

Presenter Notes

BYU Community Hymn Sing
BYU Organ Workshop
Thursday, August 6, 2026
Concert Hall, Music Building
Don Cook

This is one of my dreams - to be here with you in this beautiful concert hall, playing on this wonderful new pipe organ to accompany you in singing some great hymns. This hall and its great organ – and I – can hardly wait to make music with you tonight!

This event is part of the 25th annual BYU Organ Workshop. Developing this workshop was an important part of my career as an organ professor here. And although I retired a year ago, I am honored to be a part of this year's workshop and especially this hymn singing experience.

One tiny housekeeping item: many of you received a battery-operated candle as you entered the Concert Hall. If you did, please keep it handy. We'll use it a little later.

How did I choose the hymns for tonight? They all have special meaning or purpose for me, which I will share with you before we sing each one.

My job tonight is to do all I can to inspire your best singing through the choices I make and the way I accompany you at the organ. *Your* job is to sing your little hearts out! Please resist the urge to stop singing in order to focus on what I'm doing down here. Instead, join me in one big ensemble as we sing these praises. Changing the *sound* of the organ between verses often reflects their changing imagery and spirit. In so doing, I hope to assist you to better resonate with the message of the hymn – or at least to rattle your minds loose by playing a little differently than you may be accustomed to hearing.

On the front of the program you will see basic instructions for each hymn. Unless it says otherwise, you can choose to sing either in parts or in unison. Singing in unison means everyone sings the melody of the hymn – not their particular voice part. Most of the time I ask you to sing unison on the last verse so that the organ can play a new harmonization – a “free accompaniment.” Singing in unison is very powerful, since everyone's vocal energy is focused on the melody. Combining that unity with the new harmony coming from the organ can be a moving experience.

On the back of the program are the stop combinations that I am using for each of these hymns. They may be helpful to organists who are interested in exploring new combinations at their organs.

Most of the free accompaniments that I am using are unpublished. Fortunately we are making them all available online to organists who are registered either in person or online for this workshop. The link is online in the class description for this event *but will be unavailable after one week*, so download them soon. This is a rough compilation of free accompaniments, not a publication, but you are welcome to use them if you'd like. They're for the organists among you who are joining us tonight. Please do not copy or share them.

Now let's get singing some hymns. I chose "Come, Rejoice (Hymn 9)" as our first hymn because of its message. We have come together tonight to rejoice in our Savior through song. The hymn mentions that "truth bursts out in radiant light." I have chosen "light" as a theme for tonight. In the context of this hymn text, light is truth, and according to the apostle John, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." He and His truth are the reasons for which we rejoice tonight.

1. Come, Rejoice (Hymn 9)

Our next hymn is another call to rejoicing – *a massive one*. It calls upon multitudes of natural elements to join us in doing so:

All creatures
The burning sun
The silver moon
The rushing wind
The sailing clouds
The rising morn
The evening light
The flowing water
The masterful fire
The Mother Earth
And her flow'rs and fruits

This hymn has been important to me since my youth. Our family had a Tabernacle Choir LP titled, "The Lord's Prayer," which included Gustav Holst's Psalm 148. Alexander Schreiner's organ playing was most compelling to me, and that recording may have been the single brightest light that drew me towards the organ as a young man.

2. All Creatures of Our God and King (Hymn 62)

Now I know it's August, but I wanted to include two Christmas hymns tonight. The first one, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, I chose because to me it is a powerful part of the Christmas season. It includes this sentence: "Light and life to all he brings, Ris'n with healing in his wings." In plain English it seems to say that He (Christ) brings light, life, and healing to all. He brings these gifts *to us*, but they *live in us* only as we accept them.

I also chose this hymn because I have had a hard time finding a good free accompaniment for it in published sources. So I composed my own years ago that I'd like to share with you tonight. Since there are only two verses in this hymn, the unison verse jumps up on us quickly, so sing in unison with power and confidence on verse 2.

3. Hark! The Herald Angels Sing (Hymn 209)

Light serves as an *important symbol* at Christmas time. One slightly rearranged line of the hymn "Silent Night" mentions it in addressing the newborn Christ child: "Son of God, love's pure radiant light beams from thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace." What a beautiful image – a new child whose very face beams with divine love and grace!

If you have one of the candles, turn it over and make sure you can turn on the switch easily. Then turn it right back off until your cue.

As I step to the organ the house lights will go down. After I play the introduction and you begin singing verse 1, those in the front row who have candles, turn them on and hold them up. If these were real candles, you would then turn around and share your light of Christ with those behind you. So when you see candles lit in the row in front of you, light *your* candle. Once we reach the top of this section, then let the candlelight move along the two sides.

In all of this, for heaven's sake, keep singing! Especially because you'll be on your own for verse three, singing acapella and in parts the beautiful words I just spoke about. Sing with confidence and feeling as we enjoy the light of Christ symbolized by the candles.

4. Silent Night (Hymn 204)

Thank you. You are welcome to keep your candles or return them to the ushers on your way out tonight.

The hymn "It Is Well with My Soul" was written by Horatio Gates Spafford after a series of devastating personal tragedies. In 1871 he lost much of his fortune in the Great Chicago Fire. Two years later, while his wife and four daughters were sailing to Europe ahead of him, their ship collided with another vessel and sank. His wife survived, but all four daughters drowned. As Spafford later crossed the Atlantic to join his grieving wife, the ship's captain pointed out the approximate location where his daughters had perished. It was during that voyage that Spafford penned the words of this hymn.

I hope that most of us will never experience tragedy to that degree. But all of us may experience grief, disappointment, anxiety, pain, hopelessness, or other trials in varying degrees of severity. My own family has had to endure the loss of a child. And I, for one, feel strength when I reflect on Spafford's words through this hymn, and also when I consider that many others have faced trials like ours and turned to God in spite of them.

Although the hymn does not use the word "light," certainly enlightenment is what is described in *this* sentence: "O Lord, haste the day when my *faith* shall be *sight*, The heav'ns be rolled back like a scroll."

5. It Is Well with My Soul (Hymn 1003)

Faith becoming sight. Heavens rolling back to reveal the next life. All made possible by the atonement of that Son of God who is referenced in all these hymns. In *His life* and *His ultimate gift* we find Earth's greatest dichotomies: from deepest darkness to brightest light. Perhaps none of our hymns are more vivid in their description of Christ's sacrifice than "O Savior, Thou Who Wearest a Crown." We read "crown" and understand both "king" and "thorns." Piercing, pain, grief, scorn, mocking and flailing, gall to drink, and the nailing. Yet even the lowliest of creatures can feel His presence. His Love. And how can we praise him? The next hymn says, "To thee *our love* we bring." That's how we truly come to him – by loving him like He loves us.

My free accompaniment tries to capture the pain and darkness described in this hymn, but then turns to redemption in the light and triumph of His atonement.

6. O Savior, Thou Who Wearest a Crown (Hymn 197)

One of the best ways to Love the Savior is to learn of him. Marvin Gardner's text, "Thy Holy Word" was set to music by organist and composer Robert Cundick. Following his retirement as tabernacle organist in 1991, Brother Cundick and I worked on several projects together as he continued his passion for enhancing worship through music. In his honor I chose this simple but beautiful hymn. May we find inspiration "to learn His word, and live it all our days."

7. Thy Holy Word (Hymn 279)

The Church of Jesus Christ has placed great emphasis in recent years on worshipping Christ, learning of Him, and practicing His gospel *at home*. But perhaps the message of the hymn, "Love at home" is too tall an order in real life. True, life is great when there is love at home. But what about when there's *not* love at home? What are we to do when there is strife? When there is separation? When we *set the stage* for love, but no one else seems to care? Someone very near and dear to me has taught me through her actions that love is *the* answer. That there is so much power in loving, that no setback is worth giving up on it. If someone leans towards becoming our enemy, loving them is the answer – not that it will necessarily change the relationship, but because it preserves the light in *our own* life.

So as we sing, consider giving love in our homes a try for one more day. And maybe the reason that *God smiles on high* is that He knows what happens inside *us* when we nourish Love at Home.

8. (Hymn 294)

I saved this next hymn to near the end because it is my way of bearing my testimony at the conclusion of this little event. I don't verbalize it often, but I hope that through most of my actions, choices, and my music that my family and friends get the message – I know that my Redeemer lives. The last verse of this hymn is especially powerful to me, and Gerald Dick's reharmonization seems to catch that power.

9. I Know That My Redeemer Lives (Hymn 136)

Just as our first hymns were a call to rejoicing, our last hymn is an invitation to continue our positive efforts, to "Press forward" in worthy pursuits – "with hope's bright flame alight in heart and mind." There's that light again – this time associated with hope. I have great hope for you and us as disciples of Christ. Many of you are so moved by great music that you have an eternal passion to share it with your family, friends, and fellow church goers. The efforts you *organists* make in sharpening your skills, which most often go unnoticed, are known by your Creator and I believe that He values your efforts in His service.

My beloved associate Vanja Watkins, who penned the music to "Press Forward, Saints," also composed the rather straight-forward but glorious free accompaniment. Its manuscript is included in the collection of free accompaniments that is made available to you organists for a week.

Thank you for joining me in song this evening. I am uplifted beyond description with gratitude, respect, and love for you and for our Savior, whose light fills my life.

10. Press Forward, Saints (Hymn 81)