

THOUGHTS ON PLAYING FOR WEDDINGS

by Kevin McChesney

Here are some thoughts on playing for weddings, including considerations of logistics, communication, presentation, and simply being what the bride and groom need on their happy day.

"It was a lovely ceremony."

"Didn't she look beautiful?"

"Wasn't he so handsome?"

"The music was wonderful. How nice that the bell choir played."

"It was a beautiful day."

That's the goal - for everyone to come away remembering that it was a beautiful day.

Weddings are lovely, messy, confusing, stressful, wonderful ceremonies to play for. Having the bell choir, ensemble, or soloist play adds a marvelous dimension to the day...

...as long as you know what you are getting into. :) Weddings require work, preparation, and above all, a patient and understanding way of communicating. Here are some thoughts on playing for weddings.

LOGISTICS

- **Set up** is probably the first thing to bring up. Often brides and grooms don't realize how much room a full bell choir takes up - or a small ensemble or soloist either, for that matter. It's important to have exact dimensions and to communicate these clearly. Have a couple of alternatives in mind. For instance, if you are having a full five octave choir you can come up with a "U" set up, a straight line, a "V", or two rows. If space is at a premium, remember that if you own five octaves that means you own four octaves, and three, and two. The best solution for the space available (and if you have ringers out of town that weekend) may well be to use a smaller group or an ensemble with a smaller set up.

Along with discussing how much room the bell choir needs, you need to discuss placement. Will pews or other furniture have to be moved? Will you be encroaching on an aisle or space needed for traffic? Where do the ringers sit when they aren't playing? And if they need to move any distance to sit down or enter and exit, is the path clear and not in the way of the congregation seeing what else is going on?

- **Money** is probably my least favorite subject when it comes to playing professionally, but it's a subject that has to be addressed. You may be playing for a ringer in your group and donating your time, but often you are the hired professionals and should be paid as such. For friends and people who are close to Pikes Peak Ringers (PPR) in one way or another, I simply ask them to give us what they think is appropriate. But for more business-level events, it's important to set a fee. There can be some flexibility in the fee if that seems to fit the situation, but don't sell yourself short as a professional musical organization - if we don't treat ourselves with that kind of respect, no one else will either. Money matters can be handled politely and calmly and in a positive way.

- **Schedule:** Be sure you are clear on when you or your group will meet with the wedding party. Know when the wedding rehearsal is and be SURE to have someone there; it's unlikely that the whole group can attend the rehearsal, but someone needs to be there to get the lay of the land and all of the last-minute details. On the day of the wedding, be clear with your group about call and warm up time, when you begin playing, the time of the ceremony, how long they are likely to be there, and so on.
- **Directions:** If you're playing at your home church or facility, you've got it made, though you do need to be certain that any substitutes know where they are going. If you are packing up the equipment and taking it to another facility, first know that this takes more TIME on the schedule and plan accordingly, and then be sure to GO TO the facility beforehand to check on directions and how long it takes to get there. Don't rely on Map Quest, Yahoo Maps or Google Maps - those can help, but it pays to have you or someone from your group physically visit the site so that you can warn the group about any odd turns or confusing signs, etc. The best rule concerning directions is "it will take longer than you think to get there." If you think it should take 30 minutes, plan on at least 45.
- **What to wear:** Ok, maybe money isn't my least favorite subject: maybe it's outfits. :) It's a pretty close race. :) Still, especially in a wedding where the colors and styles that folks are wearing are of such importance, it's important to know what the wedding party and the minister and other leaders in the ceremony are wearing. While formal black always seems to work, there may be other possibilities for enhancing the look - after all, the bell choir is one of the leaders in the ceremony as well. Soloists and small ensembles may have more possibilities for matching than larger groups. Also discuss colors for the table covers if you have some options.
It's also important to keep the overall setup in mind when discussing outfits. In our home church and in other churches I've seen, it's possible that some guests will actually be seated behind the bell choir. So this wouldn't be the day to play barefoot or in tennis shoes! :)
- **What goes where - beyond the setup.** I know of a soloist who was placed prominently at the front of the church only to have a very large floral decoration placed right in front of him, obliterating his line of sight with the center aisle and making it so that he had to guess when the bride had arrived at the front. It pays to know the lay of the land and either make adjustments if possible, kindly ask if any obstructions or problem furniture can be moved, or at least have fair warning about what you're up against.
- **Who is bringing what.** Make sure you have everything you need and that it will all be transported well before call time - music, folders, stand lights (assume you need these!!), extension cords, music stands and risers, pads, covers (the right color!), tables if they aren't being provided by the facility, and any extras (including big extras - one time PPR had to bring our own electronic keyboard with amp, extension cords, and the whole nine yards).

COMMUNICATION

Brides are fragile. Handle with care :). For that matter, so are mothers of the bride, grooms, best men, maids of honor, bridesmaids, scripture-reading cousins, and on down the line through all of the families and friends. In fact, so are the other professionals involved in the day, like the photographer and the florist. How you communicate with these excited, stressed-out, easily hurt, wonderful people is very important.

- **This day is about them, not you.** This is one of the strange things about playing for weddings - it's an odd combination of being a performer and not being a performer but a servant. Yes, you need to polish your music so that it sparkles at the ceremony. Yes, you should work on your presentation so that it is smooth and communicates wonderfully, enhancing not distracting from the other beautiful objects and people around you. But at the end of this special day, all of your polish and hard work is to create something that puts the focus on the happy couple, not on you. Keep a servant's heart and communicate in a spirit of always wanting to make this what THEY want.
- **Be careful about your tone of voice.** This is the most important consideration in today's lesson! Often what you say and what is heard are not one and the same. And what you say doesn't count a tenth, a hundredth as much as HOW you say it! One small comment like "We'll need more time at this point," or "Would it be possible not to seat the guests directly behind or in front of us?" may seem like nothing to you, but could mean the difference between a bride or family loving what you do and a total emotional meltdown depending on HOW you say it.
- **The responsibility for decisions rests with them, not you.** If decisions have been made that are not ideal for you but are liveable, go with them. It's not worth the fight and potential hurt feelings if you can make do. You do need to communicate the needs of the bell choir or ensemble clearly and gently; if you need more space, need more time for set up between numbers, need to work out miking, etc., it is important that the couple and family and wedding coordinator know about these needs. These considerations can be discussed openly but understanding that the minds of those you are working with are likely on a hundred other things right now. Once you have the basic needs of space and equipment and lighting and time to get from place to place worked out, be ready to work with whatever decisions have been made about the guests' seating arrangements, order of worship, where the flowers go, when the photographer is taking pictures, and so on and so on. There's a LOT going on that day, and there comes a time where resistance is futile. :)
- **Be mindful that other people have a job to do that day, too.** If the flash photography is bothering you while you are warming up, at most say something gently to that effect. And then don't be at all surprised if the photographer goes right on shooting - it's his/her job, after all. :) The other professionals may well be as scattered and stressed out as the family, so it pays to be considerate and not overly concerned about getting your own way in the details; again, if it's liveable, go with it.
- **The most organized bride you've ever encountered wasn't that much more together than the least organized bride you've known.** :) When they are stressed, send them peace; when they are upset, talk to them with love. Whether the problem du jour is a big deal to you or not is immaterial - it's a big deal to her (or the groom or her family or...) and therefore it matters. Help if you can or at least show your support and give them positive energy. Weddings are celebrations, and celebrations are FUN, and it may well fall to you to take on the job of simply reminding everyone of this. :) This is a natural role for handbell ringers and directors who take such joy in what they do!

BEFORE THE CEREMONY

- **Communicate with the bride, other organizers in the family, other musicians, the wedding coordinator, etc., much more than just once (if only for reassurance).** There are too many details and too many things that can change for you not to communicate and double-check frequently (and gently!).
- **Check directions to the site and how long it takes to get there.** The best rule of thumb is that it takes longer to get there than you think it will. :)
- **Go to the wedding rehearsal and write things down.** Then time everything out for yourself and make a chart or list of EXACTLY where everyone needs to be when.
- **Make a list of equipment needs and be on site WELL ahead of time to be sure everything is in place.** Better to be ready and waiting around for a while than to be scrambling at the last minute.
- **Put the music in order in the folder.** This may seem obvious, but I've been to a wedding where we waited while the bell choir was clearly searching for the next piece.
- **Have Plan B (and C and D!) firmly in mind.** One of the first rules of weddings is that the possibility that something will go wrong is high. Or at least something may go in a direction other than the original plan. Be ready to take an extra repeat. At one wedding, Pikes Peak Ringers played the inevitable Pachelbel's Canon for the processional and took the pre-determined repeat not once or twice but more like 11 times! Coordinate with the keyboardist so that if extra music is needed to cover something, he/she is ready to step up. If guests were seated in the spot that was reserved for the bell choir, be ready to stake out another spot. And so on...
- **Have extra music prepared.** This is especially important for music played before the ceremony, as it's anybody's guess whether this will start on time. At least be ready to repeat something.

AT THE CEREMONY

- **Have a signal for repeats.** This can be a hand signal, or I know of one director who holds up a colored sheet of paper, which I think is a brilliant idea.
- **Be ready for anything.** If something goes wrong, be ready to step in and help. This covers moving any of your equipment if it turns out you and the florist are in each other's' way after all, being ready to cue off of something other than what was originally planned in the flow of the service, dealing with flash photography despite numerous times you asked the photographer not to do that to you, and so on.
- **Be in the moment and ENJOY this!** True, the day is clearly about someone other than you, but it IS a joyful, beautiful day! While a lot of this lesson makes playing weddings sound like hard work - and it is :) - it's also true that weddings are FUN and SHOULD be fun! So enjoy playing, smile, play your best, your utmost for their highest (as the saying goes), and above all have a great time!

AFTER THE CEREMONY

- **Be ready with extra recessional music if needed.** Also, don't be surprised if you DON'T play everything you had planned for the recessional - people usually get out of there much more quickly than they came in.
- **Again, be in the moment.** ENJOY the hand shaking and hugs and compliments.
- **Be gracious.** After all, the focus of the day is on the bride and groom, and it's a very simple matter to respond to compliments on the music with a simple "we love to play" or "we are proud to be part of this beautiful day." (This applies no matter how well YOU think you played! The proper response to their saying "thank you" is not "that didn't go very well," it's "you're welcome!")

AND AT ALL TIMES

- **Communicate gently and watch your tone of voice.** I cannot emphasize this enough! Tone of voice and HOW you say what you say matters MUCH more than what you actually say. Be sure that the messages that they are HEARING are what you intend to SAY to them. And don't you want them to hear that you enjoyed doing this and are grateful to be here?
- **Have a sense of humor.** Probably a good rule for life generally, this DEFINITELY applies on this crazy day! If something does go wrong, better to find the humor in it than to wallow in the mistake and just relive it over and over. The other professionals and the family and guests want to remember you as someone pleasant to work with who contributed to a beautiful day.
- **Be grateful for the opportunity and understand that this is their special day and we are just happy to be a part of it.** An attitude of gratitude goes a long, long way toward helping the family have a magical day.

I haven't covered NEARLY all the details and logistics of playing for a wedding, just highlighted some of the things that I think are important and worth thinking about. Yes, weddings are messy, marvelous, bizarre, wonderful things to be a part of! Of course, no matter what went wrong, no matter how hot it was or how late someone was, whether or not a bell got dropped or the pastor lost his place, at the end of the day the lovely couple is married. :) Approached with good organization, gentle humor, and above all understanding concerning this crazy time, what really matters is that "it was a beautiful day."