

AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS CENTENNIAL

THE GUILD GROWS

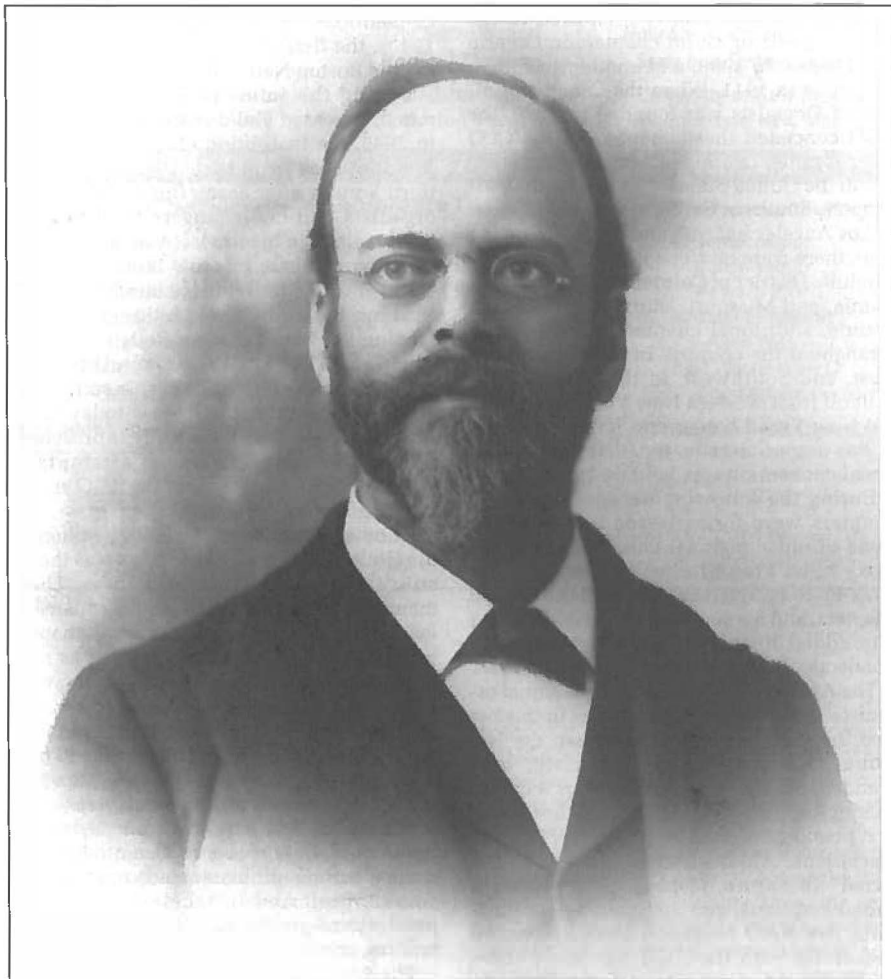
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Growth of the Guild was slow in the early years, doubtless because of the examination requirements. A year after its founding, the membership stood at 240, but this included the honorary members, most of whom were clergymen or notable European organists. In 1901, a recommendation was made to institute another examination "of only moderate difficulty," to attract more "rank-and-file" organists to membership, but this was rejected. A similar proposal, but omitting entirely any examination, was made a few years later, in 1906, by Founder R. Huntington Woodman, a strong proponent of expansion who also encouraged the formation of chapters. This time the proposal was accepted, and the constitution was amended to include, along with the Founders, Fellows, and Associates, a category of "Members," described as "organists of recognized standing." These were to be proposed by two active members and elected or approved by the council or chapter executive committee.

From the very outset, the Guild was active in the promotion of good church music and the encouragement of talented organists. Public services (really "model" services) were held for many years in all areas where the AGO had active members (primarily larger cities), showcasing the best choirs and organists, and often featuring music composed by Guild members. Public recitals were soon added, and it is said that the only requirement for these was that the performer play at least one large work by Bach. Because the Founders took the academic part of their mandate seriously, an official hood and gown was adopted in 1905. Also in 1905, a committee met to discuss and draw up standards for console dimensions, although the actual implementation of this did not occur until later.

The earliest competitions were all in the area of composition. In the very first year, Founder Walter J. Clemson of Taunton, Massachusetts, established a competition for the best anthem by an AGO member, for which he awarded a gold medal. This competition lasted for several years, and after the first few years, the publishing house of H.W. Gray added a cash prize of \$50. This was increased to \$100 after 1920, when the gold medal was discontinued. The closest thing to a performance prize in the early years was \$100 awarded by George Foster Peabody to the Fellowship candidate with the highest marks. This was awarded only for a few years following 1905.

From its very beginning, the AGO maintained a connection with a professional publication. For the first three years this was *The Pianist and Organist*, but for the next two years the Guild published its own *Bulletin*. In 1901, the H.W. Gray Co., emerging as a major publisher of church music, established *The Church Music Review*, and this became the official AGO magazine until 1918, when the Guild published its own magazine, *The American Organist*. The Guild sold this journal to its first editor, T. Scott Buhrman, in 1920 and returned to the Gray publication (renamed *The New Music Review*).



Dr. Henry Granger Hanchett
1853–1918
A Founder and First Secretary

The most important incentive to growth in the early years was the formation of chapters. Although Guild events had occasionally been held outside of New York City in the early years, chapters in other regions made it possible to have more of these, and to attract more members in a given area. The first of the chapters, established in 1902, was the Pennsylvania Chapter, ostensibly including the whole state, but for practical purposes headquartered in Philadelphia. Several Founders were already located in this area, and an already existing Organ Players' Club provided a ready pool of other prominent organists in the city.

The next chapter was not organized until 1905. Scattered throughout Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Maine were 26 members of the Guild. These were the founders of the New England Chapter (there were several members in Connecticut also, but they remained in the orbit of the New York headquarters). Before long, virtually all the prominent organists of the Boston area had joined the AGO, but there were also centers of activity in Providence, Rhode Is-

land, Portland, Maine, and western Massachusetts. However, it was not until the 1930s that some of these began splitting off as independent chapters—Providence in 1933, Portland in 1935. At this time, the parent chapter was renamed the Massachusetts Chapter, and, as chapters in that state began to proliferate, it later became the Boston Chapter. This pattern was repeated in other regions as membership grew.

Wardens John Hyatt Brewer and Warren R. Hedden, holding office between 1905 and 1910, were zealous in the founding of chapters, especially after membership eligibility was expanded in 1906 to include those without certification. The Chicago Chapter was founded in 1907, and the Cleveland Chapter in 1908, followed speedily by the Western New York (now Rochester) Chapter. It was the "Member" category that made such expansion possible, but this also caused problems with the Guild's accreditation by the New York Board of Regents, which viewed the election of "Members" illegal according to the original charter. This was, in fact, true, for although the constitution had been

amended, the charter had not. This was accomplished in 1909, however; the "Members" were renamed "Colleagues" and the AGO successfully weathered one more "growing pain."

The new charter gave the AGO the freedom to organize even more chapters, not only in the United States, but in Canada. Warden Hedden was particularly interested in the latter, organizing Guild chapters in Ontario and Quebec in 1909, and another in British Columbia in 1911. When the Canadian College of Organists was founded in 1920, the AGO conceded these chapters to the CCO and thereafter confined its organizing activities to the United States. The first West Coast chapter, Southern California, was organized in Los Angeles in 1910, and by the following year, there were new chapters in Minnesota, Virginia, District of Columbia, Northern California, and Missouri. During the following decade, additional chapters were founded throughout the country, in the South, Midwest, and Southwest. In the East, Buffalo split off from Western New York, and a Central New York Chapter was founded. It was in this second decade, too, that the first national convention was held, in 1914.

During the following decade even more chapters were formed—some as subdivisions of older regional chapters, some entirely new. Frank L. Sealy, Warden from 1922 to 1932, oversaw the formation of 26 chapters, and his successor, Charles H. Doersam, added 30, including the first chapter in Connecticut (New Haven), founded in 1938.

The AGO was not the only professional organists' group that was prospering in this period. In 1908, a rival organization, the National Association of Organists, was founded, not by an organist, but by a choral conductor, Tali Esen Morgan, although its first president was an AGO founder, Will C. Macfarlane. Although avowedly more "fraternal" in nature, leaning more toward a choral emphasis, and not granting certification, the NAO seems to have coexisted peacefully with the AGO for nearly three decades, and some organists belonged to both organizations. This organization may indeed have been initially a little more progressive than the AGO in that from the outset it gave special encouragement to young organists and to women. The NAO had its own journal (*The Musical World*), formed chapters, and held conventions, one of which, in 1932, was given jointly with the Canadian College of Organists.

During these years of growth, many important things were happening in the AGO. In 1933, the first Code of Ethics was adopted. The following year, in response to demand, a new examination was instituted for choir directing skills, and the successful candidates were allowed to add "ChM" to their names. In 1935, *The Diapason* became the official journal of the Guild, and remained so for many years to follow. In the same year, the NAO disbanded, and the AGO assimilated many of its members and chapters.

The years of World War II were a lean time for church musicians. AGO chapters remained an important social unit in the lives of American organists, but, as the pages of *The Diapason* reveal, many of the younger ones joined or were drafted into the armed services, and some never returned home. Organbuilding was virtually at a standstill, and "blackout" curfews in coastal cities discouraged the presentation of evening concerts.

National conventions had been held annually from 1925 to 1939, and biennial conventions were held in 1939 and 1941, with regional conventions scheduled in between, a practice that continues today. Although some "Spring Music Festivals" and conclaves for deans and regents were held in New York during the war years, national conventions did not resume until the late 1940s, the first one of substantial scope being the Boston National Convention of 1950.

During the immediate postwar years, much increased Guild activity was evident. In 1945, the institution of an annual "AGO Sunday" was proposed. Usually held the third Sunday after Easter (no doubt to allow organists and choir singers time to catch their collective breaths), it was an opportunity for members to draw attention to the Guild in their individual churches by performing music by their fellow members, reading the Declaration of Religious Principles, and (hopefully) persuading their priests or ministers to deliver a sermon on music. While this practice has today fallen into disuse in many areas, it represented one of the Guild's earliest attempts to "raise consciousness" about the AGO among churchgoers.

Another attempt to broaden the sphere of the Guild that began in the 1940s was the institution of Subscribing Members. These members, who paid a reduced membership fee, could belong only to the local chapter, were non-voting, and were defined as non-musicians (or amateur musicians) who were interested in attending chapter functions and receiving the chapter newsletter. In 1946 (and, indeed, sporadically thereafter), concern was expressed by Headquarters that some professional church musicians were joining as Subscribers to avoid paying national dues, but this seems never to have become a serious problem, since most professionals preferred to receive the official publications and to have voting and office-holding privileges.

The year 1946 marked a high point in the life of the Guild, as the celebration of its 50th anniversary launched the organization into its second half-century, which might also be called its second period of growth. By this time, the AGO could (and did) boast "a chapter in every state"—125 in fact, comprising over 9,000 members. Indeed, during 1946 alone, a record number of 32 new chapters were chartered, almost as many as had been formed during the preceding five years. Student groups had been established two years earlier, in 1944, and already numbered nine, tangible proof of the Guild's growing commitment to the younger generation. This commitment was given additional impetus with the establishment in 1950 of the Young Organists' Competition, the first performance competition to be sponsored by the Guild, and one that continues to the present day, although its official name has been changed several times.

Among the festivities of the 50th anniversary in 1946 was a concert of music for organ and orchestra, featuring several works by American composers, performed at Hunter College in New York by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitzky, with E. Power Biggs as soloist. It was possibly the first AGO-sponsored concert to be broadcast nationwide on radio.

Sufficient postwar enthusiasm and energy

seem to have been generated by the anniversary and subsequent well-attended conventions that the Guild could not resist celebrating again in 1956, on the occasion of its 60th anniversary, with special events held at the National Convention in New York. By that time, only three of the Founders—Gaston Dethier, Clarence Dickinson, and Henry Gordon Thunder—were still living, and, rather amazingly, still active in music.

That year also saw the Guild taking the first step towards publishing its own magazine, with the appearance of *The AGO Quarterly*, edited by George Litch Knight. In 1964, S. Lewis Elmer, who for many years had held the office of National President, wrote for that magazine an article summing up some of the Guild's achievements. Most impressive, perhaps, was the fact that in the 18 years since the 50th anniversary, the membership had nearly doubled. By 1964, it was approximately 17,000, with 280 chapters, six branches, and nearly 100 student groups in colleges and conservatories across the country. In the same year, 397 members passed the Guild examinations. *The AGO Quarterly* continued to supplement *The Diapason* with scholarly articles and Guild news until October of 1967, when the AGO launched a new monthly publication exclusively for members, which for several years bore the somewhat ambiguous masthead of *MUSIC/The AGO Magazine*.

During the 1960s also, increasing attention was being paid to what has come to be called Professional Concerns. As early as 1949, a Committee on Members' Interests was formed, but those interests seem to have been more musical than professional. That certain classes of church musicians had felt their needs were not being fully met by the Guild during the 1930s and 1940s is perhaps suggested by the formation in that period of several special interest organizations, notably by and for women. Although four women were among the Founders, and women began passing the certification examinations from 1904 on, Guild membership was for many years predominantly male. Few women served as chapter deans or national officers in the early days, although many served in lesser capacities.

Thus, during the prewar years, groups such as the Chicago Club of Women Organists and the Boston Women's Organ Club were founded. Minorities were even more overlooked than women in this period, which doubtless inspired the formation of groups such as the Greater Boston Guild of Colored Organists and Directors, active into the 1940s, and a separate black AGO chapter in the Baltimore area, active into the 1950s. From what one reads about such organizations, however, feminism and ethnic identity were not the important issues, at least musically (although they doubtless were socially). Programs reported in various publications featured the same standard classics by the same mostly white male (but not always dead) composers found in programs of the AGO and NAO, but performed by organists and choral groups that probably would not have had the opportunity for performance before the larger organizations.

By the 1950s, this situation was changing rapidly, particularly for women, and outstanding recitalists such as Claire Coci, Jeanne Demessieux, Catharine Crozier, and Marilyn Mason began to be regularly fea-

tured in convention and chapter programs. During this same period, an increasing number of minorities and women began entering the organ departments of American colleges, eventually to be assimilated into AGO chapters in the areas where they settled after graduation. More women deans were evident beginning in this period, even in larger chapters.

During the 1960s, however, there began a groundswell of concern for the professional status of all church musicians, centering on the often unsatisfactory conditions of their employment. In 1966, a standard contract form was proposed, and AGO members were urged to negotiate contracts with their churches.

Between 1970 and 1974, Martin Steinmetz conducted his survey into the employment of Guild members, which resulted in *The Work and Compensation of the Church Musician*, initially published by the Boston Chapter, but soon to be distributed nationwide. Some of the facts disclosed by the survey were deeply disturbing: many members were not only underpaid for the amount of work demanded, but had not had a raise for long periods of time; women were, on the average, paid less than men of comparable credentials for similar jobs, and were sometimes tacitly excluded from certain positions. And many members still did not have contracts. In the intervening years, this publication and similar ones by various other chapters have been of great help to chapters and placement chairs in calling attention to and remedying some of these inequities, and Professional Concerns committees at both the chapter and national level have been able to assist and act as advocates for members who have been discriminated against or otherwise unfairly treated by their employers.

Other landmarks of the 1970s included a change in the bylaws that allowed regional councillors to be elected directly by members in their region (instead of being appointed by the National Council) and the election in 1975 of the Guild's first woman president, the capable and tireless Roberta Bitgood. The 1976 National Convention, with its American Bicentennial theme, broke all previous records with an attendance of 2,400. In 1979, the title of the Guild's periodical, its masthead having in the interim been made even more unwieldy by the addition of the RCCO, was formally changed to THE AMERICAN ORGANIST®—the original magazine bearing that name having ceased publication a few years before.

Of considerable significance was the institution, in 1978, of two additional examinations. As early as 1901, it will be recalled, examinations of lesser difficulty than the AAGO and FAGO had been suggested, but the idea had lain dormant for an inordinately long time. At least part of the motivation for instituting the Colleague (CAGO) and Service Playing examinations was to provide something less daunting than the original certification examinations yet that would nonetheless require some study, and could help enhance many organists' status in their churches. Organists who passed the Service Playing Test were encouraged to work toward their CAGO, and some of those who passed the latter eventually went on to try for the AAGO or ChM as their skills increased.

Membership continued to grow and in 1982, it was reported in THE AMERICAN OR-

GANIST that national membership stood at over 20,000, with 316 chapters—perhaps not as spectacular as the growth of the 1950s and 1960s, but encouraging nonetheless. Two years previous, the burden that this growing membership and its needs were placing on the elected officers and the limited office staff (and space) had made the National Council realize that some changes were sorely needed if progress was to continue. The first was the moving of the offices of National Headquarters from the Rockefeller Center location to more spacious quarters on Second Avenue, and the second was the appointment of the first full-time executive director, Daniel N. Colburn II, after an extensive job search. One of his first tasks was to engineer the establishment of the now-familiar Annual Fund, which has provided additional financial resources for such things as membership development, new music commissions, and educational projects.

The 300th anniversary of the births of J.S. Bach, G.F. Handel, and Domenico Scarlatti in 1985 was tailor-made for projects geared to enhance the visibility of the Guild. Advance planning on the national and local levels resulted in a variety of choral, organ, and harpsichord performances and workshops by chapters and individual members throughout the country, as well as a series of scholarly articles in special editions of THE AMERICAN ORGANIST.

As the 1990s approached, Guild members began to be aware of a coming crisis: enrollment was dropping in music schools throughout the country, and organ departments seemed to be especially hard hit. Retiring teachers were often not replaced, and some organ departments were phased out or downgraded. The pool of future professional

organists seemed to be shrinking. Doomsayers delighted in predicting the demise of our profession, while at the same time the more creative minds were brainstorming for ways to reverse the trend.

Thus was born one of the most successful and promising AGO innovations of the '90s—the Pipe Organ Encounters for young people, providing an enjoyable learning experience of high quality for piano students and beginning organ students, while encouraging them to consider careers in organ performance or church music. In addition to these projects, renewed emphasis was placed on competitions for young organists, and low student membership fees were established to encourage early involvement in the Guild. Many chapters have come up with innovative programs of their own for educating and encouraging young organ students, and for introducing children to the organ. By the mid-'90s, enrollment in college organ departments appears to have stabilized, and, in some instances, is beginning to increase. Was the AGO at least partly responsible for this turnaround? We like to think so!

So the Guild continues to grow and evolve in the year of its 100th anniversary as the end of the 20th century approaches. Looking back on the early years, we see some things unchanged—the emphasis on education, the commitment to and promotion of good church music, resiliency in meeting new challenges, and (not to be overlooked) the support and friendship of colleagues. But from time to time we are reminded that, although we are now the only national professional organization for organists in the United States, there are still many organists who do not belong to the AGO. Outreach and growth will continue to be among our goals for the foreseeable future.