

BYU ORGAN WORKSHOP

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Keynote Addresses

Elizabeth Forsyth, Daniel Kerr, Alena Hall, and Brian Mathias

Note: This joint keynote address was delivered by four of our long-time instructors.

On Being a Perennial Student

Elizabeth Forsyth

Next month marks 50 years since my first organ lesson. You might think there is a line on the calendar of my life separating when formal lessons ended and life as an organist began but that is not the case.

Since I only have five minutes, I will spare you the details of why I chose the organ, and of my first several years of study. I do want to share some stories and facts that I hope inspire you on your journey.

I will start with an experience that took place two floors beneath us, in E-208, the office of JJ Keeler, then chair of the BYU organ department. In those days, you did not come to BYU to audition seven months in advance of your first day as a freshman. You auditioned after you arrived. I found Brother Keeler stern and very intimidating. Instead of asking me to play, he proceeded to interview me. One question in particular I will never forget. "How many years of piano have you had?" "None" I answered innocently, "but I've had..." He cut me off. "You need to go home and take at least five years of piano. Then come back and we'll talk." I can't go home, I thought. My parents dropped me off and left. I've moved into the dorms. I'm here to be an organ major. I don't have a Plan B! Despite a quivering lower lip, I asked "May I at least play for you?" "(grumble grumble) Ok." Short version: He let me in. But I had to make up for my lack of piano background through all four years of undergraduate study and during the summers. And I am grateful for that.

Sometimes we don't know we have weaknesses until others, often teachers, point them out to us. This is one of the many reasons I keep going back to take lessons or get coaching from organists that know a great deal more than I do. Often I might think I am putting the finishing touches on a piece, only to check it with the metronome, or after listening to a recording of myself. Ah, but there's so much left to do and to fix! Sometimes metronomes, recorders and even the ears of others can be our teachers.

Following college, much of my continuing education has come from attending workshops, concerts and conventions put on by the American Guild of Organists. I am a better teacher after taking notes at master classes by Russell Saunders, David Higgs,

Olivier Latry and others. I know more about organs and the artists that play them because of the monthly *The American Organist* periodical. I am more motivated to practice and more creative in my registrations after attending wonderful concerts. I also have a growing list of organ literature I want to learn. This is not the last you will hear of the AGO this week, I guarantee it. That's because this organization exists, much like this Workshop, to help you succeed. I recently returned from the regional AGO convention in San Diego, where the motivation I received will likely last well beyond the end of the year. Join the AGO! You'll be glad you did.

And now a little science. Did you know that your brain has a quality called plasticity? This means you can teach your brain, however old or young, new tricks. And in fact, your brain appreciates being taught NEW tricks. It might be fun to keep on doing what you already do well: Golf, juggling, piano. But the brain is kept young and supple by learning new coordination skills. Did you hear that? Can you think of anything

that will dust the cobwebs out of your brain more thoroughly than playing the organ? And hey, it's safer than taking up gymnastics. As far as I'm concerned, every Bach trio sonata is like learning a new sport. While working out a tricky section, you can now imagine the neurons in your brain branching out to new areas formerly unused.

I once came to this Workshop and heard a teacher say, "As organists we do hard things." I went home that summer and promptly told my family that we had a new family motto: We Do Hard Things. More recently I heard someone add to this bit of inspiration by quoting the verse in Philippians, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." (Philippians 4:13) So often in organ study or in life, we think, this is just too hard. I'm not up for this. And that's probably true, if it were all up to just us and our skill sets. But it's not. I have a former adult student who began every practice session with prayer. She often felt guided in her preparations for playing in church on Sunday. A current student shared with me recently that in the solitude of the chapel when she is practicing she has distinctly felt the approval of the Lord for the work she is engaged in.

I am so grateful to be here — this is my favorite week of the year. I predict that you will simultaneously be stretched and challenged AND have a great time. And at the end of the week, I hope you'll join me and many others in being a perennial student.

Daniel Kerr

I am glad to add my welcome to all of you here at the BYU Organ Workshop. Each of you is here to learn something about the organ. Perhaps you are just starting out; others of you may be capable players who are here for a boost and to polish up some specific aspect of the craft. Regardless of where you are in your abilities, the fact that you are here speaks to your desire to improve. So, during this week, dig into the material and do your best to master it!

I have found an analogy that is helpful in demonstrating the value and importance of thorough, dedicated, diligent practice, and it has to do with construction. Now, I am hardly an expert on construction management, but in the eleven years that I have lived in Rexburg, Idaho, I have seen many buildings built from the ground up, and have found some (hopefully) helpful parallels between building a building and developing as a musician.

Every time a new building is announced, there is a festive groundbreaking, where speeches are given, prayers are offered, and an artist's rendering of the completed structure is displayed. There is a great sense of excitement and anticipation for the building that is to come.

But then an interesting thing happens: seemingly nothing! At least, it appears that nothing happens. But work is going on. Rocks and debris are cleared; the land is smoothed and graded. Trenches are dug deeply. Rock is sometimes blasted out, and then wooden planks are lowered into the trenches. It is hot, dusty, dirty, messy work. It is unglamorous, and bears little resemblance to what the final product will look like.

After the wooden forms are in place, then concrete is poured into the forms and the foundation is laid. Once the concrete has cured, the forms are removed and then repositioned to form the foundation walls. Concrete is again poured and cured to form the foundation walls. This takes a long time, and happens under ground level, out of sight. Up on the surface, it looks as if the project has stalled.

Not until this preliminary foundation work has been laid does the form of the building begin to take shape. First, structural steel is anchored to the foundation walls, outer walls go up, a roof goes on, and we begin to see the result of all of the preparatory work. At this point, the project moves quickly with windows and

doors, siding and landscaping, and the building looks much as it did in the artists' conceptualization. When the building is completed, it is dedicated and put to use. If the preparation work was done carefully and correctly, the building will stand solidly for many, many years.

It is much the same way with a musician learning a new piece of music, or, for that matter, learning an instrument. Initially the student is excited to learn a new piece and be able to play it like the masters. But first there is real work that needs to take place. Hours upon hours of time must be devoted to the process of learning the piece. Fingering must be written into the score; phrasings, articulations, and manual changes must all be determined and practiced. Left hand, right hand, and (in the case of us organists) feet need to be coordinated. Like laying the foundation of a building, this is very slow, tedious, time-consuming work that is done out of sight in the practice room (or an empty chapel). It is not at all glamorous or particularly exciting. It is very exacting labor. But eventually patterns and scale figurations are learned, the piece eventually comes together, and, if the preparation was adequate, it can be polished to performance

standard relatively easily. The better and more thorough the preparation, the better the final performance will be, and the longer the piece of music will stay with the performer.

Now, I don't speak of dusty, difficult, exacting labor to be negative about what this week is about. On the contrary, I offer it as encouragement and something of a promise. The more carefully the groundwork is laid, the more rewarding the final result will be. So dig in with enthusiasm! Be patient with yourself, give yourself a sufficient amount of time and energy to be diligent and work hard, and if you do, you will be amazed at the results. Much like the seed of faith grows up into a tree bearing much fruit (as described in Alma 32), your faith and effort will grow up into a technique that is sure and solid, and your proficiency at the organ will grow and flourish. I wish you all the best as you embark on this journey of inspiration, preparation and progress!

Alena Hall

There is a saying that states, "The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between." Upon first hearing this, in my literalist state, I wondered what kind of fool would say something like that – certainly not a musician. But upon more thought and experience I can understand what the author of this quote might have been suggesting.

How many of us have ever heard a young student plow through a piece giving little notice or consideration to that small notated silence called a rest? In contrast, how many of us have paused our breathing as the conductor on his podium raises his arms, ready to launch his orchestra into the initial downbeat?

In the "Organ-World," music can be found in the silence after an introductory presentation of a chorale, just prior to a performance of a favorite chorale prelude. Or perhaps, in a French toccata full of furious notes that climax on a dissonant dominant chord that dissipates into silence – it is the silence that enhances the triumphant moment when major tonality is introduced to conclude the chaos. I personally love that moment of silence between movements of the Mendelssohn sonatas, Widor symphonies, or a Bach prelude and fugue. The sound evaporates, a percussive change of stops is heard, and then a small juncture of stillness.

And what of that glorious moment in a reverberant cathedral when a stunning recital ends . . . the final chord has been released by the organist, but the sound echoes, then vanishes?

Music is notes, pitches, rhythms, sharps, flats, bar lines, staves, clefs, harmonies, and many other things. But what is music to you? Is it a way to relax? Is it an outlet for stress and anxiety? Is it a way to convey emotions and thoughts in the deepest way possible? Is it communing with God? Is it a means of helping share the Holy Spirit? I am certain that every person here has been moved in deep ways by music.

As a musician you become the instrument that conveys what it is the music has to say. The notes can be boring and stagnant or they can dance with life and passion. A hymn can be played in a way that hypnotizes the congregation and no thought is given to the words. Yet even an amateur organist who is well-prepared can share the abundance of spirit a hymn has to offer. And so music is not merely sound, it is emotion, it is feeling. Music is also discipline. It is consistent effort. And it is practicing.

I remember the first time I realized that you could practice the organ. It was the summer that I turned twelve years old and it had never occurred to me that our church organist might come to the church during the week to practice. I was ecstatic about the idea of being able to have the organ all to myself. My wise piano teacher, who also served as our ward organist, arranged for me to have unlimited access to our church and its organ. He also offered free organ lessons in addition to the paid piano lessons he was giving me. The only catch was practice hours. To receive the free organ lessons, I had to practice two hours a day on the organ, in addition to the two hours a day he required on the piano. I accepted the challenge and practiced diligently for two months. At the end of those two months, this cunning man moved and I became the new ward organist.

This experience began my journey into organ playing. Some of you have become organists out of love for the instrument or its literature, or as a means of developing your God-given talents. Some of you, have been figuratively tossed to the wolves in that your congregation needs an organist and you are it. We all have desires to be a better organist, even if our journeys began for different reasons. Progression at the organ occurs in two ways: learning and practicing.

So let's tie this all together. You are here this week to learn. You will learn pedal techniques, manual techniques, practice techniques, registration guidelines, rules of theory, shortcuts, tips, do's and don'ts of every sort. And hopefully in the midst of all this technical "stuff", you will experience the silent moments like those I described. Moments of beauty and delight, compelling and gratifying.

The real work begins at the close of this workshop. The learning should continue but progress will be made in the practice room. Think of this workshop as the notes, rhythms and technicalities of the music. The silence then is the coming year of practice in which your passion for music increases along with your command of the instrument. You will find as I have found that there really is much music to be found in the silence. I've always felt the music department here should adopt BYU's motto with one slight change: "enter to learn, go forth to practice."

May God bless you in your efforts.

Brian Mathias

I'm grateful for the opportunity to share a few of my thoughts with you this morning. As I've pondered over what "words of wisdom" I might share with you, the topic that has continually been upon my mind is why learning to play the organ is worth our time. Since I began teaching at this workshop in 2010, I have been inspired by the stories I hear from workshop attendees regarding why they come to this workshop. I meet many people who have recently been called as a ward organist, and come here to try and learn just enough to help them stay afloat in their new callings. A few years ago, I met a brother from Canada who had many years of professional experience as a church organist, but had recently joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and came simply in hopes of learning more about music in our church. Still others have been coming to this workshop since before it was the BYU Organ Workshop, and come each year to get their yearly dose of motivation, encouragement, and instruction. Your stories and enthusiasm for this instrument have been an annual source of inspiration to me, and frequently serve to remind me of why I chose to pursue organ in the first place.

We live in a world where many things compete for our time for our time every day—some of them menial, and others of great importance. I feel confident that we could all agree that amid all the things we are responsible for, it is often difficult to carve out time to improve our organ playing. For most of us, playing the organ is not the most important responsibility in our lives, and it may not even make the top ten. However, we make time to do it, and for many different reasons. This morning, I would like to share why I feel that working to improve our skills is worth the sacrifice of time it requires.

For several years, I have been impressed by the following line from the music section of the Church Handbook: "Congregational singing has a unique and often underused power for unifying members as they worship together" (Handbook 2, 14.4.3., emphasis added). Why is this power "often underused"? In many cases, it is because the members of our congregations simply are not participating. Cultural changes of the last twenty to thirty years have created a society in which many people do not sing, and many possess no inclination toward sacred music. Additionally, many people are simply distracted by conversations with others, the ever-greater pull of smartphones, and attending to the needs of children. Perhaps most fatally, many (and perhaps most) people in our congregations have never actually experienced the power of good congregational singing, and therefore see no compelling reason to participate.

Sadly, we live in a time when this power is needed more than ever. Our religious convictions are increasingly being viewed by the world as second-class convictions, and the Christian way of life is quickly coming to be regarded as "outdated." It is gradually becoming more difficult to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. In order to maintain our faith amid the storm that surrounds us, we need the strength and renewal that our weekly worship can provide. We need to be nourished by the spirit of God. We need to feel at one with our brothers and sisters in the cause of Christ.

This, I feel, is where our organ playing comes in. While many people are currently choosing not to participate in congregational singing, that doesn't mean they can't be

persuaded. A well-prepared and confidently-played hymn introduction can do much to invite participation. Appropriate registration can help people sense the message of the hymn text as they sing. Thoughtful attention to phrasing can help those who sing understand old words in a new way. Well-prepared, thoughtful organ playing encourages singing, and uniting in song invites the Spirit of the Lord in a powerful way. I think we have already experienced that power this morning, and I'm confident that we will continue to experience it throughout this week.

While it's easy to get bogged down by the mechanics of playing the organ and the many challenges that confront us at each step of our progress, we should always keep in mind the tremendous impact our efforts can have on the people we serve. This, in my opinion, makes every hour of practicing our pedaling or polishing our hymn playing worthwhile. We may never fully know the impact of our efforts on the members of our congregations, but I assure you that the time each of us spend to hone our craft is time spent in humble service to our brothers and sisters, many of whom come to worship in desperate need of nourishment. Let us all give appropriate time to the improvement of our skills, so that they may be used to make the unique power of congregational singing not "underused," but a weekly source of strength.