

# McGill Summer Organ Academy

July 8–18, 2013, Montreal

By Martin Goldray

The McGill Summer Organ Academy took place in Montreal from July 8–18, 2013 during a fearsome heat wave. This biennial two-week event, which was founded in 1997 by Artistic Director John Grew, brings together teachers and students from all over the world and takes advantage of the great variety of first-rate organs in a small area of downtown Montreal near the McGill University campus. On the McGill campus itself is the marvelous 1981 Hellmuth Wolff organ at Redpath Hall, the first “authentic” French Baroque organ in North America and the first organ built by Wolff with suspended action. John Grew, who arrived at McGill in 1976 and whose distinguished career has focused on French organ music, was prescient in bringing the instrument into existence years before the general public’s reawakening of interest in the French Baroque, which began, perhaps, with the production of Lully’s *Atys* by Les Arts Florissants in the late 1980s.

There were seven two-week seminars on seven different instruments: **John Grew** on French Classical repertory, **Hans-Ola Ericsson** on Messiaen, **Olivier Latry** on Vierne, **William Porter** on 17th-century North German repertory, **James David Christie** on Bach, **Sietze de Vries** on improvisation, and **Hank Knox** on harpsichord repertory. The Academy included evening recitals by all the faculty on the instruments they used in teaching their classes, and a Saturday excursion to two churches outside of

Montreal: Saint-Alexandre Presbytere, where **Jonathan Oldengarm** played a short recital on the 1896 mechanical-action Casavant restored by Juget-Sinclair; and the Old Brick Church in West Brome, where **Bill Porter** played a concert of Italian music on the Hiroshi Tsuji organ, the first organ exported from Japan.

Along the way there was a stop at the Juget-Sinclair workshop, where their work on a 58-stop organ for Dallas was explained. There was yet another excursion to see the large, not-yet-completed Casavant at the Maison Symphonique, a new concert hall in downtown Montreal, that will be inaugurated this May by Olivier Latry. The Academy kicked off with a lecture by **Elizabeth Gallat-Morin**, the scholar who in 1988 discovered the *Livre d’Orgue de Montreal*, the largest extant manuscript collection of French Baroque organ music, and whose talk included a fascinating account of the early history of importing French organs to Canada.

I heard excellent reports from fellow students about their classes. The two I attended, Grew’s French Classical and Porter’s North German, offered a wealth of information on scholarship and interpretation, and despite the different national styles naturally shared an attention to Baroque articulation, fingering, pedaling, score-reading and registration. Grew commented at the first class that students have been coming to the Academies with increasing background in French Baroque style. Certainly



McGill academy faculty members Hans-Ola Ericsson, James David Christie, Hank Knox, Olivier Latry, John Grew, William Porter, and Sietze de Vries

recordings and research in the last few decades have given us all great resources, including most recently David Ponsford’s book, *French Organ Music in the Reign of Louis XIV*. Grew was, characteristically, being generous; the resources are there but many of us rely on our teachers and adopt their horizons, which may only sometimes include an awareness of performance practices. But nothing trumps charismatic teaching and demonstration.

Grew often showed us how early fingering can produce elegant and natural articulation. He played the first four bars of the Duo of Grigny’s *Veni Creator* with only the second and third fingers, using the fourth finger for the first time on the

last note of the fourth bar, and noting that the pinky is usually a termination (a “stop sign”). He spent much time on questions of ornamentation, registration and articulation. Couperin said “we write differently from the way we play” and the task of the performer is to know how to read the notation. Students in the class were constantly rewriting their scores: prefixes to trills should be played faster than the sixteenths with which they were notated; *notes inégales* should be applied where appropriate, sometimes sharp, sometimes gentle; thirds might be split and filled in as *coulées*; fast scales (*tirades*) should be played on white keys only and the prevailing



A group of McGill Summer Organ Academy students



Hank Knox, William Porter, Sietze de Vries, Hans-Ola Ericsson, Olivier Latry, James David Christie, and John Grew hang out with a bust of Lynnwood Farnam, who studied at McGill

accidentals cancelled; cadential accidentals, such as raised leading tones, should be applied retroactively to their quick prefix notes; notes with mordents, which are always played quickly, can be rendered more expressive with slow appoggiaturas; the pedal might take over the bass line for a few notes when tenor and bass diverge by more than an octave. None of these things is indicated the score.

Sometimes this extended to substantial correction, as in the famous bar in Grigny's *Recit de tierce en taille* where the melody is notated a step too high, resulting in some pungent but erroneous dissonances (Grew's recording is one of only two, along with Kimberly Marshall's, which corrects the mistake). This correction comes with a conundrum, however: J. G. Walther and J. S. Bach both copied Grigny's *Livre d'Orgue*, and although Walther corrected the mistake, Bach didn't. Was the composer of the most powerful but logical dissonances yet written somehow tickled by this unintentional one?

One other element of this class was the interchangeable pedalboards: a fairly conventional German-style pedalboard and a French pedalboard with smaller keys, which thankfully was not as difficult to play as it looked. At the end of the two-week session Grew exhorted everyone to read Couperin's *L'art de toucher le clavecin*—indeed, to keep it on our bedside table.

The natural expressivity of early fingering was one element in Porter's teaching as well. He showed how the second variation in Böhm's *Freu Dich Sehr, O Meine Seele*, which repeats a short-short-long figure in various positions over the interval of a major ninth, can be played with the middle fingers only, not turning the wrist and reaching for a new position "like a spider," but by keeping the center of gravity in the middle of the hand and "dancing on the keys," thereby revealing the music to be a "narrative of figures." Porter's class continually shunted back and forth between scholarship and interpretation, and he showed how they fertilize each other, starting with: What are we looking at in a printed edition—ostensibly an

Urtext—where only flawed manuscripts exist? Porter made sure we knew, for example, that Klaus Beckmann's Buxtehude edition utilizes techniques of criticism he learned as a theologian and that he constructed hypothetical originals that exist in no source, presenting what he thought Buxtehude might have meant to say.

Porter showed how articulation was related to bowing techniques, which in turn were related to metrical stress patterns, and in turn again to the idea of inflecting music like speech. The interaction of strong and weak beats was shown to have many ramifications, including pedaling: for weak-to-strong beats use the same foot, for strong-to-weak beats the other foot. We examined what a plenum meant in the 17th century, and how the plenum depended on the quality of the mixtures and the degree to which they were suited to polyphony. He pointed out that we know Praetorius played free pieces on two manuals, and that Johann Kortkamp, a student of Weckmann, said that Weckmann pulled stops for his teacher Praetorius, all implying somewhat more varied registrations than we often now hear.

To prepare for the class on Scheide- mann's *Magnifac Primi Toni* we sang

that chant as it was notated by Franz Eler in his *Cantica Sacra* of 1588—slowly! Porter pointed out that slowly sung chant better balances the organ versets and leads to *alternatim* settings that are not as dominated by the organ as we currently often hear. Porter exhorted us not to worry so much about the spaces between notes, but

more about achieving the right character, a useful reminder to be less fussy. Altogether this class was a goldmine of information and insight, and the scores I used now have more of my class notes on them than musical notes. And what a pleasure it was to hear and play the beautiful 1961 Beckerath at the Church of the Immaculate Conception.

The next McGill Summer Organ Academy will be held in 2015 and will be co-directed by John Grew and Hans-Ola Ericsson. Ericsson is now in his third year on the McGill faculty and before relocating to Montreal was in Pitea, Sweden, where he inaugurated the Gerald Woehl Studio Acusticum organ (see Kimberly Marshall's article in the February 2013 issue of *The American Organist*). Until then a great way to keep developing early music score-reading skills via charismatic teaching would be to view the two videos by fortepianist Malcolm Bilson, *Knowing the Score* and *Performing the Score*. ■

Martin Goldray has served on the faculty of Sarah Lawrence College since 1998; he is the Miller Faculty Scholar in Music and was the 2010 recipient of the Lipkin Family Prize for Inspirational Teaching. He earned a B.A. from Cornell University, an M.M. from the University of Illinois, a D.M.A. from Yale University, and was a Fulbright scholar in Paris. He has performed with many new music ensembles, including the New Music Consort and Speculum Musicae, worked with Milton Babbitt and Elliott Carter whose music he has recorded, and was a member of the Philip Glass Ensemble from 1983-1998, conducting the premieres of several Glass operas and appearing on many recordings of Glass's music.

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