

9. The Best and the Worst

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It may be that Charles Dickens, though writing about the year 1775, was referring to every year when he began *A Tale of Two Cities* with these familiar words: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Best and worst certainly seem to refer to our period.

Let’s start with some of the worst. Martin Marty, in one of his *Sightings* (August 8, 2016) referred to a report from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni about the absence of history from our classrooms and then, with careful construal, mentioned “multi-partisan chaos.” The latter mention reminded me of articles in which writers have noted that we live in an age of anger and rage. The absence of history reminded me of our period’s version of book burning, as “experts” have admonished us to avoid all language above a fourth-grade level and to excise from our use all words that have historical associations, like “hymns”—with the spoken or unspoken presuppositions that we ignore complexity and reduce things to a sales pitch that increases the treasury. Then I remembered a conversation at a Hymn Society conference where a few of us were discussing how things historical were being obliterated by administrators. I said something about the relation of budgetary matters to such cuts. A wise and seasoned hymnologist responded, “It’s not about budgets; it’s about a lack of vision.”

The organ, which has a very long history, is tied into this iconoclastic worst of our period. Attacks on and cuts of the organ are not unique to the organ. They are part of a large cultural milieu in which the systemic controls are the present moment, little or no concern for long trajectories of the past’s importance for the present and future, and “Where’s mine?”

Now for some of the best. Rather remarkable organs are being built, re-worked, and cared for. At the Hymn Society conference where we had the conversation about historical ties being obliterated, a college-age organist led the hymn singing very well from a fine organ. His skill and the organ reflected plenty of historical understanding and preparation lived into the present and the future. Organ committees still meet and inevitably discuss all sorts of broad historical and long-term issues—about the church’s song for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor—to which the organ invariably leads them. The Twin Cities (Minnesota) Chapter of the American Guild of Organists has produced a video about one such process. In thirty minutes it summarizes the installation of the Glatter-Götz/Rosales pipe organ at Augustana Lutheran Church in West St. Paul, Minnesota.

These best of contexts include oases of deep concern for the common good. They fill the land (usually with little publicity) in many places, including churches and church-related schools, where vision is in rich supply. With it comes the beauty of art and music and concerns for the whole social fabric, the neighbor, and the planet.

Some years ago an oasis was in evidence at the dedication of an organ in a seminary chapel. If I recall this correctly, one of the speakers was a faithful church organist who said what you would not expect such a person to say—until you think about it a bit. He said that an organ is not about music. It’s about the new Jerusalem. It’s a little city that works together in love. You may have difficulty convincing an organ committee of that without the realization that omitting the musical piece is hyperbole that serves to highlight it. Organ committees, along with thoughtful organists, choirs, and congregations, however, tend to discover the truth that it encapsulates. It and all the rest of the best of our period are worth remembering.

Be of good cheer. Our mix of best and worst is apparently not unique to our period. And we can join the organ in contributing to the best in the midst of whatever worst we face.