

From the Dickinson Collection: Speech to the St. Louis Chapter of the American Guild of Organists by Clarence Dickinson

edited by Lorenz Maycher

The first installment in this series, "From the Dickinson Collection: Reminiscences by Clarence Dickinson, Part 1: 1873–1898," was published in the July 2008 issue of THE DIAPASON; next appeared "From the Dickinson Collection: Memorizing Controversy," September 2008; and most recently, "From the Dickinson Collection: Reminiscences by Clarence Dickinson, Part 2: 1898–1909," February 2009.

Introduction

As a founding member of the American Guild of Organists, Clarence Dickinson (1873–1969) was a frequent speaker at AGO functions throughout his lengthy career. In this speech given to the St. Louis Chapter in 1959, Dr. Dickinson reflects on playing the 1904 St. Louis Exposition organ, offers colorful memories of the chapter's founding members and of Andrew Carnegie, reflects on his personal career as a church musician, and offers helpful advice to organists of all ages. Additional material has been incorporated into the text from a speech Dickinson gave at Westminster Choir College on October 1, 1968. All material in this series is taken from the Dickinson Collection, Dr. Dickinson's own personal library, which is housed at William Carey University in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. We are very grateful to Patricia Furr and Dr. Gene Winters of William Carey for granting access to this special collection, and for permission to use these items in this series intended to preserve the life and legacy of Clarence and Helen A. Dickinson.

—Lorenz Maycher
Laurel, Mississippi

I am delighted to be here with you tonight, and to share in the celebration of the Golden Anniversary of the founding of your chapter. Thank you, Howard Kelsey, for all these undeserved kind words. It hardly seems necessary to say anything, but just to stand here and let you imagine I am all things I should like to be. I am not much of a speechmaker. Whenever I find myself in the position of making a speech, I am reminded of Thackeray's saying: "My wit is cab wit," which means I always think of the bright things I might have said when I am in the cab going home afterwards!

My first acquaintance with Howard Kelsey came with his arrival at our school at Union Seminary. Many of the students were arriving in ancient, rather dilapidated Fords, which they had purchased for anywhere from ten to twenty-five dollars and then sold upon arrival. One of our students, now Dr. Allwardt, met him coming down the hall and said, "I suppose you came in your Rolls-Royce." Howard answered very simply, "Yes." He had driven the family car and sold it for enough money to carry him through the entire two years' course.

I have been rather intimately acquainted with St. Louis—the town, not the saint—and your organization for a long time. I first came here to play at your Exposition in 1904. That was the year Mrs. Dickinson and I were married, and we had been in Europe (Spain and elsewhere) for a long trip, the last stop being England, where, a few days before we sailed, Lady Patterson gave a luncheon for us to meet Lady Penell. We were telling her of the trip ahead of us, how we would travel miles across the ocean, then take the finest train of that time, the Twentieth Century, up the Hudson. Lady Penell interrupted and said, "Oh, that is wonderful! Then you can tell me about my Hudson Bay stock."

Arriving in St. Louis, I had the pleasure of giving a number of recitals on



Clarence Dickinson at the Brick Church Skinner console as delivered in the narthex of the old church on Fifth Avenue in 1918

the magnificent organ at the Exposition, which was designed by Dr. George Ashdown Audsley, the author of the greatest early book on organs and organ building. I remember the old gentleman's coming to the house for dinner, bringing the two great volumes and putting them down very wearily, saying, "I have brought you twenty-seven pounds."

The Exposition organ marked a great advance in organ building, with many new mechanical devices. I have always remembered playing Liszt's "Evocation à la Chapelle Sistine" most effectively on it, as I was able to put more atmosphere into the playing of it than ever before or since. You may remember the main theme is that of Allegri's "Miserere," which has been sung every Good Friday in the Sistine Chapel since it was written, in diminishing light, until it is finished in complete darkness. The score and parts were held for use in this manner and were jealously kept secret until the twelve-year-old Mozart wrote it down from memory, and we have all had the wonderful privilege of singing it ever since. Liszt used the Mozart "Ave Verum" for his second theme. On your organ, it was possible to depict the darkness Liszt desired by using in the pedal stops 64', 32', 16' and enough soft 8' pitch to define the tone, with 32', 16', and soft 8' on the manuals, gradually climbing upward till one could end the final triad at the top of the keyboard on a 4' flute in an organ in the ceiling of the high auditorium. This is the organ which was later installed at Wanamaker's in Philadelphia. In the foundation work, Dr. Audsley harkened back to the period of middle 19th-century tone that he advocated, although using a bit more color and control.

I would like to speak a bit about the changes in organ building during my lifetime. The first organ I played in my father's church was made within the same period as the Exposition organ, as was the first organ of my own in the South Presbyterian Church in Evanston, and later the organ in St. James in Chicago. Organs of this period had clarity of diapason tone, and, in the larger instruments, had brilliance achieved through the reeds and mixtures. With the advent of electric action came the possibility of octave couplers, and the declaration by the Austin Organ Co. that nothing above a four-foot stop was necessary, which unfortunately gave us quite a long period of impossibly dull organs. Even in the large four-manual concert organs no number

of super-octave couplers could infuse any life into them. With Mr. Skinner there came additional beauty of tone, which had its drawbacks, too, since many small organs sacrificed the real organ tone in order to secure some of his beautiful color stops—not so far as I remember, though, in his large organs: the Brick Church organ, built in 1918, contained six mixtures, and other overtones, on which a baroque program could sound as successful as much as one built today.

There have been several periods of what you might call "feverish organ building." One increase in good organs throughout the country we owe to Mr. Andrew Carnegie. The building of better organs led to an increased number of good organists capable of handling the larger instruments, and then to higher standards of church music. This debt has never been adequately acknowledged. Mr. Carnegie gave 8,400 organs distributed all over the United States, and greatly helped the cause of good church music. I speak as one very grateful, since the hundred-rank organ in the Brick Church came to us in this manner. His insistence that the church contribute half the cost was wise, as it interested the members in an undertaking in which they had a part. Mr. Carnegie also had a very fine organ in his home, and maintained an organist so that he awoke to the music of an organ every morning.

I was quite well acquainted with at least three of the founders of your chapter: Ernest Richard Kroeger, the real founder, Charles Galloway, and James T. Quarles. The year before I went to Paris to study with Guilman, Mr. Galloway had worked with him. Whenever I especially pleased Guilman with my playing of some large number, he would say, "Mr. Galloway played that very beautifully!"

Mr. Kroeger and I were very good friends. One winter he came to Chicago and attended a rehearsal of my Musical Art Society. My accompanist, as it happened, was away that day, so I ventured to ask Mr. Kroeger if he would mind helping us out, which he very graciously did in wonderful manner. We were rehearsing Grell's sixteen-part Mass, a mean piece to read at sight as there was no reduced score—just the sixteen-part score. The chorus had only their single parts. The first chorus gives out the first eight-bar theme, then the second enters singing the same bit. As this was their first look at it, trouble soon developed. After straightening it out, we started



Clarence Dickinson, circa 1904

over again. When the third chorus entered the same thing happened. When I started for the fourth time, Dr. Carver Williams, who was the 2nd bass in the last chorus, threw his part down on the floor and cried out, "I'll be darned if I will count 64 bars again!"

As you know, Mr. Quarles was organist at Cornell University for a number of years before he moved to St. Louis. Andrew Carnegie had given a splendid new four-manual organ to the university's large auditorium. Quarles got the idea of having four organists play the dedication recital. So, on this occasion, Quarles opened the recital, Dr. Tertius Noble followed, and William Churchill Hammond, the Holyoke organist, came third. Hammond finished his section with a very soft, quiet number, during which Mr. Carnegie went sound to sleep. I came next, opening with full organ, at which Mr. Carnegie woke with a leap in the air. So I, for once, had the honor of awakening Mr. Carnegie from his slumbers.

I would like to make a few remarks as suggestions of how we, as musicians, may go forward to the new day. In the first place, build up good fellowship among all organists of the city, young and old, long-time residents and newcomers. Too often there are two or more separate sets of members, the older and the younger, with separate, perhaps even conflicting points of view. See if you can build a warm, personal relationship with each other. Let the joy of association help promote a more definite feeling of "togetherness" in what each of you, as individuals, and all of you, as a group, are trying to accomplish. As you cultivate generosity and appreciation of others' efforts and talents, feelings of rivalry, or competition, of professional jealousy, of any semblance of strife among yourselves, will be minimized. Give emphasis to a spirit of cooperativeness, of encouraging one another, of striving, not separately, but together, toward achieving accomplishment of worthy goals. In the work of the Guild, remember we all either "hang together or we hang separately." This may necessitate a bit of "giving in" on the part



Clarence Dickinson rehearses a festival choir for the Knoxville AGO Institute of Church Music at First Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tennessee, June 9, 1949

of everyone concerned, but the results will be well worth the effort and the sacrifice. Your Guild, planning and working together, brings harmony and unity, and will have a positive influence in your city. I am not suggesting here that there is any noticeable lack of this fine spirit among your members; rather, this is the very first bit of advice that I would offer any chapter, for I believe it to be a truly basic principle for our progress, and I believe that improvements can always be made in any of our chapters in this regard. It is very important that newcomers to our "fold" be made to feel welcome and wanted.

To my mind, one of the chief good works of the Guild is its bringing us all together, and not only within the confines of our own city, but city mingling with city. It is stimulating and enlightening, and furnishes us much of that in our country which has been one of the chief benefits of our European sojourns. In this connection I have a pleasant thought of such a visit, which I think would, as the Germans say, be "sympathetic" to this occasion. It is of a visit of a couple of hours duration with Georg Schumann, the Berlin composer whose organ "Pascaglia" and "At Evening" we play in this country, and whose motets are sung by all our Musical Art societies. He had been only a vague acquaintance, a composer, but when I came into personal touch, he was—I cannot convey to you how delightful. There was first, with much enthusiasm, the Bach manuscript to show me, which he had just found at the Singakademie, tucked away for centuries and lost to sight. Just as I was leaving and had reached the door, he exclaimed, "Ach, Himmel! I almost forgot! Come back, won't you!" So I returned to my chair, while he disappeared for a few minutes, then reappeared and passed through his study again, beyond the living room in which I was sitting. Then he called me in. On the wall hung Stuck's famous "Mask of Beethoven," which the artist had presented to the composer. It had been put away for the summer, but Schumann had gone to all the trouble of unpacking and re-hanging it, and, as we stood before it, in all its wonderful impressiveness, after a long silence, he said, "Now, whenever you see this in reproduction"—and one does so often, on the covers of all the Hugo Wolf things, for instance—"Whenever you see this in reproduction, you will think of me and of how this hangs just here in my study."

And so the Guild brings us all in touch; to the newcomer in a city or chapter it means everything, in the unique opportunity it offers for getting acquainted; to the steady residents, it should mean the inciting to do ever better work, and in intercourse with other organists and composers, inspiration. I say organists and composers, for the organists are giving to the world the greatest body of church music; and this, I believe, will be, in future, more and more stimulated by the Guild.

Admittedly, the purposes of the Guild are manifold, and the accomplishing of all of them is no easy task, but let us not forget that one of our principal aims is the raising of church music standards. And, in this, I would offer a word of warning if you are to build wisely and effectively for the future: remember that progress, if it be real and lasting progress, is a slow process. It must be gradual, step by tedious step. It evolves. Rome was not built in a day, you know, but it was practically destroyed in a few hours under the leadership of a stupid, lackadaisical, "fiddling" ruler. In attempting to raise standards, therefore, work positively and confidently, but move patiently, calmly, understandingly, and cautiously.

The future of the world we live in depends on the rising generation. The future of music, as it affects our common life, depends on the ideals being shaped in the minds of our young people. Therefore, try to keep the music sung in Sunday school up to a high standard, as well as that used in the main church service. But, be patient. Do this gradually. After we sang Palestrina's "Reproaches," with its use of plainsong, in the Brick Church a good many years ago, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees came up to me and said, "That was a queer thing you gave us this morning." Notwithstanding this implied criticism, we repeated it some time later, and then again. After the third repetition, without realizing that he had heard it before, the same man came up and commented almost enthusiastically, "That was a beautiful anthem this morning. I hope you will repeat it soon." I never heard a more vivid reversal of opinion. So, do not get discouraged. But, make sure if it is old and modal, or very modern, that it is really inspired.

And while I am on the subject of high standards in church music, let me remind us that this may be accomplished through a varied musical program and that it is not necessary to limit ourselves merely to "Bach, or Pre-Bach," as is suggested by one teacher I know. A question I should like to ask is "Why do some of us limit organ specifications to the point that we can play only linear music?" I admire Rembrandt's drawings greatly, but that is no reason for me to deny myself, and others, the enjoyment of the color in his paintings, as well.

I feel like giving a suggestion to the young players here, as I did recently to the New York chapter when the treasurer had just announced a change of address for seventeen young organists, which meant they were moving from one church to another: When you go out to consider a new position, you look at the organ very carefully to make sure it is an instrument you will enjoy playing, and you examine the choir library to see what material there is to work with—probably also the piano in the choir room—but you do not examine the minister, the most important factor in your future happiness. Scrutinize your minister, because



The Dickinson Collection, William Carey University, Hattiesburg, Mississippi

he can make or break your career in that church by loving and demanding rather cheap music, or backing you up on the use of beautiful music and helping you to raise the standards of the music used in that church.

It might interest you to know the one reason I have led a happy life as an organist and choirmaster is the fact that I have invariably been associated with kindly and sympathetic ministers. When I went to my very first church, the small one in Evanston, a big new organ was being installed. I was appointed permanent organist, but for the dedication of the new instrument, a well-known organist from Chicago was invited to play the opening recital. When the program was being arranged, the minister said to the visiting organist, "But do let the lad play the first number on his new organ."

The minister of the next church I served in Chicago was a very brilliant young man who afterwards became dean of the Harvard Divinity School. He helped me by insisting I should play an organ number after his sermon that carried out the spirit of his text, sometimes quietly meditative, sometimes big and stirring. After a couple of other short associations in Chicago, I became organist and choirmaster of St. James Episcopal Church, and found a rector who was fond of the best, and very sympathetic to all I strove to do in presenting the use of fine music.

When I came to New York and the Brick Presbyterian Church, I had Henry Van Dyke, the poet, writer, and Ambassador to Holland during the First World War. The church was always crowded to hear him preach, yet he was a great enough man to say occasionally, "It hardly seems necessary to preach a sermon—the music has said it all."

Then came William Pierson Merrill, who had been organist of Union Seminary when a student there, bass of the quartet in the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, where they always had distinguished soloists, and director of his own choir in Chicago. He also wrote very good anthems and hymn settings, and his text of the hymn "Soldiers of Christ Arise" had gone into practically all the English and American hymnals. You can imagine how interested he was in building a unified service by the fact that he took the trouble to cable from London the text for the first few Sundays in the fall.

In addition to our serious work together, we always had good times because of his keen sense of humor. He liked to tell of the Saturday before his first service as minister of the Brick Church. I was rehearsing the choir in the old building on Fifth Avenue in the first chorus of the "Elijah," and was having great difficulty in getting the choir to enunciate the final letter P in the word "Help." It was just at this moment that Dr. Merrill decided to visit the rehearsal and speak a word to the choir. He used to say, "Dickinson stopped them and cried out in a loud voice, 'You'll have to do that again—it sounds like hell.'" Dr. Merrill continued, and said, "I decided this was no place for me, and returned to my study."

His two sons inherited his sense of humor. During the two years that the new Brick Church was being built on Park Avenue, we worshiped in a lovely little Gothic church on 85th and Park Avenue, where there was not room enough for the console in the chancel, and the organist sat in a little curtained room to the side. Ernest Merrill, as deacon, was passing communion, and brought me the bread in this little room. I then looked at my watch and found that I must leave at once to catch the one o'clock train to play a recital in another city, so put another organist on the bench for the finish of the service. When Ernest came in with the wine, his face took on a look of horror, and he asked the other organist in a sepulchral whisper, "What did you do with the body?"

Dr. Merrill and his family once had an audience with the Pope, along with a number of other people. Before the Pope entered, the majordomo went around and pulled down the sleeves, pulled up the collars, and saw that the women had something on their heads. Fourteen-year-old Billy turned to his father and asked, "Wouldn't it be much simpler to just blindfold the Pope?"

It has been one of my goals to encourage all ministers to acquire knowledge of, as well as an appreciation of, music. I do not see how one can hope for a service of worship if the minister writes the sermon, someone else selects a miscellaneous lot of hymns treating three or four different themes, and the leader of music puts on some anthems he likes, or the soloist chooses a solo he likes. A good old Scotch Presbyterian minister once said, "I preach my sermon, and that's all I want; I don't care what they do with the music." Such a minister deserves the fate of one who preached on the text, "Launch out into the deep," after which the choir rose and sang, "Throw out the lifeline."

We must keep ever in mind the power of music to lift the individual person out of his self-centered existence. When he joins in singing a hymn or listens to an anthem, he ceases to be wholly individual; the congregation becomes one, and he a part of it. Personal differences of creed, questionings, doubt, disbelief are forgotten as hearts and voices unite in gratitude, joy and aspiration. It is the privilege and the responsibility of the organist and choirmaster, working with the minister, to offer music so worthy, so noble, so universal in its appeal, that it will not only lift the congregation into closer fellowship with God, but will subtly re-establish in some measure the consciousness of the fellowship of all Christian souls.

Not long ago, one of my pupils gave me some advice, which I should like to pass along to you: "Keep practicing. Although there are no immediate dates pending, keep practicing." ■

Lorenz Maycher is organist-choirmaster at First-Trinity Presbyterian Church in Laurel, Mississippi. His interviews with William Teague, Thomas Richner, Nora Williams, Albert Russell, and Robert Town have appeared in THE DIAPASON.