

2003 MCGILL SUMMER ORGAN ACADEMY

The McGill Summer Organ Academy attracts many students of all ages and from numerous countries. This, the fourth bi-annual Academy, attracted 67 students as well as a large and distinguished faculty. The artistic director was John Grew, McGill University Organist for 29 years. James David Christie taught 17th-century North German repertoire; Marie-Claire Alain (Jehan Alain); Ludger Lohmann (German Romantic); Bernard Lagace (Johann Sebastian Bach); Olivier Latry (the works of Olivier Messiaen); Jean Ferrard (early Spanish music); Kenneth Gilbert (harpsichord works of François Couperin and J.S. Bach); John Grew (French Classic); James Higdon (20th century American organ music), and Christopher Stenbridge (music of Frescobaldi and Mayone). Hank Knox taught continuo and Patrick Wedd, service playing. Gerre Hancock and Julian Wachner taught improvisation.

Part of the very intricate program offered in these two weeks was a first-rate recital, usually by organists, every evening. The first week began with a recital by John Grew and Patrick Wedd. Both played the Hellmuth Wolff French Classic organ in Redpath Hall, and in their hands, the instrument demonstrated brilliance and clarity of sound. Mr. Grew played from the great Organ Mass by de Grigny. His playing was technically fluid and, above all, spiritually uplifting! Mr. Wedd, with his crystal-clear technique, played contemporary works by English, Canadian, and American composers.

The well-taught classes were a rich source of enlightenment and inspiration. We who perform regularly need new ideas and stimulation in order to grow, and the McGill Academy was just the place to receive this stimulus. I spent nearly two weeks in the classes of James David Christie, an important resource for technical and musical ideas in early music. We studied works by Heinrich Scheidemann, Jan Sweelinck, Samuel

Scheidt, Dieterich Buxtehude, Georg Böhm, and J.S. Bach. Mr. Christie's enlightened musicianship culminated in a recital at the Église de l'Immaculée Conception. His clever planning and brilliant Baroque touch brought the audience to its feet several times. Another extraordinary class taught by Marie-Claire Alain emphasized the works of her brother, Jehan Alain. Much of what she covered in her classes can be found in her soon-to-be-released critical study of the works of Jehan Alain. Mme. Alain also played a recital on the Casavant at Église Saint Jean-Baptiste, where she had spent the week teaching. Both the room and the instrument were wonderful vehicles for her mature artistry. The audience was captivated by her clarity of line, as it combined with stunning registration and fiery drive. The program consisted of Widor's *Symphonie No. 9*, some pieces by Albert Alain, and the *Deuxième Fantaisie*, *Deux Danses d'Agni Yavishta*, and *Trois Danses* of Jehan Alain. The audience's thunderous applause was a thorough tribute to the artistry of a great lady!

Of particular importance were the weeklong classes of Olivier Latry on the complete works of Messiaen. M. Latry brings an engaging personality and formidable musicianship to his classes and recitals. Since he has had access to Messiaen's manuscripts and personal copies, he also brings a great authenticity. His brilliant class work was vividly portrayed in his recital on Friday evening. This was a stunning recital by virtue of its highlights. As an organist of *Nôtre-Dame-de-Paris*, Latry should know a thing or two about this master of mysticism, whose organ music he has recorded in its entirety for Deutsche Grammophon. [His improvisation] was a highly coherent fantasy in a style comparable at first to Debussy and then, in the concluding ostinato, to Poulenc. Yet the best was still to come: the rousing finale of Alexandre Guilmant's *Sonata No. 1*, played as an encore "with clarity and force to stand your hair on end" as quoted in Arthur Kaptanis's review in *The Gazette*, July 20, 2003.

At the end of the first week, the Academy treated participants to a bus ride into the Quebec countryside, which included two organ recitals as well as a trip to the Casavant plant. Our first stop brought us to Église Sainte-Famille, a splendid example of 18th-century New France architecture in Boucherville. Jonathan Oldengarm was the recitalist for this morning recital on a beautiful Casavant organ. He played with authority and finesse and we all wish this young man a brilliant success in his future career. The next stop was the Casavant shop, where we were given a tour and lunch. After the Casavant tour we traveled to Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, a Benedictine Abbey in the countryside. Here is a very large and beautiful group of buildings that includes a lovely church with another brilliant Wilhelm organ. Bernard Lagacé played music by Samuel Scheidt, Georg Bohm, and J.S. Bach.

My comments have covered only a fraction of the many musical offerings held at the McGill International Organ Academy 2003. This program is not for the faint-hearted, for the day begins at 8:30 A.M., and ends after receptions, about midnight! When I took the one-hour flight home I thought about how many different countries I had visited in a musical sense. Furthermore, all of my preludes and postludes for our fall program at St. Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, were planned and prepared. I am certain that those of you who decide to look into the next International Organ Academy will be very glad you did!

JUDITH HANCOCK