



AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS

2026 National Competition in Organ Improvisation

The AGO National Competition in Organ Improvisation (NCOI) seeks to further the art of improvisation by recognizing and rewarding superior performances and encouraging excellence in the art of spontaneous musical creation at the organ. A flourishing tradition of improvisation is fundamental to a truly vital musical culture.

The AGO NCOI Committee has invited prominent organist-improvisers and composers to contribute themes to the 2026 competition and wishes to express gratitude to theme contributors Sophie-Véronique Cauchefer-Choplin, Philippe Lefebvre, Karol Mossakowski, and Jean-Baptiste Robin.

COMPETITION RULES

The NCOI Committee has the sole authority to interpret and enforce the rules and procedures of the competition. Any supplemental rules, clarifications, or corrections issued in any form by the committee are to be considered an official part of these rules.

A competitor may be disqualified at any time for failure to abide by the rules of the competition or for actions deemed to be in conflict with the spirit of the event. Such disqualification will be made by common agreement of the NCOI leadership and the executive director of the AGO, in consultation with the AGO councillor for competitions and new music.

I. ELIGIBILITY AND REGISTRATION

The competition is open to all organists regardless of age or citizenship. First-place winners of previous AGO improvisation competitions are not eligible. Applicants who do not reside in the United States are responsible for understanding and complying with U.S. visa requirements, as well as managing travel costs where applicable. Each competitor will complete the official online application form and submit it along with the application fee (\$75).

II. APPLICATION ROUND

There are two important deadlines to be met for submitting an NCOI application. The application portal at AGOhq.org will open on October 1, 2025, and applications must be submitted by **December 15, 2025**. The application round will then be evaluated by a recording that must be made between January 1 and February 10, 2026, and submitted via the application portal at AGOhq.org by **February 10, 2026**. The recording session must be monitored by an approved proctor such as an AGO officer, a teacher, or a recording engineer. The competitor is

responsible for selecting the instrument and obtaining a proctor. A field of no more than five semifinalists will be announced on or before March 15, 2026.

Performance Requirements

1. One of the following works: *Prélude*, from *Trois Improvisations pour orgue ou harmonium*, by Nadia Boulanger; *Praeludium in D Minor*, BuxWV 140, by Dieterich Buxtehude; or *Toccata in D Minor*, Op. 59, by Max Reger.
2. A *Petite Suite* of four movements in contrasting styles on a given theme. Each movement should not exceed one minute.
3. A free improvisation on a given theme, not to exceed six minutes.

The competitor may set initial registrations on their chosen instrument before the proctored recording session. After the proctor has provided the themes, the competitor will be permitted a total of 40 minutes' preparation time immediately before the recording session.

Proctor's Responsibilities

- Attend the entire recording session, with no other audience members permitted except a recording engineer.
- Receive the themes and proctor's form from the competition administrator.
- Ensure that all recording equipment is working properly with a brief trial recording before giving the themes to the competitor.
- Provide the themes and the hymn to the competitor 40 minutes before the recording session begins. The competitor *may* play the organ during this period, and, per the competitor's wishes, the period need not last a full 40 minutes.

- During the 40-minute preparation, competitors may sketch contrasting themes and/or blueprints for forms but may not compose specific full harmonies. The proctor will examine the competitor's notes at the console to ensure compliance before the recording session begins.
- After the recording session, ensure that the recording is high-quality, continuous, unedited, and free of background noise or other imperfections that would impair its evaluation and effectiveness.
- Sign the proctor's recording form certifying that the recording session was properly monitored, the performance was continuous and unedited, and the recording's quality and playability are acceptable for submission.

III. SEMIFINAL ROUND

No more than five semifinalists will participate in the semifinal round, which will be held Sunday, July 5, 2026, at Little Flower Catholic Church, preceding the 2026 AGO National Convention in St. Louis, Missouri. AGO Headquarters, under the guidance of the executive director, will provide each competitor a travel and housing allowance for the duration of the competition period. In addition, each competitor will be provided complimentary convention registration, reimbursable at the early registration rate.

All competitors must avoid the competition site outside of the appointed orientation, practice, and performance times, except for official AGO convention events. Each competitor will practice alone. Except for an NCOI Committee-approved person who may demonstrate combinations of the competitor's choice, no one may accompany or listen to the competitor during practice sessions. Competitors are permitted to record their own practice sessions, however. Each competitor will receive no less than three hours of practice time on the competition instrument in the days preceding the semifinal round. On the day of the round, each competitor will be allowed 20 minutes on the organ prior to receiving the themes.

Performance Requirements

1. An Adagio and Scherzo in 19th-century Romantic style on two given themes: one for the Adagio, and one for the Scherzo. The two movements should be presented in succession and not in alternation. The entire work should not exceed nine minutes.
2. A Gregorian paraphrase on a given chant theme in early 20th-century modal language, not to exceed six minutes.
3. A free improvisation on a given theme, not to exceed seven minutes.

The competitor will be given the themes 30 minutes prior to performing. No keyboard will be provided for review of the themes. During this time, the competitor may sketch contrasting themes and/or blueprints for forms but may not compose specific full harmonies. All notes carried to the console will be examined to ensure compliance.

IV. FINAL ROUND

No more than three finalists will participate in the final round, which will be held Tuesday, July 7, 2026, at Second Presbyterian Church during the 2026 AGO National Convention in St. Louis, Missouri.

All competitors must avoid the competition site outside of the appointed orientation, practice, and performance times, except for official AGO convention events. Each competitor will practice alone. Except for an NCOI Committee-approved person who may demonstrate combinations of the competitor's choice, no one may accompany or listen to the competitor during practice sessions. Competitors are permitted to record their own practice sessions, however. Each competitor will receive no less than three hours of practice time on the competition instrument in the days preceding the round. On the day of the final round, each competitor will be allowed 20 minutes on the organ prior to receiving the themes.

Performance Requirements

1. Accompany the audience in the singing of a hymn, making use of an improvised introduction and creative harmonizations conducive to singing. The specified number of stanzas must be observed. The entire presentation of the hymn should not exceed six minutes.

2. A lyrical improvisation based upon a text, not to exceed five minutes.

3. An Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue on a given theme, not to exceed ten minutes.

The competitor will be given the hymn, the text, and the Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue theme 30 minutes prior to performing. No keyboard will be provided for review of these materials. During this time, the competitor may sketch contrasting themes and/or blueprints for forms but may not compose specific full harmonies. All notes carried to the console will be examined to ensure compliance.

V. ADJUDICATION

The application round is evaluated by three judges in strict anonymity. No judge may be a current teacher of any applicant. Judges may be drawn from members of the NCOI Committee for this round. Each judge will provide signed, written comments to the competitors.

The semifinal round will be evaluated by a panel of up to five judges, screened from viewing the performer. Judges may be current or former teachers of a competitor. In such a case, the judge will not give a numerical score to that competitor but will be permitted to participate in the verbal deliberations. Each judge will provide signed, written comments to the competitors.

The final round will be evaluated by a panel of five judges, screened from viewing the performer. Judges may be current or former teachers of a competitor. In such a case, the judge will not give a numerical score to that competitor but will be permitted to participate in the verbal deliberations. Each judge will provide signed, written comments to the competitors. A tally of the judges' scores will be calculated, but prizes will be awarded only after discussion and final deliberation of the judges. The judges reserve the right to withhold any or all prizes. The judges' decisions are final. Judges' comments from any of the three rounds may not be quoted or publicized.

VI. GENERAL JUDGING CRITERIA

The judges' criteria for the evaluation of performances in all three rounds include the following:

- Thematic use and development. In addition to developing the themes or portions of the themes, additional thematic material may be introduced.
- Creative and consistent harmonic language.
- Clear presentation of form.
- Timing as appropriate to style, form, development, and contrast.
- Stylistic consistency.
- Rhythmic integrity and interest.
- Intentional direction and melodic/linear contour.
- Effective use of the instrument—e.g., registration, range, texture.
- Sophisticated use of counterpoint.

VII. PRIZES

Awards for the Final Round

First Prize

- \$5,000
- A performance during the 2026 and 2028 AGO National Conventions
- A CD recording on the Pro Organo label and a promotional video, both distributed by Naxos of America Inc.
- Eight 1/6–page display ads in *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* (design costs not included)

Second Prize

- \$3,000
- Four 1/6–page advertisements in *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* (design costs not included)

Third Prize

- \$2,000
- Four 1/6–page advertisements in *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* (design costs not included)

Audience Prize

- \$1,500

NB: Votes for the NCOI Audience Prize may only be cast by registered AGO National Convention attendees.

Renée Anne Louprette, *NCOI Director*
Jeffrey Brillhart
Jeffrey Smith

Peggy Haas Howell, *AGO Vice President/
Councillor for Competitions and New Music*