

A Conversation with Todd Wilson

Jerome Butera

One of America's leading concert organists, Todd Wilson is head of the organ department at the Cleveland Institute of Music. He also teaches at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, and serves as organ curator of the Norton Memorial Organ (E. M. Skinner, 1931) in Severance Hall, Cleveland, Ohio, the home of the Cleveland Orchestra. He has recently been appointed as Artist-in-Residence at Trinity Cathedral (Episcopal) in Cleveland, and as House Organist at Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens in Akron.

For nineteen years he was director of music and organist at the Church of the Covenant (Presbyterian) in Cleveland. From 1989 through 1993 he was also head of the organ department at Baldwin-Wallace College Conservatory of Music in Berea. Prior to these positions, he served as organist and master of the choristers at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City, New York. In New York, he taught on the faculties of Adelphi and Hofstra Universities and was organist of the George Mercer School of Theology.

Todd Wilson has been heard in concert throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan. In 1992 he was a recitalist for Austrian Radio in Vienna, and he has performed for the American Guild of Organists national conventions. He has recorded on the JAV, Delos, Disques du Solstice, and Gothic labels.

Todd Wilson has won numerous competitions, including the French Grand Prix de Chartres, the Fort Wayne Competition, the Strader National Scholarship Competition, and the national competition sponsored by the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles. A sought-after adjudicator, he has been a member of the jury for many of the world's most prestigious competitions such as the Nuremberg Competition (Germany), the Calgary International Organ Festival and Competition, the St. Albans International Organ Festival (England), the Grand Prix de Chartres and the Toulouse Festival Competitions (France), and the American Guild of Organists National Young Artists Competition. Todd Wilson is represented by Karen McFarlane Artists, <www.concertorganists.com>.

I met with Todd at the Church of the Covenant in Cleveland in May 2008 and at Trinity University, Deerfield, Illinois in April 2009.

Jerome Butera: Tell us about your childhood and early training. Where did you grow up? Did you come from a musical family?

Todd Wilson: I grew up in Toledo, Ohio. My father was an amateur musician—he played the French horn in his early years and always loved the horn. During the years I was growing up, he didn't have the time to keep up his playing. Then, much later, ten years before he passed away, he went back to horn playing and enjoyed it greatly. My early musical recollections are LPs of Sousa marches and the Mozart horn concertos played by Dennis Brain. My dad played those all the time. To this day I still adore Sousa marches and all the standard horn repertoire.

JB: Did you start with piano lessons?

TW: Yes—my real start in music was at age nine or so. The church we attended was Trinity Episcopal in downtown Toledo, which had a wonderful Skinner organ and in those days a thriving men and boys choir. When I was in the fourth grade I was recruited for the choir. The choirmaster was a wonderful man named Wesley Hartung. He came to our house, we all sat down in the living room, and he said "I think Todd would be a good boy for the choir." I was just transfixed by the whole thing—I loved the choir, the



Dinner at home with the CIM organ class (from left: Zahari Metchkov, Kevin Kwan, Joanna Li, Graham Schultz, Leslie Smith, Abbie Rockwood), 2006



The Wilson family (back: Todd, Ruth, Jenny; front: Ben, Rachel, Clara), Thanksgiving, 2008

camaraderie, the singing, and the organ. This was quite a grand old Skinner organ that had many beautiful sounds and a thrilling 32-foot Bombard that shook the whole building.

You can imagine this 9-year-old drinking all this in. I went to Wesley Hartung and said "I want to play the organ." I can still remember him looking down at me and saying "You shouldn't even touch the organ until you've had many years of piano." So I said "OK, let's get going with the piano right away." He was a wonderful teacher, a very strict old-school teacher, and you didn't pass one piece until every "I" was dotted and every "T" crossed and you could play it perfectly from memory. Everything had to be just so. He started me off by setting the bar very high, and I've always been hugely grateful for that.

JB: Did you study organ with him also?

TW: No, unfortunately he passed away before I was able to start on the organ. I always kept up the piano, and to this day I still love playing the piano. The literature and the feel of the piano—it's so good for the fingers. I continued piano study with Hugh Murray, who was the organist at Rosary Cathedral in Toledo, and started the organ in high school with a wonderful man also there in Toledo named James Francis, who was the organist at Collingwood Presbyterian. Collingwood Church has a Holtkamp, Sr. organ from about 1955 in the balcony—Rückpositiv on the railing, all exposed, so it was the opposite of the big Skinner organs that I had experienced at that time.

I can still remember walking in for that first lesson with Jim Francis when I was a freshman in high school. I remem-

ber the sound of the organ and the feel of it—I remember being struck by how different and how clear this organ was. That was another little turning point for me as an organist—my first exposure to a "modern organ," as it were.

JB: What kind of teacher was he?

TW: He was a terrific teacher, very encouraging to me. He allowed me to play some things that were a little beyond what I should have been doing through high school, but at the same time that stoked my enthusiasm in a big way. I remember I did a recital my senior year in high school and really worked hard on it—that was the first full organ recital I played. Jim Francis was a wonderful man and fun—a very different personality than Wesley Hartung. He was younger with a vivid sense of humor.

JB: Were you playing at a church in high school?

TW: Yes, all through high school I always had little church jobs around Toledo, and Jim would set me up with substituting here and there. I remember a few jobs where an organist would be out for several months. Jim would get wind of it and recommend me.

JB: That's great experience; you got to see a lot of different organs.

TW: Different organs, different services, different denominations, hymnals and all that. My senior year in high school I had a nice little Methodist church that was my first time being responsible for a choir week by week. I still keep in touch with a few people from that choir. There was a nice two-manual organ and the choir was right in front, and I got to do lots of standard choral literature, Palm



Opening a record (and record player) for Christmas, age 2



Age 4—it looks like churches were in Todd's future from an early age



Todd at 12 with his dad, Rod Wilson

Sunday cantata, all sorts of things like that. For a senior in high school to be in charge of planning, rehearsing, performing, publicizing—it was all a valuable and exciting experience.

JB: What led you to the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music?

TW: Jim Francis had studied there in the early '50s with Wayne Fisher, with whom I went on to study.

JB: What kind of teacher was Wayne Fisher?

TW: He was a remarkable teacher. I was so lucky when I think back on it, to have stumbled on these fabulous teachers—my folks didn't know much about organ teachers so they weren't in a position to choose one who was better than the next, and I didn't know enough—it was all just mostly dumb luck to follow on these people one right after the other. I always felt very fortunate about that. Jim Francis suggested I should go down to Cincinnati for a high school summer music institute. I went for two summers in high school, and Wayne Fisher and I hit it off right from the beginning.



Relaxing at Cape Cod with Ben and Ruth, 2007



Daughter Rachel at St. Luke's recording session, Evanston, IL, 2002

He was a fabulous teacher. He was one of those bachelors whose students were his family, and it was a multi-generational family. He kept in touch with all the students from years before; there'd be parties and it was such fun. I would say that I worked very hard and played very hard in those college years. I practiced like mad and learned a lot of things then that are still at the core of my repertoire—because I learned them so well in those years and memorized them solidly.

JB: As a player, was Wayne Fisher flamboyant or scholarly?

TW: No, not scholarly, he was not of that scholarly generation. He grew up in the '20s and the '30s and studied with Dupré in France in the '30s; his bachelor's degree was in piano, and his master's degree was in organ. So he had wonderful fingers, very live fingers I would say—he was that kind of player. His playing at its best was full of rhythm, full of vitality, full of color. He was a musician who loved the organ and played it very well, but his interest in music and I think his general approach to music was not that of an organist only. He had a huge record collection, and only a small bit of it was organ. He was a great fan of the piano literature and Rachmaninoff in particular. I remember Wayne Fisher telling me about traveling in the early '30s to hear Rachmaninoff play a solo recital at Severance Hall in Cleveland.

JB: Todd, you've been in Cleveland for almost 20 years. Can you tell us a little bit about the positions you had before you came to Cleveland?

TW: I had always been much involved with and enthusiastic about the English cathedral repertoire and Anglican music in general. I really wanted to go to England and spend some time soaking up things day by day in an English cathedral. During my master's degree preparation I thought more seriously about that, and several people helped me out, Gerre Hancock in particular.

I wrote letters to several English cathedral organists asking if I could come over and hang around. Nowadays that sort of thing is pretty common, but in those days there weren't so many opportunities. I remember Jim Litton had done that early in his career and John Fenstermaker had as well. I talked to both of them and they



Recording duets with David Higgs at National City Christian Church, Washington, DC, 1994



Rehearsing the combined choirs of the Cathedral of the Incarnation, Garden City, NY, and All Saints Church, Worcester, MA

suggested a few people to write to.

One of them was Allan Wicks at Canterbury Cathedral. Of the folks I wrote to, the first one who wrote back and said yes was Allan Wicks. So, after finishing my master's degree, I spent about a year in Canterbury, playing some and accompanying some, watching the rehearsals day by day, and listening to every service the choir sang. I helped out in various ways and also had the chance to travel around England and Europe and hear the music in other collegiate chapels and cathedrals.

It was during that fall that I thought I should enter the Chartres Competition. I was feeling burned out from competitions because I had entered a lot of them in college, and I thought I'd do one more and really give it my best. So I worked hard that summer preparing. There were

three rounds, and you had to play everything from memory, and it was a very demanding competition. I was very fortunate to win, and that enabled me to play some concerts around France—it was great fun. But I spent that year mostly in England, based at Canterbury, and it was a wonderful experience.

When I came back to the U.S., I took the job that my former teacher had had at Collingwood Presbyterian Church in Toledo for a year. I was able to do lots of things because I was full of youthful enthusiasm, and we did concerts and many ambitious programs that I never had the resources to do at a church before.

But I really wanted to be in an Anglican situation, so I was very happy a year or so later to get the job at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City, New York. That's a cathedral with quite a long

and interesting history—not a terribly large building, but very beautiful. I loved working with the men and boys choir. The years there were some of the happiest of my life. I still look back with the fondest memories and still keep in touch with some of the kids who were in the choir—those were very special times.

JB: Did you go from Garden City to Cleveland?

TW: Yes, after brief stays back in Cincinnati and in Paoli, Pennsylvania (outside Philadelphia). Our first child had been born in Garden City, but even in those days, of course, Long Island was a very expensive place to live, and we paid what seemed a fortune for a small one-bedroom apartment. We came back to Ohio where housing prices and the cost of living in general were much more modest and still are.

JB: In Cleveland you were able to combine Church of the Covenant and the Cleveland Institute of Music. Was that a joint appointment?

TW: There was the possibility of it. I started teaching at CIM the second year I was here. Karel Paukert who had taught at CIM was ready to give that up, and it was very nice that it worked out.

JB: And you were able to have some of your organ students as organ scholars at the church.

TW: We've had church music interns over the years at several churches here in Cleveland—Covenant being one of them—a terrific succession over 20 years of wonderful students, several of whom have gone on to fine careers of their own.

JB: Was the choir an all-professional group?

TW: No, it's a mixed group, with usually ten paid singers. We often had some students who sing with us, but I tried to have section leaders who were not students to lend continuity over the years. We had some wonderful singers who stayed with us for a long time.

JB: How do you balance the demands of your church work, teaching schedule, recitals, recordings, and family—what's your secret formula?

TW: As you well know, it's never easy and it's a constant juggling act. It's very rare that I feel I've done a perfect job of it.

JB: What do you enjoy doing the most?

TW: I enjoy all of those things. As an "older" father with kids spanning quite a number of years, I love the time with

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each of them. It's a challenge to do everything and feel like you're doing your best all the time. Sometimes when you're doing that many things you feel you're stretching yourself a little thin. Often it's good for us to be stretched; you realize it forces you to be economical with your time and make really good use of a limited number of hours.

I love the teaching. I love the church work; the balance of those two things over the years has been very rewarding. We've had some terrific students who have been such a joy, and the annual cycle of the church year has been very helpful, sort of an anchor in life. I love playing the Sunday service. No matter how scattered you may feel in other ways, having the chance to play great hymns on a wonderful organ with a really good choir—it keeps you grounded. So much inspiring choral literature comes up again and again; you think of all the wonderful Advent anthems, and you think “oh boy, it's about to be Advent again,” and the same for every season. I've enjoyed all of that tremendously.

JB: When did you come under management?

TW: A long time ago—just before Karen McFarlane moved the agency to Cleveland, it must have been about 1982 or so. I was in Garden City. I remember quite vividly Karen called me and asked if we could have lunch, and we met at a little deli in New York. She invited me to be part of the management, which I accepted very gratefully, and have been happily a part of the management ever since.

JB: You've played recitals all throughout the United States, Europe and Japan, including some of the significant orchestra hall installations—Walt Disney Hall, the Meyerson, and here in Severance. Could you single out a few especially memorable recitals on fine organs?

TW: Well, there are so many organs that are really a delight in various ways. I always find that question a little hard to answer, because I usually forget to mention some organ. In recent years I certainly loved playing the Disney Hall organ because I was able to play with the L.A. Philharmonic—and I especially love playing with orchestra. I think for any of us those gigs are always infrequent, especially when you get to play with a top-level orchestra in a beautiful hall on a wonderful organ. It's rare that all those things happen to come together. So that was a real treat. I played a number of years ago for the OHS national convention at Girard College in Philadelphia, and that was a big thrill. Just recently I have to say the new Fritts organ at St. Joseph's Cathedral in Columbus is sensational—certainly one of the great organs I have played in this country or anywhere else.

JB: Tell us about your role as organ curator at Severance Hall and about the restoration.

TW: I wasn't really a part of the restoration. They invited me to take this position as curator when the organ was done, and it's a joy to be connected to such a fine organ in a beautiful hall, and with one of the world's great orchestras.



At the organ of Chartres Cathedral, 1978



With Karen Holtkamp and Mme. Duruflé, Cleveland, 1993

JB: And you've done recordings here too, haven't you?

TW: A couple of recordings. The Musical Arts Association of the Cleveland Orchestra asked me to do one of Christmas music, which I believe is still the only solo recording of that organ, and then a couple of years ago a CD with Michael Sachs, the principal trumpet player of the Cleveland Orchestra. We did a recital at Severance of organ and trumpet things and recorded that program.

JB: I'm looking over your discography, and there's such a range. You've done the complete Duruflé works, a disc of Widor, Jongen, Langlais, Bonnet, Demessieux and Dupré, the complete Thalben-Ball, the complete Frank Bridge, a 2-CD set for Delos (In a Quiet Cathedral), Double Forte with David Higgs, and National Cathedral Live. You've mentioned the trumpet and organ CD here and you've done an organ and cello recording with your daughter Rachel. Tell us about that one.

TW: That was really fun to do, and we did it in your neighborhood at St. Luke's in Evanston. Rachel is my oldest daughter, and she recently graduated from Ohio State University. She studied cello from about age five and is a very gifted cellist, really a beautiful player with a very fine ear. Her ear is certainly much better than mine. I remember when Rachel was nine or ten she'd hear a soloist in a choir, someone I'd think was singing magnificently, and she'd say “you know, that note was a little sharp.” It sounded fine to me, but that's the kind of ear she has.

JB: The list of recordings represents, one would have to say, a very eclectic repertoire. Do you find yourself drawn to any particular period of music or any particular composer?

TW: I think as the years go by my interests in music and organ music are more and more eclectic. I've always enjoyed playing 19th and 20th century music, and I suspect that if I were going to name any area I might say that, but I certainly would not want to be limited only to that repertoire.

JB: You've had experience with Skinner organs and have played many

Ernest Skinner and Aeolian-Skinner organs—do you have particular fondness for that type of organ?

TW: I enjoy them very much, and appreciate all the remarkable craftsmanship and the beautiful sounds, often very extraordinary sounds. But I enjoy playing lots of different organs, and as the years go by I am more and more persuaded of the great value of playing mechanical-action organs on a regular basis. So I wouldn't want to limit myself to playing electric-action organs by Skinner or anyone else. Mechanical action makes you more aware of details that even with your best efforts you're not sensitive to in electric-action instruments. You listen in a different way, your perception is much heightened, I think. I've certainly noticed that in teaching. I can see such a difference in students when they play regularly on a mechanical-action organ.

JB: Do you have any comments on the current organ scene—the renewed interest in Cavallé-Coll, certainly in Skinner and Anglican-style organs, as well as the continued interest in historical building styles?

TW: It all seems to me very healthy. I remember so well growing up that there were very rigid camps: this was OK, and that was not OK, and there was very little sympathy or empathy between those various camps.

There's not much of that anymore, and so many fabulous organs are being built in all these different styles, with a remarkable degree of quality and musicality. It's all very good. It's wonderful as players, as musicians in the broadest sense, to be able to play all these different kinds of organs with an appreciation for what it takes to play a particular type of organ really well. It makes us broader and more complete musicians. The organ profession is much livelier, I think.

JB: Do you have any observations on the general style of teaching and playing from your college days to where you are now?

TW: I think the teaching and the playing reflects that same thing. The standard, the versatility, and the knowledge required to be an adaptable organist nowadays are a great deal broader than they were 30 years ago, and that's all to the good.



Commencement Day at the Cleveland Institute of Music, 1999, with new graduates Tom Trenney, Seung-min Oh, and Kimi Nosé

JB: Has your playing changed in the last 30 years?

TW: I hope so! It's hard to be your own best judge, but one learns so much through teaching. It's listening, it's thinking how does this music work, what is it all about, how can I help this student to zero in on that. Of course, you deal with that in terms of your own playing as well, and I think the instruments are a great prod to better playing, better teaching, better listening with all these different styles. You travel around and play recitals and you're going to play a wide variety of organs nowadays in all the styles that you mentioned.

JB: Now you've also done some silent film accompaniment. Tell us how you got involved in that.

TW: I've always enjoyed improvising, and the first year I was in Cincinnati was Gerre Hancock's last year there before he went to St. Thomas in New York. Another influence for me was Jim Francis, my teacher in Toledo. When I went down to Cincinnati as a high school student, he said “Now you've got to visit Christ Church and hear Gerre Hancock play.”

I was so bowled over, I can still remember that first service I heard. It was the middle of the summer, nothing big going on, but his service playing was such a departure from anything I had heard before. I was smitten by it, and have been a huge admirer of Gerre's ever since. We had him here at Covenant for a weekend a year ago. He worked with the choir and improvised and gave a talk at our AGO annual dinner. It was such a treat for me to have him work with the choir—we did a whole program of his music.

Hearing Gerre play really fired my interest in improvisation, and I've always kind of dabbled in it. I started doing the silent films at Covenant on our summer concert series. Sure enough a lot of people showed up, and one thing led to another. Every so often someone asks me to do a silent film.

JB: What music do you play for that?

TW: My repertoire of films is not very large, so I usually have some themes for each film and I do leitmotifs, a kind of quasi-Wagnerian approach. I have a little theme for each main character, drama themes, and love scene themes; but mostly I try to have some identifiable themes for the main characters and then fill in around that. And then it's fun to put in little snippets of standard organ literature depending on the audience. If I'm playing for an AGO chapter, I try to put in dabs of famous organ pieces, just sneak enough in that they might guess what that is.

JB: You've referred to your cellist daughter Rachel; can you tell us more about your families?

TW: Anne and I had two children, Rachel and Clara; Clara just finished

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With Gerre Hancock at the Church of the Covenant, Cleveland, 2007

her sophomore year at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and is working on a pre-med track. She's a fine pianist and loves to play. I'm married to a wonderful woman, Jenny Eppich, who is an urban planner, and we have two children: Ben who just turned nine, and a little daughter Ruth who is four.

JB: Are they musical children too?

TW: Ben has a very sweet voice, and I think he could be a fine member of a boys choir. He matches pitch well and also plays the trumpet. We did Britten's *St. Nicolas* a while ago at Covenant, and Ben sang the boy Nicolas to great acclaim—that was a very special moment for me as his proud papa, as you can imagine.

JB: You've had an interesting year. Tell me about the time at Indiana University.

TW: It's been an interesting and challenging year! I taught at CIM one day per week, and continued as curator of the organ in Severance Hall, while commuting to Bloomington and teaching there for three or four days each week. I enjoyed teaching at IU, but ultimately we were not able to move to Bloomington on a permanent basis. I sure became a fan of books on tape during those long drives back and forth!

JB: What are some of your goals now in Cleveland?

TW: I look forward to the continued evolution of the CIM organ department. We have a wonderful new president of the school, and it really is the start of a new era there. We've been fortunate to have terrific students, and I enjoy working with them as performers and church musicians. It's an ongoing pleasure to look after the organ at Severance Hall, certainly one of the most beautiful concert halls in the world. I'm thrilled to be part of the music program at Trinity Cathedral! It's a beautiful building with two Flentrop organs, a very lively and diverse congregation, and a superb new musician in Dr. Horst Buchholz. Another fun new project will be to create a concert series and other uses for the newly restored Aeolian organ at Stan Hywet Hall in Akron. Stan Hywet is the amazing Tudor Revival-style home built by F. A. Seiberling, the co-founder of the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company. The house organ is located in a spacious and remarkably beautiful music room.

JB: Do you have any recording projects on the horizon?

TW: I'm making a recording on the new Fritts organ at St. Joseph's Cathedral in Columbus, Ohio. It's a sensational organ, pretty eclectic, really more so than Fritts's earlier work—very successful and very exciting. You can play quite early music, Renaissance and pre-Bach, and everything right down to the present day. It's a very large and complete 3-manual organ in a superb acoustic. We've already recorded the music for organ, cello, and English horn, and I'll record the solo pieces in the next few months.

JB: What's on the recording?

TW: The Reubke *Sonata*, which people have been after me to record for a very long time. It's been one of the cornerstone pieces of my repertoire since college days. So often people ask after recitals if I've ever recorded it, and I never have. When I played that organ in

Columbus I thought it would sound fabulous there. So, the Reubke, some Widor, a piece for organ and cello by Craig Phillips, and Calvin Hampton's *Variations on Amazing Grace* for organ and English horn, which is a piece I've always been very fond of and I don't believe there's any commercial recording available. This will be on the Delos label.

JB: Any humorous experiences you would care to share?

TW: I don't have the best memory for funny events, except when they happen to float to the surface prodded by something else. I was recently reminded of one quite funny story, which is funnier now that I look back on it some years later.

This would have been ten or twelve years ago when we got a new console at Covenant, a movable console that's been such a joy to play, built by the Holtkamp company. The organ is essentially an Aeolian-Skinner. In the mid-90s Holtkamp provided a console and made a few tonal additions as well. We had a dedication service for new console, with fancy music and blessings. Tom Trenney was my student assistant at the time, and we both played lots of stuff.

There is a big hooded trumpet in the rear balcony that's by far the loudest stop on the organ—a wonderful stop, and it plays from the gallery Swell. One of our frequent habits was to put that on with the Unison Off so we could have it available when we wanted it, but it wouldn't play through the normal Swell to Great coupler. Unbeknownst to us, there was a little electronic bug in the console, and all the gallery Swell played through the front Swell coupler—so when we had that big trumpet ready it turned out to be playing all the time. The console is positioned around the corner and we really couldn't hear all that well. So, I think we played nearly every verse of every hymn with that great big Chamade trumpet on without knowing it—which would have been deafening in the congregation and most atypical certainly. The grande dame of



Stilt-walking in Cleveland's annual "Parade the Circle," 2009

the congregation said after the service that the organ now had "that Holtkamp edge." Chick Holtkamp and Karen and everybody laughed greatly afterward.

JB: What are some of your non-musical interests?

TW: I treasure time with my family, as the years seem to pass ever more quickly. We all especially look forward to our annual summer get-away to Wellfleet, Cape Cod. Jenny and I love bike riding and gardening together. I'm an avid reader, particularly of anything historical. Sports-wise, I am a lifelong baseball fan, and also enjoy golf, even though my golf game has gone mostly downhill since I was in high school. Pie baking has become my cooking specialty, and I hope to find time to broaden my cooking repertoire in the years to come.

JB: Todd, thank you for the interview. We wish you continued success and will follow your career with great interest.



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