

Worship Team Training

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Classical Pianists in a Worship Band

Piano 911

Okay all you pianist and keyboardist out there in worship bands – this article is for you and your worship leader! I get this question all the time and I have found that answers are rarely addressed. We are talking about what to do with the classically trained pianist or any keyboard/piano player in worship teams. Whether if your team is big, small or flying solo, there is something here for everyone to build on your piano technique and to minister in a fresh new way.

From my clinics as well as from numerous phone calls and emails, I have heard many concerns from piano players (and worship leaders) of their function and role as a pianist in the worship band. It seems that there are two polarities on this topic. On one side of the earth, you have piano players, who are the most talented individuals, yet they are without band experience. On the other side of the world, you have talented leaders and other musicians, but they are without piano playing experience. So here we have two worlds colliding; I hear frustrations on both ends. The funny thing is that each person thinks that the other has a personal problem or misunderstanding. Well, let's agree that both sets of people come from different background areas. This doesn't mean that one is right over the other. In the bigger picture, there are two larger issues at hand: the relational and the technical.

Understanding Your Pianist:

The relational issue is simple. Seek to better understand the person as you work together. Like the above paragraph, just because a person comes from a different set of background experiences makes them no less or greater than you or the group. Each one of us posses a unique and different set of skills, talents and insights. The benefit in this relationship is when we learn from one another, we draw upon both weaknesses and strengths.



Romans 12:3 says: For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

As you are a band, make it an opportunity to learn and work together. Keep in mind, not everyone shares your same strengths and weaknesses. The best opportunity is to learn from those who can help you progress in your weaknesses, as you help others improve by your strengths. Moreover, when you take time to understand people, it shows how much you care. In creating an environment of care and acceptance, you facilitate a positive learning experience, stemmed from a teachable spirit.

When instrumentalist or singers have a difficult time to adjust musically, it is because they may be learning a new set of musical rules and are competing with old habits. By fact, they want to improve otherwise they would not be there. The most challenging issue you may have, may not be the other person, but you in learning a new area of expertise or teaching method. If you are the leader in this position, it is your job to lead and equip your team. Even if the most or least you can do is find a teacher for that instrumentalist – do it. Great leaders either teach or find great teachers to help empower their teams. Education is the best tool you can provide because you are edifying and equipping the Body for the work of the Church (Eph. 4:12). Your team will thank you, as you are freed-up to move on to other things.

Understanding The Technical:

From the keyboard player's perspective, they honestly feel like a fish out of water. Here you have a great piano player that feels like they have their hands tied (I'll refer back to this point). They are at a loss of what to do. The guitar player or the worship leader is telling them they're playing the music wrong, but yet they don't explain to the pianist how to play the music in a way that's conducive with the band. Because the leader or other musicians are not as experienced to communicate musically, the piano/keyboard players are left in the dark. The main default answer is: just make it sound good, play slower or don't play at all.

Let's start off by explaining what is familiar to pianists. Most piano and keyboard players come from a classically trained background; hymns and classical piano sonatas are most common from their music experience. Because of the nature of typical piano music or hymns, the piano player is responsible for all three major forms of song: melody, harmony and rhythm - all played by two hands. Piano players are known for being the one-man band. Now if we were to create a band from each of these sections we would have three instruments: lead guitar, piano and bass. However, pianists are familiar with covering all parts in playing alone. When they join a band, they continue to play in the same mold. This is typical in many keyboard players in worship bands. What do you do? Earlier, I referred to the statement: tie the hands – this was my exact response to a worship leader and pianist's question from a clinic. I'll explain.



Instead of the piano player trying to catch all the music and play it at once, it is easier to break everything down by section. Let's use the previous analogy of the lead guitar player pianist and bassist. Here each instrument is responsible for their individual part. Where does that leave the piano? Exactly. In the middle. This means the pianist is left to play in the middle register with tight chord voicings. It also means that the piano player is going to play half of what they normally play. Most often, individuals in worship bands typically overplay their part. The easiest solution is to either play one half or one quarter of the music. Let's try this with the piano player.

Tie the hands in the middle! Let the bass player play the notes that are normally played in the left hand by the pianist. Vice versa, the lead guitar will play the notes that are played in the pianist's right hand. Take the music down by a half. In other words, instead of the piano player being responsible for every 8th and 16th note, let's create a fourth member of the band and call him a drummer. Sounds like God creating man and woman! Anyway, the drummer is going to pick up the busy rhythms, as they are played on the high-hat, kick and snare. There you go! The pianist is freed up from all the responsibilities in being the one man band.

Each of the instruments have an equal part making up the whole. There is an uncomfortable result. Having fewer notes to play does increase the impatience factor. It's like taking a track sprinter and confining to a walk-a-thon. All musicians and piano players need to develop a calm approach and patience in playing less. What you will find in this new approach is the ability to create texture – shaping the song and sound environment. To find sheet music examples of this article, visit: www.worshipteamtraining.com go to the Downloads Page.

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