

A Comprehensive Technical Guide to 'As the Deer' Musical Arrangements: From Liturgical Traditions to Modern Praise

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The musical setting of Psalm 42, often recognized by the title "**As the Deer Longs**" or simply "**As the Deer**," represents a cornerstone in both contemporary worship and traditional liturgical repertoire. This text, rooted in the ancient Hebrew poetry of the longing soul, has been adapted by various composers, including **Martin Nystrom**, **Bob Hurd**, **Bob Moore**, and even **Felix Mendelssohn**. For music directors, pianists, and choral conductors, understanding the technical nuances, harmonic structures, and pedagogical demands of these various arrangements is essential for effective performance and ministry. This article provides an in-depth technical analysis of the most prominent versions of this piece, evaluating their scores, instrumentation requirements, and historical contexts.

1. The Scriptural and Historical Foundation of Psalm 42

Before diving into the technical specifications of the scores, it is critical to understand the source material. Psalm 42 (often paired with Psalm 43 in liturgical settings) provides the lyrical framework: "*As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.*" This imagery of thirst and spiritual desperation has inspired two distinct musical paths: the **Contemporary Praise and Worship (P&W)** style, characterized by Nystrom's 1981 composition, and the **Liturgical/Choral** tradition, represented by the works of Bob Hurd and Mendelssohn.

1.1. Contextual Divergence in Composition

The contemporary version by Martin Nystrom is typically performed in a **folk-pop ballad** style, utilizing a standard I-V-vi-IV chord progression structure that facilitates congregational participation. Conversely, the liturgical settings by Bob Hurd and Bob Moore often utilize **modality** or more complex **diatonic harmonies** to suit the reflective nature of the Roman Catholic Mass or mainline Protestant services. Mendelssohn's 19th-century setting, "*As the Hart Pants*" (Op. 42), introduces the complexity of the Romantic era, requiring high-level vocal technique and orchestral or organ accompaniment.

2. Technical Analysis of Martin Nystrom's "As the Deer"

Martin Nystrom's arrangement is arguably the most recognized globally. From a technical standpoint, the piece is usually set in the key of **C Major** or **D Major**. The accessibility of the piece lies in its melodic contour, which stays largely within a comfortable octave range for the average singer.

2.1. Harmonic Progression and Structure

In the key of D Major, the primary progression of the verse follows a standard functional harmony pattern: **D - A/C# - Bm - D/A - G - A - D**. This descending bass line (D to C# to B to A) is a classic compositional technique that provides a sense of grounding and emotional gravity. The use of the **A/C#** (the dominant in first inversion) creates a smooth transition between the tonic and the submediant, a hallmark of 1980s worship music theory.

2.2. Arranging for Piano vs. Keyboard

For the solo pianist, the technical challenge involves balancing the **melody-plus-chord** texture. Advanced arrangements, such as those found on platforms like Sheet Music Plus or MuseScore, often incorporate **rolling**

tenths in the left hand to provide a richer, more orchestral sound. In a band setting, the keyboardist must focus on "pad" textures, using synthesized strings or warm electric pianos to fill the frequency spectrum without clashing with the acoustic guitar.

3. Liturgical Settings: Bob Hurd and Bob Moore

The version titled "**Psalm 42/43: As the Deer Longs**" by Bob Hurd is a staple in the *OCP (Oregon Catholic Press)* hymnal. This setting is functionally different from Nystrom's; it is designed as a **responsorial psalm**. The structure consists of a recurring refrain for the congregation and varied verses for a cantor or choir.

3.1. Rhythmic and Modal Characteristics

Hurd's setting often utilizes a **syncopated 3/4 or 6/8 meter**, providing a gentle, flowing movement that mimics the "running streams" mentioned in the text. Harmonically, it may lean toward **Aeolian or Dorian modes**, which provides a more somber, ancient feel compared to the bright Major tonality of contemporary versions. The use of **Seventh chords** (e.g., Bbmaj7, Gm7) adds a layer of jazz-influenced sophistication common in modern Catholic liturgical music.

3.2. Choral Voicing: SATB vs. SAB

Choral arrangements of the Hurd or Moore settings typically offer multiple voicings. A **SAB (Soprano, Alto, Baritone)** arrangement, such as the one by Gabriella Snyder, is particularly useful for smaller parish choirs with limited male voices. The **SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass)** version by Bob Moore allows for more complex **contrapuntal writing**, where the Tenor and Bass lines provide a rhythmic counterpoint to the Soprano melody.

4. Comparison Matrix: Versions of "As the Deer"

The following table provides a technical comparison of the most common versions of the song available for purchase or download.

Composer / Arranger	Style / Genre	Primary Instrumentation	Vocal Voicing	Difficulty Level
Martin Nystrom	Contemporary Worship	Piano, Guitar, Lead Sheet	Unison / 2-Part	Easy / Intermediate
Bob Hurd	Liturgical (Catholic)	Organ, Keyboard, Guitar	SATB, SAB, Cantor	Intermediate
Felix Mendelssohn	Romantic / Classical	Orchestra or Organ	SATB Choir, Soloist	Advanced
Bob Moore	Contemporary Choral	Piano or Organ	SATB	Intermediate
Salvador (Arr.)	Pop / Inspirational	Piano, Vocal, Chords	Solo Voice	Intermediate

5. Performance Practice and Pedagogy

Executing an effective performance of "As the Deer" requires more than just hitting the correct notes. Technical writers and music educators emphasize the importance of **phrasing** and **dynamics**.

5.1. Piano Technique: The Legato Challenge

Because the song mimics the flow of water, the pianist must master **legato pedaling**. This involves "clearing" the damper pedal exactly as the new chord is struck to avoid harmonic blurring while maintaining a seamless sound. **Finger substitution**(switching fingers on a held key) is often required in the melody line to keep the phrases connected without over-relying on the pedal.

5.2. Choral Direction: Breath Control

For choral directors, the phrase "*so I long, so I long, so I long for you*" in the Bob Hurd refrain requires significant **breath support**. Singers should be coached to avoid "breathing through" the phrase, instead utilizing **staggered breathing** to ensure the musical line remains unbroken. The technical focus should be on the **long 'o' vowel**s to ensure a resonant, unified choral tone.

6. Technological Integration and Digital Formats

In the modern era, the distribution of "As the Deer" sheet music has shifted toward digital-first formats. This has technical implications for how music is rehearsed and performed.

- **PDF Score Distribution:** The standard for high-quality printing. Most professional arrangements from Sheet Music Direct or JW Pepper are delivered via secured PDF, which supports annotation on tablets (e.g., using the forScore app).
- **MIDI Integration:** MIDI files for these arrangements allow rehearsal directors to isolate specific parts (e.g., the Alto line) for learning. This is particularly useful for the complex harmonies in the Mendelssohn or Moore versions.
- **Transposition Services:** Digital platforms now allow for instant transposition. A technical tip for worship leaders: If the original key of D is too high for a congregation, transposing to C Major can significantly increase participation levels, though it may lose some of the "brightness" associated with the D-string resonance on acoustic guitars.

7. Advanced Case Study: Felix Mendelssohn's Op. 42

While often grouped with simpler hymns, **Felix Mendelssohn's "As the Hart Pants"** (the German "*Wie der Hirsch schreit*") is a masterclass in 19th-century composition. The technical complexity here is significantly higher than in contemporary versions.

7.1. Orchestration and Harmonic Depth

Mendelssohn uses an **obbligato oboe** in some movements to represent the "thirsting" soul, creating a dialogue with the soprano soloist. The harmonic language includes **secondary dominants** and **diminished chords** to depict the distress of the psalmist. For the organist, the pedal part is active and requires precise **toe-heel technique** to manage the chromatic bass lines.

7.2. Troubleshooting the Mendelssohn Arrangement

Common failures in performing this version often stem from **rhythmic instability** in the polyphonic sections. The choir must be technically proficient in **independent entries**. If the choir is struggling, directors should focus on the **tactus** (the underlying beat) and use **solfège** to solidify the intervals before adding the text.

8. Summary of Technical Requirements for Music Directors

When selecting an arrangement of "As the Deer," music directors must evaluate their available resources against the technical demands of the score.

1. Assess the Vocal Range: Ensure the melody does not sit too high for the congregation or too low for the choir's tessitura.
2. Instrumentation Alignment: Choose the Bob Hurd version if you have a skilled organist; choose the Nystrom version if you have a rhythm section.
3. Licensing and Copyright: Ensure compliance with CCLI (for Nystrom) or OneLicense (for Hurd/Moore). This is a technical administrative requirement that cannot be overlooked in professional settings.
4. Rehearsal Time: The Mendelssohn version requires weeks of preparation, whereas the Nystrom arrangement can often be mastered in a single rehearsal.

Ultimately, whether performing the simplified piano sheet music of Martin Nystrom or the complex choral textures of Felix Mendelssohn, the technical execution must serve the emotional and spiritual intent of the text. By understanding the harmonic progressions, rhythmic structures, and stylistic requirements detailed in this guide, musicians can deliver a performance that is both technically sound and profoundly moving. The enduring nature of Psalm 42 in the musical canon ensures that these arrangements will continue to be studied, adapted, and performed for generations to come, bridging the gap between the ancient liturgical past and the contemporary musical present.

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