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Dean’s Message

Music and the Mind

Music, uniquely among the arts, is both completely abstract and profoundly emotional. It has no power to represent anything particular or external, but it has a unique power to express inner states or feelings. Music compares the heart directly; it needs no mediation. Consider Oliver Saks’s *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain.*

Since first dipping into the seminal investigation into the relationship between the brain and music by the late neurologist and author Oliver Saks, I have been curious to learn more about the scientific observations concerning the power of music that we all know and understand. As organists, we are privileged to play and listen to instruments that deliver an exorbitant range of frequencies, dynamics, and harmonic and technical complexity, more so than any other instrument, and surely equal to that of a full symphony orchestra.
Perhaps it is because of the overwhelming nature of the organ that our fellow “classical” audiences can tend to view us with suspicion, as purveyors of a “specialist” kind of music that is in some way detached from the mainstream. That is partly inevitable, of course, due to the fact that most organs are designed, built, and voiced specifically for the room in which they sing. We cannot just move a world-class instrument from hall to hall as we might with a Steinway or Stradivarius. Moreover, in NYC at least, while our houses of worship contain some of the most superb examples of the organ builder’s craft, our concert halls are embarrassingly devoid of pipe organs. It is something that has been written about and discussed widely, with none other than NYC Chapter member and IPYA winner, Paul Jacobs, writing a stimulating opinion in The Wall Street Journal in 2019.

Hallowe’en has just concluded its annual pick-and-mix of costumes, parades, and corn syrup. Bizarrely, it is also the time that many people welcome the organ and its music into the hallowed halls of popular culture and mass recognition. For one night only, Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor sounded out across the Western hemisphere, the ultimate soundtrack to ghostly apparitions, carved pumpkins, and oversized spider webs. I have written here before about the prevalence of the pipe organ in Hollywood, when it is generally portrayed as the pastime of choice of a devilish, socially annexed individual, perennially dissatisfied with mainstream human interaction. What I would give to speak with those Gothic-inspired authors and directors on their reasons to present our sphere as such!

There is no question that the act of playing the organ is a veritable neurofest for the brain. In a recent book by rocker-turned-neuroscientist, Daniel Levitin mediates on the specific processes that music excites in our brains. Reading music requires that we process three staves of music, in multiple clefs, via our Visual Cortex and Occipital Lobes. Listening to ourselves or to others makes use of the Auditory Cortex and Temporal Lobe. Playing, as we do with both hands and feet, maximizes activity in the Primary Motor and Prefrontal Cortexes and the Cerebellum. The Cerebellum, in addition to the Nucleus Accumbens, process our emotional response to that music. In short, the entire brain is a hive of activity, a series of neurological fireworks without compare.
It is clear, then, that playing the organ and listening to its music maximizes the capabilities of our brains. For some, perhaps, it is simply too much. But for others, it is a thrilling foray into a world of exquisite music and incomparably rich sound palates. All of this was made clear at our recent event featuring the past two first-prize winners of the AGO/Quimby Northeast Regional Competition for Young Organists, Eddie Zheng and Cecily DeMarco (many thanks to James Wetzel, our host). If you missed that, you can watch it again here. I look forward to seeing you all at our next event, a Memorial Tribute to John Weaver on Sunday, November 14th at 3 PM at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, when even more brain sparks will fly!

With my best wishes, as ever,

James Kennerley, Dean

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**Program News**

**Chapter Events**

**Memorial Tribute to John Weaver**

**Sunday, November 14th – 3 PM**

Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church

921 Madison Avenue at 73rd Street

MAPC’s Saint Andrew Music Society and the NYCAGO are cosponsoring an organ recital performed by students of Dr. John Weaver, featuring Chelsea Chen, David Enlow, Andrew Henderson, and Alan Morrison.

Admission is free (at the door) for all NYCAGO Members and is $25 for the general public ($20 for students and seniors). Attendees must show proof of vaccination against Covid-19, and all attendees must wear masks. For more information, click here.

**Presidents’ Day**

**Monday, February 21, 2022**

Save the date! The annual cornerstone event of the NYCAGO Chapter is always held on Presidents’ Day. More information will be forthcoming shortly.
Events around Town

The Complete Works of Demessieux at Saint Thomas Church

Saturdays – 3 PM
November 6th, 13th, and 20th
Saint Thomas Church
Fifth Avenue at 53rd Street

Concert Organist Stephen Tharp will present the complete organ works of 20th century French virtuoso Jeanne Demessieux, marking the centennial year of her birth. This three recital series is part of the Concerts at Saint Thomas 2021–2022 season. For more information and to purchase tickets, click here.

In November, AGO National is airing a series of three webinars entitled Conversations for a Centenary. The third, on Monday, November 22nd at 5 PM will consider Jeanne Demessieux and Marcel Dupré. Panelists Jeremy Filsell and Stephen Tharp will discuss their recent recitals of the complete works of both composers. For more information, see below and here.

Musica Viva Series featuring Trent Johnson

Sunday, November 14th – 5 PM
All Souls Church
1157 Lexington Avenue at 80th Street

Trent Johnson, organist and composer, will premier some of his new works for organ, along with the music of Bach, Mozart, Vierne, and George Walker. In the second half of the program, Trent will accompany the silent film comedy For Heaven’s Sake from 1926, starring the legendary silent film actor Harold Lloyd. This film was one of the highest grossing of the era and is one of Lloyd’s most enduring roles. For more information and to purchase tickets, click here.

Note that this is the same afternoon as the John Weaver Memorial Tribute. As the churches are only ten blocks away, it should be possible to attend both.

Consider adding your events to the Concert Calendar for the season. Email submissions to Sam Bartlett here.

Email suggestions and comments for the Program Committee here.

Bulletin Board
AGO Year of the Young Organist

Investing in the Future

The AGO National Council is committed to membership recruitment, retention, and growth within our organization. During the Year of the Young Organist, July 1, 2021–June 30, 2022, any individual under the age of 30 can become a member or renew her/his membership for free as part of this program.

The Year of the Young Organist will provide opportunities for both personal and professional development. Programs will include master classes and webinars on a wide variety of topics. Click here for more information.

If you know of a young organist in New York City who is not a member of the Guild, please reach out or let us know.

Curtis Organ Department Receives Donation

In October, Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute of Music announced that it has received a gift of $20 million from an anonymous donor, with a portion of the donation going towards the organ department.

Pogorzelski-Yankee Memorial Organist Scholarships

Young organists are encouraged to apply for the Pogorzelski-Yankee Memorial Scholarships, which are presently awarded for a period of up to four years to four undergraduates. Next year (2022), the AGO will increase the number of scholarships and award two scholarships. One entering college freshman and one college student currently enrolled at either the freshman, sophomore, or junior level will be awarded for the 2022–2023 academic year ($15,000 annually). Each award is renewable if requirements are met. Click here for more information.

Correction

The Requiem Mass for Edith Ho at the Church of the Advent in Boston was held on September 11th, not November 11th as was misstated in October’s Newsletter. Mea culpa.

Send Bulletin Board submissions to the editor for publication.
**Diane Meredith Belcher**, Music Director of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church on Central Park West, has been appointed to the Chapter Board as a member of the Class of 2024, filling the position of Colin MacKnight who moved to Little Rock, Arkansas to become Director of Music at that City’s Trinity Episcopal Cathedral.

**AGO Webinar Participants**

Chapter members **Daniel Ficarri** and **Raymond Nagem** (Monday, November 8th at 4 PM), **Neal Campbell** (Monday, November 15th at 4 PM), and **Jeremy Filsell** and **Stephen Tharp** (Monday, November 22nd at 5 PM) will participate in a series of three webinars entitled *Conversations for a Centenary* produced by AGO National. These webinars will examine the lives and great works of three 20th Century organists: Alec Wyton, Richard Wayne Dirksen, and Jeanne Demessieux. For more information and to register for webinars, click [here](#).

Submit news items (professional appointments, retirements, marriages, births, obituaries, etc.) to the editor for publication.

**From the Editor**

**Practice Makes Perfect**

In [last month’s article](#), I began to consider the ways in which organists practice and allocate time as a means of professional improvement, and proposed to continue the topic over several subsequent months.

**Staring into (Cyber) Space**

Let us simply accept as a universal given that we ought to practice more than we do. So a soapbox speech enjoining everyone to spend more hours on the good old 8 foot gedeckt would be a waste of time, and certainly hypocritical. However, it may be worthwhile to consider just how much time we spend on that other kind of keyboard: the one connected to a glowing screen.
I am constantly on my computer, mostly out of necessity. Excel for budgets, InDesign for leaflets, Sibelius for editions, Word for music lists. And though I often bemoan my triage approach to the inbox, I will admit that I do enjoy the administrative aspects of being a music director. (A topic for another editorial down the line should be what balance we achieve in these competing responsibilities.)

I am also on Facebook, mostly to post things for my Parish’s page, but, of course, also to nose around a bit to see what other people are doing. It is a useful tool for announcing concerts, appointments, recordings, etc, and without it, I would be unaware of many wonderful bits of news. Also, really, who doesn’t like a good bit of gossip?

**Facebook sees you when you’re sleeping, it knows when you’re awake…**

So what is Facebook? Is it a personal diary or a professional bulletin board? Well, both, but in what proportion? In this confusing and confused world of social media and instant communication, the line between colleague and friend has become blurred. It is a particular issue for our profession, as organists are generally affable and approachable, and because our community is comparatively small.

Unsurprisingly, I am “Facebook friends” with a number of organists. Some are among my oldest and dearest friends in the genuine sense of the word; some are close colleagues, the kind with whom you have a drink after a recital and from whom you seek advice; lastly, some are “friends” simply because they are fellow organists, even though they live across the country and we have never met.

**It knows if you’ve been bad or good…**

So to whom is my social media presence directed? Do I share my opinions on, say, Trump or Biden, Benedict or Francis, *WSJ* or *Times*, the way I might in person with my immediate circle of friends? Does some compeer you would pass unrecognized on the street know how you dressed for Hallowe’en? Or do I limit my activity to innocuous puppy photos and a link to Sunday’s postlude?

We spend a good deal of time molding our careers in terms of the music we program and the quality with which it is presented. But both our technical proficiency and our social presence contribute to our professional profile. Next month, I plan to continue examining the duality of these “practices”.

Submitted for your consideration,

Sincerely,
Quote of the Month

*The enemy of art is the absence of limitations.*
~Orson Welles (1915–1985)

NYCAGO Chapter Information

**General Inquiries**

[Chapter Contacts Page](#)  
[Chapter Committees and Appointments](#)

**Newsletter**

James D. Wetzel, *editor*  
The newsletter is published at the beginning of every month. Please submit all material (advertising, announcements, classifieds, etc.) to [the editor](#) by the 24th of the preceding month.

**Executive Board**

**Dean:** James Kennerley  
**Sub Dean:** James D. Wetzel  
**Secretary:** Raymond Nagem  
**Treasurer:** Patrick Kreeger  
**Registrar:** Larry Long  
**Auditors:** Paolo Bordignon and Andrew Henderson

**At-large (Class of 2022):** Sam Bartlett, Gregory D'Agostino, Jason Roberts, J. David Williams, and Janet Yieh

**At-large (Class of 2024):** Diane Meredith Belcher, Loraine Enlow, Nathaniel Gumbs, Bernadette Hoke, Jared Lamenzo, and Lena Tharp

The biographies of the board members are provided [here](#).
Visit the NYCAGO Chapter website by clicking here.

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