

Ars Organi II: Jay Peterson honors Anton Heiller (Oct. 4)

by Timothy Robson



Chicago-based organist Jay Peterson, a former student of Anton Heiller (*left*), continued St. Paul's Episcopal Church's Ars Organi II series on Friday night, October 4. The recital was the first in a three-event mini series devoted to Heiller, the great Viennese organist, composer, and pedagogue who lived from 1923 to 1979.

A panel discussion about Heiller on Saturday afternoon featured Peterson, Ars Organi mastermind Karel Paukert, and Oberlin Conservatory visiting organ professor Christa Rakich, also a Heiller student, who played a recital on Sunday afternoon.

Peterson's excellent program included works that he studied with Heiller while on a Fulbright grant, as well as works that Heiller himself frequently performed.

Georg Böhm was active in Lüneburg when J.S. Bach was a teenager singing in another church in town. His *Präludium in a* features brilliant toccatas interspersed with short fugal passages and includes a short pedal solo before the final manual flourish. Peterson followed the prelude with Böhm's chorale prelude on *Vater unser im Himmelreich*, playing the highly ornamented tune on a piquant *cornet* combination with subtle phrasing.

A close friend of Paul Hindemith, Heiller often programmed the composer's three organ sonatas. Peterson played the third, written in 1940 and based on folk songs that Hindemith elaborated upon with his idiomatic "stretched" harmonies. The composer didn't specify registrations, but Peterson chose striking combinations and played with stately tempos.

Samuel Scheidt's *Cantio Sacra* variations on *Warum betrübst du dich mein Herz* is a classic example of his early Baroque style: a series of short movements with variations of sometimes daring harmonic complexity and technical difficulty. The chorale melody is always apparent, and the variations offered Peterson the chance to show off the sounds of the Holtkamp organ with great imagination.

Peterson played three of J.S. Bach's eighteen Leipzig Chorales — *Von Gott will ich nicht lassen*, BWV 658, *Herr Jesu Christ, dich uns wend*, BWV 655, and *Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist*, BWV 667. A few, rare technical slips proved that these are challenging settings even for very fine organists, especially BWV 655, a trio with one voice in each hand and a third in the pedal.

The program also included music by Heiller himself. *In Festo Corporis Christi* for organ solo celebrates the Roman Catholic feast of the Blessed Sacrament. Peterson played the severely dissonant fourth movement, based on the Gregorian chant *Lauda Sion*, and not a work for the faint of heart.

Heiller's *Two Sacred Songs* for soprano and organ set Biblical texts in Latin. The outstanding Cleveland soprano Madelyn Hasebein tackled the difficult vocal line with aplomb, especially in "Optavi" for the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, which features wide, angular leaps, a broad vocal range, and a quite independent organ part. "Gaudete" is equally difficult, its long legato lines lying in a high range, but much more listener-friendly in its harmonic language. Hasebein and Peterson gave commanding performances.

The concert closed with three short works by the prolific early 20th-century German composer Max Reger, whose printed scores are often black with fearsome chromatic passages and complicated registrations. Peterson's choices showed Reger in a much more light-hearted mood. The *Scherzo*, Op. 65, No. 10 was especially cheerful. *Melodia*, Op. 59, No. 11 was lyrical and light, played mostly on flute stops. The closing work of the concert was Reger's *Toccata*, Op. 80, No. 11, which opens with a pedal solo followed by brilliant manual figurations.

From start to finish, Jay Peterson's tribute to Anton Heiller was extremely satisfying both in its choice of repertoire and its execution.

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