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VOX HUMANA: Checking it twice

This column started as a gag – a goof on hypothetical holiday gifts for organists. Wouldn't we love a new pair of Nike Pedalmax organ shoes? Or page turner in a can?

But about half way through, a life-threatening case of writer's block hit square on. Writing editorial commentary, like composing string quartets, has its moments of surcease. Ideas grow and plateau. Phraseology crashes. You can pound away, of course, but often to trifling advantage. So this failure to finish a big holiday joke bears a bigger message.

The point of this month's column shifted in due course to that well-trod, but still ripe topic of legitimate gratitude. The confluence of major religious observances, the Winter solstice, the end of the calendar year, and the family observances that accompany these days cannot help but invite any half-sentient individual to some contemplation. Of course, putting such reflection down in maudlin Hallmark words not unlike a late December issue of a small town newspaper's editorial page incorporates its own perils. The point of this column is not gratitude for food on the table, gas in the tank, or quiet in the streets that makes us Americans believe that we live with greater privilege than the poor orphans elsewhere. Those are not bad thoughts and wishes still best left to the secular editorialists. Today's Christmas list affects us and our profession, and the genuine gifts that make this musicianly life just a little more dear. So what does *our* Santa check twice?

There is the gift of music itself (told you that these sentiments were not far from schmaltzy blather!). What youngster struggling through piano lessons never heard from that old Dutch uncle that they needed to practice harder because of the great gift of music? Clichéd, maybe, but still true. Look at your library brimming with Bach, Vierne, Mendelssohn, or Messiaen. The next time you feel poor, turn to one of the Trio Sonatas, even the simplest of slow movements, or a small page or two of the *Orgelbüchlein*. These are riches beyond compare. And, was there a composer of the past century who dared rival someone like Messiaen – *our* Messiaen – for profound, timeless depth, and hallowed intent. Stravinsky, or Copeland, or Poulenc, for all their respective genius, could not.

To this, add the considerable gift of the instrument itself. Have humans ever invented a more challenging, intriguing, impressive, or humbling instrument as the organ? Put otherwise, who else routinely sits at instruments costing a million dollars? Even a minimal organ can buy several of Yo-Yo Ma's cellos, or a room full of brand new Steinway D's. Organs are costly and prized musical playthings. What kid can resist that under the tree?

Looking back over the past three years of *Vox Humana*, one finds lots of poison tipped arrows aimed straight at the institutions we serve. But love-hate, not love alone, is what really makes the world go 'round. So call it slobber or calendar-driven generosity of heart, but we doubtless need to acknowledge the gift of our respective métiers too.

For all the inadequate compensation, and micro-managerial committees and clergy, these places set us up reasonably well. Who else offers the option of sitting in a splendid sacred space, filling it with magnificent sound, interacting with like-spirited people who

join together to make music, and, at the end of the day, a chance to change lives, or offer a glimpse of heaven. It's not at all good to gloat about this (something about wearing one's beliefs on the outside rather than within), but it does put a nice halo around the workplace. Those of us in academe profit from similar fortunes – the life of the mind in communal discourse, the enthusiasm of young learners, the institutional support, the libraries, studios, technology. There is no equivalent.

That leaves the best package for last... us, we, ourselves. What a cause for celebration. Considering that something like 25 or 30 thousand of us in North America in one way or another are attached to musical life around the organ is a reality worth noting. Sure, we don't all play those million dollar organs, or self-ruminate by reading through a trio sonata, or collect a paycheck, paltry or munificent, from one of the continent's cathedral churches or music conservatories, but we are an eminent and concerned company of colleagues who stand for the right principles and cheer others in the chase of art. Creaky or crisp, curmudgeon or cheerleader, ours is an out of the ordinary kinship. Upon that we should tie a big red bow!

Cheers.

- Haig Mardirosian