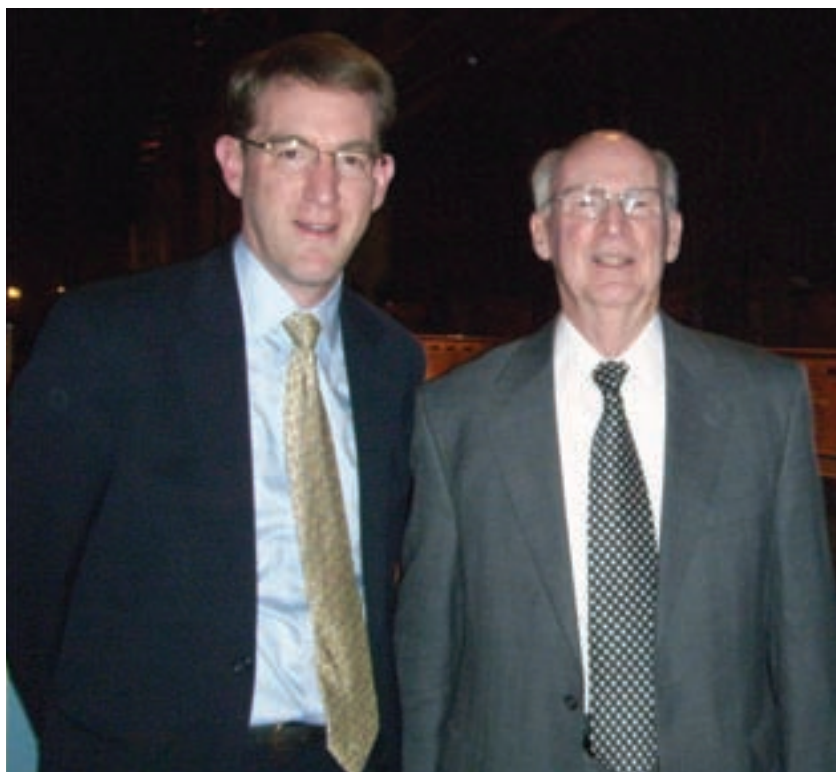


Like Father, Like Son: A Conversation with Lee and Scott Dettra

Joyce Johnson Robinson



Scott Dettra and Lee Dettra following Lee's recital at Washington National Cathedral, January 25, 2011

These days, while it is not uncommon for sons and daughters to follow in their parents' footsteps and become doctors, lawyers, and corporate chiefs, it is somewhat unusual for offspring to take up the "family business" if that business is playing the organ. The Dettra family brings to mind other musical fathers and sons. In fact, three Dettras are organists—Lee, Lee's brother Philip, and Lee's son, Scott. What makes a musical dynasty tick? We discussed this with both Lee Dettra and his son Scott.



Lee Dettra at the West Point console

Lee Dettra retired four years ago after 53 years of serving churches and universities in Florida, Pennsylvania, New York, and Delaware. A graduate of Westminster Choir College, he also earned the Master of Sacred Music degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and holds the American Guild of Organists' Fellowship and Choir Master certifications. His study of the organ was mainly with Alexander McCurdy and Searle Wright.

In 1985 Lee Dettra was appointed by President Reagan as organist and choir-master of the Cadet Chapel at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, where he served until 2000. There he presided over the 325-rank, 20,142-pipe organ and conducted the Cadet Chapel Choir, which sang at the annual service for the U.S. Army at Washington National Cathedral.

Lee and his wife Janet, who live in Delaware, have three children and four grandchildren. He was the first organ teacher of their son Scott, who has been organist and associate director of music at Washington National Cathedral for the last five years and is now director of music at the Church of the Incarnation in Dallas, Texas.

Scott Dettra is director of music at the Church of the Incarnation in Dallas, Texas, where he oversees one of the nation's largest Anglican music programs. Prior to his appointment in Dallas, he was organist and associate director of music at Washington National Cathedral for five years. A native of Wilmington, Delaware, Scott Dettra holds two degrees from Westminster Choir College and has studied jazz piano at Manhattan School of Music. His principal organ teachers have been Joan Lippincott, Dennis Keene, and his father, Lee Dettra. He is also organist of The Crossing, Philadelphia's new-music choir.

He has performed at national conventions of the American Guild of Organists, the Association of Anglican Musicians, and the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians. Festival appearances include the Lincoln Center Festival, the Carmel Bach Festival, the Arizona Bach Festival, the Bermuda Music Festival, and the Piccolo Spoleto Festival.

His debut recording, *Tongues of Fire* (Pro Organo), featured French music performed on the 325-rank organ of the Cadet Chapel at West Point. *Majestus* (Loft) features large-scale organ favorites performed on the Great Organ of Washington National Cathedral. Scott



Scott Dettra at Washington National Cathedral

Dettra performs throughout the United States and Canada under the management of Karen McFarlane Artists.

Joyce Robinson: Do you have any musical ancestors? And are any of your grandchildren musical?

Lee Dettra: My parents were amateur violinists and actually met playing in the Norristown, Pennsylvania Community Orchestra in the 1930s. My mother taught public school music, having earned a music education degree from Beaver College. Janet's and my granddaughter (the oldest of our four grandchildren) plays the trombone in her high school band.

JR: How did you and your brother Philip become interested in the organ? What was your training?

LD: My grandparents purchased a home organ when I was nine, and I began organ lessons with my piano teacher in Pennsylvania, Eleanor Fields Holden, a Curtis grad. My younger brother Philip, now an accomplished pianist and architect as well as a church organist and choirmaster in North Carolina, soon followed with piano study and eventually organ study. When my family moved to Florida when I was in junior high, I first studied organ with Herman Siewert at Rollins College, and, when he retired, with Ruth Richardson Carr at Stetson University. Philip and I both studied piano with Maude Beiser when we were in high school. During this time I served two churches as organist in our home town, Mount Dora.

I began college at Houghton, where I studied organ with Charles H. Finney and piano with Eldon Basney. I then transferred to Westminster Choir College (graduating in 1963), studying with Theodore Keller and then Alexander McCurdy (both Farnam students). After serving in my first full-time church position in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, I entered the School of Sacred Music at Union Seminary in New York, where in 1968 I earned the Master of Sacred Music degree, studying with Searle Wright. About this time I earned the AGO's Fellow and Choir Master certifications. I then served First Presbyterian Church in Sharon, Pennsylvania (also teaching organ at Thiel College), and then First and Central Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware, where I also founded and conducted Wilmington's Center City Chorale, and taught organ at the University of Delaware.

It was during this time that Scott, our youngest of three children, was born. From 1985 to 2000 I was organist and choirmaster of the Cadet Chapel at the



Young Scott practicing piano at home

U.S. Military Academy in West Point, New York. During these years Scott and I both served as accompanists of the Masterwork Chorus in New Jersey under Andrew Megill. When I retired from West Point, my wife and I moved back to Delaware, where I served Immanuel Episcopal Church on the Green in New Castle for six years.

JR: When did Scott show interest in the instrument?

LD: From a very early age he exhibited interest, ability, and a natural talent for music. He began organ study at around age eight, after several years of piano lessons. During high school he served as organist for churches in Highland Falls, New York, and Newburgh, New York, before entering college.

JR: Were you able to give him access to the major instruments you played?

LD: Beginning in Wilmington, and continuing at West Point, Scott had access to the organs, where he practiced and had his lessons with me. He eventually gave several recitals on the West Point organ in recent years.

JR: Have the two of you ever worked together, or presented any duet programs?

LD: In his early years Scott and I gave some recitals together, where we included some duets. Then at Trinity Church in Princeton, when he was assistant organist there, we presented a "Dueling Organs" recital, where we played a Sousa march encore with both of us at the same organ.

JR: You have held positions in large and prominent churches and chapels, including at West Point. What advice did you pass on to Scott about handling such a responsibility?

LD: Do your best, taking changes in your stride, and even if you have ten weddings to play in one day, as I did once at West Point, try to keep it all "fresh!"

JR: Can you tell us a bit about your West Point position—was it at all different from an organist-choirmaster position at a church? What was the required repertoire?

LD: It was a joy and a privilege to work with the fine cadets at the U.S. Military Academy. My duties included con-



Lee & Scott Dettra play a duet at home



Scott Dettra tries out the West Point organ

ducting the Cadet Chapel Choir (which sang for the Sunday morning Protestant service and did some touring), teaching a music appreciation course in the English department, giving VIP tours of the 1500-seat Gothic Cadet Chapel, conducting Handel's *Messiah* with orchestra and chorus each December, planning the organ recital series, playing carillon recitals, playing for many funerals of graduates, overseeing the maintenance of the organ, and playing the Cadet Chapel organ for the Protestant service and many weddings (attending their rehearsals as well).

JR: Just how many weddings?

LD: Any weekend might include four rehearsals and four weddings, with my busiest weekend involving 21 weddings, ten of which were every hour following two Sunday morning services. Many weddings required much organ repertoire, as I tried not to repeat preludial music too often. (Most processions and recessions got repeated many times, though!)

JR: One biographical item mentions television recording, including for the BBC. Please tell us about that.

LD: While at West Point I recorded a few pieces several different times for the BBC, as well as for some American programs. These featured the West Point organ—now 390 ranks—the world's largest organ in a religious building and third largest in the world, surpassed only by the Atlantic City Convention Hall organ and the Wanamaker Organ in Philadelphia, which Scott and I have both played. While at West Point I recorded a CD—*West Point Classics*, which is available through the Organ Historical Society. (Scott's CDs are available there, also.)

JR: You have helped present a POE. How did it go, and how did it make you feel about the organ's future?

LD: I was very encouraged by the talent and enthusiasm of the 30 students who participated in the Wilmington, Delaware POE in June 2011. Even at the various levels of playing exhibited, all were so enthusiastic, and so grateful to find others their age who were also interested!

JR: What changes have you observed in the organ world?

LD: Of course, the knowledge of earlier performance practice has colored interpretation greatly since my first organ study. The other change, as exemplified by POE attendance, has been an increased interest in the organ, giving much hope for the future!

JR: How are you spending your time in retirement?

LD: In 2008, after 53 years of serving churches and universities in Florida, Pennsylvania, New York, and Delaware, I retired from regular church work, but have done a lot of substituting, as well as quite a few organ recitals. Actually, this year I am serving as assistant organist of the Episcopal cathedral in Wilmington, Delaware—the Cathedral Church of St. John—assisting Eugene Lavery in the fine program there, which includes the

Cathedral Choir School of Delaware. I am enjoying once again being part of weekly playing—on the Noack and Möller organs there.

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Joyce Robinson: Tell us about beginning organ study with your father.

Scott Dettra: I grew up watching my father play the organ in church and was fascinated by both the music and the instrument. For as long as I can remember, I wanted to do what he did. I don't specifically remember our very first lessons, although I know they were when I was eight years old. I had been taking piano lessons since I was three, so I already had several years of keyboard experience under my belt. People always ask if I could reach the pedals when I was eight and the answer is yes, although I could only reach with my toes originally (great practice for when I later learned about Baroque performance practice!). Some of the topics I remember covering in early lessons were legato, finger substitution, basic registration, and hymn playing.

JR: How were lessons handled?

SD: We didn't have a regular schedule for lessons. We would just have one whenever it was convenient. If I had a day off from school I would go to work with Dad, practice all day, and have a lesson. We also had a one-manual and pedal instrument at home that Dad built from a kit. So there was always an organ available.

JR: You were only nine years old when you had your first job.

SD: My first church job came through my father. Silverbrook United Methodist needed an interim and I played for



Lee and Scott at First and Central Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware

four weeks. It was Advent of 1984, if I recall correctly. There was no choir to conduct. I prepared a prelude and postlude each week, along with hymns and service music. My mother took me on Sundays because Dad was busy at his own church, obviously.

JR: And you played at Riverside Church when you were eleven.

SD: John Walker invited me to play at Riverside for their Youth Sunday in 1986 after he and I met at West Point, where he was playing a recital on my father's series. I played the postlude—*Toccata and Fugue in D minor* (no less!). Obviously, it was a thrilling moment for an eleven-year-old!

JR: Is your mother musical, too? How did she manage in a multi-organist household?

SD: Mom is a registered nurse and doesn't play any instruments. She enjoys singing and has sung in Dad's church choirs for as long as I can remember. Obviously, she has heard more than her share of organ music over the years and has always been a great support for both of us.

JR: Did you ever want to do anything else?

SD: When I was in the second or third grade, I was fascinated by some of the early personal computers and remember telling people I wanted to be a computer programmer. But I never seriously considered another profession. I did flirt

with jazz piano quite a bit while in high school and actually began my college career at Manhattan School of Music as a jazz piano major. I think that was the extent of my teenage rebellion!

JR: What about study with your other teachers?

SD: After one semester at Manhattan School of Music, I changed my major to organ performance and studied with Dennis Keene. Although I only worked with him for one semester, this was a very important time for me in my development as an organist. He was the first teacher I had ever had besides my father and his teaching engaged me in a new way. I still use and value many of the things I learned from him during that semester and am very thankful to have had the opportunity to study with him. When I transferred to Westminster Choir College I studied with Joan Lippincott, who is wonderful in every possible way. I finished out my college years with her and continued on for my master's. I am so thankful for the time I spent studying with her and treasure our relationship to this day.

JR: Your prior position was as organist at Washington National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Were you at all affected by the recent earthquake there?

SD: Life at the cathedral was exciting and busy. The earthquake caused considerable damage and forced us to close the building for almost three



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Scott's first job at age 9, Silverbrook United Methodist Church, Wilmington, Delaware



Scott posing at Riverside Church, 1986



Scott, age 11, plays postlude on Youth Sunday at Riverside Church, April 1986



Young Scott Dettra at West Point

months. It will take many years and tens of millions of dollars to repair all of the earthquake damage. During the closure, many services and events were moved to other venues (including major services for the opening of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial and an entire weekend of services and concerts for the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks), a logistical challenge met with the utmost distinction by the entire staff. Happily, the organ did not seem to have suffered any damage in the earthquake. In fact, we used the downtime to repair some of the most pressing maintenance issues threatening the instrument.

JR: What were the special challenges, especially musical challenges, of a position in such an internationally prominent cathedral?

SD: The most challenging thing was the lack of practice time on the cathedral organ. The organists are unable to practice during the day, when the building is open for tours. Another challenge was the musical pace. That was also the thing I loved most about

the job. With seven choral services each week, the choir and organists go through a vast amount of repertoire very quickly. I loved that there was at least one service to play almost every day I came to work.

JR: You gained some new and notable exposure at the 2010 AGO convention, particularly for your endurance in playing multiple programs on the same day. Obviously you have inherited your father's stamina genes! Where do you get your energy?

SD: To be completely honest, I didn't realize all three programs were scheduled for the same day when I agreed to them. That said, I approached it as a fun challenge. It was an exhausting day to be sure, but we should all have a few of those now and then! As for where my energy comes from, I love to perform and never have trouble gathering the energy necessary to do so.

JR: Following the convention, you came under management. Has that changed your life in any way?

SD: My concert career is very important to me. I love playing recitals, traveling to places I have not yet been, meeting new people, and playing a variety of instruments. Being under management with Karen McFarlane Artists has certainly shed a new spotlight on that part of my career, for which I am very grateful.

JR: Which are your preferred works and who are your favorite composers?

SD: For me, all music begins and ends with Bach. His music has always been my first love. Other composers for whom I have a particular admiration are Franck, Widor, Duruflé, Brahms, Mendelssohn, and Healey Willan.

JR: You studied jazz piano—was that an end, or a means?

SD: At the time it was an end, but now I see it as a means. My high school band director got me interested in jazz in a big way. I had a church job throughout high school, but my real love was playing jazz piano, not organ music. My background in jazz has certainly had an influence on my organ playing, but not a large one. I think it influences my continuo playing more than anything. Realizing figured bass is really no different from reading a jazz chart.

JR: You have been involved with the Embassy's promotion of concerts—you presented recitals in Washington D.C., and also in Barbados. What is this program and how did you come to be involved in it?

SD: This has not been a formalized program so much as a few isolated events. In the case of my recital in Barbados last year, it was very exciting to work with our embassy there to connect with music students in local schools. We played music for and with each other and had some very interesting question and answer sessions.

JR: Tell us about your new position as director of music at the Church of the Incarnation in Dallas, Texas.

SD: I could not be more excited about my new position at the Church of the

Incarnation. Having had the privilege to assist several excellent directors in a number of prominent programs—John Bertalot, Jim Litton, Mark Dwyer, and Michael McCarthy come to mind immediately—I have a strong urge to run my own program at this point in my career. The program at the Church of the Incarnation offers everything I'm looking for, including excellent choirs, a commitment to traditional Anglican liturgy and repertoire, and a large and active parish that we can make the center of our family life.

JR: There seems to be a sort of musical migration down to Texas! First the Hancocks moved back there; Ken Cowan and Isabelle Demers will be teaching there; and now you. Any thoughts on this?

SD: Several people have commented on the fact that Ken, Isabelle, and I are all heading to Texas at the same time. I can only speak for myself when I say that while I never pictured myself in Texas, I have found there an exciting position that will challenge me and allow me to grow in new ways. And I will be very happy to have such excellent colleagues nearby.

JR: What are your goals and plans for the future?

SD: My main goal is to continue to grow as a musician, both in the church and on the concert stage. That means continuing to challenge myself with new projects, new repertoire, and new ways of doing things. I would like to grow as a conductor, an aspect of my musical life I haven't spent a great deal of time cultivating thus far. I would also like to continue to record, but only when I feel I have something interesting to say about a particular part of the repertoire. I also have non-musical goals and dreams, such as earning my private pilot's license and hiking the Appalachian Trail.

JR: Thank you, Lee and Scott—happy trails to you!

Joyce Johnson Robinson is associate editor of THE DIAPASON.

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