

Program Notes for February 21

Lottie Enns-Braun

The organ music chosen for this service was written by composers that I am privileged to call teachers, colleagues, mentors and in one case – perhaps a bit presumptuously – a kindred spirit.

The prelude is by Alice Parker (1925-2023), an American composer who created more than 500 choral arrangements including hymns and spirituals. She was invited to participate in a conference in Winnipeg when I was a young student at CMBC and her enthusiasm for the “music of the people” and her love for teaching made a lasting impression. Her simple arrangement of the American folk melody “Wondrous Love” is a perfect example of her respect for the structure and content of existing folk traditions. It appears in an unassuming little volume of “Hymn Preludes for Organ based on Music from the Mennonite Hymnal, 1969” published by Goshen College in 1970.

Canadian composer and pianist, Ruth Watson Henderson (b.1932) is a long-time member of the RCCO, now residing in Ontario. Ruth spent some time living in Emerson, Manitoba while her husband served the United Church in that town. I have had several opportunities to correspond with Ruth about her organ compositions and she has always been encouraging, gracious and helpful with her suggestions. Ruth’s sensitive meditation on “Herzliebster Jesu” was commissioned by the Toronto Centre of the RCCO and published in 1993.

Esther Wiebe (1932-2023) was my piano teacher when I was a young college student. I was terrified for my first lesson because she had also been my “far more talented” older brother’s teacher a few years previously and I wasn’t sure I would measure up. Esther was a kind, generous and incredibly efficient teacher. Over the years we became colleagues and friends, particularly when we were both instructors at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in the

1980’s. Her prelude on the tune “Zion’s Pilgrim” also appears in the 1970 Goshen College publication.

It is certainly presumptuous of me to claim that J. S. Bach (1685-1750) is a kindred spirit – but I will dare to, nevertheless. His exquisite chorale prelude on the Lenten hymn “O Mensch Bewein...” is rife with written in ornamentation. This is a trait that is highly unusual for his organ music. I would suggest that, in this case, the additional ornaments are not there to provide extra glitter but rather to heighten the intensity and depth of the emotion inherent in the text.

Rachel Laurin (1961-2023), also a member of the RCCO, was a formidable performer and a prolific composer of organ music. She performed internationally and her compositions are known worldwide. I considered Rachel a friend and a colleague. She performed with great enthusiasm. She lived and loved life fully. She always had time to respond to questions about her compositions and express gratitude to anyone who performed her compositions. Her untimely death was mourned by many. She was born in Quebec, served as organist in Montreal for many years and then in Ottawa in her final years. Her Prelude in B minor is a sectional work featuring angular and meandering themes and witty contrasting sections that all come together in peaceful repose at the end.

