

How, What, and Why I Transcribe

Carol Williams

Carol Williams is widely known as a performer, recording artist, and composer. Her recital programs often contain transcriptions of pieces that are not composed for the organ but are adapted so that they work well on the organ. This month she shares with us some stories regarding her background and some rationale and techniques for transcribing.

—Wayne L. Wold

EVER since the age of seven when my dad would take me to concerts where I did a cameo, I have spent my life playing concerts and enjoying all types of music. At home my father loved to play theater organ; he had a tremendous ear, as did my Aunt Olwen, who was an amazing musician and had a church job in Wales. There was always a Hammond organ in the house while I was growing up, and I became very familiar with jazz and theater organ music. My classical music studies were very intense, and playing popular music was a great release for me on my own time. During my studies at the Royal Academy of Music I became known as Miss Wurlitzer!

Transcribing music has been a regular activity for me over the years. Working from piano and orchestral scores has always been necessary. In this day and age it is so easy to obtain music online from various outlets. I often use Musicnotes.com. Although most popular music you find on the internet is for piano or guitar, if you are lucky you can find a piece of music and purchase it in the key you are looking for. This makes it much easier to transcribe for the organ. There are many organ transcriptions of orchestral works, for example by W.T. Best and Edwin H. Lemare, just to name but two. These are tough and need many hours of practice to learn, but they are truly fabulous and worth the extra effort. Every transcription is unique and a piece of art; every musician has a personal interpretation. However, you can look around and find organ arrangements of many of these pieces. For concerts or weddings this task will be well worth the work. We as organists must help audiences today on their journey to love organ music.

Let's say you want to transcribe "The Entertainer" by Scott Joplin. What I do for this piece is play the lower bass notes on the pedals and the chords with the left hand. I encourage you to use piquant registrations, have fun, experiment, and play with it. Although these kinds of pieces are not ideal for church—unless you want a new job—they can be used at concerts and even some weddings. I remember hearing Carlo Curley play this piece with delightful, delicate registrations and wonderful humor. When it comes to show tunes, such as from *The Sound of Music*, I use the piano arrangement and adapt it to the organ. Being familiar with

chord symbols helps enormously. Pretty much any music can be transcribed for the organ. For "Life on Mars" by David Bowie I use a piano score. For the voice part I choose melodic registrations, and I use the chord symbols to determine what to play in the pedals and left hand.

During my 16 years as civic organist of San Diego, I kept the audience in their seats using many show tunes, marches, and American favorites, as well as classical organ pieces. Most pieces from the first three categories needed to be transcribed. For marches, I picked the most popular Sousa marches and used a piano or full score. In addition, I often listened to band recordings to give me ideas for registrations. In my role as a civic organist, where the concerts were free, I needed to keep the listeners in their seats in order to be considered successful. And I was successful in building and keeping an audience for many years, mostly by transcribing a lot of popular music.

While I was civic organist, and even now, I take great pleasure in raising money for nonprofit organizations. For these special concerts I program many transcriptions, as the audience likely would not be acquainted with much solo-organ repertoire. But popular repertoire might bring them to the point where they would be "ripe for the taking" and become organ fans. Most people know popular tunes and famous songs such as "You'll Never Walk Alone." These are timeless classics that need to be played for the audience on the King of Instruments.

Remember, most of all, to experiment and have fun. Admittedly, most of my transcriptions are not (yet) published. The only one I have in print is "The Flight of the Bumblebee," which I transcribed to make it easier. It is available at my website: Melcot.com. This piece on YouTube has over five million views to date, and I get asked to play it all the time. I suggest you find a piece of ragtime, a show tune, rock, jazz, or pop music, or whatever you really like and adapt it. Enjoy a new area of music for the organ—it will be most rewarding.

Carol Williams is a member of the Richmond (Va.) and New York City AGO chapters.

Material for this column is compiled by Wayne L. Wold, AAGO, for the AGO's Committee on Sharing Skills and Resources. He can be reached at woldw@hood.edu.