

VOX HUMANA

ESSAYS ABOUT THE WORLD OF THE PIPE ORGAN
AND THOSE WHO PLAY IT

HAIG MARDIROSIAN

FOREWORD BY
CRAIG R. WHITNEY


MorningStar
MUSIC PUBLISHERS A division of
ECS Publishing Group

MorningStar Music Publishers, Inc.
1727 Larkin Williams Road, Saint Louis, Missouri 63026-2024
morningstarmusic.com

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Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-0-944529-73-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017902772

Cover photo: The Fred J. Cooper Memorial Organ, Verizon Hall, Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Dobson pipe Organ Company, op. 76.; photo credit: Len Levasseur.

Cover design: Paige Gialanella

Book design: Kristen Schade

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Foreword		vii
1	Prelude		1
	Bel Canto	<i>October 2003</i>	7
2	The Most Mysterious and Complex Instrument Ever Invented		11
	To the Power of n	<i>April 2004</i>	12
	Knobs	<i>August 2006</i>	14
	Imagination	<i>June 2004</i>	17
	Royalty	<i>June 2010</i>	19
	A Point of Contact	<i>August 2010</i>	21
	Less Is More, More or Less	<i>April 2012</i>	23
	Clink, Clink, Clink... Next	<i>November 2012</i>	26
3	Who Are We?		29
	Stereotypes	<i>March 2004</i>	30
	School	<i>September 2010</i>	32
	The Organ as a Liberal Art	<i>April 2008</i>	34
	The Shoe on the Other Foot	<i>April 2004</i>	37
	Workplace Deviance	<i>July 2010</i>	39
	Twice the Fun	<i>March 2013</i>	42
	Two American Saints	<i>July 2005</i>	44
4	Musical Tools and Techniques		49
	Voice Leading	<i>February 2013</i>	50
	Deep Analysis	<i>September 2011</i>	53
	Our Bach	<i>March 2010</i>	55
	Our Messiaen	<i>December 2008</i>	58
	Swinging the Stick	<i>March 2011</i>	61
	Antiphon of Time	<i>January 2006</i>	63
5	Inside Baseball		67
	Hard Music	<i>October 2010</i>	68
	Shh...	<i>May 2011</i>	71

Incoherency	<i>October 2011</i>	73
Recitals, Part I	<i>January 2012</i>	76
Recitals, Part II	<i>February 2012</i>	78
Virgil at 100	<i>May 2012</i>	80
6 A Little Laughter		83
Milfington and Churl's Opus 25 ²	<i>October 2006</i>	84
Did You Hear the One about...?	<i>April 2005</i>	87
Now...OK...Turn...Please!	<i>May 2008</i>	89
Making Perfect?	<i>October 2005</i>	91
From the IAAC	<i>May 2009</i>	94
7 Nostalgia		99
Home Alone	<i>September 2007</i>	101
The End of Music, Part I	<i>May 2006</i>	102
The End of Music, Part II	<i>June 2006</i>	105
The Grinch That Stole the Space?	<i>April 2009</i>	108
Ultimate Things	<i>April 2012</i>	110
8 Impact		113
Friendship	<i>March 2012</i>	114
Belovedness	<i>January 2011</i>	116
A Long Overdue Letter	<i>June 2013</i>	118
Sebastian, on a Sunday in the Park	<i>September 2013</i>	121
Many Truths, One Truth	<i>December 2012</i>	125
9 December		129
Civility	<i>December 2011</i>	130
A Visit from the Tuner	<i>December 2004</i>	132
Tryste Noël	<i>December 2007</i>	134
The Magic Memories of Those Five Minutes	<i>December 2010</i>	136
10 Postlude		139
General Cancel	<i>October 2013</i>	142
Index		147

FOREWORD

Have you ever looked at the dozen or so pipes you can see in a pipe organ façade and wondered how they can make so many different sounds? Have you ever heard somebody ask that question and wondered how anybody could know so little about this instrument? Either way, you are sure to enjoy *Vox Humana*, this collection of Haig Mardirosian's essays that ran over a decade in *The American Organist*, the monthly professional journal of the American Guild of Organists.

You love music, but you don't know what a Vox Humana is? Don't worry—Mardirosian, a professional organist, has footnotes for you.¹ You do know? Don't worry that this book is nothing but shop talk (though it does make fun of that). "To write about the organ is to write about music and musicians, architecture, technology, history, theology, culture—in short, much of the best that life can offer," the author says, and he keeps his word in these pages.

Vox Humana is about many big things: the increasingly sparse audiences not just at organ recitals but in concert halls and opera houses around the country, for example, and what organists, conductors, and other musicians can do to fight the decline. Playing and performing not just familiar warhorses or "comfort music" but challenging pieces, music that will attract audiences of the younger adults who nowadays can hear what they like on their iPods, for one thing. And for church musicians hidden up there in the choir loft, he says: "There exists some connection between upright, difficult literature and the *raison d'être* for the instrument in the first place."

That purpose was originally to magnify the glory of God in houses of worship, though in the nineteenth century and again in recent decades, having versatile pipe organs in concert halls came into vogue.

1. "The Vox Humana is a reed stop with a buzzing sound which vaguely resembles the human voice."

Nowadays, it is not unusual to find megachurches that have no organ at all, pipe or digital. Yet, as Mardirosian points out, “today’s instruments are arguably superior in nearly every respect” to pipe organs built in the mid-twentieth century, when many organists and organbuilders were fixated on trying to return to standards of “authenticity” set in the Baroque era. After they figured out the physical principles and design characteristics, they succeeded, and then applied those same sound construction principles to other types of organs, with happy results. Organists, too, are much more skilled than many players were back then: “[T]oday’s music school graduates are, as a cohort, better musicians, more rounded thinkers, and technically more proficient than those of prior generations.” That does not mean that these pages are devoid of references to such colorful characters as E. Power Biggs or Virgil Fox, who once explained why he always wore a cape when performing out in front of a concert audience: “Honey, they see ya before they hear ya.”

Organists, some listeners will perhaps be surprised to learn, are human beings who can be as frustrated and perplexed by workaday problems as the rest of us, only their frustrations include page-turners who don’t pay attention to where the performer is in the score, building custodians who let the temperature fall when the hall is empty and then raise it for a concert or a church service, throwing all those hundreds—or thousands—of pipes behind the façade out of tune, and clumsy tuners who can also wreak havoc. Not to mention the benches organists sit on, high enough to play all those manual keyboards, but not so high that their feet can’t play the pedal keyboard—and woe to the player if the bench wobbles.

Not to mention the hundreds of lonely hours spent in darkened empty halls preparing and practicing, whether for a recital or for a funeral service. “Like it or not, we work in relative close proximity to the reality of death,” the author wrote in April of 2012, after the death of his own mother at age 101, citing the music critic (and organist) Paul Hume’s reminder to organists at a convention in Washington, DC thirty years earlier, that the music they make can open the doors of heaven, and that they held the keys. “YOU hold the keys,” he repeated.

Vox Humana holds the keys to greater enjoyment of the music written for the instrument by Bach and Handel, Brahms and Schumann, Mendelssohn, Bruckner and Franck, and then by Widor, Messiaen and

Dupré and others who may be less well known to non-organists. This book is fun to read, and it can make organ music more fun for those who do read it—players and audiences alike.

—Craig R. Whitney

1

PRELUDE

Imagine the remote origins of a pipe organ. Could the instinct of humans to contrive tools have somehow provoked the precise circumstances that would lead to the invention of this most mysterious and complex of musical instruments?

We humans embrace technology in order to extend the reach and capacity of our bodies. So somewhere between fire, pottery, the airplane, and the iPad, human music making took one important step: the invention of a whistle. Where the voice could no longer suffice, so now a column of entrapped air set into vibration by the turbulence of the passage of wind past a narrow gap and gash in the tube would produce a tone. The essential roots of the modern pipe organ were thus known as far back as probably the Stone Age.

Another evolution, known through persistent legend and a museum artifact or two, afforded the organ one of its key characteristics: the capacity of sustaining tone until the supply of air fails. Accounts say that a Greek hobbyist, Ctesibius, a third century BCE Alexandrian, created a device that compressed air in a piston by means of flowing water. What to do with that resulting air?

Ctesibius attached a whistle to his device. Hence, the *hydraulis*. In time, the speech of multiple such pipes could be controlled by levers, essentially keys, and the instrument began its centuries-upon-centuries' development. The Latin term *organum* (meaning "tool") came to describe this apparatus.

By coincidence, the Christian church from the Middle Ages to the present has served as willing patron for those who build organs, play

them, and compose for them. Christianity is only one piece of the story. The organ has also been adopted by Reform Judaism as its liturgical voice and by various fraternal organizations such as the Masons, who use organ music in their ceremonies.

Within the past 150 years, the organ became lavishly secularized in settings like concert halls, public gathering places, and the fashionable salons of the affluent. With its increasingly symphonic tonality and disposition, the organ would inevitably find its way into theatres and broadcasting studios.

The past 150 years have also witnessed expansion and challenge, economic hardship, and artistic changes. Cultural swings have provoked a long list of questions as to the future of the pipe organ. In a time of strong discontinuity with the past, these issues are best grouped around several undeniable influences: the changing nature and face of religion, cultural pluralism displacing the predominance of Western art, the phenomenal rise of technology as manifested in the wide dissemination of music through sound and video reproduction, and the growth of electronic re-creation or synthesis of instrumental sounds.

No wonder, then, that the pipe organ has been so much a topic of conversation and debate. Such conversation spawns the present book.

As long as human beings have designed, built, played, composed for, or listened to the pipe organ, they have held opinions about it. Just as modes of wheeled transportation can run the gamut from a red American Flyer wagon, to roller skates, to a bicycle, to a Ford Sedan, a BMW coupe, a Rolls Royce, a Toyota Prius, or an 18-wheeler, organs fulfill enormously varied musical demands and purposes. From a small tabletop Renaissance replica to those that vie for the distinction of largest and loudest in such places as Macy's in Philadelphia or Boardwalk Hall only sixty miles to its east in Atlantic City, each phylum of organ claims its champions, its detractors, its students, and its masters.

This, as well as the highly honed musical insights and personalities of the organ community, has contributed to no lack of discussion and even dispute. Our counterparts who play the piano, for instance, probably cannot comprehend the depth of passion over grand sweeping ideas or

the tiniest of minutiae that preoccupy us organists. While pondering the increased size of a printed disc insert and, with that, increased production costs, a recording producer once asked me why buyers expected organ recordings to include long and unfathomable stoplists. He paused abruptly and answered his own question.

“Oh, I forgot. You are organists!”

Yes, we are. And today we can join various special interest and professional communities. The largest such association has been the American Guild of Organists, chartered as a degree-granting academy in 1896 by the New York State Board of Regents. One can still compete for and earn ratings, certifications, and titles from the AGO, but its mission and interests have spread to embrace advocacy for the instrument and to provide resources and continuing education for its players. Membership is open to anyone, trained performer or not.

Since the mid-1960s, the journal of record for the AGO has been *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*. It is from its pages that the essays reproduced in this book are drawn.

From its beginnings, my professional life has been trifurcated into unequal but always vital sectors of musician, academic, and writer. Though first trained as a performing, on-stage musician (or should I say, choir loft musician) with the added perceptions and sensibilities of liturgical music making, somewhat random if always fortunate steps led to a path veering toward academic administration. Simultaneously, invitations to contribute critical writing to a number of publications started arriving.

My first “break” in writing happened during my graduate student days while honing my practical skills as assistant organist at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Baltimore. Frustrated that the weekly concerts being presented there on Sunday afternoons never attracted the city’s two newspaper reviewers, the music director registered a complaint with them that resulted in a job for me. I became a stringer working alongside a remarkable, fascinating, and influential critic and essayist, R. P. Harriss, upon whose death *The New York Times* called “the dean of Baltimore’s working journalists.” *The Times* portrayed Harriss, who

wore a three-piece suit with a trademark carnation in its lapel each day in the midst of a swarming, grimy, and smudgy city room, as “one of the last of a group of breezy, irreverent editorial writers and columnists in Baltimore who reached their peak in the 1920s and 1930s.”

Harriss had been a crony of the legendary H. L. Mencken¹ and a member of Mencken’s Saturday Night Club, an aggregation of friends who shared loud, sometimes irreverent opinions about all that mattered: literature, food, drink, politics, art, theatre, and music. By the time I received the benefits of my two-year boot camp in criticism at the now long defunct *Baltimore News-American*, Harriss was a venerated soothsayer about all matters of human creative expression, at least in Baltimore.

I was overawed and excited to cover three concerts a week, dashing from venues back to the paper’s home in what is now the Inner Harbor but was then a squalid waterfront of docks, warehouses, cheap laborers’ hotels, and unmentionable establishments to pound out a few hundred words on Harriss’s manual typewriter in the middle of the night in the nearly deserted city room, to compose and count out the headline, and to leave a pulp manuscript on an editor’s desk upstairs. Before leaving I would always drop a parting note to Harriss: “Chamber music sent up for first Monday.” Translation: “I left my review of last night’s string quartet concert at the Johns Hopkins University on the night editor’s desk in time for the 2:00 a.m. deadline to make it into the earliest edition of the paper.” (The *News-American* may have been an afternoon paper, but the early edition was printed at about ten in the morning.)

Harriss, saying but a few words to me, usually by phone the day after a review’s publication, taught me how to write with speed and cheekiness. In the early 1970s a critic could speak unencumbered. If a writer found the concert terrible, they could simply trounce it. We devoured unsuspecting amateurs. No pressure from management or advertisers would prevail over independent, unabashedly assertive opinions.

My time at the *News-American* lasted about two years and, fortunately for me, included opportunities to write a few longer feature pieces

1. Henry Louis Mencken (1880–1956), Baltimore journalist and social critic, was a prolific writer on a broad range of topics including politics, religion, food, humor, and music and was noted for his fluent prose.

and some interviews and to cover the opening two nights (concert hall and opera house) of the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.

But with an invitation to begin teaching, first as an adjunct instructor and later in a professorial appointment, time to commute from Washington to Baltimore several times a week became increasingly scarce. Now there were theory papers to mark in the evenings.

Still, the adage about ink in the veins holds true. When the phone rang, therefore, a meager three years later, the temptation struck once more. The unlikely voice at the other end began, “So, I hear that you’re a critic.”

Joel Flegler, an elementary school teacher in New Jersey, had fancied founding and publishing a (mostly) classical record review journal. He named it *Fanfare* magazine, and in a short time it grew to be one of the largest, most influential and stimulating recording review journals then on the stands. I accepted Joel’s invitation and was handed the organ and choral beat. For 25 years, I produced well over a thousand reviews, giving up the assignment only when the growing demands of academic administration (by then I had become a program director and was deep into the work of General Education) simply didn’t allow the time to enjoy the comparable luxury of writing record reviews. Unlike the newspaper’s hard, late-at-night deadlines, I could now listen to and reflect on the subject at hand, research the topic, and prepare drafts before submitting. I might sit with score in hand, isolate and replay passages, or put the entire project aside for a day or a week, only to return with ears refreshed and maybe even new viewpoints. The time spent, however, on these critiques was far greater than the late-night short minutes in the city room.

Early in my *Fanfare* days, a remarkable moment, pertinent to the current project, struck. While at the 1982 American Guild of Organists National Convention in Washington, DC, and walking outside the exhibits in the convention hotel, a familiar voice rang out to my left.

“So, when are you going to write for me?”

Anthony Baglivi, editor of *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, argued that I should just submit my *Fanfare* items to be reprinted in TAO! Knowing that *Fanfare* would never accede, that we would run afoul of copyright laws, and that we would breach journalistic ethical standards, I found

myself agreeing to a completely new set of writing assignments for TAO. In time, yet more duties at my university, not to mention real-world music making, compelled me to step down at *Fanfare* and to propose a bold idea to TAO. Here it was.

I had reviewed recordings, scores, books, and new media for 25 years at one journal and for 20 years at the other. Now I proposed an alternative. As a gen-ed guy and Dean of Academic Affairs who was evaluating scholarship in far-flung areas like political science, economics, literature, languages, chemistry, and communication, I had been thinking increasingly about the esoteric world of organs as something more integrated with other strands of cultural, intellectual, scientific, and social life. How ironic, thought I, that this most comprehensive, complex, and mysterious of instruments had been so removed from the conversations around the current “big themes.”

Wanting to reduce the hours I spent writing but make them more valuable, I begged my supportive editor to allow me to initiate a monthly op-ed while ramping down my criticism of recordings and books (though I am not quite sure I put it that way). Baglivi had been considering a similar idea with another writer, but he accepted my notion and allowed me 700 words per month. Thus, in October 2003, my monthly column, *Vox Humana*, was born. It ran without interruption for exactly a decade.

It was the most gratifying opportunity of my 42 years of journalistic writing. I could now take unconstrained looks at the breadth of human endeavor and creativity in order to formulate ideas about the arcane world of organs and organ playing.

Reader reaction was very positive, though not universally so. Some commented that they turned to *Vox Humana* immediately upon receiving TAO each month because they enjoyed it, others because they hated it. As Oscar Wilde once put it, “What is worse than being talked about is not being talked about.”

Vox Humana said its farewell in October 2013, but readers continued to ask for some replication, continuation, or compendium of the column. Having done a handful of presentations including readings from the column for AGO chapters around the country (the book tour before the book) under the banner of *Vox Humana Live*, it was time to choose selections and reassemble this writing under one cover, annotate

INDEX

A

- Acoustical Reverberation Assist 85–86
 Adès, Thomas 126, 126n5
 Aeolian-Skinner 68, 68n2
 American Classic style 17–18
 American Guild of Organists (AGO) 3, 5,
 74–75, 105, 105n3, 142
 American Institute of Organ Builders 107, 142
 THE AMERICAN ORGANIST (journal) vii, 3,
 5–6, 84, 84n2, 110. *See also Vox Humana*
 (monthly column by Mardirosian)
American Organist (early publication) 110
 Associated Pipe Organ Builders of America
 107, 107n6, 142
 Austin Organs 68, 68n2

B

- B-3 organ 31, 31n3
 Bach, Johann Sebastian 55–58
 birthday of 55, 55n8
 “Das alte Jahr vergangen ist” 64–65, 65n25,
 137
 Fantasia and Fugue in G minor 51
 Fugue in G minor 122, 122n3, 125
 holiday season and 136–137
 imaginary encounter with 121–125
 “Jig Fugue” 81
 legacy of 49, 144
 Orgelbüchlein 64–65, 65n25, 137
 Prelude and Fugue in B major 71, 71n6
 Prelude and Fugue in C major 137, 137n7
 Baglivi, Anthony 5, 6, 9
Baltimore News-American 4
Bandoneon de Piazzolla chorus 87
 Barone, Michael 144
 Beethoven, Ludwig van 49, 60, 60n24, 107,
 125–126, 125n2
Bel Canto (Patchett) 7, 8
 belovedness 116–118
 benches 21–23
 Berle, Milton 45
 Best, William Thomas 69, 69n4
 Bethlehem Chapel 143
bicinium 51, 51n4
 Biggs, E. Power 15, 15n6, 38n9, 80
 Bingham, Seth 110–111, 110n8
 Bombarde 75, 75n12
 Bower, John Dykes 83
 Brahms, Johannes 49, 51

- Bruckner, Anton 49
 Burns, Robert 137
 Busch-Resinger Museum 80, 80n13

C

- Cabaret* (musical) 30–31
 Callaway, Paul 143, 143n1
Cantabile (Franck) 90, 90n12
 Carlos, Wendy 57, 57n11
 Cathedral of Mary Our Queen 3
 Catholic heritage of organ music 1–2, 20
 Cavallé-Coll, Aristide 38, 38n11, 71
 Chaarani, Mona Sanjakdar 37, 37n8
 chamade 13, 13n1
 Chanukah 130. *See also* holiday season
 Charles, Prince of Wales 21
 choirmaster 42–44, 61–63
 choir rooms 108–109
Choosing Civility (Forni) 131–132
 Chorale in A minor (Franck) 33, 53–54
 Christianity 1–2
 Christmas 130, 132–136. 135nn4–5. *See*
 also holiday season
 church security and violence 39–42
 Cioran, E. M. 144
 civility 130–132
 Cliburn, Van 22, 22n17
 Cochereau, Pierre 110, 110n8
 collective musical management 42–44
 composers. *See* specific composers
 Concentus Musicus Wien 57, 57n14
 concerts 76–80
 conducting 42–44, 61–63
 console standards 74–75
 counterpunal/harmonic continuum 50–52
 Courboin, Charles 81, 81n16
 Crawford, Jesse 26, 26n23
 crescendo pedal 42, 42n15
 Cromorne 13, 13n3
 Ctesibius 1, 37
 Currier and Ives 135, 135n6
 cut up 86, 86n6

D

- “Das alte Jahr vergangen ist” (Bach) 64–65,
 65n25, 137
 December 129–138
 diapason 8, 8n3
Dichterliebe (Schumann) 59, 59n19

DiMenna Center for Classical Music 72
 Dirksen, Richard Wayne 138, 138n9
 Dobson, Lynn 25
 double open wood stop 71, 71n7
 Dukas, Paul 59, 59n20
 Dupré, Marcel 58, 58n17, 71, 129
 Duruflé-Chevalier, Marie-Madeleine 56n9
 Duruflé, Maurice 56, 56n9

E

Ebert, Robert 107, 107n6
 education 32–36, 34n5
 Eliot, T. S. 101

F

Fanfare (magazine) 5–6
 Fantasia and Fugue in G minor (Bach) 51
 Fantasia and Fugue on the Name of BACH
 (Reger) 51, 51n1
 Farnham, Lynwood 81, 81n14
 Feibel, Fred 26
 Fillmore East 56, 56n10
 Fisher, Cleveland 89
 Fix, Carolyn 89
 Flegler, Joel 5
 flutes 86, 86n7
 Forni, Pierre Massimo 131–132
Four Last Songs (Strauss) 101
Four Quartets (Eliot) 101
 Fox, Virgil viii, 38, 38n9, 44–47, 45n18, 46n20,
 56, 80–82, 145–146
 Franck, César 38, 53–54, 90, 90n2, 131
 French Romanticism 24, 24n19
 friendship 114–116
 fugal composition 51
 Fugue in A-Flat minor (Brahms) 51
 Fugue in G minor (Bach) 122, 122n3, 125

G

Gardner, Howard 35
 Gehry, Frank 18, 18n14
 Gibson, Archer 81, 81n15
 Gould, Glenn 57, 57n15
 Grand Orgue 93, 93n14
 grands jeux 25, 25n21
Grosse Fugue (Beethoven) 125–126, 125n4
The Guardian 21
 Guilmant, Félix-Alexandre 110, 110n10
 Guiney, Louise Imogen 134

H

Hammerklavier (Beethoven) 60, 60n24
 Hammond Organ Federal Trade Commission
 hearings 72
 Hammond Organs 31n3, 81, 89, 89n10
 Handel, George Frideric 49
 Harnoncourt, Nikolaus 57, 57n14
 Harrison, G. Donald 17–18, 17n12
 Harriss, R. P. 3–4
Hauptgottesdienst 42, 42n16
 Heaps, Porter 72
 Henry Willis & Sons 71, 71n8
 Hill, Peter 60
 Hindemith, Paul 13
 Hindu music 60, 60n23
 Hobbs, John H. and Elisabeth A. 35n6
 holiday season 125–127, 129–138
 Holtkamp, Walter, Sr. 18, 18n13
 homophonic textures 37–38, 52, 59
 Hopkins Civility Project 131
 Horowitz, Vladimir 57, 57n16
 Hume, Paul 112, 112n11
 humor, organ-related 83–97
 Hurford, Peter 83

I

impact of organ music 113–127
 improvisation 51
 incoherency 73–76
 innovation 17–19
 Institute of Advanced Ancient Culture (IAAC)
 94–97
 intellectual and creative property rights 103
 Islamic music culture 37–39

J

“Jig Fugue” (Bach) 81, 81n17
 Judaism 2

K

Karg-Elert, Sigfrid 69, 69n3
 Kemper, Margaret 20
 Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts 5,
 104, 115
 “King of Instruments No Longer?” (*New York
 Times*) 19
 Klapem and Waite, LLC 85
 knobs 14–17
Komm, süßer Tod 46, 46n19, 81
 Kotner, Douglas 88

L

leadership 144, 145
 Lebrecht, Norman 105
 Lemare, Edwin 69, 69n5
 Lieblich Gedeckt 40, 40n12
 Liszt, Franz 36
 loudness 71–73
 Lousier, Jacques 57, 57n12

M

Mahler, Gustav 115–116
 Mardirosian, Florence 110
 Mardirosian, Haig
 background of 3–7
 family of 83, 110
 imaginary encounter with Bach 121–125
 letter to teacher of 118–121
 Vox Humana monthly column by 6–7, 99,
 142–143
 Mason (Freemasonry organization) 2
 Mencken, H. L. 4
 Mendelssohn, Felix 49
 Messiaen, Olivier 36, 36n7, 49, 59–60, 80
miçra varna 60, 60n23
 MIDI keyboards 16, 16n10, 64, 91, 91n13
 Milfington and Churl's Opus 25 84–87
 mixture chorus 13, 13n4
 Moeser, Jim 20
 Moore, Clement Clarke 132, 132n3
 Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus 20
 multiple intelligence theories 35, 35n6
 Musical Instrument Digital Interface. *See* MIDI
 keyboards
 musical tools and techniques 49–65
 music education 32–36, 34n5
 music industry 106–108
 music theory 53–55
 Myers, Grace 118–121

N

Napster 103, 103n11
 National Association of Music Merchants 140
 National Symphony Orchestra 115
 Nazard 13, 13n2
New York Times 3–4, 19–20, 69, 118
 Noates, Holden D. 87
 nostalgia, artistic 99–112

O

“O” antiphons 135, 135n4
 old vs. new technology 14–17, 27–28, 91,
 91n13

Omni Temperament system 87
 Ondes Martinot 59, 59n22
 Opus 25² (Milfington and Churl) 84–87
 orchestral conducting 42–44, 61–63
 Ord, Boris 31, 31n2
 organ. *See* under pipe organ
 Organ Historical Society 89, 89n9, 142
 The Organ in Sanity and Madness, 83
 organists. *See* pipe organists
 Organmasters (shoe brand) 121, 121n2
 organ music. *See* pipe organ music
 Organ Reform Movement 17, 17n11
 organum 1
Orgelbewegung 17, 17n11
Orgelbüchlein (Bach) 64–65, 65n25, 137
orgelreisen 51, 51n2

P

page-turning 89–91, 89n11
 Patchett, Ann 7, 8
 Pecoraro, George 88
 pedals 42, 75, 75n10
 Pepin 37
 Perrone, Vito 77–78
 piano industry 107, 107n5
 Piano Sonata No. 29, Op. 106 (Beethoven) 60,
 60n24
Pièce Héroïque (Franck) 131, 131n1
Pipedreams (radio program) 144, 144n2
 pipe organ building industry 107, 107n7,
 139–141, 142. *See also specific building
 companies*
 pipe organ case 18
 Pipe Organ Encounters 34, 34n5
 pipe organ instrument. *See also specific features
 of*
 as royalty 19–21
 benches for 21–23
 care and keeping of 141
 complexity of 11–28
 console standards for 74–75
 history of vii–viii, 1–3
 homophonic texture of 52
 old vs. new technology 14–17, 27–28, 91,
 91n13
 tuning of 26–28, 132–134
 variations of 2
 pipe organists. *See also specific persons*
 belovedness of 116–118
 frustrations of viii, 19–21
 identity of 29–30, 129
 music's impact on 113–127
 professional advancement of 102, 140

retirement of 101
 solo vs. collective 42–44
 stereotypes about 30–32, 53, 131

pipe organ music
 civility and 130–132
 community and 114–116, 125–127
 difficulty of 68–71
 exponential possibilities in 12–14
 extinction and legacy of 102–108
 future of 143–145
 history and purpose of 1–3, 20–21
 holiday season and 125–127, 129–138
 humor and 83–97
 impact of 113–127
 innovation in 17–19, 73–76
 monthly column on 6–7, 99, 142–143
 nostalgia for 99–112
 on death and eternity 110–112
 recitals 76–80
 religious connection of 1–2, 37–39,
 129–138
 simplicity in 23–26
 tools and techniques in 49–65

pistons 75, 75n9

polyphonic textures 37–38, 52, 59

Pope John Paul II 47

Pope Paul VI 73

Poqueline, Jean Baptiste 131, 131n2

“Positive Deviance and Extraordinary Organizing” (*Positive Organizational Scholarship*) 41

Powers, David 89

Prelude and Fugue in B major (Dupré) 71, 71n6

Prelude and Fugue in C major (Bach) 137, 137n7

Preston, Simon 83

Principal names 14, 14n5, 31, 31n1

probelauf 51, 51n3

professional advancement 102, 140

Proulx, Richard 137, 137n8

R

ranking system 86, 86n4

recitals 76–80

Reger, Max 51, 51n1

registering 24, 24n20

religious connection of organ music 1–2, 37–39, 129–138

requiems 111

retirement 101

Reti, Rudolph 54, 54n7

reversible pistons 75, 75n9

RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) 103, 103n2

Riverside Church, New York City 45, 68, 80

Ruckpositiv 26, 26n25, 42, 84, 84n3

S

sabermetrics 67, 67n1

St. Patrick’s Cathedral, New York City 45–47

scale 86, 86n5

Schenker, Heinrich 54, 54n6

Schnitger, Arp 15, 15n7

Schumann, Robert 49, 59

secularization of organ music 2

Sheen, Fulton J. 44–47, 45n17

Silent Night 129

Silicon Creative Group, Ltd. 85

Simeone, Nigel 60

Skinner, Ernest M. 15, 15n9, 17n2, 38,

Skinner Organ Company 68, 68n2, 71

social relationships 114–116

Solo division 75, 75n11

The Sound of Music (musical) 30

Sowerby, Leo 58, 58n18

Spellman, Francis Cardinal 46, 46n21

Stein, Gertrude 15

stentorphone 8, 8n6

Stickney, Edwin L. 88

Stokowski, Leopold 57, 57n13

stopknobs 14–17

Strategos International 40–41

Strauss, Johann 136

Strauss, Richard 101

String Quartet no. 13, op. 130 (Beethoven) 125–126, 125n4

Stumm, Johann Michael 20, 20n16

swell box 8, 8n8

swell shoes 75, 75n10

Symphony no. 1 (Mahler) 115–116

T

Tanglewood 125–127

temperature and humidity 27, 27n28

time 63–65

Time (magazine) 56

tremulants 26, 26n24

Tristan und Isolde (Wagner) 59, 59n21

Trois Pièces (Franck) 131, 131n1

tuba 8, 8n4, 72

tubular pneumatic 8, 8n2

tuning 26–28, 27n27–28, 132–134

U

University of Chicago Chapel 72

V

Victoria, Tomás Luis de 40, 40n13
 Vierne, Louis 38, 38n10
 violence 39–42
 Voix Celeste 8, 8n5, 13
 volume 71–73
vorspeise 51, 51n5
 Vox Humana, defined vii, 8, 8n7
Vox Humana (monthly column by
 Mardirosian) 6–7, 99, 142–143

W

Wagner, Richard 59, 59n21
 Walcha, Helmut 106, 106n4
 Walt Disney Concert Hall 18, 18n14
 Wanamaker organ 32, 32n4
 Warzyn, Anne B. 88
 Washington National Cathedral 112, 138,
 138n9, 143
 Weaver, Judy 88–89
 Weir, Gillian 83
 whistle 1
Who Killed Classical Music? (Lebrecht) 105
 Widor, Charles-Marie 24, 24n19, 36
 Wilde, Oscar 6
 Willcocks, David 83
 Woods, Rose Mary 26, 26n26
 workplace deviance 39–42
 workspace 108–109
 Wright, Searle 26, 26n22
 The Wurlitzer Company 15–16, 15n8

Y

Youngman, Henny 83, 83n1

Z

Zimbels 19, 19n15, 88, 88n8