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A Woman on the Bench

GAIL ARCHER

Choir and organ are the center of my creative life. From my earliest years, I sang in church and school choirs and played the piano, which led naturally to an interest in the sonic possibilities of the organ the moment my legs were long enough to reach the pedals. My interests are rooted in early music, as I am a Roman Catholic and always sang hymns and Gregorian Chant. For many years, I balanced teaching with church music, working with amateur and professional choirs, developing rehearsal techniques that would help singers to investigate the inner workings of the music, particularly rhythmic complexity, modal scales, and harmonics.

At the organ, I played the old Dutch and early German masters leading to Bach, and devoted myself wholeheartedly to early fingering, ornamentation, alternate tuning systems, dynamics, and registration. My doctoral dissertation, earned at the Manhattan School of Music, was a transcription and translation of a seventeenth-century print by the Venetian composer, Barbara Strozzi: *Cantate, ariete a una, due, e tre voci*, Op. 3, which was published by A-R Editions in their Recent Researches series. Fascinated by Barbara's story and the culture of the *ospedale* in Venice with their all-women orchestras, I searched for the location of one of her prints and found the one I edited in the British Library in London. While the project was very satisfying, I realized that I was destined to be a performer rather than an academic.

Then came the family crisis; my son was gravely ill and my marriage fell apart as a result of the stress of that difficult period. I had always thought of myself as a teacher in the classroom, a choral conductor, and a church organist, but never a

concert organist. After my son was well, I began to play short organ recitals in my own parish in New York City and little by little, gained confidence playing up in Boston or in Washington, DC. At this same time, I started to investigate modern organ literature and was drawn to the spirituality of Olivier Messiaen, whose music is full of chant, improvisation, bird song, modal scales, and highly complex rhythms. In July 2002, I played the cycle *Les Corps Glorieux* on the summer series at the Riverside Church and received my first positive review in the *New York Times*, complete with a photo — I was launched in a new direction.

Quite honestly, I set up shop on my own dining room table, sending out let-



Gail Archer (photo by Buck Ennis)

ters and press kits, recording my live performances, making demonstration CDs to prove my worth, and posting a website: www.gailarcher.com. In time, I found a publicist and recording company; to date, the CDs range from the early Dutch literature to Bach, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Messiaen, and American music. Fortunately, I am able to practice at home on a digital organ with two manuals and full pedals. My repertoire is based upon the series that I

play each spring in New York City, which I then take on the road to about fifty concert venues a year. The concerts also take me abroad each year to England, Poland, Germany, Hungary, France, the Low Countries and Italy, my favorite destination, where I speak the language and have many friends. In the spring of 2008, I became the first American woman to play the complete organ works of Messiaen in honor of the centennial of his birth.

The spring 2012 series, "An American Idyll," is devoted to American music by women and men from 1900 to the present including works by Joan Tower, Libby Larsen, Emma Lou Diemer, Clare Shore, Judith Lang Zaimont, Pamela Decker, and Kim Sherman. The spring 2013 concerts, "The Muses Voice," will feature music by international women composers. I have commissioned the Russian-American composer Alla Borzowa to write a piece based upon the Chagall windows at the chapel at Pocantico Hills, in upstate New York. Alla hails from Minsk, the same region where Chagall was born. Chagall also inspired Messiaen. I received permission to use a 1936 Chagall painting of an angel on my CD, *A Mystic in the Making*, which features *L'Ascension* (1933) and *Les Corps Glorieux* (1939). The new commission brings several powerful creative interests together.

Since 1988, I have been the director of the Barnard-Columbia Chorus and Chamber Choir at Columbia University (still a labor of love), and then in 1994, I became director of the music program at Barnard College, where I teach full-time. I am the only full-time person in music at Barnard, because the main university music department is at Columbia. With a staff of six adjunct voice teachers and an adjunct history assistant, we serve about 120 students in solo voice lessons and the three levels of voice classes, advise sixty majors or pro-

spective first- and second-year students, support an undergraduate ethnomusicology major, sponsor two opera companies in residence: Opera Hispanica and the Opera Company of Brooklyn — and the choirs. I teach a year-long music history survey, direct the choirs, and advise forty-five students in addition to the administrative work of the program. Five years ago, I became organist at Vassar College, leaving church music to build an organ and harpsichord program; a dozen students registered in the studio for the January 2012 term.

The challenges that women organists face are daunting because the organ has been associated with religious observance for centuries, in which the leadership is traditionally masculine. The musicians considered the leading figures in the organ world today, therefore, are men teaching organ in conservatories or playing in cathedrals. When openings are announced, few of the searches are genuine, and women rarely move forward in the process. Paradoxically, the majority of these men hold an MA degree, while the women who are prominent organists hold a DMA or Ph.D. and are also conductors and composers. Women organists dominate in towns and villages, while men dominate in large cities.

My personal experiences bear this out: I have built my teaching career in women's colleges, Barnard and Vassar (which is now co-educational), because these schools value education and achievement. There is a forward path in these fine places, whereas churches and conservatories blocked my progress. It is my hope that the search process for organists at cathedrals, conservatories, and colleges in the major cities of the world will become transparent, equitable, and based upon merit in the very near future, so that many women will assume positions of leadership. It is inspiring to be among the many serious, creative women of the IAWM, and I look forward to meeting you all.