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VOX HUMANA: Random Thoughts of a Holy Week

The pace... Easter comes early this year, as early as it can accounting for an equinox, a full moon, and a Sunday. The heavens go crunch in an astronomical sprint rivaled only by the pace of things musical in and around the choir loft. Anyone who plays or conducts the daily services nearly universal to most Christian denominations knows that there is no breathlessness quite like that of the three days leading up to Easter - the Triduum as some of us call that time. And depending on the complexities of style, repertoire, and place, any one of us may well play or conduct more music in that short dash than many a concert performer does in weeks or months. There is no doubt about it: with the possible exception of a pit conductor in an important opera house, even a moderately busy church musician is the most productive of musician, especially this early Easter.

Silence... Modern life increasingly fills any available void with unremitting and big sound, a tendency not lost on religion. Audio (and video) systems invade worship spaces, blaring the message with, at times, doggedness and, at other times, lyricism. But we bombard the pews nevertheless. Long gone are the times when audio in worship was an assistive technology. One wonders too if the several newest trends in organ building – orchestral romanticism and digital augmentation – didn't grow in response to the demand for sweeping landscapes of sound. There are days (though all not that many) when the pew critics may have a point: "you play too loud!" A friend commented that on a recent visit to one of the Parisian organ temples, he was disappointed because the *titulaire* played nothing louder than a mezzoforte at the morning mass. Yet silence has traditionally been the means of hearing the divine message. Quakers, early Christian mystics, those who adhere to various Eastern meditative practices may just have it right. One way of getting the self out of the way of the spirit is to just be quiet. How lamentable then, that one old rubric of unreconstructed Roman Catholic liturgical practice has slipped away across the decades – that of silencing the organ from the Gloria in excelsis of Maundy Thursday to the same moment of the Easter Vigil Mass. A Good Friday spent in quiet and unaccompanied singing is a tonic for modern ears.

Practice... Not allowed! And just how, one asks, is one to learn that dreaded toccata for the Easter postlude, the slash-and-dash accompaniments, the hymn embellishments, the extra-complex service music, when the edifice itself is all tied up with the holiest of days? If it is not a service, or a vigil, or just times when the doors are open to the faithful, it is the fevered preparation of others – the altar guild, the flower guild, the maintenance folks, the cleaners. Organ practice vanishes just when we need it the most dearly. And, is there any damp and cold quite like the damp and cold of arriving to practice at 4 a.m.?

The clock ticks... Those who organize their lives and their work around yearly cycles are doomed to an understanding of time – and its human confines – that often eludes others. Sure, a stock broker or a plumber may feel a small twinge of nostalgia on yet another birthday or New Year's Eve (and maybe a *retired* stock broker might sense it with some greater urgency), but there is nothing quite like seeing annual faith rituals unfold publicly, adorned in color and language and light and music to cause one to lift the eyes upward and

wonder just where it all went and just how many more might be ahead. For me, it is less the *Ecce lignum* or *Exultet* of a Holy Week than the first strains of “Once in Royal David’s City” at Lessons and Carols, but these yearly moments chime the hours of our lives with striking poignancy.

Strangers in the house... Who are they? Why are they here? Why do they not return? Last year, the pastor of a large Baptist congregation in Chicago, a church that ordinarily attracts 9,000 or more worshippers each Sunday, asked his own congregation to stay home on Easter morning! Thus, the entire 10,000 seats could be reserved for visitors on Easter Day. This demands no comment, but speaks volumes.

An early Easter in March and days unlike any other.

- Haig Mardirosian