

Heinz Wunderlich

A Remembrance One Year Later

By Jay Zoller

Heinz Wunderlich died March 10, 2012 (see “Nunc Dimittis,” THE DIAPASON, May 2012, pp. 10, 12). He served for many years as music director at St. Jacobi in Hamburg and as professor of organ and improvisation at the Hamburg College of Music. He concertized throughout the world, including several tours with his choir, the Kantorei St. Jacobi. In the United States alone he made twenty-six tours. Students came from all over the world to study with him—many to study the works of Max Reger, as Wunderlich was one of the few musicians in a direct line of succession with Reger.

Wunderlich left an extensive body of organ works, as well as choral music. He remained active as a recitalist until his 91st year, when he decided not to play any more. See “Heinz Wunderlich at 90,” by Jay Zoller, THE DIAPASON, April 2009, pp. 19–21; “80th Birthday Tribute—Heinz Wunderlich,” by David Burton Brown, THE DIAPASON, April 1999, p. 18; “Heinz Wunderlich at 74,” by David Burton Brown, THE DIAPASON, April 1994, p. 6; and “The Published Organ Works of Heinz Wunderlich,” by

David Burton Brown, THE DIAPASON, April 1994, pp. 12–13.

Beginnings

As a sophomore in high school, after seven years of piano lessons, I began my study of the organ with the organist at my family’s church. My teacher, David Whitehouse, was also a student—at the University of New Hampshire—and he did his best to impart to me the correct methods of playing the organ. In addition, he stimulated my interest by taking me, even before I had my own driver’s license, to hear concerts on the large organ at the Methuen Memorial Music Hall, which was about an hour’s drive away from my home in Durham.

My recollection of many of those recitals is hazy at best, often sitting in the front row so I would have a ringside seat—watching was as important to me as listening. However, one Friday night stayed in my memory like no other: October 20, 1961 at 8:30 pm—the program, which I saved, reads: Heinz Wunderlich, Organist, Jakobikirche, Hamburg. From my front-row seat on the right-hand side, I was transfixed as his program

proceeded: Buxtehude, *Prelude and Fugue in E Minor*; Bach, *Trio Sonata III in D Minor* and *Toccata and Fugue in F Major*. After intermission he played his own *Sonata on a Single Theme*, a piece which, little could I imagine at the time, I would know intimately later in my life. Wunderlich ended his program with the Reger *Fantasie and Fugue on B-A-C-H*. For whatever reasons, the image I had of him there would remain with me.

1989

My story now jumps ahead nearly thirty years. I was working for the Andover Organ Company in Methuen, Massachusetts, designing pipe organs. We had just finished a small two-manual organ of my design for St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in North Andover, Massachusetts. Unknown to me, Heinz Wunderlich had been engaged for the dedication recital through his friendship with Arthur Howells. In addition to the recital, a masterclass was to be held the day before. I was one of five or six people who offered to play. I did not realize this was the man that I had heard play so many years before. Nor did I think about the fact that he was a recognized authority on the music of Bach! So, imagine my embarrassment when I played the *C Major Prelude and Fugue* of Johann Ludwig Krebs rather than Bach.

Despite being unfamiliar with the music, Professor Wunderlich was most gracious and offered helpful advice on many aspects of the piece. I still have his markings in my score. I was fortunate to see a program of the next day’s recital and noticed that it included one of his own pieces, the *Sonata on a Single Theme*. I asked him about his music and if it was published. Alas, nothing was published at that time, but he was very kind and brought me a cassette recording of some of his organ works. When I listened to it later, I was hooked! It became one of the most listened-to recordings in my collection. The music had a clear crispness to it; it was a fresh sound—a controlled wildness made it come alive for me. I couldn’t stop listening. It sounded the way contemporary organ writing ought to be.

I waited, hoping that it was being published, and finally wrote to Professor Wunderlich roughly two years later. I identified myself as the person who had played Krebs for him that day. Yes, he remembered me. And, yes some of the organ works were now published. I immediately ordered every one. The first piece that I learned was the very one I had heard him play, the *Sonata on a Single Theme*. I quickly discovered how difficult the music actually was.

I should say that my correspondence with Professor Wunderlich began late in his career. He had retired in 1982 and was devoting his time to concertizing and preparing his many compositions for publication. There was no reason that he needed to be kind to an unknown American who had somehow converted to his music so late in life. But, sometimes things work out differently than you



Heinz Wunderlich at 85th birthday celebration after his Bach concert

expect. I wrote to him and told him what I was working on, asking questions about the music and the way he wanted it performed. Occasionally, I even discovered a wrong note in the score. I would send him my recital programs when I had included a piece of his and he always answered; and at the same time he answered my questions and thanked me for my interpretation of his music.

Over the years I played quite a few of his pieces, even playing one lunchtime all-Wunderlich concert. As 1999 grew near, Wunderlich asked me if I would write an article about him in honor of his approaching 80th birthday. I did so and my article “Heinz Wunderlich at 80” appeared in the April 1999 issue of *The American Organist*. I had also made the decision to travel to Hamburg, Germany for his birthday celebrations and so bought my ticket expecting to have a relaxed trip.

Birthday celebrations

I had played the *Fuga Variata* in a recital two months before my scheduled trip, but had no inkling of the phone call I was about to receive, literally the day before I was to leave. Heinz Wunderlich called from Germany to say that the organist who was scheduled to play the *Fuga Variata* was unable to do so, had backed out, and would I be willing to play? I was soon to discover that Wunderlich’s birthday celebrations consisted of many concerts over the period of nearly two weeks. In 1999 Heinz Wunderlich played an all-Bach recital on the Arp Schnitger organ at St. Jacobi; five days later he played another all-Bach program of harpsichord and violin with his violinist wife, Nelly, at the Museum of Art. One day later was an all-Wunderlich program played by former students at the Domkirche St. Marien on the four-manual Beckerath organ. And finally, on May 8 Heinz Wunderlich played an ambitious program of Reger and Wunderlich at St. Michaelis.

Without promising anything, and with my heart in my throat, I said I would bring my music and organ shoes and we would see what happened. When I arrived, I practiced for a couple of days on Wunderlich’s own three-manual organ, which was in the lower level of his home. I was still feeling insecure about the music when Wunderlich came down and wanted to hear the piece. In my nervousness, I must have played very badly, but he was always kind and offered suggestions. Finally, he took me to St. Mariens for a lesson on the large Beckerath organ. The organ was located in a rear gallery, which must have been 30 feet off the main floor. He would help me set up registrations and then take the long walk down to the main floor to listen. Returning to the gallery, we made changes, and moved to the

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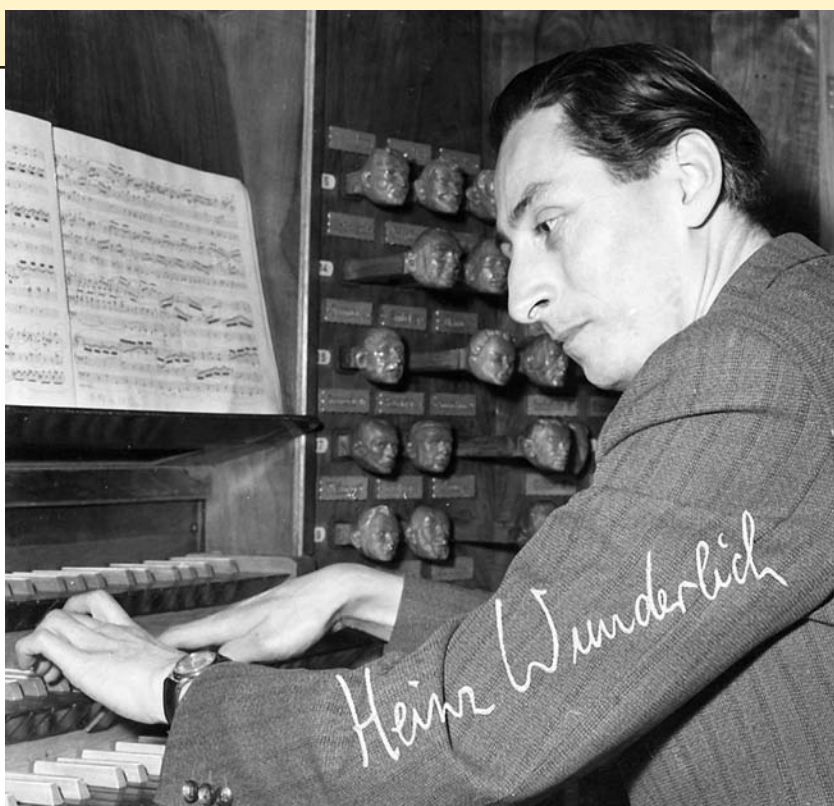
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In the early 1960s at the Schnitger console



Participants at the all-Wunderlich recital, May 8, 2004, St. Petri, Hamburg: Jay Zoller, Izumi Ikeda, Dörte Maria Packeiser, Heinz Wunderlich, Andreas Rondthaler, Akemi Tonomura, and Thomas Dahl

next section, always checking on what it sounded like downstairs. I learned a lot about his ideas of registration and playing in an acoustically live building. Heinz Wunderlich was very precise. He wanted all of my old markings erased. Changes and balances were carefully worked out as well as precise fingerings, paying attention to every marking in the score.

I was thankful for the time and attention he was willing to give me, all this at the age of 80 and having several concerts of his own to prepare. At the same time it was terrifying to be performing with the composer himself sitting in the audience. For me it was the experience of a lifetime.

Later that year, I arranged an American tour for him. It included five concerts at churches where former students were playing and a concert at the Methuen Memorial Music Hall where I had heard him play 38 years before. Among other things, he played his newly composed *Sonata über Jona*; his wife Nelly joined him for his *Variationa Tuelvetonata for Violin and Organ*, also newly composed, and some Rheinberger sonatas for violin and organ, which brought tears to my eyes. For his 85th birthday in 2004 I wrote another article about him, this time published in *Choir & Organ* magazine, and once again traveled to Hamburg to play his newly written *Emotion and Fugue* in the all-Wunderlich program. This program was again on a large four-manual Beckerath, but this time in St. Petri, where former student Thomas Dahl is the director of music. Again, Heinz Wunderlich was of great assistance with interpretation and registration.

In 2009, for Wunderlich's 90th birthday, I again played the *Fuga Variata* on the St. Petri organ along with other former students. Although Professor Wunderlich was noticeably frail, he still played an

ambitious recital on the Kemper Organ at St. Jacobi. Unfortunately, it was the last time I would hear him play.

Epilogue

For me, knowing Heinz Wunderlich, one of the 20th century's greatest virtuosos, became a transforming event in my life. To know the man, the gentle teacher, the consummate musician, the loving husband and father, gracious host, and the appreciation he had for my performances and articles, was reward in itself. But the real transformative aspect was the music. My interest in contemporary music expanded tenfold. His organ works alone have occupied me for over 20 years and constantly present me with ever-new challenges. In addition, I have been able to listen to performances of works that I will never play—works for organ and orchestra, for chorus, and his masterful improvisations. His interest has also given me the chance to travel to Germany and perform on organs that I had only dreamed of, as well as make many new friends. Thank you, dear man. I miss you. ■

Jay Zoller is organist at South Parish Congregational Church in Augusta, Maine, where he plays the church's historic 1866 E. & G. G. Hook organ. He holds degrees from the University of New Hampshire and the School of Theology at Boston University.

A retired designer for the Andover Organ Company, he currently designs for the Organ Clearing House and for David E. Wallace & Co. Pipe Organ Builders of Gorham, Maine. Zoller resides in Newcastle, Maine, with his wife Rachel.

In addition to writing several articles about Heinz Wunderlich for The American Organist, Choir & Organ, and THE DIAPASON, he has played in all-Wunderlich recitals in Hamburg, Germany in 1999, 2004, and 2009. His article, "An Organ Adventure in South Korea," appeared in the December 2011 issue of THE DIAPASON.



At the Kemper console at St. Jacobi in 1970



Albert Schweitzer (around 90) and Heinz Wunderlich at St. Jacobi



Wunderlich gravestone

Trauer Gottesdienst

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Paul Arthur
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