

A conversation with Ken Cowan

Joyce Johnson Robinson

Since the beginning of this century, the recital calendar of *THE DIAPASON* has included numerous listings for Ken Cowan. A native of Thorold, Ontario, Canada, Cowan was first taught organ by his father, David Cowan; he subsequently studied with James Bigham, with John Weaver at the Curtis Institute of Music, and with Thomas Murray at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. He has held organist positions at St. Bartholomew's, St. James Episcopal Church, and the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in New York City, and St. Clement's Church in Philadelphia; during his college years he was on the roster of associate organists for the Wanamaker Grand Court organ in Philadelphia. He presently serves as Assistant Professor of Organ at Westminster Choir College of Rider University in Princeton, New Jersey; Rider University has honored him with the 2008 Distinguished Teaching Award.

A featured artist at the 2004 AGO convention in Los Angeles and during the 2008 AGO convention in Minneapolis (as one of several players during a concert recorded for *Pipedreams*), Ken Cowan has also performed at many AGO regional conventions, as well as at conventions of the Organ Historical Society and the Royal Canadian College of Organists. His discography comprises numerous recordings (for the JAV label) on Skinner instruments, including *The Art of the Symphonic Organist*, recorded on the 1921 Skinner organ at the Parish Church of St. Luke, Evanston, Illinois. (Note: John Speller's review of this recording in *THE DIAPASON* praised Cowan's choice of repertoire, demonstration of the organ's colors, and skill with buildup and decrescendo, calling the disc "one of the finest I have heard in some time." See *THE DIAPASON*, August 2004, p. 14.) With Justin Bischoff, he recorded Aaron David Miller's *Double Concerto* for organ with the Zurich Symphony Orchestra, on the Kleuker organ in the Tonhalle in Zurich (Ethereal Recordings). Cowan's repertoire is broad, but favors nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers, from Bossi to Liszt, Wagner to Widor, Dupré to Roger-Ducasse, and much in between. He is associated with transcriptions, yet these do not dominate either his recital programs or his recordings. As a performer he seems relaxed, taking any difficulties in stride. Ken Cowan is represented by Karen McFarlane Artists.

JR: Let's talk about your DNA! Your father is an organist, and other grandparents were too, correct?

KC: Yes, two grandmothers and great-grandmother Cowan. Thurza Cowan was an organist, and I think she must have been pretty good too, because the repertoire that is still sitting around my house in Canada shows she played some really difficult things.

JR: Were those the days when you had to have a pumper?

KC: A little bit after that, I think it was. She played a Woodstock organ. I saw a picture of the old console, and it looks like a theatre organ console. But it would have been electrified, I think.

JR: And your grandmothers?

KC: My father's mother and my mother's mother both played, each as a local parish organist.

JR: Did your grandmother teach your father?

KC: No, actually; that's not our family's habit. My father studied with a local organist named George Hannahson, actually a very good player; the brothers Hannahson did a lot of the church music in the area. Except for the things that my dad showed me to get me started at the



As a student at the Curtis Institute, 1996

organ, I think everybody in my family who learned an instrument always studied with somebody outside the family.

JR: Were your first lessons with your father?

KC: He got me started with the instrument. He didn't teach me piano, so we always had it in mind that I would eventually find an organ teacher outside of our house.

JR: Did you insist on organ lessons, or did he suggest you should take them?

KC: No, it was me. He insisted that I study the maximum amount of piano possible before I ever touched the organ. Ever since I was three years old, I would hang around the organ bench, and I knew what all the stops were. I knew the difference between a Liebhlich flute and a Rohr flute when I was little—before I could play anything. And I was the token key-holder in the family—if the reeds needed to be tuned, I would be carted down to the church. The arrangement was that if I was well-behaved in church, he would play whatever my favorite organ tunes were before we would go home. I still remember that.

JR: So what were your favorite organ pieces when you were a wee lad?

KC: They were a little different from what they are now! (laughter) Probably mostly little songs that I knew how to sing at the time. Or wedding pieces and old campy hymns, I used to like those too—and I knew all the words. Somewhere I have a tape of myself singing along, I think—locked away! Anyway, I was fortunate that there was a really nice Casavant organ from the '20s in the church where my father played, a three-manual organ, so it was great just to get to know registration on a nice instrument first. And we always had a lousy piano—which is still there, actually! So to have this really nice organ—I couldn't resist but to learn how to play it—or try.

JR: How old were you when you started playing the organ?

KC: I knew how to play a hymn on the organ, but I really started to learn pieces around eighth grade, so twelve or thirteen. I knew how to play the piano pretty well by then. In fact, I got a lot more



Working on piano technique, ca. 1981

going to be what I would do primarily. And I never had any doubt that certainly I'd always be involved in music in my life. But I guess I was brought up in a casual enough way that no one ever said "You must be a musician." And there are plenty of other interesting things out there to do! So it was by the time I went away to Curtis for college. I was fortunate that they were willing to take me in, and it was a great experience. I've been fortunate, in every place and with everyone with whom I've studied—I really made some lucky choices.

JR: At this point, could you identify who your big influences are?

KC: I think now it's sort of a conglomeration. But there's no one that I've ever studied with who hasn't been an influence, and recordings are very valuable too. I remember when I was in high school—even though it wasn't a complete immersion in music like college, I remember clearly what I learned from James Bigham, who was my teacher at that time—a major influence and a masterful player and teacher. At Curtis, of course, I was studying with John Weaver, and he had a different approach to teaching and was demanding about what was to be expected week to week.

My experience at Curtis was great. I still remember bringing in—I think it was my second year there—the Liszt *Ad nos*, and I was trying to be conservative, in the sense of not using countless general pistons. At that time the organ at Curtis Hall had just twelve general pistons, so I learned it using only one level, and I thought, "well, that's a bit of restraint here"—a mere twelve generals, with lots of divisionals. I finished playing through it, and we talked about the music, and John Weaver said, "Now, I just should tell you, that when you're approaching the registration of a piece like this, you can't always count on having a dozen general pistons. I just bet that through use of more divisional pistons, I could work out all the registrations for this piece with no compromise whatsoever, on six general pistons." And the amazing thing is—that he could! He was really impressive in that way, because, having decades of touring experience, he's mindful that there weren't always multiple memory levels. So he was very encouraging about people not being a slave to a computer combination action. For example, if you hit a piston for a chorale prelude registration that had a flute here and a cornet there, you'd be asked—"Can't you remember these stops? Why do you have to hit a piston?"

Then of course, Thomas Murray is sort of a wonder in his own way. I enjoy just watching him at an organ—how he approaches the instrument, how to choose registrations—musically and registrationally always doing the most with the least, and loving every minute of it. I think a lot of people associate him with

interested in piano after I realized how much I really liked playing the organ. I learned about some organ pieces that had been arranged for piano—I remember one was the Liszt B-A-C-H—I guess if you don't realize that it's a hard piece . . . So I improved a lot as a pianist after I decided I wanted to try to become as good an organist as I possibly could, and realized at that time, too, that piano was the key, at least for a lot of it. A couple years after that, studying some Bach and other things, I heard music of Dupré for the first time. So I went along for a while just learning all the pieces that made me think "oh, that's a really neat piece!" It wasn't the most logical progression, but it worked out all right.

JR: What was your first recital like?

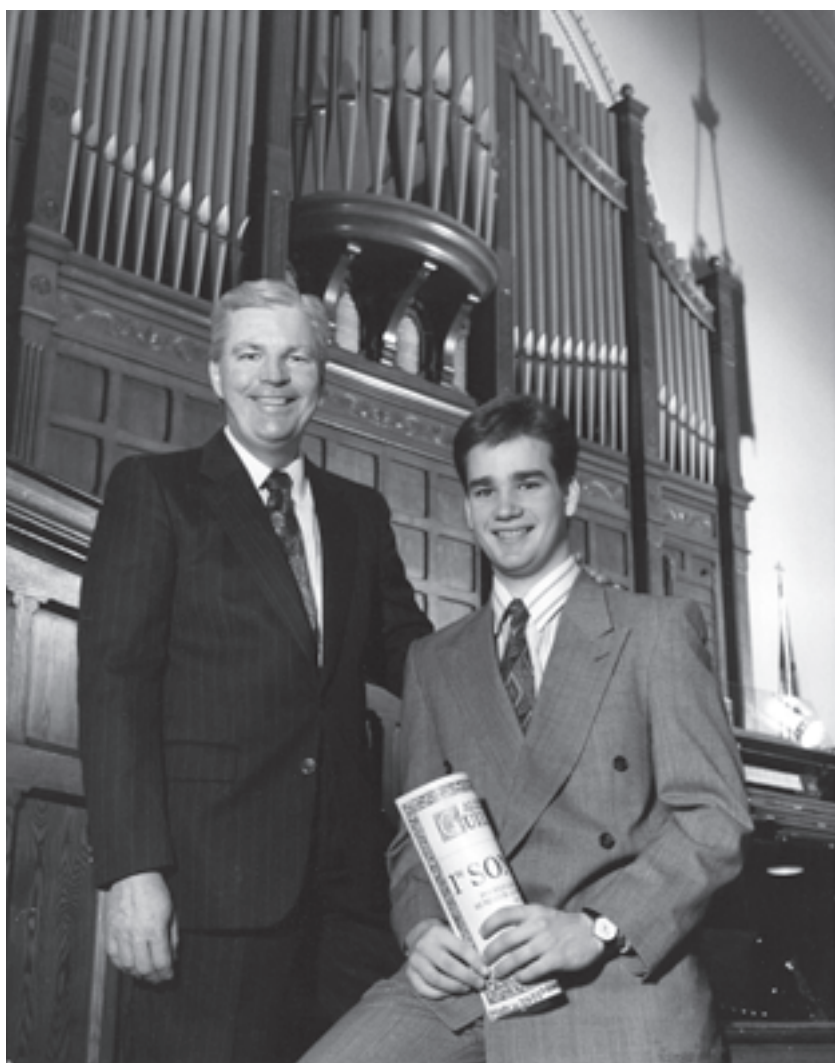
KC: First recitals on the organ—I was 13 or 14. At that time it was mostly playing the Widor *Toccata*, the Bach *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, *Fantasy and Fugue in G Minor*—I used to work on lots of Bach pieces when I was in high school, so I always programmed that. I could practice the same pieces quite a lot, unlike now where there are piles and piles of things to get through in a short amount of time. But at least when I began performing I was confident that "I've been playing this Bach piece for a few months, it'll probably be all right."

JR: What was your first church position?

KC: I was sort of the perpetual assistant organist! I worked that way alongside my dad for the last year or so of high school, so I guess outside of any kind of familial supervision was when I went to college. I was assistant at St. Clement's Church—and that was being thrown into the deep end of the pool, because Peter Conte was the organist at that time and of course ran a pretty tight ship, and still does there. I stayed at St. Clement's the whole time I was in college in Philadelphia, and worked for a couple years at St. Mary the Virgin, and then at St. James Madison Avenue, and then at St. Bartholomew's.

JR: You had said that when you were first studying, you weren't sure about a career. At what point did you know that this was going to be your life's work?

KC: I think that when I went away to college I knew pretty well that music was



David Cowan and Ken Cowan, March 1993

“oh, and he hits 500 Swell pistons.” Actually he doesn’t; he uses the fewest number to get the greatest effect. I didn’t realize that until really watching.

Martin Jean began teaching at Yale the same year I began studying there, and he was a really interesting person to study with as well. I had lessons with him for a semester at Yale while Tom Murray was on sabbatical; in addition to a coaching here or there at other times, students in the Yale department were free to coach with faculty outside of their own studio. Martin was full of curiosity about compositions and their possible interpretations, so I would always leave lessons with him pondering many possibilities. And I remember along the way I had a few lessons with McNeil Robinson, and he, in terms of how to learn a piece of music in a really thorough way, is just masterful. But you don’t have to study with someone for five years to get something immensely valuable, that you’ll never forget.

JR: Were you fairly confident with your registration ability before you studied with John Weaver and Tom Murray?

KC: I guess I was. Since I was a little kid I was fascinated with how stops were built, what the different ones did, the difference between the various colors, and so on. And there were enough nice instruments around that I pretty much understood how that worked—also, my dad was good at registration himself; that helped. If you’re around someone just an hour a week, that’s different than being around somebody all the time—as an aside, you can at any point say, “hey, how come you would do this, as opposed to something else?” And then Jim Bigham, with whom I studied in high school, just has an amazing imagination for registration and a huge instrument at Holy Trinity Lutheran; that was another great stroke of good fortune for me.

JR: When you studied with John Weaver and Tom Murray, did you work more on interpretation, or did they spend a lot of time with registration?

KC: A little of everything. Tom Murray in particular is very attentive to registration; even if he doesn’t change

something radically, he is very sensitive to the finest details. Even if you can row your own boat to start with, I’d say to study with Weaver is to learn his system of managing a big instrument. He’s quite amazing in that he can register an entire recital in a couple of hours, and it will sound as though he’s played the organ for a long time, just because he’s so clear about exactly what he’s going to do at every point in a piece. Tom Murray is known as this “orchestralist,” who gives each color in an instrument its best opportunity to shine, so just to watch him do what he does is really an education!

JR: At Curtis, you were required to play pieces from memory. How many pieces have you memorized?

KC: Oh, probably hundreds. I think from year to year there are pieces—especially pieces that I learned when I was in high school—that I find I can usually play without really thinking about it much at all. From year to year I’ll carry around a few recital programs’ worth of repertoire, at any given time, and I try to keep on expanding that. During school semester, for example, there’s just not time to practice the number of hours a day that I’d love to, so I’ll always practice technical things on the piano, even if I don’t touch an organ. I find that to maintain a few hours of music is manageable, but it takes a lot more time to be constantly learning dozens of pieces.

JR: Do you have some favorite pieces? Desert island pieces?

KC: I’ve always loved Bach, and I think as is the case with so many people I ended up playing the organ because of the music of Bach. As things have gone, I’ve gotten into a lot of repertoire that is far from Bach—I’ve always loved symphonic organs, orchestral transcriptions and that sort of thing. But I think I could do just fine with some of the great works by Bach.

Now as far as what’s fun to play in a concert, on, say, a particular type of organ—for Skinner organs, they’re great at something English Romantic; the Willan *Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue* is a fun piece to play because it relies quite a lot on the interpreter, as does Liszt, Reubke, Reger—if you hear three people play the same piece by Liszt, or Re-



At the Wanamaker console, ca. 1998 (shortly after the console reassembly)

ger, or Reubke, it will sound completely different, as I think it should.

Many people who play those pieces think that it couldn’t possibly be done any other way than their own, because they require a very strong interpretive perspective, but in reality there are of course many possible interpretations. I love playing transcriptions, because on an American symphonic organ, you really push the instrument to the edge of what it’s able to do, and that’s always kind of fun. And historically it’s been controversial because for much of the twentieth century the attitude of most organists was “why would you do such a thing? Go learn some more legitimate organ pieces!”

JR: It’s nice stuff!

KC: Yes, there are so many great pieces that weren’t originally composed for the organ. I think once you do learn most of the standard organ repertoire, it’s fun to look beyond it a little bit and see how an instrument can work at interpreting something else. I have to confess, too, that I started listening to records of tran-

scriptions when I was in high school. I have old recordings by George Thalben-Ball, for example, and I still remember getting two recordings of transcriptions by Tom Murray and Thomas Trotter, I think both made in the ’80s, and so I thought, “Wow! That instrument sounds great—and very expressive. Wouldn’t it be fun to learn how to do that?”

Anybody who gets into this kind of orchestral stuff might be pigeon-holed with “Oh, all he plays is Wagner,” or, “All he plays are transcriptions,” which of course I don’t think is true of anybody who does. One of the keys to having success with transcriptions, though, is to know when it’s a good idea not to play something, because one of the pitfalls about the organ is you cannot bring exactly the same program to every instrument, or else you’ll win some and lose some. I find as with some of the big Romantic works, a transcription can sound great on an ideal instrument and it can sound like a dismal failure on the wrong instrument. I hope to usually be a good judge of when’s the time, and when’s not the time, to play a particular part of the repertoire.

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JR: How about the future of this instrument with young people?

KC: I'm always glad when I know someone is bringing kids to a recital. And in a way, it's a good reason to think about programming very carefully. Every once in a while I'll play a program that might get a little too—mature for the newcomer.

If I were only playing for myself, I could go on for days listening to very intense-sounding organ music. But I'm not just playing for me; though I guess some people would say you should always be playing as though no one else is there—but someone else IS there. (laughter) So I am usually quite cognizant of the fact that there may be some young person there who's never heard an organ recital before.

JR: Do you ever program a specific piece with children in mind?

KC: If I know they're going to be there, yes. Things that are very effective with kids are pieces that are programmatic and tell a story, or pieces that really are "visual" in how the instrument is used. Kids immediately get a kick out of the fact that there are all these different colors and that wow, the organist plays with his feet, and beyond that things like Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre* are great for kids, because they understand—they can tell what's going on in the story as it's going along. Of course, that's a transcription, but there's George Akerley's *A Sweet for Mother Goose* nursery rhyme suite—that would be just the thing. I've heard some people do things like *Carnival of the Animals* and so on—that's another work that's not originally an organ piece, but can certainly get children's interest in the instrument. And they all love the *Tocata and Fugue in D Minor!*

JR: How do you plan a program? Fast—slow, or loud—soft, or keys?

KC: Having interesting key relationships can be nice, particularly if you segue from one piece to the next. More importantly, just not flogging people with the same kind of piece over and over again is a good rule of thumb. For example, I wouldn't play half a program of, say, a prelude and fugue by Bach, followed by a prelude by Buxtehude followed by *Prelude and Fugue on the Name of BACH*, and so on—but contrasting forms, contrasting styles. I've never been much into the philosophy that "we should always go in chronological order." It's more a question of how can you give a good psychological flow to it? I guess that's the right way to describe it. And it's different on recordings, too. I think how you listen to a recording is a little different. In a concert, you can go from fast and furious to very intimate, to scherzo, back to this, back to that. On a record, if you do exactly the same thing, you end up with people constantly adjusting the volume control.

Programming is a constant challenge. And then the trap is, when you find a combination of things that you think works really well, to then be able to get out of it. I remember reading an article years ago about Glenn Gould's thoughts on why he stopped playing concerts; he said he was feeling that sometimes he settled in on the same small number of



Ken at console of First United Church, St. Catharines, Ontario (ca. 1989), playing Bach *Passacaglia*)



At the Woolsey Hall console, ca. 1999

pieces, the philosophy being, "well, the Beethoven worked in Toronto, it'll probably work in New York, too, so I'll play it again!" And again, and again—and so on it goes. Trying something new, even if it means going out on a limb, is a good idea, I think.

JR: You've long been an Organ Historical Society convention favorite. How did that get started?

KC: Good fortune, I guess! When I was working at St. Clement's in Philadelphia, I think it was 1996 the OHS had their convention in Philadelphia; at that time we were doing an Evensong at St. Clement's as part of the convention, and they wanted Peter to play something, and he was already going to play a recital at the Wanamaker Store, so he said, "I'll play the prelude, and why don't you have my assistant play a short program after the Evensong?" I think there was some

trepidation at first; "who is this guy?" I guess they liked it. And one thing led to another there; I've been back several times since.

JR: Yes, including in 2007 with your wife! Tell me about her, and how you cooked up this scheme.

KC: We met in graduate school; she went to Yale too. While we were students there, I had always liked an old recording I had of Jascha Heifetz and Richard Elsasser playing the *Vitali Chaconne*, as arranged by Leopold Auer. So on one of JAV's Skinner series recordings, Joe Vitacco asked me to go out to Jefferson Avenue Presbyterian in Detroit, and I checked out the organ and it's a great instrument—huge sound, and very mellow sound. I thought this would be a good accompanying organ, and that it would be neat to try and do a violin piece. So I asked Lisa to come along then, and that was the beginning of playing together. In the last seven or eight years, we've been asked to play duo programs together, so we've always been on the lookout for good repertoire that has been written for violin and organ, and things that transcribe well. We'll often do an early piece, maybe something that's contemporary written for those instruments; from the Romantic period, Rheinberger wrote some violin and organ works. I'll often transcribe a concerto accompaniment for the end, and do a violin concerto as a violin and organ piece. And then we'll usually do a solo piece each, too.

JR: The review of the OHS convention in the February 2008 issue of THE DIAPASON mentions Lisa playing behind a screen.¹



Photo for a newspaper ad in the St. Catharines Standard, ca. 1994

KC: We did the Karg-Elert *Fugue, Canzona and Epilogue*, for organ and violin, and a quartet of women's voices is included at the end. I think Karg-Elert may have started this tradition himself, but there's been a long practice of putting the violinist and the singers either offstage or in the Swell box. And at this particular church it worked, because you could open the door behind the Swell box and there was a hallway in behind. So everyone crammed in behind the chamber and you could have this diminuendo to nothing at the end. It was very unexpected color coming out of the organ chambers suddenly! It was a lot of fun, and everyone was a very good sport about the whole thing. The instrument was a Kimball organ, and certainly played repertoire well, but maybe accompanied even better. So it was nice to show that side of things.

JR: At the AGO convention in Minneapolis you played some new works. Do you play new pieces from memory?

KC: Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. One of the things I've been working on this week is memorizing them. I find if I have a deadline, it doesn't take long to get things like that learned. I probably spent a week or so learning each of the preludes and fugues. But then the question is—what do you want to do with it? There's no question that I play a piece better after a year than after a week. So the rest of the time is spent just trying to refine things and get a clear interpretation, especially with brand-new pieces. The composer Henry Martin is a pianist and is probably known for composing *24 Preludes and Fugues* for piano, and he teaches jazz and music theory at Rutgers, Newark. The reason for the commission was that Michael Barone really liked his piano pieces, and so commissioned him to write a couple for organ. Not knowing what his musical taste is—of course, when you learn a piece like that, I found I was initially sort of cautious in an interpretive sense—if it's not written in the score, well, is it OK to do something? Well, he has a great imagination, and is a good sport about everything. That was actually nice to discover. Interpretive freedom is good! So I really liked them—they're difficult, but I think will make nice pieces.

JR: Teaching versus performing—do you enjoy the balance that you have right now?

KC: Absolutely! I think it would probably be hard for me to only teach, because you end up living musically only through your students, instead of being able to do something yourself—so you need an outlet. On the other hand, it's great to work with other people—it's so satisfying and exciting when students work very hard and get a lot better, and you can help them along their way. This year, it was only the second time in recent memory that I didn't play Easter Sunday some place. So before cooking dinner for family, I went to Trinity Church where two of my students play, and I had a bet-

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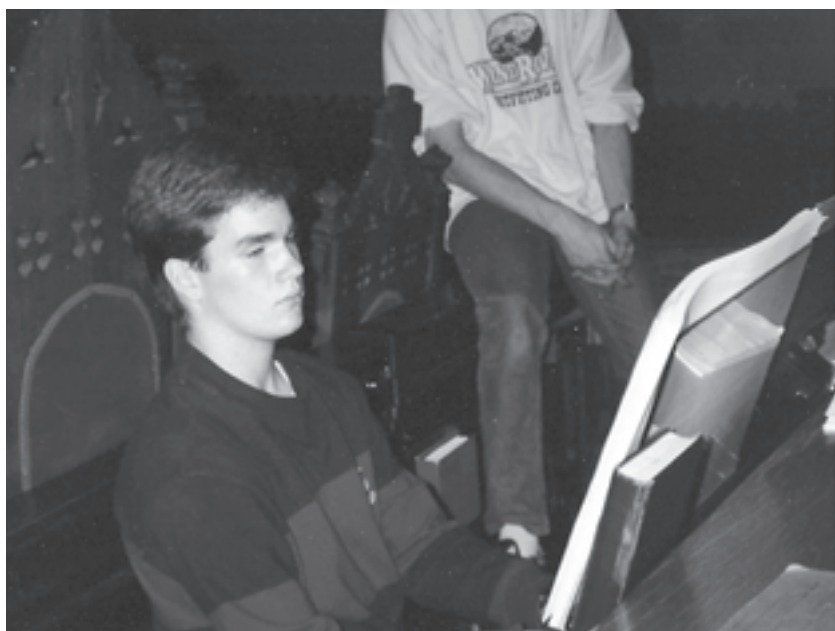


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With father, David Cowan, at First United Church, St. Catharines, 1989



At First United Church, St. Catharines, 1990

ter time listening to them accompany the Easter service than I would have if I'd done it myself! I've always been interested in teaching, so I have no regrets there at all.

JR: Tell us about your position at Westminster. Do you teach service playing, or does your teaching concentrate just on recital literature?

KC: Mostly my colleagues Alan Morrison, Matthew Lewis, and I end up concentrating on creating some kind of structured program of study for each student. I do at times make students learn hymns and accompaniments as part of their lessons. I find that you can teach somebody about as much about creative possibilities at the organ through hymns and accompaniments, at least from a registration point of view, as from anything else, because so often with a lot of the primary parts of the repertoire—Bach, Franck, Vierne, and so forth—you frequently follow convention or instructions for registration; in service playing you have a blank slate, and can really get acquainted with the organ in a more individualistic way.

The school's strong emphasis on choral training provides a great background for developing graduates who can become very effective church musicians. There are classes in improvisation, courses in organ literature, there's a class on accompanying at the organ, which is primarily a service playing course. Then the sacred music department offers courses on the history of church music, theology, choral pedagogy and management of programs, worship planning, and congregational song. A broad range of guest lecturers in the organ and sacred music departments address other specific topics. It could be a masterclass on organ playing or literature on some occasions, or frequently guest perspectives on the general field of church music in America.

JR: Do you see any consistent patterns of problems among your students?

KC: Nothing that applies to everybody. In fact, that's one of the fun challenges of teaching—it's all problem solving, but everybody's a different case. For example, some students don't learn pedal technique in a structured way, and I'm surprised that students coming in at the graduate level sometimes don't understand very much about registration—that can be a big project. But that's certainly



Ken Cowan today

not unique to everybody; some of them are great at that. Nuanced registration is a hard thing to teach in a short time. And if you encounter people who are trained to do only one thing in a particular situation, it can be a real challenge to make them more curious and sensitive to the precise character of each stop or chorus on different instruments, and how they combine with others. Then comes the issue of how to control the instrument in the context of a complex piece if they've never been trained to manage a console with a combination action.

JR: Do you have responsibilities at Westminster besides teaching?

KC: I also am the coordinator of the organ and sacred music program. That involves plenty of meetings, planning, and discussions with other faculty about how to proceed with programs and curriculum. In the past year we have revised the entire curriculum in organ and in sacred music. This year began the implementation of those revisions, which is a big undertaking, but a necessary step to try to keep the program from getting behind the times. Of course, I'm not doing that on my own, but I certainly have to stay involved with how things develop. And then another task for sacred music at Westminster will be to find a faculty member to succeed Robin Leaver, who just retired. Hopefully we'll soon be looking for the next teacher of sacred music there, but in the current economic climate, universities can be tentative about filling vacancies. Always something, you know! It's the sort of place where I can stay there until ten o'clock every night and have plenty more to greet me the next morning.

JR: Are you ever able to go hear other organists or other concerts?

KC: Here and there. There's not as much time as I'd like there to be, because I'm often away weekends, when a lot of great concerts happen. Going to conventions and so forth, I can hear a lot of things in a short amount of time, just to keep track of who's doing what. And then the nice thing living between New York and Philadelphia is oftentimes there will be good concerts on week nights. Plus, Princeton has some really good music series right in town. So whenever possible, I attend performances.

JR: Do you have any big projects planned?

KC: For Westminster, keeping the department growing stronger is a priority. As far as playing goes, it's asking myself, what do I want to play now that I haven't played before? And I've got lined up some recordings that I've been promising to make and that I haven't gotten around to yet, so I'll just keep chipping away at them. A new CD on the big Schoenstein organ at First Plymouth Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, was just released this February on the Raven label. That disc has German Romantic repertoire (Reger, Reubke, Karg-Elert) and a transcription of the Liszt *Mephisto Waltz #1*. But otherwise it's a question of just balancing responsibilities out—and finding some time for fun, too.

JR: Thank you so much, Ken! ■

Notes

1. Frank Rippl, "OHS 52nd National Convention, July 11–17, 2007, Central Indiana," *THE DIAPASON*, February 2008, vol. 99, no. 2, pp. 24–29.

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