

From the Dickinson Collection: Reminiscences by Clarence Dickinson, Part 1: 1873–1898

Compiled by Lorenz Maycher

Introduction

The reputation of organist, composer, and educator Clarence Dickinson (1873–1969) has suffered undeserved neglect among American church musicians since the 1950s. By the time he retired as organist-choirmaster of the Brick Church in New York City, changes in taste and style had radically altered what was considered acceptable in church music and organ design. Following Dr. Dickinson's retirement in 1960, the magnificent Skinner organ he played for over forty years was discarded, and his music gradually fell out of favor. Today his music lies largely forgotten. A recent search of a leading used music catalog produced 25 full pages of anthem titles by Clarence Dickinson that had been discarded by church music libraries throughout the country.

As we all know, styles are constantly changing, with one period of music, style of composition, or set of performance practices replaced by the next. Dr. Dickinson himself put the case well in his 1962 speech to the American Choral Directors' Association:

I suppose it is always a little rash to make any predictions about the future, because we seem always to be like the little boy who asked his mother whether the preacher was right when he said that we are dust, and will return to dust. When she said, "Yes," little Johnny asked, "Is that pile of dust under my bed coming or going?"

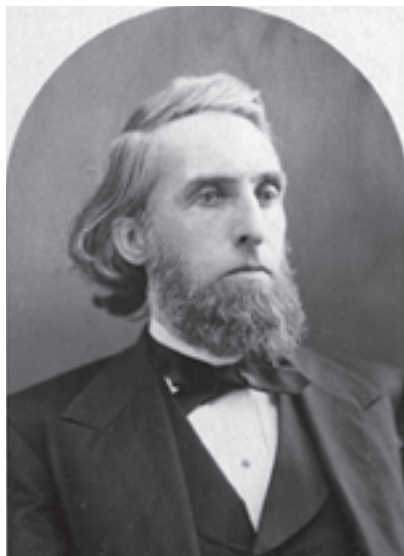
When I was a student in Berlin, Strauss was writing the latest of his tone poems. Heinrich Reimann, my organ teacher, played the first Berlin performance of the Brahms *Chorale Preludes*. When I got to Paris, Debussy was just beginning to be known. I prepared the chorus for a performance of the Beethoven *Ninth Symphony* and *Choral Fantasy* for Mahler in New York, at a time when Mahler's music was considered very advanced. There have been many significant changes since that time.

Our relationship to the repertory of the past will change. Thirty or forty years ago, who would have predicted the fashion for the baroque which seems now to be sweeping this country? I think it is likely that within a generation, only relatively little of this music will be used in churches. By that time, someone will have come up with some new period which captivates the attention of scholars and choirmasters, and then, who knows; we might even develop a mania for Barnby and Buck! I understand that the editor-in-chief of an important German reference work has said that the period which needs most research is the nineteenth—that's right—the nineteenth century. When musicologists start work there, and doctoral dissertations are written about Stainer and his continental counterparts, how the picture of church music will have changed!

Recent trends suggest that the romantic style of music making has returned in full force: new church and concert organs are being built in the romantic tradition, with string divisions, abundant color reeds, and double expression, and the inclusion of romantic transcriptions has become acceptable even on degree recital programs in the major universities. Perhaps now is the time to reconsider Clarence Dickinson, surely one of the most influential figures in American church music in the first half of the twentieth century. This pioneering musician, composer, arranger, author, educator, historian, and concert organist set the standard for generations of church musicians and organists. He served as organist-choirmaster at Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City for over fifty years and was founding director of the School of Sacred Music at Union Theological Seminary and a founding member of the American Guild of Organists. As a composer, Dickinson was a master of form, counterpoint, and heart-felt melody. Working with his equally famous wife and partner, Helen A. Dickinson, he produced an important body of



Clarence Dickinson at the Skinner console, The Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City



Rev. William Cowper Dickinson, D.D., Clarence Dickinson's father, at the time of his pastorate in Lafayette, Indiana

musical research, including hundreds of lectures on church music and music history, and published countless original anthems and historic editions. As his extant recordings reveal, he was also one of the great concert organists, with a dazzling technique and profound sense of color, drama, and musicianship.

Reminiscences, which is compiled from autobiographical sketches and speeches by Dr. Dickinson, is the first installment in a projected series of articles featuring items from Clarence Dickinson's personal library, housed at William Carey University in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. We are very grateful to Patricia Furr and Dr. Gene Winters, of William Carey University, for so generously providing access to this collection and granting permission to publish these important historical documents, preserving the legacy of Clarence and Helen A. Dickinson.

—Lorenz Maycher
Laurel, Mississippi

This matter of age is a queer thing: for a goodly number of years, if you start early, people keep saying "Is it not wonderful that such a young lad can handle a great organ?" Then, through the middle years, when you are working your hardest, they just take it for granted that you do your job. After you hear yourself for the first time referred to as an octogenarian (an awful shock), people say, "Isn't it wonderful that the old boy can handle that great organ at his age?" I thought you might be interested to know how I got started on this road.



Clarence Dickinson as a child



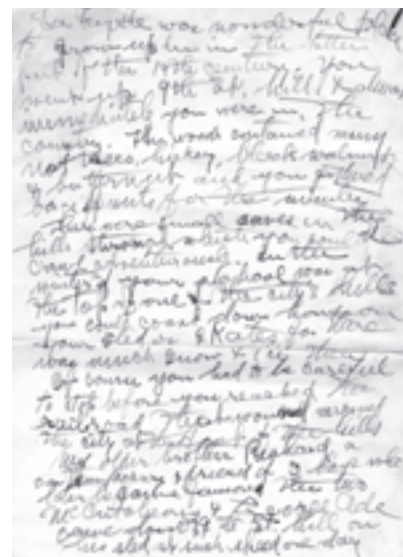
Clarence Dickinson, age 10

Lafayette, Indiana, was a wonderful place for a boy to grow up in the latter part of the nineteenth century: one went up Ninth Street hill and almost immediately found himself in the country. The woods were full of nut trees: hickory, black walnut, and butternut, and it was such fun to gather bags of nuts for the winter. There were small caves in the hills through which you could crawl adventurously. In winter, if your school was at the top of one of the city's hills, you could coast down home on your sled or skates, for there was much snow and ice. Of course, you had to be careful to stop before you reached the railroad track that wound around the city at the foot of the hills. My older brother, Richard, coasted down icy Ninth St. hill on his sled at such speed one day that he could not possibly stop. He arrived at the crossing at the very same moment as a freight train, and slid safely under the moving train, as he was lucky enough to strike the very center of a car. He never told anyone of this adventure until long afterwards, or I feel sure he would have made the first page of the *Courier*.

Many exciting things happened in those days: one was the flood where the water reached the level of the city streets. The old wooden covered bridge was in danger of being swept away. Mr. Goldsmith, the bridge builder, a perfect giant in the eyes of a small boy, was directing its rescue. The men attached a great cable to the bridge and fastened it around a large brick house which stood at the end of the street, so that if the bridge should be

Clarence Dickinson

Clarence Dickinson autograph



Clarence Dickinson handwritten autobiographical sketch, page 1

carried off its stone piers it would swing around alongside the shore and be salvaged. They knocked out a great number of the boards at the sides of the bridge and allowed the water to race through over its floor so that it did not offer much resistance to the raging current. It was not swept away, but it certainly was an exciting sight for a small lad!

We lived in the large Presbyterian brick manse on Columbia Street, which was, in my young judgment, most admirably situated, as all processions passed by the house every summer; the circus parade and the marches at election time, in which men carried swinging gasoline torches, their great wicks giving off light and smoke.

When I was about seven years old I made my first and only business venture. My allowance was 5 cents a week for carrying in kindling wood, and one of my classmates informed me how I could double my income by going down to the *Courier* office in the late afternoon and buying two copies of the paper for a nickel and then selling them for 5 cents apiece. I did this one day all on my own, and was much surprised when my family was not enthusiastic over the venture. It was probably just as well, as the nervous strain of wondering whether I would really recover my initial investment proved rather great for such a young man.

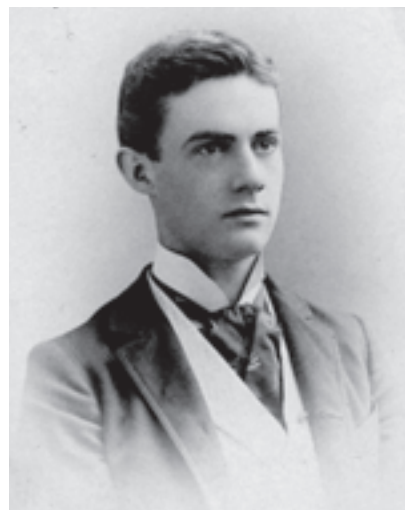
I began piano study with my two older sisters, Martha (Mattie) and Sarah, in those early days. My father, The Rev. William Cowper Dickinson, D.D., was the pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church, and my earliest memory of that church is of the great golden organ pipes standing so imposingly in front of me at my sister's wedding. I suppose my future was settled right then. When I was ten years old, my father accepted a call from the College Hill Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati. It was like going home to him, because he had spent his boyhood in Walnut Hills, Cincinnati. My grandfather, Baxter Dickinson, had moved to Lane Seminary to be associate director of the seminary with Lyman Beecher, so that my father had as playmates Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher (later Stowe), who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Baxter Dickinson had been a professor at Auburn Theological Seminary, where he wrote a very famous paper called the "Auburn Declaration," which separated the church into the old school and new school, the conservative and the advanced. He lived to see the two churches unite on that same basis—the old church had caught up with the new. When I



Rev. Baxter Dickinson, Clarence Dickinson's grandfather



Clarence Dickinson, age 15



Clarence Dickinson, October 1891



Harrison M. Wild



Ye Little Old Folkes' Concerte, 1886

came to the Brick Church and sat down at the piano in the room that served as social room and chapel. I looked up at a picture over my head, and there was my grandfather standing on the steps of the old Church of the Covenant, which later became a part of the Brick Church, at the assembly which brought the two churches together.

In the summer of 1883, our church in College Hill was just putting in a new organ, and since the manse was next to the church, I was kept busy watching the erection of the organ. I spent all my time watching this, and learned much about the organ. I "helped" in various ways, occasionally pumping the wind into it for tuning, and part of the time holding the keys down for the tuning. When the men were away, I would pump the organ full of wind and race around to the front and play till the wind gave. I had a terrible time trying to decide whether to play for a couple of minutes on the softest stop or whether to have a great burst of glory with full organ for a few seconds. When the day came for the dedication of the new organ, a famous organist came up from Cincinnati and found this lad performing this act. He very kindly went around to the rear of the organ and pumped for me, so for the first time I could finish my piece. It was a very kind and wonderful thing for a great artist to do, and I doubt whether, in all my life, I have ever had a more exciting experience.

Soon after, I was allowed to play some of the Christian Endeavor services on the small organ in the chapel, and came to know the hymn book very well, as my father was rather strict, allowing no secular music to be played on Sunday. I was studying piano, and enjoyed the Mozart and Clementi sonatinas, but I gloried especially in a little book of operatic transcriptions my older sister had left behind when she married, enjoying immensely the showy arpeggios and splashy effects, in *Martha*, for instance. When I was twelve, I made my debut as a pianist and conductor in the Town Hall wearing little old folks' concert dress. There I sat with my ruffled shirt, blue velvet coat, and white curly wig, conducting a chorus of children and the "orchestra," which consisted of a piano and one violin.

When I was fourteen, in June 1887, my

father retired, and we all went to California to live in Pasadena for ten months, where I grew 10 inches in 10 months, a good advertisement for the California climate. It happened that we took our dinners at the same boarding house as the quartet of the First Presbyterian Church, a church which has remained famous for its music ever since. By this time I had learned to play the piano well, and when the quartet, which included the beautiful soprano soloist, Mae Staats, was asked to sing after dinner, I was the only one who could play for them. This was a wonderful opportunity for me to learn all the well-known solos, duets, and quartets. (Years later, when Mrs. Dickinson and I were holding music conferences in the three universities—University of Los Angeles, University of California, LA, and Occidental College—notices of the conferences were in all the papers. I received a letter from Mae Staats in Northern California asking, "Were you the little boy who used to play for me so many years ago?")

But it happened that my best friend was going to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and he persuaded me to join him there in the preparatory school, which had just reopened after being closed from the Civil War to that year. Here I had the good fortune of being appointed University Organist at age fifteen, gaining my first experience in playing major services and accompanying anthems. This was an exciting winter because my friend and I occupied the room General Harrison had occupied when he was there, and this was the fall in which he was elected President of the United States.

The president of the college, President Warfield, started athletics that year, and we all had to play. I played on the scrub football team against the real

team, on which the faculty played. One chilly afternoon, with players swarming the field, President Warfield, who was six feet, four inches tall, broke through the line, knocking men right and left, till I was the only one between him and the goal! I can still hear the spares yelling, "Hold him, Dickie! Hold him!"—but he knocked me sprawling. My friend unfortunately gave the mathematics professor a black eye during one game, and he was flunked owing to that black eye. I barely passed with the lowest successful mark possible.

When the year was over I joined my family in Evanston, Illinois, and entered Northwestern University in the fall of 1890 as the youngest member of a class of 125. When I showed my bad mark to the professor of mathematics at Northwestern, I was told I should have to take that course again. This was disheartening, as it was the one course in which I had no interest. Nevertheless, I attended the first meeting of the class. The professor finished with an amusing story, which he thought very, very funny. Naturally we all laughed uproariously, and while he was almost choking with laughter at his own joke, I shoved my application under his hand, and he signed it without putting on his glasses. You have all seen the play "How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying." This shows you how to enter college with one bad mark!

I had started a classical course, in line with what most of my ancestors and relatives had done, with the idea of becoming a professor of Greek and Latin. But I was still interested in music, so right away I got an appointment as organist of a small church in Evanston—the South Presbyterian—and began the study of organ in earnest with Professor Cutler,

organist of the First Methodist Church, of which I became the organist quite a number of years later for a short time, following Peter Lutkin. With the experience I had, it did not take me long to eat up the instruction book which Prof. Cutler gave me, and when I asked, "What next?" he replied, "You should have some Bach." I said, "What shall I get?" He said, "Oh, get Volume I of Bach's works in the Peters edition." Bach's Volume I contains the six organ sonatas which he wrote to complete the education of his son, Friedemann Bach. It was like being thrown into deep water and being told to swim. But I was always thankful, because when later I came to study the big preludes and fugues, they all seemed comparatively simple and easy.

At the Methodist church in Evanston, I not only practiced and years later became organist and choirmaster, but made my debut as a concert organist after only three months of study—a great occasion, naturally, for a young lad, but why it called for the purchase of my first stiff Derby hat, I do not know, as I could not wear it at the console. My number came in the middle of the program, so I sat in the front pew, and, when the time came for me to play, I left my new Derby, the pride of my heart, on the seat to keep my place. The audience was kind, and I returned to my seat during generous applause, feeling quite elated, but lost all consciousness of the pleasant sound when, to my horror, I saw what seemed to me the largest woman I had ever seen sitting in my place. "But where is my hat?" I cried. "I ain't seen no 'at," was the reply. I finally persuaded her to rise, and there it was, my precious Derby, crushed flat as a pancake, never to rise again! A lesson for life: you may have as many as three successes in a row,

St Giles without Cripplegate, London



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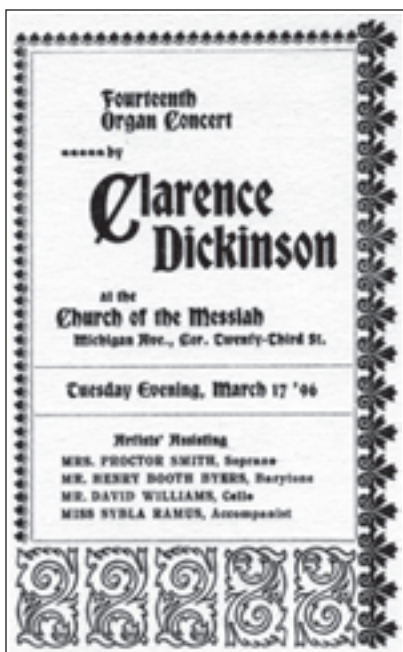
The new organ for St Giles Cripplegate was inaugurated to a full church by a wide ranging recital played by Thomas Trotter on the 1st of April. It has mechanical key and pedal actions and electric drawstop action with some unique features to assist visually impaired players. Although of modest specification, the organ is proving very versatile and quite capable of leading the choir and a full congregation.

GREAT ORGAN	SWELL ORGAN	PEDAL ORGAN
Open Diapason 8	Gedackt 8	Bourdon 16
Stopped Diapason 8	Principal 4	Principal 8
Principal 4	Chimney Flute 4	Trumpet 8
Fifteenth 2	Recorder 2	
Mixture IV 1 1/3	Sesquialtera II 2 2/3	
Trumpet 8	Oboe 8	
	Tremulant	

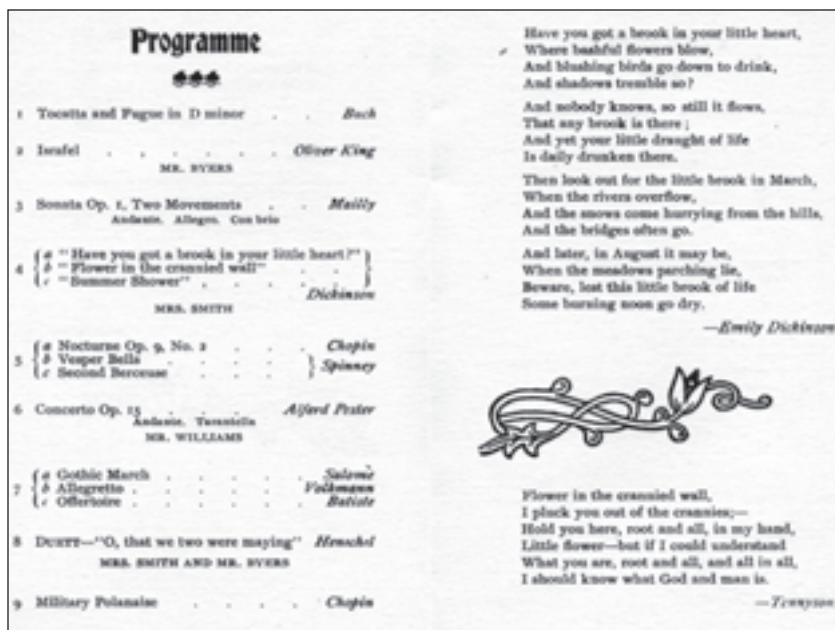
► St. Peter's Square - London E 2 7AF - England
[t] +44 (0) 20 7739 4747 - [f] +44 (0) 20 7729 4718 - [e] ManderUK@mander-organs.com

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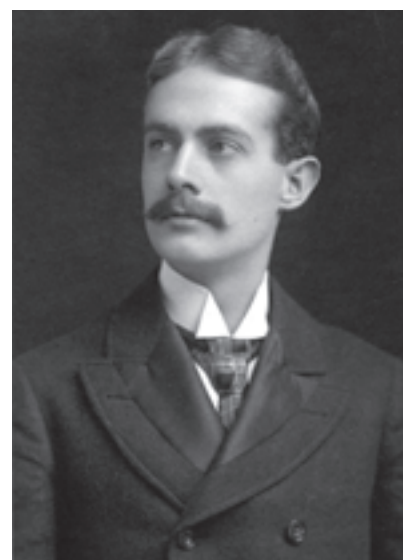
MANDER ORGANS



Program cover, March 17, 1896



Program for March 17, 1896 recital at Church of the Messiah, Chicago, including Mrs. Proctor Smith's performance of three Clarence Dickinson songs



Clarence Dickinson, 1895

but then comes the inevitable "bump" to bring you down to earth again.

Organ study was quite expensive, because I not only had to pay \$1.50 for a lesson, but I had to pay \$.10 an hour to a pumper. My pumper was what we called a "Bib," that is, a student at Garrett Biblical Institute of Northwestern University. He was a solemn young man, and would pump with his right hand and read a book held in his left. If I pulled out too many stops, he would quit pumping and come to the front of the organ, gazing at me very reproachfully over his glasses, so I would have to withdraw the larger stops.

The organ pumper was a very important being in those days. Dr. Isaac Woodbury, of Boston, the writer of some of our well-known hymns, used to speak of his pumper as a very skillful inflator of the bellows. If he did not pump steadily, he could spoil your playing by letting the wind run down, then pump fast and furiously to fill the bellows again, thus shaking the tone. When I was growing up in College Hill, we were fortunate to have the village blacksmith as our pumper. He was used to blowing up the bellows with one hand and then striking the red-hot horseshoe on the anvil, which made it very easy for him to pump steadily.

I remember substituting in a Baptist church one summer when vacationing from my own church. The morning service was quite exciting because they had baptisms. The leader of the choir would take hold of my coat tails, and as the victim stepped into the water, he would pull my coat tail very gently, gradually harder and harder, until he gave a sharp pull and I would come out with full organ to hide the splash.

This was summer, and the evening service was very quiet. After the sermon, I gave the signal to the blower for the concluding hymn, but there was no response, even after a second vigorous bump on the board which a certain stop struck. So I had to get off the bench, go back and wake up the young lad. He came to, saying, "I was just sneaking a little snooze."

The best blower I have ever known was in Dublin. I naturally was anxious to see the organ that Handel played when he gave the first performance of the *Messiah*, so I went to that church. It was locked, but I found a reluctant sexton who opened the door. When I asked to see the organ, he said, "We never show the organ." I told him I had come all the way from America just to see the organ that Handel had played. So he finally unlocked the organ console and said, "Of course, no one is allowed to play this organ except the organist of this church." I sat down and put my hands on the keys, while he objected. I said, "I only want to see how hard the action is in this old tracker organ." Then I pulled out a few stops, saying, "I just want to see how far one has to pull them. Sometimes they are very long in these old organs." Suddenly the organ gave forth sound. He looked as though he had seen a ghost and dashed around to the rear of the organ. There

was Mrs. Dickinson, pumping away. So he finally relented and said, "What's the use of fighting these Americans." He took over the pump handle so that I could play some of the *Messiah* and one of the concertos of Handel which I hoped might have been the one Handel played between the parts of the oratorio. When we came away, I gave him an extravagant tip and we parted good friends.

In my first position, at South Presbyterian Church of Evanston, where I was organist from 1890 to 1892, I received what was to me a fine salary; \$100 for the first year. The second year they raised it to \$10.00 a month.

In 1892, I saw an advertisement in a newspaper, "Organist Wanted," for a big church in Chicago, Church of the Messiah, where they had just installed a beautiful Roosevelt organ, the most up-to-date in the city, with an electric blower, making it possible to play as long as one wanted. I applied for the job and got it. There I met a lady, Mrs. Proctor Smith, who immediately took an interest in me. She insisted that I must devote myself to music, and worked on me for hours, trying to convince me that I had enough natural ability to devote my life to it. She also later secured a \$3,000 loan for my study abroad, and practically forced me to try my hand at writing music. So the Greek professorship went out the window. Mrs. Smith knew a great deal about art, poetry, and music, and put an interest in it all in me. She possessed a beautiful soprano voice, and studied in London, and later in Boston with the great singer and conductor, George Henschel, conductor of the London Philharmonic, and later, for one year, to get it started, the Boston Symphony. With such teaching, and her own natural feeling for the text, as well as the music, she was a wonderful interpreter, and so was the great inspiration of my young life. I dedicated my first set of songs, set to poems by my cousin, Emily Dickinson, to Mrs. Proctor Smith. These were written when the discovery and publication of Emily Dickinson's poems was still creating much excitement and discussion.

It was at Church of the Messiah, where I was organist from 1892 to 1897, that I gave what was the first entire organ recital from memory, an innovation that called for much comment for and against. Clarence Eddy, internationally known as the leading organist of America, had brought up a pupil, Harrison M. Wild, to be a rival in Chicago. Although I substituted occasionally for Mr. Eddy, I was attracted more by Wild's playing, and so studied with him. He gave a series of Sunday afternoon concerts to large audiences, and occasionally asked me to play a group of pieces.

When a young German organist, Wilhelm Middelschulte, arrived in Chicago, friendless and moneyless, he came to Wild for help. Wild secured for him a good position as organist of a leading Catholic church, and invited him to play a group of numbers on his recital series. Middelschulte played these from memory! Wild then said to me, "This will become the

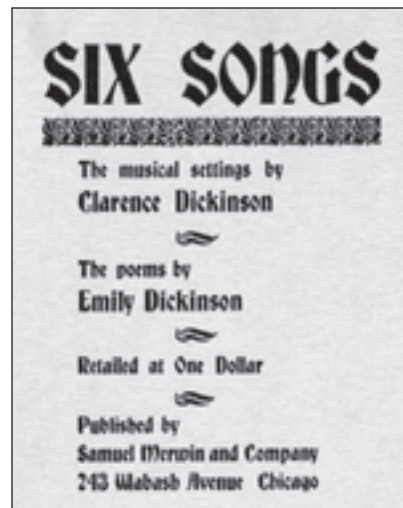
custom, I am sure. Get busy and play your first recital from memory." I did.

Clarence Eddy attended the first half of the recital. He left at intermission, and the *Tribune* critic came in. The *Tribune* critic gave me a very enthusiastic review, insisting I played much more freely and better, not being hampered by notes. The next Sunday paper published a letter from Clarence Eddy, saying that my playing from memory had been a mistake—that there were so many things to attend to on an organ that I was nervous, and I would have played much better if I had had a score before me. All very true, and his presence did not help! But, by the time he left, and the critic entered, my nervousness had disappeared. Other leading organists wrote to the *Tribune*, and the discussion was carried on in the New York Sunday papers, all this to explain why I was the youngest organist asked to be one of the founding members of the AGO. It was at this time that John Hyatt (High Hat) Brewer, a very fine and quite pompous organist, came out from New York to organize the Chicago Chapter of the Guild.

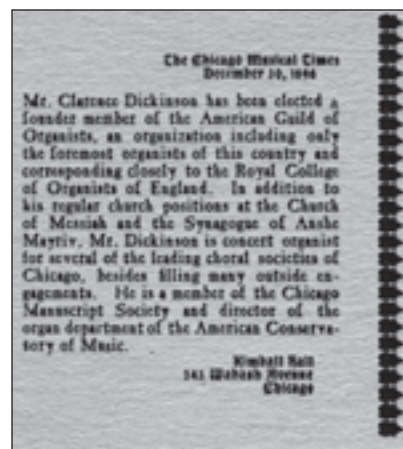
Church of the Messiah closed for two months every summer. By great good luck I became the substitute organist for the summer months at the services of First Church of Christ, Scientist, substituting for Frederick Root, who, with his father, wrote many of the songs of the Civil War. The church held its meetings in the Chicago Auditorium, with its great five-manual Roosevelt organ, giving the young college boy a chance to amuse himself with what you would call "romantic registration." This organ had the first crescendo pedal, which was an enormous barrel with projecting metal tabs which struck other tabs as it revolved and drew the stops in succession. This was really comparable to a music box on a tremendous scale.

It is interesting to see how inventions develop: when I was a student in Berlin, young Josef Hofmann, the brilliant pianist, was much interested in inventions, and asked me over to see his latest. Foolishly, I did not go. You all know one: he made a device for orchestral players to turn their music, controlled by the foot. The Boston Symphony adopted it for one season, but Hofmann made a great deal of money by later turning it into the windshield wiper for automobiles.

After five years at the Church of the Messiah, in June 1897, I moved over to St. James Episcopal Church—now Cathedral—for one year as organist. Then my friends insisted that I must go abroad to study. One of the older vocal teachers had been kind to me in Chicago, and having learned of my proposed trip, took me to supper at Theodore Thomas's home after the Saturday night orchestra concert. Mr. Thomas, the conductor, very kindly gave me some important introductions to great musicians. He was in a good mood and reminisced with a number of amusing stories. The one I remember particularly was the one about the trombonist and the tympanist. The trombonist had



Cover of Clarence Dickinson's Six Songs, poems by Emily Dickinson, dedicated to Mrs. Proctor Smith, published in 1897



A publicity brochure from 1896

borrowed \$10.00 from the tympanist and had been very slow in returning it. The tympanist importuned him very strongly, and the trombonist said, "I'll pay you Saturday night." Just before the tympanist was to play a very long roll, the trombonist turned around and began tossing pennies across the drums which, of course, bounced high in the air and made a continuous shower, to the amusement of the audience as well as the orchestra. It must have been a great sight.

To be continued

Lorenz Maycher is organist-choirmaster at First-Trinity Presbyterian Church in Laurel, Mississippi. His interviews with William Teague, Thomas Richner, Nora Williams, Albert Russell, and Robert Town have appeared in THE DIAPASON.