

“Karel Paukert Up Close and Personal” at St. Paul’s, Cleveland Heights (Jan. 30)

by Daniel Hathaway



Remember the reality documentary series *This Is Your Life?* On Sunday afternoon, January 30, the Cleveland Chapter of the American Guild of Organists honored Karel Paukert with a retrospective of his distinguished career, together with a recital that included the world premiere of a new work by Frank Wiley.

Friends, colleagues, and parishioners packed the nave of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, where Paukert continues to serve as organist and choirmaster after nearly 40 years. His other longstanding gig was as curator of musical arts at the Cleveland Museum of Art from 1974-2004.

Beginning with his recollection of a Paukert recital at the Museum in 1975 that *Plain Dealer* critic Robert Finn described as the “weirdest program of the season,” host Timothy Robson guided Paukert through a chronicle of his journey from Czechoslovakia to Belgium and finally to Cleveland, with stopovers in Iceland, St. Louis, and Evanston.

He wound up in Cleveland largely through the encouragement of Walter (Chick) Holtkamp, Jr. of Cleveland’s organ-building dynasty. Paukert presided over two of the Holtkamp Company’s flagship instruments at CMA and St. Paul’s, playing over a thousand Sunday afternoon concerts at the Museum alone, as well as curating a concert series that leaned heavily toward new music.

In Sunday's conversation, Paukert rattled off a long list of notable artists who had appeared in Gartner Auditorium during his tenure, including Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod, Elly Ameling, Marian McPartland, Dave Brubeck, and Lukas Foss, along with rising musicians who played "for peanuts and a review."

During the interview, the self-deprecating organist joked about his accent ("Is it interfering? I can change it!"), responded to the question of whether he had any regrets about his career (he had always wanted to learn to play the Ondes Martenot), and spoke about the wonderful resources St. Paul's had provided over the years ("a wonderful, choir, supportive administration, and excellent instruments").

Then Paukert moved to the back gallery to begin demonstrating those excellent organs, first with a charming little set of mass movements by Domenico Zipoli played on the Italian Renaissance-style instrument. Built by Gerhard Hradetzky, the organ features a set of *campanelli* or bells and a *Tromboncino* stop ("like bagpipes," Paukert said) that added sparkle and buzz to the music. Moving to the 1952 Holtkamp in front, Paukert played a spirited performance of the first movement of J.S. Bach's *Concerto in a after Vivaldi*.

Then came the premiere of Frank Wiley's *Labyrinths*, a belated 80th-birthday gift for Paukert that makes use of all three of the church's organs and nearly every corner of the worship space. A chorus of seven sopranos was located in the gallery, with Patricia Wiley at the Italian organ, as a solemn procession of musicians moved down the center aisle to the sounds of antique cymbals and a Tibetan singing bowl.

Then the vocal soloists took their places: Emily Stauch and Elizabeth Frey in the gallery, Maddie Hasenbein in the Transept, and Sandra Simon and Maria José Badano at the Main Altar. Paukert, who had joined the procession, positioned himself at the chancel organ, composer Frank Wiley settled in at the chamber organ, and other musicians — clarinetist Dennis Nygren, violist Kirsten Docter, percussionist Paul Cox, and conductor Alec Popovici — took up positions in the front.

A mesmerizing sound cloud colored by musical beams of light from the organs eventually gathered into a *tutti*. Then a grand cadenza from Paukert finally dissipated into percussion solos, swooning sounds from the singers, fragmented solos from the instrumentalists, and the unearthly effects of partially closing stops on the Hradetzky instrument. A recessional to viola pizzicati brought this attractive, ritualistic piece to a conclusion amid too-eager applause (this was the perfect spot for a long moment of silence).

Paukert followed with a bravura performance of the “Postludium” from Leoš Janáček’s *Glagolitic Mass* — a brilliant flourish that ended the afternoon appropriately on a Czech note.

Photo courtesy of Nicole Keller.

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