



MIDI *in* MINISTRY

THE INFO SOURCE FOR CHURCH MUSICIANS

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MORE THAN MEETS THE EAR **Part I**



5 MINUTES

with Rob Biagi

Rob Biagi is a worship leader and songwriter with years of experience working in music ministry. Currently, he serves as the director of the Children's Ministry at Mariners Church in Orange County, CA. MIDI in Ministry recently had the opportunity to discuss how music technology and Roland gear have made a difference in his work, both at Mariners and as a solo artist.

MIDI in Ministry: Tell us a little about your musical background and how you got involved with Mariners Church.

Rob Biagi: I started in vocal groups at school at age 16, and played keyboards in bands through high school and college. I came to Mariners after I saw a bulletin announcement regarding auditions for summer vocal teams. After a while, I ended up getting to lead adult praise & worship in the main sanctuary, made some recordings, and even toured Europe.

MiM: What is your current involvement at Mariners?

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STEP UP

Whether you come from a classical piano background or play by ear, using a synthesizer keyboard effectively in worship requires a different approach. This may seem obvious, but even experienced and accomplished pianists and organists feel awkward when they sit down at a synthesizer. The natural tendency is to quickly find a piano or organ Patch and do what feels comfortable—play that sound the way you always have. This is what I call the “Patch of least resistance.” There’s nothing wrong with this approach on your first day. It’s wise to take baby-steps. But don’t stop stepping! Just as we’re to be weaned from milk to solid food in order to grow, the fruit is sweeter when we get beyond the basic, single sounds in a synth.

One of the great things about a synthesizer is that you can do this. You can combine sounds. You can divide the keyboard into sections with different sounds. This may not be new information to you and you may already be doing some of these things. If so, I’ll give you some tips on how to have greater success with it and give you some new things to try. If this is all new to you, welcome to the exciting adventure of becoming a realtime orchestrator.

THE STRAIGHT SCOOP

First of all, when we talk about a synthesizer, we’re basically talking about any keyboard that requires electricity. There are many varieties. One common type is a 5-octave keyboard with unweighted-keys. The big advantage of this type of synthesizer is affordability. You can get plenty of good sounds and features for less than \$1,000.

A workstation is a keyboard with an onboard sequencer, giving it the ability to record complete compositions. Many workstations also have “sampling”—the ability to capture external sounds, i.e. vocals, and play them from the keyboard or use them in a composition (sequence). A workstation may have a 5-octave, unweighted “synth-action” keyboard or an 88-note, weighted “hammer-action” keyboard.

Finally, the digital piano with its 88 weighted-action keys is a popular favorite with churches. These instruments are easy to operate and have the essential “bread-n-butter” sounds most often used for worship. There are portable digital pianos, as well as those that look like an upright or grand piano with all the wood cabinetry. Bottom line: they’re all synthesizers with a variety of sounds and capabilities that are well suited for worship music.

Regardless of the shape and size of your synthesizer, it has vast sonic possibilities. A modern synthesizer isn’t a single-sound instrument. So we shouldn’t treat it like one. In fact, it should be treated like an orchestra—making you not just a keyboardist, but an orchestrator! Don’t be intimidated though; you don’t have to be John Williams to make your keyboard sing. There are some simple and effective ways to create your own expressive soundscapes.

DO LESS—GET MORE

Let’s start with a simple combination of piano and strings. Most synthesizers have a preset Patch with these two sounds already layered together. Many allow you to create your own combinations using two or more Patches. In both cases, you’re doubling the instrumentation and the number of notes. Even though you may be playing the same number of keys, you’re playing two instruments and thus two notes per key. This requires an adjustment in your playing. First, be very careful of the sustain pedal. A string Patch typically has a slower attack and a longer release time than a piano. So, if you’re using the sustain pedal, it’s very easy for the notes to overlap—creating a busy, muddy sound.

Our tendency as pianists is to play everything like it’s a piano. As a realtime orchestrator however, we need to think about how the actual instrument is played—in this case, the instruments in a string section. Obviously, there’s no sustain pedal on a violin. Also, think about how a string section is used in the style of music you’re playing. You may

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RB: I am currently working in the Children's Ministry, working with everything that gets presented from stage: praise and worship teams, drama, and audio/video components. We are unique in that we actually record CD's of songs our music team is doing and make them available to the families in our church. We've done three so far, all with proper copyright licenses, of course.

MiM: How have you integrated music technology into your work?

RB: Some of the most innovative stuff we're doing now uses the [BOSS] SP-303 Dr. Sample. We record voiceovers and sound effects and fire the samples from the SP-303. It gets the kids laughing and ready to listen to your Bible story or message. The teachers usually give me a list of the voiceovers or sound effects they want, and I go through my libraries and dump them into the Dr. Sample.

MiM: You also use V-Drums®, right?

RB: We have used Roland electronic drum



Roland V-Stage Set (successor to the V-Custom)

kits in both our 2nd/3rd grade room and our 4th/5th grade room since 1999. The

V-Custom kit has fantastic factory sounds, and it was really easy to tweak the EQ, effects, and volumes to get the sounds we wanted. Our drummer has a blast using the hip-hop Patches and effects to change the feel of the church tunes. Also, we've used my XP-60 [Workstation Keyboard] to replace parts if a certain musician couldn't come that day. It's often been our drummer or our bass player. And of course, the piano sounds are great.

MiM: What are some of the common difficulties you've seen when it comes to integrating music technology in worship?

RB: Most people won't just read the manual and do some tutorials, so they waste a lot of time in the beginning. If you use the

videos and the Quick Start guides, you can produce right away! The night I got my XP-60, I was able to create a fairly elaborate sequence with a drum track, bass, and several layers of keyboards and guitar sounds. I was stoked!

MiM: Tell us about the Roland gear you are using and why...

RB: My first synth was a Roland Jupiter-6! Since 1999, though, the XP-60 has been the foundation of most everything I've done at Mariners Church. When I compose, I lay basic tracks for the demo on the XP. When we make our recordings, the XP is the control machine that drives our hard disk-based recording units. When I go back to create the final drum sounds, I combine real percussion with some factory sounds from the TD-7 and the XP, and get some great grooves and feels. On my new solo CD, *You're a V.I.P. to G-O-D*, I again used the XP-60 to compose and edit the songs, to create click tracks that drummers played to, and even as the MIDI controller for my music notation.

MiM: Do you feel that your Roland gear has made life easier and how so?

RB: Absolutely! I get song ideas and quickly record them onto a handheld

recorder, then when I get to my XP-60, I can start playing melodies, creating textures, finding Roland grooves that may give my song a unique feel, and turn that red light on! It's great to have something so simple to use, yet so powerful. One of the songs on my *V.I.P.* CD, called "Jesus, I Know," has factory XP-60 percussion on it, as is.

MiM: Any gear tips or tricks you can share with your peers?

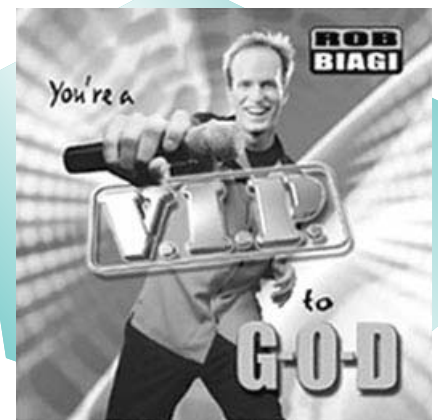
RB: I just goof around and experiment a lot. I like to put stuff together in Performance mode, then switch drum kits or play a totally different feel behind it. Sometimes just by goofing around and speeding the song up radically can make something old sound new. I often mix two or more sounds to get different timbres and EQ. Even though my music is acoustic pop primarily, it's fun to try different things.

MiM: What gives you the most satisfaction in your work with Mariners?

RB: Making music that's relevant to today's kids, and seeing them come alive during praise and worship time is the most satisfying thing about doing music in the local church. Roland products are enabling me to put out good music and a solid biblical message that will stick in the kids' (and parents') heads. Music is that powerful. Sometimes we can't remember the middle of a sermon, but we always remember the middle section of a song we love.

MiM: Thanks Rob!

For more information on Rob Biagi, please visit his website at www.robbiagi.com or send an e-mail to info@robbiagi.com.



NAMM® SUMMER SESSION

The Summer NAMM show in Nashville recently came to a close, and Roland and BOSS introduced some new products perfect for your music ministry. Let's check 'em out:



BR-864 Digital Studio

Have you ever wanted to record your worship band or make custom rehearsal CD's? The BOSS BR-864 is an ultra-convenient way to accomplish this without spending a lot of cash. Inside this portable studio are 64 Virtual Tracks for recording; eight playback tracks; built-in effects like reverb, delay, COSM® Guitar Amp Modeling and more; plus a Rhythm Guide drum machine. You don't even need electricity or a microphone. There's a built-in condenser mic and it can run for hours on eight AA batteries. This is great for making quick vocal team practice tracks—anywhere! And nothing could be better for songwriters. Just pull-out your guitar and press Record. The BR-864 records to convenient Compact Flash media, and comes with a USB port so you can easily transfer your tracks to a computer for CD burning.

RS-70 Synthesizer

Is it time to update your keyboard sounds? Then your ministry should definitely check out the new RS-70. This affordable, 61-note



keyboard workstation boasts an all-new selection of Patches based on CD-quality waveforms—a difference you'll immediately hear. And finding sounds is easy, thanks to new Direct Access buttons.

The RS-70 also comes with powerful recording and performance features like an Arpeggio/Phrase Generator and Multi Chord Memory function, plus an easy-to-use Quick Sequencer. This means you can create complete arrangements of your favorite hymns and choruses, faster and easier than ever. Factor in a D-Beam™ controller, onboard floppy drive, USB port and Roland's new V-LINK video technology, and you've got a solid performance instrument that will serve your arts ministries for years to come.

AD-8 Acoustic Guitar Processor

If you've ever tried to use an acoustic guitar for worship, you know the feedback nightmares that come along with miking it. More than likely, you've opted to amplify your acoustic with a piezo pickup, but this can result in a thin-sounding tone. With the BOSS AD-8, you can give a piezo-equipped guitar the warm, full-bodied sound of a high-end acoustic using BOSS'



new COSM® Acoustic Guitar Modeling technology. Of course, the AD-8 also comes with specialized acoustic effects like reverb, EQ and anti-feedback. Plus, it has balanced XLR outputs so it can go right into your mixing board.

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need to study some recordings. Listen for things like: range, volume, what parts of the song the strings are in, etc. It will be different for each song and style of music so listen to lots of different artists. The keys to making a piano/string layer sound good are simplicity, dynamics and open voicings.

Simplify the part you're playing. It's good to play fewer notes with longer values. Remember, for every note you play, you're actually playing two—so more sound is generated without playing more notes. Also, give your left hand a rest—especially if you're playing in a rhythm section with a bass player. Make sure anything you play in the lower octaves compliments what the bass player is doing. No song needs two bass lines. In case you're wondering, the energy won't suffer due to playing fewer notes because your layered sound is bigger and more lush. Let the sound work for you. Besides, there are other fun things to think about...

ABSOLUTE CONTROL—AT LAST!

Use dynamics and controllers to create contrast between sections of the song. Resist the temptation to use the same mix of piano and strings all the time. There's so much more expressiveness available to you. Your synthesizer is velocity sensitive. String Patches often have a fast attack if you strike the keys hard, and a slow attack when played softly. Use this to your advantage as a realtime orchestrator. The string Patch will be more prominent when you play harder so wait for the chorus or bridge to do so. On many synths, you can even create velocity curves wherein the strings won't even play until you play hard enough.

Many keyboards have onboard faders or knobs to manually control the volume of each layered Patch. For example, on the RD-700 Stage Piano, one fader can control piano volume while another controls string volume. This kind of onboard control makes it easy to create dramatic effects. For example, turn the strings all the way down while you're playing the piano Patch during the intro or verse of a song. On the last measure of that section, land on a whole note chord. While you're holding it with the sustain pedal, gradually fade in the string Patch with the fader. This is a powerful effect often used by film composers and also works in the reverse at the end of a big chorus to bring things down for a final verse or outro.

If you don't have that kind of knob or fader control on the front panel, your synthesizer may have a Foot Control or Expression Pedal jack on the back. If so, you may be able to create dynamic effects like swells, fades and sforzandos with your foot. This is great because you don't have to take a hand off the keyboard.

Which notes you choose to play will also make a huge difference in the sound. We'll get into detail about this in Part II, along with more advanced layering and velocity concepts and the power of Aftertouch. In the meantime, explore your synthesizer and discover your inner-orchestrator!

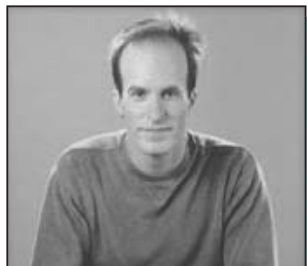


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Christian Musician Summit

November 14 & 15, 2003

A two-day gathering for musicians, worship leaders & technicians to improve their skill and inspire their talent.

Come to *CM* magazine's first annual musicians conference for two days of workshops, exhibits and concerts. Private lessons will also be available. Friday's workshops are geared toward worship, with instructors like **Jami Smith** and **Lincoln Brewster**. Saturday's seminars are focused on developing musicianship and will have offerings from Phil Keaggy, **Roby Duke**, Will Denton and more. A special night of worship on Friday evening will feature Jami Smith and Lincoln Brewster. On Saturday night, **Phil Keaggy** will be in concert! All the concerts, exhibits and seminars are included in the registration. Go to www.christianmusician.com for details and registration.