

In the wind...

The usual fare

My colleague Amory Atkins and I have just returned from a second trip to Coolin, Idaho, where we completed the installation of a Möller Double Artiste in a lakefront residence. Regular readers may recall mention of this project in the February 2014 issue of THE DIAPASON, in which I talked about it being strange to take an instrument so far and do all that work when the client does not play the organ, and there seems to be little prospect for this instrument to be played. We were there in December and had to leave early because of the death of a close friend, and we are glad now to have the project finished.

Northern Idaho is a beautiful and rugged place. Dense forests of Western Red Cedar cover steep slopes that plummet to the edge of the water. Logging trucks lumber along scary narrow roads (if logging trucks can lumber, can lumber trucks log?), smoke from “controlled burns” obscures the roads, and deer and moose pop out of the brush to startle drivers. The rugged people who live there work hard through ferocious winters, and play even harder, roaring through the woods on high-powered recreational vehicles, providing graphic demonstration of the origin of the phrase “breakneck speed.”

Our client's house is twenty-five miles north of the village of Coolin (population between 75 and 100, depending on whom you listen to), and twenty-five miles south of the Canadian border. The towns of Priest River and Newport are around thirty miles south, but for people in Coolin, “going to town” means driving ninety miles or so to Spokane, Washington, a city of about 210,000. You have to go there for medical care, haircuts, and any shopping more complicated than quarts of milk and loaves of bread.

And when you drive across the city limits, you're instantly immersed in the world of the ubiquitous chains and franchises. Taco Bell, Chili's, T.G.I. Friday's, Home Depot, WalMart, and dozens of other familiar signs cover the roadside. It's as if there could be no individualism in such a distinctive provincial capitol. This spectacular region of transition from dramatic mountains to beautiful and fertile plains, striped with rivers roaring full of



Stopping for dinner

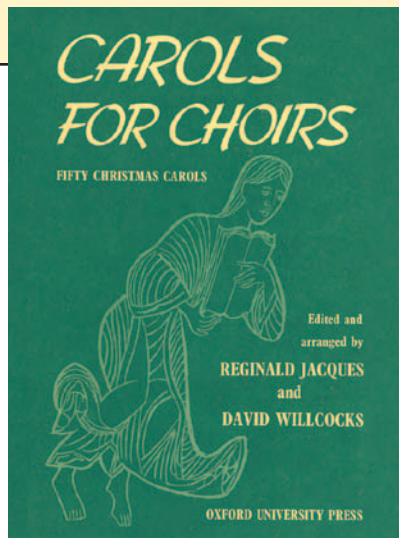
the run-off from huge snow melts, is no different from Waco, Sacramento, Akron, Albany, Cheyenne, Taos, or Manchester. The same books are on the front tables at Barnes & Noble, the same makeup is in Rite Aid, and the same clothes are at The Gap. We're homogenized and pasteurized, and herded into compliance by advertising campaigns.

It seems as though the only chance for individualism is buying California Pizza in Richmond and New York Bagels in Tucson.

The choir room table

I've been servicing pipe organs for just about forty years, since I started working part-time for Jan G. P. Leek in Oberlin, Ohio, when I was a student. Sometimes it seems impossible that it's been that long, and sometimes I think I can feel every ladder rung and every nasty wriggle under a windchest. I moved from Ohio back to my home turf in the Boston area in 1984, and there are about a dozen organs I've been caring for since then, among the many others. There are three organs built in the 1980s for which I've provided the only maintenance.

Going in and out of dozens, maybe hundreds, of churches over such a period of time, I've paid attention to trends in modern church music, and the church in general. One worrying trend is the diminishing office hours. We used to take for granted that there was someone in the church office answering the phone during business hours. Today,



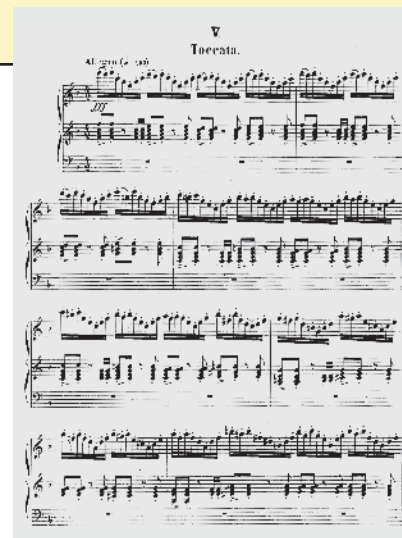
Carols for Choirs

we listen through endless answering-machine greetings that offer us God's and/or Christ's blessings, give directions to the church, publish the hours of worship and Christian education, and finish by giving office hours on Tuesday and Thursday from ten to two, and a voice-mail directory: “If you want . . . Pastor Bill, press two, if you want . . .” If you want to ask that the heat be turned on a couple hours before the tuning, what button do you push?

Another trend is the diminishing number of chairs around the choir-room piano and number of copies of anthems spread about. Yet another is the sameness of those piles of anthems from church to church. Is all this related?

It's been almost fifteen years since I left “the bench” to follow the heavy travel schedule of the Organ Clearing House, but I remember thinking that *E'en So, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come* (Paul Manz) was beautiful and insightful programming for early Advent. Then I see it on the choir room piano in thirty different churches. I guess that means I was right—it's wonderful programming. Likewise, I imagine that if all the copies of the green and orange volumes of *Carols for Choirs* (Oxford University Press) were suddenly to vanish, Christmas would be cancelled in American Christian churches.

The last church I served as music director was located near a popular resort hotel with a famous golf course—the sort of place where professional athletes hang



Widor you-know-what

out. It was common for a couple to book a room there for their wedding reception and ask the sales director if there was a pretty church nearby. So we had a heavy schedule of weddings—nice income for the organist, but lots of time spent planning music with people for whom the church was not necessarily a priority. I tried to offer a variety of music, but somehow it seemed we always went back to *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*, *Hornpipe*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Like *Carols for Choirs*, I suppose we could end the concept of wedding music if we took away Wagner, Purcell/Clarke, Handel, Bach, and Mendelssohn.

Toccatas: a touchy subject

Easter Sunday was a couple days ago, and in the preceding days I spent the usual amount of time running between churches tuning reeds, fixing sticky keys, and lubricating expression shutters. Several of the organists we work for left notes on the console saying, “I need this for the Widor.” Say no more. I know exactly what you're talking about.

In fact, Wendy and I went to church with my brother, sister-in-law, and nephew, and sure enough—“The Widor.” There's no doubt it's a masterpiece, and it has taken its place as an icon among repertory for the pipe organ. And there's no doubt that people love it. The congregation jumped to its feet cheering at the church we attended. But really, is it all we have to offer? How many congregations heard that piece this past Easter Sunday?

I freely admit that I've played the piece dozens (hundreds?) of times, almost never on an appropriate organ in an appropriate acoustic. The moment I could wrap my sixteen-year-old fingers around it, I was shrieking it across the airwaves on any organ at all. A favorite was the ten-stop organ in Yarmouthport, Massachusetts, built in 1872 by William H. Clarke, and rebuilt by the Andover Organ Company in the 1960s. Original “extra” eight-foot stops had been replaced by Mixture, Larigot, and Sesquialtera, and boy did that Widor sing. The lone sixteen-foot Bourdon gave drama to the stately pedal line, and the hair-plaster walls of the country church provided acoustical depth and majesty. Looking back, I suppose it sounded like dumping a barrel of marbles on a metal roof.

Permit me a few thoughts about this ubiquitous piece of music. The basic rhythmic unit is the half-note. I think that implies a certain stateliness. If I can't hear the left hand sixteenth-note repeated chords, you're playing too fast. That's an awkward position for your wrist, playing those chords up so high with your left hand. Give yourself and your carpal tunnel a break!

The first beat of the piece comprises five notes played simultaneously, all above middle C. If you start out of nowhere using full organ, you startle me.

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I don't think you need all the mixtures on just then, but I do think you need plenty of sixteen-foot manual tone. How about principals and reeds at sixteen, eight, and four? Your organ doesn't have sixteen-foot manual tone? Then don't play this piece on that organ. And I believe that the real motion of the piece is steady half-notes, not a machine-gun volley of frantic sixteenths.

But don't just listen to me. Open YouTube and search "Widor Toccata Symphony V." You'll find twenty or thirty different performances, all less than five-and-a-half minutes long, except the one played by Widor himself on "his" organ at St. Sulpice in Paris. I concede that the 1932 recording was made when Widor was 88 years old, but he took exactly seven minutes to play the piece—and those sixteenth-note repeated chords are clear as a bell.

The past becomes the future

Don't get me wrong. I am not advocating that we shouldn't play chestnuts. Obviously people love them. I love them. But my vantage point is different from many organists because my work takes me in and out of dozens of churches each year, and I can't help noticing how much repetition and overlap there is from one church to another. It's not fair to say that *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*, *Toccata and Fugue in D*, and *Toccata from Symphony V* (don't need to name the composers) are the Taco Bells of organ music. Those pieces and many others like them have great artistic content, while any factory can throw ground beef at a crispy tortilla shell. But there is no shortage of thrilling and beautiful music written for the organ, and I think it's a shame that we focus on such a small sampling.

The organ world is brilliantly and appropriately focused on history. For the last sixty or seventy years we have worked hard to understand all that preceded us. We strive to match music with the instruments best suited for it, and we put lots of effort into wondering how music sounded when it was played by its creators in earlier centuries. The Organ Historical Society is a marvelous organization that has added much to our lives and work by venerating the life and work of our predecessors. But as I've written before, I'm interested in the Organ Future Society.

What will pipe organ professionals be doing in twenty years? Fifty years? A hundred years? Will hundreds of us grace the benches of America's churches week after week, bringing meaning and majesty to public worship? Will the members of our churches be rallying around the purchase of new pipe organs? Will people be flocking to hear organs played in recitals outside of worship? Follow and continue the lines on the charts over the last fifty years, and the answer is clear. No. No. No.

There's a wonderful organ built by Ernest M. Skinner in 1928 in a church near us. I've been proud to know that I am the second "organ guy" to care for the organ since it was new. The first service technician was there to help with the installation. But I just heard that the building is for sale. Oh well. There goes another one.

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What do we make of all this? Is the organ doomed because churches are closing? Are we too focused on tradition to be perceived as creative? Is the church at fault, failing to pay living wages to musicians, making it necessary for those musicians to work "day jobs" rather than practicing? Are musicians at fault for

insisting that singing Bach's cantatas in German is meaningful for modern congregations? Carefully and thoughtfully we select exactly the right chorale prelude for the day or season, then publish the title in German—are we right in assuming that the congregants know all about the tradition of chorales and the improvisatory style that begat them?

One big exception is Bach's easy-to-program and difficult to perform chorale prelude on *Valet will ich dir geben*. Dutifully we put the title in the bulletin. And perhaps just this once, someone in the pews will notice that it sounds a lot like *All Glory, Laud, and Honor*. Why? Because it is *All Glory, Laud, and Honor*! Great. We have Palm Sunday covered. I think I'll play it every year. (And I did.)

Real live improvisation is one of the great things about organ music, and much of our beloved literature was conceived as improvisation. If someone had been there to transcribe all of Dupré's improvisations, there would be thousands of opus numbers. Pieces like *Variations on a Noël* and *Passion Symphony* were originally made up on the spot. Think of it.

The American late twentieth-century focus on historic music did little to foster improvisation, but thankfully, we are witnessing a strong revival of that vital art. The wide dynamic and tonal range of the organ makes it the perfect vehicle. It's as if a whole symphony orchestra could make up a monumental piece of music on the spot. Very few of us are modern-day Duprés, but more and more of our young organists are being schooled in the pedagogy, theory, and harmony necessary to support real improvisation.

I don't know if there's any single answer to the conundrum of the dwindling church and the perception that the pipe organ is yesterday's story, but if there is, improvisation must be part of it. If our congregations are thrilled to hear too-fast and too-loud performances of Widor, and remain unaware of how many other brilliant and flashy pieces Widor created, think how much they'll marvel when you whip up a toccata on the tune of the recessional hymn.

You organists who are out there learning, don't forget the ABCs. If you

learn theory and harmony, if you learn about musical architecture, and if you learn to manipulate your instrument like a conjurer, you'll take the pipe organ into the heart of the twenty-first century just as our predecessors took it through the nineteenth.

Don't give up on the classics. Learn from them and create new ones. It's a little like turning down dinner at Applebee's and whipping up a wonderful meal in your own kitchen. ■

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