

My first encounters with the King of Instruments

Most of life's great journeys are anything but linear, and my first encounters with the King of Instruments trace a winding path that would double and triple back on itself over the course of my vocation. Having taken leave of my post at Holy Trinity, San Pedro at the end of August, I'm not entirely sure when I'll next sit on the bench of an actual acoustic instrument. I've consulted on three pipe organ projects in the last 5 years so I'll likely make a journey to see the tonal enhancements of my latest opus at my former "dream job," clear across the continent. To paraphrase Saint Augustine (I, myself, a kindred soul of the in his younger days), "Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new...you called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I...now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire..." Thus began and continues my devotion to the King of Instruments.

My parents were a match of blue-collar stock from Baltimore, each raised during the height of its post-war economy. My father, a Green Beret (the army's equivalent of a Navy Seal) who sang in choirs as a teenager; my mother, steeped in the mysticism and majesty of the Roman Catholic Church from her time with the Sisters of Mercy and Sisters of the Holy Cross. They took refuge and residence a few tiers away from the suburbs in the country, in rural Harford County, where new homes were going up in developments that promised good schools and safety from urban decay. I couldn't tell you where I got my taste for European culture, but it might have something to do with Mom waking me up at dark:30 AM to bake a pineapple upside-down cake to celebrate Princess Anne's wedding. I would have just turned four that previous August, and we watched and listened on the portable black-and-white set on the kitchen table, but even then and "through a mirror, dimly," I beheld the majesty of the Anglican musical tradition, sweetened all the more by her culinary expertise. I also had the good fortune (if you can call it that) of watching two back-to-back papal funerals and coronations just four years later. A weekly diet of *Hour of Power* with a side of *The Lawrence Welk Show*, and you have an alchemical brew for a young organist in chrysalis form.

I was a weird kid, there's no two ways about it. My paternal grandmother reconciled herself to this and full-on encouraged me to act-out my Cinderella fantasies through drawing the heroine with

Shirley Temple locks and open-toed shoes of varying heel heights. I can proudly say that I was probably the only 9-year-old boy in the neighborhood who received Brusher and Van Nostrand's *Popes Through the Ages* as a Christmas gift that year. I was also a painfully late bloomer in riding a bicycle. As a toddler, I could ride a Fischer Price tractor down hill the same way I took the stairs to our basement: backwards. I had an early grasp of social distancing, watching the neighborhood riff raff shooting off bb-guns and reading *Field & Stream* while I was swooning to Anthony Newman recordings and riding a Big Wheel®. But, finally, I learned to ride a bicycle, and my peers-from-another-planet showed me a short-cut from our neighborhood's upper cul-de-sac through a corn field which led onto a state high way which led to our County Seat whose name feels all the more poetic some 40 years later living in Koreatown, reasonably equidistant from the opulent residential enclave which shares the same name: Bel Air.

The largest city and county seat of Harford County, Maryland had just under 8,000 residents at the time of the 1980 census. I had gained access to the greatest cultural advancement known to civilization when I rode up to the Golden Arches and purchased my first 6-pack of newly-concocted-and-aggressively-marketed Chicken McNuggets (with honey, of course). Just a few miles further stood a church with gothic arches whose doors were always open. It must have taken me a year or so to get up the nerve to park my bike and knock on the Rectory door to ask about playing the organ (I assumed they had one, didn't every church)? The Rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church must have been gob smacked to see this chunky tweenster peddling for organ time, but he was nonetheless gracious and acquiesced. I can't imagine that a four rank Möller from 1940 in a single swell box ever sounded so glorious to another sentient entity as it did to me, who had only ever heard a self-contained Allen with a princess pedalboard in a manufactured church replete with metallic folding chairs. I biked many happy returns that summer to play on that precious unit before Father Moser would have me improvise a prelude to the Rogation Sunday Eucharist that fall.

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