



VOX OCEANA

OCT 2020

NEWSLETTER OF THE RHODE ISLAND CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS | VOLUME LIII NO. 6

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FROM THE DEAN

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I hope you are well and thriving, even in these uncertain times. We at RIAGO are working hard to contribute to your well-being and your musical life, so dig in to some of the comforts and curiosities that this month's newsletter holds for you.

One article by a friend and fellow student of mine at Boston University, **Alex Green**, offers a comforting and reflective viewpoint, so timely now. Alex has also agreed to join a round table discussion we will sponsor in November.

Don't miss the date change of our event, Creating a Virtual Choir! A ZOOM event. Our clinicians, **Dr. Teresa Coffman** and **Jack Zornado**, experienced some equipment issues and lost much of the resenatation they had worked so hard on. But all is up and running again, and I'm hoping you will be able to attend the new date, Saturday, October 17th from 10 am – 12:00 pm. It promises to be enjoyable as well as informative. A Q&A will allow you to ask questions about creating your own virtual choir adventures! Email RIAGOevents@gmail.com to reserve a place in this event. The Zoom link will be sent to you on the morning of the event before 9 am.

Our Virtual Postcard feature has been a big hit, with 160 views of **Stephen Busby's** postcard from S. Stephens. In this issue, we have a postcard from our acting subdean and publicity manager **Stephen Martorella**, from the First Baptist Church in America.

Note that we have created a new series called **Mentoring Minutes**. These video shorts address specific topics by various organists. I decided to kick us off by highlighting legato playing on the organ, a subject every pianist asks me about when confronted with playing in church on the organ. Over the months, other organists will present tips on their chosen subject. We hope these *Mentoring Minutes* will engage your curiosity about each subject. You are invited to pose questions and suggest subjects for a future segment. Address your topic of interest or question to RIAGOmedia@gmail.com and put Mentoring Minutes in the subject line.

Lastly, please check out our COVID Relief Initiative's Emergency Relief Fund that **Stephen Martorella** and **Lawrence Wilson** have developed to help those of us in need. The pandemic has created uncertainties for everyone and certainly for fellow musicians who have seen their pay reduced, or lost their job. We are a small organization but we care and we want to find a way, however small, to help you if you need help. All the information for qualification and application procedures can be found in this October issue. Any information you give will be kept private so no need to feel embarrassed to apply for a bit of help!

I wish you joy, peace and beautiful music!

Gigi Mitchell-Velasco, Dean

MENTORING MINUTES

We are instituting a new series under the heading *Mentoring Minutes* in which organists will offer a brief lesson on some aspect of organ playing. This month, our Dean, **Gigi Mitchell-Velasco**, presents a brief discussion and demonstration of achieving legato on the organ. Here is the address for the 11 minute video: <https://youtu.be/JDoQuMwbhtl>

HOW MUSIC CAN BE OUR MEDICINE

This is the title of an article by **Alex Green**, organist at UCC Church in Walpole, MA, and music therapist for a group of adults. His musings and suggestions may give you a new perspective. Alex has graciously shared this article with us. Read it at the end of this newsletter.

WISH YOU WERE HERE...

The second of a series of *The Video Postcard Project* offered by The Rhode Island Chapter of The American Guild of Organists features music and photos of organs and organists, guest stars from the last RIAGO-organized Regional Convention. Lovely and historic pictures of the First Baptist Church in America, as well as other Providence churches, and even a stained glass rose window grace this postcard from **Stephen Martorella**, organist at the First Baptist Church in America.

Enjoy the postcard at <https://youtu.be/BGwLSp3fpbQ>

RESCHEDULED: OCTOBER 17, 2020 RIAGO ZOOM EVENT: 10AM

Breaking News: Rhode Island College Concert Chorus has been placed on the ballot for the 63rd Grammy Awards in two categories: *Best Top Duo or Group Performance* and *Best Music Video*, both for their rendition of *When I Think of You*. And WE have a chance to go behind the scenes on October 17 to see the making of the video. Congratulations to **Teresa Coffman** and all the performers!

The event is open to everyone, not just RIAGO members, so please spread the word. Dr. Coffman will cover the basics; and Senior student **Jack Zornado** will give a tutorial on how to put it all together. To learn more from Dr. Coffman about the process, see https://youtu.be/IciLsL_qw_o

To attend the Zoom event please email RIAGOevents@gmail.com and we will send the link.

MEMBER MATTERS

Our condolences go to **Stephen** and **Philip Martorella**, whose Mother, Jeanne, died on September 27, at age 95. She was a founding member of the Rockettes, among many accomplishments. Requiescat in pace, **Jeanne Martorella**.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR COVID SETBACKS

RIAGO has set up an Emergency Relief Fund in response to the current and ongoing crisis and its economic impact on our members. The relief will be a \$100 gift card to a supermarket where the recipient buys groceries. To be eligible, applicants must be current members of our chapter and have lost income from their church postings as a result of being laid off due to the Covid lockdown any time after 15 March 2020. This gift card may be issued only once in a 12-month period. Individuals with liability and/or insurance claims pending are not eligible. To apply, send a statement with your name, home address, telephone, email, a brief paragraph detailing the circumstances of your dismissal, the date of dismissal, (date of reinstatement if applicable) and the name of the institution from which you were dismissed. Please send this material to Steve Martorella at steve.fbc@verizon.net

The matter will be subject to review by the committee for the ERF (Lawrence Wilson and Stephen Martorella) and subject to final approval by the Dean (Gigi Mitchell-Velasco).

AGO National offers a link to various articles indicating helpful sources of information for musicians, religious institutions, students regarding many of the Covid-related challenges facing members. <https://www.agohq.org/responding-to-Covid-19/>

WANT TO SEE YOUR ARTICLE IN PRINT?

We encourage you to submit an article to the *Vox Oceana* newsletter on an organ or music-related subject. Send submissions for consideration to our Newsletter Editor, Althea Allard, at altheaallard@gmail.com. All submissions will be edited and included as space allows.

PLACEMENT LISTINGS

Contact Julie Tagen (401-225-9594) to list

North Kingstown United Methodist 4/17/20
35 Congdon Hill Road, Saunderstown, RI 02874
Mark Zaccaria 401-225-5051 zaccaria@att.net
Pipe organ \$6,000-8,400 O

A WORD TO THE WISE...

For easy access to the web addresses in this newsletter, use the links listed in the email which brought you this letter!

SUBSTITUTE LISTINGS

Contact Julie Tagen (401-225-9594) with changes.

AVAILABLE SUNDAYS & WEEKDAYS

Babbitt, Jonathan 401-864-9009
Casteel, Eden: 401-932-5589
Clarke, Margaret: 401-726-4128 (all)
Higgins, Stephen: 401-441-2270 (comfortable with any keyboard situation)
Jones, William: 401-848-4327 (all)
Kohl, Karen: 401-787-2695 Please Inquire
MacCubbin, Jay: 401-521-0698
Nicholson, Nancy: 401-521-9097 (all)
Norton-Jackson, Diana 401-714-2700 interim, sub, no weddings
Tagen, Julia L.: 401-225-9594 (all, weddings/funerals/interim)
Taylor, Terry: 401-253-9030 (tutti@fullchannel.net)
Vecchio, Gina: 401-954-2163
Vinson, Duncan: 781-888-3848
Westhaver, Verna: 401-683-2636 (substitute/interim)
Wilson, Lawrence: 860-857-5493 Organ; Sacred Jazz Composer/Arranger

AVAILABLE WEEKDAYS ONLY

Black, John: 401-737-1230 (all, available Saturdays & weekdays)
Castellani, Roger: 917-621-6530
Cranmer, David: 401-447-9848
Martorella, Philip: 401-615-0769 (no Sun. a.m.)
Sobaje, Martha: 401-626-0099 (weddings, funerals)

SUBMISSIONS

DEADLINE: 20th of each month. SUBMISSIONS: Send Word or Text files to altheaallard@gmail.com or to Althea Allard, 166 Suffolk Ave., Pawtucket, RI 02861. ADVERTISING: Word doc, PDF (print ready), JPG (high resolution), or TIFF. All files should be grayscale at 300 dpi resolution. Email to altheaallard@gmail.com

ADVERTISING RATES

1/4-page ad (3.5"W x 5"H): \$18 -or- 1/8-page ad (3.5"W x 2.5"H): \$10
Flyers provided electronically for inclusion with newsletter (for RIAGO members): \$10.
Make checks out to RIAGO and mail to Althea Allard by the 20th. \$25 non-members.

How Music Can Be Our Medicine

by Alex Green



Alex grew up in Utah with a twin brother who now plays professional guitar. Alex now identifies with the UCC (United Church in Walpole, MA) where he has worked since beginning his Master of Sacred Music at Boston University (graduating summa cum laude). Alex also works as a music therapist, celebrating the growth in a group of young adults with developmental delays, and as a choral director at a retirement center, singing and playing old Broadway with people whom he wishes would adopt him already. He spends time outdoors, cooks, dances and has a lifelong love of making art (currently he's working on a portrait of someone's bird). He is known to run barefoot, almost year-round, having police called on his behalf by concerned citizens. He began running this way at 12, inspired by the Rarámuri of Mexico. He dreams of living off-grid while still enjoying the benefits of electricity, and playing the organ, piano and guitar.

Like many of you, I'm a music director. I'm also a music therapist. A few weeks ago, for the first time since the outbreak, I conducted my first online music therapy session with my group of seven young adults who have developmental delays. I was coming up with new ideas like having them stretch out their hands toward the screen in order to "strum" my guitar. To my surprise it worked. They smiled as I strummed, in time, whenever they reached out. My successes have usually come after disappointments. One such: failing to check in.

I took for granted human contact and its immediacy before all this. The scintillating presence of someone feels more muted to me online. Yet, even in person when I have worked with my music therapy group or with my two choirs, I have fallen into focusing only on the mechanics, forgetting the found heaven of souls around me. I'd be knee deep in the music, but not much else. Yes: I am a director of music but my greatest moments and those of my choirs and collaborators have often come only after my lens widened to include more of the landscape around the notes and music. What is that landscape? How much of it do we take in and where are we in the midst of it? I've taken advantage of a musician-development course along with other tools, like Buddhist-influenced meditation, to up my game. When I work with my adults in my music therapy program, I have goals in mind. Foremost among them is that I "center down" within myself, so I connect with them. I come with an agenda, but I also try to engineer the session with them in mind, with music being a means to that end. I haven't taken their interest for granted. They've yawned at me, told me to start the goodbye song before I'd planned, and pulled out their devices. I've had to earn their participation by focusing on them. My focus on them has been a practice that begins with seeing myself in their midst, conceiving of the session as collaboration.

I've attended Sunday school classes when the instructor would come to a topic of great interest to me and my classmates; we'd be full of questions and comments, fielded by the teacher. Often, he or she would then come to a point of frustration and abruptly end the sometimes lively and engaging discussion. "We've got to move on," they'd

say. "There's a lot more we have to cover." I, with many of my friends, would slump in our chairs. Were they teaching a lesson or were they teaching people?

Sometimes I lose sight of the landscape, marinating in the mechanics of how I'm playing, and, when I'm working with other church musicians, how they're doing and whether we can get it done well and in time. I go underwater, worried about sound quality alone, and don't surface for air until it's all over with me wondering how it went. I am oblivious to music quality when I'm with my young adults in music therapy. In our sessions, it's about connection alone, music as the medium. What is the point of playing after all? It's a paycheck, certainly. Beyond that, for me it's finding connection with God and others. It's finding connection to the music. It's ultimately a connection to me. Are we connected to the music? To the meaning of the music or the words in the music? Is there music, as it were, in the words?

The ancients talked of the power of music, voices with instruments, to move minds and hearts. Much of the groundings of music therapy come from thoughts of philosophers like Plato who spoke of the harmony of the spheres and how even the planets rotated and orbited the sun in melodic line. The human soul and body were believed to harmonize with other forces as well as within itself. Plato spoke like a doctor prescribing medicine when advocating for, and against, certain modes or types of music, supporting those he thought fostered discipline and courage.¹ His pupil, Aristotle, was less restrictive, believing music could be used for pure enjoyment and catharsis, or a release of emotions. Interestingly he thought playing solely for others was unseemly for free-born sons. Music should be played for one's own improvement; simply seeking a career in virtuosic public playing was seen as vulgar.² I emphasize the part where Aristotle thought it important to play music mainly for one's self and agree that music can best fulfill its possibilities when it is an outlet for the soul and not just a dazzling display of something.

I have fun with my regular gig here at United Church in Walpole [Massachusetts]. I enjoy what I do. I still have times, though,

of hurt and frustration, mostly with myself. Why did you pick such a hard piece? I'll ask myself as the recording deadline looms. Since I'm making a permanent record of my playing, I don't feel I can get away with clipping the note or getting mushy with my phrasing. After all, I do have multiple takes while recording to get it right. Before all this, I could make mistakes in our in-person services, and it would be more or less discouraging, but I could move on. Our live service was never to be redone. But now when I record myself playing, accompanying and singing the hymns, I get to revisit each take again and again. Like many of you I tend toward perfectionism. So, when is good enough?

It's easy for me to approach the piano or organ bench and think, "Is this going to please the pastor or Mrs. Higginbotham, who has certain opinions?" I don't ignore those voices, but I do try to allow them to guide me to places of productivity and not stagnation. Above all I try to allow the music to speak to me. Like you, I imagine, I have some latitude in what I decide to play, for the prelude, the postlude, and so forth. I've played most of the favorite hymns many times. I can easily just focus on the familiar notes, rhythms, etc., and forget the words or their implications.

In the beginning of our present crisis, while I and my church were offering strictly online worship, I was working to present hymns in the absence of choir or congregation. While recording for our services I found, if I worked, I could accompany myself at the organ or piano and also sing at the same time. During these weeks I would spend time with the stanzas, often memorizing them so I could manage the task better.

I'd even lie in bed sometimes, rehearsing the lyrics, as I've sometimes done with the notes themselves.

Maybe you believe, maybe you don't. I know at least one of my choir members does not consider themselves a believer but is quite involved. We speak of welcoming believers, questioning believers and those who do not believe. Music has the power to bring us all together. During one of our final live practices I asked my choir to forget about the music, which we'd been working at, and look at the lyrics. I wanted to hear what I only hear when I feel music has touched the one making it. "Connect with the music or the message, or both; and if you can't do that, connect with what you think another person could find uplifting." After we ran through it again, one of the men spoke for us all: "Wow."

When I began my current position at United Church in Walpole, I'd started a Master of Sacred Music degree at Boston University. I was spending hours on the phone almost daily with family over issues that had come up at the same time. I was burning the candle a bit. I felt it; my choirs seemed to feel it too. I was leading them after all. "Choir is about having fun, isn't it?" my aunt suggested, opening the landscape a little more for me. I'd been serious about choir practice, perfection, looking the part, making the congregation happy. But fun: Fun was a revelation. It's a lesson I've been learning with my music therapy group too. Music, like learning and growing, is work. It is also its own reward. Just before the summer break at that time, a choir member subsequently said, "Thanks for making choir fun again!" I smiled. I had

been trying to make things fun for them, but also for me.

Checking in with yourself: While it's not about you, it's all about you. I have observed worship services and music therapy sessions that seemed to go much better because of me and of how I entered the space, more in harmony with the landscape, the atmosphere. I've also come away from services that had gone, in my opinion, not so well also because of me and how I felt. Did I give the music to myself? Or did I go through the music without letting it go through me?

Music can be a medicine. Physician, check in with thyself.

Some suggestions (because I like getting them):

- Pick pieces you like but don't break the bank.
- Seek challenges that are fun, that you can learn from.
- Observe (the middle path between reacting and repressing).
- Wait a few seconds between practice repetitions and use the time to reflect on what went down and what could be better.
- Rate your performances, objectively, differentiating between productive or incriminating self-talk
- Enjoy breaks, early and often.
- Know what you want to accomplish in each session, plan, or practice repetition.
- Do everything in small bites.

*And when the strife is fierce,
the warfare long,
steals on the ear
the distant triumph song,
and hearts are brave again
and arms are strong.*³

Endnotes

¹ *A History of Western Music*, by J. Peter Burkholder et al., 7th ed., W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 2019, pp. 15.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 16.

³ "For All the Saints." *Glory to God*, by David Eicher, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2013, p. 326.

