

Hymn Transposition

The eighth in our series of articles on organ teaching, compiled by the RCO Academy Organ School's team of seventeen teachers under the direction of Anne Marsden Thomas. The team hopes that the guidance will be useful for those preparing for the LTRCO diploma (Licentiate Teacher of the Royal College of Organists), CertRCO or ARCO, and others who want to achieve a better result from their teaching.

Most advanced organists need to transpose at sight, whether they are playing accompaniments for solo performers, changing the keys of hymns to match preludes or postludes, harmonising melodic sequences, or developing their ability to improvise from a given theme. The typical student often approaches transposition fearfully; what is more, their progress through the initial stages can seem discouragingly slow. However, a *staged* approach allays fears and offers opportunity to identify achievement at each level, thus encouraging and motivating the student. This article explains a method for approaching any transposition exercise; it then gives a staged approach with exercises from *New English Hymnal*.

Preparation

- 1) Play the piece in the original key, listening carefully. The elementary student should play aloud; the more advanced student should 'play' silently without moving fingers or feet. This is because the student needs the ability to hear the score in the original key before playing it—largely by ear—in the new key. (To help the student get used to hearing a score without playing it some exercises are given in the appendix.)
- 2) Name aloud:
 - a) the interval of transposition

- b) the new key
- c) the new key signature
- 3) Mentally transpose each accidental, using a real or imaginary keyboard. (Note that the accidental may change, for example a natural may become a sharp.)
- 4) Mentally transpose each cadence.
- 5) Identify repeated notes because these can be hazardous when transposing.

As soon as the student has worked through the preparation they are ready to play. However, before starting the nine stages outlined below, most students need to work through simple textures before they are ready to transpose hymns. These simple textures may include pedal solos, two-voice/manuals-only music and cadences in four voices.

The nine stages below train the student in transposing hymns up to ARCO level.

Stage 1: Focus on accidentals

This first stage requires the student to transpose up or down a semitone but without changing the letter-names of the notes. The student gains practice in remembering a new key-signature and transposing notes affected by accidentals.

E major to E flat major – 133 *Crucis Victoria*
 A flat major to A major – 251 *Abends Memoria*
 D flat major to D major – 223 *Dulcis Memoria*

Stage 2: Transposition to C major

Now the student faces the challenge of transposing up or down a tone, but at least the new key-signature is easy to remember. If the student finds this stage difficult you could recommend an additional preparation technique: that of arpeggiation: the student builds up each chord, one note at a time, from bass to treble, then releases it before moving to the next chord. This technique trains students to read chords upwards and also imposes a slow tempo.

B flat major to C major – 511 *Winchester New*; 18 *Narenza*; 493 *Wareham*
 D major to C major – 140 *All for Jesus*; 419 *Tallis's Ordinal*; 230 *Boyce*

Stage 3: Transposition to/from keys with one flat or sharp

Stage 3 requires the student to apply the new key-signature's flat or sharp. Ask the

student to identify the first note on each staff which is affected by the key-signature (for example, when transposing F major to G major find the first 'E's and note that they become F-sharps).

F major to G major – 304 *Albano*; 387 *Quem Pastores*; 441 *York*
 G major to F major – 408 *Love Divine*; 461 *Cross of Jesus*; 298 *Waltham*

Stage 4: Transposition to keys with two flats or sharps

As the key signature increases, observe that the last sharp or flat in the new key-signature is the most vulnerable to error and therefore the most important one to remember. (In the subsequent stages this rule increases in importance.)

C major to D major – 410 *Westminster*; 417 *St Anne*; 509 *St Theodulph*
 C major to B flat major – 351 *Neander*; 336 *Angel Voices*; 473 *Laudes Domini*

'adopting a staged approach to transposition allays fears, and offers opportunity to identify achievement at each level'

Stage 5: Transposition to/from keys with three flats or sharps (up or down a tone)

Now that three flats or sharps are included we open up the possibility of transposing up or down, not just a tone, but also a semitone; however, our system delays semitonal transposition until Stage 6.

E flat major to F major – 124 *St Fulbert*; 242 *St Peter*; 105 *Wurtemberg*
 A major to G major – 318 *St James*; 468 *Marching*; 102 *Nun Lasst uns Gott*
 G major to A major – 317 *St Stephen*; 232 *Morning Hymn*; 346 *Richmond*
 F major to E flat major – 14 *St Thomas*; 82 *Song 46*; 42 *Winchester Old*

Stage 6: Transposition up or down a semitone.

This involves imagining the change of a key-signature from flats to sharps, and vice versa, which students sometimes find challenging.

E flat major to D major – 257 *Billing*; 331 *Eventide*; 442 *Mendip*

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A major to B flat major – 468 *Marching*;
332 *Miles Lane*; 371 *Cameronian*
B flat major to A major – 200 *St Andrew*;
349 *Nativity*; 256 *Monkland*
D major to E flat major – 341 *Franconia*; 63
St Bernard; 456 *Sandys*

Stage 7: Transposition to/from keys with four flats or sharps

Transposing *from* a key with four flats or sharps should not be difficult, but still needs practice.

A flat major to G major – 252 *St Clement*;
367 *Charity*; 451 *Northampton*

E major to D major – 500 *Irish*; 5 *Merton*;
180 *Ave maris stella*

E major to F major – 228 *Newbury*; 452
Carlisle; 147 *St Flavian*

A flat major to B flat major – 250 *Ellers*;
439 *Gerontius*; 463 *Newington*

Transposing *to* a key with four flats or sharps is much more challenging.

G major to A flat major – 83 *Caswall*; 189
Alfreton; 342 *Dominica*

B flat major to A flat major – 401 *Regent Square*;
176 *St Bartholomew*; 427 *Laudate Dominum*

D major to E major – 482 *Gott sei dank*;
416 *Stracathro*; 246 *Huddersfield*

F major to E major – 459 *Crimond*; 378
Bishopthorpe; 399 *Rochester*

'the last sharp or flat in the new key-signature is the most vulnerable to error'

Stage 8: Minor keys

Minor keys should pose no more challenge than major keys. Nevertheless, you don't want the student's first encounter with minor key transposition to be in a public arena, so remember to include them in your training. Here are some minor-key hymns to use for practice.

7 *Little Cornard*; 402 *St Mary*; 70
Southwell; 403 *Uffingham*; 416 *Burford*;
481 *Tunbridge*; 411 *Song 20*

Stage 9: Chromatic harmony

Finally we include some more complex harmony to exercise the advanced student.

From here the student can move to J.S. Bach's chorale harmonisations.
248 *Strength & Stay*; 270 *Bangor*; 287
Benifold; 90 *Passion Chorale*

Finally

Tell your students to take extreme care when responding to directions: you may be surprised how often students fail to listen or

calculate accurately. For example:

'Up a tone from D major? That's E flat major!' (Oops.)

'Up a tone from C minor? That's D major!' (Oops again.)

Transposition to the wrong key may seem a tiny error to the student so it may be worth pointing out that it is fatal when playing in ensemble!

Appendix

Aural and sightsinging exercises to develop listening skills useful in transposition.

- Play two or more chords and ask the student to return to the keyboard to repeat them.
- Ask the student to follow the score of a hymn while you play it with pitch errors which the student must identify.
- Ask the student to sing each voice-part of a hymn (transposing at the octave as necessary to suit the student's range).
- Ask the student to sing up each chord of a hymn in this order: bass, tenor, alto, soprano. Only use the keyboard to check accuracy. ■