

THE UNIFIED ORGANIST

Keynote Address delivered by Dr. Richard L. Elliott
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One of my most memorable experiences came while serving a mission in Argentina. I had been in the country for nearly a year, during which time I had not heard or seen a single pipe organ. After a long day of tracting with no success, my companion and I passed in front of a church from which we heard emanating the sounds of a real pipe organ. My companion, who was no shrinking violet, nudged me up the stairs and into the balcony. Imagine our surprise when the organist turned around and said, in perfect English, “Elders, what are you doing here?”

I will save the rest of this story for another time and place, but I wish to begin by asking all of you the same question: “What are you doing here?” or, in other words, “Why are you here?” What I mean by that is not, “What do you want to learn today?” but rather, “What was it that motivated you to study music?” and “What is it that keeps you striving to reach the next level?”

I would suspect that you are all motivated to study music and to keep striving for improvement for many of the same reasons why I continue to study and strive. As I have thought about what has motivated me the most, what keeps coming into my mind is the feeling I have—both as a performer and as a listener—when things “click” and when I experience a type of joy which transcends nearly every other earthly sensation. The best way to describe this feeling is as a feeling of oneness—of being one with the instrument, one with the music, one with the audience or congregation, and one with my whole self. I would like to explore each of these ideas in detail.

First, the idea of being one with our instrument. To me, one of the distinguishing features of a truly great musician is the high degree of oneness which he or she exhibits with his or her instrument. They are so unified that you can’t tell whether the performer is an extension of the instrument or the instrument is an extension of the performer. What are some things we can do to become one with our chosen instrument, the organ?

It is a given that we should work diligently to polish our manual and pedal technique, but what else can we do to become one with the organ?

Number one, we can make an effort to learn all that we are able about how organs are constructed, about the different types of organ pipes or organ tone, and about the names of the stops and what they indicate.

Number two, we can learn about organ registration, or, in other words, the recipes for the effective combinations of stops. In conjunction with this, we can learn about regional and historical differences in pipe organs and how they influenced organ registration. Registration of 19th-century French organ music such as that by Franck is very different from that of 17th- and 18th-century French organ music by composers such as Clerambault and DeGrigny.

Number three, we can become fluent with the various mechanical aids of the organ which have been invented over the years to facilitate more musical playing. These include pistons, swell pedals, the crescendo pedal, and the Great to Pedal reversible. It has been my experience that relatively few organists know how to use these devices effectively.

Number four, and most importantly, we should realize that organs are much like people, and should be treated accordingly. Just as there are no perfect people, and very few nearly perfect people on the earth today, there are no perfect organs, and very few nearly perfect organs. Most of us are fairly

average, and so are most organs. But if we will look for the best in each organ (or person) and seek to emphasize its strengths and downplay its weaknesses, we can make beautiful music together.

Along with being one with the organ, being one with the music is supremely important if we want to be successful performers.

The first thing one must do to be one with the music is to learn as much as possible about the rudiments of music: music theory, harmony, counterpoint, musical form and composition, orchestration, and performance practice. This is definitely a lifetime pursuit, and it can seem very daunting, but there's no time like the present to begin learning.

The second thing we must do to be one with the music is to know the piece as thoroughly as we can. In the words of the 19th-century conductor, Hans von Bulow, "One should have the score in one's head, and not one's head in the score." Even if you choose not to play a piece from memory, you should strive to have as much as possible of the piece's form and structure committed to memory.

It also helps to know something about the composer, about his or her other works, about the musical and social environment in which he or she labored. My colleague, Mack Wilberg, is a voracious reader of musical biographies. On a recent stateside tour with the Tabernacle Choir, I found it interesting that, during our brief periods of free time, when the choir was out seeing the local sights, Mack could frequently be found in the local public library, browsing the stacks in search of musical biographies which he had not read.

Since much of an organist's job consists of accompanying choirs and congregations, we will also do well to be as familiar as possible with the words of the hymns or anthems. By doing so, we will have a better sense of the central messages of the piece, and we will also be better able to project the subtleties of the text. For example, I once read of an organist accompanying a congregation in the Battle Hymn of the Republic. For the 2nd stanza, which reads, "He has sounded forth the trumpet," the organist brought the organ down to soft celestes; for the 3rd stanza, which reads, "In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea," he brought on full organ.

Finally, if we truly want to be one with the music, we need to love the music. One organist, when asked what his favorite piece was, replied that he didn't really have a favorite piece in particular; rather, his favorite piece was whatever he happened to be working on at the moment. This may be more of a stretch with some pieces than with others, but I believe it can be done.

I have spoken of our relationship with the organ and our relationship with the music. Perhaps the most important part of being a musician is cultivating a relationship with the audience.

It is interesting to note that many anthropologists believe that music first evolved as a way to "strengthen community bonds and resolve conflicts."¹ There can be no doubt that it continues to serve those functions, especially in the worship service.

How does a musician become one with the audience or congregation?

First, when we choose our repertoire, we need to understand the needs and abilities of those who come to hear us play or those with whom we worship and whom we accompany when playing the hymns. My own feeling is that a steady diet of either all milk or all meat will inevitably alienate or bore many listeners. In my own recitals and in my playing for church, I strive for balance and variety in the repertoire which I program. If I go too far in either direction, I can usually sense that I am losing my connection with the audience or congregation. C. S. Lewis said the following:

"There are two musical situations on which I think we can be confident that a blessing rests. One is where a priest or an organist, himself a man of trained and delicate taste, humbly and charitably sacrifices his own (aesthetically right) desires and gives the people humbler and coarser fare than he would wish, in a belief (even, as it may be, the erroneous belief) that he can thus bring them to God.

¹Jourdain, Robert. *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy*, (New York: William Morrow, 1997), p. 308.

The other is where the [ignorant] and unmusical layman humbly and patiently, and above all silently, listens to music which he cannot, or cannot fully, appreciate, in the belief that it somehow glorifies God, and that if it does not edify him this must be his own defect. Neither such a High Brow nor such a Low Brow can be far out of the way. To both, Church Music will have been a means of grace; not the music they have liked, but the music they have disliked. They have both offered, sacrificed, their taste in the fullest sense. But where the opposite situation arises, where the musician is filled with the pride of skill or the virus of emulation and looks with contempt on the unappreciative congregation, or where the unmusical, complacently entrenched in their own ignorance and conservatism, look with the restless and resentful hostility of an inferiority complex on all who would try to improve their taste -- there, we may be sure, all that both offer is unblessed and the spirit that moves them is not the Holy Ghost.”²

Second, we can be one with the audience by understanding something of the psychology of music. A fascinating book on the subject is Robert Jourdain’s *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy*. Jourdain’s main point is that musical perception consists of a string of expectations on the part of the listener. The listener hears a sound and, because of a number of factors, anticipates that the sound will proceed or resolve in a certain way. If the music becomes either too predictable or too unpredictable, the listener becomes either bored or frustrated. Jourdain writes:

“Music sets up anticipations and then satisfies them. It can withhold its resolutions, and heighten anticipation by doing so, then satisfy the anticipation in a great [rush] of resolution. When music goes out of its way to violate the very expectations that it sets up, we call it ‘expressive.’ Musicians breathe ‘feeling’ into a piece by introducing minute deviations in timing and loudness. And composers build expression into their compositions by purposely violating anticipations they have established.” Jourdain goes on to say, “For composer and performer alike, music-making is always a tug-of-war between the maintenance of underlying musical structure and the indulgence of musical deviations. With too much deviation, music becomes cloying and incoherent. With too little, music becomes cold and mechanical.”³

Another way to be one with the audience is through our stage deportment. A book which I have found very helpful is *Stage Presence from Head to Toe* by Karen Hagberg. She writes:

“Respecting the audience means appreciating the people who took the time and trouble to come and listen. After all, without them there would be no performance. When you are appreciative of your audience, you will sincerely want to do your best for them, and this will be reflected in your facial expressions and body language. Audiences, like guests, will feel welcome if you greet them with genuine friendliness and respect.”⁴

We can also cultivate a love unfeigned for those who come to hear us or worship with us. Sidney Lanier, the American writer and musician, said, “Music is love in search of a word.” You have probably already heard that the Greeks had three different words for what English refers to as simply “love.” “Agape” referred to love from above, or compassionate love; “Eros” referred to Romantic love, or the love which puts the recipient on a pedestal; “Philia” referred to brotherly love, or love between equals. It is the cultivation of this last type of love, “philia,” which can make a huge difference in how we perceive our listeners and how they perceive us. Have you ever been present at a concert where you

²Lewis, C. S.. *The Joyful Christian: 127 Readings*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1977), p. 84.

³Jourdain, op.cit., p. 312.

⁴Hagberg, Karen. *Stage Presence from Head to Toe*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), p. 3.

sensed condescension from the performer? At the other extreme, have you ever been present at a concert where the performer seemed to have an inferiority complex which got in the way of true communication?

Many performers have found that the secret to feeling at one with the audience is to focus their thoughts on one person, real or imagined, who is in the room. By putting a real or imaginary face on a faceless mass, they can then have a target for their emotions and energies.

Finally, music affords the performer an opportunity to develop greater unity of self, and this unity will inevitably affect the music which comes out. Music is a window into the soul of the performer. A few months ago I was in New York City to assist Craig Jessop with a National High School Choral Festival. On the last day of the festival, Craig remarked to me that standing in front of a choir (especially a choir of teenagers) can be an overwhelming experience because of what you see in their faces when they are performing. Some exude light; others seem to be saying, “Keep your distance—I don’t want you to see what I am made of.” None of us is perfect, and we each have our personal mountains to climb, but I believe that personal integrity will bless our musical lives as much as it blesses our personal lives.

I also believe that a musician should be tuned in to his or her body to a higher degree than anyone in any other discipline. Athletes and dancers work with larger muscle groups and do not need the constant, unrelenting split-second timing which a musician must summon for an hour or more without stopping. Ironically, the more we grapple with these complex physical movements, the less conscious effort our brain needs to expend. The process of improving one’s musical technique is less a process of adding than a process of eliminating and refining. In the words of an ancient Oriental proverb, “If you know a thing, it’s simple. If it isn’t simple, you don’t know it.”

And finally, a performer must develop the habit of being mentally focused. I know of many, many people who have been successful in fields other than music who attributed their success to the ability to focus which they learned from studying a musical instrument.

Going back to my original questions, “What was it that motivated you to study music?” and “What is it that keeps you striving to reach the next level?”, what motivates me is a deep need for those transcendent moments when everything “clicks” and I feel at one with the organ, with the music, with the audience, and with my own self. What results is a magical cycle in which these experiences provide a foundation for progressively more rewarding experiences.

One pair of researchers expressed this phenomenon in these words: “At that elusive moment when we transcend our ordinary performance and feel in harmony with something else—whether it’s a glorious sunset, inspiring music or another human being—our studies have shown that what we are really coming in sync with is ourselves. Not only do we feel more relaxed and at peace, but this entrained state increases our ability to perform well and offers numerous health benefits.”⁵

So, again, why are you here? Why play the organ? To be in harmony with something or someone else; to be in harmony with ourselves; and, consequently, to enjoy greater peace, relaxation, and health. Not a bad payoff. And the only thing it will cost you is lots of practice and the price of a pair of organ shoes. May you each have success today and in all of your future musical endeavors.

⁵Childre, Doc and Howard Martin, *HeartMath Solution* (?), p. ?