

# UPCOMING CHANGES TO THE GUILD'S COMPETITIONS

## A REPORT ON THE 2013–14 COMPETITION EVALUATIONS

Christian Lane

SINCE THE GUILD'S founding, our organization has supported the development of both composition and performance artistry through means of healthy competition, and in so doing, we nurture and cultivate the development of our art and its artists. As Mary Ann Dodd eloquently and thoroughly documented in an article published by *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* in 1996, written to coincide with the Guild's centennial, the AGO's competitions—currently three performance contests and two composition programs—have changed and evolved much over the years, but their core mission of educational and developmental support for participants has not wavered.

Through the offering of both challenge in pursuit and incentive of reward, the music competition process yields a structure through which aspiring artists can hone their craft with both intention and timeline. In my own experience as a competitor in performance competitions, I have found the greatest benefits to be neither cash reward nor notoriety of winning, but rather the opportunity to meet and befriend like-minded, similarly ambitious colleagues; to glean feedback and advice from jurors and leaders in our profession, many of whom quickly became mentors; and to hear my peers perform at exceptionally high levels. Indeed, to hear—and to be heard—is, in my mind, the single greatest benefit of a performance competition.

Over the past year, each of our five nationally administered competitions has undergone a thorough evaluation and review, and the resulting recommendations and procedural changes will better position our organization's efforts for relevance and success in the future. In recent decades, many new competitions have sprung up in each of these realms (performance and composition)—and, in a sense, the Guild's competitions are now, more than ever, in a position of needing to “compete” with

similar programs in this country and abroad. For, while the AGO's programs are appropriately “American” in nature, advances in technology and efficiency of travel demand that they also be international in scope.

It is indisputable that many of these peer programs are better funded than our own competition offerings, and, while stronger funding is by no means the measure of programmatic success, funds for staffed administration, operational support, and larger cash prizes nonetheless allow for more focused efforts by organizers and remain enticements for potential participants. If our own programs are to thrive in this environment, we must be in a position to offer an experience that, in process and execution, is valuable beyond measure to a developing musician. We must have a procedure that is not only valuable in and of itself, but one that also supports and prepares a winner for the expectations associated with a performance competition's outcome. And, we must have a winner's experience that excels in supporting these budding artist professionals, instead of merely sending each home with a prize and our congratulations.

In this climate of similar competing programs, the Guild's efforts stand to offer integrity in mission, a strong history of record, and the encouragement of our diverse membership, both locally and nationally. We offer competition prizes that favor professional development and opportunity. We rely on volunteer leadership for the administration and execution of these programs, thereby cultivating a climate of shared responsibility and an attitude of intentional support by our members for the participants. Indeed, these are each flagship Guild programs, offered for the betterment and support of aspiring artist professionals.

Under the leadership of chairwoman Eileen Hunt, the Guild's national New Music Committee has spent considerable time and effort dissecting

and evaluating our two composition competitions: the AGO/ECS Publishing Award in Choral Composition and the AGO/Marilyn Mason Award in Organ Composition. And, under my leadership, a special review committee extensively surveyed our three performance competitions: the National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance (NYACOP), the National Competition in Organ Improvisation (NCOI), and the AGO/Quimby Regional Competitions for Young Organists (RCYO).

The results of the New Music reviews are summarized below and were approved by National Council at its executive meeting in January 2014. Indeed, these new procedures are reflected in the 2016 announcements for these programs that appear elsewhere in this issue of TAO.

The recommendations of the Performance Competitions Review Team were accepted by National Council at its meeting in October 2013 and are likewise summarized below. Changes to these programs will be reflected in the 2015 cycle of the regional program, RCYO/Quimby, and in the 2016 cycles of the national programs NYACOP and NCOI.

I thank every Guild member who participated in this process of review and evaluation. The impressions and suggestions gleaned from the summer 2013 competitions survey were indeed enlightening and informative.

Documents posted online at [Agohq.org/competitions](http://Agohq.org/competitions) are available for further dissemination:

- Mary Ann Dodd's 1996 article documenting the history of the Guild's competitions, referenced above
- The full survey results from the summer 2013 performance competitions survey
- The Performance Competition Review Committee's full report of recommendations and rationales

## NEW MUSIC

Our Guild's earliest competition, established concurrently with the AGO's founding, in 1896, was the Clemson Medal for excellence in choral competition. Today, the AGO/ECS Publishing Award in Choral Composition carries on its mantle, and, in so doing, has contributed significant new works to the repertoire. The most recent winner is Croatian composer Ivan Bozicevic, whose *Kyrie* setting will be premiered during the 2014 National Convention in Boston; earlier winners of the AGO's choral award include Frederick Candlyn, Horatio Parker, Jane Marshall, Barrie Cabena, and Gilbert Martin.

The Guild similarly supports the composition of new music for organ through the AGO/Marilyn Mason Award in Organ Composition. Recent winners include Barrie Cabena and Rachel Laurin; past recipients include George Frederick McKay, Camil Van Hulse, and Frank Ferko.

Unfortunately, in the 2014 cycle of the AGO/Marilyn Mason competition, the distinguished panel of judges came to the unanimous opinion that no entry merited the award. This surprising and disappointing result provided strong impetus to review each of our new music competitions' aims and practices. How could our processes better support an outcome that produces enduring and exceptional additions to the repertoire?

In discussions throughout summer and autumn of 2013, the New Music Committee reflected on the current state of the Guild's new-music competitions and examined successful peer programs. After considerable time and thought, consensus emerged supporting a central and fundamental change to our process: Instead of judging *submitted scores* and selecting a winner (as is current practice), jurors will *review proposals* for a new work and *award a commission* to execute the proposed piece.

In this new commissioning format, a composer submits a detailed proposal for a work reflecting the parameters delineated in the competition guidelines, and s/he provides substantial supporting materials to demonstrate both ability as composer and potential to create a lasting work for our instrument.

This revised format allows com-

posers to write with an intentionality and dedication that comes from guarantee of performance, and encourages established composers—who are maybe reluctant to spend considerable time writing to spec with only little chance of reward—to enter the competition and to engage our peculiar, often bewildering instrument.

Indeed, composers who have little or no past experience with the organ are encouraged to explore and learn, and, if selected winners, are afforded active mentorship throughout the competitions' composition phases. Additionally, winners have nearly a year to execute the commissions, allowing for ample time for exploration and enlightenment.

In making this fundamental adjustment to the processes of both the AGO/ECS Award in Choral Composition and the AGO/Marilyn Mason Award in Organ Composition, the Guild's New Music Committee strongly believes these restructurings will yield results that serve to strengthen our instrument's newly composed repertoire, will better align our new-music competitions with established best practices in the field, and will help to ensure ever-better, quality additions to our sponsoring publishers' catalogs and our members' music libraries.

## PERFORMANCE COMPETITIONS

In April 2013, the AGO National Council approved a temporary expansion of the National Competitions Committee to facilitate a thorough review of the Guild's three active performance competitions:

- The National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance (NYACOP)
- The National Competition in Organ Improvisation (NCOI)
- The AGO/Quimby Regional Competitions for Young Organists (RCYO)

Later that spring, the review team wrote and distributed a survey, soliciting feedback about the current portfolio of performance competitions. The survey was distributed online to the entire AGO membership and was open for responses from June 24 to July 22, 2013; a total of 1,697 responses were received. In general, the

Guild's members feel our competitions are worthwhile activities and are admirable in their respective missions. Forty-six percent of those surveyed recognized that, in general, performance competitions are a helpful opportunity for young artists, while 48% went even further, saying that they are "a vital service, critical in promoting and encouraging performance excellence amongst our profession's future leaders." Only 6% suggested the Guild should not cultivate these programs.

As expected, responses to specific queries on competitions processes tended to skew toward the *status quo*. Given this outcome, it is worth reiterating that the survey was not, and was never intended to be, a democratic "vote" on competition practices; rather, its purpose was to solicit suggestions and to gauge general views and impressions from the membership (regardless of past experience with these programs).

The review team met in Cambridge, Mass., on July 29 and 30, 2013, to discuss survey results and to begin the process of review and evaluation. The team subsequently met via web conference and other electronic means.

In the July 2013 meeting, the first task was to compose a comprehensive mission statement for the Guild's performance competitions; this new statement guided and informed all subsequent conversation:

**The mission of the AGO's performance competitions is to support organists, professionally and pedagogically, enhancing their ability to communicate effectively as musicians; to inspire and engage participants and audiences; and to foster greater appreciation for the organ, its breadth of literature, and its improvisatory, creative, and collaborative possibilities.**

What follows is an overview of selected procedural changes that have been approved by National Council. I encourage all interested members to peruse further materials, including the full recommendations and rationales, posted online at [Agohq.org/competitions](http://Agohq.org/competitions).

I thank the Performance Competitions Review Team for their work and dedication to this process:

**Michael Barone**, host of nationally syndicated radio program *Pipedreams*  
**Matthew Burt**, director of music, Christ Church Portola Valley, Calif.; local RCYO director

**Harold Calhoun**, AGO staff, *ex officio*

**James Higdon**, professor of organ, Kansas University; regular judge on international competition juries

**Jay Peterson**, chair, NYACOP

**Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra**, organ improvisation scholar; former member of the NCOI Committee

## NATIONAL YOUNG ARTISTS COMPETITION IN ORGAN PERFORMANCE (NYACOP)

NYACOP holds pride of place as the Guild's premier performance competition. Winners spanning several decades have gone on to establish prominent careers in our profession, with many first-prize winners remaining on the artist management roster long after his or her term as NYACOP winner concluded. This in itself is testament to the competition's historic strength for identifying successful performance artists.

However, it has been 16 years since a NYACOP winner was retained by management following the prescribed prize period. Moreover, for an open application round that is designed to identify a field of 25 "official competitors," the 2014 NYACOP cycle collected only 23 applicants.

While a winner's ultimate career outcome and a diminishing applicant pool are by no means the only measures of NYACOP's success or failure, these realities did lead to an evaluation of our competition's mission and goals, its processes, and its outcomes.

### *Mission statement*

**NYACOP seeks to cultivate and support young artists in organ performance. By encouraging effective musical communication and refinement of technical skill, the competition aims to identify those performers best poised to engage and inspire audiences in years ahead.**

### *First prize*

The NYACOP first-prize winner receives (1) two years of career development assistance from Karen McFarlane Artists; (2) cash prizes from Karen McFarlane Artists and the Jordan Organ Endowment; (3) a CD

recording on the Pro Organo label; (4) a performance at the subsequent AGO national convention; (5) a selection of recital awards in venues around the country; and (6) a defined amount of web and magazine advertising provided by the AGO and THE AMERICAN ORGANIST.

### *Competition timeline*

To better reflect the intense career demands of a performance artist, the competition timeline is condensed; the time span from announcement of repertoire to final-round performance is reduced, from 26 months to 15 months. Additionally, the semifinal round is now scheduled to closely precede the final round, increasing the amount of performance-ready repertoire necessary and better reflecting the demands of a traveling artist.

### *Number of rounds*

The total number of rounds is reduced, from four to three: (1) recorded application round; (2) live semifinal round; and (3) final round, to coincide with the Guild's biennial national convention. The second recorded round is eliminated, thereby placing stronger emphasis on live performance.

### *Number of competitors*

The application round yields nine semifinalists; five finalists are then chosen. With an added emphasis on live performance, it is appropriate that the number of competitors in these rounds be increased. Additionally, with first, second, and third prizes available, it is appropriate that there be more finalists than prizes.

### *Amount and type of repertoire per round*

As we seek to identify those who will be successful recitalists and thoughtful musicians, a full recital and a collaborative work are now requirements. The final round thus comprises a full program of 55–60 minutes, planned by the competitor; this recital includes a prescribed work with instrumental or vocal soloist. The recorded round requires two contrasting works, including a major work of Bach; the semifinal round requires three major works.

Instead of fully prescribed repertoire throughout the competition's

rounds, as has most often been the norm with NYACOP, there is now a mix of (1) prescribed repertoire, allowing for the most direct comparison between competitors; (2) repertoire chosen from short lists of comparable works; and (3) free-choice works, for which the competitor considers the instrument's specifications and the resulting balance of a program when choosing repertoire.

### *Audience expectations in live rounds*

At the semifinal round, the audience is expected to remain silent for the duration of a competitor's program and is invited to applaud at the conclusion of each competitor. During the final round, the audience is permitted to applaud between works as appropriate, akin to normal performance conditions.

### *Competitor anonymity and number of judges*

The application recording is evaluated by three judges in strict anonymity, none of whom may be a current teacher of an applicant. Jurors in this round keep written documentation using a provided rubric; contestants are provided copies of judges' scores and/or comments after the competition concludes.

The semifinal round is evaluated by five judges, none of whom may have taught a competitor in the previous three years, and jurors are screened from viewing the competitors in this round. Competitors receive written juror comments—and are additionally afforded opportunity to converse and interact with the jury members—upon completion of the round.

The final round recital is evaluated by seven judges, none of whom served in a previous round. Two jurors in this round may be nonorganists (such as a music critic), all jurors view a competitor's performance along with the audience, and there are no restrictions regarding a judge's relationship to a competitor. In this final round, the paramount concern is to engage the most diverse and highly qualified jury possible—instead of needing to overlook many of our profession's most experienced listeners because s/he might have taught a competitor. With seven jurors, no single judge's vote has enough influence to unduly sway an outcome.

At the conclusion of the final round, the first-prize winner is determined by simple vote of the jury. The second and third prizes are subsequently determined by vote of the jury. Guidelines are given to the jury, but no point system and no rubric are provided for this round.

#### *Postcompetition AGO responsibilities*

The Guild establishes a Winners' Blog on its website. The first-prize winner will contribute to this blog, documenting his/her travels and professional activities.

The Guild will publish and promote all prizewinners' concerts through its social media mechanisms.

The Guild will provide, free of charge, a defined amount of THE AMERICAN ORGANIST and/or web advertising to all three prizewinners during the prize period.

The Guild will publish an article in THE AMERICAN ORGANIST, written by, or about, the first-prize winner in the year following his/her win.

## **NATIONAL COMPETITION IN ORGAN IMPROVISATION (NCOI)**

Organ improvisation has not, until recently, been a focus of concerted study in our country. Therefore, NCOI's timeline is expanding significantly. This expanded timeline allows increased opportunity for practice and preparation, exploration of specific improvisation concepts, and, ultimately, a deeper fluency in improvisation performance. Additionally, it allows for improvisation pedagogy and performance to become a regular and substantive part of regional convention programming.

NCOI aims to integrate the art of improvisation into the everyday language of professional organists, highlighting its inherent connection to the creation and performance of repertoire, and to its liturgical possibilities.

#### *Mission statement*

**The National Competition in Organ Improvisation seeks to further the art of improvisation by recognizing and rewarding superior performances in the field and by promoting improvisation pedagogy as an integral art of the consummate musician. A flourishing tradition of improvisation is fundamental to a truly vital musical culture.**

#### *Competition timeline*

To encourage pedagogical exploration and to allow time for acquiring fluency in techniques and styles, the timeline for NCOI expands. Rules and expectations are published roughly 24 months ahead of the final round; the application is due roughly 20 months ahead. Semifinals occur during one of the Guild's regional conventions, roughly twelve months ahead of the final round.

#### *Age of competitors*

Like the Guild's other contests, NCOI seeks to support developing artists; competitors are therefore now age 40 and younger. NCOI has a broader age range than NYACOP to accommodate those who first engage improvisation study and practice later in his/her development.

#### *Amount and type of repertoire per round*

The competition seeks to draw connections between the art of improvisation and (1) its historical connections to the development of repertoire; (2) its collaborative possibilities; and (3) its use in service-playing. Performance rounds therefore include not only improvisation, but also repertoire, continuo, and service-playing skills.

For instance, the preliminary round now includes repertoire of an improvisatory nature from the 17th or 18th century, such as a North German *Fantasia*; indeed, a strong improviser should also demonstrate skills as a thoughtful and accomplished interpreter of repertoire. Competitors are subsequently afforded opportunity to improvise in this style.

Each round includes significant improvisations for which formal structure is prescribed but stylistic characteristics are not. While a strong improviser will be conversant in a variety of historical styles, the best improvisations are undoubtedly influenced by a specific instrument and setting. The competitor is encouraged to improvise in the style s/he feels most appropriate to the setting and is judged on success of execution, not on choice of style. In the final round, a collaborative component with vocal or instrumental soloist is prescribed.

#### *Delivery of themes*

Rarely do truly great improvisations simply fall from the sky. Improvisation is instead a cultivated and rehearsed art form; the best improvisations form and marinate over seemingly long periods of time.

Therefore, while some competition components retain a 30-minute preparation allowance, as has been past practice, some components now allow multiple days' preparation. Competitors receive themes for these components three days in advance and are encouraged to live and work with them, though they are not allowed to bring any substantive material to the competition console.

Use of a keyboard is now allowed during this preparation period. Competitors may sketch a contrasting theme or blueprint for a form but may not compose specific, full harmonies during this time. All papers carried to the console are examined to ensure compliance.

#### *Audience expectations in live rounds*

At the semifinal round, the audience is expected to remain silent for the duration of a competitor's program and is invited to applaud at the conclusion of each competitor. During the final round, the audience is permitted to applaud between works as appropriate, akin to normal performance conditions.

#### *Competitor anonymity and number of judges*

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#### *Postcompetition AGO responsibilities*

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### **AGO/QUIMBY REGIONAL COMPETITIONS FOR YOUNG ORGANISTS (RCYO)**

The AGO/Quimby Regional Competitions represent a vibrant and suc-

cessful program of the Guild, supporting the youngest organists in their professional development.

The review committee recommended mostly administrative changes to this competition; some changes in repertoire were also made to better reflect the high level of proficiency displayed by many competitors.

#### *Mission statement*

**The purpose of these competitions is to encourage younger organists to pursue excellence, to gain performance experience, and to receive recognition for their achievements.**

#### *Regional Competition Coordinator*

A new regional office, the Regional Competition Coordinator, coordinates and advises organizers and participants in each region's competition process.

#### *Competition timeline*

The timeline now begins roughly 15 months before the final round, with the identification of each region's six chapter competition sites. Identifying chapters to host the competition at this stage helps to ensure geographic diversity and appropriate pacing of competition occurrences, while also affording a host chapter the opportunity to budget and appropriately plan its subsequent program year.

The chapters to host competitions are published with the official rules roughly twelve months ahead, allowing competitors the opportunity to better plan.

Competitor applications are due roughly eight months ahead, allowing chapter organizers more time to confirm plans and engage jurors.

Chapter competitions occur over a six-week window roughly five months ahead.

Regional competitions occur in conjunction with the regional conventions.

#### *Competition repertoire*

In the chapter round, competitors perform a major work of Bach, a prescribed American work of moderate difficulty, and a contrasting work of the competitor's choice. Additionally, a hymn is played in its entirety, and the assembly is encouraged to sing. Maximum total time is 40 minutes.

In the regional round, competitors retain the three repertoire selections from the chapter round and additionally include a fourth repertoire selection. In choosing this work, the competitor should keep in mind the balance of the program. The competitor also chooses and performs a different hymn, but in similar fashion, to the chapter round. Maximum total time is 50 minutes.

#### *Postcompetition responsibilities*

Chapters throughout a winner's region are encouraged to present the regional winner in recital.

The region's subsequent Pipe Organ Encounter is encouraged to include the regional winner in its programming or activities, as appropriate to the winner's age and experience.

Chapters throughout the region are encouraged to profile or interview the winner for their newsletters and other communications, involving him/her in chapter programming when appropriate.

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**Christian Lane**, winner of the 2011 Canadian International Organ Competition and Laureate in many other contests, is associate university organist and choirmaster at Harvard University. He serves as National Councillor for Competitions and New Music and may be reached at christian.lane@mac.com.