

# AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS CENTENNIAL

## AGO CONVENTIONS 1980–1994

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The First Church of Christ, Scientist (The Mother Church), AGO Boston 1990 (© Robert D. Davis)

Nothing equals the excitement of an AGO national convention. You arrive a bit tired from the trip, a bit confused by where to go, a bit flushed with anticipation, and with the first “hello” to an old friend, former student, or colleague, you are off and running for a very full, very busy week. Some conventions are dominated by a particular personality, composer, or event, and some by the newest organs you may or may not have heard. In some measure, the Ruffatti organ in Davies Symphony Hall did this for San Francisco 1984 to highly differing opinions; Detroit 1986 boasted the adventure of hearing Janice Beck’s all-Bach program on the Silbermann-design Fisk at Ann Arbor, Michigan; Boston 1990 ranged from the E. and G.C. Hook of 1875 in Holy Cross Cathedral, temporarily held together by the prayers and devotion of long hours of volunteers’ work, to Wellesley’s Fisk with divided black keys and short-octave keyboards; and Dallas 1994’s Fisk Opus 100 in Meyerson Symphony Center with its two consoles.

### Opening Convocations

An opening convocation is certainly a grand way to begin by gathering the conven-

tioners into one space. Surely, for all the great playing, singing, and preaching that may occur, the single most memorable part of the service will be the hymn singing of 2,000-plus organists. Hymns are most often done with improvised introductions and interludes by an expert, such as McNeil Robinson (Minneapolis 1980) or others equally well known. Opening and closing organ music is generally a large-scale organ composition, such as Huw Lewis’s performance of Franck’s *Grande Pièce symphonique* (Detroit 1986), or concerted works such as Vierne’s *Marche triomphale* or Widor’s *Salvum fac populum* (Washington 1982). Commissioned works are customarily offered, such as Fred Bock’s *Festival Te Deum* for organ, chorus, congregation, brass, harp, and percussion (San Francisco 1984) and Joyce Mekeel’s *Light*, on texts by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and T.S. Eliot, written to match the general theme for the worship (Boston 1990).

Speakers have been drawn from various professions: Martin Marty, Horace Allen, theologians (Minneapolis 1980, Boston 1990); musician Barry Rose (Detroit 1988); educator Peter Schoenbach (Detroit 1986); and our own Guild presidents.

### Worship

No matter how you cut it, worship in church and temple is central to the work of almost all the country’s organists: that’s where we perform, that’s what we learn music for, those are the people outside the profession with whom we most closely work. Through the ‘80s, most Guild services were generic with a strong, at times, Episcopal emphasis. These services, including pre-convention services at local churches, have premiered new works, anthems, hymns, and voluntaries. Some conventions have been satisfied with only a couple of services; others have programs falling almost into the category of illustrative concerts, such as Marie-Claire Alain and Lenora McCroskey’s reconstruction of the Christmas liturgy from Guillaume Gabriel Nivers, 1686, that showed alternatim possibilities for the psalm verses using choral settings by Nivers, Lully, and Charpentier with organ verses by Lebègue and Nivers. Umberto Pineschi, whose workshop on Italian repertoire included a service—a reconstructed Italian Mass with Gregorian chant and organ, using for organ music the anonymous 18th-century *Messa del Doppio* and Frescobaldi’s *Messa delli Apostoli* from *Fiori Musicali* (Atlanta 1992).

Beginning with Boston in 1990, a change in approach can be seen with many denominational services being offered in varying locations and for various liturgical occasions: Church of the Advent, Episcopal—All Souls' Day, a Requiem using Victoria's *Missa pro defunctis cum sex vocibus*; gospel music at Park Street Church; Sabbath Eve Service at Temple Sinai; Lessons and Carols at Unitarian King's Chapel. Dallas 1994 was to continue this pattern with regional differences apparent in the denominations represented.

#### Solo Organ Recitals

Paradoxically, the solo organ recitals, which are at the very heart of conventions, are numerically impossible to talk about in summary fashion. I would like to remind readers of the excellent reviews of conventions that appeared in both *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* and *The Diapason* following the events. The reviews and the program books have been the main sources for information in this article.

There is no question that the cream of our national artists appears with some regularity along with the best of local talent. Playing standards are inspiringly high; enviably good organs are used for the most part with a rare mismatch of instrument to repertoire. Our own American performers are used a good 90% of the time, with the addition of English, French, German, and others appearing frequently, both as soloists and workshop leaders.

In thinking about the music that is performed, there is an excitingly high proportion of commissioned and new works by American composers. This varies, but still the number of otherwise unheard works is quite astonishing. What bothers me is how quickly most of it disappears into oblivion, or, if it is available, where, how, and from whom. Wouldn't it be terrific if by common agreement, copies of new works, yet unpublished, might be placed in some agreed upon place—possibly AGO National Headquarters, possibly the Boston Organ Library. It would be of great worth, historically and artistically.

I wondered at first if the number of workshops on early music far exceeded the actual performances of early music at conventions. I don't now find that to be the case; they are about equal. A great deal of the early music is embedded in chamber music programs and special services. Of course, the music of Bach is performed about three times as often as any other composer, either in complete collections such as the *Clavierübung III* or individual preludes and fugues and chorale preludes. Buxtehude holds his own surprisingly well, as does De Grigny. Composers who write the big blockbusters are well represented—who wouldn't want a rousing ovation—Dupré the most, Widor slightly less than Reger and Vierne, Liszt less frequently. The small works of Reger are indeed rare, mostly the chorale fantasies, and Vierne is often represented with a complete symphony. Music of value and interest from out-of-the-way corners is abundant. Music covers the field from very early to what was finished, sometimes, just the week prior to the program. I am sure we all take pride in this.

#### Choral Singing

Next to organ playing, one way or another, all organists must work with choirs, as accompanist or director. Choral music forms the second largest category of musical events at any convention. As one reviewer commented, some of the most thrilling moments in Minneapolis 1980 came from the convention having the St. Paul's Cathedral choir (Barry Rose, conductor) in residence. The choir's singing of Matins and Evensong and its concert were heartily anticipated. In

Washington 1982, men and boys choirs were again represented by Gerre Hancock and the St. Thomas Choir in a mixed program, to be followed later in the week by an exemplary and moving performance of Leo Sowerby's *Forsaken of Man*, conducted by Paul Callaway and accompanied by Douglas Major. It is a great satisfaction to hear works that cannot be done just anywhere, such as the Vierne *Messe solennelle* for two organs and choir (Detroit 1986). The Detroit Symphony Chorale also sang Hugo Distler's *Totentanz* in conjunction with the Attic Theatre following Larry Palmer's performance of selected Distler organ works.

King's College returned to the convention scene in Houston 1988, this time under the direction of Stephen Cleobury; in addition to the round of singing expected on Monday night, they treated conventioners in the exhibit area with arrangements of "Summertime" and "Mood Indigo." First-class local groups have always been in evidence. Conducted by Richard Coffey (Boston 1990), the 50 singers from the Connecticut Choral Artists (CONCORA) earned a standing ovation. The Theatre of Voices (Dallas 1994), a California-based octet conducted by Paul Hillier, moved easily from early American pieces to Arvo Pärt. In all programs, commissioned works abound. Robert Sirota's fascinating *Mass* for chorus, soloists, organ, and percussion, sung by the Boston Cecilia Society conducted by Donald Teeters, with Barbara Bruhns playing the organ part (Boston 1990), is a good illustration.

#### Workshops

Convention reviewers sometimes take a stab at discussing the workshops, reviewing the few they are able to cover or giving it up as an impossible task altogether. There are anywhere from 20 to 40 workshops at each convention, covering an enormous range of concerns to the profession from rudimentary skills to the last word in scholarly research—acoustics, Bach performance and research problems, Brahms, children's choirs, employment contracts, fabric as symbol, Guild examinations, Hindemith, and improvisation. The constants are workshops on hymn playing, general service repertoire, children's choirs, handbells, liturgical issues of all sorts, everything that has to do with our work. Of increasing importance, since 1980, are the problems that women face in the workplace, contracts, clergy/organist problems, seminary relations (how we sensitize clergy regarding music and musicians in the church), gay/lesbian concerns, psychological burnout, physical burnout, and orthopedic problems that arise in our profession and their avoidance.

Papers on organbuilding, organs of Paris, as well as performance issues from early music, increasing interest in Romantic performance issues, and on down to our time, are also delivered. Indeed, it would be surprising if our collective concerns did not come up for airing. What an opportunity, though, for all of us to rub elbows and exchange ideas with experts from around the world.

#### National Young Artists Competition In Organ Performance

Nothing is quite so instructive to an organ teacher as to follow the National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance from the preliminary sessions through the final selection of two or three to the narrowing down to one winner. One certainly has empathy for the judges who must remember backwards to what happened hours before and make a qualitative judgment based on a large number of factors. The quality of playing is astonishingly high (one is tempted to say throateningly) as war-horses and blockbusters fly off the fingers of the young artists, all coping with an organ not that familiar and often not that ideal.

One of the reviews made a very strong case for an award for the choice of winner from the audience's perspective. Like betting on the horses, my choice for winner, as probably yours, has not always won. Actually, I am not for this, for anyone entering a competition knows there are winners and losers: let it stand. One complaint that appears rather frequently is that the contestants lack communication skills. It is not so easy to "just play the music" in the presence of a critical audience and unknown judges!

For all the discussion, what is clear is that very often some of the best playing in a convention has been done by a young artist. I will list the winners over the period I am discussing so you may judge for yourself how many have entered into the mainstream of the organ world:

1980	Jeffrey L. Walker
1982	Brett Wolgast
1984	Mark Laubach
1986	Michael Farris
1988	Christopher Young
1990	Matthew Dirst
1992	Martin Jean
1994	Douglas Cleveland

#### Improvisation

A first in programming was the Improvisation Academy in Detroit 1986, when four internationally known practitioners of the art offered sessions to a limited number of students and a host of auditors. The class concentrated on strict forms: ABA, sonata form, toccatas, chorale preludes, and canons. To whet the appetites and to place improvisational skills front and center, the four teachers were given an opportunity to display their art in a shared concert in Ford Auditorium. Daniel Roth began, developing his themes into an evocative *Tombeau* in memory of Maurice Duruflé; William Porter and Harald Vogel antiphoned using a pedal harpsichord and a small tracker organ in a charming set of variations; while Gerre Hancock, picking up what was left of the submitted themes, came up with a stunning work, which included "Old McDonald." Students in the classes presented their own concert at the end of the week. The Improvisation Academy concept, though not the name, has been included since in the workshops category. Beginning at Boston 1990, the first improvisation competitions were held, being analogous to the Young Artists Competition. Wide latitude was given in terms of style and form. One theme was specified to be a chant, chorale, or hymn tune, plus a contrasting given theme.

A great service to the profession has been made by the increased attention given to improvisation. It is interesting to note that we are just beginning to get some good texts in this field, where there has been little guidance in English before. I give the names of the winners of the competition:

1990	Bruce Neswick
1992	Ronald Stolz
1994	Jeffrey Brillhart

#### Pedagogy Conferences

With the gathering of over 30 teachers of organ in this country, a veritable roster of who's who in the profession, the first National Pedagogy Conference was held in Washington 1982. Each teacher was asked to make a brief statement about his or her priorities. Fascinating as it was, it turned out to be a long sit and after a discussion of early performance practice, we were kindly invited by Charles Brown, who was presiding, to stand and exercise by wiggling fingers 2, 3, and 4. We all obliged by doing just that and more. Nearly all aspects of teaching got covered in one way or another, offering food for thought for what needed more in-depth coverage in the future.

In San Francisco 1984, Catharine Crozier gave the keynote address, "Performance Practice: Is There an Emerging Consensus?" One definition given during the subsequent discussion for historic performance practice was, "However anyone plays at any given time." It's worth thinking about.

A change of format came with Detroit in 1986, with the concept of "Windows on Lessons," where individual students played the same repertoire for three different teachers, in this instance, David Craighead of Eastman, Robert Glasgow of the University of Michigan, and Robert Anderson of Southern Methodist University. It proved a most useful and instructive time—we all learn from watching each other work. Seminars followed in the afternoon.

Houston 1988 continued the "Windows on Lessons," together with such topics as the teaching of improvisation, organ methods, and conducting from the console. In 1990, Fred Hockberg, a specialist in physical problems peculiar to practicing musicians, discussed avoidance of physical problems and how to treat them when they exist. Atlanta 1992 continued this course by presenting a specialist in the Alexander Technique, Barbara Conable. There were more opportunities to observe teachers, this time Catharine Crozier, who emphasized fundamentals of technique, and Clyde Holloway, dealing with intermediate and advanced students. The elder statesman of organ teachers, Leslie Spelman, gave the keynote address: "Organ Teaching Then and Now."

A less general and more scholarly format dominated Dallas 1994 with the invitation to Christoph Wolff of Harvard to speak on "Buxtehude's Influence on Bach: Compositional and Performance Aspects." Related papers were presented. Luigi Tagliavini dealt with "Frescobaldi's *Phantasticus* and *Affetuoso* Style and Heritage," followed again by more papers. Caryl Johnson was the hand therapist discussion leader. As a first cousin to the conventions proper, the pedagogy conferences have had more time to develop themes, and smaller groups have allowed for more personal interchange—a wonderful addition to the Guild's involvement in education in this country.

#### *Organ Plus*

Of all the works for organ in combination with other instruments—voice, percussion, brass, orchestra, whatever—none sticks in my mind quite so firmly as the composition by Henry Brant (San Francisco 1984) called *Orbits: A Symphonic Spatial Symphony for 84 Trombones*, spaced in the round in St. Mary's Cathedral, with Leonard Raver valiantly playing the organ part. It was full of quarter tones, slides, and other sonic delights. If nothing else, I found it fascinating and recall thinking I'd better make the most of the chance to hear it—I can't offhand even name enough trombone players to consider performing it. Where else but at Guild conventions do we get the opportunity to hear such a wide range of compositions for organ all the way up to its use with full orchestra in some of the best music halls in the world.

For the organ and one extra musician, we have had organ-vocal music by Phyllis Bryn-Julson and Donald Sutherland (Atlanta 1992), the organ duo of Elizabeth and Raymond Chenault (Atlanta 1992), organ and piano music by Brian Jones and Andrew Gordon (Detroit 1986), and organ plus at Lovers' Lane United Methodist Church, with works for trumpet, oboe, and English horn (Dallas 1994). Smaller ensembles abound: the American Baroque Ensemble (Houston 1988), Mu-

sica Antiqua Köln (Bach's *Musical Offering*), and the Texas Baroque Ensemble conducted by Susan Ferré (performing little-known Mexican compositions from the 16th and 17th centuries) (Dallas 1994).

Certainly the high point of most conventions is the organ with orchestra program. To mention just a few large-scale works by composers in alphabetical order: C.P.É. Bach's *Concerto in A Major*, Samuel Barber's *Toccata Festiva*, Enrico Bossi's *Concerto in A Minor*, Stephen Douglas Burton's *Homage to Johann Sebastian Bach*, Aaron Copland's *Symphony*, and Paul Creston's *Symphony*. The last 15 years have taken us on a tour of places and times: *Lombard Street* by Henry Brant, *Pebble Beach Sojourn* by Ron Nelson, and David Raksin's *A Song After Sundown*. A treasury of possibilities for future performances.

#### Opera

Opera may not be the first thing you would expect to find at an AGO convention, yet we have had two during the eight conventions that fall under discussion in this article! At Minneapolis 1980, Philip Brunelle conducted Peter Maxwell Davies's *The Martyrdom of Saint Magnus*. The production was stunning in effect. It was also the most controversial composition of the week. At Dallas 1994, the new music committee commissioned Conrad Susa to compose a church opera. The result was *The Wise Women*, scored modestly for flute, harp, guitar, handbells, organ, and percussion, with nine principal roles. Both of these works, by significant composers, help to enlarge a small but select repertoire and offer wonderful performance opportunities for those with the resources to take advantage of these scores.

#### Carillon Concerts

One of the pleasures of convention going is simply the different sorts of physical, social, cultural, and environmental situations to be found in the locality visited. Apparently Washington 1982 was the only locale able to include two carillons in its programming. Robert Grogan, carillonneur at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception played the 56-bell Paccard, and Richard Strauss played at Washington National Cathedral, where the John Taylor carillon has 53 bells. The carillon in the Hoover Tower at Stanford University was heard at San Francisco 1984.

#### Closing Events

Final events must somehow top what has preceded, or markedly set a change of pace. Minneapolis 1980 presented organists Robert Glasgow and Paul Manz at the Cathedral of St. Paul with Philip Brunelle conducting the Berlioz *Requiem*, the Janáček *Mass*, and a Vaughan Williams *Te Deum*, sung by all. At Washington 1982, in Constitution Hall, we heard Horatio Parker's *Iam sol recedit igneus*, selections from *Porgy and Bess* and *Oklahoma*, Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, Lambert's *Rio Grande*, and Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever*. The last event in San Francisco 1984 was recreational—theater organist Lyn Larson playing a midnight recital to a capacity crowd. Detroit 1986's closing concert of concerted works with the Detroit Symphony featured Marilyn Keiser, Stephen Hamilton, and Ray Ferguson as soloists. Houston 1988 concluded with a concert by Chanticleer in Jones Hall. Boston 1990 ended characteristically at the "Pops" in Symphony Hall with James David Christie soloing with the Boston Pops Orchestra and concluding with the audience singing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." Atlanta 1992

closed with Hector Olivera playing a gilded 1929 Moller in the Arabian Nights setting of the Fox Theatre, ending his skillful and entertaining program with the premiere of William Albright's *Flights of Fancy—Ballet for Organ*. William Balcom and Joan Morris, performing at the refurbished Majestic Theatre in Dallas 1994, brought their wonderful and sophisticated artistry to a delighted audience that was willing to stay all night for more.

A convention is, at a minimum, a good four years in the planning from site selection to finished program. A staggering debt of gratitude is owed to those committee mem-

bers who work long and hard at everything from where to park buses, locations of comfort stations, hotel spaces, planning programs, and executing contracts with artists. We owe a great debt, too, to the artists, performers, and lecturers for making the conventions what they are for the attendees.

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