

A Conversation with Robert Powell

Celebrating his 80th birthday

By Steven Egler

Introduction

On October 13, 2012, Robert Powell was interviewed as part of a weekend celebration of his music and in honor of his 80th birthday (July 22, 2012). Special thanks to First Congregational Church, Saginaw, Michigan, where the interview was conducted; recording technician Kenneth Wuepper of Saginaw; Dr. Richard Featheringham, Professor Emeritus in the School of Business, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, who transcribed the interview; Robert Barker, photographer; and Nicholas Schmelter, director of music at First Congregational Church.

The weekend included a recital October 13 at First Congregational Church, Saginaw, featuring Nicholas Schmelter performing the first portion of the concert on the church's chapel organ, Aeolian-Skinner Op. 1327 (1956), and the second portion on piano with flutist Katie Welnetz and soprano Rayechel Nieman.

A concert of choral and organ music on October 14 at Trinity Episcopal Church, Bay City, Michigan, featured the Exultate Deo Choral Ensemble, conducted by Robert Sabourin of Midland, Michigan. Steven Egler and Nicholas Schmelter were the organists, and flutists Robert Hart and Lauren Rongo performed on several compositions.

These events were co-sponsored by First Congregational Church, Saginaw; Trinity Episcopal Church, Bay City; and the Saginaw Valley Chapter of the American Guild of Organists.

Robert Powell, born July 22, 1932, in Benoit, Mississippi, has approximately 300 compositions in print for organ, instrumental ensembles, handbells, choir, and flute and organ. He earned a Bachelor of Music degree from

Louisiana State University and later a Master of Sacred Music degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York as a student of Alec Wyton. From 1958–1960 he was Wyton's assistant organist at St. John the Divine in upper Manhattan, and from 1960–1965 was organist-choirmaster at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Meridian, Mississippi. For three years (1965–1968), he served as director of music at St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire, and then from 1968–2003 served as organist-choirmaster at Christ Episcopal Church, Greenville, South Carolina, until his retirement in 2003.

A longtime member of the Association of Anglican Musicians, Powell holds the Fellow and Choirmaster certificates of the American Guild of Organists, and is a member of the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), from which he has received the Standard Award for the past twenty years. His well-known and popular service for the Episcopal Eucharistic liturgy appears in *The Hymnal 1982* of the Episcopal Church.

He and his wife Nancy recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary and are the parents of three, grandparents of four, and great-grandparents of one. Robert Powell was interviewed by Jason Overall shortly before his retirement (see *THE DIAPASON*, November 2002).

Steven Egler: We are happy to have you with us this weekend for a late celebration of your 80th birthday and to enjoy your music.

Thank you. It's a wonderful celebration for me.

You retired as organist-choirmaster at Christ Episcopal Church,



Robert Powell and Steven Egler

Greenville, South Carolina, in 2003, but you are still playing. Is that correct?

That's right. I'm playing in a small Methodist church. I started out to retire, and I managed three weeks. The first week I played for the Presbyterian church, and the second week I played for the Episcopal church I now attend. The third week I stayed home and wrote songs on Mary Baker Eddy texts for a lady who came later to Greenville as one of the actors in the *Phantom of the Opera*. She came over and we played through some songs. She gave us free tickets to *Phantom of the Opera* and took us backstage to show us how they made the boats go around and how the mechanics worked. That was enough retirement for me.

So it may be moot to ask if you miss being in church work, whether it's full time or part time.

It's different being in full-time church work. When I went to Christ Church, membership was about 1,500; when I left it was 4,000. There were lots of staff meetings and such. I felt like I never worked a day in my life, except at staff meetings. (laughter) Otherwise, I was writing, directing the choirs, and all that. I don't miss it, but at the same time I do. I went straight into a small position where I don't worry about choir members coming or going, and just play the organ—that is great fun. We have a good choir director, too; she and I are great friends. It's five minutes from home, and they keep the church at 72 degrees all day and all night year round.

We discussed that you were going to learn how to say "no" by the time you were 75. Have you learned how?

I have NOT learned how to say "no," but it's led to some interesting things. One time someone wanted me to write a setting of "Abide with Me" and to include the *Agnus Dei*. I didn't think that the *Agnus Dei* had any relationship to "Abide with Me," but I wrote it anyway and it was published.

Another instance was at the library snack shop. A man came over with a stack of papers. On the music paper he had written down a tune by Louis Bourgeois, and on the other stack a French poem he had translated and wanted me to set to the tune. This would have been a wonderful opportunity to say "no," and I said "Ah," but I did think that it would be a challenge. I set the text and it worked out because the poem was good.

He told me exactly what to do. He wanted an introduction, a soprano solo in French, and then the choir—a tenor/bass choir—would sing in English; there

would be an organ interlude, and the second verse would be sung by the choir in unison, and then the oboe and the organ would play. So I did all of those things and filled in the blanks. It was great fun.

If you had said "no," it wouldn't have happened.

No. On the other hand, people have come up with ideas for years, and I haven't always agreed; but many projects have turned out to be blessings in disguise.

You just go forward and never stop composing.

Oh, yes. I go to the church in the morning and always write at the keyboard. I just write notes, so writing at the keyboard of an organ is the same as writing at the piano keyboard. I am not thinking that this will use a 16-foot stop here, a cromhorne or flute. I just push General 3 and hope for the best. (laughter)

You are still very prolific.

Some people don't know when to put the pencil down!

Austin Lovelace told me one time that this writing thing cycles. There are times when you are writing things and it is going really well. Sometimes you get to some part and you can't do it; you go to sleep at night and the next day it's already done because the subconscious takes care of it.

Are you writing more music now?

That's right. I have more time to write. I just go down to the church; I spend less time at it but write more. I am not as careful as Duruflé or someone like that would be. My teacher, Searle Wright, would say, "Write it down as fast as you possibly can and go back and correct it later."

So I do it as fast as I possibly can and then I go back and correct my work. I have six publishers to submit music to. If they don't want an anthem, I turn it into an organ piece and send it somewhere else. Sometimes that is accepted, so this recycling continues.

What are your current projects?

For the AGO Region IV Convention in Columbia, South Carolina, in 2013, I wrote a set of variations on "On This Day" (tune: PERSONENT HODIE). It's a wild tune and was a challenge, but I managed to get six variations on the theme. It's going to be played by Charles Tompkins; he suggested me for the commission. I'm also working on some pieces for GIA for brass and organ.

How much does improvisation play into your composing?

A lot. John Ferguson told me one time what he does—I don't know if he





Nicholas Schmelter, Robert Powell, Katie Welnetz

composes at the piano, but he must because he improvises and he writes his improvisations down. The hard thing about writing is getting an initial idea. John Rutter said that. Get the initial idea—a little motive—and improvise on a theme to get the initial idea and fill in the blanks.

Improvisation has become more important both in organ playing in general and also in academia, where a certain amount of improvisation is expected.

Organists must improvise sooner or later. The wedding is going to start late and you have played all your music twice, the second time with different registrations, and the bride still hasn't arrived, so you have to play something. You will feel better if you add something besides a C major chord, an F major chord, or a G major chord. In Searle Wright's course, we had to learn how to improvise in different situations. It was fun and he was such a great teacher. He would use students' names at graduations at Columbia at the cathedral [St. John the Divine] and he improvised on the names of three boys who had gotten doctorates: Cline, Davis, and Harrison. He would improvise on the syllables in their names. It was so clever, and then he'd throw in a fugue at the end. It was wonderful and so good. We were all pleased to be in his class.

Did those people know that was happening?

No, of course not. Only he knew it. It was so clever. I was fortunate to have such teachers in New York. I had Seth Bingham, too, after Harold Friedell died. Friedell played at St. Bartholomew's Church and taught us all to improvise. Improvising is so important not just for weddings and funerals and things, but there are people who must have music to move from one place to another in the service—they must have some kind of walking music. You can just flop around or you can make some kind of form out of it. When the little kids come down for a kids' sermon, then you can really have fun with that. It is always fun to create something on the spot.

I was very curious about your comment in THE DIAPASON's 2002 article concerning relationships.

If you have a good relationship with your choir, they will sing for you no matter what. Alec Wyton said that the choir director is 90 percent personality and 10 percent musical ability. So I have been fortunate in that I like the choir and the choir seems to like me, and we get along very well.

I was watching Bob Sabourin rehearse this morning—he is mentoring the entire choir, and thus they want to sing for him. He works them hard, which they should do; they don't just chatter and carry on. They work hard because they want to, and come back because they like to. That's the relationship that we organists and choir directors need with our choirs.



Steven Egler performing Powell's *Sonata for Organ* at Trinity Episcopal Church, Bay City, Michigan

Now, in regard to the clergy, I have always had collegial relationships; I have always been able to say let's have a cup of coffee and talk about something. I have always worked with good clergy who were very supportive.

The church secretary/administrative assistant is absolutely wonderful. She's from Mississippi like me and she will do things outside of her job description. In the Methodist church right now the minister, of course, and the secretary are Methodists, and the two Episcopalians are the choir director and the organist. We have a great relationship—all four of us—and we don't have staff meetings.

That makes it even better.

You're absolutely right. Sometimes the pastor, the choir, and organist can be very distant from everyone else. In the church where I am serving now, before the service starts we go down in the congregation and "play the crowd." Then the minister gets up and says the announcements, the call to worship, and then I play the prelude, which means they have to listen.

That is a wonderful way to establish rapport with your church members.

It works better in a small church. Going out into a church with 600 in the



Exultate Deo Chamber Choir at Trinity Episcopal Church, Bay City, Michigan



Front row: Robert Sabourin, Steven Egler, Kenneth Wuepper; middle row: Nicholas Schmelter, Patricia Bowen, James Rabideau; top row: Robert Powell, James Hill

congregation—it's hard to do that. But you can do it in small churches, where everybody knows each other. I am as fortunate as anybody could be. My advice to church musicians is to get to know everybody you can, work as hard as you can, and be cognizant of relationships with everybody in the parish—not just the choir.

I love the story about your playing too many verses of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Bishop Pike was at St. John the Divine before he became a bishop. I played "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and played and played and lost my place and wasn't looking, and I played 13 verses before I finally decided maybe I had better end. But

I was forgiven. Then one time I played a hymn in the wrong place, and the clergyman whose name was Howard Johnson—a wonderful fellow—said when I told him this sad story, "The heavens didn't fall."

And yet playing the text is important. I have students who come in and all the notes are just right, but they haven't read any of the text and don't know where to punctuate or breathe.

They'll do something like "Thy kingdom come! On bended knee" (author: Frederick Hosmer). I don't want the kingdom to come on bended knee particularly. My mentor told me to breathe with the congregation and to make them breathe and leave the same time



East Texas Pipe Organ Festival
P. O. Box 2069
Kilgore, Texas 75663

www.EastTexasPipeOrganFestival.com
EastTexasPipeOrganFestival@yahoo.com

EAST TEXAS PIPE ORGAN FESTIVAL

November 10-14, 2013

Honoring the Life and Work of
Roy Perry

Thirteen recitals
on five Aeolian-Skinners

with

Joby Bell, Charles Callahan,
Ken Cowan, Isabelle Demers,
Nathan Laube, Lorenz Maycher,
Bruce Power, Jason Roberts, Chandler Teague,
Tom Trenney, Thomas Trotter,
Brett Valliant, Bradley Welch,
and special exhibits and presentations
honoring the life and career of
William Teague.

between verses. I found the trick to that is to hold onto the last chord. When I let it go they know that I am trying to start.

Tell us about your time with Alec Wyton.

We had Evensong every day except Monday, so I played the Evensong along with Morning Prayer. He wanted to make sure I knew how to play Anglican chant, so he didn't play every service. Of course, he conducted many services and I played a lot of them when he was conducting and that was a difficult task: but he was down on the floor, and I was up in the loft.

Let's discuss teaching and mentoring.

I was fortunate to have people who saw something in me that I didn't see. The first one I had in high school was an organist named Walter Park. He was a wonderful fellow. He became the band director to just keep eating, but it didn't suit him very well. He played in a small Episcopal church and I had a one-hour organ lesson every week. After the organ lesson, we would then have a three-hour composition lesson—all for the same price. I finally learned to write a little march like a Sousa march, and I used these ancient books that taught you voice leading. It was wonderful. Preston Ware Orem was the author of the book, *Harmony Book for Beginners* (1919).

Mr. Park was a great person and encouraged me to write things, and I would bring them and we would look at them and talk about them. He made me feel that what I was doing was worthwhile. That is what mentors do. Later, of course, I studied with Alec Wyton who thought that I could be an assistant without falling completely to pieces. I told him at one time that I was scared of that place—blocks of stone! You know it scares you to death. There were other people who over the years were kind and helpful. But those two are the main ones.

So a teacher isn't always a mentor?

These people and I were working together—we were learning the pieces together, writing the pieces together. I wrote the pieces and we would go over them. You might have done something

here entirely different, let's try that and see what happens—it was as if we were learning them together. That is true mentoring. It is difficult to be a mentor. I'm not that. It is probably easier for people who are full-time teachers.

I use the term “psyching out” the choir for a Sunday morning: that is mentoring. You are doing something that might be more difficult, and they're hesitant about it.

They have the full confidence in you as the choir director. They will do their best, but they are not confident. One terrible thing happened during the Bach cantata “Praise Our God.” We were singing it in English and the choir got lost—completely lost in the final movement. Somewhere along the line a soprano came in and had the right place, and they all picked it up. I didn't stop, I just kept on going. That kind of thing is challenging. Another time we did the *St. John Passion* with half the orchestra on this side and half the orchestra on the other side. Half the orchestra had gotten one-half beat behind the other half, and so we got through the first 26 pages and they had this extra beat. We started in for the *da capo* and we did it right the second time. I wasn't going to stop!

What would you say afterward to your choir members when things didn't go well?

I told them that it's ok to make a mistake; I don't dwell on it. “The heavens didn't fall.” We have something else to do next week anyway. Don't say too much about the mistakes. Think about the good things and move on.

What are your thoughts on the status of things in the church today?

I try to keep up with what is going on. There is some good writing among the church composers today, and I could name ten of them. One publisher told me a long time ago that they had put the music submissions in three piles: some of them they certainly don't want, and the middle one could go either way. So much of that stuff is ok, and those tend to be both boring and exciting; and so choosing music is very difficult.



Robert Powell at the Möller organ, Trinity Episcopal Church, Bay City, Michigan



Robert Powell at age 14 (1946)

What are their criteria for selecting music for publication?

I would say how they set the text, where the accents fall, and what kind of voicing they have. I can write for college choirs sometimes and make it interesting, but I don't have a college choir to experiment with, and I never really had. I have always had between 15 and 20 people, so you write for what you have. Is the range bad or good, does it have an independent organ accompaniment?

Publishers respond to various trends, and they are watching what happens. Right now it seems that organ composers are writing music based upon gospel hymns. I have recently published three of my favorite gospel song arrangements. I enjoyed doing the gospel settings—I had fun with them.

It's great to have them, and particularly the churches where they sing these hymns. To play “Sleepers Awake” is one thing, but not if they don't know the hymn. They DO know “Fairest Lord Jesus,” “Open My Eyes That I May See,” and “Standing on the Promises,” and they can relate to these old favorites. Publishers may choose these arrangements in particular.

When you were in the Bronx, you had two anthems in the choir library.

On-the-job training. That's what we would do, and Everett Hilty was the

on-the-job supervisor [at Union Theological Seminary]. All I had was just one tenor, a few women, and a couple of basses. And the tenor anthem was “Seek Ye the Lord” by J. Rollins—one of the two anthems that I had. The other one was Wallingford Rieger's “Easter Pas-sacaglia,” which was for 16 parts. If they had had two sets of choirs, they couldn't have sung that one. So in the end, I wrote two parts real quick. You know what sounds good and what doesn't. You don't have to make a canon of it, but you have to make the sound good.

In the 2002 interview, you mentioned that a balance between “renewal” and “classical” music is more desirable. Can you elaborate?

We had that at Christ Church. They had everything—classical, Anglican; but the other service—the bigger one—had plenty of guitars, basses, flutes that would play during the communion or special occasions, offertory or something, and the rest of it would be traditional. We used HYFRYDOL or some of the traditional hymns. I didn't play for it since they didn't use organ; they had a piano player. It worked out very well.

That parish was large enough to accommodate different services.

A small parish would probably end up going one way or the other. We attended a service in a nearby city, and we expected it to be a traditional Episcopal service and it wasn't. It was the guitars and a singer with a microphone up front. I think they had a string of eight guitars, too. Flashed the words on the screen. Some classical person might be turned off, but it didn't turn me off. It was a very devotional service, and there was nothing wrong with it. It was just unusual—going in expecting something and coming out having experienced something else.

I tried different things when I was a choir director. If I had to advise anybody, it would be to try different things. One time we had handbells, and we were going to do “Of the Father's Love Begotten.” The handbells and singers were going to come in and play something, and on the other side of the church they would come in from the other transept singing and playing the handbells. We were supposed to have been together all the time. Well, it didn't work. Nobody was together. Handbells were playing, the people were singing, and there wasn't much happening!

Then another time we had 40 in the choir and were going to do the Schütz *Psalm 100*. We had three choirs that were echoes—one choir and two echoes. The piece is wonderful, but I did it

GOT WEB?

A highly functional website is your 24/7 sales force — keeping potential customers informed and engaged, even when your office is closed for the day.

To compete in the global marketplace, a sophisticated website that is fully responsive, content rich and totally device independent not only puts you in the race — it positions you in the lead.

SEO? Search Engine Optimization ensures that your website content is ranked high enough in the search results that it is found more often.

At MediaPress Studios, we apply now + tomorrow solutions to "now" problems, whether enhancing existing sites or building new device-independent websites.

MEDIAPRESS STUDIOS
An office of dynamic online communication

Building websites for tomorrow

Content Strategy | Custom Coding | E-Commerce | SEO | Training

Want to know more? Check us out at www.mediapressstudios.com or e-mail sales@mediapressstudios.com.



Robert Powell during the 1980s



Robert Powell today

wrong. I put the main choir down front facing each other, and I put the first echo choir in the back, facing the congregation, and I put the third echo choir in the anteroom. We had loud, moderately loud, and soft, but we did it anyway.

We experimented with Richard Felciano's pieces, and they went very well. We had gospel choirs come in and sing with us, and we did all of this wonderful community stuff. It is good fun to try these different experiments and see what might happen. I had a brass group come in to play—half downstairs and half in the balcony and it did work. All these experiments worked out. Doing the same anthem six times a year: that's not good fun.

Right now we're in a situation where the congregation likes a wide variety of anthems—and sometimes you use the junior choir. We have a choir of 12 when they are all there—no tenors, and four good basses, and the sopranos are great. For a junior choir, you take an SATB anthem and make an SAB anthem out of it. You have to experiment; it is good training—you have eight people here in the choir and none of them tenors; what do you do? You can do all kinds of things.

One has to have an eye [and ear] for what will work.

You have to compose FOR them. Same thing as playing a descant in something; for instance, everybody knows *Fairest Lord Jesus* and it has a descant floating above, just for organ—that makes you sort of a minor composer compared to a major composer.

Regarding hymnals—you worked with the 1982 book for the Episcopal Church.

I thought *The Hymnal 1940* was a treasure; Leo Sowerby was the general editor. *The Hymnal 1982*—my good friend Ray Glover was general editor—is very good. Other good influences upon the 1982 book were James Litton, David Hurd, and Marilyn Keiser, among others. Most of the hymns I find are very fine, including some of the hymns by Calvin Hampton. Some of the other denominational hymnals have included more Spanish hymns in their hymnals.

What do you have to say about that in terms of the future of hymnbooks?

We just don't know what's going to happen with the hymnbooks. It depends on how big your congregation is and if you have people from different cultures. I think there should be hymns for everybody—American hymns, Spanish hymns and Mexican hymns, Scandinavian hymns—because you never know when

some enterprising organist will want to make them better known in their parish. I think they should be there.

Tell us about your involvement with organizations.

Oh, yes. I was with the Choristers Guild board for six years and that was a wonderful thing. I was on the AGO certification committee for four years and that was fun, too. There were some wonderful people there—Joyce Shupe Kull and Kathleen Thomerson—and I enjoyed meeting in New York at the AGO headquarters. I was involved with the orchestration portion of the exam.

I was on the National Council for six years (Councillor for Region V), and there were so many very good people who conducted the examinations. We divided the responsibilities according to our areas of expertise and discussed the questions/answers.

You have been involved with the Association of Anglican Musicians.

They met in Greenville last year. I wrote them two anthems (published by Selah), and I was very pleased and excited. Some other people wrote music and then there was talk about professional concerns: problems that we all have, such as getting fired without due notice—to know what the people are

doing about it; and they usually have very good sermons. Jeffrey Smith, the late Gerre Hancock, Marilyn Keiser, and others—always concerned with preserving good Episcopal church music. It is a great organization.

Tell me about your ASCAP award.

Alec Wyton asked if I wanted to be in ASCAP. They have a list of approved pieces for each composer—I have 170 pieces approved by ASCAP. When so many of my pieces are performed each year, I receive an award. They have given me the same award for the last 20 years.

Your biography mentions restoring a link to St. James.

St. James, the oldest Episcopal church in the country, is in New London, Connecticut. They asked me to write a Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis 35 years ago. As far as I know they never performed it. Then about five years ago a group of people called me up there, and they performed my music. It was great, but it has taken them 35 years. It was discovered in the church basement—when they were cleaning out the church basement, which they clean out once every 35 years! But they were kind enough to perform it, and they asked me to write another piece for them, so I ended up writing the *Benedictus es, Domine*. I set the text in English, and they said they took it to Bristol Cathedral in England. They are wonderful people out there and very good group of singers.

Tell us a little about your family.

I'm going to be a great-grandfather. Yes, we have three kids—one of them is still going to school, and he is about 50. The oldest one is married and has two children. She is a nurse practitioner in San Diego. My wife was a nurse, and my mother was a nurse. The granddaughter works in a hospital. You can't be sick in our family with all those nurses. Of the three children, the youngest works for the patent office. They have sent him to Tokyo five times and to St. Petersburg and Moscow. He's had a happy career. His wife works for a defense contractor, and they have two kids.

Would you change anything?

I would do it all over again. I can't think of anything I would want to change. I would not go to staff meetings, if I didn't have to.

How do you see your legacy as a church musician and as a composer?

I don't know what to say. I don't think people should copy what I do specifically, because everybody has his/her own style—they should focus on what they are doing and hope that what they do will be memorable or useful to their generation and to following generations. You just don't know what you have done that is going to be appreciated, such as with my communion service. I am pleased and flattered, and nothing can be better than to have your music sung.

I hope that people who continue after me will write for real people. Craftsmanship is important, but music should be easy for real people to sing, not so complicated that only the collegiate choir can sing it.

Erik Routley commented that he knew that there would be other hymnbooks and yet hoped they will keep a lot of the traditional material.

Traditional is good, and it fills that criteria—to be singable by real people, not just choirs.

Congregations do not know how to read music that is going to jump a ninth or a seventh—not unless they are really lucky. You do want to make the congregation happy—they DO pay the salaries. Yet you don't want to go overboard and dumb down to them; you want to meet them at their same level. You don't want to take something like "Open My Eyes" and make a caricature of it. That is not a good thing.

This has been a huge pleasure. I will look forward to the next major birthday.

That's right. At 90 we'll do this all over again! ■

Steven Egler is Artist in Residence at First Congregational Church, Saginaw, Michigan, and Professor of Music (Organ) at Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, a position that he has held since 1976.



St. George's Anglican Church, Parktown - South Africa - 2012



Seoul Sungnak Church - Korea - 2010

**Rieger preserves the past
as it embraces
the future.**



Rieger-Organbau GmbH
A-6520 Schwarzach-Vbg., Heiligenstraße 120
T +43 (0) 5372/50132-0, F +43(0) 5372/50132-6
www.rieger-organbau.com, rieger@rieger-organbau.com