



Pipe Organ Encounter: FOX VALLEY June 20-25, 2004

Sunday June 20, 2004, was a momentous day for the Fox Valley Chapter: Opening Day of the Region V POE. The POE Team, headed by David A. Lincoln, had organized and prepared for 2 years, and now it was “show time.” We need not have worried. As the lobby of the residence hall at Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, echoed with the sounds of students, family members, faculty, and a whole host of Fox Valley volunteers, the excitement was palpable and contagious. It was going to be a wonderful week!

And it truly was. From the opening Theatre Organ demonstration and recital on Sunday afternoon to the closing student recital on Friday afternoon, people of many ages and wildly disparate backgrounds were united in their love of, and joy in, music played on pipe organs.

Sunday afternoon’s program was played by Clark Wilson on a theatre organ in a private home. After a short break for dinner the group heard an organ recital by Ed Zimmerman on the 4-manual, dual console, mechanical action, 70 rank/50 stop Casavant (2000) at Edman Chapel, Wheaton College. This was followed by a “Get Acquainted” ice cream social on the plaza. We had 20 boys and 16 girls, ages 11-19, from Illinois (23), Wisconsin (7), Michigan (4), Indiana (1), and Missouri (1), some of whom knew each other from previous POE’s, all of whom were thrilled to be there.

Monday began with an Introduction to the Organ by Ed Zimmerman, and an aural demonstration of all the families of stops of the Casavant heard in recital the previous evening. Then Lorraine Brugh gave a lesson in how to practice, and some basic organ techniques. In the afternoon the students and teachers were off to put their new knowledge to the test of a lesson and a practice session. Late afternoon all gathered at Trinity Episcopal church, for choral Evensong. In the evening we were treated to the silent movie, “Phantom of the Opera,” with Todd Wilson at the console of the same “mighty” Casavant.

Tuesday began with Todd Wilson giving a workshop on ways to strengthen as well as enliven one's service playing skills. This was followed by Richard Webster teaching how to improvise, including simple ways to just get started. After lunch it was time for another practice session and another organ lesson. Later we visited the Berghaus Organ Company, Bellwood, where Len Berghaus and staff showed how plans are drawn up for an organ's design, how a pipe is voiced, and how the chests are built and prepared for the pipes. After Len and his wife, Judy, fed us, we were bussed to St. Raphael's Catholic Church, Naperville. There Douglas Cleveland presented a concert on the 3-manual, 61 rank/50 stop Berghaus (1999).

Wednesday began with lessons and practice sessions in the morning to prepare us for the afternoon's big trip to Chicago. The POE Team had arranged for visits to 4 important organs in the city. Not only were they going to hear these organs; each student was going to have the opportunity to PLAY one of the instruments for 3-4 minutes! Which organ they played was determined by lottery. First stop was Orchestra Hall, where David Schrader demonstrated and played the 3-manual Casavant (1998). Assisted by David, 10 students then played for us. Next stop, the group divided in 2. Half went to hear the 4-manual, mechanical-action, 71 stop/117 rank Flentrop (1989) at Holy Name Cathedral. Matthew Walsh, Organist/Director of Music, welcomed the group; H. Ricardo Ramirez, Associate Organist, demonstrated the organ, and assisted the 5 students who played. The other half of the group went to St. James Cathedral to hear the E. M. Skinner (1929; rebuilt 1997-2000) demonstrated by Bruce Barber, Director of Cathedral Music, and 5 students played. Then the two groups swapped places, and another 5 students played at Holy Name, while a second 5 played at St. James. The final stop for the whole group was Fourth Presbyterian Church. Thomas Gouwens, Associate Organist, demonstrated their 4-manual Aeolian-Skinner (1971), and the final group of 6 students played.

Then we were off for a different kind of playing time: supper and evening at Chicago's Navy Pier, where all kinds of food, shopping, and family-friendly choices awaited us. To say "A good time was had by all" would be an understatement!

Thursday began with lessons and practice as students concentrated on preparing their pieces for Friday's recital. Thursday afternoon there were Master Classes led by Naomi Rowley (Advanced Students) and Margaret Kemper (Beginning Students). This was followed by a trip to hear the Theatre organ at the Arcada Theatre, St. Charles, where David Rhodes gave a recital and demonstrated the organ. Everyone traveled by bus back to Glen Ellyn for pizza at St. Petronille Catholic Church. Charles Sega presented a recital on the church's 2-manual, 29 rank Schantz (1976). St. Petronille graciously opened their swimming pool/gymnasium area so the students could have open free time.

Friday morning presented its own challenge: providing time for all 36 students to prepare for the afternoon's recital at College Church, Wheaton. Dividing into 3 groups gave each student-plus-teacher 5 minutes to register their piece on the organ, while some students practiced elsewhere, and some filled out their evaluations.

The afternoon student recital was a WONDERFUL experience! From 1:30 - 3:30, 36 young organists made music on the 3-manual Schantz (1991). Family, faculty, POE volunteers - all were thrilled by the sound of our next generation of organists.

Recently Northwestern University closed its Organ Performance program citing lack of interest in the organ as one cause. By contrast, we in the Fox Valley POE had 36 students eager to learn, and had to turn away another 15. We had 18 faculty eager to teach, as well as other willing faculty. Each student had a lesson and a practice time, on a different organ, every day. In addition, every venue where a program/recital was given included open-console time so students could sit on the bench and play the organ. There was NO lack of interest on the part of the students, teachers, and the many volunteers who made this POE possible. There was only enthusiasm, joy, and a deep desire to make beautiful music. What more could we ask for?

As Dean, it was my privilege to work with an amazing and energetic group of people, and I thank them all for their ideas, insights, and energy. This POE would not have happened without them!

Carol Olmstead, Fox Valley AGO