

NEW INSTRUMENTAL **Sounds** in Church Music

By **DAVID S. WINKLER**

The technological explosion that has so readily affected our daily lives has reached into the world of music and the world of the church as well. How we as church musicians respond to these changes will have much to do with our effectiveness in reaching our world for Christ in the next century.

Changes in past music history have often involved new instruments as well as new musical forms. The invention of valves on brass instruments, for instance, opened the way for composers to create new music that was not limited to the few notes available on non-valved instruments.

The symphony orchestra as we know it today evolved from the smaller instrumental ensembles of the Baroque Period, to the woodwinds/horns/strings orchestra of the Classical Period, to the massive orchestras of the Romantic Era. At each stage of development, new and improved instruments were included, broadening the range of tonal possibilities.

THREE STRONG CURRENTS

Three strong currents have greatly affected church music of recent years. The first wave is what has come to be called "Contemporary Christian Music," or CCM. The roots of CCM began in the late 60s as young people involved in the "Jesus Movement" began expressing their faith through folk and rock music of the day. The guitar was the instrument of choice for these young musicians, often accompanied by electric bass, drums, and keyboards of various types.

As this generation matured, an industry began to form involving the recording and publishing of these newer styles. The rise of the Christian pop star, with frequent crossover to the secular market and vice versa, has made this movement a strong feature of the evangelical subculture.

The second current that has greatly affected church music today is the "Praise and Worship" movement. Musically, the praise and worship style also draws heavily from the music of the pop culture, with an emphasis upon the participation of the congregation rather than the performance of a select group. Lyrically, the songs feature scriptural texts and simple phrases that can be easily memorized, often with a pronounced vertical focus in directing praise to God.

The instruments employed are also mainly those of the "rhythm section"—keyboard, electric bass, guitar, and drums. Orchestral instruments may also be used, but the rhythm section is the core in this style.

The third great current of thought that is affecting church music is what some have termed the "seeker-sensitive" concept of ministry. Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago and Saddleback Church of Mission Viejo, California, are two key congregations where this philosophy has been developed. This approach

The "future shock" that Alvin Toffler wrote about in 1970 is well upon us.

involves a greater effort to speak the language of the present culture in order to reach unchurched individuals with the gospel.

The common thread in all of these trends is a marked departure from traditional "sacred" music to an acceptance of musical styles drawn from the pop culture. While some have condemned this situation, others have embraced it with great enthusiasm. The question of how much of each of these trends an individual body of believers will accept is ultimately for each church to decide for itself. There are many new options available, not only in regard to the use of new instruments, but also the use of old instruments in new ways.

ELECTRONIC INSTRUMENTS

The most obvious new sound being heard in our churches is that of the synthesizer. Electronic instruments have developed from the modular, patch-cord-connected, single-note instruments of the late 60s (which were often very expensive) to the affordable, integrated multi-timbral work stations of the present. Because of their versatility, these instruments have much to contribute to church music if used properly.

There are several effective ways to use synthesizers. First, synthesizers may be used as a substitute or supplement to traditional instruments. Today's advanced synthesizers are capable of producing remarkably realistic imitations of woodwind, string, brass, and percussion sounds. Many published orchestrations now include synthesizer parts. These parts are often a reduction of the strings' lines.

Two keys to making this concept work are (1) the use of an adequate speaker/amplifier combination to produce the best sound possible, and (2) the ability of the player to articulate the notes in a way that imitates the sound of the live instruments.

While the ability of the synthesizer to recreate the sounds of traditional instruments is remarkable, the potential of the synthesizer to produce entirely new sounds is even greater.

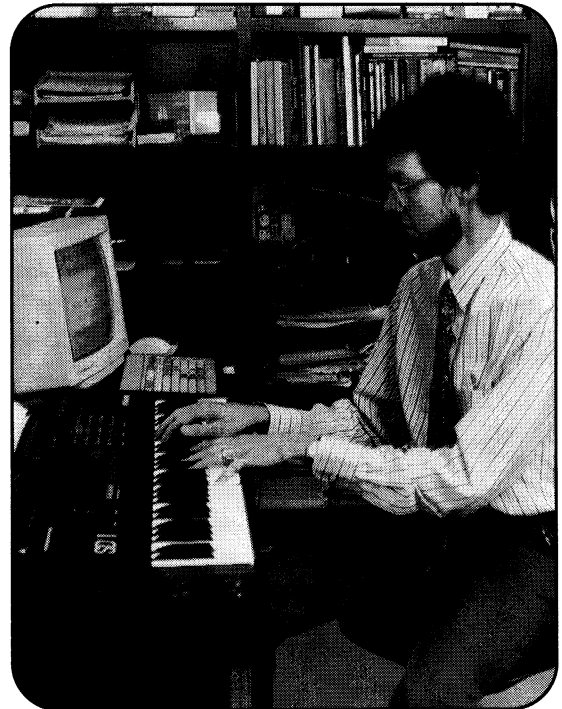
As electronic instruments have evolved, the sounds have changed. The early synthesizers of the 60s and 70s were known for their raw electronic sounds that stood out from those of traditional instruments. With the advent of digital and sampling technologies of the 80s, more sophisticated, warmer sounds became available that were easier to blend with acoustic tones. The capacity of the synthesizer to generate new sounds is endless and is limited only to the imagination and skill of the programmer. Each year it seems that new sounds come into vogue, often due to the recordings of particular artists as they continue to seek new and interesting sounds.

The third and perhaps most fascinating way of using synthesizers is in the creation of sequences. A sequence refers to a series of musical events that is recorded digitally on a computer, a sequencing device, or a synthesizer that is equipped with a sequencer.

Music can be built up in different layers or "tracks" that are recorded and then played back through one or several synthesizers. Because the information is stored digitally, the music can be edited or changed on screen. For example, the tempo can be changed without affecting pitch, the music can be transposed to another key, or one sound can be programmed to replace another on any or all of the tracks.

Practically speaking, the result is like having a recording studio at one's disposal. The music minister or keyboard player could use such technology for the creation of customized accompaniment tracks. Or, sequences may be programmed to be performed on the synthesizer along with other instruments in a live situation.

Traditional keyboard instruments may now be altered to interface with sequencers and synthesizers. Organs now come equipped with MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface), the language of communication for electronic instruments. A device has even



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David Winkler demonstrates the synthesizer's ability to imitate woodwind, brass, string, and percussion sounds.

been developed that can be installed in the keybed of an acoustic piano so that the keys of the piano will register a MIDI response. And as the new technology continues to develop, newer and better ways of electronically making music will become available.

THE RHYTHM SECTION

Rhythm instruments—the guitar, electric bass, and drums—were accepted in the church of the 60s as a form of accompaniment for youth groups. Then, the basic church music was still centered around the piano and organ. Now that the youth of the 60s are the adults of today, many music ministries are seeing the replacement of the piano/organ core by the rhythm section.

A word here should be said about the use of electronic drums. One of the greatest problems of bringing drums into the church has been volume. Even when played sensitively, the sound of drums has often been offensive because of the sound level. The last few years have seen a great improvement of electronic percussion products that have proven to be very useful in the church situation. They merit serious consideration by those desiring to develop a rhythm-section sound for the worship service.¹

USING OLD INSTRUMENTS IN NEW WAYS

The use of band and orchestral instruments in churches, which has flourished in the past 15 years, will likely continue into the next century. As much as the pendulum has swung toward the newer, more contemporary styles, people still enjoy making music in a traditional band or orchestra or listening to such a group. New combinations of such instruments, however, may expand the borders of church music in ways yet unimagined.

The rise of the church “big band” is a recent development. The impetus for this movement came from a project which was the joint effort of gospel music producer Jack Price and arranger Camp Kirkland. Dubbed “The Gloryland Band,” the lively, jazz-band style arrangements generated an immediate response, and within a few short years dozens of churches formed their own Gloryland Bands to play Kirkland’s charts. A similar type of ensemble, scaled down to include usually two to four horns—trumpets, trombones, and/or saxophones—with a rhythm section, has become known as a “praise band.” This type of instrumental group is often used to accompany a group of “praise singers.”

One other current trend worth noting is the revival of interest in the harp. This development is occurring in the secular world, often associated with the New Age subculture, but also has a strong Christian connotation and support among evangelical Christians.

Harpist Greg Buchanan, with his energetic playing and dynamic testimony, has done much to acquaint the Christian community with the harp as a worship instrument. With its angelic connotations and pleasant tone, the harp is perfectly at home in both traditional and contemporary church music ministries.

With a little instruction, a person with a background in piano can learn to play the harp well enough to participate in an orchestral or ensemble setting. Though a full-pedal harp is quite expensive, competition among manufacturers in recent years has made the instrument more affordable.

As our world continues to change, it is inevitable that praising God with a new song will also mean using instruments to praise Him in new ways. In all this, let us remember that behind every instrument is a person, and inside every person is a heart that needs to be directed in praise to the Creator.

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¹ For more information on the use of rhythm section, see the chapter “The Rhythm Section-Based Orchestra” in *Orchestral Concepts in Today’s Church* published by Convention Press.



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