

# From the Dickinson Collection: Memorizing Controversy

Lorenz Maycher

*The first installment in this series, "From the Dickinson Collection: Reminiscences by Clarence Dickinson, Part I: 1873–1898," was published in the July 2008 issue of THE DIAPASON.*

## Introduction

On March 28, 1893, Clarence Dickinson, age 19, performed a recital at Church of the Messiah in Chicago in which he played his solo repertoire from memory. The following day's favorable review in the *Chicago Tribune* sparked a heated debate among prominent Chicago organists, carried out in letters to the editor. Two months later, the journal *Music* published a symposium on the subject based upon these letters. The following article presents the original *Chicago Tribune* review and the symposium from *Music*, documents found in Clarence Dickinson's personal library, housed at William Carey University in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. (Clarence Dickinson's own words concerning the memorizing controversy may be found in "Reminiscences by Clarence Dickinson" in the July 2008 issue of THE DIAPASON.) "Memorizing Controversy" is the second installment in a series of articles featuring items from Dr. Dickinson's library.

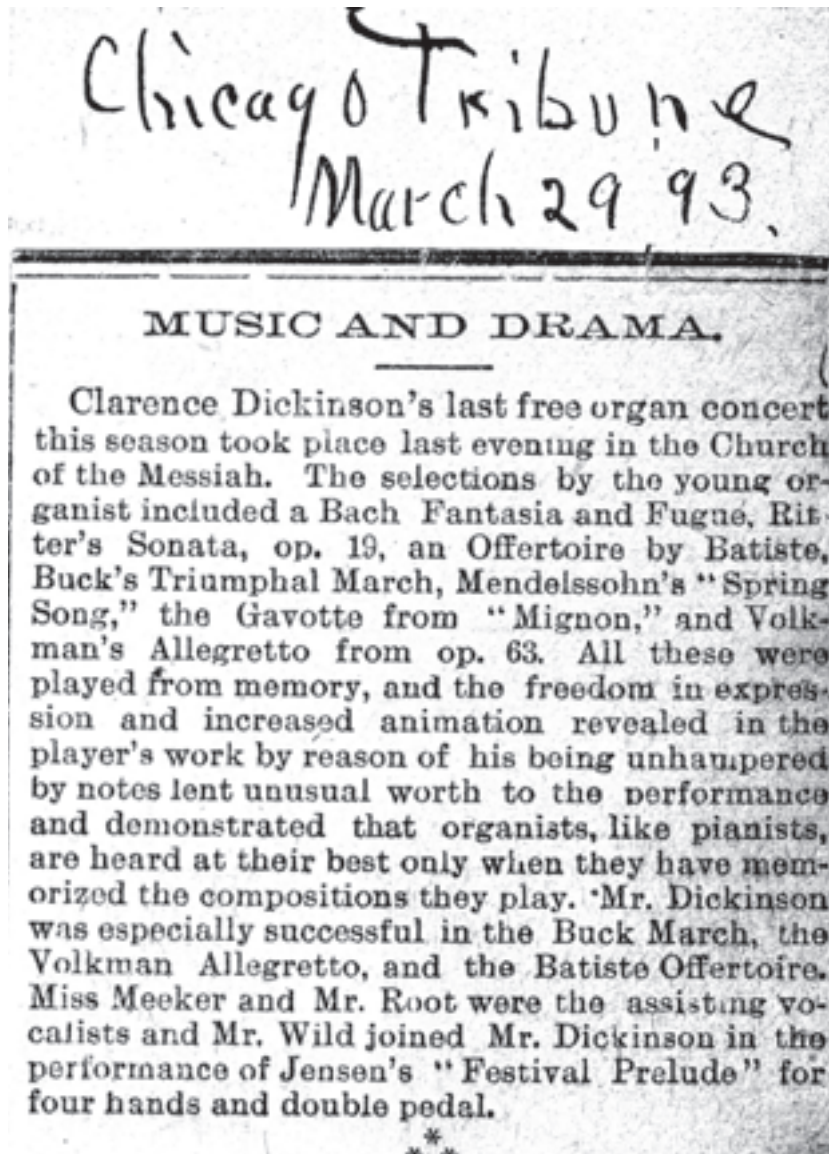
—Lorenz Maycher  
Laurel, Mississippi

## From the *Chicago Tribune* March 29, 1893

Clarence Dickinson's last free organ concert this season took place last evening in the Church of the Messiah. The selections by the young organist included a Bach Fantasia and Fugue, Ritter's Sonata, op. 19, an Offertoire by Batiste, Buck's Triumphal March, Mendelssohn's "Spring Song," the Gavotte from "Mignon," and Volkman's Allegretto from op. 63. All these were played from memory, and the freedom in expression and increased animation revealed in the player's work, by reason of his being unhampered by notes, lent unusual worth to the performance, and demonstrated that organists, like pianists, are heard at their best only when they have memorized the compositions they play. Mr. Dickinson was especially successful in the Buck March, the Volkman Allegretto, and the Batiste Offertoire. Miss Meeker and Mr. Root were the assisting vocalists, and Mr. Wild joined Mr. Dickinson in the performance of Jensen's "Festival Prelude" for four hands and double pedal.

## From *Music* May, 1893 Organ-Playing from Memory A Symposium

The time has gone by when a pianist dare present himself before an audience for a recital from notes. The example of



Review of Clarence Dickinson's memorized recital, *Chicago Tribune*, March 29, 1893

Rubinstein, Tausig, Buelow, Paderewski, Joseffy, Liebling, Sherwood, Mme. Rivington, Miss Aus Der Ohe, Mme. Carreño, and many others, some of them mere pupils, combine to show that there is nothing at all of an impossible character in memorizing some hundreds of pieces and playing at a moment's notice. Some who teach much more than they devote themselves to public playing do this. Here in Chicago are Sherwood and Mr. Liebling, either one of whom is able to play at a moment's notice any one of, perhaps, three hundred compositions you may chance to call for. Frequently, these artists never refer to the notes of some of these pieces for years together; other pieces may momentarily fade out

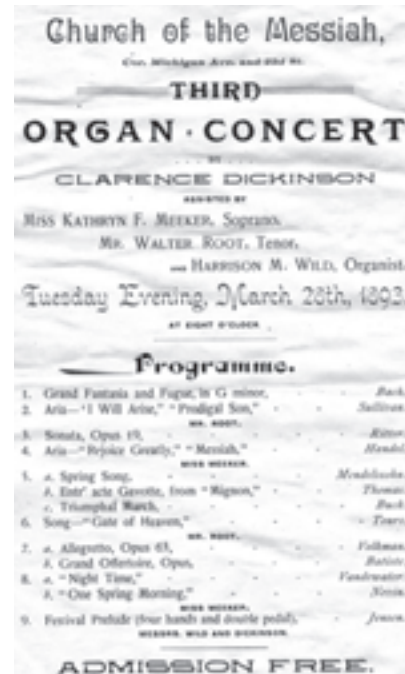
of consciousness, but a few minutes at the keyboard will generally recall them.

But organ playing without notes is much less common. There are organists, such as the late Arthur Creswold, Frederic Archer, and Harrison Wild, who occasionally play without notes, while the majority of their public appearances are made with notes. It happened a few weeks since that a young Chicago organist played an organ programme from memory, and the critic of the *Tribune* commented upon the fact favorably. This elicited the following letter:

### By Mr. Clarence Eddy:

Your issue of today contains a report of an organ concert which took place in this city last evening. After mentioning some of the selections contained in the programme, your reporter makes the following assertion: "All of these were played from memory, and the freedom in expression and increased animation revealed in the player's work, by reason of his being unhampered by notes, lent unusual worth to the performance, and demonstrated that organists, like pianists, are heard at their best only when they have memorized the compositions they play."

As an organist of considerable experience, and a personal friend of many distinguished players of the organ, whose views on this subject coincide with mine, I take exception to the import of the above statement. In only one particular is the organ like the piano—namely, that the keyboards are similar. The structure of the organ is vastly more complicated than that of the piano, while its scope and tonal resources are incomparable. In order to completely master a large organ, one must not only have a perfect com-



Program for Clarence Dickinson's first recital from memory, Church of the Messiah, Chicago, March 28, 1893

mand of the manual keyboards, but of the pedals and the vast array of mechanical accessories. He must not only comprehend the instrument as a whole, but thoroughly understand the workings of every detail. It is often necessary to prepare certain combinations of stops long before they are brought into action, and the mind is constantly forced to act far in advance of the fingers and feet.

Now, to burden the mind with memorizing the notes in addition to these requirements is as harmful as it is useless, and I maintain that organists are heard at their best when they are unhampered by the mental strain attendant upon committing to memory the compositions they play. The "increased animation," which your reporter discovered last evening, I observed to be rather a frequent hurrying and unsteadiness of the tempo, caused by nervousness, which rendered the work of the player indistinct and inaccurate.

In my opinion, greater "freedom of expression" might have been attained if the player had referred occasionally to his notes, while the value of his performance from an artistic standpoint would not have suffered in the least. Among the most noted organists of my time, whom I have known personally and with whose playing I am quite familiar are: August Haupt, Gustav Merkel, A. G. Ritter, W. T. Best, Alexandre Guilmant, Theodore Dubois, Eugene Gigout, Charles M. Widor, Dudley Buck, Samuel P. Warren, John K. Paine, Eugene Thayer, Frederic Archer, George E. Whiting, and George W. Morgan.

As a rule, all of these artists have been in the habit of playing from notes in public, and even their own compositions. Who can say they were at such times not "heard at their best?"

It would be better for critics to confine themselves to a plain statement of facts than to express an opinion at variance with sound judgment based upon a practical knowledge of the subjects they write upon.

### By Mr. Harrison M. Wild:

In replying to Mr. Clarence Eddy's letter in your issue of April 3, wherein he seeks to belittle the memorizing of organ music as well as the knowledge of the critic, I desire to acknowledge the questionable taste of taking up the cudgel against a former instructor, at the same time deprecating the motive that will prompt a great artist to take from one over a score of years his junior one word of the praise extended, or to ques-

## MANDER ORGANS



New Mechanical  
Action Organs



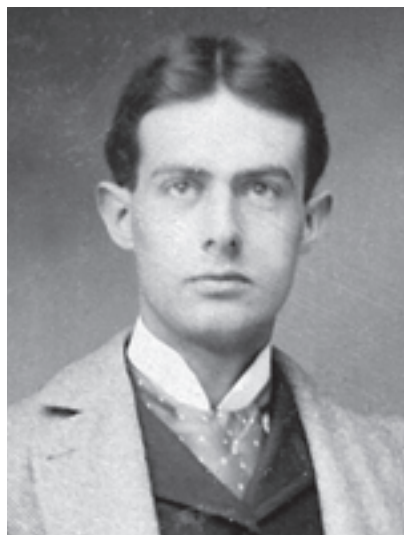
Exquisite  
Continuo Organs

St. Peter's Square  
London E 2 7AF • England  
[t] 011 44 20 7739 4747  
[f] 011 44 20 7729 4718  
ManderUK@mander-organs.com  
www.mander-organs.com

Imaginative Reconstructions



Clarence Dickinson at the Skinner console, Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City



Clarence Dickinson in 1893



Clarence Eddy



Harrison M. Wild

tion the desirability of possession on the part of the latter, or anyone, of an ability never, to the writer's knowledge, publicly displayed by the former.

As for the critic, were he as capable of judging an organ performance as Mr. Eddy, the probability is that Mr. Eddy would find in him a rival organist, better say brother artist, certainly not the critic, an evident thorn in the flesh. The people who read criticisms know that they are but expressions of one man, or a few men. No critic's criticism tallies with all his readers' opinions, and the greater the critic, the more heinous becomes the crime of non-agreement. If a critic thinks as we do, let us bless him. If he doesn't, let us curse our bad luck and hope for better luck the following time.

As to the young artist's concert, I know it as his first attempt at public playing by memory, and, barring his pardonable nervousness, which resulted in a lack of clearness at times, more than compensating amends were made by results obtained in other parts of the works, by lightning-like changes of registration,

and, greatest of all, by the effect produced upon the audience, as evidenced by its attention and applause and the verbal encomiums afterward by musicians not in any way interested in the welfare of the young musician.

As to memorizing, we can but look at that from two standpoints: first, the doing away entirely with the music. The mere mechanical portion of an organ performance is so trifling that the mind that can memorize the Bach G minor Fantasia and Fugue, or the Thiele Variations, or the Reubke Sonata, can in a few moments so fix the registration for a strange organ as to leave fantasy free. I make bold to assert that Mr. Eddy could write out within five minutes the registration of the foregoing three numbers for any specification submitted, and, having done it, would not have to think one beat ahead, since at any particular point a change could be thought of and made, when necessary for the effect at that point or further along. If Mr. Eddy will grant the possession of this ability, the remainder of the organ memorizing is placed upon the plane of piano memorizing, and who shall say that the

piano performance, simple or otherwise, is not more artistic without notes than with them? That such memorizing is physically harmful none but the expert physician or personal experience can determine. That it is for best artistic results, Mr. Eddy will not deny, when he remembers the performances of artists such as Archer, Creswold, Middelschulte, and the like, who were, or are, tried in the fire of public appearance. I know Saint-Saëns plays by memory. A pupil of mine, who has studied with Guilmant, says Guilmant has a wonderful memory, and plays at a moment's notice any one of a host of pieces. Best told a pupil of mine, when the rumor went the rounds of his failing eyesight, that he could get along without the notes now, since he knew by memory most of the music he would need. Mr. Middelschulte told me that Haupt knew by memory all of Bach's works, and played them without notes.

But why continue? This surely is sufficient. Can it be said that anyone of the list of great organists given by Mr. Eddy, that for one entire season all performances were by memory? If not, then there was not a sufficient trial, there could

have been no freedom acquired in the new medium of expression, and hence an opinion could be of little or no value, or might be summed up in the following words: "I find that I am too nervous without the notes to do myself or the composition justice," or, "have not the time to adequately prepare, but must play, and hence must use the notes." That others have not memorized and given such memory performances thorough trials is no sufficient reason why it should not be done in the future, any more than because no one discovered America in the fourteenth century Columbus should not have in the fifteenth.

The second way of memorizing is the partial way, needing but a glimpse here and there at the music. How many possess it? The one who can remove the eyes at any moment for any number of measures, can do without the music, and from personal experience I can say that there is much more trouble in finding one's place after a piece is memorized than there is in keeping right on by memory.

Now, to close by answering the question sure to be put: "You do it with your piano playing, why don't you do it with

## LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

### PIPE ORGAN DEDICATION WEEK CELEBRATION

Both the Office of Mission and Ministry and Sacramental Life invite the community to a week-long celebration of the new Madonna della Strada Chapel pipe organ. Tours, demonstrations, recitals, guest speakers, and other special presentations will be held at the chapel throughout the week of October 19.

#### OCT. 19

ORGAN BLESSING  
Masses at 10:30 a.m.,  
5 p.m., and 9 p.m.

#### OCT. 20

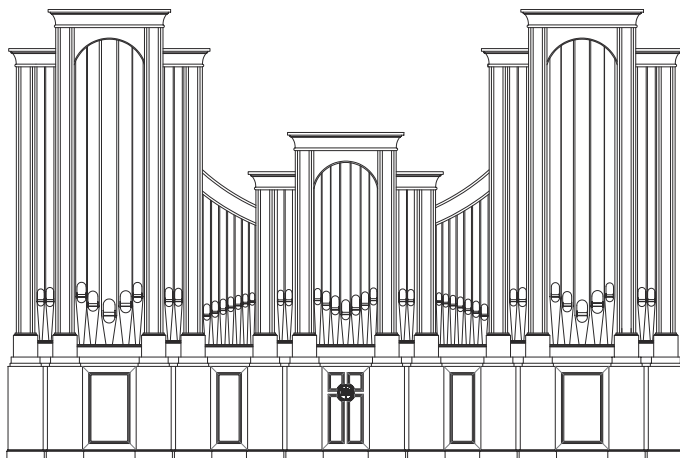
CHapel LECTURE SERIES  
Guest speaker Michael Joncas  
will discuss the topic of  
Liturgical Music Today  
at 7 p.m.

#### OCT. 20, 22, and 23

ORGAN DEMONSTRATION  
Find out how an organ works,  
how it was built, and hear  
great music. 12:30 p.m. Oct. 20  
and 23; midnight Oct. 22.

#### OCT. 24

DEDICATION RECITAL:  
GUEST ARTIST TOM TRENNEY  
Recital at 7 p.m.;  
open reception to follow.



Goulding and Wood Pipe Organ Builders, Indianapolis, Indiana, Opus 47

All events are free and open to the public.  
Please join us for this very special and  
one-of-a-kind musical celebration at the  
Madonna della Strada Chapel on the  
Lake Shore Campus.

For more information, call 773.508.8043  
or visit [LUC.edu/sacramental\\_life](http://LUC.edu/sacramental_life)

your organ playing?" If multitudinous duties, teaching and the like, could be laid aside and my income remain the same, I could be found any day between 9 and 5 o'clock upon the Unity Church organ bench, and every programme I played would be by memory, to my extreme satisfaction, and to the certain enhancing of all artistic effect to such a degree as to do a great share toward the lifting of that onus which clings to an organ performance in the minds of the majority of the people.

**Mr. Louis Falk:**

Clarence Eddy, Esq.: Your reply in yesterday's *Tribune* in relation to playing at organ concerts from memory pleased me very much. In regard to memorizing: I question whether playing or singing from memory is under all circumstances the proper way of rendering music in public, for it very frequently leads the performer into faults, such as inaccuracies, interpolations and mannerisms entirely foreign to the sense of the composition. Witness the contortions of many pianists, violinists, and singers as living examples of my assertion. Again, why does not Theodore Thomas conduct his matchless concerts from memory? Does not the score, which he is constantly following, detract from his ability to properly direct his orchestra? Has he more work to perform than an organist sitting before the great Auditorium organ? Let us see. The conductor uses his brains and hands with which to guide from fifty to 100 players; the organist uses his brains, hands and feet to master five keyboards, 120 registers, and innumerable combinations; he is required to represent every instrument of a large orchestra, either individually or collectively, in the performance of some pieces. What would become of the player's wits and his accumulative memory in case of the not infrequent mishaps to some parts of the organ during his playing? The chances are that he would wish to have his music before him. We shall probably have the pleasure of listening to many organists of world-wide fame during the coming sum-

mer, and I dare say they will, one and all, play with their music before them. Does it follow that masters like Guilman and Best are incapable of memorizing what they purpose to play? Indeed, it seems to me that if anything, the efficient organist is better equipped and qualified to commit music to memory than any other specialist in music. He is, or ought to be, thoroughly familiar with the theory of music, from the simple chord to the intricacies of the double counterpoint, in order to properly assume the duties of his profession, especially in Catholic and Protestant Episcopal churches, where improvisation in accompanying plainsong is almost imperative. It may, therefore, be understood that the reason why an organist plays with the music before him is because he considers it to his advantage and not because of any defect in his musical training.

**Mr. Wilhelm Middelschulte:**

At your request I would say in regard to an organist playing from memory: The virtuoso is the interpreter of the idea of the composer; in order to interpret well, technical difficulty in performing must not exist for him, then, which is more important, he must be inspired by the idea of the composition so that the playing appears as a new creation and not as a studied piece. If he is able to do this, then he is a true artist, whose noble profession it is to send light into "the depths of the human heart" (Rob. Schumann). Can the virtuoso reproduce the composer's idea better with or without the notes? I am rather inclined to leave this an open question. I should say, in order to play artistically, it is not necessary to play without notes. But if the organist prefers to memorize his pieces, I think it has its advantage—he bears the composition of great masters like precious jewels always with him, in his head and his mind—they are like dear friends to him—constantly in unity with him, they grow on him the more he knows them. In order to keep them constantly in memory it is not necessary to always practice at the instrument—while he is

riding on the car or taking a walk, he can play them over in his mind—certainly a pleasure to him. And the more the performer gets familiar with his pieces, the more he likes them, he is not afraid that something might happen while he is playing them, for he knows his friends too well. Then, while he is playing, he is his own listener; he not only gives pleasure to others, but the first and best of all to himself. I have a blind friend in Berlin, who studied the organ with me; I found that the ear keeps good control, while the eye has nothing to do. At the same time, I do not deny the difficulty in playing polyphonic music without the notes. August Haupt, my teacher, played once in a concert, where Felix Mendelssohn was present, the F major "Tocatta" of Bach by memory; while he was playing the second canon, the wind in the pedal stops suddenly gave out, which confused him for a moment. Mendelssohn, who no doubt noticed the little mistake, remarked, "The second canon occurred, compared to the first one, a little short." Haupt told me that he, in his younger years, practiced every morning before breakfast the six organ sonatas of Seb. Bach, and knew them by memory, but never risked playing those difficult trios in public without his notes.


A good result of playing by memory would be that the too much neglected improvisation of organists will take more place, for the musical form of a composition goes into his flesh and blood and will give him power and confidence enough to express his own thoughts in appropriate form without much preparation. Especially the thorough musician will profit by this method.

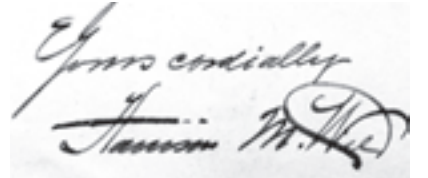
**The Editor of Music:**

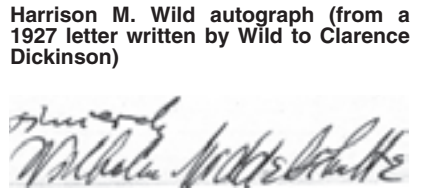
When the ground has been so covered by these eminent gentlemen, it is perhaps unnecessary to add anything; nevertheless, as there is a principle involved, *Music* makes bold to put in its oar. The principle of mentally acquiring the subject matter of whatever musical discourse one wishes to address to an audience is exactly the same as that involved in the reading of an actor or elocutionist. There was a time when actors had to depend upon the prompter; now an actor who does this is recognized as not "letter perfect" in his part, and therefore not arrived at the point where he is ready to begin to "interpret" it. Elocutionists have discovered for themselves that they are much more free and effective in their readings when they have the text securely in their mind, leaving them free to deliver it with all the emphasis and nuance of an original discourse.

Piano recitals would be impossible from notes. There is not an audience in the world that would sit through a recital played from notes. Not even Paderewski could hold his audience, were he hampered in this way. The reason that so many play without notes is that it is less strain. The mind is more free to feel the music. The interpretation comes home to the hearer. One reason for this may be that the player has to be much more master of his discourse than when he can depend upon the notes. He must have studied it more thoroughly. Few players realize how half-hearted is the quality of mental attention devoted to practice. When a player is trying to memorize, he has to pay close attention, and out of this attention grows a finer appreciation of delicate nuances and beauties of the piece.

Now this, which is so demonstrated in the case of the piano, is still more true of the organ, for, as Mr. Eddy says, the organ is a very complicated instrument. Besides using the feet for playing, there are many changes of registration, and not a little adaptation and substitution to do in order to realize or represent an effect which the individual organ may not have

  
Clarence Eddy autograph (from a 1923 letter written by Eddy to Clarence Dickinson)

  
Harrison M. Wild autograph (from a 1927 letter written by Wild to Clarence Dickinson)

  
Wilhelm Middelschulte autograph (from an undated letter written by Middelschulte to Clarence Dickinson)

in its repertory. The player, independent of notes, has time to do this; the player, confined to notes, lets it pass. Moreover, there is the same question of quality of attention. When a man knows a fugue in the sense of knowing all the answers, all the modulations, all the little counter themes, which come in here and there, he is in much better condition to make the hearer realize them also. What kind of work would an actor make of the "To be or not to be" if he had to hold the book in hand while giving it?—or "The quality of mercy is not strained."

The question why orchestral directors do not direct without notes may as well be answered here as elsewhere. *They do!* Mr. Nikisch, who is always a fine pianist, often conducts without notes; *always*, when he knows the work sufficiently well. And when he *does* conduct without notes, you will find that he is doing something very different with his men than when he is half the time keeping his place in a score where he has to turn a leaf at a precise moment once in about forty measures. Von Buelow often conducts Beethoven symphonies without notes, and they say that he plays them wonderfully. Mme. Carreño told the present writer that of all the privileges of Europe, she prized Buelow's orchestral readings of Beethoven symphonies better than anything else. (But this was before she married D'Albert.)

Hans Richter, I believe, sometimes conducts without notes. All conductors of light opera do so; many conductors of grand opera do so when they have a run of a single work. Von Buelow has often conducted the "Meistersinger" without notes. Even Mr. Thomas, who belongs to an older school of conductors, sometimes conducts without notes, and it is safe to assume that if he had to begin again his career as leader at the present time, he would acquire the habit, in order to leave his eyes at freedom to control his men.

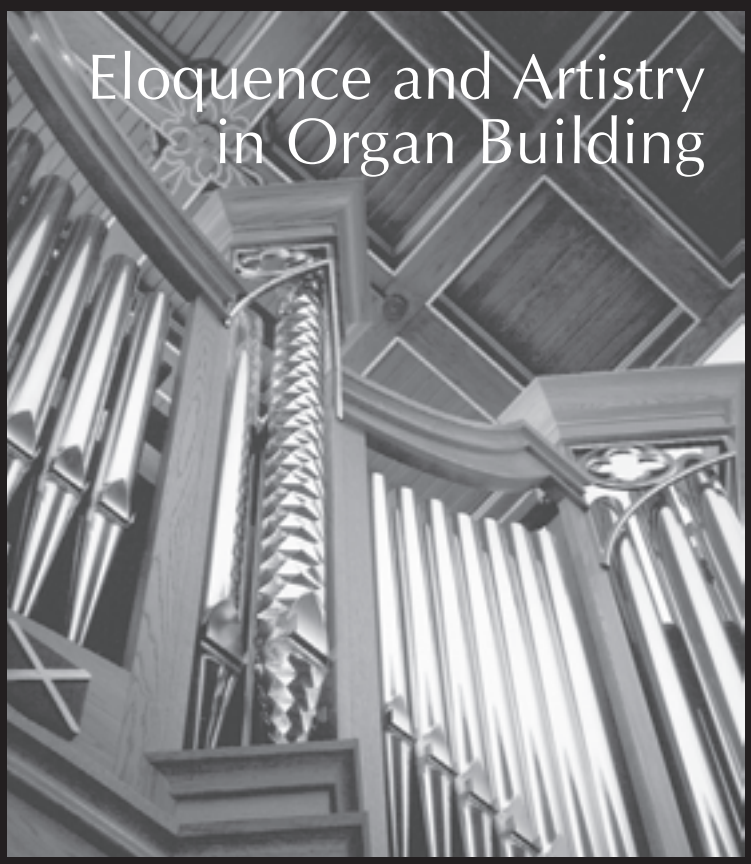
The perfection of orchestral playing would be where all the players were "letter perfect" in their parts, and played them under the eye of the conductor—such a conductor as Nikisch or Tomlins. I mention these rather than Mr. Thomas, not because I think them greater, but because they belong to a different school—the school of intense interpretation, where all the smaller parts of a piece are fully brought out, without intending to crowd them into the prominence of the grand parts.

In short, whether we take memorizing as a convenient method of sifting out the incompetents, or as the easy way for those who thoroughly possess a musical subject, the fact remains that it is the proper thing for all public performers, and for all private performers who care about making a *living* effect.

W. S. B. Mathews

**To be continued**

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*.



Eloquence and Artistry  
in Organ Building

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, Denver, CO  
Timothy Krueger, Music Director, Frank Nowell, Organist



Member, Associated Pipe Organ  
Builders of America  
112 West Hill Street  
Champaign, Illinois 61820  
800.397.3103 • www.Buzardorgans.com

**New!**  
Classified advertising on  
**THE DIAPASON** website:  
[www.TheDiapason.com](http://www.TheDiapason.com)