

Prairie Voices: A Musforum Conference

June 8–9, 2017, Omaha, Nebraska

By Gail Archer

Musforum (www.musforum.org), held its second conference, *Prairie Voices*, in Omaha, Nebraska, June 8 and 9, 2017. Omaha was the conference site because it is the only American city in which a woman serves as music director at both the Catholic and Episcopal cathedrals, **Marie Rubis Bauer** (at St. Cecilia Catholic Cathedral) and **Marty Wheeler Burnett** (at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral), respectively. Women organists, composers, and conductors from across the United States were the featured artists, from age 12, **Gianna Manhart**, the youngest student at the St. Cecilia Institute, Omaha, to age 88, the remarkable **Wilma Jensen**, who was our keynote speaker. The events took place at St. Cecilia Catholic Cathedral, Dundee Presbyterian Church, and First United Methodist Church in Omaha. The conference was made possible, in part, by a generous grant from Barnard College, Columbia University, New York.

Thursday, June 8

The events began on Thursday morning, June 8, with a program of early Dutch and German music combined with contemporary music by women composers played by **Rhonda Sider Edgington** from Holland, Michigan. Edgington is the organist and assistant music director at Hope Church and a staff accompanist at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. The Pasi organ at St. Cecilia Cathedral is really two organs, a mean-tone instrument and a well-tempered instrument on which it is possible to play a program in ancient and modern temperaments. The program opened with the variation set by Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, *Est-ce Mars*, followed by *Intabulation on Alleluja, laudem dicte Deo nostro* by

Heinrich Scheidemann and *Praeludium in G Minor*, BuxWV 150, by Dieterich Buxtehude. Edgington made these works come alive with her precise articulation and colorful registrations, which were heightened by the meantone tuning.

She then turned to living women composers for the remainder of the hour: Patricia Van Ness, Cecilia McDowall, Rachel Laurin, and Margaret Sandresky. The Laurin pieces, “Fugue on a Bird’s Song” and “Scherzetto,” were taken from the *Twelve Short Pieces*, op. 64 (2012). The light, vivacious gestures in both pieces reached to the highest range of the keyboard and delighted the audience with their humor and rhythmic verve. Sandresky’s “And David danced before the ark of the Lord,” from *Five Sacred Dances* (1998), drew a fiery and powerful performance from the recitalist.

Chamber music played by the women’s ensemble, **I, the Siren—Darci Gamerl**, oboe, and **Stacie Haneline**, piano—was featured in the late morning performance in the nave of St. Cecilia Cathedral. The musicians presented works by Bach, Mahler, Clara Schumann, Amy Beach, and Alyssa Morris. The splendid ensemble playing, sparkling dialogue, and nuanced phrasing were such a pleasure for the audience, as these Omaha-based musicians have collaborated for many years.

Our keynote address was provided by Wilma Jensen from Nashville, Tennessee. Jensen was the music director at St. George Episcopal Church in Nashville and taught organ at Oklahoma City University, Vanderbilt University, and Indiana University. Her lively and amusing address focused upon healthy keyboard technique. She emphasized, “Each finger swings freely from the knuckle to the key, while the thumb rotates to the key to play. The thumb does not lift to play. Separating the action of the thumb from that of the fingers is often one of the most difficult tasks for keyboardists.” She demonstrated at both the organ and the piano, as we were in a classroom at the St. Cecilia Institute adjacent to the



Lynne Davis, Wilma Jensen, Gianna Manhart, and Crista Miller after the choral concert at St. Cecilia Cathedral.



Sarah Johnson, Shayla van Hal, and Yumiko Tatsuta after their joint recital



Wilma Jensen presenting her keynote address



Mary Perkinson, violin, Elisa Bickers, organist, and Sarah Tannehill Anderson, soprano, performed at St. Cecilia Cathedral.

cathedral, which has a fine small pipe organ and a piano. The organ was built in 2000 by Darron Wissinger of New Hampshire and revoiced by Hal Gober in 2009 for its installation at St. Cecilia.

Jensen encouraged organists to practice wisely using a gradual method for tempo. “Once I know a passage thoroughly at a slow tempo, I take it a little faster, generally only two metronome numbers, so that the mind and hands hardly notice the change. At each playing I increase the speed by two metronome numbers until I reach a limit where I can still deliver the passage accurately but can’t exceed the speed. There I stop.” Jensen also drew attention to resources for ordinary touch of Baroque keyboard music and cited

texts by Quentin Faulkner, *J. S. Bach’s Keyboard Technique: A Historical Introduction*, and *Organ Technique Modern and Early* by George Ritchie and George Stauffer, as well as texts by Jon Laukvik, John Brock, and Sandra Soderlund.

Musforum provided luncheon each day and a wine and cheese gathering on Thursday afternoon. These social occasions are as important as the musical events, as they give everyone a chance to get to know each other and discuss our work in a relaxed and informal setting. One of the problems for women who are organists is that we are separated by great distances and do not have regular opportunity for the conversations that we enjoyed at the conference. The

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Gail Archer, Lynne Davis, and Crista Miller at the final recital at St. Cecilia Cathedral



Rhonda Sider Edgington after her recital at St. Cecilia Cathedral



Gianna Manhart before her performance at St. Cecilia Cathedral

conference schedule is deliberately arranged so that we all attend every event and we all have sufficient time to meet our colleagues.

Organist **Elisa Bickers** and the **Bach Aria Soloists** from Kansas City performed on Thursday afternoon in St. Cecilia Cathedral. Soprano **Sarah Tannehill Anderson** joined the violinists and organist in arias by Claudio Monteverdi, *Si dolce è'l tormento*, and G. F. Handel, *Da Tempeste il legno infrante* from the cantata *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, HWV 17. Bickers performed the *Variations on John Dowland's 'The Prince of Denmark's Galliard'* by Samuel Scheidt and *Toccata in F Major*, BuxWV 156, by Dieterich Buxtehude. The varied program also included chorale preludes, *Herzlich tut mich verlangen* by Pamela Decker and *Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns halt* by Cecilia McDowall. The concert concluded with *Prayer* by Olufela Sowande and *Nun danket alle Gott* by Egil Hovland. The rich variety of the repertoire was the hallmark of the programming and this factor drew many people from the general Omaha community to all of the performances.

The afternoon session concluded with a reading session: "Women Composers for Lent" presented by **Stacie Lightner**. Lightner serves as director of music at St. Martin's Lutheran Church in Annapolis, Maryland. During the workshop, we sang a number of the choral works listed in the extensive 12-page resource guide, which included both choral music and organ literature appropriate for the liturgical season of Lent, all composed by women.

The St. Cecilia Cathedral Choir under the direction of Marie Rubis Bauer presented an inspiring evening concert, which included choral music by Omaha composers J. Michael McCabe, Marty Wheeler Burnett, and Marie Rubis Bauer. Music arranged by Alice Parker, *Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal* and *Be Thou My Vision*, as well as the *Messe pour deux voix egales*, op. 167, by Cécile Chaminade were featured in the program. Rubis Bauer played *Ave Maris Stella* by Girolamo Cavazzoni as the prelude and "Dialogue sur les grandes Jeux" from *Ave Maris Stella* by Nicolas De Grigny as the postlude. Certainly one of the most inspiring moments was provided by 12-year old Gianna Manhart playing *Galleries ancient* by Dennis Janzer. The beautiful music from the Latin Office, "O Caecilia felix! O felix Caecilia!" began the concert, and the audience sang *Magnificat on the Fifth Tone* by Kevin C. Vogt at the conclusion.

Friday, June 9

Our Friday morning session at Dundee Presbyterian Church began with a fine organ recital by **Chelsea Vaught**, music director and organist at First Presbyterian Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, followed by a lecture/recital by **Catherine Rodland** on the choir and organ traditions at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota. The morning concluded with three young women organists currently enrolled in graduate study, playing a joint recital, with half hour segments for each performer: **Sarah Johnson** at Boston University, **Yumiko Tatsuta** at Indiana University, and **Shayla Van Hal** at the University of Kansas. The afternoon session began with a lively lecture on the more than 500 hymn texts written

by Rae E. Whitney presented by **Marty Wheeler Burnett**, who researched these texts for her doctoral dissertation. We learned about Whitney's fascinating life story and sang a number of the hymn settings of her poetry together. There was also a professional quartet of singers who performed additional musical works set to Whitney poetry. Burnett emphasized the importance of including women's voices when planning music for worship.

The afternoon concluded with a duo organ performance by **Melody Steel** and **Ann Marie Rigler**. Steel played *Sanctuary* by Gwyneth Walker as a solo selection and Rigler performed *Psalm 151* by Emma Lou Diemer as a soloist. The duo organist repertoire was powerful and very exciting: *Variations on Veni Creator Spiritus* by David Briggs, *Martyrs: Dialogues on a Scottish Psalm-tune*, op. 73, by Kenneth Leighton, and *Rhapsody for Organ Duo* by Naji Hakim.

The gala final recital took place on Friday evening at St. Cecilia Cathedral featuring **Lynne Davis**, **Crista Miller**, and myself, **Gail Archer**. A well-known specialist in French repertoire, Davis began with "Offertoire sur les Grand Jeux" from the *Mass of the Convents* by François Couperin, followed with *Choral II in Si mineur* by César Franck and concluded with the *Té Deum* by Jeanne Demessieux. My own program featured *Ceremonies Suite* by Jennifer Higdon, *Prelude and Fugue* by Alexander Shaversaschvili, and *Power Dance* by Joan Tower. Tower and I worked together on this piece on the organ at Vassar College for nearly a year, and it was a great pleasure to play the work at this event. Crista Miller concluded the concert with works by Fanny Mendelssohn, *Prelude in G Major*, Pamela Decker "Ubi Caritas"

from *Retablos*, Brenda Portman, *Trio on St. Helena*, and Naji Hakim, "Rags" from *Esquisses Persanes*.

All women, no matter what age or point in their professional career, are welcome in the Musforum network. Women organists are cordially invited to join us by sending me an email: garcher@barnard.edu, and I will add your name to the free listserve. Women need to move forward in the field on the basis of merit: their education, 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. ■

Gail Archer is an international concert organist, recording artist, choral conductor, and lecturer who draws attention to composer anniversaries or musical themes with her annual recital series. She was the first American woman to play the complete works of Olivier Messiaen for the centennial of the composer's birth in 2008; Time Out New York recognized the Messiaen cycle as "Best of 2008" of classical music and opera. Her recordings include her September 2017 CD, A Russian Journey and The Muse's Voice. Archer's 2017 European tour took her to Germany, Italy, Great Britain, Russia, Ukraine, and Poland. She is the founder of Musforum, an international network for women organists, college organist at Vassar College, and director of the music program at Barnard College, Columbia University, where she conducts the Barnard-Columbia Chorus. Archer serves as director of the artist and young organ artist recitals at historic Central Synagogue, New York, New York.

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