Prairie Voices: A Musforum Conference

June 8–9, 2017, Omaha, Nebraska

By Gail Archer

Musforum (www.musforum.org), a network for women organists, 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 Past 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 on Alleluja, laudem dicte Deo nostro, followed by Est-ce Mars de Jean-Baptiste Louis Fage. Jensen was the music director at St. George Episcopal Church in Nashville and taught organ at Oklahoma City 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 cathedral, which has a fine small pipe organ and a piano. The organ was built in 2000 by Darron Wissinger of New Hampshire and voiced 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 tests by Quentin Faulkner, J. S. Bach’s Keyboard Technique: A Historical Introduction, and Organ Technique Modern 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 work in a relaxed and informal setting. One of the problems for women who work in a relaxed and informal setting. One of the problems for women who work in a relaxed and informal setting. One of the problems for women who work in a relaxed and informal setting. One of the problems for women who work in a relaxed and informal setting. One of the problems for women who work in a relaxed and informal setting.

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Rhonda Sider Edgington after her recital at St. Cecilia Cathedral

Gianna Manhart before her performance at St. Cecilia Cathedral

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 Choir under the direction of Marie Rubis Bauer presented an inspiring evening concert, which included choral music by Omaha composers J. Michael McGahee, 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 Ave Maria…

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 Grands Jeux” from the Mass of the Convent by François Coperinus, followed with Choral II in St. minore by César Franck and concluded with the Te Deum by Jeanne Demessieux. My own program featured my own compositions, Variations on Veni Creator Spiritus by David Briggs, Matrya. Dialogues on a Scottish Psalm-tone, op. 73, by Kenneth Leighton, and Rhapsody for Organ Duo by Naji Hakim.

The 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 Tannahill Anderson joined the violinsts and organist in arias by Claudio Monteverdi, Sî dolce el tormento, and G. F. Handel, De Tempore il legno infrante from the cantata Giulio Cesare in Egitto, HWY 17. Bickers performed the Variations on John Dowland’s The Prince of Denmark’s Galiard by Samuel Scheidt and Toccata in F Major, BusW 156, by Dieterich Buxtehude. The varied program also included chorale preludes, Herzlich tut mich verlangen by Panumelle Decker and Wo Göt der Herr nicht bei uns halb by Cecilia McDowell. The concert concluded with Prayer by Ohufela Soxwone 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.

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