Taking Advantage of Music Notation Software

By Danielle Tragardt

No matter the size of your church’s worship team — from just a few musicians to a complete ensemble — getting everyone on the same musical page requires both investing in rehearsal time and structuring that rehearsal time so that it’s most effective. To do this, many churches decide to make photocopies of sheet music, put it into binders, and bring those binders to and from rehearsals and services — while other praise teams talk through chord changes together, run through them, and ultimately rely more on memory to play each Sunday. But, whatever system you currently depend on, by taking advantage of music notation software, you can really make the most of your rehearsals and save a lot of time and energy in the process.

And, best of all, music notation software is extremely easy to use. At heart, all music notation software is designed to help make writing music, rehearsing music, and sharing music with the congregation easier. It reforms a laborious “pen-and-paper” approach to writing down music into an interactive and rewarding computer experience.

Whether you want to keep track of song ideas, write out instrument-specific parts for the whole worship band, create backing tracks, rearrange your favorite worship songs, or just print out chords and lyrics, you can do it quickly and easily — and that’s really only the beginning of its potential applications in your house of worship!

Many Times Faster Than Writing Out Sheet Music

To start using music notation software, all you need is a computer. You can use your regular computer keyboard and mouse to enter in notes, creating quick “short cuts” to speed up adding common rests, note values, and time signatures. But, one of the best ways to enter in notes is to use a MIDI-capable keyboard controller — and it’s possible that your church’s main worship keyboard will do the job. Just connect it to your computer — maybe via its USB connection or with a MIDI interface (check out page 74) — and then play each instrument’s parts on the piano. The software will intelligently put the notes in the right place on the musical staves. In fact, even if you aren’t used to formally writing music notation, you can just choose the right tempo, play along with the virtual “metronome,” and perform your entire composition on the keyboard — it’ll appear right on your screen, just as if you’d entered every single note and its note value! What’s more, you can conveniently “copy and paste” your musical ideas around, to creatively try out new arrangements, without committing to them, just like you would with text in a word processor.

Hear Your Creations Played by a Virtual Worship Band

Music notation allows for an extremely fluid, inspiring workflow, which helps bring your focus to the music as a whole, rather than the tedium of each note. And adding to that easy workflow and overall rewarding experience is the ability to actually hear your musical ideas played back as you create them. That’s because most notation programs include a wealth of virtual instrument sounds — from basic instruments all the way to orchestral sections, choirs, and beyond. When you enter in note information — say, a bass line, a piano part, and a few guitar chords — you can hit “play” and hear a virtual worship team play the song back to you. It creates a much more natural way to work than does playing out each instrument part on the piano — you can really get a feel for how instrument voices work together and contribute to the overall sound. Plus, even if you don’t know how to play a particular instrument in reality, the software will let you know if you’ve written a part that’s too high for the instrument or that’s too difficult a range for most musicians to play — that way, you can more easily tailor your compositions and arrangements to the skills of each member of your worship team.

Easily Rework Your Favorite Worship Songs, Just by Scanning Them In

Rather than starting with a new song, if your house of worship currently has a collection of favorite sheet music, then you can easily bring it into your notation software program of choice for reworking — without having to enter in every note. Many programs support music scanning right out of the box or...
Using Lead Sheets As a Performance Tool and to Connect with the Congregation

While creating and using complete sheet music is often useful in the rehearsal stages with your worship band, sometimes you just don’t want to flip pages when you’re performing in the chapel — but you also don’t want to rely entirely on memory to play through your long song list. To aid with this, notation software includes tools to help you create “lead sheets,” or streamlined versions of songs. These lead sheets typically include a staff with vocal melodies and harmonies, lyrics below those notes, and chord names printed above the musical staff. In moments, you can take all of your complete songs, quickly generate single-page lead sheets for everyone, and place them on music stands for quick reference while performing.

Outside of performances, you can also use lead sheets to help the choral ensemble practice, since all the lyrics, harmonies, and melodies will be printed on the page. You could even use lead sheets to create a custom praise book for your church, and then make copies for the congregation, so everyone can sing along during services. Plus, because the chord changes are clearly noted on the lead sheets, it’s easy for the youth leaders to take the sheets out on a youth retreat and play through favorite songs on just guitar.

From Solo Guitar to Full Ensemble — Finding the Right Program to Serve Your House of Worship’s Needs

There are a variety of excellent music notation software options available, and we’ve outlined them for you on the next few pages. Many are actual versions of the same program — just with varying feature sets, to meet different degrees of need. In fact, there are even guitar-specific notation and tablature-creation programs available, which are perfect for those with more guitar-based services. Of course, if you have any further questions about which software is right for your house of worship, your personal Sweetwater Sales Engineer will be happy to help you — just give him or her a call!