

In my mind, Max Miller and the pipe organ have long been symbiotically linked --- to the point that they have practically become synonymous, an aesthetic marriage of a refined human consciousness with a mechanical marvel; please allow me to begin by talking about the musical instrument in order to put Max's many achievements in context.

The organ has been correctly called the king of musical instruments, and like other kings with a divine right to be as autocratic, moody and difficult to deal with as any Habsburg, Bourbon or Romanov. No other instrument begins to present the dazzling variety of material, technical and acoustical anomalies and related logistical problems associated with the organ --- for no two organs are exactly alike; the building that houses the organ becomes a primary acoustic factor in its sonority; the placement of the instrument within the building can be crucial to its effect; the climate of the locale in which the organ resides affects its reliability; the wind chests have evolved in too many ways to retail here --- and the terminology

and technology of the multiple stops, keys, registers and linkages changes so radically from instrument to instrument that one must probe deeply into the individual features of each one to make the music played on it work as well as possible. Whenever a traveling organ virtuoso plays in a previously untried venue, he risks making a fool of himself if he does not spend what may seem to be an inordinate amount of time trying out, testing and acclimating himself to the special features of that instrument.

Even early organs can have almost as many moving parts as an automobile; to me the Baroque so-called "tracker action" looks a lot like a MacPherson Strut. Like cars, organs can be "lemons," and fixing them may sometimes tax experts to the utmost. For example, I find the instrument in M. I. T.'s Kresge Auditorium to be acoustically unsound, despite innumerable efforts to adjust and improve it. Generically, the organ's myriad challenges thus never end and unexpected ones appear suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, so that the mastery of one does not come close to being the mastery of them all.

The men and women who have dedicated

themselves to the depth of the study, performance and control of this wondrous royal monster share a special, indescribable feeling for it that connects them to the great organists and organ composers of the past, from the Mediæval Francesco Landini to the Renaissance's Antonio de Cabezón, and on to the Baroque Girolamo Frescobaldi, the Nordic Dietrich Buxtehude, the Austrian Romantic Josef Rheinberger, and further on to Charles-Marie Widor, Ethyl Smith, Louis Vierne, Edward Power Biggs, Olivier Messiaen and so many others all the way to the present -- but most of all *to the master of masters*, Johann Sebastian Bach. Like their famous predecessors, these men and women not only perform on these keyboards, but often compose for them, help repair and renovate them, at times design new ones, and this describes a tradition of nearly a thousand years of loyalty to the glory of the organ, a steady tradition that they cannot help but try to maintain. To an outsider like me, it appears that they bear an unusually heavy burden, but the best of them would have it no other way.

Max Burdorf Miller carved out and maintained an exemplary existence as a child of

God, a Christian, a citizen, a composer, a husband, a father of three fine sons, a Boston University faculty member, an intellectual with interests far beyond music, a remarkably effective conductor of choirs and instrumental ensembles and a teacher of organists, but as he himself modestly said, he remained first and foremost simply an organist, but with all the associated achievements that go with that title. His innumerable distinguished activities in the maintenance, repair, restoration and design of organs place him among the most important contributors of his generation to that grand tradition.

And how he played! ----- He had an almost magical way of communicating the emotion in an organ work on an instrument that prides itself on its very cool objectivity and lack of cheap sentimentality. When Max portrayed sentiment, there would be nothing cheap about it. He also masterfully improvised, as so many of his predecessors had --- and could link improvisation to direct reading of a musical text with smoothness and aplomb. On this chapel organ he invariably chose the best registration to balance his sonority with that of a vocal soloist, instrumental soloist or chorus. That came through even on the WBUR

broadcasts of his services here.

Max, assisted for many years by his close friend, and another dedicated organist, George Faxon, served as the foundation upon which our organ department functioned at the time I joined the faculty of the School for the Arts back in 1964; he organized the curriculum, administered the levels of achievement expected in each semester, and ran the performance exams or juries with the tightest possible control. The professional level of improvement in organ performance served as a model for the other departments. He maintained this control even after the department shifted to the School of Theology in the 1970s, and adjusted to his altered academic environment admirably until his retirement in 1991. Over the years some members of the faculty maintained closer relations with Max than I did, especially after he left our school, but so many of these have since gone on to accompany the chorus of angels, that on this occasion, for better or worse, I am left to deliver my memories of him as well as some that colleagues shared with me.

I recall him best from my early years here when I operated blindly in the classroom, just learning my craft. We met regularly at the makeshift lunchroom in the old School of Fine and Applied Arts and always managed to interest each other in activities in our respective disciplines. The two of us seemed to others to be a strange pair; he devoted his life to his beloved church duties even more assiduously than to the administration of our college, while I lived an almost entirely secular existence, happy only in libraries or at a microfilm reader or typewriter --- and only later a computer, and very gradually but finally, in front of a class. Though most of his teaching involved a one-on-one operation, he understood classroom dynamics very well and had a great deal to say about them.

Max and I also met at official and social faculty gatherings, recitals, concerts, in the Mugar or Theology Libraries, and at the most traumatic events here at Boston University, doctoral oral examinations --- where we both strove to make the process comfortable for the candidate with uneven success. On most of these various occasions we tended to sit side by side talking shop or inquiring

after each other's families. Each time, however, we revealed enough about our ideals to show each of us that we had more in common than not. We found ways to assist each other in both musical and academic matters, and I hope Max learned a bit from me, for I learned so much from him. These connections now seem so distant, so few and far between, most especially after 1973, but over the near half-century of our acquaintance they would always be productive and memorable. He strongly warned me against employing FEAR as a primary method of locomotion in my classes. I can only roughly paraphrase his advice but it ultimately sounded like this: "Let them respect you and you must learn your level of respect for them; do not frighten them with multiple exams and embarrassing individual challenges in class. Musicians have thin skins and express themselves better in music than in words, so allow them to gradually grow relaxed and they will open up and come around and justify your patience." I did as I was told and it worked just as Max said it would.

Max and I often shared data about books, articles and other bibliography worth consulting. He personally introduced me to Peter F. Williams, one of the international stars of organ studies, and

to several lesser lights in his world. Williams invited me to guest lecture at Duke University where he chaired the music department, and the many valuable connections I made there I ultimately owed to Max. My friend Max moved easily and genially throughout the upper echelons of organ circles in both the United States and Europe. Many sought his advice for dealing with an anomaly in their instruments or with their attempts to make particular pieces effective on them. I thought these people were supposed to be standoffish and difficult to know, but Max quickly got them to warm up to him and even to me. My contacts with other musicologists rarely proceeded as smoothly as my interactions with Max's peers; many of them remained friends long after we met and some still e-mail me.

In the last score years the organ has suffered a decline in popularity, with few students enrolling in this major or minor. Max must have been deeply disappointed by this, but endured it with his quiet determination, characteristic smile and positive attitude. I, on the other hand, thought it criminal that young people would not

feel themselves drawn to the greatest challenge one can face as a musician, the sense of mastery of the organ and the choir it serves --- and I told Max so! Just to be able to play the "great eighteen" organ chorales of J. S. Bach successfully would be enough, if I could do it, to make my life feel complete. I heard Max play so much Bach, with such love and respect for every golden note, that it often brought forth tears, as I sat entranced by this truly worshipful manifestation of the very essence of real music.

Max and I agreed however, that Bach could not be our favorite composer, for saying so would be the equivalent of saying that "Earth was our favorite planet." That fairly describes how far above all other composers we both judged Bach to stand. The honor of playing his *Toccatas*, *Fugues*, *Fantasias*, *Variations* (especially the *Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel hoch da komm' ich Herr*, *Trio Sonatas*, and all the rest of Bach's organ output remained the greatest joy in Max's life as a performing musician. Bach worked all his life to obtain "a well regulated church music, and two centuries later Max did the same. I feel that both Bach and Max truly walked with God, whatever their shortcomings, --- and Bach as a man had

many, many more of those than most music lovers may be aware.

The satisfaction of teaching young people to play this magnificent literature, or the music of Samuel Scheidt, Johann Pachelbel, Max Reger, or any of the other thousand composers in the Theology Organ Library that Max built and lovingly tended, enormously nourished him with the sense that he could hope to pass on his art and artistry to at least a select few in one generation and indirectly to who knows how many more? He had faith that the organ's popularity would return and that he needed to carry the torch for it until the cycle turned around. Some of his closest colleagues did not agree, however; one of them confided in me that he believed that they would be the last generation to fully serve that millennial tradition. Max knew of their pessimism but hoped against hope that they were incorrect.

I recall Max telling me about many special organ students whose scholarly bent would suit my fancy, and recommending them to study with me on the way to fashioning a doctoral dissertation

of distinction, a positive, meaningful contribution to the field. In that regard he would never be wrong, as each and every one he championed did seek me out and did end up doing exemplary scholarship --- my personal favorite being Nelly Maude Case and her huge study of the keyboard music of Aaron Copland. The Theology Organ Library awards a biennial Max Miller Prize to an outstanding book about organs and performance. In addition, one of these very organ doctorates, John Kenneth Ogasapian, not long after earning his Ph. d., suddenly and prematurely died, but left us a fully funded foundation that gives annual prizes to the best book about organs and organ playing, the latest one going to a volume by David Yearsley entitled *Bach's feet*, ostensibly about Bach's legendary pedal technique.

One could similarly write about Max Miller's feet as he negotiated the organ pedalboard with a certainty borne of hours of practice, a creativity that helps him find the best solution to a galling foot-crossing or toe and heel trick, and a desire to be worthy of the composer and of Bach's intense devotion to his art and through it to his God. Old Sebastian, in the manuscripts of his church cantatas, would inscribe *Jesu Juva* at the

start and *Soli Deo Gloria* at the finish. Max played as though every sacred organ work similarly began with a praise of Jesus and concluded with an affirmation that all the glory of the composition and rendition belonged not to its human agents but to the Creator. For Max, playing the organ and leading his choir amounted to regular heartfelt prayers, a kind of musical liturgy, and he communicated this sense to every sensitive man and woman in the congregation.

In official (and often officious) faculty meetings, Max said very little, but when he did speak, his mature and magisterial authority almost always carried the day. He never rambled, never wasted words, never gave in to despair, not even when our budgets would be cut, or when a good, useful and in my view necessary proposal met defeat at the hands of those faculty members who saw it as an undue burden for them to bear. Our Music Faculty (including myself I must confess) always has been a beehive of *prima donnas*, save for a few who thought of students foremost, and who always believed that the students needed to be

musicians first, last, and always --- and specialists second, whether their major might be voice, education, viola, bassoon, trombone or organ. Nobody believed this more strongly than Max, and in his own patient, careful way, he fought for this ideal throughout his long career at Boston University. And nobody acted out the role of *prima donna* less than Max Miller, for he listened carefully and respectfully to the points made by all his colleagues. He was thus fully respected by them for his cool maturity, honesty, directness and true humility. Now you can see why I and most of the Music faculty missed him so very much after his department switched schools --- I believe that we never truly recovered from that untoward and destructive separation.

As a writer, he has left us many articles, especially in *The American Organist*, which range from scholarly to whimsical, from practical to ideal, from literary to down-to-earth --- and always with clarity and a deep sense of the need to reach his reader as completely as he could. He reveals in these articles, a universal appreciation for organ music from that of the enigmatic Jehan Titelouze

to the one masterwork by the arch-iconoclast Arnold Schönberg. Most organists work within a fairly limited number of styles and pieces that they feel they can control. Max allowed himself no such limits. As a young man in California studying Schönberg's fiendishly difficult *Variations on a Recitative*, (which ought to be entitled *Variations, cadenza and fugue on a 12-tone set hammered into D minor*) he actually managed to get coached by the composer, a fact that I did not know until this year, so I never got to ask Max about what that had been like. Schönberg's personality could be very spiky and difficult, and the way that Max confronted that would be a tale worth telling. It would have been far more interesting to me than Max's happy, productive Viennese years studying with his ideal, the great organist and organ teacher Anton Heiller.

At any rate, his articles show him to be a master of his instrument, of its literature, and of the need to adjust one's registration and style of playing to each individual organ and its acoustical logistics. Some good Samaritan should publish in hard covers a compilation of the *Ask Uncle Max* columns he wrote for so many years. As we Jews say, that would be a *Mitzvah!* an especially good

deed. Max's advice in these pages has not become dated or been proven irrelevant or immaterial, and it seems only fair that young budding organists should continue to learn from the insights Max so generously shared.

My friend has been gone now for most of this year, but his infectious smile, his stoic bearing, his beautiful playing --- and that of his students, especially on the organ in this very chapel, all linger on long after he rose from the bench for the last time. His contributions to the University and the two colleges where he worked cannot be simply described, for he accomplished so much in very subtle ways. I have been very fortunate to be in contact with him but I really do not think I truly knew him for he was far more profound and inscrutable than my other co-workers. I feel privileged to have been a distant planet in his orbit, and sad only that I did not get a chance to spend more time with him and his lovely wife Betty. I will always remember his kindness to me, his real interest in my musicological projects, and his encouragement in my constant struggles with university president John Silber over policy

matters that hindered the operation of our school. My own *magnum opus* about Bach's *Musical Offering* will appear in print later this year, and I owe Max a great deal for it. In fact, I owe Max more for the success I ultimately enjoyed in the classroom than I realized at the time we both taught here. His quiet, calm persuasion and understated encomiums colored many of my attitudes and polished my techniques. He deserves a share in the several teaching awards given to me.

We remained comrades-in-arms in the good fight for serious music and its truth unto its innermost parts, as both Harvard's *VERITAS* and Brandeis' *EMES* claim in their logos. Finally, Max lived a full, virtuous life apart from his musical accomplishments. One of the building and grounds workers said of him that he "was the most regular guy, the most sincere person" he had met at B. U. To that I can only say Amen!

The chorale text that Bach chose for one of his very last chorale preludes: *Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit* may best express Max's level of piety throughout his productive life and as he proceeded to his well-deserved reward, just as it

had for Bach himself in his last declining days; I offer my own translation of three of its fifteen verses, which may be more than a bit free and Old-Testament-like in its verbiage, but my German has always been tinged with Hebrew and Yiddish:

Before Thy throne I have arrived at last, Lord
My God! I implore Thee to pay heed to my prayer,
Turn not Thy loving Countenance away from
This poor, tired sinner suing for Thy Favor.

My father who hast made me in Thy Likeness,
Who hath protected me and deigned to give me
Solace in my need, I owe my very self to Thee
And fear nothing in Thy august presence.

Release me from Sin's overwhelming debt, and
Purify my heart and soul; purge it from hypocrisy;
Grant that my ending be worthy of Thy Love
And that I shall later wake to see Thy Face.

Joel Sheveloff