

# The American Organist Magazine

February 2008

VOX HUMANA: Baggage

It's time for a New Year's resolution. This year, mine will be to cast off old baggage, something that seems a little odd coming from someone who has always thought that he could live and work with modesty, orderliness, and a minimum of fuss and distraction. Nevertheless, we all carry around our shopworn paraphernalia of life, both tangible and palpable.

So what comprises musical baggage? How's this? An amateur choir rehearses for two hours. They spend twenty minutes on vocal warm ups and exercises. They sing. Things go flat. They stop. They do ten jumping jacks. They resume. They go flat again. They hear a ten minute talk from the director about the theory of staying in tune. They sing again. It's time for a break. They eat and drink. They resume. The cycle repeats. That's a rehearsal full of baggage so heavy that nothing moves forward.

Then, consider the issue of organ shoes. Now I, for one, own at least three pairs of Organmasters. Two sit next to the two instruments on which I play regularly. One is the traveling pair that for a while rode around under the seat of my car. I seem to recall another battered pair sitting on the music shelf of a bench somewhere that I no longer practice, but that pair is, as the bean counters would say, fully amortized. How are these essential tools of our trade baggage?

I recall a boss organ professor from one of the Midwestern university music mills once lamenting at an AGO convention workshop that "nobody should have an excuse not to play the organ at any given opportunity. Don't say that you don't have your organ shoes. Just sit down and play!" And, if I recall, he did just that the next night at a convention performance, establishing himself as the only recitalist I recall playing in Hush Puppies. It was a credible job too. I think that the repertoire was all early enough to be rendered authentically with nothing but toes on the job. Hush Puppy, Nike, and Top Sider heels just don't facilitate good toe-heel technique!

The point was, naturally, forget the baggage – just play! That was also a lesson not lost on a European colleague who, as his page turner once pointed out, had worn the same shirt since arriving to practice two days before the recital. Difference was he added a tie for the performance. No baggage there and a wardrobe intriguingly appropriate for a program heavy on Reger.

How this clangs in contract to the young American recitalist I once encountered while in Europe myself on a recital tour. This individual traveled with her own pillow and a stuffed animal of some serious dimensions, lest she not sleep well in strange lands the night before a performance. That qualified as an issue of *literal* baggage.

These examples, perhaps amusing, perhaps ironic, sidestep the deeper matters—preconceived ideas, unwillingness to change, ego, resistance to our own best judgments and insights, barriers. That is far more serious baggage. Nothing is quite as sad as the realization that one has not changed – an actuality often phrased backwards as in "the world has just passed me by." Thinking back to how we learned our instrument and the repertoire we played can offer a useful insight. A musical interpretation that has not changed over the

years is but baggage that weighs us down, causes us the exhaustion and breathlessness born of dead weight.

Not all baggage comes from the unwillingness or inability to clean house. What's worse than carrying one's own baggage is to inherit the leaden precedent of others. "We don't sing those hymns" carps the old parishioner who owns the pew to the new organist. "Never pull this out," reads the sticky note on the Great mixture knob. Then there was the (true tale of the) Sesquilatera that played only its quint rank, thanks to the organist who had stuffed cotton into the tierce and left it behind for his successors. Baggage, and we didn't even pack it ourselves.

Exactly how one goes about cutting loose such stones around the neck is another matter. Clearly, it takes a modicum of courage to let go of comfortable objects and known patterns. But of this we can be certain: to focus more deeply on qualities of growth and change is to embrace the concept of traveling light. That out of tune choir can self-correct without the wasted effort and time if the choirmaster leads them to dig deeply into the musical structure and shape with their ears as surly as their voices. Great music making moments and opportunities need not demand the organ shoes in tow at every moment. It does not take your favorite stuffed animal to play a recital of a lifetime 6000 miles from home. Pull that forbidden knob. Go forward. See where it leads.

Happy New Year.

- Haig Mardirosian