

INCREASING INTEREST IN ORGAN RECITALS

THE IMPORTANCE OF VARIETY IN REPERTOIRE

Carl B. Dodrill

ORGAN RECITALS are often poorly attended. The reasons for this are not well understood, and almost never is an empirical effort made to better understand likely causes for the small audiences. This article examines one potential reason—namely, the type(s) of music commonly played at organ recitals. Specifically, it considers the preferences of an audience when a truly wide variety of music is offered at a single recital.

RECITAL SETTING

The material for this study was collected at a recital at Mercer Island Presbyterian Church on Mercer Island, Washington, on April 19, 2013. Here are some key facts about this recital:

First, the organist who played the recital was Mel Butler, who received his training in organ at the Oberlin Conservatory and Eastman School of Music. One of the senior organists in the Pacific Northwest, he is canon musician at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Seattle. While known for his fine classical and liturgical music, he also plays jazz piano weekly, has played some theater organ pieces, and has accompanied silent films.

Second, the repertoire selected for this recital was chosen by the organist in response to a specific request to select music that would have strong popular appeal including theater organ selections. In response to this request, Butler chose three types of music; the specific pieces he chose were:

“Classical” music

Walther, *Concerto del Sigr. Torelli* (Vivace, Adagio, Allegro)

Mozart, *Andante fur eine Walze in eine kleine Orgel*, K. 616

J.S. Bach, *Prelude and Fugue in G Minor*, BWV 535

Elgar, *Nimrod from Enigma Variations* (arranged for organ by W.H. Harris)

Mulet, *Carillon-Sortie*

Music other than “classical”

William Albright, *Sweet Sixteenths* (*A Concert Rag for Organ*)

Thomas “Fats” Waller, *Rusty Pail Blues*

Hymns with preludes

A chorale prelude by David A.

Schack was played before each of three hymns; in each case, attendees were asked to stand and sing all stanzas from hymn books. The three hymns were:

“Hyfyrdol” (Love divine, all loves excelling)

“Bunessan” (Morning has broken)

“Nun danket alle Gott” (Now thank we all our God)

Note: in using the term “classical,” a standard traditional meaning was intended, namely the general style associated with recognized organ masters prior to 1900 but also including compositions since 1900 that are in the style of the earlier masters.

People with strongly classical interests enjoyed the nonclassical music as much as those who had little classical background.

Third, the *pipe organ* used for the recital was a III/25 electric-action instrument (Pipe Organ Foundation, Opus 2), which is American Classical in disposition with a French Romantic influence. It has eight principal stops, seven flutes, six reeds, and four strings. The Great and Swell and part of the Pedal are in the front of the church, the Antiphonal is in the back; there is an Open Wood on one side of the room, and the Harp is on the other side. The keyhole-shaped room seats approximately 275 people, and it has good acoustical properties.

Fourth, the questionnaire used to obtain the data for this study is included with this article. It had two parts. In the first, the audience was asked to rate each piece on a scale of 1 to 5, according to how appealing (“attractive, enjoyable, interesting, etc.”) the piece was, with larger numbers indicating greater appeal. In the oral introduction to the questionnaire at the beginning of the recital, it was stressed that the ratings were to be of how appealing the

music was in and of itself, not how well the pieces were played.

In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents noted, again on a 1-to-5 scale, information about themselves including the degree of exposure they had to classical music and music other than classical, their enjoyment of classical and music other than classical, and their lifetime involvement in music (vocal, instrumental). Gender and age group (up through 20, 21–35, 36–50, 51–65, 66 and up) were also requested. Organist Mel Butler and Seattle AGO Chapter Dean Christopher Glenn contributed significantly to the design of the questionnaire.

PEOPLE ATTENDING THE RECITAL AND STATISTICAL METHODS

A total of 135 people attended the recital, and of these, 116 (86%) completed the questionnaires and turned them in. The responses from these 116 people were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, and detailed analyses were performed. To make the results as easy to interpret as possible, only the statistical test used will be mentioned, along with results that will be given as the probability (p) that the conclusion being drawn is in error due to chance or sampling factors. Thus, “ $p < .05$ ” means that there is less than a 5% chance that the conclusion being drawn is in error and “ $p < .01$ ” means that there is less than a 1% chance that the conclusion being drawn is in error. Following conventional statistical practice, findings were considered to be statistically reliable only if there was no greater than a 5% chance that the conclusion being drawn was due to chance or sampling factors.

Gender and Age

Of the 97 people who volunteered information on their gender, 50 were women and 47 were men. With regard to age, only one respondent was younger than 21 years of age, two were 21–35, eleven were 36–50, 26 were 51–65, and 66 were age 66 and older. While age of the audience can only be estimated given the questionnaire used, it appears that the typical person was in their late 60s and possibly slightly older than that.

Musical Background

Data on musical background and experience are summarized in Table 1. As evaluated using the Student *t* statistic (which evaluates the likelihood that the differences between means are due to chance factors), there was no statistically reliable difference in reported exposure to classical music and to music other than classical. Enjoyment of music was high for both classical music and music other than classical, with no difference between the two areas. Personal involvement in music (past or present) varied markedly.

RESULTS

Overall appeal of various types of music played

Table 2 presents the data on the degree to which the audience found appealing the particular pieces played at the recital. The *Rusty Pail Blues* by Fats Waller took the top spot with an average rating of 4.74 on the five-point scale; it was followed by Mulet's *Carillon-Sortie* (4.7) and then by the concert rag *Sweet Sixteenths* by Albright, which tied with Bach's *G Minor Prelude and Fugue* at 4.54. Taken as a whole, music other than classical was rated as having significantly greater appeal than classical music, with an extremely low chance that this conclusion was in error ($p < .00001$). Also, music other than classical had statistically better ratings of appeal than the hymns and hymn preludes by a similar margin ($p < .00001$). While classical music as a whole was rated as having slightly more appeal than the hymns and hymn preludes, the difference was not statistically reliable.

Comparison of personal variables with appeal of music

With regard to *gender*, the only finding in the entire study was in relation to hymns with preludes. Women gave more favorable responses (average of 4.48) than men (4.09) for the preludes ($p < .02$), and the difference was even greater for the actual singing of the hymns (women, 4.45; men, 3.78; $p < .002$). No differences in ratings of appeal were found with regard to *age*, although the fact that most people in this particular audience were older prevented an adequate evaluation of this variable.

In a further effort to identify who did or did not like the nonclassical music played at the recital, the classical exposure and classical enjoyment variables were combined and averaged. It was then possible to divide people into three approximately equal groups according to whether they had a Low (1–3.5; 31 people), Medium (4.0–4.5; 45 people), or High (5.0; 34 people) classi-

RECITAL QUESTIONNAIRE

We wish to obtain information on the types of music played at organ recitals. Please rate each piece played according to how appealing (attractive, enjoyable, interesting, etc.) the piece was to you by putting a circle around your answer.

	Not at all appealing			Extremely appealing	
Concerto del Sigr. Torell (Walther)	1	2	3	4	5
Andante fur eine Walze (Mozart)	1	2	3	4	5
G Minor Prelude and Fugue (Bach)	1	2	3	4	5
Three Chorale Preludes (Schack)	1	2	3	4	5
Audience hymn singing	1	2	3	4	5
Sweet Sixteenths (Albright)	1	2	3	4	5
Nimrod from Enigma Variations (Elgar)	1	2	3	4	5
Rusty Pail Blues (Waller)	1	2	3	4	5
Carillon-Sortie (Mulet)	1	2	3	4	5

To help us evaluate the above answers and to better understand who is coming to our recitals, please circle your answers below:

	Very little			Very much	
1. Amount of exposure to classical music:	1	2	3	4	5
2. Enjoyment of classical music:	1	2	3	4	5
3. Exposure to music other than classical:	1	2	3	4	5
4. Enjoyment of music other than classical:	1	2	3	4	5
5. Personal involvement in music (vocal and/or instrumental, current or past)	1	2	3	4	5

Optional (circle): Gender: M F Age group: Up thru 20 21–35 36–50 51–65 66+

Please put any comments you would care to offer about this recital on the back of this sheet of paper. THANK YOU for your help on this questionnaire—it is greatly appreciated!

Table 1

Frequencies and summary measures of self-ratings of personal musical background

Self-rating of personal experience

Item	Very little					Mean (average)	Standard deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
Exposure to classical music	2	7	26	40	35	3.90	0.99
Enjoyment of classical music	0	2	15	31	61	4.38	0.79
Exposure to music other than classical	0	4	26	39	41	4.06	0.87
Enjoyment of music other than classical	0	2	21	39	47	4.20	0.81
Personal involvement in music	24	9	19	18	38	3.34	1.56

cal background (exposure and enjoyment). Overall appeal of the various types of music to people in these three groups was then compared by means of one-way analysis of variance.

The results of the analyses described in the last paragraph are presented in Table 3. Exposure and enjoyment of classical music in a person's background were indeed related to appeal of classical music and hymns at the recital. In each case, persons with medi-

um or high classical music backgrounds gave reliably higher ratings of appeal for the classical music and hymns played than did people having low backgrounds in classical music. However, regardless of the level of background in classical music, the ratings of appeal of music other than classical were similar. Thus, people with strongly classical interests enjoyed the nonclassical music as much as those who had little classical background. →

Table 2

Frequencies of degree of appeal (1 to 5 on recital questionnaire) for each piece of music played at the recital

Degree of appeal

	Not at all appealing		Extremely appealing			Mean (average)	Standard deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
Classical music							
Concerto del Sigr. Torell	1	6	31	52	22	3.79	0.85
Andante fur eine Walze	0	3	18	40	54	4.26	0.82
G Minor Prelude & Fugue	1	3	7	25	78	4.54	0.80
Nimrod from Enigma	0	5	14	27	69	4.39	0.87
Carillon-Sortie	0	0	6	20	82	4.70	0.57
<i>Summary:</i>	0.4%	3%	13%	29%	54%	4.34	0.53
Music other than classical							
Sweet Sixteenths	0	0	9	35	72	4.54	0.64
Rusty Pail Blues	0	1	6	14	92	4.74	0.59
<i>Summary:</i>	0%	0.4%	7%	21%	72%	4.65	0.50
Hymns with preludes							
Three Chorale Preludes	1	1	13	43	55	4.33	0.78
Audience hymn singing	2	8	15	36	53	4.14	1.01
<i>Summary:</i>	1.3%	4%	12%	35%	48%	4.23	0.78
SUMMARY (entire recital):	0.05%	2.6%	12%	29%	56%	4.38	0.46

Table 3

Appeal of the types of music played at the recital related to degree of prior exposure to and enjoyment of classical music

Classical music exposure and experience groups	Ratings of appeal		Statistical significance from one way of variance
	Mean (average)	Standard deviation	
Overall appeal of classical music played at recital			
Low classical exposure/experience	3.96	0.66	Statistical difference overall ($p < .001$) with the Medium and High groups being reliably higher than the Low group
Medium classical exposure/experience	4.47	0.40	
High classical exposure/experience	4.49	0.41	
Overall appeal of music other than classical played at recital			
Low classical exposure/experience	4.56	0.44	No statistically reliable differences exist between the groups
Medium classical exposure/experience	4.77	0.48	
High classical exposure/experience	4.54	0.54	
Overall appeal of hymns with preludes played at recital			
Low classical exposure/experience	3.85	0.74	Significant difference overall ($p < .01$) with the Medium and High groups being reliably higher than the Low group
Medium classical exposure/experience	4.42	0.66	
High classical exposure/experience	4.32	0.80	

NOTE: Low, Medium, and High classical exposure/experience groups are defined in the text.

Written comments from the audience

Forty-seven of the 116 respondents wrote one or more comments on their questionnaires. Nearly all of these were positive, and they praised the organist, the music chosen, and the organ. A common theme that ran through these comments was appreciation of the wide variety of music chosen.

DISCUSSION

This study had several advantages in exploring the importance of appeal to the listener in the selection of music for organ recitals.

First, we had an organist who was willing to step out of the usual conventions in music selection and perform frank theater organ music. Second, that same organist was willing to have the audience sit there with paper and pencil in hand and rate the music he was performing. Third, we had an organ with enough diversity in resources including a variety of strings, reeds, and percussions (chimes, harp), that a broad range of sounds could be produced. Fourth, we had a setting where this experiment could take place, as it was specifically blessed by the concert committee of the church. And fifth, we were able to attract a large enough audience that we had significant statistical power to come to a number of reliable conclusions.

A study of any single recital has obvious limitations because it is an evaluation of one set of circumstances that has inherent boundaries and biases. Nevertheless, given the strengths just outlined, the following findings do appear to be reliable:

1) The age of the typical person in the audience was noticeably older than in the general population. This was true despite the fact that we had appealed to the general public by newspaper advertisement; by advertisement to the church, which has a number of younger people in it; and by other methods which reached younger people. While our older group may be atypical of people attending organ recitals, it is also possible that it is all too typical, and if so, this is a matter that deserves attention. The people in the audience appeared to come from many sources, with less than one third coming from the church where the recital was performed.

2) People loved the variety of musical styles offered in this recital, which exhibited marked differences in tempo, rhythm, voices, and other features. Perhaps it was the unexpected variety in pieces such as the *Rusty Pail Blues* that resulted in the whistling and cheering that was especially evident at the end of

that piece. Persons planning organ recitals should consider the possibility that inclusion of a broad range of music might be especially appreciated by their audiences.

3) The popularity of the music other than classical is a major finding from this study: this music had more appeal than either the classical music or the hymns. It remains to be determined if this finding would be duplicated, but future studies need to be set up to examine if this is the case. Related questions also need to be examined, including whether or not a novelty effect was operative here. Would the great enjoyment of music other than classical have persisted had there been an equal number of classical and other-than-classical pieces?

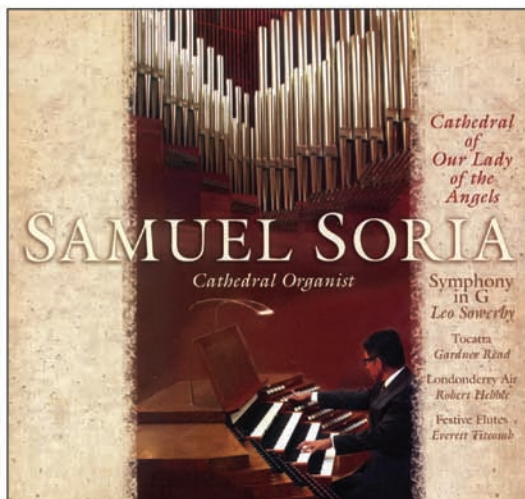
4) Our audience reported a substantial background in classical music with a large amount of exposure to it and enjoyment of it. The typical person who came likely expected a primarily (or solely) classical recital. However, the nonclassical music played was enjoyed at a high level even when there was a strong classical background. Perhaps these two types of music should not be viewed as in tension with one another but as different ways to appeal to the public. Might the combination of classical and other-than-classical music render appeal greater to the general public than would either type of music alone?

The results of this investigation should be taken in the context of articles already published in *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*. The AGO Task Force on Long-Range Planning has recently published a “white paper” on the state of classical music in America.¹ This article reports that the audience for live classical music is diminishing sharply and that if the trend continues, “. . . the traditional field of classical music is on its way to extinction” (p. 57). It was specifically recommended that more cross-generational programming be presented to recognize the artistry of organists in jazz, rock, and other specialties. There has also been the report of an extremely well-attended recital that focused on music other than classical.² The findings of these two reports are in agreement with those of this study.

While this article has focused only upon the choice of music played at organ recitals as a possible reason for frequent poor attendance, there are clearly other possible contributing factors: (1) the familiarity of the pieces to the audience; (2) the manner in which the pieces are played (e.g., enthusiasm, energy, creativity, daring musicality); (3) a possible lack of pieces composed

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specifically for organ that accommodate styles of music other than classical and liturgical; and (4) the tonal composition of the organs upon which the pieces are played, which may be short on color and texture. It would be useful to undertake investigations of the relevance of each of these topics to overall appeal of organ music. If a number of us undertake such investigations, we may indeed discover how we can generally improve the status of the instrument that we love so dearly—and not just improve it in our own circles, but in the mind of the general public.

NOTES

1. David Vogels, “The State of Classical Music in America,” in *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, Jan. 2013, pp. 56–57.
2. Rick McKnight, “Four Hands/Four Feet: Hundreds Turn Out for SRO Organ Concert,” in *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, Jan. 2013, pp. 70–71.

Carl B. Dodrill, PhD, is dean-elect of the Seattle AGO Chapter and also president of the Pipe Organ Foundation. His work has focused on encouraging young people’s interest in organ and also on making the pipe organ appealing to and available to people in the general population.