

# The American Organist Magazine

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VOX HUMANA: Back to school, Part I

Years ago, this column would have appeared in September, that month far crueler than April. Back then, only football players and unwitting southern kids even thought about school before Labor Day. Today, it's nearly always back to the books in hot, sticky, August.

Sticky weather and organs don't mix. As in France, August ought to denote vacation, even for musicians. For years, it was common to see professional card ads in journals like the old *American Organist*, or *The Diapason* that mentioned both city and summer jobs. "L. Stentorphone Pedalpipe, Organist/Choirmaster, St. Big Guy, Fifth Avenue, New York and Summer Organist, St. Neptune's-of-the-Breezes, Nantucket," or similar. Air conditioning and the pressures of professional productivity killed that boondoggle.

So, it's back to class in August and that invites us to reflect on the organ and education. Decades ago, someone like Senator Emerson Richards could persuade the Atlantic City Board of Education to install a 125-stop pipe organ in its high school auditorium and sponsor weekly concerts to advance the "general education" of citizens. Nothing like that could ever happen again in K-12 public education, but colleges and universities are another matter.

The relationship of the organ and the academy has been long-standing, but hardly uncomplicated. If we debate, from time to time, the threats to the profession, if we ponder the organist shortage, or the cultural swings, we must inevitably gaze at our educational establishments. Religiously affiliated schools obviously have a straight-forward connection, often via campus chapels or the charge to prepare musicians for service to religious institutions. Notwithstanding, it may be something just short of miraculous that the organ has survived as long as it has in American education. American education is, predominantly and proudly, a secular convention and the obvious challenge is to convince secularists that the organ, essentially a Christian artifact, has a place in such context. This is touchy stuff.

Three factors influence the relationship of organs and universities: the philosophical need for an organ curriculum as part of a music degree program (and, in a few sad places, the trenchant

debate on the need for music at all); the astonishing cost of the instrument; and the headcount. These are interdependent factors. Who's going to study if the place doesn't have an instrument and offer access to it, and what institution is going to procure and maintain an organ without the students demanding the resource, and how can any of this happen if the over-arching notion of learning and teaching neither stresses the priority of music instruction, nor the affirmation that the organ is an instrument consistent with the culture.

The numbers are shockingly straight-forward. Putting it in rounded terms, the number of organ majors in credit-bearing programs in the United States is barely 500, this according to the National Association of Schools of Music. That number has just about halved in the past decade and a half. NASM has about 600 members. That yields .83 organ majors per school. Wonder why we never see an ad for "Assistant Professor of Organ" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*?

As for resources, what institution is going to put a cool million after an instrument that only .83 of a major will touch? The answer, we all believe, is an angel. Here's how that goes. When a respectable university in the midst of putting up a fine arts center was recently offered the gift of a wonderful, historic organ—one of those superlative old machines that set the standard for rich diapason choruses, dark burnished reeds, the seat-of-the-pants rumble of an Open Wood for the price of the taking, refurbishing, and reinstalling in their beautiful new recital hall, the VP for Development commented, “forget this. It's a big distraction.”

Similar tales abound, and among the saddest are accounts of on-campus organs that languish for want of departmental repair monies. Contrary to speculation, such line items have not vanished; they've simply been deflected to cover things like piano loan/sale programs, technology, and MIDI. Why maintain a million dollar asset for that .83 student and a handful of audience at a graduation recital once every five years when the same funds can replenish the high-tech machines that every music major will expect to see as they show up in August?

But, the intellectual and spiritual will of the institution is the deeper issue. Institutions of higher learning, for everything we hear on talk radio, hardly define culture, or politics, or trends. Universities are, by their very character, centers that study, synthesize, and react. Just consider the dilatory pace of academic publishing. A scholarly book can take seven or more years to research, write, review, and publish (just in time to save that tenure bid). That's hardly the CNN, New York Times, Madison Avenue, and Hollywood speed-of-light assault on the senses that accelerates cultural advancement. So, for all the drivel about higher education's leftist slant and how that contaminates the minds of impressionable and uncritical youth, academics are only sitting back and contemplating what comes their way. Political scientists predict election trends from the data the electorate gives them. English professors analyze novels that someone has already published. Music programs fight to keep their heads above water by preparing musicians for the “real market”. Today's market, for whatever reason, wants jazz players, musical technologists, and musical theater performers. Majors in those concentrations abound. Meanwhile remember the lonely .83 of an organist?

Should we be concerned? Yes. Desolate. No. Next month is cruel September, the *real* back to school month, and we'll look at some remedies then.

-Haig Mardirosian