

# String Arrangements

Keith Getty

*HOW: Keith, how long have you been writing orchestrations, and what got you involved in this area of music?*

KG: actually began my orchestration work in the church. I started being involved in the praise times during youth group and evening services when I was mid-teens and really wanted to combine classical instruments with the band. We tried adding string quartet and then brass and wind for Christmas services. I always loved and worked hard at it although some of the early arrangements must have been a challenge to listen to!

*HOW: So when did you first write scores for worship recordings? Are there any differences to bear in mind when writing for music that is aimed to be congregational?*

KG: I first began writing scores for worship albums when Steven Doherty at Kingsway allowed me to produce and arrange the "New Irish Hymns" album with Margaret Becker, Maire Brennan, and Iona's Joanne Hogg.

For worship albums, I believe we should try and write expressive, powerful music of the very best quality whatever the song type. Too often we have compromised or undervalued what we do by rushing or uncritically accepting mediocre standards. The bible gives us an incredible wealth of creative inspiration inviting us to stretch the gifts he has given us.

In terms of writing for church services the two things I am most aware of are the context with which they are being used and the restrictions the practicalities bring. If the piece is being used for closing hymn, solo or communion - it may require a different touch or leaving certain instruments out and should not distract the congregation - music is only at best there to serve the people in the service. Also we must keep in mind the practicalities of rehearsal time, standard of the players and size of the group. It is often best kept as simple as possible for their benefit.

*HOW: You recently scored the songs "The Heart of Worship" and "Let everything that has breath" for us. How do you start out writing an orchestral arrangement? Are there any particular methods you use to find inspiration and explore ideas?*

KG: In all arrangements I listen and try to get as much information about how it is being used and as much feedback from producer, artist or composer (or even worship leader or pastor in some cases). We then try to put something together with them that helps what they are trying to achieve with the song.

For "Heart of Worship" we tried to create a moment in the service for stillness and reflection. In the context of the production we were involved in, there was much up tempo music and much big symphonic music and I knew this song gave us a great opportunity to pause (something we need to do a lot more of). It began with a simple reflective string prelude which lasts for 40 secs based on the acoustic guitar riff on Matt's original recording - it gradually faded out as Matt came in with "when the music fades". A string quartet faded in (giving a more intimate sound which is very popular with a lot of pop bands at the minute), moving to full section and let the choruses sing out with the violins taking a 'hook' counter melody - always leaning into the phrase 'all about you Jesus'. The end dies, echoing Matt's melody and then has a fade out - once again giving people 30-40 seconds just to pause.

For "Let everything that has breath" the challenge was to add to the rhythm and excitement to the fantastic pulse and also not to sound 'out of date'. A lot of people who do orchestration have amazing classical training, jazz knowledge, contemporary music experience or studio techniques but don't really understand songs and the orchestrations can sound very out of date (or just a little odd!). The lower strings we used on a basic rhythmic hook. We also tried "word painting" - effects to highlight specific words or emotions - eg. pizzicato (plucked) strings around the 'angels' words. We also used strings in contemporary experimental ways (eg. building the rhythm by playing the instruments on the back of their bows at times, 'glissandi' - what guitarists call 'slides'.)

*HOW: You wrote scores for us for a large orchestra, but in reality that size of string section is not reproduceable week by week in your average local church - how does it differ when you're arranging for a quartet, for example?*

KG: Keep it simple - I think a hymn where the strings play the basic four part harmony is one of the most beautiful things in the world - or a simple melody where the melody is shared around between a violin and cello is so powerful. There is no need to be complicated.

Unless the players are professional, keep the parts low. Once a violin goes on to the E string the sound is very piercing and can sound very out of tune. Lower it is richer. Remember it takes violinists years before they are good enough to play in public - and even then they are very exposed. On their instrument they have to create the tuning for every note.

Also - most classical musicians prefer organisation and disciplined rehearsals as that is how they are trained. It is important that those from a band background respect that or the players will just get frustrated and leave. Even something as simple as the music leader asking how they can help them prepare adequately and working with them is so important and shows respect for their gifting.

*HOW: If the string parts are accompanying a worship band, how do you make sure things don't sound overcrowded/busy?*

KG: Again - nine times out of ten, simplicity is best - the very sound of strings adds richness to music. String arrangers should also listen to how strings are used in contemporary albums to be more authentic stylistically in contemporary songs. Band musicians should also be careful not to overcrowd them and give them time to be heard.

Listen both to what works for the musicians involved and what works for the congregation - like anything, it is trial and error - I still sometimes write an orchestration three times before I feel it is good enough.

*HOW: You seem to work across a broad range of musical styles in worship, having written songs with Stuart Townend for example, and then working with orchestras etc too. What is the key to staying musically versatile?*

KG: Ultimately I love music and am completely passionate about every project. I have greatly benefited from good collaboration - always trying to learn new things and working hard for everyone have been the most important things for me.

*HOW: What would you say to those who have encountered tension between the band-vibe electric players, and the classical musicians?*

KG: In the main I enjoy really good relationships in projects. The way church musicians behave however can be deplorably arrogant and in the classical vs. pop debate I think a judge would have a hard job deciding the guilty party. Both are art forms with huge but differing value - be aware of how much you don't know, ask lots of questions and always aim to give and take.

CS Lewis when discussing church music in the 1950s said that until musicians see tolerating other styles as part of their worship and a "means of grace" they will have missed the whole point. There is a lot of truth in that.

*HOW: Lastly, what advice would you give those in their local churches who want to start using string arrangements in worship?*

KG: Good on you! It will be hard work but very rewarding - huge numbers of church attendees have far more leaning towards the sound of orchestral instruments than many of us imagine - especially in the older reaches of the congregation and it will be an important addition that will be widely appreciated.