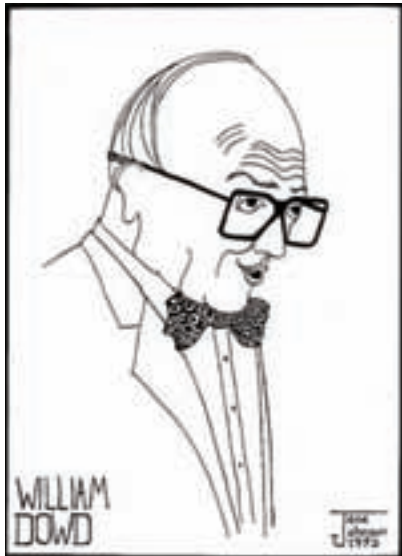


# William Dowd (February 28, 1922–November 25, 2008) An Appreciation

Larry Palmer



Dowd caricature by Jane Johnson (1992)



Gustav Leonhardt and William Dowd at the Smithsonian Institution, May 15, 1983 (Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution)



William Dowd (moving one of his harpsichords) and Larry Palmer; Boston Early Music Festival 1983

American harpsichord maker William Richmond Dowd and his business partner Frank Hubbard set new directions for the modern harpsichord revival with their gradual return to the historic construction principles of fine harpsichord making. English majors at Harvard University, each apprenticed with a noted 20th-century revivalist: Hubbard worked with Arnold Dolmetsch in England, Dowd with John Challis in Michigan. The two young men reunited in 1949 to set up their harpsichord workshop in Boston.

In 1956 an instrument designed after the work of Pascal Taskin was introduced. The usual modern spectrum

material, leather, was used until 1958, after which Delrin, found to have sound-producing qualities similar to quill, was the material of choice. In 1959 Dowd established his own independent shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Continuing his study of antique instruments, he brought the designs of his own harpsichords ever closer to historic specifications, eventually disposing with register pedals and the 16-foot stop. Keyboards were built to antique measurements after 1965, and beginning in 1971 sliding keyboards were introduced that allowed a transposition from modern to "old" pitch by moving them laterally.

In 1972 Dowd, in collaboration with Reinhard von Nagel, established a second shop in Paris, maintaining control of this operation until 1983. With the resulting availability on two continents, his harpsichords, highly regarded for their tone, touch, and reliability, were played by many professional harpsichordists. At the time of his retirement and the closing of his American shop, Dowd had produced 529 instruments in the United States and an additional 250 in Paris.

THE DIAPASON celebrated William Dowd's 70th birthday in its issue of February 1992. The front cover displayed images of four Dowd harpsichords; inside (pages 12–20) were fourteen tributes and reminiscences, plus photographs, Jane Johnson's caricature of the harpsichord maker posing as jazz great Earl "Fatha" Hines, and a complete musical score of composer Glenn Spring's *William Dowd: His Bleu*. The short essays were written by Fenner Douglass, Frederick Hyde, Albert Fuller, David Fuller, Miles Morgan, Robin Anderson, Donald Angle, Sheridan Germann, John Fesperman, William Christie, Dirk Flentrop, Arthur Haas, Tom and Barbara Wolf, and Gustav Leonhardt—a distinguished group of contributors, indeed. I am indebted to Bill's wife Pegram, who survives him, for the concept of this celebratory issue, as well as for her considerable help in bringing it to publication.

I invite each of our readers to seek out this kaleidoscopic view of William Dowd's extraordinary contributions to our shared history and to classical music culture both in the United States and in Europe. Such illuminating anecdotes from those who knew him throughout his productive life are especially to be treasured now that many of the writers are no longer with us. Also to be noted is Bill's response to the various contributions, his chance to "set the record straight" as it were, published one year later in THE DIAPASON for February 1993 (page 11).

Especially endearing was the contribution from the leading harpsichordist of the age, Gustav Leonhardt, whose whimsical offering was an inevitable choice to conclude the words in Dowd's honor. I place it here as tribute to both the master builder and the master player who so often made Dowd instruments reveal their beauties in indelible performances.

## Dowland and Purcell Choosing their Texts with William Dowd in Mind

O how happy's he, who from bus'ness free  
Music for a while  
(Yes, a very good while—since 1949)

While bolts and bars my days  
control[ed]  
(The last two letters added by the editor  
make comment superfluous)

From silent night  
(Only since acquiring a telephone answering machine)

If my complaints could passions move  
(Deliver them at No. 100 [Tremont Street, address of the Dowd Shop])

Shall I sue?  
Here let my life  
(*Bostonia amata*)

Now, o now I needs must part  
(*Bostonia abandonata*)

Shall I strive with words to move?  
(Well, it actually was done with a van)

Welcome to all the pleasures  
(Of Alexandria's feast [the Dowds' retirement address])

Love those beams  
(Oh, those joists and summers in the olden workshops)

Thou tunest this world  
(Which is mean and needs a lot of tuning)

If music be the food of love  
(Eat on)

Fine knacks for ladies  
(A man is never too old)

What if I never speed  
(Keep your Chevrolet)

Flow my tears  
(For good humidification)

Lachrimae  
(The same, for another kind of customer)

An old plebeian let me die  
(H.P. must have been confusing W.D. with another maker)

O lull me, couch'd in soft repose  
(Bless you, but isn't that a little early?)

Now the curtain has fallen and we say "rest well," dear friend. Your legacy of nearly 800 instruments assures an honored place in the history of the harpsichord.

[Freely adapted from my entry "Dowd, William (Richmond)" in *The Harpsichord and Clavichord—An Encyclopedia* (Igor Kipnis, Editor). New York and London: Routledge (an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group), 2007.]

### SAINT PAUL R.C. CATHEDRAL OF PITTSBURGH ANNOUNCES RE-INAUGURAL EVENTS OF THE 1962 RUDOLF VON BECKERATH ORGAN RESTORATION BY TAYLOR & BOODY ORGAN BUILDERS OF STAUNTON, VIRGINIA

TUESDAY, JANUARY 6, 2009 - 7:30PM

JAMES DAVID CHRISTIE  
OBERLIN CONSERVATORY, HOLY CROSS COLLEGE, THE BOSTON SYMPHONY

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 7, 2009 - 7:30PM

ORGAN AND CHOIR - ST. PAUL CATHEDRAL CHOIR  
KENNETH DANCIK, ORGANIST; DONALD FELLOWS, DIRECTOR

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2009 - 7:30PM

ORGAN LECTURE/DEMO/CONCERT BY DONALD FELLOWS  
ST. PAUL CATHEDRAL

SUNDAY, MARCH 22, 2009 - 4:00PM

HARALD VOGEL  
BREMEN, GERMANY

MONDAY, MAY 18, 2009 - 8:00PM

JEREMY FISELL  
ORGANIST OF THE BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL  
SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.

SUNDAY, JUNE 21, 2009 - 4:00PM

CATHEDRAL ORGANISTS IN CONCERT  
J.R. DANIELS, KENNETH DANCIK, DONALD FELLOWS  
ST. PAUL CATHEDRAL

THURSDAY, AUGUST 27, 2009 - 7:30PM

JOAN LIPPINCOTT  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2009 - 7:30PM

DAME GILLIAN WEIR  
THE UNITED KINGDOM

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2009 - 7:30PM

WILLIAM PORTER  
THE EASTMAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC, AND MCGILL UNIVERSITY

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2009 - 4:00PM

KENNETH DANCIK  
ST. PAUL CATHEDRAL

NO ADMISSION FEES  
FOR DETAILS: CATHEDRAL MUSIC OFFICE, 412-621-6082  
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