



# Organists and COVID-19

## How to Survive and Thrive During a Pandemic

BY MARY NEWTON

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of our lives. We have seen the shutdown of schools and businesses. Churches have suspended holding public worship, which is something we never imagined we would experience in our lifetimes. With these abrupt changes, organists are left wondering when we might be back at our church jobs. We find ourselves in various stages of loss—the loss of financial security, the loss of doing something that we love, the loss of community, and perhaps even the loss of loved ones. Despite the challenges we face, it is important to remember that it is possible to survive during this uncertain chapter. There are three things we can focus on to help us during these difficult times: (1) strengthening musical skills, (2) focusing on mental and physical well-being, and (3) reaching out to others.

### Strengthening Musical Skills

For many of us, this shutdown has provided an unplanned break from the weekly routines of church work. We now have more unscheduled time on our hands. A great way to use this time is to commit to strengthening your musical skills. What were you going to work on this summer, modulation or transposition? Or was it refining your hymn playing? Perhaps you were dreaming of pulling out that Bach fugue that has eluded you.

This is the perfect time to work on these skills. Whether you have access to your organ at church or are limited to working at home on your piano, you can make it your goal to refine your musical skills. If you are wondering what to work on, here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Practice creative hymn playing and improvisation.** There are many great resources to use for hymn playing and improvisation. One of those resources is the AGO's Education page, which features several educational online videos. Another source to consider is the variety of easily accessible resources listed for the Guild exams.

- **Work on AGO certification.** These exams are a terrific way to strengthen many skills at one time. The AGO website (AGOhq.org) has many resources to help study for these exams. To access them, go to the Education tab and click on "Certification" in the drop-down menu. Previous exams from each certification level are available there to help with preparation.

- **Learn how to use music notation software.** Being able to use technology at church is always a plus. Perhaps in college you meant to take a class in Finale or Sibelius but did not have the time. Now there are both commercial and open source programs available. If you need help, contact a peer who can assist you. Partnering with someone in this way (or for any project) would be a great way to connect with colleagues.

- **Rework a beloved piece.** Do you have a favorite piece that you learned in college or for a former recital? Consider dusting it off and reviewing it. Remember what you loved about it and consider how you can approach it in a different way. This is also a terrific way to remember the power of music and how important it is to you personally and professionally.

• **Start a new piece.** Choose a piece on your wish list and go for it!

• **Review books and articles.** Do you have books from college or graduate school that you would like to review? Now would be a great time to do this. Are there some members in your chapter who have written articles or have books published that you have not had time to read? This would be a wonderful time to delve into these resources. Maybe even start a virtual book club for members and share articles and books for discussion. This would be another great way to connect with fellow colleagues.

If you are a new organist and are uncertain what resources are available to you, go to the AGO website and click on the Education tab. There you will find a series of short online videos that are designed to help new organists. Some topics that are covered include "The Basics of Pedal Technique" (lesson 12), "Reharmonizing Your Hymns" (lesson 16), and "Determining Your Pedaling in Organ Literature" (lesson 29). Whether at church or at home, we can do many things to strengthen our musicianship. When we return to our churches and our lives get busier, we will be grateful for the time we had to methodically work on these skills.

### Focus on Mental and Physical Well-being

During times of stress, it is important to take care of ourselves both mentally and physically. Dr. Melinda Morgan, a Minnesota chiropractor and doctor of functional medicine, reminds us that mental and physical health are reliant on each other. She encourages people to take time for themselves in the following ways:

- Stick to a routine
- Find some time to move each day
- Get out at least once a day for at least 30 minutes
- Reach out to others
- Limit social media

Because our physical, emotional, and nutritional health are connected, we should be careful not to ignore any of these categories. Dr. Morgan suggests making a list of activities that help us physically, emotionally, and nutritionally. Each day we should do one activity from each category and make it part of our daily routine. This will help to maintain a healthy balance in our lives. While there are many things that are beyond our control, we do have control over how we deal with our mental and physical well-being. Be sure to take proactive steps to ensure your health and well-being.

### Reaching Out to Others

During this period of lockdown, the needs of our communities remain great. Even when our communities eventually begin to reopen, there will be much

work to do. Are there some ways that you can reach out to people in your community—especially in your church and your local AGO chapter? Below are some ideas to consider:

• **Reach out at church.** Since most of the regular ministries at churches are suspended, the question becomes, How can we minister to our church family now? Consider some projects your musicians can participate in. One project could be a food drive to help church families in need; another could be to cook and deliver meals to shut-in members. Or maybe they could organize the making and delivery of masks for people in need. Churches have had to quickly adapt to practicing ministry in creative ways and being a church "without walls." Even though we cannot be together in person, we are still called to be a light in the darkness. Choose a project and let the musicians minister to their community in new ways.

• **Reach out to your local AGO chapter.** The mission statement of the American Guild of Organists is "to foster a thriving community of musicians who share their knowledge and inspire passion for the organ." How can we live out this mission at a time like this? Simply stated, *support your fellow colleagues*. These are challenging times, and they will probably become more challenging before they get better. Whether it is connecting with colleagues to share professional resources or to just visit, we need each other maybe now more than ever. Strive to find ways to purposefully connect with your fellow organists during this period of uncertainty. It will be salutary for everyone involved.



The pandemic has forced everyone to put their lives on hold. However, it will not always be like this. Eventually schools, businesses, and churches will reopen. Our lives will slowly gain some feelings of familiarity. We will indeed be back at our church jobs. In the end, we will see how this hiatus made a difference, to ourselves and others. We will be musicians that have strengthened our musical skills and enriched our minds and bodies through proper self-care. We will have reached out to others in need and, hopefully, have strengthened the bonds of collegiality and what it means to be a neighbor and friend. We will survive and thrive—it is up to us. Good luck!

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