

Hellmuth Wolff: Mentor and Friend

A Remembrance

By Herbert L. Huestis

News of organbuilder Hellmuth Wolff's passing on November 20, 2013, was not unexpected, but still came as a surprise and shock. He was 76 years old. Hellmuth had sent a message to let us know that he was afflicted with an asbestos-related lung condition. Twenty years ago, on one of his visits to Vancouver, I had noted that he was not much of a hiker. His respiratory difficulties had been evident for years, but it was a shock to hear that his condition was asbestos-related. Blower boxes? That seemed to be the only source in an organ. However, he may have been installing organs in auditoriums and churches where asbestos would have been disturbed in the bad old days. One can only speculate.

Nevertheless, when the news came, it hit hard. Hellmuth had been a friend for a long time and since the days when I had made a reputation as "The Reed Doctor," he mentored me on the intricacies of voicing of tongue and shallot, much to my benefit. He was indeed a master of voicing, and to the best of my knowledge, his reputation as one of the finest organbuilders rested entirely on the elegance of the organ pipes, cases, and playing actions in all 50 organs of his making.

Hellmuth Wolff, born in Zurich, Switzerland, September 3, 1937, brought to Canada a strong sensibility of the historical traditions of organ building. While his instruments have modern attributes, they reflect exacting organ building according to authentic principles and practices. He was one of the key players in the revival movement of organ building in North America. He played the piano and received organ lessons from Bernard Lagacé in Montréal.

He apprenticed with Metzler Orgelbau in Switzerland, then worked for Rieger Orgelbau of Schwarzach, Vorarlberg, Austria, Charles Fisk of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Otto Hofmann in Austin, Texas, before emigrating to Canada in

1963 to be a designer in the new mechanical action department of Casavant Frères of St-Hyacinthe, Québec.

He worked briefly with Karl Wilhelm before establishing his own firm in 1968 in Laval, Québec. By 1997, he had built 40 organs, ranging in size from one stop to 50 stops. Wolff's largest organ is of 61 stops, 85 ranks, which he installed in Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria, British Columbia, in 2005.

Our professional relationship was that of teacher and student, and our personal relationship was a long-distance friendship. He never gave up trying to teach me French, and though I had written my Ph.D. language exams in French on economic history, one does not learn a language by barely passing an exam, even though the reader can imagine my elation at passing on the first try. Hellmuth sent me Québécois jokes from the newspaper, which I would figure out after several readings. He never gave up.

Hellmuth was involved in a proposal for a Vancouver church, which brought him to the left coast many times, and to our home. Our daughter Amy-Claire finished her baccalaureate degree at Concordia and found employment when needed, with Hellmuth and Guy Thérien. As an 'organ helper' she learned how to lie to the nuns if she had to play hooky and managed to holler in French to her technician supervisor that she had spilled glue on a reservoir. Necessity is the mother of invention; Hellmuth had her make paintings for the door panels of his house organ. She worked on and off at the shop, on everything from high-art painting of organ panels to leathering bellows. One time when I called her, she was sorting trackers.

It was always a pleasure to see Hellmuth and his wife Claudette. They had a lovely old Steinway grand piano that had seen better days. On one visit I tuned it so Bach inventions would sound right, and learned later that he had had it rebuilt.



Hellmuth Wolff and Opus 27, Church of St. John the Evangelist, Montréal, Québec (photo credit: Andrew Maruzzella)

I inspired him once and he inspired me many, many times.

Hellmuth always had a sparkle in his eye. It seemed to inspire his organ building team, and it certainly impressed me when I would visit his shop to assist in the voicing of reeds. It was usually summer time, and he would put me out in front, by the large door to his shop, open to the street, first in line when the postman and other callers came looking for him. I tried to learn a new word in French every day. They were not enough, but they helped!

That Vancouver client had contacted a number of organ builders, and the kink in the project was a single donor, who really did not want to see a change in the old organ, at least in appearance. Any organ builder knows that story, and the project eventually devolved into a 'rebuild' project by my staff, when it had been earnestly hoped that a Wolff organ would be the result. Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, we all made the best of it, leaving the Wolff shop preciously short of work, right then.

You might say this resulted in an experiment, carried out with the blessings of organist, technicians, and organ builder. We enclosed two divisions of the electro-pneumatic organ in organ cases from Hellmuth's shop, and put to rest, at least in our minds, the notion that thick cases make for more expressive pipe divisions. Thin, resonant panels, tracker-organ style, made an extremely expressive result. The organ has tremendous expressive volume from low to high dynamic. Partner James Louder assisted us with planning for construction and installation, and the result was nothing short of fantastic.

And a lull in work at the Wolff shop was avoided. It takes much humility and resilience to go for that kind of solution to an economic slump—and a long-term friendship between fellow organ builders.

Working on reed tongues with Hellmuth was tremendously inspiring. He would hold each tongue up to the light, check for flat spots, and meticulously curve for the smoothest upturn. He would work with me side by side, then leave me on my own, when I had a sense of what I was doing. Opus 47, the largest organ he made, for Christ Church Cathedral in Victoria, had a wide variety of national reed styles, and offered me the chance to work with a master of reed voicing for which I have always been enormously grateful. He worked side by side with all his employees, which I observed to be the most productive management style possible. My daughter Amy was once again involved in the project—this time, participating in the production of the *maquette* (scale model), which was an integral part of his organ-building process.

We would get together for conferences and fell into the habit of chumming with Martin Pasi, always a pleasant experience.

My visits to the shop came right at the end of Hellmuth's partnership with James Louder. I liked James very much and was sad to see him depart after 26 years. This happened at the time of my retirement and to my delight James bought my reed-voicing jack, which Martin Pasi had made for me years before. I was always in love with that little one-stop organ, and it had seen many successful jobs come and go. Somehow, I always thought of that voicing jack as a peace offering between two long-term partners in organ building. James wrote a very touching tribute to Hellmuth, which I have quoted, and which appears at the end of this remembrance.

Hellmuth's friendship had a domestic quality that I loved very much. He would tell me stories of how he met Claudette Begin at a concert, where she was handing out programs. It was a real romance and made a great story. He and Claudette

Biography and partial opus list:

www.musiqueorguequebec.ca/orgues/wolff.html

Wikipedia article:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellmuth_Wolff_\(organ_builder\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellmuth_Wolff_(organ_builder))

January 19, 2014, Redpath Hall, McGill University, Montréal, Québec.

A memorial concert by Mireille Lagacé, Geneviève Soly, John Grew, William Porter, Hans-Ola Ericsson, and Hank Knox:

www.mcgill.ca/channels/event/memorial-concert-hellmuth-wolff-builder-mcgill-university-organ-232052

Announcement of Hellmuth Wolff's death

by Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria, British Columbia:

www.christchurchcathedral.bc.ca/index.php/what-s-on/news/532-hellmuth-wolff

Remembrance by Michael Gormley, organist, Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria, British Columbia, and tribute by James Louder, organbuilder:

<https://www.facebook.com/ChristChurchVictoria?sk=wall&filter=2>



Martin, Claudette, Maya, and Hellmuth Wolff in Victoria, British Columbia (photo credit: Robert North)

Hellmuth Wolff: Opus list milestones

Opus 2, 1969: Bourgie Hall, Montréal, Québec

2 manuals and pedal, 12 stops, A=415 tuning, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 8, 1973: St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cambridge, Ontario

2 manuals and pedal, 20 stops, 25 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 9, 1973: Abbey of Notre-Dame-du-Lac, Oka, Québec

2 manuals and pedal, 6 stops, 23 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 14, 1974: Church of St. John the Evangelist (Roman Catholic), New York, New York

3 manuals and pedal, 26 stops, 37 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 15, 1974: Gary Thomas residence, Minneapolis, Minnesota

2 manuals and pedal, 11 stops, 12 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 16, 1975: First Unitarian Society, Ithaca, New York

2 manuals and pedal, 18 stops, 22 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 20, 1977: Eighth Church of Christ, Scientist, New York, New York

2 manuals and pedal, 25 stops, 28 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 22, 1979: Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Davenport, Iowa

3 manuals, and pedal, 40 stops, 52 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 24, 1981: McGill University, Redpath Hall, Montréal, Québec

3 manuals and pedal, 37 stops, 51 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 25, 1982: Bates College Chapel, Lewiston, Maine

3 manuals and pedal, 37 stops, 53 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 26, 1983: St. John's Lutheran Church, Montréal, Québec

2 manuals and pedal, 14 stops, 18 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 27, 1984: Church of St. John the Evangelist, Montréal, Québec

2 manuals and pedal, 27 stops, 37 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 29, 1985: Travis Park United Methodist Church, San Antonio, Texas

3 manuals and pedal, 63 stops, 85 ranks, mechanical key action, mechanical and electric stop action

Opus 30, 1986: Christ Church Episcopal, Oyster Bay, New York

2 manuals and pedal, 32 stops, 43 ranks, mechanical suspended key action, mechanical stop action

Opus 31, 1987: Kalamazoo College, Stetson Chapel, Kalamazoo, Michigan

3 manuals and pedal, 44 stops, 65 ranks, suspended mechanical key action, mechanical and electric stop action

Opus 32, 1990: Christ Church Cathedral (Episcopal), Indianapolis, Indiana

Chancel Organ: 4 manuals and pedal, 50 stops, 72 ranks, 3,280 pipes, mechanical key action, electric stop action

Opus 33, 1991: University of Toronto, Knox College Chapel, Toronto, Ontario

3 manuals and pedal, 32 stops, 44 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 35, 1993: Presbyterian College, Montréal, Québec

2 manuals and pedal, 13 stops, 16 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 36, 1993: Church of the Visitation, Montréal, Québec

2 manuals and pedal, 23 stops, 28 ranks, 1,352 pipes, mechanical key action, electric stop action

Opus 37, 1994: St. Giles Episcopal Church, Northbrook, Illinois

2 manuals and pedal, 19 stops, 25 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 38, 1994: St. Columba Chapel, Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax, Nova Scotia

1 manual and pedal, 10 stops, 14 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Beckerath, 1959, Wolff, 1994: Mountainside United Church, Montréal, Québec

2 manuals and pedal, 28 stops, 41 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 40, 1996: University of Kansas, Bales Recital Hall, Lawrence, Kansas

3 manuals and pedal, 45 stops, 66 ranks, self-adjusting suspended mechanical key action, electric stop action

Opus 41, 1997: United Church of Marco Island, Marco Island, Florida

2 manuals and pedal, 22 stops, 26 ranks, 1,332 pipes, mechanical key action, electric stop action

Opus 43, 2000: University of Northern Iowa, Jebe Hall, Gallagher-Blue-dorn Performing Arts Center, Cedar Falls, Iowa

2 manuals and pedal, 31 stops, 37 ranks, mechanical key action, electric stop and combination action

Opus 44, 2001: Chamber Organ, Early Music Vancouver, Vancouver, British Columbia

1 manual, 5 stops, 6 ranks, mechanical key and stop action

Opus 45, 2001: Foundry United Methodist Church, Houston, Texas

3 manuals and pedal, 47 stops, 64 ranks, 3,016 pipes, mechanical key action, electric stop action

Opus 46, 2003*: DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana

3 manuals and pedal, 41 stops, 56 ranks, 2,848 pipes, mechanical key action, electric stop action *Organ's nameplate states Opus 47, 2002

Opus 47, 2005: Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria, British Columbia

4 manuals and pedal, 61 stops, 86 ranks, ~4,300 pipes, mechanical key action, electric stop action

Opus 48, 2008: Winspear Hall, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas

60 stops, 83 ranks, mechanical key action, electric stop action

were very inclusive and treated me like a member of the family, when I visited Laval, and my wife Marianne and I included them in our family when they were in Vancouver. We shall miss Hellmuth very much, and remember him with great fondness, and wish Claudette, Martin, Maya, and his extended family the best possible future in his absence.

I can only echo the kind tribute from James Louder, who said:

Hellmuth was dearly loved and deeply respected by innumerable lovers of the organ . . . who will mourn his death but will long celebrate his art. Hellmuth's true monument will be his work, fifty of the finest organs built in our time . . . Thank you for everything, my dear Hellmuth, and farewell. ■

Herbert L. Huestis is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music, where he studied organ with David Craighead 40 years ago. After a stint as a full-time church organist, he studied psychology and education at the University of Idaho, obtaining his Ph.D. in 1971. He spent time as a school psychologist, and was subsequently lured back into the organ world and took up pipe organ maintenance with his wife Marianne and son Warren. Now retired, he spends time tuning pianos and reconditioning harpsichords.




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