

# OUR OWN WORST ENEMIES

I got my act together and took it on the road. That is to say, instead of just writing about professional concerns, I recently accepted several speaking engagements on this subject. What interests me most about such occasions is the question period. This is so, not only because I then get some reaction to what I said, or because of the pleasures of conversation, but also because, in response to questions, I often find myself saying things I might not otherwise have thought of.

That sort of thing happened recently. An organist complained at length and, in my opinion, not altogether reasonably, about her clergyman and parish council. Out of what I readily grant was mild annoyance I said, "But madame, you choose to work for these people."

Well, she does, doesn't she? Nowhere is it written that she must work for this church—or for any church, for that matter. That is why I think my response to her, while less than polite, was fundamentally just: *we church musicians are our own worst enemies.*

In the May, 1982, Professional Concerns Column, I suggested that we often do ourselves in by poor musicianship or by failure to take account of the societal context of our music-making. I found in the July issue that President Hansen warmly commended my remarks, ranking me with such luminaries as Beethoven and Pogo. But quite seriously—and honestly, now—what does your tape recorder tell you about your music? *Should* anyone want to pay for that? Do you esteem it enough yourself properly to present, or "stage" it?

But there are other, grave ways in which you can be your own worst enemy, and the rest of this column will deal with them—in the manner of a good old-fashioned religious examination of conscience.

In the first place, turn back, if possible to the September Professional Concerns Column. There we offered a "Professional Concerns Reading List." Let each of the headings given there be for you a probing question. If you are not compensated adequately, can you honestly say that it is *in spite of* your having tried the things our thoughtful column-writers have suggested? Did you, for example, come well prepared, with parish financial statement, "AGO Redbook" computation of hours, and governmental cost-of-living figures, to a parish meeting—with the right people, at the right time? Have you thought out your personal priorities: do you even *know* whether you are *primarily* a volunteer or a paid resource-person? In your conversations with your church or synagogue, have you tried to link your wishes with their long-range development plans, bearing in mind that in many cases only increased membership can bring in the dollars you want? Do you have an adult, psychologically untrammelled understanding of religion, or do you still regard all representatives of organized religion with the tongue-tied awe of a Sunday-schooler? Hardest of all, have you the courage to say to a

religious employer, "You are unjust and dishonest," and then, if necessary, quit? Yes, these questions are rough. So is not having enough money.

This is not, it is true, one of our nicer columns. Permit me to suggest that the reader who would like to stop at this point is the one who should keep reading. It is possible to rephrase the questions given above, which are stated in individual terms, in terms of the profession as a whole.

In the second place, then, are you acting in such a way as to make things harder for *other* church musicians? Can mean-spirited employers point to *you*, or to *what you condone*, as a model, as an excuse, for paying *someone else* less? Is your situation an ingredient in the formation of *public opinion* on church music, in the sense that church music is not to be paid for? We can make this more precise, uncomfortably so.

Either you are or are not a volunteer. By *volunteer*, in this article, I mean anyone who to any extent *contributes* professional services. Contributing professional services means, here, doing them for less money than the Redbook or one's chapter recommendations suggest. *Now, what justifies being a volunteer, or contributor?* I can think of three reasons—only three. Here they are:

a) *You work for a congregation that truly cannot pay you.* You know because you have seen their financial statement, or at least because you consider them trustwor-

thy and accept their plea of poverty. (You may, of course, receive from them some monetary token of appreciation; the point here is that it is less than the amount suggested.) Pleas of poverty are much more credible when they are in writing: your employer should have the decency to send you thank-you letters periodically, wherein his inability to compensate you is clearly stated. This simple practice marvelously aids inter-personal relations. Also, this is the one situation where you might consider *not* having a contract: mandated volunteer service makes no sense. You should certainly have the freedom to march out the door forthwith *when they cease to meet your expectations.* Tell them you will give at the office.

b) *You work for a congregation that expects to be able to pay you properly after a reasonable lapse of time.* And you are going to help their picture brighten; you are part of a deliberate and prayerful plan. I say they're lucky to have you around!

c) *You work for a congregation as part of your freely given service to the Lord.* You're OK, too—except, as I'm sure you will agree, we must be on our guard against the devil masquerading as an angel of light. Your enterprise would be much more credible if your congregation first paid you top dollar and then you gave all or some of it back. You *would* make that donation, wouldn't you? You should also consider seriously that you will not be the musician for that congregation forever. Maybe next time around the congregation will not have someone like you, and will have to go out and hire someone. Your being paid in full will help them to budget responsibly, and will help that next person.

I said I can think of only three reasons for accepting less money than you should. I just gave them. *If none of these three reasons covers your situation, and you are accepting less, then you, sir or madame, you individually and personally are betraying your colleagues. You are your own—our own—worst enemy.* To be sure, if you accept a position where the previous incumbent was treated poorly you are doubly a transgressor.

And that, as old-fashioned Baptist preachers used to say, that is my message and burden this month. One final thought, however, does come to mind.

Out on the preaching circuit, in those question periods, it became quite clear to me that often it is we musicians who have to educate our employers in correct *procedure*. This is particularly true in the area of performance-review and compensation-review. We have to school them in how to set reasonable objectives for us, assess our performance and determine reasonable rewards for it. Up to this point the AGO at the national level has limited itself to laying down *principles* of compensation, not, as have some chapters, specific dollar figures for specific modes of employment. Here it must be emphasized that the AGO is an educational institution and is legally precluded from acting as if it were a union. If, however, to help in "educating" your employer, you would like the AGO at the national or regional level to make more specific recommendations, that is, *to the extent that it legally can*, you should make your views known. The best way to do this would be to write to your regional professional concerns coordinator. Your chapter dean or "PC" resource-person can tell you to whom to write.

In Victorian England, congregations that could afford an organ but not an organist often purchased a revolving-barrel player-mechanism, into which a few hymns were "pegged." This device was often called—I kid you not—a "dumb organist." Act now, before more people find out about this.