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by Jackie Saunders

Throwing convention to the wind wasn't exactly Jeff Buchholz's plan when entering the Roland Atelier Organ Fest, but it definitely worked in his favor. Instead of playing the standard "Tico Tico" or "Amazing Grace" on the home organ, Buchholz's tune of choice was Bryan Adams' "Everything I Do."

Buchholz's mother-in-law, an organ teacher, saw an ad for the local contest in the fall of 2008 and encouraged him to learn a song and enter. "She happened to have an endless stock of sheet music and she picked the Bryan Adams song," says Buchholz, 41. "The more I worked on it, the more I liked it. I started adding the voices and before I knew it, I was three-quarters of the way through the song."

A piano player as a young boy, Buchholz recalled his musical prowess from the past and ended up as the national champion in the festival's Hobbyist division at the finals in Los Angeles in March, winning both the local and semi-finals in the qualifying rounds. "I was only playing for a month and somehow it just all came together," says Buchholz. "I couldn't be happier—it was a great experience."

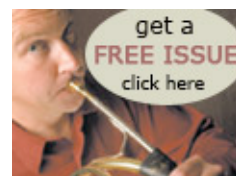
Calling All Organists

In order to promote organ-playing at a grass-roots level, Roland Corporation set up a nationwide competition to find the best organists in four divisions: Youth, Hobbyist, Advanced Hobbyist, and Professional. Then in the fall of 2008, organ dealers and music stores began to spread the word about local contests and hundreds of contestants began to sign up. "It was a friendly, light-hearted competition not based on putting pressure on the players but helping them learn how to orchestrate on their organs and share their music," says Lynda Smith, manager of business development for Roland.

The competitions were judged in a set up similar to American Idol, where the contestants received feedback from three judges after the performance. "We all felt comfortable going in and I just felt like, even if I don't win, I had a good time," says Buchholz. Judges would tell the contestants what they enjoyed about the performance and give constructive tips for the future.

"It was informational and fun and it made the audience more interested in the outcome," says Smith. "There was this general feeling after everyone played that it was such a good time that they wanted to compete again. The audience was so supportive; it really did boost their confidence as musicians."

After Buchholz performed in the local competition in Dana Point, California, he remembers joking to his mother-in-law, "Hey, wouldn't it be funny if I actually won?" The joke was on Buchholz when he advanced to the semi-final round in Orlando, Florida, and then went on to win the division. "I think my best performance was in Florida," says



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Buchholz. "At that point there were so many contestants from all over the country I thought there was no way."



A Life Long Love

Mark Cammuso, 50, first set his eyes on an organ in a mall in 1975. "I convinced my parents to buy that first one for me," says Cammuso. "It didn't hurt that the salesman was playing 'Spanish Eyes,' my dad's favorite song, so it was easy to persuade him."

Cammuso loves the organ because of the versatile sounds it produces. The organ provides not only the sounds of a piano, but also those of a whole orchestra, says Cammuso. Although he only took lessons for a year, he continued to play the organ throughout his life and tries to play a little bit every day. Now a retired vice president of a credit union, Cammuso has extra time to scour local organ stores for concerts and workshops. He found out about the Roland Atelier Organ Fest on the Internet.

Cammuso has a soft spot for romantic ballads and classics such as "Moon River" and "My Heart Will Go On," and he decided to take his first crack at the Roland organ competition by playing, "Over the Rainbow," in the Advanced Hobbyist category at a music store in Clearwater, Florida. "I was quite nervous and, when I got off the stage, I told my friends in the audience I made some mistakes," says Cammuso, whose friends assured him they didn't hear any. "I had convinced myself I made mistakes."

After winning the local and semi-final competitions, he competed in the finals in Los Angeles, tweaking the arrangement of "Over the Rainbow," each time so the judges wouldn't get bored. "At the finals all the contestants ate lunch and dinner together," says Cammuso. "There was a lot of camaraderie and support for each other."

Throughout the various levels of the competition, the judges came out into the audience after the performances and spoke with contestants and the audience. "They made you feel welcome and were very friendly," says Cammuso.

The warm and welcoming atmosphere encouraged audience members, many of whom play the organ, to enter next year's contest.

"It was probably a little scary for some of the players to play in front of the pros but everyone was so diplomatic and praised everyone's efforts, that even more people are willing to compete next year," says Cindy Soriano, manager of Desi's Music Centers in San Diego, a host of one of the local competitions. "We just had fun. We were like a bunch of soccer moms rooting everyone on. The atmosphere was all about socialization, making music, and camaraderie."

On to the Future

Hot off his victory in the Advanced Hobbyist category, Cammuso is already preparing for next year's competition. He plans on playing "Time to Say Goodbye," an Italian duet originally sung by Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman in 1995. Buchholz plans on competing again, but moving up to the Advanced Hobbyist division. "I just want to get in there and do the best I can and hopefully get a lot of ideas from the people who are up there playing for years," says Buchholz.

