

Basic Principles of Song Leading



**BASIC PRINCIPLES
of
SONG LEADING**

By L. Leroy Neff

Song leading has become a part of instruction in some of the classes at Ambassador College. The reason is obvious since many graduates have regular duties as song leaders, in addition to their preaching and teaching responsibilities.

The lessons learned about speech technique in speech class should also be employed by the song leader. A song leader is a sort of "toastmaster," or "master of ceremonies." He should be friendly, have good stage presence, some proper humor, and also have a genuine interest in his audience and the occasions.

A person who is not familiar with song leading may at first consider this kind of speech opportunity as a strange and unusual situation, which requires considerable musical background and training. This is not the case at all! Any good speaker who has a sense of rhythm and is able to sing the hymns can also, with diligence and perseverance, be a song leader. But you need the basic song leading instruction included in this book.

If you have studied music or music notation, you will already have much of the basic knowledge necessary to lead songs. If you do not have such a background, you should carefully study all that follows. The information concerning musical notation can be skipped over if you already understand music fundamentals.

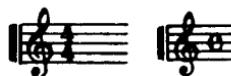
There are certain basic rudiments of music, such as the system of time notation, which should be understood. The duration of time that any one particular note is held is dependent on the following points. (1) The speed of the pulses, or counts, per minute. (2) The number of counts or fraction of counts for the particular note.

In order to understand this clearly, it is necessary to know how the element of *time* is indicated in music today.

At the beginning of each musical composition you will find the clef signature. This gives the musician information relative to pitch. There will usually be an accompanist on the piano available to set the *pitch*.

Time Indicators

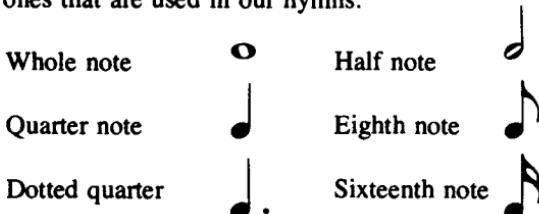
Immediately following this clef signature you will notice two numbers arranged, one above the other. It is necessary for the song leader to understand what this means, as it has to do with the *time element* of the music.



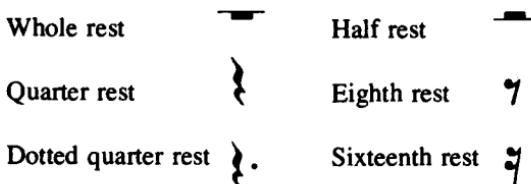
The upper number always indicates the number of counts per

measure. The lower number indicates which kind of note will get one count. Here is an example. This is called four-four time and is also occasionally indicated by a large letter C, which means that it is *common* time. The upper number indicates that the selection will have four counts to each measure, and the lower figure indicates that each quarter ($\frac{1}{4}$) note (J) will receive one count.

In order to understand the different kinds of notes, here are the principal ones that are used in our hymns.



There are also musical notations for short periods of rest. You should compare them with the notes above.



The comparison of *time* used for these notes and rests is the *same ratio* as their numerical values.

Very often a dot is used following a note. This increases the length of the note by *one half*. It is important to remember this if you are trying to count out a measure which has a dotted note. Notice one example in the dotted quarter above.

After the number of counts to a measure are determined, and what *kind* of note will get *one* count, it is also necessary to observe the *speed* or *tempo* at which the composition will be sung. If it is very *rapid* and has six counts, it may be necessary to *divide* each measure into fewer beats, such as two or three beats. In some cases the songs we sing have six counts to the measure; however, the RHYTHM is actually either *two beats* or *three beats* to the measure. An exception which requires this kind of change is included in a later place in this article.

This same principle holds true regarding the directing of music. It is

the *rhythm* that is beat out by the hand gestures. The exception to this rule is when there is a long note which is held longer than the indicated time (a held note) or at the end of the song where the last note may be held longer than indicated.

Only Three Gesture Patterns!

Surprising as it may seem to the beginner, there are only two gesture patterns that need to be learned in order to properly lead the songs in our hymnal. There is another pattern that is used in some other songs that you may encounter, so we are also including it.

All of the drawings of the basic pattern of beats are for a right-handed person and are drawn out just as they would appear from the point of view of the song leader. A person who is left-handed would have the left and right directions reversed. A person using *both hands* in leading would use the pattern as indicated with the right hand and just the reverse with the left hand.

Two Beat Pattern

This pattern is a simple down-and-up stroke, with a slight arc to the right. Occasionally, the two counts for this pattern of directing can be slightly altered to give more flexibility. Instead of the downstroke being count one and the upstroke being count two, the complete down-and-up stroke can be used as *one* count.



FIGURE A

Three Beat Pattern

The next pattern of gestures are those for rhythm using *three* beats. This is done with a downstroke for the first count, a stroke to the right for Number 2 and then an upstroke for Number 3. These strokes form an irregular but somewhat graceful triangle.



FIGURE B

Four Beat Pattern

The last pattern is for rhythm of four beats. It is a little more complex than the others. The first stroke is (as always) a downstroke, stroke Number 2 is toward the left, stroke 3 to the right passing over the midpoint to approximately an equal distance to the right, then an upstroke completing the pattern with beat Number 4.

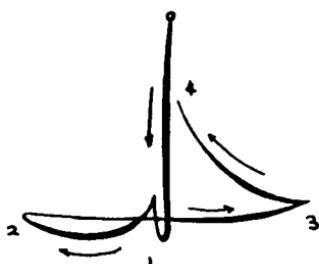


FIGURE C

One cardinal point that must always be remembered is that each measure must start with a *downbeat*. Notice that each of the three patterns in Figures A, B and C start with a *downstroke*. The measure markings are indicated by vertical lines between notes. You should always have a downstroke *immediately following* one of these measure lines.

Probably the most common technical error with song leaders in the church is to violate this rule.

Before starting to practice song leading, it is necessary to first ascertain which of these three patterns should be used for a specific song. Then, before ever attempting to lead the song in public, the song leader should practice enough so that he can beat out this pattern AUTOMATICALLY, without having to give thought or consideration to the gestures.

The gestures should be automatic. A person who is leading the songs needs to have his full attention on other matters such as announcements, instructions to the singers or congregation, the words of the song, and singing.

There are several ways that one may practice these gesture patterns so that they become automatic. The ideal way is to have a pianist or musician play the music while the novice song leader practices going through these patterns in rhythm with the music.

Another way to practice is to merely think these patterns through, just as though you were directing the songs or music, whenever you hear music sung or played. In fact, you can employ your right index finger to go through these very same patterns and motions when you hear music. The main thing is to get these patterns *ingrained* in your *mind* so that they are automatic and so that you do not have to think about the pattern.

It may be helpful to practice these patterns before a mirror to see whether the gestures appear natural or whether they appear unnatural, jerky, out of proportion, or in some other way improper or distracting.

Different Hymnal Examples

Here are some examples of hymns with the *beat* numbers printed directly over the notes. Compare these numbers with the appropriate pattern of Figures A, B and C. Also notice that the beginning note and the note following each measure line *must* be a downbeat! each measure line *must* be a downbeat!

The first example is that well-known hymn, "Come, Thou

COME THOU ALMIGHTY KING

1 2 3 1 2 3 123 1 2 3 1 2 3 123

Author Unknown

Felice de Giardini

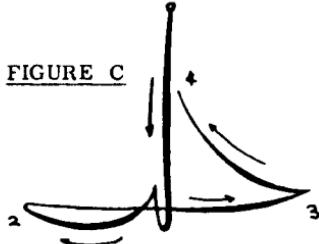
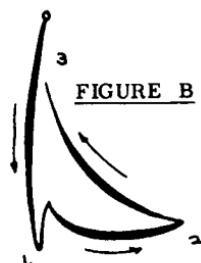
1. Come, Thou Al-might - y King, Help us Thy Name to sing,
2. Come, Thou In-car - nate Word, Gird on Thy might - y sword,
3. Come, Ho-ly Ad - vo-cate, A pure heart in us cre-ate;

1 2 3 123 1 2 3 12 & 3 1 2 3

Help us to praise: Fa-ther, all glo - ri - ous, O'er all vic -
And us de-fend. Come and Thy peo - ple bless, And give Thy
In this glad hour. Thou who al-might - y art, O - pen our

12 & 3 1 2 3 12 & 3 1 2 3 123

to - ri - ous, Come and reign o - ver us, An - cient of Days.
word suc-cess, Spir - it of ho - li-ness, Our pray'r at - tend.
minds to see What Christ would have us be; Spir - it of pow'r.



"Almighty King." This particular piece has a rhythm of three beats to the measure, so the pattern shown in Figure B is used. The rhythm is continued to the end of the piece without pause, hold or interruption.

LORD, I WILL PRAISE THEE!

1 2 3 4 12 34 12 3 4 123 4

Psalm 138

Dwight Armstrong

1. Lord, I will praise Thee with my whole heart;
 2. More than Thy Name Thy Word is en - larged;
 3. Yes, they shall hear, O Lord of Thy ways;
 4. Though in the midst of trou - ble I walk;

I'll sing Thy prais - es be - fore all the gods;
 And when I cried in that day Thou didst hear;
 Then shall they sing for Thy glo - ry is great;
 Thou wilt pre - serve with Thy right hand, my life;

Wor - ship and bow t'ward Thy ho - ly place,
 Thou strength -ened me with Thy strength, O Lord;
 Though God is high the poor He re - respects;
 Thou wilt ful - fill Thy pur - pose for me;

Prais - ing Thy Name for Thy kind love so true.
 Kings of the earth will then hear, prais - ing Thee.
 But strikes the proud down from His sover - eign height.
 Thy stead - fast love will en - dure ev - er - more.

The next song reproduced here is "Lord, I Will Praise Thee." It has four beats to the measure and is directed according to the pattern of Figure C. Please note again the overprinted numbers to give you the beats of each measure.

TO THE HILLS I'LL LIFT MINE EYES

12 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3

*Psalm 121**Dwight Armstrong*

1. To the hills I'll lift mine eyes; Ah, from whence shall come my help?
 2. God thy keep - er still shall stand, As a shade on thy right hand;

12 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3

All my help comes from the Lord Who hath made the heav-en and earth.
 Nei-ther sun by day shall smite, Nor the si-lent moon by night.

12 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3

He will e'er be thy guide, And thy foot shall nev-er slip:
 God shall guard from all ill, Keep thy soul in safe-ty still:

12 2 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3

God who keep-eth Is - ra - el, Nev-er slum-bers, nev-er sleeps.
 Both with-out and in thy door, He will keep thee ev - er-more.

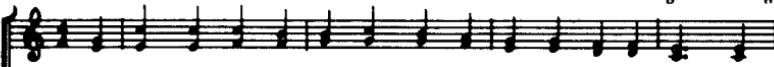
There are a number of songs in the hymnal which call for six beats to the measure. They usually can be directed by using two patterns of three beats each. Such a piece is "To the Hills I'll Lift Mine Eyes." Notice the overprinted numbers to show where beat Number 1 and Number 2 are used.

MT. ZION STANDS MOST BEAUTIFUL

4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4

Psalm 48

Dwight Armstrong



1. The Lord, E - ter - nal is most great and great-ly to be praised! With-
2. With - in her pal - a - ces our God is for a re-fuge known; For
3. As we have heard, we saw with - in the cit - y of our God; The

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4



in the cit - y of our God, up - on His ho - ly hill. Mount
lo, the kings as - sem - bled, to - geth - er they did come. When
cit - y which the Lord of Hosts es - tab-lished ev - er-more. We

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4



Zi - on stands most beau - ti - ful, the joy of all the land! The
they be - held it, all a - amazed, they fled in great dis-may; And
of Thy lov - ing kind-ness thought, in Thy most ho - ly place, O

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4



cit - y of the might - y King, doth on her north side stand.
be - ing trou-bled at Thy sight, they thence did haste a - way.
God ac - cord - ing to Thy name, Thy praise fills all the earth!

The “Upbeat”

A new procedure is used with the song, “Mt. Zion Stands Most Beautiful.” Notice that there is a one-quarter note before the first complete measure. This is called an *upbeat*. Remember the cardinal rule that the *beginning* of each measure must start with a downstroke. Since

each measure must start with a downstroke, then each measure must *end* with an upstroke. The first note of a song beginning with an upbeat is done with Number 3 in Figure B or beat Number 4 in Figure C. However, since this note commences the song, and in order to get the attention of the audience, it is best to have the arm raised at the start, a little higher than at the bottom of the strokes pictured by Figures B and C. Figure D will indicate approximately the place where the stroke should begin. In order for you to understand more clearly, this upbeat is superimposed with dark lines over dotted lines, reproducing the three- and four-count pattern. It is a sort of combination of a down-and-up stroke, as you will notice; however, the *upward* part of the stroke is *emphasized*.

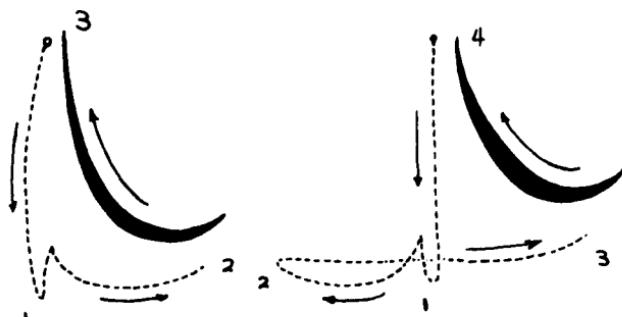


FIGURE D

Holds

Holds are an important part to music. They are indicated by this sign ($\text{--} \text{--}$) and mean that the *rhythm* that has been set is *interrupted* and held for a longer time. During a *hold* the rhythmic beating is *not* continued.

Whenever you come to the end of the final stanza or to a note which has a hold over it, the hands should be held in an outward position until you wish to stop the music.

Final Suggestions

Any person who anticipates having an opportunity to lead songs **must PRACTICE!** Then, if an opportunity comes to lead songs, be sure to be the *song leader*. Do not permit the singers, the congregation, or the *piano player* to be the leader. Be *definite* and *precise* in your gestures. Do

not be sloppy in these gestures so that the congregation will be unable to follow. Be sure that you yourself sing out with your best strong clear voice. And be sure that your voice and the gestures are *synchronized*.

When the time finally comes to lead a song in public, here are some suggestions for you to follow. After preliminary comments are completed, the song number has been announced, and you are ready to commence, turn your face to the pianist; nod slightly or motion to the pianist to start the introduction.

The pianist should then begin the introduction, which usually consists of a few measures at the end of the hymn. As the pianist plays the last measure of the introduction, raise your hands so that the audience knows you are ready to begin. Just an instant before the time to start singing, move your hands in a brief upswing and start the appropriate gesture pattern for the piece. Make a little more emphasis and speed to the downstroke of each measure. And remember, *each measure must start with a downstroke*.

The momentum or rhythm of the hymn should continue *smoothly* without stopping between introduction and first stanza, as well as between other stanzas. Avoid abrupt changes of tempo.

You should realize that people will follow the pianist first and you secondly, as most will listen to the piano but not watch you carefully. Therefore, it is very needful that you and the pianist are together. You may wish to practice song leading with just the pianist beforehand so that you will work well together. The pianist has a very important part in successful song service. In many cases, the pianist will be a better musician than the song leader. You should take advantage of this and use the experience to help you do a better job. Song leading must be a joint effort between you and the musician if it is to be successful.

Be in command of the situation. Be sure that the audience sings together. If they do not, stop at the end of the stanza, call the attention of the audience to this fact, and get them to sing together. God is not the author of confusion, nor does He delight in every man going his own way in song services. There should be unity in the body of Jesus Christ. If the congregation does not respond properly, and the music drags, stop at the end of the stanza, ask them to speed up their singing and watch you as the song leader, so that all might be done in *order* and to the *glory* of God.

Do not use this opportunity to harangue the audience and *do not* give a sermonette before or after each song. Inspire your audience so that they will really *want* to sing praise to God with their whole hearts.