

Making merry: The world of the organ

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 18, 2002](#) issue

"The rising of the sun / And the running of the deer, / The playing of the merry organ / Sweet singing in the choir" rings the chorus of "The Holly and the Ivy," a favored carol of the season. It inspires me to a love song, an overdue tribute to the pipe organ, producer of merriment, inspirer of awe, mimic of angelic choruses, undergirding of hymns.

My sister, brother and I had good reason to despise the instrument, though my two siblings learned to play it—my sister with finesse, my brother against his will. I learned to listen. Why despise it? To answer that I must tell you what hardly a soul is still alive to remember: before organ blowers were powered by electric motors, one had to pump them by hand. We Marty three are old enough to have lived at the end of that epoch.

In farm country around Battle Creek, Nebraska, in 1939, the kerosene lamps were being shelved and everything had recently been electrified. However, the good souls at St. John's Church had not gotten around to electrifying the organ. Someone had to hand-pump it, and the Marty trio did, for ten cents an hour, while father rehearsed or played. If one overpumped, an escape valve would wheeze; if one tired and underpumped, the sound would die—as it has now died in "contemporary worship."

While pumping, we learned to love the repertory and to hear what the organ can do to bring congregational (as opposed to "audience") singing alive. To praise the organ is not to denigrate the guitar, lute, mandolin, banjo or any number of other now electronically enhanced ancient instruments with which people praise God. But to laud them at the expense of the organ seems unfair. By being taught to forget the organ, to leave it behind, people are being deprived of a wonderful experience.

When I served on the Centennial Committee of the American Guild of Organists—no auditions, fortunately, for that post—we brainstormed to find ways to help the organ appeal to younger generations. I'd like to waylay the MTV folks and work with them

on a way to introduce the organ to the young. Get pop stars to display its wonders. Show high schoolers the dazzling complexity of organ technology and “mixtures.” I think they’d get hooked and learn to love it in worship.

When I read the monthly the *American Organist*, I find much to rejoice at in the organ world. Each month there’s a color cover showing a new or restored organ. One could paper the walls with a sequence of these and be stunned by their beauty. The second page of the November issue pictures 40 smiling organ performers in one advertisement, and many such advertisements follow. Reports on regional meetings show that there’s life in the enterprise.

For all the lugubriousness with which some mourn the organ’s decline, I found inspiration in the issue’s obituaries column listing departed organists. Dorothy Quennell Flexner, 78; the great Robert Noehren, 91; Frances Sovall Felder, 102; Elizabeth Birkshire Brothers Sherman, 91. And now the December issue notes the passing of organists 93, 96 and 103 years old. Their long lives are no doubt testimonies to their long love of the instrument in its manifoldness, in the possibilities of pipings they could never exhaust.

So this Christmas, yes, use the lute —Martin Luther did—and then let the world of the organ, with its “divine elemental roar” and its “merry” sounds, herald once again the birth that inspires music-making in a world that needs something as “merry” as the organ and as “sweet” as choir-singing. Oh, and please stay seated and meditate during the postlude. It’s part of worship!