

The University of Michigan 50th Conference on Organ Music, October 3–6, 2010

Marijim Thoene, Lisa Byers

This year's gathering marked the fiftieth anniversary of the University of Michigan Conference on Organ Music, directed by its creator, Marilyn Mason. Organists from France, Germany, Poland, and the U.S. performed on the Aeolian-Skinner on the stage of Hill Auditorium. The shimmering golden pipes of this organ made this year's theme especially appropriate: "Pure Gold: Music of Poland, France and Germany." The conference was dedicated to the memories of Erven Thoma, a Michigan DMA graduate in church music, and William Steinhoff, Professor Emeritus of English at U-M and husband of Marilyn Mason.

Sunday, October 3

Frédéric Blanc, 43-year-old native of Angoulême, opened the conference with a program of all-French music. He introduced his program by saying that Fauré, Ravel, and Debussy are never far away in nineteenth and twentieth-century French organ music. Their influence was undeniable in the works Blanc performed, a mix of well-known and loved repertoire—Franck, *Choral in A Minor* and *Cantabile*; Vierne, *Carillon de Westminster* and *Méditation Improvisée* (reconstructed by Duruflé), repertoire that is occasionally heard—*Prelude in E-flat Minor* (from *Suite*, op. 5) by Duruflé and *Allegro* (from *Symphony VI*) by Widor, and repertoire that is rarely heard—*Introduction et Aria* by Jean-Jacques Grunenwald, *Toccata* (from *Le Tombeau de Titelouze*, on *Placare Christe Servulis*) by Dupré, and *Prelude* (from the suite *Pélleas et Mélisande*) by Debussy, transcribed by Duruflé.

Blanc's technique is formidable and his choice of registration was both poetic and daring; however, his playing became more impassioned and inspired in his improvisation—a Triptych Symphony based on three submitted themes: *Jesu*, *Joy of Man's Desiring*, *Hail to the Chief*, and *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. His imagination and creativity were dazzling as he altered rhythms and keys of the submitted themes, seamlessly moved from dark and somber to warm and brilliant colors, from pensive to ebullient moods, and ending with a bombastic pedal toccata. He delighted in making the instrument hum, growl, and break forth in glorious trumpeting.

Monday, October 4

On Monday afternoon Frédéric Blanc gave a lecture entitled "A Mind's Eye." He spoke informally of how his life as a musician has been shaped and influenced by unique circumstances, his teachers, and his views on improvisation. While he was a student at the Bordeaux Conservatory, Xavier Durasse heard him play and persuaded him to come to Toulouse, where he was then asked to be organist at St. Sernin. There he had all his nights to play the organ, and there he met Jean-Louis Florentz, André Fleury, and Madame Duruflé. When she heard him improvise, she said, "I will take you to Paris and I will make you work very hard." He told how he was not prepared to play Dupré's *Variations on a Noël*, one of the required pieces for the Chartres competition, and she told him he had to be able to play it from memory in fifteen days or she would never see him again. She was delighted when he came back in fifteen days and played it from memory. Blanc said that the most important thing he learned from her was that "each piece has its own way to be played, you must express yourself, your sensitivity must flow through the music."

Blanc's candid answers to questions about his own improvisation left me feeling that here is a man whose life is charmed, who is fully conscious of the rare gift he has been given, and is fully committed to nurturing it. When asked



Michael Barone, Margaret Mary Becker (granddaughter of René Becker), Julius Becker (son of René Becker), Dr. Sheila Becker (daughter-in-law of René Becker) and Charles Echols



Frédéric Blanc

who taught him how to improvise, he answered: "I wasn't. I listened to Madame Duruflé, Pierre Cochereau, Jean Langlais, and to recordings of Tournemire. Nobody can give you the gift. If you are not given the gift you will never be able to improvise a symphony . . . I heard Cochereau at Notre Dame and it was like magic, like being pierced by a sword, raised to heaven. He was at one with the organ."

When asked about the state of organ building in France today, Blanc lamented that there are no organs in concert halls, and the organist cannot be seen in the lofts in churches. He commented that Cavaillé-Coll was a builder who turned toward the future and restored his own organs for new music, especially those organs in Notre Dame and Sacré Coeur.

Blanc's final dictum concerning how to play French organ music: "After historicism, it must be the music and what you have inside."

Charles Echols, Professor Emeritus of St. Cloud State University, lectured on "Observations on American Organ Music 1900–1950," covering a large variety of topics: the movement of American composers to create "American" music; changes in musical style and organ building between 1930–1950; approaches to researching organ music by American composers; and an introduction to the organ music of René Louis Becker, whose scores have been given to the University of Michigan by his family, who were present at the lecture.

On Monday evening **Martin Bambauer**, 40-year-old organist and choir-master at the Konstantin Basilika in Trier, played Dupré's *Poème héroïque*, op. 33; Tournemire's *Triple Choral*, op. 41; Liszt's *Eglogue* (from *Années de Pèlerinage*), transcribed for organ by Bambauer; Karg-Elert's *Partita Retrospectiva*, op. 151; Iain Farrington's *Fiesta!*, plus his own improvisation. He played with great precision and refinement. His performance of Tournemire's *Triple Choral*, op. 41 was an Ann Arbor premiere. Farrington's four-movement work, *Fiesta!*,



Martin Bambauer and Frédéric Blanc

was a bit of fresh air, conjuring up all sorts of secular venues, from a stripper's stage to a cocktail lounge.

Tuesday, October 5

On Tuesday, Martin Bambauer began his lecture, "Tournemire's *Triple Choral*," by saying that it was Tournemire's first major organ work, and he had learned it in a week (!) and played it for the fourth time in public yesterday, and that it was not a very popular piece. Truly, I would have thought he had been playing the piece for years. This early work of Tournemire is introspective and cerebral, and at the same time hints at the otherworldliness that would characterize his later work. Bambauer mentioned that in 1896 the *Liber Usualis* became Tournemire's constant companion, and when he became Franck's successor at the Basilica of St. Clotilde in 1898 he only improvised on chant in the services. He thought sacred music was the only music worthy of the name, and when Langlais questioned him, asking what about the music of Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky, he said it didn't matter! Bambauer recommended listening to Tournemire's eight symphonies, among them *Search for the Holy Grail* and *Apocalypse of St. John*. Tournemire was drawn to the mys-

terious and supernatural, apparent not only in his music, but in his biography of Franck in 1931, and the naming of his two cottages "Tristan" and "Isolde"—his Opus 53 bears those names.

Bambauer pointed out that Tournemire was recognized as a great improviser, and Vierne described him as being "impulsive, enthusiastic, erratic, and a born improviser." Tournemire's *Five Improvisations*, recorded in 1930 at St. Clotilde and transcribed by his student, Duruflé, are his most popular works. His *L'Orgue Mystique*, fifty-one liturgical sets of five pieces each, was composed between 1927–1932 and is the Catholic counterpart to Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*. Bambauer explained that the first edition of *L'Orgue Mystique* was dedicated to César Franck and states in the preface that the performer is free to choose the registration; however, in the second edition Duruflé includes registration and manual changes.

Bambauer's insightful analysis of Tournemire's *Triple Choral* not only focused on his compositional techniques—use of imitation, paraphrase, and inversion—but how and when Tournemire used the same harmonic vocabulary as Franck. Bambauer illustrated the meticulous craftsmanship in this early work of Tournemire based on his newly created chorals entitled "The Father," "The Son," and "The Holy Spirit," and discussed how the prose with which Tournemire prefaced each choral was mirrored in the music. Tournemire's prose offers a poignant testimony of his profound faith and allows the listener to participate in Tournemire's personal vision.

Bambauer commented that the highlight of the piece occurs at the end as the three chorals softly merge together. Bambauer treated us to another performance of Tournemire's *Triple Choral* and "the knowing made all the difference."

Tuesday evening **James Kibbie**, Professor of Organ at U-M, presented a stunning memorized recital. He has a special affinity for the music of Marcel Dupré, Jehan Alain, Dan Locklair, and Jiri Ropek. He played Dupré's *Prelude and Fugue in B Major*, op. 7, no. 1, with conviction and assurance. The pleasure of hearing Alain's rarely played *Two Preludes* was heightened by being able to read the texts that accompany them. Kibbie's sensitive interpretation made the images of the text take on a life of their own.

Dan Locklair's *Voyage* was another kind of tone poem, providing a journey to fantasy lands filled with sounds of the ebb and flow of tides, jazz, bird song, chimes, and billowing waves evoked by hand glissandi. Kibbie managed to weave together these disparate elements into a fabulous and entertaining voyage.

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It was a pleasure to hear Kibbie speak of his meeting Jiri Ropek when he won the Prague Organ Competition in 1979 and of his continuing friendship with this celebrated organist/composer who suffered greatly during the Communist oppression. Kibbie related conversations he had had with Ropek that offered insight into his music. Of the three Ropek pieces on the program, Kibbie said that the *Tocata and Fugue* (dedicated to Kibbie) was the most complex and dissonant, and mirrored in the work is Ropek's philosophy: "Life is not only one melody, but many and dissonances, but in general I'm quite melodious. No frightening the audience." To hear this account made Ropek's *Tocata and Fugue*, filled with haunting and aggressive motives, a kind of musical autobiography. Kibbie also explained the compositional process of Ropek's *Fantasy on Mozart's Theme*. In 1775 Mozart improvised a work in a monastery, and only the first 57 measures were written down. Ropek was asked to play it and he added a cadenza. He worked on it over the years and finally he attached his own music to Mozart's original piece. It was one of the last things he wrote before he died and is dedicated to the students of James Kibbie at the University of Michigan. It was published in 2009.

Kibbie mentioned that he had just played Ropek's *Variations on "Victimae Paschali Laudes"* in Prague the week before and made a recording for the radio at the Basilica of St. James where Ropek was organist for 35 years. This beautiful work has become a signature piece for Kibbie.

Wednesday, October 6

Five recitals were performed on Wednesday, an intense day of listening.

The first recital of the day was played by **Andrew Lang** on the Létourneau organ in the School of Public Health. Lang is a student of James Kibbie and commutes from Chapel Hill, North Carolina. His program was well suited for the room and instrument: "The Primitives" and "Those Americans" (from *Five Dances for Organ*) by Calvin Hampton; *Dies sind die heiligen zehen Gebot*, BWV 678, *Fughetta super Dies sind die heiligen zehen Gebot*, BWV 679, and *Prelude and Fugue in B Minor*, BWV 544, by Bach. Lang played with verve and energy; the contrapuntal lines were electric with clarity and precision.

The day's second recital was played at Hill Auditorium by **Józef Kotowicz**, who received his doctoral degree in 2001 from the Music Academy in Warsaw. He is active, playing recitals in music festivals throughout Europe, producing a radio program devoted to organs of northeast Poland, recording on the organ in the Cathedral Basilica (Bialystok), and teaching and serving as organist at St. Adalbertus Church. Two of the most interesting pieces of his ambitious program were works by Mieczyslaw Surzynski (1886–1924), *Improvisation on the Polish Sacred Song "Swiety Boze,"* and Stefan Lindblad (b. 1958), *Espanordica*. Kotowicz explained to me that "Swiety Boze" is a very popular hymn in Poland and is sung often during funeral services. A translation of the first line reads: "Holy



Andrew Lang



Józef Kotowicz



Gale Kramer, Marilyn Mason, and Arthur Greene

God, Holy [and] Mighty, Holy [and] Immortal, have mercy on us." The hymn has inspired many composers.

After hearing the performance of Surzynski's *Improvisation*, it is easily understood why he is the most revered Polish composer of organ music. The work began with a statement of the hymn, and six dramatic variations followed, with variations one and five being the most riveting. In variation one, thundering chords are played in the manuals while the *cantus firmus* is heard in the pedals. In variation five, a fiery toccata is in the manuals while the *cantus firmus* thunders in the pedals.

Kotowicz's performance of Lindblad's *Espanordica* was electrifying. Each of the three movements—*Rhapsodia*, *Nocturno*, and *Litanies*—is built on Spanish dance motifs. Kotowicz told me that Stefan Lindblad lives in Göteborg, Sweden. Lindblad has composed two large works for organ, *Hommages* and *Espanordica*, which Kotowicz has performed in Ann Arbor. Both of these pieces have never been printed and he is the only Polish organist who has the scores. He also commented, "It's interesting that Lindblad is almost completely unknown in Sweden, so I feel like his promoter. I know him personally because I often play in Sweden."

In honor of Chopin's 200th birth year, **Arthur Greene**, Professor of Piano at U-M, performed an all-Chopin recital. It was truly a gift to hear such great artistry.

His program provided a rich and tantalizing view of Chopin's brilliant oeuvre. Greene drew sounds out of the piano like a magician—singing, soaring, languorous melodies, and thunderous, tumultuous chords. Greene is a master in knowing how to use his body in eliciting such sounds, and in controlling the exact timing of each key and creating suspense through poignant pauses. The audience was captivated by the huge gamut of emotions, from laughter to dark despair, that were portrayed in Greene's memorized recital. In his hands each piece



Michael Barone, Marilyn Mason, James Kibbie



Joseph Balistreri



Susan De Kam



Richard Newman



Timothy Tikker



Louis Canter and Marilyn Mason

became a sort of microcosm of its own, glowing with its own unique beauty. His program included three short *Mazurkas* (op. 67, no. 3; op. 24, no. 3; op. 24, no. 4), the well-known *Nocturne in E-flat Major*, op. 9, no. 2, *Écossaise*, op. 72, and four *Ballades* (op. 23, op. 38, op. 47, and op. 52).

The 4 o'clock recital featured graduate students of James Kibbie and Marilyn Mason. Each performer played with such artistry, conviction, and joy. Their discipline and dedication to their art was obvious. Those performing from Kibbie's studio included **Joseph Balistreri** (*In Organ, Chordis et Choro* by Naji Hakim); **Susan De Kam** (*Partita sopra "Nun freut euch"* by Lionel Rogg), and **Richard Newman** (Final from *Symphony No. 5*, op. 47, by Louis Vierne). Mason's students included **Timothy Tikker** (*Pièce Héroïque* by César Franck) and **Louis Canter** (Adagio, Fugue from *The 94th Psalm* by Julius Reubke).

The final concert of the conference was played by **Charles Echols**. His entire program was devoted to the music of René Louis Becker (1882–1956). In his notes, Professor Echols described Becker's career as a musician in the Midwest, and commented that among the many churches Becker served as organist were Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Detroit and St. Alphonsus Church in Dearborn, Michigan. Echols also indicated those pieces that have been published and those that are in manuscript form. Echols's playing was flawless, and

he is to be thanked for advancing this composer's work, which recalls the music of Mendelssohn.

Professor Marilyn Mason has been responsible for the organ conference at the University of Michigan, a "happening" in Ann Arbor for 50 years. When I asked her what inspired her to begin this incredible conference she told me: "I began the conference for our students; my then manager, Lillian Murtagh, urged me to sponsor Anton Heiller, who had never played in Ann Arbor. Further, I realized since the students could not have a European experience *there*, we could provide it for them *here*: especially to hear organists who had not played in Ann Arbor. Some firsts in Ann Arbor were the Duruflés, Mlle Alain, Anton Heiller, and

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many more. This contact also provided a window of opportunity for the students, many of whom went on to study with the Europeans after having met them here." This gathering together of world-class performers and teachers continues to nurture and inspire. We are indebted to Marilyn Mason for literally bringing the world to us.

Marijim Thoene received a D.M.A. in Organ Performance/Church Music from the University of Michigan in 1984. She is an active recitalist and director of music at St. John Lutheran Church in Dundee, Michigan. Her two CDs, Mystics and Spirits and Wind Song are available through Raven Recordings. She is a frequent presenter at medieval conferences on the topic of the image of the pipe organ in medieval manuscripts.



Jason Branham

Aristide Cavallé-Coll (son); and Mouchere. The photographs of the organs were enhanced by illustrations of their settings; highlights of the organs included historical cases, consoles, and principal internal components.

Organs of Bach Country traced the life of Bach, with photographs of the places where he grew up, the churches where he worked, and the organs he designed and played, along with additional photographic documentation of the organs of Andreas and Gottfried Silbermann, and Arp Schnitger.

Organs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire included pipe organs of Hungary (Budapest, Esztergom, Tihany, Zirc), Austria (Vienna, Melk, St. Florian, and Salzburg), and the Czech Republic (Prague). Historic and modern organs were presented from a variety of churches, cathedrals, abbeys, and concert halls. The photographs showed churches and organs associated with Mozart, Bruckner, Haydn, and Liszt. The photographs and information about these organs and their sites will be available in the near future from the University of Michigan Organ Department website.

The photographs described above and information are contained in several books available through <blurb.com>. The Fehers, along with Marilyn Mason, have produced a photo book about historical organs of Germany and Denmark related to Bach and Buxtehude, entitled *Sacred Spaces of Germany and Denmark*. Their second book on the organs of Hungary, Austria, and the Czech Republic is entitled *Sacred Spaces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire*. They are beginning to work on another book about the organs of France and Northern Spain. All books may be previewed and ordered from <blurb.com>.

V. Tuesday, October 5, 10:30 am, lecture by **Christopher Urbiel**, "The History of the Frieze Memorial Organ at Hill Auditorium, The University of Michigan"

Urbiel's interesting history of this grand organ housed in Hill Auditorium began with the early instrument at Festival Hall at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Farrand & Votey organ, 1876 and 1893. Albert Stanley purchased the instrument for \$15,000 during U of M President Angel's tenure. It was placed in University Hall and named for Professor Frieze, founder of the University Musical Society and Choral Union, in 1894. In 1912 it was moved from University Hall. The organ has been changed, modified, and "rebuilt" through the years: Hutchings (1913), Moore, Palmer Christian, E.M. Skinner (1928), G. Donald Harrison, Noehren/Aeolian-Skinner (1955), Koontz (1980), renovated in 1900s, and rededicated to Frieze in 1994. Urbiel was very detailed and thorough in his presentation on the Hill Organ, a large unique instrument, and the audience showed great appreciation for his informative and delightful lecture and pictures.

VI. Tuesday, October 5, 11:30 am, lecture by **Michael Barone**, "Louis Vierne (1870-1937): The 'Other' Music (songs, piano pieces, chamber and orchestral works)."

Michael Barone presented the audience with a detailed listing (seven pages), containing comments, performers' names, disc identification, and other information of Vierne's "other" mu-



Janice and Bela Feher

sic as described in his lecture title. He discussed Vierne's life and provided insight into the interpretation of his music based on the tragedies and pain Vierne suffered in the losses of his brother and son, coupled with the difficulties Vierne endured in his career, health, and home life. Barone provided more than 20 recorded excerpts, with verbal descriptions and information in an entertaining and interesting manner. Near the end of the seven-page compilation, Barone listed a disc summary of Vierne's non-organ repertoire. The audience appreciated Barone's thorough work, sense of humor, and sensitive presentation.

VII. Tuesday, October 5, 1:30 pm, lecture/demonstration by **Michele Johns**, "Organ 'Plus'"

Dr. Johns began her lecture/demonstration by sharing some down-to-earth tips when deciding to use the organ with other instruments in services and concerts. She discussed conducting from the organ, getting funding, how to pay performers, ways to obtain band and orchestra members, vocalists, planning rehearsals, and rehearsing. Her program featured three pieces written for organ, two trumpets and two trombones, which she conducted from the organ. In celebration of this 50th annual University of Michigan Conference on Organ Music and in honor of the Organ Department, an arrangement of "Angels We Have Heard on High" for congregation, brass quartet, tympani and organ was premiered. This was a welcomed and

enjoyed opportunity for the conferees to participate in this rousing and exciting setting written by Scott M. Hyslop. Dr. Johns received thanks for her expertise.

VIII. Tuesday, October 5, 2:30 pm, lecture by **Steven Ball**, "Music of René Becker"

Dr. Ball gave a brief history of René Becker, son of Edouard, who was an organist at Chartres Cathedral. Born in 1882, Becker and his four siblings trained at Strasbourg's Conservatory of Music. In 1904, Becker moved from France to St. Louis and taught piano, organ, and composition at the Becker Conservatory of Music, which he formed with his brothers. He later taught at St. Louis University and Kendrié Seminary. In 1912, Becker and his wife moved to Belleville, Illinois, where he became organist at St. Peter and Paul Cathedral. It was at this time that son Julius was born, the only living child of René. Julius, a retired banker, presently lives in Birmingham, Michigan.

René Becker became the first organist of the newly built Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Detroit in 1930; an AGO member, he helped to establish the Catholic Organists Guild, and with his son founded the Palestrina Institute. Becker retired in 1952 at the age of 70 from St. Alphonsus Church in Detroit. He left over 160 compositions for organ when he died in 1956. Dr. Ball shared some pictures of René Becker and introduced Becker's son Julius and his family to the conferees. It was a delight to see Julius Becker (keeper of some of Becker's compositions) in person. Steven Ball received a four-year grant to record René Becker's compositions.

Lisa Byers received master's degrees in music education and organ performance from the University of Michigan, and a J.D. from the University of Toledo, Ohio. She is retired from teaching music in the Jefferson Public Schools in Monroe, Michigan, as well as from her position as organist/choir director at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Tecumseh, Michigan. She currently subs as organist in the Monroe area.

These articles represent the ten sessions that I reviewed (each session is designated by roman numerals I-X).

I. Sunday, October 3, 4 pm, A Grand Night for Singing, Hill Auditorium

This inaugural event was a multi-choir extravaganza led by conductor and artistic director Professor **Jerry Blackstone**. He was assisted by other U of M faculty conductors, vocalists and instrumentalists. Six U of M student auditioned groups participated, with approximately 650 students. Composers ranged from Monteverdi to Sondheim, fourteen in all, and many various ensembles, representing a variety of musical genres. Each of the sixteen presentations, including choirs, solos, opera, theater, and musicals, was greatly appreciated by the audience, which rendered a standing ovation.

II. Monday, October 4, 10:30 am, dissertation recital by **Jason Branham**, at Moore Hall, the School of Music, on the Marilyn Mason Organ built by Fisk

Branham's recital featured Buxtehude's *Praeludium in E Major*, BuxWV 141, Bach's *Liebster Jesu, wir sind heir*, BWV 731, and *Trio Sonata No. 5 in C Major*, BWV 529, Clerambault's *Suite du deuxième ton*, and Mendelssohn's *Sonata No. 4 in B-flat Major*, op. 65. Branham performed with an understanding of musical forms, in a sensitive and confident manner. The variety of works presented allowed him to demonstrate well many registration possibilities of this unique instrument. This performance was acknowledged with great applause.

III. Monday, October 4, 4 pm, dissertation recital by **Christopher Reynolds** at Hill Auditorium

Cantabile by Franck, *Passion*, op. 145, No. 4 by Reger, *Prelude on Picardy* by Near, *Meditation on Sacramentum Unitatis* by Sowerby, *Elegy in B-flat* by Thalben-Ball, *Praeludium in g*, BuxWV 149 by Buxtehude, from *Zehn Charakteristische Tonstücke*, op. 86, *Prologus tragicus* by Karg-Elert, and *Concert Variations on The Star-Spangled Banner*, op. 23 by Buck. Reynolds appropriately approached and performed well the pieces that required a reflective and meditative interpretation. His registrations, musical sensitivity, and facility made his selections interesting for the listeners who aptly responded with approval.

IV. Tuesday, October 5, 9:30 am, Organs of France

IX. Wednesday, October 6, 9:30 am, Organs of Bach Country

X. Wednesday, October 6, 10:30 am, Organs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire
Janice and Bela Feher presented three narrated photographic summaries of the European pipe organs visited and played on University of Michigan Historic Organ Tours, 2005-2009.

Organs of France were viewed via a PowerPoint presentation of pipe organs from various regions of France. The Fehers showed examples of French Baroque, Classic, Romantic, and Symphonic organs, and they highlighted sites and instruments associated with important organists and composers. Instruments included organs built by Dom Bedos, François-Henry, Louis-Alexandre, and Robert Clicquot; Jean-Pierre Cavallé (grandfather), Dominique (father) and

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