

Organist & pilot Erik Wm. Suter to play recital at St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights September 20

by Daniel Hathaway



Former Washington Cathedral organist Erik Wm. Suter will play a recital on the Holtkamp organ in St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights on Saturday, September 20 at 5:00 pm. The big question is whether he'll fly himself to Cleveland.

When Suter was growing up in Chicago, two things fascinated him, and the first one wasn't music. "I took my first airplane ride when I was three," he said in a recent telephone conversation. "For better or worse, they let me come up to the cockpit and I was hooked. I really wanted to be a pilot — who doesn't when he's a kid!"

The organ came later. "My dad was a Lutheran pastor, so I was exposed to organ playing every week. I found the instrument more technically fascinating than musical — I'm drawn to complexity — and originally I was more interested in building organs than in playing them. Then I started taking lessons at the age of 13 and fell in love with the repertoire."

Suter revisited his interest in organ building while studying organ performance at Oberlin with Haskell Thompson from 1991-1995, where he came into contact with Oberlin's organ technician. "Hal Gobert hired me for a few summers at his shop in Toronto. I think it makes you a better organist if you fully understand what goes on inside."

After going on to Yale for graduate study, Erik Suter was appointed organist at Washington National Cathedral, where he served from 1998-2007 and again as interim organist from 2009-2010. Though he had pursued airplanes as a hobby and had earned his private pilot's license, he said "my dream of flying lay dormant until I was 30, when I thought it would be fun to combine my two passions. I had no desire or inkling that it would become a profession, but I thought it might be practical to fly myself to a recital or two."

Then, toward the end of his original tenure at the Cathedral, Suter began to feel restless. “As I learned from my father, working in churches is not easy. You spend 50 to 80% of your time doing non-musical things. In Washington, I increasingly felt lucky if I got an hour or two a day to practice. That just wasn’t how I envisioned my life as a musician.” He looked into positions elsewhere, “but it was just the same situation in a different church.”

Then the airlines began hiring pilots again for the first time since 9/11, and Suter saw an opportunity. Discovering he was already halfway to qualifying for a commercial license, he enrolled in an intensive training course from the fall of 2007 to the spring of 2008 and within a month received a job offer from US Airways Express. “It’s odd,” he said. “It’s the hardest job to get and the easiest job to do.”



*Suter flies himself to a recital in Princeton University Chapel.
Images from “Erik Wm. Suter on music and flight,”
a YouTube [video](#) by Mark Willey.*

Now, Erik Suter is able to neatly balance his life between his hours in the air as a pilot and his days on the ground as an organist. “It turns out that flying commercially is a better profession for a recitalist than a church job. I now have fourteen days off every month, I’ve never met my boss and never had to attend a meeting. And I have way more time to practice now. It gives me the opportunity to have a much more stress-free life and perform a lot more.” He also has more time to spend with his family. Based out of Washington National Airport, he flies Canadair regional jets seating from 50-85 passengers “wherever US Air goes in the eastern U.S. and Canada. When I’m away, I’m away, but when I’m home, it’s like having an uninterrupted four-day weekend every week.”

Flying has other perks. Suter’s 12-year old son is a chorister at St. Thomas Church in New York, and he and his wife can travel up to visit him two or three times a month at the choir school.

Suter hasn't completely abandoned church work. He's done stints as an interim at St. Thomas and Trinity Church, Wall Street, in New York and at the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. "I don't want to maintain a regular church position, but I have the high-profile skills to fill a temporary position."

Suter's recital on Saturday at St. Paul's will draw on the programming experience he gained at Oberlin, Yale and Washington Cathedral. "I really feel that a good recital program in any venue should begin with something that appeals to everyone without resorting to the lowest common denominator. In Washington, because of tourists, we had from 300 to 700 people at weekly recitals, and the vast majority of them didn't know about the recitals before they arrived. Wouldn't it be great if the first thing they heard was something really memorable?"

Erik Suter tells me that he has a few personal rules for making organ recitals work. "First, never speak before you play, because the first piece has to grab people's attention right away. It doesn't have to be showy or flashy, but dramatic and rhythmically exciting from the get-go!" Suter will begin with the prelude from Marcel Dupré's second symphony. "That will get the job done," he said. "Second, pieces have to flow into another with good key relationships — like going from J.S. Bach's "Wedge" Prelude and Fugue in e minor to a piece in G major."

Later in the program, he's counting on the listeners' familiarity with American hymn tunes to draw them into the music of William Bolcom and Dale Wood. "People know *What a friend we have in Jesus* and *In dir ist Freude (In thee is gladness)*, but they may not know the work of Dale Wood, who has written an elegant, simple and delightful piece on that tune. On the other end of the spectrum, Duruflé's *Prelude and Fugue on the Name ALAIN* couldn't be more sophisticated and perfectly crafted for the organ, but it's very appealing and colorful — an all-around great piece."

Suter will end his recital with the finale from Petr Eben's *Sunday Music*, which he'll play in honor of St. Paul's organist and choirmaster, Karel Paukert. "I love Eben's music," he said. "It's thought-provoking and modern. It can be difficult to digest, but its connection to the resident organist at St. Paul's — who, like the composer, is Czech — compelled me to play this piece."

I mention the unusual day of the week and time for his recital — Saturday at 5:00 pm — and wonder why more presenters don't organize concerts on Saturday rather than on Northeast Ohio's crowded Sunday afternoons. In St. Paul's case, there's a big parish event scheduled for that Sunday, but Suter thinks it's an interesting time slot. "Saturdays in the fall are especially good. I was scheduled to play a recital in Green Bay on the Sunday when the Packers were playing in the Super Bowl. They wisely moved it up to the day before." Anybody listening?

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