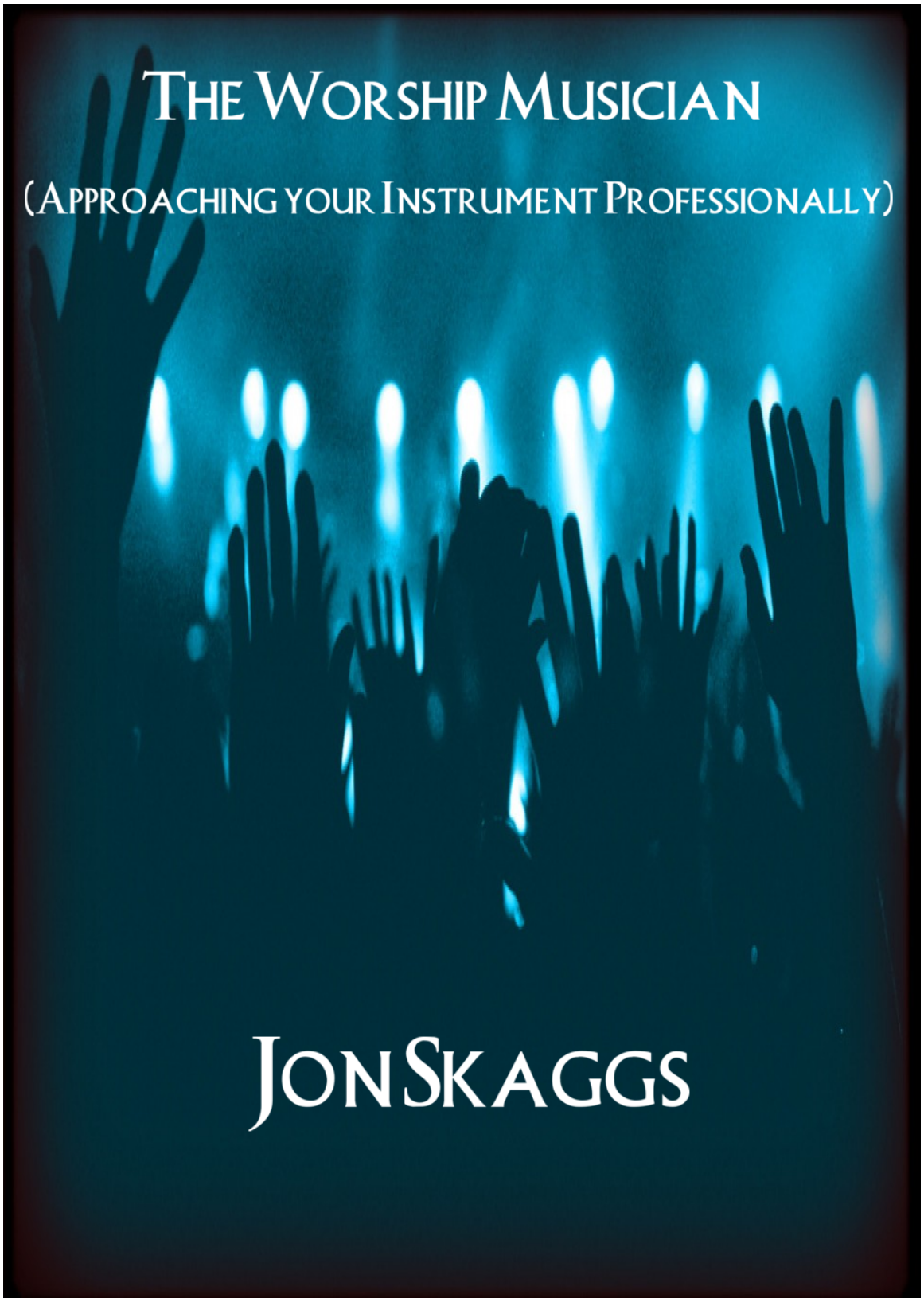
The Worship Musician

(Approaching your Instrument Professionally)



Jon Skaggs

The Worship Musician (Approaching your Instrument Professionally)

by Jon Skaggs



About the Author:

Jon Skaggs has been a producer, composer, drummer, and writer for over 20 years. He has played with some of the biggest names in music in both Christian and Mainstream. Though that is the case, Jon is passionate about the church and worship. As Christ is central in his life he wants to teach and guide other musicians the importance of being equipped with the truth and excellence in music. You can find out more info about Jon at his website http://jonskaggs.net and visit http://theworshipmusician.com for more resources, blogs, and articles from other Worship Leaders, Music Producers, and Christian Artists.

Jon is available for worship team clinics, speaking engagements, teaching sessions, or to sit in on drums with your band. If interested you can contact him here! mailto: jon@jonskaggs.net

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Introduction:

Hello! And thank you for purchasing this E-Book! I started compiling this book with my friend Don Chapman a year ago. We talked about the different roles of each instrument in worship and how approaching them in a professional manner can make a worship leader's job so much easier. Of course to approach your instrument professionally one would need to know how a professional does this. I came to the conclusion that approaching your instrument professionally is not the most difficult thing you might think it is and it really seems to involve one revolving key component among every instrument.

Being a drummer by trade I came to realize the small and simple things that seem to make a worship experience successful and kept me in the mix as a working musician. Through the course of writing this eBook it was really interesting to read the simple mechanics that professional musicians follow that are their basic building blocks of playing. I could definitely relate to many of these experiences and elaborate further about them in the coming chapters.

This is a very simple and short read for your respective instrument. I think of it as a start for you to gain more curiosity into how you and your instrument may work. I believe that this information from professional musicians will prove invaluable. I welcome you to contact at my contact information above with any questions you may have and hope the best and God's many blessings upon you and your worship team!

Jon Skaggs

Chapter 1: For the Worship Band

"You've got to create the space, then fill it" – Chick Corea

The above quote is from renowned jazz pianist, Chick Corea whom has played with a few people over the years Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Charlie Mingus to name a few. Oh and currently collaborating with?? John Mayer, yeah that's right. Ok you get it.. You may have never heard of him but he's one of the best piano players still alive from the Miles and Coltrane era. And even though I don't agree with Chick on a lot of the interesting beliefs he has; I can never disagree with him on how he approaches music. And with all of the great musicians I see this trend. Although we can name a lot of the musicians we know and love who can fill every space with a note and it sounds amazing. I've seen the same musicians play what's exactly needed. In my younger years I would scoff a little because I wanted to hear Pat Metheny go off a little more with Joni Mitchell and I probably didn't understand that buying a Toto record didn't mean that Jeff Porcaro was going to play a drum solo on every song. But as I even started playing with bands, church services, and singer/songwriters more and more I started to learn something. "Oh it's not about me?" and the greats get that. The musicians we look up to understand the beauty of the arpeggio and block chords if that's all the song needs. When the time comes for them to have their 32 bars to shine, they do, and they make the most of it. But in the context of worship music does this ever happen?? The arpeggios, block chords, 4 on the floor drum beat, and 8th note bass pattern?? Yes that's more likely to happen. Worship Music is not designed for musicians to shine. It's designed for Musicians to provide a meaningful vehicle for Worship. There are moments in worship songs that have musical moments but never jazz 32 bar solo moments. The attitude of worship music should be different. And here's a few ways you should approach it.

- Playing in a worship band requires your restraint and taste not your unpararelled skill in playing your instrument. (You will do a lot of stopping and starting your job is to follow the Worship Leader)

- Focus on your tone, being in the pocket, and providing a solid foundation. (These things are more prominent in Worship than not)

- Philippians 2:3-8 – This verse (Read it and meditate on it) it's all of the essentials to being onstage at any church. And with more lights, more sound, more video this verse should be burned into every worship musician's heart.

- The Worship Musician is playing Worship to God. It requires your best but it also requires your humility.

- Worship Songs are best understood from the bottom up and not the top down. (Solid Groove, Solid Bass Line, Guitar Chords, Piano in when needed, Vocals tight)

- The best musicians get the concept of space. It’s in fact what makes them the best.

Chapter 2: For the Guitarists

"Listening is the key to everything good in music" - Pat Metheny

I've recorded a lot of great guitarists in my short time. There's always more than one characteristic of every good one, although vastly different in a lot of ways, so many great guitarists know the importance of the core traits to being a quality guitar player. What are these core traits you ask? Hold on as we will talk about them in great detail in a bit. Firstly, I want to elaborate on the quote preceding this paragraph by Pat Metheny. He is known for being one the greatest jazz guitarists of all time and he also faces his share of negative critics all the same. He plays with a technique not common to most guitarists but commands attention with how he executes his ability. And though there won't be a guitarist that will mimic his playing for any worship set you should almost always mimic his approach to songs and music. This reason is because he approaches every song as if he is in the background at all times. His emphasis is on texture, tone, and providing a melody that is a contribution to the song and its memorability rather than being the main instrument of attention. Now of course it's jazz, and there are many standout moments for Metheny. But the approach to those standout moments is still the same in serving that particular genre of music. "Listening is the key to everything good in music" as a quote from Metheny really makes sense. He does an incredible job listening to his fellow musicians on stage and that listening translates to being not just a leader but a follower. There's a flow to each time you play through a set and some are drastically different from others. The awareness of your fellow musicians, charts, tracks, and worship leader are so key in being at your best onstage and becoming a better guitar player. Sure there are so many technical aspects to becoming better but listening is such a key foundation.

Since there are more than one guitarist in many worship bands let's explore their most prominent and important roles. The acoustic guitar drives a lot of worship music today. The lead guitar also does this and has evolved quite a bit since worship music became more band based. Below I break up the two and explain a bit more about their respective roles in regards to what I have explained above.

Acoustic Guitarist

I've worked with a lot of different worship groups that are employing the use of not one acoustic guitarist but 2 and sometimes 3! That's usually composed of the worship leader playing lead acoustic and maybe 1-2 other people playing acoustic guitar as well. My first impression of this is that this can get messy quick! This is merely because of the nature that is the acoustic guitar. It's usually strummed and strumming is one of the toughest rhythms to conquer while trying to play in time and keeping in sync with other acoustic guitars strumming as well.

So while this presents a huge challenge for multiple guitarists, here are my suggestions if you and your church are going this particular route.

- *Using capo variations* - This will help the acoustic guitars stay out of each other's frequency range. This will also bring a lot of variation and creativity to each respective acoustic player. There are a lot of great capo resources on the internet to know what capos to use where with what key. A lot of these resources will also involve how to play with different chord shapes according to your capo technique. I highly recommend "The Capo Chord Book" by my friend, Lance Beaumont. You can find it at this link here http://www.melbay.com/Products/20751/the-capo-chord-book.aspx . This book will be a great resource for you on capo variations and the subsequent chord shapes to play with them.

- *Work out parts* - In relation to playing with a capo you should also work out different corresponding parts. Not all acoustic guitarists playing together should be strumming or doing the same thing. This will reduce clunky and clashing rhythms from too many people strumming at once. I suggest the worship leader (if playing acoustic guitar) be the anchor and play the simple root chord shapes while additional acoustic players figure out how to color on top of the chords the worship leader is playing. This will take some verbiage between all guitarists (electric and acoustic) on what to do and who should play what parts/roles. The result should be an enjoyable alchemy of harmony instead of clashing and boring steel on steel.

Electric Guitarist

Here are 3 aspects that are a foundation of a worship guitarist.

- Tone is not only big in worship music. It's one of the biggest defining details of a guitarist in any genre. Defining your tone is truly a characteristic of the player's personality. You can copy, mimic, and try to make some part of another guitar player’s tone your own. But your playing style will define your own distinct tonality in the end. It’s almost always imperative to keep things simple and articulate when it comes to tone in worship. Your tone will be a great thing in dictating this.

- Your signal chain lends so much to the point above. There's so much about worship music tone that is light, airy, clean, and not too distorted. The aforementioned descriptions of worship tone are some of the most used and well known on a majority of worship songs today.

- Understanding a diversity of Chords is so crucial to lending color to every song.

Your guitar is an instrument to provide the soundscape of the worship service.

These things are often achieved by being quite intuitive with pedals, amps, and playing style. So understand your instrument and though it might be frustrating, will be worth it when you are creating beautiful music with a guitar tone that is tasteful for the songs in worship.

Chapter 3: For the Drummers

“Save the Neil Peart fills and just find the Downbeat!!!” - anonymous

This quote is an actual experience of mine and I honestly deserved to hear it. That whole experience happened to me over 10 years ago now and is one that I will never forget! I mean who forgets when the worship leader you’re playing with stops everyone in rehearsal mid song and chastises your fills as being too Neil Peart-ish? It’s like a round about way of saying “Why don’t you just sit in your room with all of your Rush CD’s and play your new set of octobans and rototoms but don’t waste our time with that nonsense here!” And honestly to this day that guy was totally right and I learned a lot from that experience at the young age of 20. And the more that I played with him and other worship leaders I realized that 98% of the worship leaders that I have played with could care less about the new fill you just found in the Dennis Chambers bag of tricks. They just want you to create that feel behind them to give them a comfortable cushion to play within.

Makes sense right?? Of course of course! What am I really talking about?? Well I’m talking about the 1 and the 3, the downbeats, but more importantly the 1. That first downbeat at the top of the measure can sure be a tricky one if you’re playing a fill that’s going to rush the downbeat on the one or make you miss it entirely. And I’m not saying that those fills don’t always fit or aren’t always appropriate. But I am saying that more often than not; they probably aren’t. So you need to seriously ask yourself; Are your fills a little too Neil Peart-ish in the context of your church worship service? Does your downbeat fluctuate or not happen at all at the top of each measure? Do you even know what a downbeat or a measure is??

So that’s a good start to the overall lesson that I’ve had the learn the hard way as a drummer over the years. But I also must say that even though we’re giving Neil Peart a bad rap on his fills. I can honestly tell you that even with how busy he plays and how many toms he hits in a fill. I’ve never heard Neil Peart not land on the downbeat. So am I contradicting myself by saying that all the fills in your bag of tricks will always push you away or off the downbeat of every measure?? Maybe it could appear that way but let me explain myself a little further. Here are some questions that you should ask yourself to help determine if you fit in the “I play a fill too much” and “I’m in love with my toms” “ADHD” Drumming.
First of all how many toms do you have? And do you find yourself hitting them more than your snare?

Do you understand the term “In the pocket” or the “Groove”
Do you play with a click track/metronome or scorn its existence? And if you do play with one can you play to it and practice with it?
Do you think that drummers who play little or no fills are bad drummers?
Are the words “Solid Drummer” offensive to you?

And lastly, are you never being called back for the last worship service you played?

Ok so we're whittling away at whom the professionals are and who might need to woodshed on some simple and practical basics of musical taste. And I don't say these things to demean anyone. I say them all to help! I get asked so many times by drummers on how to become a professional drummer. Among the few things that I suggest are always play solid, simple, and let your artist and whole band know where the downbeat is at all times. And if you read below here are some more tips on how to play less fills and find your feel for solid grooves, tasteful fills, and knowing how to accentuate the downbeat for all to hear.

Practice by taking one tom away at a time. Or all of them – I actually played and still play a kit to this day with only a floor tom. Did I just blow your mind?? Maybe some of you; but it is truly an emancipating feeling to know that you have only a few fills to make work with a floor tom, kick, and snare. And you'll be amazed at what you come up with! But if you love your toms more than your snare, kick, and hi-hats (Where groove most often happens) then you should try this approach. It's a little like going on the patch or chewing nicotine gum for a smoker. Basically you just keep lowering the dosage as needed and you soon become cigarette free. Or is this case "Neil Peart-ish fill free". Give it a whirl and you'll be amazed at how many compliments and respect you'll get by your band by how you focus more on the groove than 100 tom fills.

Listen to what professional drummers in Pop, Country, and top 40 music do — I actually heard an interesting stat from a studio engineer friend of mine that the biggest #1 Pop/Rock songs of all time have little or no tom fills at all. And as I listened to a bunch of old #1′s he was totally right! As I researched further I also found that those drummers are no slouches. Drummers like Vinnie Colaiuta, Jeff Porcaro, and Steve Gadd. Whom are all technically on another level than a lot of us but still get that playing on a song involves tasteful playing and giving everyone the joy of knowing where the downbeat is.

Listen to the worship leader and other musicians you're playing with — Most of the time you'll know when you're "going off" a little too much because the other guys around you will probably tell you or just never call you again. So make sure to eat some humble pie if you're told that you're being a bit too busy. It's for your own good!! I promise!

Simply copy the fills that the drummer played on the record – Unless the worship leader you're playing for just simply hates the drum fills on the song you're playing then do your best to play a variation of them. But you must remember that a producer, A&R person, manager, engineer, artist, and full band have scrutinized a lot of songs that you hear on recordings. So I guess that fill is the fill that they wanted to keep in there and let's hope that if it was too messy

then they would've have canned it. But whatever the circumstance here… Do your best to just learn the fills where they are placed in the song.

Learn to groove, keep your fills from speeding you up or slowing you down into the next measure – This is an advanced task that will take you locking yourself into a room with a click and hearing how you naturally play your fills into the next measure. Fills are usually 8th or 16th note based and the faster they get, the more apt you'll be to rush your next downbeat. I know of studio drummers that would practice for days on this very thing. They were tired of having to punch and re-punch fills that were too busy and rushed the next downbeat. Now we have Beat Detective and Flex Time to fix these issues in the digital recording world. But when you're playing live you don't have that nice warm blanket called "You're about to have surgery on your whole drum track"

Knowing how to play simple and tasteful is what makes you a professional player — Some of you will disagree but to be honest I have used about 6 or 7 drum fills of the 100 drum fills I've learned in my life just this year. No one cares that you have the coolest fills ever! No one but a small majority of people in this world will ever hire a drummer based on the amount of fills he or she has up their sleeve. It all will revolve about how confident you are in the pocket and how great you make that Artist's music feel. If you are playing too much you just simply will not last long. So slowly break down you're playing and use this word in your brain at all times while playing RESTRAINT

Avoid the Clinic Drummer mentality — I think that everyone loves a good drum solo, and so DO I! But it's a drum solo and I've only played a few of them in my 20 yr studio and touring career. I've heard a lot of technically off the charts drummers play the socks off a clinic and blow my mind. But when I've heard some of them try to groove in a simple worship song at church it just felt wrong. You can tell who spends more time "In the pocket" and grooving and who spends more time on drum solos. So marry your metronome and spend more time on the thing that will keep getting you work. "The Groove"

Chapter 4: For the Bass Players

"The drums tell me everything. Everything else registers a millisecond later." - Adam Clayton

Even if you take away Bono and The Edge; you can almost always identify a U2 song by its unmistakable rhythm section. Maybe it's because you'll recognize the famous intro of "With or Without You" that spotlights only 4 notes of driving eighth notes every time it's played. Maybe it's because that is a signature rhythm and groove from a rhythm section of one of the most successful rock bands ever. In any case, U2 has been one of the most recognizable and copied bands in the history of music and there's a very good reason for that. Adam Clayton isn't regarded as the greatest bass player in the history of music but that doesn't really matter. What Adam has done as a bass player has influenced enough music to not have to be compared to Jaco Pastorius or Victor Wooten. His impact on worship music has also been influential in so many ways for many bass players. The style that Adam plays in is characterized by adjectives such as solid, tasteful, and rock and roll. The same style could be said for bands such as Coldplay. It's a style of playing that lends to the big foundational sound of the most popular songs in the world. But how exactly does Adam do this and why is this relevant to worship music?

The most applicable technique of bass playing that lends itself to worship music is the style that Adam Clayton plays in. The kind of music that U2 writes has a tendency to lend itself to the driving eighth note style of music that you hear a lot in church worship today. There's nothing particularly fancy or flashy about it and there's nothing about Adam's playing that really stands out. It's a playing style that suits the song the best and gives the ambient and rhythmic guitars of The Edge a lot of space to work. There's also a lot of room melodically and harmonically since Adam doesn't dance around scales or use passing tones that often. I believe this is a style of playing that is what a bass player in worship should model more often than not.

What is this style? And why am I focusing on it so much? I am focusing on this bass playing style so much because it's the type of style that seems best suited for worship music. I've played with many bass players that have tried to play a lot or be busier in a worship song and it just never seemed to work. I'm saying most of the time and not all of the time and really bouncing off the styles in the top 20 songs in the CCLI chart for the moment. But I believe if you're a bass player and you want to lead worship in the best way; then you should key in on the bass playing style of Adam Clayton. This is the style of simplicity and humility and it is great for any beginner also.

Below are the 3 main points any bass player can do to be at their best for

worship.

- Tone is important for any guitar because it's a melodic and harmonic instrument creating the atmosphere of a song. The bass is creating that tonal low end to give the band and listener the knowledge of the each chord and chord structure of each song. The tone of your bass gives the clarity of these things. If your bass tone is muddy then the chord structures seem muddy. If your bass tone has clarity then the songs feel good and have structure.

- How is this tone achieved? Signal chain, simplicity in your signal chain, bass amp brand and EQ, Playing over pickups for definition. Playing tight, Bass Guitar brand and EQ, A good sound man :)

- Playing tight - Knowing your note values - So this is what that metronome is for. If you have one set it at a slow tempo of anywhere between 58 - 68 BPM playing scales and then gradually nudge the tempo faster. This will teach you the correct values of timing and where to land on the beat with each note you play.

- Playing tight - knowing how to play with a drummer's kick drum - The greatest way to stay with a drummer's kick drum is to not only hear the kick drum patterns but to visually see the kick drummer's pedal. Some mixes won't be the best or the greatest and the visual of the drummer's kick drum pedal will help you coordinate your bass patterns with your drummer.

Chapter 5: For the Keyboardists

"Simplicity is the final achievement. After one has played a vast quantity of notes and more notes, it is simplicity that emerges as the crowning reward of art." —Frederic Chopin

Though I'm not teaching classical music in this book; I believe that Chopin hits the nail on the head with a piece of wisdom not just for piano players but also for all musicians. Yet in regards to pianists, in my experience, it seems that the essence of most piano playing is the opposite of this Frederic Chopin quote. And the irony is that most Frederic Chopin pieces involve a lot of notes and little simplicity with maybe the exception of his piece Nocturne no. 9, which by listening is a study in simplicity and emotive performance. I think a genius of Chopin's caliber looks at simplicity in relative terms. Yet you can't discard the central truth of what he's essentially saying in the quote above. A listener may hear a vast amount of notes but the music and listener is best served by the restraint of play by the artist.

There couldn't be a better saying that attributes to the core of playing worship music more than this. Chopin is saying something that attributes to the playing of worship music and how it should be approached musically. It can't be easy for anyone with a large amount of musical talent to remain "simple" and this is where I think Chopin is coming from. In the context of worship music though, simplicity, is the exact thing any musician playing it will need to focus on. In the case of a keyboard player in worship, we have to focus on the practical. The keyboard's role in worship has vastly changed over the course of 20 years in the contemporary church. The piano and organ were the centerpieces and sole instruments driving much of church worship for the early and late 20th century. The keyboardists of these days played more notes, not only because hymns were written that way, but also because the keyboard was the only instrument driving the worship service. Today a keyboard is rarely a centerpiece at all. The keyboard in worship music today is sometimes the chosen instrument of choice by the worship leader but what I'm focusing on is the band keyboardist. In the instance of a band keyboardist, the role of the keyboard changes drastically. The keyboardist can either be playing a synthesizer or a piano but the role will remain the same. The key for keyboard players in worship is knowing the role that each hand plays.

Here are some tips to key in on for the role of each hand while you play a piano or synth in worship.

The left hand

- Be mindful of your bass player with your left hand. Since you're playing mostly bass/root notes with the left hand it's very important to stay out of the bass player's way. The bass player should have the right of way in a worship band setting. And besides having 2 people playing notes at that low bass frequency can get become a train wreck very quick.

- Keep it simple and play only octaves.. play sparse.

- No Passing tones! Keep it strictly to root notes. Chances are your bass player will cover anything in the bass line. There needs to be no conflicts in the lower register

The right hand

- Color is so key with your right hand. Learn your inversions and variations of chords. Anyone with great sense of color will play with many chord variations.

- Try and keep it to parts but work this out with your lead guitarists. Everything with your right hand must compliment what the lead guitarist does.

- If you are a lead instrument then try and keep your right hand more dominant than your left. If you tend to have a song where you are leading out more then tell your bass player to keep it simple.

If you're playing synth then keep it simple with patches and sounds. Only apply the use of Organs, Pads, and anything with texture and air. Your right hand should play a lot of whole and half notes. If you're playing organ then know when you need to play out and when to not. There are sections where organs shine and where they fade.

Extra

Song Memorization Tool:

This can be a tool for you to memorize a song on the fly and apply certain grooves, chords, parts, and dynamics for those different sections. Once you get the hang of it this will help you feel out a song's movement from beginning to end. This type of structure that you'll see below is sometimes referred to as The Verse with Middle Eight. Meaning the "B" part is 8 bars long. But in today's music the "B" part can be 4 or 16 bars longs depending on the writer(s). Below is an easy way that I have formulated this and made it work for me. I simply make all sections 8 bars long for ease. If it's 16 bars then I'll double it like so (A, A for repeating 8 bar verses) or (B, B for repeating 8 bar Choruses). And if a section is shorter, which will probably be more applicable in an Intro, Turnaround, or Outtro, I'll write (I 1/2, or T 1/2). Again this is what works for me. It's a great way to show up to a rehearsal, if you haven't really heard the material, and memorize it or reference it quickly if you seem to forget where you're going.

Look at the key and Examples below for reference.

Key:

I = Intro and Outtro

T = Turnarounds - Sometimes known as Midtros or Connectors

A = Verse

B = Chorus Sections

C = Bridge Sections

Looks fairly simple right?? Here's a few examples of very popular songs using this type of tool

Chris Tomlin's "And if Our God is For Us"

I, A, A, B, T 1/2, A, B, B, C, C, C, B, B, B, I

Worship Ideas "Forever Amen"

I, A, B, T 1/2, A, B, T 1/2, C, B 1/2, B, I

Coldplay's "Clocks"

I, I, A, A, B, T, A, A, B, B, T, T, C, I, B, B, I, I

Feel free to elaborate and make it your own. It is a tool for speed and accuracy when don't have time to gather, prepare, memorize, and rehearse all of your material. Sometimes life is busy and interrupts all the things we would like to do and have time for. Hopefully this tool will help you in a crunch or in everyday charting while you prepare and rehearse for your worship service or performance.