

David Hurd to play David Boe Memorial Concert at Oberlin

by Daniel Hathaway



Oberlin Conservatory alumnus David Hurd has been tapped to play a David Boe Memorial Concert on the Fisk organ in Oberlin's Finney Chapel on Sunday, March 3 at 4:30 pm. His [program](#) comprises some two decades of his own compositions.

Boe was a beloved professor of organ at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music from 1962 to 2008 who also served as the ninth dean of the Conservatory.

David Hurd is among the most celebrated church musicians and concert organists in the United States. He received the American Guild of Organists' Distinguished Composer award in 2010, and currently serves as organist and choirmaster of the Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin in New York City.

I reached Hurd at home in New York via Zoom to talk about his career, his experiences at Oberlin, and his program on Sunday. I began by asking him about his relationship to Boe as a student.

David Hurd: I studied harpsichord with David Boe. He was a young faculty member at the time, and I knew and admired him very much. That was before he became the dean of the Conservatory. And so I'm glad to know that his legacy is being cemented with this series, as well as having the Chair of Organ named for him. What a lovely man.

Daniel Hathaway: What was the Oberlin Conservatory like in those days?

Hurd: That seems like 100 years ago. The conservatory building itself was very new and the concert hall organ was a big Holtkamp which had just gone in, I think, in 1964, three

years before I came to Oberlin. So it was a new organ, and was already to some degree being critiqued as not being perfect, because everything has to be perfect at Oberlin.

But the practice building was heaven. Along one hallway was a whole line of Flentrop organs, and along another was a whole line of brand new Holtkamp organs. It was really quite amazing. I had come from Juilliard, where the organ facilities at that time in the old building were quite modest and the quality of the instruments was not in any way comparable to this brand spanking new facility at Oberlin.

There were four full studios of organ students with young and vital professors, and the critical mass of students was very exciting. Not a lot of schools could have offered that concentration of organ energy. It was only in retrospect that I recognized how much I learned from my fellow students, and having that critical mass was a tremendous inspiration.

I think I learned as much in the practice rooms and in the lounge talking with my fellow students as I did in my lessons. That's not to take away from the quality of teaching, but just to say that the environment was significant. Of course the variety of instruments has expanded tremendously since I was there.



Hathaway: You have a reputation for being a great improviser. When did you start doing that, and who influenced you?

Hurd: Well, I never studied improvisation as such. I started playing the keyboard by ear when I was four years old, and I started piano lessons when I was six. So, in a sense, my introduction to the keyboard was extemporization and an imitation of things I heard. But the theory and skills curriculum at Juilliard Prep, where I studied from age nine through high school, was really extraordinary. I had two years of keyboard harmony with Frances Goldstein, who had an amazing ear. She could be on the opposite end of the piano and

tell you what finger you were playing a key with because of the tone that you got from the instrument. The exercises she had us do provided a real foundation in knowing the keyboard. Not just letting the fingers do the walking, but really having a consciousness of exactly where they were going and what they were going to achieve when they got there.

So there was never a particular moment or a particular improvisation course, but the gathering of a lot of influences, and my own enthusiasm for doing it. And I was in church situations where improvisation was either encouraged or required, like at Trinity Wall Street. It was something you had to do.

Curiously enough, when I was a student at Oberlin back in the late '60s and early '70s, you had the sense that improvisation was considered the one thing the Europeans did that we didn't wish to imitate. I remember that the first time Marie-Claire Alain played a recital at Oberlin, she submitted three memorized programs, each of which included an improvisation. I was told that she was asked just to play repertoire.

Of course, a few of us would sneak into the concert hall late at night and roll back the curtains, play hymns, and carry on and have a good time. That was sort of being naughty, because it certainly wasn't approved behavior.



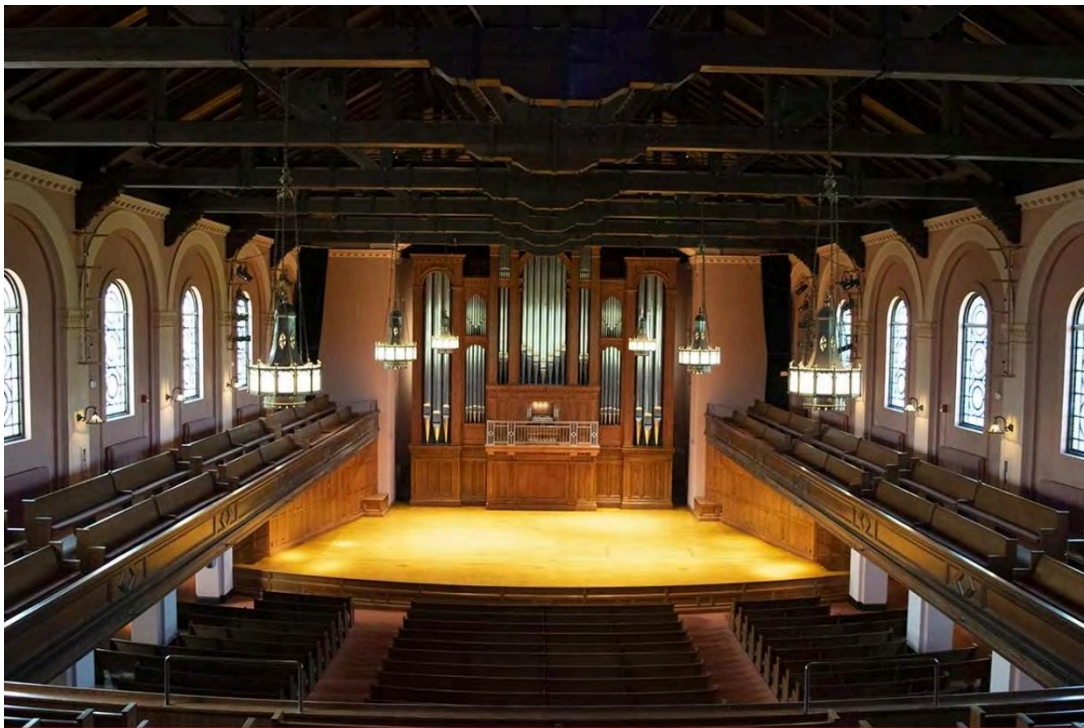
Hathaway: Let's talk about your program at Oberlin. It's all music by David Hurd.

Hurd: In the invitation to play the recital, I was asked that the program be "The Best of David Hurd." So I asked myself, what can I offer in a recital that they wouldn't have otherwise? I remember when Bill Albright came to play at Oberlin during my student

days, he surprised us all by going down to the stage and playing ragtime on the piano. I'm not going to do that, but I thought maybe my distinct contribution would not just be another performance of the Franck E-major chorale, but rather music that hasn't been played on the Fisk.

Most of my compositions were born out of my appreciation of the historic organ. My *Te Deum*, the oldest piece on the program, is the most comprehensive of my organ pieces. It's in four movements, and there are bits and pieces of all kinds of stuff in there. There's a lot of tradition, and yet it's a very American piece, perhaps because of its eclecticism.

And that's another thing. It's astonishing that I got through two performance degrees and never played a single work by an American composer. I can't imagine anyone going through a music school in France or Germany or Holland or Italy and never ever playing a piece by a native composer. And yet generations of American organists have been trained to know European music very well and to know virtually nothing about American organ music. This isn't true of other disciplines. Pianists, singers — everybody does American music, but organists somehow carry forward an inferiority complex that many of us learned in music school.



In the early '80s, I was one of the four finalists in improvisation at the Harlem Festival, and at the final concert, everyone played a piece from their native land — except me. At the reception, I had a conversation with Piet Kee. He was very sweet and lovely, but he said kind of pointedly, 'We had hoped that we would hear some American music.' It

really stung when I realized that the Dutch wanted to hear American music from the American organist.

So that was part of my thought process in playing my own compositions on an American organ — even one that largely gets branded as a Cavaille-Coll-inspired French instrument. I think that the Fisk organ and my music are a very good match. And if what Oberlin launched in me as a musician is of any value, the evidence for that is to a great degree to be found in my compositions. Hopefully I can play them decently.

Hathaway: I notice there's about a 20-year spread in the composition dates of your works. How much has your style changed in that period of time?

Hurd: I'm probably too close to it to gauge that, but one good composer friend of mine told me that over the course of time, 'You've learned to use fewer notes to say what you're talking about.' I think he's right. The *Te Deum* is full of fistfuls of notes, and I don't do that quite as much now. The economy of using only what's necessary to say what wants to be said is something that I've learned over the course of time.

Hathaway: Were any of these pieces commissioned?

Hurd: The *Te Deum* was commissioned by Larry King when he was at Trinity, Wall Street. He wanted a piece to play in a recital at Riverside Church. The *Arioso and Finale* was commissioned by the Queens chapter of the American Guild of Organists, to honor one of the founders of the chapter, Lillian Duhart Rogers, who was my choir director when I was a child. It was written shortly after I'd come back from a tour of French organs, and I was feeling a bit French.

The *Suite in Three Movements* wasn't really a commission as such, but was intended for an Organ Historical Society convention in Denver. I was never really happy with the piece, and several years later, I completely redid it. The original ideas were still there, but now it's much more modern.

And the most recent work — the *Introduction, Passacaglia, and Fugue on "Wyndham"* — was commissioned by the Victoria Bach Festival in Texas, at the instigation of Renée Luprette. She premiered it two summers ago at the Festival, and performs it beautifully in a YouTube [video](#) in Uppsala Cathedral in Sweden. I'll try to play it as well as she did.

Hathaway: During your four decades at the General Theological Seminary, you've also occupied several Episcopal church positions. Now you've traded Chelsea Square for Times Square. How did you end up at St. Mary the Virgin?



Hurd: I actually auditioned for GTS, but for my last three parish jobs, I've come in through the back door. In the first one, my predecessor was declining with MS, I came in to help him out, and one thing led to another. He went out on disability, they invited me to stay, and twelve years passed. Next came Holy Apostles, when Donald Joyce was suffering a terminal illness and asked me to come in and help. He entirely expected to come back to work, but the illness got him. So they asked me to stay, and sixteen years went by.

I had been an occasional sub at St. Mary's, and when my predecessor had to resign suddenly due to personal reasons, they asked me to come in and fill out the choral season for two more months. Shortly thereafter, the rector said, why don't you just stay so we won't have to search any further. Now eight years have gone by and I'm still there. So I think of myself as a two-month interim who just didn't leave.

Hathaway: That's kind of a wonderful way to come to a position, though.

Hurd: They had already pre-tested the merchandise, and I knew what I was getting into. I don't know how long it's going to go on, but so far it's been lovely to work in that church with such a splendid acoustic and a magnificent G. Donald Harrison organ that has been enhanced since its original installation. I have a wonderful eight-voice choral ensemble that can sing anything that eight voices can sing — if I sing too, that makes nine. And St. Mary's has a liturgy that really allows for a range and seriousness of choral music. So it's been a nice thing to do in my unofficial retirement.

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