

Music with vigor, vitality and vision: An exploration of the compositions of Harold Stover

Compiled by Marilyn Biery

My lifelong interest in new music began to come alive in a vivid way when I attended a workshop on the subject given by Harold Stover at an AGO regional convention in New England in the mid-1980s. My organ studies at Northwestern University had begun my interest in contemporary music by introducing me to the music of Messiaen, Hindemith, Distler, Dupré, Duruflé, and other early twentieth-century organ composers, but my interest flamed into a slow-burning passion at this convention and this workshop, because here was the first opportunity for me to actually meet a composer. This was a huge turning point for a twenty-something musician, and not only did I meet this composer, but I discovered that he had a sense of humor and personality, he was approachable and friendly, and he knew how to generate interest in new music. It was a defining moment, and I've never forgotten Stover or the workshop. His distinguished career has demonstrated the vigor with which he has championed new music, his personality has brought vitality and style to the field through his commitment to composing with unusual subjects and methods, and his vision of new music and its role in worship and concerts tells a compelling story of past and future for those who listen.

I don't remember much about the workshop content but vivid in my mind is Stover telling about a performance of his *Nocturnes* where the button on his shirt-sleeve got caught in-between the keys during a forearm cluster. He took a serious subject and made it fun instead of stuffy. I have also heard him tell of doing such a cluster at another performance where someone from the audience, concerned about his lingering, prone position on the keys, shouted out during the piece: "Are you okay?" According to Stover, he has since learned to tell the audience what he will be doing *before* starting any piece with such an effect, so as not to raise any concerns during the performance that he might be ill or incapacitated.

And so the workshop reflected the nature of the music written by Stover: engaging, slightly quirky, decidedly and wholeheartedly American (with homage to Virgil Thomson, Charles Ives, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, among others), and reflective of his interest in stretching technical boundaries of the organ through use of clusters, glissandos, tremolos and random repetitive patterns. Stover juxtaposes styles from various periods of music history and mixes musical genres not commonly found in compositions for organ.

Much of the information contained in this article comes directly from Harold Stover, beginning with his biography. Stover was also gracious enough to provide most of the analysis of his pieces, except for *Shall I Tell You Who Will Come to Bethlehem?* My work in bringing this article to the public was primarily that of compiler, not as author. So I am grateful to him for all his enthusiasm and responsiveness to my myriad requests for information and clarification. It is my hope that readers will be intrigued by this presentation and discussion of Stover's music, and that they will add these pieces to their repertoire.

Harold Stover was born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, in 1946. He graduated from the Juilliard School in New York in 1969 with a major in organ, having also previously attended Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His principal teachers were Vernon de Tar, John R. Lively, Robert Ivey, and Donald G. Wilkins in organ and church music, Nikolai Lopatnikoff and Carlos Surinach in music theory, composition, and orchestration, and Abraham Kaplan and Richard Strange in choral and orchestral conducting.



Harold Stover

From 1968 to 1992 he served as organist and choirmaster of Second Presbyterian Church in New York City, where he directed the church's amateur and professional choirs and was founder and director of the "Music at Second" concerts, which presented a wide variety of choral, instrumental, and keyboard music, including many first performances of new works. In 1986 the church's music program was the subject of an hour-long profile on the nationally syndicated radio program *IBM Salute to the Arts*. During this time, Stover also served as director of music of the Alexander Robertson School, a private elementary school in New York, and as organist of the St. Andrew's Society of the State of New York.

In 1992 he was appointed organist and director of music of Woodfords Congregational Church in Portland, Maine, where he directs the adult choir in service music and in concerts of major choral works with orchestra, directs the Pilgrim vocal choir and the Woodfords Ringers handbell choir, and serves as producer of the choir's recordings. He also directs the Portland-based chamber chorus Renaissance Voices, a position to which he was appointed in 2001. In May 2008 Stover was honored and his music celebrated during an all-Stover concert sponsored by Woodfords Congregational. At that time he was presented with the gift of a two-week creative leave each year in honor of his fortieth year as a professional musician, and fifteenth year at the church.

From 1977 to 1992 he served on the faculty of the New York School of Liturgical Music, where he taught organ, choral conducting, sight singing, music theory, and church music history. In 1995 he was appointed to the faculty of the Portland Conservatory of Music, where he teaches organ and music theory.

His compositions include keyboard music, choral and vocal music, chamber and orchestral music, electronic music, and two film scores. In 1986 his *Triptych on the Name of Bach* was one of the prize-winning entries in the international composition competition held at Southern College, Collegedale, Tennessee. In 1989 he chaired the New York City AGO chapter's "Organists Against AIDS" benefit, and twice served as chair of that chapter's Presidents' Day Conference. His writings on organ and church music have been published in *The American Organist*, *THE DIAPASON*, *The New England Organist*, *The Tracker*, and *Worship, Music, and Ministry*. Harold Stover lives in Hollis, Maine, with his wife Elizabeth. They have two daughters: Alice, of Washington, D.C., and Lucy, of Portland.

Concert music for organ and piano

The first two pieces highlighted are examples of his concert music, beginning with his duet for organ and piano, *Neumark Variations*. At first hearing, this piece enralls the listener with its

Example 1. *Neumark Variations, I: Musette with Ghost Image*

Example 2. *Neumark Variations, III: Trio with Sound Effects*

sense of fun, its continuity, and its elegant, charming and innovative variations, each with a clear intention and purpose. Performance length is just under fifteen minutes; six of the eleven variations are discussed here in some detail.

"In January 1987 I was asked by organist Daniel Junken for a piece for organ and piano, to be performed by him and pianist Nancy McDill, the request specifying a work based on a hymn tune. I chose the Lutheran chorale *Wernur den lieben Gott lässt walten*, better known in American hymnals as *Neumark*, after its composer Georg Neumark (1621–1681). The tune is a solemn one in a simple AAB form, and it proved an ideal subject for the construction of a set of variations ranging widely across the stylistically diverse landscape of late twentieth-century American music. The result is a postmodern¹ work in that all eras of musical history are freely drawn upon for the styles of the different variations. *Neumark Variations* was first performed in October 1987 at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey, by its dedicatees.

Variation I: *Musette with Ghost Image*. Two flutes are heard in the organ pedal, the upper one sounding a sustained note, the other repeating quarter-note beats in the manner of an 18th-century French musette. Above this, two voices sound the A portion of the chorale in a tonal and rhythmic canon. The theme is given to a reed stop in values that produce a 9/8 meter (the quarter note of the original version now equaling a dotted eighth), and to a 2' stop in values that produce a 3/8 meter (the quarter of the original now equaling an eighth). The pedal's steady pulse of 3/4 accentuates the polymetric effect. The piano, joined by pianissimo string stops in the organ, sounds the B portion of the theme in minor-12th chords. These mysterious chords, following the bright sounds of the musette, were inspired by the images that remain in the eye after a photographic flash has gone off. (See Example 1.)

Variation III: *Trio with Sound Effects*.

Organ and piano here coexist in different historical times. The organ sounds a chorale prelude in 18th-century trio style, manuals in a strict canon based on the chorale, pedal sounding the cantus firmus in longer notes. The bass of the piano inserts loud clusters intended to sound like the cannon in Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, using the "cannon" as a bad pun on the "canon" in the organ part. The treble of the piano further contributes to the historical mélange in a crazed distortion of the baroque organ's Cymbelstern bells, identified in the score as *le cymbelstern maudit*, after César Franck's cursed huntsman,² in a further blending of music history's epochs. (Example 2.)

Variation VII: *Second Dialogue*. The 19th century here makes an appearance in a dialogue whose keyboard textures are modeled on the piano works of Brahms. The romantic virtuosity of both parts builds to the principal postmodern surprise of the work, Variation VIII: *Country Dream Sequence*. This variation transposes Neumark's chorale from its original key of g minor into G major, and transports it from 17th-century Germany into the American countryside. The piano part—influenced by the country piano stylist Floyd Cramer—and the organ part—drawn more on the urban theatre organ style of the 1920s—are synthesized into a variation based on the American vernacular music the love of which Daniel Junken and I shared, both in its original form and as transformed by composers like Charles Ives and Virgil Thomson. (Example 3.)

Variation IX: *Bitonal Canon*. The theme is harmonized in triads in D major and E-flat major, heard in a canon à 4 over a G pedalpoint. (See Example 4.)

Variation XI: *Finale*. The tempo indication is "Rocking out!", indicating that the source of this final variation is the sound of American popular music as it was transformed in the 1950s and 1960s. The repeated chords in the piano (a characteristic sound of early rock and roll) and the syncopated ground bass set up a back beat (one-AND-two-AND),

Example 3. Neumark Variations, VIII: Country Dream Sequence

Example 4. Neumark Variations, IX: Bitonal Canon

Example 5. Neumark Variations, XI: Finale

augmented by a triplet toccata figure in the treble of the organ and a syncopated variant of the theme in the bass of the piano. (Example 5.) These elements are exchanged among the registers of the instruments as the variation unfolds and the harmonic and rhythmic tensions build to a climactic piano cadenza in double octaves and a fortissimo, dissonant organ harmonization of the first half of the chorale's B section that ends with the pedal repeating C-naturals and E-flats, decreasing in tempo and volume and finishing on a sustained E-flat.

Over this sustained tone, the piano quietly completes the chorale, its original harmonization quietly calling across the centuries. In the last two measures, the piano sounds the opening notes of the theme rapidly and loudly in the bass, but what seems to begin a new statement of the chorale is cut off by a low G marked "very long—hold till all sound has died away." This is a final postmodern gesture, this time toward an iconic musical moment of the late 20th-century, the E-major chord that ends John Lennon and Paul McCartney's *A Day in the Life*.

Example 6. Father James' Song No. 1

Example 7. Quick Dance No. 2 (South Union, Kentucky, 1838)

Example 8. Mountain Music: Quick Dance

Example 9. The Happy Journey

Concert music for solo organ

Mountain Music is a suite of three movements, each based on a Shaker melody. The Shakers are the oldest surviving religious communal society in the United States; the last active community is at Sabbathday Lake, Maine. *At Evening*, a quiet nocturne, quotes *Father James' Song No. 1*, notated by Elder Thomas Hammond at Harvard, Massachusetts, in 1853 but originally sung by Father James Whittaker in 1783 (Example 6). The second movement, *Quick Dance*, featuring *Quick Dance No. 2* (South Union, Kentucky, 1838) (Example 7), is a comedic scherzo that seeks to reconcile the disparate worlds of the classical organ and the country fiddle (Example 8). *Pilgrimage*, based on *The Happy Journey*, also notated by Hammond, but sung at Hancock, Massachusetts, at least as early as 1808 (Example 9), is a set of variations over a descending ground bass. Performance length of the set is about fifteen minutes.

All three of these tunes were created by Shakers with a religious intent, but only the final movement of *Mountain Music* could be construed as overtly sacred music. In adapting the other two melodies to secular purposes, I have tried to take my cue from the way in which the Shakers were able to instill in the most utilitarian tasks a purity of purpose and devotion that reflected their mantra of "hands to work, hearts to God."

Music for concert or worship

The next two compositions, *Angel* and *Toccata Brevis*, are shorter works for solo organ, each less than five minutes in length, and are appropriate for concert or worship.

The initial inspiration for *Angel* was non-musical: a radio broadcast in 1997 commemorating the launching of the first man-made satellite 40 years earlier, and featuring a recording of the signals that it sent back from space. I remembered listening to the original broadcasts of those signals as a young boy and being struck by how otherworldly they sounded—a message from a vast beyond. The work begins with a musical evocation of the radio signal and continues to depict the visitation of an entity that draws nearer, assuming various guises as it does, and then retreats leaving radio signals alone in the vastness of space. The musical material consists of several short themes heard in various harmonic and contrapuntal combinations.

In 1998 I was invited to play one of the 30-minute Sunday afternoon organ recitals at Westminster Abbey in London. I naturally wanted to include a work of my own in that historic venue, but one that would not consume so much of the short recital time as to limit the options for the rest of the program. I decided to compose a three-minute piece that would serve as a musical calling card and curtain raiser, and thus *Toccata Brevis* was born.

The work takes its title not only from its short length, but from the brief motifs on which it is constructed. These consist of:

- a fanfare-like theme heard in the first measure (Example 10)
- a sixteenth-note figure that twists and turns back on itself (Example 11)
- a series of overlapping broken chords in eighth notes played on only the black keys by one hand and on only the white keys by the other, producing the effect of a kaleidoscopic burst of sixteenth notes (Example 12)
- a series of homophonic chords that punctuate the toccata texture (Example 13).

These elements are freely developed and juxtaposed throughout the brief duration of the piece, which ends with a six-measure coda built on variants of Examples 12 and 13.

The metrical structure throughout the piece is a measure of nine eighths divided into four plus five, giving the effect of steady but uneven larger beats. The tonal center is C major, although the keys of D major, F-sharp major, G major, and E-flat major are alluded to in the course of the material's development."

The last composition mentioned in detail is Stover's newly published composition for SATB choir and organ, a Christmas anthem on an old Spanish carol translated by Ruth Sawyer, *Shall I Tell You Who Will Come to Bethlehem?*

Shall I tell you who will come to Bethlehem on Christmas morn?
Who will kneel them gently down before the Lord new-born?
One small fish from the river with scales of red, red gold.
One wild bee from the heather, one grey lamb from the fold.

One ox from the high pasture, one black bull from the herd.
One goatling from the far hills, one white, white bird.

And many children, God give them grace,
Bringing tall candles to light Mary's face.³

This delightful anthem features an organ ritornello, inspired by the 18th-century French *tambourin* noëls, alternating with choral statements of the text. The ritornello comprises a drum-like rhythmic pattern in the left hand and a right-hand melody on a 2' stop (Example 14). The vivid picture painted by the Sawyer text matches the musical diversity as the anthem provides charming and unexpected shifts from the tonal center of G major through C major, E minor, A major, B major, A-flat major, F major, G minor, A-flat major, C minor and E minor on the way back to G major.

Harold Stover's music is intentionally eclectic as he draws from all angles and aspects of musical styles and periods. The vision and skill with which these diverse ingredients are mixed together creates an impression of delightful juxtaposition and creative innovation. This music, brimming with vitality, is to be delighted in and chuckled at, vigorously proclaimed from organ lofts and pipe chambers, savored and internalized. Harold Stover's compositions paint vivid pictures for listeners to conjure up their own visions of musical storytelling. ■

Available compositions by Harold Stover

All music without publisher listing is available directly from the composer at <www.haroldstover.com>.

Sacred Choral

And We'll All Sing Hallelujah (SATB, org)

None Other Lamb (SATB a cappella, ECS Publishing)

Shall I Tell You Who Will Come to Bethlehem? (SATB, org, Paraclete Press)

Jubilate Deo (SATB, org, Triune Press)

Forth in Thy Name (2-pt, org, handbells, Triune Press)

Thus Sings the Heavenly Choir (2-pt, org, H. W. Gray)

Phos Hilaron (SATB, vc, handbells, org)

Psalm 150 (SATB, org, opt br quartet, timp)

A Litany of Praise and Thanksgiving (SATB, br quintet, org)

Across the Desert (SATB, fl, perc, org)

This I Am (SATB a cappella)

Earth Eternal (SATB, org, br quartet, perc)

The Spirit of the Lord (SAB, org)

God Is Love (SAB, org)

I Find My Refuge, Lord, in You (SATB, org)

Sweet Was the Song (SATB a cappella)

Sweet Was the Song (SATB a cappella)

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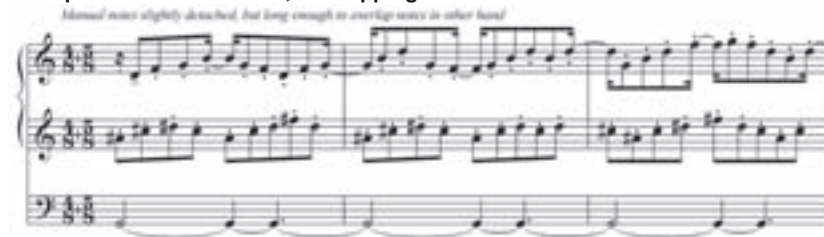
Example 10. Toccata Brevis, fanfare-like theme, m. 1



Example 11. Toccata Brevis, sixteenth-note figure



Example 12. Toccata Brevis, overlapping broken chords



Example 13. Toccata Brevis, homophonic chords



Example 14. Shall I Tell You Who Will Come to Bethlehem?



Carillon: Nine Chorale Preludes (Augsburg Fortress)

Organ and instruments

Nocturnes, Book III (w/tpt, perc)

Neumark Variations (w/piano, MorningStar Music)**

An Easter Carillon (w/br quartet, perc)

Piano

Souvenir

Chaconne

Two pianos

*Rag, Pastorale, and Carillon***

Voice and piano

Celtic Invocations (m-sop)

Voice and organ

Sayings of Jesus (sop)

Chamber ensemble

String Quartet No. 1 (Rag-Very Slowly-Tango)

String Quartet No. 2 (Allegro agitato-Passacaglia)

* recorded on Albany TROY765 and ACA Digital 20094

** recorded on ACA Digital 20050

*** recorded on ACA Digital 20023

Notes

1. Coming after, and usually in reaction to, modernism in the 20th century, esp. in the arts and literature; specif., of or relating to a diffuse cultural and artistic trend or movement, esp. in art, architecture, and writing, since the 1950s, characterized by eclecticism in style and content, freedom from strict theoretical constraints, indifference to social concerns, etc. <<http://www.yourdictionary.com/postmodern>>.

2. The symphonic poem, *Le Chasseur Maudit*, was written in 1883 and first performed in the following year. It is based upon the familiar ballad of Bürger's, "Der wilde Jäger" ("The Wild Huntsman"), and is divided into four sections, for which the composer has provided

a program. In the first movement, amid the pealing of bells, the shouts of the crowd, and the intoning of a chant, the hunting horn of the Count of the Rhine is heard as the huntsmen prepare for the chase. In the second movement the chase is in full progress over the fields and moors. A voice bids the Count listen to the pious chant, but he refuses and urges his horse forward. In the third movement he is found alone; his horse cannot move, nor will his horn utter a sound. A strong piercing theme gives out the curse, "Desecrator, be forever driven by the Evil One." In the last movement flames shoot up and the Count flies, forever pursued by demons. <<http://www.musicwithease.com/franck-chasseur-maudit.html>>.

3. Anne Thaxter Eaton, ed., *Welcome Christmas! A Garland of Poems* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955).

Musical Examples

Toccata Brevis examples reproduced with the permission of Harold Stover.

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Marilyn Biery, DMA, AAGO, is a Pi Kappa Lambda graduate of Northwestern University, with bachelor's and master's degrees in organ performance, where she studied with Richard Enright and Grigg Fountain. She holds the DMA in organ performance from the University of Minnesota. In 1982 she was a finalist in the National Open Competition in Organ Playing, sponsored by the American Guild of Organists. From 1986-1996 she was director of music ministries at the First Church of Christ in Hartford, Connecticut. Since 1996 she has been associate director of music at the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Biery is a former director of the National Young Artists Competition in Organ Performance, sponsored by the AGO. Her texts and music are published by Alliance Publications, GIA, MorningStar, and Augsburg Fortress. Marilyn Biery is a frequent collaborator with a number of American composers, including Libby Larsen, David Evan Thomas, Stephen Paulus, Pamela Decker, and James Hopkins. She has written a number of articles on American organ music, including "The Organ in Concert," THE DIAPASON, January 2005, and with her husband, James, was the subject of an interview in THE DIAPASON ("He said, she said: A conversation with James & Marilyn Biery," June 2008).

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