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Coffee Break

with Daniel Colaner



Daniel Colaner

Daniel Colaner is a name to look out for. At just 20 years old, he has already claimed a host of top prizes at major competitions, including the Northern Ireland International Organ Competition, the Arthur Poister Scholarship Competition, and the AGO Regional Competition for Young Organists (RCYO). He is a student of Alan Morrison at the Curtis Institute of Music and a member of The Diapason magazine's "20 under 30" class of 2021. I met Daniel when he gave an outstanding recital for the Greater Bridgeport AGO Chapter, having won the chapter's 2024 Miller-Knox Scholarship Competition.

ALEX HODGKINSON

I was first introduced to music as cognitive therapy when I was a very young child. At six months old, I was diagnosed with stage 4 neuroblastoma, a rare form of pediatric cancer. I'm lucky I was young enough that I don't remember most of the procedures. Since the chemotherapy put me at risk for learning delays and fine motor deficits, exposure to classical music and learning to play an instrument were recommended for my recovery. Thankfully, I did recover, and so now I wake up every day saying to myself, "OK, I'm going to make something of this day, because I almost didn't get here!"

I have taken part in quite a few organ competitions. They are a great way to meet other young organists and be inspired by them, and to meet lots of wonderful people who are either organists themselves or organ aficionados. But the most valuable thing is the feedback and encouragement I receive from the judges and audience members.

Competitions often include a concert engagement as part of the prize, so I've gotten to play a wide variety of really interesting instruments, which is always a thrill. I gave one of the Bach Corner concerts this July at the St. Albans International Organ Festival, and next summer I will be part of the Rising Stars performance at the AGO National Convention in St. Louis.

I try to choose repertoire that will complement the competition instrument. Depending on the organ, I may want to bring out certain stops or colors; maybe the strings are really nice, or if the plenum is good I might program a really beefy Bach piece. I'd say it's a balance between being secure with the repertoire and being able to showcase it on whichever organ I'm playing. I have registered Bach's Fantasia and Fugue in G Minor, BWV 542, on a lot of different organs at recitals and competitions recently, so it's a piece that feels secure for me.

For the RCYO in Phoenix in June, I knew that the plenum on the organ at Orangewood Presbyterian Church was going to be pretty good, so I decided to program the Bach. For Karg-Elert's *Harmonies du soir*, I used the Vox Humana with the Swell Diapasons, and it ended up being quite effective. That's another thing about a competition: it's an opportunity to experiment, to step out of your comfort zone and show your musical personality.

Competitions challenge you to perform at a high level under pressure, and that takes time and careful preparation—you really have to drill down into the repertoire. I've also found that persistence is just as important as preparation, not only when it comes to competitions but in every aspect of music, whether it be taking auditions, applying for jobs, or even just practicing.



Occasionally, I have received less favorable feedback from judges, or sparse feedback where I would have liked more. But the comments are almost always very helpful, and it's important to remember that they're not necessarily a direct reflection on you—they're not necessarily saying you're right or wrong. As one of my former teachers remarked, "Change one judge and you'll change the results!" I find it so valuable to be exposed to different opinions and different schools of thought when it comes to organ playing. The judges' comments can provide that, as well as a window into what the audience hears.

Above all, it's really helped me to go into competitions thinking of them as learning experiences—remembering that, at the end of the day, it's about becoming a better organist. And when I know I haven't done my best work, I try to learn from it and aim to deliver a better performance the next time. You just keep learning and learning, and keep trying to make yourself the best organist you can be.

One of the greatest pieces of advice I received early on came from David Higgs, my organ teacher throughout high school. He often said, "Organ is a slow burn, so don't be in a hurry." It's hard not to be anxious about achieving success as a musician, and of course social media now provides a platform for self-promotion that didn't exist 25 years ago. But from talking to the performers I admire most, and hearing them play in recitals and on recordings, I have realized that there is so much that goes into becoming a world-class organist, and a lot of it comes from time and experience.

Several years ago, I had the good fortune of being at one of Daniel Roth's last U.S. recitals. I was awestruck by his playing—playing that was the result of a lifetime spent at the organ. That is my inspiration.

Alex Hodgkinson, FRCO, is director of music at St. Theresa's Church, Trumbull, Conn., and co-dean of the Greater Bridgeport AGO Chapter.

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