

MULTIPLYING OUR MASONIC ORGANISTS:
A LESSON FROM NATURE

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"We dance around in a ring and suppose,
But the secret sits in the middle and knows."

... Robert Frost: The Secret Sits

One of the facets of the situation currently facing the Masonic fraternity across all jurisdictions is the shortage of organists to serve our organizations, an issue which hasn't always been given enough attention or even recognized for the problem it presents. What is it exactly, that an organist DOES? ... well, think of a silent movie. Silent movies were never really silent; there was always something going on ... a piano in the pit, an organ, a small combination, a symphony orchestra ... describing in musical terms what was happening on the screen. And that image on the screen, and our reaction to it, was sort of tied together by the music, and it created this happening to where, if the music wasn't there, we'd miss it. It wasn't supposed to be obtrusive, the audience was just supposed to know that it was there, and it added this dimension. Likewise, when an organist plays for our ceremonies and work, the music works the same way. It adds this dimension, supports any singing, smooths over any awkward places, and when it isn't there we get the sense that something's missing. When things are being planned and our minds are on the agenda of the meeting we don't always assign much importance to having an organist who supplies the right music, but then, when we don't have it, it makes a heck of a hole. And this is where it becomes problematic.

Those who are contemplating playing the organ for our fraternity are needing to develop a modicum of general keyboard knowledge and skills, be able to perform when the heat is on, be

well acquainted with the ritual, be willing and able to invest in and transport their personal equipment, practice and prepare for weeks beforehand, make whatever other sacrifices are necessary, and be willing to fully immerse themselves in the study of the instrument, learn a new thing occasionally that may not be as familiar, and, at times, put their ego in their shoe for the sake of the organization. It takes a rare bird to be able to occupy that particular perch. Such birds don't grow on trees but they do live there ... they're not an extinct species within the membership and probably never will be ... and they're living in those same trees right now.

Some of our more forward looking presiding grand and subordinate officers who love our fraternity enough not to be apathetic or indifferent about this particular issue (the opposite of love isn't hatred, it's indifference) have issued the noble call for our members to "renew the search for musicians." While these past and current presiding officers are to be commended for their vision and leadership in terms of their willingness to bring the issue to bear and for their understanding of the characteristics and needs of the group, the fact is, simply organizing a search for members who are able to perform the music for our ceremonies and work, while this is challenging enough, is not sufficient; if this were all it takes, then there would be already a sufficient number of organists (perhaps not an abundance, but a sufficient number) serving our fraternity. This is clearly not the case.

Ironically, the antidote for reversing the situation is so clear that it's been difficult for many to see. Robert Frost would put it poetically: "They dance around in a ring and suppose, but the solution sits right under their nose." Thus, "The Solution Sits" ... so closely in fact that our senses don't always detect it.

Nature teaches us that we don't go out loaded for bear with our snares, nets, wire cages, bird calls, and field glasses to make diligent search of every tree limb to locate that one particular rare bird in the woods unless we want to waste our whole day and come back empty handed. Even if we're lucky and manage to spot such a bird on some branch a hundred feet up in the air we're still faced with the problem of how to capture it, bring it back, release it on our own property, and hold it there so it doesn't take a notion to leave. And how are we going to do all of that? ... No, searching the woods like this can be expected to lead to nothing but disappointment (and, so far, in terms of getting any substantial results, it has).

Instead we first need to figure out what attracts these creatures, what they need to flourish, and then figure out what we can do to draw them to our own locale and encourage them to

stay there. WE don't find THEM. THEY find US. They may be all wired differently, but, if conditions are right, they contain themselves right where they are.

Here is how we draw those rare birds we have in mind toward us, encourage them to stay, nurture them, and expand their numbers, keeping in mind what nature can teach us:

FIRSTLY, we figure out what it is that draws them. We provide our property, the locale in which we live, with the kinds of trees, cover, perches, and nesting holes they find most attractive ... which means keeping those wonderful, old, historic pipe organs we find in our larger temples and Masonic centers maintained and fully playable. We spend whatever it takes to get this done, specially raising the money for it, if need be (there are proven, effective ways for doing this). This provides ACCESS, access to the real McCoy ... a beautiful pipe organ as fully playable as it was when it was brand new, straight from the factory ... and, just as importantly, an empty bench that begs to be occupied.

Further, if the King of Instruments (the organ) at our worship center is sitting there with a locked fallboard, having been put off limits by the clergyman in charge due to having made the decision that this instrument's function in worship has been retired for the foreseeable future due to the exclusive preference for praise bands, then it's also necessary to see that this same "King" is unlocked and freed from his dungeon of exile as soon as possible so that any would-be organists of ours in the congregation might have access to it. Access to an instrument ... any instrument, anywhere ... opens the gate for those who can come forward and play it.

SECONDLY, we give these birds an incentive of some kind, something that satisfies some need of theirs, to encourage them to stay ... simply put, we offer them RECOGNITION for their hard work, talent, and abilities to create a music making which adds a dimension to our ceremonies and work like nothing else can. This recognition is really no different than giving a ring-necked parrot an unshelled peanut or slice of apple for being a good bird, but they have to do something for it ... they have to stop listening to their primitive sense of withdrawal for self-survival ... they have to be willing to have a go at it, to come forward close enough to our hand and extend their foot far enough to grab the ring from us when it comes around ... they have to be willing to make up their mind, when they feel the winds of fear blowing on them, when they want to shrink away and hide from anything intimidating that's offering them an opportunity to reach for a higher level of attainment, to know that they're on to something and head directly into it ... they have to exercise some effort or ingenuity of their own, to earn it.

Whether it's a parrot of ours or a dedicated organist of ours, the results of providing recognition like this are still the same ... it's a win-win.

There are ways to standardize the music used at various places in the ritualistic and ceremonial work and to provide the right type of coaching and guidance to perform it such that this part of the ritual could be incorporated into, and be made a part of, the proficiency requirements for certification. In the same way that the certificate program has been an incentive to induce our membership to take a stab at it and work their best at learning the ritual, a certificate program stands to energize and encourage more members from the sidelines who have a little background in keyboard playing to take a stab at sitting behind the keys, learning the music, and serving as the much-needed organist. It makes perfect sense to give credit where credit is due, and acknowledging, in this case, that a member is proficient at supplying the musical accompaniment for our ceremonies and work is one way to do it. A list of possible music for certification can be assembled and marked at various places in the ritual book. How this would be decided (i.e. which selections make it into that list and what it means to be "proficient" at performing them) would be under the auspices of the appropriate ritual committee, but the important thing is that a means of recognition is being provided to these individuals. Recognition makes every person feel good about themselves, about the effort they've put forth, and encourages them to want to keep at it, constantly striving to become even more skillful and proficient at it, to learn more, and to continue serving.

THIRDLY, we provide everything else they need to grow and thrive as a special species, viz., the right kind of food, plenty of fresh water, and other birds of a feather with whom they can flock together, observe, and from whom they can learn ... which means providing them with the right kind of COACHING, guidance, information, materials, and tips they need to overcome their fear of failing, to win their inner creative battles, and to help them to succeed at this special calling with nothing considered off limits including, and especially, this link: www.organbench.com - this will take them to a helpful, informative, and encouraging blog, one that they desperately need to grow and thrive as a Masonic organist.

If it's important for us to try to provide every officer with whatever he needs to help him succeed at his job, then that means EVERY officer. The piccolo player appointed to do his job is not somehow immune to this.

FOURTHLY, and finally, we should let people know that this "conservation effort" needs to be made a priority across

political and geographic lines with the idea that the preferred HABITAT of these birds will be widened and expanded through a larger team effort so that other attractive localities will be developed in other places than our own to help propagate the species ... which means recognizing that it's a front burner issue, making it a priority across state and provincial jurisdictions, and using every resource, including regular publications, to reach the membership with this message.

This means also, that this process of how to multiply these birds deserves to be discussed at regional conferences to get our members fully informed about what they have to do to turn it around, if they really want to see the situation improve, and that, by simply getting on the band wagon to renew the search, we're signing on for a waste of time ... some would say "a wild goose chase" ... and frankly, judging by the non-results that history teaches us, to be going about it all wrong. Those who are entrusted with organizing such programs would be wise to consider that, if this issue isn't important enough to make it into a conference program, then it must not BE that important ... at least, to them. But the fact remains, it IS that important ... to everybody, as it should be. Anything that adds to the impressiveness of our ceremonies and work (and that includes the right kind of musical accompaniment) is vitally important. Why? ... because the more we can impress our candidates and members with the sights and sounds of our ceremonies and work, the more lasting impression it will make, and good lasting impressions create good lasting members. The importance of working across jurisdictional lines and getting everyone aboard this train creates a bigger team working together to meet this challenge, and that can't be a bad thing.

Access - Recognition - Coaching - Habitat ... A, R, C, H ... the first letters of these four words spells "Arch" ... a reference to the Royal (Kingly) Arch ... and is a reminder to the Royal Arch Mason of what the whole team has to do, to turn this around to help multiply those who would play the King of Instruments (or its electronic substitutes) for us.

The same plan that nature itself uses to multiply a species over time is a blueprint for how the dwindling population of Masonic organists will be counteracted finally and ultimately reversed ... by going to nature itself and taking a page from it.

In a nutshell, for those who love their fraternal organizations enough to care that they have an organist, how to attract and hold these rare birds can be boiled down to this:

Step 1: Realize that we don't find them, they find us.

Step 2: Follow the plan that nature says will work.

Step 3: Stop being indifferent about Steps 1 and 2 ... get people fully informed, make the effort to talk about it, then

take the initiative to actually DO something about it. Nothing happens all by itself ... someone has to make it happen, push it to happen, if it's going to happen.

It's really as simple as that.