# AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS CENTENNIAL

## AGO CONVENTIONS 1941–1958

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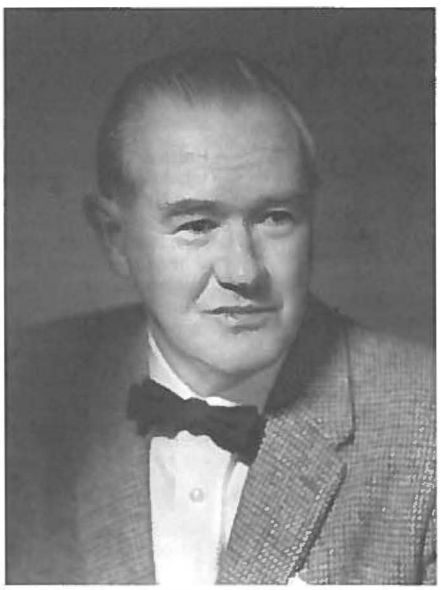

E. Power Biggs

Robert Noehren

Howdy Pardners!

This here is a little ol' invitation from the Lone Star State. We are fixin' to have a Roundup next June 23 to 27 for all you organ folk at "Ranch Houston," so get out your boots, saddle up, and get on the Salt Grass Trail to "Ranch Shamrock Hilton." We are goin' to give you a real Texas welcome and sure-nuff, one which you won't forget. Yo'all be fixing to attend this here Organ Rodeo. . .

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So long for now, Pardner,
G. Alex. Kevan, Publicity
(Houston, 1958)[1]

By the time AGO members arrived in Houston in June of 1958, the many-faceted, multilayered, mega-national convention of the American Guild of Organists was well established. All the characteristics of modern conventions were in place: there were large crowds, layers of simultaneous events, long days and short nights, the organ competition, and recitals were presented by the leading names in the profession.

It was in the two decades preceding Houston that the conventions made the transformation—both philosophically and pragmatically—from the more localized General Conventions of the 1920s and '30s, to the fully mature, fabulous AGO nationals we now take for granted. But like any century-old establishment, their evolution was a gradual process as each committee learned something from the previous convention's successes and failures. Sometimes a committee abruptly broke with tradition, such as in Houston, where the sacred—and expected—banquet was supplanted with a Texas-style rodeo, barbecue, and square dance!

But lest you think that nothing has changed in the meantime, ponder the following vignettes, taken directly from the reviews and the program booklets. Some are humorous, some are poignant, and the last one is pitiful:

**Washington, D.C., 1941**: Ladies attending events scheduled at the Washington Cathedral will be expected to enter the church with your head covered.[2]

At the Lido swimming pool of the Wardman Park Hotel is a bathing beauty contest for men.[3]

**St. Louis, 1948**: Headquarters will be at the Hotel Jefferson. Rates are as follows: $3.50.[4]

**Boston, 1950**: Events have been worked out to require a minimum of travel. Bumper signs will be given car owners at registration to assist AGO hitchhikers.[5]

**San Francisco, 1952**: It was not surprising that clever quips were heard about the fact that the AGO convention was following the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America. One group at Sunday dinner was playing a game attempting to decide which patrons of the restaurant were organists and which were butchers.[6]

**Minneapolis, 1954**: Registration—$15.[7]

**New York, 1956**: Last concert of the day: 2:00 A.M., Milkman's Matinee Recital, George Wright at the Mighty Wurlitzer.[8]

**Houston, 1958**: Hotels. Shamrock Hilton Hotel, $7 to $9. Algiers Hotel (colored), $4.50. Texas Southern University (colored), $2.50.[9]

Before World War II, all the conventions were held in the northeastern quarter of the country. The Guild did go to Memphis and Indianapolis in 1929 and 1931, respectively, but it was not until 1952 that the first convention was held on the West Coast, and 1958 when the Guild made it to the Deep South. By then, our conventions were serving the needs of a large and diversified membership all over the country.

During the 1940s and '50s, the two most important conventions were held in Boston in 1950 and New York City in 1956. The registration at those two events exceeded all the other national conventions of the period put together. It was in those cities that the greatest and most long-lasting innovations occurred.

### NEW YORK CITY, 1956

The 23rd national convention took place between June 25 and June 29, and celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Guild. Because of the war, there was no national convention in 1946 to mark the golden anniversary, although some local commemorations were held.[10] Cognizant of the opportunity this afforded, the New York committee organized the biggest and most spectacular convention in the history of the Guild. Indeed, the 60th anniversary was larger than life, and by all reports a "barn burner" of an event.

Registration broke all records with more than 1,600 in attendance. It was the largest gathering of organists ever, and every effort was made to engage the finest performers. Convention headquarters were located in no less a place than the famous Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, an institution in itself. The committee, co-chaired by Virgil Fox and Robert Baker, reads like a "Who's Who" of the American organ world.

A distinction held by the 1956 convention was that it was the first AGO national convention to receive a glut of press coverage. Throughout the postwar period, *The Diapason* had functioned as the official organ of the Guild, and routine news appeared there.[11] T. Scott Buhrman, the editor of the old *American Organist*, was never happy

about that, so he made it his policy not to cover AGO events. After Buhrman's retirement, Ray Berry, the new editor, brought a competent team of reporters to the 1956 convention, and for the first time, 16 pages of candid criticism about the convention appeared in THE AMERICAN ORGANIST. Likewise, Laurence Swinyard, the editor of *The Organ*, also published a review. Combined with accounts from newspapers and memoirs, we can get a pretty good idea of who did what—and how well.

The official opening took place on June 25 with Pierre Cochereau, the organist of Notre Dame in Paris, presiding at the newly rebuilt Aeolian-Skinner organ in St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue. William Self, then the organist at St. Thomas, vividly recalled the event:

> St. Thomas Church was packed for the recital. . . . The nave and both balconies were filled, people had been admitted to the chancel while others stood in the aisles and some were even sitting on the floor. One felt the customary excitement that is part of the opening of a national convention and knew that this was an historic conjuncture of "firsts." It was the first tour of Pierre Cochereau in the United States, his first recital in New York City, the first recital of the 1956 convention, and the first recital on the new organ. To many, the instrument was already sacred, as the last organ of G. Donald Harrison, but there were others who had not heard of his death and would learn of it only later in the program.[12]

(Harrison had died of a heart attack just two weeks before the convention.)[13]

The program was entirely French. It consisted of the *Second Suite* by Clérambault, two movements from the *Symphony IV* of Vierne, the *Veni Creator* of Duruflé, a composed piece—i.e., not improvised—by Cochereau, and the *Symphonic Poème* of Dupré. The program ended with an improvisation on submitted themes, one of which was G–D–H, Harrison's initials.

Reactions were mixed. "The Clérambault was marred only by a sudden buildup to full organ at the end of the Caprice," wrote Gruenstein,[14] and Berry thought "it was just too much French—music *and* playing,"[15] but noted, "never has an AGO convention started off with such a bang!"[16] He was being literal here, because at one point Cochereau apparently coupled the State Trumpet into full organ, giving those Guild members at the back of the church quite a jolt. Swinyard enjoyed Cochereau, but thought his improvisation was a bit long for its musical content.[17] Seth Bingham singled it out as a highlight of the convention.[18]

That evening, a choral service at St. Bartholomew's Church featured a performance of the *Requiem* by Duruflé, as well as other 20th-century works. Reports were good, although Alistair Cassels-Brown took exception to the way the choir sang Anglican chant. "Unsatisfactory," he wrote, "the end of each phrase was much too long."[19] After the concert, a "Rendezvous at the Waldorf"—a fancy name for an open cash bar—concluded the evening's activities.[20]

Tuesday morning offered a choice: a tour of New York church organs, or remain at the hotel and hear a demonstration on an electronic organ.[21] The tour was opted for by 1,594 Guild members; six slept in.

By mid-morning, everyone was back together at St. Thomas for sung Morning Prayer. All agreed that the service was superb, maintaining an air of reverence and devotion without ostentation. Self, who directed, recalled that it took the choir most of the year to prepare the music.[22] David Fuller, the organist of Dartmouth College, opened the service with the *Choral in B Minor* by Franck, and concluded with the Final of the *Symphonie Romane* by Widor. In between was a varied program of choral pieces, selected from the polyphonic period and the standard repertoire of Anglican church music. The choir, in particular, was very well received.

Tuesday afternoon brought two veterans of the profession together for a joint concert at Riverside Church: Donald McDonald, a professor at Westminster Choir College, and George Faxon, the organist of Trinity Church, Boston. Berry described McDonald's Bach as "clean, crisp, and sparkling" and commended his tremendous sense of proportion in the fiendishly difficult *Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue* of Healey Willan. Reports of Faxon varied, not regarding his playing, but to the program. It was all by 20th-century American composers. Perhaps Berry hit the nail on the head when he wrote, "Modernism, for its own sake, is not necessarily synonymous with music which is music." Not one of the pieces Faxon played is in the standard repertoire today.

Charlotte Garden, who played at St. John the Divine, was apparently not prepared for the overwhelming acoustics of the space, and played too fast. Swinyard washed his hands of it, stating, "It is often impossible to tell that a change has been made in registration until sometime after the event has occurred, and some of a previous higher dynamic has died. I therefore refuse to comment on this recital." Berry wrote that her efforts, however dear, were "largely defeated." One new piece, the *Fanfare* for organ and brass by Alec Wyton, was singled out as "mighty effective."

The evening concert featured Virgil Fox and the choir of the Riverside Church under the direction of Richard Weagly. The program included the premiere of Seth Bingham's *Credo*, and performances of the *Suite*, Op. 5, of Duruflé, and *Dona nobis pacem* of Vaughan Williams. It was so well received that Alistair Cassels-Brown concluded that Riverside must have "some of the best music in New York." However, Gruenstein complained that the accompaniment, consisting of organ, brass, and percussion, was so loud that the choir could barely be heard.

For those who wanted still more, there was the "Rendezvous" at the hotel, an "Evening on the Town," and then at 2:00 A.M.—believe it or not—a theater organ concert on the Wurlitzer at the Paramount. Jack Fisher remarked: "Square pegs in round holes might be the description of most organists faced with the monster generally referred to as the theater organ,"[23] but a substantial crowd of AGOers gathered. "The party picked up with a promising roar at the entrance of Virgil Fox," wrote Fisher, and before it was over, Fox, Searle Wright, Richard Purvis, and even Pierre Cochereau were persuaded to try their hand at the Wurlitzer![24]

On Wednesday morning, some members went to the Annual Meeting, while others went on the organ tours. The first afternoon event was Wilbur Held playing the AGO test pieces. Swinyard said it was disappointing, and "certainly no inspiration to any student preparing for his examination."

Later that afternoon, members split off into special interest groups. Harold Gleason and Catharine Crozier chaired a forum on teaching with Robert Noehren, Leslie Spelman, Claire Coci, Vernon de Tar, and Mildred Andrews. Otto Luening, Leo Sowerby, Seth Bingham, Robert Crandell, and Paul Creston conducted a session on composition, and William Mitchell lectured on "Examinations and Music-Making."

Before dinner, Alexander Schreiner gave a recital at St. James that included the *Passacaglia and Fugue* of Bach, the *Symphonia Mystica* of Camille Van Hulse, and the *Symphony III* of Vierne. Fisher reported that it was "absolutely wonderful," and Swinyard described it as "meticulous, so that the music took shape, each phrase had beauty of form." Fisher questioned the prudence of programming three large works on a hot summer afternoon in New York.

The central event of the convention was the appearance of Claire Coci and George Thalben-Ball with the New York Philharmonic in Lewisohn Stadium. The program, which included the Bach *Magnificat* sung by the New York Choral Society, and two organ concertos by Handel and Delamarter, was Thalben-Ball's American debut.[25] The event was plagued by the same problem that hinders most concert spaces in New York—the stadium did not have an organ. Thalben-Ball's blatant indignation at the electronic organ supplied for the occasion was noted by all the reviewers. Coci apparently did better with it, performing the seldom-heard *Concerto in E* by Eric Delamarter to great acclaim.

Another problem was the amplification of the chorus and orchestra. Balance was such a problem that individual choristers could be heard above the entire orchestra. Parmenter, writing in the *Times*, said, "The concert was more noble in its aims than in its achievements."[26] Whatever its shortcomings, outdoor concerts for thousands of listeners were new in 1956. The committee should be commended for pulling together what must have been an extraordinary event for the time.

On Thursday afternoon, E. Power Biggs and a small ensemble of instruments played a program of Baroque and Classic music at Hunter College. Hermann Schlicker had set up a portable organ in the school's auditorium, and despite the instrument's small size, its clear tone left a favorable impression on everyone. The timing was perfect. At this point in the convention, people were weary of *sforzando*, and Biggs's program, consisting of Sweelinck, Soler, Handel, and Mozart, was like a breath of fresh air. Swinyard proclaimed that "high praise was due the six instrumentalists who played . . . they really made music," and Bingham branded it "artistic perfection."

Later that afternoon, a joint recital featuring Claribel Thompson and Oswald Ragatz was held at St. James. Both players offered standard programs of Bach and a series of 20th-century pieces. Two compositions by Robert Noehren and the *Pantomine* by Harry Benjamin Jepson came as surprises. Fisher described these programs as "splendid recitals by fine performers."

That evening, Thalben-Ball played again, but under better circumstances. His program, at Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue, began with two classical English pieces,

which Berry dismissed as mere "openers." Then, after a straightforward reading of the *Prelude and Fugue in A* of Bach, Thalben-Ball launched into the *Sonata on the 94th Psalm* of Reubke, bringing the house down. Berry called him an "accomplished artist," and the evening a "rewarding experience." The only objection was to the sound of the organ, which was apparently buried deep in a chamber.

Friday morning began with High Mass at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle. Fisher lamented: "I must honestly submit that if this is the most exemplary effort possible by the Archdiocese of New York, there is much to be done in the way of liturgical and musical improvement."

Next came a series of three simultaneous lectures. Of timely interest was "Trends in European Organ-Building" by D.A. Flentrop. (Don't forget that he was soon to install an organ in the Busch-Reisinger Museum in Cambridge.) Flentrop asserted that all the aspects of constructing an organ influence the sound, and should be considered collectively. He expressed a preference for slider chests, mechanical action, freestanding casework, and placement high and on the central axis of the room. While these fundamentals of good organ design are generally understood today, they were not by many of the people who heard that lecture in 1956. Simultaneously, Ray Berry lectured on acoustics, and Seth Bingham spoke on music for small churches.

Emily Ann Cooper, the winner of the competition, played at St. Mary the Virgin on Friday afternoon. Her program included standard works by Bach, Franck, Vierne, and the *Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue* by Healey Willan. Gruenstein noted that "her handling of the large organ in a resonant building was admirable," and that she shows "great promise." Cassels-Brown labeled her recital a tour de force. She "plays with the freshness and vitality of youth and with fine conviction."

The final recital of the convention featured Clarence Mader in a program of largely unknown 20th-century works at St. Bartholomew's Church. On the program was *Fantasia und Fuge*, Günter Raphael; *Orgelkonzert*, Friedrich Micheelson; *Portrait Cycle*, Clarence Mader; and *Symphony No. 3*, Clifford Vaughan. Even under the best circumstances, this was a heavy-duty program, but at the end of a long and exhausting week, it was a planning blunder. Gruenstein noted that Mader's playing "displayed taste and style," but Swinyard was less patient: "So much of this modern dissonant composition is merely modern and merely dissonant. Odd scraps and phrases float up, heading nowhere, except perhaps to a climax full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Berry said the "aridity basic to the Raphael and Micheelson pieces leaves me equally so insofar as comment is concerned." The banquet followed and the convention closed after Anna Russell had 1,600 organists howling all at once.

With Fox and Baker as the chairmen, the New York convention was exactly what you'd expect from them—everything possible, all at once. Berry complained: "Saturated ears, aching arches, disrupted digestion, and an overwhelming desire to sleep indefinitely are a few of the 'occupational hazards' with which one gets thoroughly acquainted. . . . Future convention program planners take heed! For heaven's sake give the registrants a break occasionally." If the New York convention was the biggest, loudest, fastest, and most elaborate, then its opposite occurred in Boston six years before.

### BOSTON, 1950

What made the 20th national convention so different from its New York counterpart was its conception. The bulk of the work was done by four people: Joseph Whiteford, Ruth Barrett Phelps, and E. Power and Peggy Biggs.[27] Biggs served as the program chairman.[28] With such a small committee, it was an ideal forum for Biggs to put forward some of his own beliefs on programming, and without having to compromise. Combined with the popularity of Boston as a convention site, and the fact that 1950 was the bicentennial of Bach's death, the Boston convention was one of the more successful in the history of the Guild.

The committee planned the program with some clear objectives in mind. First, small organs were just as good as large ones, and many of the concerts were played on small organs. Second, even a small pipe organ was better than a substitute: electronic organs were not used in any official capacity. Third, and perhaps the most lasting innovation of the Boston convention, was the first Young Organists' Competition, won by Robert Whitley of Oklahoma City.

Held between June 19 and June 23, the convention opened on Monday afternoon with Choral Evensong at Trinity Church. The choir was directed by Francis Snow, and the voluntaries were played by Carl McKinley and George Faxon. The choir of men and boys sang Renaissance works of Handl, Tallis, and Victoria, and modern works by Titcomb, Willan, and Snow, all of which were well received.

That evening Virgil Fox played on the Casavant organ in Emmanuel Church. He apparently played a program that was almost entirely different from the one published in the booklet.[29] Beginning with the *Messe des Pauvres* of Erik Satie to good effect, he alternated movements with the choir of Emmanuel Church under the direction of Grover J. Oberle. This was followed by some typical Foxiana, "Come, Sweet Death" and the "Fugue à la Gigue" of Bach. His major offering was the *Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue* of Healey Willan, which was described as "overwhelming" in its effect.[30]

Tuesday started off with a loaded discussion on forming a union for organists. William H. Barnes was in the chair, and the panel consisted of Rudoph Elie, a music critic from *The Boston Herald*, Harold Gleason, and others. The comments were somewhat unfocused, but the status of the organist, recitals, low fees, and the perception of the organ in the public eye were all touched upon. Edward Grossman, of St. Louis, concluded the session by stating that labor methods, such as "picketing and other evils," have no place in our profession. Not surprisingly, no official action was taken or recommended.

One of Biggs's salient contributions to this convention was that he successfully persuaded four organ firms—Aeolian-Skinner, Wicks, Estey, and Moller—to set up small organs in the hotel ballroom.[31] On Tuesday, the first of a series of programs using these organs was given by Alexander McCurdy and his wife, Flora Greenwood. That afternoon, a program of Colonial American music was presented at King's Chapel. This was surely an early attempt to match a specific repertoire to a historically appropriate performing space. Moreover, the music of Billings, Jacob Kimball, and Supply Belcher must have come as quite a surprise; not many people were familiar with this repertoire in 1950. Two of Belcher's pieces, "Set down that glass" and "No brandy will we take," were obviously chosen with the organization's membership in mind.

The remainder of the day was devoted to programs of contemporary music. Robert Ellis, who was scheduled to play, was unable to attend for personal reasons. At a moment's notice, Marilyn Mason stepped in and performed from memory the unbelievably difficult *Variations on a Recitative* by Arnold Schoenberg to everyone's astonishment. Sharing the program was the first Boston performance of the *Mass* by Igor Stravinsky, sung by the Chorus Pro Musica under the direction of Alfred Nash Patterson. That evening, Catharine Crozier played a program at the Church of the Advent featuring "new" works by Hindemith, Sowerby, Alain, Dupré and others. "As Miss Crozier had been heard on tours across the nation and gave her first recital at an AGO convention some years ago in Cincinnati, her virtuosity caused no surprise."[32]

Wednesday morning offered a choral workshop led by Fred Waring. He was followed by a program of music for two organs, consisting of selections by Soler, Cherubini, and others, played by Fenner Douglass and Larry Moe on the organs in the ballroom.

That afternoon, conventioneers traveled north to Methuen Music Hall to hear Fritz Heitmann, the organist of the Berlin Dom. With 1,100 people registered, Heitmann had to play the program twice so everyone could hear him. The all-German concert, literally—organ, organist, and repertoire—included the *Passacaglia* of Bach and the *Fantasy and Fugue on B–A–C–H* of Reger, among other works. Gruenstein reported: "The performance was one that justifies the use of superlatives and the modest-appearing man who sat at the console was able to rouse his hearers to great enthusiasm for himself and for the magnificent organ. . . ."[33] Oddly, while Heitmann barely mentions the recital in his memoirs, he vividly recalls the excessive heat and humidity that week.[34]

That evening was the central event of the convention. E. Power Biggs joined forces with the Boston Pops Orchestra under the direction of Arthur Fiedler, and the new Aeolian-Skinner organ in Symphony Hall was used. The major work was the Sowerby *Concerto*. Gruenstein wrote: "The concerto, in three movements, gave the orchestra the opportunity to let loose in an almost riotous performance of a distinctly modern work which was thoroughly enjoyed even by those not yet acclimated to the modern type of composition. The wild ovation given Dr. Sowerby, Mr. Biggs, and Mr. Fiedler made it unmistakably clear that everybody was happy."[35]

Two discussion groups opened Thursday's activities. The first was led by Senator Emerson Richards and covered organ design, and the second, led by Werner

Mueller, dealt with acoustics. Later that morning, the organs in the ballroom were again used in a program of contemporary American works for organ and strings. Mary Crowley Vivian, a student of Biggs, played the Sowerby *Classic Concerto*, William Watkins played the *Prelude and Allegro* by Walter Piston, and George Markey performed a *Passacaglia* by Ellis B. Kohs. Once again, Fiedler and his Sinfonietta provided a quite able accompaniment.

That afternoon, Arthur Poister gave a solo recital at Symphony Hall. His program included four of the 14 *Stations of the Cross* of Dupré, the *Choral in B Minor* of Franck, and the *Prelude and Fugue in E-flat* of Bach. A reviewer commented that Poister played with authority and clarity, and the recital was "outstanding."[36] Later, Archibald T. Davison gave a lecture on the church choir of the future, expressing dismay at the poor quality of much concurrent work in the field.

Before dinner, Ernest White played a concert of early music on the organs in the ballroom. Consisting of works by Bach and Handel, he was joined in the program by a string quartet from the Boston Symphony Orchestra. "The entire performance was one of rare beauty and style."[37]

That evening, a major concert of Bach's music was presented at Trinity Church. Ifor Jones (the music director of the Bethlehem Bach Choir), the Chorus Pro Musica, and an orchestra performed Bach's *Magnificat*. The program also included the academic procession, an address by the Rev. Theodore Ferris, the rector of Trinity Church, and voluntaries played by Robert Noehren. The crowd was so large that hundreds were turned away. *The Diapason* called it "impressive," and Heitmann singled out the "Wundervolle Solisten!,"[38] among whom was Metropolitan Opera soprano Phyllis Curtin.

Friday morning offered the Annual Meeting, followed by a discussion of the examinations. Harold Friedell was in the chair, and the panel consisted of Rowland Dunham, Carl McKinley, and Harris S. Shaw. Later that morning, the fifth and last ballroom concert featured Robert Owen playing chamber music with Louis Speyer on the English horn.

That afternoon, Guild members made it to Cambridge to hear the small Aeolian-Skinner in the Germanic Museum made famous by E. Power Biggs's weekly broadcasts. Mary Crowley Vivian played three works of Bach. Next, members of the Guild stopped at Memorial Church to hear competition winner Robert Whitley play works of Buxtehude, Bach, Haydn, Franck, and Messiaen.

Boston was arguably the finest convention of the postwar period. Not before or since has such a balance been maintained between large and small organs, newly composed and established repertoire, and never have orchestras and instrumental ensembles played such a significant part in a convention program. All of this shows the guiding hand of Biggs, and it was largely to his efforts that the Boston convention was such a success. Many of the programming and organizational ideas introduced at the Boston convention were adopted by the committees in San Francisco and Minneapolis.

### SAN FRANCISCO, 1952

The 21st national convention was held between June 30 and July 4. Registration, how-

ever, was only half of its immediate precursor, reaching 644 on the final day. Economics had a sobering reality: the committee planned a leaner convention with fewer top-notch performers, reduced instrumental forces, and no international performer.

Like Boston, two small organs were set up in the hotel, but they were less used. In what was an important first at this convention, some Guild members heard a modern tracker organ built by Rieger, but it was not part of the official program. It had been set up in the Emporium Department Store, and Robert Noehren played a program of Schlick, Sweelinck, Buxtehude, Vierne, and Bach on it. Another convention novelty was the appearance of Bruce Prince-Joseph playing a harpsichord.

Organ recitals were presented by Harold Mueller, Ernest White, Edward Linzel, George William Volkel, Searle Wright, George Markey, C. Griffith Bratt, Claire Coci, David Craighead, Virgil Fox, and Robert Ellis. Craighead, according to Gruenstein, was "well received," but R.H. Hagan, writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, asserted that Fox's recital "was a major exhibition of virtuosity at the expense of good musicianship and taste."[39] The unexpected happened on Thursday when Robert Noehren played an entire program of 19th- and early 20th-century compositions, including the *Prelude and Fugue in E-flat* by Saint-Saëns. One might have guessed that this was out of his league—at least then.

G. Donald Harrison, then in the prime of his career, spoke on contemporary organ design. The presentation consisted of—to use Harrison's own phrase—some "off-the-cuff words of advice from a man proud of his gray hairs to a young generation of organists."[40] Mixtures, he asserted, must not be used to excess, and an organ needs good placement and live acoustics to be effective. His most prudent advice was that church organs should be built for congregations, not for the whims of an individual organist. Those words ring as true today as they did 40 years ago.

The highpoint of the convention occurred Wednesday night, when E. Power Biggs joined members of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra at the Civic Center. The program consisted of the *Concerto in C* by Haydn, conducted by Biggs from the console, the *Concerto in G Minor* by Poulenc, and *Concertpiece*, a new work by Leo Sowerby. Sowerby conducted the final two works. *The Diapason* called Biggs a fully "mature and finished musician" and Sowerby's conducting "impressive." The *Concertpiece* made a good impression; it was "ingratiating . . . and the enthusiasm of those who heard it was great."[41] "After they had finished, both men were called back to the stage many times by the long ovation from those present."[42] The convention ended with the expected banquet on Friday evening.

### MINNEAPOLIS–ST. PAUL, 1954

By 1954, there was no turning back on the Baroque revival. For the 22nd national convention, held between July 12 and July 16, Bach, his contemporaries, and his precursors accounted for 60% of the programming. While a few new personalities surfaced at this convention, it was at the expense of the tried and true veterans of the profession. E. Power Biggs, Catharine Crozier, Virgil Fox, and Leo Sowerby were conspicuous by their absence from the program. Registration—at about 600—was on a par with the San Francisco convention, but was far below the throng that descended on Boston four years earlier.

In general, the Minneapolis convention offered little in the way of novelties. The major choral works were the *Passion According to St. Matthew* by Schütz, and a complete performance of the Coopersmith edition of *Messiah*. While one could chastise the committee for not being more audacious, 2,800 people heard *Messiah* in the Minneapolis Auditorium, 500 more listened by electronic amplification, and 1,000 were turned away.

The most interesting recital of the convention was played by Marilyn Mason. It consisted of two works of Bach, a series of modern French compositions, and the premiere of the *Concerto for Organ and Brass* by Seth Bingham with the composer conducting. "From the first theme of the beginning movement to the last note of the finale there was an emotional strength and power of expression in the music that few composers ever achieve."[43] Gruenstein said, "This was more than an ordinary recital." It was solid, grand, and firm, and Mason performed with "ease and accuracy achieved only by [a] real artist."[44]

An awkward moment occurred when Donald Willing "read a short paper pointing out the advantages of tracker action. He stated that this type of action establishes the most sensitive relationship possible between the player and the instrument." The forum for this was a lecture by Walter Holtkamp, who, according to Gruenstein, epitomized the "*avant-garde* of modern organbuilding." The panel consisted of Willing, architect Victor Gilbertson, and Richard Bolt, an acoustician. Of course, Holtkamp spoke on organ placement, soundly condemning chamber and divided chancel installations. A skeptical reviewer concluded with this remark: "The fact that the 'panel of experts' did not agree with one another on every point added interest to the discussion and many in the audience who felt that they were not ready to accept some of the ideas advanced also felt that they had gained a great deal of valuable information."[46]

Other concerts were presented by Ronald Arnatt, Arthur Poister, George Markey, Heinrich Fleischer, Arden Whitacre, and William Teague, and all the programs were relatively conservative. If the Minneapolis convention is remembered for one thing, it will be that the convention chairperson was a woman, Mrs. A.J. Fellows.

### ST. LOUIS, 1948

The 19th national convention, held in St. Louis, July 5–9, was the first major gathering of the membership following the war. With about 500 registrants, it was smaller than later conventions, and its program was even less innovative.

There was one exception: a two-hour discussion titled "Symposium on Organ Design." Chaired by William H. Barnes, the panel was composed of Michael Harrison (son of G. Donald Harrison), Emerson Richards, and Edward Gammons. For a generation of organists who were taught and believed that their Ernest M. Skinner organ was the aesthetic ideal for *all* the music they played, this session must have been a bit unsettling. It was the first concrete evidence at a national convention of that mysterious and concurrent European movement called the *Orgelbewegung*, although it appears by the comments that no one understood where it was all leading, except perhaps Richards himself.[47]

Gammons initiated the discussion by tracing the history of the organ, and even that was probably news to most. Michael Harrison dealt with organ tone "as a matter of aesthetics." The zinger, however, came when Richards argued for a "renaissance in organ design." He stated that the organ evolved "with a nation's musical and cultural development," and that different styles of organs were suited to different types of literature. To degrade the organ by using it as an orchestral imitation is folly, considering the large number of orchestras now in existence. Thus, the organ should return to its original function, which is to play organ music.

Then there were comments from the floor. Arthur B. Jennings and Rowland Dunham complained about the use of "too many reeds and mixtures" at the expense of solo stops. William Pilcher advocated an "American" style of organbuilding, combining all the different schools. John Selig, of the Reuter Organ Company, pleaded for guidance in building small organs. This needs our attention, he stated, or should we "walk away and leave the field to electronics?"[48]

Electronic organs did play quite prominently in this convention. There was a formal demonstration of a different type of electric organ each evening.

The major recital of the convention featured E. Power Biggs with orchestra. The program opened with the "Cuckoo and the Nightingale" Concerto by Handel, and included three fugues from *The Art of Fugue*, four *Epistle Sonatas* of Mozart, *Variations on a Noël* by Dupré, and a performance of the *Concerto in G Minor* by Poulenc. Regarding the latter, Gruenstein noted that the piece "in the modern idiom made a most favorable impression on everyone. The Dupré and Poulenc works aroused the throng in the church to a tremendous outburst of approval, compelling Mr. Biggs to return repeatedly to bow to the admiring crowd."[49]

Other recitals were presented by Arthur Jennings, Richard Purvis, Robert Baker, Charles Peaker, and Edward Linzel, who played the *Suite* of Duruflé, only a few years after it was composed.

### WASHINGTON, D.C., 1941

The 18th national convention, held in Washington, D.C., June 23–27, was really the tail end of the long succession of general conventions that began in 1914. On the opening day, Germany declared war on Russia, so this cast a pall over the proceedings.

The preconvention festivities began with a series of events at the Library of Congress, including a concert and an exhibition of rare manuscripts. The concert, presented in Coolidge Auditorium, was significant because it was an early performance of E. Power Biggs at a national convention.[50] Ironically, his name does not appear in the program booklet, which causes me to wonder if it was underwritten by Mrs. Coolidge. Biggs met her in 1940, and she was very generous in sponsoring many of his projects.[51] The program spotlighted some unusual numbers for the time, among them several Church

Sonatas by Mozart. Ray Brown, writing in the *Washington Post*, dismissed them with, "Few of the auditors had ever heard before and may never hear again, three one-movement sonatas by Mozart for two violins, violoncello, and organ. None of these works is of particular significance either in themes or workmanship. . . ."[52] In deference to Mr. Brown, and with abundant thanks to Biggs, the Church Sonatas of Mozart are now standard repertoire. Neither was Brown especially charitable to Biggs: "His performance was more technical than colorful. . . ."[53]

The opening recital of the convention was played by Joseph Bonnet. His program consisted of the "St. Anne" Prelude and Fugue of Bach, two American pieces, a couple of French compositions, and several of his own compositions. By this time Bonnet was getting on in years, and perhaps for this reason, Gruenstein commented, "He is still a giant whose 'ancient valor,' as Caesar put it, has not departed, though he has not to the same degree the fire and force that he displayed a quarter of a century ago."[54]

An immense success at this convention was the appearance of Catharine Crozier on the new organ built by Ernest M. Skinner & Son at Washington Cathedral. Crozier, the only woman on the program, played the huge *Symphony in G Major* by Sowerby, the *Pastorale* by Roger-Ducasse, and Karg-Elert's *Ach, blieb' mit deiner Gnade*. She was so fantastic that Gruenstein said her program will "stand out as a high point in the history of conventions of organists."[55]

The event that got the attention of the local newspapers was a "Male Beauty Contest" held Thursday morning at the Lido Swimming Pool. An anonymous writer in the *Post* noted: "All will not be solemnity at the gathering which will be officially called to order at 9 o'clock this morning. . . ."[56]

Other events included recitals by E. William Brackett, Leslie Spelman, and Walter Blodgett, who played the "Maggot" by Thomas Arne on an organ in Old St. John's with "distinct Baroque leanings."[57] Virgil Fox accompanied a performance of Robin Milford's oratorio, the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Gruenstein described his playing as a "tower of strength."[58]

The war in Europe was not—and could not—be forgotten by anyone attending this convention. At the closing banquet, M. Gaston Henry-Haye, the ambassador from France, told of an incident involving himself in the previous World War. As an officer at the battle of Verdun, he entered a damaged church with a captain who in civil life was an organist. Going to the organ, which had miraculously escaped damage, the captain started to play. The Germans heard the organ and stopped firing. "In this sad period in the world's history," said M. Haye, "let us pray that some organist will arise who will be able to cause the combatants to cease firing."[59]

The Guild did not have another national convention for seven years.

### HOUSTON, 1958

If anything, the 24th national convention was a decided reaction against what transpired in New York two years before. Instead of an excessively hectic schedule, the pace was relaxed and leisurely, and Wednesday morning was entirely free. "A convention can be full, varied and interesting without being driven at such a mad pace that delegates are bleary-eyed and footsore after the second day," wrote Berry.[60] And there was one other delightful and very welcome surprise for the delegates in Houston—air-conditioned churches!

The convention, held June 23–27, kicked off with a three-part recital by Robert Baker in Christ Church Cathedral. Part I included Baroque works; Part II, contemporary American works; and Part III was a hodgepodge of unrelated works chosen to illustrate the "colors of the organ." Although Baker played splendidly, he was somewhat upstaged by the unveiling of an electronic reverberation unit by the Aeolian-Skinner Company.

Back in October of 1957, the firm ran a two-page advertisement in *The Diapason*, announcing the installation of a similar unit in Christ Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The contraption, actually quite advanced for its day, consisted of a tape recorder with a loop of tape. It recorded the sounds captured by a microphone near the organ, and then immediately played them back with a delay. This was channeled through a series of speakers mounted near the ceiling of the church. Its purpose was to provide an illusion of better acoustics than really existed. The advertisement trumpets the unit's success, and contains a number of endorsements, one of which was by Edward Gammons.[61]

Like the Cambridge church, the Houston cathedral had terrible acoustics. Officials from Aeolian-Skinner decided to introduce

the acoustical "band-aid" at the opening recital, but reactions were certainly mixed. "Delegates unlucky enough to have undesirable seat locations for Dr. Baker's recital were unhappy at the distortion they heard."[62] In contrast, Jack Fisher stated that the unit was "completely convincing," although he admitted that it had a "canned" effect.[63] Another report noted that it caused heated arguments throughout the convention.

On Wednesday evening, Catharine Crozier played a program of Bach, Sowerby, and the Reubke *Sonata on the 94th Psalm* at the First Presbyterian Church. Hilty called it the "musical climax of the convention," adding that "Miss Crozier's flawless technique coupled with the abandon necessary for a work of this sort brought convention members to their feet." *The Diapason* agreed.[64]

Other recitals were presented by Charles Peaker, Heinrich Fleisher, E. Power Biggs, Leslie Spelman, and Virgil Fox. Virgil Fox played his own transcription of the *Sinfonia Concertante* of Joseph Jongen with great success. He is a "prodigious showman who needs an adoring and flabbergasted audience for his most effective exhibition." Fisher called it "dazzling entertainment."

The most memorable aspect of the Houston convention was the southern hospitality, and the committee made the most of it. Instead of a frumpy banquet followed by overlong speeches and endless acknowledgments, the committee organized a Texas-style barbecue and rodeo at Rockin' R. Ranch. Guild members were decked out in Western garb, and after luscious food was served on picnic tables covered with red-checkered tablecloths, all went over to the corral for a "Rodeo by the Texas Posse." A fabulous evening ended with an exhibition of square dancing.

### THE ROUNDUP

Having come full circle, we can tie this together with a few remarks. The two most substantial artistic personalities of the period were E. Power Biggs and Virgil Fox, who, ironically, represented drastically different approaches. Their contributions as both players and organizers were enormous. Not far behind was Catharine Crozier, whose extraordinary artistry dazzled thousands of conventioneers over two decades. Also deserving mention were notable contributions by Marilyn Mason, Leslie Spelman, Richard Purvis, and Robert Noehren.

The literature of these conventions was predominantly by Bach and 20th-century composers. While Germanic music of the pre-Bach period was just beginning to make an appearance, French Classic, Italian, Spanish, and English Baroque music was still in the future. Absent, too, except for a handful of works by Liszt, Reubke, and Franck, was the majority of literature written between the late Classic period and the end of the 19th century. Only one Mendelssohn Sonata appeared in 20 years of convention programming.

Absolutely astonishing is the enormous amount of new music heard at these conventions. Many now-standard works of Vierne, Duruflé, Dupré, and Hindemith were heard in early performances at these conventions. Sowerby was practically the composer in residence; many of his grandest and most splendid works were either written for or performed at these gatherings.

The preferred instrument was an Aeolian-Skinner; that company's most distinguished work represented the majority of instruments heard. Other beautiful organs built by Casavant, Austin, Wicks, and Moller were also played. Those firms that brought organs to the conventions for display and programs in the hotels—particularly Aeolian-Skinner, Moller, Schlicker, Wicks, Rieger, and Reuter—did so at enormous expense, and deserve special commendation.

Many of the trends that shaped the organ world of today first became evident at these conventions. On an organizational level, they served as a forum to discuss problems that confronted the membership. On an artistic level, the greatest accomplishments of a generation of performers were displayed. On a personal level, the conventions provided an opportunity to meet and renew acquaintances. On a professional and educational level, they were a source for new ways of thinking and provided encouragement to improve one's skills. Finally, as we conclude this indulgence, we stand in awe of the achievements of the period, and we laud the immeasurable contribution the Guild has made to the betterment of church music and the organ.

Now, as we approach our Centennial and prepare to greet a new millennium, we can paraphrase our Houston compatriot:

"So long, pardners! This is my last article until we see you in New York. We know you will have a swell time there. We are not bragging. We don't do that in New York."

### NOTES

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3. Ibid., 17.
4. Convention Booklet (1948), p. 5.
5. Convention Booklet (1950), p. 5.
6. Siegfried Gruenstein, "Varied Events Mark Convention of AGO," *D* 43:9 (August 1952), p. 9.
7. Convention Booklet (1954), p. 6.
8. Convention Booklet (1956), p. 17.
9. Registration materials, Houston Convention.
10. Samuel Atkinson Baldwin, *The Story of the American Guild of Organists* (New York: H.W. Gray Co. Inc. [1946]), pp. 78–79; and Barbara Owen, "American Guild of Organists Centennial: The Guild Grows," *The American Organist* [hereinafter *TAO*] 30:3 (March 1996), p. 46.
11. "Diapasons Founder Closes Long Career—S.E. Gruenstein Succumbs," *D* 49:2 (Jan. 1958), pp. 1–2.
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26. Ross Parmenter, "Music: An 'Organ Night,'" *The New York Times*, June 28, 1956, p. 33.
27. Convention Booklet, 1950, p. 3.
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29. Siegfried Gruenstein, "Boston Draws 1,141 to AGO Convention," *D* 41:8 (July 1950), p. 1.
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32. *D* 41:8 (July 1950), p. 2.
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34. Richard Voge, *Fritz Heitmann: Das Leben eines deutschen Organisten* (Berlin: Verlag Merseburger), pp. 84–85.
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38. Voge, p. 85.
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63. Jack Fisher, "Demonstration of the Electronic Reverberation Unit," *TAO* 41:8 (August 1958), pp. 290–91.
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