

HOW TO PLAY TOGETHER

Welcome

Thanks for downloading the Speakers' Notes for the Worship Central Course.

For this sixth session, we've outlined the structure and key points for the talk, and left space for you to add your own examples. Feel free to personalise the examples and make it your own, but we'd please ask that you keep the core material the same, as we want people to be able to get the same course wherever they are.

We pray this course will be a great blessing to you and your worship team, and we stand with you as you seek to encounter God, equip the worshipper and empower your local church.

Tim Hughes & Al Gordon

Introduction

Welcome to the Worship Central Course. In this session we will be looking more practically at how to play together as a band.

We've all no doubt experienced what we like to call 'worship horror moments'. Whether that's starting a song in the wrong key, or forgetting the words, a guitar solo with a painfully out of tune guitar, or a musical train wreck at the end of a song. We've seen amps blow up, people fall off the stage whilst playing – we recently watched as a worship leader had his head split open by the headstock of another guitar as his fellow band member jumped joyfully in the air. Blood poured everywhere as he bravely carried on leading. Playing music can be eventful!

In this session we're going to look at ways we can nurture and develop our playing so that we might fully enjoy all the riches and depths of the gift that God gives us in music. We'll start with four key disciplines that every one of us needs to embrace in order to P-L-A-Y well together.

The first is:

P // Practice

The Beatles are the best-selling band of all time. They have had more number one albums, sold more records and topped the charts for longer than any other band in the history of music. In the ten years they played together, they collected: seven Grammys, fifteen Ivor Novello Awards and were included in *Time* Magazine's list of the hundred most important people of the twentieth century, alongside Nelson Mandela, Gandhi and Albert Einstein.

How did they do it? Malcolm Gladwell, describes how in their formative years in Hamburg, Germany, the Beatles would play for eight hours a night, seven days a week. By the time they became a worldwide success, they had performed live an estimated 1,200 times, more than most bands play in their entire careers. They had learnt the discipline of practice.

To excel musically we need to practise, finding time in the midst of busy and full lives to develop our skills. For some, it will mean carving out time each day to practise working on scales, rhythms and techniques.

For others, it will mean using a morning commute to listen, study and think about the songs you're learning. For some it will involve investing in new gear and working with new equipment. For all of us, without practice, we're simply going nowhere.

Regular practice has great physical benefits. Musicians have been described as athletes of the small muscles as we rely on very repetitive actions. We have over thirty different muscles in our hands alone, which all need to be used regularly if our hands are to respond effectively to what our brains are telling them to do.

Practice also has a mental benefit. Over time, practice trains the synapses in our brains to respond so that the playing becomes second nature. Musicians can't learn without repetition. For this reason, it is better to practise little and often, even if it is just a couple of minutes, than to leave long periods of time between sessions.

Secondly:

L // Listen

We have to learn to listen. It sounds obvious but the most common cause of a musical train wreck is a lack of communication. When playing, with so many sounds and so much activity going on, we have to be skilled communicators and skilled listeners. A band will never be able to play together effectively if they don't know key signals such as how to end a song, when to repeat a chorus, how to build the music or simply when to hold on a chord.

Insert example

Either use the example given below or give your own example of signals you use as a worship leader to communicate / give direction to the rest of the band during a song.

Example

Here are a few simple signs you might use to communicate with your musicians:

- *If a song is going to end then the worship leader tilts their guitar and turns to look at the drummer. Everyone then knows to end the song*
- *If you want to repeat a chorus quickly lift a foot behind you. When wanting just the drums to play, quickly point to the drummer*
- *If you're keen for the band to really build dynamically, begin to stamp your feet more vigorously*

All this can sound a bit ridiculous, but communication is essential and different signals will work better for different groups.

Insert story

If you have a humorous example of where band signals were used ineffectively, insert it here, or use the example given here by Tim Hughes.

Example story

Tim: 'I remember playing acoustic guitar for a worship leader who led from keyboards. His signal for ending a song was to make a cut across this throat [like this]. It always terrified me, because I could never be sure whether he was signalling to end a song, or whether he was telling me that he was actually going to kill me later for something I'd done wrong.'

Of course, all these visual cues mean that the musicians have to keep their eyes open, especially at key moments in a song. If everyone's eyes are always closed, the signals become redundant.

God created us with two ears but only one mouth, a good reminder that we should listen twice as much as we speak. In playing with others it is critical that we learn to listen to one another. What others play should impact our own musical contribution. If there's a new melody line coming through – or a singer adds a fresh harmony – what we play or sing should work to compliment rather than challenge it.

Sound checks are also vital if the band members are to listen to each other effectively. Take time to carefully check each instrument and make sure that each musician can hear what others are playing. It may seem tedious, but will always make a significant difference to the overall sound. There can be a temptation to rush sound checks, but we do so at our peril. We mustn't be afraid of taking the time to ensure that we can hear all that we need to hear adequately.

So that's the second discipline, learning to listen.

Thirdly:

A // Arrange

Arranging a song for a time of worship needs great care. Firstly, think through the groove of the song. The groove is the underlying rhythm; it is always the foundation of any music and is chiefly determined by drums and the bass guitar. If the groove of a song is unclear, then the band will sound shaky and unstable. Like the foundations to a building, if they are not firm and secure, then everything that sits on top is vulnerable.

Spending time with each other locking in to the same rhythmic pattern is so important. It is particularly key for the drums and bass to be playing in unison. Different grooves will always give a different flavour to a song. Any song will take on an entirely different feel if it is played with a varying groove such as rock, country, disco, jazz or reggae.

Secondly, be aware of the harmony in the chords and notes each musician plays. The combination of music and chords provides the essential bedrock for the melody to sit upon. The musical harmony adds depth, meaning and expression to a song. It's important to ensure that everyone is playing the same chords at the same time. If the bass guitar is hitting a root note that clashes with what the keyboards and guitars are playing, then the music will sound confused and messy.

Thirdly, think about the motif of the song. A motif is a musical idea, often a melody that becomes intrinsically connected with a song. It can be a powerful way of capturing emotion. Think of the piano motif on John Lennon's 'Imagine'. As soon as you hear the intro, it's instantly recognisable. Everything about it sets up the sentiment of the song. Or the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which is arguably the most famous motif in classical music, with its trademark 'dud-dud-dud-daahs.' The motif adds drama and depth to the song.

Fourthly, map out the dynamics. Without dynamics you have no music, you simply have sound. Every style uses musical dynamics to take the listener on a journey. If there is no variety in a song, with everyone playing loudly at all times, then pretty quickly people will lose interest in the song. We need to be intentional with how we build our arrangements, adding and subtracting instrumentation at key moments.

There are several types of musical dynamic. For instance, a song can be built up through using linear dynamics, where the band move together as a unit, either in crescendo or decrescendo, getting louder or quieter. A band may do this when building into a chorus.

Alternatively, a song can use terraced dynamics. In this case, variety in a song comes by alternating when instruments are introduced and removed.

With dynamics, it is essential for musicians to be disciplined in not overplaying. It is said of truly great musicians that it's not what they play, but what they don't play that sets them apart. Silence is part of the music. Great music needs space. Remember less is more.

Finally:

Y // Yield

The best way to play well together is to yield to one another. Bands form when individuals unite and lay down their own personal agendas to become one musically. Great bands will always have a collective musical goal, rather than simply being about personal aims. There is an

understanding that ultimately the sum is greater than all the parts. This mind-set has huge implications on how we play musically when we join with others. Whether your team involves a fifty-piece orchestra, a rock band, percussion and an acoustic guitar, or an organ and choir, the same principle remains.

Whatever you play, the goal is always to play as one – not simply to sound amazing on our own instrument. If that means playing the simplest of chords on the keyboards, or a drummer using brushes, or a singer only singing in the choruses, then so be it. The conductor Leonard Bernstein was once asked what the most difficult instrument to find for an orchestra was. He responded saying, ‘Second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who plays second violin with enthusiasm is difficult. Yet, if no one plays second fiddle, we have no harmony.’

So that’s the P-L-A-Y of how to play together. Let’s now look very briefly at some of the individual instruments involved in a typical band with some tips on how to play well.

Note:

It can be effective to make this session practical by getting musicians to present each brief section covering: drums, bass, keys, electric guitar, vocals, or whatever instruments play a key role in your worship band. If possible try to have instruments set up so that brief examples of how to play / how not to play can be given. If this is not possible, you can just present the sessions below as scripted, or play the relevant sections from the Worship Central Course filming online.

Drums

Drummers have to keep a **steady** pulse throughout the music. Drummers need to lay down the foundations with strong timekeeping, so practise by playing along to a song or album, and by rehearsing regularly with a metronome. This will help highlight any areas of weakness. When you’re practising try playing along to a song with a ‘feel’ that inspires you, which you can then try to emulate. Play a simple beat and sit on it, don’t change the rhythm, and try to make the beat ‘feel’ good.

You can improve your timing by learning to count the subdivisions of the beat: dividing the beat up and counting the “1-and-2-and-3-and-4s” and, in your head or out loud, as you drum. Learning to keep a steady beat will provide a fantastic foundation for the rest of the band to build on.

Then there's the **sound** you make. It has a lot to do with the calibre and tuning of the drums you're using, but regardless of the quality of your gear, how the drums are played is how the sound is produced. If you're careless and hit the snare in different areas, each snare hit will sound different, which will result in a lack of consistency to the overall sound. Practise slowly, concentrating on hitting the drums in the centre with consistent velocity, being aware and in control of the dynamic balance between all parts of the drum kit for example, for some songs you may want to hit the hi-hat louder. For others, you may want the snare drum louder.

Lastly there's **sensitivity**. Great drummers are sensitive drummers – responding to the musical dynamic, the worship leader and the Holy Spirit. It's hard to stay focused on your sound and timing at the same time as being relaxed and open, but it's what makes all the difference. Drummers should always be listening and watching. Listening to the other instruments in the band and responding to their rhythms and melodies, helping to shape the music. And watching the worship leader and the congregation, always ready to respond to the flow of the worship time.

Bass

The bass is a very powerful instrument, using the lowest and some of the most powerful sonic frequencies. Consequently great **tone** is essential. Spend time getting a sound that you like and make sure it works best with the rest of the band. Experiment with the tone controls on your bass and the amplifier but also practice your technique in how you attack the string. There will be moments when you need to be delicate perhaps using your thumb, or gently plucking the string, and moments when you need to play with more attack perhaps using a pick and getting more purchase on the string. We often call this harder attack 'driving' the bass line. The tone should reflect the mood, dynamic and feel of the music.

Secondly, **time-keeping**. This is more often associated with drummers, but it's just as important for the bass player to keep excellent TIME. It is essential to 'lock-in' with the drummer's rhythm, not just relying on them, but taking responsibility for your own timekeeping. Pay particular attention to the pattern of the kick drum and talk through with the drummer whether you're going to match it or compliment it somehow differently. Once a solid sense of time and groove is established, then the rhythm section can truly come to life. Rhythm sections often refer to this as being 'in the pocket'.

Finally, bass players have got to have **good taste**. Flea, the bass player for the Red Hot Chili Peppers once said, 'Play every note like it's your last.' Don't be afraid of keeping it simple by just playing root notes with blistering precision and disciplined accuracy. When you're rehearsing try to find the best and most tasteful part to play in the context of the song. Make every note count. Choose carefully the right moment to add a fill otherwise you can distract the worshipper and draw unnecessary attention onto you and away from the worship. Remember that the bass line is key to the foundation of the music so it needs to be solid and tasteful.

Keys

As a keyboardist, your task is to listen to where you can fit in to the overall sound and mix of the other instruments, making good choices to **select** the right part. Don't overplay: only play what is necessary. For example, over playing the bass line or melody line might clash with other lead instruments.

In rehearsals, you should think carefully, make notes, talk with the other melody instruments and listen to the vocals, so that we select the right path for the journey through the song.

Secondly, learn how to master your instrument. You've got a lot of sounds at your disposal and it is essential that you take the time to explore all the various sounds to find the best suitable ones for your worship set. Take the time to learn how your equipment works so that you can move back and forth from all your presets so that it is seamless.

You can influence the style of a song in endless ways. The danger with all of these sonic possibilities is losing a sense of focus, so develop your **skill** in understanding the sounds you are using for each song or section.

Lastly, good keyboardists **support** what is going on in the rest of the band. Listen to the electric guitarist and support each other musically. While one of you might choose a more rhythmic pattern, the other might focus on a more melodic line. Or if the electric guitarist is playing high up the fret-board then the keys will perhaps be more effective lower down the octave range. The relationship between the keyboards and the other melody instruments is as crucial to the band as the relationship between the drums and bass.

Electric guitar

Electric guitarists, you are a powerful addition to a band, adding harmony, melodies and rhythms; shaping dynamics and ambience. It is easy for you to dominate the band so think about the **space** you create as well as where to play. Being sensitive is key. You need to be able to play two instruments: your guitar and silence. Don't give into the temptation to play too much rather than selecting the part that will really help the music.

Secondly, get a good variety of great **sounds** by learning to master your guitar, amp and effects. You might want to start with three basic sounds: a 'clean' tone for verses, something more driven for the chorus and then something special that you reserve for those big moments in the song. Always be thinking about what the song needs rather than what you want to play. Think about the vibe the instrument is creating. Is it adding emotion or anticipation? Is it creating a sense of energy or majesty?

Finally, **structure**: Don't 'noodle' through the song ineffectively – playing endless riffs that go nowhere. Think about the parts you are going to play for each section of the song. Whether it's a light arpeggio pattern in the verse, powerful chords for the chorus, or an iconic riff, spend time working on what will serve the song best. Ask yourself how you can musically support the lyrics of the song. Also use your volume well to create dynamics throughout the journey of each song. Whatever you choose to play, try to serve the song and the worship time.

Vocals

Deciding and knowing your vocal **parts** is very important for any vocalist. Singers add tone and texture to the lead vocal. Harmony is the ideal way to do this – such as singing a 3rd below or above the melody. Think about choosing a harmony line that compliments the melody. Often the best harmony lines are the ones that stay consistent. If in doubt, don't be afraid of sticking to the melody or simply singing off the microphone, or even not at all.

'**Phrasing**' is the way vocalists use the diction and tone of their singing voice to add depth, energy and colour to the part. It is really important that we lock into how the lead vocal line is being sung, being careful to remain the support voice. It requires both sensitivity and boldness to do this. Make sure that you can hear all of the vocals to help with both phrasing and tuning. Also, listen to what the band is doing, the dynamics of the different sections. The tone and phrasing we use for a chorus of declaration may be really different to how we approach an intimate song of worship.

It is also important to understand how your voice relates to the microphone that you are using. Learn to master this on your own with a microphone listening to how your voice sounds with different techniques.

Singers are unique in that our instrument is our body, made by God, and not by man, hugely powerful but also vulnerable. Because of this we are uniquely placed to demonstrate physical posture in worship and are free to model what it is to worship **passionately**.

So many examples of worship documented in the Bible speak of a group or an individual's physical response to God, whether that be lifting hands in praise or bowing down in awe and wonder. It is therefore important that we remain visually engaged to inspire and give permission to the congregation, to worship God both vocally and physically.

Many of these insights and principles will be relevant to other instrumentation you might use in your worship teams, such as solo instruments or an organ. The essential thing is to work hard at combining the different sounds and melody to play together as one.

In Psalm 150 we find an amazing call to worship for everything that has breath to praise the Lord. We see all types of instrumentation involved: drums, stringed and wind instruments. There are melodies, harmonies and rhythms all colliding to form a beautiful symphony of musical praise.

'Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
praise him with tambourine and dancing,
praise him with the strings and flute,
praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.'

Here we are encouraged to use everything we can to praise God. Music is an incredible vehicle for worship: it unites people, captures emotion and gives voice to our deepest longings. We are encouraged – even commanded – to use every type of musical expression to bring glory to God.

Someone once said, 'You can't whistle a symphony on your own. You need an orchestra to play it.' In playing together as a band, time must be invested in appreciating the strengths and uniqueness of each musical contribution. This understanding and awareness is essential to playing great music. When individuals join together as one, something special can be accomplished for the glory of God.

Pray

Father, we thank you for the amazing gift of music. We pray you'd bind us together in time and in tune, so that we'd fill the world with the sound of your mercy, truth and goodness. Let everything that has breath, Praise the Lord! Amen.

Next

Take time to pray for people, then gather people by instrument (if you have enough people) and discuss the three practical recommendations outlined above.

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