

The American Organist Magazine

October, 2007

VOX HUMANA: Recitals, Part I

In the four years of *Vox Humana*, the topic of recitals has never come up. This is no oversight. Would all the active recitalists please raise their hands...? As suspected, a small and elite number who spend any portion of their creative lives on stage. But, if we as a larger community harbor concerns over the future of a whole profession, then some insight into a distilled core of experience in the rarified world of concert playing can be an instructive element in the analysis, debate, and theorizing.

There are a lot of angles to this question of recitals, who plays, who attends, and why. One that has been well-enough dug out has been the relationship of programming to talent to audiences to instruments, a calculus fairly easily to understand. Limit any one variable, and there is some effect on the others. Given the installation, say of less than 100 new pipe organs a year in North America (as compared to ten or more times that amount in the early part of the last century), limited demand for recitalists is a phenomenon easy to understand. Other quests ensue. Are fewer (musically engaging) new players emerging? How does artist supply shape demand? If audiences dwindle, who can justify investing in a recital career? Are the thousands of hours of preparation worth it for a Sunday afternoon spent before 40 or 50 enthusiasts, the same who heard the last recitalist?

These issues have had their day and, at the risk of off-loading readers to another publication and another observer of organ life, John Bishop unpacked them quite well in his January 2007 column, *In the Wind*, published in *The Diapason*. For the moment though, let's presume that performance of high-toned historical and new literature *does* have some future in the hands of skilled, willing, and expressive players.

Then, why perform? First-hand youthful experience as a willing page turner for visiting recitalists previewed and validated what was ahead. As Mr. Big once sighed immediately before hitting the first chord, "I always go this far and wonder why!"

Love or hate it, performers *must* perform. If we lament the general quality of organ playing or literature or the general decline of music in religious ritual, one small contributing factor must be the lack of commitment to *performance* on the instrument at all levels and in all places. We have heard enough of the falsely modest and hugely self-defeating shibboleth that goes something like, "this is not a *performance*, it is music for worship." Want good music in worship? Perform! Want to inspire others musically? Perform! There is nothing wrong with the fantasy of sitting at a modest instrument playing in a humble place before twenty devout parishioners and imagining all the while that this is the performance of a lifetime at Saint-Sulpice. That idealism builds committed performers willing to communicate on a grand scale.

Performance is a vocation... a calling. Only that can insulate us from its perils (of which there are many). And high-level performance is also enhanced, distilled experience for the performer. No sleepy Sunday morning can substitute for the rock-hard concentration and focus of the recital stage. Recitalists complain of distraction while at work, but the truth is that little *can* distract the locked-in mind and body of the state of performance (although it is true that Neanderthal presenters once seated overflow audience members in the choir loft

and in pews immediately abutting the console and, worse, the closest auditor at about elbow's length persisted in tapping his foot through the entire recital slightly off the beat – there was no locked-in mind and body that afternoon!). Real performers soon learn that the distractions are internal, not imposed. One's own state of mind engenders the physical reactions that alter the experience. Any performer will, in a candid moment, confess the experience of being in that frozen zone where all muscular movements suddenly feel alien, new, unrehearsed. There are moments when performers can be so disoriented that notation itself seems like an unknown set of glyphs.

Those terrors should be but ephemera. In the course of any recital, there comes that tipping point where self and music and audience and instrument and acoustic merge comfortably, even triumphantly. The performance anxiety books claim that it takes time – five minutes, a quarter hour, the intermission. For some individuals, finding the “zone” takes a premeditated prescription like opening the program with works that ease into the stresses of the program, or technically challenging works so as to “see the enemy face to face.” For others, it is a matter of ritual: quiet beforehand, or stress-busting meditation, or a stroll around the block. Some players admit that talking to the audience relaxes them... and spare the audience lest we ever become too comfortable! Memories spring to mind of eating pasta in a little restaurant across the plaza from a village church in Germany only 5 minutes before show time. The host explained that all the recitalists waited there since there was no heated space near the choir loft (no Chianti to wash it down that day and, fortunately, no red sauce stains on the tie).

And why do all this and for whom? Come back next month.

- Haig Mardirosian