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VOX HUMANA: Back to school, Part II

If last month's column found lemons, this month's looks for a lemonade recipe. In August, we appraised the weakening relationship of the organ and the academy. It probably wasn't pleasant beach reading, at least for those lucky enough to have some vacation and smart enough to take along a copy of *The American Organist*. We calculated that the numbers of organ majors in American universities amounts to an average of less than one per campus, that institutions cannot buy and maintain expensive organs given these numbers, and that the educational bias of institutions frequently leaves the arts, music, and organ in an untenable position. What is our response? The multiple strategies to combat the trends are as interrelated as the knotted problem.

Educational outreach. The AGO has already launched some admirable outreach initiatives. Pipeworks, POE, and POE+ are projects aimed at roping in interested individuals. Think back. Everyone reading this has been the beneficiary of a particular experience at some pivotal moment – hearing a recital, watching parts of a pipe organ being unloaded from a van, knowing a student preparing a graduation recital, hearing E. Power Biggs on the radio, sneaking into a darkened choir loft on a Saturday afternoon to see first hand the place from which all that music came. Chances are, we stumbled into an epiphany of our own. The point now is to deliberately generate such moments. POE holds the promise of steering young students on to continuing formal organ study. It should also result in a more interested, organ-literate public. American music education has always been more about educating the audience than the performer.

Right sizing. Look at the ratio of organ majors to the 600 NASM member conservatories, colleges, and universities (.83 majors per school). Discounting the number of (mostly) small music programs that offer no applied instruction in organ, many institutions still carry organ majors on the books that, by virtue of these statistics, have obviously died. Academic planning professionals (read that as administrators) are ruthlessly efficient in identifying and purging dead wood, but it is a far better technique to proactively engage problems. Musicians must manage curricular review and retrenchment, not distant disinterested deans, or callous competitive committees. However controversial, the profession itself must determine which top-notch places *should* be the centers of organ instruction at the major and graduate levels by concentrating the attention and resources of the profession there. This means that many who teach studio organ might be in a position of advocating against their own jobs (though .83 majors a year can't result in much personal profit), their own prestige, and their own pride (ever notice how many adjunct music instructors call themselves "professor," despite adjunct and non-professorial appointments?).

If the country boasted of 20 truly distinguished organ majoring programs, our average .83 majors would have become 25 majors, a decent critical mass in almost anyone's rendering of academic bean counting. Twenty-five majors in nearly anything comprises a bona fide program, demands enough studio hours to support two or more full time professors, churns mutual support and companionship among students, fully enrolls

repertoire and literature classrooms, and insures a healthy string of on-campus student recitals, which performances only bring more attention to the instrument.

Supply and demand. We keep hearing that religious institutions cannot find qualified organists. When an HMO can't find primary care physicians to practice in, say, Alaska, it does what any business would do – it pays more. In urban settings, a musical version of this already flourishes. In “high-end” churches with professional choirs, a bidding war for qualified singers has waged for years. The smutty truth is that choirmasters have always lured singers from place to place with promises of more money (or shorter hours, or fewer musical demands). So, bringing pressure to bear on churches to raise organist salaries thereby deliberately creating competition would close the loop begun two paragraphs above. Create market demand and academics leap at any custom-tailored program to train students for that demand. Turn church music into a profession rather than a vocation and watch academic institutions design attractive programs to attract organists, not music theater performers nor media techies. Those youngsters first coming to POE's, drawn to designated magnet majoring organ programs, could anticipate real career options after graduation.

Much of this agenda has to do with creating and massaging institutional opinion. The AGO has managed a significant start; the challenge ahead requires new and stronger strategies and the willingness to distill resources to the ends of excellence.

- Haig Mardirosian