The Muse’s Voice: A Museum Conference

June 19–20, 2015, New York City

By Gail Archer

Following a delicious and convivial luncheon, the afternoon performances featured Canadian organist Karen Holmes and a song cycle by composer Pamela Decker for piano, soprano, and dance. Holmes delved into the French Canadian tradition with lively, short organ works from an anonymous sixteenth-century manuscript, Livre d’orgue de Montréal. Her program included Courte Pieres, Vol. 7, by Canadian composer Rachel Launier and the Chronique Portint by impresario Wouter Huyton. Pamela Decker wrote the poetry for her song cycle, Henes: Songs of Mystery and Memory, and played the piano as accompanist for soprano Katherine Byrnes and dancer Cleo Elaine Hanceok. The hour-long work has fourteen songs, some for soprano and piano alone, and others choreographed by the dancer. The performers used the whole space, having chosen the altar area to take advantage of the various heights of the front of the sanctuary at West End Collegiate Church. The music and dance combined beautifully to express the color, emotion, and elegance of the poetry.

Moving to Emmanuel Lutheran Church on Manhattan’s East Side, we enjoyed a wine and cheese hour prior to the evening performance by harpsichordist Alexandra Dunbar and violinist Clio Gould. Gouldenoth Thot very kindly allowed us to see one of her two large two-manual harpsichords for the performance. Duchar and Dekker offered a splendid selection of music ranging from Bach, Couperin, Riber, and Corelli. The ensembles playing was perfectly coordinated; the dynamic range, pristine articulation, and flawless technique manifested a truly fine harpsichord recital.

Our second day began early in the morning on June 20 with a varied and interesting liturgy service in the historic church of Trinity, St. Paul’s, New York. Doris Pattee at Southern Meth- odist Church in Dallas, and Sharon Bly, a former professor at the Boston Conservatory, led the service. The morning sermon was a spiritual approach to the problems and prejudice that female organists face in the modern world. She suggested that fearfulness for all needs to become our goal. “The ‘oleum female’ becomes the ‘hardest choice for the common good.’” Women need to search for beauty and then communicate that joy and beauty with fearlessness and determination.

Rather, the role of the artist is to trans- form the rules and codes of the music and to bring about being as a human being. This is not quantum physics, but it is able to express grief, beauty, love, to struggle with our own humanity, our own mortality. It is not necessarily measurable, but the search for beauty and expression of beauty has origins in all religious expression, fused with art, poetry, and music.

A recent commission for the American Guild of Organists, Katerinina. Louise Mundinger gave a detailed analysis of the piece along with a performance of excerpts, with extensive communica- tion from Hillary Tann. The afternoon concluded with two hours of inspired playing by four young women who are pursuing graduate study or who have recently completed advanced graduate study in organ performance. Katelyn Emerson (one of THE DIAPASON’s 20 under 30 Class of 2015) and Mary Capolei, Emma Whitt- ton, and Ashley Stenly.

In the afternoon session, Marie Ruben- Bauer, the organist of St. Cecilia Cathedra- l in Omaha, Nebraska, presented an eclectic program of early works by Schiöeder, Weidlich, and Afregaita de Honorada, and selections from a contemporary compositional keyboard, Kopfs: Two Organbooks by Don Locklair. One of the most uplifting moments of the conference was the Evening service at 5 p.m. at the Church of the Transfigura- tion. The celebration of the service was the Rector, Bishop Andrew St. John. Music director Claudio Dumoshak led her children’s choir in two English anthems, O Praise the Lord by Master John Fare, and Greene and Ewing Hymn by John Rutter. The Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis settings were composed by celebrated composers. The angels of the young singers were graciously accompanied by organist Judith Hancock.

The gala evening recital took place at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Featuring Kimberly Marshall, Sarah Jane Starzer-Germani, Jennifer Pasqual, and Gail Archer. Marshall offered the Mass L’heureuse aura by Margaret Yardell Sandefors, Starzer Germani presented Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in A Major, BWV 535, selections by Jeanne Demessieux and Alexandre Galliats. Panfelt’s For the Front of the Accompas- sion, Music director Pasqual and Archer played programs composed by women: Libby Larsen, Johann Smeltzer, Penny Marschelh, Clara Schumann, and Jeanne Demessieux, among others. All the participants remarked upon the supportive and kind atmosphere of the weekend—we came together to affirm one another and to celebrate women as organists, composers, and conductors. We had enough social time to have meaningful conversations about our work; we made new friendships and developed long-standing ties among our colleagues. Many women who are organists live a continent away from one another and have only rare opportunities to interact professionally. One can feel validated and even encouraged by the general culture of the organ world, which too often diminishes the contribution of highly educated and skilled female organists. Musicians grow out of my research on the success of female organists, which I published in the Journal of the International Alliance of Women in Music in spring 2013. The database of female organists is on the Musicians on line: www.musicians.org as well as the complete program, biogra- phy, photos, and an archival recording of the conference under “Events.” All women, no matter what age or parent in their professional career, we welcome in the Musicians network. Join us by sending an e-mail to gacher@barndard.edu. Women need to move forward in the field on the basis of merit; their educa- tion, skill, and accomplishment. The world will be enriched by our musical gifts, and we will lift up hearts and minds by the beauty and powerful inspiration of our song.

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