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VOX HUMANA: Home alone

The most haunting of Richard Strauss' *Four Last Songs* is "September." "The garden is in mourning," the poet writes, "the cool rain seeps into the flowers. Summertime shudders, quietly awaiting her end." September itself is a mellow time: days of warmth and maturity, of fulfillment, of the world getting back to work, at least for most.

It is also a time of new colleagues acclimating themselves to new work, for our "season" launches in September. In many of our institutions, except perhaps the educational ones, few of these musicians have the advantage of any orientation, or enjoy only a piecemeal view of what they are about to begin. They also run the risks of comparison to their predecessors, in some cases greatly beloved predecessors. If the public can be fickle, it can also cling nostalgically.

Still, folks come and go. We've just endured what one might term the "firing season." Some colleagues, to call it like it is, have recently retired, or "retired." A few have moved on to new organ benches, others to new careers. Make no mistake. The time from May through August is a poignant, troubling spell.

To put a personal edge on it, in the past four months, an uncharacteristically large number of professional colleagues have left their positions. Some veterans were ready to press the general cancel for one last time. Others went off bitterly. "Partings," the poets would swell, or the quiet wistfulness of the once-champion athlete cleaning out the locker and gazing at the green field for one more glimpse of glory now faded.

Though it would be tempting to rush into yet another gloomy analysis of the long term professional prospects, or insult clergy and committees anew for their psychotic musician-bashing penchant, there's another side to this story. That other face is the enforced renewal of fresh colleagues moving to new consoles. And how bad is that? Everyone reading this was once new at something. Many will be new again.

The larger reckoning concerns professional advancement and growth. What is the aggregate effect of workforce changes, both coming and going. Do we improve the profession, let it languish, or diminish it? Are the positions themselves growing? Do organists as a whole have better working conditions, higher salaries, and better instruments today than they did a year ago, a decade ago, a century ago?

Are we growing? Do the new arrivals play better, more insightfully, more musically? Can they guide the institutions they serve to positive change? Do they conform to the whims of these institutions without skepticism, resistance, or questioning? Would they stand heroically in the name of right headed principles? There is a cartoon on a page of the Church Pension Fund calendar a few months ago in which a guitar strumming priest asks an organist (seated at what looks pretty convincingly like a three-manual tracker key desk) "when are we going to have some *contemporary* music?" The balding old organist shoots back, "how about *never*? Is *never* soon enough?" You figure it. Put down, or red badge of courage?

There's a third population. Some of us are left behind. Are we the lucky survivors, or merely on borrowed time? A musical acquaintance commented on my observation about so many colleagues departing so quickly that "it was like someone opened a window and a wind

just blew all the papers off the desk.” Another friend reflected on all the great names of the past on all the organ benches in the city. It just wasn’t the same without those women and men in those places. A week later, he too decided to retire and go elsewhere. For those of us left behind, it is as though we are home alone.

Home is an odd place when everyone else has moved away. Parents certainly learn that as nests empty. It is much like a perpetual September, nostalgic, muted, even quiet. But there is more to September, a time of warm breezes, fullness of harvest, of gentle solitude. So, coming or going, or just staying put for a while longer, those are qualities to embrace, and rewards for a career still in gear and moving ahead. September, for all its poignancy, is still a time of transformed beauty.

- Haig Mardirosian