

# ‘Be Good or Be gone’

*New-world discoveries and memories of home*

One of the joys of being a jobbing organist is getting around to different churches to sub for truanting chums. It’s always interesting to see how other places do it, to meet new people and to get to know new instruments. I recently played for a wedding at an unfamiliar parish. I arrived in plenty of time to be met by the wedding planner, a no-nonsense New Yorker in late middle age, glamorous in appearance, with a demeanor that was somewhere between efficient and curt. She was perfect for the job.

I received my instructions, and all was going well until, midway through the first reading, the bride unexpectedly darted into the sacristy, trailed by a bridesmaid and said wedding planner. No one was quite sure how to react. The lector continued. I had an unopened bottle of water with me, so, in an attempt to be helpful, went backstage to offer it. It transpired the bride was having a panic attack brought on by the pressure of the occasion and exacerbated by the dress and the church’s central heating.

A few moments later, her breathing now steadier, the overheated bride asked if there was any ice to help cool her. In a gravelly drawl, the wedding planner replied, “Honey, this is a church, not a cocktail bar – now let’s get on with it.” Though I don’t doubt the anxiety was very real for the poor bride, tough love seems to have done the trick: Mass proceeded smoothly and off the couple went to start married life together.

There’s something about the direct New York approach, I find. My dentist once asked, “What is it with you Europeans and your obsession with New York City?” soon after the chair of doom had been lowered. As it was tricky for me to offer any sort of defence with a mouth full of drills and spikes, on she went. “It’s dirty and horrible, there are rats everywhere, and it smells bad. There are so many actually nice places to visit in New England.”

## ALEX HODGKINSON

A bit harsh, I thought, but perhaps she has a point. Manhattan in 2025 is uncomfortably busy, and – although I haven’t seen any rats – lately the unmistakable stench of cannabis wafts down every sidewalk. I invite anyone who thinks blanket legalisation is the answer to US cities’ drug problems to come and smell the grim reality, and see the often devastating consequences.

That aside, the Big Apple still holds plenty of charm in my book, not least for its plethora of historic Catholic churches. St Patrick’s Cathedral is a magnificent Gothic jewel, well worth battling the Fifth Avenue crowds to visit. But there are plenty more that are both interesting and beautiful. The Jesuit churches of St Francis Xavier (on the corner of 6th Avenue and West 15th St) and St Ignatius Loyola (Park Avenue and East 84th) are lavish, neo-Baroque masterpieces, while St Peter’s in Lower Manhattan – the oldest Catholic parish in New York State, and an official city landmark – is a Greek-revival haven.

After a spot of church-crawling I usually pop my head round the door of McSorley’s



in the East Village for something restorative. Established in 1854, it lays claim to being the oldest Irish bar in NYC. There is literally sawdust (and probably some spit) on the floor. There’s no amplified music, and they only deal in cash. The beverage options are simply light ale or dark ale, all poured by a cheerful barman, broad in accent, long in tooth and winding in tale.

The place is bedecked with interesting pictures and memorabilia, including Houdini’s handcuffs; not a single item of decoration has been removed for over a century. The pub’s motto, emblazoned above the bar, is a stern warning to those who might be tempted to let the jovial atmosphere get the better of them: “Be Good or Be Gone”.

Back in Connecticut, I recently spent several hours trying to iron out a conflict between our children’s choir rehearsal and the parochial school basketball team practice; apparently these days there are kids who want to do both music *and* sport. As I was doing so, a similar situation from early on in my teaching career sprang to mind.

A timid first-year student shuffled up to me in the school dining hall one lunchtime. “Scuse me Sir, would it be OK for me to miss choir practice tomorrow?” Naturally I took a very dim view of it, so replied, “What could you possibly have on that’s more important than choir?” “Well, Sir,” came the reply, “I’ve got confirmation class.”

I could see my good friend the chaplain dining within earshot. As a potshot at my clerical pal, I asked, with a theatrical snort of mock-incredulity: “And do you think God is more important than choir?” The student took a moment to consider this before giving his response. “I don’t know yet, Sir,” he said. “I haven’t been to the class.” **CH**

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