

# The American Organist Magazine

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VOX HUMANA: Freedom's price.

In the United States, July is a month as much shaped by thoughts of freedom as November is by harvest and thanksgiving. But, today, for a minute, let us consider freedom in a very different light from pride of flag, apple pie and Chevrolet, the claims of securing ourselves against villains and their presumed development of weapons of mass destruction, from the tensions of balancing security of state and society with the trouncing of individual rights. Perhaps we as musicians should mark a quiet moment of reflection on the hard to pin down toss-phrase, artistic freedom.

At one level, we could debate the privilege of performing a work of music in whatever way the intellect and soul agree upon. My trills are not your trills, nor is my sense of *fonds 8* in a particular piece, yours. For all the fervor of discourse, the argument over rights and wrongs, the objective or individualistic, the good or bad ways of artistic expression, the deeper, richer discussion grapples with the rights, obligations, and wherewithal to make art in the first place.

Rather than unleash one more fusillade at the sensational reports—the connection of the arts and human rights, political interests muscling the first amendment to prevent the creation or showing of works, the Maplethorpe/Helms/NEA debates, the evaporating funding, the economically driven shifts in culture—perhaps a tranquil assessment of ourselves and what we do where we do it is in order. Our relationship to those immediately around us, our institutions, and our employers ought to shine the light of day on the over-spanning question of what artistic freedom signifies and what we must do in defense of such liberty.

No reasonable institution—the churches, synagogues, schools, and universities that employ us— would let on for even a moment and publicly confess limiting artistic freedom for anyone. And, unlike novelists, sculptors, painters, or even pianists, we are preponderantly institutional employees. Organizations sometimes limit artistic freedom in benign and workable, even necessary ways, and sometimes in cancerous ones. Take the case of liturgical limits. A lectionary, a yearly liturgical cycle, feasts, times, events, or sermon topics are constructive limits. A micromanagement executive, pastor, rector, church council, liturgy team, vestry, department chair, or dean is altogether another matter. Nothing new here—anyone whose program or career has been dumped in favor of something arguably inferior, please stand up.

The first step is definition. Just what is artistic freedom? Fundamental attributes of it are clear. Our First Amendment must defend the fundamental dispensation to select and perform appropriate music. Forget the rest of the artistic Bill of Rights, for we win or lose the war on the shoulders of the simple truism of liberty of choice. Form a committee to pick the music, cloak choice in layers of approval, substitute inoffensiveness for intrinsic artistic strength, and summarily dispense with any dispute about professional standards, just compensation, or right to use the organ for private teaching.

Dozens of years ago, a newspaper feature writer asked a random group of laypersons to dream up the ideal job. Astronaut, financier, movie star paled against the amusingly chilling response of one woman who aspired to “selecting the music that Leonard Bernstein

would conduct with the New York Philharmonic.” Ouch... not engagingly delightful at all, but a threat to the fundamental premise of what it means to conduct. Programming the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, or the parish choir, must amount to something infinitely more complex, wonderful, and profound than deciding which CD to pull off the shelf for an agreeable hour of amusement.

The slogan goes that freedom is won, and nearly always at a price. By long-standing tradition, artistic freedom has been an artist’s entitlement. Yet in an age where the term “long-standing” counts for less and less, we are likely to have to demand, steal, buy, or scheme up freedom. As a simple illustration (get ready to stand again), how many of us suffer through “day jobs” in order to buy the sovereignty to be musical in the evenings and on weekends. The dentist asked the other day, “What do you have planned for the weekend?” A mouthful of fingers and tools saved both of us from the long and complex answer. Yes, we buy freedom. In the same vein, how many of us suffer through ecclesiastical political jockeying not only to achieve the big goals (a new organ, a better choir room, a bigger budget, a paid choir), but to earn the trust and respect requisite to the basic liberty of doing the job unfettered. And, how many of us have paid the price for taking an important, courageous stand—perhaps an important, edgy, new work of music in a place where old, comfortable, down-home, and unchallenging is exactly what everyone would expect.

Still sitting at the end of all of this? Hopefully not. Those of us on our feet need your help! Happy Independence Day.

-Haig Mardirosian