

“That song wasn’t meant to be played on the guitar.”

As a Music Director or Liturgical Musician, you’ve undoubtedly have been faced with the prospect of adapting your instrument and playing style (or that of an instrumentalist in your ensemble) to idioms that are either not inherently guitar friendly, or that are close-enough to Country that the default Boom-Chuck-Chuck rhythm all too seductively (and unappealingly) just falls into place. Swing tempo or Gospel pieces like “Rain Down” and “Soon and Very Soon” are perfect cases in point.

Rain Down, by Jaime Cortez:

Yes, waltzes do tend too easily to bring out the heavy ONE-two-three, ONE-two-three beat.

While the ONE is, of course, the pulse beat, in Gospel and Swing, it’s more often the reference point for the syncopation and push that spring from, and around, it. That’s a tough concept for guitarists, unless they’ve had experience with jazz, where the pulse is about patterned movement, not about the more static demarcation of beat endemic to folk, country and rock.

Another complication with idiomatic music in church is that it really is best unfolded with a true rhythm section of piano, bass, drums, and guitar. The bass is critically important, assuming the paradoxical role of enforcing the rhythmic

and chordal structure, while also leaving room and offering the invitation for complimentary rhythmic pulses which add the idiomatic color.

What makes it more interesting (and difficult) is that indeed, the vocal lines of songs like Rain Down may be direct and 1-2-3- pulsed, where beat one is always a sung syllable (no rests or staggered measures), but the real rhythmic feel of the piece is more 1-2-3and 1-2-3and.... The “And”, second pulse of beat three, is the Gospel edge, and really changes the sense from Tennessee Waltz to Alabama Soft Shoe.

A sidebar here--the notion of movement, the idea of dance, in liturgical music is, I feel absolutely essential to the interpretation and presentation of compelling, authentic, accessible church music. The intention of singing is to remind us that we come into church with a soul, yes, but with a body, too--a body that is as holy from the neck down as it is from the neck up!

I’m not advocating for Liturgical dance at every liturgy--I’m advocating that we musicians acknowledge the inherent physicality of what we are doing. Our feet may not be cha-cha-ing, or soft-shoeing, but the sense of our surrender to the natural, instinctual beckoning of the beat is critical to communicating the “We come to this place of worship as fully engaged human beings, mind, souls and body (or booty, if you like)”

Anyway, back to Rain Down--

Have the guitarists try a 4 strum per measure pattern, where strums 1,2,3 are straight and right on the beat, but 4 is on the upbeat, the second pulse of 3, and leads right into the flow of the next cycle of 1-2-3and, 1-2-3and.....

Even before you do this, I’d encourage you to invite the guitarists to put their instruments down for 5 minutes while you play the piece as the accompaniment is written. As they hear the “and” push off of beat three, and as they even watch your body move on the bench and the keyboard, they’ll have to sense the difference between the 1-2-3 of waltz, and the 1-2-3and 1-2-3and of this piece.

Unfortunately, sometimes even piano accompaniments are dumbed down for ease of play--a very, very bad idea, unless the accompanist is skilled at improvising, and filling in what the composition hungers for.

Typically, I find GIA piano accompaniments more reflective of the author’s intentions, and more helpful to guitarists. I don’t even play new pieces from the guitar book until I’ve seen the piano arrangements. I’d encourage your guitarists to try, if not abandoning their guitar accompaniment books, at least begin their learning of a song by reading off of your piano accompaniment. They’ll SEE first hand, as they stand around you and the piano, and HEAR

what is happening with the accompaniment so that they can decide what of the accompaniment they will imitate, and what they will improvise off of.

This brings up another point--if you have 2 or 3 guitarists, it's a waste to have them all doing the same thing. This is not a popular idea, but no ensemble needs more than 2 guitarists. Most guitarists sing, and they sing better when they don't have to divide their energies between playing and singing.

If you are blessed with multiple guitarists, make sure that they have different tasks. One should be the color player, adding melodic/harmonic riffs, like the lead guitarist in a band. The other, the rhythm player.

If the players are not skilled enough yet to divide our rhythm and lead, at least have them play the inversions of chords by having one play chord positions on the lower frets, without a capo, and the other, on the upper frets, appropriately transposed for the capoed positions.

I've had some success in converting an extraneous guitar player into a bass player. If the player is up to it, and he's amplified, as a prelude to buying a bass guitar he can start learning and playing some basic bass accompaniments using the GDAE strings of his regular six-string guitar.

If these ideas don't work, having the third guitarist rotate into a schedule so that they are

not axed out is another way to keep the two guitar ideal while honoring the ministry desires of the third.

The best place to work with the guitarists on such things is NOT in the main rehearsal with everyone there. It's not time efficient, and it can be embarrassing for the guitarists to be stumbling in public. I'd suggest, if your whole ensemble rehearsal starts at 7:30, get the rhythm section in at 6:45, run through the pieces with them listening and not playing as you point out technical subtleties, and then bring them in to play with you. First you play, then the bass (if he's seasoned, then the guitarists.

I wouldn't be surprised if, when your singers arrive at 7:30, the actual rehearsal time needed for the whole group would be reduced and more effective because the instrumentalists are already on board and you can focus on the vocal blend, interpretation, etc., with the singers.

Soon and Very Soon: African American Traditional:

Yes, Hee-Haw, Peter Paul and Mary, New Christie Minstrels--White people singing Black music.

Of course, they can--if they (we) understand the idiom and it's subtleties.

Actually, I don't see this piece as a guitar piece at all. Piano? Yes. Or, a Capella? Yes. Guitar? No.

The benefit of having multiple instruments coming in and out of the ensemble is that each piece played can have a texture, a flavor distinct from the other pieces.

I love playing guitar, but there are times in the Liturgy when I don't play, either because the particular piece is not improved by the guitar's addition, or there is just a need to intersperse the experience with different instrumentation. Even within a song, it's good to vary the accompaniment in intensity or instrumental complexity, reflecting the movement of the lyrics and the overall drama of the composition.

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