

## SUMMER ORGAN ACADEMIES IN CANADA

### The McGill Summer Organ Academy

During the last two weeks of July, nearly one hundred organists descended in the island of Montréal for the 2001 McGill Summer Organ Academy. This bi-annual programme, organized by Professor John Grew of McGill University, has rapidly risen in prominence to become a highly respected international summer school, and a source of some pride of its organisers, and indeed the Canadian organ community. This year's participants were primarily university students, professors, concert artists and church organists from all over Canada and the United States, although a significant number came from as far away as Sweden, France, Poland, and even Hong Kong and Australia.

Perhaps the main attraction of the McGill Academy is the calibre of professors offering masterclasses in a variety of genres of organ music, spanning two continents and four centuries. This year's programme was the largest ever, featuring masterclasses and recitals from some of the most celebrated performers in the world: James David Christie (Boston), James Higdon (Kansas), Olivier Latry (Paris), Luigi Tagliavini (Bologna), Ludger Lohman (Stuttgart), Bernard Lagacé (Montréal), John Grew (Montréal), Hank Knox (Montréal), and Kenneth Gilbert (Paris).

Given such an impressive roster, it is hardly surprising that this summer's McGill Academy was a resounding success. Nevertheless, it is important to identify some of the highlights of the programme, and to offer a few suggestions for future years. As far as the highlights are concerned, one must begin with the recitals, which, of course, were magnificent. After all, how often does one get the opportunity to hear such a remarkable group of concert artists perform each night on some of the most famous instruments in the country? For all of us who participated in the Academy, this was a rare treat.

Although all of the recitals were undoubtedly a success, one stands out among the best performances I've ever had witnessed: Luigi Tagliavini's performance on the Wolff organ at McGill's Redpath Hall. Tagliavini's playing was absolutely delightful, combining flawless technique and exquisite ornamentation with

beautifully-shaped musical phrasing, and a light, playful touch. After the performance, one of McGill's doctoral students who has participated in numerous organ festivals across Europe and North America, remarked to me that that was the cleanest playing he has ever heard in a live performance. Tagliavini's programme largely featured composers of the Italian Baroque, such as Girolamo Frescobaldi, Giovanni Gabrieli, Arcangelo Corelli, Bernardo Pasquini, and Giuseppi Torelli. Given the relative obscurity of this repertoire in today's mainstream organ culture, it was a rare treat to hear an entire programme of early Italian keyboard music, presented by one of the foremost authorities on the performance practice of that era.

Of course, the other recitals each had their own charm, and I was especially pleased to have another opportunity to hear Olivier Latry and James David Christie in live performances, and to watch Kenneth Gilbert and Luc Beausejour amuse themselves with a two-harpsichord arrangement of Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 6*. Nevertheless, Tagliavini's recital stands out as one I will never forget...I hope that he will be back for the 2003 Academy.

The second major highlight of the programme was the field trip to Saint-Hyacinthe and to l'Abbaye-Saint-Benoit-du-Lac. Although I had to miss the field trip as a result of the responsibilities of my church position in Toronto, all those that I spoke to about the trip found it to be most enjoyable. The field trip consisted of a demonstration of the Létourneau organ at Église Saint-Gilbert in Montréal, a visit to Saint-Hyacinthe – the unrivalled organ-building capital of Canada – and a recital by Bernard Lagacé on the new Wilhelm organ at Saint-Benoit-du-Lac. All of this was undoubtedly enhanced by the scenic beauty of rural Québec, which provided a pleasant contrast to the stifling heat and unbearable humidity that continued to grip Montreal. Thus, the field trip was very much like a weekend retreat or a trip to the cottage for an organ-crazed public, who relishes the idea of combining Scheidemann, Scheidt, and Bach with the great Canadian outdoors!

Thirdly, I must commend Karl Raudsepp on his slide presentation at McGill on the first night of the programme. This informative presentation

was an excellent opening to the Academy, as it introduced the participants to the rich heritage and the unique organ culture of Montreal. Given the number of visitors attending the Academy, it was a great idea to expose them to some of the treasures of the city. Raudsepp's presentation was extremely informative, and it brought to light the need for today's organists to continue to build on the heritage that we have received from our predecessors. The presentation certainly instilled in me a desire to remain active as a church organist, and to take a more active interest in the restoration of some of the historic instruments in Montreal and across Canada.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the McGill Academy was that it reinforced a strong sense of camaraderie among organists from across the world. From registration on opening day until the reception following Olivier Latty's recital, I ran into dozens of familiar faces, many of whom I had not seen since the 1999 Academy. It was great to catch up with old friends, and to see the progress that so many of the younger organists have made in the past two years.

For university students like myself, the McGill Academy provided an unparalleled opportunity to interact with some of the most sought-after teachers in Europe and the United States, in an informal, relaxed environment. This is undoubtedly important, because it allows organ students to assess some of the strengths and weaknesses of the various pedagogical methods, and to learn more about their specific interests and needs. All of the processors were very approachable, and strove to provide all interested students with all the attention that they needed. In fact, much of the best student-teacher interaction occurred in informal settings such as the receptions that frequently followed the recitals, or the dinner provided by McGill on the first night of the programme. Such settings undoubtedly blurred the distinction between teacher and student, thereby allowing everyone to interact on an equal footing. This reflects the pedagogical approach of John Grew, who enjoys chatting with his students in social situations in addition to at their formal lessons and masterclasses. As a result of this informal atmosphere, everyone felt at ease throughout the Academy, and all those I spoke to appeared to be having a great time.

While the 2001 McGill Academy was undoubtedly a success, it is important to look ahead to the next academy, which will be held in two years' time. I have a few suggestions that might build upon the already-excellent quality of the programme. First of all, I think that a few new courses might be welcome in 2003. For instance, it would be nice to have someone like Tom Murray (Yale University) offer a course on organ transcriptions. Another suggestion might be to offer a workshop on improvisation, perhaps led by masters such as Naji Hakim (Paris) or Raymond Daveluy (Montreal). Perhaps a course featuring English Romantic music or early Iberian music would prove successful as well. The organ repertoire is incredibly diverse, reflecting a wide variety of cultural traditions, which should be represented at programmes such as this. However, for certain genres, it might be necessary to offer one-week half-courses, if the estimated enrollment is low. For instance, a four-day course on English Romantic music can be followed by a similar course featuring music by Canadian composers; perhaps these two courses could even be led by the same teacher. This, I feel, would significantly broaden the range of repertoire available to study for students.

I should also note that Artistic Director John Grew and Executive Director Tammy-Jo Mortensen did a good job at providing information on the things to see and do in Montreal. However, it would be a great idea to let visitors to Montreal know ahead of time of any discounts offered to music students or teachers by stores, museums or concert halls. For instance, many of the visiting students that I spoke to were not aware of the discount offered by Musique Archambault, and thus did not bring their identification cards with them. This was unfortunate, as I am sure Archambault made a tremendous profit from the sale of organ music during the two weeks of the Academy!

While perhaps some of these suggestions will be considered for 2003, this year's programme was nonetheless a resounding success, and it was genuinely enjoyed by all who participated in it. For me especially, it was a fulfilling, satisfying, albeit tiring experience, which rekindled my interest in the King of Instruments. That means I'll likely end up spending the rest of my summer learning new repertoire, some of which may come in handy for 2003!

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