In celebration of the 100th birthday, October 27, of Helmut Walcha: Artist-Teacher—Part 2

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Full disclosure

As this second section is more personal, the reader may indulge the author's use of the first person singular. I first heard of Helmut Walcha through another mentor, Tui St. George Tucker, the late composer who not only taught me to play the recorder but was in some ways like a second, or alternate, mother. In my seventeenth summer, which I spent at Camp Catawba in the Blue Ridge mountains of North Carolina, where Tui directed the music, she simply instructed me, one day, to listen to recordings by Helmut Walcha, beginning with the six Trio Sonatas by Bach. At first I did not "get it." Though years before I had been a choirboy and found the organ fascinating, I'd devoted neither systematic nor serious attention to its repertoire. I presumed that the recommended recordings would feature a grand but somewhat opaque, if not "muddy," sound. It was a surprise, at first more puzzling than edifying, to be confronted with clearly inflected and articulated "chamber music" of a bell-like transparency and played, on historical instruments, in rather dry acoustics (e.g., the Schnitger organ "stored"—forever—in the village church of Cappel, north of Bremerhaven). Tui asked me not to be put off but to persist in listening. The revelation, my sudden epiphany of understanding and profound appreciation, came after the third or fourth try; now, I was hooked—as it turned out, for life.

The next spring, almost a year—and many Bach organ works—later, I wrote a fan letter to the player, asking him if, when next in Europe, I could meet him and hear him in person. Walcha replied that I should come to a Saturday afternoon service of Vespers at the Church of the Three Kings (Dreikönigskirche) in Frankfurt and let him know, in advance, both the date and my choice of two pieces; in my response, citing a date in September 1957, I asked for the chorale-prelude *An Wasserflüssen Babylons* (in 4 voices, cantus firmus in the tenor) and the *Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor*—and was amazed, of course, when, some months later—and without further correspondence—my father and I walked into this church, just across the Main river from the Frankfurt Cathedral, and found both of these works in prominent positions in the printed order of service!

On the gallery afterwards, he recommended that I continue my piano studies in New York and in about three years come to audition for him at the Hochschule für Musik (State Music Academy) in Frankfurt. Nothing was said about organ lessons—nor were there any. The organist of the church where I was then singing allowed me to practice regularly there, on his Austin, after showing me, "Here are the manuals, here are the stop tabs, here are the pedals—you use toes and heels, both." Not until after completing memorization of the *Orgelbüchlein* in the first of my four years of study with Walcha did I confess to him that he was my first organ teacher—a revelation he seemed to take in stride ("I don't object to capable virgin students"); while I did not have a B.A., most of his foreign students had master's degrees and many were on Fulbright scholarships.

Subsequently visiting Europe every summer in the decades following 1966, I saw him each year, at home or in his vacation haunts, until 1989 (two years before his death). It is fair to say that we developed a friendship, and after his own retirement he continued to encourage my work and to take a vivid interest in what I told him of the gratifications and frustrations of church and academic life at home in America. Soon after his 70th birthday I rendered an oral translation to him of the first portion of this article, in the form in which it had then been published, and was naturally pleased that he found it (while likely somewhat more systematic than had he himself put pen to paper) a valid summary of his views and pedagogical emphases.

Case of the Arp Schnitger organ in Cappel (photo by Guy Millet, May 1991; courtesy Jérôme Do Bentzinger)

Crucial to this full disclosure are, I think, the years of study and decades of friendship and, perhaps more important (or unusual), the fact that it was not only the music of Bach but also specifically its interpretation by Helmut Walcha that, as it happened, both drew me initially to the pipe organ and, in the end, served to nourish a lifelong interest and commitment to this musical medium.

The biography

A first biographical study of the organist, entitled *Helmut Walcha: Nuit de Lumière*, appeared about two years ago (no date is given) in Colmar, France, edited and published by Jérôme Do Bentzinger and authored, in collaboration, by two French organists, Joseph Coppey and Jean-Willy Kunz. To many it may be surprising that theirs should comprise the first available major documentation of so un-Gallic a musician and musical thinker. The book itself offers a list of hundreds of works, by some 30 composers, comprising Walcha's memorized repertoire, but not one is French nor even from outside of the German cultural sphere. M. Coppey got to know his subject during Walcha's few trips to France—he visited the cathedral of Poitiers, dedicated the organ at St. Séverin in Paris, and recorded some of the Bach harpsichord music, including the violin sonatas with Henryk Szeryng, in that city, and did his second—stereophonic—round of Bach organ recordings at St. Pierre LeJeune in Strasbourg—while M. Kunz is the son of a deceased friend who had originally intended to collaborate with Coppey in researching and writing this biography.

The barely 200-page book has some puzzling oddities—it is printed in a font almost as large as that of the *New York Times Large-Type Weekly* (for the sight-impaired), contains no index, and speaks of Helmut Walcha, along with his wife and some of their friends, mostly on a first-name basis. At the same time, the work leaves nothing to be desired in terms of reverence and affection for its subject. The authors—who speak little English, although one of them knows a good deal of German—did extensive research in Germany, tracking down friends, colleagues, pastors, and students of the master and—especially valuable—some of Walcha's former chamber music partners, still lucid but now largely "lost" to the world in senior citizens' centers. They also elicited written testimonials from associates and admirers, including from within the French cultural sphere (e.g., L. Rogg, M. Chapuis, R. Saorgin, M. Schaefer).

Praiseworthy and useful as these efforts and their results are, it can be said that the story told here really covers only the first half of Walcha's life—the second half, after all, had a lot to do with the United States, via his 50 American students, of whom the evidence provided here is quite spotty. So far as I know, I am the only American student with whom the authors spoke. Among the others, those *omitted* here, in the published "non-exhaustive" list of students, include Robert Anderson, David Bowman, Edgar Billups, Virginia Banfield Bollinger, Edward Brewer, Larry Cook, Elise Cambon, Paul Davis, Melvin Dickinson (Margaret got in!), Sheila Beck Dietrich, Delbert Disselhorst, Tony Godding, Barbara Harbach, Philipp Isaacson, Gene Janssen, Lorna DaCosta McDaniel, Margaret Mueller (John did make it), David Mulbury, Doris Parr, Edmund Shay, Bob Thompson, and Nancy Walker! It was good to see in print the names of Frankie Cunningham and Betty Steeb (both among the students sent over early on by the late, and great, Arthur Poister), as well as that of Oberlin's David Boe (who married the second daughter of Walcha's pastor, Pfarrer Paulus North).

There is no sign of the three South African students, including composer Jacobus Kloppers (now in Canada) or Elise Feldtmann Liebergen. Among the Germans, Oda Jürgens (long active in Berlin) and Helmut Röhrig (who settled in Cincinnati) are missing—and, although composer Reinhold Finkbeiner did make it onto the list, there is no indication of his having been interviewed, which would quite likely have provided color and special interest in light of his outspoken dissent from aspects of Walcha's aesthetics and pedagogy. Like Disselhorst, Charles Krigbaum is mentioned once (on page 141), as a contributor to the 70th-birthday Festschrift, but then, 18 pages later, omitted from the list. Yet it has to be said (at least here) that, as the Yale University organist for decades, Krigbaum would appear to have occupied the most prestigious position attained by any of Walcha's students, anywhere.

The American and other omissions are particularly egregious inasmuch as Prof. Walcha himself often remarked (but never in France?) that of his best students a considerable number was to

Helmut Walcha and Henryk Szeryng recording (Philips) the Bach sonatas for harpsichord and violin, mid-June 1966, in l'Èglise de Liban, Paris (photo by Paulus North; courtesy Jérôme Do Bentzinger)

be found among the Americans. In addition, although the most intense wonder at Walcha's prodigious memory and veneration for his interpretation and technique are expressed repeatedly, the biography lacks the sort of detailed analysis and explanation of these factors that readers would be justified in expecting such a book to attempt. In short, another biography—or at least a "Part Two"—will still be needed. The pictorial material in the book—much of it of an "exclusive" nature—is wonderful and, for those interested in acquiring such (even if nary an American be shown therein), probably worth the price of the volume. We are grateful to M. Bentzinger for the samples he has kindly provided for reproduction in these pages.[1]

The historical context

The historical context out of which Walcha and his interpretation emerged was that of the "Leipzig School" of the early 20th century. Thomas-Kantor Karl Straube stood at its center. His own life was marked by the transition from the late-19th-century extravagantly Romantic interpretation of pre-Romantic music to a new, disciplined and "ascetic" neo-Classicism that came to pervade certain, even large-scale, compositions by musicians like Stravinsky and Hindemith no less than the seemingly unrelated arts of organ-building and organ-playing. In Germany it was connected with the destructive caesura of World War I and the hopes aroused by formation of a new, Kaiser-less "Weimar Republic." In any case it was clear that the old, complacent and hyper-bourgeois order was dead and nothing would ever be the same again; all was open to reconsideration.

In this context, and parallel to his friendships with outstanding late-Romantic musicians like Reger and Leipzig's own Karg-Elert, Straube opened himself, "midstream," to the growing interest in early organs and the interpretative concepts seemingly implicit in their structural features (tracker action; *Werkprinzip*; absence of facile electric playing aids; high mixtures and mutations; etc.). Neglected old instruments like the two Silbermann organs in Rötha, just outside of Leipzig, came to set new standards and, once newly playable and audible, imprinted their sonorities indelibly on the minds of aspiring and up-to-date musicians like the young Helmut Walcha.

In the unique atmosphere of "Weimar's" creative ferment—soon to yield to the fanaticism of Nazism and the consequent pervasive chaos of the new German racial, foreign and military policies—it seems highly unlikely that Straube and his own finest pupil (and the next Thomas-Kantor) Günther Ramin, who, though only nine years older, became Walcha's major teacher, could have reached the thorough, "chiselled" and, in time, "settled" concept of virtually every detail of interpretation that came to comprise Walcha's accomplishment and, at least in terms of the applied interpretative *method,* his most specific organistic and musical emanation and legacy.

And yet Walcha, who studied theory with Reger's conservatory successor Karg-Elert but was musically involved with the more neo-classical Leipzig composer Günter Raphael and his pupil Kurt Hessenberg (later Walcha's beloved Frankfurt friend and colleague), attributed to Straube (under whose cantata-conducting in Bach's Thomaskirche he sometimes played continuo) and, especially, to *Ramin* his life's major organistic inspiration—along with that of Albert Schweitzer, through that scholar's early study of both historical organs and the theological and pictorial symbolism in Bach's music. In conversation it was, as Coppey and Kunz have noted, hard to elicit from him the specifics. Detective work, including carefully aimed examination of Straube's correspondence, writings and editions and of Ramin's recordings—perhaps leading to a musicologist's future dissertation—might yet uncover the most critical points of both similarity and difference between Walcha's concepts and those of his early Leipzig models. Lionel Rogg's pronouncement of him as "original" implies, I think, that it was not only in Walcha's sometimes ravishing sonorities that he may—or must—have diverged from his teachers.

In two somewhat ironic ways Helmut Walcha's productivity was framed and promoted by misfortune. In his personal history, the poor eyesight and subsequent blindness (resulting from the teenager's smallpox-vaccination calamity) served both to focus and enhance his musical ear and to promote the uniquely "horizontal" and minutely analytical method of learning (i.e., memorizing) polyphony voice by voice. In the history of his times, the need for safety from the World War II bombings of Frankfurt prompted Walcha's flight to the tranquillity of the countryside, where he was able to learn, undisturbed by any urban distractions, the entire *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and doubtless to hone and solidify those more general interpretive concepts that would inform all his concerts, recordings and lessons.

Performing and recording

Among those who became familiar with Walcha's recordings and were also fortunate to hear him in person, many perceived a subtle but unmistakable difference between the two musical experiences. My own observations confirmed the fairly consistent difference and I have, after considerable thought, concluded that it arose from different concepts operative in the artist in the two contexts. For Walcha a recording was foremost a documentation of the score, of the composer's discernible intentions as objectively as possible—it was not intended to be, any more than could be avoided, a record, for eternity, of a particular moment in a particular performer's life; not an attempt, that is, to artificially "freeze" such a subjective human moment beyond the composer's already confirmed success in integrating an original experience, song and form into the enduring work of art. This extrapolation of mine is consonant with Walcha's attitude toward improvisation; he was not opposed to subjectivity and certainly not to spontaneity—but these were of the moment, not of eternity. For this reason he did not improvise in concerts—i.e., in the "presence" of finalized masterful works—nor did he authorize the recording, the "eternalization," of any of his thousands of glorious subjective and spontaneous liturgical expressions. Those of us allowed to partake of some of his "greater" ritards or other spontaneous rhythmic "bendings" of the moment, in an inimitable and unrepeatable interaction between him and a particular concert audience, would not ever wish to have missed them—yet nor would most of us desire to have such superimposed upon the documentation he chose to leave behind of his underlying, more objective conception.

In addition to the word *Musiker*, for musician, the German language includes a special word, *Musikant*, for the musician—the performer—who feels and transmits the experience of a beguiling spontaneity. Without any part of a doubt, Walcha was a Musikant as well as a Musiker—yet I can imagine him expressing a view that recordings are not an appropriate place for vagaries of *Musikantentum*. It is quite possible to believe, as many may, that, on the contrary, recordings, like all performance, can justly be about little else. To this premise I presume to venture no comparably axiomatic rejoinder. In departing this field of contention, however, it may be permissible also to pose a question: Is it possible that subjective spontaneous re-interpretations of particular musical passages, such as inevitably emphasize—more than is usual or ultimately justifiable—particular aspects of a work at the expense of others, may, however enchanting at the moment, *when* ***frequently reiterated*** *through the objectification of recording*, be perceived as grating and finally come to stand, rather than as mediators, as **obstacles** between the listener and the sensibility—as embodied in the work—of the composer?

The poet-singer—communication for the ages

In what I hope is only an apparent paradox, I hasten to affirm that of course the poet-singer in this great artist desired, especially in his work as an interpreter, to communicate with the hearts of fellow humans, both in the moment and across the ages. All the salient features of his performance—the singing, sometimes overlapping legato, interrupted by the "breathing" of the pipes simulating the human lung, the pointed staccato, the gravitas of portato, the nuanced virtuosity of leggiero touches, the accentuated highlighting of syncopations and of other rhythmic as well as harmonic tensions, the clear yet sensuous registrations as well as the illumination of form through their changes, the intriguing simultaneity of different articulations, and the "chiselled" or etched identification and re-identification of motivic structures and relationships—were applied to this end. One may differ about the degree of his success, but no one can properly gainsay Walcha the sincerity and intensity of his work toward two goals—of optimal communication with his listeners, and of endurance of the insights he believed to have achieved especially about the music of Bach and the conditions for its fullest realization.

This may be the place for three suggestive and all somewhat surprising quotations. It is no German, but René Saorgin, writing in French in his testimonial (on pg. 199) in the book by Messieurs Coppey and Kunz, who declares that "Helmut Walcha was quite certainly the greatest organist of our time." Lionel Rogg, when I drove him from Kennedy Airport to New Haven some 35 years ago, told me plainly that "Walcha is a great romantic" (I don't believe he meant it with a capital R, but rather that he was referring to the poetic intensity he felt communicated in Walcha's renditions). And the late Robert Baker emerged from Walcha's summer 1963 concert of pre-Bach masters on his then new Karl Schuke church organ to tell me, in considerable excitement, "He's a colorist—like Clarence Dickinson!" (I don't believe Bob really meant quite like Clarence Dickinson—but the colors he surely heard.)

Playing!

While seeking to zero in yet further on "what made Walcha Walcha," it is useful to recall that over the centuries German philosophers—such as Schiller, Nietzsche and H. Marcuse—have repeatedly emphasized the relationship of play, and indeed the playfulness of the child, to the work of the "serious" artist. That art is always, to a significant extent, play, or that the artist's "work" is, itself, a kind of play, was—contrary to a common false impression—well manifested in our subject. He had no children, but he took a lively interest in them, in particular in the children of his friends (e.g., making reference to them in occasional poems he wrote); he had a ready sense of humor, enjoyed funny stories and sported a hearty and infectious laugh; he identified better than many a musician with the more humorous elements in Baroque music, e.g., fresh, somewhat insolent repeated notes, or certain bold leaps, or fast—and jocular—alternating neighboring tones; he understood the provocative

The Dreikönigskirche in Frankfurt/Main (photo by Guy Millet, May 1991; courtesy Jérôme Do Bentzinger)

capriciousness of the *stylus phantasticus* passages in 17th-century music (though the term itself was not yet in common circulation); and he loved and liberally employed the airy playfulness intrinsic to many of the applications of high-pitched, "Baroque" flutes and principals, of mutations such as sundry fifths and thirds, and of bright Zimbel-type mixtures or Tertian combinations. It will be apparent, indeed, that this artist's playfulness plays right on into our next subject.

The Walcha organ

Touring throughout Germany, as well as in the Netherlands, Scandinavia, England and France—and recording on historical organs—Walcha came to know an extraordinary number and variety of instruments. He could master, and more quickly so than most sighted musicians (and—also—later recall!), the intricacies of any console—the precise distance between manuals, the instrument's specifications, and the locations of the stop (and of any combination) mechanisms, and the different structures among the key- and pedal-boards of new and old organs. Most importantly, he could always find, and usually did use—as was said of J. S. Bach—unconventional, hitherto untried combinations of stops, and he thus drew from most instruments sonorities previously unheard and yet uncannily apt for the composition to be realized. He looked always for emotional expression and warmth in addition to the clarity required for following the polyphony, and he certainly displayed no fear of a good tremulant.

By the end of the 1950s, in recognition of his sustained and extraordinary contributions to the cultural life of Frankfurt am Main, the city fathers determined to have built for installation in Helmut Walcha's church an instrument of his own design and specifications. After Walcha, who had an excellent von Beckerath organ at his disposal in the large recital hall of the Hochschule, and who had enjoyed instruments by Karl Schuke in Berlin and elsewhere, apprised the city government that he would find either of these builders suitable for the Dreikönigskirche, the mayor and councillors arrived at a decision to afford special consideration to the delicate needs of the isolated city of West Berlin—i.e., for ongoing political, moral and financial support from West Germany—and thus, all else being equal, to award the commission to West Berlin's Schuke (rather than to von Beckerath, of Hamburg in West Germany).

Following its dedication in 1961, and for the rest of his public musical life, this three-manual Schuke was Walcha's "home" instrument. It is likely that he explored all of his then still current repertoire—notably including many 17th-century works as well as the late(st) works of Bach, including, e.g., the *Art of the Fugue* and the *Musical Offering*'s Six-Part Ricercar—with its resources. And of course he exploited it no end in delicious and brilliant free and chorale-related liturgical improvisations. The organ, while ample for the sympathetic room, was never over-aggressive, and featured a rich pedal palette complemented by a deeply resonant, (relatively) foundation-strong Hauptwerk, a lyrical Oberwerk with Krummhorn, and a bright and playful Brustwerk. Interestingly, however, this latter division includes no principal (a 2′ one would have been "normal") and only a very high mixture, but instead features such (playful!) "gourmet specialties" as a 4′ Quintadena and a 4′ Regal!

I personally have found an interest in such stops elsewhere only in the work of the late M. Searle Wright, coming from a quite different aesthetic—as in his partial revision of the specifications of an organ Edwin Link had assembled and donated to the old chamber hall of S.U.N.Y. in Binghamton, Searle's home town. Though I enjoyed (as did Robert Baker) Walcha's idiosyncratic application of these sonorities in Frankfurt, I would (and recently did, on the Dreikönigs organ in its currently refurbished and very slightly altered condition) not find much use for them for my own musical purposes.

Yon Brustwerk division—by no means all bad!—does represent a triumph of Helmut Walcha's playfulness (and his especially playful relationship to some of other composers' and his own music) over certain organ-structural considerations that, for most other artists, would in the end take precedence . . . That, at least, is the only way that I can understand it. It was/is his instrument—and did/does he not deserve to have (had) it? A monument to playfulness—how many of those are there? ■

This article will be continued.

Notes

1. *Helmut Walcha: Nuit de Lumière* may be ordered directly from the publisher, Jérôme Do Bentzinger, 8, Rue Roesselmann, F-68000 Colmar, France; Tel: 03 89 24 19 74; Fax: 03 89 41 09 57; E-mail: <jerome-do.bentzinger-editeur@wanadoo.fr>.