

Ascension Organ Academy

June 20–25, 2011

Will Thomas



Front row: Lyudmila Sryochkina, Jon Gillock, Will Thomas; middle row: Benjamin Kolodziej, Eva Sze, Brian Glikes, Karen Schneider-Kirner, Scott Raab; back row: Peter Lynn, Dennis Keene, Arthur Lawrence

June 20–25, 2011 was a week full of high energy and excitement. Selected professional organists from around the U.S. gathered for the first annual Ascension Organ Academy at Manhattan’s Episcopal Church of the Ascension, Fifth Avenue at Tenth Street, in the heart of Greenwich Village. The academy was centered around the church’s new Manton Memorial Organ, built by Pascal Quoirin of St. Didier, France, which is the first French-built organ to be installed in New York City. Containing approximately 6,183 pipes, 95 stops, 111 ranks, and two consoles, the instrument distinguishes itself as the largest French organ built anywhere in almost 50 years. On this eclectic instrument with widely contrasting color palettes, one can play a wide variety of organ works, using the softest, gentlest flutes to the strongest, most powerful reeds. (See THE DIAPASON, November 2011, cover feature.)

The academy’s theme was French repertoire, ranging from the early Baroque through Messiaen, although other works could be requested. Led by Jon Gillock and Dennis Keene, participants in the academy had the opportunity to receive outstanding coaching on two works they had prepared—one for Gillock’s class, and the other for Keene’s. The Baroque pieces were taught at the 3-manual tracker-action console, the Romantic and modern compositions on the 4-manual, electric-action, movable console.

Each afternoon and evening was filled with high inspiration as Dr. Gillock led a class from 2:30 to 5:30 and Dr. Keene led another session from 7:00 to 10:00. While trying to teach seven different students playing fourteen different pieces in a daily six-hour time frame for five days may seem like a daunting task for any instructor, both Dr. Keene and Dr. Gillock utilized every moment to the fullest, providing immeasurable amounts of knowledge and creative perspective.

Though sessions at the console were certainly down to business, the dinner

break between classes, usually spent together, allowed students and faculty the opportunity to relax and converse. Dr. Gillock autographed copies of his new book, *Performing Messiaen’s Organ Music: 66 Masterclasses*. With the final session ending at 10:00 p.m. every evening, most participants went on very little sleep, as they rose early for morning practice times. Nonetheless, all players greeted each new day with fire and drive, growing significantly in the development of the advanced repertoire they performed. Ascension and the faculty enthusiastically plan to continue offering this opportunity in a second organ academy in June 2012. Whatever the topic, participants will undoubtedly walk away with a fresh and inspiring mindset that will strengthen their playing.

Participants playing for the academy included Brian Glikes—Messiaen’s *Dieu parmi nous* and Mendelssohn’s *Sonata III*; Benjamin Kolodziej—Franck’s *Choral in E Major* and *Prelude, Fugue, and Variation*; Arthur Lawrence—Franck’s *Choral in A Minor* and movements from Couperin’s *Mass for the Convents*; Karen Schneider-Kirner playing Marchand’s *Grand Dialogue in C* and Franck’s *Final*; Lyudmila Sryochkina—Durufle’s *Prelude from the Suite, op. 5*, and Franck’s *Pièce Héroïque*; Eva Sze—Durufle’s *Prelude and Fugue on the Name of Alain*, and Messiaen’s *Joie et Clarté des Corps Glorieux* and *Le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*; and Will Thomas playing movements from Couperin’s *Mass for the Convents* and Alain’s *Litanies*. ■

Will Thomas currently serves as the full-time director of music and organist for Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church, a 2,500-member parish in Alcoa, Tennessee, of the Knoxville Diocese. Thomas holds the Bachelor of Music degree in sacred music from Carson-Newman College and the Master of Music degree in organ performance from the University of Tennessee Knoxville. His organ teachers have included Michael Velting, Marilyn Keiser, J. Ryan Garber, and John Brock.

Concert hall instrument:
C.B. Fisk, 3 manuals, 35 stops

Practice instruments:
Fisk, Holtkamp, Walker

Local community instruments:
E.M. Skinner, Fisk-Schreiner, Flentrop, Tannenberg, Grooms & Payne, Austin

Timothy Olsen, kenan professor of organ

olsent@uncsa.edu

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