

Sewanee Church Music Conference

July 14–21, 2013

By Jane Scharding Smedley

The 63rd annual Sewanee Church Music Conference, directed by **Robert Delcamp**, president of the board and university organist at the University of the South, welcomed three ‘first-timers’ as music faculty this year: **Richard Webster**, **Maxine Thévenot**, and **Edmund Connolly**. The Reverend **Barbara Cawthorne Crafton** returned as chaplain, to the great delight of those privileged to hear her in 2011. Webster is director of music and organist at Trinity Church, Copley Square, Boston. Thévenot and Connolly, in addition to their extensive performing and re-cording careers, serve as organist-choir director and assistant organist-choir director, respectively, at the Cathedral of St. John’s in Albuquerque. Reverend Crafton, author, counselor, and spiritual director, has served several churches. She heads the Geranium Farm, an institute for the promotion of spiritual growth.

The scope of the conference allows for many essentials: learning, worship, fellowship, spiritual enrichment, and the proverbial “re-charging of batteries.” This year’s gathering accomplished all this and more. In the first rehearsal, Webster took the 138 singers through all the music to give them a taste of what was in store, while getting acquainted with the ensemble at his disposal.

On Tuesday evening, the annual Gerre Hancock Concert was presented by Thévenot and Connolly in All Saints Chapel. Thévenot played Marcel Dupré’s *Placare Christe*

Servulis from *Le Tombeau de Titelouze*, op. 38, Sweelinck’s variations on *Ballo del Granduca*, and selections by Bruhns, Hampton, Messiaen, McNeil Robinson (*Homage to Messiaen*), and Phillip Moore. The inclusion of Gerre Hancock’s *Air* was most fitting, as many of those present personally knew of his long-time relationship with the conference. Thévenot showed sensitive accompanying skills on three songs by Hugo Wolf offered by Connolly; Vaughan Williams’s beloved “The Call” was a perfect match for his expressive baritone voice. Thévenot concluded with Vierne’s *Carillon*—the pulse of the piece could have set the carillon in the Shapard Tower above tolling.

Choral reading sessions were spaced throughout the week: Richard Webster, **Alvin Blount**, and **Peggy Lyden** shared proven winners from their own church programs, with anthem packets provided by **Elizabeth Smith** of **Lois Fyfe Music**. A highlight of the conference is the presence of this store on campus all week for browsing, professional advice, and conviviality of shoppers. **Mark Schweizer** of **St. James Press** previewed its latest collection, and Maxine Thévenot presented organ music from her native Canada.

Long-time attendee **Richard Moore** offered two workshops on the use of computer programs especially geared towards the work of church musicians. To judge from the overflow crowd he drew,

this was obviously filling a need for many.

The popular and invaluable “Episcopal Basics” class offered by School of Theology faculty member **Susan Rupert** now includes “Singing the Altar Book” and “Liturgical Planning”—pertinent topics whether one is serving a small parish or a cathedral.

While the primary focus of the music faculty is the rehearsal and performance of literature at the two main liturgies, each offered sessions on various topics. Thévenot gave a thorough and excellent overview of hymn-playing skills, demonstrating such with attendees **Bill Bane**, **Parks Greene**, and **Richard Mangiagli**. In her organ masterclass, coordinated by **Alvin Blount**, players **Tim Hall**, **Bill Bane**, **Jeffrey Ford**, and **Stanley Workman, Jr.** were each allotted 30 minutes; this allowed in-depth observations by the clinician that could be beneficial to all. She shared background tidbits to illustrate reasons for approaching a piece in a certain way.

Edmund Connolly’s well-received classes on vocal techniques were further integrated into the group rehearsals: at Webster’s invitation, Connolly oversaw warm-ups and made suggestions for dealing with specific issues throughout the week. Such displays of teamwork were noted positively by colleagues.

Choristers from St. George’s Episcopal Church in Nashville assisted Webster in his presentation entitled “The Joy of Doing REAL Music with Children.” The



Richard Webster rehearsing

topic of composing and arranging drew about 35 who read through submissions conducted by attendees **Mark Janus**, **Stephen Schalchin**, **Brennan Szafiron**, **Stephen Casurella**, and **Kirby Colson**. Webster facilitated feedback from the observers, with each composer receiving positive and insightful suggestions on their work. A workshop on choral conducting offered **Eric Vinciguerra**, **Jennifer Stammers**, **Susan Yoe**, and **Mark Janus** (all expertly accompanied by **Dory Light**) the chance to show their interpretation of Howells’s *Like As the Hart*. In addition to Webster’s comments, others made positive and useful observations, further showcasing the collegial aspect of this conference.

Each year one looks to bring back some pearls of wisdom to share with one’s choir: a vocal warm-up, a conducting gesture for the clean release of a final ‘s,’ a catchy phrase to drive home a point—even a good joke! Webster’s rehearsals contained many such gems, generously and respectfully shared. Later in the week, on a more personal note, he told his story of being present at the Boston Marathon when the bombings occurred, only two months previously (see *THE DIAPASON*, October 2013, pp. 20–21).

The Reverend Barbara Crafton was back as chaplain—truly by popular demand! Besides deeply spiritual insights, her talents in theater and music, among others, showed forth in her profound messages—choices of words, their



63rd Sewanee Church Music Conference attendees



Edmund Connolly and Maxine Thévenot



Connolly and Thévenot at console

delivery, timing, pacing, punctuated with delightful humor. Daily morning homilies were scripture-based, with everyday examples woven throughout. Glimpses of personal stories and musical knowledge obviously resonated with her listeners, including her image of the choir as a model for the world in its blend, ensemble, unity, harmony. In addition to using her voice as a preacher, she very capably served as Precentor at Evensong. Her presence at daily choral rehearsals was further evidence of her appreciation of the conference's focus on liturgy. It was notable that, unlike some years, attendance at morning Mass did not decrease as the week went on! The titles of her four lectures alone enticed listeners to come and hear: *The Music of the Spheres*; *A Tree Falls in the Forest*; *Nude Descending Staircase*; *The Also-Life*.

The *Missa Dorica* by Webster was sung at daily Eucharists, with the *Durham Mass* by Daniel Gawthrop used once. Organ selections provided by Dr. Thévenot on the Rodgers organ in the small Dubose Chapel ranged from Buxtehude and Bach to Boëllmann, Langlais, and Messiaen.

This year's commissioned organ work—*Variations on 'Ubi Caritas'* by French-Canadian composer Denis Bédard—served as the prelude one morning, with the chant later sung at the Offertory. The work consists of three statements of the chant in contrasting styles and lasts six minutes—a useful and accessible setting. Thévenot also played it during Communion at the Sunday Eucharist in All Saints Chapel.

A carillon concert by **John Bordley** and the Reverend **Raymond Gotko** beckoned worshipers to Friday's Evensong. Both retired college professors,

each took up the field of campanology as a second career in recent years.

Canticles by Edwardian composer Charles Wood (*Collegium Regale in F*) were complemented by Webster's Anglican chant for Psalm 85 and his *Preces and Responses in Mixolydian Mode* (nicknamed "Web in Mix" by his own singers). The musical centerpiece of the liturgy was S. S. Wesley's major work *Ascribe Unto the Lord*, an amalgamation of Psalm 96 and 115 written in 1851. Webster crafted descants for BROMLEY and ST. CLEMENT. His drilling of the singers on diction, precise rhythms, and tuning was rewarded. Thévenot concluded the service with Victor Togni's exuberant *Alleluia! (Five Liturgical Improvisations)*.

The use of modal tonality in Webster's *Missa Dorica* brings a fresh element to music written with a congregation also in mind. As done in many places this year, Benjamin Britten's centenary was acknowledged; his *Festival Te Deum* served as the Offertory anthem. Jennifer Stammers's soprano soared over the chorus into one of the most beautiful endings in modern choral repertoire. George Herbert's text "The Call" was heard this time in a sweet and accessible SATB setting by Harold Friedell. This further showed the range of difficulty presented each year in choral choices. Some, like the Britten, provide a venue for clinicians to teach techniques, while letting singers experience repertoire most could not otherwise perform. John Whitmer's professional recordings of the liturgies not only serve archival purposes, but allow the musical experiences shared by the attendees to be heard by a much wider audience.

Special note is made of the various tasks—many behind the scenes—shared



Jeff Ford, Alvin Blount, Bill Bane, Maxine Thévenot, Stan Workman, and Tim Hall at organ masterclass

by attendees: **John Hobbs** and the Reverend **Thomas Williams** at the altar; Frolic producer Jennifer Stammers, among others. **Bill Bane** now joins the board of directors who oversee the planning and execution of the conference. **Kim Terry Agee**, director of the Dubose Center, announced her retirement after 25 years. Her presence will be greatly missed.

Faculty for the 2014 conference (July 14–20) will be Todd Wilson and Peter Conte, with Bishop J. Neil Alexander as chaplain. It was announced that Todd Wilson will become the conference director beginning in 2015, the 65th anniversary of the

conference. Information can be found at www.sewaneecconference.org. ■

Jane Scharding Smedley has served as organist-choirmaster at St. Peter Roman Catholic Church in Memphis, Tennessee since 1980. She earned bachelor's (Rhodes College) and master's (Wittenberg University) degrees in sacred music, and holds Colleague and Choirmaster certificates from the American Guild of Organists. Her teachers included David Ramsey, Tony Lee Garner, Frederick Jackisch, and Richard White. An attendee at the Sewanee Church Music Conference since 1979, she currently serves as secretary of the board of directors.

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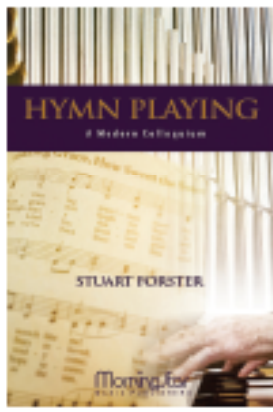
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