

RCCO NATIONAL CONVENTION

LONDON, ONTARIO—AUGUST 17-21, 1981

Stephen Adams



Erik Routley

ERIK ROUTLEY stood there at the front of the church, telling his audience of organists how very *odd* organists are. His surroundings seemed curiously symbolic: a modern Baptist sanctuary, very square and severe except for an enormously outsized Baldwin organ (installed for Bennie Hammel's demonstration next to it) that dominated the altar and blocked the passage to pulpit and microphone. It was like a dream: The thing had taken over. . . . Routley, however, rising easily above the awkwardness, not only charmed his audience thoroughly but articulated for them the serious keynote of the entire RCCO Convention.

I have long been aware, from my oblique perspective as a string player, of the oddity of organists. Therefore, on being asked to observe this year's convention in London, Ontario, and report my findings, I braced myself for a week of talk about flute stops, middle Baroque ornamentation and the intransigence of the organ. Such topics were in the air, of course, but not to the degree I had anticipated. Instead, over the crowded week of concerts and festivities there hovered a somewhat different concern, an anxiety about what Routley called "the assault on beauty"—a phrase that comprehends a multitude of pressures against those trying to uphold the cause of good music in church.

The oddity of the organist's task, Routley reminded, is that he must labor so valiantly to create music that no one really listens to—"a kind of sacred Muzak." During the organ prelude, worshipers ought to be thinking of something else. If the organist makes the mistake of being noticed, he is liable to become an object of abuse. His task is to transport the listener, without his realizing why, into another world; his craft is to conceal all the craft he has. "You ought to be enjoying your oddity more," Routley urged.

Well, enjoyment was much in evidence throughout convention week, and the delegates themselves were shamelessly conspicuous. Downtown London teemed with nearly 300 organists, circulating from one event to another and not even trying to be invisible. Enjoyments ranged from the serious—concerts and workshops—more frivolous pastimes like visits to Batt's Brewery (with free samples) and Baldwin's spur-of-the-moment wine and cheese on closing night. And, of course,

the soul of any convention, conversation. The entire week proceeded without a hitch. Indeed, I pressed several delegates for complaints, entirely without success. Chairmen Alan Barthel and Lanse MacDowell seem to have thought of everything.

OPENING FESTIVAL SERVICE

The formal opening of the convention, fittingly, was a festival service celebrated at St. Michael's Catholic Church. For many delegates, as I heard through the week, this event remained the highlight of the convention: a service of worship in which the language of music took equal place beside the language of words.

The theme was the light of creation: by God ("Let there be light"), and by man ("Let your light so shine before men"). Around this center gathered expressions from a multitude of traditions of worship, focusing in all their diversity on one ecumenical truth. The eight participating clergymen represented the Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and United Churches, and the music drew from an even broader range. There was traditional psalmody balanced by a new responsory psalm by Barrie Cabena, familiar hymns plus a new one written for the occasion, the spoken Word followed by a wordless flute, prayer intoned alternately in French and English, a Russian litany, an Anglican motet, a moment of silence.

But the beauty of the service lay not only in the planning (for which George

Black deserves credit) and the excellence of the music; it came from the congregation itself—a congregation of musicians who loved the familiar, appreciated the unusual, and coped gracefully with the new. From my corner of the choir, I was deeply moved by the congregational singing of Barrie Cabena's *Antiphon on Psalm 141*. This composition, unfortunately, will not be often heard, since its musical demands place it beyond the reach of ordinary congregations; but here, it resounded through the church in four-part canon, with organ, handbells, choir, incense—an overwhelming experience. I must also mention the new hymn "The Singer and the Song," written, both music and words, by Peter Davidson, rector of Bishop Cronyn Memorial Church in London. With its musicality, its poetry, its theology—and its immediate appeal—it deserves to prosper.

The festival service also featured organists: Michael Bloss, who played Bach for prelude; Jan Overduin, who accompanied the service; and John Vandertuin, who improvised a postlude on Peter Davidson's hymn. The improvisation of Vandertuin, a young blind organist, left a particularly strong impression. But the emotion that gathered there was not merely admiration for a virtuoso performance, excellent as that was. The entire service, in being a co-ordinated artistic expression, seemed to crystallize for the whole congregation those feelings that motivate church musicians in their difficult vocation.

CONCERTS

Organ recitals—those peculiar vehicles of revenge for long weekends of servitude—formed the core of the musical entertainments during convention week. There were six of them, not counting two noon-hour concerts which I was unable to attend, but which revealed much favorable comment in conversation (Joyce Jones, sponsored by Rodgers Organ Company, and Bennie Hammel, sponsored by Baldwin).

Such an intensive battery of concerts threatened early saturation, especially for a non-organist like myself. But I found my interest renewed repeatedly by the varied programs, the diverse instruments put on display, and the individuality of the performers. Whether by accident or design, the programs surveyed the full range of organ repertoire, from early Baroque to ultramodern, supplying something for virtually every taste. (All I missed was a sampling of early French.)

Pre-convention activities opened Sunday night with an all-Canadian recital played with conviction by John McIntosh

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from the University of Western Ontario. Despite the distance of the organ chambers and the dull acoustic of St. James (Westminster), this was a satisfying concert, opening with three seldom-heard works by Healey Willan, followed by four works of local London composers. Familiar with Willan as a choral composer, I was startled by the intricacy and ripe chromaticism of these organ pieces. Best was the early *Prelude in A minor* (1918) with its serpentine fugue subject that includes eleven of the chromatic tones and recalls Reger at his best. The tremulant *Epithalamium*, on the other hand, based on the now-celebrated "Rise up, my love," scarcely alluded to the beautiful motet and wandered in such an improvisatory way one wonders why Willan troubled to write it down.

The local works demonstrated an impressive standard of craftsmanship. True, none of the composers was born in London, and only one, Gerhard Wuensch, still lives here; but if every center of this size can support musicians of such quality, perhaps the state of church music is not as perilous as we sometimes think. The one premiere, Gordon Atkinson's *Introduction and Toccata*, was an effective display piece written for this specific instrument and designed to show off its powerful trumpet. Barrie Cabena contributed two playful musical portraits, *Hugh's Hornpipe* and *Peaker's Pride*. John Cook's Scherzo from *Five Studies in the Form of a Sonata*, a lively jaunt in irregular 5/8, made me want to hear the other movements. Gerhard Wuensch's *Ricercare* for organ and eight French horns, written in 1962 for the Los Angeles Horn Club, provided an unusual finale; I am not eager to hear eight French horns again, but on this occasion they offered an intriguingly subtle and antiphonal contrast with the organ sonority.

Tuesday brought a second Canadian recital — *Sursum Corda* (Gordon V. Thompson), voluntaries published in honor of the late Charles Peaker. John Tuttle, Peaker's successor at St. Paul's in Toronto, played ably, without a hint of the virtuoso, in keeping with this practical liturgical music. I will not pause over each of the nine pieces, which (judging from the number of scores among the audience) are familiar enough to organists in this country. But whatever their merits individually, the collection did not benefit from constructive performance. Erik Routley, in a gracious aside later in the day, said the recital made him feel as if he had known Peaker; I suppose, then, he must envision him as an ecclesiastical "Shropshire Lad" pining in pastoral nostalgia, for that was the single mood. Accounts of Peaker that reach me suggest a much more energetic figure; but whatever quality these pieces possess, energy is not conspicuous among them. I liked best Gordon Atkinson's *Soliloquy*, an unpretentious melody and accompaniment; Barrie Cabena's quiet *Prelude in the Lydian Mode*; and Derek Holman's *Prelude on "Ave Virgo Virginum,"* slightly more acerbic than the rest without being offensively "modern."

The energy level rose considerably Tuesday night with Martin Haselböck's recital, certainly the most controversial

performance of the convention. Opinion polarized, and if I found the young Viennese Haselböck the most exciting and distinctive personality of the week, I was startled to discover myself in disagreement with so many. My several theories about this response are not wholly satisfactory, but it strikes me that Haselböck's outstanding quality is *panache*. He takes risks. Those who disliked him apparently interpreted his impetuosity, his aristocratic *sprezzatura*, as carelessness.

Then, too, the opening of the concert alienated some beyond recall. One's Bach is always under scrutiny at these affairs, and Haselböck's combined a curtness of phrasing with more liberties of tempo than many will tolerate, though his interpretation was consistent within itself. This he followed with the world premiere of *Ricercare para Organo* by Spanish composer Cristobal Halffter, a work that exceeded acceptable limits of modernity for much of the audience. The two Mozart pieces that completed the first half were not enough to soothe their savage breasts.

For me, Halffter's work was one of the week's major events, an expressively supercharged use of the organ in an up-to-date idiom. As a sci-fi soundtrack it would have offended no one; but on a recital, situated between Bach and Mozart (and in a church!), it failed to convert the skeptics. (Liturgically, I suppose, it would be most useful for the earthquake on Good Friday.) The most memorable features were the sustained high chord (pre-set on one manual with lead weights) and the outbursts of rapid clusters played not with forearms, as I had thought, but merely with palms and fists. Listening, I recalled John Cage's remark that the clarinet was his favorite instrument — because it reminded him of feedback. I liked Halffter's piece because it reminded me of a synthesizer, with its pure sine tones and capacity for sneak attacks. And yet, far from sounding "inhuman," the piece made a musical statement that could only be made by a live performer seated at a responsive instrument.

Haselböck, best known in North America as an authority on Mozart's organ works, played his Mozart with extreme contrasts, a delicacy of phrasing in lyrical passages set against driving power in the *C-minor Fugue* (K. 546); here, in fact, he brought forward the same awesome technique that impelled Liszt's "Ad nos" *Fantasy* after intermission, rippling off sequences of pedal trills (mit Nachschlage) with more snap than most players achieve with their fingers. The Liszt itself stood my hair on end. Haselböck closed with an extended improvisation on three given themes, including Barrie Cabena's *Antiphon* from the opening service.

Diane Bish's program next day, which received more universal applause, contrasted in every way; instead of the brilliant classical organ of First St. Andrew's United, she played a large chambered Romantic instrument (also by Casavant), vibrant within itself though slightly muffled in the acoustic of Metropolitan. Her program, lacking the high seriousness of Haselböck's, was a showcase of shorter pieces, alternating between the sober and the splashy, but each

one demanding a maximum of digital dexterity. Miss Bish played it all with flawless accuracy.

While the more spectacular items on the program did come off best, Miss Bish's renderings of the Buxtehude *Prelude and Fugue in G minor* and the Bach *Toccata in F* (sans fugue) combined restraint in phrasing with surging rhythmic momentum and established her mastery in this repertoire unequivocally; her Mendelssohn *Sonata VI*, too, was done without exaggerated sentiment. Still, the attention getters were charming novelties like Haydn's *Five Flute Clocks* plus several mostly familiar French Romantic items that exhibited every coloration in the instrument. I could have spared Max Drischner's routine set of variations; but Vierne's *Carillon de Westminster* took on musical depth and breadth as it grew under Miss Bish's hands, Jehan Alain's *Litanies* took on refreshing freedom, and Mulet's *Toccata on "Tu Es Petra"* ended the concert with effortless bravura. Two short pieces by Diane Bish herself, just before the end, proved nothing more than pleasing *morceaux* demanding (incredibly) even more digital filigree than the rest of the program; but their inclusion helped round out one's picture of a commanding musical personality.

One element absent from this personality, a taste for austerity, was supplied by the two back-to-back recitals Thursday afternoon. Coming at week's end, requiring the effort of transportation, in the heat these programs made a demanding regimen; but if I must confess to flagging attention at times, the fault lay with myself and circumstances, and not with the performing artists.

Antoine Bouchard, from Laval University, offered a program of German music before Bach. However small in scale, this concert held its own among its companions by its perfect integrity. Father Bouchard's instrument was a little two-manual, all mechanical organ (only ten stops altogether) built by Gabriel Kney, perfectly suited not only to this repertoire but also to historic Christ Church in which it sits. Of all the organs that I heard, this was the most ideally attuned to its surroundings. The small sanctuary, with its simple lines and its embellishments as few and tasteful as Father Bouchard's, enhanced the purity of tone and allowed a kind of intimacy that organ music does not often have. The program included works by Scheidemann, Scheidt, and — slightly later and more florid — Böhm and Buxtehude. Only the big Buxtehude *Toccata in F* at the end seemed to strain the resources at hand. I was surprised, however, that Father Bouchard's reception was more "appreciative" than enthusiastic; it made me wonder whether organists are not more romanticists at heart than I had thought.

Moving from Christ Church to Aeolian Hall, the audience exchanged one of Canada's smallest organs for one of her best and largest — also built by Gabriel Kney. Aeolian Hall itself, I should explain, is a peculiar London institution. It is the work of one man, Gordon Jeffrey, a lawyer by profession, who has made his musical avocation the center of musical life in this

city for many years. Aeolian Hall is regularly the site of concerts by visiting virtuosi and rising young musicians alike.

Jon Gillock from the Church of the Incarnation in New York gave a program that spanned from Bach to Messiaen. As a pupil of Messiaen who has performed the complete organ works in concert, Gillock's rendering of the *Messe de la Pentecôte* excited the greatest interest; but the program leading to it set it off canily.

Gillock's intention, he explained at his Tuesday workshop, was to pair the Messiaen with Bach's Pentecost chorale, "Komm, heiliger Geist." This, in fact, had less effect than the entire sequence of juxtapositions. After the Bach, we had a sampling of Cabanilles, showing off the exotic Spanish trumpets of this organ. There followed Brahms's superb (and rarely heard) *Fugue in A-flat minor*, a leap into the Romantic era, preserving the Baroque decorum but preparing for the exotic sonorities of Tournemire's *Improvisation on the "Te Deum."* Messiaen thereafter brought into focus all the previous intellectuality, exoticism and Romantic feeling in one major work.

Gillock's playing was smooth, secure in each of the styles, elegant. After attending his workshop on Messiaen, I had not quite expected this approach, since his emphasis there was on the heightened emotional content of Messiaen's music; Gillock urged his demonstrators to emote over the phrases and I half expected his own performance to be rather hectic. But on Thursday, the feeling was fully absorbed into the music, and the *Messe de la Pentecôte* communicated as it should from its own remote heights.

Of the two choral concerts during convention week, I can only speak of one objectively. In the other, a pre-convention presentation of double organ masses by Widor and Vierne, I participated as a chorister, so all I can say is that Alan Barthel and the choir of First-St. Andrew's United had a full round of compliments afterwards.

On Wednesday night, the Elmer Iseler Singers, who made such a strong impression at last year's AGO Convention in Minneapolis, gave a concert in the same location, St. Peter's Cathedral. It was, frankly, a big letdown. They sang a short concert—less than an hour of music—and they battled the cavernous acoustics of the cathedral all the way. The Mozart *Missa Brevis in C (K. 115)*, not a weighty piece of music to begin with, was particularly ill-suited to the space. Florid detail got lost entirely, and severe pitch problems developed with the organ. Although there were moments of beauty in the motets interspersed between movements of the Mass (Durufle's *Ubi caritas* and Blow's *Salvator mundi* stood out), the event fell far short of expectations. Although I can offer no explanation, Elmer Iseler's choirs have given me too many hours of pleasure for me to hold one failure against them. As a friend remarked to me afterwards, "I came expecting to hear archangels—and after all, they were only human."

CONCLUSIONS

If this schedule of concerts seems

crowded, it scarcely begins to suggest the round of events that filled the week. I have not mentioned the competition, for example—a melancholy subject, since the jury decided to award no first prize. (As a result, there was no recital by the winner, so I was unable to hear Gerhard Wuensch's commissioned work, *Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue*.) There were lectures and workshops touching every aspect of church musicianship—performance, playing for services, hymn singing, choral conducting, children's choirs.

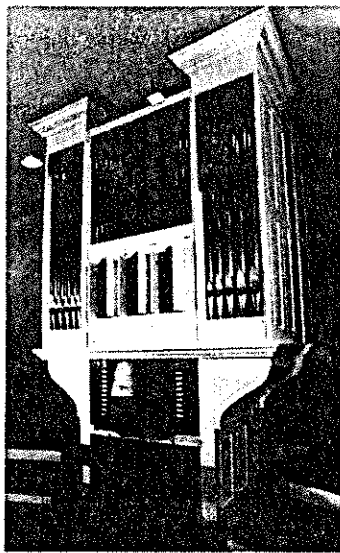
I attended several of these pedagogical events, but I will not pause over them individually, since there were so many others that I cannot report on. Generally, however, what struck me was not only the level of discourse conducted by the leaders, but the motivation, the professional commitment among the delegates eager to absorb any new idea and carry it back with them.

All of which brings me back to Erik Routley and his worry about "the assault on beauty." Actually, Routley's message had been anticipated at the opening banquet by the Reverend Maurice Boyd ("that genius," Routley called him), who spoke—magnetically—on creative inspiration as a gift of the Spirit; the message, though familiar, bears repeating, and it gained a breath of novelty in the mouth of a United Church minister. Routley's three addresses held it before the delegates through the week, and it sounded through his closing hymn service on Thursday evening.

Routley responded by attacking "the fallacy of instant comprehension," a conviction that accounts for the flatness of modern liturgical language and the banality of musical taste. "Good taste is the enemy of clarity," cries one Roman Catholic writer; "the pursuit of beauty is elitist." Every church musician, I suppose, has had to fight that battle in one way or another.

As Routley articulated his reply, the only reply possible, he brought to my mind a sentence from the poet Wallace Stevens: "A good poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully." The same is true, I would say, of a good sermon. Or any new work of art. Something of mystery must always remain.

It's no good, I've decided, to keep reminding the church musician that his place in the service of worship is secondary, that he provides nothing but window dressing for "the message." He is reminded too frequently as it is. Pretty soon, he may begin to believe it. Instead, I would remind him that the test of anyone's sincerity is the effort he is willing to put out; that just as any musician knows the satisfaction of coming to terms with a recalcitrant masterpiece, so every man of faith knows how it feels to arrive at some difficult truth. The diverse energies that I witnessed during convention week all seemed to pivot around this basic assumption. Music may not be able to articulate dogma, or tell people to be good. But given the chance, it can say certain things no words can ever reach.



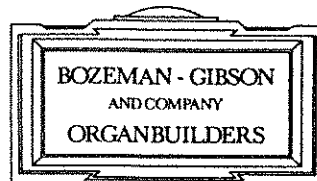
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