

# The Organist at Prayer

By Marie Kremer

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When I began to think about prayer in the life and ministry of an organist, I went to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, looking for a short definition of the subject. I found an article that took up about fifty pages, but, just at the beginning, there was a short quote from St. Thérèse of Lisieux that grabbed my imagination: "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love embracing both trial and joy" (*Manuscripts autobiographiques*, C 25r; CCC #2558). In this statement I found a description of prayer that goes beyond objective definition and one, with its focus on "both trial and joy," that seems to fit our work very well.

For some time I have thought that, when we talk about music for worship, we always seem to begin our considerations by attending to the text. Since our primary musical focus in worship is the singing of the assembly and its ministers, such attention may be understandable. But we also have to consider the music itself. We need to ask how this *sound* enhances the text, the season, the feast, the celebration. Any artist, visual or musical, has the ability to lead us beyond the tangible to the intangible, the realm of the spiritual.

Whenever we play the organ, I believe, whether we are accompanying the assembly, choir, or cantor or providing an instrumental prelude or postlude, we are at prayer. The specific ministry of the organist is to provide music, so I thought it would be good to focus on the music that we provide without words, that is, solo organ music in worship.

In the workshop that I offered in Orlando, in the summer of 2000, I played twenty-one relatively short organ pieces, chosen as examples of music to be used primarily for various seasons and feasts. I asked the participants to listen to each piece as prayer, setting aside whether or not they liked the composition, and then to mark on a sheet, using a scale from one to five, how strongly or weakly the piece moved them to prayer. Some of the selections were chorale preludes or chant-based pieces; others were composed without reference to a text. The compositions ranged from the baroque period to contemporary pieces.

The highest ranking went to several Bach chorale preludes - five from the *Orgelbüchlein* exemplifying different liturgical seasons and "Schmücke dich o liebe Seele" from the *Great Eighteen Chorales*. Also highly ranked was Buxtehude's "Praeludium, Fuge und Ciacona," not based on any existing melody, which I offered as a good festive prelude or postlude. High marks were given as well to two contemporary chant-based pieces: Langlais's "Paraphrase sur Salve Regina" from *Vingt-quatre Pièces pour Harmonium ou Orgue* and "Veni Creator Spiritus" by Libby Larson from *A New Liturgical Year* (ed. J. Ferguson, Augsburg). The Larson piece scored fours and fives with the exception of one two, given by a listener who found none of the contemporary music prayerful. (This listener also gave the Langlais piece a one.) Couperin's "Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi" from *Mass of Parishes* also scored well, as did "Toccata on Lobe den Herren" by Hans Micheelsen.

The remainder of the pieces fell roughly into three categories. Rating less than four were Alfred Fedak's "Improvisation on Veni Creator Spiritus," two chorale preludes by Hans Micheelsen, "Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen" by Brahms, and "Rorate Coeli" by Jeanne Demessieux. Rating a three or more were four pieces: "Basse et Dessus de Trompette" by Cierambault, "Ave Maris Stella" by Gerald Near (from the *St. Augustine's Organbook*, Aureole), "Dialogue" by Russell Schulz-Widmar, and Naji Hakim's "Danse (Ave Maris Stella)."

Receiving the lowest ranking (two plus) was Hakim's "Pastorale (Regina Coeli)" - both Hakim compositions are from his *Mariales for Organ* (United Music Publishers).

Since instrumental music should be prayer not only for the hearer but also for the performer, I could well ask myself if I did not play the pieces that ranked lower as well as I might (or - if I did not *pray* these pieces as well as I might), though I certainly tried my best and chose this music because I thought it had great merit.

I also shared with the participants my own personal frustrations, earlier in 2000, at not being able to play the organ and, therefore, to pray as I should. Some time before the Convention, I broke the tendon on the fourth finger of my right hand. The tendon was reattached in surgery and, after some weeks, I was able to use that hand again. Though it is still not perfect, I am now able to play quite well. During the time when I couldn't play, however, I felt very strongly the absence of my playing as missing prayer. I had never before thought of my playing in those terms.

There is one other aspect of the connection between prayer and organ playing that we ought to consider. As evidenced by the responses of those who attended the workshop in Orlando, the choices that we make will lead listeners to respond to the music in various ways. Our goal is not only to lead them into prayer, however; it is also to stretch them a bit, to lead them deeper into prayer or to experience new ways in which music can be prayer. Sometimes it is good to move people beyond well-known and comfortable sounds to sounds that may be a little less familiar, a little less comfortable. We may need to stretch ourselves as well. And, if we use our organ music well, we may be able to move hearts and minds to a deeper spiritual level.

Reflecting on performance as prayer and as invitation to prayer, I wonder about pastoral musicians who complain that they are so busy playing, conducting, or singing that they feel as if they don't have time to pray. Such comments are a mystery to me, for I believe that what we are doing is our most profound prayer.