

Opening Address
for the “Super Saturday” Workshop
Utah Valley chapter of the American Guild of Organists
Harris Fine Arts Center on Brigham Young University
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First of all I would like to thank the Utah Valley Chapter of the American Guild of Organists – in particular, I would like to thank the Dean Mrs. Petersen and the Chairman Mr. Beesley for inviting me to speak to you today; I feel very honored to be among you. You know I am Italian and before beginning my address I want to beg for your indulgence and patience for my poor English.

It is exactly one year since I moved to SLC from Rome, following my appointment as Organist and Assistant Director of Music at the Cathedral of the Madeleine. This has been a very important change in my life, not only as a musician, and today I would like to share with you some thoughts that have been turning in my mind in the last months. I would also like to tell you something about me, and to explain you what brought me to Salt Lake City.

I was born in Rome and grew up in that City full of history and art. Everyone in my family likes music, in particular opera and symphonic repertoire, but none before me has been working as a professional musician. I started my musical studies at the age of 6, as in my elementary school there was the opportunity of taking piano lessons as an after school activity. I must say, I did not find those lessons very exciting – it was mostly like a normal and quite boring part of my school education.

In fact, when I was in the 6th grade I told my parents I wanted to quit taking those piano lessons. Now, my parents never forced me to study music, or any extra-school activity. They always allowed me to explore and to experience many activities, and never forced me to pursue anything I felt not comfortable with. I am so grateful to them for their wise decision; I don't have kids, but if I will, one day, I would act exactly the same way.

Actually, during those years the *embers* did not extinguish completely, and love for music burnt up again when I was 13 yo. I remember exactly how it went. I was watching a short film in which was presented the life of Karl Richter, the famous german organist and conductor. In that film, they showed Richter in choir and orchestra rehearsals and performances, and also playing the beautiful 1766 Riepp Organ in the Ottobeuren Basilica, in Germany. This was the first time I ever heard the Bach's Passacaglia in my life. At that time, my all experience of organ and organ-playing was the one of church services in my parish, which I remember was very bad. Instead, I was totally fascinated by that film, watching this man playing *by memory* a very complex, long and thrilling piece, mastering this *enormous incredible* machine, with a guy by his side that had to pull the stops while the organist was playing with both hands and both feet! I must confess that in that moment I was fascinated more by the organ as a *machine* rather than by the music that was playing, and I yelled out “Mom! I *must* learn how to play this machine!” Then it started a quite hard

research for a teacher and in a few months I was able to resume my music lessons, with the firm intention to become an organist. From that moment onwards, I never stopped studying and playing. I pursued my studies in Organ and Composition and took exams in the State Conservatory. Afterwards I attended a three years postgraduate course in Organ Improvisation at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome and the Hochschule für Musik in Luzern, in Switzerland.

My experience as church musician began quite early, as I was allowed to use the organ in my parish for my practice, and in exchange I was asked to play some services. When I was 18, still pursuing my undergraduate studies, my principal teacher, Mr. Juan Paradell Solè, who was at that time the Titular Organist at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, proposed me to become his assistant and principal deputy organist at the Basilica. This was a great opportunity for me to grow, as a young student, since this is one of the four major basilicas in Rome and the quality of the liturgy and music performed there was very good. It was in that place, and thanks to my teacher, that I learned almost everything I know about Roman Catholic rite, Gregorian chant, and how to deal with complex services. I have been collaborating with the Basilica for about 15 years, before as assistant organist and then as titular organist, as when Mr. Paradell was appointed Organist for the Papal Choir in St. Peter's Basilica, in 2011, I was asked to succeed him as titular Organist.

I have always considered myself more as a church musician rather than as a concert organist and to be an organist in Rome was a very exciting and remarkable experience. I remember playing the organ in Santa Maria Maggiore, facing an amazing 14th century mosaic, playing for cardinals and popes, surrounded by history and art... This was just great! Unfortunately it was not enough to live, as it was impossible to turn my position in a way that would have been a solid and trustworthy basis for my life. But I wanted to be a church musician, more precisely, this is the only thing I think I *can* do in my life. Besides that I have to say that, as time went by, the working environment, the quality and range of music activities were not as exciting and engaging as they were when I started, and there was no room for a further artistic growth. Then I started looking for positions abroad and applying for posts in the UK and US. One day I bumped into an announcement from the Cathedral of the Madeleine, Salt Lake City (at that time I barely knew where Utah State was...) and now here I am!

When I applied for the position, somebody must have thought "This guy is nuts!" – I want to be clear on this point: I am not disavowing anything of my experience as an organist in Rome. But I wanted to be a church musician and this requires time, energies and a 100% full time dedication. If one has to make another job to pay his bills he will not be able to commit himself completely as a musician. This is not the kind of musician I wanted to be. I would like to leave a suggestion, in particular to young students: sometimes there might be the temptation to think that all the possibilities at our reach is within the environment in which we have grown up, or in which we work or study; or the temptation – even worst – to think that what we do is the best that can be done. This is not true. As students and professionals we should always look with interest at other's work, talk to well-experienced teachers and professionals – *many* of them – ask for advices and opinions, share experiences and ideas; this is the only way to grow and to understand what can be done and what we could do. How important this is, regardless of the type of job!

So, I arrived in SLC in April last year, just in time for the major services of the Holy Week and Easter. The working environment I found at the Cathedral of the Madeleine was way above and

beyond my expectation. I was truly moved in realizing how everyone was welcoming and thoughtful with me. Everyone both at the Cathedral and at the Choir School, is highly qualified and committed to offer his best at every single performance. All my colleagues are a source of continue inspiration and impulse for my daily work.

As you know, the Cathedral Organ is one of the finest instruments in town; I love to play and to take care of it. It is really an intense and versatile organ, and took me several weeks to fully appreciate its richness and its Irish personality, and to become a friend of him... I had to review all my technique in order to match the new instrument, the new acoustic, the new type of congregation and congregational repertoire I was not used to.

A particularly fascinating aspect of my job is working every day with the kids of the Madeleine Choir School who serve as choristers for the Cathedral liturgies. Their commitment and musical skills are simply amazing. I think that there is something in church music, something deep and supernatural, that only kids, unconsciously, can express. This is what I admire in them, with amazement, every single day.

I have a very full time position: it was not easy to let my parents and friends understand that what I was going to do was not just playing the organ at church... Of course, as the Cathedral Organist, my principle duty is to play the organ. Besides that, there are a lot of other responsibilities I have to attend to in my daily work at the Cathedral. I assist the Director of Liturgy and Music in all aspects of the Cathedral's liturgical and musical life and serve in the Faculty of the Madeleine Choir School, assisting the School Director of Music in training the Choristers. Finally, I serve as Director of the Eccles Organ Festival, an international annual organ concert series that is now announcing its 22nd edition.

It is really *a lot* of work. Besides the weekend services, the chorister sing for the daily Mass almost every weekday. There is a lot of repertoire that I have to learn and practice every day. Some periods of the year are particularly intense and I must confess that there are days in which I feel very overwhelmed, days in which I look at the music list and the stack of scores to practice and think "I will never be ready to play this work in time ...". Here is another suggestion, in particular for students: a detailed organization of our activities is the main secret to successfully deal with intense and demanding schedules. Since certain times might be "blocked" by rehearsals or performances, the way I proceed and I recommend is to organize your weekly schedule in order to have 4 to 5 hours of practice every day (both at piano and organ) and 2 to 3 hours to attend other businesses (like composition, scores preparation, responding to email, etc). Do not forget to include entries in your schedule like "go to grocery" or "cook meal"! Concerning the repertoire to practice, a detailed and reasonable schedule is helpful as well, in order to be prepared to play the works when they are due, and to enlarge and maintain your solo repertoire. I also recommend practicing organ and piano technique every day – this is not a waste of time, indeed a solid technique will train muscle memory and sight-reading skills and will speed up the learning of new works for your repertoire.

Talking about repertoire, I want to spend a few words on improvisation. This art has very strong relationship with the organ playing for liturgies and is also a relevant component of organ solo concert practice. All of my experience as church musician is the context of the Roman Catholic

Church, and I resolved that improvisation is an irrevocable component of liturgical organ playing, basically for two reasons. First, it offers the organist the opportunity to establish very solid connections between the choral and congregational repertoire and the organ solos performed in a service. For example, I often improvise preludes and postludes to services based on hymns, or gregorian chants that are sung on that precise occasion. Second, liturgies have to be smooth, in the sense that the people in the congregation must have the feeling that the music performed during the service perfectly matches the liturgical action. It often happens that a congregational hymn, or a motet performed by the Choir is not long enough to cover the action they are meant to accompany. Of course there is no way to perform a piece of literature in such an unpredictable situation. Here the organist's improvisation skills take place, in order to give the congregation that comforting feeling that music and liturgical action integrate each other aiming for a beautiful and prayerful worship.

Working as a Church musician requires dedication, modesty and altruism. It is not just playing for others, as any other performer does, it is much more than that. Every musician uses its art as a mean to communicate and to share with others feelings, moods and images and perceptions. In my point of view, a church musician does all of that as a prayer, not only as his own prayer, but also as an interpreter of other's prayer. As a Catholic serving in the Roman Catholic Church, I am grateful to the Lord, as he uses the music to take me close to him, and allows me to pray him through the music. In a Church service the priests, the readers, the musicians, the altar servers, everything and everyone, all together collaborate to the same scope, which is expressing beauty and offer an opportunity to pray, an opportunity to make our prayer easy. Actually, all of these "actors" are essential and useless at the same time. That's why our service has to be modest: because the most important thing is not the music, nor the homily or the liturgical action itself. All these things together point the only important thing, which is to pray and to give thanks to God. One more thing; I believe musicians, in particular soloists, and in particular organists, may tend to develop a huge ego. We are very happy and pleased to perform for a large crowd, or in a TV or radio broadcasting... That's very good, as this is our job. Sometimes I have to play at a daily Mass with twenty people in the congregation, or a simple vesper with even less people. Well, maybe one of these twenty persons went to the church after a very bad day, and with our service we can help him to rest for a moment and to offer his prayers and his suffering to the Lord. When one of this persons comes to me after Mass, to thank me for what I have done, believe me, as a church musician this is much more rewarding than playing for the Pope or broadcasting for the national radio.

As I approach the conclusion of this talk I would like to spend a few words about mathematics. Don't worry, I am not going to oppress you with partial differential equations and optimal control theory... As you maybe know, I have some previous experience as a mathematician and I would like to share some final thoughts with you about that. Since I was a young boy I was fascinated by this completely abstract and crystalline discipline, that seems to have nothing to do with real world, and instead is a way to look at the beauty and perfection of the created order and to explain concepts beyond our imagination. I studied Mathematics in the first University of Rome for the master degree and then in the University of Padova where I obtained the Ph.D.

While working for many years both in Mathematics and Music I realized how many aspects they share. Like music, mathematics is a language without words. Both music and math require highly demanding training, discipline and hard work, like practicing sports or performing dance at a professional level. The two disciplines also have in common the fair amount of frustration that those who practice them have to face; you can spend weeks practicing a piece and find your performance miserable, or you can spend weeks or months trying to prove a new theorem and find a stupid mistake in the proof when your article is ready for publication... Both math and music taught me respect for others and respect for myself, respect for my own mistakes and for others' mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes, even the "superstars" (that exist among mathematicians as well as among musicians) – we have to forgive others' mistakes in order to have the freedom to challenge ourselves with new ideas, and to make mistakes when these ideas result to be wrong. I am used to make mistakes very often, as a musician and as a mathematician (That's why I am so glad I am not a surgeon...). I feel so bad when I make mistakes, especially when my mistakes affect others' work. With experience, I learned to work hard, but also not to be too tough with myself. Mistakes just happen in our life, and are an opportunity to grow as they show us the direction in which we have to push.

I have a picture in my office - I look at it every day. It is a picture of Stan & Ollie. Ollie is playing the violin and Stan the trombone. Oliver is completely focused on the score he is reading on the stand, not realizing that he is sticking the bow into Stan's eye. It is so funny, but I find it also very profound: it says to me that regardless the type of work we do, no matter how hard we work, how committed we are, we can always make mistakes and "stick the bow in Stan's eye". Because there is nothing we can do if we are not helped. There is nothing we can do if we do not ask the Lord with humility to be helped every day. Let's be kind with ourselves, because despite our mistakes and our insufficiency, it is through us that the Lord brings others his beauty and his love.

Thank you.
