

Increasing Interest in Organ Recitals

THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIST-RELATED VARIABLES

BY CARL B. DODRILL

ORGAN RECITALS are often poorly attended, but the reasons for this are not well understood and are rarely investigated empirically. Two reasons were recently explored in data-based studies that were published in *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*,¹ and both of these were *music-related variables*. The first study focused upon *variety* in the music played, and it showed that without question, the inclusion of music of markedly different styles, genres, and purposes added appeal of the recital to an audience that did not have a known focus upon classical, religious, or popular music. The second study focused upon *familiarity* of the music played, and it showed that music familiar to an audience was definitely rated as more appealing than unfamiliar music. While these conclusions are not surprising, it is not at all clear that their importance is commonly appreciated. Also, it is not clear that these variables are the only ones related to the appeal of recitals to audiences.

The present study further explores reasons for poor attendances at organ recitals by evaluating another category of variables—namely, *organist-related variables*. In particular, this study explores whether or not reported enjoyment of the recital is related to the following variables: (1) *visibility*—whether or not the organist is visible to the audience; (2) *verbal communication*—whether or not the organist speaks to the audience between pieces; (3) *enthusiasm*—the degree of enthusiasm and energy put into the music as perceived by the audience; and (4) *cre-*

ativity—the degree of creativity and novelty put into the organist’s playing as judged by the audience.

We now turn to assess the relationships, if any, between the four organist-related variables and enjoyment of the music played. In order to relate these variables with the *variety* and *familiarity* variables already studied, those variables were also included in the present investigation.

RECITAL SETTING

The data for this study were collected at a recital at Mercer Island Presbyterian Church on Mercer Island, Washington, on October 17, 2014. Key facts about this recital were as follows:

First, the *organist* who played the concert was David Wickerham, who received his training in organ at the University of Arizona. He soon expanded his classical studies to theater organ, and he became both a church organist and a theater organist. In recent years, he has emphasized the theater organ and has played in prominent theater venues and for the American Theatre Organ Society. The recital under study was given the title “Pipes and Pizzazz,” and posters advertising it said the following: “Internationally acclaimed organist plays popular, classical, and liturgical music. Plus, he will play what you want him to play by taking selections from the audience and putting them together in a Grand Medley. No tickets needed—freewill offering.”

Second, the repertoire selected was chosen by the organist. He declined to

have a program of particular selections and pointed out that he relied heavily upon feedback that he was getting from the audience about what they were enjoying in his ongoing choice of music. He played a Grand Medley from requests that the audience had written on a tablet during intermission. It is estimated that approximately 70% of the pieces he played in the 110-minute recital were popular or theater, approximately 15–20% were religious, and approximately 10–15% were classical. The recital was played entirely by memory with no musical scores whatsoever.

Third, the *pipe organ* used for the concert is a III/27 electric-action instrument (Pipe Organ Foundation, Opus 2) that is orchestral and American Classic in disposition with a French Romantic influence. It has eight principal stops (ten ranks), seven flutes, six reeds, and four strings. The Great and Swell and part of the Pedal are in the front, the Antiphonal in the back, an Open Wood on one side of the room, and the Harp on the other side. The key-hole-shaped room seats approximately 275 people, and it has good acoustical properties.

Fourth, the Recital Questionnaire used to obtain the data for this study is included with this report. Endorsed by the church’s Concert Committee, the questionnaire focused heavily upon factors related to enjoyment of the event and to an evaluation of the balance in the types of music played. In addition, it asked for information from the respondents in terms of their musical backgrounds, gender, and age.

PEOPLE IN ATTENDANCE AND STATISTICAL METHODS

A total of 101 people attended the recital, and of these, 69 (68%) completed the questionnaires and turned them in (one was omitted as it was less than one-half completed). The data from these 68 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 in this report, 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, whereas " $p < .01$ " 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 in error due to chance or sampling factors.

Gender and Age

Of the 60 people who volunteered information on their gender, 38 were women and 22 were men. Of the 66 people who gave information with regard to age, no respondent was less than 21 years of age, two were 21–35, one was 36–50, twelve were 51–65, and 51 were aged 66 and older. While age of the audience can only be estimated given the questionnaire used, it appears that the typical person was in the last half of their 60s and possibly slightly older than that. In comparison with both prior studies, there were more women in this study, and in terms of age, respondents were similar to those in the first study and slightly older than those in the second study.

Musical Background

Data on the musical background and experience of the audience are summarized in Table 1. As evaluated

RECITAL QUESTIONNAIRE

We are very much interested in offering the best concerts possible at Mercer Island Presbyterian Church. We therefore request that you complete the questionnaire below. Thank you! —MIPC Concert Committee

How did you hear about tonight's recital? Check all that apply:

- MIPC bulletin/e-mail announcement Retirement center publicity
 Radio announcement Flyers/posters
 Word of mouth—friend/acquaintance Other: _____

Relative to your *enjoyment* of tonight's program, please rate each of the following on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important), and put a number in each space:

- Variety of the music played
 Familiarity of the music played
 Visibility and closeness of the organist to the audience
 The organist taking the microphone and speaking to the audience between pieces
 The enthusiasm and energy put into the music by the organist
 The degree of creativity and novelty put into his playing

What did you enjoy most about tonight's program?

Was the balance of *classical*, *popular/theater*, and *liturgical/church* music in approximately the right proportion tonight? Circle Yes or No:

Yes No

If No, check all that apply:

- I would have liked more classical popular/theater church/liturgical
 I would have liked less classical popular/theater church/liturgical

How would you rate the quality of the overall program tonight (circle a number):

Very poor 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Absolutely excellent

To better understand who is coming to our concerts, 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+

using the Student t statistic, 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. All of these findings were similar to those of the previous studies, except that in the second study, exposure to and enjoyment of classical music was much higher than exposure to and enjoyment of music that was not classical in nature.

RESULTS

Table 2 presents the data on the relationships between the reported enjoyment of the recital with the two music-related variables and the four organist-related variables. Each respondent rated the importance of each variable from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (extremely important) with regard to enjoyment of the recital. All variables were considered to be important and were given high ratings (the lowest was 8.34), but it was found that the *enthusiasm* and *creativity* variables were at the top, with extremely high average scores of 9.44 and 9.48,

Table 1

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

Self-rating of personal experience

Item	Very little		Very much			Mean (average)	Standard deviation
	1	2	3	4	5		
Exposure to classical music	2	2	15	19	29	4.06	1.03
Enjoyment of classical music	0	1	13	18	36	4.31	0.83
Exposure to music other than classical	0	1	12	31	22	4.12	0.75
Enjoyment of music other than classical	0	4	7	30	25	4.15	0.85
Personal involvement in music	9	7	10	13	27	3.64	1.45

Table 2

Data on the relationship between enjoyment of the recital and ratings of 1 to 10 of the importance of certain (1) music-related variables, and (2) organist-related variables.

Variable group and individual variables	Average rating	Standard deviation	Ratings of 9 or 10
Music-related variables			
<i>Variety</i> of music played	8.86	2.07	70%
<i>Familiarity</i> of music played	8.39	2.02	57%
Organist-related variables			
<i>Visibility</i> of the organist to the audience	8.58	2.09	65%
<i>Verbal communication</i> with the audience	8.34	2.15	58%
<i>Enthusiasm</i> and energy put into the music	9.44	1.25	86%
<i>Creativity</i> and novelty put into the playing	9.48	1.36	86%

Note: *Enthusiasm* and *Creativity* were both more related to reported enjoyment of the recital than were *Familiarity*, *Visibility*, and *Verbal communication* (Student *t* statistic, $p < .001$). No other statistically significant differences ($p < .001$) were detected.

respectively. Both *enthusiasm* and *creativity* were reliably higher than all other variables except for *variety*. It is clear that an audience is likely to give high marks in terms of enjoyability of a recital when the organist shows high levels of enthusiasm and energy while performing a variety of music in creative and novel ways.

While the conclusion just drawn would appear to be self-evident, the question can be raised as to how important each variable is. For example, while the lowest average score of 8.34 on *verbal communication* would appear to be fairly high on a 1-to-10-point

scale, is there any way to evaluate how high it is relative to another standard? There are two ways to do this.

First, it is noted that the studies already published showed that the variables of *variety* and *familiarity* of the music played were unquestionably related to the enjoyment of the recitals. In the current study, those two variables had average ratings of 8.86 and 8.39, respectively, and thus, when ratings on the organist variables fell within that range, it is reasonable to assume that those variables were also important. As Table 2 shows, *visibility* (8.58) and *verbal communication* (8.34)

were within that general range—and therefore importance may be ascribed to them, even though they did not get the top ratings of *enthusiasm* (9.44) and *creativity* (9.48).

Second, it is reasonable to assume that anyone giving a rating of 9 or 10 on a variable thought that variable to be very important. Percentages of respondents giving those ratings for each of the six variables are shown in the last column of Table 2. In general terms, 55–85% of the audience thought every variable to be important in the enjoyment of the recital. Further, the six variables appeared to be important to the group as a whole as none of them bore a statistical relationship to any of the personal variables (age, gender, exposure to and enjoyment of classical music, exposure to and enjoyment of music other than classical, personal involvement in music).

Regarding the Grand Medley, during the intermission, people in the audience lined up to write down their requests. A total of 43 requests were made, 37–39 of which he actually played either partly or completely (sometimes it was difficult to tell whether a piece was played for just a few bars). The medley consumed 48 minutes of continuous playing. Of the pieces requested, 23 could be broadly classified as popular, 14 as religious, and 6 as classical.

We turn to the perceived balance of classical, popular/theater, and liturgical/church music. Of the 57 people who responded to the question about balance, 33 (58%) said that the balance was about right, but 24 (42%) disagreed. The 24 indicated one or more changes they would have preferred, with 17 wanting more classical music, five more popular music, and eight more church/liturgical music (among these 24 people, one wanted less classical and four less popular). People who thought the balance was right rated the overall quality of the program as somewhat higher (9.84) than persons who would have liked a different balance (9.35; $p < .02$); but there was no difference between these

groups on any of the six music/organist variables.

Musical backgrounds of the audience were related to perceptions of importance of the six music/organist variables. However, no relationships could be detected between exposure to and enjoyment of classical music in one's background and any of the six variables, and the same was true with regard to background in music that was not classical by nature. These findings held both when a simple Pearson correlation technique was used and also when Analysis of Variance was applied to persons divided into three background groups (Low 1.5–3.5; Medium 4–4.5; High 5.0). Thus, musical background was not related to the degree to which people reported the six variables as being important in their enjoyment of the recital.

With regard to the quality of the overall program, on a 1-to-10 scale, the average score was 9.66, and 95% of the respondents gave a score of 9 or 10. This overall rating of the recital is very high, and while there are no standards for comparison, it would appear to be difficult for a recitalist to get such a positive response from an audience not highly trained in or focused upon classical, religious, or popular music. On the present occasion, there were few people there from the church, almost no other organists were there, and almost no one was there from the local theater organ society to which the organist was scheduled to give a concert two days later. People from the general community predominated. Attendees wrote down multiple positive comments about the organist, the music, and the organ.

DISCUSSION

This study clearly shows that the enjoyment of a recital is not related just to the music that is played, but to key organist-related variables as well. To be sure, having a *variety* of music played contributes significantly to the enjoyment of the recital by the audience, and playing music *familiar* to the audience also adds appeal. Howev-



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er, just as important are a series of organist-related variables that include those evaluated in this study and perhaps others as well. Let's look at those variables more closely.

First, it is instructive to relate the four organist-related variables to what it is believed that organ instructors commonly tell their students. The author of this report knows of no instructor of organ who tells students to be sure to be *visible* to the audience when playing a recital. Indeed, organs are often built in such a way that the organist is entirely invisible to the audience—such as when the organ is in the balcony or when there is a Ruckpositiv division. Although there may be some exceptions, it appears that *verbal communication* of the recitalist with the audience has not been encouraged but rather frowned upon. Playing with *enthusiasm* and energy has perhaps gotten the best support from teachers of organ, but it may be there are times that playing with precision has been emphasized instead. Playing with *creativity* and novelty has been valued, but it also seems that playing in the way the composer originally intended has been valued more highly, regardless of whether such intentions enhance the appeal of the music to an audience. While there are reasons for all of these positions taken by organ instructors, a number of these positions may not be helpful in connecting either the organist to the audience or the audience to the music.

The *visibility* of the organist may be more important than has commonly been supposed. The reason may be because having the organist visible promotes connection with the organist and thus to what the organist is producing—namely, the music. In the present study, the organist was seated immediately in front of the audience, with some people no more than six feet away from him. The organist moved rhythmically with the music he was playing, he was truly “into it,” and the broad smile on his face showed that he was having fun. It was easy for him to convey enthusiasm and energy,

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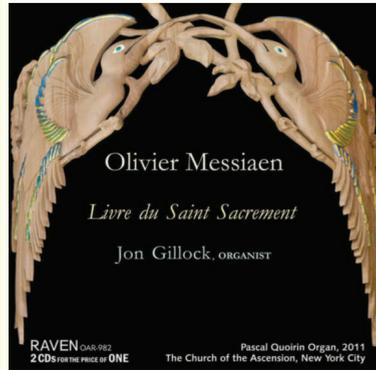
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and it was difficult to miss the creative and novel things he was doing at the console. Apart from this particular concert, it has been the consistent observation of the author of this report that people in the audience will sit where they can see the recitalist if there is seating that permits this. Having a video screen showing the organists' hands and feet has also been utilized, apparently to help the audience get more connected with the organist.

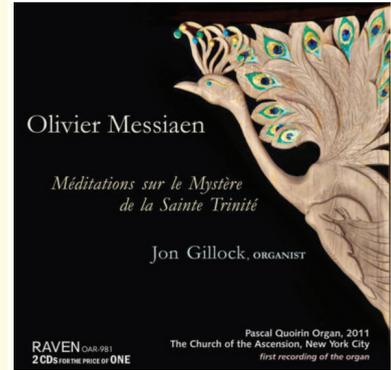
When the recitalist has *verbal communication* with the audience, not only is a connection established between the two, but information may be provided that helps the audience to connect with the music. If the audience finds a connection with the music, it is reasonable to believe that more enjoyment will be experienced than when no connection is made. In the present study, the organist speaking to the audience contributed to the enjoyment of the recital—and this was true even for people with strong backgrounds in classical music. However, the program notes (not available for the present recital) may serve a similar function, and therefore, *verbal/written communication* may ultimately be found to be the best name for this variable.

Enthusiasm and *creativity* were at the top in terms of audience enjoyment of the recital. Stephen Tharp's recital at the 2014 AGO National Convention in Boston was similar to the recital reported here in certain key respects. Scott Cantrell summarized this event as "the Boston performance that people will be talking about for years to come"² and made specific reference to Tharp's arrangement of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Cantrell noted an incredible number of variations in registration, expression, and every other form of adjustment in sound. The result was "jaw-dropping brilliance." In fact, there were 243 registration changes in 33 minutes of playing, which is a change every eight seconds on average.³ The piece was played entirely from memory. In the current recital, the author counted registration

Jon Gillock Plays Messiaen

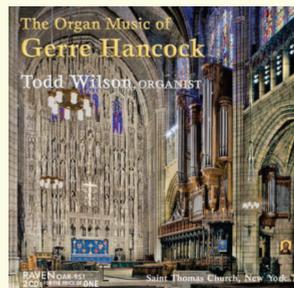


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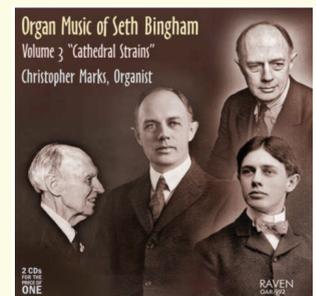
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changes in the 48-minute Grand Medley, and found that there were approximately 205 or one per 14 seconds on average. While numerous registration changes do not prove creativity, when such variations bring out the depths of meaning in the music, they are creative and add immensely to audience enjoyment. Clearly, there are some pieces in which one would not wish to make such changes, in order to render the piece as originally intended; but on many others, such changes might enhance the attractiveness of the piece to the audience.

The organ recital studied here was not the typical recital that has a strong focus upon classical music, nor was it attended primarily by classically trained organists. One wonders if the audience would have responded differently, especially to the variable about verbal communication of the recitalist with the audience. For example, at least some organists would make the point that they do not attend recitals to hear talking. In the case of the present recital, however, the recitalist's comments were routinely brief, interesting, and informative. It is remarkable that even the people with strong backgrounds in classical music reported that the comments he made contributed to their enjoyment of the recital. Given that fact, recitalists may wish to consider this focused verbal-communication technique in addition to or in place of program notes.

In conclusion, this study and two previous investigations have used an empirical and data-based approach to address the question of why attendance at organ recitals is often less than desirable. These studies have shown that the music selected is important, and people very much like to hear a great variety of pieces—and especially those that are familiar to them. It is also clear that variables pertaining to the organist are important; among these are connecting with the organist visually and verbally and playing with enthusiasm and creativity. Given these facts, the following postulations are

presented for discussion and debate among organists everywhere:

1. Audiences wish to be connected with every piece of music they hear. When they are connected with the music, they find enjoyment in it, and when they find enjoyment, they find meaning. When they find meaning, they return to hear more.

2. The six variables studied (variety, familiarity, visibility, verbal communication, enthusiasm, creativity) are tools in the organist's toolbox to connect with people in the audience and to connect the audience with the music. There may be other tools as well that were not studied here. Not every tool is appropriate for every piece of music or in every setting. One should choose the tools most appropriate for every piece played, with attention to the likelihood that the tool will help to establish connections. There is no need to try to use all the tools with any particular piece; however, the planned use of more than one of these tools on every piece played may result in a greater likelihood that the audience will thoroughly enjoy the music.

These postulations are presented to the organ community with the hope that they will be discussed, tested, and responded to with feedback and interaction that will help all of us to produce increasingly popular organ recitals.

NOTES

1. Carl B. Dodrill, "Increasing Interest in Organ Recitals: The Importance of Variety in Repertoire," *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* 47, no. 11 (Nov. 2013): 28–31; "The Importance of Familiarity of Repertoire," *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* 48, no. 7 (July 2014): 48–51.
2. Scott Cantrell, "An Impressive Turnout for AGO National Convention 2014: Boston, Massachusetts," *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, 48, no. 9 (Sept. 2014): 34–43.
3. John Bishop, "In the Wind . . .," *The Diapason* 105, no. 9 (Sept. 2014): 20–21.

Carl B. Dodrill is past dean of the Seattle AGO Chapter and 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. He can be reached at carl@dodrill.net.

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