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VOX HUMANA: The Organ as a liberal art

So many words have been spilled over the past years about the future viability of the organ that adding to that din suggests at best a lack of originality. Call it an occupational hazard of an organist who works in academic affairs, but thinking about options for young college organ students-to-be sparked some ideas, yet one more time, about the place of the organ in higher education.

Take the case of a hypothetical high school junior who has taken note of the organ and thinks that perhaps that instrument has some future role in learning and career. This student may have self-discovered the instrument, tried playing “at” it, taken some lessons, or done the POE, but, huge questions loom.

Chances are that such a student is a bright individual. It takes some brain power to want to decipher the multiples layers of the organ – the mechanics, the physics, the aesthetics, the style, the physical coordination. If Howard Gardner identified eight intelligences in his research, then it must take a good seven of those to succeed as an organist (we could argue which is left out, but one cynical opinion would be “interpersonal intelligence”). Smart people – even those who play the organ – are smart in lots of ways, and there is no guarantee that, passion or not, such persons would *not* choose science, or math, or literature, or film, or politics, or business, or law, or medicine as the career path of choice. Such are the intractable set of choices that burden high school juniors – what about college, what will I study, where, how about my passions? Make no mistake: these existential issues are stressful for anyone, let alone teenagers.

What advice do we offer such youth? Looking around the professions, not only the academic enterprise, discloses a measurable population of folks doing very well at life’s work all based upon an organ performance degree or two as an intellectual cornerstone.

Somewhere in the canon of American music education, we decreed that there is a gulf between performance experience as integral learning, inquiry, and knowledge, and a “liberal education,” that misused term supposedly certifying the breadth of culture and experience gained from exposure to the great thought and writing of human experience without particular emphasis on the practical application of that wisdom. One might assert, therefore, as has the profession for decades, that the path to a liberal education via music must be the inchoate cafeteria line of a BA degree in music. A few theory courses, some music history, a “secondary” relationship to an instrument, a simple ensemble experience and, *voilà*, the juices mix in the crucible along with some core requirements, language, science, and math, and the “formed” individual is ready to face the world.

But if we dare propose that studying a musical instrument, with passion and depth, can also be the basis of a valid liberal education, then we also need to go beyond this disjointed notion of a musical education. There is nothing wrong with BA degrees in music – indeed my own campus offers this certificate – but consider the place of *real* music-making in such a curriculum. What does learning to play the organ at a high level of skill and sophistication mean to wider intellectual process and preparation for engaging wise-flung questions?

Communication. Music is symbolic communication in the most ephemeral of ways. As sound, it lives only in memory or imagination. To intuit meaningful patterns in sound is to tackle organizational matters of the highest complexity.

Physics: The organ is, arguably, the most complex of musical instruments, combining simultaneous sound of stunning variety and range. Even registering a simple fugue is an inquiry into the convergence of mathematics and aesthetics.

Mechanics: Figuring out the organ as a working machine teases the brain into a three-dimensional understanding of interdependent systems.

Aesthetic judgment: Some decisions result from thinking in patterns others than quantitative or qualitative as associated with language.

Coordination: Like a dancer, an organist must move as a single yet unconstrained muscular organism.

Cultural bindings: Bach was a representation of the essence of his society and times. So was Widor, or Messiaen, or Liszt.

Succeed at but half of these as a musician, and the seeds are sown for leadership in a range of endeavors in and out of music. These are lessons that rival the best that courses in the humanities, sciences, and allied arts have to offer and while playing an instrument is no excuse to defer reading, studying, or earning degrees in other fields, it is also no reason to suggest that learning an instrument – to a certified stage of artful sophistication – is anything less than an intellectual enterprise and growth opportunity of the highest order.

What do engineers, physicians, college presidents, bankers, chemists, corporate executives, and airline pilots have in common? Some notables of them hold degrees in organ performance.

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