

A PAGE FOR THE PART-TIME CHURCH MUSICIAN

Esteem and Self-Esteem

IS THERE a person among us who hasn't felt inadequate in his or her work at one time or another? There are those rare people who are so confident in their substantial musical abilities that they never seem to suffer the pangs of inadequacy. But many of our fellow musicians, whom we may privately idolize, experience a great deal of inner turmoil and lack of confidence. Even the genius Mozart may have had the shadow of a doubt once or twice in his own self-esteem.

Most all of us are racked with doubt at one point or another. Was my prelude musical enough? Did my accompaniment of the choir succeed? Did my hymn playing encourage the congregation, or did it turn them off? Did the ministers appreciate that my music selections supported the worship theme or mood? Did that mistake in the pedal passage ruin the entire postlude for everyone? Does that visiting organist who came to the service today find my playing sub-par? And then that dark subjective suspicion: am I really any good as an organist, or am I just an imposter? Does anyone honestly admire what I do?

Many of us began to study music when we were young, and we all remember at least one painful moment when, despite our best efforts, in an early performance, a studio recital, a family event, or even the first attempt at a worship service as a novice organist, something went seriously wrong—notes, memory, fingers, music. Even years later, we cringe at the shameful memory. The most fortunate among us develop in our profession as musicians and experience enough reliable success to soften the memory of mi-

nor (or major) failures. Success or failure, status of position, level of mastery, recognition, or the lack thereof are all factors in our esteem.

The decision to join or not to join a professional society may depend on such a factor. Those of us in the Guild who have struggled with building membership are fearful to broach this evaluative issue, knowing that there is great potential for the discussion to appear patronizing and condescending. But it is the elephant in the room with regard to membership in the AGO.

Many of us part-time organists question our abilities. We doubt whether we measure up. The idea of an AGO membership might intimidate us. Our self-esteem is in doubt. Furthermore, there is a perception that the Guild is elitist, intended for "professionals," and exclusive of those with more modest gifts, background, or study. But high esteem and snobbery are not the same thing. AGO members may have at times projected this very attitude—could professional pride be mistaken for arrogance? Musicians at all levels of ability value honest accomplishment. After all, those AGO members who have achieved honors, whether degrees, certificates, or professional positions, had to work diligently to attain their measure of musical mastery. A mission of the Guild from its earliest days has been to honor and encourage the highest professional ideals as evidenced in the men and women who are consummate musicians. Every professional organization builds on such logic—give honor where honor is due.

The Guild is also simultaneously welcoming and encouraging to musicians in all developmental stages. Since its inception, the

AGO has had a vigorous outreach to promote our instrument, its music, and its art to young and old, novice and veteran. Non-Guild musicians who consider the Guild to be overbearing and exclusive might reconsider whether these perceptions are true. The Guild as I have known it for decades has made great efforts to avoid condescension.

Organists are unique among musicians. Who else can claim week after week, unceasingly, to provide music for large communities of people? Places of worship are ubiquitous in every village, town, and city, most of which require our skill as church musicians. If a census could be taken of the total number of organists in the nation, the number would be huge. Take that number and consider the percentage of church musicians who are AGO members. Would it be one in four (optimistic), one in ten? And of all those who are not Guild members, an overwhelmingly high percentage are part-time organists.

The Guild currently boasts a nationwide membership in the thousands. Yet the concern of this column and the Task Force on the Part-Time Church Musician is to expand our outreach efforts. The significant addition of that vast number of part-time organists could contribute great riches of talent and tap otherwise unrealized potential, which would directly support and further the Guild's goals, objectives, and ideals. Likewise, the Guild has much to offer church organists at all skill levels. As just one example, in the area of education, I invite you to visit the page on educational resources available on the AGO national Web site: go to www.agohq.org/education/index.html and click on "Professional Education." In addition, consider accessing the rich network of like-minded souls who attend conventions sponsored by the Guild each summer.

Many part-time church musicians are highly accomplished in their art but choose other career options. In my case, a part-time job is perfect in retirement. My point in this article is not to characterize any group as to their esteem level but rather to suggest that everyone has doubts, everyone fears criticism, and that coupled with false perceptions of the Guild's professionalism may deter people from joining. If there is a kernel of truth, however, in the false perceptions, then the Guild needs to honestly address it.

We need to encourage an attitude within the Guild that is more constructive than critical. We must work to edify those who aspire to be musicians in the church by affirming their knowledge, whether it is basic, intermediate, or advanced. Guild members could adopt an even more welcoming attitude for all those who are just beginning to develop their talents. And non-members might rethink their perception of the Guild by laying aside matters of esteem and self-esteem that act as barriers separating musicians from one another. We all doubt ourselves. There's a support group for that—the American Guild of Organists.

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