

TRIBUTES FOR GEORGE FAXON (1913–1992)

One hates to think of eras ending, but when George Faxon passed away on June 25, 1992, a long chapter in Boston's musical life drew quietly to a close. Among its participants had been Albert Snow, Francis Snow, Carl McKinley, Archibald Davison, Ruth Barrett Phelps, and many others. Beyond the local scene, George shared the bench with such organ celebrities as Carl Weinrich, Clarence Watters, David McK. Williams, Ernest White, and Edgar Hilliar. And in a third sphere, George's interest in organ-building brought him in close contact with Ernest Skinner and G. Donald Harrison, Edward Gammons, and William King Covell. It is in these many contexts that the loss of George takes on such powerful resonance.

Unlike other organists of his day, George's love of the classical organ and its literature never expressed itself in anti-Romantic ways. Most likely, this stemmed from a highly diverse training. In 1931, George came to Boston to study with Albert Snow, organist of Emmanuel Church. According to George, Snow was a superb, well-rounded organist who also arranged player rolls for the Skinner company. In addition to organ study, George sang at the Church of the Advent, spent time with then-organist Frederick Johnson, and became highly interested in the new Aeolian-Skinner being built for the church in late 1935. (He even stood in the empty organ chamber after the old Hutchings had been removed and before the new Aeolian-Skinner went in.) War service took George to England, where he studied both with Harold Darke in Cambridge (then deputizing at King's College) and Carl Dolmetsch (the earliest of English early music specialists). Coming home, George joined the faculty at the University of Michigan, working under the renowned organist Palmer Christian. In 1946, George returned to Boston, assuming the position at the Church of the Advent. A few years later, he moved to St. Paul's Cathedral, then in 1954 to Trinity Church, where he remained until 1980. Upon retirement, he became artist-in-residence on the other side of Copley Square at Old South Church. Throughout this period, he taught many students at Boston Conservatory and Boston University.

George gave recitals across the country, although he never seemed to desire a large concert career. He made several contributions to Aeolian-Skinner's *King of Instruments* record series, the most notable being Volume One, in which G. Donald Harrison narrates a tour of the modern organ. Harrison's script is illustrated by musical examples; George recorded the majority of these on the 1953 organ at St. Paul's Cathedral, which he, Harrison, and Edward Gammons had designed. (Harrison's famous phrase, "The Oboe is interesting" is followed by George's playing on, naturally, the Swell Oboe.) George also contributed two Bach selections to Volume Two, *Organ Literature: Bach to Langlais*. And he was a longtime participant and trustee in the St. Dunstan's College Conference on Sacred Music.

Such a breadth of experience gave George a far more comprehensive musical outlook than many of his contemporaries. He always seemed to expand, not limit, his horizons. Although George was one of the earliest



Americans to investigate historical performance practices, his motivations were not scholarly per se, merely another ingredient in his education. No literature was unfamiliar to him, and the extensive Faxon library seemed to have everything—Krebs to Kreisler, Titcomb to transcriptions. Equally strong was his passion for jazz, inspired by an early introduction to the music of Duke Ellington. Later, he became a fan of piano giant Art Tatum, and always kept tabs on the best theater organists. Even in his last years, George spent time at the piano, testing and thinking, arranging and playing. In all music, he was on a constant search for rhythmic significance, harmonic ingenuity, and architectural integrity.

George's organ playing was immaculately accurate, controlled, measured, and inventive—never flashy, always classy. Above all, he demanded a tight rein on rhythm. "Duration equals intensity" was a favorite motto. Following his own doctrine, George employed a remarkable range of touches, from the silkiest legato to the cleanest detachment. He excelled in articulation—controlling the precise attack, length, and release of each note—and he believed that the greatest variety was possible through the uniform touch of a good electric action. His recordings (Bach *Trio Sonata I* and Vivaldi-Bach *Concerto in A Minor*) display this control: everything subtly different, no two identical phrases alike, a slightly new perspective at each turn.

In a time when many organists shunned colorism, George reveled in it, and he never failed to provide magical registrations. At Trinity Church, the large double organ offered unusual front-to-back possibilities. One characteristic combination was the chancel Cor de Nuit (a quinty stopped flute) with the nave Solo Flute (a typical Skinner Orchestral Flute, or diminutive Flauto Mirabilis), both with tremolo. Normally, these two stops would make an odd marriage, but the effect was remarkable and atmospheric—and merely one in the stable of

Faxon sonorities. In 20th-century music, George would often reveal one remarkable color after another.

Like his playing, George himself could be reserved, even a bit aloof. Beneath this diffident exterior, however, lay a marvelous mind: complex but disciplined, wide-ranging yet ordered, all infused with a quiet, wry humor. When asked how he managed Trinity's busy Sunday evening music series, he replied, "It's easy. First you get someone to play the thing. Then you get someone to conduct the thing. Then when they ask what you're doing out in the church, you tell them you're listening for balance." Actually, he conducted or played a good number of these services, and when he didn't, he offered the parts to those younger musicians who might benefit from the experience. According to Thomas Murray and Max Miller, there was nothing reserved about George's generosity and determination to help young organists. He worked tirelessly behind the scenes to place those he considered talented in good jobs. And he was a legendary source for obscure literature. After exhausting all other channels, organists would turn to George. "Gosh, let me look upstairs," he would say over the phone. A few days later, a perfect photocopy, bound in George's trademark Gamble hinge tape, would arrive at your door.

In retirement, George corresponded widely and was increasingly receptive to phone calls, conversation, and personal visits. Sitting in his comfortable living room, surrounded by things musical and the hospitality of his delightful wife Nancy, George would spin his ever-observant conversation. Not only had he met virtually everyone of importance, but he had known many of them well, and remembered everything. He might just as readily illuminate an idea with a reminiscence of Darke or Dolmetsch as with one of E.M. Skinner's limericks.

While he loved to talk organ, George would often return to the larger questions of music making, a subject on which he was highly discriminating but rarely biased. His convictions stemmed not from any particular doctrine, but in the principles behind all musical effectiveness. For him, the same questions applied to Bach or Ellington—style may be important, George would reason, but the use of style was critical. He understood substance and style, knew how to differentiate between them, and constantly experimented with innovation.

This philosophy also involved his conception of organ design. Always a modernist, George was naturally at home with American Classic organs. He wanted clarity, responsiveness, delicacy, and beauty; power for its own sake did not interest him. In the new Aeolian-Skinner at St. Paul's Cathedral (#1207, 1953, III/96), he integrated a complete three-manual classic organ (Great, Brustwerk, Positiv, Pedal) with modern Swell and Choir, and considered the design versatile. Later, when the Trinity nave organ (a 1926 Skinner) was being tonally renovated, George and his technician Jason McKown (a superb voicer and finisher) achieved a mild, tight ensemble with a remarkable spread: bold but never oppressive, and brimming with subtle color.

George had a special fascination for instrumental manipulation. The St. Paul's console teemed with unusual features: Pedal to Great, unison offs for all divisions, and everywhere pistons and cancels, vents, and reversibles. Even with the setter placed below the left-hand Choir key-cheek, pistons still filled the key-slips end to end. As an example of George's thoroughness, the "Brustwerk only" piston drew not merely the Swell Unison Off, but also canceled the Swell 16' and 4' couplers, Brustwerk Unison Off, and Choir to Swell. Upon moving to Trinity in 1954, George designed an even more compact, yet more complex console, which Aeolian-Skinner built in 1956: 108 ranks on three manuals with the Solo playing from the Choir manual, and only two expression pedals plus Crescendo. Since the Trinity organ comprised both nave and chancel sections, George divided the console down the middle: left-hand buttons and couplers performed left-hand (nave) functions while right-hand controls took care of right-hand (chancel) functions. Even the cancel button was divided. Like St. Paul's, the Trinity console had its ingenious devices: one could transfer the front boxes to the right shoe and the back boxes to the left; the Solo shades, normally on the Choir shoe, could operate from the Crescendo Pedal and the Crescendo silenced; a Sostenuto Pedal held any struck notes (so you might walk out and "listen for balance"); and a special reversible converted the six nave and six chancel combinations into twelve additional full generals, for a total of 18—an ingenious concept in the age before multiple memories.

It was to this console that George brought his wife (Nancy Plummer Faxon) as page-turner, some of his favorite music, and an old-fashioned floor lamp (not unlike Landowska's in concert) for a farewell recital on April 30, 1980, in the spring of his retirement from Trinity. After three Bach selections, George played John Ireland's *Elegiac Romance*, moving to three harmonium sketches of Karg-Elert and the Intermezzo from Dupré's Second Symphony. As he often did, George devoted the latter part of the recital to American composers: Mrs. Faxon's *Sonata Fantasy*, the *Pantomime* of H.B. Jepson, three selections from *In Fairyland* of R.S. Stoughton, and George's own medley of Ellington tunes ("the finest composer of the 20th century, you know").

George was at the height of his powers that night; he had a lot to say, and his integration of musical and expressive techniques was complete. In the more atmospheric moments (the Karg-Elert, the Jepson, the middle of the Faxon, the Stoughton, the Ellington), the playing was sheer perfection. George glided from one mood to the next, exhibiting a gorgeous reserve, meaningful because he revealed the full power of the organ only when the music demanded it, and in just proportion to the overall mood of the evening. Stoughton's *March of the Gnomes* depicted dank and gritty creatures, contrived on the Clarinet 8' and English Horn 4' played in the bottom octave; perfect phrasing, swelling, and agogics in the Jepson; mixtures with tremolo masquerading as tibia trebles to surprising effectiveness in the Ellington; and throughout, an ability to move a line, shape a phrase, and make the organ stand up and sing. After the applause died away, George stepped to the lectern and said, "I thought I'd play one more song of Duke Ellington. It's

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Sunday, 18 October 5 pm

DUO ORGANISTS CAROL AND THOMAS FOSTER

Carol Foster, Director of Music at St. John's Church, Los Angeles joins Thomas Foster in this program featuring both solo works and music for two players at one instrument. The Fosters were featured artists at last summer's series at the Methuen Memorial Music Hall in Massachusetts. They will play music of American composers Samuel Barber, Larry King, Calvin Hampton, Roland Diggle, Daniel Pinkham, and All Saints' own Craig Phillips.

Sunday, 1 November 5 pm

HANDEL - ALEXANDER'S FEAST

All Saints' Choir, full Baroque orchestra and soloists; Dedication of new Chamber Organ

Sunday, 29 November 5 pm

A PROCESSION WITH CAROLS ON ADVENT SUNDAY

All Saints' Choir continues the tradition with this centuries-old candlelight carol service.

Sunday, 13 December 5 pm

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All Saints' Choir, full orchestra, and soloists

Sunday, 7 February 5 pm

EPIPHANY EVENSONG AND CONCERT WITH SERMON BY THE RECTOR

John Reading - Responses
Richard Farrant - Evening service
William Mundy - O Lord, the maker of all things

Concert: Camille King, soprano

Professional concert artist Camille King is soprano soloist in All Saints' Choir and an All Saints' parishioner. She will perform works from the Baroque era, accompanied by chamber orchestra.

Sunday, 21 February 5 pm

A DIOCESAN CHOIR FESTIVAL

Choir members from parishes and missions throughout the Diocese sing Evensong under the direction of Jeffrey Rickard, Director of Music at Trinity Church, Redlands, and Director of Choral Activities at The University of Redlands.

Sunday, 14 March 5 pm

LENTEN EVENSONG AND CONCERT WITH SERMON BY THE RECTOR

Richard Shephard - Responses (for Liverpool)
Richard Shephard - Evening service (for Salisbury)
Philip Moore - It is a thing most wonderful

Concert: Music for two keyboard instruments

Thomas Foster and Craig Phillips play duet works on the church's harpsichord and new chamber organ.

Friday and Saturday, 7 and 8 May 7:30 pm

THE CHOIR "SHOW"

For those unfamiliar with this occasional happening, members of the choirs of All Saints' exhibit their non-liturgical talents and let their stage faces be known. The results of the last show were such that it has taken three years to muster the courage for another production. The Lower Parish Hall is transformed in cabaret style, dessert is served at intermission, and serious music is far overshadowed by outrageous frivolity. A celebrity guest will be announced in due time. Prepare to see and hear the talents of our choir members in a distinctly new light. The show will be a benefit for the next All Saints' Choir Tour in the spring of 1994.

Sunday, 30 May 9 and 11:15 am

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called"—and he paused, looking slowly left to right—"Don't You Know I Care?"

Those five words were the lyrics of George's life. Not only did he demonstrate that music can produce an expression of enduring significance, but he provided examples which would become his finest lessons. We would be wise to study them.

JONATHAN E. AMBROSINO

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The following tributes by Max Miller, FAGO, and Thomas Murray were delivered at a memorial service in Old South Church on June 30, 1992.

George Faxon was almost universally called "Uncle George"—sometimes to his face, almost always when organists gathered together. I was present more than once when some student would timidly ask if he minded being called that; the reply usually ran, "Sure, call me anything you want. Yeah, that's me, Uncle George." I am certain each of you will understand from your own experiences why this was so. An uncle, after all, is someone you can call on, a mentor, an adviser, and above all, someone to whom you can turn.

If this morning I speak from my own experience, I have little doubt that by changing names and times here and there you will be able to personalize what I say in most cases by recalling similar incidents in your own life. I am lucky to have worked with George Faxon during his long tenure at Boston University, but my indebtedness goes back to my arrival in town as a moneyless student; of course I knew who George Faxon was, but I was more than surprised, not having met him, to receive a letter from him inviting me to accompany an oratorio at St. Paul's Cathedral which his men and boys choir were to sing. That started our friendship. I am now aware how often he gave that sort of helping hand to organists just getting going; encouraging them, helping them to get placed in good positions, making calls on their behalf.

Some few years after that, to my excitement and delight, when I had already been teaching exactly one year, George left the New England Conservatory to come to Boston University as chairman of the church music and organ department. He was given a nice office which he promptly turned over to Jack Fisher, also of the organ faculty, who had no office, remarking, "If you have an office, they can find you—I don't need it!" After all, George had his brief case containing, as he was wont to tell you, dry socks (might get caught in a rainstorm), motion-sickness pills (never know when you might find yourself on an airplane), flashlight (electricity could go off), four freshly sharpened pencils, extra glasses, and an endless assortment of music, letters, and papers. His students in those days were easily identified by brief cases of identical design to his.

As you can imagine, George ran the department with a minimum of fuss. When it came time for school faculty meetings, he generally entered the room with a "Whatever it is, I'm for it." Then to speed discussions along, he saved his voice for more important things beyond the meetings. Not that he was really quiet, mind you. Both my wife, who worked with him at Trinity Church where she was director of religious education, a job he recommended her for, and I soon learned that the place to sit at a dull meeting was

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next to George, who kept up a very quiet undertone of devastatingly dry, humorous comments on all that went on. It was a bad business because it was you who were laughing when others were not. George? His expression didn't change.

George Faxon was a superb musician. Just to look at the scores he played from, so carefully fingered, and so carefully worked out in each detail was a lesson in how to go about doing things. In fact, he worked hard at not working hard in the very best sense. At the National Pedagogy Conference which preceded the National Convention of the American Guild of Organists, a biennial gathering of organists from all over the country, nearly all of the teachers were asking how George was until the announcement of his passing was made. I think Robert Anderson, just finishing his term as National Counselor for Education, summed it up: "You know," he said, "I, like a lot of people in this country, feel as if I were a student of George's, though I never studied with him. I learned so much from him. When I was in town, I always asked him questions, saw how he worked things out—he always shared what he knew with everyone."

Each of you will have many favorite performances which will come to mind whether you think of George as a recitalist or as a church musician. Do you ever expect to hear performances that can better his of the Liszt *Ad nos*, or top some of the stunning choral works which Nancy wrote for their beloved Trinity Church Choir that went so hand-in-glove with the spectacular choir, organ, building, and performers? Think about it.

George was famous for his library. One had only to mention that you had tried every avenue you knew to secure some obscure piece and he would say, "Oh, I've got that, see that you get a copy!" In a day or so there it would be in the mail, bound better than you could have purchased it. For how many of you sitting here was that true?

George served as dean of the Boston AGO Chapter, and, through the years, in nearly every other capacity as well. Following the national convention held in Boston in 1976, an organ library was proposed, started, and well under way. At the time, no one would step forward to chair the committee. George said, "Come on, Max, we can do that; we'll be cochairmen. We can divide things up." His working on that committee was a wonderful thing for all of us—he did that until just this year when the additional work became too much.

George Faxon was a popular and frequent lecturer and recitalist. He played a great deal in this country and Canada, appearing at many regional and national conventions. In 1990, when the national convention was once again held here, there was a special session on "The Wit and Wisdom of George Faxon." We could have a wonderful time with that title among ourselves following this service—in fact, it will most likely happen whether it is suggested or not.

Among his many honors and distinctions were: charter membership in the honorary music fraternity, Pi Kappa Lambda Fellow, Trinity College, London; from its beginning 25 years ago, trustee, St. Dunstan's College of Sacred Music. He was also a member of the Charles Wesley Society; a retired member of the Society for the Preservation of New Hampshire Forests, Sandwich Notch Division; and charter member of the J.R.R.

Tolkien Society. In 1985 he was honored by the New England Conservatory and presented with its Outstanding Alumni Award.

He was widely read in English literature. In fact, on any question he was asked when I was present—from poker to pool to stocks and bonds—he had something noteworthy and significant to say. Truly remarkable!

Just before I close, I would like to mention two more memories: the first is the pleasure one always had after spending any time at all in the gracious atmosphere of his home. The warmth of hospitality always extended by Nancy to all comers and the obvious joy and pleasure the members of his family had in their day-to-day interchange with one another. Would that all families could be so lucky.

The second regards George's playing in church: before going upstairs to start a service, it was his custom to take exactly five roasted peanuts—"for energy, you know"; then, once upstairs, there remains the picture of the man quietly kneeling on the cold marble altar rail. He gave of his music, his knowledge, his skills, and above all of himself. We know God blessed him; we know that we were blessed by his presence. There have been giants among us. George was one of the greatest, even of the giants.

MAX MILLER, FAGO

It was just 20 years ago that I first had the privilege of meeting George Faxon. In those days there were midwinter AGO conclaves, and in January of 1972, under crystalline Arizona sunlight, we enjoyed our first conversations. As I desired to move from California to New England, I asked his advice, and, upon my migration to Boston 18 months later, we had ever more frequent association.

More than anyone else, George helped me to become established—in a challenging, yet ultimately very rewarding church position which he himself had occupied some 20 years before. I was especially honored to join his roster of accompanists for those never-to-be-forgotten Sunday evening musical services at Trinity Church—a marvelous opportunity for anyone who loves to accompany choral music.

Of all George's characteristics, the most definitive, for me, were his perception of human character, his perception of the reality beneath the appearance of things, his wise and seasoned understanding of how to deal with problems (most especially the prob-

lems faced by musicians), and his quiet but direct way of offering advice. Artistic people do not always possess that healthy objectivity which George happily never lost sight of. He recognized pretense for what it is—characteristically, without comment. Recognizing pretense and self-importance for what they are, it followed naturally that his own life was refreshingly free of these traits. He knew artistic excellence: he achieved it consistently himself—again, characteristically, without comment, for his distinctive music making needed no verbal defense or explanation. Nor did he fail to recognize extraordinary gifts in others. In his own musical preparation at the organ or in the logistics for a major choral performance, no detail was beneath his concern; if there were chairs to be moved, with no one to move them, George saw nothing demeaning about pitching in. Indeed, I clearly recall his saying that "moving chairs is what this job is really about"—for he knew the truth of the matter: that behind the most transcendent music making lies much routine, non-musical work, without which the "magic" cannot happen.

For me, the quintessential "magic" occurred on that evening in Trinity Church when George played his "farewell" recital in 1980. Since the lighting of the organ console was never really ample, a three-way living room floor lamp, complete with large cloth shade was transported from his home in Chestnut Hill for the evening. As spacious as the Trinity chancel is, the lamp shade seemingly "fill-ed the Temple," as we enjoyed a program rich in musical delight. We seemed to be "at home" with George and Nancy—and indeed, we were "at home" in the church which had been a spiritual home for them for many years. George selected some of his favorite music for the evening. There was John Ireland's *Elegaic Romance*, some exquisite Karg-Elert harmonium pieces, and George's own *Tribute to Duke Ellington*, in which the bridge preceding *Mood Indigo* had craftily been lifted from one of the more tender moments in the organ music of Olivier Messiaen. In retrospect, that evening was absolutely singular in the musical history of Boston; yet when I later suggested to George that he record his selections, he responded: "But gosh, Tom . . . it's just a hobby."

May all of us who live, and move, and have our being in the world of music retain that simple love for our art which was at the heart of this singular musician, this most modest and lovable man.

THOMAS MURRAY



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