

Harpsichord News

by Larry Palmer



3 November 2002: players at the dedication of Richard Kingston's Millennium harpsichord, opus 300, in the Washington, D.C. music room of Charles and Susan Mize. Left to right: Dr. Mize, Larry Palmer, Virginia Pleasants, Don Angle, Brigitte Haudebourg, and composer Glenn Spring

Another member joins the harpsichordists' century club

Virginia Pleasants, harpsichordist, clavichordist, and fortepianist, celebrates her 100th birthday on May 9, 2011. Born in Ohio, she attended Wittenberg University and completed her baccalaureate degree (with a major in piano) at the College-Conservatory of the University of Cincinnati. After private piano study in New York City, she won a first prize in the MacDowell Competition for Chamber Music.

Joining her husband, music critic Henry Pleasants, in Europe at the end of World War II, the couple lived in Austria, Switzerland, and Germany until settling in London in 1967. There Henry wrote music criticism for the *International Herald-Tribune* and Virginia served for twenty years as an adjunct lecturer at Cambridge University. Her frequent recitals of early music and her gift for keeping in touch with a wide circle of interested friends kept Virginia in the forefront of the British early musical scene. In turn she kept many, including readers of *THE DIAPASON*, better informed about interesting happenings across the Atlantic. Pleasants' discography includes four discs of Haydn *Sonatas* for The Haydn Society, and Quincy Porter's *Harpsichord Concerto*, issued by Composers Recordings Incorporated.

Four years after the death of her husband in 2000, Virginia came "home" to Philadelphia. In 2002 she joined several friends in dedicatory festivities for Richard Kingston's 300th harpsichord, playing music of Zipoli, Blow, Croft, Domenico Scarlatti, and Hungarian composer Tibor Serly. A longtime member of the South-



Virginia and Henry Pleasants, 1996 (photo: Charles Mize)

eastern Historical Keyboard Society, Virginia gave a memorable lecture-recital on the fortepiano works of Philadelphia composer Alexander Reinagle for the Society's 2007 conclave at the University of North Texas in Denton.

With her attainment of the century mark, Virginia Pleasants joins a select group of revival harpsichordists, including Marcelle de Lacour and Virginia Mackie. More research may be needed, but it seems that daily practicing, especially on a plucking instrument, might be considered beneficial for a long, as well as happy, life.

Comments and news items are always welcome. Address them to Dr. Larry Palmer, Division of Music, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX 75275. E-mails to <lpalmer@smu.edu>.

In the wind . . .

by John Bishop



The temperamental organ

Winter was coming to an end, and at Fenway Park, fabled home of the Boston Red Sox, and the facilities manager was working down his checklist of pre-season chores. This would be the second year of the new ballpark organ, and he figured it would need tuning. He called up Fred Opporknockity, the guy who had delivered the organ, and asked if he could come to tune the organ before Opening Day. Fred replied that the organ didn't need to be tuned—he was sure it would be fine. Mr. Facilities suggested that the organ at his church was tuned for Christmas and Easter. "No," said Fred, "don't you know that Opporknockity tunes but once?"

This joins a long list of so-called jokes like the one that ends, "Is that an almond daiquiri, Dick?" "No, it's a hickory daiquiri, Doc." Or the one that goes . . . But I digress. (How can I digress when I'm only 160 words into it?)

In fact, the Fenway Park organ didn't need to be tuned. It's electronic and was tuned at the factory. But the tuning of pipe organs is a subject without end or beginning, without right or wrong, without rhyme or reason—it just needs to be in tune!

Mr. Facilities' recollection that the church organ needs to be tuned for Christmas and Easter (notice that I capitalized Opening Day as a High Holyday!) is only half right, in my opinion. For years I scheduled big tuning routes that occupied Advent and Lent, but where I live in New England, Christmas and Easter are almost always both winter holidays, and the August brides would walk down countless center aisles straining to the strains of sorry 8-foot trumpets that made her guests pucker as if they were biting into a lemon. It's my experience that summertime tuning problems always involve either "soprano" D, F#, or A, ruining virtually every Trumpet-Tune processional. In one wedding I played, the fourth E went dead—the trill on beat three of Jeremiah Clarke's ubiquitous tune made me laugh. I was only quick enough to go down a half-step, a safe enough transposition because you can keep playing the same printed notes with a different key signature. It was an awkward sounding transition, but at least it gave me back my "dee diddle-diddle-diddle da-da dum de dum dum" instead of "dee doh-doh-doh da-da dum de dum dum."

Gradually I changed my plan to define seasonal tunings as "heat-on" and "heat-off"—around here that works out to be roughly November and May—and maybe it means I found myself a little extra work because there often seem to be Easter touch-ups as well.

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Why do we schedule tunings according to seasons? Simply and authoritatively because the pitch produced by an organ pipe of a given length is subject to temperature. Say a pipe plays "440-A" and say it's 70 degrees in the church. Raise the temperature a degree and now the same pipe plays 442 (roughly). And the catch is that the reeds don't change with temperature and the wooden pipes (especially stopped pipes) are more affected by humidity than temperature. So when there's a temperature swing the organ's tuning flies into pieces. You cannot define organ pitch without reference to temperature. A contract for a new organ is likely to have a clause that defines the organ's pitch as A=440 at 68 degrees.

And here's the other catch. My little example said it was 70 degrees in the church. But it's never 70 degrees everywhere in the church. It may be 70 at the console, 66 in the Swell, 61 in the Choir, and 82 in the Great. If these are the conditions when it's cold outside and the thermostat is set to 68, you can bet that summertime conditions have it more like 75 or 80 degrees everywhere in the building except any high-up area where you find organ pipes—then it's super hot and the reeds won't tune that high.

Conditions outdoors can have a dramatic effect on organ tuning. Imagine an organ placed in two chambers on either side of a chancel, and imagine that the back wall of each organ chamber is an outside wall. The tuner comes on a rainy Friday and gets the organ nicely in tune. Sunday dawns bright and sunny, the south-facing wall gets heated up by the sun and that half of the organ goes sharp. During the sermon the organist "txts" the tuner to complain about how awful the organ sounds. (Wht wr u doing?) The following Thursday the organist shows up for choir rehearsal and finds the tuner's bill in his mailbox. What would you do? Was it the tuner's fault that it rained? Any good organ tuner pays attention to weather conditions and forecasts as if he were the mother of the bride planning an outdoor wedding.

I care for a large tracker-action organ in Boston, housed in a free-standing case with polished tin Principal pipes in the façades of Great, Pedal, and Rückpositiv cases. It's situated in a contemporary building designed by a famous architect, who gave the congregation the gift of light from the heavens coming through a long narrow window that runs along the ridge of the roof. In the winter as the sun moves across the sky, brilliant light moves across the front of the organ, heating the façade pipes as it goes. Instantly the Great 8-foot Principal goes 30 or 40 cents (hundreds of a semi-tone) sharp. Do the math—how many hundredths of a semitone are there in a quarter-tone? Guess what time of day this happens? Eleven AM. And guess what time the opening hymn is played on a Sunday morning? The first time I tuned that organ, I felt as though I were in a carnival fun-house with mirrors distorting the world around me as the organ's pitch followed the sun across the room.

Temperature's rising

In order to do a conscientious tuning, we ask the church office to be sure the heat is up for when we tune. When they ask what it should be set to, I reply that they should pretend that the tuning is a Sunday morning worship service. If the heat is turned up to 68 degrees five hours before the hour of worship, then set the heat at 68 five hours before the tuning. It's not very scientific but it seems to get the point across.

I've arrived many times to start a tuning to find that there is no heat in the church. Sorry, can't tune. I'll come back

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tomorrow—and the time and mileage I spent today goes on your bill. Once I showed up at the church (made of blue brick and shaped like a whale—some architects have the strangest ideas) and the sexton proudly announced, “I got it good and warm in there for you this time.” It was 95 degrees in the church and the organ sounded terrible. Sorry, can’t tune. I’ll come back tomorrow. He must have run \$400 of fuel oil through that furnace in addition to my bill for wasted time. And the haughty authoritative pastor of a big city Lutheran church once said to me from under an expensively-coiffed shock of theatrical white hair, “We heat the church for the people, not the organ.”

The eternal battle of the organ tuner and the thermostat is not because we don’t like working in cold rooms. It’s not because we want the organ to be warm. It’s physics. When you chill oxygen, the molecules get closer together and it thickens to the point at which it becomes a liquid. When air warms, the molecules get further apart. When the air molecules get further apart, the air gets less dense. When the air gets less dense, sound waves need less energy and they shorten. When the sound waves shorten, the pitch increases. It’s not a matter of comfort, it’s physical law—the laws of physics.

The same laws say that the organ will be in tune at the temperature at which it was tuned. Set the thermostat at 68 on Thursday for the organ tuning, turn it down to 55, then back up to 68 on Sunday. Voila! The organ is in tune—unless the weather changed. And it’s better for the organ not to be vigorously heated all the time. Ancient European organs have survived for centuries partly because their buildings are not superheated. American churches are often guilty of “organ baking”—keeping the heat up all winter, using the argument that it’s more cost-efficient than reheating a cold building several times a week.

It’s a Zen thing.

I’ve been asked if I have perfect pitch. No—and I’m glad I don’t. A roommate of mine at Oberlin had perfect pitch, and he identified that my turntable ran slow (remember turntables?). It didn’t bother me—but he couldn’t bear it. The organ tuner with perfect pitch has to compensate for the fact that you are not necessarily tuning at A=440. If the organ is a few cents sharp or flat when you arrive to tune, chances are you’re going to leave it that way. It takes several days to change the basic pitch of most organs. And for really big organs it can take weeks.

I’ve been asked how I can stand listening to “out of tune-ness” all day. I don’t like hearing it when I’m listening to organ music or attending worship, but when I’m tuning I love it because I can change it. There’s a satisfaction about working your way up a rank of pipes bringing notes into tune. You can feel them “click” into tune—in good voicing there’s a sort of latching that I sense when I give the pipe that last little tick with my tool.

An organ tuner is something of a contortionist—he has to be able to forget about physical discomfort in the often-awkward spaces inside an organ so he can concentrate on the sounds. He often hangs from a ladder or a swell-shutter for stability. (Key holders, please keep your dagnabbit feet off the Swell pedal!) He learns to tune out little mechanical noises and defects of speech. An organ pipe might have burps and bubbles in its speech that are clearly heard when you’re inside the organ and still sound perfect from the nave or the console.

He gets into a nice quiet state and a rhythm develops: “next,” tick-tick-tick, “next,” tick-tick-tick. A couple hours and ten ranks (610 pipes) into it and the sexton comes in with a vacuum cleaner. The flowers are delivered for Sunday. A lawn mower starts up at the house next door. The pastor brings in a soon-to-be married couple. They politely assure me, “Don’t worry, you’re not disturbing us.”

Once I showed up to tune the organ at a university chapel. A couple heavy trucks full of equipment were outside and a guy was loading tools into the bucket of a cherry picker. I went up to him saying I was there to tune the organ and wondered if they’d be making noise. “Not much,” he said, “just a little hammer-drilling.”

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As I write, the Red Sox official website says that the Opening Day game at Fenway Park starts in twelve days, eight hours, thirteen minutes, and twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three seconds. It doesn’t really matter whether the organ is tune or not—they don’t use it as a ballpark organ any more. But there was a time when the organ music was an integral part of the ballpark experience. A common question in Boston sports trivia quizzes was, “Who’s the only person who played for the Red Sox, the Bruins (hockey), and the Celtics (basketball)?” Answer—John Keilly, the organist for Fenway Park and the Boston Garden.

My father and I have been to dozens (maybe hundreds?) of games at Fenway Park. He’s had the same seats (section 26, row 4, seats 13 and 14) since the early 1970s. When John Keilly was at the Hammond B-3, we joked about getting to the park early so we could hear the preludes. And he had an uncanny knack for playing the right tune at the right time. When Carlton Fisk hit his now legendary “walk-off” twelfth-inning homerun to win game six of the 1975 World Series, Keilly created a secondary sports legend when he played “Hallelujah”—though not according to historical performance practices.

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Nancy Faust was organist for the Chicago White Sox from 1970 until her last game on Sunday, October 3, 2010. She missed five games in 1983 when her son was born—otherwise she played for more than 3,200 games without missing one. When she was hired, petitions were



Pretty Nancy Faust doll

circulated by fans and sports officials of the White Sox had placed a woman on the team’s payroll. But she came into her own when Harry Caray became the radio commentator for the Sox. He gave her the moniker *Pretty Nancy Faust*, and started the tradition of leaning out the window of his announcer’s box to lead the singing of *Take Me out to the Ballgame* as Nancy played. She played by ear, and kept current with all the latest music through her four decades of playing so she was always ready with a current musical quip for the amusement of the fans. She was the originator of the ballpark use of the now ubiquitous 1969 Steam song *Na Na Hey Hey (Kiss him goodbye)*, playing it when the pitcher of an opposing team was pulled out during the 1977 pennant race.

Nancy Faust was honored by the White Sox for her years of service to the team and its fans on September 18, 2010 in a pre-game ceremony. Ten thousand Pretty Nancy Faust bobblehead dolls were distributed to fans that day. My wife Wendy lived and worked in Chicago for about ten years, and as both a gifted organist and a baseball fan, she joined countless other Chicagoans celebrating Faust’s contribution to the game. We heard about her retirement on the NPR sports program “Only A Game” early one Saturday morning, and Wendy let me know how much she wanted one of those dolls. With thanks to Chicago organbuilding colleague and theatre organ guru Jeff Weiler, I found one complete with the ticket stub for the September 18 game, and it now has an honored place in our living room.

In the pages of this journal we often read about churches celebrating their retiring long-time organists. I’ve read plenty of stories about fancy concerts with reunions of dozens of past choir members, music committees commissioning commemorative anthems (bet you can’t say that three times fast!), cakes that look like pipe organs, bronze plaques, and surprise tickets for Caribbean cruises, but never bobblehead dolls. How cool is that? ■

On Teaching

by Gavin Black



Buxtehude and Boëllmann—final thoughts (for now)

For the last year I have looked, in as much depth as space seemed to permit, at the process of studying and learning two contrasting and, I hope, complementary pieces—the *Praeludium in E Major*, BuxWV 141 by Dietrich Buxtehude, and the *Suite Gothique*, op. 25 by Leon Boëllmann. This month I will share a few thoughts about this project as a whole; then next month I will turn to something new.

The goals of this long series of columns were really two: first, to provide a template for working on the two pieces, which, if followed, would help a student learn those pieces securely and comfortably; and second, to suggest ways of thinking about and working on organ repertoire that could be applied broadly to other pieces.

The learning process

The process of learning a piece of music on the organ can be thought of in three parts—parts that are not rigorously separate, but interact with and blend into one another. The first is the very practical: learning the notes by working out fingerings and pedalings, and by practicing the notes systematically and patiently—and practicing enough. The second is getting to know the piece as well as possible. This includes anything that permits the player to know, consciously or subconsciously, what is coming up next in the piece. This has a working relationship with the act of memorizing a piece, but doesn’t depend on memorization. (And indeed memorization does not guarantee really knowing the content of a piece musically.) This knowledge reinforces the learning that comes from practicing—makes it more secure. The third part comprises purely interpretive decisions that are made about *how* to play the piece: tempo, articulation, phrasing, and so on—and of course also registration.

In the columns of the last year I emphasized the first two of these, writing

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