

## WILL YOU PLAY THE ORGAN FOR OUR WEDDING?



*Whether you're a practised hand at playing for weddings, or someone for whom such a event is a rarity, there is a good amount of extra work involved in providing music which is meaningful to the couple at the centre of the whole event. In this article, abbreviated from a piece first published in the June 2006 edition of Church Music Quarterly, Anne Marsden Thomas gives a comprehensive overview of the logistics and issues involved. While primarily written for organists, choir directors will also find much of this advice useful.*

The first time you receive such an invitation you may feel both excited and alarmed. You may feel even more alarmed when you realise that the engaged couple sees you as an expert on all aspects of the musical arrangements, even if you have never before played for a wedding.

### What is involved?

At the service the organist usually plays:

- Quiet music before the service, for five to fifteen minutes
- Processional music, up to two minutes
- Hymns (usually two or three)
- Accompaniment to one or two anthems or songs, if requested ...
- And/or quiet music during the signing of the register, about ten minutes
- Recessional music, at least three minutes.

### Your first response to the invitation

Ensure that both you and the couple understand the commitment involved. You might like to double-check that the couple has already booked the church where they wish to be married! If you are not the regular organist, the couple must also seek permission for you to play, and depending on the resident organist's contract, they should expect to pay the regular organist a fee for non-attendance.

Guidance on fees for organists, and choir directors where appropriate, is available from the RSCM to Affiliated churches and Individual Members. These vary according to the status of the church, the experience of the musicians involved, and whether the service is filmed. Advice for freelance organists is also available to those who are members of the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM).

After agreeing these initial arrangements, fix a date for a planning meeting, and exchange contact details with the couple.

### Preparing for the planning meeting

There are three main discussion areas:

1. A music list
2. A draft order of service
3. Fees

#### 1. *Music list*

This is a list of the preludes, marches and interludes you are prepared to play, and some well-known, appropriate hymns. Organise your list into 'very familiar choices', 'innovative ideas' etc, so that the couple can readily identify which suits their style. In your music shop you will find many books of wedding music for organ and all of these contain arrangements of the most

familiar marches. However, most of these include hosts of completely redundant notes, making the organist's life unnecessarily difficult, so choose or adapt the arrangements to suit your realistic playing standard. Similarly, check that the hymns you are offering are well learned and comfortable to play.

## 2. *Draft order of service*

This is to help the couple see where their chosen music will fit in. Ideally, ask the officiating minister or priest to sketch this out for you, or use previous orders of services from weddings in that church.

## 3. Fees

Advice on fees is available from the RSCM to Affiliated churches and Individual Members, including additional fees for the filming of a wedding. These vary according to the status of the church, as well as the status of the organist. For freelance organists, further advice and guidance is available to members of the Incorporated Society of Musicians.

## The planning meeting

'Sell' the music on your list: play snippets and talk persuasively about each item. Write down any item that gets a positive response, congratulate them on their good taste, and move on. Choosing their music should be a lovely experience for them, but you don't want it to take too long.

If they ask for something not on your list, these are your options.

- a) If you think that their chosen piece will be suitable, fun to learn, and useful for future services, say yes, provided that *they* provide a legal copy of the music in an arrangement appropriate for your playing standard and instrument.
- b) Explain that you are able to offer only the music from your list. Unless you are charging a fee suitable for a professional organist, this is a fair response. It is unreasonable for the couple to ask an amateur organist to spend valuable time learning a piece which may receive only one performance.
- c) Explain that the piece will not suit the service, or the organ you play. Some couples request secular songs which have unsuitable texts or connotations for a church service; consult the clergy if unsure. Some couples request a non-organ piece or a pop item which would sound silly on a church organ. Recommend that they play the unsuitable piece at the reception instead and suggest the nearest alternative from your list.
- d) Suggest they bring in a professional organist to share the playing with you. (If they wish to replace you altogether with a professional organist you are still entitled to a fee for the planning meeting and/or, if you are the regular organist of their chosen church, for non-appearance.)

## Choosing the hymns

While churchgoers will have no difficulty choosing suitable hymns, others may struggle to identify three hymns they even know. In this case try suggesting:

- Morning has broken (tune *Bunessan*)
- Praise, my soul, the King of heaven (tune *Praise my soul*)
- The Lord's my Shepherd (tune *Crimond*)
- Love divine, all loves excelling (several possible tunes; check which one they want)
- Now thank we all our God (tune *Nun danket*)
- Lead us, heavenly father (tune *Mannheim*)
- Give me joy in my heart/Give me oil in my lamp (tune *Sing Hosanna*)

The following frequently requested hymns are usually chaotic in performance unless a strong choir leads the singing:

- And did those feet in ancient time (tune *Jerusalem*)
- Make me a channel of thy peace (tune *St Francis*)
- Be thou my vision/Lord of all hopefulness (tune *Slane*)

*Further suggestions can be found in the music list on the RSCM web page.*

## **Copyright issues**

There are two potential hazards regarding copyright. The couple may ask you to play from photocopied sheet music to play, and/or they may wish to print a service leaflet containing words (and even music) of hymns in copyright. *Advice on copyright issues is available elsewhere on the RSCM web page.*

## **At the service**

Don't forget to work out a reliable system of cues, for the start of the bridal procession and again for the start of the recessional march. Cues for the start of items can be relayed via a flashing bulb at the console, carefully adjusted mirrors, a clergy announcement 'will the congregation please stand', or a 'runner' to come and tell you. Make sure you know what each cue means: for example, 'the bride has arrived' needs a different cue from 'the bride is ready to walk in'. Check you can see where the bride and groom will stand, so that you can judge when to conclude the processional march.

You need to know your organ music extremely well because you will be repeatedly distracted by cues, unexpected noises and various unforeseen events. Mark suitable termination chords in the pieces you will play before the service, for the bride's processional march and for the music during the signing of the register. Try not to be disheartened by congregational bustle and chatter during your pieces: *some* people there will certainly appreciate your music, even if they have to struggle to hear it. If the congregation is exceptionally noisy during the prelude or the signing of the register, try alternating quiet pieces with loud interludes and/or silence.

Have some extra short items ready in case signing the register takes longer than expected, or if the bride is late. However, if she is more than ten minutes late there is no need to provide a free concert if you don't want to – just stop playing and wait (you could gently warn the couple at the planning meeting that you intend to do this). Play the hymns boldly and rhythmically, whether or not a shy congregation is joining in – they might summon the courage to sing as the service progress.

After the service, take a few minutes to jot down what you have learned from your first experience, so that next time, you can reply with informed confidence: 'Yes, I would love to play for your wedding!'

*Anne Marsden Thomas is a distinguished organist and teacher, and is Director of the St Giles International Organ School based at St Giles Church, Cripplegate in the Barbican, London.*