

PART-TIME/VOLUNTEER/AMATEUR CHURCH MUSICIANS

Since its beginning, the Professional Concerns Committee has dealt chiefly with the full-time professional church musician. There is no question but that this has been the correct course, for unless the very best in our field receive their due, there is little hope for anyone else. Now, however, that the principles for determining the conditions and compensation of the full-time professional have been set forth and have received a wide measure of acceptance, it may be time to take a closer look at those musicians who are variously described as part-time, volunteer or amateur. This very numerous group of musicians deserves attention, not only out of a simple concern for equity, but because they are the core of the public for and among whom the full-time professionals work.

In this and later articles, then, I will address the situation of the part-time, or volunteer, or amateur church musician. First, though, I want to suggest some clarification of terms—in the hope that the distinctions made here will continue to be used by others. Webster's gives, for our purpose, two definitions of a *professional*: 1) one whose work "conforms to the standards of a profession"; and 2) one who "engages for livelihood or gain in an activity pursued, usually or often, for non-commercial satisfactions by amateurs." What, then, is an *amateur*? Again two definitions are given: "one who cultivates a particular . . . study from taste, without pursuing it professionally; also, a dabbler." What distinguishes the professional from the amateur seems to be *both*, or *either*, financial intent *and/or* proficiency. The term *part-time*, unfortunately, is unrelated to both financial intent and proficiency. The term *volunteer* is also of doubtful value here, because its distinctive note, "without valuable consideration," seems to exclude the religious or aesthetic satisfactions of church music, as well as because almost all church musicians receive at least *some* financial reward for their efforts.

The best way out of the verbal thicket, I believe, is to stay with the terms *profes-*

sional and *amateur*, qualifying them with other terms to specify which of their meanings is intended. As the appropriate qualifying terms I suggest *earnings* and *level*. By *earnings* I mean *only* dollar earnings. By *level* I mean *current* level of proficiency. As will be apparent, it is fairly easy to speak of those who are pure types, that is, either professional or amateur in both earnings and level. Difficulties arise in the mixed cases, that is, where an individual is professional in one sense and amateur in another. Perhaps some imaginary case histories will be helpful.

J. Willis Trumpett is organist and choir-master at St. Wilfrid's Cathedral in a sun belt city. He and his employer have a good relationship, and he is paid according to the AGO guidelines in *The Compensation of the Church and Synagogue Musician*. He holds a master of music degree from a well-regarded conservatory. His performances, while not always exciting, are invariably competent, and well received. Mr. Trumpett is clearly a professional in both earnings and level.

And then there is Hastings Bourdon. Mr. Bourdon's musical background consists of what he has gleaned from much reading, record-listening and concert-going, and from some piano and harpsichord lessons he took during his college years. He likes the sound of the organ, the bigger the better. Occasionally he receives an organist's fee of between twenty-five and a hundred dollars, but he does not depend for his livelihood on receiving these sums. When he practices, he can play voluntaries at the level of *The Church Organist* or *The Organist's Companion*. When he does not practice, we try to pretend he is not *our* companion. Evidently Mr. Bourdon is an amateur in both earnings and level. It is extremely unlikely, I might add, that Mr. Bourdon could get, or at least long hold, a professional-earnings position.

I did say, however, that it is among the mixed cases that we encounter problems, and very serious indeed is the case of Celeste Gamba. Ms. Gamba is organist and choirmaster of St. Peter's Church in

an older northeastern city. She holds a baccalaureate in music education, and she is an AAGO. For the last twenty years she has held a combination position at St. Peter's, doing the church work but also teaching music in the parish school. Now here is the rub: after working through the AGO's compensation materials Ms. Gamba was made painfully aware that her church work, considered apart from her school work, is almost a full-time job by itself; what results is that the *hourly* return for her church work is below even that of unskilled labor in her area. When she pointed this out to her pastor, he replied that the parish is financially sound *because* its funds have been "invested" in programs other than music, and that, besides, her kind of position was meant for a married woman, who would be "freed" by her husband's income to work for the church. Miss Gamba was deeply hurt, but she can see no remedy; she cannot sue her own church, and she would not if she could. Here—and it is a glaring inequity—we have professional level with what can quite plausibly be called amateur earnings.

Another mixed case is that of Rolf Zimbelstern. Mr. Zimbelstern is music director at Holy Trinity, a country church in a north central state. He majored in organ at the state university, and now he runs a music store and conducts the district high school band. He puts in about twelve hours a week at Holy Trinity; and although he would gladly do more, his church, though fervent, is so small there is simply no more to be done. It should be stressed that Mr. Zimbelstern is a good organist and an inspiring conductor of his amateur choir; in another scenario he might have made quite a name for himself, but he preferred to live, and raise his family, in the area where the Zimbelsterns have lived for a century. Here again we have a situation of professional level but amateur earnings—only with this enormous difference, that by AGO guidelines Mr. Zimbelstern is properly paid for what in fact he does.

The plot thickens, you see. Consider, finally, the case of Germaine Regal. She is a practicing attorney, having become a partner in her father's firm of Regal & Wrangle. Church music is her *hobby*: "Daddy played the horses," she chuckles; "I play the organ."

Another amateur like Mr. Bourdon? Not on your life! Ms. Regal's growing up was surrounded with every advantage a prosperous family, private schools and a fine women's college could provide. Among the advantages were singing in excellent choruses and, above all, first-class individual instruction in theory, piano and, when she asked Daddy for it, organ, too. Over the years, regular disciplined practice has become integral to her life-style, a habit that is mightily reinforced by her professional *attitude* toward all that she does. She is the organist of Central Methodist, a west coast inner-city landmark with a fine 1890s organ—they are restoring it—but few financially well-off

parishioners. Ms. Regal performs well at the AAGO test-piece level—and unlike anyone mentioned thus far, including the redoubtable Mr. Trumpett, she is a gifted improviser.

In return for her services Ms. Regal is paid \$2,500 yearly, which, by the way, goes right off the top of her income to the IRS. She calls the \$2,500 her “retainer,” and calls the availability of a fine organ, precious to her, her “constructive income.” In sum, here again we have the professional-amateur mix, but again with significant differences. Ms. Regal is a professional-level musician, even though she is not a full-time musician. Her earnings are amateur, but it should be grasped that her church could not possibly hire her or anyone of comparable proficiency. When the parish budget committee compared what they pay her with the AAGO guidelines, it dawned on them that she is the largest single donor to their church. They treat her *very* courteously.

Thus far the stories. Once the varieties of affiliation with a religious body are laid out, certain things become clearer, and my object in making this presentation is to suggest that the AAGO's discussion of conditions and compensation be more nuanced than it has been to date. To be sure, Mr. Trumpett, above, is professional in level and earnings, and the AAGO must use its moral influence in supporting him. On the other hand, the AAGO would have difficulty in sticking up for Mr. Bourdon, except to encourage him to adopt a more stable, effective interest in being a decent musician.

Among what I have called the mixed cases, Ms. Gamba has a grave need of the AAGO's moral influence. Whereas for Mr. Trumpett the AAGO need only bless what is already done; for Ms. Gamba it must call for what is not but *should* be done. (How to go about this without getting Ms. Gamba fired will hopefully be the subject of a later article.) From Mr. Zimbelstern and Ms. Regal, on the other hand, the AAGO has something to learn. It must never be lost sight of that Zimbelstern and Regal are professional-caliber musicians, even though, for wholly sensible personal reasons, they are not full-time musicians. That they make music in churches with restricted financial bases takes nothing

from their professionalism; they are not taking anyone's job and are not lowering regional compensation standards. The J. Willis Trumpetts of the organ world should not treat them as misguided poor relations.

I should stress, in conclusion, that the ideas offered here are merely my own, and should not be taken as those of the Committee for Professional Concerns or the AAGO generally. Readers are warmly invited to write in their opinions.

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