

Reharmonising Last Verses of Hymns

Video script by Dr Steven Nisbet OAM

Introduction

1. Welcome to this video about reharmonising last verses of hymns.
2. In my many years as a church organist, one thing I enjoyed about playing hymns was reharmonising last verses.
3. After doing this for a few years, I decided to write them down.
4. I now have more than 150 hymns for which I have written reharmonisations. I have also written descants for treble voices for each hymn. These are published in my book Creative Last Verses.
5. Having made some videos about organ stops, I was recently asked by a colleague in the Organ Society of Queensland to make a video about reharmonising last verses of hymns.
6. So, this is it. It's my personal story about how I reharmonise hymns, and has no reference to text books.
7. I have been inspired by listening to reharmonisations of hymns in church services.
8. I first heard hymns being reharmonised many years ago by my organ teacher, Dr Robert Boughen who was organist at St John's Cathedral at the time.
9. Robert told me that he was first inspired at an RSCM event by Dr AE Floyd, then organist at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne.
10. I have also been inspired by the harmonies of the chorales of JS Bach. For instance, he wrote a number of different harmonies to the Passion Chorale in the St Matthew Passion.
11. I have also been inspired by the reharmonisations of Eric Thiman, who wrote a number of classic settings, "The church's one foundation" (Aurelia) and "When I survey the wondrous cross" (Rockingham) to name two.
12. I acknowledge these musicians, because, as Isaac Newton said, "we stand on the shoulders of giants", and their examples have gone into the mix to help produce my approach to the reharmonisation of hymns.
13. So, in this video I will explain some techniques I use to combine with the musical ideas that are in my head to produce a reharmonisation.
14. At the end of the video I will give some advice about how you might approach the task and develop some relevant skills.
15. So here we go.

Number one issue is the text.

1. As with all vocal & choral compositions, the text has to be considered right from the start. The meaning of the text dictates the mood of the hymn's accompaniment and level of harmonic complexity and the direction of the harmonic adventure in the reharmonisation.

2. Compare “Tell out my soul” (Woodlands), which is played with strength, with “My song is love unknown”, which is played in a reflective mood.
3. Compare another strong hymn “Love divine” (sung to Hyfrydol) with the reflective hymn “Be still my soul” (sung to Finlandia).

Now let’s consider the harmony.

1. For me, a reharmonisation is a harmonic journey, a chordal progression, not just a few spiky chords interspersed at various points in the regular harmony.
2. A harmonic journey is made up of many chord progressions and cadences.
3. Remember that when you go off into new harmonic territory you have to come back safely. Fortunately, I have not had too many occasions when I have got stranded, and I have had to jump back to the original harmony.
4. I have been assisted greatly by the fact that I have been playing piano by ear since the age of three, playing and harmonising easy tunes, hymns, pop songs, jazz pieces, orchestral pieces, music heard on the radio, etc. Consequently, I have a natural feel for where the harmony can go.

So what techniques do I use for writing reharmonisations?

When I look at my own reharmonisations, I find that I have used many 13 different techniques.

The technique I use for a hymn just comes to mind as musical sounds when I am thinking about the hymn and playing it at the organ or piano.

I don’t say I want to use this technique or that technique today; rather it’s what comes into my head.

So I suppose that’s what you call inspiration.

But as the saying goes with developing new ideas and new products, it’s 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration.

Starting off is always the hardest part, so I will talk a lot about techniques for the beginning of the reharmonisation.

The remainder of the reharmonisation usually comes easily once I have made a start.

Here are my 13 techniques and examples of them in specific hymns.

1. **Melody in octaves (just the opening notes of the melody, followed by a few crunchy chords – diminished or ninths):**
 Joyful, joyful, we adore you (Ode to joy) (in F)
 Christ is the world’s light (Christe Sanctorum) (in D)
 Glorious things of you are spoken (Abbot’s Leigh) (in C)
 Love divine, all loves excelling (Hyfrydol) (in F)

I know that my redeemer lives (Church Triumphant) (in B flat)
I'll praise my maker (Monmouth)

2. **Sustained tonic pedal note at start, with varying harmony above.**

Forth in your name (Song 34) (in F)

3. **Sustained dominant pedal note start, again with varying harmony:**

At the name of Jesus (Camberwell) (in C)

Be thou my vision (Slane) (in E flat)

Come down, O love divine (Down Ampney) (in D)

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty (Nicea) (in D)

Praise the Lord, ye heavens adore him (Austria) (E flat)

There's a light upon the mountains (There's a light) (in G)

All creatures of our God and King (Lasst Uns Erfreuen) (In E flat)

All my hope on God is founded (Michael) (in F)

What a friend we have in Jesus (Blaenwern) in (F)

I'm not ashamed to own my Lord (Jackson) (in D)

In the cross of Christ I glory (Stuttgart) (in F)

Rejoice in God's saints (Paderborn) (in G)

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness (Was Lebet) (in D)

4. **Descending pedal line:**

Now thank we all our God (Nun Danket) (in E flat)

Sing all creation (Iste confessor) (in D minor)

Brother, sister, let me serve you (Servant Song) (in D)

Crown him with many crowns (Diademata) (in E flat)

Jesus, lover of my soul (Aberystwyth) (in E minor)

My song is love unknown (Love Unknown)

The Lord's my shepherd (Crimond)

Tell out my soul (Woodlands)

5. **Ascending pedal line:**

Jesus shall reign (Warrington) (in B flat, start on F)

Joy to the world (Antioch) (in D, start on D)

In Christ there is no east or west (McKee) (in B flat, start on B flat))

Praise to the holiest in the height (Gerontius) (in G, start on pedal B)

We limit not the truth of God (Ellacombe) (in A, start on A)

The king of love my shepherd is (Dominus Regit Me) (in G, start on G)

When morning gilds the skies (Laudes Domini) (in C, start on C)

6. Canon:

Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts (Wareham) (in B flat)

7. Relative minor:

The head that once was crowned (St Magnus) (in D, start in B minor)

Here, Lord, we take the broken bread (St Columba) (in E flat, start in C minor)

Stand up and bless the Lord (Carlisle) (in D, go into F# minor)

8. Solo Trumpet or Tuba lines:

Christ the Lord is risen today (Easter Hymn) (in C, after first line, LH from B)

Love Divine, all loves excelling (Hyfrydol) (last 2 lines, LH)

Immortal, invisible (St Denio) (A, from start)

9. Delayed reharmonisation – use of diminished chords and ninths

Thine be the glory (Maccabaeus) (in E flat, use G dim in 2nd line)

10. Delayed reharmonisation – major/minor swaps

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing (Dunedin)

11. Tension resolution at final cadence

Tell out my soul (Woodlands)

12. Jazz techniques – Blues style with flattened thirds and swing rhythm;

What a friend we have in Jesus (Converse, blues style)

13. Jazz techniques – Walking bass:

Mine eyes have seen the glory (Battle Hymn)

Writing the new harmony down – either by hand or with software

- I use Finale software on my computer, but other software like Sibelius is fine to use.
- I set up three staves – the top staff for the descant (which I write after the reharmonisation).
- The other two staves are for the accompaniment – which is usually four parts, sometimes more, depending on the chords I want to use.
- I start by writing the hymn melody in the 2nd staff.
- Then I write the pedal part in the 3rd staff. For me, what I write is governed by what I can hear in my head. It might be a hymn tune for which I have improvised a different harmony while singing it at church, or I have improvised during the offering.

- After the melody and bass parts are notated, it's then a matter of filling in the inner parts according to the new harmony. That's the difficult part. Again, for me it's governed by what I hear in my head.
- After finishing the first draft, I make sure it's saved on file and then I print it out. I go to the organ and play it to find any errors, omissions or typos, and to assess the harmonic progression.
- I sometimes find that my writing is more conservative than what I want to play. So I scribble on the 1st draft adding extra notes or altering the harmony.
- Next, it's back to the computer to produce the 2nd draft. I would the add extra notes to some chords, perhaps to make the chords more 'crunchy'. I might add more passing notes or passing chords.
- The 2nd draft then has to be tested by playing it on the organ and revised again if I think it needs it. I use my ear to make these judgments.
- The reharmonisation should now be ready to add a descant. I will talk about that in another video.

Creative Last Verses

As I said at the beginning of the video, these reharmonisations, and more, can be seen in my book **Creative Last Verses** (3rd edition, 2020). It contains last verses for 150 hymns.

Please contact me if you would like to obtain a copy. My contact details are on my website www.stevennisbet.com.au

Also, I mentioned at the start of the video that I would say a bit at the end about how you could develop some relevant harmony skills to assist in writing reharmonisations. So here are 11 points to consider.

How to develop your harmony skills

1. Develop your facility with scales, keys, chords and cadences. I know that sounds a bit boring, but the greater knowledge and practical skill you have, the easier it becomes to re-harmonise hymns.
2. Play sequences of triad chords with each hand separately and then together – starting with C major, C# major, D Major, D# major, etc, up one octave up to C major. Repeat with minor keys.
3. Try playing simple tunes in different keys without music e.g. Happy Birthday. Start in G. Next modulate into A flat, A, B flat, B, C, etc. Use a dominant 7th to modulate up to the next key.
4. Now go back to G, and try to re-harmonise Happy Birthday, trying some different chords and chord inversions.

5. Repeat those steps for another well-known tune, perhaps the national anthem.
6. Find out how many different chords can be played with a nominated note on top. The Latin jazz song, One-Note Samba, by Antônio Carlos Jobim, is a great example of this concept. (Start on E).
7. Now try finding chords with G on top. Start with G major, then G minor, G 7th, C major, C minor, A 7th, E flat, F 9th, A flat major 7th, B flat 6th, etc.
8. Examine the score of The St Matthew Passion by J.S Bach. Look for the different harmonisations of the Passion Chorale.
9. Explore the harmonies in the Chorale Preludes of composers such as – JS Bach, Dietrich Buxtehude, Johannus Brahms, Franz Liszt, and Max Reger, along with the Chorale Improvisations of Sigfrid Karg-Elert.
10. Explore some reharmonisations and variations of more recent composers such as Eric Thiman, and George Thalben Ball, Noel Rawsthorne & June Nixon.
11. Then explore the Hymn Preludes and Improvisations of contemporary composers such as – Paul Manz, Gordon Young, Michael Burkhardt, Kristina Langlois, Edward Bairstow, Christopher Tambling, Denis Bédard, Charles Callahan, & Emma Lou Diemer.

If you have any questions about what I have said in this video please contact me. My email address is on my website: www.steven.nisbet.com.au

The script for this video is available too on my website as well as the websites of the Organ Society of Queensland and the Royal School of Church Music - Queensland Branch.

Thanks for watching.

Steven Nisbet

3rd April 2021

info@stevennisbet.com.au