

Concert Report **Organ Historical Society's Cleveland Convention features six brilliant concerts**

by Daniel Hathaway

Last week, Cleveland welcomed five hundred members of the Organ Historical Society for their annual national convention. The week included demonstrations of more than thirty organs in greater Cleveland, Toledo, Elyria, Sandusky & Oberlin. CC.com joined the convention for five concerts that were free and open to the general public.

Masonic Auditorium: Peter Richard Conte

We started out on Sunday evening at the Masonic Auditorium with a concert which both ended the convention of the American Theater Organ Society and began the weeklong gathering of the OHS.

Peter Richard Conte, who for the last twenty years has been Grand Court Organist of the famous John Wanamaker Organ in Philadelphia (in the department store now owned by Macy's), was the featured recitalist on a large 1919 Austin instrument enclosed in chambers to the right of the stage proscenium.

After welcoming speeches by the presidents of both organizations and an introduction by 'Pipedreams' host Michael Barone (who served as the dryly witty emcee for all of the week's events), Conte appeared at the four-manual console which occupies a box near the pipe chambers to begin a program of original organ music and transcriptions launched by his own version of Bernstein's 'Candide' overture, moving on to Alexandre Guilmant's 'Marche Religieuse' (based on 'Lift up your heads' from Handel's Messiah), two of Charles-Marie Widor's Bach arrangements (from 'Bach's Momento'), Conte's arrangement of Fritz Kreisler's 'Variations on a Theme of Arcangelo Corelli' and Robert Elmore's cheeky 'Fantasy on Nursery Tunes', ending the evening with a standard concert work, César Franck's 'Final' (dedicated to Franck's colleague, Louis James Alfred Lefébure-Wély).

Part of the Organ Historical Society's mission is to preserve period instruments and keep them in play-

ing condition. Thus a team of professionals and volunteers was sent in to bring the 90-year-old Austin up to snuff for the occasion. Tonally, the instrument is typical of its period, an era when organs departed from their classical nature and became orchestral imitators, jettisoning their high-pitched ranks and choosing color and subtlety over texture and ensemble. Also typically, pipework was located out of sight in chambers (partly to be able to control dynamics by enclosing divisions in shuttered boxes).

Even after 90 years, the organ produced a lovely palette of colors and nuanced timbres, and no poltergeists were at work in the mechanisms tonight. The instrument's plethora of unison stops, voiced on the chubby side, led to some muddied textures in louder passages, and sometimes the organ seemed to protest against its confinement.

Conte's program was wisely chosen for this organ, and his prodigious technique was put through its paces, particularly in the Bernstein and Kreisler pieces. The recitalist has the tendency to become self-indulgent with rubato — sometimes to the detriment of the underlying rhythm of a piece — but he brought wit and élan to pieces like the Elmore Nursery Tunes fantasy. You can hear him play similar repertory twice a day at Macy's in Philly.

If poltergeists weren't haunting the organ, they were busy with the sound system (persistent hum) and the video projection of the player's hands (which broke up all too frequently into abstractions). Too bad about the sound system, because Conte's oral program notes were full of information and insight, and what you could hear of the impromptu interview Michael Barone launched before the Kreisler was prescient and articulate.

Trinity Lutheran: Joan Lippincott

On Monday afternoon, the busses pulled up at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church at West 30th & Lorain for a performance by Joan Lippincott on the 1957 Rudolf von Beckerath organ, made in Hamburg, Germany. At that point in time, this important instrument broke new ground (or re-established the organ on its old turf) as the first modern four-manual instrument with mechanical action installed in the US.

St. John's Cathedral: Ken Cowan and Jack Sutte

Although the Beckerath harked back to a golden age with its 'Werkprinzip' approach to organbuilding (every division complete in itself and inhabiting a certain position in an organ case, with everything linked directly and mechanically to the keyboards), there was still more rediscovery to be made as this builder and other Europeans delved deeper into the principles and details of classical organbuilding.

Nonetheless, the Beckerath stands as an important monument on the continuum of rediscovery, and can be enjoyed every Wednesday at 12:15 in concerts by Florence Mustric, Robert Myers and guests. The organ is now in the process of being restored at a cost of over \$300,000 and various fundraising initiatives are in the works.

The Beckerath has always been regarded as an instrument perfectly suited for the music of J.S. Bach, and Joan Lippincott of Princeton was an obvious choice as the performer of an all-Bach program both by reputation and temperament.

The instrument itself is a handsome sight — a light blue highlight in an interior which was probably brightly decorated several generations ago, but has fallen into dowdiness in recent years.

The repertory (two chorale preludes, a prelude & fugue, a trio sonata and the famous and unique 'Passacaglia and Fugue') promised a demonstration of all the organ's voices, but Lippincott chose middle-of-the-road and repetitive stop combinations.

The two preludes on 'Nun danket alle Gott' (first sung by the 'congregation') and 'Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele' used the same solo stops and the recitalist opted out of the possibility of a contrasting color for the repeated section in the latter piece. The C Major Prelude & Fugue (unique for the gigue-like 9/8 meter of the prelude and the long-delayed entrance of the pedal line in the fugue) were registered identically. The 'Passacaglia', with its twenty variations, got more color choices, but the only reed stops used today were Trumpets and Posaune at the climaxes of the fugues.

Technically, Lippincott navigated the thousands of notes Bach demanded of her with accuracy and authority. There was a moment of confusion in the middle of the C-major fugue, and given a second opportunity, the performer might have chosen a more deliberate tempo in the third movement of the trio sonata (my pew-neighbor scrawled 'speed kills' on his program).

On Monday night, we headed downtown to the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist for a program by Ken Cowan on its 1948 Votteler-Holtkamp-Sparling instrument, with the important collaboration of Cleveland Orchestra trumpeter Jack Sutte.

We haven't had many opportunities to hear the cathedral organ in concert — like most instruments in Catholic churches, it's most often heard in the course of the liturgy. On this occasion, it sounded colorful, versatile and really quite wonderful in the hyper-reverberant acoustics of the mysteriously-lit nave, and one could hardly have wished for a more sympathetic pair of hands (and feet) to show it off.

The week's recitalists didn't choose easy pieces to launch their programs. In Cowan's case, first up was a challenging transcription by Samuel Warren of Mendelssohn's 'Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream'. Using both the main gallery and smaller chancel organs, he produced a thrilling, idiomatic and colorful version of a well-loved orchestral work without dropping any notes.

Next came an impressionistic work by the German colorist, Sigfrid Karg-Elert. 'Stimmen der Nacht' (Voices of the Night) evoked a quiet cacophony of nocturnal events both charming and spooky, showing off the instrument's quieter voices.

Trumpeter Jack Sutte joined Cowan for Petr Eben's 'Okna Fenster', a four-movement work based on stained glass windows by Marc Chagall in the Hadassah Synagogue in Jerusalem. This brilliant and immediately likeable work made the ears 'see' blue, green and red in the first three movements. And for something completely different in the fourth, 'Gold', Eben, who died in 2007, pitted a solemn chorale by the organ against the trumpet tooting away in an unrelated key — a profoundly unsettling but not unpleasant experience. Sutte and Cowan were well matched virtuosi. Part one of the concert won a standing ovation.

The curiously constructed second half began with Max Reger's 'Introduction and Passacaglia in f', a typically overbusy and rather incoherent work. Cowan did as well as anyone has in making sense out of it.

Reger was followed by George Thalben-Ball's 'Elegy in B-flat', a lovely occasional piece in the same

vein as Elgar's 'Nimrod', interrupted here by a few mischievous cracklings from the sound system poltergeist, who had migrated from the Masonic Auditorium to St. John's. He also got into the digital combination memory system of the organ, which Cowan admitted early in the concert had been acting up all afternoon and might need another exorcism before the evening was out. A couple of long pauses marked rebootings of the device during the second half.

After Thalben-Ball came a mid-program encore (Cowan: "We wanted you to get more than you paid for tonight") The inserted piece for piccolo trumpet and organ was Henri Tomasi's 'Semaine sainte à Cuzco', a charmingly kinetic representation of Holy Week in a Peruvian village.

Then — it's an OHS tradition to sing one hymn in every venue — the scene changed to Britain as the multitude rose to sing Gustav Holst's great hymn tune 'Thaxted' (aka 'Jupiter' From 'The Planets') to the words 'I vow to thee, my country'.

At the request of convention chair Joseph McCabe, Cowan ended the concert with Dudley Buck's 'Variations on The Star Spangled Banner', in the spirit of any number of period variations on 'The Carnival of Venice'. What can you say? It was just good fun, and got the whole crowd to its feet once again to sing the final variation on the tune that began life as 'To Anacreon in Heaven'.

The insatiable audience sought and received an encore: Christopher Steel's arresting 'Flourish' (one of six pieces for trumpet and organ). All in all, this evening was one of the most memorable organ performances we've heard in years, made the more remarkable by faultless trumpet playing.

Holy Rosary Cathedral, Toledo: Todd Wilson & Nanette Canfield

Back on the road. Tuesday took the convention in the direction of Toledo, ending up at the art museum and the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary. We met up with the group for Todd Wilson's evening concert at the cathedral.

The building is a stunning architectural polyphony of Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic elements (with some Moorish elements mixed in) which somehow comes together into a harmonious whole. The

cathedral is polished within an inch of its life and beautifully maintained. A group of proud docents were deployed to answer questions.

The organ in Holy Rosary is a large and unaltered E.M. Skinner dating from 1931. Like most Skinner organs (there are a lot of them in Northeast Ohio, and many were heard during this convention), the instrument exudes nobility and good breeding — like a Cadillac of a certain age — and makes up in color and sheer volume of sound for any lack of clarity it suffers by way of voicing or its location in a large, barrel-vaulted nave.

Todd Wilson constructed a program of music by Dupré (the 'Cortège et Litanie'), English 'minatures' by Stanley, C.S. Lang (the famous 'Tuba Tune') and Edwin H. Lemare's version of 'Londonderry Air', and Franck's 'Chorale in E', which ended the first half. The second part began with Gerre Hancock's variations on the the hymn tune 'Ora Labora' written by the first organist of St. Thomas Fifth Avenue in New York, T. Tertius Noble (did he have brothers named Primus and Secundus?), then the singing of the hymn itself with a descant composed by two students at St. Thomas' Choir School.

The program continued with song — Wilson had brought Cleveland soprano Nanette Canfield along for a lovely reading of Louis Vierne's 'Les Angélus', a three-movement song cycle on the traditional morning, noon and night prayers. Vierne was followed by another meditative piece, Bruce Simonds' similarly nocturnal, chant-based 'Prelude on 'Iam sol recedit igneus'. The concert ended with the variation set that opens Widor's fifth symphony (the symphony ends, of course, with the famous 'Toc-cata').

Wilson has a fabulous technique and unimpeachable musicianship, qualities which might have shone out more brightly in a program with a more purposeful trajectory. The Franck and Widor were curiously episodic with rather too many small climaxes instead of a long view of their musical architecture, and, in the Widor, pauses for stop changes interrupted the progress of a piece written as a set of continuous variations. Then again, programs conceived to demonstrate organs to aficionados can follow different rules than those designed to engage a wider public. Wilson unearthed and lovingly played some unusual repertory tonight which was fun to experience on a distinguished organ in such a beautiful space.

First Methodist: Nathan Laube

On Wednesday evening, we were back in Cleveland for Nathan Laube's program at First United Methodist on a 1943 Casavant whose installation under wartime conditions was something of a miracle. The OHS's opulently illustrated and painstakingly documented 'Organ Atlas of Cleveland' produced for this convention chronicles a long tale of bureaucratic meandering between the US and Canadian governments having to do with wartime restrictions on metals.

Laube was having a big evening of it. Not only was he making his OHS convention debut, but it was his 21st birthday as well, and he was appropriately serenaded at halftime.

A recent Curtis Institute graduate, the charming and fearless recitalist launched into his own virtuosic transcription of the 'Fledermaus Overture' as an opening gambit and then moved on to the Symphonic Chorale on 'Jesu, meine Freude' by Siegfried Karg-Elert.

We confess to a weakness for Karg-Elert and for this piece in particular. Though the composer's overcolored harmonies can cross the line into dubious taste, his grasp of large forms, penchant for seductive melodies and contrapuntal rigor are important redeeming features.

Laube brought amazing clarity to Karg-Elert's intentionally chaotic depiction of the Inferno in the first movement. He shaped the long, sensuous melody of the Canzone skillfully and negotiated the stops and starts of the fugue with an clear eye to its overall structure and direction.

He played the entire recital from memory, which was impressive, but this feat denied the audience one piece of visual fun. Karg-Elert assigns two pedal notes to the page-turner/registrant in the huge last chord, so there should be a total of five notes played by four feet on the pedals!

After the interval, and jokes about 'Puer natus est', the fourth movement of Widor's *Symphonie Gothique*, the birthday boy plunged into a brilliantly lyrical performance of the Widor itself. Another movement was later offered as an encore.

The program concluded with Julius Reubke's probably overlong 'Sonata on the 94th Psalm', a famous showpiece by a composer who died at the age of

24. The convention poltergeist had by now set up shop in the Casavant, causing Laube to take a long pause to re-set combinations midway through the piece. Apparently unflappable, the recitalist just started again where he had left off, bringing the work to a predictably stunning conclusion.

For its era (roughly the same as St. John's Cathedral), the Casavant sounds remarkably like a theater organ, and at least from our seats in the balcony, lacked a room-filling power and presence. Strange, because of its deployment across the whole front of the sanctuary. Still, the terraced, César Franck-like console was an impressive piece of furniture, and its location dead-center made it fun to watch the recitalist at work.

Severance Hall: Thomas Murray

The grand finale of the Organ Historical Society's week in Cleveland brought the conventioners and more than six hundred ticket buyers from the community to Severance Hall for a predictably distinguished performance by Yale's Thomas Murray, who regularly holds forth on the similarly large Skinner organ at Woolsey Hall.

The saga of E.M. Skinner's opus 813 has been told many times: its original and unsuitable installation above the stage, its 'entombment' on the wrong side of the 'Szell Shell', its reinstallation at stage level during the hall's renovations by Ohio's Schantz Company in the last decade. The results are a lovingly restored 1931 instrument by a famous builder which simultaneously demonstrates all the glories and flaws of American organbuilding in that era.

The centerpiece — actually the finale — of tonight's recital was Calvin Hampton's transcription of the Franck Symphony, aptly introduced by Thomas Murray: "There are many conductors who say that this is really an organ work. So..." And Murray went on to make a powerfully convincing argument for that point of view, coaxing beautiful and intricately related solo lines out of the Skinner's lovely reed stops, negotiating amazingly nuanced crescendos and diminuendos, setting up sonorous climaxes, and skillfully using all of the organ's resources to redistribute Franck's symphonic work over only ten fingers and two feet.

As an opener, Murray chose Bach's 'Toccatina in F', which revealed at the outset that contrapuntal music of the baroque period is not the instrument's strong suit. To suit 1930's ears, the instrument is

voiced so that brilliance decreases as the music ascends, which acts at cross purposes with this toccata. The voicing of higher-pitched ranks is also uneven: here and there a pipe stuck out of the ensemble like a violinist playing on an open string. Murray elegantly negotiated the finger-tangling counterpoint, and except for a few nicked notes in the pedal solos (imagine opening with this piece!), all went swimmingly.

In his remarks, Murray noted that Hindemith had taught at Yale, where his staff-lined blackboard is still preserved in a classroom. His three organ sonatas from the 1930's have long been regarded as works written to parallel the organ reform movement in Germany (and thus chronicle the move away from romanticism). Murray thought this was a mistaken notion, asserting that Hindemith was actually a romantic colorist. Considering his orchestral works, one would have to agree, and thus Murray's highly-colored registrations for the first sonata made perfect sense on an organ built four years after the work was written, even if they might have horrified an organ reform purist.

The first half concluded with Guy Weitz's 'Regina Pacis' from the 'Symphony on Gregorian Themes' and (as the 'hymn' of the evening) a beguiling, audience-sung version of Schubert's song, 'An die Musik', which Murray noted was a Yale music school commencement tradition.

Jean Berveiller's 'Mouvement', a little less-than-three-minute work (a 'lolipop', as my row-mate described it) was a much-played favorite of the great French organiste Jeanne Demessieux, the music for which Murray had hunted down for years. Featuring a perpetual motion ostinato in the pedals, the work was a fun but perhaps unnecessary curtain raiser for the Franck Symphony.

Murray's elegant playing and astonishingly smooth control of the instrument had the audience out of their seats the moment his hands came off the keys at the end of the Franck. Sensing that an encore was expected, during his third bow he wagged his finger and mopped his brow: enough!

Cheers to the organizers for matching so many excellent recitalists with appropriate organs and for so skilfully managing the intricate people moving operations the schedule demanded.

As he did at the opening concert, emcee Michael Barone asked how many in the audience were not

members of the convention. Hundreds of hands went up on both occasions — a good sign for the future of organ concerts in Cleveland. We hope that the out-of-towners enjoyed it as much as we Clevelanders did.