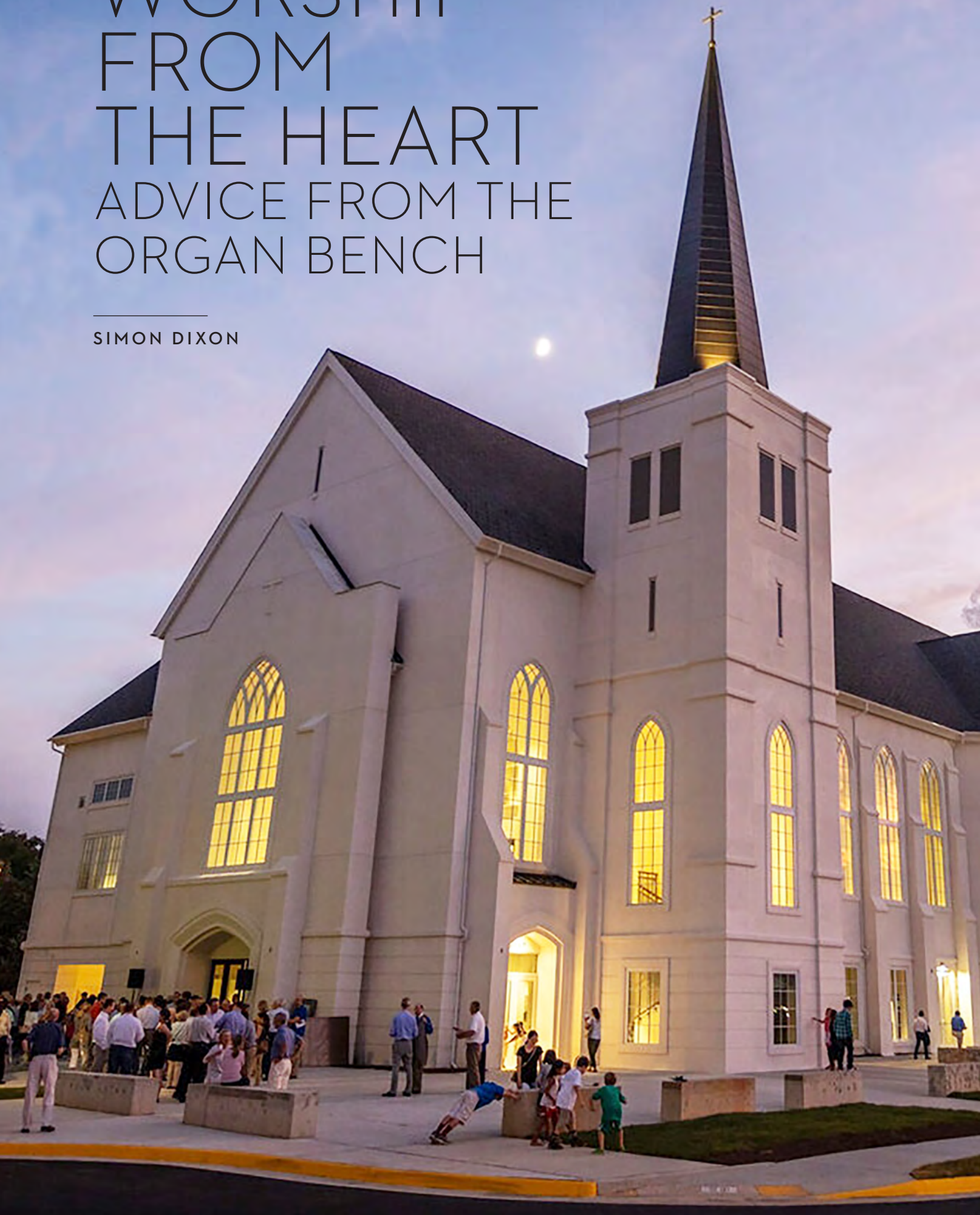


WORSHIP FROM THE HEART

ADVICE FROM THE ORGAN BENCH

SIMON DIXON





Left: The Falls Church Anglican, just outside Washington DC.

Simon Dixon is director of worship at The Falls Church Anglican, just outside Washington DC. In the first part of a two-part article, the second part of which will appear in March, he shares some top tips for those leading music in worship and extols the benefits of putting God at the heart of your musical life.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, wrote:

Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of the imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love; the surrender of the will to his purpose – and all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable ... [William Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, Gifford Lectures 1932–3 and 1933–4]

We live in a world that encourages worshipping the 'self'. It has been said that what you think about most in your day is what you tend to worship most, which is a sobering thought. God created us in his image to be in relationship with and worship him alone. Derived from the word 'worth-ship' (ascribing worth to something or someone), worship is God's gift to us. When we truly understand this, we can join the many great composers and hymn writers throughout the ages who wrote God-inspired music.

As American pastor and author A.W. Tozer (1897–1963) said in an address to a Youth for Christ convention, 'God wants worshippers first. Jesus did not redeem us to make us workers, but to make us worshippers.' At the end of his manuscripts, J.S. Bach wrote *Soli Deo Gloria* – 'glory to God alone'. I include these quotations because I found it to be life changing when I finally understood, in my heart as well as my head, that, as in the parable of the talents, our calling as church musicians is to use and grow God's musical gifts for God's glory. I had previously believed that the pressure of performance rested firmly on my shoulders and how hard I practised, and this brought with it the anxiety and stress felt by many performers. I drove myself hard, including making my feet bleed from over-practice. I would make myself exhausted from over-preparing and put myself through difficult

*'Let everything that has breath
praise the Lord'. Psalm 150*



Above: Simon Dixon leading the choir.

and stressful situations. Out of many examples, a few are: transposing on sight a handwritten brass arrangement when playing organ at the Proms at the Royal Albert Hall; giving an organ recital at St Paul's Cathedral suffering from the flu and a temperature of 104 degrees; and the time when the Archbishop of Canterbury processed down the aisle and the organ just kept going. I turned the wind pressure off, which was fine until I had to turn it back on again to play the opening hymn and the cypher was still there!

My heart is beating faster just remembering each one of those. You will undoubtedly have your own stories where playing, conducting or singing in a service or concert did not go according to plan. Yet in each instance, I would try to think of something positive to take away, such as 'this experience is character building', or 'this will be good for my *curriculum vitae*'. As I let go of control and began to

worship more from my heart, I realized that it wasn't all about me and how good or bad my performance was, but that God was and is more committed to his bride (the church) than I will ever be. As I moved from the self-inflicted pressure of 'it's all about how well I perform' to that of adoration with my attention on God and his grace and love for the church, I experienced a greater sense of freedom and peace. Away went the self-consciousness and anxiety. And do you know what? I found that my playing actually improved.

SOME PRACTICAL AREAS OF DISCIPLINE

Fellow church musicians will know that this role can be isolating and sometimes lonely. Someone once said to me, 'Simon, it's interesting that you chose the organ: an instrument where you can hide and not be seen and yet still make the loudest noise!' I remember enjoying not having to face people, except perhaps at the end of a concert when I would sometimes have to run

down from the loft to take a self-conscious bow before the applause stopped.

At times, church musicians need to interact with others, whether the choir, instrumentalists, soloists, congregation or clergy, and this is the area in which I have been most challenged to grow. I have found that many of the disciplines necessary to be a church musician are learnt away from the organ bench. I could write an article about each one of them, and you will doubtless think of others that are equally important when leading worship, so here are my top 14 for you to consider:

1. Be consistent and organized. Plan worship for the liturgical calendar in advance, informing and booking musicians, and pay particular attention to planning special services such as lessons and carols, Christmas Eve, Good Friday and Easter.
2. Order, hire and collate music in advance. Ideally, have a choir librarian to help you.
3. Be punctual and expect others to do the same. Start and end rehearsals on time.
4. Plan your warm-ups around the pieces you are about to rehearse.
5. Have a predetermined rehearsal schedule with timings and decide which areas of music need particular attention. Factor concentration and stamina into your timetable.
6. Work within the budget.
7. Maintain and tune the instruments under your care.
8. To avoid confusion, maintain a choir seating chart based on voice quality, character, height and experience (this is an art in itself).
9. Consider having choir section leaders who can help care for the choir and answer relevant questions.
10. Regularly review the worship you are offering and the musicians you are leading; have a body of people you trust (a choir council) to help and advise you.
11. Create an easy audition pathway for those seeking to join your music group while maintaining, for the sake of Sunday worship and those already

taking part, the standard of musicianship you have set. For some this may mean taking lessons and re-auditioning at a later opportunity.

12. Pray together. Be flexible. Laugh and cry with one another. Plan social events outside of the Sunday schedule.
13. Be personable, humble, gracious and kind as you work and encourage others, whether that's the choir, instrumentalists, congregation or clergy.
14. Seek to maintain a good working relationship with your clergy.

On the last point, I have found that maintaining a mutually healthy relationship with the clergy is vital if church worship is to thrive. There is so much that can be said about this, and it seems to me that both theological and music colleges have only recently started paying enough attention to the issue. There can be misunderstandings on both sides – most often due to a lack of ongoing communication and comprehension. I have been fortunate to serve under gracious and godly pastors in all the churches in which I have played, but I also know that there are others, both musicians and clergy, who have been less fortunate, and it can be distressing if not addressed. One key area of potential conflict seems to be around the choice of worship: traditional or contemporary, a subject I will expand on in the second of these two articles.

It is important that we grow in our ability to plan, practise, prepare organ registrations, turn up before the rehearsal starts and be personable. If, for example, I have to choose between two good singers, I will often choose the one who is easier to work with rather than someone who is demanding, unprepared or unpunctual.

As church musicians, I believe our role is like that of ushers or waiters who escort you to your seat or serve your meal with a deference that doesn't draw attention to themselves. We have the privilege, through the choral pieces and hymns we choose and sing, of ushering the congregation into the very throne room of God.

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LEADING HYMNS FROM THE ORGAN BENCH

Hymns such as 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven', 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty', 'Tell out, my soul' and 'Immortal, invisible' have all stood the test of time. They are majestic and glorious to sing and will continue to be sung for generations to come: they are just as relevant today as when they were written. I encourage those of you who are organists to resist the temptation simply to mark which number they are in the hymn book and how many verses you're playing. Instead, spend just as much time preparing the hymns and sung service music as you do your preludes, postludes and choir music. It takes great skill to play a hymn effectively. Here are a few factors to consider.

1. Play accurate and clear introductions and cut-offs between verses.
2. Choose tempos that keep a hymn moving while allowing for breaths.
3. Play in keys a congregation can comfortably sing. D tends to be the ceiling I encourage for a congregation. For example, 'feed me now and evermore' from 'Guide me, O thou great redeemer', all on a D.
4. Anticipate and lead a congregation as they sing. Pause ever so slightly to gather them on the first note.
5. Play slightly ahead of the congregation to keep the music flowing at the tempo. If not, it may drag and get slower and slower.

6. Occasionally articulate the alto, tenor and bass while keeping the melody legato. This will help to keep the hymn moving forwards.

7. Choose a registration that is different for each verse, including playing the melody occasionally on a different manual to complement the voices and the general feel of the hymn (look to support rather than squash). For instance, I would register 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind' differently from 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven'.

8. Anticipate and breathe with the phrases as a singer would. This is so important.

9. Understand and complement the meaning of words being sung as you play.

Like shepherding sheep (the Bible often compares us to sheep), unless given clear direction we are prone to go astray. An organist needs to lead hymns and service music in such a way as if to say, 'this is where we are going; come with me.'

TRADITIONAL VERSUS CONTEMPORARY

I remember as an organ student being told to avoid churches that had drums or guitars, that they were 'the enemy' of the organ and would, when introduced, lead eventually to the church organ being broken up for firewood! In the second of these two articles I will include some observations about the sometimes thorny issue of contemporary worship music, from the perspective of someone who has spent the last 30 years of my 40-year career working in both fields.

Below: The adult choir singing in a worship service with brass and organ at The Falls Church Anglican.

