

TO BE AN ORGANIST: A GIFT FROM GOD

Karl E. Moyer, FAGO

IT IS A GREAT gift from God to be an organist. Oh, we should hasten to add that any worthwhile endeavor is a gift from God, to be exercised to His glory and to the benefit of one's fellow man.

But in some ways, being an organist is special. For one, organists deal much of the time with some of the most spiritual music there is, *music not merely of high aesthetic quality but also of great and specifically spiritual expression*. The continuing experience in playing such music brings great blessings to us organists, not to mention to those who hear the music we make.

Not all music is good—or good for us. Indeed, some music is just the opposite. Many contemporary Americans prefer to deny that, for in so doing, they can justify simply entertaining themselves with relatively trite or even degrading music while pretending that it has no negative effect on them or others. Opportunists make lots of money from this, of course, disclaiming its deleterious effects and arguing that it merely expresses existing attitudes. Such claims evidence postmodern thought: if you like it, it's good. However, one passage in Aristotle's *Politics* puts the lie to these claims as he ponders the impact of a given sort of music on the making of the good citizen. Too few of us pay much attention to such ideas.

Conversely, our performance of spiritually rich music becomes at once a witness to others of our faith, evidence of our subtle, deep-running pleasure in things of higher value, and a worthy example that others should pursue high spiritual expressions as well.

But there is also a great and nearly inexhaustible pleasure, satisfaction, and *gift* that comes to us organists as we assist people in public worship, inspiring them and energizing their song. Teachers, coaches, pastors, and the like understand this best: the positive effect we can have on others and, at the same time, the blessings that come to us when we see the results of our efforts.

When I retired from regular service as a parish musician, I did not miss practicing and performing organ music, wonderful though that often was. I did not miss planning for services or preparing and conducting choir rehearsals. And believe me, I did not miss weddings! What I missed most was playing the organ while the people sang their own sacrifice of praise and prayer. That's why it has become such a blessing, a great gift from God, in my retirement years to alternate, on the average every other week, with a friend, a civil engineer, who resists the pressure of weekly organist's duty.

THE GIFTS OF GOD

God's gifts come to us in various ways, often in ways we do not fully understand. Sometimes they just fall out of the sky. Perhaps this is part of what St. Paul is talking about in his letter to the church at Rome (12:4–8), where he discusses the gifts of the Spirit. Indeed, just as faith is a gift of God and, therefore, nothing of which to boast, so likewise must we not boast of God-given musical talent.

God's gifts often seem to come to us through the intermediation of some person, whether a teacher, a Girl Scout or Boy Scout leader, an athletic coach, a pastor, or, especially, one's parents and grandparents. Perhaps such people do not so much actually bring them to us as to awaken in us the many gifts that come from God Himself.

PIANO LESSONS AS OPENING GOD'S GIFT OF MUSIC

I thank God for my parents' role in awakening God's gift of music in me. They were like God's emissaries, seeing to piano lessons for me starting at kindergarten age. Taking piano lessons was simply what a boy did growing up in our house. And if perhaps after a decent length of time it did not "catch on" for some youngsters, that was OK. They could explore other things more akin to their abilities, to their "spiritual gifts." St. Paul is clear: we do not all receive the same gifts. But for me, piano study "worked."

Piano lessons can become an invaluable grade-school-years experience in the sort of spirituality that music casts on those who find it a welcome expression. Children learn not merely to use music to express their own inner feelings, but also to express those lofty "spiritual" feelings and ideas they learn from fine composers and then make them their own. Suzuki students know this experience well.

Let me urge you who are parents and grandparents to bring your family youngsters to music study with lots of support and encouragement—and especially to introduce them to the piano at a young age. Some will not flourish, of course, but more will than we might expect. Their lives will be richer because of it, and sooner or later they'll be thankful to you for this life blessing, even though they might not say so.

How often we see ads for retirement facilities in which a group of folks are standing around the piano while one of them plays for the delight and emotional release of all the rest. Those piano-playing folks are now grateful recipients of their parents' good guidance. Don't rob your family kids of this potential.

STEWARDSHIP AND MINISTRY

We're talking here about the worthy use of God's gift of music to us and to the youngsters in our families, churches, schools, and communities. Our duty is to guide these youngsters in putting all of their gifts to good use. These gifts must be nurtured, a duty that is especially the province of parents and grandparents but also of teachers, pastors, coaches, and other youth workers. The stewardship of God's gifts to our youngsters will result in a youngster becoming a citizen who is both spiritually sensitive and artistically skilled regarding music.

Out of those who do flourish at the piano, a small percentage will become organ students. They are of great importance to the church, for some of them will become the church's future organists. So along with stewardship, this is a ministry issue as well.

The church needs to do a better job of guiding parents in rearing their children, urging them to maintain good balance among the various experiences kids should have in their early years. Along with Scouts, sports, drama, and a host of other gainful pursuits, we should do better in guiding them to save enough time for the spiritual—not only specific Christian catechesis but also the kind of spirituality that study and involvement in the various lofty expressions can provide.

Parents should take greater care in our sports-crazed society to avoid the excesses of sports that rob children of sufficient time, energy, and sheer focus for other areas of growth and learning. I'm not opposed to athletics; indeed, I continue to pursue my own athletic "thing," even in my "old age." It's not the involvement but the overemphasis on sports that results in youngsters' imbalanced lives, which testifies to our failure to guide them well.

I thank my parents for guiding me into a primary focus on things of enduring value: in the faith, in music, in school studies, in a work ethic, and otherwise. Would that our children and grandchildren will be able and willing to say that about us some day. It is good stewardship of God's gifts to them.

The concert committee of Grace Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., from whence I retired in 2002, invited me to play a recital on March 31, 2008, in celebration of my 60th year as an organist—and counting—the congregation and community joining me in this milestone. I do thank God for these 60 years of music making at the organ and most especially of leading the people in their own song in worship.

I concluded the program with one of the great theological essays in music, the E-flat Fugue with which Bach closes *Clavierübung III*, along with its prelude movement. My violinist-wife and a women's ensemble had just joined me prior to this work in the *Fugue, Canzona, and Epilog*, Op. 85, No. 3, by Sigfrid Karg-Elert, which quotes the opening plainsong melody for the Credo. As such, both works served as statements of Trinitarian faith—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and as an opportunity once again to express this faith to those present.

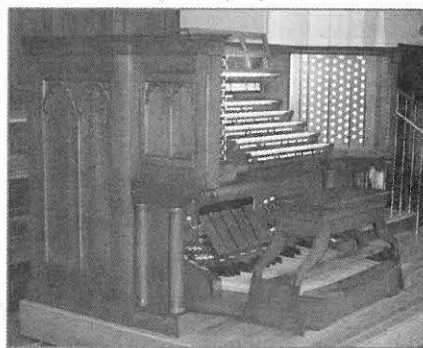
Before the final number, I commented to the audience on the blessings I've received from God as an organist, ideas I'd thought about but never actually committed to paper. Following the program, several persons prevailed on me to submit these comments to an organists' magazine, and I found it a "no-brainer" to offer them to the *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*. I have emended them slightly for sharing here, but they remain a "speech" not an essay.

My "organ playing" days began on a family heirloom, a reed organ, on which I first developed the "organ touch." As a fifth-grader, I accompanied my father to Harrisburg one day, and we stopped in front of the former J.H. Troup Music Store on Market Square to look at the Solovox attachment to a piano there. We went into the store to try it, and when the salesman observed my "organ

Atlanta First United Methodist Church



A.E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Company and Atlanta First United Methodist Church are pleased to announce the completion and dedication of their new 5-manual, 93-rank pipe organ. Go to www.pipe-organ.com to view the complete specification of this and other projects.



A.E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Co.

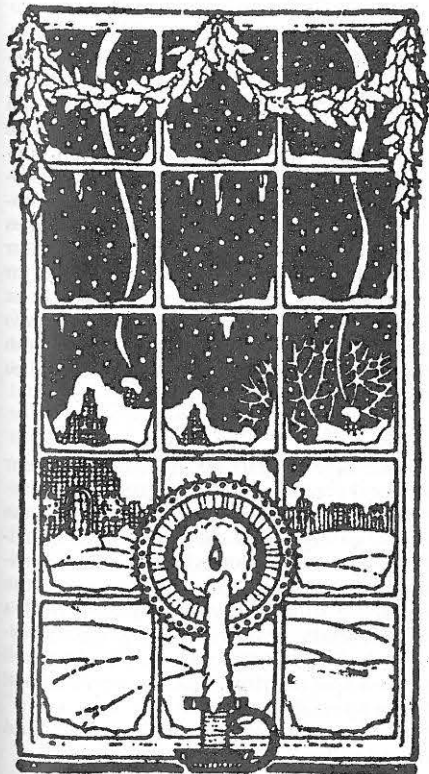
P. O. Box 838 • Lithonia GA 30058
800-836-2726 • 770-482-4845 • www.pipe-organ.com

touch," he soon took us to the next floor up to try a Hammond organ. I began organ lessons within some months on a two-manual and pedal Estey reed organ and continued to practice on it through my college years.

I began playing the organ in eighth grade and finally retired from regular church organist duty after 51 years. On the average of every other week I now alternate at St. John's Episcopal Church in Marietta Pa., with a friend, an electrical engineer who cannot bear the pressure of weekly organ-playing duty.

The reference to "my own athletic 'thing'" in my comments reflects my life as an adult recreational runner, including marathons that led to running the Boston Marathon in 1982 and winning the "old man's" category of a local five-mile race on May 31 of this year. I am an avid baseball fan, especially of my namesake, Jamie Moyer, also a Pennsylvanian. As a university music professor, I often went to watch the department's intramural softball team play and on occasion took them out for pizzas afterward.

I took a music education degree at Lebanon Valley College, the master of sacred music degree *cum laude* at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, a master's degree in music history from Temple University, and the DMA degree in organ performance and church music at Eastman. My primary organ teachers have been R. Porter Campbell, Vernon deTar, and David Craighead.



BAYLOR UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Fifteenth-Annual Midwinter Organ Conference

February 8-10, 2009

Concerts • Lectures • Master Classes • Hymn Festival

Celebrating American Music and the Fifteenth Anniversary
of the McLane Organ in Jones Concert Hall

featuring

MARILYN MASON
ROBERT PLIMPTON
JOYCE JONES

For more information, contact:

Keyboard Division
Baylor School of Music
One Bear Place #97408
Waco, TX 76798-7408

REGISTRATION	ADVANCE	ON-SITE
Adult	\$100.00	\$120.00
Senior (over 65)	\$75.00	\$90.00
Student	\$50.00	\$60.00

telephone: (254) 710-1417
fax: (254) 710-1191

e-mail: J_Karen_Johnson@baylor.edu