What I've Learned About Memorizing Music for Worship

by Mark Cole

Lately, I have been reminded about the importance of memorizing the music when I lead worship. I have found that memorization brings my leading of the congregation and worship of God to a whole new level.

I lead on either the guitar or the keyboard depending on the situation. Playing and singing at the same time involves another whole level of memorization. When you spend enough time with the music so that you have it memorized, it becomes a natural part of you. You don't have to spend a lot of energy in the public worship time thinking about the music. Instead, the music flows out of you. *With the music memorized, you can concentrate on leading the congregation and singing and worshipping the Lord with your whole heart.*



Here's what I do to memorize music:

1. I write out my own chart for the music. First, I put the song in a key that works for the congregation and myself. Secondly, I type out the words and I make sure the musical form and chords are the best that they can be. Then I make a full SAT chart for the band and singers. This first step helps get the whole song and arrangement in my brain.

2. I practice it every day. It is very important to spend time with the music on a daily basis. I learn a new song twice a month. That gives me two whole weeks to learn it well. As I learn the song, I transition from just merely playing and singing the song to worshiping God from my heart.

3. I slowly wean myself off the music in my personal rehearsal time and in the band rehearsal time. I start by learning one section of the music at a time. I'll learn the chorus first because that is usually the part of the song that gets repeated the most. Then I begin learning the verses and the bridge of the song.

4. I memorize the chord progression first. I often think of music as numbers, so I will normally memorize a chord progression as a number pattern. Let me give you an example. The notes of the scale in the key of G are G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G. So the first degree of the scale is G or "1". A is 2, B is 3 and so forth. If the chord progression is G, C, Em7, D. Then I would remember 1, 4, 6, 5. This is basis of the system that is used in the Nashville Numbering System.

As you develop as a musician you will also learn to 'hear' the chord progression. Your ear will begin to hear where the progression goes next. You will start to hear the progression go from 1 to 5 to 6 to 4. (In the key of D.. that is D-A-Bm-G). Learning to 'play by ear' or hear the progression is an important next step in developing as a musician.

5. I put the song in a playlist on my phone so that I can listen to it regularly at home, in my office and in my car. I sing along with the original recording of the song so that the words naturally become a part of my memory. Any words put to music become naturally easier to remember. It's part of how God designed our brains.

6. I use the new song as much as I can. In the most recent church that I worked in, I normally lead worship five times per week. I lead in a small pastoral prayer time twice per week. Then I lead in the Christian school that the church ran. And then I lead twice on Sundays (9:30 AM & 11:30 AM). I would try to use the new song as much as possible in those various worship times.

7. I repeat the song regularly in our Sunday worship rotation. My habit has been to do the new song three times in the first month. I normally repeat it the first Sunday after introducing it. Then I give it a Sunday off and repeat it on the next Sunday. That way the congregation has three times to learn it and the worship team and I have three times to solidify the memory process.

8. I have the lyrics projected on the back wall of the church so that the team and I have the lyrics readily available. The words to the second verse are usually the toughest ones for me to remember in a live situation. We rehearse with our media people so that the words come up in a timely manner.

9. I have the music on an iPad app in front of me. This is my emergency back-up. I use a **GigEasy** stand with an **Airturn** bluetooth foot switch to turn pages on the **forScore** music app. I rarely look at the music. It is there only as a quick reference… just in case.

It is so important for worship teams to memorize their music. When I see a group of musicians with their eyes glued to the music, it really lowers the presentation of the music. It puts a barrier between the musicians and the audience. I realize that they don't have the music in their minds and hearts.

Their lack of preparation is keeping them from being the best that they can be. Their lack of preparation is keeping them from worshipping God with their whole heart, soul, mind and strength. And really, isn't that the goal!

Question: What methods have helped you to memorize you music? Do you think memorizing music is important?



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The article above and many additional insights may be found on Mark's blog at http://markcole.ca/

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