."

Choose your anthems as you would choose the hymns, with the readings open beside you, and put them on the same calendar. If you are planning to use anthems that are new to your choir, make sure to start rehearsing them well in advance of the first Sunday of Advent.

Mapping the whole season

With the season's shape in mind, the work starts with your preflight planning. Gather every piece of music you will play between the First Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve: the Advent hymns for each Sunday, the service music, the preludes and postludes, the anthems you will accompany, and every carol on the Christmas Eve service. Lay it all out by date. As a pilot, I like to see the whole route before I take off on a long flight, and December at the organ is no different.

Then sort it. Some pieces you can play tomorrow. Some need polishing. A few are new to you. The new pieces go to the top of the list, because they need the most time, and this is the time to start working on them.

Next, mark your scores. Write in fingerings and pedaling for the hard passages, and mark the places you will breathe between phrases. Also, be sure to mark in any registration changes that will occur – mark exactly where they will occur on the score. A pencil mark made in the first week is a decision you never have to make again under pressure.

Finally, practice slowly. Learn the new pieces one hand at a time, then the pedal alone, and only then put them together. Slow practice feels like the long way around, but it is the shortest route there is: the notes you learn slowly are the notes that stay put when you are nervous. Another trick I use when learning something that is more challenging is to work backwards – I learn the last measure first. Once it is mastered, I work on the second to last measure. Once I can play that, I put it together with the last measure. If that is good, then I move on to the third to last measure, and so on. That way, I am always working from the unknown to the known.

Bring hands and feet together

Once the music is mapped and marked, continue putting the pieces together. Hands and feet now play as a team, still slower than the final tempo.

This is also the time to look closely at your touch. The organ does not forgive the way a piano does. There is no sustain pedal to hide a gap, and a note sounds exactly as long as your finger holds the key. In the carols, this is used to your advantage to help lead the congregation in singing. Some notes may require a true legato, while others may require a clean break between notes, especially at the end of phrases or when a note is repeated. Where a note repeats in the same voice, lift it just a bit so the congregation hears the new beat instead of one long smear. Try it on a single carol: play it once holding every repeated note, then again with each one released just before it sounds again. The second version breathes, and the congregation will breathe with it.

Now plan your introductions. The introduction tells the congregation the tune, the key and the tempo before they sing a note. Decide how each hymn and carol will begin, write it down, and practice it as part of the hymn, not as an afterthought. With the Advent hymns, play the hymn tune as the introduction. They are heard only once a year, so the congregation needs to hear the tune before it sings. And play the introduction at the same tempo the hymn will be sung at.

And set your pistons. If you have read my earlier guide to registration, you know the recipes.

Run the service

With the notes learned and the registrations saved, the next step is to put each of the services together in order. Play the Christmas Eve service at full tempo from the first note of the prelude to the last chord of the postlude, with no stopping and no going back.

Here is where you find the problems that hide between pieces. Time how long it takes you to turn from the prelude to the first hymn, check that the next piston is already set, and make sure the opening carol follows the prelude or processional without a scramble. Practice the gaps as carefully as you practice the music. A service is judged as much by what happens between the pieces as by the pieces themselves.

If you have a sequencer on the organ, record all of your service music. Then go and sit in the pews. A sound that seems overwhelming at the console may be modest out in the room, and a sound that seems balanced at the bench may bury the singers. Register for the person in the pew, not the person on the bench.

Polish, don't learn

With the service run and the singers rehearsed, this next rule is simple: learn nothing new. If a piece is not ready by now, set it aside for next year and play something you know. There is no shame in that. Of course, the congregation will never know what you didn't play, but they will hear a piece that was not ready.

Spend these last days polishing. Play through the service once more at full tempo. Spend extra time on the passages you marked initially, and leave the passages that already go well alone.

Most of all, practice recovering. Sooner or later every organist plays a wrong note. The congregation remembers what happens after a wrong note. Practice playing straight through a slip without stopping, without going back, and without letting it change the tempo. A congregation follows a steady pulse far more closely than it follows perfect notes. Do it on purpose: start a carol, miss a note, and keep going. The wrong note is already behind you. Time to move on.

Christmas Eve itself

The work is done.

Arrive early. Turn on the instrument, check that your pistons recall what you saved, and play a few chords to hear the room. A church full of people sounds different from an empty one, so expect the

organ to change once the pews fill. Lay out your music in service order, check the page turns, and make sure you are on the correct memory level.

Before the prelude, take a moment. Then begin. You have played this service before, more than once, and every one of those run-throughs is with you on the bench. That is what preparation buys you: calm.

The last word

The best advice I can offer is to start early and follow the plan. Give the Advent hymns their due, save the carols for the Christmas season, and let preparation do the rest.

And when the last carol fades and the congregation heads out into the night, enjoy the quiet for a moment. You have earned it.

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