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DEAR UNCLE MAX

Send questions to Dear Uncle Max, AGO National Headquarters, 475 Riverside Dr., Suite 1260, New York, NY 10115.

Many of you who have been to England, or have listened to services on radio or TV, may have noted that the English seem to have a different sense of time required between stanzas of hymns. This was brought home once again on the broadcast from Westminster Abbey of the funeral service for Princess Diana. A CD of that service which is available from London Records, might serve to illustrate the following letter.

I read the inquiry from L.H. of North Carolina and your response (Sept. 1997). In courses I have attended run by the Royal School of Church Music, the policy was always to allow two beats between stanzas. One beat was felt to be too short, producing a musical "hiccup," and three to be too long. My policy now is to stick to two beats in duple time but to prolong the last chord in triple time by an extra beat, then have the two-beat pause.

You may be interested to know—if you do not already—that Max Miller was a well-known British music hall stand-up comedian before the war. He was banned from the radio, as his material was thought to be too risqué.

R.B., England

Thank you for the letter. It just shows that one cannot proof-text from Deuteronomy how to get from one stanza to the next!

You are the second person to give me a tidbit about my namesake. I loved it. Why be a stand-up comic if you can't be risqué? Are we related? Of course. I long ago discovered every Miller is at least a second cousin, thrice removed. Don't worry about Saddam Hussein; the real threat is when Millers form 51% of the world's population.

Perhaps you can address some pertinent issues, such as (1) "Why are organbuilders building such unmusical instruments?" or (2) "Why do organists register in such a way as to get the most objectionable sounds out of the instruments?" and (3) "When will organists learn how to put together interesting programs instead of pulling out their four or five big pieces and blasting away?" On second thought, perhaps you should avoid such subjects.

D.G., Fla.

There is more to this letter than I have quoted. I especially got a kick out of your playing a Wurlitzer connected to two grand pianos and starting Elmore's *Rhumba* on them—no wonder the

crowd went wild. You are one of the few who can mix theater organ repertoire with the classics and make them equally convincing. You mention two other musicians, formerly from my cold part of the country, with whom you meet, and I can picture the three of you sitting in the simmering sun, sipping cool colas, and concocting curiously confounding questions to send me. Your second thought is right on—avoid such subjects.

Still, we wouldn't ask questions if we didn't think there was some truth to be found by asking. I put numbers into your letter, O.K.? The quick answers are:

1. Because organists ask them to.
2. Objectionable sounds tend to keep an audience awake.
3. When they learn a sixth piece that is soft and slow.

All three of your questions involve taste, which is very personal—what is musical/unmusical; what is beautiful/objectionable as sound; what makes an interesting/dull program? The oft-quoted Latin saying, "De gustibus non est disputandum" (there is no disputing about tastes), is right on. We can talk things through, examine and analyze, and while tastes do and can change, it doesn't happen often from the outside by arguments but from the inside by experience.

Since we are just at the New Year and thinking more and more in terms of the next century when we will expect

BIG CHANGES

I will risk some thoughts about taste that have been useful in my own thinking. "Reader beware: astrologically I am a Libra, the sign of the scales, which, for me, bounce around, seldom resting on the balance mark; I have a subnormal capacity for things philosophical, theological, and so forth.

Let us say, though, that taste and style are somewhat synonymous in the sense that we like (have a taste for) a certain style of music making, painting, or other art. By and large, art works can be divided into favoring (ideally in the sense of tending toward) either *ethos* or *pathos*. Terms are slippery: *ethos*/pathos, Apollonian/Dionysian, Classic/Romantic, controlled/free—all paired opposites.

Ethos indicates a calmness of soul, self-control, a not too much or too little way of looking at things, a belief in absolutes, perfection, norms, and permanence, while *pathos* indicates roughly the opposite: motion, growth, change, human suffering, personal expression, breaking of bounds. In any given period both of these approaches are present, but one or the other trend tends to be more prominent with neither having complete control. Or, as Curt Sachs says in *The Commonwealth of Art* (p. 391), "The sequence of styles . . . cannot ap-

pear as a straight evolution . . . the grandiose orbit of art meanders in generational turns, which in their to-and-fro safeguard eternal motion and balance. The generational phases, again, form in cycles evolving from ethos to pathos . . ."

One of the impulses toward changes in taste is the generational shift mentioned above: what your parents and teachers held as inviolate has to be challenged by the next generation. There is a certain automatic rejection (not entirely, of course) in favor of newly found or reformed territory. You, when you are young, are apt to hold, to a certain extent, the values of your grandparents over those of your parents. All this keeps the world turning quite nicely and lets the new generation be itself and have a unique identity. Some of the shifts now going on in the organ world were quite clearly exemplified at the New York AGO National Convention. Scarcely a program lacked a major transcription, long considered a no-no. Check recent publications of organ music and note the great interest in music of the 1800s, except for French music, long considered uninteresting. Check the shifts in organ design in new instruments for changes of emphases. Note which composers are being played more frequently, which are disappearing from current recital programs.

Generational shifts of emphases don't come about like a place on a map into which you stick a blue pin, but they can be followed in their broad outline. Any one prominent emphasis will last about 20–25 years with overlap at both ends.

The point of this is just to live comfortably in a changing world—one doesn't have to change to be with the majority at all times. If you think something is so, believe it, and act on it. One still remembers passionately three-sided Guild meetings: tracker backers on the left, electropneumatic fanatics on the right, confused and indifferent in the middle. Where will the 21st century place dividing lines? Most likely where we least expect them.

Why do builders build such unmusical instruments? Maybe we want to play different kinds of music on them now. Why register for most objectionable sounds? Maybe we want to hear something different. Uninteresting blasting-away programs? By the next national convention, we may have even louder electronically assisted en chamades by which to check our cardiovascular health. Be ready!

Taste! The trick is to live long enough; that way you will be in style and with it at some revolution of the world's wheels. While I can imagine the three of you simmering in the sun right now, I can as well imagine the three of you melting, mildewing, and mashing bugs in the summer while I quietly garden in comfort. Long life!

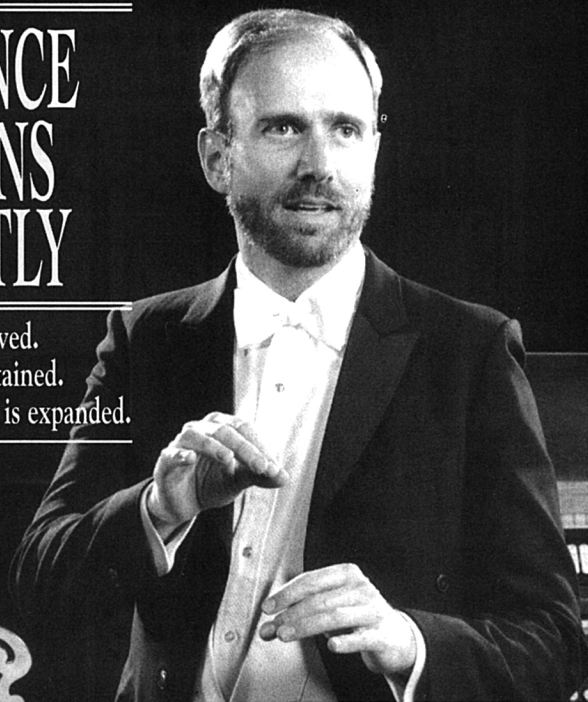
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