



Austin Lovelace, March 19, 1919–April 25, 2010

A Remembrance

Donald R. Traser



Austin Lovelace at his home

Austin Lovelace died April 25 at the age of 91. (See the “Nunc Dimittis” in the June issue of THE DIAPASON, page 10.)

Austin Lovelace and I first became acquainted at one of the annual meetings of The Hymn Society, which Austin attended regularly. Subsequently, I began sending church bulletins to him and many other composers when I played their compositions and listed them in the bulletin. Some composers have never even acknowledged receipt of a bulletin, but Austin always sent a kind note and had many nice things to say.

He spent time in Virginia at Camp Peary from 1944 to 1946, played several recitals at Bruton Parish Church, and sang tenor for a *Messiah* performance in Richmond. A niece lived in the area, but with him in Denver in recent years, their paths seldom crossed. Austin remembered Jim Sydnor and knew Mary Ann Gray, as well as her better-known sister Charlotte Garden, from his time at Union Seminary. Unaware that Mary Ann was still going strong, he remarked, “Old organists never fade—they just diapason.”

Austin was the first of a number of composers to have written an organ work for me, in 2003. One of his anthems, *The Lord My Shepherd Is*, was written many years ago for his children’s choir in Evanston, Illinois. It has such a beautiful *bel canto* melody that I asked if he’d ever written an organ piece based on that tune. He replied, “No. Would you like me to?” Before I could even respond, the manuscript arrived in the mail—two variations: the first chordal and pretty straightforward, the second a delightful little trio. He commented, “I doubt if it will take too much time for you to work out any fingerings. When in doubt, just pick up the finger!”

Sometime later, Alice Jordan began writing a postlude for me on the tune *ORA LABORA*, one for which little has been written for the organ. Austin sent me a copy of his *Partita on “Ora Labora,”* published by H. W. Gray, which I was able to use as a prelude on the Sunday when I premiered Alice’s postlude. Austin wrote, “As you will notice, I dedicated it to the memory of T. Tertius Noble, who was one of the teachers at Union in 1939–41. I had composition with him but really learned nothing helpful. His approach was to rework anything you did to sound like T. Tertius Noble. And yet I must have learned something, for my first two anthems—*Be Known to Us in Breaking Bread* and *Let This Mind Be in You*—are . . . still in print!”

A few months shy of his 88th birthday, Austin wrote, “I find that I’m not as gung-ho about doing things as I was



At the organ

for so long. But I’m still writing a lot of hymn preludes for organ for Darcy Press . . . and Wayne Leupold . . . I also have written several anthems but can’t find a publisher interested in what I want to write. I refuse to take the low road! But I can’t complain about my long career approaching its conclusion. My philosophy has been to bloom where planted—and I’ve been lucky to land in some pretty good soil in all of my jobs.”

The Darcy Press preludes are part of the “Musical Gifts” series, and I was given the original manuscript for the prelude on *DOVE OF PEACE*. Despite the perceived lack of publisher interest, Emerson Music has 17 Lovelace anthems in its catalog, the most recent a setting of “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” which came out in 2009. He would often send me complimentary copies, folded to fit in a letter-size envelope.

After I began serving at Second Presbyterian in Petersburg, I asked Austin (then age 90) for an anthem for my choir, and in short order we had a new choral work entitled *Hymn at Dawn*. I suggested several texts, from which he chose “High O’er the Lonely Hills” (No. 473 in *The Hymnal* 1940). After we sang it, Austin wrote a note to the choir: “Thank you for letting me write an anthem for you and the church. Donald says that you sang it well, but that some thought it was a bit difficult. Congratulations—yes, it is a bit difficult! As a composer, I always let the words tell me where to go, and that text . . . posed plenty of problems for me with its shifting moods and pictures . . . But I think that I came close to letting the different moods come through with my music. The nice thing about repeating anthems is that every time you will find new and fresh insights coming to you . . .”



John Yarrington, Carl P. Daw, Jr., Austin C. Lovelace, Polly Lovelace, Carlton R. Young (Photo by Stewart Kull)


My last Austin-gram was dated October 14, 2009. The Denver AGO and Wellshire Presbyterian Church, from which he retired, had just celebrated his 90 years and seven decades of composing. He described it: “The choir was magnificent, the organist spectacular, and the Young Singers of Colorado beautiful. The church was packed—added chairs in the narthex, and the offering of over \$3,600 went to the Lovelace Scholarship Fund of The Hymn Society. My nephew (in a wheelchair), his wife, and sister flew here from Suffolk, Virginia for the event, and we had a great family get-together—hard to arrange these days. I’m still in disbelief! Carl Daw . . . came from Boston to speak, Carlton (Sam) Young was Master of Ceremonies with much humor, and John Yarrington came from Houston, Texas to be one of the conduc-

tors. Now I’ll have to start planning for 100 & 8 decades!”

I’m sure that many people join in my regret that such a celebration won’t take place. ■

Donald R. Traser is the author of *The Organ in Richmond* (reviewed in *THE DIAPASON*, December 2002). Organist and/or choirmaster of several Richmond-area churches since 1970, he has served as organist/choirmaster at Second Presbyterian Church, Petersburg, Virginia, since 2009, and is a past dean of the Richmond, Virginia AGO chapter.


Traser played the carillon for 27 years, including the Taft Carillon in Washington, D.C. for Ronald Reagan’s first inaugural parade. He has written four books and numerous articles on such topics as hymnology (life member of *The Hymn Society*), trains, travel, organs, and stained glass. He is currently working on a book about stained glass in Richmond.



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