AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS CENTENNIAL
ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF COMPETITION: ENCOURAGING EXCELLENCE

Mary Ann Dodd

The AGO Centennial is providing a historic milestone from which to view a time-honored facet of Guild activity known as competition. For, why, and when did the competitions originate? What has been their pattern of growth and development? What have been their strengths and their weaknesses? And what should we hope for and work toward in the future? The primary sources of information for this article have been organ journals, AGO National Council minutes, and conversations and correspondence with those who have been associated with the competitions—performers, judges, administrators, etc. I am grateful to the many individuals who took the time to share their thoughts with me.

Competition—an altogether familiar word in the world of performing arts. What does it mean to compete artistically? Competitions are about winning and losing. Steven H. Holm, author of The Competition Obsession: A Philosophy of Non-Competitive Living (San Diego, 1996, p. 6), defines competition as "...two or more people trying to acquire a prize which only one can have." Taking a more positive view, Alva Grace Daniels, representing the Guild for International Piano Competitions, has written in a letter to Clefiver magazine (Dec. 1994, pp. 2, 3): "Competition, as an art form, has inspired and prepared many great talents and has given artists many opportunities." Competitions provide incentive and challenge. The rewards can be financial, educational, and in the preparation itself.

One overall observation about music competitions is that there will always be inherent difficulties in regard to fairness. As one disgruntled competitor put it: "Judges' reports are often contradictory, unreliable, and unfathomable. Sports competitions rely on simple, objective criteria, while in music matters are subjective, few if any, measurable and objective standards. " Thus, an overview of the first 100 years of competitive activity in the Guild reveals a never-ending, ongoing attempt to perfect the procedure, leaving in its wake a dramatically shifting spectrum of ever-changing rules and requirements.

Today, the Guild sponsors five competitions that fall into two main categories: (1) performance: National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance (NYACOP), Regional Competitions for Young Organists (RCYO), and National Competitions in Organ Improvisation (NCOI); and (2) composition: Holtkamp-AGO Award in Organ Composition, and AGO/ECM Publishing Award in Choral Composition. Each of the performance competitions has its own national committee, and the two composition competitions are both under the aegis of the New Music Committee.

The AGO/ECM Publishing Award in Choral Composition

The earliest competition in the history of the Guild was the choral composition contest, known then as the Clemson Medal. Walter J. Clemson of Taunton, Mass. (1857-1945) was born in London and came to the U.S. in 1859. He had a BA from Cambridge and was one of the founders of the Guild as well as dean of the New England Chapter for many years. In 1896, he offered an annual prize of a gold medal worth $50 for "an anthem of all-round excellence of reasonable length (6-8 pages of octavo)" with a free accompaniment to an English text. Council members had been asked by Mr. Clemson to consider whether ". . . a sum of money would be more esteemed by the composers." According to the Council minutes, the reason it was decided to give the prize in the form of a medal was ". . . that it may have distinctly the character of an honor conferred rather than that of a reward for labor done." The first winner, in 1897, was Will C. Macfarlane, national secretary of the Guild, and one of its founders. The title of the winning anthem was "Happy Is the Man Who Findeth Wisdom."

In 1901, in an effort to stimulate more interest in the contest, H.W. Gray (agents for Novello at that time) contributed an additional $50 in cash with the provision that the winning anthem would be published by Novello, the composer to receive royalties. At this time, the contest was open to all musicians residing in the U.S. or Canada, but only if they were members of the Guild. In the first 24 years, only 15 medals were given, attesting either to the extraordinary high standards of the judges, or to the extraordinarily poor quality of the anthems submitted.

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The American Guild of Organists

Dudley Buck, Honorary President
Gerrit Smith, Wardan, 63 East 52nd Street
Will C. Macfarlane, Secretary, 45 East 66th Street
Walter J. Hall, Treasurer, 401 Carnegie Hall

New York, December 20th, 1898.

PRIZE ANNOUNCEMENT.

The Council of the American Guild of Organists offers a Prize of Fifty Dollars ($50) for the best Organ Voluntary.

Competitors must be members of the Guild and must conform to the following regulations:

1. The Composition may be in the form of an Opening or Closing Voluntary. For an Opening Voluntary, the time of performance must not exceed six minutes; for a Closing Voluntary, the time of performance must not exceed eight minutes.

2. The successful Composition will become the property of the Guild.

3. Manuscripts must be sent to the Secretary not later than March 1st, 1899.

4. The Manuscript must have no clue to the identity of the Composer but must be signed with a motto. The same motto must be written upon an envelope enclosing the name and postal address of the author, and be sent with the composition.

5. The Adjudicators will withhold the prize if, in their opinion, no composition is of sufficient merit.
Some years continued to be less fruitful than others, and often the prize was withheld. In 1947, no award was given. That year the judges were John Huston, Myron Roberts, and Hans Stora. The winners were submitted the following report to the Council:

I saw the 42 compositions first. As I carefully went through them I hoped to find something for one to set itself as a work possessing musicality, the craftsmanship—such a work would have me included as one of the other judges. Each one of us included a general comment from which I quote:

"Keeping in mind that one of the objects of the Guild is to raise the standards of church music, I should not have been surprised if some of the compositions had a lower quality. I would not vote for it because it is my understanding that the emphasis here is on service music."

"I am sorry to say that I do not find any of these submitted anthems worthy of an award by the American Guild of Organists. I decline to indicate any first, second, or third choices, because the Guild should recognize distinguished creative work—not the commonplace, not the lifeless, certainly not 'correct' and certainly not work which is marred by crudities or defective organ accompaniments."

"I think it would do the Guild no good if we offered a $100 prize. I think the Guild would be better advised to refrain from offering such a prize."

"I would be inclined to say that it is a good idea to have these compositions."

"The Guild is to raise the standards of church music. I would not vote for a work that was not better than such a work that was not suitable for such a work."

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The contest was judged in April 1947. The results of the competition were not considered successful enough to warrant its continuation.

In 1951, the Guild announced a competition for the best organ piece five minutes in length in the form of a chorale prelude or a prelude suitable for church services. The contest was judged in April 1953. The results of the competition were not considered successful enough to warrant its continuation.

In 1961, the Guild announced a competition for the best organ composition in the form of a chorale prelude or a prelude suitable for church services. The contest was judged in April 1962. The results of the competition were not considered successful enough to warrant its continuation.

The contest was judged in April 1963. The results of the competition were not considered successful enough to warrant its continuation.
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harmonic idiom and is the work of a thoughtful, sensitive mind.

The spirit behind the composition contests has always recognized the plethora of service music based on outworn formulas that could just as easily be improvised. Seven years ago on the editorial page of the New Music Review, these words were to be found: "Are we printing too much church music? Organists who receive from all parts of the United States 'hatches' of what is supposed to be 'ecclesiastical' music, and who throw about nine-tenths of it into the wastebasket naturally think that there is an absurd wastage of ink and printing ink, to say nothing of postage and advertising. Of really valuable anthem and service music, there is a dearth so great that 'immortal compositions' are repeated from year to year for the reason that there is nothing to take their place."

Another chronic problem has been that prize-winning compositions are often extremely difficult and accessible only to virtuoso performers. Yet another related issue has been and continues to be that of motivating recitale and church musicians to program works of contemporary American composers. As early as 1917, Roland Diggel wrote an article for the December issue of The Diapason entitled "American Music in the Church" in which he pleaded for the more general use of American compositions and deplored the neglect of the American composer.

Wesley Morgan, writing in The Diapason (Nov. 1959, p. 5), had this to say: "... Having set a goal aloft, the organ world has isolated itself from the main currents of musical criticism. The value of musical composition for the organ is determined almost solely by organists themselves, who, by virtue of this position may weigh the scales of evaluation, more heavily with sentiment and disabuse than with musical discrimination. Hence to recognize the position of organ composition as related to the parents activity first and last, and where in the world of music that is sought and the organ in the church's world of the church.

National Young Artists Competition in Organ Playing (NYA COP)

Surprisingly enough, Guild-sponsored organ performance contest at the national level did not begin until mid-century. The earliest Guild-sponsored performance contest was founded in 1935. The following announcement appeared in the New Music Review: "It is believed that there are many organists who have, in the past, brought their technique to a highly high level but who have never, in the past, had the opportunity to return to regular practice, to continue and develop. They need encouragement."

recognition gained in such a contest would be a valuable asset in any community. The contest took place publicly, and the contestants were all invited to one of three levels depending on their level of training and experience. Each level had its own required repertoire in each case a specific Bach piece and a special piece by a contemporary American composer.

It was not until 15 years later, in 1950, under the presidency of S. Lewis Elmer and the chairmanship of Searle Wright, that a National Competition Committee was created, and the NYA COP had begun. Since its inception it has gone through many names and purposes. The Young Organist's Competition, The Students Competition, The Organ-Playing Competition, and it is known today as The National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance. From the very beginning, its primary and purpose—unlike that of the Georgia Chapter in the '30s—has been to seek out and encourage young talent and to provide opportunities for growth and learning.

When the three-level competition (chap- ter, regional, and national) was first established in a two-year cycle, there were 15 re- gional winners and 15 national winners. Later, for a brief time in the '80s, the country was divided into four geographical zones for the semifinals, each zone being allowed to send two contestants to the finals, and the AAGO or FAGO certificate being one of the eligibility requirements.

As previously mentioned, the rules have undergone constant change. Judges at the national level have been as few as two and as many as nine! Repertoire requirements have always been, and still remain, controversial. In the beginning, the contestants were allowed to play absolutely anything they were chosen for 15 minutes. In other years, every piece was specified with no latitude given to the performers. At the point that the performers had to learn three completely different sets of pieces for each of the three competition levels.

Applause has been allowed and disallowed, and the issues of visibility and anonymity among contestants and judges form the basis of an ongoing debate. Tangible awards have ranged from a bronze plaque to $1,000 and the now-mercurial-to- today's prizes of $2,000, $1,500, and $750.

Prize money and scholarships have been generously granted by private individuals, foundations, public and private, and the firms. In 1960, nine organ companies and publishers furnished the prize money! In earlier years, chapters were expected to contribute to a re- gional fund to pay for the finals. The finalists to the national convention. In 1971, it was felt by the Council that there was too much emphasis on the prize money, and the council voted to give the $1,000 and $500 prizes in half for the next competition cycle. Allowable practice time and actual playing time at the competition have varied over the years, but not by much. The requirement of Guild membership in response to express by the National Competition over a general lack of musicianship and musical understanding on the part of the contestants, the AAGO or FAGO certificate was made a requirement between the years 1960 and 1964. A list of winners at the national level from 1950 to 1964 includes, among others, Robert Whitley, Dorothy Young, Dale Peters, Emily Cooper, Ray Ferguson, David Mulbury, Clyde Holloway, Thomas Murray, George Baker III, David Lennox Smith, Peggy Haas, Robert Duer, John Chappell Stowe, and Jeffrey Walker.
two years of actual experience as a concert artist, the program provides the winner with the opportunity to learn firsthand what concert life is really like and how to manage a concert career. "In the competition," MacFarlane, attention is given to such matters as stage etiquette, programming, writing, and recording program notes, publicity, bio, adjusting to unfamiliar city, limiting of number of performances, as well as keeping repertoire fresh and exciting. The winner can expect to play, on average, between 50 and 100 recitals during the two years after the competition. Designed to give the winner a "leg up" in the establishment of a career, the program has been referred to by MacFarlane as "the building, recital by recital, of an artist."

Between January 1994 and June 1996, the current NYACOP winner, Douglas Cleveland will have played between 100 and 120 recitals, many of them sponsored by AGO chapters. This, contrasted to the one or two recitals played by winners prior to 1982, provides a strong testimony to the effectiveness of this new program.

During the 1980s, the competition continued to flourish and there seemed to be an observable upward number of competitors and the number of chapter competitions continued to increase. Chapters and regions were encouraged to offer cash awards, a competition time and practice time were allowed, and the age level continued to rise, as well as the prize money. The final round was now presented in two phases, with the winner presenting a 90-minute concert at the national competition. There were specific required works and more comprehensive guidelines. There were now five sets of rules in extremely small print. According to Philip Baker, NYACOP director at that time: "We've nearly 'ruled' ourselves to death."

The 1982-84 competition cycle culminated at the 1984 convention in San Francisco. It boasted 200 competitors, 50 local competitions, and more than one hundred observers at the finals, prompting critic Byron Belt to comment in his Tao review (August 1984, p.32): "I somehow doubt the validity of contests but have no solution that offers a better potential for rapid recognition of outstanding talent."

Returning from San Francisco, enthused by the success of the competition, NYACOP director Philip Baker approached his dear friend and mentor, John Akin, concert artist/teacher extraordinnaire, who had already expressed a wish to make a significant contribution to the Guild. The result was the establishment of the Akin Competition Fund in the amount of $50,000 to underwrite the performance competitions.

There has recently been a rather dramatic restructuring of the competition beginning in 1990-92 with the creation of a second division for younger organists. In the present structure, which first went into effect for the 1992-94 competition cycle, there are now two complete competitions. The national level (NYACOP) has become more professional in its orientation, and it is hoped that the chapter and regional levels (RCYO) will be able to coordinate their work with the Pipe Organ Encounters and the Committee on the New Organist. The jury is still out, and opinion is divided over whether these changes are good.

The new NYACOP advertises itself as a competition which gives young artists experience in preparing and presenting concert material and a tape of a live recital. There are three performance rounds: the tape round in which there is complete anonymity and in which all but 25 applicants are eliminated; the semifinal round in which seven finalists are chosen; and the final round, which has two phases. In the first phase, three are chosen to compete in the second and final phase. Under these new rules, more emphasis is given to how each player relates to the audience. Stage presence, as well as involvement with the music, is an important consideration.

For the national competition (NYACOP) in 1994, there were 44 applicants, which were narrowed to 25 for the semifinals. The maximum age limit is now 32. The new minimum age limit of 22 recognizes the fact that for the younger performer still in school (late teens or early 20s), the performance schedule after winning the NYACOP is much too demanding and stressful as impractical. For these young artists, it is felt that it is in their best interests to go no further in competition than the regional level.

In the Regional Competitions for Young Organists (RCYO), the upper age limit is 23 and competitors may compete only in the region of their school or their home. Applause is permitted and the judges are allowed to see the competitors, although the judges must remain anonymous until the competition is over. The winner plays a 45-minute recital at the regional convention. First and second prizes are awarded in the amounts of $1,000 and $500 respectively. Seed money in the amount of $500 is given to each region from a Regional Fund administered nationally. The repertoire for the 1994-96 cycle included works by Buxtehude and Franck and four contemporary American works from which the competition could choose one. Some negative feelings regarding the RCOY center around the fact that more local AGO chapters aren't sponsoring their regional winners in recital. Hopefully, this situation will change. Another objection is that potential contestants are no longer motivated to participate since the competition lacks the "glamorous" possibility of competing at the national level.

Mark Dirksen, a former NYACOP competitor, was the coordinator for the 1990 Boston competition. At that point he was asked to join the National Committee and soon went on to become its director. Having been closely involved from the beginning with the entire restructuring process, he was pleased with the results and proud of the fact that with the new format, "... each step in this competition yields concrete returns to those who participate. Speaking of competition in general terms, he sees its value so much in terms of what it does for the Guild, as in what it does for the participants: "There is no other place that one can really find out what one is made of as a player. Recitals can be glossed over, lessons fished, masterclasses excused. But to sit down at a given time and place to play just as you possibly can under close scrutiny is an experience that can change your life. Not by the outcome—but by what one faces inside oneself, and how one deals with the result, for good or for ill. And I think that the Guild can offer this experience to those who seek it (or need it) in a safe, equitable, and confirming way."

According to Vice President Edward Hansen: "NYACOP has evolved over the years to one of the finest competitions in the world. Its prize is one of the most valuable of any competition. It is not a dead-end list-it-on-the-resumé-and-put-the-money-in-the-bank prize. The two years of recitals under the management of Karen MacFarlane are a most valuable boost to a career. The current structure is really drawing out our finest young players."
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result they were cheering for each other, a valuable contribution to an atmosphere in which everyone had the best possible chance to play his/her best. [Thomas Murray was the writer, and Marilyn Kaiser was one of the runners-up.]

Regarding the future of the composition competitions, past New Music Committee Director Philip Brunelle had this to say: "I hope that interest in having composers living today become more involved in writing for the organ will grow and that the awareness of organists of the fact that compositions written in the last 50 years deserve their attention will also flourish. It is a long, slow process but one that must be encouraged and supported. We as the Guild must continue to find more ways to encourage interest in writing for the organ and a true awareness of its beauty, its majesty, and its potential."

Regional Competitions for Young Organists (RCYO)

Regarding the future of the performance competitions, it is clear that the recent restructuring has brought the RCYO to a point of crisis. The NYACOP has now become a truly national event showcasing emerging concert artists. The RCYO, our newest competition, is a separate regional event under the direction of Susan Dickson Moeser, with a chapter round and a final round. What we have here is not a second-division NYACOP but rather a marvelous opportunity for AGO leaders at the chapter and regional levels to work together to nurture and develop this competition in conjunction with their outreach programs for young organists and the Pipe Organ Encounters. (See the article in the Dec. 1995 TAO, pp. 76-79.)

The machinery has been set in place. The potential for the future of our profession is tremendous. But a successful outcome depends solely on the vision, the effort, and the leadership at the local level.

One cannot write about the NYACOP without giving special recognition to Philip Baker, under whose direction the competition grew and developed and flourished for 18 years (1972-1990). What are his thoughts and wishes for the future? We talked at length on the phone and, with his permission, I would like to paraphrase his understanding of his vision: He would like to see less emphasis on winning and judging and fairness, and more energy devoted to developing the competitions into "uplifting experiences and encouraging ventures." He points out that while the newer competitions such as Harlem and Chartres may seem more streamlined, more highly organized, and involve more money, ours is "homegrown." The local chapters and regions can feel a connection with, and take pride in, their winners. Among those lines, he would like to see the Pipe Organ Encounters expanded and more recognition given to the teachers of our young musicians. The administration at all levels of the competitions down to the chapter level involves many, many people who need to become "benevolent enablers, rather than policemen." In short, we need to focus not so much on the outcome as on the process—a process that will provide a valuable and positive experiences to all who participate.

Philip's vision ends with a challenge, which I believe could easily be extended to include the composition competitions as well. His hope is that our competitions might help to prepare our young church musicians for the 21st century. The next generation of organists should not feel threatened by the new technology, but rather welcome it, embrace it, and learn to use it wisely and with dignity. Our emerging young professionals need to be encouraged to live in this day, to expand their repertoire to include all literature and performance styles, and to never overlook one of the most fundamental and practical aspects of organ performance: the capacity to inspire its listeners and to create an atmosphere of worship.

Coda

Having taken a backward glance at the first 100 years of AGO competitions, what—from my bird's-eye view—is my personal hope for the future? I would like to add a coda in harmony to Philip's vision. I believe the competitions possess a hitherto untapped potential. We live in an age obsessed with competition. Why could we not, through the employment of imagination and creativity in the area of public relations, transform the Guild competitions into vehicles that could, by educating the general public, transport the organ not only into the 21st century but, more importantly, out of its narrow closet and into the musical mainstream. To paraphrase that old hymn: Nobody else can do it for us; we've got to do it by and for ourselves.

Mary Ann Dedd is Colgate University Organist Emerita. She remains active as a recitalist and lecturer. With coauthor Jayson Engquist she has recently completed a bio-bibliography for Greenwood Press of the American composer Gardner Read. She is currently working on a biography of Leonard Raver.