

A GUILD FOR ALL THE MEMBERS?

A Report on the AGO Task Force on Digital Inclusiveness

Membership recruitment and retention are areas of constant concern to members of the AGO National Council, individually and collectively. The Council addresses issues that may impact any area of the Guild's membership, finances, outreach, or other important Guild interests, with a healthy combination of scrutiny and creative thinking.

Background

At their spring 2002 meeting, the Regional Councillors (RCs)¹ had a lively dialogue regarding membership issues. One prominent idea discussed—not original to that conversation, by any means—was that many members who play non-pipe and/or combination instruments often feel consigned to a second-class status within the Guild, creating our own “digital divide.” Admitting little empirical data for this, the RCs nevertheless recounted much anecdotal evidence, including:

- reported hostility among some Guild members toward instruments (and those who play them) whose means of sound production is anything other than pipe;
- the leadership of some chapters who promote the idea that venues with non-pipe instruments are inappropriate for Guild events;
- while THE AMERICAN ORGANIST (TAO) has excellent content, its near-total emphasis on pipe-only organ issues may foster inappropriately the notion that non-pipe instruments never can produce credible musical results;
- that many Guild documents seem to suggest pipes as the obligatory method of sound production, with little regard to the actual quality of their sound.

The RCs collectively concluded that an appropriately positive “signal of inclusion” for members and potential members who play non-pipe instruments was desirable.

To enable discussion of this issue with the entire council, the RCs crafted a motion (necessary for discussion on a specific topic to take place). This motion would have placed the Guild on record as supporting “instruments of quality, regardless of the technology employed to produce the sound.” It is important to note that the motion did not express support for any particular means of sound production, nor did it seek to amend the Guild's current Mission Statement.²

Unsurprisingly, the council's discussion was passionate. On one hand, council members expressed a desire to be proactive on an issue of apparent concern to much of the membership, with an eye toward recruitment of organists who currently feel “left out.” On the other hand, there was fear that such a statement would damage membership retention among the many Guild members who are zealously pro-pipe. Particular concern was voiced about harming the valued relationship between the Guild and the Associated Pipe Organ Builders of America (APOBA). Members of APOBA, both individually and collectively, have long been extremely supportive of the Guild, and TAO serves as APOBA's official journal.

In the end, the motion was tabled to allow time for further consideration. At its fall 2002 meeting, the Council agreed that further study was warranted, and the Task Force on Digital Inclusiveness (TFDI) was created to discuss the motion; members included Steven Eglar (RC, Region V), Timothy Howard (RC, Region IX), Shirley King (Director, National Committee for Membership Development and Chapter Support), and John Obetz (Councillor for Finance and Development).

The Task Force's Work

The TFDI engaged a number of issues raised by the motion, including its basis, its purpose, its historical context, and as many implications (both pro and con) as we could think of. We were charged only with discussing the motion, not gathering hard evidence in any area. Summaries of some areas we discussed follow.

Historically, the Guild has resisted voicing official support for one type of organ construction or another, yet the perception that we have done so persists, including among those chapter leaders who refuse to allow Guild events in venues with a non-pipe instrument. We worried that the motion might be perceived as a change to this longstanding practice, and that its passage also might oblige us to create policy statements regarding choirs, repertoire, praise bands, and other issues facing AGO members at the beginning of the 21st century.

A number of high-profile AGO leaders regularly play recitals on non-pipe instruments, challenging the notion that the Guild is elitist with regard to technology. However, we acknowledged that even the names of many AGO programs are clearly slanted toward pipes (Pipe Organ Encounter, Pipe Works, etc.), with little or no favorable mention of alternative technologies, save advertisements in TAO, and occasional convention appearances.

Guild leadership routinely hears that many organists feel unqualified for membership because they lack the appropriate educational credentials or professional experience. These organists typically would not hold positions with significant pipe instruments at their command; thus, we found it reasonable to conclude that what appears to be a digital vs. pipe question actually might be rooted in educational issues. In either case, it is clear that the Guild consequently suffers in such significant areas as membership and finance.

We heard reports that many larger, apparently successful chapters op-

erate as if they are uninterested in expanding membership. Though this posture likely grows out of attitudes unrelated to the digital vs. pipe question, again, the AGO as a whole suffers.

We learned that the ratio of digital or combination organs sold to exclusively pipe organ installations continues to widen at a startling rate.³

Conclusions and Recommendations

While the original motion specifically addressed types of sound-producing technology, its underlying motivation clearly had to do with membership issues. Again citing anecdotal evidence, we hear that the Guild is perceived as exclusive, elitist, perhaps even snobbish; we concluded, however, that the “digital divide” is but one manifestation of that perception. We noted that the current AGO Mission Statement is inclusive—albeit vaguely so—of all manners of sound-producing technology.

We began by debating the value of having an official statement regarding sound-producing technology; we ended by agreeing that the Guild should be centered more on organists and less on the kinds of instruments we play. We agreed that any policy statement regarding technology runs the risk of shattering longstanding professional and institutional relationships, even if it is intended only to remedy the Guild's passivity in a particular area. We concluded that we must find and develop additional ways of being inclusive and less exclusionary, and that our discussions of this issue may reflect a certain “coming of age” for the Guild.

Finally, we presented suggestions and recommendations for consideration by the National Council; those adopted by the council at its spring 2004 meeting include:

- We acknowledge the Guild's valued relationship with APOBA and its individual member firms. We nevertheless urge AGO leaders, both national and local, to be more open regarding their use of digital technology for performance, teaching, and services.
- We acknowledge that TAO has done a good job of providing helpful information to Guild members with relatively less formal education on the organ (for example, easy organ and choral music recommendations). However, information about non-pipe instruments (on which many of these members play) has been noticeably absent from TAO editorial content. We suggest that this could be remedied by the inclusion of occasional statements in the regular columns (from the President or Executive Director, etc.), or in special articles.⁴
- We recommend that TAO recitals column start including the builder of instruments, where such information is known.⁵
- We recommend that the Committee on National Conventions and the Committee on Regional Conventions urge future convention planners not to shun arbitrarily non-pipe technologies when structuring their programs, and that issues particular to non-pipe technologies be addressed in workshops.
- We recommend that the Headquarters staff, in cooperation with the Committee on Membership Development and Chapter Support, vigorously encourage organbuilders (both pipe and digital) to provide a Guild membership with each organ sold. We commend Executive Director James Thomashower for steps already taken in this area.
- We encourage the Committee on Membership Development and Chapter Support to expand recruitment and retention tools available to the RCs, District Convensers, and chapter Deans. These tools should emphasize the Guild's inclusive nature.

On accepting the TFDI's conclusions, the council recommended the establishment of a new task force to engage the much broader issue of inclusiveness within the AGO. That group, the Task Force on Issues of Guild Inclusiveness, is already working, and its members eagerly solicit input from all Guild members; please send any comments you have on this subject to <tfigi@drmusic.com>, or by regular mail to the task force's attention in care of AGO Headquarters.

TIMOTHY HOWARD, DMA
Director, Task Force on Digital Inclusiveness

NOTES

1. Regional Councillors are elected by members of each of the Guild's nine regions to, among other things, represent the interests of their region on the National Council and actively encourage membership recruitment. To that end, the RCs have frequent contact with chapter leaders and members, and therefore typically have a good understanding of the membership's needs and desires.
2. “The purpose of the American Guild of Organists is to promote the organ in its historic and evolving roles, to encourage excellence in the performance of organ and choral music, and to provide a forum for mutual support, inspiration, education, and certification of Guild members.”
3. While figures are difficult to obtain and verify, recent conversations with industry insiders suggest the current ratio of digital to pipe-only instrument installations is in excess of 15:1.
4. It should be noted that with rare exceptions, TAO's content is the result of submissions by AGO members.
5. TAO's Recent Installations section has already begun listing instruments that utilize pipe and digital technology.