

2008 AGO National Convention in Minnesota: The Twin Cities

Larry Palmer

Expensive as national conventions of the American Guild of Organists have become, it was still a bargain to be in eastern Minnesota enjoying an extensive program of musical treasures from France, England, and Germany, without the financial challenges of elevated euros or precious pounds. Add the Twin Cities advantages of near-perfect cool summer weather, many events scheduled within walking distance of the central city hotels, and a well-organized charter bus transport package available for travel to sites farther away, for further incentives to participate in the morning-to-midnight musical marathon detailed in the lavish (and heavy) 252-page program book.

Each of the nearly 1800 registrants attending the AGO's 49th biennial gathering (held June 22–28 in Minneapolis and St. Paul) will have unique impressions of the meeting, based not only on individual tastes, but also on which of the presentations were heard. Many recitals and all workshops were offered concurrently. This report describes what I chose to experience, in this, my 50th year of attending such national meetings. Comments about several events I did not attend are treated as "convention buzz."

From France: Messiaen Plus

France was represented with quite a lot of music by Olivier Messiaen: it is, after all, the centennial year of his birth. The first organ recital heard on Monday, the first full day of the convention, was played by **Stephen Tharp**, who gave a masterful account of Messiaen's *Messe de la Pentecôte* as the climax of his all-French program on the bright and forthright 2001 Lively-Fulcher organ in St. Olaf Catholic Church. Tharp's brilliant playing recalled again the visceral shock of this music when first encountered at Oberlin, presented by Fenner Douglass as very recent music. Even now it is not possible to hear the most evocative and accessible movement of the cycle, the Communion *Les Oiseaux et les Sources* (*The Birds and the Springs*) without remembering Douglass's trenchant, if acidic, review of a 1972 performance in a non-reverberant Dallas sanctuary: "The birds . . . called out weakly as they died on the branch, and the drops of water more resembled curds of old cottage cheese."¹

I suspect the late, lamented Professor Douglass would have been happier with Tharp's account! This time the birds sang jubilantly and chirped ecstatically before flying off into the stratosphere, while the springs burred gently as they descended to subterranean depths at the piece's ending.

Following a riveting performance of the final movement from Widor's *Symphonie Romane* and works by Jeanne Demessieux, the Mass served as a bracing reminder of just how much hearing a dose of Messiaen's organ music helps to balance some of the pabulum so often served up as modern church music. But it does remain difficult listening, and oft times more fun to play than to hear. Tellingly, a perusal of the entire convention program revealed no other organ works by Messiaen listed for performance during the entire week! For National Young Artist Competition in Organ Performance [NYACOP] contestants, for the Rising Stars organists, as well as for more established recitalists, the French notes of choice were most often penned by Langlais, Dupré, or Naji Hakim.

. . . at Orchestra Hall

Kudos to the convention program committee for making certain that nearly everyone got some exposure to works by one of the 20th century's most eminent masters when the entire convention attended the most discussed program at



Opening celebration, Central Lutheran Church, Minneapolis (photo credit: R. Levy Photography)



Stephen Tharp at St. Olaf Catholic Church, Minneapolis (photo credit: R. Levy Photography)

Orchestra Hall on Tuesday evening. All-Messiaen, the concert contained no organ music at all (not surprising, since there is no organ in this major symphonic space); live music was followed by a post-concert showing of Paul Festa's mesmerizing 52-minute documentary film, *Apparition of the Eternal Church*.

For more than two hours the assembled church musicians and organists heard readings of three poems by the composer's mother Cécile Sauvage and secular pieces by Messiaen, performed almost exclusively by women. These were all early works: *Theme and Variations* for violin and piano, 1932; voice (selections from *Poèmes pour Mi*, (1936); three of the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* for solo piano (1944); and, best of all, two of the eight movements from the composer's chamber masterwork, *Quartet for the End of Time* (1940–41)—*Abyss of the Birds* for solo clarinet; and the final eight-minute transcendent *Praise to the Immortality of Jesus*, for violin and piano—performed with maximum expressivity and intensity by clarinetist Jennifer Gerth and violinist Stephanie Arado with Judy Lin, piano.

Programming the 35-minute closing piece, *Festival of Beautiful Waters* (1937) for a sextet of Ondes Martenots, provided a probable once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to hear this work expertly played by L'Ensemble d'Ondes Martenot de Montréal. The delicate electronic instruments, their sounds inspired by the changing frequencies of radio dials, produced tones somewhat like Benjamin Franklin's eerie glass harmonicas (tuned water goblets). Capable of playing only single notes, the keyboard instruments have considerable dynamic and touch-sensitive possibilities. The audience dwindled markedly as the clock approached ten, and passed it: sad, because the short explanation and demon-

stration of the Ondes Martenots following the performance was both instructive and charming.

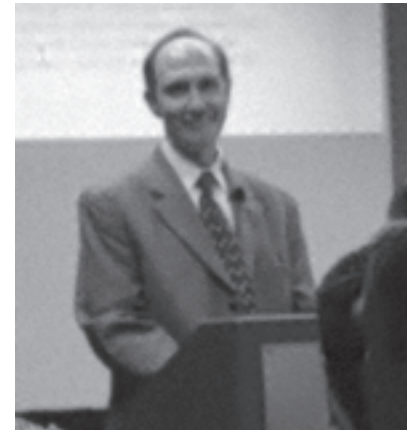
I missed the first part of the subsequent film showing while attending a posh Eastman Organ Department reception in the Orchestra Hall Green Room, an especially celebratory event since the first place NYACOP winner this year was current Eastman doctoral student Michael Unger. Something—perhaps as simple as not wishing to walk back alone to my hotel—led me to look in on the film in progress. I stood, totally engrossed, for the remaining third (arriving just as the late harpsichordist Albert Fuller described an early life-changing experience in the low C pipe of Washington Cathedral's Skinner pipe organ. The unexpected sight and story grabbed my attention!).

A program book disclaimer read, "Please note that the film deals frankly with sex and violence in explicit language . . . However, DVDs are available for sale [at an Exhibition booth], should curiosity get the better of you afterwards." The filmmaker, Paul Festa, writing of his creation, explained that Messiaen regarded one of four tragedies, or "dramas" of his life experience, to have been that "he was a religious composer writing, for the most part, for nonbelievers." This film concerns "what . . . the nonbelievers see when they hear his music," in this case the 1931 organ composition *Apparition of the Eternal Church*. The film shows responses to Messiaen's creation by 31 individuals. They range from Yale professor Harold Bloom and filmmaker John Cameron Mitchell to fringe culture and drag figures, as well as Fuller and the composer Richard Felciano, a student of the French composer.²

. . . and in workshops

Messiaen's music was the featured topic for a pedagogy track during the workshops, a new concept implemented to replace the pre-convention pedagogy workshops of previous years. **Charles Tompkins** filled in as master teacher for the indisposed Clyde Holloway. His "Windows on Lessons" featured students Brent te Velde (Trinity University), Tyrell Lundman (University of Montana, Missoula), Julie Howell, and Erin MacGowan Moore (both from the University of Iowa).

Youthful scholarship was represented in two juried papers, selected by the AGO Committee on Continuing Professional Education (COPE). I attended the presentation by Yale student **Christopher White**—"Creating a Narrative in Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur*"—in which he assigned certain extra-musical associations to various individual pitches and chords (an example: E=Jesus,



John Near lectures on Widor

E Major=Jesus on earth, as human) and made a convincing case for such an analysis of Messiaen's nine-movement Christmas cycle. The University of Iowa's **David Crean** followed with a complex discussion of "Messiaen's Sixty-four Durations" (from the extraordinarily complex *Livre d'Orgue*, possibly the composer's most abstract organ work).

Indiana University faculty member **Christopher Young** gave a workshop on "Understanding the Theory Behind the Art in Messiaen's Organ Works." However, it may have been the quiet mysticism of the Frenchman's lush Communion motet *O Sacrum Convivium*, sung as the opening work at Thursday's finale concert, that made the most friends for Messiaen's elusive art.

A fully subscribed workshop (on a non-Messiaen topic) was musicologist **John Near's** "The Essence of Widor's Teaching: Interpretive Maxims." I arrived slightly after the appointed starting time, learning later that I had missed a brief recorded example of Widor's voice! Pithy exhortations from the composer—"Let's learn to breathe," "Derive tempo from the space in which you are performing," and an oft-repeated "Slow down" (borne out by each subsequent lowering of the metronomic indications for the composer's signature work, the *Symphonie V Toccata*) as well as his instruction to "Respect the work, not the performer"—all ring as true today as they did in the previous century! Dr. Near, currently working on a biography of Widor to complement his stellar editions of the composer's organ symphonies, continues to do service to our profession by reminding us of the basic root values underpinning the French symphonic tradition. Nearly all the auditors stayed on to engage in further questions and comments.

A French recitalist

French organist **Marie-Bernadette Duforcet Hakim's** opening de Grigny *Ave Maria Stella* was more effective than a jolt of double-strength espresso as a wake-up aid for her early-morning recital on the House of Hope's large C. B. Fisk *magnum opus*. This organ's *Grands jeux*, weighty, noble, and thrilling, provided a filling mass of sound in this Presbyterian Gothic edifice, which unfortunately lacks an extra five seconds of reverberation that would allow the loud and brilliant organ to bloom. That virtual coffee may have had an adverse effect on the recitalist, resulting in an overly brisk tempo for Franck's *Pièce Héroïque* (after all the composer did mark it *Allegro maestoso*). Mme Hakim's nuanced performance was stylistic, but any majesty was decidedly of the jet age. It seemed perverse, as well, to be hearing this beloved Romantic work on such unforgetting sounds, when directly before us stood the sanctuary's other organ, an 1878 instrument by Merklin, created in exactly the same year and country as Franck's composition.



Merklin organ at House of Hope Presbyterian Church (photo credit: R. Levy Photography)

Like most fine instruments, the Fisk took on the character of its player and served her especially well in her own composition *Vent Oblique*. After hearing an abundance of bright upperwork, it gave pleasant aural relief to encounter warm and lovely 8-foot sounds in the mid section of Jean Langlais' *Jésus, mon Sauveur béni*, based on a hymn popular in his native Brittany. The program concluded with a set of well-crafted short variations on *Pange lingua* by husband Naji Hakim, and an improvisation that seemed to be based on the *Ave Maris*, but with an unexpected appearance, near the end, of the hymn tune *Ein feste Burg* as an offering, apparently, to the many Lutherans who call Minnesota their home.

English visitors

From St. Paul's Cathedral, London, the choir of men and boys was in residence for three convention appearances, repeating a highly successful visit to the 1980 national meeting in the Twin Cities. **Mark Williams**, a former assistant sub-organist and director of music at the Cathedral School, stood in as the choir's conductor, replacing an indisposed Andrew Carwood. Visually arresting in black cassocks, with bright red stoles and music folders, all seemed in good shape chorally (save for the occasional trumpeting tenor), and organist **Tom Winpenny** displayed his sensitive musicianship over and over again, both as soloist and impeccable choir accompanist.

The Monday evening concert took place in the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul—the most apt of venues, a magnificent 1907 Wren-like domed structure blessed with ample reverberation. Major offerings of early English motets by Weelkes, Peter Phillips, Orlando Gibbons, and the *Mass for Five Voices* by William Byrd were interspersed with organ works: *Fantasia in G* by Byrd, and the *Fantasia of Foure Parts* from *Parthenia* by Orlando Gibbons. The cross relations in these Tudor pieces sounded forth pungently from the three-stop portative organ in the chancel.

Employing the cathedral's gallery and chancel organs for maximum surround sound, the second part of the concert offered Judith Bingham's *Cloth'd in Holy Robes* (2005), an entirely engrossing and striking setting of a poem by Edward Taylor, with spinning wheel-evoking accompaniment supporting both the



St. Paul's Cathedral Choir, London (photo credit: R. Levy Photography)



Tom Winpenny

opening lines and subsequent allegorical references to clothing in this beautiful text. Anthems by Gerald Hendrie (*Ave Verum Corpus*, sung by the men of the choir) and Stephen Paulus (*Arise, My Love*) were separated by Paulus's challenging *Toccata for Organ*, given an absolutely flawless and viscerally exciting performance by young Mr. Winpenny, who then returned to his accompanying duties for Benjamin Britten's cantata *Rejoice in the Lamb*, a performance made particularly memorable by the male treble soloists in the fourth and fifth sections. "For I will consider my cat Geoffrey" and "For the Mouse is a creature of great personal valour."

Is there anything more sublime in Britten's choral output than the quiet "Hallelujah" that ends this memorable setting of Christopher Smart's idiosyncratic poetry? It provided an inspired conclusion to an enchanting concert.

Back on the other side of the river, the choir sang both Matins and Evensong in the Minneapolis Basilica of St. Mary. The afternoon program on Tuesday gave us baroque music of John Blow (*Cornet Voluntary in D Minor*) and his prize pupil Henry Purcell (*Hear My Prayer*, the anthem *Jehova Quam Multi Sunt Hostes Mei*, and *Evening Service in G Minor*) with responses by Thomas Tomkins. The hymn, Bishop Thomas Ken's 1695 text "All praise to Thee, my God, this night" was sung to the familiar *Tallis' Canon* tune (for one retrospect of the Renaissance), the psalm to a 20th-century chant

by Walford Davies, and the closing voluntary brought us back to the baroque with music by Purcell's Danish contemporary, Dieterich Buxtehude, his oft-played *Praeludium in G Minor*, BuxWV 149, in a stylish, virtuoso performance by Winpenny. The basilica was overflowing with rapt conventioners who had arrived by bus before our walking group made it to the church. Seated in a far rear pew that was probably in another zip code, it was difficult to hear much except a soothing, but beautiful, wash of reverberated sound.

Matins, early the next day, was quite another matter (conventioners like to party till the wee hours, so there were only a third as many worshipping at this morning service). I found a pew with good sight lines only several rows back from the chancel; both sound and repertory were worth the early rising! A full program of British 20th-century cathedral music, from Herbert Howells's *Rhapsody in D-flat*, complete with a seamless decrescendo at its conclusion; Edward Bairstow's *I Sat Down Under His Shadow*, the ecstasy of Bernard Rose's responses, one of William Walton's most inspired canticle settings, *Jubilate Deo* for double chorus (who would not be joyful in the Lord with such music as this?), and the somewhat less inspired, but serviceable *Te Deum in G* of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Elgar's *The Spirit of the Lord* was the anthem, its extended organ introduction beautifully rendered, and the service concluded with organist Winpenny's brilliant traversal of Fernando Germani's *Toccata*, opus 12. That evening the Londoners flew back to Britain, these three convention appearances their sole purpose for the trip across the Atlantic.

Otherworldly Holst

What a gem of an organist is **Peter Sykes**! Perhaps even better, what a fine musician, whatever instrument he plays or music he chooses to program!³ His own transcription of Gustav Holst's orchestral suite *The Planets* was beautifully made and impeccably realized in a Wednesday recital at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral. From the lowest rumblings of the opening movement (*Mars, the Bringer of War*), with growling reeds and a flawless quick crescendo, to the final *Vox Humana* above strings (a most satisfactory sound for evoking Holst's wordless female chorus) as *Neptune, the Mystic* subsided in echoes of the spheres, Sykes missed nary a nuance with his clever use of organs fore and aft (perhaps most fittingly in *Mercury, the Winged Messenger*). The Welte/Möller/Gould and Sons organ was an apt partner (continuing this convention's fine record for careful pairing of instruments and players), but then, how could one go wrong with an instrument possessing a Divine Inspiration stop?⁴



Elke Voelker at the Basilica of St. Mary, Minneapolis (photo credit: R. Levy Photography)

A welcome German recitalist and some Americans playing German music

My second recital of the convention introduced an outstanding German artist new to me, **Elke Voelker** (whose U.S. connections include study with Wolfgang Rübsam at the University of Chicago). Ms. Voelker is the first to record the complete organ works of Sigfrid Karg-Elert. Her program in the Basilica of St. Mary utilized a good-sounding four-manual Wicks organ (1949), greatly enhanced by the spacious six-second reverberation of this domed, marble-interior building, America's first basilica (according to pew cards in the church). Two major works by Karg-Elert, his *Symphonic Chorale: Ach, bleib' mit deiner Gnade* and the monumental *Passacaglia (55 Variations) and Fugue on BACH*, opus 150, were flanked by Wagner's *Festival Music from Die Meistersinger* and Bach's celebrated *Air from Suite in D*, BWV 1068, both in arrangements by Karg-Elert: so, in essence an entire program of music by the German impressionist.

Elke Voelker made convincing music from these many notes, handling the organ with panache and ease, managing her own page turns, and giving us many thrilling moments. The opening Wagner brought chills to the spine at the pedal entrances in familiar music from the opera, and the addition of the Chamade Trumpet to the final chord was a capping effect. The *Symphonic Chorale*, one of the composer's better-known works, is of a reasonable length and very appealing. As for the lengthy BACH work, I am pleased to have heard it, but would not seek to repeat the experience in the near future.

Further musical highlights of this "German theme" were provided by the sterling American artist **Stewart Wayne Foster** (winner of the first Dallas International Organ Competition). I have never heard Foster play poorly, and his concert for the convention (heard in its second iteration on Thursday) was another example of superb results made possible by his carefully calibrated articulation always employed in service to the musical line. Foster's attention to each voice, including the bass, reflects his extensive background in harpsichord continuo playing.

Partnered with the 2004 Glatter-Götz/Rosales two-manual organ of 50 stops, Foster showed what a small number of keyboards could be made to accomplish with skillful use of a sequencer coupled to an ear for color and utilizing stops in various octaves. Karg-Elert again, this time three of his lovely *Pastels from the Lake of Constance* (not necessarily what one would expect to be played so idiomatically on a two-manual tracker instrument) were prefaced by an attention-gripping reading of Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in G Minor*, BWV 535, and

1184 Woodland St. SW, Hartsville, Ohio 44632
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Rachel Laurin at the University of St. Thomas (photo credit: R. Levy Photography)

a rhythmically infectious treatment of Buxtehude's baroque dance-based chorale fantasy on *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, brightened with two appearances of the *Zimbelstern*, the second as counterpart to an improvised cadenza leading into the final cadence.

Three North American works, especially *Rising Sun* by Brian Sawyers, provided the "wow" factor for this program. It was good also to hear two of Samuel Adler's *Windsongs*, and the winning work of the AGO organ composition competition, Canadian Rachel Laurin's *Prelude and Fugue in F Minor*, with its reminiscence of the Dupré opus 7 work in the same key. Foster's overall theme for the program, "Atmospheres: A Prayer for the Environment," demonstrated his special affinity for unusual thematic programming. The organ, with both 16-foot flues and reeds on all divisions, and added 10½ flue and 32-foot reed in the pedal, possessed a gravitas that was welcome in the favorable acoustic of Augustana Lutheran Church, St. Paul.

More German offerings were, of course, to be found in various convention programs. One could characterize

Carla Edwards's program as Germanic (Buxtehude, Bach), or German-inspired (Planyavsky's lively *Toccata alla Rumba*, neatly dispatched on the recent two-manual Fisk organ in Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Shoreview; and Petr Eben's astringent take on the ubiquitous *Prelude, Fugue and Chaconne in C*, his *Hommage à Dietrich Buxtehude*). A non-Teutonic exception was provided in *Triptych of Fugues*, an early work by Gerald Near. Though Minnesota-born, Near seems often to be curiously under-represented in programs featuring Minnesota composers. His three lovely contrapuntal movements were played here without the requisite suppleness of line needed for this composer's idiosyncratic amalgam of lyricism with strict fugal form.

And, of course, the convention buzzed about Cameron Carpenter's version of THE *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, an arrangement using selected added material from Romantic-era transcriptions by Busoni, Friedman, Godowsky, Grainger, Liszt, Tausig, Stokowski, and Sir Henry Wood, that turned the possibly-not-by-Bach work into a "... sort of cumulative celebration flinging wide the gates of possibility."⁵ I did not hear Mr. Carpenter's program (there were simply too many concerts in one day), but his awesome technical prowess and showman's style may mark a return to "the good old days" of the Virgil Fox versus E. Power Biggs opposites in America's concert life. Carpenter's popularity seems a positive development if it signals a healthy resurgence of bankable diversity in organ playing. Anyone who can attract more people to organ concerts has my admiration and support. And having fun at a recital? What a great concept!

Final concert: Siegfried Matthus's *Te Deum* (2005)

At 8:40 trumpets from the rear gallery sounded the opening fanfare to the ten-minute opening movement of Matthus's monumental work, composed for the dedication of the reconstructed Frauenkirche in Dresden. One hour later the

same trumpets signaled the start of the final movement (*Amen*), with most of the same music, though some appeared in different sequence. Most magical of all, the cathedral tower bells were used in the very last measures, gently dying away as the chorus quietly intoned over and over again *Te Deum laudamus*.

English visitors having departed, it was left to local singers to provide the choral forces for this great work. **Magnum Chorum**, the **Minnesota Boy-choir**, the **National Lutheran Choir**, and **VocalEssence Ensemble Singers and Chorus**, each group garbed distinctively, comprised the voices assembled under the confident baton of conductor **Philip Brunelle**. There were six vocal soloists, plus **John Scott** (ex London St. Paul's) playing the significant organ part, not the least of which was his fine rendition of the Bach *Toccata in D Minor*, above which composer Matthus had set a text from *The Organ* by Friedrich Wilhelm Zachariae, beginning "Listen to the rushing wind in the silently expecting organ which it is preparing for its sacred song." Herr Matthus was in attendance for this highly successful first American performance. Ovarations were lengthy, loud, and deserved.

The first third of this closing concert united the three European national strands together with a fascinating selection of choral music: the Messiaen motet mentioned earlier and an excerpt from Dupré's early *De Profundis*; the curiously moving *avant garde* work by John Tavener ("Verses Written on an Ecstasy" from *Ultimos Ritos*) in which four soloists in the chancel, the Magnum Chorum behind us in the nave, with larger forces split on both sides of the transepts, provided a cruciform arrangement of choral forces. The singers mused in ever more significant phrase fragments based on an underlying taped performance of the *Crucifixus* from Bach's *B-Minor Mass*, at first barely audible, but ultimately overwhelming by the end of this effective work. An intense rendition of Stephen Paulus's modern choral masterpiece, the *Pilgrims' Hymn* that concludes his

church opera *The Three Hermits*, realized the exquisitely chosen harmonies that find the simplest of resolutions in the work's octave unison *Amens*.

John Scott played a convincing first performance of an appealing organ work commissioned for the convention. Finnish composer Jaakko Mäntyjärvi took his inspiration from a poem by Emily Dickinson, *And Hit a World, at Every Plunge*. In program notes the composer mused, "... it is certainly not a comfortable piece. At some point I realized that I was ... harking back to the very first time I heard an organ piece by Messiaen." Organized as variations on an underlying twelve-tone row, the piece is "restless." In a disarmingly honest description the composer noted that "the variations are very different in character and length, from funeral march to *moto perpetuo*. Although [the piece] aspires to a triumphant ending, it never quite seems to get there." Indeed the work ended with three tonal chords, interrupted by cluster-crashes, leading to an ultimately quiet culmination. I found it engrossing, a work I would definitely want to hear again.⁶

Another convention choral commission, *The Love of God* by Aaron Jay Kernis, suffered from pitch problems in its first performance. The pre-Matthus part of the concert ended with an audience sing-along of Hubert Parry's *O Praise Ye the Lord* (1894), cementing the English choral music arc of the week.

Organ concertos, American and "Jacobean"

Benson Great Hall of Bethel University was the site of this convention's organ concerto program: four works for organ and instruments, conducted by Philip Brunelle, with organists **Stephen Cleobury** and **James Diaz**. A fine American eclectic three-manual 67-stop instrument by Blackinton Organ Company dominated the ample stage and was well balanced in this large, yet intimate-feeling, auditorium.

Ron Nelson's *Pebble Beach*, commissioned for the 1984 AGO national convention in San Francisco, opened



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Concerto concert, Bethel University (photo credit: R. Levy Photography)

the program. Diaz's sparkling playing was abetted by brass and percussion in this loud, lively curtain-raiser. Winner of the 2000 Dallas International Organ Competition, Diaz was also the brilliant soloist for Stephen Paulus's *Grand Concerto (Number 3)*, a Dallas Symphony commission first heard in 2004 (with the most recent Dallas Competition winner, Bradley Hunter Welch, as soloist).

Paulus is a composer who not only knows his craft, but one who has something to say with that facility. This major work has many impressive moments from its beginning with the organ and lower strings, through a second movement featuring the organ's Harmonic Flute, then orchestral flute and strings, and finally the organ's strings—a lovely blend of timbres. Building to a climax, the movement ends with a reference to the hymn *Come, Come Ye Saints* (a favorite of the composer's father) and pizzicato lower strings. In the final movement (marked *Jubilant*) there is joy in virtuosity, especially in the rapid jumping between manuals, a lovely bit of lyricism when the high strings introduce the folk melody *O Waly, Waly*, and a knock-your-socks-off pedal cadenza. The audience loved this piece, the only one requiring a complete symphonic complement of instruments. Woodwinds and brass having joined the strings, the orchestra made its best showing of the day in this culminating performance. Cheering and ovations were deserved.

The other two concertos were in the capable hands of Stephen Cleobury, who had a rather thankless assignment in

Calvin Hampton's *Concerto for Organ and Strings*. Understandably, the program committee chose this work commissioned for the previous Twin Cities national meeting in 1980. Preparing at that time for my own concerto program in Orchestra Hall, I did not hear this work by a dear friend from undergraduate days at Oberlin, although subsequently I learned that Calvin himself did not regard the piece highly. Hearing it now I did not find the string writing particularly apt, and I am sad that this was the only piece to represent such a gifted American composer during this 2008 convention. The ending, at least, is memorable, with organ arpeggios providing a bit of filigree above orchestra strings, which were, unfortunately, not well tuned.

Cleobury's second stint on the organ bench was as soloist in Judith Bingham's convention commission, *Jacob's Ladder—Concerto for Organ and Strings*. (In her notes for the program book, she wrote that her inspiration was derived from the first view of a photograph showing the laddered effect of the attractive organ façade.) Four brief movements bearing programmatic titles showed a fine correlation of component parts to produce an appealing ensemble work. Once again the upper strings were quite messy.

Hindsight is, of course, always more successful than foresight, but it did seem as if three ensemble works rather than four could have allowed more rehearsal time for each, and in a day jam-packed with musical events, would have been quite enough for the audiences as well.



Pipedreams Live! cast (photo credit: R. Levy Photography)

Pipedreams Live (and program long)

We all owe much to **Michael Barone** for his continuing contributions to the public awareness of the pipe organ, its wide range of instruments, as heard weekly in the successful Minnesota Public Radio series. The service he renders to the profession is unparalleled in today's media. That said, it was fortunate that this Wednesday evening audience in Wooddale Church consisted almost exclusively of the already convinced. Anticipatory at the beginning, fatigued or comatose after a two-hour and fifteen minute program without intermission, many of us would have appreciated an earlier employment of the organ's cancel button.

As for repertory, it was a program in which the oldest piece heard was Joseph Jongen's 1935 *Toccata*, opus 104, the program opener, given a brilliant rendition by this year's NYACOP winner **Michael Unger**. Then followed a steady stream of new and unfamiliar pieces played by first-rate players who slid on and off the bench either of the movable console or of the attached mechanical-action one of the large Visser-Crowland organ: **Herdon Spillman**, **Calvin Taylor**, Barone himself, splendid jazz player **Barbara Dennerlein**, **Ken Cowan**, **Aaron David Miller**, and **Douglas Reed** (who brought the marathon to an end with William Albright's *Tango Fantastico* and *Alla Marcia*, aka *The AGO Fight Song!*).

Along the way, **Jason Roberts**, winner of the National Competition in Organ Improvisation, perhaps sensing the encroaching weariness, gave a brief example of his art in a French Classic idiom; well-loved Lutheran church musician **Paul Manz** was warmly applauded after the playing of his chorale-improvisation *Now Thank We All Our God* by **Scott Montgomery**; and **Isabelle Demers**, in the penultimate program slot, played with consummate musicianship a gentle and moving *Prelude in E Minor* by Gerald Bales and Paulus's *As if the whole creation cried*.

AGO business/The business of music

The business meetings of the Guild during national conventions have been fun and musically rewarding during the six years of outgoing president **Fred Swann's** administration. This time the afternoon event was held at Central Lutheran Church, where **Marilyn Keiser** gave first performances of a prize-winning work and a commissioned movement to be featured at the Organ Spectacular (officially scheduled for 19 October 2008) during this International Year of the Organ: Bernard Wayne Sanders' *Ornament of Grace* for organ and solo melody instrument (published by Concordia Publishing House) and Stephen Paulus's *Blithely Breezing Along*, a seven-minute solo organ piece (available from Paulus Publications).

An impressive number of exhibitors (102) displayed their wares in the exhibition spaces of the Minneapolis Hilton Hotel. From Nada-Chair back slings (for organists with "Bach Pain")



Stephen Paulus and Marilyn Keiser (photo credit: R. Levy Photography)



Bach Pain?

one could wander to composer Stephen Paulus's booth, often manned by father and son Andrew; or stop by the AGO national headquarters table, where a newly released compact disc of *Conversations and Lessons with David Craighead* preserves some taped lessons with Judith Hancock as well as more recent responses to queries about various pedagogical topics as posed by an unidentified interviewer. (Buzz has it that the interlocutor is Richard Troeger.) The purchase of this disc also triggered the bonus gift of "A Grand Occasion," an AGO cookbook from the past. This brought on extreme nostalgia for several familiar figures who contributed some favorite recipes: Robert Anderson [caramelized carrots], Howard (Buddy) Ross [Shrimp Howard], and L. Cameron Johnson [Philly-Miracle Whip Dip]!

Some random items of interest found in various publishers' displays: the recently republished Distler organ works in an "Urtex" edition at Bärenreiter; a reminder via a special brochure from Breitkopf that 2009 will mark the 200th anniversary of Mendelssohn's birth; Calvert Johnson's valuable new edition of Frescobaldi's *Fiori musicali* (with variant chromatic alterations from the Torino Manuscript) at Wayne Leupold; from ECS Publishing, free copies of their prize-winning anthem heard at the opening celebratory service, Stephen R. Fraser's *Rejoice, the Lord is King* (SATB and organ), with its especially haunting, chromatic shift from a melodic F-sharp



"Dateline: Sweden -- Going Up!"

"We finished bringing everything into the balcony of the Uppsala Domkyrka today, from the heavy mahogany slider chests to the 210 Kg (460-pound) low C of the 32-foot Subbass. We also brought up one of the two huge four-manual adjustable consoles, still in its crate. More on that later."

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Stephen and Andrew Paulus

to F-natural between the second and third measures of the idiomatic and very effective organ accompaniment; from Oxford University Press, a special brochure on the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams, in commemoration of this year's 50th anniversary of his death.

A pre-convention mailing had brought advance word of a special recording titled *Real French Sounds* to be had at the convention, the promotional gift from the Association of French Organ Builders. This two-compact disc set comprises an elegant set of performances by various French organists, including such well-known players as Olivier Latry, Daniel Roth, Thierry Escaich, and Pierre Pincemaille, playing fifteen historic instruments (restored by the firms Atelier Bertrand Cattiaux, Jean-Baptiste Gaupillat, Michel Jurine, Patrick Armand, Giroud Successeurs, Nicolas Toussaint, and Jean-Pascal Villard). It is, overall, a useful demonstration of some lovely organs.

American pipe organ builders were well represented here, as were makers of digital instruments. The Twin Cities provided good examples of outstanding organs from many of the exhibitors, as identified throughout this report. Happily, I acquired only one new trinket, a black stop knob key chain from the Wicks Organ Company. It joins useful previous white ones, giving my collection some needed diversity. A year's worth of compact discs and DVDs were available for purchase, and all this commerce, especially that transacted during late night hours, was made more pleasant by an accessible cash bar.

Summary thoughts

I heard it expressed several times that "this was **Philip Brunelle's** program." The wide-ranging, often challenging exploration of new music (seventeen commissions and competition prize-winning works were listed on the Convention Evaluation Form), plus the programming of other recent works surely new to a majority of the convention goers, reflected both appetite and taste of the prodigious program chair, this year celebrating his 40th anniversary as organist-choirmaster of Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis. Brunelle certainly generated a great deal of musical excitement, not only as planner, but also as conductor for the two major orchestral and choral/orchestral programs.

That the music of **Stephen Paulus** held such a prominent place at this convention was particularly gratifying. Currently AGO's composer of the year, the Minnesotan is one of America's finest, an artist who consistently produces challenging music for organ and for choral forces as part of his ongoing artistic efforts. He is also a genuinely kind person whose many interactions with convention-goers was much appreciated.

A personal regret was that there was not at least a tad more celebration of Hugo Distler's centenary, which actually occurred on Tuesday, June 24, right in the midst of this gathering. One workshop, one choral composition (the motet *Singet dem Herrn*, heard on two days at one of four concurrent worship services presented on Monday and Thursday), and that was all. In Lutheran territory?

(At least St. Paul's Luther Seminary had presented a March symposium on the composer's life and works!)

Appreciated amenities: possibly the easiest to see, least self-destructing name tags of any convention in my experience, and a many-pocketed, multi-zippered convention tote bag with an external water bottle holder, the whole a classy production that also ranks with the best ever: no expense spared here, and usable at home, too.

And, certainly not least, a smoothly functioning hospitality/information center at the hotel, staffed by Twin Cities AGO chapter volunteers. There one could find nibbles, coffee and water, transportation schedules, gay pride guides, and the occasional leftover workshop handouts, among which two of the more interesting were on *Latin American Organ Literature* from Cristina Garcia Banegas and *Organ Music from Czech Composers* from Anita Smisek.

And finally . . .

A tally of convention events from Saturday afternoon through Thursday evening gave these numbers: three open performance and improvisation competition rounds; four evening concerts plus two performances of the daytime concerto program; fifteen organ recitals, each performed twice, plus two carillon concerts and nine Rising Stars organ programs; sixty-six workshops including cho-

ral reading sessions; an opening evening church service, four individual daytime worship opportunities, each given twice, plus Evensong and Matins services. [For complete details, refer to the convention website <www.ago2008.org>.]

My apologies to artists whose programs I was not able to attend. Many are friends, or friends of friends, or students of friends. It must be obvious that no one person, not even the proverbial little old one in tennis shoes, could cover as large and event-filled a gathering as this national convention. The time in the Twin Cities remained enjoyable primarily because I did not attempt to do everything.

Throughout the week there were many cherished meetings with people not encountered often enough, individuals who trigger memories of shared experiences, ones who make such professional gatherings personal. To mention a very few of them: Marjorie Jackson Rasche, FAGO, now of Galveston, TX, whom I met at my very first AGO regional convention 52 years ago when both of us were young Ohioans; Carl and Kathy Crozier, of happy Honolulu memories; professional colleagues Jim Christie, Susan Marchant, and Cal Johnson; and new acquaintance, Alexander Schreiner's son John.

Of memorable chats while traveling on the buses two stood out in particular: one with West Point organist Craig Williams; and another with Patricia Scace

from Maryland, who told of acquiring a John Challis instrument that turned out to be the first harpsichord I ever played.

And finally, the realization that as the Twin Cities 2008 national convention became part of AGO history on Friday June 28, there remained only 735 days until the July 4 opening of the 2010 meeting in our nation's capital city. Start saving up for it now!

Notes

1. *Music: the A.G.O. / R.C.C.O Magazine*, August 1972, p. 25.
2. AGO 2008 Program Book, p. 144.
3. Here I pay homage through imitation to Gustav Leonhardt (in honor of his 80th birthday year). Many years ago, while auditing a masterclass at the University of Michigan, I was much amused by his comment to one eager young participant, who had flailed her way speedily through some Bach. "You are a very fine harpsichordist," said the master. "But, perhaps it is better to be a good musician?"
4. See Program Book, p. 55, for the corroborating organ specification (it is on the Great). Thanks to friend and former student Travis Powell for pointing it out to me. I have been assured that the stop does appear on the console, but, like divine inspiration, it is mute. Some clever humor here among the Episcopalians: a cathedral brochure also listed "Holy Grounds" as their coffee house in the undercroft.
5. Notes by Susan Slaymaker (in discussion with Cameron Carpenter), Program Book, p. 130.
6. Information from Program Book, p. 215.

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