

AGO Task Force on Gender Equity

AN INTRODUCTION



By Nancy Cooper

More than five years ago, in the April 2015 issue of TAO, the results of a national AGO membership survey conducted in October 2014 were published. One of the results of that survey follows:

Member Birth Decade	% Male	% Female
1920s	54	46
1930s	47	53
1940s	53	47
1950s	59	41
1960s	69	31
1970s	74	26
1980s	74	26
1990s	72	28

A 2019 survey of the membership showed that these statistics have remained near constant, with men making up almost three-quarters of the youngest members. Those of you who read TAO regularly know that the membership of the organization has been dropping, and the projection included in the October 2014 survey was that membership would drop to 12,000 members in 2024, 8,700 in 2034, and 6,900 in 2044.

As part of the April 2015 TAO article, a paragraph focusing on the above chart, titled “Gender,” had this to say: “Overall, Guild membership is 60% male and 40% female, varying significantly from the U.S. population as a whole, which is 51% female and 49% male. It is interesting and counterintuitive that the gender imbalance is most pronounced among the younger members.”

Imagine a young woman paging through TAO, wondering about how women are represented in our organization as a whole? What might she infer from what she sees? Would she find role models in our workshops, our recital series, our large metropolitan church jobs, and our collegiate organ programs, or would she conclude that all these are still dominated by men? And based on this contemplation, would she be likely to attend a chapter meeting if given an invitation?

I am near retirement and have no fear of retaliation, but so many women in our field are reluctant to bring up their concerns for fear that they will be denied jobs or performance venues. In my opinion, this is sad, and shameful.

Either we want our organization to succeed, or we don't. Staying on the path we're on, with the numbers dropping below 7,000 in 20 years, will lead to women becoming even more marginalized than we are now.

In an effort to fight this trend, the AGO Executive Committee in June unanimously approved the creation of a new Task Force on Gender Equity. The current draft of its mission statement is as follows:

***To advocate for women organists;
To bring more women into the Guild;
In particular, to attract a new generation of young women organists;
To build equal representation of women in the Guild at all levels.***

The task force was to be launched at the 2020 AGO National Convention in Atlanta, with a workshop on gender equity. After the cancellation of the convention, we are now setting our sights on virtual opportunities for building awareness. To that end, the task force will begin with the following steps:

- regular articles in TAO, speaking to a variety of gender equity issues;
- the creation of a gender equity page on the AGO's website (AGOHq.org/task-force-gender-equity) for the sharing of resources and information of all kinds; and
- the gathering of contact information from interested women, in order to build a stronger advocacy group.

All interested women are invited to respond to Elizabeth George, AGO director of member engagement and chapter development (elizabeth.george@agohq.org). The more, the merrier! Don't wait—write *now*!

As we get our task force off the ground, I encourage all of you to begin to look at your local chapter, your local large church with a recital series, your local college or university that offers organ study, and consider their programming. If the number of women being featured is negligible, speak out in favor of a more equitable roster. Host a virtual open house for teenage girls who are studying piano. Contact your local college or university and volunteer to mentor a young woman undergraduate. Mentor a woman pianist at your church. At every turn in the road, make an effort to help women feel valued, welcomed, and appreciated, and their talents acknowledged.

Lastly, here is a resource you might like to visit: the Society of Women Organists, at SocietyOfWomenOrganists.co.uk. Sarah MacDonald, who covers liturgical music in the U.K. for TAO, has devoted three of her "UK Report" columns to liturgical choral music by women. Her three-part series (June–August) will be among the many abovementioned resources to be included on the new gender equity page of the AGO's website.

The founding members of the task force, which will soon be growing by leaps and bounds, are Eileen Hunt, AAGO, codirector; Vicki Schaeffer, codirector; Nancy Cooper, CAGO; and Elizabeth George, staff liaison and director of member engagement and chapter development. Contact us through the link on the AGO website.

This task force can make important changes within the AGO, as well as to the future of generations of women organists, but not without your help. "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Take that step and join with us today.

Nancy Cooper holds a DMA degree, a performer's certificate, and an artist's diploma from the Eastman School of Music. She has a magnet on her refrigerator, given to her for Mother's Day by her daughter Beth, that says, "Carry yourself with the confidence of a mediocre white man." She tries to do that, every single day.