From the Dickinson Collection: Speech to the St. Louis Chapter of the American Guild of Organists by Clarence Dickinson


Introduction

I am delighted to be here with you tonight and to share in the celebration of the Golden Anniversary of the founding of your chapter. Thank you, Howard Kelsey, for all these undeserved kind words. It hardly seems necessary to say another word here and let you imagine I am all things I should like to be. I am not much of a speechmaker. Whenever I find myself in the position of making a speech, I am reminded of Thomas Jefferson: “I am,” he said, “as an Englishman, a Frenchman, and an American, I mean always to think of the bright things I might have said when I am in the case and when the public at large are not here.”

My first acquaintance with Howard Kelsey was his coming to our school at Union Seminary. Many of our students were arriving in ancient, rather dilapidated Fords, which they had purchased for anywhere from ten to twenty-five dollars and then sold upon arrival. One of our students, now Dr. Albright, met him coming down the hall and said, “I suppose you came in your Rolls-Royce.” Howard answered very simply, “Yes.” He had driven the family car and sold it for enough money to carry him through the entire two years’ course.

I have been rather intimately acquainted with St. Louis—the town, not the state—for a long time. I first came here to play at your Exposition in 1904. That was the year Mrs. Lestrade arrived, and we had been in Europe (Spain and elsewhere) for a long trip, the last stop being England, in time a few days before we sailed. Lady Patterson gave a luncheon party in her home for the farmers and milkmen attending the Exposition. As you know, Mr. Quarles was organist at Westminster Choir College on October 1, 1918.

I started for the fourth time, Dr. Carver Williams, who was the 2nd bass in the last chorus, threw his part down on the floor and cried out, “I’ll be darned if I will count 64 bars again!” As you know, Mr. Quarles was organist at Curnell University for a number of years before he moved to St. Louis. Andrew Carnegie had given a splendid new four-manual organ to the university’s large auditorium. Quarles got the idea of having four organists play the dedication recital. So, on this occasion, Quarles opened the recital. Dr. Tertius Noble followed, and William Churchill Hammond, the Hoboly organist, came third. Hammond finished his section with a very soft, quiet number; during which Mr. Carnegie went sound to sleep. I came next, opening with full organ, at which Mr. Carnegie woke with a leap in the air. So I, for once, had the honor of awakening Mr. Carnegie from his slumber.

I would like to make a few remarks as suggestions of how we, as musicians, may go forward to the new day. In the first place, build up good fellowship among all organists of the city, young and old, long-time residents and newcomers. Too often there are two or more separate sets of members, the older and the younger, with separate, perhaps even conflicting, points of view. See if you can build a warm, personal relationship with each other. Let the joy of association help promote a more delicate feeling of “togetherness” in what each of you, as individuals, and all of you, as a group, are trying to accomplish. As you cultivate generosity, interest and appreciation of others’ efforts and talents, feelings of rivalry, or competition, of professional jealousy, of any semblance of strife among yourselves, will be eliminated. Give enthusiasm to a spirit of cooperation, of encouraging one another, of striving, not separately, but together, toward achieving accomplishment of worthy goals. In the work of the Guild, remember we all either hang together or we hang separately.” This may necessitate a bit of “giving in” on the part of...
of everyone concerned, but the results will be well worth the effort and the sacrifice. Your Guild, planning and working together as a unit, will have a positive influence in your city. I am not suggesting here that there is any noticeable lack of this fine spirit among your members, rather, this is the very first bit of advice that I would offer any choir, for I believe it to be a truly basic principle for our progress, and I believe that improvement can always be made in any of our chapters in this regard. It is very important that nothing get in our way of being made to feel welcome and wanted.

To my mind, one of the chief good words of the Guild is the bringing of all together, and not only within the confines of one city, but with other city. It is stimulating and enlightening, and furnishes us much of that in our country which has been one of the chief benefits of our European sojourn. In this connection I have a pleasant thought of such a visit, which I think would, as the Germans say, be “sympathetic” to this occasion. It is of a visit of a couple of hours duration with Georg Schumann, the Berlin composer whose organ “Pas- sacaglia” and “At Evening” we saw in this country, and whose motets are sung by all the best organists. What a charming and amiable fellow he must be, how delightful. There was first, with much ring of organ, preparing to surprise me, to show me, which he had just found at the Singakademie, tucked away for centurians and sight. But I was left without leaving and had reached the door, he exclaimed, “Ach, Herrmanson! I almost forgot! Why, you have only been a vague acquaintance, a com- pany, but when I came into personal touch, he was——I cannot convey to you how delightful. There was first, with much ring of organ, preparing to surprise me, to show me, which he had just found at the Singakademie, tucked away for centurians and sight. But I was left without leaving and had reached the door, he exclaimed, “Ach, Herrmanson! I almost forgot! Why, you have only been a vague acquaintance, a company, but when I came into personal touch, he was——I cannot convey to you how delightful.

He had been quite a friend of the choir. He used to say, “Dickinson impresses, after a long silence, he disappeared for a few minutes, then returned, and said, “Now, whenever you see this in rehearsal, immediately, ‘That was a beautiful anthem this morning. I hope you will repeat it soon.” Notwithstanding this, I was not always sure, and when he again came to rehearse, he said, “That was a queer thing you gave yesterday morning. I hope you will repeat it soon.”

The life which we live is dependent on the ideals being shaped in the minds of our young people. Therefore, try to keep the music sung in Sunday school up to a high standard, as well as that used in the main church service. But, be patient. Do this gradually. After we sang Palestrina’s “Requiem,” with its music of a quartet in the Fifth Avenue in a good many years ago, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees came up to me and said, “You have a great deal of music, but I must say it all. I have heard a more vivid reversal of opinion, so, do not get discouraged. But make sure if it is old and modern, or very modern, that it is really inspired. And while I am on the subject of high standards in church music, let me re- mind you that this may be accomplished through a varied musical program and that it is not necessary to limit ourselves merely to “Bach, or Pre-Bach,” as is sug- gested by one teacher I know. A question I should like to ask is “Why do some of us limit organ specifications to the point that we can play only linear music?” I ad- mit we are in a position to indulge in a little of that, and no reason for me to deny myself, and others, the enjoyment of the color in his paintings, as well.

I feel like giving a suggestion to the young conductors before I leave you. When you rehearse the New York chapter when the trea- surer had just announced a change of church, and that the choir was being put on the side. I have known of churches which meant everything, in the unique opportu- nity of working with experienced composers and conductors, I say organists and singers, for, but city music is giving to the world the greatest body of church music; and this, I believe, will be, in future more and more stimulated by the Guild.

Admittedly, the purposes of the Guild are manifold, and the accomplishing of all of them is no easy task, but let us not forget the chief aim of our present efforts is the raising of church music standards. And, in this, I would offer a word of warning if you are to build wisely and effec- tively for the future: remember that progress, if it be real and lasting progress, is a slow process. It must be gradual, step by tedious step. It evolves. Rome was not built in a day, you know, but it was prac- tically destroyed in a few hours under the leadership of a stupendous, gigantic “fiddling” ruler. In attempting to raise standards, therefore, work positively and energetically, in a declaration of understanding, and cautiously.

The future is to the choirmaster and organist what the past is to the historian. I have often heard the words of the same man, a part of it. Personal differences are forgotten as hearts and voices unite in singing a hymn or listens to an anthem. Music can be a unifying service by the fact that it is not necessary to limit ourselves merely to “Bach, or Pre-Bach,” as is sug- gested by one teacher I know. A question I should like to ask is “Why do some of us limit organ specifications to the point that we can play only linear music?” I ad- mit we are in a position to indulge in a little of that, and no reason for me to deny myself, and others, the enjoyment of the color in his paintings, as well.

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This has been one of my goals to en- courage all ministers to acquire knowledge of, as well as an appreciation of, music. I do not see how one can hope for a service of worship if the minister writes the services, someone else selects the music, and the music director is in charge of three or four different themes, and the leader of music puts on some anthems he likes, or, the choirmaster selects a solo by a foreign composer. To me, the best organists and choirmasters, working with the minister, to offer music so worthy, so noble, so universal in its appeal, that it will not only lift the congregation into a deeper understanding of the music, but will sub- stantially re-establish the concept that music is a part of the service of worship. Let us consider the power of music to lift the individual person out of his self-centered existence. When he joins in singing a hymn or listens to an anthem, he ceases to be wholly indi- vidual, the congregation becomes one, and he is a part of it. Personal differences of creed, questionings, doubt, disbelief are forgotten as hearts and voices unite in gratitude, joy, and aspiration. It is the privilege and the responsibility of the organist and choirmaster, working with the minister, to offer music so worthy, so noble, so universal in its appeal, that it will not only lift the congregation into a deeper understanding of the music, but will sub- stantially re-establish the concept that music is a part of the service of worship. Let us consider the power of music to lift the individual person out of his self-centered existence.