

2008 Albert Schweitzer Organ Festival September 5–7, 2008

Frederick Hohman

Any organ professor who speaks honestly will not deny that, when teachers and students engage, it is in fact the teacher who learns as much as the student, whether that engagement is by regular weekly lessons or by way of a jury-contestant relationship. It has been my privilege to serve in each of the past eleven years as a “constant” juror for the Albert Schweitzer Organ Festival. So that means, with the other two jurors changing year to year, I’m the one who has had the opportunity to learn the most! And yes, I’ve grown in many good ways from the experience.

This year, as we’ve seen in so many of the previous competitions, the level of playing keeps getting better. This indicates two things, both of which I believe to be true: (1) the overall level of achievement in our young organists is higher and higher at an earlier and earlier age; and (2) the news about the Albert Schweitzer Organ Festival being a very worthwhile event for young organists is beginning to travel far and wide. The ASOF is unique in many ways. The remainder of my report shall illustrate this.

One of the immediately obvious elements that contribute to the fame of the ASOF is the fine reception and hosting that is given by the staff and congregation of First Church of Christ, Wethersfield. As in each of the past eleven years, I’ve seen this exceptional, yes, even unique hospitality extended liberally to everyone involved in the competition.

September 5–7, 2008, I had the fabulous company on the jury of two of the best-known and long-established organ talents: Gerre Hancock, recognized as America’s foremost organ improvisateur, and whose name comes to mind as a living icon when one thinks of the vocation of “church musician,” and Marilyn Mason, whose reputation as an organist and as a teacher at the University of Michigan spans so long, that her career alone is like the glue and stitching that holds together the 20th-century organ music history book.

Per our tradition, the Festival Concert in 2008 offered fine singing—the finest singing yet that I’ve heard from the choir—led and accompanied by First Church’s master church musician David Spicer. At the Festival Concert on Friday night, again per tradition, each member of the jury was featured in a solo performance on the organ. Having jurors perform before an audience in concert—one with the competition contestants listening attentively in attendance—is a unique way of keeping the jurors humble. It is a humbling thing for a juror to recall one’s own Friday night performance when adjudicating on the following Saturday morning! Both students and teachers, are, after all, striving for the same excellence and spiritual connection with our organ playing. The experienced organist and the newcomer organist share this calling. About the only things that separate the student contestant and the teacher are experience and knowledge. And what a joy it was for the jury to share our perspectives and feedback, and a bit of our experience and knowledge, with each of these six very talented young organists—through personal conversations at the post-competition dinner, through our juror notes, and in the Sunday masterclass. It is this organists’ spirit of giving and this common purpose among organists that is shared and acknowledged each September at ASOF. This awareness of things spiritual is so great that it makes the competition’s cash awards seem to be only one of the weekend’s many benefits.

Another unique aspect of the ASOF is that all contestants, once the Saturday competition is finished, return to First Church on Sunday morning to participate in one or more of the three Sunday



Back row: ASOF co-founder David Spicer; judges Gerre Hancock and Frederick Hohman; finalists Caroline Robinson and Chelsea Barton; and ASOF intern Yea Eun Park; front row: finalists Gregory Zelek, Nathan Davy, James Kennerley, and Christopher Houlihan

morning services. This “giving back” of one’s gifts, and sharing the gift of musical leadership with God’s people, calls to mind the spiritual axioms so eloquently expressed by the words and writings of Albert Schweitzer.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, the ASOF is unique in that it stresses the art of hymn-playing and hymn leadership as a key part of the curriculum. During the Saturday competition, which is an all-day event, hymn playing counts for about 40% of each contestant’s score.

The points discussed in our Sunday afternoon masterclass were applicable to hymn-playing. The competition and class allowed the sharing of ideas that may well take root with both the jurors and the contestants as we continue to grow into our maturity.

I expect the 2009 ASOF and its competition to be no less unique, and I do very much look forward to it.

The judges’ decisions

High School Division—first place: Caroline Robinson of Greenville, South Carolina, student of Charles Boyd Tompkins at Furman University. Second place: Chelsea Barton of Mechan-

icsburg, Pennsylvania, student of Shelly Moorman-Stahlman at Lebanon Valley College. Third place: Gregory Zelek of Coral Gables, Florida, student of Thomas M. Schuster, organist and director of music, Church of the Epiphany, Miami.

Young Professional Division—First place: Nathan Davy of Rochester, New York, student of David Higgs at Eastman School of Music. Second place: James Kennerley of Greenwich, Connecticut, former student of Thomas Trotter at the Royal College of Music (London), and David Sanger, teacher of organ at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Third place: Christopher Houlihan of Hartford, Connecticut, student of John Rose at Trinity College.

The 2008 first-place winners, Nathan Davy and Caroline Robinson, will perform in recital on Sunday, June 14, 2009, at 7:00 pm at the First Church of Christ, Wethersfield, Connecticut.

Information about the Albert Schweitzer Organ Festival and current requirements for the competition are available by telephone at 860/529-1575 ext. 209, by e-mail at <music@firstchurch.org>, or by viewing the ASOF website: <www.firstchurch.org/ASOF>. ■



Marilyn Mason



Frederick Hohman

Frederick Hohman is a concert organist and an audio producer/engineer, the producer/host of an organ music television series, and a composer. He earned the Performer’s Certificate, Mus.B., M.M. and D.M.A. degrees while in the organ class of David Craighead at the Eastman School of Music. In 1984, he won First Prize in both the Mader and Poister national organ-playing competitions. His original compositions and organ transcriptions are published by Wayne Leupold Editions and by Zarex Scores. His concert tours have taken him throughout the USA, the Caribbean and Australia, and to the UK and Finland. His music studio and audio/video facility, Zarex HD, is located in South Bend, Indiana. Further information at these websites: <www.zarex.com> and <www.frederickhohman.net>.

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