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## Where the Organ Meets the Outside World

### Part I

If I had to summarize Ruth Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians* in a single sentence, I would say that it is chiefly an examination of dualities—amateur and professional, product and process--and the tension that exists between them. Finnegan's arguments regarding the importance of these distinctions are supported by an exhaustive study of all things musical in the English town of Milton Keynes. As a skeptic, I hesitate to say that ideas built on the observation of a single geographic location could ever hold true across the world. Yet, my own field work on the rise and fall of pipe organs in the Pioneer Valley has—with a few important exceptions—reinforced Finnegan's concepts across the board.

Finnegan devotes an entire chapter of her book to “The Churches and Music,” and it is on this chapter that I will focus the bulk of my attention, as it pertains more directly than any other chapter to my own personal fieldwork. It is also an interesting avenue through which to explore the concepts of amateur and professional musicians. Like Finnegan, I have found that most churches—especially large ones—have a full-time organist and/or musical director, as well as a pool of substitute organists. This may at first appear contrary to the complex “continuum” of professionalism described by Finnegan. Some musical directors hold salaried positions within their congregation, and none of the substitute organists I have met receive any monetary compensation for their work, but they still fail to fit into such tidy categories as “amateur” and “professional.” For example, many substitute organists are retired full-time musicians, such as an elderly gentleman named John whom I met at the Estey Organ Co. Museum in Brattleboro. Some people who I assumed to be “professional organists” instead identified primarily as teachers, such as Larry Schipull, the organ instructor at Mount Holyoke College.

These are just two of many examples that reinforce the idea that the amateur/professional distinction is a deeply layered—and somewhat inconsequential—duality that more often than not is ignored by the actual music-makers within a given soundscape.

I found many other connections between Finnegan's fieldwork and my own while reading “The Churches and Music.” In both the Pioneer Valley and Milton Keynes, churches, organs, and organists play a large part in the education and training of musicians, in the economic growth of communities, and the identity of the religious institutions involved. But while Finnegan found the people surrounding church music to be from “varied backgrounds,” (p. 220) my admittedly tiny—compared to Finnegan's—amount of fieldwork has not found the same result. Obviously, most organs are found in Christian churches and most of the people who play them are also Christian, but whereas Finnegan found a reasonably wide range in the class, ethnicity, and age of organists in Milton Keynes, I have found only older, upper-class white people. I have also found far fewer organs, organists, and thriving church-based musical communities. I feel that both of these differences, however, are due largely to a continuing decline in the number of practicing Christians nation-wide; the average churchgoer is older now than they were in the mid-eighties, (when Finnegan wrote *The Hidden Musicians*) and a rotten economy leaves fewer people with the economic flexibility to make music and donate time without pay. In other words, one needs a certain amount of leisure time in order to participate in the creation of organ music, which brings me to my third and final connection between Finnegan's fieldwork and my own.

Finnegan asserts that one can distinguish between music created for leisure and music created for work, but that both instances hold value and contribute to the overall soundscape in their own ways (p. 330). Here, I am reminded of Peter Beardsley, principal organist and music director for Christ Church Cathedral in Springfield. When Pete went on sabbatical several years ago, instead of avoiding the instrument that was the center of his day-to-day employment, he traveled to Europe and played many of largest, oldest, and most distinguished pipe organs in the world. That this experience was

more enjoyable for Pete than his regular duties speaks to what I think is part of what makes a musician unique. Anyone who identifies as an artist will be familiar with the back-and-forth between economic necessity (one needs to eat to survive) and artistic desire (one wants to do more than simply survive). A career as an organist promises to fulfill both need and desire, but it also threatens to remove the enjoyment from what is usually considered a pleasurable activity. In the end, the ability to balance both ends of the spectrum is what determines how fulfilled a given organist will be as a performer and as a person. And as Finnegan would agree, the personal success or failure of key individuals—like church organists—will ripple out into their personal musical communities, then into the larger musical world, and finally into everyday life, where music is just one of many pathways that make up that complicated and ever-changing enigma we call the world.

## Part II

I have yet to meet anyone who would describe the people surrounding pipe organs as part of a specific subculture. In fact, no one has even referenced the thousands and thousands of organists around the world as anything more than a vague cloud of people who exist mostly in solitude, connected only by their profession, acknowledging each other only when they cross paths, like bus drivers waving at each other as they drive in opposite directions down a busy street. I suspect this is due in part to the nature of the organ as an instrument. Not only is a pipe organ fixed to a specific location, and not only is the console often isolated or hidden from view, but it is played, more often than not, without the accompaniment of any other instrument. This is not to say that the organ is usually a solo instrument. Organs as they are most often utilized—as the leading instrument in the music of a religious service—usually act as accompaniment for a choir or cantor. Other instruments may be added in, but there is rarely a need for two organists to be in the same place at the same time. Even in classical organ pieces (as opposed to organ pieces with specific religious functions) there is

never a need for more than one organ. The instrument, in its unparalleled frequency range and variety of tone, is specifically designed to replicate the effect of many, many separate instruments, thus making the pairing of two different organs redundant and overwhelming. All this contributes to a group of people who do get together—to teach, to learn, to chat, and do all the other things social niches are want to do—but who almost never play their instrument of choice with each other. (I say “almost never” here not because I have encountered any organ duets, but because I assume that such a composition must have been written and performed at least once, if only for the novelty of accomplishing something never before accomplished.)

Still, though they are largely autonomous, most organists play similar roles within their communities—usually Christian churches. The organist either leads or accompanies the choir, which is one of the more commonplace ways for everyday parishioners to get involved in their church and their spirituality as a whole. The music produced by a pipe organ also affects the rest of a given congregation. Most everyone I have spoken to about organ music said that they find some spiritual or religious value in the sound of a pipe organ, and would most likely agree that the organ in particular usually plays a central role in the soundscape of any given service, church, or choir. The organ also plays a role in the economic life of a religious community. As Finnegan points out on page 209, the construction, repair, maintenance, and replacement of organs is a major concern for many (if not the majority) of churches. The churches that I've encountered in my own field work are either fiercely proud of their organs or determinedly working towards repairing or replacing their existing ones. Of course, many churches also utilize pianos. One in particular—the Westhampton Congregationalist Church—uses a piano to accompany their chorus, while their fully-functioning Estey Pipe Organ lies dormant almost all the time, being put to use only when an organist is brought in by the organizers of a special occasion, such as a wedding.

All of this illustrates that, while there is not much of a pipe organ subculture, the instrument and its players nevertheless play a crucial role in their communities. Without them, not only would the

world of religious music be unimaginably different, but a countless number of professional, casual, musical, and economic relationships would simply cease to exist.