

What was I thinking?

March 6, 2022



MacLean's Cross on Iona in Scotland, erected fifteenth century

Blending in

I said I would start writing weekly again and I didn't do it. It's Lent and I've confessed my sin. Something unexpected came up and I'm working to catch up. In January, I received an e-mail with "February gig" in the subject line from someone at Piedmont University (formerly Piedmont College) in Demorest, Georgia. I served as an artist-in-residence (a.k.a. organist on call) at Piedmont for a few years. When I gave that up, I told them if they needed an organist, they knew where to find me, so I'm sort of a "pinch hitter" now. This time I was being asked if I could play the organ part in a performance of Schubert's Mass in G, a beautiful and fairly well-known choral work. The original version was scored for string orchestra and organ to accompany the choir and soloists. The organ was meant to be a continuo instrument, meaning the organ part is just a bass line with numbers under the bass notes indicating what notes or chords to play over that bass line. I enjoy the challenge and the freedom of playing from a figured bass part, but some editors write out what notes and chords they think the organ should play. I was asked to stick with that in this performance and I did.

The important thing to know in a piece like this is that the organ is part of the orchestra. It's a supporting role, not a leading role. My job as organist was to blend in, not stand out.

There was a Saturday morning rehearsal with just the orchestra so we would know what we were doing before the choir joined us, a Sunday afternoon and evening rehearsal adding the chorus and soloists, Tuesday night was the dress rehearsal, and Thursday night was the concert. In addition to the Schubert, there were symphonies by Haydn and Mozart.

Since the organ part wasn't that hard and I did most of my practicing here at church, I didn't need much practice time at Piedmont, but I had to set up the organ and practice a little to determine which stops to use. That had to be done before official rehearsals started, so I had to get there early. I had to allow an hour for driving to Demorest, and time to call campus security and wait for them to let me in the chapel. I'm not allowed to tell where the keys to the organ are hidden, but the Professor of Organ/President of Piedmont University (also a friend and fellow Indiana University graduate) always tells me jokingly, "The keys are in the liquor cabinet!" and I know where to look.

I turned the organ on with a key, found another key to unlock the memory system and set it to my memory level so I could save my settings, found yet another key to open a door to get out the rear-view mirror that attaches to the organ so I could see the conductor. Organ on, memory system unlocked and set to my level, mirror in place, organ shoes on, I adjusted the organ bench to the right height and distance from keyboards. I had my organ part (and also a full score in case I get lost at any point – the organ part doesn't show what else is going on), pencils, reading glasses, everything I needed. I tried out a few stops to see what might sound good and saved those settings on my memory level. Keep in mind, the first time I set the stops, I'm guessing that they will be right. I don't know for sure until the orchestra and choir were rehearsing too.

My teacher, Marilyn Keiser, puts it all this way: "You have to make your nest." At church, my "nest" is usually set the way I need it but as a visiting organist, in this case, the process can take 10-15 minutes, not including driving and waiting for security to let me in.

On that Tuesday night, there was a chorus rehearsal at 6:00 (which didn't involve me), and the dress rehearsal with the orchestra at 7:00, and the Schubert was last on the program. I had to have the organ set up (my nest made) before the 6:00 rehearsal so I could be ready to hop on the bench and play when my time came up in the dress rehearsal. I ate supper at 4:00 (I learned Saturday and Sunday that I'm getting too old for fast food on the road), left Athens at 4:30, arrived at Piedmont at 5:30, got set up before 6:00, and then I waited for my turn to play, which wasn't for another two hours.

I'm not telling you all of this to brag or show that I'm a suffering artist. I'm just setting the stage (figuratively) for a lesson that I learned. The organ is unique instrument. Many of us organists feel we have an orchestra at our fingertips. We have oboes, trumpets, flutes, strings, trombones, and unique organ sounds that can produce the greatest variety of sound and color, the greatest dynamic range, and the largest range of pitch of any musical instrument. The organ is usually a solo instrument, or it is used to accompany congregational or choral singing. Much of the time, we are the orchestra. But not in this case. In this concert, the "King of Instruments," as Mozart called it, had a very modest role.



In this performance, I played on one or sometimes two stops, the first being a relatively quiet flute stop. I was to fill in harmony, support the choir, and blend in as just another instrument in the orchestra. The organ was barely heard. In fact, it occurred to me that the only way it would be really heard and noticed was if I played something wrong! The organ may be the King of Instruments, but it's also the most unforgiving of instruments when (not if) a mistake is made. If a string player in the orchestra or a singer in the choir made a mistake, it would probably be hard to know

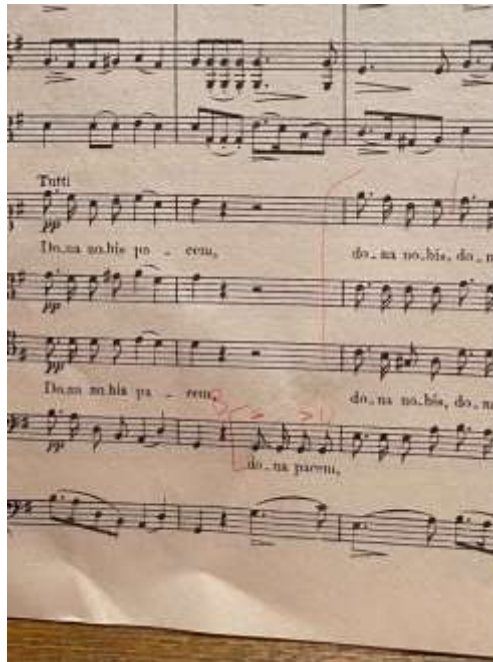
who did it. But there was only one person playing the organ. If I goofed, there would be no mystery about it. If I did everything right, I would probably go unnoticed.

Was it worth it? When I got home late the night of the performance, Kate asked that very question. I jokingly replied, “Well, there’s a check on the dresser in the bedroom you can deposit.”

Eight hours of driving, about forty minutes of “making my nest” at the organ four times, a few hours of practicing on my own, at least three hours of sitting, doing nothing but waiting for my turn to play, all to perform a piece of music that, if I did my part right, I would go largely unnoticed in. But I got to be part of something that was bigger than just me. I worked with other musicians, instrumentalists and singers, to do something none of us could do on our own.

There’s the lesson, in music and in life. Yes, we’re all unique individuals and God loves us all as we are. We should be free to be ourselves. But, many good things in life can be achieved if we work together, not for our own recognition, our own benefit, but for the common good. As St. Francis said in his prayer, it is in giving that we receive, giving without expecting anything in return.

I also noticed something else, probably because of the world news. That Schubert Mass doesn’t have a big, bombastic ending. It didn’t bring the audience immediately to their feet with thunderous applause. The mass ends *pianissimo*, meaning very soft, with the words *Dona nobis pacem* (Grant us peace). Instead of applause, there were several seconds of silence as we all let that sink in.



Grant us peace. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Soli Deo Gloria (to God alone be the glory),

John