

Concert Report: Organist Tom Trenney in master class and recital at First Baptist (February 20-21)

Published February 22, 2010

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A substantial number of Cleveland organists have been following the ascendance of Tom Trenney's career for almost twenty years, from when he was a tall, skinny young teenager from Perry, Ohio, through his undergraduate career at the Cleveland

Institute of Music, where he was Todd Wilson's student. He then went off to the Eastman School of Music and earned a couple of master's degrees. For several years he was music director at a church in the Detroit area, and in mid-2009 he relocated to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he is Minister of Music at First Plymouth Church (United Church of Christ). He has established himself as one of the leading performers in a new generation of concert organists, winning, among other awards, the First Prize and Audience Prize in the American Guild of Organists' National Competition in Organ Improvisation.

This past weekend (February 20-21) Tom Trenney made a return visit to northeast Ohio, performing almost constantly: a master class on Saturday morning, working with students from CIM; accompanying a silent film at Hiram College; and playing a recital at First Baptist Church of Greater Cleveland on Sunday afternoon. His energy and sense of humor were much in evidence, as was his excellent musicianship. I note that he is still tall and skinny.

I attended the master class at First Baptist Church on Saturday and the Sunday recital. At the master class (which was sponsored in part by the Cleveland Chapter of the American Guild of Organists) Mr. Trenney offered advice to two talented organ students from the Cleveland Institute of Music. Patrick Parker played two movements from Louis Vierne's Symphony No. 2 for organ. After playing

through the first movement, Tom Trenney asked the audience how many had played the piece. Few, if any, raised their hands, and he said, "Well, I haven't either." But he did what any good teacher does, he discussed general principles of articulation and rhythmic freedom as they related to the Vierne work at hand. Master classes tend to be artificial situations, since making any real change on the spot is not likely, but Mr. Trenney did suggest other possibilities for the student. CIM undergraduate student Dana Steele played Marcel Dupré's difficult Prelude and Fugue in B Major, with its brilliant French toccata prelude and fugue which required the utmost in manual and pedal independence. Again Mr. Trenney gave useful suggestions of how to bring out melodic lines, emphasize climaxes, and other related topics.

The second half of the master class was devoted to the topic of organ improvisation. Mr. Trenney gave straightforward ideas about how the improvisation beginner can approach improvisational techniques and how to practice. His number one guideline: "Practice wild, unabashed creativity within specific, sensible guidelines." As he pointed out, it is not necessary to study harmony for six years in Paris in order to become a competent improviser. He produced a set of "flash cards", each of which has a simple exercise for practicing a specific musical technique that would lead to improvisational fluency. For example, after one opens the hymnal randomly for a "hymn of the day," he suggested practicing the melody in both hands and feet; or practicing the melody in different key signatures or different meters. The CIM students in attendance each took a shot at choosing one of the flash cards and trying out the technique listed on his or her card. Improvisational techniques can be taught, but the key still lies in individual practice and creativity (hence, "unabashed creativity"). One can lament the lack of encouragement of piano teachers to get their young students to put away the music and play "by ear" sometimes, and to make up simple pieces. The freedom from being tied to the printed score (and music written by someone else) is key

to successful improvisation. Indeed, pianists in the “gospel” tradition often have excellent improvisation skills, being able to play any song in any key and to create accompaniments for vocalists taking extreme liberties with the tune.

Tom Trenney’s Sunday afternoon recital at First Baptist Church had a quite large audience for one of the few sunny days in recent Cleveland history. His many talents were well in evidence: scrupulous preparation, prodigious technique and imaginative presentation. Two segments of the program were devoted to improvisation, first a set of three brief improvisations on poems by Shel Silverstein. Mr. Trenney recited the poems, then played after each. At the end of the first half of the program, there was another extended improvisation, this time on the African-American spiritual “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord.” Mr. Trenney extended the sense of the spiritual beyond that of the usual Holy Week to include movements for Christmas, Epiphany (with phrases of “We Three Kings of Orient Are” thrown in for good measure), the Crucifixion, Mary at the Cross, and the Resurrection. The audience sang the stanzas of the spiritual in unison between each portion of the improvisation, with Tom Trenney conducting the assembly.

The remainder of the recital program consisted of composed literature: Vierne’s famous “Car-

illon de Westminster” (based on London’s Westminster chimes); an extravagant set of variations by the late nineteenth/early twentieth century American Dudley Buck on the popular song “The Last Rose of Summer”; and Johann Sebastian Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in G Major, BWV 541. The Dudley Buck work was splendid; the Bach seemed a bit mannered, with pronounced rhythmic emphasis that sometimes disturbed the basic pulse of the work.

The only work on the second half of the program was the Sonata on the 94th Psalm by Julius Reubke, who died in 1859 at the age of 25. Reubke is known only through two major works, a sonata for piano and this organ sonata. It is in four connected movements, all using the same thematic material. The music is pianistic with a “Lisztian” virtuosity evident throughout. (In the interest of full disclosure, I admit that I am not a fan of this piece, finding it unnecessarily long and bombastic; but it certainly displays the talents of the organist and uses all the resources of the organ.) Mr. Trenney did a commendable job in holding the thing together. He was rewarded with a standing ovation. He played a brief encore, Bach’s Fugue in G major, known popularly as “The Jig.” Mr. Trenney used a registration of flute stops; it was delightful—a light dessert following the preceding heavy German meal.