

Music for churches without a musician
smallchurchmusic.com

This is the story of a website (www.smallchurchmusic.com) that provides mainly Pipe Organ accompaniments free of charge, to assist churches with their congregational singing.

The site owner and organist is Clyde McLennan, of Perth (Western Australia).

The site has grown over the past 30 months beyond the wildest expectations, with visitors from over 155 countries making more than one million downloads.



Clyde McLennan
*(Organist, computer programmer,
Baptist Minister)*

A. The need

My organ training began at Lismore Methodist Church (NSW) in the 1950's. I later trained and served as an ordained Baptist minister in several smaller churches in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania. Consequently, I was conscious of the struggle many churches have with the music for their services and other ministries.

When I retired from the 'worker-priest' ministry and was living in Melbourne, I was organist for several years at Kew Baptist, and also occasionally played at Canterbury and Camberwell Baptist when their organist was unavailable.

Early in the 2000's I retired after 30 years from my secular employment as lead computer systems designer and programmer of shop floor systems for a large manufacturer, and we moved to Perth (WA) so we could be near family.

In seeking to address the problem of music for churches without musicians, I struggled with two main issues:

- (a) I found making acoustic recordings very difficult to do because of the high quality recording equipment required,
- (b) Recordings highlight any imperfections in one's playing, even the small variations in timing and the occasional wrong note which go unnoticed in the live situation of playing in church.

During our early days in Perth, when looking around for a local church to attend, I went to a church using the midi hymn transcriptions commonly available from the Internet. The lack of 'human' feel of these transcriptions disturbed me for it seemed to rob the hymn and music of all its richness. So I resolved that anything I offered to the churches must be played by experienced church musicians who had a feeling for the hymns and their meaning.

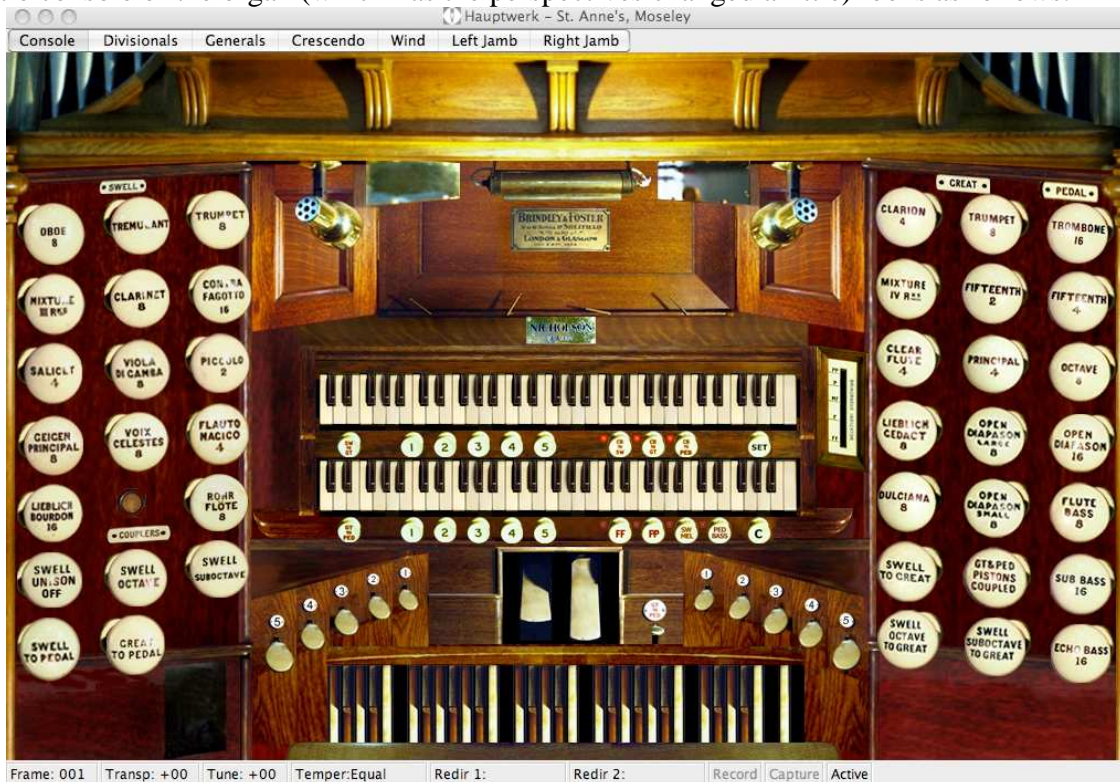
B. The Solution

In searching the Internet for possible solutions, I came across 'Hauptwerk' virtual organs. At first it was only a casual interest as the initial cost was reasonably high for me. However, as I continued to play their sample files, I became convinced that this 'Virtual Pipe Organ' software contained the answers to my two dilemmas indicated above, for:

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- (a) The high quality recording of the organ was already done. The Hauptwerk system supplies recordings of each individual pipe on the organ (includes the pipe startup sound, multiple continuous note samples, and the shut-off sound) together with all the other organ noises (eg, tracker action, swell shutters, blower noise etc).
- (b) I could drive these 'virtual organs' either directly from my home organ (for real time playing) or via an intermediate midi file, the midi file option provided me with an opportunity to correct those minor playing errors which stand out in a recording.

So I purchased the basic Hauptwerk organ in 2006 from crumhorn-labs.com. The basic package comes with pipe recordings of a typical church pipe organ. Once loaded onto my computer, the software console of the organ (which has the perspectives changed a little) looks as follows:



(The stops, and pistons and notes can all be operated with the mouse, or controlled via the midi file).

I was soon captivated by this setup, for I felt like I was sitting on the organ bench controlling the sound of organ by adjusting the stops, swell etc as the edited midi file played the notes of my live playing.

Yet the result was not completely as I would like. It did not seem to properly replicate the richness and depth of the pipe organs I played in the live church setting.

To me the problem was in two separate areas:

- (a) The lack of normal building reverberation which greatly affects the organ sound, (the basic organ only had minimal reverberation) and
- (b) The mix of pipe types, I needed more of the wooden pipes which provide the full but yet mellow organ sounds.

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The solution to these two issues, I believe was again in the Hauptwerk system. I purchased two more organs as follows:

- (a) A large 4 manual cathedral organ from the Czech Republic. This provided the much needed reverberation (plus additional stop tonal qualities)
- (b) A 'do it yourself' Hauptwerk organ which had 150+ stops of all types. I was able to construct a 'software' organ just of ranks that I needed to produce a balanced organ.

(I also purchased a theatre organ from the USA, and this provided me with percussion instruments that I have been able to include in some Christmas carols (bells & chimes) and hymns from African countries (eg castanets)).

Armed now with an edited midi file of my playing, and with a number of organs, I record each organ separately, changing stops etc as the organs are playing. The organ software outputs a 'wave' file.

Mixing of these three wave files provides an opportunity to balance the sound of each organ in respect to the other organs, and also the spread (pan) of the sound. Through this process, a composite MP3 audio file was prepared for the website.

I now have a file that meets, I believe, the needs of the churches, and during the process overcome the problems of recording and minor playing errors. And all this I can do from the comfort of my home, at my own time and pace, and with virtually no ongoing costs.

C. What about copyright?

All public domain music offered on the site can be downloaded without charge.

For copyright music, a 'download' royalty fee must be paid to the copyright holder for each download. The normal church CCLI licence covers usage in the services, but does not cover the 'download' royalty.

Copyright regulations have changed over the past few years to come to terms with the internet. For example, APRA/AMCOS (The Australian Performing Rights Association and the Australian Mechanical Copyright Owners Society) recently introduced a 'downloads' copyright system. This allows owners of sites to pay 'after the event' for the number of times the music has been downloaded.

This has been a wonderful provision, as it now makes it possible for me to offer copyrighted music without having to first make a significant up-front financial investment. In fact there are no up-front costs for me.

For my site, users wanting to download copyright music can purchase on-line 'copyright credits' for 15c US each, each credit allows them to download one song. (Unused credits are held in a copyright account for use on subsequent visits.) They can purchase these by using their credit card in countries where PayPal is available, or alternatively through a recently added facility to the site of paying by charging to their telephone account, which covers over 200 countries and does not require the use of a credit card.

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D. The response

To put it simply, the response has been overwhelming.

At the time of writing this (March, 2009), the number of downloads has gone past the one million mark, and to over 155+ countries. Significantly, people from more than half of those countries would visit the site each month.

I feel like the boy in the Bible story of the loaves and fishes – through the simple offering of what I can still do, despite the limitations imposed by a minor stroke, to ‘feed’ music to hundreds of churches. It is beyond my comprehension.

Currently there are nearly 2000 hymn MP3 files available on the site, of which nearly 400 are copyrighted music. I aim to record and add three hymns a day, which is a full day’s work.

The number of encouraging e-mails from people from all parts of the globe has spurred me on to continue with the work. A number of ministers have sent me the full music version of their hymn-books, which I gladly add to my resource pool for future recordings.

I try to keep abreast of newly published hymn books, and recently obtained the New USA Baptist Hymnal (published Aug, 2008), the English Hymns Old & New, (2008) and the Lutheran Service Book (Missouri 2006).

My playing skills have been challenged and extended into a wide variety of music which hitherto I had never attempted, including music from different countries. What could be more varied than the hymn arrangements by Bach to the very rhythmic music of South Africa, or the ancient hymn tunes to that of the modern composers, or a sung communion service to a gospel hymn.

E. Conclusion

It would be an understatement of the greatest magnitude if I said I consider it a great privilege and joy to have this opportunity to serve Christ and His Church in this way in my retirement.

I think the words of a Reformed Anglican Catholic Bishop in the USA expresses the thrill that is mine, when he e-mailed, ‘you have turned our church into a singing church again’.