

In the wind . . .

by John Bishop



The power of teachers

My wife Wendy's daughter Meg is a vibrant young woman who inherited an intense sense of curiosity from her mother. She's an avid reader, an intense student of whatever is the subject of the day, and well versed in world politics. Woe betide the stepfather who finds himself on unsure ground in a dinner table debate!

Meg was a philosophy major at Brown University, a school with an unusually flexible program that allows students (with the help of their advisors) to create their own curriculum to support their major interests. It's increasingly common for college students to spend a semester abroad, and Meg's plan was to break the more usual pattern of going to one of the mainline European countries. Consistent with her interest in philosophy, she chose Greece, and consistent with her insistent curiosity, she resolved to learn to speak Greek.

Elsa Amanatidou is the director for the Center of Language Studies, and senior lecturer in Modern Greek Studies at Brown. She has degrees from the University of Thessaloniki and East Anglia, as well as King's College, London. She's worldly, dynamic, and vivacious, and she captivated Meg. As Meg took her first course with Elsa, I was dimly aware from overhearing one end of telephone conversations that something special was going on. But it wasn't until after she graduated, returned to Athens to work at a prep school, and Wendy and I visited her there that I understood the depth of that experience.

Meg spoke Greek. Not the way I might claim to speak German, stumbling through a pretty good vocabulary with a poor grasp of grammar, and understanding much more of what is said than I can ever answer. She was fluent and confident. She didn't stop to ponder and mumble, "how do you say . . ." More

than once, we watched a shop clerk do a double take as a young American woman spoke so fluently. We spent a week driving in the Peloponnese, stopping for a night in the ocean-bound village of Monemvasia where we had a dispute with a hotel clerk about a mix-up in our reservations. It was a riot witnessing Meg taking this guy on, obviously astonishing him with her command of the language, to say nothing of her agile mind. Later, she took a job as research assistant for a public intellectual, and her language became literary, poetic, and erudite.

And Meg was a student of Greece. She was a terrific tour guide, sharing her rich knowledge of the country's history as we visited places like Delphi, Corinth, and Sparta, to say nothing of Athens.

Elsa's influence on Meg was boundless. It resulted in her spending more than five years in Greece. She lives in Athens with her architect boyfriend Yorgos, and has been immersed in the machinations of a fascinating and complicated country in one of the most difficult chapters of its 4,000-year history. Her world-view, her professional background, her social life, and her personal life have all been formed by that experience.

A fresh wind in Texas

I'm thinking about teachers because we learned (officially) yesterday that Isabelle Demers has been appointed to succeed Joyce Jones as assistant professor of organ at Baylor University. I admire Isabelle as one of the great artists of our day. She is part of a growing list of brilliant young people who are taking the art of organ playing to new levels, and it thrills me to think that she will be influencing the next generation of players.

This news comes after the recent passing of Gerre Hancock and David Craighead, two towering figures in the world of teaching organ and church music. The influence that they have had on modern organ playing is incalculable, but vividly apparent in the increasingly public, public exchange. For weeks after each of their deaths, Facebook was strewn with remembrances, quotes, celebrations, and gratitude. We were reminded countless times of generous spirits, quiet authority, deep friendship and companionship, boundless energy, innate wisdom, and deep knowledge. These two men taught hundreds (thousands?) of talented musicians, many of whom are today's great teachers. It's exponential.

In Boston we live in a big condominium building. One evening as I was getting home, the concierge Kare stopped me to say that another organist had just moved in, and there was Joan Lippincott, longtime professor of organ at Westminster Choir College, with her husband Curt, lighting up the lobby with her terrific smile. Through many neighborly conversations with Joan, I'm keen-



Isabelle Demers



Gerre Hancock

ly aware of how much her students mean to her. It seems as though she's always just back from a former student's wedding, from hearing one play a recital, or from playing a recital at a church where a former student is organist. She speaks of her students all the time, and so they speak of her with admiration, gratitude, and affection.

The study of musical performance is one in which principal teachers play a central role in the lives of their students. I remember well as a student at Oberlin how personal the relationship between teacher and student could be. "Studio politics" was the subject of daily conversations in the student lounge, and there were many times when a friend, organist, singer, pianist alike would come away from a lesson weeping. Rarely enough, a student would work up the courage to apply to change teachers. Each time that happened it was something like a divorce, and the rumor mill would be fed for days. It was tougher on students of many orchestral instruments because, for example, there was only one teacher of flute!

There are few areas of study where undergraduates have as close a relationship with a major teacher as in musical performance. It's common for a student to have two or three private lessons each week in addition to a performance class when all students in the studio are together. I think it's more usual for an undergraduate liberal arts major to have three or four courses with a favorite teacher, but comparatively little one-on-one interaction.

The other major difference between the experience of someone entering an undergraduate school of music and Meg's serendipitous meeting of Elsa is that the student of music enters undergraduate study knowing exactly what he or she intends to do. No high school senior would even get an audition with John Schwandt at the University of Oklahoma, Ken Cowan at Rice, or Isabelle Demers at Baylor unless he was already deeply committed to being a serious organist. Compare that with the liberal arts major who arrives on campus as a freshman, takes a couple semesters of classes, and starts to focus on a particular area of interest.

My mentors

Haskell Thomson was my organ teacher at Oberlin. He's a very tall man and was an imposing presence in his studio, which, with both organ and piano taking



David Craighead



Joan Lippincott



Haskell Thomson

up space, was a mighty crowded place. The room was arranged so that when I sat at the organ, my back was to my teacher. I'm not sure if this memory is real or fabricated, but I swear I can still hear the sound of his red pencil marking up my score as I played. Be still, my crawling skin.

When I was Haskell's student, I was also working part-time for John Leek, the school's organ technician. John had a thriving maintenance business on the side, and three days a week I went off with him tuning organs. And I was music director at Calvary Presbyterian Church on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland. I was deeply interested in working on organs, and the job at Calvary was an important education as well as a tuition-paying salary. But I'm pretty sure that Haskell was disappointed in me as a student—I was doing too many other things to qualify as a serious student of organ playing. Nonetheless, I am very grateful to him for his patience, for the comfortable playing technique he helped me acquire, and perhaps above all, for the sense of the motion of music that he cared so much about. My peers will chuckle when I remember him saying, "and then to here, and then to there, and now we turn around and go to here . . ." all chanted in the rhythm of that day's music. It had a comical side—but the older I get the more I realize the value of the lessons, that every piece of music has direction and motion, inevitable progress, and while the performer can allow the pace

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John Skelton



John Leek

to ebb and flow to express the music, it is the performer's responsibility to take the piece to a logical, reliable, and satisfying conclusion. I remember laughing to myself the first time I did that with a choir I was leading.

When I was in high school, I studied the organ with John Skelton, organist of the Congregational Church around the corner from our house and teacher at the University of New Hampshire. He had studied with Yuko Hayashi (there's another great teacher) at the New England Conservatory, and with Anton Heiller in Vienna. The organ at that church was a three-manual Fisk built in 1969 (I was startled when the church celebrated the organ's fortieth anniversary), with plenty of power and great variety of tone, and John coached my early love of registration, helping me understand why stops sounded well together, and how to effect registration changes as I played. We went through lots of literature and he encouraged me to give recitals, so I learned early how to perform. I had practice privileges at the church, which was handily on my way home from school, and I looked forward to my Friday afternoon organ lessons all week. Along with my regular lessons, John also took me around to hear other organs and other musicians. The organ scene in Boston was very active, and it seemed you could hear the dedication recital of a new organ every month. It was a rich experience for me to be immersed in the variety that is the pipe organ during my first couple years of study.

Roger Shoup was the pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church for the first six years I was organist there. I was just eighteen when I was hired, and though I had played for several churches while in high school, this was my first grown-up job, and I thought I was quite a hotshot. The organ was terrible—a four-manual Austin that had been installed in 1917 when Albert Riemenschneider was organist there, and that had been messed up by several subsequent rebuilding projects. The choir was a great group of people, and I was privileged to be able to hire a quartet of singers, most of whom were my friends from school.

My father was rector of a big suburban Episcopal church, and I know I learned a lot about the operation and machinations of a parish church from observing him in action and by osmosis, simply by growing up in the rectory. But Roger Shoup was my principal instructor in how to be a church staff member, how to present music to the congregation in a meaningful way, and how to apply musical authority to a choir made up of people the ages of my parents and grandparents.

Roger was another big and imposing man. He had been a powerful leader of the civil rights movement in Cleveland, and he had the deepest of convictions about his faith, his social and political views, and how to care for the complicated multi-racial community of that inner-city parish. He encouraged me when I had creative ideas, he corrected me when I misstepped, and when something complicated happened in the life of the parish, he would call me into his office to explain what was going on. Sometimes he took me to a bar where we discussed things like this over Strohs draft beer. He was a powerhouse of a pastor, he loved good music, and he taught me.

John Leek was my principal teacher as an organbuilder. I had worked a couple

summers for Bozeman-Gibson in New Hampshire, where my appetite for the trade was whetted, and I took up working with John those three days a week during the school year, full-time during summers, and stayed on for about five years after I graduated. John was a native of the Netherlands, and had apprenticed with organbuilders since before he was ten. His wife was the daughter of a workshop superintendent. He came to the United States in the early 1960s to work for the Holtkamp Organ Company (in the days of Walter Holtkamp, Sr.), and when the company was installing the organ at Warner Concert Hall, the predecessor to the Flentrop organ, he

noticed that the school was looking for a new organ curator. Shortly after I started working with him, he left the school and established his own company.

John is the quintessential "old world" craftsman. He has huge and powerful hands, a surgeon's touch with a chisel, and extraordinary ears. He could snap the tiniest, tinniest sputtering pipe of a Mixture into tune like a bat grabs a mosquito from the air! He taught me how to read the grain in a piece of wood before putting it through a machine, how electro-pneumatic actions work, how to make a keyboard from scratch, to set a temperament, and to feel comfortable on scaffolding. He taught me how to organize a service call, to trouble-shoot malfunctioning actions, and to gently inform organists how to use an organ with the intention of making it sound better. (You really don't want the tremolo on with the Mixture.) We re-leathered Skinner organs, installed new Flentrop organs (John was great friends with all the boys at Flentrop), built a small fleet of harpsichords, and two new pipe organs.

He could teach by gesture. I remember struggling to tune a Brustwerk Chimney Flute pipe—the pipe was sharp and every time I tapped up on the cap with the iron, it jumped out of its hole. When it fell back the stopper dropped a little, so it was getting worse and worse. John took the iron, held it at a certain angle, and said, "Try this." Every time I

tune a stopped metal rank I remember that brief scene. I even remember the church—the First United Church in Austinburg, Ohio.

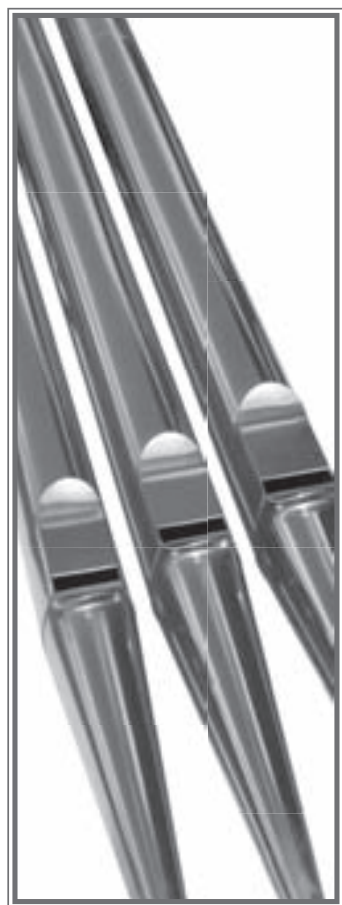
John was cheerful and optimistic. He sang spontaneously. And he loved a practical joke. We built a beautiful cathedral-ceiling screen porch on the side of his house. Finishing up, we were painting the floor. I was painting a corner, facing my work with my back to John. I turned around to find him furiously (and silently) painting me into the corner!

John Leek opened mysteries of the organ for me. He was with me for my first marriage, the birth of my sons, my senior recital and graduation from Oberlin. He was a life mentor.

§

We can all remember the teachers who cared for and fed us. Whether, like Meg, we met our most important teachers by chance, or whether we labored through high school preparing to audition for that legend of teaching we dreamed of studying with, we each have mentors in our past who guided us through the thicket. In our field, there are many great teachers at the ends of the careers, but happily there are equally great young people taking their positions and continuing their traditions. If you are among those who will be fortunate to study with Assistant Professor Demers at Baylor, get ready to work hard. ■

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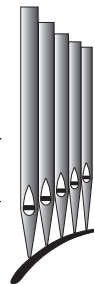
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