



Gilbert Martinez, with Neil Roberts and Ann Walton in the background, Joni Mitchell reclining, Fort Burgwin, 1988 (photo by Clyde Putman)

In the wind . . .

by John Bishop



Stephen Tharp at the Kotschmar Organ



WNR and Katherine Roberts Perl, May 2010

Mr. Blancrocher, as my way of remembering Wm. Neil Roberts.

Among Neil's gifted students, two outstanding ones, now professionally active in the San Francisco Bay Area, are Gilbert Martinez (attracted to that first Fort Burgwin Workshop through Neil's influence) and Katherine Roberts Perl (who continues Neil's rare combination of distinguished harpsichord performance and skillful technical expertise in the maintenance of the instrument), both of whom have contributed to this memoir. Further information was offered by David Calhoun of Seattle; Elaine Funaro, through the *Aliénor Newsletter* for Spring 2011, viewable at <www.harpsichord-now.org>; and by Neil's business and life partner, Anthony Brazier, who survives him. ■

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>.

THE DIAPASON

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We're havin' a heat wave

It's hot. I'm writing in mid-July from the coast of Maine, where we usually enjoy cool ocean breezes. But records are being set. It was 98 degrees in Portland yesterday and it's 98 degrees at home today. I said ocean, didn't I. That means humidity. A few minutes ago, the meteorologist on the radio said the humidity is "about as high as it can go." Like most desk-days, I'm talking on the phone with people all over the country, and everyone says it's terrible today. Electric utilities are limiting power even though they're dealing with record high demands. Hospital emergency rooms are busier than normal. Several of the church offices I tried to call today had messages on their phones saying they had closed early in order to save energy.

For fun (or longing) I looked at the website of the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to learn that while it's 98 here, it's in the high 60s in Nome, Alaska and around 70 in Helena, Montana. But it's 90 in Detroit, 103 in New York City and 104 in Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania.

All those organs sounding terrible

Many churches have summer schedules during which the organ isn't used much—a good thing, because when the weather gets hot, the pitch of flue pipes rises dramatically, while the reeds stay right where they are. I advise clients (and resist temptation myself) not to raise the pitch of reeds in the summer to match the rest of the organ. That's how tuning scrolls get wrecked—you roll them down "into the quick," as if you were trying to get a carp out of a sardine can, to match the pitch of the flues. Then in the winter when you try to get the reeds back to usual pitch the scrolls are torn. When a tuning scroll is damaged and "leaks," the speech of the pipe is compromised.

If your church has "Church School Sunday" on the first Sunday in June, then summer services in the air-conditioned chapel (pretty common in New England Protestant churches), you're fine. I played for almost twenty years at

a church with exactly this schedule. It was a delight because there was no choir in the summer, and the services were an hour earlier. I was active in a sailing club in those days and we ran races every Sunday, so it was handy to be finished with church at 10 a.m. We moved the church's wonderful piano from the sanctuary to the chapel each year so I could play on a "real" instrument for the summer—a great opportunity to keep my fingers around my piano repertory. The permanent instrument in the chapel was an aging and low-end electronic organ. Something about it meant that every A# in all the "stops" was out of tune and the dealer/technician said it couldn't be fixed. There was a sprinkler head above it that never leaked.

The problem with this summer schedule at my church involved the huge and popular Sheraton resort nearby. A couple would book one of the banquet rooms for their wedding reception and ask the wedding consultant if there was a pretty church nearby. We had dozens of weddings. Not bad for the pocketbook, but couples who "booked" their weddings because ours was a "pretty church nearby" were often less devout than we might have wished and came with priorities counter to many of the church's teachings. 'Nuff said.

I might be scheduled to play ten or twelve weddings in July and August. The church had a large and attractive electro-pneumatic organ with plenty of reeds, and any organist knows how important reeds are to the standard wedding repertory. Think of all those eighteenth-century English trumpet tunes or that ubiquitous Mendelssohn march without reeds. If it was 80 degrees or less, the organ sounded okay. Much above that and the reeds couldn't be used. And I would not tune them in temperatures higher than chamber temperatures at Christmas or Easter, when the furnace was running for days on end and the organ got good and hot. That was the limit. I'm not willing to wreck \$75,000 worth of reeds for a wedding march. On a re-

ally hot summer Sunday you can play a perfectly respectable worship service without using the reeds.

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It's a privilege for me to serve on the Board of Directors of the Friends of the Kotschmar Organ (FOKO) in Portland, Maine. It's one of two instruments in the country with a municipal organist on the bench (Ray Cornils in Portland and Carol Williams in San Diego, California) and it's a popular beloved civic icon. It was built by Austin in 1912—the centennial year is coming up—and has 100 stops and five manuals. The people of FOKO work diligently to maintain the instrument and present up to twenty concerts each year with a variety of international stars. In addition, the organ is used in performances of the Portland Symphony Orchestra, Choral Arts Society, and for many high school and college graduations each year. You can see a full schedule of concerts, specifications of the organ, and information about educational activities at the website <www.foko.org>.

Last week Stephen Tharp played a concert as part of the regular summer series. His program included some wonderful twentieth-century music, a couple of the big classics, and his own transcription of *The Fair* from Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. Stephen has been voted 2011 International Performer of the Year by the New York City Chapter of the American Guild of Organists and will be presented in recital at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in New York City as part of the chapter's annual President's Day Conference next February. That is the weekend before the beginning of Lent, a perfect time for a few days off between the high spots of the liturgical year. Come to New York for the conference. You'll hear great musicians playing great organs. You can find details at <www.nycago.org>.

Stephen and his wife Lena stayed with Wendy and me for a couple nights after the concert, and we had plenty of chance for shop-talk, carrying on about the state of organ teaching, performance, and building. Much of our talk focused on the philosophy of performance—what do we try to accomplish when we perform, what are the benefits for the performer and the audience? Many organists have two levels or venues for performance—worship and concert. Are they the same?

When we work from the organ bench on a Sunday morning, we are certainly trying to do our best, maybe even consciously hoping that the congregation (at least the personnel committee) is impressed. But our challenge is to focus our skills and diligence to enable the fullest communication between the congregants and God. It's essential to do your very best, but it's not appropriate for you to be feeding your ego.

I'm reminded of a story from the Johnson White House. President Johnson was presiding over a working lunch with members of Congress and foreign dignitaries. He asked his press secretary Bill Moyers (whose Ph.D. came from

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John Bishop and Stephen Tharp on the Damariscotta River

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas) to give a blessing as the meal began. Moyers folded his hands, bowed his head, and began. Johnson bellowed, "Speak up, I can't hear you." Moyers replied, "Mr. President, I wasn't addressing you."

When we perform on a concert stage or in recital at the church on a Sunday afternoon, we are working to create a harmonic unity between composer, performer, audience, and instrument. The performer who is inspired by the instrument and the music can bring the audience along on a magic carpet ride. What's the energy that makes the carpet fly? It's the energy that the performer draws from the experience and shares with everyone in the hall. Have you ever attended a concert and found that you were exhausted when it was over? That's because the energy transmitted by the performer passed through your consciousness and body, sapping your energy in the process.

Have you ever wondered about the word *recital*? The dictionary in my Macbook says, "to read aloud or declaim from memory." It's a standard word in our organ lexicon, as well as those of singers, pianists, and almost any solo musician. If we get fussy about etymology, a recital by definition would not be an exciting event, but simply a retelling of something created in the past. That would be the essence of an "Urtext" performance—playing the music as the composer would have played it (to the best of our research and ability) on an organ that the composer would have recognized from a score presumed to be as authentic as possible. It's hard to fathom resisting the temptation to add any of yourself to that mix, and the best historically informed performances are those in which the player manages to inject his or her personality into the music, allowing the energy to flow, and projecting the excitement of the music. Bach, Buxtehude, and Bruhns were all great improvisers, and I bet their performances were bawdy and thrilling. Bach would have been the master at slipping *Happy Birthday* to a violinist during an offertory improvisation, no doubt in retrograde inversion and canon.

Using the strict definition, does a recital allow for any creativity? Is the performer licensed to add to the material being recited? Is the listener free to feel moved emotionally? I remember the terror of being required to recite a few verses of a Longfellow poem in elementary school. I was well into my thirties before I felt comfortable speaking before a large group.

We've all heard thrilling renditions of the great classics of organ literature. But haven't we also heard boring, rote recitations of pieces when half the audience knows they could have done better? Is that the best way to project our magnificent, thrilling, all-encompassing instrument to the public?

As part of his concert on Tuesday, Stephen Tharp played Bach's *Toccatina and Fugue in F Major*. That's one of my life pieces—you know, those pieces you played for required student performances in school, the equivalent of final exams for organ performance majors. I worked on it for months, did a harmonic theoretical analysis of it, memorized it, and offered the longest performance on

record because of those traps Bach left us where if you change a B-natural to a B-flat you jump back sixty measures! Stephen's performance had none of that. All he did was give us an energetic rendition, clearly defining the architectural structure of the piece, sharing the trickery of canon and triple-invertible counterpoint in the relative minor, using Bach's toccata-flourishes as bridges that connected those mile-post pillars. It was Bach's music, clear as day, but it was Stephen's performance. As he played, he showed us what he likes about the piece. I like it that way.

Stephen, along with many of our brilliant young players, is blessed with tremendous technical facility, honed and nurtured by countless hours of practice. I recall plenty of performances with enough shaky moments that I would worry as the player approached each treacherous passage. It's hard to enjoy a performance if you can't trust the performer. We are extremely fortunate to share the instrument with a growing breed of brilliant organist/musician/performers whose love of the instrument and musical instincts allow "just anyone" to appreciate the organ to the highest degree.

Be all you can be, but be who you are

Tradition says that a symphony conductor mounts the podium with white tie and a cutaway jacket with tails. In the 1980s, Seiji Ozawa startled the conservative blue-blood crowd in Boston with his trademark white turtleneck shirts. Heresy. I'm sure he wasn't the first to break tradition on those exalted steps, but he sure made a noise. In the 1960s and '70s, E. Power Biggs and Virgil Fox carried on their celebrated feud, one in a tux, the other with sequins and a scarlet-lined black cape. What does the performer's dress have to do with the performance? Does it make the music sound better? Does it help the audience understand the depth and excitement of the music? Does it help the performer define for his or her own self who and what is being given to the audience? Does it honor the dignity and majesty of playing great masterworks in a huge acoustic space?

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When the visit was ending, I drove Stephen and Lena to the Portland International Jetport (international because of daily flights to Nova Scotia, jetport because they have jets!). We stopped in Portland for lunch and dropped in to St. Luke's Episcopal Cathedral to see the Skinner organ as restored by the A. Thompson-Allen Company of New Haven, Connecticut. It's a modest four-manual organ with 47 ranks that include seven ranks in the chapel at the rear of the nave that doubles as the Echo of the Chancel organ. It's a beautiful building, and the organ is a knockout. The Vox Angelica in the Echo absolutely disappears when the shutters are closed, and the full organ is a mighty blast of gorgeous tone. The extreme range of volume and the possibility of truly seamless crescendo from the softest (imaginable) string to the thrilling fortissimo and back again are perhaps the most impressive facets of the wonderful organs built by Ernest Skinner.

As Stephen played through countless combinations of stops, we reveled in the beauty of the sound. But it was hot. Remember, it was 98 degrees outside. It might have been five degrees cooler—or less hot—indoors, but it was hard to tell. The organ sure knew it was hot. The reeds, and especially the gorgeous harp, stayed right where they belonged, and the flues went to the heavens with a fiery tail. No worries. The stakes were not high, the organ sounded terrific, and we were the richer for the experience. The cathedral musician, Albert Melton—my colleague on the FOKO board—was on vacation and the office staff welcomed us warmly. Congratulations to Nick Thompson-Allen and Joe Dzeda and the staff of the Thompson-Allen Company for their wonderful work and obvious deep respect for Mr. Skinner. Congratulations to Albert and the people of St. Luke's for their appreciation of the great artwork that is their organ.

Now let's have some cooler weather. ■

On Teaching

by Gavin Black

Thoughts on teaching interpretation

Interpretation is fascinating from many points of view. These include the relationship between interpretation and technique, how different approaches to the problems of authenticity affect interpretive choices, the history of different interpretive schools, the many elements of interpretive choices—tempo, registration, phrasing, articulation, rhythm, rubato and adagio accentuation or the relative lack thereof, and more—and in general, the strange phenomenon of *how different* performances of exactly the same notes can be.

With organ music in particular, interpretation begins with the choice of instrument and the venue—in effect, this is the beginning of the registration pro-



cess. Sometimes—most of the time for most of us, in fact—the choice of venue and organ comes first. This part of the interpretive process is turned upside down: we choose music that suits the instrument and/or the room, or we make decisions about how much we feel that the music needs to be an exact fit for the situation or how much we can bend and stretch and compromise. This is all part of the interpretive process, and it shares with the rest of that process the fact that different players approach it quite differently from one another.

Conveying interpretation to students

For teachers, primary questions about interpretation or interpretive stance are joined by questions about how to introduce students to matters of interpretation. These questions start with the overriding one: whether or not a teacher should hope or expect or even insist that his or her students take a similar interpretive approach to that of the teacher. It often seems almost routine to do so. In listening either to established or to up-and-coming players, we often expect to be able to tell who studied with whom based on what the student's interpretations are like. However, it is by no means

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