

How to choose Music for a Memorial Service

By Suzannah Doyle • www.SuzDoyle.com

Planning a memorial service while dealing with the emotional aspects of losing of a loved one can be challenging. This article, written by a seasoned performer who has provided music at hundreds of funerals and memorials, helps you understand how to choose music for memorial services, and -- most importantly -- what the function of music is at these gatherings. This article is free to copy and share, but not to sell or re-sell.



Here are basic guidelines for planning music for a service:

Understand the Function of Music at a Memorial Gathering

Music:

- 1) provides a safe space/ container for people to experience the gathering
- 2) signals the beginning and end of the event, and transitions to different elements of the service
- 3) underscores and reflects the emotional needs of the attendees (giving them a safe way to laugh, cry, and process the grief)
- 4) reflects the character of the person who is being memorialized

As in a movie, music guides the emotional experience of a gathering.

Consider the Format of the Music Experience at a Memorial:

1. Prelude music - 1/2 hour before the service begins (usually instrumental background music or soft vocal music - this provides a comfortable feeling to those who arrive early, and sets the overall tone for what is to follow)
2. Opening Song - sung or instrumental (signals the start of the service)
3. Special music during the service - 2 or 3 songs, often sung, interspersed with spoken parts of the service
4. Closing song - signals end of the service
5. Postlude music - 2 or 3 quiet background instrumentals to underscore the transition of people going to next event (e.g. potluck, graveside service, etc.)
6. Additional music -- during potluck, other gatherings

- The music's job is to emotionally underscore the entire event, from before to after, so it feels smooth, seamless and flows easily from one part to the next.

Choose Songs that Reflect the Character of the Deceased

This could mean anything from reverent hymns to country western or gospel singalongs. Choose styles of music that reflect the personality of the family, and that has meaning to the survivors. It is especially important to let loved ones express themselves musically, whether it be by playing a song, or compiling a CD of music to be played as a prelude.

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Select whatever music best serves the family -- and especially the children -- right now. Sometimes working on a music presentation is very cathartic for children who may not otherwise know how to face their sadness. If that means most or all the music is performed by the kids or loved ones, then that would be very meaningful and healing. It's helpful to have someone to musically "hold the space" for what is happening; e.g. if it becomes too emotional for the kids to perform, the professional musician could step in and keep things going smoothly.

Don't be Afraid to Say "No"

It is likely that you will get numerous offers by musicians and others who would generously like to offer their music to the event. It is important to decide what would truly best support the gathering. It may be the kids singing, or a younger child playing guitar to underscore a poem being read, or a teen making a mix tape to use during part of the service. A good professional musician will want to support you in creating the best experience possible, which means stepping aside if other musical choices would be best.

The Function of the Professional Musician

The number one responsibility of the professional musician at a memorial service is to hold the center for everything that happens musically at the event. This means helping singers or instrumentalists rehearse, providing accompaniment as needed, and holding the center and continuity for the entire flow of the event. This includes being prepared to provide music at the spur of the moment if a song sung by a family member becomes too emotional to be finished. The professional musician's most important role, by taking care of the musical details of the service, is to free the family up to concentrate on all the other details of the memorial service.

Other Considerations

Some churches or gathering places have restrictions on what types of music or instruments are allowed. Have your musician check on this before making detailed choices about music.

Your musician functions as an ad hoc music director for the memorial service. They should check on sound system requirements with the officiant, on approval for using instruments in the facilities, and on availability of electrical outlets, microphones, sound systems, etc. If several different singers, instrumentalists and performers will be playing, the music director should ensure that everyone's musical needs are clearly ascertained ahead of time (determining their technical requirements) and that set-up and sound check times are clearly agreed upon.

Take Good Care of Yourself

Choosing a dependable musician to deal with all the details of the musical aspects of your service enables family members to take better care of themselves during this emotional time. Be generous with your self-care right now. Don't be afraid to sit quietly after the service alone, to let things settle in. Your job, as a grieving family member or loved one, is to honor your grief and give yourself space and time to begin healing. Your job is NOT to act as host or hostess of the memorial. Let a trusted friend or family member handle that role.

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General Tips

Delegate tasks as much as possible, so you can take good care of yourself. Let the music director attend to all the music and performing details; choose others to handle decorating, catering, being a liaison between the officiant, the venue and the funeral home.

Arrange as much quiet down time as possible amidst attending to matters.

Breathe. Let others comfort you.

Lean into the grieving process knowing it will become easier with time.



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*Those who will not slip
beneath the still surface
on the well of grief
Turning down through
its black water
To the place we cannot breathe
Will never know the source
from which we drink
The secret water cold and clear
Nor find in the darkness glimmering
the Small Round Coins
Thrown in by those who
wished for something else.*

-David Whyte