AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS CENTENNIAL
ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF COMPETITION: ENCOURAGING EXCELLENCE

Mary Ann Dodd

The AGO Centennial is providing a historic milestone from which to view a time-honored facet of Guild activity known as competition. How, why, and when did the competitions originate? What has been their pattern of growth and development? What have been their strengths and their weaknesses? And what should we hope for and work toward in the future? The primary sources of information for this article have been organ journals, AGO National Council minutes, and conversations and correspondence with those who have been associated with the competitions—performers, judges, administrators, etc. I am grateful to the many individuals who took the time to share their thoughts with me.

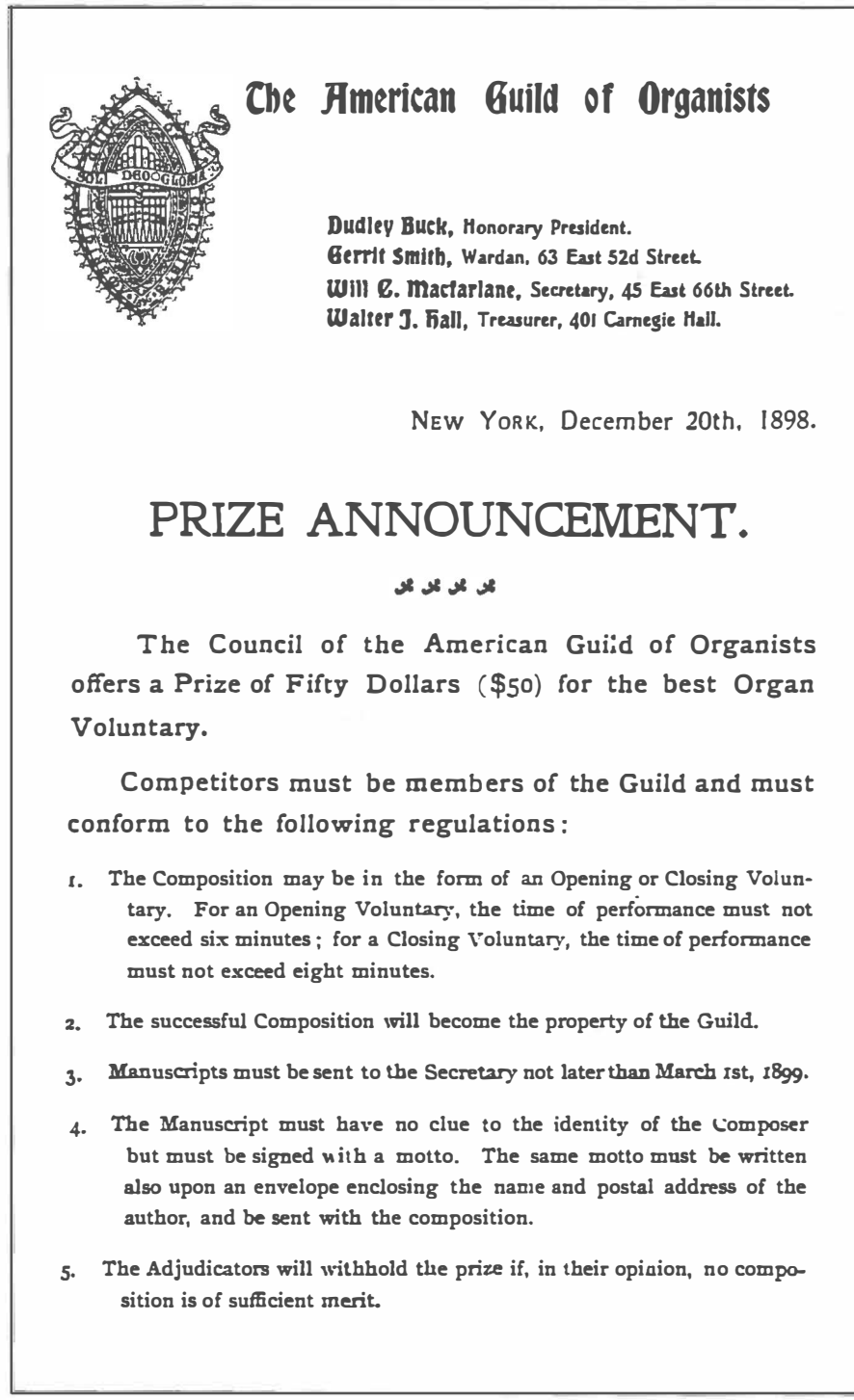
Competition—an altogether familiar word in the world of the performing arts. What does it mean to compete artistically? Competitions are about winning and losing. Steven H. Homel, author of *The Competition Obsession: A Philosophy of Non-Competitive Living* (San Diego, 1980, p. 6), defines competition as ". . . two or more people trying to acquire a prize which only one can have." Taking a more positive view, Alva Grace Daniels, representing the Guild for International Piano Competitions, has written in a letter to *Clavier* magazine (Dec. 1994, pp. 2, 3): "Competition, as an art form, has inspired and prepared many great talents and has given artists many opportunities." Competitions provide incentive and challenge. The rewards can be financial, educational, and in the preparation itself.

One overall observation about music competitions is that there will always be inherent difficulties in regard to fairness. As one disgruntled competitor put it: "Judges' reports are often contradictory, unreliable, and unfathomable. Sports competitions rely on simple, objective criteria, while in music making there are very few, if any, measurable and objective standards." Thus, an overview of the first 100 years of competitive activity in the Guild reveals a never-ending, ongoing attempt to perfect the procedure, leaving in its wake a dramatically shifting spectrum of ever-changing rules and requirements.

Today, the Guild sponsors five competitions that fall into two main categories: (1) performance: National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance (NYACOP), Regional Competitions for Young Organists (RCYO), and National Competition in Organ Improvisation (NCOI); and (2) composition: Holtkamp-AGO Award in Organ Composition, and AGO/ECS Publishing Award in Choral Composition. Each of the performance competitions has its own national committee, and the two composition competitions are both under the aegis of the New Music Committee.

The AGO/ECS Publishing Award in Choral Composition

The earliest competition in the history of the Guild was the choral composition contest, known then as the Clemson Medal. Walter J. Clemson of Taunton, Mass. (1857–1945) was born in London and came to the U.S. in 1885. He had a BA from Cambridge and was one of the founders of the Guild as well as dean of the New England Chapter for many years. In 1896, he offered an annual prize in the form of a gold medal worth $50 for "an anthem of all-round excellence of reasonable length (6–8 pages of octavo)" with a free accompaniment to an English text.



The American Guild of Organists

Dudley Buck, Honorary President.
Gerrit Smith, Wardan, 63 East 52d Street.
Will C. Macfarlane, Secretary, 45 East 66th Street.
Walter J. Hall, Treasurer, 401 Carnegie Hall.

NEW YORK, December 20th, 1898.

PRIZE ANNOUNCEMENT.

The Council of the American Guild of Organists offers a Prize of Fifty Dollars ($50) for the best Organ Voluntary.

Competitors must be members of the Guild and must conform to the following regulations:

1. The Composition may be in the form of an Opening or Closing Voluntary. For an Opening Voluntary, the time of performance must not exceed six minutes; for a Closing Voluntary, the time of performance must not exceed eight minutes.
2. The successful Composition will become the property of the Guild.
3. Manuscripts must be sent to the Secretary not later than March 1st, 1899.
4. The Manuscript must have no clue to the identity of the Composer but must be signed with a motto. The same motto must be written also upon an envelope enclosing the name and postal address of the author, and be sent with the composition.
5. The Adjudicators will withhold the prize if, in their opinion, no composition is of sufficient merit.

Council members had been asked by Mr. Clemson to consider whether ". . . a medal or a sum of money would be most esteemed by the competitors." According to the Council minutes, the reason it was decided to give the prize in the form of a medal was ". . . that it may have distinctly the character of an honor conferred rather than that of a reward for labor done." The first winner, in 1897, was Will C. Macfarlane, national secretary of the Guild, and one of its founders. The title of the winning anthem was "Happy Is the Man Who Findeth Wisdom."

In 1901, in an effort to stimulate more interest in the contest, H.W. Gray (agents for Novello at that time) contributed an additional $50 in cash with the provision that the winning anthem would be published by Novello, the composer to receive royalties. At this time, the contest was open to all musicians residing in the U.S. or Canada, but only if they were members of the Guild. In the first 24 years, only 15 medals were given, attesting either to the extraordinarily high standards of the judges, or to the extraordinarily poor quality of the anthems submitted.

H. Leroy Baumgartner of Yale was the winner in 1925, which year marked the first official performance of a Guild prize anthem at a general convention, which was held in Chicago that year. The anthem was sung at St. Luke's Church, Evanston, at the Great Service. Arthur B. Jennings and Charlotte Klein were among the chosen singers who were selected to be geographically representational of the country.

The anthems were published in beautiful editions by H.W. Gray and are now, probably without exception, out of print. H.W. Gray (1868–1950), who immigrated to the U.S. in 1894, was a prime mover in the early years of the prize anthem contest. He devoted a lifetime to encouraging American composers of choral and organ music and was often quoted as saying: "I perform new music because I consider not doing so a sin."

In an earlier TAO article (Sept. 1984, p. 54), Charles Henderson has written that these early anthems, though well written, have not earned a lasting place in the choral repertoire because many of them were conceived, according to the trend in those days, for quartets comprised of solo voices of operatic quality. The music often required professionally trained voices and vocal technique far beyond the reach of the average choir.

In the very early years of the contest, the main problem seems to have been a general lack of interest on the part of composers. In 1901, only three anthems were submitted. But by 1911, the Council had opened up the competition to all musicians, members of the Guild or not. Sometime in the 1920s, Mr. Clemson stopped giving the medal and the AGO offered a $50 cash prize instead. A little later on, H.W. Gray offered a $100 prize and the contest became known as the H.W. Gray Prize Anthem Competition. By today's standards, the rules tended to be extremely loose and were often given in the form of non-binding recommendations: "There is no restriction as to the difficulty or the length, but it is *suggested* that a composition of about eight pages is the most practical one . . . it is *suggested* that an anthem requiring more than ten minutes for performance *might* be deemed excessively long. . . ." In the year 1945, there were over 100 manuscripts submitted, and by 1958, the prize money had been increased to $200. Apparently the amount of prize money varied from time to time because the records show the prize to have been only $150 in 1965.

In 1957, a report from the judges (Robert Elmore, Jack Ossewaarde, and Vernon de Tar) contained the following general comments about the entries for that year: ". . . a lack of development of materials, insufficient knowledge of effective choral writing (organ writing, too!) and a lack of sensitivity to texts. Composers of church music might do well to listen to more services, acquainting themselves with problems of performance, and also some of the possibilities that are too often not explored."

In 1961, for the second year in a row, no anthem prize was forthcoming. On the June 1961 editorial page of *The Diapason* the following appeared:

> In the course of a year we see perhaps nearly 1,000 anthems. Too large a proportion of these are unabashed tripe, designed for quick sale to directors who either don't know any better or don't care.
>
> The worthy anthems seem to us to fall into two main classifications: the simple, useful, safe anthems for which there is always need, and the very advanced, difficult, dissonant ones requiring special abilities in both choir and director. The great middle ground of original, inventive, musically stimulating works within the abilities of good average choirs (with enough rehearsal) seems to us these days a desert with few oases.
>
> We wonder if this very area is not the one for which the Guild competitions are designed. If so, perhaps the judges are viewing the same desert we are.

Some years continued to be less fruitful than others, and often the prize was withheld. In 1967, no award was given. That year the judges were John Huston, Myron Roberts, and Hans Vigeland. John Huston submitted the following report to the Council:

> I saw the 42 compositions first. As I carefully went through them hope burned eternally for one to assert itself as a work possessing musicality, craftsmanship, taste, and a text that would make that particular one a useful addition to choir repertoire. There was none of this type. Three were chosen as the least poor, pending reaction of the other two judges. . . . Each one of us included a general comment from which I quote:
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> "Keeping in mind that one of the objects of the Guild is to raise the standards of church music, some of these—perhaps with attractiveness and craftsmanship—I would not vote for because it is my understanding that the emphasis here is on service music."
>
> "I am sorry to say that I do not find any of these submitted anthems worthy of an award by the American Guild of Organists. I decline to indicate any first, second, or third choices. I believe that the Guild should recognize distinguished creative work—not the commonplace, not the lifeless, conveniently 'correct' and certainly not work which is marred by crudities or defective organ accompaniments."
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> "I pretty well go along with you—and agree—hardly a winner. I have a feeling this kind of thing is not on the right course. There are the perennial contest entrants—and one is worse than the other."
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> In the future, I see no reason why certain limitations on the choice of text might not be imposed. As one in the profession in need of service music, I think I can speak for all and say that we need no more settings of "Psalm 23" and/or "The Lord's Prayer." And if "practical service music" were specified, it would eliminate the "stunt" pieces with highly involved rhythmic devices and with division—even to tripling—in all voices.
>
> Finally, contestants might remember that whoever sees his work is only human and its appearance counts for something. All submitted manuscripts should be in ink and on regulation manuscript paper that will stay in place on a music rack. Single sheets out of tablets, paperclipped, bradded, or stapled together are a nuisance.

Apparently this negative report from the judges resulted in a Council decision to suspend the contest indefinitely. Following a long hiatus, the choral composition contest experienced a renaissance in 1984 under the aegis of the New Music Committee. In 1985, the M.P. Moller organbuilding firm became the cosponsor of a biennial choral composition competition offering a $2,000 prize, publication by E.C. Schirmer, and performances at each of the nine regional conventions. Today, the competition is cosponsored by ECS Publishing and is open to citizens of the U.S., Canada, or Mexico, with no age restrictions. The contest this past year called for ". . . one unpublished work for SATB chorus and organ, from three to five minutes in length, in which the organ plays a distinctive and significant role. The text for the work must be suitable for use in religious services of various kinds."

Over the course of the past century, some of the more illustrious choral composition contest winners have been Will C. Macfarlane, T. Frederick Candlyn, Horatio Parker, Porter Heaps, Channing Lefebvre, Ronald Arnatt, Jane Marshall, Conrad Susa, Barrie Cabena, Gilbert Martin, and James Hopkins.

The Holtkamp-AGO Award in Organ Composition

The Clemson Medal Anthem Prize was already nearing the end of its second decade when the idea of an organ composition prize took hold. In 1914, the Guild announced an Organ Composition Prize in the amount of $100 to be contributed by the organbuilding firm of Hillgreen & Lane of Alliance, Ohio. Unlike the anthem competition, which at that time was very loosely structured, the requirements for the organ competition prize were extremely explicit and confining, to say the least. The composer could choose between the following two forms: I: (1) Andantino or Allegretto, 48 to 64 bars; (2) Allegro (climax *ff*), 36 to 48 bars; (3) Andantino (repeat), but varied in harmonization and figuration, 48 to 64 bars. A short coda was permissible. If compound time was used, the number of bars could be reduced. II: (1) Andante or Adagio, 36 to 48 bars; (2) Più mosso or quasi Allegro, 36 to 48 bars (climax *ff*); (3) Andante or Adagio (repeat), 36 to 48 bars, but varied in harmonization and figuration. A short coda was permissible.

Eighteen entries were submitted, and the winner was Gustav Mehner of Grove City, Pa., for his *Elevation in F*. Apparently the results of this competition were not considered successful enough to warrant its continuation until 20 years later, in 1934, when the Guild announced a competition for the best organ piece five minutes in length in the form of a chorale prelude or a prelude suitable for church services to be published by J. Fischer & Bro. The winner would receive royalties, and the piece would be played at the general convention in New York in June. *The Diapason* contributed $100, and the contest was open to all composers residing in America. The purpose of the competition was "to encourage the writing of practical organ music for regular church services—something that will always be useful, rather than a work suitable almost wholly for recital purposes." The winner that year was Leon Verrees with a chorale-improvisation on "O God, Our Help in Ages Past."

In 1936, the competition was announced again, this time with a different focus: ". . . the best organ composition in one of the larger forms . . . availability of the work for recital purposes should be emphasized and it may be in the nature of a symphony, a sonata, a prelude and fugue, an overture, or a fantasia."

From this point on, the organ composition competition seems to have become a rather spasmodic event, the prize money eventually increasing to $200 donated by *The Diapason* and, later on, by H.W. Gray. It eventually emerged, in 1984, along with the choral competition, as a biennial event. Known today as the Holtkamp-AGO Award, it carries a $2,000 prize furnished by the Holtkamp Organ Company and publication by Hinshaw Music Inc. The precise nature of the requisite organ composition in any given year has varied continually, running the gamut in terms of form, length, the inclusion of other voices or instruments, practical service music vs. virtuoso recital repertoire, etc. Restrictions regarding age and nationality have also varied over the years. At the present time, the competition is open to all citizens of the U.S., Canada, or Mexico, with no age restrictions. A list of earlier winners includes many distinguished names: George Mead Jr., George Frederick McKay, Camil Van Hulse, Edmund Haines, Ivan Langstroth, Milton Gill, and Norberto Guinaldo, to name but a few.

While searching through the Guild archives, I discovered an interesting judges' commentary in reference to the 1958 competition, won that year by Ivan Langstroth for his *Toccata in A Major*. The judges were Alexander Schreiner, Leslie Spelman, and Alec Wyton, whose report had this to say: "Many of the entries were lacking in technical discipline quite apart from any stylistic merits shown. The ability to develop an idea into a convincing, logical essay is of paramount importance to a composer, and it was in this area that many of the entries fell short of the standards the judges looked for. Too many good manuscripts showed either a disregard or ignorance of the details of musical calligraphy. The winning piece is a well-constructed movement, lies under the hands and feet, and sounds well upon the organ. It has a convincing, original, and consistent

harmonic idiom and is the work of a thoughtful craftsman."

The spirit behind the composition competitions has always recognized the plethora of service music based on outworn formulas that could just as easily be improvised. Seventy years ago on the editorial page of the *New Music Review*, these words were to be found: "Are we printing too much church music? Organists who receive from all parts of the United States 'batches' of what is supposed to be 'ecclesiastical' music, and who throw about nine-tenths of it into the wastebasket, naturally think that there is an absurd wastage of paper and printing ink, to say nothing of postage and advertising. Of really valuable anthem and service music, there is a dearth so great that 'immortal compositions' are repeated from year to year for the reason that there is nothing to take their place."

Another chronic problem has been that prizewinning compositions are often extremely difficult and accessible only to virtuoso performers. Yet another related issue has been and continues to be that of motivating recitalists and church musicians to program works of contemporary American composers. As early as 1917, Roland Diggle wrote an article for the December issue of *The Diapason* entitled "American Music in the Church" in which he pleaded for the more general use of American compositions and deplored the neglect of the American composer.

Wesley Morgan, writing in *The Diapason* (Nov. 1959, p. 5), had this to say: ". . . Having set itself apart, the organ world has isolated itself from the main currents of musical criticism. The value of musical composition for the organ is determined almost solely by organists themselves, who by virtue of this position may weigh the scales of evaluation more heavily with sentiment than with musical discrimination. Hence to recognize the position of organ composition as related to the present and past currents of stylistic development and continuity is difficult, if not impossible. . . . Organ and church music must not be permitted to develop as a thing apart from the mainstream of musical composition, untouched by its criticism and unaffected by its criteria. If it is, the consequences are threefold: organists and recitalists will continue to be forced to dilute the quality of their programs; such a course implies to the rest of the musical world that organists are either indifferent or do not know the difference; and, worst of all, no significant and truly representative works of our times for the organ will be deposited in the vast accumulative storehouse of musical knowledge and repertory for generations yet to come." *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

National Young Artists Competition in Organ Playing (NYACOP)

Surprisingly enough, Guild-sponsored organ performance competition at the national level did not begin until mid-century. The earliest Guild-sponsored performance competition to surface in the course of my archival searches was sponsored by the Georgia AGO Chapter in 1935. The following announcement appeared in the *New Music Review*: "It is believed that there are many organists who have, in the past, brought their technique to a fairly high point, but now carry on their routine work with only as much practice as is necessary to carry them through the church service; that the music of the church would be improved generally if the organist were inspired to return to regular practice beyond that which is necessary; that many organists of high accomplishment will welcome an opportunity to work for a definite goal; that competition in contest would bind together in common interest the organists of this section; and, finally, that the recognition gained in such a contest would be a valuable asset in any community." The contest took place publicly, and the contestants entered at one of three levels depending on their level of training and experience. Each level had its own required repertoire—in each case a specific Bach piece and a specified piece by a contemporary American composer.

It was not until 15 years later, in 1950, under the presidency of S. Lewis Elmer and the chairmanship of Searle Wright, that a National Competition Committee was created, and the NYACOP had begun. Since its inception it has gone through many names and many guises: The Young Organist's Competition, The Students Competition, The Organ-Playing Competition, and it is known today as The National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance. From the very beginning, its philosophy and purpose—unlike that of the Georgia Chapter in the '30s—has been to seek out and encourage young talent and to provide opportunities for growth and learning.

When the three-level competition (chapter, regional, and national) was first established in a two-year cycle, there were 15 regions and 15 finalists. Later on, for a brief time in the '60s, the country was divided into four geographical zones for the semifinals, each zone being allowed to send two contestants on to the finals, and the AAGO or FAGO certificate being one of the eligibility requirements.

As previously mentioned, the rules have undergone constant change. Judges at the national level have been as few as two and as many as nine! Repertoire requirements have always been, and still remain, controversial. In the beginning, the contestants were allowed to play absolutely anything of their own choosing for 15 minutes. In other years every piece was specified with no latitude given to the performers. At one point performers had to learn three completely different sets of pieces for each of the three competition levels.

Applause has been allowed and disallowed, and the issues of visibility and anonymity between contestants and judges form the basis of an ongoing debate. Tangible awards have ranged from a bronze plaque to the winner and scrolls for the runners-up to today's prizes of $2,000, $1,500, and $750. Prize money and scholarships have been donated by private individuals, foundations, publishers, and organbuilding firms. In 1960, nine organ companies and publishers furnished the prize money! In earlier years, chapters were expected to contribute to a regional fund to pay the expenses of the finalists to the national convention. In 1971, it was felt by the Council that there was too much emphasis on the prize money, and the council voted to cut the $1,000 and $500 prizes in half for the next competition cycle. Allowable practice time and actual playing time at the competition have varied over the years, as have the age limit and the requirement of Guild membership. In response to concern expressed by the National Committee over a general lack of musicianship and musical understanding on the part of the contestants, the AAGO or FAGO certificate was made a requirement between the years 1960 and 1964.

A list of winners at the national level from earlier years includes, among others, Robert Whitley, Dorothy Young, Dale Peters, Emily Cooper, Ray Ferguson, David Mulbury, Clyde Holloway, Thomas Murray, George Baker III, David Lennox Smith, Peggy Haas, Robert Duerr, John Chappell Stowe, and Jeffrey Walker.

A relatively recent and significant addition to the NYACOP has been a career guidance program launched in 1982. Designed to educate the winner as well as give him/her

two years of actual experience as a concert artist, the program provides the winner with the opportunity to learn firsthand what concert life is really like and how to manage a concert career. Under the guidance of Karen MacFarlane, attention is given to such matters as stage etiquette, programming, writing program notes, publicity, bios, adjusting to unfamiliar instruments in a limited amount of time, as well as keeping repertoire fresh and exciting. The winner can expect to play, on the average, between 40 and 50 recitals during the two-year period after the competition. Designed to give the winner a "leg up" in the establishment of a performance career, the program has been referred to by MacFarlane as "the building, recital by recital, of an artist."

Between January 1994 and June 1996, the current NYACOP winner Douglas Cleveland will have played approximately 40 recitals, many of them sponsored by AGO chapters. This, contrasted to the one or two recitals played by winners prior to 1982, provides a strong testimony to the effectiveness of this new program.

During the 1980s, the competition continued to flourish and there seemed to be an observable upward trend as the number of competitors and the number of chapter competitions continued to increase. Chapters and regions were encouraged to offer cash awards, more competition time and practice time were allowed, and the age limit continued to rise, as well as the prize money. The final round was now presented in two phases, with three finalists presenting a 90-minute concert at the national convention. There were specified required works and more comprehensive guidelines. There were now five pages of rules in extremely small print. According to Philip Baker, NYACOP director at that time: "We very nearly 'ruled' ourselves to death."

The 1982–84 competition cycle culminating at the 1984 convention in San Francisco boasted 200 competitors, 50 local competitions, and more than one hundred observers at the finals, prompting critic Byron Belt to comment in his TAO review (August 1984, p. 32): ". . . I somehow doubt the validity of contests but have no solution that offers a better potential for rapid recognition of outstanding talent."

Returning from San Francisco, enthused by the success of the competition, NYACOP director Philip Baker approached his dear friend and former teacher Nita Akin, concert artist/teacher extraordinaire, who had already expressed a wish to make a significant contribution to the Guild. The result was the establishment of the Nita Akin Competition Fund in the amount of $50,000 to underwrite the performance competitions.

There has recently been a rather dramatic restructuring of the competition beginning in 1990–92 with the creation of a second division for younger organists. In the present structure, which first went into effect for the 1992–94 competition cycle, there are now two completely separate competitions. The national level (NYACOP) has become more professional in its orientation, and it is hoped that the chapter and regional levels (RCYO) aimed at the younger organist will be able to coordinate their work with the Pipe Organ Encounters and the Committee on the New Organist. The jury is still out, and opinion is divided over whether these changes are good.

The new NYACOP advertises itself as "a competition which gives young artists experience in extramusical aspects of their career while retaining the high musical standards of previous competitions. The application procedure includes a complete curriculum vitae, a letter of recommendation, professional quality publicity materials, and a tape of a live recital. There are three performance rounds: the tape round in which there is complete anonymity and in which all but 25 applicants are eliminated; the semifinal round in which seven finalists are chosen; and the final round, which has two phases. From the first phase, three are chosen to compete in the second and final phase. Under these new rules, more emphasis is given to how each player relates to the audience. Stage presence, as well as involvement with the music, is an important consideration."

For the national competition (NYACOP) in 1994, there were 44 applicants, which were narrowed to 25 for the semifinals. The maximum age limit is now 32. The new minimum age limit of 22 recognizes the fact that for the younger performer still in school (late teens or early 20s), the performance schedule after winning the NYACOP is much too demanding and stressful, as well as impractical. For these young artists, it is felt that it is in their best interests to go no further in competition than the regional level.

In the Regional Competitions for Young Organists (RCYO), the upper age limit is 23 and competitors may compete only in the region of their school or their home. Applause is permitted and the judges are allowed to see the competitors, although the judges must remain anonymous until the competition is over. The winner plays a 45-minute recital at the regional convention. First and second prizes are awarded in the amounts of $1,000 and $500 respectively. Seed money in the amount of $500 is given to each region from a Regional Fund administered nationally. The repertoire for the 1994–96 cycle included works by Buxtehude and Franck and four contemporary American works from which the competitor could choose one. Some negative feelings regarding the RCYO center around the fact that more local AGO chapters aren't sponsoring their regional winners in recital. Hopefully, in time, this situation will change. Another objection is that potential contestants are no longer motivated to participate since the competition lacks the "glamorous" possibility of competing at the national level.

Mark Dirksen, a former NYACOP competitor, was the coordinator for the 1990 Boston competition. At that point he was asked to join the National Committee and soon went on to become its director. Having been closely involved from the beginning with the entire restructuring process, he is pleased with the results and proudest of the fact that with the new format, ". . . each step in this competition yields concrete returns to those who participate." Speaking of competition in general terms, he sees its value not so much in terms of what it does for the Guild, as in what it does for the participants: "There is no other place that one can really find out what one is made of as a player. Recitals can be glossed over, lessons finessed, masterclasses excused. But to sit down at a given time and place to play just as well as you possibly can under close scrutiny is an experience that can change your life. Not by the outcome(!)—but by what one faces inside oneself, and how one deals with the result, for good or for ill. And I think that the Guild can offer this experience to those who seek it (or need it!) in a safe, equitable, and *affirming* way."

According to Vice President Edward Hansen: "NYACOP has evolved over the years to one of the finest competitions in the world. Its prize is one of the most valuable of any competition. It is not a dead-end 'list-it-on-the-résumé-and-put-the-money-in-the-bank' prize. The two years of recitals under the management of Karen MacFarlane are a most valuable boost to a career. The current structure . . . is really drawing out our finest young players."

The National Competition in Organ Improvisation (NCOI)

The youngest of the Guild competitions is the National Competition in Organ Improvisation. Sparked by the success of an improvisation contest run by Newell Robinson at the national convention in Philadelphia in 1964, there was a burgeoning interest at the national level of the Guild in doing something to further the development of improvisational skills among the membership. The Philadelphia committee had consulted the International Improvisation Competition at Haarlem regarding procedures. There were four contestants. The winner that year was Victor Togni of Toronto, and the runner-up was Robert Quade. There was a first prize of $500 and a second prize of $200 provided by Casavant and Aeolian-Skinner. Judges were Seth Bingham, William Volkel, and Searle Wright. For the 1966 improvisation contest, the lack of response to the preliminary tape deadline prompted the Council to extend the published deadline to April 1. That year Ann Labounsky and Thomas Atkin split the first prize of $500 awarded by the Aeolian-Skinner Company, and Philip Gehring won the second prize of $200 awarded by the Allen Organ Company.

In 1967, regionals were urged to have improvisation contests, but the response was not good. New York City and New Orleans said "yes"; Pennsylvania said "no." None of the other regional convention chairs even bothered to respond. In 1968, at the national convention in Denver, the contestants had to be regionally sponsored. Edward Ladouceur was the director of the national committee that year, and the winner was Hector Olivera. The prizes were $1,000 and $500. For the Buffalo convention in 1970, Leonard Raver was the national coordinator, and his committee consisted of Frederick Burgomaster, Samuel Walter, and Squire Haskin. By this time, the age limit had been raised from 28 to 35 years, no audition was required, but the contestant had to be recommended by one or more Council members with tapes required for screening. The committee and the jury selected themes and forms and each contestant had 45 minutes to prepare. Philip Gehring was the winner, and the other three contestants were Robert Quade, Hector Olivera, and McNeil Robinson. The judges were Gerhard Krapf, Paul Manz, and Daniel Pinkham. For the 1972 convention in Dallas, Gerre Hancock was in charge. In order to spark some interest in the competition and to motivate individuals to prepare for it, he wrote an article about improvisation that appeared in the December 1970 issue of TAO (p. 34). Due to lack of interest, the dearth of applicants, and the generally low level of skills, the competition apparently never took place, and two decades would pass before its revival.

In 1986, at the AGO national convention in Detroit, a renewed interest in the art of improvisation was demonstrated by the inclusion in the program of a four-day Improvisation Academy featuring Harald Vogel, Gerre Hancock, William Porter, and Daniel Roth. It was enthusiastically received by conventioneers who could choose to participate in four two-hour sessions taught by the improviser of their choice. Each instructor had his own distinct style of improvisation: 15th–17th century, cathedral style, classical style, and French style.

In 1985, the summer before the Detroit convention, the first San Anselmo Organ Festival, under the direction of Sandra Soderlund, had featured a national improvisation competition that continues to this day. Writing about the San Anselmo festival in the July 1986 issue of TAO (pp. 80–82), Susan Summerfield commented on the disappearance of improvisation from American music education: she cited improvisation as the proving ground for the musical skills taught in the classroom, requiring imagination, technical skill, physical dexterity, as well as a knowledge of musical form and language. She also pointed out that organists have the ideal environment in which to improvise.

So it comes as no surprise that about this time, riding the wave of the current revival of interest in improvisation, and at the suggestion of Walter Holtkamp, the National Council approved the formation of an ad hoc committee charged with the formation of a national improvisation competition and a national committee to administer it. The competition was to take place at the time of the AGO national conventions—to be known as the National Competition in Organ Improvisation (NCOI). The first competition took place at the 1990 Boston convention. The judges were William Albright, Ann Labounsky, and Wolfgang Rübsam. The winner was Bruce Neswick.

A carefully worked out statement of purpose by the committee states, in part, that the competition ". . . seeks to further the art of improvisation by recognizing and rewarding superior performers in the field. Although improvisation may have value in the context of worship or the concert hall, it more significantly has value for its own sake. A flourishing tradition of improvisation is fundamental to a truly vital musical culture. Historically, improvisation is the source from which performance and composition both flow. When improvisation is strong, when there may be found numerous artists who can make *spontaneous* musical utterances at the highest levels, there will also be higher standards for *prepared* musical utterances: performance and composition."

The rules are quite comprehensive. All ages may apply, but contestants must be members of either the AGO or the RCCO. Under the most recent rules (for the 1994–96 competition), there is a preliminary tape round from which seven semifinalists are chosen. From that group three finalists are selected. There is much less latitude in the improvisation requirements than in 1994. The competitors have 45 minutes to prepare and 25 minutes of performing time. The first part of the competition requires an improvisation in any form (single or multi-movement) based on a given free theme (the competitor chooses from three). The second part of the competition requires an improvisation in the form of a theme and variations (at least four) on a given theme. The theme is to be chosen from three—a hymn tune, a chant, or a chorale. The judges may rank or use numerical scoring but must be consistent. There is no applause, and complete anonymity is observed through the end of the semifinals. The $2,000, $1,000, and $500 prizes are furnished by Walter Holtkamp, the AGO, and Mary Louise Herrick.

According to Edward Hansen, "The improvisation competition is drawing attention to a part of our art that has not been emphasized in our country as it has been in Europe. Therefore, it is not only a valuable tool in promoting this art, but also an important outlet for organists who have developed these particular skills."

Looking to the Future

In the course of reviewing an entire century of AGO competitions, I came across some short-lived, but nevertheless remarkably innovative "twists" that I mention here on the chance that they might provide a thought-provoking stimulus for some creative planning in the future:

1. In 1953, the New York City AGO Chapter sponsored a "publishers' recital." The object of this unusual event was to give composers an opportunity to have their unpublished (and unaccepted) compositions heard by music publishers under recital conditions. It was felt that such a program also would stimulate interest in composing for the organ.

2. In 1957, at the instigation of Dean Edward Linzel, the New York City Chapter arranged to bring the regional NYACOP winners, who had performed there at the national convention in 1956, to play full recitals on some of the large organs in New York churches during the course of the year: "It is felt that the interest which they [the regional competitors] aroused last year should be furthered in every way, their incentive stimulated, and the New York organ-loving public be given a chance to become better acquainted with the young artists." John Weaver played the first of these recitals at St. Thomas Church. Roberta Gary, Richard Grant, Roger Nyquist, and Thomas Spacht were among the other regional winners.

3. In 1968, at the national convention in Denver, competitors were required to play a Bach work and a Romantic or contemporary piece in addition to the one required work. Frank Tirro of the University of Chicago was commissioned by the National Competition Committee (chaired by Mary Hornberger) to compose a five-minute work for all contestants to play as the one required work. It was mailed to the competitors three and one-half weeks before the contest.

4. *The Diapason* editor Frank Cunkle's reported on the playing competition at the 1966 national convention in Atlanta (*The Diapason*, August 1966, p. 34):

> There was good reason for arriving early: the student playing competition, saved by wise transfusions from its recent attack of pernicious anemia, blossomed this year into something beautiful to behold. Thirteen of the 15 regions were represented and a finer group of young players probably never gathered in a single place to play in a single day in all the centuries since the invention of the hydraulis.
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> Chairman Raymond Martin's design of this whole event at Agnes Scott College was exemplary. The young people arrived early and were housed together during the practice period. They got to know one another, listened to each other, and apparently achieved a kind of group feeling. As a re-

sult they were cheering for each other, a valuable contribution to an atmosphere in which everyone had the best possible chance to play his[/her] best. [Thomas Murray was the winner, and Marilyn Keiser was one of the runners-up.]

Regarding the future of the composition competitions, past New Music Committee Director Philip Brunelle had this to say: "I hope that interest in having composers living today become more involved in writing for the organ will grow and that the awareness of organists of the fact that compositions written in the last 50 years deserve their attention will also flourish. It is a long, slow process but one that must be encouraged and supported. We as the Guild must continue to find more ways to encourage interest in writing for the organ and a true awareness of its beauty, its majesty, and its potential."

Regional Competitions for Young Organists (RCYO)

Regarding the future of the performance competitions, it is clear that the recent restructuring has brought the RCYO to a point of crisis. The NYACOP has now become a truly national event showcasing emerging concert artists. The RCYO, our newest competition, is a separate regional event under the direction of Susan Dickerson Moeser, with a chapter round and a final round. What we have here is not a second-division NYACOP but rather a marvelous opportunity for AGO leaders at the chapter and regional levels to work together to nurture and develop this competition in conjunction with their outreach programs for young organists and the Pipe Organ Encounters. (See the article in the Dec. 1995 TAO, pp. 76–79.) The machinery has been set in place. The potential for the future of our profession is tremendous. But a successful outcome depends solely on the vision, the effort, and the leadership at the local level.

One cannot write about the NYACOP without giving special recognition to Philip Baker, under whose direction the competition grew and developed and flourished for 18 years (1972–1990). What are his thoughts and wishes for the future? We talked at length on the phone and, with his permission, I would like to paraphrase my understanding of his vision: He would like to see less emphasis on winning and judging and fairness, and more energy devoted to developing the competitions into "uplifting experiences and encouraging ventures." He points out that while the newer competitions such as Haarlem and Chartres may seem more streamlined, more highly organized, and involve more money, ours is "homegrown." The local chapters and regions can feel a connection with, and take pride in their winners. Along those lines, he would like to see the Pipe Organ Encounters expanded and more recognition given to the teachers of our young musicians. The administration at all levels of the competitions down to the chapter level involves many, many people who need to become "benevolent enablers, rather than policemen." In short, we need to focus not so much on the outcome as on the process—a process that will provide a valuable and positive experience to all who participate.

Philip's vision ends with a challenge, which I believe could easily be extended to include the composition competitions as well. His hope is that our competitions might help to prepare our young church musicians for the 21st century. The next generation of organists should not feel threatened by the new technology, but rather welcome it, embrace it, and learn to use it wisely and with dignity. Our emerging young professionals need to be encouraged to live in *this* day, to expand their repertoire to include *all* literature and performance styles, and to never overlook one of the most fundamental and practical aspects of organ performance: the capacity to inspire its listeners and to create an atmosphere of worship.

Coda

Having taken a backward glance at the first 100 years of AGO competitions, what—from my bird's-eye view—is *my* personal hope for the future? I would like to add a corollary to Philip's vision. I believe the competitions possess a hitherto untapped potential. We live in an age obsessed with competition. Why could we not, through the employment of imagination and creativity in the area of public relations, transform the Guild competitions into vehicles that could, by educating the general public, transport the organ not only into the 21st century but, more importantly, out of its narrow closet and into the musical mainstream. To paraphrase that old hymn: Nobody else can do it for us; we've got to do it by and for ourselves.

Mary Ann Dodd is Colgate University Organist Emerita. She remains active as a recitalist and lecturer. With coauthor Jayson Engquist she has recently completed a bio-bibliography for Greenwood Press of the American composer Gardner Read. She is currently working on a biography of Leonard Raver.