

Sewanee Church Music Conference

July 9–15, 2012

By Jane Scharding Smedley

This year's conference, directed by **Keith Shafer**, immediately followed the national AGO convention just up the road in Nashville. What a fine experience it was for those fortunate to attend both, with their wide range of performances and learning opportunities. At Sewanee, however, the emphasis is on music within worship, taught through actual "doing." Daily choral rehearsals provide a teaching laboratory, as well as preparing repertoire for the Friday Evensong and the Sunday Eucharist that concludes the week.

Huw Lewis and **Bruce Neswick**, long-time favorites of this conference, returned as music faculty. Dr. Lewis, organist at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, is director of music at St. John's Church in Detroit. Mr. Neswick, well known in AGO and AAM circles from past cathedral positions, is associate professor of organ and sacred music at the Jacobs School of Music, Indiana University. Both masters on the bench and the podium, they showed seamless teamwork and sterling professionalism. They shared the bench at the Tuesday evening recital, now named in memory of long-time conference leader Gerre Hancock. In homage to his teacher, Neswick performed his works (*Air; Variations on tunes ORA LABORA and PALM SPRINGS*), ending his half of the concert with an improvisation. Lewis balanced the program with skillful renderings of works from past masters: Bach (*Fugue in E-flat Major*), Brahms (*Chorale Prelude and Fugue on "O Sorrow Deep"*), and Franck (*Chorale in A Minor*). Both in recital and later in the worship services, the resources of the large Casavant organ in All Saints Chapel at the University of the South were fully explored.

In the nearby Chapel of the Apostles, a newer two-manual Casavant instrument was used for a masterclass led jointly by Neswick and Lewis. Ten performers, representing a range of ages and backgrounds, received individualized coaching and guidance. Special mention is made of those present who represented the next generation—two in their teens and eight of college age or under thirty. Board member **Alvin Blount** coordinated this event; he also led a reading session of organ repertoire based on hymntunes useful for worship. Other workshops on hymn-playing techniques and improvisation were offered by Neswick on this smaller instrument, a nice gesture towards those present who may not be blessed with four manuals and an en chamade on Sunday mornings.

Other sessions offered throughout the week included handbells, Episcopal basics, computer notation systems, and reading sessions. **Bradley Almquist** presented excellent workshops on "Conducting Skills" and "Music Theory for the Singer."

Huw Lewis's choral skills were fully evident in the daily rehearsals, demonstrating various techniques and a

few 'tricks of the trade'. To illustrate the importance of posture and how to efficiently communicate this to singers, Lewis shared a simple system that came to be named "Position 1, 2, 3." It gave attendees a useful technique to take home—and provided much humorous fodder at the Annual Frolic later!

The daily Eucharists in the Dubose Conference Center's chapel gave Neswick more opportunity to incorporate creative service-playing and improvisations.

To complement the rehearsals, workshops and performances, **Lois Fyfe Music** brought its excellent display of choral and organ music, along with related items. In spite of this conference following a very busy week at the Nashville AGO convention, **Elizabeth Smith** cheerfully shared her expert advice as browsers delighted in a shopping spree.

Repertoire for Evensong included the *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in B-flat* by Henry Smart and *Preces and Responses* by Robert Lehman. The anthem was Baird's gorgeous setting of *The King of Love*, using the beloved ST. COLUMBA melody. Anglican chants by Walmisley and S. S. Wesley added variety to the many verses of Psalm 18 appointed for the evening. Under his sensitive guidance, with superb accompaniment by Neswick, Lewis enabled the beauty of Anglican chant to meld 145 voices into true sung prayer. A prelude improvisation on MIGHTY SAVIOR was offered by Neswick to undergird the solemn procession of 145 vested singers, then seamlessly flowed into the hymn itself.

The liturgical and musical climax of the week was the Sunday Eucharist. Neswick's preludes were on tunes to be sung: NETTLETON by Hancock, LEONI by Seth Bingham and Richard Proulx. Hancock's *Houston Mass* (also sung at daily Eucharist) was used.

This year's commissioned anthem—*Hymn of Praise* by Gary Davison—used a text from Revelations and the Psalms. Its shifting meters and dynamic contrasts were well performed by the singers under Lewis's precise musical direction; Neswick had the very challenging accompaniment, punctuated by dramatic silences, well in hand.

Deeply appreciated by this writer, Neswick demonstrated throughout both liturgies the role of the organist in connecting the parts of the liturgy. When silence was needed, it was there—when a musical thread could serve the flow, he wove it with sensitivity and art. His free accompaniment to IN BABILONE ("Hail, Thou Once-Despised Jesus") was classic, with twists of key and registration, but never straying from its purpose to lead and support congregational song. Later at Communion, he used motifs from the anthem to come. He sensitively bound the flow of worship, leading into Davison's lovely setting of *My Soul Shall Be Always*, followed by NETTLETON ("Come, Thou Fount"). All followed his musical cues to bring the hymn to a



◀ Huw Lewis and Bruce Neswick

▼ Huw Lewis, conductor



gentle close. "Praise to the Living God" (LEONI) closed the liturgy, then continued as seed for a final improvisation: a postlude of flourishes, calm mid-section, then fugal ending—a marvelous musical coda to a wonderful week.

Father Matthew Moretz served as the conference chaplain. A member of the clergy of St. Bartholomew's Church, New York City, Fr. Moretz is an advocate of Internet resources as a means of evangelization; he spoke to the conferees about ways he thought they might enhance their ministries through electronic media.

This year's gala banquet honored two long-time board members. **Keith Shafer** is stepping down as conference co-director. **Janet Perkins**, registrar for many years, provided a friendly face and concerned ear to all who have been part of the Sewanee 'family'. Gifts were bestowed along with much applause to show appreciation for their dedicated service.

The sense of community at the conference is further supported by

delicious culinary offerings issuing from the kitchen at the Dubose Center under **Kim Agee**, director, advised by board member **Nancy Whitmer**, hostess extraordinaire. In spite of a packed schedule, no one loses weight during their week on the 'holy mountain'.

The faculty for 2013 will be Richard Webster (Trinity Church, Boston) and Maxine Thevenot (St. John's Cathedral, Albuquerque). The Reverend Barbara Cawthorn Crafton, who served as chaplain in 2011, will again share her spiritual gifts. ■

Jane Scharding Smedley has served as organist-choirmaster at St. Peter Roman Catholic Church in Memphis, Tennessee since 1980. She earned bachelor's (Rhodes College) and master's (Wittenberg University) degrees in sacred music, and holds the Colleague and Choirmaster certificates from the American Guild of Organists. Her teachers included David Ramsey, Tony Lee Garner, Frederick Jackisch, and Richard White. An attendee at the Sewanee Church Music Conference since 1979, she currently serves as secretary of the board of directors.

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