AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS CENTENNIAL

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO: THE FOUNDING OF THE AGO

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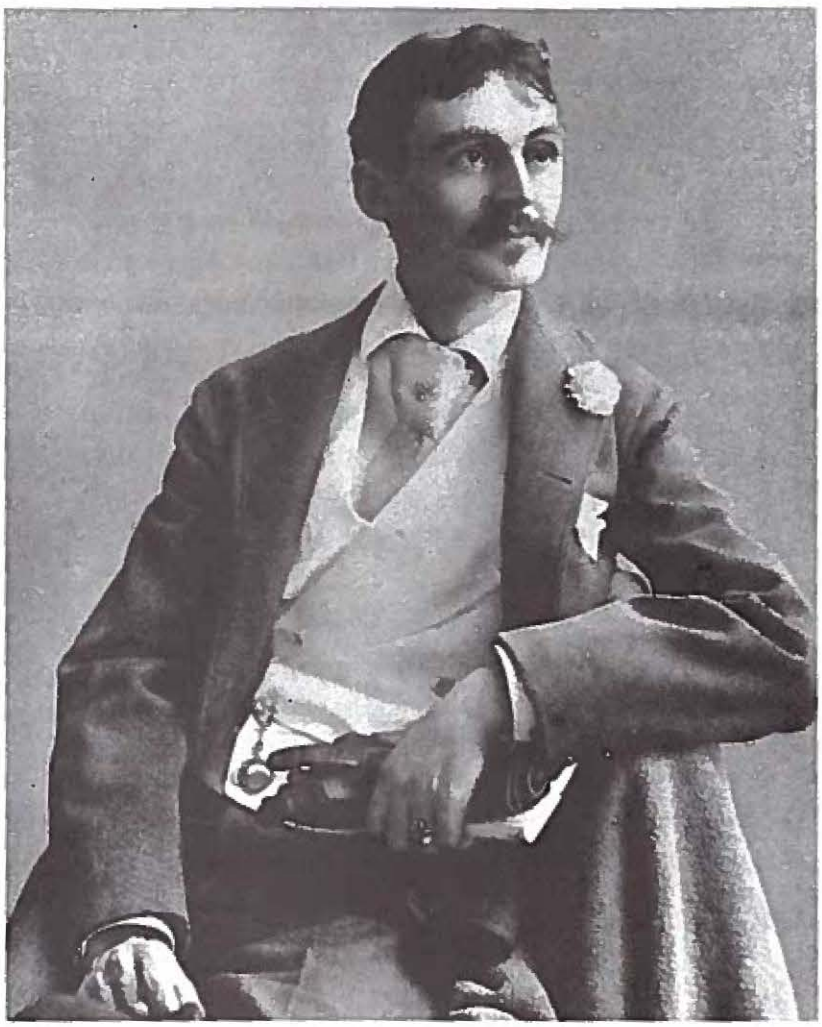
The Roman God Janus—for whom our month of January is named—is depicted as having two faces, one looking back, the other looking forward. Nowhere are the symbolic two faces of Janus more in evidence than at the end of a century. We look back and try to chronicle (and make sense of) what has gone before. But we also look forward to the next century as to a blank new page, trying to visualize and idealize the good things we want to write on it.

A new century was within sight in 1896. Thomas Edison's inventions of scarcely a decade previous were beginning to show promise of revolutionizing communications and industry. Railroads spanned continents, speeding the travel of people and goods, but in the 1880s, Karl Benz had invented the internal combustion engine, and during the 1890s, Henry Ford and others were patenting new methods of applying it to "horseless carriages." Barely a decade later, the Wright brothers would successfully adapt the engine to a flying machine.

The 1890s were peaceful—deceptively so. The aging Queen Victoria still sat on the throne of Great Britain, but her grandson, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was beginning to implement dreams of empire in a recently unified Germany, and the writings of Karl Marx were stirring revolutionary thoughts among the disadvantaged of Russia. Grover Cleveland was President of the United States, struggling with reasonable success to keep the country on a secure financial basis following the Panic of 1893.

In the music world, Franck and Tchaikovsky had recently died, and in 1896, Brahms sat at his piano in a sanatorium in Ischl, penning his unique dying gift to organists, the Eleven Chorale Preludes. In the same year, Edward MacDowell was appointed to the first professorship of music at Columbia University. The French organ virtuoso Alexandre Guilmant was making his first concert tours of the United States in the mid-1890s, playing to sold-out audiences and introducing public and organists alike to the music of the French Romantic school. In Paris, young Albert Schweitzer was taking organ lessons from Widor, and across the channel in England, another youthful musician, Arnold Dolmetsch, was startling audiences with performances of Renaissance and Baroque music.

Among organbuilders, Cavaillé-Coll and "Father" Willis were in the final years of their long lives, and the American firms of Johnson and Jardine were about to close their doors. Among the younger generation, there was considerable interest in the inventions of Mr. Edison. In 1896, Robert Hope-Jones began manufacturing electric-action organs in England, and in the same year, young Ernest Skinner, having developed an early version of the pitman chest, was appointed factory superintendent at the Hutchings firm in Boston. Two years later, another innovative pioneer in electric-action design, John T. Austin, opened a factory in Hartford, Connecticut. Organists observed these developments with keen interest, if not always unanimity of opinion.



GERRIT SMITH
1859–1912
WHOSE VISION AND INITIATIVE
MADE POSSIBLE THE FOUNDING OF
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Professionalism among organists had come a long way during the second half of the 19th century. Until the 1850s, the typical organist in the United States was either an amateur or a musical jack-of-all-trades. It is true that a number earned their living solely from musical pursuits, but these were likely to include running a private music school, directing civic or school choruses, acting as concert impresarios, and writing, publishing, and selling music—most of it secular. Playing the organ was often just one more sideline to these musicians. One notable exception was English-trained Edward Hodges, organist and choirmaster at New York's Trinity Church, who in the 1840s began paving the way for future full-time church musicians.

The picture began to change during the 1850s, when a number of young American musicians, including Dudley Buck and John Knowles Paine, began to go abroad to study. In Germany, France, and England, they met (and often studied with) respected organists who held important church and teaching posts. They also discovered organ recitals—not the pastiches of oratorio transcriptions, vocal solos, and clumsy improvisations they had known at home, but real concerts during which music by past masters such as Bach, Mendelssohn, and Rinck was heard, along with that of contemporary composers such

as Lemmens, Thiele, and Lefébure-Wély, and well-crafted (if often flamboyant) virtuoso improvisations. They were also encouraged by their teachers to compose substantial organ pieces themselves.

Successive waves of American musicians, most of them proficient on the organ, followed suit in the 1860s and 1870s. Their ranks included W. Eugene Thayer, Clarence Eddy, George W. Chadwick, George E. Whiting, and Horatio Parker; their teachers included Rheinberger, Haupt, Reinecke, Schneider, Best, and other noted European organists and composers of the period. Like their mentors, these musicians saw themselves as mainstream composers who (like Bach and Franck) happened to play the organ.

The introduction of substantial secular concert-hall organs, beginning with Boston in 1863, gave these musicians a bully pulpit to proclaim to audiences at large that organ music, whether written by Bach or by themselves, was interesting and even exciting. Because the audience's knowledge of "legitimate" organ literature was not great, programs included transcriptions of popular classics (usually operatic overtures, since opera was the current rage) as well as sets of variations or improvisations on familiar hymns and songs. Organists may never have achieved the "superstar" status of operatic divas in this period, but the best of them did, for a time, achieve wide popularity with concert audiences, who flocked to hear them play.

The organists who played in the concert halls also held church positions, the most notable of them in large churches in metropolitan areas such as Boston, New York, and Chicago. Some also taught in the conservatories that were springing up everywhere during the 1860s and 1870s. As a result, while some organists still traveled abroad to study with teachers such as Best and Guilmant, the generation of organists active in the 1890s included such notables as Arthur Foote, Henry M. Dunham, and Harry Rowe Shelley, whose training in music occurred wholly on American soil.

It is interesting to note that American organists and organ composers of the late 19th century first achieved professional distinction as recitalists. But this rather quickly rubbed off onto the church music scene, where many were also active. It was not long before churches began to vie for the services of popular organists, offering attractive salaries. And those whose earliest compositional efforts had been recital pieces soon began to write anthems, sacred solos, easier organ pieces, and method books. Indeed, Dudley Buck became so successful in the acceptance of his compositions that he eventually retired from his concert career to devote most of his time to church work and the composition of both sacred and secular music.

By the 1890s, the United States could boast a fair number of professionally successful organists who were earning a good living from large churches, teaching, recital work, and royalties on their compositions—a far cry from the professional status of organists 50 years previous.

In 1876, the Music Teachers' National Association had been founded, and many organists were active in it. The MTNA was the first truly professional music organization in the United States, and its members came from all musical disciplines. Over a decade earlier, in 1864, British organists had founded the Royal College of Organists, possibly the first organization to address the advancement and training of a specific segment of music professionals.

The RCO was celebrating its 20th anniversary in 1894 when Gerrit Smith, organist of the South Dutch Reformed Church in New York City, spent a summer in England. He came in contact with organists there, and became extremely interested in the RCO and its work, collecting information on the organization to share with his colleagues upon his return. Among these were Charles T. Ives, Henry G. Hanchett, and John Hyatt Brewer. Smith also shared with them the germ of an idea: Was it not perhaps time for American organists to form their own national organization—one that could educate, give examinations, promote church music, and advance the collective cause of its members? A few small local organists' clubs already existed in places such as Philadelphia, but their orientation was more social than educational, and they had little influence. Smith's vision was national in scope, and encompassed a great deal more than occasional organ recitals and high teas.

It would appear that Smith's colleagues supported the concept from the outset. It is interesting to note that at this time programs of specific interest to organists were being incorporated into the conferences of the MTNA, and this may well have strengthened the conviction of the members involved that the time was ripe for an organization that addressed their own unique professional needs.

In January of 1896, a notice was placed in a periodical called *The Pianist*, inviting clergy and organists to attend a meeting on February 3, 1896, in the chapel of the South Dutch Reformed Church, New York City, "to consider the advisability of forming an American Guild of Organists." The notice was signed by 20 organists and 14 clergymen. "Forty prominent organists of this city [New York] and Brooklyn" attended, according to an account in the *New York Tribune* for February 4, 1896. These musicians endorsed the concept of a professional organists' group, called a follow-up meeting for February 14, and began the business of organizing a "guild to advance the cause of church music, to elevate the status of church organists, to obtain acknowledgment of their position from the authorities of the church, and to increase the responsibilities and duties of organists." Professional concerns seem to have been there right from the beginning.

On April 13, another meeting was called at Calvary Church in New York. This was attended by 33 church musicians, and the extent of their interest in Smith's proposal is shown by the fact that while many were from the New York area, others came from as far away as Boston, New Haven, Philadelphia, and Chicago. It is obvious that Smith and his colleagues had not been idle, for at this meeting the American Guild of Organists was formally organized.

Officers and a council were elected, and a constitution—doubtless drawn up in advance by Smith and his friends—was adopted. Gerrit Smith was elected the first Warden, for the term 1896–99, and Dudley Buck was appointed Honorary President for the same term. The Honorary Presidency was discontinued in 1912, but the title of "Warden" for the chief elected officer persisted until fairly recent times. Other founding officers were Charles H. Morse, sub-warden; Henry G. Hanchett, secretary; Walter John Hall, treasurer; Will C. Macfarlane, registrar; Sumner Salter, librarian; and John Spencer Camp and Frank Taft, auditors.

The educational emphasis of the new organization was immediately apparent, for one of its first acts was to file an application for a charter to the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York. This charter, authorizing the AGO to conduct examinations and grant certificates, was granted on December 13, 1896. From start to finish, the organization and accreditation of the AGO had taken scarcely eleven months, although one can be sure that these were very intense and active months for the founding group.

As far as can be determined, the first public activity of the AGO was a service held on November 24, 1896, at St. Bartholomew's Church in New York. Regular public organ recitals were shortly to follow, but the public services, held in churches of various denominations and showcasing the choirs directed by the members, were a frequent occurrence for many years. They were held several times during the year; by December 9, 1897, they already numbered four, and by the 1920s they had passed the hundred mark.

Perhaps the first dilemma faced by the new organization was how to define its Founders. The 33 who had attended the meeting in April of 1896 were designated as "Founders in Fact." By December of that year, the number of members had grown to 112. Were the additional members also Founders? And some were apparently disturbed that certain of the country's most distinguished organists had not yet joined, so it was decided to do some further recruiting and close the founding membership on December 31, 1896. This must have entailed a bit of rather frenzied activity, for as of that date the membership stood at 145, and the list of Founders—those officially entitled to place the initials "AGO" after their names—was finally closed. Many noted organists joined the Guild during the final years of the 19th century, some very quickly being elected to offices in the organization. But they were not Founders!

Other categories of membership specified in the original constitution included Fellows and Associates, both to be admitted only through examinations or by transfer from the Royal College of Organists. Subscribers were non-voting members whose privileges were limited to tickets of admission to the public meetings and services. Honorary Associates were "clergymen and other such persons, not musicians, as shall have distinguished themselves . . . by conspicuous services in the advancement of church music." Honorary Members consisted of "distinguished foreign organists and musicians." Members of the "honorary" categories were appointed and had no vote.

Within the first few years of the founding, another problem arose. The 145 Founders were undoubtedly members, but none (save for five FRCOs) had taken or passed any examination. The first AAGO examination was held on October 15, 1896; it was taken by three people (none of them Founders), and two—Frank W. Chase and A.A. Sponder—passed. Twelve more new Associates were

admitted by examination in 1898, but although the first Fellowship examination had been given on June 22, 1897, there were still no new Fellows. Only one candidate appears to have taken this examination, and he had flunked. R. Huntington Woodman, who became Warden in 1901, finally succeeded in whipping up some interest in the Fellowship examination by bravely offering to take it himself. Five other Founders followed his example, along with six other organists. The examination was given in May of 1903, and five of each group passed, including Woodman—but we are not told which of the Founders failed! One other Founder passed the following year, but the remainder were apparently content to rest on their laurels, and all future Fellows came from outside the Founders' circle, including the first woman Fellow, Gertrude Elizabeth McKellar, who passed the examination in 1904.

Two other Guild features of long standing come from the first few years of its existence. The first competition of any kind dates from October of 1896, when Walter J. Clemson, one of the Founders, proposed offering a gold medal as an annual prize for "the best anthem by a member of the Guild." A contest was duly announced, and in 1897, Will C. Macfarlane became the first recipient of the Clemson medal for his anthem, "Happy Is the Man That Findeth Wisdom," which was published by H.W. Gray.

Recognizing that the fledgling organization already had members living a considerable distance from New York, Sumner Salter, at the first regular council meeting held on May 4, 1896, proposed that members in the Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago areas be authorized "to form branches for the furtherance of the interests of the Guild in those localities." These "branches" were to be the first chapters, but it was not until 1901 that the first of them was formed in Philadelphia, and called the Pennsylvania Chapter. This, like the Fellowship examinations, was due to the involvement of Warden Woodman. The second chapter, then called the New England Chapter, was not formed until 1905. Although centered in Boston, its membership was drawn from all of New England with the exception of Connecticut, which remained in the New York circle—at that time not regarded as a chapter.

Thus by the first decade of the 20th century, virtually all of the essential building blocks of the present-day AGO had been cemented firmly in place: structure, accreditation, the examinations and certificates (with the exception of the ChM and CAGO), competitions (although playing competitions are of a later date), and chapters. Some changes in the political structure have occurred over the years, often, as with the appointment of an Executive Director, in response to growth. Membership is now open to all organists, regardless of whether or not they have passed an examination. Chapters have proliferated, probably beyond the wildest dreams of the Founders. Although all chapters sponsor recitals and many hold special services, the "official" public services, originally intended to elevate taste in sacred music, faded away around the time of World War II in the Boston area, and had probably been discontinued earlier in other chapters.

Still, the Guild remains guided by the basic ideals of its founders. It is still committed to professional recognition and education; it still does all in its power to advance the cause of quality church music and good working conditions for its members. Perhaps emphases have shifted with the times, and the present-day membership is more varied in its background, but the basic philosophy holds true. And should a time-machine suddenly pick up Gerrit Smith and set him down in the midst of our 1996 Centennial Convention, one likes to think that even though he might be surprised at the proportion of women and minorities, and possibly appalled at seeing so many people so casually dressed, he would nonetheless twirl his impressive moustache, sit down, and find congeniality in the music making and company of this latter-day multitude of colleagues.

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See also documents reprinted in THE AMERICAN ORGANIST in 1995.

AN AGO FOUNDERS TRIVIA QUIZ
(find the answers in the next issue)

How many Founders were born in England, and who were they?

Which Founders were born in Germany, Austria, France, and Italy?

Which Founder was a Canadian citizen?

How many Founders did not survive the AGO's first year?

How many Founders were still living at the 50th Anniversary in 1946?

How many Founders won the Clemson medal for anthem composition?

How many Founders were choirboys at Trinity Church in New York?

How many Founders were women, and who were they?

Which two Founders were father and son?

Which two Founders were blind?

Which two Founders were son and grandson of organbuilders?

Which Founder was an executive in the Aeolian Company?

Which Founder was a homeopathic physician?

Which Founder committed suicide?

Which Founder was the first professor of music at Harvard?

Which Founder also founded a school for organists?

Which Founder became municipal organist of Portland, Maine?

Which Founder was a violinist in the New York Philharmonic?

Which Founder was editor of *The Pianist and Organist*?

Which Founder was mayor of a California city?

Which Founder composed a famous Benediction?

Which Founder wrote a book on New England psalmody?

Which Founder wrote a piece made famous by Virgil Fox?

Which Founder submitted a theme for Dupré's *Symphonie-Passion*?