

I am writing in the middle of the Covid-19 shutdown while New York City is drowning in grief, Kenyans are being beaten for not heeding curfew, Amazon warehouse workers are slaving away, with more than their usual risk of body and soul, and domestic abuse victims are trapped with their abusers. I, however, am luxuriating in a slower pace of life and making the most of time with my two dogs and a cat.

I am a parish organist, not a concert artist, though I wish I had the courage to be. That would be thrilling, but I don't perform often enough for it to be fun. Giving a recital is as close as I have ever experienced to childbirth, as I can't think of anything else that has taken so much out of me. I do give the occasional recital, but am rarely pleased afterwards. Church services are different, however, and I usually feel good about them, especially since my music director chooses music that is quite rich and satisfying. "Quality over quantity" as my teacher at the Longy School of Music, Peter Sykes, once said, so I put all my energies into Sunday mornings.

As a part-time organist I supplement my income by teaching mathematics part-time at community colleges. I feel that I'm making a difference in marginalized sectors of our community. I teach the lower levels, mostly statistics, and mostly students who are first in their families to attend anything past high school. Their challenges, and partly mine too since I'm their teacher, range from math phobia to homelessness. Fortunately, there is a skilled team of counselors and colleagues always available at a moment's call.

My community colleges are quite a contrast to the well-heeled church where I am organist, St. Bede's Episcopal, Menlo Park, CA. For me being a parish organist is really for personal pleasure, though I suppose it also satisfies some need for community and some sense of loyalty towards the church. As a cradle Episcopalian (Anglican, really, since I was baptized in Ghana as a baby where my parents met) I do have faith in God, though in the Anglican sense which easily embraces doubt and all possible intellectual quandaries.

I started playing the organ when I was twelve because my mother grew up at St. Mark's Cathedral in Bangalore, India, where her mother was on the vestry. My grandmother died of rabies when my mother was about twelve, so I think my mother felt it important to support the church in every way possible. She insisted that both my sister and me to be able to play the organ. (A few years ago she took me to a Sunday service at her old church in Bangalore, and the organ was still being played lustily, though extremely out of tune.) My sister didn't stick with organ, but I enjoyed it and have continued until now. I appreciated as a beleaguered teenager in Richmond, VA, that I had no competition, while every other sport, instrument, club and clique was so competitive. At Mount Holyoke College I was like a piggy in a puddle with a big stone church with a big Skinner and a medium-sized Fisk, and often the only organ student on campus. (If you ever want a great place to record, just ask them. There is no one there in the summer, and the acoustics are highly rewarding.)

My current church, St. Bede's Episcopal, Menlo Park, CA is an especially nice situation with my music director, Katherine McKee, who appreciates the organ and invests heavily in contemporary women composers. If we hadn't had this coronavirus shut-down we would be offering an evensong service all composed by [Angela Kraft Cross](#) who lives down the road. I so appreciate both the music and the musicians around me; however, the instrument is the main reason I am at this church.

The honeymoon has never ended with this two-manual 1969 von Beckerath organ. When I first sat down at it after having jobs with mostly electric organs, it brought me new life. The sound immediately

reminded me of my trip to Ostfriesland on a Schnitger tour in 1998, perhaps the best two weeks of my life. To play this Beckerath is rarely a chore. Its North-German timbres, action, and sensitivity are sublime. It is somewhat eclectic, does French Classical reasonably well, and I can usually pull off the accompaniment to cathedral choral music. Ireland's "Greater Love Hath No Man" nearly killed me, though.

We are lucky to have the original voicer from Beckerath maintain the organ, Hans-Ulrich Erbslöh, who now works independently. He travels from Germany every couple of years and also visits some Beckeraths in Hawaii, so the airfare is split up by all the churches/residences on each trip making it financially feasible. He knows every cubic inch of this organ, and I love listening to him describe it. About once a year something little goes awry, and I call him in Germany. He is very skilled at coaching me over the phone to fix the problem, and I feel terribly accomplished afterwards.

My biggest challenge as a musician is simply to not punish my body as I strive for musical excellence. I drive thirty minutes each way between church and home, so that takes a toll on my body, as do my unwitting habits which lead to tension. I have been taking Alexander Technique lessons twice monthly for a couple of years with [Dana Ben Yehuda](#). It has helped me play better, but it's slow going. It's all about practicing thoughts, which creates mind games with my body and can make me a little crazy. For example, one thought I was toying with is to let my thumbs let go of tension when I play, which lasts about three seconds before I have to remind myself again. Now with the shut-down I have been having lessons on zoom, and my teacher instills all kinds of mental images that really help. One of them is imagining the miles of air above me and the miles of rock supporting me from below. That transformed my playing immediately. Yesterday she taught me over zoom a slightly different way to think about my arms which really freed me up, something to do with how apes walk. It's amazing how much Alexander Technique has to do with monkeys!

Apart from my different career hats, I have "special" hats which I put on occasionally. I am finishing up as sub-dean of the local AGO chapter after perhaps ten years, and I am an environmental activist. The AGO has always been a good chunk of my social life, though now I have been wooed by AAM, which I'm happy to say, turns out to be much friendlier than the first impression it gives with an application essay. When wearing my other special hat, I occasionally participate in civil-disobedience climate protests. For instance, last fall, my group shut down the main branch of Wells Fargo in San Francisco since the bank is the second greatest source of funding for oil pipelines, Chase being the worst offender. Yes, it is incongruous with my values that I play the most energy intense of musical instruments.

I did inquire with the leaders of my church while writing this article whether our church gets its electricity from 100% green sources. The answered that probably we do but we are not sure, so that is of some comfort. Unfortunately, the church leaders were not interested in shutting off the furnace which runs for two hours every morning in both the church and the parish hall here in balmy California. I reminded them again at the start of the coronavirus shutdown of the needless CO₂ emissions. Their response was that it was to prevent mold, though two-hours each day seems hard to justify. This does bring up the dissonance between me and this church which I felt over the past twelve years. I'm sure many of you endure similar situations. We are to have a new priest in a year or so, so perhaps there's a ray of hope . . . or maybe a rainbow.

I take courage from a sermon delivered in Boston by June Osborne now Bishop of Llandaff, Wales.
<https://www.trinitychurchboston.org/media/the-very-revd-june-osborne-hope-in-the-face-of-the-impos>

[sible](#) At the time she was dean of Salisbury Cathedral and preached on this painting by Constable called *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*.



Her sermon states that the church, despite its darkness within and without, will prevail hold true to its mission and integrity. The rainbow is a promise of better things, and we certainly need that right now. I believe that rainbows and all things beautiful are sacraments. We need these reminders of pure goodness for comfort and to remember that all will be well. Perhaps we as musicians are helping to hold up that rainbow for ourselves and for the rest of the world. Our organ recordings for streaming church services, however scratchy and muffled, are a way to remind us all that things will get better.