



The Wedding Guide

May 2019

Rest up after Holy Week, because wedding season is upon us! Organists tend to participate in more weddings than average, and it's not just because we're so popular. Even among irregular church attendees or members of churches with praise bands, many couples want to incorporate organ music in their weddings.

For anyone who has mostly studied piano, or for a young organist just coming into their own career, playing the organ for weddings can be stressful. Still, it can offer a nice flow of extra income, as well as an opportunity to grow as a musician. If you'd like to play more weddings but are afraid of being remembered as "that organist" who ruined the big day, check out this guide below.

- 1. Discuss the Order of Service before you commit.** Two very different sets of rules apply depending on whether or not this wedding occurs at your church, and how much control you have over weddings. As organists, we tend to have strong opinions over what makes "good" wedding music, and of course we do - we care deeply about music. If the wedding is at your church, you have room to gently negotiate offending pieces.

But if you've been asked to play at another church, you may not have any control over whether a bride has always wanted Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, unless you know ahead of time. That way, you won't end up saying "yes" up front only to back out later. It's also good to know ahead of time whether or not you may be asked to play a movement of a Bach trio sonata. Obviously, some couples change their minds or simply have no idea what they want, so communication along the way will be necessary to ensure that everyone is satisfied in the end.

- 2. Consider your fees ahead of time.** As a student, I wasn't expecting that first phone call from a mother-of-the-bride who had been referred to me. You'll want to really consider your level of experience, the difficulty of music that you will provide, and the date of the wedding. If somebody wants Vierne at the last minute, they might pay a little more, due to the considerable amount of practice that it would require.

- 3. Review the order of service on the big day.** Maybe you thought all along that they were referring to a hymn in your trusty Hymnal 1982, and they didn't think to tell you that they were thinking of the Methodist hymnal which omits a verse. Maybe the soloist fell ill and other arrangements were made. In any case, you always want to double-check the program.
- 4. Bring a mirror.** This may sound like a funny tip, but I was once asked to play at a church where a number of bouquets, recording devices, and rearranged chancel furniture blocked any chance of seeing the bride walk down the aisle except through a narrow angle. Because this trip required an overnight stay, I happened to have a travel-sized mirror in my purse, and it saved the day.
- 5. Organize, especially for prelude music.** Many organists don't feel comfortable improvising for an hour, but if the bride is late, you may be called upon to do just that. That is, unless you've brought a folder of generally uplifting, easy-to-play standards. For pianists, there are so many collections of manuals-only music that you can easily find one from your favorite publisher and use the same one each time. After all, unlike a weekly church situation, no one will know if you've used the same pieces twice or twenty times!
- 6. Don't fear if no one sings the hymns.** If you're a "hired gun" in a situation where the couple doesn't attend a church, or attends a church with a praise band, their friends and family may very likely be in similar situations. It can be a little awkward to power through verse three of "Be Thou My Vision" with nothing but mumbles from the congregation, but know that this is not a reflection of your playing.
- 7. Attend the rehearsal and charge by the hour.** For one thing, you can charge more for your time. Secondly, you never know what last-minute changes have been made, or what aspects unique to this wedding need additional attention. If you're accompanying a soloist, who knows what tempo they might have assumed compared to the

one you practiced. I have not once regretted attending a rehearsal, and have only occasionally regretted a failure to charge by the hour.

When everyone has recessed and you're switching off the organ, it can feel a bit awkward to enter the crowd of people you don't know. But the great part about playing for weddings is that they are happier than funerals (unless something has gone *drastically* awry). Even if the soloist wobbled or you could barely stay awake during an overly-long sermon, the best weddings are a reminder of love and new beginnings. A bride you never see again might always treasure the gift of music that you contributed.