Let’s face it—these are difficult times to be an organist. Appreciation of Western art music is in decline; religious affiliation is dropping at an alarming rate, particularly among the mainline denominations; and as worship attendance falls, too, many pastors respond by slashing traditional music programs, perceiving traditional music as out-of-touch or elitist. In his new book, A High and Holy Calling: Essays of Encouragement for the Church and Its Musicians, Paul Westermeyer mounts a full-throated defense of the importance of the organ and the organist in the life of contemporary Christianity. Although he draws on his Lutheran background, his words speak to those of any denomination.

This 104-page compilation is a quick read and could be devoured in a single sitting or enjoyed as individual nuggets of inspiration. The first section, “Reflections,” is adapted from twelve columns written for the newsletter of the Twin Cities Chapter of the American Guild of Organists. The second, “Hymns,” contains four brief essays on hymn playing and hymnody. The final and greatest section, “Vocation,” exquisitely explores the trajectory of this theme using the historical examples of the Reformation, Bach’s Clavierübung III, and the ministry of Paul Mantz.

Anyone looking for a scholarly or exhaustive exposition on any of these topics will be disappointed, nor does this book purport to propose that the duets are an exploration of vocation, a musical sending-out. While this subject would seem tangential to proposing the case for hope—and the relevance of our profession—more compelling.

My favorite part of the book was the chapter on Bach’s Clavierübung III that aims to contextualize and explain those exquisitely crafted duets just before the fugue. While the subject would seem tenuous, he points to numeric symbolism, key relationships, and motivic structure to propose that the duets are an exploration of vocation, a musical sending-out. We will never know what Bach’s true purpose was, but Westermeyer’s line of reasoning is compelling.

The author’s narrative style is engaging, and this book should inform the present, citing the past, and as worship attendance falls, too, many pastors respond by slashing traditional music programs, perceiving traditional music as out-of-touch or elitist. In his new book, A High and Holy Calling: Essays of Encouragement for the Church and Its Musicians, Paul Westermeyer mounts a full-throated defense of the importance of the organ and the organist in the life of contemporary Christianity. Although he draws on his Lutheran background, his words speak to those of any denomination.

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This book may find its greatest purpose as a pastoral tool for organists facing uncertainty, disillusioned in their jobs. To these readers, Westermeyer says he hears them, and they are not alone.

—Stephen Buzard
Chicago, Illinois

New Organ Music


John Marsh, an English organist and composer, wrote “some 324 voluntaries for organ as well as numerous anthems, songs, glee’s, and thirty-nine symphonies, according to the editors’ preface. An inheritance early in his career as a solicitor allowed Marsh to devote himself to teaching and writing music for the organ, his true passion. Although five volumes of his voluntaries survive, only a few pieces have appeared in print until recently. Both editors of this volume bring exemplary credentials to this task. David Patrick is well-acquainted with the classical English voluntary, having edited the multi-volume set, 18th-Century English Organ Music; (Oxford), and John Collins researches and performs early organ and harpsichord repertoire in addition to regularly reviewing organ music and recordings for THE DIAPASON.

Volume 1 contains Marsh’s treatise on playing the organ; Volume 2, on the other hand, is music for performance. The twenty pieces in this collection provide a window into eighteenth-century English organ music in the tradition of John Stanley (who Marsh heard play as a young man), Maurice Greene, and William Goodwin (whose Twelve Voluntaries for Organ are another item in the Fitzjohn catalogue).

Marsh displays both skill and originality of invention in these pieces, making it difficult to provide a collective description. Following some general comments, features of particular voluntaries are presented to give some idea of the variety found herein.

Most of the voluntaries are cast in the slow-fast pattern familiar to users of the Oxford Old English Organ Music for Manuals volumes. First sections, marked, “Largo,” “Largo e cantabile,” “Andante,” and “Allegro,” are generally homophonic, expressive, and fuller textured (three voices with added notes) than the following sections. Second sections present satisfying contrasts in tempo, texture, and harmony: these are enigmatic, tentative passages in two voices that touch on secondary key areas before resolving to the tonic. Manual indications, among Great, Swell, and Choir divisions, and registration suggestions, are all original, reflecting Marsh’s pedagogical bent; in his preface to the 1792 publication, he states that these pieces are intended “chiefly for Young Practitioners.” Old practitioners will find them helpful, too.

Voluntary I is lighter than most of the others, with a da capo indication at the end

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THE DIAPASON
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